

# Case Study

## Entertaining the Troops

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The place is Fort Hamilton, the U.S. Army based in Brooklyn. The on-site movie theatre is filled, but the audience isn't here to see any Spring blockbusters like Iron Man 2 or Robin Hood. Instead, the entertainment is a distinctly live nature: Everyone is rocking out to a lively rendition of the Miley Cyrus hit "Party on the U.S.A." A few minutes later, a pair of dancers glide around the stage to Irving Berlins "Cheek to Cheek".



For all the Glee fans on hand, there's a high-energy version of the Journey classic, "Don't Stop Believing", followed by, among other things, the Beyoncé hit "Halo" and Michael Jackson's ever-popular "Billie Jean." The program is rounded out by some country and gospel selections, all of them greeted with rousing cheers.

Welcome to the U.S. Army Solider Show, a live touring entertainment - now in its 27th year - that, before it completes its run, will cover most of the U.S. ad parts of Europe and Asia. The onstage talent consists of entirely of service personnel; the same is true of the show's tech staff. As staged by Victor Hurtado, the production is a fast-moving 90 minutes of song and dance, delivered in a variety of styles.

Despite a relentless touring schedule of one-night stands, this edition of U.S. Army Soldier Show is fitted out with the latest technology, especially the extensive use of video projections. As designed by Nicole Coppinger, the set has a thoroughly up-to-date look; the upstage drop is covered in half a dozen images of smartphones; the "window" of each is a video monitor. The downstage area is frames by legs, at stage right and left, designed to look like a series of circuit boards; these serve as projection surfaces. In addition, a downstage scrim occasionally flies in for between-the-numbers video sequences that play on the show's theme of digital media and social networking. (All of these drops were printed by Rose Band, the show's soft goods supplier.) Paul Turner's lighting - a mix of conventional, automated and LED unit - paces the action, adding plenty of colour and effects.

Coppinger and Turner work with Stephen Smith, the staging and lighting supervisor with the Army's entertainment division. None of them are Isa-us-army-4 enlisted personnel, Smith is an experienced technical director whose résumé includes gigs at various resident theatres. Another job, on a live entertainment event at Fort Gordon in Georgia, introduced him to the army's entertainment division and eventually, to the job he holds now.

Coppinger, who has a BFA in set design from Ithaca College and who is married to Smith, says "We were both working at the American Repertory Theatre, in Boston but were burned out from freelancing, and were trying to figure out a new direction for our careers. Steve had this connection to Army Entertainment and they asked him to come on board. They contracted with me to do a couple of shows and then they decided they needed a set designer on staff; that was when they created a job for me.

The creative process begins, says Coppinger, when "I meet with the director and program manager, and we come up with a concept. This year, the army has been moving more into Twitter and social networking sites. We started discussing the fact that the modern soldier is so computer-literate. This led us to come up with the idea of doing Soldier Show 27.0." The title alludes to the show's 27 years of existence; it is also suggestive of software updates, an appropriate concept, because, as the designer notes, "This is an updated edition that builds on past shows".

In concert with the social networking concept, Coppinger adds, "I wanted to use much more video this time; we discussed the concept of using different short video pieces based on different websites. Originally, we thought about having a giant video wall, but the cost was too high. Then I wondered: Could I use TVs?" The answer was yes; that's when she came up with the idea of placing multi monitors in the upstage wall, turning them sideways to create narrow vertical screens like those seen on iPods.

The upstage monitors are Sharp Aquos 65" LCD units. "It's the standard \$2,000 product," says Smith. Imagery is fed to them from the production's Barco/ High End Systems Axon media server, which is connected to video-configuration software made by the UK-based company Datapath Limited. "It's the Datapath Vision800 video wall controller gave us a multi screen solution; it lets us control the screens as one big monitor," Smith adds. "The video captured is live from the Axon and outputs it to the screens within the video wall as if they were on big screen." The product, he adds, provides remarkable bang for the buck. It takes a high-definition signal all day, it doesn't crash, and it spits the images out exactly the way you want. That was the biggest challenge - finding something to run the multi monitors."

The downstage circuit-board legs are made of Tendo stretch screen, which was provided by Rose Brand; they take front-projected images from a pair of Barco High End DL3 digital lighting units. To create the rolldown screen for the longer video sequences, Coppinger says she wanted to work with scrim, but the challenge was finding a scrim material that could put up with the rigors of touring without becoming damaged. "Rose Brand has a heavy-duty mesh used in concert productions; it works really well," she says. "It's stiff enough for our purposes and it also takes projections very nicely." The screen receives images from Sanyo PLC XFR47 15,000 - lumen projector.

## Building in the lighting.

Coppinger notes that she works closely with Paul Turner, the production's lighting designer: "Once I've created a model, I get in touch with him and we talk constantly. Because it is a touring set, I can't go crazy on scenery, so I'm always picking my brain. Last year, for example, we had a star drop and Flex-Neon. The show is based on a series of musical numbers - there's not necessarily a through-line - and Paul is invaluable to me, because the lighting carries us through the show."



Isa-us-army-5Turner, who is currently based in Austin, Texas, has been lighting the U.S. Army Soldier Show since 1999. He was working at Baltimore Stage Lighting - which is now part of 4Wall Entertainment's D.C. office - when the Army Entertainment Division purchased a Wholehog II lighting console. "They hired me to train them on it," says Turner. He adds, chuckling "Then Tim Higdon who was one of their production manager, asked me if wanted to light the show - which was scheduled to open in ten days. I stayed around, and did it. The following year, I was officially the lighting designer.

"This is the most video capture-heavy show we've ever done," Turner continues. "On a previous show, we had a set of G-LEC panels that formed made a backdrop in front of the cyc, but their images were more low-resolution. With this year's show, basically it was all about digital scenery, which made a nice change - less stuff hanging in the air that didn't have to be tailed down.

"It all went very easily," he adds. "Nicole did a lot of the upfront projection work u, picking out three or four files for each song, which I could use to base my colour palette on. She also did the custom artwork for the DL.3s, working with soldiers and other subcontractors."

Turner says he chooses his gear based "on its tour-worthiness and how well it packs. We have only two trucks for the show. Also, it gets set up and taken down by soldiers, who may not have any experience with the gear. We don't have, say, a moving light tech. They can do basic repairs but they don't have the manpower for anything really complicated."



The rig, which is owned by the Army Entertainment Division, evolves from year to year, as Turner adds new items and retires older units. "When I started lighting the show, the rig was full of (High End) Intellabeams, and the console was a (High End) Status Cue," he recalls. More recently, he adds, "We're looking to making the rig more efficient - for example, getting rid of scrollers and adding LED PARs." Currently, the line up includes 12 High End Studio Colour 575s and four Studio Spot 575s, four Philips Vari\*Lite VL3000s and five VL2500s, five Martin Professional MAC 2000s, four High End Technobeams, seven Philips Colour Kinetics ColourBlaze 48 LED striplights, plus strobes, ETC Source Four PARs and (Wybron) colour scrollers.

Turner designed the rectangular truss configuration, which, he says, "really changed how we light the show. It used to be a front-truss-back-truss set up, a very '80s kind of design. I added in sidelight skin systems a few years ago, to make it more dynamic. And now the digital scenery totally makes the install so much easier - I can have second and third electric positions, because there are no traveller tracks. It makes for a very clean show."

Smith concurs with Turner's assessment that new lighting purchases are made with an eye towards achieving greater simplicity. "We're trying to get away from a 96-dimmer rack and lower our power consumption," he says. "That's why we've switched to LED cyc lights - and, for our next round of purchasing, we're looking at a new sever-colour LED fixture. This year, we spent money on video, and on the (High End) Road Hog Full Boar console, because it can run the DL.3s and the Axon media server."

The show is run on time code, which is delivered via ProTools from the Midas Pro6 sound console. "When we hit 'go,' it sends signals to the lighting console," says Smith. "That way, no one has to call a cue." This approach is helpful in other ways, Turner adds: "I run a video device to record an entire rehearsal, to get the audio and time code feed, then I program the lighting overnight, live on stage at Fort Belvoir in Virginia." Smith adds, "We're controlling the DL.3s with High End's Art-Net system, which works great." (For the record, the rest of the sound system includes eight JBL VERTEC loudspeakers - four to a side - and, for the mics, Shure UHF-R wireless system with Countryman headsets.

Isa-us-army-6Coppinger notes that the majority of theatres the troupe visits are laid out in nearly identical fashion, which simplifies loading in and out. Smith adds, "The size of the auditorium can change, however, some of them are longer than others. I had to check out the Fort Hamilton theatre in advance, to make sure we could go in there." Also, says Coppinger, "A couple of shows are staged outside - or if there is no theatre on base, it might happen in a gym or a tent, in which case they set up a platform staging for out stage footprint and we load into that. Given these conditions, Turner adds that one design challenge involved "making sure we had the right throws for the DL.3s and that the custom masking Nicole made for the DL.3s worked right. Fortunately, it all worked great."

## Touring and ancillary productions.

The U.S Army Soldier Show went out in April and toured the US all summer; after that came shows in Germany and Italy, followed by more US dates, ending in Korea just before Thanksgiving.

In the meantime, Smith and Coppinger have other projects to attend to. One of them is Operation Rising Star, an American Idol - style talent competition that is broadcast online and on the Pentagon's television network. To assemble the talent, each base stages a local contest; the winners send videos of their performances to the Army Entertainment Division at Fort Belvoir. From these, 12 contestants are selected. "The show airs just before Thanksgiving," says Coppinger. "It takes a week. They come in at the beginning of November, work with the show's musical director, and we're ready to go by mid-November. We do three shows - the top six acts perform, then the top three, and then there's the finale. All the voting is done online."

Another event is the Army's isa-us-army-7 Birthday Ball, a giant dinner event with entertainment, complete with birthday cake for 2,000. "The official birthday is June 14," says Smith. "They plan the ball for the weekend closest to the date. Like Operation Rising Star, it is taped and broadcast on the Pentagon channel. We have the Army drill team, the bugle corps, and the colour guard in their old Revolutionary War outfits."

Coppinger adds, "It's always held at a big venue, like the Hilton Hotel in downtown D.C., or the Gaylord Centre at National Harbour. Last year, we had Trace Adkins as the entertainment." On this event, Smith and Coppinger work with Benji Tschudin, of Silver Spring, Maryland-based Atmosphere Inc.

It all makes for a busy schedule for Coppinger and Smith, but, one. Army bases can be isolated places, and access to live entertainment is necessarily limited. This explains the wildly enthusiastic response at the Fort Hamilton performance; the opportunity to see a slickly staged, professional-quality live musical entertainment must surely be welcome. The U.S. Army Soldier Show allows talented personnel to showcase their skills while offering service personnel and their families a uniquely good time.