

JOSEPH'S TECHNICOLOR DREAM

Julian Williams in the West End

When a lighting designer first walks into a theatre, to light a show, he knows that he will have to fight for stage time from then on. On this occasion it was Andrew Bridge, complete with his bag of many colours, going into the West End and the London Palladium. He had organised his team so that they had every chance of surviving the battles that lay ahead, and would be ready for the first technical rehearsal. From then on there were just five days to put in a 460 instrument rig plus a contingent of Vari*Lite.

The original version of this production was a charming piece without complex technicalities. This time 'Joseph' is a high profile and expensive production, reflecting the kind of spectacular that Lloyd Webber audiences have come to expect. But Andrew Lloyd Webber didn't want any visual high technology to be noticeable, and the constrictions of this brief meant that Paul Sadler's Delstar Engineering company had to use some innovative planning to enable the ideas, of designer Mark Thompson, to be presented in the most subtle of ways. Despite this, the mixed reviews for the new version expressed disappointment that there is a sense of visual overkill.

This Joseph has been sent up in a kind of camp-style humour. For example, there are orange, pink and yellow sheep, a Pharaohic statue that turns into a fruit machine, and Joseph himself appears on a large golden-winged chariot.

The story of Joseph and his richly ornamented 'coat of many colours' is told in a series of scenes inside a picture frame type set. It has a bank of stairs running from downstage to upstage on each side. The show opens with Joseph, seen through a front gauze, floating through the sky in a haze of dry ice and cloud projections. He is raised on a single column hydraulic cable lift which rides inside the outer revolving stage, and comes up with an arm which is moved around as the revolve moves.

Considerable use is made of the traditional double revolve and drum lift well-known in this theatre. Much of the first half of the story is set around the Canaan Wall, which has entrances through five hydraulically operated rising slider panels in its backing, with the centre panel able to be lowered into the stage for an effect. Each panel rides inside another without post supports, allowing all the panels to be withdrawn as required. They are all operated by jigger rams and controlled from a central point. In the Pharaoh as 'Elvis' scene, the collar piece comes downstage, with side trucks, to join the face piece, which is flown in. This is then manoeuvred from upstage along guide tracks in the stage false floor, where all the jigger rams are pulling cables that bring the whole together in synchronisation.

The Palladium's 1930 revolve drives had to be upgraded, with a motor drive system with positional read-outs, so that all its complex moves could be set up for the correct time, accelerating or decelerating at a plotted pace, and to accurate dead positions. The drum lift and inner and outer revolve, which continuously break up with the various changes, have to marry up absolutely correctly for trucks to traverse the various crossings.

It is interesting to note that this production could be about the fastest mounted for a major West End musical, taking just 14 days

from get-in to the first preview. However, the Palladium's crew is used to having to turn diverse shows around with speed and efficiency — and to working non-stop around the clock.

Production electrician Mike Odam explained: "We started the get-in on a Sunday at 2 am. By 6 pm the entire stage lighting rig was up, coloured, gobo'd, plugged up and flashed out on the board. We started focusing the FOH at 6 am on the Monday. We put the patch in the board, and flashed it all out on Tuesday, and we worked flat-out before the scenery came in. Andy Bridge focused the FOH on the Wednesday; other than that we couldn't have a proper focusing session. It was done along with the noise of angle-grinders and with all the working lights on. They weren't turned off until the company had been rehearsing on stage for some time! However, it was nice to go into a theatre that had enough dimmers and we didn't have to worry about adding more."

Associate Vari*Lite designer Richard Knight told me that for him it was an 'enhancement' job. "A rig of all VL4s is unusual, and it's used here to enhance the conventional lighting rig without any special effects."

Associate lighting designer Hugh Vanstone, working alongside Andrew Bridge for the fourth time, said: "Every day the damage list had to be updated after all the overnight rigging work had taken place. Because of the amount of general rigging, much re-checking had to be done each day and something always needed re-setting."

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"When we got to the preview stage, knowing that time was tight and that there was a considerable amount of technical finishing off to do, we were naturally reluctant to fiddle too much and to do much more artistically, in the knowledge that between then and opening night we would just be doing technical work. We did get there, but it did

limit things somewhat, artistically."

It's at the end of the show that any major technical visual effects are realised. The Vari*Lite are then much more in evidence with their broad sweeps and multi-coloured beams grouping together. This happens in an eight-minute sequence of lighting in a grand finale style Megamix scene. After which Joseph transcends, projected on a three-sectioned telescopic boom operated from a hydraulic ram under the stage, ascends from the back of the orchestra pit wall and extends almost 30 feet high out over the audience, in an auditorium that is almost instantly filled with white smoke.

The train of Joseph's dreamcoat is simultaneously fanned out to this height by a hydraulic tab track system opening from the front of the false stage floor . . .

Lighting Background:

The stage rig is based on 14 LX bars, with two ladder booms each side (purpose-made to allow for the maximum number of units and get-off height underneath the bottom unit). To complement this, are the theatre's traditional front of both circles and box and pros boom positions. Control is the recently up-graded Strand Galaxy 3 house board.

There are 18 Vari*Lite VL4s mounted into four of the LX bar positions, on independent rigging lines, and driven by an Artisan control.

In the D/S bay there is a Howard Eaton Lighting light curtain in five sections with a Rainbow colour changer. The luminaires are generally profile units, with 126 Altman Lekos in three focal ranges, comprising 6 x 9, 6 x 12, and 6 x 16.

There are an assortment of Strand units consisting of 32 Cantatas in the 18/32 and 26/44 focal ranges and 12 Cadenza PC units, four Cadenza EP 2kW effects projectors, a Quartet, a couple of Patt 743s and still some faithful Patt 23s. There are 80 Thomas Par 64 cans, 44 of which have narrow focus lamps. A dozen or so CCT Silhouettes are also in use.

MR16 Ministrips are mounted behind the bottom edge of the picture frame set and these act as a form of footlights.

The followspots comprise three Colortran house units complemented by two Pani Beamlight followspots on each side behind the false pros.

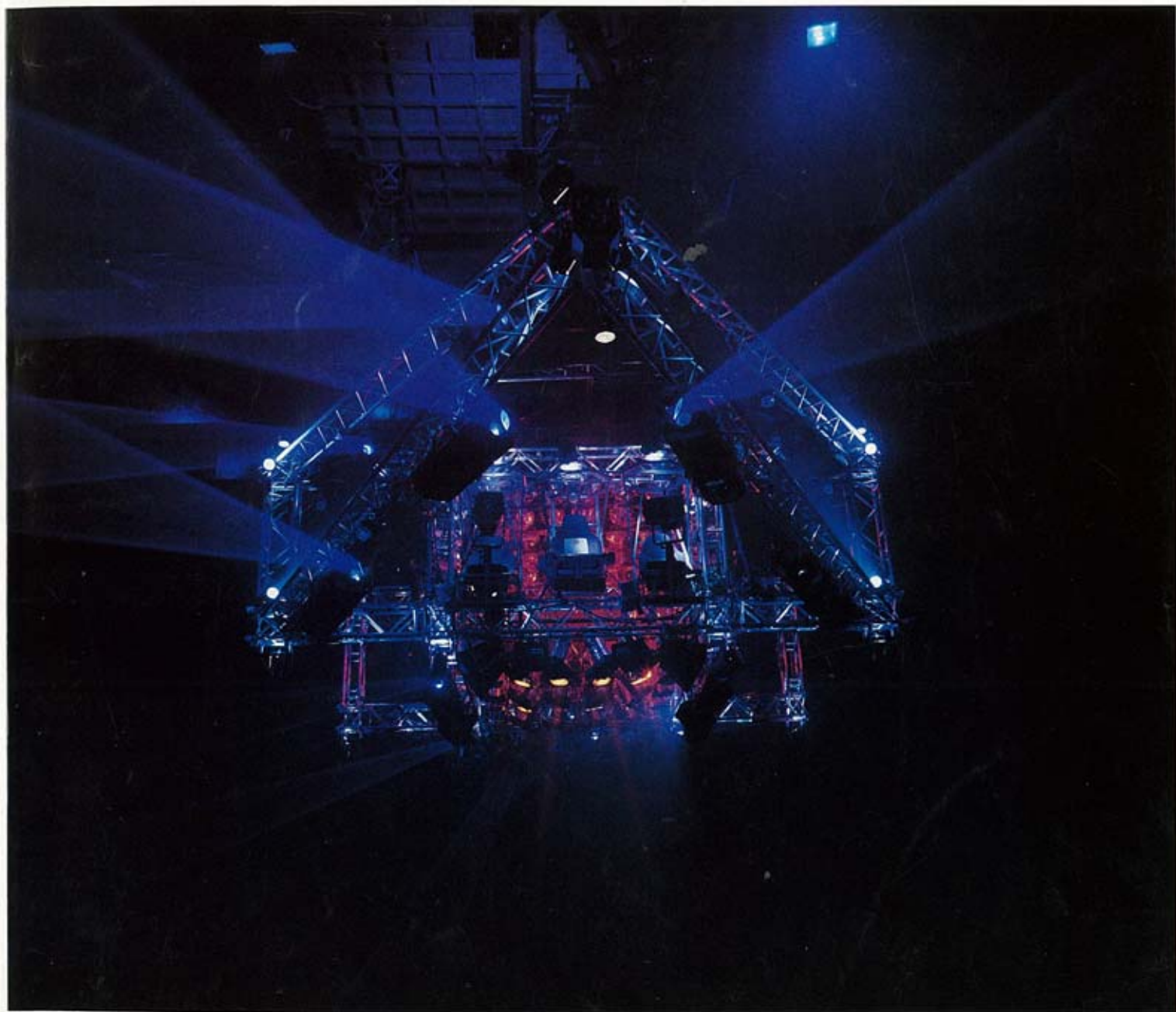
Two HFL dry ice machines are used on each side under the stage. Also involved are two Le Maitre Optimist smoke machines and two Smoke Processors.



Lighting designer Andrew Bridge at work.

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