

LIGHTING+SOUND

International



JESUS CHRIST SUPERSTAR RETURNS TO LONDON'S WEST END

- Second Coming: Robert Halliday behind the scenes at Jesus Christ Superstar
- Vietnam's new nightlife: Planet Europa in Ho Chi Minh City
- Profile: Theatre Projects on the eve of their 40th anniversary
- The Quest for Surround Sound
- Britpoppers Shed 7 live at London's Forum
- Limerick by night: how the young Irish are being entertained

PLASA

JANUARY 1997

SECOND COMING

Rob Halliday (part of the technical team) provides an inside view on the resurrection of Andrew Lloyd-Webber's Jesus Christ Superstar at the new Lyceum

They might almost have been made for each other. Both stars of their time, acclaimed for their long-lasting brilliance through many different incarnations. Both long-neglected. And both now triumphantly re-vamped and revitalised for the nineties and beyond.

And they suit each other so well: the Lyceum Theatre, a gorgeous, wide-arched, clear-sightlined, 2000-plus seat theatre just right for large-scale musicals. And *Jesus Christ Superstar*, the show that set the British musical bandwagon rolling at the start of the seventies. The Lyceum's history is much longer, though for the past decade that history has looked highly precarious. It is thanks to the protectiveness of The Theatres Trust and the commercial muscle of Apollo Leisure that this beautiful theatre has now not only been returned to active duty in the West End, but has had its staging facilities brought up to scratch to boot.

The two stories met in the first week of October, when the main fit-up for the new production of *Superstar* started in the newly refurbished theatre. The new production surprised some. It is, after all, not much more than a decade since the original London production at the Palace Theatre ended its record-breaking eight year run, and other versions of the show have been seen in touring productions and concerts ever since. The success of the recent *Joseph* revival perhaps gave a clue that there was still a demand for the older shows, and the film of *Evita* is keeping the Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber names out in the public's eye. But the final 'excuse', if one was needed, is that it is the twenty-fifth anniversary of the show's first stage production. And Andrew Lloyd Webber through his Really Useful Theatre Company saw that as an opportunity to, finally, give the public a version of the show that presented it in the way he saw it.

This is his production: *Superstar* as drama; the 'opera' part of the 'rock opera'. To realise his vision, he took two tried and trusted collaborators who are highly experienced in both the drama and musical worlds: set designer John Napier and lighting designer David Hersey. To direct, he selected Gale Edwards, whose production of *Aspects of Love* (L+SI, April 1993) had already impressed him enough for it to be brought from Australia to form the UK tour. She was paired with choreographer Aletta Collins, formerly of London Contemporary Dance and now running her own dance company. This just left the all-important role of sound designer; all of Lloyd Webber's recent shows have had Martin Levan in charge of this area. With Levan in America working on Lloyd Webber's new show, *Whistle Down The Wind*, the role fell to Richard Ryan, a former Levan assistant who earlier in the year designed the new production of *By Jeeves*.

The challenge the team faced was to present a new production of an established classic in a



Steve Balsamo takes the title role in *Jesus Christ Superstar*.

"The only surprise is that there are no hard-edge automated units in the rig. But we didn't miss them. Can we have a bright, hard-edged, tungsten moving light for theatre, someone?"

'straight' style, and to do so on a schedule and budget that were (by the standards of recent shows) relatively restrained. The praise heaped on the production by the national press suggest that they have succeeded . . .

DESIGN

When first viewing John Napier's set model, many would have assumed that the design was for a grand opera; the formal circular amphitheatre, with a round playing area backed by several levels of curved seating topped by a pile of rubble certainly owed nothing to the flashing disco floors of earlier versions. The triumph of the design is the way that Napier has linked his set to the theatre, binding the Lyceum's history in to make it part of the show.

The main playing area is a dome formed from three concentric circles. Those familiar with Napier's earlier work might have expected all manner of revolves but, while these featured in earlier discussions, the only 'trick' is that the central section can drop down to form a two-metre deep hole, or lift to form a two-metre high platform, or, by lifting just an outer section, form a 'cage' centre-stage.

Viewed from above, the stage resembles a Roman shield, fitting in well with the Romanesque-style outfits with which Napier and associate costume designer Sue Willmington have dressed the show's many soldiers. This whole section of stage breaks through the Lyceum's proscenium arch, thrusting out into the stalls where the seating was re-raked and re-arranged to allow the best view of this set.

Centrally located behind the main stage is a big entrance, above which is a platform used in several numbers, and then two ladders leading up to a further platform, and then up to a heap

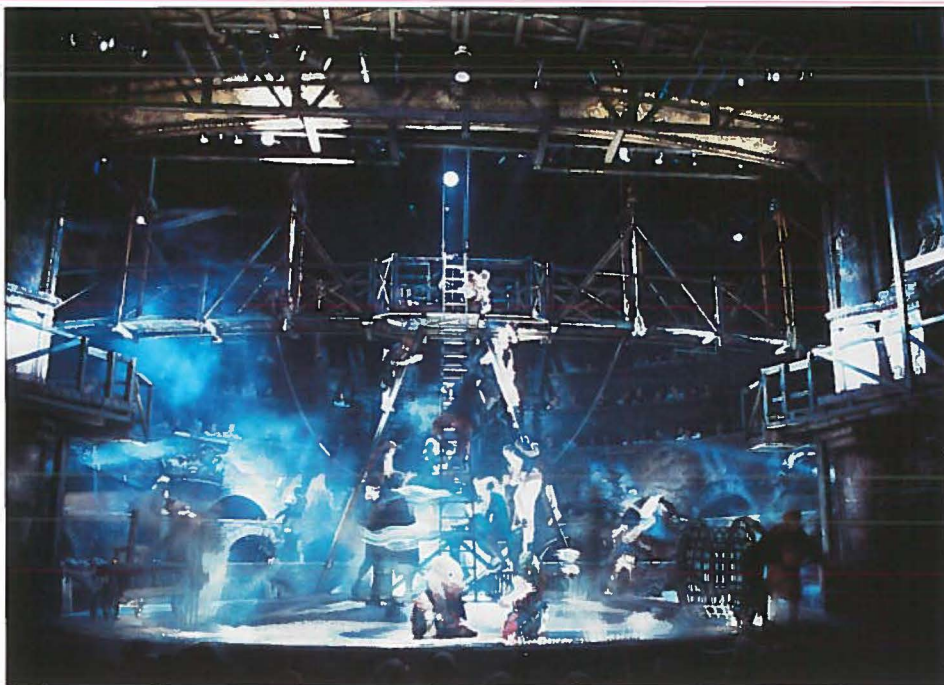
of rubble. Curving around from either side of these are two steps with arches cut into the front of them, and above those are three levels of 'tribune' seating which are also then topped with rubble. The front of these seating units contains a hint - moulded box fronts reminiscent of the theatre's own - that the set is intended to be a relic, 'found' during the restoration of the Lyceum.

This theme is continued above the stage and out into the auditorium: the area from the pros out to the second box has been painted in a brown textured colour rather than the bright red of the main auditorium, and the boxes have been partly covered by large wooden frames supporting walkways that allow the cast to break through the proscenium arch and out into the auditorium, in a manner reminiscent of Napier's earlier work on the RSC's *Nicholas Nickleby*. The feel of these structures is then continued in the walkways suspended high above the auditorium; these never actually become part of the action, but do provide walk-on access for focusing most of the front-of-house lighting, as well as a home for the central followspot. All the bridgework appears to be held up by rope (they are all safely supported by steel wire run back to steel joists supported from points above the ceiling, the installation being carried out by Colin Raby and his team from Unusual Rigging - the steel wires were then wrapped with hemp to give the required appearance), and the result is that it feels as if the audience has stumbled across an archaeological dig.

The set has two other moving elements. One is a staircase that can slide out from under the central platform to allow Pontius Pilate to march from this area down to the stage and back again. The other is a flying bridge, used for the first appearance of the priests and to create the interior of the Temple of Thieves. The show is relatively technology-light, however; while the bridge is automated, using Stage Technologies' Counterweight Assist motor system, it is controlled from one of their hand-held controllers rather than from an automation desk. The central staircase is just run from a winch, and the Delstar-created lift is hydraulically powered, controlled by an operator in the basement using two levers.

Three final 'tricks' round off the set's capabilities. A second Stage Technologies' pendant controller drives a rope, used for a spectacular entrance by Judas in the *Superstar* number. And then there are the elements: fire and water. A ring of 12 gas jets on the centre ring of the set, with a further two on the platform, create six-inch high flames during Kind Herod's song and, after the crucifixion, real water falls upon Jesus' body.

Both systems were designed and installed by Howard Eaton Lighting Ltd, who seem to be making something of a name for themselves in this kind of work. Rumours that the water was installed in case the gas went wrong were consistently denied! The simple-looking set



Above and facing page, various scenes from Jesus Christ Superstar - a production that works because it dares to take the material seriously - and succeeds.

actually belies the amount of work required to get it into the theatre. The on-stage seating presented the main problem, since the stage required additional reinforcement to take the weight and provision also had to be made for heating, secondary lighting and both entrances and emergency exits as in any other part of the auditorium.

Because the main fit-up schedule was quite tight, and because the theatre was already a building site, Really Useful's technical manager, Martin Heap, and the show's production manager, Richard Bullimore, were able to start work on the seating unit early, with extra steelwork being installed in the basement and the seating levels being constructed and then tied in to the air-conditioning and sprinkler systems as they were installed in the theatre.

Though this time-saving did get the show ahead of schedule, it also added an extra complication to the rest of the fit-up since the structure effectively blocked off the dock door; the rest of the scenery either had to be squeezed through a narrow gap or winched over the top . . .

Once past this obstacle, the set went up remarkably quickly. The entire stalls area was covered with a scaffolding platform to provide a flat surface on which to assemble the two side structures and then the overhead walkways prior to winching them into position. In just a few days production rigger Colin Raby and production carpenters Colin LeGendre and Dominic Addy and their teams had the side structures up and the main catwalks hanging at ground level, ready for production electrician Gerry Amies and his team of Jonathan Badger, Greg Hamlin and show electricians Steve Reeve and Rodney Icceton to fit the lighting bars, attached by custom brackets to Unistrut points designed in and installed at the scenery workshops of Terry Murphy Scenery and Met Scene.

At the same time, production carpenter Micky Murray was starting to install the stage floor. To accommodate Napier's round acting area, and to leave space underneath for the lift mechanism and the lighting equipment

required to light up through the floor, the Lyceum's stage and orchestra pit area had been left as more-or-less a hole, with no stage surface installed over the large pit/substage area - Apollo were planning to include a motorised orchestra pit, but this remains a project for the future. The Superstar stage thus stands, for the most part, on its own legs on the basement floor; the front section is then supported by the frontmost section of the stalls floor, necessitating some careful alignment most of which took place while crawling around under the stalls scaffolding.

Above the stage, Unusual Rigging were responsible for designing and installing the complete flying system, an 80-way, single-purchase counterweight system fabricated off-site and then just bolted together like a giant meccano set. To satisfy the building's owners, one Unusual team had to finish the installation, before another started adapting it to suit the show, diverting sets to feed the flown bridge, lighting bars and the various 'man drop' ropes, as well as hanging motors for lifting scenery over the set and hoisting the three on-stage followspot platforms and the projection platform into position. This summed up probably the greatest problem of the fit-up: the building wasn't finished, hadn't been handed over to Apollo from building contractors Wilmott Dixon, and was therefore still technically a building site.

Despite these complications, the set was finished on-time, though it then of course became subject to endless tinkering by the director and designer; scenic painters Liz and Chris Clark were kept busy gently shifting the colours of the tribune seating and rubble areas right up until the opening night!

LIGHTING

David Hersey and associate Jenny Kagan began designing the Superstar rig during dull moments in the technicals of *Martin Guerre*, and the two shows are clearly related in their use of equipment. The Source 4 profile satisfied every demand thrown at it on the earlier show, and the 160 profiles forming the majority of the rig were therefore supplied by ETC - a mixture

of 10, 19 and 26 degree units, with rig suppliers White Light receiving every unit in one shipment.

But the rig isn't really that big - especially considering that the show is in-the-round and therefore needs to be lit from behind to deal with the on-stage audience. The lighting had to cover not just the stage, but also the upstage platforms, rubble and the auditorium walkways - as well as lighting up through the floor from below the stage. While the Source 4s provide general area lighting and gobo washes, the overhead rig also contains around 70 Par cans, many topped with Rainbow scrollers, providing backlight and low sidelight from underneath the auditorium walkways; a dozen 2.5k Alto PCs, again topped with Rainbows, giving coverage around the outer 'ring' of the set; and two Rainbow'ed 5k Fresnels giving the usual Hersey three-quarter backlight to the acting area. All of the overhead rig can be reached (though sometimes with a bit of a stretch!) from the flown bridge, the projection truss or the side catwalks - which is fortunate since there is neither a tallescope nor a Genie lift in the building, and using either on the domed stage floor would be extremely unpleasant! Offstage, each of the four arches in the curved steps were backed by booms containing Source 4 Pars, the units chosen for their brightness, even beam quality and compact dimensions in already narrow and crowded wings.

The rig then continued understage. Hersey and Kagan had three types of floor to deal with; the outer ring with its peppering of holes, the grilles in the outer ring, and the grille-like floor of the central lift. After experimenting with sections of the floor, they elected to use PCs for the floor and R&V 500W beamlights for the grilles. The problem then became keeping the lamps a constant throw from the floor so that the resulting 'fingers' of light were consistent around the ring. And this was complicated by the desire to top the PCs with scrollers to allow colour variations during the show. With the chosen 2.5k Alto PCs, space became a problem in the downstage area where the stage sat on the stalls floor and there wasn't enough clearance to point an Alto straight up. In addition, everyone was worried that if the lamps were pointed straight up, the resulting heat would destroy the scrolls very quickly.

The solution was created by Dave Isherwood and Bryan Raven of White Light, who suggested that, as the old showbiz saying goes, it could all be done with mirrors: by having the lamp horizontal and then placing a mirror at 45 degrees to the lens, the light could fit into the narrow downstage space, some of the heat would be kept away from the scroll and the light could still shine up through the floor.

After some experimentation, White Light had metal frames created that bolt to the lamp's trunion arm, then hold mirrors made from plastic heatshrink mirror material attached to wooden frames. The lamps and frames were then rigged from a custom-rolled curved bar that matched the curve of the set, and each mirror was topped with a domed plastic roof to deflect the worst of the rubbish swept through the holes in the stage. The same solution was applied to the lights rigged inside the central lift. Here the tolerances were even tighter; Cadenza PCs were used instead of Altos, and six of the new AC Chroma-Q scrollers were used because they are shorter than Rainbows, and so

just fitted between the base of the unit and the heat-proof glass installed to keep the water from the rain effect away from the lights. Another 500W beamlight had been specified for the centre of the lift; when it didn't fit, Jonathan Badger took a minimalist approach, stripping the mirror, bulb and transformer from the housing and just installing those!

With a long run anticipated, and mindful of the gas installation also taking place under the stage, Amies opted for a 'permanent' trunking installation substage, using custom trunking and armoured multicore runs supplied by HELL. The same approach was taken with the lighting on the front of house bridges, where both mains and data cabling are neatly installed out of harm's way. The substage lights run from two temporary 24-way LD90 dimmer racks installed on the basement. The rest of the rig is controlled from the building's comprehensive new dimmer and facility-panel installation for which Stage Electrics were responsible.

There are four elements to the rig. The show has six Robert Juliat spots, 2.5k Aramis units front and back, and then four 1.2k Korrigans on the diagonals. The front spots sit in the FOH scenic catwalks, while the on-stage three each have wooden platforms, again suspended from 'fake' rope and so adding to the overall feel of the set. These spots really are superb, tight enough to be capable of pinspotting a wrist-watch and then following it around the stage, and as bright as you'd need. A seventh Juliat, this time a 2.5k D'Artagnan, is used as the 'God' light, giving a bright, clear, white shaft of light to the central lift (through a trap door in the flown bridge, which also sits above the lift) for Jesus' big solo number and during the crucifixion; it offers a quality of light that no other profile we've seen could match.

The second element is the projection, provided by two Pani 4k HMLs complete with grey-scale dimmer shutters and 15-slide random-access slide changers from Production Arts Europe. These, again, are a follow-on from their success on *Guerre*, where they allowed Hersey to experiment with different slides in different scenes very quickly. A similar usage had been planned here, adding texture to the stage floor by diverting the beams downwards from an overhead projection bridge using Pani's beam divertor mirrors, but it never really found favour with the director or the designer. What they did like, though, was the look of the crisp, single-source backlight the projector's generated. So Hersey and Kagan proceeded to make masks to allow the light to be cut to different sections of the set generating full-stage backlights that give clear, precise shadows, or isolating the different rings without any of the spill that attempting the same thing with a collection of conventional lamps would lead to.

Thirdly - and a late addition to the rig - was the 70kW Lightning Strike strobe. The first time Jesus' death was rehearsed, it became abundantly clear that 'something' was needed to define the moment, and however we played with the rest of the rig we couldn't make that 'something'. Hersey had seen the strobe at the PLASA show, and White Light were able to get one to the Lyceum for a trial. It has stayed there ever since, running from the extra touring rack supply in the dimmer room that everyone had assumed would not be used for the run of the show! The effect still didn't quite work, though,



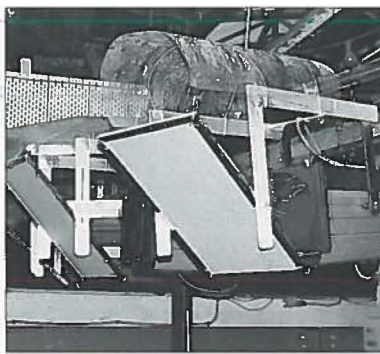
until an alternative triggering box arrived from Los Angeles that enabled it to give a slightly longer continuous 'pulse', finally allowing it to match the musical chord played at that moment. It's not a cheap effect (with a usage of just five seconds per show, Richard Bullimore spent a dull moment working out the hire price per second instead of per week), but it gave that moment in the production a lift that it had been lacking.

The final element involves the moving lights and it is this which, to some extent, has kept the rest of the rig so small. David Hersey is a big fan of the R&V 500W beamlight as a 'special' light to highlight moments of the stage; the lamp has featured in many of his shows, both in the rig and as followspots. The problem has always been having enough of the lamps to be able to cover every special moment. The solution to that problem first arrived on *Martin Guerre* - DHA's Digital Beamlight. There, for the first time, precise yet discrete, soft-edged light could be directed to any part of the stage. And





Sound operator David Ogilvy and sound number 2 Emma Watwood with the Cadac desks.



The beam divertor mirrors for the sub-stage Alto PCs devised by White Light.



Deputy electrician Rodney Icton at the Strand 550.

though the DBLs were, in retrospect, perhaps slightly underused on that show, they certainly proved their worth. 18 were specified for the Superstar rig, two on the mid-auditorium front-of-house bar, two per side on the auditorium catwalks, two on each perch boom and a further eight over the stage. This allowed practically any part of the stage to be lit from a variety of angles, and some combination of DBLs is now part of practically every cue in the show. Though one edict resulting from the 'drama' approach to the show was that no lights, apart from the followspots, should be seen moving, the beamlights are smooth enough that some subtle live moves have crept in without any grumbles.

To balance the DBL's tight beams, 10 Vari*Lite VL5Bs were rigged overhead, to provide more general wash lighting. As with *Guerre*, these were run from DMX but using Vari-Lite's new 16-bit DMX software, which does much to smooth their movement and improve positional accuracy. The combination of 5s and DBLs is a powerful one, and it is remarkable how quickly we all became blasé about the fact that we could quickly and accurately get light to any area needed. The only surprise, given the show's rock pedigree, is that there are no hard-edge automated units in the rig. But we didn't miss them and, besides, the harsh blue-white light from the HMI or MSR lamp fitted to practically every hard edged moving light would have been out of place here. Please can we have a bright, hard-edged, tungsten moving light for theatre, someone?

Control for the rig also repeated the system proved on *Guerre* - the Strand 550 range, with two desks used for plotting, one for the moving rig and one for the conventional rig, to allow us humans to keep up with the breakneck speed of the technical rehearsals. These were then merged down into one desk once the show was running, giving one operator complete control over every part of the rig. This desk is remarkable for the speed with which it allows even the most complex of plotting operations to be carried out. Though other rivals are now appearing, I don't think there's another desk I'd like to use for a show like this. And with another big upgrade to the Tracker moving light software due in early 1997, that lead looks set to increase.

We did discover a powerful ally to the desk, though, in the shape of the WYSIWYG lighting visualisation software. This has quickly become established as a powerful way of pre-programming large rock and roll shows. It was used as a 'monitor' to the rig, running it in its 'blind' mode where it shows the position and colour of all the lamps, even when they are off. Used like this, it essentially replaces the desks'

numeric display screen for much of the time, as well as making it possible to get lights to roughly the right place before turning them on, and so minimising the distraction to the lighting designer plotting conventional lights, as well as to the rest of the creative team.

Control for the rig runs through two DMX lines from the control room above the upper circle to the DMX splitter panel in the dimmer room, and then to outlets on the facilities panels around the building. To ensure that the dimmers driving the VL5s were controlled from the same mux ring (and so, during plotting, the same desk) as the actual lights, some of the LD90 racks were fitted with dual-processor cards so that dimmers could be set to respond to the 'A' or 'B' ring as appropriate.

David Hersey has managed to light what has always been thought of as a 'rock' show as a theatre piece, and do it with considerable style and refinement. The lighting so precisely matched the composer's ambitions for the production that Lloyd Webber was heard heaping praise on Hersey in front of the cast at the end of one of the final rehearsals. As with *Guerre*, the show uses a fair amount of technology, but that technology has now reached a stage that it rarely hinders what a lighting designer is trying to achieve.

SOUND

And if any of us thought we had it tough on this show, it was nothing compared to the challenge facing the sound team. Where they told us 'drama', and gave us a 'drama' set and, for the most part, 'drama' staging, they told sound 'drama' and then presented them with a rock and roll band playing orchestrations that would be immediately familiar to anyone who knows the original concept recording of the show. And this in a building that was still unfinished (and so very hard to judge acoustically) even once the fit-up had started and with an audience at the back of the stage as well!

But sound designer Richard Ryan has already faced the in-the-round challenge this year, on Lloyd Webber's *By Jeeves* first in Scarborough and then in the West End. And he is very familiar with the composer's work, having worked with sound designer Martin Levan on shows such as *Joseph and Sunset* - and also with director Gale Edwards, having designed the sound for the UK *Aspects of Love* tour and last year's workshop production of *Whistle Down The Wind*, which Edwards directed. To form his team, Ryan brought in assistant sound designer Brian Beasley and production sound engineer Mike Walker, who, in turn, brought in sound engineers Nic Chua, Eddie Teo, Daren Hirst and Paul Spedding.

From the make-up of the band - three

keyboards, flute, sax, horn, trumpet, trombone and bass trombone, guitar, bass guitar, drums and percussion, Ryan knew that a very 'solid' sound would be called for, and so he elected for a conventional, boxed loudspeaker rather than the boxless Tannoy drivers that Martin Levan has made familiar on Lloyd Webber shows. Experience with, and a preference for, the EAW range meant that the rig is largely composed of EAW speakers; front-of-house there are 10 KF3001 units on the booms at stalls and circle level, and on the overhead bridges feeding to the upper circle. Four more of these units, two on a flown lighting bar and two attached to the back of the pros arch, serve as the main system for the on-stage audience. The FOH audience then has a comprehensive delay system of 34 EAW JF50 speakers feeding the back of the stalls and the first circle; some of these units are also hidden in the front of the stage to provide fill for the front few rows of the stalls audience.

The auditorium then has a surround system of 44 JF60 speakers, used to pull vocals, music and effects out and around the audience. And there is also a selection of sub-bass units - six EAW SB 120Is, 10 Bose 302s and two Bose 502s, used to add weight to the score and also for effects - some of the units are hidden at the back of the auditorium to ensure that the effects really can come from any direction! The entire rig is driven by Yamaha amplification, 59 H5000s running at quite high levels.

With the band not in a pit, but instead hidden behind the first platform, upstage and above the acting area, Ryan had to decide how much to try to tie the band's sound to this position. Since they were originally meant to be seen throughout the show, two three-way KF6501 speakers were hidden in this area of the set to allow the band sound to be 'pulled back' to this position, and this is still present in the mix even though the band were subsequently hidden from view (apart from a fleeting appearance at the start of the overture).

The things that worried Ryan most were the problem of getting enough level from head-mounted radio mics with speakers firing backwards across the acting area as well as forwards from it, and the possibility that the cast might be asked to appear anywhere in the auditorium, making it hard to guarantee that they would hear enough from the orchestra to pick up their cues. The level problem could have been solved by using hand-held microphones - indeed, the original London production used wired microphones, and the blocking is reputed to have been more about not tripping over cables than any real choreographic art - but the creative team did not want that kind of 'rock show' feel here. They

were prepared to discuss head-mounted boom mics, increasingly seen in the rock and roll world, but last minute changes of heart led to the decision to try head-mounted capsules and, though Mike Walker describes the resulting levels as being "right on the edge", the show has been made to work with these mics.

To tackle the hearing problem, Ryan decided to try another rock and roll device: Garwood's in-ear monitoring system. This had a knock-on effect in other areas, since each in-ear monitor knocks out several of the precious frequencies usually saved for radio microphones so, rather than offer it as a universal solution, the team kept it in-hand for solving specific problems for specific actors. In the end, only Zubin Varla, playing Judas, makes use of it - perhaps unsurprising considering he sings from many different places including, at one point, hanging from a rope 30 feet up in the air.

Since the number of in-ear units has been reduced, the number of radio microphones has been increased, and there are now 40 Sennheiser SK50 transmitters and 40 EM1046 receivers on the show, allowing each of the cast to wear a microphone, Judas and Jesus to each wear two, and still leave two spares. The microphones used are a mixture of MKE2, ECM77, B&K and COS11 capsules, and the sound support team of Emma Watwood and Jo Wredde are doing wacky things with blu-tak and plastic bags to minimise the problems of sweat getting into the heads and connectors.

Sound from the radio mics and the band runs up to the mixing position at the back of the stalls, where operator David Ogilvy oversees an 89-input desk made up of a 50-input (six motorised), 14 VCA, 14 sub-group Cadac J-type that deals with the radios, effects and final mix of the show, and a 39-input F-type that handles the band. The F-type is used because the band's monitor mixes are also sent from here, and the F-type's multiple outputs give the flexibility required. Racked beneath the desks is a variety of processing equipment, including Yamaha DEQ-5 digital graphic/delay units, Lexicon PCM80 and PCM90 digital effects units, Yamaha SPX1000 effects processors and YDP2006 parametric EQ/delay units, and a variety of Aphex compressor/limiter units. There is also a mini-monitoring system in the band area, with Formula Sound foldback mixers and a selection of Sennheiser headphones.

The result is a clean sound that lets the voices of the talented cast carry easily out into the auditorium with power and energy. It's not a subtle design - where a surround-sound effect kicks in, you know all about it, where the show gets loud, the sound gets loud. But in all of that, the words always come through - and in a production intent on telling the story, that is its triumph.

From a practical perspective, production engineer Mike Walker cites the biggest problem with getting the show on as being problems with the building being incomplete when work started. As a result, though the theatre is meant to contain a sound installation capable of coping with the large scale musicals that a 2000-seat theatre will inevitably attract, Walker and his team ended up installing a self-contained system for the show just so that



The new Lyceum which reopened in October 1996 - its original splendour now fully restored by the Apollo Leisure Group.

they could guarantee that it would work on time. The in-the-round staging, where the cast can be looking anywhere when singing, means that it is quite heavy on video, with three circle front monitors, two more just behind the proscenium arch, two more in the upstage entrance, and many more scattered around the wings. With the MD hidden at the back and unable to see the cast, video also runs the other way, and the circle front camera is remotely controllable so that it can (under the control of DSM Carolyn 'Nog' Wyld) close in on particular moments for the MD to see cue points.

The comms set-up is predominantly Clearcom, with soundproof Sennheiser headsets for the followspot operators to keep their sound 'exposure' within appropriate health and safety limits, and Motorola radios with headsets for the stage management team of Marianne Stratton, John Caswell ('the real JC', according to his first-night cards!) and Clive Mitchell-Harris - including one with just a small earpiece, worn on-stage as the crucifix is raised at the end of the show so that the cast can be told they can let go after it has been locked into position under the stage. All of the sound and communications equipment is supplied by TP Sound, with Dave Perry acting as project director and Mike Weaver handling the tricky juggling of radio frequencies.

PUTTING IT TOGETHER

This was no epic-length fit-up: Unusual Rigging started on 30th September, with the lighting rig going in a day later. The cast started rehearsing on stage three weeks later, and three weeks after that the show started a week of previews leading up to an opening on November 19th.

In visiting the site less than a month before the start of the fit-up, it seemed inconceivable that the show would open on time: the auditorium bare, unpainted, lit just by fluorescent worklight on stands, devoid of seats with many of the front-of-house staircases in a rather precarious state; the stage with a flying system going in but without a floor or any electrical facilities beyond a contractor mains. When we arrived to start the fit-up proper, seats had arrived and Stage Electrics' contracting team were on-site installing dimmers and facility panels. But the stalls were now covered in scaffolding, the walls were still unfinished, and the whole theatre was filthy.

One of the first things in was the batch of Source 4s. It has become traditional on shows like this, where the rig hangs inactive for several weeks, to wrap the lamps in bin bags to keep

the dust off them. Ever vigilant, White Light had picked up on this trend - and have started supplying rigs with lanterns sealed in clear plastic. Since the stalls were conveniently covered in scaffolding, the first area rigged was the lower circle front.

As the rest of the lighting rig and the first of the sound equipment started arriving, the main problem became waiting for other contractors to finish working in areas so that we couldn't be accused of slowing them down and so incurring extra costs for Apollo and working around problems caused by the real building differing from the plans. Mike Walker and his team encountered particular problems with this, particularly when the planned cable routes for the rear-circle surround speakers were found to be blocked by large concrete slabs. Even where equipment could be installed, it often couldn't be tested: the rig couldn't be flashed out, for example, because the dimmers were several weeks away from commissioning.

Two weeks in, and with the overhead and side walkways rigged, the stalls scaffolding was removed, allowing the theatre's intimate seating to be fully appreciated - it certainly doesn't feel like the 2000-seater it is. At this stage, David Hersey, Jenny Kagan and assistant Amanda Garrett started their move in. When the cast arrived on-stage, the technical period took a slightly unusual turn since we didn't just launch into frantic lighting over rehearsals. Instead, Edwards spent a week concentrating on adapting the rehearsal room staging to fit the theatre without worrying about lighting and sound at all, though this week did give us an opportunity to start experimenting with light, and sound the chance to start programming the desk with the appropriate combination of microphones for each scene. With a director and designer who often had clear ideas of what they wanted to see, work proceeded quickly, leading to the creation of around 250 lighting cues - which, in a show that runs for just 90 minutes, keeps the operator busy!

The previews were calm, simply allowing the production to be refined in the way that previews are always meant to, but rarely do. This is one advantage of working on a show that has already proved itself by running for eight years - you know that the material works, and so any problems must be with the production. Here the material is superbly presented by an excellent cast, free from 'stars' or egos.

The opening night was a real, good, old-fashioned triumph, with the audience spontaneously rising to their feet at the end to welcome *Superstar* back to London. The production works because it dares to take the material seriously - and succeeds.

Apollo Leisure said that with the Lyceum, they were trying to create a touring theatre in the centre of London, and that was the brief many of their contractors were working to. But the excellent reviews that have greeted this production means that its unlikely that any other shows will see the inside of this beautiful theatre for some time to come. And the composer-and-producer's delighted reaction to the production makes it seem likely that it will soon also be seen in other parts of the world... the resurrected *Superstar* lives on!

Photos: Wyatt Enever and Michael Le Poer Trench