Such Stuff podcast
Season 2, Episode 5: This Sceptred Isle

[Music plays]

Imogen Greenberg: Hello, and welcome to another episode of Such Stuff, the podcast from Shakespeare's Globe.

Shakespeare was not the first, and nor indeed the last, to look back at the history of his country and to ask what it all amounted to. And for generations, we have used the words of Shakespeare as a prism, to look at our own place and moment in history. Today, we thought we would be bringing you an episode as we left the European Union. Now, in the midst of political paralysis and constitutional crisis, we're taking this moment to look backwards to Shakespeare's moment and beyond, and forwards to an unknown future, and to ask: what is 'this sceptred isle'?

Dona Croll:

This royal throne of kings, this sceptred isle,
This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,
This other Eden, demi-paradise,
This fortress built by Nature for herself
Against infection and the hand of war,
This happy breed of men, this little world,
This precious stone set in the silver sea,
Which serves it in the office of a wall,
Or as a moat defensive to a house,
Against the envy of less happier lands,
This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England,
This nurse, this teeming womb of royal kings,
Fear'd by their breed and famous by their birth,
This land of such dear souls, this dear dear land,
Dear for her reputation through the world,
Is now leased out, I die pronouncing it,

Like to a tenement or pelting farm:
England, bound in with the triumphant sea
Whose rocky shore beats back the envious siege
Of watery Neptune, is now bound in with shame,
With inky blots and rotten parchment bonds:
That England, that was wont to conquer others,
Hath made a shameful conquest of itself.

IG: So this week on the podcast, we'll be asking what the 'sceptred isle' meant for Shakespeare, and what it means for us to use his words and his ideas as a kaleidoscope through which to view this moment in our history? We'll be talking to artists from across our winter and summer seasons, whose work on the history plays is a dialogue with its unravelling political parallels in Westminster.

Coming up, we chat to Adjoa Andoh, director and star of Richard II – a historic production in our very own Sam Wanamaker Playhouse, the first all women of colour Shakespeare production on a major UK stage – about the significance of this production now.

And Richard II kicks off Shakespeare's history cycle, which will open over the next year on our stages. What do these plays say about who we are as a nation? And more importantly, who we want to be? What role does art and theatre have to play in challenging the way society looks and reflecting the country we might want to live in?

So we catch up with members of the Globe ensemble who will be presenting Henry VI parts 1 and 2, and Henry V, and we chat to our artistic director Michelle Terry about the significance of programming the history plays now. The history plays carry a very particular aura around them, of generations of ideas that attach a very specific and sometimes narrow ideas of Britishness to these plays. What happens when you strip all that away? What happens

when you start from both who we have been as a nation, but also who we might become?

As Michelle reminds us, the combination of live theatre and very lively politics means we don't actually know what will happen this summer, what resonances will abound between Shakespeare's moment and our own… but we'll keep asking the question: What country, friends, is this?

[Music plays]

IG: Up first, Adjoa Andoh. She has co-directed this landmark production of Richard II, and also stars as the eponymous king, manoeuvring against and out-manoeuvred by the powerful figures who seek to overthrow him. We chatted about the significance of this production, the first ever all women of colour Shakespeare production on a major UK stage, and how the way they're presenting the show re-examines what – and who – this England, this 'sceptred isle', might represent… Here's Adjoa on the resonances of performing this play now…

Adjoa Andoh: Gosh, well. What we've seen happening in Parliament at the moment, thanks to Gina Miller, a woman of colour, and our production is all women of colour... what we've seen is Parliament overseeing the wishes of the executive as the legislature. And the way that Parliament has said to the executive, 'No, no, we don't want your deal, no we don't want your deal'. Twice. In a way, it's very reminiscent of Act 4 Scene 1 where Richard is deposed, and he has to be deposed in front of the House of Commons. So you have the executive, like Theresa May, that's Richard, and the House of Commons is telling the executive 'We are going to make decisions about the future of this country, not you'. So it very juicily on point. I mean Shakespeare's always on point, there's always something going on in the world where you go 'That's Shakespeare on point'.

Shobna Gulati:

The blood of English shall manure the ground,
And future ages groan for this foul act;
Peace shall go sleep with Turks and infidels,
And in this seat of peace tumultuous wars
Shall kin with kin and kind with kind confound;
O, if you raise this house against this house,
It will the woefullest division prove
That ever fell upon this cursed earth.
Prevent it, resist it, let it not be so,
Lest child, child's children, cry against you woe!

AA: For me what's also really interesting in this production, if you take it on to a very personal level, is Richard has this speech where he says 'I know not now what name to call myself'. And I think there is something very moving about a boy who loses his father when he is 3, loses his grandfather when he's 10 and then becomes King at 10 without a proper support system of love around him. And I think what Richard does is he creates that support system by the followers and flatterers and the people he surrounds himself with who just tell him he's marvellous the whole time. And it distorts his perspective on the way the country should be run. Now if you don't get enough love in your life, you can take love from people who are actually inappropriate to be loving you, and looking after you. And I think that on a very human level, that's what we see with Richard. We also see somebody who may not be fit to be a King. The accident of his birth means that he is the King, but that doesn't mean he's got the skillset. Bolingbroke would probably be a far better King.

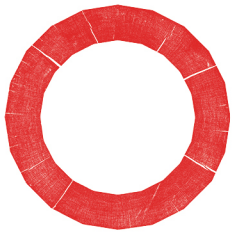
AA: Tell Bolingbroke - for yond methinks he stands -
That every stride he makes upon my land
Is dangerous treason: he is come to open
The purple testament of bleeding war;
But ere the crown he looks for live in peace,

Ten thousand bloody crowns of mothers' sons
Shall ill become the flower of England's face,
Change the complexion of her maid-pale peace
To scarlet indignation and bedew
Her pastures' grass with faithful English blood.

AA: So it makes me also reflect on the ways in which we are obliged by forces of circumstance to live in careers and ways that may not be appropriate for us. Or to be judged as a human being by the way we step up to the mark of the furrow that we've been stuck in. And I would say for women of colour that's often the case, where you are not valued as equal to white men because of the accident of the body you're born into. That has nothing to do with your intellect, that has nothing to do with your character or your skillset or anything that you may think is wonderful in the world. It has to do with other people's value judgements about what value is a person who is not white, what a value is a person who is a woman. You know, I just think we live in a world where people are forced down paths which are not necessarily the path that they are actually gifted to be travelling down, so I'm really interested in the play on that tip as well.

In terms of the production, I spent a long time cutting the text, and I was very clear that I wanted it to be performed by all women of colour, particularly because it was going to be at the time of Brexit. I wanted for us as an audience and a cast to get involved in a thought experiment that says 'What happens if you tell the story of England out of the mouths of women and people of colour, women of colour?' who are generally the bottom of the heap in social hierarchies, and particularly women who are in this country because at some point this country went to their countries through Empire and either took them or their goods or their natural resources and through them prospered as a nation.

You know, I'm from Bristol, and you can look through the records of the merchant ships, the Merchant Ventures, who still exist, and



you can look through the records of their stealing Africans and taking them to the West Indies and flogging them for slavery and returning with either money or rum or sugar, selling those on. And the profit that they make from the original theft of those people, you can see it in the actual construction of Bristol. You can see it in the construction of the squares around the docks, like Queen Square, Park Street. You can see the way that Clifton was a completely separate area, was joined together through the building that was done from the money that was made from the stealing of black Africans and enslaving them. So this country... and you know, you can say that about Africa, but you can also talk about the South East Asian continent, you can talk about the opium trade that the British started in China, you can talk about the Middle East, all of it. So I wanted to have women from all those parts of the Empire involved in this production. So, you know, we have a fight director who's Israeli, we have a designed who's Iraqi-Iranian, we have actors who are from India and Pakistan and Jamaica and Barbados and Trinidad and Ghana and China and the Philippines. We have costume designers and we have composers and musicians who are from all these places that were part of the British Empire. Because I wanted to say all these places that were part of the British Empire go to make the flag of St George. I'm a big football fan, the flag of St George is the one I'm always waving if there's an international match, it's the one I have hanging outside my house. And I wanted to say this is our flag as well, we built this nation, so let us have a conversation with the audience in which we reflect the state of the nation, we reflect on the story of Richard, in a very personal way as I was talking about, the little three year old boy, the little fragile person who actually comes to have a true sense of himself when he's lost all the things that the world considers valuable, his status, his properties, his wealth, the respect and the allegiance of the nation. When he's lost all that, he becomes a human being and he begins to understand what's important. He says, you know, 'Nor I nor any man that but man is, with nothing shall be pleased til he be eased with being nothing'. So until you can just see yourself as another

person, nothing better, nothing worse, just a person, that's when you come into your true richness. And I love the fact that Shakespeare allows us to see the journey that looks like someone is falling, but actually in a way, they're gaining.

AA:

For God's sake, let us sit upon the ground
And tell sad stories of the death of kings;
How some have been deposed; some slain in war,
Some haunted by the ghosts they have deposed;
Some poison'd by their wives: some sleeping kill'd;
All murder'd: for within the hollow crown
That rounds the mortal temples of a king
Keeps Death his court and there the antic sits,
Scoffing his state and grinning at his pomp,
Allowing him a breath, a little scene,
To monarchize, be fear'd and kill with looks,
Infusing him with self and vain conceit,
As if this flesh which walls about our life,
Were brass impregnable, and humour'd thus
Comes at the last and with a little pin
Bores through his castle wall, and farewell king!
Cover your heads and mock not flesh and blood
With solemn reverence: throw away respect,
Tradition, form and ceremonious duty,
For you have but mistook me all this while:
I live with bread like you, feel want,
Taste grief, need friends: subjected thus,
How can you say to me, I am a king?

AA: So I've co-directed this with Lynette Linton and we wanted to make sure that the production was accessible to audiences, in terms of the style of it, in terms of verse-speaking, because I think everything you need to know is in the text, you just have to mine it properly, and in terms of the look of it. So you know, people say,

'Well, where have you set it?' Well we can't set it in anywhere where women of colour have been in power, because no such place exists. So we set it in the frame of the bodies acting on stage. So our world is culturally a blend of all the cultures from which our antecedents came. So I wear an Ashanti crown, but my costume is an Indian prince. The whole set is predominantly bamboo, because bamboo is a material that you will find in all the different geographies of the places where our antecedents came from. And also, because you have a cast who have darker skin than that space was originally intended for, it's very hard to light the skin when you're using just candles. So the bamboo is a light material and it reflects the light. So we have cultural things like you know, if you're before the King you touch the ground with your hand, because that is what you would do in West African traditions. If it's somebody that's close to you personally, you touch their foot which comes from Indian traditions. So we're trying to synthesise lots of different cultures... and there's lots of other things in there which I'm not even remembering properly. The instruments come from China, they come from South East Asia, you know there's a whole blend. There's drums that would be West African. And the room is surrounded, the space is surrounded by photographs of all our real grandmothers, aunts, mothers, loving female antecedents. Because say you go to... when I've been to Buckingham Palace, you know there's paintings of Sir Blah-Blah-Blah and Blum-Blum-Blum, who is somebodies uncle or father or brother or nephew, so in our world, these are our great and good, and so there's something lovely about having them smiling down on us every night.

So I think the audiences sort of get all that. It's a very loving and tender show, I hope. But full of energy and fire and humour and they're getting all of that. So we've just come off the stage this afternoon and people have just been laughing... laughing at funny bits, there are lots of funny bits in it, and sad at sad bits. But really listening, and there were lots of school kids and people of all ages and stages in there today, it was wonderful. And we've also

wanted in our advertising and the way we've you know, just designed the poster with a flag of St George and my big old brown face on it, to say to people 'You are welcome! Everybody, you are welcome.' It doesn't matter your... whether you feel that you have not been educated well enough to understand, you know, Shakespeare's not for the likes of me... that sort of attitude. Shakespeare is not a tool to beat people over the head and tell them they're stupid. Shakespeare writes on a heartbeat because he loves human beings. And he wants human beings to come and see his work and not feel intimidated. And bring themselves to it. And everybody is going to have a different opinion about what they see and that's what I love about it. He doesn't dictate the opinion. You come with all your thoughts and your feelings and you watch a Shakespeare play and somewhere in the middle some magic happens between your heart and the hearts beating on stage and you come away with something that's really precious and it's only particular to you. So I'm hoping that audiences hearts have beaten, can you say that? Have been beating with our hearts and that they've taken something that's sort of precious and particular to them away from the show.

[Music plays]

IG: Richard II opens a season of history plays, of Shakespeare looking back on his own ‘sceptred isle’ and us looking back on his political moment through the prism of our own times. I sat down with Michelle, all the way back in the Autumn, to ask about that relationship between past and present in the Globe theatre.

Michelle Terry: I think we are in a particular moment in our own history; this will be a period that people look back on as a defining moment as we leave the EU. So it felt appropriate to go 'OK, what does our ‘sceptred isle’ look like now?' and do that through the prism of Shakespeare also looking back on his own ‘sceptred isle’. And so Richard II kicks off the Henriad of Richard II, Henry IV Part

1, 2, Henry V, then Henry VI, Richard III and Henry VIII. So it makes sense to start at the beginning and see where we end up.

IG: When you're sort of thinking about programming, what is it about history plays that offer a dialogue?

MT: I think there's no doubt that we, very particular to this theatre, that we are a sort of intersection of then and now, the fact that people walk into the building, into the Globe or the SWP and immediately what it was like then to be a groundling, or what it was like then to sit in a candlelit theatre, but actually they're sitting in one theatre that's twenty one years old and another theatre that's five, six year's old. So it's always a dialogue between then and now, and then even when you're in the plays, you can't not be now. Theatre is the most present art form you can have, 'cos those people are actually speaking now to those people, standing or sitting there listening. And I remember doing Henry V and it was a gender equal company, so we were all playing... er men were playing women, women were playing men. For a while, that became the thing that people were concerned about, you know, what was, what would Henry V be like played by a woman? And then I remember on our press night, that was the day that we, that the referendum happened and the following morning I think we all believed we would be waking up to one particular result and we woke up to something we weren't expecting. And suddenly lines in those plays, where we thought the concern would be about the gender switch in the play, very much became about hearing those lines at the end of the show, which are: 'We've lost France and made our England bleed'. That's a really... through the prism of now, hearing those words written then, that's a different light being shed on them. And then the following week, the Chilcot Inquiry came out, so lines like 'May I with right and conscience make this claim', again is heard through a different prism. And then the following week Theresa May became Prime Minister and women were granted the right to be soldiers on the front line, and in the show, the four soldiers, the English, Irish, Welsh, Scottish soldiers

were all played by women. So we could never have predicted that a collision of events that happened in a particular moment in our history also resonated so profoundly with moments in time, written four hundred years ago, which were also about moments in history. So that's why it feels essential to programme history plays.

IG: And I guess there's a sense then that when we go through this full cycle, we don't really know what's going to happen...

MT: Not a clue! [Laughter] We have no idea what's going to happen, which is amazing, because we have no idea how we will receive those plays now.

[Music plays]

IG: Following on from Richard II, Henry IV Parts 1 and 2 and Henry V will open in the Globe theatre. Created by a company of actors – the Globe ensemble – the plays will be treated as new writes, with all assumptions about how to cast, to play and to represent these plays stripped away. I chatted to Leaphia Darko, Jonathon Broadbent and Philip Arditti from the Globe ensemble about this very different process. We also chatted about the particular version of an English past that the history plays are often associated with, and how you go about examining them with fresh eyes.

Leaphia Darko: Yeah, I'm Leaphia Darko.

Jonathan Broadbent: Hello, I'm Jonathan Broadbent, or Johnny Broadbent, or Johnny B.

Philip Arditti: My name is Philip Arditti.

LD: And I'm an actor in the Globe Ensemble.

The Ensemble is a group of 11 actors supported by amazing creatives, and then what we're doing are 7 plays across the year, 3 in this summer season. And the way we're going about creating them is a bit different. It's slightly, I guess, innovative, and it's just a very collaborative process so every aspect of what we're doing from the costumes we're wearing to what the actual final script looks like, all of that stuff is decided by the company as a whole. We sort of all chip in and help shape everyone else's characters, or the look of scenes you're not in, you sort of have a huge input into the production as a whole, and there's a real equality in terms of the responsibility for the storytelling amongst the company. It makes for a crazy rehearsal room. It's been a really fun process to be a part of, its been really inspiring to be a part of it as well, becaue as actors we've been allowed to take ownership of a lot of our own work in a way that I thnk you aren't normally able to in a rehearsal process, because so many conceptual decisions are normally already made.

JB: I think the aim of it is to see how a group of people who will be working together for a more than normal length of time for an acting company will adapt and evolve a working practice and how that might manifest itself in the work that is presented before the public.

LD: So to compare it to a normal rehearsal process, essentially the look of the production, the concept behind it, so if it's a Shakespeare, the idea of whether it's going to be done in period dress, whether it's going to be set today, all that kind of stuff, is normally decided ahead of time and as an actor, you're normally one of the last pieces of the jigsaw to sort of slot in. Obviously you want to be a collaborator in the room, but your main responsibility is sort of doing your part the best you can, and also normally you are called ofr the scene that that character is in, that you're playing, you're not necessarily in the room all the time as we've been doing, sort of feeding each other lines or sometimes you get up and do someone else's speech and play around with it. But

yeah normally you just obviously do your own part, there's normally a sort of a generally accepted pace to things whereas this is a lot more like... I don't know, it's more ephemeral, let's use that word. I don't get to use it often! Yeah it's a more ephemeral process so sometimes you have bits, sometimes you don't, certain scenes you know at the minute, certain scenes you don't know yet, certain scenes have lines cut or added and you get a say in what that is. [Laughs] It's a lot of fun, you kind of have to be constantly alert and constantly on the front foot and really adaptable to whatever happens. Oh and normally you're only rehearsing one play for like 4-8 weeks whereas we're doing 3 quite literally at once. So it started out maybe one play per week, whereas now at the point where we're at will be like in the morning you're doing a scene from Henry V, then in the afternoon you're doing the jig from Henry IV Part 1 and then after that you're doing a music call for Henry IV Part 2 and then you're running a scene... It's completely all over the place so you're yeah... I mean disclaimer! I may have gone into some scenes at certain points in time and sort of been in the wrong play and started speaking lines as a character I'm not at that point in time in that play, that may have happened you know in the interests of transparency, but it's all part of the process...

Yeah this process is throwing up a lot of ideas that you don't normally get to talk about in the room...

PA: There's been a conversation about... I mean there's been many conversations about casting. Earlier on I think there were conversations because it's very open and free casting and men play women, women play men, you know old plays young, young plays old, and so they really are I think suggesting in a very unimposing way an aesthetic of theatre that is actually quite unlike what I think you would see around London or England at the moment. Certainly not something you'd see in a theatre that holds a thousand people. I don't think you would see that, I think often people constrict themselves to literal understandings of both

casting and situations etc in theatre. I think here, the aesthetic is much freer and is not really connected to who we are in terms of cultural identity. I think it's connected to who we are in terms of people, so that throws up a very interesting kind of reading of the play, I would say. Where you're really kind of freeing yourself from a sense of history or a sense that these people are our ancestors, which is often how, when these history plays are put together, is kind of suggested I would say, you know?

LD: So we've been talking a lot about essentially what the significance is of doing these plays at this time and looking at them as much as possible as pieces of new writing and trying to work out for us as an ensemble, and we're a very eclectic group of people and no one is cast to quote unquote type, what is that we want to explore? What is it that we want to say? And so we've talking a lot about gender, about race, about ideas of like nationalism and things like that that are normally associated with the plays, and going where is that something that we want to discuss, particularly with the political climate with Brexit, and where is that something that for our taste as an ensemble, we feel has been like imposed on the plays for sort of maybe jingoistic reasons in the past, and have now become expected themes that should be attached to them, which may not necessarily relate to ideas of sort of nationalism that were contemporary to Shakespeare, for example. So we're sort of questioning a lot of things. And we've had a lot of discussions about the George Cross and what that means and whether to have it, whether not to. Are the plays about, especially when you get to Henry V, is it about England and France or is it about two noble families quarrelling. And same with Henry IV Part 1 and Part 2, is it more about families than a particular brand of Englishness which I think has become attached to them. And then you know, what are the racial implications beyond that? But yeah it's been really exciting to have a say in those sort of things and for it to feel like whatever these plays become when we start sharing them with the public, it will feel very much like a tailor made version of them for who we are

as a collection of artists and not us maybe going 'Oh we're doing the Henry's and that's the Henry suit, let's step into it and put it on'. It feels more like, oh, we've made our own like custom made tailored suit that we feel like represents who we are as a people at the moment, and the questions we have about the world we live in right now, and that's really exciting.

[Music plays]

IG: That's it from us, but you can catch Richard II in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse until 21st April. You can see Henry IV Parts 1 and 2, and Henry V in the Globe theatre from the 23rd April – 11th October. Throughout the summer season, we'll be running events and discussions alongside the shows, so check our website and our social media to see how you can get involved in the conversation.

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