TRANS SIBERIAN ORCHESTRA SHOW

Huge production behind 'The Ghosts of Christmas Eve'

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Bathed in purple light and strafed by multicolored lasers, the lower bowl at Bon Secours Wellness Arena bore no resemblance Friday evening to the chilly, equipment-strewn cavern of just a few hours earlier.

Trans Siberian Orchestra brought wailing guitars, snow-and-smoke machines, and a season's worth of holiday cheer to its production, "The Ghosts of Christmas Eve," which played two shows at the arena Friday.

Lighting rigs that started the day resting on the arena floor, attached to chains leading to the catwalk dozens of feet skyward, flashed rotating bulbs in rich reds and greens. Their metal scaffolding morphed into diamond shapes or triangles, descending toward the stage and retreating up again, shifting colors to the music screaming from the guitars and violins.



Crew members set up the stage for Trans-Siberian Orchestra.

Smoke billowed from the stage, and snowflakes rained from the sky, leaving cold droplets on hair and glasses and shoulders.

The work to transform the arena into the setting for a heart-warming, and guitar-melting, Christmas tale began in the frigid 5 a.m. darkness. Long before sunrise, crew members began unloading 20 tractor-trailers full of lights and black electrical cables and trunks filled with the makings for bursts of pyrotechnic sparks.

By 8:30 a.m., metal racks of lights fill the loading dock, a few feet away from black trunks stenciled with things like "Magic Dot" and "Pyrotek: Bringing Live Alive."

Trunks are outlined in tape of varying colors that correspond to the type of equipment the case holds. The color-coding system makes it easier for crew members to get each cable or speaker or light fixture to the right place.

Black cases that hold the pyro are marked "Flare," "Impres-

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LAUREN PETRACCA/STAFF

Crew members set up the stage for Trans-Siberian Orchestra at Bon Secours Wellness Arena.

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sions," "Magic Ring," along with the helpful instruction, "Do not flip."

Amps and lighting rigs rest on the floor, attached to chains leading to the catwalk high above the seats in the arena. As stagehands slowly raise the rigs toward the ceiling, long yellow tape measures dangle below each piece of equipment, marking the floor.

Sounds of beeping lifts and clanking chains mingle with shouts from stage hands: "Watch your fingers." "Stand by." "Can I get one of your carpenters up on stage and move this away?"

Far above, the catwalk buzzes with crew members placing and securing equipment. Metal frames are shaped into squares or triangles implanted with spotlights.

Stagehands connect black-encased amps to one another, and soon, there's a cluster of two dozen speakers, swaying gently before they're raised to dizzying heights.

A smoke machine lighting, an elaborate drum kit complete with chimes, steel stands for the keyboards, microphones of varying heights.

By late morning, it's ready to roll — literally. More than a dozen crew members push the rolling stage into place beneath a black curtain and a wall of video screens.

The screens flash primary colors and test patterns as lighting crew members make sure everything works properly and can showcase the filmed sequences that tell the story of "The Ghosts of Christmas Eve." During the concert, those video screens also project a starry night, clouds, bursts of fire, a snowy city.

After everything is unloaded, the 18-wheelers line up on Elford Street until it's time to pack up after the show.

Lighting designer Bryan Hartley has worked for TSO for 17 years, and his resume includes stints with Aerosmith, Lenny Kravitz and Joan Jett as well.

Each year, Hartley begins coming up with the lighting concept for the next show in January and February.

focus rather than props on stage, as in years past.

Eliot Saltzman, director of touring and production for TSO, said each year's mandate is "bigger and better."

The production has two touring units, one traveling through the East Coast states, the other through the West.

That means hundreds of people, thousands of lights, 66 colored strobes for each production, miles of electrical cable, and million-dollar sound consoles.

Greenville's show featured 18 musicians in an entourage of 125 people, including crew members. Additionally, Saltzman said, the tour hired 145 local crew members to help with load-in and load-out.

Because the TSO touring season is about two months out of the year, most of the musicians have other gigs as well, but "I take pride in the fact that we're able to have the best of the best out here," he said.

Around 16,000 people saw the two shows, cheering the screaming guitar solo that highlights "O Holy Night," aah-ing in unison when a tiny kitten pops up on the [illegible] waving