



Photo: Richard Davenport

As the Christmas musical returns to Hammersmith Apollo for its third annual residency, Kate Lyon reports on what makes the production sparkle and shine . . .

Anyone who celebrated Christmas with a young family in 2010 will be familiar with the film *Nativity!* and its subsequent sequels. The films have since taken on that cult status that some of our most quintessentially British screen productions aspire to; this may have a story based in Bethlehem at its heart, but its very 'Englishness' is at the centre of its charm. In 2017, a musical stage version of the first film made its world premiere at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre, followed by a short tour that included the Hammersmith Eventim Apollo.

Now in its third year of production, *Nativity! The Musical* has returned to Hammersmith as part of its UK Christmas tour, once again produced by JWP (Jamie Wilson Productions). Writer, director and co-composer (with Nicky Ager) is Debbie Isitt, who details some of the back story and elaborates on the show's structure and narrative: "I first met Jamie Wilson about four years ago when he called up my agent to see if the rights to my movie of *Nativity!* were available for a stage adaptation. I told him that I'd already started developing the musical and he agreed to pay for more workshops with a view to staging the world premiere of *Nativity! The Musical!*"

She continues: "Both Jamie and I were on the same page regarding our aspirations for the show. We wanted it to be big, glossy, funny, emotional and feel-good. We wanted to create something that was an alternative to panto - a proper Christmas musical that the whole family could enjoy. It was important for me to keep the story of the original film intact, but enhance it with new songs."

For those readers unfamiliar with the narrative, it's a tale of a primary school class of children with low aspirations whose teacher (Mr Maddens) is as lost as them - but through the actions of an eccentric and unqualified teaching assistant (Mr Poppy), they produce a nativity play that exceeds all expectations and brings warmth and love back to the stars of the show. The stress and pressures of producing a nativity at a primary school is something many teachers and parents will be familiar with - and is where the initial idea took hold for Isitt. "I was very involved in primary school life," she says. "I was a volunteer at my daughter's primary school, where I first got the idea for the original movie. Primary schools are special places. Children are amazing and working with them is such a privilege."

The children are central to this show; taking a theatrical production on tour with so many young players might seem a daunting prospect, but it's one that Isitt clearly embraced. "Once we knew this [production] was going to happen, Jamie found producing partners and investors and the wonderful Birmingham Rep came on board," she says. "JWP booked the tour and the huge Eventim Apollo as its London venue. It was a very exciting time!"

On realising the show, she explains: "We wanted it to stand up in its own right as a musical, so we wanted genuine depth from the characters. The story of Mr Maddens and his lost love Jennifer and him losing faith in himself as a teacher and the kids in his care had to stay at the heart of the story. This emotional narrative underpins all of the ensuing comedy, which



makes it layered and rich. Mr Poppy, the teaching assistant character, drives the action and the comedy, but even he has his sad moments that are genuinely touching. The most important thing for us was getting the casting right to enable an authenticity with the acting - so no matter how heightened the situations get, the acting is always truthful and believable. This also goes for the children in the show. I work a lot with improvisation, so everyone contributes to the dialogue script and makes each part their own.

"Each year is a bit like starting again as we have to recast some of the adult actors, some of the children, and find new technical staff, too. This year, we began rehearsals in September and toured from October, opening at the Wolverhampton Grand Theatre and ending our season with three weeks at the Eventim Apollo over Christmas. It's a huge operation: a massive show to tour, an amazing set, a lot of costumes and a very large performing company that includes over 20 children, a dog and two puppies!

"Casting the children is an extensive process. I am determined to use what I call 'ordinary' kids (not from stage school) for the St. Bernadette's classes, so we have open calls and spend months trying to find the little characters that are so dazzling in the show. Casting directors Keston & Keston have done an incredible job helping me source the children, and they have also been responsible, along with the amazing regional children's director Rebecca Louis, for finding the local Oakmoor (another school in the show) children, who are also fantastic."

As Isitt and all the production team make clear, this is not a pantomime, but it contains many of the production complexities that would make touring a panto something of a logistical challenge: children, animals, flying, ridiculous costume changes, set changes and backdrops without the use of AV to simplify matters. It comes as no surprise that *Nativity! The Musical* has two production managers to carry the load: Matt Jones and Simon Gooding. It was Jones who was in charge on the opening night at Hammersmith: "Although we play some significant-sized venues on the tour, the Eventim Apollo Hammersmith is our largest theatre and that brings with it some additional challenges. We are not able to screw into the stage here, so we have to lay a sacrificial floor; we ask our lighting rental company, Hawthorn, to bring in extra fixtures and followspots; we leave our touring PA system in the truck and use the house L-Acoustics rig. Hammersmith is known globally as a rock'n'roll venue, so a three-week run of a show with 20 children and various small creatures is a bit of a departure. We bring in portacabins to alleviate pressure on dressing room space, but there's no doubt it's a busy and extremely tight backstage during the show."

"Load-in and extra rehearsal time for the additional elements in the show have to be carefully managed," he continues. "Aside from the audio set-up and lighting programming required, we also have extra players for the London shows who need rehearsal time on stage - and the children, of course. It's about all departments working alongside one another to achieve the end result. We are very fortunate that the same team has worked on this for the last three years, so we are well and truly into a rhythm."



Photo: Richard Davey/Spot



← Alex Boucher (lighting programmer), Tim Mitchell (LD) and Andy Fidgeon (associate LD)

Simon France (sound #1) and Tom Marshall (sound designer)

VISUALS

Part of that integral team is LD Tim Mitchell who met Debbie Isitt through JWP. "I was lighting *Tell Me On A Sunday* for JWP; we hit it off and our relationship has grown from there. As a team, this is a great production to work on. My first call is with Mark Burnett at Hawthorn to explain what we

want. As always, there are some things I was fixed on and there was a line here and there that we could not compromise on and other things we change or cut to fit within the budget. Mark, as always, is very helpful. It does help when you work with a rental company you have a positive relationship with as both myself and Alex Boucher, my programmer, do with Hawthorn."

Mitchell's touring rig of Martin MAC Encores and Vipers has been strengthened for Hammersmith by the addition of nearly 20 extra Vipers on a downstage-front truss and some extra of those ever popular GLP impression X4 Bar 20s. The profiles are supported by Claypaky B-Eye K10s and MAC Aura XBs. A selection of ETC Source 4 LED Lustr 2s along with PAR 16 Birdies and batten lighting from GLP impression X4 Bar 20s and Chroma Q ColorForce completes the package. Mitchell's console of choice is the ETC Gio. Hawthorn has also supplied two Robert Juliat Cyrano followspots,

powerful enough to work where that extra throw and sharpness is required for the Hammersmith run; on tour, the production makes use of house spots.

The colour palette of the original film is followed in the set design by David Woodhead, who has worked with Tim Mitchell previously. He comments: "Debbie was really clear from the start that she wanted the production to be larger than life - bright, bold and magical. We were looking to take all the wonderful visuals from the film and enhance them further for the stage. That brief was the starting point for both Tim and I. I kept everything clean and crisp, which Tim enhanced through his lighting design - that ambient theme is one that flows through into Tom Marshall's sound design and George Dyer's musical arrangements."

Mitchell is in full agreement: "It is the set that sets the tone of the lighting and the choice of palette. David's design means that I don't have to work with saturated colour mixes all the time as the stage reflects the colour. My colour choice at times has to be easy and subtle, otherwise bodies will disappear, but we are dealing with the very vivid imagination of our hero Mr Poppy, so we have to reflect that.

"Overall, I would liken this design to one of the most popular numbers in the show: *Sparkle and Shine!* It has to be a bit of fun lighting-wise and in many ways you try and follow the imagination of Mr Poppy and the kids. A lot of colour movement is used, particularly here in Hammersmith. It draws in our family-centred audience. The narrative is very important: we go

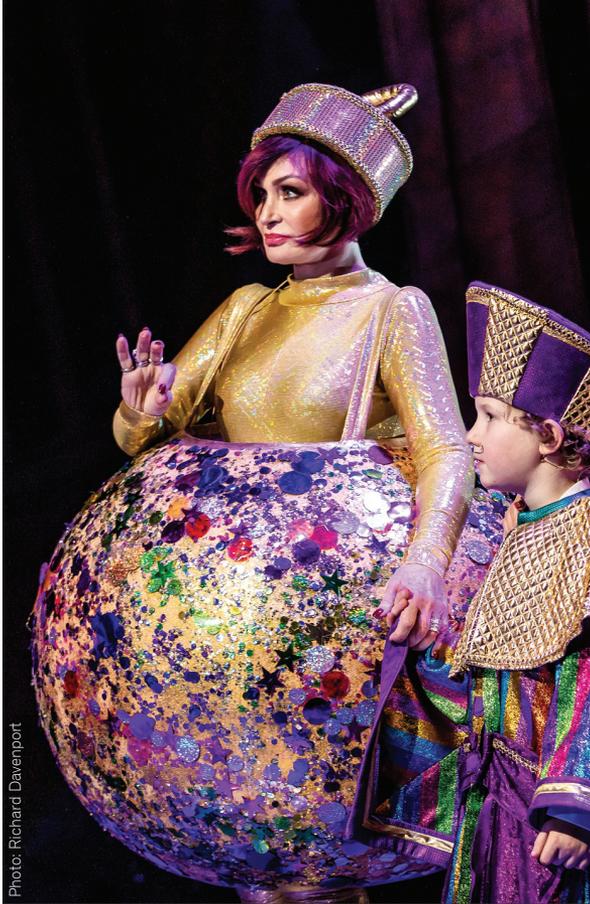


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from a classroom to Hollywood and lots of locations in between, which we tell as simply as possible in terms of lighting and set. There are a lot of practical fittings built by the incomparable Andy Fidgeon who is our production LX and associate LD and his team from Hawthorn. As we have taken this production out before, we only had four days of tech rehearsals for lighting and it was Andy who relit it."

Mitchell and Woodhead are as one in creating a set and rig that is both creatively attractive and logistically practical. "Lighting-wise, the only changes made are when we are in Hammersmith; otherwise, everything stays the same," explains Mitchell. "On the road, we have to do a full run through with the children at every venue, so managing stage time is key. There's simply a lot to get through, so we didn't want to be changing fixtures and re-programming from one venue to the next."

Woodhead agrees: "Working on a large-scale new British musical is a real privilege and not an opportunity that comes up very often. After the first year, we were able to re-look at the production and what worked well and what could be improved on logistically. It was necessary to make some adjustments to the set to streamline certain flown pieces and make the show easier to fit up and tour. As much as possible I prefer to have a design that is consistent from venue to venue rather than an A or B version. I'm really proud of how the stage version has its own identity whilst remaining true to the spirit of the film."

Having sat in the auditorium during the day of the opening show at Hammersmith, it was clear that the visual team's pragmatic approach is the right one. The sectioned archway effectively forms the show's proscenium, forming a fixed stage size wherever the show is playing. Downstage of that and to either side are moveable props that can either fill a wider stage such as Hammersmith or squeeze into a narrower venue.

Even without running through scenes with the extra celebrity cast members - Danny and Dani Dyer, Sharon Osbourne and Rylan Clark-Neal - the children need to be familiarised with the stage, whilst the flying sequences, courtesy of Flying by Foy, have to be thoroughly checked to make sure the youngsters are comfortable with the set-up. The busiest man in the building has to be stage manager Matt Elesmore, who works miracles on

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a minute-by-minute basis. There is certainly no opportunity for specific technical time; a fussy, complicated array of hardware to work with would be an unwelcome challenge.

AUDIO

Tom Marshall is sound designer for the production. Like the visuals team, he already had a successful working relationship with JWP before *Nativity! The Musical*. For the tour, the loudspeaker system from Stage Sound Services is a KV2 rig, but here at Hammersmith, the L-Acoustics house rig has been deployed. "This seemed the sensible option," opens Marshall. "We made the decision that it would be far easier and more beneficial to use the house PA in Hammersmith as there's a huge amount of air to move. We have, somewhat reluctantly, lost our KV2 point-source proscenium boxes in favour

of the L-Acoustics K2 rig. We've retained our KV2 centre cluster, front-fills and all stage foldback. The rig is really designed for a more rock'n'roll production, so the challenge is to make a huge system such as the K2 work as more of a theatrical sounding rig and, as such, deliver clear and clean coverage at a nice level. We also re-designed the array hangs to be lower and more curved, thus pulling the focus and image down, more so than if they were in a standard formation."

Away from the immediate challenges of a new loudspeaker system, Marshall was happy to talk about the brief for this touring production: "Debbie, Jamie and I discussed what we thought would be expected of the show in initial meetings, and from there I specified the system to deliver this. Believe it or not, *Nativity!* is a very tricky show to get right from

a sound point of view. It's a fine balancing act of delivering an exciting up-front sound but retain a theatrical journey that crescendos with the final 20 minutes of the show, whilst not being too loud and relentless for the younger - or older - audience members. All fairly standard stuff, but adding 20 untrained children to the mix makes it quite unpredictable in terms of getting everything to sound right at times. Despite it being a very pre-programmed show, there's always a certain amount of 'fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants' live mixing every show."

He continues: "Knowing the key elements such as weekly budget, touring timescale, venues to be visited and what is required of the show sonically, I specified the equipment I believed would best fit this brief. KV2 speakers have become a popular choice on a lot of my shows at the moment - I was introduced to them a few years back and I really like a lot of their characteristics. The ERS 215s are a great box for up front 'pop' musicals and I've learnt how to get the best out of them. Being point-source, both the team and I find them a great choice for weekly touring.

"Other key elements for me are the DiGiCo T software, in this case on an SD10, running with the RE as a backup system. I tend to push the desk programming to the full, utilising most features of the T software - Auto Update, Players, Aliases, Merge inputs . . . The desk is the master controller of the system, with the cue list firing all other devices using MIDI and GPOs. Despite the small band, there is a high channel count, with over 30 inputs coming in from QLab, so we're over 100 inputs from the off. QLab (currently V4) is also a must



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as it's a product I've now been using for over 10 years and you can't fault its durability for the demands we put on it.

"Band monitoring is personal Roland M48 mixers, fed from the auxiliary MADI stream on the band rack. These too are currently top of the list for personal monitoring due to the flexibility and sound quality. Cast radio mics are on the good old analogue Sennheiser SK 5212s with DPA 4061 headsets. Fairly old-school these days, but they do the job nicely. System control is via four Meyer Galaxy speaker processors. All controlled wirelessly from a MacBook Air.

"There is only a five-piece band on *Nativity!* - drums/percussion, two keyboards, guitars, trumpet and woodwind. The rest of the orchestra is supplemented by extensive click tracks, all produced and arranged by our amazing orchestrator George Dyer. Nearly all the songs and musical numbers contain some amount of tracked music, all individual stems running from a dual redundant QLab system, triggered by the MD. As the children aren't trained and can be somewhat inconsistent vocally, we have tracked vocals for their songs, which we blend with the live vocals in order to create a fuller ambient vocal sound. There is also a full array of kids' solo backups in case mics go down, which are all controlled via Macros from the DiGiCo to enable and disable QLab files."

Marshall continues: "On stage, it's very basic. There are left and right stage point-source foldback speakers to give an even coverage from front to back: a combination of Meyer UPJs and EM Acoustics EM61s and EM81s. This is all fed from FOH, so there is no monitor desk in the chain. This varies very little during the show and any changes are with the FOH cue list programming."

When asked if *Nativity! The Musical* is essentially a musical or more reliant on the spoken word, Marshall is unequivocal: "Yes, it's most definitely a musical. It's essentially the first *Nativity!* film with a much bigger score and song list. One could argue that having celebrities playing cameo roles here at Hammersmith could draw parallels to the pantomime genre, but we strive to keep it firmly in the musical genre and retain all of its production values as such. This does affect my choice of equipment slightly. With a majority of pantos, the budget usually allows for a standard sound 'footprint', if you like. Enough equipment to deliver what's necessary to entertain

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