Interval Drinks podcast, Series 3

Erica Whyman and Maggie O’Farrell - transcript

Welcome: Welcome to the Royal Shakespeare Company.

Host (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: 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, his 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, like 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. We just see ourselves within different worlds that are creative.

Host (Ibraheem Toure): Have you collected your drinks? Then let's begin. Catching up in the interval. This week we have the RSC's acting artistic director, Erica Whyman, in conversation with award winning novelist Maggie O'Farrell.

Erica: So this is a total privilege to be in conversation with Maggie O'Farrell. So Maggie is the author of Hamnet, obviously, which was the winner of the Women's Prize for Fiction 2020, and the author of the memoir I Am I Am I Am, which were both Sunday Times number one bestsellers. And her novels include: After You'd Gone; My Lover's Lover; The Distance Between Us, which won a Somerset Maugham Award; The Vanishing Act of Esme Lennox; The Hand That First Held Mine, which won the 2010 Costa Novel Award; Instructions for a Heatwave; and This Must Be the Place. And her latest novel, The Marriage Portrait, was published in August 2022 and is on the shortlist for the Women's Prize for Fiction, is it not?

Maggie: It is.

Erica: And she's also the author of two books for children, Where Snow Angels Go and The Boy Who Lost His Spark, in October last year. So I'm Erica. I'm the Acting Artistic Director of the Royal Shakespeare Company. Full name Erica Whyman and the director of the stage production of Maggie's extraordinary book, Hamnet. And I very much wanted to be in conversation with you about intervals and life and theatre and inspiration. So thank you, Maggie, very much for making the time to have this conversation with me.

Maggie: It's absolutely my pleasure to be here. Thank you for having me.

Erica: My first question is what is your interval drink of choice?

Maggie: Well, I'm a very, very cheap date because I don't drink and I don't really like tea or coffee either. Um, so actually, if anyone ever wants to buy me a drink, it won't cost them very much because I really just like water. And if I'm really going to push the boat out, it would be sparkling water.

Erica: Ice cream?

Maggie: Ice cream? No. Too cold. Much too cold. I would say that I don't like... Sparkling water. Always has to have no ice. Ice cream. Yeah, I'm not I'm not a huge fan of milk and dairy and also the idea of it being really cold. So no, no thanks to that. But I wouldn't say no to a chocolate bar.

Erica: But I've got, I have to admit something which I hadn't thought about until you said that, which is I've developed a bit of a passion for the RSC salted caramel ice cream. It's really surprised me. That does sound something. I can take it back in and I can eat it silently whilst writing notes. So that's probably what it is. It's like a really rubbish silent directors.

Maggie: That's a whole kind of new genre of eating experiences.

Erica: Directors' dinner, as we used to call it, used to be used to be a handful of cashew nuts, but now gone up in the world. And what was the last interval that you did get a glass of lukewarm, sparkling water?

Maggie: Well, actually, weirdly, and it feels as though I'm trying to kind of publicise Hamnet, but it would have been Hamnet, actually. I saw Hamnet and then a few days later I saw my daughter in a school production of As You Like It. So it was really strange. I had these two kind of experiences of Shakespeare in two days. So yeah, so it was both those times. But I don't think I don't think I did get a lukewarm sparkling water at the school production.

Erica: Do you have any rituals in the interval?

Maggie: I wouldn't say rituals, no actually. I really like the idea of intervals. I used to play the piano when I was a teenager, and I think obviously in music intervals are a very are a crucial thing. You know, silence is is a very interesting partner in music. You have to have the notes and you have to have the silences. And I would say absolutely the same is true of writing, particularly poetry actually. I used to write a lot of poetry. Not so much these days. And in a sense sometimes, particularly what you're saying poetry is, it's as important as what you don't say. And the kind of white spaces around structuring a poem are crucial. You know, visually, it's a very important thing. But certainly, absolutely in novels, the breaks you have between chapters or the breaks you have between sections, the things that you don't say, the things that characters don't say or don't mention, what you elide over in the narrative are absolutely crucial. And I do think in the theatre it's the same thing. You know, I, I always find it very interesting at what point in a narrative or in a play the director will choose to make that break.

Maggie: So the audience gets to take a breath and gets to walk around and move around and also to talk to each other. That's what's fascinating about intervals, I think in the theatre is the conversations you hear around you. A 100 years ago I used to work on a newspaper and occasionally I was very low down the food chain on the newspaper, but I worked on the arts desk and occasionally when one of the theatre critics or film critics was off, I could put my hand up and say, "Can I do it this week?" So I used to be able to do that. And I know that the other theatre critics who were obviously a lot more experienced and seasoned than I was aged 24 or whatever I was, used to

absolutely have a ban on never talking to each other during the interval and never talking about it afterwards. And in a sense I quite like that. And often when I go to the theatre with friends, I almost don't want to talk about it too much. But I do quite like listening to what other people have to say.

Erica: That is very funny because I think if you make theatre, maybe, especially if you're a director, I don't know, maybe it's just personal. The interval is a kind of nightmare.

Maggie: Yes, it must be terrifying. Terrifying. Would probably just want to go and put my head in a box somewhere. Not listen.

Erica: Yes, but the trouble is, and this I'm sure, is personal, I can never decide, particularly during previews. I get better at it as the run goes on. But during previews, when you're still working on the show and you're trying to learn what works and what lands and what doesn't, I think that all I want is to be locked in a cupboard and for nobody to be able to reach me and no word to reach me, but I can't resist because it's so rich. Exactly what you say about the conversation. I want to hear a little bit. But of course, I'm really just like a heat seeking missile, trying to find somebody who is simultaneously objective and liked it. That's all I'm doing. I'm roaming, roaming, trying to pretend I've got an invisibility cloak when I haven't. Trying to hear the person who says, Oh, I thought it was terrific. Who was this.

Maggie: Friend? Yeah, it must be terrible. I mean, I know, you know, when you create any piece of art, like a theatre or a book or whatever, you know, obviously it's always going to be the feedback that you get from people. It's going to be interesting, but at least as a novelist, you don't have to watch somebody reading it, you know, you don't have to sit in the same room as them and listen to them muttering things under their breath. You know, all that happens completely at a distance, which is good. So I can't imagine how it must feel to be a theatre director sitting in the theatre watching people watch your your production. Oh, horrific.

Erica: I mean it is exactly that. It is completely horrific. And yet, of course, sometimes these amazing things happen where they they feel things you hoped they might or they feel things you had no idea they would. And they're delighted by that, you know. Of

course, the rewards are massive, but yeah, it is horrific. I think there should be a, you know, special, a special place for us to retire to where we can recover from the trauma.

Maggie: Just one long interval. Exactly.

Erica: Just one. Exactly. Endless interval. But I love what you say about the gaps and the spaces, because I think there is something of a trend in the theatre, which is to do with lifestyle and the way that we've all come to consume stories in different ways, particularly thinking about on television, that we talk about a kind of running joke that the the thing you most want to hear is that it's 90 minutes straight through. So it's all done by 9:00, you can go home and the audiences love that. I don't subscribe to it, of course, you know, I see a lot of theatre and so I'm very happy when I get to come out at 9:00 and go home. But I think there is something in that breathing space because the theatre isn't a very forgiving medium in which to open that space up in the action. You can do it. And it would be interesting maybe to talk about the show because there's there are things in there in the book that I think do that so eloquently, sort of passages where it's very clear that nothing can happen. There's a sort of emotional inertia or a processing or a and indeed the gaps between, you know, moving backwards and forwards in time. And some of those are harder to do in the theatre. So the interval definitely serves that purpose of digesting what you've seen and, and sometimes talking about it, sometimes keeping it to yourself. But can I go back a little bit before we talk about Hamnet, although we will very soon. But I wonder to ask a kind of big question about inspiration, if there are people who have inspired you and your work. I know writing's been a part of your life all of your life, as I understand it, and took different forms to the beginning, to what you do now. But I wonder who's inspired you along the way.

Maggie: Oh, my goodness. So many things, actually. Sometimes it's really hard to pinpoint inspiration in a sense. You know, it's one of those quite amorphous things. Certainly there are countless writers, but actually people themselves, certainly there were teachers. I had an amazing English teacher at high school and he was one of those teachers that really changed the way I saw books and literature. You know, I think there's a certain age, actually, I think, which certainly I did when I was a child. I didn't really think of writers as actual human beings who had lived or did live. They seemed a bit like Greek gods, these kind of very distant beings up on Mount Olympus. But he really changed that for me. And he was actually the first person who ever told me about

the existence of the boy Hamnet. And it was him who mentioned in passing that Shakespeare had a son with pretty much the same name. So I would say him. And also, I think, you know, the family who I grew up in, it wasn't particularly literary. My parents aren't writers. And, you know, as far as I know, my grandparents or great grandparents or whatever. But I think there was a great oral tradition in my household, certainly an awful lot of "you'll never guess what happened to me today?", you know, and this kind of storytelling, just it was sort of anecdotal, actually, but it was often quite long and complicated.

Maggie: I've always been intrigued by the way people do tell stories, you know, because it's often they slip in and out of different tenses and they slip between the first person. "I did this. And then you were thinking to yourself", they slip into the second person and it's very, very fluid and very alive. And I've always felt, certainly for me, that I want to when I'm writing my books, I want to come as close to that kind of very animated, febrile verbal storytelling, which is ironic, actually, because I had real problems with my verbal communication as a child and adolescent. I had a terrible stammer, absolutely crippling stammer. I couldn't talk at all. So I think in a sense, when I look back at it now, it was me. I used to find writing such an most enormous relief. It was my kind of complete happy experience because I was able, there was nothing to stop the words coming out of the nib of my pen, whereas actually as my mouth was really problematic for me. So I think maybe there's a link between the way that I like to write, which I like to come as close as you possibly can to that very naturalistic anecdotal storytelling.

Erica: That's brilliant because I was thinking that there is something very special, I think, in your writing and it's very vivid in Hamnet that is is not quite stream of consciousness. You know, I'm partly saying this because one inspiration for me was those sort of generally female novelists, actually, which I don't always admit because I'm meant to be a creature of the theatre, but...

Maggie: I won't tell anyone Erica.

Erica: Yeah, we can keep that between ourselves. But I see in your books and I've mentioned this to you before, that there's this sort of seeking of how you might draw a map between life events in order to understand something that happens later. And

sometimes you're directly going back in time or you're going backwards and forwards, or you're interweaving multiple stories with different protagonists, but somehow it's like a treasure hunt.

Maggie: Yes, absolutely. I mean, I've never really adhered to chronology as a kind of narrative propulsive force. It doesn't really interest me. I don't really think, that goes back to what I was saying about storytelling. You know, if somebody says to you, "Oh, this thing happened to me yesterday." They don't say, "I got up in the morning and then I ate breakfast and then I went out and then I caught the bus", you know, because that's, it's boring apart from anything else. But also, I think really crucially, it's not the way our memories and our our narrative functions work. You know, we don't think of a sequence of events very neatly, going from A to B, from left to right. And I also think that's not the way our memories function. We don't have a kind of series of, you know, I think, you know. The way our photos are now organised on our, you know, smartphones and we have this very, very clear thing in months and years and weeks. And it's all, you know, in a beautiful stream in a grid. And of course, we aren't like that as humans. We're much more complicated. And I actually think of it more, the way the human brain and memory is structured is a bit more like geology. You know, we have these kind of layers as a kind of bedrock, which is our childhood and then these layers of experience or, you know, and it actually takes something, some great seismic or tectonic shift for something underneath all those layers to erupt to the surface. And that happens to us all the time. You know, some kind of mining can take place and we go right down to some very, very hidden layer. But it will always come up just like, you know, how mountains are formed or tectonic plates shift. So I suppose I just have always wanted, um, the way I tell stories to reflect that.

Erica: Do you think that there's a, I think there might be a link between that understanding of, of time and influence. I suppose we're talking about as well things in our lives that influence us and your ability to just say straightforwardly, of course, William Shakespeare's play, Hamlet, must have something to do with the fact that his son died at the age of 11. Because so many people have just put that idea on the margins and said, "well, sure, but it's not the most important or interesting thing about this play about a Danish prince." You know, I feel very lucky to have spent the time with your book and Lolita's play to go, "It's it's just so screamingly obvious." So I'm just interested if you think there's a connection between the two things, that influence is also

not linear. It's not, 'I write about this because this thing just happened to me.' It's doesn't work like that.

Maggie: Yeah, of course not. I mean, I think I think producing any kind of novel, play, whatever, is always going to be a very, very complex tapestry or patchwork of many, many different threads. Obviously, there are always going to be things that you borrow from, maybe a newspaper article or you know, something you read or something you overhear. But there are also going to be things that you simply just make up. And there are also going to be a lot of autobiographical things that will come in there. But yet you use a mask or you put some experience or some words. You give them to a character or, you know, in some ways I think. Novels always will have elements of your biography or someone's close to you biography submerged in them. But what's so great about them is that no one will ever really know unless there's somebody who's very close to you and they can always see the join. You know, I think it is very an odd experience for someone who's close to a writer or a playwright or whatever to read or, you know, watch something that they've written because they'll be able to see the source material in a sense. But actually, sometimes not. I have had the experience where people close to me have read things and absolutely not even recognised things they themselves have said to me, which is good.

Maggie: And I feel that's a good thing because that's what fiction is. I think fiction is, any kind of fiction, whether it's a play or a novel or a poem or whatever or or a film is is going to be a palimpsest of lots of different things. But for a lot of my life, it was frustratingly obvious to me that, of course there's a link. How could there not be a link between this child called Hamnet and this play called Hamlet? You know, in the 16th century, spelling was not as stable as it is now. Pre, you know, Johnson's dictionary. And they are completely interchangeable in parish records and in records of the time. And you know, I think it's very well known that there was an earlier play called Amleth with a similar plot that Shakespeare. I mean the thing about Shakespeare is all you can say is 'probably' 'may have' because we never know for sure, but it's likely that he read that. But in the first instance, I'd like to say, well, why do you think maybe why was he attracted to a play called Amleth, which of course, has, you know, certain assonance with his son's name? It's ridiculous to assume that he just did it because he couldn't think of another name. And it's ridiculous. You know, every every person who writes, who create will take enormous care about anything like that.

Maggie: And it's toweringly significant. You know, I've read brilliant biographers, writing things along the lines of 'It's impossible to know whether or not Shakespeare was thinking of his dead son when he wrote Hamlet', which, you know, it has been. I've actually wanted to throw his books across the room and just think, Are you serious? It's clearly nonsense. It's nonsense. And you only have to read, you know, the opening scenes of that play to understand that the whole structure of that play is underpinned by this enormous sense of loss and grief and the idea that, you know the story, which is perhaps apocryphal, we don't know. As with so many things about Shakespeare, that he himself took the role of the ghost in the first production, which, you know, and it doesn't really take a psychiatrist to see what's going on there, does it? Where the young man called Hamlet is alive, desperately wanting to make a connection with his and desperately grieving his dead father who's been murdered and taken away from him. And he's trying to find this ghost. He's trying to locate this ghost and trying to communicate with his dead father. And, you know, it doesn't take a psychiatrist to see what Shakespeare is doing there. He's doing what any parent would absolutely want to do, to take the child suffering and the child's death upon himself and say, 'I will die and you can live in my place.'

Maggie: You know, particularly I mean, partly in I don't know why, but the speech where the ghost describes his death and the poison coursing through him and the gateways and alleyways of his body and its 'horrible, horrible, most horrible'. I've always felt that speech is leaps off the page and it leaps off the stage whenever I see it. And there's something very odd about that speech and it always gets it. Even now when I'm thinking about it, I can feel the hairs on the back of my neck raising and I have a horrible feeling that that is Shakespeare describing Hamnet dying and in a less serious, you know, less devastating way, the scene where the play within the play where Hamlet comes along and says to the actors, 'you know, this is the way I want you to talk. Please don't gesture, Please don't, you know, speak them trippingly off the tongue.' And whenever I see or read that, I think there's there's a really interesting spirit. That's him talking to his players saying, don't do this. Don't do that. Please don't do it. You know? And that I find that really extraordinary. And it's quite a light-hearted moment in the play. But at the same time, it gives me a kind of really strange feeling because I think that's him. There he is.

Erica: There's a moment in Hamlet for me that is, you know, it just doesn't get quite as much air time as the speech to the players, which is, as you say, completely brilliant. But when he's talking about having watched the Player King and and he's he's really trying to understand how it's possible that he's more moved by an actor playing a part than by an event in his own life. Yes. He says 'what is Hecuba to me?' The sense that there's no direct relationship and yet he's moved in that moment? It's not logical to him that you could be more moved by a play. And yet he knows it's true. He knows it's true that there is something possible at the distance between the audience and the stage and also the immediacy of the audience and the stage. That means you can feel things you can't perhaps afford to feel. And so there is something he's touching there, about you can find yourself in somebody else's tragedy or strife or.

Maggie: Yes. But you're able to place those feelings inside a situation on a stage or in a book or in a play, which is easier. You can unpack whatever agonies you yourself have and put them somewhere which is almost safer than thinking of them in your own life, I think.

Erica: When I, and I've said this to you, but when I when I first read Hamnet, I found it the most extraordinary invitation to share a sense of loss. All sorts of different kinds of loss. Of course, it's about bereavement and and losing a child, which is, you know, is going to be close to any parent's heart I think, whatever their experience, but also loss of identity, loss of faith, loss of sense of what happens, what might happen next, all of which really chimed because it was 2020, all the theatres were closed. I was here in Stratford, so reading that book here about Stratford, and this sort of terrible, terrible emptiness after Hamnet dies. So, sort of opening up a little smorgasbord of things we might talk about, but children and family grief - how do they all knock around in your head?

Maggie: I suppose the main purpose, for me anyway, behind writing the novel Hamnet, and it was a novel that I wanted to write for a really long time. Recently I was looking through an old notebook, not for this for some other reason, and I did find - it's a book where I write just scraps of ideas or possibilities or just even titles sometimes. And I'd gone back to look for something and I just found this entry that says 'novel about Shakespeare's son, Hamnet, and link to the play Hamlet.' And I think it was in about 2011, maybe 2013, actually, I'd put square brackets around it as if to say, that's an idea,

I should, I should explore. The thing that stopped me mostly was, I had this odd superstition about it because I have a son and two daughters like the Shakespeares did. Different order of age. My son is the oldest. But I could not write this novel while my own son was under the age of 11. Couldn't do it until he was at least 12. Just because I knew that I'd be thinking about him and I knew that I would be putting myself inside the skin of a woman who is forced to sit by her son's bedside and watch him die, you know? And I just couldn't do it. I couldn't do it. So I put it off for quite a long time. But I think the main reason why I wanted to write it, was that I've always felt that Hamnet the boy has never been given his due.

Maggie: He was always relegated to a footnote in his father's story, and not enough people knew about him. I studied English literature at university and I asked several friends of mine who had done the same course as me or similar courses. Do you know what Shakespeare's children were called? And they all said "No. No idea. Did he have children? How many did he have?" And I thought, this is extraordinary. Why? Why don't people know about him? He's so important, you know, and this this child dying in this play that appeared, you know, four or five years later. And I looked for him. I searched for him in these enormous biographies, which are incredible works of scholarship. And Hamnet is lucky if he gets maybe two mentions, that he was born and that he died and his death was inevitably pretty much always wrapped up in statistics about child mortality in the 16th century Elizabethan times, which of course was heartbreakingly high. You had a 5050 chance of making it to your fifth birthday, and beyond that, you had a higher likelihood of dying. But, you know, there was you could die from a cut finger. You know, you could die of sepsis within a couple of days. There was a lot that could fell you, unfortunately. But, you know, the idea that Shakespeare didn't really feel anything or didn't grieve for Hamnet is very present in a lot of these works of scholarship. It always baffled me as to why. There's so much there's so much of an urge out there with scholars and biographers and I should say actually other writers of films and novels about Shakespeare to give him a kind of posthumous divorce.

Maggie: It's very odd. And to completely ignore his life in Stratford and his connection to his family, you know, there just seems to be this kind of cultural and folkloric idea that when he left to go to London, that was it. He didn't go back to Stratford. That was you know, he'd cut his ties. It's absolute nonsense. Of course he didn't. You know, all the money he earned in London, he sent back to Stratford-upon-Avon, you know, he bought

New Place, you know, this enormous mansion of a house. A year after Hamnet died. He owned fields and cottages and land that he leased out. And the most crucial biographical detail to me, for him, is that at the end of his career in London, when he retired, you know, he was an incredibly wealthy man at this point. He could have lived anywhere he wanted in the world, but he chose to go back and live in Stratford-upon-Avon with his wife. I think I wanted to put Hamnet the boy centre-stage and say to people, 'This is a story you don't know. This child was important. This child was significant. He died at the age of 11. But we owe him so much.' You know, without him, I don't think we would have Hamlet and I don't think we would have Twelfth Night.

Erica: I so agree. I get I get absolutely livid about it on a number of fronts. I mean, it does centre around. It centres around Agnes as as as as we call her in Hamnet. And I think there is a proper lesson about now because my theory is that the scholars, but also, as you say, other artists and novelists, they they cannot accept, it defeats the narrative about class in England for sure, where it's not possible for a man of his brilliance to have been born in an undistinguished market town to have had a what was not an ordinary education, but was was the education that every boy in the town got. Somehow the whole idea of Anne or Agnes would have been a drag on his brilliance. They seem to be completely connected. You've got this idea that being gifted or skilled or being an artist of note, being a person of note, a person of importance, culturally, artistically is just not compatible, not compatible with being married to somebody that you love. And I agree very much about the the way we talk about child mortality and other life events or tragedies that happen in the home or happen primarily to women, the combination of the two. I've been in a lot of rehearsal rooms where someone will say, 'Well, of course it happened all the time', as though as though the instruction is so don't, you know, don't indulge it in a sort of 21st century way or 20th century way. Don't indulge it because they wouldn't have done they'd have just moved on.

Maggie: I mean, yeah, this is one of the things that I came up against again and again. It was a real bugbear, the idea that somehow because it happened a lot, that it was less painful. And, you know, it's just, it's so short sighted and so callous, actually, because I just refuse to accept at any point in history, any point in history, any point anywhere in the world is anything less completely anything less than catastrophic to lose a child. When I was.

Erica: Doing A Midsummer Night's Dream, we did a bit of slightly wild international research into fairies. I was very interested, like, What the heck, what the heck it was.

Maggie: It sounds like a very fun workshop.

Erica: You know, what the heck are they? And one of the things that came through incredibly, strongly for me that I hadn't heard before was that in a very wide range of cultures, one of the roles of fairies was that if you had a child, a baby that wasn't thriving and you would take it and offer it to the fairies and you had to turn around and walk away. I'm sorry. Sorry to do this to you. This is like reading your memoirs, but you had to walk away and there was a given amount of time. And when you walked back, of course, if the baby was alright, the fairies had saved it. And if the baby wasn't alright, the fairies had taken it. And I found it incredibly moving, partly because it really did turn up in like two or three very different cultures. But the reason I mention it, is that I think there are these things in life that are so, so hard to explain. We can never say that it's okay for a child to die or that it's part of the natural cycle of life. And yeah, the numbers from the 16th century are terrifying but never acceptable. And you can see it in these belief systems. It Interests me that even in the the sort of warm and fantastical plays because that's that's before, but only just before Hamlet dies. A Midsummer Night's Dream, there's a sort of exploration of what is it to keep a child, look after a child, all of those things. And in so many of the plays, and in Romeo and Juliet, which is the same year anyway, we could go on, I suspect. Is this true that this adaptation of Hamnet is the first time one of your novels has been adapted for the stage?

Maggie: Yes, it is.

Erica: I didn't know that when I started because I was already quite enough pressure on this production. Can you tell me what that's felt like from your point of view?

Maggie: It's been amazing, actually, from start to finish. I mean, I have a really clear memory of, um. the day when I think I think I had a phone call from my agent and she said, "Are you sitting down?" And I said, "Yes," I don't know why. And I hate it when people say that because you think, well, God, what's coming? And then she said, "Well, I've had a phone call from about Hamnet." And I thought, 'Oh, God, what is it?' You know? And she said, "It's from the RSC." And I said, "What?" And then she said, "They

want to do a play" and blah, blah, blah. And so we had this very long chat and then there was a long pause and she said, "So do you want to say yes?" And I thought, 'Oh, sorry, did I not say', I thought I mean, it's slightly rhetorical question. I mean, I remember being absolutely gobsmacked and it was amazing watching, you know, Lolita was very generous and shared a couple of her drafts with me. And it was really fascinating to see the way that she had taken the novel and sort of disassembled it and rewrought it, you know, in this chronological form. And that was really interesting to see the story, obviously, that I knew inside out, to see somebody else rearrange it in a way. One of the most extraordinary things was when I came to the rehearsal in in London and seeing that, and it almost felt like witnessing this very secret initiation rite. And I was also amazed by the presence in the room that you had because your stereotypical idea of a theatre director as somebody rather demonstrative and quite loud. But you are not. You have an incredibly quiet authority. And you talk quite quietly and everybody listened. You were like the sun and they were the plants, and everybody leaned towards you as you spoke. It was absolutely fascinating. The first scene that I saw was Hamnet dying, which was like a kind of punch to stomach. I wasn't quite ready for that. And obviously I was amazed because, clearly I wrote it and I have redrafted it a thousand times or whatever. I've never read it aloud. People have said to me, Can you read that aloud at an event? And I've always had to say, actually I can't because I won't be able to get through it to see. And I actually cried in the rehearsal room, which was slightly embarrassing. So I thought I thought, who are they going to think... I'm so moved by my own words?

Erica: No.

Maggie: But it was so incredible seeing especially the two actors, Alex and Ajani playing Hamnet and Judith because they are so astonishing and they inhabit those roles so brilliantly, and the relationship between them is almost tangible. I mean, it's, it's they are brilliant. And seeing of course Madeleine as Agnes, it was, I mean, it was just, it was astonishing. I was really floored by it. And I felt as though I learnt so much, so much. And then of course, seeing it, you know, I came to Stratford, all my family with my children, my three children and my husband and a couple of friends of my son, and we all came to see it. My daughters are quite young, and so they haven't read anything. I mean, they've read my children's books, but they haven't read it. So it was the first time in a sense that so I sort of warned them and I said, you know, this will happen and this

will happen. But my ten-year-old daughter, so she's almost almost 11, she was sitting next to me. And the moment when the plague doctor appeared, she was absolutely terrified and she grabbed onto my arm and shrank down. And that was really amazing because, of course, it was mirroring exactly what happens on stage and in the novel. She was she said, Who is that? And this kind of horror. And I had to say to her, It's okay, it's okay, it's the doctor. And it was really weird. It was I was having a conversation with her that, yes, Agnes has with Hamnet in the play and the novel. So it was that was extraordinary. But it was just seeing it, it was so incredible and seeing it, you know, from the sort of the way it had pulled together from the rehearsal to the stage was amazing with the music and the costumes and the movement and the lighting and, you know, just all the sort of sum of all of these people working. It was astonishing. I will never, ever forget it till the day I die.

Erica: It's just lovely hearing you say all of that, it's just gorgeous. And hearing you talk just then, it seems to me that one of the reasons that theatre makers love this book or people who love the theatre love this book, is that you suggest something at the end of it. And I still don't want to spoil it for people who might not have seen the show. But you suggest something about what theatre can do, that I think really for me, certainly chimes with a very strong chord. I think that's shared by a lot of people that they think theatre and theatre people are going to be. It's a very polite word, demonstrative. I'm going to nick it, but, you know, I'm going to be we're going to be luvvies and we're going to be flamboyant and we're going to be colourful and we're going to be bossy or whatever we're going to be. And there's something I think those of us that have, you know, been lucky enough to spend a life in the theatre know, something else to do with emotional understanding, thinking about other people's emotions and trying to replicate them in a way that tells a story and can let them live on stage. It seems to me like you've got a profound understanding that that is something the theatre can do. The end of the novel is so beautiful because it doesn't say that it happens, but it suggests that it might be possible that there's some sort of healing or some new level of understanding or seeing one another. We know that and we are still struggling, I think, in the theatre to say what that is and to invite people into that effectively. So yeah. What's that for you?

Maggie: I love theatre. I go whenever I can and obviously I live in Edinburgh and we have a month long celebration of all different kinds of theatre, you know, right from, you know, incredibly international touring, professional plays, right down to, you know, one

person monologues that have been put together by a student troupe, you know, all of which are incredible. And there's mime, you know, there's everything. So I see a lot of that. But I, I think what I was aiming to do with the closing scenes of Hamnet, the novel, I wanted to explore two things, which were where art comes from, you know - the mechanism by which some people, you know, we don't know why will take life experience or imagination and transpose it into something that is public that other people can see; and also why we need it, why we need to see it, why we need to read it, why we need to experience it. It's like a map, isn't it? You can find your way. You can use a play or a novel or a poem or whatever to navigate your way through an experience. If you feel lost or if you feel upset, or if you feel joyous, you know you can find a way through it by reading about the experiences of others or the interpretation of others. So I was just thinking about where Hamlet might have come from in Shakespeare's day. I mean, obviously we don't know a lot about him. We don't know. But for me, always there has always been a very clear line. It's always felt to me that Hamlet the play is a message from a father in one realm to an unreachable son in another realm.

Erica: Just to touch on. I Am. I Am. I Am - because I love that book. I think it's extraordinary. I found it the most terrifying read. It's like hanging on a kind of white knuckle rollercoaster of your life. But I found it very hopeful, actually, just to sort of continue that theme a little bit, although genuinely frightening. Every time you come up against a completely fresh way to die or someone close to you to die. But I wondered if when you set out to write that there was that sense of offering, I don't know if hope's a bit soft, really, but it feels grittier than that to me. Something like saying 'this is what life is, it's sort of constantly ducking or not. Mortality in so many different forms.' That felt quite liberating or something to me, that that is what life is about, and I think we spend quite a lot of our energies for understandable reasons, trying to claim that life isn't that life is, you know, about success on a public stage or about romantic love or it's about all of those things, isn't it? But you get at something that then feels freeing. And I just wonder what inspired that and does it connect to what we've been talking about in Hamnet?

Maggie: Actually, I have a friend who refers to that book as, "Oh, God, oh, God. Oh God." He says that he can't read it, it's too much. At the time I wouldn't have thought about it. But looking back now, to me, it seems that there's quite a link in a sense

between I Am and Hamnet. In a way I think I needed to write. I Am before I could write Hamnet. And, you know, I think every book you write in a sense is a reaction to its predecessor. But I think those two there is a kind of there is quite a... I can see that I needed to get that out of the way in a sense or get it out of my system before I could actually sit down and tackle Hamnet. I would say, you know, that that book is a memoir. The structure that I use or the structure that I came up with about it was actually, as you say, actually quite liberating because I would never have wanted to write the kind of memoir that began. You know, I was born in Northern Ireland and then I did this and this and then, but actually coming up with a non-chronological structure, the books are arranged by body part rather than time. And in a way that was quite liberating because I was able to tell the amount I wanted to say about myself, but actually there was an awful lot that I could hold back. I mean, the subtitle is 17 Brushes with Death, but actually for me, it's really about life. It's about living. It's about enjoying it and about living in the moment and living your biggest and best and fullest life you possibly can within whatever strictures you happen to have.

Erica: You, I do really see that at the end of Hamnet that in spite of, or because of, really, really tough things that have to be digested and lived with and held, you can you can go forward more alive. Differently Alive.

Erica: I'd love to ask you about things that might offer us hope for the future. So I'm sort of interested in if there's anything you've watched or seen or read or digested in some other form of sort of cultural experience or creative experience that gives you hope for the future. Particularly thinking, I suppose I have got an eye on with my hat on of being in an artistic leadership role at the RSC, and leaving that role quite soon, and the arts still having to fight like crazy. I mean I think it's absurd, the degree to which we have to fight to exist properly. I wonder if there's anything you've seen, watched, thought read that gives you hope for the future of the arts.

Maggie: Oh gosh, so many things, actually. I mean, so many books. There's a novel coming up which hasn't been published yet, but it'll be coming out in the autumn, which absolutely blew me away the other day. It's called North Woods, and it's by Daniel Mason, an American writer. It tells the history of the continent of North America, all via one really small patch of land. And it has this extraordinary message about people who pass through this patch of land and live on this plot of land and what happens to them

and how they they arrive and they marry and love and disappear. And then somebody else comes, and that's one of the most hopeful books I've ever seen. I'd also say, actually, that watching my daughter in her Shakespeare school play was incredibly... it was really strange because I went from watching the RSC do Hamnet, to watching these kids who were 13 and 14 put on As You Like It. And they did the whole thing and they designed their costumes. She came back from quite early in rehearsals and said, I hate Shakespeare. I don't understand it. Ra Ra Ra! And she had this massive strop. And I said, "Well, it's not easy", You know - nobody can be 14 and pick it up and think, no. So we did a bit and we watched Baz Luhrmann's Romeo and Juliet, which of course is just gorgeous. And by the end of it, she loved it. And she was playing Don Pedro slightly against type because she's female and she's petite and blonde. But she did it and she had a wonderful curly moustache. And she just got it. And I saw all these kids getting it and loving it and giving it their absolute best. And it was just so heartening to see, that this next generation coming up understood it and got it and will always remember it. And those speeches, of course, will be locked inside and they'll always know them. I learnt, "accoutred as I was", the speech in Julius Caesar when I was about 12, and I can still remember it.

Erica: I mean, you know, we get to see that experience you've just described genuinely every day here. It is the best thing about working at the RSC. And everything that you say - that it is difficult. It is 400 years old. It is unfamiliar. That's why it's great. That's why it's great. There are so many ways in and you just described a great experience, there's so many ways in to conquer that difficulty. And then you just learn how to climb mountains and then you can climb any mountains. And once it's unlocked, it's unlocked. And we see the most amazing effects on young people, whose literacy for lots of different reasons is impacted either because of confidence or because English is their second language or because they haven't had that teaching that's worked for them or a family life that's encouraged that. And Shakespeare often turns a key that's really exponential in their lives. And it's extraordinary.

Maggie: I went to two very bog standard comprehensive schools and we were taught it at 11. We began at 11, and we did one at least one play every year. And I suppose I would just beg any educational authority listening to give children a chance at it.

Erica: Shakespeare is the only art subject I sometimes say that is completely compulsory, if you think about meaning sort of physicalized arts, whether that's visual art or theatre or music. It's the only one that's on the curriculum. But you are right, that it's not done as though it's theatre, it's done as though it's only literature. And that it's all over. It's all over.

Maggie: Sitting in a chair, reading it aloud.

Erica: 100% with you on that campaign. And we might indeed ask you to come and campaign on our behalf. So we're going to keep at it. Very good.

Maggie: Please do. I'm a terrible evangelist about this, so bring me along.

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

Erica: I know We have to wrap up. I do have one more question, which is? Who, fictional or real or, in some sense, imaginary, who would you most like to have an interval drink with?

Maggie: Well, it's probably going to be horrifically predictable, but I would like to have a drink with William Shakespeare and Agnes Hathaway. Please. If that will be possible. Probably some kind of herbal tea.

Erica: Would be good. Possibly something stronger for William.

Maggie: A bit of ale with William.

Erica: I would really like to join you for that? That sounds like an excellent... I'm not sure we'd go back in and see the second half.

Maggie: Please do.

Erica: Because we'd be having such an interesting conversation that it'd be very hard to go. 'I'm sorry, we've got to go back in and take our seats.' That's it. That's it?

Maggie: Yeah, that's it. The bell's gone.

Erica: Thank you so much. What an excellent conversation. I've enjoyed it enormously.

Maggie: It was my pleasure. Thank you for having me.

Erica: We'll see you in an interval very soon, probably at the Garrick Theatre in London when we open Hamnet.

Maggie: Yes. I'll be there. I'll be there.

Host (Ibraheem Toure): Join us for the next episode when director and climate activist Elizabeth Freestone will be getting a round in for Liz Bentley, Chief Executive of the Royal Meteorological Society.

Host (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'.