

# MUSICALS ON A SMALLER SCALE

Robert Halliday looks at the current West End versions of Piaf and Cabaret

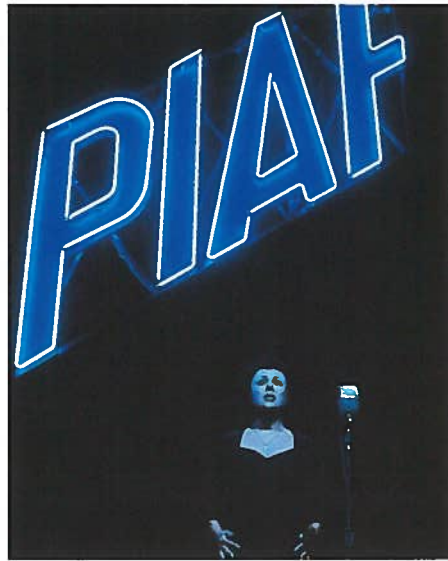
The run up to Christmas saw a flurry of activity in London's West End. The traditional British pantomime, whilst still filling almost every other theatre in the country, failed to be part of the London scene once again. Instead, there appeared a straight play - justified by its star cast, a children's show, and two new musicals, Piaf at the Piccadilly Theatre, and Cabaret at the Donmar Warehouse.

Both of these musicals are slightly unusual by West End standards - neither makes any attempt to be a huge blockbuster with the biggest effects, loudest band or the most complex lighting and sound. Instead, they have been carefully designed to allow their performers to perform, supporting them when required, but giving them the space to get on with things at other times. These similar objectives are, however, realised in vastly different ways.

Piaf is the more conventional of the two shows. Pam Gem's musical play charts the life of French singer Edith Piaf, following her rise from the streets of Paris to international fame, through a huge number of affairs, alcoholism, drug abuse and on to her eventual death. Originally produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company in the late 1970s - by coincidence at the Donmar Warehouse, currently home to Cabaret - the current production approaches the show as a musical play, rather than the play-with-music view that other productions have taken. But then with Elaine Paige playing the diminutive chanteuse, what other approach would be appropriate?

The Bill Kenwright/Peter Hall production re-united Hall with many of his long-term associates, notably set designer John Gunter, lighting designer David Hersey and sound designer Paul Arditti. They all faced the challenge not just of producing a West End show, but rather of mounting the show in a regional theatre (the Thorndike in Leatherhead) that could then tour the country for eight weeks before finally moving into its London home. In practice, one design did not fulfil all of these aims.

John Gunter's full set comprises a steep Steeldeck rake, with a wood-planked central acting area downstage surrounded by a black floor. Gauze walls either side and upstage, and a gauze roof, all covered with abstract newsprint about Piaf's life, serve to enclose the action. Doors in the walls, and three walkways either side leading to those doors, provide entrances, exits and spaces for characters to lurk in the Parisian street scenes. Two trucks cross the stage, one



Elaine Paige as Piaf at the Piccadilly.

carrying a piano and the other a drum kit, while a third moves up- and down-stage carrying a bed or settee as required. In the gap between each walkway as well as upstage, flying pieces representing Paris, New York, a hospital/asylum and the South of France can be dropped in behind the walls to set the location for each scene. The result is a show which, while not appearing complex at first glance, led to some long nights for production carpenters Colin Small and Jerry Hough diverting first the Thorndike's, then the Piccadilly's, flying system to fit the flying pieces into the space required.

It's also a show that presented lighting designer David Hersey with a fair share of challenges, the first being simply to find lighting positions that could get light into the acting area. The solution reached was to use a specially built 'A' shaped truss which would follow the line of the gauze walls, and sit between the walls and the roof. Three heavily-loaded ladders each side followed, to provide light onto the walls, onto the flying pieces and through the doors. A bar flown high in the grid provided toplight onto the roof, and two upstage bars gave light through the Paris windows at the back of the set.

A conventional number one spot bar gave Hersey light onto the downstage acting area. The rig was composed largely of Strand equipment,

principally a mixture of Cantata 18/32s and 26/44s and Cantata PCs, along with around 20 Par cans. To make the limited rig as versatile as possible, 44 Lightpaint colour scrollers were added, including two on the front-of-house R&V Beamlight followspots, which were worked very hard throughout the show.

A third, conventional spotlight wasn't worked so hard, but gave the correct feel to the club scenes. Effects came via two animation disks front-of-house, used to create the ripples of water at night, and two vari-speed gobo rotators used in a sequence as Piaf overdoses. Finally, just to show that he doesn't just use technology for the sake of it, Hersey included some vintage S-battens and Patt 23s! The rig ran from 96-ways of dimming, a mixture of flight-cased Green Ginger and Act 6 racks, with everything controlled by an Arri Imagine 250. All of the show's lighting equipment was supplied by Playlight.

By the end of the Leatherhead production period, Hersey had managed to gain control over the acting area, the lighting clearly supporting the mood of the show by setting the location and time while still providing a great deal of atmosphere. The use of colour, in particular, helped to differentiate between the many clubs and concerts that the show features.

On tour, even greater demands were placed on the lighting, since the practicalities of a show moving weekly and opening on a Monday night meant that spending three days diverting a theatre's flying system to make the show work (and then putting it all back to normal afterwards!) was not possible. The flying pieces were therefore largely cut, leaving just the Paris window flats, while the set's roof also vanished, taking the grid bar with it. Hersey and his assistant Jenny Kagan changed the make-up of the ladders, replacing the PCs which side-lit the flying pieces with Cantata profiles to do gobo work on the gauze walls. While visually not as successful as the full set, the touring version did still define the location of scenes while being a great deal more comfortable to tour, and versatile enough to fit into venues as diverse as the tiny Richmond Theatre and cavernous Birmingham Hippodrome.

The rest of the rig remained largely unchanged for the tour, with the truss and ladders being toured pre-rigged and fed from multicore tripes to speed up get-ins and get-outs, although some problems were encountered with the scrollers which didn't take terribly well to a life on the open road. The



relatively small front-of-house rig meant that no problems were encountered with using local FOH rigs, though Kagan's Monday nights were always spent busily introducing the local followspot operators to the huge number of characters in the show!

Even for the London show the rig didn't grow that much; the ladders returned to their original configuration, a few more scrollers appeared, principally to allow colour dissolves on the upstage wall, and the grid bar returned, this time armed with Silhouette 15s rather than 2k fresnels. Elsewhere, some of the Cantatas were swapped for Silhouettes (all equipped with DHA Tadpoles in place of the Cantatas rotating gate!), primarily because Hersey preferred their optical performance with some of the gobos.

The main addition was a line of three six-lamp Digital Light Curtains on the downstage cross-piece of the truss. These are perhaps the most underworked DLCs yet, the Macintosh that controls them only having around ten cues. Yet where they do appear, they enhance the look of the show, and their limited usage shows once again how Hersey now treats them as standard lighting tools rather than expensive toys that have to be used as often as possible to justify their existence.

Paul Arditti's sound design underwent one less re-design than Hersey's lighting plan, remaining largely unchanged between Leatherhead and the tour. In producing his sound rig, Arditti faced a number of challenges - giving a clean, clear natural sound for the songs while differentiating between those sung in clubs and those sung to reflect Piaf's thoughts and emotions; mixing a band who appeared on-stage for the club scenes and off-stage for the rest of the songs; providing foldback so that Elaine Paige and the band could hear themselves and each other; and creating the sound effects the show demanded, setting the scene in clubs or a boxing ring or re-enacting aeroplane and car crashes.

His first move was to split the task into two, with separate front-of-house and foldback mixing desks and operators. On stage, number two sound operator Nicole de Souza mixed foldback through a 12-channel Soundcraft 200 desk feeding Apogee monitor speakers at the front of the stage and hidden behind the side walls. She also dealt with paging cables on-and-off stage to the piano truck, drum truck and period thirties and fifties microphones used in the club scenes (which, though practical, were often only used as back-up to the Sennheiser radio microphones worn by Ms Paige).

Out front, Mark Cohen ran the show from a 36-channel Cadac B-type desk, feeding a Meyer rig consisting of UPAs, UPMs and two USW-1 sub-bases FOH and two UPAs upstage for sound effects. Local systems for providing under-circle delays were tapped wherever possible, since no time was available for rigging up such a system from venue to venue. Overall, the system could be described as a fairly standard Autograph system - not surprising, given that Autograph supplied the sound rig - though quite an upmarket system for the scale of the show.

The Cadac fully justified itself, however, giving a very clear sound - a standard system being made to sound very good indeed by the care taken in setting it up by the operators, designer and production sound engineers Matt McKenzie for the first half of the tour and John Owens for the remainder.

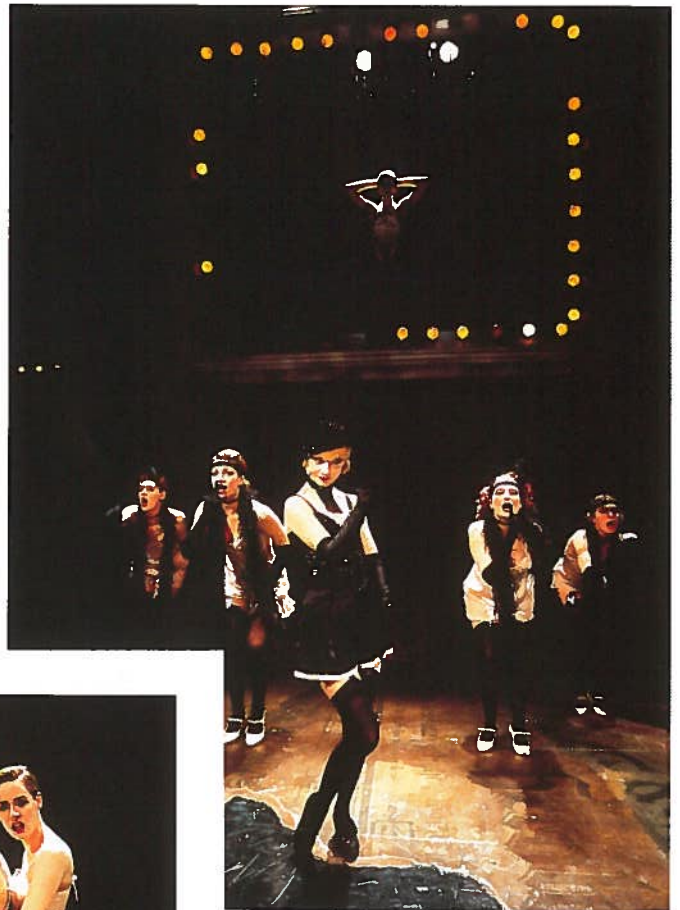
The sound-effect replay system used was also one that is now becoming quite standard, although the cost involved means that it is not yet available to all. Effects were replayed from an Akai S1000 sampler, controlled by an Apple Macintosh running the Vision Midi sequencer (which also handled the reprogramming of the various Midi



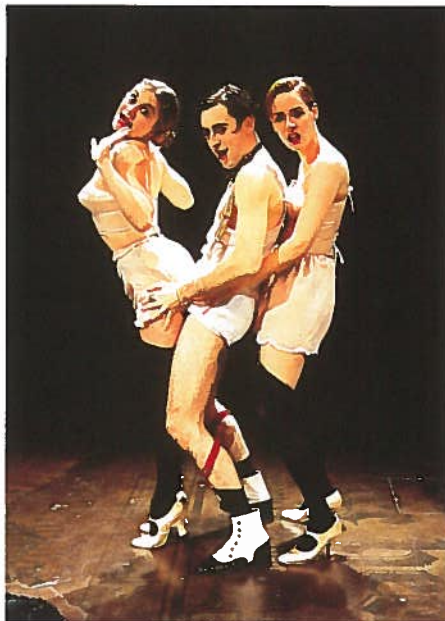
David Hersey.



Paul Pyant.



Above and left, Cabaret vamps it up at the Donmar Warehouse.



effects processors). The Akai samples and programmes were changed in the interval, being loaded from a SyQuest removable hard drive which also ensured that the data was safely backed up.

For the West End, the basic principle of the sound system remained unchanged, but the details were altered both to ensure the best possible sound for the 1,100-seat, three-level Piccadilly theatre, and to cope with changes in orchestration which added an extra keyboard player and an off-stage band room in an attempt to give a bigger sound to the show. The foldback desk became a 32-8-2 DDA S-Series monitor mixer, and front-of-house the Cadac grew by 12 channels.

A large FOH speaker rig was installed, with two sets of JBL Control 1 delays providing fill to the rear of the stalls, one set to the circle, a group providing centre-fill to the front of the stalls, and Meyers just about everywhere! Nestled on the pros booms at stalls level were two UPAs and a UPM per side, sitting above one USW-1 sub-base per side. At circle level, a further two UPAs per side were tucked below the beamlights, with a further USW per side hiding in the boxes.

And to complete the rig, and provide centre fill to the upper circle, a further two UPAs were clustered together suspended from the overhead lighting grid. Vari-Curve equalisers were added to

give the necessary control over so many speakers, and careful tweaking of the EQ and setting of the delays has ensured that the show has retained its clean, precise sound, although it is a sound that has now grown into that of a high-quality musical rather than a boosted play. But the audiences, who've come to see and hear their favourite West End singer have no complaints about that, and a clutch of good reviews and a series of standing ovations from capacity audiences have set the show on its way to a lengthy run.

If Piaf has grown from an intimate play at the 250-seater Donmar Warehouse to a West End blockbuster in a conventional theatre, Cabaret has made exactly the opposite journey. Its London premiere, way back in 1967, was at the Palace, and it reappeared a few years ago at the Strand. Now it is at the Donmar Warehouse, at the end of that theatre's first full year since its refurbishment and re-opening as central London's only privately funded producing theatre. That year has given the theatre's crew time to grow accustomed to the building, and to remedy any omissions from its specification.

The main addition has been a cleat-rail and miniature flying system, used for a number of small items in Cabaret. It is to the credit of everyone involved in the refurbishment that most of the rest of the technical installation has proved a success (even down to the carpeted walkways in the grid!) and also a credit to the crew that the theatre still feels new, despite the workload it has handled in that time. Cabaret concludes a year that has been greeted with constant critical acclaim, and follows on from the Donmar's production of Stephen Sondheim's 'Assassins', which was a sell out last Christmas.

The Warehouse's intimate and versatile interior has given director Sam Mendes and designer Sue Blane the chance to do something that would be almost inconceivable in a big West End theatre - they have literally transformed the auditorium into the Kit Kat Klub of the show, replacing the lower seating with a series of club-like tables and chairs



facing into a small, central club stage. They've even had the auditorium licensed, so that the audience can enjoy a bottle of wine as they watch the show! The rest of the design has a bridge across the theatre's back wall, which houses the versatile band (most of whom combine acting and dancing roles with playing an instrument); a large mirror frame at the centre of the bridge from which the Emcee looks down on the action below, two spiral staircases where the seedy club members loiter, having a constant presence even in the non-club scenes, and a series of doors across the back of the stage. The rest of the detailing and atmosphere comes from Blane's precisely-tattered costume designs.

It is all supported, of course, by the lighting design of Paul Pyant. Rounding off a busy year - as Cabaret opened, Pyant's designs could also be seen on 'Carousel' at the Shaftesbury, and the National's revival of 'The Wind in the Willows', amongst others - his design allows the action to swing from boarding house to train to club without missing a beat. And all that accomplished with a rig which, by musical standards, is tiny. Indeed, if Piaf is a play aspiring to be a musical, this Cabaret attempts to treat the musical as straight drama. Partially, of course, the limitations are imposed by the Donmar's production budget - it seats only 250, and receives no public money. Pyant's early ideas involving Vari\*Lite VL5s were therefore quickly rejected on cost grounds.

The final rig uses the house stock - Patt 743s held over from before the theatre was refitted, Cantatas and Preludes purchased afterwards - supplemented by some Patt 264s lent by the National Theatre, four Rainbow scrollers and a small amount of extra gear supplied by White Light. The Rainbows are supplemented by a few colour wheels - added after the scroller budget ran out, according to the Donmar's chief electrician

Jonathan Richardson and deputy Stuart Crane. The rig is run from the theatre's 108-way Arri dimmer installation, and controlled from their Arri Imagine 2 desk.

In performance, Pyant's lighting moves smoothly from scene to scene, largely reserving colour for the Club scenes and lighting the rest in cooler tones. A number of simple devices are used to great effect, though - an overhead fan, toplit, casts a moving shadow to suggest a moving train; naked bulbs are flown in to represent different rooms; the lamps on the audience's tables are lit when they become part of the action at the club, and a giant mirrorball is put to dazzling use in a couple of scenes. In line with the tiny number of colour changers, there is just one followspot, a vintage Strand unit, again kept busy and used to great effect throughout the show.

The relative simplicity of the lighting rig is also reflected in the sound design, entrusted to John A. Leonard, who filled the same role on last year's production of Assassins (and also, coincidentally, on the original Piaf). Despite the theatre's tiny size, a sound system was needed both to provide a degree of control over the band, to replay sound effects, and to boost the voices of the principals; the roles of Sally Bowles and the Emcee being filled by actors rather than singers.

The budget yet again limited what was possible, but the two principals were given radio-microphones to back up the many directional mics covering the stage. These were taken through the theatre's own 24-channel Soundcraft Venue desk and out through a main rig of Apogeos, with a Yamaha-based system providing under-balcony fill. The additional equipment was supplied by Farrahs, maintaining the link established when they equipped the theatre after its refurbishment.

The sound is mixed by operator Fergus O'Hare,

using what he calls a mixture of inspired guesswork and memories of Leonard's suggestions and advice during the technicals, since positioned on the theatre's technical gallery he receives a very different sound to the audience. The system supplements the live sound, rather than replacing it, since even on the technical gallery it is possible to hear the singers live over the band. O'Hare also operates the shows effects, replayed on this occasion from an Akai S1100 sampler triggered by a simple Midi keyboard, though the Warehouse team will often have a CD of the effects made once a show has settled down.

The overall result is a show that works, to the extent where its almost impossible to imagine Cabaret ever working in a bigger, more conventional theatre. The intimacy of the theatre, especially with the stalls club seating and the clear, live sound, forces you into the action and makes you pay attention to its message.

More importantly, at the time of writing, both Piaf and Cabaret are selling out, clearly showing that there is room in the West End for productions that fall outside the mega-musical style, provided they are of a high quality, and as well presented as they can be.

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