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Wicked!

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All production photos: Tristram Kenton

Ozmopolitan, Wizzomaniacal, Wicked



words by
Sarah Rushton-Read

The latest incarnation of *Wicked* - the multi-award-winning prequel to *The Wizard of Oz* - has arrived on the London stage, bringing with it a potent brew of technical wizardry. L&SI speaks to the design and technical teams behind this wicked production . . .

Multi award-winning Broadway production *Wicked* is now playing on the stage of London's Victoria Apollo Theatre. A prequel to *The Wizard of Oz*, *Wicked* is all about the relationship between good 'bad' girl Elphaba and a bad 'good' girl - Glinda, posing the age-old question: is wickedness nature or nurture? It demonstrates that even though some of us are perhaps more vulnerable than others, there are no foregone conclusions. For example, being born with green skin could be considered a precursor to wickedness. This could be further compounded if your father hates you because your green skin reminds him of your loose living mother, who had a proclivity to drink Absinthe during pregnancy! It's a universal issue.

Adapted from an original novel by Gregory Maguire and directed by Joe Mantello, with music and lyrics by Stephen Schwartz, *Wicked* has performed to sell-out audiences in London since it opened. The production values are extravagantly sophisticated and the show's transfer to the UK has made good use of the skills of a diverse array of UK theatre technology specialists. These include Howard Eaton Lighting, Stage Technologies, Terry Murphy Staging, Delstar, Unusual Rigging, PRG and Autograph, to name but a few.

Wicked has also been responsible for a huge rise in sales of red sparkly slippers - in all conceivable shapes and sizes - plus it has made the colour green de rigeur this season!

With a budget comparable to that of a small blockbuster film, the UK production has positively transformed the Apollo Victoria Theatre. Today, strips of green neon (LED Line) complement its scrubbed art deco architecture. The deco style carpets in the foyer are colour co-ordinated and nearly everything else is Wickedly Green to match. When the show first opened, many of London's Hackney cabs also briefly turned an evil shade of emerald.

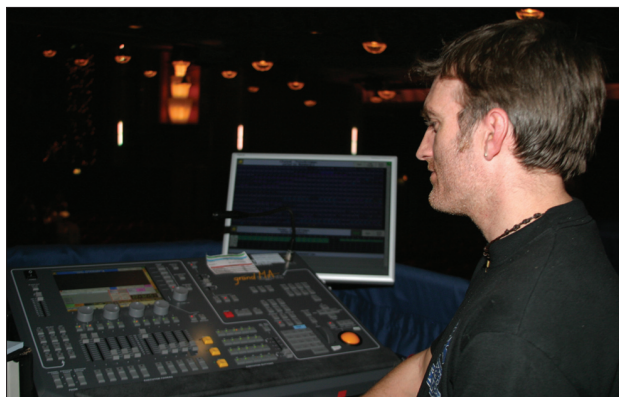
In just three years, *Wicked* has won 15 major US awards and is the highest-grossing Broadway show in history. There are productions running on Broadway, in Chicago and on tour nationally in the US, with further productions planned.

Each new production is based on a blueprint of the original, but as with any successful long-running show, additional flourishes are invariably added along the way. For London, recreating this technically demanding show necessitated a humungous bible of technical detail and specifications. Each time a new production of *Wicked* is mounted, the book's detail has further developed.

UK production manager Richard Bullimore elaborates: "In the case of *Wicked*, the book was massive. There is not a piece of set that does not include lighting or technology in some shape or form. The book includes details of every technical nuance, effect and piece of equipment that facilitates *Wicked*, and as we develop it, so more is added."

One of the show's biggest technical suppliers is Howard Eaton Lighting Ltd (HELL). The company is responsible for building all the LED lighting effects, a beautiful art deco 'Emerald City' set piece, the special stage lighting booms and ladders, the smoke distribution and control systems plus a variety of automated and special effect scenery.

Howard Eaton comments: "When I saw how many practicals there were on this show I thought 'God, it's going to be a nightmare'. It takes a full universe of DMX to run them. Over the last three months we have built literally thousands of fully dimmable green LEDs and dimming systems. These include our standard StarLed single point source LEDs, plus some bespoke six- and 40-way LED clusters and strips. In all there are over 2,000 LEDs fittings on this show."



From top:

Lighting chief Damien Ridge with the grandMA console.

Howard Eaton examines the smoke distribution system.

Michael Odam (third from left) with the LX crew.

Richard George and Suzie Hills, sound.

Crew and set photos:
Sarah Rushton-Read



There is absolutely nothing inconsequential about *Wicked*. This is particularly so when it comes to lighting. Even the front cloth twinkles with jewel-like peabulbs. Award-winning lighting designer and Tony Award Nominee for *Wicked*, Kenneth Posner, has left no lighting opportunity unexplored. Every onstage cut cloth features thousands of green fairy lights and is framed with strips of iLight Plexineon - all are fully dimmable, using HELL technology.

The HELL Emerald City set features a huge, full stage width, art deco aluminium sunburst piece, which flies just downstage of the cyc. It is encrusted with individually twinkling green LEDs. A huge 10k silhouettes Elphaba as numerous Vari*Lites cross beams and project break-up colour which then diffuses through and bounces off haze, smoke and low fog - all MDG units of various flavours supplied by PRG - delivered from various locations around the stage. This all goes to create a wonderfully theatrical levitation scene, where Elphaba rises high up above her critics. It's made particularly dramatic given the remarkable height of the pros'.

Lighting hits the stage from all conceivable angles. Every nook and cranny seems to be stuffed with ETC Source Fours and/or Vari*Lites. The cyc' can be anything from a huge clock with numerous cogs silhouetted against rich coloured backgrounds to surreal tinted skies. From the moment the front cloth flies out to the final scene of the show, *Wicked* is a magnificently dynamic visual feast.

Posner explains: "My intention has always been to create a stimulating and unique visual experience. The entire design team spent many hours recreating the Broadway visual elements and embellishing the original design. The Victoria Apollo has a very dramatic height but a narrower and shallower stage. This made it necessary for us to redesign and replot many of the scenes. I have been absolutely thrilled to have the opportunity to revisit my *Wicked* lighting design, its been great fun."

Posner and his associate LDs Karen Spahn (US), Michael Odam (UK) and Warren Flynn (also moving light programmer) were

supported by an excellent production team of West End veterans. Led by Pete Lambert, Chris Luscome, Steve Reeve and Alistair Grant worked six days a week for five weeks to perfect the show.

Michael Odam says: "By the time I came in, it was all up and working. My role is to oversee the show in the UK, learn it and possibly relight any potential European productions in the future. I hadn't worked with Kenneth or his assistant Karen before. They were both great, Ken knew exactly what he wanted to achieve and just got on with it. The show is cracking, a very cleanly-lit, sharp-looking piece of theatre."

Programming the numerous VL2000 spots and washes and the VL3000Q spots was done on a full-sized grandMA console. Conventionals were programmed on a grandMA lite, with a second running as a tracking back up. These are networked to three MA Lighting NSPs (Network Signal Processors), which provide a total of eight streams of DMX to three separate dimmer locations. The desk also controls two Catalyst projectors FOH via an Artistic Licence ArtNet system.

Board operator and chief electrician Damien Ridge comments: "We had to bring in a few extra dimmers for this show which are in

various locations including the organ loft and the fly floor. *Wicked* is now run from one grandMA Lite console, with another for backup. It's a great console and once you understand it's incredibly logical protocol, it's very easy to edit the show."

Overall the lighting is clean and sharp. Impressive effect lighting comes from the Vari*Lites; magnificent dynamic gobo washes of broken colour mix with the haze and fog to create magical environments in which the action takes place. As Posner comments: "The smoke is one of the major cast members in this show!"

All lighting hires were supplied by PRG Europe. Loz Wilcox, PRG project manager for *Wicked* says: "So far, PRG has provided lighting kit for every *Wicked* in the USA, so we know what's required to ensure this technically complex show runs smoothly. We have provided everything from the esoteric hardware used for special effects right down to specially manufactured fixtures not normally used in the UK theatre market."

Where lighting ends and set begins is particularly tough to define on this show. Eugene Lee's set creates a simple, yet flexible performance environment. A series of cut cloths frames the basic set, and there are very few big scene changes. Scenic

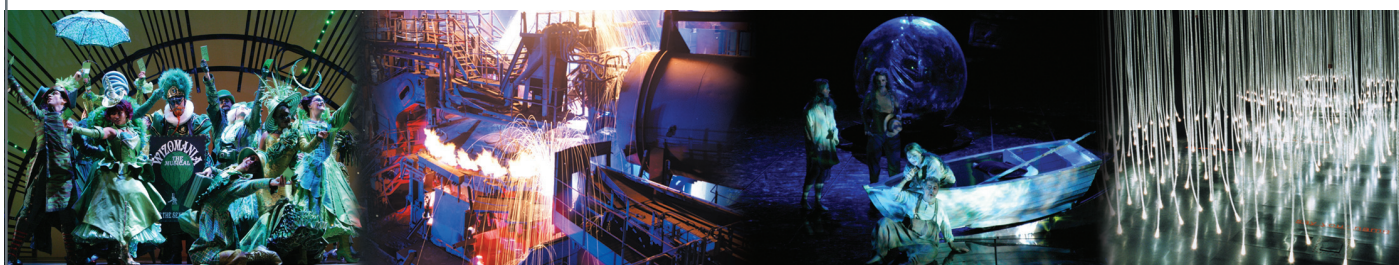


Top: Hidden lights with Wybron's Coloram II scrollers

Above: One of the specially made lanterns.

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elements are, in the main, small and fluid - trucks and set pieces give a sense of place to each scene. The biggest of the trucks are the Oz head, with radio-controlled lighting and dimming by City Theatrical, and the dragon at the centre top of the pros', both of which pieces came in from the USA. In the UK, Delstar Engineering built the show deck frame and tracks, while the floor was clad and scenery built by Terry Murphy. HELL was responsible for the electrics to the electrified tracks, which deliver two big mechanical trucks to mid-stage centre.

Because the Apollo stage is relatively shallow and there's a fair amount of flying, the grid is pretty tight. It accommodates a couple of large flying pieces, including two massive chandeliers that fly in for a party scene. To facilitate this, the mid-stage lighting truss was split in three, so that the chandeliers could effectively be flown through it. There is also Glinda's decadent mode of transport - a huge circular chair, which churns out bubbles as she tracks across the stage: both the chandeliers and the bubble chair were manufactured by HELL, while Stage Technologies engineered the trusses and bubble chair track.

Performer flying - carried out by Freedom Flying - is also an important element of the show and includes Elphaba's troupe of flying monkeys. Unusual Rigging is responsible for the customised flying, and Stage Technologies supplied a couple of Big Tow Winches and tracking.

Wicked is heavily reliant on atmospherics and smoke, both for time and place and for effects. Smoke dramatically comes up through vents and holes scattered across the stage floor. In the basement a series of twisted tubes and ducting run across the underside of the floor. Smoke and low fog is zoned and distributed to the various vents via this spaghetti like network. HELL designed and built the system using its standard DMXbabels, configured as fan speed controllers for all the smoke zones. Eaton explains: "The DMXbabels have outputs which operate the motorised zone

valves so that the atmospherics can be fed into specific parts of the stage and blocked from others. Our product allows for the entire zone and effects control to be done from the FOH lighting console."

Also squeezed into the relatively small basement are hundreds of costumes. Brightly coloured green and yellow outfits seem to consume and fill every inch of spare space. They are squeezed around monitor desks for the orchestra, CO2 canisters for the low fog and flying and stage machinery for the traps, reveals and special effects. "With a cast of 26 [excluding swings], all regularly changing their kit, it can get a bit fraught down here," said one wardrobe mistress.

Such regular costume changes can also pose a challenge to the on-stage sound team. Each change requires that performers' radio mics are checked, as they can easily become dislodged or disconnected in the rush.

Add to this the 17-member orchestra, and up to 24 performers on stage at any one time and it's clear this show is a very busy one for the sound department. Sound designers Tony Meola and Kai Harada worked with UK FOH engineer Richard George and Autograph Sound to realise their concept. George explains: "We actually have two separate PA systems on *Wicked*, one delivering the band and orchestra and the other delivering the vocals."

The set up is a classic Autograph arrangement. George elaborates: "We are using Meyer M2Ds in the pros' for the band delivery and a central cluster of Meyer M1Ds to deliver the vocals. Delays are a combination of Meyer UPJs and UPMs and we have a surround system of Meyer MM4s and UPJs. Foldback is Meyer MM4s and UPJs. There is little processing, just some Meyer CP10s for parametrics, a couple of Lexicon 960L reverb units and some Meyer LD3 line drivers."





For George and assistant Suzie Hills, this is their first time in this venue. A former cinema, the Apollo has its own idiosyncrasies: "The room does have its challenges but so far it's been a pretty smooth run. The biggest challenge on *Wicked* is the fact that it's a relatively long show and we are continuously busy. In terms of set-up, however, the designers knew exactly what they wanted and how it should sound so it was pretty sweet."

The rig is entirely analogue apart from the XTA digital crossovers, which are used as delay and EQ units - the Meyer system has its own crossovers. Also the drums and percussion come in on a little Yamaha 1000 submix, this then feeds into the main Cadac J Type FOH console which features motorised faders. The signal remains analogue after that.

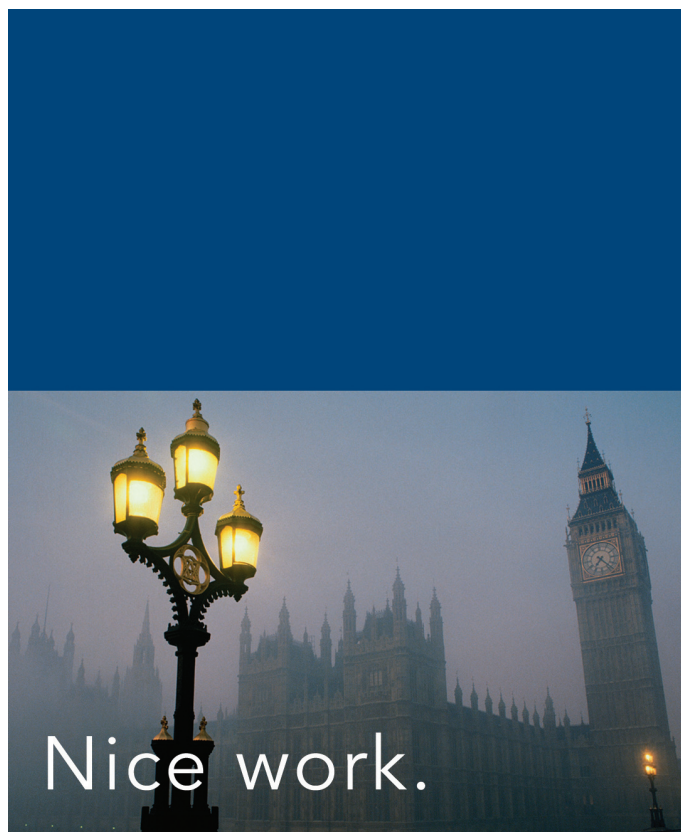
Backstage, a Yamaha 2000 runs the monitor mix from active splits so that pit monitoring remains completely separate. The band members each have their own Aviom personal mixers, allowing them to control their own foldback. Amps are four-channel Lab.gruppen 2400Qs.

All performance mics are omni-directional, and there is no foldback for performers to avoid potential feedback issues. Things are further complicated by the fact that the cast sometimes perform downstage of the PA - which can be tricky. George says: "The most important thing for us is to keep the artists balanced and stop them from feeding back. Tony and Kai used the Meyer SIM system to set up the PA and - touch wood - so far we've not had any problems. More importantly, even though the cast only hears what comes back from the house, they seem very happy with the set-up."

Meola is very particular about microphones. All the cast are on the new Sennheiser 5212 bodypacks and Countryman B6 mics. George explains: "The B6s are incredibly small, about a quarter of the size of the MK2s. You can therefore pull them down that bit further and they are much easier to hide. They also sound excellent."

He continues: "This is a huge show with a big chorus. It's also a busy show backstage. Costume changes for both main characters and supports seem to be almost constant and the main characters are at least double mic'd and, in the case of Elphaba, triple mic'd, with one in her witch's hat."

Wicked is a technically elaborate and exciting show. There is a feast of detail that is tough to digest all at once. What makes it wickedly thrilling, is that it is a constantly changing environment packed full of surprises and wondrous theatrical artistry. The designers have taken all those classic theatre tricks and techniques then realised them using state-of-the-art technology and invention. Live theatre entertainment has moved into a new, very sophisticated dimension and it's electrifying. Just five years ago a theatre show like this would have been inconceivable, it's both difficult and intriguing to imagine what the future might hold.



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