

Clear-Com Empowers Spectacular Theatrical Immersive Experience 'Free Your Mind' with Cutting-Edge Intercom Technology



This past October, the theatrical immersive experience, Free your Mind, debuted in the United Kingdom, and utilized a Clear-Com® system to optimize the workflow of their A-List creative team. Mounted in Factory International's™ new cultural venue, Aviva Studios in Manchester, Free Your Mind centered around the classic sci-fi film The Matrix and was produced by a world renowned creative team including Director Danny Boyle, Producer Tracey Seaward, Choreographer Kenrick H20 Sandy, Composer Michael 'Mikey J' Asante, Writer Sabrina Mahfouz and Set Designer Es Devlin. The show's complexity, the number of departments, and the expectations of the creative team required robust intercom – a challenge championed by Clear-Com. "When you're working with directors and creators on this level, they're used to a certain standard," said production sound engineer David Gregory. "That standard applies to every element of production technology deployed on Free Your Mind, including intercom, which, given the complexity of this production, needed to be expansive."

For channel count and reliability in a frequency-rich environment, the V-Series panels, in conjunction with FreeSpeak II® digital wireless system, provided a solid basis for expanding the venue's existing system. Gregory added that "with the number of channels and FreeSpeak II, all we had to do was upscale the rig to accommodate everybody."

Sound design for the show was by multi-Tony and Olivier award-winning Garreth Fry, whose work includes the

V&A's landmark David Bowie is exhibition and the Opening Ceremony of the London 2012 Olympic Games. The intercom system designed by Fry was then implemented by Gregory and included an Eclipse HX-Delta matrix intercom system frame (outfitted with an E-IPA-HX card), FreeSpeak II digital wireless, and V-Series Iris User Panels.

Fry's work designing the intercom system for Free Your Mind had unique challenges as a show due to its immersive nature and moving parts. Due to the complexity of the show, the team needed top-of-the-line equipment to succeed.

"My job was purely to implement comms." Gregory continued. He noted that his previous work with both Boyle and Fry gave him clear idea of the level of flexibility and functionality necessary for intercom. "Danny came in with basically the same team that did the 2012 Olympics, and they have certain requirements." Gregory shared that "because there are so many different intrinsic parts (to the show) things need to happen really quickly."

To present this take on The Matrix required intercom infrastructure more on the scale of a broadcast system than a standard performance setup "including many extra user panels. Obtaining those extra panels was challenging because the number of Clear-Com V-Series Panels required to augment the venue's Clear-Com rig was the template for the more extensive system.



"The theatre and corporate market is quite small here, and, at that moment, no one had any to spare. That was when I contacted Clear-Com and said, 'Can you help me? We need more V-Series panels, and I don't know where else to go. Brilliantly, Ben Turnwell (Clear-Com's UK sales representative) helped us get

enough V-Series so everyone who needed one could have a panel to ensure the show worked seamlessly.â€•

The creative team trusted Clear-Com because its technology proved both flexible and able to fluidly integrate additional elements as necessary to meet the multiple challenges presented by the space. From the large scale of the production, the immersive nature of the show, and the requirement to provide intercom throughout the space as the performers, audience and technicians move through it during the show, Clear-Com was the clear solution.

Communications for the show required all the capabilities of the original venue's Clear-Com system and a substantial expansion â€“ a combination of fixed and temporary installations. â€œBecause of the nature of the building and the venue design, this project was commissioned to utilize the flexibility of the space to its utmost,â€• explained Anna Moutrey, Senior Producer at Factory International. â€œWeâ€™re effectively running two shows simultaneously, in two separate spaces in the same building â€“ one in the hall space and one in our warehouse space, which is why we needed this massive comms system.â€•

Factory International started with separate conversations with Boyle and hip-hop dance company Boy Blue about the potential of creating individual projects for the venue. However, given their previous experience working together, Boyle and Boy Blue pitched a collaborative dance interpretation of The Matrix. “When they presented the idea to us, we thought, â€˜Whatâ€™s not to love?’â€• Moutrey added.

With a combination of choreography by Kenrick H20 Sandy of Boy Blue and the comprehensive use of the venueâ€™s entire space, Free Your Mind is a bold statement of intent â€“ a nod to the vast possibilities the facility will offer other creative teams and productions.

Production Manager Phil Wilding explained that the show takes place in two spaces,Â starting in the 22- by 11-meter hall, and moving to the 65- by 35-meter warehouse. The V-Series Panels are spread throughout the venue due to the necessary inter-departmental communication. â€œThe V-Series Panels are spread out (around the venue) because a lot of communication is necessary between departmentsâ€• Wilding shared, â€“ among them lighting, video, sound, lasers, pyrotechnics, aerialists, costume, and automation departments all dealing with 50 dancers and 30 volunteers who manage the audience movement throughout the space during the show.



To say there are a lot of moving parts is a massive understatement, Gregory explained, “normally these will be separate venues, but in this case are being used in tandem for the show, and itâ€™s a massive space. If the audience is delayed, we need people that are in one space in the venue to be able to speak to the other venue.â€• He went on to explain that while there is an extensive and brand-new Wi-Fi network, like all Wi-Fi networks, you donâ€™t want issues. â€œThat’s why itâ€™s brilliant that weâ€™ve got FreeSpeak II because using 1.9 GHz allows us to get around where standard IT infrastructure sits.â€•

Gregory cited Clear-Comâ€™s responsiveness in sourcing and integrating the required elements, as well as its outstanding ongoing service and support as the system design evolved. In his words, â€œI phoned Clear-Com out of the blue, and they picked up. I didnâ€™t know anyone there. I just said, â€˜could I get someone to talk to me about helping (get what we need), and within half an hour, I got a response connecting me with Ben. Then, suddenly, there were options available.â€•

Overall, the Clear-Com systems utilized by the creative team helped the intrinsically difficult show come to life and excite the viewers across multiple venues.