



Photos: Sarah Rushton-Read



Never being boring

How do you tour a band that once said they were too boring to tour? Sarah Rushton-Read reports on the Pet Shop Boys' current UK outing . . .

UK - Keeping a show fresh when it has toured the world for over a year can be challenging. Not so for the strikingly successful existentialists of pop, The Pet Shop Boys. They once said they were too boring to tour, yet their Fundamental tour is packed with exciting imagery, moody lighting and banging, all-embracing audio, wrapped up in a dynamic theatrical package. Perhaps the Pet Shop Boys have over-compensated - to the benefit of their adoring audiences?

Production manager Joe Sanchez, says: "Pet Shop Boys have always aimed to produce arty, highbrow, very visual shows and to that end have worked with some of the most avant-garde architects, theatre and opera designers of our time to achieve this."

Since April 2006 following the performance of the Pet Shop Boys' ICA-commissioned score for Sergei Eisenstein's classic 1925 silent movie *Battleship Potemkin* in Newcastle Gateshead (see L&S June 2006), they have played many European festivals, followed up with a tour of the Americas and Australia.

In the beginning, the show was somewhat different to its current incarnation. Sanchez explains: "Originally the set was a giant 4m x 4m cube onto which video and lighting was projected. Designed by Es Devlin - perhaps better known for her set design work for the RSC - the cube, built by Specialz, opened out to form a 4m x 12m screen which could spin on its end, split up into four individual units plus various other configurations and made for a very versatile and dynamic set."

All very well until it came to air freighting the cube around South America and elsewhere. A new concept was hatched between Devlin, Sanchez and lighting designer Carl Burnett and a two-dimensional version of the cube in the form of a screen was developed. Drapes, either side, top and bottom and a moving frame comprising numerous Element Labs VersaTubes allows the screen to change its size and shape as before.

In association with Devlin, Brighton-based Julien Hogg created the concept for video. He says: "PSL supplied us with three brand new Barco R12+ projectors bought specially for this tour. We have them overlaid to gain the high level of brightness we require. Media comes from a hard drive controlled by timecode emanating from the stage and delivered via a Dataton box. Basically, video runs to frame code from the audio on stage - everything is lip sync'd. The screen is two way and during many songs it's backlit simultaneously with the projection. The fact that we're only using a partial part of the frame means we need a lot of lumens to really punch through."

The result is that there is a slightly ethereal quality to the screen, the combination of the vibrant matt colour of the backlight with the front-projected images giving a strange dimension. Many PSB songs have a narrative, each creating a small scene, thoughtfully punctuated by imagery, both realistic and symbolic.

Further enhancing the look is Carl Burnett's sometimes moody, sometimes glitzy, always tasteful, 1980s superclub-style lighting, which is extremely theatrical in its presentation. Keyboardist Chris Lowe is never directly lit (at his own request, whilst the rest of the stage and the audience receive the full benefit of Burnett's treatment).

The look is simply created using numerous High End X.Spots overhead, a further six on the floor for angled key light and 13 more to backlight to the screen. Burnett proves unequivocally that it's not necessarily the type or the number of tools available that ensure successful show lighting. More it's the thoughtful structure of the programming, the timing and cuing - in this instance the lighting is sharp, enhancing and never upstaging. Burnett says: "The most important thing in this show is to make the boys look good. In terms of gear [he snores] we are using a Hog III; it was a toss up as to whether we use a hog or a grandMA. I am a Hog II user, however that was not the deciding factor, more that we were going to be doing a combination of festivals and halls and the Hog platform is the more common one. I need to be

