



There is little sign of a 'dry January' on this Saturday afternoon as the snow turns to sleet and the wind whistles down the canyons of Birmingham's streets. The post-Christmas melancholic miasma seems to pervade every nook and cranny. Until, that is, the doors of the Birmingham Arena open and you are enveloped in the warm, self-deprecatingly camp, glitzy golden glow, cuddly niceness that is *Strictly Come Dancing Live 2018*...

Now in its 11th year, the spin-off tour of the popular BBC talent show that graces primetime TV every autumn was no doubt first conceived to exploit that ratings winner. But, without losing its connection to the mothership, *Strictly Come Dancing Live* has evolved into a self-sufficient satellite, able to deliver the *Strictly* fix to fans across the country - with a look and a sound that, although clearly

Strictly-esque, have a character very much of their own. Tour director Craig Revel Horwood may inhabit the captain's cabin, but the man with both hands at the helm and all things above and below deck is production manager Andy Gibbs of Phil McIntyre Entertainments.

It might be a little trite to say, but the success of a repeated touring production can often be measured by the number of crew who keep returning year-on-year: on that barometer, *Strictly* is hard to beat, as Gibbs explains: "Since the inaugural tour, we have used Sonalyst as our full production provider and most of the touring crew keep their diaries clear for the annual January outing."

The Welsh entertainment equipment supplier provides everything but the pyro, video and catering. Sonalysts'

Kate Lyon reports from Birmingham Arena as Strictly sashays through the winter gloom ...

experience in this field makes it an ideal choice: from arena comedy performers like Bill Bailey and John Bishop; other TV talent shows that take to the road, such as *Britain's Got Talent* and *Dancing on Ice*, and - for something completely different - Monty Python's recent shows at the O2.

The team working for Sonalyst MD Rory Madden bring a calm and ordered structure to the stage that Gibbs clearly values. "The production values have evolved over the years, but we still keep a tight rein on the technical budget. That's not to say we don't deliver a spectacular show - this is a 15-truck tour, with 130 cast and crew with us, and two rigging systems on the go in order to do a load in on the morning of a matinee show where the itinerary demands - no mean feat with 143 points. But we have

never attempted to completely reproduce what is seen on the TV show; it would be an impossibility to tour that with our schedule. We create a set and show that the audience immediately recognises as 'Strictly' which is tweaked every year. That signature look is core to the show, just as the set design is."

"The double swept staircases have remained the same since the beginning and form a set for the band," continues Gibbs. "Downstage of that is where the judges sit. This is an arena show, where we use the whole of the standing floor as the dance area, so it isn't practical to have them 'as seen on TV'. We carry our own floor and we are using an extensive raised oval performance area that gives the floorspace a sense of depth and scale."

ON TOUR



↑ L-R: Chris Hirst, Mike Rothwell and Richard Jones

→ Sonalyst project manager George Pakenham



↑ L-R: Jamie Cowlin (camera man), Richard Ellis (director), Owen Evans (media servers/playback), Jeroen 'Myway' Marain (engineer), Steve Grincer (crew chief/projectionist), Hamanshu Patel (scores)

Above the extended floor are nine mirrorballs and a number of bespoke chandeliers, along with a set of gilded palm trees and a shimmering, ruched set of drapery to complete the ballroom look. "Over the years we have changed the dance area bit-by-bit, but the essential look remains the same," says Gibbs. "The raised area has changed shape, height and size; the chandeliers that were built by Specialz were sent back for a brush-up and spray refurbishment recently. We keep everything in store but the aim to make everything look familiar enough for the audience yet freshened up for our many returning customers who come back year after year."

LIGHTING

Back for his seventh year as LD is Richard Jones, a veteran of musical theatre and a long-time collaborator with tour director Craig Revel Horwood. Jones comments: "I've worked with Craig for many years - he has a very clear vision of how he wants the show to look, but at the same time he is technically very astute. We clearly cannot replicate the amount of floor projection and lighting effects that are now *de rigueur* in the TV studio, but in the arena environment I feel it would detract from the performers' connection with the audience. Here, we are playing to thousands - very different to the intimacy of the studio - and we have cameras positioned around the performance area for the IMAG screens, yet the relative simplicity of the lighting keeps the audience's focus on the performers."

Jones adds: "This year, Craig's objective was to make the overall look more theatrical - the set props like palm trees which disappear when necessary and the little extra risers at the end corner of the performance area used by the dancers and singers all work well."

On his choice of luminaires, he says: "I've gone for a bold and lush look with a generous use of Robe BMFL Wash XFs and some Robe MMX WashBeams from above. The floor is a polished parquet wood that sections together, and this year - along with the signature Robe 700s in chrome - we are using the LED X4 Bar 20s from GLP around the rim, which really help to create individual looks on the floor for each dance."



ON TOUR

Photos: Roy Baron

"Lighting such a large area in an arena creates its own challenges," explains Jones. "We have to fly the rig very high to preserve sight lines. So although we can create depth and colour upstage, there are times when I have to be quite imaginative with wash and followspots, but the spectrum of colours afforded to us by the Robe rig and the array of [Robert Juliat] Cyrano followspots means I've been able to integrate my looks with the costumes of the professional and celebrity dancers - very, very important on a show like *Strictly!*"

"I liaise with my programmer Chris Hirst very closely; he and I have worked together for about 10 years. We don't pre-plot using WYSIWYG, but build lots of stacks and cues and take it from there. I don't try to replicate the numbers that have already been televised, but rather bring a fresh look to them. For TV, the rig looks have to be very beamy to cut across the floor projection, but here we can be subtler. During rehearsals, we don't really have a great deal of pure lighting time - the dancers need to work with the cameras for their cues, so we work around them. Chris is an amazing programmer and my operator, Mike Rothwell, is a wonderfully-safe pair of hands on the grandMA2 - between them the show is pretty much spot-on from the word go."

AUDIO

Fraser Munro is the erstwhile monitor engineer for Scouting for Girls but is currently resident system tech for the audio team, and yet another member of the crew who keeps his January diary marked as full for the annual *Strictly* outing. He comments: "We are a pretty happy bunch of campers and, using the word in the best possible way, this is a really 'nice' gig to be a part of. This is a Meyer rig with hangs left and right along with two side arrays left and right as we sell seats right up to the furthest upstage line. The subs are hidden below the screen, so the set has a very clean look."

He continues: "Our boss at Sonalyst, Rory Madden, is essentially the sound designer - he's been doing this for a while now, so we're happy for him to dot the 'I's and cross the 'T's. Front of house, we are more than fortunate to run the show on

DiGiCo SD10s: one for the show element looked after by Rory Maguire, and one manned by Dave Dixon who mixes the band. I really rate these consoles - I don't think you can better them for implementation, support and customer service."

The influence the live band and the singers have on the ambience and energy of the show cannot be overstated. In their element away from the constraints of a small studio, the band and singers revel in the arena atmosphere. The decision to bring the singers out onto the performance area whenever possible turns what could be a banal accessory to a dance routine into a joyous and inclusive event.

Crew chief Gareth Lewis takes care of sound on stage, but it's Munro who explains the set up: "There are around 56 inputs for the band with 32 show extras as we have the judges, Ore Oudba - who is comparing - and both professional and celebrity dancers mic'd up. The singers all use Sennheiser IEMs, as do some of the band and the producer. On stage, there is a mixture of wireless and hard wired; some of the band prefer a wedge - the bass player, for example. There are no monitors out on the dance floor - the dancers take their sound from the PA, but I think the singers' presence helps bring the music out to the performers as well as to the audience."

SPECIAL EFFECTS

Project manager for Sonalyst is George Pakenham, who says: "The market for what you might categorise as 'light entertainment production' barely existed just a few years ago. But today it's a massive sector; from Ricky Gervais to Brian Cox and shows such as *Strictly* there's a huge appetite for this level of production, and it's pleasure to be a part of. After 10 years, this tour is a well-oiled machine."

He adds: "Noticeable differences this time round are slightly higher production values - we added those GLP X4 Bar 20s and they've been a great success. I know they've also spent more on pyro this year, but essentially this is a tight ship that is not in danger of running aground anytime soon."

ON TOUR



Photo: Dave Hogan - Getty Images



Photo: Dave Hogan - Getty Images

Madden takes up the story: "We have worked with Andy Gibbs for over 10 years on many productions including the *Strictly* arena tour. He is undoubtedly one of the most experienced and thorough production managers we have the fortune of dealing with, which in turn helps us a great deal in delivering the best equipment, service and support on his productions."

The pyro that Pakenham alludes to comes courtesy of MTFX. Tom Freeman is the man on the ground and Mark Turner does the talking: "*Strictly* on tour has been one of our regulars for several years, so we have a close relationship with Andy Gibbs. We have a pre-tour chat about what's required and go from there. This year, Craig was looking for a line of flames and we were able to oblige using a machine adapted to fit with the production's particular requirements. One of the advantages of being a returning supplier for the production can sometimes be seen best in the little things - some of our machines are built into the set and we are always aware pre-tour of what's expected. Andy and I get together and talk through the FX; how and when it should be delivered. We use a 10-way Galaxis controller unit and all the cues are manually executed."

VIDEO

The largest crew contingent on the tour is the video team from Blue-I Event Technology, with Steve Grincer in charge.

As another returning part of the production, Grincer is very familiar with the specific challenges relating to *Strictly*: "The TV show has continued to grow over the years - 2017 was the most popular yet, I'm told - so we have a lot to live up to. Our audiences are here to see the professional and the celebrity dancers and the IMAG screens provide that link to what they have seen on TV. All the routines are carefully choreographed down to the last twirl, so - unlike most normal touring shows - the cameras have a huge number of stepped cues. Backstage, at video central, it is essentially a TV control room during the show, with Richard Ellis directing and Annie McDougall as script supervisor beat counting and calling the shots. We have six manned Sony cameras and two Panasonic robo cams along with the odd security camera for backstage cues."

He continues: "Aside from the IMAG screens, we also work the content in the famous arches that mimic the TV set: there is a Cat5 link to those screens. As the screens and IMAG work is all tightly pre-scripted, we have no problem with keeping the lights and the camera work working harmoniously. Once we get into rehearsals, it's the odd tweak here and there and we're all done - apart from the camera team changing into their bow ties and dinner jackets of course! They look great, but it does hold us up a bit on a load-out as they insist on changing back at the end of the show."

KEEP DANCING

As for the show itself, it's fair to say the production team have got it just about spot-on. Jones' design is a masterful lesson in how to maximise what is hanging on the rig and, in the moments where the far downstage was compromised, astute use of the Cyranos filled the gap. The GLP batten is a great addition to the floor lighting as they bring a far more saturated look across the performance area.

The running order of the show is choreographed to accommodate audience expectations whilst allowing for the multitude of costume changes. There's a big opening number,

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Steve Grincer, Blue-I Event Technology

lots of banter from the exuberant Ore Oduba - who won *Strictly* in 2016 - and slightly risqué exchanges with the judges interspersed with pre-dance video shorts from each of the couples who dance two numbers.

The routines have been chosen to play to each couple's strength and popularity: a careful mix of the stylish, the skilful and the comic. The SFX come into their own towards the end of the show - think gerbs, flames and kubuki drops along each side of the performance floor. Of course, the mirrorballs play their part too, as does a small part of the truss at the climax of the show. The audience vote for their favourite, giving them the opportunity to award the Glitterball trophy to their chosen couple. Once again, the production team manages to give the show its own stamp and character while holding fast to the traditional *Strictly* TV format.

Even on just the second show out, the resulting look is slick, lush and glitzy -

a perfect foil to the audio experience. The Meyer system doesn't have to work too hard, but this is not a show where you expect to feel the subs through your seat. That said, the appreciation of seeing that the lovely Debbie McGee is indeed quite flexible aside, the band and the singers are a joy. Allowed out of their shadowy existence and with the benefit of an arena-sized PA, the vocalists really deliver across a full range of vocal genres, although a very Motown-esque soul session is definitely a favourite.

Every show is sold out and even the matinees attract enthusiasts. If you are not a *Strictly* aficionado, you might wonder what the fuss is all about - but you would be hard-pressed not to be drawn into the uplifting spirit, warmth and mutual affection between performers and audience that exudes from every moment of the evening. It would take a cold, hard heart indeed not to walk back out into the dark January night without a smile on your face and a jaunty little step in your stride. 🎵



KIT LIST

SOUND

Meyer Sound MICA line array
Meyer Sound 600-HP sub
Meyer Sound M'elodie line array
Meyer Sound UPA point source
Meyer Sound UPM point source
Meyer Sound MJF-212 wedges
Shure UHF-R microphones
Countryman headset microphones
Sennheiser G3 IEM
Shure P6HW hard-wired IEM
DiGiCo SD10 mixing console
DiGiCo SD racks
QLab playback system
CSC playback system

LIGHTING

Robe BMFL Blade
Robe BMFL Spot
Robe BMFL Wash XF
Robe Spider
Robe MMX Spot
Robe MMX WashBeam
Robe 700 Beam in chrome
GLP X4 Bar 20
MA Lighting grandMA 2
iPix satellites
2m mirrorball
80cm mirrorballs
Avolites dimming

RIGGING

Outboard LV12 & LV6 motor controllers
CM Lodestar 2T, 1T, 0.5T
EXE 0.5T category A motors
Solenoid kabuki

COMMUNICATIONS

Clear-Corn Partyline communications system
Tempest wireless radio coms
TAIT basestation for two-way show channel transmission

VIDEO

Projectors - Panasonic PT DZ21K
LED panels - Martin LC/Kindwin
Spider 30
Media server - Catalyst
Playback - QLab
Desk - BlackMagic Atem 2 M/E
Robo Cams - Panasonic AW-HE120
Records - BlackMagic Hyperdeck
Cameras - Sony HDCU2500

PYRO - INCLUDED ...

Gerbs
Crackle mines
Titanium mines
Flitter mines
Waterfall of 20 x 20 gerbs
Wireless flame machines