

# Barrie Rutter Uncensored (Founder and Artistic Director)

Issu No. 4/1

Interview with Barrie Rutter, founder and Artistic Director, Northern Broadsides Theatre Company.

Did you consider any direction in life other than one in theatre?

I was, I think, fifteen and a half when I first got on a stage after my voice had broke and I just loved it. I've no other word for it, I'd no desire really. English teacher said come and be in the school play and I said, oh I'm too busy, football, cricket, etc. And when I finally got on, I just felt comfortable. Six lamps in them days, the early sixties, I knew where everyone was. I'd an instinct for it. I didn't know that at the time, but I did feel comfortable, I know I did. And then when I scraped five 'O' Levels and was allowed to come back for 'A' Level, it seemed the only way forward but equally I was naïve. Somebody said you should go to Drama School. I said, I'll go. No, no, no, they said, you'll have to get in. I said, I'll get in. No, no, no, they said, you have to pass an audition. I said, I'll pass it. What's an audition? It was naïve right through. And equally, jumping ahead to '92, when I formed my own company, Northern Broadsides, I was equally naïve. I didn't know how on earth to get my idea off the ground. My agent said, ring the accountant, and I said, what's he got to do with it? And she said, well, he'll make you a company. So I rang him. He said, send me £600, pick a title and you're a company. And that's how that started. Ignorance is courage! Innocence is courage! Naivety is courage! That's the best.

You served your apprenticeship in the National Youth Theatre in the 1960s, presumably. How important was this to you? What did it do for you?

It was a great adventure. I was already at the end of my first year sixth that I did my first season. That was 1964. And then at school, '64, Shakespeare's quater-centenary, I played Macbeth. Then I got into Drama School. Then I went back for my second year with the Youth Theatre in '65. I was in the West End of London, aged 18, and then going back to college---if I had a chip on my shoulder, they certainly helped to raise its elevation! They'd say things like, Oh, well, you've done that. But now you're coming here to learn properly. I used to think, piss off! I left college early. I remember the head of the college said, I've cast you as Uncle Vanya. I said, I know, but I'm going all round Europe first class to play Nipple in Little Malcolm. So, I'm going. And I did. I never looked back.

Did it have the sixties' buzz about it?

The sixties passed me by. I don't know what the sixties were. I knew there was a music for me, but I never had any money in the sixties, not until very late, around about '68 and then it was gone. I remember being in the first term at college: these women used to gather and drink coffee and listen to this wanker called Bob Dylan. At least, I judged him a wanker because these women used to collect and drink coffee to listen to him. I was a fish dock lad from Hull who supped pints of ale. I was a rock-'n'-roller, Jerry Lee, Little Richard, Presley. When I discovered for myself, Bob Dylan, years later, I mainlined on him; it was wonderful. At the time, you know, one guitar, one voice and a nasal whine, very much associated with dope; none of which I was 'cos dope was secretive and quiet and you had it in corners. I was garrulous. I was gregarious. A pint-supper.

I was thinking more of the political stuff...

I'd no inkling. That's not quite true. I wasn't totally thick on what my thoughts were. Fish-dock lad from Hull. At the time I got a very good grant to college; I'd got a private bursary grant; it was available in Hull to go to the Youth Theatre. The state paid for everything. I knew what sort of state help I was getting. I knew there was an enemy out there, and whether you want to call it the Tory Party, you can, or if you want to call it organized Christianity, you can. The big jig for me to dance, and lead the dance, is the disestablishment of the church. That's the big dance for me to be led. I just hate the fact that our rules and our government and our parliament are all sworn in by the so-called established church.

Did you have a Christian upbringing?

I sang in the church choir. I loved singing. But, no, nowt Christian about it. That working-class 'there's a god' type Christianity but no-one ever went to church. Nobody bothered. Weddings, funerals and christenings, like everyone else.

You weren't involved with Methodism or anything else?

None of that sophistication. There was no articulation of anything like that in my house. No books whatsoever. None. No.

And then Shakespeare comes to be at the heart of your very being...

Well that was really through the Youth Theatre first, but, you see, I'd always had a love of the rock-'n'-roll of language and poems with a metre and a rhyme, you know, like when you're reading in school class---well, I'd always read, I'd always be asked to read 'cos I always like to rock-'n'-roll. And even now, when I do so-called master classes it sounds a bit grand but I say, from Elvis Presley to Shakespeare, it's only rock-'n'-roll. And I do the rock-'n'-roll of formal verse. And even now in rehearsal, every day, I never talk about character; there's no such things as characters there are roles to play with characteristics which are given by the author. But there's no actual character. And even now, I don't talk about character, I talk about music. I say, your music's wrong there. Look at it again: it's got alliteration; it's got rhyming couplets; it's got very short vowels; it's got monosyllabic words two lines full of monosyllables. And it has a music. Get the music and you'll get the sense. These poets aren't idiots. They didn't write because it was esoteric. It was the best way for them, in an open-air theatre, four hundred years ago, to call attention to themselves. Formal verse calls attention to itself. You never see a juggler apologize for his skills. He can't, or he just can't juggle. And formal verse is exactly the same. You can't sack the juggler. The detractors of what I do say, oh, it's not very subtle. Well, fuck subtlety! What they mean by that is dot, dot, dot, dot soap-opera actors: modern psychological acting where all the lines are provided, in spite of the lines. And I hate that. I don't hate it per se, 'cos it fits sometimes, but not in formal verse. Some say, oh, that's not my character. Bollocks to your character! Who do you know speaks in rhyming couplets? Well, you do on this day, so do it! The trick is then to convince people you can be that sort of person, not that you are it. That's not the trick. That's why it's called acting. There's something existential about acting, and the modern, investigative world, and the modern world of film and television, where they talk about their characters oh, don't they talk about their fucking characters! Stanislavski re-wrote a lot of his stuff and said, I have no way into formal drama. The Greeks, Moliere, Shakespeare---he had no way in because the formal drama defeated, and he acknowledged that. People forget that bit about Stanislavski. They forget he re-wrote a lot of stuff, or changed his mind, or had his mind altered fifteen years later after he wrote this stuff that has then gone to America, been watered down and then has come back across the Atlantic as the great guru of acting. Bollocks!

That's all very interesting. I also think, from my own personal point of view, that Shakespeare isn't actually that difficult if you sit and read it, let alone see it acted in the way that you and your people do it. You can be put off Shakespeare at school by all this bloody analysis. When you come to read it, it's perfectly comprehensible.

Especially if you get up on your feet and read it. Colin Welland, my friend Colin Welland told me a lovely story. When he was a teacher, he had a rugby team under-11s or under-13s out on the pitch. You know, Yellows versus Blues. And he said, we came in and I was doing English with them the next lesson. Before I let them shower, we went straight into the gym and we did the forum scene from Julius Caesar: the Yellow team and the Blue team. He said it was electric: the best I've ever seen that scene anywhere. Of course, it was raw. Of course, it was untutored, mawkish, but, my god, it was two sides. Completely got the point, and one was in yellow and one was in blue!

Tony Harrison, poet and fellow-northerner, is described in the literature about you as your 'guru'. From his seminal adaptations, *The Mysteries*, *The Oresteia* and *The Trackers of Oxyrhincus*, all performed in the northern voice, grew the idea of Northern Broadside. Would you tell us something about your relationship with Tony Harrison and the qualities of his work that mean most to you?

Yes. I was invited in 1980 to join Bill Bryden's group at the National to do the *Mysteries*. I only knew of Tony Harrison at that point. I didn't know him. He was off in New York doing the libretto for *The Bartered Bride* and marrying Maria Stratus, the opera singer, soprano. Anyway, he came back to the National, saw what we'd done with what became *The Nativity*, the first third of the *Mystery* trilogy, started to talk to me and found out I was from Hull and by no devious means within ten minutes we were talking of Rugby League and about the great Hunslett team of the sixties, mentioning names like Gabbitas and Gunny, which Rugby League fans will spot. And I was talking to him about the great Hull pack of the sixties: Johnny Whitely, Bob Coverdale, Mick Scott, etcetera, etcetera. And I thought, my God, this is someone who I like. And then he said, I'm just coming to the end of translating *The Oresteia* and I've been working on it for ten years for voices like yours. That was, then, the meeting and then that went on and he wrote TV for my voice, he wrote *The Trackers of Oxyrhincus* for my voice and Jack Shepherd's. We've done plays at Delphi together, we may do one next year in Delphi and we're planning and talking all the time. He's seventy this year, I'm sixty this year but we've still got ideas. I keep saying to him, thank you for all your wonderful works. He says, but listen, I don't speak them. You do. Thank you. It's a real, genuine love of each other's skill, but, basically, from his original creativity. There's a whole tombstone he calls it his 'tombstone' a book that Bloodaxe brought out about Tony Harrison --- everybody from professors in America to me and my first sentence is, of all the people in this book, I get to speak the bloody stuff

Tony Harrison has translated some of the classical Greek plays, and adapted translations of them. He, and you, obviously support the transposition of works from one culture to others. To me its importance is self-evident, but there's quite a lot of resistance to this in certain quarters.

Resistance to what?

To even translation because so much is lost in it. You get a lot of people saying, oh yes, but, what's the point because you lose so much. But my point is that if you don't even make the attempt, how the hell are we going to get to know each other?

Well, the older I get and the more old plays you do, classical plays, you realize that the stuff of human conflict has not changed whatsoever, from the Greeks to the present day. If I do a play by Shakespeare, you automatically edit because you're doing something four hundred years later. The next production edits from you because there's a different designer, different actor, different director.

It's almost a translation each time...

Absolutely. It's someone's interpretation each time. And the transposition from language is something else. I get bored with the idea of somebody saying, oh yes, it took me nine months to translate Ibsen's play. And you say, nine months! It should have took you nine years: it's in verse. All these prose versions of the Greeks.... The only thing that the western lyre, since the Renaissance, has given to ancient Greek drama, the only thing of any worth is rhyme. The Greeks didn't rhyme; spellbinding open verse, but they didn't rhyme, and we as translators in various languages have given rhyme to the ancient Greek plays. It's actually our only gift to the past, apart from the continual celebration of words and thoughts. And as for Shakespeare: I've just done a family tree for the programme for Wars of the Roses. I put in a box, 'cos I wanted to make it fun, 'This family tree has been changed to suit Rutter's re-working of Shakespeare's re-writing of English history.'

You make the point completely clear: we're doing that all the time.

We're doing that all the time. We're doing that all the time.

It shouldn't be an issue at all.

It shouldn't be an issue. It shouldn't be an issue. And people who hang on to the past so much, like fundamentalists of any religion, or, at least, the one book religions, which seem to me one book fascists and I don't care who I upset with that it becomes fascist, as if the past matters in that way. The rock that all the one book religions fall down on is the so-called veracity of their book. Not one single thing can be proven in it (sic), not one, not one scintilla. It's the fascism of the fairyland against the world we live in. I notice that Tony Harrison said, after his American sojourn, that, "I don't read America with the same spiky class instincts as I read England." The use of the northern voice in Northern Broadsides productions is self-evidently an assertion of 'spiky class instincts', and gives the company its particular definition. Yes, it is. Only because it's mine, via Harrison; he taught me the dignity, really, of the sound of my own voice. There was a sort of Green Room scuttlebutt in the RSC, years ago, that Rutter could never play kings 'cos he had an accent. Whether I was good enough to play it in their eyes, that's irrelevant. So you always played like Tony Harrison says in his poem Them and Us I played the drunken porter in Macbeth 'cos 'he' had an accent. Not for him the Byron and the Keats, although Keats was a Cockney man originally. But also, our first English classics were The Mystery Plays, of which the York and Wakefield and Chester cycle were as dominant as any others. Our first English theatrical classics were northern plays. And via that, and via the fact that I've never lost my accent, ever -- I mean, I can do other accents, but what I can't do, I can't do posh; I can't do RP; I've never been able to do it -- the groundings, if you like, of what I later did in '92, were beginning to be sown. Not that I knew it. The thing about the spikiness, as in Britain and America, the class system in America is based on money. People said to me once, oh, the streets of America are paved with gold. It's called education. And I said, bollocks! It's called money. You can buy education 'til the cows come home over there. You can't earn it in quite the same way as you can do over here. But I know what it means about 'the class system': we have it and it's centuries old; it's older than the discovery of America. It just so happens that it's a happy accident that I happen to be born in the same county as the man who instilled that thought in me and, at the time, was the President of the Classical Society and yet was writing 'fuck', 'shit', 'piss' and 'cunt'. When questions were asked in Parliament about who's this upstart, and, in The Times, he wrote back under his title as the President of the Classical Society of Great Britain, and just latinned and greeked them out with his erudition! How dare they? Pompous asses!

He used their snobbery to take it back to them!

Probably earlier in the twentieth century it wouldn't have been possible to do this (ie, Northern Broadsides), would it?

Oh, no, it wouldn't. No, no, no. Right to the mid-fifties: it took the Butler Education Act of 1944, and by natural osmosis into society, it didn't really blossom out until about the late fifties. That's the time scale it took. Just in simple terms, you go back through history and you realize why the Labour Party was created: because of the inequalities that were about. It's nothing profound to see where things like that come from but that '44 Education Act, we still owe a massive debt to, and we still do. Rightly so. Wonderful piece of national legislation. No other country has them. No other country has them in quite the same way. And no other country and this is the other thing I do notice when I'm abroad in any single country abroad, is the notion of the BBC. It is utterly unique. No other country has it in those terms, where it is completely independent of government.

And then having to fight for that independence....

And then having to fight for that independence under the guise of freedom. It's all about money. It's all about real estate. I would die for the maintenance of the BBC.

It has fostered so much, hasn't it?

I don't know how people can watch television in America and then come home and say we have to do the same on the BBC. I don't know how they can do it. It is unbelievable!

The whole political agenda is a sort of Americanization, isn't it?

Total! I get slightly upset. I read the critics. I read the TV critics. They don't see it when it goes out on Channel 4 or ITV with five commercial breaks in it. They don't see it like that. They see it continuous. They have no idea how bloody awful it is at point of delivery. I work on TV. Nobody works less than their top integrity, but when it's put together and then presented with five breaks, often it's got no fucking integrity at all. And yet everybody's integrity making it was supreme. You get found out very quickly if you don't work at the top of your integrity whether you're a lighting man, cameraman, actor, writer, wardrobe, or whatever. You don't get the next job. It's the nature of it. But when it goes out to the screen, something just happens.

You describe Northern Broadsides as 'northern voices doing classical works in non-velvet spaces'. The unconventional venues in which you play, including your home base, The Viaduct, here at Dean Clough in Halifax, and the physical movement within these spaces on the part of the actors and the audience, creates a very different, deeper relationship between the two than that reached in 'velvet spaces' and reaches a different audience than the one that habitually goes to the theatre.....

The first thing to say about that is we're running out of them. The world has changed: health and safety, the cost of a local supporter who says, yes, we will change this old barn into a proper acoustic place, put seats in, put in heating and get a licence for you to play. There aren't many around now. There were many more in '92 when I first started. We opened in a yacht-repair shed in Hull. It was a modern yacht-repair shed. Then we played the old Bradford Transport Museum and Richmond's army and Richard III came off the number 43 Wibsey bus! I always used to use what was there. And then we went up to a transport warehouse in Barrow and then we played Middleham Castle, which was Richard III's favourite house when he was alive, the proper one, and we played Richard II there. So that was the first year. Then we played Salt's Mill the next year and outdoor gardens up in Yorkshire and all that. And then we went to India that same year. I invented the phrase, 'non-velvet spaces'. If you use it, acknowledge that I invented it, 'cos the Arts council are beginning to nick it! The truth is, we're playing more and more velvet spaces 'cos we're asked to. And, in the end, I can't afford not to acknowledge the invitation. And, of course, audiences in these spaces, they don't know that one's preference is for Skipton Cattle Market, which is, still, the only cattle market in the land with a theatre licence. We were absolute pioneers in that whole creation of that; and, especially since 'foot-and-mouth', where the cattle market itself has evolved into other areas -- not everybody likes it, but they've got to exist and we played Oedipus there during the foot and mouth epidemic. Now, in the play, it's a play killing people, and although foot-and-mouth wasn't exactly killing people, it was, because livelihoods were being taken away, suicides were more and it was never, ever more pertinent than when we played it in Skipton Cattle Market. It was riveting. So, although we have our space here, in Dean Clough, in The Viaduct, which is still very much a found space, a non-velvet space, they are running out. And if there are buildings in the town or the city which have a support system and seats, people say, well, why bother looking for an empty mill, especially when they have to foot the bill. And they're quite right. So, more and more of our stuff is in formal theatres.

I think the non-velvet spaces bring something fantastic to the whole thing in terms of the audience, particularly: you are part of the thing; you are drawn in, in a way that you're not in the same way in the formal theatre.

You're quite right. Often there's a pride in their own space being used for something unexpected. We played a railway shed in Elsecar, near Barnsley, and this woman she came to see Twelfth Night and I knew because I talked to her afterwards, I don't think she'd been out of Elsecar. She'd never seen theatre in her life, but, because she worked in Shed 21, she came to it. And she came out, and she'd never seen theatre before, and she said, well, that were nice; that were very nice and if it'd been any nicer it'd 've been right nice! You can't translate that! You just have to take her at full face value. A completely naïve, wonderfully innocent statement from a woman who's had an unexpected great time in a room she worked in, and now she's seen metamorphosed into Twelfth Night. Magic! Magic!

The overriding emphasis in any Northern Broadsides' production is language. You appeal, first and foremost, to the ear. I'm particularly interested in how it all went down in Chandigarh.

Let me ask you. What's your interest in Chandi?

Well, I'm doing this interview for Tadeeb, which is bi-lingual, cross-cultural, as you know, and there's a great tradition in Urdu culture of presenting the poetry and stories by recitation to massive audiences. At a poetry session in northern India or Pakistan, you might have a hundred-thousand people and they will go on all night with the poets and they will boo off the poets whom they don't think are good enough because they know what they're hearing.

Wonderful! Wonderful!

And they will join in. It's a popular thing.

I didn't know that. That's grand. Well, we played Chandi. We played the little theatre in the rock garden. Nek Chand, who was Corbusier's number two was actually a Pakistani. When Corbusier left, having done the main job, there was all this building detritus left, and Nek Chand broke all these tiles down and built all those animals that are in the rock garden at Chandi, along all the paths. In the middle of this is this arena which safely seats about four hundred people. But we got about nine hundred in that night because we were only doing one night. The Governor of the Punjab came. There are steps at the back down onto the stage area. I was coming down dressed as Falstaff, with a big fat belly and padding, and an armed guard walked you down in view of everybody! Because the Governor of the Punjab was there and the British Council and all that.....Anyway, half way through Act IV luckily I was on stage so the audience saw my expression the Governor of the Punjab got up and left and I gave him a mean and moody, bitter look and we carried on, which meant that all the walkie-talkies and the armed guards left as well, so the last half an hour was a lot better. At the reception afterwards, I said, what happened to the Governor of the Punjab. Someone said, well, like all big people or little people, if they suffer from hay fever, they have to go. He suffered from hay fever and that's why he left! Eighteen months later he was shot and killed. I couldn't help a little bubble coming from my head saying, well, you shouldn't have walked out of Merry Wives then! --- We had a wonderful time, a wonderful time.

And did you find the audience responsive and unpassive?

Absolutely, absolutely! We'd done Poona, and then we did Bombay. We got beautiful people in Bombay. We played in something called an RAF auditorium --- Indian Air Force then Delhi and then we went up to Chandi. Chandi was like a breath of fresh air. I wanted to stay in Chandi and play more but the tour was already booked. We came back to Delhi and then we went to Calcutta, then down to Madras and Bangalore. They were the best audiences, in the south.

How do you mean?

If you like, Calcutta, Delhi, Bombay, they get things and at the time, in '93, Madras and Bangalore didn't get as much, so they were much more grateful and hungry. And every ticket was free it was a bank thing -- so, really, the keenest got in there. And the audiences in the south were just wonderful, really wonderful. We just took ourselves and costumes and a few basic props. Didn't take any scenery. That was the whole point. We didn't have any scenery. We'd opened in Salt's Mill. We went just as we were, and in Chandi, of course, you didn't need any because it was the rock garden itself that was the scenery: this little theatre in the rock garden. We met Nek Chand. He came to see us.

He must have been quite old.

In '93, he'd be about in his sixties, I s'pose, early seventies. Shand (sic) and Shakespeare, I called it, I remember. He was at the reception. A goodly double: Shand and Shakespeare. He was responsible for the rock garden, as such. I don't think Corbusier had anything to do with the rock garden. I think it was Nek's thing. And he built it out of all these building supplies. I think what happened in '93, India changed its banking laws but hadn't written the legislation underneath it to support it. So there was a big furore. I know Standard Chartered Bank lost a lot of money and had to let off a lot of workers, so they were desperate to do something for the country to say sorry, or something like that, and they said to the British Council, get us some culture. And this was like in August for a tour in November. Now, this is very quick. I'd already been talking to my contact in the British Council about a trip to Denmark.

And she said, what are you doing now? I said, Merry Wives. She said, oh, that awful play! I said, have you seen it and have you read the reviews? They're sensational. She said, no. I said, anyway, what's it for? Oh, she said, no, I'm not telling you. I said, go on, tell us. She said, trip to India in November. I said, we'll go! She said, no, no Barrie, no, no. I said, bring 'em up to Oldham and the British Council from India and the Bank came up to a mill in Oldham and saw us and the deal was done at the interval. And then I went on a ten-day 'recce' tour and went to all the cities and then we went back in the November. So that's how it came up: British Council and Standard Chartered Bank. It was Merry Wives, the production.

So that happened, again, by chance.

By chance. Absolute happenstance. Serendipity. But, we were able to respond. I like that. I love that.

A more formalized, hidebound company couldn't possibly do this.

Not that quick, at the drop of a hat. No. In '96, we got invited to Brazil, with Anthony and Cleopatra. But, Vanessa Redgrave had just took her Anthony and Cleopatra there, which was awful, and Brazil said we never want to see this fucking awful play again! So I said to the British Council, don't lose the invitation. We'll do the Dream, I said, out the back of my head, 'cos we'd done it the year before. And so they had to check if the Dream had been to Brazil in the last ten years and if it had it couldn't go. Anyway, we did the Dream. Within three weeks, we got a tour together to include Brazil and then came back and played The Globe. If you said, can you do something tomorrow, or in the middle of the Wars of the Roses at the West Yorkshire Playhouse --- can you do the Passion Play over Easter, I'd say, yes!

Because you could.

Because I'm mad! I like all that stuff!

Do you carry your actors with you when you make these rash decisions?

There's a core which I could get together. Difficult things are easy. It's the impossible that has its attractions.

When was the Brazil trip?

'96

So, if you get the invitation, you'll be off.

We can go.

Your audiences are obviously very different wherever you go, aren't they? The Indian audiences were very popular, or were they more invited, or what?

I don't know. I mean, you can't pretend you're playing to village people, but then, do you want to. You've got to ask yourself this. If tickets are going to be made available for a show, then the outlet is by the written word. If you can't read, you aren't going to have access to it. We can't kid ourselves that this is egalitarian. It's always a mixture and often you're playing to the beautiful people of whatever place you're in. You can't help that. Having said that, we certainly get a much more of a local audience in a lot of our venues and certainly in the found venues. One of my favourite letters, which I sent straight to Lord Gowrie, Minister for the Arts, was 'Dear Mr. Rutter, We enjoyed your last show here at Skipton Cattle Mart. We cannot come to the next one because we're lambing.'

You have developed some detailed and inspiring educational packs, based on some of your productions, for use in secondary schools. What feedback have you received as to their effects?

Everything has a colour of me, of us. Even if I don't write it, then I proof it and edit it. Everything that goes out in our name has to have our stamp on it. And the feedback that we've had so far now, look, obviously, nobody's rung up and said I think your education pack's a load of rubbish! but the feedback that we've had has been nothing but positive. We used to have an Education Officer 'cos we got funding for it, but now that funding's dried up and we can't really afford it out of our core budget. What we do, because we go to so many buildings where they do have Education Officers, we go through them. They broker it locally and then we as the team go in: actors, musicians, or me; or they come to us at the theatre of performance. We cannot do that much because it's all extra to our core work, but every time we can tap in, then we do. But, having said that, I've always had an open-door policy on rehearsals: anyone can come in. You make a row, you get a bollocking, but anyone can come in to our rehearsals. I've always had it. For instance, on our present production, there's somebody coming in at the very beginning, in the middle and the end because that suits his university lecturing. York University are doing my script of the Wars of the Roses as one of their modules for an MA. It's available and I've made rehearsals available. They will visit the rehearsals and then they will visit the production and they are looking at a piece of editing: my edit for the Wars of the Roses. I'm very happy to do that and I've said to the actors, look, if this gets too much, I'll protect you. Don't worry, I'll be there, and I'll tell them all to piss off, but, at the moment, we have a complete open-door policy. And I love it when people come into a rehearsal.

I mean, we are actors, after all; you get a preening from everybody! Somebody's going, who's that, who's that, ooh, and so you do what you're doing that little bit better or with a little bit more shine on it because you've got an audience! That's what we are. I love that! Anything that makes it less precious.

You are preparing for your next production, Wars of the Roses, made up of Shakespeare's Henry VI, parts I, II and III and Richard III. You're doing the three plays over a whole day. Please tell us something about this Wagnerian-like project!

Every venue, every Saturday we do all three plays. There's no point doing three plays if you don't put them together, is there? It's our fifteenth season, and this from someone who never knew he'd have a second, never mind a fifteenth. I'd one good idea and that was to do a Shakespeare with an all-northern cast and the play was Richard III and that was in '92. And that was as far as I saw. Once it had opened -- audiences, peers and to a lesser extent funding bodies agreed that it should go forward. So we did and here we are, year fifteen. Think big! Wars of the Roses. I'm a Roses man by birth and abode. I've always wanted to do 'em, and, really, what better timing in terms of our fifteenth year? Also, it was West Yorkshire Playhouse's fifteenth year. Ian Brown, the Artistic Director, he and I were nattering eighteen months ago over a glass of wine, and I said, I'm thinking of something big for the fifteenth, and he said, oh, it's our fifteenth, and I said, well, I'm going to do Wars of the Roses. He said, would you like to do it here? So, we got the back-up of the West Yorkshire. We play there for a month, and then we tour for nine weeks after that and we bring it back here to Halifax. So, we bring it home. We finish here. It's the three Henry VI plays of Shakespeare which I've edited down to two, and those two plus Richard III. What we've done, we've called it Henry VI, Edward IV and Richard III. We're at the end of week two of rehearsals at the moment. Now, if you're going to call something the Wars of the Roses, then you have to edit to the title. And that is exactly what I've done. And every word is Shakespeare. I mean, it's cut and edited, it's cut and pasted, but it's Shakespeare. And every play is free-standing, stands alone. I've edited it and am directing it for that purpose.

But plays I and II will have a slight cliff-hanger to take you into the next one.

How long did it take you to do that editing?

Altogether, with the reading, and then the editing and the re-edit and then a further edit, it took me about a year. I was doing other things. I did a big spring tour and then an autumn tour as well. I wasn't just doing that.

A busy year!

Good stuff!

Why these plays now? You've partly answered why these plays now: it's the big project for now. Is there any connection with the contemporary chaos unleashed by global capitalism and American and British imperialism?

It's a big project, and whatever else...and as I've said before, the stuff of human conflict is always contemporary. Now these were battling, rabid, wolf-pack lords. You don't need to go too far to see 'em. I'm playing the Duke of York, who's the father of Edward Clarence, Richard and Rutland. And my death Queen Elizabeth says, stand him on this molehill here. And, yes, I were doing the rehearsal and I stood on a molehill and at one point she says, hold his arms while I crown him. I'm stood on a molehill, which, for us, is just a concrete block, arms held, there's a blade at my neck pushing my head down 'cos she's a small woman and she's made a paper crown. And she crowns me with this mocking paper crown, stood like that, and somebody said, that's the shot from the jail, Abu Ghraib with the Iraqi prisoners and the Americans. Absolute perfect shot. Now, I didn't do it like that but, by extension, standing on this molehill, then I put the crown on she's too little to reach up-she's only four foot odd it's a perfect snapshot of Abu Ghraib. You don't need to labour it; you don't need to dress them in American fatigues. People get it. You don't need to shoot Macbeth with a machine-gun to say we're now setting it in Kosovo. Because the stuff of human conflict, as I say, is always contemporary. Always, in these great plays. Always. That's why I love 'em. I don't set them in modern dress as such. It's just a timeless thing. Basically, it's budget as well. We don't get a lot of money and I like to employ a lot of actors! And there's twenty-one actors in this. We're playing ninety-seven parts between us. Alright, we don't have ninety-seven costumes, but you have to accommodate the story-line for ninety-seven characters. How best do you do that? How deft do you do that? How wittily do you do that? And so it has a timeless nature with slight medieval overtones and then when we move up to Richard III, we move in to a so-called modern dress, which is quite deliberate. I don't know why! Just is!

Oh, I know why, it's because at the end of Edward IV, at the end of the second play, the Lancastrians are utterly defeated, so it's a white world, so to celebrate that white world, which ends with a christening of one of the princes, who becomes one of the princes of the tower, we're going to have a white world and a white modern world. The only fly in the ointment there is Richard himself.

What are your thoughts on Harold Pinter winning the Nobel Prize for Literature? Did you read his acceptance speech? If so, what did you think of it?

I read his Nobel speech in The Guardian. He's quite right, of course. Whatever ravages his body is going through at the moment, his brain is still as razor-sharp. Got a great deal of time for him. Not everything: sometimes, you think, oh Harold, shut up! Don't be daft. But you can say that about all of us! If that's the worst you can say about Harold Pinter, then fine! He's earned his spurs.

Of course, when you reach prominence, you get asked about everything.

You have to say something. Stick a microphone in front of you. These people who are gods on the football field, they come off and they're, 'er, er, er'. Of course they are. But yet we persist in asking them these stupid questions. 'You've just won the Cup. What does that feel like?' Ooh, fuck off!

Let me feel it! Just go away!

They're not paid for their erudition.

No, I thought Harold Pinter was... And I read Heaney's as well when he got it a couple of years ago. And Heaney's was a wonderful song for poetry. It was political as well, but it was a song for poetry. I read one or two adverse comments about Pinter's speech, but, hey, the whole thing was set up by what? Someone who discovered dynamite... And so, you know, the Nobel, whatever the panel were doing, they knew who they were choosing. They knew what they would get. They weren't going to get soft soaped and thanks very much, isn't it wonderful and I'd like to thank my agent!

And my mum!

Or my mother. Yer...

A headline to an article by Lyn Gardner in the arts page of The Guardian, last August, devoted to a resume of theatrical offerings at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, read, 'Playwrights? They're so last year.'

Any comment?

Well, the Fringe, sometimes you have an audience of one sitting in the back of a taxi 'cos that's your play. All the time I'm in charge of what this company does, then my playwrights are Aeschylus, Sophocles, Shakespeare, Moliere, Goldoni. I make no apologies for saying, on a fringe-type festival, where often the spoken word is the last thing that's celebrated... There's been a movement: since the Berlin Wall came down, and South Africa, the British Council moved into non-verbal world-wide tours. Dance became massive. If you were a dancer you could go all over the fucking world, because, although the British Council is supposed to spread the English language, unless you were the RSC or the National, you could go to hell. They don't like me, anyway, 'cos I'm a maverick...., Brazil was a particular offer, India was a particular thing. So, the non-verbal is dead easy on the Fringe. The non-verbal is remarkably immediate, but often you go to these things --- and I often describe it like, as soon as you've come out, you've won the FA Cup, and quarter of an hour later it's melted 'cos it was made of ice. Now, having said that, great experiences or good experiences are terrific! I'm not decrying it; I'm not knocking it. Playwrights are the people who perpetuate the stuff of human drama. And, she's probably dead right. There were about fifteen hundred, sixteen hundred things that she could have gone to on the Edinburgh Fringe. You don't need playwrights for stuff like that.

Michael Coveney, writing in The Observer, last October, argued that serious criticism 'is all but dead', reflecting a wider problem 'that theatre itself, once a benchmark of our culture, has been sidelined.' What do you think of contemporary drama criticism? Do you think the latter quote has any real meaning?

... All the new technologies that come into theatre and we're supposed to celebrate them videos and... -- I fucking hate them! The two-dimensional technologies that come so much into theatre again, I'm not saying you can't have a good experience but if you want cinema or the television, then do it. The theatre is about the imagination. They might be right, but it's coming down and down and down to a more concentrated experience, and maybe being done by less people, but audiences are still holding up. And those of us who love theatre and work in theatre, I think including Coveney, 'cos he does, we ain't going to go quietly. If I'm a dinosaur, I'm going to fucking tread the earth as long as I can!

I'm sure you will!

And advocating what I do as something worthwhile.

I didn't quite see what he meant by theatre being sidelined. Was he thinking of a time when theatre had a bigger role?

I think, possibly. But the world is more diverse now. Everything. You can escape much more now. You can escape in public now. Stick your ipod on, and you escape. Or, the number of people who walk down the street talking to each other and all that impinges on. And you talked about a hundred thousand at a Kashmiri poetry recital, but we still all want ipods and things. When the Berlin Wall came down, they wanted McDonald's and pornography! They were the two big things that the East wanted. And you think, oh, don't, but, you know, who the hell are we to say, no don't.

Whether we choose to use that or not, we've got it.

We've got it....

I can't see theatre disappearing, or live music for that matter, in spite of all technologies.

This is another thing about our productions as well: all of our music is acoustic. I've never plugged anything in other than a light in my productions, and I don't want to. Again, this is about employing people; not technicians, per se, just to plug in something.

Even to that extent, you are a live performance.

Yes.

I defy anybody who's experienced a rock concert, or whatever, the live thing is just magical and you can't replicate it in any other form.

The whole experience. Everything about it. The wonderful thing about theatre, the other wonderful thing is it's ephemeral. I mean life's ephemeral, I know, but it's ephemeral and you don't carry last night's audience with you. It's a new audience tonight and if you're a big hit you can't drink too much champagne because you're on tomorrow night! If it's a bit of a flop, you can't drink too much scotch because you're on tomorrow night! There's none of this thing: here y'are, stick this in a machine and watch my performance on while I go to the pub! Once you're on, theatre is about acting and the maintenance of the performance. And that's a skill. It's also a craft and an art, and if there's a word better than 'art', then I've yet to come across it. It is an art. They say, oh, he's a natural actor. Is he fuck? I'm not a natural actor. I'm an actor who can maintain it, who has the craft to get there and then maintain it. That's what acting is. Film can capture natural acting. But if you have to do something nineteen times, it can't.

Wars of the Roses concludes with Richard III, the play with which you launched Northern Broadsides. In a sense, you've come full circle. What does the future hold for yourself and Northern Broadsides?

There is a bit of sweet circularity there, isn't there? And I'm not playing it. I started with Richard. I played it in '97 when we did it again. But I'm not playing it this time. I'm too old. It also makes me free to do the trilogy: to direct the trilogy.

When you started Northern Broadsides, you started with Richard III, and as you say, you didn't know what the hell was going to happen after that. Do you still work in that way? Or, have you got rather more long-term plans?

In terms of Northern Broadsides as a company, of course, there is a bureaucracy now. It's much bigger than the initial idea. Although we're a lean machine -- there's basically only me and Sue, who's the General Manager -- we still cast as per, but, for instance, we started on the 23rd January, I only get four weeks off in July, and then we start the next one. And then I only get the month of December off. For nine months of the year, we're employing. And on our grant, that's not bad; and we're doing Wars of the Roses and we're doing Blake Morrison's translation of Goldoni in the autumn. It's two outlets of the year, basically, which are the big two touring seasons. Spring's always bigger than the autumn.

Are you looking any further than that?

Well, I've got a new play on commission for next spring, plus a Shakespeare: that'll be a double bill. I think I know what I want to do in the autumn, but even if the actual subject changes, we know we're going to do something, because that's what we do.

Northern Broadsides marries all your loves, in an artistic sense, doesn't it?

Yes, because if it doesn't, I make it do so.

You've got that control..

I've got that control. This ain't a democracy. Fuck all that! You just get confused. And the rehearsal room's not a democracy. You have to stand by a decision sometime or later. I used to describe my marriage, with a smile, I hasten to add, because she's still my best friend, my ex-wife, as a 'democratic dictatorship'. I was invited to agree with her decisions.

It's rather like that in Northern Broadsides, is it?

Yep! Everyone's invited to agree with my decisions! No, I love, I really do encourage everybody to improvise, physically. Not verbally! I couldn't give a monkey's about somebody else's version of Shakespeare. But to improvise physically and to improvise on the word 'how', that's what's exciting. Never ask 'why'. Why.....? Because it bloody says so! Now, get on! 'Why', I find irrelevant. 'Why' is a sort of wank that's come out of screen acting. It's a ridiculous question, 'why'. 'Why am I doing this?' 'Cos you have to!

Why am I alive? Yer.

Ask me, 'how?' Then you have fertility.

'How' is the question.

'How' is the question. And that's why I always encourage people to go for broke. I always say,

I want you to rehearse large, all the time. I don't like this creeping and then suddenly it all comes out. Fuck me! Where's that been? I can't do anything with it this late on. So, go to the moon first and then we'll come back to Yorkshire! But try, you know expansive rehearsals. Not first day, not first hour...but when you put things together, go for it! It's big language, big ideas. You're big. Whether you're dying or you're out of breath, you've still got to reach the furthest seat. And all of that takes rehearsal and takes practice. It's my job when I sit out front to orchestrate it. I do the orchestration. That's a very good way of describing the director's role.

I encourage everybody, even though I formed the company and I act in it, I encourage everybody to be as good as I want myself to be. And that is one of the strengths of the company.

It certainly comes across in performance: the sincerity and the heart in it...

Generosity of spirit. That was Lyn Gardner in The Guardian said that.

Rather a good note on which to end up. Thank you very much, Barrie.

A pleasure.

---The End---