

THE MUPPET SHOW

Rob Halliday found that the Muppets had arrived in Hammersmith, at the new stage production of Doctor Dolittle at the Labatts Apollo

Famous film becomes stage musical. It's not exactly a new headline, the big screen having provided the material for shows ranging from *Sunset Boulevard* to *Beauty and the Beast*. A film that's taken longer than many to make the transition is *Doctor Dolittle*, Hugh Lofting's story of a man who could converse with animals that was turned into a musical screenplay for Rex Harrison by Leslie Bricusse. The biggest problem was cited as being finding a way of bringing the animals to life on a stage: even the risky strategy of using live animals wouldn't have made some of the creatures featured in the film - such as the double-headed Pushmi-Pullyu - possible.

But now it's happened, and it is the solution to the problem which makes the show: the casting of the Muppets as the animals! Well, not exactly. You don't find Kermit the Frog playing Doctor Dolittle - that role falls to television presenter Philip Schofield - but all of the creatures have been created by The Jim Henson Creature Shop, making full use of the techniques they developed for *The Muppet Show*, *Sesame Street* and countless films since, including by some curious coincidence, the recent big-screen version of *Doctor Dolittle*!

Produced by Apollo Leisure, the show has taken up residency at their Labatt's Apollo in Hammersmith, and it was the venue which presented the biggest challenge to both the creative teams and production crew. Spatially, the venue is a challenging one because it was conceived as a cinema, with the result that the proscenium arch is incredibly wide; technically, the venue has in recent times mainly been a rock and roll venue and so has very little technical infrastructure of its own. Practically everything used by the show had to be brought in, even down to extra dressing rooms!

For its creative team, *Dolittle* reunited the people responsible for the recent hit revival of *Joseph*, a production which also spent a spell at Hammersmith and allowed Philip Schofield to make the jump from television presenter to musical star. Director Steven Pimlott and designer Mark Thompson filled the same roles on *Joseph*, while lighting designer Hugh Vanstone was associate LD on that show.

Thompson's design sets the style for the show: slightly cartoonish, heading towards being over-the-top, as a show in which humans and animals freely converse demands, yet still keeping enough of a toe in realism for it all to be just about believable. The basic scenic elements are principally there to control the space: an elaborately curved gold pros arch, complete with chasing light bulbs, frames the entire playing area, this actually sitting some way forward of the theatre's arch, since a forestage is used to extend the acting area. Within this, a series of rotating panels effectively form a narrower pros arch, these black on one side and painted with clouds on the other, allowing a quick and effective



The Jim Henson Creature Shop created central animal characters such as Pushmi-Pullyu.

transition from closed-in indoor scenes to panoramic exteriors. The cloud motif continues upstage on the backcloth, while the floor is a series of perspective boarded strips that gently blend in to the variety of scenes played on them. A section of the floor can also lift and tilt, to provide a separate level used as a harbour wall in the opening scenes and a table in the court scenes. The playing area then extends beyond the pros, onto two side thrust stages that then connect to a walkway that continues all the way around the theatre's circle front. The walkway prevents the action from just being stuck on the stage, while at the same time giving the circle audience a closer look at the characters who are normally a touch distant in the Apollo's vast, ungainly space.

Two big scenic elements track into the main performing area: Dolittle's tall, cluttered house in act one and his ship - complete with rocking motion - in act two. Other scenery appears from every direction: the perspective seaside town that tracks on, the rings of the giant flower that fly in, circus caravans, the exterior of Dolittle's house and much, much more - some flying in the forestage area, beyond the theatre's flytower.

The challenge of making all of this work, issued by production manager John Holding, was embraced by the Unusual Rigging empire with just about every part of the company getting involved. The theatre's flying system needed careful cajoling to get it into a condition for the show, while upstage the company designed and installed three storage platforms that live high above the stage, and two pallet lift systems used to transfer scenery to and from the platforms. Though one of the few companies not directly involved in creating the scenery itself - this work was divided between Bowerwood Productions, Delstar,

Met Scene, Souvenir, Stageworks and Victor Mara - Unusual did supply the automation control system for moving it all, run from a PC-based controller located on the stage left perch and operated by Darren Williamson.

Unusual's pièce-de-résistance is the moon moth, upon which Schofield makes his spectacular final entrance, sweeping over the heads of the audience before landing gently down-centre. To achieve the effect, Unusual installed a monorail track around the roof of the auditorium; with the track weighing around 2,500kg and the moth itself a further 800kg this necessitated installing around 150 evenly-distributed points in the theatre's roof structure. The creature is suspended from a monorail trolley which also includes motors that lower the moth as it tracks along; power for these motors is fed through encapsulated conductor rails, while power for the radio-controlled animatronic movement and fibre-optic wing lighting comes from batteries in the moth itself. The effect is worth the effort and is only slightly spoilt by the moth's relatively slow movement: apparently it can move faster, but perhaps the nerves need to settle a little before it is cranked up during the show!

LIGHTING

It seems to be Hugh Vanstone's turn to claim the title of hardest working man in theatre lighting: *Dolittle* sandwiched itself between the Broadway production of *Art*, the West End transfers of *Closer* (from the National) and *The Unexpected Man* (from the RSC), and new productions of the plays *Amadeus* and *The Blue Room* and the operas *Carmen* and *Macbeth*. For *Dolittle*, he has followed the increasingly-standard musical path, with a core conventional rig backing up a versatile collection of automated lanterns.



Above, Hugh Vanstone's lighting has created the wide range of looks the show demands. Right, The show's resident lighting crew of Lee Threlfall, Andrew Smith and David Sadler. Below, the sound effects desk, based around a Yamaha O2R.

As with so many recent shows, the conventional rig is based around ETC's Source Four, though an early plan to use nothing but Source Fours and Source Four Pars was eventually dropped on budgetary grounds, the Pars being replaced by conventional Par cans. Source Four profiles remain plentiful, but are supplemented by Altos, Cantatas and Optiques; the Altos and many of the Pars are topped with Rainbow scrollers. Dataflash, Toccata EPs with VSFx disks and HELL wave effects are also featured. The front-of-house rig is quite large, hung from trusses and bridges supplied by Unusual that also support four followspots (two 2K Color Arcs in the centre, a Robert Juliat Aramis on each side) and their operators. A replacement for the circle-front position also had to be created because of the installation of the circle front walkway; a truss hung beneath the front of what is quite a high circle serves this purpose well. As is his usual style, Vanstone has made extensive use of tophats and half-tophats to keep the lenses out of view as far as possible, giving a very 'clean' overall feel to the rig.

On-stage, the majority of the conventional equipment is hung on the sides of the stage, with quite a full perch-type boom position and three side ladders. The scenery storage platforms do double-duty as an extra lighting position, rigged with Par cans to backlight the skycloths. There is then quite a tightly-packed, curved downstage electrics bar tucked in behind the false pros, but the rest of the overhead rig is entirely automated. Supplied by the Moving Light Company, the majority of the equipment is from Martin Professional: 16 MAC 500 spotlights, and 29 MAC 600 washlights, split between the standard version and one with an extended lens snoot that gives a narrower beam. The 600s were topped with spill rings to try to keep stray light off borders, but this remains something of an on-going problem with these units.

Four of Martin's PAL1200 framing mirror spots also feature in the rig, on the front-of-house lighting bridges, while six Cyberlights give a remotely focusable gobo crosslight from



the side ladders. 20 DHA Digital Light Curtains complete the rig: two are rigged on the pros booms, from where they give a wonderful shaft of crosslight, the rest form four overhead runs. For these units, Vanstone has elected to use MFL flood bulbs in place of the usual VNSP spot bulbs; the resulting wider, more diffuse strips of light are an interesting variation on the light-curtain effect, giving a punchy yet diffuse backlight. Control for the moving lights is from a Wholehog 2, programmed by Richard Knight, while the conventional rig is run from a Light Palette 90 and the DLCs from Light Moves on a Macintosh. A second Mac runs Richard Bleasdale's SAM MIDI control program and binds the other computers together: the operator runs the show from the Hog and the rest are triggered as required. For the plotting period a third desk - an ARRI Finesse - was used by assistant LD Hartley Kemp to plot the huge array of smoke and haze (Skywalkers, DF50s and Pro-Haze stainless-steel dry ice machines from Sweden) into the show, this data eventually being recorded into the Palette.

Getting the rig in and working was a demanding project given the lack of infrastructure in the building. Production electrician Ben Jeffery led the team that took it on, aided and abetted by Nick Derrick, moving light tech Chris Dunford, and electricians Lee Threlfall, Andrew Smith and David Sadler who now run and maintain the show. Everything was brought in: on the stage left perch there is a 144-way touring rack based around ETC SmartRack dimmers, plus a 72 way Avo rack, plus the moving light mains distribution



running the stage rig, while a second dimmer room has been created at the rear of the circle next to the projection room. This contains six 24-way Strand LD90 racks that run the front-of-house rig. Control cabling was installed by The Service Company with the conventional lighting rig and dimmers supplied by White Light. The result of all of this work allows Vanstone to create the wide range of looks the show demands, from the naturalistic feel of villagers by the sea to the warm jollity of Dolittle's house, and from the crashing violence of an enormous storm to the tender intimacy of the show's rather bizarre main love song - sung by Philip Schofield to a seal!

SOUND

The most unusual aspect of *Dolittle's* sound is that there are two completely separate sound design credits for the show: Richard Ryan is sound designer, Paul Arditti is sound effects designer. It's a distinction that finally acknowledges the dual nature of this work, where creating a sound rig to reinforce the vocals of a large-scale show requires a completely different set of skills to creating atmospheric sound effects. The job was split on this show because sound effects encompassed not just crashing seas and thunderous storms, but adding sounds (and personalities) to the animals, and in particular to Polynesia the Parrot, voiced by Julie Andrews. Sadly, Ms Andrews couldn't be in Hammersmith every night, and it is therefore up to Arditti and sound effects operator Simon King to take her recorded voice and 'perform' it with the rest of the cast every night.

King operates the sound effects from the rear of the stalls, in a booth next to that operated by the main Cadac desk and sound operator Richard Brooker. Polynesia lives in four Akai 3200 samplers controlled from the Vision software running on a Macintosh (with a second as live back-up) and triggered from a MIDI keyboard (this system also sends MIDI to the lighting system during the storm sequence to keep thunder and lightning in sync). Samplers were chosen for their ability to replay sound effects over and over without delay, and for their instant start. The effects are mixed into a Yamaha O2R, which routes them out to an effect main and surround speaker system composed of Meyer UMP-1 and UPA-1A speakers specified by Arditti - these and the rest of the audio are supplied by TP Sound.

The sound reinforcement system is controlled from a desk made up of 44- and 30-way Cadac J-types and a 46-way Cadac F-type that feeds out through Yamaha amplifiers (mainly H5000 and PCM4002s) to a largely EAW loudspeaker system: 16 KF300s, four SB625 sub-bases, 14 JF80 surround speakers,

four MS120 surround sub-basses, 12 JF50 frontfills, and four UB12 downfills. The downfills are tucked just inside the false pros, directed at the difficult mid-side stalls seating in the hugely wide auditorium. The system is actually configured as a twin A/B system, allowing Brooker to keep singers talking directly to each other in separate systems and so keeping distortion to a minimum.

The Cadac receives inputs from 35 Sennheiser SK50 radio mics, with the cast on head mics and the principals, in particular Philip Schofield who rarely leaves the stage, equipped with two mics and transmitters for security. 10 boom mics are distributed around the puppeteers who operate the animals and, where an animal's movement and sound have to directly interact, make the animal noises. Because these sounds do not require quite the same degree of clarity as the vocals they are sub-mixed before being fed into one input on the Cadac. Two Garwood transmitters with 10 in-ear receivers are also distributed as required.

The most complex sound handling is reserved for Polynesia; because she has to be mixed in with the rest of the cast, she arrives on her own channel on the Cadac as if coming from a radio mic (though the studio recording of Julie Andrews passes through some fairly dramatic EQ to make it match the sound from the radio mics!). However, because the show's sound re-inforcement 'theory' is based around making real on-stage sounds 'louder', Polynesia's voice is also routed to on-stage effects speakers, coming out of whichever is closest to her location at any time.



The system allows Ryan to cope well with a difficult auditorium, the acoustic of which still betrays its cinema origins. After some lack of clarity in the opening moments, which Brooker attributes to some orchestral underscoring confusing the sound and audience, the cast are clearly and cleanly audible. In an auditorium that feels like a barn (and against a constant background noise of over-excited children), this is no mean achievement.

AND ANIMALS . . .

Even in the midst of all of this lighting, sound and scenic technology, the animals steal the show. The Henson company's work is fantastic, with their creations able to stand up to far

closer scrutiny than most of the Apollo's audience will have the opportunity to give them. The animals are all slightly stylised, theatrical rather than cinema-realistic, but - and this is the real strength of the Creature Shop - they all have enormous character.

Just about every animatronic technique is put to use. There are people in costumes, there are glove puppets, mechanically-operated puppets for the larger creatures, such as the horse. There are also self-contained mechanically-animated creatures - animals that just move around in the background rather than playing a direct part in the action. And then there are the radio-controlled creatures, such as Polynesia, run by puppeteers from the wings. However, the theatre's location - next to a main road, directly below the Heathrow flightpath - led to some worries about loss of radio signals and animals appearing to freeze up, so these creatures contain a back-up system: if they lose radio signal they drop into pre-programmed movements until the communications are re-established.

The result is truly magical, with real interaction between creatures and humans (Philip Schofield looking the most natural of the cast members at this, perhaps thanks to his years of practice with Gordon the Gopher on kids TV) and even creature overacting at time; the pig, in particular, hams it up enormously during the storm scene. Their triumph is such that the few scenes where the animals aren't on stage feel lifeless and dull. This is media 'cross-fertilisation' at its best. Maybe next time we'll get Kermit himself on the stage . . .

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