



Mirror image

The first surprise: discovering that the building on the Marylebone Road in London, familiar from childhood trips, is actually part of a multi-million pound entertainment empire that now spans the globe.

The second surprise: discovering that the waxwork figures of the great, the good and mere celebrities, vaguely remembered from those same childhood trips and gently derided in the years since, are not only brilliantly executed works of art, but are also completely fascinating to be around.

The third surprise: that, given both of the above, it's taken the Tussaud's Group so long to set up one of their Madame Tussaud's Waxworks in New York, which would certainly see itself as a world centre of greatness, goodness and all things celebrity.

'So long' in this context means more than 200 years - at least, according to Tussaud's publicity material. They are counting from the time of the birth of their founder in 1761; having

learnt wax-modelling from her mother's employer, Philippe Curtius, she later found herself imprisoned with the future Empress Josephine in 1793, a contact that allowed her to model Napoleon after the revolution. Tussaud inherited Curtius' wax exhibition in 1794; she took her show on tour in the UK in 1802, and established a permanent base in Baker Street in 1835. Tussaud herself died in 1850, but her grandsons moved the show to its current Marylebone Road site in 1884 and continued to expand it, the show surviving both a 1925 fire and the 1940 bombing which destroyed 325 head moulds but, ironically, left the figure of Hitler unscathed.

The Planetarium was added in 1958 but further expansion did not come until 1971 when a new exhibition opened in Amsterdam. This was expanded during the 1980s, when the Tussaud's Group also opened the Rock Circus in London's Piccadilly Circus, then dramatically

Rob Halliday Waxes Lyrical on Madame Tussaud's, New York

revamped the London show while at the same time moving into other areas of entertainment. It now owns Alton Towers, Thorpe Park, Chessington World of Adventures and a themed attraction at Warwick Castle, and manages the London Eye. Most recently, new exhibitions have opened in Las Vegas and Hong Kong.

On November 15th, these were joined by Tussaud's New York. The new, 85,000sq-ft museum is located on 42nd Street, west of Broadway, right at the heart of Mayor Giuliani's plan to revitalise Times Square and, from there, the city as a whole. This block is effectively one massive construction site, cinemas and shops all at various stage of completion. Tussaud's light, airy foyer offers immediate respite from the chaos outside, with Whoopi Goldberg present to greet visitors. They then travel up glass elevators to a viewing gallery on the front of the building which allows views down 42nd Street to the water on both sides of Manhattan.

The exhibition then has six areas. 'Opening Night Party' is intended to be a first-night party in progress, New York celebrities ranging from Woody Allen to Donald Trump standing around the central pool of an Italian-style baroque garden. This leads on into a corridor of mirrors -



"No, they don't melt. We've never had a problem with heat! So says lighting designer Stephen Wentworth, getting the most obvious question about lighting waxworks out of the way first."



the route pointed out, rather incongruously, by Benny Hill dressed as a tour guide - then through to a section showing scenes from the French Revolution and the history of Madame Tussaud herself. The next section is slightly surreal in that it features a waxwork of a Tussaud's modelmaker making a waxwork of a Tussaud's subject, with a video then explaining the process.

'The Gallery' is a collection of world leaders and other important pioneers and society figures - Nelson Mandela, John F Kennedy, Albert Einstein, Princess Diana - with the modern 'celebrity' status of such people represented by photographer Annie Leibovitz. Then it's on through 'Sport and Popular Culture', which works through the 20th Century decade by decade, icon by icon - everyone from Babe Ruth to Bill Gates. The museum also includes an 'immersive surround film' carrying people through a century of New York life, computer generated by Evans & Sutherland but still experiencing some teething troubles on the day we visited.



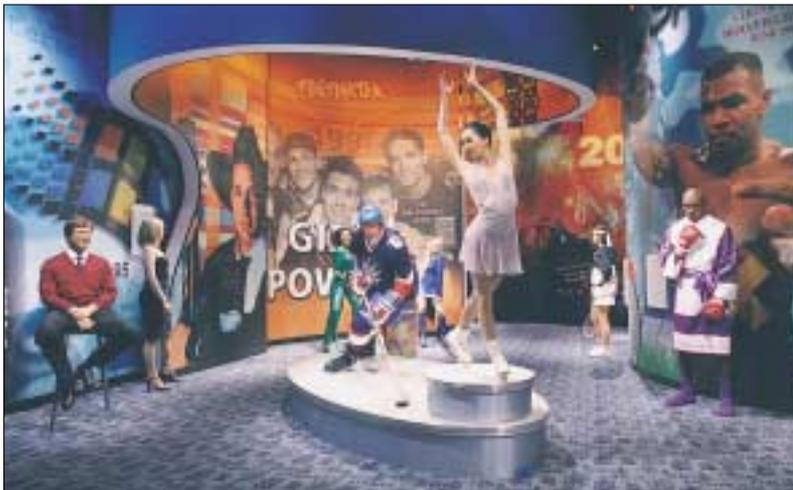
over years instead of weeks. "You have a plan; you know where the figures are going to go, you have to decide how you're going to light them, much like you'd do for a show, then you have to draw a plan to show where to put the lights. The problem is that by the time you come to focus the show you might not have looked at the plan for two years - I occasionally had to ask them to let me stop for a few minutes to figure out what things were for!"

The designers also approach their designs in different ways. "Mark works completely differently to me," Wentworth notes, "to such an extent that I'm surprised that they like both of our styles! Mark puts one source on each figure, then maybe a second source from the back. I always like four sources - left and right from the front and the back, because although you get a plan for positions, you never quite know what the orientation of the figure is going to be. And Tussaud's are very particular about what the portraits look like - they don't like shadows, not even sculptural lighting - it almost has to look like a photograph. To do this in 3D is quite tricky - they like to be able to see into the pits of the eyes, with no shadows under the nose. And then they always throw in a problem, like putting a hat on John Wayne! I was lucky with him - the light was able to get under it!"

Henderson, for his part, jokingly suggests that Wentworth uses more lights per figure because "he is better at getting money!" before suggesting that the different rooms encouraged different approaches. "Most of Steve's rooms are lower; the Party room has very high ceilings. Having lit the Party in London with birdies and suffered from excess light everywhere, I put ETC Source Fours in because I wanted to be able to control it more - to isolate the figures and dress everything else separately. Then we strung pea-lights around the room to disguise the lighting grid."

For New York, both designers relied on their previous experience with both wax figures and the Tussaud's stylistic preferences. "When I started, one person would say they wanted it to look theatrical, whilst another would come along and say 'what's that shadow?', or 'you can't have blue light on the face'. It took me years to work out that you can have colour as long as it doesn't hit the face!" comments Wentworth. Henderson also agrees with Wentworth's comment that "you learn that waxworks don't take a lot of light. It's not like flesh; you have to keep the level down for it to look real, otherwise it starts to look translucent," with Henderson adding that he "tends not to put any colour in the lights at all - everything is generally on check, so it goes to a yellowy tone anyway."

Using this experience - and despite constant design changes brought about by regular budget cutbacks - both designers have managed to inject a huge amount of style into the exhibition. Wentworth even manages to track the progress of a century with lighting in the 'Popular Culture' section: the opening decades are lit in sepia, the history of faded photographs, then it moves to the greys and pale greens that suggest early flickery black-and-white televisions, then on to static coloured lighting for the early days of rock and roll, flashing lights



LIGHTING

"No, they don't melt. We've never had a problem with heat!" So says Stephen Wentworth, getting the most obvious question about lighting waxworks out of the way first. Originally a theatre electrician and lighting designer - spending a long time at the National Theatre, where he lit the superb Peter Hall production of Antony and Cleopatra amongst many others - Wentworth lit Tussaud's Amsterdam exhibition in the eighties and has been lighting their projects ever since, interspersing this with working at CAD

specialists Modelbox. The New York project was split between Wentworth and fellow British lighting designer Mark Henderson, LD of more shows than it is possible to recount, including many acclaimed productions with the Almeida company. Henderson lit the First Night Party and the Gallery and Wentworth the rest.

Wentworth describes the design process for the exhibition as being like a theatrical design, but stretched

Top, a scene from Madame Tussaud's Story

Centre, the Popular Culture area

Bottom, the control racks, including Richmond's Audiobox, backstage

and a mirrorball for the discos of the seventies, a truss-full of chrome mini-Par cans for Springsteen, Tina Turner, Live Aid and the stadium rock of the early eighties, moving lights doing big, obvious, gobo-based wagging for Madonna and Prince and then the fading of saturated dichroic colours for the Spice Girls at the end of the century.

AUDIO

An exhibition full of silent wax figures would be quite a dull exhibition - which is why all of the rooms in Tussaud's have some kind of audio background, these and the systems to provide them designed by Aura Sound Design in London. Recalls Aura's John Leonard: "Originally, Tussaud's called us about a big project and a small project; we were very busy, so we turned down the big project and said we'd do a proposal for the small project. Somehow from that we've ended up doing the whole thing!"

Looking back with the show open, Leonard is happy with the results they have achieved. "The sound has worked really well because the whole concept, from system design to scripting and casting the voice-overs, was carried out by Aura, working with the exhibition's designer, Caroline Elliott. But, because we knew there would inevitably be changes, we designed a system that would give us as much flexibility as possible."

The system is based around the Richmond Sound Design AudioBox, with four of the original units which give eight tracks of audio replay through a 16 x 16 matrix and four of the second-generation models which have 16-track playback. The 16-track units provide the complex sound montages that run through the 'Sport and Popular Culture' room and bring the century to life with the other four providing sound effects, voice-overs (including, prior to opening, Leonard's voice introducing the French Revolution section; he has now replaced himself with actor Ian McDiarmid, "though I have to say that he does do it in my style!" he adds) and background music commissioned by Aura from respected film, TV and jazz composer Colin Towns to the other rooms.

"Because everything is separate in the AudioBoxes - there is no 'mix down' - we are able to go in and change anything. For example, when they decided to move Cher from the Party room to the Popular Culture room they wanted music to go with her portrait. They finally decided that she should go into the Nineties area, and it only took about an hour to source the music and program it into that cue-list. The flexibility got taken for granted in the end, but I don't think we could have done the show without the AudioBoxes."

Leonard's design also underwent other changes as the exhibition proceeded towards opening. The 'Popular Culture' room had been

conceived as separate 'pods', each containing a different decade. "When they first spoke to us, they kept saying that they wanted isolation within each cell - you'd only hear the audio for that decade when you were in that cell, and you would hear nothing when you were outside the cells. And we more-or-less achieved that by carefully positioning and setting the loudspeakers, putting in directional loudspeakers to cover the figures who were outside pods, then carefully setting the levels. The next day, the note we got was 'there's nothing to draw people into the cells - could you make it all louder?' So, we did!"

"We had to make certain changes in the soundtracks for the Sport and Popular Culture area for legal and political reasons," said Leonard, "so Bill Clinton's famous denial of



them. It does worry me however, what impression they go away with. New York, in particular 42nd Street, is the hardest place in the country to get anything done. Tussaud's is an installation and so was done by the electrical union. We were allowed to bring in a few theatrical union people for the focus."

For Tussaud's, the project was co-ordinated by the unflappable Tim Coucher, veteran of many such projects. "Tim and Mike made the perfect team - no fuss, no screaming, just a desire to get the job finished to everyone's satisfaction," added Leonard.

Under Lay's supervision, the infrastructure for the exhibition, including overhead pipe grids and cabling in the Party and French Revolution rooms and track-mounting elsewhere, was installed. The rig, including ETC Source Fours and Source Four Pars, UL-listed Thomas Birdies and Selecon track-mount profile spots with integral dimmers, and a selection of small moving fixtures from High End, as well as the JBL speakers, were installed and cabled back to one central control room. This features ETC Sensor dimmers run from three ETC LPC

Top, Jason Goldenberg (left) and Michael Ray of PRG with latest trainee, Elle MacPherson
Centre, the Gallery of leaders and pioneers (forgive us, but is that Fred and Ginger centre stage?)
Bottom, waxwork building waxwork

sexual impropriety is missing from the last decade, which is a pity." And neither design nor audio have much representing the 21st Century thus far, but then it would be hard to pick what to include when America can't even decide who it wants to be President!

MAKING IT WORK

"This show wouldn't have happened without Mike Lay," says John Leonard. Production Arts were charged with the practicalities of making the lighting and sound work, and PA veteran Lay was their man on site. He's equally complimentary about the Brits: "They were truly great people and it was good to work with

'Expressions in a rack' controllers through Gray Pathfinder DMX routers, a real Expression 3 taken out to the rooms for programming, the AudioBoxes, the Alcorn-McBride showcontroller, QSC amplifiers, Midi Solutions' MIDI merge and thru boxes, a mini-mixer and Yamaha reverb unit ("We pick up any sound in the hall of mirrors, feed it through the reverb and back down to there just to give some delay and echo," explains Leonard) and a PC used for programming the AudioBoxes through Richmond's ABEdit software, newly-expanded at Leonard's request to be able to deal with four cuelists.

Many of the racks bear what must be the last Production Arts installation labels, given the on-going rebranding at PRG; the audio wiring

The Opening Night - you can pick out the famous faces for yourselves, but just who is Oprah Winfrey talking to - the invisible man?

was handled by Signal Perfection Ltd, another PRG company, with their team led by Mark Hoffman and the site supervision handled by Mike Morely. The system was programmed by Jason Goldenberg of PRG, with the AudioBoxes (and the MIDI triggers they send to the lighting consoles to synchronise the moving light sequences to the music) programmed by Aura's Scott George.

With the majority of the build completed, Tussaud's opened for a preview period in October, allowing bemused visitors to wander what still felt like a building site, and technical troubleshooting to take place ("At first we had to turn off the smoke ring firing canon in the French revolution section, because it kept setting off the fire alarm," Lay recalls). With everything just about finished, the official opening took place on November 15th, with real celebrities mingling with their wax copies.

It would be interesting to find out what the guests thought when they found their clones -



since even for those of us who don't have a double on show, it's a surprisingly fascinating experience. At first there's something satisfying about discovering one is taller than action-hero Nicolas Cage (for example), but it's more interesting than that - finding that these celebrities and heroes are real people rather than the distorted, larger-than-life versions that appear on news reports or cinema screens. The detailing is remarkable,

the wax not wax-like until you peer at it in ridiculous close up. And the eyes - it is the eyes that are most remarkably real, aided, no-doubt, by the careful lighting.

Tussaud's New York does feel a little light on content, especially when the film isn't running. But it's fascinating just how many hours vanish without trace as you wander, enchanted, through it. 

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