

From Sochi to Sharjah



Visual elements formed the main technical requirements (Pictures courtesy of Scott Willsallen and Ian Cooper)

Having covered the opening and closing ceremonies for the Winter Olympics and Paralympics, the next project for Auditoria's **Scott Willsallen** was a theatrical performance about the birth of Islam



Clusters of Light ran for four nights at Sharjah's Majaz Amphitheatre

SCOTT WILLSALLEN HAS DEVELOPED A REPUTATION

as the go-to audio designer for mega-events around the world. With a back catalogue that includes everything from Olympic Games and Rugby World Cup opening and closing ceremonies to theatrical events and music festivals, the Auditoria director's skills are constantly in demand.

As such, he is no stranger to the Middle East. Various projects have seen Mr Willsallen cover a number of sporting ceremonies in the likes of Kuwait, Turkey and Qatar. But his latest job in the region moves away from the sporting environment, and highlights the diversity of events which benefit from high-quality sound design.

Having spent much of the early part of 2014 in Russia as audio designer and director for the opening and closing ceremonies of the Sochi Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games, Mr Willsallen's next project provided a real change of direction. Trading the Black Sea resort for a small man-made island in Sharjah's Khalid Lagoon, Mr Willsallen was engaged as audio director and designer for *Clusters of Light* - a truly unique theatrical



L-Acoustics cabinets were used for the show

experience charting the birth of Islam.

The event was created and produced by Multiple & Spinifex for the Sharjah Media Centre as the first event of the 2014 Sharjah Islamic Culture Capital programme. The musical show tells the story of the Prophet Mohammed from his birth until his passing and its debut production featured over 200 actors and 70 musicians.

Getting *Clusters of Light* to the stage was no small undertaking. The international creative team began work in October 2013 to understand the technical requirements for the show and ensure that the new 7,238 sq-m Majaz Amphitheatre could accommodate the large set. At the time, the design for the amphitheatre was complete, but the construction was yet to begin. This meant that the team could make some key changes to the design of the venue in order to hide some of the technology and allow sufficient space for the temporary staging.



Three arrays of eight Kara in a left-centre-right configuration were used for the performance

'The first task was to understand the show, Spinifex made this very easy by creating animations of each scene including the projection content, cast movements and demo music tracks,' recalls Mr Willsallen. 'Once the content and layout of the show were clear, I worked with the technical team to integrate the various loudspeaker systems into the stage and set where possible.'

It was the job of technical director Nick Levett and technical designer Piers Shepherd to juggle the competing requirements of the technical services into the final design and create the best possible experience for the audience. With 21 projectors called into action, the visual side of the production provided the main technical element. The show relied heavily on this technology to form the basis of each scene, with performers interacting with the images on the main projection surface. Added to this, more than 400 moving lights were required for the production.

While this visual side took the priority, the role played by the audio system should not be underestimated. 'It was clear to me from the outset that this project would require a highly theatrical sound system, multiple sources and very specific localisation of sound to vision content to meet the creative expectations,' explains Mr Willsallen.

'The venue was a circular amphitheatre with approximately 200-degrees of terraced seating with a crossover aisle in the centre and one behind the back row. A continuous technical catwalk was elevated above the rear crossover for projection, lighting and other technology,' he continues. 'I designed individual loudspeaker systems for each performance area or projection area, each of which was fed separately from the DiGiCo SD7 FOH console.'

The main performance space consisted of three distinct areas. A thrust stage where most of the live action took place, the Colonnade a 12m high by 40m wide rear projection surface, and the mid-stage area which joined the two.

'We built six ground-stacked arrays of five L-Acoustics dV-Dosc and one dV-Sub into the front fascia of the thrust stage. This system was used to deliver speech and music content to the seating up to the crossover aisle,' says Mr Willsallen. 'Fourteen ground-stacked arrays of three L-Acoustics Kara were placed on the crossover aisle to extend coverage of the stage system to the seating beyond. The stage dV-Dosc and delay Kara were fed from a stereo mix bus on the FOH SD7.'

The video content for the Colonnade was full of detail and required multiple loudspeaker sources to support the sound design content. 'We used three arrays of eight Kara in a left-centre-right configuration and eight SB28 subs for low frequency effects. Each Kara array provided full coverage of the audience so the LCR localisation was very effective and supported the vision extremely well,' explains the audio designer.

'Given the dimensions of the building and its circular design, it was obvious that surround sound could be used very effectively to enhance the show,' continues Mr Willsallen. 'I designed two systems, a quadraphonic system consisting of four arrays of three Kudo, and a 16-channel surround system consisting of 16 12-inch two-way loudspeakers. The Kudo arrays were placed in a typical quad layout on the technical catwalk, the 16-channel surround system was distributed around the technical catwalk and on the top of the Colonnade.'

This portion of the audio solution provided the *Clusters of Light* team with plenty of interesting ways to manipulate the audience experience. 'We used the surround and quad systems to great effect for battle scenes and atmospheric sounds, as you would expect,' recalls Mr Willsallen. 'However, the most memorable moment for me was created by breaking the choir up throughout the quad and surround systems for a poignant moment which completely enveloped the audience, like they were the choir themselves.'

Mr Willsallen is keen to emphasise



The design of Sharjah's Majaz Amphitheatre was altered to accommodate the large set

that the audio enabling the event was very much a team effort. Auditoria supplied the audio design team consisting of Mr Willsallen as audio director and sound designer, Ian Cooper as associate designer, Ian Shapcott as FOH mix engineer

and Corrado Campanelli operating the dual Pyramix replay systems. 'We worked very closely with Christian Steinhäuser the musical director who we had previously worked with in Doha on the 2006 Asian Games Ceremonies, and Brendan Woithe from Klang who looked after the sound design content creation,' notes Mr Willsallen.

The audio equipment for the production was sourced from Dubai-based rental house Delta Sound. Delta was also called on to supply the crew, which was led by Andy Jackson and Liam McGrath.

Clusters of Light ran for four nights in Sharjah to great acclaim before heading off to tour other cities around the world. While not on the same scale as some of his other credits, this production will surely rank highly in Mr Willsallen's ever-expanding back catalogue of headline events.

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