

EPISODE 6: Tracy Ryans STRIKE! – The Play

Andrew Muir 1:07:20

Hi, I'm Andrew Muir, creative director at Ardent Theatre. If you enjoy this show, please share. Subscribe and leave us a five star review. Thanks for listening.

One day in 2008, a radio interview grabbed the attention of playwright Tracey Ryan. Irish Department store owner Ben Dunne was trying to apologise to a former employee. It wasn't going well. That employee, Mary Manning, had spent more than two and a half years on strike at Dunnes and Tracey had stumbled on to the story of how a small group of shop workers defied the Irish establishment. Her play Strike was born.

Tracy Ryan 1:07:59

So I was kind of like, What's this about? So I just started googling and looking around and then start to read about the strike and I was like, Wow.

Andrew Muir 1:08:09

Fast forward to 2023 and with Ardent Theatre Company, Tracey brings strike to the London stage with Kirsty Patrick Ward directing.

Kirsty Patrick Ward 1:08:17

You've got to tell the story. Tell the story with heart and truth and conviction and respect for what they did. The best you can do for them is tell their story well, and I was totally fine until the lights went down and I grabbed my husband's hand.

Andrew Muir 1:08:30

And I was like, I really hope they like it. I'm Andrew Muir, and this is activism in the eighties, where we shot the protests and culture wars that changed lives in Britain, Ireland and beyond.

In this episode, we'll explore the long journey from that first spark to opening night at Southern Playhouse.

Let's start with that radio interview. Here's Tracy Ryan.

Tracy Ryan 1:09:03

I was living in Ireland and I'd been there a year or so, and I was just listen to the radio, which is ARTY radio, and I heard Ben Dunne was on there and they brought on Mary Martin and he was trying to apologise to her for the strike He runs while he used to run Dunnes stores.

Andrew Muir 1:09:22

Right.

Tracy Ryan 1:09:25

Really? RESIDENT You know, she was like very held back and I found out later that she didn't know he was going to be on the radio show. She didn't know he was going to try and make certain that it wasn't set up to apology. They were just like, No, I just put her on and said, Look, can we bring you all? So I was kind of like, What's this about? So I just started googling and looking around and then start to read about the strike. And I was like.

Andrew Muir 1:09:44

Wow, was there much around about the strike?

Tracy Ryan 1:09:47

There was fragments. And as I would find out later, Mandy and Brendan actually kept the story going. But to get to the strikers, there was no contact numbers. I didn't know how to get hold of them. So I contacted Mandate the unions, and they put me in touch with Brendan Archibald. So I wrote to Brendan and told him a little bit about my own past, about stuff I'd been involved with politically and said, I'm really keen to write the story of the strike. And he said, Let's meet for a pint. And we did.

Andrew Muir 1:10:12

Where did you meet him?

Tracy Ryan 1:10:14

Well, we met in Win's Hotel, which is just off O'Connell Street in Dublin. In Dublin? Yeah. So I was living there. So we met him. Wins. Wins. The very famous hotel is known for lots of political meetings and things like that. So it was quite a, you know, a good place.

Andrew Muir 1:10:25

Appropriate.

Tracy Ryan 1:10:26

Appropriate to meet that. Okay. And Brendan was amazing. He was a union organizer at the time throughout the strike, and Dunnes hated him. They did see him as a red troublemaker. But what Brendan did for me was I've got Irish parents, grew up in London, very proud of that. So I kind of missed out on that history of all because I grew up here. But returning to Ireland, so curious about Irish history and what happened. So Brendan was brilliant. Just give me the context of the eighties and what was going on, particularly in the south of

Ireland. And he says, Would you want to meet the strikers? And I was like, Of course he went, Well, I'm going to Australia, but they've got an anniversary meeting, so go down and meet them. And I turned up.

Andrew Muir 1:11:04

So where did you meet them?

Tracy Ryan 1:11:05

The teachers club, which is another.

Andrew Muir 1:11:07

Tell us about the teachers.

Tracy Ryan 1:11:08

But the teacher club is a bar. They have a theatre there again. In Dublin. In Dublin, yeah. And so I met them there and I kind of walked in and I think they were a bit like that.

Andrew Muir 1:11:18

Yeah.

Tracy Ryan 1:11:19

And I was like, I'd like to write a play about the strike. And they were lovely and they shared pictures with me. It was an anniversary meeting. They were having them every year, so they were all there, their supporters, a nice group of people. And Karen stood up and made a speech and what I took away from that, apart from them being absolutely lovely to me, was that there was this great bond that stuck together through all this time and would meet a few times a year, and especially on the anniversary of the strike to celebrate what they'd done. But in a very low key way. You know, they weren't searching for publicity or anything like that. And Brendan as well was brilliant because he had an archive when he was leaving the mandate union. They were going to throw out all the archive material about the strike. So like letters from bishops and clippings and letters from all around the world supporting them, they were going to go in bin liners and thrown out. So Brendan was like, I'll take it. So he kept hold of this really valuable archive that has been amazing for me to use. And as.

Andrew Muir 1:12:13

He gave you access, he did.

Tracy Ryan 1:12:15

Yeah. I went round his house and he kind of laid it all out in the living room floor and all the clippings.

Andrew Muir 1:12:20

Which is brilliant for a playwright, presumably, because, my.

Tracy Ryan 1:12:22

God.

Andrew Muir 1:12:23

There's the research laid out in front of you.

Tracy Ryan 1:12:24

Yeah, Yeah. Because at that time, there wasn't much online about the strike. For example, Archie didn't have the archive material they've put up since, because now you can look at footage that they had from that time, but there wasn't any of that. And when we did the first one, the play, I hadn't seen a picture of nimrods. Luckily the Marxist Library and also Labour youth had kept letters on some of his speeches, but there was no images online. So it was really interesting. You know, I found a book that he was included in organize or Staff, which is written about the unions in South Africa.

Andrew Muir 1:12:57

Can you just tell us Nimrod is a character in the play? Yes.

Tracy Ryan 1:13:00

Yeah. A nimrod, uncannily at the time was in exile in Dublin. He'd been involved in the freedom movement in South Africa. It was being done for treason along with Nelson Mandela, and had to leave leave his family.

Andrew Muir 1:13:13

He was living in Dublin.

Tracy Ryan 1:13:14

He was live there. He'd been all around the world. He'd been to Tanzania, Russia, Egypt, you know, begging on the streets of Egypt, really tough time and ended up in Dublin. And it's true what you said, that his father pointed to the map and said, in this country, white people press other white people.

Andrew Muir 1:13:29

You know, okay, So.

Tracy Ryan 1:13:30

There was that.

Andrew Muir 1:13:30
In the play.

Tracy Ryan 1:13:31
This is a beautiful line.

Andrew Muir 1:13:32
Yeah. Yeah.

Tracy Ryan 1:13:33
Right. Yeah. So that was great. And I suppose the writing just began to pick up stuff, but I couldn't have done it without Brendan's intervention of sharing all that material with me.

Andrew Muir 1:13:40
So when did you, Tracy, when did you hear the Mary conversation? Ben
Conversation on the radio when we turned.

Tracy Ryan 1:13:47
29, two.

Andrew Muir 1:13:48
Thousand.

Tracy Ryan 1:13:49
Nine, early 2000.

Andrew Muir 1:13:50
And did you think, as most writers do, like Magpies as we are, did you think immediately this could be a play or was it maybe a novel, a book or whatever? Or was it always were you thinking this could make a play?

Tracy Ryan 1:14:02
I think play because my background's in theatre, so I suppose the easiest thing for me is to create a play film and TV's completely different, you know, it's a different medium. So the thing I'm comfortable with is creating theatre, and I was shocked nobody had done it already, you know.

Andrew Muir 1:14:16
Well, I think that big million dollar question

so I'm going to bring in Kirsty now. Kirsty, had you heard the story before you had read the script?

Kirsty Patrick Ward 1:14:28

Weirdly, I had actually heard of the strike before, but that was really by chance.

Andrew Muir 1:14:32

How.

Kirsty Patrick Ward 1:14:33

I know, I know actually from another podcast, The Moth podcast. So if anyone wants to hear a bit of the real Karen Gearan, there's a brilliant episode where she talks about it. And my sister, she'd heard it and told me about it, and I was like, How do we not know about the story? This is incredible. So when you guys got in touch, I was like.

Andrew Muir 1:14:51

I actually do know about this, right? So with so how Kirsty How did you get involved in the project in the first place?

Kirsty Patrick Ward 1:14:59

Yeah, I mean I was really lucky in terms of audience, so Andrew, you and Mark and Tracey reaching out to me to have a read of the script and I interviewed for it and it was from the moment I read it, I just thought, This is brilliant and epic.

Andrew Muir 1:15:14

Was it one of those? Was it a very quick kind of.

Kirsty Patrick Ward 1:15:17

Yes, it was.

Andrew Muir 1:15:18

Connections.

Kirsty Patrick Ward 1:15:18

Yes. I think already I was intrigued by the story, but within I think by the end of the first scene, that wonderful changing room scene, I was just so enamoured with the characters. I loved the kind of wit that Tracy had in the writing, and they're real people. And I think, Yeah, that was me from that moment on. And I think actually twice the entire time I was being interviewed, I kept asking you questions, be like, And that really happened.

Andrew Muir 1:15:45

And that really happened as well. Tracy Letts If you like, 2009, it started to build this idea of potentially a play where now 2023 So presumably it's changed as a play or it's exactly the same as a play. Tell us a little bit about the kind of the journey if you like, of the play of the script.

Tracy Ryan 1:16:06

Yeah, it's been on a real journey, actually. We did a production of it in 2010, so I write it quite quickly. I went to a cottage in Tipperary. A friend said, Go down there and finish it, you know, we're going to put it on. So we did it in 2010 at Trinity, at the Samuel Beckett Theatre and also the Access Theatre in Ballymun. But what happened there was it really lit up the story again. I remember going to do an interview on Aunty Radio with Karen and I was a little bit excited. I hadn't met her again for a while and I was going, I hope she likes the play. Yeah, so they're going to go, she's watching a picket line outside, you know.

Andrew Muir 1:16:38

Yeah.

Tracy Ryan 1:16:38

So we're in the Radio Derek Mooney show and they gave her a big bunch of flowers and spoke pretty much to Karen for the hour because, of course, everybody is remembering the story, remembering what they did. And I think she was really shocked that they were acknowledging what they had done. So we did the play then and great response. And I think it was that triggering of the story again and people's memories. And we had done store workers coming to watch it who had supported it. And people from Cork would support. You know, we had really a lot of people who supported it back in the day. And then we tried to get funding, but at the time we had a cast of 18, so it was even bigger then it was.

Andrew Muir 1:17:11

18 and yeah, and so now there are 30.

Kirsty Patrick Ward 1:17:15

Which I can verify is quite a lot of people.

Andrew Muir 1:17:17

I'm going to get to that. KIRSTY I've got a few questions around the size of that cast and how you deal with that. Okay. So was it you were responsible for putting it on?

Tracy Ryan 1:17:25
Tracey I was, yeah.

Andrew Muir 1:17:27
Behind you helping, producing, etc.. Yeah. Was it you? Pretty much.

Tracy Ryan 1:17:30
It was me directing because we wanted to get on quite quickly. I was working with Helen Ries, producer and two hand person, a script with eight people and saying, You've got four weeks is quite a huge thing to do. So I thought, well, first time out I'd take it on as director. But we had been done in it. We had bishops, we had, you know, all the other characters in it as well. We even had Bono in it for a few seconds. And, and what we found, Helen, I, when we reflected on it, was people were interested in the striker. So every time they were on a you know, they enjoyed all the other stuff. You know, it's very agitprop, very in that tradition. But it was a strike as people were interested and also Nimrods and Brendan, those relationships were the ones that really stood out. So we tried to get funding, but obviously such a big we know in theatre.

Andrew Muir 1:18:12
It's yeah, you.

Tracy Ryan 1:18:12
Do it in monologues. You do to people.

Andrew Muir 1:18:15
Yeah. So then what happened, How long, how long did you keep trying to raise those sort of funds to be able to do more with it.

Tracy Ryan 1:18:21
Yeah. For a couple of years. And I think luckily in 2015 I was talking to yourself and you became interested in it. Argent became interested. I was like, Oh my God, this is great.

Andrew Muir 1:18:31
Yeah, Bringing a cast of that size, I was like, immediately, absolutely. No, there's no way. And then read it and just fell in love with it as a story, something I'd never heard of. And that's why I think we really went for it. Yeah.

Tracy Ryan 1:18:42

And what I really appreciate with Arden was one thing I always thought was I'm not getting rid of any strikers. I don't want to do composite characters because all those Henry Street strikers stood on the line and lost so much, but gained a lot politically. Education.

Andrew Muir 1:18:58
Absolutely.

Tracy Ryan 1:18:58
I feel really uneasy to take any of the Henry Street strikers. Yeah.

Andrew Muir 1:19:01
Yeah, totally. So that was 2015. It landed on our destiny in Scotland and now 2023 we finally managed to make the production and put it on. KIRSTY When you got that script with that many actors, we knew it was at the Playhouse, didn't we, that had been booked. Yeah. So you knew this kind of space we were talking about. How on earth did you manage it?

Kirsty Patrick Ward 1:19:27
Took a deep breath. Yeah. I think Tracey had done a brilliant job in the script handling those characters and for me it was looking for those three lines and finding those journeys, and particularly their activist journeys. And I think that's one of the things I love about the play is they really they really don't know anything about activism at the beginning.

Andrew Muir 1:19:45
At the beginning, Right.

Kirsty Patrick Ward 1:19:46
The reason they got into the strike is because it's a union directive, but they don't actually really quite know what they're striking for. It's only through meeting Nimrod, meeting other South Africans in exile that they actually understand what apartheid is. And I love the journey of it and yeah, there's a lot of scenes, there's 23.

Andrew Muir 1:20:03
23 scenes.

Kirsty Patrick Ward 1:20:04
Three scenes, and you have scenes within them.

Andrew Muir 1:20:06

So you've got 13 actors with 23 scenes in that tight space and only one time because they have we got all 13 on stage at the same time.

Kirsty Patrick Ward 1:20:15

Yes, quite a few. Yeah, there were quite a few moments.

Andrew Muir 1:20:18

So how do you direct that? Well, how do you do that. Yes. I mean, that's your skill.

Kirsty Patrick Ward 1:20:23

Obviously, that staging is important.

Andrew Muir 1:20:25

Yeah.

Kirsty Patrick Ward 1:20:26

I think you've just got to make sure that it feels totally undirected, but at the same time.

Andrew Muir 1:20:32

Right.

Kirsty Patrick Ward 1:20:33

Doesn't really clear plot of where people need to be because you want to feel like you're one of the strikers in those big group scenes. So when you're on the picket line, when you're in Brendan's office because it's performed on three sides, it's incredibly immersive. So it's about making sure that your sightlines are clear, but at the same time you're embracing the fact that there were that many people on stage, and particularly women as well. It's just not something you see in theatres in general, let alone in fringe theatre. Yeah, so the staging needed to be specific. And also the big thing for me was forward momentum and front footedness, because the energy those strikers have when you meet them and the stakes of what they're going through, you never want it to feel episodic. Front footedness is always the notes.

Andrew Muir 1:21:15

On the front footedness This mean like from an acting perspective.

Kirsty Patrick Ward 1:21:19

It's the opposite to being on the back foot, isn't it? It's about keeping the Thor on the line rather than having a think and then saying your line. And also, I do think that's a wonderfully Irish trope as well. There's an energy and a kind of

wit and speed to the way that people talk. It is reflective brilliantly and Tracey's writing. So honouring that felt important and you know, it's got to be slick. And there is also a terrifying Google doc, which is a four week rehearsal schedule where literally every moment of those four weeks is planned out because I just need to get it as good.

Andrew Muir 1:21:52

That's what I was going to ask. Yeah, how much planning? Yeah, actually.

Kirsty Patrick Ward 1:21:56

I mean, everyone's got different processes. As a director, I like to have a four week schedule. I basically work it backwards from how many times I want to run it in the rehearsal room, because I think the big thing with the show is those actors have got to have ownership over it. It's so huge. And you're telling three years of people's lives and that's what I love about theatre, is you get a whole world on stage and you're living their lives and you see them grow and change. But in order to do that, the actors, they've got to have very left brain, right, right. You've got to be totally in the scene, but also know what the hell is coming up next.

Andrew Muir 1:22:27

Yeah, totally.

Kirsty Patrick Ward 1:22:29

I mean, our first run through it was brilliant. You'd have people kind of come in and be like, Oh, no, it's not the scene.

Andrew Muir 1:22:34

I know.

Kirsty Patrick Ward 1:22:35

Which was fantastic, but that's why we needed to do three in the rehearsal room before we got into tech, because the first few times the company were chasing the play and then by the end they were the ones driving it. Yeah, and that felt really important. Yeah, they kind of have that level of ownership over it because it's a great story. We also did some cuts. We cut about 12 pages over the course of the four weeks and just refining and interrogating things. And Tracey was brilliant for that because, you know, you've also got 13 fantastic minds in the room. So to not utilise that, I just think as a director you're shooting yourself in the foot. A good idea is a good idea.

Andrew Muir 1:23:17

Tracey How did you as playwright in the room working alongside Kirsty 12 pages, maybe being cut, how was that for you, that process being in the room, getting understanding of what worked, what didn't work and making cuts as you go?

Tracy Ryan 1:23:29

Yeah, I'm actually fine with that and I think that may be as the director's head as well. You know, like, you know, if something's not working, I think, you know, first read through of it When we sat in the big circle and read it, I think we sat down, the three of us, and there were seven pages gone because you can hear it, you know, it drags. I should probably use as that whole dramaturgical support. It's been going on for a few years through Arden. I don't know how to explain how amazing it is for a writer to be able to go back and spend time with something. I've changed my relationship with strikes and I've got to know them a bit better through the years. I know more now, you know, completely. So having the time to reflect that into the script has been amazing. And I think all of us, it's something about their story that engages people whenever we're done reading and we've done quite a few public readings with Arden. So a test.

Andrew Muir 1:24:13

Yeah, absolutely.

Tracy Ryan 1:24:13

Which has been incredible. Yeah, but every actor that's been involved, I think, Have you found this curse? They just connect with the story and there is something which you don't often see, that there's a passion to tell the story and to tell it well. And so I was very happy for it to be slick, clean, get rid of any that would drag it down until.

Andrew Muir 1:24:32

It became very expedient and very tight. And one of the things I've always admired about you as a writer is how well you take on board feedback notes and that you'll go away. Think about them. It's your choice whether you use them or not. But for me, when it landed in 2015, I felt it still slightly needed a bit more theatricality to it. That sort of language. You've created it now for me, it's become such a theatrical piece. It really is exciting to watch and like all the stuff that Kirsty, your team that you brought in, the lights, the sound, the.

Tracy Ryan 1:25:07

Movement, I mean it's.

Andrew Muir 1:25:09

Taken it on to another level.

Kirsty Patrick Ward 1:25:10

Yeah. I mean there was a huge that's the other thing I kept saying in rehearsals is it is a play, it's not a documentary. So how do we make it theatrical and movement wise? One of the most powerful scenes, I would say in the show is when Tommy is beaten up by the police. Right? That was a very different scene. That was more historically accurate. But what we wanted to do was show police brutality on a much wider scale, that this actually can be happening is happening all over the world in different context. So, yeah, and there's a moment in the show where because the strikers don't have any money to have proper weather shoes, they're pursuing plastic bags inside their shoes. And it felt a really important story point to share because it's about sacrifice and the fact they're working class and what they went through, but also to show it theatrically. So Ira Mandela and our amazing movement director, I actually did say to I was like, so they need to put them on on stage. We've got this piece of music. Off you go.

Andrew Muir 1:26:11

Go, Ira Yeah, go.

Kirsty Patrick Ward 1:26:12

Ira He was amazing and it took a lot of work. There was definitely a point where I was like, Is this going to work?

Andrew Muir 1:26:19

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Kirsty Patrick Ward 1:26:20

But through his brilliant movement direction and also the real commitment of the cast, you're so right, Tracy. I think everyone feels they believe in the story they're telling and they feel a responsibility to honour it. So if ever anything is tough, you're like, Well, good. Nothing worth having is easy. So the movement, I think the theatricality felt important and show don't tell, right that thing. And trusting great actors like they've done that in a look. They don't need to say that yet.

Andrew Muir 1:26:44

Did you find that, Tracy?

Tracy Ryan 1:26:46

Oh, absolutely. And I have to say Kirstie was brilliant. That slickness that you talked about and the way that it moved and everything, I thought that's it.

Because otherwise it gets stodgy and the audience are looking at their watches. But often when we met and we'd go through and you'd ask me questions and we'd talk about lines, so that was really important. It's such a collaborative process.

Andrew Muir 1:27:03
Yeah, it really.

Tracy Ryan 1:27:04
Is the whole thing. Yeah.

Andrew Muir 1:27:05
Can I just backtrack a little bit because something I'm really interested in is the fact that this is based on real people. So for both of you as director and as a writer, you're writing a play based on a truth and a reality. In terms of all these characters. How did you find that? Did it mean that it was easier or was it more difficult? Were there particular characters in reality that you chose to embellish slightly more than others? How did it work when everything's that factual?

Tracy Ryan 1:27:33
I suppose the thing is because you want to respect also the people you're portraying as well, but also want to tell a story. So there is stuff that's fictional. For example, Shane, who crosses a picket line that is a composite character, friends who cross the picket line for the strike, as I suppose you want to tell their story, but respect them because.

Andrew Muir 1:27:53
Were you nervous, Tracy, about.

Tracy Ryan 1:27:54
Yes.

Andrew Muir 1:27:55
Life slightly changing it. Did you think you need to seek permission or did you just go for it?

Tracy Ryan 1:28:01
I kind of went for, I think especially the original one. I kind of naively just wanted to tell the story. But I suppose afterwards that relationship grew from there. I could talk to some strikers and just clarify things.

Andrew Muir 1:28:13

And did that help talking to strikers, Did it help having all that information at times? Was it just too many facts and figures and information? Well, I.

Tracy Ryan 1:28:21

Tell you, what I decided to do was tell the story of the strike in action. So that gave me the through line. Yeah. And so that became another character that drove through. And so everything moved on from that. So yeah, in some ways that's been the same from the beginning.

Andrew Muir 1:28:34

And specifically the Nimrod character. Tell us about how you felt writing that particular character.

Tracy Ryan 1:28:41

Yeah, I suppose again, you know, it's a long time ago when I first wrote it, so I suppose I was very keen to have the character represented. And I suppose since Ardent took it and we have had workshops we have consulted with actors and I know Kirsty spoke a lot with Menser and you know, discussing the role. So that's been invaluable as well, that kind of contribution and just testing out and hearing out things like that. Yeah, well.

Kirsty Patrick Ward 1:29:05

There was a language we found in the show. It was subtly embedded, but it came out of something I wanted to put. I pulled out more in the staging once we started running it together, which is Nimrod, and this is so based in truth. I think Mary talks about it a lot in her book. He's very much also an architect of the strike. He is encouraging them, advising them the whole time because he is a freedom fighter and he's exactly the kind of person that history never talks about, that actually, without the nimrods of the world, these things wouldn't happen. But so often their stories are never told. So it felt really important to us to readdress that. And me and Tracy talked a lot about it. We developed that a lot in terms of his relationship to the other strikers because they would spend hours on the picket line but also years together. So it was really important to get inside him as a character, why he was doing it and what the relationships were. And he's representing all those unsung heroes in activism, I think.

Andrew Muir 1:30:00

And as you say to begin with, the majority of those strikers were fairly ignorant of what was going on. And so through the character of Nimrod, they learn, as I learnt also as an audience member, as hopefully other audience members learnt too. It was that whole process of becoming more aware of it.

Tracy Ryan 1:30:19

I think, and that's what's really exciting to watch. You don't have to be fully informed to start something you believe in. Yeah, there were others who've been part of the struggle for longer, who pass on information, who pass the baton on, you know, So and that's what a beautiful thing is. That kind of multigenerational thing is that we are actually a kind of pass on knowledge to each other.

Andrew Muir 1:30:38

Kirsty I know when you're in the room, when you're in the rehearsal room and you're directing and you start talking about characters, characterisation and all that sort of stuff, sometimes we don't know anything about the characters because they're not based on someone. But you did. You had a bunch of actors who you knew somewhere. That's going to be information about those particular characters. How did you do that? What was that sort of process?

Kirsty Patrick Ward 1:30:58

It was a really fine line because we're not doing an impression of people. No. And also the people written in our play, they're Tracey's take on it. Yeah, there's a lens it's coming from. So I think and also just for me in terms of casting, it's not about casting people that look like them. It's about casting people that embody the character, their relationships to each other, what they bring to the table, who they are that felt much more interesting to me and actually much more respectful than being, Oh, I'm just going to call someone that looks a bit like that person. So from day one, there was a very clear delineation of like, we're not doing an impression of them. There may be references to things. So, for example, Mary in the show is wearing a Bruce Springsteen t shirt because I know she loves Bruce Springsteen.

Andrew Muir 1:31:39

Okay.

Kirsty Patrick Ward 1:31:39

I went to a gig and it's important to the story, but there was a moment where Adam wanted to wear glasses for Tommy because that is factually correct. But I was like, But hang on, that doesn't feel correct. In the Tommy we have created us. So you've got to be really careful. I think he's also too Reverend, and there's a difference between a character and a real person. So being really clear about the boundaries. Okay.

Andrew Muir 1:32:01

Tell me, what is it like to have the real people in the auditorium watching your work?

Kirsty Patrick Ward 1:32:07
It's very stressful.

Andrew Muir 1:32:10
Because I could see them. I knew how.

Kirsty Patrick Ward 1:32:11
They were sat in front of.

Tracy Ryan 1:32:12
You. SAT in front of me? Yeah.

Andrew Muir 1:32:13
How many do we have to be?

Tracy Ryan 1:32:14
Who we had Michele of couldn't make it, unfortunately. On Tell Me. So we had everybody else. Everyone? Yeah, yeah, we had everyone. So what did that feel like? Well I suppose I'm in a different position to Kirsty because I would have met them over the years and they've been to so many, there's been so many readings and there's always two or three of them to come and listen and talk to actors I would still wanted them to enjoy because I know it had changed.

Andrew Muir 1:32:35
Exactly. So something new was something fresh.

Tracy Ryan 1:32:37
And Kirstie's direction has brought out so much beautiful work and everything. So I just wondered what they would think of this. You know, knew it was very sensitive to how they might feel. And I think they saw it twice, didn't they?
KIRSTY The first night was very jubilant because it was the opening press night and the second time they watching the matinee with some school and they really took in the story. And I think again, I.

Andrew Muir 1:32:57
Think when I saw them coming out of that night, it seemed to really hit them. It was quite powerful. Mm hmm.

Tracy Ryan 1:33:08
How was it for you, Kirsty, though? Yeah.

Kirsty Patrick Ward 1:33:10

I mean, you've got to also not think about it too much. You've got to tell a story. Tell the story with horror and truth and conviction and respect for what they did. The best thing you can do for them is tell their story well. And I was totally fine until the lights went down and I grabbed my husband's hand and I was like.

Andrew Muir 1:33:27

I really like it.

Kirsty Patrick Ward 1:33:29

Because you feel a responsibility. You know what? Course you do. Amazing. Of course. And as soon as that was, you know, it's lovely saying ovation, applause. And I was like, great, cool. So I kind of, you know, snuck over to Karen and she just gave me a massive hug and I was like, Great, this is excellent. And they were really moved. And it was so moving on press night to have the real strikers meet the people playing them.

Andrew Muir 1:33:52

Yeah, it.

Kirsty Patrick Ward 1:33:53

Was very special and actually and it was one of those great things where I was just like, well, look, whatever happens in terms of, you know, reviews is part of theatre. It's why, know they're important, it's why we do it, but it's not the reason we do it. And I think their reaction and also actually other people involved in activism who had come and seen the show and been moved by it and felt that it was authentic, I was like, Well, that's who I care about. Yeah. So, you know, I was relieved.

Andrew Muir 1:34:20

KIRSTY Can I ask, was there a particular scene where you thought, I don't know how I'm going to do this? Was that anything in that place? Oh my goodness, This is a difficult bit. Yeah.

Tracy Ryan 1:34:30

I mean.

Andrew Muir 1:34:30

There's little share.

Kirsty Patrick Ward 1:34:32

Comforts now. Yeah, there's lots of it, but it's kind of what directors live for. The excitement of how are we going to tell it? I had an amazing creative team. I

think that's really important to say. So yeah. Ira Mandella, Siobhan, incredible movement director who actually I didn't introduce me to. I had not worked with him before, but we just instantly clicked. I think what his movement brought to the story really helped in like what a theatrical way of telling it. But also Jamie Platt are amazing lighting designer and Dom Brennan, who was in rehearsals a lot because the music.

Andrew Muir 1:35:02

This was the sound.

Kirsty Patrick Ward 1:35:03

He saw. Who did the sound? Yes. It's really important to capture the the atmosphere and also keeping us in the eighties. So working collaboratively with them. And Libby, our amazing designer, you know, God, when we got that set together. So Claire and.

Tracy Ryan 1:35:17

I saw Libby's model of it. I actually got very emotional there because I thought, this is just incredible, her vision for how it was going to work and so supported you. Kirsty And you know, that movement and quickness and everything was incredible.

Andrew Muir 1:35:29

And that's also, I suppose, one of those things where you talk about Kirsty in terms of actors coming in and not being there, shouldn't have been there in those first couple of rehearsals. What was that set like to use? Because it's three panels with some drawers in the cupboard but everything's in there.

Kirsty Patrick Ward 1:35:42

Yeah, it's wonderfully versatile and slick whilst a never feel it's encroaching with the space because I kept stating that I I'm just going to need space. I'm not having a table that's difficult to get on and off. It's just can't happen. Scene changes are literally sometimes a couple of seconds. It's really important and Libby totally understood that and that was just dreamy because I think if you're a director and you're a designer, if you're not entirely clear on your theatrical language, it's never going to work. So the SAT really helps and it helps the actors so much. But also those costumes which are so completely correct of the time. I mean, the energy that has gone into sourcing all of that.

Andrew Muir 1:36:22

Yeah. And now on reflection, how do you feel about the way it's gone, both of you?

Tracy Ryan 1:36:28

Well, for me, it's been absolute joy that it has it. Yeah. I've just loved every minute of it. I just see, like. Kirsty, I agree with you seeing the audience reaction to it because they're so engaged.

Andrew Muir 1:36:37

Yeah. How have you found that audience response?

Tracy Ryan 1:36:39

Well, we're getting a standing ovation practically every time, which is incredible. Yeah, there's a silence.

Andrew Muir 1:36:45

Why is that, do you think? Well, I think.

Tracy Ryan 1:36:47

It's the story here in the story because it's new and obviously people involved in the anti-apartheid movement would be aware of it. It's quite new to a lot of people. Yeah. I think also because we are a certain time at the moment it felt relevant when we did it originally, before it was really relevant. Now, you know, the whole idea of what striking means and trying to save that, they did an incredible thing. They went on strike for people that didn't even know.

Andrew Muir 1:37:12

And they went on strike for two weeks, didn't they?

Tracy Ryan 1:37:14

Originally to Brandon Arch was there two weeks.

Andrew Muir 1:37:16

And that's it.

Tracy Ryan 1:37:17

Dun dun.

Andrew Muir 1:37:19

And it ended.

Tracy Ryan 1:37:19

Up it wasn't done two.

Andrew Muir 1:37:21

T is nine but yeah.

Tracy Ryan 1:37:22

Yeah. It's a long, long strike. Yeah. Yeah. You know, and I think that capacity to stay on strike to go against the church at the time their bosses and to keep going you know they had food thrown at them from the top of the dome. Starving.

Andrew Muir 1:37:38

Yeah. And because of the some of the moments in the play that Tracey captures, they are quite extraordinary aren't they. I mean.

Kirsty Patrick Ward 1:37:44

Yeah. And it's oppression and that goes on all the time. I mean that's what is so moving but also difficult about the play is there are so many links you can make to what is happening now. But that's why I think the ending is really important. And what has been so satisfying for me in terms of people I know that I've come to see the show, but also people I don't know, people that I've just spoken to. May is a feeling of hope and being galvanised that actually when we pull together, we can achieve those ideals and that.

Andrew Muir 1:38:12

That solidarity, that moment and yeah, you feel compelled to join them on that picket line.

Tracy Ryan 1:38:19

And I was really very conscious of that because I thought, I don't want people to come away, go, I'm what can we do? There's nothing we can do. They do that, then we can't do anything. I think it's really important and we know through looking at the history of theatre, like the work as there is movement generally towards work that you can create theatre that galvanizes rather than the lazy depressed. And I think it's particularly important to show working class people with agency completely.

Kirsty Patrick Ward 1:38:42

And Karen, we had a brilliant zoom with a real Karen Guerin before we started rehearsals. I was trying very hard not to fangirl and failed massively, and I said to her, What do you what do you want audiences to take away? What do you want audiences to take away from the show? And she said, I want people to feel that they can do things, that you can achieve things. And I think I think we've done that.

Tracy Ryan 1:39:01

Yeah, I think so. And I think we need to tell more stories that celebrate the success of movements and coming together, how we can achieve so much.

Andrew Muir 1:39:10

Yeah, absolutely. And so I'm going to wrap this up with one final question, really is what's going to happen next to strike?

Kirsty Patrick Ward 1:39:18

I mean, surely this is a question for our esteemed producer.

Tracy Ryan 1:39:22

We should probably that the 40th anniversary is next is next year.

Andrew Muir 1:39:25

So I think the dream is to hit the Dublin, isn't it, To get into Ireland. Yeah. Thank you both so much. It's been an absolute pleasure.

Tracy Ryan 1:39:33

Thank you.

Kirsty Patrick Ward 1:39:34

Thank you.

Andrew Muir 1:39:36

Bringing strike to the stage has been an amazing experience for us. Ardent We are so grateful to Tracey and Kirsty and all the many others who worked so very hard to make this show a success. And thank you for listening to activism in the eighties, where we have charted the protests and culture wars that changed lives in Britain, Ireland and beyond.

Activism in the Eighties is a podcast series recorded in response to the police strike, written by Tracy Ryan and produced by Ardent Theatre Company at the Southwark Playhouse London in April 2023. This series have been funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund and was produced by Creative Kin.