

Robert Icke is an award-winning writer and theatre director, who became Associate Director at the Almeida Theatre in London in 2013. From 2010-2013 he was the Associate Director at Headlong. His adaptation of George Orwell's 1984 premiered with Headlong in 2013 before transferring to the West End's Playhouse Theatre; the production won 'Best Director' at the 2014 UK Theatre Awards and 'Best Director' at the Liverpool Arts Awards in 2013, as well as being nominated for 'Best New Play' at the 2014 Olivier Awards. Robert also directed the European premiere of Anne Washburn's *Mr Burns* at the Almeida in 2014.

In 2015 the Almeida staged its 'Greeks' season, jointly led by Robert and the theatre's Artistic Director Rupert Goold; the theatre's programme was devoted to a series of productions of ancient Greek texts. These included a marathon 16-hour reading of the whole of the *Iliad*, part of which took place at the British Museum, and a staging of Robert's own adaptation of the *Oresteia*. After being met with widespread critical acclaim, his *Oresteia* later transferred to Trafalgar Studios in the West End.

This interview with Emma Bridges was recorded on 5th October 2015 at the Almeida Theatre.

EB. Today I am at the Almeida Theatre to talk to the theatre's Associate Director, Robert Icke. Thank you for taking the time to talk to me today, Robert. The 'Greeks' season here at the Almeida has been phenomenally successful, in terms both of critical reception and audience numbers. Could you tell me how the idea of having an entire season devoted to performing texts from ancient Greece came about?

RI. It's the child of Rupert Goold [Artistic Director at the Almeida] and I, and we both started talking about it at Headlong. We've been in an ongoing conversation since 2010 about how one should run and programme theatres, and what success looks like. Is it measured by box office bottom line or by audience numbers? If so, does that audience look a certain way, is it a certain age, a certain diversity? We had noticed that lots of people do Shakespeare seasons – you see that all the time, four or five Shakespeares programmed together – but that other corners of the repertoire didn't seem to get as committed a workout. As at Headlong we didn't have a building, we were a touring company, one of the big challenges if you are a touring company is how the hell you have any identity because you are always in somebody else's theatre. It's always a co-production between Headlong and the National, Headlong and the Nottingham Playhouse or whatever. How to have a brand was the challenge we used to live with there, and how to make Headlong mean anything to people – if, say, you do a new play by Duncan Macmillan and it's on at the National, how does anyone see that Headlong is there, involved? So we wondered about maybe doing a Headlong season that was all Greek, even if it was all produced in different places, with Greekness as the thread joining it together. Also, we felt that we'd seen some – like, one in ten – really interesting productions of Greek tragedy, but that a lot of the time it was really boring. I'd said for years, for example, that I didn't understand why we always got poets to adapt Greek tragedies, and not

playwrights. You look down the list of people who've adapted the *Oresteia* and it's mainly poets, and I find that really strange. Then when we came here, which was in late 2013 – Rupert took the job at the Almeida and brought me with him – we started to discuss what we could do that would be a sort of opening gambit, to go, 'Here's what we think the Almeida might be; here's the sort of work we think we might do; here's the sort of interests we have'. We re-opened quite quickly the idea of doing Greeks. We considered at one point being completionist and doing all of them [surviving Greek plays]; not staging them all here but staging some of them off site in smaller productions and reading some of them. Then Ben [Whishaw, who played Dionysus in the *Bakkhai*] and James [Macdonald, director of the *Bakkhai*] came to us with the idea of them doing *Bakkhai* together as we were having that conversation and it just seemed to fit; their dates for *Bakkhai* worked out for the summer and we worked out that we'd have space for one before and one after and that'd be a triple. We were always nervous about the thought of having Greek tragedy on at Christmas! That may have been ill-founded actually, now – it feels like if we were doing, say, *Oedipus* next, the audience would come with us, but at the time we didn't know that and we thought that they'd be exhausted by the time of the third play and be saying 'Please, for God's sake, give us something else!'

EB. So do you get a sense of what kinds of audience you've attracted? Do you think that you began with people who were familiar with Greek tragedies, and have you brought a lot of people in who might never have considered watching a Greek tragedy before?

RI. It's a huge mix. In relation to *Oresteia*, in terms of my own work, I want it to be able to appeal to Simon Goldhill [Professor of Greek Literature at the University of Cambridge], who knows everything there is to know about Aeschylus, and for him to be able to have a really good evening and not to feel frustrated, but also to appeal to a fourteen-year-old version of me who knows nothing at all, not even the rules of engagement with Greek tragedy – so doesn't know what a Chorus is, doesn't know what a messenger speech is, and certainly doesn't know that it's OK in Greek tragedy to have huge amounts of relevant information narrated rather than staged. It's my feeling always that if you can't get the convention to speak for itself – if it doesn't justify its own place – then you're allowed, obliged even, to change it. Anecdotally here [at the Almeida, before the *Oresteia* transferred to the West End] it was a much more knowing audience – partly because it was successful and it was well reviewed and so as we're only a small house here it booked up. Also when you announce Lia Williams [who played Klytemnestra] in things, the theatre audience prick their ears up and think, 'Oh, she's brilliant'. At Trafalgar Studios in the West End it's been a much more ordinary audience – people who've come to see it instead of other things in the West End because they've heard it's good. They seem a much more virgin audience when it comes to Greek.

EB. In terms of the season as a whole, apart from the obvious success of your *Oresteia* – which I'd like to come back to and talk more about in a moment – have there been other particular highlights for you?

RI. The *Iliad* day was incredibly special for all of us. That was my idea originally – I just said ‘we should read the whole of the *Iliad* in a glass box in the foyer’, that was my original pitch – and then the festival around the three main shows kept changing. There were all sorts of things the festival really was. Then the British Museum got on board with this idea of the *Iliad* and we thought we could do some of it there, and then suddenly it was this huge thing. So Rupert and I agreed that I would open *Oresteia*, he would then go on holiday while I prepared the *Iliad*, we’d do the thing together and then I would be able to go on holiday when he came back. Of course the last thing you expect is that a four-hour long, no celebrities production of a Greek tragedy is ever going to have a commercial life; that’s just not a thing you plan for, but that’s what happened, and what that meant was that for a while I ended up trying to run *Iliad* and *Oresteia* West End at the same time. *Iliad* day had lots of nice surprises; it was lovely that lots of last-minute ideas really came off. So the idea of having the glass box, which is still in the foyer, with the discarded pages of the performers’ scripts in, was a last-minute addition which worked very well; also the idea of having the audience transported in rickshaws as if they were chariots between the British Museum and the Almeida. That Simon Goldhill started it in Greek was satisfying; then he came back and read the whole of the famously difficult ships section brilliantly and really charismatically so you thought, ‘This is amazing’. At nine o’clock in the morning at the British Museum there was a queue outside to get in to see the *Iliad*, and when we started it was full and there were people standing at the back! It felt like a lot of things came together in a very satisfying way, so that was really special. Also the Greekness of just listening to that story all day, and remembering what a great story it is, and how tense it is, and how well-structured it is.

EB. A lot of people might have thought it was a bit of a gamble to run a sixteen-hour reading of a poem which is over two and a half thousand years old, but as you say it had such reach, partly because of the online interaction, and it really worked! But I can’t begin to imagine how you go about organising something like that. Where did you start, even with just getting that many performers to be in the same place on the same day?

RI. The big challenge of it, and the thing that I lost sleep over, was, what if they go fast or slow? You need the performers to turn up at a certain time, so what if they were all slower than we expected, and what if all the times got out by half an hour, then by an hour or two hours? Or worse, what if they go fast, and the next reader hasn’t arrived? We had to make edits anyway, otherwise it would have been twenty hours, so we did make some trims. But I also had what I called ‘sandbags’, which were sections in grey in people’s texts, so if we were behind we’d cut the sections in grey, and if we were ahead we’d read the grey sections, so there was a way of moderating it.

EB. And how did you go about assigning sections of texts to particular performers? Did they get any say in it?

RI. None at all! We chopped up the text – me and two associate directors, Anthony Almeida who is my associate on *Oresteia*, and Daniel Raggett who is my associate

on 1984 – we chopped it together and wrote notes about the character of each section, so whether it was a comic section, or a dramatic section, or where the really juicy pieces of plot were. So for example that big Hector/Achilles fight at the end is really dramatic so we gave that to someone who we really knew could carry it – the brilliant Tobias Menzies. Then we had a wall with all the sections on it, all sixty, just a numbered wall with little cards and actors' names on slips of paper which we stuck on the wall. Then as actors said 'oh, I can't actually be there until eleven' and so on, we'd swap them around. So there were a couple of days of that and then quite late we sent out all the bits and said, 'here you go, here's your bit.'

EB. How much prep time did they get?

RI. Almost none! They were sent in on the Tuesday before the Friday of the performance, so it was last minute, but on the day we had people downstairs in our sort of war room – including Anthony Almeida, and Lucy Jackson, the academic who had worked on it with us. They were doing things like pronunciation, and to enable people to rehearse if they wanted to. We asked the actors to be here half an hour before their slot but said they could come two hours before that, and there'd be people in a room who they could talk to and rehearse with if they liked, talking them through it before the stage management came to get them up to the podium. So it was quite the operation! It was exhausting – we were delirious by midnight. It literally doesn't stop.

EB. The whole process, I think, taught us something about oral performance; this text was of course originally performed orally, and when you see people bring their own personalities to it you get a sense of how that works, with some improvising more than others and so on.

RI. The thing I kept seeing, which I didn't spot when we first read it, was that certain characters are introduced in the same way every time, and there are certain phrases that come up again and again. I remember hearing Simon Goldhill's reading and the repetition of the phrase, '...the tall, black ships'. Almost every sentence there finishes, 'the tall, black ships'. It has that rhythm, like a chant, and you could feel the audience recognising that rhythm, and you almost wished they'd joined in with it. You could feel an inclusivity in that gesture. For example, is it Thetis who's introduced as having 'glistening feet'? That's doing a specific job, to root an audience – 'don't worry, it's this character again, you've met them before'.

EB. I know you read English at Cambridge. Had you studied the *Iliad* during that time?

RI. Not at all. I'd read it – it was on the reading list before I went, but I never studied it.

EB. And what about the Aeschylus? Was that something you'd studied?

RI. Only in that I read it at university as part of the Cambridge Tragedy paper, that everyone who does English there has to do. I thought about it then, but I'd never seen it performed. I watched a little bit of the Peter Hall version on YouTube.

EB. So what drew you to it – why Aeschylus?

RI. People keep asking me that and I keep saying that it's a bit like falling in love – people think, why that person and not that person, but it just kind of always was. It's just what made sense. I suppose it felt like to do a Greek season – ideally we'd have done an Aeschylus, a Sophocles and a Euripides – but *Oedipus* had been done relatively recently at the National, and we didn't want to do *Philoctetes*, which felt kind of minor – then there was the *Bakkhai*, and Rupert wanted to do *Medea* and Kate [Fleetwood] wanted to play her, and Rupert had the idea of asking Rachel Cusk to write a version and it felt too good to say no to. It felt important partly as an introduction, as other texts sprang off the Aeschylus, and for the gesture of the Greek festival it felt right to go back to the start of drama, to go back to the source. And Aeschylus is the only surviving trilogy, and so it felt important to include it. It's also partly because of the way my mind works. I feel very strongly about trying to uncover the impulse of the original play, not to recreate it, but to discover what it is that it's trying to activate and interrogate. Something in me is slightly unsatisfied by the idea of doing one play of an unseen trilogy; part of me thinks, why would I want to do *Medea* or whatever, when it's one of three and we don't know the other two. There's something about the Aeschylus where at least you can see the whole structure and think that here's the experience he wanted the audience to have.

EB. So why do you think that Greek tragedy is appealing to an audience in 2015? What does it have to say to us now which means that people come to watch it?

RI. I think it's the same as all theatre. It's why a play is called a 'play', I sometimes think. It's playing with the idea of the bad thing happening. It's also not a film, in that you don't have to keep it, to have it on your shelf; it's not like buying a photograph where you have to have it in a frame. You can go to the dark place; it only exists while it's happening, and the second it stops, it's dead. It's a bit like life, really – when it's over, it's over. The second they're clapping and the final light cue is gone, you're done, and you're released from it. I think somehow that allows you to go to a much darker and more profound place because you go there in real time with the characters – and then stop. I think it's a form in which – and clearly this has always been true if you look at the Aeschylus – we find things that we're really scared of, and really anxious about, and don't understand about ourselves, and you can play with the idea of 'What would we do if...?' Greek drama is great for that. 'What would you do if you had to choose between your mum and your dad?' That, fundamentally, is what *The Libation Bearers* is about. 'What do we do with murderers?' 'How do you feel about a murderer who was murdering for a reason we all understand?' You think, 'Well, I'd probably murder someone who'd murdered my dad.'

EB. Is it also about the idea of putting people in an extreme situation, turning up the heat and watching things explode?

RI. I think that's right. I also started to feel very strongly, when I was writing the adaptation, that a lot of great drama has more than one 'right'. So I happen to think that there is no right answer in *King Lear*; yes, he's unreasonable, but also deserves to be treated better, but he also makes a huge mistake. So when the daughters say, 'He's mad, let him go out into the storm, let him get on with it and we'll see what happens later,' they're kind of right. When they talk about how wild and unruly he is,

you think they're right, but on the other hand they're also extremely ungrateful and they don't look after their parent in the way you'd hope they would. It's very difficult to balance that play because you're aware that both sides are right. This is a situation that doesn't really offer a forward answer. No-one wants to be unkind to Dad but no-one wants him to live at their house. And I understand that. Shakespeare has something I really respect and try to emulate – a kind of moral detachment. I don't think it's interesting to have heroes and baddies and I think so many Shakespeare plays are incredibly morally balanced like that. So I always felt that what is normally presented with the *Iphigenia* story is that Agamemnon is a thoughtless monster – to a liberal audience anyway – and that is uninterestingly simple. And when the *Oresteia* is done, Klytemnestra is a horrible monster waiting like a spider to trap him. One of the things that I found very interesting was a book I read by Michael Sandel, called *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?* He puts forward a version of a philosophical problem, the trolley problem, which we had reprinted in the programme and which I set the cast on the first day of rehearsals. It's this thing where you're on a train; there's a split in the track and on one track one man is working, and on the other five men are working. If you pull a lever the train will hit the one man, not the five men, but if you don't pull the lever it'll hit the five. Everybody usually says, 'I'd pull the lever,' and if you ask why they'll say it's because the greater amount of life will prevail. So problem number two is that you're standing on a platform and a train is about to rush past; there are five men working on the track but standing next to you is a very fat man, and if you push the fat man onto the track he'll stop the train and the five men will get out of the way. Everyone balks at that a little bit and thinks maybe they wouldn't, and you realise that the principle does not operate as strongly as we'd like to think. And of course more interestingly than that, how do you know you're going to pull the lever until you've got your hand on the lever and you find out who you are, and what in real terms you are capable of? That is also something that I think is very significant in Greek; that sense again and again in the Aeschylus where he says 'you suffer; you learn': you meet yourself in moments of trauma. Your real self is only unveiled when it really hurts, and it's really hard and really horrible. So I suppose that sense of having to pull the lever, having to make a decision if you're Agamemnon; or actually this is for me in the court as well, where you have to decide 'innocent' or 'guilty'. Both of those verdicts are right; both of those verdicts are both satisfying and unsatisfying. I also went to a court, to the Old Bailey, and I sat in on the sentencing hearing of a woman who had killed her children, and I met exactly the same thing, the same sense of a grey area. There were two versions contained within that courtroom, both of which seemed true, but in one of which she seemed clearly guilty, and in one of which she seemed clearly innocent. The choice was unsatisfying; we didn't have enough information, and only within the cube of her head could you possibly have known what she really intended. And particularly when it comes down to, as it does in the Aeschylus, madness – when the Furies appear and Orestes points at the Furies in the *Libation Bearers* and the Chorus say 'If you can see them, it means you're crazy,' with no Furies onstage. Little break, play three, the Chorus are now the Furies. So have we gone inside his head, or are we all mad? What is the deal? It's very clever I think in that third play of Aeschylus, which says either you are now watching something which is subjective to Orestes and is

therefore untrustworthy, or you've gone crazy, and it's therefore untrustworthy. I think it very cleverly holds off the appearance of the gods until it's able to draw a huge question mark around the whole experience of the third play and quite what that's supposed to teach you. When I went to this sentencing hearing she [the defendant] had another child who had his birthday, and she didn't want to murder the children on the day of the birthday; she'd written her note explaining what she was going to do. She was going to kill herself afterwards, but that attempt, in the end, didn't work. She'd written her note at I think eight o'clock in the evening and the child's birthday finished at midnight. So between eight and midnight, what did she do in those hours? If it was a film you'd have her pacing the corridors, wringing her hands or whatever, but she didn't – she went on Pinterest and liked and commented on lampshades and home furnishings. There is something about that which really stayed with me. Until the moment you pull the lever you can be fine, and your subconscious can know where you're going but it doesn't have to be conscious. As Lia Williams and I worked on *Klytemnestra*, working with the Greek and working with my adaptation, it became clearer and clearer that the thing – and this is really one of the things I've learned from doing Greek – the Bee Gees say that tragedy is 'when the feeling's gone and you can't go on' – and I don't think that's true at all. In fact I think that's almost exactly wrong of the *Oresteia*. I don't think it's about lack of feeling or loss of feeling, it's about too much feeling. It's that you love your daughter but you also love your man, and you have to choose. You have to choose which one you love more. A lot of tragedy I think comes down to love decisions. In some ways that expresses the fundamental action of the *Oresteia* again and again and again. Who do you love, your mum or your dad? Who is going to get your love when it comes to the real test of that? Of course that's what happens to *Klytemnestra*. He [Agamemnon] comes home from the war, and some critics would say that he [Aeschylus] wants her language to be double, and sort of 'wink, wink' at the audience, but I really felt that who knows? Maybe *Klytemnestra* knows consciously all along what she is going to do; maybe it's her subconscious expressing a violence which she is only aware of as she has a knife in her hand. In court I looked at someone who had murdered her children and thought, 'maybe you always knew exactly what you were doing, or maybe you knew nothing until the moment you did it.' Or maybe it's anywhere in between those two, and we'll just never know. I suppose you read that double language of *Klytemnestra* when she says, 'The worst thing about him being over there [at war] is that you dream and dream and dream about the fact that he's dying; you dream about his death.' Probably a plausible thing to say, actually, or is it her subconscious saying, 'You're going to kill him'? Or is it her conscious mind saying, 'You're going to kill him'? But in some ways to me that last is the least interesting choice because, psychologically, why would you flag that to someone who might stop you? One of the things that I see in that play is that *Klytemnestra* really does love him, and just because he's killed their daughter doesn't mean she stops loving him. That's the agony of it; that he comes home, and she is actually very pleased, I think, that he hasn't died on the battlefield. But he has still killed their daughter. And now he's brought Cassandra with him. Cassandra was another area of the play where I think there'd been one critical reading, one fairly chauvinistic critical reading, for a lot of years, which was very judgemental. It was that Agamemnon brings back a

sex slave, and Klytemnestra is rightfully angry. We were given Klytemnestra's point of view, but not Agamemnon's. What does he think he's doing? Is he just an idiot? It occurred to me that, in bringing back a young girl who he has rescued in a sacred place – someone who could have been put to the knife and wasn't – in some strange way what he's done is try to rehabilitate a version of Iphigenia, hence why we staged it with that ambiguity. So maybe they're having sex and maybe that's what it is; maybe not. Maybe he's just genuinely trying to put back the thing that he knows is missing. He says in the first act of our play (and in the choral ode of Aeschylus which that play is a dramatization of) that he knows that making the right decision will destroy him. Just because it's the right decision, that doesn't mean that it doesn't hurt. Of course it does hurt. He comes back from the war and she looks at him, and she sees the man she fell in love with all those years ago, and her husband, and the father of her kids, but she also sees someone who's murdered her child. Greek tragedy is very clever at collapsing several identities into one human. In Orestes' case you're your mother's son and your father's son at the same time. In Agamemnon's case, most self-evidently, you're the general, you're the commander of the ships, you're the person responsible for the country, and you're her [Iphigenia's] dad. You're all of those things at the same time, and those different responsibilities pull you in different directions, and you have to choose which one to act from. But in some ways what's going on there is that you're forced to make a love choice. For me that's the end of a long process of working on the Greek, endless rereadings of the Greek. For me with any classic text you're trying to see the thing that is in the text, but that in production isn't being seen, asking what is the accepted version of this. For me that was Klytemnestra as a monster: I just didn't accept it. I thought there was something about the bath as a place to murder him that felt sort of impromptu. Maybe she's always known somewhere that that's what she was going to do, but she didn't consciously know perhaps until the moment she's doing it. Then she's done it and says, 'My god, it feels great; I wish I'd done this ages ago!' I struggled for a long time in the writing of it with how to structure the evening, where to put intervals and how to break the evening up. Then when I went to the court they had these monitors that had screens that said when court was resuming, and if you weren't back in on time you couldn't get in. At the Old Bailey there are lots of courts and there's a real sense of 'tick tick tick tick tick'. It occurred to me that my plays were going to fall into what was effectively a series of actions. So, 'Should we murder the child?' in play one. At the end of the play we either do or we don't. 'Should we murder the husband?' in play two. At the end of the play we either do or we don't. And in play three, 'Should we murder the mother?' Play four, 'Should we murder the son?' It's interesting and deliberate in the Aeschylus, I think, that the pattern goes: 'Should we murder?' 'Yes.' 'Should we murder?' 'Yes.' 'Should we murder?' 'Yes.' 'Should we murder?' 'Yes.' 'Should we murder?' Tied vote: 'No' – but just. Then it finishes on that, on that strange, wobbly, liminal – optimistic, just about, I think, because he's alive – ending. But what did that mean, and how are we to read that? These plays are obsessed with reading things, and with signs being double, about language being untrustworthy. It has this elliptical ending: the word 'innocent' is supposed to mean 'not guilty'. But it doesn't take the blood away; it doesn't take away the whole evening. What sort of future does it promise? Not sure.

EB. I was struck by the recurring idea in your play that our responses to that as an audience are very much conditioned by lots of different things, depending on our own perspective or our own experience, and that is something which can change from one day to the next, or even one hour to the next.

RI. And it does. For the ancient Greeks they were watching these plays in a civic setting. The fifth-century Athenians would have experienced these plays in the same place that legal decisions were made, looking at the civic officials who were also sitting there in their tribal deme. So in some ways this gesture of asking how theatre is like court and how court is like theatre is right at the heart of the Dionysia. That's really central to what the whole thing was about – we look at something difficult, and we try and decide as a civilisation and a democracy how we are going to deal with it. I think that's in all theatre at the root anyway. Here is this thing we feel anxious about: what if a guy was to have sex with his own mother? How are we going to process that? What does one do? Let's see if we can act that out and discover. It's so huge, the Aeschylus, in that sense and I've tried to keep all the themes in the air.

EB. What was the process of creating a single play from the trilogy?

RI. Well, there's not really a single process. My version is sort of a single play, but sort of four plays, in a strange way, where the original is three plays. The reason I added the first play, the Iphigenia play, which of course is not a Euripides rewrite but a dramatization of Aeschylus' Chorus – is because the fifth-century Athenians would have known that story from Homer. When you show them Klytemnestra they would have reacted as we would if we were shown Hilary Clinton, say: 'Here's Hilary Clinton in 2001; Bill's about to get home.' You'd go, 'Oh, I know this story, I know what the stakes are here.' In the same way 'here's Klytemnestra and Agamemnon' would have been a provocative start, and an interesting, exciting start. The whole idea of my Iphigenia play is to be true to the ancient audience's experience. Of course their other experience would have been that Orestes was a hero. In the *Odyssey* he's a hero and everyone tells Telemachus to be more like Orestes. It says he avenged his father, but it doesn't say how. So that moment when he is confronted with his mother and you realise what Aeschylus has been doing all this time is an incredibly provocative rewrite of the Homeric view of Orestes; it's saying you think you know this story and you don't, or that you haven't thought about this bit of it. Again that's something I wanted to try to hang on to; that sense of the moment when he sees his mum and all the clarity of his vengeance vanishes. We see him, like his father, have to wrestle with a moral decision and decide what to do. But in the final play the gesture is very different – it says, rather than decide on your own, why don't we all decide? Let's have a show of hands and see what we'll think, then go with that. And you feel really good about that...and then the vote ties. And then one person makes the decision anyway, and makes it on questionable, very strongly chauvinistic grounds. I think that tells you nothing about the chauvinist politics of fifth-century Athens and everything about Aeschylus' dramaturgy, which is that he says, 'I will give this person the most provocative reason for finding him innocent, to prove to you that this is one person's opinion, and that one person's opinion can be extreme and can, nonetheless, get the result that is more merciful.' What does happen in the *Oresteia* some nights – it's happened quite a few times now, and it happened here in

the previews – is that the audience shout out. One time when Rudi Dharmalingham [who played Calchas at the Almeida] said in the final scene, ‘Think either INNOCENT or GUILTY...three, two, one...’ a bloke in the circle looked directly at Luke Thompson, who plays Orestes, and shouted, really aggressively, ‘GUILTY’. He didn’t laugh, it was just cold. There was a very strange, very charged silence, then Rudi said ‘Thank you,’ and we moved on. Another night when I was in the audience, someone shouted ‘GUILTY’, and then someone else shouted ‘INNOCENT’, and then a whole load of people shouted out, but there was a divide, a very clear divide. Then Rudi said, ‘The house must now observe the times to speak and be silent,’ and, slightly chastened, they laughed nervously, and we moved on. When we got to the verdict and he said that the vote was tied, the silence was completely different – fuller - because their vote was tied. They’d been asked to vote, and we’d seen, as a fact, that they had not reached a unanimous decision at all. That was really exciting. It’s so unexpected, the tied vote, that I think people don’t think it’s the Greek, and think it’s me adding it in, but of course it’s exactly true to the action of the Greek.

EB. It’s fascinating that you have that literal audience engagement, in which people join in the action as they have done emotionally for the last four hours, and that the courtroom setting seems to have brought that about.

RI. One of the challenges that the production had to try and face was that, for the fifth-century Athenian theatregoer, he was already in a court, the court was already visible and became embraced by the literal action of the story only in the final play. It’s very clever – Aeschylus is being site-specific and thinking, ‘Well, we’re in the court anyway, so why don’t I set the last one in the court?’ We used that. So the logic of the LED tickers, and the evidence being shown, and Calchas at the side of the stage as the clerk of the court, is all designed to do that to you. So you don’t notice it’s there; well, you do notice, but you just think it’s the production being tricky, and then it asserts itself just before that final interval when he says, ‘Please be upstanding’, and now they’re in a court, and now everything you’ve been watching all evening hopefully pays off. In some sense maybe it’s been a court all along – not necessarily, but maybe. That’s an attempt to restore the experience of watching the original.

EB. Well, court itself is theatrical, isn’t it? It’s a performance by certain people, in a very specific setting, on a specific occasion, with certain rituals, which is very like theatre.

RI. Yes, and it also relies on people taking on opinions which they don’t necessarily hold, and arguing for them.

EB. I’m really fascinated by the idea that myth is continuously evolving and changing, and that stories are adapted and put in new settings for new audiences, which is obviously what you’ve done here. In that process are there some elements of the story which you feel that you can’t change if you want to keep the essence of the original story?

RI. Well that idea of cultural transmission is exactly what *Mr. Burns* is about, another play which I did recently! In some ways it was a kind of precursor to us doing the

Greeks, with that strand of interest. I really don't believe that you gain anything by trying to recreate original performance practice. The great problem is – and I can talk about this with Shakespeare – you look at that Henry Peacham drawing of *Titus Andronicus*, a Roman play, and it shows you a load of people wearing Elizabethan costumes with a few Roman bits, but mainly it looks Elizabethan. So clearly they saw this as a play about now, that was set in Rome, sure, but the emphasis was on *performed now*, about now. So to set the plays now in Elizabethan dress is to completely miss the gesture. You're not actually being true to the original thing by doing that; you're letting it ossify and fossilize. So, for example, the original Greek plays would have been in masks, but I had no interest in doing that at all because it doesn't do the job for us that it would do for them. It's a different thing and means something entirely different. The formal Chorus too – I can see the dramaturgical job it's doing in the Aeschylus, but I always find it awkward when there's a separate Chorus. I remember going to see *Electra* and thinking I just didn't know what they were doing there, or who they were. I can do that thing that one does, you know, if you've been to Shakespeare's Globe in the last five years, where you switch off that critical part of your brain and see it as like a kind of cultural theme park; an experience that is not urgent to my life. But you never do that when you watch *The Sopranos*; you never have to go, 'I accept that bullshit convention as a bullshit convention, and I will just get over it.' It would knock you out of the tension and the emotion, and the feeling of having had your guts ripped open that watching something really good like that gives you. Of course there are Choruses that we do understand – if you think of Alfieri in *A View from the Bridge*, for example. The big breakthrough for me with the Chorus was that at different points in the *Oresteia* they are different things. Sometimes they're invested characters with a stake in what happens; sometimes they're questioning on behalf of the public and saying, 'Why did you do that?', being Paxman; sometimes they're being therapists and saying, 'Why did you do that, for you?' Sometimes they just ramp up the tension. Those jobs were all there in Chorus at different moments, so what I did was to treat all those jobs differently. So if we wanted Paxman we had Paxman; older Orestes serves the function of invested character questioning the action, and his therapist does a lot of the, 'But why would anyone do that?' sort of psychology. So the Chorus' jobs are all there, and a lot of the Chorus' text in fact is there, it's just not always in the same place, and it's not spoken by people standing at the side. The music in the same way is very important to the Aeschylus. Sometimes the choral singing is used, I think, just to ramp the tension, purely and simply. That glorious thing when Klytemnestra and Agamemnon walk in on the red carpet and go in and the door closes, Cassandra doesn't appear in the Homer, so you wouldn't expect that, you'd expect 'stab stab stab scream scream scream', and instead you get Cassandra in that very particular bit – which is why we kept it in the ancient Greek – she makes that extraordinary sound. But then the Chorus sing and they sing 'I feel really scared, I feel really scared.' Effectively it's like putting on some suddenly loud Hitchcock-y music. You're just ramping the tension up until the moment of the murder. I got quite excited by the idea of thinking that the other thing the Chorus is is music, which meant I could use music and I could very legitimately play a song as relevant to the action, and that that might play to ramp up the tension as we get to the moment when Klytemnestra

eventually murders him. So I suppose all of those things have their roots in the impulse that it is faithful to the spirit rather than to the letter of the original thing. And the spirit is more important, because what we don't have is a 458 BC audience; we have a now audience, and my responsibility is to keep them captivated and interested. I keep giving this analogy to everyone of adaptation being like a plug adaptor. So you're standing in a room and your hair's wet, and you're holding a hairdryer. You try and plug it in but it doesn't work. You can try and hammer it in if you want but you're still going to have wet hair. You're confident that the thing you're holding in your hand, the old thing you're holding, can dry your hair, if only you can get the energy present in the room into the old thing. That's what it's like with an old play sometimes. You go, 'I'm sure that the *Oresteia*, after I've spend some time with it, can work: I have an impulse, an instinct, that it can dry my hair – it's going to be really exciting, it's going to do exactly what I want it to do, but I have to find a way of plugging it into the room I'm standing in, because if I don't I'm just showing them this thing that once could dry hair and now doesn't.' If I can find a way of reworking the way it connects with the room so that it comes alive, suddenly it feels like it felt in 458 BC again, one hopes.

EB. In terms of the text itself, you've mentioned a couple of times working with the original ancient Greek text in your own version. Did you also read lots of other translations? And you also mentioned Simon Goldhill earlier – how much input did he have?

RI. Simon was brilliant. I was taught briefly by him at university and I was really inspired by him. I wrote to him when we were thinking about the Greeks season to start with, and we had a chat about it in his office in Cambridge. Then last September when we knew we were doing it, 1984 had just closed in the West End and I knew I needed to go away for probably two or three weeks and spend some time doing nothing other than reading the Aeschylus, and starting to map out a rough version. So I wrote to my old college and asked if I could have an old student room. They asked whether I liked cats! When I said yes, they said that the Provost was away and they were going to have to pay someone to come in morning and night to feed the cats. So they said I could just stay in the Provost's lodge for three weeks for free as long as I could remember to feed the cats! So I was alone in this colonnaded mansion in the centre of King's College Cambridge and once a week I had lunch with Simon; I had a yellow pad with about a hundred and fifty specific questions on, and senses of where I might go that I used to bounce off him and see what he thought. So he was very generous about that, and about helping me with the grammar and translations of words by email. When I'd finished a first draft he read it all and commented, very brilliantly, and then in the first week of rehearsals he came down and spoke to the whole cast and answered all their questions, gave them a background in Greek theatre and the *Oresteia* and Aeschylus. He also taught Hara Yannas, who plays Cassandra, the ancient Greek. He has been the consultant presence. I have a very small amount of Greek but can stagger my way through.

EB. Where did you learn your Greek?

RI. Autodidactically, with a textbook. I did Latin at school for GCSE so I picked up a bit then, but my Greek is not impressive. I also read a lot of other versions, but none of them really helped. I worked mainly from completely unperformable academic translations – the Richmond Lattimore one, with Chicago Press. I defy anybody to do a production of that translation although it is very faithful to the Greek. Most of the other translations are by poets, not playwrights, and I felt very strongly that the dramatic situations were really exciting and that you never got that because they [the characters] don't really talk to each other. And I do not understand at all why anybody would employ 'thees' and 'thous' in rewriting an ancient Greek text. I saw one not that long ago which began with someone saying something like, 'Thou, son of Agamemnon, we have walked hither for nine days,' and I thought, 'OK, I immediately don't buy this.' Because (a) nobody addresses anybody as 'son of anybody', unless they've got some dramatic exposition to do, and (b) if you've just walked together for nine days why are you telling him? Immediately we're in a realm where the dramaturgy is cruder than ours, or just the translation is lazier. It isn't accurate to the Greek, even though they would have used those patronymics like 'Son of Agamemnon', to translate it as 'Son of Agamemnon', because you're taking something that would have been familiar to them and allowing it to be totally unfamiliar to us. You're not doing your job to actually present the play in its new context; you're making it strange rather than making it itself. So my version is a complete mix. Some of it is direct line-by-line translation, slightly smoothed for speakability; other parts are further away.

EB. How much did it evolve later once the actors got involved?

RI. There was a fairly fixed script by then. I'd done a draft by December, which is when Lia Williams first came on board. Lia was given that, then I revised it in February after comments from some more people, and did another revision in late March. Both of those times we did a reading, where we got some actors in a room for a day, read the whole thing out cold and discussed it with them. Then I did some work on it following those readings. So by the time rehearsals started it had already been knocked around a few times. The first play, the first act, changed the most in rehearsals.

EB. In that first play I'm interested in your decision to have a very young Iphigenia. Where did that take on her character come from?

RI. A lot of those family decisions stem from Electra. The number of daughters Agamemnon has varies, text to text, myth to myth. Sometimes it's Iphigenia only. Sometimes it's Iphigenia and Chrysothemis and Electra, sometimes just Iphigenia and Electra. So this idea of women being secondary in the myth is always there. Whereas with Orestes you always have just Orestes. I suppose it felt less interesting to me that Iphigenia had agency. In the same way the soldiers don't have any agency; it felt important that Agamemnon makes a decision without being able to consult them. The Euripides – I think it's fundamentally a satirical gesture anyway to have the child make the argument, 'Kill me and I'll be really famous' – I didn't quite buy psychologically. I did think about it. I did wonder about a version – which I think I wrote, early doors – where the family sat down to discuss it round the table, an open

discussion with everyone there, at the end of which they agree not to do it, at which point Iphigenia grabs the bread knife and plunges it into her own throat. But I could never quite live with it in a way that I thought was believable.

EB. So it comes down to the importance of Agamemnon making that active choice, which you talked about before?

RI. Right. And dramaturgically, he's going to be punished in play two, so he needs to have done the crime. It needs to feel like it was his decision to make and he made it. I also thought it was a worse thing than if she was a teenager. There was something about her being the representative of future. She's so clearly got a future that she hasn't started out on yet, and I was much more moved by that than I was by the idea of a sort of a teenager.

EB. In your version Iphigenia had her own song, 'God Only Knows' by the Beach Boys. Where did that idea come from?

RI. Early on I looked at how the Chorus might use music to create energy. I knew then that music was going to be important. At that point I thought there would be some sort of musical element to the sequence that ends with Agamemnon's death. In the original you get Orestes, and them in the house, and the Chorus nearby, nervous, and Cassandra. In the original there's a layering up. For me [Agamemnon's death] would sit sort of at the centre of the evening before the longest of the intervals. It felt like it needed to lift to that moment. I don't know where that song particularly came from but before it was Iphigenia's song it was for me the song for the murder of Agamemnon, and I liked the doubleness of it. I liked the fact that the lyric could mean, 'God, the things I could be if you weren't here,' or it could mean, 'God, I wouldn't be anything if you weren't here.' The lyric does that; I enjoyed the doubleness of that. Then it says in the Aeschylus, in the first choral ode of the *Agamemnon*, when Iphigenia is held upside down to be sacrificed, her eyes meet the eyes of men for whom she had sung at her father's feasting-table. I thought that was a great image: that she knows her killers, but also that she has sung – that idea of that family ritual, 'Come on darling, sing your song,' felt like it hadn't aged. I thought about her as the little girl who wants to sing the song; it felt like it was very true to the Greek but also very dramatic, particularly as Cassandra says, 'The ghosts of children are singing in the house; there's always singing.' That suddenly all added up in my head; it's not just Thyestes and the previous generations but it's also Iphigenia, and she's there in the house still singing that song. Also the Agamemnon/Aegisthus double [both characters were played by Angus Wright] would have been something they would likely have done in the original production. It's impossible not to see that psychologically. In some ways are we projecting onto Aegisthus the face of Agamemnon because that's who we remember sitting in that chair? Or is it that Klytemnestra's got a 'type' and she's gone for the bloke who looks just the same as the dead husband, just like Agamemnon replacing Iphigenia with Cassandra? She thinks she's broken free and actually she's just gone from one cage into another cage. I found that really interesting in terms of the stagecraft, that death didn't mean vanishing – in fact quite the opposite. When Cassandra says 'They're all still here, in the house, there's blood all over the place,' that wouldn't be a crazy person saying

things that aren't true but in some ways that might express the world that we've put on stage. You're constantly watching the dead wander around, and then you get to that court and there's the cast, and actually Menelaus and Agamemnon and Klytemnestra and Cassandra are there. You've seen these people die and yet here they are making the pro and con arguments and they're taking the same sides they would have taken in the first acts.

EB. One of the things that is striking about your Agamemnon, who was played by Angus Wright in your version, is his religious belief. We see him praying, for example. I always imagine that one of the difficult elements of adapting a Greek play would be making the religious aspects – prophecies, anthropomorphic polytheism and so on – relatable and meaningful to a modern audience. What are your thoughts on that?

RI. It's really hard. There is no right answer, and I can only talk about the route which we found. The thing I always hate people saying about 'Shakespeare's England' (and I intend the inverted commas), for example, is 'Oh, they were all religious.' You think, well, they were complex enough to come up with these plays. Just because we have a monarchy doesn't mean we are all monarchists; just because we have democracy doesn't mean we all believe in it. Any society complex enough to produce these plays must be complex enough to have a spectrum of varying opinions. If you imagine a bus of people going through central London you wonder what you could possibly say that would be true of all of them, other than that they are on the bus. You couldn't generalise about race or age, or where they were born, or where they might die. You couldn't generalise about politics or religion. There's nothing at all other than their immediate circumstance. Of course [in ancient Greece] there were lots of different shrines you could go and sacrifice at, and if you had a problem you could pick which god you wanted to go to. I thought that's more like the modern world. The polytheistic world is quite like the modern world: many religions, many gods. There is a sense of mystique, of there being something up there, but which is the right person to go to and who is on your side, and who will punish you if you don't go to them? The idea of the oracle is in some ways a very contemporary idea, that you can be given the answer but it's given elliptically, and you have to be so careful about the question that you ask, because the question will be answered. So if you ask the wrong question you will get the wrong answer, or you'll get the answer you don't need.

EB. And you've still got to work out what to do with the answer when you get it.

RI. That's right. I said to the cast, would it hurt you if I told you I thought the right answer was to pull the lever? Of course it doesn't help, because your problem isn't really with the answer, it's whether you'd be able to, and how you'd feel afterwards. But of course what the oracles are lovely at is being like horoscopes or fortune tellers or mysticism. Very few people are confident enough to say they don't believe in it if faced with it.

EB. Yes, and we take the bits we want to believe, and leave out the bits that we don't want to believe.

RI. Right. And as people get older they start to worry about what comes next, and church attendance goes up. I think we think we're free of it, and we're really not. With the Greeks because it's polytheistic it's this world where you have to choose, again. You have to choose what your version is. Who is *your* God? For me, in my *Oresteia*, Agamemnon claims to have one version [of belief] publicly but seems in fact to have a slightly different version to the version he claims, which is different again from his wife's. But even he is not confident enough to be able to say that he's had the instruction from God and will now kill his child. It's still an agonising process of real-world decision.

EB. We touched a little bit earlier on the character of Clytemnestra too, and you talked about chauvinism in the portrayal of the female characters, and the fact that often in versions of the *Oresteia* she is shown as something of a monster. Is there something problematic about showing Clytemnestra on stage now that you had to tackle?

RI. I don't think so. If you start with a boring simplistic assumption you will have a boring simplistic performance. So if you start out playing Iago by showing him as the baddie who screws everything up, and you don't investigate for a second the possibility that maybe he is honest or that maybe he really is trying to do something good – I'm not saying that is true necessarily – but if you don't investigate that you will never find it. Confirmation bias means that you'll design it to prove yourself right. For me with Clytemnestra you need to find an actress who can do all of it – you need someone who can be a murderer and a mother at the same time, because that's possible. Someone who can love her daughter and love her husband, who can disagree with the decision and be broken by the death of the daughter and yet still love him. Too often we smooth out the contradictions.

EB. Did you always have Lia Williams in mind for your Clytemnestra?

RI. Yes. I'd known her for a few years and thought she was a genius for a lot longer. What's extraordinary about her is that she's so delicate, very feminine and beautiful and fragile, and yet has in her this tremendously deep rolling fury. You're just never quite sure how the one thing can live with the other thing; she's a fascinating contradiction. I didn't want one of the actresses you might traditionally think about for a Greek tragedy a sort of [roars] actress. I didn't want that thing. I wanted a mum. To me a lot of those actresses couldn't feel like a mum. It felt really important to me in play one that this felt like it was a family that might function, and might be happy, otherwise there's nowhere to drop from. It was always Lia's to turn down, even before it had been written. Another note I made said 'Electra should be like that girl from *Albatross* (funny)', and that girl was Jessie [Jessica Brown Findlay] who plays her. I didn't know her at all but had seen her in the film and was reminding myself to cast Electra with an actor who could be funny.

EB. How did you manage working with the young children who played Iphigenia and the younger Orestes? Is there a potential for it to be quite traumatic for them?

RI. You have to manage it very carefully. We did it on 1984 as well so I had some previous experience. You have to allow the kids to be part of the game that is being

played with the audience. So rather than say, 'You die in this scene,' you say, 'We're going to trick them into thinking that you die, and they're going to be upset, and it'll really freak them out if you stay really still.' So you allow the child actor to be part of the effect and not part of the reality. Even though the other actors actually by the time it comes to the performance are part of the reality more than they are of the effect, as long as the child is keeping a foot in the effect you're fine. It's when the child starts to act it properly that you're in trouble. You keep them away from the run-throughs, and from having to watch that big argument scene, or any of the real angst.

EB. We've talked a lot about the characters and the plot, but your set was also particularly striking. How rigid a brief did you give the set designer?

RI. Well I don't really give a brief to the designer. I started working with Hildegard [Bechtler] on it before I'd written it so I pitched to her at length what I was going to do. I said to her that I thought a lot of the reason I hadn't liked Greek plays in the past was because the versions, the texts tried to do the 'high', the 'ritual' element, 'Son of Agamemnon, we have walked under the apricot vines for nine days now,' and so on, but the productions tried to do the everyday, the usual. So what you tended to get was people saying things that nobody would ever say, peeling an orange! I had an instinct that the reverse might be better, to have a much more ritualised production in the way music and light and choreography were used, but that people spoke normally; that the text was not the place for the ritual, but the production was a much happier home for it. So I said to her that it needed to be a space that doesn't feel like a set. It can't feel like it's a house but it needs to feel domestic. It needs to feel like a court all the way through and like a home all the way through, as well as being a ritual environment. We played around. We took everything out of the Almeida first. We sat with a model box and started putting things back in: could we do it just on a white floor; did we need the table? We had sofas at one point everywhere. You play around. Then the idea of glass kept coming back, partly because we had exhibits, and the dock, and a court, and that whole sense of seeing something through the lens of something felt exciting. Then we discovered on Google that magic glass that can do that switch [from being transparent to opaque]. The thing we didn't like about having a set was that you couldn't see the walls of the theatre; the Almeida is a big brick oval and we really missed the brick if we built walls, so the idea of having the glass screen meant that you could reveal the space. But I thought an open stage would feel really big all the time and wondered how we could stage a two-man argument even if there was glass, because you'd be able to see through it. When we found that magic glass we could have our cake and eat it because we could close the space down with the sliding glass panels, creating a white wall, so we could effectively have a white box. But then if you switched the glass to clear you suddenly had space.

EB. I really liked the fact that when the lights were down the audience could see their reflection.

RI. The reflections are glorious, aren't they?

EB. How did that transfer into the space of Trafalgar Studios, which is a very different kind of theatre?

RI. We did have to make adjustments. It all had to get a little bit narrower. Also there was no door for the wind to blow through like there is here. At the Almeida too the audience are much more spread out, with the side stalls and the back stalls. They're much more pocketed. At Trafalgar Studios we used brick and pillars to feel like the Almeida scenically, but the big difference there is that the audience are together in one big square, so they're easier to get to. On the whole it plays faster there, probably ten or twelve minutes faster. I think that's partly to do with the fact that the audience are all together so it enables more speed of attention and focus.

EB. I know people who've seen it several times, and who say they've got something different from it every time they've seen it .

RI. Really?

EB. Yes, I think that relates to what you said about perspective, and the fact that your view on something changes depending on what sort of day you've had.

RI. That's true of all the things I like watching best. *The Sopranos* repays multiple viewings; *The Shining* repays multiple viewings; *King Lear* repays multiple viewings. You're not going to get it all in one go. I'd love our play to aspire to the condition of any of those three. It shouldn't be clear and immediately legible. So much in theatre is too simplistic and sends you home with a party bag with the answer in. You want to feel emotionally churned up and intellectually churned up and morally churned up.

EB. A couple of times you've mentioned the horror movie genre, Hitchcock and *The Shining*. Is that genre an influence on the way you work?

RI. Actually I'm not a massive horror movie person at all. I've seen *The Shining* a lot of times but I've seen it as a Stanley Kubrick film: he is a big influence for me, and I've seen all of his films several times. It's more about tension actually – that's the thing that you really learn from Hitchcock and *The Shining*. That feeling that's always worth remembering in theatre, but that is very difficult to cultivate, is the sense that something might happen *now*. So when Agamemnon comes back into the house and says, 'I'm home' in the second play, and rubs his hands across the table in the same way as he did when he very first came in, then she [Klytemnestra] comes in and you want to feel like she could be carrying a knife. So if you know the story and you know what happens next in the Greek, the next thing could be that she walks over to him and drags him to the bath, or the table becomes the bath, or whatever. That sense of 'maybe now is the key point of the story'. I think so often we forget with classics the basics of narrative tension and we lose that thread of tension too often.

EB. So what will you be doing next? Are you going to come back and do more Greek?

RI. It's been brilliant for us to do this, and I hope we've left it so that the next time someone does Greeks they will have to refer to ours. I hope we've moved the stage history line forward a little bit; we've added to the discussion of how you do those

plays in 2015. I feel that having done Greeks now, we should do something different next.

EB. What about giving us a reading of the *Odyssey*?

RI. Well...we're going to do it on November 12th. It's going to be an *Odyssey* round London, completely unticketed. So there'll be a livestream to follow and you'll be told that if you want to watch it live you have to get to x place by two o'clock. So with a whole load of actors that's what I'll be doing for the next few weeks. It'll be in the final week of *Medea* and on the day of our closing party for the Greeks festival. Rupert and I are quite geeky about classical texts, and there is often something quite literary about the way that we programme. We started with two adaptations of novels – *American Psycho* into a musical, *1984* into a play, then we did *King Charles III* which is a mock-Shakespeare play, and *Mr. Burns* which is about cultural transmission and *The Simpsons*, but fundamentally looking at *The Simpsons* as a kind of cultural text. Rupert very famously had a big success early in his career with a production of *Paradise Lost*. We felt that we might never get a chance to do the *Odyssey* again unless it was part of the Greeks festival, so we felt that the time was now.

EB. Wow. I'm absolutely delighted to hear that you're planning on an *Odyssey* – you've made my day! That seems like a great place to end. Thank you again for being so generous with your time, and I wish you all the best for the rest of the season.