

Such Stuff podcast

Season 3, Episode 9: What country, friends, is this?

[Music plays]

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

Throughout this hot, tumultuous and ever surprising summer, we've been undergoing an experiment of our own here at the Globe.

Through this year, we will be performing Shakespeare's Henriad across our stages. Shakespeare's cycle of history plays explores political turmoil, ambitious personalities and treacherous behaviour. Sound familiar?

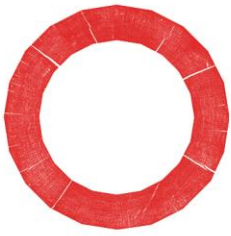
Well, we wanted to see what would happen if we put Shakespeare's politics alongside our own, re-interrogating the plays in the fresh light of today's ever-changing landscape. And part of this endeavour was handing the stories and the roles – so often associated with a particular idea about Englishness and an inherited notion of our collective past – to fresh voices.

Our historic, all women of colour production of Richard II in the Playhouse kicked off the cycle, before handing over to the ensemble productions of Henry IV parts 1 and 2, and Henry V, which are running in the Globe now. And soon, we'll return to the shadowy candlelight of the Playhouse for our ensemble's take on Henry VI and Richard III.

We wanted to ask, what is this sceptr'ed isle now?

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,

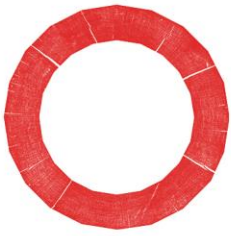


This happy breed of men, this little world,
This precious stone set in the silver sea,
Which serves it in the office of a wall,
Or as a moat defensive to a house,
Against the envy of less happier lands,
This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England,
This nurse, this teeming womb of royal kings,
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, as Brexit rumbles on to an uncertain end... we revisit some of the companies who joined us for the Henriad, in particular the women of colour who took on roles across our season that have for so long not been open to them. We'll be asking: why is it important to interrogate and keep interrogating our own history, as well as Shakespeare's version of it? And how can these plays act as a kaleidoscope through which to view, to understand and to question the uncertainties of our times?

[Music Plays]

IG: First up, way back in March, we chatted to Adjoa Andoh about the historic, all women of colour production of Richard II, which she co-directed and in which she took the titular role. At the heart of the play is a besieged Richard, at war with rebels, nobles and his own parliament. Its resonances are all too clear...

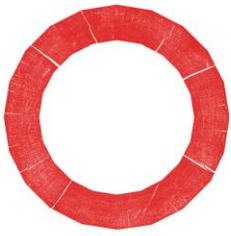


Adjoa Andoh:

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: 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.

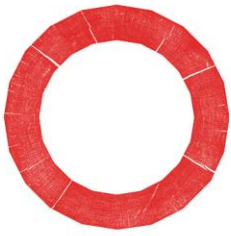
You know, I'm from Bristol, and you can look through the records of the merchant ships, the Merchant Ventures, who still exist, and you can look through the records of their stealing Africans and taking them to the West Indies and flogging them for slavery and returning with either money or rum or sugar, 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 designer 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, 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.

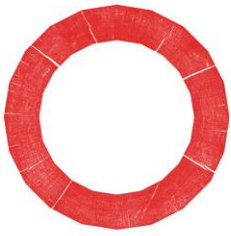
AA:

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,



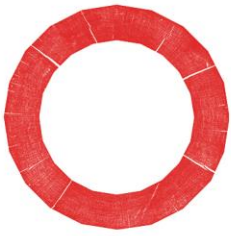
Allowing him a breath, a little scene,
To monarchize, be fear'd and kill with looks,
Infusing him with self and vain conceit,
As if this flesh which walls about our life,
Were brass impregnable, and humour'd thus
Comes at the last and with a little pin
Bores through his castle wall, and farewell king!
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.



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 woofullest 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!

[Music plays]

IG: Taking on an iconic role is never easy. What happens when that role carries the weight, not just of theatrical history, but of England's past too? Farah chatted to Sarah Amankwah who plays Henry V in our productions about how playing the historic Henry has intersected with her identity now.

FKC: Sarah, you're playing Henry V this year...

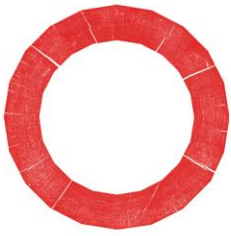
Sarah Amankwah: That's correct...

FKC: And I wanted to talk to you a little bit about that. But the history plays, traditionally aren't really places where women get lots of opportunities for performing.

SA: No [laughs]

FKC: So I wonder if you could talk a little bit about the Globe Ensemble's approach to casting in this trilogy of Henry plays that you're doing.

SA: Yes. So I guess when we first had our meetings for the Ensemble, it was sort of pitched to us that we would be looking at these plays as if they were new plays. So we had no idea what the



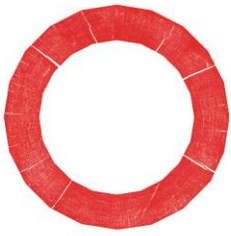
castings were gonna be, I definitely didn't know. Yeah it was very much the sense of we are approaching these plays with a whole new way of exploring them, so they can be very much set anywhere, with anyone playing the King or Queen, what have you, and exploring it from that kind of narrative. And for me to, to have the honour and opportunity to play a King has been one of the most amazing but also toughest challenges I've ever had to take on, surprisingly. But it's just great, just approaching a particular narrative that has many assumptions about how its viewed or who speaks it, who gives it life if you will. And to be able to be I guess a sort of conduit as well in that sense, because I've never seen these plays, I've never read these plays, so I in particular I guess came from a very fresh and if anything, raw perspective.

FKC: That's exciting!

SA: I just saw these people as people, and you know characters as opposed to sort of imposing a gender on anyone, and just sort of taking these humans in this world and this experience and sharing that, really.

FKC: Has playing this part made you think about the different ways that men lead and the different ways women lead? Has it made you think about women and leadership or women and power?

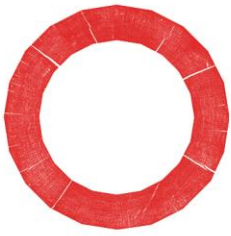
SA: It's interesting, actually, because I've tried not to? Just to, again, try and not impose anything on the situations and circumstances. However, what's been very interesting is the conversations that have come up with even just me playing the King. You sort of learn very quickly that no one listens to you. [Laughs]. Like oh great, this is great, this is going to be interesting. Again, and that's not necessarily anything that's done deliberately of course, but just in course of what's kind of... where we've come from and what we, you know the environments we've grown up in, how our culture, backgrounds kind of shape how we view each other in sort of gender differences. But it's very interesting how there is a sort of natural what's the word... privilege that comes with certain men, you know, intentionally and unintentionally when they



are playing roles with... authoritative roles. Whereas to women there's a sort of sense of... Oh, oh ok... [laughs]... I sort of have to kind of deal with this sort of nuisance if you will. And that comes from a long stem of you know sort of culture enforced on how we... you know women have been sort of silenced and yeah emasculated or however you want to phrase it. Yeah, so it's been very interesting for myself to again just sort of taking the task of 'Ok, I just sort of have to play this person of authority', and then having certain opinions imposed on you is very, very interesting, because then being able to sort of deal with that and deal with the challenges, in particular of Henry's thought and Henry's kind of pursuits, there's a part of me that's sort of like, 'Are you disagreeing with me, Sarah? Or are you disagreeing with the character?' And sometimes for some people it can be very hard to differentiate the two. Especially me being a woman of colour as well... there is what I've kind of had an ongoing sense of... the sense of being invisible. And obviously that's in and of itself a lie, as every human being has intrinsic worth and dignity and value. But then when one is put in a position when they have to somewhat lead... there is that, that they have to contest with. They have to contest with people's backgrounds, people's views and opinions. Yes, long-winded answer...

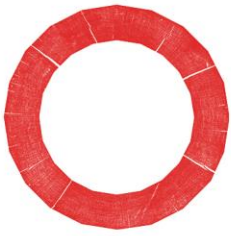
FKC: No, really interesting answer, actually because it leads into other questions that I have, because obviously you've been playing it for a couple of weeks now. And I'm curious about the audience and how they're sort of connecting to you as King Henry. Because obviously this part has this sort of legacy of the great English King, the big, white, male authority of the past. And even Shakespeare sort of I guess alludes to that legacy, because he had that legacy in Shakespeare's time. So I'm wondering how you're dealing with the challenges of all those assumptions that are on his character.

SA: Ooh, yeah that's a really hard question. Short answer, I don't know just yet. In all honesty, every day, every show, even today I was just sort of like 'Oh gosh, God help me get through this show!' [Laughs]. 'Cause its very hard to gauge... I mean obviously you can only take what people sort of give you, and some people have been very encouraging and very forward thinking in the sense of you



know, seeing myself play this character. But it's very hard to come on the stage and deliver this narrative and try and read or understand what the eyes are telling you? And obviously in a space like the Globe it's so exposing, so there's that and you know, being able to say sort of 'Once more unto the breach' and then you're sort of having, you know this predominantly if you will white audience looking at you, predominantly male as well. And there's parts of the inner psyche that's like you know, sort of has this imposter syndrome? Of like 'I don't think I'm supposed to be here [laughs]. Sorry I'm just gonna... I'm just gonna leave now'. And I think that's partly what Michelle in particular wanted to tackle and there's a part of me that's sort of like 'Wow, I feel like I'm at times this sort of sacrificial lamb that's kind of been pushed on'. But nonetheless, it's something that I'm very passionate about, particularly with art. And I think for those who come to see it, for one they already know I'm playing Henry V, so the fact that they're looking at me is saying a lot. So the challenges come every day, but I think a lot of its very much internal challenges, challenges that I have personally faced dealing with racism in the industry, dealing with sexism as well, so there's so many aspects of that that I am carrying within Sarah's personhood and having to sort of meet that and push through, it's kind of not a yes and no answer, it's sort of still being navigated through and it's very exciting. It's very exciting because the amount of questions that I've had to ask myself and I have to keep reminding myself, at the end of the day Sarah, these humans are humans, and they're broken and they're fallible and at the end of the day, for me anyway, that's what I am on this journey to expose, that leadership, male or female, isn't going to be perfect. And regardless of how people assume this legacy within Britain, within Henry V, it's always going to have some blind spots. You know, with our politicians, our leaders today, they're not perfect [laughs]. And I think for me, it's being able to show that, if anything, so that we are able to at least have that same grace [laughs] with each other as well. That's kind of been my pursuit or my reminder if you will.

FKC: So to what extent is... really, you've probably kind of answered this in many ways... but to what extent is your identity being brought to bear on how you're sort of crafting this character.



SA: Good question...

FKC: I mean it may not be something, until the end of the run, that you're really, fully conversant with!

SA: Yeah. I guess... so when you say, just to see if I understood your question, my identity...

FKC: As a woman...

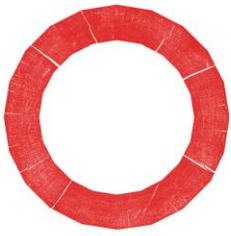
SA: As a woman of colour?

FKC: Yes.

SA: I think, without having to... It's interesting actually, I guess yeah... touching on what I'd said in the previous question I think which you'd alluded to... being able to again, strip back and by stripping back I don't mean denying my gender and my race, but at the same time all I have are his words.

FKC: Yeah.

SA: That's all I have. And there are times where I guess through the whole process, having to sort of suppress this imposter syndrome and go, well I've been given these words and whenever I sort of walk on to the stage even to this day, hearing you know 'Here comes your majesty', I have to believe that they're talking about me? I sort of look over my shoulder and go, 'Oh wow they're actually... they're talking to me'. And I think in that sense as well that that can be somewhat relatable to the character in his journey of having to wrestle with his identity and being this sort of reluctant king and having to kind of take on the sins of his father and all of that has allowed me as Sarah to wade into those kind of issues. But then at the same time, with the face I have, with the amazing God-given body that I have, I am able to stand and speak a voice, with a voice sorry, that people are less exposed to, says something else which I am still yet to discover, actually. And I think there's a part of



that, whether people want to call it humility or not, I think it's... for me, I just kind of have a delayed response to things anyway. So I think allowing whatever that is, when I speak his words, for those people to engage, especially with speeches like 'Upon the king' and you know 'Crispin's Day', there is something that again, we tend to... certain things that we don't get when we don't have a woman's perspective, which makes it even more poignant because obviously we're so used to seeing things from a male, a white, male perspective. To then have a woman, if anything a woman of colour who in society, in my opinion is very much the lowest of the low, to be able to speak such words, to be visible, for me says so many other things which I think is quite a powerful message. That I think is an absolute honour to be part of it. It's sort of history in the making if you will.

FKC: It really is. Fantastic, have a great season.

SA: Thank you.

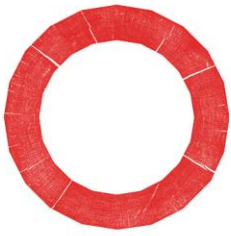
FKC: And thank you so much for joining us on the podcast.

SA: Thanks so much, thanks for having me. Thank you.

[Music plays]

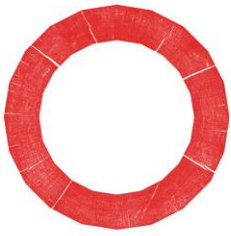
IG: Henry IV parts 1 and 2 and Henry V were created by an ensemble of actors, working across all three plays at once. They're now in rehearsals for Henry VI and Richard III. Here's Leaphia Darko, part of the ensemble, on how this changed the way they approached the plays.

Leaphia Darko: Yeah, I'm Leaphia Darko 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, it's been really inspiring to be a part of it as well, because as actors we've been allowed to take ownership of a lot of our own work in a way that I think you aren't normally able to in a rehearsal process, because so many conceptual decisions are normally already made.

Yeah this process is throwing up a lot of ideas that you don't normally get to talk about in the room... 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 still catch Henry IV parts 1 and 2 and Henry V in the Globe theatre until the 11th October. Henry VI and Richard III will be in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse from November, and as always, tickets for all of these productions are available on line or through our box office.

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