

Reopening Story: *SLEEPLESS* London

Ever wonder what it's like to work on a theatrical production during the COVID-19 pandemic? We talked to Ken Billington, the Tony Award winning Lighting Designer behind [SLEEPLESS A Musical Romance](#), which is among the first shows in the UK to reopen this August with socially distanced indoor performances at the Troubadour Wembley Park Theatre in London. Here's what we learned about his experience.

DESIGNER Q&A:

City Theatrical (CTI): When did you start working on *SLEEPLESS* London?

Ken Billington (KB): We started the load in March 1, 2020 and began tech March 16, and stopped on March 18. I flew home to New York, and did not start back until the producer, Michael Rose, found a 50-Minute COVID-19 test. I returned to London for a two week quarantine and then began at the theatre on August 13.

CTI: What has the daily process been like?

KB: The cast, crew and orchestra arrive at an appointed hour each day for testing. A nurse swabs either your nose or throat, a small expensive machine runs the test, up to 24 at a time, and then notifies you on a smartphone app of your status. If you've passed (which everyone has except for two shop techs on our first day back), you get a colored wrist band and can enter the theatre. You are not permitted to leave the theatre property, if you do the bubble is broken and can not return until the next day. We all bring our lunch, dinner, snacks and drinks with us.

CTI: What's it like now, behind the scenes?

KB: The actors go onstage without masks. The staff members wear masks and all remain in their assigned groups, or bubbles. For example, the director can't come to the designers table to speak. I've only been to the stage once since starting tech. We can't walk on the stage with outside/street shoes. And we're maxing the 1,200-seat theatre out at 400 seats. It's uncomfortable to wear a mask with a headset on but these rules are there to follow and do since we need to keep everyone safe.

“Being back lighting a new musical is exhilarating. It's all very different now. Hopefully with *SLEEPLESS* the world will see that theatre can happen in a safe way.”

- Ken Billington, Lighting Designer, *SLEEPLESS* London



Kimberley Walsh (Annie), Jobe Hart (Jonah) & Jay McGuinness (Sam) in *SLEEPLESS* (Photos by Alastair Muir)

