Interval Drinks podcast, Series 3

Alex Gilbreath and Adam Bambrough - transcript

Welcome: Welcome to the Royal Shakespeare Company.

Ibraheem Toure: You're listening to Interval Drinks, the podcast where current RSC artists talk to those who inspire them. Each week a different creative from the RSC speaks to another artist about their secret interval rituals, fascinating personal stories and the big questions facing artists today.

Maggie O'Farrell: You know, Shakespeare is a very mysterious and shadowy person. You know, on one hand, we have this enormous wealth of his work. On the other hand, there's so much about him we don't know. But I've always felt that Hamlet is a play in which he becomes most visible to us at certain times as a human being.

Philip J Morris: It's kind of my bread and butter for theatre making. It's the thing that connects us as human beings. It's being able to go, you know what? I understand you or I maybe didn't understand, but now I feel like I know a bit more. Just see ourselves within different worlds that are creative.

Ibraheem Toure: Have you collected your drinks? Then let's begin. Catching up in the interval This week, we have actor Alexandra Gilbreath in conversation with CEO of Wellbeing in the Arts, Adam Bambrough. What do you think they've been watching?

Alex: Hello and welcome to Interval Drinks. I'm Alex Gilbreath and I'm an associate artist with the RSC. Joining me today is Adam Bambrough - actor, director (used to be) and founder of Wellbeing in the Arts, an organisation dedicated to providing mental health and wellbeing support for creatives and artists in the entertainment industry. How are you, Adam?

Adam: I'm very well, thank you.

Alex: I'm very good. Now I'm having a virtual tea in our interval drink here and I want to know what you would like to drink.

Adam: Definitely a cocktail and today feels like a whisky sour day to me.

Alex: There you go, whiskey sour. Although I wouldn't be offering you drinks because I'd be standing in the queue in the ladies' loo because that's all we do, because there aren't enough toilets. Anyway, let's moving on. Tell me more about Wellbeing in the Arts.

Adam: Sure. So Wellbeing in the Arts provides mental health and wellbeing support to the arts industry, as you said. We offer access to 1 to 1 counselling. We run workshops, mental health first aid courses, we provide wellbeing support to TV and film sets, rehearsal rooms, music studios, etcetera. We run surgeries where we'll have a counsellor in an arts building so people can drop in and have a single session, which is often a gateway into further support. And we work with arts organisations across the country, across the industry, and I think it's really struck a chord.

Alex: And when did you found the company?

Adam: Last year.

Alex: Last year?

Adam: Yeah, beginning of last year.

Alex: Wow. So it's gone - your trajectory is massive in such a short space of time. And why did you set the company up? What was your particular journey to that?

Adam: So I was an actor-director but really struggled with my own mental health. I had really severe depression throughout my whole time. I was working for about 15 years. I was probably an unusual type of actor in that I got lots of work, but I never really enjoyed it. The reasons being the kind of impact it had on my mental health, really struggled with anxiety to the point where I remember the last show I did was in London and I'd got good billing, a long run ahead of me, and the last thing I wanted to do was go on stage. I just wanted to get out of that building. So I thought that this has to be the end for me. So I got through the run, ironically got the best reviews of my career, funnily enough, but that was it for me. And then I took a job running a small arts charity in

Covent Garden, and I would travel around the UK and meet people who worked in the arts who'd come forward saying they needed help. Often they couldn't feed their children, pay their mortgage, pay their rent, clothe themselves, etcetera. And I would spend some time with them and then get them some help. And I did that for about six years, met around 3,000 people. So a fair sample size. What was really interesting to me was how many people I met had underlying, often undiagnosed mental health issues.

Alex: Yeah.

Adam: And I was somebody who kept all my issues to myself. So suddenly meeting all these people who've got stories that resonated with my own just opened my eyes to this, this whole side of the industry I never knew. And they would say things like, 'Oh, I don't want to tell my employer about my mental health. I'm terrified they'll find out.'

Alex: This is...you see, as actors, we are encouraged to be vulnerable. That's sort of how we earn our living. We develop characters. We go on journeys that take us to places, dark places sometimes. And you have to do that over and over again eight times a week. However, we're not allowed - we think we're not allowed - to be vulnerable as people. We can't show ourselves in a way that, because we need to be employed, we don't want anyone to think that we are, in a way, well, vulnerable, you know? And that's why when I met you in the beginning of the RSC, when we were rehearsing in Clapham for Cymbeline. I just couldn't believe that I was now sitting with someone that would help me. I've been in this company now for 30 years. There have been designated first aiders, and yet this is the first time the company has introduced me to a mental health first aider. And that for me was a revelation. It was a sense of, you mean if I hurt myself physically, I'm taken care of. But if I have an issue mentally, I'm also taken care of. And it's not that it's valued, but then I suppose it is. It's valued because it's something I was just listening to you then about any kind of mental health issue, we try and pretend it doesn't exist, which makes it worse. Is that how you feel? Do you feel that the industry now because suddenly you set this company up a year ago and so many people are sort of relieved. They're now taking you on thinking, thank goodness you're here.

Adam: I think there's a mental health crisis in our industry. There has been for years made worse by Covid, I think. And I've just found travelling around the country again, working with organisations, offering my story, which I think is important because it gives other people permission to put their hand up and say, 'Look, I'm struggling with my own issues.' Everyone's nervous, everybody's anxious, everyone's dealing with personal, professional issues. And yeah, I think just being present in spaces has really helped people engage. I think there's one thing to say, 'Oh, you can call this telephone number or email this email address or call the Samaritans', whatever it is. You just don't know who you're going to get. But when you meet somebody, in this case myself, who is running the organisation or you meet somebody I'm working with as part of the organisation, it humanises the whole process, which I think is key.

Alex: Absolutely. Well, you know, my experience I went through about ten years ago when my children were younger and was sort of that mid 40s, early 40s when I hadn't been working much. My my husband was going away, I was offered a fabulous play in a local local theatre to me in West London, wonderful theatre. And at that point, because he was going to be away, I had my mother's hat on and I just couldn't see how I could be mum, actor taking on a great big role, single parent. And it plunged me into this terrible pit of anxiety, depression because I thought maybe I can't act anymore if I can't act anymore, I don't know who I am. And I got back on stage. A friend of mine after some amazing therapy, some CBT that I managed to sort of get back on it. But what frightened me most is that it came out of the blue. I was fine and then I wasn't literally overnight. If I had met you ten years ago, I wonder if my experience would have been lessened because I could have reached out to a company, people who absolutely understood what I was going through because it's the creative arts. Juliet Stevenson does daredevil sport. She does wing walking to get over her stage fright. She puts herself in a position that is more terrifying being strapped to an aeroplane than it is to get on stage. So she's sort of rewiring herself and I just wondered if I'd met you ten years ago that my experience would have been slightly different because it's like you've got a friend who's understanding, who understands what you're going through at the time.

Adam: Yeah, I hope so. I think a lot of the work is breaking down those barriers that stop people accessing support. So I think it's really important to always make the point that we're an arts specific organisation. So all of our counsellors have worked in the arts

as directors, actors, writers, musicians, so they understand the world. I think it's reminding people that it's a confidential service, 100% confidential.

Alex: It needs to be, because we're, you know, working. Of course, being in work is the most important thing. Any excuse you give prospective employers not to employ you. That's why it's so brilliant that the RSC, a company the size of the RSC, have a designated mental health first aider. So there is someone that you can reach out to to say, I'm actually feeling really anxious X, Y, and Z. I mean, also another potentially aspect to my experience. Now we can talk about this as a woman in her mid... I potentially was perimenopausal, I had no support. There was no one there. And I just wondered, now we can talk about this, it feels as if, by bringing it out in the open, we are we're there is a potential of sort of diminishing its power. Does that make sense?

Adam: Yeah, definitely. I'm a big believer in early intervention and prevention, and I think talking about it is key to that. I think the more we share about how we struggle or what our fears are, etcetera, you're right, it diminishes what that is. I think something that's left on the shelf that we ignore just grows and grows and grows. And yeah, the more we talk about it, the more we give other people again permission to talk about it. And there's a shared human experience there, I think. And just knowing that other people are going through what you're going through, is important.

Alex: And yet when you're an actor and I'm sure you will agree with that, you sort of need to be all people to all things all the time. I find I can't say no. We feel as if we have to do everything.

Adam: I think it's a curse of the self-employed.

Alex: It really is. It's something that we need to do. It's part of - if I wasn't an actor, I don't have an identity anymore.

Adam: That's key. Part of your identity is being an actor. When you're not acting, there's a whole issue around what your identity is. That's something I struggled with. Onstage the world made sense, offstage I was all over the place.

Alex: Do you miss acting?

Adam: No. Not at all.

Alex: That's so awesome. So that feeling of going, of being able to express yourself. You express yourself now in this wonderful way.

Adam: Yeah. I think I can express myself better through this work than I can being an actor. I was an actor who worked really hard. I felt like I had to on preparation, script, etcetera, but I didn't have natural ability. Some actors I met could just turn on a performance or they had like almost like a pocket full of characters they could pull out at any point. I was almost like a boat on water, if I knew what I was doing, I was comfortable, I was fine. As soon as that got rocked, I was all over the place. All my mental health issues came out. I hated auditioning. That's probably my example of stage fright was the auditioning process. I walked out of so many auditions for big things just because I was just so lost in it. I would be in the waiting room, I would be called. I would go put my hand on the door to go into the room to meet the casting director and be like, I cannot do this. And I would literally run out of that building. I'd convince myself if I walked into that space, there was no way I was going to remember my lines, my legs were like jelly, my heart was pounding. It was a very physical response, but also a mental response. I really believe that whatever the issue is, there's root causes that can go all the way down, even as far as childhood, from a psychological point of view. For me, as I've grown to learn more about myself as somebody who recently diagnosed with ADHD and autism, there's a whole sense of a lack of control around the environment, around what I might be asked to do. An overwhelming of the senses for me just put me into an emotional shutdown.

Alex: Right. Right. That's fascinating. I mean, I of course, I've realised there are mitigating circumstances to everyone who feels who goes through that abject fear. For me, I think it was motherhood, single parenthood at that point perimenopausal. But I know that you know various people who have been through it. Tony Sher wrote about when he was playing Iago in Othello and almost from the press night on, he writes about the fear and he drew it as this scary hyena, this sort of the ugliest of the animals in the animal world. He drew this sort of hunched, this sort of skulking around that actually when the fear capital T capital F descends on a performer it's very hard. You live with that fear constantly. And I can relate to that. When the fear sits in. But I also

wonder sometimes I think it's about, for instance, our recent production of Cymbeline. We rehearsed for six weeks. We have a certain period of time to really understand the work, the language. I think sometimes the fear descends when you necessarily don't feel confident with what you're doing. It's not in your muscle memory.

Adam: Yeah.

Alex: So how would you go about now, if I was meeting you with my experience of ten years ago. And actually before I go on, it does sit with you constantly. It sort of is always there once you've been through stage fright, like Tony Sher then went to do a one man show, you know, he went, 'Right, I've had this experience. What what's the worst that can happen to me? I know I'm going to stand on stage by myself.' If I was coming to you now, ten years on, what would you say? What would be our first session?

Adam: I'm always interested in how you present in the moment, but also tracing that backwards because there is a reason behind everything. It's not always the obvious reason, but it absolutely could go all the way back to childhood. It could be something much more recent. I think, with the stage fright element, when you have that fear. For me, it was almost like a separation of body and soul, and suddenly I wasn't the character. I was me placed in this highly vulnerable place and that was terrifying and all systems shut down. But your experience of it might be very different. And that's what we'd understand is your truth of what stage fright is, because we can define, all these terms mean different things to different people.

Alex: Absolutely.

Adam: But I think it's important for you to define to me what that is. And then we break that down very slowly, very gently. And I do it alongside you over a number of sessions that would really help us get to the kind of core issues.

Alex: What is it that's frightening you? Yes. I mean, I had some CBT and this wonderful therapist said, Alex, what evidence do you have that suggests that you will stand on stage and not knowing, not know what comes next? And I remember saying to her, I have no evidence. There was no sort of mitigating circumstance of me going, I literally don't know what happens next and I don't have anyone to help me out of it. That hadn't

happened. It was something that I had imagined because because my particular experience at that time, I had so many plates spinning, I literally didn't have mind space to put my children, my family life and the violin practice, the spellings, the picking up, doing swimming lessons ebadebada, to taking on an enormous, great role with all those responsibilities. But it plunged me into... Because I felt. I'm an actor, I have to be able to do both.

Adam: Right. I hear that. My immediate response to that would be, I imagine your home life and the brain space that requires meant that you weren't able to fully focus or feel you couldn't fully focus on your acting work. Therefore, were perhaps less prepared, less confident, which creates that vacuum where the fear of I'm not fully in the right place for myself and walking on stage, if it's ever going to go bad, now's the time it's going to go bad. I had to break down about two months ago myself, where literally one Sunday morning, it just hit me like a wave, like I can't be everything I need to be at work, everything for the kids, a partner, for yourself. It just really hit me really hard. I think I counselled myself last. I think self-care, I had no self-care.

Alex: Your self-care's crap!

Adam: Terrible. Absolutely terrible. Yeah, Really, really bad. And it's such an obvious thing.

Alex: Of course it is.

Adam: But I can't put I can tell myself what I need to do. I can sit down and write myself a schedule for the week, which has got everything I need in it within half an hour. I've thrown that in the bin. My mind is built that if one thing on that schedule doesn't go as is intended on the schedule, the whole thing is gone.

Alex: Right? Do you then rewrite another one or do you then go to hell with it?

Adam: I've gone as far as, again this is speaking to my my ADHD, my autism. I've gone as far as to buy a notebook, write the first line in it and feel like, no, that's not how I envisaged the line would look in my notebook. Throw the notebook away. Go buy the exact same notebook. This is how it is for me. How my mind works, it's literally like that.

So I like solitude. I like silence because I feel I can control myself and my space. When you throw children, when you throw rehearsal process into that, where it's chaos, that for me is very difficult. And I didn't know that until recently. I just felt I wasn't good enough. I felt like, what's wrong with me? I'm not coping in this space at all. Everyone seems on point. I'm terrible at learning lines. If a director can do something different, I'm like, but I haven't prepared that. My mind was stuck.

Adam: But it wasn't until I got my diagnosis that I realised, okay, that's the way I am.

Alex: And things fell into place then.

Adam: Yeah, looking back, it all makes sense to me now. But with that comes grief. Because you're thinking, my life might have been different had I been diagnosed earlier.

Alex: What was your first encounter of Shakespeare?

Adam: Um, I imagine, like a lot of people being given a Shakespearean book at school thinking, I've got no idea what they're talking about. And thinking, what is this rubbish?

Alex: I hear you. I used to hate it when I was at school. I used to have this wonderful teacher called Sandra who used to take me for sort of drama lessons, and she would say, "Let's do Shakespeare." "Oh, I don't want to do Shakespeare. Shakespeare is so boring." And here I am 30 years later. I've been at the RSC for 30 years. It's amazing, isn't it? What is it about Shakespeare that we hold on to and that potentially we keep coming back to time and time again?

Adam: I think from a from a creative point of view, I'll answer it for me, if you don't mind, For me. What excites me about the arts is character. I think the characters are a huge part of any piece of work. I think Shakespearean characters have just lasted so long. I think the themes, but also the moments. I think those are the three parts to me of any good film, TV, theatre. Those are three essential parts of it. And I think because they're such strong characters, they're such human themes that just play out even today.

Alex: Absolutely.

Adam: We can keep coming back to it. We can keep relating to it. So it is almost timeless.

Alex: I suppose The challenge is always telling the stories to a new audience, but making sure that Shakespeare, the language, is at the top of the tree because that's how we communicate with those ideas. There are so many times when I've been to a play. Anything Julius Caesar, Romeo and Juliet and suddenly at different times in my life, a line has sort of lasered out to me. And there was one time it was a production maybe 25 years ago of Julius Caesar, and I was about to play Hedda Gabler, and I was quite young to play Hedda Gabler. And I was really terrified because I thought, 'Oh, I'm not qualified, I'm not old enough to do this.' And there was a moment in the play. And I will misquote it. 'There is a tide in the affairs of man which taken at the flood leads on to fortune.' And I remember listening to this thinking. That's me. I'm not going to be scared because I'm going to seize this opportunity and I'm going to give it my best shot. And I'm not going to flail around in the shallows, because if I don't seize the day, if I don't seize the moment, I will regret it. And I remember going to the library. This is when you went to the library in those days and you get something and you photocopy something. Do you remember those days?

Adam: I do.

Alex: And then you pay your 5p and then... And I cut out this little piece of Shakespeare and I stuck it on my front door.

Alex: And every time I left to go to rehearsals, I had this little bit from Julius Caesar. 'There was a tide in the affairs of man, which taken at the flood, leads on to fortune.' And it inspired me. And there are moments like that when you know that you're you're sort of sitting and living with his plays, the language and they move you forward and I know this might sound slightly cliched, but there are times when you can be on stage and you can say a line. And for instance, there's a moment in The Winter's Tale when Paulina says to Leontes. Hermione, his wife, he's just accused Hermione of doing all sorts of things. And Paulina says, 'Good queen, my Lord, good queen. I say, good queen.' And there a single syllable beats on each line. And it's almost as if Shakespeare is saying, Forget everything. This is how I want you to say this, these lines. And so forget sort of six degrees of separation. You have this connection with arguably one of

the greatest minds ever to have walked the planet, ever to have breathed air. And he's saying, 'Alex, play it this way.' And that for me is the biggest thrill of playing Shakespeare and doing what we do.

Alex: Is there something that you've watched, seen read lately that gives you hope for the future of the arts and indeed society more widely?

Adam: The last thing I did see was, which does give me hope, was Black Boys Who Contemplated Suicide When the Hue Gets Tough.

Alex: That's the Royal Court?

Adam: Yes. And then moved into the West End. And I think, just speaking as a male, having a show about male mental health, which got people talking and touched on themes that I've seen a lot from doing this work, be it men and their mental health, be it the cultural issues around mental health, I thought was really important. And the fact that it was a well-received show and it brought those topics to the stage in a way that people could digest from an entertainment point of view as well as educational, I thought was really, really powerful. And I also again, the human element of it, which is I think what I look for in all art, is that human contact, that human connection of having men of colour speak about mental health and have people like myself, a white male, be able to connect with that. Not all of it. There was cultural elements in there that are not my culture, but there's something there. It crossed over and I think it's so important that we find ways, even through Shakespeare, I mean, and the casting of Shakespearean roles I know historically has been an issue.

Alex: Yeah, yeah.

Adam: But I think it's so important that we just cross over those those barriers wherever we can. And that show, I think, did that. We could connect as two human beings.

Alex: That's amazing. Dominic Cooke, the brilliant director, once described playwrights as the shamans of the village. They're the witch doctors. They shine a light on something in the world. They don't solve it. They just shine a light on it. And as actors, my job is to be the sort of conduit so that to share that ideal comes through me to the

audience. And what frightens me about the world we live in now, that those shamans of the village somehow can be reduced because of things that potentially they're not allowed to say.

Adam: The arts is definitely a vehicle to challenge.

Alex: Yeah, that's its job.

Adam: That's its job. And I don't think we should ever lose that. It's a place where we can challenge ideas, we can shine a light on things and have a look at things. I think that's so important for the arts to provoke us, to make us think, to make us question. And I like art that challenges me and makes me think, okay, how do I feel about that?

Alex: Absolutely. That's the point of it. That's what I mean. Surely that's what we've been doing for millennia. You know, the ancient Greeks were doing it. Here's an idea. What do you think about that? I was asked a question recently about audiences and do we think our audiences have becoming slightly more badly behaved because you've got people being thrown out of theatres. And I thought, Well, I think we've never had it so good. You know, audiences, if you look back to our ancient Greeks, the Elizabethans, the Jacobeans, Restoration Theatre, I think all sorts of things happened. I think we're really attentive now. So and I'm hoping that the future of theatre is that all we do is, we are the shamans of the village. We shine the light on things in terms of, to help people deal with what it is being human.

Adam: Yeah, I think that's the beauty of live performance. You have a different emotional reaction to something.

Alex: Every night.

Adam: Presented in front of you. If you're an audience member and you go see a show, you're in that space. You feel the energy. You have an emotional response as well as a psychological one. I often find when watching film, there is that distance it's something on TV. But the live performance can really help challenge you in different ways. And that's yeah, I think it should really be the kind of the science lab of society where we

play with ideas and we test things and we see what the feedback is, what the comebacks are.

Alex: Absolutely.

Alex: I suppose it's the congregational aspect. It's the collective experience of people sitting there potentially having the same experience together.

Adam: Yeah.

Alex: And oftentimes recently with Cymbeline, we might have an audience of 800 people who are having the same collective experience. One night we had this sort of riotous night where everyone found it and yet the next night perhaps they were slightly more subdued, slightly quieter. But if you took an individual and put them into the other night, their perception would be very different. But I'm fascinated by that collective experience of theatre.

Adam: Yeah, that was always a mystery to me as well. Different nights, different audiences, different places.

Alex: Same play, same people, and how people respond to it.

Adam: Absolutely.

Alex: In different ways.

Welcome: Please take your seats. The performance is about to continue.

Alex: We might be having our three minute bell question because we do have to go in and see the second half and you better drink your cocktail quickly. And my gin and tonic was finished years ago. Who, real or fictional, would you like to share (apart from me, of course), your interval drink with?

Adam: You know, I don't know why this person came to mind.

Alex: There you go - it's the first person.

Adam: Billy Connolly.

Alex: Oh, that's awesome!

Adam: He's just somebody who, the images he creates with his storytelling for me is just. Yeah.

Alex: You know what, unfortunately, we probably wouldn't go back for the second half because we'd be having too much fun. I'd quite like to. I quite like the house playwright. I'd quite like William. I'd quite like to hang out with William Shakespeare for a bit. The only thing that frightens me is that maybe he's got no conversation tool. He could be really shy. Or he's got terrible halitosis. Can you imagine it? If he's such a disappointment that you think it's William Shakespeare? William Shakespeare? Oh, we talked about the weather for 15 minutes.

Adam: This is true, isn't it? You build people up in our minds so much when you meet them.

Alex: And then I'd quite like Aphra Behn. Aphra Behn is our first female playwright, and during her time, she was one of the most produced playwrights of of the Restoration theatre world. And she was she kind of out punks, punk, you know? She put the rock and rock and roll. She was a spy for Charles II. And then he didn't pay her and she was forced into debtor's prison. And, you know, she she ran with the with the fast crowd. And she I think she would have been I'd quite like to put Aphra Behn, William Shakespeare and Billy Connolly.

Adam: I feel like you went to a lot more intellectual answer than I did.

Alex: No, no, because I really think I think the three of them, I think we would. Well, I think we'd be quite drunk because maybe you'd probably need a couple of whiskey cocktails and I'd definitely need a double gin and tonic.

Adam: I think I've just got such an affiliation with Scotland. It's my spiritual home and he's just such an embodiment of it.

Alex: Yeah, exactly. And what a wit.

Alex: You see, his wit sort of transpires eras you can imagine holding forward, hanging out with Aphra and Rochester and they'd have an absolute crack. Yeah, That's awesome. Adam, thank you very much for joining me today.

Adam: Thank you for having me.

Alex: Thank you.

Ibraheem Toure: Thanks for joining us today. Remember, you can listen again to past episodes on the Royal Shakespeare Company website. Just search 'RSC Interval Drinks'.