

WORKING WITHIN THE ELECTRONIC WORLD

Tim Frost talks to hire and design company Autograph Sound



The London production of Les Misérables.

Rock 'n' roll PA hirers occasionally cast an envious eye over the lot of the theatre sound hire companies. None of this rigging in the morning for the evening show, and then out again before midnight, half a dozen times a week for them. All the theatre boys have to do, is put the system in once, and sit back and enjoy the profits for a few years.

So I went to see Autograph Sound, the leading theatre sound hire company to find exactly how easy life was for them. With practically every Lloyd Webber show in town, and a load more worldwide under

their belts, they could be considered pretty successful at what they do.

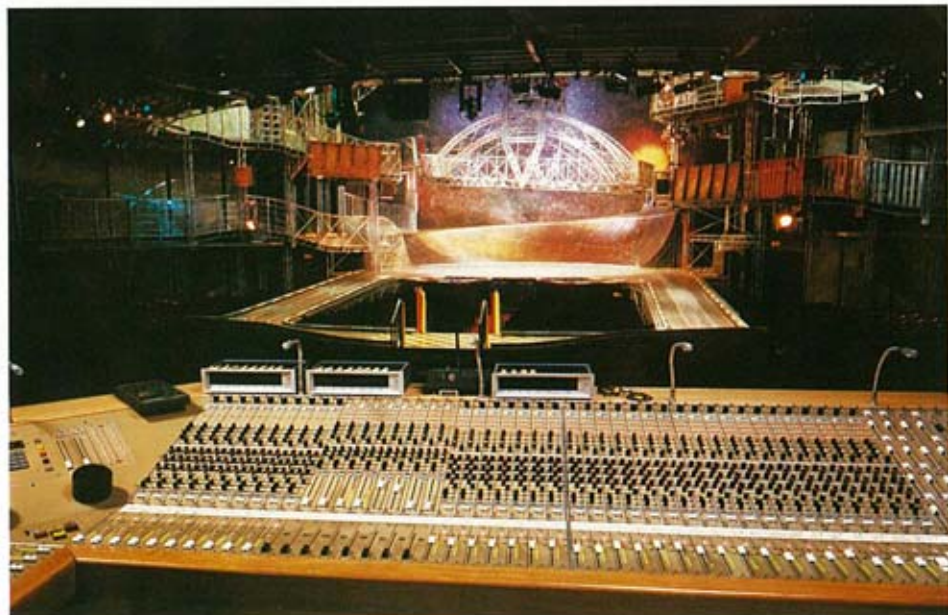
But exactly what do they do? Directors Andrew Bruce and Julian Beech set the record straight. Julian explained: "We perform several roles. In the case of Aspects and Starlight Express we were the equipment supplier. Martin (Levan) is the designer for both and although we had a fair amount of input into Starlight as technical advisers, in Aspects we purely supply the equipment, which we rent and install to the best of our ability.

"The other job we do is design systems; the producer assembles his creative team and some particular producers or directors choose us to design the sound as well as supplying the system. Bruce designed Les Misérables and Miss Saigon, and he also did the Cats tour because Martin Levan wasn't available to do it. So we can offer a complete service — both design and supply."

The sound design and supply process is fraught with potential conflicts, between the needs of the producer, the set designer and even the sound designer. If Autograph 'the supplier' are working with a separate sound designer rather than doing the design work in-house then they need to keep a close eye on the practicality of the proposed system, especially for a long term hire.

"There are technical things that we contribute to the design and these are mainly concerned with keeping the show running over a period of years. We have to look very carefully at our ongoing responsibility to the show, as the equipment may need to last ten years. When we hire equipment to a show we know that the cost of replacing the system will be ours, so we do seek to influence designers to look down the line a few years. If you are writing a cheque for a new desk and you are being asked for one that you really do not think is going to last, then you seek to change it or, ultimately, turn the show down."

There was a time when producers bought their equipment, but in the last decade, and especially as sound systems have become so much more complex and costly, the



Sound control view of Starlight Express.



The sound-effects studio at Autograph showing the DAR Soundstation.

system are almost always hired in. The reasons are simple commercial ones. Big name rock concerts can now use large stadiums to bring ticket sales to the 100,000+ level per show, but the size of theatres and the number of seats available to a musical's producer has not changed over the past 50 years. And while the potential for ticket sales hasn't varied, the costs have. Everything from salaries to sets have gone up.

The producer is faced with a bill to put on the show. He can't hire the set as it has to be built specifically and it is no use to anyone after the show has come off, and it's the same situation with most of the costumes. To get the show off the ground he has got to raise £2 to £3 million. His income from ticket sales is absolutely predictable, so when he gets to the sound system, if he buys it he will be adding another £1/4 million to his costs. If he hires it, he can reduce his outlay and can forget about maintenance. If anything goes wrong he doesn't have the designer, supplier and mixing engineer all arguing about whose fault it is.

This actually puts Autograph on a somewhat different footing to a simple rock system hired from an existing equipment stock. "What has evolved is that companies like Autograph are a kind of investor in a show," explains Bruce, "we are taking a risk. Like the shows 'angels' (backers) we will put 'x' thousands of pounds of first class equipment into it and we will get a return, except ours is called a hire fee. At some point we will go into profit, sometimes it goes into mega profit, and sometimes we will get all the gear back four weeks later having spent £1/4 million pounds. People forget there have been bidders, like 'Cafe Puccini'. The bits we bought specifically for that show have sat here for two years and not been used again. It really is a gamble."

Unlike a rock show, the musical is a notoriously risky venture. In the states if it isn't pre-sold and gets bad reviews, a show can close in a week. Over here it takes a little longer, but not much. There have been many notable examples recently of shows that have dramatically failed with substantial

losses for all concerned — the Bakers Wife and 'King' come immediately to mind.

But even with the risks of some of the shows closing after a few weeks, Autograph have somewhat lengthened the odds working with producers Cameron Macintosh and the most successful musical writer ever Andrew Lloyd Webber. Surely, I asked Andrew Bruce, a ten year run with Cats more than makes up for the occasional bummer? "It is no secret that on a major show it is probably two to three years before we make any money and cover our capital costs, and that would stretch further if we took into account the interest elements. Yes, you are raking it in with Cats in its tenth year, but it has to be said that after ten years the producer is still paying the price he was paying in 1980.

"When we tender for a show, we give the producer an inkling of the kind of money we are investing in equipment, so he has some idea of our commitment. The producer knows you are going into profit at roughly the same time as he is, and then he starts looking for the cost to go down. As the equipment gets older the maintenance costs go up. So the longer a show runs the less interesting it looks. After a long run the equipment has virtually no resale value. It must be questionable that the customised Cadac desk that we use on Starlight Express can be used on anything else. When it comes back to us it will be a write-off, even

though it's only ten years old."

From the hire point of view, there is an optimum run period of about four years, after that the profits start to tail off. Autograph's ideal mix of work would be to have three or four shows that run and go on running, and then two or three more that change after a year. Providing they get the next job at the theatre, the ever increasing sound budgets keep the income on the increase.

There has been a dramatic growth in the importance of sound systems for musicals. A decade ago, the sound budget would have been half the lighting budget at best, now it is the other way around. The absolute flexibility it offers the writers, directors and performers is one reason for the change, another is an increased awareness by the general public of what good sound is about. Sound technology has to stay up to date and producers are trying to do much more with it using bigger desks and more radio mics.

For the big shows Autograph develops new systems, often based around custom-built Cadac desks, to tackle the increasing technical demands. But although the latest designs include computer and MIDI control with additional automated matrixing and moving faders, Julian has to be confident that each new innovation has proved to be reliable before it is let loose on a major show.

"At every opportunity we will try and step forward the technology, but I think the secret of trying something new is that you don't crow about it, you keep quiet because otherwise it signals panic to the producer and director. So we introduce new ideas very quietly and try things in-house to prove it to ourselves first. For example, we've been using NAB cartridges since 1974 first for Dr Who and the Daleks which had 160 effects and we didn't want to have clacking Revoxs. They have been fine but we wanted to get away from the tape noise problem and have now gone to the RSDAT machines which turn a Sony DAT into a broadcast cart machine."

An operational change has been bringing the mixer position into the auditorium. "Producers now accept that it is impossible in these complex musicals for the balancing engineer to mix anything accurately or consistently unless he can truly hear what is going on. The producers have learnt that the balancing engineer is acting on behalf of the



Julian Beech.



Andrew Bruce.

audience and they generally allow a position within the auditorium. There is, of course, a direct financial equation. If you are taking 20 seats out at £14.50, it costs the show over £2000 a week. Over a ten year run that's around a million pounds."

But the biggest challenge of all has been the massive increase in use of radio microphones. In the past, engineers did large musicals using float mics (fixed mics on a stage) now most have decided to opt for the radio mic solution. Autograph have pioneered the use of multiple radio mics and currently Andrew Bruce is using 25 channels of radio mics on Miss Saigon. At that level everything has to be set up absolutely perfectly if he is to avoid losing channels during a show.

"The most successful shows are a result of incredible teamwork with back stage staff. I've seen the back stage mic engineer picking up three or four faults every night — hairspray and actors sweat on the microphones, and aerials broken in quick changes. We used to put the mic on the lapel, but as that became reliable we gave ourselves a whole bunch of new problems by putting the mic on the face, because the end result is so much better."

Sound used to be remote to the performers, something that went on out front, now it has become very personal. Sticking a microphone onto the performer, in his or her hair, makes for a much more intimate relationship between performer and sound engineer. Some paying customers, critics and performers still object to the use of sound systems. The basic argument being

that they weren't needed 20 years ago when performers were **real** performers, and could project into the audience unaided.

In rounding up, Julian Beech commented on this somewhat rose tinted view of the past by quoting the Music Hall performer Chesney Allen. Meeting Allen at a performance of *Underneath the Arches*, a couple of years ago, Brooks asked him what he thought of the sound.

"He thought performers now were very lucky. In the music hall days, the first gag went to the front of house, the second to the left hand side of the dress circle and the third to the right. People who couldn't see the comedian's face accepted that they

wouldn't hear the joke. The show had to be structured so that everyone got some of the jokes.

"Now the audience's expectations are a lot higher and you have the freedom to do what you like in the way of staging and costumes. The producer can have his flights of fancy in the knowledge that all the technical support people will still hear everything.

"It is the same with the composer, you don't have to have just the strings shimmering away under a love song. Now, people like Lloyd Webber could not, and would not, want to work outside of the electronic world."



The interior of Autograph's sound recording offices.



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The Director of Studies will be **Francis Reid**, Lighting Designer, formerly Head of Theatre Design Department at London's Central School of Art and Design.

The course is planned to interest all those who are involved in the provision of lighting for performance. In addition to specialists responsible for lighting design on all forms and sizes of stages, it is hoped that participants will include people concerned with designing and manufacturing lighting equipment, advising on its installation, and educating its users. There are vacancies for 25 participants. Course fee: £880, non-residential; £1,695, residential.

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