

Designer Q&A: Mitchell Fenton on *Pippin* Australia



Ever wonder what it's like to work on a theatrical production during the COVID-19 pandemic? We talked to [Mitchell Fenton](#), the Associate Lighting Designer for *Pippin* Australia, which is the first musical production to open in Australia since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Here's what we learned about his experience.

City Theatrical (CTI): When did you start working on this production of *Pippin*?

Mitchell Fenton (MF): We first found out that *Pippin* was going to play Australia in August 2020. It was all very sudden.

CTI: When did the show officially open?

MF: The show officially opened December 3, 2020 at the Sydney Lyric Theatre in Sydney, Australia.

CTI: What was it like working on the first musical production to open in Australia since the COVID-19 pandemic began?

MF: It was a long process due to COVID-19 restrictions and regulations in Australia. For something that would normally take 2-3 weeks from load in to first preview or opening, it took 2 and a half months. It was an amazing feeling at the first preview when the show started, lots of cheers and clapping.

CTI: How are audiences enjoying the show?

MF: People are thrilled to be back in the theatre. Opening night and the first preview was a very fulfilling experience for everyone. To be part of a production that is the first musical to open in Australia is really quite special.

CTI: What has your process been like, day to day?

MF: It was a very abnormal process in terms of schedule and logistics. The load in started before the show was cast, which was also a major advantage due to the nature of the show. Rehearsals that would normally take place in the rehearsal room took place on stage on the full show set from 9am to 6pm. From 6pm to 11pm, we would come in and do work notes, focus or cueing. This went on for four weeks before we made it to technical rehearsals. Once we hit technical rehearsals, it was back to normal.

CTI: Were there any COVID-19 related restrictions that you have encountered while working on this show?

MF: Yes, there were quite a few! From the moment we entered the stage door, we had to be wearing a mask and were not allowed to take it off until leaving the theatre. The only exception to this rule was for the cast, when they were onstage. Every day we would sign in at stage door and answer three health questions. If you were sick, you were sent home. Every company member had to have a COVID-19 test every week on Wednesday or Thursday. Furthermore, we would have to practice social distancing as much as possible while in the theatre.



Photos by David Hooley





Photos by Brian Geach



DESIGNER Q&A (Continued)

CTI: Have you been able to work with the other designers and creative teams effectively?

MF: Yes, the creative process and working with everyone on the creative team was normal. There was definitely an extra added layer of communication as COVID-19 did affect the logistics of some things which meant some elements of the production were a bit later.

CTI: What is it like behind the scenes now?

MF: The day to day is exactly the same. The only change that happened is when an audience is let in, the theatre is split into two zones. Once you are in Zone B (Front of house) you cannot cross back to Zone A (Backstage).

CTI: How is this production / lighting design of *Pippin* different or similar to the Broadway production?

MF: This production of *Pippin* is [Kenneth Posner's](#) Tony nominated design. It is a hybrid of the Broadway and tour light plot, but it looks the same as it did on Broadway.

CTI: Any shout outs to key team members who have helped make it all possible for *Pippin* Australia?

MF: Yes, of course, to the electricians! Especially the Head Electrician L'Argent Wilson and the Deputy Head Electrician Lachlan Hogan. Also, a huge thanks to my fabulous programmer Jason Fripp.

As the lighting rig came out of [PRG Melbourne](#), which is in a different state than the theatre, we were dealing with the rules of crossing state lines and a limited number of PRG employees being able to go into the shop and pull the gear. PRG did a tremendous job, special thanks to Ken Roach, in pulling the gear off the shelf and getting it on a truck to Sydney. Following that the electricians prepared the whole lighting rig in the theatre as they loaded it in.

For more information on *Pippin* Australia, visit:

<https://pippinthemusical.com.au/>

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