

York Shakespeare Project Newsletter



August 2009

“Or wallow naked in December snow”

Richard II

Question and answer with the director of Richard II, Hugh Allison...

Q. You've got an exciting theatrical CV, why were you drawn to the York Shakespeare Project as your next adventure?

A. Adventure is perhaps an exaggeration. I like to see all plays I work on (whether as an actor, director, stage manager, lighting designer, writer or other) as an experience. Even plays I have only worked on for one day (filling in for an ill technician etc) I have learned something from, be it about myself, theatre in general, technicalities or human interaction.

I will not get involved in a play, especially one which would take up so much time, energy and brain cells, unless it was one I was truly excited about, and willing to learn from. Thus, seeing a play as an adventure undermines and/or trivialises the reasons I get into a project - I need to be able to give and get as much as is possible from a play - and this is something I find has more potential with Shakespeare than from any other writers.

On top of this, I like the idea of working in York - a city I hadn't been to since Primary School. It is a beautiful city and I hope to learn a lot about the culture (historical and theatrical) of the region, whilst working on the play.

I had applied to direct *Julius Caesar*, but wasn't selected for an interview. However, whilst doing research to prepare for an interview (should I have been given one) I discovered that a lot of YSP's aims and objectives are remarkably similar to that of The Yellowchair Performance Experience (TYPE), which I set up to give new talent their first chances to work in a professional theatre environment on a fringe scale production.

As "new talent" can be extended to crew as well as cast, I believe that (whilst focussing on a specific city and a specific playwright) YSP's aims are remarkably similar to TYPE's and it is thus a company close to my heart.

Q. Is there a specific setting in time of your production, and why?

A. June/July 2007. There are many parallels between the character of Richard (a religious, comparatively young and debatably weak leader) and Tony Blair. As the biggest issue, in my mind at least, of the play is Richard being replaced in the top job by Bolingbroke, I have set it around the time of Blair being replaced by Gordon Brown; ironically both replacements being older and (supposedly) wiser, more ambitious and, eventually, more despised.

There are many further parallels with other politicians of the time. The Duke of York could be seen as representative of John Prescott (from nearby Hull); both are renowned for temper and rudeness and yet (when Richard/Blair is away in Iraq/Ireland fighting an unjust war) when left in charge of the country, both turn out to be incompetent ditherers.

I do not feel it too advisable to go into too much detail on the correlations, as an audience may then start to find parallels which are not there; likewise, if we see a role such as Northumberland as similar to one modern day politician, I do not feel that should over-ride any modern day equivalent that an audience member might perceive.

Shakespeare wasn't writing about early 21st century figures, and it would be as counterproductive for the actors to look into these people as it would for them to look into the historical versions. It is purely as fictitious characters (with timeless characteristics and some grounding in history) that I believe actors should study them.

Q. In previous productions of Richard II, what have been the things that most impressed you, and why?

A. I've only seen one performance of *Richard II* in my life, and since being chosen to direct this interpretation, I have intentionally not seen any more. I have encouraged my cast to not research other interpretations of the piece either - it is more important to find the roles from within.

The production of *Richard II* that I have seen in the past was at the Gainsborough Studios in North London - the penultimate play to be performed at this fine venue before it was turned into a block of flats. This was at least seven years ago, and had one of the Fiennes' brothers in the eponymous role, and Emelia Fox as Queen Isobel.

Although many things within the play stuck with me (the intentional coldness of the theatre building, the ways the actors conveyed their character's status through their physicality and the way that - by changing seat in the audience between performances - I could see totally different interactions and emotions) the strongest impression left upon me was from the lighting. I have, on many occasions, cited this production of *Richard II* as when I first became interested in lighting design.

The set was the wall of an old castle, and depending on the lighting you could tell whether or not the scene was set inside or outside the castle. The side lighting caused huge shadows to indicate the size of the armies, and the use of shutters in a profile made Richard's cell into a perfect square, showing the eponymous character as stark and alone. (I have copied the perfect square

idea in my lighting design for *Jackajack* - to be performed at the Lyric Hammersmith on September 26th.)

Having said the above, the *Richard II* I am directing is to be lit as minimally as possible, so as to keep the audience (and the performers) focussed on the acting.

Cast List

And here we are, your players and backstagers...

Aumerle	Tom Strasz
Bagot	Luca Woolney
Bolingbroke	Robin Sanger
Bushy	Jim Stafford
Duchess of Gloucester / Duchess of York	Margaret Hillier
Duke of York	Sam Valentine
Hotspur	Matt Simpson
Isobel	Esme Kaim
Joan of Gaunt / Bishop of Carlisle	Libby Wattis
Marshal	Jeremy Muldowney
Mowbray / Exton	Christopher Laishley
Northumberland	Maurice Crichton
Richard	Mark Burghagen
Salisbury / Groom	Christina Nobbs
Willoughby	Jane Collis
Director	Hugh Allison
Dramaturg (Shakespearean)	Julia Atkinson
Stage Manager	Rosalind Campbell
Front of House Manager	Janet Looker
Fight Director	Lee Maloney
Costume Designer	Nicki Martin-Harper
Dramaturg (Historical) & Prop Designer	Jeremy Muldowney
Lights & Sound	Matthew Pattison
Vocal Director	Pulak Sahay
Website & Programme Designer	Brian Sharp
Photographer	Sarah Strong
Publicist	Andraea Zambakides

If anyone is interested in working Front of House for *Richard II* please contact Janet Looker through Sally.

YSP AGM

This is your chance to get involved in the running of the YSP, and becoming a member of the committee. The committee all resign at the AGM, and the following places are up for grabs;

Chair

As per the title, the precise purpose of this role is to Chair Executive and other Project meetings, but previous incumbents of this position have tended to do more than this. The chair is often seen as the public face of the Project.

Project Secretary

This role consists of writing and reading letters relating to the Project, and arranging meetings, attending to insurance, obtaining necessary licences, etc.

Treasurer

The core of the role is effectively the management of the Project cashbook during the year, and then filing the annual accounts, either via accountants, or directly to the Charities Commission.

Membership Secretary

This position involves collecting payments from members and emailing them round matters of such interest as this newsletter.

Educashun Secretary

Responsible for fulfilling the Project's education remit. Developing contacts with schools, colleges and other community groups.

Minute Secretary

“A Harmless Drudge,” as Dr. Johnson said of his own trade of Lexicographer.

Website Secretary

Keeping the website up to date and pretty.

Newsletter Secretary

Producing a monthly newsletter of amiable flim-flam.

Holding Trustees

A backup resource for the Executive, there to give advice and resolve problems if necessary.

There are committee meetings monthly in which all aspects of the project are covered, and they usually take place in a pub that serves good beer.

Members of the committee also take roles in each production, such as publicity.

Request for accommodation

If there is anyone who has cheap accommodation going (looking for a roommate etc) Hugh Allison is looking for somewhere, anyone interested can email him directly at histahugh@yahoo.co.uk

Edinburgh Memories

Hugh is thinking of writing an article comparing working on Richard to working at Edinburgh. Please can anyone who has ever "done" the Edinburgh Festival -not necessarily this year- to email him.

Minster Nights

And don't forget to go along to York Minster on Sunday 30th – it's open till late in the evening with lots to see and do. YSP members will be performing some well-know Shakespeare speeches at 6.30pm and there will be an abridged performance of T.S.Eliot's masterpiece 'Murder in the Cathedral' in the West End of the Cathedral at 7.30pm and 9.30pm by Mooted Theatre Company. Entry is free to York residents (with proof of address) but there are extra charges if you go on one of the 'Hidden Minster' tours.

That's Nothing, You Should Hear Me Play Piano

Next newsletter will be out in early September, not the usual end of the month shambles and rush and will have more information about Richard II and the annual general meeting. Any comments, thoughts, articles, please email me at mr.alistair@talk21.com. They are important to me and I do read them and try to reply to them all.

ports and happy havens