

»NOTHING WILL COME OF NOTHING«: AN INTERVIEW WITH SIR RICHARD EYRE

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Abstract

The article features an interview with Sir Richard Eyre, a long-time Director of the Royal National Theatre in London and the director of the production of William Shakespeare's tragedy *King Lear* in the very same theatre in 1997, which also saw a successful film version. Sir Richard openly spoke about his dilemmas as a director in the process of staging the play, finding the right cast, about rehearsals and the first night performance, as well as about some key scenes interpreted by him somewhat differently, although he essentially firmly relied on the text and the more traditional staging of this famous Shakespeare's tragedy.

This interview with Sir Richard Eyre was made on Sunday 27 February 2000 at the Castle of Leopoldskron in Salzburg during the Salzburg Seminar on Shakespeare around the Globe. Sir Richard Eyre, C.B.E., formerly for many years Director of the Royal National Theatre in London, a famous theatre and also film director, graciously consented to answer the questions about his staging of William Shakespeare's play *King Lear* at the Royal National theatre in 1997, the stage production which was later also made into a film version that was shown on the Slovene TV in the year 2001.

Question: When did you decide to embark on this particular 1997 production of *King Lear* in London and how does a stage director feel on such an occasion – confronting Shakespeare?

Answer: I'd committed myself in the summer of 1995 to directing *King Lear* almost two years later. When you approach a new play as a director or an actor, you carry no baggage, you are free of opinion. With a Shakespeare play you arrive with pantechinons: you cross continents of critical prose. When I thought about the play I felt as if I was balancing the summit of an inverted mountain on my skull. I started by taking a frail defensive position: »It's only a play«, I said. But as my confidence grew I began to realise that far from being a life-preserving reductive position, it was the only proper position to take – and not just because I'm a theatre director. I became aware of the comparative rarity of commentators – all convinced of the greatness of the work on the page – to concede, or perhaps even to understand, the singularity of Shakespeare's genius. Shakespeare was writing plays not for publication or reflective analysis, but for a medium that only exists in the present tense, a medium which depends

for its success – at the moment of performance – on the skill of the actors and the imagination of a willing audience.

Question: Do you consider Shakespeare a ‘bad’ poet in his being a ‘good’ playwright, as it has been suggested, and did this at all influence your staging of this particular production of *King Lear*?

Answer: Well, ... Shakespeare is often referred to as a poet, and a poet of variable abilities – as if to describe him as a playwright and to judge him as such is to risk some sort of intellectual infection. Even such a keen theatregoer as Dr Johnson could only view him through the prism of poetry: »Shakespeare«, he said, »never had 6 lines together without a fault«. Johnson’s successors are all around us, one of them boasted in a newspaper column that she didn’t need to see any production of *Lear* in the theatre – and in particular *my* production; her friend had been to see it and had e-mailed her response: »No sequins. They all took their clothes off, shouted and died«. Poetry is applied to plays, not as Dr Johnson seemed to think, like a sort of decorative paint, but as an expressive tool that gives a greater pulse, momentum, and distillation of thought and feeling than prose. However, it’s no less a medium for delineating individual characters – and for that reason it makes no sense to criticize Shakespeare’s characters for speaking »bad verse«, any more than to criticize Harold Pinter’s for speaking »bad prose«. If Shakespeare had wanted to write his plays in prose he would have been more than capable of it – as a glance at the ‘Willow’ scene in *Othello* will confirm. To appreciate Shakespeare thoroughly is to believe in him as a writer who wrote for the theatre in verse as a matter of choice, which is why the wonder of *King Lear* lies not only in its profundity but in its accessibility. To believe in the theatre is like believing in religion: you have to experience its effect rather than discuss it – which is part of what makes it so much more difficult for me to describe the making of a production than to do the thing itself ... (laughter).

Question: So, why did you, in fact, choose *King Lear* for the 1997 production?

Answer: You see, I have been a director for over 30 years and by the time I decided to do *King Lear* I had directed at least two thirds of Shakespeare’s plays, but I had always fought shy of *Lear*. About 15 years ago – just before I started to run the National Theatre – I was asked by Joe Papp to direct it in New York with George C. Scott. »Are you ready for *King Lear*«, he asked combatively. I obeyed my instinct. »No«, I said, »I don’t think I am«. But until recently I didn’t know why. The first production of *Lear* that I saw was Peter Brook’s production with Paul Scofield in the early sixties. Since this was almost the first Shakespeare production I’d seen I had no sense at the time of its iconoclasm or its historical importance. I barely knew the play, and I was knocked sideways by its savagery, its bleakness, and its extraordinary prescience. I’ve come to know Peter Brook well in the last ten years, and not the least of the challenges when I came to direct *Lear* was the certainty that I would have to confront his criticism of my production. I can’t say exactly what made me decide to approach Ian Holm, but the fact that he was approaching 65, and was an actor for whom I had boundless admiration and considerable affection had something to do with it. He was intrigued. He didn’t say yes, and he didn’t say no. »How does one play an 80 year old man«, he said.

Question: How did you decide for a minimalist staging of the play in the first place, and how is it that you as a stage director rather unusually insisted on creating a series of separate scenes in mostly domestic interiors?

Answer: Good question, indeed. It's a commonplace to observe that Shakespeare has a 'filmic' style; but, only by providing a staging that allows a seamless cut from the end of one scene to the beginning of another can we begin to experience it – for instance, the 'cut', in the cinematic sense, from Edmund's »The younger rises when the old doth fall« inside the house, to Lear. Kent and the Fool on the heath in the storm; or from Kent's soliloquy in the stocks to Edgar escaping from his pursuers. These scenes are simply robbed of their power unless the pulse of the verse – and the action – is allowed to beat unbroken. And, as in so many other Shakespeare plays – *Hamlet* and *Richard III* to name but two – the vertiginous speed and the breathless plausibility with which events develop are a crucial element of the descent into disaster. We have to keep rediscovering ways of doing Shakespeare's plays. They don't have absolute meanings. There is no fixed, frozen, way of doing them. Nobody can mine a Shakespeare play and discover a 'solution'. To pretend that there are fixed canons of style, fashion, and taste, is to ignore history. When there is talk of 'classical acting', what is often meant is an acting style that instead of revealing the truth of a text for the present day, reveals the bombast of yesterday.

Question: But how do we, then, present plays in a way that is true to their own terms, and at the same time bring them alive for a contemporary audience?

Answer: It's much easier to achieve this in a small space, and it's no coincidence that the most successful Shakespeare productions of recent years have been done in theatres seating a couple of hundred people at most, where the potency of the language isn't dissipated by the exigencies of voice projection, and the problems of presentation – finding a physical world for the play – become negligible. We have to avoid latching on such a visual conceit that tidies up the landscape of a Shakespeare play, and avoid trying to impose unity through a rigorously regimented verse-speaking. Verse-speaking should be like jazz: never on the beat, but before, after, or across it. An Elizabethan audience would have responded to the pulse, the rhythms, the shapes, sounds, and above all meanings, within the consistent ten-syllable, five-stress, lines of blank verse. They were an audience who listened.

Question: How do you personally tackle this actor-audience relationship in your productions?

Answer: We have to aim at re-establishing the relationship between actor and audience that had existed in Shakespeare's theatre and I don't personally believe we can do this by looking for a synthetic Elizabethanism - a sort of aesthetic anaesthesia, involving the audience in an insincere conspiracy to pretend that they were willing collaborators in a vain effort to turn the clock back. We have to use scenery not to decorate and be literal, but to be expressive and poetic. It must also be specific; it must be real; it must be minimal and it must be iconographic: and this is what I have done in the production of *King Lear*.

Question: When did you actually start thinking seriously about the play?

Answer: In August of 1995, by reading it aloud to my wife who had just had an operation, I started to develop a sense of what the play meant to me: a play about

family, about fathers and their children, about children and their fathers. There are two fathers in the play – one with three daughters, the other with two sons. Both receive a brutal education in parental love, both in a sense being made to see through blindness. I began to realise why I had shied away from the play until now: I didn't know enough about the subject-matter, but with the death of my parents I was no longer a child: I was an orphan, a grown up, and a parent myself – and I was ready to understand *King Lear*. I realised my sympathies had shifted with time. When I was young I saw two terrible daughters abusing a man more sinned against than sinning. Now I was no longer prepared to judge: all were to blame, all could be forgiven.

Question: When did you decide for introducing the 'naked' storm scene, which some saw as shocking and too advertising?

Answer: Ha, ha, ha ... (laughs heartily). In the fall of 1995 both Ian Holm and myself were working in New York. We would meet once a week in a favourite restaurant and talk about *Lear*, of fathers, children, and of kings. Of parental tyranny, different only in scale from the political variety. We talked of old age, and we talked of madness. »If we get the beginning right«, we said, »it will all fall into place«. We must think of the habit of power: a man who never has to ask for anything, a man who only says 'thank you' – possibly for the first time in his life – on the edge of death«. »And I have two thoughts«, said Ian, »about the storm«. »Oh, so do I«, said I. »You speak«, he said. »Real rain is the first«, I said. Ian nodded. »And the second«, I said. »He must be naked«, Ian said. And I nodded; anything less than an 'unaccommodated man' would be dishonest. I know of no other actor who would have suggested this, agreed to do it – but more importantly have made it seem so inevitable, so unself-advertising, and so deeply shocking.

Question: Could you tell us more about the significance of the rather bare, minimalist stage in the production?

Answer: I had a clear view of how I wanted to stage the first scene: a long table around which the family sat with Lear at the head of the table. An image of order, of hierarchy, of family, one that would resonate for everyone in the audience – a family meal, a family meeting, the king's cabinet. I started to understand that the play depended on a world of the 'versuses' of life: the home and the heath, comfort and privation, soft clothes and nakedness, riches and poverty, interior and exterior. I understood the stark horror of being locked out of your own home by your children, and this led me to believe that I need walls and doors, a sense of being inside, protected from the elements, and a sense of being outside, exposed to wind and rain and mud and nature. I wanted to create a world on stage that was consistent within its own terms, specific but ahistorical, that didn't lean on specious notions about the look of pre-Christian Britain, eschewing woad and iron age jewellery. In short, the design of the set and the costumes had to serve Shakespeare's imaginative universe: all expression and no decoration.

Question: To what an extent did you decide to edit the text of the play?

Answer: Any director of a Shakespeare play has to make a number of choices about cutting the text prompted perhaps by anxiety about the performance length, perhaps by anxiety about comprehensibility, or even to suit a directorial conceit. I cut a little for length largely in the Fourth and Fifth Acts, and perhaps 100 lines on the grounds of comprehensibility – largely the Fool's obscurer jokes and the wholly

untranslatable parts of Edgar's 'Poor Tom' speeches. I decided to put the interval after the 'joint stool' scene, at the tail end of the storm. This meant starting the second act with the short, sharp shock of the blinding of Gloucester, which had the effect of ending the first half with Edgar's speech:

When we our betters see bearing our woes,
We scarcely think our miseries our foes...

That became a pre-echo of his speech at the end of the play:

The weight of this sad time we must obey;
Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.

I had decided to place Edgar on stage at the beginning of the play, watching the eclipse of the sun, establishing him in the mind of the audience perhaps as a thinker, a rationalist, a student scientist. Apart from inserting Edgar at the start of the play, I made no changes to the content or position of his speeches.

Question: The play was staged in 1997; when did you start casting and rehearsing your cast?

Answer: I started to cast the production in the autumn of 1996, and rehearsals were to start in January of the following year. If politics is the art of the possible, casting is the art of the available. Casting is a lottery: it's an almost invariable rule of casting that the actor and actress you want has just signed for a film, or is planning to have a baby or is about to retire. The luck in a production is in obtaining the right actors at the right time. When you cast you start with certain given facts derived from your understanding of the play – the demands of the characterisation and the play's dynamics. With *King Lear* you under-cast at your peril: there are 11 parts which need to be strongly played, anything less will dilute the power of the play. I am convinced that part of the play's meaning lay in the sense of the young needing to be liberated from the oppression of the old – the universal feeling of the child towards the parent, or as Edmund says: »The younger rises as the old doth fall«. This led me to the conviction that there were four old men in the play: Lear, Gloucester, Kent and the Fool. It may be pointed out that Kent says in answer to Lear's enquiry that he is 48. This, I was convinced, was intended as a joke, and I was reassured that it was consistently received as such by the audience.

Question: And rehearsing, then, started soon afterwards?

Answer: Not until the third week of January 1997. Rehearsals have to begin somewhere and this began with a meeting of the cast, and a reading of the play. I talked a little and my words drifted like incense over a group of actors who, regardless of their mutual familiarity, were at that stage united only in their nervous anticipation and social unease. I stood like a heron, rigid with anxiety, and offered the cast a few simple precepts, which can be used in the production of any play, as much to remind myself of the guidelines as to inform the cast:

1. You may be daunted by a play that appears to be about everything. At this moment it may appear to be a mountain that is inaccessible and unscaleable. But trust your own knowledge of the world: this is a play about two fathers – one with three daughters, the other with two sons. Everyone is an expert on the subject of families.

2. Believe that the writer is a playwright who understands what he is doing. However great Shakespeare's genius, it doesn't help to treat him as a sort of holy fool, or as a messianic seer. He was a playwright, and an actor, and a theatre manager. He was utterly pragmatic; his plays would not and could not have worked if they had been shrouded in obscurity and abstract conceits.
3. Treat the verse as an ally not as an enemy. Look at the scansion, the line endings, the line breaks, the changes of rhythm: they are all aids to understanding the meaning and how to convey it.
4. Don't make judgments on the characters. Let us – and the audience – discover what the moral scheme of the play is. Don't describe anyone as good or evil; let us decide on the basis of their actions.
5. Rely on the evidence of the text, not on speculation, or psychological theory, or conceptualising, or spurious historical research.
6. Try to be simple; trust that Shakespeare is trying to do the same, however profound, eloquent, and complex is his intention. Be specific: all good art is derived from specific observations, all bad art from generalisations.
7. Our job is to discover and animate the meanings of the play: its vocabulary, its syntax, and its philosophy. We have to ask what each scene is revealing about the characters and their actions: what story is each scene telling us? We have to exhume, examine and explain: line by line, scene by scene. We have to understand the mystery of the play - in the light of that understanding.

Question: When did you actually start working with the text?

Answer: Then we read the play, not apologetically as often happens at a first reading, but following Ian's example, with daring and ferocity. Right after that we sat around and talked for a few days. Partly as a means of trying to gain purchase on the mountainside, partly as a way of putting off the moment when the actors stand up and you start to draw on the blank sheet of paper, and partly as a way of finding out about each other. We talked about religion, about money, about monarchy, about hierarchy, about living conditions, about crime and punishment, about the climate, about the geography, about the food, the clothes. All assertions had to be supported by the evidence of the text; everyone had an equal voice in the discussions. For the first week or so of the rehearsals I felt overwhelmed by the size of the task; I had never done anything so difficult or so physically draining. I didn't feel physically prepared for it.

Question: How did you feel when D-day approached, when *King Lear*, your grappling with this myth of a play, written by William Shakespeare, a playwright something of a myth himself, was to go onstage?

Answer: What do *you* think? Excited and worried. For me the most exciting part of the production is always the first time an audience sees it even though it's often disappointing, and sometimes catastrophic. But this was one of those nights that Lorca fit dog gnawing at the bone. It took nearly three weeks to work through the play from beginning to end, blocking out each scene, chipping away like a sculptor with raw stone. At that stage I decided to have a run through, so we could all feel the power of the play in the light of what we'd learned about it. We sat round in a circle; some actors read their parts, others performed them. Some stood up for their scenes in the middle of the circle, some remained seated. We did the play without a break: 2 hours

45 minutes. It was thrilling: fast, clear, intensely moving. The process of rehearsal defies conventional description. Only a Proustian narrative could do justice to the countless steps forward and back, the nudges of excitement, the nuances of insecurity, that mark the growth of the organism of a production. It is all in the detail: the physical minutiae of speech and gesture and movement – whether it be the blinding of Gloucester, the seduction of Goneril, the fight between Edgar and Edmund, or the death of Lear himself. Some scenes took weeks to evolve: the arrival of the Knights in Goneril's house, for instance, where we were trying to create the mixture of licensed anarchy and sycophancy that characterised the court of the King of rock and roll, Elvis Presley.

Question: Did Ian Holm himself come up with the idea for a special variant of the famous 'Howl' speech delivered by Lear?

Answer: We talked just before the performance. »I think I know how to do the 'Howl' speech«, he said. »Ah«, I said. »See what you think«, he said. And he did know how to do the 'Howl' speech. He carried Cordelia's body on – always an anxiety for every Lear – and instead of putting her down before he spoke, he stood with the body in his arms and howled at Kent, Albany and Edgar. The four 'howls' emerged as an order, a command, the indictment of a father: Don't be indifferent to my suffering. We weren't, and not for the first time in the evening I found myself brushing tears from my cheeks with the palm of my hand, professional objectivity long since cast aside. I don't know what makes one production soar like a bird of paradise, and others embarked on with just as much optimism and care, fall like dead sparrows from the nest. I know that I was part of an enterprise that did manage to be more than the sum of its parts, and I know that that is at the heart of every successful theatrical enterprise.

Question: Sir Richard, many thanks for this interview, which shall hopefully find many interested readers in Slovenia, where Shakespeare and his plays are well known, frequently performed, and, what's most important, very much liked.

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