

# lights, helicopter, action...

Polystyrene, MDF and Resene house paints have helped event company Orange Productions set the scene for some of this country's most spectacular product launches, corporate dos and movie premieres.



Semele and Stu Robertson



Event management is a little like interior design, only with much shorter lead-in times and far less permanence, according to Orange Productions company founder Stu Robertson. And on a slightly larger scale.

The average interior designer, for example, wouldn't be expected to kit-out and then pack-down six to 10 spaces in seven days, but that's a typical working week for Orange Productions. Based in a 900sqm warehouse in Onehunga, the company employs 12 full-time staff, who manage every event detail, from sound checks to circling helicopters.

One of the company's most elaborate events to date was the opening of the Lumley Centre on Shortland Street in Auckland. An old flour mill had been transformed into a modern, high-rise office tower and the developer wanted to throw a party to celebrate. On the night, four different bands and an endless stream of performers entertained the 350 invited guests, on a series of stages. Gourmet food and wine flowed. Outside, stuntmen scaled the building, while helicopters hovered overhead with spotlights and cameras filming images of the guests, which were then vision-mixed live on site and played back on massive plasma screens around the venue.

For impact, though, hovering choppers and hi-tech screens pale next to some of the props that have been created from scratch by the team at Orange Productions. Including a carpenter, a scenic artist and prop designer, and a former Disney and Warner Brothers animator, they

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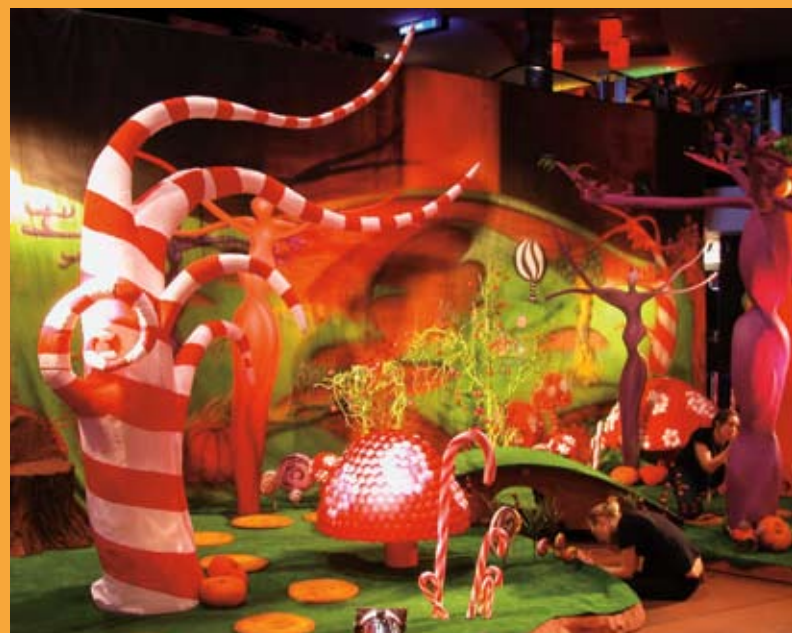
handcraft the props and backdrops that bring event concepts to life.

When the movie *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* opened here, Orange Productions was asked to create and execute the concept for the premiere. They selected the scene of every kid's dreams and, using Resene paint and colours on carved polystyrene and MDF backdrops, recreated Willy Wonka's confectionery land, complete with a chocolate river, candy-cane trees and marshmallow mushrooms. Final touches included roaming Oompa Loompas, a chocolate scent being pumped throughout the venue and the handing around of actual oversized confectionery.

Other film events include the local premiere of *Whale Rider*. This saw the team create a massive underwater backdrop – once again using Resene paints and an incredible amount of artistic talent.

The company's warehouse is overflowing with hundreds of other props ready to create just about any event concept imaginable. Massive cacti, logs and trees sit across from a towering paua and authentic ranch backdrops.

"We try to come up with original concepts and all the props to go with them, before they're needed, because



lead times for production can be very tight in this industry," says Stu. "Even so, we often work 16–18 hours a day to prepare for an event that has a tight production deadline."

Fortunately for the Orange team, work's not a bad place to hang out. Aside from the visual appeal of all the props and backdrops, their offices are kitted out with lounging spaces, a jukebox, and a games room stocked with pinball machines, air hockey, arcade video games, and pool and ping pong tables.

The people who work at Orange Productions also love what they do. Stu and his wife Semele began building the business – whimsically named for Stu's favourite colour – five years ago, for a couple of reasons. They saw a demand for a company that could manage every aspect of an event and, more importantly, they wanted to bring their creative sides into their work lives.

"Everyone that works at Orange has that creative bent. They don't just come to work and paint a prop; they're living it whenever they can."

So, when deadlines are tight, Stu says everyone from the logistics manager to the accounts manager will happily grab a chainsaw and paint to transform metre-high cubes of polystyrene into gigantic native ferns.

Creative talent, long hours and detailed planning have seen Orange Productions pull off thousands of events for top companies and organisations. While there are

some key elements to a good event – top venue design, good food and entertainment, effective lighting and proceedings that flow – Stu says there's no set process you can follow.

"If you had a process that you always stuck to, then you couldn't come up with the results that amaze people. And that's what we're aiming to do every time, regardless of whether the budget is a few hundred or a few hundred thousand. Instead, it is a creative and collaborative process, where the Orange team gets together, we call on past experiences and what we have wanted to design and produce for a particular event or theme in the past, and then move to looking at the budget and how we can make it work.

"Once we have done that, we look at the lead time and wonder how we are going to pull it off!"

And when everything's in place, what's the measure of success?

"In event management, organisation and experience count for an incalculable amount of how well the evening goes. If we do our job right, everybody has a great time and nobody gives a moment's thought to what went into the event to make it happen."

That's not a complaint, either.

"The satisfaction you get from seeing all the different elements come together is huge. It's a great thing to love what you do." **H**

This page (from left): Props in the factory, life-size toy soldier at Orange offices and the set for *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*.