

# Sound and Beauty

When the stage production of *Beauty and the Beast* arrived in Kuala Lumpur, its sound designer found a new audience and a new challenge. **Tim Goodyer** reports



Cogsworth and Lumiere (played by Ashley Knight and Ben Stock)



The tavern scene from *Beauty and the Beast*

## SHARING ITS ROOTS WITH THE

Korean language production of *Notre Dame de Paris* (Pro Audio Asia, July-August 2008), the recent run of *Beauty and the Beast* at the Plenary Hall of the Kuala Lumpur Convention Center dates back to Jean Cocteau's black-and-white film classic *La Belle et la Bête* (1946) and Disney's subsequent animated version that brought the French title into English. Fittingly, the original musical was staged for the first time in France in 1998 and it has since gone on to international acclaim – not to mention an enviable haul of awards.

Although already seen by more than 25 million people worldwide – making it one of the biggest musicals of all time – this was the production's first venture into Malaysia. It was staged by Yvents! and presented by CIMB Bank, and ran from late June to early July 2008 with the same cast as in the UK – Ashley Oliver as Belle, Matthew Cammelle as the Beast and Richard Colson narrating. The set design was by Charles Camm, with Alison Pollard serving as director and choreographer. Gareth Williams was the musical supervisor and James McCullagh musical director. The fairy tale tells the story of small-town girl Belle who is taken prisoner by the Beast, who is actually a human prince under a spell. Both captives in Beast's castle, they learn about the true meaning of love and friendship, and find the means of breaking the spell binding the prince.

'The principle aim behind the audio design for this production was to create an involving and exciting listening experience for the audience,' says sound designer and front-of-house engineer Glen Beckley, who has worked in almost every

aspect of technical theatre since he took his first job as a staghand at the age of 14. British-born, he began designing productions for musical theatre in 1997 with the UK tour of *42nd Street*, clocking up an enviable list of credits, before a stint in the US as systems engineer for Southern Gospel outfit the Gaither Vocal Band. On his return to the UK, he established and ran the audio production department at Stage Electrics in Bristol, where he concentrated on developing new and better systems to enable easier moves between venues, faster setup times and reduced crew costs.

Bringing this experience to bear on the stage production of *Beauty and the Beast*, he needed to accommodate the broad age range of the audience brought about by the wide appeal of the show. 'It is important to maintain the attention of some very young minds,' he observes. 'The average level of the mix is 2dBa to 3dBa higher than most theatre shows, making a focus on the fidelity of the system very important. It is for this reason that an analogue signal path was chosen.'

The first impact of adopting this approach was that a 48-channel Midas Heritage 3000 analogue mixing console with a 16-channel stretch was chosen for use at front of house. In a small concession to digital convenience, a Yamaha O1V was used to submix a further 24 inputs from a Tascam MX2424 hard-disk player and an Akai Z8 sampler. In all, the show's music is provided by 10 musicians and 24 tracks of pre-recorded backing.

The loudspeaker system is sourced principally from Funktion-One, using

10 Resolution One loudspeakers left and right on the proscenium and a centre cluster of three AX88 skeletal mid-high enclosures on a custom-designed array frame. These are supported by eight F118 subs for the bass frequencies with more custom-designed flying hardware that allows them to be rigged in a variety of ways depending on the constraints of the venue. MC2 E-series amplifiers drive the F1 system with XTA DP448 processing. 'I believe that the ability of [Funktion-One founder] Tony Andrews' loudspeaker designs to deliver a listening experience that is involving and dynamically exciting is unsurpassed anywhere in the world,' says Mr Beckley. 'The Resolution One speakers used in the main system were chosen for their extremely natural and open sound. Also the lack of a compression driver in the box is very helpful in maintaining the centre image of the mix.'

This also extends to the choice of amplifier: 'MC2 is one of very few amplifier manufacturers that has musicality as its priority,' Mr Beckley says. 'The company care about what it does as much as I do. For me the E-series is the only choice of lightweight amplifier out there.'

Also part of the FOH system, six EAW JF80s provide front fill from the lip of the stage, while 16 Apogee SSM compact loudspeakers are used as under-balcony fills when necessary. There are no dynamics processors inserted on any inputs, although a pair of XTA Sidd dynamics processors is used across the orchestra and vocal sub-groups.

'The auditorium at KLCC is big – approximately 38m deep by 40m across at its widest point, and very tightly controlled with lots of



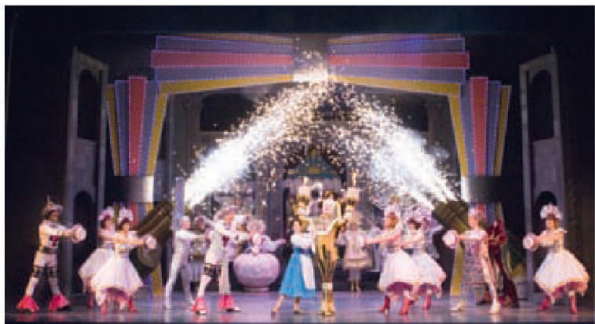
Sound designer and front-of-house engineer Glen Beckley with Midas and Yamaha desks



Funktion-One AX88 skeletal mid-high enclosures



**Belle (Ashley Oliver) and the Beast (Matthew Cammelle)**



**The cast**



**MC2 amplifiers, XTA DP448s and d&b E-Pak units**



**Glen Beckley at front of house**

acoustic treatment everywhere,' Mr Beckley reveals. 'This meant that not only did the system have its work cut out filling the room, but it was very much on show from an acoustic point of view. However it coped brilliantly, delivering smooth, even coverage and a dynamic and involving experience to every part of the room. We had a few comments from the local guys about previous shows from the UK having problems with audio prior to opening, but these were pretty much silenced by the interval of the first show.'

In addition, there are eight d&b audiotechnik E3 loudspeakers hidden around the stage to provide foldback for the performers and image location for the 150-plus sound effects that are used during the course of the show.

In the orchestra pit, a selection of high-quality Neumann and Hebden Sound microphones are used on the acoustic sections of the 10-piece orchestra, while eight channels of TL Audio valve DI are used for the electronic instruments. Neumann TLM103s are used on timpani, percussion (tuned and toys), trumpet, trombone, clarinet/bass clarinet and oboe/cor anglais, with Hebden 3020s on the flute, piccolo, hi-hat and kit overheads. A Neumann U87 is used on double bass. For the cast, a 26-channel Trantec

S6000 radio microphone system is used with either DPA 4060 or 4061 lavalier microphones. 'I learned early on that sitting down and listening to what an instrument really sounds like when it is played acoustically, knowing and appreciating how it sounds in front of the microphone, is the most important thing,' says Mr Beckley.

The musician's monitoring is provided by an Aviom A16 personal monitor system, with the mixes derived directly from the Midas console at front of house.

Nominated for nine Tony awards including Best Musical, *Beauty and the Beast* has been winning audiences worldwide with record breaking runs in Sydney and Tokyo, as well as New York, Los Angeles, Toronto and London's West End. 'Our time in KL was a great success,' said Mr Beckley. 'The rig sounded fantastic, as attested to by the number of audience members that made a point of coming up to the console to say thank you after each show.'

From Malaysia, the production moved to Dublin for six weeks, to be followed by 15 weeks touring the UK arriving in Cambridge for Christmas. 'Next year sees us in Indonesia and Thailand in the spring, then more UK dates,' concludes Mr Beckley. 'After that, who knows?'