

THE CRACKS IN MY SKIN: Interview with Director Chris Meads

Can you tell us a bit about how you came to be working here at the Royal Exchange?

I never went to the theatre to see anything until I was the ripe old age of 25! I'm from County Durham in the north east, and it just wasn't part of my family or the people I knew's lives. Of course, I loved drama on the TV and films etc, ...but the nearest decent theatre to us was in Newcastle, which is quite a trek to get to. And certainly, I had no idea that you could actually try to make theatre for a living. I enrolled on an English degree at the University of Sunderland and eventually changed courses to do a joint honours in English and Drama. Firstly, this was because it was a much more sociable course! But more importantly, we had a theatre visit to see a National Theatre production of *Death of a Salesman* starring Alun Armstrong (also a Durham lad) and the combination of seeing this production and beginning to be involved in the making of theatre on the course had a really profound affect on me.

In 1999, when it was time to graduate, I had a chat with the head of the course, a fantastic woman called Val McLane (who incidentally had worked successfully as an actor at the Royal Exchange and who used to regale us with her stories of what a great theatre it was). She asked me what I was thinking of doing next and she suggested that I pursue directing. Because I'd been doing joint honours, I'd studied plays in depth as part of the English degree and then we'd stage the same plays within the drama course. So I would be in the rehearsal room helping the actors with the text and, without me knowing it, directing them! But I had no idea how to go about trying to do it for a living, so in my naivety I rang up the head of drama at the Arts Council and asked her. I think she was amused by my cheek, but she very kindly told me about the training schemes that you could apply for, one of which was the Channel Four Directors' Scheme. I applied and to my surprise I eventually got to the final interview stage. One of the directors on the panel was Ian Rickson, then Artistic Director at the Royal Court, and, while I didn't get offered the bursary on that occasion, he offered me the opportunity to assist him. Shortly afterwards I was awarded a bursary to train with the RSC and then very fortunate to have the opportunity to assist Max Stafford-Clark. I then went back home to the north east, where I was able to work as an actor teacher and also get funding from the Arts Council to direct quite a bit of my own work in Newcastle. My work as a teacher of acting is very important to me and has without question helped me enormously in terms of what I believe theatre directing to be fundamentally about: helping a group of actors to make contact in the most meaningful way with an audience. I was working at E-15 Acting School in London and directing bits and pieces in London on the fringe, when I was invited to attend the National Theatre Studio Directors' Programme, which is a really intensive and rigorous two week training programme. Fiona Laird, who was running the Channel Four Scheme, came in to chat to us and suggested that I apply again (I thought that I was a bit long in the tooth), I did so and happily Sarah Frankcom from the Royal Exchange was on the panel and she felt that I might fit in here at the Exchange.

I think the difference between my first interview for the C4TDS in 1999 and then later in 2006 was through the experiences that I'd had I was able to talk from the heart about why theatre mattered to me, the kind of work I wish to do and why, rather than feeling any pressure to say what I thought the panel wanted to hear.

So, it's through a combination of being prepared for the long haul, being open to learning as much as I could, and having the fortune to have learnt from some great people. It's a fantastic experience to have had and I feel very fortunate.

It must be very exciting, with the Royal Exchange being such a prestigious and renowned theatre. What have been the highlights so far?

Highlights? There's literally been a highlight everyday.

It's an extraordinary building and I love being in during the day and watching people who are walking through the foyer encounter it for the first time. The moment when I first saw the building was definitely a highlight. Also, seeing a show for the first time and experiencing that bit before it starts when the doors are open and you see the actors in costume walk around the theatre: very gladiatorial and a huge adrenaline rush. Of course, having the opportunity to work with some amazing actors and witness them move up through the gears from the rehearsal room to performance in what is, no question, the most thrilling space to experience actors in the country. As there are five directors in the building, it's been invaluable to be able to seek advice from Greg,

Sarah, Jo, Jacob or Braham, and also many people in other departments – the combined experience here is pretty phenomenal.

I suppose if I were to choose one moment it would be when I initiated and led of an intensive ten day Shakespeare workshop inside the Theatre. The ensemble was comprised of recent graduates from Manchester Met University, the University of Manchester, The Arden School of Theatre and the University of Salford, working alongside one another for the first time. It was also the first time that the graduate actors had played 'in-the-round' within the Royal Exchange Theatre, and the first time that many of the texts had been performed within the space. Members of the Royal Exchange *The Tempest* acting company, including Pete Postlethwaite, Simon Trinder, Sam Robinson and Trevor Cooper worked alongside the group, sharing their professional experience of Shakespeare's texts. The workshops culminated in a showing of the work in the Royal Exchange Theatre, within which the graduate actors played a selection of Shakespeare scenes alongside the members of the *The Tempest* acting company and exchanged what they had learned during their process with the audience, comprised of their fellow students, tutors and practitioners from the theatre and the industry. I thought that the best way of getting the message of what the project was all about to the audience was to have the graduates and *The Tempest* company sharing warm-up exercises together in the middle of the space as the audience entered. It was an unforgettable experience to see the audience's faces as they came in, thinking, 'Blimey, that's Pete Postlethwaite warming up with my mate from uni.' But it was also fantastic to learn a little of how the space works on a practical level during that project: it doesn't just look great, the space is one of the best acting teachers there is. It really stretches the best of them.

Directing THE CRACKS IN MY SKIN will be the culmination of your year-long residency at the Exchange. How are you feeling about the project?

The residency was initially for twelve months, but then the Exchange extended it by a further seven months. So it is strange in a way, because the first night of the show will also possibly be my last night officially within the theatre, which I'm going to find difficult. Not only because it's a theatre that I love, but there are many people within the building who I'll miss a great deal – the Exchange really is like an extended family atmosphere, which is rare.

However, I'm very honoured to have been asked to direct the play at the Exchange. When I first read the play a year ago I was really affected by it. I know the people within it and the world in which they live. I had the feeling that I'd known these people and this world for ages.

It's how I grew up. It's people I knew as a child. I wish I'd known the writer, Phil Porter, as a kid, we'd have been good mates! I can't write plays, but if I could it would be the play I would write. I can't remember if I mentioned this to the directors (I don't think I did), but for them to gauge that it would be a play that I would connect with so much says a great deal for their ability to 'read' people.

It's been a very long process. I've directed plays before, but not at this level and not in this way. I was asked to direct it a year ago and since February Phil Porter and I have been working through successive drafts of the script, trying to tell the story in the best way possible. I've never worked in this way with a writer before, so this was a bit daunting at first, but I've gradually earned Phil's trust and we get on very well indeed. We share a sense of humour and a mutual respect. Then, gradually more and more people get involved. Hannah Clark, the designer, has been working with me since the summer, then Steve the sound designer and Kay the lighting designer... And most recently, we've just finished the casting process. So it's kind of like getting an ever expanding gang of like-minded people together. I'm really fortunate to have such a strong team who are not only highly skilled but who really 'get' the play on a creative and emotional level. There's been a lot of overlaps, in terms of people chipping in ideas, which I think is the best way to work. For example, Hannah has been hugely important to me, not just in conjuring up the visual world of the play, but by asking really tough questions about the kind of production it should be. Good people stretch you. And I think the trick is (which I'm still learning, obviously) try to get the best out of people creatively, help them to feel that they have an investment in the production, but ensure that everyone is telling the same story.

We've got a seriously good ensemble of actors in the production. Seriously good. And now it's a case of waiting to see what they'll bring to the rehearsal process. As actors they all have in common the ability to take these characters somewhere quite special, and you have to steer and encourage them towards that, rather than restricting them to the play that Phil or I might see in our heads. We must be prepared to be surprised. Being in a room with actors is also the bit I feel most comfortable and experienced with.

So I'm knackered, ready for my Christmas pudding, but really excited about getting in a room with the cast and getting our hands dirty in the New Year.

Without giving too much away, what can we expect from the show?

Ah, that would be telling!

Well, the characters, how they approach the world, and the world that they inhabit it quite off-beat and strange in many ways, but at its heart the play is a love story (appropriately, our official first night is on Valentine's Day), or rather, eight love stories. But it's a deeper more profound love than romantic love. The love stories are unusual and unorthodox.

It's a group of people who have been neglected, or who have lost someone that they loved very much, and who desperately want to give and receive love, and gradually in the play they come together to form this new kind of family. The play is about how that family forms, how the characters are changed by this experience and how it falls apart. It's about why it's important to be with other people and how hard it can be to let go of them. It's about how hard it is getting close. It's about us and every person in our audience. It's apt that the play will be played for the first time at the Royal Exchange: a theatre in which the live exchange that happens between actor and audience is everything.

What Phil is very determined to do as a writer is avoid the clichéd or the obvious, so every choice that he makes is unexpected or left-field and taken to the extreme. But what's great is that by doing so, the play, the characters and their world, manages to become universal.

What's more, the play is unusually lacking in cynicism about the human need for contact with one another and how people are diminished if they try to operate alone. It's also a play about what *happens* between people, about how their behaviour changes and is affected by physically coming into contact with one another. The play has pathos and is life-affirming, it ends with informed optimism. It's totally self-contained – a world within itself.

But, above all, it's very, very funny. It made me laugh out loud when I first read it and it still does!

What sort of audience will enjoy it?

It's a question the team have been asking one another throughout the process. But the fact that we're quite a disparate group of people who all love the play says a great deal. The play's about us and about potentially every person in our audience. It's apt that the play will be played for the first time at the Royal Exchange: a theatre in which the live exchange that happens between actor and audience is everything.

People who like people and are up for enjoying themselves with other people will like this play and the people in it. In the end, you just direct a play in the way you do cause it's the kind of thing you'd enjoy seeing yourself.

Is the 'world' of the play a naturalistic place?

It's a good question and one that we've wrestled with a great deal. Initially when you read the play the language feels almost stylised. But 'stylised' acting to me always seems like a detached experience for the audience, which I knew it shouldn't be in this production. The audience have got to like, understand and be 'with' the characters. But then I discovered when working on the play with actors that if you approach the play with the attitude that these people exist, that the audience should empathise with them and that they are expressing their truth, then something really interesting happens. They express themselves the way that they do because they gradually become uncensored and unselfconscious, they lose the inhibitions that we all normally have when we interact with other people. They express themselves very physically, viscerally and through a very strong emotional impulse. So what we're aiming for is achieving an unusual degree of naturalistic behaviour, people gradually becoming as natural as it is possible to be with one another, but in situations that are very extreme, high temperature and high stakes.

The visual world of the play is like our own, but like an alternative universe to ours. When the emotions in the play rise, the world literally heats up and becomes more colourful and vibrant. We're attempting to create a world that the audience sees in the same way that the characters do, from their sensory and emotional

perspective. Also, because I feel that the play is very much written from a child's perspective, in the sense that Phil's stored up these particular curious things from his childhood and early adolescence, it gives us a licence to be much freer and playful and fun with how this world looks and feels.

Who are the characters we will meet in this world, and what did you look for when auditioning for these roles?

In a play that's essentially about a 'family' becoming unusually at ease with one another and who the audience have to hopefully like, it's been vital to cast very particular actors. Firstly, they have to be unusually open and generous players with one another, and have as little self consciousness as possible. They have to be genuinely warm people whose company you're going to enjoy, in both the rehearsal room and for the audience in the theatre. These sound like obvious things, but surprisingly few actors possess these qualities and they can't be 'acted'. They also have to be incredibly skilled players in that the approach that I feel the play demands, acting on impulse and being really in-the-moment and 'living through' what the characters experience, rather than 'acting' it, are all very difficult things to do.

The play takes place in that long summer holiday after you leave comprehensive school. Where we are is never specified, but it's quite a grubby world and the people in it are, I suppose, the forgotten people or misfits. Phil is a democratic writer – always looking for beauty and interest in the lives of ordinary people. The characters are Janie, whose is 16 years old and has experienced extreme neglect: the kind of kid which we all remember from school who's feral, and smells quite a bit and never brought their PE kit (because they never actually had one) and who the school disco must have been a nightmare for. No friends, seriously bullied and now she's started to grow large cysts on her head. She's desperate to be loved. Linden's next, who's also 16 and the only black kid in the school. He lives with his granddad Roper and they're both doing up Josefa's (Linden and Janie's art teacher) garden while she's in hospital for an operation. Linden's a very self conscious adolescent and in quite a bit of turmoil as his mam and dad have stopped getting in touch with him. Josefa, the art teacher, desperately wants to be a mother and has a room in her house filled with thousands of dragon ornaments. Inger is the resident school bully and psychopath, who makes Janie and Linden's life hell in the graveyard, which is a feral place where all the sex, and gin drinking and fights happen after school. And finally, there's Alun, a doctor, who Josefa meets in hospital and who tries to change her life.

Have you drawn inspiration from any music, films or books?

That's one of the elements of a production that I most enjoy, being open to anything that can be of influence as you're preparing it, but also remembering things that you'd forgotten about that becomes relevant. And collectively, the team becomes big fans of everything that we all bring to the table.

Photography was a big influence on this production, not sure why, but there's an emotional nostalgia to the play that fits with certain types of photography. Seeing the world in a heightened state of awareness. With three particular photographers, everything looks brighter or more vivid, or space and time feels more tangible; things seem more real: William Eggleston, for his heightened, vivid use of colour, Rineke Dijkstra who focuses on people in a transitional stage in their life. Compositionally, her subjects stand facing the camera against a minimal background, which was a big influence. And Loretta Lux, who creates the most extraordinary photographs of young children. Also, I saw a video installation last year called *Still Lives* by Sam Taylor-Wood. It was relevant in that it reminded you of humanness, our commonalities and the ephemeral nature of life.

Film? *The Station Agent*, *My Summer of Love*, *Room for Romeo Brass*, *Last Resort*, *Summer Salt*, *Heavenly Creatures*, *Kes*, *Ghost World*...

In terms of music, for some reason what we're calling DADPOP feels right, so we've had great fun listening again to ELO, Queen, 10CC...all that kind of stuff. It feels open hearted and inclusive. But also, lots of kind of slightly eerie, slightly melancholic, slightly wistful, folksy electronic music.

And finally, can you summarise the play in a six word story?

A new kind of love story.