

Putting Beauty into The Beast



It's panto time again in the UK... with the slapstick, craziness and innuendos flying as fast as a foam pie in the face...

At Blackpool Grand this year, putting both beauty and some beast attitude into the show, lighting designer Andy Webb specified 81 x Robe fixtures - 98 per cent of them LED sources - for a brand-new version of the classic tale produced by UK Productions for the 2018-19 season.



It's the fourth consecutive year that Andy has lit the famous UK seaside resort's panto, which was directed by Damian Sandys with whom he also worked on the 2017-18 production. This was a huge advantage to the fluidity and creative flow of this year's show, together with knowing the venue, a beautiful original Matcham house that is notoriously tight for space when installing the complex modern productions of the 21st century.

Andy chose Robe as his main lighting fixtures for several

reasons. "I've spec'd and worked with Robe on numerous shows and I know the products really well" he explained, adding, "there is a great choice of fixtures, their LED light sources are of an excellent quality and overall the kit is super reliable".



He relishes the chance to light panto as a genre which is seriously fast-paced and offers huge scope for colour, melodrama and fun - simultaneously playful, exciting and scary - all great ambiances to embellish with light. Lighting a brand-new production for the first time was also really exciting, and it offered the opportunity to set the ground rules and create some spectacular signature elements.

To give the Beast's character more gravitas and depth, Andy introduced some proper darkness and foreboding to his castle domain. That darkness was also an imaginative starting point for the lighting to evolve, as they needed to be able to flip between this state and a host of bright mischievous lighting for the comedy scenes - of which there were plenty!

Lighting was also used for other metaphors - throughout the show, as the Beast slowly but surely falls in love with main female protagonist Belle, more lights and festoons, etc, are introduced to his castle environment transforming it from a dingy, grubby den to a brighter more vivid and alive space.



Andy started with ten Robe DL4S Profiles, eight distributed between LX bars 1 and 3 with the other two rigged at FOH.

Eight Spiider LED wash beams are also on LX 1 and 2 as Andy wanted a BIG lush wash lighting effect covering the whole stage.

Three DL4F fresnels on back light bar - LX3 - create a look that has become one of Andy's 'classic' panto scenes; "the fresnel lens as a back light really brings a different take and quality of light to the picture" he said.

On the same rear LX bar are six ParFect 150s and two Robe LED Strobes used for lightening effects critical to the big fight scene, helping the audience to feel every push, shove and punch.

On the final upstage LX bar are another four LEDBeam 150s utilised for special pickups at the back of the set and for set dressing - in conjunction with two VIVA Spots and one VIVA CMY on the same bar - plus another two VIVAs on the pros perch (FOH).



Four LEDBeam 150s on the house bars either side of the pros point into the audience for blinder effects and movement cues. As with all pantos, audience interaction is fundamental to the genre. Andy also reveals he was inspired to capitalise on these side pros lighting positions after working on the 'Cirque Robe' live performance show at the 2018 Prolight+Sound expo in Frankfurt... with LD Nathan Wan.

There is also an LEDWash 300 on both pros' bars for the low-cut shadow work in the castle scenes and for those featuring The Beast.

A total of 20 x ParFect 100s and four ParFect S1s are deployed in various positions including eight at FOH acting as a contrasting set wash, with the rest on side stage boom ladders for cross stage lighting and a pair upstage swooshing across the Cyc.



Traversing the stage floor at the front - in the footlights position - are four CycFX 8 LED battens which provide excellent moody shadow lighting onstage and swing around into the audience for dramatic specials that build excitement at strategic moments in the narrative.

Just offstage of these each side is a Spikie. Andy has used the Spikie flower effects to help enhance the magical moments in the storytelling, like when the good fairy is working her spells for peace and harmony to prevail. They also give a nice low cross light for The Beast's reveal and for his transformation back into a Prince!

Just two of these small fixtures were all that were needed to play an integral role in the production, as Andy needed a neat and compact source zoomed in to 4 degrees so the (performer) flying wires weren't caught in the beams!

Next to the pros arch each side was a Robe Pointe - the only intelligent discharge fixtures in the show! These were unleashed for wizardry effects and in particular - in conjunction with three half mirror dishes - what Andy calls his 'magic zap' effect where super-fast beams of light zap between them, ping-pong style! This was devised to create the effect without using pyro.

The Pointes were also used for their more standard beaming effects into the crowd.

A single Robe MiniMe effects projector rigged in the upper balcony came into play during the Beast transformation scene, running sparkling video content. Andy was impressed considering the unit was over 40 metres away from the stage and focussed tightly into the Beast's chest. Again, the call was for a small and very controllable fixture to avoid revealing the flying wires.

The intelligent lights were supplied by CEG Hire & Productions from Cambridge, and Andy also used the house generics - Source Four profiles at FOH and PARs on some of the side booms.



As with all his designs the cues are multi-layered and complex! There are 312 cues in the show, all of which Andy programmed into an Avo Tiger Touch II console which is

being operated by the house LX team for the run of 59 shows which go until the end of January.

Unsurprisingly, the biggest challenge was shoehorning the required programming for a West End style design into three days on site which included Andy doing live updates during the dress rehearsals. Known for his near OCD attention to detail, one of his keys to achieving this was to be well prepped and another was using all the Robe kit. “This has been a massive bonus for me as it’s offered so many creative options” he stated.

He has also enjoyed being back at the Blackpool Grand: “knowing the house crew – and them knowing you and your MO is also a great help”.



Photos: Louise Stickland