

Interview: Robert Icke & Andrew Scott: 'There's method in their madness'

They might seem an unlikely combo, but their hi-tech Hamlet is bringing the Bard to a youthful crowd

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Another Hamlet! They're not like buses: they're always here. Yet Andrew Scott and Robert Icke's version, recently premiered at the Almeida, stands out from the endless cavalcade. Together, the Sherlock star and the wunderkind director have conspired to give a fresh and dynamic reading of the Danish tragedy. This much is clear from the first scene, where the apparition of the Ghost, Hamlet's murdered father, has morphed from a sad trundle along the castle walls to a spooky freakout on CCTV.

"Sometimes I find it really useful to start with the version that I never need to see," muses Icke, 30, who has done yet another piece of vicious upholstery on a classic, after his *Oresteia*, *Uncle Vanya* and *Mary Stuart*. "That, for me, is people in Elizabethan costumes — I never need to see that again. I'm done. The play opening with dry ice, and people carrying spears, and pacing back and forth. I've seen it a thousand times. It's dead. It's completely boring. So then you go, 'OK, so who are the guys that watch over a palace?'" Cue tetchy security guards watching multiple screens, and a fresh take on a hoary old trope.

"That's what I mean about what you do brilliantly," Scott, 40, tells Icke. He is relishing being back on stage after a long spell of filming *Sherlock*, *Bond* and the like. "You do the play, not what the play reminds you of."

We meet in the middle of previews, late on a Friday morning — understandably late, as the curtain went down at 11pm the evening before. With press night yet to happen, you assume there are some nerves, but they don't much betray it: both are discreetly proud of their work, with plenty to say about *Hamlet*, Shakespeare and British theatre in general.

Is this an Andrew Scott *Hamlet* or a Robert Icke *Hamlet*? It's both, a pure collaboration. Neither is interested in its being a star vehicle: Icke had already been asked to do it with two big-name actors (he won't say who), but "didn't see the point". They seem to agree on everything. The only difference is how vociferously they say it. Icke has never minced his words; Scott is typically more diplomatic, happier to rely on suggestion. Call it the young turk and the wry Irishman.

They even order the same brunch, or think they have, but the waitress messes up and they eat in a rare show of disunity: Icke has a solid egg and avocado on toast, and Scott is left with just two forlorn sausages. Eventually eggs, then toast, then ketchup, will appear, at staggered intervals. "It's all gonna come like a train, in carriages," Scott sighs in his Dublin accent. "It looks like a kid's breakfast set," says Icke, less obviously from Stockton-on-Tees. "You're going to have to name each thing."

Eggs aside, the talk is all *Hamlet*. I express light surprise that they've done it, since neither, in their careers, has shown much interest in doing the done thing. Scott gives a politely shocked laugh, because, he corrects me softly, "people have spoken to me about it for years, and it's something I feel is in my, um, er, you know". What he means, but would never say, is that *Hamlet*'s mercurial modes suit his own, swooping between the poignant and the absurd, the comic and the sinister, and managing it with ease.

Icke says they didn't consciously set out to join the parade. They just knew they wanted to work together. "There were quite a few plays in contention, weren't there? And we didn't agree on anything, we just said they were all really interesting. Then we met up a second time, and both of us just talked about *Hamlet*."

"I think both of us wanted to do more Shakespeare," Scott adds. "The thing that gets us excited is the idea of what theatre is now."

It's not a given for an edgy young director and an interesting, unconventional stage actor that "what theatre is now" is Shakespeare. Yet their passion for and belief in the Bard are what dominate the conversation. What also looms large is their frustration with what is usually done to him. On this, Icke is the more voluble, with Scott providing both backup and mitigation.

"The water is completely poisoned by reverence and bizarre, operatic modes of delivery," Icke says. "Actors do really weird things. They'll take lines that are completely colloquial and

naturalistic and normal, and [he imitates] 'They will say it like it's the Bible'." The result is that many feel there's "a high-culture party going on, which, if you're honest, you don't know how to behave at". He thinks it has something to do with the class system, but then ploughs on to another point.

"Someone said to me the other day, 'Who's doing the text work on your show?' I said, 'What do you mean?' And they said, 'Well, who's there to explain it to you?' I thought, well, it's not written in Klingon!" And don't get him started on the idea that Shakespeare, a humble grammar-school boy, didn't write his plays: "F***** bullshit."

Scott confirms that actors often feel "intimidated" by these plays. "I certainly, in the past, have felt there's something you have to have possession of."

"Special rules," Icke huffs.

"And of course, like any play, there are things that help," Scott continues. "But there are no rules."

Aren't there? Many of the battle lines with Shakespeare are drawn over how you say his lines: don't you have to honour the verse? "I think you have to honour the writer," Scott levels.

"Verse is one of the things British theatre has totally shot itself in both feet about," Icke says. "Because we pretend there's such a thing as 'verse-speaking', and people say things like 'I didn't think the verse-speaking was very good', and nobody knows what that means." Look at Tony Kushner or Aaron Sorkin or Samuel Beckett, he tuts. "All text that is well written has rhythm." In other words, Shakespeare should not be treated as a special case. "All this nonsense about 'Pause at the end of every line' that Peter Hall perpetuated in the 1960s..."

A thought occurs to me: "You wouldn't have liked working with Gielgud, would you?"

"Oh, kill me! I just don't think it's acting in any modern sense."

All this iconoclasm is in a virtuous cause: opening up Shakespeare to a wider, younger public. Both men, having encountered his work quite young, feel strongly about it. Scott says it's "absolutely not" a choice that he has done no Shakespeare as a professional — it just happened. He has fond memories of performing it as a teenager in Ireland, at the local drama festival, the feis ("fesh"). "It's in a community hall in May. There's sunlight streaming in and maybe four people in the audience — and it's kids doing Shakespeare. You can do an extract from Richard III in your mum's coat. I did Launcelot Gobbo, from *The Merchant of Venice*."

It was a reminder of the power of the text. "If you can create an atmosphere in a completely atmosphere-less scenario — I remember thinking, 'Oh my God, that's brilliant.' Kids have real responses to Shakespeare."

Of course, they're not the first to embark on this crusade. But getting young people into Shakespeare matters because, whether you like it or not, it essentially means getting them into British theatre — the one so dominates the other. Scott is chuffed to bits that there are free tickets at the Almeida for young people. It has to be done like that, he says.

"I really don't believe in forcing people to see Shakespeare if they don't want to. You have to have confidence in the product. It's something you experience, and if you experience something you love, you will love it enough to go again. If you don't, you won't. It's as simple as that."

Naturally, Icke has lots to say on this. "I don't know why we, in theatre, think we have the right to expect a sort of reverence from an audience, whereas on TV, if it's boring or bad or overacted or just not interesting, you switch it off."

I do understand this, I say, but what about the fact that some things are worth spending a little more time on? If the value of everything can be decided by a casual flick of a switch, it doesn't leave much space for those things that may surprise, or subvert, or just grow on you.

"I think that's totally fair," he replies. "Although I also think it's our job to be captivating for as long as we've asked for your attention." A lot of the modern shows he loves, he says, be it *The Sopranos* or *The Shining*, "are actually really hard". Again, it comes down to confidence. "It's about offering a door into the maze and saying, 'Come into this maze, it's gonna be exciting.' And if they get lost and find that scary or frustrating, that's fine. My feeling is more that we don't open the door, we just go, 'You'd be lucky to get into this room — doing Shakespeare!'"

They are already planning to do another of his plays, but won't say which. It won't be Coriolanus: Scott thinks the arrogant war hero is beyond him. "I couldn't do the majority of them," he frowns.

His director is more encouraging: "I can cast you in quite a few." Romeo would have been lovely, they agree, but it's a bit late now; Benedick, from *Much Ado*, could still be a hoot.

Scott puts a stop to all this, though. He first has nearly four hours a night to get through at the Almeida. (There are also hopes of a West End transfer.) "You want more?" he asks in mock exasperation. But of course we do. Wasn't that the theme of the entire conversation?