Laureus Sports Awards

Laureus Sports Awards, which this year took place in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia is a top-flight awards ceremony that puts on quite a show. Steve Moles reports . . .

Even if you don't like sport there are one hundred million good reasons to watch the Laureus World Sports Awards. In terms of presentation quality, this is one of the most visually dramatic and engaging shows you'll have seen - that's why it has such a huge world-wide television audience.

Staged this year in Kuala Lumpur at the Istana Budaya theatre, the show was produced by UK specialist Done & Dusted with a truly international list of suppliers and creative talent, in a packaged technical production led by The Production Office (TPO). Many of the names will be familiar to readers of this magazine - Unusual Rigging, Creative Technology (CT), Dimension Audio; others less so - Orange Events, based in Kuala Lumpur, provided the audio equipment; The Show Company from Singapore most of the lighting hardware.

This is the second time TPO has handled the technical production for Done & Dusted: TPO founder Chris Vaughan working the 2013 show in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, the country of his birth. As an aside, and acknowledging Vaughan as a native Portuguese speaker, one wonders if his hand will be on the tiller for the Olympics ceremonies in two years' time? But we digress . . .

Overview

For the 2014 event Vaughan was already committed to the Gary Barlow arena tour, so he passed the reins into the capable hands of Paddy Hocken, another member of the TPO team. Hocken comments: "A preliminary recce was made in late January, the event took place on 26 March - so actually, for such a big production this was not that much time to line-up all the suppliers, especially for the special build stuff." Not long at all. So how does a prestige event like this unfold?

"Done & Dusted are the main producers," he continues, "they manage the overall production of the event - don't forget this is televised in over 100 countries. While the Laureus organisation takes care of the public side, the red carpet and media interface, it's a well-balanced division of labour. Done & Dusted already had a prior relationship with some of the contractors we engaged, not least CT, but we were largely left to assemble the team. On that score, the suppliers all rose to the challenge but the really skilled local labour we would need in terms of stage hands was initially difficult to source; we ended up with a superb team headed up by Mohamed Ali Ayub Khan from starCom Management. The Malaysian GP F1 event was on at the same time, there was also the Future Music Festival, and a major offshore energy conference."

What of the venue? "The Istana is one of the best mechanically appointed theatres I've ever worked in. The stage machinery is at the level you typically see in national opera houses. Completed in 1998 it is a multipurpose hall and although it leans toward international level opera mostly, they do also stage domestic productions here and, amazingly, rock and roll."

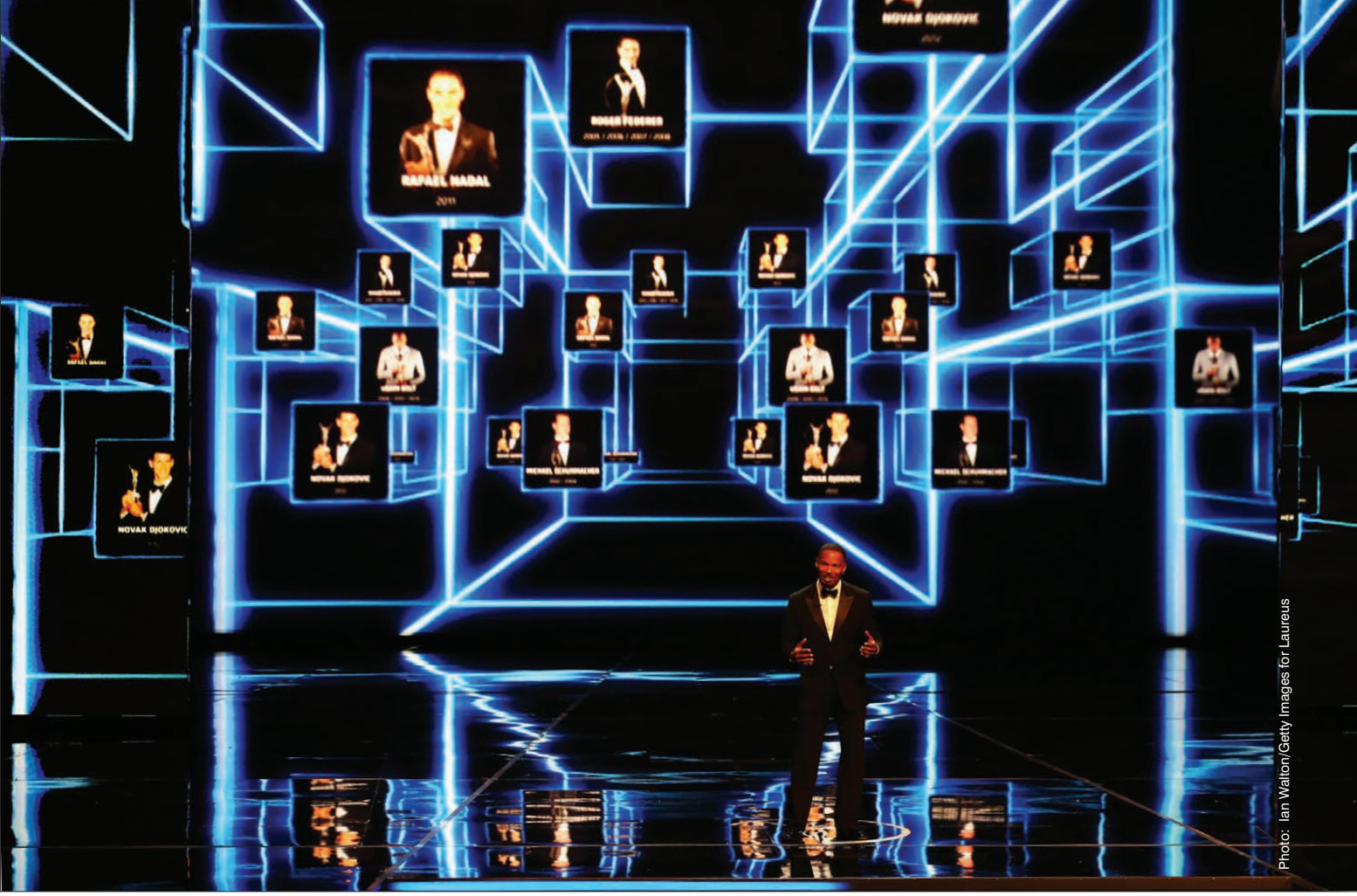
The show concept was heavily woven around stunning visual chimeras created through intense use of video technology; presenter Benedict Cumberbatch often appeared to be floating within another reality. The concept developed by set designer Florian Wieder was ambitious in scale, just how difficult was it to bring to realisation?

"This was the first time for me working with Florian and I was super impressed with, dare I say it, the Germanic fashion his team applied to the project. Everything was very black and white in terms of what they wanted manufactured, and wanted to achieve in terms of look. From the supplier end of things, there was little room for misinterpretation. Per Arne Janssen, Florian's art director, did most of the drawings. It was really refreshing working with them. They did all the technical drawing and rendering, and brought in Cinema 4D to render the content they wanted. Again, the brief to them was well prescribed and not just a bunch of sketches. Gravity created most of the video content. Chris Saunders at Ogle Hog oversaw all the content management and was our screens director."

Video

Video hardware predominated, and in multiple formats - who managed that? "Rob Day, our supervisor for video, worked with Chris Burke from CT's Pacific office in Singapore. It was Rob who oversaw all the screens and the Watchout system. Obviously, there was a high demand for screens at the GP event, so we were heavily reliant on Chris and Rob."

That's possibly an understatement, as Burke explained: "We met with many suppliers in Malaysia and Singapore to assess what was available. We decided to go with a Singapore supplier to support us with the LED parts. This decision was driven by a number of factors: Product - the LED products available to us - in this case a Lighthouse R4 4mm LED for the main screens and a lightweight Chinese 3.9mm LED product for the holographic screens; Location - the ability to consult with the suppliers "on our doorstep" from CT's Singapore HQ. A lot of preparation work was required with the cable management for all of the LED, as they were all moving in one direction or another during the show. This was a crucial factor; Adaptability - to cope with changes to the specs in the weeks leading up to the event - we anticipated changes of some kind along the way and with Singapore being only a day's drive from KL we had some level of flexibility; Price - always an important consideration; regarding Spyder, there are only a handful of X20 Spyder systems available in Asia in the rental market and, fortunately, some of those are in Singapore, so



Jamie Foxx speaks on stage during the 2014 Laureus World Sports Award show at the Istana Budaya Theatre, Kuala Lumpur.

we were confident we would have the necessary support managing the project from our Singapore office."

So how complex was the screen motion aspect? "To give some perspective, we had a total of five LED screens, four flown and one on a pulley system tracking across the stage. The flown screens were moving through both horizontal and vertical planes across a distance of between 15 and 20 metres with the weight of each of the Lighthouse screens in excess of 1500kg. The cable management for both power and signal needed to be formed in to tight cable looms specially to account for all these wall movements and the fact that the LED control position was 30 metres above the stage."

Can you give some description of the complexity of the video presentation? "Watchout was the backbone of the video media system, with a system configured with full redundancy. Watchout also sent time-code to the Avolites Media Ai servers, used for effects through the Video Flex used extensively on the awards set."

And Video Flex is what exactly? "This was a key part of Florian's design," adds Hocken, picking up the story. "It was supplied by Light Initiative in the UK. If you look at the photos you'll see the stage form is basically a forced perspective box in 3D filled with cube shapes and with LED video dressing to the wings - what we came to call a 'Tron' look. To define that structure and to avoid looking like some horrific scaffold monster, the whole thing was covered with Video Flex - something in the region of 1500 metres of it. It's not a simple RGB lighting product that takes streaming video, this is a fully-fledged video product - set into the floor, on the walls, everywhere, it looked great. There's lots of lower quality individually modular LED cluster festoon-style technology out there, but this needed to look 120% state-of-the-art, so I was happier, and I think everyone else was happier, with going direct to Light Initiative, a source provider who had pre-existing expertise in this kind of thing."

What about the conflicting demands of F1 Grand Prix and the like? "CT Singapore didn't have all the screen technology available that we needed, as Chris explained, but they sourced all we needed from regular partner providers and again, project-managed. So to all intents and purposes it was just like a regular CT gig. Most of the LED screens were tracking and needed long cable infrastructures, so extra cables were sourced from secondary providers, network infrastructure from another, screen hardware from a third - all that needs close attention to detail. That's where their experience and organisational skills paid off."

Audio

Paddy Hocken is a former audio specialist, so knows the demands of this department intimately. How was the level of support from the Malaysian contractor? "CT's audio division, Dimension Audio, under Staf Rowley led the sound side, providing expertise and management, while Orange Events - a big Malaysian company - provided most of the hardware. Orange is an L-Acoustics K1 partner, so I had no worries there. When we visited their warehouse I was very impressed with their set-up. The audio spec was pretty typical for a venue of this type, it's on the video presentation side where we were breaking new territory."

Staf Rowley from Dimension comments: "We put out a tender document for what we needed which was sent to various rental houses. Paddy went to look at the facilities of the various bidders. With his background in sound I trusted his judgement; he said Orange looked extremely professional

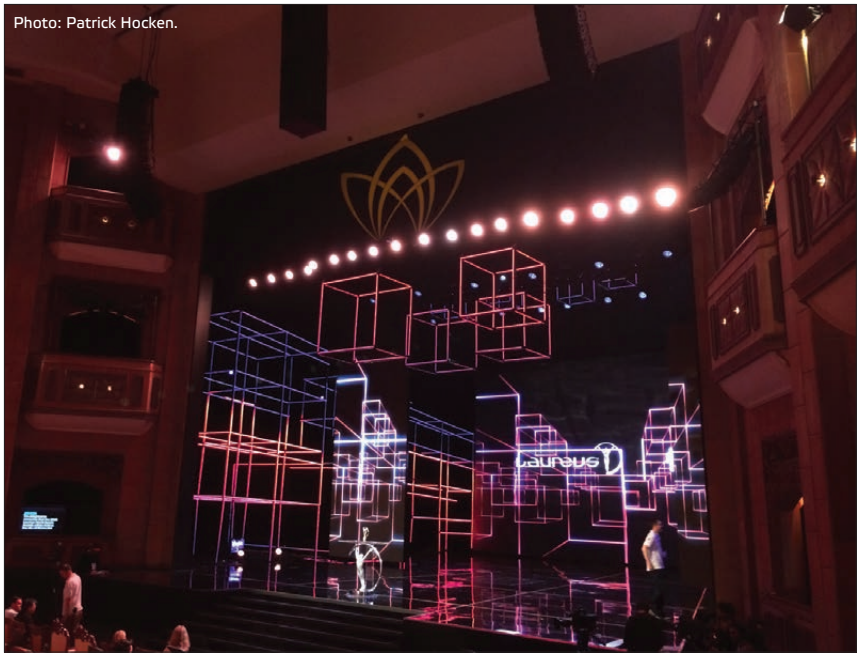


Photo: Patrick Hocken.

and that's what we thought when they came to do the job. Coming from Dimension we have very high standards."

This is a modern, purpose-built theatre, apparently designed primarily for opera: how did it bend to reinforced sound? "The room had a very kind acoustic for the type of presentation," said Rowley. "What Orange proposed as a system design was entirely appropriate and covered every seat well from top to bottom. Although the emphasis was on speech reproduction there was a live music element, not least from Jamie Foxx, so the sound had to meet people's normal expectations. It's also true that TV shows like to see a strong vibe in the audience because that atmosphere is easily conveyed on camera. To that end, we needed a proper low end to the system and made considerable effort to conceal that from the cameras. Four subs were hidden in the stage apron, and the flown array was partially concealed, hanging between the two main hangs. Rigging was easy - the venue has six dedicated PA points, L/C/R, with inverted motors already in place."

Lights

Hocken was similarly pleased with the service and back-up of Singapore lighting supplier Show Company. "Like Orange, great to work with and they have a full Vari*Lite inventory and Hog 4 for control, so again, top line equipment kept in great shape. Gurdip Mahal, our LD, and Ross Williams took control of lighting, Gurdip determining the application of lighting onto the master show design from Florian."

Mahal comments: "The lighting and set design of a high profile production such as this is always a collaborative effort between departments. Florian and myself have worked closely together on a number of previous occasions, including these awards for the past few years, so this process is one that comes naturally."

The show included floating 'holograms' by David Dutton at C2R - he provided the foil and the 'how and why' as to how to film the content

used upon them. (Unfortunately, Dutton was busy elsewhere and we were unable to secure any comment from him about this aspect.)

I asked Mahal, was the holography a restraint on lighting? "The set this year featured a series of flying holographic elements which worked exceptionally well. The main restriction on lighting was the physical space the frames took up in the grid, which limited hanging positions considerably."

And what of the lighting equipment? "As is common-place with such shows, the lighting rig relied heavily on automated fixtures. It's often hard to find the usual brands and models locally. For these awards we brought equipment in from the Show Company in Singapore, who I've worked with a number of times before. Their modern stock of Vari*Lite fixtures formed the basis of my design, supplemented with a few effect lights such as Clay Paky Sharpys. Coupled with the expertise of their crew, headed up by Juay Ming Hee, this proved a successful formula. The Show Company also provided a fleet of Whole Hog 4 consoles operated by James Tinsley and Ross Williams, both of whom have worked with me on Laureus numerous times."

Hocken added that "normally, in the past, lights would be hung using house pipes (the previous venues have all been theatres), but with so much moving video and the nature of the set it was more sensible to independently fly the lights on trusses to enable easier servicing. Hence the equivalent of three trucks of rigging kit from Neg Earth, Unusual Rigging and Showtec."

Rigging

Again, Hocken paints the picture: "The Kinesys lifting and tracking system came from Neg Earth, but to some degree Florian's design had to be fluid, and once the design developed and changes began, we had to bring in additional winches from Unusual to handle some of the faster tracking motion. We shipped out two sea containers in total - one from Neg and Unusual, and one for power infrastructure [of which more later] and then flew out the winches and a few other pieces.

"Steve Porter from Unusual did an outstanding job as lead rigger; to qualify that, it's important to note Laureus' input to the presentation. They wanted more than anything for the action to be as close to the people on stage as possible. They're right of course: while you can present more broadly for the audience in theatre, for the TV show the more that evolves in camera shot of the principles, the more coherent the presentation for the TV viewer. Just consider that for all that kit at the Istana Budaya theatre, by the time we had finished setting up, it presented a proscenium opening of just 11 metres, and most stage action took place on the downstage five metres."

Staging & Scenery

"The flown scenery all came from Total Solutions Group (TSG). Amazingly, it was cheaper to have this built in the UK and flown out than to have it fabricated in KL. Aluminium scenery is not yet commonplace in Asia and the finished product from TSG was much better than we could have expected locally. Mervyn Thomas at TSG did the deal, all fairly simple; no-one from TSG flew out and we were able to put it all together with our existing stage team led by Josh Williams. What they built was the light cubes [various sizes of scenic cube], the 3D-Grid [main scenic element] and the cube structures for the holographic foils and LED screens used as the bounce image. These are size and strength critical, in particular the tensioning on the holographic foil screens is very high."

"There was a small stage extension at the front, maybe 50cm, and a local company, Pico, built that, plus the step detail. They also made the extension to accommodate the usual stuff, sub-bass and front-fills for the PA. Pico also supplied the high-gloss black flooring. The Video Flex was laid into the floor, the wooden decks were cut to allow channels for cable runs between them and to accept the Video Flex, and then decked over with Perspex. I had anticipated this would be hard and it was in fact the only part of the build that over-ran - that was largely due to Pico's conducting their main business in building for expo's where the time-frames are easier. They did find the load-in flow a little disturbing at first, they were

unaccustomed to working in conjunction with so many different departments simultaneously, but once they'd recognised the situation they responded really well."

Power

"This cannot pass without mention of power," said Hocken. "It is a major consideration when you're doing a live broadcast to 100+ countries and with all the kit we brought in the theatre was never going to have enough power anyway. Jerry Singleton from The Technical Department ran this side for us. Normally they would bring in Caterpillar generators, but what was available from the local vendor was too industrial and didn't have the facilities to sync their machines, so we went to a company called Gencool, with The Tech' Department bringing out the cable infrastructure, plus switch gear and distros. Normally for such shows, Jerry would isolate the house system from the grid and impose generated power into the building, but the house distro' were eight floors up and not easily accessible (no major ducting), so there was no way to run heavy temporary mains cables up there. In that sense it was more like a rock show, running mains direct to all departments. That required some care, especially as there were places where we used the house lighting system and obviously had to disconnect that from house mains."

Conclusion

There were several other departments and suppliers for TPO to coordinate: what was the defining aspect of such a big production telescoped into such a short space of time? "The biggest thing was dealing with the changes," explains Hocken. "Unlike a rock tour where you evolve solutions to production demands over time, here the demands are immediate and unavoidable, so when the cameras come in you have to adapt to their needs, some of which are almost impossible to anticipate until the setting is made. That said, we made few major changes on site, so the advance work was very effective.

"Picture this: in that downstage focussed area you have a 6 x 3 x 3 hologram cube tracking across stage left to right, then two LED portrait panels tracking on from each side, then a couple of smaller holographic cubes - and maybe add in a scissor-lift from below stage. And all of that was concentrated in a few square metres for the cameras. The movement cues had to be millimetre precise, so much so that the first time they turned on the house A/C units during rehearsals we had to reprogramme the holographic cube motions because the foil membranes acted as sails. Jon Wood from Neg Earth ran all the Kinesys and the Unusual winches from that control system and did a great job. But we did have to coordinate with the house flymen, who moved many of the other flown elements at the same time. Now that's a 'rub your belly in a circular motion while you pat the top of your head with the other hand' manoeuvre!"

Laureus Factoids

- **Chris Burke of CT:** "Overall we had approximately 90sq.m of LED, comprising 42sq.m of Lighthouse R4 in two flown sections and 48sq.m of a lightweight 3.9mm Chinese LED which was used primarily in two flying holographic screen systems and one holographic screen which tracked on and off stage.

"For the rear projection screen we stacked six Barco HD20s, projecting on to a screen which was 13m wide x 7.5m high [the screen was a ShowTex RP Grey low gain twin projection screen]. This guaranteed a very bright image which can be a challenge when you are combining both LED and projection in the same set."

- **Video Flex:** "This is almost the default product for TV scenic pixelation these days. Like a rope light, it's bendable, flexible, yet entirely mapable, LED pixels. We work with the provider Light Initiative frequently; you'll see their Video Flex on shows such as *Big Brother*, *The Voice*, and *Strictly*."