

Q and A with Adriano Shaplin, the RSC/CAPITAL writer in residence, on his play *The Tragedy of Thomas Hobbes*, a new MIT/RSC commission directed by Elizabeth Freestone.

You are the Artistic Director of The Riot Group in New York and writer-in-residence for the Royal Shakespeare Company. Can you tell us some of the contrasts and similarities between the two companies?

Both companies are ensembles, meaning they are grounded in long-term commitments between artists. With the RSC there is this back-bone of the house playwright, and performing his plays, but within that we are also making new work, and growing plays that can be rehearsed and performed in repertory with Shakespeare. I've been writing plays for Riot Group since I was seventeen, and performing with them as well. Before that I acted with an amateur company in my home-town playing boys and off-stage dogs. For me, theatre-making has always been a communal, collaborative experience. Ensemble means that the actors are a given, and are shared by several shows. That means, as the playwright, I can't compose any old thing that tickles my fancy, I must compose for the ensemble, and tailor the story I tell to suit that group. Working with Riot Group prepared me well to join the RSC and has had a profound effect on my work with the Riot Group.

Both companies have ensemble at their heart. How do you build an ensemble and what does ensemble mean to you?

The idea that each artist in the theatre; the actor, the director, the writer, etc.; is an independent unit brought together by producers is very new. So is the practice of collecting actors together to perform only one play. Ensemble means long-term commitments and marriages between artists. It means that the artists are in charge of what they make, and the people in charge are taking the same risks as the actors on-stage. I think of ensemble theatre-making as ancient, like farming. Ensemble is like a family farm that grows things together, recycles energy and shares labour, and works the same piece of land for a long time. It is the opposite of agri-business, though the product often looks the same. The main thing you get out of ensemble is love; love shared between artists in process, and love from the audience when they are entertained.

Under what circumstances did you first meet the RSC's Artistic Director, Michael Boyd?

In 2005, I was invited to participate in a debate. The topic was "Is Shakespeare a Millstone around the neck of British Culture?" I had a new play on in London at the time, and was invited to argue that Shakespeare was indeed a millstone. When I asked the organisers against whom I would be debating they told me Michael Boyd from the RSC. I don't think Shakespeare is any millstone, but I felt obligated to be as outrageous as possible, and rail

against the conservative practice of constantly reviving old classics. I accused Shakespeare revivers of being necrophiliacs, bent on touching the Bard's dead body. I remember at the debate Michael and his assistant looked like Russian spies smoking in the corner. We discussed the idea of switching positions, and wouldn't it be more interesting if Michael argued against Shakespeare, but we had both worked very hard on our speeches. I threw down pretty well and got some people riled up. Michael's Shakespeare advocacy was quite moving, he certainly won the day. He even told the crowd about my past dabblings in Shakespearean interpolation that truly dissolved my guise. Two months later the RSC asked me to join the company. I called the RSC necrophiliacs who were only interested in reviving old authors; and they proved me wrong by hiring me to raise a new play.

You have been immersed in Michael Boyd's History Plays since 2006. Can you describe some of your experiences as an American working for the RSC and writing about English History?

I arrived in Stratford-upon-Avon with very little experience of Shakespeare. I had seen three of his plays performed and read none. Being in Michael Boyd's rehearsal room was a necessary education for me. It allowed me to puzzle over Shakespeare and watch an amazing group of artists solve problems and interpret his work for weeks and weeks. It tuned my ear to his language. I became very intimate with the history plays and I was always trying to understand the recipe Shakespeare used to cook up all that raw history into dramatic story-telling. It gave me a blueprint with which to think about my own history play, and establish some rules for how I would tell the stories of real people.

The most curious thing about writing a history play is how often I am struck that everything is the same, or that everything that occurs under the sun is repeated. There is no passion or human phenomenon that rests forever in the past, all of it bleeds through into our lives and returns. Shakespeare's history plays communicate this to me. On the one hand, Shakespeare covers his ass and resolves certain events as part of "Progress", connecting past injustice to present peace under Elizabeth. But all the history plays taken together tell another story about the eternal and cyclical nature of monarchy, family, ambition, creation and destruction. Indeed, many of the events in *The Tragedy of Thomas Hobbes* are still happening, the same struggles are unfolding.

Has your time in the UK and your time surrounded by the language of Shakespeare influenced your writing, and can you tell us something about your new play, *The Tragedy of Thomas Hobbes*?

I won't say much. It is a history play charting true events in the lives of ten of so people, including Robert Boyle, Robert Hooke, Thomas Hobbes and Issac Newton, but also contains much theatrical invention. It tells part of the story of the founding of the Royal Society that most people do not know, and may not

please the Royal Society. It also deals with certain widespread myths about science and religion and the notion of an "Enlightenment" having occurred in the past that is determining our society now. And a lot of it is written in blank verse.

Why have you chosen Elizabeth Freestone to direct the play, rather than directing it yourself?

The play I'm creating is much bigger than me, and the canvas is larger. I've always relied on collaborators to write and direct my plays, and working for the RSC for the first time makes this all the more necessary. Elizabeth Freestone is the perfect partner. She is a radical and experimental artist, but has also directed for the RSC before, and can walk me through my "lost in translation" moments, or break down doors I don't know how to shift. It means I can be in every rehearsal and alter the script as we go along, and have another artist there to balance and challenge everything I do. I think the best collaborators are those that prevent you from being phony or taking short-cuts, and that those that dare you to be as radical and uncompromising as possible, and I have that in my relationship with Elizabeth.

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