

# The League of Gentlemen Live, Again!

Kate Lyon braves a visit to Royston Vasey as the masters of dark comedy return to their stage show roots . . .

Performance photography: Duncan McLean

Following its reinvention as the European City of Culture in 2017, Kingston-upon-Hull may be regarded as many things but Royston Vasey it is not. The mythical location for The League of Gentlemen's myriad of characters may share a geographical similarity - the North, Yorkshire and even references to nearby Scarborough emerge in the show - but these days Hull professes to adhere to a loftier plane of culture. Royston Vasey, on the other hand, emerges on the stage at Hull's brand new Bonus Arena, still as edgy and socially controversial as it was back in the far less politically correct era of the 1990s.

As all aficionados of The League of Gentlemen (TLOG) will know, the show was created by Jeremy Dyson, Mark Gatiss, Steve Pemberton and Reece Shearsmith, finding successful exposure by winning the Perrier Award for Comedy at the Edinburgh Fringe and through BBC Radio 4 and *On the Town with The League of Gentlemen*. The first of three TV series was

broadcast in 1999 and the first outing as a live show came two years later. This latest touring production celebrates 20 years of TLOG and builds on the narrative of the Christmas 2017 trilogy of TV specials. That said, the production has been careful to script a show that doesn't necessitate the audience being intimately engaged with all things TLOG.

Watching the arena fill before the show at the new Hull venue however, it was fairly clear to see that this was an audience who knew what to expect. There was an element of cult cross-dressing on show and an air of expectation as the pre-show chatter seemed to centre around which characters would make an appearance and if the cast would bend in line with the winds of social change or remain robustly dark, alternative and teetering on the edge of acceptable taste.

"This production is unlike any other touring operation," opens production manager Ashley Newsome. "I came onboard





very late in the proceedings, the day before the first show in fact, so for me this has been quite a steep learning curve. Fortunately, I know my predecessor, Andy Gibb, very well and have worked on many Phil McIntyre/Sonalyt productions, so I was confident I would be stepping into a comfortable, efficient and well organised pair of shoes. Rehearsals were at the Backstage Centre in Purfleet which provides excellent facilities both for the technical rehearsals and the cast. It was already apparent that our itinerary would provide us with some technical challenges, and the crew planned for two versions of the show: A for arenas and B for proscenium arch theatres or venues that couldn't provide the width for IMAG. Our first show was in Barnstaple with a capacity of 400 and our biggest show will be at London's O2 Arena which neatly illustrates how flexible we need to be!"

The brand-new Bonus Arena in Hull was the host for LSi's visit; the venue had only been open for two days and the

smell of fresh paint pervaded backstage as if in anticipation of a Royal visit. The venue is too narrow for IMAG despite its 3,500 capacity, so this was to be a B rig day. Aside from the extra screens, the B rig considerations are also based around each venue's available hanging points for both sound and light, followspot positions and on-stage dimensions. Technical supplier and production for the entire tour is Sonalyt, with a crew well-versed in making on-the-spot hardware decisions before load-in.

#### LIGHTING, SET, WARDROBE & VIDEO

A veteran of McIntyre productions, Richard Jones is the LD for TLOG. His rig is dominated by Robe fixtures: BMFL Blades, Washes, Spiiders and the new Spikie along with ETC Lustr 2 and the Chauvet Strike 4 LED which offers a real energy saving audience blinder in addition to its strobe facility. With his fingers on the grandMA2 console on a nightly basis is operator Adam Archer. He comments: "The LX crew





↑ The appropriately named 'Denton Slosh Truck' set piece in use; Mickey and Pauline in bed; 'Hello Dave!' Papa Lazarou recruits a new wife - in front of a video back drop

→ Facing page, top: Sound team, Kyle Carter and Ashley Jones

really have their work cut out on this show, even though it looks as if it should be a pretty straightforward brief; there are only three cast members after all. Rehearsals at Purfleet evolved naturally; Richard has popped in now and again but we've not made any major changes. We did begin with an A and a B programme, but now I have everything on a single show file with subs for all the alternative rig set-ups. Our cast are really professional and, although they have got more relaxed as the tour has progressed, comedians find it hard not to organically adjust to the audience in front of them - cue lines are always on cue and placements are spot on. This is a very theatrical show, particularly in the second half and my background is in theatre, but the Robe rig is more than up to the mark. Their fixtures have great optics and are very low maintenance - I think we have only changed out one lamp since the start of the tour - they are really punchy and the colours work well."

Toby Cartmell's official title is LX crew chief, but he seems to fill a myriad of roles. "I am sometimes head rigger, sometimes production electrician, but at the end of the day we all do what is necessary. Before this went out of the warehouse, we made sure that we prepped each fixture with separate cabling, so we can be totally flexible about what hangs where and how at each venue. Including audio and AV, we have 30 motors on the truck but what we hang and where depends entirely on the venue, unless we are at an arena venue where everything is much more straightforward. However we rig this, it's a reliable rig, well thought out and with flexibility high on



the agenda. Little things, such as the two Spikies which provide vital blue upstage working light that we are in control of, are vital for a theatre production such as this. If we were doing a residency, it would be built-in with the house LX but as a touring show, it's one less issue to deal with on a daily basis."

Set designer Duncan McLean was also responsible for the extensive video content that supports The League whichever system's in place. "Richard (Jones) and I worked very closely together about the look of the show - using the projection as a base for each scene, he would then build his colour palette from there. It was a totally collaborative process, The League themselves were very hands-on with every element of the production, from the look of the content on screen down to the smallest prop. Their attention to detail is fantastic, which makes them a joy to work with."

Total Solutions was responsible for the extensive set build, as McLean explains: "The concept of the set came about quite quickly as The League were very clear that they wanted projection to be a big part of the show in terms of the locations of different sketches. Myself and my associate, Simon Wells, sent off our

original drawings as per a normal theatre design, and Merv [Mervyn Thomas] at Total Solutions re-drew everything based on their own construction methods."

"But with the different scale of venues - from 400-seaters in the South West, all the way up to the O2 in London - this obviously posed huge challenges. In the end, we had two versions of the show, the A version, that had the full-size 'Local Shop' for the finale, and the B version which featured a scaled-down version supported by projection. Our biggest compromise was the construction of the back wall - because of the schedule of the tour, it needed to go up as quick as possible, so instead of a solid construction, it was built as an aluminium frame with a printed stretched fabric over it."

Clearly a central part of the set design, the wall acts as a screen as well as providing the extensive yet discrete upstage area used for wardrobe, make-up and set pieces. "Our back wall was able to be built in two sizes - 32ft wide, and 50ft wide - this meant when the tour was in smaller venues, it freed up space backstage for the crew, wardrobe, set and props. But even then, some of the venues were definitely trickier than others."



Photo: Adam Archer

*"There is one part of the show, Les McQueen's big number, where I have to make it sound really awful; it's harder than you might think and really goes against the grain!"*

- Ashley Jones

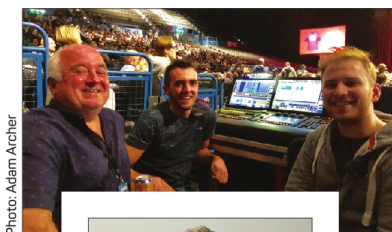
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- ↑ Act One sees the Gents perform in their classic tuxedos; Act Two involves complex costumes, sets and props - including Dr Chinnery and a very unlucky panda
- ← The lighting team: LD Richard Jones, relighter Adam Archer, LX chief Toby Cartmell
- ← Production manager Ashley Newsome

Although the screen and projection provide a vital contextual element to the show, through discussions with The League it was very clear that the screen would be used for back drops and location setting only . . . where we *could* achieve physical set and lighting, we would, even if only represented by, say, a bed standing upright."

McLean continues: "Having been a huge fan of the show since it first screened on the BBC in 1999, I wanted the set and projection to be for the fans - namely the Local Shop. Although it's only on stage for a little over two minutes, it's our biggest set piece and is meticulously propped by the fantastic Lily Mollgaard - her team sourced many props from the actual TV show, so it added a huge amount of authenticity to the tour. This was the same for the 'Denton Slosh Truck' - which replicates the living room of popular characters Harvey and Val Denton - and even the posters in the Job Centre scene. Our objective was to make the audience feel like they were part of the TV show, just on a bigger scale, and we have achieved that thanks to the hard work of all those involved."

Anyone familiar with this essentially sketch-based show will know that set and costume changes come at the audience at a dizzying pace, making the upstage area often busier than what is taking place in front of the audience. Russel Duce is The League's stage manager (and also appears as a very unfortunate member of the audience in one sketch). He comments: "As Duncan says, authenticity plays a big role in the stage props, so all the most recognisable sets are solid furniture like in the living room; in the shop, which we have two versions of, even the packets on the shelves are the real thing. This is not a show that has cut corners. As a touring production, that certainly makes for a busy evening; there are four crew working on set changes and we use another four of the venue's stage crew to help us. I won't deny that back-to-backs are pretty gruelling, but I still laugh every single night; watching The League in action is just a real privilege. It's clear they really enjoy it - returning to their roots after all the individual successes. They are so professional and understand every nuance of what's required, especially when presented with a more challenging venue."



→ Clever use is made of space backstage to facilitate multiple quick costume changes in Act Two; The wardrobe team, and friend



Photo: Adam Archer



"It's really important that our upstage area is the correct size every night, otherwise the changes just wouldn't work - along with the quick-change wardrobe area which has to be in precisely the same place every time." For wardrobe, there is no margin for error; Bryony Clayden is in charge. She comments: "We may only have three cast members, but we have 100 costumes here, so for wardrobe and make-up, it's vital everything is set out the same wherever we are. The first part of the show is relatively calm - Mark, Steve and Reece stay in tuxedos throughout - but once the second half begins, there's no let-up until the final curtain - and we have (spoiler alert) the panda to deal with as well . . ."

"I think for the first time ever I arrived at rehearsals with the wardrobe and accessories completely sorted," continues Clayden. "The League know exactly what they want for each character and how they want the props to work. The costumes were designed by Yves Barre and are identical to what you see on TV; there was close collaboration with Richard, our LD, to inform the way the costume colours would work with the lighting. We also have some doubling up for things that get wet - the Slosh scene is quite tricky to work."

#### AUDIO

Sonalyt supplied a Meyer Sound system and shares sound design credits with Al Ashford. The mixture of cabinets

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*- Bryony Clayden*



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provides the audio crew with the necessary options at each venue (see audio spec). FOH engineer Ashley Jones explains further: "The mixture of Mica and M'Elodie gives us that flexibility. Obviously, for our arena shows we can fly everything - M'Elodies provide the side hangs - but for the theatre dates, we have to be a bit more imaginative, although we have only had to ground-stack M'Elodies as the main PA once so far. In some venues, we've used the M1Ds as front-fills and the UPM-1P as side-fills; it just depends on the room. We've been fortunate to have the new Galaxy processor which provides us with a smooth response in any environment."

Meyer's Andy Davies explains why Sonalyst took this option: "The key to the delivery of the PA system was Sonalyst choosing to upgrade their system processing to our new generation Galaxy processor. The Galaxy allows a greater flexibility in input and output configuration and a more powerful matrix

section than our previous processors. Importantly, for *The League of Gentlemen*, Ashley Jones has been using the 'delay integration' settings. This gives the user quick and easy starting points for all of our products, including legacy cabinets no longer in production, to make sure they all share a similar phase response. This means all the different combinations of cabinets 'fit' together in audio terms and makes for a quick and easy system set-up and a more cohesive audience experience wherever you sit and whatever part of the PA system you are in the coverage of. Talking to Rory Madden at Sonalyst, he told me Ashley was telling everyone about his 'new' M'Elodie system so the Galaxy is doing its job."

Ashford also opted to make use of two AMIE studio monitors as a content creation tool. Initially designed for the post-production market, AMIE is an extremely transparent nearfield that exhibits directivity control, reducing reflections from walls, equipment and



Photo: Adam Archer

➦ The video team:  
Malcolm Mellows,  
Bryan Miles, Richard  
Ellis (sitting), Chip  
Wood, Rob Fender,  
Owen Evans

➡ Stage manager (and  
occasional extra)  
Russel Duce



## Precious Things . . .

### SOUND

Meyer Sound - M'Elodie, M1D  
Meyer Sound - 600-HP, 500-HP, UPM-1P  
Meyer Sound - Galaxy  
Yamaha CL3 mixing console  
Yamaha Rio 1608D & 3224D stage boxes  
QLab 4 playback system  
Shure UR4D wireless receivers  
Shure UR1M body pack transmitters  
Shure UR2 handhelds  
Countryman H6 headsets  
DPA 4061 microphones  
Clear-Com Partyline comms  
Clear-Com Tempest Wireless comms  
Motorola DP 3400 two-way radio

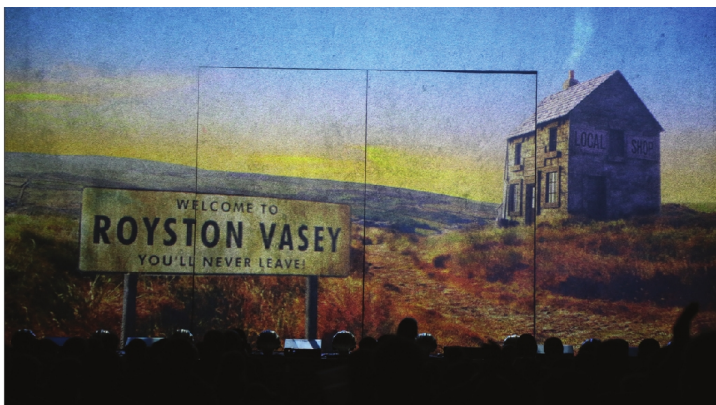
### LIGHTING

Robe BMFL Blade, BMFL Wash XF  
Robe Spider, Spikie  
ETC Lustr Series 2  
Chauvet Strike 4 LED  
Reel EFX DF-50 hazer  
Jem ZR12 & ZR45 smoke machines  
Jem AF1 DMX fan  
MA Lighting grandMA2 lighting consoles  
MA Lighting grandMA2 network processing unit  
Robert Juliat Cyrano 1015 2.5K followspot  
GSL 120-way hot power powerlock distro  
Jands FPX 12-channel dimmer  
Luminex DMX rack-mount splitter

### RIGGING

James Thomas 52cm GP Truss  
James Thomas 30.5cm Supertruss  
Pipe & Drape system  
CM Lodestar 0.25t, 0.5t & 1t motors  
Outboard LV6 & LV12 motor controllers  
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THEATRE

*"Our objective was to make the audience feel like they were part of the TV show, just on a bigger scale, and we have achieved that thanks to the hard work of all those involved."*

- Duncan McLean

worksurfaces in small studios or edit suite environments. As Meyer found that they work similarly in a live environment, Ashford used them to create and mix content for the show that would then be used on the large format and transparent PA system. As Davies reports: "Al called me a number of times during pre-production rehearsals to say just how easy it had been to go from the AMIEs to a full scale, well set up, PA. We both agreed it was nice to see the theory working so well in the real world."

At FOH, for Jones, sometimes the well set up PA is more of a hinderance than a help. "There is one part of the show, Les McQueen's big number, where I have to make it sound really awful; it's harder than you might think and really goes against the grain!"

This is not a big production tour by any standards - there are three in the cast and 19 on the crew, including Eat to The Beat caterers. The whole rig disappears into three very tightly packed trucks from Transam, but PM Ashley Newsome is rightly proud of his crew and what they achieve. "In many ways, this is something of an old-fashioned tour," he concludes. "In the days before arenas were dotted around the country, every production would have to accommodate the vagaries of theatre venues on a nightly basis. On top of those challenges, we are touring a show whose natural home would be a residential run. The League wanted to tour this, to bring Royston Vasey to audiences around the country and, judging by the sales and reaction of capacity audiences, we have achieved that in spades." ❖

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