



COULD IT BE MAGIC?

Well, with its giant mechanical elephant, big top and 10m-high puppet ringmaster, Take That's new show is certainly surreal. But who designs and builds this sort of stuff? **Thomas Lane** went behind the scenes at the fastest-selling show in UK pop history

A stage opens up like the petals of a flower and four figures slowly rise up on a platform – a platform that gradually reveals itself to be balanced on top of a giant, 7.6m-tall mechanical elephant. Then a section of the circular stage swings away and the elephant performs a full turn, blows some water from its trunk and begins to move towards a main stage 50m away ... Welcome to the opening of the fastest-selling show in UK pop music history. The four figures standing on the elephant's back are better known as Take That and this is their Circus Live tour, which kicked off last Friday at the Stadium of Light in Sunderland, before taking in a further seven stadiums across the country.

The show continues in the same vein as its bizarre opening – as the band steps onto the main stage, a big top rises and in front of it an enormous top hat begins to emerge, eventually revealing the whole 10.4m body of a puppet ringmaster. As the band sings on, perched on a small platform in front of the ringmaster's head, its 11m-long arms move round and embrace them protectively.

You may not be a huge fan of the group, but there is no denying that its stage set is pretty groovy. And although the end product is rather different to most construction projects, there are some definite similarities between the two worlds: many of the people working in this business have backgrounds

in construction; the hours are punishing; the financial risk is huge; and the client can change its mind at the drop of a hat. But in the world of stage design you also have the added fun of designing and building elements that have never been tried before and, of course, dismantling the whole thing night after night and rebuilding it a few hours later in another city.

So what sort of world is it behind the scenes? For a start, there isn't much of a design brief. This particular show was conceived by stage designer Es Devlin, but it's down to Clay Brock to make it happen. He is the project manager for Brilliant Stages, the company that has delivered this project. Brock started off as a project manager in construction, but moved into the events world because he found buildings too boring. "The set designer dreams up these crazy ideas and has no idea how they're going to work," he says, quoting the ringmaster puppet as an example of what he has to work with. "They wanted a puppet that leans

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forwards, holds out its hands and goes 'boo'. That was our creative direction."

It's down to Brilliant Stages to take this minimal brief and make it work. In the same way that the construction industry gets in a team of consultants to design a project, Brock assembles a team of specialists. These include engineers who handle the mechanisms and people like structural engineer Malcolm Richards, who is a director at Capita Symonds (see box). They take the idea and work out what it might look like. They also have to consider how it's going to work, what effect the wind will have on it, whether it will be safe and reliable, how it's going to be erected, dismantled and packed