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## Applications, Theatre

### The phenomenon that is Thriller, the musical

For three years now, long before the sudden demise of Michael Jackson, there was already a production in the UK that venerated the King of Pop. If anyone ever doubted this man's ascendancy to the throne you only have to look at the continuing success of the phenomenon that is Thriller, the musical. In residency on the West End stage and on tour around the UK courtesy of promoters Flying Music, for emerging sound designer Chris Whybrow it has proved an off the wall experience.



"The show plays at the Lyric", said Whybrow. "It is a nine hundred seat theatre with four levels of audience. The stalls are full length but the three balconies, Dress, Upper and Gallery are all very steep yet shallow, so it's not the easiest of rooms for a high SPL show. To cover properly and give the whole audience a full sound rendering, after all this is a Michael Jackson musical, I've split the d&b audiotechnik Q-Series PA into pairs at each level." Whybrow, a long time fan of d&b loudspeaker systems, is using John Saunders Productions to supply the audio system. "We first asked Chris to design for another Flying Music production, What a Feeling a couple of years ago" Saunders explained. "We'd noticed his work and were impressed. He has proved to be a hotshot designer."

What impressed Saunders was Whybrow's mixed approach; "He has sensitivity for the theatrical environment, but brings a fresh taste of concert realism to the audience". For all that, Whybrow's approach is workmanlike and methodical. "The balconies though shallow are quite wide, fifteen metres approximately. The pattern from the Qs is tightly focussed and over the distance I can cover each level without putting energy onto the sidewalls. The gallery is even more problematic; after about seven rows the audience can no longer see part of the stage, they also loose line of sight with the PA, so I've had to fit delays EV S40s. I'd have liked E0 but there's always a budget squeeze somewhere, and that was the least offensive place to make a cut. There is no surround sound, and to be fair, with the SPLs we're achieving it would largely be an indulgence."

It's not just levels where Whybrow breaks convention. "The four d&b B2 subwoofers I specified are another important nod towards the Jackson musical style. This is not light music; it's strong powerful, emotive rhythms with compelling dance hooks, so the bass line has been one of my principal areas of focus. The Q-SUB is great for vocals and other instruments, but the B2s give me a little extra for kick and bass; more reach, more depth, and something special no other loudspeaker gives. The musical Director John Maher and I spent a lot of time on this in development; we both have strong ideas about how it needs to sound. We looked at the video edits to be used and spent hours matching instruments; keyboard sounds, drum kit sounds, guitar sounds; in fact matching all the sounds they are performing in the show closely to the original versions of the songs."

With the extended run at the Lyric exceeding original expectations, the touring version has begun again with Whybrow's proven design heavily influencing the equipment specification "In fact after What a

Feeling I evolved to become sound associate on the first Thriller Tour. Now having done sound design for the West End run of the musical I'm also designing for the new touring version. I've used the same principal elements of Q-Series loudspeakers and B2 subwoofers and we've sent out the full three-level flying equipment as used here, and they also have flying frames and motors to fly it as a true array. It is a truly versatile system; one day we may fly the whole lot in a concert hall, the next it may be split into pairs in a small theatre, and the next some ground stacked and some flown off the truss in a large theatre. That means we can cover pretty much any theatre in the country in the same way that we have for the Lyric. That's important; where the music is such an integral part of the overall experience we couldn't in fairness do it any other way. Why should the provinces have a poorer experience than the London audience? That's the strength of Flying Music. They expect to be doing this for years, and with such delivery I'm sure they will."

With Jackson's unquestioned talent and huge contribution to the pop industry now regrettably but rightfully back in the spotlight, we have to imagine Wybrow's closing assertion to be more than prescient. Watch out Las Vegas.

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