



IQ111 AN ILMC PUBLICATION
JUNE 2022 | £25 | €25

ILMC34 REPORT

SOLVING THE SUPPLY CHAIN CRISIS

Industry Experts
Outline Solutions

THE LONG TALE OF CODA

Agency Marks
20 Years With
New Ownership

BERN BABY BERN

Swiss Market
Report

STEELING THE LIMELIGHT

Staging Suppliers
Talk Recovery



STEELING THE LIMELIGHT

Derek Robertson takes a look at some of the companies responsible for event infrastructure and the multiple challenges they are facing as the live music industry returns to business after a two-year hiatus.



Cast an eye over the rest of 2022, and it seems that something approaching normal service – at least within the live music events industry – has resumed. Huge renowned festivals such as Glastonbury, Primavera Sound, and EXIT are all scheduled to return at full-capacity, while some of the world's biggest pop and rock stars – Guns N' Roses, Foo Fighters, Charli XCX – will be filling arenas and stadiums in typically bombastic fashion. As such, it means full speed ahead for businesses involved in site infrastruc-

ture such as staging and steel. But with demand rapidly ramping up, suppliers face several challenges – not only dealing with what could potentially be the busiest period in their history after a fallow two years but also placing a renewed focus on sustainability and innovation, at the core of what they offer.

It's all a far cry from the sudden shutdown most companies had to deal with back in March 2020. "We were loading-in on a BTS test build in Pennsylvania, dismantling the Tomorrowland Winter structures, and shipping for the intended Metallica South American tour," says Tom Bilsen,

operations director for Stageco Belgium. "Borders closed at midnight on March 1st – our last trailer had passed through only 30 minutes before."

For many, the sheer scale of their operation made it a scary time. Stageco typically has structures out to 60 or 70 locations during a normal summer, using upwards of 450 subcontractors and freelancers. Others are equally as busy: eps executes 3,000 events a year; Megaforce supplies around 120 events during a typical summer; TAIT Wakefield employ over 900 people in 17 offices around the globe; and CT Northern Europe are the biggest suppliers of stages, rigging, and

**StageCo constructed
the spectacular staging
for MDLBEAST SOUNDSTORM
RIYADH 2021**



trussing in the Nordics, as well as delivering technology to corporate events and the sports sector.

The enforced downtime and ensuing uncertainty caused much consternation – more than one company placed staff on furlough and wondered what might be left of the live events industry post-pandemic – but many also made good use of the time to take stock and really think about their core offering. “We took a long look at our processes,” says Ben Brooks, managing director of TAIT Wakefield. “We created a global assets catalogue to make ourselves more efficient and, crucially, more sustainable as a business going forward.”

Stageco focused on the storing, cleaning, and maintenance of their inventory alongside diversifying what kind of projects they took on – “mostly industrial projects,” says Tom Bilsen.

All Access Staging also got creative. “We designed and developed things like rapid deployment homeless huts, backyard office structures for those unable to go indoors, outdoor patios for bars and restaurants, and an entire product line of Covid-response structures, including mobile hospitals,” says Jillian Forrester Braithwaite, chief operating officer. “We did our best to adapt to the changing landscape.”

Eps decided it was imperative to make good use of one commodity the live industry rarely affords: time. “We thought: ‘No events? What else can we do with our power and knowledge?’ So we questioned and challenged all our processes across every department – IT, logistics, accounting, project management, and staff education,” says Sebastian Tobie, COO of eps international. “We wanted to prepare ourselves and our staff for coming back stronger than ever.”

He also notes that R&D was busy working on new entry concepts regarding hygiene regulations for shops, schools, and factories, alongside innovations in their core disciplines such as flooring and barrier solutions. “All these concepts needed to be designed, engineered, and manufactured, but we accepted the challenge and broadened our horizons.”

Throughout 2021, order books remained in flux. Some, such as CT Northern Europe, diversified. “We shifted towards productions in TV, streaming, corporate events, and gaming,” says Fredric Holmgren, chief business development officer. “We also worked closely with clients to supply productions where they were allowed, taking into account local rules and restrictions.” TAIT Wakefield managed to deliver “several large projects,” says Brooks – *Moulin Rouge! The Musical* at the Piccadilly Theatre (London), Gary Barlow’s *All The Hits Live 2021* tour, and the SOUNDSTORM festival in Saudi Arabia.

Having already relocated his company HQ – and his family – from Russia to Latvia in 2014, “for political reasons,” Alexander Strizhak, owner and managing director of stage company JSA Europe, has been dealing with a catalogue of challenges over the past eight years.

That hard work paid off, and pre-pandemic, things were looking rosy again for JSA. “[The company] again became the official seller of stage structures from world leaders – Layher, SIXTY82 and Protos,” says Strizhak. “With my old friend, Asteris Koutoulas, we prepared a unique FLEX-ODROM project – a mobile, modular and multifunctional hall, based on structural systems from the Layher plant in Germany. At the end of 2019, we started to gain momentum, but the coronavirus crisis forced us to be very slow and again look for ways to survive in the new reality.”

Elsewhere, as the pandemic decimated the order books of industry peers, many also fell foul of rapid changes in infection rates and new Covid variants. “In mid-May 2021, we had 24 truckloads of material on-site in the south of Portugal, ready for unloading,” says eps exec Tobie. “But the day before the first install, everything was cancelled.”

“Terribly exhausting” is how Megaforce CEO Michael Brombacher describes the never-ending postponements and cancellations that blighted 2021, but all agree that 2022 is scheduled to be busy. Sometimes overly so. “Our volume is up 20%, and we’ve been forced to turn down work,” says ▶



All Access Inc worked with stage designer Es Devlin for Dr Dre's Super Bowl halftime show

All Access Staging's Forrester Braithwaite. Stageco is facing similar problems. "Demand is largely outpacing supply capacity in all aspects," says Tom Bilsen. "If everything takes place, we might be a little short on gear, transport, and crew."

Rising Prices

Such shortages are also noted by Alistage managing director Phil Christodolou, who points out a further related issue. "People are still planning, but in a lot of cases are unable or unwilling to commit to quoting, as prices are spiralling upwards at an alarming rate," he says. It's the same for eps. "With a lack of raw materials and supply chain interruption, there's been a drastic increase in pricing for stages, steel, and productions in general," states Tobie. "Costs are just much higher than 18 months ago, and if the current economics stay as they are, it'll probably influence production design and the technology behind it."

Aside from cost issues, staffing seems to be the primary concern across the board when it comes to delivering in 2022 – the pandemic forced many skilled freelancers and subcontractors to seek alternative work, and many fear that they've been lost forever.

"Many professionals are now enjoying a normal 9 to 5, and they won't come back," says

Megaforce's Michael Brombacher. "As long as the situation remains unpredictable, and the conditions are so unstable, no one would quit a job for an uncertain future in the live events industry." And it's not simply a straightforward brain-drain either – Brombacher also notes a demographic issue. "For years, we've had problems with the lack of young professionals in this business; now it will be even worse."

JSA's Strizhak has also suffered from staff shortages – especially in roles that require skilled crew. "Many former employees have already found other jobs and either do not want to return or cannot end their relationship with a new employer so quickly," he says.

"We expected that we would be able to hire staff in Ukraine, and we planned to make a global step on this market in 2022. But now, because of the war, everything has changed, and we are again forced to find new solutions. I already found a way to [solve] this problem with the [scaffolders] for the staging, and now we have begun the process to form the new JSA Stagers team."

Others also contend that the employee situation is improving. Forrester Braithwaite reports that All Access Staging is "finally well-staffed," while TAIT Wakefield is coping with renewed demand by planning and investing in their teams, both in the UK and globally. That way,

says Brooks, "we can scale quickly and bring in our specialists from around the globe to accommodate whatever a project's needs are."

The key for many is to retain the ability to deliver quality and, of course, safety. "For us, the most important factor is to set a high standard," says Fredric Holmgren. "And to not take on projects that we can't deliver to that standard." And Tobie agrees. A significant challenge will be to "deliver everything with the quality we strive for," he notes, "without burning out experienced people with a non-stop shift from April to September."

Green Issues

In the music industry – as in wider society – momentum around sustainability issues is building, with many organisations and companies taking drastic steps to reform and become an example of green recovery. The likes of A Greener Festival have done important groundwork in this sphere, which has been taken on by newer collectives such as Music Declares Emergency – a group of artists, music industry professionals, and organisations dedicated to making the "cultural and operational changes necessary [...] for a carbon-neutral future" – and Earth Percent, a charity helping the music industry address the climate emergency.

"NO MUSIC ON A DEAD PLANET" warns

Music Declares Emergency's flagship campaign, emphasising that artists and fans can bring the issue into the mainstream and "encourage a global response on a global issue." Meaningful change is certainly something that all the companies *IQ* spoke to are thinking deeply about; one positive to come out of the two-year pause in live events was the space and the time to properly consider their sustainability credentials.

"Sustainability has a lot to do with thousands of small steps," says Tobie. "We've been working on topics like e-trucking and green materials in the production of our barrier- and flooring systems, but we also developed an IT-based loading and trucking algorithm. In combination with our ERP, it helps us optimise loading space and material routing, ultimately reducing trucking in general."

TAIT Wakefield has long been engaged in evolving a more sustainable model for the long-term but, says Brooks, the last two years allowed them to really focus. "Alongside constantly looking at our carbon footprint, that global assets catalogue we created means we're not making everything from scratch every time. And, since we do not have to build things twice, we can do things more quickly. Improving the efficiency and effectiveness of everything we do has been a blessing."

Similarly, Megaforce has developed its international network and keeps materials in strate-

gically favourable locations. Alongside a new set of national partners, this is helping them keep logistic costs – and the resources required to move equipment – as low as possible.

All Access Staging has been busy, too. Their core product line, the Versa system, is "inherently green," according to Forrester Braithwaite, "because it can be used over and over again in countless configurations, like a really cool LEGO set. We also recently designed an upgraded version of our staging deck that is lighter, stronger, and more versatile than previous generations. In general, managing supply chain issues, and respecting the increased expenses that come with those challenges, is something we're learning about all the time."

War in Europe

Having fundamentally overhauled his life because of Russia's military manoeuvres, JSA's Strizhak is better placed than many to comment

on the impact Vladimir Putin's war in Ukraine has had on the region.

He explains, "The quiet and gradual process of my withdrawal from the Russian market began a long time ago because of the Russian war in Georgia in 2008. Even then, I understood that the Kremlin would revive the hybrid USSR, using show business, including television, radio, press, cinema and, of course, live concerts and various events, as their weapons for propaganda."

Russia's annexation of Crimea and the beginning of military aggression in the east of Ukraine in 2014, prompted Strizhak to close his premises in Moscow and St. Petersburg. "It was hard," he admits. "JSA was the first professional stage company in Russia. I had a large number of employees, the company had many significant projects every year, great business connections, and a good reputation. I had to stop it all. It still saddens me that I had to leave my strong and re-

The design used a photo from the stage setting by the JSA in Kyiv on Maidan Sq.



STAGING & SCAFFOLDING & TRUSSING

WE WILL CONSTRUCT YOUR SHOW AGAIN!

More than 25 years of successful activity in the market of live music and events!

We are back in business after a two year break due to the corona crisis!

Production management, installation team, engineering ideas, warehouse of stage constructions:
Layher Scaffolding, Roof Systems, Aluminium Trusses, Rigging, Modular Podiums and more...

WWW.JSA-STAGE.COMPANY

WE WILL LOOK FORWARD TO COOPERATION WITH YOU - JSA EUROPE / STAGE COMPANY

Headquarters and warehouse in Riga (Latvia) - phone: +37122774848, email: welcome@jsa-stage.company
Representation in Kyiv (Ukraine) - phone: +380953614848, email: ukraine@jsa-stage.company

“2022 will be the busiest and strongest year in the history of eps, and maybe even the entire events industry”

Sebastian Tobie | eps

liable team there. To all these people, I express my gratitude for their cooperation.”

Acknowledging that the scale of JSA’s operations took a hit following its withdrawal from Russia, Strizhak tells *IQ* it took him a number of years to build a new team and find “new paths” for the staging company. Some of that work involved JSA fulfilling contracts in Ukraine: *Eurovision 2017* and Olerome Forum One in Kyiv; Leopold Jazz Fest in Lviv; and Underhill Music Festival near Ivano-Frankivsk.

Indeed, he contends that Ukraine led JSA’s pandemic recovery as the country’s quarantine rules facilitated a return to business. “In 2021, the [Ukrainian] market began to recover earlier than it did in Europe and [the] UK,” reports Strizhak. “That season, many outdoor concerts and festivals took place, and JSA made good sales of stage structures for Ukrainian production companies. But we could not develop and make long-term plans in the fog of remaining restrictions.”

Russia’s invasion earlier this year put an end to all such ambitions, and Strizhak says JSA in Latvia is now involved in humanitarian projects for Ukraine in partnership with local Ukrainian societies and the local Embassy of Ukraine.

On the business side, he is again scrambling for solutions to keep his business running and says that despite the war, enquiries from other countries mean he and his staff are being kept busy. “Currently, we are focused on active work in the Baltic States and for the European market,” he reveals. “We constantly receive requests for stage structures in different countries. As a rule, these are requests for help and support opportunities for unexpected projects. So, in my opinion, we will be able to take part in big and worthy projects this summer.”

And, while other companies are suffering from a scarcity of equipment, Strizhak believes JSA is in good shape for the year ahead. “We already have a sufficient stock of Layher, trusses, podiums, and large roof systems,” he says. “JSA engineers are already making structural drawings for customers. In addition, customers are quickened to purchase new designs, and we have orders. So I am optimistic about the development of the company’s business this year,” he adds.

Quality of Live

But something else that companies are keen to emphasise is a deeper, more fundamental consideration of their place not just in the live music industry but society in general, and what that might mean in the post-Covid 21st Century. As Forrester Braithwaite puts it, “We are more focused on maintaining the quality of life for our hardworking crew. During the Covid pause, people had the opportunity to re-evaluate their lives and priorities, and as a company we are trying to take a modern approach to our teams’ workdays.”

It was the same at TAIT Wakefield; “Improving our work/life balance has been a big focus,” says Brooks, “and the ways in which we’ve been

forced to work have not been all bad. For example, some of the virtual commissioning we did was a great proof-of-concept, so we can take that forward into 2022 and beyond.”

“The key is in personnel; good training, attractive remuneration, integrative framework conditions for the family and career, and appreciation for all participants in the value chain,” says Megaforce’s Michael Brombacher. “To overcome this crisis, it’s imperative to stop producing or procuring everything ever more quickly and cheaply. We need to remember that quality has a price and that secure and quality preparation takes time.”

Yet, as long as the industry in general takes heed of such factors, many believe the future is bright – and that the live music industry can be better than ever. Sebastian Tobie predicts that, as long as Covid restrictions remain minimal, “2022 will be the busiest and strongest year in the history of eps, and maybe even the entire events industry.” Phil Christodolou is more cautiously optimistic. “We’re starting to emerge out the other side,” he says. “But we hope that all of us in the live sector have learnt lessons from what’s happened and use this knowledge to navigate the future.”

“The biggest lesson learned is to be nimble,” says Forrester Braithwaite. “We had the ability and necessity to pivot to offering different products and services, and this creativity and willingness to branch out into new areas will allow us to thrive in the years to come.”

“We’ve been able to figure out what ‘better’ looks like over these last two years,” adds Ben Brooks. “It’s absolutely affected what we do and changed our approach to live events, but in many more positive ways than negative ones.” Such a sentiment is shared by Megaforce’s Michael Brombacher, who says that while times will remain turbulent, “there will also be new opportunities. Success will certainly be redefined in the future, but I’m not worried – we will survive this crisis.”

For as he – and others – note, music will endure. “The value of culture is priceless important – all the politicians on Earth should understand this by now,” he says. Brooks points to events like British rapper Dave’s London O2 show selling out in four minutes as indicative of just how healthy public demand will be going forward, and why companies such as his can finally be optimistic again.

“I think there’s a renewed appreciation of what live music means to people,” he says. “You could argue it was taken for granted; the ability to walk out your front door, travel to a venue where you could stand shoulder-to-shoulder with like-minded music lovers, and enjoy that visceral experience of a live show. People want that more than ever now, and that bodes well for the industry.” **IQ**





we live Rock 'n' Roll
together with passion

MEGAFORCE



The Stage Company

MEGAFORCE

Joehlinger Strasse 118
D – 76356 Weingarten

Phone +49 72 44 72 02 0
info@megaforce.de
www.megaforce.de



New name. Same faces.



WASSERMAN MUSIC

TEAMWASS.COM/MUSIC

[@WASSERMANMUSIC](https://www.instagram.com/WASSERMANMUSIC)