

If you think theatre is boring, you haven't seen a Robert Icke play

The radical young director talks to Laura Barton about reinventing the classics for a new age

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Each night began with the flip of a coin. After the auditorium had filled and the crowd had hushed, actors Lia Williams and Juliet Stevenson made their way through the stalls, advancing at a stately pace until they drew level and faced one another. The two women, of similar age and dressed in nearly identical dark suits, appraised each other shrewdly. "Heads," called Williams as the ceremonial flip began. And then a hesitation. The audience held its breath. "Heads," she said again, firmly.

This scene was the starting point of every performance of Robert Icke's version of Schiller's "Mary Stuart", a play which explores the relationship between the doomed Mary Queen of Scots and her cousin and executioner, Elizabeth I. The production opened at the Almeida theatre in north London in 2016 before transferring to the West End in 2018. Williams and Stevenson each learned both of the leading parts, and every night the toss of a coin decreed who would play which role. The moment brought a high-stakes charge to the live performance of a play about the fickleness of power and the peculiarity of fate.

Icke is Britain's most radical and exciting young theatre director. Now 31, since 2013 he has been associate director of the Almeida, where he has made his name with a series of revelatory adaptations of classic plays, including "Hamlet", "Uncle Vanya" and the "Oresteia". Pernickety, impassioned and unswayed by hierarchy, he has dedicated himself to upturning convention: it irks him, he says, that so much lazy, derivative theatre goes unchallenged. His audacity is there in the staging, from the stripped-back minimalism of "Mary Stuart" to the CCTV footage that provided the backdrop to "Hamlet". It's also there in the way he will happily rewrite texts, adding lines, sections and scenes, no matter how revered their authors. "What he does is dyno-rod theatre," says Susannah Clapp, the Observer's theatre critic, "blasting open clogged pipes to show how galvanising staple theatrical plots can be...He has opened up expectations of what might be seen on stage."

His first sole production was in 2012, when he presented "Romeo and Juliet" not as a drama of the destiny of star-crossed lovers, but as a tale of happenstance. He brought a series of rewinds, retakes and counterfactuals to the stage by playing scenes first with one outcome and then with another, which gave audiences who felt they knew the play a fresh perspective on it. What if Romeo and Juliet had never met? What if the fight had never happened? What if the nurse had failed to deliver the letter? For some this proved abrasive - "So hip it hurts," wrote Dominic Cavendish in the Daily Telegraph, "so flash it blinds you." For others it was invigorating. Whether you liked it or not, it showed that Icke had the guts to reimagine the work of the world's most revered playwright.

More audacious still was his version of Aeschylus's "Oresteia", a trilogy set after the Trojan war about the cycle of murder set in train after Agamemnon sacrifices his daughter to appease the gods. Many regard it as the foundational text for Western drama, yet Icke wrote a new, 70-minute first act, which not only staged the killing of Iphigenia, already in the distant past when Aeschylus's original begins, but also prefaced it with family meals and petty squabbles. Icke's production dragged the action out of the ancient world and into the contemporary kitchen. "He managed to get that play transferred to the West End because he made it about family, which everyone can relate to," says Lia Williams, who played Agamemnon's wife Clytemnestra. The intervention worked. Williams recalls how at the moment of the killing, carried off with a mixture of chilling calculation and heart-rending tenderness, the entire audience would lean forward in their seats. "I've never had that in a theatre," she says. The production won Icke, then just 29, an Olivier Award for best director - which slightly undersells his work. "He is as much a writer as a director," says Clapp. "His speech has a real rhythm and pungent phrasing. So what he produces is his own work." When she reviewed the "Oresteia", she called it "a demolition...You can almost see the dust flying off the old master."

Icke's latest production, which is playing this autumn at the Almeida, is a new version of Ibsen's "The Wild Duck". Written in 1884, it tells the story of the Ekdal family, which is broken apart when an old friend exposes a historic affair, leading to unspeakable tragedy. At its essence it is a play about the disruptive consequences of truth-telling, of life being turned upside down. "The main character is someone who feels the truth needs to be uttered, and Rob is a bit like that," says Rupert Goold, artistic director of the Almeida and Icke's boss. "Old truths being smashed, things

being overthrown: there's almost a revolutionary fervour, and inevitably there will be some casualties."

One morning in the middle of Britain's summer heatwave, 45 students were holed up in a rehearsal room near the Almeida. Aged between 14 and 22, they had headed from all over Britain to this dappled corner of the city, with its streets of imposing Victorian villas and expensive boutiques. Two had flown in from America. They were here for an intensive three-day workshop for aspiring directors, and now they sat in the stillness of a repurposed church hall – eager, open-faced and wearing casual summer undress – waiting to hear from theatre's fast-rising star.

Icke entered the room, looking tall and faintly awkward in black jeans, black T-shirt and bright orange trainers. Standing beside a flip-chart at the front of the room, he had the look of a slightly perplexed physics student. On the board he had listed a series of exercises. The first was called "Look Elsewhere", and was designed to encourage the students to go beyond the conventional reading of a play.

He asked the fledgling directors to summarise "Hamlet" in two sentences. After a few moments' contemplation, the group began sharing their answers out loud. All of them echoed the same idea: "The ghost of Hamlet's father appears. Everyone dies." Icke wanted them to go further. When he's directing, he says, "I have to have a back-door key. I have to find another way in to this thing." Juliet Stevenson, who, after appearing in his productions of "Hamlet" and "Mary Stuart", is part of his unofficial company of actors, says that "his starting point with a play is 'Let's look at the antithesis of what it's supposed to be.'" It is not so much a process of moving out of the box, she says, as starting out of the box in the first place. "Sure," Icke told his students. "But what about 'Ophelia's boyfriend is behaving strangely. Then he murders her father'? That's also happened. And that's not the Hamlet that you stage."

Icke makes for exhilarating company. His conversation has a habit of swooshing one way and then unexpectedly another, as if a great many thoughts are headed to a single destination, moving as a murmur. For the next exercise, he asked the young directors to name some theatrical pieces they had memorised. They responded with poems and excerpts from Shakespeare plays. This wasn't what he was looking for. Icke believes that one of the many factors that stifle young theatre audiences, actors and directors is "a whole bullshit conversation in British theatre about verse". It drives him crazy. "The littl'uns all feel like, 'Oh shit, I need to know what iambic pentameter is!'" he says. "And you're like, 'Shakespeare wouldn't have known that, so why d'you think you [have to], just because some dickhead has told you that's the way through?'"

Icke suggested they recite something else: "Who knows the theme tune to the 'Fresh Prince of Bel-Air'?" Everybody did. "OK, go on then," he told them, and the room obediently chanted back the television theme tune. He explained that their minds had stored the theme's rhythm first, its words second. The point was to show them that language is as much about rhythm and sound as it is about sense. "It's like music, it's totally like music!" he said. Then he asked them to imagine the backstory behind the song. "He gets in that fight and there are people up to no good – like, who are these people? Are they drug barons? They were enough for his mum to worry so much that she sent him away to a whole other place." He was encouraging them to do what he has spent his life doing: "It's about trying to give them permission to think their own thoughts."

Icke was brought up in Stockton-on-Tees, a town in the north-east of England known for shipbuilding, blast furnaces, inventing the matchstick, and, from the 1970s, for suffering from the region's industrial decline. "It seems to me like that area is defined by a weird kind of masculine shame. What do you do as a man, if your skill was making things, and your dad's skill was making things, and now there's nothing to make?"

His parents didn't make things. His mother was a teacher and his father was a tax inspector; his dad encouraged his restless son to read at an early age. By the time he started primary school he was already some way into the Narnia series. Icke's Auntie Di was horrified to see his father goading such precociousness. "You'll destroy that child, you'll ruin him!" she used to say.

Sure enough, Icke never really fitted into life in Stockton. Overweight, academic, uninterested in football, at the local comprehensive school he became "an obvious target to get masking-taped to a tree". He learnt to avoid being beaten up by deploying the one weapon he felt he had – his wit. Perhaps his earliest theatrical success came when he was 11, a blistering parody of the school's headteacher written and performed with his best friend for the end-of-year variety show. "When you did something like that", he remembers, "it really created ripples."

If Icke's reputation as a theatrical provocateur began anywhere, it was here. He was, he says, "the person who would deliberately destroy lessons", enlisting the heft of his 35 classmates to stage acts of vengeance against their teachers. He would signal a time when the entire class would drop

their pens en masse, encourage them to ask questions that did not make sense, to move their desks slightly, subtly, sinisterly forward, to consider a style of insurrection that did not involve shouting and throwing chairs. It was, he points out, an early example of him directing and writing. He established then and retains now what he regards as a "Roald Dahl" value system – only those who are nasty, angry and vindictive are ever fair game. "If I think somebody's being unfair – not even just to me, but to one of my classmates or one of my actors – then all the bets are off," he says. "I don't lose my temper but I say, 'OK, I'm going to take you down.'"

Over the course of two years in his teens, two transformative events occurred. First, when he was 13 – "old enough to know, but not really old enough to know how to cope with it" – his parents divorced. In the space of about a month, he says, "I was one thing and then I was another." The following year his father took him on his first trip to the theatre, to see Kenneth Branagh as Richard III at the Sheffield Crucible. The experience, he says, was "Damascene" and "electric", so much so that he wrote to its director, Michael Grandage, to ask how this magic had been achieved. "It was a very impressive handwritten letter that went on for a few pages," Grandage recalls. "It was a letter that you could not ignore." He invited Icke to meet him.

Icke remembered every detail of Grandage's production, and asked endless questions: how did you decide to make that line funny? How did you decide when to set it? How did you choose your opening image? It was his eye for detail and his enthusiasm that struck Grandage: "I remember somebody illuminated by the process before he knew what the process was."

Afterwards, says Icke, he returned to Stockton changed. He launched his own theatre company and staged "A Midsummer Night's Dream". Icke dressed Bottom in a donkey's head and a pair of false teeth made by a local dentist. The audience "gasped with laughter," he later told an interviewer. "You heard them saying 'Fucking hell!' That has never really left me. You don't want to waste time being reverential: you want people to have a real rollercoaster."

When Icke was 17, a busload of students from Cambridge pulled up outside his school to encourage kids from a deprived corner of the country to consider applying. He remembers an undergraduate wanting to discuss the "Merchant of Venice", and some attractive women talking about poetry. His presiding thought was, "I've no idea what you're talking about but I'm going to find out the second I can. Because if this is what people like you talk about I'm totally going to get good at it!"

When he arrived at King's College, Icke was both bewildered and captivated. He remembers the first few days as "a series of special rituals for which you have to wear a suit"; meeting choral scholars, Etonians, people who called their parents "Mummy and Daddy". "I had a much stronger north-east accent then," he explains, "so everyone just kept looking at me vaguely." But he was also delighted by the fact that finally he was "allowed to be interested in things that were difficult".

One thing he wasn't interested in was the Cambridge theatre scene. "It was just university productions of Shakespeare or whatever," he says, pronouncing the word "university" as though brushing something small and unwanted from his sleeve. More important were his studies. In his first year he wanted to focus on the Jacobean playwright Ben Jonson, and was encouraged to seek out Anne Barton, a tutor at Trinity who was both a leading Jonson expert and wife of the director John Barton, who had co-founded the Royal Shakespeare Company with Peter Hall in 1961. She was gloriously unlike anyone Icke had ever met. "She seemed to have the whole of English literature in her brain just on call," he remembers. "You'd go in and say 'How are you today Anne?' And she'd say 'The day is cold, and dark, and dreary...'", and then look at you to see if you got the reference. She had a singular brain and total confidence in her own abilities that I just used to awe at. And she took real pleasure in taking your brain out of your head, massaging it, and then putting it back in."

After the Jonson dissertation he continued to study with her for the next two years. Later, after he left university, he would return to see her each time he wanted to discuss Shakespeare. By then Barton was suffering from macular degeneration, and was forced to sit with several lights pointed at her to grant her as much vision as possible. "She was kind of angelic," he says, "she was so overlit the whole time." These conversations would often dissolve into enjoyable arguments, which Icke generally lost. But they proved formative. He remembers one occasion when they "really got in" on the subject of why, in Hamlet, Claudius kills his brother. It prompted him to ask a question that he often returns to in his work as a director: "How can I put my empathy into that person and try to figure out what it's like to make those moves?"

A few years after leaving Cambridge Icke met Rupert Goold in the bar of the Almeida. Goold, who was then artistic director of Headlong, an innovative British theatre company, found him interesting, gossipy and clearly a big fan – "which was flattering". Not long after that meeting,

Goold was looking for a new assistant, and Icke applied. He was by far the youngest applicant, but his interview proved memorable. Asked to provide a brief “takedown” of one of the company’s shows, Icke made a bold choice – “Enron”, the theatrical blockbuster that Goold had directed. Icke took the play apart, pointing to a hole in its structure that had hitherto gone unnoticed. Goold recalls sitting there thinking, “I can’t tell whether he is incredibly arrogant or fun to be around. Either way, I want his notes.”

It was the start of a long relationship. When, in 2013, Goold moved to become artistic director of the Almeida, Icke went with him to become associate director. He began to get to know the actors with whom he now collaborates on a regular basis, Juliet Stevenson among them. She remembers meeting him when he was “virtually a boy” at a gala at the theatre. Backstage he asked if she would like to run through her lines, and soon they fell into conversation. “My gosh,” she remembers thinking, “this is the most interesting theatrical mind I can think of!”

Some while ago, Icke was struck by a conundrum: why is theatre never moving? Why is it that he could weep at the “West Wing”, even when watching it for the seventh time, but feel so unstimulated by a production of “Hamlet” or “King Lear”? “Why is it that so often in theatre I feel politely, respectfully bored?”

In the pursuit of the not-boring, Icke has at times walked the fine line of good taste. When his adaptation of Orwell’s “1984” debuted on Broadway, the New York Times reviewer offered a warning: the play’s torture scenes were “graphic enough to verge on torture porn”. But livening up theatre is not just a matter of on-stage effects. Icke has compared the process of adapting an old play to finding the right plug for a trip abroad, once telling the Guardian that “You have to find the adaptor which will let the electricity of now flow.”

Often this is a matter of locating the humanity in lines that have long since grown hackneyed. When he directed Andrew Scott in “Hamlet” in 2017, the pair worked hard to remove the play’s pomp and grandeur. In most productions, the language is “foresquare, churchy”, Icke says. “And you say all of the words, and you stress random words.” He calls this Alexa Shakespeare. “You don’t have to go “Give me the map there!” he booms. “Give me the map there,” he says gently, and clicks his fingers. “It’s modern English. What bizarre cultural baggage is leading us to bellow this writer’s work?”

Grandage recalls the impact of that production. “I thought I wouldn’t want to see another ‘Hamlet’,” he says. “I’ve seen it countless times, I’ve directed it.” It was only out of loyalty that he “dragged” himself along. It proved revelatory. “There are lines where you think, ‘Have you just added that?’” he says. He was stunned by the way the play’s opening line – “Who’s there?” – had been rethought: in Icke’s version it was delivered in response to a buzzer, as if blurted at a video security screen. The words acquired an urgency that charged the play and freed the line from the weight of tradition. “His mind works in different ways to most directors,” Grandage says.

For Icke the most important question when considering whether or not to do a play is, “Is the central issue live enough?” Earlier this year he began work on a new version of Ibsen’s “The Wild Duck”, which tells the story of how the Ekdal family is blown apart by the revelation of an affair, throwing the paternity of the daughter into doubt. It seemed to Icke that, in the era of #MeToo and fake news, Ibsen’s drama of sexual manipulation, past sins and cover-ups was worth exploring. Icke was keen to interrogate the play’s ideas, particularly the suggestion that knowing the truth will make us happier. “The structure of ‘The Wild Duck’ suggests that maybe that’s not true,” he says. “And that maybe the truth can be destructive.”

When we first met in the early summer there were ten weeks to go until the production opened. Icke, who had completed just one draft of his version of the play, was entirely unruffled by the pressures of time. He had sent the draft to a select group of readers, and was feeding his actors “tidbits” of dialogue via Whats-App. Meanwhile he was working and reworking his interpretation, knuckling deep into the life of the play.

As he worked he found the back door that he always looks for: the playwright himself. At 18, while working as an apprentice at a pharmacy in Grimstad, Ibsen had an affair with a servant ten years older, who became pregnant and bore a son, Hans. Though he supported his son financially, the pair had no contact. Icke’s version would cast “The Wild Duck” as an alibi for Ibsen’s own buried truth. The play, Icke writes in his new version, is “a lie with something to prove, sold to audiences night after night after night – a lie that covers up what sort of father he is: and a lie that warns you to stay quiet, tells you that truth is destructive and corruption is better off buried – ‘The Wild Duck’ is a lie.” He regards his take on the play as “much more contemporary and much more woke”.

One warm Friday in late September, a stuffed duck lay waiting in a corridor at the Almeida. Icke was in the rehearsal space in a black jumper, blue jeans and orange trainers, accompanied by his sound designer Tom Gibbons. As in all his productions, Icke has transposed the action to a contemporary setting. Before him was an approximation of a family home: a worn sofa and an armchair, beige drapes, a dinner table. That Friday he was running through the play's most emotionally fraught scene, the first confrontation between the couple, Gina and James Ekdal, since the revelation of the affair.

To see Icke direct is like following a nest-building, something fastidious and instinctive. He moves quickly and often, and speaks with a quick and murmured precision. Icke crouched on the floor with his arms out, as if conducting. As an acoustic version of Sandy Denny's "By the Time it Gets Dark" began to play, Nicholas Farrell, playing Ekdal's washed-up father, stepped forward to speak. "I don't know where they first heard it," he began, "but this song was the kids' choice for the first dance at their wedding reception." As he spoke James and Gina, played by Lyndsey Marshal and Edward Hogg, began to dance.

For a moment only Denny's voice filled the room. "Where are we?" Icke asked Gibbons, who was timing the progress of the song. "Fourteen seconds," said Gibbons. "Keep playing it for me," Icke instructed quickly. As much as he is led by the text, he is led by rhythm. For a while he was fascinated by the idea of the natural length of a play. When he directed "1984" he found that it played "beautifully" at an hour and 39 minutes, OK at an hour and 40 minutes and that at an hour and 42 minutes it felt too long. On nights when they hit the sweet spot, as the final line finished the audience would sit in total silence for up to 30 seconds, and then clap. At an hour and 42 minutes they would clap immediately. "The actors used to adore it when they could make that hour and 39 minutes happen," Icke says. "They would stay standing on stage in the darkness, feeling that silence."

After a moment Hogg picked up Marshal, and settled into the armchair. She nuzzled his neck. Icke was walking around the set, appraising it from every angle - the number of steps required to circumnavigate the table, reach the armchair, tethering the song to the action and the lines. Gibbons clicked the beat. Icke lifted his face. "Now I'm at T minus 30, aren't I?" Icke was physically enacting the idea he had pressed on to his group of young directors: that language is as much about rhythm and sound as it is about sense, that a play is essentially "like music".