

Wide Christmas

Phil Ward discovers when a one-horse open mic doesn't nearly cover it . . .



[UK] The Thursford Christmas Spectacular is Norfolk's Brigadoon. It appears out of the mist, swirls into Technicolour action and disappears again without apparent trace. Those in the know return year after year by the coach-load, drawn by the show's extraordinary transplant of West End talent and technology to a converted farm shed somewhere down a narrow country lane. For its director and producers - local man John Cushing and his team - only the best is good enough.

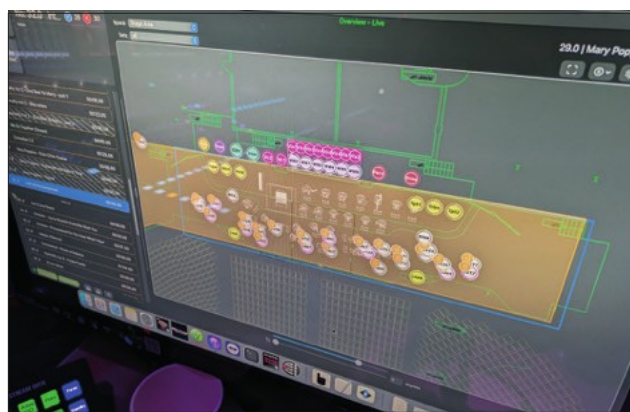
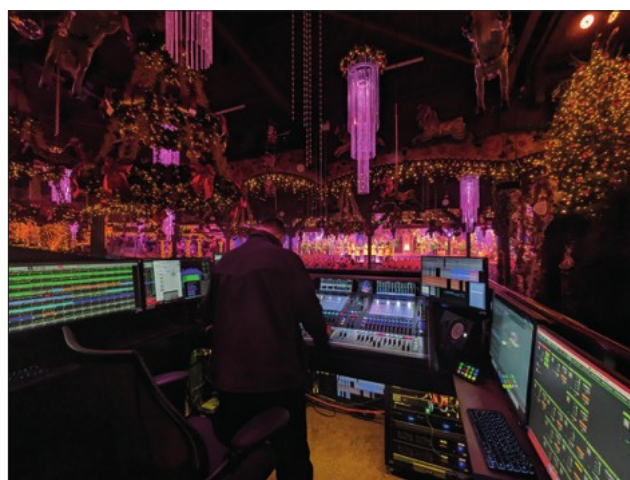
And for Christmas 2023, for the first time, that includes d&b audiotechnik's Soundscape spatial audio ecosystem and Out Board's TiMax TrackerD4 Precision Stagetracking, supplied by full-service company Southby Productions. The stage and proscenium profile is at least three times wider than any in London or New York, and with 48 singers, a 30-piece orchestra, 23 dancers, two bagpipers, a comedian, several circus-artists and a mighty Wurlitzer entertaining a 1,400 capacity audience, the audio is a Norfolk Broad-sized challenge met, for the sixth time, by sound designer and engineer Mark Rogers.

"At 40m wide and with a very low ceiling, line array just wouldn't work here," Rogers explains. "So, it's always been a point source solution. But something would happen at one extreme of the stage, and because each audience member was hearing almost everything from only the speaker closest to them, there was no sense of localisation whatsoever. You could see the heads turning from left to right."

Faced with this annual compromise, the production team needed little persuasion when along came some of the solutions that now address these issues with just a hint of Christmas magic. "John Cushing is absolutely passionate about sustaining the emotional impact of the show upon the audience," Rogers continues, "and if you've lost them for a couple of seconds because they're trying to work out where a sound is coming from, that's unacceptable. Part of them, even for an instant, is no longer engaged in the experience."

Huge investment in Soundscape and TrackerD4 duly followed, as part of a system upgrade that introduced two separate Soundscape zones - processed by two DS100s in a 64 in, 128 out extended I/O configuration. Southby's system design brought in 17 of d&b's Y10P loudspeakers every 2.35m along the width of the stage, with 18 44S front-fills to maintain a solid 180° image. Expanding to 360° around the room, d&b's Jack Page and his team settled on 22 T10 and three 4S speakers with T10 and 44S delays. A generous 10 V-Subs and four SL-Subs complete the frequency range.

Cosseted in mulled wine, the audience is blissfully unaware of this. "People say they've enjoyed it even more this year," Rogers continues, "but they don't know why. We've been subtle with the effects, because a little goes a long way with spatial sound. And we've tried to keep the natural feel of this extraordinary space, rather than make any infrastructure changes, because



that's part of the charm of a converted farmyard building. You could build a beautiful custom theatre, but it wouldn't be this show."

CHRISTMAS TRACKER

The sightlines have been improved too, according to Rogers, despite the fact that there are more boxes than before - a measure of how the Y10Ps and 44Ss dovetail into the space while still providing coverage and clarity. And while much use is made of

The Thursford Christmas Spectacular's stage and proscenium profile is at least three times wider than most West End and Broadway theatres

Mark Rogers at FOH

The Atlas GUI in full flow

Soundscape's En-Scene localisation, together with the En-Space reverb engine to add enhanced boundary plane responses, further icing on the mince pie is provided by Out Board's TrackerD4.

The go-to interface for Mark Rogers in all this is Flamingo Software's new wunder-GUI, Atlas - a controller for multiple spatial audio processors. "It's amazing," he says. "Once I'd experienced Atlas in Southby's Dean Street studio, I knew I had to use it at Thursford. They actually wrote TiMax integration into it for me when I told them about our tracking system here, and I couldn't be happier with the way it seems to just pull everything together. Some of the complex moves throughout the performance would put a lot of pressure on any combination of technologies, but Atlas is a game-changer."

Out Board director Dave Haydon joined the team to ensure a smooth deployment of TrackerD4 in the run-up to this winter's upgraded production, and immediately saw the need for an expanded installation. "It's a very busy show, and adequate show control is crucial," Haydon says. "Once we'd demo'd a four-sensor system on site, it was an easy fit. I did a survey of the long, narrow stage and the low-ceiling auditorium, and realised we'd

need a lot more sensors than you do in a conventional, Matcham-style proscenium - 12 in all, which is a lot bigger than a typical theatre." TiMax maps the stage and identifies all the tags, 34 in total, they go into the TrackerD4 server and are converted into OSC commands for the DS100, via Atlas. Atlas is able to monitor both the tracking and the audio spatialisation.

So: 240 input channels to the DiGiCo Quantum SD7T console, 82 channels of Shure radio, 915 cues in the QLab show file . . . that's a big show, and no wonder there are 10 outboard screens at the FOH position on top of the three in the console. "Being a variety show," Rogers reflects, "there's something like 500 mic changes, and trackers are being swapped around with costume changes as you would expect, but this system handles it all. It has really struck us, this year, how effective this combination can be. When you have the full chorus spread out, you hear this true wall of sound rather than everything apparently coming from one speaker. The feeling of spaciousness sends a shiver down the spine . . ."

That's what it takes, these days. And a little bit of fairy dust.

www.thursford.com/christmas-spectacular

*"When you have
the full chorus
spread out, you
hear this true wall
of sound rather
than everything
apparently coming
from one speaker.
The feeling of
spaciousness sends
a shiver down the
spine . . ."*

- Mark Rogers