

Sunset Boulevard

Theatre gets ready for its close-up as Curve's *In Concert At Home* series sees the Andrew Lloyd Webber classic escape the confines of the stage for a unique filmed production. Rob Halliday charts the magic in the making . . .

If we have learnt anything from this pandemic, it is perhaps this: those who have succeeded in getting work out there in front of the public by whatever means are those who've been nimble, able to react quickly when they spot an opportunity. To turn on a dime. To 'pivot', as the world of big tech and internet startups would call it - to switch quickly to a new idea when changing circumstances means the first no longer works.

The really nimble haven't just pivoted once; when the rules have changed again, they've pivoted again. Case in point: Leicester's Curve Theatre.

Leicester has had it particularly rough in this pandemic: locked down with the rest of us in March, but then it feels like it was left in lockdown as the rest of the country had the rule loosened. Just when it felt like they, too, might be allowed out, almost the whole country was sent into Tier 4. Which unfortunately meant Curve's first pivot went out the window. That plan had been to present a series of shows - *The Colour Purple*, Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Sunset Boulevard*, and a play, *Memoirs of an Asian Footballer*, interspersed with some one-night shows - in an in-the-round theatre created by opening up the vast metal curtain that divides the building's main and studio auditoria, then building seating blocks on either side of the main stage. In the middle of that was placed a quadruple revolve lent by Cameron Mackintosh from his production of *Half A Sixpence*. There would be minimal scenery, to help on both fit-up speed and budgetary grounds, but helping to define the space would be an epic lighting rig designed by Ben Cracknell ('using every light in the building,' Curve's press release claimed) sitting above it; able, through the building's

power-flying system, to raise and lower, undulate and morph, intended to be shared across all the shows. Cracknell himself lit *Sunset* and *The Colour Purple* since Joshua Pharo, who originally lit the latter, wasn't available, and Charlotte Burton - *Asian Footballer*.

All the shows had been done before, either at Curve or, in the case of *Sunset*, in a tour directed by the theatre's artistic director, Nikolai Foster. The casts were generally all willing and able to return, saving rehearsal time. The vast foyer space that circles the two auditoria would allow the audience to be carefully managed in to the now-combined venue; even with social distancing it would allow 500 people per night to see the shows.

The seating and rig were in. They were ready to go. Then Lockdown #3 came . . .

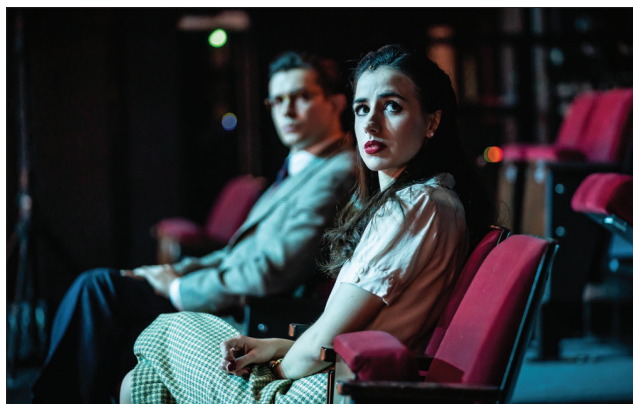
"We had to postpone *Colour Purple*. But we thought, f*** it, we cannot carry on like this, constantly having to abandon things at the last minute," recalls Nikolai Foster. "It was just cruel, to all of those performers, all of those technicians sat at home for almost a year. Were we really going to close the doors again? But then we thought, this is what the Cultural Recovery Fund - which we'd been incredibly fortunate to receive some money from - should be for: to support those people. So we decided to do that. 'Let's film *Sunset*. Let's stream it. Let's make it happen!'"

PIVOT

Foster's idea wasn't simply to take the production he'd intended to put on the stage and just film it without its live audience. "Main character Norma Desmond's first







entrance is down a huge staircase in her abandoned mansion. I looked up at the dress circle and thought, that could be good. Joe's garret, maybe that's on the fly floor . . . I started to see how it could work in a much less naturalistic way. We had nothing to lose, a year of stopping and starting, feeling frustrated, challenged. So we thought, let's throw caution to the wind, take that idea, explode it, embrace film as an art form, which is a feature of the show: not just put some cameras in the corner and do that archivey thing, but rather celebrate the art of film-making. It was kind of mad. I got lots of looks from people who no doubt thought, 'my god, he's actually lost it now . . .'

But that became the new plan: to use every conceivable corner of the theatre as locations, in lieu of Colin Richmond's set from the tour - really turning the theatre inside out to become the scenery, which was fitting for a theatre designed from the outset to be able to turn itself inside out, exposing its inner workings to the public. Curve was criticised by many on its opening in 2008 for those qualities. A decade and a bit and a global pandemic on, they've turned out to be invaluable assets.

The follow-up part of the plan: Foster was determined that this be performed straight through as a live show, not a stop-and-start film shoot. Partly, that was because they'd been licensed to stage a show, not make a film; partly it was to try to maintain the through-dynamic of a live performance. Ultimately, there were some minor cheats - a pause in filming as Norma (played by Ria Jones) re-located from the circle back to the stage after that first entrance; some moments where the manic costume changes from the earlier production were no longer possible with COVID safety measures in place - but effectively, the show started at the beginning and went through to the end, theatre exposed, band spaced apart in the stalls, sometimes cameras catching sight of other cameras. In a show about movie-making, that just felt normal.

It was a quick turnaround. Two days of music rehearsals followed, then rehearsals on stage with Foster and choreographer Lee Proud started on the Saturday. One performance was recorded the following Friday, a second on the Saturday, then two days of frantic sound and picture editing before going live to the world via the internet on Tuesday . . .



Photo: Marc Brenner

Foster is relatively new to filmed work, having had a little training at Yorkshire TV, but was a fast learner: "I started in the space with a monitor, but really quickly realised I had to train myself to stop looking at what was actually happening and to look at what the camera was showing." He also credits both Crosscut Media, who filmed it with a team of seven cameras, and Ben Cracknell in particular for helping with this: "Ben, having lit a lot of TV, particularly the Olivier Award shows, knew that all that dynamic in the space needed to be checked down, evened out. I learnt a hell of a lot really quickly from him."

LIGHTING

For Cracknell, hot-footing it up from the *Pantoland at the Palladium* (see pages 24-25) into a show that was not at all what he was expecting nor one that his season rig had really been designed for, it became "very much about reacting to the moment," he reveals. "I arrived on the Tuesday while they were still doing stage rehearsals, and very quickly started figuring out what we needed to add; by the end of that session, I must have added about 50 lights to the rig." Some of this was just getting lights into all the nooks and crannies of the theatre that were now providing locations. Some of this - principally the PAR cans that circled the entire space, around the main theatre's circle front, along the sides of the stage then into the studio theatre - was to provide a background so there were never camera shots looking into darkness, "and just to pull the spaces together," as Cracknell explains. Some of it was lights on stands as background to scenes, including some period fixtures from the tour.

Curve's remarkable resources were used to the full. "I'd go, we just need to put up some floods - and luckily, Curve has 60 floods in a room somewhere," says Cracknell. "Then we'd have to plug them in, and wherever we went there was a facilities panel to plug in to - Jonny Laidlow, the head of lighting, said he'd often wondered why some of them were there, but was now glad that they were."

Cracknell does deny using quite every light in the building, though he will concede that perhaps they used every piece of cable. Even then, he was aware that sometimes they'd need lights on the cameras just to be sure. "In particular, there was one single shot where the character Joe (played by Danny Mac) walked from the back of the studio to the back of the main theatre under the depths of the dress circle in a single Steadicam shot. We couldn't have one light source get him from A to B evenly, particularly in the rehearsal time we had, so it made sense to light it broadly then put a light on the camera just to make sure we had his face covered. Equally, a lot of the very specific stuff I'd focused in the original season rig sort of went for nothing because you can't be that specific - the camera is what's giving you the close-up. Lighting doesn't need to do it. And lighting has to be broader: you can't have someone pop out of a blackout because it doesn't give the camera time to get focus."

During rehearsals, Cracknell had the console set up in the auditorium and roamed the venue. "All of a sudden it would be a case of a scene happening halfway up a bit of seating, and the best way of figuring out how to deal with that

↶ ↷ Every corner of Curve was used to provide locations for the show, in lieu of Colin Richmond's set from the tour

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Photo: Marc Brenner

was just to run down, look up and think, 'oh, great, there's a TW1 there, let's use that'. It was a real rush of adrenaline, really exciting just to almost be improvising," he says.

For the filmed performances, Cracknell was "in the control room at the back of the stalls, but with a piece of black serge over the windows because everything happened everywhere and nobody wanted to see us!" Curve's David Hately programmed the lighting, with Curve's lighting team of Steve Ratcliffe, Adam Bee, Jude Michell and Judith Moulton running the followspots.

"I'd put followspots on the fly floors for the live shows, but I added a couple of Source Four Lustrs as followspots in the Studio in a sort of high-side position, and a couple in the auditorium to cover me for the bits and pieces out there. So the electricians hopped around between those positions."

Sunset just after panto - meant Cracknell had a busy December. But despite bookings in the diary for 2021, he's taking nothing for granted as we move into the second year of the coronavirus, and is grateful to have had the chance to be involved in two of the shows that did manage to happen, albeit in different ways.

"It was just amazing to be there," he recalls, though adds that, "there was a strange moment when we got to the end, when Norma says 'alright Mr DeMille, I'm ready for my close-up', then we hit blackout. But there was no audience, no curtain call, so then it was just this strange sort of, 'well, there we go'. So Nikolai made a speech, and it was incredibly moving to see all those people, who'd put so much blood, sweat and tears into putting the show on, especially the crew at Curve. They'd spent so much time getting the building COVID-secure and ready for live performance only to have that snatched away. It was wonderful to have everyone back, for the building to be alive for a week..."

SOUND

For sound, too, "the brief changed overnight, from making a show work in a unique space to capturing a live performance as best we could - all while adhering to social distancing, the budget and using the same Curve in-house equipment," notes sound designer Tom Marshall, another veteran of *Sunset*'s recent UK tour. Where Cracknell's starting point was to add, his was to subtract, turning off much of the PA they'd just spent a few days meticulously rigging and tuning (Curve's house rig of d&b and Meyer loudspeakers), since "it was now all pointing at empty seats." What elements remained on were then turned

into a monitoring rig across the three spaces - main theatre, stage and studio - to supplement the acoustic sound from the live, 16-piece orchestra, now situated in the stalls seating and spaced out as per the government guidelines at the time, with the woodwind and brass 3m apart, everyone else 2m apart. The available space meant that screens weren't required for COVID control purposes, though some were used, particularly around the percussion for acoustic purposes. Even with this new monitoring system, the diverse range of locations used did mean a little local help was sometimes required, with small powered speakers deployed where needed to achieve this.

The essentially one-take nature of the shoot meant that it was treated as a live performance by the sound team, with the cast radio mic'd (though only with single mics to minimise the visual intrusion of the mics in close ups; any mic issue would have justified a pause to fix it), and the radio team of Jack Harper and Sean McCabe joining the cast bubble to enable this. Curve had started the process of upgrading to digital radios pre-lockdown, but hadn't completed it, so the existing Sennheiser G4 system supplemented with some additional units borrowed from the nearby De Montfort Hall, all using DPA 4061 mics, carried the day. "Hats off to the old Sennheiser system for holding up," Marshall notes, "even when the action was taking place just about as far away from the racks as it possibly could!"

Marshall knew both that rehearsal time was limited, and that with the show going online just a few days after the end of shooting, post-production time was going to be very tight. "We decided that in order to give us the best chance of turning this around in time, we would need to minimise the workload in post. So we took a standard MADI-64 stream from Curve's DiGiCo SD10T to capture a mixture of direct feeds from key instruments and lead cast microphones, and post-fade mixes of stereo orchestral and vocal stems. Matt 'Bambi' Nunn, who mixed the show when it toured in 2017, was brought in to take care of the latter, which - to his credit - he achieved flawlessly after just a few days refresher on the desk."

The team was supplemented by sound designer Adam Fisher. "We brought Adam in as an additional sound designer and recording mix engineer, positioning him in the lighting box at the rear of the stalls with the recording computers and a DiGiCo remote PC. His expertise was valuable, supervising the complex rehearsal period involved in making a show this size, and then sub-mixing the live stem mixes as they were recorded," Marshall explains. "After the cameras stopped, we all locked down in our own areas, video editing at Crosscut Media's HQ in Leicester



Photo: Marc Brenner

while a couple of us stayed on at Curve to do two weeks' worth of mixing in just 48 hours using ProTools."

Marshall credits everyone in his team, led by Dave Norton, Curve's head of sound and video, with the success of what was achieved. "What you hear in the end result is a completely live recording, no miming or correcting in post. The only additions were orchestral and vocal reverbs and a few of the show sound effects that didn't quite make it to tape. This is adaptable theatre sound in its element, no recording trucks, no state-of-the-art studios, no swathes of time in production. Just good people making the very best of the situation in these trying times - a huge testament to the skills of all those involved."

PERFORMANCE

The end result is a rather unique creation - not a straightforward capture of an established theatre show, not something crafted as a movie with each shot meticulously laboured over. If it has the spirit of anything it's perhaps the live-for-TV musicals that have become commonplace in America over the last few years - but those are done on enormous budgets with scenery designed and crafted especially for them, and of course, they also have live audiences. This is a live show of a story about the entertainment business, brilliantly performed by the cast, and with the theatre itself providing the scenery, the locations, indeed almost becoming a character in itself - while at the same time allowing the show to drop down to a single performer on an empty stage with just a hint of light behind them, if that's what a scene called for (this quite a contrast to the epic scenery that ordained the original London production back in 1993). The empty seats you do see are a haunting reminder of that final, missing element - people.

But that also meant Nikolai Foster wasn't afraid to take advantage of the fact that it was made entirely to be watched on screen rather than live if that served the story better, replacing effects intended to be created by Cracknell's shape-shifting lighting rig with camera close-ups, taking some of the projected video material that had been used in the stage show and using it as overlaid montages at other times. "In fact, Douglas O'Connell, our video designer, did create some new, bespoke stuff for this version, particularly a really amazing animation of arriving at Paramount, pulling us in to the story to fantastic effect," Foster notes.

Curve chose not just to throw this out onto the internet for free; at the end of the day, the company does have to try to make some money to pay for the production, for the running costs of the building, and for the work it continues to do with the Leicester community during lockdown, including a new Curve Classroom series of 35 one-hour tutorials. Curve took those from idea to finished product in just a few weeks, a reflection of Foster and chief executive Chris Stafford's ability to respond to ideas quickly and dynamically. So, you bought a ticket to watch an online performance; co-operation with the rights holders ultimately allowed Curve to keep the show available online until they'd sold as many 'virtual' seats as they could have sold real seats had they been allowed to do so.

Will the concept form the basis for future work at Curve, particularly should lockdown continue into the new year? They're not saying quite yet. *Sunset's* success means it would seem sensible to assume it will. But then again, maybe they've had another a new idea, and another pivot is coming . . . ✖

FOR SUNSET BOULEVARD AT CURVE - IN CONCERT AT HOME

Director: Nikolai Foster
 Designer: Colin Richmond
 Musical supervisor: Stephen Brooker
 Musical director: Chris Mundy
 Choreographer: Lee Proud
 Lighting designer: Ben Cracknell
 Sound designer & mix engineer: Tom Marshall
 Video & projection designer: Douglas O'Connell
 Production manager: Sam Paterson
 Company stage manager: Julia Reid
 Deputy stage manager: Anne Baxter
 Lighting associate: Charlotte Burton
 Sound recording & mix engineer: Adam Fisher
 Live mix engineer: Matthew 'Bambi' Nunn

Curve Technical Team:

Buildings & technical director: Jay Bridges
 Head of production: Andy Nairn (until his passing in Dec 2020)
 Head of lighting: Jonathan Laidlow
 Head of sound & video: Dave Norton
 Head of wardrobe: Edd Lindley
 Deputy head of lighting: David Hatelly, Steve Ratcliffe
 Deputy head of sound & video: Angel Russell De Pablos
 Deputy head of stage & automation: James Dainty, Martin Pickard
 Deputy head of wardrobe: Lucy Duncan
 Lighting technicians: Adam Bee, Jude Michell, Judith Moulton
 Sound technicians: Sean McCabe, Jack Harper
 Stage technicians: Emily Walker, Mark Kenny, Milton Robinson, Jasdeep Singh

Crosscut Media:

Video producer: Dan Flanders
 1st AC/online editor: Duncan MacLeod
 Director of photography: Jordan Dean
 Crane operator: Dan Hunt
 Gimbal operator: Mbili Munthali
 Camera operators: Francesca Costa, Lauren Pster, Lauren Taylor

*Production in loving memory of
Peter Gee and Andy Nairn*