

Neil Austin chooses Robert Juliat SpotMe for Paddington the Musical world premiere

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In December, Michael Bond's much-loved children's character gently padded into the silvered environs of London's Savoy Theatre as *Paddington the Musical* erupted into a glorious, fast-paced confection of a production that enchants audiences of all ages.

A co-production between Sonia Friedman Productions, STUDIOCANAL, and Eliza Lumley Productions on behalf of Universal Music UK, with music and lyrics by Tom Fletcher, book by

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Jessica Swale and direction by Luke Sheppard, this world premiere production is packed with outrageous characters and new musical numbers. Curious, atmospheric, fantastical and homely scenes are juxtaposed with complex, compact sets – all of which add to the magic, and the challenges, of lighting this continually moving show.

Robert Juliat is delighted that the entrancing new musical's multi-award-winning lighting designer, Neil Austin, chose Robert Juliat's SpotMe tracking system to enhance the followspot-driven automated lighting. "What's great about SpotMe is that I can allocate moving lights to a real followspot, AND I have a real followspot front-of-house (actually three RJ Aramis followspots)," he says, "so, I can create bright musical theatre looks with the addition of accurate tracking of the automated fixtures and more creative options."

SpotMe is paired with LightStrike, the software Austin and Dan Murfin developed for *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*, to give smooth, perfect lighting that brings big show looks to the intimate space of London's Savoy Theatre, Robert Juliat having worked very closely with Murfin to ensure the compatibility of SpotMe and LightStrike.

Sculptural Finesse

"Using SpotMe, I was able to pair the movement of the front-of-house followspots with high side light to add beautiful, subtle sculptural effects to what would normally be traditional solo spot applications. These would then track with the performer in a deeply helpful way," explains Austin. "For example, there's a transition moment when Paddington sings *I've Never Seen A House Like This Before* when the house front flies out and the spots focus on Paddington alone: by adding two additional side spots I was able to add some sculptural elements that make Paddington's fur looks infinitely more realistic and dynamic, and bring him to life in a more animated way."

Hands-on Advantage

Austin had aesthetic preferences behind his choice of SpotMe, which bases its performance around the movements of an actual followspot operator: "I always steer towards something with a human in control because the organic interaction between performer and operator makes for

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smoother results, and more intuitive and predictive movement. There's nothing like a good followspot operator and we have three wonderful ones: Beth Shepherd, Millie Ealing and Ella Harrison-Walsh working with Nicola Crawford as followspot caller. A great followspot operator can interpret a performer's movements and predict absolutely when a performer is going to move, and work with them. All these are things that automated tracker systems cannot – and won't ever be able to – do."

Economic Option

SpotMe also made economic sense, being the most cost-effective choice compared to other tracking systems, and only required one programmer, Jack Ryan, to work with Austin. "I didn't want to put the financial burden of costly systems and multiple programmers on the show, so I was looking for a system that would satisfy the concerns of the producer and director, and also be an asset, and SpotMe was the one," confirms Austin. "I've been familiar with SpotMe since 2017 and our producer had good experiences with it on Broadway, plus it's infinitely more affordable than any other option."

Programming Magic

Austin and Ryan were able to maximise the spare moments during rehearsals and previews to add to the creative possibilities that SpotMe gave them: "SpotMe is remarkably easy to set up by simply mapping the four corners of the stage with the followspot, leaving you free to focus on the creative programming," says Austin. "We were able to add to the looks and finesse many aspects as we had time during rehearsals and previews, creating a lot of sculpted, beautiful looks in almost every scene. Yes, the show could exist with just a normal followspot but using SpotMe we were able to give it a lot more depth and be even more lovely to look at."

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Micro Control, Macro Advantage

Ryan and Austin were also able to use the off-set functions in SpotMe to programme optimum positioning for each of the three actors who played Paddington, plus the cast's understudies. "Our Paddingtons are very different heights so we pre-programmed the 'Y' setting at chest height for every single preset according to the height of the individual actor. Now we can simply use a macro on the show file to automatically reset for any individual actor or understudy as necessary, which makes the whole process very quick and easy."

Getting the Right Angles

"I like the SpotMe system and I like having a real followspot," says Austin, "and followspot

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operators like to have a real followspot, something with heft! Robert Juliat followspots are beautiful weighted and with a perfectly balanced trunion arm that all operators love!

“There are some wonderfully experienced people working as followspot operators but it’s also often a gateway job into the industry when a college route isn’t possible or desirable. It would be a great shame if we lost that opportunity.



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“What SpotMe gave me was the ability to have, in an impossibly tight set, a beautiful high, side ‘opera-house’ beamlight/followspot position added to the followspots from the front of house, controlled by a human operator for the optimum, beautifully smooth appearance for the

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audience. It did exactly what I wanted it to do. It's a great system that has really served us well on this show."

The Robert Juliat SpotMe system and Aramis followspots were supplied as part of the show lighting rig by White Light. www.whitelight.ltd.uk. "Robert Juliat followspots have been a trusted part of our rental fleet for many years thanks to their exceptional reliability and durability," comments White Light's Head of Lighting, Dom Yates. "Our long-standing partnership with Robert Juliat reflects the confidence we have in their products, which consistently deliver outstanding quality and performance. We've enjoyed working with Neil and the entire LX team on this fantastic new production, bringing together technical excellence and creative collaboration."

Robert Juliat is distributed exclusively in the UK by Live Technology www.live-technology.co.uk "We're thrilled to see Robert Juliat's SpotMe system bringing its unique capabilities to another major UK production," says Joshua Wakley, Head of Lighting at Live Technology. "SpotMe isn't just about followspot tracking, with PSN integration, it opens creative possibilities for mapping other elements across the stage. Our team worked closely with White Light to provide training and assist with the setup, ensuring the system delivered maximum impact for *Paddington the Musical*. It's fantastic to see this innovative technology continuing to enhance the artistry of live theatre."

For more information on Robert Juliat SpotMe and the full range of RJ lighting solutions, visit www.robertjuliat.com

Credits:

Lighting Designer: Neil Austin

Associate Lighting Designer: Nic Farman

Lighting Programmer: Jack Ryan

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Production Electrician: Martin Chisnall

Followspot Caller: Nicola Crawford

Followspot Operators: Beth Shepherd, Millie Ealing and Ella Harrison-Walsh

Production Manager: Oli Bagwell Purefoy/Gary Beestone

Sound: Gareth Owen

Scenic: Tom Pye

Video: Ash Woodward

Supplier: White Light

Exclusive UK distributor for Robert Juliat: Live Technology

Production: Sonia Friedman Productions, STUDIOCANAL, and Eliza Lumley Productions on behalf
of Universal Music UK

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