Brit Awards 2009: Kings Of Leon

ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE

STAGE AND PRODUCTION DESIGN THAT BURSTS THROUGH THE SCREEN

NICOLINE REFSING

Nicoline Refsing is founder of production design and staging company Rockart Design. She has staged shows for One Direction, The National Television Awards, The BRITs, The Eurovision Song Contest and The X Factor and has designed performances on award shows for artists from Amy Winehouse to Rihanna, Coldplay, Mark Ronson, Little Mix & Take That. She explains how to make a great show look even greater

At the moment it seems like there is a trend for large productions with big storytelling. You need a strong, clear and simple idea and a theme or concept for the whole production. TV producers are asking for originality, the 'wow' factor, ideas that work with multiple camera angles. The brief is for the stage design to be memorable and to capture the thrill and status of the event and the stars appearing on it.

I think each overall show design and performance should have its own look, a brand identity which the audience will remember. For me the greatest shows are the ones where all the different departments seamlessly add up to one higher whole, lighting, screens, set, camera etc. I am a big fan of using projections as screens, especially for TV which gives such a good looking soft image with no pixels in the background. And in recent years the projector power has increased a lot. Adding glitter and sparkle never fails to look good. Common mistakes would be

not matching the set to the scale of the space. Making the live show stage design look amazing but forgetting how it relates to the TV audience at home.

Looking at the artist, it is key to make sure you work to their strengths and make them look stronger. Surprisingly there are many TV performances where the broadcast audience loses connection to the artist. We want to feel the artist's heart and soul on the other side of the screen. I love the space between screen content and set, to dissolve the border between the two, so you do not know where the set ends and the screen starts. A lot of my work over the recent years has been focused in this area and I am still finding new ways to play with the relationship between screen, content and set.

Stage designers should master the drawings in 3D and be able to provide accurate visualisations of the set to the clients. They should also have a grasp of what audiences expect, understand how brands work, be great communicators and great collaborators. For successful designs, it is an advantage that designers have good technical knowledge. What you see on stage on a show is effectively only the tip of the iceberg. So much time, work and people have been involved in the process before a show rolls out. Knowing the processes of the each department involved in the delivery is essential. Designers who

know the ins and outs of a show production on a technical level are more likely to deliver on time and on budget.

I admired this year's Eurovision design. Having been the creative director for Eurovision before, I think that it stands out as a show where everything and anything can happen. Eurovision's audiences have come to expect to see visually arresting stage designs, setpieces, pyros, water, special effects, big screens and more. The bigger, bolder and more ambitious the better. Therefore the generic stage must have the scale and scope to accommodate these kind of big ideas. For Eurovision's stage designer, it is a real challenge to create something which can effectively facilitate 42 different performances and still keep a strong show identity.

Some of the best sets in rock 'n' roll history were designed by the legendary Mark Fisher, who I originally learned my craft from. Shows such as Rolling Stones' Bridges to Babylon and U2's PopMart. These stage designs electrified audiences, they were an unforgettable visual extension of the artist's brand. Audiences from the front row to the very back of the arena would have enjoyed the visual spectacle.. Iconic shows of this calibre help to sustain the artist's longevity and keep audiences coming back for more for years to come.

One of my favorite designs was a set I did for Kings of Leon on the Brit Awards 2009, it was like the set had exploded and suited the band very well.

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Everybody liked it from the first sketches and then I just had to work out the design to be a series of flats so we could quickly fly them in and out. With all the artists I work with, I listen to their music about 300 times to get the essence of the artist. I am looking for something with heart and soul and a story to tell the audience. I think about the song's lyrics and a narrative can start to be created which can start to be visualised.

I was proud of my work with the National Television Awards, scaling the show from the Royal Albert Hall to O2 Arena. I designed the show for three years. With award shows it is important to have an iconic set design and theme that stand out from year to year. I worked closely with the producers of the show to make sure we created a live and TV experience which captured the core values of the show. Obviously when designing a show over a number of years you need to make sure each show gets bigger and more spectacular.