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Tarzan the Musical

Disney's latest stage production has made the move from Broadway to Europe, and grown bigger muscles on the way. Sarah Rushton-Read reports on what she finds to be a jolly vine show . . .

Performance photos by Deen van Meer

The Netherlands - April 2007, Fortis Circustheater, The Hague: A 2,000-strong audience shuffle to their seats as a subtly lit, blue scrim frontcloth sways gently downstage. Animated images of the African continent fade in and out. Another cloth, slightly upstage, dominated by the image of a massive sailing ship, slowly undulates. At the same time a sound-scape gradually builds, eventually filling the auditorium with the slap of waves against the sides of a moving ship, rigging gently creaking, sea birds crying overhead.

Then bang! The houselights snap out. Thunder crashes and lightning explodes - the waves are now smashing into the sides of the ship, the rigging and sea birds are screaming and the huge sailing ship starts to break up. As suddenly as the houselights go out, the action cuts to the interior of the ship where a young couple desperately try to save their baby's life.

As the boat begins to disintegrate the performers, sandwiched between the two cloths, use aerial gymnastics to illustrate their fight to survive. Just as they appear to give up, the lights fade, the front cloths disappear, the noise abates and the lights come up on a quiet, sunny beach scene.

Depicted on a huge backcloth at the rear of a lush green, vine infested box set, additional cut cloths in the shape of waves drop in and out of the picture to lap at the feet of the vertically suspended storm victims - now washed up on the vertical seashore.

Tarzan the Musical's opening sequence is one of the fastest paced, most dramatic openings to a show I have ever experienced - there were more cues in the first five minutes than you could shake a 'standby' at. Sound, automation, flying, lighting, projection, traps - you name it, the 'showcaller' was calling it - a veritable orgy of technical activity.

Visually, aurally and technically, *Tarzan* is a truly spectacular piece of theatre. With a percussion-based soundtrack by Phil Collins, it's a showcase of what can be achieved with oodles of time, plenty of money, state-of-the-art technical equipment and a lot of very clever, conscientious and dedicated production staff.

And dedicated they needed to be! The show footprint has been transferred from a much smaller Broadway theatre and expanded to fit the substantial Fortis Circustheater - not as simple as it may first sound. This was not helped by the fact that when the US design and production team arrived they were faced with an auditorium with no roof or seating, and a load of cranes where both, in theory, should have been.

This state of affairs did not make it easy to install the complex cable infrastructure required for what is technically and logistically a very demanding show. Featuring multi-part human flying combined with sophisticated stage automation, and LX, video and sound cues running within microseconds of one another, one of the most crucial elements of the show is the comprehensive communications system.

Performers fly across both the stage and auditorium so there are numerous sights around the venue where both visual and audio communications are essential. Some areas have headsets and a single video monitor, but others - like the showcaller, the automation controller, the human flying system, some members of the band and the people below stage setting up lifts and traps - have numerous monitors and switchers to jump between views.

Sound

The showcaller's desk, positioned high above the audience at the rear of the auditorium - is more like an air traffic control centre than a prompt desk. The show relies heavily on over 24 cameras, both static and



moving, strategically placed around the stage and auditorium. This is backed up by a sophisticated Clearcom communication system, Softcue cue light system and no less than 24 twin-channel fully duplex Telex radio comm units, all of which is supplied by the UK's Orbital Sound.

Chris Headlam, managing director of Orbital, says: "The video and wireless communication elements of this production are vital for safety reasons - so much so, that if any part of it went down, the show would have to be cancelled. The show is video recorded nightly so if an accident does happen the H&S people can analyse the footage."

Orbital also supplied the PA system to producers Stage Entertainment. Sound designer John Shivers and his associate David Patridge wanted to use an L'Acoustics system, as they had in the USA. However, the Dutch venue is substantially bigger than the Broadway theatre so the original dV-Dosc PA was upgraded to V-Dosc.

Headlam explains: "Main PA has increased in size because the Circustheater is a larger venue. The original US system of dV-Dosc has been replaced with a 14 cabinet V-Dosc system providing a seven element hang L and R. This is backed up by 15 dV-Dosc elements, nine of which form a central cluster whilst three left and right hang under the V-Dosc to cover the front few rows of the auditorium. In addition there are eight d&b B2 subwoofers and d&b E3s for front-fill. FOH there are 56 L'Acoustics MTD108a, 40 providing FOH surround and the remainder provide fill and under-balcony cover.

Racks came in pre-setup from Orbital, which helped massively time-wise. Chief engineer Henni Schwithal discusses the

setup: "It's a frame-wrap Orbital build to its own specification. This is an interlocking system. There are three PM1D DSPs, one of which is redundant. The other two work in parallel allowing a single PM1D control surface to mix 196 channels. Next along is the LCS Matrix - three frames, which handle all the sound effects and the surround sound programming. Above that we've got a flat screen (which at the time was displaying the PM1D manager programme for the remote access in to the PM1D and its diagnostics). Then we have a three-phase mains distribution system. The rest of the racks are composed of 40 Lab.gruppen LAB4000 amplifiers, the only other amps in the system being d&b D12s for the B2 sub-basses and the E3s. System processing is done with XTA DP448 units working with a digital input."

So how did the sound designers feel about a UK company doing their show in Holland? Shivers responds: "It was really good to have Orbital on board. Their level of expertise was compatible with the complexity of the show. There is

a significant amount of technology on this show, plus we have 24 video cameras and an LCS surround system. From our point of view, having a company with such a great track record of West End shows was the kind of expertise we really needed."

In terms of live musicians this is no ordinary set-up - to maximise bums on seats, the production company has reclaimed all but a 3ft strip of the pit. Add to that the extension of the stage and it's also pretty closed in.

Sound designer John Shivers discusses: "The production company wanted to have more seats in the auditorium, which was something we didn't know about before hand. One minute we were working in the orchestra pit and the next the offstage wall moved in 3ft! Because we knew how much percussion there was we phoned the players and asked them to bring their stuff in and position it in the pit. Unsurprisingly, once all the instruments were in, there was no room for any people!



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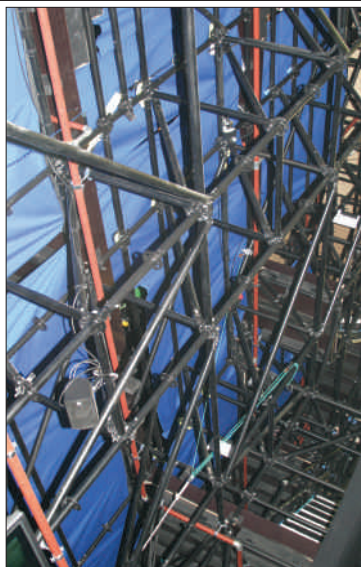
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Photo: Deen van Meer



Photo: Louise Stickland



Clockwise from top:

Right, the showcaller's desk - "air traffic control".

Truss and access platforms behind the set.

The automation control position.

As a result, a sound-proof percussion room had to be built understage. This ultimately has a dual benefit: it gives more room for the musos, plus the live music level can be more easily controlled. The only instruments left in the pit are electronic keyboards and strings. Keyboards have two laptops each, one as a back-up, and all connected via ADSL with the keyboard programmer in New York. Any trouble and he can re-program or troubleshoot instantly.

Shivers continues: "I'm really happy with this percussion booth, in hindsight it actually makes sense with the choice of speakers and the amount of sub-flow you hear. Phil Collins is very particular about how his show sounds, it's important to get good percussion and drum sounds; that's the base from which everything else grows."

All musicians have an Aviom personal mixer, which provides customisable submixes. Each individual unit has 16 adjustable channels. It's all run via Cat 5 cabling. Chief engineer Schwithal discusses: "Musicians are not too careful about how they handle cables. We chose a different Cat 5 than normal, more robust and therefore much more reliable."

An integral part of the design is the LCS system. There are ambiances played

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throughout the show; when you are sitting in the auditorium you really feel part of the action, whether in a tropical forest or by the sea. Associate sound designer David Patridge explains: "We have been able to expand locations for the surround and we have more surround in the ceiling and around the walls because the room is more open and much bigger. There is also a reasonably low ceiling FOH. I think sonically the biggest challenge has been the shape of the room, semicircular; the walls tend to capture the sound and send it back into the room, fortunately not so much high end, but at the low end it is definitely a problem. Because the low end cancels itself out in certain spots, even with one subwoofer on, you know it's not an interaction of speakers. Of course it's physics which, try as you might, you can't overcome! We have put multiple subwoofers on various time alignments to try and move the nodes off to the sides so they are in the isles to get a smoother response - definitely a challenge."

Other challenges are the 'bouncy castle' style set, Patridge discusses: "It has a sound all to itself due to its inherent leakiness. The fans that inflate the wall are quite noisy, plus there is a significant background noise level from moving light fans and scrollers. However, the show is a

pop musical and its level is way above the ambient noise floor. Obviously you could not do a straight play in this environment!"

The theatre literally envelops the audience - a sort of semi-circle canopy over people's heads which is used as an effective



metaphor for the canopy of the forest. Speakers overhead and around deliver the sounds of rustling leaves and birds. The jungle surrounds you as scenes play out in different parts of the theatre; the point is shifted so you feel it has a context and a place.

There is no denying this is a sound-heavy show and in an atmosphere where sound designers are constantly in the firing line when it comes to amplifying shows, what is too much and what is too little? How do the duo feel about presenting such a sound-heavy show? Patridge discusses: "Yes, this is a sound heavy show but essentially it's a pop musical. We are presently working on The Little Mermaid, which will be much more orchestral and lush as opposed to loud. We definitely believe that hearing everything should not be a chore for the audience, on the other hand it certainly should not be so loud that it diminishes performances or feels aggressive and nasty sounding."

Lighting

Equally as luscious as the sound is Natasha Katz's rich lighting, which gives dimension to what is essentially a huge blow-up three-sided box set literally dripping with copious greenery, vines and dangly bits. The base fabric is essentially transparent, perfectly lending itself to dramatic backlighting. To that end, behind each wall is a four-tier access platform attached to which are hundreds of LED fittings, ETC Source Four Pars and profiles with scrollers.

Katz certainly had her work cut out. Not only did she face the challenge of pulling

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Clockwise from top left:

Lighting programmer/operator Mennc Dak.

Showcaller Jacco Vroom.

Sound designer John Shivers and associate David Patridge.

The understage percussion room.

Orbital's Chris Headlam (right) with chief engineer Henni Schwithal.

performers out from this huge and sometimes overwhelming green box, but she also had to light people working at every height from stage floor to fly floor.

Tarzan was therefore a show that was never going to adhere to the rules when it came to lighting. The fact that the majority of the performers spend much of their time hanging or bouncing around in the air or travelling at breakneck speed through the auditorium, across the stage and bouncing off the set, makes lighting them - never mind followspotting them - an obvious challenge.

With so much human flying the electrics trim height has to remain at least 45ft off the stage, resulting in pretty steep overhead lighting angles. The three-walled nature of the set leaves little lighting access from the side, and the flying means there are limited FOH positions. However, despite this, Tony Award-winning Katz, in association with her moving light programmer Aland Henderson and associate LD Yael Lubetzky, has triumphantly created a rich and magical environment full of movement, colour, dimension and perspective.

Katz is no stranger to Disney-style spectacles having lit *Beauty and the Beast*, *Aida* and currently working on *The Little Mermaid*. You can't help but envy her.

These are shows with substantial budgets facilitating the use of state-of-the-art, latest gizmo lighting kit. They also allow time for experimentation during the design and programming process.

However, Katz is true to her art and is not one to use technology for technology's sake. Whilst *Tarzan* does indeed feature literally hundreds of Lagotronic LED fixtures, which can equally give the transparent walled set a rather ethereal, slightly fluid quality or make it appear solid and impenetrable, she also uses a lot of conventional fixtures. There is an abundance of the latest Vari*Lite fixtures overhead and FOH. However, *Tarzan* is still what Katz describes as "very much a meat and potato set-up". This is born out by the fact that she effectively uses hundreds of Source Four profiles and PARs, PAR 16 birdies, heaps of James Thomas PAR cans and plenty of Wybron colour scrollers. Ampco Flashlight supplied all lighting - hire and sales - under the watchful eye of project manager Guus Hogenes.

Katz says: "The challenges have been great but I believe that on every show you can always defy some of the rules. In this case I have achieved this with colour and texture. When you can't dig in from the side and back this is probably the only way to pull your performer out from his or her background."

The show is loaded with gobos, many bespoke designed. Some directly sampled from the set design plus images of real leaves transformed into greyscale. These are layered with colour and shape to give a 3D environment that flatters its contents as opposed to overwhelming them.

Whilst Katz uses colour to achieve dimension and perspective, it's not so simple when the environment you are lighting is almost entirely green. "It's really been fascinating and challenging to me; the fact that the box is green throughout the show completely changes one's perception of colour. We all talk about warm white, cool white and keying off white - but here we are keying off green. On a green set, red is black, orange becomes red and blue turns green. It's a complete colour mind bend - you are constantly re-evaluating your own perception of colour."

Another very subtle and clever Katz technique is that many of the set and costume elements have been treated with varying measures of UV reactive paint. It would be imperceptible if you didn't know it was there; however, once you do, you can see what an impact it makes. Katz elaborates: "The UV reactive paint is particularly effective on the Leopards that kill *Tarzan's* parents and on the vines that hang down from the set. Every moving light has a UV filter and this really does lift the set out of its otherwise total greenness. My aim was always to get a good sense of composition, musicality, structure and creativity in the lighting. I hope I've achieved that."

Tarzan is a testament to the creative team, the technicians, specialist companies and backstage staff that ensure the safety of performers, the continuity of the show and the sharpness of the production. The show certainly has its moments of brilliance, however the plot supplied a whole new meaning to the protagonist's long-familiar signature cry: Aghh-aghh, Aghh-aghh, Aghh-ahh - whereas technically it was more 'Ooh, Ahh, wow!' Need I say more?