

David Mercatali is Associate Director at Southwark Playhouse. He has directed much new work including two plays by Philip Ridley, *Tender Napalm*, for which production he was nominated for the Evening Standard Outstanding Newcomer Award (2011) and *Dark Vanilla Jungle*, for which he won the Fringe First Award (2013). In the closing months of 2013 David directed a production of *Our Ajax*, a new play by Timberlake Wertenbaker, at Southwark Playhouse. The play, which borrows from the *Ajax* of Sophocles, sets the action in a modern war zone. The actor Joe Dixon played the role of Ajax.

Interview by Chrissy Combes (Southwark Playhouse, 16 December, 2013)

An illustrated version of this interview is available on the *Practitioners' Voices in Classical Studies* website at <http://www.open.ac.uk/arts/research/pvcrs/2014/mercatali>

CC. I am talking today to the theatre director, David Mercatali. We are at Southwark Playhouse, in its temporary premises on Newington Causeway near Borough High Street, London. David is going to discuss his production of *Our Ajax*, a new play by Timberlake Wertenbaker, inspired by Sophocles' *Ajax*. The play had its world premiere here at Southwark Playhouse in November, 2013. David, hello - and thank you very much indeed for talking to me today.

DM. Thank you.

CC. You are an Associate Director at Southwark Playhouse. Could you just explain for us the recent change of premises?

DM. Yes. The change has basically been a matter of necessity. Network Rail owned our previous premises under the arches on London Bridge and in their new development plans for the area the theatre premises were going to be demolished. So, that was really going to be the end of the Playhouse. However, there was a petition that was signed by many people, including Stephen Fry and Alan Rickman, all of whom supported the history and the future of the Playhouse, and this petition was sent to Network Rail. And it was successful, which was tremendously pleasing. Network Rail has now agreed that the new development will include Southwark Playhouse as part of its plans. However, we probably won't have that new home until 2018 so Chris Smyrnios, Artistic Director at the Playhouse, scouted round and found these temporary premises, a former factory warehouse, in Borough. The warehouse has been converted into a theatre building with two spaces, the Little and the Large, which have much the same atmosphere as our old London Bridge home. *Our Ajax* was staged in the Large theatre.

CC. Was Timberlake Wertenbaker keen to have the play staged at the Southwark?

DM. Yes, I think she was very interested in having the world premiere of her new play here. Her translation of Sophocles' *Antigone* was staged at the old Southwark theatre in 2011 and I know she liked the feel of the space, and the fact that the theatre attracts a young, very engaged audience. Also, over the last few years the Southwark Playhouse has emerged as a venue for presenting challenging new work.

CC. And, in many ways, *Our Ajax* is challenging new work. I saw the production and it was a very harrowing experience, extremely moving. But although the new play clearly borrows from Sophocles' *Ajax*, it is very different, isn't it?

DM. Yes, it is. There are significant departures. But when I read Timberlake's play for the first time I didn't feel that it was just a straightforward updating. I didn't feel it was anything as reductive as that. She maintains so many ideas, keeps so many original mythological references. For example, one of the famous choral odes retains references to Pan and Apollo and Ares. Even, with regard to place, she constantly refers to Troy. She is a person with a huge classical background, a classicist herself. She

really cares about the original. However, in her version, the setting has been shifted from the Greek army camp at Troy to that of a modern combat zone, an army station in the desert, possibly Afghanistan. Timberlake draws on the ancient play's plot, the competition between Ajax and Odysseus, but she is also writing more directly about the psychological cost of modern warfare on today's soldiers, the damage to minds as well as bodies. Sophocles' Ajax was the legendary hero of the Trojan War who defended the Greeks from the Trojans time and time again but was humiliated when the armour of the dead Achilles, which he saw as rightfully his, was awarded to his great rival Odysseus by the leaders of the Greek army. He sets out to murder Agamemnon, Menelaus and Odysseus in revenge but is driven into a frenzy by Athena so that he mistakenly slaughters livestock instead. In *Our Ajax*, on the other hand, Ajax is a contemporary British military hero, a brave Lieutenant Colonel, who loses his mind when, after long years of combat, he is passed over for promotion and Odysseus is made into a Brigadier above him. This Ajax is still driven berserk by Athena, and he butchers dogs and a herd of sheep and goats belonging to a local community near the army station, under the impression that the animals are his enemies. As in the original play, he is portrayed as a great man who cracks under the pressure of his situation and the shame and humiliation he feels, but the madness of Timberlake's Ajax has also a great deal to do with the effects of war on today's soldiers. So characters refer to grenades and sniper bullets and IEDs, Improvised Explosive Devices. The new play confronts the daily terrors soldiers face today.

CC. This Ajax still commits suicide, doesn't he?

DM. Yes. But whereas in the original play Ajax goes to a lonely place on the seashore and falls on the sword given to him by Hector, in the new play Ajax goes to a desert place and shoots himself in the mouth with his rifle.

CC. Could we talk about the reasons why Timberlake Wertebaker made these changes? I'm interested to talk about the text just to begin with. Timberlake Wertebaker, as a very famous, very prolific playwright, is possibly most well known for *Our Country's Good* at the Royal Court. But she has also done quite a lot of work that's either translation or influenced by Greek myth as in *The Love of the Nightingale*, and then pure translation of Sophocles' *The Theban Plays*, first of all staged at the RSC, and then Sophocles' *Electra* and a play by Euripides, the *Hecuba*. And in all of those – I've looked at some of them – they do seem quite close to the original text. But there is a change here, isn't there? She writes in her introduction to the published text of *Our Ajax* that a new play began to superimpose itself on the original, and it seemed to come into the idea of the modern combat zone. Can you talk about the changes, the setting and so on, the idea behind it?

DM. Of course I can. I think it all came from the fact that I believe Timberlake had set out to do a translation of *Ajax*. That was her plan. I don't know if she had been asked to do this by somebody, but that is what she set out to do. And I think as she read it... It's one of the great plays that is done less often, and I think as she read it, she realised why it is done less often. It's a problematic play. For instance, some of Ajax's speeches present major difficulties; it isn't always easy to understand his motivation. In addition, there's a famous structural problem in the original play in that Ajax, the central figure, dies two thirds of the way through. Apart from these intrinsic problems, Timberlake was extremely aware that headlines about current wars, particularly the war in Afghanistan, are in the news all the time. And, although she is a playwright who is very anti-war, she is drawn to war as subject matter. She has family members in the army and she is very interested in the effects of war on soldiers. So, in *Our Ajax*, she has taken Ajax's story into another direction and she has clarified the motivation of Ajax and the major characters for a modern audience. It's hard for a modern audience to understand the heroic ethos, the notion of pride, why Ajax does what he does. And the four soldiers who represent the chorus in Timberlake's play are more individually fleshed out as actual people than the original Sophocles' 15 strong chorus would have been. Timberlake makes their relationship with Ajax very real. In the original text the chorus are sailors from Salamis and they are deeply concerned about Ajax and his state of mind. But in the new play, this is emphasised even more; they are squaddies and to them he is 'our' Ajax, a much loved and respected military leader. Timberlake shows that strong connection between Ajax and his men. They use rough barracks humour and even play music on their iphones, but some of their choral odes are still lyrical and beautiful, they still make a great emotional impact on the audience. And Timberlake uses the chorus as well to condemn

war. For example, in one of the famous odes in the original text, the chorus of sailors yearn for Salamis and refer to their miserable years spent at Troy, their lives worn away by time. In Timberlake's verse, an individual soldier speaks of his beloved homeland and remembers:

*A girl I sat next to
Is home
but not here:
Troy, Flanders, Basra, Helmand
those places where time wastes away
and men wear away
months and years beyond counting
staring at death.*

Troy is still referred to, but Timberlake emphasises the dreadful continuation of war through the centuries, its universality and the effect it always has on the ordinary soldier fighting anytime, anywhere – they just long for home. And I had long conversations with Timberlake and with James Turner, the set designer, about the setting. It was very important to me as a director of this story that the setting was very real and tangible and that people felt what they saw was a war zone. I wanted an elongated thrust space, a true thrust, a deep epic space that was also very intimate. I really wanted the audience to be 'on' those actors, to feel they were right in among the action. The Southwark has an unusual capacity to do this – to achieve something both epic and intimate.

CC. In the original Athenian staging – Sophocles' text indicates that the scene building is meant to convey the tent of Ajax. Could you describe what your setting was like?

DM. Yes. What you had, as I mentioned, was an elongated thrust so that the audience was on three sides but fairly evenly split along those three sides. And the vast majority of the stage was covered in sand, so it was the desert, instantly talking to us about modern wars. You don't think World War Two when you see that, you think of the modern wars that are being fought in the desert in countries very far away. And in different parts of it, James had constructed gate netting with barbed wire above which gave the sense of a camp, and that's what people walked into, so they walked through that and got the sense of being somewhere else. The first feeling when you are doing something like this and you're creating a play which is set elsewhere is to feel as soon as you walk into the space that you are somewhere else, and I think that is what James achieved with this. Finally, at the very end of the thrust, on the side where there is no audience, there's the tent. James created the concept, the idea of a tent, rather than an actual tent. And in the centre of that main stage backdrop was Ajax's tent. Through several stage management problem-solving tasks, we got to the point where two soldiers would pull the flaps back and Ajax would be discovered in his tent with the blood and the gore and his destruction all around him. You would have the image of Ajax there.

CC. It is thought that in the ancient Athenian theatre, the actor playing Ajax would have been pushed through the central door of the *skene* on the *ekkyklema*. The effect would have been that of a shocking tableau, the maddened Ajax surrounded by the butchered livestock. And Joe Dixon's first appearance in this production was certainly shocking too, bloodied as he was by the grisly carcasses. Sophocles connects the name Ajax (*Aias*) with Alas (*ai ai*) and I notice that Timberlake Wertebaker retained *ai ai* in her text. I thought Joe Dixon conveyed this lamentation, this cry of agony superbly.

DM. Yes. As an actor, Joe never holds back on conveying the emotion, the anguish of a character. In Timberlake's text the slaughtered animals are sniffer dogs employed by the army to detect mines, and sheep and goats belonging to a local training village. And in places like Afghanistan villagers value their livestock highly; it is their only source of fresh meat. So Joe really convinced that Ajax had been humiliated on two counts, that he felt himself appallingly betrayed by the army who had passed him over for promotion, and that he felt deeply shamed and disgraced by Athena's trickery.

CC. Did you find it difficult to integrate the role of Athena into the modern context?

DM. Yes, the gods are always tricky for a contemporary director. Timberlake didn't remove the god, she kept the role of Athena very firmly involved. And the character was beautifully played by Gemma Chan. But some of the reviews and some of the audience expressed doubts about the role of the god in

the modern context. Although, on the whole, we had a very positive response to the production, some people just didn't feel that the divine aspect carried the weight it would have done in the original context. They didn't feel this concept of the divine was appropriate, they couldn't understand it. Yet we live in a time where two of the most powerful politicians in recent years, Tony Blair and George Bush, claim to have a relationship with God regarding their reasons for going to war. So, although I might be simplifying things, I can't see how a god isn't relevant in a modern context. Athena accuses Ajax of *hubris* in the Sophocles' play and there are certainly parallel aspects of *hubris* with regard to those contemporary politicians.

CC. I'm interested in how you emphasised the sense of Athena as a divine presence, invisible, watching the action from the start. In the Theatre of Dionysius, she might possibly have been on top of the scene building, on the *theologeion*. Can you tell us how you managed her entrance?

DM. We started with Athena being up in the audience space as the audience came in, then quietly observing Odysseus on his tracking mission. Then she came down into the stage area for the first scene with Odysseus. And she was able to play with the space, move around the space and own it. She remained 'invisible' to Odysseus and maintained the idea that this goddess was vindictive and capricious, mocking Ajax and controlling everything. Athena loves her power, she says 'See what a god can do'. She manipulated the characters, even to the point of making Odysseus put on a sheepskin as camouflage so he could observe the maddened Ajax without being seen!

CC. How did the character feel about having to put on the sheepskin?

DM. Odysseus was fairly indignant! He's a favourite of Athena, he has just been made a Brigadier, and she tells him to act like a sheep.! But it was a joy to have those moments of humour. On the whole, that opening scene is difficult and it is very important to get it right. You have to get it right. I think that early on in the rehearsal process there was debate about whether two of the guards in the training village might have been killed as well, but Timberlake eventually removed that. It was felt that it would detract from the audience feeling sympathy for Ajax.

CC. Was the playwright present during rehearsals?

DM. Yes, she was present during the whole process. It is very important for a director and for actors working on a new play to be able to question the playwright, to help everybody to come to an understanding of the logic of the characters. And, of course, Timberlake had interviewed soldiers and done a tremendous amount of research and that all fed in to the rehearsal process as well.

CC. I am interested, very interested, that you say that the playwright had interviews with servicemen. This play, *Ajax*, and one of Sophocles' other plays *Philoctetes*, have been part of the Philoctetes Project and the Theatre of War and used as vehicles of healing for military people. Whereas, this is slightly different, isn't it, this research is actually informing the play. And one of the aspects which is extraordinary and quite challenging in a way is that the playwright uses a lot of military language, military banter and also acronyms. Can you talk about some of the acronyms, that language?

DM. Of course. The soldiers would constantly talk about PTSD, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. They would also talk about TUs a lot. When we think about TUs, we might think about Trade Unionists, but in the army it means Temperamentally Unsuitable. Actually, the army has a lot of acronyms which are extremely specific and really only known within their esoteric language. We did a lot, Timberlake did a lot of research a long time ago and interviewed people, but we brought different members of the army in. I had a friend who had served in Iraq and he came in and spoke to everybody, one of the Assistant Directors knew somebody who served in Afghanistan and he came in and spoke to us all and it was very interesting interviewing them. We were trying to be as accurate as possible, get the right terminology. When do they say 'sir'? When do they salute? When does this happen? One of the most amazing things we found out, considering we were doing a piece of theatre, was that when you are in war, specifically when you are in camp, the army refers to this as being 'in theatre'. And we spent a lot of time debating the rifle, the SA80, which is referred to. A few years ago, Timberlake had interviewed a Major who had referred to it as a fantastic rifle. And then one of

our actors who had actually served in the army, the leader of the chorus, the Company Sergeant Major, and my friend who had served in Iraq both said the SA80 is the worst rifle in the world, a dreadful rifle, it's appalling. And this was discussed. And then the person who had served in Afghanistan more recently said it WAS fantastic. And we had to work out where the conflict in peoples' understanding of the rifle came from - mostly because it has recently had an upgrade. We had to understand that, what that was, the exact description of the rifle. We made a decision to be extremely accurate in the portrayal of the army so that if army personnel came they wouldn't say: 'That doesn't make sense, we don't believe in that.' And we got a fantastic response from members of the army who came along, and that meant a lot.

CC. And I suppose the rifle is hugely important because whereas, in the original text, Ajax impales himself on the sword which Hector had given to him as a gift, this rifle has to have significance as a prop, doesn't it, for your company?

DM. Huge significance. Huge significance. You have to find the modern significance which is different from the original significance. In a modern context you couldn't have a dispute over who gets whose armour, it's not going to work that way. But a dispute about the ranking system, who gets promotion, is an excellent parallel that works very effectively. We know from *The Iliad* that Ajax was considered to be the second strongest in the Greek army, second only to Achilles, and so he deserved the armour of Achilles. Sophocles, of course, took a lot from Homer and other epic poetry, then concentrated on the story of Ajax's downfall. Timberlake, as well, brought out this sense of downfall, a dreadful loss of status. She knows that when you're in the modern army and you have reached a certain rank, you have to progress. If you are not given promotion, it is an insult to you. And I made a decision in the casting to cast the actor playing Odysseus (Adam Riches) as considerably younger than Joe Dixon. So this Ajax, had he lived, would have been serving under a man about 10-15 years younger than him, a man he doesn't respect, and who is considered a lesser soldier by the men. And I loved that the competition between Ajax and Odysseus made itself felt very early on, in one of the first rehearsals. In a discussion, Adam (Odysseus) said about Ajax: 'But he's reached his ceiling, hasn't he, in terms of promotion?' A couple of days later Joe (Ajax) said to me privately: 'I found that remark *irritatingly* helpful.' As a director, it was fascinating to see that the actors were already developing partisan feelings about their characters.

CC. Ajax was a cult hero in Athens, a very important figure, worshipped by Athenian youth. There is a school of thought that says that in the intellectual upheaval and changing world of ancient Athens, Sophocles was trying to rehabilitate this man of action.

DM. I think that this is what Timberlake was trying to do as well. Within the modern context, Ajax is still a character we find difficult to understand or even, necessarily, respect. He is a big, strong powerful man, a man of action, he can be reflective, of course (some of his verse is so lovely), but generally he acts before he thinks. He is not a strategist like Odysseus. I feel there was definitely an intention on the part of Timberlake to rehabilitate the concept of a modern soldier, what a soldier has to face every day, in combat, on patrols, avoiding snipers and so on. All I can say is the recent story concerning the soldier described as Marine A in Afghanistan, the soldier who shot and killed a wounded member of the Taliban after he had surrendered – I won't go into detail, but my perception of that story is different now that I have learned as much as I have learned, having directed *Our Ajax*. I don't feel any differently about the legal standpoint, what I see as right or wrong, none of that changes, but my understanding of the context and the deeper issue is greater than it would have been four or five months ago. I know the word 'relevance' is always a dangerous word when it comes to theatre, but there is something extremely relevant here in both the original and the new play.

CC. Let's just talk about you then as a director of this new, exciting and very challenging play. Did you refer to the original? How do you do it? Do you just take it as a new play or do you refer to the Sophocles as well? How do you approach it?

DM. Well people may take different approaches to it over time, and different directors will take different approaches, but I didn't feel you could bring Sophocles into the room, because if you bring

Sophocles into the room – on a simple level, you just confuse. One of the things that Timberlake had kept was the original names. Had she removed those, I don't think anyone would have felt that we should have brought Sophocles into the room, because then you would see that it was a new, modern play with different characters written in a different way. To some extent, we had to work past perceptions very early on, from the ancient Greek ideas of these characters to actually the characters that were written in the play. Really, we were doing a new play, we were doing a new play written by Timberlake Wertenbaker, we had to actually assess this, on its own merits, really, starkly, truly. If you start to bring the Sophocles into it, then what you are in danger of doing then is a representation or an idea or a portrayal of your concept, *your* concept of what these heroes are. And, you see, this is the thing, Timberlake in many ways, had wanted to remove the word 'hero' from the script.

CC. The whole heroic ethos and the idea of 'help friends and harm enemies', the warrior ethic?

DM. You have to be really careful of that. Because that's not what we were aiming for within a modern context. We were looking for just modern soldiers working in the real world as we know it. And Adam Riches, who played Odysseus, in particular, had to tackle this issue in that he had a fascination with Greek mythology and he loved Odysseus in the past, and he was very interested in Odysseus's history, and, as we know, Odysseus is one of the most conflicted characters in terms of portrayal. He has always been described as cunning and crafty but that has been portrayed as both a positive and a negative. Sophocles portrays Odysseus quite favourably in *Ajax*, and Timberlake follows through on this, conveying his reluctance to laugh at Ajax in his madness, and showing that Odysseus restores Ajax's reputation at the end of the play. Yet we know Sophocles and Euripides both portrayed Odysseus as manipulative in different plays. In Homer though, and in the Epic Cycle, it's different. In *The Iliad* Odysseus is a hero, his cunning and his craft are positive things that help the Greeks win the war. And then there's *The Odyssey* – he is the hero. What was important was that Adam didn't think 'I'm playing a hero so I have to portray the character in that way.' Odysseus is portrayed in *Our Ajax* as a career soldier who has his eyes on promotion, as simple as that. He isn't a hero but he isn't a bad guy either. He has selfish intentions, he's an opportunist, he wants to play all situations to his advantage, but he shows compassion and makes the right choice at the end. We had to understand all that, get underneath that. Concentrate on what is written in the play and not on the reputation of the character. Adam is a very subtle actor and he brought out the complexity.

CC. The reputation of Ajax, of course, is that of a great warrior.

DM. Yes, and that aspect came into the casting (in spite of what I've just said about not looking for heroes!). And I was very excited about having this huge, powerful actor in the role of Ajax, he conveyed the physical magnificence of the character so well. Joe is a wonderful, greatly expressive actor, very intelligent, and his performances are so brave. I had seen his work with the Royal Shakespeare Company and I very much wanted him in the role. And Joe got to the truth of the character the whole time. In Timberlake's text, Tecmessa says to the chorus:

*Your great, your mighty, your strong
tautly muscled brave giant
your Ajax
lies stricken, slack.*

We had to explore all these aspects of the character. In the rehearsal process, it was all about giving Joe freedom and then feedback later. When you have an actor of Joe's experience, ability and creativity, you just have to set up the scene, the circumstances, the intention, and then just let the actor go with it, just let him go. I worked on the opening scene separately with Joe to begin with, and I shall never forget the moment in full rehearsal when he came out of the tent for the first time as Ajax and expressed his despair to the soldiers about the carnage of the previous night. The actors were genuinely astonished by what they were seeing, because what Joe did was so alive and so unpredictable. It was absolutely riveting. And Joe brought all this out wonderfully. He has all the physical strength to convey the authority, and the rage and madness of Ajax, but he also has the sensitivity there in his eyes and his soul, and he brought out Ajax's isolation and his vulnerability.

CC. Ajax had a very tender relationship with Tecmessa in this play and production, hadn't he?

DM. Very. The relationship is more equal in this play than in the Sophocles. She is a slave, a concubine in the original. In Timberlake's play, the army have invaded her country in the past but she has since become a medical nurse, a combat medic with the army. It's a more equal relationship, there is a big change there. Ajax can still be brusque with her but she challenges him more than in the original. And I loved Frances Ashman in that role. There was something very truthful about it.

CC. And Ajax's son was played as a much older child than in the original?

DM. He was played as about 13-14. And Doug, Douglas Wood (actually aged 17) playing Ajax's son, he didn't have a line in the play but he had hugely favourable responses from people. I was so delighted about that. There was a brilliant moment of spontaneity from Joe in rehearsals, which we kept in performance. Joe scooped up some of the blood from the animal corpses and smeared it on Doug's face. Doug is an angelic looking blond boy, rather pure looking, and when the blood was smeared on him, it was something very horrific to look at. Overall, Doug was so moving.

CC. I don't think we can really talk about this play, or Timberlake Wertenbaker's version or adaptation of it, without reference to two of Ajax's speeches. The first one is when he talks, with Tecmessa and the son onstage, about the mutability of time, and so on, and appears to have changed his mind about committing suicide out of pity for the grief he is going to cause them – and in Timberlake Wertenbaker's text, she refers to the fact that he feels he can't leave her, and he can't leave his son an orphan. Was he, in your view of this new play, *Our Ajax*, trying to deceive or not? What was he doing? What was his rationale in saying what he says?

DM. I don't think he was deliberately trying to deceive. And I don't think that was Joe's intention through it. I don't think Ajax knew what he was going to do at that point. That's my take on it. At that stage, I think he felt he was being truthful, he felt he was being real, he felt he had got back who he was, he felt he could communicate with his soldiers again and inspire them again and he felt his connection to his family. Joe and I spoke about that speech quite a bit because Joe had said 'this is a very famous speech' -

CC. The Deception Speech. It's got a tag, hasn't it?

DM. Yes. And he had said 'Look there is an understanding about that speech'. And Joe approached it in a way that was very spontaneous. We almost took aside anything we knew about the original, the Deception Speech or anything like that, and it just became what Joe did in the moment. For me, it wasn't deception. For me, it was Ajax thinking 'Actually, I am not going to do this. But I need to go into the desert because I need to bury this weapon, and I need time to myself and then I can work out what I am going to do.' He needed time on his own. Clearly, the possibility of suicide is in his head but right up to the moment – in Timberlake's play – that he puts the gun to his mouth at the end of his following speech, he did not know what he was going to do. I have done a great deal of research about people who have committed suicide and the frightening thing is that up to five minutes before they actually do it, the vast majority of people behave as if their life is going to continue. And I think that is the case with Ajax's speech here. It is a beautiful speech, the Time speech. And one aspect of Timberlake's version makes it even more moving. At the close of the speech, Ajax speaks individually to his men. In the original text by Sophocles, Ajax gives a final brief instruction to the chorus, telling them to ensure that Teucer, when he comes, looks after his brother's body. In the original text, Ajax calls the sailors 'my comrades' and Timberlake has expanded on this allegiance, having Ajax speak briefly but individually to his men about their personal problems. She makes this a very touching farewell to soldiers in a modern war zone. For instance, Ajax tells one of the soldiers to speak reassuringly on the phone to his girlfriend, and to give her no descriptions – except of sunsets – in order not to worry her. In these moments, we got to see 'Our' Ajax, the old relationship between Ajax and his men, we see the inspirational leader, the man who cared for them. All in all, this was a very challenging speech and I know it is a controversial and ambiguous one. But Joe and I felt that the whole speech was not about manipulation or deception, nothing so complicated. For us, certainly based on Timberlake's text, the situation is that from moment to moment, Ajax's desires and intentions change. And that is fascinating.

CC. And then we come to the big Death Speech. And this is a speech that, again, has caused such controversy for such a long time among scholars. Just last month, in November, there was a three day conference in Italy with a whole crowd of various academics. The subject was just Ajax and his suicide, that speech, going through that speech. It is so difficult to think how it might have been staged originally. Was he on his own? Was there a change of location? The chorus have gone, which is very unusual. It is thought that no violence would have been shown onstage. - All of these things. Plus the third actor rule, where originally the guy playing Ajax would have to go offstage and probably come on again as Teucer. So, there is such debate. Then you come to this theatre at Southwark Playhouse – and I’m not saying it’s simplified, it isn’t – but modern techniques perhaps help the staging. Could you just tell us how that death was staged?

DM. Yes, basically, we didn’t have a specific set, we had what you might call a staging, so we had the sand and the tent at the end which we could take out. You could light that in a certain way so that the tent no longer seemed part of the action and you could focus on the sand. So you could change location through lights and you felt that you were in the middle of the desert. The scene changed and it changed quite swiftly. And Ajax came out on a patrol into the desert and then he suffers, in the script and in the staging, he goes through again the memory of an ambush, of something that has happened. And, you see, that, for me, comes back to my point about what his intentions were. Whatever he might have wanted to do, he is constantly tormented by his memories and his suffering, his constant memories about losing men and explosions and attacks and making the wrong decisions and all this suffering, constant suffering that soldiers go through. And so he’s there. And he relives that. And then, I think it brings him to breaking point. So after speaking to God one last time – and I think it’s the most moving moment – in Timberlake’s script, Ajax says he doesn’t want medals or promotions any more. All he wants is a body brought home with honour. It’s a beautiful, beautiful moment. And then Joe had made a decision – once again, it’s something that just came out of rehearsals – he pulled out an iphone and looked at an old video, himself with his family, which was like his final goodbye, and then he grabbed his rifle and shot himself right there in the centre of the stage. And the way we staged it was that he put his gun to his mouth and there was a bang. We had big questions about gunshots. Gunshots are controversial in theatre because they are often associated with the worst kind of old ham theatre. But we tried it without a gunshot and we found it it was very confusing storytelling-wise. So we achieved a very quick light change and then a blackout – we found a gunshot in the end we were happy with which was actually quite shocking for the audience, which was great. And then instantly the lights changed and were focussed on the soldiers coming in. I had an idea very early on in rehearsals that the soldiers should come around the back of the audience on their scouting mission to go and find him. And that was it. It was done there, right there, in front of everybody. With it blacked out after the moment of the gunshot, so that we didn’t see what happens to him. Of course, we knew we were slightly playing staging wise with the suspension of disbelief, with what his body was going to look like after he has shot himself, but his body stayed onstage afterwards. When Tecmessa entered, she covered Ajax’s face (as she does in the original play) and when Teucer finally enters, he finds Ajax’s body there, close to the audience.

CC. Could we talk a little about the play’s structure? You said at the start, David, that Sophocles’ text is problematic. Did it create problems for you that Timberlake Wertebaker retains the hero’s early death, two thirds of the way through the action, and that the play becomes a series of arguments over Ajax’s funeral rites? Does this make it a play of two parts, in your opinion?

DM. That’s interesting. Most directors will tell you there are some universal problems about staging Greek theatre in a modern context, and this is one of them because it is all about debate, about rhetorical arguments. But in rehearsal, you just play it for the truth of the moment, and actually, after Ajax’s death, quite a lot of action happens, certainly in Timberlake’s version. I think of Ajax’s death as a catalyst for a dramatic war of conflicting desires about what happens with his body. Clearly, you have to avoid any slow paced discussion, you have to make the arguments between Teucer and Menelaus and then Odysseus and Menelaus move. (Timberlake omits the role of Agamemnon in *Our Ajax* and focuses on Menelaus). Structurally, I have more of a personal feeling about Teucer. I know Sophocles built up suspense deliberately over the delayed arrival of Teucer, but I would have loved to have seen some scenes between Teucer and Ajax. Teucer is a lovely, loyal, calm character, committed

to defending Ajax's reputation and honouring his body. And he was brilliantly played by Billy (Postlethwaite) in our production. I would have liked Teucer entwined in the action earlier, with some scenes between the half brothers – but that is a personal thing, me re-writing Sophocles!

CC. How did you – and the actor playing Menelaus - view that character? Did you see him as a completely unsympathetic character?

DM. Good question! Timberlake makes Menelaus an American – a member of the American force stationed in the desert. And she brings out a sense of power politics, of an uneasy British/American alliance, just as in the Sophocles, you get a sense of an uneasy Greek/Spartan alliance, with Menelaus being a Spartan. John Schwab, who played Menelaus, is American and he was inspired by Bush, this bravura leader who cared so much about appearances, hilarious but scary. Of course, Menelaus is bullying and petty and the argument over the burial is very heated, he intends to prevent the burial. But there are definitely reasons for Menelaus' hatred of Ajax. John kept saying 'Well, he did try to kill me! Maybe, wanting his body to rot isn't that outrageous, given those circumstances!' Menelaus cannot forget that Ajax set out to murder the army leaders in the night. It is only the force of Odysseus' argument that sways him. In the end Odysseus, who recognises Ajax's great qualities, persuades Menelaus to allow the body to be brought home with full military honour.

CC. In Sophocles' text, Teucer places the child, Eurysaces, beside the corpse of his dead father, as protector. So the original staging - before the funeral party processes off with Ajax's body - would probably have been a tableau of the mourners kneeling beside the body. Would you tell us how you staged the close of *Our Ajax*?

DM. Much the same. Odysseus left the stage after the conciliatory conversation with Teucer, and then Teucer organises for the body to be wrapped in the British flag, a sign of military honour for a soldier. We had Tecmessa and Teucer and Ajax's son kneeling behind the corpse, with the four members of the chorus behind them. Ajax's family and friends. Teucer says to the child '*Place a loving hand on your father*', as, I think, in the original text. And this grouping is the very last image the audience was left with. I think it is a wonderful ending. Ajax getting his full honour is the right ending, the right emotional ending to the play. Ajax has said that a real man either lives well or dies well. '*Mess up the first, that leaves the second.*' And, after all his shame and humiliation, he dies well, he dies with honour. It's all about honour, isn't it?

CC. Finally, how do you think this new play, *Our Ajax*, will be received in the future?

DM. Oh, I think it has a huge future. I hope that people appreciate the fusion in this play between the classical and the modern. Sophocles contributed to public life in ancient Athens, he was eventually made into a general, he understood about war then. And Timberlake understands about war now, its dreadful toll on military leaders and on all those who are sent to engage in it, and the importance of full burial rites for soldiers who die on the frontline. Timberlake has not betrayed the play's classical roots but has proclaimed its classical roots, given even more relevance to it, for contemporary audiences. *Our Ajax* is a superb, unique creation.

CC. David, thank you very much for talking to me, and congratulations on a terrific production.

DM. Thank you, Chrissy.