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REVIEW

DVD Review: Arena - *Smoke & Mirrors*

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On September 22nd, 2005, at the Wyspianski Theatre in Katowice, Poland, British neo-progressive rockers Arena celebrated their 10th anniversary and filmed this excellent, two-hour, career-spanning concert, which comes to you as *Smoke & Mirrors*. This concert features the same lineup of Clive Nolan (keyboards), Mick Pointer (drums), Rob Sowden (vocals), John Mitchell (guitars), and Ian Salmon (bass), that appeared on their last concert DVD, 2003's *Caught In The Act*, and have now miraculously been together since 1999. After overcoming numerous personnel changes, during the band's first four years, it appears that things have finally stabilized in the Arena camp.

Although not one of my favorite progressive-rock bands, Arena have consistently churned out high-quality music, since their 1995 debut, *Songs From The Lions Cage*. Each album unfolds with complex moods, and dramatic concepts that blend elements of symphonic-prog, metal, and classic-rock, and often demand repeated listens to fully absorb all that is being unraveled before you.

My reaction to the band mostly mirrors what you see from the remarkably subdued audiences on each of their DVDs. Rarely do they rise from the comfort of their theater seats, or manage more than a few polite claps. Not your typical rock concert vibe. Some of the band's performances can be quite uninspiring, while others, such as "The Hanging Tree", "Solomon", and, the always climactic, "Crying For Help VII", can be downright

amazing. These guys are very hit and miss for me.

With this new release, Arena have again put out one of the best conceived concert DVDs of the year, in terms of overall content and quality. Too often, you see bands, with probably ten times the budget that Arena has, put out these mediocre, hour-long, concert DVDs, with hardly a hint of bonus material, which is why it is so refreshing to see bands, like Arena, who obviously care about giving their fans something special. This DVD has a total running time of almost three hours, including all of the bonus material.

Smoke & Mirrors is anchored by the 19-song, two-hour main feature, and is enhanced by an interview with Clive Nolan and Mick Pointer, a biography, a discography, and a photo gallery. This is all highlighted by the October 16th, 2005 reunion concert footage, from Zoetermeer, Holland, which featured a couple of old band mates, John Jowiit (bass), and Paul Wrightson (vocals), leading a few of their older classics. This footage adds another 27 minutes worth of excellent live performances to the package.

The set list for *Smoke & Mirrors* differs radically from that found on the *Caught In The Act* DVD. Where *Caught In The Act* focused primarily on their new album at the time, *Contagion*, *Smoke & Mirrors* features more of a career-spanning set that focuses heavily on their 1998 breakthrough album *The Visitor*, represented by six songs, and their latest album, *Pepper's Ghost*, which provides four. Each of their other studio albums accounted for an even two songs apiece.

The performances were good, but certainly not dazzling. As usual, guitarist John Mitchell is an emotionless, robot on stage, who almost looks bothered to be up there at times. The guy is as technically proficient as anyone, but he's got no personality to elevate the songs beyond what you get on the albums. When you listen to Hendrix, Van Halen, Page, Gilmour, or any of the greats, you can hear their personalities shine through in their playing.

The only sign of life that Mitchell showed was during the reunion concert, when he and his former band mate, John Jowitt, were jumping around playfully during "A Crack In The Ice", as Wrightson sang from out in the crowd.

Sowden was his usual charismatic self, and he helps to make up for Mitchell's lack of personality with his colorful attire, excellent showmanship, and theatrical interpretations. He performs the first half of the show wearing a long, blonde, braided wig, dark glasses, and the occasional black top-hat, which made him look eerily like Gary Oldman's Dracula.

Not until the 13th song of the night, "Chosen", is the blonde wig gone and he is wearing a black, full-length, hooded, leather overcoat, with those ridiculous, fluorescent-green, wraparound sunglasses he likes to wear.

The production quality of this DVD is once again outstanding. The widescreen presentation was very sharp and captured the colorful light show well. Dolby Digital 5.1 surround and stereo audio options were provided, and they sounded excellent. The surround mix was crisp and provided good instrument separation. The front center channel was only used for ambience, similar to the rear surrounds, and the lead vocals were spread evenly across the two front speakers instead.

The camera work was superb. The director never felt the need to rapidly alternate between multiple angles every couple of seconds, which is so prevalent in most concert videos. Here, all of the great camera angles that were deployed, slowly faded into each other after beautifully, only after lingering on each shot for just the right amount of time.

Arena fans could not ask for a much better concert DVD than this, and if you are new to the band, this is an excellent place to start.

Set List

01. "Bedlam Fayre"

02. "A Crack In The Ice"
03. "Midas Vision"
04. "Elena"
05. "The Hanging Tree"
06. "A State Of Grace"
07. "(Don't Forget To) Breathe"
08. "Smoke And Mirrors"
09. "Purgatory Road"
10. "Waiting For The Flood"
11. "Medusa"
12. "The Shattered Room"
13. "Chosen"
14. "Skin Game"
15. "Witch Hunt"
16. "Enemy Without"
17. "Solomon"
18. "Friday's Dream"
19. "Cry VII"

Performance 7/10

Production 9/10

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