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LSI

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EDITION

# Peaky Blinders

On The Rise in London

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plasma media

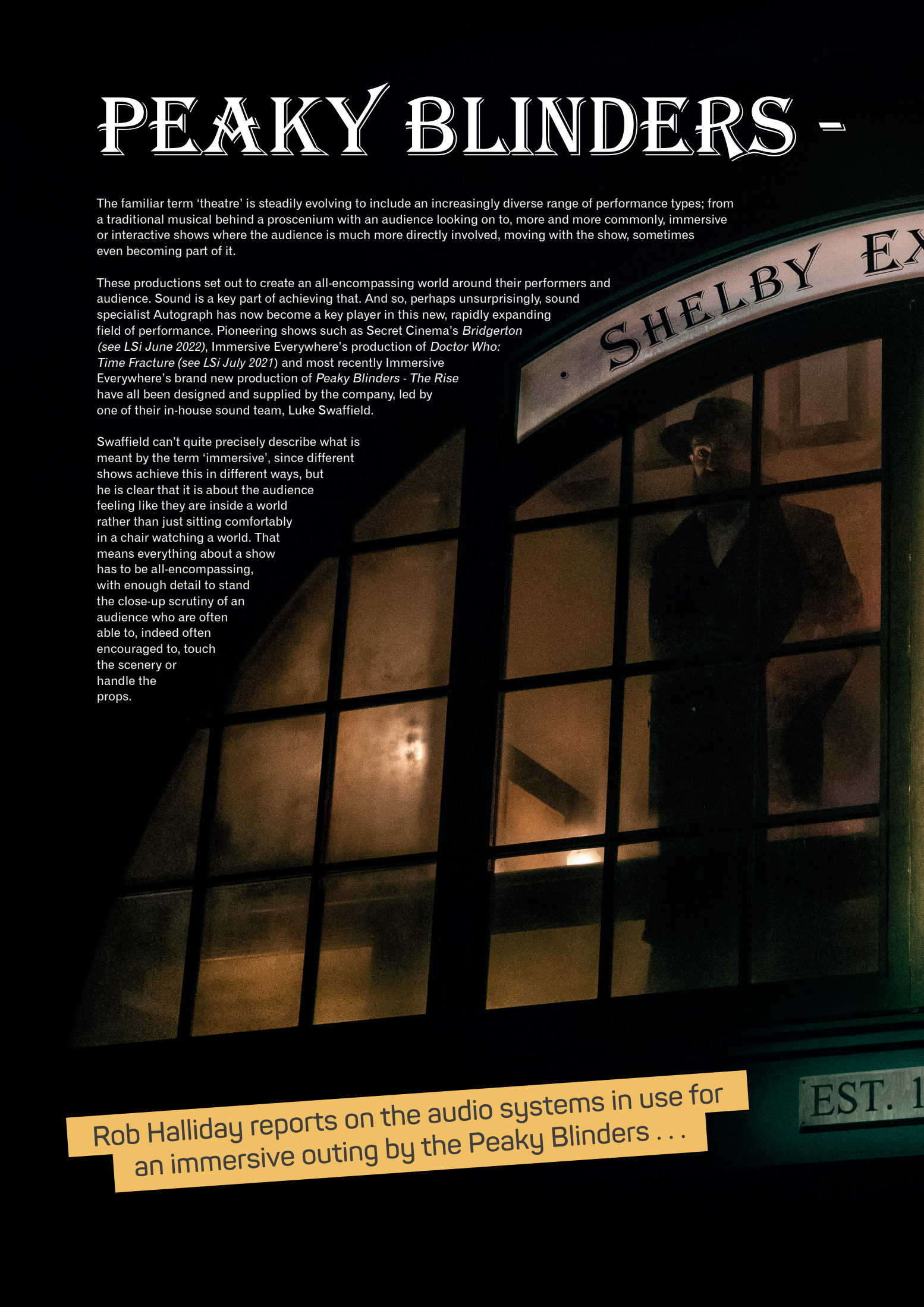


# PEAKY BLINDERS -

The familiar term 'theatre' is steadily evolving to include an increasingly diverse range of performance types; from a traditional musical behind a proscenium with an audience looking on to, more and more commonly, immersive or interactive shows where the audience is much more directly involved, moving with the show, sometimes even becoming part of it.

These productions set out to create an all-encompassing world around their performers and audience. Sound is a key part of achieving that. And so, perhaps unsurprisingly, sound specialist Autograph has now become a key player in this new, rapidly expanding field of performance. Pioneering shows such as Secret Cinema's *Bridgerton* (see *LSi* June 2022), Immersive Everywhere's production of *Doctor Who: Time Fracture* (see *LSi* July 2021) and most recently Immersive Everywhere's brand new production of *Peaky Blinders - The Rise* have all been designed and supplied by the company, led by one of their in-house sound team, Luke Swaffield.

Swaffield can't quite precisely describe what is meant by the term 'immersive', since different shows achieve this in different ways, but he is clear that it is about the audience feeling like they are inside a world rather than just sitting comfortably in a chair watching a world. That means everything about a show has to be all-encompassing, with enough detail to stand the close-up scrutiny of an audience who are often able to, indeed often encouraged to, touch the scenery or handle the props.



Rob Halliday reports on the audio systems in use for an immersive outing by the Peaky Blinders . . .



# THE RISE



*"For sound you can't ever stop, because as soon as the sound stops, the audience are suddenly out of your world . . ."*

*- Luke Swaffield*

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Photo: Mark Senior



Photo: Graham Chrimes



Photo: Graham Chrimes

"For sound, that means you can't ever stop, because as soon as the sound stops, the audience are suddenly out of your world. So we even have loudspeakers in the toilets, so the soundtrack carries on in there. It also means real things have to have a real audio life to them - clocks have to tick; if there's a radio, sound has to come from that. But, particularly for shows such as *Peaky Blinders* which are set in a definite period, you don't want to see any of the technology achieving that, so speakers have to be hidden away in the prop radios, and larger speakers providing the overall audio we work very hard to hide from view in the environment we're in."

For *Peaky Blinders* that is in a building which was the animal hospital for the army barracks that used to be on the site that is now London's Camden Market - though it also has a special connection for Autograph since the company was originally based in a neighbouring building on the same site.

*Peaky Blinders* is the latest creation from the team who also made *Doctor Who* and works for Secret Cinema in the UK and China: Luke Swaffield has been a key member of that team for many years. "I'd been working in the digital department of Autograph in the early days of the QLab audio playback and show control software," he recalls. "There I'd had to learn all about it because someone needed to support it! That knowledge led me to Secret Cinema's

*Doctor Strangelove*, originally just for a couple of days to help them program their QLab systems. I ended up there for rather longer than that, and got on really well with the Secret Cinema team - so they asked me back for the next one. Ultimately I'm the sound designer, but my role has always been rather wider than that, looking after the sound but also all of the show control stuff, triggering other departments and really linking the whole show together."

Swaffield's goal has always been that "the show should be led by the performers - so we need to figure out how to react to them, rather than the other way round." That's meant tricks like hidden switches that performers use to trigger particular moments. On *Peaky Blinders* it's meant an increased use of 'call points' - locations with a hidden microphone that can lift a performer's voice slightly to call an audience together - though Swaffield doesn't use radio mics on the performers as he feels that separates them too much from the audience when they're all meant to be in it together.

It's also meant dealing with the non-linear nature of these shows, which sometimes even have different possible endings. "*Peaky Blinders* incorporates game play, which we have to react to, and has three possible endings, which we have to signal to the cast in ways the audience won't notice." And with the audience interacting with the show, it's also meant creating new ways of making everything seem

- ← Previous page: Craig Hamilton as Tommy Shelby
- ↑ From top: Isaac Beechey as John Shelby  
Luke Swaffield, sound designer  
Niadh Gaffney, associate sound designer
- Facing page: Elliot Rodriguez as Isiah Jesus and Kieran Mortell as Arthur Shelby  
Inset: Emma Stansfield as Polly Gray





Photo: Mark Senior

real: "My favourite idea for this show was the séance table, which has sensors in the letters and tremblers underneath, so as the performers move the cards to the right letters, the table shakes - which the audience definitely reacts to!"

One of the really exciting parts of the show for Swaffield was the use of music. "We were given the steer from Caryn Mandabach, producer of the TV show, very early on in the process about the importance of music in the show and the fact that it should feel like a 'rock concert'."

Along with director Tom Maller and Barnaby Race, composer and musical director, Swaffield and associate sound designer Niamh Gaffney spent a lot of time researching the music from the TV show, then finding music of a similar vibe and putting together several hours of playlists which underscore the different scenes. "There's music pretty much the entire way through the nearly three hours of performance," Swaffield remarks. "Alongside the existing background music the show is peppered with live performance numbers paying homage to artists such as The White Stripes, Arctic Monkeys and of course Nick Cave. There's even a secret 1920s jazz bar with a live singer that you can find yourself in if you're playing the game hard enough!"

Developing these shows is complex, but is now helped by the friendship and trust between those involved. "*Peaky Blinders* was made by a team that has now worked



Photo: Mark Senior

together a lot, including director Tom Maller, lighting designer Terry Cook and set designer Rebecca Brower. We all talk about things, but there's also a lot of trust just to get on with it. On this one, after the first public performance, one of the producers just said, "that was great. There are some things we need to sort out but I trust you to deal with them," and then let us just get on with it."

Over a number of these shows, Autograph has developed techniques for getting the sound system in place in what are usually found spaces rather than venues designed for performance. "Sound is distributed around the space using a Dante network and Yamaha DME devices," Swaffield explains. "Loudspeakers and other key items of infrastructure are often purchased.

Installation is complex because you need to be in early to get things behind or through walls as they're being built. To achieve that we tend to have a smaller crew but for longer - Autograph's production sound engineer for *Peaky*, Jim Douglas, jokingly calls this 'pottering about' but it means we're here when they suddenly start building something so we can react to it."

As they always have for traditional theatre, Autograph has also provided the show with all of the communications and backstage audio infrastructure such as paging and show relay, "those things that no-one wants to spend money on, but everyone complains about if it doesn't work properly," as Swaffield describes them. "It's something Autograph have a huge amount of experience in however,





Kieran Mortell  
'Arthur Shelby' and Reece  
Richardson 'Georgie Sewell'

Photo: Mark Senior

with their sales and installations department having installed countless paging and backstage relay systems throughout the country."

At the heart of the show then is the QLab playback software, for *Peaky* running on two MacMini systems, each with a fully tracking redundant backup system using Autograph's bespoke Signature Series switchover boxes. "We're always pushing QLab right to the limit, sometimes just a little bit beyond, with multiple cuelists running simultaneously, some looping, some triggered, all triggering other things," Swaffield explains. "These are also the only shows where I use QLab's random function - in this case to choose the winners of horse races in the bookies area - even the performers don't know the result each night!"

Here, as on *Bridgerton*, Swaffield used the panLab software to create complex movements of sound around the space, and also to allow more than one person program QLab simultaneously. "PanLab allows us to think about the sound in a different way. We can think about it visually - where we want the sound to come from, how we want it to move - rather than having to manually work out which speaker to send it to. Often nowadays I find myself giving the note to Niamh 'Can you move that sound slightly more in to the space?' rather than 'Can you add another 3dB to the surround, please?'"

Niamh Gaffney from the Autograph team came on board for this show as associate sound designer because "an extra pair of

ears, an extra pair of hands is essential on this kind of show, where you really do need to be in lots of places at once, particularly when following the different tracks of the show during rehearsals and early performances," Swaffield explains. "So on *Peaky* I said very early on that I'd like to bring in an associate - and the reaction was an immediate yes."

For Gaffney, this adds to the catalogue of shows she has been involved with for Autograph, including *Cabaret* which took some of Autograph's immersive show techniques for the production's pre-show sequences around the theatre's foyers (see *LSi March 2022*).

With *Peaky Blinders* open to great acclaim and great audience reaction, Luke Swaffield's attention has already turned to the next of these shows. It would be easy for him to go into it thinking, 'I know how to do this', sitting in a comfort zone of things he knows work. But that's not his way, nor is it the Autograph way. He has new ideas of his own he is waiting to try.

"And I will also say to everyone, don't be afraid to ask for something. We'll always try to deliver it, because we always want to be pushing things forward. Trying new things, achieving those challenges, bringing something unexpected to each new show - that's what makes it exciting."

*Peaky Blinders - The Rise* is running now at the Camden Garrison. ☘

➤ [www.autograph.co.uk](http://www.autograph.co.uk)  
➤ [www.immersivepeakyblindners.com](http://www.immersivepeakyblindners.com)

## PEAK PROGRESSION

LSi learns more about associate sound designer Niamh Gaffney's career so far . . .

Associate sound designer Niamh Gaffney confesses - quietly - that when she started working on shows at school she was originally more interested in lighting. But while studying at LAMDA she ended up working on the sound of one of the college's musicals. As they often do to help encourage and support those starting out in the field, Autograph provided a sound mentor to the show.

"For a couple of days, that was Luke Swaffield," Gaffney recalls. "Though sometimes it felt like he wasn't really paying attention to me as he was always on his laptop answering emails," she adds, to which Swaffield immediately grins and responds: "I was teaching her the importance of staying on top of future projects as well as the current one!" Gaffney continues: "But when someone would say, 'is she doing OK?', he'd look up and say 'yeah, she's doing fine'." "Because she was!", Swaffield adds.

This sparked a new interest in sound, which led to a placement at Autograph, "just working in the warehouse. But then I sort of stayed," she explains. "Initially as the shop rep, the interface between Autograph and anyone coming in to prep a rig. Then as a junior production sound engineer (PSE), learning about things on site, which was invaluable. Eventually there was a conversation with Autograph chairman Terry Jardine about whether I wanted to work towards being a PSE or a designer. I think he already knew what the answer was . . ."

Since that conversation - and that decision to concentrate on sound design - Gaffney has been out on a number of shows with different Autograph sound designers, including *Cabaret* with Nick Lidster. "They've all been great," she notes. "And there really is nothing to beat learning by doing it and seeing how it's done."

But you can't stay an associate forever, particularly at Autograph which has always encouraged and supported career progression, and the next step is to move into the designer's chair. That'll happen on the UK tour of *Pride and Prejudice (Sort Of)*, which Luke Swaffield designed in the West End, but for which he's not available to set up the tour, which opens in late September at the Minack Theatre, Cornwall. So, he proposed Gaffney fill the role.

Gaffney, for her part, is not just ready, but "very excited - really looking forward to it - particularly knowing that I have the full backing of everyone at Autograph behind me. It really is the 'Autograph family'." ☘