



Designer Q&A: Mitchell Fenton on *Sound of the Silk Road* in Xi'an, China

Ever wonder what it's like working on an international theatrical production emerging from COVID-19 pandemic - with a global team ranging from New York to China? We talked to associate lighting designer Mitchell Fenton to learn more about his work with Tony Award-winning Lighting Designer Ken Billington on [Sound of the Silk Road](#) in Xi'an, China, produced by Nederlander Worldwide, Shaanxi Tourism Group (STG), which opened on Friday, July 23, 2021. The show was rehearsed at the Ankang Theatre, opened at the Opera House at [Shaanxi Grand Theatre](#), and will be permanently installed from mid 2022 on in the Silk Road Paradise Theme Park.



Sound of the Silk Road ([video here](#))

Q&A:

City Theatrical (CTI): Tell us about the show. Is it a new production? What is it about?

Mitchell Fenton (MF): *Sound of the Silk Road* is an original show that has been in the making for almost four years. This Broadway-style musical was written in English, then translated and performed in Mandarin. It is a fictional story that follows a Chinese teenager named Joey, who was raised in the West and accidentally time travels back to the Han Dynasty 2000 years ago. Joey tries to find his way home but accidentally drifts into danger.

CTI: Where can the show be seen?

MF: We started technical rehearsals in Ankang, China. After two performances in Ankang, we transferred the show to the Opera House at Shaanxi Grand Theatre in Xi'an, which is where we opened the show on July 23, 2021. After a short run, the show will be stored until mid 2022. We will install it permanently into a purpose-built theatre inside a new Chinese theme park called Silk Road Paradise. It is there that the show will run indefinitely.

CTI: What was the timeline for designing the show?

MF: Ken was contacted September 2018. Final Designs October 2020. Quarantine April 26, 2021 - May 24, 2021. Load in May 24, 2021. Tech June 17, 2021. Preview July 8, 2021 in Ankang, load out and load in to Xi'an July 10, 2021. Open July 23, 2021. China has continued to put on shows through the pandemic in cities that are COVID-free.

(Continued on page 2)

CTI: What was your design process like? Was there any global coordination?

MF: The initial design process was very similar to any other international process. There were weekly production calls with New York and China. Once we got into the theatre, we had two live feeds that anyone involved could access from around the world. We also had a digital clear com system, such that the members of the lighting design team could work from NYC, and video design team members could work from Germany.

The production was built in China and about 80% of the lighting rig was sourced and purchased locally. All the lights were purchased from Golden Sea, Silver Star and Ayrton, the control system is from MA lighting. The lighting design team is all from New York, the rest of the lighting team is made up of local professionals from China.



The Journey featuring the Bandleader, his musicians and their camel in *Sound of the Silk Road*

CTI: Did any local COVID-19 protocols affect your design process?

MF: China is COVID-free. There was one outbreak in China during our stay but it was in another city and did not affect us. There were still many COVID protocols we had to adhere to before departing the USA and when we got to China. COVID makes the process longer as we had to arrive in China earlier to quarantine.

CTI: Do you have a favorite lighting moment?

MF: We all enjoyed the song “Journey” where one of the characters in the show embarks on a journey back to the marketplace with his musicians. The combination and collaboration between video and lighting made this a beautiful production number. During the number, the video design incorporates a downstage hologauze and an upstage rear projection screen to show the journey that the Bandleader, his musicians and their camel take. (Shown in the photo above.)

CTI: Were there any lighting challenges you were able to overcome?

MF: There are many lighting challenges that come with mounting a locally produced and built Chinese musical. Locally produced musicals to this scale are not common in China, most people including vendors had never seen a show like this in China that was locally built, produced and executed. Everybody took on the challenge and the production has been a major success with Chinese audiences.

CTI: What lighting looks did QolorPIX Pixel Controlled LED Tape and Controller help you achieve?

MF: QolorPIX was mounted inside a set piece called the Armillary Sphere. The QolorPIX tape was essential in creating a time travel sequence that was dynamic and magical. Qolorpix was easy to work with and program, we were able to program our desired effect quite fast. It was important we used an LED pixel tape product that worked for the design and that was also robust as this particular piece of scenery that the QolorPIX is in spins and moves throughout the show.

CTI: Are there any folks to shout out for helping bring this show to life on stage?

MF: Our local crew in China went above and beyond to help us. Working in a foreign country with a language barrier is extremely difficult. Our Chinese-based production team helped us navigate the local expectations and procedures. We are very grateful for their help, as well as for our programmer Jackson Miller.

For more information on Mitchell Fenton, visit: mitchfentonld.com

For more information on Ken Billington Associates, Inc., visit: kbany.com