

BY DESIGN

In the Spotlight

Behind the curtain with Fireplay, the world's premier concert-design team

By Joshua David Stein • Illustration by Liam Brazier



The Fireplay Team

4—Brian Buckner
Director of architecture
Brings the sets and stages to life

1—Nick Whitehouse
Chief executive officer
Designs the light shows and acts as head honcho

5—Josh Zangen
Executive director of design
Dreams up the sets and stage productions

2—Jess Christiansen
Executive producer
Makes things happen how and when they should

6—Steve Dixon
Chief operating officer
Keeps everything—and everyone—on a budget

3—Max Duval
Chief marketing officer
Gets the word out and tells the story

7—Kelly Stickse
Executive director of R&D
Creates the lasers and special effects



It's a cool spring evening and Madison Square Garden is filled with the shrieks of thousands of women—women in their 30s and 40s who were teenagers when Justin Timberlake first broke their hearts with his baby blue eyes and angelic voice as a member of NSYNC.

The sold-out arena is bathed in pink light, with blue spotlights roaming the audience. JT, who just started his *Man of the Woods* tour, has yet to emerge, but his fans excitedly crowd around the stage's long catwalk, which unspools like a ribbon across the arena floor. They no doubt

are wondering many things—will he play “SexyBack”? Might he reach down and touch my hand? Will I get a selfie?—but 36-year-old Josh Zangen is likely the only one wondering whether Timberlake will slip on the raked stage as it slants down from the main stage to a stand of fake

plastic trees. “That’s a tricky part,” Zangen says, nodding toward the slope. “That’s why we’ve put a texture design on it—to avoid slipping.”

Zangen, a bearded, curly-haired guy from Nyack, New York, is one of the seven cofounders of Fireplay, a design collective behind some of the biggest shows and events happening all over the world. The group is responsible not just for this tour but for Timberlake’s well-received Super Bowl halftime show, with its massive Prince projection; James Taylor’s valedictory 70th birthday tour, featuring a backdrop of twinkling stars; and The Killers’ supersaturated rock ‘n’ roll live show, packed with neon signs and lasers galore. Next year, the design team will produce Aerosmith’s “Deuces Are Wild” residency in Las Vegas and Carrie Underwood’s North American tour, as well as the continued takeover of the global teenage heart by K-Pop megastars BTS.

Although the collective is relatively new—Fireplay officially launched in 2016—each of the group’s principals has decades of experience in events and design. Think of them as the Ocean’s 11 of multidisciplinary design, each member bringing a different skill to the table. Zangen has a background in theater and musicals, while Nick Whitehouse started out as the lighting guy for Coldplay. “That’s back when they were playing bars,” explains Max Duval, who learned the marketing business at Marketel McCann in Montreal, working with global brands as well as the NHL and NBA. Steve Dixon has done tours with everyone from Lord of the Dance



to Britney Spears and “knows where every penny gets spent on tour,” according to Duval. Architect Brian Buckner specializes in space design. As a producer, Jess Christiansen has worked her organizational magic on numerous Olympic ceremonies. Kelly Stickse has a pyrotechnics background and is basically the world’s leading laser and SFX expert. In 2013, he petitioned the U.S. government to adapt its laser laws (so that he could include an audience laser scan in JT’s 20/20 *Experience* tour) and won.

Duval says the principals founded Fireplay in part because of how the industry has shifted. With the advent of

streaming content, musicians have come to rely more and more on touring as a source of revenue; this, in turn, has increased the pressure to put on unforgettable shows. The task of creating these shows has fallen, traditionally, to pickup teams of professional designers—freelancers who cobble together a career by hopscotching from one roadshow to the next. Fireplay, on the other hand, is an efficient one-stop shop. It offers the appearance of rock ‘n’ roll with the stability of easy listening.

Back at Madison Square Garden, Zangen takes out his iPad and shows me a series of renderings the team presented to Timberlake before the tour’s start. The amount of work that goes into planning these experiences is astounding. “The stage is inspired by the floodplains of the Mississippi River,” Zangen explains. “The direction was a mix of the natural world, with elements of *Blade Runner*, plus the themes of family life and personal development. This is about the hero’s journey—even if no one picks up on it.” The images on his iPad only vaguely resemble the black-on-black aluminum and wood stage at MSG, but when Timberlake finally emerges from an almost blindingly bright portal at one end of the stage, to the adoring howl of the crowd and the synth riff of “Filthy,” it hardly matters. The hero has arrived, and Fireplay has set the stage for his glory.



From top: Justin Timberlake’s *Man of the Woods* tour; The Killers’ *Wonderful Wonderful* tour