

SLEEPLESS IN LONDON



A new musical aims to wake up the city's dormant theatre scene

By: Rob Halliday

If you could have just landed in the middle of the Troubadour Theatre in Wembley, on the western edge of London, in late August, it would have felt completely normal at first glance: just a new show in tech, pulling together all of the elements piece by piece. Until you noticed the masks. The face visors, even the director wearing one. The spaced-out production desks. The white crosses on the seats, indicating which were not to be used. It was familiar—but not quite normal as we knew it.

But you couldn't just land there. You couldn't even just drop in. Access meant arriving at 10am to be swabbed for an on-site test, then a carefully distanced hour waiting to be declared clear of COVID-19. Then, and only then, would you be given a wristband, your pass to enter. This was definitely not your average day of tech—though through all that was an overwhelming feeling of delight that tech was happening at all after so many months of nothing.

This is the world of *Sleepless: A Musical Romance*. Not quite the first theatre production to get going—the different rules applied to outdoor theatres meant they claimed that prize. But very probably the first show to get up and running in a relatively normal manner (nightly performances to a live audience) in a relatively standard indoor theatre.

Given that some of the biggest names in theatre seem to have just shut everything down and run for the hills, getting this to happen has fallen to Michael Rose, a producer quite happy to describe himself as “not the biggest fish in the pond, though I’ve been around forever.” In getting the show back on—it had loaded in and just started tech when shutdown came on March 18, and everything has been sitting in the building since—he’s found himself the center of attention for an entire industry, and while neither that nor being one of the very few shows actually playing can do any harm from a publicity or possible ticket-sale point of view, he’ll tell you that’s not his reason for doing this. “I admire the work that’s been done raising charity funds for the many thousands of freelancers that have dropped through the gaps in the government support scheme, but that money will be gone in a flash. The only real answer to this is to get back to work.”

From the audience’s point of view, that’s meant sticking to the current government guidance and reopening with social distancing of at least a meter between people in the auditorium unless they’re part of the same household bubble. The theatre housing the show is, in some ways, ideal for this: It’s a former film studio that was converted to a per-

formance space by the insertion of a large single-tier bank of 1,200 seats. Removing some seats has created more aisles for better circulation. There is a large foyer space and plentiful big, spaced-out toilets. There are none of the pinch-points of narrow corridors that traditional West End theatres have. In normal times, it arguably lacks the intimacy of the best of those theatres, but for the circumstances we now find ourselves in it might just be the perfect place.

Testing every time

More interesting, though, is how things are handled for those working on the show, the key part of which is the daily test. Every single person—cast, crew, band, backstage visitors—is tested every single morning, using an on-site test lab that can get a result in about half an hour. Allow half an hour to swab people, then load the samples into a 24-slot testing machine and that’s about an hour turnaround in total, with the test team running two of those machines in tandem to improve the through-flow. You receive a pass or fail message through the Yoti identity app on your phone, or sometimes the company manager gets to you first. Pass and you’re in for the day, fail and it’s off for the official Health Service test. Once everyone’s been through the test team and their equipment leave (to another gig, presumably) and you’re in for the day—hopefully having remembered to bring something for lunch!

Rose found the company capable of doing this, using a test developed in Poland. Rupert Graves, from GeneMe UK, the company that brought this test to the UK and runs them for *Sleepless*, explains that “the test is called FRANKD, which stands for Fast, Reliable, Accurate Nucleic-based Kit for Covid-19 Detection. FRANKD uses RT-LAMP technology, a much newer technology compared to what’s generally being used in traditional labs. It’s different because there is no RNA extraction stage, which means we can run the test on-site. It also means we can deliver results in 30 minutes from each test run. Since we are running 24 tests per machine, it means we can run 48 tests per hour. We have two machines at *Sleepless* so we can process nearly 100 people per hour.”

GeneMe UK has an on-site team of three or four people, with those being tested only really having contact with the nurse who swabs them. “That’s a first filter: We are only testing people who are asymptomatic. If someone turns up with obvious symptoms, they shouldn’t be there in the first place and we’ll just send them away,” Graves explains. “We can swab the nose or mouth; it makes no difference. The swab goes into a buffer that contains a



Designed by Morgan Large, the set consists of a diamond-shaped stage, pointed towards the audience, with a large revolve by Tait and Adder Engineering set into it.

binding agent, which renders the virus inert if it's present. Then we pipette that into a reaction tube that contains our patented enzyme. The reaction tube then goes into a PCR machine which heats it to a constant 65°C. If fluorescence is detected it means that SARS-CoV-2 RNA is present, and that particular sample is considered positive."

"The protocol at each testing location is a bit different," he continues. "At *Sleepless* if there's a positive test, we will move them to one side and test again immediately. If it's positive again, they get sent home to self-isolate and request a test from the NHS." He admits that "we do get inconclusive results every now and again. In such cases we also retest immediately." But he also notes that a key complication of on-site testing is actually dealing with group dynamics when people get results: "Normally, people get test results by post or email when they are at home. In this type of testing environment everyone gets their result at the same time and there is a group pressure to share the result. This being the case, it is really important to consider psychological welfare in addition to the risks of COVID-19." The Yoti app offers

a secure route for communicating the test result and allowing a person to display when they last took a test: "Yoti is a UK-based digital identity company that works with both governments and large corporations. The close integration with Yoti means that it is a fast, secure, and totally paperless resource. We are so much more data-secure compared to most testing processes, where results are shared on pieces of paper that anyone can read." The claim is that this test can detect the virus' presence within a few days of someone being infected, early in what is now accepted to be the roughly 14-day period before physical symptoms appear.

A key question is, of course, cost: Every person every day quickly adds up. "The standard testing-as-a-service price is £50 per test," Graves reveals, though hinting that that's not what they're paying here. Rose puts the cost of testing at £60,000 for the show's run, which ends on September 27. Inevitably, the question becomes whether the testing regime has to be this rigorous, and in early discussions with the people and unions involved with the show Rose had proposed the test not be daily. He does



A set of flown slatted blinds (also by Tait, engineered to concertina inside each other because of the limited flying height in the venue) drop in for certain scenes.

now concede that doing it every day “has given the cast, the company, and the musicians great confidence,” and he has achieved concessions from some of the unions that the time spent waiting for the test doesn’t count as “on-the-clock” time. During production, testing took place in the venue’s big lobby; there was a strange hushed calm over this in the early days, a strange nervousness about the process from those waiting to be tested (with newcomers happy to take advice from those who’d been through the process—throat less intrusive than nose, but only allowed if you haven’t drunk or eaten anything for the preceding half hour or so), and about the possible result from those sitting patiently post-test. Regulars had quickly learned to bring a book or other distraction to while away the time. But once everyone was in, there was a definite sense that you might now be in the safest place in London.

A few weeks after *Sleepless* restarted, the British Government announced its Project Moonshot, in effect proposing to extend this test-and-passport-app-as proof approach to the entire British population.

Once inside

Accept that the test proves everyone is COVID-free and there is, of course, an argument that masks could be dispensed with—but everyone is still wearing them. It does no harm, of course, also because while the show’s policy is testing, the venue’s is that masks must be worn. The only exception was for the cast onstage while performing; apart from that even director Morgan Young was masked up, though he did switch to a transparent face visor while working with the cast: “It just works better, because people can see your mouth,” he notes—before reflecting the general sense of everyone there about being “so excited to be back.”

During tech, the scene was familiar—production desks across seats—but with everything a bit more spread apart than usual, with people who might normally sit together (such as the video designer and programmer) on separate desks, and with specific areas behind each desk taped off to try to control who could get too close to whom. The biggest effect on the usual way of working was, as lighting designer Ken Billington notes, “just in those little moments

when you want to run down to someone and have a chat with them about something. That wasn't really possible anymore." This audio department was tasked to help overcome this problem, upgrading the comms system in use on the show to a Clear-Com HelixNet/FreeSpeak digital system able to give more rings to allow both private communications within a department and easier communication across departments.

While this was the first indoor production to be back, it should be noted that it is not entirely a COVID-era show: the load-in and first day of tech was all achieved pre-COVID. The load-out at the end of what is now a relatively short run will be COVID-era, something production manager John Rowland is giving consideration to. But the two particular problems presented as part of getting going again were of walking back into a building and turning on equipment (lighting, sound, automation, video) that had sat idle for almost six months, and then adapting both working methods and the show as a whole, including its staging, to deal with COVID.

The equipment part went better than some had expected: With a few tiny exceptions, everything powered up and worked, though caution was the watchword with Rowland bringing both TAIT, who'd supplied the scenic automation, and Unusual, who'd supplied the rigging, "back in to recommission everything as if we'd just finished the load-in."

For working practices, Rowland turned to his heads of department for their thoughts. "We had a big Zoom meeting, after which each head of department wrote their COVID assessment. I thought we'd have to go through lots of versions of this, but we're at version 1.1 and everyone seems happy. Of course, some of that might just be because everyone wants to come back to work, but equally some have kids and the like, so everyone also wants to be safe." The final document covers the testing procedure, general procedures for the rehearsal room (including all actors being off-book straightaway so that no hard copies of scripts or scores were required), for inside the venue (including hand sanitizing, one-way systems, masks worn backstage at all times, designated items such as comms and handheld mics for anyone using them, and wiping down and disinfecting of equipment), and then department by department. Generally, the aim was to reduce contact points and interaction times, so careful timetabling for cast members to be fitted with wigs by wig crew wearing PPE, and cast members doing much of the work of fitting their own radio mics and packs. Much of the detail is common sense in the style of so many health and safety risk assessments—but it only now feels like commonsense because it's been thought about, written down, and is now being followed. The show also has two nominated COVID reps—the company manager and one of the cast—to allow issues to be identified and resolved.

In practice, the two very noticeable things during tech



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were the director's willingness to make changes to the blocking or staging to separate people slightly more or to ensure they weren't singing directly at each other, and then the work done by stage manager Luciano Macis and his team to manage people backstage and coming on and off stage. Macis notes that director Morgan Young "just wants this to work and is always happy to make sure we're all on the same page. He'll request something, then we just make sure we don't have unnecessary crossovers, and that people come down just before their entrances, so we don't have unnecessary contact." That extends to the cast when they're not onstage: "The dressing rooms are stage left, and we have all of the ensemble on the downstairs level with the principals upstairs—the ensemble also contains the covers, so if one of the principals becomes unwell their cover has been separated from them as much as possible." Another new duty has been "track and trace on the props—if it's going to be used again it gets cleaned as soon as it comes offstage, and every day everything is cleaned down and sprayed with an anti-bacterial mist." Infection control also extends to clothing and, particularly, shoes: "Anyone coming in from outside has to wear a different pair of shoes to come onstage; the stage also gets misted and will be mopped with disinfectant before each show."

If the general COVID document required just one revision, dealing with the band, who live offstage on a platform stage right, has required a great deal more work from Rowland and sound designer Simon Biddulph. "There was talk early on about just recording it and doing it to a track, but that didn't sit well with the show's general philosophy of getting people back to work. But I think Simon is up to version 15 of his band layout now," Rowland notes. Biddulph himself thinks he's on version 30, in part because the guidance from government about the risks to musicians and from different instruments kept changing without ever really being made definitive. "The end result is that we are more spaced out than normal, and we have more screens than normal, though that's been a bit of a chal-

lenge because there's been a shortage of Perspex, since it's a byproduct of oil and there's less oil being used," Biddulph explains. "It's quite a tight fit; if anyone from sound has to get in there, they will be in full PPE." There's also, of course, the potential for a musician to arrive and fail the test. "What we've agreed is that we'll make an announcement and start the show without them, hoping the audience understands until a dep arrives and can be tested in," Rowland explains.

Design

Designed by Morgan Large, the set consists of a diamond-shaped stage, pointed towards the audience, with a large revolve by Tait and Adder Engineering set into it. On it stands a permanent structure representing the domestic locations of the show (principally the houseboat that leading man Sam lives on, and the house that leading lady Annie lives in). This can be hidden from view by flown slatted blinds (also by Tait, engineered to concertina inside each other because of the limited flying height in the

venue) that drop in to surround it. This also provides the exterior of the top of the Empire State Building for the show's final scene. All of this is controlled from a TAIT's entertainment automation platform and is overseen by automation head Nick Page and his deputy James Brittle.

Backing all of this are a series of LED video wall sections (from PRG) with a header section of LED wall following the set's diamond shape, and with two Panasonic 20K projectors allowing imagery to be projected onto the screens when in. All are used to set the detail of each location using architectural blueprints, reflecting Sam's profession.

It's one of those designs in which, in some ways, the set designer has provided a blank canvas for the video designer, that role filled here by Ian William Galloway. As Galloway explains, "Morgan Large and I have been through many different shapes for the set, but the concept has always been the same: The essential conceit is that he's an architect in the early '90s, so he lives onstage in an architectural model of his houseboat. The video around





Sound designer Simon Biddulph has repeatedly revised the band's layout to conform to changing guidance from the government about the risks to musicians.

that is low polygon '90s silhouettes and architectural sketches, a concise and abstracted idea that is very quick to create. The nice thing about a show with such a pure minimal design is that, once we knew the idea there was no tug or pull—we did some test versions, drew it all, it was very simple.”

Despite the relative simplicity of the design, Galloway is using a high-powered playback system, a disguise gx 2c, programmed by David Butler, a choice made because of one other key design decision: Behind the imagery on the screens is almost always a colored background layer. “The design is white lines, black silhouettes, and I don’t really care what color goes behind it,” Galloway explains, “and we knew that every time the lights changed, the sky would have to change color, too. If the lighting designer is choosing those colors, I’d have to match it. It’s much easier just to let the LD color all the things that need color, so we’ve given him two controls, one for the top color, one for the bottom then we work out the gradient in between. To make that as good as possible we’re working with ten-bit color, for which we needed the gx 2c.” This has started opening up new possibilities for next time in the designer’s mind: “The show is all drawn at the moment, but having that server means we have Notch, and if we do the show again it would be interesting to turn some of our locations into 3D models that Notch could then manipulate.”

On COVID-era working, Galloway’s comment is interesting: “What we’ve found is that with the desire not to exhaust everyone and with the time for COVID testing every morning, we’ve ended up doing much nicer 1pm – 8pm sessions, the option for 8pm – 10pm technical time if needed. It ended up being a much nicer working day than the usual six long days a week.”

Lighting

“I’ve now seen the pre-view of retirement; I have no interest at all in seeing the actual show,” is Billington’s comment on the time between leaving the venue to catch one of the last flights back to New York back in March, and arriving back in the UK to serve his two-week quarantine in August. He was thrilled to be back at work, thrilled to be back in a theatre, and reunited with his team (including associate Dale Driscoll, programmer Vic Brennan, show lighting crew Tom

Boucher and Lizzy Gunby, and Chris Vaughan, deputizing for production electrician Sam Floyd). The team was delighted; Vaughan was “so excited to be back in a theatre that I couldn’t sleep last night. It is so much better than working at a supermarket, which is what I have been doing!”

The first task: moving the followspots, three Robert Juliat Cyranos originally clustered together at center on the venue’s rear catwalk, further apart to conform to the UK’s “1m-plus” social distancing rules. Consideration has been given to covering these roles: There is a desire not to have extra people tested and in the building each day, but, Rowland explains, “We have a cover who lives locally who knows all the plots who we will call in if necessary.”

With the show produced to a tight budget, Billington’s rig is a mix and match of equipment that PRG had available, including ETC Revolutions, PRG Icons and Best Boys, Martin by Harman Vipers and Auras, GLP impression X4 wash lights plus X4 Bars lining the back of the flown blinds, and tungsten ETC Source Fours fitted with color scrollers. These, plus the video wall colored background and various practicals, (including City Theatrical QolorFLEX LED tape run wirelessly via SHoW DMX), are controlled from an ETC Eos Ti console, which also sends cue triggers to the video playback system.

Throughout the show, Billington displays his usual mastery of color, especially the delicate lavenders and pinks that in less experienced hands can often become muddy, his ability to get right into the performers’ eyes, and his skill at taking a scene seamlessly from clear naturalism to highly colorful musicality. He may have been less inclined to run down to chat to the director, but that just resulted in a little more occasional shouting to get the director’s attention before switching back to using comms. (He does note that “it’s uncomfortable to wear a mask with a headset, but

those are the rules.”) He is also full of praise for his producer for getting the show back on at all: “Michael has had to do so much, including even finding the testing, which is what’s really making this possible, and has done much of that without any support. I think he’s done a remarkable job—and I am delighted to be back to finish this!”

Sound

Lighting, video, and automation can generally operate physically distanced from each other and from the performers. This is less possible for the sound department, where the mixer has traditionally been surrounded by audience and the crew backstage have been fitting and checking radio mics, and so it is Harry Barker and Luke Capay, on the sound team, who have had to make perhaps the biggest changes to day-to-day procedures. Mics and packs will be cleaned and disinfected each day, and cast members will fit their mic packs (each placed inside a balloon to keep it dry) and run the cable up to their heads themselves before coming, one at a time, to a sound check point where the A2 in full PPE will fit and check the mic, replacing their gloves before moving to the next person. At the end of the show, the cast removes mics and packs and leaves them to be collected; the sound department cleans each one before storing them in plastic Nano Silver anti-bacterial containers overnight. Everyone has a dedicated mic, including covers. Out front, the seats closest to the sound desk have been removed, the operator wears a mask while mixing, and the console is wiped down and cleaned each day.

The sound system is run from a DiGiCo SD10 console, fed from Sennheiser SK 6000 radio mics and sent out to the audience through d&b audiotechnik loudspeakers—a T10 center array, ground-supported Y8 arrays on either

side, E6 front-fills and E8 delays, Y-Series subs, and E3 and E4s for foldback and spot effects. System Sound & Light supplied the equipment. “But it was great to be back, and to get some lovely reviews about the sound, which is a rarity in theatre,” Biddulph notes, crediting also production engineers Sam King and Margot Gloaguen and programmer Simon Sayer alongside Barker and Capay.

Back in a theatre with an audience

The last unknown in the process is whether an audience will attend. Do they want to come to an unusual venue with unknown air quality to be surrounded by strangers, or would they much rather stay at home?

Sleepless suggests they will. The socially distanced capacity of the theatre is 401, and it felt like that many were there, undeterred by leaving home, by public transport, by the temperature check at the door, by the hand sanitizer, by having to register their presence to allow them to be traced if an infection is later identified or by having to wear a mask throughout. Despite only a third of the seats being sold, broken up into blocks to suit groups of up to four from the same social bubble, the auditorium didn’t feel as empty as you might fear. What the reduced capacity and extra aisles removed was the need to squeeze past people to get to your seat, even if any kind of one-way system seemed to break down in the interval and at the end of the show.

Most importantly: We laughed, we clapped, we collectively had a good time as a group, rediscovering the magic that makes live events unique. It’s a first step back to normality, but it’s a first step someone had to make. It’s unclear who’ll make the next, but during the performance I did spot the masked figure of Andrew Lloyd Webber sitting auditorium center just checking things out... 📶



Masks and face shields were worn at all times, the one exception being the cast onstage.