LIVE FROM THE 1989 LIGHT & SOUND SHOW - PAGES 31-60 PLUS EXCLUSIVE TECHNICALS ON MISS SAIGON AND LEICESTER HAYMARKET'S WORLD TOUR HAMLET

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MISS SAIGON: LONDON'S LATEST DAZZLER

Julian Williams scoops the technical story from lighting designer David Hersey

September 25th saw the opening, at the Theatre Royal Drury Lane, of the much heralded new musical 'Miss Saigon' by Alain Boublil and Claude-Michel Schonberg, directed by Nicholas Hytner. The designer was John Napier, and lighting designer David Hersey.

The show's opening scene pictures Saigon in 1975 as the last of the Americans are preparing to leave, and in the Dreamland Night Club there is a 'Miss Saigon' competition in progress. A US Marine falls for the girl he has won in a raffle.

We stay with the proceedings until Saigon becomes Ho Chi Minh City, witnessing the pandemonium and panic of evacuation and all that followed.

I asked Tony award-winning lighting designer David Hersey how he commenced the enormous task of lighting this spectacular show, where he was again working with designer John Napier, a relationship that goes back some 20 years.

"The starting point of any big musical is always the same," he began. "There's all the scenery, and all the scenes, and you've got to negotiate room for one or two lights! This particular product had been around for some time, going through a number of drafts, and was designed last year - in a completely different form from the one we are now doing.

"I began serious work on it in April this year to develop the rig," he continued. "The model was available, and there were certain known elements for a long time. The idea of using a helicopter was developed some time ago, as was the idea of using moving screens on each side.

"John Napier's ideas of the set were well advanced by the time I got involved, and he knew he wanted to hang a lot of gauzes and light boxes. We had to negotiate space for the lights, and so we brought in the bridges and side catwalks so they would accommodate both the scenic and lighting requirements.

"If you are going to do anything about Vietnam, the image of the helicopter is a pretty strong part of anything you see. We also found these steel pylons which are in lots of pictures of the landscape, and they've become a scenic device on the stage. The truth is that with these big sets today, lighting design as a starting point is to some extent by default. You find what space there is and you stake your claim and you try to fill it up with stuff.

"Obviously, as anyone who has been around for a while will know, you do develop a kind of style of your own. There are certain kinds of ingredients you like to have around as part of your 'kit'. And those ingredients you tend to develop from show to show - so there are not always the same ingredients, but there is a kind of logical progression. The light curtain is a case in point."

While talking about equipment, I asked David Hersey if there was anything in this show which might be the starting point of new effects, such as a product he may develop further.

"We've been motorising light curtains for a while now, but having them with a colour change makes them a very powerful weapon! We went to a couple of scroll people and said we wanted to do this. We had one generation done for the 'Carmen' production at Earls Court, which Tasco built, and at the same time the Swedish company Camelont (who are marketed in this country by M&M Lighting) were having a go as well. I requested that they send me a prototype."

I asked him if the light curtains in this show were the first to be 'scrollerised? "Absolutely," he said. "They were the second lot!



The 25 foot statue of Ho Chi Minh is mounted on a hydraulic lifting platform.



'Miss Saigon' contest at the Dreamland Bar: 'The Heat is on in Saigon'.





In a highly acclaimed performance engineer Jonathan Pryce entices the tourists of bustling Bangkok (left), in stark contrast to the bleak and war-worn Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City) from where Kim and her child flee as refugees (right).

We did it for Carmen which was a good way of solving a problem for that project, but I wanted to make sure that the technology existed before Miss Saigon, because there are some mechanical problems involved. It isn't something you can just go out to your lighting store for. You can't simply bring back an armful of light curtain scrollers!

"We had to alter our motorising hardware a bit because it changed all the balance points. It makes the light curtain a different thing, and it needed sorting out. There are 11 colours including open-white, and I have to admit it will be hard to go back to not having them in another situation.



A Rainbow followspot scroller in use on a R&V 1k low voltage spot.

"At the opening we also wanted to do a sunrise effect coming up over the horizon, and used a CCT 2.5kW 25° profile, projecting on gauze with the light going through in a deep coloured red. We had been fighting a losing battle, as you need as much 'poke' as you can get, and the CCT profile provided the answer as it is a very hot lamp, and CCT were able to send it to me right away. We put our standard DHA 'Yo-Yo' linear moving gobo (which again came out of a need to do something as a moon on another production) in upside down. It has a scroller on it so it can change from red to amber.

"There are 20 sections of light curtain (4 runs of 5). Originally we had 10 on each of the side catwalks, but they had to be cut to help afford the Vari*Lites - you have to keep very strictly within a budget for hire fees.

"The show is already sold out to March next year, which is a very privileged position to be in. There are 30 musicians in the pit and 41 artistes on stage - so why shouldn't I have a Vari*Lite rig as well? If you don't get a chance to use it in this situation, when do you ever?

"The trouble is, it allows you to do some things I will really regret having to give up in other more normal situations. It's very interesting how fluid it can become. We've got light curtains following trucks. Trucks come in with light curtains sweeping down on them!

"One always wants more Vari*Lites than one could have, and that led us to putting up these tracks in the front of the pros. Jim Douglas motorised the Triple E track so we can run the Vari*Lites up, down, and along the front of the pros. We then put in a second track with two on it, which gave us four units. This means we can have three lights at the top, so we can have three units together. And it also gives us the light in the right place, and the opportunity to get 'round' the scenery!

David Hersey explained his reasons: "If I could have put five or six lamps in the proscenium position, I probably wouldn't have done it - and these lamps are very expensive. It was a really good way of maximising the value of the lamps and making them earn their keep! They could always be used and they would always be in a usable position for a scene.

"I actually think that with a cleverly thought out rig with a few tracks, you could get down to a surprisingly small number of units to light a show. I've always been sceptical about that because usually when you've got a moving light rig you get a 'real' rig as well, just in case! What's interesting now is that even some of the specials in the real rig have been replaced with the Vari*Lites.

"I've still used a dozen beamlights around the place. I feel very secure when I have those. Also it's nice if you have a beamlight as a special; and if you've got a beamlight as a follow spot which can jump as an actor moves from one to the other.

"I have used some CCT Silhouette 15's that are doing some gobo work, and some Par cans doing some ordinary colour washes. For instance, there's the gauze panels which fly in and out which have to be lit from the bottom sometimes, so that you have a sense of horizon. In order to do that we've introduced a two colour coverage built into the floor on both the inside and outside.

"And then we have the two colours from behind at the top, but we don't have the equivalent coverage at the top from the front. But we do have the ability to streak it



The Vari*Lite Artisan control.



The new Mini-Artisan is used as back-up.

from the front with the Vari*Lite positions above! We have three Pani projectors: one on the bridge lining the backcloth, and one on each side, lining the sides."

I asked if there have been any major problems for him on the show. "Not really," he responded. "The problems have been get-ting to do it - for all the other departments to get their act together so we can get under way. It's just a question of scale with a show like this. I've had a great team, and I'm very well looked after."

I asked at what point he considered the use of the Vari*Lite system on this production, knowing he had used them on recent stage shows in theatres. What was his specification to Vari-Lite?

"The starting point is the cost: Vari*Lites are expensive. Starlites are at least as expensive, if not more expensive. You always need to get a couple of quotes on a show of this size. But the real issue very quickly became a matter of the units.

'Vari-Lite's new VL4 unit, which are colour

Kimpton Walker - Miss Saigon's Builders

Computer programming makes possible the orchestration of 14 principal trucked movements, lateral, diagonal

and vertical. These include six multi-purpose pylons that are both scenic and practical since while powerful visually, they also tow together the interlocking sets as vital pieces of stage machinery. Bridging all the movement below is the steel catwalk that envelops the entire 400 sq.m. stage area and contains within it in their 'flown' positions the full size working helicopter and gigantic golden statue of Ho Chi Minh. Kimpton Walker's metal department built the catwalk and supplied Ho Chi Minh with his hydraulic lifting

gear. At the same time the art department formed the towering proportions of the leader. Miss Saigon's sets, from downtown interior to brilliantly lit but sleazy night spot, are a faithful representation of the Gl's dream world and the tourist's of Bangkok. The props with which Kimpton Walker created these backgrounds were made in KW workshops or unearthed from authentic Kimpton Walker Created these backgrounds were made in KW workshops or unearthed from authentic sources. They contribute a visual realism that is one of the hallmarks of the show. Sleazy, jagged or split in pieces, they are nevertheless accurate to a millimetre when it comes to the mechanics of scene changing. Alan Walker was responsible for designing and supervising the KW work which took three months on the drawing board and 18,000 hours in the Kimpton Walker workshops.

dissolve, don't have gobos and things, but they are half the price of a regular VL2B or a Starlite. That's a big consideration. The number of units I could have, seemed on the face of it to be greater with the Vari*Lites, although in the end I must say that Starlite did come up with an extremely good quote.

"It was really about the VL4's, and the fact that I could get these light colour dissolves, which are a major element in the show. I needed that kind of a light. In the event the actual choice of colours of the Vari*Lite are in my view far more theatre orientated perhaps than the Starlite. The Starlite has some very good rock and roll colours and is a very good rock and roll unit, but the current generation doesn't have the subtlety of the Vari*Lite.

"In the sense that you can get more coloured tints - though it could be arguable that some of the deep colours are deeper than on the Starlite - it seems to be much more 'actor friendly'. The quality of the light, also the fade rates and the ability to fade them in and out gently and unobtrusively, seems at this moment in time to be far superior with the Vari*Lite.

"We are using them here like the theatre lights we are fading up and down. And if something is wrong I can complain about it in the same way as if it were a stage light, which is really quite a remarkable achievement.

"It already comes within the house staff operation responsibilities, and this is a major policy departure over the past year, that Vari-Lite are prepared to allow this without having to have one of their own operators all the time. And you don't really need to have that situation once the show has settled down.

"It's hell to plot one of these shows, especially the way we are doing this one, because the Vari*Lite control desk has not only the Vari*Lites on it, but also the 20 light curtain scrollers, 40 Par lamp scrollers, follow spot scrollers, and all the light curtain motors. Everything is on the one desk. We could have bought another card and got another 384 channels on the Strand Galaxy lighting control board and done it on that, but it seemed a good idea to have all the equipment that moves under the control of somebody who is used to dealing with moving things.

The Vari*Lite board has the capability of driving conventional dimmers, and they like the idea of putting the whole show onto the Vari*Lite board. But it's not really ready for that yet, coming up from the rock and roll end as opposed to the kind of control that we are used to in the theatre. It doesn't have the refinements that we are used to. Nor necessarily could it, because motion is a different problem than just dimming.

"We have been planning a big 'Starlight Express' tour which is going out in America this fall. It's going out rock and roll style with everything trussed and boxed, and we actually considered putting the whole thing on the Vari*Lite desk. But we decided against it because it's a guick set-up and it's far better for the Vari*Lite man to do his own thing with his own control desk, while the conventional work was dealt with with that operator's own control desk. That way one doesn't slow the other one down. So it's much better to keep them totally separate in a situation like that.

"Clearly, if you had a system with four or five luminaires on a track, and you had four or five of those tracks and you had a couple of vertical possibilities as well with 20 or 30

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The Strand Galaxy 2 in the Theatre Royal Drury Lane control room.

lamps, you could do an awful lot of damage. You really could. It's amazing how much you could do!

'We are only using 19 units here (10 VL4's and 9 VL2B's), and I have actually been taking down lamps. I've actually cut into the conventional rig we put up for the show, and sent it back. Because of the flexibility with these units I haven't needed so many specials, except in some situations where the Vari*Lites are too busy doing other things at that time."

I suggested that was the reason he was using conventional lights. "Yes, because I've got them committed to doing lots of other things which the conventional lights couldn't do, and there are a few beamlight specials. What I really want is what I'm calling a 'Vari-Beamlight'. I want to be able to have a beamlight I can move around and change colour and track a bit as well!

"I think a system that is worked out of Strand's PALS idea, that had some not-soexpensive units, would be good to see. We went into the consideration of these units as part of what we might have to do for this show, but PALS were going to cost so much money you might as well have the real thing!" he said.

"We didn't want to end up with many different systems on one show, and when the cost of the 'all-singing all-dancing' lantern is so high you need to be able to augment it with other things. An ordinary show can't afford it. The National Theatre can't afford to use them either, but it would be wonderful if you could have a nucleus of these kind of things in difficult positions."

How did he feel about having a moving light as a performer or as a remote controlled unit for positioning the light?

"If you've got the right equipment, you've got both options. In Miss Saigon it does a couple of obvious cues and we use them for a moving effect a couple of times in the show, but basically they are not doing just that. They have the option to do it, and when the show requires it you can do it. The point is it gives you the colour wash when you want it and you can change it, and you can do a live colour dissolve on a colour wash when you want. What's really interesting is using them with the Par scrollers as background or with the light curtain with a colour change, while mixing with the Vari*Lite. It's a wonderful combination.

"We do one cue where the scrollers do a

live colour change over a minute and a half, going from an '04' into a '19' as part of the sunset where it is nice to be able to do a slow, live colour change.

"Because of the way the fourth bank of light curtain works I've had to split one run of light curtains up into three independently motorised sections. In the upstage run the centre section has its own motor and that often works in a different position than its mates either side, or it works with them. This is because the centre section has to be able to drop to the deck for the helicopter effect . . .



David Hersey

Since moving from New York to London in 1968 David Hersey, has designed the lighting for some 200 produc-tions for most of England's major theatre, opera and ballet companies. His work has been seen in many cities around the world and has won several awards in America including three Tony awards.

His West End productions include: Miss Saigon, Les Miserables, Cats, Starlight Express, Chess, Metropolis, Song and Dance (sets and lights), Marilyn (sets and lights) and Evita. Other productions have included: The Little Shop of Horrors, Hapgood, The King and I, The Sound of Music and Camelot. On Broadway he has lit Les Miserables, Cats, Starlight Express, Nicholas Nickleby,

Miserables, Cats, Starlight Express, Nicholas Nickleby, Merrily We Roll Along and Evita. For ten years, from 1974 to 1984, he was lighting con-sultant to London's National Theatre, during which time he lit 26 plays, which included: Guys and Dolls, The Government Inspector and more recently Bartholomew Fair, and Ghetto. For the Royal Shakespeare Company, the plays he has lit include: Peter Pan, Mother Courage, As You Like It, Nicholas Nickleby and Too True To Be Good.

He has lit numerous operas and ballets for the Royal Opera, English National Opera, Ballet Rambert, London Contemporary Dance, and Scottish Ballet. His recent work at Clyndebourne includes, Idomineo, Albert Herring, Simon Boccanegra, Porgy and Bess, and La Traviata. Most recently he has lit Carmen at Earl's Court, in London.

He is the founder of DHA Lighting Ltd., whose head offices are in London, and which concentrates on the design and manufacture of specialist lighting equipment and effects.

From 1984 to 1986, he served as Chairman of The Association of Lighting Designers.

Awards:

Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle: Lighting 1979 Evita Drama Logue Critics Award: Lighting Designer 1980 The Crucifer of Blood

Tony Award Best Lighting Design 1980: Evita Maharam Foundation Design Award 1982: Nicholas Nickleby Tony Award Best Lighting Design 1983: Cats

Drama Desk Award Outstanding Lighting Design 1983: Cats Dora Mavor Moore Award for Outstanding Lighting Design 1984: Cats

1984: Cats Drama Logue Critics Award Lighting Design 1985: Old Times Civic Trust Award 1985: Exterior Lighting of Old Vic Theatre, London Tony Award Best Lighting Design 1987: Les Miserables Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle: Lighting 1988 Les

Miserables

Dora Mayor Moore Award for Outstanding Lighting Design 1989: Les Miserables

Miss Saigon, Theatre Royal Drury Lane

Lighting Equipment (courtesy White Light, London) Lanterns: 49 Sil 30 axial 1k 64 Sil 15 axial 1k 70 Par 64 6 Par 64 short nose 12 R&V beamlight 6 2k fresnels 4 AC1001 floods 6 500w floods LF 1000w floods 42 Coda 4 battens 70 Coda 1 floods 4 Coda 3 battens 7 Minuette fresnels 12 Patt 123 fresnels 2 Patt 264 4 Patt 23 2 M16 Howie battens 13 M16 Birdies c/w transformers 8 Par 36 pinspots Effects and Scenic Projection: 3 Pani BP5 projectors c/w auto slide changers 2 13.5cm lenses 1 11cm lens 8 2k effects projectors 8 storm cloud effects 8 5.5" lens Effects 6 CCT Mx colourwheels 1 12" half mirror ball gobo rotators 1 indexing gobo Yo-Yo effect 20 Thomas motorised light curtains 20 3kva transformers 20 Rainbow light curtain colour scrollers 41 Rainbow colour scrollers 6 R&V 1k followspots c/w spill rings 6 manual dimmers 6 Rainbow followspot scrollers 4 Rosco 1500 smoke machines 1 Minimist smoke machine 1 JEM Heavy Fog 2 Howie dry ice machines Cable, etc.: 6,400 ft Lectriflex 77 male spiders 42 female spiders 35 stage boxes 11,000' 15A TRS cable (over 500 lengths!) 140 2 way Lumex splitters 3000' 4mm TRS cable 1200' DMX control cable 2300' Rainbow control cable Control, etc.: 1 Arri Connexion input module 1 Arri Connexion Plus 2 Arri Connexion remotes 1 mains conditioner 6 Rainbow power supplies and splitters Act 6 dimmer 1 Mx colour wheel controller Lighting Control: Strand Galaxy 2 Vari*Lite equipment: (courtesy Vari-Lite Europe Ltd.) 9 x VL2B's, four on hoists 10 x VL4's with top hats

Vari-Lite VLD (dimmer interface) which controlled the 6 moving light curtains and their 20 scrollers, 40 Par scrollers, and 6 scrollers for the followspots. Control: Vari-Lite Artisan control backed up by a Mini

Artisan. (Note: Miss Saigon saw the first UK use of the new

Vari*Lite VL4 and Mini Artisan.)