

All the Thrills. Ben Hur Live opens in Rome. Interview with Stewart Copeland

Anticipatory excitement in connection with the launch of **the spectacular show *Ben Hur Live*** is building up in **Rome** as we get closer to **the 29th. September 2011**, the day of the **gala opening** in Rome of Ben Hur Live at the **Nuova Fiera Di Roma**.

It was a long ride in the luxury bus for us to the Nuova Fiera Di Roma but awaiting us there were **the entire cast and crew of the extravaganza and the stars** at its helm, **director Philip McKinley**, one of the show producers Rolf Deyhle from Germany and celebrated musician composer Stewart Copeland among others. After traversing up and down metallic stairways and ramps we were greeted by costumed women from 1A.D. and seated in style in the second row. The arena that seats a good 2400 looked like a wonderland of white and festive colours with a gigantic boat, like an ark from the age of Noah, afloat in a sea of white foam. A fireeater with the expertise of a circus act performer came on and astounded the press and public there with a demonstration of fireeating signalling the start of the mini show we witnessed.

Three Sequences Glimpse

Director Philp McKinley introduced the show and stars before we were presented some of the highlights from Ben Hur Live, namely a song by the lead who plays Esther Jantien Euwe supported by dancers in a song and dance sequence from the show. Jantien Euwe has a warm resonant voice with carrying power and she sailed through her stirring song lines comfortably even as the Ben Hur Live T-shirted dancers performed around the main stars a sequence from the show, different in that they weren't in actual costume for this Preview. The dance choreographer Liam Steel took a bow. From London, straight from his newest choreographed production Ghost that's soon to make its way from West End to Broadway, his choreography on Ben Hur looked dynamic and effervescent. A sword fighting sequence intricate and involved followed between Ben Hur and Messala, something that would delight boys at the show and all those into stunt scenes and choreographed fight sequences. The incredible fight choreographer Rick Sordelet acclaimed for his stylish scenes in Lion King and Tarzan acknowledged the applause in the glimpse of what promises to be a tantalising production laden with colour and dangerous feats amazing to witness. The highlight of this Preview was the chariot race in which the slowest of the chariots in the show, four horse driven, took off at relaxed pace and then at full tilt for effect with the charioteer in costume. All the stars then posed atop the ageold ship for photographs and even Philip, Stewart and the leads climbed on sportively to give us the total effect of all that's gone into its making.

The Italian Involvement

The press conference was lively and introduced us to the main stars and specially the creative team of experts and behind the scenes thinkers and planners such as Rolf Deyhle because of whom all this has come about and the show brought to Rome. Ben Hur Live, in addition to the cast and crew that has toured Switzerland and Germany, in the Rome production involves innumerable Italians hired to act and stage hands employed to realise the show hence the Rome Fair director Mauro Mannoichi proudly labelled it as *"a business initiative that would fetch accolades for its performances but also play a role in enhancing the economic climate of the city."* **Philip McKinley complimented the Italian actors** he has had the opportunity of working with in Rome calling them immensely talented, *"We have hired several Italian performers in Rome and I am happy to say they are every bit as talented as performers I have worked with on Broadway."*

Among the Italians in the show is **Luca Ward who stars at the one and only narrator**, the official voice on the show. *"We grew up with the film Ben Hur. I have been acting for 48 years and to be part of such a show-- for it is*

the first time in the world such a spectacle is being staged-- is emotionally moving for me. How they move in this arena is incredible and I am honoured and happy at the fortune of having this proposal and to participate in this production.” Luca then recited some of his prize lines from *Gladiator* (in which he is the dubbed Italian voice) which fetched laughs and claps all round.

“Rome is a perfect place to do the show,” said Philip McKinley. *“There are complications involved when using live actors. It is technically challenging because it’s so intricate and also dangerous. There is a market place and horses run through a market scene. It’s like a film but live on stage. Like seeing a film happen. I think people are going in more and more for the spectacle such shows offer. And this is a perfect show for this arena because the arena is a sports venue. Ben Hur Live has athletic moments. Two ships and a sword battle on ship. All on a very large scale. Like doing, directing, a film live with live actors, live animals. This could become a path for the future. It is an ideal place. Especially because it has such good parking, of the kind we need in every city. I would like to see this arena become a destination, an artistic centre. I am happy to start this relationship.”*

Directorial Viewpoint : All The Thrills

Philp McKinley also gave us the lowdown on the show’s legendary costumes. *“Costume designer Ann Hould Ward who had a week in Istanbul to shop her fabrics in antique markets even managed to extract old fabrics a hundred and more years old from the houses of the dealers there to create the inimitable one of a kind 784 costumes to be worn in the show.”* **On the cast of performers, actors and dancers** he confirmed that there were at times even as many as two hundred on the floor. *“Yes, in the market scenes which are huge crowd scenes we have as many as 200 men women on the set.”*

In reply to a question I fielded on the nature of his experiences in Broadway that had been brought to Ben Hur Live and how this differed, Philip McKinley added, *“Working with large groups of people and animals is something I am used to from my circus experience. We had scenes on an enormous scale in Spiderman so that I am accustomed to. Here it is more like making a film but instead of canning the film and seeing the same thing we have the task of recreating the film, all the effects every night live, on that same large scale. The chariot race is dangerous, wheels come off, things go wrong as part of the action. We do all the stunts we have to bring it off each night live, that’s the challenge. I enjoy this brush with danger, I like challenges. People on Broadway call me the ‘fire guy’ because I like the use of pyrotechnics and like utilising hightech hairraising effects for drama. Much of that is incorporated in Ben Hur Live, all the thrills are there.”*

Fitting Music Like A Glove Onto Scene

Stewart Copeland answered my question on **the musical score he wrote for Ben Hur Live** which I said he must have had to time to sequence. *“In a film such a task is easy because the music is scored when the visuals are ready. How was this accomplished in the changing environment of a live show where sequences might change?”* I asked. *“Was it all timed and scored after? Were there compromises? For you couldn’t have possibly written music at random even with all the themes researched and in your mind?”* Copeland laughed and explained, *“Working on Ben Hur Live was a change from music for movies and stage. When you work with a wildly creative man like Philip McKinley things are constantly on the move, changing and even the music is a moving target. Running it faster or slower, altering the tempo to match the atmosphere is always a challenge and I was full of new ideas we constantly worked on together. Although to many the grand things, animals and people, the effects, the fights, all this is important, to me, to my music, I couldn’t care less. I was interested in the culture, what was behind the scenes, what gave it depth. I went out to sense that and brought that into my music.”* Copeland spent hours of research into old music. The score was recorded in several cities. *“So a number of ideas went into it and even after the creation and completion, getting it all to fit like glove onto the scene was the ultimate challenge.”*

Two Answers

In fact **both Philip McKinley and Stewart Copeland answered the question addressed to Stewart**. Philp McKinley stated, *“I met Stewart Copeland in LA at a studio and described the scenes involved, scene by scene, all that required music. I described the script and the staging in detail. We discussed the adaptations involved. Stewart*

came up with the music. It was timed and we then reworked adaptations, worked on the adaptations that would be required. It was a constant give and take, interchange of ideas, continual tightening of sequences until the music was right. For example, I had told Stewart a particular sequence would be 52 seconds because I knew that it took an elephant that much to do a semicircle, half of Madison Square Garden in NYC. So I thought... ah horses, faster, twice as fast. And came up with the same 52 seconds for the full circle in this arena. In fact I was wrong. The chariot horses do the fast sequence in 27 seconds. So Stewart had to work with that. Tighten the sequence.” “Fortunately in this day and age,” smiled Stewart Copeland, “it is possible to speed up the music on some of the track without affecting the quality. I also rewrote sequences and edited constantly.”

Cultural Significance & Music

Stewart Copeland elaborated upon the reasons that drew him to Ben Hur Live, one of which was the prospect of **its staging being in Rome**. “That absolutely clinched the issue! Rome, that’s where I’d like to be!” Referring to his connection with The Police, the band his career has long been associated with as drummer, composer and musician, he laughingly stated, “I was a rock and roller. Now I am a gladiator!” What attracted him most to the idea of composing the music for Ben Hur Live was the cultural significance of the show. “The show is fun. The spectacle is fun and it is done by people who know what they are doing. That’s the reason why we’re here doing Ben Hur Live in Rome. But the music has a special thing. It has roots. It is a mix of the Aramic culture and the western music of the western world. For me it is the cultural significance that’s important, the conflict between eastern and western spheres and that is what was at the bottom of my musical compositions for Ben Hur Live.”

Strangest , Most Exotic Mix!

Of course **Stewart Copeland who likes travelling** and has had his formative years in the middle east, Cairo and elsewhere, took up the opportunity of researching this work and locating appropriate musicians for his score in many parts of the world with the result that the score has many inputs and is a mix of cultures. “We had the chance of recording in Bratislava with full orchestra and even Istanbul to get some gypsy musicians playing. Ben Hur Live demanded the strangest most exotic that there is in terms of sound and music. To get wild stuff we scoured the surfaces of and toured Dusseldorf, Turkey and California. From angry guitars spinning out rock and roll to Aramic song and Turkish strains, it is a mix of different musical sounds and cultures. Hence musically I’d say it’s very rich.”

We in Rome look forward to this exotic tapestry of vivid cultures and complex textures unfold before our eyes as it resounds with the music of Stewart Copeland and is shaped artistically by **director Philip McKinley celebrated for his Broadway hits Spiderman, Hair and Boy From Oz at the Nuova Fiera Di Roma** 29th. September onwards, six shows a week for two months. Based on the Lewis Wallace book Judah Ben Hur of 1880 with the filmscript by Shaun McKenna of *Lord Of The Rings* London West End fame, Ben Hur Live has wondrous costumes by Ann Hould-Ward, the lights of Patrick Woodroffe who is a master at effects for opera and rock shows and sets and stage design by Mark Fisher who designed the Beijing Olympics opening ceremony. The fact that **we have the best in each camp pouring their artistic expertise into this production** convinces us of its artistic validity and cultural promise as astounding family entertainment for all times.

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[Ben Hur Live in Rome](#) [1]

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