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Unconventional Choices For DNC

Oct 31, 2012 7:00 PM, By Michael S. Eddy



© Democratic National Convention Committee

A staple of American politics, the Democratic and Republican National Conventions give each party an opportunity to present its candidate in an engaging environment. This year, both conventions showcased production designs that had strong video elements and also brought unconventional twists to the traditional convention look.

The Democratic National Convention at the Time Warner Cable Arena in Charlotte, NC, took place from September 4–6, featuring incumbent President Barack Obama. After their well-received 2008 convention, the Democrats again turned to executive producer Ricky Kirshner of [RK Productions](http://www.kirshnerevents.com/) (<http://www.kirshnerevents.com/>). “I think from a producing point of view, it always starts with the design,” explains Kirshner. “At the end of the day, most people are watching to see the speeches, and they care about the content of those speeches. We’re there to support that and present it in an engaging manner. We tried to keep it just that simple.”

In a departure from convention designs of the past, production designer Bruce Rodgers of [Tribe, Inc](http://www.tribedesign.net/) (<http://www.tribedesign.net/>) and the production team chose to put the podium stage in the end goal area of the arena rather than at the traditional centerline location. “The Charlotte arena architecturally really worked for the end stage arrangement,” says Rodgers. “It just looked right and felt better. It got the delegates a lot closer, so there was a great energy in the space.”

Of his design approach, Rodgers says he wanted to keep it stylish and modern, beautiful yet simple. “I decided go with form following function,” he says. “I knew functionally it was important to have a wide shot that looked great and was impactful. We also needed a beautiful tight close-up shot—the classic head-to-toe shot with the President standing behind the lectern—and I wanted a strong reverse shot.” He placed the lectern very far downstage for good reverse angles from the cameras on top of the backing wall. “That angle was a chance to see the speakers in a way that felt really honest,” he adds. “You saw their view out over the delegates; you connected with them; it was personal.”

Rodgers’ “simple” set was actually technically quite complex, as he designed it to have a curving vertical feel. “I wanted the stage to be open but also have a strength and a hopefulness that the height gave it,” he says. “I felt a cylindrical shape would be powerful but knew we couldn’t do all curved LED screens, so the header walls at the top of the set and the main backing wall at the bottom were curved, creating the illusion that the whole set was curved, even though the center I-Mag screen and the two tall side verticals were flat.”

The main stage walls were convex, but the horizon walls that reached 80’ in either direction from the stage were concave, giving opposing curvatures. “It looked very dynamic, both on camera and in the arena, from varying angles because of the play of depth it created,” adds Rodgers. The set walls were 90% video screens with a mix of resolutions. The 42’x12’ backing wall behind the lectern used [Barco](http://www.barco.com/en/) (<http://www.barco.com/en/>) NX4 4mm LED tiles, while the hero wall I-Mag screen and the two side I-Mag screens were [VER](http://www.verrents.com/) (<http://www.verrents.com/>) BR7 7mm LED tiles.

[WinVision](http://www.verrents.com/products/led/creative-led/winvision/) (<http://www.verrents.com/products/led/creative-led/winvision/>) 9.375mm LED product was used for the vertical sides, the SR and SL walls, and the long horizon walls. “Part of the curving illusion was created due to all these resolution changes,” notes Rodgers. “Your eye focused the most on the super hi-res and fell off to the lower res tiles.” [PRG](http://www.prg.com/) (<http://www.prg.com/>) built the entire set and the custom frames, including the curving backing wall frame that required the LED tiles to be deconstructed to be mounted. VER provided the LED and video packages.



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The video playback control, using [Green Hippo Hippotizers \(http://www.green-hippo.com/\)](http://www.green-hippo.com/), came from [Mobius Productions \(http://www.mobius-productions.com/MOBIUS_PRODUCTIONS/MOBIUS_PRODUCTIONS.html\)](http://www.mobius-productions.com/MOBIUS_PRODUCTIONS/MOBIUS_PRODUCTIONS.html). [Kish Rigging \(http://www.kishrigging.com/home/index.asp\)](http://www.kishrigging.com/home/index.asp) handled the entire rigging package. Lighting designers Bob Dickinson and Bob Barnhart of [Full Flood, Inc \(http://fullflood.com/FULL_FLOOD.html\)](http://fullflood.com/FULL_FLOOD.html) spent a lot of time working with the video team on balancing the lighting and the video. “Today’s screens have a capability that far surpasses the needs of an event like this,” says Dickinson. “Once we got the screens level set, we balanced out the rest of the show. In terms of light levels, we wanted to deliver between 60-70fc on the delegate floor as well as on the speakers. Depending what was happening in the arena at a given moment, we manipulated that.”

Dickinson notes the live manner in which the programming process typically goes. “I sit with Ricky Kirshner and Glenn Weiss, the director, and based on what they want done, we are able to be very reactive to it.” The modern TWC Arena was built to maximize sightlines at the shortest distance to the arena floor, but also creates the lighting challenge of very steep mounting positions.

“We wanted to light the floor 360° so that the delegates were well lit, and the press could photograph people anywhere on the arena floor,” says Dickinson. “The problem is that you can’t light people from a 60° angle overhead, so we had to choose our truss positions carefully and still be mindful of the sightline from every seat. We lit the delegates from four directions, allowing pretty much bulletproof coverage.”

For keylighting, Dickinson used followspots. “They are so important that we have backup keys that we use in the case of a failure of a followspot, and we use redundant power sources,” he says. “A followspot is essentially the only tool that can make that throw and can contain—very, very tightly—the spill of the light the way I want.” Of the overall design itself, Dickinson says, “If people were looking at the lighting, something was wrong. There was some lighting for music guests but nothing too big. It was a very straightforward design.”

Kirshner was very proud of the whole team, commenting, “This starts with a small group of us designing it, but none of it could happen without hundreds of people—stagehands, technicians, vendors—that were integral to the success. Everyone deserves a lot of credit; they all worked really,

really hard to make it happen.”

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