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## *Two Strangers (Carry a Cake Across New York)*

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THEATRE



## On the Town

## Two Strangers (Carry a Cake Across New York) is a study in intimate design

By David Barbour

**O**n Broadway, modesty is rarely seen as a virtue. Even as costs rise, producers seem willing to spring for bigger and more extravagant entertainments like *The Great Gatsby*, *Moulin Rouge!*, and (the biggest of them all) *Stranger Things: The First Shadow*. But change is in the air. Following the quick failure of several splashy new musicals in the last couple of seasons, producers are starting to notice the success of *Maybe Happy Ending* and *Operation Mincemeat* (not to mention *Six*), all of which take a more intimate approach. Outside the musical theatre sphere, the raucous comedy *Oh, Mary!* continues on its blockbuster way.

This new Broadway environment has been hospitable to *Two Strangers (Carry a Cake Across New York)*, a two-hander, transferring from the West End, that, almost heretically, relies on a solid book and character-revealing songs (both by Jim Barne and Kit Buchan). Directed with a light hand by Tim Jackson, it's the funny-wistful tale of opposing personalities thrown together during the preparations for a Financial District wedding. Dougal arrives from the UK to meet the groom, the father he has never known. (His parents' marriage broke up before he was born; his dad moved to New York and became a successful financier.) Robin, whose 30-year-old sister is marrying Dougal's considerably older father, is scurrying around town, carrying out last-minute errands.

Dougal, who works in a cinema and whose sense of New York was shaped by movies like *Home Alone*, is the most starry-eyed of tourists, bent on hitting all the sights. Robin, an overworked barista in a Village coffee joint, wants nothing to do with this rube from the English countryside. But, horrified by his sleazy Chinatown hotel room, she agrees to let him tag along while she picks up the all-important wedding cake. Culinary disaster ensues, followed by a halting, yet growing, emotional involvement. Lurking in the background are nagging questions: Why has Dougal's dad suddenly decided to include him in his life? Why is Robin, so busy with wedding preparations, not on the guest list? And why hasn't she seen her beloved grandmother, who raised her, in two years?

All will be revealed in a musical that neatly balances laughter and sadness, as two likable people, facing hard truths about themselves, fall into something that looks like love, leading to a finale that charmingly leaves open the question of what happens next.

Faced with a book written more like a screenplay than a traditional musical, scenic designer Soutra Gilmour (whose

Broadway credits include revivals of *Merrily We Roll Along*, *Sunset Boulevard*, and *Waiting for Godot*, along with the long-running musical *& Juliet*, covered in LSA's January 2023 issue), came up with a clever solution: a unit set featuring two towering piles of luggage on a turntable. There's more than meets the eye here: Many of the pieces open up to reveal various locations: two hotel rooms, Robin's workplace, a bar, and a Chinese restaurant, among others. The design is also a sly comment on the story, in which the characters are ships passing in the night, getting thrown together for a potentially life-changing moment.

Gilmour says this is the first time she has worked with Tim Jackson as a director (he also choreographed *Merrily We Roll Along*), and she notes that the design "is something that is so particularly of Tim and I. We went through loads of different ways of doing this show, but some parameters were really important to us. We didn't want to spend two-and-a-half hours watching actors push and pull furniture around. We wanted to find a delivery service that would present each space to them."

Also, she says, the show "is a little gem. It's two people and these beautiful songs. It's incredibly gentle and delicate. We wanted to get the actors closer to the audience." Given these qualities, a sense of intimacy was crucial. "At the Kiln [the London Fringe theatre where the production started], the proscenium is two-thirds of the way to the back of the stage. It's also a modular stage; you can take it all away and have a little island in the space. The band went upstage of the proscenium. In front, I had this complete world that nobody else could step into or out of. It is just [Dougal and Robin's] for 36 hours. They're together, and they're close to the audience."

And behind them are those twin towers of baggage. "We tried different ways of framing it, but the idea of the suitcases just fell out of the sky at some point," Gilmour says. "Of course, there's the simple thing about travel, with Dougal coming to New York. And there's something bigger and more poetic about the emotional baggage aspect of it." Also, she notes, "is the idea of lost luggage. It's a kind of sadness that is useful in this piece, about two people trying to find some joy and connection." She also took inspiration from "how my grandmother kept her old black-and-white family photographs in a suitcase under her bed. In this show, the suitcases are a portal for memory and family."

Finally, Gilmour notes, "New York is a city built on people bringing their stuff with them, whether it's the pizza shop or their sewing skills, or whatever. It's where immi-

All photos: Matthew Murphy

# Lighting & Sound America

## THEATRE

grants have come with all their stuff and literally built the city. There's something powerful in that."

Of course, she notes, the set is "a practical vestibule to hide a drinks cabinet, a bed, and a restaurant. Most of my work involves sculptural objects in a space, whether it's the screen in *Sunset Boulevard* or the tunnel in *Waiting for Godot*. In this case, the sculpture of suitcases gives us a three-dimensional form that actors could sit on, remove things from, and climb on, and be on, behind, on top of, or in front of. It propels the action downstage."

Figuring out the place of each location inside the set, vis-à-vis the angle of the turntable, "was a progressive piece of work," Gilmour says. "We did a version in the model, which got changed in the drawings, and then at the Kiln we shifted things. Then we went to ART [in Cambridge, Massachusetts] and ticked it a little bit. It's a kind of a Tetris game; you're switching things and pushing them against each other, creating reorientations so it looks like a really pleasing object." With some accuracy, she adds, looking at the luggage onstage, it resembles "a set of skyscrapers and roofs, the architecture of New York."

Interestingly, Gilmour says, in moving the show to ever

larger theatres [including the Criterion in London's West End], "It is actually, unbelievably, exactly the same footprint we had in the Kiln. It has grown into those bigger spaces. Of course, it has that intimacy, but it also has a kind of epic quality." She concedes, "We've added a couple of flown pieces at the Longacre." These are thematically linked: "Whether it's a light in the subway, the neon sign in the Chinese restaurant, or the traffic signal in Flatbush, all the flown objects are light-related." One other lighting touch involves many of the suitcases with LED tape. "It's a kind of glow-up element," she notes, "It's about luminescence," a quality that underscores the show's sense of romance.

Overall, Gilmour cites the "cohesiveness of the team and the gentleness and the kindness of the writer-composers. They're just incredible." Many hands have achieved a unified result.

### Lighting

Jack Knowles, recently seen on Broadway with a revival of *Caroline, or Change*; *Patriots*, a trenchant drama about the rise of Vladimir Putin; and *Sunset Boulevard* (with a set by



Above: Many of the luggage pieces that make up the set open to reveal various locations: two hotel rooms, Robin's workplace, a bar, and a Chinese restaurant, among others. Opposite and previous spread: Knowles' lighting helps to define many locations and emotional states.

Gilmour), goes back to the show's earlier iteration in London's Kiln Theatre, which seats 292. From there, it transferred to the Criterion Theatre in the West End, which seats 588, the ART [about 550], and now Broadway's Longacre, with room for 1,091 patrons. The latter may be the best location so far, he notes. "The Criterion is located underground, almost like a bunker, and the show was bursting at the seams there." He says. "It sits really nicely in the Longacre." The larger space showcases the actors "floating in the space; if really helps you focus on them."

A set design that only sketches in various locations posed singular challenges for Knowles. Still, he adds, "As much as the locations are important in a show like this, the emotion of it is equally so. I didn't want to shoehorn myself into being too distracted with what JFK [Airport] or a coffee shop looks like. It's more about getting the audience to tap into the story. For example, I made JFK bright and open-looking; a lot of it was about letting the audience meet the characters for the first time. There's some warmth there, which allows the audience to relax and realize the show is funny." He also notes the desire to highlight Dougal's character: "He is discovering New York for the first time, trying to portray some of his wild excitement. And there are big moments that get very busy, evoking what the characters are feeling." A good example is the trip to a nightclub, a key moment of loosening up between Dougal and Robin, which allows Knowles to cut loose with saturated colors

and ballyhoos. (See photo on page 30.)

Because of the story's peripatetic nature, shuffling back and forth between various spots in Manhattan and Brooklyn, much of Knowles' lighting is also dedicated to creating fluid transitions. "There's a cinematic quality to the piece," he says. "There's a lot of movement also, in the way the turntable works and in how the piles of suitcases evolve." Again, this is linked to the story: Dougal, who works in a cinema back home, "has all these bad references from the wrong film at the wrong time." ("Keep the change, ya filthy animal!")

Gilmour's set design left Knowles with plenty of options regarding positions. "It's so exposed; there are no walls, or ceiling, or portals." However, he adds, "It was more of a challenge in terms of getting positions to light the right bits of the suitcase, while also wanting a sense of order and neatness in the rig. This part of the show's aesthetic definitely comes from the Kiln, a theatre without wings and with a sort of egg-crate grid overhead."

For the band, which is located upstage, behind the set, "It was an ongoing process of getting the orchestra to a place where they were able to see what they needed without being dominating in the overall picture, fully lit. So they are predominantly lit by their music stand lights, with birdies, Source Four Minis, and various little lights picking out parts of their instruments. I was very keen to have that lighting contained, so that it has a different feel. Whenever

# Lighting & Sound America



THEATRE



Above and opposite: "Most of my work involves sculptural objects in a space," Gilmour says. "In this case, the sculpture of suitcases gives us a three-dimensional form that actors could sit on, remove things from, and climb on, and be on behind, on top of, or in front of. It propels the action onstage."

the band is visible, I start with music stand lights that look the same," before adding anything else.

Knowles' workhorse profile is the ETC/High End Systems Halcyon Titanium; the product is a good example of how ETC has adapted High End's moving light technology for the theatre, with CMY/CTO color mixing, a four-plane shutter system, and relatively quiet performance. In the show, "They make a sort of subtle top light," Knowles says. "I like what they do with color, and they're good with all sorts of skin tones. But they also do quite a fat beam for making a backlight wash look. In terms of expanding to the bigger theatre, they have a bit more of the punch we needed."

Another key component is a set of GLP Impression X4 bars. "Instead of being hung as one long bar to make light curtain effects," Knowles says, "they're individually placed." The rig also features a considerable number of GLP FR1s, which, one imagines, are useful here for their color-mixing and compact size. They are paired with Martin MAC Ones, which pack beam, wash, and eye candy functions into a single fixture; they, too, are notably

compact. "It's a slightly weird mix of these two tiny lights," the designer notes. "The FR1s are wider than the MAC Ones, and not quite as punchy; they both deal with colors ever so slightly differently." This isn't necessarily a problem, he adds, because, given so many locations, "it's not a show with one palette, so to speak." Filling out the rig are GLP X5 Wash units, used in both shin and high positions. "They are almost too punchy for the show, but they're very good at doing a range of colors, warm and cold. They're also nice and quiet." ETC Source Four Lustrs are responsible for most of the production's cross light. The followspots are Robe FORTÉs. Lighting is controlled by an ETC Eos console.

Noting the difference between West End theatres (tall and shallow) and Broadway houses (lower and wider), Knowles says he has to "fill out into the corners" of the stage. "The three-quarter backlight position from up in the corners is much more present. Otherwise, it is much the same. It came to wanting to keep the charm of the show, preserving it without overdoing it on Broadway."

## Sound

Sound designer Tony Gayle is making his official Broadway debut on *Two Strangers*... although he did serve as an associate to Ken Travis on the musical *Aladdin*. In London and Europe, he has designed many big musicals, including *The Wiz*, *Newsies*, Disney's *Aida*, and *Kinky Boots*, although he is no stranger to smaller shows; for example, he also did the highly acclaimed Donmar Warehouse production of *Next to Normal*, starring Caissie Levy.

Big or small, however, he says his approach is the same. "I pride myself that I can scale up and scale down as needed," putting a premium on intelligibility in all cases. Moving from one theatre to another, he says, "The biggest change has been in the physical design. You have to play to the room. I don't have a template; I very much approach each show and each venue for its unique characteristics. I'm a very pragmatic sound designer—I approach each show for what it needs. What I really care about is: Can I hear the lyrics, and can I hear the orchestrations and detail in the songs?"

It was at the ART production that Gayle settled on hav-

ing an L-Acoustics loudspeaker rig. "It wasn't my initial choice," he admits, "because, in the UK, L-Acoustics is seen as quite expensive. But when [PRG, the sound gear supplier] offered it, it was a no-brainer: I could definitely use it."

The rig is built around L-Acoustics' Kara II boxes. It features left and right main arrays, each comprised of ten Kara II enclosures, addressing the orchestra and mezzanine seating areas. Flown above those hangs are two arrays of five Kara IIs per side that cover the upper balcony seating. Between those two upper arrays are three A Series loudspeaker hangs—three A10 Focus units over two A10 Wides—interspersed with a pair of low-frequency hangs, both featuring a trio of SB18 subs. Two additional SB18s are located one per side behind and beneath the main Kara II arrays.

The Kara boxes "give me the subtlety that I need in the atre—the transparency, the sound of it at a lower level, and the clarity and detail," Gayle says. "It can also scale up when I need it to sound like a bigger box." He adds, "With a lot of other speaker manufacturers, when it gets

# Lighting & Sound America

THEATRE



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loud, it starts to change tonally. You have to use plug-ins and EQ just to tame certain elements, especially the vocals. For me, vocals have to be very linear, very across the board, because that is what is driving the story. That's

so important."

Beyond that, two dozen coaxial X8 enclosures are spread throughout the room for various fill applications, while 65 ultra-compact 5XT loudspeakers surround all

band reverb, to make the five-piece band—a key-boardist/musical director, percussionist, drummer, guitarist, and bassist—sound bigger. "It's making sure that the songs all sit within the same world, so you don't feel like something just came out of nowhere," he says. For the actors, he says, "I looked for speaker positions for onstage foldback because, obviously, at some point, the actors will be in front of a speaker. I worked closely with Soutra to negate those moments. It worked out well in the end."

Again, vocal intelligibility drives Gayle's design strategy. "There are seven hangs of speakers on the main truss: two are subs, and three are dedicated purely to vocals—no band goes through them at all," Gayle explains. "Vocals then hit every other speaker as well, mixed with the band. I'd say vocals represent 75% throughout all the speakers. The front-fills are predominantly vocals."

While Gayle wants the band to sound as big as possible, he needs robust vocal energy—especially with only two cast members and no pre-recorded vocals. "All those speaker hangs are there to cover the space and make sure I've got that headroom right."

Gayle deployed two cardioid sub arrays on the truss to keep low-frequency energy off the stage. While he typically prefers ground-based subs that couple with the building structure, the flown configuration worked well here. "I was able to steer the sub image, and because they're around the same height as the band, it felt right," Gayle says. "I was pleased with the sub coverage—it's quite a big theatre for having no subs on the floor. We've got six flown in two cardioid hangs of three, plus one in each side box." The cardioid configuration keeps low-end energy focused on the audience while maintaining the punch that the score's diverse mix of genres requires.

Regarding the placement of the musicians, Gayle says, "I've done a lot of shows with the band onstage. We all know what kind of beast that is, and how to tame it. Here, it very much aided the piece because there are only two people onstage, and having the musicians made them feel like part of the action. Each band member has their own [Aviom] mini-mixer; they control their own instrumental and vocal mixes."

However, he adds, "I spent a lot of time trying to tame the percussion. In London, we had just two keyboards, a guitar, and drums. For here, we added quite a big percussion rig upstage center. Suddenly, I had all this acoustic sound I couldn't really hide, so I worked with it and was very clear about my instrument placements. We have screening around the percussion."

The actors sport DPA 4066 mics in discreet headworn placement as opposed to the more obvious use of headsets. "In London," Gayle says, "the actor playing Robin was on a headset, and Sam's was hidden away. We tried

three seating levels and line the left and right sides of the stage for 360° audio coverage. The entire system is powered and processed by 32 LA4X amplified controllers.

Gayle uses the surround system for subtle effects, like

# Lighting & Sound America

## THEATRE

having both of them on headsets at ART because everyone said, 'This is the US, and we're going to have to make the sound bigger.' I fought against it because I knew I could make it work. We went with the headsets, and they were fine. But when we went to Broadway, I had a conversation with the director and the producers, saying that I really wanted to go with headworn mics. Using headsets feels like cheating when I don't have to use them. I'm so proud of that fact." The wireless gear is Shure Axient, "which," he says, "is my go-to system because it's much, much lighter. It also has a user-friendly operating software. I'm also making my team's lives easier." The band mics are a mix of units from Audio-Technica, AKG, Audix, Countryman, Shure, and Neumann.

The sound is controlled on a DiGiCo SD10. "It's quite old now, but it's what we originally did the show on at the Kiln," Gayle says. "And it works because we don't need that many inputs." He also delivers a cascade of authentic New York-centric sounds, including the AirTrain, the subway, and a church, with plenty of ambient street noises. "The New York City soundscapes are a mixture of my own recordings and library sounds," he says. "I tried to be as authentic as possible without being too obvious. In the London version of the show, I really had to lay into the

New York City sounds, but on Broadway, they're a lot more subtle." The sound effects are played back via QLab.

Other key personnel include Judith Schoenfeld (production stage manager), Alfredo Macias (stage manager), Thea McRae (assistant stage manager), Brian Webb (associate scenic designer), Rachel Wingate (UK associate to Soutra Gilmour), Jessica Creager and Kirk Fitzgerald (associate lighting designers), Cody Spencer (associate sound designer), Andrew C. Cappelli (production carpenter), Sumner Ellsworth and Jonah Camiel (moving light programmers), Chad Rowe (automation programmer), Laacey Gibby-Brown (head carpenter), Dennis Wright (house carpenter), Michael W. Brown (production electrician), Zak Katz (head electrician), Richard Rogers (house electrician), Matt Nieski (board operator), Erik Putz (followspot operator), Mike Wojchik and Jake Scudder (production sound), Curt Miller (sound engineer), Lily Tomasic (assistant scenic designer), Hope Debelius (assistant lighting designer), Miriam Milder (assistant sound), BB Prop Services/Emiliano Pares (production props), Rich Klinger (production props associate), Olivia Wells (head props), Melchizedek Elcock (house props).

*Two Strangers (Carry a Cake Across New York)* continues its open-ended run at the Longacre Theatre. 📺