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Behind the Shows: PRODUCTIONS

PAN FIGHTS TO GET IN THE AIR

It's a Fantastical journey, in more ways than one. Connections went backstage in Sydney to find an incredibly complex production where pre production was continuing smoothly - despite the Producer's very public falling out.

Pan is the most ambitious theatre production yet undertaken in the southern hemisphere. It seeks to capitalise on a very visual story, and is loaded with stage effects and potentially magic moments.

The show opens May 14th after almost three months pre production in the Capitol- Sydney's largest and grandest theatre. During rehearsals the producers fell out and created a media nightmare for publicist Suzie Howie. Newspapers said the show's creator and producer Kerry Jewel was locked out of the theatre and was claiming copyright, while the financiers, German theatre conglomerate Musical Entertainment AG brought in theatre impresario Kevin Jacobsen to mediate. All while Jim Henson's Creature Shop- themselves financially involved - worked on their animatronics at the theatre.

Media reports have the dispute centred on budget blowouts, from six to nine million dollars - and a visit to the theatre shows why. It is an enormously technically complex show, and it's being created from scratch.

Pre-production and the theatre stalls are littered with work benches, computers, notes and work lights. We are there before lunch and the various departments are still winding up after a late night, but on stage the carpenters and mechanists are frantically resetting part of the scene for today.

The vibe is surprisingly good - and there are still Jewel family members in the production. Son Dean Jewel is the Technical Producer. He is upbeat about the wrangling behind the scenes.

Downstairs two technicians are working on some of the 24 creatures in the show, including Fribbits, Sqassums, a Snrtle and a Grocer Bird. They have a large bank of battery chargers cranking away.

But the largest creature is already onstage. This 22' crocodile looks menacing sitting still under a worklight - in the show it must be terrifying. Two operators crawl inside the thing, through an opening where one may expect to find the creature's arse. Operator one works the head and jaws, while number two works the power actuators for the tricycle wheel set and pulls wires to make the thing thrash around and appear to walk.

A third operator off stage uses a Futaba remote controller (most commonly seen operating model airplanes) to operate the beast's eyes and brows.

At rear of house sound editing is already underway. The show is un-usual in that it uses pre-recorded music, and a staggering number of sound effects. An early problem faced by audio contractors System Sound was synchronising sound effects for the creatures which were operated by creature actors.

The sampler has space for 128 effects each triggered by a midi note. But how to transmit that note? Midi doesn't like bring sent over a wireless system.

Enter a DTMF to MIDI system which is currently being used for one creature (The Grocer Bird), with the possibility that it will be required on another. This System Sound solution equips each creature actor requiring a sound effect sample with a push button keypad like on a telephone wired to a DTMF (dual tone modulated frequency) unit. This produces that quaint modem-like tone you hear when you dial a phone. If you have a DTMF decoder at the receiver end of the wireless system, it reliably receives the signal of a key push, which can then be programmed as a midi note! So dial one, get midi note I, dial two etc. And, each midi note fires a unique sound effect.

The majority of creatures sounds (Honkers & Fribbits) are actually voiced by the creature actors themselves. Each of these creature actors not only wear In Ear Monitors for general foldback and listen only comms (as they're sometimes under the stage or behind a piece of scenery) but also wear a Sennheiser SK2012 radio transmitter with an MKE2 boom. mic so they can make appropriate creature sounds. The various creature sounds (live or samples) are then mixed on a Yamaha 01V where they're balanced, processed, placed in the stereo field and sent to the AudioBox for final routing and level control.

This was but one of many challenges faced by sound designer (and System Sound CEO) John Scandrett. Associate designer Kelvin Gedye arrives slightly bleary to me about the communications system. "Lucky we have some clever R & D people at SYSTEM like Ian Stevenson, Nick Reich and Cameron Herbert to help us make these gizmos work" he says.

The show uses what may be the most complicated comm's system seen on a stage in the region. There are 6 comm's loops, with 30 Clearcom stations - then a 24 station Motorola GP300 wireless 2 way system is fed in. There is a two-way full duplex system for two of the creatures that operators are inside of- namely the crocodile and the Sheldon (The Snurtle) suit operator so that the creature "captain" (kind of like their own personal stage manager) can maintain constant communication with them and give them directions regarding their location and orientation on stage.

The Sheldon. also has a head operator who remotely controls his mouth and eyes and provides his live voice. The duplex comms system is also connected to a wired Clearcom station so that the Henson's creature director can keep tabs on what's happening and direct them from out in the house. (They don't and can't talk to the stage manager).

This system also applies to the IEM (In Ear Monitors) the other creature actors wear, so that they can be given direction from the house and or the creature "captain" Naturally, because the IEM's are stereo, they get foldback on one channel and comms on the other. Also, because the Sennheiser Evolution series IEM's have a "focus" mode, it's possible to listen to the dual channel feed in mono in one ear and mix the relative level of the two sources using the balance control. (Sounds complicated? Yep!)

But all this pales into insignificance against the sound editing task. It seems that given the pioneering nature of this show, the music recording (at Song Zu) wasn't actually done to quite the exact lengths required for the scenes. No one should cast blame here, it is just the way it happened, and scene times and timing do change. That's usually why there is an orchestra on hand.

Enter Paul Hitchens, sound effects designer and ProTools wizard. He trades as Cyren Sound. Today he is busily editing some of more than 200 sound effects, sourced from everywhere. Some were even recorded in the theatre! Then there is the occasional and emerging need for a character to record their dialogue when a mask is found to impede the spoken part. More arduously, now a fully fledged defacto music editor, Paul is also cutting and stretching the score to fit the scenes with the assistance of Vanessa Scammell.

Never before has a program like ProTools (multitrack recording and editing software/hardware on Mac or PC) been so tested... for so long... with so much pressure.....

Of course the stage manager also needs accurate music notation to call the show which Vanessa is doing on a daily basis once the latest music has been edited.

Imagine playing to cue more than 50 tunes and over 200 sound effects. Worse yet, imagine that the show - most shows - requires some to play asynchronously. Meaning, one is playing, while another - and another - start up and play independently

"There's a lot of under scoring, it's more a film approach." says Kelvin.

Getting the final music and effects onto hard disk appears a far distant task when we are there, but once it is, the actual playout during the show will be reasonably orderly. Alix Campbell will be in charge of this, using ABControl software on a Mac to drive AudioBox, a multi track system devised by Richmond Sound Design. This allows eight independent tracks to be played to 8 independent outputs, at any time, in any order.

The software interface includes a mixer, matrix, and dynamic controls like EQ and time delay. So you may program a squawk sound to play now for - say - three seconds, while a music track is already running, then another sound effect to run. Up to a total of eight at once, and to any matrixed output. Whew!

The final link in the audio world is the actual live sound

itself, and here we see ENTECH award winning theatre sound engineer Paul Tilley at work on a Cadac F-Type console, supported by two wireless technicians. Jenny Morgan and Suzanne Jones are responsible for 24 Sennheiser SK 50/1046 and 12 SK 2012/1036 UHF wireless microphone/receiver combinations. And eight in ear monitors for the Creature actors.

I'd love to see the Duracell bill on this production!

The speaker system is mainly Meyer with a mixture of UPA-1C's, UPA-2C's and UPM-1's for the vocal system and CQ1's, PSW's and MSL4's for the music and SFX system. System are also using Apogee SSM's for delays and foldback speakers and 12 x EAW JF80's for surround FX speakers. The system drive processing is a pair of BSS SoundWeb's which are providing practically all of the delay and EQ processing for the system as well as some pretty tricky pan/delay processing for the vocal system. Amplification is mainly Yamaha H5000 and H7000 with a few Yamaha PC2 002's for delays and SFX speakers.

- Julius Grafton