

A Midnight Clear

Donnie Brawner lights one of the biggest Christmas pageants ever seen

by David Barbour



The houses-of-worship market has become increasingly important to the lighting industry in the last decade. That is never more true in December of each year, when certain churches unveil their Christmas pageants. Of all these events, none may be more spectacular than the Dallas Christmas Festival (DCF), presented by the Prestonwood Baptist Church, in Plano, a suburb of Dallas, TX. The elaborate DCF pageant, involving nearly 1,000 cast and crew members, is produced by R. Todd Bell, directed by Micheal Meece and managed by Cyndi Nine.

Prestonwood boasts a 7,000-seat worship center where the DCF has played for the last three Christmas seasons. It began a major

lighting design and equipment upgrade in 2002, with the participation of LD Donnie Brawner, of Brawner & Associates, L.L.C. He is not a stranger to large-scale holiday entertainment, having designed, or been involved in, many holiday shows, events, and pageants; among other things he has been lighting director for *The Radio City Christmas Spectacular* in Branson, MO since 1994 (a production designed by David Agress) and the same Radio City show in Mexico City in 1999 and 2000 (designed by Brian Monahan).

Brawner's company is a turnkey production firm specializing in production and consultation services for theatre, video, concerts,

corporate meetings, attractions, and special events. Other projects include annual meetings with corporate clients such as Wal-Mart Stores Inc. and Ranger Boats, numerous theatrical productions, outdoor special-effects extravaganzas and consultation projects for high schools, churches, and amusement parks (including lighting and scenic design of Stone Mountain's 4D Effects theatre in Atlanta, GA). Brawner's company also production managed and designed a new large-scale Christmas Pageant for the First Baptist Church Of Springdale, AR in 2003.

In reworking the lighting for DCF, Brawner says, "We started from scratch. The church

owns about 500 PAR cans and a handful of ETC Source Four ellipsoidals, but, otherwise, they didn't have the equipment we needed. We drew up a pretty substantial list of rental equipment and sent it out to bid. The numbers were a little higher than they had seen before, but their response was they didn't want to stand in the way of creativity. They had been searching for a change and upgrade in the

rollerblades, and festive holiday dancers. It ends with a horse-drawn sleigh coming up center stage, with a line of dancers, snow, and pyro effects. At the finale, there are more 150 people onstage.

"This leads into a youth number of the Prestonwood youth choir which has more than a hundred students. This year, the number featured a country-western setting, with the

The program of the DCF includes choir music (this page, top left), as well as a dramatized life of Christ (this page, top right and bottom left, opposite page). Throughout the production, Brawner uses his moving gear in highly visible fashion, creating architectural looks with beams of light. Below right, some stunning laser effects were added to this year's show.



lighting and this was the associated cost" Christie Lights, Dallas, TX won the bid; check out the equipment list on page 34.

The show, which covers all the bases in celebrating Christmas, is structured into three acts, says Brawner. "Act I is a secular Christmas revue which was all new this year. It starts in Santa's Toy Shop, with elves rappelling in from the ceiling, running through the aisles as they prepare to pack up Santa's spaceship; Santa comes down the aisle, gets into the spacecraft, and flies out, with lighting, smoke, and pyro effects. The next 20 minutes are filled with waltz numbers, dancing trees, gingerbread men, a visit from a 7' Frosty on

kids in a local tavern, where only soda is served. In a theatrical, musical way, a story is told of an 1800s Western town where the people have been led astray by mean town ruler and how they all see their way to God by the appearance of a heavenly visitor. The visitor happens to be a cowboy dressed in white who flies around the stage as he delivers his message. The local townspeople receive a renewed spirit and begin a jubilant celebration where they are joined by other angels and another 100-odd townspeople filling the aisles. The finale ends Act I.

"Act II is a concert, featuring Prestonwood's adult choir; here, we have more than 450 peo-

ple onstage in addition to the 70-piece live orchestra as they perform a collection of different styles of Christmas anthems. The overwhelming sound of a 450-voice choir is incredible and it really gets the crowd going. It's one of our moments to make the lighting shine and build with excitement as we decorate the air, choir, and backdrop to the musical score."

"Act III, which is over an hour long, is the story of Christ, from birth to ascension. It's narrated by an actor playing a shepherd, who starts by telling the story of Mary and Joseph making their way to Bethlehem as they make their entrance to song on a donkey. ▶

During the Nativity, we are visited by five flying angels over the crowd and one we see through the hillside scrim. The 500-plus cast members make their way to the stables carrying candles. The Three Kings make their entrances from three different aisles complete with elaborate props, camels, and costumes. We see Jesus as a youngster and healing the blind man in the market, Jesus preaching the Beatitudes, the Hosanna on Palm Sunday. We do the Last Supper, then go into the Garden of Gethemene, where the guards rush in to take him away. We show the Via Dolorosa, with Jesus being pushed, dragged, and kicked down an aisle as he drags his own cross. It's quite an amazing moment and is very realistic. The costumes, makeup and props are top shelf.

"At the end of the scene, the guards drag Jesus offstage as the music fades out and we go to black. We hear the nailing of the cross, and the the lights come up revealing Jesus on the cross in a sea of fog all the way upstage over 100' from the first row. There's a massive storm scene with surround-sound audio and lightning effects that clear the cast from the stage. Jesus is dramatically carried off the cross and is given to Mary. His body is wrapped in a white cloth and they carry him downstage to a tomb. White-light lasers are mounted in a set of steps behind him; we go into a two-minute lighting and laser show built to a very powerful soundtrack where it appears the laser light is emitting from the body of Jesus. There are big hits with the music; on the last one, the lights go out and the body is gone. Three seconds later, Jesus is revealed in heaven, suspended about 7' in the air surrounded by angels where he then rises over 30' for the ascension."

Throughout the production, Brawner uses his moving gear in highly visible fashion, creating architectural looks with beams of light. "That's one of the distinctive qualities of our lighting and one of the reasons we work with [director] Micheal Meece on so many different productions." he says, adding, "I use moving lights as scenery, as one of the major elements to drive the emotion. When you have a show of this magnitude and it builds as this one does so many times throughout the night, you have to be able to make the lighting build with the

same intensity." His extensive rig includes a number of different moving units. "We have a lot of [Martin Professional] Mac 2000s in the front of house, for texture on the set, stage and drops; all the Mac 2000s in the show have custom gobo patterns. We turn the stairs into snow, breakups, and grass, for example."

In addition, "There are six Mac 2000s in the orchestra pit and others on the stage wings. I use a lot of floor lighting, usually saving it for the big moment of a scene, when I really need a new exciting element. The 15,000 sq. ft. stage is 150' wide and the outside floor lights help to frame in the picture somewhat. The church already owned six High End Systems Cyberlights, so we use them as sidelight, from upstage of the portal. They

come in pretty handy and saved us a time or two. We also have 54 [High End] Studio Colors, which are our workhorses for downstage backlight—due to hanging space there's very little backlight in the show, outside of the Studio Colors; they also paint the drops, which are created by Peter Wolf." The Studio Colors play an important role during the Crucifixion scene, creating a moving color wash across the cyc. "It's a red glow that moves from stage left to stage right over several minutes," says Brawner.

In addition to the Macs, Brawner has eight Martin Pal 1200 units in side positions. "Last year," he says, "I had a couple of sidelight trusses with [ETC] Source Fours with scrollers, but they were very difficult to focus and ▶

DALLAS CHRISTMAS FESTIVAL

LIGHTING EQUIPMENT:

- 54 High End Systems Studio Color 575⁰⁹
- 6 High End Sytems Litho Cyberlight⁰⁹
- 48 Martin Mac 2000 Profiles⁰⁰
- 8 Martin Pal 1200⁰⁰
- 22 ETC Source Four 5° Ellipsoidal¹⁰
- 178 ETC Source Four 10° Ellipsoidal¹⁰
- 48 ETC Source Four 19° Ellipsoidal¹⁰
- 20 ETC Source Four 26° Ellipsoidal¹⁰
- 12 ETC Source Four 36° Ellipsoidal¹⁰
- 10 ETC Source Four PAR¹⁰
- 310 PAR 64 Fixture
- 12 PAR 16 Fixture
- 8 PAR 20 Fixture
- 8 PAR 64 ACL Units
- 3 MR-16 Blinder Unit
- 42 Altman Single Cell Cyc¹¹
- 10 Strand Iris Single Cell Cyc¹²
- 7 Altman Q-Lite¹¹
- 30 Pinspot
- 21 MR-16 Strip
- 82 AC Lighting Chroma Q CL-3 Scroller¹³
- 10 Chroma Q M5 Large Format Scroller¹³
- 64 Wybron Forerunner 10" Scroller¹⁴
- 8 Martin Atomic strobe¹⁰
- 6 Robert Juliat 1.2kW Korrigan Spot¹⁵
- 4 Lycian 2kW Followspot¹⁶
- 2 La Maitre LSG Low Smoke Generator¹⁷
- 2 MDG Fogger¹⁸
- 4 Reel EFX DF-50 Hazer w/RE Fan¹⁹
- 4 Rosco 4500 Fog Machine²⁰

RIGGING EQUIPMENT:

- 293' 20" x 20" Truss
- 1,335' 12" x 12" Truss
- 04 12" x 12" Articulating Corner Block
- 63 1/2 Ton Chain Hoist
- 34 1 Ton Chain Hoist
- 02 1 Ton Chain Hoist, High Speed (32' Per Min)

PRODUCTION STAFF

- Executive Producer: R. Todd Bell
- Artistic Director: Micheal Meece
- Production Manager: Cyndi Nine
- Lighting Designer: Donnie Brawner
- Programmer: Cameron Yeary
- Production Electrician: Greg Garrison
- Moving Light Technician: Charles Kinnard
- Head Rigger & Production Coordinator: Patrick Keller
- Technical Director: Chris Hinkle
- Laser Design & Programming: Sam McGee
- Lighting Vendor: Christie Lites, Dallas TX.
- Laser Vendor: Starlasers, Inc
- Flying Effects: ZFX, Inc
- Scenic Design & Construction: Wolf & Company
- Scenic Setup & Management: Encore Productions
- Pyrotechnics: Russell Swinney
- Animals: Joe Hedrick Productions

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ALL PHOTOS: CAMERON YEARY



not real flexible. This year, I wanted sidelight that we could put texture into, could mix color as opposed to scroll, but it had to have framing options. I wanted to use the Martin Mac 2000 Performance units but, with all the changes we made to the gear list, I had a hard time fitting them into the budget. I didn't need the pan and tilt of the Macs for this purpose, due to the side position, so we substituted the Pal 1200s. Although they have framing and are pretty bright they are not quite a 2K Performance."

To light the crucial moments when angels fly into the house over the audience (flying effects for the production are engineered by ZFX), Brawner says, "We brought in six Robert Juliat followspots to go with our four Lycian 2kW followspots. The Juliat units were placed on the side of the stage to light the angels. Since they're there, we also use them for a couple of scenes with Jesus in the garden, sidelighting the fog moving across the stage, and for various events in the aisles."

There's plenty of conventional gear as well, including 310 PAR cans, many of which are used to add polish to the Nativity scene and color blasts from FOH, and approximately 180 ETC Source Four 10" units as the main source of front light. The Source Fours are all fitted with Chroma-Q scrollers. "We also have another ten large-format Chroma-Qs on Strand Single-Cell Cys," he says, "plus 64 Wybron

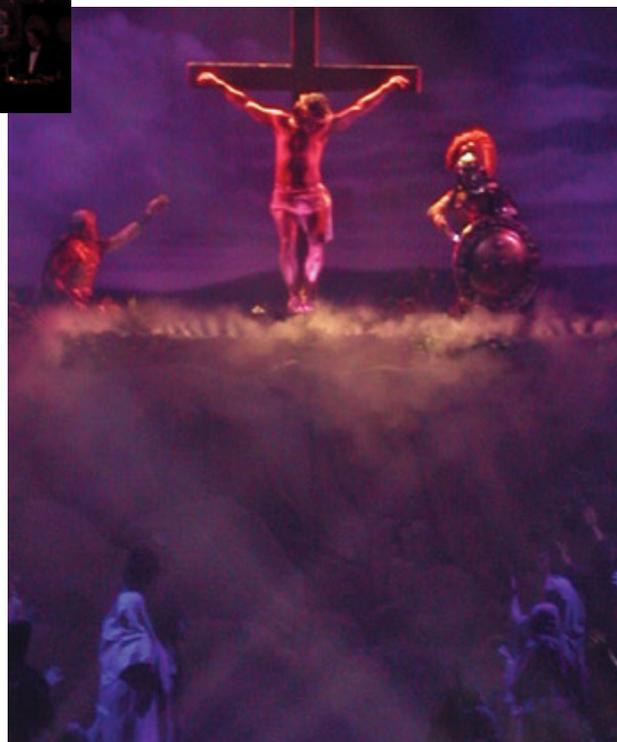
Forerunners as part of the house equipment. We also have eight Martin Atomic strobes in the house and onstage, another 100-odd Source Fours for sidelight, specials, and upstage fronts, and MR16 striplights to dust in the tops of the drops." The show also makes extensive use of fog, using gear from High End, Le Maitre, MDG, Reel EFX, and Rosco. All the new equipment brought in for this year's production was supplied by Christie Lites' Dallas office. "Christie does a remarkable job for us on this show and others throughout the year and the level of service is impeccable," he adds.

Lighting is controlled by a church owned grandMA console, from MA Lighting, distributed in the US by A.C.T Lighting. "My programmer, Cameron Yearly, is a real talent. He knows programming, fixtures, and the console inside and out, has a great attitude and offers a lot to the success of the lighting" says Brawner. He also credits his electricians, Greg Garrison and Charles Kinnard, as well as his assistant on all projects, his wife Karen.

The laser effects were new this year, and were created, provided and designed by Sam

McGee of Star Lasers in Hollywood, CA. "We are partners and have worked together for years," says Brawner. "Sam doesn't see lasers necessarily as a tool that survives on their own in this particular theatrical environment; that laser mentality drives me nuts. On every project, we work together to create a total picture with lighting and lasers.

Over the last two years, Brawner has managed to significantly rethink the lighting for the DCF. "It's an undertaking," he says "as our biggest challenge is to create a theatre complete with proscenium, flying sets and drops, moving set pieces and over 100 motors in a space not at all designed for such activity. The



show sees four weeks of facility conversion, set construction, rigging, lighting hang, rehearsals and programming." At any rate, this year's show was a big success, drawing 70,000 people for 13 performances over two weeks. The only question is, what will they do to top themselves next year?

The DCF's first act includes a performance the church's youth choir (top left). The final act depicts the life of Christ (above).

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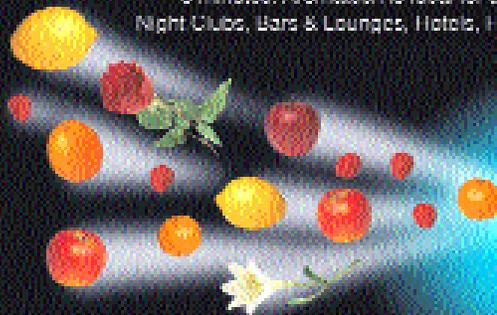
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