Fright Nights at Thorpe Park

With no resident technical staff to call on, popular themed attraction Thorpe Park employs the services of a specialist team put together by Entertainment Control Systems Ltd. Julie Harper **visited the team as they prepared for** *Fright Nights . . .*

"Want to cover the Fright Nights at Thorpe Park?" asks our Editor. Hmm, at first, I wasn't quite sure I did . . .

Walking through the darkened mazes looking at the technical set-up by Maglite is slightly unnerving, if only because it's hard to avoid walking into walls with their gobbets of rotting flesh, or accidentally denuding dangling chandeliers of their spray-on cobwebs. But having to experience the full effect a second time at the back of a string of screaming visitors with ghouls and lunatics leaping up on either side of you, screaming, moaning, grabbing your calves and, possibly worse, dribbling feather-light fingers down your cheek, is another thing altogether. But, hardened by so many years of the PLASA Show, it was beginning to feel in quite familiar . ..

Thorpe Park Fright Nights are one of the main events in the Park's calendar, attracting up to 20,000 visitors a day during its three-week stint. The major attractions include four themed Horror Mazes brought in for the event and shoe-horned into place in a theme park which is already bursting at the seams.

Two mazes, the stark *Asylum* and the gothic *Hellgate*, occupy the abandoned sites of old rollercoaster rides; a third, *Se7en*, based on the Seven Deadly Sins, inhabits an outdoor arena and the last, *The Curse,* is sited on what, in the summer months, is a children's paddling pool with the sand bulldozed to one side to make way for the decidedly un-child-friendly attraction.

Thorpe Park has been bought by the Merlin Entertainments Group, which also owns nearby Chessington World of Adventures and Legoland, and other attractions including the London Dungeons, Madame Tussauds, Alton Towers and the London Eye. It is due for heavy investment over the coming years which should address some of the overcrowding issues and grant still more leeway to the creative content of the mazes.

The mazes have been designed and built by film set creatives, Weird and Wonderful, themed attraction specialist RMA Limited, and Merlin's own in-house studios, with the sound, lighting and control systems for all but *The Curse* devised and installed by Entertainment Control Systems Ltd.

Thorpe Park has no resident technical staff, so ECS Ltd's owner, Dave Lascaut, works with the Park's management to put together the team which, this year, consists of Lascaut, Steve Wallin, Jamie Tibbetts, Isobel Rush, Marcus Wareham and Jason King.

"It's a really challenging job," says Lascaut. "Not only do the team have to know sound, lighting and control systems but they rapidly develop
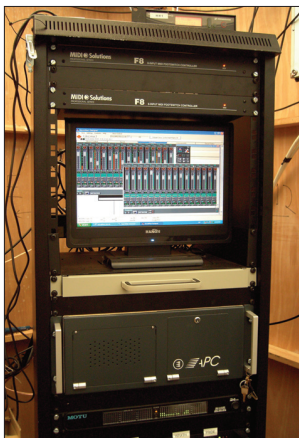
Facing page: scenes from *The Asylum* and *Se7en*.

Above: Members of the technical team outside The Asylum - Jamie Tibbitts, Isobel Rush, Dave Lascaut and Steve Wallin.

Left: The Richmond Sound Design SoundMan Server.

skills in carpentry and pneumatics too. We have an intensive daily maintenance schedule across all of the mazes and, because things can get a bit boisterous, frequently need to do running repairs whilst the attractions are open.

"Designing the install has given us a real opportunity to create the right atmosphere in each maze which includes picking the right equipment to do the job. For example, for *Se7en* we needed a UV fluorescent light with the ability to strobe and strike instantaneously. This proved almost impossible to find in the UK, so we went to Wildfire in the States for two of their Effects Master units which were perfect for the job."

Lighting is very low level and consists largely of birdies and flicker candles provided, like most of the lighting and smoke machines, by A.C. Entertainment Technologies Ltd. *Se7en*, for example, has only 24 channels of dimming via SoundLab 4-channel IEC dimmers, since nothing requires more than 100W of power.

Smoke is provided by a variety of machines including a Martin JEM Glaciator in *Hellgate* and JEM ZR33s (of which there are 10 across the park, each consuming a bottle of Pro Fluid a day) in *Se7en* and *The Asylum*. The only exception is *The Curse* which, having been designed to different specifications by RMA, uses Look Solutions' Viper NT machines.

Inappropriately named 'fragrance' machines - Vortex units from Dale Air - emit a cocktail of aromas: 'Hospital' smells in *The Asylum*, 'Musty' and 'Burnt Wood' in the fireplace of *Hellgate*, 'Vomit' ("My favourite!" claims Lascaut. "It's so strong we just turn it on in the afternoon to 'stain' the room and have to turn it

themed attraction

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off before anyone comes in or it is unbearable!") in *Se7en* and the, comparatively pleasant, 'Sea Breeze' and 'Boiler Room' in *The Curse*.

Sound is run through QSC RMX1450 or Inter-M QD4960 Quad amps to speakers concealed in dark corners and hidden in, or disguised as, pieces of scenery. TOA HX5B speakers act as mini line arrays and give accurate angle adjustment - essential when managing sound pollution in such a tight environment. They also have the added bonus of being weatherproof for outdoor use. High quality sound effects and general soundscapes are provided by British-manufactured Ohm KS-3 speakers, whilst Lascaut claims to be "very impressed" with the JBL Control 1 units which he has used for the first time and describes as "powerful and with a good frequency response for their size and price".

"We have to be careful to keep all sound and lighting equipment discreet and concealed as much as possible from the visitors, otherwise the effect is spoiled," explains Lascaut.

Visitors must stumble through the near-dark mazes in small groups with hands on the shoulders of the person in front - which, far from instilling a sense of security, serves rather to transmit fear along the line.

As they pass, photo-electric beam-break sensors are triggered which, with additional signals from actor-operated buttons in each room, initiate various smoke, lighting and sound effects, air-cannons and other pneumatic effects. "The timing of lighting effects, sound effects and blackouts is crucial to distract the visitors' attention, guiding them to where we want them to be and enabling actors to take advantage of blackouts to move about rapidly and increase the scare-factor," explains Lascaut.

"It's essentially a piece of promenade theatre but with audience involvement. They need not only to see and hear, but to smell and feel the whole experience. It's about managing people's expectations - and then abusing them!"

Pinpoint co-ordination of sound and lighting is made possible using the new SoundMan-Server, a virtual sound system from Richmond Sound Design, installed for the first time within the dank and grisly rooms of *Se7en*. "It's a fantastic piece of software," says Lascaut, "and we are really excited to be bringing it to Thorpe Park."

SoundMan-Server is an audio routing, playback and processing software designed for multi-zone audio control in theme parks, museums and live theatre. It can run off any PC and is completely scaleable in the number of inputs and outputs it can handle. *Se7en*, for example, uses 24 inputs, 24 outputs and 48 playbacks, yet has the capacity for more than 1000 if needed.

The software accepts MIDI show control messages from the buttons around the attraction - such as the flickering corridor lights and electrical crackling sound effects triggered on entering *Se7en* - and then sends the relevant commands to lighting and sound equipment to ensure perfect coordination.

The SoundMan-Server also runs a Hog 3PC (also supplied by A.C. Entertainment Technologies) which triggers the eight cue lists needed to run the attraction. "I have complete and precise control over every aspect of the lighting and sound with this set-up," Lascaut explains. "Timings and delays can be adapted quickly and easily and inserted into the cue list wherever and whenever I need them - even during the show if

necessary. This is especially valuable when adjusting the effects to work with the actors in the maze.

"It can also be used to set sound levels - which vary from subtle to blatant across the attractions - and secure them from tampering by the actors once we have left the site! There is also an over-ride facility which the hosts can use when speaking to the visitors before they enter the maze or for making emergency announcements. SoundMan can also perform seemless loops which, traditionally, are very hard to achieve."

This is the first time Entertainment Control Systems Ltd have used the SoundMan-Server and Thorpe Park have been so impressed they have already expressed an interest in rolling it out across other attractions next year.

In contrast to the close, dark confines of *Se7en*, *The Asylum* - technically simple but very effective - consists of an open maze of chicken-wire fences and mirrors, lit entirely by six Martin Atomic 3000 strobes and filled with smoke from JEM ZR33s. Actors dressed in white move with stop-frame jerkiness under the strobes as they lurch around and above the unfortunates trying to negotiate a way through.

"People emerge believing the walls to be moving - it's very disorientating and noisy," says Lascaut.

The sheer volume of the soundtrack adds to the confusion but with the Park surrounded by residential housing and a sound level of 105dB coming from speakers placed only a couple of metres away from the visitor, it is vital that the sound levels are set and directed precisely and remain tamper-proof. This is done using a Soundweb 3088 digital signal processor from BSS Audio.

"With the Soundweb I can program everything on computer and upload it to the system so it cannot be touched. Crossovers, limiters and EQs are all stored in the SoundWeb, saving the speakers from damage and allowing multiple outputs from the amps. This is especially good when carrying out sound checks and to guarantee that the strict regulations are always adhered to."

Inhabited by up to 80 actors and, at peak times, with a new group passing through each maze every 30 seconds, it is not the easiest of jobs for the actors. Panic attacks and asthma attacks are potential scenarios which have occasioned stoppages in the past. With only a show captain amongst each team of actors and a senior host front-of-house to guide the visitors, Lascaut's team must be on hand at all times to respond to any emergency and carry out running repairs on the sets. Calling for medical or security assistance to deal with over excited visitors, stopping and re-starting the show and ensuring safety procedures are carried out are all part of the job.

"With all this going on, it's important that the technical side of each attraction is fully automated so it can 'live and breathe' by itself. We want to scare the living daylights out of the customers, yet still keep them safe!"

Lascaut has the wicked sparkle of someone who enjoys his job. "If the visitors come out crying or have to change their trousers - and it has been known - I think 'Great, we've done a good job!'"