

# Precision and Order

By: David Barbour

## A New Zealand production of *Mary Poppins* heralds the country's return to normalcy

Imagine entering a packed theatre again and seeing a show without coronavirus tests, masks, social distancing, or worries of infection. One place where that is happening right now is New Zealand, where a recent production of *Mary Poppins* signaled a return to normalcy that the rest of the world can currently only dream about. That it was a joyous event is beyond doubt. As theatre critic Ethan Sills wrote in the *New Zealand Herald*, "It has been seven months since the Civic Theatre was last able to stage a show, and I didn't know how much I'd missed that star-covered ceiling or those steely-eyed lions guarding the stage until I sat down, surrounded on all sides by a socially undistanced crowd equally thrilled to be back."

Martin Searancke, the production's lighting designer, adds, "It's been a roller-coaster ride. The show was going to open in April, but we went into our first lockdown on the Monday before the Friday we were due to pack-in. We have a level system here for the coronavirus. Level 1 is normal, but with our borders closed. We went to Level 4, which meant everyone had to stay home for about six weeks. The only things open were supermarkets and pharmacies; the police were there, stopping people on the streets. You had to have a piece of paper that showed you were an essential worker."

The lockdown worked, Searancke says. "We slowly came down the levels until we celebrated 100 days without any COVID cases. During that time, the producers phoned, saying they had new dates for the shows." The news came with a surprising emotional punch, he adds. "I'm a really upbeat person, normally; it takes a lot to get me down. I didn't realize how much the lockdown affected me until I got that call."

All photos: Courtesy of G&T Productions







Searancke says that he gave some numbers a pastel look (above) while others received grittier treatment (opposite page).

A setback appeared when, Searancke says, “We got a community case that spread and had to go to Level 3, which meant fewer than ten people in gatherings. But it happened far enough out from the opening that it didn’t stop us. We delayed the show twice more by a week, and we ended up packing in at Level 2, knowing that we couldn’t open” because it tops out gatherings at 100 persons. The hope was the country would reach Level 1 in time for opening night. “Halfway through the first week of production,” he says, “we got the news that we were going to Level 1. You could hear the cheers all over the theatre. It was a little touch and go, but it happened in the end.” The show’s producers note that it was the largest production in the world since the pandemic happened.

He adds, “Since we’ve opened, we’ve had a couple of nervous moments. A community case popped up last week, but it was someone who works on a fishing boat,” so authorities decided to hold firm. He adds that Grant Meese and Terry O’Connor, of G&T Productions, the show’s producers, “put it on the line to make the show happen and hats off to them. They personally stood to lose a lot of money, but they took that risk.”

The production was staged in the Civic Theatre, a vintage cinema that narrowly escaped being demolished in the 1990s before being renovated into a house for touring theatre. (Before the shutdown, *Mary Poppins* was set to open

at another theatre.) “It was a big project,” Searancke says of the renovation. “They built a complex at the back, with a new stage; it’s a great place to work.”

In the case of *Mary Poppins*, Searancke says, “The show relies on a lot of projection elements and, as a lighting designer, that complicates things a little bit, making it that much harder to light subjects.” For that reason, he made extensive use of Vari-Lite VL2600s; their full-wipe framing shutters allowed him to work with precision, focusing on specific aspects of the set without fighting the projections.

The move to the Civic caused a rethink of the designer’s approach because it “has much bigger throw distances,” he says. “The bridges there are three times the distance, but it has much easier boom positions. Also, the previous theatre would have come with a house rig, so we had to negotiate to get a similar rig at the Civic.”

In addition to the VL2600s, Searancke says that he made extensive use of a number of Showline fixtures, plus Vari-Lite VL3000s for additional firepower. “This is the first show I’ve done where everything onstage and overhead, except for four fixtures, was a moving light or an LED source. That was a little scary for me.” As a result, he notes, “I didn’t have as many lights as I would normally have, but we are now at the point where you can get away with doing that.” Still, he says, “When I was doing power calculations, I thought, I must need more for that! I ran the whole show off



## CLOSE-UP: LIGHTING

130A, three-phase.”

The makeup of the lighting rig caused an epiphany, he notes. “It made me realize how much things have changed. Even a few years ago, I wouldn’t have front-lighted someone with LEDs. The colors that LEDs give us are wonderful but for a long time they just didn’t work to light faces. *Mamma Mia!* [in 2018] was the first show I did where that all changed. The technology is there, and it works.”

Breaking down the script, Searancke says, “You have the expansive parlor scenes [in the home of the Banks family]. There you need to light a big space. In the fantasy numbers, like ‘Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious,’ I took inspiration from pastel paintings. The third element is the rooftop scenes [the setting for the second-act showstopper “Step in Time”]. They are much grungier and dirtier; those were the great ones to do.”

Running the numbers, the rig included three VL3000

Spots, three VL3500 Spots, ten Showline SL300 FX Washes, 12 ETC Source Four Lustr Series 2s, 12 Adam Hall Cameo EVOS W7 Wash units, twenty 5°/80V Selecon Pacifics, thirteen 220V Selecon Pacifics, three Robert Juliat Cyrano followspots, two hazebase base hazers, and one Martin Jem smoke machine. Most of the gear was supplied by Xytech Lighting Systems.

For control, Searancke had a Strand NEO as his main desk, a Strand Neo Compact 10 remote console, and a Strand Neo rack system for tracking backup. It’s an unsurprising choice, as he is the director of Dream Solutions, maker of the software Lightfactory, which is the basis of the Strand Neo range. The Compact 10 is a brand-new product, a ten-fader console designed for smaller applications. It includes an internal 7" touch screen, along with the ability to add an external touch monitor. It features four DMX universes by default with the ability to upgrade to ten. (Also coming



The production also featured scenery by John Harding, costumes by Stephen Robertson, projections by David Spark/Pixel Productions, and sound by Glen Ruske/Bounce NZ.



out at the same time is the NEO Compact 10 PC Wing, a USB control surface accessory based on the same hardware design as the Contact 10.) To support the Compact 10, the company has also released Neo OS V3.11, which adds enhancements to cue lists and the magic sheet as well as a new matrix timing tool, among other features.

Searancke says that the Contact 10 was useful when working in a big theatre like the Civic. "I could take it up to the dress circle and make little tweaks to the lighting from that vantage point." He adds that one feature of the new software release was especially helpful in lighting the show. "It's the ability to spread attribute timing using a matrix and this was used effectively to get a color change to correlate with a video projection wipe effect happening on the set. Thus, at the beginning of the number 'Jolly Holiday,' when Bert [Mary Poppins' chimney sweep consort] waves his hands and the park scene changes color, I used the soft-

ware to do a sweeping motion with the lights. I often use my shows as a way of showcasing new software."

Overall, he notes, one of the biggest challenges in lighting *Mary Poppins* involved keeping pace during the many transitions, which moved in and out of various fantasy states while also switching locations. Overall, he estimates, the show required about 400 cues.

The show was so well-received that Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern even dropped by with her entourage. "It was pretty exciting for the kids in the cast, especially," Searancke says. For everyone else, *Mary Poppins* provided that most exciting thing of all: a sense of normalcy. As leading lady Shaan Kloet told the world at the opening night curtain call, "The *Mary Poppins* cast and crew are thinking of you guys and we hope that you raise your curtains really soon. We are sending all of our love from the Auckland Civic Theatre here in New Zealand." 📶



Searancke cites the number "Steps in Time" as his favorite challenge because of the "creative angles and indirect lighting that I could use."