Interval Drinks podcast, Series 3

Amber Silvia Edwards and Greg Hicks - transcript

Announcer: Welcome to the Royal Shakespeare Company.

Host: You're joining us for Interval Drinks, a podcast in which we talk to artists who inspire us. Catching up in the interval this week are actors Amber Silvia Edwards and Greg Hicks.

Amber: I found it so intimidating and I thought, oh gosh, how do you prove you're worthy of the name? Have I trained enough? Am I clever enough? Did you not have any kind of iota of that at all? Was it just like, no, I'm going to jump into this head first and soak up everything I can?

Greg: Well, I had both. I had that extraordinary sort of awestruck, overwhelmed feeling of, yes, I'm about to enter this empire of excellence. But at the same time, I because I nearly got it and then didn't. By the time I did get it, I was ready to. I didn't care how deep the ocean was or how wide it was, or how long it would take me to swim to the other continent. I just threw myself in.

Host: Have you collected your drinks? Then let's begin.

Amber: Hello and welcome to Interval Drinks. I'm Amber Sylvia Edwards, and I'm making my RSC debut in this year's production of Macbeth. Joining me today, we have an RSC Associate Artist, an actor and director who has been described as one of the most 'complete Shakespearean actors in Britain'. First joining the RSC in 1976, he has played some of the most well known celebrated roles in Shakespeare and led an incredible career on both stage and screen. For his portrayal as Coriolanus, he was Olivier nominated and was awarded the Critics Circle Theatre Award for Best Shakespearean Performance in 2003. It's none other than the wonderful Greg Hicks. Greg, thank you for joining me today. You've got such a rich relationship with the RSC. And so it was hard not to choose you. Um, and of course we met, months ago on a Tube platform. So I thought, why not? I'll pull in Greg on this. And now it's a question that everyone is dying to know. What is your interval drink?

Greg: Well, it very much depends on what I'm watching. Sometimes I'd go for half a craft lager. Sometimes I go for a double espresso. Depending on what I'm watching.

Amber: I take it that's depending on the length.

Greg: Yeah, but it could be very short and intense, in which case I'd still go for a double espresso. But then if it was long and gentle, I'd probably go for half a lager.

Amber: And I'm probably along the same lines as you. If I'm behaving myself at the theatre, I'll have a ginger beer or a coffee and but if it's a night out and I want to enjoy myself, I'm a whiskey girl all the way.

Greg: Oh Excellent!

Amber: Scottish stereotype. Oh, it's the way to be. It's good for the voice. And so, Greg, you joined the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1976. What was that first job like with the RSC? To be a 23 year old joining such a prestigious legacy?

Greg: Well, the company I joined was completely jammed with luminaries. Really Judi Dench, Ian McKellen, Donald Sinden, Barbara Leigh-Hunt, Michael Pennington, John Nettles, John Woodvine, David Waller some of these names would mean a great deal to you. Francesca Annis. It was just the richest company that I could have found myself in at that point in my career. So for me, it was an amazing opportunity to actually watch a lot. I mean, I must have watched Romeo and Juliet, which I was in, playing the Page. I must have watched that from the wings, I don't know, at least 140 times. And it was a brilliant, a brilliant thing to be able to do, to be able to watch an actor like Judi Dench or Ian or Francesca or any of the others, just to learn from that. And then at that time... you were able to climb an apprenticeship ladder, which is very much more difficult. Now, I started off on a, you know, I was playing a really nice part in Romeo and Juliet for my age and my status at the time, but I was able to climb, as we all were, within the company and command a little bit more responsibility by the time I'd left the company, which was a wonderful thing. We had Cis Berry there all the time, and she was absolutely in her in her meteoric prime at that time. Um, so she worked with us very closely. And, you know, it was a time when the RSC were at the Aldwych, which was a

wonderful venue to be in, in London. The Other Place was really smoking like a volcano. So everything - it was a brilliant start for me, actually, and I look back on it with a fantastic amount of gratitude. Actually, I actually joined the RSC in my penultimate term at Rose Bruford College, but I never made the job because I was rushed away from college to join the company at very short notice as a walking understudy. The night before, I was meant to appear in the rehearsal room. I was staying in what was the Arden Hotel, which is opposite the stage door. And yes, I was so nervous. I'd bought a teach yourself yoga book with me, and I tried to teach myself. I tried to teach myself a handstand first thing in the morning as I got up and I slipped a disk in my neck, And I ended up in Stratford Hospital for two weeks on traction. So I never really, I never arrived.

Amber: Oh my Gosh!

Greg: That must have been in about 1975 or late 74. Anyway, that was the story of how I arrived and then didn't arrive. And then people were great, you know, they were sending me telegrams in hospitals saying, "oh, dear boy, we've heard all about you and we're so sorry, and here's some chocolates." And at that time, some embassy cigarettes. Um, yeah. It was it was a great way. It was a great way to start. It was a brilliant way to start. Yeah. Anyway, I eventually ended up there in 76. Yeah.

Amber: You most definitely did. How is your yoga practice now in comparison to back then? Can you still do that handstand?

Greg: It's pretty shit hot actually. I mean, I've had lots of classes since then, but no, no, I still do yoga and I still stand on my head. I'm quite notorious for it apparently. It was a brilliant way to start to actually not start a career. But anyway, yeah.

Amber: I think that's I mean, not about ending up in hospital, but you kind of gushing over how wonderful it was and being able to to just watch and learn and, and to be immersed in such kind of talent, like, that's such a wonderful thing to hear, because as I said, this is my first job at the Royal Shakespeare Company. Um, and I found it so intimidating and I thought, oh, gosh, how do you prove that you're worthy of the name? Have I trained enough? Am I clever enough? Did you not have any kind of iota of that at

all? Was it just like, no, I'm going to jump into this headfirst and soak up everything I can?

Greg: Well, I had both. I had that extraordinary sort of awestruck, overwhelmed feeling of God, I'm about to enter this empire of excellence. But at the same time, because I nearly got it and then didn't. By the time I did get it, I was ready to. I didn't care how deep the ocean was or how wide it was, or how long it would take me to swim to the other continent. I just threw myself in. Yeah, but it was at that time it was a different feel in the theatre than it perhaps is now. You really could look, learn and grow. It's much more difficult to do that now because of just the way things are. Things are much more insecure and much quicker, much faster. Social media is involved now. You profile in a very different way. You grow in a very different way. I'm not saying it's not possible to grow, but the actual concept of apprenticeship is very hard to find now. It really is.

Amber: Yes, yes, because of course you very much had that at the RSC with.

Greg: Yeah, totally.

Amber: Peter Hall and who was a fantastic director founded the RSC. And was Artistic Director between 1968, and you just had this long standing collaboration with them. And that is something that you don't see now.

Greg: No you don't. And I actually ended up meeting and working and growing and well, I would like to think blossoming, although some people might call it that, with him, not at the RSC. I met him at the National when he was running that, and then I spent, I think I did about, I think 23 productions with him over a course of maybe ten years.

Amber: That's incredible!

Greg: Maybe longer actually. He became my absolute number one mentor, if you like. He taught me so much about the structure of Shakespeare, the language in Shakespeare. He taught me a brilliant grounding point for me to develop my own journey, my own style, or my own take on things. I always remember him saying to me, if you want to know how to speak Shakespeare, don't listen to classical music. Listen to jazz. Really good jazz. I've never forgotten that.

Amber: Wow.

Greg: If you really want to understand the dynamics of Shakespeare and its language, listen to jazz. Really good jazz. And I did, and I do. And it's something I do a lot of actually, if I'm doing a Shakespeare play, which I haven't done for a while.

Amber: That's a very solid piece of advice, I think, because I imagine a lot of people, yeah, they listen to Shakespeare and think, oh, it's very classical. I imagine that's the first word that pops into their head. They would never think of something as kind of free and and expressive as jazz, but that's exactly what it is when it's done correctly and truly.

Greg: I remember when I was playing Brutus in, in one production of Julius Caesar that I was in a while back, directed by Peter's son, Ed. I used to listen to Jimi Hendrix a lot before I used to do the performance because, you know, Hendrix was just such a brilliant improviser on a basic blues pattern. But he took it to extraordinary realms of invention. So I used to I used to find that quite useful, actually.

Amber: That's brilliant. Having that long standing collaboration, as you kind of brilliantly pointed out, I don't think that is something that exists in the world of actors anymore. Like, you don't have somebody who mentors you, who takes you through your career.

Greg: Well, when I left drama school, well, I left drama school, as you know, to stand on my head badly and lose the job. But around that time.

Amber: But to come back.

Greg: But I do remember saying to myself, the one thing you're really going to need here, in this journey, is patience. Really long term patience and a very long, a very long arc of development. And I think I gave myself 35 years. I was quite specific about it, although I'm not specific about very much, but I was I remember going, yeah, 35 years. Yeah. If I haven't done in 35 years, I'll do something else. Um, and actually, if I really think about it, that's about how long it took me to establish a momentum whereby I was

consistently getting offered work in the theatre. So that's about how long it took me. Whereas now I don't know whether the same condition applies really.

Amber: I was just going to ask you that. I don't know if you've ever experienced this. You have dry spells. You have periods where you just don't work for a long time. And to have that level of patience, to have that level of patience for 35 years, like that's almost in the realms of like religion, like you have to be so dedicated to the craft and know that it's bigger than you. As you said, it's such an instantaneous world right now. You have things like Twitter, Instagram, TikTok. You expect things to happen in such a smaller time frame.

Greg: It was very interesting because by the time I joined Michael Boyd's company, the late, great Sir Michael Boyd, his vision was a longer term company, you know, a three-year company, which I was absolutely, gloriously blessed to be part of. He believed in long, a long arc of development, not only personally but as a group of actors. He was very much influenced by what he experienced in Russia working out there, and he and he brought that back to his work at the RSC by forming that three-year company. Obviously it had its low points and it had its vulnerabilities. But actually outside of that, it was a grand idea. And a lot of the work was really tremendous because of the long gestation period of a group of people in the same room working on these extraordinary plays.

Amber: That's wonderful. And as we were saying, you've got a really profound focus on Shakespeare in your career. What was your first encounter with Shakespeare like?

Greg: I played Shylock when I was 11.

Amber: Oh!

Greg: I was at school. And my English teacher, Mr. Puffer, his name was. But he was a marvellous man. And he gave me the chance to play Shylock in the school play. And it was quite a quite an elaborate production. It wasn't just something that we threw together, it was properly rehearsed. And I suppose that was the very first time that I encountered tussling and trying to communicate this language. And then the next school I went to secondary school. I then ran into another brilliant English teacher who

encouraged me to do all the school plays, which were mostly Shakespeare. He was the person that encouraged me to to keep going, really and to really consider it as a serious option, much to the dismay of my father, I have to say.

Amber: How has your approach to Shakespeare's texts kind of change from then? Maybe not as far as 11, but when you started back when you were 22, 23 to how it's changed now?

Greg: I'd like to think it's deepened rather than changed. What happened to me was, because of all the years I spent with Peter Hall, I learnt a lot about structure. Um, he was a great one, Peter, for form, the actual form of the language. And he and John Barton were kind of, you know, the most prolific experts on the structure of the language in Shakespeare, whether you thought their productions were good or not good, the fact is they knew a huge amount about how the language worked. And then I suppose, looking back to someone like Cis Berry, I mean, she said a million remarkable things. Well, at least a thousand. But one of the things she said is "You don't do Shakespeare. It does you." And I've never forgotten that that's not as woolly or as new agey as it sounds, because your job is, is to internalize it, so the language is spoken through you, not by you. It's a really subtle thing. I can't really describe it in any other terms. Famously John Barton, you know, his whole thing was there's no such thing as character in Shakespeare. There's just what you say. So the language is the character.

Amber: Wow!

Greg: So it's not like you have to go home and work out what Falstaff had. You know, what happened to him when he was ten. You you might find out that by references in the play, but actually it's the language that leads you to the opening and discovery of who that person is that you are strutting about, you know, performing.

Amber: That's such a golden nugget of information to give to people.

Greg: I used to be a bit paradoxical about this because I would really embrace that, but I'd also go home and and give myself a lot of anxiety and headaches by going, yeah, what was his dysfunctional childhood like? What, you know, what did I have for breakfast? What was my relationship like to my first girlfriend/boyfriend? I used to do all

that, but all of those things are revealed within the language. I really came to understand that. That if you simply walk on. And if you're playing Hamlet and you surrender, for example, to any of those given soliloquies. You have to have the equipment to do it - I'm not saying, you can't do it without working technically on your instrument, like any musician would or any interpreter would. I think Shakespeare is sufficiently alchemical and magical that what might appear as an exchange, either prosaically or more poetically framed, it will reveal itself as a structure. Actually, if you look at a play like Macbeth. The structure is absolutely brilliant in it. You know, there are fantastic codas of exchanges, and then there are flights of poetic imagination which go into some other realm of reality, if you like. You know, his soliloquies or her soliloquies or moments of reflection by a character.

Amber: Yeah.

Greg: The thing about Shakespeare is that or the thing about a great play. It doesn't have to be Shakespeare. It can be, you know, thousands of other playwrights. It has to be critical, and the stakes have to be high enough for you to have paid your money to sit there in the theatre for 2.5 hours. You don't want to be watching a conversation. You want to be watching something, something that could be on the edge of crisis at any given moment. And I've always believed that. I've always believed that about high stakes. I did do a production out in Brazil with some Brazilian actors. We did Macbeth in Brazilian Portuguese.

Amber: Oh my gosh, that must have been gorgeous.

Greg: Yeah, it was great. I used to practice capoeira. Do you know what that is?

Amber: Yes. It's kind of martial artsy?

Greg: It's a martial art dance. Ritual, dialogue with music originating from Angola, translating itself into Brazilian culture. And I did that for many, many years and in fact, still use it as a methodology, either if I'm preparing or I try and even sometimes get it into a show if I can um, which I've just done actually in Oklahoma - you would have seen capoeira for the first and only time in the musical Oklahoma!

Amber: Oh my gosh!

Greg: Yeah. If you. Look closely, if you didn't know about capoeira, you wouldn't know it was there. But, um, but yeah, I had a lot of mates who came who do capoeira and said, ah, yeah, there it is. Look, you're doing it.

Amber: That's a great little Easter egg for people who are like, he's done it! Do you find it like a way of like kind of meditating then as a sense of grounding yourself?

Greg: Yeah. I guess.

Amber: Full body, mind.

Greg: Full body mind stuff. Um, capoeira is extremely grounded, but it's also... you can fly and you spend a lot of time upside down, which philosophically appeals to me very much. And I also think it's relevant to doing Shakespeare, because I think sometimes you have to turn these things upside down. These plays and what lies within them, they turn you upside down and they turn the audience upside down. For sure. They do.

Amber: Yeah. Is this your first musical, then Oklahoma?

Greg: Yeah.

Amber: What did you make of it? Um, because I don't know about you. They're quite knackering. I find them quite exhausting.

Greg: Yeah they are. And I was knackered. We only finished two weeks ago, but I loved the rigor of doing eight shows a week. If you were in tune with the show you were doing, which I most certainly was. I really believed in the show. I thought it was really provocative and exciting and new and different and la la la, all that. Uh, so for me, the eight shows a week, although it was knackering, I also found it incredibly, um, strengthening.

Amber: Yes.

Greg: And restorative in a funny kind of way.

Amber: You do get a kind of high off it, don't you? Being able to make your body do that eight times a week.

Greg: Yeah, you do. And I've never I've never done all that singing and dancing business, albeit deconstructed, in this production. So for me, that was a real joy, especially for a person who thought he really couldn't sing, really.

Amber: Oh well, you can.

Greg: Well, ultimately I got there. But when I first did the audition, they said, yeah, Greg, I mean, you know, we like your acting and all that, but what about these songs?

Amber: No!

Greg: Well, yeah, I auditioned three times for that. Most people did. And each time I sang the song, it wasn't quite good enough. And the very last time I sang whatever the song was, they gave me to sing, it also wasn't good enough. But the guy that the director did, Daniel Fish, this marvelously complex man from New York who I really love. He'd met me at the RSC. He'd directed me in a show at the RSC about 20 years ago. A wonderful play in verse by a woman called Joanna Laurens. And he never forgot me. And then 20 years later, he gave me a chance to be in Oklahoma. But the third audition, when they asked me to sing the song again for the third time.

Amber: Oh gosh!

Greg: And I just didn't get there. And I knew. I knew he liked me, and I knew he wanted me in it. And I knew that he, you know, he was very supportive of what I could bring. However, I couldn't do the song. So I did the song and I was putting my jacket on. And saying goodbye to the assembled people. The musical director. La la la. And I was just about to go out the door and I knew. I thought, fuck, I've blown this. I haven't got the job, which is a real shame. And he stopped me just as I went through the door and he said, wait a minute, wait a minute. He said, "Take your jacket off." So I took my jacket off. He said, "come back in the room, sing the song again." And he gave me a fourth chance to

sing it. And I don't know, something happened between me taking the jacket off and walking into the middle of the room.

Amber: You know, it's all or nothing.

Greg: I just must have pulled something out, that I hadn't pulled out before and I don't know, it was maybe it was just sheer desperation or something, but I pulled something out and they gave me the job.

Amber: Fantastic! From what I remember watching it, there is that kind of sense of desperation, though, that very much lived in the song. And of course, I think of Oklahoma being this really beautiful, operatic, classical sound, and you think of it being all beautiful and quite twee. But what presented on stage amongst that sound was people who were just kind of like, gripping at life that were just like on the edge of something.

Greg: He was utterly insistent that, before we went on, on any given performance eight times a week, that we would constantly remind ourselves that what we were coming on with was the knowledge that someone was going to die before the end of the evening. It was a brilliant note. It was an absolutely brilliant note because even though you were sitting around that table, you know, drinking those beers, flirting away and being sexy and all, actually, underneath it all, you knew that something bad was going to happen at the end of all that. And that was his way of puncturing the American dream, which was his intention.

Amber: This is about a strange question, but what are some of the most bonkers things that you've had to do for an audition or for a job, apart from sing a song four times in a row? What is one of the most mad things? My partner has a better story than me. He once had to puppeteer a teddy bear with a coat hanger and sing a lullaby to a child in the voice of Al Pacino. I've had to fit a script to the song of It's Raining Men.

Greg: Oh, actually, remember having to walk the plank as a pirate. You know, that one where pirates walk the plank? And then I remember that. And then I had to deliver some kind of ridiculous dialogue as I was, you know, falling into the ocean to die. And it was all about selling some food product. I think it was absolutely ludicrous.

Amber: The reason I asked is because I read a story in about, I think it was a production where you had to have water thrown on you, and apparently, depending on how the stage manager was feeling, the water would change in temperature. So I think there was a day that you got quite a cold shower.

Greg: Well, now, look, this is a seminal story. I'm not sure what the age group of this podcast is, but anyway, I did a very notorious play once called The Romans in Britain, which if you look it up, you'll find it's the most notorious court case in the last 40 years of British theatre. Um, but anyway, in this play, I had to be completely naked from the beginning to the end. Uh, in a wig. A kind of Rod Stewart wig. actually. One of the actors, he used to throw water at me just before I went on. And depending on how he felt about me, it would either be freezing cold or quite hot.

Amber: Greg, people know you around here. People know you in Stratford.

Greg: Yeah, I'm sure they do.

Amber: So when I was getting my wig fitting originally for this job, I was telling the wig in the department, wig, hair and makeup, and they're fantastic. And, oh, I'm doing a podcast. I'm doing it. Greg Hicks. And there was someone that went, "oh, he's very cheeky, isn't he?" And I said, "is he?" And he went, "oh yes, he loves a prank." And I was like, "is it?" And I thought, what what could they possibly be referring to? What are they talking about? Greg. Are you cheeky?

Greg: Well. I'd like to think. Yeah. And I'd like to think it's getting worse as I'm getting older.

Amber: That's the best part.

Greg: But, um. Yeah, I guess so, I guess so I guess you can get away with it more. But I've met some brilliantly cheeky actors in my career that, you know, older actors at that time when I was younger, who were fantastically cheeky. Oh my God, they were cheeky. Judi could be a huge prankster. She was a huge prankster. She loved to prank, did Judi.

Amber: What kind of pranks are we talking about here? Oh gosh, am I going to get someone in trouble?

Greg: She just liked to. Keep, keep, keep everybody on the right side of not not being ultimately serious about it. That's not to say she isn't an absolutely magnificent actress. Yeah, there were pranks she were involved in. Certainly at the RSC. She organised one night in Comedy of Errors, for a stuffed bird, I seem to remember to be dropped from right at the roof of the building, right in the middle of a particular scene where the actor didn't know. And of course, she just loved it because she'd organised it.

Amber: Do you have any advice for somebody approaching Shakespeare for the first time, like somebody who's about to come in and make their debut with the RSC? Have you got any more words of wisdom, you've given so many, but.

Greg: You have to honour the fact that that your instrument, your vocal instrument, your sensory instrument, your body, you have to be in good shape, I think. I mean, you've got to understand that this is a muscular language. It's muscular, poetic, volcanic. It plumbs the depths and it soars to the heavens. And it's also very normal. You have to catch that, too. You have to catch the, not the normality of it, you have to catch the visceral, everyday-ness of some of that language. If that is the case, if you've done, you know, you've taken care of your voice and your body to some extent, and your mind and your soul and your heart, this language is is alchemy. It's alchemical. And the deeper it goes into your bloodstream, the better it is. So one thing I would say I always try and learn stuff before I do it on the first day, but I try not to learn it out loud. That's a Grotowski thing. I try and learn it silently so that when you as you're learning it, the language is working inside you like some kind of medicine. I can't describe it.

Amber: That's a beautiful thing to say.

Greg: I'm sounding rather fanciful and incredibly... I know that does sound somewhat suspicious and pretentious, but I know that to be true. And I only know it because I've done it so many times.

Host: Ladies and gentlemen please take your seats. The performance is about to resume.

Amber: Okay, so sadly, the three minute bell has went. I need to ask who real or fictional would you most like to share an interval drink with and why?

Greg: Christopher Hitchens would be one. I thought he was an amazing guy. Um, I think Samuel Beckett would be another. And probably Keith Richards of The Rolling Stones.

Amber: That would be a great person to sit and have a drink with.

Greg: Oh yeah. He doesn't drink much now, but it would be a very good person.

Amber: You need longer than an interval.

Greg: Because he's incredibly well read. And I would be interested on his take on on things. Christopher Hitchens. Well I loved him as a, you know, a commentator on life and Beckett because I'm sure he was actually very good company.

Amber: Yes, that's brilliant. Greg, thank you so, so much for your time. It's been such a pleasure to think, months ago, we met on a tube and I went, "you were great in Oklahoma" to now having a lovely little podcast chat. Thank you so, so much and thank you so much for listening today.

Greg: Okay. Well thank you and good luck with everything you do and I hope our paths cross again.

Amber: I'm sure they will. Greg, I'll be keeping an eye out for you. Okay.

Greg: Yeah, I'll be keeping an eye out for you too.

Host: Join us next week when director Eleanor Rhodes will be talking to magician and illusion designer John Bulleid. Who do you think they've been watching? Remember,

you can listen again to past episodes on the Royal Shakespeare Company website, including series one and two. Just search RSC Interval drinks.