

The World's Biggest Little Event

The Tropfest short film festival camps out at The Domain.

Text:/ Matt Caton

LONG BEFORE THE RED CARPET, the A-list celebrities and the 'taste' of Hollywood rolled into Sydney for the annual Tropfest short film festival, a substantial amount of work had been done to prepare the site for the screening of the Festival. The broadcast event sees the 16 short-film finalists screened live to 90,000 film lovers in Sydney's Domain, while simultaneously being broadcast nationally to seven live sites and an estimated 150,000 PayTV viewers.

Tropfest was born out of a short film festival for friends and family put on by award-winning actor and director John Polson. The first event took place in 1993 at Sydney's Tropicana Café; a far cry from the massive scale of the 2011 production. Today, Tropfest is known as the largest short film festival in the world and is considered one of the most important events in the Australian film industry calendar.

Since moving to The Domain from Rushcutters Bay Park eight years ago, the event's unique point of difference has been that it is presented to the live Sydney audience 'in the round' – a triangular truss structure supporting three massive screens provide 360° visibility. This delivers a wonderful experience from the punters' perspective, but provides myriad challenges for the production team.

MASTER OF THE DOMAIN

Two years ago, event director Tim Freeland of Splendid Communications engaged Sydney-based Production Technologies to bring some enhancements to the audio and lighting elements of the event and streamline the production management. Production manager and technical director Nick Macfie spent the early part of production week overseeing the installation of the complex power and signal distribution systems. The Domain is very popular with summer festivals and live events, but that wasn't much help to Macfie and the 38 contracting crew during this setup: "Given we switch the site on its head, everything is reversed compared to previous events in The Domain during Sydney Festival season."

The Botanic Gardens & Domain Trust which manages The Domain takes its duty to protect the site very seriously, so in order to preserve as much of the gardens as possible, all

power and signal cables to the stage travelled 120m through the 200mm underground ducts in the famous Domain pits. The main stage was powered by two 150m 400A Powerlock cable sets that were run from the back-of-house compound. Further to this, a mix of 13 x 32A outlets were spread across the BOH compound in preparation for broadcast equipment and the temporary television studio. The audio system was powered by Aggreko gen sets, while the lighting and video took their mains feeds from the adjoining Royal Botanic Gardens.

90,000 VOTE WITH FEET

Julia Zemiro and Adam Spencer opened the live broadcast on stage before an estimated assembled audience of 90,000. Over the course of the evening, the centre stage hosted interviews with the 16 finalists, a speech by founder John Polson, the final presentations and the grand finale of the Baby Animals playing live to close out the night's entertainment.

The guest judges included Olivia Newton-John, Jack Thompson, Bruce Beresford, Stephan Elliott, Xavier Samuel, Liz Watts and Abe Forsythe, as well as Tropfest founder John Polson. Joseph Fiennes cast his vote via satellite live from Spain, in his somewhat baffling role as guest Cyber-Judge. The judges made their decisions only minutes after the sixteenth film had been screened; making for a very tight and streamlined event.

ON THE BIG SCREENS

They say that film making is all about making it on the 'The Big Screen' and Tropfest is certainly no different. The centrepiece for the night's entertainment was the three large LED screens supplied by Big Picture. Each screen was a 7 x 5 array of Lighthouse R16 (16mm pitch) outdoor LED panels. They also supplied an autocue screen at FOH, which was a 3 x 2 array of the same LED panels, as well as LCD program monitors in the VIP area and the judge's hut.

A Grass Valley Kayak SD/HD vision mixer fed the screens via SDI over fibre, with all video outputs being in SD broadcast format (576i). Due to the structure of the event and broadcast, different signals were fed to the screens at different times, requiring



A very magenta Tropfest fills Sydney's Domain.

Photo: Jeremy Shaw



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Centre stage before main event. The circular truss is laden with overhung molefays, underhung MAC 2000s with rainhats and EAW JF260z front fills. An array of EAW KF750s sits on each corner of the triangular screen, while 24 EAW BH760s encircle the stage to provide a little bottom end for the system. Coemar Infinity ACL spots sit on stage at the base of the towers.

careful collaboration between Big Picture and Foxtel's broadcast facility supplier, Cutting Edge. Technical manager of communications, Matthew Dorn of Big Picture explains, "This year the event and broadcast networks were consolidated into one. There are two separate productions; the *Movie Extra* broadcast on Foxtel and the pre-show entertainment for Tropfest and Tropfest Jr, including TVC playback. Essentially, the Big Picture vision mixer fed the screens at all times and the Cutting Edge OB van output was a source on that mixer – via a frame synchroniser."

SOUND IN THE ROUND

According to technical director Nick Macfie, "The hardest thing about this site and the nature of the triangular screen structure is coverage of the site for the film's speech component." In previous years, the mono audio deployment came from line source systems with a maximum 110° coverage. "Whether you draw this on CAD, EASE or a bar napkin, the obvious outcome is the same; the dispersion leaves a massive gap in front of each screen, and in-fill boxes cause delay issues and some mixed tonal characteristics." Put simply, the best audio was on axis with the worst site lines to the screens, and the best site lines had the worst audio.

But for the first time in 15 years, Tropfest 2011 was heard in stereo by the live Domain audience, thanks largely to the work of audio project manager Justin Arthur. This was achieved through the deployment of 12 EAW KF750 (35° x 35°) array cabinets in a four-wide by three-high hang on each of the triangular structure's corners. This allowed the left (2x3) array and right (2x3) array to

provide the respective stereo imaging to their closest screen. Each hang has the capability to provide 140° of horizontal dispersion with front fill taking care of the die-hards in the front rows.

Bottom end was supplemented by EAW BH760 balanced-horn sub cabinets, with 24 boxes surrounding the structure, while front fill comprised pairs of EAW JF260z boxes placed the whole way around the truss ring. The first of the two delay points backed onto the FOH control tower and was an EAW KF730 small line array roughly 60m from the main structure and covering the next 50m of the park. The VIP canopy had a stereo delay, again consisting of EAW KF730 elements left and right of the seated VIP audience.

HOLLYWOOD WITHOUT THE LIGHTS?

Lighting Designer Richard Neville of Mandylights had the task of creating a flexible design that catered to the various audience perspectives. "We wanted it to look as good for the crowd as it did on TV, and not just light The Domain like a massive television studio." The 2011 Festival's theme colour (magenta) was on full display, giving this year's event its genuine signature feel.

The main event stage was covered by 15 Martin Mac 2000 wash lights mounted on the upper truss ring, while Coemar Infinity ACL spots sat on the stage deck at each of the three corners. The stage was finished off with a dozen four-way molefay blinders perched above the top of the truss ring and three fog machines that worked pretty hard during the Baby Animals set.

A further nine Mac 2000s and 20 ETC Source Four profile spots were distributed

among the three broadcast towers surrounding the stage. All lighting, including the 20 Quartzcolor 2k fresnels on the red carpet and the 16 Source Four profiles on the VIP area, was controlled by a grandMA2 lite located on the FOH tower.

... & THE WINNER IS

Of course there was much more to Tropfest than the audience in the Domain. Seven major live remote sites were set up around Australia in addition to it being broadcast live on Foxtel's *Movie Extra* channel. This year five of the remote sites took the event via the Foxtel signal which was made available through a set top box on either a satellite or cable feed. Due to location impracticalities, two of the sites remained as traditional satellite downlinks, made available through the digital broadcasting and satellite provision services of Globecast Australia. The Foxtel broadcast – produced by Active Television – included footage of the awards and some extra studio items with hosts Spencer and Zemiro, which were integrated into the live event.

The 2011 Tropfest event was one of the more successful in its 19-year history. "On a technical level we could not be happier with the result across all elements. On show day, the crew battled tirelessly in the excruciating heat for over 18 hours and pulled off nothing short of a seamless event," enthused Macfie.

And in case you were wondering; the major winner of this year's festival was Damon Gameau for his film *Animal Beatbox*, which incidentally was made on a budget of \$80. But I hardly noticed; I was too busy looking at the truss ring, and the screens, and the speakers, and the lights... 🐣

PRODUCTION TEAM



Event Director: Tim Freeland, Splendid Communications
www.splendidcomms.com
Technical Direction: Nick Macfie, Production Technologies
www.productiontech.com.au
LED Screens & Event OB: Big Picture
www.bigpicture.com
Event Show Direction: Dennis Murphy, Big Picture
Communications Technical Manager: Matthew Dorn, Big Picture
Audio Project Manager: Justin Arthur
Audio Supply: Norwest Productions
www.norwestproductions.com
Monitors Engineer: Matt Barnes
Lighting Design: Richard Neville, Mandylights
www.mandylights.com
Lighting Supply: Bytecraft Entertainment
www.bytecraftentertainment.com
Lighting Project Manager: Don McGregor
Site Electrician: Craig Adamson
Satellite Provision: Globecast
www.globecast.com.au
Broadcast Facility Supplier: Cutting Edge
www.cuttingedge.com.au
Broadcast Technical Manager: Garth Wiencke, Cutting Edge
Site Management: Humm
www.humm.net.au
Staging: ESS Australia
www.ess-australia.com
Structures: Butlers
www.butlersevents.com.au
Site Infrastructure: Coates Hire
www.coateshire.com.au

The pre-rigged circular truss and triangular screen support are swung into place on the truss towers by a 40m crane.



Photo: Nick Macfie