

CASE STUDIES

SOUND FOR SUNSET BOULEVARD

DPA's expertise in musical theatre applied to new production.



SUMMARY

System Sound has been at the forefront of musical theatre sound design for decades. Christopher Holder from Audio Technology speaks to David Greasley and David Letch just before the Australian run of Sunset Boulevard, which features an entirely new production and a fresh audio design to complement it.

David Greasley kicks us off: "Musical theatre producers want the seemingly impossible: they want the show to sound as natural as possible – with the music sounding like it's coming from the orchestra pit and the vocals sounding like its coming from the singer on stage – but they also want the sound to be present and exciting – big, luscious and involving."

David Letch continues: "To achieve this we start with solid fundamentals – non negotiables. Everyone in the house hears audio from more than one source."

ACHIEVING THE PERFECT SOUND

Let's first address the 'natural sounding' requirement. System Sound has mastered the art of creating the ideal musical theatre 'Goldilocks' balance, where the audience throughout the show neither feels the need to 'lean forward' nor 'lean back' in their seats.

Performances seem to emanate effortlessly from the precise point on the stage where they are taking place. The orchestra blends seamlessly into the soundscape, making it feel like a natural extension of its presence in the pit. This impeccable sound experience is consistent for every seat in the house, from the front row to the highest balcony. When you think about it, you might wonder: how do they achieve that? How does someone in the back corner experience the same audio imaging as someone in the front row? (Spoiler: it involves a lot of speakers and a complex array of matrix outputs.)



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MILLIMETRE PERFECT

Having the audience area meticulously zoned so that theatre-goers experience a mix of different loudspeaker sources, precisely timed for natural imaging and coherence, offers additional benefits, according to David Greasley: "I think we get a bit more gain before feedback. There's no single, large wavefront exciting the room and returning to the stage. This setup is especially important for shows like Sunset Boulevard, where the production requires completely hidden microphones."

WHY DPA?

Some shows, especially higher-energy ones, willingly use visible headset microphones to achieve higher sound levels. Other shows strictly adhere to the traditional approach of hiding tiny microphones in the performers' hairlines. Sunset Boulevard relies on the DPA 4061.

"The 4061 is just such a natural, transparent-sounding microphone," confirms David Letch. "That's why it's a mainstay in musical theatre."

David Greasley: "DPA mics sound really good – they provide a really high resolution super-accurate sound. System Sound has a fantastic suite of microphones but when they're in a pit and they're all jammed in together type it's as much about the mic next to you as it is about the mic in front of you. You want your mics to sound as accurate off pattern as they do on axis. The aim is to have the pit sounding as natural and as accurate as possible and those DPA microphones do that."



This triangle deserves a DPA 4011.



The pit is bristling with DPA 4011



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**FOLDBACK PRAGMATICS**

With numerous DPA omnidirectional miniature microphones open on stage, foldback becomes a challenging task.

Musical theatre increasingly relies on a larger number of smaller speakers concealed in cavities under the stage.

However, the Sunset Boulevard stage wasn't deep enough for this setup, so monitoring had to be placed elsewhere—

pointing down from above, from the sides of the stage, in the 'ladders' side of the stage, and within the scenery and staging.

Essentially, David Greasley and David Letch found creative places to hide loudspeakers wherever they could.

"Performers spend months rehearsing with piano accompaniment, without microphones or loudspeakers,"

explains David Letch. "It's not like a rock band rehearsing with everything turned up to 11. Our principals aren't expecting 'more me' in the foldback, even if we could give it to them. Mostly, they're looking for enough orchestra to feel confident in their ability to pitch correctly."

Interestingly, the principals also receive a touch of vocal reverb in the foldback. This simulates the ideal acoustics of an amazing theatre and gives the performer something to 'push into' as they increase their dynamics during a big chorus. It's subtle but noticeable, and many performers appreciate it.

NIGHT AFTER NIGHT

Sound design for musical theatre is a specialised field, and System Sound's expertise reaches far beyond Australia.

David Greasley, in particular, finds himself traveling extensively throughout the region to ensure that the vision of show creators and producers is brought to life.

"We're fortunate in Australia," David Greasley points out.

"Sound designers from Broadway and the West End often visit for extended periods, and System Sound benefits from these direct collaborations. We're trusted to translate that vision and ensure its realisation across the region."

The 'bedrock' philosophy of uniformly distributing the same mix through every loudspeaker in the theatre is one of the principles imparted by respected international sound designers. Ultimately, for David Greasley and David Letch, the goal is consistency—no surprises. Their role focuses on meticulous preparation and reproducibility to deliver outstanding results night after night, city after city.

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DPA
MICROPHONES