

SIX DEGREES OF SEPARATION: Pre-rehearsal interview with Director Michael Buffong

Michael directed ON MY BIRTHDAY in The Studio at the Royal Exchange Theatre in 2002. His other credits include THE PRAYER (Young Vic), BROTHER2BROTHER (Lyric Hammersmith) and IN PIECES (Belgrade Theatre Studio). Michael also wrote and directed the award winning short film SIMPLE!

What is the appeal of directing SIX DEGREES OF SEPARATION?

One of the things I like about the play is the first line spoken by Ouisa: *Tell them*. Unlike most plays, the lead characters in SIX DEGREES OF SEPARATION talk directly to the audience and I find this fascinating. I have worked a lot with Forum Theatre and I like the way that with a lighting effect you can suddenly change the scene and have a character say “*and then we went to the park.*” Suddenly the audience find themselves watching the scene in the park and all because one character said so. With this play I’m looking forward to getting in to the rehearsal room and playing around with some of these ideas. The play starts in the apartment of a very wealthy Manhattan couple at 6am in the morning. They tell the audience that they will show what happened to them the night before and then immediately they play out this scene. The action of the play then goes backwards and forwards in time. I don’t think it really matters that we need to know the specifics of a scene, is it daytime, night-time, a Monday or a Tuesday? What’s important to me is discovering the emotional journey of each character and I’m really looking forward to doing this in rehearsals with the actors.

What relevance does the play have for a British audience?

I think the play is very relevant for a British audience. The two lead characters in the play, Ouisa and Flanders Kittredge live a comfortable life style which I’m sure a lot of people aspire to. They’re very wealthy, they live in a very nice part of Manhattan and are successful Art dealers. I’m sure that some of the people who see the play at the Royal Exchange will live a similar life style to the Kittredge’s and there’s nothing wrong with that. I hope that an audience watching the play will look at Ouisa and Flanders and ask themselves if they were that wealthy what would it mean to them and how would they behave in similar circumstances?

The play also touches on a lot of other issues such as our need to be part of a family, the differences between parents and their children, race, wealth and Art. Another major issue in the play is the idea of celebrity, which is very relevant to a British audience.

Have you seen the film version of the play starring Will Smith?

I have seen the film version and it’s OK. Primarily though SIX DEGREES OF SEPERATION started out in the Theatre and I believe that its greatest strength is as a play. With a very stark set the play lends itself brilliantly to storytelling in the round. As a film the story is presented very realistically, however, in the round, like the paintings of Kandinsky, you can be more abstract in your storytelling.

Do you think that it is important for an audience to have knowledge of Art history to be able to understand some of the themes in the play?

I don’t think it’s important for an audience to have knowledge of Art history to be able to understand the play. If anything, having seen the play some people may want to go and look for themselves at works by Cézanne, Matise and Kandinsky who are all mentioned in the play. I don’t have a great knowledge of Art history. I would like to think that if I had seen the play, I would want to find out more about Kandinsky and his abstract way of painting.

How important are Ouisa and Flanders' roles as narrators in the play?

The brilliance of SIX DEGREES OF SEPERATION is that there are two characters that talk the audience through all the action in the play, scene by scene and event by event. This happens right at the beginning of the play and I hope very much that the audience won't be too confused when the actors playing Ouisa and Flanders run onto the stage and start talking straight at them. The two characters keep us informed all the time of where we are in the play and what is happening.

What qualities did you look for in actors when you were casting the role of Paul?

The role of Paul is an extremely demanding one. The actor we have cast in the role, O-T Fagbenle already has a lot of the role's attributes. He is charming, good looking and as an actor has the ability to both make you laugh and scare you. I'm really looking forward to working with O-T in rehearsing the role.

In the play, Paul talks at length about the novel *The Catcher in the Rye*. Do you think there are similarities between Paul in the play and the character of Holden Caulfield in *The Catcher in the Rye*?

If there are any similarities between the two characters it's probably to do with when Holden Caulfield in the book accuses everyone of being *phoney*. A theme that runs through SIX DEGREES OF SEPERATION is people not being who they say they are. Paul we discover is not Sidney Poitier's son, Ouisa and Flanders are not as wealthy as they say they are and Geoffrey, the diamond miner is not as liberal with his workers as he would like to think that he is.

Do you believe in the six degrees of separation theory?

I believe that there may be six degrees of separation between people on this planet. It seems quite feasible to me that in some way everyone is linked to each other and that the theory is true.

How will you approach directing this play in the round?

Directing the play is an exercise in storytelling. In the round there are problems such as actors having their backs facing the audience which you have to be aware of. What excites me about working in the round, however, is because of how the actors will be positioned on stage, I will be able to explore more freely than if I was in a proscenium arch theatre, how the characters relate to each other.

How closely have you worked with the designer on this production?

I've worked very closely with Julian McGowan who is designing the play. Together we've looked at lots of design books and pictures of Manhattan. Julian and I have also spent a lot of time thinking about what furniture there should be in the Kittredge's apartment and discussing how we can realise a lot of images on stage.

What other plays in the future would like to direct in the round?

A play I would love to direct in the round is TWELVE ANGRY MEN, I think it would be superb at the Royal Exchange. It works on so many different levels and would be an absolute joy to direct!