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The Essence Music Festival Stage Design, Part 1

Aug 13, 2010 11:33 AM, By Stefan Beese

The production design and elaborate stage build for the [2010 Essence Music Festival](#) (produced by [Rehage Entertainment](#)) might be looked at as a prototype for its effort to fuse elements like lighting, scenic, audio, and video—to combine these assets into one compact stage that is uniform yet an organic and fluid sculpture.



I approached this process with the mindset similar to that of a car designer, one who designs where and how metal bends to meet glass, how glass curves to become the windshield, how these materials then coalesce with technological assets such as LED lighting, speedometer, compass, etc, all to create one comprehensive organism that can “do it all.” The same went for this year’s stage; it served as a screen for I-Mag content and video, as well as a projection surface, and appeared differently from various viewing angles due to the rounded shape and complementary video content.

The 2010 stage was an endoskeleton structure consisting of two fluid volumes utilizing video mapping and large scale projections to create one uniform sculpture. To expand upon [the 2009 production design](#), a larger volume for actual performance space was created on stage, allowing performers to get out of the main center deck area. This stage sculpture sat atop a glossed black surface, with two additional side catwalks, providing the ability to move far left and right directly in front of two curved screens comprising [Barco MStrips](#), and alongside the lower projection surface of the stage. Another decision was to create two areas within the canopied projection area that were masked out into an organic shape that could switch from video to I-Mag content. This was targeted toward the audience seated in the upper levels of the [Louisiana Superdome](#), allowing special performance moments and action on stage to be seen on these rooftop canopies.

To eliminate hanging points from previous years, the stage frame was designed as a fabric shell mounted to two stage roof structures measuring 50’ wide by 40’ deep by 58’ high from 24”x60”. Boxtrusses were built by [Premier Global Production](#) (PGP) at stage left and right, with the curved aluminum pipes (directly extracted from RE:BE’s wireframe model to accommodate the organic shapes) mounted to these towers. [Event Producers Inc.](#) produced the aluminum curves and created the spandex roofing system over PGP’s truss towers. John Clark functioned this year as the show’s lighting designer, and PGP provided all lighting equipment and trussing. Clark needed to create corresponding lighting moments for areas that could not be reached by the projectors (i.e. the VIP area or center downstage screen). The video mapping was done through [XL Video](#) by software operator Emmanuel Zugler. Using the [Vioso Presenter system](#), Zugler made a significant time investment in perfecting all elements of this complex architecture. Overall, this was a great achievement for such an elaborate build in such a short amount of time.



This year, the downstage center screen (surrounded by an ellipsoid frame) functioned as a stage “curtain” and backdrop during set changes, to visually block the activity on stage and catered to sponsor moments and special announcements. The spandex frame created a larger vision block, as well as additional projection surface area when in its highest position above the lighting rig. The screen hovered above the action during performance, showing the Essence logo or I-Mag content, but was brought down and docked into the ellipsoidal MStrip

areas to create a vision block during set changes and backdrop for all special announcements.

Event Producers were the general contractors for this project, manufacturing the stage and delivering video and projection equipment (provided through XL video). During the pre-production phase, I worked with 3D designer Seyavash Zohoori on custom production design vignettes to create a general festival look. Using my organic design, including ink drops transforming into fluid masses that took on the shape of the stage,

similar narratives were tested in various 3D animations, such as digital ink and liquid particle animation to real life footage of ink drops, such effects (by Dana Hunt) were revealed over the surface. Once onsite, the general show look was created and finalized for the Essence Music Festival. Due to the fact that it was the 40th anniversary of *Essence* magazine, a tiled magazine cover look from the past four decades was projected over the canopied canvas, with covers interchanging in a fade in fade out transition projection technique. Specific content—elements and logos for Raphael Saadiq and Earth, Wind, and Fire—was created on site by a full production customization team led by Hunt. It was essential to brief each main stage artist's LD team how to utilize the projections and stage elements in order to blend together and maintain the overall production design.

Every year, featured sponsored moments are spliced in between each performer's set lists, so this year custom vignettes were made for the sponsors. Another goal regarding sponsor presence was to produce something more dynamic and relevant than the classical vinyl sponsor logo banners, typically hung either next to the stage or added to a stage scrim. Zohoori built custom projection content on site after reviewing each sponsor commercial segment. For example, Army was given a camouflage look projected over the entire surface, while a red and white bubbled effect was created for Coca-Cola. This made each sponsor appear unique yet catered to the integrative overall festival design aesthetic. In addition to the single sponsor moments, a sponsor collage was generated, allowing each sponsor logo to appear in different areas on the stage surface through a dynamic rotation of images.

Rehage Entertainment also took on the role of producing Janet Jackson's performance for this year's festival, allowing the group to work closely with her team, including her designer, Vince Foster, who had created her '08 tour. Communication and content sharing began four weeks prior to event day. Foster, Zohoori, and I were working on custom applications of Foster's existing library for the stage. Once Foster was onsite, he teamed up with Matt Webb, the video programmer, to program the show. The projection content, achieved by 10 Barco FLMR22+ projectors, was a strong element in producing one uniform presentation, by bridging what was shown on the I-Mag content on the [Chromatek 6mm screen](#), the [Pixled F-7](#), and the Pixled F-40 upstage screens.

Stay tuned for plots, renderings, video, and more from Beese's design.

Selected Gear

392 Pixled F-40 (58'x30')
135 Pixled F-7 (25'x15')
192 Barco Mstrip In Custom Frame
160 Modules Chromatek 6mm Black (2 25'x15' Screens)
10 Barco FLMR22+ Projector
Vioso Presenter System (For Custom Warping)
3 [PRG Mbox Extreme v3](#)
18 [Martin Professional MAC 700 Wash Fixtures](#)
24 [Martin MAC 2000 Wash Fixtures](#)
16 [Vari-Lite VL3500 Wash](#)
28 [Barco High End Systems Studio Beams](#)
12 [Barco High End Systems X.Spot](#)
6 [High ACL Bar](#)
4 [8-lite Mble](#)
8 [Philips Color Kinetics LED Color Blaze 72](#)
12 [Martin Atomics 3000 Strobe](#)
6 [Coemar Panorama Cyc](#)
2 [MALighting grandMA](#)
1 [MALighting grandMA2](#)

CREDITS

Production Designer: Stefan Beese, Re:Be Design
3D Design: Seyavash Zohoori
Lighting Designer: John Clarke
Lighting Designer For Janet Jackson: Vince Foster
Producers: Rehage Entertainment Inc
Rigging: Steve Brown, Rhino Staging
Media Server Programmer: Matt Webb
Projection Programmer: Danny Whetstone
Content Programmer: Dana Hunt
Software Operator, Vioso System: Emanuel Zueger
LED Engineer: Gary Madura
LED Technicians: Trace Deroy, Prince Tilahun, Luke Pilato
VIP Areas Construction: Ken Battle, Revitalizations, LLC
Convention Center Lighting/Projection Technicians: Chase Kesner, Patrick Theriot, Jacob Heintz, John Lejeune, Jackie Johnson
Video Vendor and Staging Build: Event Producers Inc.
Video Vendor: XL Video
Lighting Vendor: Premier Global Production Company
Sound: [Clair Brothers](#)
Convention Center Projection/Lighting: [See Hear Productions Inc.](#)
Columns and Ribbons: Mardi Gras Productions