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Garden Party

Teamwork and preparation save the day at a grand-scale event with unexpected plot twists

By: David Barbour

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aura Healey “does not fit the traditional profile of a Massachusetts governor. Accordingly, her swearing-in celebration won’t be your typical pomp-and-circumstance-filled inaugural ball.” So said Mike Deehan on the Axios website on January 3. Actually, that was putting it

mildly. Healey, a Democrat, made history in November when she became the first woman to reach the state’s highest office and the nation’s first openly lesbian elected governor. With Lieutenant Governor Kim Driscoll onboard, her administration marks the first instance in which women have held the number one and two positions in

All photos: Matt Teuten.



state government.

Instead of the usual ballroom gala, Healey's inauguration event was held at TD Garden, home of the Boston Celtics, an apt choice for a politician who played basketball professionally before turning to politics. With the theme "Moving the Ball Forward," and a lineup of performances that included Brandi Carlile and the rapper Oompa, the event was billed as "a celebration of teamwork, positivity, and breaking barriers."

The same words could apply to members of the event's production team, who dealt with challenges that included an ambitious scale, a short time frame, and an unexpect-

ed, last-minute baby boom. The project also tells you something about the Boston production community, which, apparently, functions as a kind of repertory company of professionals who regularly team up on gigs large and small.

Lighting

"I was the first," says Graham Edmondson, lighting designer with PORT Lighting, the Seabrook, New Hampshire company that supplied lighting design and gear for the event. His child "was born at 9:27am and Steve Bearse's was at 11:30 that night." Although both designers



Left: “We do a lot of large events, but this was really big,” says Todd Gerrish, founder and president of PORT. “It called for more gear than they have for a lot of concerts, and it had to go in quickly.” Above: On-site, Thistle Communications tied in all the video elements, including cameras, playback, and graphic elements on the Garden’s screen system.

were expectant fathers, their teaming on this project was predicated on a plausible theory: The odds were slim that both mothers would go into labor at more or less the same time. After all, what were the chances?

That the event, produced by Rafanelli Events Management, went smoothly is a tribute to the unflappable team at PORT and the can-do spirit that drives this industry. It helped, of course, that PORT and its staff are so familiar with TD Garden. “Our install department supports almost all of the lighting in the bowl, as well as all of the color-changing lighting inside and outside of the building,” Edmondson says. “We also design the pre-game light

shows for both the Celtics and Bruins.” Edmondson adds that, several years ago, PORT installed a lighting system in TD Garden, mostly consisting of Robe BMFL WashBeams and Pointes. Brought in for the event were, from Robe, 12 FORTEs, 33 iFORTEs, 48 MegaPointes, and three Robospots; from Martin by Harman, 16 MAC Aura XIPs, and 56 MAC Aura PXLs; 32 Ayrton Zonda 9 FX units; 12 Chauvet Professional Color STRIKE Ms; 12 Chroma-Q Color Force 72s and Chroma-Q Color Force 48s; and eight ETC Fos4 PL 16s panels. Atmospheric effects were provided by four SmokeFactor Tour hazers. Control was provided by two MA Lighting grandMA2 Full-Sizes, one grandMA



Several years ago, PORT installed a lighting system in TD Garden, mostly consisting of Robe BMFL WashBeams and Pointes. An extensive lighting package was added to provide the necessary coverage for the gala event.

light, and five grandMA 3 NPUs, running in 2 mode. Networking featured eight Pathway Connectivity Octo eight-port gateways and seven Pathway Via 12 gigabit Ethernet switches. Gear was hung using Tyler GT truss. “We had over 30 universes of direct-to-fixture Art-Net control on top of the almost 50 universes on standard DMX,” Edmondson says. “We also tied into the building’s existing control network for control of the house, which gave us another layer.” Production rigging and equipment were provided by Steve Robinson, general manager, of SGPS’ Boston office.

Designing the system was fairly straightforward even if the project was daunting. “Rafanelli’s senior designer Emily Plourde gave me a design deck,” Edmondson says. “It was about a month out from the event. No one was quite sure of the scale the campaign was looking for, so we started by going all-out and cut back from there. Emily was fantastic to work with, identifying elements that were important to her and the campaign while still being flexible and taking the logistical realities into account. We laid it in, doing previsualization with Vectorworks Vision. We also

brought in Sam Paine, of Earlybird, who did our programming.” Paine, who previously worked with PORT, was familiar with the team.

“We do a lot of large events, but this was really big,” says Todd Gerrish, founder and president of PORT. “It called for more gear than they have for a lot of concerts, and it had to go in quickly. We went in the day before the event, working from three until midnight. Then we were in at seven the next day and were ready for soundcheck by noon. It helped that Sam Paine had already programmed a lot of his looks during our pre-viz day.”

Then again, a set list wasn’t produced until the day of the event. Asked how he coped with this late-breaking information, Edmondson says, “Sam is terrific; that’s the answer. He went along with it.” It helped that all four members of the design team share a long history of working together: “Sam, Steve, Bailey [Costa], and I all worked at the same summer stock together on Cape Cod.” Because of TD Garden’s schedule, load-in was a necessarily rushed affair. But, Edmondson says, “Most of what we do is like that—large social events with headliners.” Therefore, tight

schedules hold no terrors: “The rig wasn’t even up until noon on the day of the show,” he adds. “We went in and made it happen.” One time-saving activity involved building out the rig on the GT truss in advance, allowing it to be hung pre-rigged.

Given the many dimensions of the event, different parts of the rig had distinctly different functions. Many BMFL WashBeams and Pointes were used to cover the audience seating. The Megapointes (“We’re big fans of them,” Edmonson says) provided aerial beam work, while the FORTes provided pattern washes on the seating. The Zonda 9 FX units, obtained from the New Jersey-based rental house Main Light, provided plenty of eye candy. (“Sam was very impressed with them,” Edmonson says.) The MAC Aura XIPs delivered backlight onstage while the MAC Aura PXLs created color washes all over the room. The Color STRIKE Ms were hung over the stage, serving as blinders/strobes. “We also hung custom-printed fabrics for branding and used the STRIKES to backlight them.” Similarly, the Color Force 72s uplit the banners onstage.

Meticulous preparation was key, as was having plenty of capable staff who could fill in when needed. “The technical team ran through the entire show, including a video production truck, from our offices at PORT using the previzualization two days before the event, streaming it out so the client could see the preview,” Gerrish says. The truck was supplied by Thistle Communications; Jim Thistle, the company’s owner, says, “We utilized our broadcast truck to tie the event together and to pre-produce the event.

sense of the event.”

“We ran cable out to the truck and streamed the design to the client,” Gerrish says. “Ariadne Villarreali, the technical director, was here calling the show like she would the live event. Sam was able to previzualize all of the lighting looks and see the video content on screen in Vision in real time.”

Meanwhile, Edmonson’s wife, who was scheduled to have an induced birth later in the week, was taken to the hospital with complications. Edmonson followed and Bearse took over. The next morning, Edmonson adds, “I got a call from Steve, saying, ‘I’m on my way to the hospital.’ Faced with these two imminent births, Bailey Costa, hired as lighting director, took over, with Pat Richards, a senior project manager at PORT, also stepping up. The good news is, both deliveries ultimately went off without a hitch. “I had a boy and Steve had a girl,” Edmonson notes.

Collaborators

Gerrish notes that he founded PORT in 1985. “I started in my parents’ garage. I was playing in bands with my brothers, and I noticed that the lighting was usually a mess. I started with audio, but I figured that if I took care of the lighting, somebody else could take care of the sound.” Along the way, he developed a passion for lighting. Today, he says, he has a full-time staff of 30, with more than a hundred freelancers on tap. The week of the inauguration was typically busy, including First Night Boston, the city’s annual New Year’s Eve celebration; an event for Janet Mills, governor of Maine; and Winter Classic, the outdoor National Hockey League match between the Pittsburgh Penguins and Boston Bruins held at Fenway Park.

PORT works frequently with Rafanelli Events Management, and on this project, it drew on several regulator collaborators, including the previously mentioned Thistle Communications. Also, Element Experiential, based in Wilimington, Massachusetts, provided the event’s LED video wall and switching. James Avery, Element’s president, says, “We provide high-end audio and video gear and design services. We don’t do lighting, rigging, or staging. In the New England area, we’ve built a core group of vendors like SGPS and PORT Lighting. We’re lucky to have such awesome groups that do things so well. It has allowed each company to grow and succeed in that vertical.”

For this event, Element supplied the upstage LED wall plus a pair of four-sided LED cubes, along with the screen control package and media servers. The LED panels consisted of INFILED AR Series panels. “INFILED is probably one of the top players in the rental market right now,” Avery says. “They’ve made big waves in technology and support, and we invest in them heavily.” A Pixera one media server delivered content; Avery notes that, despite the current ubiquity of disguise products, Pixera offers a



TD Garden, home of the Boston Celtics, was an apt choice for Healey, who played basketball professionally before turning to

We’re a broadcast television company and we’re on the event side as well. Our trucks can do that sort of thing. Here, we cut things together to give the client an overall

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solid alternative at an attractive price point. Switching was done using a Barco E2 image processor, which he describes as a workhorse product, also featured was a Ross Video Carbonite package plus a set of Ikegami cameras.

Video content came from a variety of sources, including Rafanelli and the Healey campaign, who employed the firm AVFX. Video content was also controlled by a VJ for select musical performances. For the

performance by Oompa, Avery says, “We took four or five of her songs, gave her some color schemes and my guys at video village worked with her. It had a big impact.” Brandi Carlile, he adds, “didn’t have a ton of content, so our team provided a lot of stuff. She sang ‘Over the Rainbow,’ so we found this awesome colorful content. A lot of her set was acoustic, without a ton of visuals.” Nevertheless, he adds, “There were such sharp, powerful moments. She had her wife come out and do a song, because they were married in Massachusetts, which was the first state to have same-sex marriage. They had their kids with them. We had six or seven cameras covering her; that part of the event was more about the camerawork and audience-reaction shots.”

Like the PORT team, Element’s load-in was fast. “We got in the day before, in the afternoon and had to be out by 11,” Avery says. “We had a lot of equipment for an eight-hour call. The next day, we got in at seven and worked straight through the show, loading out pretty quickly. We did a full day of preproduction at PORT’s office; which was a saving grace. We brought all our servers and playback. PORT did the 3D modeling of the Garden. We did a split-screen view showing the playback on the upstage screen and the cubes, along with the lighting. We pushed it out to the campaign so they could see the transitions, video graphics, and other key moments. This allowed us to get everything programmed, roll into the Garden and get everything installed and live in 16 hours of load-in. The prep was so important to us; we had so much video content.” Further shortening the time frame was the time of year; the holidays usually make for a crowded event schedule—like the PORT team, Element was involved in the Winter Classic—with staff members taking



Element Experiential provided colorful content for Brandi Carlile’s rendition of “Over the Rainbow.”

time for their families. “It was a tight turnaround,” Avery adds. “We were loading content as it was coming in.”

Although it was a political event, Avery says, the security presence, while elevated, didn’t affect the load-in. However, he adds, at one point, “The building was undergoing routine maintenance, which took the entire electric grid offline. We didn’t have access until they could re-energize the building. It was tight. But we did a lot of routing and infrastructure so the broadcast truck could roll in and tie into the panels; the cameras needed to be deployed and we had to build an entire video village. We spent a lot of time in the shop, prepping things like it was a tour.”

On-site, Thistle Communications tied in all the video elements, including cameras, playback, and graphic elements on the Garden’s screen system. “We used Evertz Dreamcatcher,” Thistle says, referring to the well-known live production suite. At times, he says, “We had 15 or 20 videos on 11 LED screens.” He, too, cites the tight load-in schedule, but he notes, “Our trucks are at the Garden often, so we can move pretty efficiently.”

By all accounts, the inauguration event was a success, helping to launch a new era in the state’s politics. And it was accomplished with remarkable teamwork. (Scorpio Sound, another member of this constellation of collaborators, provided the event’s sound system.) “Going back to this community of vendors,” Avery says, “we’re used to working on these large, high-profile events and we all lean on each other. We share this, we share that. The amount of volume that this group does together and the efficiencies we’ve found are how we were able to pull this together. It’s something I’ve found over the years: We’ve all got to succeed. How can we share to make everybody’s day easier?”