



# MANAGING A GIANT

Glastonbury Festival is renowned for being home to the weird, the wacky and the wonderful. A giant rave spectacle encompassing cranes, fireballs and circus performers, the Arcadia spider stage is arguably its most exciting and dangerous to date. Tim Wood reports.



When the lights go out on the Pyramid Stage at Worthy Farm each year, tens of thousands of Glastonbury revellers turn their attention to the night ahead. Do they head to the infamous Shangri La for a night of the weird and wonderful, or to the Green Fields for an all-together more relaxing experience? Or do they dance until the early hours of the British summer in the belly of a post-apocalyptic spider that breathes fire and flings acrobats from its limbs? Don't worry, you read that right.

Right at the heart of the Worthy site stands the Arcadia spider – an immense megastructure, designed from recycled military hardware that draws festival-goers to worship at it as if it were a deity. Far from rain dances though (Glastonbury usually has that

already), this type of worship involves dancing to the sounds of riotous drum and bass to the early hours against the backdrop of 10ft fireballs and a laser show that lights up the Vale of Avalon.

This, after all, is billed as the best festival in the world, and they don't do after hours entertainment by halves. And, of course, with so much media attention, health and safety is something which isn't done by halves either. For some, health and safety might mean keeping the cleaner well stocked with wet floor signs. For Arcadia, it's keeping tens of thousands of party-goers safe in a field of mud whilst putting on a spectacular show of epic proportions.

With its nightly displays of acrobatics and pyromania, Arcadia is a special

part of the Glastonbury experience, and is one of the 'entertainment extras' which sets the festival apart. But, in order for those dancing up to their knees in mud to go home with lifelong memories, there's a team running around behind the scenes, making sure everything goes off – quite literally in the case of pyrotechnics – without a hitch.

For 2014, that team was headed up by Linda Crossland-Clarke, Director at Hull-based consultants, SHE Knows Health & Safety. Even with over a decade's experience with the company, Arcadia stands out for Crossland-Clarke as one of the most unique projects she has been involved in.

The Arcadia spectacular, which travels everywhere from Glastonbury to



Thailand, necessitates its own health and safety team, separate from Glastonbury's, to manage everything from the electrics in the DJ booth to signing off on bungeeing acrobats picking other people out of the crowd. Arcadia prides itself on 'unconventional creativity' and 'high octane partying' – a cocktail of words that might bring a bead of sweat to the brow of even the most hardened H&S team.

For Crossland-Clarke, it's the unexpected which concerns her most. After a rigorous two-week build process, you'd be forgiven for thinking the hard work is over by the time the campers arrive on site. But, despite hours of dry runs and the best will in the world, the show is ultimately at the mercy of the notoriously unpredictable English weather, as she explains: "The greatest challenge is carrying on when something goes wrong. For example, we received warnings about thunderstorms [Lily Allen appeared half an hour late for her Friday slot on the Pyramid Stage due to an electric storm that closed most of the main stages].

"We had to have a plan of action in place for such eventualities so, if there was heavy rain, we might keep the light show but maybe not use

the pyrotechnics or the aerialists – if they're picking people up out of the crowd, it's not the right environment for that. We actually had to completely power down during the storm but, fortunately, Arcadia has a 66-wheel drive ex-military vehicle which they've converted into a mobile DJ booth with its own power unit, so the music didn't have to stop like elsewhere."

'The show must go on' might be considered the Arcadia motto when it comes to defying the weather gods, but it also applies to keeping the crowd from ruining their best-laid plans. The Arcadia spider is an interactive party stage, and encourages hardcore festival-goers to dance under and around it. And, bearing in mind the size of Glastonbury, it's not uncommon to have huge crowds in attendance. Then take into account the amount of drugs and alcohol onsite and you have a situation that has the potential to become dangerous.

"With most stages closing at midnight, Arcadia gets a huge surge of people arriving after the headliners finish," Crossland-Clarke explains. "If you climb up one of the viewing towers, you can see crowds coming from



every direction. There is the possibility that the Arcadia fields can get too full, so you have to manage those crowds. That might mean slowing the music down if there are too many people or upping the laser and lighting displays so people don't have to get as close to experience them. The die-hard 'Arcadians' want to be underneath the structure whereas a lot of the people see it like a firework display and just want to view it from a distance.

"You have to get into the mind of your audience if something happens outside of what you can normally control. It's a case of managing security and not allowing things to escalate. We want everyone to have a good time but, if they're not willing to comply and cause a danger, then we have to get security involved."

That could be anything from looking after the over-intoxicated to making sure Glastonbury's famous flags don't make it too close to the structure. Another of the issues security are hot on is the aerialists picking people out of the crowd. The chosen ones are unsurprisingly other, planted aerialists – stationed by strategically placed spotlights – but there is the real risk of a member of the public trying to grab them and turning things sour. To remedy this, the plants are protected by undercover security, posing as festival-goers, who are also involved in ensuring the event is free of crowd surges. As Crossland-Clarke points out, the inebriated often think the mud is a comfortable place to call it a night.

The viewing from a distance aspect of crowd management cannot be understated in the case of Arcadia. Having been moved to higher ground this year for crowd control reasons, the propane fireballs fired from the 'whompers' atop the structure can be seen from almost anywhere across the 900-acre site, along with the ground-shaking pop that comes with piping the gas underground, away from the public. In fact, it's a wonder anyone at the festival gets a wink of sleep; a thought which isn't lost on the diligent H&S team who enjoy the luxuries of caravans and catering over the tents and cereal bars more commonly associated with festivals – all in the name of an alert workforce.

So while a lack of sleep or nutrition isn't an issue, it's the old adage of 'practice makes perfect' which ensures the smooth running of an event on the scale of Arcadia. One of the biggest challenges for the performance team is having to perform in the dark and, while all the stops might be pulled out to ensure the safety of the aerialists, it's the less glamorous jobs that pose the greater risk.

"As soon as the aerialists want to start practicing, you have to enter 'show mode,'" Crossland-Clarke explains. "While the aerialists are all strapped in, the crane operators and the sound teams have to be able to operate in the dark without their usual hi-vis. The challenge is making sure they are competent in doing what they do, in an unusual setting. Obviously, a lot of that work is done pre-setup but it can slip through the net in that sort of environment. Sitting in a crane might not be that different, but setting up pyrotechnics at height is a lot harder than on the ground, so you have to make sure the people doing it are comfortable and aren't getting ahead of themselves."

For the hardworking crew, when they're not working, they're sleeping, and there's little chance to get out and about to enjoy the rest of what Glastonbury has to offer. Arcadia is a dry site until the final show closes at 2:30am on the Sunday morning, when the laser and sounds specialists begin de-rigging, ready for 'nuts and bolts' deconstruction the next day. The team introduced drug and alcohol testing this year to ensure best practice and Crossland-Clarke believes there's barely a minute to spare for such activities anyway: "The problem with trying to get out and enjoy the rest of the site is the size of Glastonbury. How far can you get before someone radios you and asks you to come back? Glastonbury has its own health and safety team, and every time a construction is complete, it needs to be checked for structural conformity, fire safety and sound levels, so you have different departments coming and going all the time. The experienced staff take their bicycles with them so that it doesn't take half an hour to get from one stage to another. Maybe I'll do that next time.

"It is difficult work but the team know there's a party at the end of it so it's worth the wait!"



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