

//ABOUT MACBETH. ENTREVISTA A DECLAN DONNELLAN//

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(El que segueix és la transcripció d'una conversa de Miquel Berga amb Declan Donnellan, director de la prestigiosa companyia britànica "Check by Jowl", coneguda pels seus nombrosos muntatges de Shakespeare, que va tenir lloc al Teatre de SALT, durant el Festival Temporada Alta, el novembre de 2009. Donnellan hi va presentar "Macbeth".)

Miquel Berga: The Macbeths manage to convey to the audience an extraordinary mixture of excitement, joy, doubt, ambition and mutual dependence in the first scenes of your production. How did you achieve that? Did you work with a precise rationale for the actors to express so much?

Declan Donnellan: I am very lucky to work with such wonderful actors and we spend a long time working together on a scene and trying it in many different ways. No, I absolutely do not start with a fantasy of how a scene might come across. We explore many different aspects of how these people connect with each other and *how these people connect with the space in which they find themselves*. And then we set up the scenes but the scenes, I can assure you, are slightly different every night. That is the only way that we can ensure that they are alive. I think it is very important in art to make priorities, and very often we fail not because we make priorities but because we have been too cowardly to de-prioritise. For me the most important priority is that the work that we do is alive and not dead. I let that be my guiding light and I fall back on the simplicity of that goal. So the litmus test is not "is it right or wrong?". The litmus test is not "do I like this or not?". The litmus test is always, and must always be, "is it alive or not?".

MB: Judi Dench reminiscing her own involvement as Lady Macbeth in a 1976 production of the play recounts that Ian McKellen –seeking an insight into his role as Macbeth- asked Trevor Nunn: "*He's Nixon isn't he, Macbeth?*". To which Nunn replied: "*No, no, he's not Nixon, he's Kennedy. It's the golden*

couple; everyone loves the Macbeths". To what extent would you take Trevor Nunn's remark as revealing? Has there been any contemporary situation you found useful to relate to in the development of your own production of the play?

DC: Of course many many things get said in rehearsal and many of things that are said in rehearsal are conflicting, because the thing that is important on Monday may not be the thing that is important on Tuesday. We all use short-hand in rehearsal, as we try to get down to deeper layers. And it is perfectly legitimate to say as a throw-away remark that the Macbeths are more like the Kennedys than the Nixons and that may be useful at a given moment in rehearsal. We always use fragments from our every-day experience. But of course Macbeth is neither Kennedy nor Nixon nor Obama; Macbeth is Macbeth. We can use different facets of what we see on the news every day to help us find the life in somebody. But the life in the situation that is being enacted will be its own independent life, so you cannot possible map anything onto the character and situation you are playing. Because every character in every world, in order to be alive, must be unique.

MB: Your last Shakespeare play presented at the Temporada Alta Festival was *King Lear* with the young RSC. As it happens, *Macbeth* was the play Shakespeare wrote immediately after *King Lear*. Do you feel that that chronological continuity can be traced in the nature of the two plays? After having had yourself such an intense experience of the two plays can you comment on how do they compare? Are there things you know now you did not suspect before?

DC: There are always things that I discover that I did not expect before. I choose to work on the plays of Shakespeare because he continues to surprise me. I think you need to approach Shakespeare in a state of humility and ignorance. I don't think he is there to teach us anything, I think he takes us by the hand and guides us, as an equal, in some absolutely extraordinary landscapes. There are many many themes in common running through all of Shakespeare's plays and certainly in common with *Lear* and *Macbeth*, apart from the fact that both were kings in our damp northern island! One of the great themes of *Lear*, which Shakespeare plays with, is the theme of "Nothing", as in Cordelia's "Nothing will come of nothing." "Nothing" rolls like a great millstone through the heart of the play and round and round its bowels. The theme of "Nothing" is also alluded to many, many times in *Macbeth*: the theme of unbeing.

MB: And, of course, there's what *Macbeth* comes to realize too late: "it [life] is a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing"...

DC: Indeed! It is an audacious aspect of Shakespeare's work that he often tries to stage the thing that isn't. Staging the thing that is, is much easier. Staging the thing that isn't is more difficult. For example, we cannot really stage death, because the essence of death is that it is about absence and it is extremely difficult to make absence present. Of course we can stage people killing each other, but the experience of absence is very very difficult to stage. In *Hamlet* and in *Troilus and Cressida*, and indeed in *Lear*

and Macbeth, Shakespeare expounds the outrageous theme of inaction. Most drama is about action and he attempts, normally with terrific success, to stage the effects of inaction or inactivity itself. This is part of the great challenge of Shakespeare and part of his genius that he often tries to stage the other side, the side that we must experience in order to be fully human. In order to experience experience itself, we must also to a certain degree experience non-experience. It is a tremendous attraction for Shakespeare and for us all, that we feel these themes running around Macbeth in lines like “What’s done cannot be undone.” The theme of the thing undone is very very important.

MB: Some scholars have argued that, though all theatre depends, in one way or another, on illusion, Macbeth does establish illusion as a central preoccupation of the play (the study of illusion as a structural foundation of the play, as Nicholas Brooke put it). Would you agree with that?

DC: I would. My family is Irish and an uncle when I was a child once told me that Shakespeare’s great tragedies fell into different themes and how honoured we should be as Celts that when he came to write the great tragedy of the imagination, he honoured the Celtic people by making it about the Celtic imagination. I agree now that this seems a very sentimental view, but it’s not without its truth. Of course the whole play is very much about the imagination. To what degree are the witches imagined? How does the imagination affect what we do? How dependent are we on the imagination, and what happens when the imagination becomes cancerous? What happens when we use imagination to defy the rules of time; as Lady Macbeth says “I feel now, the future in the instant.” Is she defining the great “now”? It is because the play is about imagination, that we wanted to encourage the audience to imagine as much of the play as we possibly could, and that’s, for example, one of the reasons why we used so much mime; because the audience needs to take responsibility for imagining the play.

MB: You have insisted on the fact that Macbeth is not so much about murder but about the conscience having committed it. Yet that does not stop Macbeth from carrying on with his cruel deeds. I mean, that is not the kind of awareness that creates doubts and has paralyzing effects and that we tend to associate with Hamlet. Could you comment on that?

DC: Hamlet and Macbeth are very similar characters who make very different decisions. They are both paralysed by the fear of action and by the fear of inaction. Hamlet, as we know, doubts so much that he fails to act. But Macbeth’s need to act springs from a very similar place; that he cannot bear to be the cat in the adage: ‘Letting ‘I dare not’ wait upon ‘I would’, / Like the poor cat i’the adage’. His wife taunts him with his incapacity to act. Conscience isn’t really what I had in mind. I had in mind something more humble than conscience: I use the word realisation. For example: it is sometimes said that the dramatic action of Oedipus takes place offstage. I hotly disagree with this. All the dramatic action of Oedipus takes place onstage. The only place where dramatic action can possibly take place is onstage. The dramatic action of Oedipus is not about a man who murders his father and sleeps with his mother. That is not the dramatic action of the play. The dramatic action of the play is watching a man realise

that he has murdered his father and slept with his mother. The dramatic action must take place in the present now, as we watch it unfold. Similarly I used to think that Macbeth was about a man and a woman who conspire to murder an old man but I now realise that's more of the prologue to the play. The play proper starts when the two of them start to realise what they have done, and more specifically how they try to deny the growing realisation of what they have done. This is more primitive than conscience. Conscience is quite a complex reaction that is connected to morality and our sense of right and wrong; I am talking about something much more basic, just the simple realisation of what we have done. In the sleepwalking scene Lady Macbeth famously asks: "who would have thought that the old man had so much blood in him?". I used to think that the magnificence of the line lay at the end of the line – the poetic intensity of the amount of blood an old man might contain, but more and more I realise that the important part of the line is in fact the beginning. It is the "who would have thought" – that is the moment that shows us that, in other words, "I wouldn't have murdered him if I had known that he would die as a result". I am afraid many of the terrible things which we do in life, is that we never face up to the consequences of our actions. I don't think the Macbeths would have murdered Duncan if they had realised that he would die as a result. I don't think any of us can point the finger and say how stupid they are because such stupidity is part of the human condition, it is not to do with a lack of intelligence, it is do with self-deception.

MB: Well, its is always safe to suggest that Shakespeare's drama is "about us" but perhaps you are in a position to offer an answer to a straight question: "What's Macbeth all about?"

DC: I can't possibly tell you what Macbeth is all about because I don't know. Like all of Shakespeare's plays it changes the more you get to know it. I suspect that if we got Shakespeare in and interviewed him he wouldn't be able to tell you what it is all about. Because he has found a way of making something which has so many facets that we all look at it in different ways, it is like an extraordinary matrix of human experience and however you look at it, it always seems slightly different. And that's his genius. To let the many meanings of what he has done leave his control.