

## The Road to RICHARD

Director Robert Woodruff has been planning his production of Richard II for well over a year. Unusually, he was keen to involve Thomas Derrah, the actor playing Richard, in the process from the start. Gideon Lester talks to Woodruff about the evolution of the production.

GIDEON LESTER: The last Shakespeare play you directed was twelve years ago, *The Tempest* at the La Jolla Playhouse. You've never staged any of the histories. Why not?

ROBERT WOODRUFF: I'm not particularly interested in kings. But when you look more closely at the texts, they turn out to be about far more than their historical setting. I'm now attracted to *Richard II* as a play about an artist, a man who continually reinvents himself. The text is traditionally treated as a struggle for power between Richard and Bolingbroke, but that doesn't excite me. I see Richard as a man who deliberately undermines his own power, who understands that the ultimate artistic act is to destroy his own work, and with it his self. I'm currently preparing Edward Bond's play *Saved* in New York, and when Bond was in rehearsal last week he told us that if he could, he'd burn all his plays. In his work Bond struggles to define what it means to be a human being, and he's beginning to find that material too difficult to handle. Richard is in a similar existential dilemma. Ultimately the production may describe how frightening it is to have an artist in control of anything, like a major cultural institution.

GL: Tommy Derrah has been actively involved in the design process for *Richard II*. Have you ever worked so closely with an actor at this early stage?

RW: No, though I knew from the start it was important to have Tommy on board, and it's been a great collaboration. Tommy is a wonderfully extravagant performer – an important quality for Richard – and his artistic instincts are excellent. He brought a wide range of source material to the table, and I collided his research with mine. The dialogue has been in progress for almost a year, and we continue to respond to each other's ideas.

GL: Can you give an example?

RW: He introduced me to the work of the New York artist James Bidgood, who uses an incredibly vivid palette in his photographs. Tommy made some sly remark about being tired of gray in Shakespeare productions. I'm addicted to dark tones, but by showing me Bidgood's images Tommy encouraged me to break that habit, and in Richard II I'm taking a risk with color. The first part of the production is largely pink, which is a gesture I've never used before.

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GL: Where had your own research led you?

RW: For several years I had been researching the work of the multimedia artist David Wojnarowicz, thinking that I would use it for a production of Marlowe's Edward II. I don't like to waste research, so I car-crashed the material into Richard II to see what came of it. In his art and writings Wojnarowicz described life in the gay

communities that hung out on the Chelsea piers in the 1970s. The social environment interested me and there was something about the form of a pier that seemed right for the Britain of the play – an autonomous, insular structure, surrounded by water. The idea has now been highly abstracted by our designer David Gammons, but in essence it remains a wooden pier. The set is very bare, the most open space I've ever worked with. It feels appropriate to Shakespeare, which needs to be predominantly about text and the actors' bodies. Exposed bodies will be central to the production – bodies on wood, bodies in water, bodies clothed and unclothed.

GL: How do you prefer to work with scenic designers?

RW: As when I'm working with actors or dramaturgs, the process needs to be a dialogue. I like having as many people to talk to as possible, and I use designers as a sounding board on which to try out ideas. Design is ultimately about scale and proportion – ideas are cheap and meaningless until they're given form. I outline a conceptual approach to the play, but I rely totally on my designers to provide the details of that gesture, and to evoke mood, thought and emotion.

GL: Do you find it helpful to consider how other directors are currently staging the play?

RW: As it happens I've seen five productions of Richard II, more than of any other Shakespeare play. The most memorable was that of the French director Ariane Mnouchkine, who staged it in 1981 with her company, the Théâtre du Soleil. It was one of the most striking pieces of theatre I've seen – a faux-kabuki pageant that was entirely underscored by percussion. Georges Bigot was astounding as Richard, a suffering man at the height of his artistic power, a kind

of Pagliacci figure. But it's almost more useful to see a mediocre, literal production where at least the verse is well-spoken, since it gives me a better sense of the play.

GL: You read voraciously while planning a production. The A.R.T. Literary Office has already sent you more than a thousand pages of research for Richard II – literary criticism, production histories, Shakespeare's source material, and many texts that are only tangentially related to the play.

RW: The greatest part of living in the twenty-first century is that we have access to almost limitless information. Shakespeare could only read texts that had been written by 1597, but we now have an additional four hundred years of thought to consider. We can hardly choose to ignore it, so it makes sense to incorporate it, thereby ensuring that the creation of drama continues to evolve.

Gideon Lester is A.R.T.'s Resident Dramaturg.