

Such Stuff podcast
Season 2, Episode 6: Radical Optimism

[Music plays]

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

In an age of political antagonism and, often, despair... is being optimistic and hopeful about the future a truly radical act?

Way back in the depths of winter, our Associate Artistic Director, Sean Holmes first put this idea to me.

Shakespeare's comedies throw their protagonists into confusion, despair and any number of hare-brained incidents, albeit very funny ones... And in true Shakespearean style, as much as there is comedy, darkness is never too far from the surface. But we go along with them for the journey and it all comes right in the end.

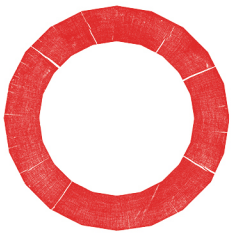
So, is performing this, watching this, celebrating this, together... a radical act?

Fast forward five months ... and the world around us is still as confusing and Dream-like as ever... but Sean's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has burst into the Globe Theatre in full technicolour.

So I sat down with Sean to ask what he meant by 'radical optimism', what the community of the Globe does with a play like *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and why *Dream* might just be the play we need right now...

IG: So, way, way back in the depths of winter, we were talking about *Dream* and you talked to me about this idea of radical optimism...

Sean Holmes: [Laughs] Yeah

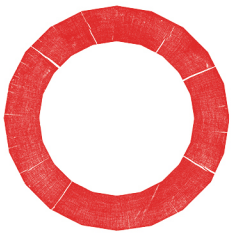


IG: ...when it comes to Shakespeare's comedies, and in particular Dream. What did you mean by that?

SH: I think... I suppose I meant it in a sort of political sense, a small 'p' political sense that it's very easy especially when the world seems to be going to hell in a handcart, as it is at the moment in lots of different ways, for the radical position to be one of negativity or miserableness or doom and gloom and that can never affect any sense of change. And you could argue that the genuine radical position is to be optimistic. Now, this may sound a bit grand for anyone who's seen my production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which obviously I've turned everything up to 11, it's very colourful, it's very loud, it's very musical, it's very surreal. But I think over and above those things there is a sort of genuine and rational and rigorous idea about the connection between audience and actors, which I think you can see at the end of the show, when there's a real, genuine sense of transcendence and community, which I think is something that Shakespeare is completely in charge of and is the... for all the dark shades and sharp edges in his comedies, they really are about that coming together of everyone in what you could only call optimism. And I think that optimism can feel in a small 'r' way radical.

IG: It's sort of... I'm aware that there are 3 Dreams just in London this summer... you know, is this sort of the play we need right now?

SH: Well, it may just be happenstance, but maybe it is. Maybe it feels like we're living in a bit of a Dream. You know, for me, it feels like a Dream that Boris Johnson will probably be the Prime Minister by the time this podcast goes out, you know, and that seems sort of slightly incredible [laughs] and extraordinary. And I think in lots of ways... if you think about a dream, you go to sleep, you wake up and the dream wasn't real on one level but a profound or deep dream affects you and you're a slightly different person when you wake up as you were when you went to sleep. And I think there's something that's in the DNA of the play that Athens in the last quarter of the play is very different from Athens in the first quarter of



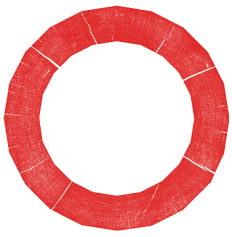
the play, and yet all that's really happened is somehow the deep mechanism of the dream section, the middle two quarters of the play, has affected somehow what happens at the end.

IG: Because in that sense, it's... as you say, it's got sharp edges, there's dark moments, and yet we come to that resolution at the end but no one feels quite the same...

SH: It seems to me that's what Shakespeare does. You know, there's obviously these sharp corners, these tricky bits, the misogyny in the play, the power shifts in the play, but in effect, I think it's hard to completely resolve them. I think what Shakespeare's doing is asking questions, not writing answers and he gets us, as the audience, to ask questions, to think about why that happened, what did that mean, why did this happen. And also he leaves areas or gaps where the company have to solve the seemingly unsolvable and I think that energy, that active energy from the audience engaging with a sense of wonder in this extraordinary, strange, surreal play is something that I really, really enjoy.

IG: And having this sort of idea as a director. What does that look like in the rehearsal room?

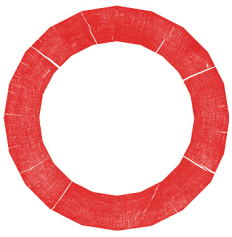
SH: So what was really important to start with, almost before the rehearsal room is who's in the rehearsal room and from my time at the Lyric and now here at the Globe, I really like having not the usual suspects playing the parts. Well, of course, it is to do on some level about wanting to have a more representative and diverse casting, of course it's about that, but actually it's about, it's just really interesting when you get people who don't normally play things playing things. So in our production, I suppose it's the bulk of the mechanicals are women and what I really like is the play, the production is not built on a choice that the mechanicals are women, it just sort of says they are. And also, again, they're women of colour predominantly. Again, of course that's a political decision, small 'p', but at the same time the production is not built solely on that decision, the production is built on a sense of we can all



collectively rise above any attempt to pigeon hole us and any attempts to dictate who we are and what we are, and you know that mercurial sense of transition and transformation and power that Shakespeare's writing gives people. And I think that's really clear.

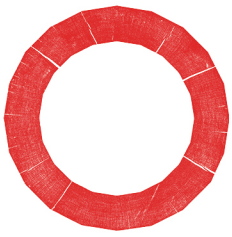
See, what I enjoy in the production is actually, amidst all the sort of fun and games and madness, there's some quite rigorous thinking about the relationship between that show and its audience. For one, it feels that the people on stage could have come on the tube with you to the Globe. So another way to put that is it feels like London is on stage. So though the design world is its own world, it's not London, it's not now, it's not today, it's not contemporary, it's not trying to literally be the city we live in now, I think the performances feel very much like a group of people that are alive in 2019, talking to another group of people who are very much alive in 2019. There's no sort of Shakespeare acting going on if you know what I mean.

Secondly, with a spoiler alert, but we bring an audience member out of the crowd to become Starveling, one of the mechanicals. But also there's some thinking around that, because what we do is we bring all the mechanicals out of the yard, so the sense is they've been chosen from the crowd in total. The audience member who comes up - who's been chatted to before by one of our actors dressed as a volunteer steward, to make sure they're OK with it - is... they then represent in effect the audience on stage, and what's really important is the way the mechanicals look after that person. Because if we were mean to that person or we ridiculed them or we just ignored them, the audience would notice and they would turn against us. But when they see us value, look after, interact with, care for an audience member on stage, as well as gently poke fun at them, I think they lean into the production and they lean into the gesture of the production, which is to insist that we're more the same than we realise and that differences are artificial and that our... that we can all understand the same things and feel the same things much more than we might think, especially in the current climate.



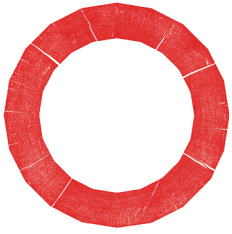
IG: So bearing that idea of radical optimism in mind, how do you think about the ending of that play?

Well obviously... [laughs]... you've got the classic Shakespeare trope where there's three weddings, but you've got Demetrius still drugged with the love juice, so he's in love with somebody he wasn't in love. You have Hermia and Lysander who seem the perfect lovers at the beginning, he's been very, very horrible to her and said he hated her and everything in the night, in the dream. And obviously Hippolyta has been won as a prisoner of war and generally, in any production, that's problematic, what that love is between them. So I think Shakespeare's in charge of that, and there is a version and I'm sure there have been versions of the play which make that a dominant reading of the play and therefore it doesn't end in celebration and communion. But I think there's a way that it can, because all relationships are built on difficulty and strangeness. We can all know ones that are our own or ones that... or people that we know who have come to love and communion through strange and odd routes. And obviously in our production we find a way to sort of subvert the Hippolyta / Theseus story, and Theseus in effect... Theseus' ideas of how this marriage are going to work are completely subverted at the end. And for the lovers which feels really, which feels genuine, there is a sense of transformation and dream. They can't remember quite what happened the night before, you could argue and maybe the love juice releases something that was in Demetrius anyway and he was pursuing Hermia for other reasons that weren't really to do with love, that were to do with status and money. So there's something in it that feels true about the lovers. The audience clap when they kiss at the end of Act 4 and maybe that's just we want a happy ending, but I think it's in the play as well. And I wouldn't argue that there's another reading of it that isn't that, but it's the joy of Shakespeare, isn't it? That you can, there's a million choices you can make and they're not necessarily wrong or right, they're just a choice and another production will come along and make it's own choices so we're not doing anything to the play, we're just borrowing it for a summer.



IG: That community and that optimism that's seeped into your production... why now? I mean obviously we've talked about the politics a bit, but what is it about the journey of that production that felt like that was the right ending?

SH: Well, maybe my initial thought was it felt like in the palette of the season we could do something that was really sort of dynamically connecting with the audience and was really heavy on joy and community. Hopefully not at the expense of some serious thought. I think the other thing... I suppose when I started here I was a convert to the Globe in my head, and now I feel I'm a convert to the Globe in my heart as well. Because I think there's something really radical about 1500 people from around the world watching a 400 year old writer and having an amazing time. On the day we opened, we did a matinee and then an evening show, 3000 people saw that show. And what was really clear was you had people who... English isn't their first language, who have people who maybe came as a sort of, as tourists, and I don't know why we use that as a negative, and they find the same joy, wonder, surprise, communion, transcendence as any of us and that's a really special thing. That's the sort of radical populist thing, because populism again is a thing that's got negative connotations at the moment, but I think I really love that word in the right context, which is there's a way that we can all be there together. And it's not going to solve... you know, a play can't change the world. But you can put a bit of good energy into the world, you can change the discourse, you can remind people of our similarities rather than our differences and I think the Globe's perfect for that. You know, all the things that seem tricky to a director initially who's used to working indoors... lights, sound, control of image, all of those things, the really exciting thing is the relationship between actor and audience. So rather than like 'this is how we talk to the audience', it's like 'who are we today, who are you today, welcome, we're going to really get to know you as much as we can'. And I think audience members sense that, that's why the audience member coming on stage and being part of it is so important to the DNA of that. Because we make that whole O a world and for one moment we're all in that world. Somebody, it was like a friend of a friend, said she was talking to an audience member



and they'd come down from Leicester to see the show and as the guy she was talking to came out at the interval he said 'Oh, I'd much rather stay in that world in there than come out to this world in here', and I thought 'Ah well, that's the best review you could get'. And that's, I suppose, that's what we were aiming for, for everyone to feel that.

[Music plays]

IG: You can catch *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in the Globe theatre until 13 October, and we'll be back with more stories from *Dream* on the podcast soon...

You've been listening to *Such Stuff* with me, Imogen Greenberg, and Sean Holmes.

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