

Robert Icke: 'I walk out of plays in the interval all the time'

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Robert Icke, quite possibly the most exciting young director around, has a problem with theatre. Most of it isn't very good.

"Most of my friends think theatre is boring," he says. "And actually I suspect that, on average, you and I think that theatre is boring too. Certainly more evenings at the theatre are boring than not boring. Which is depressing. It would be nice to have it the other way round."

Icke is passionate about theatre that makes his heart beat faster; he lists some directors whose work he loves, not least Ivo van Hove, the Belgian whose version of Arthur Miller's *A View from the Bridge* conquered London and New York and whose David Bowie musical, *Lazarus*, is about to open in London. He had an amazing time the other night watching Billie Piper in the Australian director Simon Stone's reworked version of Lorca's *Yerma* at the Young Vic.

Yet increasingly he has little patience, he says, for the theatre of the not-too-bad. Does he ever leave shows in the interval? "All the time. Not in an aggressive way, but . . . I let myself be honest about when I think it's not going to be worth sitting through. It makes me annoyed."

Icke himself has developed quite the knack for creating shows that tend to be more revelatory than boring. The 29-year-old wunderkind from Stockton-on-Tees, Co Durham, is on a hot streak. He has a job as Rupert Goold's second-in-command at the Almeida in north London. Last year his long, bold, insinuating, thoroughly accessible reworking of Aeschylus's *Oresteia* trilogy transferred from there to the West End. It won him an Olivier for best director too. This year he reworked Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*, with revolving stage, three intervals, Bowie singalongs and moments of remarkable intensity as he depicted provincial torpor.

The multimedia adaptation of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* that he created with Duncan Macmillan is about to end its third West End season. And he has two high-profile shows coming up at the Almeida. In December Juliet Stevenson and Lia Williams (Olivier-nominated for *Oresteia*) will star in his translation of Friedrich Schiller's 1800 verse play *Mary Stuart*. They will alternate the two lead roles of Mary, Queen of Scots and Elizabeth I. In February he directs Andrew "Moriarty" Scott in *Hamlet*.

Before that, though, he is mounting his first show at the National Theatre. We meet after he has spent the day rehearsing *The Red Barn*, a new play by David Hare that stars Mark Strong, Hope Davis and Elizabeth Debicki (Hugh Laurie's mutinous girlfriend in *The Night Manager*). It is based on *La Main*, a 1968 novel by the Maigret creator, Georges Simenon. Icke first heard about it last year when he got a call on his mobile, without warning, from the powerful American producer Scott Rudin. Shortly after, he was meeting Hare to discuss the stage production.

As to what *The Red Barn* is exactly, Icke suggests that the less we know, the less boring it will prove to be. All the National's website gives away is this: "Connecticut, 1969. On their way back from a party, two couples struggle home through the snow. Not everyone arrives safely."

Nice to have a proper old whodunnit to work on, then?

"It is a little like that," says Icke, cautiously. He compares it with Hitchcock — in the sense that most stories suggest straight away just what kind of idiom they are in. "The first five minutes of a Hitchcock film are not a clear guide as to where the last five minutes will finish. Hitchcock is incredibly brave about these sort of handbrake turns. And this play does that a little bit. So to describe it too much would be to destroy the pleasure of it."

Don't expect Icke suddenly to turn into a traditionalist, though. For instance, to conquer the cavernous 900-seat Lyttelton auditorium, he is miking up his actors. This may ruffle feathers among those who insist it's an actor's duty to project properly. "But I don't know how you can not have microphones in a massive space like that. We're the last European nation not to do this. Doesn't get in the way. Nobody notices. Naturalistic theatre acting has come to a level of focus and emotional commitment where it is no longer permissible to do the Gielgud boom. When I see actors screaming at each other I just want to leave."

Theatre, for Icke, has to be a weather system. Something you can feel in the room. If we can't feel something then what's to stop us from thinking that this is just an overpriced, underpowered

alternative to watching something good on the telly? He worries that theatre's rising prices and tolerance of the stilted and the opaque — no, he's not a fan of Harold Pinter — are a threat to its own survival.

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“The danger is that we only play to people who already know what theatre is, and that we become like a cryptic crossword, a game you have to know the rules to be able to play. And that's not true of Stranger Things on Netflix, that's not true of The Sopranos. Put anyone who has an attention span and a brain in front of that stuff and it will work on them. It's like being bitten by a real dog, not a puppet dog.”

With *Oresteia* and *Uncle Vanya*, he felt he was getting to the kind of experience that theatre is uniquely equipped to offer. “Which is, the actors feel real things and really go through some stuff live and you stand near them and bear witness to someone who is actually, to some degree, suffering.”

Which sounds like hard work for actors who have first to find those emotions and then repeat them eight times a week. Williams as *Klytemnestra*, say, killing the husband who killed their daughter; or Paul Rhys as *Vanya*, middle-aged and utterly marooned. Of course, says Icke. His actors are “absolutely knackered” by the ends of their runs. “But I don't think the art form is healthy enough for dead work to be OK.”

He does period plays because they are great plays, but period costume is a distraction. Theatre, he says, “is not a literal experience. I have never seen a play in period dress and not felt let off the hook a bit. As if it's saying, ‘This is not about you.’”

You'll have spotted that there is an element of the Young Turk about the highly personable, highly opinionated Icke. Or as Goold once said: “He has a sort of revolutionary, ‘I can see the shining path and everyone else is in the woods’ confidence which is at times endearing and at times irritating and at times inspiring.” It makes him terrific company, though. If he wants his casts to go beyond their normal limits, his own willingness to think — out loud — for himself puts you in a place where your own limits feel newly expanded.

And he has already been doing this for half his life. He was raised in Stockton-on-Tees by his mother, a teacher, and his father, a tax inspector. In 2002, when he was 15, he went to see Kenneth Branagh play *Richard III* at the *Crucible* in Sheffield and suddenly felt how powerful theatre could be. “It just felt alive. Branagh felt dangerous, genuinely dangerous.” He decided that, without a working theatre at home, if he was going to see the plays he wanted to see then he needed to put them on himself. So while his peers were spending their summer holidays “lighting fires on the fields and drinking cider”, he was forming a theatre company.

In the summer holidays after GCSEs he staged *Julius Caesar*. The next year was *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. He still remembers an argument he had with a woman — “quite posh for the northeast” — who came up after the show and asked him why he had changed the text. He assured her that he hadn't, that it was the original Shakespeare. She wouldn't believe him. “She stormed off. And I remember thinking much later that what she was offended by was that she understood it. The experience of understanding what those words meant was not what she had paid for, thank you very much, she had paid for two hours of polite boredom.”

The shows kept coming each summer holiday: *The Taming of The Shrew*, *An Inspector Calls*, *Richard III*, *Journey's End*. By the last ones, people were queueing to get in to the 360-seat Arc theatre. “Which was glorious, because it was Stockton-on-Tees and people don't go to the theatre. It has always given me faith that if you are confident, you can make it captivating or profound, no matter where you are or who you are talking to. Because fundamentally human beings can always talk to human beings.”

By this time he was at Cambridge, studying English. Once there he found himself hugely disappointed — in a pattern being repeated today — by the quality of theatre on offer. He staged his own shows, separate from the university's theatre society, “and gradually others started joining in”. After graduating he joined Goold's former theatre company, *Headlong*, as associate director.

So here he is, a success story. Once *Hamlet* is done, he has commissions for film and television projects too. They may pay a bit better — you would think 1984 might have been a big money-spinner for him, but he says not — and also give him the chance to reach a bigger audience. He rents in north London (alone or with a significant other, he won't say), but it's work not money that drives him, he says. And he is nothing if not driven and accomplished; he translates his own

plays, is a proficient pianist, is mulling over Hare's suggestion that he should write his own original play.

"I get very hungry for challenges," he says. "I need the intellectual equivalent of steak in my life."

He doesn't like wasting time; he has never drunk alcohol, doesn't spend the evening watching rubbish on the television. He went to see a reflexologist once, who felt his feet and was convinced — wrongly — that he had had a nervous breakdown. "I think I've always had this strange sense that there is not enough time to not get on with it. And clearly I have had that since I was 15. I am aware that that is quite weird."

Meanwhile, though, he has passions to pursue and dead wood to clear out. "I've got a lot of work to do. I feel like I've barely started."

The Red Barn is at the Lyttelton, SE1 (020 7452 3000), to January 17. 1984 is at the Playhouse, WC2 (020 7359 4404), to October 29. Mary Stuart (December 2–January 21) and Hamlet (February 17–April 8) are at the Almeida, N1 (020 7359 4404)

Five I saw to the end, by Robert Icke

Yerma, Young Vic

I had a thrilling, immediate time at Yerma. Confident, neon-modern, properly exciting, it brings an old play hurtling into our orbit. Billie Piper is electric.

The Encounter, Barbican

Simon McBurney is a bona fide genius and his solo show, now on Broadway, is a typically idiosyncratic, magical, perfect marriage of form and content. Like much of his work, it sneaks up on you — but then airlifts you to the Amazon.

Antlia Pneumatica, Playwrights Horizons, New York

Anne Washburn's meditation on stars and life and death infected my thoughts for weeks after I'd seen it. It has her characteristic mixture of primal and gentle and the universal strangeness of a folk tale. Formally it's way ahead of its time.

Kings of War, Barbican

An object lesson in how to do Shakespeare: clarity of structure and pacing; extremity; emotion; humour; incredible music; a design that is a metaphor as well as a literal world, and the finest acting ensemble in the world. Our Shakespeare theatres should be ashamed.

YOUARENOWHERE, Shoreditch Town Hall

Andrew Schneider's part-play, part-performance art blew my mind. It's a finely calibrated grenade of video, acting, performance, design and text that's way more than the sum of its parts. So much theatre feels like the past; this felt genuinely like a future.