

Drama Queen

Cardi B's latest tour comes complete with
angel wings, stripper poles, and more

Photos & Text by Steve Jennings





Norman conceived three distinct stage and catwalk designs for Cardi B and her creative team to choose from. “I made sure the stage had great sightlines, as I knew the tour would sell beyond the 180° view line. I wanted a clean, modern look with plenty of straight lines, levels for dancers, and stair access points. I oftentimes really don’t like having LED screens behind the artist—camera feedback really annoys me—so that inspired the main center gap to become an automated lighting feature.”

The *Little Miss Drama Tour* is a high-energy, visually exciting celebration of Cardi B’s music career. The show’s stage production is top-notch, with Cardi B using it (and props) to her advantage. With fun choreography, it’s a wild party each night of the tour.

Selena Fragassi, in the *Chicago Sun-Times*, describes the production as featuring “five interludes sandwiched between the distinctive show acts where video montages carried the story arc. Beginning with a crumbling metropolis akin to the fall of Rome, the imagery soon turned to a display of impenetrable museum statues and Cardi rising above it all, flapping a pair of wings like a phoenix.”

According to Dan Savoie in *519 Magazine*, “Multiple stage configurations descended from the rafters or rolled out from the wings throughout the night—a giant birdcage taking over center stage for one sequence, a rotating strip-per-pole carousel that was equal parts spectacle and athletic event, a sweeping angel-wing swing that lowered Cardi into the room as though she was being delivered by something that didn’t have to ask permission. Staircases appeared. Platforms moved. The whole rig felt less like a concert set and more like a modular environment that kept reorganizing itself around her.”

Writing in *Billboard*, Kyle Denis noted of her show at Madison Square Garden, “Cardi has spoken about

Beyoncé's recent stadium-conquering *Renaissance* and *Cowboy Carter Tours*, which inspired her own trek, and that much was clear at last night's show. Dan Norman, the lighting and production designer for the *Little Miss Drama Tour*, understood exactly what piqued Cardi's interest about Beyoncé's light design. Queen Bey & Co. design each aspect of the show to make every vantage point feel like a front-row seat. At the *Little Miss Drama Tour*, the lighting design functions as a second show, extending the color palettes and transitions of her video interludes into projections that turned every section of The Garden into an extension of the stage."

Dan Norman, production/lighting designer

Before Norman started working on the design, he talked with Cardi B's creative director, Patientce Foster, and manager, Courtney Worrell, to get their initial inspiration. "I then created research imagery covering various ideas—props, stage layouts, lasers, lifts, flames, confetti, pyro, and lighting, all that cool stuff, so they could pick the ideas they wanted me to start merging into a design," he says. "Cardi really wanted a carousel. That was the main focal point. She also really wanted as many large interactive props as could fit onstage (and backstage). Beyond that, I was given a blank slate to start with."

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Norman adds, "I also worked with choreographer Sean Bankhead to develop props for the dancers. Patientce worked with Cardi to build the setlist and divide the show into 'acts,' which often allow for costume changes, large set piece/prop changes, and give the dancers a break. The run of the show lets the audience settle into a world, but we don't stay there too long: We constantly introduce new visual information and themes to keep them engaged."

This was Norman's first time using the ACME Lighting Pulsar S2. "It's so quick and has a tight zoom for great beam looks. Then tilt it over, and you have a strobe plate; it's a really cool fixture. I'm glad we were able to get enough of them to build out several systems across the circle trusses and stage-left/stage-right pods.

"Then we have truss fixture rings. I wanted something easy to match the turntable geometry at center stage that could automate into exciting positions and add energy for the audience. The rings were originally intended to be the carousel topper, albeit more scenically finished and loaded

with lights, video, and special effects. However, there were technical limitations when it came time to make the topper spin. With all the cables, maybe it could have spun two or three times in a direction, then go back to unwind. Or it could have gone all battery-powered with no cables, but there wouldn't have been enough power for a centerpiece. We decided to make the carousel topper ground-supported and attached to the carousel/dancer pole base, and simplify the overhead rings into circular trusses loaded with Pulsars." He adds that StageWorks and DAS DesignWorks fabricated the carousel.

Norman notes that the topper was stripped down and attached to the base, with the lights converted to Astera products running wireless DMX so they could rotate freely without cable issues. "I'm used to shows cutting a bunch of props, but we were able to make it all work budget-wise and give Cardi everything she asked for. We did have some blow-through lights in the original design, but the show was already so massive, and there was so much happening that we decided to cut them after opening night. It lessened the workload on the crew, and with everything else going on, they weren't missed."

The archway gives Cardi B a few hero moments—one placing her in the center of the portal with Astera Titan Tubes and lasers around her, and steps to the top for elevation. "The dancers interacted with the prop really well, and the initial rotation with the Steadicam walk forward is such a magical moment," Norman says. "TAIT/Gallagher Staging fabricated the archway. The bird cage was my idea. I wanted to use bungee cords that emerge from the ground rather than a large steel tube cage blocking everyone's sightlines, so I came up with this in-stage design that works surprisingly well. TAIT/Gallagher fabricated that, too."

He adds that Bankhead "wanted to give Cardi more levels and height, so the circle stage lift was a great way to get her elevated on a circular platform that matched the geometry of the B stage, and that also works with the circular bird cage. The flying wings came about because Cardi wanted to incorporate the crows from her album artwork. Armando Farfan fabricated the wing set, and Tamlyn Wright did a fantastic job art directing all the set pieces and props alongside me."

Given the style of music, Norman wanted plenty of gear to play with. "I love a clean line, using systems of lights to accent the music, really layering things in without getting too muddy. I have used all the fixtures before, except the ACME Pulsar S2s. They're tiny, but, like the [Robe] Spikie, there's power in numbers. The Robe iForte LTX is such a wonderful key light unit with beautiful skin tones. The [Vari-Lite] VL3600 was the workhorse effects profile on the rig—it's bright, the colors are fast, and it has great features. And I still love a Solaris Flare LR!"

Mickey Curbishley, Brooke Hershey, Dave Evans, John

Flynn, and David Hopkins were Norman's Solotech [lighting and video] reps. "They knocked it out of the park on this one. We did do some fixture swaps—I had wanted all [Robe iForte LTXs] on the rig, but to save on budget, we went with the VL3600, which, besides a good key light, did a great job. The GLP JDC Burst 1 was subbed to the Strike M, again for budget reasons, but they're such similar fixtures that I had no issues. I'm very happy with them. I want to give a shout-out to Nolan Padilla for his groundwork and for keeping us on track as creative producer. Baz [Halpin], thank you for having me design this show. Terry Smith, a phenomenal crew chief. Then from TAIT, Aaron Siebert, Logan Lower, and Saron Lasu, who were such a pleasure to work with.

Davey Martinez, lighting programmer

This was Norman's first experience with Martinez, whose past clients include Beyoncé, Adele, Bruno Mars, Jay-Z, and Jennifer Lopez. "It was a very collaborative process from the start," he says. "Pre-production was focused on aligning on the show's visual language, what the rig should feel like, how aggressive or restrained certain moments should be, and how lighting would support the overall performance. Dan has a very clear vision, but he's also open to ideas, which made the process exciting. A lot of our communication was about refining intent, taking a broad concept, and dialing it into something that reads clearly in a live environment. By the time we got into rehearsals, that foundation made things move quickly."

Martinez didn't start with a completely locked setlist. "In grandMA3, we programmed a broader range of material than what made it into the final show. We built out a flexible library of songs and looks, so we had options as the creative direction evolved. As rehearsals progressed,



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Above: Given the style of music, Norman wanted plenty of gear to play with. “I love a clean line, using systems of lights to accent the music, really layering things in without getting too muddy.” Opposite: Nick Arnold programmed all of the flames, pyro, and lasers for the tour. It requires more than 500 pieces of pyro product for each performance.

the setlist tightened up, and a few songs were swapped or restructured, but because the system was built with flexibility in mind, those changes didn’t require starting from scratch. Much of the programming approach focused on creating adaptable building blocks that could translate across multiple songs.”

Martinez’s early career was rooted in classical music and EDM, which he feels provided him with a solid training ground. “Those worlds move fast, and it forces you to think rhythmically and react instinctively to music,” he says. “You’re building looks that are very timing-sensitive, very dynamic, and often driven by energy more than narrative. That experience translated directly into my work with major artists. Even in more structured pop or hip-hop shows, there’s still a need for impact, precision, and musicality. The difference is that you’re applying that same intensity with a lot more restraint and intention.”

A few of the rig’s elements were new to Martinez, especially the ACME Tornado. “It is a super aggressive and versatile fixture with tons of flexibility. It has great beam quality, strong color, and movement that really brings the rig to life. I was very pleased with this fixture and will definitely be looking forward to programming with it in the future.”

Sandy Paul, lighting director

Paul, who has previously worked with the tour management company HansTolo Inc. on tours starring Chris

Brown and Lil Baby, happily returned to the fold for the *Little Miss Drama Tour*. “Davey and I had previously worked with Lil Baby on a small amphitheater run right after the pandemic,” he says, “but this was my first time working with Dan. It was exciting watching them put this show together.”

The show is run almost entirely using timecode, with a few small exceptions, such as when the DJ plays to the crowd during brief breaks between the show’s acts. “I’m directing the show on a grandMA3 console,” Paul says, “and it’s been exciting to run. With Cardi’s energy and magnetism onstage, combined with the level of her production, this show is quite an experience.”

Paul notes that the rig includes 24 Robe iForte LTXs for front-of-house key light; 45 Robe Spiiders on ladders and under the stage; 119 VL3600 Profiles on the main chevron trusses, providing high side dancer key lighting, and under the scenic risers; 140 TMB Solaris Flare LRs on main chevron trusses, also on the toms with the Tornados and under the scenic risers, 144 ACME Tornados lining the runway plus six toms positions across the back wall; 161 ACME Pulsar 2s in multiple square and circle pods; seven ACME Thunderbolts under the stage for lighting portholes, 296 Astera AX2 Tubes installed in the scenery, and 20 CHAUVET Professional Color STRIKE Ms under scenic risers and down the runway spine truss.

Brittany Mena, media server operator

The tour, Mena notes, involves “a very plug-and-play style of programming where we receive and create a layer for the content clip and then attach the necessary timecode stamp; from there, it’s making sure the timing lines up and mitigating any delays in frames. We have two upstage hero walls that take input from Disguise and two side IMAG screens that take the program cut directly from the director’s desk. For Cardi B’s set, every song runs on timecode, and I use a summina MIDI foot controller along with a Bomebox [MIDI hug] to fade up an IMAG layer for the moments when she wants to speak to the audience. For the opening DJ sessions, I run through several looping effects, and I set my MIDI controller to control the lighting, color, and speed of these videos to make it a more interactive session and to go along with the music as needed. We are running video with two GX 3 [servers from Disguise], outputting as HDMI to a routing matrix to then go to the LED processors.”

The tour has many interactive IMAG segments, including the artist descending into the pit to perform with the

audience and “fan cam” segments that put dancing audience members on the big screen. “In those moments, it’s crucial to be quick and have some discernment on when it’s time to go to black or move on to another audience member,” Mena says. “We also do not want to put any audience member in compromising positions up on the big screen, so it’s a team effort in knowing when to try to cut something off, whether that’s coming from me as the operator, the director, or the camera operator. We’re all here to make sure everyone’s having a good time.”

Mena notes the show is synced to timecode with the playback (AP) rig. “Along with that, we have genlock generators to allow for accurate sync with the camera and LED systems. Visually, this is an absolutely amazing show: The lighting, choreography, video, and camera work all come together in a beautiful way. Cardi B calls it a party instead of a show, and it’s the perfect description of what was created. I’m glad I could be a part of making this happen, especially with the people on this crew that I’ve known for many years and consider my family.”





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Demetrius Moore, front-of-house engineer

Moore mixes the tour on a DiGiCo Quantum 852, noting that he’s so comfortable with its work layout, he can get around the surface with his eyes closed. “Channel macros have been one of my favorite features of this desk. I’m running 64 channels for main left and right, subs, and front fills.” He doesn’t use many in-console effects, just dynamic compressors, dynamic EQ, and the Mustard Source Expander. “For my outboard gear, I do use plug-ins running through DiGiCo’s transform.engine [by Fourier Audio], with other plug-ins that include the Seventh Heaven Professional reverb, Soundtoys 5, TC Electronic 2290s, Avalon VT-737SP, Eventide H9000, and a dbx 120A sub-harmonic synthesizer.”

Clair Global is the tour’s audio provider, and for the PA system, Adamson Audio was chosen. It consists of 21 Adamson VGts for the main hangs and 15 for side hangs, 19 flown VGs subs, eight for ground subs, then 16 CS10s (270 hang0, and four Adamson CS7s for front fills. “I’ve approached this tour like any other tour, making sure the artist’s vocals are upfront. For Cardi B, with the album music mix, I’m making sure the signature instrumental parts are cutting through. Blending the album parts and the live elements to give the songs a little bit of a different dynamic and movement in the arena and keeping it consistent daily.”

Chainey Harpe, monitor engineer

Harpe mixes the tour on a DiGiCo Quantum 338 console, which he says is “the right tool for the job. The

console can manage it all if need be. The rest is preference and attention to detail that should always be a factor at this level. It's assisted with a Rupert Neve Portico II master bus processor, Waves, UAD, and Bricasti M7, then a Sound Devices RF with Sennheiser capsules, and Wisycom for IEMs." He adds, "My plug-in list changes from tour to tour. I look for plug-ins that specialize in certain areas as well as those that are versatile. Again, it depends on the need. Sometimes less is better."

Harpe says it has been smooth sailing on this tour. He has spent many hours mixing arena and stadium shows where the principal artist is on a ramp in front of the PA, sometimes resulting in severe feedback, but he has learned how to deal with this. "Cardi is strong on the mic with good technique, which makes it easy to keep her set in the mix."

Cardi B's main vocal mic is the Sound Devices Astral HH with Sennheiser MD 9235 capsules. "It was the mic choice Demetrius made, which I agree with. For Cardi's headset mic, we have a Sennheiser HSP4 on the Sound Devices Astral Mini." He created a mix for Cardi B during production rehearsals, which she likes. "After using it, we had a couple of short conversations, and we've been on a roll ever since. Cardi is using JH Audio Sheena [in-ear monitors] and the IEMs are the Wisycom MTK952/MPR50, where I run everything AES."

Nick Arnold, special effects designer/programmer

Arnold programmed all of the flames, pyro, and lasers for the tour. It requires more than 500 pieces of pyro product for each performance. "Dan Norman reached out to me to help design the effects for the tour, and Pyrotecnico provides the crew and equipment. This show would not be possible without the incredible Pyrotecnico crew: Tyler Cooke [crew chief], Rey Mangubat [SFX/pyro shooter], Nick Toverada [SFX/pyro technician], and Greg Ellis [laser operator]. They are absolute rock stars who ensure the show looks its best every night. I would also like to thank Dan Norman, Raphiki [Rhodes], Tone [Lopez], and [tour manager], and Jason [Milner] for involving me in this project, and also Jackson Frazier, the project manager at Pyrotecnico, who was with me on this."

Cardi B and her team were specific about the pyro programming, including the now-viral opening, which utilizes nearly 100 pieces. "We have 12 [Galaxis] G-Flames during the penultimate act to support the intensity of the music and choreography, and eight Magic FX Eco2Jets on the downstage edge. For lasers, we use ten KVANT Atom 60W units in the rig and seven KVANT Atom 10W units embedded in the archway. We also have six [Magic FX] Stadiumshot confetti cannons, a pyro rifle, and a pyro bow and arrow. This show does a great job of

switching up what effects are utilized at what times; just when the audience thinks they've seen everything, we hit them with something different." All effects, flames, and lasers were programmed on the grandMA3, along with controlling Pangolin Laser Systems BEYOND software. "The pyro was programmed on Finale 3D and is fired with FireOne. Ray operates the special effects, flames, and pyro, while Greg [Ellis] operates the lasers."

Greg Ellis, laser operator

Ellis [who is subcontracted through his own company, The Phoebus Cartel] uses the grandMA3 command wing XT to control Pangolin BEYOND. "The entire show is timecoded on the MA side with programming done primarily by Nick Arnold," he says. "My biggest challenge from show to show is the zoning of the lasers. This design contains numerous elements where I need to avoid hitting B-stage scenic pieces, numerous robspots with cameras attached, etc. Finding the alleys to safely zone while maintaining creative integrity has been an adventure, to say the least!

"We have ten KVANT Atom 58W lasers, which are full-color RGB semiconductor diodes. There are also seven KVANT Clubmax 10s used in our bridge scenic during one section. Those are used with -2 diffusion lenses for a crowd-scanning effect during Cardi's reveal in that act."

The Little Miss Drama Tour concludes its run on April 18 in Atlanta. 📶

Little Miss Drama Tour

Production Crew:
Production/Lighting Designer: Dan Norman
Lighting Programmer: Davey Martinez
Lighting Director: Sandy Paul
Video Director: Bertrand Pere
D3/Disguise Operator: Brittany Mena
FOH Engineer: Demetrius Moore
Monitor Engineer: Chainey Harpe
SFX (Lasers/Flames/Pyro Designer/Programmer): Nick Arnold
Laser Operator: Greg Ellis
Production Managers: Raphiki Rhodes, Tone Lopez (HansTolo Enterprises Inc.)
Tour Manager: Jason Milner
Production Companies:
Lighting & Video: Solotech
Staging: TAIT/Gallagher
Additional Scenery: Stage Works USA/DAS DesignWorks
Automation: TAIT
Sound: Clair Global
Video Content Designer: Raw Cereal
SFX: Pyrotecnico
Props: Silent House