

Interview: Robert Icke, one of Britain's youngest theatre directors

The director on daring to take on great works of the past and reshape them for contemporary audiences

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Theatre is the great art form of now," says Robert Icke. "It happens to you live; we cook the food live. And if it's not doing that, there's a teenager in me that starts rebelling and going, 'I just don't know what that is for.'"

Although he is not yet 30, Icke has already proved his originality as a stage director. His 1984 (co-created with Duncan Macmillan for Headlong and currently touring the US) reshaped Orwell's dystopian novel into a disturbingly timely stage work about surveillance and thought manipulation. The production won Icke and Macmillan the Best Director accolade at the 2014 UK Theatre Awards.

Another Best Director award followed last year, after Icke launched the Almeida Theatre's Greek season with a revelatory and electrifying new version of Oresteia that approached the 2,500-year-old tragedy as if it were a contemporary text. Icke configured the theatre as a courtroom where nothing was certain — justice, narrative, the role of theatre itself — making us wrestle with our own judgment on the desolate central story.

So how do you follow such a harrowing, blood-soaked epic? In Icke's case, rather surprisingly, with Chekhov. He's back in the Almeida rehearsal room with Uncle Vanya, which, in contrast to Oresteia, with its cast of royals and deities, depicts a rundown rural estate peopled with disconsolate misfits.

"I really wanted to do something that was less bleak," he explains. "Which seems hilarious now I am working on it! I spent 14 months working on nothing but Oresteia, which was blissful — but it's a dark place to live. So I wanted something that was a bit more emotional; more microscope, rather than telescope. And this story is the opposite [to Oresteia] in a way: nothing actually happens and there really is no plot in the traditional sense."

We are huddled beside a portable heater in a spartan back office at the Almeida's north London rehearsal space. On the other side of the door, two cast members are practising lines, committing to memory the farewell scene between Astrov and Elena. Even when delivered with no emotion, it is heartbreaking — one of the many pinch-points in Chekhov's humane masterpiece of misdirected love, wasted potential and thwarted hopes.

It's the Russian playwright's sheer daring that fascinates Icke. "Chekhov talks and talks about how you make it real," he observes. "He says in a letter — this is paraphrased — everyone runs around on stage firing guns; too much stuff happens. There should be plays where people just eat and then fall asleep and get a bit drunk and say things that they don't really mean.

"[In Uncle Vanya] characters keep doing things that you wouldn't expect them to do in a traditional plot structure. So they say something and then don't do it. He is so good at the unfinished sentence and the thought that nobody responds to. There's just nothing like it. I can't think of anyone else now who can achieve that sort of observation."

The difficulty, Icke adds, lies in conveying that radical impulse afresh. As he did with Oresteia, he has written a new version, this time digging back into the Russian to try and catch Chekhov's alertness to fragmentary patterns of speech. And his staging won't feature the samovars that locate Chekhov safely in his period.

"In 1899 the answer to the question 'How do you make theatre more like real life?' was naturalism," he says. "It isn't any more. So if you're genuinely asking the question that Chekhov wants you to ask, you get a different answer. And that's the joy of it."

In person, Icke exhibits the same mix of approachability, insight and intellectual energy that characterises his work. He combines the disciplined focus of his Cambridge degree with eclectic enthusiasms: conversation roams from the ancient Greeks to *The Sopranos*, Stanley Kubrick and *Grand Theft Auto*.

He grew up in Stockton-on-Tees in north-east England and says that when he worked on 1984 his acid test was: "Would the kids I went to school with be excited?" So how might you achieve that quality of "liveness" for a 21st-century audience? For Icke, it has to do with fostering the intensity of the engagement between spectator and actors. It's partly about "clearing out unnecessary literalism". He adds: "Literalism in some ways is the great enemy of theatre, which is fundamentally a metaphorical art form."

Icke points to Ivo van Hove's award-winning *A View from the Bridge* as a model. That production of Arthur Miller's play dispensed with a realistic set — it was framed in an empty box — but within that abstract set-up the actors produced searing performances.

"There's a book by Daniel Kahneman called *Thinking, Fast and Slow* about how your brain works," he says. "The thesis is: you have two brains, a fast brain and a slow brain. If I say to you 'What's 14 times 250?' you can do it, but you're going to have to really engage. That's your slow brain. However, if I say to you, 'Don't solve the next question: what is two times three?' you can't help but do it because your brain runs ahead and fills in the gap with what it knows it knows."

"I think when theatre involves that sort of cleanness of aesthetic combined with real emotion from the actors, it functions like that. It creates space for your quick brain to get in there and paint the rest of the scene on. It certainly did in *A View from the Bridge*. And that's glorious because it means you, as the audience, are genuinely participating in the creation of the art work."

He goes on to give examples from 1984 of audience members fainting at the dental torture scene because, although the lights are out and nothing is shown, their imaginations fill in the gaps. It's the fact that theatre can ignite that live act of complicity, while at the same time revealing how it is done, he observes, that can make it such an exciting, ambivalent and unsettling art form.

Isn't there a bit of him that feels nervous about tackling seminal works by figures of the stature of Aeschylus and Chekhov, and recreating them in his own versions? "I do if I think about it like that," he says, grinning. "I could make myself really nervous about it, of course. But you don't think, 'I'm doing a famous play on a London stage', you just think, 'This is compelling.'"

"I always feel like I am trying to find ways of recapturing the original," he adds. "In some ways it's a kind of nostalgia. You're saying, for example: 'God, I'd love to have been alive and witnessed the first performance of *Hamlet*.' There's *Hamlet*, who studied at Wittenberg, where Protestantism kicked off, being confronted by a ghost that has come from Catholic purgatory."

"Everyone in 1599 must have wanted the answer to that conundrum: if that ghost is a demon, then we should all be Protestant, but if that ghost is a real ghost who has come from purgatory, we should all get Catholicism back. To sit there in 1599 and watch this play that speaks directly to your anxiety: what does that feel like?"