

## Michael Boyd, director of *Henry V*

*This is a transcript of the Director Talk event in November 2007.*

*Paul Allen interviewed Michael Boyd in front of an audience at the Courtyard Theatre.*

**Paul Allen** Good afternoon. My name's Paul Allen, I'm an arts journalist - I have a particular interest in these [History] plays because I'm writing a biography of Falstaff at the moment. This is Michael Boyd, Artistic Director of the RSC and director of *Henry V*.

This is a moment of great excitement in the theatre because it's the climax of an extraordinarily ambitious cycle of plays involving the same company throughout. Last night was the press night of *Henry V*, when it was unveiled to the public.

Michael and I will talk for 20 – 25 minutes, and then there'll be time for questions. How many people have already seen this production? And who is going tonight? *[waits for show of hands]*

Well, we'd better not give away the plot... *[laughter]*  
What I don't want to give away is some of the staging, because I think it's spectacularly unexpected.

Michael, maybe we could just talk first about why the Histories feel so current at this moment, given that it's not only a historic moment for the theatre but they are steeped in history. They belong in one sense to 1400 and in another sense to roughly 1600, yet here in 2000 and they suddenly seem... like a box office hit..?

**Michael Boyd** Two reasons. One, at the time of writing, Shakespeare was dealing with a very profound and dangerous wrestling match about Englishness: what did it mean to be English; to be a loyal English person when the country was so religiously divided; when the English Catholic Church had been abolished within a generation. What did it mean to be English in terms of getting on with your neighbour, who may have decided not to practise the Catholic faith any more, or even members of your family who were treating life differently in terms of their religious faith?

The danger of dissent, but also what it meant to be a loyal citizen at a time when England was potentially under threat from Catholic neighbours in Europe.

I think the question of Englishness is on the agenda again today – it's in a difficult wrestling match. Obviously since the war, as Britain divested itself of its empire, there was the first wave of a new consciousness about what Englishness means. But I think it perhaps rested back on Britishness, so with the fragmentation of Britain - devolution to Scotland, moving towards a resolution in Ireland, England itself in a very awkward relationship with Europe and a much-criticised relationship with America - the notion of Englishness is again an important one that's in the popular consciousness.

I think more immediate question is that of religion and conflict generally. Power and the abuse of power feels very current now, at a time when we're involved in a war ourselves and we're also aware of the threat of civil unrest in the form of terrorist activity both here and in America or Europe. The idea of civil conflict to the point of violence - one of the central streams that runs all the way through the History Plays - is something that we can respond to now.

I think those are two reasons why they have surfaced.

**The whole thing gets set out right at the beginning, early in *Richard II*, where John of Gaunt has that extraordinary speech known as the 'This England' speech, where every line contains at least two book titles! But people take this speech as reassuring patriotism of an old-fashioned kind. At the end, John of Gaunt says what the speech is really about is the way England has been messed up by the government of Richard II. So he [Shakespeare] sets up that splitting-apart of Englishness. Does he resolve it by *Henry V*?**

No, I don't think he does. It wouldn't be very Shakespearean I think to do that! I think Shakespeare's great gift - and another reason why he's still current today - is that he leaves the conflict still ringing in the air: in his dialogues, in his scenes, in his plays and even in his great History cycle.

One of the reasons why he leaves the dialogue ringing in the air unresolved is that if he were to have resolved it at the time, the Lord Chamberlain would probably have stepped in and said, 'If those are your views then I'm afraid we can't allow your play to be performed in public'. So it's a survival technique, but it also happens to be brilliant drama.

It moves forward by *Henry V* certainly, but I think [it splits] into almost more pieces. The order of writing is he did the *Henry VI* plays first, then *Richard III*, then *Richard II*, and then *Henry IVs* and *Henry V*. So although it's in the middle of the story, it was actually the last of the plays written, written round about the time of writing *Hamlet*.

Working through the plays, my sense has been of a robust, clear set of conflicts in the early plays, and by *Henry V* it's like a broken window that you're trying to piece together. And it's all enclosed in the mind of one man! You're very nearly ready for the kind of mental conflict that Hamlet is dealing with! The pressure on the individual of the conflicting moral, spiritual, personal demands are almost unupportable. The only sense in which it's resolved in *Henry V* is in a charismatic, likeable central character. So you follow them, love them, and forgive Henry his sins. So if it's resolved at all, I guess it's resolved by that act of forgiveness.

**You say that we like Henry, and I think we have to while watching the play. It's very difficult for anybody to do the rhetoric of those big speeches and not move an audience, stir them probably to things that we would rather not be stirred to – that is, readiness for military adventure, to kill people.**

**But at the same time Henry is hugely manipulative - this was used by the Olivier film at the end of the Second World War to be a patriotic call to arms. He loves getting people in his power, like the poor common soldier Williams who he leads into a situation where he's presumably terrified about what's going to happen to him next. Then Henry comes out with the generous act, the glove full of gold coins. Henry loves getting people into that situation – that's not a terribly nice characteristic, is it?**

**He's ruthless, on occasions when it's probably sensible to be ruthless. He employs rhetoric, which is now a pejorative term but wasn't in Shakespeare's day. So not everything about him is lovable, until maybe that last scene when he courts Katherine...**

**So I'm wondering how much we are to identify with Henry?  
How much we are to love Henry through this story?**

He's also there as an irritant, a stimulant to thought, because you identify with him and inevitably travel the journey with him. You are allowed inside him as you are allowed inside Hamlet.

Having done that, however, Shakespeare then does take you to some very uncomfortable places. Quickly in the play, Henry is seen out-manipulating other manipulators. The first scene of the play is set up as the Church trying to manipulate Henry away from damaging them, and he does manipulate the Church to provide ecclesiastical legal cover for his invasion plans of France. So you do have to question his religious and political conviction about invading France, especially when his father has said the only way to arrive at peace at home is to be at war abroad. Is that why he's doing it?

You question him all the way through, including in the love scene. There are moments when you just see him manipulating Katherine as much as he manipulates politicians; when he is in some ways as bullying to Katherine as he is to other people. But there's no doubt that Shakespeare invites you to stick with him. I suppose it's by the combination of the two that Shakespeare does force the audience to face its own moral dilemmas; to question itself on all the dilemmas that face Henry.

**You mentioned that opening scene in which the two archbishops offer what has been interpreted in a lot of more obviously topical productions than yours as the equivalent of the 'dodgy dossier'.**

**I've seen productions in which this scene is done on television screens, or in which a side-kick actually hands round a dossier at the moment the case is being made for invasion of another country. It says, say the bishops, that it is absolutely legal for you to do this. You've presumably turned your back on that kind of very obvious topicality?**

Well... [gestures] If you iron that bit out – this bit makes sense, if it's happening now, but then this other bit jumps up like a huge lump, so you bang that bit down... and then another bit comes up.

I suppose it's partly as a result of this coming at the end of a cycle of eight plays – we wanted continuity with the other plays with this production so we

decided it's broadly period. There are contradictions there, for example, Hal and his bedraggled army are in some senses portrayed as religious fundamentalists of little means fighting a war against a complacent superpower.

To make it a play about the imperialist ambitions of the developed Christian world on the Muslim world, a continuation of an Elizabethan battle, is not straightforward, because the kind of fundamentalism that's being talked about in detail at the top of the play - the Reformation - has more in common in some ways with Islamic fundamentalism, for example, today, than anything the French have to offer.

Also, it was OK to be xenophobic in a public theatre, in a funny way, in Shakespeare's time, so the French are portrayed simultaneously as fearful opposition and clowns. That's hard to translate to now...

**You've come up with a very non-naturalistic way of showing the French as wild peacocking exotics...**

I suppose what I like about the visual presentation of the French - which is that they live in the air - is that it gives them a literal sense of elevation, being above the English, more obviously cultured, in some senses, than the English, with greater means than the English, and also more playful.

It can turn easily from something that's a bit silly to something impressive and alarming. The messenger - the herald Montjoy - doesn't waltz in wearing a fancy costume to deliver his French messages. He hurtles in from the sky in a way that's quite threatening. There are times when the English on the ground, wary of the French up above, reminds you of people looking out for fighter planes or bombers.

**There are no scenes of hand-to-hand fighting as there are in the earlier plays. You've gone for a period in which people are in trenches; there are shells whistling over head; there's a sense of warfare taking on a magnitude and a horror that wasn't there before. The age of chivalry, of individual heroism is suddenly gone...**

Yes. It's set in Shakespeare's time, militarily, where you did have swords alongside ordnance, cannons, gunpowder. They were separated in their roles, but individual guns and muskets were of limited use because they were single-shot and inaccurate. Whereas cannons didn't need to be so accurate to be effective.

There are no gunshots in our production, there's artillery and swords and of course there are arrows.

**I noticed that all these plays have a mixture of public and private scenes, in the sense that Henry is sometimes in public and sometimes in private, and then there's another public-ness, when Chorus addresses us with the house lights up. And one or two changes of words, early on... it is not a 'wooden O' anymore, is it? What's the thinking behind that? To bring us into the theatre as a public space that's not pretending to be anything else?**

I think that's patently Shakespeare's idea. It's interesting that he came to this so late in his History cycle. He was busily proud of himself in the *Henry VI* plays, I think, of the spectacle that he was creating with all these battles and so on. It's what he made his reputation as a young playwright on, in many ways. Then by *Henry V*, he's apologising for it just being theatre. Or maybe he was apologising for it being public theatre, i.e. poor theatre as opposed to court masque? Hey, we haven't got Hollywood effects here – the equivalent of Hollywood in Shakespeare's time was the expensive royal masques, with huge production values, thousands of pounds spent on them and a cast of aristocrats. So the Chorus talking about, 'if only royalty were here we could have a *real* king', is probably at the expense of the royal masques to some extent, and partly an apology – 'we're just a small public theatre company and there'll be a bit of a 'bish, bash, bosh' with a few swords but that's all you're going to get, ladies and gentlemen, we're very sorry'.

It's also a political distancing device. It's almost like putting Peter Quince [from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*] up front saying, 'We're just humble players, we'll make lots of mistakes, and the actors might say some lines that aren't in the script, honestly, if there's anything seditious, it's an ad lib'. It's a very useful way of shrugging your shoulders and opening the palms of your hands to the heavens to the censor.

Also it's very nice to have someone holding your hand through the show, you know! Forbes [the Chorus] is there, a warm presence, and if there's any danger of you lazily getting too jingoistic and patriotic because you're not paying proper attention to the play, the Chorus is there just to gently remind you there's a few contradictions here. One of the nice dramatic ironies in the play is that the Chorus is using language that people have realised is almost stolen word-for-word at times from the recruiting pamphlets of the times, recruiting for the wars in Ireland. The same rousing rhetoric is used by the Chorus. Then we cut to the next scene which completely contradicts the heroic nature of that rhetoric. So Shakespeare's saying, 'Honest, Guv, I never said nothing', but he's cutting and pasting the scenes to make his argument very clear.

**When the Chorus makes that reference to – presumably – the Earl of Essex coming back in triumph from an Irish campaign that was going very badly, what's he saying then? Last night, it seemed to me that Forbes Masson did sound a bit deliberately halting over those lines. Is Shakespeare saying that the war in Ireland is a good thing? Unless you undermine it?**

Yes. It's very important for the actor on Shakespeare's stage to say: 'The war in Ireland is a good thing'. Then something else might contradict that and you can't find out where the author's politics are. We don't talk about a war in Ireland, which you might have done in a 1970s production, we just talk about our wars.

**To come to the big St. Crispin's Day speech, we tend to assume that in Shakespeare's time, they were still celebrating Agincourt and St. Crispin's Day. But it wasn't, was it? They'd already forgotten, 180 years after the event.**

So it's at the same time ironic for the audience, but enough to stir those guys up to withstand an extraordinary blitzkrieg in which they were desperately outnumbered and under-resourced, all sick, with almost no chance of surviving.

It's a moment when the hairs on the back of your neck stand up but it's all actually rather sardonic. I don't know how a production approaches this, and how accurate an approach is that kind of knowledge..?

Sardonic?

**Well, almost sardonic from the author's point of view. The speech itself is not sardonic, and that's the kind of contradiction I find fascinating.**

Yes... I think the speech is full of different parts of Hal's spirit to feel rounded. It comes after a moment of him contemplating his illegitimacy as a king, and giving every indication of not being ready to lead a battle, and he goes off-stage dispirited. You think, 'I don't think we're going to win Agincourt'. Then this famous speech occurs as he walks to join his soldiers, who are all in shock at seeing the size of the French army - and it's a great speech; a brilliant piece of leadership against his own *internal* odds as well as against the *external* odds.

It is spoken by someone who had inherited a crown of dubious provenance from his dad. And that's highlighted by the scene before, where he refers to the fact that the crown was usurped from Richard. There's a resonance there in the Elizabethan theatre for the contemporary audience about the constant questions over the legitimacy of Elizabeth's rule, because she was - according to the Roman Catholic Church - illegitimate because Henry's marriage to Ann Boleyn was not a real marriage.

So the question of legitimacy is one that hovers very interestingly over Henry V and Elizabeth I, and it's an issue that I think we're concerned with now: the legitimacy of leadership and authority. Legitimacy of the royal family is in fact quite a big issue, but we're very concerned with the legitimacy of our political leaders, where does their authority come from when the turn-out at elections is going down, and so on. So I think that's very current for us.

**To go back to what Shakespeare resolves and doesn't resolve.**

**How do you respond to what still seems to be a prevailing thought that Shakespeare likes order? That he believes in inherited kingship; that anything that might trouble authority is bad for the community as well as the authority themselves?**

**As the Daily Telegraph critic said at the end of the Complete Works Festival, 'Shakespeare is essentially conservative'. How do you respond to that?**

I think it's a partial reading of the plays. The tidiest and the most orderly figure of authority in the whole of Shakespeare is Angelo in *Measure for Measure*, and he's probably one of the least well-equipped to run a country.

I think Shakespeare's very honest about order. His favourite positive image of order, from his childhood, is the order of a hedgerow, which isn't very ordered but it has an ecological sense of natural order. It's brutal, messy, dirty. It

involves death, reproduction and everything else, but it's OK. The order that he's always questioning is human hierarchy. That's not to say that he doesn't admit human society has to organise itself somehow, but I don't think Shakespeare comes up with any answers.

I think if there's any consistent political message in his work - which is hard to find, given the elusive nature of that in his work - is that artificially imposed order will *always* lead to disaster. The more complete a ruler's control over their world, the less sympathetic the author ends up being with it. One of the things that is appealing about Henry is that while he is capable of steering a council, a country and an army, he can accommodate dissent and disorder. He can see it and turn a blind eye to it.

**He leads from the front at least...**

**Let's have some questions... Brave first person?**

**[Question from audience member]**

**Do you think that Shakespeare intended Henry to use the blundering arguments of Canterbury and Ely at the beginning of the play to confirm his true Christian right to fight the French?**

**Or did he use them just to confirm something he regarded as politically expedient?**

Political expediency I would say. I wouldn't call it a blundering argument. It's quite a good argument that the Archbishop puts forward on Salic law. And it's a brilliant piece of Shakespearian ambiguity because it's a powerful denunciation of this argument of the French that the English royal family has no claim to the throne of France. It's a powerful attack.

At the same time, Shakespeare the playwright knows he's writing a funny speech, so it is both cogent and funny. Now who's undermining here?

Is it Shakespeare shifting the carpet under the speech by making it funny or is it even the Archbishop? Is the Archbishop distancing himself from it by being a bit of a clown, and washing his hands of a conflict with Catholic Europe, as the head of a Catholic-associated church at the top of *Henry V*?

There's this first scene in *Henry V* – not the scene with the Salic law - where the Archbishop talks about a threat from Hal; that the church may have half its lands confiscated. I don't know how often it's done. It wasn't published in Shakespeare's lifetime. For the audience of the time, that must be bursting with resonance in terms of what Elizabeth's father had done with the Reformation, and the word 'reformation' is used of the change in Hal. So the church is set up very clearly in this first scene that I suspect was too controversial to be printed in Shakespeare's lifetime. The church is being set up as an enemy of Hal.

Hal in some ways is another of these funny heroes of Shakespeare's, like Hamlet: protestant-educated, reforming youngsters dealing with the reality of an unreformed world. It's part of what makes both of them so interesting as characters. It takes one to know one: Hal is just as manipulative as the Archbishop and they're sizing each other up. Hal lets him do his turn and says, 'Fine, you're getting a few laughs out of that. I don't care. I'm going to France. I have the church's backing – did everyone hear that?' So he gets what he wants.

**He is very religious after that, though, isn't he? Historically Henry V was extraordinarily religious, partly because he was doing pious things to pay back his father's impiety?**

Yes, but I just think Hal's religion is very different from the Archbishop's.

**[inaudible question from audience member]**

**I'll repeat that. The question is how far, when directing the whole sequence of plays, did Michael began on page one, Act I Scene 1 and worked steadily through, or was an overall vision that informed the production of all of them?**

It's easier to have a vision about the first tetralogy, the one that was written first. Sorry I'll explain the jargon: The first four plays, which are historically the *later plays*, *Henry VI* and *Richard III*.

It's easier to have a vision about them because they have more of a sense of wholeness within themselves as one story with one ending.

It's true to say that an interpretation of those plays resulted from the casting. It was about trying to find interesting journeys through those four plays; what different parts that could make sense with each other, threaded through those four plays. Out of that came a story outside the story; a bigger story that was trying to chime in with an attempt at a providential vision on Shakespeare's part, with something like a happy ending with a question mark at the end of it, with the conquest of evil in *Richard III*. In a way, *Richard III* was born as a consequence of the Wars of the Roses: the monster produced by the Wars of the Roses, in a sense, and finally defeated by the forces of harmony and true faith.

That was reinforced by the way that we produced the second four plays, written later by an older and probably wiser writer, certainly more compromised and worried. They are less easy to have one broad-brush-stroke for. Narratively, they refer to each other so it's crucial you hold them all in mind.

The character of Bolingbroke goes through the first three plays of the second tetralogy, and his son Hal goes through the last three plays of those four plays. So you've got continuity of human beings, but I'm not sure that you have the same degree of continuity of idea.

I certainly didn't start off with a vision for either half of the eight-play cycle. I would say that the different plays have ricocheted on each other. The two times when we've been rehearsing three at the same time, we did rehearse them 1, 2, 3 each time. But of course you rehearsed one, got it up-and-running; you rehearsed the next one, and that then informed the one that you were up-and-running with!

Now, although Paul describes this as a moment of climax, I don't think we as a company feel that at all. The finishing line is just another starting line for us. We've got to the end of the eight, so now it's possible to begin to understand the plays that we've already put on. Now we can revisit.

Already this afternoon, we were working on early scenes in *Henry IV Part 1* and *Henry IV Part 2* that are transformed by our understanding from *Henry V*.

[inaudible question from audience member]

Absolutely no question whatsoever. He's going to the safe territory of 100 or so years ago to write about now without going to jail. He's cavalier with history: he'll change history to suit himself, for instance, put cannons in where there were no cannons.

As for the costume, there might have been the flimsiest hint of medievalism in his productions, but his idea of a Roman was someone with a sash over them; someone in contemporary costume with a sash. That was Roman-ness. So *Antony and Cleopatra* would also have reeked of Elizabethan England in its own way, as well as being set in Rome.

There nearly always another country or period of history as a refuge for Shakespeare to talk about what he wants to talk about safely.

**It's also the case, isn't it, that at times of national crisis of one kind or another, there can be a national paranoia. I'm thinking of for example, the United States after the Second World War when notions of what was 'American' and 'un-American' became a matter of life and death – certainly of whether you would be able to earn a living.**

**I think this can also be true during a period when there are a number of immigrants coming into a community. In northern France, it was acceptable because, like Polish people in England now, the immigrants worked jolly hard and helped prop up the economy. *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello* suggest Shakespeare grappling with something else, and it seems to me that Fluellen, Gower and Macmorris in *Henry V* are ways of dealing with prejudices by sticking them onto another.**

**You unite the Englishmen, Scots, Welsh and Irish in the course of this play because you can say, 'Whatever you might think of them, the French are worse'. Maybe we should mention the fact that [a video clip from] this production of *Henry V* was used before the big rugby international at Twickenham recently to gee up the English in a match against the French – and it jolly well worked, we beat them. Unfortunately we didn't beat the South Africans but we don't have a history of literary rhetoric against the South Africans! It does seem brilliant on the part of the RSC...**

We were very worried about it but it was quite tasteful in the end. The real analogy is not actually within the French. It's British-born Muslims and being asked the question, 'Just how British are you?' Integrate, integrate, integrate.

In Shakespeare's time, that integration meant taking the oath of allegiance, which was against their faith. I think that's our current crisis; our equivalent of McCarthyism; this deeply unsettling split in society. It's a minority split but deep in its effects, where a large population of loyal, peace-loving Muslims feel

accused, and the rest of the population is nervous on a tube-train with someone reading the Koran in London.

We are in that situation, and the same was true for visibly-practising Catholics at the time. Why shouldn't they be associated with Spanish plots to assassinate Elizabeth? It's an understandable paranoia: the might of Catholic Europe against poor little Protestant England, and the fifth column of the practising Catholics within England. I think there's very much a danger of an analogy with the Muslim population in England now.

**[question from audience member]**

**I haven't seen any of the other History plays – does it matter? Will I be able to follow the story?**

Shakespeare was aware of that as a good showman and made sure he gave you 'the story so far' within *Henry V*. There are constant reminders of Hal's wayward youth within *Henry V*, so you don't necessarily have to have seen *Henry IV Part 1* or *2* to understand *Henry V*, although it helps!

**We have to finish there. Michael Boyd, thank you very much.**

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