

Trotting the Globe on One Set

Designing Who's Your Daddy?

Generally, people test out their care-taking skills on a dog before committing to a child. The play *Who's Your Daddy?* turns that on its head, as it begins with a lost dog and ends in the adoption of a child.

In his true life journey of adopting a Ugandan orphan, actor Johnny O'Callaghan discusses how he leaves New York for a big break in Los Angeles where he finds work, more space, sunshine, beautiful lovers, and a faithful dog. When things turn sour, with his rock star boyfriend kicking him to the curb and his dog running away, O'Callaghan rediscovers a deep depression and an alcohol problem. As he is papering his neighborhood with fliers about the lost dog, an acquaintance invites him to help film a documentary about an orphanage in Uganda. The play covers the nine months that ensue as he meets a three-year-old boy, attempts to adopt him, and organizes his life suitably enough to raise a child.



When lighting designer Michael O'Connor initially read the show's script, he thought he counted 50 light cues, but with the constant movement, "I think we topped out at 130," he says. This was partially because the play takes place in more than 30 locations across the globe, all of which are denoted by a combination of O'Callaghan's characterizations and O'Connor's lighting.

The studio space at the Irish Repertory Theatre is notoriously small—O'Connor estimates it at 16' x 16'—leaving little room for location changes by set designer Charles Corcoran. Thus, the team agreed on a muted palette for the set; Corcoran's design included rough-cut lumber for the side walls, a wall made from PVC piping, and a painted watercolor wall as the background. All these elements absorbed O'Connor's lighting well and offered clear distinction from the bright, white light of Los Angeles to the sumptuous greens of the Ugandan rainforest.

The most predominant feature of the set was the PVC wall with a cutout of a wild Syringa tree, which was built by Ken Larson Studios of Garnerville, New York. Corcoran says the wall was intended to invoke the cross-section of reeds and grasses that crop up across the plains of Africa.

“We kept finding that what was important was this very natural environment,” Corcoran says. “Predominantly we’re in Africa. Even when we were in LA, his mind kind of drifts back to Africa.”

Directly behind the wall is a watercolor painted on the wall by Corcoran and his assistant, Kristin Meyer. “I had found various watercolors of Africa and took those various browns and lavenders and muted them,” he says.

This worked out well for O’Connor. “Charlie’s set is beautiful. It took the colors so well,” he says. “There was never a problem where I said ‘Wow. It looks great on the actor but not on the set. The PVC wall allowed me to stream light through that, and again, all the lush colors allowed us to change locations and bring across the beauty of the story.”

This worked out well for O’Connor also. “Charlie’s set is beautiful. It took the colors so well” he says. “There was never a problem where I said ‘Wow. It looks great on the actor but not on the set. The PVC wall allowed me to stream light through it, and again, all the lush colors allowed us to change locations and bring across the beauty of the story”

The pale quality of the light in the Los Angeles scenes stemmed from the actor’s suicidal ideations and general despair, O’Connor says. When the colors change, they reflect the richness of Uganda as well as the way O’Callaghan was “awoken by Africa and the life that it brought him,” he says.

The bold colors were unusual in that O’Connor would generally not use such colors in a one-man play, he says. These included an aqua in place of muted blue for the sky and a deep yellow for the sun. “Just going for the lush idea made Uganda seem really beautiful,” he says.

Other choices also reflected the way lighting was used to set the mood. In one scene, O’Callaghan stands before a judge who is deciding whether or not he can adopt the child. The judge is very imposing, and the team originally planned to use a lot of back light. “But we didn’t want to go scary because this is the guy who says ‘I see the love between you and this child,’” he says. However, in a scene with a town supervisor who is trying to extort the actor, O’Connor went for it. “We tried to isolate it and take the light off the stage,” he says.



Director Tom Ormeny's openness to collaboration allowed O'Connor to make strong creative choices. "A lot of directors want to hold back nighttime scenes, that you have to be able to see the actor more. Johnny's acting ability and the character he brought allowed me to achieve a true nighttime feel. You were so drawn to the character; that let me get away with a lot."



One challenge O'Connor faced was the amount of power available at the Irish Repertory Theatre. The building was running 200A total for all components of both theaters and, generally, O'Connor says this is the amount of power he would use just for lighting. However,

the staff accommodated the problem as certain shows had tripped the power before. To avoid similar disaster, he installed two Color Force 72" RGBA Strip Lights which reduced the power requirement.

Other lights in the rig included nine ETC Source 4s, three Altman 3.5 Lekos, eight ETC PAR WFLs, two ETC PAR MFLs, one PAR-16 Birdie, sixteen 6" Fresnels, and two 3" Fresnels. For dimming and control, the designer had one ETC Microvision FX, one ETC Sensor with twelve 2,400W dimmers, and five ETC Smart Module 2s.

The space also has an extremely low grid just 7' up, while O'Callaghan is nearly 6'2". This meant tucking lights into every corner and attempting to get them as high as possible. "You don't want to break the magic," O'Connor says.

A large steam pipe also cuts through the set, which Corcoran covered with burlap and barbed wire, an important element of O'Callaghan's African memories.

In the end, one is left with a heartwarming show simultaneously hilarious, hopeful, and tragic. "I light like 40 shows a year," O'Connor says. I enjoy working on all of them, but it's rare that one really grabs my heart," he says.

O'Connor wasn't the only one that felt that way. At press time, the show had received a two-week extension. —**Breyanna Knoll**