

A STUDY IN SCARLET





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Bold colors, startling video, and trippy effects are the hallmarks of Doja Cat's *Scarlet Tour*

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"Doja Cat is that gratifying form of celebrity where you can completely understand why she's famous." So wrote Kat Sophia in the *Santa Barbara Independent*, citing the singer's catchy hooks, captivating voice, assertive personality, and "dance moves that sweep almost all of her contemporaries under the table." These skills are on display on the *Scarlet Tour*, the star's first arena outing, which proves that she can easily handle (and fill) large venues.

Just as Doja Cat's similarly titled new album represents

a venture into darker territory (its original working title was *Hellmouth*), the *Scarlet Tour* serves up a bizarre, slightly nightmarish vibe. Beginning with a film-noir opening featuring shafts of stark white light, it offers elaborate dance numbers, a giant spider, and a detached eyeball stalking the star. These and many other effects are drenched in saturated color. As Bob Gendron wrote in the *Chicago Tribune*, "Doja Cat had a packed audience seeing red Wednesday at United Center. Literally and figuratively...the rapper-vocalist coordinated most of the visual features of

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her show around the primary color. Emotionally, she conveyed it with her welled-up anger and sultry passion.”

According to creative producer Parker Genoway, of the firm Silent House, “This is Doja Cat’s first proper tour and anticipation was high for what she was going to do to stun audiences. Brett Alan Nelson (creative director and stylist), Baz Halpin (producer), and I started collaborating months ago with Doja Cat to dream up different gags and moments that would frame her as the badass rap artist that she is.” He also cites the input of Tony Marino (tour manager) and Aaron Draude (production manager). “The new music was the focus, but she also had an extensive repertoire of hits that needed to be featured alongside the *Scarlet* album. The goal was to use impressive special effects and puppetry (created by NewSubstance and Michael Curry Designs) to bring an eerie tone that made audiences feel unsettled and curious.”

Unsettling is the word for the set, which features a deck that practically thrusts the star into the audience and, upstage, towering video screens placed at 90° angles. “We knew we wanted a massive architectural statement shape that played to all seats,” Genoway says. “We started with a large triangular stage flanked left and right by angled portrait LED screens split center by a large turntable. The

stage footprint corresponds to the upside-down ‘A’ used throughout the *Scarlet* album campaign. The layout of the screens prioritized IMAG rather than full-canvas landscape video content. We’re so used to seeing shows these days with large amounts of world-building video content and it was important to us to feature brilliant camera work ahead of video content. Christian Lamb, the camera director, chose a slew of camera positions that played with this architecture and highlighted Doja Cat epically with visual content/Notch developed by BLINK. It was also great to get Doja so far out into the audience with this layout; we could sell seating on the far sides because all seats had unobstructed views.”

All these elements come together in the opening sequence. “During the deeply unsettling intro by music director Gil Smith, Doja’s bloody body double, ‘Scarlet,’ appears flashing on the screens in different locations. Quick frames create confusion and have hints of horror,” Genoway says. “This sets up the reveal of the real ‘Scarlet’ appearing upstage center, shrouded in a veil. It was a fun trick because audiences assume that she is Doja only to watch ‘Scarlet’ fall into a trap door downstage center where Doja rises, revealing a new custom outfit every night of the tour.”





Opposite and above: CHAUVET Professional Maverick Storm 2 Profiles are seen in the overhead pods and in floor positions. “We also use [GLP impression] X4 Bars to create a ghostly fog curtain between the screens, which ended up being one of the best-looking moments in the show,” Genoway says.

About that spider and eyeball: “The idea of ‘monsters’ kept coming up,” Genoway says. “Doja is terrified of spiders, so it felt natural to bring a 15’ tall articulated spider to life. With a performer inside moving the legs, it is connected to two [TAIT] Nav Hoists on a tracking truss above, creating huge movements above Doja and the audience. The eyeball, also with a performer inside, was inspired by a painting by Doja. It has a carbon fiber frame, making it lightweight enough to move around easily; it has a 50’-long light-up optical nerve from the back, disappearing into the rig above.” TAIT handled all staging and automation.

Interestingly, Genoway adds, “Ninety-five percent of the time, we feature live IMAG from our comprehensive camera package provided by Solotech and Railcam. We also did a shoot with XR Studios ahead of the tour to capture some footage that was intermixed, but most of the time it is live IMAG.” The screens, consisting of ROE Visual Carbon CB5 panels, are driven by disguise gx 3 media servers, handled by programmer Ryan Sheppard, of Dark Matter Technologies. Video gear was supplied by Solotech.

Adding to the spectacle are special effects provided by IMAGE SFX, which Genoway calls “easily one of the most effective parts of the show. Nick Arnold programmed lasers, pyro, flames, LSG pop-ups, fans, and fog curtains. Each side of the stage is lined with their proprietary Fire Screens;

we can run intricate chases where each jet is treated as if it were a pixel. It was also fun to play with our 10-plus pyro positions to create dynamic looks throughout.”

Lighting

The lighting is both spectacular and economical, employing, Genoway says, “bulk amounts of very few fixture types. The different systems of lighting blend nicely with the scenic and LED as we hid any sort of truss from the audience. The primary fixtures are Color STRIKE Ms and Maverick Storm 2 Profiles [both from CHAUVET Professional]. We also use [GLP impression] X4 Bars to create a ghostly fog curtain between the screens, which ended up being one of the best-looking moments in the show.”

The overall rig consists of 92 Color STRIKE Ms, 137 Maverick Storm 2 Profiles, 30 impression X4 Bar 20s, 24 Robe FORTEs, and five FORTEs as part of the RoboSpot followspot system. Fog is provided by MDG theOnes and Martin JEM ZR45s. Dan Norman, the tour’s programmer, says, “The Color STRIKE Ms flank the screens on towers,” an arrangement, he adds, that “allows us to get some shapes and energy without sacrificing any of the [video] content. Typically, a beam fixture might obscure the content. But having all those strobes there allowed us to do intricate programming with color gradients, intensity wipes, and

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TAIT handled the production's staging and automation; soft goods were supplied by Sew What?

whatnot. You don't have to turn the units up to 100, and they still provide enough excitement without compromising other aspects of the production." The units also help facilitate certain creative effects: "There's a moment when everyone is on the turntable upstage and we're able to tilt the fixtures upstage, which lets us do some cool sidelight."

The Maverick Storm 2 Profile, Norman says, "is a small unit but impressive. Its size is deceiving; I was expecting it to be kind of dim, but it packs a lot of power. It's awesome to have a single fixture across the stage because it's easier to match colors, strobe rates, and intensities. When Parker wants the whole rig to strobe at a certain Hertz, we can do that because we have a single fixture type in all those positions." The units are deployed in the pods above the video screens. "There's also a skinny pod, upstage center, behind the curtains," he says. "More of them are on the ground, flanking the stage at right and left." This being the *Scarlet Tour*, he notes, the Maverick Storm 2 "makes a red that is quite saturated. Typically, we swap over to color-chip red because, on other fixtures, the CMY red can come out like amber. On this, the CMY red is actually

preferable. [The unit] also has a fast tilt and faster zoom, which is usually what I'm after."

The impression X4 Bars, Norman, says, "are upstage in the center gap between the video screens. They give us a sheet of light that we often use in transitional moments. We turn everything else off and they execute a sweep as a way of getting into a different look." The FORTES, he adds, "are our key light fixtures because they have a strong CRI. There are 12 over the stage as top lights for the dancers and 12 as key lights. Sometimes, we swing them out to wash the audience for some extra excitement."

In terms of programming, Norman says, "It's interesting with an artist like Doja Cat. Some songs program themselves because the hits and actions are quite obvious. You don't have to go hunting for a hook. A lot of it involves picking a concept for a song, say, let's use the pods overhead as our main fixture and accent it with the other clusters. Sometimes we use only the fixtures on the ground because that's the concept. But I think many of the timings in the programming were pretty self-explanatory."

At the same time, he notes, "It can be easy to over-pro-



The eyeball, which has a performer inside, consists of “a carbon fiber frame, making it lightweight enough to move around easily; it has a 50’-long light-up optical nerve from the back, disappearing into the rig above,” Genoway says.

gram, hitting every single bit, so sometimes I’ll be a little restrained and keep from hitting everything. You don’t want it to look too crazy or too busy. A few times on this show, I thought, this song is about the choreography, so it’s okay not to hit every accent.” Nevertheless, the cuing is extremely lively, especially the fast-paced chases in the opening and, in other numbers, the bumps and hits that draw out the music’s insistent rhythms.

Lighting is controlled via an MA Lighting grandMA3 console, using MA3 software. Although many lighting professionals, comfortable with grandMA2, have been slow to embrace the new version, Norman says, “I’m a convert. I’ve actually reprogrammed some MA2 shows on the 3 software, and I won’t be going back. It’s an interesting concept of programming. Like the old software, there are ten different ways of accomplishing the same thing and the hardest part is figuring out the most efficient way to get what I’m after, as quickly as possible, while still making it adjustable in rehearsals. A lot of the basic stuff is the same. Inside the software, you have presets, fixtures, and group selection orders. Most of the stuff a touring operator

will work on, like updating positions, is exactly the same.

“It gets a little tricky when you’re talking about the effects engines, which are called ‘phasers’ and a new system of ‘recipes’.” According to MA Lighting, “Recipes can be a very useful tool for touring shows or when the show changes a lot. Recipes can be stored in cue parts and presets. A cue part or preset can contain multiple recipe lines describing what should happen based on a set of information. The recipe can be used to ‘cook’ values into the cue part or preset. This cooked data is marked by a small pot icon and the cooked data can easily be removed again if needed.” Norman says, “I’ve started programming productions as recipe-based only, putting actions for intensity, color, and other repeatable ideas into them. I think some people are still working out what is the appropriate time to use a recipe and when to do it the old-fashioned way.”

Offering an example of the power of recipes, Norman says, “Let’s say you have 60 fixtures, and you want to do a wipe from the center with a one-second delay time. If you program that with a recipe and a group selection, you can tell it to turn on from a time of zero to one second on cen-

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ter. The cool part is that if we go to a festival and they have 200 fixtures, you can take that same action and apply it, and the console can do the math. You don’t have to sit there and rework it. Those selection groups let you update a show super-quickly and they make scaling things a lot easier. In the MA2 software, you had to spend a day or two in previz, updating all your discrete delay times; with MA3, you can accomplish the same task in an hour or so.”

Another advantage, Norman says, is that with the MA3 software, “You can use a USB key to connect to [the previz program] Dependence. Previously, you’d sometimes need 12 NPUs to unlock enough parameters. The MA3 software has a USB key that allows you to previz your production. All those things make it so much easier. I also have a good

workflow to get out of Vectorworks, using an MVR to get inside the console to get all the patch and everything. It’s turned out to be a super-efficient and time-saving software change for me.”

Anna Merritt, the board operator, says, “Part of the reason I really wanted to do this tour was to learn the MA3 better. It’s a pretty easy learning curve; I thought I’d have a lot harder time picking it up. Sometimes, I have to Google things—like, I need to approve access for all my universes, so where is that? It used to be in the pool and now it’s in the patch. But there are some super-awesome things about MA3. You can recast presets, which means you can add in new attributes. Say you have a whole rig with gobo wheel one and you’re at a festival and you need to switch because wheel two has rotating gobos; you can literally do that. Add that new attribute, recast it, and it updates everything.”

Echoing Norman, she says, “Recipes are a great addition.”

And, Merritt adds, “Dan is phenomenal. He has been on MA3 for more than a year and he’ll only use MA3. I feel spoiled because I got to learn from one of the best programmers out there. And, going forward, I’m going to ask for MA3 if I can.”

Norman adds that he was careful to ensure that the spider (photo, above) is lit so that its mechanics aren’t visible to the audience. In any case, the show features a wide variety of looks, contrasting thick, atmospheric saturated color washes with electric chases, and sinister, noirish flicker effects among others. Overall, the production provides Doja Cat with an ideal launch into the arena world.

The *Scarlet Tour* ended, temporarily, in December, but its European leg begins in July. 📡