

# Say When

## Wireless communications orchestrate fast-paced turns in stage direction for *Carmen*

By: Gregory A. DeTogne

"Imagine *West Side Story* transplanted to 19th century Spain..." That's what *The Los Angeles Times* said recently about La Jolla Playhouse's production of *Carmen*, which ended on July 22 after a five-week run. Adding his own indelible stamp to the ambitious musical production was director Franco Dragone, a singular talent probably best known for his many stagings for Cirque du Soleil.

Famous for its emotive and powerful use of Flamenco and original contemporary music, the tale of gypsy seductress Carmen took new turns under the tutelage of Dragone, who injected the opera with mystical imagery, original music, and dance to weave a timeless story of love, betrayal, sex, and death.

"There's probably no other way to define his directorial style other than to say it's pure Franco," says Vikram Kirby, the show's assistant sound designer. "He refers to technical rehearsals as 'creations,' and, once you work with him, it becomes quite apparent why. As the production evolves, the basic framework of the script may stay the same, but a lot of lines and scenes start twisting around as he tests things, always trying to build something new. Props seen in the first scene can quickly migrate to the last. If the Titanic is onstage, going right, it may have to suddenly shift to the left instead. Nothing is linear, and everything is subject to change, right on the fly."

Coming to the project from Burbank, California-based Thinkwell Design & Production, Kirby and sound designer Francois Bergeron realized early on that Dragone's fast-paced and quick-turn style would require responsive and reliable backstage communication. "If there was one constant throughout these shows, it was that no one ever really knew what was going to happen for sure," Bergeron adds, reinforcing Kirby's assessment of their working environment. "Every one of us was on constant call, just waiting for Franco to say when."

Given the way Dragone works, there was no time to relay direction to the various crews supporting the production from single team leaders: Everyone from the talent, sound designers, and lighting team on down to the carpenters had to listen to every second of the proceedings and be ready to respond.

Compounding the matter of effective backstage communication were the sheer numbers of personnel involved, and their respective locations. Numbering nine musicians in total, plus the director, the orchestra was hidden away from the proceedings entirely, with no view of the stage whatsoever. Production work spanned multiple levels at the theatre, requiring technicians and workers to shuttle between floors to do their jobs.

Faced with the task of linking everyone together behind the



scenes, wherever they may be, Bergeron and Kirby provided video monitoring in key areas, giving vision to those finding themselves in locations isolated from any prospect of seeing the stage properly. For verbal communications, the pair called on the resources of HME, based in nearby Poway, California, to build a wireless intercom network that wouldn't interfere with the 26 channels of Sennheiser wireless microphones already in use onstage.

HME, which has also built a name in the quick-service restaurant industry as the manufacturer of the famously bulletproof intercom headset systems worn at drive-through fast food windows everywhere, came to *Carmen* with its DX200C digital wireless intercom via New York's Production Resource Group (PRG), the vendor supplying Bergeron and Kirby with their audio gear. Supplementing a hard-wired backstage communication system, as well as an existing HME PRO850 wireless intercom system that was recently made a permanent part of the La Jolla Playhouse's audio inventory, the DX200C systems included WH200 ComLink all-in-one wireless headsets. Doing away with the need for users to wear belt pack receiver/transmitters, the WH200/DX200C combination offered



license-free 2.4GHz operation, rechargeable batteries, and synthesized voice prompts in a package, giving Bergeron and Kirby the reliability and cost-effective performance they needed.

A total of 14 backstage crew members were tied into Bergeron and Kirby's DX200C network, while another eight were placed on the La Jolla Playhouse's own PRO850 wireless systems.

"In retrospect, it's funny, because we took a lot of ribbing when we first introduced the WH200 headsets to the crew," Bergeron wryly recalls. "There were a lot of references made to the fact we were working in theatre, not a fast-food restaurant, but after everyone tried them, they refused to give them up. They all felt that ,based upon just the cable-free mobility they afforded alone, the headsets were better than anything else. When things got crazed, they no longer had to worry about snagging a belt pack and its cord on something as they rushed about."

While both the DX200C and PRO850 systems offer frequency agility, automatic frequency selection, and an extended operating range, the nature of the DX200C's 2.4 GHz configuration made life easier for the sound designers, because it fit right into the overall wireless scheme without posing any potential interference problems.

"That was important too, as all of our standard bands of wireless operation were already full," Kirby explains. "With every second counting on this show, we needed to spend our time with the stage sound design, not setting up the intercom. We requested HME's components because they are essentially plug-and-play. We can turn them on, then just walk away and get on with other tasks."

With the stage manager occupying a central

"[Everyone] felt that based upon just the cable-free mobility they afforded alone, the headsets were better than anything else. When things got crazed, they no longer had to worry about snagging a belt pack and its cord on something as they rushed about."

hub position, communication branched out on the *Carmen* set rapidly in all directions. Facilitating return messaging just as quickly, the DX200C wireless systems also had the advantage of allowing specific team members to communicate among themselves on an isolated channel while still being able to hear what was happening on the network. In *Dragons'* turbocharged world, where it sometimes seemed as if there was a need for everyone to talk at once, this allowed carpenters, for example, to talk among themselves about a task at hand after receiving direction from the stage manager without disturbing other communications.

"What really surprised us the most was that the DX200C systems' range far outreached that of the Sennheiser wireless onstage," Bergeron adds. "We had the power to reach outside the building easily, and even into the elevators as they moved between floors. The latter may not seem to be an especially big deal, but the crew was overjoyed. Again, when every second counts, having those extra moments to receive and transmit information in places that had formerly been out-of-reach makes a big difference."

Playing in the La Jolla Playhouse's Mandell Weiss Theatre, *Carmen* lived up to Dragone's reputation as a purveyor of visually stunning shows. "I really feel that people left this show with a very vivid painting of sorts etched into their minds," Kirby says. "It's our hope that the sound was just as gorgeous to them. Working with Franco was inspirational for all of us. Without the power to communicate amongst ourselves to the degree we enjoyed, there wouldn't have been a show." 📡