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Sensational West End Show Gives Theatre Audiences a Vote

Electronic voting system allows audiences to participate in the action and have their say as the drama unfolds

Hamilton Rentals plays a leading role helping an innovative production company create an immersive and interactive audience experience that challenged theatre-goers to think again.

The challenge

Finding the right technology solution would be no easy matter as John Page, the show's Production Manager, explains.

"We needed to find an elegant yet simple way of putting a voting mechanism into the hands of audience members, ensuring the selected solution didn't disrupt the pace or smooth running of the play and was accessible to, and usable by, any audience member – regardless of age or dexterity."

Initially, the production team considered if a mobile app was the way forward but this opened the door to people fumbling for phones and risked performances being disturbed by audience members' phones ringing in key dramatic moments.

"We quickly realised this wasn't a workable option. Not everyone has a smartphone, plus we then had to consider the time-consuming complexities of 'walking' audiences through the download and voting process," says John.

To evaluate other potential approaches, John turned to Hamilton Rentals to see if they could help resolve the audience voting conundrum.

"Once I explained our dilemma they immediately suggested an interactive radio frequency (RF) audience response system that could easily be implemented into an auditorium setting. There was no complex or bulky hardware involved and the system featured simple push-button key pads that made it easy for people to place their votes."

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Background

Creating a live theatrical performance with a difference

When William Village commissioned the play 'Quiz' from prize-winning British dramatist James Graham, he knew he wanted to make audiences part of the action from the get go.

A fictional re-examination of the 2001 conviction of Charles Ingram, dubbed the 'coughing Major', for cheating on the TV show Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?, Quiz invited theatre-goers to look inside the story in a new way.

"We wanted lots of interactive elements that would engage theatregoers, asking them to judge for themselves if light entertainment and the media warps our attitudes to truth and justice," explains William Village.

"From a technical standpoint that meant finding a way to let audiences vote during the live performance to decide whether they thought the coughing major was guilty or not."

During the first act, which recreates the intensity of a high stakes game show, the audience gets to vote on whether they believe the Major is guilty as charged. The second act, however, replays much of the action from a different perspective before the audience, armed with all this additional knowledge, gets to once again vote on the verdict.

"We wanted to instil a sense of quiz-fever into audiences, so they were genuinely part of the game-play," continues William. "That meant the voting element had to be real and immediate – with results displayed in real-time on the set."

Enabling audience participation in the show's quiz rounds and the live votes on the question of justice would require some hi-tech ingenuity to enable the central game-show immersive concept.

"We needed a digital voting system that would do exactly what we wanted, at a cost that was not prohibitive. Not an easy proposition when you consider we were planning an initial five week run at the intimate 350-seat Chichester Festival Theatre, before transferring to the much larger 900-seat Noël Coward Theatre in London's West End for 12 weeks."

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The solution

Preparing to go live – audience participation made simple

Hamilton Rentals worked with the play’s production team to tailor every element of the TurningPoint voting system, customising devices to control the polling process and transposing live results into Powerpoint images that could be displayed on the set during performances.

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“Hamilton Rentals even created a branded overlay for the voting keypads, making it pure simplicity for audiences to quickly select the appropriate button when placing their vote,” says John. “We’d never even considered this as an option and it added a nice touch that made the audience experience even more impactful.”

Following a sell-out run in Chichester, the production prepared for the move to the West End.

“The Noël Coward Theatre in London represented a very different proposition to the more intimate setting of the Chichester Festival Theatre,” continues John.

“The 900-seater auditorium is arranged over four levels, so it was vital to ensure the radio frequency coverage was effective enough to capture every audience vote – regardless of seat location.”

The answer was to test drive the system during a live performance of another play running at the London theatre, issuing ushers with the discrete keypads to check if the solution was rugged enough to cope with a fully populated tiered theatre.

“The dry run undertaken by Hamilton Rentals proved the solution was more than capable of handling a much larger and more complex physical setting,” explains John.

“But that wasn’t all. Hamilton Rentals also resolved the challenge of ensuring we didn’t ‘lose’ keypads between performances as a result of audience members accidentally walking out with the voting devices.”

The outcomes

Opening night and beyond

At Chichester, audience members were issued with voting devices on lanyards which they wore around their necks, handing them in as they exited the auditorium. But with so many exits at The Noël Coward Theatre, a re-think was required to minimise the risk of device loss.

Tethering the devices to each seat in the West End theatre ensured that audience members could easily find their voting keypad at key moments of the play, while minimising the risk of these being dropped or lost in the dark. It was an approach that also ensured the production team didn't have to worry about the cost or hassle of having to collect or replenish lost devices after every performance.

Hailed as a visually stimulating piece of immersive theatre, Quiz was deemed a technically breath-taking theatrical success that wowed critics and audiences alike with a thrilling blend of engaging entertainment. Jointly produced by William Village, Playful Productions and Chichester Festival Theatre, Quiz was listed as one of the Top 5 'must see' theatre plays by The Stage.

“Really didn't know what to expect, but thoroughly enjoyed it, in particular the audience participation with the voting. Very clever concept.”

Barbara B – audience member

“Utterly compulsive viewing – this one's a winner!”

Sam Marlowe – The Times

“Exuberantly entertaining and thought provoking – huge fun”

Paul Taylor, Independent

The solution

Why Hamilton Rentals

Hiring a complete audience response technology solution from Hamilton Rentals enabled the Quiz production team to turn their creative vision into reality – without breaking the bank.

“I knew that the play's director was very concerned we wouldn't find the right voting solution – but with Hamilton Rentals's help we were quickly able to identify a workable and highly effective system that effortlessly integrated with our theatrical AV systems,” confirms John Page.

“From the first moment of contact, Hamilton Rentals's response was immediate – they picked up the idea and pushed me for answers, so they could tailor the system to our exact needs,” he continues. “If I'm honest, it was like having my very own voting department on tap.”

“The Hamilton Rentals approach seems to be to drive things along in a very proactive manner. In the world of theatre, this kind of fast collaborative working is an absolute boon to making complex things happen within limited timeframes – helping us resolve issues the moment they arise to create a truly unique audience experience.”

Evaluating how Hamilton Rentals played a key role in helping to bring Quiz to life on the stage, William Village confirms how the all-important real-time audience interaction was a key cornerstone of the production's success.

“Thanks to Hamilton Rentals, we were able to ensure everyone attending the play was able to vote – indeed, the system was sophisticated enough for us to reveal at the end of each show how previous audiences had voted. All of which added to the reality of the moments we created for theatre goers,” he concludes.

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