

Laura Martin-Simpson and Rachel Bagshaw are co-founders of Blazon Theatre, a company devoted to producing work by and about women. In collaboration with the writer Paula B. Stanic they developed ICONS, a play based on the myth of the Amazons.

On 7th July 2016, at the colloquium 'Remaking ancient Greek and Roman myths in the twenty-first century' (held at the Open University's London centre), Laura, along with Ronke Adekoluejo, gave a rehearsed reading of scenes from ICONS. After the reading Laura and Rachel participated in a discussion about their work.

*Laura trained as an actor at RADA and was nominated for the Best Actress Award at the Iris Film Festival for her lead role in the film *The Adored*. She has performed Shakespeare as well as working in the research, development and performance of new writing; including with Theatre Delicatessen, where she was involved in exploring the concept of interactive theatre and the theatrical space. Other credits include: Nottingham Playhouse, Young Vic, and roles in *Holby City* and *Ashes to Ashes*. Laura also has a degree in Classical Studies from the Open University.*

Rachel has directed a wide range of plays, including both new writing and existing works, for theatres including the Young Vic and Paines Plough. She was Resident Assistant Director (ACE) at the Young Vic from 2010 – 2011. She currently reads for the Royal Court and is a director for the National Theatre Connections programme, as well as teaching at drama schools including RADA and Mountview.

*Ronke Adekoluejo, who joined Rachel and Laura for the reading, previously participated in the development of ICONS in the summer of 2015, when she was involved in performing a reading of the play at the RADA festival. Ronke graduated from RADA in 2013 and has worked on a range of TV productions including *Chewing Gum* for E4 and *Suspects* for Channel 5. Her theatre credits include *Twelfth Night* for Filter Theatre, *the Oresteia* for Home Manchester, and *Pride and Prejudice* for the Sheffield Crucible.*

This piece is a transcript of the discussion, which was hosted by Emma Bridges, and which took place before and after the rehearsed reading on 7th July 2016; it also includes some questions and comments from the audience.

Online version: <http://www.open.ac.uk/arts/research/pvcrs/2017/blazon>

EB. Thank you all for joining us – it's an absolute pleasure to have you here. I'd like to start by asking where the idea to create a 21st-century play based on the myth of the Amazons came from.

LM-S. When I was in my third year at RADA I played Hippolyta in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. I'd heard of the Amazons before, but not to the extent of having the kind of knowledge that came from doing research for the part. I was fascinated by what Shakespeare chooses to give Hippolyta to say, and what he chooses for her not to say. She doesn't speak a lot, and is presented in her first scene as a war trophy within a masculine patriarchal society where a woman is going to be put to death if she doesn't follow her father's rule. I decided that Hippolyta probably wasn't very pleased with that. I then developed a real fascination with the Amazons; as an actress I began to ask where the Amazons are in literature, and where they are placed on stage. Is there an archetype that we

can find for actresses? My answer to that was no. If you can find them they are still presented via a male gaze; they are still presented as hysterical and barbaric and mad in some way. Rachel and I met over a modern reception of *Medea* ten years ago. From there we pledged that we would make this happen, and as we've got older and our lives have broadened, so the lives of these Amazons and the choices that women make in order to survive have seemed more and more important. We wanted to give these women, who feel kind of shackled in myth, a contemporary breath of life.

RB. If I'm honest I didn't know much about the Amazons until Laura started talking about the idea of doing something like this, but the more we talked about the project, the more I became really fascinated with the concept of what it means to be a strong woman. What does it mean to be a warrior and a woman? And one of the things we've increasingly been exploring is what does it mean to be displaced? What does it mean to have to start again, and to keep having to start again, and to keep having to reinvent yourself in some way? That's one of the things which really hooked me into the project. The writer we've been working with, Paula B. Stanic, who couldn't be here today, has been equally fascinated with this concept of the strong woman and what that means in a twenty-first century context. A lot of the work we've been doing has been exploring that idea. How do we pull [the Amazons] out of the myth and make them real? How do we make them not a concept, not a construct to serve something else, but make them whole?

EB. There aren't many sources which talk about the Amazons, so where did you start? Were you looking at ancient images, for example on vase paintings, or did you start with post-classical receptions?

LM-S. I hadn't started my degree then but about twelve years ago I bought a book called *The Amazons* by Guy Cadogan Rothery. He wrote it in 1910, and it was the only book that I could find on the Amazons in the bookshop! He does quite a good job of pulling sources together, but his introduction reads, 'Of the historic Amazon little need be said for the moment. Under stress, human nature is very much today what it was yesterday and will be tomorrow. And woman, being woman, under stress is very apt to exaggerate human passions.' The realisation hit me that that reception of these women, real or not, fragments of women on battlefields somewhere along the line...it still hasn't moved on that much. The Amazonomachy is this very weird sexual paranoid nightmare of men, of what is the worst of women, the worst of this world. But also, they're strong enough to be in the myth cycle, they're strong enough that men have to overpower them and take something from them in order to be heroic. So [ICONS] was about subverting all of that. Herodotus talks a lot about them, and it's about well, did they cut off a breast, did they sear a breast? If that's what the men are saying, what's the reality of that? It's about filling in all those gaps and humanising them.

EB. The mission of the theatre company, Blazon, that you founded together, very much ties in with that idea of trying to unearth those perspectives, doesn't it?

RB. For both Laura and me our work is about reclaiming a perspective; it's about putting women on stage and about creating work which is made by female artists both onstage and offstage. One of the things we've done with the myths is start with certainty; we started with what we knew, but where that becomes really interesting for us is with what we don't know. Where that gets exciting for Paula, our writer, is being given the freedom to imagine those possibilities, to imagine what those lives outside of the myths might be like.

EB. Rachel, please could you introduce the play and tell us a little about the readings we'll be hearing tonight?

RB. We have four characters in the play, four different Amazon queens who are the sisters who form the tribe: from the eldest Lyte (Hippolyte), Orithya, Tiope (Antiope) and Lea (Penthesilea), the youngest. You'll see one of those strands, which is the relationship between Lea and Tiope. The play is split into scenes, which move between 'Before' (pre-attack, before the arrival of Heracles' ship to take the belt), 'After' (post-attack), and 'Now', which is twenty years on from the events shown in the play.

EB. One of the things which strikes me about your script is the way in which the story shines a light on some of the different relationships between the women. It encourages us to reflect on the relationships between, for example, mentors and mentees, or role models and the women who look up to them.

RB. Yes – we've been really keen to explore those relationships in the narrative. We've got all sorts of different versions of what it means to be female, to be women together – sometimes mothers, sometimes queens, sometimes sisters, sometimes lovers. [In the scenes between Lea and Tiope] we get younger and older sibling and we also get leader and trainee. This relationship morphs in the course of the story. The other two characters, Lyte and Orithya, are much older. They're played as two pairs – a younger pair and an older pair – and those relationships operate in different ways. A lot of the work we've been doing has made us think about relationships with other women in our own lives, and how we as women function within those relationships.

LM-S. In the ancient versions the four women we chose are jumbled together and reinvented all the time so we sharpened their roles and identities. We chose to cast the women at the age they are when they die within the myths. In a sense that's when their life stops but their myth begins.

EB. How important was it to you to cast women across a spread of generations as well?

LM-S. It was incredibly important.

RB. In each of those age brackets for actresses there tend to be stereotypes which people are expected to conform to. I think that particularly the roles for women over 40 can become very narrow. We were very keen to explore those casting opportunities for older women. To play sisters across a 40-plus year age gap has also been really interesting.

EB. I was also really interested in what your play has to say about the 'woman who has it all'. In one of the scenes Lea projects this ideal onto Tiope; and the ideal comes crashing down, and Lea takes Tiope's love for her own child almost as a personal betrayal. Is that playing on the idea that the woman who has it all is a myth in herself, and potentially a damaging and problematic one if we think about a woman as trying to do everything, and to be all things to all people without falling apart?

LM-S. Totally! And it's a myth created by a man.

EB. I think it reflects on that inner conflict, and the anxieties that some women have in the contemporary world, about trying to fulfil all at once the roles that have been traditionally designated as ‘masculine’ and those traditionally designated as ‘feminine’.

RB. Yes. The twenty-first century version of this is the full-time working mum who still has dinner on the table yet is working until midnight and pretending that everything is fine. We were keen to explore what that myth might be in this story as well. Does what Tiope does in her version of the story – to protect a child, and to stay and be a mother to her child – make her any more or less Amazon than the others? That takes a different kind of strength, to stay in those circumstances.

EB. Your work also highlights the very timelessness of myth. To me your play feels simultaneously of the present moment, and in the past, and for always. How did you go about achieving that with this myth?

LM-S. That was the main objective creatively right from the start. We didn’t want to set it very definitely in ancient mythological times in terms of costume and speech. We wanted the speech to sound modern – it doesn’t need to be archaic to us. Also really, when it comes to it, the choices haven’t changed. They’re still all choices of survival. So you get stereotypically the mother, and the warrior who doesn’t want anything to do with [motherhood]; you get the woman who’s having a mid-life crisis feeling that she can’t do her job anymore; and you get the woman who’s very peaceful and doesn’t want war and wants to progress into a different form of society. Because this is a dogma as well, and dogmas can’t exist for ever.

RB. But some of the things we were really keen to hold on to were also those things that make them Amazons – worshipping a goddess, the fighting and the hunting and the bows and arrows, the one breast, whatever that is. But we wanted to explore those things with contemporary language, and to make the script very immediate, very now, even though we’re operating in different time zones. That’s in the actions as well as in the dialogue. When Lyte asks ‘How will we be remembered?’ she’s asking how we start myth. How do we create our own myth? But before that we want our audience to see these women in their everyday lives. Then we can talk about myth and to think about how we start telling our own stories; but first we wanted to see the women live and breathe. With the script Paula has given them their own lives.

LM-S. We’ve been working with Paula now for two and a half years. Over that time we’ve taken all classical references out. To begin with there was Theseus, Heracles, Artemis, Penthesilea and so on. Then we thought we didn’t want to give any space to the male heroic characters – quite frankly they’ve already had a lot of space over the past thousands of years. We wanted to extract them as much as possible, so they became ‘they’. Then we had just Theseus and Athens, but in this latest revision we’ve taken those out as well. We want it to be accessible to as many people as possible, and we were finding that during readings people would hear Theseus’ name and worry that they should know something about Theseus and it was distracting them from the action. Especially for young women – we wanted them to have their own idea of what an Amazon is, for them to make up their own mind having looked back to thousands of years ago.

EB. In relation to that I understand that you do some outreach work as well.

RB. Yes. We've done some work with teenage girls and young women at an all girls' school, where we workshopped the play quite early on. They knew nothing about the Amazons. We explored with them the ideas in the play, but also their ideas about what a strong woman is to them, and what those archetypes are to them now. Inevitably there was quite a broad spread: Beyoncé comes up quite a lot, as well as their own mums and sisters and other strong women in their lives. What's been lovely about those workshops has been seeing those young women wanting to be Amazons themselves by the end of the workshops, to see them saying 'I am a warrior' or 'I'm going to be a warrior'.

Audience member. What kinds of responses have you had from men who've heard your readings?

LM-S. We were conscious from the start that we hadn't set out for this to be a man-hating play, and we were absolutely against having the characters portrayed as despising men. I think men sometimes go into the readings a little bit scared of potential emasculation, but that doesn't happen because we very definitely veered the opposite way. What's interesting is to find out people's perception of what an Amazon is before they see the readings. Some have thought we were doing a play about the rainforest! Those misconceptions are one of the reasons why we feel it's so important to do it.

RB. I think there's something really important too about allowing audiences to make their own world of this. It would have been possible to do a version of this where we transpose it into a definitely twenty-first century world, and that might have been more problematic for a male audience. But because these women exist in a kind of timeless tribal world of their own, that perhaps makes it more accessible for a male audience.

Audience member. There's a sense of cultural displacement here too; where Antiope has the child who is the product of a rape, she also seems to become part of an alien culture, and there's a lack of acceptance of that from the others.

Audience member. I wondered about whether Artemis comes into your portrayal of the Amazons. Artemis is the goddess equivalent of an Amazon; she's a virgin so she takes this to an extreme. She's also a huntress, yet she nurtures young animals and young children.

LM-S. We tried to avoid emphasising too much the religious and cult elements. It's really hard for a modern audience to believe in that world, particularly when we're showing these very fragmented scenes.

RB. An earlier draft had Artemis with a much heavier presence, but we've cut that back to mentioning a goddess. Including Artemis meant that it was placed very firmly in the mythical world, so it became trickier to access our own versions of these stories. The fragments we've taken from the myth are now well and truly ours; they're a different version of the Amazons from the ancient versions. And the women that we see in the play show those different facets – we have the hunter and warrior, the nurturer and feeder, and we have different versions of what those things mean.

EB. Thanks to you all for sharing your thoughts this evening – we'll look forward to seeing how the play develops in future.