



Next to Bus to Alice Springs

Turning a classic road movie—with drag queens—into a musical. *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert's* journey from Australia to Broadway

By: David Barbour

PRISCILLA



According to the program notes for the new musical at Broadway's Palace Theatre, "Stephan [Elliott] saw a drag queen's feathered plume rolling down the street like a tumbleweed from a Sergio Leone western. In that single moment, he created *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*. The image still haunts him."

The fruit of that moment of inspiration was the 1994 movie *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*. It was a true original, a big-hearted, but tart-tongued, comedy about two drag queens—plus one male to female transsexual— from Sydney—traveling by bus through the Outback to a gig at a casino in Alice Springs. A breakout indie hit, it was also one of a handful of films from the period—along with *Strictly Ballroom* and *Muriel's Wedding*—that helped define a new sensibility in Australian cinema, marked by a cheeky, mad-camp sense of humor and colorful over-the-top visuals. (It also put the actors Guy Pearce and Hugo Weaving on the road to international stardom.) It remains a cult classic, especially among gay audiences who treasure the film's unapologetic presentation of its characters' outrageous lifestyles.

Priscilla, the film, was driven by a score filled with disco classics, especially the songs of ABBA. This fact alone must have made it seem like a tempting property for the musical theatre. One wonders if any potential songwriters were scared away by the prospect of competing with the film's playlist of blockbuster hits like "I Will Survive," "I Love the Nightlife," and such ABBA classics as "Mamma Mia!" and "Fernando." As the century turned, however, the rise of the jukebox musical format, spurred by *Mamma Mia!*, must have made the notion of transferring *Priscilla* to the musical stage, with its disco hits intact, seem like a no-brainer.

Which is what it has proven to be: Elliot, adapting his screenplay in collaboration with Allan Scott, one of the show's producers, has retained the film's lively characters and catty repartee, along with its many touching moments, all of which are staged to the maximum effect by Simon Phillips. Thanks to a little thing called *Mamma Mia!*, the ABBA songs had to go, but this only made room for more dance-floor favorites, including "It's Raining Men," "Material Girl," and "Boogie Wonderland." As in the film, the musical centers on Tick, a troubled drag performer on Sydney's gay nightlife circuit. Even as Tick struggles with self-acceptance issues, he gets a phone call from his estranged, but friendly, wife, Marion, who runs a casino in Alice Springs. Marion needs an act for the nightclub, pronto, and she all but demands that Tick put one together for her. Of course, Marion has an ulterior motive; she feels it's high time that Tick spent some quality time with their young son.

Afraid of facing the boy, but seeing no other way forward with his life, Tick talks two of his chums into joining him on the stage at Alice Springs. The companions he chooses are Bernadette, the retired queen of an old-style Sydney revue called *Les Girls*, and Adam, a fun-



Left to right: Tick, Bernadette, and Adam in three of Tim Chappel and Lizzy Gardiner's outrageous costumes.

seeking, trouble-courting junior diva, who performs under the name Felicia Jollygoodfellow. From the get-go, Bernadette and Adam are like oil and water; in her heyday, she fully impersonated women, lip-synching to popular recordings; offstage, her gracious-lady manner is reminiscent of British film stars of the '50s. (Unlike Tick and Adam, she is a male-to-female transsexual.) In contrast, Adam's on-stage persona is brazenly artificial; he specializes in wildly high-concept costumes that do nothing to conceal his well-muscled body; to Bernadette's horror, he belts his numbers in his own obviously male voice. Offstage, his boy-crazy antics and zinger-filled commentary do nothing to endear him to Bernadette.

This unlikely trio commandeers a broken-down bus, redecorated into a kind of gay bar on wheels, and sets off across the outback, where they contend with bigoted rednecks, innocent tourists, wisecracking Aborigines, and each other. It's a tour of self-discovery for each of them: Tick realizes he can be a proud gay man and an active participant in his son's life. Adam learns to treat himself with respect. And Bernadette discovers the possibility of love with a gentle, good-natured mechanic who comes along for the ride.

In many ways, *Priscilla* breaks from the conventions of the jukebox musical, drawing its score from multiple sources and eras, and adding a trio of divas who fly in from time to time to provide their own musical commentary, as well as the opportunity for Tick, Adam,



Above: The interior of the bus is a riot of glitzy details. The beaded curtains hide elevators that take the divas (here seen flying above the bus) up on the roof. Below left: The bus after it has been "painted." Below right: Note the leopard interior.



and Bernadette to indulge in some skillful lip-synching. (The flying sequences are by Foy.) Most of the time, however, Priscilla's creative team seems determined to retain everything that made the film a hit, including the bizarrely amusing costumes by Tim Chappel and Lizzy Gardner. (Many of the film's greatest sartorial hits, including the one-piece dress made of flip-flops, make return appearances here.) But, in sticking to the film's road-trip structure, they faced many challenges. Chief among them was the issue of the title figure—exactly how do you render a life-size bus, both its interior and exterior, on stage? What are its implications for the rest of the design? And how do you create an evening of sparkly, glittery, disco-inflected fun with a big, dowdy, silver bus occupying center stage?

Well, first of all, you get 30,000 LEDs...

The rainbow bus

Brian Thomson is credited with "bus concept and production design" on *Priscilla*, a designation that should clearly indicate the relative importance of that four-wheeled vehicle in the overall scheme of things. The designer confirms that he basically began with the bus, building the rest of the show around it.

While not involved in the film of *Priscilla*—he did design another movie, *Frauds*, for Stephan Elliot—Thomson has a long list of credits that clearly mark him as the man for the stage version. These include the original *Rocky Horror Show* and *Rocky Horror Picture Show*; *Shock Treatment*, a film sequel to *Rocky Horror*; the Gillian Armstrong-directed musical *Starstruck*; and most of the stage appearances of Barry Humphries in the persona of Dame Edna Everage.

The bus, which, according to the libretto, has been bought second-hand by Tick, appears to be a '50s-era contraption with a rather drab silver exterior; it is 28' long. Inside, it has been redecorated to include a bar accented with hanging silver ornaments, a couple of pink flamingos, shag rug-covered chairs in rainbow colors, flowers affixed to the walls, a pink steering wheel, and a leopard driver's seat. At upstage center, there are three sets of beaded curtains, each wrapping around on three sides, depicting a tropical island theme. "Most of the bus dressing in the Australian production came from my home," laughs Thomson, who adds that it has gotten more elaborate as the show moved from Australia to London to New York, with a tryout stop in Toronto.

In London, the bus operated on a wireless control system, but, for Broadway, a different solution was used. According to Chuck Adomanis, a senior engineer with Hudson Scenic Studio, builder of the show's scenery, the Palace Theatre in New York is smaller than the Palace Theatre in London, the show's West End home. "It quickly became clear that it would be foolish to recreate that kind of autonomous movement, because, in the Palace, there isn't any space for those driving motions," he says, adding that an in-deck control system was also less expensive.

"There are three primary axes that move that bus," says Adomanis. "One is a belt-driven winch, for up- and downstage movements. There's also a rotating motor that allows the bus to spin. A third axis lets the bus shift off the center line; it's harder to see, but it's most noticeable in the scenes when the bus is hitting different objects." A standard Hudson motion control system is in charge of this and other elements, including the bus' wheels, which change speed and move forwards and backwards.

Inside the bus, behind the three beaded tropical curtains, are three elevators, for moments when the divas appear on the roof; three sun roof elements open up to allow the singers to pass through. Then there's the large side panel that opens up to reveal the bus' interior. "That's the most complicated effect," says Adomanis. "It's an enormous panel that covers the entire side of the bus, and it has to be a big, flat piece when open. It takes four separately controlled motors—two for the top end and two for the front—to make it appear that it is opening like a garage door, even though it doesn't hinge like a garage door. At the same time, the piece is loaded with set electrics, but it has to be very thin."

In referring to those set electrics, Adomanis is bringing up the bus' biggest talking point, the 30,000 Traxon Technologies LEDs that cover its surface, transforming the vehicle into a giant rolling piece of LED signage. Like everything else in *Priscilla*, this is a concept that gradually evolved over the course of several productions. "We originally used clusters of LEDs to get a dot comic-strip look that I was originally satisfied with, although something was missing," says Thomson. For London, the designer lobbied the producers for a more sophisticated system, creating a series of spec images to demonstrate what he had in mind. Stage One, the London scenic house, cobbled together an LED system left over from its contribution to Olympics Beijing-to-London handover ceremony.

For Broadway, David Rosenfeld, electrical foreman at Hudson Scenic Studio, says the Hudson team worked to simplify the LED system and also to make it more reliable. The key was the identification of the right product, in this case, Traxon's String RGB LEDs. "I was basically looking for a string LED that had UL-listed components, that was sold off the shelf, and didn't require any kind of proprietary software or control," he says. The Traxon product was chosen after a demonstration of various LEDs. "I liked the way the pixels are enhanced by their encapsulation," Rosenfeld adds. "It makes them glow a little more, as opposed to say, a Color Kinetics product in a Soft-LED drop, where the pixel is very crisp and clean."

Jeffrey Shepherd, a Traxon project manager, says Hudson favored the product because of "our ability to modify the product to meet their requirements, which included fitting them into CNC-routed holes, which we did by taking off the over-molding. We also created a custom pixel pitch." Rosenfeld adds, "Working with Traxon, we were able to set the pixels 1 3/8" vertically and horizontally.

“The media is downloaded into a Coolux Pandoras Box Media Player STD system on the bus, which is powered by the 200A three-phase power unit,” continues. What’s nice about Pandoras Box is that you can do color-shifting and image-shaping through DMX. The Pandoras Box unit outputs DVI, which goes to a DVI splitter and then to the e:cue’s video micro converter, or VMC. Each VMC stores the pixel-mapping information for a section of the bus; all of them work together off of one main image. There are nine VMCs altogether.” Next, says Rosenfeld, “The VMCs output to the power supplies, each of which handles three pixel distributors from Traxon; each of those supports five LED strings with 32 nodes each, for a total of 160 nodes.” One plus factor of this system, he notes, is the ability to identify the location of trouble spots in case of LED failure.

The unlit LEDs are not immediately apparent, because, says Rosenfeld, they are covered with “a vacuform material that we sandblasted to created a frosted surface, and then treated to give it a uniform tone. In London, circuit boards with black backgrounds were used. We worked with Brian to select a white background that keeps you from seeing that LEDs at all. Using a CNC router, we generated the panels that hold the LEDs; each LED is inserted into a white CNC Kydex panel. We cut each panel and, on the back, we engraved zones so you can see where each pixel distributor’s LEDs were to be located. Once we started laying in LEDs, we put in stickers that tell the electrician where each string goes. It took time to install each LED by hand, but each pixel has to be in the correct place.”

The LEDs appear when the side of the bus is defaced by a spray-painted anti-gay epithet. (It is part of a panel that attaches to the bus for this scene.) Then Tick, Adam, and Bernadette “paint” the bus, and the LEDs come on, first turning it pink. Later, the LEDs perform color chases; other sequences include a slithering serpent, during a sequence featuring an aborigine acting out a “vision quest” for a gaggle of gullible tourists, and a panoply of soap bubbles, plus a rubber ducky, in “Girls Just Want to Have Fun.”

Although the LED surface is the most eye-grabbing aspect of the bus, it has many other built-in set-electrics as well, all of which require supporting gear, notes Rosenfeld. “All the dimmers for the MR16s built into the ceilings, accent lighting, LED strips, and the PixelRange PixelLine Micro W units are located behind the walls of the interior. The side panel also contains seventy-four 50W MR16s; when open, it provides additional downlighting in the bus. There also are headlights, marker lights, and LEDs that illuminate the kewpie dolls on the bus.

“One major challenge was determining that everything would fit in that tight space without too much heat generated,” says Traxon’s Jeffrey Shepherd. “We had to do a volume and power study, to make sure the actors wouldn’t be uncomfortable—and also that there was enough space inside the bus for power supplies and set pieces, and up to 12 actors.” Thomson notes that nearly every of the bus’ elaborate décor is hiding a dimmer, cabling, media server, lift, or some other piece of electronic gear. He also notes that, when occupied by the



The divas are seen on top of the bus, having arrived via elevators. The mics on stands atop the bus are props. The vast majority of the company uses DPA 4066 capsules and Sennheiser 5212 wireless systems. The three leads and the divas are double-miked.



Above: The New York version of the bus, featuring the Traxon LED system.

three leads, the divas, and additional wardrobe and technical personnel, “at times, there are as many as 12 people on the bus, although you can’t see them,” he says. He adds, laughing, “That’s where the real show is.”

Designing the outback

The rest of Thomson’s scenery also features a significant number of set electrics. The show curtain depicts a rough map of the route from Sydney to Alice Springs, drawn in lipstick; When it reappears at the end of the Act I, it shows the progress of the trio toward their destination. “The drop features a set of red LED modules, with eight circuits of control,” says Rosenfeld. The basic design includes a trio of pink portals, each of which looks as if it is outlined in pink lipstick. The outlines are illuminated during certain musical numbers, thanks to Deon LED by TPR Enterprises. “We had to customize the way they were fed,” says Rosenfeld. “Normally, the power comes from the ends, but here we did it from the sides, which allowed us to create individual segments of light. We used vampire taps to tap into them from the sides; it wasn’t that easy, because you had to find the wire feed; once we did that, however, it just a matter of straight circuits running off the show’s regular ETC dimmers.”

However, between London and Toronto, where the show played its pre-New York engagement, the relationship between the bus and the rest of the scenery underwent a change. “The original concept was for the bus to be seen most of the time, surrounded by a ring revolve, which brought into play anything else that was needed,” says Thomson. For scenes in which the bus wasn’t needed, he says, “it would go upstage and a wall would fly in with two holes built into it for the ring revolve to go through.” Because of the lack of space at the Palace in New York, Thomson adopted a different strategy; now the bus stores upstage, where it is obscured by a series of drops that fly in for other scenes. There is also a travelator located downstage, on which various scenic pieces cross the stage.

The opening sequence ricochets between a number of locations, including the stage of a drag club, Tick’s dressing room, and the funeral of Trumpet, Bernadette’s



Above: The bus in Australia featured a different, lower-resolution LED system.

lover. The cabaret stage is a small piece that rolls on and off, as is Tick’s vanity table. The funeral is shown only by a coffin on wheels. We meet Adam when he flies in on a giant dollar sign, singing “Material Girl.”

The cabaret set is backed by a rain curtain. There is also an upstage curtain consisting of strings of more Traxon String RGB LEDs in 6400 nodes. RGB Lights, of Chicago, custom-spaced a Flexiflex grid for Hudson. “All the LEDs are superimposed on 1/16" black aircraft cable mesh with node holders every 4" on center,” says Rosenfeld. “The final layout was 5½" horizontal and 4" on center vertical spacing for the mesh. There are seven panels; each has two power supplies at the top. There are two VMCs, located on the center unit. The curtain has its own Pandoras Box playback unit. Basically, the PB Playback feeds the content to the VMCs, which feed out to the power supplies; each VMC can handle eight outputs to the power supplies, so there’s a total of 14 that are used.” The curtain features various images, and, most amusingly, the words “Go West,” when that Village People classic is performed.

The show’s introductory sequence also contains a profile scenic element depicting Sydney’s Harbor Bridge, which, says Rosenfeld, “features a module that we built called Dim 12, which can handle 12 channels of dimming, and the Diminator, a four-channel PWM LED controller. The unit contains 79 channels of control and is fed by two



The flip-flop dress is a holdover from the original film,



The rain curtain seen above is used in the opening sequence.

DMX lines and six non-dim circuits. A flashback to Bernadette's youth as a performer in *Les Girls*, a glitzy drag show, features a drop defined by stairways at left and right, with an electrified Eiffel Tower in the center. This scenic unit features warm white LED Christmas lights. "We used an over-the-counter product," says Rosenfeld, who recalls the sight of "many people clustering Christmas lights around an aluminum frame."

Because of the necessity of storing the bus upstage, most other locations are defined by drops. An outback bar is basically an upstage wall plus a bar unit. The wall is decorated with a mural of cowboys, based, says Thomson, on a photograph of the Marlboro Man as seen by him on a billboard in Los Angeles in the early 1970s. "I was there doing the L.A. production of *The Rocky Horror Show*," he says, "and I was staying at the Chateau Marmont, and the billboard was right outside my window." At one point, the cowboy's lasso lights up with LEDs. Another outback location, the town of Woop Woop, is defined by a wall of corrugated metal. When the trio performs their act in Alice Springs, we get a backstage view of the performance, with a low, flown-in proscenium that features a reverse-view neon sign saying "Alice Springs Casino."

Perhaps the biggest scenic effect is the giant shoe that



The corrugated metal wall seen above defines one of the show's many Outback locations.

appears at one point on top of the bus, to recreate an iconic moment from the film in which Adam, in full drag complete with a cape rippling up into the sky, lip-synchs to “Sempre Libera” from *La Traviata*. “In Sydney, the shoe had flashing strobe lights built into it,” Thomson says. “But, totally by accident, I found out about some Swarovski crystals and they were kind enough to make them available for the show.” (In a strange example of synergy, Thomson is also working with Swarovski on an actual production of *La Traviata*, to be staged outdoors in Sydney Harbor next year, in a production directed by Francesca Zambello.) Adam’s shoe extends out past the bus, bringing him closer to the audience for the climax of the aria.

Thomson notes wryly that, with each new city, the production has gotten bigger, yet each new theatre has been smaller, with New York’s Palace being the smallest of all, especially in terms of wing space. As a result, he says, the show is controlled chaos backstage, especially with the nonstop costume changes. Even with all the scenic glitter, he notes that he strove to keep things relatively simple. “I was aware that there was no way I could compete with the costumes,” he says. “I think we have a good balance—otherwise, it would be too much.”

Glitter lighting

On one point, Thomson is penitent: He has made life just a bit difficult for Nick Schlieper, the show’s lighting designer. What with the divas flying in and out, Schlieper has a vastly reduced number of overhead positions. Then there is the issue of lighting a stage with an LED-covered bus and the upstage LED curtain.

“Yes, I would have liked to have had a bit more room over the stage,” says Schlieper. “I’ve lost almost all the overhead flood bars, except the most upstage one.” This position is of limited use to the designer, as the upstage area is used almost entirely for storing the bus. As a result,



An Outback bar is defined by an upstage wall depicting a Marlboro Man-style cowboy.

he says, “We stretched the light plot as far as it could go. It really tested my technique.” He adds that the LED curtain was less of a challenge. “I can fudge with it, because the resolution is so low. Also, I made the content for the curtain.” (Speaking of those “Go West” cues, he says, “That was an irresistible joke; I couldn’t not do it.”)

The bus, of course, was a horse of a different color. “You don’t want to have to turn the LEDs down on the bus,” Schlieper says. At the same time, he notes, the vehicle, when unlit by LEDs, has to be treated carefully, in order not to expose the technology built into it. “We experimented for a long time before we found the right frosting for the skin of the bus. When you’re lighting it, you have to shade it very carefully; otherwise, you’ll reveal all of its tricks.”

In approaching the show, Schlieper made the discovery that *Priscilla* contains two different realities, each of which needed its own lighting approach. “There are almost two lighting rigs,” the designer says. “One is a fairly substantial conventional rig for the book scenes. Then there’s a moderate-size moving light rig on top of that.” Many of the moving lights can be found in side positions downstage—there’s a substantial position squeezed in behind the right and left line arrays—which he uses to shape the show-within-a-show musical numbers.

The workhorses of the moving light rig are Philips Vari*Lite VL3500s, which are used overhead and at the front of house, with Martin Professional MAC 2000 Performances in the side positions. (Schlieper chose the latter for their shuttering abilities.) He also makes use of ETC Revolutions as refocusable performer specials. “They are good units for color control. Because they have a halogen lamp and a scroller, I can use them with the conventionals. The Revolutions do a lot of tracking, especially with the divas. Michael P. Jones, my associate, and Chris Herman, the programmer, spent days on the vagaries of tracking people swinging on very long wires. That’s one aspect of the design we have had to refine as

we went, because it's such a time-consuming process. Each time that we've done the show, we've had a little bit more time to play with the flying. New York has the most extensive and complicated version of the flying, in terms of how many moves and when and where they occur."

Schlieper's lighting, especially the automated rig, caresses the production's many shiny surfaces—from rain curtains to Swarovski crystals—but, in some ways, he says, the bigger challenge involved lighting the overall set. "It's a neon fluorescent pink box, and you have to embrace it," he says, adding that, if it isn't well-lit; the stage pictures will turn dramatically flat. "You've got to make sure that the box lives and zings and sing. That's the starting point." He adds, "Perversely, I did search out opportunities to put a light source into every possible piece of scenery," as he goes on to mention the various set electrics discussed above.

The designer has plenty of fun cueing to all those '80s disco classics, and he freely admits that the show is extremely cue-heavy. He notes that the opening, which was refined between Toronto and New York, "introduces each character in his own context and with his own song." Thus, we meet Tick performing "It's Raining Men" on stage at the club. Bernadette is introduced at the funeral, which turns unexpectedly raucous with her rendition of "Don't Leave Me This Way." And then Adam flies in on that dollar sign to perform "Material Girl." This sequence also features another drag queen, named Miss Understanding, offering a wicked Tina Turner imitation in "What's Love Got to Do with It." As a result, the designer says, "You've got nothing but production numbers for the first 20 minutes of the show." He adds, "There's a hell of a lot of cues in the show. I think it's up to about 1,800 cue parts now, and something like 500 called cues."

For the record, the lighting rig includes 191 ETC Source Fours in various sizes and degree numbers, 164 PAR 64s, three Wildfire and two Altman UV flood fixtures (for the show curtain), ten L&E MR1612 striplights, 12 Altman four-cell striplights, 146 Wybron Coloram II scrollers, six Philips Vari*Lite VL1000s, ten ETC Source Four Revolutions, 25 Vari*Lite VL3500Qs, 20 Martin Professional MAC 2000 Performances, six Martin Mac 250 Entours, three Lycian 1293 followspots, along with Strand 520 and grandMA consoles for control of the conventional and automated units, respectively. (A grandMA Lite serves as a backup.) The gear was supplied by Hudson Sound & Light.

Priscilla marks Schlieper's Broadway debut. He was last seen in New York with a starkly designed and powerfully staged production of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, starring Cate Blanchett, presented at Brooklyn Academy of Music. Despite the many challenges posed by *Priscilla*, he describes the trip from Australia to Broadway as an enjoyable one. "My American team is fantastic, and the house crew in New York is fabulous. I've said to them, whatever else we do, we do our best to have a great time. I've had a ball doing this show."

Turn the beat around

Like Schlieper, the sound designer Jonathan Deans describes *Priscilla* as a remarkably enjoyable experience. Deans joined the production for the Toronto engagement; because he was also attached to *Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark*, which underwent an extended period of delays, Peter Fitzgerald joined the production as codesigner. (Fitzgerald's firm, Sound Associates, supplied the sound gear.) Fitzgerald, who notes that the team included associate designer Garth Helm, adds, "We had never worked together as a team, but we got the best of everyone's talents."

Despite the fact that the cast members are performing musical numbers defined by a highly processed '80s disco sound, the voices sit very well on the orchestrations and the lyrics are notably intelligible throughout. Deans cites the contribution of Stephen "Spud" Murphy, who did the orchestrations with Charlie Hull. "Spud did all the drag queen shows in Australia in the '70s," the designer says. "His knowledge of this kind of show is enormous. It was a brilliant experience to work with him. He is a very clever orchestrator; he knows how to leave spaces where the vocal line sits."

In addition, says Deans, "The show was cast with people who can sing; everyone in the chorus can nail a song. I can't even think of the last show I did where I could say that." This fact is especially notable given the demands the score makes on the chorus. "In this show, when they're not on stage, they changing costumes—and, even then, they're singing offstage," providing additional backup vocals. "It's a testament to Spud and to Simon Phillips, who hired a company of triple threats."

The Palace Theatre, with a mezzanine and balcony, and, on the orchestra level, an oddly off-center loge seating area, has been described by some designers as a difficult space. Deans, however, says he and Fitzgerald found it relatively easy to manage, thanks to their gear choices. The loudspeaker system features impressive-looking line arrays at left and right of the proscenium consisting of Meyer Sound MICA boxes. The Mica is a compact curvilinear line array, offering coverage of 100°, thus making it a good choice for the theatre's wide orchestra as well as its upper levels. The center fill consists of Meyer M2Ds and the under-balcony areas are covered by Meyer M1Ds.

Also, a delay truss, containing five Meyer M'elodies in left and right positions, is focused on the balcony level. "It's primarily used as a music fill for the topside," says Helm. Side fills and box fills are provided by four Meyer UPJs and a pair of UPMs. Four Meyer 700-HP subs provide the low end, aided by a pair of d&b audiotechnik B2s for the balcony. "Basically, there are two systems," says Fitzgerald. "The balcony system is pretty much independent of the main system, which handles the first two levels. Some of the signal in the center cluster is used for imaging in the balcony, but the balcony has its own separate PA."

Interestingly, there is no surround system, "which," says Deans, "is great. It would have been hugely expensive in

this large theatre. They had surrounds in London and Australia, but I wanted to spend more time focusing on the left-right array system. And, anyway, in a disco show like this, the surround would only be used for reverb and effects.”

Onstage foldback is a slightly more complicated proposition than usual, since coverage had to be provided for the three divas, who fly in over stage. The system includes Meyer UPJs for the mid- and upstage areas, and three vertical arrays of M1Ds for the divas when they are in flight or resting atop the bus. Helm notes that it was necessary to add some foldback inside the bus; to keep the performers up to speed on what’s happening on stage while they undergo costume changes.

Partly because of the many costume changes, and partly because of the style of music, the performers wear headset mics. The vast majority have DPA 4066 capsules with Sennheiser 5212 wireless systems. Dean adds that there is a set of Neumann 89s on stands for when the divas are required offstage. “We spent a lot of time in Toronto on mic placement,” says Fitzgerald. “In the Sydney and London productions, they used vocal tracks [to augment the on-stage vocals], but here they didn’t want to do that. Because of this, we had to mic everyone in the cast all the time. Their mics stay on during costume changes.” This leaves them free to take part in musical numbers even when they aren’t on stage. “The two on-stage sound crew people do lots of maintenance checks on the mics, which can deteriorate when things get damp. Of course, all three leads and the divas are double-miked.”

Sound is controlled by a Midas XL8 console. “I’m responsible for that,” says Helm. “I’m a huge fan of it.” It’s also the right console for this particular project,” he notes: “The score consists of mainstream rock and disco music, and the Midas product is much better at delivering it, in my opinion. Also, Midas has been really great in responding to our requests to meet the higher input counts you find on Broadway. In a rock touring situation, you would simply keep adding surfaces; on Broadway, we have real estate issues, and Midas has been helpful about that.”

Fitzgerald comments, “I wanted the best-sounding console we could get our hands on, and the Midas is one of them. I’ve always liked the EQ on it. Also, we had it in stock at Sound Associates.”

Deans is normally a fan

of the Meyer LCS console, but he notes, “It wasn’t really needed here. When I’m working on big shows for, say, Cirque du Soleil, you need many more outputs to control the speakers individually or in groups, as needed, and the LCS is perfect. But when you’re doing a show with disco music, what you need is reverbs and beats and other effects to get that specific sound.” In fact, he and Fitzgerald make use of a fair amount of onboard gear, including TC Helicon Voiceworks for reverb, Waves MaxxBass to get a lower harmonic, and TC Electronic 6000 reverbs. “The rest is in the board,” he says.

Also on the bus

Besides those already mentioned, additional personnel involved in *Priscilla* include David Benken (technical supervisor), David Hyslop (production stage manager), Bryan Johnson (associate scenic designer), Steve Henshaw (head sound), Carolyn Wong (assistant lighting designer), Jamie Clennett and Kenji Oates (animators), Pip Runciman and Micka Agosta (Photoshoppers), Chris Twyman (LED web content), Patrick Evison (head carpenter), Jon Lawon (production electrician), Patrick Ainge (head electrician), Jesse Hancox (assistant electrician), Jerry Marshall (production props).

Although the reviews for *Priscilla* were somewhat mixed, it has quickly proven to be a crowd-pleaser and is posting robust numbers at the box office. In any event, *Priscilla* is notable as a pure expression of the Australian pop sensibility, especially in its design. “It’s really an Australian musical, not a Broadway musical,” says Deans, adding that the producers and creative team “have kept it as true as possible to the Australian heritage, without losing the audience.” Given the numbers of patrons willing to sign on for the bus trip from Sydney to Alice Springs, they needn’t worry about that. 📶



The *Les Girls* sequence, as seen in the Australian production.