

Robe Gets into More Panto Madness

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The UK's Festive holidays ignited the zany and uniquely British performance phenomena of pantomime which came to theatre stages up and down the UK! This year lighting designer Andy Webb was delighted to be asked to design two high-profile panto shows - *Aladdin* at the Waterside Theatre in Aylesbury and *Beauty and The Beast* at the Festival Theatre in Malvern, both for UK Productions (UKP).

Andy chose a selection of Robe moving and LED luminaires to help bring the vibrant, trippy craziness of the genre to life.

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“Rule number one in panto lighting is keeping up with the fast-and-furious pace of the action whilst informing the narrative and captivating the audience’s attention,” he explained. Audience participation is a major aspect of any panto production.

All of this means that lighting must be highly adaptable and multi-functional, as the LD must be thinking constantly on multiple levels and able to change at the drop of a proverbial hat!



In the last decade, Andy has been among the trailblazers advocating the use of LED and moving light sources in panto. He has dipped extensively into the various Robe product ranges, and lit several seasons in Blackpool and other cities, known for his fresh and enthusiastic approach.

The theatres in Aylesbury and Malvern are very different in size and shape, and to facilitate the tight programming schedule, Andy chose primary lighting fixtures which would work in both contexts and be scalable to fit the two venues, with Robe Spiiders and ESPRITES as the main

workhorses.

Five MegaPointes were the primary effects lights on both shows, but apart from these, the other Robe fixtures were all LED, and these were combined with luminaires from the house rigs of both venues.

Aladdin

With copious scope for magic lanterning, Andy also had the good fortune to light the 1200-seater Waterside Theatre's 2021 panto season, so was familiar with the space and the house crew which was a big advantage.



He made full use of all seven available LX bars distributing five Robe ESPRITES and six Spider LED washes on LX 1 and 2 to provide all the main over-stage looks.

These seven bars were part of a grid of 53 bars, with all the rest utilised for hanging cloths and scenery pieces apart from two.

The huge versatility of MegaPointes was needed for all the flying carpet scenes and to create the massive aerial and big rotational lighting looks integral to creating the magic of this important illusion.

Eleven LEDBeam 150s on LX bars 4 and 6 were deployed for mid-stage specials. These bars flew in and out and were trimmed at different heights throughout the performance and were vital to the lighting of the sumptuous musical 'production numbers'.

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Being a small and highly manoeuvrable fixture, they proved very handy for sneaking into scenes needing additional coverage, or to highlight upstage sections of set.

More LEDBeam 150s were rigged on the pros arch drop down ladders where they could fire light along the front of the stage and also create movement going out into the audience – always great for audience interaction. They also assisted in the flying carpet reveal.



Andy's design used eight Robe ColorSpot 700E ATs, four on a split bar straddling the palace wall set piece, with the other four on the same pros arch drop down ladders as the LEDBeam 150s, where their main task was skimming and texturing the side cloths. This Robe legacy fixture can still be found working meaningfully in all sorts of scenarios, and at The Waterside, they also augmented the audience lighting looks.

It was the first time since Covid restrictions were lifted that the cast could go out and wreak havoc, panto style, amidst the public – anarchy and fun unfolded and were relished by everyone involved!

Andy's FOH rig at Aylesbury included Robe ParFects which added fill where needed from their advanced bar positions, together with an additional pair of ESPRITES on the circle front.

On LX2 he deployed 8 x CycFX8 moving LED battens rigged at different trim heights for fanning out into the auditorium and creating columns and shafts of light that were fundamental to lighting the cave scene, where he wanted a specific 'runway' effect.

A pair of Spiiders on the bottom of the pros ladders punched in at head height along the front stage apron. "The CTO mix was perfect for illuminating people's faces," noted Andy, adding that "they could also be used for 'bonus' light on some of the scenic cloths."

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The house's static LED profiles also fired in from the side cuts and boom positions, with generic Source Fours at FOH creeping in subtly to lift the face coverage. Andy observed that all the Robe fixtures were "spot on" for matching the warm QCT206 orange and the cooler 063 Pale Blue of the generic face light filters.



The two shows opened within a few days of one another, so decisions on fixtures had to be made quickly. A major logistical challenge at Aylesbury was that there were only 2 days to fully rehearse and tech the show onstage, so much of the programming was completed almost blind, referencing rehearsal videos for approximate positioning.

As cast positions and movement frequently changed once they were rehearsing properly onstage, Andy had to be ready to modify cues immediately and this is where experience working under pressure came into play.

Andy operated the nearly 300 lighting cues in the Avolites Tiger Touch II console for the two dress rehearsals himself, before handing over to the Waterside house lighting team for 4-week run.

Fog and haze were also running through the console, and the show was generally SFX heavy with multiple pyro moments to keep the excitement pumping.

Beauty & The Beast



To fit the more compact environs of the Malvern Theatre, Andy spec'd three ESPRITES and four Spiiders, rigged in near identical positions on LX2 as the fixtures in Aylesbury, with another four ESPRITES and five Spiiders on LX2, picked for the same reasons to cover all bases.

In this production, his upstage MegaPointes were again used to create and enhance the magic and key theatrical moments, like the transformation of the Beast at the start of Act 2. Again, they were used for bold, spectacular aerial work where definition and beams were needed, and for general effects and razzamatazz that dissected the Spiider and ESPRITE stage looks.

ParFect 150s on LX4 were used for shafts of light peeping over the top of the west wing set, with a pair of ParFect 100s as pipe-end cuts on each of the five onstage bars.

Robe's compact LEDWash 300s were spread out on the lower levels of the pros ladders, approximately 10 ft from the stage. "They still packed a remarkable punch for their small size," he observed, "and I still love them for more intimate spaces."

Two DL4S Profiles were rigged on the front of the circle balcony and used to texture the stage cloths and front curtain, together with four ParFect 100s in the same position.

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Four Spiiders on the advanced bar provided extra fill and were utilised to spin out across the audience for interactive moments, working in conjunction with a pair of MegaPointes on the FOH pros perch to assist with the transformation scene.

Beauty & The Beast featured some striking bleed-through reveals via gauze curtains, a task at which the ESPRITES excelled and “made the process really magical” as they picked out the emerging characters.



This show also featured plenty of effects – serious smoke content with glaciator foggers, and Salamander flame effects in the orchestra pit which were fired through the lighting console – also an Avo Tiger Touch II.

Andy collaborated closely with his production LX Shaun Ellis on both shows. He remarked that knowing the Aylesbury crew from last year helped the whole tech process massively as he was comfortable tasking them with certain things knowing they appreciated his workflow and style.

All the Robe moving lights and LED fixtures were supplied by Cambridge based CEG, a rental company with which Andy also enjoys working. CEG supplied a total of four UKP pantos this season including these two.

Photos / Images: Lindsay Cave (Aladdin) & Beauty & The Beast (Shaun Ellis).