

An Actor Prepares

by Kyle Brenton

"I feel as if I'm entering uncharted territory," says A.R.T. veteran Thomas Derrah about *Richard II*. "The play is enormous, and when I think about it I feel very small. But I'm eager to prove myself wrong." Helping him plot a path through this intimidating landscape is director Robert Woodruff. "I'm privileged to be working with someone with Robert's courage. His theatrical vision will take *Richard* somewhere it hasn't been before. It's a quiet, philosophical play, and that's why it's such a great marriage of play and director. He has such an audacious visual aesthetic. It won't be *Prince Valiant* in wigs."

From the start actor and director exchanged ideas and impressions of the world in which the production would take place. "Woodruff encouraged me to talk about anything that struck a resonant chord with me about the play, even if it seemed tangential." This intuitive approach often took Derrah into unexpected places. "It's exciting to have so much to chew on, and I'm very privileged to start my journey so early in the process. I don't have to worry about what the set's going to look like or what images the director has in mind, so I can let my imagination run freely."

One area that Derrah's "tangential research" led to was the "Boston Bohemian" movement at the turn of the century, a group of Beacon Hill artists strongly influenced by Oscar Wilde and the Aesthetic movement with its credo of "art for art's sake." This group, led by photographer Fred Holland Day, was fanatically devoted to their art. "I love the outlandishness of it. Holland Day would starve himself and grow his hair long to photograph himself as Christ. The saga of

this artist consumed by his work grabbed me."

Another stop on the journey was James Bidgood, a '60s photographer who photographed his subjects in a wild Technicolor swirl that was revolutionary for his time. His best-known work, the film *Pink Narcissus*, has been a homoerotic classic for many years, but Bidgood refused to sign his name to it, so the artist has remained obscure. "I love his use of color, the decadence of this over-saturated palette, pinks and blues taken farther than anyone had taken them before, and I wanted to talk to him to see if he knew how seminal he has been in the development of current pop artists such as David LaChapelle, French photographer; painters Pierre et Gilles, and Japanese painter Sadao Hasegawa. So, on a whim, I called directory assistance, got his number, and went down to New York to visit him. He's as poor as a church mouse, lives in a tiny place that's so full of stuff you can barely move, has two cats, and is amazingly modest and daffy. We spent an entire day talking about his work."

A further stop on the road to Richard was the Sokol-Union of the late nineteenth century. Started by Dr. Miroslav Tyrš, this movement advocated the creation of a national gymnastic training program for adults. In addition to training the body, they also advocated Czechoslovakian nationalism and were perceived as a threat by fascist groups like the Nazis, especially when they staged public gymnastic demonstrations uniting hundreds of people. "It's interesting to me," Derrah notes, "because while it was ostensibly about health and physical beauty, there was something dangerous underneath, a coup d'état hidden within what I see as an aesthetic movement."

So what lies at the end of this twisting road? The thread that unites

all these tangents is art. "I see Richard as someone consumed by his own power, and for me that power has something to do with art. He's a poet and a philosopher; he sees himself as the artist of his world, and finally it's his own creation that destroys him. He's involved in an act of creation that transforms into an act of self-destruction." Indeed, in his speech on returning from Ireland, Richard greets the earth "as a long-parted mother with her child," and exhorts, "Feed not thy sovereign's foe, my gentle earth, nor with thy sweets comfort his ravenous sense, but let thy spiders that suck up thy venom and heavy-gaited toads lie in their way." He is so caught up in his own rhetoric that he creates poetry rather than planning for battle. And, like Holland Day starving himself for his pictures, Richard's single-minded devotion to his creation prevents him from paying attention to the facts of governance, which leads to his destruction. According to Derrah, "He slashes away at everything, destroys everything in his path in the name of art, hurtling headlong into his own destruction. Richard reminds me of Rimbaud's drunken boat."

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