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THE ENTERTAINMENT TECHNOLOGY MONTHLY



BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

PHOTO: MICHAEL LE POER TRENCH

- The Good, The Bad and The Ugly: Disney's Beauty and the Beast
- The Big PA Spend in the Touring World
- FX Rentals: Taking the Hire Ground
- Supertramp's Tour de Force in Rotterdam
- Solitaire at the Swan Hunter Shipyard
- Lighting Designer Simon Sidi in Profile

PLASA

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BRING OUT THE BEAST

As London's most expensive musical settles into its stride at the Dominion Theatre, Rob Halliday looks at where a substantial portion of the reported £10m has been spent

It's a funny old world at times: while the tradition has been for new musicals to start on the stage and then progress to the cinema - a trend undergoing a revival with last year's film of *Evita* and talk of a film version of *Phantom*, allegedly to star John Travolta - Disney, an undisputed king of cinema, are moving in the other direction. *Beauty and the Beast* enjoyed considerable success as an animated feature film and is now, as the advertising constantly points out, London's most expensive musical - a £10m blockbuster that has settled into the Dominion Theatre for what all involved hope will be a long run. Turning a stage show into a film is relatively easy: the cynic might say that you just employ a star (singing ability optional) and scale up the visuals. But to turn a film into a show - especially an animated film, where just about anything goes? That's harder.

It works in this case because even in its film incarnation, *Beauty and the Beast* had a familiar story told in the structure of a good old-fashioned musical - narrative linked songs, interspersed with moments of spectacle. This is probably because of the theatrical background of its creators: author Linda Woolverton, composer Alan Menken and lyricist Howard Ashman.

Once the film was released, its theatrical nature was recognised by director Robert Jess Roth, designer Stan Meyer and choreographer Matt West, a trio then working on shows and parades at Disney's American theme parks. They took a proposal to produce a stage version to the Disney executives who, after some persuasion, agreed. The show, expanded with extra lyrics by Tim Rice, brought in after Howard Ashman's death in 1991, opened on Broadway in 1994, collecting countless awards and spawning not only further productions around the world (London is version 10), but also a new division of Disney - Disney Theatricals, which owns the New Amsterdam Theatre on Broadway and is actively involved in developing more musicals.

DESIGN

The show's look is based quite closely on the film - the human characters, Belle, her father, Gaston and the villagers, are dressed practically identically to their cartoon counterparts, while scenic designer Stan Meyer also manages to cram most of the locations featured in the film onto the stage. Perhaps, the biggest challenge facing the creative team was translating the 'object' characters from the film - Mrs Potts the teapot, Lumière the candlestick, Cogsworth the clock and their friends - into something that would work on stage.

Meyer's design combines techniques from scenic design through the ages. There are moving 3D pieces of all sizes: the enormous castle which tracks up and down stage, the castle's west wing which also moves up and down stage, but can spin to show the Beast outside on his balcony (a complex piece of engineering, since the tower has to change its



Beauty and the Beast: the highest production values, but critics have been 'sniffy'.



rake to compensate for the raked floor as it turns) and the village houses which track on and off stage. There are flown pieces, notably the exterior of the Beast's castle and a series of drapes and cloths used for various locations inside. And there are pieces which rise up from the floor - a bench downstage and the huge staircase which rises up centre stage during the huge Be Our Guest production number.

But Meyer is also not afraid to use the oldest type of theatrical scenery, and one which has gone somewhat out of fashion in these days of film-style 3D realism: the painted cloth. The cloths work because they are beautifully detailed and exceptionally well painted, and because a great deal of care has been taken in lighting them.

Getting this scenery up and working was entrusted to production managers Simon Marlowe and Stewart Crosbie and production carpenter Micky Murray who, to a great extent, treated the show as a new British production rather than just a clone of the New York version - with one British contribution, the new versions of the pyrotechnic effects created by Le Maitre, particularly delighting the director and designer. The five main players in its construction were the Artscene Partnership,

which painted the backcloths, Terry Murphy Scenery, which built and painted the 3D elements, Delstar Engineering, who constructed the structural elements and installed the sub-stage hydraulic ring-main, Stage Drives and Controls who were responsible for the automation and Vertigo Rigging who hung it all in the air.

The range of projects tackled by these companies were very diverse, but all required tight co-ordination with each other. The Beast's castle, for example, moves up and down stage from self-contained drive systems, but also contains dimmers to feed the many

lighting units hidden within it, and pulls a large cable 'drag chain' containing automation, lighting, Vari*Lite control and power, and control for items such as the magic rose with falling petals - a Howard Eaton Lighting Ltd (HELL) special. As well as making this work, Delstar also found themselves refurbishing the Dominion's own, long unused, centre stage lift, put to use in the show for the Be Our Guest number, while Vertigo had to revamp the theatre's grid, suspend the Foy flying system used to fly the enchantress at the start of the show, support the stage lift while Delstar worked on it and even lift the industrial-sized washing and drying machines into the wardrobe department, newly constructed as part of the extension at the rear of the theatre. With the producers talking of a run of at least five years for the show, Vertigo and their crew chief Ken Mehmed worked to ensure that all of the rigging would meet forthcoming safety standards. And with the show's flying pieces forming a very tight fit in the grid, the company also tried to build in flexibility with a pulley block system that allowed millimetre-fine adjustment up-and-down stage so that when the inevitable clash of flying pieces occurred, it could be resolved with the minimum of fuss.

As is now becoming standard practice in large-scale musicals, all of the scenery in the show is automated, partly to allow complex movement sequences to be run identically night after night, and partly because that's how this show has always been done because of the high labour costs in America. The automation system was supplied by Barry Steele and his Stage Drives and Control company, using their new PC-based control system which controls the 44 counterweight-assisted motorised flying pieces, the hydraulically powered pieces, as well as elements such as tracking chairs, tracking cloths (these running on Triple E Unitrack, with some of the tracks corded in an unusual manner and including rearfold carriers to allow the soft material to stack correctly in the wings) and the line of pop-up candles across the front of the stage.

LIGHTING

On becoming part of the creative team for *Beauty*, lighting designer Natasha Katz joined a director and a designer who had already been working on the project for a couple of years, and so had already filled most of the available space overhead! To gain the most flexibility in what little space remained, Katz turned to Vari*Lites to form the core of the design for which she received a Tony lighting award nomination. Vari*Lites remain the principal part of the rig in the London production: 67 units, a mixture of VL2Cs and VL4s overhead and on the side-lighting ladders, with VL6s on the circle front and tucked away between the iron and the red show portal and VL5s built in to the top of the Beast's castle.



Barry James as 'Cogsworth'.

The rest of the rig is largely a mixture of Par cans and ETC Source 4s. Front-lighting comes from a new lighting bridge, custom built and installed by Vertigo, that runs practically the full width of the Dominion's wide auditorium. This contains a high- and low-bar, each fed from custom trunking supplied by HELL and containing a mixture of 10 degree and 19 degree Source 4s, and allows easy access for maintenance or focusing. The theatre's lower circle position was refurbished, with the old boxes being removed and a new, wider bar installed and then filled with Source 4s, Par cans, VL5s, a Pani 2.4K projector complete with

film scroller and greyscale shutter from Production Arts used to project falling rain in the climactic final battle sequence, and even one five-degree Source 4 to give a bright highlight to the falling rose petal painted on the show's front gauze.

Upstage is a battery of floodlights to tackle the huge range of backcloths; these are lit with a mixture of direct and indirect light from above and below. ADB 1K floods are recessed into troughs in the show deck, some of these loaded with Devon glass, capable of giving deep colour without burning out, mounted in custom colour stand-offs supplied by City Theatrical in New York, while overhead there is a combination of three- and four-cell 1K floods, lines of Par cans (substituted for the 6-cell Par striplights found in the States) giving another six colours, and then a line of DHA Digital Light Curtains fitted, unusually but effectively, with medium flood bulbs.

The rig also contains close-on 100 Rainbow 2-16 scrollers, System 1200 photoflash strobes used for lighting effects, remote controlled dimmers from Howard Eaton Lighting driving some practicals in the battery-powered invention, four of the superb SS-6000 dry ice machines from City Theatrical, and 40 DHA Double Gobo Rotators, some used to project rotating knives and forks in *Be Our Guest*, the rest used to give a 'sparkly' effect to the cloths and characters in some numbers. The conventionals in the rig were driven by a dual-electronics ETC Obsession 1500 desk, with a Macintosh driving the DLCs, another Mac controlling the Pani film loop, and an Artisan used to program the Vari*Lites, which



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was replaced by a Mini Artisan 2 once the show was running. The Obsession's ETCNet ethernet network was used to drive an Obsession designer's remote on the production desk as well as a remote video node at the Artisan which allowed the Vari*Lite operator to see the cue sheet and so stay in sync during plotting.

All the lighting equipment for the show was supplied by Theatre Projects and Vari-Lite, with TP's Michael Odam serving as UK associate lighting designer and the rig and control system being installed by production electrician Gerry Amies and his team of Jonathan Badger, Greg Hamlyn and electricians Mark Whittemore and Mark Leahy; the Vari*Lites were installed by Paul Cooke and Chris Dunford, programmed by Stuart Porter and are now operated by Simon Targett.

However, with the show requiring a great deal of other electrical work, including a new dimmer installation, new power supplies for automation, cable management for the scenery and an enormous number of practical circuits built into the set, TP expanded their role to become the overall electrical manager for the project. They then sub-contracted Dick Smith of RWS Electrical to re-wire the theatre's dimmer outlets to a mixture of Socapex and 15A outlets, then install a new mains distribution system and 366 new ETC Sensor dimmers in the sub-stage dimmer room.

On stage, Ken Priddy was contracted to install the cable management systems to several sliding trucks and the more extensive system feeding the Beast's castle. This consists of two drag chains, one to the main castle and one to the west wing, that contain automation



Derek Griffiths as 'Lumière' and Rebecca Thornhill as 'Babette'.

power and control, DMX, Vari*Lite data and power to feed the ADB dimmers built in to the base of the two trucks. With the VL5s in the truck being controlled from the Artisan but powered from the truck's on-board dimmers, a merging arrangement was also required to convert the Artisan data to DMX, then feed it to the dimmers alongside the data from the Obsession.

Theatre Projects also oversaw the practical installation; Andy Evans managed this area, daunting because practically every piece of scenery contained some kind of light source,

from the red eyes in the monsters moulded into the castle's tracking columns, through the birdies highlighting areas of the castle itself, to the chasing bulbs, neon and sparkle strobes built into the huge Be Our Guest flown portals, the show portal and several other flown cloths. Evans and his team became shadowy creatures during the fit-up, eventually appearing only at night when they could work on bits of the set uninterrupted!

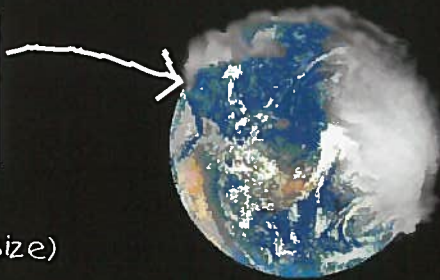
As the lighting period for Beauty approached, the American lighting team for the show was actually being stretched quite thinly, with Natasha Katz herself about to give birth to her second child and associate lighting designer Greg Cohen stuck in Mexico City working on another production of the show. Early lighting was thus handled by Aland Henderson, expanding from his usual role of Vari*Lite programmer, and assistant lighting designer Dan Walker alongside Mike Odam, with Natasha Katz arriving just before the start of previews to apply her own refinements and revisions. The conventional rig was focused very quickly, but the vast majority of the show is lit using the Vari*Lite rig which, with a hard-edged light and a wash light clustered together just about everywhere, is close to being the ultimate rep moving light rig, able to get a light of any quality, in any colour, from any angle to just about anywhere on the stage.

The Vari*Lites do all of the specials in the show, as well as many of the washes, some area lighting and special effects. Whereas *Tommy*, seen in London last year, used the pure white of the VL2Cs to great effect, this show plays with the strong, crisp colours available from

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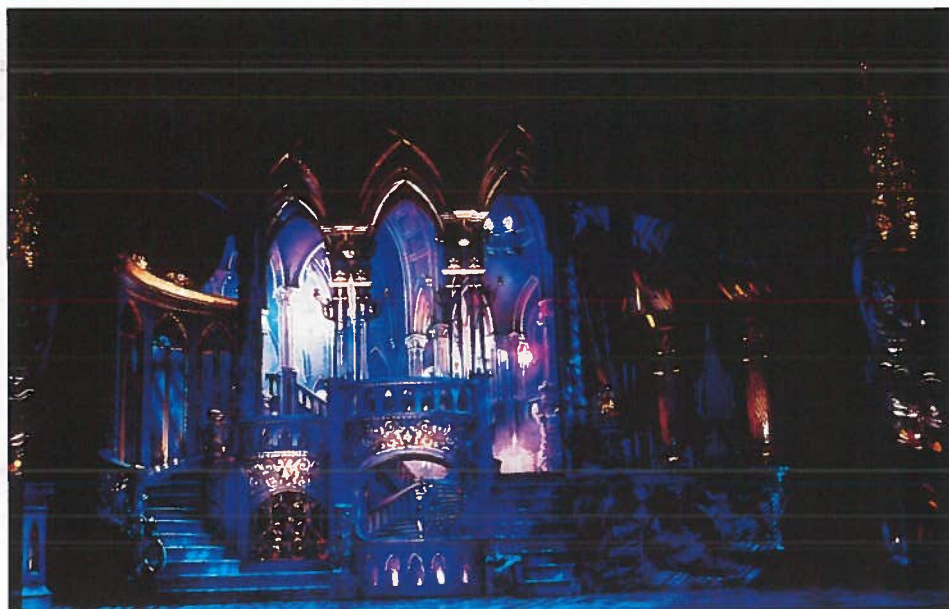
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their VL2 and VL4 colour mixing systems, especially when lighting brightly coloured pieces of scenery. The rest of the rig just fills the gaps and lights the cloths, with four followspots (two 2K Super Troupers in the front box and two Lycian StarkLites in the side auditorium boxes) highlighting principles. Unable to get the soft edge they desired from the spots, Henderson and Walker had some 'baggies' - American plastic sandwich bags - Fedexed over from the States, to give a diffusion to the edge of the beam that is subtler than the more commercial frosts!

Lighting sessions were also very entertaining because of director Rob Roth's fascination with the lighting technology, 'just hold positions while we Vari*Lite you', being one of the most commonly-heard cries. The result is a very busy show, lighting wise: the Obsession has no free effects, and somewhere less than 5% of free cue memory. It is distinctively 'American musical' in style at times - bright washes made up from several colours, all cleanly focused off the set - yet the Vari*Lites also allow the creation of moody gobo states, or tight highlights to particular areas. When spectacle is required, it is delivered - especially in Be Our Guest when at one point it almost seems that every lamp in the rig is chasing. One of the best moments comes in the garden scene where the Beast and Belle waltz. Here, there is a painted backcloth, but with the painted lamps wired with tiny bulbs, a pair of 3D gates dressed with 3D flowers, and a beautiful blue gobo wash from the Vari*Lites that lets Belle's dress appear to flow as she moves. The audience were enraptured. The lighting designer's hope is that the show will run long enough on Broadway for her children to appreciate its magic . . .

EFFECTS

Le Maitre's brief was to supply and install all the pyrotechnic effects. As the show was an exact copy of the US version, the company had to custom make all the effects to Disney's requirements. For this Le Maitre put chief chemist Colin Lindsay to work, whilst technicians set about installing all the cabling to shoot the effects. Key effects are installed into Maurice's cart, whilst smoke effects are



Vari*Lites handle all of the specials in the show, as well as many of the washes.

packed into Mrs Pott's spout with both fired by the actors from hand-held firing systems. The company were also responsible for the ignited fireball which is thrown across the stage and explodes on impact.

SOUND

It was the combination of a great deal of experience and of being in the right place at the right time that landed Richard Sharratt the first large-scale musical sound design of his own. Originally asked to be the UK associate to sound designer Jonathan Deans, Sharratt's role on the London production grew slowly as Deans and Disney came into dispute over the ownership of sound effects in the show. This probably isn't the place to get involved with the politics of that dispute, but the result was that though Disney brought some of the sound effects with them, Sharratt and his team had to create everything else from scratch - something that caused some early panic in the director, who'd been expecting the sound system to arrive on floppy disk and be ready to go. Fortunately, as Sharratt explains: "He very quickly realised that we'd done our homework,

and things were fine after those initial moments." Indeed, Sharratt now feels that having to programme the show, especially the LCS computer system controlling the complex effects, has been more useful to the team running the show since they've been able to learn the systems from the ground up, rather than just being thrown into a pre-existing show.

And those effects do take some learning: whereas the sound for most musicals is about reinforcing the singers and balancing the band, with perhaps just one or two short sound effects, *Beauty* is altogether more challenging because of the director's desire for lots and lots of sound effects, in an almost cartoon-like manner. To achieve these effects, Sharratt's sound team divided forces; while one team, led by production sound engineer Thomas Ashbee and including Jim Armstrong, Jim Douglas, Harry Harris, Paul Johnston, Tim Lynn and Greg Pink, lived in the theatre and gradually got the huge rig up-and-running, Sharratt and sound effects mixer Tracy Campbell spent more time in the rehearsal room, which was equipped with a miniature sound effects system and so allowed them to rehearse the 'comedy' sound

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effects with the company. Campbell now spends the shows in a sub-stage sound control room, running the effects from two Akai 3200 samplers for the spot effects and two Akai DR4 hard disk recorders for the longer effects, all routed through the LCS system - this even being versatile enough to make sound effects follow visible on-stage sources (such as the invention truck) through speakers hidden on stage.

The sound effects join the rest of the system at the "embarrassingly large array of Cadac equipment" located at the rear of the stalls. A 60-way J-type desk handles the 34 radio mics (presided over by Lisa Sykes), reverb returns and effects, while an F-type is used for the orchestra mix. The F-type is equipped with 17 dial mono inputs and 19 stereo input modules, these created for the show by Cadac at Sharratt's request. A two-man team run the desk, Phij Adams mixing the chorus and orchestra, while Borneo Brown handles the radio mics and the overall sound of the show. Having two operators is a rare sight in this day and age, but is something that every production of *Beauty* has enjoyed and which, Sharratt feels, probably gives a better result.

Vocals reach the desk through Sennheiser SK50 radio mic transmitters connected to Countryman B3 mics, while the orchestra sound is captured by a comprehensive range of mics in the pit. The sound then runs through 33 Macrotech MA1200 amplifiers and on to the loudspeakers.

The separate vocal and band systems share space on large booms either side of the pros, each containing (in order, from the top) a 650 sub-base unit, two self-powered MSL4s carrying the band to the circle, two UMs carrying vocals to the circle, two MSL4s (stalls band), three UMs (stalls vocal) and a further 650 sub-base unit. The booms themselves, rigged by Vertigo, are actually constructed from two RSJs bolted to the floor and secured at the top, and with ladder steps welded in to the back of the 'I' beam. Though looking slightly precarious to a casual observer, they actually give a very clean line to the speaker's rigging (without the usual mess of boom arms) as well as allowing easy access to the crew.

Filling the gap between the booms in this very wide theatre is a central cluster containing



Mrs Potts - Le Maitre smoke effects are packed into her spout.

three MSL4s and three UM downfills, and then a comprehensive delay system, with two rows of eight UPM1s for the stalls. There is also a set of front-fill loudspeakers built into the front of the stage, though these are split into groups and can 'pan' with the main booms, helping the effect of sound moving from one side of the stage to the other for those sitting in the centre of the stalls. The speaker tally is completed with a comprehensive surround system, formed mainly from JBL Control 1s at the back of each level, and then above each level pointing downwards to help the effect for people who would normally be away from the surround systems. Each run of Control 1s is wired alternately, to help move effects around, and the surround system is completed by two USW sub-base units hidden (by the ever versatile team from Vertigo!) in air conditioning ducts at the rear of the stalls from where, by a fortunate quirk of the air conditioning system, they also get sound to the circle. The surround and delay systems are driven from amplifiers hidden in a tiny amp room at the rear of the stalls, in the wall behind the mixing desk - and, given the production's budget and anticipated life, sound engineer Tom Ashbee even managed to acquire some wooden flooring from Ikea, to add a touch of class to the proceedings!

So, despite being the newest member of the creative team, Sharratt and his team seem to have got up to speed with the show very quickly, with vocals being, for the most part, clearly and cleanly audible. Some of the 'cartoon' effects don't work quite as well, but I suspect that's because the difference in sound

quality between a 'real' actor speaking and a sound effect, and an actor on film and a sound effect, is enough to make the sound seem unnatural. But the kids in the audience loved them. And anyway, the Disney team must be happy: having avoided the subject until after London opened, they've now signed Sharratt up to create the sound for the forthcoming production in Stuttgart.

The show opened in London on Tuesday May 13th, 1997. Nobody quite wants to say exactly how much it cost to fit-up, how much it costs to run, and how much it is taking at the box office. Rumour suggests that, to break even, it can't close until sometime in the next century, and has to consistently be very full

between now and then. And, of course, it didn't get off to the best of starts when most of the critics were very sniffy about it.

On the other hand, during the London production period, the Broadway version of the show celebrated its fourth birthday. Just after London opened, the Mexico City production - the first large-scale musical ever to play that city - opened, and is then intended to play to a number of cities in South America. Another production opens in Stuttgart later in the year. Disney is, above all, a commercial organisation and wouldn't keep opening the shows if people weren't going to come and see them, so clearly, lots of people like it - though it is interesting to note that Disney have licensed the London production to the German producer, Stella, and so stand to lose little but reputation if the show doesn't last here.

The best London critics commented that the show was a large-scale pantomime; that is about right and, as with the best pantos, there are lines which will sail safely over the children's heads while making their parents laugh. It is one of the few current London shows which is a 'good night out for the whole family'. Yes, it's an expensive night out. But that money buys you the highest production values, just as it does in the films, or at the theme parks, or with anything else connected with the Disney brand. Disney seem to understand that people will pay more for that kind of quality and solid craftsmanship; a lesson that some producers of underdeveloped, underproduced pap would do well to learn.

Photos: Michael Le Poer Trench



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