Scouting For New Talent

Matt Caton reports from Australia on the long-running institution among the Scouts and Guides of Melbourne . . .

Photos: David Reeve

Australia - The term 'amateur' is actually an old French word meaning 'lover of' and is generally used to describe an individual who attaches themselves to a particular pursuit, study or science, without pay and often without any formal training. This is in reverse of the word 'professional' which, according to the great oracle and keeper of all knowledge (Wikipedia), describes "a person who is paid to undertake a specialised set of tasks and orchestrate them with uncommon skill." Despite the clear definitions, the line between amateur and professional has always been a blurry one, and in a live production sense sometimes the only real difference between the two is the budget.

One such amateur stage production that is continuing to confuse the parameters of what we regard as professional, is the *Melbourne Gang Show*. Descended in a direct line from the original London production in 1932, this music-based show is a long-running institution among the Scouts and Guides of Melbourne, and has been providing a platform for their artistically- and technically-minded members to show off their wares since 1953. While the show is a non-professional showcase for members of the Scouts and Guides, it has some very professional support, both in terms of equipment and manpower.

"We actually pay a show fee to be involved; so all members of the team donate 100% per of their time," explains technical director David McKinnon of CVP. "It's really all about providing a chance for some of the technically-minded kids to see what they can do on a large complicated production."

But again, even within the professional support, the lines are blurred. The production team is actually an interesting mix of professional technicians performing roles they don't usually do, or to put it more distinctly, don't usually get *paid for*. Stage manager Mat Baranow is also a production manager and editor for CVP's film productions. Lighting designer Darren Kowacki is a professional stage manager with the Malthouse Theatre; head of audio Dale Krummins is a senior technician at the Melbourne Convention and Entertainment Centre; had of scenic art Ben Brook is a lighting technician with PRG and - well, you get the picture.

Rock That Panto

The show itself, which is staged at the Besen Centre in the Melbourne suburb of Burwood, was split into two distinct acts - the first was a futuristic video game-styled rock opera, and the second a typical pantomime-styled fantasy quest complete with goofy dragon. Darren Kowacki effectively lit both these contrasting scenarios using a rig largely made up of equipment donated by one of the show's major sponsors, PRG.

Production Credits

Producer
Jon Willis

Director
Rob Motton

Technical Manager
David McKinnon

Stage Manager
Mat Baranow

Production Manager
Jacq Siebel

Lighting Design
Darren Kowacki

Lighting Operators
Callum Walker, Chris Williams

AV Design
David McKinnon

AV Operator
Alan Lambe

Sound Design
Greg Ginger

Sound Operators
Dale Krummins, Tim Archer

AV Equipment
CVP (www.cvp.com.au)

Lighting Equipment
Production Resource Group (www.prg.com)

Sound Equipment
Outlook Communications
(www.outlookcomms.com.au)

Into his 11th year as lighting designer for the *Melbourne Gang Show*, Kowacki had the tricky job of creating a design that not only catered for both acts, but was able to cater for times where there were 150 kids - each with a face that their parents wanted to see - on stage at the one time. "Gang Show is unique when it comes to the lighting design as it's part musical theatre, part pantomime and part rock eisteddfod," explains Darren. "The show works around a production director [Rob Motton] and a large creative team that create and direct the show; so there are a lot of people wanting many different things." For the numbers people, this year's show had approximately 320 LX cues and over 1400 DMX channels.

PRG supplied a moving light package made up of nine Techobeams (High End Systems), 13 Vari-Lite VL2500 spots and 15 VL2500 washes, as well as various Strand fixtures, a couple of Xenex followspots and Dual Molefays. The scrollers, truss, dimmers

and various other equipment, including the WholeHog 3 desk that controlled it all, were included in the package, which more than complemented the Besen Centre's house rig.

Another of the show's longtime and faithful sponsors, Outlook Communications, donated the sound for the show. Managing director Greg Ginger designed, while Outlook supplied all mics as well as additional speaker arrays for the show.

The Professional Touch

Each year, the technical team puts a strong focus on one of the particular technical areas, and this year it was clear from the very opening scene that the ante had been upped on the audio-visual. The main character, The Facilitator, was placed centre stage while having his image projected onto the scrim in front of him, plus a screen behind him and on smaller screens fixed to the rotating staging, as well as being displayed on four flown-in plasma screens. A Sony DSR-PD170 camera rigged on the first lighting bar and mounted on a remote pan/tilt head supplied the image back to the media server.

Video and live feeds were shown on the many projection surfaces at various stages of the show. Side stage played home to a Green Screen booth with its own feed, captured by a GY-JVC HM100E SDHC camera. The live footage was then fed back to the media server, which orchestrated live on-the-fly chroma-keying.

Technical director David McKinnon also doubled as the AV designer, and chose AV Stumpfl's WingsPlatinum 4 media server to drive the sophisticated AV design. Aside from the two live camera feeds, inputs included custom animations created by CVP, some stock footage and some footage filmed specially for the show. The WingsPlatinum 4 system was then output to eight projectors

ranging from 3,000 lumens to 12,000 lumens and four 50" plasma screens. The system could output four different media outputs simultaneously and, through the use of shutters, was able to have multiple devices share media server outputs. The projectors on the three rotating scenic trucks (which we'll get to shortly) received their video inputs via Gefen VGA-over-UTP devices, while all other projectors and the plasma screens ran RGBHV. The live camera feeds were run over HD-SDI.

All devices on the system were controllable over an Ethernet network, so that the individual devices could have been controlled remotely if the WingsPlatinum system failed. The network had a wireless component which meant it could all be done via an iPhone had the worst-case scenario eventuated. Predictably though, the system and equipment - all donated by CVP - had no such problems.

Gang Show Truckers

The set and staging was cleverly designed to be usable in both acts. Forming the foundation of Act One was one of the production's real highlights - the three rotating scenery platforms. Further to the practical staging use, the platforms were each decked out with two Panasonic projectors which rear-projected onto custom-made screens. When 300mm Vertical Box Truss covered in pro Shop LED Happy Tubes, LED PixelPars from PixelRange and the Dual Molefays were added, an issue

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arose with the amount of cabling being run to these movable trucks. McKinnon explains: "By carefully playing with the set model, we established the best way to run the 'umbilical cords' as we called them, to enable the most discrete running. On truck C we in fact wrapped the cable around the truck as part of the preset and it unwrapped during the show

as the truck unrolled." Each truck also had on-board a 12-channel dimmer and had 3-phase, DMX, mains power and Cat 5 cables carefully run to them.
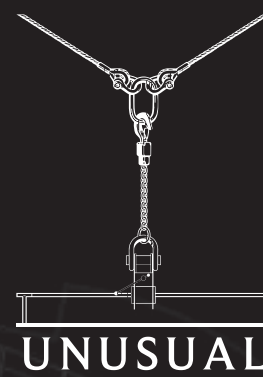
Up In Smoke

Act Two was a pantomime fantasy, which allowed the AV team to play with some clever smoke projection techniques. Built into the set were two Mitsubishi 3K projectors with DMX-controlled shutters, which rear-projected onto accompanying smoke screens built into the floor. The custom-built smoke screens used Corflute to create three stable air-streams: the two outside streams were fan-driven air which sandwiched the centre smoke stream to create the 1.5m high screen of smoke. The smoke was generated by an F100 smoke machine running at approximately 40%, while the images came from live camera feeds from the Green Screen booth, which allowed the on-stage characters to interact with the mystical smoke characters.

It's a running joke in Australian production circles, and particularly in Melbourne, that everybody seemed to get their start - or at least spent some time with - the *Melbourne Gang Show*. Keeping that in mind, there is every chance that one of the kids who was rolling cable at bump-out might just end up becoming an acclaimed lighting or sound designer one day, and may find themselves back at the *Gang Show*, teaching technical to a whole new crop of kids.