

'Cruel to be kind': the radicalism of Robert Icke

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By the time I meet Robert Icke, at the end of a long day of rehearsals for the West End transfer of *Hamlet*, I, too, feel like a dreaded sight. Biblical early-summer rain has soaked me to the skin and drummed on the windows of the Union Chapel in Islington, north London, breaking the actors' concentration as they work out how to move the production from the Almeida, a 325-seat theatre, to a venue that holds 796.

I sit on the sofa to dry out, hoping it's not the one that Andrew Scott plans to hide behind at the Harold Pinter Theatre in central London in a few days' time. The lead actor is here, relaxed and laughing in a blue shirt and yellow Converse; there is none of the whiff of sulphur that hangs about him as Moriarty in the BBC's *Sherlock* or his extraordinary, volcanic *Hamlet*. As stagehands remove masking tape from the floor and the rest of the company say their weekend goodbyes, Robert Icke stands serene. There is something of the Nineties student about him: big, round glasses, black T-shirt and light blue jeans. He wouldn't look out of place in an early *Blur* video.

But he's much too young for that. After all, there are two things that everyone in the theatre world knows about Icke. The first is that he is young – disgustingly young, thrillingly young – the director of seven acclaimed shows since joining the Almeida and just past 30. The second is that he thinks a lot of theatre is crap. "Certainly more evenings at the theatre are boring than not boring," he told the *Times* in October. He walks out of shows at the interval, he said, "all the time".

At the Almeida, where he is associate director, he has focused mostly on classic texts, culminating in a *Hamlet* that has now transferred to the commercial stage. He loves Shakespeare as much as he hates the cult of Shakespeare, all doublets and what he calls "actor voice". He also hates period dress. "It's about a weird kind of nostalgia for the past, because, you know, 'It was safer then and there were no brown people to fuck things up,'" he tells me as we eat in a nearby restaurant. "I find period dress as an aesthetic choice to be like a political choice – lazy and safe."

Icke is London theatre's golden boy. The only other director of his generation who inspires anything like as much buzz is Lyndsey Turner, who is so publicity shy that she doesn't even have a Wikipedia page. Although she won an Olivier Award in 2014 for *Chimerica*, her 2015 *Hamlet* – a blowsy epic at the Barbican starring Benedict Cumberbatch – had disappointing reviews.

By contrast, Icke can apparently do no wrong. His version of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* has just opened on Broadway, and his translation of Friedrich Schiller's *Mary Stuart* will follow *Hamlet* to the West End next year. Over Christmas, while the Schiller play was running at the Almeida and *Hamlet* was in rehearsal, he also directed David Hare's *The Red Barn* at the National. Next April, he will stage *Oedipus* in the Netherlands with Toneelgroep Amsterdam. He watches each production at least once a week, continually refining it.

This success is why critics worry that his click-bait pronouncements will overshadow his talents. "He doesn't seem to have an edit function when it comes to public speaking," says David Benedict, the former London critic of *Variety*. "There are times when he appears to be on some kind of mission, but I'm not sure what the mission is."

Henry Hitchings of the *London Evening Standard* agrees. "He's 30 and everything he's done has been very successful. He's already this grand eminence in the British theatre, but that doesn't mean he's the finished article." Kate Maltby, who reviews for the *Times*, adds: "He is the subject of real hatred and envy by his peers – it's the response to youthful success."

Yet his mentor, the Almeida's artistic director, Rupert Goold, is sanguine. "He has got a reputation for being very controversial. People imagine it must be arrogance," he tells me. "But he's really not. He has moments of great doubt. I remember after seeing a rehearsal of *Hamlet*, I had a few thoughts, and I could sense he felt he had a lot of work to do. He was having his own *Hamlet* moment."

Icke sees himself not as a provocateur – theatre's Damien Hirst – but as a radical, in the old sense of "going back to the root". Goold says that the pair of them are always talking about the "Dyson factor". "No one thought to put a big ball in the middle of a Hoover and, oh, look, it's made the Hoover a million times better," he says. "So what's the Dyson factor for George Bernard Shaw, or Schiller? What's the big round ball that makes it better?"

OK, so what happens if we do to Robert Icke what he tries to do to his texts: strip away the click-bait? What is it that makes so many people swoon over his productions?

Act I: Oresteia

"I hadn't seen any of his work," says Hildegard Bechtler, who has designed sets and costumes for four of Icke's shows. "But straight out of that first conversation, I wanted to collaborate on the Oresteia."

There was one problem: there was no text to work from. "I didn't have his version, so I got a bit panicked about it. It was a jump into the dark in every sense for me." That was because Icke was translating the text himself, creating a family saga around Orestes, who kills his mother to avenge his father.

"When I look back on Rob and his development," Goold says, "the moment that accelerated his career was when he wanted to adapt the Oresteia himself." The play was conceived as part of a Greek season at the Almeida in 2015, but it became the standout success.

Until he picked up his Olivier Award for Oresteia – becoming the youngest person ever to win the Best Director prize – Icke was a cult hit rather than a mainstream success. Born in Stockton-on-Tees and educated at a Church of England state school, he decided at the age of 15 to become a director after seeing Kenneth Branagh in Richard III. Returning home, he wrote to the play's director Michael Grandage, who offered him a two-hour personal tutorial. But Icke didn't enjoy the drama scene at Cambridge, where he studied English at King's College. He told the university paper Varsity in 2014: "There was a lot of cliqueness and I thought the work was rubbish."

While still at school, he co-founded a youth theatre company in Stockton, and he repeated the exercise at Cambridge with an outfit called the Swan. By 2009, however, he was considering giving up, having been told by the National Theatre that its lower age limit for associate directors was 28.

Then he met Goold, who was the artistic director of the Headlong touring company. Their meeting has been mythologised: one critic tells me a Chinese whispers version in which Icke "went up to [Goold] in a lobby of the theatre after his play and told him it wasn't very good".

The real version is less dramatic: they met at a function at the Almeida. Yet there is a kernel of truth to the story. At his interview for the assistant directorship at Headlong, Icke was asked to give a "two-minute takedown" of one of its shows. He chose the phenomenally successful Enron and quickly identified a flaw in the structure that Goold hadn't seen in two years of working on it.

"When I first met him for the interviews at Headlong, I read his CV," says the older director now. "I thought, 'This is the comedy version of an academic CV. The highest A-level in the country! The best degree!'"

Perhaps the apparent ease with which Icke has excelled has left him intolerant of the compromises made by others. He never reads reviews, he tells me, partly because critics get such small spaces in which to dissect a play. "A lot of them, they just aren't good enough at criticism to be able to spot [a theme] and go, 'That's what's going on.'"

For their part, more than one of the people I spoke to wondered if Icke's oppositional stance dates back to his 2014 Almeida production of a play called Mr Burns. It was a new work about a post-apocalyptic society that has fashioned a mythology around The Simpsons. The bad half of the sharply divided reviews called it boring, unintelligible and too long. "In the final act, it all got really weird with the actors putting on gold outfits and playing out some sort of Nativity scene," wrote Tim Walker in the Telegraph. "This bit looked like it was directed not so much by Robert Icke as David Icke."

But Mr Burns sold well, and the Almeida's audiences – who were notably younger than the critical establishment – liked it. (A friend of mine who saw it recalled sitting next to a critic who proudly announced that she had never seen The Simpsons.)

"There is a slight generational divide, as much to do with the receptiveness of younger generations to a more European style of theatre as anything," says Andrzej Lukowski of Time Out, who is close to Icke's age. "Mr Burns got very polarised reviews. He was quite distraught by some of the reception to that."

Although Oresteia was more rapturously received, the notices didn't change Icke's opinion that much theatre criticism is shallow. "I had a thing in Oresteia which nobody has noticed at all," he

says. "Because the ancient Greeks believed that sneezing meant that the gods had gone into your body in some way, and the sneezing was a sign of the presence of a god, there is a series of strategically placed sneezes in *Oresteia*."

Come on, I say. Presumably everybody thought: he's worked this company too hard and they've all caught a cold. He pauses. "I don't know," he says. "I never asked them."

Act II: Mary Stuart

Two women, dressed identically in black trousers, white shirts and black jackets, walk up to the stage. There is silence in the theatre as one drops a coin into a bowl, where it spins and lands. Heads. Tonight, it is Lia Williams' turn to die and Juliet Stevenson will order her death.

Schiller's *Mary Stuart*, first performed in 1800, was even more unpromising as source material for a modern audience than *Oresteia*. When Icke first asked his two lead actors to read it aloud, the old Victorian translation they had to use lasted five hours. His reworking recognised that this was a rare moment in early-modern history when the fates of two powerful women were intertwined. Each night, one protagonist would be executed and the other would live with the responsibility for making that happen. "As soon as I had the idea of them doing *Mary Stuart*, I thought, 'Brilliant, but which way round?' I read it again and I realised that their interchangeability in the play dramaturgically, and their longing to be the other one, was the way to do it."

It wasn't the first production to play with this kind of dualism: for Danny Boyle's 2011 *Frankenstein* at the National, Benedict Cumberbatch and Jonny Lee Miller alternated as the scientist and the monster. But by making the assignment of roles part of the drama, watched by the audience, Icke emphasised the arbitrary nature of fate.

Kate Maltby, who wrote notes for the programme, is ambivalent about this treatment. "I loved it as a piece of theatre. I just hated it as a feminist and a historian," she tells me. "His vision of the play is of two women who are mirror images of each other. It was sharply executed but it's part of a long male tradition of seeing women as interchangeable."

I make a similar point to Icke. The play reminds me of being asked in my late teens, as part of a personality test, whether I identified more with Marilyn Monroe or Audrey Hepburn. Now, I would probably ask: are those really the only options? "It's like there are two different sets of characteristics, of which we all have a bit of both," he says. "The whole question of that play is: is Elizabeth strong enough to kill off Mary, and can a Mary ever kill off an Elizabeth?"

The dramatic structure sets the "doomed, romantic, instinctive" Mary against Elizabeth, "who has thought things through, kept all her personal life out of the tabloids . . . Can [Mary] ever defeat the woman who got to the top? Equally, though, if you're Elizabeth, are you prepared to take the bit of yourself that is Mary Stuart – sexual, maternal, all those traditionally female qualities, and behead that?"

Or you could put it another way, Icke says, smiling as he acknowledges the cliché: "Can't a woman have it all?"

In the Almeida's staging, the climax of the play is an extraordinary, wordless scene. As with *Oresteia*, Hildegard Bechtler built Icke a revolving stage. After Elizabeth has ordered Mary's death, the revolve starts, a pop song by Laura Marling plays, and the doomed queen is undressed – by men – down to her shift, ready to be executed. Her triumphant rival, meanwhile, is dressed – by men – in a skeleton version of the cumbersome farthingale and white-lead face paint of the period. "Undressing one and dressing the other had a strong visual impact," Bechtler says. "One was going to her death and was liberated, but the other was tied down... in an imprisoning garment."

It was a beautiful scene, showing confidence in the audience at the end of a long (over three hours), dialogue-heavy play. And, to be brutally honest, I was surprised to see a male director so attuned to the meaning-laden potential of female clothing.

I confess my sexism to Icke. "That is very sexist," he agrees. "I am embarrassed as always to be a man. It's a terrible club to belong to: they do terrible things, they're only interested in football and alcohol, two things in which I have zero interest. But if you switched the gender roles in our conversation... that would be profoundly offensive. Not that I'm offended."

The Almeida announced *Mary Stuart* when the 2016 Tory leadership race had narrowed to a contest between Theresa May and Andrea Leadsom. Although Icke appreciated the echo, he doesn't want to do overtly political theatre. "I don't really need a whole evening for me to tell you

what I think about racism," he says. "I probably think it's bad, and you probably think it's bad, and I don't need a whole evening of your time for that."

Yet he hopes that someone – not him – writes a great play about Brexit. "There will be a really good show in the campaigns, not in the referendum result, because what you have effectively is two rudderless tribes of people interested in their own advancement." He thinks it would be like a "non-violent, mainly white West Side Story".

However, he doubts anyone could write a British version of *Hamilton*, Lin-Manuel Miranda's epic musical about America's founding fathers. "It has myth and nobility and a kind of moral evangelism," he says. "Guy Fawkes is the grand moral narrative that I suspect most of the British populace agree with, which is: blow the fuckers up."

Act III: Hamlet

Over the past few years, a consensus has arisen: Hamlet is the play. It has a plum part for a film or television actor looking to prove himself, the best-known soliloquy in all of Shakespeare and the modern themes of surveillance and selfhood. (You can imagine Hamlet worrying that no one is liking his posts on Instagram.)

Perhaps there's another reason why Icke was keen to direct it: the production would be a high-profile test of his theory of what radicalism means. He sees staging a Shakespeare play as like restoring an Old Master. You have to scrape away the layers of varnish and try to see what was there at the start. "There's a kind of plastic casing on the play, which is years of stage history," he says, "a lot of which is nonsense." He was excited to work with Andrew Scott, who had never done Shakespeare before, because the actor didn't have "bad habits you have to chip off".

The insight he brought to his version of Hamlet was this: "Maybe your key source is crazy." In other words, the audience should be aware that Gertrude is bad, Claudius is bad, because that's how Hamlet sees it. "Probably because of star culture, we interpret a lot of the famous, famous plays through the protagonist," he says. "One thing I really felt about Hamlet was that I'd never seen a production that honoured the other characters."

That meant adding in scenes from the "bad" quarto, such as one between Horatio and Gertrude before the final duel, which fleshes out the queen's character. "It's almost certainly not by Shakespeare and makes Gertrude a less ambiguous character," Maltby says. "But it really worked, and I got the sense he was trying to give a voice to women as much as possible. Ophelia was on stage a lot more than usual."

There is a "star culture" around directors, too, obscuring that one of the measures of success, as well as its guarantor, is the strength of your team. Icke has returned again and again to the same actors – Juliet Stevenson, Lia Williams, Angus Wright, Jessica Brown Findlay – and frequent collaborators such as Hildegard Bechtler, who are willing to work on small budgets. "The pay for small spaces like the Almeida, the time you invest, it doesn't pay," Bechtler says. "You have to be excited about it." Sonia Friedman, the über-producer, is another quiet champion, bankrolling his West End transfers.

Goold says that there are a few other people to whom Icke listens: his associate Dan Raggett; his girlfriend; the sound designer Tom Gibbons. This continuity makes it possible, not even a dozen major productions into his career, to identify an Ickean aesthetic – even if, as sceptics say, it occasionally borrows too freely from the Belgian director Ivo van Hove, who will bring an adaptation of the 1976 film *Network* to the National Theatre in London this autumn.

As well as its attention to female roles, *Hamlet* bore other hallmarks of the Icke style. There was a heavy underscore and liberal use of modern music – including Bob Dylan's "All Along the Watchtower" – and Bechtler reused the smoked glass from her minimalist *Oresteia* set, creating front and back sections of the stage. Depending on the lighting, the glass could be opaque or transparent, allowing for the meaning of a scene to be undercut or bolstered by something happening in the section behind it.

At the start, that second layer of action is Claudius's and Gertrude's wedding party. Later, we see Ophelia bathing at the back of the stage (another echo of *Oresteia*, in which Agamemnon is murdered in a ritual bath) and, because of the distance and the glass, we feel like voyeurs. The glass also allowed the final scene to be re-imagined, with the dead dancing together, bathed in heavenly light, using the same underlying music as for the wedding party.

The theatre blogger Florence Bell has suggested that this borrows from an episode of *The Sopranos* – one of Icke's favourite television shows – in which the mafioso anti-hero Tony hovers

between life and death. (Icke also appreciates the final instalment of *The Sopranos*, which ends with Tony turning his head in a restaurant and then a six-second cut to black, because the ambiguous ending neither lets him off for his crimes nor lets you off for enjoying them.)

There are also echoes of the climax of *Hamilton*, which Icke saw in New York when it was the hottest ticket in town, in which the lead character reconciles himself to death with the lyrics: "I catch a glimpse of the other side... My son is on the other side." Here, Hamlet is already dead when he acknowledges, "The rest is silence."

David Benedict experienced that last scene as a revelation. "It was the first time I thought, 'I'm watching a play about a young man who died.' It should be obvious but I'd never seen it before." For Icke, there was another, more banal, reason to finish in this way. "The end of *Hamlet* is usually a lot of people doing 'dead body' acting, and that's never moving."

Is this why Icke's performances seem so fresh? Like all directors, he magpies freely, but unlike the generation above him he's borrowing from musicals, from computer games – we discuss the indie platformer *Braid*, which tells one story played forwards and another when reversed – and from mainstream television shows.

For the dumb show that starts the play-within-a-play, he took inspiration from the Pixar movie *Up*, which recaps the life of one of its main characters, a grumpy old man, at the pace of a flick book. (The other protagonists are an overweight schoolboy and a dog with a collar that gives it a human voice.) This speeded-up movie-in-a-movie shows the whole span of the man's history with his late wife, through meeting, marriage and the disappointment of infertility, ending with her death.

The compression of life's highs and lows turns that scene into emotional napalm, I say. It always makes me cry. Icke agrees. "Yeah, no amount of fucking talking dogs was going to help me after that."

Epilogue

In 1599, his study of the most important year of Shakespeare's working life, James Shapiro offers some startling figures:

In an England of four million, London and its immediate environs held a population of roughly two hundred thousand. If, on any given day, two plays were staged in playhouses that held as many as two to three thousand spectators each, it's likely that with theatres even half full, as many as three thousand or so Londoners were attending a play... On average, it's likely that over a third of London's adult population saw a play every month.

Icke cites these figures – pretty much word perfect – to explain why he made it a condition of transferring *Hamlet* to the West End that there would be cheap seats to attract younger audiences. (There are 300 seats at every performance for less than £30.)

After all, Shakespeare saw himself as a popular entertainer and wrote for the groundlings as much as the elite. Icke and Andrew Scott "really believe that 15- and 16-year-old versions of us [should be able to] come from Ireland and Stockton, if [they] wanted to get a train and come and see it". He argues we should be tougher on subsidised theatres that charge high ticket prices: "It's not OK if you charge me 65 quid for something I've already paid for with my taxes, particularly not if it's in a big space."

In the last week of *Hamlet's* Almeida run, the theatre offered free tickets to under-25s. "The actors said it was the best shows we ever played, because they didn't know the story... They laughed in different places, they gasped. I don't think I've ever been prouder to work at the Almeida than when there were queues of under-16s round the block to see a three-and-a-half-hour *Hamlet*. I thought, 'This is what it's for, this is why we put our taxes into this place.'"

The unspoken backdrop to our conversation about Shakespeare is the tenure of Emma Rice at the Globe, cut short because the trustees were unhappy with her use of sound and lighting rigs in a theatre that doubles as a museum. Icke must be aware that the Globe is on the other side of the Shakespeare wars from him, although he never mentions names.

I decide it's time to bring up the Controversy Thing. It might sound shallow, but isn't he worried that people won't talk to him at the Olivier Awards? "I hope I've never said publicly, 'That person is terrible.' It's about why we do this as an art, so hopefully no one feels it's personal." He smiles. "I'm also not a great socialiser, because I'm completely teetotal, so I don't go to pubs, and a lot of my mates don't work in theatre."

Both Gould and Henry Hitchings wonder if Robert Icke's next step will be to direct a film, or whether he might fancy the artistic directorship of the Young Vic, which has become available this year. "He would hate so many elements of what that job is - thinking about loo rolls and corporate sponsors and what drinks get served at the bar," Hitchings says. Bechtler hopes that the nature of their collaborations won't change because of demands on his time. "Rob might change utterly now he's become so successful, but the amount of talking [that we do] is crucial."

There is one landmine ahead. A few of the people I spoke to were worried that the transfers never quite manage to capture the intimacy of the Almeida. A proscenium arch and a vast auditorium present a challenge for the focused, intense naturalism of Andrew Scott's Hamlet, for instance. Still, David Benedict pays him the greatest compliment a critic can offer: "While I have doubts about elements of Icke's work, I'd rather see his failures than some of the kiss-of-death competence of other directors."

"Hamlet" is at the Harold Pinter Theatre, London SW1, until 2 September. "Mary Stuart" opens at the Duke of York's Theatre, London WC2, on 13 January 2018