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Dragon Tales:

Robert Lepage Stages an Intimate Spectacle in Toronto

The Blue Dragon is a far cry from Robert Lepage's customary marathon epics, such as *Lipsynch* or Wagner's Ring Cycle but, in a mere 90 minutes at Toronto's Royal Alexandra Theatre, where the show played in January and February, his creative team dazzled the eyes and ears.

This production was set designer Michel Gauthier's 150th design. "The set was elaborated around the idea of a comic strip page, with ever-changing forms and sizes in squares within a frame," says Gauthier. "I created a skeleton of horizontal and vertical lines that would offer as many opportunities for the video and light, without interfering with the diffusion of the sound. Mostly, we researched the universe of

Herge's Tintin, exploring the colors, the shapes, the light. We were not trying to recreate this universe, just to translate it."

The show was set in present-day Shanghai; Gauthier's versatile, two-story set was built mostly of aluminum by Astuce Decors Inc. The walls, as well as the frame that divided into numerous squares, were made of polycarbonate boards. "Interior scenes are framed by painted custom vinyl blinds, and the exteriors are made out of venetian blind laths mounted on a cylinder to create a warehouse effect," the designer says. "These doors are manipulated on each side by hand, so we can get the exact speed we want. Most of the 'effortless' scene changes are the result of the well-

coordinated work of the technicians on stage. No motors are used, other than the ones working the mobile bar."

The set's squares rearranged themselves into endless configurations: a two-story house, an airplane cabin, an art gallery, a train station, a karaoke bar, the deck of a ship, and an airport among them.

Projection designer David Leclerc experimented with Gauthier's frames to create different story fragments. He added interactive video to one of the principal's dance routines "to help with the poetry of her movements." Leclerc made certain to "have the right fabrics that would reflect infrared light for the video motion tracking to work inside a Photon [media server] system.

"One of the characters appears to be doing Chinese calligraphy at three different moments in the show, and, on one of these occasions, he actually uses an oversized brush and paints on the 'polichinelle' [clown character], a trick easily achieved with the Photon system

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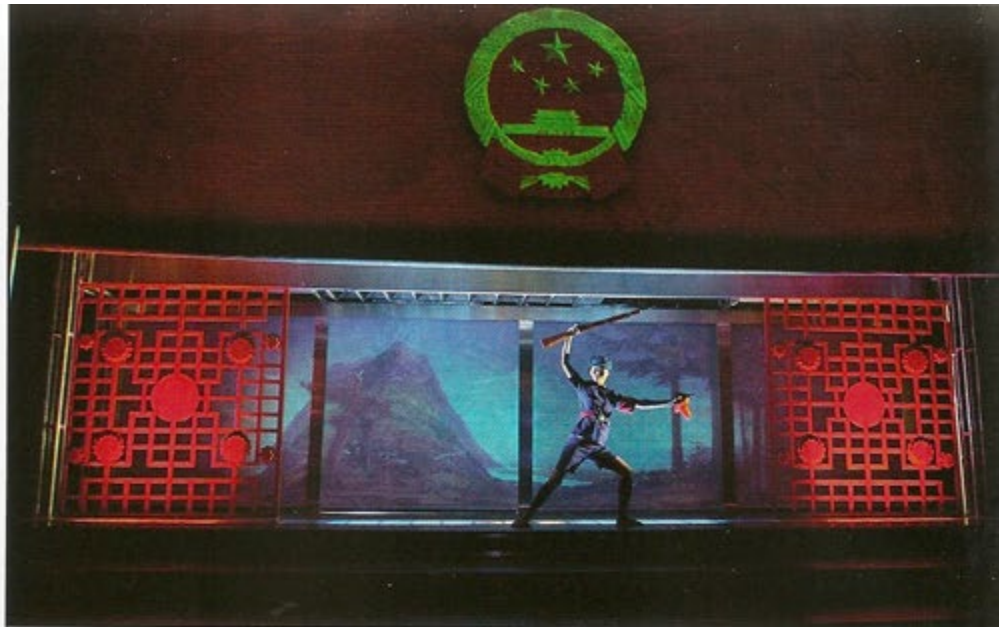

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and an infrared camera. We struggled with the physical brush, and ended up using 3M yellow reflectors to reflect the infrared light to the camera. Since *The Blue Dragon* is in English, French, and Chinese, we needed an efficient subtitle system. Emeric Epstein and Martin Granger-Piche, at VVV [maker of the Photon], integrated the VNC protocol in their Photon system, so another computer, running PowerPoint Keynote, could send subtitles directly to a layer, which we can move, change in opacity, and key over other images all through the show."

Leclerc created his projections with a Macbook laptop running PowerPoint using the VNC protocol. The front-of-house equipment consisted of an Ikegami ICD-42A infrared camera, a Black Diamond ZXLED850.30BD infrared LED illuminator for special effects, and a TVOne LM-701M seven-inch LCD monitor for monitoring its signal.

A Panasonic PT-DW5100 projector at



the front of house covered the entire stage, and a PC computer running Photon allowed for special effects during the performance. Output was through a Matrox TripleHead 2 Go, linked to the three projectors. A Behringer BCF 2000 MIDI controller handled the software.

Lighting designer Louis-Xavier Gagnon-Lebrun and sound designer Jean-Sebastien Cote complemented each other's designs. Bright Chinese

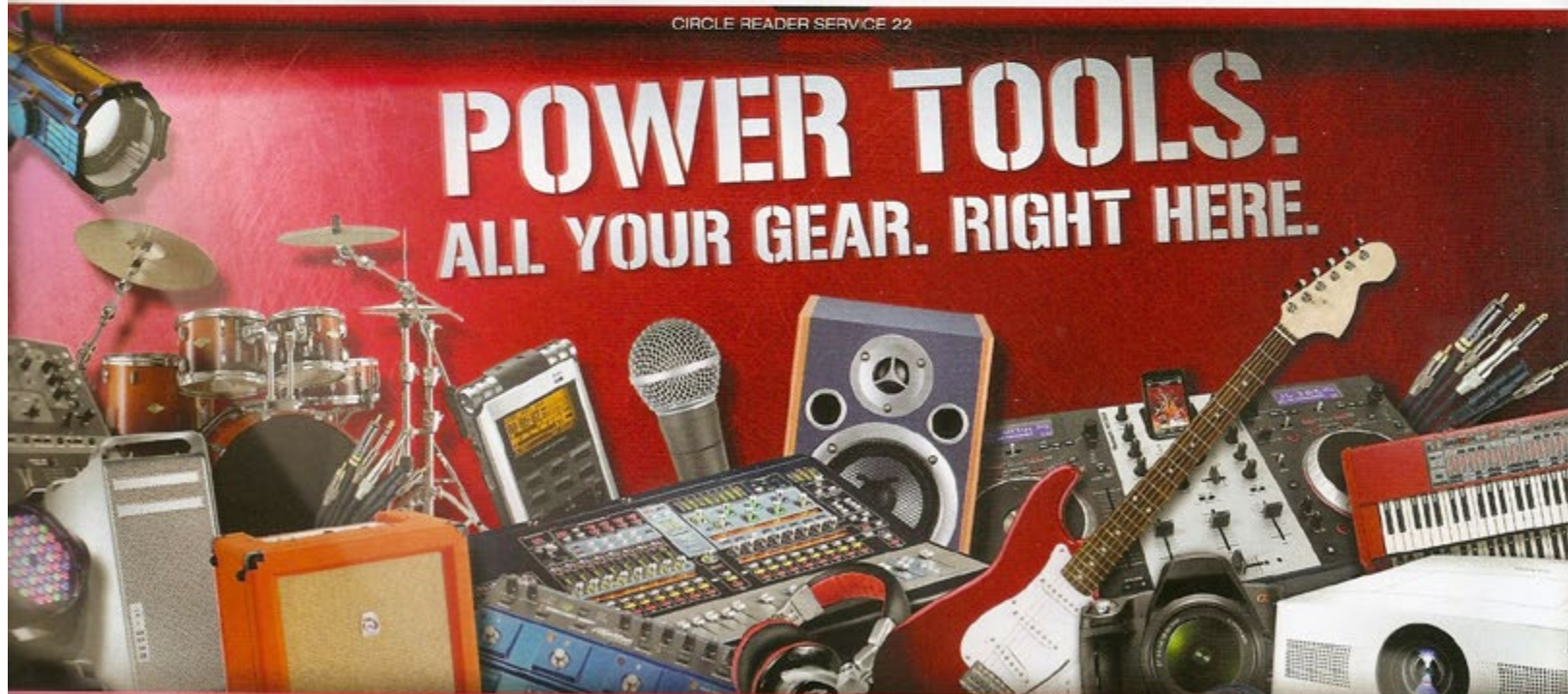
reds and deep blues were enhanced by sounds of Chinese music; startling flashes of lightning were followed by realistic crashes of thunder.

The set was divided into five narrow acting "corridors." None was deeper than 3', leaving little space to fit in lights or get proper front-of-house lighting. "To add to this complexity," says Gagnon-Lebrun, "many of the scenes involve video projection on surfaces right behind the actors. I had

Photo: Eric Labbe

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to make sure there were no spills of light and to perfectly blend the lighting of the actors and the video images. I quickly realized that I had to rely on sidelight for most of the show. This constraint became an advantage, with the sidelighting providing a high-contrast light on the actors and creating the desired cartoon style. Because the set is mostly shiny aluminum, the lights have to be positioned very precisely to control the reflections yet keep hot spots on the actors. To distract the audience during scene changes, I used strobe lights in the windows of the set, adding a dramatic touch to these moments."

Some of Gagnon-Lebrun's gear was custom-made by Ex Machina, Lepage's company. It included a desk holding an MA Lighting MA2port Node pro with grand MA on PC and an Apple MAC Mini. The rig included T5 dimmable fluorescent fixtures, T8 dimmable fluorescent panels and PAR 20 NSPs. Also used were Strand Fresnels,

ETC Source Fours, PAR 64s, and High End Systems Dataflash strobes.

Among the challenges facing Sebastien Cote, the sound designer, was how to position unseen but normal-sounding mics on the principals. "With two actors, you often get more signal in the opposite actor's mic than the speaker's mic. The operator has to constantly move the faders between the lines. We integrated live percussion sounds to three 'routines' in the show, and they are performed with a MIDI keyboard beside the desk. The operator plays Chinese percussion sounds according to the actions onstage. A lot of soundscapes are mixed live, using up to eight individual tracks."

Cote's mixing board was a Yamaha 02R6. He had 14 lines of audio coming from an iMac running Ableton Live through a MOTU 828 MKII interface; a backup was run on a Mac laptop with another MOTU interface. Both were connected to a custom digital audio switcher that allowed the operator to

go from system A to system B at the flick of a switch. Both computers were triggered by the same MIDI controllers: an M-Audio keyboard on one side and the 16 assignable buttons from the Yamaha 02R96. The keyboard sent the cues to Ableton Live, triggering 25 percussion sounds; the 02R96's buttons were used for 14 thunder sounds and one door buzzer.

Wireless Lectrosonics, DPA, or Sennheiser mics were used by the actors, along with Lectrosonics Venue receivers and LMA transmitters. Three Yamaha MSP-5 speakers were located beneath the 'ceiling' of the main floor of the set and two MSP-3 speakers were placed underneath the tracks on stage. Meyer Sound UPQ-1P, UPA-1P, USW-1P, UPM-1P, and UPS-1P speakers were also used in the orchestra, on the balconies, and upstage. The audio was processed through two dbx Driverack PA+ loudspeaker management system units. —Julie Reka Rickerd

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