

## **Interview with Michael Dray.**

*Transcription: Marguerite Vaillard*

*Michael Dray answered WHT France's questions on 16th September 2017, during the dress rehearsal of the plays he had directed: A Pinch of Salt, Neighbours with Long Teeth and A Midsummer Night Dream.*  
See the video on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3HdEJ5TkNcU>

### **Introduction**

My name is Michael Dray. I'm a joined artistic director with White Horse Theatre in Germany. This is my 20th year. I started as a guest director in 1990. So that makes it 27 years all together.

### **On staging the same play several times**

The shows that we are bringing to France this year I'm very excited about because in fact, I had directed these three shows in the past. My first association with *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was, I think, in 2004 I've directed it... this is the 5th production I've done for White Horse. Every time I do it, I find something new to explore in the play. Shakespeare, because of the way he writes and the fact that his plays have lasted for over 400 years, means that there's always something new to find and I love that .. You hear a line you've heard so many times before and you suddenly think "Oh! it means that." I love that. The fact that he can be interpreted in so many different ways.

*A Pinch Of Salt*, I think, originally I did the very first production.

And I've done that production a couple of times before too. Again, a lovely fairy tale very appealing for children, based of course on the *Cinderella* story although, there's a little touch of Shakespeare in that as well, although there's no Shakespearian language. It is very simple English: It is a very lovely story of a princess who finds herself working as a maid in a kitchen and falling in love with a prince and he falls in love with her and all ends happily ever after.

And again, there's always a different way of finding to do it.

The other play *Neighbours With Long Teeth* which I've done several times, again, you can interpret it in many, many different ways. We've gone for... Well, it's the story about a lot of things. I mean, the idea of the vampires coming into this neighbourhood, settling into this neighbourhood with all these very middle class people who don't like the idea, as it were, of foreigners, strangers being there and the attitude of the family who they come to live next door to.

What I wanted to do this time was to explore the idea that on the surface they were these very rather prim proper people who wanted everything to

stay the same. Actually they were a little bit alternative themselves. So that can have added a bit to the theme of tolerance... Yes, basically accepting difference when you find it and finding in that something which actually contributes to your life and makes it different and more positive.

### ***On working with different groups of actors.***

Well of course, I mean, every group you have during a very short space of time to get to know each other. What for me is really very important in a rehearsal room is to allow the actors to play and give them the freedom to experiment. I never... Of course, I'm gently sort of steering it, but I said to the actors the other day, I like to see them, I almost thought of myself as being the orchestrator, a sort of conductor: they're playing the instruments and I'm conducting it. So they have their contribution, their contribution is actually the most vital because they are the ones who are actually doing the performance. So of course a different group of people will always make a play, a production different. And so when people say "Oh how can you direct *A Midsummer Night's Dream* four or five times?" I say well because every time I get new actors coming in and a new designer, something new happens and the relationship, the contact that I, as a director, have with the actors is always different. So, it's a lot to do with personality and how you relate to each other. For me, the important thing is to allow the actors a chance to play, to experiment, don't make judgements. If I see an actor doing something that doesn't quite work, ok, let's keep trying, see if we can make it work. If we find it doesn't work, we hopefully agree on it and we find another solution. So I think that's what's so exciting about it really.

It doesn't really matter what you're playing with in terms of the material as long as you are enjoying it. That is what communicates to an audience.

### ***On staging comedies***

I have been thinking about this today actually. I thought I've done three comedies because, I mean, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is basically a comedy although of course, when you use that word 'comedy', in the old fashioned sense of the word of course, it really meant something that dealt with all humanity. It isn't just something we laugh at, It is also an observation of sort of things that happen to us in life, either through character or situation or a combination of both. I think comedy is actually a lot more challenging to not only play, but, I think, to direct as well. Because so much of it rests in timing. I mean you have a lot of timing in dramatic work as well, to make something to touch an audience, make them laugh, that's quite a precise skill. And I think sometimes you have to approach comedy more seriously than you do with a tragedy funnily enough.

So to answer your question, I think it's for me, in a lot of serious situations in life, there is underlying humour. And where is humour, there is also underlying sadness as well. I don't think there's just comedy or tragedy, I think it's a fusion of the two which is what our lives are about really.

So I always try to, when I'm directing a play, to find, I suppose, the truth. Of course, everyone's truth is different, but I think there's a sort of commonality to such a word. I think there's a certain general tendency to say 'the truth' and it's my truth and it's my actors' truth as well. So that's what I'm looking at and the truth of the character, it's finding the truth.

You know this boy who starts a relationship with the vampire girl feels very strongly about her and defending her to his parents. That's quite a sad scene because his parents feel he is rejecting them and he feels they are rejecting him. So that's not just a funny moment, that's a serious moment. So you have to find that as well as the humour in the situation.

### ***On how the evolution of society influences productions***

*Neighbours With Long Teeth* as we heard today in the introduction was written thirty years ago and a lot has happened and changed in society. I mean if you think that the play is now being performed by young adults who weren't even born when that play was first done. And yes, of course when I was directing it I was thinking we've got to make this for today's young people. We were talking about 14, 15, 16, 17-year-olds, they've got to be able to relate to it. Therefore you've got to give it a modern twist.

But what's so very interesting about *Neighbours* is, to begin with, when I first started to direct it this year, I thought maybe it's going to be a bit old-fashioned. But in fact, all the themes brought up in the play are all as relevant today as they were thirty years ago. I think attitudes hopefully have changed a bit towards acceptance of strangers and foreigners and people who are different but it's all something we are essentially challenged by. We have to sort of ask of ourselves "How acceptant am I about the differences that come into my life, into our lives?" and not to go backwards.

### ***On your greatest satisfactions***

.... Somebody said to me "How do you direct? What's your method?" I don't think I have one. I'm sure probably if someone sat in my rehearsal room and watched for three weeks, they would say "Oh that's how he does it." I can't analyse that. So, to answer the question "What is my most satisfying moment?", it is that moment when — it's like alchemy — you basically do it when you stage it first. You get a sort of very rough sketch and then you start to fill in the colour and the details. And it's that moment when it suddenly comes together and you don't see that happening. I can never actually say "Ah, it happened there". It's just suddenly it comes. The actors find those moments and it just comes together. That is the most satisfying thing.

I remember the scene, where ... there's a pure farce scene in the play, when the boy and the girl are going into her house, they're sitting on a coffin which belongs to her father the vampire Count and they realise he's actually in it trying to get out. So there's a lot of running around the stage, coffin lids opening a little bit like in a bedroom farce, the doors opening... people running. And that took a long time to actually get the timing before the lid

opens and Cout Spatula appears. And I remember thinking when that happened I was so excited: “We’ve done it now!”

In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, there’s a terrific scene where you have the four lovers: the two men are chasing the one girl and the other girl is completely sort of outcast and it’s huge. The scene lasts about eight minutes and it’s a big fight. And again, you have to be very careful with how you choreograph.

This group are fantastic. I think the first time we actually worked it, they clicked up, they picked it up like that. And then of course we shaped it, we had to find the pauses and the timing. But when that came together then it was like a set piece, eight minutes of pure physical theatre. That was also a hugely satisfying moment. So those are the moments when you think yes, those are the moments you can sort of think back on and remember immediately as being what excited me.

And then of course, when you see the whole thing come together and suddenly there’s a life to the production.

### ***On audiences (playing in front of friends vs playing in front of students)***

I say to the actors today, you are performing the play in front of your peers, so they are a hundred percent supportive. They all know you there’s a lot of fun seeing their friends doing the play. The reactions will be very different from what you have, say, next week when you start going into schools. And it’s very interesting, you know, when you rehearse a play you hope, you think: “Oh, we’re going to get that reaction here, that reaction there.” It’s not till you put it in front of an audience that then you see what the reactions are going to be and it doesn’t sound of always the same.

It’s quite interesting, we did a sort of private run-through of *A Mid Summer Night’s Dream* yesterday<sup>1</sup>. We had a few of the actors who’ve now gone to Japan, they’re touring over there for a few weeks, and they came to watch a little private run-through. I was amazed at what they found funny and what they didn’t find funny. You make that kind of adjustment. Be open to, you might get that kind of reaction. They might laugh, they might cry. Who knows? That’s what then, I think, happens once the actors are up in front of an audience it changes again. Because they’re then working off. The audience, after all, is the other big contribution to the work. If they weren’t there, there would be no point in putting on a play. So there is that contact between the actors and the audience: its vital for good theatre.

### ***On how it always begins***

Dominique who organises our French tours has often asked me how I started a production, and I would say I had a little image, just one little image,

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<sup>1</sup> This group of actors toured with White Horse theatre in 2016-2017. They have experience as regards performing in front of students.

maybe a few of them, maybe more than just one image, but an image. So I must say this now so that she can hear it as well. My image for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was, I just saw, I saw flowers and I saw foliage, and I saw this wood. It's all I saw. I think I'd seen a coronet of flowers in a picture and I thought "That's what I want. I want those fairies, coming out of the art of nature". And that was the picture I saw when I started to work on it. I was very lucky with a wonderful designer, Florence Boyd. We worked very closely together and she's come up with a very beautiful design that she has really set in a forest with lots of flowers and shrubs. She has sort of visualised my little frame I saw several months ago.