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For Stunning Jesus Christ Superstar Production

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Coinciding with Denmark's "Freedom Day" – the lifting of all the current coronavirus restrictions – in September, an innovative and popular production of Jesus Christ Superstar featuring the Danish Chamber Orchestra (Danmarks Underholdningsorkester) conducted by Andreas Vetö was staged at Copenhagen's Royal Arena, complete with a spectacular lighting and stage design by Sune Verdier.

This acclaimed version of Andrew Lloyd Webber's famous 'rock opera' was a truly 'crossover' performance that skilfully embraced the production genres of theatre and rock 'n' roll in staging and lighting.

The lighting included an all Robe moving light rig comprising nearly 150 luminaires – supplied together with audio equipment by Copenhagen-based European Tour Production (ETP).

Stark, raw, and minimalist, the 'bare stage' look was also epic in proportions.

Imposing three-tiered scaffolding decks accommodated the orchestra, while a 30 metre long 3 metre wide runway extended across the arena floor which was the principal playing area for all the action. This layout enabled the actors to get close up to the audience, which apart from the surprise element – as everyone gets used to face-to-face contact again – was particularly effective for the many intense and intimate JCS moments.

With no video the pressure was on the lighting as the main visual embellishment to enhance all the emotion, drama and thought provocation of the piece, plus highlighting a string of rousing musical numbers. "I wanted the lighting to be edgy, simple and impactful," explained Sune, adding that getting that uncomplicated look ... is actually a complex task consuming serious time and effort!

During the planning stages, no-one was certain what venue capacities might be possible, so it was planned for a half-arena format, with seats around 270 degrees, which also informed how Sune lit the production together with the 31-piece orchestra which is a regular client of Sune's, the 28-strong choir and the nine principals.

Sune started – rock 'n' roll style – with an arc of vertical lighting towers around back of the stage and on top of these were the 16 x Robe MegaPointes. For this show, the lights produced lots of heavy back-lighting, beam patterns and a succession of effects blasting through the orchestra risers. Four in the central position were aligned to shoot straight down the catwalk.

Sune specs MegaPointes regularly for his concert and theatre designs and they are one of ETPs busiest rental fixtures. They were chosen for “the sheer power needed to have an impact when firing through the metalwork from behind, and also for the range of effects,” although he's quick to point out that the trick was to do all of this without getting light in the musician's eyes!

They were augmented with 24 x Pointes effectively extending the arc of MegaPointes around the back of stage and widening the scope of the lighting out into the outer perimeters. The Pointes were grouped in fours and rigged in the seating blocks not being used for audience.

The idea was to make the stage bigger, wider and have more depth and to have lighting in and around the audience, helping to pull them into the action and feel the energy coming off the stage.

The 25 x ESPRITES were a recent purchase for ETP. Jesus Christ Superstar was their third production since July and the first of Sune's shows to utilise them. “They were a perfect white source LED profile fixture to work with a 20-metre trim height,” he explained.

Fourteen ESPRITES were rigged as ‘primary profiles’ on the spine truss immediately above the catwalk and used throughout the show for a mix of gobo and colour effects as well as for some beautifully fluid super-tight shuttering and shutter chases effects that followed actors moving up and down the ramp.

Eight ESPRITES in two pre-rigged trussing sections were flown in the optimal front array positions – fashion show style, left and right of the end of the catwalk, with another three above the large cross set piece upstage centre for key lighting the action on the small stage area at the top of the ramp.

Sune was delighted with the results, appreciating the quality of the light, the excellent colour rendering along with several other attributes! “They are very tidy – and not once have I had to re-focus”. He also observed the smoothness of the movement with the trusses stayed very steady even during the more manic lighting cues!

The 31 x Spiider LED wash beams are another favourite! Sune likes the power of the source – needed for his longest throw distances of 40+ metres – and the zoom which goes down to 4 degrees and creates an “outstanding beam” which can also be used as a wash effect in some cases.

Two flown pods upstage of the orchestra stage left and right each contained 9 Spiiders that worked extensively through the show. The remainder were behind the orchestra risers boosting the punch of the back lighting array.

“I chose Spiiders for my washes as I know exactly how they are going to behave,” he commented, adding that the colour continuity between different Robe fixture ranges is “outstanding” and very helpful to any designer.

Originally – the Orchestra had performed this show in 2020 – when restrictions were lifted following the first Covid wave in summer 2020 allowing some limited capacity touring in smaller venues, and on those shows, there had been a row of CycFX moving LED battens along the front of the stage in the footlights position.

These were replaced in the Royal Arena with a row of 38 x LEDBeam 150s which were a great match with the Spiiders and provided fill-in wash across the orchestra when needed as well as beaming across the audience at times.

In addition to all the Robe moving lights, Sune had some other LED lights on the rig including individual pixels outlining the cross and a barrage of classic genuine CP60 PAR cans at the back on the towers, great for tungsten flash blow-throughs. This was also a homage to the classic rock ‘n’ roll lighting of the 1980s when Jesus Christ Superstar was originally written.

Sune programmed and operated the lighting himself using a grandMA3 console.

The main overall challenge was very limited rehearsal time. However, he was lucky enough to have the basis of a show from the initial tour, even though the fixture list was upped substantially for this and there was a lot of reworking to make it work effectively in the larger space.

He really enjoys working with the Orchestra, each show is creatively a close collaboration with Andreas Vetö, and there is a constant stream of ambitious performance ideas and plans embracing a diverse range of music and styles 'bubbling under'.

Photo Credit: Louise Stickland









