

Michael Boyd, director of *Richard III*

Interviewed on 24 January 2007 by Jonathan Bate in front of an audience at The Courtyard Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon.

When have you decided to set the play?

One thing we're doing is we take a huge leap in time. We end the *Henry VI* trilogy in a loosely late mediaeval/early Renaissance world, and we arrive at the beginning of *Richard III* in a 21st century world, roughly.

Shakespeare himself is funny about time in that way, because it is either – after you've seen *Henry VI Part 3* in the afternoon and then you come to see *Richard III* in the evening – it's either three weeks later as defined by Richard, as in he stabbed – no, it's three months later - he stabbed Prince Edward roughly three months ago so that makes it about three months later - or the length of time, a shorter period, whereby Henry's body hasn't decomposed, so probably a week or so, or the length of time it takes a tiny wee baby to grow up to be a twelve year old i.e. twelve years.

So I suppose that gave us some courage to take a leap chronologically and yes, in Jonathan's case [Jonathan Slinger, who plays Richard] probably quite a big leap in terms of where Richard is at.

How does Richard's attitude to his appearance change?

Richard starts off in *Henry VI Part 2* with a big wig, kind of toupee really, as a young man to hide a disfiguring birthmark. And in the soliloquy that Jonathan's referring to, from *Henry VI Part 3*, that comes off. He decides to take it off and show us his disfigurement. And his leg brace – still in *Henry VI Part 3* – is always covered, you just get a wee glimpse of it, this brace that keeps him upright in his weak leg. And we decided that by the beginning of *Richard III*, Richard had decided to celebrate his ugliness, his differentness and to sell himself, in a sense, as someone who is perfectly, actually, at ease with the way he was. "Take me or leave me. I've got a great big wine stain over my head, which I've now more or less shaved. I'm proud of my crippled leg, and I'm not – no longer getting the tailor to disguise the malformation on my back. And you know, I'm just an Honest John. This is who I am. I say it as I see it. I'm sorry if that's a bit rough for everyone but that's who I am."

What we've tried to do is a journey through the play where the audience realise that Richard isn't sorted with it at all, that this is just another mask. That this mask of Honest John, plain man, what you see is what you get, is hiding an almighty volcano of pain and resentment.

Is there a particular image of Richard that you focussed on in this production?

He is a serial killer. And I think we were very interested in how serial killers walk amongst us. Perfectly nice people that you would buy your milk with. And what is it that's ticking away underneath there? I think that's been the main preoccupation, to get away from it being about just purely an issue of the malformations and the ugliness or whatever to what's going on in here. What's it like to have no pity? What's shut off there? What bit of the brain has been cauterised by pain in the past?

So I think a sort of mixture of the vaudevillian Richard and the psychopath that gives that vaudevillian Richard so much energy would maybe be at the centre of what we were exploring.

Your Richard seems like someone you could meet today in the street - how did you arrive at this interpretation?

That's about the actor. It's about Jonathan [Slinger]. It's about the casting. Jonathan's almost incapable of not just standing on stage and just being there. It's a great gift he has. It's a curse he has as well, in a way! But as an actor, as a performer, as a presence on stage he plonks himself there and waits until he catches someone's eye and there's an inbuilt recognised ability about him. We didn't approach it theoretically in that way. I mean yes, sure, we put a jacket and trousers on him rather than a tunic, but I think he would have been just as recognisable in that sense as an ordinary person you might have met in the street even if he was in a strange tunic.

What references do you make to your productions of the *Henry VI* trilogy? In particular, how do you make Clarence's dream clear for the audience?

There's a particular moment in Clarence's dream in this production where he talks about imagining himself going to the underworld after death. It's half the Christian purgatory and half the Roman or Greek underworld. And he meets the Earl of Warwick, who he aligned himself with in *Henry VI Part 3*. He betrayed his own family in a godfather context. He went over to another family and fought for them. In this case he was fighting for the Nevilles, for Warwick, for the Lancastrian Red Rose cause, betraying his own White Rose heritage. And then in turn he felt remorse and betrayed Warwick. So one of the people he was afraid to meet in Hades was Warwick, and he duly meets him in his dream as he's talking about it to the keeper. And we do have Patrice Naiambana who plays Warwick in the *Henry VI* plays, a massive role, a crucial role, a very charismatic role. And he just simply comes out of the doors and goes back again.

We wanted to bring on the next person he meets in Hell, who is Prince Edward who he took a part in murdering: he was one of the three murderers. And the actor who was playing Prince Edward in the previous production was playing the son of a different queen in *Richard III*. He was playing Dorset, Elizabeth's son. And we were toying with how confusing or interesting this might be. And actually we have decided we're going to do it bifocally when we're doing four plays in a row. Wela's [Wela Fraser, actor] going to come out as well. But while we're just doing *Richard III* he won't come out because it might be too confusing. We still flirt with that in the scene before Clarence's dream, when Margaret is cursing over the skeleton of Wela, which she produces to render her curse credible and powerful. Wela is standing right next to her with his nose to his hanky, because the bones are not that old, they're still smelly. And at one stage his character Dorset says, "Speak not with her, she is lunatic." And we've chosen for Margaret to turn on him. In the script it's just as aggressive. We haven't changed the script or anything. She turns on him aggressively but she's also completely choked, because if you're just seeing *Richard III* this is another young man who reminds her of her son, but if you've seen the *Henry VIs* because she's confusing him with her son, and has to remind herself that her son is dead by looking back to the bones. And then she completely and utterly breaks down.

So there are different perspectives on quite a few moments in the production, almost like those 3D things that you kind of go boss-eyed to look at, and then they emerge as a dolphin when they just look like a big smudge. It's a bit like that really. There are some things that are either one thing if you look at them one way or something different if you look at them in another way.

Why do you think Shakespeare created such powerful women?

Pubs in the east end of Belfast. People might credit John Major and Tony Blair with great things in Northern Ireland, but that process was actually started by the women of Belfast. 'The disappeared' in Argentina and in Chile – it was the women who were championing resistance against very powerful, very frightening military regimes. And it

was the women who stepped forward to be counted, who in a very patriarchal, cultural way maybe had a kind of armour on them. Elizabeth doesn't get her head cut off. Lady Anne does get poisoned, but she has to be poisoned in a clandestine way. And the Duchess of York seems invulnerable to everything except age. So women have always had power in certain situations, even before they had a franchise to vote, or run countries, in a sense.

How does Margaret evolve through the tetralogy (*Henry VI - Richard III*)?

The entire character of Queen Margaret seems to me to be an irrelevance unless you've seen the *Henry VI* plays, or at best a colourful batty old woman, whereas if you've actually gone a journey with her, which in our case starts with her as Joan of Arc, fighting the English, exploiting the supernatural to not particularly good ends, but becoming an object of our compassion at her burning and her mistreatment, clearly even in Shakespeare's eyes, by the English. Then in our version she re-emerges almost from the smoke as it were of her burning as Margaret, Princess of Anjou, who is taken across to marry the young King Henry VI by her lover, and kidnapper if you like, the Earl of Suffolk.

She suffers at first in the English court from a great deal of anti-French sentiment, a lot of resentment to do with the deal of the marriage – it's not very favourable for England. And eventually she acquires her claws and her teeth and learns how to fight at court, fight her corner, and becomes quite a tyrannical authority at court. And then war breaks out and she becomes a war leader, an iron lady, and quite brutalised. And then she loses her son. And she re-emerges again as a human being, as she has been perhaps more at the beginning, as Joan of Arc or as the young princess. And we leave her being dragged away inconsolable over the murder in front of her eyes of her son.

We rejoin her in *Richard III* as someone who isn't at all mad. She's been rendered eccentric by grief, by the loss of her crown, by the loss of an extraordinary, elevated position. And now she is an exile. She's banished on pain of death, but she feels compelled to return to curse all the people who have killed her son or been involved in the murder of her son.

Now without all that prehistory that I've given you, or without sitting in this Courtyard through the *Henry VIs*, you still get the benefit if you come to *Richard III* of Katy Stephens coming to that, not particularly old, not really batty, but enraged, impassioned, deeply damaged by grief, and accessing what women of the time increasingly resorted to, again accessing the occult as the only source of power for the powerless, in her cursing of the murderers of her son.

So I think I would say, a long way round to answering part of the question is, that even though coming to *Richard III* cold you haven't got all that back history, unless you read your programme carefully, you get an actress coming to the role, and a director coming to the role, and a whole company addressing that character as a very serious contender, as a very important character, rather than as someone who is usually cut to ribbons, frankly. She's mostly left on the editing room floor, and is there slightly motiveless, slightly lost, and therefore quite often played mad, because it's the only way to explain her behaviour if you don't go into the grounds for her behaviour.

How do Anne and Elizabeth affect Richard?

The thing with Anne and Elizabeth, yes, there is this extraordinary seduction, twisting, bullying, lying, hypnotising event, very near the beginning of the play. And I think it's true that in many ways Richard just tries the same trick again later. Richard's powers are on the wane by then, and it's more puffed up with rhetoric rather than what you might call a brilliant virtuoso performance in Act 1 Scene 2. And of course he fails. And we deliberately keep Elizabeth on stage to overhear unbeknownst to him his dismissal of

her. He does the same thing to both women, more or less saying 'tart' once they've agreed to what he wants. But Elizabeth hears it. Richard doesn't know that Elizabeth has heard it, and that Elizabeth's going to go off and, having persuaded him that she will capitulate she goes off to arrange for her daughter to be married to Richard's political rival, Henry Richmond. And that's the downfall of Richard. So he's sealing his fate in that scene, just as he thinks he is achieving yet another glorious victory.

Why did you decide to create lines for Mistress Shore?

Well it's partly from the whole ensemble thing. You know, Alexia's dead good, let's try and find her something coherent. And there's the luxury of just trying things out. In *Henry VI Part 3* we tried out Alexia as Rutland, as opposed to having a child actor in that instance. And we liked what Alexia did, and so we thought right, let's do it. Let's do it that way.

We tried this first in the choric citizens' scene where people are talking about the death of King Edward. Everyone's very nervous about what's going to happen next, the beginnings of fears about Richard of Gloucester, who previously had been not thought of as a contender. It reminded me of conversations with friends in the Soviet Union in 1979 when they would put a blanket over the phone, the kind of guarded conversations where you know people are talking in code to each other.

It occurred to me that a particularly interesting person in that situation might be Mistress Shore, who has lost her umbrella of protection in the form of the King her lover. And then also it was interesting to think about Hastings, who clearly has also been her lover, maybe being with her the night before the council scene that seals his fate. And then maybe she's produced as evidence, when she's referred to during the council scene when Hastings is summarily accused and sent off for execution. And because we have a standing company on this project we were able to experiment with that idea. And rather than have Alexia just hanging around, or doing a part called 'citizen', we thought we might make her a sort of high-class citizen!

The full text of *Richard III* takes about four hours to perform. How did you decide what to cut?

I'm quite often very cruel to the actors in that I prefer to cut as we go, in rehearsal. So everyone has to learn everything. And also when you cut, it then seems like an appalling judgement on the way they're playing a scene. "Oh, it's because it's not working?" No. Because I think it's almost as hard to do an edit on a show in advance as it is to design a show in advance. You need to find it in the rehearsal room, I think, for best results.

So you feel the way a story is already clear and needs no more. You feel the way an image, perhaps, has become firmly implanted in the audience's mind and doesn't need replanting. So you begin to take away repetitions that you don't think are necessary. Sometimes actually they are necessary, because sometimes (as we all know) we need to be told something five times before it sinks in. And Shakespeare's not daft in that way. And there are moments where you do just have to take out an idea.

There's an idea – it's a fairly small idea but it's a good, witty idea - that I'm sad to see gone from the Richard/Elizabeth scene, where there's a quibble between Elizabeth and Richard over the phrase, "I love your daughter from my heart." And Elizabeth says, "yes, I know you love my daughter *from* your heart (i.e. out with your heart). And *from* my heart I do believe you. From *my* heart I do believe *you*." And he says, "Stop quibbling. I mean 'with my heart'." It's a sad loss because it shows from very early on in the scene the resourcefulness and wittiness of Elizabeth. And it's sad to lose it, but hey, you know, people have got buses to catch.

Is there a danger that your modern setting suggests *Richard III* is the more contemporary piece while the *Henry VI*s are historical artefacts?

Yes, I suppose it is. I think there's something about Shakespeare himself talking about the passing of an era. It's something to do with either a pre-Renaissance, chivalric, high Christian world being flattened by a rationalist, Machiavellian, pragmatic, mercantile and largely Protestant world. And I think the modern world is, if you like, much more like our world.

I think we are in the middle of a crisis of faith, a crisis of moral authority, a crisis of values. And I think Shakespeare in characters like Iago and Richard III is trying to do a painting of the car crash of that crisis, of the cost of throwing out all the old, primitive if you like, moral babies with the bathwater of modernisation in the Renaissance. And yes, I suppose I would say that that does speak to a very immediately contemporary crisis. And a lot of the world of the *Henry VI* plays, for them it was very important for us to remind the audience of the otherness of it, that we were actually in a deeply Christian cosmos all the time, which is very alien to our own time. And therefore the alienness of the costuming I felt was useful.

I've done this first part of the cycle before, and had wanted to go contemporary on *Richard III* and pulled back just at the last minute last time I did it, and regretted it. And I'm glad that we've taken the jump this time.

You're about to start directing the other History plays. How do you feel at this halfway stage?

Fear and ignorance, which I think is sort of appropriate! We're doing them this way round deliberately, because I think that (although you suddenly go back deeper into the Middle Ages with *Richard II*, and that is in a sense the beginning of the story, almost the biblical primal sin of regicide that causes all the trouble that ensues, including the *Henry VI* and *Richard III* plays) there's another way of looking at it which is Shakespeare's journey, where there's still the young angry Shakespeare fighting in the *Henry VI* plays, fighting against injustice. And his pen and his players are allowed to rage. Because of the censors, they have to rage slightly obliquely and they have to be coded somewhat. But the temperature is angry and revolutionary.

With *Richard III*, it goes cold and murderous. And from then on in, everybody's compromised, to a certain extent including Shakespeare. By now he's beginning to take the King's or the Queen's shilling. And he's no longer working under the patronage of one of the leading Catholic aristocrats of the time: Lord Strange, Lord Stanley. He's now working if you like under the pay of the Government a bit more. And times are perhaps also a bit more tense in terms of international politics, in terms of we're fewer years away from the explosion of the Gunpowder Plot and so on. And we're getting nearer at least to Elizabeth's probable death, and therefore the very dangerous question of who will succeed her, a Catholic or a Protestant. I think it knuckles and buckles in the writing. The politics become colder, become more modern. Shakespeare himself is almost scared to be so angry.

I think there's almost, and I have to deal with this, I think there's almost a retreat into naturalism. A sort of dramatic journalism in the *Henry IV* plays so Shakespeare can almost say, "Honest, guv, I'm just telling it how it is." The hugely celebrated growth of Shakespeare's sort of East End or sort of rural characters, those small details of real life, to some extent, I think, are Shakespeare hiding behind what he's claiming to the censor are observationalism and actually it's the only way he can get it down in a recognisable way for the audience to see what he's trying to get at.

So without treading all over that lovely, gorgeous, picturesque detail of those plays, I'm also going to be trying to bring out what I think are some very submerged politics in those plays, and religious politics in those plays.

Politically, do you think Shakespeare was an optimist or a pessimist?

I think Shakespeare would be with Antonio Gramsci - he would be a pessimist of the intellect and an optimist of the will. He hoped passionately and searched for ways to find optimism in his heart, and wherever he looked he saw the abuse of power, he saw the loss of faith, the loss of moral authority, he saw very slippery thin ice. I don't think Shakespeare did say, "the best is yet to come" at all. I think if anything I would say he was a pessimist.

As a director, are you a conduit for the actors or more authoritarian?

I think I'm fairly schizophrenic about that! I really enjoy trying to be like my mentors in the Soviet Union where - to the extent that I trained - I trained. Where the director's art is a very serious one that takes a long training and they have a very considerable sense of their artistic responsibility. And they're autocratic. They're a nightmare. You don't eat your soup this way. You eat your soup *this* way. It can be – for an English actor – a very traumatic experience.

But on the other hand, what I like about that is that an eastern European director will take responsibility for their art work. On the other hand, especially in an ensemble context like this, you're living and working with people over a long period of time and you get to know them, and you want them to come out and shine, and you just want to use their inner momentum and just say, "on you go – it's amazing, it's a discovery".

How did you develop the music for this production?

It started with Jimmy Jones who is a percussionist by trade, which if you learn, includes lots of tunes because they hit marimbas and xylophones and things that have melody. But it really started with him and a bunch of old junk metal in a rehearsal room and being with us all the time. And another wonderful example of ensemble is that over the years RSC musicians – who are beautifully skilled musicians – also develop this ability, of really being able to read a play, a rehearsal room, a performance brilliantly well, and Jimmy became another voice, another part.

It got the stage where, rather than arriving at the technical rehearsal and suddenly The Score arrives with all the lovely music for the scene change or something like that – Jimmy, right the way through rehearsals, would be jamming, basically, with the actors. And towards the end he would be joined by one or two other people who would then expand his ideas. But he became something that if you took it away an actor would say, "wait a minute, I had a dialogue with that noise. You've taken it away, can I have it back please?" rather than it being appliquéd music.

Transcription by Veryan Boorman
Edited by Suzanne Worthington