

Catch the Fever

For a small lass, Kylie Minogue has a huge stage presence.

Steve Moles negotiates himself a rare backstage pass to talk with the creative team behind one of this year's biggest productions



House-lights dim and the music begins. Dark, punchy, relentless, the rhythms swirl and the beat infests this huge arena. Despite the musical overtones, it's not post-industrial - the colours are too rich, the music not dark enough - but it's strong. Slowly, a sleek black chromium-clad phallus penetrates from beneath stage right; the crowd, already in a highly excited state, raise a cheer and clap so hard that for all the world it sounds like a typhoon on a tin roof. Perching somewhere between Robo-Cop and the Oscar figurine, the chromium cadaver (for now we can see it is a body) slowly, automatically, splits open to reveal the elfin figure of Kylie Minogue.

It's an absolutely fantastic opening; it could so easily have looked kitsch, laughable even, and by the end of the third number it's obvious to me there is only one reason why not. If Kylie's star has risen to the heavens in this past 18 months, and if her bank account now groans under the weight, she has spent it lavishly upon her audience.

It's an oft-repeated mantra - don't shoot your wad in the first few numbers, but on the concert stage, mantras, like rules, are made to be ignored. Here is two sustained hours of high-class wad-shooting.

You'll forgive the sexual aphorisms: if I were to draw comparisons, then an obvious choice would be Janet Jackson last year - similar Dance-imbued musical style, similarly sexy star, similar big budget production. What's the difference? One carries the show along, the other is carried along by the show. That Kylie is the former requires immense strength of personality and is a tribute to her.

There are big things here, too much for any one reader to embrace perhaps, but look to your sections below. There are firsts here for production, sound, set and video, and while there might be no new technology on the lighting, its contribution is also significant.

PRODUCTION

Steve Martin is the man in charge of production - and he's working with an impressive line-up, amongst them Alan MacDonald/Willy Baker (design), Charlie Kail (set consultant), Chris Keating (video), Vince Foster (lighting) and Chris Pyne (audio). "I think we've got a good team. When we finished the last tour, Kylie came to me and said: 'Do you think there's any chance of getting everyone back together again for the next one?' To tell the truth, I didn't really expect to be able to get everyone - maybe it's a measure of the respect they hold for her that they all made the effort to be here."

Credit is due to Martin (and assistant Helen Smith) for running a tight rehearsal that paid dividends on the road. "I've got 30 moving points in the lighting rig alone," commented LD Vince Foster. "Then there's screens, traps, stage gags, not to mention the dancers flying in for the opening. Steve ran it all in sections during rehearsals - technical in the morning, dancers and band in the afternoon. On day one we prepared technical part one, then completed it in the afternoon. On the second day we prepared parts one and two, and ran both complete in the afternoon; day three saw parts one, two and three in the same fashion. It ran very well." So much so that Martin felt able to clear rehearsals a day early and give the production crew a day's break before embarking on the first show at Cardiff. That's a significant gain: so often crews arrive quite knackered at the first load-in, having had an intense rehearsal period followed by a slow load-out as they get their truck packs sorted for the first time.

I pressed Steve Martin further on the rehearsal plan that Vince Foster referred to. "Well, we had a very similar show last time around, just nowhere near as big. Whilst out on tour we realised that we'd rehearsed the band and Kylie two or three times a day with the

production as it built. That meant long periods when they were hanging around waiting for the technical stuff to come together. We determined that it could be done more efficiently with more time for technical rehearsals, whilst not boring the pants off her."

STAGE SET

As mentioned, Alan MacDonald is the set designer for the tour, though that slightly understates his role. Charlie Kail is in there too, in his role as set consultant. The set is built by Total Fabrications (TFL's Neil Darracott being the controlling force in getting from blueprint to set cart) while the various lifts and traps are from Brilliant Stages and Steel Monkey respectively - all three suppliers being marshalled by Kail.

The stage is based upon an 18m by 15m platform, in this instance a rental item - TFL's Arena Deck, rolling version. "We've developed new extrusions," explained TFL's Darracott, "which means the stage can be configured in more complex ways, without diminishing the basic simplicity of what is a stage system comprising just four parts. We originally designed Arena Deck to be idiot-proof, hence just four parts to the system, and it's only possible to assemble it in the correct way. For Kylie, the multiple stage traps and Brilliant's excellent electro-mechanical lift need to be very securely integrated into the

Alan MacDonald's set has drawn praise from all quarters.

stage. Previously, that would have been achieved with custom parts, now we can do this with the new adaptable extrusions."

Which all sounds rather cosy, and maybe one reason why the rehearsals ended a day early, as Steve Martin commented at the time: "Alan's set looks fantastic, makes Kylie look fantastic, and it fits together a treat." Which makes a refreshing change from the usual production manager bleat of 'stage sets being completed in situ during rehearsals and causing delays.'

What of the design itself? Kail was effusive: "Alan MacDonald has done his first design - it's beautiful, it's abstract, and yet he hasn't broken any of the rules. This set hasn't been difficult to build, and it's well conceived for touring." In essence, the stage comprises four staircases that intersect asymmetrically, approximately mid-stage, and there's an enclosing back wall of perforated metal (more on this later) with sections of XL Video's Barco LED screen integrated to the wall upstage left and right. It sounds simple, but looks can be deceptive. 'Architectural' and 'minimalist' are two frequently over-used



adjectives which, for once, are not misplaced. MacDonald's simple canvas of stairs and wall gives him ample opportunity to paint and repaint, image upon image.

"Willy Baker and I work together - we talk through ideas - and once we'd defined how the set would be in the seven different sections (Metropolis, Clockwork Orange, Crying Game, Street Urban, Death in Venice, Cybertronica, and the encore section), we looked to the choreography. Choreography is the big work; we wanted to make this a modern dance piece, more operatic than a rock show. Having the set pieces going up and down makes for an ant colony scenario." MacDonald's reference to the three flown LED screens on the front truss as 'set pieces' is accurate, in that he uses them as stage flats to

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redefine, to shape, or just influence the look of the stage. "That's all important as the stew for the show."

MacDonald's background is highly relevant to the character of the Kylie set: "I spent 20 years doing art and set design for Pop videos and more recently I've been doing that for feature films. Because I have no

enthusiasm hasn't waned. "Alan MacDonald produced a model of the set last November. I then created a CAD version in 3D which helped him and made it easier to edit." Being able to extrapolate 3D drawings from a photo underlines the essential simplicity of the set.

"Fundamentally, little has changed since then, just the odd step taken out of the staircases. We - that's myself,



Moles on Minogue
I'm a cynical old lag
who visits maybe 4/5
concerts a month;
this is a two-hour
show and yet it was
90 minutes before I
looked away from
the stage to check
the crowd reaction.
Even then what I
found was many still
slack-jawed in
amazement. Without
question, this is the
most visually
entertaining show
I've witnessed in 10
years of scribbling.

background in rock, I could break certain rules, but I still understand the machinery. I'm not daunted by it." But with no previous history in rock, were there others who might be daunted? "Kylie's management didn't know me at all, so yes it was a great leap of faith on their part." But there were connections: "I'd been friends with Kylie and Willy for about five years, and they both thought I was right for it."

MacDonald is nothing if not modest about his achievements and he quickly acknowledges the co-operative spirit of the venture: "It's a combination of talents - myself, Kylie, Willy and Steve Anderson, Kylie's musical director. We started with many influences and drew up a list of songs and films that inspired us." MacDonald, it should be noted, filled the gaps in his knowledge base by assiduously visiting arenas to check view, scale and perspective. "We commissioned Blink to develop two hours of original video for the show as there is no live footage on the stage screens." There are, however, two live IMAG screens flanking the stage. Like everything else in this show, they too present something quite different in terms of 'live footage' - as we'll discover.

"The video is primarily scenery - it's moving wallpaper." Is there a good bit? "All of it, the fact that it works. The fantastic thing is that once you put Kylie in there she gives the whole a quality of mystery." It's a subtle distinction: essentially the Kylie set is not in realisation a great shift from many we've seen before, neither in terms of its mechanics, nor its form. But the complete integration of MacDonald's vision of set, scene, dance and music, and his inherent filmic vision, makes the whole greater than the parts.

LIGHTING

I well remember Vince Foster waxing lyrical about the pleasures of lighting a Kylie show last time around. His

Charlie Kail and Steve Martin - suggested the 18m by 15m basic stage, and originally I did propose a 25m thrust into the audience, but the seat kills saw that reduced to 10m."

"Once we'd to'd and fro'd with the model, I began to play with the trusses. I wanted the option to light the set from anywhere so that lighting wouldn't be an issue. We discussed materials for the back wall - a chrome finish was suggested but it's my experience that unless you can light it straight on, it looks dull. With audience to the sides, front, and up high relative to the set, we'd have had to light it from every angle. The alternative brushed finish on the perforated metal sheets has worked perfectly." Foster also suggested UV paint treatment to the back wall, which was nixed, but UV did find its way onto the stage floor which has the potent effect of making the four staircases that define the stage really pop out.

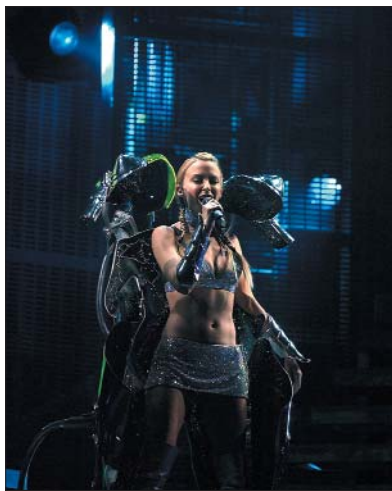
"Being the show it is, and the shape it is, I decided early on to eliminate house followspots. I'm sick of house spots bouncing off the set, so I've got three 2.5kW Juliats about 35ft out from stage and 45ft up in the air." Foster gave a ringing endorsement for the Juliats, provided by Neg Earth, who service the whole rig. He singled them out for their power and brightness, "a relatively small lamp for its power, easy to truss mount. There are other advantages: you don't lose a man out in the house with a flotilla of Super Troupers and intercom gear for a day, so from a purely technical point of view it helps contain the show.

"The other big consideration is the dancers: I've lit a lot of dance shows recently and you need heaps and heaps of front light. I was determined that, if at all possible, I wouldn't do that with lots of Pars." Though he did have a substantial number on the front truss at rehearsals, he quickly found ways to dump them. "Fortunately, I have the luxury of using all the lamps out over the thrust, and they're at a 45° angle relative to the target, much less acute than the angle from the front truss.

"When I first pre-programmed the show proper I didn't touch the front truss or thrust lights at all; then when the dancers appeared at rehearsals I watched them while Rob [Gawler, Foster's show operator] ran the basic show. I noted all the dance positions and wrote a script for their lights; it was very apparent there was plenty of light to cover the dancers, I knew even then I could lose all the Pars."

Some elements of MacDonald's set proved a touch more problematic. "I had 10 Studio Beams on the front truss, and another 10 on the T truss above the thrust which was more than enough front light. But with three LED screens on the front truss dropping in and out throughout the show, there was obviously going to be some interruption to the beams from the thrust." Rather than lose all that thrust light when the screens are in, Foster surreptitiously dowses only those that will hit the screens; add in the classic dance light, shin busters with three Studio Beams each, and he's well covered. "For back light I have three six-lamp bars of CP61s in an arc mid-stage, all with Wybron changers - with over 20 colours they're the only ones worth considering."

One of Foster's trademark effects runs on this battery of Pars: "I ripple the colours through the lamps, using a variety of lavenders, reds, purples and greens," meaning a variety in each colour group, and in a tonally darkening sequence. I programme them all together at



first, then off-set them, lamp to lamp, to produce the ripple. It's easy to do with a Hog. To produce the colour changer sequences with a chase would require programming in maybe 60 to 70 steps to build, but with the Hog it takes seconds, and you can adjust the run in real-time. You can even do the same thing with the Studio Beams." Watch carefully, for he never overplays his hand, and you'll see these peel-off sequences appear throughout the show.

As noted earlier, there are seven major sections to the show. "With Alan having such defined ideas, sometimes colours too, I've tried not to over-power in any one department - the last thing this show needs is gratuitous lighting. Sometimes the

performance and dancing is so strong that I just light it, I don't feel compelled to prop it up with lights and effects, because very often it doesn't need any propping up." So it is that Foster's lighting is often static, though the viewer is still smitten by animation on stage, from the dancers, Kylie herself, the video most potently, and the set.

VIDEO

As already mentioned, the use of video in this show falls into two distinct and quite separate groups; the ineffable Chris Keating runs a live section, feeding stage action to screens either side of main stage, while Marcus Viner and Tom Colborne provide two hours of pre-recorded footage which feeds the five Barco DLite screens around and above the stage. It's important to understand the only unifying bond that ties these two is equipment, all of which is supplied by XL Video; that apart they exist as separate entities.

Viner and Colborne are from Blink TV and they were commissioned by MacDonald to produce the footage for the show. "The significance of what's been produced is down to communications," Viner informs. "Alan and Willy had a very clear idea of what was wanted."

The four men began discussions three months before the finished article was required, an immediate indication of MacDonald's understanding of the medium. "The deadlines were tight, but Alan's prior experience meant he knew what we were talking about. He had a realistic expectation of how long shooting and post-production would take. We had many meetings and all four of us got on really well - having that common language meant that there was instant trust. So often with a client they don't really know what it is they want. This, conversely, was absolutely gratifying because they had such a clear vision."

What's relayed to the screens falls into three camps: animation, what appears to be Kylie live action, and what Viner refers to as the John Mabury section. "The animation was all handled in-house. Jason Hartigh is our regular animator - we relayed the instructions from the brief to him, at the same time producing a storyboard for Alan and Willy. "The footage of Kylie is shot by John Mathieson (check the credits to *Gladiator*) and then lip sync'ed to the music. Again, we were very lucky, Mathieson is a friend of Alan's and was a joy to work with. He made it easy. Mabury is a video artist: he produced that classic video for Sinead O'Connor for the Prince song, 'Nothing compares 2U'. He produced the weird, abstract and funky visuals as used in 'I Feel Love', for example. This is where Tom and I really went to town on the editing side."

At this point it should be explained that Kylie's musical director Steve Anderson was also in the video loop. "Steve kept us constantly updated with live tracks as the band rehearsed and if musical arrangements

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Kylie was recording for a live album, a DVD and making a live WEBcast via the Microsoft Network (MSN) on the third and fourth nights at the Manchester Arena. In a measure of his recognized abilities, Chris Keating was given free rein and called in 15 cameras - obviously Keating is a stranger to fear.

changed, then he supplied new recordings. With the Mathieson 'live' footage lip sync'ed directly, and the rest of the video tied to the music, that source of accurate material proved essential."

Whilst that might sound a self-evident necessity, the end product, run directly to the live music via MIDI, points out how effective the link between the two can be. Watching Kylie on stage while the images on the LED screens show her elsewhere - but perfectly in time - is distinctly surreal. So too with the way the animations and Mabury's abstractions link to what's being played, the connection is emphatically visual but askance rather than obvious and direct. In essence, the viewer has to work harder to make the link, but in so doing is more engaged by the process.

Viner concludes: "If I could use one word to define why this all works, it's communication. And if anyone had the complete vision of how it would work in the context of the show, and could communicate that, it was Alan."

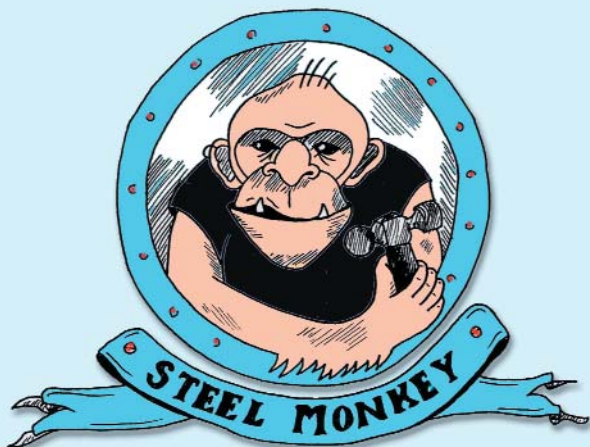


For Keating, the demands of the show were quite different: "This is straightforward IMAG for the audience in the far seats," he said, self-effacingly. Not that that has prevented him from producing something quite different from what we're used to seeing from such a role: "You should check out what Chris Keating is doing," said production manager Steve Martin without prompting when I first arrived at the gig. "To say it's reinforcement is an insult. It's beautiful to see." And Martin is not alone in this opinion.

"I've got a four-camera package," Keating explained, "feeding the same image to each

side [Barco 9300s paired on each screen]; one camera FOH, two in the pit, and one handheld on stage. What makes it complex are the amount of shots going on on-stage." Meaning the amount of action that warrants attention from a lens: "That's why we're using four cameras; the shots come from everywhere. It was a good decision of Production's to bring us in from the start of rehearsals - often we're working as an extension to the dancers."

Once more that completeness of vision proving the key, as Keating admitted: "Willy Baker wanted to bring across that this is more than just someone singing. Although Kylie is the 'money shot' I'm making it more content-based." A factor that makes Keating's job simpler because of its liberating effect. "It's easier because I'm not having to constantly look for new ways to get that money shot: I said to the camera men, 'think of yourselves as dancers'. That way we produce more of a true representation of what's happening on stage." That's not to say that Kylie isn't frequently up there as the main image, but the way Keating and his team constantly find new ways to arrive at destination Minogue is refreshingly different from the more usual force fed close-ups that characterize concert situations. The visual experience has more in common with watching television drama, where information and understanding are pivotal to the shots we see: that's fun and different.



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SOUND

Chris Pyne is a new name to these pages: a fellow countryman of Minogue's, he might be new to the UK, but he's by no means green. "After 23 years on the road she is without doubt the easiest person I've ever had to deal with," he said, by way of introduction.

Pyne is using a Meyer line array supplied by Capital Sound, composed of M3Ds with M2Ds hung beneath in the near down-fill role. This is the first time anywhere that this combination has been used, but more on that later - first of all, the artist and her music.

"The whole band are on an IEM system, and have been for the last two years," a factor Pyne attributes to monitor man Rodney Matheson's powers of persuasion. "Rod took them into the fold. He's technically fantastic, and he's diligent. It's one thing to get an entire band on in-ears, but to get them all to lose their back line as well . . ." a reference to all guitar and keyboard amps being firmly ensconced below stage in isolation boxes, "or foam-lined flightcases as we like to call them." Don't you just love Australian directness?

"This does mean you can crank it right up and there's no problem. Gain before feedback is huge." Pyne then goes on to explain just how lucky he is on that front. "For such a diminutive artist she is incredibly fit; she has a great voice, one of those things that's stayed with her since the old days [meaning Neighbours]. She's always invested time working with a voice coach and she sees it as part of the job, always has."

That said, she does have to dance a lot on stage - doesn't she lose some projection? "Hardly at all, it's usually at peak power. She's



particularly strong in the upper mid range which is one reason why I've chosen the Neumann condenser microphone. It's flatter and even, and, combined with the Sennheiser radio package, is the best." Pyne did admit the tour has a deal from Sennheiser, but his endorsement was audibly sincere - half-truths just don't feature in the Australian vernacular.

"There are eight channels of sequencer, as well as all the band sends. Couple that with the musical style - predominantly dance/club oriented - and it all sounds very dense. Steve Anderson and I spent a lot of time on balancing and EQ in rehearsals; truth is, there's not a lot of room in some of the songs so you have to get it right to make it work."

The tools Pyne alludes to in this role include the Drawmer Power Gate 501: "These have an EQ channel so they're very useful, especially in lifting the kit when it isn't cutting. I've also got the new TC6000, the flagship of reverbs, four stereo reverbs in one device, great." No surprise to discover it's assigned to Kylie and backing vocals.

One unusual intruder to the rack is a Sherman Filter Bank: "It's an analogue piece of synth' equipment, mainly used by studio musos. For one particular song I patch the entire band through it, the effect is to slowly take all the top-end off." Used for the song 'Love at first sight', this peculiar treatment is exactly from that process Pyne outlined, where Anderson indicates a particular effect that keeps the live replay in line with what the musicians are trying to achieve on stage.

As for the system: "With this PA - and bear in mind this is only our fifth show - it changes venue to venue. New PA, and new configuration. The thing I've particularly noticed is it's typical Meyer - what goes in certainly comes out. So there's an element of learning to control it all. The refining process is still to be overcome." In walking the hall there were indeed some very 'shouty' areas, though I found them in the minority. But this was a complex hang with a combination of M3Ds and M2Ds in two distinct hanging positions either side of stage, an acute off stage axis L-Acoustics Arc cluster, plus Meyer UPAs at the sides and UPM2s across front stage, and that's not forgetting the various subs.

CONCLUSION

On balance, and although many strongly sexual allusions are made by the creative team to define the show, the overwhelming sense is one of glamour. And that's glamour as personified by fifties Hollywood, all lip gloss - lavish and lustrous. "Making this tour bigger was not a problem," said Steve Martin, "that's easy. It's making it better that counts."

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