

THE WORLD'S A STAGE

Technological innovations in the stage rigging and dressing sectors is transforming the live events industry and opening up a whole new world of possibilities for production teams in the GCC. Here, we profile the key players and technologies changing the way crews are doing business in the Middle East.



The rapid development of stage rigging technologies has had a profound effect on the way live events have been presented in recent years. Whether it be a small theatre production or a major stadium-style concert event, the introduction of automated technologies such as motion control systems and motorised rigging structures has not only simplified the tasks facing production crews but also revolutionised the experience for audiences, opening up a whole world of production possibilities as a result. Coinciding with this has been the development of new stage dressing materials such as starcloths and drapes, and the application of LED-based technologies in traditional stage designs, which have in turn revolutionised AV presentations, particularly at large-scale rock concerts and festivals.

The vast majority of the industry's leading suppliers are based in the UK and Europe, but most boast a presence, whether directly or indirectly through a distribution partner, in the Middle East.

Stagetech

One of the top companies in the sector is London-based Stage Technologies, otherwise known as Stagetech. While the company does not have a permanent presence in the Middle East, it has completed a number of high-profile projects in the region, including the Dubai Mall in the UAE and other venues in Qatar.

Stagetech marcoms manager Louise Sheffield says the company may consider opening an office in the region in the future or at the least, securing a partnership with a local supplier.

"We currently do not have a direct presence but our staff base of more than 160 engineers and support crew means that we have the capability to deliver numerous projects simultaneously in different parts of the globe," she says.

"We have enjoyed working in more than 30 different countries and there is always something new to inspire us.

"We feel that there is a huge scope to share our technology and knowledge to provide Middle East-based performance venues a competitive edge."

Sheffield explains Stagetech's roots lie in West End London theatre projects, providing theatre automation technology.



STAGING TECHNOLOGY SPECIAL

gies to venues such as the Adelphi. It now operates a "thriving" rentals department that caters to worldwide events from rock shows to corporate launches and touring theatre productions.

Recent projects include Viva ELVIS in Las Vegas (Cirque du Soleil), Love Never Dies in London's West End (Andrew Lloyd Webber), the Pink Funhouse tour 2009/10, Grammys and MTV Music Awards, Mika and Katherine Jenkins.

The company's product range includes plug-and-play style touring control technologies, and advanced wireless control and rigging systems.

"We also supply a range of portable control desks and handheld controllers; advanced wireless control technology (including stage trucks, tracks and trolleys, seating wagons and lifts); eChameleon software and optional joystick programming control for precision 3D performer flying and complex motion plotting; and a wide range of winches and point hoists built specifically for the stage environment with robustness, longevity and safety in mind," says Sheffield.

Showtex

Another company that has carved a formidable niche in the Middle East market is Showtex, whose local operation based in Dubai is steered by industry veteran Sven Peeters.

The company's ShowLED starcloths and extensive range of draping technologies are impressive in terms of quality and are particularly well-designed for outdoor applications, making them ideal for use in the Middle East.

Showtex has found considerable success supplying kit to recent high-profile events staged in the region. It supplied all custom-printed and decorative fabrics for the Meydan opening ceremony at the Dubai World Cup, projection screens and a 1000 m2 roof covering in printed banner drape for the recent Ultimate Fighting Championships (UFC) in Abu Dhabi, and printed inflatable start and finish banners for the Tour of

Oman. ShowLED starcloths featured on-stage at the Mawazine Festival in Morocco, the Miss World pageant in South Africa, the Star Awards on Al Watan TV, and the Dubai International Film Festival.

According to Peeters, the live staging market accounts for at least half of ShowTex's overall business.

"We've focused on fabrics all these years because the possibilities onstage are endless. Designers keep coming up with amazing concepts and innovative textiles are the perfect medium for making them a reality. ShowLED starcloths have quickly become the standard here for everything from stage backdrops to venue animation," he claims.

ShowTex Middle East recently moved to a significantly larger workshop and office space, Peeters explains.

"We are extending our focus to export sales and will soon have a regional manager who knows the ShowTex product range inside and out as well as being a ShowLED specialist," he says.

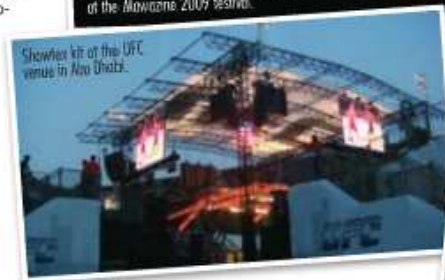
"ShowTex's roots lie in Europe. The European offices have been operating for 150 years. This means we've already established good relationships with many of the other companies in the industry that are now operating in the Middle East."

Peeters stresses that it was essential ShowTex Middle East be a full service location and "not a distributorship".

"Our giant projection screens and ShowLED starcloth systems have done very well in the region," he claims. "The climate and open spaces in the Middle East lend themselves to outdoor performances and grand scale productions in a



Showtex's ShowLED Animation in action at the Mawazine 2009 festival.



Showtex kit at the UFC venue in Abu Dhabi.



STAGING TECHNOLOGY TRENDS

LEDS TO THE FORE

"We're seeing more and more performances that integrate giant glassless mirrors, HiSpeed roll ups with spaghetti string curtains, and digitally printed backdrops and canvases," says Showtex's Sven Peeters. "Our workshop is now able to print screens up to five metres in width, which creates an infinite number of imaging possibilities for stage or trade show decoration."

"The ShowLED components can be added to all kinds of fabrics, drapes, or three dimensional soft goods and we've achieved some amazing results combining sheer- and semi-sheer fabrics and foils with the ShowLED system."

"So customers can use LEDs in the traditional way, or alter the definition of light and colours with other fabrics like our X-Foil and CycloLED, or even use DropPaper and Voile to achieve softer light effects."

AUTOMATED CONTROL IS KEY

"We're seeing more and more shows with automated controls and expanded use of automation," says Anne Johnston. "Also the use of variable speed chain motors is increasing. If someone can dream it up, we can automate or fly it. We pride ourselves on pushing the technology to provide solutions, with both custom and stock components that act as building blocks. By having key



LEDs are becoming intrinsic to modern staging presentations.



stock components, we can engineer a more cost-effective solution. Many of these technologies are becoming increasingly smaller."

WIRELESS WONDERS

"More venues and production companies are embracing wireless technology for improved safety and flexibility," says Louise Sheffield. "More companies will move towards standard components. For example, we use Siemens industrial components in our control racks to ensure repeatability and availability of parts 24/7."

"Education and understanding what

can be achieved with automation will improve as a new generation of technical theatre students and set designers join the professional market. In the world of virtual reality and interactive gaming, performers and producers will want to compete for audiences with more daring and sophisticated entertainment technology."

CONVERGENCE IS THE FUTURE

"With the ongoing 'convergence' between lighting and video, automation is also becoming a highly creative tool for visual designers of types, and 'movement' is emerging as an imaginative show element in its own right, particularly in relation to lighting, video scenic/set pieces," claims Kinesys' Dave Weatherhead.

"The ability of digital media servers to now render and map video content in real time and keep pace with moving screens is also opening up many exciting possibilities."

"Stage automation has reached a level of sophistication where it can be viewed as an essential component by any production team."

Weatherhead adds that staging automation technologies also help reduce demands on venue staff in certain areas, reducing stress, enhancing safety standards and facilitating faster turnarounds between shows.

