



Interview by Alison Shutt, editor of the Prompter with the director, James Last, of the current production BEN HUR

Alison Shutt I am interviewing the man whose job it is to keep all his camels in a line, Director, James Last.

James Last This adaptation of *Ben Hur* is written by Patrick Barlow who also wrote the Olivier and Tony award winning comedy *The 39 Steps*. If you've ever seen that play, then you'll have a bit of an idea of what to expect.

A.S. I wonder how are you going to find enough actors for this extravaganza and its "cast of thousands"?

J.L. We're not talking thousands, exactly. In fact, the cast comprises just four actors. But WHAT a quartet they are! This IS *Ben Hur*, but perhaps not as the cast and crew of the movie knew it. It isn't what you'd call a 'straight' adaptation. It's essentially "a play within a play." (Think Michael Frayn's *Noises Off*, or the mechanicals' performance from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.) We follow a group of four actors (Craig Norendal, Stewart Grant, Cara de Mello, and Ian Quirk), as they stumble through a disaster-strewn performance of *Ben Hur*, running from one calamity to another, trying desperately to keep everything afloat. The tension comes from seeing how the actors deal with each impending disaster.

A.S. Have you experienced any specific challenges while directing this play?

J.L. It's not a gentle comedy, and it does present some unique directing challenges. The play has a manic energy about it which is infectious but can also easily run away with us. The challenge is to control that energy and channel it into a strict rhythm. The audience needs to hear every punchline and each gag needs just the right amount of time before we move on to the next. In short, this play is the living definition of organised chaos. As well as dealing with chariots, Roman galleys, epic on stage sea battles and a troupe of sand dancers, the actors are also constantly changing costume.

A.S. How are the actors managing with these costume changes?

J.L. Most of these are quick changes with only about ten or fifteen seconds during which the actors must transform themselves. If an actor gets longer than thirty seconds to change, that's a luxury! We had to do the blocking at what felt like the speed of light. As performance week came closer, broad brushstrokes were followed by a lot of detailing. The last couple of weeks of rehearsals was the time to tighten, drill and refine each joke, gag and stunt.

A.S. It sounds as though it is incredibly demanding work for your actors?

J.L. It has been physically demanding for the actors whose enthusiasm for the production is manifest. Everyone is giving it everything they have, so I have been trying to pace

rehearsals so that all involved build up stamina for the run without exhausting themselves every night.

A.S. How about the demands on the stage crew?

J.L. As you can imagine, this is a very technically demanding play with almost as much happening backstage as in front of the audience. A lot of plates are spinning at once so careful planning has been key. Technical Director Scott Ashton has spent countless unflappable and patient hours feeding me tea while we plough through mountains of sound cues, and Helen Earl is literally performing miracles in the wardrobe department. So enormous thanks must go to them and to everyone of the less visible, unsung heroes behind the scenes without whom we could never manage.