

Revista Backstage – Touring Musicals in Brazil – March 2010

Entertainment touring in Brazil is not new. It has been successfully done for years with “Country” music and Rock and Roll. But touring a musical from city to city has not been attempted. Until recently, shows like “Novica Rebelada” or “Esta É Nossa Canção” have opened in Rio de Janeiro and then moved to São Paulo. But to my knowledge, creating a musical specifically for touring in Brazil had not been tried before.

When I heard that Claudia Raia had created the show “Pernas Pro Ar” and that it was intended for touring, I was immediately intrigued by the idea of touring musicals in Brazil because of the many years that I have toured. And touring is not an easy task. The logistics of moving a few tons of equipment from place to place (or from one country to another), plus the time allowed for setting up a show, make it a high pressure and sometimes frustrating occupation. This process can drain the energy out of everyone and anyone attached to the tour. This is the daily job of a roadie.

In the U.S., touring shows have been a tradition for almost 100 years. And there is a little history behind this that I would like to share with you. In the early 20th century there was a singer named Al Jolson who was immensely popular and very talented. And if he were still alive today he would tell you the same thing! But he did bring two major changes to musical theatre in particular. First, he decided to offer his shows once a week in the middle of the afternoon. Instantly, the matinee performance was born. You might be wondering, “WHY did he do this?” At that time, most actors, dancers and performers worked at night. And he wanted them to be able to see and hear him sing and dance. Not only did he have a tremendous ego but he also created more work for more artists. So in the final analysis it was a good thing for the theatre world.

Now that he had expanded his admirers by introducing additional shows per week, he started thinking about how else he could get more people to see him. You and I are the ones who have benefited from his never-ending thirst for hearing audiences applaud his shows. He (almost single-handedly) created the touring industry for musical theatre. Before his innovation, the only entertainment that travelled to cities and small towns were the vaudeville acts. These were individual or small groups of actors, singers and specialty acts like acrobatic dogs. Jolson brought sets, lights, costumes, musicians, actors and technicians across the U.S. by train, truck and car.

After nearly a century of touring in the U.S. they’ve managed to get it right most of the time. What has prevented them from creating the “perfect” tour? In a word: “technology”. It is changing so fast and the problems it can create from one theatre to another are the major reasons why no tour is easy or simple.

You need ample experience. You must be able to think on your feet. And because every space is going to be different, you have to be able to adjust your show each time you move to a new location. Touring also means that you have VERY little time to make the decisions and changes before each performance. The difficulties are multiplied as you begin to use more and more sophisticated equipment. From audio to lighting and video, every high-tech tool you use makes the solutions to potential problems more difficult to find.

For example with audio, today’s musicals all use wireless microphones. Each one must use an individual frequency which uses its own receiver that must get the signal from an array of antennas surrounding the stage. On Broadway, for example, so many wireless microphones are used that each company must be sure that the show next door is not

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using the same frequencies that you are using. I'm sure you can imagine the trouble if 2 different voices were heard over the same microphone frequency with one show as a classic musical and the other a rock and roll style show.

You must also carry enough spare microphones and receivers because you cannot get them fixed if one breaks and you are in a small town. In the modern musical everyone has a microphone. This means that you are also mixing each voice PLUS the musicians. Your mixing console must be able to control it all. While really big shows might carry a spare mixing board with them, the cost (we will not even talk about the weight) to rent a spare board that you might never use, would make most producers unwilling to have the added expense.

Now that you have all the voices and musical instruments connected to your board, you need to send that combined signal to your amplifiers and speakers. Modern musicals require a system for the audience to hear and another for the actors and musicians who must be able to hear themselves. Each part of the output is an independent system of amplifiers and speakers which further complicates the operation of an audio system in a live event. The possibilities for errors and breaks in connections can make the simplest live sound installation a nightmare.

But now that you've got an entire system installed and working, you have to acoustically tune the system to the room you are in. (Personally, I always leave the stage whenever audio starts using "White or Pink" noise.) This is another area that takes time even though you will have very little time when you are on the road. The final aspect is setting the levels for each actor/singer and the musicians. This is often done each day before a show but when you are on the road you must work fast!

I am very grateful to Andre Garrido for the time they took to share with me some of the common problems they have encountered with their show. It's nice to know that there are still people willing to take on the thankless job of touring. Being an old "roadie", I know the excitement and frustration that is part of the normal day on the road. And I agree with Andre when he said that audio always has to balance the needs of the audience with the desires of the cast in terms of the volume of the show. But when you are performing in a space like PIER MAUÁ, you also have to raise the level of the sound so that it can be heard over the noise of the industrial air conditioners.

Artistically "Pernas Pro Ar" has decided to perform in mostly alternative spaces around Brazil, like PIER MAUÁ in Rio de Janeiro. These spaces offer the show both freedom and obstacles. For example, you can place your stage anywhere in the space pleases you. But you also have the reality that because the space is not a theatre, the audience will be on one level in front of the stage, making the view of the stage difficult for many audience members. (The solution for this in Rio was to build platforms for the audience's chairs.)

As I understand it, the scenery was conceived by Claudia Raia to feel as if her show was in a box. The final execution of her idea then is successful. Because the 3 large walls are also used for video projections to give multiple scenes of various stage images. And the side walls of the set open downstage for use as secondary video screens. Their video system uses 12 servers which control the output of 5 video projectors throughout the performance. This sophisticated system has a simple user interface which allows the operator to easily move from one video image to the next in sequential order.

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Another area that is expensive and takes up lots of space (in the truck and onstage) is the lighting. You will want to carry all the lights your designer requires, plus have enough lights as spares. You might need them in a theatre that is larger than what the original design planned for. You will not only need spare lighting equipment but you will also need to have extra lamps. We all know they burn out. But they also do not travel too well in a truck over bad roads. In most shows that I have worked on, the lighting department carried their dimmers also. This tour decided to rent the dimmers in each location. I am not sure whether this was to save space or because the local theatres usually have their own dimmers. My thanks go to Paulo Medeiro for giving me copies of the lighting design so I may share a little of it with my readers. When I spoke with him, he told me that the most difficult aspect of lighting this show was balancing the stage lighting with the video images. He needed to light small areas of the stage, scene by scene, so that the lights were never brighter than the projections. And because this was also a musical, his lighting had to be bright and energetic.

My touring experience in the international market is primarily in the U. S., Canada and Mexico. Touring is done at such a fast pace in North America that it can be quite easy to make mistakes if you are not experienced and plan your show well. This is needed for every department in a musical but I will only talk now about the lighting. For my part, I usually have a five hour time frame to install and focus all the lights for my show, whether it is a musical or a ballet. And in many of my tours the calendar is very full. My last ballet tour did 158 performances in 165 cities. I travelled each night and set up my lights every day in a different city with only a few days off to rest.

Hanging the lights, speakers and video equipment in alternative spaces also means that you must carry with you an amazing variety of rigging equipment. And while I did not see any chain motors, there were many manual chain lifts used to get the lighting trusses and speakers to the positions needed for the show. This made think about the need to travel with at least one person who is qualified in rigging. Personally, I don't want to ever have think, "Is it OK to be standing under this truss?" No one else in a company should wonder either.

Theatres and alternative performance spaces all over Brazil should consider creating architectural drawings complete with all the information needed for a show to come to their town or city. And I encourage you send them to me because when I receive enough data from you, I will create a website on my server to share this information. I envision having at least one page of contact information (names, phone numbers and addresses), one page for the technical drawings (AutoCAD or VectorWorks) and a final page for the technical information about the space (like the number of lights, dimmers, sound equipment, curtains and backstage dressing rooms). Touring of musicals is growing in Brazil. And shouldn't your town and your theatre be the first in your state to present them?

In my next article, I will discuss in depth, the steps needed to plan and create a lighting design for touring including the equipment, lamps, cables, roadboxes, tools and expendables needed to start a tour.

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