

Epic romance: “Doctor Zhivago” opens on Broadway with grandMA2

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Posted on May 8, 2015



An epic romance set in the last days of Czarist Russia, “Doctor Zhivago” has opened at The Broadway Theatre with lighting design by Tony Award winner Howell Binkley. Conventional and moving lights, wind, fog, snow and fire effects for the sweeping new musical are controlled by grandMA2 light consoles.

Doctor Zhivago has been described as one of the most romantic stories of all time. The Broadway musical, based on the Nobel Prize-winning novel and Academy Award-winning motion picture, is directed by Tony Award-winner Des McAnuff. Doctor Zhivago reunites McAnuff and Binkley, long-time collaborators who both garnered Tonys for their work on Jersey Boys.

“There is a lot of big storytelling in this show,” says Binkley. “Being epic in size but small in content, as far as the scenes are concerned, means that there are a lot of isolated moments and specificity. There is a need to call attention to the emotions of each scene and in doing that I’ve had to be particular about the color palette. How the scenes relate to each other helps to dictate the transition from warm to cool environments.”

Binkley says that a number of effects help illustrate the passage of time and the various locations

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in the story. “For example, there are a couple of battle sequences that had to be synched with the video, sound and pyro cues,” he explains. “There is a feeling of the battles surrounding you in the theatre.”

There’s even a train, which features lighting, smoke and scenic effects; falling snow; and a huge jet of flame emanating from a pit under the stage. “The nature of the set has dictated that we have different trim heights for our electrics in each act,” says Binkley. “The side booms, attached to the Act 1 walls, are moved during the Intermission. We can actually recycle the Act 1 side light into Act 2 from the where the set is stored backstage. This helps in the changeover process during Intermission. The back wall, which is entirely LEDs, is a large factor in balancing the looks of each scene.”

Programmer Chris Herman selected 2 x grandMA2 light - one main and one back up - and 2 x MA NPU (Network Processing Unit) to run conventional and moving lights as well as the wind, fog, snow and fire effects. For production he programmed on a grandMA2 full-size and utilized two MA onPC command wing for feeding designer screens. “The grandMA2 feeds Art-Net directly out to PRG’s Series 400 system, which eliminates the need for DMX a/b switches and other failure points,” he says.

Herman notes that, “the grandMA2 range is very versatile; its ability to deal with multiple cue lists as well as multiple triggering methods, such as MIDI in, MIDI out and SMPTE timecode make it the ideal console for this show. As is the norm on a Broadway show, we have a main cue stack with about 460 cues that are called by stage management or triggered via MIDI or timecode. Beyond that list we have over 200 cues, in six external cue lists, that run solely off timecode or triggers from audio or other departments. Being able to seamlessly pull control of one feature or all features of a light or effect from the main cue list to another and release it back has been integral to achieving the look of the show.”

Herman takes advantages of many unique features of the grandMA2 for Doctor Zhivago. As noted, Advanced MIDI I/O gives him the ability to send notes, program changes and control changes on different channels on a per-cue basis to different departments. Timecode Pools enable him to use both internal timecode and external SMPTE timecode for consistent playback of hundreds of cues and effects.

Herman also deployed the layouts feature to create a layout that mimics the magic sheet for channels rather than using the standard-style channel sheet.

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He reports that the grandMA2 is performing “fantastic” and Binkley agrees. “The grandMA2 has been splendid with all of the different layers of networking and cue stacks that we’ve had in this show,” Binkley says. “Almost every department has cues triggering or triggered by the board and being able to have that level of versatility has been unequivocal.”

Herman adds that “Will Murphy and the rest of the A.C.T support team are great and always quick to respond when we get into sticky situations.”

For Doctor Zhivago Ryan J. O’Gara is the associate lighting designer; Joe Doran and Amanda Zieve assistant lighting designers; Christopher Herman moving light programmer; James Fedigan and Randall Zaibeck production electricians; Patrick Johnston head electrician; and Sandy Paradise lead followspot operator.

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