

# Lighting & Sound international

January 2011

entertainment, presentation, installation

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# Colombia's



Manchester missed a trick this night. Here was a performer at the top of her game, someone who manages to engage with her audience with great passion and sense of fun, yet without compromise to her image as sexual diva. The house wasn't even half sold, unlike the O2 a few nights later. This must be a little unnerving for Live Nation, for a quick examination of the shows flanking Shakira's at this venue hardly indicates a large demographic overlap - it should have been rammed. Did someone forget the posters or is Manchester suffering a samba deficit?

That aside, if you've ever been to Rio during carnival you'll be all too familiar with the thunderous beat of the drums. Those rhythmic

ulations insinuate themselves into your mind and propel you and the seething mass of humanity alongside you, ever onward into dancing swaying ecstasy. It's a given that Shakira has that carnival rhythm beating in her Colombian heart. Not convinced by her South American lineage? Try this from her sound engineer Mike Keating: "This is the first time in my career I've ever been asked to turn it up." Now Mike and I are old, old friends. I've listened to his mix for over 25 years. I also know his passion is for classic V8 American muscle cars and when he's not on the road he drives bulldozers. As a 'dozer driver he uses massive power to sculpt the landscape in subtle fashion, slicing off just an inch here and there over a 300 metre gradient. His application to mixing power is the same: a PA is not a blunt instrument in his hands and he knows all about how to manage grunt when he's asked. This is not a show to sit down to.

# Finest

Steve Moles visits Shakira's Sale el Sol touring production in Manchester . . .



## Lights by Lite Alternative

Lighting designer Paul Normandale made some very enlightening comments when I spoke to him later, but first I engaged with Fraser Elisha, who has been running the show since the tour first began in the autumn. "Tait Towers built the thrust and the Mask," he began. "The mask is a little over-engineered, but that's because it was originally going to split apart to allow dancers to enter stage through it."

The stage set is designed by Es Devlin, a designer of increasing reputation in rock and roll circles. This set is relatively simple, yet high impact. A very large HD LED screen dominates as a backdrop: 60ft (18.3m) wide and 30ft (9.15m) high, it splits vertically mid-way through the show to reveal the mask, a 3D relief as tall as the screen and perfectly proportioned. If you've seen one

before it resembles a death mask in that it's white, facially featured but expressionless. As a projection surface it's quite disturbing, especially as the chop frame animation of talking heads projected upon it brings it to life. These images are interspersed with voodoo face painting, but as with so much of Shakira's performance, it's done with a sense of fun.

Main stage is quite plain: three low-level risers (less than half a metre) hold the musicians, drums, percs and keys. In contrast the thrust is prominent, it sticks out a good 30 metres, almost reaching the mix consoles, and has a significant B stage platform at its end. For Shakira, B stage isn't a rendezvous for the acoustic interlude, it's an integral part of the total performance area and is visited frequently. "She likes to see and be among her audience," said Elisha. Having walked through the crowd to enter the stage at





the thrust end for openers, she waited only till the second number before inviting four young fans up on to it to dance with her.

In terms of numbers, lighting comes from two principal manufacturers - Martin for movers and Color Kinetics (Philips) for static - although Novalight and iPix also feature strongly. Normandale had good rationale for choosing these lamps, but Elisha had some pertinent observations. "The Novalight Flowers - there just isn't anything to compete with that effect - well, maybe the Dominator. The strobe and chase off the Martin MAC III is highly effective. There's a gobo look she likes and calls the laser effect."

And she's right, it does have that look, especially in a saturated hue. "The [iPix] BB4s as audience blinders are deceptively punchy; I would like to see an open white in them, but used alongside the DWE four-lights you get to see just how powerful they are. The [Color Kinetics] LED ColorBlaze strips we've ended up using only two colours, but they work well along the walkway. The ColorBlast [also from CK] provides both warm and cold white and are good up-lighters; especially useful for making her look good on the screen."

The screen images are huge close-ups of her face and fill the screen. "She knows all about aspect ratios and what flatters her," added Elisha. No bad thing, this artist has a clear sense of presentation and harnesses every tool to realise it. Like Jean Michel Jarre last month, she has taken the time to learn the technology of stagecraft and every member of this production team knows all about it. "She sends out little messages, maybe 30 of them, from her Blackberry every show," said Normandale later. This is quite remarkable for she's no slouch on stage; how she finds the time or has the presence of mind to spot and remember things is beyond me, but you'll learn as you read on, spot and recall she does, and in some detail.

Normandale, not known for his willingness to engage with the Press, was this evening a model of information. I had been told by

Elisha that Shakira had seen one of Normandale's Depeche Mode shows and, liking the wave trusses and the general design, sought Normandale out. "Yes, that's correct," confirms Normandale. "I think she saw their show in Bogota." Having already learned from several members of production that Shakira involves herself in the minutiae of her show, I asked Normandale about his approach to designing for an artist who already has a clear idea of how she wants things to look. Does he design to the artist, to the music, or some preconceived notion that is more an abstract of the two?

"It's always a process of translation," Normandale explains, "deciphering from what they say they want; what they think they want; and what they really want. Truthfully, and despite the physical resemblance, this is a very different show to Depeche."

So how much input did she provide ahead of time? "We met for just 30 minutes in Barcelona prior to the tour, or rather prior to arriving at rehearsals in Montreal. It was clear she was visually determined - she has, after all, been doing this since she was 17. But as with all artists, the foundation of design is built

upon an element of trust, you've got to do the best you can, and then develop with them."

Normandale found he was blessed by one aspect of Shakira - she is a consummate performer. "When she runs through her numbers in rehearsal she might work her movements two or three times; after that she hits the same mark every time. How you follow that with the lighting is more liberal." In that you're not aiming to have a light cue to every mark after three goes? "No. But rehearsals are intense, she comes in at 11pm and works through till 3am, then wants to do it again. Once she has it right she's split-second perfect. As to the lighting, she then has the gumption to ask the right question. On this tour it's not unusual for her to send out 30 questions on her Blackberry to various members of the production during the show."

An observation I found refreshing, inasmuch as it's no bad thing for an artist to be fully engaged with the process of their presentation. It's a mark of Normandale's accomplishment as a designer that he takes these Blackberry messages as positive contribution to the presentation.





He continues: "The set list quickly became clear; we talked about colours, she was very specific colour to song, and she would explain the meaning behind the songs in relation to colour. The difficult part in all this was to retain intimacy with the enormous video presence."

Shakira obviously has a cinematic vision of her presentation. The live camera action that director Bob Higgins puts on screen is uniquely close-up; I've never seen anything quite like it. The HD impact is immense and can easily overwhelm the stage. It demands attention - this is big-scale TV.

"She wants to be close to the crowd, that's a defining influence on choice of light, Normandale continues. "For example, the MAC 250 Wash with the beam kit mounted along the thrust are chosen not just for their brightness, but for their size. You just can't have some enormous moving light in that position."

It's apparent that either Devlin or perhaps Normandale had Tait Towers make the lighting mounts deliberately tailored to get these lights, and the ColorBlazes, lower and less intrusive, without compromising their output on the artist.

"We do have to sustain light levels for the cameras," adds Normandale. "In fact, the ColorBlazes aren't the brightest, but the ability to chase along them and light the dancers as they advance down the thrust, rather than up-light the whole thrust, is good for the sense of motion."

What about other light choices up in the air, where instrument size is less important? "The XBs are about 20% brighter - in an arena system like this, when they're 30 feet away, that extra makes a difference. The other reason I went for them and the MAC IIIs is simplicity. This design can be replicated anywhere - remember she has a huge following in Mexico and all of South America . . . she plays stadiums in those countries and fills them night after night, so being able to get the same lamps in Europe and North and South America is important."

"The BB4 is so much better than a Molephay with a colour changer," says Normandale, who takes advantage of the ability to address individual cells of the BB4, using on occasion just two in white with the DWE's for an audience light-up, then as the predominant stage wash turns to mauve on the middle eight, switches to different BB4 cells, and cross-fades from the white BB4/DWE combo to these two other cells in matching mauve. Sounds simple, looks great.

The wave trusses, when I first saw them above stage, made me think Normandale is in danger of having a signature look,

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## Notes . . .

- LD Paul Normandale on ColorBlast: "The combination of providing both warm and cold white is very useful for the TV work. As I said, we have to be aware she is, for all intents and purposes, being filmed on stage."

- The band risers have BB4s concealed beneath them, the grille fronts to the risers have a cut-out front that resembles the panels of a double MR16 strip, and the visual effect is exactly that. Cheap and easy.

- Screenworks provided the video screen projectors and PPU, they are a division of NEP Broadcasting, it said on the flightcases. The screen is very cinematic, not just in scale, but in the image Higgins casts upon it, and Shakira is brightly lit. Obviously Elisha and Higgins spend the time each day balancing to camera and it's very effective - real TV broadcast quality.

- The wave trusses, hung beneath the main grid MAC Ills and lit from above by them, adds an alternative view, especially when dropped in across the LED screen. Something else Normandale did that's so obvious but I've rarely seen done so well - the Martin MAC 250 Washes on the thrust sides worked the room frequently, even when Shakira was on the main stage, throwing beam shapes up in front of the stage, something that dragged the show into the audience domain.

- Lighting for the gypsy music sequence was straight out of a Goya campfire scene. I'm sure Normandale must have referenced the great man's work to choose the colours and quality of lighting; touches of dark red, and lots of golden hues - it looked fantastic. And to add poignancy the articulation of the acoustic guitars in the mix was just perfect, breathy. Easily the best unplugged sequence I've ever witnessed, so much more than just a few old songs rendered acoustically; this was proper, considered performance art. Textured, nuanced, and back-lit with MAC 250s.



but when I thought about it a bit more I realised the truth is, every show I visit has flat trusses above the stage, why should wave trusses not be just as commonplace? "The main reason they are there for me is so I can at some time impinge upon the video wall space, to intrude physically upon it. We only get to use them three or four times."

Curiously for such a sensuous object (the trusses can flex as snake-like as Shakira's hips), she didn't want movement from them in song. Was that frustrating for Normandale? "We have had the trusses a few years now and have yet to explore all the things we can do with them. I think it will take a smaller-scale theatre tour for their real impact to be exploited fully." We'll look out for that one.

### Video

Bob Higgins is a regular visitor to Europe. Director in residence for Santana since *Supernatural* over a decade ago, he's here most years stabbing a switcher somewhere. "There are a lot of tight cues to this show," he began. "The video projection cues for the mask we have to do manually, even though it's run through timecode. It's because we've gone through so many changes since rehearsals it needs that manual touch; plus I'm an old guy and it's the way I know best."

Higgins frequently refers to his age, but watching the show, his cuts are sharp and

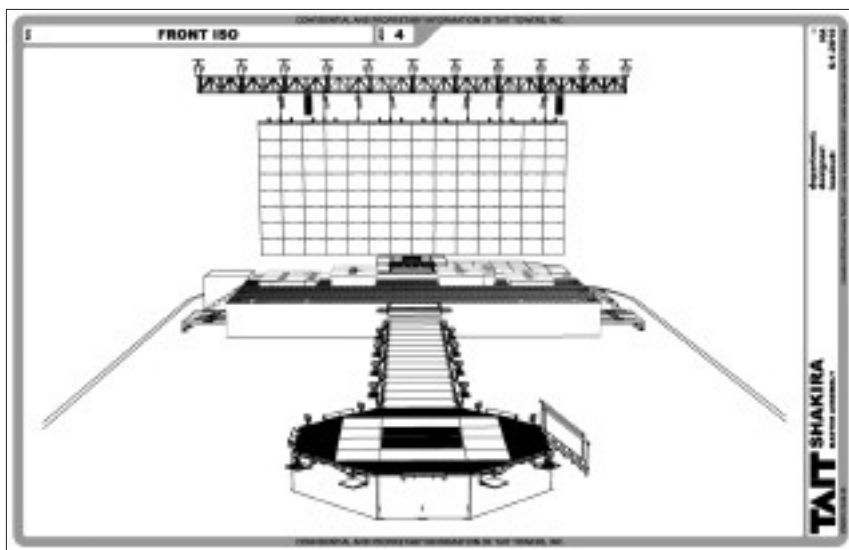
smooth. "I'm more an editor than a director on this show," he opined ruefully. "The thing is, when the mask is in, then the live-versus-playback thing requires that subtlety you can only manage manually. The mask takes care of itself, but the screen needs human input."

The mask is projected onto from FOH by two Barco FLM R20+ 20k projectors. The LED screen comes from Screenworks (a division of NEP Broadcasting). Made by Daktronics in South Dakota, it has a 10mm pixel pitch. I joked that coming from the Dakotas it can probably withstand the cold weather currently assaulting the UK better than most LED screens. "You're closer to the truth than you think," said Higgins. "These screens are seen mainly in sports facilities and stadiums as fixed installations so they are built to endure weather."

The Dakotan winter makes what the UK has just endured look like springtime: does that emphasis in design make them less manageable for touring? "Not really," said Higgins' assistant, Keith Lockette. "We open the trucks around 10:00 and the screen is up and running by 12:30, and this is a big screen." From the audience perspective it looked good: the centre join was just visible in the top 30% of the screen, which presumably is more a rigging problem than an LED frame module problem.







Clockwise from top left:

Tait Towers' front isometric projection of the stage structure.

Drummer Brendan Buckley with FOH sound engineer Mike Keating.

Lighting designer Paul Normandale and extended family.

Video director Bob Higgins (standing) and assistant Keith Lockette.

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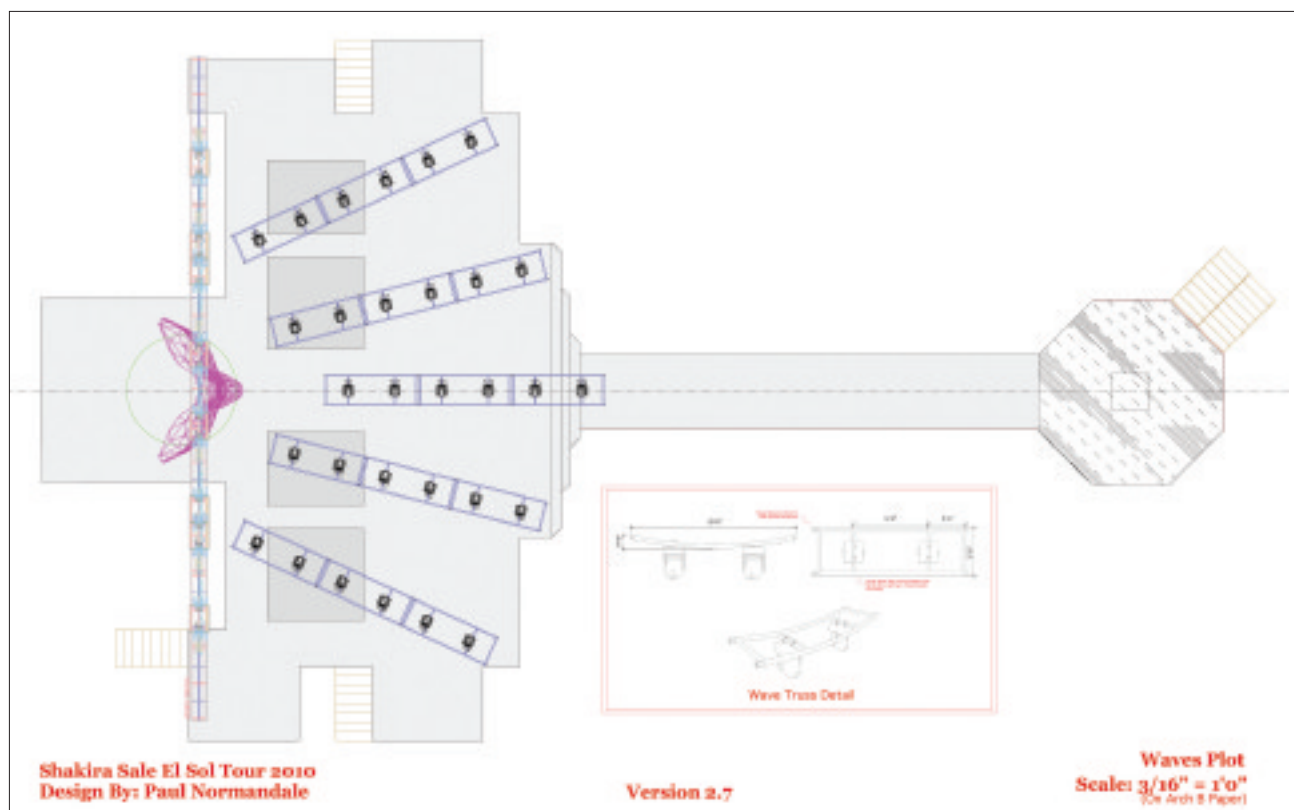
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"We have four hi-def cameras - Sony HDC 1500s," continued Higgins. "We did try standard def but it just didn't look right. HD works really well with this LED wall." Just four cameras? "We did have some POVs and Robo cams, but found there was no function for them we couldn't cover with these four. It's all about the size of the image and she's picky. If I were her, I'd be picky too. She knows her stuff really well, she's very technically oriented. I will get a message after the show - frankly, it's phenomenal; who knows how many shots I take during a show? It's in the thousands, and she'll catch the two or three I missed."

And how did the live video content evolve? "It's a combination. She's well choreographed and decides the benchmark shots for the show; I work to and around them. What's so helpful to me is she never misses her mark."

You're running the show off a Synergie 3 from Ross. What about effects treatment to the images, or is it all untreated? "No, I do have two channels of DVE loaded in the switcher. The Syn3 is my favourite, the logic of operation comes straight from the Grass Valley genealogy. It's about the colour coding of the work surface, it's not grey and mysterious. For us old guys that's important. And although it's not a function we're using much in this show, they're really friendly for running playback. We do have Green System drives for the Mask content, but as I said, that's to timecode triggers."

And stepping back to the cameras for a second, where are they? "Two rostrum at FOH, and two hand-held in the pit." Doesn't that end up being a bit 2D? "She does like the front-on look; the show has a distinct TV look to it. Frankly, she fills a lot of your time just keeping up with her. If there was anything I'd add, I find she's already done it. Just occasionally I sneak something in when I think she's looking forward, but I get the feeling she spots it somehow - a little cheeky grin comes on her face."

### Sound

Ed Dracoulis on monitors opened with "I don't do interviews". A man of his word, I didn't get much more out of him. He uses a Digidesign D Show, has a Shure radio mic system and Sennheiser in-ears. "It's a mix of G2 and G3", he volunteered. "It's a system that has grown; some of the gear is hers, some ours." By 'ours' he meant Clair Global: most of the flightcases I saw were from AudioRent Clair in Switzerland, so I guess the guys in Wales at Concert Sound were busy?

At front-of-house, Mike Keating uses a Yamaha PM5000. "You know what? It's never done anything on its own - never turned itself on or off," he says. Keating is, you'll gather, a keen adherent of the analogue domain, and based upon results, you can't fault him for it.

I ventured that there are many engineers from Keating's generation who'd be right beside him on the analogue preference, but anecdotally it seems Midas is the preferred tool. "How about Dave Cobb, or Clive Franks?" he ventured robustly. We had a brief discussion about Franks' recent tiff with Dame Elton at the Roundhouse, agreed that after almost 40 years together they'd probably heal that wound, and returned to desks. "I never chose this console, it was Clive who originally turned me on to it, and he's my favourite engineer. I prefer the recall set-up, and the PSU will power 20 stereo inputs so you can get all the channels you want."

Keating has a 52 channel board with a 28-channel stretch out front. "I'm actually using 18 stereo ins on the 52, keys, guitars and lots of Protocols: five different keyboards. There are 80 inputs in total - drums, bass, two guitarists, keys, percussion, and violin, seven in the band plus her."

As discussed in the last issue, Keating would normally be out with Sting: maybe it's Shakira's good fortune that he's not. Keating has good credentials with female pop stars - Cher and Maria Carey among them. "I was in France with Johnny Hallyday when the Sting tour started, but I was disappointed not to do the show," he says. As with Franks and Elton, I'd be amazed if artist and engineer aren't reconciled soon.

Keating is using a Neumann K105, quite a sensitive mic. "Female artists rarely have stronger voices than men, and she is no exception, so getting her vocal above the instruments is a challenge," he says. "Stage levels are not too bad, but when she's out in front of the PA, which is often, it can be tough." Besides a flown Clair i5 line array, Keating has eight BT218 subs per side, "I'm working at 104/105dB from the main system, as I said, I've never been told it's not loud enough before, not till this tour. The subs, which don't register on A-weighting, probably push levels up as far as 130-132."

That's an over simplification, however 'A' weighting does devalue the effect of low end noise. I measured during the show and A weighted



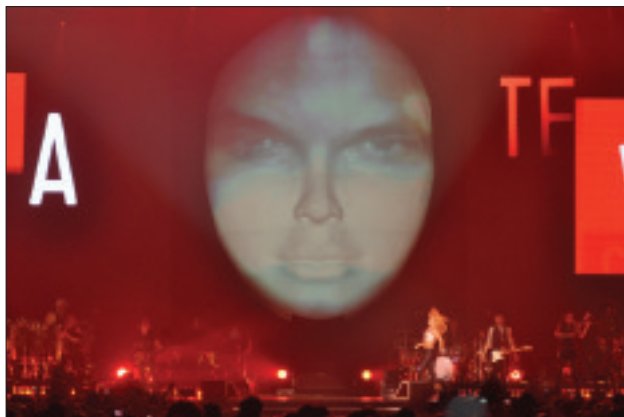
(Slow), 105dB was peak: mostly it was settled around 101/102dB. The subs could be monstrous, but the sound was warm and, for a Clair's system, tight. Did he prefer the i5 over the i4? "Nothing has changed, just the rigging; it's essentially the same system, but the Subs are the bee's knees." He then added: "One of the things I don't like with line arrays is if you blow one component and it happens to be in the box that you're hearing front-of-house, then you think the whole PA's out. Put a wall of S4s up there and you'd never notice if you lost a single driver."

Onstage is a range of instruments including a Churango (a Ukulele-type instrument from South America) and violin. Keating says: "It's all about mic placement. I try to make sure I don't spill channels. I'm using a lot of the Beyer Opus range - the 87 and 88. I'm a big fan of those condenser mics, they can really bring things to life."

Effects and dynamics out front looks little changed from what you'd have for Sting? "Yep, same stuff, Lexicon 480, PCM 90 and 70 for reverbs, I'm still a big fan of the Distressor from Empirical Labs. On the bass I have two limiters, a Distressor and a Manley ELOP8 which works well."

At this point we were interrupted by a member of the band who happened to be sat with us in catering, listening in. "I tell you this," began Brendan Buckley, who has been drumming for Shakira for 12 years. "Everybody I invite to the show texts me afterwards and says it's the best sound they ever heard." He was not alone, the band's new second guitarist Grecco Buratto and keyboard player Albert Menendez chimed in and agreed, adding "he [Keating] is also a cool dude to take out to dinner." Obviously he has been picking up too many bar tabs.

Keating added: "For me, the thing is listening and asking everyone else what they think, rather than imposing my opinion. 'Does that sound good to you?' is what I ask."



Facing page: A plot from Paul Normandale's lighting design.

Above: The 'mask' - in previsualisation, and during live action.

Mike, it sounded great, and for the volume exceptional. The mere absence of tired ears at the end of the evening says much about the musicality of the show.

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