



President Barack Obama with his family after accepting the presidential candidate nomination at the Democratic National Convention at Time Warner Cable Arena on September 6, 2012 in Charlotte, North Carolina.

The Human Factor

The design teams at both political conventions strove to present their candidates in the best possible light

By: Sharon Stancavage

Creating an American political convention is quite the task: The event must be presidential, television-friendly, and capable of handling the day-to-day business of the parties involved. This year, the Republican National Convention took place in late August

at the Times Forum in Tampa, Florida, and the challenges extended beyond the hurricane that scrambled the schedule of events.

"It's an unusual process," says Jim Fenhagen, senior vice president of design at Jack Morton Worldwide in New York City, who served as the production designer of the GOP

event. "For the first part of the creative process, your client is the Republican National Convention and their leaders."

Fenhagen reported to the RNC because planning began long before the identity of the candidate was known. The designer says he was brought in by executive producer Phil



Vice presidential candidate Congressman Paul Ryan and presidential candidate Governor Mitt Romney wave to the crowd after Romney's official acceptance of their party's nomination at the 2012 Republican National Convention in Tampa, Florida.

Alongi, of Alongi Media Solutions in Manalapan, New Jersey, and was asked to create a set that was “grand and important and had a certain amount of gravitas to it because of the nature of the office. And that was pretty much the only creative brief. You were designing something for a president, and it had to have good sightlines.”

In late April, Fenhagen and his team, led by Eddie Knasiak, presented a design to Russ Schriefer, from Governor Mitt Romney's team. “Russ liked it; he said he appreciated all the work—he was very, very approachable about it,” Fenhagen says, adding that Schriefer explained that Romney “does better in smaller town hall meetings with a small podium down close to the people. We needed more of a warmth about him.

That's what we're trying to focus on—who Romney is as a person. He also wanted it to be more intimate.” Schriefer also uttered a catch phrase: “America's living room,” and Fenhagen says, “That's a creative concept; I love stuff like that.”

Fenhagen and his team went back to the drawing board, coming up with three distinct designs for the Romney camp. Two were based roughly on the original design, while the third came out of left field, he says: “Our director, Ron de Moraes, and I discussed this Frank Lloyd Wright idea.” Speaking of the famous architect's homes, he says, “They're modern, yet they're warm and residential. But there's something strikingly modern about them. Based on an idea I had floating around in my

head, I did this really rough sketch featuring all these screens in different sizes and a thrust stage.” It was a hit with Romney's people and became the blueprint for the convention. Scenic fabrication was provided by the longtime RNC scenic vendor, Freeman, of Dallas.

One unexpected design element was the skylight screens placed above the stage. “They came about through that whole America's-living-room concept and Frank Lloyd Wright concept,” says Fenhagen. “I was trying to make a big space feel smaller, and I think that helped. It put a lid on it, so it doesn't flow out into space.” The Pixled F-6 LED screens—provided by XL Video, of Atlanta—showed more than just moving clouds and sky. “In the tribute



The end zone placement of the lectern at the DNC was designed to remove all barriers between the speaker and the audience.

to [Neil] Armstrong [who died two days before the convention began], there were images of him, and up in the skylights were images of outer space. It was so beautiful.” Also included in the ground plan were two spaces for musicians nestled into the downstage left and right corners.

The stage utilized 13 framed

decided that we didn’t want to impede on the big screen for that one moment,” says Fenhagen. “Most people didn’t notice it, but that opened it up so nothing was blocked. It was a pure picture.”

For screen control, the team turned to Control Freak Systems, of Red Bank, New Jersey, and screens

specificity and amount of content, to really make sure that, when someone was up there speaking, the supporting imagery went along with their speech.” It was a lofty goal, considering the fact that “the speechwriters work on those speeches right up until [showtime],” he adds.

Much of the content creation was

“Once the content was created, we had to have systems to pack it and get it loaded into the various servers as quickly as possible. Some looks were loaded while the show was live, especially on that first day when we were on the air for ten hours. There were people working all day, loading content through the entire show.” — Sanders

screens with cherry-wood faces and mahogany bevels. The sizes ranged from 8’6” to 12’4”. Fenhagen explains, “All the screens seen behind the close-ups were 4mm, and, as you moved away from them, they became 6mm. As you got to the skylights, the side screens were 11mm, because they were never going to be seen in a close-up, only in wide shots. When you pulled back and saw the whole thing, all the screens pretty much all looked the same.”

During the final speech from Romney, the designers altered the screen layout, flying one screen out so it would not block the other. “We

director Dirk Sanders, who explains: “At Control Freak, we have custom software called Encore Bridge. It allows us to control Barco Encore [presentation switchers] from a DMX console. We use that in conjunction with the media server—I love the [PRG] Mbox, and the dissolving layers allowed us to be very flexible in this show.” For the 13 screens, there were two Encore Bridges, 20 Mbox EXtreme 2.5 media servers, eight Barco Encores, six MA Lighting grandMA1 control consoles, 12 grandMA NSP2s, and two programmers.

According to Sanders, the RNC wanted “to raise the bar regarding the

built at the arena courtesy of a staff of editors and animators on site. Because it was being created as the convention took place, it couldn’t be tested on the screens first. To deal with this challenge, “Control Freak designed a screens visualizer, the CFS Freakulizer visualization system,” says Sanders. “We were able to put the screens in a screen saver, so to speak, using TV truck playback. We kept working in the background with the Mboxes, getting feeds from the truck and visualizing them in a 3-D environment virtually in real time. It was sort of like WYSIWYG for video.” The Freakulizer also sent a signal to



the truck “so the director could see the imagery and screen cues, even though there might be other things going on. We could look at content in the visualizer and not send it to the real screens.”

One key element in organizing the content was a system from Pronology of Los Angeles. “It is a comprehensive software platform encompassing acquisition, management, distribution, and archival of media assets,” explains Pronology’s co-founder Jonathan Aroesty.

“At the RNC, the Pronology system distributed and managed content between the various content contributors and artists destined for Control Freak Systems playback. We also provided an online-based portal for viewing, logging, and approving all RNC content before and during production,” he adds.

The visuals hub of the project was located backstage. “During the day, we had a pre-viz space set up backstage, so the programmers worked in there,” says Sanders. “Also during the day, we had a big 60” plasma with the visualizer on it. People from the RNC would come through, take a look at graphics as they were being made, and sign off on them.”

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get it loaded into the various servers as quickly as possible,” Sanders says. “Some looks were loaded while the show was live, especially on that first day when we were on the air for ten hours. There were people working all day, loading content through the entire show.”

Creating a theatrical look

For the lighting, Alongi called on another key member of his inner production circle: Steven Brill, of New York City-based The Lighting Design Group (LDG). Brill brought along Dennis Size, vice president of design at LDG, and freelancer David Grill. “Dennis was a tremendous help, and Dave has done previous conventions as a lighting director and programmer, so he was invaluable as a consultant for us,” says Brill. Rounding out the team were gaffer Chris Szabo; programmer/moving light operator Evan Purcell; Rolf Lee, the conventional lighting board operator; and lighting assistant Alex Kyle-DiPietro. Supplying the lighting was PRG’s Orlando office; rigging was done by Kish Rigging, of Moorpark, California. “PRG was great; Kish was great,” Brill states simply.

Speaking of his creative brief, Brill says, “They were looking for a more theatrical look with more feeling and more life to it—more dramatic and more energy, you might say.” The lighting team achieved these goals using several tools, he adds: “We increased the quantity of moving lights, decreased the overall intensity, and used movement and color as well.” The rig included more than 300 automated fixtures, “an increase from previous conventions.” The gear included PRG Best Boys; Philips Vari*Lite VL3000 Spots, VL3500 Spots, and VL3500 Washes; Clay Paky Alpha Spot HPE 700s; and GLP Impressions. “The frames [around the LED walls] were quite a challenge, because very few lights shutter down that narrowly for great distances; the

Alpha Spot 700s were great for that.” The trim heights ranged from 40’ to 60’. “Some of the throws were 50’, 60’, 70’, and, in a few cases, 100’ or greater,” he notes.

“The conventional rig relied on ETC Source Four PARs and ellipsoidals,” says Brill. “The PARs were for the audience, and the ellipsoidals were used as accents on the frames and areas where we needed additional light. Eighty [Philips Color Kinetics] ColorBlasts were used for the truss toners while six Strong Gladiator spotlights were placed throughout the venue for additional key light.

ETC also supplied the consoles: an Eos for the moving lights and an Ion for the conventional fixtures. Both had backups. Brill says, “I love using them, but generally I let the operator choose, because you want the operator to use what he’s quickest and most comfortable with.”

The use of color was a challenge. “It is, after all, a convention before it’s a production. And, as a convention, a certain amount of business takes place, so we were in bright white light whenever business was going on,” says Brill. More saturated colors were used on the band areas, during video playback, and in the red and blue truss toners and as “eye candy” throughout the arena.

“We also decreased the overall illumination level from 100fc, which had become a standard at these sorts of events, down to 85fc,” he says. “At first, there was some concern about this, but the broadcasters and the still photographers were fine with it. This lower level allowed us to introduce a little more depth and subtlety to the lighting. I think this helped create a warmer feeling overall.”

Brill also did some customization of the on-stage lectern. “We added eye lights, which, in this case, were little 2”-by-6” LED panels from Litepanels into the lecterns; they fill in the eye socket and under the neck a little bit. It just makes everything a little softer

and a little prettier.” The eye lights were controlled by the moving light console, so they could be adjusted for each speaker.

With all the video screens, color temperature became critical to the project. Brill notes, “Everything was lit to a color temperature of 4,200° to balance between good color rendition in the arena as well as on the air.

Overall, concludes Fenhagen, “We came from a slightly different point of view. I’ve done a lot of debates over the years, so I had that experience, and I used what I knew to do this project. And it did come out differently, I think.”

No barriers

The Democratic National Convention took place in early September at Time Warner Cable Arena in Charlotte, North Carolina. Production design was handled by Bruce Rodgers, of Tribe, Inc. of Salem, Connecticut and Venice, California, with Ricky Kirshner, of RK Productions of New York City, serving as executive producer. Both men worked on the 2008 convention as well as this year’s Super Bowl halftime show. Rodgers says, “From the get-go, there was the feeling that we wanted the design to be open, accessible, understandable, and focused. The DNC wanted it to feel like there were no barriers

between the lectern and the audience, that there was this closeness and a common dialogue.”

Rodgers began his process by looking at the arena placement of the stage. “We do a lot of TV shows where we load in at the rock concert end zone of the arena,” he says. “Ricky said, ‘Let’s do a study on the implications of moving to the end zone instead of the 50-yard line, which people are more accustomed to.’ The engineers of arenas typically design for heavier loads on the end zones, which makes it easier to rig. And when you’re on the 50-yard line, you have to build in extra rigging structure, which equals greater expense.”

Sightlines were also a concern. “My design was based on scale and dimension and optimizing sightlines, and it was heavily supported by the creative content designed by Allen Wells and his team at [content provider] MDot,” Rodgers notes. Sightline studies found that placing the stage at the far end of the arena was the best option for both the TV and live audiences. “We found, in this particular venue, that if we maximized sightlines to 270°, there were existing suites and work stations—chairs with tables—that were built into the arena that worked well with the stage design,” he adds. “So we didn’t have to build all the expensive desks and

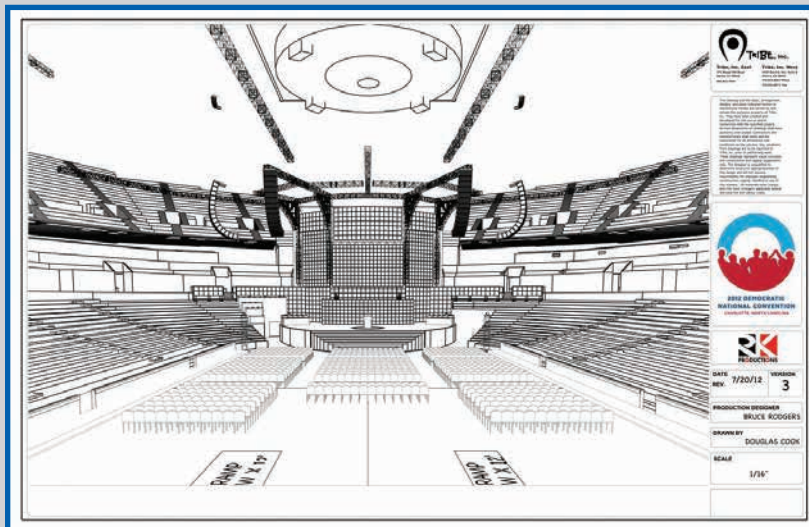
the seats like we had to do in Denver [in 2008].” Also, he says, the end zone stage “was exciting because it was a completely different way of looking at it.”

“I drew my lectern position at 100’ off the [main pedestal] cameras, and, with that situated, I designed the rest of the set around the lectern,” he continues. “I wanted a greater distance behind the person at the lectern than I had in 2008, to give the feeling that [he or she] was closer to the audience. Because we were on the 50-yard line in 2008, I only had 12’ of distance behind that person. I almost got it doubled at 22’, and, as it turns out, it allowed for some really beautiful reverse shots. It also looked very much like the people at the lectern were out in the audience, which was a plus.”

The next elements to be added in were LED walls in the form of what Rodgers calls a “hero” screen (32’-wide-by-20’-high 7mm Everbrighten BR7), a curved backing wall under that (42’-wide-by-12’-high 4mm Barco NX-4), and two supplemental walls (15’-wide-by-60’-high 9mm WinVision) at stage right and left. “The curved backing wall was custom-fabricated to help add to the illusion of dimensional imagery on the wide shots, but was very important to the tight close-ups that make up the majority of coverage on television.” All of the LED panels were provided by VER, of Los Angeles, and ran on Green Hippo Hippotizer media servers routed through TV trucks.

Curves were a key feature of the set design. “I knew I wanted my design to be a cylinder shape so that, no matter where you were in the room, you felt that dimension coming at you,” notes Rodgers.

The press was also an important consideration. “For the DNC at least, the designs are all about allowing photographers, cameramen, and news stations to feel like they can stand anywhere and get a photo-



A CAD view of the DNC stage setup in Time Warner Cable Arena in Charlotte, North Carolina.



An overhead view of the DNC stage.

graph. So we built this reverse-camera platform right behind the lectern, which you can see in some of the pictures. It's just a perch. It's the perfect position for a camera person." The set was fabricated by PRG Scenic Technologies, of Las Vegas; the company worked with Rodgers in 2008 as well.

Originally, the plan was for President Barack Obama to accept the nomination at Bank of America Stadium. "Pyrotek was going to help with a pyro finale after the President's speech there; [the company] had lots of confetti for the stadium speech as well. When the use of the stadium was abandoned because of the weather," he says, "we just brought all our confetti machines over to the arena."

Accommodation also had to be made for the talent that was scheduled to appear in the stadium. The bands performed on the main

stage and shared the gear in the arena, since the stage wasn't designed for set changes. "We couldn't do a full-on rock performance, so we did a hybrid rock/unplugged performance, which ended up, to me, having more impact because it was more intimate," Rodgers says.

Presidential lighting

For the lighting design, RK Productions turned to Bob Dickinson and Bob Barnhart, of Full Flood, Inc. in Los Angeles. Barnhart and Dickinson, veterans of the DNC, worked their first such event in 1996. "It's a very interesting project to be involved in, and we've always had a good time on it," Barnhart says.

Dickinson explains, "Ricky Kirshner was very clear that everything we do must reflect the importance of the event and acknowledge that the

convention is a serious event. Much discussion also focused on being as disciplined as possible with the design and the screen content. The last thing he wanted was for the convention to look like an episode of *American Idol*."

Like Rodgers, the pair had two venues to worry about: the arena as well as the stadium. "When the decision was made to abandon the stadium, it caused most of our arena team to go with no sleep for three days to accommodate the changes necessary for the change of venue," says Dickinson. "We all were crestfallen to move to the arena, as it had been months of planning and thousands of hours of installation in rough conditions."

Describing the process, Barnhart says, "You're first looking for your set design, which will raise all your questions from logistics to design

TELEVISION



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The load-in. The RNC light rig included PRG Best Boys; Philips Vari*Lite VL3000 Spots, VL3500 Spots, and VL3500 Washes; Clay Paky Alpha Spot HPE 700s; and GLP Impressions.

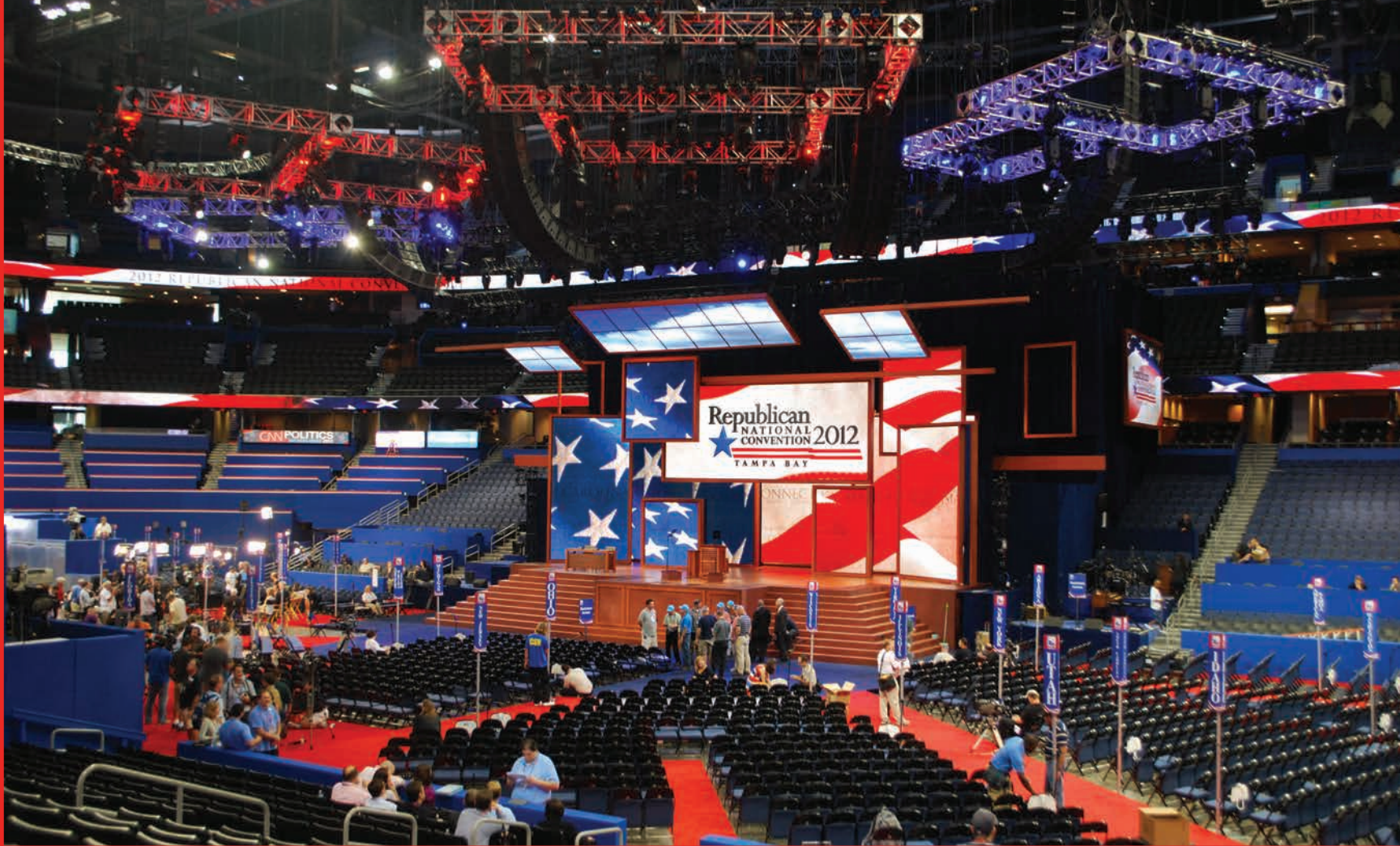
approach. Once they decided they were going to put the stage in the end zone and renderings were approved, we were on our way.”

Six Strong Gladiator spotlights were placed in the house; two, used for the lectern and main stage key light, were focused at an 18.5° angle. “The spotlights in the grid were too steep for close-ups,” says Barnhart. “In this venue, there were pretty decent followspot platforms at a very acceptable angle—it happened to be very far away, which made it difficult for the operators. We went ahead and used it, partly for reasons of cost. Also, because it’s physically part of the building, it’s easier on the crew to get up and down from their positions.”

For their automated fixtures, Barnhart and Dickinson relied on Philips Vari*Lite VL3500 Washes, VL3500 Spots, and VL3000 Spots. “The 3000 Series of fixtures is a very good staple in the industry in terms of intensity and reliability,” says Barnhart. The units were used primarily for backlight. “From an artistic standpoint, the workhorse was the Vari*Lites,” he adds.

Two hundred seventy-five PAR units were used to illuminate the delegates in the audience: “We illuminated the main floor, the first level of seating—the club level—and then the upper level as well,” Barnhart says. The rig also included Coemar LED PARs and Philips Color Kinetics ColorBlast 12TRs and iColor Cove MX Powerore. The equipment was provided by PRG’s Los Angeles and Orlando offices.

Control was handled by two consoles and two programmers. Jim Rogers programmed the moving lights on a PRG V676 console while Ron Martin handled the conventional units on an ETC Eos. Dickinson comments: “The V676 platform is extremely stable, and I use it on almost all of our large productions, like the Grammys, Oscars, etc.” The Full Flood crew included arena



The stage utilized 13 framed screens with cherry wood faces and mahogany bevels to emphasize the creative theme of “America’s Living Room.”

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lighting directors Jon Kusner and Travis Hagenbuch as well as stadium lighting director Ted Wells.

“We felt very strongly that the use of color needed to be reserved and appropriate to the screen content and the subject matter” on stage, says Dickinson. “Whenever there was no clear direction from either of those, we defaulted to medium to light blue, as it is the ‘type O’ of color, works best with most wardrobe, and is especially flattering to foreground skin tones,” says Dickinson.

From a lighting standpoint, Barnhart

and Dickinson treated the design as if “it was all on TV. I assume that, once that convention starts, we’re on TV the entire time,” Barnhart notes. That means controlling the color temperature in a very large venue. “The audience—the delegation—is a big part because that’s where the press is. And they’re interviewing people, so the color temperature of the press is key, and you want it to be as pristine as possible. It’s not going to be as pristine as the podium; however, you don’t want those two color temperatures to be too far apart. It’s easy to

get out of hand. There are a lot of loose lumens, and there’s press with their own lights everywhere,” he notes.

In the end, Dickinson and his team were happy with the results. “As I mentioned, there was a lot of work to make it work scenically and fit it within all of our various goals. I feel rather good that, through all of that, we ended up with a lighting design that in no way was compromised and was able to fulfill the functional needs of the event and the visual goals we were shooting for,” he says. 