

Robert Icke, theatre director: 'Oresteia? It's quite like The Sopranos'

The director of the Almeida's acclaimed Oresteia on being inspired by Kenneth Branagh, Michael Grandage and Tony Soprano

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Robert Icke, 29, is one of the theatre's most explosive talents. He was associate director of Headlong from 2010 to 2013, and is now the associate director of the Almeida. His productions include *Mr Burns* and *1984*, which he co-adapted with Duncan Macmillan. His tremendous *Oresteia* has just transferred to the West End.

Do you have a theatrical background?

No, my mum's a teacher and my dad's a tax inspector.

What turned you on to directing?

It was seeing Kenneth Branagh as Richard III, directed by Michael Grandage at Sheffield. I was 14 and my dad dragged me away from my PlayStation. It was a proper Damascene conversion – really electric. There was no language barrier. I wrote to Michael Grandage and asked him how he did that stuff. He said: if you come and see me I'll try to tell you. This was before I'd ever been near a proper rehearsal room. He gave me all this advice, which I scribbled down and have been living by ever since.

Didn't you direct at a theatre in Stockton-Tees while you were still at school?

That's where I learnt to do it. It was a very depressed area. You weren't allowed to be boring: the audience there would just have left. I remember the first performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* when Bottom came on in a donkey's head with these amazing false teeth made by a local dentist. The audience didn't know the story. They gasped with laughter. You heard them saying "Fucking hell!" That has never really left me. You don't want to waste time being reverential: you want people to have a real rollercoaster.

Your productions often throw uncertainty on the truth.

One of the joys of Shakespeare and the Greeks is that you don't have to make a single closed-down interpretative decision. That's characteristic of all great drama. There's always a possibility that the Macbeths might not kill the king. The human mind is full of ambiguity. You don't really know what you're going to do until the moment you're doing it. When Nora leaves at the end of *A Doll's House*, you think: what the hell happens next? Does she turn around after 30 seconds? At the end of *The Shining* – I love Stanley Kubrick – all your literal versions of what might be going on are spread out in front of you like a smorgasbord.

And in Oresteia?

The whole point of the drama is that you see both sides. It does not condemn anyone. You say I'd hate to be Agamemnon, and I don't know what I'd do. And I'd hate to be Clytemnestra, and I don't know what I'd do. You love your family and you love your wife and your country and your soldiers. And you are being made to choose who, what and where you love, and that is horrible.

Did you always have a cast in mind?

Lia Williams is the only person I could think of who would be able to do both extremes of Clytemnestra, who could believably be a good and loving mother of small children, and also someone who could drag the body of her husband across the floor in a tarpaulin as she killed him. I asked her to pencil the date in before I'd finished the play.

How hard was it to write your adaptation?

I have a bit of Greek so I could stagger my way through. I feel you have to be 100 per cent faithful not to the letter of the original but to the impulse that motors the whole thing forward. In my

head, the play is quite like *The Sopranos*. I think of adaptation as like using a foreign plug. You are in a country where your hairdryer won't work when you plug it straight in. You have to find the adaptor which will let the electricity of now flow into the old thing and make it function. That's the long job.