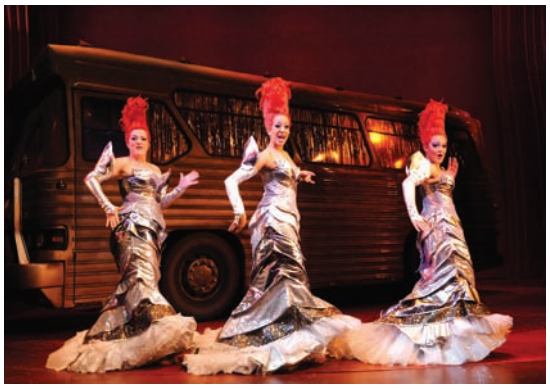
Priscilla, Queen of the Desert: London Production

Aria scene: a stunning crystal encrusted shoe projects 5m over the audience

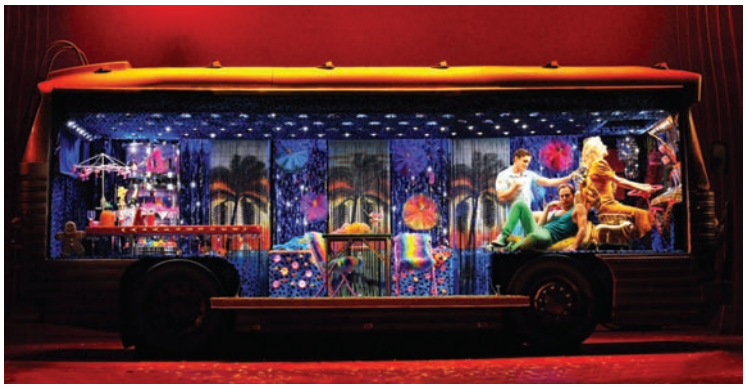
"We visited Stage One's very impressive operation and took a leap of faith, deciding to go with a one-stop-shop approach and get them to do as much as possible on the scenic side. This removed any need to discuss issues with a committee of different suppliers. We were combining a number of systems uniquely with Priscilla; it was always going to be a difficult get-in and it was. We faced the same teething problems that any large automated show will confront, but Stage One delivered. We would not have opened as we did without their full commitment and involvement. We'll certainly be talking to them about our future plans for the show throughout the world."

Garry McQuinn, Producer.

The UK production of this show at London's Palace Theatre has allowed us the opportunity to extend our collaborative relationship with Back Row Productions and Really Useful Group UK. The award winning London incarnation of the show, designed by Brian Thomson, is far more technically complex than its Antipodean counterpart and arguably more complex than any show seen in the West End to date. As such, it required us to develop a unique and highly concentrated package of automation, engineering and scenery. Having previously provided automation and lifting technology for the Sydney production of the show, we were approached to provide the London package by the show's producers: The Really Useful Theatre Company and Liz Koops and Garry McQuinn for Back Row Productions.



The PetG skin resembled the texture and colour of a real bus



The fabulous cocktail bar interior complete with palm trees and leopard print

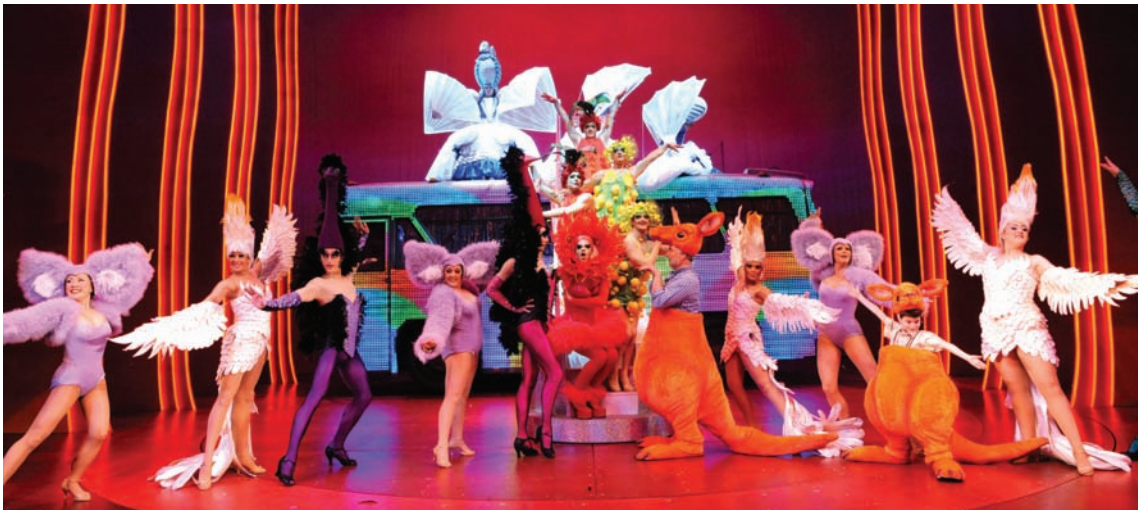
THE BUS

Priscilla herself provides a unique and highly concentrated package of automation, lighting and effects technology. The bus is purpose built and fully self-contained, with batteries supplying over 2000Ah of power at 24v, providing power for all the automation, interior lighting and exterior LED lighting. The batteries alone contribute 1.6 tonnes to the overall nine tonne weight. Built from scratch in our extensive workshops in North Yorkshire, Priscilla can be 'driven' around the stage completely independently, using a specially devised - and disguised - drive wheel system. This system also helps to protect the surface of the show deck. She is programmed to deliver 40 major movements during the course of the show, along with many other smaller movements such as those of the mirrors, the three performer lifts contained within and the 5m garage style door that runs the full length of one side. This door opens to reveal a fabulously over-the-top cocktail bar themed interior fit-out. Over all, Priscilla contains 22 axes of movement with eight motors controlling four slew rings and four drive wheels.

Cupcake scene: Priscilla in full flow – rotating and in mid light sequence

The interior contains all the theatrical lighting required for the actors' performances within the bus, but externally, the lighting is two-fold. Firstly, there is the traditional practical vehicle lighting, but secondly a stunning level of LED technology is revealed as the story unfolds. It is here that Priscilla departs radically from previous incarnations as the unique construction of the bus enables the transformation into what is essentially a moveable LED video wall of over 40,000 pixels, allowing a myriad of lighting effects to be achieved, all controlled via the bus's media server.

The multi-layered construction of the bus required a meticulous approach. A steel substructure was clad with a plywood skin on to which the LED mountings were attached. This was then followed by the LED's themselves, with a PetG skin being applied as a final layer. PetG is a clear, vacuum moulded material, requiring us to supply and manufacture moulds, a process we carried out using our in-house 5-axis CNC facility. The resulting translucent 'skin' not only resembled the texture of a real bus, but also allowed the colour and movement of the LED's to show through. Once in situ, the bus was sprayed a dull grey colour and grey she remains until the scene in which she is painted, when the LED's provide a stunning pre-programmed reveal, synchronised perfectly with the actors and action on stage. Most of the programming was completed off-site, with our Australian office devising the model animations of each sequence, meaning that less time was spent undertaking complex programming in the theatre.



A highly concentrated self-contained package of automation, lighting and effects technology

SCENERY AND PROPS

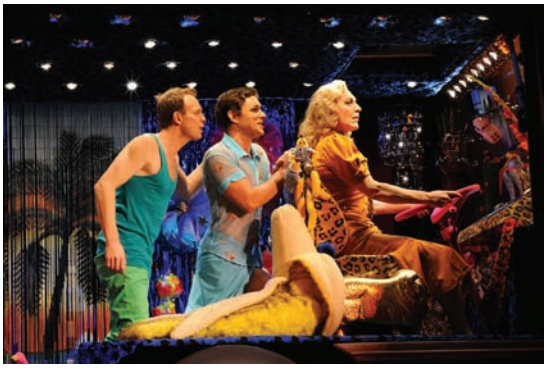
The Palace Theatre required a few alterations with the first five rows being anti-raked to accommodate the specially constructed show deck and orchestra pit. As well as being specially strengthened to allow for the weight of the bus, the show deck also contained a ten metre annular revolve along with two stage lifts: one upstage and one downstage. We created proscenium masking along with four portals, positioned at intervals upstage and embedded with LED flex.

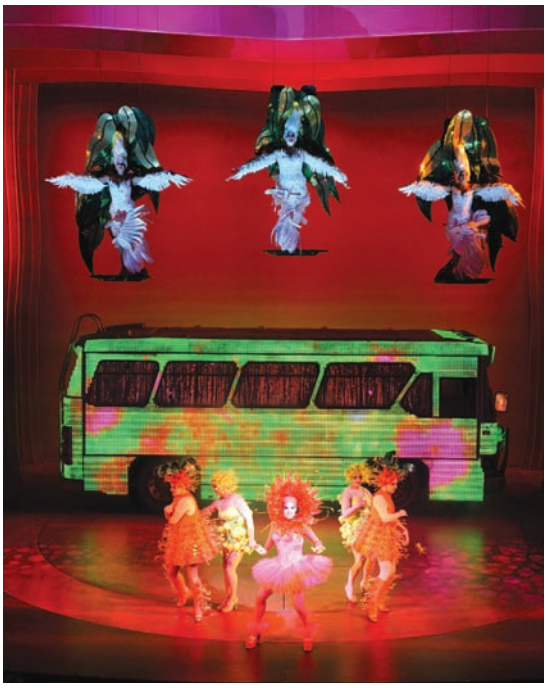
The scenic build involved replicating and embellishing all the elements used for the Australian production and included the construction of a Sydney Harbour Bridge, the Alice Springs Casino, The Broken Hill Pub, Woop Woop Hotel, Uluru and 'Les Girls' flashback scene. These scenes ranged from the relatively straight forward to the highly complex, integrating with automation, lighting and other effects. All major construction was carried out in our extensive workshops in Yorkshire before being transported and installed at the venue.

The Broken Hill pub, for example, consisted of a false-perspective 2D flat complete with fly-strip curtain and painted detail including animal skulls and a cowboy figure. The pub name lettering was outlined in yellow neon whilst the cowboy figure was studded with fibre optics, his lasso lit up with rope light. Our interpretation team also produced a number of props including a replica pool table, which had to be both convincingly realistic, yet strong enough to be danced upon.

The dusty outback scenes of the pub and hotel are in stark contrast with the full-on glitz and glamour of the Les Girls scene. Here, we constructed a huge flown candy-pink double staircase, encrusted with lights and 'supported' by cut-out columns. The staircase and columns were embellished with glitter curlicues and the handrails lit with fairy lights. The staircase is flown in complete with showgirls, while a 7m high Eiffel Tower, also encrusted with tiny lights, is also flown in from above.

Our interpretation team made full use of our 5-axis CNC machine and FRP sculpting facilities in the creation of a number of props with the most unusual being the giant shoes. Styled, painted and adorned in keeping with the outrageous glamour of the show, the shoes were used in a variety of contexts. For the Aria scene, a 2m crystal encrusted shoe, complete with performer sitting on top, descends and positions itself over the bus. It then projects out 5m over the audience with metres and metres of fabric unfurling behind. Another shoe, a 4.3m silver and glitter high-heeled 'peep-toe', contained a staircase for the finale, complete with chrome handrail, backlit risers and rope lights.





40,000 LED pixels and a quantum leap in production standards

FURTHER AUTOMATION

Our team of specialist automation engineers designed and programmed all of the show automation, which included not just the movement of - and from within - both the show deck and the bus, but also the performer flying. An auto-flying truss was erected to carry three lines of flying for the three show divas who fly up to 12m above the stage for various sequences. We also provided three stock winches for counterweight assisting as well as two three tonne hoists for the huge 'Les Girls' staircase. Within the show deck itself, we provided the annular revolve and two scissor lifts. All of the automation was operated by our Qmotion motion control system.

We provided all practical lighting including LED's, flex and neon elements and also a black flitter drop with LED strips to allow for cast and scenery entrances.

BUS STATISTICS:

- 32 batteries supplying over 2000Ah of power at 24v
- 40 major movements
- 22 axes of movement
- 3 performer lifts
- 5m automated garage style door
- 8 motors controlling 4 slew rings and 4 drive wheels.
- External lighting incorporating over 40,000 pixels
- Specially devised drive wheel system
- Control via bus's own media server
- Total weight of 9 tonnes