

## **The Editing of Emma Rice**

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London theatre has been shocked in the last fortnight by the announcement from Shakespeare's Globe that its new artistic director, Emma Rice (who began her tenure in April and has just completed her first season), will be leaving her post in April 2018. The controversy has even made national news, featuring on both Radio 4's Today programme and BBC2's Newsnight. This is testament to the strength of feeling elicited by the Globe's announcement, and the polarized views that have characterized its discussion and connected it to national events such as the Brexit vote. Like Brexit, it has generated a great deal of satirical anger, with blogs and tweets attacking and lampooning the Globe, of which the parody account @RealGlobe2018 is representative: 'Know it's been a while but any1 remember best way to do blackface? Asking for a friend... #MakeShakespeareGreatAgain #Globe2018 #EmmaRice'.<sup>1</sup> As Alistair Smith, editor of The Stage newspaper tweeted, 'Suspect anger at Emma Rice news amplified by fact it feeds into wider UK narrative of reactionary forces prevailing over progressive ones'.<sup>2</sup>

In its statement to the press, the Globe highlighted Rice's experiments with using lighting and amplified sound as the source of irreconcilable differences between the director and the theatre's board, by whom she was appointed in 2015.<sup>3</sup> This announcement followed a series of negative responses in the press and online, which dismissed her artistic programme as fundamentally inappropriate to the Globe. Some spoke up for Rice, most notably Guardian critic Lyn Gardner, but the mood music could be heard by all, and there was a strong sense that some of it was being conducted from within the Globe and its wider circle.<sup>4</sup> In what follows, I'll offer a brief survey of responses to these events, make a case for what I think is really at stake in Rice's dismissal, and conclude by asking what this sorry episode tells us about the position of artistic leaders more widely.

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<sup>1</sup> Tweet, @RealGlobe2018, 1.18pm 25 October 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Tweet, @smithalistair, 4.36pm 25 October 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Shakespeare's Globe, 'Statement Regarding the Globe's Future Artistic Direction', Shakespeare's Globe (2016)

<<http://blog.shakespearesglobe.com/post/152286922818/statement-regarding-the-globes-future-artistic>> [accessed 9 November 2016].

<sup>4</sup> Lyn Gardner, 'Emma Rice is right to experiment at the Globe – art should reinvent, not replicate', *The Guardian* (2016)

<<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2016/sep/28/emma-rice-shakespeares-globe-theatre-modern-audiences>> [accessed on 9 November 2016].

Responses to the Globe's statement have been substantially factional. It has been all but impossible to find a theatre professional willing to speak in favour of it, and many have come out in public to condemn it. The exception to this rule has been Mark Rylance, who has claimed, in an interview with Time Out, that the cause of Rice's departure was the fact that her approach was placing limits on the Globe's ability to use its spaces in a range of ways (I'll return to this).<sup>5</sup> Likewise, scholars working on contemporary theatre have been apparently unanimous in their disdain for the Globe's actions and its justification for them. Theatre critics, on the other hand, have divided, as they often do, along roughly political lines. Those favouring experimental practice (who we would have called left-wing and might identify this year as Remainers) have been united in their support for Rice (though I suspect that many of them may view much of her work as somewhat anodyne and commercial) and the cultural conservatives have, if not welcomed the news, then accepted it without significant comment. Shakespearean scholars have divided along similar lines. Most notably, Richard Wilson, Sir Peter Hall Professor of Shakespeare Studies at Kingston University, was reported in *The Stage* asserting the Globe's 'responsibility to the worldwide scholarly community' to create productions reflecting 'Elizabethan conditions according to current research'.<sup>6</sup>

This echoes the argument made by the Globe's public statement, which asserts that 'shared light' is fundamental to the theatrical particularity of its performance spaces. The case for shared light as a cause for Rice's departure, however, is unconvincing because she has not, in fact, done away with it. We have become habituated to a distinction between stage and auditorium defined by lighting because of darkened auditoria, not lit stages. Until the introduction of electric (as opposed to candle, oil or gas) light, auditoria remained partly illuminated alongside onstage lighting, as does today's Globe. Rice has not extinguished

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<sup>5</sup> Andrzej Lukowski, "'It's very tragic": Mark Rylance speaks out about Emma Rice's shock departure from the Globe', *Time Out London* (2016), <<http://www.timeout.com/london/blog/its-very-tragic-mark-rylance-speaks-out-about-emma-rices-shock-departure-from-the-globe-110316>> [accessed 9 November 2016].

<sup>6</sup> Matthew Hemley, 'Shakespeare academic defends Globe board's decision to remove Emma Rice', *The Stage* (2016) <[https://www.thestage.co.uk/news/2016/shakespeare-academic-defends-globe-boards-decision-to-remove-emma-rice/?utm\\_content=buffer78011&utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_source=twitter.com&utm\\_campaign=buffer](https://www.thestage.co.uk/news/2016/shakespeare-academic-defends-globe-boards-decision-to-remove-emma-rice/?utm_content=buffer78011&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer)> [accessed 9 November 2016].

auditorium lighting and nor could she (with the exception of a few days at the end of the Globe's summer season, when the sun goes down before the show does).

But haven't Rice's additions to the theatre's auditorium represented an unprecedented break from the artistic policy ascribed to the theatre by The Stage ('to represent Elizabethan conditions')? In short, no. 'Original Practices' productions (developed under Mark Rylance's tenure as Artistic Director) explored limited aspects of these conditions (the construction of clothing and use of make-up, for example), but they were conceived, designed, rehearsed and directed entirely in line with mainstream contemporary practices. Rylance's claim that the policy pursued by Rice of installing lighting and sound equipment 'prevents everybody else from doing any other kind' of production is not convincing.<sup>7</sup> As I have shown elsewhere, there was only one production of a play by Shakespeare in the first four years of Dominic Dromgoole's tenure at the Globe that did not feature a rebuilt stage, and there was no public response from the Globe's Board to his policy of altering its building.<sup>8</sup> Even the Globe's founder Sam Wanamaker did not have a purist attitude to the theatre he created. Paul Prescott's admirable analysis of his engagement with Shakespeare warns against any such simplistic idea: 'Much in his life was adventitious and unpredictable; the founding of the Globe was no exception'.<sup>9</sup>

That said, Wanamaker clearly also saw the Globe as a significant intervention into the staging of Shakespeare. And, even if we reject a trans-historical essentialist understanding of it, the reconstructed theatre retains its capacity to challenge theatre makers and audiences to reconsider their relationship with Shakespeare. We may, for example, see the Globe as a place constructed by highly skilled craftspeople that stands at a human scale against the glass and steel assertions of capital by which it is surrounded. It offers the opportunity to see and hear plays out in the air, with hundreds of other people, for a few pounds. This vision of Shakespeare's place in our culture lay behind Rice's only Shakespearean work before her appointment at the Globe: Kneehigh's *Cymbeline* (2006).

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<sup>7</sup> Lukowski, 'Rylance speaks out'.

<sup>8</sup> Tom Cornford, 'Reconstructing Theatre: The Globe under Dominic Dromgoole', *New Theatre Quarterly* 26:4 (November 2010), pp.319-328.

<sup>9</sup> Paul Prescott, 'Sam Wanamaker' in *Great Shakespearians Volume 15: Poel, Granville Barker, Guthrie, Wanamaker*, ed. by Cary M. Mazer (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp.151-210 (p. 153).

Michael Billington complained that this production showcased 'Kneehigh's cleverness' as opposed to 'Shakespeare's genius' and Dominic Cavendish bemoaned that 'the text has been decapitated, leaving only the bare body of the story walking about madly'.<sup>10</sup> The subtext of these criticisms is so clear that it almost obscures the text. 'Clever' is what men call girls. It's an adjective that withholds as it praises. 'Genius' does no such thing. It is the noun that keeps on giving. But it is reserved for the Great Dead Men. And I challenge you to saturate a sentence in as toxic a mixture of castration anxiety, fear of death and class hatred as Cavendish has managed in his image of the decapitated text staggering about.

Emma Rice has asserted, both in public statements and implicitly in her actions, that the Globe should be a genuinely popular theatre and has challenged the gendered, and race and class-based ideas that continue to dominate representations of Shakespeare. Valery Wayne wrote of Kneehigh's *Cymbeline*, that it 'conveyed not the letter of the text but its spirit'.<sup>11</sup> We might think of Rice's work at the Globe this year in the same way. Her disinterest in the literally historical has been balanced by an emerging commitment to creating a new public theatre. In this project, she has tried to counteract some of the multiple inequalities of contemporary Britain that the wider theatre is still struggling to resist. Some, like critic Kate Maltby, have argued that this project tilts at a straw man, and that Rice is not nearly as radical as she purports to be.<sup>12</sup> There may be some truth in that, but it obscures the important fact of the small but significant changes that Rice's tenure has achieved.

Before Rice, for example, Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) performers had overwhelmingly appeared in leading roles (defined as title characters and/or a play's largest parts) in touring or educational productions and in the (smaller) indoor Sam Wanamaker Playhouse. Where BAME performers had appeared in main productions, they were usually cast in roles that have been long associated with non-white performers (including Romeo, Othello, Caliban, Ophelia, Horatio, Tybalt), and they were cast by white directors. In the last

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<sup>10</sup> Duška Radosavljevic, *Theatre-Making: Interplay Between Text and Performance in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp.57-58.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>12</sup> Kate Maltby, 'Emma Rice was never as radical as she thought she was', *The Spectator* (2016) <<http://blogs.spectator.co.uk/2016/10/emma-rice-never-radical-thought/>> [accessed 9 November 2016].

Globe season, however, a new pattern emerged. There were two BAME leading roles on the main stage (a notably more diverse season than previously) and Iqbal Khan was brought in to direct *Macbeth*, with Ray Fearon in the title role and a notably multicultural cast.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, re-gendering roles to increase opportunities for women was a clear policy.<sup>14</sup>

The Globe has also seen a more inclusive *style* of production. In Matthew Dunster's *Imogen*, for example, we heard not the Edwardian formality that still dominates Shakespearean speech, but a sound closer to contemporary London. In short, Rice has set out to address the Shakespeare industry's systemic bias towards those with power and privilege. In so doing, she has begun to make what might have become a compelling case for the Globe's prominent place in London today and Shakespeare's in our culture, by using the production of his plays to question our relationship with our collective pasts and presents. But the Globe's decision has put paid to that. It has confirmed that the theatre is fundamentally committed to (which is to say branded by) aesthetic and political conservatism. Those are the stakes of these recent events.

And so we come finally to the fact that the Globe's Board has taken issue with Rice's use of the building in a way it never did with her predecessors and has chosen not to stand by the decision to appoint her that it made only a matter of months ago. The significance of her gender in these events must not be dismissed. Both of Rice's male predecessors experimented with ways of altering the Globe to work as a contemporary theatre and both endured periods of critical disapproval. Neither was removed as a result. Rice's treatment is another instance of the commonly observable phenomenon of women in high profile positions being subjected to a form of censure that men rarely receive. Rice's professed inexperience of Shakespeare, for example, was rounded upon in a way that similar statements by Dominic Dromgoole (who had also directed only one play by Shakespeare prior to running the Globe) never were. But the imminent conclusion of Rice's tenure also suggests that the artistic leaders of our biggest and most prominent theatres are being

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<sup>13</sup> Many thanks to Jami Rogers, researcher on the University of Warwick's British Black and Asian Shakespeare Project for supplying this information.

<sup>14</sup> We should note, however, that Helena was re-gendered in the other direction to become Helenus in Rice's *Dream*, and that there was no re-gendering of a leading role in the season.

seen, by some, like the managers of football clubs. They are options to be gambled with and ultimately disposable.<sup>15</sup>

This is even more concerning because none of what Rice has done has been unpredictable. She has continued at the Globe the kind of work that she developed with Kneehigh. She has created an inclusive form of broadly mainstream theatre with a contemporary edge, focused on clarity of narrative and exuberant theatricality. If the Board considered that inappropriate for the Globe, why did they appoint her? Once they had decided to appoint her, why did they not feel it incumbent upon them to stick by her? Rice has long been considered a talented director, though she has had relatively limited experience of leading an institution. She has entered a major role in the London theatre with gusto and a serious purpose, and she has delivered a financially successful first season. And she has (to put it factually) not been supported.

This is more widely concerning because of the way the Globe is funded. Unusually, it is not in receipt of core funding from the Arts Council, and is therefore more than usually dependent upon ticket receipts, and philanthropic and other donations. We have heard from the Globe that Rice's first season has 'achieved exceptionally strong box office returns'.<sup>16</sup> But what about donations and sponsorship? Since Rice's departure, one philanthropic organization, the Joyce Carr Doughty Charitable Trust, has announced that it is considering demanding the return of the funding it has given to the theatre 'to support performing arts bodies that engage new audiences', a project that it sees as contingent upon Rice's position.<sup>17</sup> It is not hard to imagine, given this statement, that the attitudes of other funders with other objectives were instrumental in the events that led to the announcement of Rice's departure. And this is important because, in a future of what ministers are fond of calling 'mixed economies' of funding, theatre makers are going to be more accountable to what may well be unaccountable groups and therefore vulnerable to

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<sup>15</sup> There are echoes here, too, of the National Theatre's recent, chaotic handling of Tessa Ross' brief period as joint Chief Executive with Rufus Norris.

<sup>16</sup> Shakespeare's Globe, 'Statement Regarding Globe's Future Artistic Direction'.

<sup>17</sup> Matthew Hemley, 'Emma Rice decision prompts charity to shelve future Globe funding', *The Stage* (2016) <<https://www.thestage.co.uk/news/2016/emma-rice-charity-shelve-funding-globe/>> [accessed on 9 November 2016].

half-hidden agendas and private interests. Editing (as Shakespeareans well know) ends up telling us most about the editor.