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“These days it is all about getting people to talk about your event, rather than talking to them about it”

Peer Osmundsvaag of Norway's Atomic Soul's



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Brilliant Stages

The international staging sector has had a tough few years including stage collapses, festival cancellations, new regulations, aggressive competition and shrinking budgets, but on the up side, everyone needs a stage and for many major artistes and events, the bigger and more impressive, the better. **Brooke Nolan reports.**

It was in the mid-1970s that rock promoters began to need more than a stage built from scaffolding and wooden boards (or worse).

Structures needed proper roofs to protect the increasing amount of electrical equipment from the elements and US artistes, in particular, were used to a higher level of production than they often found in Europe, let alone elsewhere.

As the story goes, outside the US, a man by the name of Edwin Shirley in the UK decided to import some American staging and upped his game. It led to him forming Edwin Shirley Staging (ESS). When he saw the trucks and trailers used to transport the gear over to him, he imported some of those too, forming Edwin Shirley Trucking. He'd previously been using a former bread van to tour David Bowie and Uriah Heep's tour equipment.

There was no Health and Safety industry in those days and neither was there a European Union, since then both have added layers of regulation on sectors such as staging.

There have also been some stage collapses

resulting in deaths and injuries, which have made staging companies even more aware of their challenges and responsibilities.

Meanwhile, staging – especially for festivals – has become a multi-million-dollar global industry, with a variety of regional leaders and associations that can provide a major artiste with the same kit almost anywhere in the world.



Mark Hornbuckle

With its ancestry stretching back more than four decades to Edwin Shirley and ESS, ES Global provides stages and structures to music, sports and corporate events internationally, working with artistes such as Simply Red, Bryan Adams and Status Quo, and UK festivals including Lovebox (cap. 50,000) and Boardmasters (30,000).

"A stand-out gig for us was Jess Glynne at Gloucester Rugby club, her biggest solo gig to date," says project manager Mark Hornbuckle. "But it's been a great summer all round. The UK staging market is strong and we're also seeing demand from the US and Japan in the run up to



Pete Holdich

Rugby World Cup 2019 and the 2020 Olympics."

Hornbuckle has noticed a closer collaboration with clients regarding the Construction Design and Management Regulations (CDM), which came into force in April 2015 in the UK.

"We pride ourselves on quality product with no compromise on safe delivery and it's good to see clients paying attention to the new regulations we're complying to," says Hornbuckle.

"Blending quality and service with all of the CDM and health and safety requirements, all whilst providing a top quality product within the client's budget, is increasingly challenging," Hornbuckle concludes.

Aiming to bring clarity to the CDM regulations, the Guidance for The Management & Use of Stages and Temporary Event Structures was created by fellow staging companies such as Serious Stages, Star Events, Stageco and Acorn Event Structures.

"There's still a risk that some events are not complying properly," says Star Events head of structures Pete Holdich. "We have had to walk

away from a small number of jobs this year where the budgets did not allow us to be legally compliant."

Star worked with UK festivals such as Barclaycard presents British Summer Time (65,000) in London's Hyde Park, Bestival (55,000) and Wild Life (35,000) this summer, and with artistes including Kasabian, Stereophonics and Stone Roses.

"It's all about bespoke looks these days," says Holdich. "An example being the stage we built at Wild Life, which replicated the adjacent airport's Art Deco control tower."

The company has invested £500,000 (\$651,400) in stock during 2016 and is introducing a new staging product aimed at the medium-size festivals.

Holdich has noticed an increase in competition as new players enter the market. "There is savage undercutting by new arrivals trying to buy their way in," he says.

Moving parts

Headquartered in Belgium and with offices across Europe, Stageco has had a busy year with international touring, supplying Beyoncé, Coldplay, Rihanna, Bruce Springsteen and AC/DC.

The Beyoncé tour features a custom-built stage in the shape of a giant rotating box, clad with video screens, which opens and closes during the show.

"There's been a trend for a few years now to have very interactive stage sets with flying gags, moving screens etc," says Stageco operations manager Tom Bilsen. "But this takes it one step further. It's the stage itself that moves."

This trend towards bespoke stages is made difficult as clients give shorter lead times for projects. "People are waiting to see how well their tour dates sell before they commit to a budget," says Bilsen. "But at the same time clients want every show to be more spectacular than what people have seen before."

The company has added 10 per cent to its stock annually for the ninth consecutive year, as well as investing time in working within the industry to improve global safety standards.



Stageco is part of two safety advisory groups, the European CEN TC 152, a technical committee handling temporary structures for events, and the Memento Ensemble Demontables in France.

"It's even more important now to be involved in initiatives like these," says Bilsen. "There are lots of new suppliers entering the market imposing their own rules."

Increasing complexity

Although based in the UK, Serious Stages has a global reach, as well as working with British events such as Glastonbury (140,000), Reading (90,000) and Download (85,000), with new contracts including Elton John's Wonderful Crazy Night tour.

Echoing Stageco's experience, Serious, is noticing a trend for artistes looking to create the wow effect through the use of complex set designs.

"A great example is Electric Daisy Carnival," says Serious Stages MD Stephen Corfield. "We designed a structure for the Crystal Village stage which needed to support large scenic elements and integrate pyro, water and CO2 cannons."

These bespoke requests have seen Serious invest heavily in its in-house design, engineering and manufacturing team. All of its products are manufactured on site at the company's premises, which overlook the Glastonbury site.

"Manufacturing everything ourselves also enables us to keep a close eye on the safety and integrity of our stages," says Corfield. "Just this year we have gained a CE certification in our manufacturing facility and ISO 9001 on quality control."



Stephen Corfield

The home festival market has proven busy for Serious but one area that hasn't matched expectations is Australia.

"There's poor market sales and an over-capacity of staging companies all vying for work," says Corfield.

One reason for this is the cancellation of several multi-day, touring festivals that used to be stalwarts of the Australian live music market. Big Day Out, Stereosonic, Soundwave and Future Music were all abandoned after suffering falling ticket sales.

Festival fall-out

Australia's Stageset in New South Wales was established in 2011 when Edwin Shirley Staging (ESS) ceased trading and eventually morphed into ES Global.

Stageset supplies the structures for festivals and live events including St Jerome's Laneway (15,000), Splendour in the Grass (100,000 over three days) and Groove in the Moo (20,000). Alongside the festival scene, its stages are used by touring acts and venues such as Sydney Opera House. (2,670) ▶

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Stageco

Touring specialities

All Access Staging has US and UK offices and has this year supplied staging for Ellie Goulding's world tour, Macklemore, Mumford & Sons, Radiohead, and a one-off for Jess Glynne.

"Artistes want to add new dimensions to their shows. And, for example, we have supplied hydraulic scissor lifts for Years & Years and Brian May," says sales manager Matthew Bull.

Where Access All Staging products are all available to rent, allowing artistes to integrate automation without having to invest in custom-build.

"Years & Years is a great example of the flexibility this offers," continues Bull. "They had one of our scissor lifts which was used on a couple of their tour dates, where space and capacity allowed."

The company's rolling stage system is also proving popular. "It's a great bit of kit if you're touring," says Bull. "Quick to put up, easy to handle and it complies with all of the engineering regulations that people are asking for."

The All Access team gives full training to clients and also goes on-site to train and sign-off technicians and crew.

"The industry seems very buoyant at the moment," notes Bull. "We've even started shipping to Asian markets as touring artistes want to keep the continuity and quality that comes with using the same supplier for all tour dates."

"Australia was overrun with one-day city festivals for a long time," says Stageset director Chris Beehan. "They've failed because they're simply too expensive. Especially EDM ones, where the price of the acts alone has killed them."

Stageset's self-designed 14m stage is its most popular product, with Beehan looking at introducing it to the New Zealand and European markets.

"A lot of the smaller stage market is based on aluminium lighting grids," he explains. "This is steel and withstands the interchangeable, extreme weather we have here in Australia."



Chris Beehan

The age-old issue of wanting more for less is the same in Australasia.

"Festivals grow year-on-year, with thousands of new tickets being sold," says Beehan. "But clients still want to have the same, or more, for less when it comes to the staging. It can make it hard to reinvest, but we do to stay top of our game."

With rumours of international festivals making their way to Australia, Stageset believes it is in the ideal position. "Bring it on," says Beehan. "The Australian market is tough, but as a company, we're thriving as we focus purely on staging, nothing else."



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Translating vision

So far in 2016, Acorn Event Structures has supplied Bruce Springsteen, MTV Crashes, We are FSTVL (15,000) and Field Day (30,000). The company focuses on delivering bespoke stages, using its stock of Layher Event System and Prolyte Modular Staging Products.

"We have the freedom and flexibility to translate our clients' visions into reality by tailoring structures from stock components," says Acorn MD Andy Nutter. "This means we can deliver bespoke solutions for sensible money without the need for time-consuming and expensive custom fabrication."

In response to the demand for bigger, more immersive stage solutions, Acorn has invested £1.8m (\$2.34m) into its new Super Structure, a modular 50m x 20m structure which can be configured to any size by way of 2.072 centre beams. It has a minimum 100-tonne capacity loading and debuted at the UK's Creamfield's festival (50,000) this year.

"The live music sector has become a crowded place with each event trying to differentiate themselves through everything from the acts performing to the stage they perform on," says Nutter. "As a result, our clients are continually pushing the boundaries of festival production."



Matthew Bull



Splendour in the Grass

Creating a spectacle

Another company helping artistes to achieve something memorable is UK-based Brilliant Stages.

"We've had lots of stand-out projects over the last 12 months, but the Muse Drones tour was particularly special," says director Ben Brooks.

"The band wanted to perform in-the-round so we created the space station, a hanging structure made up of 12 separate pods which housed the majority of the lighting fixtures, projection and videos screens, not to mention the Drones, along with several crew members."

The concert touring sector is the company's main area of expertise with other clients this year including Queen, Jeff Lynne's ELO,

Radiohead, Coldplay, and all three Glastonbury festival headliners.

"There has been a lot of investment in new workshops, studio build space, and equipment," says Brooks. "And we now have access to the scenic expertise of Perry Scenic Creative. This means we can offer an even more comprehensive service to our clients."



Ben Brooks

Partnering expertise

Also based in the UK, No Nonsense Group has seen an increase in international contracts, particularly in South America, this year.

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All Access Staging

Out of the box

Malta-based Right Structures has supplied its curved-roof staging system to Live at the Marquee (5,000) in Cork, Ireland, for the past five years, welcoming artistes such as Lady Gaga, Tom Jones, Simply Red and The Coronas.

The system has also been used for Joseph Calleja, Anastasia, Zucchero, Claudio Baglioni, Susan Vega, Antonello Venditti and more in Europe.

"Clients and artistes are asking for a much larger performing area," says Right Structures CEO Anita Mifsud. "This means a bigger stage and higher rigging solutions to allow for more scenic elements such as LED."

The company continues to expand its curved roof range with the RS Round Arch stage designed specifically for outdoor sites with rigging capabilities up to 50 tonnes and spans of up to 48m.

"The main challenge faced is to convince producers to move away from the traditional truss box type of stage," says Mifsud.

Rebirth in Riga

One company that has experienced more change than most others is JSA.

Originally based in Russia with outposts in Latvia and Ukraine, the unstable political climate in the region persuaded founder Alexander Strizhak to relocate the entire business to Riga in Latvia, where the company has had an office and small warehouse since 2006.

"We're continuing life as JSA Europe SIA," says Strizhak. "It was a difficult decision to make as I had to lay off staff who had worked for us for many years. I thank all of our employees, partners and clients for some unforgettable years of joint creativity."



Alexander Strizhak

JSA is already consulting with various events in Eastern Europe and is now preparing itself to launch fully into the wider European market.

"We offer great expertise, strategic ▶



Steve Richards

a local company, it has worked with Coldplay, the Rolling Stones, Guns N'Roses, Maroon 5 and the huge Vive Latino Festival in Mexico.

"South America is becoming a popular destination for the larger tours," says No Nonsense director and co-owner Steve Richards. "Whilst there is a lot of staging equipment in the region, there is not always the knowledge as to how to use it to meet the requirements of the incoming production."

In the UK, No Nonsense clients include Parklife (70,000), where it builds the Temple Stage and (newly added this year) the Arches Stage.

"The three arches, with the largest spanning 50m, created an imposing structure," he says. "Our products are very flexible, so we only needed to fabricate small components to enable us to use the large roof trusses from our Atlas roof in a curved configuration."

Leap-frogging roofs

Established in 2001, Upstaging is based in the UK's East Midlands and along with festival work, handled staging for the European leg of

Rod Stewart's tour of football stadiums. "It was a really tight schedule of nine shows in 21 days," says Upstaging MD Tom Watson. "We provided two of the three touring platforms and the European staging roof leap-frogged between all three systems."

Noticing the increase in competitors coming into the market, Watson believes that not all of them will stay the course. "I think 2017 will be the year when new regulations really challenge some companies," he says. "Although the

"We have the freedom and flexibility to translate our clients' visions into reality"
Andy Nutter

real challenge is making the job safe, timely and also affordable to the client."

Upstaging has invested in additional Layher components to allow more specialised builds.

"I think people have grown rather jaded with the same old roof configurations," he says. "People seem to be seeking more architectural looking solutions which is what we're investing in."

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RS Round Arch | Joseph Calleja Annual Concert - August 2015

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thinking, flexible communications and the highest levels of engineering proficiency," says Strizhak,

"The digital revolution is forcing artists to make more of their shows," he says. "They want more rigging capacity, a bigger roof span, a larger performing area, more room to hang scenery and special effects."

Big across Europe

Germany-based Megaforce supplies stages across Europe, from Nova Rock Festival (55,000) in Austria to Iron Maiden in Switzerland, Bravalla festival (50,000) in Sweden and Rock a Field Festival (20,000) in Luxembourg.

Austrian singer Andreas Gabalier played Munich Olympic Stadium on the company's largest stage,

nicknamed 'the fat lady', which was increased to 70m in width.

"Clients are no longer looking for standard stages," says Megaforce's Timo Mathes. "We're adapting our stages with scaffolding to allow them to integrate huge set pieces and scenery



Timo Mathes



Megaforce stage

like you see at events such as [EDM festival brand] Tomorrowland."

Though enquiries are coming thick and fast Megaforce's ability to cater for all of them is hindered by a lack of talented crew in the region, with Mathes suggesting that "really good stage builders are dying out".

It is one of the areas impacted by a stream of new competitors entering the market and offering attractive prices, but for lower quality gear and less experience. "The issue is that often these companies aren't building in a 100

per cent safe way," Mathes says.

"But until a client is directly affected by a near miss, he will learn nothing and continue to take the cheapest offer."

Mathes suggests that the only way to stay in the game is to work as a partner to clients. "We have to show our faces, meet them, keep close contact with them and show them our procedures of working," he says.

"Clients then understand that it is worth the extra dime to go with us. It's like paying for extra insurance." ■



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all members of JSA TEAM: offices in Moscow, Saint-Petersburg, Kyiv (Ukraine), Riga (Latvia) and Warehouse and Sales Department, who worked inside in various times and who made great job for our success and win. Especial great thanks to all STAGERS of JSA as the best first staging team in Russia and who made this job like the new profession for industry.

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*) In 2014 JSA closed activities in Russia by political reasons / now we have only one office in Europe (Riga / Latvia)

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