

# CONCERTS

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# MISS JACKSON

## ROCKS WITCHU

A concert tour designed for dancing and spectacle

By: Sharon Stancavage

**I**t's a concert filled with precision dancing, saturated beams of light streaming across the stage, stunning background visuals, and, for a change of pace, a bondage scene involving an audience member. Yes, Janet Jackson's *Rock Witchu Tour* has something for everyone, from dance aficionados to those whose tastes run a bit...darker, so to speak.

The production began in earnest in late 2006. "It's been a long birth," notes production and lighting designer Vince Foster. At the time, Jackson was considering a tour; however, things changed, as they often do in the music industry. "She decided she didn't want to do the tour, she wanted to put an album out, so it all got put on hold," he adds. "About a year and a half later, we took it out of the mothballs and built a bit more to it, let it evolve a bit more, and put it out on the road."

As expected, choreography plays an integral part of the production. "It's very well choreographed—you know exactly where everyone is going to

be, everyday," says Foster. "They're in the same place, so you can really make it quite dramatic, since you know where everyone is going to stand." The precision of the production also increases the safety factor, he notes: "There are large scenic elements flying around, and trap doors and things moving in and out; if people end up in the wrong place at the wrong time, they end up getting hurt."

### Bridges and bondage cages

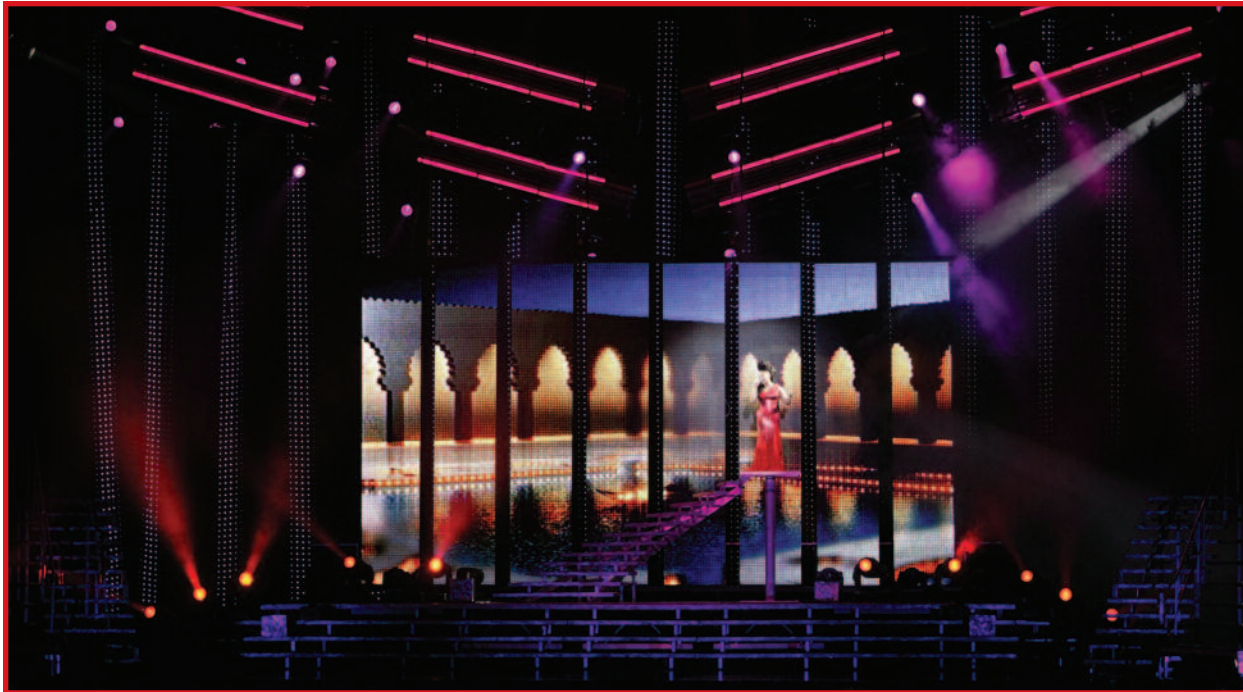
The show is loosely based on the struggle between good and evil, with both characters played by Jackson. Each scene takes the audience into a variety of different worlds: from under the sea, to the future, to a New York loft, to a dance club, to a sex dungeon, and even to a loosely imagined heaven. "It's totally theatrical—in a very camp way. I think that's why Janet called me," Foster admits with a smile.

Jackson's set, which was retrofitted by B and R Scenery of Camarillo,

California, features an impressive set of stairs that runs the length of the stage. There's also a 75' long by 64' wide box-shaped thrust that takes Jackson into the audience, and, at the same time, brings the audience into the show. "Janet likes to interact with audience quite a lot, so she was very keen on having some sort of a thrust," Foster explains.

One of the main scenic pieces on stage is what the tour calls "the bridge." This 50'-wide item, clad in Element Labs Versa TUBES and PixelRange PixelLines, spends most of the show 30' above the audience, acting as part of the lighting rig. At certain points, it lowers, via four 2-ton Chainmaster Vario-Lift motors (as supplied by Show Distribution), and becomes an upstage bridge, linking stage right and stage left. "The bridge was pretty complex and we had to hit a lot of criteria on that," notes All Access client design and fabrication liaison Erik Eastland. Not only did the span have to be structurally sound, but it had to accommodate the lighting

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The staircase, seen in a drawing (right) and on stage (above).

as well. “The underside of the bridge is lined up and downstage with Versa Tubes, while the front edge of the bridge has PixelLines on it. And interspersed amongst it are [Coemar] Infinity wash lights and [Martin] MAC 700s,” explains lighting director Alex Reardon.

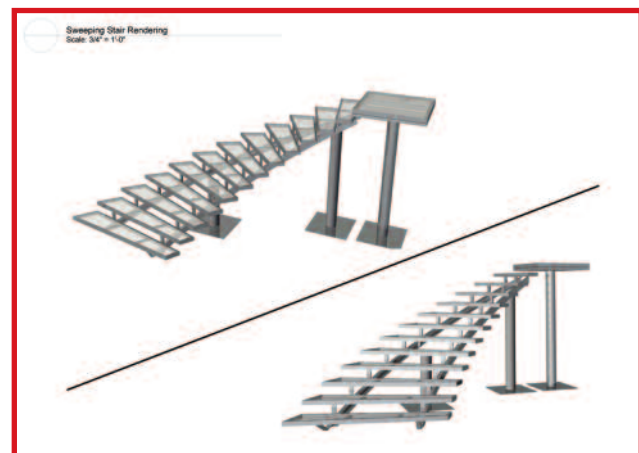
Eastland and his team at All Access engineered the bridge so that it comes apart in eight pieces; the VersaTubes on the bottom and the PixelLines on the handrails stay on the unit when it is moved. “It needed to have rapid deployment, and, in the end, Chris Kansy, the production manager, couldn’t say enough about the engineering on it,” he adds.

Working in tandem with the bridge are what Foster calls “the pyramids”—triangular-shaped stair units that enable the dancers to walk up onto the bridge, which later spin and transform into silver cages. “The pyramids were pretty straightforward—there’s lighting and LED units inside of them, and the only criteria was that they needed to be solid but light enough so you could easily load such large items

on and off quickly,” explains Eastland. The key, he adds, was to not overbuild the pyramids, and to minimize the thickness of the materials.

The most entertaining scenic piece, for both the design team and the audience, is the bondage cage. “It was very difficult to do the scene where she picks people out of the audience and ties them to this bondage cage, because we were doing it without an audience, and it didn’t make any real sense. But when we finally did it with the audience, it became a very strong part of the show, because there was a huge interaction with them,” explains Foster.

The design and fabrication team also found the bondage cage to be an entertaining concept. “We had to go to some pretty graphic sites to see what was out there, and that was pretty humorous,” notes Eastland.



“The names of things are just hilarious.” The concept was very broad, and Eastland and his team had to press Gill Duldulao, the show’s choreographer, for details. “We said to Gill, ‘A bondage cage is a very broad statement. What do you want to do? What is your vision? Then we can start honing it in to reality,’” Eastland explains. Duldulao gave them more details on the piece, and, consequently, the team found that the cage had to fit several criteria: It had to fit on the lift, be on a simple motor system, it couldn’t be too tall, and the

harness for the audience member had to be easy to put on. "I sent them drawings of the cage, thinking it was simple, and they loved it," says Eastland. They also dressed the cage with whips and leather belt, and *voilà*—a bondage cage that's easy to use, and each night gives a special audience member the thrill of his life. "It's a real highlight of the show. The audience guy is ready to faint, he's so excited," Eastland says with a smile.

### Saturated colors and pop pastels

The video and lighting complete Foster's visual picture. "What I wanted to do originally was use a high-resolution screen and cut holes into it, so that it was like Venetian blinds," explains Foster. Instead, he uses six vertically oriented Toshiba 4mm LED screens, provided by Screenworks, in a 24' x 14' landscape configuration "We have trusses behind the screen, big moving trusses with [Zap Technologies] Big Lights to create that classic Steven Spielberg broken-up filmic lighting," he says. The screen, like the bridge, also moves throughout the show: "You can clear it completely out of the way if you want, or, when the bridge comes in, the video screen goes up, so it becomes a backdrop to the bridge as opposed to a backdrop to the set."

The truss configuration is fairly straightforward. "Vince has arrayed eight short horizontal trusses on Vario-Lift motors, four upstage, four slightly downstage of them all upstage of the high-resolution video columns," says Reardon. "We also have a front truss, as well as a front-of-house truss at mix position with four Lycian M2 long-throw truss spots." The trusses, like the bridge and the screen, move quite a bit throughout the production. "The trusses can form different shapes and change the general shape and the look of the video," adds Foster. "For example, you can make an eye shape, an ellipse, and you can stick the video



Two views of the set show its different configurations.

screen bang in the middle of it." The eight trusses upstage do the most moving during the show, and change position for almost every song.

Another unique part of the truss configuration involves the blast shields, which were custom-built by Upstaging, the tour's lighting supplier. "The blast shields are curved set pieces that sit as truss fascias that have Versa Tubes built into them," explains Reardon. Eight 13' blast shields are configured directly to the downstage chords of each of the eight main upstage trusses.

The workhorse of the lighting rig is the Coemar Infinity wash light. "Most of the work is done with the Infinity washes. They are very bright, and they do exactly what they're supposed to do," confides Reardon. "The [Martin MAC] 700s are being

used more as beam effects into the audience, rather than as gobo projectors on the set. They're also used for key light, but mainly for beam light." Upstaging provided 40 Mac 700 Profiles, 28 Martin Atomic 3000 Strobes, 250 Versa Tubes, 90 PixelLine 1044s, eight Big Light 4.5K xenon units, eight Coemar Infinity Wash XLs, seven Lycian M2 followspots, four Reel-EFX DF-50 hazers, six High End F100 foggers, one Le Maitre G150 fogger, five Catalyst media servers. The truss is from Tomcat, much of it the company's Swing Wing product.

The color palette for the show is bold. "Janet loves reds. I get the feeling that it took Vince a lot of work to convince her not to do the entire show in red or no color," notes Reardon with a chuckle. Although



One of the show's many pyro effects at work.

some of the show's most vibrant moments are indeed in red, there are also intense greens and blues interspersed throughout. The very end of the show, the encore, has more pastel colors. "It's a big pop show; it's a pop dance show—if it was unsaturated throughout, I think it would lose definition," Reardon explains.

**“The trusses can form different shapes and change the general shape and the look of the video. For example, you can make an eye shape, an ellipse, and you can stick the video screen bang in the middle of it.”**

The show also features a large complement of special effects. The pyrotechnics were designed by Lorenzo Cornacchia of Pyrotek, who, at rehearsals, integrated over 250 various visual effects into the stage design. Pyrotechnic crew chief Robert Liscio and pyrotechnician Raymond Seymour introduced the effects in each

show. The cues were spread throughout four selected acts, including the opening. The effects included fireballs, gerb waterfalls, multi-colored comets, gerb spinners, cryogenic jet heads, multiple dragon flame units, and more igniting the stage.

Foster programmed the production on a High End Systems Road Hog

console. "Sometimes, if you're in the middle of programming and you're also the designer, it gives you the right to change direction and be able to keep up with it—you don't have to worry about explaining yourself to someone else," says Foster. Reardon, who was out with Metallica, came in during rehearsals, transitioning

seamlessly into operating the Foster's show. "I've known Vince for nearly 15 years, so I had a pretty good idea how he was going to program it. The cueing structure was very straightforward, and I made sure I knew all the songs before I arrived," Reardon notes. And although he's a designer in his own right, Reardon is enjoying this stint with Miss Jackson. "It makes a nice change not to have the pressure of being the designer," he comments.

Reardon has nothing but good things to say about everyone involved. "It's a complicated thing to build, and the crew from Upstaging has been incredible. John Huddleston [of Upstaging] continues to define how a salesman should do his work, and Chris Kansy brings it all together with efficiency, humanity and humor—a notable combination."

Jackson's *Rock Witchu Tour* wrapped up its North American leg at the end of October. Look for dates in Europe, Asia, South America and Japan after the New Year. 📡