

Once

a new musical . . .



Almost exactly a year after it opened in New York - where it went on to triumph in Broadway's Tony Awards, winning eight awards including Best Musical, Best Design, Best Lighting and Best Sound - and after a quick stop in its spiritual home, Dublin, the musical *Once* started playing at the Phoenix Theatre in London. Rob Halliday reports . . .

Performance photography by Manuel Harlan





Adapted from the 2006 film of the same name, the show is an autobiographical tale of its writers Glen Hansard and Markéta Irglová - 'an Irish busker and a young Czech girl,' as the promotional material has them - meeting and falling in love in Dublin; the pair played themselves in the film. While never a monster hit, the film did win an Oscar for the song *Falling Slowly*, and is beloved by those who know it. It was perhaps, therefore, only a matter of time before someone realised it could have another life on the stage. This could have gone disastrously wrong, but fortunately the producers entrusted this process to director John Tiffany, who was clear that he wanted to turn it into a uniquely theatrical piece rather than just a line-by-line film adaptation.

Around him, Tiffany built a great team, of Irish playwright Enda Walsh to expand on the world created by the film's writer-director John Carney; movement director Steven Hoggett - his collaborator on the acclaimed *Black Watch* - and musical arranger/supervisor Martin Lowe.

All involved were astute enough to realise they'd need feedback to see if their approach to the show was working, so instead of launching straight onto Broadway the show began life quietly at the American Repertory Theater in Boston, where designer

Bob Crowley, lighting designer Natasha Katz and ART's resident sound designer Clive Goodwin came on board.

Once opened there in April 2011; those present recall audiences falling in love with it. They also admit that that production has fuelled much of the design of the show since - the realistic bar (fully functional, drinks are served to the audience prior to the show) covered in mirrors which is Bob Crowley's set was inspired not just by the pubs of Dublin but by the bar with the mirror behind it at one end of that studio theatre.

From Boston, the show moved to New York, playing off-Broadway at the downtown New York Public Workshop. Audiences loved it there too, and it began building the word-of-mouth buzz (supported by a carefully crafted, elegant poster campaign that was quite visually distinct from any other show on Broadway) that would ultimately turn it into a Broadway hit.

What makes it a hit? Heart, I think. And being grown up enough not to (spoiler alert!) insist on a happy ending. And really strong performances from the cast - who are also the band. They are always on stage, sometimes playing as part of the action, sometimes playing while just framing it. Plus there's the beautiful support by the highly skilled design team - skilled enough to just give the show what it needs, a versatile space in which it can live and breathe without being smothered, with just the occasional little touch of theatrical fairy dust . . .

Sound

I realise that traditionally it's been scenery, then lighting, then sound in these articles - just habit, I think, or perhaps inspiration from the magazine's title. But let's talk about the sound first for a change. Why? Because at the end of the show in New York two jaded, cynical theatre types who've sat through a lot of shows and a lot of sound (that would be me and my wife) turned to each other and both said 'that was a beautiful show' then - unprompted - 'and that was the most amazing sound', pausing only to add 'and you couldn't see any mics!'

Adding to the surprise was that - to a lampie's eye, admittedly, but one that has seen a lot of sound rigs - it looked unusual, with strange-looking loudspeakers pointing in what felt like unusual directions. Plus the name on the credit was unfamiliar: Clive Goodwin, not one of the Broadway regulars. His website showed an unconventional career path, everything from loudspeaker design, to television sound, to photography. Nothing wrong with any of that, but all intriguing. Many of the people involved with this show got a fan email from me after that performance. Clive Goodwin's was the one I wrote first.

I should say straight away that there are definite 'schools' of sound design. Some deliberately strive to deliver a larger-than-life show into the laps of the audience; some for an even more out-of-body experience with sound whirling around the audience's heads. There's nothing wrong with any of those things - it's all about context, and the context



here was to take this intimate little love story and pull the audience in to it. It felt like there was no 'sound,' just people on stage singing and playing instruments - until you got into a number and, analysing it, realised that the sound had actually got big with the song. "The show is very delicate, very personal," Clive Goodwin explained when I caught up with him in person in London. "I wanted people to have to lean into it, almost to embrace it - to have to pay attention to it."

Saying that is easy, of course, making it happen much harder - particularly when the best-laid plans of sound designers can so easily fall victim to directors or producers who think 'loud' is the easiest compensation for other perceived deficiencies in a show. Here, Goodwin has gone about his work with the full support of his director: "John is brilliant, he just sort of leads people to places by asking them what they think should happen. He's very calm, very receptive - every director should be like him. My plan was always to have the show sound very natural, not like an 'amplified' show, but that said, I'm not sure it ever really arrived out of any kind of discussion - it just felt like what the show needed. It took us there from the very first production."

So how is it done? Goodwin has his stock answer, which clearly belies the amount of thought he's put into this: "Basically, any time I became aware I was listening to a loudspeaker rather than a person, I'd make adjustments until I wasn't aware of that any more. Sometimes that would be level, sometimes that would be EQ, sometimes it would be timing or delay. Which sounds simple, but . . ."

Fortunately, he's also happy to elaborate. "For *Once* I was very keen not to have the sound coloured by the acoustics of the room

- to have it so that the audience weren't just hearing the sound bouncing off the walls of the theatre." Those unusual looking loudspeakers are there to achieve that: "They're Funktion-One Resolution 2SH, a horn loudspeaker with a 50 x 25° dispersion, which in New York we arranged as a centre cluster of four, giving 100 x 50° coverage plus two hangs of 50 x 50°, and in London as three clusters of two configured as 50 x 50°. That lets us cover the audience without the sound getting onto the walls." At the Phoenix, Goodwin's big request was for a truss in line with the balcony to carry the Funktion-Ones for the upper levels. "I could have put the speakers back on the line of the pros', but it seemed to me that would give an unnecessarily long throw and, with that, more chance of the room and reflections getting involved."

The manufacturer choice is by personal preference: Goodwin has also worked for the company on occasion. "I've always liked the

speakers, though they certainly divide opinion. I just remember years ago, when I was still playing in bands, being at the University of London Union and hearing the cricket on TV at the far end of the bar, but somehow the sound of the crowd just carried to me in a way I'd never experienced from a loudspeaker before. I have a lot of respect for their speaker designs, particularly that they don't need lots of processing or EQ." His connection with the company meant that he was also able to access a new prototype speaker, a wider-dispersion (90 x 55°) version of the RM15 unit.

"The next thing we do is to adjust the delays to match where people are on stage - that can be a change of 40ft from right upstage to right downstage. The human brain does a funny thing, it uses the first place it hears a sound from to locate that sound, so I always try to arrange things so that the sound coming from the loudspeaker arrives fractionally after the sound arriving from the



person, so the brain locates to the person. The speaker sound can't arrive too much later otherwise it just sounds like an echo from the building, but you must hear the sound from the person first."

Then, EQ. "With the human voice, someone close to you sounds different from the same person further away - you lose the mid and low frequencies as they move away. We change the EQ to try to replicate that, helped by dynamic EQ plug-ins so that the EQ will change itself as we get to a louder part. It's complicated, but it works very well - though you need to keep an eye on it as the EQ requirements will change slightly for different performers in the same role."

Goodwin also uses EQ to counteract the building: "Most theatres are designed to amplify the sound to some extent - it will resonate at certain frequencies. When I hear something stand out like that, I'll identify the frequency - using an app on my phone if it's not a dedicated sound session - then use the EQ to pull that back, so the overall result is for it to end up being flat."

All of that relies on getting the sound into the system to start with, of course. Part of the magic of *Once*, for me, was not seeing the microphones, though Goodwin insists there are no special tricks here, just care and attention to detail. "If you're on stage in

the pre-show you can certainly see them, but they're hidden in the hair or behind the ear. Once they're hidden, we colour-match them to the performer. It's all just about care."

The show does use a lot of radio mics - a spectacular 68 in London. Autograph are supplying the show: "I think because when they said '68 radio mics' everyone else just laughed. Autograph were really the only people who could deal with that," Goodwin notes. There are also DPA4060 capsules through Sennheiser SK5212 transmitters, all marshaled through a DiGiCo SD7T console then Meyer Galileo and XTA processing and Lab.gruppen amplification. In part, the quantity is because the performers are all double mic'd, since they almost never go off stage so there's no chance for someone to attend to a problem. The instruments are also mic'd, and as the production has grown up, so the number of instrument mics has increased to help smooth the running of the show. "When the drum kit gets moved, they used to have to scabble around unplugging and replugging things. The day we added radios to that, Steven Hoggett said, 'that was like your Christmas present to me'. He was very happy!" That said: "We don't always use the separate instrument mics. If someone is singing and playing an instrument we'll just be using their mic and it'll be picking up the instrument as well - then sometimes we'll just

add a bit of the instrument, just to make it richer."

Goodwin has a key ally in making all of this work: the insanely talented and delightfully lovely musical director and arranger Martin Lowe. "He is brilliant. Sometimes he'd come up and say, 'I think we need a bit more of . . . ' and we'd make adjustments to give it to him. But equally, I could say, 'if you could do this, it would help us', and he'd know everything so well that he could just do that. It was a great way of working."

He also freely admits to being helped by what he calls, "the absence of the instruments of war - drums and horns. They're a big problem on most shows; here we have neither for most of the show, and when we do have drums in the recording studio scene, they're hidden behind a screen." That's not to say there's no percussion in the show - there is, lots of it, it's just mostly the cast stamping and slapping and kicking rather than traditional instruments. The rest is predominantly strings - think eccentric but wonderful folksy ceilidh band.

Goodwin also pays tribute to Natasha Katz. "Her rig is very quiet - she even turned off the scroller fans for me. Early on it wasn't the case - downtown there were more moving lights, but ultimately they all went . . ." And he



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was supported by his associate, Brian Walters, “who’s been with me on the show from the beginning and does a really good job - he’s great at figuring out the programming side, so I can just say ‘I want . . .’ and he’ll figure out how to do it,” as well as by production sound engineer Ken Hampton and the show sound team of Andrew Graham, Matthew Ferrie and Seeta Mistry.

If that all sounds like a sound designer completely in control, it shouldn’t: Goodwin has a healthy paranoia that constantly keeps him striving to improve things. “Sometimes I worry that I haven’t got it right. And it’s an imperfect thing - ideally, you’d want a separate set of delays for each set of speakers. On the first night in New York I ended up sitting downstairs on one side, and in one scene the character was on the opposite side of the stage. I’d been worried that maybe I didn’t have the speakers loud enough, but suddenly I was aware of the speaker because the delay wasn’t exactly right for my seat. At least it meant it was loud enough,” he laughs.

Now the demands of *Once* and other projects having led him to step away from ART (“I’d been taking unpaid leave to do *Once*, which they were happy with - but ultimately it wasn’t fair to them that I was away so much”), he has a bigger challenge to solve: how to translate this intimate little show into the huge theatres it will play on its US tour. You wouldn’t want to bet against his careful, considered, analytical approach cracking the problem of getting 4,000 people to lean in . . .

Design & Lighting

Designer Bob Crowley and lighting designer Natasha Katz are collaborators of old, on plays including *The Coast of Utopia* and musicals such as *The Capeman*, *Aida*, and *Tarzan*. Both were involved in the show from the very beginning, learning how to make it work as it scaled up - Crowley’s set, built for the UK by Souvenir, evolving into the working pub with its red-and-white chequerboard floor, U-shaped wall that wraps around the cast (also neatly reflecting the Phoenix’s U-shaped auditorium). The set is then covered in frames that look like they should house faded pictures but in fact

surround mirrors, with one enormous mirror positioned upstage-centre. The mirrors are all tilted down so as not to reflect light into the audience’s eyes. Crowley talks of the mirrors fracturing the space, but they also helpfully let the audience see around the space - seeing a piano being played even when the keyboard is upstage; seeing the reflected faces of the ensemble as they look upstage. Scattered between the mirrors are large-filament light bulbs; scattered around the set are objects - the flotsam of life - which look like mere decoration but are later used to help conjure location, a lit clock taking us to a living room; a single bulb to a bedroom. The top line of the set also provides a projection surface for some neat surtitles, projecting Czech to let us know when we shouldn’t be understanding words spoken in English. Above all that, a ceiling of lights, recreating the feel of the Public Theatre’s fixed grid, though now constructed of walkable truss to provide access for focus and maintenance, hung by Unusual Rigging.

By curious coincidence, the almost-entirely-tungsten lit *Once* arrived in London just a few weeks after Katz’s entirely-tungsten-lit *Chorus Line* - though the designer insists that in both cases she was pulled there by the show rather than through any kind of out-of-hand rejection of arc sources. “Believe me, I love arc source moving lights,” she laughs, “but these two shows are definitely palette cleansers. Originally, we had some arc moving lights on *Once*, but it became really clear really fast over one day of cueing that the colour temperature was all wrong, that this show was all about earthiness and humanity so we quickly started adding Fresnels and Source Fours. The rig we have today is directly evolved from that rig.” So much so that it still features a core of Fresnels providing a backlight to the stage, unusual in a Broadway design.

None of this is to say there aren’t moving lights, they’re just tungsten moving lights - ETC Revolutions and City Theatrical Autoyokes fitted with Source Fours. This mix is on cost and noise grounds: both are used as re-focusable specials, the Revolutions fitted with shutters to make the squares and rectangles that delineate rooms and that have





Photos: Rob Halliday

become a feature of the show. "Originally, we had one scene - the bank scene - where there were four tables and I did four square specials for them," Katz explains. "Then the director said, if you're going to do them there, you should do them everywhere, really go with it." So she did.

These specials, many from moving lights on the advance truss, are invaluable in isolating and controlling the space because - and this strikes me as the bravest possible decision to make when lighting a musical, just on the grounds of removing your ultimate safety net as an LD - *Once* has no followspots. "One electrician teased me that the management must have really gotten to me, not wanting to pay for the spots," Katz recalls. "But it was a clear choice. To add spots with John Tiffany would have added a fourth wall, pulled the characters out of the ensemble piece - any kind of followspotting, that little circle of light, would have changed that. We were very lucky to have John on the show. He's a genius."

The designer also notes the contribution of the "fantastic producers - people who love the show, and all understood that it was OK to do an off-Broadway transfer; to move that show to Broadway without suddenly glitzing it up. They remained true to the feeling of the show, hence no spots - and also great moments, like having the audience on stage at the beginning."

This absence of 'glitz' some might consider unusual in a Natasha Katz show, so well-known has she become for her high powered, incredibly dynamic, deeply coloured, tightly cued musicals. Here, instead, she brings a beautiful naturalistic clarity to the show. The only scrollers are on the moving lights, allowing the silent moments to be really silent, and the rest is old-school covers in different colours - a tightly muted palette that has at its core a warm humanity, and really only ever ventures as far as cooler naturalism with just an occasional hint of really deep blues, this mainly on the brick wall that backs the set. "It's my standard palette from my younger days," she laughs. "Before moving lights came in and corrupted me. It's like going home, back when I started working with Eugene Lee and no-colour light."

"There were also certain surprises, nice surprises - the colour of the walls, warm tungsten light in the room, the interplay of the mirrors and the blue and the warm. There were also things we learnt at New York Theatre Workshop - the wall is lit by Color Kinetics TRX LED units, which do the deep blue very well, but they also have an amber and a white in them since, without those, we found we just couldn't make the wall work, make it warm enough." There's also no haze: it's about what the lights hit, rather than seeing the light itself in the air.

Crowley, Katz and the rest of the show's creators conjure joyously simple theatrical magic within this fixed space, which the cast occupy for the entire night. Take the opening, when the full cast are in the brightly lit bar then - through just the frisson of a slow tungsten fade - the crowd go, our man turns one corner to be behind his guitar case and is left in a single crosslight, taking us magically from pub ceilidh crowd to solo street busker. This crosslight is actually a rarity in the show, literally the only light low on the pros. For the rest of the evening the embrace of the set doesn't really allow it, and the designer seems to prefer high side and back angles rather than the theatrical artifice of low sidelight. This is all beautifully controlled, allowing the central playing area to shade into shadow around its edge. There's a wonderful set of blue toplights on the mirrors; these are usually lit just by bounce from the floor, receding into their own shadows. The toplight is used sparingly, but suddenly makes them leap viscerally from the wall. Generally, Katz seems to be unafraid of letting people's faces feel shadowy in a way that is unusual on Broadway - to my eye, this feels like a very 'British' design from one of Broadway's leading designers.

Just when you think you've figured out the lighting, though - that it will be beautiful without being tricky - there's a beautiful

trick, when the lovers climb high above the back of the stage, high above Dublin to look down on the city's lights, revealed not just as a hidden cityscape of fibre optics in the floor but an extra set hidden in the costume of one actor lying on the floor. Katz is quick to pass the credit, "so beautiful, the genius of Bob Crowley"; in London, the effect was realised by Howard Eaton Lighting.

When the schedule appeared for *Once*'s transfer to London, via a short stop at the Gaiety in Dublin, Katz realised she wouldn't be able to make it, since she'd have started tech on the new musical *Motown* in New York. "That's been a very strange feeling," she notes. "I've never had a first version of a show that I haven't been able to go to. And in the West End, too!"

In her absence, she assembled a strong team to remake the show, her associate from New York, Peter Hoerburger, coming over and teaming up with US associate Stuart Porter and production electrician Pete Lambert, both - along with production manager Richard Bullimore - hot-desking between *A Chorus Line* and *Once*. The team also included programmer Sarah Brown, looking after the Eos console programmed by Sean Beach in New York, and electricians Mike Dixon, Keith Johnson and Lee Threlfall plus head of lighting Kate McNicholas. All dealt with Dublin, then the move into the Phoenix, a theatre probably finding itself slightly in shock at a new show after hosting *Blood Brothers* since 1991. It turns out to be a beautiful auditorium, though one that keeps the three levels of audience quite detached from each other, particularly when the side boxes are not sold. As in New York, the rig was provided by PRG, with some gear doubled up to speed the move from Dublin to London; Hoerburger also notes that Crowley's floor also provides the show with a helpful built-in focus grid to aid rapid set-up!

The result, in London as in New York, is a beautiful, quietly touching show. It does seem to divide opinion somewhat, I think perhaps along generational lines - the review that calls it 'London's date musical' is probably not far wide of the mark. But it is very well done: if the show is an ode to Dublin, an ode to the power of music, and an ode to the soup of love then as those instruments and voices come in, cutting through each other and building wave after wave of joyous sound, the production as a whole is an ode to the power of theatre.

Once is currently booking at the Phoenix Theatre until 31 May 2014.

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