

STAGE ENTERTAINMENT TOURING PRODUCTIONS

A MAMMOTH UNDERTAKING



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Caspar Gerwe talks about the challenges of gearing family musicals for mega venues and a world tour

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As family entertainment goes, there has not been much on offer in the stadiums and arenas of Europe—or North and South America for that matter. Sport, rock and pop have held sway; until now. At the beginning of November a groundbreaking new musical production based on the hugely successful Ice Age films, was launched at the Wembley Arena in London. Playing to an audience of over

25,000 visitors in just three days, it faithfully brought to life the endearing film characters that families have grown to know and love.

The company behind this ambitious production is Stage Entertainment Touring Productions, a new division of the Netherlands-based international entertainment group Stage Entertainment.

The parent company has a well established and enviable position as Europe's leading live entertainment provider, managing and

creating the content for some 25 theatres scattered across France, Germany, the UK, Holland, Spain, Italy and Russia. Focusing on the production of musicals, it not only delivers some of the world's greatest hits to the European audience under licence from their creators but also develops completely fresh new musical productions. Among its current portfolio of titles are *Les Misérables*, *Mamma Mia!*, *Saturday Night Fever* and *Sister Act*.

“We are currently seeing many new big arenas being built around the world, and these venues will need to be programmed with content,” said director Caspar Gerwe. It is a gap in the market that Stage Entertainment Touring Productions has been created to fill. *Ice Age Live!* is merely the spectacular launch production in what will ultimately become a portfolio of completely new shows, all aimed at a family audience and scaled for arena venues. “We will also take these



Holiday on Ice will continue for another year

25,000

Visitors to Ice Age Live! in three days at Wembley Arena, London

productions on tour around the world. That makes us unique. With this regular flow of new content coming through, arenas will be able to programme us on a regular basis.”

Under licence from 20th Century Fox, the story line behind Ice Age Live! is a completely new adventure that sees the baby mammoth Peaches kidnapped and the herd embarking on an adventure to rescue her. “I can’t reveal more about the story,” Gerwe said, “but it’s fair to say that the characters have many adventures along the way. We have created new characters and introduced a new villain called Shadow, a dangerous and evil bird.”

Bringing these well known and loved characters to life for the arena has been an enormous challenge. The mammoth Manny, for example, is 4.5 metres (15 ft) in length and height and moves, behaves and looks exactly as he does in the films. Anything less than a faithful portrayal would have diminished the magic of the production.

Achieving this feat of imagination, design and engineering has been the work of an internationally renowned creative team led by creative director Guy Caron of Cirque du Soleil fame, and character visualisation designer Michael Curry, known for his work on The Lion King. The original concept, book,



The company has an internationally renowned creative team

music & lyrics are all completely new for the production and created by Ella Louise Allaire and Martin Lord Ferguson from Canada, both of whom had worked with Caron and with Stage Entertainment before.

“We have turned this production into a multi-dimensional visual spectacular by combining a number of elements including that of the circus,” Gerwe explained. “As the story is set in the ice age we began with an ice floor upon which the characters can skate

or walk. Then we introduced large platforms which move on the ice and provide a stage, particularly for the enormous mammoths. Above this we have aerial acts and we even have a big screen backdrop where we can project animations. So the audience continues to appreciate this is a movie related product.”

The production features what Gerwe describes as high level artistic moments. For example, the challenge of managing a fight between good and evil, the herd

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against the villainous birds, is portrayed as an ‘out of body experience’ with actors in body suits emerging mystically from the character and them merging back into it again after the scene.

There have been many challenges in bringing this spectacular to life, not least of which was the tight timeframe. The company was formed just 18 months earlier and in that time has created and developed the story and brought the production into being. One of the interesting early decisions for Ice Age Live! was to prerecord the dialogue and music rather than perform it live. This liberates the puppeteers and the stage team to concentrate on the highly technical aspects of managing the movements of the characters and the stage set. It does, however, impose tremendous cueing constraints on them as they have to ensure every movement is exactly synchronised with the recording.

Taking this production on tour will no doubt also be a challenge, but the company is able to draw on the considerable knowledge and experience of the world famous Holiday on Ice show, which has been part of Stage Entertainment since 1996 and is celebrating its 70th anniversary next year. Today, Holiday on Ice is continuing its programme of touring ice shows as an integral part of



An extensive programme of touring family shows is planned

Stage Entertainment Touring Productions, and is sharing its knowledge and expertise in everything that makes up a successful touring operation—production, promotions, logistics, touring, manufacturing and so on.

Ice Age Live! has received wide audience acclaim at its international launch in

London, and is now touring in Germany where it will be shown in 14 cities over a period of three months before going to France. The production is scheduled to continue touring in Europe, North and South America for a period of five years. In each country the dialogue will be re-recorded in the audience’s language.

This successful launch is only the first in what the company hopes will become an extensive programme of touring family shows for the arena. Another production is currently being created by DreamWorks, based on the hugely successful computer animated film series Madagascar Live.

Featuring live music and dialogue, it is due to open in the UK in January 2013 and will then go on tour in South America.

The forward momentum continues. “We are currently brainstorming new content for 2014 and 2015 and we have many ideas,” Gerwe commented. “Ice Age Live! and Madagascar Live will still be running, and Holiday on Ice will continue with Speed for another year, but we have a number of options for future productions, and we have yet to make the final decision.”

There are many synergies between Touring Productions and its parent company, and these have provided a solid foundation for the

“OUR AMBITION IS TO BECOME A GLOBAL PLAYER IN TERMS OF DEVELOPING, PRODUCING, AND PROMOTING ARENA-BASED SHOWS WITH OUR OWN CONTENT”



Holiday on Ice has been part of Stage Entertainment since 1996

company's business and operational structure. The benefits of the collaboration extend in both directions. Stage Entertainment's French theatre production of *Mamma Mia!*, for example, has been running for two years in Paris and now Touring Productions has adapted it for the arena and currently take it on tour, extending the lifetime of the production by several years.

"Our ambition for Stage Entertainment Touring Productions is to become a global player in terms of developing, producing, and promoting arena-based shows with our own content," Gerwe said. "And we are also positioning ourselves as a promoter for the European market. Through Stage Entertainment, we have dedicated teams in all countries of Europe, along with media partnerships, a sales and distribution network, and ticketing capabilities. Combined with our expertise in the touring and arena markets, this infrastructure would be an invaluable asset to companies with an ambition to roll out their content in Europe."

There is much to play for in this hitherto unexploited marketplace. The launch production, *Ice Age Live!* has certainly set the standard very high. And while it may appear to be a hard act to follow, the company has the vision, drive and creative teams to continue developing new and exciting shows. The next production will be worth looking out for. **BE**

For more information about Stage Entertainment Touring Productions visit: www.stagetouring.com



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