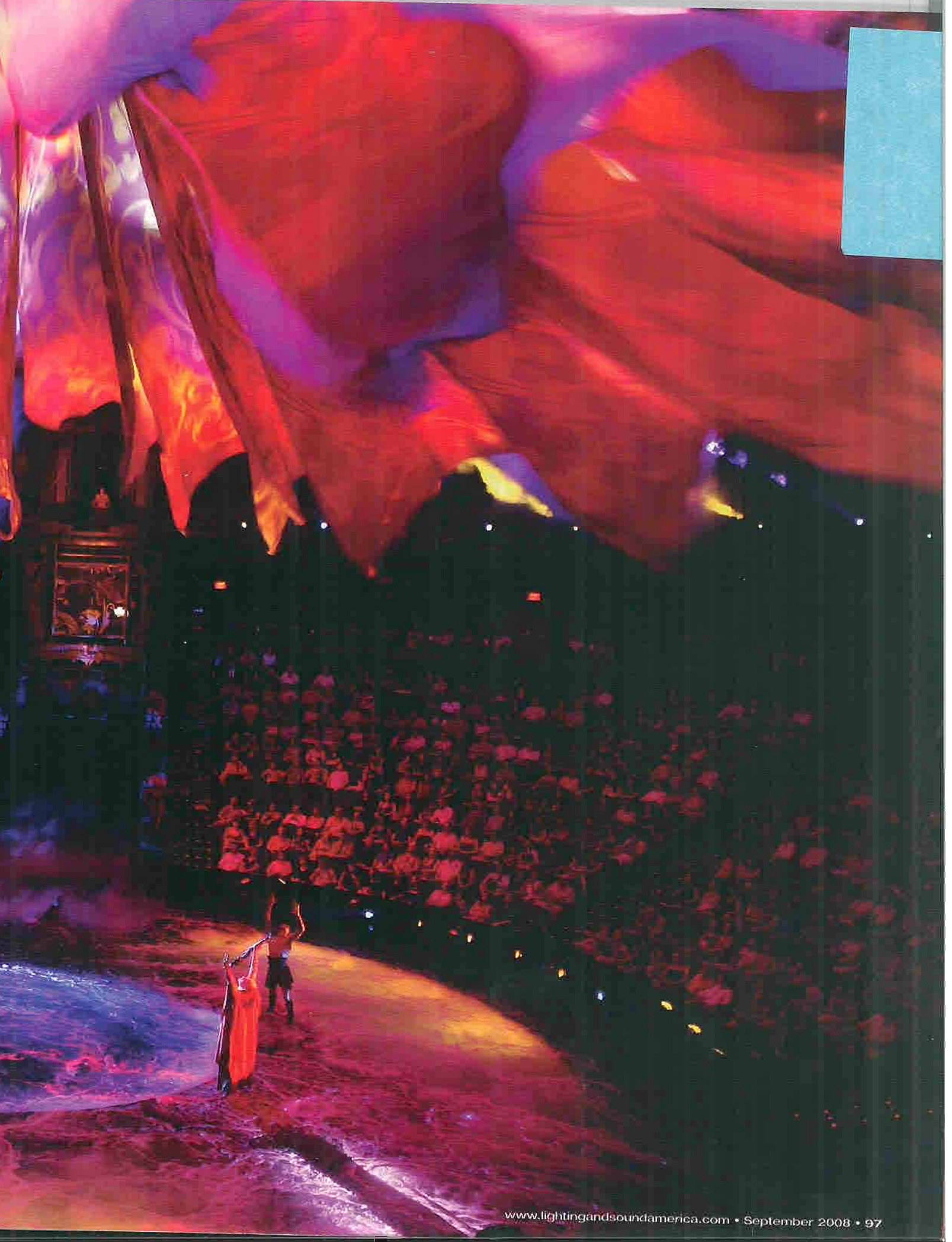


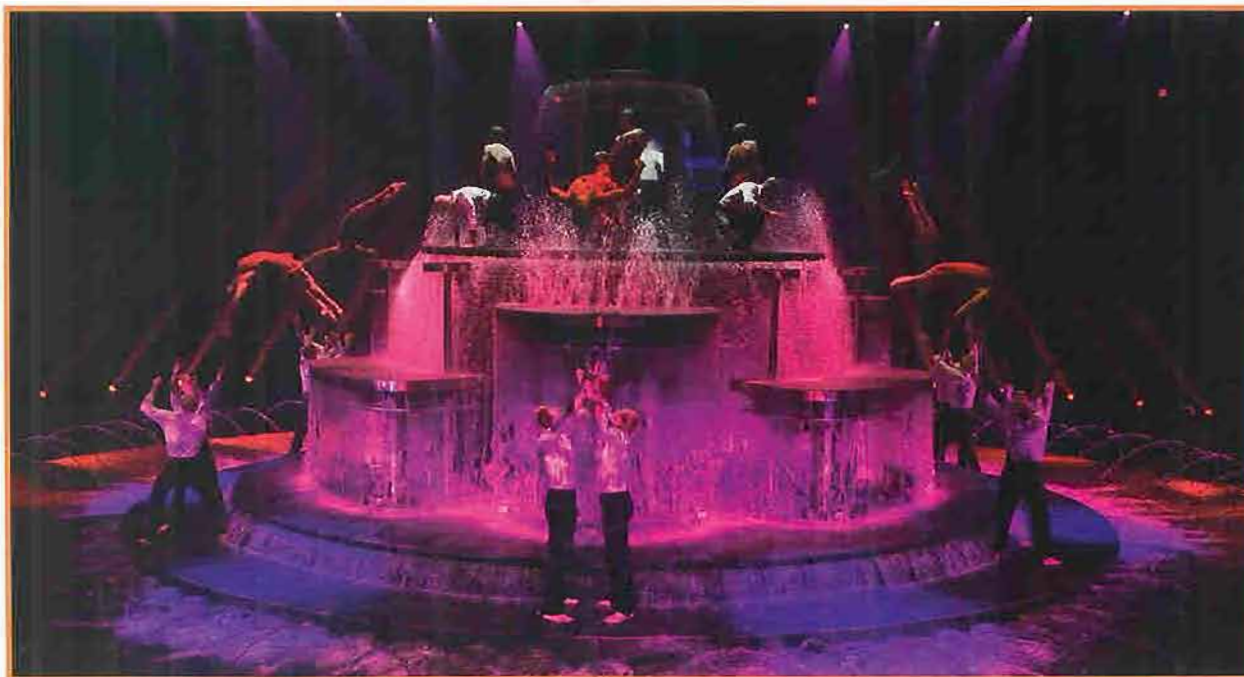
SPECTACULAR

# Water colors

Jules Fisher and Peggy Eisenhauer  
reimagine the lighting of *Le Rêve*

By: David Barbour Photography: Lewis Lee





The deck rises out of the water to make a triple-tier wedding-cake arrangement.

Las Vegas audiences are used to spectacle; after all, they can find it on practically every street corner. Moving stages, 300'-wide LED screens, the sinking of the Titanic—all can be had for the price of a ticket. This fact of life is what makes *Le Rêve*, at Wynn Las Vegas, so counter-intuitive and so intriguing. Theatrically speaking, it's a contradiction in terms: an intimate spectacle.

To be sure, *Le Rêve* is not small. It takes place in a towering, domed, in-the-round theatre—tall enough for grids to be placed 66' 6" and 82' above the stage. The "stage" is, in fact, a 68.5' diameter swimming pool that contains, among other things, a center lift, with turntable, that rises to 15' above the water and turns at the rate of four rotations a minute. (The pool requires 1.1 million gallons of water.) Above the pool are six rotating winches with two individual lift axes each, a large carousel with 20 axes of motion, and three more winches with six axes.

And yet *Le Rêve* doesn't aim to stun viewers with the sheer tonnage of its technology. The images in the show are frequently larger than life,

but they're often constructed of air and water, lending them a certain lightness of spirit. Furthermore, they don't frequently involve masses of people onstage. Most of all, the many tableaux and effects are carefully sculpted and tightly focused. Some of the most stunning moments are composed using a only few performers, the pool and/or stage, and plenty of colorful light. To top it off, it all takes place in a circular theatre that is only 12 rows deep; audience members sitting in the front-row seats are less than 4' from the action.

*Le Rêve*, which opened in 2005, was conceived and directed by Franco Dragone, the staging genius behind such Cirque du Soleil spectacles as *Mystère* and *O*. The theatre at the Wynn, designed by Claude Santerre with the participation of the theatre consultant Scéno Plus, was purpose-built for the show. This is Las Vegas, however, and it is not unusual for a long-running extravaganza to undergo more than one makeover during its lifetime, and, in the last year, *Le Rêve* has been subject to a number of changes.

The theatre itself underwent a

renovation designed by Mark Fisher and Roger Thomas. The interior was repainted and the walls recovered; the color palette, formerly blue, is based on cocoa, bronze, and deep red. (Fisher also designed *Le Rêve*'s new opening effect, in which a fabric canopy, hung over the stage, vanishes through the roof of the theatre.) The seating capacity was reduced from 2,087 to 1,606, while making room for premium seats that, for an additional charge, come with such amenities as chocolate-dipped strawberries and champagne. Overall, the changes to the interior reflect a softer, Art-Nouveau influence with plenty of floral motifs. In addition, the staging has been augmented by the addition of ballroom dance sequences choreographed by Maksim Chmerkovskiy, best-known for his appearances on the hit television series *Dancing with the Stars*.

*Le Rêve* has also been transformed by a new lighting design by Jules Fisher and Peggy Eisenhauer, which floods the space with incredible, jewel-like colors; provides a series of cinematic fades and transitions; and alluringly sculpts the performers'

bodies out of the darkness. It was an unusual working environment for the team. Still, their lighting may well be the crucial factor in turning a procession of dances and acrobatic/aquatic feats into the kind of hallucinatory experience that makes for a hit on the Vegas strip.

### Learning the rules

One imagines that *Le Réve* posed a challenge of a different sort for Fisher and Eisenhauer, as most of their best work has been achieved in theatre and film, where their first priority is to support the narrative line. Even their concert-touring projects tend to have strong overarching concepts.

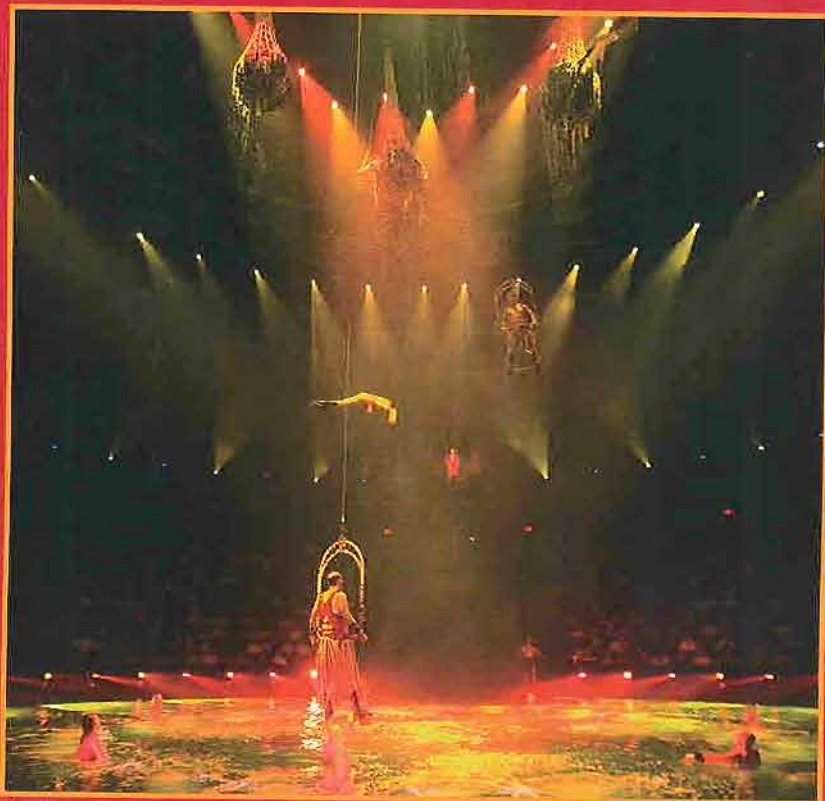
*Le Réve*, however, is a different animal. Reportedly inspired by the Picasso painting of the same name (which, incidentally, is owned by Steve Wynn, owner of Wynn Las Vegas), it begins with a woman, a man, and a bed. The couple, apparently lovers, parts, and what follows is a succession of dreamlike, often frankly surreal,

visuals. A chorus line of women's legs appears from below the water line, kicking away anonymously. A cylinder of cloth flies in and apart, revealing a spinning globe, to which aerialists are attached. A cloudburst of water turns into a shimmering vertical rainbow. A tree flies in, adorned with acrobats; bodies dangle, swing, and fly through the air, sometimes plunging into the water from terrifying heights. A deck rises out of the water to create a triple-tier wedding-cake arrangement, complete with colorful fountains, that suggests a collaboration between Busby Berkeley and Hans Arp. (There is the suggestion the entire piece is an emotional journey for the woman seen at the very beginning, but, as is typical in these entertainments, nothing is that explicit; the visuals are everything.)

Lighting such a spectacle, constructed out of a series of disconnected

"wow" moments required a different way of thinking, acknowledges Eisenhauer. "Every time something happens on stage, it's not related to what happens before it," she says. "Every single act is a brand-new experience."

First, however, the designers rethought the existing rig, removing a substantial amount of gear and installing a new, more simplified setup that nevertheless facilitates any number of colorful and dramatic looks. "Because the existing show was running, the gear had to be swapped out in stages," says Fisher.



The designers' circles-of-light concept can be seen in both of these shots.

"About halfway through this process, to show Steve Wynn what we were doing, Peggy took two pieces of music, a ballad by Mariah Carey and an up-tempo number by Gloria Estefan, and programmed a light show to them. He was blown away by it," Eisenhauer adds. "I suggested that we do the demonstration, so he and Franco [Dragone] could understand the vocabulary of the system."

Eisenhauer says that new positions were created, in the name of making the system more "geometric"—in other words, to define the tall, cavernous space with lighting. (The new rig consists almost entirely of Vari\*Lite VL3000 and VL3500 units, about 200 in all.) "We started working geometrically, to make the power of the room and the lights work together," she says. In addition, she says, "We wanted to avoid any glare or spill on the audience"—a tall order when the theatre is in the round.

Indeed, the new design is based on a single clarifying idea, which proved to be remarkably flexible in terms of creating a wide number of looks. "One of Peggy's great contributions was to put the lighting into concentric rings," says Fisher. "There's one in the pool, underwater, and another at the feet of the performers, surrounding the pool. There's a ring at the mezzanine level; it's a complete circle that covers the entire room. In addition, there are two rings in the ceiling—an inner ring and an outer ring—and one in a hole in the dome, near the ceiling of the room. Finally, there's a set of 12 Vari-Lite units, in individual pods, that fly in to form a ring." The latter was built for the show by Vegas-based Fisher Technical

Services (no relation to Jules Fisher).

"The Vari-Lite pods are a support platform for a single Vari-Lite, a strobe, and a speaker, and they're arrayed in a circle around the perimeter of the pool," says Scott Fisher, of Fisher Technical Services. "The platforms are unique in two ways; one, they're suspended by special load-bearing electrical and data cables that spool directly on to the winch drums, so that the visual clutter of wire rope suspension lines and electrical power and data lines is reduced to just two black cables. Two, they're actively gyro-stabilized through the use of a pair of mechanical gyros of the type typically used to stabilize helicopter camera mounts and similar equipment. This

allows the Vari-Lite unit to pan, tilt, and roll through its normal range of motion without disrupting the stability of the platform. Normally, that's not a problem, since you're hung from a truss or something equally stable or heavy, but with a big Vari-Lite on a little two-cable platform, you're more likely to just have the platform twist to the right when

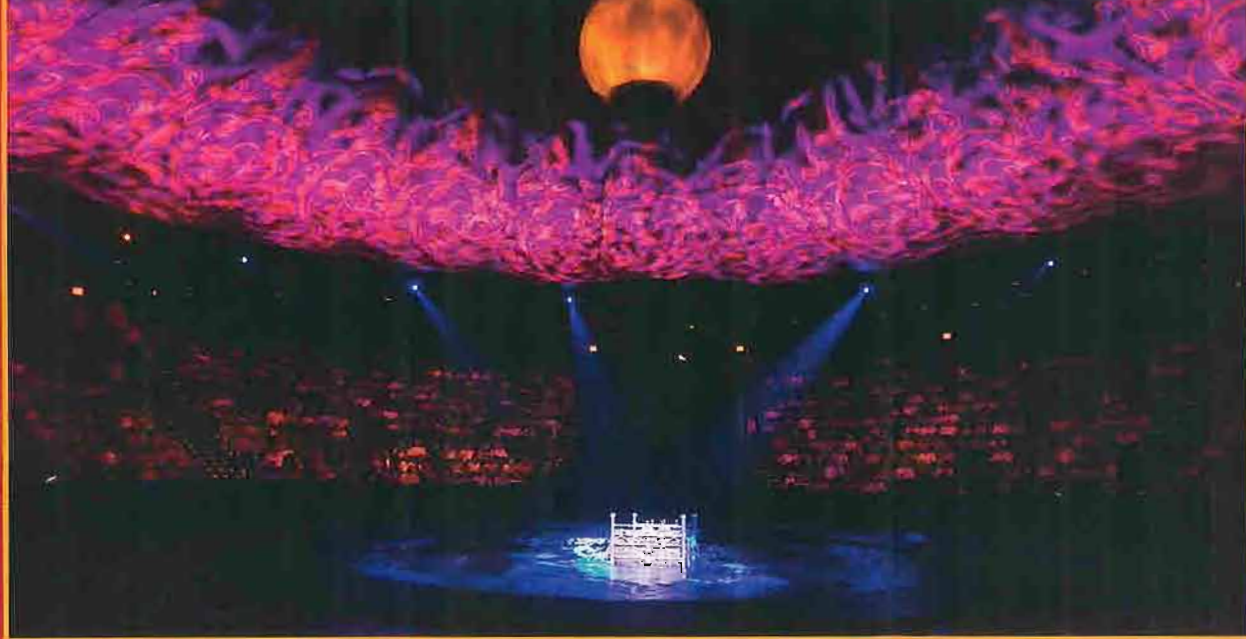
you're trying to pan the light to the left; the gyros help to both hold the platform still and to settle it quickly if it is disrupted. All of the winches are tied into the existing Navigator system in the theatre, so they have full motion control and are integrated with the rest of the normal show cueing cycle. Kenyon Labs provided the gyros, and they were great to work with." Jules Fisher adds that Dale Hurt, the show's technical director, and Rick Gray, Wynn's director of entertainment, were closely involved in the process.

The second ring—the units that surround the pool—posed certain challenges, however, because of their proximity to the water. "We took out the first row of seats and built a kind of waterproof bathtub that surrounds the stage," says Jules Fisher. "To make this happen, Peggy came up with a real innovation." It is, he says, a dome, a hemisphere-shaped shell, made of an acrylic and hidden by black louver, which protects the units from the water.

This position, known as the "beach rail," contains 36 VL3500s and is enclosed to keep it watertight. (The housing for the units also contains 20 tons of air conditioning.) In this



The striking water-color effects are achieved by lighting the water from below and layering patterns on top.



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position, the units can reach the across the pool and back to the house. The louvers prevent the light from glaring at the audience.

"The louver is attached to the outside of the structure," says Fisher. "Peggy worked with Gary Falls [president of City Theatrical] to find a way to bend the louver. With it, the dome is covered and you only see the circle where light comes out. It looks rather like a bug's eye." Eisenhauer says that an earlier attempt, which involved placing the units on a simple glass box, didn't work; her version is rooted in a single, crucial concept: "If a unit is going to pan and tilt, the surface it is shooting through should be the same distance from the lens all the way through its travel," she says. "It's an odd-looking position, but it's very efficient in how it doesn't take one's eye away from the show. It allows us to have footlights, as well as light that goes straight up to the ceiling, so we can cover the aerialists. It's a huge area to light. So much of the work we did was to control the light in the room, so there was more contrast between light and darkness."

It required great effort to arrange the units in an arc to the pool while keeping a 1" or less relationship to the inside of the dome. Indeed, almost all of the units in the show have a custom louver accessory, to make it possible to have it work in its circular location

and not affect the audience's viewing of the show—this includes followspots and non-Vari-Lite gear. (For the record, another new addition to the rig is a set of Lycian 3,000W followspots, which can fit easily into spaces in the theatre's ceiling, allowing for steeply angled looks. Also used for big-light effects is a 6,000W ARRI unit, placed directly overhead of the stage/pool.) Greg Husinko, the production electrician, provided key assistance.

The units placed directly under the waterline appear to be directly responsible for the extraordinary color effects in the water. Eisenhauer says they are partly facilitated by the pool's bubble system, in which a total of 422 in-pool air outlets, linked by 6,000 threaded connectors and three miles of control tubing, transfer 1,200 cubic feet of air per minute. (Other water effects are realized by ten pumps, moving 13,180 gallons of water per minute.) The system was installed to prevent the audience from seeing the network of staging equipment located just below the water line, but it also adds enormously to the underwater lighting, as moving water is inherently a more interesting medium for reflecting light. Fisher says that the layering on of patterns, created by custom templates manufactured by Rosco, further intensifies the effects of the underwater colors. Indeed, the show is filled with a number of complex patterns, some of

which require six Vari-Lite units in order to complete a single look. Also placed underwater, and adding a bit of glamour, is a set of Martin Atomic strobes.

The circles-of-light concept allows for a large number of eye-catching effects, including broad circular upsweeps that direct the audience's attention to the aerial performers, stately circles of narrow columns of light, 360° chases that add tension to certain sequences, and floods of colorful chiaroscuro.

Previously, the production's lighting was controlled by two boards—one for the moving lights and one for the conventional rig. "We unified everything to one console," says Eisenhauer, adding that the board of choice was the PRG Virtuoso. The process of cueing was a long and intensive one, involving months of work as changes were implemented to the show. And, for that matter, there are more changes to come, as new scenic and staging elements are scheduled to be added to the mix, which will require new lighting cues and color choices.

In many ways, Eisenhauer sees the job as one of simplification—less gear, a single console, a single unifying lighting idea. But that idea has facilitated a multitude of ideas and looks. Thanks in no small part to Eisenhauer and Fisher's contribution, *Le Rêve* has an eerie beauty that makes it stand out on the Las Vegas strip. ☺