

//ON SHAKESPEARE, WAR, AND LEADERSHIP.
A CONVERSATION WITH EDWARD HALL
APROPOS OF *HENRY V*//

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This conversation took place the morning after the Spanish premiere of Propeller's new production of Shakespeare's Henry V directed by Edward Hall in the "Temporada Alta" Festival 2011. It took place in Girona on 7th December 2011. It is published verbatim with only minor editing to improve clarity.

**Miguel Berga – You are a man of the theatre by right of birth, aren't you?
How does it feel?**

Edward Hall – It never felt right to me, really. I suppose.

MB – But you've gone as far as working with Peter Hall, your own father...

EH – Oh, yes. We worked together on more than one occasion. Last time we worked together was in Denver on a ten-hour adaptation of the story of the Greeks and Trojans written by John Barton called *Tantalus*. In the end, it took a whole day to watch, from 10 in the morning until 10 at night – 12 hours. So yes, theatre has always been home, but then I think theatres are very natural places for children. As a child I always loved the theatre and I've seen my child come to feel the same way. You take a child and they recognize the exploration of the world in which they live through plays and I think as you grow up you can lose sight of that; it becomes less distinct sometimes. To a child it is very, very clear: there are the adults and they are doing what comes perfectly natural

for a child to do, which is role play, to pretend and explore boundaries and morals of right and wrong. And you see kids taking on characters and it's very interesting. You see the truth emerge, which is what theatre is. So, I think as you get older it gets more complicated but as a child...

MB – And you had “uncles” like John Gielgud or Harold Pinter. How was your relationship with Pinter?

EH – Yes, I played a lot of cricket with him. I'm a great cricketer; I have a great passion for cricket. I played for Hampshire and Surrey up to the under-19s, so there was a moment when I was possibly going to be a cricketer.

MB – I guess for both Pinter and yourself, theatre was a second hobby.

EH – My partner at the Hampstead Theatre is also a cricket-lover and so when there's a big match on when we have a meeting, the first thing we have to do is discuss the cricket and get that out of the way. It's a great metaphor for life, cricket.

MB – We'll get to sport later on. There is this curious thing, the historian Edward Hall as the source for *Henry V*. There's no connection I imagine.

EH – No, I'd love to look back through time and see what my family roots were, but no, we've never done that and no, there's no connection. It must have been an accident. My grandfather on my father's side was called Reginald Edward Arthur Hall and my father was then Peter Reginald Frederick Hall and I was Edward, taking on my grandfather's second name as my first name and taking my father's first name as my second name, so I became Edward Peter Hall, so I'm EPH. That's, actually, where that name comes from.

MB – It's kind of shocking to see someone called Edward Hall directing *Henry V*... Anyway, why *Henry V* again? Why should a play that glorifies war and hate in the name of God be produced again and again? You've done it twice.

EH – Three times, actually. Aren't we surrounded by this? I mean, it's really interesting listening to a heroic character describe a conflict in terms of doing God's will, fighting for God. He's an Elizabethan jihadist. And it's a play full of very turbulent contradictions, which is a brilliantly realized description of the experience of war. It's very exciting. It's sexy, terrible, ferocious, disgusting, heroic... It's all these accelerated areas of human experience, accelerated by war, catalyzed by war, and *Henry V* wonderfully mixes all those elements. It's not a straightforward piece of writing at all that *does* glorify war and imperialism, but it also says that it's disgusting, and it's hypocritical and it's self-seeking. And it isn't fought by people who are necessarily heroic and each character in the play has a very interesting end: Bardolph is hung, Nym is hung, Pistol becomes so bitter that he goes back to England to live out the rest of his life as a thief; you'll meet him now in London on the streets.

MB – In spite of the speech on Saint Crispin's Day, the “happy few, the band of brothers” did not become nobles, as they were promised.

EH – But they did because they are on stage, being described as still alive and still living. I mean it's the wonderful self-fulfilling prophecy of the play, when the character on stage is saying, “This day will be remembered until the ending of the world,” and you think, here I am, it may not be the end of the world yet, but it's 2011, 412 years later, and it is still true.

MB – Such a pity you didn't have a Shakespeare to write about the English Civil War and the beheading of Charles I...

EH – Well, there you are. And it's true, that episode is probably a far more nation-forming moment in our history than Henry V. I mean it's the moment when you can see the formation of our modern English democracy. It is so eccentric and muddled, part House of Lords, part Commons, we still have a royal family. In a very British way, we haven't tidied anything up. We'll keep the Queen, and the Prime Minister will still have to go and ask permission to form a government but she's not really in charge. So, everything exists in this rather strange limbo and it works in quite an inefficient way but that story doesn't really live in the public consciousness because it's not been dramatically realized.

MB – And yet it feels like that war was the toll you paid as a nation to avoid the French Revolution.

EH – Yes, I agree. The Wars of the Roses and Henry V are sort of alive in people's consciousness today because of Shakespeare. There's the power of literature!

MB – Between your first production of *Henry V* and today, your country has gone to war. Was that somehow in your mind?

EH – Oh yes, always. I did a play earlier this year written by the wife of Tony Blair's Chief of Staff, Jonathan Powell, and she's a journalist called Sarah Helm, and she recorded everything that she heard and saw in the run-up to the Iraq War. It's very much on my mind. As a result of that play – it's called *Loyalty* – Chilcot has delayed the publication of his inquiry into Blair's part in the Iraq War and whether or not he lied to us because he's seen from the play that there is evidence that was not available to him but that he's now asked for. So, it's absolutely right at the front. I think Tony Blair is a war criminal of the highest order.

MB – How does he compare with your Henry as a leader?

EH – He compares very simply. Tony Blair believed that what he was doing was right full stop. Henry believed it was right to go to war but the difference, I think, is that Henry consistently turns towards God and tries to hear what God wants. And as a metaphor, it's the character looking into himself, asking questions of himself, saying, “Am I doing the right thing, because my responsibility is so enormous?” So he's almost the opposite of a tyrant, the opposite of a tyrannical warmonger because he questions himself all the way down the line. And in the end he believes he is going to lose but

understands that there is something to do with honour that pushes him on. As the play strips him away, you are left with a man of honour, and honour is quite an old-fashioned thing but the play describes honour wonderfully: The reading of the French dead, the honouring of the dead on the other side, as well as the reading of the English. He's insistent on reading out all the names, on the honour of that ritual. Tony Blair does not have that honour; he has the warmongering and he believed that what he was doing was right but, I think, discovered that he was wrongly-informed and he made some very bad assumptions. He hasn't admitted that he got it wrong. Now Henry would; Henry's very open, he doesn't lie, he doesn't lie to the French, he doesn't lie to Montjoy. He admits that his army is weak and sick. He's very open, which is what makes him such a confusingly charming murderer.

MB – A nice monster!

EH – Yes. It's quite confusing.

MB – He doesn't lie but he is quite a cunning character, your Henry...

EH – He's good at propaganda. Also, Henry grew up on the streets; Hal grew up in the pubs and taverns of Cheapside. So, he is a street fighter and he could walk down the street and know exactly how to handle himself and what people are thinking on a street level, because he's grown up with the Bardolphs, the Nymms, the Pistols, that's where he spent his life as a young man. So, he's a mix of urban street fighter and royalty.

MB – There was something in your production that reminded me of *Beowulf*, with the soldiers telling the tale of a heroic past. The question of what is or what makes a hero resonates throughout the play. What do you think about that? What is a hero?

EH – It's a very difficult question to answer because you can't answer that in an abstract way. You have to answer that question in a specific way. If you were to ask a soldier, who is a hero, more soldiers more often than not will say somebody who fights for the man next to him, because that is what all soldiers do. So, you don't fight for your country, you don't fight for your king or queen, you fight for the person there. A hero, in abstract terms, is somebody who's prepared to sacrifice himself to help others.

MB – Can one be a good-hearted person and yet a good, efficient leader? I think the play seems to dramatize that.

EH – It does in some senses. What is a good leader? When you are at war, when you are in conflict, a leader is somebody who has the ability to make a decision. If you speak to anyone who has been in combat, who has been under fire, they will say that it is not important necessarily that you make the right decision, but it's important that you make a decision, because when you are in that situation, people are not thinking rationally and there's a lot of adrenalin flying around and somebody needs to pull everyone together straight away, without thinking. It's hard for me to describe, as I've never experienced it, but from the people I have spoken to who have, that seems to be a common, recurring thing that they would say.

MB – It seems to me that an interesting thing about the play is that, beyond the fact that it is a study in leadership and of Henry V as a ruler, it also gives insights into the ruled, the way that the commoners react.

EH – Yes, it does. And of course it begins with a very complicated political story where you've got the Church trying to persuade the State to go to war so that they won't tax them. They think that if they manage to confuse him by giving him a big one-off payment, he'll ignore this bill that is being used to try to strip all the money away from the Church. So, it's complete politics. And then the Archbishop of Canterbury launches into a huge, long, confusing speech about Henry's valid claim to the throne of France which is designed to baffle Henry. Although it makes complete sense, all Henry wants to hear is a go-ahead signal. He's out as a man saying "I know. I know all this. Challenge me at your peril." There is a lot of politics in it and it's quite cynical.

MB – You know what Hazlitt had to say about Henry: "He was a hero, that is, he was ready to sacrifice his own life for the pleasure of destroying thousands of other lives". Would you go along with that?

EH – One has to differentiate between the literary Henry and the historical Henry. You have to be quite careful when doing that because Shakespeare is using the story of Henry to explore a myth and a hero. He's not using it to tell the story of the historical Henry and the historical Henry was a very, very brutal and uncompromising man, a man with a lot of blood on his hands. And I think to a certain degree that is reflected in the play because the French kill all the boys who are looking after the English luggage and the English kill all the prisoners. It's *quid pro quo*, but the historical Henry is a very violent, murderous man or, if you want, an extremely effective soldier. You choose. I think that, unfortunately, there's no such thing as liberal politics or liberal thinking when it comes to war and there's no such thing as a Geneva Convention. We like to think there is, to make us feel comfortable, we love to think that the construct of the modern army can give us control over what is essentially a very wild act: murdering another human being.

MB – But if we think, as it were, that war is an essential part of our culture, and we have a king facing a war situation we must admit he proves to be a very efficient guy at his job.

EH – He's extremely good, yes. Shakespeare's Henry is a man not given to boasting, he is intelligent, considered. He succeeds against all the odds and then he buries the dead respectfully, he doesn't gloat, he never falls foul of narcissism, you know. He straight away says that this is not our victory; it is God's victory. He removes himself from the equation. It is a sort of idealized version of the real Henry.

MB – You are an all-male company and war seems to be the ultimate experience in male bonding. That must have been somehow in the air?

EH – We were joined for a period of time by the British Army when we were making this production. They trained us for six weeks. We had two people from the British Army; we had a marine reservist and another infantryman who came and did

sessions with us every day, up on the common, near where we were rehearsing. It was good and I joined in too.

MB – And yet for the audience today there is a suggestion of the typical gang of British hooligans going to a soccer match.

EH – When you read or watch the play, there is a chorus that is full of bathos and constantly pulling the rug out from under you. You have a chorus saying that the youth of England are on fire, everyone is making armour, preparing their horses, everyone feels warlike, and then he shows you a scene of two guys in a bar arguing over a woman and fighting, and those are the people we're talking about, that's the reality. It's a very interesting contradiction that he is serving up. The infantrymen are going to France for one very good reason: they are going to France to make themselves rich, to line their own pockets. They are going over to Europe and smashing the windows and cleaning the shelves out. They're rioters; it's organized looting. That is why the play doesn't shy away from the truth; this is the truth of what happens. When Henry is in front of the gates of Harfleur, he says to the governor that if you don't open your gates now, this is what will happen: your infants, your children will be spitted on pikes and their mothers will watch, it will be unimaginable carnage because I won't be able to stop them, and it will be your fault. It is wonderful propaganda but also he's using the truth. It's propaganda, he's a great manipulator, he's a great politician but he bases all his manipulation on truth.

MB – He knows his people.

EH – He knows that once you let slip the dogs of war, you won't control anybody. You tell me the last time we had an organized war. There's never been such a thing. The atrocities that occur when any war happens, we don't even hear a tenth of what goes on. And that is what he is talking about. So the play doesn't shy away from those things. I think it is not a disingenuous piece of writing; it's an honest description. And I think there are very unpleasant facets of that that are uncomfortable, and that's why I am attracted to the play because it has a degree of candour and honesty that I recognize. If it didn't have that and it was an imperialist piece of glorification, we wouldn't be doing it.

MB – Going back to sports and the insulting gift of tennis balls from the French Dauphin. Someone described the play as a deadly tennis match...

EH – A deadly tennis match, yes.

MB – Some games get totally out of control. For all his faults, Henry V appears to be a leader who is obsessed with the human cost of war. Did you want to emphasize that?

EH – Right at the beginning he says to the Archbishop of Canterbury, "Tell me the truth because think about what will happen when you wake our sleeping sword of war. Once we begin, we will not stop." So, he is very aware of the consequences, he doesn't take the decision lightly and he is at pains to impress on those around him that they need to speak very carefully and think very carefully about what they say because

the consequences of Henry's actions will, eventually, be the result of what they say to him. That is why he is so angry when the Dauphin sends the tennis balls and he feels, I think, a deep, deep sense of anger that this man should treat the lives of thousands of people in such a frivolous fashion. To him, the Dauphin is being callous about his people because this will knock mothers from their sons, this will knock castles down... That's not the way to deal with such serious matters; it is irresponsible and a crime against humanity. So, I feel that is why that scene is there right at the beginning and Henry is very conscious of that all the way through.

MB – Perhaps that's why we have Shakespeare here portraying a ruthless warrior, but one that anticipates Hamlet in a sense. His thoughtful Hamlet is already there in Henry V, don't you agree?

EH – Yes I do. What's interesting about the character of Henry and actually many of Shakespeare's leaders, even Richard III, is that they have the same moment of loneliness before a battle, of doubt, which they resolve, somehow they resolve it. In *Richard III*, Richard resolves his doubt before the Battle of Bosworth by embracing his fate. Henry does the same thing: he resolves his doubt by embracing his fate. He asks God for forgiveness and realizes he is not going to get it and realizes he is on his own and it is just him and his honour and that is it; that all that's left. Hamlet doesn't come to those conclusions; that's his difficulty: he can't conclude anything. So I think what is interesting about that play is that he writes a character that goes in circles. Just before the Battle of Agincourt, which I think is the most beautifully written section of the play but in many respects it is the hardest for the audience to absorb because we watch plays in a different way now – it's a two-act indoor thing, not a five act outdoor thing – we see Henry examining the nature of kingship and what it is to be a leader and how lonely it is and how no one will understand what he feels and how can he deal with that and how can people speak truthfully to him. He is in a dream, he's just isolated. Richard has the same doubts. Hamlet's doubts go on and on and on and are not resolved.

MB – Wouldn't you say that there are ironies at play here? Isn't Shakespeare also being ironic, in a sense, in showing us how Henry goes on and on with these various things that sound very deep to us, when, in fact, he is well aware of his more prosaic final motives?

EH – It is ironic, yes. It's not an unusual story; it goes on and on and on. What I look for in Shakespeare plays are the resonances and echoes that I kind of understand, that I think connect the play to the present. They can be very useful in taking away any lens you might need through which to understand the play in the past. I always look for those visual images because it helps, I think.

MB – But you didn't want to emphasize the irony of the play? Do you think that Shakespeare is portraying characters that are truthful to themselves?

EH – The effect might be to understand ironies and contradictions and if an irony is a contradiction then yes, they are all over the place, everywhere. You can't act that, you have to play the character with great belief. You can't act thinking that this is the effect I want to have. It's actually very straightforward as a text; it's very linear, very

direct, very muscular and confident. There are a lot of contradictions in the play, which I've talked a bit about. I look for those; they are always interesting to me. The moment someone says, "I'm a hero," and then he behaves like a criminal. You are always looking to seek those moments out because Shakespeare is very, very alive to that. If I think there is anything that characterizes his work for me – and I think I've directed about half of the canon by now – it is his ability to show you the opposite truth. The moment you feel you have understood the truth of a motive or of a human character trait, he will then flip the coin and say, "Ah, the opposite could also be true." It's like a reflex in the mind that is always doing that and makes tremendously good drama and is a wonderful antidote to the way we are asked to absorb the world through modern media. Modern media seem to need to boil everything down to the lowest common denominator so that it has punch and you can absorb things very quickly and simply. So, everything is simplified and, of course, the simpler things become, the further away from the truth they are. Shakespeare takes you way away from that. I mean if he wrote a newspaper it would be great to read but they wouldn't sell any copies because it wouldn't have the usual simplified headlines.

MB – But he would inevitably be on the brink of becoming cynical, with his capacity to look at different motives, different sides to everything...

EH – But why would that be cynical? There is no cynicism; he writes people with great heart. He's not cynical about the world at all. He is of the world.

MB – Do you really think that he is just showing different sides to everything? He could as well say: look at our king, seducing this Queen of France while he obviously has other motives...

EH – No, he doesn't judge his characters. That's what is so wonderful about directing or acting him; you don't feel the author's hand. He's clever, very, very clever.

MB – You must know him quite well by now.

EH – When you read some of the corrupt texts you can feel that it is not him. You just know that it's derivative. You can pick out the bits of Fletcher in *Pericles*. There's an extremely set way he writes. He'll write speech, first line, subject of the speech, speech explores the headline. At the end, two, three, four lines to sum up, so if you haven't understood everything in the middle, because you might not be as literate, then at the end you'll get enough to get the plot. So, he's writing for everyone, covering all the bases. People will say who they are, what they want, where they are going and if he ends the scene on a tragic note, he'll try and pick up the next one on a comic note, and they'll bang up against each other all the time. Those collisions have to happen very fast on stage. If you make the mistake of introducing too much heavy scenery and you finish a scene and you have a long scene change, then you've lost the connection between the end of the last scene and the beginning of the next and over the course of an evening you won't find the rhythm, the developing rhythm of the play. When you get to act V and things are really taking off, you'll lose it. There is a sort of set of rules and ways of articulating that are consistent, robust and very, very solid. To go into a rehearsal room, they don't let you down.

MB – He never lets you down.

EH – Never. As a director you put the right people on stage and they speak and just tell the story, follow the handbook. If it doesn't say she's angry, then don't be angry, because it's written in a way where people describe their feelings. So, I will have a piece of descriptive verse that might be describing love and I should only feel love when I'm describing it and then the next line I'm suddenly into story, just narrative, nothing else, just tell the story. Your feeling as an actor shouldn't get in the way of telling the story. Then the next line you are being angry, so just describe your anger but don't describe your anger on the storyline. It's like a piece of music; it's scored exactly and very, very clearly. It's not rocket science. It's like riding a bike, I'm afraid. I'm so sorry. I'd like to tell you that it's really difficult and that I'm incredible but actually it's not, it's very plain and clear. You read Congreve or you read the Restoration writers or you read Marlow and you're in a different landscape where things are much more complicated to unlock on stage. They are not so user-friendly. You go to Byron, a Shakespeare nut who copied lots of iambic and wrote several plays but he can't do it, he couldn't do it to save his life. You recognize what he's trying to do, he's trying to write derivative Shakespearean verse but no one has managed to repeat it.

MB – Going back to what you said at the beginning about children and your own experiences, in the beginning of *Henry V* Shakespeare begs the audience the suspension of disbelief. Is the theatre still a tool to describe reality? Is it still an efficient way to deal with real issues through the language of fiction?

EH – It's a great way of exploring the world. I think it's very immediate, very intense and I think that as time goes on, it will feel to people like an increasingly intense experience. I said this 10 years ago, actually, when I was asked and I was feeling at that point, that people's experience of the world, the way they communicate, the way they relate were becoming more and more efficient but more disconnected. Actually, email is an extremely inefficient way of communicating: you don't get tone, some people don't understand, it takes a long time to type it all out and people have forgotten that you can pick up the phone and have a conversation. With the creative energy of a phone conversation you can exchange more information and develop an idea that may take two or three weeks typing away. The way we are communicating has the appearance of being more efficient in some instances, but is actually less involving so people are not required to become so involved with each other directly. The idea for a social network is a contradiction in terms. The theatre is a very intense way of exploring the world because it is life, you can smell it, you can see it, you are gathering together with a group of people who you don't know, sitting in a darkened room and, if it works, you're feeling the same thing together at the same time, with this big group of strangers. It also gives you the experience of trauma, of moral dilemmas in a very real way without you having to pick up the consequences, you can leave them behind. So, it's a very intense way of exploring the world, and theatre does that in many different ways.

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MB – I hope you'll keep working in the theatre for some time, then. Will you?

EH – I will.