

Interviews

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Gerard Horan, actor playing Clarence

"*Richard III* is also very relevant to how politics works in this country. People are not physically beheaded in England for disagreeing with whoever's in power, but they are politically beheaded."

Robert Demeger, actor playing Derby

Interviews includes:

Actors Claire Price, Gerard Horan, Richard Durden and Robert Demeger on training to be an actor, approaching Shakespeare's text and performing in *Richard III* at the Crucible.

Four actors from the Richard III company are interviewed during the first week of rehearsals - February 2002.

Claire Price - Lady Anne



What made you interested in becoming an actor?

I grew up in a theatre family; my parents and my brother are all actors. Acting was all that I was ever going to do - it fascinated me. I used to love talking to my Dad about his parts and what character he was going to play. I've been a professional actor for 8 years now.

How did you train?

I did a degree in English Literature at a University. This was partly because I'd always had difficulty with Drama as an academic subject - I was actually kicked off Theatre Studies A level for being difficult in class! It was very hard in class because acting is so instinctive for me, and I found the act of analysing acting very difficult. Finally though, drama school is a very good way into the theatre business, and so after university I did a one-year post-graduate course at Guildford School of Acting. I got an agent as a result of my final show at drama school.

What particular styles or methods of acting impressed you when you were training?

Because it was only a 1 year course we bashed thorough things very quickly, so no particular method impressed me when I was training. Afterwards, I worked with Howard Barker of the Wrestling School theatre company. I'd done lots of research for the part I was to play (as I always did then), but on the first day of rehearsals, Howard said 'I'm not interested in actors who do research, I don't want to know about the historical context - this is a work of imagination, and you don't have to justify any choice you make in the room.' I remember this being incredibly liberating.

But for some actors it's right to do research - my father always used to.

What appeals to you about your character?

I can't answer this as if Anne was a person that I could meet over coffee. I have to find something appealing about her character that is similar to something in my own, and use that to build her character. This play is more about relationships than it is about individual people. There's the big central figure of Richard with the other characters swinging into him, and what happens to us when we swing back out, and how he is affected. There's just your response to Richard, and his response to you. I'm interested how someone as physically revolting as Richard can be sexually irresistible. He has this incredible sexual pull.

Why do you think *Richard III* is relevant to contemporary audiences?

So many women are in a similar place to Anne - we call ourselves modern now, so 'Bridget Jones' - but we still think anything is ok if a guy loves you. As soon as Richard says 'I did the whole thing because I was just so in love with you', Anne's floored - there's nowhere for her to go because she doesn't have the ability to say 'well, that's actually not good enough - the fact that you love me doesn't make up for you killing my husband and my father-in-law, sorry!'. Which is what she should come back with, but she's trained to think that as long as she's loved, anything is ok. It's that insecurity that fascinates me.

What methods do you use to help audiences understand the complexities of Shakespeare's language?

I do something that Peter Hall taught my mother when she worked with him, which is to honour the line endings of Shakespeare's text. Not to leave a big space, just a little breath or a little gap - it's amazing how it opens up the meaning. I don't think Shakespeare's too difficult to understand for contemporary audiences. The language is very clear - you just have to listen! The actor's got to understand what they're saying, and mean it as well. And if you say your words as if you're a person who's just thought that thought today, then that's how it sounds to an audience, and it doesn't matter that the language is old fashioned.

Gerard Horan - Clarence



What did you do on the first day of rehearsal?

We had a cup of coffee and we met everybody from the theatre. Michael Grandage and Christopher Oram talked to us with about the design - about how they envisaged the play looking. Then at 11.30am we started with Act 1 Scene 1 "Now is the winter of our discontent...", which was tremendously refreshing. What Michael asked us all to do was to learn our parts before we started, which again I've never done before. Normally it's a process of assimilation during rehearsals. I'm considering doing it in the future. You can put the script down and you're straight into it and that's tremendously helpful.

This week we will go through the play scene by scene and clarify any linguistic meanings and acting choices. In this way we will have a structure of where people are coming on and off and how we will physically use the space. Michael already has a good idea of how he wants to light certain scenes. Next week, when we come to rehearse in more detail we will already have a physical shape in place.

Why do you think Richard III is relevant to contemporary audiences?

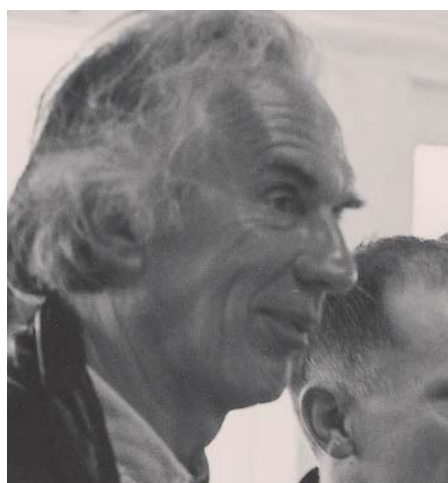
You hesitate to relate everything to September 11th, but nonetheless, I read someone in the paper the other day saying that for the post-Kennedy generation it's the defining moment of most people's lives. Edward IV has reigned over a relative period of calm and prosperity after the Wars of the Roses. Suddenly the world's thrown upside down again and I think people understand that better now in the wake of September 11th. The study of a man who is driven,

whatever the reasons, to the kinds of deeds that he has been driven to, are things that will always be interesting.

What methods do you use to help audiences understand the complexities of Shakespeare's language?

I'd recommend that anyone studying Shakespeare first speaks the text aloud, getting a feel of how a sentence scans. There can be 5 or 6 line sentences and the actual speaking aloud of them and observing the punctuation and the meter gives you a far better idea of where the weight goes in the sentence. Inevitably, there are going to be words that people do not understand. You cannot change the text and short of providing a glossary, I think you just have to hope if you are speaking your line with conviction and the characters all know what they are saying, that the audience will get an impression, at least - if not the exact specifics - of what a word is or what a phrase means and the emotion and intention behind it.

Richard Durden - Edward IV



How much research do you do prior to performing in a history play?

I'm not sure, with this play, how valuable research really is. I just asked Michael Grandage this very question. These characters are based on real people, but they are Shakespeare's take on them. I did read a book about the Wars of the Roses. It gave you a picture of how bloody, barbaric and medieval those conflicts were - it's like Bosnia now.

I'm playing Edward IV, the king who brings some stability before Richard. He was an

incredibly bloody warrior which you don't get in the play. He's often played as a dodderly old man, but we want to play him on his deathbed still wanting to bring everyone together, so that the succession of his son is a permanent and lasting one.

Can you describe the experience of performing on the Crucible stage?

I've just been here for three months performing in *High Society*. It was fantastic fun! A wonderful part; I sang, and tap-danced. The theatre was packed every night. This stage has a very special quality for an actor. You have 1000 people watching you, but there is an incredible feeling of intimacy and I believe the audience have the same experience too. Because the stage is open on three sides, the acting space is freed up and it is a very liberating experience for the actor. As long as the play is directed by someone who knows what they are doing, like Michael, you can do almost anything you like. He stages things very simply - the attention is always focused on where it needs to be. In this theatre the distance between actors becomes very important - if you are close up to the other actor you would think meaning would become amplified, but in fact, I think it is the distance which amplifies the emotion.

What appeals to you about being in this particular production of *Richard III*?

I love doing Shakespeare and there isn't much of it around at the moment, apart from at the RSC.

Michael Grandage is someone I love to work with. He's not a conceptual director who wishes to put a particular gloss on the play. He has started to block the play on day one of rehearsals which is very unusual these days. The only other person who I have worked with in this way is Alan Ayckbourn. The other thing he did was ask us to learn our lines prior to rehearsal.

He is impressive and a natural leader who gets on with things. He is very open to ideas and I think he has all the qualities you want a director to have, but few of them do. He inspires people; actors want to come to Sheffield because of all the work that's being done. The staff here are fantastic, efficient and supportive.

And I love Sheffield. People here come up to you and tell you exactly what they think - especially on trams! ... that is incredibly refreshing. They love this theatre.

Robert Demeger - Derby



What advice could you give to someone performing a part in a Shakespeare play for the first time?

For me all the clues are in the text. The text is the beginning and end of everything. You cannot start moving forward unless you really know the text. Get a dictionary and look up the words you don't know in order to know what the word means, and to know the shades of meaning within it. Try to understand the word patterns and the word shapes of your particular character, because they're going to be different. Some characters speak in very different ways to others, which is an obvious thing to say, but when we look at a Shakespeare play we think everyone speaks in that 'funny' language. Actually, when you look at it closely some characters speak a fractured language where things are broken up and they interrupt themselves. Some use lots of invocations to the gods and others use much more earthy words.

We need keys to unlock the meaning of speeches. There's an exercise that I find quite useful that I learned from Cis Berry at the RSC. If you look at the last word in each line of a speech, they form a kind of vertical poem down the page, a bit like an e.e.cummings poem. This can give you the core meaning of the speech, which is more useful than thinking about what the character is. The character is the words, not a watertight thing that events happen to.

Why do you think *Richard III* is relevant to contemporary audiences?

Along with Julius Caesar, it's probably Shakespeare's most political play and that's always relevant. And it's not only relevant to countries in Africa or the Balkans where politics is really something visceral and to

do with being killed on the street. It's also very relevant to how politics works in this country. People are not physically beheaded in England for disagreeing with whoever's in power, but they are politically beheaded. And it's not only politics in the sense of around Westminster but also how it works in the big commercial companies.

It's watching a man; I think it's wrong to think of him as a villain. Shakespeare made Richard someone who is disabled from birth and examined what that might do to a person - someone who has things stacked against them at the beginning which fires a kind of anger or resentment, and a desire to get on despite that. I certainly don't think Kenneth Branagh is interested in playing him as a villain as such. He's a man that uses power to get where he wants to get but doesn't intend to be a bad king. He intends to be someone who sorts the country out. In fact, we know from the historical records that Richard was a good king. If you have any interest in the way human beings work together in positions of power and how they make decisions then you will be interested in this play.

How much research do you do prior to performing in a history play?

I like to do a lot of research when working on a history play. Before rehearsals, I like to read biographies of the characters and to find out what it was like socially. I like to look into my own character and what he was like. Then after I've done that I forget all of it because it's not relevant. Research is all about making it a richer experience me as an actor. I play Derby, who is the step father of Richmond who becomes Henry VII at the end of the play. Through my research I found out that it's my army fighting on Richmond's side that makes Richmond win and defeat Richard. This is a historical fact which is great to play. I've also found out that a few years later my character sided with Lambert Simnel who was a pretender to the throne and that Richmond, my step son, had me put to death because of it. Now that's a very interesting historical fact but it's of no use to me whatsoever. I cannot play that; at the end of the play I can't give him a funny look as if to say "I know you're going to kill me in 3 years time". It's interesting to know it but I cannot do anything with it. So in a way it all comes back to what I was saying; 'it all begins and ends with the text.'

Points for Discussion

1. Why do you think *Richard III* is relevant to contemporary audiences?
2. Do you agree with the actors' opinions on this matter?
3. Do you think *Richard III* is a villain?

