

# Hairspray On Tour

## West-End Hits The Road

More and more big musicals are touring these days, often looking and sounding very similar to their original West End productions. JO FLETCHER-CROSS looks at how one huge show gets on the road, and how an innovation by Orbital Sound is making things easier backstage.

**H**AIRSPRAY IS A MUSICAL based on the 1988 John Waters film of the same name, telling the story of an overweight teenage girl growing up in 1960s Baltimore. The West End production, which opened in London in October 2007, closed on 28 March this year having taken £50 million in ticket sales. By any standards this is a successful show, and now audiences across the UK are getting the chance to see it, with a touring version having opened in Cardiff on April 7. This is no watered down version of the original; Michael Ball, who starred in the original West End production, is donning his wig and large bosom again to play Edna Turnblad, and the set, orchestra, and cast size is virtually unchanged from the original. With a show of this size, there are many challenges to overcome. This production is particularly interesting as one company has come up with an idea that is making life easier for those taking the show on the road.

As I was watching the show being set up for a performance in Southampton, I asked the Number One Sound Operator on Hairspray, Russell Godwin, what it was like to take such a big show on tour. "The challenges to this show are the schedule, and the amount we have to achieve in such little time. It's effectively a large West End show that fits up within two days," he explained. "The biggest challenge is that we have got an 11-piece band and we've pretty much filled a 110-channel desk. And we have an hour sound check and that's it, it's the first show." Although there are obviously difficulties inherent in all of this, Godwin is keen to point out how high the production values are. "No corners have been cut – though some of us on the road wish they had! Although there is a lot to do, it is rewarding to have that quality sitting there."

Gareth Owen, who designed the sound, elaborates on the particular challenges that faced him. "It's quite a loud show, but they don't want to see the microphones. On a loud show with no click track and no backing tracks, going to some really big venues, that's probably the main challenge." The cast microphones are DPA booms, Godwin tells me, "hidden in the hair. We're using them so we don't have to use tape. Something a bit different. They're rigid, and we don't have to put tape on that keeps coming off. Because of the rigid microphones, we can ever so slightly bend capsules off hair and they stay like that." The actual sound of the show is another test. "They want it to sound 60s without it sounding 60s; because actually in the 60s, if you go back and listen to the original Beatles recordings, they sound dreadful," said Gareth Owen. "You can't actually hear what they're saying, you can't hear the detail. So again, it's a challenge to produce that."

### Up Front

The front of house desk is a Digidesign Venue. "It's a surface I've enjoyed using for a very long time, and so has Gareth Owen," said Godwin. "We just find it the most flexible. Because of the scoping level you can do on it, we find it very, very easy to do the fast updates in sound checks without having to think about it, and going back to a song, going back to a cue to update – we can always do it easily. That's its power, on the road. And the same with all its plug-ins, they're at your fingertips. That's something that's very useful and is necessary for this show, really."

The key to the successful touring of a large, challenging show like Hairspray would appear to be a highly competent and experienced sound team, using





equipment they like and are familiar with. Some degree of experimentation and flexibility does seem to be essential to make a show like this really fly, and being open-minded and looking for new ideas to make everyone's life easier has led to a new approach to touring sound that is being put to the test on *Hairspray*.

### A Twist On Supply

Orbital Sound is a major supplier of sound and communication systems for theatre. Based in London, it sells or rents audio equipment all over the world, and supply many of the West End's major theatre productions, as well as touring productions. Formed in 2003, Orbital has expanded to become a leading company in the industry. Orbital supplied the audio equipment for the West End production of *Hairspray*, and are now supplying the touring gear, but with an innovative twist.

When I visited Orbital's South London warehouse, Technical Director Tim Sherratt led me around the vast shelving units full of equipment and cables. The space is packed to the rafters, and the company has even more equipment in another warehouse out of the city. In the middle of all this, he showed me a section where everything looked that bit neater. This is where they were putting together RacPac.

Orbital was looking at ways to make the most of its space, and also thinking about how to reduce the labour intensive way that the equipment was put together and dismantled. "We just stood there one day and there's 20 guys screwing stuff out of a rack over there, and 20 guys screwing stuff in racks there – and they need more guys," said Sherratt. "And the maths and the labour just does not work out. The prep times are just not there any more, the equipment's getting more expensive, everyone's pushing, pushing, pushing for more. So that's when we decided what we were going to do."

What they did was design their own bespoke modular system. "It was, how do we stop them having to take the equipment in and out of the rack all the time?" explained Sherratt. "So we decided we were going to take them all out of living on the shelf and put them in things like this." This is an aluminium rack, specially designed and made for Orbital. Chris Headlam, Managing Director of Orbital talked me through the process. "We spent nine months designing and re-designing that racking system. Because it's made out of aluminium there's a lot of physical structural issues you have to get over. Aluminium bends when it's welded so it's not an easy project." The equipment slots into these racks, but it doesn't end there. "There's lots of hidden benefits in there," said Headlam. "One

is that first, it sounds small and mundane, but you can actually see the equipment for once. What happens with conventional rack lights is that they take up a lot of space, produce no light, and when you need them, the bulb has blown." Orbital has circumvented these problems by fitting strips of LED lights. "We were trying to work out how to light them and we'd gone through using ordinary downlighters. They weren't very robust and in transit they'd always come loose," explained Headlam. "Then we went to marine lighting. It's very robust because of the environment it has to be in." Orbital is situated directly across from a lighting supplier, which turned out to be fortuitous. "I actually went across the road to ask them to order me some marine lighting and while I was in there I saw these LED lights on a strip, and I said, that's the solution."

### Simple And Ingenuous

More simple but ingenuous thinking is apparent when you look at the back of the unit, as Headlam explained. "Each rackframe has complete removable covers in each area, so you can interwire between the rackframes really easily. And we've developed a system of doing that using velcro and not cable ties, which means that if you want to fault find something and find the cable, what was a really boring difficult job – trying to trace a cable through a load of cables tied together, in the dark, – is really easy now, which means your fault finding is so much quicker and easier." The units also have integrated power.

Orbital can see the new racks making a huge difference. "They just go out the door," said Tim Sherratt. "And when they come back into the building, they get brought back in, broken back into their little components and they're ready to go again." In these days of tighter and tighter get-in and out schedules, Sherratt thinks they could really make



▶ an impact. "We can put in a show with this system, and have that built now in two hours as opposed to two days."

### Lights Up

How is it working in practice? The Hairspray team are certainly impressed with the speed. "We're about four hours to in and working," commented Godwin. He also admires the space saving element of the system. "It's been very useful on site, because they're much smaller, they go through normal standard doors. In theatres, our basic considerations are very small wings. We've probably got a footprint two thirds of what we would have had on the old racking system." He is particularly keen on the integrated power system. Gareth Owen took a little convincing. "If I'm honest, I actually thought it was a pretty terrible idea. Now, of course, I've revised that." What changed his mind? "Firstly, it looked really smart. Secondly, you can get around everything better. You can see what you're doing. You don't have power blocks everywhere because that's all integrated." The system came into its own when making some last minute changes to the show. "There is a big in-ear monitoring system on Hairspray that was a relatively late addition to the show," Owen explains. "Most of the racks were finished by then. We were able to just go, well, we'll just unplug that and that, and take that whole RacPac out and swap that. You just couldn't have done that with the old racking system, it just wouldn't work. You'd just end up having to rebuild the rack from scratch, virtually. It makes it more versatile."

It is a clever idea, and is being developed further. Orbital plans to consolidate its stock and eventually migrate all its hire stock over to the new system. At the moment all the power amplifiers, mains distribution, the radio microphones and computer playback systems are being moved to RacPac. It will be going out on all the work Orbital do at the Edinburgh Festival this summer, and also on a production of We Will Rock You in Holland. And for the moment it continues to tour the UK with Hairspray. "It's an adventure every week," said Godwin. "It's fantastic to bring it to the regions with this quality of production." **AM**

