

# Set yourself up to *Shine on Stage*

Make your performances even better by giving a little thought to stage production. Top designer Nicoline Refsing spoke to Bronwyn Bidwell about how to make a performance space your own

It's one thing to deliver powerhouse vocals, it's another to deliver a powerhouse performance, one which captivates an audience and leaves them wanting more.

Through her work as a production and set designer, Nicoline Refsing tries to do the latter – create a visual spectacle which complements an artist's music and enhances the audience's experience.

Nicoline has created designs and visual concepts for major television shows such as the *X Factor*, awards



DAMI IM, AUSTRALIA'S EUROVISION ENTRY. PHOTOGRAPH BY ANNA VELIKOVA

events such as The Brits and worked extensively at the Eurovision Song Contest (this year she was responsible for the Italian and Australian entries).

The Danish creative explains her approach: "I think the essence of my work is to amplify what is already there.

"I always ask: 'What is the heart and soul of the artist? What are they trying to communicate?'"

"Some artists just like to focus on the vocals and leave the visuals to a creative, others have

very specific ideas. I enjoy working in both situations."

Refsing advises singers to think about the space they are performing in and consider how they can make the most of it.

"I think every time a performer or band makes the leap to a bigger venue they need to reconsider their staging," she says. "What works in a small intimate theatre will not work in a 75,000-seater stadium. You need to find the right aesthetic that works for that artist in that space."

One of Refsing's major clients over the years has been Eurovision – known for its bright, bold and sometimes downright camp staging. It may have



PINK FUNHOUSE ARENA TOUR 2009 PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF STUFISH

a reputation for OTT pyrotechnics and excessive use of wind and smoke machines, but Refsing says the demands of Eurovision are the same as any other gig.

“It is fundamentally the same, although you have to keep in mind that the audience for Eurovision is different to say the *X Factor* or an awards show. You have to reach a lot of nationalities and do it in an emotional and appealing way.

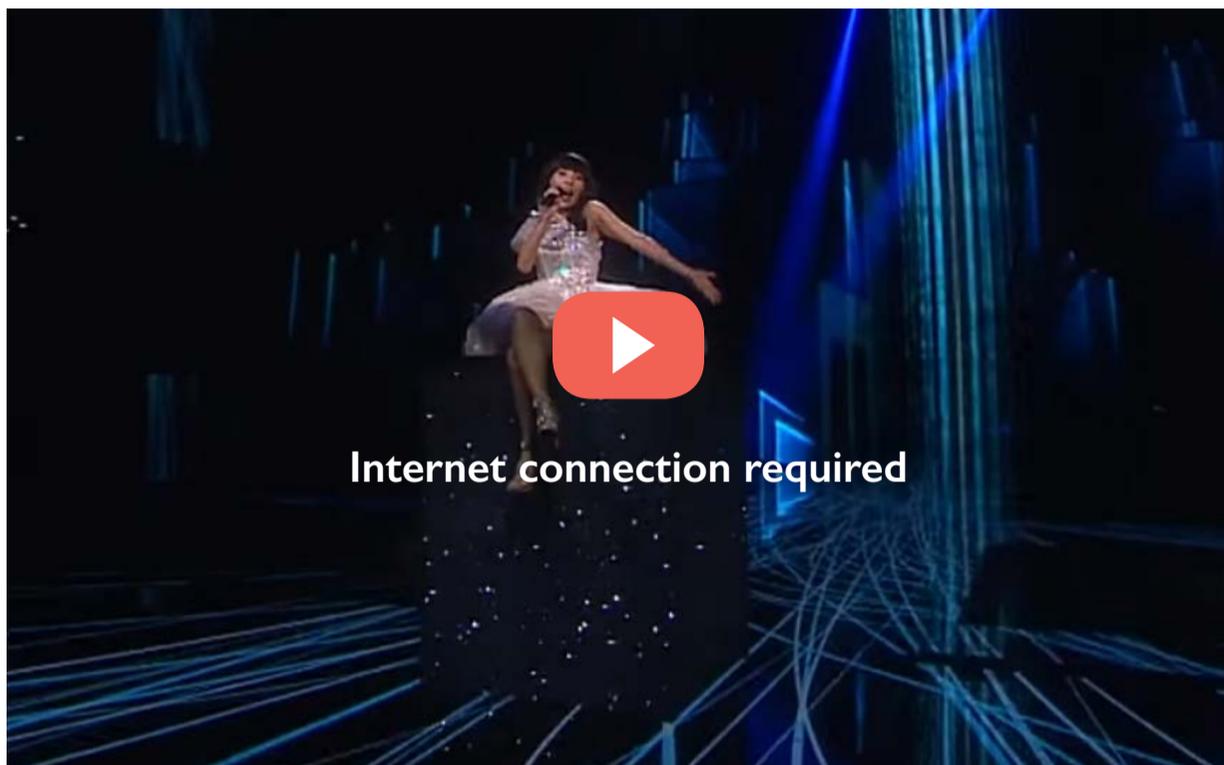
“You also have to bear in mind that a lot of these artists will be unknown to most of the audience, so people need to see the person behind the performance. With Eurovision you are really showing the unique identity of the artist.”

Refsing studied at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts and Nagoya University in Japan before working with renowned set designer Mark Fisher at Stufish (responsible for creating tour sets for the likes of the Rolling Stones and U2). In 2011 she started her own production design company Rockart Design.

It was during her time at Stufish she worked on one of her favourite commissions – Pink’s House of Fun Tour.

She says: “We had done a few of her tours before. She is such a strong and powerful singer with so many stories to tell. In the past I didn’t feel like the design was strong enough for her. So when that brief landed on my desk I thought ‘I am going to give her something really strong’. Obviously her album was very strong, so we had a lot to work with.”

Interestingly, despite her background working on high octane productions, the artist Refsing would most like to work with is no frills rocker Bruce Springsteen.



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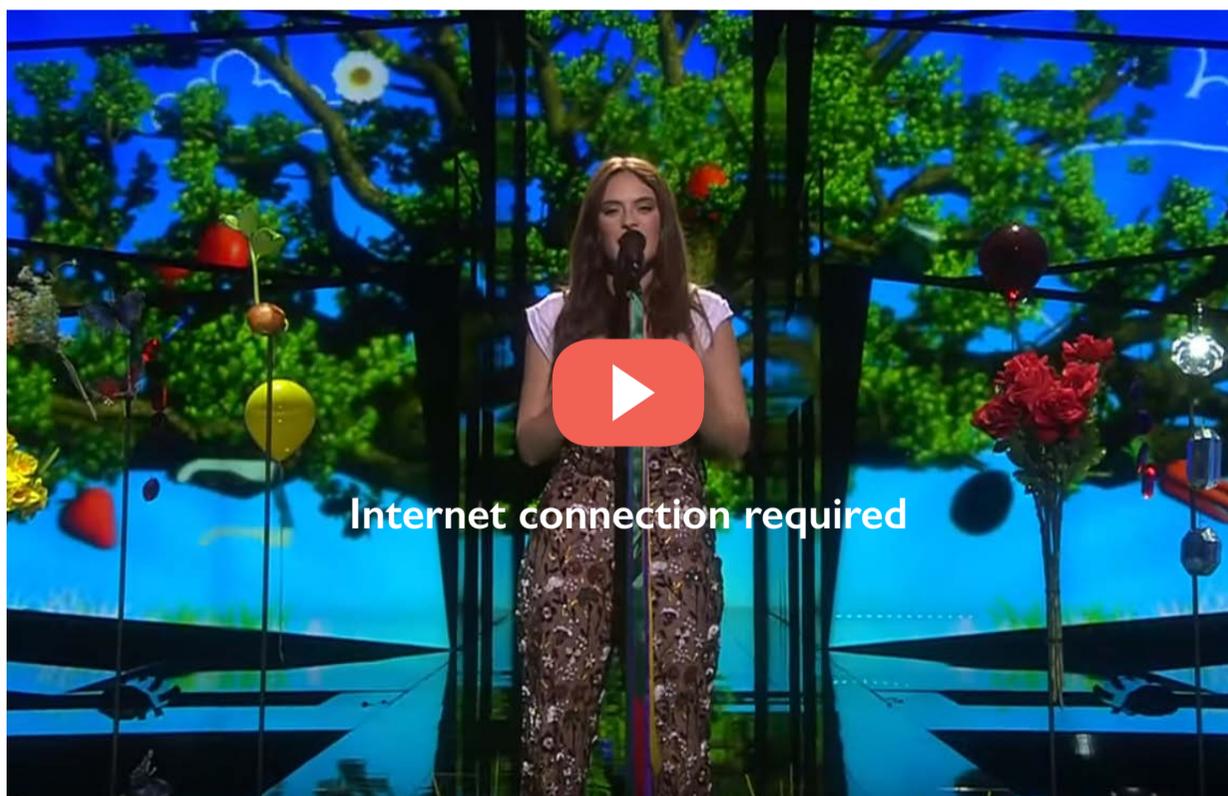
SOUND OF SILENCE – DAMI IM (AUSTRALIAN ENTRY) AT EUROVISION 2016

“He is one of my favourite performers,” she says. “I must have seen him 14 or 15 times. I recently watched him perform at Wembley Stadium and I couldn’t help but think there was a bit of stage I could have tidied up.

“The challenge (of working with Springsteen) would be to find the balance.

“I think the point is everything doesn’t have to be turned up to 11, but it has to be thought through.

“There is a whole new generation of performers coming through, people like Adele and Ed Sheeran, and their brands are very much centred around authenticity. You don’t have to do things just for the sake of it, you have to find the purpose ■



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NO DEGREE OF SEPARATION – FRANCESCA MICHELIN (ITALIAN ENTRY) AT EUROVISION 2016

# NICOLINE'S STAGE AND PRODUCTION

## Tips



- Even if you have a minimal budget there are still ways you can stand out. Consider where you fit in and what makes you different from other performers. What is your identity and how can you communicate that?
- If you are performing at a gig with three or four other bands, think about how you can stand out. Consider putting some carpet down in a strong colour, creating a backdrop with a strong image or a logo and try to be creative with the lighting.
- Work with the space you have and understand what kind of performer you are. For example, when I was working with Dani Im, the Australian entry for this year's Eurovision, I was very aware that she was a solo artist performing on a very big stage. So I put her on a podium to create a sense of focus. Another time when I was working with a band for an awards gig, I filled out the space to make it feel more personal as they were a band which tended to remain quite still and could get lost on a big stage.
- Appearing on a high profile television show, or at an awards night, is a huge opportunity to raise your profile and sell yourself. Think carefully about how you approach it, don't just do the same old thing, and work with the right creatives.

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