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Robe Flies at The Panto

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Lighting designer Andy Webb specified Robe moving lights to be at the heart of his lighting designs for two high-profile pantomime shows in the United Kingdom, The Further Adventures of Peter Pan staged at the Waterside Theatre in Aylesbury and Sleeping Beauty at the Festival Theatre in Malvern – two of 11 pantos presented this season by UK Productions.

As the proliferation of mad characters, slapstick comedy, innuendo and side-splitting humour flowed, so did the illumination, together – literally – with some cast members in Aylesbury, as the action and fun drew heavily on a series of spectacular flying gags – both onstage behind a drop-down projection screen, and out into the audience.

Aylesbury

The infrastructure needed to make this happen meant a few production compromises, and the lighting department lost several ‘standard’ positions in this 1200-capacity venue due to the installation of the flying systems, a fact that informed Andy’s general approach to lighting the show.

A large track from theatrical flying specialists Flying by Foy traversed from stage left to the upper circle enabling actors and props to fly out above the audience in a series of thrilling scenes that had everyone on their feet, gasping with wonder ... while Andy was challenged to find new lighting positions to compensate for those that were now unavailable.

Another task was to conceal as many flying wires as possible, amplify the impact of those seat-edge moments, and deal with the additional flying onstage, all of which reduced the already squeezed tight tech time and resulted in some intense overnight programming sessions for lighting which Andy and his team took in their stride. “Every challenge is also something else that drives us to deliver a great show,” he elucidated.

“Panto will often be the first theatrical experience for so many kids, so our job includes making it all as magical and mysterious as possible, so they really do believe it’s happening,” he noted, adding that children are also notoriously hard to impress when it comes to stagecraft!

For his spot-wash fixture ‘backbone’, Andy this year chose Robe ESPRITES and Spiiders, with 11 and 18 fixtures respectively, to which he added 10 x MegaPointes and 6 x ParFect 150s all supplied by rental specialist, CEG, together with the lighting kit for Malvern and two other UKP productions.

With the two main overhead lighting bridges lost to the audience flying track, Andy compensated by utilising the pros arch drop-down bars and the side ladders more, with 14 fixtures rigged each side. “I really appreciated the power of the Spiiders and ESPRITES here” he commented, explaining that these positions proved effective for crossing the stage at a steep angle.

When combined with additional moving lights positioned on the front-of-circle bar, moving lights came into the stage from all angles so everything was fully flexible. The ParFect 150s were also positioned in these high side angled positions, great for lighting the forestage and cross-stage activities.

He also spec’d 16 x Robe LEDBeam 150s which were scattered around at all levels and all angles, their small size perfect for filling any gaps.

ESPRITES on the side ladders zoomed out, with a variety of gobos added and an animation wheel dropped in which made up the “perfect” cover for flying elements as actors zipped above the audience – both highlighting them and simultaneously concealing with wires! Andy mimicked the automated flying speed and movement with the lights so everything was nicely synched.

These Spiiders and ESPRITES were the main workhorses of the show, and as fixtures with which Andy is very familiar, assisted massively in achieving results during the incredibly tight programming windows.

Colour is hugely important in lighting Panto as the different worlds of the show are usually fantastical, offering designers the chance go wild when getting imaginative. Andy was “very grateful” to have all the power and versatility of the Spiider at his disposal, known for its excellent colours and colour-mixing properties.

“Spiiders enabled me to add layers of depth and bring a huge visual warmth and sense of vividness to the different pictures,” he said, adding that in this set up, the over-audience flying also meant physically less separation between stage and audience, another factor informing the fundamentals of the lighting.

On top of that, the side stage slip (lower) and upper positions were used for playing out certain parts of the performance, “so the whole spatiality of the room was changed, everything became more integrated which required even more interdepartmental collaboration than usual”.

The ESPRITES were great for quality key lighting and for specials, contributing to the many WOW moments.

The MegaPointes, positioned onstage, produced super-bright shafts of light, and especially with the prism effects inserted, helped conceal the auditorium flying wires. “There is nothing to beat a Robe MegaPointe in a magical situation,” quipped Andy.

In addition to these 51 x Robe lights, he used a sprinkling of generic fixtures and plenty of SFX including low fog.

Programming – completed by Josh Gallagher – had to be super-accurate due to the exceptionally tight timing and to address all the challenges of lighting a panto with flying elements. Josh also operated the show for the 5-week run of performances, a role he’s taken on at Aylesbury for the last 3 years.

Malvern

Lighting for Sleeping Beauty at the Malvern venue saw Andy op for a more old-skool aesthetic, and with all the flying contained onstage, it was more about creating the right dynamics and narrative treatments with the lighting, for which he used Robe DL4S Spots, ParFect 150s, ParFect 100s and Spiiders, together with some other moving lights and a collection of generics.

Both shows have a full narrative arc that incorporates lightness, brightness and good contrasted to the gloom, doom and darkness of the sinister characters.

In Malvern, the ‘baddie’, Carabosse, was female and with numerous cross references to the musical Wicked (famous for its story of two witches), so Andy utilised plenty of green and purple looks for her scenes to underline her Jekyll & Hyde personality. This was interlaced

with some clever comedy elements that also lightened things up, hinting at potential good lurking behind the evil! Andy really enjoyed adding lighting as a layer to her character.

“I took a much more musical theatre approach with this show,” he stated. “Having these Robe lights in the rig also gave me an edge, and increased the scope of what I could properly achieve with lighting.”

He programmed the Malvern show himself using an Avolites Tiger Touch II console, finding it “extremely quick,” and both of these pantos had around 300+ lighting cues in the consoles. Andy again noted how familiarity with the fixtures – and the console – was a huge advantage in maximising the available tech and programming time.

On the Tiger Touch II, utilising features like the Shape Generator and being able to set up very user-friendly theatre-style Cue Lists was another benefit.

His LX1 at Malvern was ex-NRG (Next Robe Generation – the brand’s educational initiative) student Ben Oakey, who had worked with him and the Robe team at the 2024 Total Production Awards.

Andy loves working in pantos because there are no restrictions on lighting the various worlds which are imaginary and often bordering on hallucinogenic, a space where “there’s no right or wrong” in your treatment, methodology and interpretation as long as it relates to the characters and scenes.

The sets for both productions were designed and produced by the UK Productions in-house creative team, with *The Further Adventures of Peter Pan* directed by Chris Nelson and *Sleeping Beauty* by Paul Boyd.

Photo Credits: Barry Rivett (*Peter Pan*, Aylesbury), Stuart Purfield (*Sleeping Beauty*, Malvern)





