

MUSICAL Q&A: TRISH LINDSTRÖM

Fine actor and singer delivers a Czech mate in all-Canadian production of *Once*

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One of the brightest lights on local and Stratford stages has been Trish Lindström, who's made characters as diverse as Assassins' Squeaky Fromme and the eponymous Alice in **Through The Looking-Glass** so memorable. She's as good an actor as she is a singer, and now, in the all-Canadian production of the Tony Award-winning musical **Once**, she gets to use both skills – in addition to her piano playing – as the plucky Czech immigrant musician who meets a busker (Ian Lake) on the streets of Dublin. The show, with music and lyrics by Swell Seasons' Glen Hansard and Markéta Irglová, opens Sunday (February 22) at the Ed Mirvish Theatre for a limited run.

You've been in rehearsals for months and are finally previewing the show. What's it like to finally get it up in front of a living, breathing audience?

The thing about *Once* is that it's been tried and tested. But this is the kind of piece where in every production, even if they fill in actors, they will rehearse you for six weeks, to find stuff from the ground up. So that's been a treat. Some of the pressure has been taken off, because it's a play that works if you just breathe and talk. The stage feels like a cozy bowl, it doesn't feel presentational. The theatre is massive, but it still feels contained. As much as we're aware of the audience, it's cozy for us. And it feels like there's a structure that's safe beneath us.

But you can't get smug, right? How do you keep it fresh?

It's a balancing act. Audiences want to laugh and want to keep laughing. Our associate director keeps reminding us to sacrifice easy laughs for truths. With this show in particular, it really suffers if the actors play for laughs. You have to be aware where the laughs are so you're not speaking over them, but walk that razor's edge of the truth. You have to be present. It's easy to fall into repetitive patterns and go on autopilot. I've never done a show for eight shows a week for this long a run. That's in the back of my head: "How am I going to do this without falling into patterns?"

I imagine the show is "set." Is there still room to add personal touches?

Director/choreographers John Tiffany and Steven Hoggett worked with each other so closely so that the staging bleeds into the choreography which bleeds into the physicality. The essence of who these people are is

reflected in the text and in certain signature physicalities, and we've been given insight into those. I've been challenged with the process, sometimes feeling: "I don't want to use someone else's choice," and then dig my heels in. Then the choreographer will say: "It's the choreographer's choice to have her hands in her pockets at this moment." So it's tricky. But it's becoming easier now to think: "This is me. I am Girl." What's great is neither of them have names, so it's every Girl, and every Guy.

And it helps that our choreographer says: "Yes, these are steps, but nothing's really set to a strict beat. It's more set to a feeling, an essence. It has to remain raw, or else the piece might not affect the audience."

What's it like to play the piano onstage?

I played as a child, and stopped when I went to high school. I got to quite a high level. I was so intimidated of playing for anyone back then. I did my exams, had a keyboard with headphones so no one would hear me. Now I have a piano in the dressing room so I can play minutes before I go on. Which is great for your confidence levels. It's really a strange phenomenon to be out there. I'm actually playing. We're out there, playing and making mistakes. We're doing it. We're inside of it.

How well did you know Ian Lake [who plays Guy] before?

We worked at Stratford at the same time, but not on the same productions. I knew him, had mutual friends and we both live in the west end. We have a unique friendship. We also both trained at National Theatre School, which is interesting. We work differently when we're in a rehearsal room, but we're both going for the same thing: we're on the same page and speak a similar language in terms of the work. That's a gift.

How does it feel to have the ensemble playing music as well as acting and singing?

It's an incredible team of people. The ensemble sits at the side when they're not centre stage, but their energy comes through. Some of our warm-ups include going from sitting to sprinting. Because suddenly they'll have to get up to do a scene change. And we also have focus exercises, so when you're sitting on the sides you're not thinking about Oreo cookies. Their energy is filtered into the action of the play. We're all essentially telling the story together. Also: it's a real gift to be playing with an ensemble

of people and be forced to listen or the music just won't carry. We say that in plays, too, but with music, you really do have to listen or you'll be off. It's thrilling and exhilarating.

How is your Czech (with a bit of Irish) accent?

My dad is Estonian, so there's a little bit of Eastern European in me. As musicians, it helps that we have an ear for sounds. I've never found dialects too difficult. I visited the Czech Republic, and while I was there I asked a woman on a bus to say these Czech words I speak in the show, and I recorded her. One of them is "love." I think she thought I was asking her what the word meant, so she started hugging me on the bus! But I got the sounds. I think I went to the Czech Republic to get the flavour of the culture.

I'd met Markéta [Irglová, co-lyricist/composer] in the fall after a concert at the Mod Club, and I emailed her I was going to the Czech Republic, but she didn't get back to me until I had returned. She said [in an uncanny impression of Irglová's voice]: "Go stay with my mother and my family, she'd love to meet you!" It was really sweet. I sent her some photos I took of her home town. I wasn't familiar with Swell Season's music before, and now it's intoxicating. It's amazing to have that be some of the research.

This is a different kind of musical, it's very intimate and exposed. How does that feel?

It's like nothing else. I'm not even thinking of it as a musical. Last summer I worked at Stratford with Peter Sellars on *A Midsummer Night's Dream: A Chamber Play*, which felt similar. All these projects leading me in the direction of doing less. Stop acting. Stop hiding. It's terrifying. It's about not doing as much. Yes, we've been trained, we need technique to be able to throw it away. This isn't the kind of show where people will be saying [in a mock slick voice], "That was a great show!" It's episodic. There are so many colours in it. Some sections can soar or fall flat. Having consistency is what we're building toward. I think it's the kind of piece that will evolve and grow with time and with bringing our own bed of memories to it, so we infuse the text with something personal to each of us.

Anything else you'd like to add about the show?

Come with an open heart – and listen. Even if you've seen this production before, you haven't seen it. Hopefully you'll recognize yourself in us and in the story. Isn't that what art is supposed to do? Mirror life in a funny way?