

Unusual Rigging's work is familiar to audiences at productions such as the National Theatre's 2018 staging of *War Horse*

It's SHOW TIME!

With its traditional market in the entertainments industry in Covid-hibernation, one of the world's leading rigging specialists has set its sights on construction.

David Taylor reports

If you're having a night out at a big show in London's West End, you're probably not thinking too much about work. With any luck, you'll be too absorbed by the drama, the spectacle and the magic that is showbiz.

You might, however, briefly wonder just how Aladdin manages to fly on his magic carpet, or how that chandelier in *Phantom of the Opera* can come crashing down every night without killing anyone on stage.

The answer is 'rigging' or, more accurately, the aptly-named Unusual Rigging, a specialist contractor based in Northampton.

Theatre rigging is an old trade, but over the past twenty or thirty years, the demand for increasingly mind-boggling effects has meant that this sort of rigging has become more and more complex and technical.

Unusual Rigging is the acknowledged industry leader; in fact the company's founder, Alan Jacobi, is widely credited with having single-handedly created the modern rigging industry in response to increasingly extravagant musicals, rock concerts and outdoor events.



The London 2012 Olympic spectacular was provided by Unusual Rigging

In fact, Unusual Rigging can put its name to some of the most audacious rigging projects undertaken anywhere in the world, and not just theatreland. The company has provided rigging services for any number of major events, including the Olympics – in London, Sochi, Rio and Pyeong Chang. And work was nearing completion on sites in Tokyo for the 2020 Summer Olympics when the Covid-19 pandemic took hold.

And that pandemic has proved a watershed for the company.

There are rare occasions when Unusual Rigging's unique capabilities are called upon by contractors in the construction industry. But construction generally prefers to use standard, tried-and-tested methods wherever possible and Unusual Rigging has hitherto felt no compulsion to pursue work in construction with any vigour.

With the outbreak of Covid-19, theatres, festivals, concert halls – and of course, sporting events including the Tokyo Olympics – pulled down the shutters. As Steve Porter, director and head of production rigging at the company, puts it: "It was like someone just switched off the lights" and Unusual Rigging went from having to turn away business to having no business at all.

But while the entertainments industry shut down, construction carried on – first in dribs and drabs, but before long on a more sustainable level.

And now, with all the theatres still closed and another national lockdown announced in the UK, construction is one market where Unusual Rigging can expect to find an outlet for its services.

"We're not a name synonymous with construction," admits Porter, "but our plans to diversify aren't a completely knee-jerk reaction to the Covid crisis either."

"Some of the projects we're most proud of have seen us work with the likes of Mace, Network Rail, BW Workplace Experts and Glenn Howells architects and we were the main contractor for the construction of Garsington Opera Pavilion in 2020.

"We strongly believe that as all creative industries look to economise as a result of the pandemic, we can bring truly innovative and cost-effective solutions to the industry," he says.

Much of Unusual's work involves dynamic installations – suspended loads designed to move. In the construction industry, people generally prefer things to move as little as possible, and preferably stay put once they're off the ground.

"We're all about lift-and-shift," says Porter. "Fundamentally, rigging is about installing equipment to lift things up either permanently or temporarily." And while that all sounds fairly straightforward, Unusual's work is seldom routine.



Last year's Regent Street Christmas lights

ALAN JACOBI



Alan Jacobi has been credited with having 'revolutionised the way theatre works' with his spectacular feats of engineering.

Born in Southampton in 1953, the son of a nuclear scientist, Jacobi left school with no qualifications and got a job as a lighting assistant at Oxford Playhouse before moving to London to join the National Theatre at the Old Vic.

In 1983 he set up Unusual Rigging, expanding after a few years into production for large-scale events. His first major triumph in this field was to mastermind the UK's 50th Anniversary VE Day commemorations in 1995.

Since then Unusual has been the go-to specialist for any major extravaganza: from the Golden Jubilee celebrations in 2002 to *The Sultan's Elephant*, a large-scale outdoor free spectacle produced by French company Royal de Luxe in 2006, featuring a giant mechanical elephant.

Jacobi was made a Lieutenant of the Royal Victorian Order (LVO) in 2002 in recognition of his work on the Jubilee celebrations.

On 13th April 2020, just a few weeks after the Covid-19 lockdown was announced, Alan Jacobi died, aged 67, following a long illness.

His son, Unusual Rigging's MD Tom Harper, said: "Alan, AJ or the 'Old Man' as we all knew him was adored and respected by so many... His mark upon the industry was massive, through his charisma and can-do attitude, his extraordinary work ethic, occasional bloody-mindedness and an ability to solve any problems that arose, he took Unusual Rigging to where it is today – leading the field internationally in entertainment rigging and engineering."

As the company name clearly declares, Unusual Rigging's unique selling-point is its penchant for finding radically new and innovative ways of doing things. And while that's exactly the sort of approach that would appeal to a theatre director or festival producer, it's quite likely to make many a construction project manager extremely nervous.

Tom Harper, Unusual's managing director and son of founder Alan Jacobi, explains that the events industry and construction have a very different set of expectations. "Construction is very admin-heavy, it's also more risk-averse than events," he says. This often means that when Unusual is working on a construction project, it finds itself following a method statement prepared by the contractor or engineer with little scope for exercising its customary flair for innovation.

This was especially evident on a recent contract for a leading tier-one contractor in London: "The amount of scrutiny our riggers were subjected to was phenomenal. We're not used to that level of scrutiny," comments Harper.

Although the use of rigging in construction is quite widespread, it's done very differently from the way Unusual is used to operating. "We've got a mountain of stock of wire rope, chain hoists, slings – you name it – probably more than any other company in the country, I would guess," says Porter. "But there are other companies that also hire all this equipment out. Primarily, though, they do more 'dry' hire than anything else whereas we do dry hire or we can install and maintain anything that we install."

In construction, specialist hirers will supply all the kit needed for a rigging job, but the installation and operation of the equipment is usually done by the customer – a contractor whose core business isn't rigging.

"Anybody can ring up a lifting-gear hirer and rent a couple of chain blocks or electric hoists off them – but being able to use them properly and install them quickly and efficiently – that's a different matter," says Porter.

"I hope I'm not speaking out of turn, but in construction some of the things we see going on – it's terrible. There's so much inefficiency. I can't believe the amount of time it takes some people to do something that we'd consider a really simple task if planned properly," he adds.

Porter believes that the intelligent use of rigging techniques could offer a far better alternative

to some of the established methods currently used. "Why would you want to fill a building with scaffolding when you could hang a platform from the roof?" he asks. "If you did it our way, the people on the floor can carry on working and you kill two birds with one stone."

This is exactly what Unusual did for Mace at Birmingham New Street station back in 2016 (see box) and it's what the company is currently doing at the Grade I-listed Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, which is undergoing a major £45m refurbishment.

"Old theatres have got a big issue with all that ornate plaster crumbling and falling off the ceilings. But we can install platforms beneath the ceiling so that the plasterers can do their plastering and gilding and stuff – and you could still have performances going on in the evenings," declares Porter.

"The alternative is you fill the auditorium with scaffolding and shut the theatre for weeks – take out all the seating – it's just a nightmare." The irony, of course, is that the Theatre Royal has indeed been closed since March, though for completely different reasons.

With Covid-19 putting a block on Unusual Rigging's customary source of work, construction is looking like an increasingly important market for the company. Until March 2020, Unusual's services were in such high demand that the company never felt the need to proactively woo clients in construction.

Porter admits that the company needs to network more actively and forge better links with architects, designers and contractors. "It's really a case of who you know as much as anything, which is kind of how it works in our industry anyway," he says.

Nevertheless, with its expertise and its ability to offer a bespoke turnkey service – from design to installation and execution – Unusual Rigging feels it has a strong proposition to offer construction clients.

"We have highly qualified staff, we're fully compliant with all the health & safety and conform to all the codes of practice for the industry," says Harper. "We're used to doing extreme jobs professionally – like making a flying carpet fly: how do you do that and maintain the required level of health & safety? Well that's the sort of challenge that really turns us on," he says.

"If we can take that ethos into a new sector, the sky's the limit." ■



Unusual worked with HTC Tower Cranes and Shepherd Construction on the new biofuel eco-store at Drax power station

SUSPENDED ANIMATION

One of Unusual Rigging's most notable construction jobs was the installation of a suspended platform beneath the roof of Birmingham New Street station for contractor Mace in 2016.

"Mace was looking for a solution which allowed construction workers at the Grand Central Shopping Centre to work on the ETFE atrium roof. We've been building and installing temporary working platforms in theatres for years, allowing the show to go on while works take place overhead," says Unusual director Steve Porter.

The construction workers at New Street had installed the atrium's steel structure and demolished two levels of the existing building but needed access to the roof to install the finishes.

The solution was a pair of 40m x 8m platforms, each comprising a truss framework, aluminium joists and a plywood deck. The platforms were built at Unusual's workshop in Northampton and installed in Birmingham in just ten days.

"Traditionally, atriums are installed 'top down' and from a birdcage scaffold," says Colin Harwood, Mace's temporary works co-ordinator. "The planner for the atrium had estimated that a scaffold providing the same platform area at the level required would have taken ten weeks for installation and dismantling, so Unusual's solution was extremely time-efficient."

"The platform level also needed to be at different heights for different trades, so a lightweight platform with motorised hoists gave a further benefit in comparison to the traditional scaffolding systems."

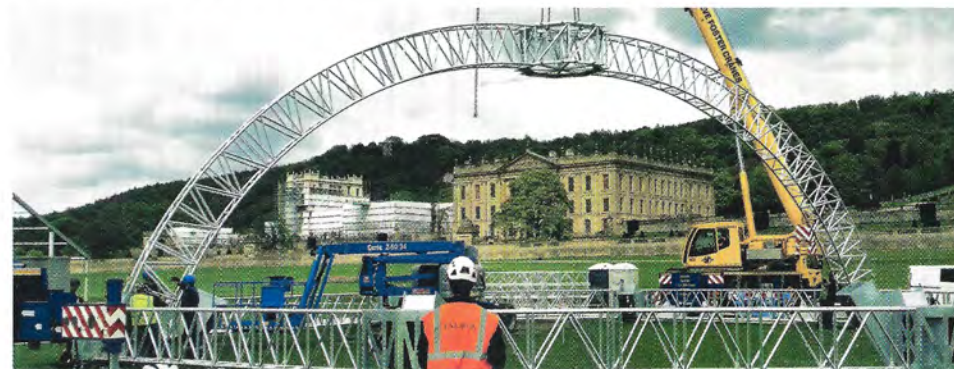
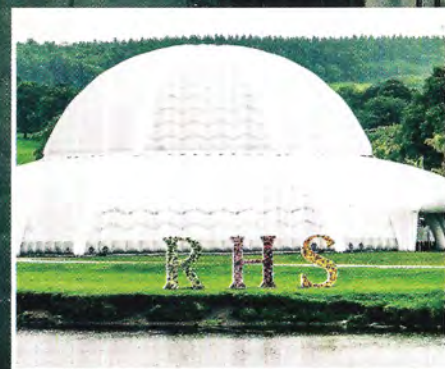
"Lightweight was the key word for us," continues Harwood. "By not having legs supported off the concourse floor level, it enabled concurrent activity of flooring below the platform. The biggest challenge on this job had always been programme certainty. Unusual Rigging's time estimates for the installation of the atrium platforms were accurate, which enabled the follow-on trades to be able to plan their deliveries and installation sequences effectively."

Network Rail has a great many stations up and down the country where roofs are to be cleaned or maintained or glazing is to be replaced, observes Harwood: "A system similar to the one adopted at Birmingham New Street Station could just as easily be used if the structure is strong enough."

Unusual Rigging built and installed the two suspended work platforms to allow workers reach the atrium roof



Below, and left: Unusual Rigging designed, built and installed an inflatable replica of Paxton's Great Conservatory for the Royal Horticultural Society's Chatsworth Flower Show in 2017



Unusual Rigging acted as theatre consultant, designer and installer for all the technical equipment at English National Ballet's new City Island headquarters in east London, completed last year