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SINGIN' IN THE RAIN



Vibrant, lively and fun, Chichester Festival Theatre's timely production of *Singin' in the Rain*, directed by artistic director Jonathan Church, opened at London's Palace Theatre in February - and the following morning it woke up to rave reviews. Sarah Rushton-Read reports from the biggest 'splash hit' musical to hit the West End . . .



Top: Simon Higlett.
Above: Tim Mitchell, LD.

As many who've seen the film will know, *Singin' in the Rain* is not short on story. It tells of a time of huge upheaval in the film industry; a time when movies makers were learning new skills, producers were discovering new stars and the film world was on the cusp of a new beginning - a story it seems everyone is keen to tell today.

Like the film, the show at the Palace gallops along at a kicking pace. By the time the all-singing, all-dancing entertainment extravaganza had received its second standing ovation I'd forgotten my usual aversion to stage musicals and found myself an enthusiastic fan.

This is a glorious production, with every creative element in total synchronicity. Adam

Cooper, Daniel Crossley and Scarlett Strallen provide glittering performances in roles made famous by Gene Kelly, Donald O'Connor and Debbie Reynolds. They lead a multi-talented cast, which features Katherine Kingsley as the hilarious blonde bombshell with the terrible voice, Lina Lamont. Andrew Wright's spellbinding choreography and Ian William Galloway's cleverly constructed video film clips hilariously highlight the challenges that the first 'talkie' films presented.

Simon Higlett's set oozes Hollywood, Matt McKenzie's sound design is an aural delight - clear, not overly loud and packed with subtle effects - and Tim Mitchell's evocative lighting brings a slightly surreal veil to the proceedings, as you never quite know what's supposed to be real and what's supposed to be make-believe.

Production photography by Manuel Harlan

Ironically, Higlett's first job in theatre was 20 years ago - on *Singin' in the Rain*. By his own admission, it put him off doing musicals for a long time. However, the chance to revisit the show was an opportunity he couldn't resist: "It's a great show and having had 20 years to think about it, I knew I could make it work!"

One of the major issues was staging the rain sequences. Unlike the Palladium, the floor for this production can't be changed half-way through the show. "Because only five minutes of the show is rain, and the rest is tap and ordinary dancing, we wanted to avoid having performers dancing in the wet unnecessarily," explains Higlett. "This means that Act 1 is 90 minutes long and Act 2 just 25 minutes. This led me to set the show in one location - the Monumental Pictures Studio."

A direct benefit of this is that scene changes are sharp. Nevertheless, there were occasions when the static set design gave Higlett some sleepless nights. "When it came to the *Good Morning* scene we couldn't work out what to do for the song and dance routine. This is the point where all three characters have been up all night and as part of their dance routine push their weight onto the back of a sofa to tip it over then skip off downstage right! We agreed to set the scene in the street and replace the sofa with a bench. I have exactly the same bench in my back garden, so obviously I tried the move a few times myself before proposing it to Jonathan!"

Inevitably, when the show moved to the West End there were things the creative team wanted to revisit, including the set lighting. "We struggled in Chichester with rain ingress affecting the soldered joints of the LED and also the damage that happened from being part of a busy rep'," says Higlett.

In The Palace, the pavement around the stage has been replaced with a single plastic surface. "I found the material in the USA and amazingly, the wetter the material gets the grippier it gets. The tap dancing is much better and we don't get the previous washboard effect. Even better, the dancers have never fallen over in the rain."

So what inspired the set design? "It's simple really, every bit of the set is referenced from Hollywood. The arch upstage is the entrance to Paramount Studios, the bi-plane is Busby Berkeley and RF's rather grand white desk is a direct copy of Louis B Mayer's desk. I used a lot of reference books and most of the images were black and white. It was only a small leap for Jonathan and I to decide to make the set black and white. Tim [Mitchell, LD] was delighted. He said it would work really well with his design and that we could pull out all the stops and celebrate the invention of glorious Technicolor when we got to *Broadway Melody*."

To that end, Higlett introduced plenty of LED into the floor and set. The upstage sliders are packed with LED and look spectacular. "Every pavement crack lights up. That concept grew and even the pavement slabs feature light-up stars and squares which come to life as Adam Cooper dances across them - an aside to Michael Jackson's iconic video for *Billie Jean*. This was a truly wonderful show to work on."

LD Tim Mitchell concurs: "*Singin' in the Rain* is a fantastic show to light, apart from the fact that I had to wear wellington boots and a sou'wester to focus it, it was great fun! Transferring to The Palace had its issues but what transfer doesn't? As Simon says, the set is not your average musical set, which I was delighted about. Scene changes are slick and we're not trying to accommodate unwieldy bits of moving scenery."

In the first act, and working with the black and white set, Mitchell uses a lot of grey, off-white and blue tones. "We don't start using the higher colour temperatures until we get to the second half and the *Broadway Melody* scene, which is a 12.5 minute singing and dancing spectacular," explains Mitchell. "I wanted to keep the colour palette simple until *Broadway Melody*, so a lot of the earlier numbers are open white Tungsten and Arc. I used Clay Paky 1500HPEs and Martin MAC 600s because of their high colour temperature, with ETC Revolutions and VL1000arcs as cross-light."

"When we get to *Broadway Melody* we use the LED in the floor, walls and flown pieces, which gives us loads of colour options. This, combined with Simon's fantastic - and very colourful - costumes gives us the Technicolor effect of all those MGM musicals we know and love."

Every crack in the floor is packed with LED. "Our aim was to heighten the action on stage. In Chichester we only had the floor lit; in London we've added a couple of big flying pieces. Simon was keen to light the pavement cracks and from that came the *Billie Jean*-style floor. It was only a matter of time before we added some stars and shapes in there. After that we agreed that we really needed to colour change the lighting in the cracks to enable them to chase more effectively. Now they irradiate out in a Busby Berkeley style array - fantastic.

"We also added lighting to the new scenic elements including the proscenium flats upstage. The one thing you've got in The Palace is height and we ended up with three vertical lengths of LED to go up and down the backstage flats. Obviously, there are large numbers of the audience who can't see the floor, so this gives them that extra dynamic."

Mitchell adds: "What I like about this show is that there's no big complex set or scene changes, which keeps me on

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Band Mics

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 Electro-Voice RE20



my toes. Each location is set by the performers, some wonderful props and some old-style theatre lighting. Yes, you've got some big old production numbers, but this show has no pretences - it's pure entertainment."

Nick Read of GDS Specials worked in close collaboration with Mitchell to design the flexible and robust LED lighting system: "Lighting had to be waterproof and shockproof, but with enough individual control to allow for three circuit chases," explains Read. "We supplied 400m of RGB, white and red LED lighting with waterproof PSUs and DMX control, 2600 pea bulbs, hundreds of metres of rope light and a battery-powered Street lamp - all of which Tim used to great effect."

When the show transferred to the Palace, Stage Entertainment's production manager Rich Blacksell asked GDS to refurbish the original show lighting and create the new effects for the additional set pieces. Bower Wood refurbished the set and replaced the original pavement surface, reducing the potential for LED damage from water ingress.

But it didn't just all happen on stage: Ian William Galloway of video collective Mesmer had his work cut out making the movie clips that the *Singin' in the Rain* story is centred around. The smooth integration of these films with the show belie a logistically and technically complex process.

The very first film the audience see is silent movie 'The Royal Rascal', which like many silent films has a live orchestra playing along. The music was written specifically for the movie and the show orchestra plays it live every night.

The first film scene in the second act is part of a scene where Kathy is dubbing over squawky-voiced Lena's part for the new talkie. Galloway explains: "The first time you see the clip, Lina sings really

badly and the audio for this comes from the video system. The second time it plays, Lina's voice has been replaced with a piano and Kathy sings along (as a 'test'). The piano audio is on the video system, and Kathy is live on stage. The third time the clip is played, the orchestra and Kathy both play live, in sync with Lina on the film. The only audio from the video system is a click-track to keep them all in sync.

To deliver this, Galloway first recorded the original song to a click-track. He then recorded the actual film of Lena singing. They also did this to the click-track, which meant that when the silent Lena film is played back, the click-track matches her words exactly and everyone can synchronise with it.

Inside the theatre, Mesmer specified two Panasonic 10.6k projectors. Stage Sound provided the projectors and Mesmer provided the playback. "We're using a really small Catalyst system running on Mac Minis, built in underneath the sound desk."

Galloway programmed the Catalyst, which in show mode is triggered by MIDI from the sound desk. "The sound op' has a manual switch over to a backup system in case anything goes wrong," explains Galloway. "There is also a hot backup running constantly in the background. It's an entirely separate system and the sound op' can switch the whole system over to backup without any audio interruption."

Making the films raised a lot of questions for Galloway and his team in terms of style and quality. "In the original 1952 *Singin' in the Rain*, the silent movie element took a lot of liberties. They're obviously 50s films as opposed to 1920s, so we decided to do the same in order to use better techniques."

With very little time for filming and three individuals to film for each character - the main lead and their two understudies -



scheduling was tight. "The Sitr ensemble is a talented bunch of performers and consequently they are never out of work. At the time we wanted to film them they were all on the Christmas shows. Half of them were on tour with *White Christmas* and the other half were in Leicester with *42nd Street*. The only time we could book everyone together was all day Sunday and Monday mornings. We then had to get each individual back in time for their Monday evening show."

Galloway ran two separate shoots. First was 'The Royal Rascal,' which was filmed at Parnham House, West Sussex. "It was probably the biggest film shoot I've ever done," admits Galloway. "We had to film everything nine times to accommodate the leads and their understudies - it was tight."

The second shoot was for 'The Dancing Cavalier', the musical talkie Don and Kathy join forces on. It takes place on a fake outdoor set, comprising a 5m tall, 10m wide set - of which there is a cut-down version on stage. "We booked out black island studios and filmed it, again doing every take nine times over."

The result is two highly entertaining films that interact with the show perfectly.

Equally for sound designer Matt McKenzie there are a number of elements he must consider. The vocals, the orchestra, the various sound effects, the rain, plus the film sequences and the multifarious tricks involved in making that work hand-in-hand with the live action.

"I wanted an old-fashioned, powerful acoustic sound for the band. To that end, all the mics are over 30 years old! For dynamic warmth I used Electro-Voice RE20s on the brass and Sennheiser MD421s on the woodwinds. Most of the other mics are Neumann KM140s - the updated classic KM84."

It's surprising that, in a traditional theatre like the Palace, the orchestra is located upstage of the set. Whilst this was the only way to do it in Chichester, with its thrust stage, why position them there in London? "This was actually the only place the orchestra could go, since there is a huge tank of water in the pit."

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Above, left: Simon Higlett's set design, and right: the set in model form.

The Palace is a big theatre - 1400 seats on four levels - and everyone needs to hear everything clearly. "Essentially I wanted the show to sound as natural as possible," says McKenzie. "To achieve this, the sound has to arrive at the audience's ear ever so slightly after it comes naturally from the actor. Ensuring the proportion of level and delay from different speakers is right for each seat makes all the difference."

Crucial to McKenzie's design is the Yamaha DME64. "It's an amazing machine. I can choose the input and output cards I want,

select all sorts of different processing modules and draw wires between them. I can have EQs, mixers or delays all in one little unit. The best thing is that it can be remotely controlled from a laptop, so I can whizz around the auditorium adjusting delay times, levels and EQ from wherever I happen to be. I have to say thanks to Ken Hampton, my production sound engineer, who is absolutely brilliant at turning a design scribbled on the back of an envelope into 100 speakers, all rigged in the right place, and connected to a system that delivers the same or similar sound to every seat."

For the Band PA, McKenzie used Meyer MSL2 loudspeakers. "The large drivers give me the warmth and punch I need. There are another two speakers positioned near the band, to establish location. For the vocal system I used Meyer UPA1s, which are flattering to the voice and feature the right dispersion for the Palace. The console is Yamaha's digital PM1D."

For effects such as the fake audience during the cinema scenes and the red carpet moments, McKenzie has rigged a whole load of speakers around the walls.



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The LED's were controlled during the production by GDS custom-built LiteWare CV control boards in waterproof enclosures via DMX.



SINGIN' IN THE RAIN

Palace Theatre London

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Creatives

Director: Jonathan Church

Choreographer: Andrew Wright

Designer: Simon Higlett

Lighting Designer: Tim Mitchell

Sound Designer: Matt McKenzie

Video Designer: Ian William Galloway

Associate Lighting Director: Adrian Barnes

Crew

Production Manager: Rich Blacksell

Production LX: Fraser Hall

Programmer: Viki Brennan

Board Op: Dave Trannor

Production Engineer: Ken Hampton

Singing and dancing are never easy to do together, but doing it in the rain adds another dimension for McKenzie. What happens when rain gets into a radio mic? "We're using DPA4061 capsules which are pretty good - if they get water in them they'll stop working, but once it drains away they're back up and running. We discussed using a click-track to make sure we always had the vocals, but we decided against it. If something happens, it happens! The audience appreciates being part of a live performance and that is actually more important than apparent perfection. When Cooper's hat gets truly soaked his mic does pick up the sound of the actual rain drops falling on it but you can't do much about that."

It seems nothing can dampen the feel-good factor this particular production has bought to the West End. *Singin' in the Rain* is a post-war celebration of the human spirit that leaves everyone feeling glorious inside - and I have a feeling it could be raining at The Palace Theatre for a long time to come . . . Do de do do, do de do do do . . . just singin' and dancing in the rain . . .

> www.singintherain.co.uk

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