

STARLIGHT EXPRESS: REBIRTH OF A MUSICAL

Robert Halliday reports

It was March 27th, 1984 when *Starlight Express* opened in London's Apollo Victoria theatre. The next day Andrew Lloyd Webber's eagerly anticipated follow-up to *Cats* was greeted with a perhaps fairly predictable response from the critics, who praised the sets and effects but didn't think much of the show and its roller-skating cast.

Only a few picked up on director Trevor Nunn's remarks in the programme about London's varied theatrical fare always having space for spectacles, to meet "the public appetite for shows that are exuberant, light-hearted, eye-popping fun". That was exactly what *Starlight Express* set out to provide.

Nine years and countless sold-out performances seem to suggest that, whatever the critics felt, the show provided what audiences wanted. A large part of that appeal has always come from the show's technical effects which take the simple story of a group of railway trains racing and lift it into a spectacular event.

Indeed, the show's advertising a few years ago was based around the technology involved describing the precision of the set's



Starlight Express - revamped for the nineties.

photos: Nobby Clark

construction and the number of miles of cable feeding the lighting, while the souvenir brochure included pieces from the production team about their work and triumphs on the show.

Nine years is a long time, though, and as the show moved into the record books as London's second longest running musical, the production team decided that the time had come to move *Starlight* both artistically and technically into the nineties. Under the control of the composer, director Trevor Nunn and choreographer Arlene Phillips, a number of new songs were added and others were re-written and re-orchestrated to update some of the eighties-based jokes.

To support the new work, a technical re-launch also took place. John Napier's basic design, which tore through the heart of the theatre to provide a central skating bowl feeding tracks through the stalls and around the front of the upper circle remained virtually unchanged, although the stage floor, which takes a nightly battering from skaters hitting speeds of over 30 miles an hour, was re-laid and re-painted in a

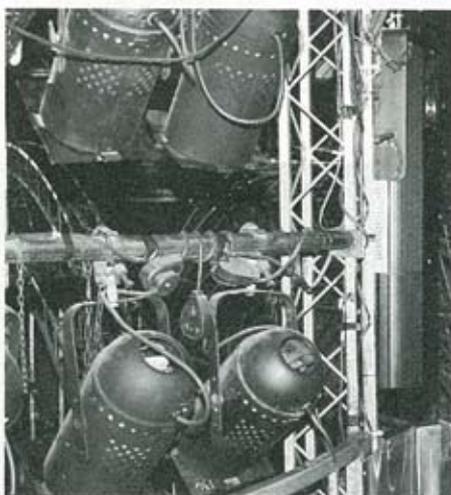


slightly different colour scheme.

The central bridge, a Mike Barnett hydraulic spectacular which tilts, spins and tracks up-and-down stage to link the various race-tracks, was also left largely unaltered, its annual servicing having kept it running since the show's launch.

The lighting, however, underwent a re-working. David Hersey's ambitious original design was hampered by the technology available at the time. The rig was based around an early system of moving, colour-changing lights developed especially for the show in an attempt to be able to keep up with the rapidly moving cast and provide a range of effects from the smallest possible number of units. The system never quite fulfilled its potential, however, and over the years has been supplemented by a variety of other equipment, including Rainbow scrollers to give colour changes, and lasers for effects. The huge number of cues in the show also ran up against the memory limitation of the mark 1 Galaxy originally installed.

The re-design which, due to Hersey's limited availability when a date for the re-launch was finally settled on, was overseen by Howard Eaton, the show's original production electrician. In the months prior to the second 'first night', Eaton, Mark Randall and Dave Knapp, the theatre's electricians, carried out a great deal of general repair and upgrading work on the show, re-wiring the lamps on the bridge, converting the control signals to the dimmers distributed around the building from analogue to digital, updating the desk to a Strand Impact, and adding 24 Lightwave Research Intellabeams, a variety of strobes and a ring of



An Intellibeam nestles amongst the original steel Parcans above the stage.

Par downlights reflecting the shape of the central bowl to the rig.

The core rig - a mixture of Lekos and early, steel Par cans remained largely unchanged, as did the masses of lighting running above the race tracks. The limited headroom meant that there was little option but to continue using the smaller, short-nosed Par cans. Many of the colours used have been changed, though, to reflect the new colours of the set.

The feeling was that, spectacular as the show had appeared back in 1984, it had since been somewhat overshadowed by the lightshows in rock concerts, music videos and films. The aim, therefore, was to add more of a 'rock and roll' feel to parts of the show, especially the new

Megamix at the end, introduced due to the success of a similar up-beat ending in the Palladium production of Joseph.

The Intellabeams, with their rapid movement, changeable gobos and dichroic colours successfully achieved this, with other, smaller effects adding the finishing touches. But the team never lost sight of the show's theatricality, rejecting effects that were too obviously 'showy' in themselves rather than adding to the production as a whole.

The control position now has a much more hi-tech look to it, with the Intellibeam controls fed by a PC which triggers each moving light sequence, and which in turn is fired by the Strand Impact. The only oddities are the two manual control units for the moving light curtains - given the limited number of cues they move in, the crew decided that leaving them on manual control would be simpler than adapting them to run off the desk and then plotting them into the show.

The desk now controls the increasingly ubiquitous Skywalker smoke machines, which have replaced the earlier Rosco units. A cracked oil machine has also been added, to make sure that the new lighting effects can be seen!

At the show's other control centre, the changes were less radical. Sound designer Martin Levan commissioned the first computer-assisted Cadac desk for the show back in 1984, and it remains now, unchanged - a fact which Levan attributes to it being ahead of its time in the first place, and which is also a testament to the quality of Cadac equipment. The sound rig, supplied by Autograph, has undergone rolling changes since 1984, with



The basic design of the set of Starlight Express remains largely unchanged, although the colours and some of the costumes have been altered.

synths and reverbs being replaced as new and better units came along. The orchestra pit had already been re-wired prior to the new launch, and so the rig underwent few dramatic changes, although the number of radio mics in use has crept up to 24.

Aside from dealing with some static problems arising from the new costumes, Levan's work simply involved mixing the new songs, checking the balance where songs had been re-orchestrated, and programming the synthesisers with a few new sound effects.

All the new elements were finally brought together in a three day production period last November, which all those involved describe as hectic, with all of the departments clamouring for stage time to fine-tune their contributions. The crew were not the only ones to be worked hard, though, as the cast, many of whom had been in the show before, had to concentrate hard to make sure they weren't drifting back into the old version!

The result is a brighter, tighter, more effective show which once again jumps ahead of the audience's expectations. To some, meddling with an established hit would have been thought foolish, yet the composer and his production team must have been confident of what they were doing since around £600,000 was spent on the new work. And the process remains ongoing; the video equipment which ensures that the audience can see the racing trains even when they're on a distant section of track, and which is still running on the original installation, is the next target for an update.

It's money well spent, though, since despite another luke-warm response from the critics the show continues to pack them in and there is already talk of a world tour of the new version later in the year. Never one to rest on his laurels, Lloyd Webber is already talking about version number three.

As it stands now Starlight serves as a testament to the durability of much of the equipment utilized on the performance, while showing quite clearly how technology has progressed over the last nine years in areas such as moving lights.

With all the advancements now being made who knows where technology might lead us, and who knows how shows like Starlight may develop. The next nine years look likely to be even more fascinating.

Starlight Express written by **Andrew Lloyd-Webber and Richard Stilgoe** is at the **Apollo Victoria Theatre, Wilton Road, London SW1**. (Opened **March 7th, 1984**).









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