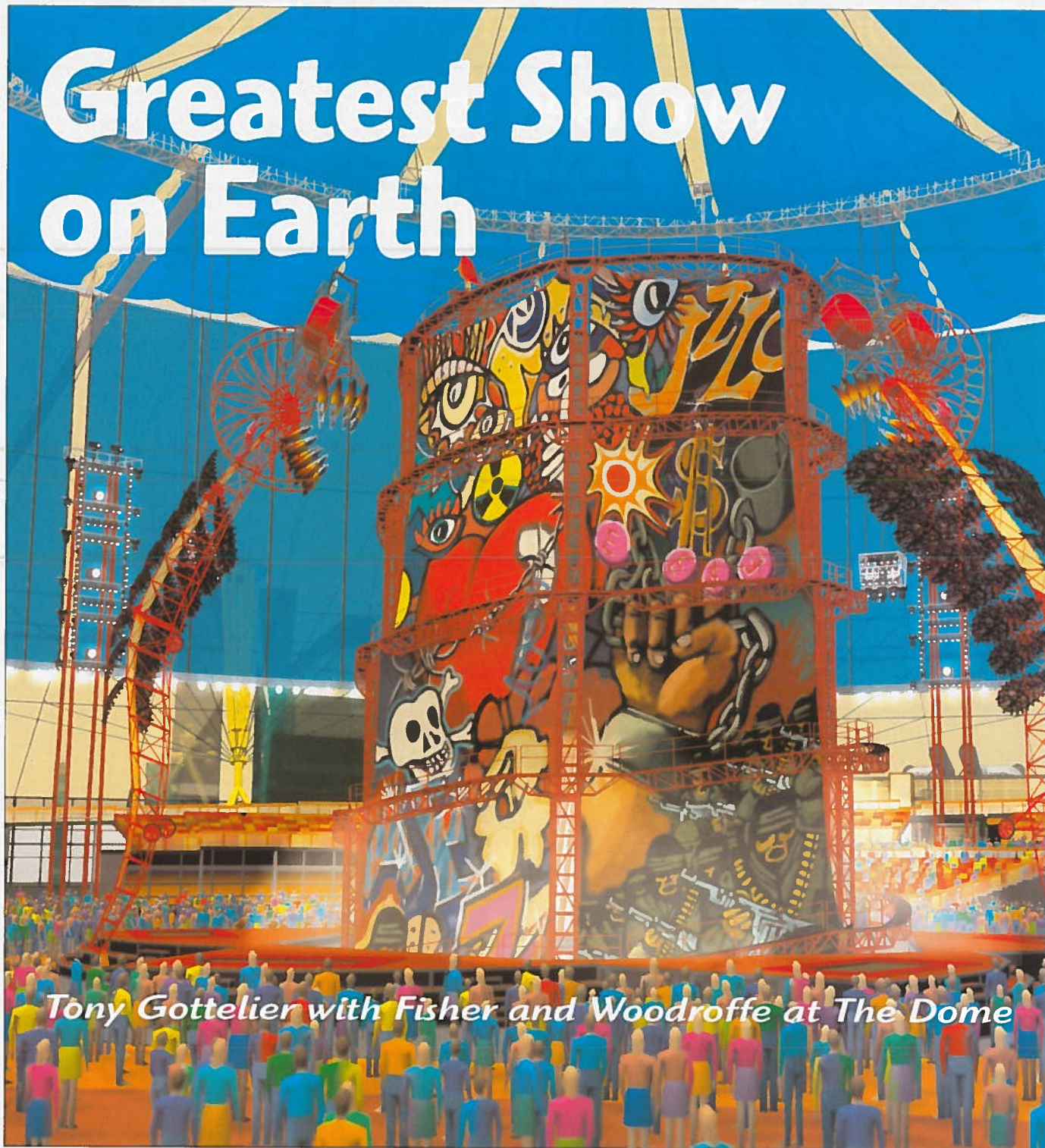




Tony Gottelier with Fisher and Woodroffe at The Dome

At Greenwich Marsh did Tony Blair a pleasure dome erect . . . and the rest is history, upon which we shall not dwell for fear of getting embroiled in the politics, which of course has been at the root of the Dome's problems from the start. No, what we are here to do is to tell the story of Mark Fisher and Peter Gabriel's creation, known to them as OVO, to the eponymous company as The Millennium Show, and to the rest of us as the Central Show - anyway, it's the show in the centre of the Dome.

It all started for Fisher some two years ago, after Cameron Macintosh's original proposal fell foul of budgetary considerations: "To be fair, it would have required a theatre to be built inside the Dome and there simply wasn't the money," explains Fisher. "And so, I was asked in a very English way, whether I thought it might be possible to mount a show of some kind in the open space thus vacated. I said yes, I thought it would be, and by the time the meeting



finished I found myself being invited to be the creative director of a new show, which had not yet even been invented."

Admitting that he was somewhat sceptical at the beginning as to whether this was really something he wanted to do, it took a telephone call to his long-standing touring cohort Robbie Williams to convince Fisher that he should proceed. With Williams on board as technical co-ordinator, Fisher felt able to start thinking about a concept and to begin building a creative team, originally with Peter Gabriel, with input from Robert Lepage, and later adding Micha Bergese, Keith Kahn and, of course, lighting designer Patrick Woodroffe.

The Fisher and Gabriel script which eventually evolved, imagined a performance which glued together elements of circus, street theatre and, inevitably with the pedigree of many of the participants, rock and roll. Most importantly, it was a production that must fill the vast space - a volume of space three dimensionally as huge as Trafalgar Square - which is why I have called this article The Greatest Show on Earth, simply because the performance is so BIG, and not in the judgemental sense of the



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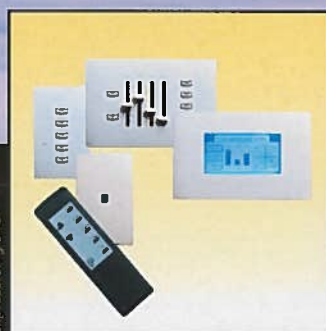
Millennium Dome, UK. Hitec / G. Photos



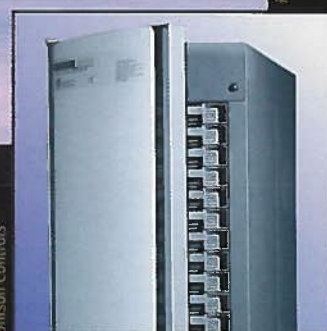
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Above, the central Dome Show and below and left, a sequence of Mark Fisher's Animation Stills from Act 1.
Copyright: New Millennium Experience Company Ltd 1999. Animation by Adrian Mudd at the Mark Fisher Studio

word 'greatest' which is for others to convey. In short, the show would be a 30-minute arial extravaganza making as much use of the space as possible, but when not in performance it had to evaporate into the ether as if it had never happened.

Realising that the political hydra would rear its ugly heads again and again, Fisher had the bright idea of making an animated video visualisation of the show, which was as well because it wasn't too long before he was asked to do a presentation at Number Ten. "The funny thing was that, despite assurances given in advance, when I pitched up, it became clear that there was no television and certainly no VCR anywhere near the Cabinet Room, where the presentation was to be made to the PM and selected cabinet colleagues.

Eventually, they dragged an ancient combo up from the kitchen." Despite the fact that the quality was appalling, due to the substandard transmission, the Ministers loved what they saw, apparently, and gave it their blessing. At subsequent events of this sort, and there were three in total at Downing Street alone, Fisher was sure to take his own equipment; on one occasion, at Gabriel's insistence, fitting half the Cabinet out with headsets. "When I looked around the room and saw

all these Ministers with 'phones on, it was all I could do to contain myself," mused Fisher, "Rock and roll in the Cabinet Room has to be a first!"

By now it would have been time to get real, and for Patrick Woodroffe, and sound designer Chris Hey, to make decisions about which equipment to put on the tender list. Woodroffe had started out thinking that he might use a relatively small number of really big lights: "You know that I was thinking of using your RazorHeads," Patrick told me, "But then I realised that, to really fill that space, it would be preferable to use masses of lights, always in the field of vision."

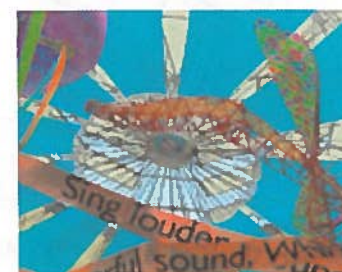
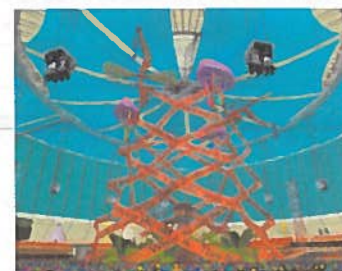
One major issue was that the show was to run in daylight, dusk and night conditions, under a tensile construction which is translucent. A giant leap forward was made when permission was obtained to drape the sides of the arena above the tiers and below the dome, the latter as an active part of the show, which would have the effect of equalising the conditions across the three planned daily performances. "Steve Nolan and I did some tests from a crane when the Dome was still a building site, and we were delighted to find automated lights registering at 45 metres," adds Woodroffe.

The next problem, which affected all concerned, was that the load-

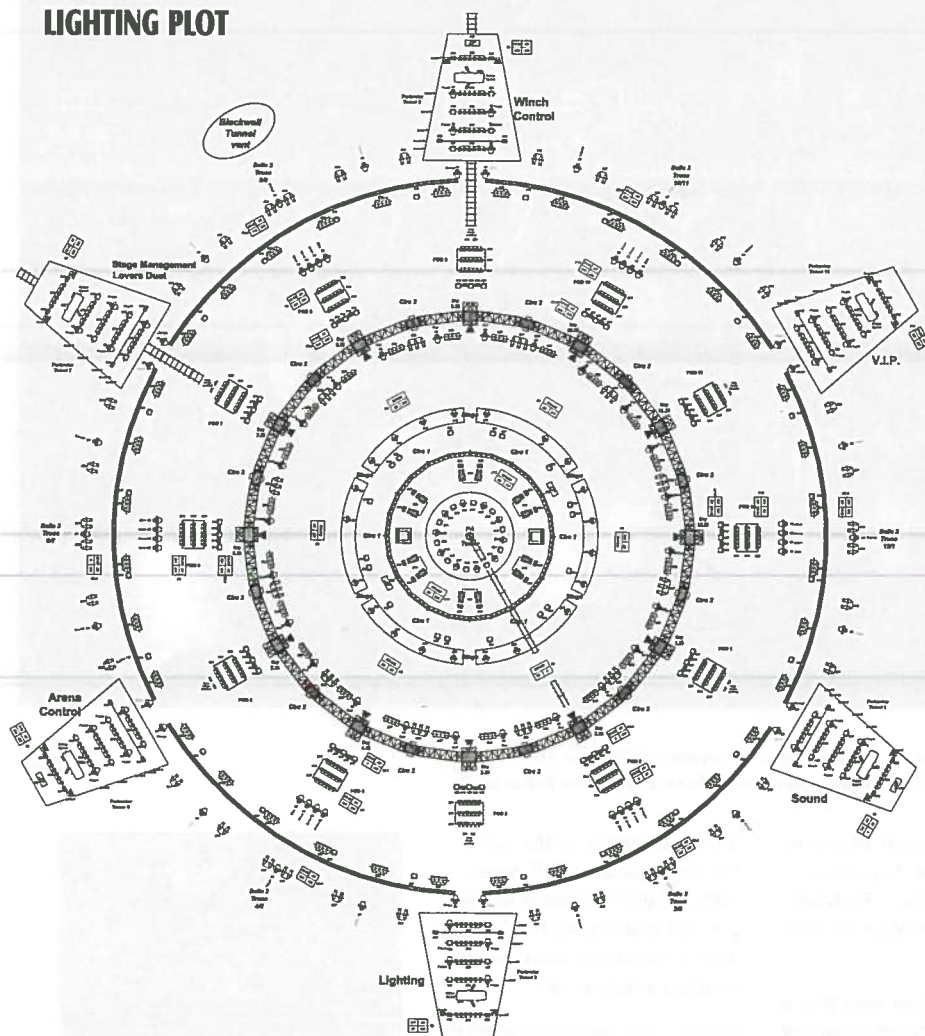
bearing limitation on the roof of the Dome was a mere 15 tonnes. "Who, in their right mind, would put up a building like this with that kind of limitation?" Mark Fisher, qualified architect, asks.

Anyway, since needs must when the devil drives, the team managed to find a solution, in a series of concentric circular trusses tied together with steel cables reminiscent of the spokes of a bicycle wheel, and so named. The ultimate structure was sufficient to support the numerous winches and their controls needed for the epicentre of the show, the soloist's arial support structure, the various drapes, the dimmers, some sound and some of the lighting. The design of this substructure was by Atelier One, a close Fisher associate, built by Tomcat USA and implemented by Unusual Rigging. In total, there are over 100 Stage Technologies computer-controlled winches in use in the show, and they have also provided two ST Acrobat scenery systems.

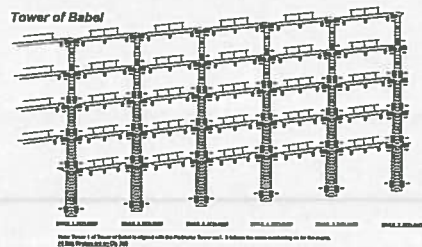
With that resolved, Woodroffe settled on his other lighting positions, six lighting towers which were already part of the Dome's original design, and 12 flown gantries, which he calls pods, which reveal themselves when lit above the seating at the start of the show, but at the closest possible position to the stage, roughly 20 metres away! In addition, the structure of



LIGHTING PLOT



Tower of Babel



Item	Quantity	Unit Price	Total Price
1. 1000W PAR 64	100	1.50	150.00
2. 1000W PAR 64	100	1.50	150.00
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THE MILLENNIUM SHOW NMEC

Lighting Design: Patrick Woodroffe	
Design: Mark Fisher	
Venue: The Millennium Dome	
Drawing: LIGHTING PLOT	DO NOT SCALE
Drawn: 10/01/00	Date: May 1999
Revised: 08/02/00	

the show itself would create other positions from the stage area and below. Of course, most of these structures had to incorporate speakers as well (we will review the sound system, as well as the equipment used in the zones in a follow-up article in the next issue). Now, at least Patrick could send his shopping list out to the tendering process, not a system he is very used to in the normal way of things. "It had been decided to purchase all the kit, with the exception of the Vari-Lites, so it had to be done in a proper way," is how he describes the

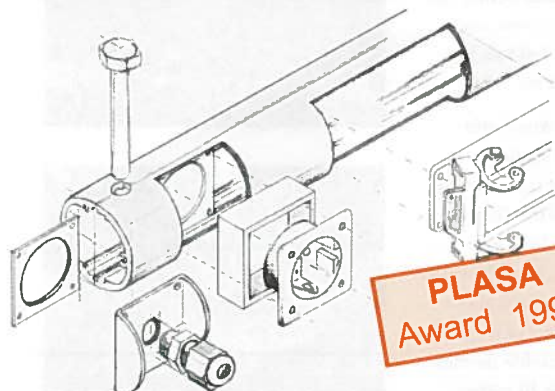
methodology. The total list included 162 Vari-Lite VL7s, 34 VL6s, 112 Coemar CF 1200s, 360 ETC Source Four Pars, 108 Source Four profiles, 60 Diversitronics 3kW strobes, Lightning Strikes effects, 240 James Thomas ACLs, 120 Thomas Par cans, 12 Arena Visions, 12 Floods and six 3kW Gladiator III followspots from Strong International. There are also two JEM Roadies.

AC Lighting won the tender to supply most of this equipment, plus two Wholehog II desks, each with remote control and tracking back-up

from a Hog II rack-mounting Replay unit. Coupled with this would be a custom-made 5,000 DMX channel WYSIWYG visualisation system from CAST Lighting. This system takes DMX signals from both controllers, or their back-up units, to create a graphical image of the show area while programming and has the added advantage of making production of paperwork an automatic by-product of the process. All of this control equipment was to be linked together via MIDI. Additionally, an Artistic Licence switchover unit that allows manual changeover from the main set of controllers to the back-up set, would be incorporated into the system.

Lumenation won the Coemar CF1200 supply bid and the Vari-Lites were rented from VLPs Europe. By now, life was getting progressively tougher for Robbie Williams and Simon Brophy, head of lighting at the Dome, as they struggled with the installation of miles of cable, and planned for the integration of equipment within the constraints of often opposing safety and service access regulations. Issues of maintenance were also complicated by the fact that it could only be carried out overnight in a venue which would be open seven days per week for an entire year.

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photo courtesy of AC Lighting

In parallel with all of this, Fisher had launched his strategy of training large numbers of the performers in the art of circus from scratch with a view to creating a pool of new performance talent in the UK. As the result, 85% of the two casts of 81 performers come from the UK, the biggest arts training programme connected to a single project ever. Mark Fisher is passionate about this aspect: "As entertainment disseminates itself across a broader base and percolates across the UK into our daily lives, these guys can play a crucial role in the future."

Meanwhile, the staging structures, incorporating a series of huge special effects, had to be designed and built. At this point it might help if I gave a brief outline of the script as interpreted by Mark Fisher, and he should know, because it is somewhat surreal and the PR description as issued by the Dome press office has been saccharined to the point of candyfloss. "There are three Acts: in the first, we are in the Garden of Eden which represents innocence," Fisher explains. "In the second, we move to the industrial revolution with corruption and violence, whilst in the third we are in the future, full of hope for the benefits of greater communication." To put over this magical, modern, biblical tale, and to fill the vacuous space, Fisher needed some big structures, but they could not be visible until showtime, and obviously they could not be dropped in. So they had to create a pit eight metres deep in the middle of the floor to conceal a stage and all the machinery below. In view of the history of the site, I bet that went

down a treat with the management and the health and safety people!

The main elements of the sub-floor equipment are the water tower-like structure which carries both the central PA system and some lighting, and which changes its role throughout, and the extraordinary Tower of Babel which grows upwards from within itself to a height of 15m - a major feat of engineering. To facilitate all of that, and a couple of other major effects which had not yet been introduced, the circular stage itself has to be capable of moving in sections and to work as a reveal. A heavy reveal at that: it weighs 75 tonnes. The stage and PA tower were built by Brilliant, and the Tower of Babel by Sheetfabs Ltd.

As well as the bicycle wheel, Tomcat also built other vital elements, namely the 20 metre long mobiles aka the Sperm. "The idea was that these big pieces would represent the life force

in the Garden of Eden, but would subsequently become weapons in Act Two," Fisher explains. "Sadly, we have not been able to implement them fully because in the end we simply ran out of rehearsal time and I was forced to cut parts of the show."

The reason, it seems, is that there were times when it got so cold last year that the cast simply couldn't rehearse. "The Dome had special dispensation not to install insulation," Fisher told me. "Consequently, as soon as the temperature drops below zero the heating cannot cope and it is simply too cold for the aerialists to function. You can't take risks with this kind of performance, everything has to be painstakingly planned and practised over and over for absolute precision." The street theatre element is used as a guise for the set-up, when quirky characters put on a comic pre-show in the area while surreptitiously preparing the area.

"Currently, the issue is, will Fisher be allowed to finish the show as he conceived it? In fact, I was witness to the first meeting between him and the new Dome supremo, Pierre-Yves Gerbeau who, apparently, assured Mark that he was very keen to see the show operate at its full potential and promised his full support to that end."

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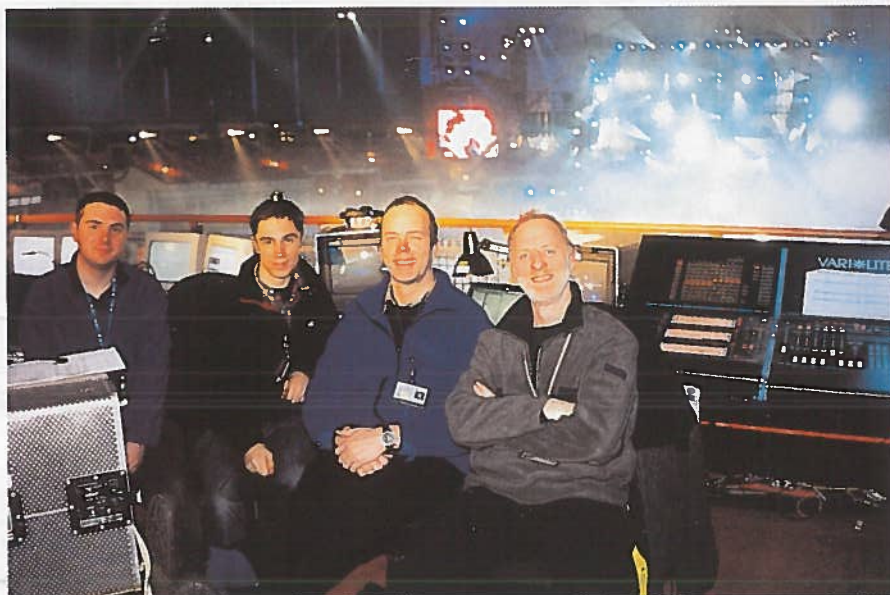
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At about the same time, and at quite a late stage, Patrick Woodroffe sat down with his board team of Dave Hill and VLP's Andy Voller, and with support from the NMEC's chief electrician, Lee Threlfall, set about plotting the lights. Meanwhile, Adam Bassett, a student seconded to assist Woodroffe from The London School of Speech and Drama, was responsible for the focusing end of things. "It has been quite some experience for Adam," Patrick says in a typical understatement. "He is staying on as my assistant at the Dome for the duration." Quite a start for a career in lighting!

The resultant show succeeds at every level: it fills the space, it sparkles, it excites, it terrifies - in short it is a 360° piece of aerial theatrical art which enthralls and thrills. 5,000 people can sit and watch the performance from the tiered seats, and there is capacity for a further 7,000 standing in the arena or sitting on the floor with the school parties. On the day I went along to see for myself, there must have been about 6,000 in the audience, and they certainly loved it.

Currently, the issue is, will Fisher be allowed to finish the show as he conceived it, including the two effects which were to make the climax of Act Three, namely the 'Tree of Life' made out of

The lighting crew at the Dome - Andy Voller, programmer, Adam Bassett, Woodroffe's assistant, lighting designer Patrick Woodroffe and Dave Hill, programmer.

photo: Mike Lethby

netting, and 'Ribbon Weaving', an effect in which the bridle winches are used to weave a nest out of giant ribbons? In fact, I was witness to the first meeting between him and the new Dome supremo, Pierre-Yves Gerbeau who, apparently, assured Mark that he was very keen to see the show operate at its full potential and promised his full support to that end.

Mark points out that with the current TV commercials, his concept has moved from being just the show in the middle of the Dome, to being, in Domenclature, 'The Jewel in the Crown'. "So it would be a great pity not to see it finished and I hope that P-Y, as he likes to be called, will be just the impetus we need." Meanwhile, it's back to the day job for Fisher and rehearsals for Simply Red and Tina Turner to think about in the next few months.

Audio aspects of the Dome, plus the zones, will be covered next issue.



CREDITS

Structure:

Bicycle wheel gantries - Tomcat

Tower of Babel - Sheetfabs

Stage - Brilliant Stages

PA tower/Maypole - Brilliant Stages

Mobiles (Sperms) - Tomcat

Swaypole - Kimpton Walker

Rigging:

General - Unusual Rigging

Lover's Duet - Ocean State

Tree Nets - Maritiem SA

Tree leaves - Banks Sails

Blue sky sails - Banks Sails

Winches & control - Stage Technologies

Ribbons - Blackout Ltd

Lighting:

Installation - CPL

Generics & Control - AC Lighting

Moving lights - VL/Coemar/Lumenation

Sound:

Installation - Spencer Hey Associates

Speakers & amps - Funktion One

Technical Consultants:

Structural engineering - Atelier One

Mechanical systems - Mike Barnett

Tech. project manager - Robbie Williams

Other Credits:

Conception - Mark Fisher & Peter Gabriel

Creative Director - Mark Fisher

Music - Peter Gabriel

Artistic Director - Micha Bergese

Lighting Designer - Patrick Woodroffe

Costumes/3D props - Keith Khan

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