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SPECIAL REPORT

Designer Jem Kitchen makes unlikely choice of F1 kit for Cole Porter classic

Pucker up, Katherine

UK: The smell of the greasepaint, the roar of the crowd, the sound of the PA – what a wonderful world theatre is. But you don't want to hear the PA in theatre; you want to "hear" the PA and not realise it. Subtlety and balance are all-important; after all it's not rock 'n' roll! bring onto stage one of the most passionate sound designers in the business, Jem Kitchen, add the innovation of Funktion One's Tony Andrews and wait for producers Tristan Baker and Alasdair Harvey to shout "From the top!", and you could be experiencing a new, long sought-after theatre sound.

According to Andrews, this production of Cole Porter's *Kiss Me Kate* at a South London theatre is "an audio purist's paradise".

"Jem Kitchen is extremely passionate about audio for it's own sake," he says. There are a few of us about the place. He has just been waiting for the right gig to use our speakers." Kitchen joined with Tristan Baker Productions as Sound Designer for a 52-week UK tour of this new production. "Tristan and Alistair are very audio aware. They are a joy to work for," enthused Kitchen. "I have made some very strange demands upon them because what is going on in there is, to my knowledge, not how a theatre show has ever been done before."

Kitchen continued, "When I was offered the opportunity to do this, because as my clients are so kind of 'pro-audio' as it were, I said; how do you feel about me introducing a new speaker system into theatre?" After discussions and an agreed change of cabinet colour, a fully-fledged Funktion One system made its theatrical debut just before *PSNE* went to press.

Kitchen's rig is fairly small, and positioned in places that may cause some to take a second look. On each side of the stage a stack consisting of one Resolution 2 and two F118 subs fill the stalls. Just above, one Resolution 2 nestles in an audience box. Above the proscenium, on a truss, two further Resolution 2s and four more F118s accompanied by a central cluster of three skeletal AX88 mounted on custom mounting hardware work the circle, gods and help fill the centre of the stalls.



Resolution 2 up in the circle: not your normal enclosure for the theatre

Lurking in the circle, two Resolution 2 SHs atop stands complete the line-up. More conventionally, six EAW JF80s provide front fill while 24 Reference 8s function as delays under the balcony and circle. Finally EAW JF60s, Mackie self-powered units and Galaxy Hotspots supply the monitoring. Seven XTA DP224s and one DP226 control the system and MC amps – seven E45s and E25s with an additional two E15s drive the rig.

And that's pretty much it. "I am not interested in things which make my life easier or quicker or are storable in memory and instantaneously recallable. I don't trust stuff like that," said Kitchen.

It's not just the lack of gizmos that make this innovative; Kitchen, like Andrews, is truly a master of his audio art. Funktion One doesn't add external electronics to EQ their boxes. Every cabinet and driver is designed in-house to allow for the maximum headroom and ultimate phase coherence and Kitchen takes this one step further. "There is no system EQ, no dynamics processing, none of that. You get the right microphone, right desk, right amps, right cable and the right speakers and the outboard gets sent home. We do have some to put out fires but we are not using it."

Across 26 channels of the Audient Aztec FOH desk sit the band, of which only one channel has any EQ on it, "to remove a bit from

a honky clarinet".

"This is a result of a four-year journey," recounted Kitchen. "When I started using Funktion One stuff I was delighted. They are dynamically exciting and musical. I then started getting very frustrated with desks. Finally I found myself a really good



More boxes on the FOH trussing

one and it sounds so good and it's not that expensive. When I had the combination of the Audient and the Funktion One I started getting really hacked off with the amps and mics..."

Finally happy, Kitchen uses purely Neumanns and his new favourite, Hebdon H3020s, on the band. The cast use Sennheiser 3063s with DPA 4061 heads for the cast.

Sound hire company Stage Electrics Audio provided the entire system and bought practically all of it especially for the production. Head of Sound Glen Beckley explained, "Jem said you need to come and hear this stuff and I was practically dragged by my ear. 'I think this is the future. It is fundamentally different to the direction the industry has gone. I think the listener will appreciate the difference. It's very exciting to be honest'."

By working closely with Funktion One and Stage Electrics, Kitchen has practically gone back to basics. He has made what actually sounds like a giant leap forward by taking what looks like a step back.

ROB SPEIGHT



(L-R): Tristan Baker, Jem Kitchen, Ann Andrews and Tony Andrews

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