

Q &A: Mark Rylance discusses Richard III and his long interest in mental health issues

Joan Thompson interviews Mark Rylance at the Globe Theatre following a performance of Richard III.



Introduction

I saw Mark Rylance's fantastic performance of Richard III on a glorious August evening in 2012. For the first time at The Globe, I was a 'yardling' and it was the best £25 I have ever spent. I heard a rumour that he had prepared for the role in a psychiatric ward and decided to approach his agent to try to get an interview for the newsletter. Mark kindly agreed and told me a fascinating story about his performances at Broadmoor and his relationship with Dr Murray Cox. Joan Thompson

Mark Rylance is an English actor, [theatre director](#) and playwright. As an actor, he found success on stage and screen. For his work in theatre he has won [Olivier](#) and [Tony Awards](#) among others, and a [BAFTA](#) TV Award. His film roles include Ferdinand in [Prospero's Books](#) (based on [Shakespeare's The Tempest](#)), Jay in [Intimacy](#) (after a novel by [Hanif Kureishi](#)) and [Jakob von Gunten](#) in [Institute Benjamenta](#) (after a novel by [Robert Walser](#)). He was the first Artistic Director of [Shakespeare's Globe](#) in London, from 1995 to 2005.

Mark Rylance, Richard III at the Globe Theatre 2012

INTERVIEW

JT: Freud claimed that Richard's villainous ambition was a consequence of his childhood deformity. I quote:
'Richard is an enormous magnification of something we find in ourselves as well. We all think we have reason to reproach nature and our destiny for congenital and infantile disadvantages; we all demand reparation for early wounds to our narcissism, our self-love.'¹

Do you agree with Freud? That Richard's sense of vengeance and grievance are driven because he's had to live with deformity and a lack of love?

M Rylance: Sir Francis Bacon has always been a big influence on me and he said similar things about Shakespeare's writing, about the consequences of deformity in a human being and the different paths that people can follow. Bacon would agree with Freud. Playing Richard, I increasingly felt that he has intense problems with women. Shakespeare uses Richard's mother to illustrate the problematic relationship between a deformed child and their mother.

JT: Richard yearns for his mother's love but never receives it?

M Rylance: No he doesn't. I've now taken to spitting in her face and slapping her!

JT: He gets the crown but not maternal love. It's a very powerful scene when she curses him.

M Rylance: There is an undercurrent in the play that suggests a transpersonal effect of curses and prayers. As you say, it's a powerful thing. We don't really have people openly cursing each other, other than they may swear, 'You fucking bastard' or something, but actually taking the imagination and aiming. I know a shaman who protects himself from curses. He bounces them back somehow on the person who sent the curse.

JT: Well in the end that's what happens.

M Rylance: Yes, he curses himself. Elizabeth gets him to curse himself.

JT: When Richard dreams of the people he murdered in Act Five, I think he begins to grow a conscience and identifies himself as a murderer. Do you think he actually has the capacity to suffer guilt or is Richard a psychopath, as some have argued?

M Rylance: With psychopaths it's very difficult to find a root. There isn't a rationale for the phenomenon. It's just a phenomenon in nature it seems from what I've read about it. But I've traced too many things in the author's imagination of the character of Richard that are hints of causes of his behaviour. The fact that he's written as deformed and talks about that, the isolation that he feels. I feel very isolated playing the part.

In rehearsals I thought, 'No, he's not a psychopath'. Shakespeare placed a conscience in this man who didn't have a conscience. As Kevin Spacey said to me, it is a play about a man that doesn't have a conscience and grows a conscience. I don't think psychopaths dream either.

Richard is more of a sociopath than a psychopath, he never mentions any remorse for anyone else, it's all self-pity, it's all completely about him, it's all about how pathetic he is. He is an incredible narcissist.

I once read a book about Dr Hare's test for psychopaths. All of us answer a few of the 30 or so questions positively, to our horror. Psychopaths, on the other hand, answer over 20 or 25 positivelyⁱⁱ.

JT: How does reading the scientific literature, like Hare's psychopath test, effect your interpretation dramatically?

M Rylance: Oh enormously. The director and I will often link Richard's behaviour to certain characteristics of psychopaths found in the literature. For example: shallow affect, dramatic displays of emotion, not accepting responsibility for one's actions, a grandiose sense of self-worth, a lack of realistic long-term goals and proneness to boredom. That sense of boredom and the need for constant stimulation was dramatically very useful for the beginning of the play.

JT: That is part of the psychopath/sociopath in the sense that he's incredibly charming and witty and such a shadowy figure. He's always manipulating the chess pieces.

M Rylance: In rehearsal I remember at one point saying to the Director, I feel like there are fifteen Richards in here and I don't know which one is him so I am feeling very confused. He said 'No, that's fine, that's what he is, he just completely changes to suit who he's trying to convince. That's all you have to do, is keep trying to convince the person who is in front of you that he's very present.'

I read a story about how a psychopath would behave in a hypothetical situation. In this example, a car has hit a young boy who is lying dead on the pavement and a crowd is gathered and the mother is there - she witnessed it. She's in a terrible, terrible state. A psychopath would go up and have a look at how the accident happened, see the child, figure it all out about what exactly took place. Then the psychopath would notice the mother and be absolutely fascinated by the mother's state and what the mother is doing and watch the mother for as long as possible.

The psychopath would then go home and practise emulating the mother's behaviour for hours and hours to absorb her reaction. That gave me a clue about Richard's watchfulness of other people, but watchfulness with more than just his eyes, but by smelling them, smelling the different levels of fear, tasting them. I've started to lick people more for this reason, hearing them, observing their bodies, just completely present in a very, very childish way. That part is quite fun actually. Really just watching what the other person is doing. Even saying to my brother Clarence, 'your imprisonment shall not be long' and seeing the slight happiness in his eyes as he misunderstands what

I mean. It's a kind of fascination with the detail of human beings in a totally removed way.

JT: Even though Richard shows some characteristics of a psychopath, I don't think he is one, because he starts to show fear and insecurity from the dream onwards; and these are not traits of a true psychopath.

M Rylance: That's right. You're right.

JT: At the start of the play he's bored, he's narcissistic and he tries to woo the audience to conspire with him.

M Rylance: Yes, there's a link between this love the audience have for Richard and the experience of boredom. If the audience were to be bored they won't stay in the theatre. They want to have some experience and Richard gives them that. Richard says at the end of his first soliloquy, 'Dive thoughts down to my soul,' and in a way that's when the play begins. That is similar to a line in Hamlet where Hamlet says, 'Sit still my soul, Foul deeds will rise, Though all the earth o'erwhelm them, to men's eyes,' ... which by the way I remember saying to a patient in Broadmoor, who was as close as you are to me now - and the look from his eyes showing understanding of what I meant and why I was saying it to him... That has always stayed with me. The audience are the soul of the play.

JT: I heard that you went to a psychiatric unit to specifically prepare for the role of Richard III?

M Rylance: No, I didn't go specifically to prepare for Richard III, but in 1989 I first visited Broadmoor Special Hospital when Dr Murray Cox was alive. I met Murray when I was playing Hamlet at the RSC. We met after the show and I accepted an invitation to give a talk to him and his fellow doctors. Murray was an avid Shakespearean and I always learnt a great deal from him. I inherited his library and my copy of Twelfth Night has his notes along the side, underlining lines from performances he'd seen. I love owning his copies of Shakespeare.

Murray invited us to Broadmoor to do a number of Shakespeare plays and modern plays. The last time I went was in 2005 to do 'Measure for Measure' but it got very difficult after Murray died because the authorities became much more wary. So we devised a different plan in his name. We are actually sitting on a bench dedicated to himⁱⁱⁱ. His name is inscribed on the bench with a quote from Twelfth Night: 'So full of shapes is fancy that it alone is high fantastical'^{iv}.

We raised money in Dr Murray Cox's name to buy theatre tickets for people in medium security wards, like Bethlem Royal Hospital. They come in groups of 20 to 30 with their doctors and nurses and if I am in the play I'll talk to them afterwards. They are a wonderful audience

because they spend all their time considering themselves and learning who they are.

JT: What did you learn from the patients?

M Rylance: I always found their apparent innocence but I suppose I mean experience, very interesting because they cross over a boundary that most of us just won't cross. They have a perspective that is completely different. What Murray found fascinating in regard to Shakespeare, is that so many characters have crossed boundaries. Murray told me a story about a man. Murray had asked: 'Why did you kill this person?' and the man said, 'Well I didn't have a life so I took a life.' Murray was always fascinated by that. Then a Broadmoor patient anonymously submitted an essay about Macbeth for an A level exam. A patient had written from his own experience and was correcting Shakespeare about what it felt like to murder a person. We were curious about what some poor A level paper marker would have made of this paper. After that conversation, Murray said it's a shame they can't experience the theatre and I said, 'Well why can't they? Why can't we come to them if they can't come to us?' So, we played in the visitor's hall with about 80 of the 400 Broadmoor patients.

The patients also put on plays themselves. They did a very funny English, middle-class, Alan Ayckbourn play once. The patients were excited and enjoyed themselves. Family, friends and staff all came to watch. I remember one glorious evening in the great Victorian hall with the setting sun. It was a very beautiful, rare kind of occasion.

It was the nurses who got us in. The doctors were all very nervous that we would awaken all kinds of problems. The nurses said, 'No, let them come. If they upset the patients all the better.' The nurses knew that only when the patients got upset that they were beginning to get better.

Recently I took a tour there and was shown a lot, including the new high security ward. I heard stories of the care and the very high level of patients leaving and coming back into society with a much better percentage than those leaving prison. The patients are really well-cared for and people from other countries often come to learn from our mental health system.

I remember being told about a man who was banging his head against the wall until it was raw to the bone. So, two nurses held him for 24 hours a day in shifts for many months. It was incredible, it would have made a wonderful play and maybe one day I'll put it on.

JT: Did the patients ever talk about their sentences?

M Rylance: I never asked people what they did although some of them told me that they'd killed their mother or their father or some treacherous thing had happened. I felt it was important that we were neutral: we weren't

family; we weren't doctors; we weren't police; we weren't like anyone else they'd met. They were quite staggered by that. Why would we want to come? Why would you come and do plays for us? They were always on very friendly terms with us when we came and you could feel they were delighted. When I went back, some of them would wave and say, 'Hello Mark.'

I knew from the first performance at Broadmoor that honesty was all that was acceptable here. The women were harder to talk to but the men were very interesting. They had such lively minds and were somehow able to talk about what had happened to them and what they'd done. It would make me weep it was just so moving. All of their stories were tragic. It was like seeing an athlete, an incredible athlete, who had spent years working on something. They had worked so hard to own who they were and not be angry, but also to know what their triggers were. Some of them were highly conscious of their triggers. It is similar to alcoholics or people like that, who have really got on top of their natures. It's very, very humbling work.

END OF INTERVIEW

ⁱ Some Character-Types Met with in Psycho-Analytic Work', (*The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV (1914-1916)*)

ⁱⁱ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hare_Psychopathy_Checklist

ⁱⁱⁱ Bench in the courtyard of The Globe Theatre, London

^{iv} *Twelfth Night*, Act 1, Scene 1