

zactrack for Newsies & The Bodyguard

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Two UK theatre musical productions, “Newsies” and “The Bodyguard”, produced by Runaway Entertainment and Michael Harrison and David Ian for Michael Harrison Entertainment and Crossroads Live respectively, both with lighting designed by Mark Henderson, have been using a zactrack SMART real-time tracking system for lighting and follow spotting.

In both cases, the zactrack system was specified by lighting programmer Stacy Cross who was also the associate LD for the latest UK tour of this latest version of “The Bodyguard the Musical”, a classic that opened in the West End in 2012 and has been touring worldwide since 2015.

Stacy had first used zactrack on a “To Kill a Mockingbird” in London’s West End in early 2022 when he stepped in to cover a colleague who was off with Covid. He immediately saw the advantages of using zactrack for touring shows where time is always tight, especially to teach local follow spot operators all the moves at each new venue.

This show also proved an opportunity to understand the system properly, and after this experience, the confidence to spec it going forward.

The Bodyguard

This very popular production has traditionally been a two follow-spot show, and these had been used primarily during the production numbers with multiple cast onstage. At the start of this year, when Stacy knew that he would be re-lighting the show for Mark – who could not physically be there due to other commitments – and that some of the set – designed by Tim Hatley – would be changing, he immediately thought of using zactrack.

“I knew if the front truss was approximately in the same position at each theatre, this system was a great solution” he commented, explaining that with the compressed fit-up schedule with a load in on the first day followed by opening on the second night, this would enable them to achieve very consistent follow spotting.



The Bodyguard: © Paul Coltas

zactrack for Newsies & The Bodyguard

Ten zactrack Anchors and 10 x Trackers are paired on the five principal actors who are picked up by six Martin MAC Encore moving lights connected to the zactrack and utilised for the follow spotting. For most of the time, there are four moving lights tracking the two main characters.

These same fixtures are also used as part of the general show lighting rig when not follow spotting.

Each time the production moves to a new venue, the zactrack system is simply recalibrated, then the show lighting programming takes over via the ETC EOS console running all the lighting elements.

The Trackers for the two female leading ladies are concealed in their wig caps, while for the three male actors they are fitted to the back of some special vests worn beneath the costumes which are also designed by Tim Hatley.



The Bodyguard: © Paul Coltas

“For touring, zactrack SMART is self-contained and easy to deploy and set up at each venue, and it has massive potential from a programming perspective. It is very easy to switch lights into and out of zactrack” explained Stacy.

The zactrack system was purchased from UK distributor Ambersphere Solutions for the tour by lighting supplier White Light.

Newsies

Having specified zactrack for The Bodyguard, Stacy was also confident it would work equally well on other shows. When Mark asked him to work as programmer on “Newsies the Musical”, a new production directed by Matt Cole – who picked up the 2023 Olivier Award for Best Theatre Choreographer for this show – he knew it would also be extremely useful.

The show opened last year at the Troubadour Wembley Park Theatre, London, so ahead of this, they again discussed the merits of utilizing zactrack.



Newsies: © Johan Persson

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Morgan Large's open set design maximised the available space, taking up the entire room with almost no masking, with multiple trusses positioned in the roof for an industrial look.

The main action happens on a large thrust stage with audience on three sides, which was one of several reasons Stacy recommended zactrack to illuminate the actors efficiently they needed at least two lightsources from opposite angles, giving everyone the same look and sense of drama.

"We knew that there would be three or four actors onstage at any one time, which would ideally require up to 8 follow spots to ensure they were all well lit, and that simply wasn't practical in the space" noted Stacy, so he and Mark started thinking about a zactrack SMART and eight moving lights.

As it transpired, the concept worked brilliantly!

Twelve Claypaky Sharpy Washes are used for the main follow spot replacement, chosen as they give a much subtler highlight to the actors and complement the main lighting design. This and speed of the Sharpy's made it possible to follow the action on the main acting areas and as the cast made their way around the auditorium.

At one point the action required a more traditional hard edge follow spot and they were able to use a Martin MAC Viper Performance for this.



Newsies: © Johan Persson

One zactrack SMART server is in action – also purchased by White Light, again the lighting supplier, utilising 10 x Anchors and 10 x Trackers, six of which are paired on three actors, with the other four used as single trackers on other cast members.

Good positions on the costumes were needed, so the Trackers are in multiple places, mainly higher up around the chest area, with one ensconced in a wig.

It did take a few moves of the Bodyguard for everyone involved to become comfortable with the system and its requirements on moving venue, but the whole time “both Ambersphere and White Light have been brilliant with their support” noted Stacy, “The zactrack systems on both shows have been absolutely rock solid”.

White Light’s Technical Director Dave Isherwood commented, “We are delighted to have zactrack

available in our rental stock. The system is proving to be flexible, user friendly and very reliable and we are looking forward to working with it for many years to come!"

Photos:

The Bodyguard: © *Paul Coltas*

Newsies: © *Johan Persson*