



Pop singer Chantal Chamandy serenades the Sphinx during live shooting of the concert special *Chantal: A Night at the Pyramids*, which will air on PBS throughout March.

Chantal Spotlights Egypt's Ancient Wonders

by Stephen Pizzello

Through the ages, Egypt's Sphinx and Giza Pyramids have seen their share of spectacle, and the ancient site never goes out of style. Last fall, the iconic monuments provided a spectacular backdrop for a unique free concert staged by pop singer Chantal Chamandy. The show, titled *Beladi (My Country)*, was a high-profile homecoming for the Montreal-based chanteuse, who was born in Alexandria to a Greek-Egyptian father and Lebanese-Egyptian mother but moved to Canada at age 6.

Multiple hi-def cameras were deployed to capture the event for a forthcoming DVD and the PBS special *Chantal: A Night at the Pyramids*, which will air throughout March. *AC* was invited to attend the open-air extravaganza, which also featured the Cairo Symphony Orchestra, members of the Egyptian National Ballet, an Egyptian marching band, Tanoura dancers (known in the West as "whirling dervishes"), a Darbouka drum band and a dazzling light show designed by Matthieu Larivée of Montreal's Lüz Lighting Design.

Chantal spent a full year planning the logistically ambitious event, which drew nearly 5,000 attendees. The night

before the show, just prior to a final rehearsal, she explained her motivation. "I could have done this show in many countries, but I picked Egypt because I wanted to come back to my roots," said the star, who performed 18 songs in five languages, including cuts from her recent CD, *Love Needs You*. "I conceived and choreographed the show with my good friend Geneviève Dorion-Coupal, who has worked with Cirque du Soleil. We could have hired a stage director, but we decided we wanted to do the show our way, without any compromises."

Another Cirque alumnus, Guy St-Amore, designed the show's stage, which featured a series of bridges to symbolize the "bridging" of different cultures both onstage and off. According to Chantal's husband, manager and executive producer, Greg Chamandy, the multicultural undertaking proved rewarding but also challenging. "There were some dynamics at the outset that involved finding a good compromise between the high-tech systems of North America and the more labor-intensive approaches used here," he said. "For example, all of the lighting scaffolds were erected manually instead of with hydraulic lifts." Larivée explains, "We were not allowed to use hydraulic lifts on the sacred land. We also had to hang lights one by one with ropes and pulleys.

The local crew was more a group of hands than specialized technicians. So 14 guys from Europe and 3 from Canada handled all the technical aspects."

In mounting the show, the Chamandys enlisted experienced television director Gérard Pullicino. Well known for his work on music videos and French TV shows, Pullicino has helmed projects for David Bowie, Ray Charles, Joe Cocker, Celine Dion and Madonna, among other artists. For *Concert at the Pyramids*, he hired his longtime friend and collaborator, Jean-Philippe Bourdon, to serve as director of photography. The two met when Pullicino was an assistant director and Bourdon a camera operator; after advancing through the ranks and working on many music videos together, they were both hired to work on the popular French musical TV show *Taratata*. "Jean-Philippe and I know each other very well, so we don't have to speak a lot when we're working," said Pullicino. "We have a 'big complicity.' He knows how I work, and I know how he works." Bourdon added, "Gérard gives me complete freedom, but it's a freedom that controls itself in a way because we share the same way of looking at things, and we like each other a lot."

Pullicino admitted that when he first heard the Chamandys' plans for *Concert at the Pyramids*, "I thought they were crazy, but I was very excited by the show and its possibilities, and the chance to shoot at the pyramids was an exceptional opportunity. When we scouted the site two months before the show, though, the spot designated for the stage was not ideal; the perspective wasn't good and the landscape wasn't interesting."

Bourdon noted, "It wasn't the first time a show had been done in that general location, but the previous shows had all been done on the other side of the pyramids, where you couldn't really see the Sphinx. We were the first production allowed to shoot with the Sphinx in front of the pyramids. But when Gérard and I arrived, we didn't like the stage location that had been proposed by the local authorities — the Sphinx was not very separated from the landscape because

Chantal: A Night at the Pyramids photos by Olivier Samson Arcand, courtesy of OSA Images.

Top: Separate lighting schemes were required to illuminate the show's stage and the pyramids looming behind it. **Middle:** Lighting designer Matthieu Larivée controlled the background lighting from his perch on a scaffold at the back of the open-air venue. **Bottom:** The concert's lighting scaffolds were erected manually by a crew of laborers.



one of the pyramids was behind it. We eventually moved the stage to a different spot where the Sphinx stood out more clearly.

"To make the view of the background clear, Gérard requested there be no stage elements behind Chantal and the other performers," he added. "Initially, there was a big door on the stage directly behind Chantal, but we asked Guy and his team to move it to one side. Everything in the central axis of the stage, facing head-on, was simplified."

Bourdon was able to bring a few key crewmembers from France, but most of the crew comprised technicians from several countries. "The camera operators and follow-spot operators were French, but the production was mostly Canadian, the video truck was from Belgium, and the rest of the crew was Belgian, Dutch, Egyptian and German. Canadian culture is very different than Egypt's, but as Europeans, Gérard and I could bridge the cultural gap."

Bourdon's team included 12 camera operators shooting with Thomson LDK-8000 HD cameras provided by the Belgian company Alfacam. A crane

Director of photography Jean-Philippe Bourdon covered the event with 12 Thomson LDK-8000 HD cameras provided by the Belgian company Alfacam. "I feel real joy that we were able to pull off such an ambitious show," he said.



arm was used to capture sweeping views of the scenic setting, and a robotic tracking camera deployed near the stage proved useful for capturing closer views of the dancers. "Gérard likes to use a variety of lenses, but that can be tricky," he noted. "Four of the cameras had Canon DigiSuper 100:1 [9.3-930mm] zooms, and when you get to the long end of the lens, the stop goes down considerably. The other cameras had very wide-angle lenses [Canon 4.7-52mm zooms], and when you're cutting from a very long to a very wide shot, you have to make sure the value of the background doesn't shift dramatically.

"A lot of changes were made between the final rehearsal and the show," he continued. "We had to find a good balance between the artists onstage and the pyramids behind them, but during the final rehearsal, we discovered our plan was not working. One of the big problems was that we were doing a show with no backlight whatsoever; we were lighting the stage and the pyramids separately, with nothing between those two points. Because we had no backlight, we had to have a background that was visually rich and fairly bright. Obviously, it was very difficult to change the stop on the pyramids themselves, so we had to calibrate all of our lighting to the pyramids. We decided to open up the irises on the cameras by a stop and a half. During the show, our stop ranged from a T2.85 to a T5.6."

In designing the lighting for the stage and pyramids and supervising the placement of the stage and scaffolds,

Larivée used a variety of software programs to plan his strategies. After using Google Earth to get the lay of the land, he worked with Google's SketchUp (an intelligent drawing system that simplifies 3-D design) to position models of the monuments using real-world coordinates. These rough sketches were then shared globally via Google's 3-D Warehouse. Larivée mapped his lighting plots with a software package called WYSIWYG (What You See Is What You Get). "We took the SketchUp renderings, put them in WYSIWYG and then started doing test renderings to determine the best distances from which to light everything," Larivée explained. "Our major concern was getting the background sharp — the last pyramid was a kilometer from the stage, so we needed a lot of power. Luckily, it's easier to get good depth of field in HD."

Lighting instruments aimed at the stage from the floor and the surrounding scaffolds included Vari-Lite 3000 Washes, VL3000 Spots, VL500s (with stippled lenses), Martin Mac 2000 Washes and Thomas 2 Lite Par 36s. Par 64s, Robert Julia Ivanhoe and Cyrano follow spots and Strand Lighting Nocturne 1000Ws were used as key lights. Color Kinetics Color Blasts (with clear lenses) and a pair of Pixel Line 1044s were used to illuminate scenery. The pyramids (known as Mykerenos, Kephren and Keops) were lit with a combination of BigLites (4.5K Xenon fixtures manufactured by Zap Technologies) and Given Kolorado MK2s and

MK3s, while the Sphinx was surrounded by a combination of BigLites and VL3500 Spots. As a final touch, an Airstar balloon containing a pair of 2K halogen fixtures was painted to resemble the moon and floated behind the stage. All of the stage lights were wired to dimmer boards. To control the background lighting, Larivée used three Grand MA lighting consoles; an Ethernet network allowed wireless control to the pyramids, and 16 universes of DMX were employed.

Powering this arsenal required 18 on-site generators, but positioning them involved a flurry of negotiations with Egyptian authorities. "We were not allowed to put the generator trucks in all the spots we'd initially planned," said Larivée. "The permissions took a week, and refilling the trucks also became an issue because they didn't want any fuel on-site. Incorporating the Sphinx into our plans further complicated things. Even the army was involved! We weren't even allowed to use walkie-talkies because of security considerations."

Atmospheric conditions also had to be addressed. "As the night goes on, there's a lot of humidity in the desert, which helps to create a nice fog," Larivée explained, adding that MDG machines were employed to add fog to the ambience. "If you want to see the lighting beams, you need to use some fog. But it's difficult to manage the fog so that you have enough onstage without diffusing or obscuring the background. If the wind picks up, the fog can turn into a wall."

Happily for all concerned, the show came off without a hitch. To prepare for the DVD release, Bourdon later supervised a "huge timing job" at Mikros Image in Paris. "I think the finished product turned out really well, but of course, I always see room for improvement!" he concluded with a laugh. "Looking back, it was a wonderful experience in a unique setting. Chantal was very nice and very human; she listened to all of our concerns and was very open with all of us. I feel real joy that we were able to pull off such an ambitious show." ■