

Such Stuff Podcast
Season 2, Bonus: Meet Sean Holmes, Associate Artistic Director

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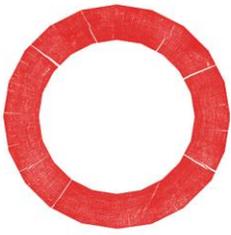
IMOGEN GREENBERG: Hello, and welcome to another bonus episode of Such Stuff, the podcast from Shakespeare's Globe. This week on the podcast we wanted to introduce you to our new Associate Artistic Director, Sean Holmes. Formerly the Artistic Director of the Lyric Hammersmith, Sean will be working with our new Globe Ensemble who are taking up residency in the Globe for the next year.

I sat down with Sean to talk about Shakespeare, the unique space that is the Globe theatre and the importance of working in ensembles.

SEAN HOLMES: Hello, I'm Sean Holmes, I'm the new Associate Artistic Director here at the Globe and before that I was the Artistic Director at the Lyric Hammersmith for nearly ten years. In fact, ten years tomorrow if I'd stayed; which I haven't.

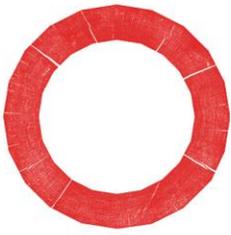
My relationship with Shakespeare? I suppose it's been quite long and manifested itself in different ways artistically. Probably the first time was, I was a trainee director at the Orange Tree in Richmond and I co-directed a schools' tour of Romeo and Juliet and I found it all a bit perplexing.

I did two schools' tours for the National Theatre and, and there was a sort of brilliant, sort of gung-ho, commando spirit amongst us, that we really sort of believed in this - about making it fun and accessible, also doing it properly, whatever that means. And both tours also went to the States. And watching, I'll always remember we did A Midsummer Night's Dream the second year and we played at the School for Redirection in Brooklyn and it's not the trendy bit of Brooklyn; it was right on the edges of New York. It had armed police



and metal detectors on the - or guards - and metal detectors on the door and it was a school basically for people who dropped out of school because of pregnancy, drug addiction, of going to prison and you know this was a chance for them to complete high school. And the look on their faces when they were introduced to, you know, a man becoming a donkey, the Queen of the fairies, it just blew their minds and it just shows that without being naff about it that if you do it in the right way, of course Shakespeare's completely understandable. It's radicalness is in the extraordinariness of his imagination, his storytelling, the way of his contrast, the surprises and I think because we can - those of us who do it a lot - can become very familiar with those twists and turns of story when you watch an audience who are confronted with it for the first time it becomes really, really exciting.

I then, in the mid 2000s, I went to the RSC and I did in one year, Measure for Measure and Richard III on the main stage and it wasn't very good. And the reason for that is no other reason than I don't think I was in the right place as a director to really release the potential of my casts. I think at that time I was treating the plays more like new writing, which is quite useful as far as it goes to treat the play like it's never been done before, but it meant that some of the sort of, deep theatricality and metaphor, I couldn't bring out. So, I just sort of feel like I failed at it with that and I kind of fell out a bit with Shakespeare. But then I did a workshop at the National [Theatre?] Studio with a company called Filter who are a devising company and they just started and this hour of Twelfth Night happened and the hairs on the back of my neck went up because I was like, Oh my God, I've seen it, I've seen how to do it and it was six actors, two musicians, no set and we had two weeks rehearsal. And what was really extraordinary, I realise now, is the kind of 'forward to the past' rather than this, 'back to the future', if that makes sense? 'Cos in a way we were working in a very twenty-first century way, how they would have worked four hundred years before. Learn the lines, you all know each other, you've got musicians, in the room, and you're sort of making it up. Now, they probably didn't drink Carlsberg Special Brew for real or have electronic, weird electronic music or have Aguecheek double with or

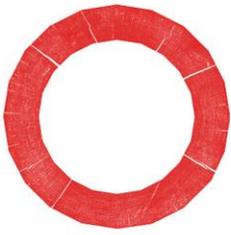


Orsino but it kind of worked and what's really extraordinary about that production is all those hours and weeks of rehearsals, hundreds of actors, you know, thousands of pounds I spent at the RSC could never crack it. That production of Twelfth Night has run on and off for the last 10, 12 years. It's played to fourth people in a tiny studio, it's played to a thousand people in The Courtyard at Stratford, it's played to 5,000 Indian street children on one night in a football stadium in India. So what was interesting is I, I felt with that kind of weird, unexpected, the gesture which was almost, oh, sod Shakespeare!, by being disrespectfully respectful I unleashed my understanding of how the mechanism worked. And we then grew on that and we did A Midsummer Night's Dream when I was at the Lyric that began life, again we made it in 10 days, for Latitude [Festival], thinking, if it's bad it'll just be 500 drunk people in a tent and if it works we can develop it and that's what we did and again, that felt, also I felt again we really unlocked the spirit of the play. And, that thing about being disrespectfully disrespectful and allowing the actors to lead and discover, to make music and sound at the centre of what's going on, felt really, really useful.

And that brings us to where I am now. Because I'm now in an organisation dedicated primarily to the delivery of his plays and more widely into the sort of investigation of his work and that of his contemporaries, and his influence and connection with the modern world. And I've never directed on this, on either of the stages here and I'm going to do Dream in the summer, so I've got to do a new Midsummer Night's Dream and scour the old version out of my head, but I think I've got some ideas about that. So I'm really, really excited at the possibility of that and learning about these new spaces.

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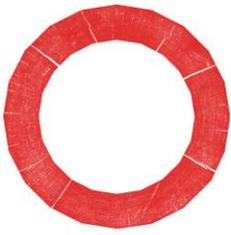
IMOGEN GREENBERG: Sean will be working with our new Ensemble. We asked about what an Ensemble means in theatre and why it matters; for actors, creatives and of course, for audiences, to work in this way.



SEAN HOLMES: Ensemble's a word you sort of bandy about in theatre and it doesn't mean a lot to lots of other people but the best way to put it would be company of actors. So, basically, we all exist and work in structures and obviously, and often, not obviously, often, we're so familiar with those structures, we don't even see them anymore. We don't realise they're the rules we've created and that we can change them. One of which in this country is how we work with actors. And the primary way that happens in most shows in most theatres is you cast individually for each show. So, I'm running the Lyric, I decide to do Hamlet. I cast a group of actors to do that Hamlet. They do it and then they leave. And that's the same all over the country.

Ensemble in its truest sense, and you can see this best in Europe at the moment - so most German theatres will have a permanent ensemble of actors from between 15 and 25 - is ensemble is you have a group of actors in the building, permanently employed by the theatre and the idea being that you share the parts and share the kind of workload. So if I'm playing Hamlet, when I'm doing Romeo and Juliet, I might play Benvolio. So I'm supporting my other actors to take the leads roles and so on and so forth. And that's closer to what Shakespeare's original company would have done.

Shakespeare's original company was an ensemble of, it's debatable, let's say between 12, 15 actors and they carried a lot of plays in their head and they did a new play every two weeks. Extraordinary. But obviously it was built on their knowledge and understanding, and familiarity with each other. I've always been interested in this and it started from a collab - a co-production we did of a new play by Simon Stephens called Three Kingdoms, which we did the Lyric in 2012 and started life in Estonia in 2011. And the gesture of the play started in London, went to Munich and then ended up in Tallinn in Estonia and we had actors from all three countries; it played in all three countries, all three languages were in the production. It was this brilliant, deep, international collaboration. And what I realised through that is that the Estonian actors in their

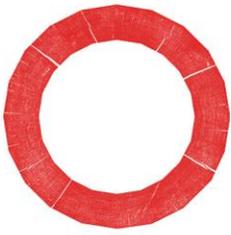


way and the German actors in their way could do things and work in ways that weren't easy for British actors to work for. Which is not that they're better or worse, it's just the structures in which they worked were different. And if you're in a permanent, if you're in an ensemble and you're working all the time with the same group of actors you develop skills, muscles, ways of thinking that is hard for an individual British actor to have as they move from different rehearsal room to film set, to radio studio.

Er, so, so taking that, I set up a company called Secret Theatre and it was kind of a daft, adolescent endeavour where we were gonna change everything. We weren't having press nights, we weren't going to people what shows we did. We were gonna do, you know, la la lala la. It's sort of daft. The whole thing was kind of glorious failure, which is sometimes the best thing to do and the things which you learn the most from. But what was definitely true, was by the end I realised what it was about, it was about the actor and that groups of actors at the end of two years collectively could work and think and operate in a way that I don't think any other group of actors in Britain could.

And that's what that's about, is agency, so you've got more say because you're not employed on a show to show basis and it gets to a point with that company which was the same as when we, as when you see the best European work, where the actors on stage are very clearly themselves and the character at that specific moment in time with that specific audience. And what I've just described seems really fitting to the Globe, particularly the outdoor space, the big theatre. And feels like it really resonates with how those actors would have been then.

Of course I'm Hamlet, but I'm also Burbage and I'm here with you at this particular moment in time. So what I mean by that is often you'll see shows in this country where people talk to the audience but in effect they talk out in the same way every night. As opposed to going - who's here tonight? what's it like - what's the temperature like? And it's qualified, this is a massive generalisation, there's any numbers of things that would disprove me, but I think that the



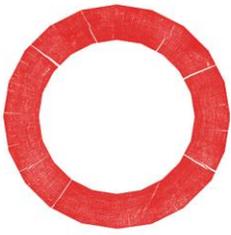
crucial thing, is what's really hard is to exist in a place where you're neither trying to charm the audience or trying to confront the audience. But you're just 'here we are, this is what we believe, we're doing it' and there is something about that delight in acting and performance and metaphor as an actor that comes out of company.

Now to bring that to us, so part of the reason I've come to the Globe as Associate Artistic Director is, is, to bring that experience of Secret Theatre and remove some of the more adolescent aspects but to bring that to bear on a company of actors. So we put together a company of 10 actors, five men and five women who at the moment are rehearsing Henry IV Part 1 and 2 and Henry V.

And that will open in the... it will open the season and what's really exciting about that is the depth of understanding, of conversation, of bravery that I hope they're already developing and will develop more. And why should audiences care? Well maybe they shouldn't care in the first instance. I don't think it's necessarily something to sell tickets on per se, but what I think audiences will experience if we get it right, is something that's where you're really aware of the dynamism, the relationship between the company, that feels different to what you're used to seeing.

And it's just the sort of difference you wouldn't even necessarily be conscious of in a really obvious way but something that then will help to inform the plays and the plays were written for this way of working. They were written for a company of actors who knew each other, they were written for a company of actors who knew the space they were playing in. They were written for a group of actors who knew the audience they were playing to.

And what's really interesting about theatre is if you think about, I don't know, Chekov, Brecht, Shakespeare, these sort of universal writers, what's interesting is that universality often comes from specificity. Try saying that after half a lager! So I say that again, universality often comes from specificity. So, Chekov Brecht, Shakespeare were writing for a space they knew, for actors they



knew, for audiences and conditions they knew very often and what's interesting is those plays written for those very specific conditions then become very malleable and able to do in lots of different ways. And then our dream would be if the company worked that we would go as Secret Theatre did, which wasn't our original intention, into a second year, who knows a third year, a tenth year, because by then you're starting to really...you can do all sorts of things, we'd rehearse a play in two weeks, or writers can be embedded with the company and write specifically for them. Or, we could collaborate with an ensemble from a different theatre, overseas and make work together that can play in both countries. And all these things are possible and really, really exciting. And that's why I think that, though it might be of only minor interest at the moment, if we can develop the company, if we can be as brave as and as bold and as true to Shakespeare as we can be then we will do something that will build on all of the success and all of the development the Globe has had to do something that's even more 'Globe'.

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IMOGEN GREENBERG: That's it from us but we'll be back soon with a longer episode going behind the scenes here at the Globe. You've been listening to Such Stuff with me, Imogen Greenberg. To find out more about Shakespeare's Globe and what's on, follow us on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram.

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