



SHAKESPEARE'S
GLOBE

Richard II

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'I Wanted it to be the People at the Bottom of the Empire Telling the Story'

Dr. Jennifer Edwards talks to the co-directors Adjoa Andoh and Lynette Linton about Shakespeare's inclusivity and directing a company of women of colour.

JENNIFER EDWARDS This is such an exciting partnership! Would you tell us a bit about what brought you together, and to the Globe?

ADJOA ANDOH I actually came to see Michelle about directing a different project when she asked if I was interested in directing *Richard II*. I was – but I also wanted to play Richard. To do both would be madness so I asked my good friend and fabulous director Lynette Linton if she would co-direct with me – I don't know anybody who's better at putting bodies in space, so that felt like a lovely combo. And we love working together, which is also quite helpful!

LYNETTE LINTON This is a really exciting partnership for me. We're two sides of the same coin – we're thinking about how we manifest those words in the space and make it accessible. I can't wait to really dig into it. It's my first time directing Shakespeare, and it's amazing to be co-directing with Adjoa.

What is it that attracts you to Shakespeare now?

LL I've always felt a little bit scared of Shakespeare, and I wanted to break down those barriers. When Adjoa asked me to read *Richard II* the world was going a bit crazy with Brexit, Trump, Grenfell, Windrush, and

#MeToo. We started thinking about our version of this play in the world today, and we've been informed by what's going on as we think about what *Richard II* stands for. It's amazing hearing all these women talking in the rehearsal room, and taking ownership of a story that is our story, in a space that is our space.

AA Shakespeare is such an emotional writer. If you write on the heart-beat, then the heart is at the centre of everything you do and the way you see the world. I don't see him as representing something exclusive and elusive, but as somebody who cares about human beings. I really want to switch things up, so that audiences don't feel intimidated, but instead feel that this is a universal story that will have some application to inspire and encourage, or make people reflect on their own lives. We'll be doing this play as we Brexit (and we will be on stage on March 29) and we're doing it with women of colour, because *Richard II* is the great play about England, and I wanted it to be the people at the bottom of the empire telling the story. People of colour, and women, are always at the bottom of the heap, so women of colour get to tell that story.

And this is the first ever company of women of colour in a Shakespeare play on a major UK stage...

AA Yes! It's 2019 and there has never been an all women of colour Shakespeare company on a major stage in this country, and that feels ridiculous. We wanted to create a space for artists who are women of colour in all departments – actors, directors, stage management, composers, designers, voice-coaches, fight directors. Shakespeare is a great humanitarian – we want to use him to reflect our stories, and as a forum in which all these artists get to flex their muscles. We've got all these superb actresses, and we're all at different ages and stages in our careers, but there are people in this room who've never had the opportunity to play these great parts, because of their gender, and their colour, and nothing to do with their skill set. Like so many

of these characters we're battling to find our place in the world, so there's an empathetic connection there that we can play out.

LL I keep thinking about that James Baldwin phrase 'the space in which I'll exist will be when I create it': we're here! We're going to tell Shakespeare the way we want to tell it, from our experiences and our backgrounds. The women in this room can tell this story with their eyes closed, because it's our story as well.

How are the discussions you're having with your company shaping the play at this stage?

LL Part of our process was to talk about our own backgrounds, and I think that will vibrate in the space and with the play, because it's both a part of who we are, and also a big part of Richard's world. You'll see the visual representations of that on stage,



Adjoa Andoh and Lynette Linton. Photo Ingrid Pollard

but the important thing is that the audience feel it, too. We also looked at some incredible images of women, and the women who came before us. We wanted to acknowledge that we're standing on the shoulders of our ancestors, and that we're part of a conversation they've been having for a long time. There's a lot about ancestor worship from all the cultures we come from, that would have been so common to people in Richard's day. It was a huge part of who they were, and those resonances are really alive to us.

AA In terms of setting, women of colour have never been exclusively in power anywhere in the world, so the setting for our world is informed by the bodies on stage. We're taking from the heritages of the actors who embody these characters and making Richard's world, like the empire that was visited on our ancestors, stretch in its influences, from Africa to the West Indies to the Middle East to South Asia and the Far East. We've looked at those nations and what things are common, and we've come up with materials, designs and practices that have a familiarity across those nations.

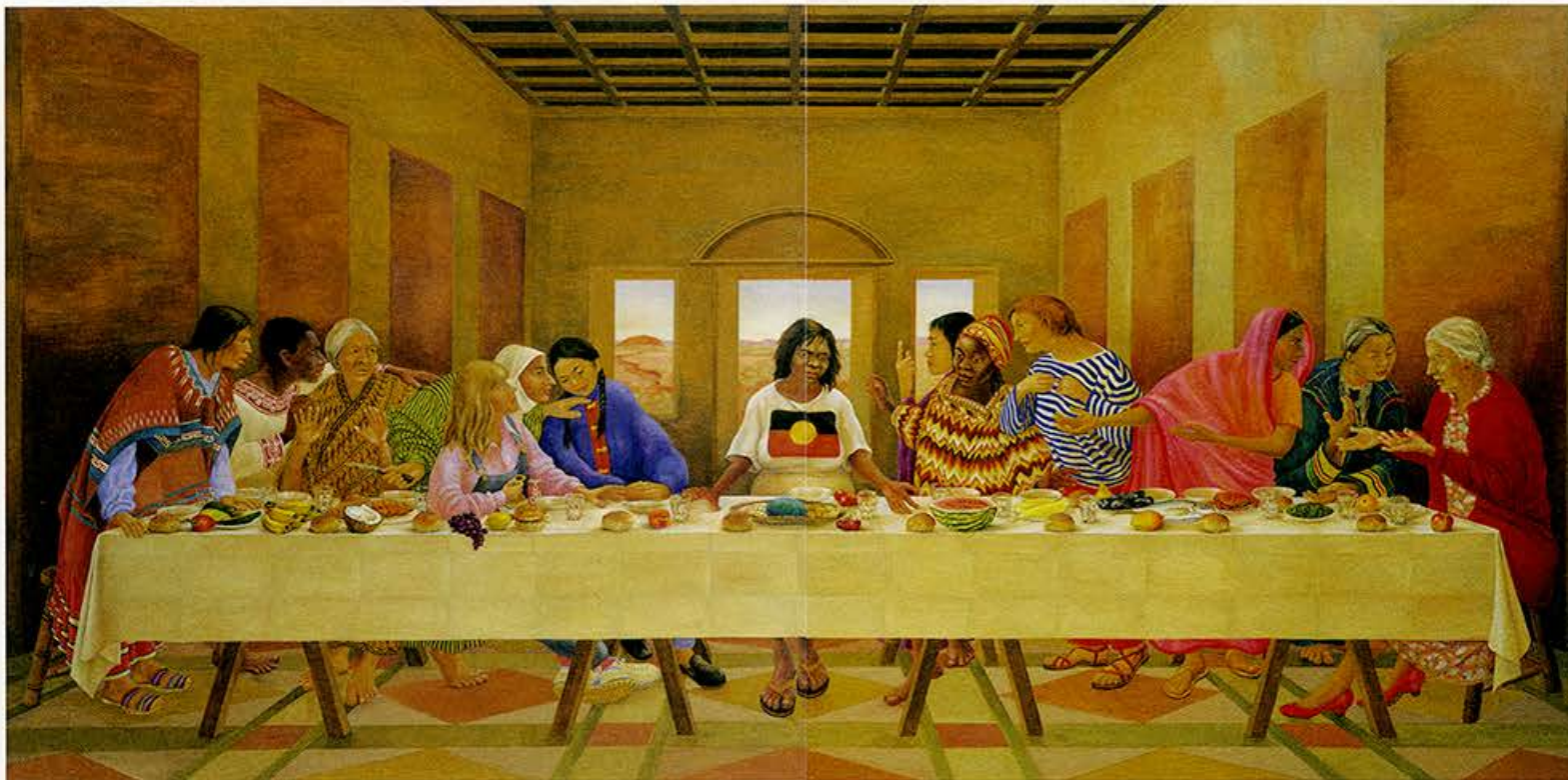
And there's a real richness in that, which sometimes gets overlooked in the way this country is thought about today. But I won't describe it and spoil the fun for people coming to see it!

And finally, what do you hope your audiences will take away from this production?

LL Part of our job is to make the story accessible without losing any of the grandeur and brilliance of the language, or performance, or design. It's a story, and we all navigate the world through stories. We want our audience to be able to take something away from this and navigate their own world.

AA There's something about human beings being in a space together – being in the theatre together is like being in communion, sharing a story from their diverse points of view. One of the things that is really important to us is that we make explicit our welcome to all audiences. Bring your hearts, bring your joys, bring your sorrows, and come and sit in communion with us in this space. Shakespeare writes for everybody, and everybody is welcome.

Dr Jennifer Edwards is Research Coordinator at Shakespeare's Globe.



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