

Lighting & Sound international

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entertainment, presentation, installation

plasma media

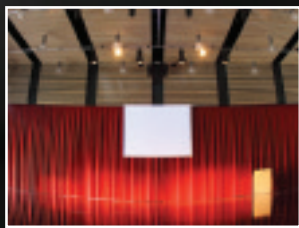
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Behind The Wall

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Simply Red: Farewell

Steve Moles catches up with Simply Red's final Farewell . . .



Three sell-out shows at the O2 tell you all you really need to know about the Simply Red Farewell tour: Mick Hucknall has little chance of waving goodbye to his back catalogue. I was listening to an earnest discussion on Andrew Marr's BBC R4 show Start the Week the other day and one of his brainy interlocutors proposed the following observation. "Because of the prevalence of digital gadgets people's lives these days are lived permanently in the near past, one feature of which is that they constantly access the music they grew up with rather than what's happening in the present right in front of them."

Anyone who has ever had someone busy 'texting' walk right into them on the High Street will be all too familiar with the fundamentals of that scenario. Being permanently plugged in is the new smack. We are all detached from the present to a greater or lesser degree, whether by MP3 or iTwinkle. What has that to do with Hucknall? Simply this: in a few years' time, some marketing wonk on planet Livid Notion will poke the computer: 'There's money to be made from a Simply Red tour, projected revenue is astronomical, call Hucknall' - and the machine will whirr back into life once more.

In the meantime, as Hucknall's long-serving production manager Kenny Underwood said to me, "for Mick, it's liberating. As the tour draws to a close we're only now beginning to come to terms with what it means. For Mick, it's the freedom to put down the restrictive elements of Simply Red and try new things."

Initially, I thought 'hang on a minute, hasn't he been

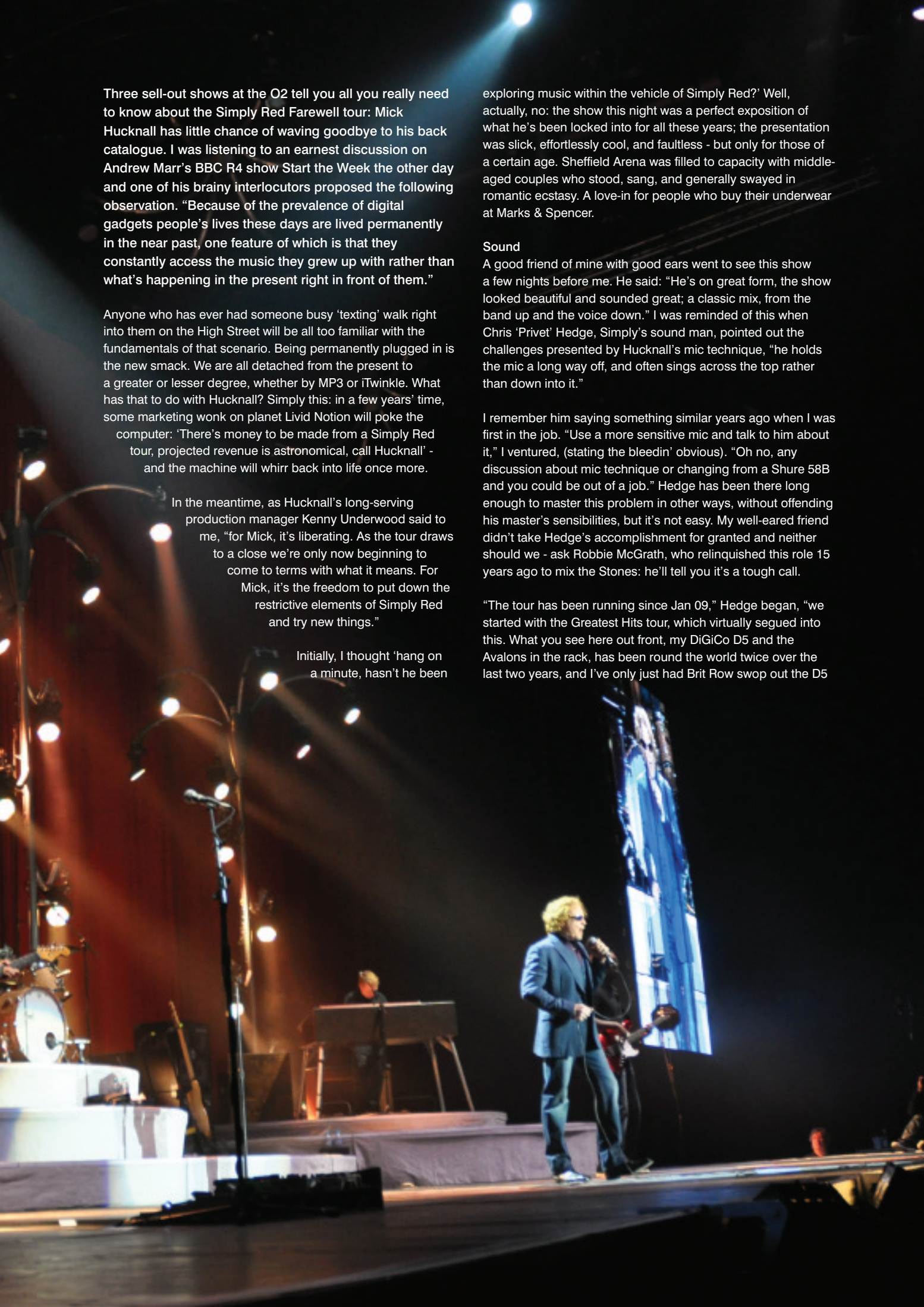
exploring music within the vehicle of Simply Red?' Well, actually, no: the show this night was a perfect exposition of what he's been locked into for all these years; the presentation was slick, effortlessly cool, and faultless - but only for those of a certain age. Sheffield Arena was filled to capacity with middle-aged couples who stood, sang, and generally swayed in romantic ecstasy. A love-in for people who buy their underwear at Marks & Spencer.

Sound

A good friend of mine with good ears went to see this show a few nights before me. He said: "He's on great form, the show looked beautiful and sounded great; a classic mix, from the band up and the voice down." I was reminded of this when Chris 'Privet' Hedge, Simply's sound man, pointed out the challenges presented by Hucknall's mic technique, "he holds the mic a long way off, and often sings across the top rather than down into it."

I remember him saying something similar years ago when I was first in the job. "Use a more sensitive mic and talk to him about it," I ventured, (stating the bleedin' obvious). "Oh no, any discussion about mic technique or changing from a Shure 58B and you could be out of a job." Hedge has been there long enough to master this problem in other ways, without offending his master's sensibilities, but it's not easy. My well-eared friend didn't take Hedge's accomplishment for granted and neither should we - ask Robbie McGrath, who relinquished this role 15 years ago to mix the Stones: he'll tell you it's a tough call.

"The tour has been running since Jan 09," Hedge began, "we started with the Greatest Hits tour, which virtually segued into this. What you see here out front, my DiGiCo D5 and the Avalons in the rack, has been round the world twice over the last two years, and I've only just had Brit Row swap out the D5





From top: Monitor engineer Graham 'Blakey' Blake with the Midas XL8.

Sound crew chief Pawel 'Pav' Zakrzewski (left) with Brit Row's Gerry Fradley.

FOH engineer Chris 'Privet' Hedge.

Above, left: Lighting operator Pryderi Baskerville.

Above, right: Screens director Tom Robinson - still suffering from the dreaded 'lurgie'.

last week because it was starting to need a bit of attention." (Britannia Row service the tour here, and provide control, monitors and support worldwide). "It has been a very reliable package," says Hedge.

As with any such lengthy and well-travelled tour, Hedge chose a PA he can pick-up anywhere, its ubiquity a by-product of its lasting success. "I just love V-DOSC, it's perfect for this band. Also in long rooms like this I can fly long enough hangs to get the HF to the back and get rid of delays."

Hedge, it transpires, is not principally concerned with saving labour. "It's about coherence. With a wide room we hang mains and sides of V-DOSC with dVs for the near down-fill; we'll even have Arcs hung as a line array to cover the back on those 270° shows. Because it's all L-Acoustics, all the different boxes sound the same and in the absence of delays you can more easily time align everything so the transition between the zones is imperceptible. The thing is, it's an open and musical system, the highs are breathy, the mids natural. It's not a bass-heavy show - I've got nine 218 subs a side, which my system tech Pawel 'Pav' Zakrzewski times in an arc, which helps me keep the lows tidy. For me, there's no colouration in this system, even on the violin. Pav and Gerry Fradley from Brit Row have this system singing for me every day."

Zakrzewski told me: "We have a routine with Privet: we have a recording of Kick and Snare from rehearsals, and a track by Seal which is Privet's favourite for use as a benchmark. After we time-align the system we check with those sounds to make sure kick and snare sound natural and nice. Then we listen to Seal to check the room and make the usual adjusts, like here in Sheffield, some gain adjustment to counter slap-back from the rear wall. For the low-end I created a sub arc - three tiny time differences between them to smooth out the humps. I usually find at worst when we walk the room three or four numbers into the show we might have to notch out one or two nasty

frequencies; but generally with this system if you set the room well enough in the afternoon it's good for the show that night."

Just one live 'grab' on the system EQ for Hedge; he has an XTA 448 on separate sends to the master rack, "so if Mick stops to sing under the side down-fills, I can quickly cut 10kHz to keep it safe."

As mentioned, Hucknall sings off mic, "and quite quietly too, particularly early in the show. In arenas I use no reverb at all because you hear enough of the room down the mic." And you handle this high input gain scenario how? "Like a monitor man would. I have to ring him out and use some fine notches on the 448 to remove the ugly stuff without compromising the character of his voice. The Avalon 737 is not there to compress, rather it's for the EQ, so as he moves off mic it keeps it warm, rather than his voice turning to paper. Fortunately, by the end of the show he does belt it out, so vocal gain improves as the show progresses. You're riding his fader and EQ all night."

Hucknall is also careful on stage, he consistently shields his mic from the kit with his body, and doesn't point it at the brass section; while some reverb from the house is constant, instrument bleed-in is rare.

"As with PA, I've chosen mics for robust touring. Nothing unexpected - 57A for guitars, 91/52 combo for kick, Beta 57 top and bottom for snare. I use dDrum triggers for the gates, which allows me to shape the envelope for the Toms, to shorten the back-end ring." It's this sort of work that keeps the low end tight. "On the desk all reverb return levels are out of the automation so I can alter them globally, depending on the venue; the only automation I'm using is Aux sends, cuts and fader settings for each song. In two years the only thing that's started to break down is one screen, which is why we swapped out the desk last week; the Avalons have been very hard wearing, just needing the occasional re-boot."

Has Hedge lined up anything to replace the steady stream of work Hucknall has given him? "I'm pitching for a few things in the Spring; but I will miss this; Brit Row put together a really good team with Gerry and Pav . . . This will be hard to follow."

Underwood's production assistant Debbie Bray forewarned me this was not the best day to visit as a nasty bug was doing the rounds. Monitor man Graham 'Blakey' Blake took himself to bed immediately after sound-check and a quick dinner, though he was kind enough to pose for a snap just before the show. He runs monitors from a Midas XL8: "I just love the desk," he volunteered in the few moments available, "just ideal for monitors."

I got the impression there would be no going back for Blake - and an interview he did with Midas certainly seemed to bear this out. He said: "The XL8 is a pleasure to use and so consistent. The band have real confidence in it so that the sound check has become something that's more 'nice to do' rather than 'essential to do'."

All the band use in in-ear monitoring - Sennheiser G2 systems - for which Blake provides nine stereo mixes, plus a separate mix for the drummer's bass cab. He also provides mixes for some of the backline techs.

In the Midas interview, Blake praised the XL8's POP(ulation) groups: "They make it so quick

and easy to access a group of inputs for mixes." He added: "The onboard graphics are great and the onboard compression is really handy. There's so much choice of compression, each has its own applications and it's all right in front of you. I am also using all the onboard gates and comps, which are good enough for me not to need any outboard, and the reverbs perform really well."

Of the desk's performance on the road, he said: "It's been freighted in and out of planes all over South America already and has been more than robust."

Lights

Dave Maxwell - who I haven't seen since Eric Clapton, which must be at least three years ago now - was absent this night. That doesn't stop me saying what a lovely job he's done for this farewell tour. Those slender, elegant chandelier lamp stands define the show, setting an immediate stylish imprimatur entirely in keeping with the romantic flavour of the show and underlining the band's musical speciality. As sports arenas go, this is as close as you're going to get to a posh club: intimacy for 11,000 is not to be sniffed at.

In Maxwell's absence, Pryderi Baskerville runs the light show from a Road Hog Full Boar. A man with extensive theatre background and a few years at Vari-Lite in the mid-90s after graduating the Welsh College of Music &

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www.britanniarow.com

Lighting:
Production Resource Group
uk.prg.com

Video: XL Video UK
www.xlvideo.com

Set: Brilliant Stages
www.brilliantstages.com

Backdrop & Drapes: J&C Joel
www.jcjoel.com

Rigging: Summit Steel (PRG)
uk.prg.com

Communications: Radio Tek
www.radiotek.co.uk

Catering: Eat to the Beat
www.eattothebeat.com

Trucking: Redburn Transfer
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Tour Personnel

Production Director:

Nick Levitt

Production Manager:

Kenny Underwood

Tour Manager:

Alan Morris

Production Coordinator:

Debbie Bray

Stage Manager:

Nik Rea

Keyboard Tech:

Vince Barker

Drum Tech:

Howard Barrett

Guitar Tech:

Morton Thobro

LIGHTS

Set & Lighting Design:

Dave Maxwell

Lighting Operator:

Pryderi Baskerville

Crew Chief:

Lars Kristiansen

Crew (FOH, System):

Philip Sharp

Dimmers:

Andrew Brown

Crew (Movers):

Matthew Bull,

Luke Pritchard

Rigger:

Richard Wythes

SOUND

FOH Engineer:

Chris Hedge

Monitor Engineer:

Graham Blake

Sound Crew Chief:

Pawel Zakrzewski

Sound Crew:

Gerry Fradley,

Steve Donovan

VIDEO

Screens Director:

Tom Robinson

Racks Engineer:

Bjorn Parry

LED Techs:

Alastair Wright,

Oliver Derynck

Cameraman:

James Cronley

Wardrobe:

Sara Batini

Carpenters:

Mark Berryman,

Stuart Simms

Chef:

Heather Crewdson

Caterers:

Bridget Jenkins,

Holly McHugh,

Patrick Quilligan



Drama, Baskerville was approached by Yvonne Donnelly-Smith, the account manager at PRG, who provide the lighting for this tour, to fill the role for Maxwell. "I'd never worked with him before when Yvonne called; I programmed the original Greatest Hits show with Dave and we've worked together on this together as it's evolved," he said.

If you look online you'll find several plot designs. In short order, the *Hits* tour started as a small B-size world touring package; that then grew to Arena status - bigger, but largely derivative and run from modified original show files. The plot for *Farewell* is a different rig altogether, but look closely and you'll recognise certain themed elements that validate Baskerville's 'evolutionary' claim. For an act as musically defined as Simply Red, this makes good sense. Like the music, all three rigs are soft edged; there's barely a straight element in there.

"After the arena tour with *Hits*, we did some summer festivals followed by trips to Asia, Australia and New Zealand, then we went into LH2, Dave Ridgeway's place on the A40 outside London [readers may recall reading about LH2, Neg Earth's new rehearsal facility, in our November 2010 issue] and started from scratch, but drew upon ideas that had worked so well - the lamp post structure being an obvious one. In terms of lighting instruments the main choices have remained - VL3000 Spots and MAC 2000 Washes. With this show rigged very high - the highest truss 16m above stage - the comparative output strengths of the two sources are well matched: the spots might be brighter, but there's lots of gubbins in the gate, whereas the Washes are open, so on the output side it is balanced. We also have some VL5s on this rig but the big change is the MAC 301s."

There are over a hundred of the 301s and Maxwell's decision in choosing them has ended up defining the whole look of the show. "Brilliant Stages built the chandeliers with built-in power and data. Originally we looked at the 301s to light the voiles between the onstage LED screens, but then we looked to the chandeliers and we realised we needed something light and simple. They've proved ideal - they're really fast, zoom

between 8° and 32° - but the real impact is their physical nature. They're small; visually it doesn't look like a moving head stuck at the end of a curved arm; and they don't have great mass, so when they all move simultaneously they don't start the chandelier swaying."

Those two simple facts exert an enormous impact on the stage; look at the photos and you see multiple lights with roughly similar sized apertures - MAC 2k, VL3k, VL5 and MAC 301 all from a distance look, for want of better comparison, like the orifice of a PAR64. While the spots and washes do the expected work, washing and spotting, the 301s set the texture and tone. They are so impactful because the ones mounted on the lamp-post style floor-standing chandeliers (as opposed to those chandeliers suspended from the grid above) are clearly in line of sight of the audience, ergo all the other lights must be the same. From the punter perspective, the whole rig is cohesive. This was entirely intended: Baskerville revealed the flown chandeliers had originally sported MAC 700 Wash, "but were changed for 301s for a more unified look." Well worth the change.

Maxwell worked with J&C Joel to produce bespoke reefer curtains made from the flame retardant seer-suckered Polyester Trevira fabric. There were 22 reefer curtains, each 1.6m wide, produced in all - seven with a drop of 7.2m, and 15 with a drop of 16.65m. To stabilise the curtains, bespoke hanging brackets were designed, consisting of slightly curved aluminium tubes, two lightweight clamps and a 500kg shackle. Two standard black unlined Polyester Trevira drapes and a further two unlined silver Polyester Trevira drapes were also supplied, the latter with eyelets in the curtain headers to facilitate the kabuki reveal (see below).

The Video element falls upon three surfaces, two flanking the stage (IMAG) and one set on stage, spilt into columns. "This is largely for content from my Catalyst, though occasionally I take live feed from Tom [Robinson, video director]. Dave got hold of every bit of band footage and edited down specific parts he felt appropriate to the various songs. So what we run each night depends very much on the set list."



Simply Red – Photo Credit: XL Video Holland



Photo Credit: Mark Fisher.

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The screens and the deeply scalloped drape plumes between them (voiles) don't appear until the 12th song; the kabuki reveal performed in darkness is, at this late juncture, quite unexpected. "The split between the screen surfaces is comparable to what's done with the Imag screens at the sides, but the separation is greater so the surface is less intrusive - more effect than screen," says Baskerville.

I watched over Baskerville's shoulder for two numbers after the kabuki drop and was delighted; the parts Maxwell has edited have been carefully chosen and crafted to fit; what appears on Baskerville's monitor pales in comparison to the way it works on the LED surface. Subliminal and ephemeral, the effect on the performance area is seductive rather than demanding of attention.

"This show builds and builds," concluded Baskerville - and this just three venues short of the tour's end. Dogged lot, these Welshmen.

The aforementioned Tom Robinson also appeared to have suffered the ravages of the tour lurgie, but was willing and able to talk through his role. A freelance director, Robinson is hoping to be working on the Aussie Pink Floyd documentary next year. I asked him first about the side screens being portrait and split into distinct columns. "It came from Dave the LD," he said. "It was also his concept to trim them low."

The screens sit at stage deck height, a position which relegates them to a snack view for the closer punters, rather than something the audience will find difficult to keep their eyes off during the show. Further away, they easily fulfil the Imag role. "Stylistically this format gives more of a 'look' to the live experience. As it's portrait I'm only using approximately 30% of what's captured on camera for the screens, but I am cutting two shows at once."



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Audiences are offered the chance to 'buy the show' - a USB stick is available for collection immediately after (order in advance at the concessions stands). Purchasers have the choice of audio only, or sound and video combined. Thus Robinson has to have his brain in two windows at once, which is possibly why he looks so baggy-eyed, rather than the lurgie.

"As Pryd' said, the show builds, and once the stage screen is revealed there are a couple of numbers where he takes my feed to the back screen, and very effective it is. We discussed where to mix and match and it's proved a very easy collaboration. The F LED screen system and PPU comes from XL (Germany), switcher is Kayak, and we have four cameras (Sony F50s, standard def'). Originally we had some pencil cameras, not bad items in a fixed position and they will accommodate some strong change in light gain, but they didn't look good enough in comparison to the main four - the contrast between image quality was distracting." There are two hand-helds on stage, a dolly cam in the pit, and one rostrum out front.

Underwood's observation of Hucknall's imminent freedom was well made; on the evidence of this night I suspect that as with his dalliance with the Faces last year, Hucknall is going to pop up in all kinds of unexpected places. Some will probably be rubbish, some great, and most of them interesting. He has the talent, he has the talismanic voice. Sit back and enjoy.

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See Dave Maxwell's lighting plot: www.isionline.co.uk/feb11







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