

In conversation: **Michael Boyd**

The Artistic Director of the Royal Shakespeare Company talks about his leadership of one of the country's most iconic institutions and his own work as a director

This event took place at Central School of Speech & Drama on 13 January 2010

Guest speaker:

Michael Boyd (MB), Artistic Director of the Royal Shakespeare Company

Chair:

Prof Simon Shepherd (SS), Deputy Principal (Academic) and Professor of Theatre, Central School of Speech & Drama

About Michael Boyd

Michael Boyd joined the RSC in 1996 as an Associate Director, taking over from Adrian Noble as Artistic Director in 2003. His 2002 epic *This England: Histories Cycle* staged all three parts of Henry VI alongside Richard III, winning him the Laurence Olivier Award for Best Director. In 2006, during the RSC's Complete Works Festival, he embarked on presenting all of Shakespeare's History plays – first in the Courtyard Theatre in Stratford upon Avon and then at the Roundhouse in London.

In 2009, *The Histories* went on to win three Oliver awards including best ensemble performance.

During the 1980s, he worked at the Belgrade Theatre, Coventry, Sheffield Crucible, and Glasgow's Tron, where he was the founding Artistic Director.

Boyd's enduring love affair with Russia began as a trainee director in Brezhnev's Moscow at the Malaya Bronnaya Theatre where he studied under Antolii Efros; last year the RSC began *Revolutions*, a four-year exploration of Russian theatre and culture featuring new plays and debates.

He is currently overseeing the redevelopment of the RSC's Stratford home, which will feature improvements to the Swan Theatre, new and improved public spaces, and a new 1,000 seat auditorium with an emphasis on intimacy. Work is due for completion later this year [2010].

As well as productions at Stratford, the RSC performs in London (Roundhouse), Newcastle-upon-Tyne, tours extensively, and has an extensive schools programme.

Simon Shepherd: The RSC is a great Institution, with a capital 'I'. A global brand, even. How do you cope with the weight of the RSC's reputation, and its history of iconic productions. And does it hinder you from doing new work?

Michael Boyd: Well, let's have a think; what are the most archetypal, iconic moments in the recent, mid- and ancient history of the RSC?

A Midsummer Night's Dream (1970), where the directors of the theatre sat at the back of the stalls thinking 'are we going to have to cancel?' The audience was very restless and some of the artistic directorate thought it was flying into

a brick wall of humiliating failure. That was *Peter Brook's Dream*, now legendary.

Nicholas Nickleby (1981), a piece of new work by David Edgar produced at a time when the company had completely run out of money and the only thing they could do was a very simply staged show that made sense of having to pay the actors' wages.

Two huge history projects: the 1964 *Roses* and our recent one. Peter Hall was regarded as doing indifferently well, failing as often as not in his first year as founding artistic director of the RSC, and generally being thought of as being slightly foreign and communist for his idea of a permanent 'ensemble'. But his approach made sense in *The Wars of the Roses* for the first time and the national, and international reputation of this new company was established.

I too was accused, and still am accused in some ways, of being a funny foreign communist for using the word 'ensemble' too often, but again I think we made sense of it. Our production of all eight History plays last year was a counter-cultural statement as well as being about English history. Asking a company of actors to commit to a 2 ½ year contract was and is anti-zeitgeist in a world obsessed by celebrity, and freedom of 'choice'

The iconic aspect of the RSC doesn't really bother me; most icons are forged in revolution. I think it's really only when you go on to words like 'brand' that I come out in a rash. People rarely use the word 'brand' in front of me at the RSC – I know they talk about it behind my back and I benignly ignore it, but they have to use words like 'identity' and 'reputation' when they're with me.

One of my personal missions when considering whether to take on such a difficult job as the RSC, was to recognise that it was as iconic for the RSC to do new work as it was to do Shakespeare; that the RSC's reputation, for me personally, was as much about the Donmar Warehouse, which we invented long before anyone else did, as it was about productions of Shakespeare. In

fact, to an angry inverted snob trainee director at the Belgrade Theatre in Coventry, at the time of *The Specials*, Stratford seemed pretty culturally irrelevant and I only went through to Stratford to *The Other Place*. I saw one half of one Stratford Shakespeare production in my whole time at the Belgrade, so I identified the best of the RSC with *The Other Place* and actually with the Warehouse.

SS: At this stage is there anything from the floor, anything that's burning to be asked at the moment? I'm quite happy to press on.

Audience Member 1: Michael, you had a pop earlier on about actors coming into your company and I'm curious to know what's useful for you in terms of what you work with, whether it's useful to have actors that know something or actors who prefer working in the unknown. You seem to like the ambiguous or like working without certainties or working with certainties. I'm just curious – what's useful to you in developing a company?

MB: Wow, the ideal would be: somebody Harvard educated from a very poor background, who came to us via Lecoq, was utterly open, charismatic and capable of great virtuosity. I don't feel ambiguous – it's totally paradoxical. One of the nice things about a company is that you can make sense of diversity. There are people in our current company for whom text-based theatre, let alone Shakespeare, is a new thing, who come from a physical theatre background. One of them, Darmesh Patel, has a run through of *Hamlet* tomorrow, already playing Hamlet after just over a year with the company. It's a small-scale production, it's relatively protected you could argue (although I don't call performing in front of a bunch of school kids protected), but somebody utterly new to Shakespeare has found their way through to playing Hamlet. There are other people who come to us more tuned into the Folio than their own body, and there are other people who are a bit of both.

Another thing is just casting against type, or expectation. There might be somebody who is a fan of Richard Katz (wonderful, genius physical comedian,

very bright, brilliant improviser) but is he one of the world's most obvious Capulets? He is now rehearsing Capulet with Rupert Goold in our *Romeo and Juliet* and loving it. He's working with some personal discomfort, experiencing new emotional and physical territory, but that's a good thing I think. It's a bit scary but it's good.

Most of the work that I'm most proud of has also been the work that has made me most convinced that I have no talent, it will fail, it will be a disaster. I've been quite certain at some point that the work will fail, and I think if you don't ever have that moment, you may have something highly achieved, but it won't be something that you'll look back on and go 'that's why it's worth doing what I do'.

Audience Member 2: I was wondering why you thought we were moving in an age of 'commitment phobia'. Do you think that affects the theatre? How does that manifest in the theatre?

MB: People's personal lives and their professional lives are very different now to even ten years ago; if you go back 20 years then you're in another universe. The idea of a professional career, a commitment to a firm, a car factory that you might spend your life with and work in different areas of that car factory, dealing with different components, maybe ending up having a career with the union or in management, or maybe just staying being a genius steel turner... people who find their community with a continuity between work, family, the church... that sense of wholeness and continuity has gone. In lots of respects, that's a very good thing, because that can be very constricting for individuals.

But, to fast forward to the specific of our profession, and even go tighter into the RSC: in the 1980s in the RSC I think there was a belief that the natural life of an actor was becoming much more fragmented, it was going to be a portfolio career, like those in the outside world, where you did a bit of this and a bit of that, and indeed it was seen increasingly crucial to be seen on screen. As visibility in the culture became more and more weighted towards television

and film, you had to split your career, and the idea of a career in the theatre was in danger of becoming a bit risible. One career is not regarded as being enough, even expertise is increasingly something that you can pick up on a short course or Google, and the idea of the embodied continuity that is enshrined in say the life of a Bunraku puppeteer who's finally allowed near the eyes at the age of 90, is very, very alien.

It's also to do with our obsession, particularly in the West, with personal liberty. We're so obsessed with our rights as an individual that we're beginning to forget the ability to communicate in a way that can bind us together and I suppose in that context, a three-year contract may be counter-cultural but it's potentially quite benign. I think we're in danger of having a false idea of freedom when in fact it's narrowing us down into a tiny little lonely box all on our own because we're severing our ties with community in order not to opt into commitments that expose us to the unbearable risk of being bored, embarrassed and a disappointed. The RSC has recently asked artists to have faith that the ensemble "whole" can be greater than the sum of its parts, and full of unexpected possibilities.

Audience Member 3: You mentioned earlier that maybe you might employ a Head of Movement. I was just wondering what your thinking was there, and what the job description might look like?

MB: We're sort of making it up as we go along. It's still very early days. This is the person who is ultimately responsible for raising the level of the physical articulacy of our work, opening the eyes of the artists to new possibilities, chipping away at the number of hours per week devoted to the body, going out into the community of physical performers and artists and wooing them to us and finding a place for them. Being the advocate within theatre, but certainly within the RSC, of the value of this work, and putting up with the enormous cultural resistance of the inheritance in British theatre that believes staggering out of the Tube station, coughing, spitting into the gutter, and walking in through the stage door is an adequate warm-up.

Audience Member 4: We've heard about the company being there for three years, I wondered: How often do new people come in? When do people leave? Does it just happen every three years?

MB: We are not at the stage yet where we can make sense of all our life with one company, even one as large as this one, which has 44 members. I say 'as large', just to nip off for a moment – when I did my first piece of work at the RSC, there were 90 people supposedly in the Royal Shakespeare Company, they didn't call it an 'ensemble', they called it a 'company', but it was a company of actors over an 18 month contract. 90 people. I don't understand how that can work in terms of relationships, and sure enough, some of my friends in those companies during those years felt they'd been ignored. Even with a company of 44, I'm noticing signs of people occasionally wilting from not enough sunshine. So, yes, the opportunities to join the acting company are less frequent than they have been.

That said, we are keeping the door open for people to come in on shorter contracts, there's a sort of rainbow of contracts available, at the heart of which is the long ensemble. In between the *Histories* ensemble and this one, in order to make it possible that members of the *Histories* ensemble could go away, get a bit of a rest, maybe do one other gig, just experience life out there, and then come back, there had to be quite a big gap which was time enough for a couple of shorter year-long ensembles. One ensemble did *Hamlet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Love's Labours Lost* with David Tennant and Patrick Stewart, but David and Patrick had to sign a contract for that year, where it was agreed that they would understudy – and that was a deal breaker. And then there are one-off gigs as well, where there's just a specific impulse of maybe one actor, or one director to do one thing, and that gets its space as well. So there are different ways, but the main rhythm is kind of every three years.

AM 4: I was just wondering, when you're picking your ensemble, do you choose an ensemble and then cast for the year or three years from there? Or is picking the ensemble part of the fundamental casting?

MB: Fundamental question.

There's another scenario that, in a sense, I would have preferred: the *Histories* Company to stay on. We might have let a few people go, and a few people join, and only then decided what plays we were doing, what directors were coming, and so on. But the culture is not ready for that yet. I wouldn't have needed the 'what directors are coming' if I had, like with the *Histories*, directed everything, but that just isn't possible, physically impossible. I could not have done that again and anyway it would have been a bad idea probably; it would have got boring.

I wanted and needed the most talented directors I could lay my hands on. So I chose the directors first. As Associates: Rupert Goold, Roxana Silbert and David Farr and then Lucy Bailey as a guest. It was then of course a nightmare putting together a company where different directors, gorgeous directors, knew who they wanted for this part or at least what kind of person they wanted. It becomes once again monstrous horse trading and again parts accumulate like bees around one particular honey pot actor, depriving other actors of nice parts. It's tricky. Putting together this company was difficult and it's a miracle it's as strong as it is.

So no, the answer to your question is we've done it the wrong way round I think. I still look forward to the time when it is the company of actors that in effect selects the directors and the work, but I don't know when we'll get to that stage of evolution.

SS: We've been asking questions and you've been talking quite a lot about somebody who's running a company, what about your own artistic practice – is that changing or developing in this role that you're in? Is it helped, impeded, shaped?

MB: I really don't know. It might be in two ways. As Artistic Director of a company it is your job to think about practice, you've got to think about it intellectually, cerebrally, in order to be able to decide you need a Head of

Movement, or to choose repertoire. You have to think about the work of other people and analyse why you think it's good.

Some of that may work on me by osmosis – if I think something's a good idea or someone's a good idea, I might start behaving more like that idea or that person. But mostly it feels like a long version of a Cis Berry exercise against blockage where, for instance, you might have to do a drawing of someone while you're talking to them or making a speech, so your mind is occupied with that drawing, thus releasing the unconscious power of the speech. While I'm running the RSC, the RSC is my drawing.

Martin Wylde (Senior Lecturer, Course Leader MA Acting CSSD): You talk about the importance of the company and you hinted at the influence of the Russian theatre. If there was one thing right now that the RSC – maybe British theatre more generally – could learn from Russian theatre, and one thing the Russian theatre could learn from British theatre, what would those two things be?

MB: Can I have two?

MW: You can have as many as you'd like.

SS: No you can't, there's only five minutes to go.

MB: One thing British theatre could learn is never to get blasé about the value of people gathering in a space like this and sharing a profound imaginative, discursive, spiritual and intellectual journey. Never underestimate it, never forget how hard won that is. Russians instinctively know how important that is to their life and how vulnerable it is. And they know it now under Putin as they did under Brezhnev. It's still deeply in there, their understanding of the fragility, and the cultural importance of theatre, as opposed to other art forms that can be more commercially influenced or much more easily editable, censorable, cuttable. Russians understand better than

us the contagious power of an art form which is inherently to do with assemblies of people.

The other thing is that Englishness can sometimes settle for something quite domestic, whereas Russia is to do with size, and soul – it's about being a big country, a vast country, most of which is Siberia and therefore unknown, but it's also to do with an embodiment of that size and the virtuosity of the six-year training, the rigour and the discipline that goes into filling the size of that soul.

In return, we could teach them not to be quite so self indulgent and autocratic as directors. Declan's Donnellan work there has been gorgeous, and he has brought to Moscow something of the swift, pragmatic rigour of our harsher, more commercial British theatre scene.

But I think the biggest thing is that nobody in this country is allowed to treat contemporary writers with the disrespect with which they can be treated in Russia. And one lesson that we're beginning to learn, but we're ahead of the Russians on, is that an expressive and experimental theatre need not be the enemy of a text-based tradition. There's a civil war going on in Russian theatre right now, between writers' theatre and classic or directors' theatre.

Audience Member 5: Do you think the RSC has the power to trigger some kind of change in the UK towards more theatres hiring actors on a long-term basis, like in Germany, for example, where actors basically get an 'employed' status over 12, 18 or 24 months? And would you, as Artistic Director of the RSC, be interested in actively pursuing this?

MB: I'm not a politician. The best way I could do that is by making it work at the RSC, to the extent that the RSC is powerful enough. I have noticed the vocabulary changing a bit and I would flatter us enough to think that some of that is to do with our whole-hearted commitment to ensemble, but it's not exclusively us – Dundee Rep has successfully worked on a much smaller scale along ensemble lines; Kneehigh has a community of artists at its core that have been working together for two decades; Complicite, again, is a

conspiracy of artists around a company that add up to an ensemble with a sense of continuity of practice and learning and development. Setting myself up on some soap box could just be presumptuous and foolish because an awful lot of really brilliant work is done ad hoc, in two seconds flat.

AM5: You've talked a lot about ensemble in terms of a company of actors, but I wondered to what extent you would include a think tank of designers, composers, sound designers, lighting designers being part of the ensemble.

MB: Yes, there is an informal community of designers around the RSC and one of our associate directors, Tom Piper, is a designer. I talked to the head of our drawing office, Alan Bartlett – who is a design genius – the other day and I said, 'You do realise that at the Maly in St Petersburg, the equivalent of you designs nearly all the shows.' And he said, 'Oh do they?' And I said, 'Have you ever thought about designing a show?' And he said, 'Well actually I have.' And I hope he might end up doing one.

It's hard because there is something that you get out of being in a rehearsal room day after day after day that's hard to ask of designers when the life of a designer, for the most part in this country, is economically dependent on being in five places at once. Otherwise they can't make a living. That's also true of lighting designers and sound designers. I'm deeply anti-ensemble in some ways. I'm not going to name any names, but my favourite lighting designer is someone that my entire lighting team begged me on their bended knees never to work with again, and I did – but I don't work with this person every time, I give the crew holidays. But to really make that work they'd have to come and join and live and design everything. That would be great, but again it's a higher state of evolution than we've achieved at the moment.

Audience Member 6: You mentioned earlier that you have a soft spot for Jacques Lecoq. Have you been drawing on traditions like Lecoq and Philippe Gaulier, and if so how? And what's your experience been like?

MB: Well I have no personal Lecoq training what so ever, so I'm entirely dependant on the kindness of friends such as Kathryn Hunter who's playing Cleopatra for me just now. Although she didn't train with Lecoq herself, she was trained by people who did. It has influenced my rehearsal room an enormous amount, not always through movement practitioners but mostly through actors who have just said, 'Can we try this?' and I've said, 'Yes.' That has led to all sorts of different uses – the avoidance of the sentimental, the avoidance of the literal, the expansion of emotion, the understanding of synchronicity... I would say that almost exclusively, in my experience, the influence has come from performers. Our current long ensemble have worked, for instance, with LEM, with Pascal from Lecoq during their time with us.

SS: I'm going to ask a last question since we're running out of time. I'm not sure what sort of size of answer we're going to get. Are you prepared to share with us your plans for the next six years or so of the RSC?

MB: Well one thing would be to evolve to the state where Alan Bartlett was designing quite a lot together with our family, an ensemble of designers. But I think it starts with the directors. If I can evolve a community of animators/directors alongside, and in harmony with, a company of actors, that's the key.

This company comes to the Roundhouse later this year and then returns to Stratford to open the New Royal Shakespeare Theatre, which is going to be the best large-scale theatre in the world with everyone close, with the audience honest about its 'audience-ness', with the ability to play huge emotion as well as recognisable domestic detail.

I'm then going to play a season of work that has been devised during the life of the company or written specifically for the company, and then they're going to play a residency, which is the first time we've really done this in a very long time, of a repertoire of our work, in New York in another version of the theatre we put into the Roundhouse. It will be the first time for a while that New York has seen us in our full glory.

Another milestone is the 50th anniversary of the company. One of the ways we're celebrating is looking at the new work that the company has commissioned over those 50 years. It's not just *Educating Rita* and *Les Misérables*, but a whole repertoire of plays that are too good to have dated. And the following year we are producing the World Shakespeare Festival as the flagship project in the Cultural Olympiad in 2012. On one level it's a continuation of relationships with companies and theatrical culture abroad that we started with the Complete Works Festival; a chance, for instance, to carry on a dialogue with Luk Perceval. After the beautiful *Othello* he did with the Munich Kammerspiele as part of The Complete Works Festival, he's worked with our company in Stratford and got to the stage where he can see himself working with a given group of actors that we would provide him with and working on some Shakespeare together. And there are lots of other relationships in the Middle East, in America, and elsewhere, and in Russia. We'll be commissioning for instance a designer-turned-director, Dmitry Krymov, to do probably *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for that festival.

We will also be looking at the non-professional theatre movement in this country – be that youth theatres, be that university drama groups, be that emerging young professionals like a lot of people in this room, be that what we call amateur theatre, from which an enormous number have come, through which a lot of us have passed, more than would care to admit it. We need to address head on the mutual fear, snobbery and suspicion between the professional and non-professional sector and see what we can do to improve that relationship, to celebrate the extraordinary community of theatrical performers there are in this country, and ask what can the profession give them and what can they teach the profession? That's going to be a third of our effort.

SS: Michael, you've got a hugely busy schedule, thanks so much for coming to talk to us so eloquently this evening.

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