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IN THIS ISSUE:

Venue: Kaohsiung Center, Taiwan
The world's biggest arts centre

Tech Focus: Yamaha's Rivage
The PM7 and PM10 reviewed

Venue: Hull's Bonus Arena
Exploring the new venue

The 1975

Live at the O2 Arena



COMPANY PROFILE: VR START-UP PREEVUE • LIGHTING LANDMARKS: THE ST LOUIS ARCH
VIDEO: RAVENNA MONUMENTS COME TO LIFE • TECHNICAL: VECTORWORKS 2019 REVIEWED
COMPANY PROFILE: EQUIPSON • IN PROFILE: LD, JOSHUA CUTTS - AND MUCH MORE ...

plasma media

The 1975:

A Brief Inquiry

Sarah Rushton-Read reports
on the production behind
The 1975's smartphone-friendly arena tour...

From the moment The 1975 hit the road for its latest album campaign, *A Brief Inquiry Into Online Relationships*, both the mainstream and music press, exploded with positive editorial and headlines describing the stunning stage design.

Created by Tobias Rylander, in close collaboration with The 1975's enigmatic front-man, Matthew Healy, the design's portrait orientations makes it supremely seductive for the band's smartphone-wielding, Instagram-snapping fans, while its sharply architectural shapes, carved out by video, deliver a stunning image from every possible viewing angle.

For a 1975 fan the live show is the ultimate gift; for The 1975 it is a playground, a physical manifestation of Matt Healy's pop star persona and a platform for a heartfelt conversation with their tribe.

There is a rare equality between the visual and sonic elements of The 1975's latest tour design. Carefully crafted from LED video screens, judiciously chosen lighting fixtures and an effective PA, it is the band and its message that is up front and present, not the technology.

The entire visual element is driven by video, while sound is packed with environmental effects that complement the slow movement of the heavy set pieces, as a foley artist would enhance a film, you don't know it's there until you know.

SPACES WITHIN SPACES, IDEAS WITHIN IDEAS

Deliciously photogenic, the design is crammed with clever, perspective-bending gags and huge dynamic scenic elements, beautifully choreographed to interrelate, both in terms of the content they broadcast and in the way they interact in three dimensional space. As eclectic as the musical style of the band's latest album, the design seems to represent a coming-of-age, a shift into something more mature as much as it feels like a multi-sensory art exhibition.

Three large, rectangular LED frames hang at the rear and either side of the stage, while three imposing video screen clad cubes hang above. The 1975's ubiquitous, rectangular logo looms, ever present, but this time it has acquired a dynamic weight, depth and detail it never had before.

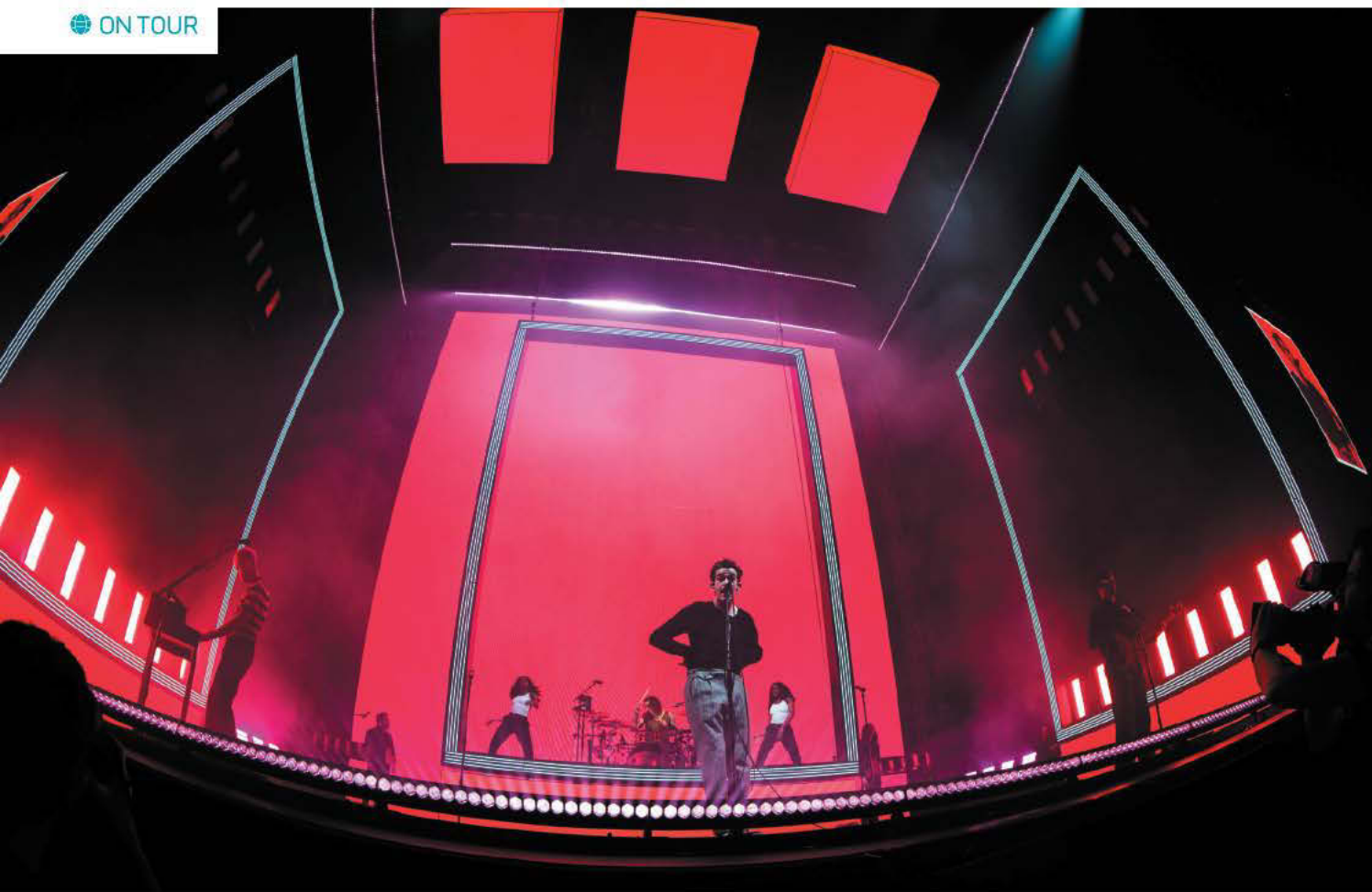
Video-mapped GLP X4 bars and SGM Q-10 fixtures carve up the stage and reach out into the haze-filled auditorium to produce huge cathedral-like walls of saturated colour and light. The portrait-configured WinVision Air 9mm IMAG screens are as much a part of the design as the stage, and video content from the main screen (also WVAir 9mm) blends seamlessly with the live camera feeds of the band.

Rylander is a master at blurring the boundaries between pixels and lights. The narratives are complex yet cohesive; his shows are circular and all content - including the band and its music - is intertwined.

"It's about the weight of technology on youth culture, screen addiction and phone swiping," says Rylander. "We wanted a design that was influenced by the digital media the band are referencing. It's about breaking down barriers, smashing through the fourth wall, coming out of the digital and into the real world and trying to find a truth."

"Matty is all about giving the hardcore fan little visual gemstones and nuggets of information, hidden in The 1975's content. He does it with album artwork, social media campaigns, music videos, everything. They all have little details that the fans will figure out. He knows what people want to see, but the show design challenges them to think again and see things in a different light."

The last tour pioneered the idea of a 'social media ready' show, and this time Rylander has honed the concept: "I spent a lot of time inside the 3D model, imagining the



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- Tobias Rylander

different Insta-stories that would come out. It had to be camera-friendly from any angle and immediately recognisable as The 1975."

Video content creator for the show Kerstin Hovland of Electronic Countermeasures elaborates: "The 1975 has a sophisticated marketing campaign and a well-established visual language. There was much to digest to ensure a cohesive picture, not just on stage but also in line with the band's other creative output. Their mission is to build an alternative reality around the band's persona. Our job is to create the pixel language and environment they perform in. Fans then take pictures and reflect it back via social media, so the show has to look good from all angles."

LED video and lighting fixtures are both a source of light and a mapped surface, constantly challenging the audiences' sense of perspective with negative and positive space: "All the frames and 3D video surfaces are physical objects that can either cast dramatic shadows or be turned off," explains Rylander. "We use shadows, contrast and brightness to create negative space, confusing the audiences' sense of scale and perspective."

Hovland adds: "We don't treat screens as rectangles of light or flat surfaces. To us, each surface represents an infinite space in which we can build another multi-dimensional world, it's infinite space."

DESIGN THINKING

Healy and Rylander spend a lot of time thinking about the show's live environment. Rylander is part of the creative process from the outset, not simply an add-on when the album is in the bag. "Some of our ideas seemed mad at first, but most of them have become real," Rylander laughs. "Once we have agreed the canvas for the show, we storyboard the narrative and scope out the different looks for each song. At the same time, we work with Kerstin and her team to create the video building blocks. I then work closely with lighting director and programmer Darren Purves, and video programmer Morgan Brown, in a pre-vis studio to build the lighting, camera, video, scenic automation and transitions for each song."

"Tobias doesn't programme in a linear way," explains Darren Purves. "He deconstructs the song, picking out sounds or lyrics he wants to highlight. We'll build a cue stack and then we'll build some buttons that work with particular sounds. Once the video elements are finished and uploaded, we timecode content to each song. It is an intricate but exciting way to work."

Video programmer Morgan Brown adds: "Tobias is really good at holding the design concept and not going off on a tangent. We're working with roughly 1,100 pieces of content, stitching them together to synchronise with live camera feeds, across both screens and fixtures. We mix and



blend content inside Green Hippo Taiga+ servers, almost as if they are a lighting fixture with infinite gobos and colour changing ability. We then layer that with the onboard effects, of which there are many."

Rylander says he is allergic to 'eye candy'. "I can't bear walls of fixtures, gobos and constantly flashing lights," he says. "We work closely with the music. It's about the feel of the song, as opposed to it being cue after cue on every musical hit. We programme lots of little tinkles on executors and buttons, every subtle hand move is recorded to timecode."

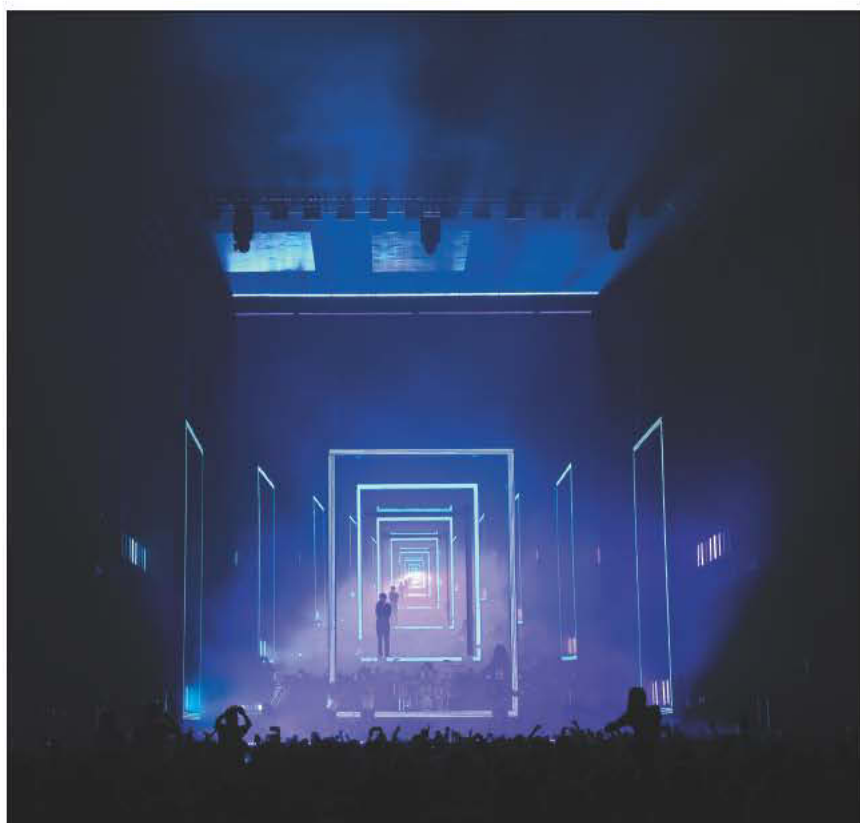
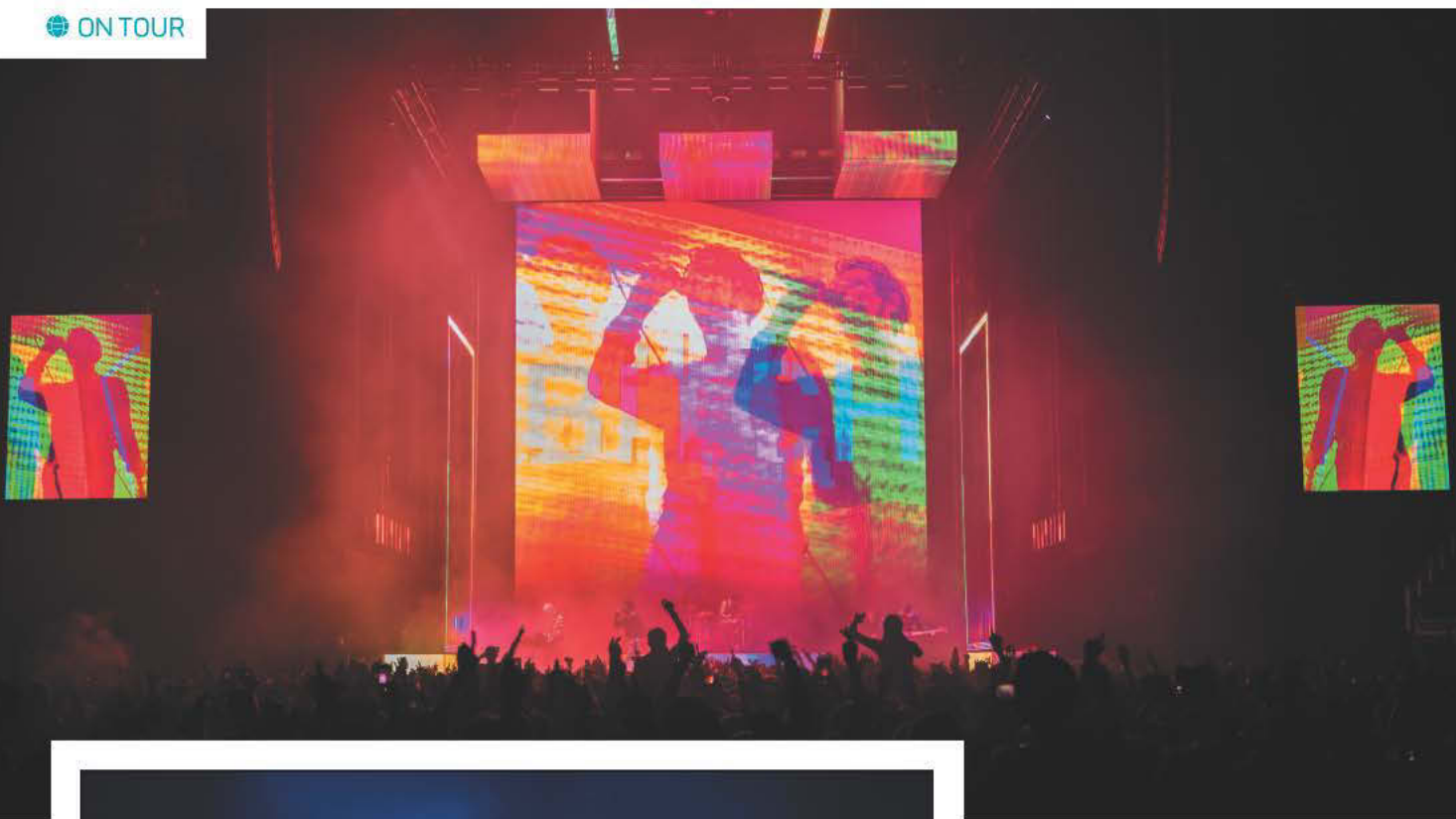
"We use the Bitmapper function in the MA console to send the video to the lighting fixtures," Purves continues. "Kerstin renders copies of the main screen video content at a lower resolution, we then line it up with timecode so it matches up with what is on the main screen. So, although video is controlling the lighting fixtures, it's not coming directly from the media server."

THE SOUND

In terms of live audio, the band works as proactively with their sound department as they do with their visuals team. FOH engineer Jay Rigby says: "Matty and drummer George Daniel both engineer and produce their own albums. They know exactly how they should sound live and they have the technical expertise to communicate that effectively. The band are all phenomenal musicians and hence very rewarding to mix."



Rigby is a purist. For the band's last tour he took out an analogue classic, a Midas XL4. "I loved it. For me it's still the best sounding console and it makes mixing more fun. The 1975 are basically drums, bass and two guitars, however, this time, the channel list expanded so I switched to a Solid State Logic L500. It's the first digital console I've used that really sounds like an XL4!"



- ➔ Facing page, top row, L-R: Tobias Rylander, production designer; Jay Rigby, FOH engineer; Dermot Lynch, production manager
- ➔ Middle row, L-R: François Pare, monitor engineer; James Valpy, camera director; Simon Lawrence, head rigger
- ➔ Bottom row, L-R: Jack Dunnett, stage manager; Josh Barnes, lighting crew chief; Willow Findlay, comms / production assistant

Rigby has used rental outfit Eighth Day Sound for The 1975 for the past seven years. This time, the PA he specified was the brand new KSL system, from the d&b SL-Series. Far from being an eyesore, the neat new d&b KSL PA deliberately frames the portrait set.

"With The 1975, the fans hang on every word Matty sings," explains Rigby. "Nowadays, most PA systems are great, but the KSL is stunning! Total clarity on the vocal, great dispersion. It's also scalable. We bounce into different sized venues on an almost daily basis and it sounds great in all of them."

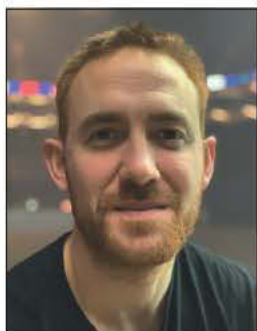
PA tech Dan Bluhm and monitor tech, Eoin Collins, both from Eighth Day Sound, toured with Rigby on the last album cycle and, much to Rigby's delight, they're back. "Dan and Eoin are the backbone of what monitor engineer François Pare and I do. Our collective relationship means we can line-check the whole 64 channel show in about two minutes!"

Over on monitors, Pare is mixing on a DiGiCo SD5. He comments: "Everybody wants a general mix of everything, with themselves a bit louder. The band are on in-ears, they're not unusual in the kind of mixes they like. Production has its own mix, as do the dancers, backline and FOH. I hover between around 16 and 20 mixes of wireless IEM systems. I've also got some hard-wire mixes for George the drummer, the playback guy and Darren, the lighting director."

Pare says he has learned a lot working with The 1975 - firstly, that consistency is key. "It's my job to deliver the same thing every day, so when your artist arrives on stage, nothing feels different or out of place. I'm meticulous, the mic heights and angles have to be exactly the same, every day."

In-ears are Roxannes from Jerry Harvey Audio. "They have been a game changer," says Pare. "Ross the bass player had them first and said he was blown away at the difference. He convinced everyone to make the switch instantly. The stereo image is wider. Musicians like a lot of bottom end, sparkly top and a bit of scoop in the middle, and these are just really musical."

Complementing the in-ear mix are four d&b B22 subs on the side of the stage so



the band can feel the sound. Audience mics also play an important role, says Pare. "For Matty, it's important to have audience in his mix, sometimes at full tilt - it enhances his connection with the fans. I pay a lot of attention to Matty; if he points the mic into the audience, he has to hear them coming back."

FROM CONCEPT TO CONCERT

The success of a precision show design like this one relies on an invested

production team who care about the show and make it their mission to honour the values of the design, not just for the first two weeks but every show for the next two years.

Production manager Dermot Lynch started working with The 1975 on the second album campaign. "Tobias is an exacting designer, honouring his concept demands a skilled and collaborative team. Also, we don't have defined A and B



CREW CREDITS

PRODUCTION TEAM

Dermot Lynch, production manager
Cherie Breau, production coordinator
Willow Findlay, comms / production assistant
Jack Dunnett, stage manager
Simon Lawrence, head rigger
Phil Taylor, rigging / mother grid
Jimmy Johnson, Kinesys
Sam Jackson, Kinesys

LIGHTING

Darren Purves, programmer
Josh Barnes, lighting crew chief
Ian McCarthy, lighting
Craig Hancock, dimmers
Hadyr Williams, lighting
Martin Golding, lighting

VIDEO

Ed Lawlor, video engineer / crew chief
James Valpy, camera director
Jak Gambino, LED
Luke Butler, LED
Conor Downy, LED
Fionn Finne, LED
Lena Wynants, camera supervisor
Graham Lambkin
Ben Clarkson

SET

Dale Small
Ryan Lucas
Conor Catterall
Jonathan Klose

BACKLINE

Matt Vangasbeck, guitar tech
Matt Tagliaferro, bass and guitar tech
Steve Rodd, keys / playback
Tom Wood, drums

AUDIO

Jay Rigby, FOH
François Pare, monitors
Eoin Collins, stage tech
Dan Blum, FOH tech
Declan Povey, PA
Jay Butler, PA



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Left: The show design's portrait orientation makes it ideal for the band's smartphone-wielding fans

"I have to be able to speak to the person at the back of the arena, the live presentation has to scale to that..."

- Matt Healy

shows, our mission is to give the fans as much as we can in each venue."

Head rigger Simon Lawrence agrees: "Tobias always inspires me to find the best solution, because the results he achieves are so stunning. His design relies on precision rigging. We're down to 50mm clearance on trusses. Some of the static elements have to be positioned in fixed locations on the mother grid. It's not a particularly heavy show, but it's designed in portrait so our loads are concentrated in a smaller area over the stage. Tobias is a stickler for clean lines, so all cable has to be out of sight. Although the perfect solution is still in development, we use automated cable reels for the tracking frame upstage and Scan Rig's chain sliders for the large video cubes in the roof."

Safety is a priority, and Lawrence works towards the PL and SIL (Safety Integrity Level) ratings. "Everything that is flown

will have been weighed in rehearsals. I then use the BroadWeigh dynamic wireless load monitoring system with the new 'Twist Link', which saves some time. Three safety spotters, plus myself and lighting crew chief, Josh Barnes, ensure the band is safe during live automation," Lawrence explains. "There are a number of Deadman Handles and emergency E-Stops around the stage. If any member of the crew feels there's an emergency, they can stop the automation. There's no comeback."

For Josh Barnes, the challenges are equally pressing: "We have 12-metre-high vertical towers of GLP X4 Bars and SGM Q-10 strobes either side of the back wall video screen. They have to line up perfectly. If a few lights are off angle, especially if they move in unison, the impact would be lost. We wanted to avoid spending lots of time aligning fixtures, so we designed custom-made standoffs that hold any fixture at precisely 90 degrees to the truss. In addition, there were no touring trusses that could take the SGM Q-10s, especially as they had to be rigged in portrait, so we made something ourselves. We've also introduced infrared camera tracking for the Kinesys system, which saves the safety spotters having to use torches and enables Kinesys operator, Jimmy Johnson, to see clearly, whether the lights are flashing or it's a complete blackout."

With over 800 LED panels, many in custom set pieces, video crew chief Ed Lawlor and his team have a big task: "Nothing here is done the easy way - we have gone to great lengths to achieve the highest quality LED finish we can, staying true to the design. It's a long day's work, but I'm lucky to have a great video crew - everyone is proud of the show and goes the extra mile to keep it looking its best."

Joining the tour this year is camera director James Valpy: "Tobias wants hero shots of Matty, but the show is not choreographed and the band move all over the stage - amazing for the fans, but challenging for the camera operators!"

IMAG is in portrait, the cameras shoot in landscape so it took time to find the sense of the image. "Camera work has to be close-up to ensure a connection between the band and the audience," continues Valpy. "We use a lot of haze, which looks fantastic, but it can be a challenge for cameras to cut through." Lawlor confirms: "It's a smoky show with extreme light levels - which we don't want to compromise, so shading the cameras is a difficult task. The equipment is definitely working at its limits!"

It's clear that production manager Lynch gives every member of his team the level of professional respect and autonomy they need to carry out their jobs and go that extra mile when required.

"We have 43 in the touring crew," explains stage manager Jack Dunnett. "We are all very proud to be working on this tour, we treat it as if it were an art installation - it is a precision operation. Big tours like this can often be segregated by department, but that just doesn't happen on this one. We have a proactive team."

With a remarkably low ticket price of just £30-40 for an arena show, it's clear The 1975 do not balance the budget for their live productions purely on the box office takings. Instead, the artistic ambition and high production values of their live show is part of a 360° offering the band creates for its fans. As Healy says: "I have to be able to speak to the person at the back of the arena, the live presentation has to scale to that. I think the thing I'm most proud of about this show is that it's still fan-led. The set, the shapes, the reference to the video. It wasn't about us making our band bigger, it's about extending our relationship with our fans. That's what we spend the money on." ●



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