

NINE INCH NAILS

HIGH ART

BY MICHAEL A. BECK

NIN CREW

Jerome Crooks, Tour Manager
 Bill Leabody, Production Manager
 Doug Eldredge, Stage Manager
 Sara Bennett, Production Coordinator/Wardrobe
 Rob Sheridan, Website Coordinator/Photographer
 Alex Pollock, Tour Accountant
 JT Williams, Security
 Brett Bachemin, Trent's Assistant
 Leo Herrera, Band Assistant
 Pete Keppler, FOH Sound
 Mike Prowda, MON Engineer
 Todd "Fox Hole" Tiedemann, Stage Audio Systems Tech
 Chris "Radar" Russo, FOH Audio Systems Tech
 Owen "Doc" Thomas, MON Audio Systems Tech
 Ryan Neuburger, Audio Systems Tech/Ghost Backline Tech
 Terry "Cowboy" Parker, Head Rigger
 Russell Glen, Rigger/Carpenter
 Andrew "Hans" Buscher, Trent's Guitar Tech
 Mat Mitchell, Keyboard/Midi tech
 Chris Harrison, Robin's Guitar Tech
 Mike Schuppan, Justin's Bass Tech
 Jeremy Berman, Drum Tech
 Michael "Blumpy" Tuller, ProTools Tech
 Ron Schilling, Lighting Crew Chief
 Josh Levin, Lighting Tech
 Jason Bullock, Lighting Board Operator
 Mike Ponsiglione, Lighting Tech
 Dawn "Cookie" Borsella, Lighting Tech
 Adam Dragosin, Nocturne Crew Chief
 Jordan Goodfellow, Video Tech
 Tina Skjerseth, Video Tech
 Jean-Phillipe Tremblay, Interactive Video
 Jen Altermatt, NIN.com Ticketing
 Rich Interlande, Merch
 Ali Vatter, Catering Dining/Dressing Rooms
 Jeremy Criscitiello, Catering Crew Chief
 Paul Fonnemann, Catering Utility
 Richard Harris, Catering Chef
 Bus Drivers:
 Steve Dodge, Steve Headley, Ron Hooper, Tracy Morgan
 Truck Drivers: Jason Gottschalk, Lead Bill Foote, Mark Selhorst,
 Tim Faye, Josee Millette, Bernard Perreault, Frank St. Jean,
 Helene St. Jean

TOUR RELATED OFFICES

Management: Rebel Waltz Management
 Business Management: Dissonance Inc.
 Booking Agency: William Morris Agency
 Travel Agency: Preferred Travel
 Sound Company: Firehouse



Going into the assignment, the comparison had been made between Nine Inch Nails and Pink Floyd. This seemed a bit odd given the massive disparity in musical styles between the two bands.

As the day wore on, however, one began to understand the similarities. There was the manner in which the crew members talked about the production not as being something they'd never seen before but as something they didn't know was technically possible.

But when you put the minds of Trent Reznor and Roy Bennett in the same room with Montreal based Moment Factory (a company that we will talk about at length in next month's "O Canada" issue) the outcome will undoubtedly cause a suspension of disbelief across the board.

While there were a number of interesting kinks in this production, it was really all about the visuals. When asked what he brags to his friends about concerning this show, FOH Engineer Pete Kepler said, "It looks great! It's hard to make something sound as good as this show looks."

The show plays in three parts. The first and third parts were, for the most part, a "straight ahead rock show." The middle section was wrapped around Reznor's "Ghost" album, a 36 song work of which four songs were played in this part of the production.

Very little of the lighting was provided by oblique angles. It all hit straight on from side lighting through the use of offstage atomic

strobes and movers, or down light from several pods flown above the stage. There were seven pods that hung on an upstage line that hit the crowd with 16 of the MAC 300's (each) that Bennett commissioned LSI/Saco in Montreal to refit with LED panels for the last Paul McCartney tour.

The effect these units had was very impressive. They didn't just hit the crowd. They moved en masse to create wave effects that seem to animate the whole array and gave it a truly fluid look. Centered at the top and bottom of each pod was a Vari*Lite 2500 that provided great back light and spent a good deal of time shooting out through the stage to the house.

In today's world, we have come to expect video as the center piece of just about any production. This show lived up to that expectation due to the massive video presence. But it's what was done with the video content of the show that changed the way everyone who saw the show will ever look at a stage again - in the same way the first automated lighting and the wireless microphone did in their time of epiphany.

It was more than just a video presentation that accented the performance of a band on stage. It was an interactive environment the likes of which has never before been seen on a concert stage.

While many people were involved in the design of the show, the glue that held the amazing look together was Moment Factory. The stage had three primary video delivery points. There was a down stage Stealth wall

that was the length of the stage, about 20 feet high and was convex toward the house.

There was another Stealth wall that was the same size but was concave as the crowd looked at it that played mid stage. Finally, there was an upstage high-res wall made of Barco D7 (which will be replaced with the incredibly crisp Saco V9 on the next leg of the tour) that was the width of the stage, flat and the same height as the Stealth walls.

All of these elements including the wall of LED loaded Mac 300's flew in and out with the same regularity as one might see in a theatrical fly system. When they were flown, they were hidden by a deep teaser that masked the entire rig. This added to the dramatic effect of the five Syncrolite units as they seemed to come slamming out of nowhere from the perspective of all but the first 20 or 30 feet of audience.

All of the elements of the show were interconnected through a hard coded system provided by Moment Factory. Moment Factory provides interactive production environments as opposed to set and scenery in the classic sense. That is a very important distinction in the context of the NIN show.

The visual aspect of this show, especially the "Ghost" segment, was constructed like a video game is written rather than the video content as we have known it to be. That being said, there was traditional video content in the show but it was integrated into the bigger picture.

Sakchin Bessette, one of the founding partners of Moment Factory described the system as a video game that uses the stage as the joy stick. The stage was painted with infrared and scanned with high speed lasers from several different positions and angles. This provided the system with three dimensional data of what was on the stage, where it was and where



NIN BAND

Trent Reznor, Vocals/Guitar/Keys/Percussion
Alessandro Cortini, Keys/Guitar/Vocals
Josh Freese, Drums
Robin Finck, Guitars/Vocals
Justin Meldal Johnsen, Bass Guitar/Vocals

NIN VENDORS

Production & Lighting Design:
Dakana Design, Inc.
Lighting: Upstaging
Video: Nocturne Productions

Interactive Video: Moment Factory
Bus Company: Roberts Brothers Coach Leasing
Trucking Company: Upstaging
Air Freight: Rock-It-Cargo
Stage Construction: Accurate Staging
Merch: Bravo Intl. Group
Communications: AAA Communications
Security: NPB Companies
Catering: Culinary Underground
Passes: Cube Services
Itineraries: Smart Art



or how it moved about the stage in the case of performers.

That information was fed to the system so that at times it could, through the use of video feedback or raw electronic signal, present an image with similar characteristics of a CAT scan or an MRI. This could be used with such precision that at times it could focus on Trent Reznor's mouth as he held a microphone to it.

This system didn't just control the video presentation. It also controlled lighting as well. During one part of the show, the downstage Stealth wall was full of white noise. As this was happening, Reznor was walking along the upstage side of the wall as he performed a song. As he moved, the system tracked his progress and kept floor mounted lights trained on him at all times. As that was happening, the system also created a hole in the white noise wherever he was so that he could be seen through the screen.

The screens were also used to create incredible depth of field. At any given time, the band played anywhere between them as well as down stage of them. There was a point of the show where the look was a

swamp. Because various parts of the scene were presented on all three screens, and the performers were positioned in among the screens, it looked like they were playing all throughout the swamp.

During the section of the show where the "MRI" effect (for want of a better descriptor) was focusing on an image of Reznor's face, the audience was completely drawn into the effect. Then when the song was over Stage Manager Doug Eldridge came out onto the downstage apron and swiped hand held conventional light across the downstage Stealth screen. As he did it, the image was washed away as though the light was an eraser.

All of this brings us back to the software that made all of this possible. The show was written, as was stated earlier, like a video game in that it could do nothing without the interaction of the people on stage. And like a video game, the hard coded data was immobile until the performers entered the equation.

In other words, if the system was the video game and the stage was the joystick, the performers were the thumb on the joystick's trigger. Various parts of the show could be

triggered by the Grand MA console, SMTP code, MIDI coming from any number of places from the stage to the FOH console. The system controlled every visual aspect of the show.

This amount of technical interaction made for amazing challenges that started even before rehearsals. "We have done a lot of interactive environmental systems. But they were mostly static applications," said Moment Factory Co-owner, Dominic Bessette. "You go in, calibrate everything and set to work every time in the same place. But in this show we had to design the system with the knowledge that it would be bounced down the road, set up and recalibrated in a different place with different characteristics every day."

That wasn't the end of it - next came rehearsals. Despite the emphasis on visuals in this production, all of the other aspects of the production had to be attended. The problem was that they were all tied into this system, which meant that the writing of this software had to involve everyone in one way or another.

And this wasn't like programming a console. When someone said, that they were

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CREW PHOTOS AND MORE

L TO R TOP TO BOTTOM

Doug Efridge – Stage Manager

FOH Infrared Array

Terry “Cowboy” Parker – Lead Rigger, Russell Glenn – Rigger/Carpenter

Ryan Neuberger – Audio Systems Tech / Ghost Backline Tech

Tina Skjerseth – Video Tech, Adam Dragosin - Nocturne Crew Chief, Jordan Goodfellow – Video Tech, Jean-Philippe Tremblay – Interactive Video

Paul Fonnemann – Catering Utility, Jerome Criscitiello – Catering Crew Chief, Richard Harris – Catering Chef, Ali Vatter – Catering Dining/Dressing Rooms



not quite comfortable with something, it meant that it all had to be rewritten.

Of course the part of the show that interacted most closely with the Moment Factory system was video delivery provided by Nocturne, as is it the company that is deploying the bulk of the final product. Nocturne has worked with NIN since 2005 when it provided the first ever hi-def video screen (Saco V9) to hit a stage. Nocturne Co-Owner, Bob Brigham spoke to us about the experience of working on the project.

“You have to understand that this is the first time that anything like this has ever been done. Therefore, it came with the expectation that there were going to be a few bumps in the road. When you know that going in, it becomes easier to deal with the kinks. And they were there. But we got by them and the finished product was well worth it. This is an unbelievable show. I highly recommend that everyone see it.”

Rigging had its share of tests as well. Lead rigger, Terry “Cowboy” Parker explained,

“This isn’t an especially heavy rig by today’s standards, but it’s really precise because of all of the stuff up there that you don’t see on any other rig. It can’t be changed at all. It’s got to go up the very same way every day.”

The rig had 11 different kinds of hoists. Parker continues, “If one of them gets out of position, you can’t ‘deal with it,’ you have to get it right. There’s 10 inches of clearance between everything that is moving up there. There’s no such thing as fudging a point. We had one point that we tried moving four inches during rehearsals, and it spiked the load from 2,300 to 3,800 pounds.”

There was an interesting backline twist on this show as well. The “Ghost” portion of the show was performed with orchestral instruments such as a 5 ½ octave marimba, timpani, orchestral bells and an upright bass that you don’t see any time during the rest of the show. These instruments obviously took up a lot more real estate than your usual backline array. They all had to be staged on rolling risers up stage and maneuvered into position and struck in a remarkable amount of time.

We could go on talking about this show for a very long time and never really get the full point across. But it must be said that this show presented a level of creativity that we haven’t seen in a very long time. That’s not to say that we aren’t seeing spectacular events, but it’s not often we see shows that reach this far.

One characteristic spoke the loudest - the complete lack of ego it took for the band to step back from the temptation to have the show be all about them instead of being all about the show. Remember, there were no follow spots or IMAG in this show. And often times the image of the band was completely lost in the image of the show.

Roy Bennett probably said it best when he described this show as performance art, thought for a moment and then corrected himself...

“Actually, it’s better described as High Art.” ☺



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