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Rob Halliday follows *My Fair Lady* from the National to Drury Lane



Only history will show whether it turns out to be true, but the statement, espoused in a number of recent newspaper interviews, is this: that Cameron Mackintosh, the world's leading producer of musicals, will not be producing any more new shows. Too much trouble - something to leave to the next generation. Instead, Mackintosh's company will concentrate on spreading its back catalogue to parts of the world as-yet unconquered, and on reviving classic musicals in stellar new productions.

Hence, perhaps, *My Fair Lady*. Technically this is a National Theatre production, but Mackintosh's touch is obvious, particularly in the creative team: Trevor Nunn directing, Matthew Bourne choreographing, Anthony Ward designing, David Hersey as lighting designer and Paul Groothuis as sound designer - a team who, in various combinations, have contributed to *Cats*, *Les Mis*, *Miss Saigon*, *Carousel*, *Oklahoma!*, *Oliver!* and *Swan Lake*, which Mackintosh produced on Broadway. Casting, too, has a Mackintosh-ish feel, with Jonathan Pryce (who opened both *Miss Saigon* and *Oliver!*) as Henry Higgins and ex-EastEnders Martine McCutcheon as Eliza Doolittle. The National, for their part, counter criticism of yet another musical filling one of their stages by saying, in effect, why not? - that it is as much of a classic as Shakespeare. A sold-out three month run and West End transfer no doubt also helped . . .

Design

The first problem in creating a new production of a show with this much successful history is in laying the ghosts. For Pryce and McCutcheon this means overcoming memories of Rex Harrison and Julie Andrews. For designer Anthony Ward, the legacy is Cecil Beaton's acclaimed sets and, particularly, costumes for the 1964 film

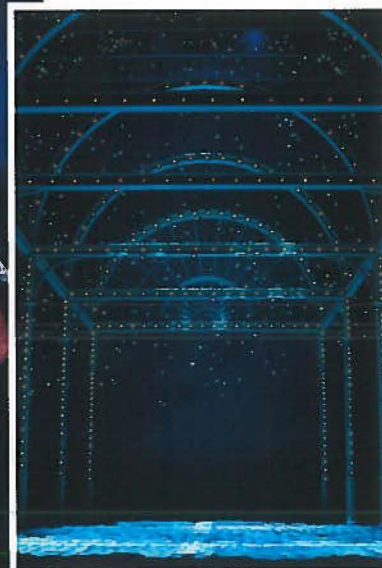
(the original stage production featured Beaton's costumes with sets by Oliver Smith).



Of course, this isn't a new challenge to Ward, whose designs replaced Sean Kenny's original *Oliver!* set for the 1994 London Palladium production. Besides, Ward has a particular style all of his own, bypassing comparison with Beaton's legendary Ascot costumes with one particularly bold step: discovering that the year the show is set in was also the year of the 'black Ascot', with racegoers wearing black to commemorate the recent death of King Edward VII - that is how he clothed the scene.

The set contains many of the designer's familiar trademarks: a double-layered painted gauze cyclorama backing a permanent standing set of a framework of arched pillars that shrink progressively upstage with a sharply-forced perspective, immediately setting the location as London's Covent Garden. Other elements transform this framework into different locations, the biggest change being for Higgins' study. Bookcases fly in to fill the sides of the framework, a huge upstage truck slides in to create the upstage wall and upper level, a wall flies in upstage of that to create an entrance hall, and other props and furniture track on down- and mid-stage on three 'travelator' conveyer belts - a combination of automation and 'person-mation' enforced by budget constraints at the National.

The destination for a transfer wasn't actually known as Ward finalised the National set: Drury Lane was a fortuitous choice, not only for its history (it hosted the show's original London production in 1958) and huge stage, but also because it has adequate wing space. It added its own complications, though: the Lyttelton is a modern theatre, with an evenly-spaced and suitably-rated flying system. The



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Lane's 120 flying bars are unevenly spaced and have a 150kg load limit; consider that three of the show's scenic pieces weigh in excess of one tonne, with a total scenic weight of 16 tonnes, and the scale of the task entrusted to Unusual Rigging becomes clear. Teams led by production rigger Simon Stone installed new steel spreader beams into the roof to support new drop pulleys and divertors before flying all of the scenery - achieving all of this in a schedule far removed from that of recent mega-musicals, since the show re-opened just three weeks after its last performance at the National and no pre-rigging was possible. This tight schedule was managed by National Theatre production manager Mark Dakin and Cameron Mackintosh's Jerry Donaldson.

Automation was handled by CML regulars Stage Technologies, with everything run from an Acrobat console in the capable hands of Alex Hitchcock, who last year operated the flying for *Witches of Eastwick* in the same theatre, and his team of Pete Wakeman and Ian Hunter. The company supplied seven BigTow counterweight assist motors for the flying pieces and one lighting ladder that has to fly to clear scenery, with the winches mounted to a rail to allow them to be moved

between linesets, if required, without drilling repeatedly into the wall. Variations on BigTows, with different gearing, drive the three travelators, which were built by Weldfab Engineering. For those familiar with the formative years of automation, it was remarkable to note how 'systemised' it now is: when an extra winch was added quite late on to handle a tricky piece of scenery (a new set of chandeliers added for the transfer), that winch was installed, working and programmed in just a few short days.

Of course, as you may have read, the show's gala opening night went up an hour late due to an automation problem. True enough, but things do break - in this case, the problem was a fault in one travelator that caused electrical damage to other parts of the system; what the national press didn't mention was that the problem occurred at 5.30pm, was half overcome by the time the show went up and almost completely overcome by the interval. Stage Technologies are still waiting to hear whether Cameron is going to pass on the bar bill for the complimentary drinks, though . . .

Lighting

It was two-and-a-half years and 38,000 miles of fresh sea air between spells at the production desk for lighting designer David Hersey - completing work on the UK tour of *Oliver!* in 1998 then sailing around the world to see in the new Millennium before finally returning to the UK in time for last year's PLASA show. *My Fair Lady* offered him the opportunity to get back to work with regular collaborators - but also posed a wealth of challenges, the sheer quantity of flying pieces leaving little room for any overhead lighting!

Automated lighting seemed to offer the solution, but the lack of space meant that the choice of lighting instruments was quite

limited. In the end the rig above the standing set is formed entirely from DHA Digital Light Curtains and Vari*Lite VL6Cs. At

the National, Hersey used the VL6B, its zoom optics allowing gobos to be scaled from upstage to downstage to follow the perspective of the set; the Lyttelton's existing VL6s were converted to 6Bs by Vari-Lite, but Lyttelton chief electrician Paul McLeish and his crew experienced problems with brightness and colour consistency across the rig. For the transfer, Vari-Lite offered the uprated VL6C: its new 700W lamp is not only brighter, but also seems to have a flatter field and more consistent colour temperature.

In position and function, the rest of the Drury Lane rig is similar to that at the National, though the lanterns used are quite different and achieving positions comparable to the Lyttelton's comprehensive front-of-house lighting bridges required the installation of two new walk-on lighting trusses by Unusual Rigging, one tucked neatly up in the mid-auditorium roof in the location first established last year by the performer flying truss in *Witches of Eastwick*. These and the theatre's circle-front and upper circle slip positions were populated almost entirely with ETC Source Fours, all with 750W bulbs because of the considerable throws involved.

Production electrician Alistair Grant somehow also managed to squeeze a 2.5k tungsten Pani projector into one of the circle front bins, this being used to project a period image of people in Covent Garden onto the show's front gauze.

On either side of the standing set, Unusual hung side trusses and White Light's new rated, adjustable LOLER ladders to give a comprehensive range of sidelighting positions, these filled with a mixture of Source Fours and Par cans. At the National, these sidelight Pars had scrollers fitted, but Hersey and his associate Jenny Kagan had perceived an unfulfilled need to be able to take a colour

but then just lighten or darken it slightly during certain cues. They therefore opted to replace these scrolls with Wybron's CXI colour-mixing units. Where CXIs weren't required, Wybron Colorams were used - except on the two 5k fresnels, two R&V 1k beamlight followspots (in the side boxes, complemented by two Juliat Aramis in the rear auditorium box) and five Alto Fresnels backlighting the upstage gauze where Rainbow scrollers were used since White Light had them available in suitable sizes. Further treatment for the upstage twin cloud gauzes came from L&E M16 battens, Orion groundrows, two further lines of Digital Light Curtains and four White Light VSFX cloud projectors.

The rig contains a few other tricks and effects, some created especially for the show. There are four VL7s, for example, doing rain - a projected effect that is notoriously hard to achieve. David Hersey replaced the 7's gobo wheel with a new wheel created at DHA that consisted of a continuous blobby breakup that could be spun continuously to create a linear movement; overlay a linear gobo in the indexing wheel (and add a cunning chase that fades the lamp out just before the 'clear' frame of the gobo wheel passes) and you have an effective imitation of falling rain. Elsewhere, an AutoYoke with DHA animation wheel and indexing gobo rotator on the circle front allows a train window to follow a group of passengers as they are traveled across stage.

Hersey's favourite effect is the opening curtains in the study. This involved the creation of a new DHA product - the YoYo+, an indexing gobo yoyo, which allows a custom 'flag', in this case a curved curtain swag, to be moved over a static gobo, here a glass window. Fit the YoYos sideways into the lights, run to open in a carefully-timed cue and, lo, opening curtains! At the National, Source Fours were used, but something brighter was needed to cut through the 750W Source Fours at Drury Lane; investigation led to the 80V 1200W version of the Selecon Pacific, which is bright - but also offers a cool gate to protect the glass gobo and YoYo. Once the crew had overcome their instinct to rig them back-end up, à la Patt 264, they worked very well, and were also fitted with Wybron scrollers to allow the window's colour to be varied during the show. The Pacifics, like the rest of the conventional rig, came from White Light, with the DLCs from The Moving Light Company.

Control for the entire rig came from one Strand 530i at Drury Lane, following on from the use of the Lyttelton's house 500-series consoles. For the transfer, Strand was able to supply its new GeniusPro 2.5 software: the new features this offered, particularly the 'magic update' command that figures out which preset group lights were in before their positions were corrected and updates them



Set designer Anthony Ward has laid to rest the ghost of Cecil Beaton.
Above, gobos wash the stage. Photos: Hugo Glendinning/Wyatt Enever

automatically, made refocusing for the transfer very slick. At Drury Lane, the 530i and backup 510i - now housed in one of the side auditorium boxes, since every other seat in the theatre has been sold - talk to the dimmer room via Strand's ShowNet ethernet system; from there four universes of DMX are distributed around the theatre to the house Strand STM dimmers (via a D54 converter), temporary Bytecraft dimmers feeding the front-of-house truss, Howard Eaton radio dimming running on-stage practicals and various moving lights on conventional DMX cable. Having been installed by a team including Chris Dunford, Pryd Baskerville, Kelvin Murray, Simon Target, Steve Reeve and Greg Hamlyn, the lighting is now looked after by the Drury Lane house crew led by chief electrician Steve McAndrew.

Sound

One person clearly much happier post-transfer is sound designer Paul Groothuis. In the Lyttelton he had a major challenge posed by the decision not to use the theatre's orchestra pit, but instead to locate the band upstage of the set. As he notes, that has been done before - quite successfully in the case of *Oklahoma!* where the orchestra lived behind the cyc. But on *My Fair Lady* things were complicated by the discovery that only one of the Lyttelton's two scene-dock doors was allowed to be open at a time - and since the side door had to be up to allow scenery on and off, the upstage door had to be closed - effectively sealing the band off in a world of their own.

Groothuis pronounced himself 'satisfied' rather than 'pleased' with the band sound obtained there, given the lack of time and money available to acoustically treat the band area. At Drury Lane, the orchestra and conductor Nick Davies are back in the pit and the show sounds like - well, like a big, full-blooded musical again!

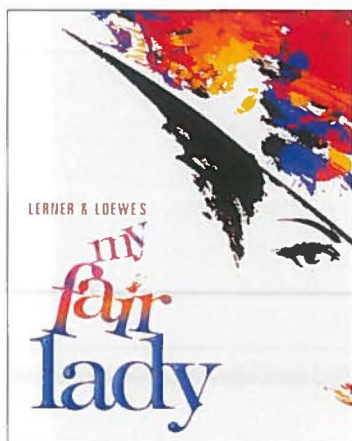
This change - and the much larger theatre (Drury Lane seats 2,400 on four levels

compared with the Lyttelton's 900 on two levels) - necessitated a considerable re-working of the rig by Groothuis, his associate Richard Brooker and production sound engineer John Owens from Aura, but the heart of it remains the same: a Cadac J-type console. At the National, the new J-type intended to replace the 15-year-old D-type in the Olivier theatre was diverted to the Lyttelton for the run of the show; the J-type was chosen after a considerable amount of research by the National's sound team - its closest competitor, Yamaha's new digital PM1D console, finally rejected because it wasn't clear whether it would be available when needed.

At the National, a Yamaha 02R sat alongside the Cadac handling the orchestra submix with the consoles run by Colin Pink; for the transfer, Groothuis specified 40 motorised faders in the J-type for the same task, though in practice he came to find that with the band in the pit, fewer changes in individual band level were required.

As well as the band, the Cadac collects inputs from 32 Sennheiser SK50 radio microphones worn by the cast and two Akai S6000 samplers used for sound effects replay, then feeds them out through Yamaha and Amcron amplification to a complex loudspeaker system. Groothuis has two principal loudspeaker systems, one for vocals consisting largely of dBb loudspeakers (12 902s, three 602s and 54 E3s) and one for the band formed from Meyer loudspeakers; Meyers are also used for sound effect output, giving a total of six USW1s, two 650s, 12 UPA-1s, eight MSL-2s, two UM-1s and 44 UPM1s.

The delay system also includes tiny Bose Acoustimass units, just delivering a treble 'sweetener' to the boxes at the rear of the first circle; their compact dimensions allowed the sound team to follow Groothuis' plan to keep the speakers as visually unobtrusive as possible. There is also a surround system, split into two sections in the stalls where speakers



How Things Change

For those who think modern-day musicals take far too long to rehearse, consider this take on My Fair Lady at the Theatre Royal Drury Lane: "The rehearsals went on for nearly a month, but proved fascinating as we had the talented understudies as stand-ins and they sung and went through the routines and lines with enthusiasm whenever necessary." Of course, the quote is from Sixty Years of Light Work by Fred Bentham - and is describing the 1958 London production of My Fair Lady! The new version had just a week of technical rehearsals!

hung from the circle front provide a surround to those sitting in the front of the theatre. These are used for sound effects, but also a gentle band reverb - a familiar Groothuis trademark.

With the band hidden away at the National, foldback requirements for the cast were quite complex; at Drury Lane they have become only fractionally less so, since while foldback speakers in the wings work for the open stage scenes, they become useless when the study set is in place - yet those inside this set still need foldback! Two independent foldback systems remain in use at Drury Lane, with EAW JF80s used for the open scenes and dB E3s carefully concealed around the set used in the study scenes. Control for the foldback is via Yamaha's DME32 digital matrix, which allows individual loudspeakers to be shut down when not required, both to keep the on-stage sound levels to a minimum but, as a bonus, ensuring the upstage foldback units are muted during scene changes so that the crew aren't having to shout over them!

During the production period, Groothuis prowled the theatre with a Fujitsu tablet PC linked by radio-ethernet to DME32s and XTA processing, allowing him to make adjustments and temporarily isolate sections of the system on the fly while listening from any seat in the house. Though claiming to try to distance

himself from the technology ("the operator is my tool to achieve good sound; the desk is their tool," - in this case operator Tom Marshall had just a few days to learn the show), Groothuis was clearly very enamoured with this device, since it allowed him to make adjustments very quickly and so produce a high quality sound throughout the theatre, despite having just a few days to achieve the results that a new production might give you three weeks of techs and previews to achieve.

The tablet, like the rest of the rig, was supplied by Autograph and installed by a team including Jeffrey Yue, Scott George, Jon Clarence, Jim Douglas, Keith Hutchinson, Andy Jackson, Paul Johnson, Stephen Owen, Tim Stevens, John Shouls, Jo Wredde and Autograph's Tony Gayle; Tom Marshall's showcrew consists of Clive Bryan and Zoe James.

Despite the late start on the first night, the show was greeted with the same acclaim it had received at the National: it is remarkable the noise that 2,400 clapping, cheering people can make. The original London production occupied Drury Lane for five years and 2,281 performances. That total wasn't beaten for 30 years until Miss Saigon eventually clocked up 4,263 performances.

My Fair Lady looks keen to regain her record. It's just possible that she might!



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