



TV/FILM



Backlot Experience

As an ex-resident of the glorious city of Sydney, it is intriguing to think that Fox Studios Australia has created an international state-of-the-art film production complex on a site previously occupied by the Royal Agricultural Society since 1882. The showground, as the site was known by locals, was a prime piece of real estate in a residential area about 10 minutes from the heart of the city and five minutes from the ultra-hip area of Oxford Street, where nightclubs and restaurants jostle for attention with minimalist-inspired clothing shops and groovy bookshops that stay open until the early hours of the morning.

Once a year the site used to host the Royal Easter Show where you could buy everything from candy floss to a prize bull, take a ride on the latest heart-stopping attraction or marvel at the dexterity of a blue heeler (Aussie farm dog) which could round up a flock of sheep before a crowd of several thousand and not break a sweat. The Easter Show was an event that was marked on every family's calendar and it is not surprising that the Fox development was not without a measure of controversy, including debates focused on heritage, residents' concerns and public money issues.

Despite the controversy the show went on, with Fox taking over the site in 1996 with a 40-year lease. It is the first Fox studio complex to be built outside of North America and it is anticipated that it will generate around A\$85m (£35m) worth of production annually. That Fox has come to town is both a boost and a vote of confidence for the local film industry. So far, the high profile and hugely successful film *The Matrix* has been shot there, as well as the Tom Cruise vehicle *Mission Impossible 2*. George Lucas has signed up to shoot the next two *Star Wars* movies there, which is sure to raise the profile of the studio and generate an unprecedented amount of interest in what the Australian film industry is up to.

In addition to the six operational sound stages, the complex also boasts ancillary film-related facilities and a huge array of public attractions. Bent Street is one such attraction, offering the public a range of activities from eating and shopping to an array of entertainment. Hoyts have developed an Art Deco-inspired 12-screen cinema complex, plus four more theatres in Cinema Paris, an ultra modern facility. For the hungry visitor there is a wide choice of restaurants and for those in need of some retail therapy the shopping precinct features familiar names like Sony, Espirit and Mambo.

The event that perhaps attracted the most publicity for the Fox Complex was the November 7th gala opening of the Backlot area, a public 'infotainment' project that includes attractions such as *Titanic: The Experience*, where you get to be an extra on the movie just as the iceberg hits (I have it on good authority that your fate rests with your choice of queue - pick the right one and you live, pick the wrong one and you meet with a nasty, wet ending!), *Star Dressing Room*, which gives you the opportunity to reinvent yourself as a Hollywood star; *The Simpsons Down Under*; *The TV Tour and Sound Stage* where the art of Foley (sound effects) is demonstrated, along with a hands-on chance to have a crack at film sound mixing.

Lights! Camera! Chaos! is a high camp piece of populist entertainment with influences that range from Jackie Chan and his Hong Kong action movies to *The Sound of Music*. The 20-minute theatrical production takes place in a purpose-built 1,200-seat theatre, exposing the audience to the disasters that surround the making of "the most expensive film ever" - *Space - The Musical*. The creative team behind the production reads like a Who's Who of Aussie talent, with the show being produced by writer/director Baz Luhrmann's company, Bazmark Live. Luhrmann is the creative force behind the hit Australian film *Strictly Ballroom* and more recently the edgy film version of

Visitors to Fox Studios in Sydney are immersed in the craft of film and television from the moment they enter the iconic gates of the Fox Studios Backlot. Jacqueline Molloy reports



Cover page, the main backlot area at Fox Studios

This page, the grand staircase – the central feature of the Titanic Experience



Inset, LD
Nigel Levings



Romeo and Juliet with Leonardo Di Caprio. The 20-minute spectacle was conceived and directed by Barrie Kosky, one of Australia's most innovative stage directors and was lit by internationally-respected lighting designer, Nigel Levings.

Levings and associate lighting designer Damian Cooper were also responsible for lighting areas of Bent Street and the spectacular Fox Backlot gates. Levings is at ease working on high profile projects and received an unprecedented amount of publicity for a lighting designer in Australia when he was nominated for both a Tony award and Drama Desk award for his lighting on the 1996 Broadway production of *The King and I*. The Tony went to Jules Fisher and in typically nonchalant Aussie fashion, Levings was relieved not to have won: "Fisher's winning lighting design was extremely powerful and I would have been embarrassed to have beaten him as I studied under him in New York for a while."

Lights! Cameras! Chaos! is based around a group of temperamental animal film makers with characters such as Walter Crockberg the producer, Eric Von Roo the director, Leonardo de Kangaroo the demanding male star, Carmen Cockatoo the screen siren and the Emu Showgirls, complete with stils and batting eyelashes most supermodels would kill for. The show starts in the foyer with the audience participating in a gossipy TV-style entertainment show, where juicy details are revealed about the celebrity animals. Once inside, the auditorium is lit harshly as though under work lights for an operational film set; eventually the lighting becomes more theatrical and over the next 20 minutes some 350 cues are executed via the Wholehog desk.

Levings and Cooper came on board the project some 15 months before the Backlot experience opened and were hired directly by Bazmark Live. Levings has a long relationship with Luhrmann and has lit all of his stage productions to date. The Bent Street aspect of the lighting project didn't hold much appeal for Levings initially, as he explains: "I do around three major architectural projects a year and they always involve too many meetings, so I really wasn't interested in the streetscape aspect of the Fox project, but they brought in architectural lighting designer Peter McClean and between us we worked on Bent Street."

McClean was responsible for the 'nuts and bolts' of the streetscape, while Levings provided the conceptual inspiration by breaking the project down into fixed areas and giving McClean ideas of colour temperature, direction of light etc. Levings explains how the lighting of Bent Street was initially conceived as a fairly complex affair, with show control playing a major part, but unfortunately scaled down as financial cuts were made: "Fox wanted to know why we needed such complicated lighting when the area would not be open at night. Unfortunately, our arguments failed to sway them."

Show control unfortunately received the chop, though Levings is happy that the provision was at least made with the cabling to reinstate it at a later date: "The lighting of Bent Street became a much more straightforward affair than we had originally intended. I was planning on a fairly detailed level of control which unfortunately didn't happen, which was disappointing. But at least it made for a much faster and simpler focus and plotting session."

McClean was responsible for negotiating the lighting team through the maze of electrical contractors and the various authorities who dictated the way work could be carried out, and Levings was relieved to have McClean handle this aspect of the project.

Bent Street was designed by Catherine Martin to represent a film set and show influences of urban and rural Australiana whilst also being a functioning retail area. The design process of this area had already commenced when Levings and Cooper came on board, with the eating district showing strong influences of Golden Fleece service stations, an integral part of Australian family life, particularly on long outback car journeys when the brightly-lit golden fleece symbol would offer a brief respite for weary travellers.

Practical period lighting fixtures are placed throughout the area, as well as conventional film lights, neon, bud lighting, festooning and fluorescent lighting. Levings had an excellent film props buyer retro-fit metal weatherproof Par lamps to fit in with the period style, and he divided them into high output fixtures for pointing and illuminating and glow fixtures which pointed into the street areas with low intensity and minimal glare.

The lighting designers were fortunate in that they had an extremely detailed model of the backlot area to work with. They spent around 20 hours going over it to plan their approach, gaining a good idea of how the whole area was going to look and feel. Part of the set for *Babe 2: Pig in the City* had been left behind on the lot and the team lit this, as well as the Fox gates which carry both the studio's famous logo and the Australian Coat of Arms.

A more theatrical approach was taken with the lighting of *Lights! Camera! Chaos!*. Australian motion control systems specialist Bytecraft was the theatrical contractor for the Fox Backlot project and supplied Levings with a wide-ranging list of equipment to satisfy the eccentric situations encompassed by the 20-minute show. Though it was a more conventional lighting scenario, it was not without its complications. The area set aside for the show had originally been slated for an external stunt show, and had no provision for a closed building that was sound-proofed and capable of taking an extensive lighting rig. This oversight had fallen through the budgetary net and though they eventually ended up with a purpose-built 1,200 seat theatre, it was an inauspicious start to the project.

"McClean was responsible for the 'nuts and bolts' of the streetscape, while Levings provided the conceptual inspiration by breaking the project down into fixed areas."

The lighting team had four weeks to bump in the show and then four weeks to programme and rehearse before the previews commenced. Levings and Cooper had a fairly logical division of labour and although both men had other work commitments throughout the project period, they managed to work it so that one of them was always on site. Levings explained that Cooper physically did the focus from his notes and whilst Cooper was away, Levings did a skeletal blocking of the cue structure based on the script, rehearsals and the CD.

Cooper was responsible for the programming of the moving lights or, as Levings so deftly put it: "Damian was responsible for fixing up the train wreck that always seems to happen when moving lights are involved!" There were very few major technical problems that the lighting crew had to deal with and Levings believes this is partly due to the calibre of lighting crew they had on the project: "Ever since Cameron Macintosh shut down its Sydney operation we've had the crème of the crew available again for local projects, which has been great." Ian (Gooch) Blackburn was head electrician and Sam Hopkins the board operator.

Romeo and Juliet, The Sound of Music, Aliens and Riverdance all make an appearance in the show, as does a 12 metre high hydraulically-operated Sydney Opera House which rises out of the stage floor. An 18m high Sydney Harbour Bridge also features, as does the Eiffel Tower. Other elements include the flying fox, which operates over the audience's heads, and the space ship itself, which is constructed from four 10m wide by 2m high flats. A 1.2m by

*The rows of
Bytecraft
dimmers
on one
of the
sound
stages*



2.5m trap door is set in the stage floor embedded with Par 56s, while Par 64 VNSs are focused from above.

With around 350 lighting cues in 20 minutes the Wholehog II desk is given a good work-out. The whole show runs off time code, as the cues are very tight and need to be precise. Above the huge stage which covers some 60ft are two lighting pods consisting of rectangular flat truss rigged with four pitching and four non-pitching DHA Light Curtains, eight High End Studio Colors and 20 High End DMX Dataflash AF 1000 strobes. The cyclorama is lit with 15 Iris four-cell cyc units and 15 Orion 4 groundrow units.

Levings had hoped to have Wybron scrollers in the rig, but the budget wouldn't stretch to it and they had 118 Colourset and Rainbow scrollers which Levings said they had several problems with, but they eventually settled down. Also included in the rig were six Strand SL 26s and 10 SL 19s, 20 Cantata

18/32s, 10 Leko 6 x 22s, 60 Leko 6 x 16s, eight Molefay duets, 17 High End Studio Spots, two High End Cyberlights, 11 500W Kombi floods, 100 Spark Lx, two F100 Smoke machines, two DF50 Hazers and one snow machine. Around 150 Par cans completed the rig.

Control was via a Wholehog 2, 22 Bytecraft 12-way, 2.5kW racks, four Bytecraft six-way 5kW racks

and 36 Bytecraft Byteswitches and six Custom Bytecraft Byteswitches for the LM2. A Wybron Autopilot system provided two followspots which Levings described as "being as good as any matinée followspot operator - not always perfect but there most of the time!" Cooper added that he felt it was the first time in Australia that the system had been used as successfully. Levings particularly loved the High End Studio Spots, which he used extensively and he felt the DHA Light Curtains provided a "terrific and powerful linear sheet of colour."

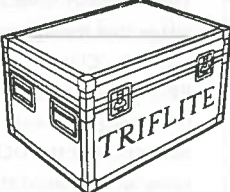
With the Sydney Olympics coming up in September 2000, the spotlight of the world will be on Sydney and the various attractions the city has to offer. By the sound of it, Fox have added one more string to that already impressive bow with their smart choice of location for their latest studio/infotainment complex. Just remember - if you're visiting the Titanic experience, pick the right queue or as an added precaution wear your bathers!



The
**Fibre Optic
Lighting People**

(PAR)

Par Opti Projects Ltd,
* 67 Stirling Road, London W3 8DJ, England *
Tel: 0181-896 2588 Fax: 0181-896 2599 *
www.paropti.co.uk E-mail: paropti@cs.com



TRIFLITE CASES

Custom Made Flight Cases

Tel: 01633 869 142 Fax: 01633 869 155

Website: www.triflite-cases.co.uk
a division of TRIFIBRE CONTAINERS INTERNATIONAL LTD



A DLC IS FOR ALL THINGS...
(...not just for christmas shows!)

- THEMED ENTERTAINMENTS
- CAR LAUNCHES
- LOTTERY CEREMONIES
- CRUISE SHIPS
- FILM SETS
- TOURS
- THEATRE

globe show
princess line
fox studios sydney
oklahoma
mamma mia
spend&spend

DHA LIGHTING LTD
384-392 WATERLOO ROAD LONDON SE1 8RQ ☎ +44 (0)20 7771 3900 ☎ +44 (0)20 7771 3901
✉ sales@dhalighting.co.uk ☎ www.dhalighting.co.uk ☎ +44 (0)20 7401 9202

Lighting & Sound INTERNATIONAL

February 2000

The Entertainment Technology Monthly

Greatest Show on Earth

- Fisher and Woodroffe at The Dome

Brand New Day

- Sting at Le Zenith, Grand Palais in France

Fascinating Aida

- Elton John and Tim Rice's Aida in Chicago

Fact to Fantasy

- Profile of Farmer Studios

Backlot Experience

- Fox Studios, Sydney