

## **Q and A with Josette Bushell-Mingo, the director of THE PENELOPIAD**

*The Penelopiad* by Margaret Atwood, directed by Josette Bushell-Mingo  
Swan Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon  
In association with Canada's National Arts Centre  
27 July – 18 August 2007. Press Night: 2 August 2007  
Box Office: 0844 800 1110 or [www.rsc.org.uk](http://www.rsc.org.uk)

*The Penelopiad* also performs at Northern Stage in Newcastle-upon-Tyne on 5, 6 and 7 September (in repertoire with *Macbeth* and *Macbett*) as part of the RSC's annual residency in the North-East of England, and then at Canada's National Arts Centre from 21 September – 6 October (previews 19 and 20 September)

### **How did you get involved in this project?**

In a rather spooky way I think. I had won the Craymer Award for Enterprise at the Woman of the Year Awards in 2004 for my work with PUSH (*a black-led arts festival aspiring to broaden the black community's perception of themselves and to inspire pride and aimed to provide a mainstream platform to broaden the understanding of black-led arts*). The organisers of the Awards were also publishers for a series of books adapting classical myths, and some very famous writers were involved. For example, Karen Armstrong, Jeanette Winterson and of course Margaret Atwood – who had written *The Penelopiad*, a re-writing of the Odyssey, through Odysseus' wife's eyes. To cut a long story short, at some point the organisers gave me the four books and I thought - what a very nice present. Some time later I was contacted by an old student of mine from LAMDA – a wonderful man called Paul Amos. (He had moved to Canada, and married a Canadian.) He invited me to do some work with him in Stratford, Ontario, because he thought I would really spice things up there. So I booked a trip to Canada and went under the auspices of the Riksteatern, Sweden's Nationwide Theatre where I also work as a director.

Some time later, the director Phyllida Lloyd, who happens to be a good friend of Margaret Atwood, rang me and said, 'Listen, Josette, would you be interested in work-shopping a play called *The Penelopiad* by Margaret Atwood?' I said I wasn't available. I can't do it. But I read it and thought that would have been great. I put the book down. This all happened about a year prior to being asked to do this job. To add to the coincidences, my son got a book for Christmas called *Rude Ramsay and the Roaring Radishes* – one of Margaret Atwood's children's books. What's quite spooky is that a CD came with the book, and it was read by Margaret Atwood – so I became really familiar with her voice before I ever met her.

Some time later my agent got a call from Deborah Shaw (*Associate Director of the RSC*) and I completely misunderstood what she was asking me. I thought she wanted me to act. I asked her to ring my agent and she will give

the usual reasons for me saying no - 'Josette thinks it's a really good idea but she can't do it because she's in Sweden etc etc.' My agent then rang me back in five minutes and explained that they didn't want me to be in it ... they wanted me to direct it! Then came perspiration of the arms and me pacing up and down in my kitchen, saying 'What?, Me? Then I frantically looked at my schedule. Could I accept? The first person I asked was my husband because I have two small children, and he said this was one I couldn't refuse. So, I said yes!

Never has a piece of work followed me in that way. I just couldn't say no to this project. It's been reaching out to me.

### **How has the novel been adapted for the stage?**

What is clear to both Margaret Atwood and myself is that a novel is very different to a stage production. There are ways that you can work with a person's imagination when they are reading a novel which cannot happen on stage. I think that the demands are different and the things that can be staged and can't be staged are very different. I'm always talking about the drama. With a book we can be passive. We can read it, sit down, put it away.

The process of bringing the book to the stage is an ongoing conversation with Margaret who, first and foremost, is a novelist. What I am trying to do is extricate the story so that it can live on stage.

So what are the difference between the book and the stage version? The first difference is that on stage, Penelope lives. When she laughs, you actually hear the laughter. It doesn't have to be described or narrated. And when she talks about the agony of something, we can represent that physically.

Jeanie O'Hare (*the RSC's Literary Manager*) and the playwright, Nicola Wilson have been helping to bring Margaret's novel to life. Margaret actually came to Stratford and we had a fabulous weekend here. Before I met her, I was terrified, but she was amazing, and I realised that maybe every piece of work that she does is important to her, and *The Penelopiad* is particularly precious to her. As the director of the piece, she has to hand it over to me and she has to trust me. Because as an actress, I am physical and visual – sometimes what I can produce visually is stronger than the book, and vice versa.

That weekend, when I met her, alongside the literary department and the creative team, I explained our plans. I showed her a model of the set - the world that the play was going to inhabit. I explained transformation, magic realism, and talked about the things that have influenced me as a director. I wanted her to understand where I was coming from. I was suitably nervous and in my excitement to demonstrate ideas, ended up with a chair on my head. I knew that what had to be done wasn't a simple brokering of the text – Margaret had first refusal on the choice of director. After that meeting she could have gone 'no thanks, or no I'm not sure.'

We laughed a lot during the weekend. I think she's a woman with magic powers. There was a certain sensibility about her and even when she wasn't looking at me – I knew she was. By the end, there were warm embraces and lots of giggles, and a comparison of our afros (because she has a mass of wonderful white wispy hair and I have none at all.) There was also a lovely exchange of ideas.

Because she's not here, the process now is that I email her a diary as often as I can. We're going to try and set up a web-cam interview and we can all wave at her. We want her to know that her spirit is in the room.

**The project involves people from Canada and the UK. How do you feel about this international collaboration?**

I think there's a deep exchange going on here and something resonant and often quite moving about the two companies meeting and adjusting to each other. This kind of collaboration doesn't happen very often. Companies often take productions overseas, but we don't often cross productions like this. Hats off to the RSC and the NAC (National Arts Center, Canada) for that.

**How do you feel about working with a predominantly female cast and creative team?**

The first meeting point for the company is as a group of artists. What I think is as interesting is that we have quite a diverse company in terms of experience and range. Of course, the gender issue adds an extra resonance but I make no assumptions just because we're all women. It doesn't mean we can understand the lives of these women any better.

And I'm enjoying it because I know it doesn't happen that often, especially on a piece of new work like this – not at the Royal Shakespeare Company or at the NAC – at this level. It's quite unique.

**Tell me something about the gender training that has been organised for the company**

As an all female company, I wanted to empower the women to play the male roles without falling too much into cliché. Gender workshops will give an insight into the psychology, physicality, subtleties and nuances of becoming a man. I think it's a thrilling opportunity. It's not just about donning a sword and a shield, it's also about capturing the double layers, femininity and the eroticism of the piece.

I think that by at least trying these ideas is giving respect to men. If we're going to portray them, we need to take it seriously. Funny or serious, we

must make the effort. What is exciting is that it will also impact on how we play the women.

**Tell me something about your previous experience of working at the RSC. Has the company changed since you were here over ten years ago.**

I did two seasons at the RSC (1991/2) and (1996/8). I started with *The Virtuoso*, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and *The Thebans* – (directed by Phyllida Lloyd, David Thacker and Adrian Noble), and the second season was *Everyman* and *The Mysteries* (directed by Katie Mitchell).

**Has it changed? No.** I think the central spirit is there. I think that's always been there. It's very interesting because people perceive me as quite radical because of the work that I've done. But there's a part of me that adores tradition. Whether it gives me something to fight against or something to nurture and support me. I did not train. I didn't go to drama school. I went straight into theatre. I learned to speak verse at the RSC. I'm still learning actually. I think it's important to learn the basics to be able to then do modern and contemporary work. This is one of the important parts of our heritage of verse speaking – and that's what I like about it.

**Has it changed? Yes.** I feel that the RSC has taken what it is and is transforming it to meet the needs of a contemporary audience. That's what I find thrilling. Ten years from now, it will look different again. Of course it's the same with every company, but the RSC is not resisting it, but going with it.

And *The Penelopiad* – I'm here for a start, and when was the last time that something like that was staged in the Swan Theatre? So for me, has it changed? Yes of course, but it absolutely hasn't either.

**The Penelopiad is the final production of the Swan before it closes prior to work beginning of the transformation of Royal Shakespeare Theatre site. How does it make you feel?**

It's moving. I've said to the actors – even if you hate what I do, then you play for the Swan. Play tribute to all of the productions that have ever played there. At the same time it makes me feel quite mischievous.

**What is it about this story which appealed to you?**

It appealed to me for three reasons. One is the fact that Margaret Atwood has begun to give voice to a woman who has been voice-less. I found that fascinating. When audiences see Penelope in this production, they may think of her differently next time they see her or study her, and maybe reflect on other female voices.

The other thing that attracted me was that I have always been obsessed with the Greeks. I think it's the only thing I can play well as an actress. But as a director and as a teacher I think that The Greeks still tell us things about our lives today. They have a capacity to hold huge emotion and solidify that which is unholdable. They crystallise the simple things which apply to everyone – grief, revenge, death, war, love. I think that they do pertain particularly to the west.

I think the third thing is that I didn't think it was all perfect. That was also something that attracted me and made me look at it differently. At the end of the day it's a phenomenal opportunity for an actress/director. It's great to be let loose with a great creative team and a very creative and talented ensemble who will give me a run for my money. I like epic work – the bigger the better.

I think the things that attracted me will attract audiences too.

**Will audiences need to know the story of Homer's *The Odyssey* before they come to see *The Penelopiad*?**

No. I don't think you need to know the story before you come. You identify with Penelope. You identify with a woman, but particularly with a person who wants to set the record straight. I think for anyone who wants a theatrical cautionary tale for our times, anyone who enjoys the Greeks, anyone who wants to be plunged back into a fantastical world, anyone who enjoy films, visual theatre and anyone who enjoys dance will enjoy it. You can definitely come and see this without knowing *The Odyssey*.

**You will be incorporating sign language in the play. How will this work?**

There are signs and symbols which exist within sign language (although they are different in each country) that I think are very, very expressive. I don't know how much I will use them in the production. But because I'm moving in that world I'm fortunate enough to have discovered it as another language which can be incorporated and used as inspiration.

However, I do want to make it clear that this doesn't mean that if deaf people can come they will understand it all as it's signed. Those are two very different things.

**Can you tell us something about the set and costumes?**

I've worked with the designer Rosa Maggiora before. She is a phenomenal set designer and extremely instinctive, and as far as I'm concerned she got it right first time round.

We just had two meetings - one in the UK and one in Sweden - and she went off and did it. She got the sensuality of it straight away. What we have done

with the set is completely stripped the Swan right back to the wall. So you see everything. Everything we've done is to create the world of the void and darkness. We've covered the floor with glass perspex so it looks like the actors are falling down as well as floating – but it could also be seen as a cabaret stage.

In this production, we know the audience is there, but it doesn't mean we're talking to them or asking them to be on stage but the awareness should bring the audience nearer to the piece.

Margaret's writing gives a nod to cabaret – so we've brought in some influences from that genre.

We've taken inspiration from brilliant films like *Pan's Labyrinth*, *The Time of the Gypsies* and *Underground*. The production will be highly stylised. Objects will float in and out. Hades is a living place. It's both funny and horrific at the same time. For example, the maids will morph from Greek furies to school children to suitors to Greek soldiers.

There will be a constant contrast. After a vicious rape, the maids will deal with the pain by coming on with feathers and doing a big Busby Barclay number. Things appear and disappear in front of people's eyes. You never forget it's a piece of theatre. But the truth of the acting is taken very much from the Greeks and Penny Downie, who plays Penelope, is amazing – quite astounding. Her questions take us all forward and her delivery and emotional detail is brilliant. She inspires me.

**Veronica Tennant is working on Movement for the production. What does Veronica, who is probably best known for her work as a celebrated ballet dancer, bring to the production?**

In terms of movement, I'm quite aggressive and ugly on stage, and Veronica brings a grace and a dignity. She's very detailed and very fine.

So when I'm in need of hand work, pointe work and particularly interesting references from classical Greek statues - she has a wonderful detail. Everyone in the creative team has a very specific role – but she brings classicism, grace, beauty and sensuality.

**What are your influences?**

Many of my influences, particularly in terms of the physicality and pictures on stage, are from films. The fights in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, *Hero*, and *The Matrix*, the nightmare stylisation of *Pan's Labyrinth*, and the theatricality of Peter Greenaway. They all use theatrical pictures on film. I love it when people fly and I love slow motion sequences. These all use techniques which are very simple and may be quite naïve – but when I see

them on stage I love it. I always think that film takes from theatre and we need to take a little bit back.

### **You live and work in Sweden. What do you do there?**

I'm married to a Swedish man, and work for Tyst Theatre, the National Deaf Theatre of Sweden, a branch of Riksteatern, Sweden's Nationwide Theatre. As Artistic Director, I programme and plan. I have a political perspective on behalf of deaf people and I run a company of deaf actors. Riksteatern is the biggest Nordic complex housing up to five different missions. As well as the Deaf Theatre, there's also an international branch, a regional department, a ballet company and a knowledge centre for children. Last year it played to just under 1 million people. It's state funded, and its mission is to be a theatre for all. It only tours so there are buses, 2 and four seater cars, coaches and trucks which travel all over this massive country of 9 million people. It is the most spectacular idea coming from the Swedish idea of democracy – the idea that everyone has the right to culture. We do everything from seminars, Shakespeare plays, one woman shows to massive concerts and musicals. They look to respond to the audience they serve. It's the most exhilarating and sometimes terrifying experience. We have about 200 permanent staff, and we could have about 43 productions on at any one point.

And – my work with National Deaf Theatre has given me a different perspective on the world. Everything I know as a black woman is changed because of my work with them. Although there are many struggles and things I will not accept and will continue to fight for, I feel deeply privileged to work with the deaf community. It is a rich and vibrant community which I'm still discovering. I'm not deaf. But as a black person, I can see the parallels, but I can also see the divide. There are behaviours and things which are simply not tolerated within our ethnically diverse society, but there are similar things which are acceptable if a person is deaf.