



Photo by Sebastian Dewsbery

| Above:
Palais des
Congres

Showlight 2025 Dijon Round-up

| Words: Bernie Davis. Pictures: Jean Nguyen and Showlight Committee Members.

The last real face-to-face Showlight was held in Florence back in 2017, and although the pattern since Showlight started in 1981 has been for it to return every four years, Covid-19 prevented it happening in 2021 despite plans being well under way. To fit the style of the times a Virtual Showlight was held in 2021 but despite attempts to recreate the atmosphere it still lacked the conversations and the networking that are the essence of this unique event.

With finances low the Showlight committee feared that they did not have the resources get the next Showlight started and it was feared that it would never return. But under the surface the will and the spirit were still alive, and at PLASA 2023 a group of us met up to see if we thought it could be resurrected. It was a big risk as the industry was still recovering from the pandemic, but we decided to give it a shot and we agreed to set the date for May 2025 giving us just 18 months to achieve what normally took nearly four years.

We had a head start however, as work had already begun on staging

Showlight 2021 in France with headline sponsor Robert Juliat. The location we had worked towards was Fontainebleau, although the town was raising a few challenges that were making it difficult; challenges such as the theatre we were getting free was barely large enough. Also the town was just on the small side for our needs. For 2025 we felt we needed to find a new location very quickly.

A new committee was quickly formed, and Showlight veteran Jim Tetlow was asked to be the new chair, replacing John Allen. To keep Robert Juliat as Headline Sponsor we needed to find a venue in France, and the well-travelled Tetlow had been impressed with Dijon on his travels in the past. Showlight asks a lot from its conference venue: It has to be big enough to take up to 500 people, have additional space for an exhibition area for the sponsors' stands, it wants to impress a discerning group of people who work in the entertainment business, and it has to be affordable – as well as available! A little research showed that Dijon had a well-equipped conference centre - Le

Palais Des Congres-Expositions De Dijon - only a ten minute walk from the centre of the old town with its many bars and restaurants as well as enough hotels to take all our delegates.

With Dijon being easily accessible from the UK and the US as well as Europe we took the decision to stage Showlight 2025 there, and quickly found that the city proved to be welcoming hosts. This charming capital of the historical Burgundy region in eastern France is listed as a UNESCO world heritage site and is very proud of its gastronomy and its wines, just what the lighting community needs!

We then had to start planning very quickly, without actually knowing how the funds would work out. But it is fair to say that Jim was taken by surprise at the generosity of the sponsors; there was clearly a strong enthusiasm for Showlight to happen again.

Next step was to gather speakers, and anyone who has been to Showlight before will know that the range and diversity of the presentations is an essential quality



Above (left to right):

Q and A Session with Roger Simonsz, Clara Daguin, David Gray, Fiffi Thorsteinsson | Host Jim Tetlow | Speaker Thierry Goron | Showlight Audience

that makes Showlight quite unique in the industry calendar. We want to hear about the big projects and the small unusual projects, we want to represent all lighting sectors, we want an international and diverse spread of speakers and subjects, we want the technical and the aesthetic, and we don't want commercial plugs. Showlight has been criticised in the past for having too few women speaking, and we certainly wanted to address that imbalance. And, of course, we wanted all these speakers to take time out from their careers to speak to us for no money. Through

a combination of promotion and recruitment we were soon very pleasantly surprised and delighted with the variety and quality of the offers, leaving the papers committee a problem with how to choose the best programme from what was on offer.

Jim Tetlow wanted to advance Showlight 2025, and introduced a workshops programme. Some presentations clearly needed to be interactive and some were great additions to the schedule whilst not necessarily having universal appeal, and so a workshops afternoon

was introduced for the first time, replacing the traditional local tours afternoon. In Florence in 2017 an enormous amount of work had gone into arranging visits in the afternoon of the second day, only to find that a significant number of people just did not show up. This year for the first time the second afternoon was planned as a number of workshops that delegates could opt to attend, and those who wanted to explore Dijon could make their own arrangements for that day, or even stay on after Showlight finished.

Another hallmark of Showlight in

Right:
Camera
Students
and Camera
Veterans



the past has been the inclusion of lighting students. In the past students have been invited to apply for up to forty free places in return for helping with the forty sponsor companies with their exhibition displays. This gave students direct connection to companies in a way they would never get during their education as well as free access to a convention they were unlikely to be able to afford. In 2025 this changed a little, and thanks to the sponsorship that Showlight raised it was possible to extend the offer to include a bursary to help cover students' travel to Dijon, and even provide free accommodation in a local hotel. With students coming from as far as Australia, Brazil, and Canada this levelled the field for them, and it was lovely hearing the students commenting on how good it was to wake up in their own hotel room instead of a shared room in a hostel! Those wanting to come were carefully vetted through an online application questionnaire, and everyone commented on the high standard of students who came. They were engaged and enthusiastic, helpful and good company. Some were selected to help with the running of the conference, which got them even more involved.

A new delegate category was also introduced – the Emerging Professionals, identified as people new to the industry who were no longer students but were at the start of their careers, and who would benefit from the experience yet are less likely to be able to afford to come. Like the students, Showlight was able to afford to help towards their costs.

The next crucial part of the organisation is the Conference Gala Dinner, where all delegates, speakers, sponsors and students get together for a dinner. Jim happened to have a contact who lived in Dijon, Sherry Thevenot, who proved to be invaluable in local research, and it was Sherry who found the ideal venue.

Château de Vantoux was completed in 1704, designed by Jules Hardouin-Mansart who was a French architect and city planner to King Louis XIV who also completed the design of the Palace of Versailles. Situated just a 15 minute drive from the centre of Dijon it made an impressive venue



Above:

Committee member Jane Cockburn welcomes guests with samples from her wine cellar

for dinner. The present owners had recently bought the chateau and are now embarking on an ambitious restoration project. To one side of the chateau is a more modern structure, the Orangerie, built to hold functions, and by chance was the perfect size to take the

Showlight conference gala dinner.

The last piece of the jigsaw was to find a suitable place to hold a welcome event at the end of the registration day, and that came up through no less than the Mayor of Dijon. The Salle des États within





Above: *The Salle des États*

the historic Palais des Ducs et des États de Bourgogne is a grand reception hall that you can't hire. It is designated for use only by the mayor of Dijon, however the mayor wanted to welcome this large and important international conference to the city, and so it gave us a spectacular start to Showlight 2025.

A tradition that started in 2005 at Showlight in Glasgow is that the STLD has hosted a dinner for the students that follows the welcome drinks, and we were pleased to take them all to Le Jeanne Brasserie for a French pizza meal!

We will be reporting back on some of the papers in future editions of Set & Light, but the general feeling is already that Showlight 2025 was a great success beyond our hopes, building on its past experience and moving it forward. Thought is

already going into Showlight 2029, and the STLD will certainly want to be involved from the start.

Enormous thanks must go to the Headline Sponsors Robert Juliat, for their financial support of course, but also for their support with local connections and planning; Séverine Zucciatte of Robert Juliat proved invaluable with her planning and organisational skills. There is also a large amount of support that comes from LSi and PLASA in the form of website, graphic design and publicity effort. And although I don't like to pick out individuals for what they did, Matt Hallard at Ayrton (Diamond Sponsors) was key in raising the support from sponsor companies, a vital component of this Showlight.

<https://www.showlight.org>

