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Doll Domination

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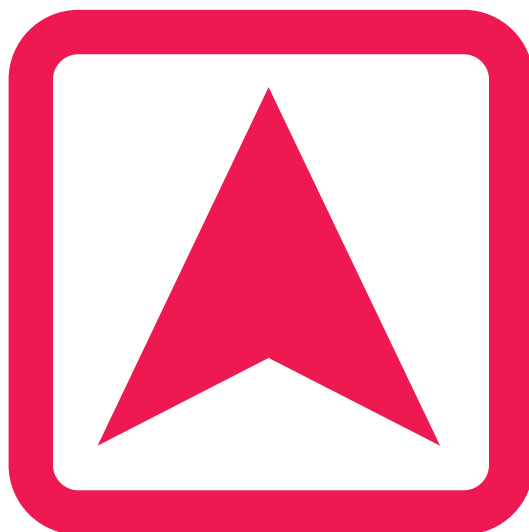


Doll Domination

What a difference a couple of years can make. Here I was, expecting the same old same old, and blow me the girls pull a rabbit out the hat, or is that pussy out the pouch? Either way, they have really raised their game . . .

words & pictures by Steve Moles





One: an excellent line-up of support acts saw Lady Gaga, a sort of hard house cross between Zigue-Zigue Sputnik (it's my age) and A Clockwork Orange, and then Noyo. Well, Noyo is a star in the ascendant, think Sinatra mixed with the best R&B has to offer. An unlikely line-up for a girl band headline act? Well absolutely not; 20,000 oestrogen-fuelled Mancunian lasses cannot help but show their chops. Say 20% of the house was in and seated as Lady Gaga began the proceedings; when she finished, just 20 minutes later, most of the house was filled and they were on their feet singing, swaying, and flashing their LED bunny ears like a Taliban Tufty confronting a GI in the shower.

Two: the girls themselves are a more polished act, their music has received a remix, courtesy of Dave Aude, which has done wonders, stripping out the saccharine and replacing it with a healthy dose of pheromones. The girls themselves have matured, while they're never going to be the most potent vocal combo' on the planet (in truth, Nicole is the only one whose voice projects real star quality) but that's not what they're all about. This is a hen party for women and girls on a grand scale, and it doesn't fail to deliver. Oh, that we could all be as happy as the assembled throng this night . . .

Production

Changes abound in production as well. The stalwarts we saw last time we visited remain - Scott Warner still does lights, and Bryan

'Froggy' Cross still wears four hats (tour manager, production manager, house and monitor mix), but the vendors have changed. Gone are Bandit Lites and Clair Brothers Audio, and in come HSL and Britannia Row. Neither of the former companies should feel particularly chagrined about this: decisions were based primarily on product, so neither former contractor fell down on their service, they just didn't have the kit this show required.

Cross is, as you might imagine, very much in the Producer role of this show. While he doesn't fill the shoes of choreographer and costume design, it wouldn't surprise me if he added those to his formidable list. For this outing the set design was very much in his domain.

To tell the truth, I have mixed feelings about production managers taking on this responsibility: set design is not just sketching up a back walkway, adding a couple of lifts, and placing the LED wall. But in the context of a pop act at this level, you can get away with it - just. If there was one weakness in this show it was the set . . . nice enough, it ticked all the right boxes, but lacked style.

We all know why it's done this way. I was talking with Steve Levitt, the UK's Svengali of the boy/girl band genre a good few years ago when he said with great prescience, that pop bands would not make money from record sales, but if they were smart, they could make money from touring.

Well it's not just pop bands that maxim applies to these days, but the point holds good. The Dolls and their management make their living off the shows, and especially in the European



market where their constituency is strong and they're a headline act. In the US they've only ever been an opener, as they are again for Britney later this year. Like I said, there's nothing inherently wrong with the set, LiteStructures have done their usual proficient job, the Props from Show FX are very plausible, and the Nocturne screens do the biz (V-Lite screens with the Tait Towers developed high-speed rigging frames). But they'd do well to drop some cash on someone who can give it some art. This was the kind of set I could design, a roadie set, and it looked it. Sorry Bryan, but fret not, I'm sure the accountant loves you, and you have plenty of skills elsewhere. Talk to the crowd.

Lighting

So what has prompted the lighting change? Last time around, Scott Warner was a disciple of all things Martin; now, he explains: "Principally it's the DigitalSpot 7000 DT that's really caught my eye. The whole rig is Robe, apart from some Vari*Lites. I'd tried the 7000 on some UK shows with the Go Go Dolls (seems like I only work with bands who have 'Dolls' in their name these days). They're very exciting - the lights that is - video and light in a moving head for an LD to play with. I also wanted to be the first LD in the US to use them; I have one at home already." Warner is taking some with him for the Britney tour, and who can blame him for wanting to break new ground on his home territory.

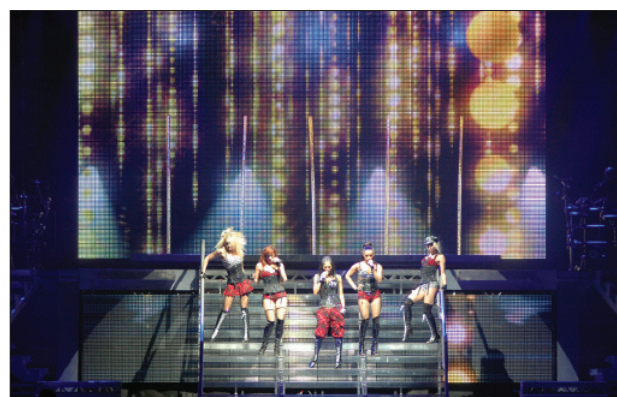
Warner continues: "We have a scenic Globe in the rig which I can project onto." (Think The Daily Planet atop Superman's place of employment.) "It's still early days for me, so I'm not exploiting the 7000s a great deal, and I have just a pair up there right now, though I'm carrying six. In fact, right now I use them more for Lady Gaga, I'm having fun with the support act and learning."

A shrewd move on Warner's part, the full rig is big and, as the idiom demands, very bright. For Gaga, playing downstage of a cityscape backdrop, there's barely 20% of the rig in action and the two 7000s are in a good environment to compete against local light levels. Plus Warner can play around, make a few mistakes, and not compromise his main act. As it happens, Warner also has a DigitalSpot 5000 which projects onto a faux advertising billboard on the side of one of the skyscrapers, while for the first song the two 7000s projected

a couple of flickering candles upon the buildings above. The Billboard is good, quite surreal in fact, making the backdrop so much more than a 2D scene. The candles, on the other hand, looked out of place. But both were clearly visible and strong enough. Later, Warner put flickering red clouds in the sky above the buildings, like thunder-clouds with St Elmo's fire within them, this was much more potent and really added some dynamic animation to Gaga's song. In that respect, the DigitalSpots earned their place in the rig, and demonstrated what can be achieved.

So what pulled Warner towards the lamp? "Robe took me up to HSL last July and showed it to me. Learning to operate was pretty easy, the only difficulty was terminology - what exactly does Lecture or Shaper do? - but it was easy enough. I used it the first night."

Warner did some one-off shows in the UK last summer, Go Go Dolls being a case in point. "As a light it's fast, has good colours. I like the LEDs down the side, I never did understand why they [High End Systems] put a camera in the DL3, the LEDs are much more useful. Other Robe lights in the rig include the ColorWash 2500E AT. I'm a big fan of the VL3500; the Robe 2500 competes well, although the Vari*Lite has the edge on brightness, especially in the UV. My Spots are [ColorSpot] 2500Es as well; I've got 48 of them. And the Red Wash 3 LED head, a rectangle of LEDs in a moving yoke. I'm



really pleased with them, a new-shaped eye candy to the audience, and a functioning light onto the stage. Same with the Red Blinder, an LED Molephay effectively. It's not as bright as the real thing, so I have a bunch of the square P36 nine lights on my downstage pods for audience light, but the LED units give colour and another new look."

Warner wraps his upstage pods with these units, I can't offer an objective opinion on their ability to cast light in an effective way - wash the stage, that is - but as a visual embellishment they are new and different. I was very struck by how nice the circles of LED clusters looked, mimicking exactly the eight-cell P36 format we all know and love, and how striking they are in contrast to the output from a conventional eight-light through a colour changer. Frou frou indeed.

Warner uses a Kinesys automation system for moving his pods around, descents and tilts, all looks very nice, and the visual decorative effect of the Red Blinders is strong and effective.

"It's a big busy stage, there are five dancers with the girls a lot of the time, and I've got two drummers upstage on the walkway so I take the TV show approach, bold and bright." There don't appear to be any



Above: Tour manager, production manager, house and monitor mixer Bryan 'Froggy' Cross (left) and lighting designer Scott Warner; Right: Cross with the Clair Brothers' 12AM leopard print stage monitor and similarly fur-lined mic case.

practicals in the set? "Bryan comes up with a lot of the set ideas, the LED screens in there do most of the work." Cross has Perspex stairs leading down from the 2 metre high rear (almost) full stage width walkway, with a 'see through' LED screen behind it. "George Elizondo runs the video, he gets the light-levels he wants and I work with it."

Warner runs the show off his own GrandMA: "It's easy, and getting the 7000s on there was too. I have seen the new GrandMA [the Series 2] and want it - it's black, who wouldn't? Seriously though, I like the look of

the new software interface, it has that clean, functional look to it, like a Mac compared to a PC. In that respect my GrandMA looks very old-fashioned on the software side."

And how's the switch to HSL on the service side? "They're great guys, but I have to say I like both [Bandit and HSL]. This switch was nothing to do with the companies, just the light."

Stage Set & Video

"Last time around we had a set that evolved from what we used as a support act," Cross began. "It didn't make sense to create

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Dolly Mixture

Bryan Cross: "Because I don't mix out front I've been able to push the FOH island right to the back of the hockey dasher, that adds at least another 150 seats; at £35 a seat that's revenue not to be ignored. We don't use any spots in the house either, so that can free up seats as well. Just one (Juliat Cyrano) on the platform FOH which is mainly for Noyo," who wears a narrow-brimmed Trilby, just like Sinatra, "he needs the spot from low level to get under the brim and hit his face."

"The Tablet control over the D-Show Profile is good, with a couple more Fritzes in the audience, one in the front row, one on the first tier, I have thought about mixing a band show off the Tablet."

Cross admitted he'd originally conceived Perspex decked ramps down from the rear walkway, "but the girls found it too steep in their high heels. I'll keep that idea for another show."

General

The two drummers upstage on the walkway provided a useful visual distraction when the girls popped off for a breather - a great improvement over the last tour's playback musical interludes. The girls have also tightened up their between-song raps; still lacks a certain sincerity, but there's a lot less schmaltz.

Video content material was varied, not knowing the Dolls' music video output that well, I can't say how much was derived from that source, so sepia images of snow clad woodshed's made no sense to me in one song, but hey, what do I know? But then alternating large Pop Art spots on screen for 'Wait a minute' just did it for me: a Polka pop song with Polka dots . . .



something completely new for Europe, so we just grew what we had. This time we had the opportunity to re-design from scratch. We wanted a clean stage like before, and very clean lines. This is a visual act, it's really important all the audience gets to see the girls; that was a primary reason why I switched PA, I was able to scale back physical size without losing audio impact."

Cross has a large screen above the walkway as well as the one below, set behind the stairs. "For the video I chose the Nocturne V Lite. I needed one of those see-through screens, but I didn't want that invisible black hole look. The V-Lite has an aluminum look to it, which complements the stage set. The top screen takes live shots and pre-made content, the below stairs screen just content. I feed George timecode to trigger content - it's all been made or adapted from music video for the tour. The piece made for the show opening works really well, it shows the girls on motorcycles, then the lift brings up the real girls on the bikes right in front of the screen. It's a really good transition."

He's right, it is a good gag, the bikes by the way, really look the part, yet weigh just 50kg each - nice job, Show FX. And on that score, the LiteStructures staging is nicely finished; Cross made a point of complimenting them: "We rehearsed at their facility in Wakefield. It's great having the shop right across the yard. The girls asked for some changes to the banister rail and it was done in a moment, none of that trucking it here and there."

"We have a lot of pyro for this show, all from Pyro Junkies - they just have such a good safety record," adds Cross. It also helps a great deal that the Dolls, unlike most of their contemporaries, were professional dancers before they became an act, so know all about hitting their marks. "We've only had one 'no shoot'

where a dancer overstepped the mark, and there's a lot of pyro cues in there," says Cross. There's also a really nice orange flame effect, using Spray Master units: "They're German, seem really good, and we're waiting for them to get back to us with some colour variations."

Sound

The rehearsals must have been a busy time for Cross. Readers may recall from last time around (see L&S March 2007) how the Dolls perform to track from the Pro Tools system, and Cross mixes monitors and front-of-house from stage left. With half the show consisting of new material, and the other half old stuff re-mixed by the aforementioned Aude, Cross was thus presented with a chunk of Pro Tools files of wide dynamic disparity that he needed to bash around when he first arrived at Wakefield.

"Really, the show flows together," he says. "There are only four or five stops in Pro Tools all through. I'm using the new Pro Tools 8, I guess it's been out a couple of months now, and I'm having no problems at all - so far," Cross chuckled: he was just being superstitious, like everyone else in the entertainment biz. "I'm using the Digidesign Profile for obvious reasons, in fact we have two out here, mine and one out front supplied by Brit Row which is for Lady Gaga. There's also a Yamaha PM5D in the house for Noyo's engineer."

Noyo was a show-up-and-play act, so I never had chance to speak with his engineer, but if you get the chance, check him out - a slick horn section, full rhythm ensemble, and Noyo's polished vocal performance, all neatly mixed, with breathing space for everything. Smooth.

"I still use Fritz out front," Fritz is Cross's bi-aural head mic, the KU 100 from Neumann, to give himself 'ears' in the house, "but I also use the desk's tablet



remote for the first couple of numbers. I like to pop out into the front rows to check what's happening there; sometimes I'll go all the way out to the first level tribune to listen to the delays."

Such confidence: you see immediately that Cross has been running shows in this somewhat unconventional fashion for some time now; he trusts his desk, the radio link to his tablet, and he knows his show intimately.

"The girls all use Sennheiser hand-helds. We had them bling'd out by Crystal Rock since you last saw us, the same people who did the Spice Girls' mics." You'll note from the photo these mics all travel in a personalised leopard skin lined case (artificial I'm sure), and that Cross's 12AM listen wedges are similarly fluffy. A sound engineer with a mild 'skin' fetish . . . I like that.

"They also have Sennheiser headset mics for a couple of songs. The in-ears are Sennheiser G2 systems, the girls choose to use either Westone or Futuresonics plugs. I do have to put some sound up there on stage as well for the dancers; two ARCS a side on top of a pair of L-Acoustics 2 by 18"s. I have a sub as well, just to give myself a little bit of low end. The monitor mix runs tight to snapshots off time code - EQ, level everything. All the IEM stuff is pre-programmed so they pretty much take care of themselves, that way I get to concentrate on the house mix. When I start the show from the console I look at the Wave analyser."

Cross then adds a thought: "Signal travels in digital all the way to the speakers, AES to front-of-house, the Lakes, only analogue from amp to speaker. I did a comparison when we rehearsed at LiteStructures using analogue snakes; that put four A to D conversions in the signal path and the signal loss was really noticeable."

Cross gave me a little listen demonstration so I could hear what he works with at the console, it was glaringly apparent that the console took maybe 90 seconds to initialise. "Yeah, too many plug-ins. But look at it another way; I'm using the full depth of the technology, instead of just pre-amps and faders." You're quite sanguine about that reliance? "Sure, plus the playback from the Pro Tools matches perfectly to the console, that ease of connection." What's to worry about?

So how about this switch from Clair Brothers' I4 system to Outline Butterfly from Britannia Row? "Well I've been using

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Left: The rehearsal stage at LiteStructures Studios, Wakefield.

Clairs for a long time and I knew what I'd need to cover big arenas like this one at Manchester. As I said, the set design was based around having a very clean stage, and we knew we'd sold the venues 104-110%. That meant playing to 240° audience - not quite in the round but a big spread. I couldn't put up two hangs of 14, say 16 in one and 14 in the other, each side of stage, plus flown 14 Subs, it would just kill too many sightlines. So I needed a physically smaller system that I could fly higher, but which still had the reach. I tried the Nexo Geo T, that would do the job but I didn't like the low-mids. Brit Row sent me a set of 12 Outline boxes and four subs to LiteStructures to try and I was absolutely blown away." So much so that Cross is considering buying a system for his rental company back in the US, Bryan Cross LLC.

"They'd be ideal for the corporate market because of their size. That did scare the management a bit when they first saw them, so I stood them in front of the sub and showed them the controlled power they can deliver. I'd given Brit Row the opportunity to show the system to me because they'd serviced a few fly dates [one-offs] in the past and their service had been consistently good - their crew are especially good - so it was an

easy decision. It has other advantages: it's relatively light, I'm using just two points for main PA, that frees up a lot of load capacity for the lighting rig and LED screen. For these big arenas I'm flying just three Outline subs for reach, and 12 a side on the floor."

In truth there was a lot of PA in the air around the stage: the main system with flown subs to the stalls and back seats, side system to tiered seats down the room, all

Butterfly - and half a dozen dV-Dosc almost backstage pointed off to the very top tier seats. There was a pair of delays, also Butterfly, right at the back of the hockey dasher, flown extremely high just to cover the top tier. During the 20 minutes of Lady Gaga's set I subjected myself to the MEN heart attack routine and walked up and down both tier levels along house left; yes, you could hear the transition from dV-Dosc to Butterfly as you passed along the side of stage in the top tier, but like the upper tier seats at the back, the clarity was excellent. And to confirm Cross's *raison d'être*, at no point did I find a seat where stage view was compromised by a row of black boxes in mid-air. Job done.

"I can't say enough about the Outline," concluded Cross. "The subs are just tight, and very compact. It's efficient too, the Outline amps are well matched and you need so few to drive the system."

Cross is a convert, but why not? As he said about the console, he's using the technology to the full and it works. You can't knock that.



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