





## From working-class Yorkshire roots to the toast of the musical theatre world... John Tiffany talks to *Caroline Baum* about his latest triumph, *Once*.



### CAROLINE BAUM

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When Glen Hansard, the Irish busker, won an Oscar for the movie *Once*, he gave his golden statuette to his mum. Which prompted John Tiffany, who transformed *Once* into a multi-award-winning musical, to do the same with his awards. The 43-year-old, regarded as one of Britain's most exciting theatre directors, laughs at the thought. His mother has become the custodian of his trophies and his struggle against class: "My mum has my Tony for *Once* and my Olivier for *Black Watch*."

Tiffany looks like he's having too much fun to be working. He's a restless, fidgety type, never sitting at the production desk for more than a few seconds to check one of his three mobile phones, his iPad, or take a segment from the four mandarins in his lunch box. In Melbourne to rehearse the Australian production of *Once*, he strides into the midst of the cast, working out angles, positions, entrances, exits and cues. He loves nothing more than the moments when performers depart from the script or improvise a move, giving the work a fresh, homegrown flavour. Lines are dropped and new ones substituted.

"I don't want two performances to be the same," he tells me.

Having auditioned exhaustively here without finding *The One*, he's unapologetic about casting a Brit, Tom Parsons, in the male lead. So much for all those TV talent shows. Yes, he watches them, enjoying their gladiatorial combat, "but you never hear of those people again. The damage those contests do is in creating a generation which sees fame as an end in itself. It's enough to make you nostalgic for the Spice Girls."

When Tiffany was first approached by Bond movie producer Barbara Broccoli to translate *Once* to the stage, he had not seen the film. "As soon as I had, I thought, 'This is a terrible idea!' It's so delicate and fragile. Traditional Broadway devices will just suffocate it at birth. But it was the fact that Glen and Markéta [Irglová] don't end up together that made me want to do it. And the intimacy of it was unique: someone said they felt like

they were watching it with everyone they'd ever loved."

Once Tiffany was on board, things moved fast: together with long-time friend and choreographer Steven Hoggett, with whom he collaborated on *Black Watch*, he developed the show in four days instead of the four years a musical usually takes. "And we have the extra challenge that our orchestra is on stage," he adds, referring to the fact that every member of the cast

has to be able to play an instrument with a high level of proficiency.

"Not only that, but they have to be able to move with them - including the cello. All our special effects are human," he says, acknowledging that unlike most shows on Broadway today, *Once* lacks high-tech gimmickry or the kind of gasp-inducing dramatic moments audiences have come to expect. "We have not spent money on a monkey or a spider," he says, having a dig at *King Kong* and *Spider-Man*.

Instead of tricks, *Once* delivers emotional intensity. "It's a healing show that comes out of a period of austerity," says Tiffany, referring to the collapse of the Celtic Tiger economic boom.

During the show's triumphant Broadway run, he joined the Occupy movement on Wall Street, "until a cop warned me I could be deported". He says, "The older I get, the more political I become." In Melbourne, he begins his days with the BBC World News "because I need to know where my day fits in with what is happening in the world". An optimist by nature, his friend and *Once* collaborator, musical director Martin Lowe, dubs him Winnie-the-Pooh. He is intolerant of non-voters and pro-Scottish independence.

Another thing that distinguishes *Once* is that it is not a star vehicle but an ensemble piece. "I believe theatre should make stars, not cast them," says Tiffany, again defying the current global trend. Which is ironic because, since *Once*, he's the toast of the town. Opening night in New York pulled all the Great White Way celebs: Liza, Jessica Lange, Jodie Foster. "It was ridiculous. I do get starstruck, but I never get tongue-tied, maybe because I'm secure in who I am; I had a happy childhood."

Tiffany grew up near Huddersfield in West Yorkshire, his father an engineer, his mother a district nurse, both solidly working-class parents who wanted a better future for their two sons. "My mother had never seen a banana until she was 15," he says.

As a child, Tiffany was intent on becoming a doctor "because I liked biology" and played with a little white medical case with a red cross on it. "When I told them I was going to switch to a career in theatre, they worried for me."

They needn't have. *Black Watch*, which Tiffany directed for the National Theatre of Scotland, put him squarely on the map as a fearless, tough-minded, physical director, interested in tackling big social themes through robust, challenging material. Small wonder that while he lived in Glasgow, where he studied biology at university, he became friends with novelist and essayist Andrew O'Hagan. Tiffany ended up staging an adaptation of O'Hagan's chilling *The Missina*, which focused on



real-life stories of people who disappeared from the city's council estates and ended up murdered. Tiffany has been confronting the darkest sides of masculinity and the human psyche ever since – most recently in a one-man version of *Macbeth*, starring Alan Cumming, on Broadway.

Until then, his relationship with Shakespeare had been fraught. "I first read him at 13 – it was *Henry IV, Part 1* for fuck's sake – and that was enough to make me want to be a doctor. He made me feel stupid. Now we are lovers. It took me until I was 39. He was such a radical, but we don't teach him that way; we make him stuffy and dusty. I hate the way he's taught at school. It's scandalous."

*Once* is the ray of light on Tiffany's otherwise sombre résumé, but he also loves a laugh: he is quick with jokes in the rehearsal room and next year will stage a family-friendly adaptation of Roald Dahl's *The Twits*, "about posh, disgusting people who keep a family of monkeys. It'll be fun, suitable for anyone over the age of seven, but it's really about how to get rid of your tyrants."

In 2013, Tiffany was appointed associate director at the Royal Court Theatre in London – a plum position at the unofficial national theatre for new British drama – which goes some way to alleviate what he acknowledges as a chip on his shoulder about class origins. "I'm still referred to by some of our big institutions as that Yorkshire director." Faced with her son's identity crisis, his mother, Margaret, responded with typically northern forthright asstringency: "Oh, come off it, you're not working class. You've got a bloody cafetière."

Success is the revenge that trumps snobbery. "It has calmed me," Tiffany acknowledges. "I've achieved more than I ever thought possible, and I'm not overwhelmed by it. It just means I get to work with the best and to pick my projects. I'm not ambitious anymore; I channel my ego into the work. And the work itself is joyous and I've got the work-life balance thing right," he says, adding that the past weeks in Melbourne "have been some of the happiest of my life. I'm in a creative city, cycling everywhere, feeling fit, eating well, working with great colleagues. The only downside is missing all of Kate Bush's concerts."

In a telling gesture, Tiffany dispensed with the traditional protocol of letting an agent tell their client they've been successful at an audition. Instead, he called

Madeleine Jones personally to give her the good news that she'd beaten hundreds of other hopefuls to be cast as the female lead in the Australian production. "And now he's here, he's fully present, not phoning it in," Jones says. "So it feels as if we are making the show. He never says, 'This is how the others in London and New York do it.'"

Thanks to a fellowship at Harvard in 2010, he gained insights – gleaned while he took a break from directing – into what he does not want to do. "I do not want to run a company or have to go to a budget meeting." Instead, he relishes the freedom of not being the boss, preferring to leave that to strong women. "I like the way they lead by empowering others, instead of by

hierarchy," he says, citing his mother, producer Barbara Broccoli and Vicky Featherstone, artistic director at the Royal Court, as examples. "Heterosexual men work very differently," he says. "They come from a place of fear and wield a power that is sexual."

Anyone familiar with the raw brutal toughness of *Black Watch*, which dealt with the dehumanising experience of soldiers serving in Iraq, will know that Tiffany was unlikely to make *Once* sentimental. "We wanted to be Irish but not Oirish," he says.

Tiffany is easily moved to tears, however. "Sometimes I crave that release," he says, citing *Terms of Endearment* as a favourite weepy, along with *The Color Purple*. He singles out Gillian Anderson's recent performance in the Young Vic production of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, too: "But that was crying for a different reason: that was a call to arms, about compassion and humanity."

Since his year at Harvard, Tiffany has been thinking a great deal about emotion in relation to how we experience theatre. "I've been trying to divert analysis away from the head. We overintellectualise performance. To me, theatre can create wellbeing and make you feel less lonely."

The impact of this inquiry into the physiological impact of theatre now underpins his approach to directing, no matter what the material is. "The body yearns to be touched, at a vibrational level – I know that sounds a bit hippie and New Age, but after spending time with molecular biologists and child psychologists and other scientists there, they confirmed my gut instinct, which is what I always trust as a director. Do you know, for example, that the bagpipe has the same frequency as what the child hears in the womb?" he asks, as if this proves his theory.

The only time he pauses to consider a question, rather than diving headlong into an intense, expansive answer, is when asked if he is good at relationships. That stops him in his tracks. He pauses to consider. Tiffany lives alone in London's Elephant and Castle, is currently in a relationship with a theatrical producer from Melbourne, and is friends with his exes "even if that takes a long time". After a moment's reflection, the answer is a slightly hesitant yes.

He only acknowledged his homosexuality in his 20s: "I was still falling in love with women till then." He no longer has the temper of his childhood, does not shout in private or at work – "I go quiet, then talk it through" – and while he never wanted children, he is an active uncle and godfather. Australia's rejection of gay marriage puzzles him: "You gave us Kylie and *Priscilla!*"

Tiffany's masterstroke in *Once* is the pre-show: members of the audience are welcomed on stage to have a drink at the bar of the pub set and join in as the cast warms up vocally, creating an immediate sense of camaraderie. "My dad, who played in a community brass band, gave me the idea for that." His mother, he adds, was a chorus girl when she was not nursing. So there was a little bit of showbiz in his working-class roots. Which makes Margaret a very fitting custodian for his award collection. ●

