

# TAKE IT TO THE STAGE: THE SECRETS OF THE CONCERT DESIGNERS

In the olden days, a concert was an artist, a stage, a coloured light bulb and a tinny PA. Times have changed, dramatically: nowadays, if you can imagine it, an ambitious artist will build it. **Dorian Lynskey** meets the designers behind the biggest shows on Earth.



PHOTOSHOT: BETTY; COPYRIGHT: STUFISH; MARK FISHER; SKETCH: LIPSONMART



The gift of sound and vision: (clockwise from left) Bono ushers in the age of custom-made video walls and the rest on U2's gargantuan PopMart tour, 1997; Mark Fisher's original sketches for the stage design; you're gonna need a bigger lorry for that, guys.



**T**he first thing you see when you enter the London headquarters of "entertainment architects" Stufish is a huge gallery of framed photographs of their most impressive concert designs, from U2 and Pink Floyd to Robbie Williams and Madonna. What Stufish's Ric Lipson jokingly calls their "wall of glory" illustrates the eye-popping scope of the 21st-century pop concert. We are living in a golden age of concert design. The standard box of tricks makes for a good night out - lights, LED screens, confetti cannons - but ambitious designers

are increasingly driven to reconfigure sports venues into art installations, sci-fi movies, cathedrals and carnivals. A show can tell a story or convey an emotion. It can make you cry, smile, shout, jump up and down or gape in awe. The best ones make you feel like there's nowhere on Earth you'd rather be. Founded in the '70s by the late architect Mark Fisher, Stufish epitomises the concert industry's combination of blue-sky thinking and nuts-and-bolts pragmatism. "Everything that we bring to it is building on the power of the music," says CEO Ray Winkler. "But people want to experience the music in a way that involves more of the senses. They're so sophisticated in how they consume

entertainment that it's not enough any more to just have big video and great sound. Everybody's looking for the next hit." "Concert designer" is a useful umbrella term because designers hail from a range of disciplines, including fine art, theatre, television and other sectors of the music industry. Most people would struggle to name one but they're the visionaries who make it possible to spend £100 on a ticket and go home feeling like you've had value for money. The more that artists rely on touring, the higher that ticket prices rise, the more important the designers become. >>

“Bands can’t make money out of selling records any more so they have to be on the road,” says Mark Cuniffe, a veteran lighting and stage designer whose portfolio includes Michael Jackson, David Bowie and Ed Sheeran. “A show is a brand; a shop window.”

If the behind-the-scenes world of concert design can be said to have a breakout star, then it’s Es Devlin, the Englishwoman who dreamt up such set-pieces as Beyoncé’s monolithic cube, The Weeknd’s spaceship, Adele’s giant eye and Miley Cyrus’s tongue ramp. Coming to pop concerts from the London theatre, she translates personality and biography into environments. “Baroque monarchs commissioned portraits in precious lapis lazuli and gold leaf,” she says. “Pop stars commission them in tourable, weatherproof LED and steel. If the portrait is a true likeness, it should deliver the words, music and spirit of the performer all the way to the back of the stadium.”

This is the eternal challenge of stadium shows: how to narrow the gap between artist and audience. Designers prefer an arena, because it’s a big canvas but a controllable one. In a stadium, there’s no roof to rig lights or speakers from, and no control over the weather or natural light. It’s also, fundamentally, too bloody big.

A stadium show is, therefore, a fiendishly tricky balancing act. It needs to be a work of art and a reliable money-maker; a memorable spectacle that fosters the illusion of intimacy; a gigantic production that can be packed away and transported to the next town; a once-in-a-lifetime experience that can be replicated night after night.

“All stadium concerts are an attempt to reconcile the scale of the stadium with the scale of the performer,” says Devlin. “How do you achieve at once strength of transmission to 80,000 and intimacy of communication as if it were one-to-one? I’m often reminded of the title of a Damien Hirst artwork: ‘I Want



“We’re over here!” A very distant Beatles play Shea Stadium, 1965; (below) U2 discuss options with designer Mark Fisher at Barcelona’s Nou Camp.



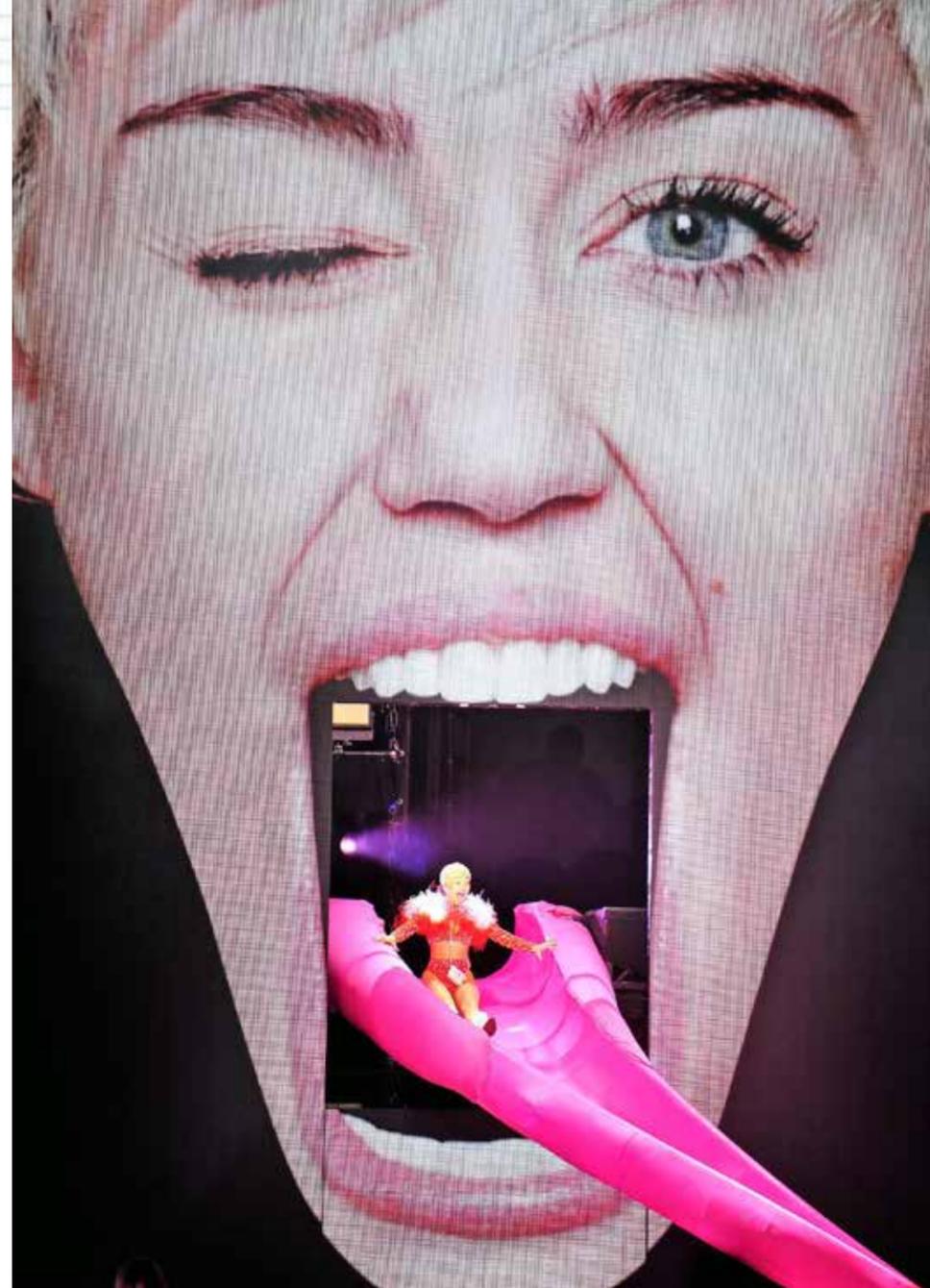
To Spend The Rest Of My Life Everywhere, With Everyone, One To One, Always, Forever, Now.’ I think that’s the ambition at the heart of pretty much every stadium concert.”

**W**atch footage of The Beatles at Shea Stadium in 1965 and you’ll see the problem that concert designers had to solve. Fans squinted at tiny figures from afar while straining to hear the weedy PA. Winkler remembers being a concert-goer in the ’70s. “There was no production value as such. People came for the music, and even the music didn’t sound great.”

Slowly, concert design evolved to fill the space. Mark Fisher arrived in 1977 with the pyrotechnics and airborne inflatable pigs of Pink Floyd’s Animals tour, then projected animation onto an edifice of cardboard bricks for The Wall in 1980. “Mark Fisher put architecture into rock’n’roll,” says Winkler. “He gave an emerging industry the discipline it needed to expand. It’s not a given that where we are now would have happened if Mark hadn’t been around.”

During the ’80s, rock’s big beasts spent fortunes on improving the stadium rock experience. Some innovations paid off, such as Genesis’s investment in automated coloured lighting and Journey’s pioneering IMAG (Image Magnification) video screens. Others flopped. David Bowie’s “glass spider” was ceremonially burned after the tour and This Is Spinal Tap spoofed real-life instances of embarrassing prop malfunctions.

Fisher, who died in 2013, remained in the



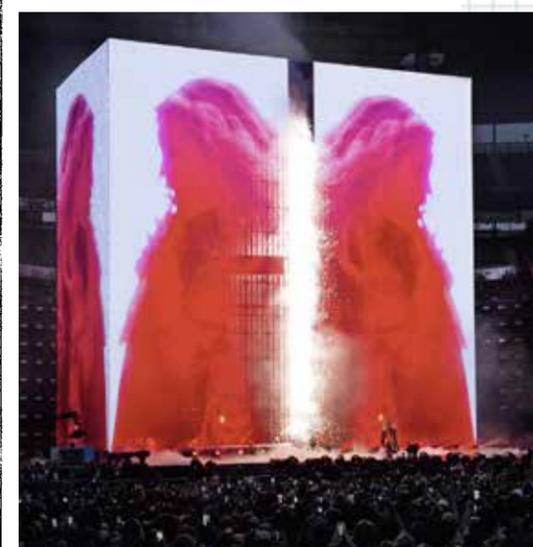
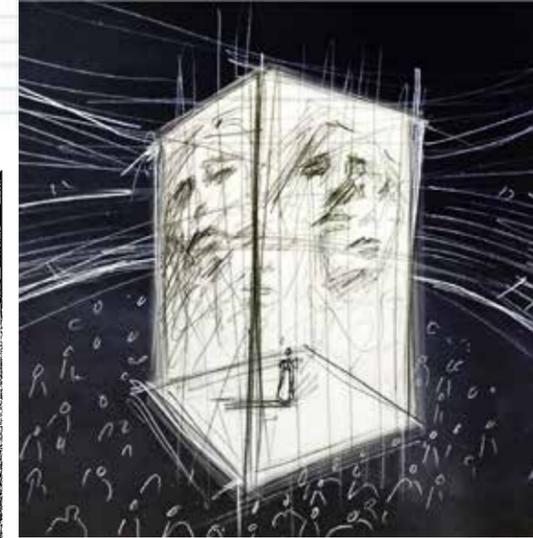
“BAROQUE MONARCHS COMMISSIONED PORTRAITS IN PRECIOUS LAPIS LAZULI AND GOLD LEAF. POP STARS COMMISSION THEM IN TOURABLE, WEATHERPROOF L.E.D AND STEEL.” ES DEVLIN

vanguard. His leviathan arch for Pink Floyd’s Division Bell tour in 1994 liberated stage design from right angles. Zoo TV, on which Fisher worked with U2’s creative director Willie Williams, introduced multiple video screens and the smaller B-stage. U2’s PopMart in 1997 was another game-changer, thanks to its custom-made video wall of low-resolution LED panels. At 700 square feet, it was the largest in the world.

“I remember looking at the first test panel

with Willie and Mark,” says Winkler. “We saw the future. Nobody had ever worked with video at that scale.” Nor, indeed, at that cost. “Mark pointed out that the server was more expensive than buying a Ferrari. We wouldn’t exist without people like U2 or The Rolling Stones. We need people who are willing to do something different and take a risk.”

Cuniffe says: “PopMart changed production design forever. Overnight, doors started opening. Once LED becomes



Tongue’n’groovy: (clockwise from top left) Miley Cyrus at LA’s Honda Center, 2014; Es Devlin’s sketches for Beyoncé’s “cube” set; the vision realised; Devlin herself.

mainstream, it becomes cheaper and more lightweight and you can be more creative. You’re not just sticking up a screen so you can see Phil Collins from the back of Knebworth. The artist’s performance becomes part of the overall visual.”

The speed of technological change is staggering but it is less an arrow pointing in one direction than a tree branch offering a proliferation of options. The best designers avoid letting technology become, in



Bust in show: Stufish CEO and design director Ray Winkler (left) and set designer Ric Lipson keep their hands to themselves.

PHOTO: SHOT SIMON SARIN, STEVE HUIJPHRENS, REXSHUTTERSTOCK, COURTESY ES DEVLIN



scale models from black cardboard and coloured plastic, and populate them with white plastic figurines.

“That’s how TV directors work out camera angles,” Buckley explains, plucking a figure from Take That’s Wonderland set. “I remember Coldplay’s faces when I turned up with a model of the Pyramid Stage in 2011.” She mimes childlike delight. “Everybody loves little worlds. Now they insist on a model because it helps them work out what the space is.”

Buckley studied fine art and worked in music television before making the move into concert design. “The first one I did I thought, ‘This is home,’” she remembers. “I set out to be a painter and I think that’s why there’s always a bit of texture in my work.” She indicates the diorama for Coldplay’s A Head Full Of Dreams: a signature visual identity that has been scaled up and down to suit stadiums, arenas, theatres, festivals and TV appearances. “You have to explore your

own curiosities. You’re thinking about the artist but also your own style.”

Each concert design is a unique combination of people, music and priorities. There are no set formulas. The period between first meeting and first night can be as long two years or as short as a few days, the sweet spot being four to six months. For her second ever concert assignment, Kanye’s 2005 Touch The Sky tour, Devlin had just 10 days. She developed the concept with Kanye during a three-hour meeting and drew the designs on the plane home.

There is, however, a rough shape to the process. Designers begin by scrutinising the new album (“our shared language,” says Devlin) and asking the artist what they want to say. “It gives you a framework even if you don’t reference it in the design,” says Buckley. “Artists have a greater awareness of the importance of touring. There’s a lot more direct conversation now. Some like you to present sketches and ideas; some wake up in the middle of the night with a vision.”

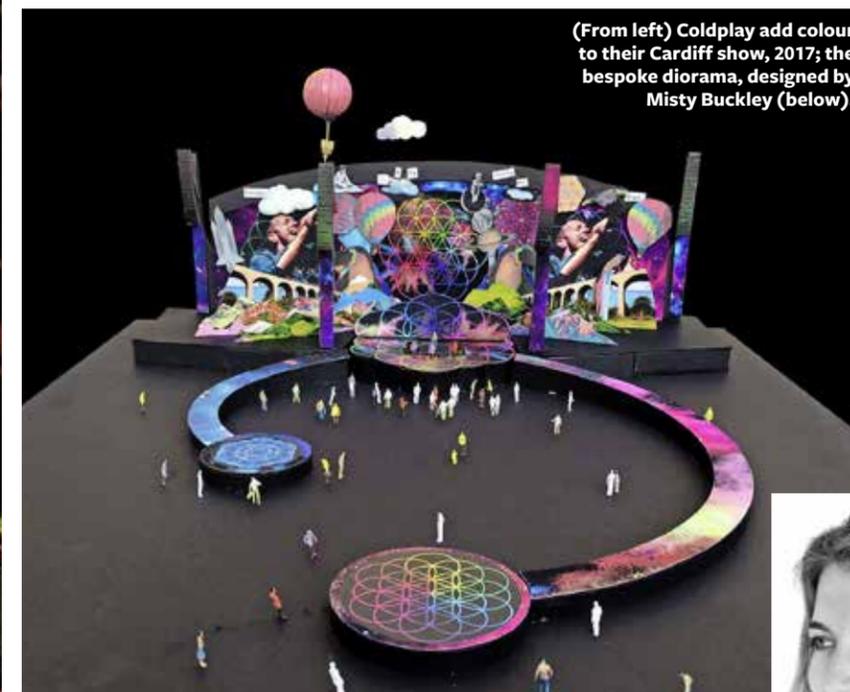
The most visually-minded artists invest extraordinary amounts of time and money in a show. “For them it’s not a business, it’s their own personal art project,” says Cunniffe. “Madonna’s very much like that. Her attention to detail!” This can make

for a challenging process. Each designer has a personal vision and recurring motifs but they are ultimately employees and the client has the last word. “The people who perform in front of tens of thousands tend to be superhuman to a degree,” says Devlin. “They become conduits of greater levels of energy than an average mortal.

It’s generally more interesting to flow with this energy than against it. If the first bold idea is resisted, then the imperative is to come up with another one – not for them but with them.”

The discussion continues. Emails, sketches and models go back and forth until the show finds its shape. The core idea could be a narrative arc, a colour scheme, a sculptural centrepiece. (Hopefully, it doesn’t clash with someone else’s: in 2009, Pink, Take That and Britney Spears all toured circus-themed shows.) Then the creative team has to thrash out the logistics. The considerations are endless.

Cunniffe opens his laptop to show me a digital model of Sheeran’s 2018 stadium tour. “The first thing you’ve got to do is think about sight lines,” he says, ticking off the key issues on his fingers. “How much



(From left) Coldplay add colour to their Cardiff show, 2017; the bespoke diorama, designed by Misty Buckley (below).



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Winkler’s words, “the tail that wags the dog”. It should facilitate ideas, not dictate them.

“A good design isn’t driven by what’s available,” says Willo Perron, an LA-based designer who has worked with Kanye, Jay-Z and Rihanna. “If you’re new all the time, it’s a bit destructive. It becomes like an arms race: this contest of who’s got the biggest thing.”

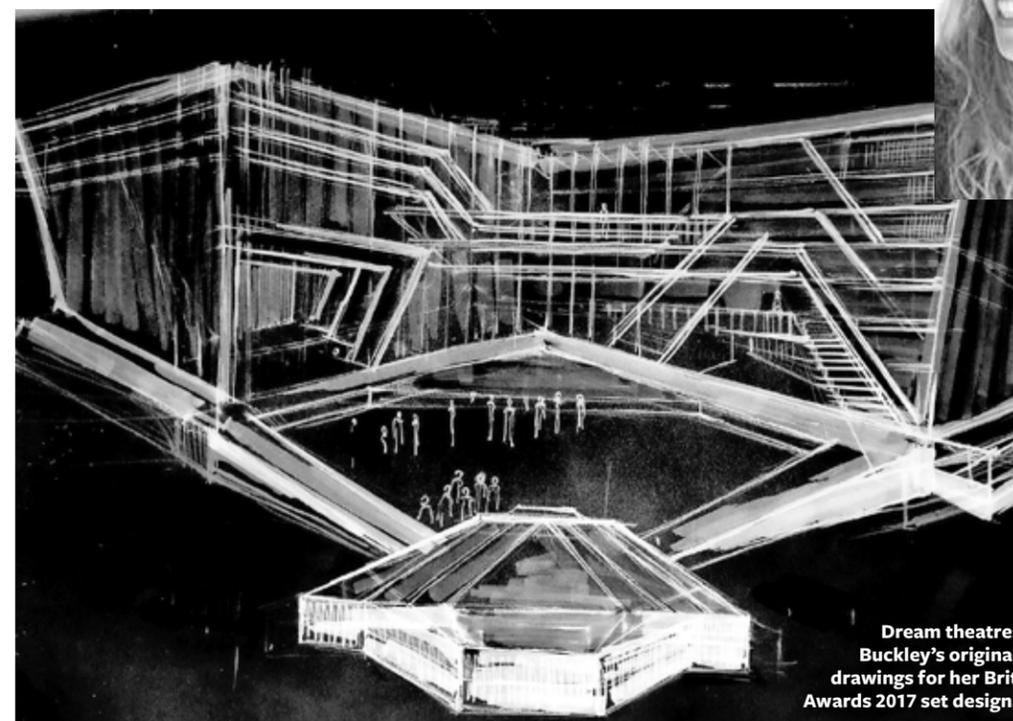
Concert design is more collaborative than competitive. Each successful innovation, whether it’s U2’s screens or Muse’s drones, adds a new colour to the collective palette. Even specific physical structures can

reappear elsewhere. Stufish resurfaced the metal infrastructure that they designed for U2’s Vertigo tour in 2005 and reused it for Robbie Williams and Muse. Some hardware enters the rental market. A bespoke automated device originally conceived for Madonna might reappear in an EDM show. Some groundbreaking inventions have had far-reaching ramifications.

“An artist willing to invest in it opens the door for everyone: fine artists, small theatres, opera companies,” says Misty Buckley, who works with Coldplay, Take That and Biffy

Clyro, and designs Glastonbury’s Park Stage. “Everyone can use a bit of this technology. It’s mind-blowing what the major bands do and don’t even realise they’re doing it.”

**B**uckley’s home studio in Pilton, Somerset is full of beautiful things, none more striking than her dioramas. You can communicate a stage design to an artist with 3D digital modelling and even VR, but Buckley likes to construct



Dream theatre: Buckley’s original drawings for her Brit Awards 2017 set design.

BACKGROUNDS COURTESY MISTY BUCKLEY

is it going to cost? What's it going to weigh? How tall is it? Something can look fantastic on paper but it has to be practical."

"There's no gap bigger than between the idea and its realisation," says Winkler. "We translate the energy of an idea into something physical that people can get in and out of the stadium and ram into trucks and planes. There are incremental technological improvements – in the speed of construction, or weight issues – that nobody in the audience will ever know about but they can make or break a show." Lipson describes it as "moving cities around".

A stadium tour is a vast and intricate collaboration, involving the artist and their inner circle, multiple designers with different skill sets, hardware manufacturers such as TAIT and Stageco, render farms that generate video content, and the production crew that keeps it on the road. "You have to understand rigging and weight-loading," says Buckley, "but my role is to provide the bonkers intention and everyone else says, 'OK, let's see what we can do.'"

Tourability is one of stadium rock's inevitable constraints. Sounding good is another. "All design for concerts is on one level an act of decorating a huge portable sound system," says Devlin. "It's a very precise science. The parameters turn out to be pretty immutable, which is why many pop concerts look quite similar."

One spectacular exception is the famous lake stage in Bregenz, Austria, where Devlin has designed the set for Bizet's *Carmen*. The fixed location and elephantine five-year production cycle enable Bregenz's technicians to perform miracles, hiding the speakers inside sculptures with acoustically

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MARK CUNNIFFE



Production designer Mark Cuniffe (above) oversaw the set design for Ed Sheeran's *Divide* tour; (right) at Nottingham's Rockpoint Arena, 2017.

transparent surfaces. Devlin calls it "every designer's dream canvas": a set which renders the source of the music invisible.

At last, production rehearsals begin, using stand-ins, then full dress rehearsals with the artist. Problems are ironed out, details tweaked. But a show doesn't fully reveal itself until it has an audience.

"It's a living organism," says Lipson. "You know what it is physically but you don't know what it's going to become emotionally. We visualise the hell out of it, we know what it looks like from every single seat, but when you get in the room, something happens and it's magic." He grins. "That's why we do it. If you know all the answers, it's no fun."

If there's one piece of technology that has influenced concert design more than any other, then it's one that's neither big nor expensive: the camera on your phone. Twenty years ago, concerts were only properly documented by press photographers down the front. These days, a big show will be photographed thousands of times from every position and the results published on social media. If there is one bad sight line or unflattering angle, then the artist will know about it. Everyone's a concert photographer now. And everyone is, potentially, a lighting device.

On Coldplay's 2011 *Mylo Xyloto* tour, Buckley and creative director Phil Harvey introduced cutting-edge LED wristbands that made each audience member an

interactive component in the show's design – a radical new way of dissolving the hierarchy between artist and audience. "I think that's our generation's language," she says. "You're constantly connected with everyone and everything. So how can we make this a more universal experience, not just us and them?"

The next step, made possible by reliable

wifi, is for fans to download apps that effectively turn their phones into mappable pixels. "You become part of the designer's plan to illuminate the stadium," says Winkler. "In the old days it was like a proscenium theatre. At one end was a set and on the set were very small people. We had beautiful scenery, lighting and video so everyone

could see but it was still a very distant experience. It's still passive consumption. I think technology will move more towards your active input into the show."

Winkler is visibly thrilled by this possibility. Concert designers are inspiring people to spend time with because they're in the business of joy and wonder. Every sketch, every detail, goes towards maximising communal pleasure on a grand scale.

"At its best, a stadium concert tour can behave like a touring outdoor cathedral," says Devlin. "A place for people to congregate and unite as they recite together the words and music that they know by heart. I worked on concerts that followed the Manchester bombing and the Grenfell fire. It became clear on the night that people valued the opportunity to experience the catharsis of mass compassion through music."

Unlike a cathedral, a tour is transient. Even the most elaborate set will one day be broken up, never to be seen again. Most fans will only see it once. It is all the more powerful because it is fleeting.

"You can't rewind it," says Buckley. "You've got to be present. You've got to be on that journey with everybody in that room." She waves her hand like a magician. "If you miss it, it's gone."

## PIGS WILL FLY... AND THE REST

### Behind the scenes at the most extravagant concerts



#### ROBBIE WILLIAMS *Swings Both Ways Live*, 2014

Mark Cuniffe: "Act one was a hotel, then an opera house, then it became a ship. I added to the concept with chandeliers that were also lighting pieces. Robbie loved the idea. There's an interval of 15 minutes, the curtain comes up again and they're all on the 'good ship Robbie'. It was absolutely stunning and tourable and cost-effective. All those boxes ticked."



#### COLDPLAY *Mylo Xyloto*, 2011-2012

Misty Buckley: "Chris [Martin] wanted to bring together a handmade quality with the latest technology. The band had written this comic – a love story about two planets – and wanted to do their own artwork, so we set up a workshop. It became this immersive world: Mylo's world. We had this painterly, textural canvas and the wristbands were the latest technology: the perfect combination Chris was looking for."



#### THE XX *I See You*, 2017

Willo Perron: "You'd never think of The xx as an arena act, so the first challenge was: how do you not jump over them with the production but still have one that's big enough to fit the room? The next challenge was: how do you do minimalism so that it feels human and not cold and stark? It's meant to be a fluid thing; all the movements fluid, all the lighting fluid. It's a big show that feels small at the same time."



#### BEYONCÉ *Formation*, 2016

Es Devlin: "Beyoncé needed to communicate the intimate poetry of *Lemonade* at a scale that manifested its powerful agitprop too. The square form looked simple but involved every department – video, lighting, automation and staging – all occupying the same area within the monolith. It was designed to work with that tension between stadium-scale superheroine and human-scale woman throughout the show."



#### U2 *The Joshua Tree*, 2017

Ric Lipson: "We did a one-off show in San Francisco last October and built a 100-foot wide video slab with lights. It looked cool and simple. So we took the theme of this billboard, made it wider, curved the screen and rigged the PA higher to make a really clean statement. We have the largest touring video screen ever and it's so clear, you can't believe what you're seeing."

REX GETTY; SHASHI DANNY/NORTH ALEX/ANNE WATKINS/NEWS.COM; COURTESY MARK CUNIFFE