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# Michael Bogdanov's Iconoclastic Approach to Political Shakespeare

Between 1986 and 1989, Michael Bogdanov directed *The Wars of the Roses* (an ambitious seven-play Shakespeare cycle that won him the Olivier Award for Best Director in 1990), introducing an accessible and pertinent Shakespeare to 1980s audiences and paving the way for later politicized versions of Shakespeare's plays – such as, recently, the New York Public Theater's 2017 production of *Julius Caesar*. Following Bogdanov's death in 2017, the time seems right for a new appraisal of his work as a radical, political director. The collection of Bogdanov's personal papers at the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust offers a unique opportunity to gain an insight into the director's mind. The papers include annotated scripts, production records, prompt books, reviews, programmes, unpublished manuscripts, and two volumes of *The Director's Cut* – documents spanning Bogdanov's entire theatrical career. In this article Darren Freebury-Jones engages with these materials, as well as the influences of theoretical movements such as cultural materialism on the director's approach, in order to shed light on the ways in which Bogdanov stimulated and inspired new readings of Shakespeare's history plays.

*Key terms:* English Shakespeare Company, *Henry IV*, *Henry V*, *Henry VI*, *Richard II*, *Richard III*.

BETWEEN 23 May and 18 June 2017, New York's Public Theater staged a production of Shakespeare's Roman tragedy *Julius Caesar* in which the title character resembled US President Donald Trump.<sup>1</sup> The production met with right-wing protests and generated considerable international discussion and debate. Delta Airlines and the Bank of America, two corporate donors to the Public Theater, withdrew financial support because of this production's depiction of a Trump-like Caesar's assassination.

As co-chief theatre critic for *The New York Times* Jesse Green points out – in a generally favourable review – the production's 'depiction of a petulant, blondish Caesar in a blue suit, complete with gold bathtub and a pouty Slavic wife, takes onstage Trump-trolling to a startling new level'.<sup>2</sup> Cassius's lines in that play seem particularly prescient when read in this context: 'How many ages hence / Shall this our lofty scene be acted over / In states unborn and accents yet unknown.'<sup>3</sup>

These twenty-first-century concerns about a Shakespeare play being appropriated for the purposes of political speech echo those

from the playwright's own time. In 1601, there was a 'famous attempt to use the theatre to subvert authority'.<sup>4</sup> The Earl of Essex and his supporters planned to replace Queen Elizabeth I with King James of Scotland, whom they considered to be the legitimate heir to the English throne. In an attempt to generate further support for their rebellion, Essex and his followers arranged for Shakespeare's *Richard II* (complete with the deposition scene) to be performed by the Lord Chamberlain's Men at the Globe. Shakespeare's text was therefore 'given significance for a particular cause'.<sup>5</sup>

But Essex's plan failed miserably and the play did not garner additional support.<sup>6</sup> It is worth noting, nevertheless, that the scene in which Richard II is deposed does not appear in Elizabethan editions of the play; indeed it did not feature in print until the Fourth Quarto of 1608. The scene was probably cut due to censorship by Master of the Revels, Sir Edmund Tilney. Thus – just as they did in 1601 – belief that staging a Shakespeare play could have serious political ramifications still exists today.

Alan Sinfield notes that Shakespeare 'is not a fixed entity but a concept produced in specific political conditions'.<sup>7</sup> One major theatre director who understood the abiding relevance of Shakespeare to modern politics was Michael Bogdanov. He is often remembered for his production of *The Romans in Britain* at the National Theatre in 1980, which led to an obscenity trial, but he was also a daring and innovative director of Shakespeare productions. Between 1986 and 1989 he directed *The Wars of the Roses* plays, an incredibly ambitious seven-play cycle, winning him the 1990 Olivier Award for Best Director. The only similar theatrical treatment of these plays had been in Stratford-upon-Avon in 1963, when Peter Hall and John Barton staged the three *Henry VI* plays and *Richard III*, which introduced a modern, political Shakespeare, a thinker for our times.

As in the case with the Public Theater's production of *Julius Caesar*, Bogdanov's Shakespeare productions took on a timely relevance, given the political climate and public uncertainty over national leaders. In this article I explore Bogdanov's iconoclastic approach to Shakespeare's history plays, partly in the context of the collection *Political Shakespeare: Essays in Cultural Materialism*, edited by Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, which, according to Andrew Jarvis, served as the director's 'bible for *The Henrys* and *The Wars of the Roses*'.<sup>8</sup>

Bogdanov regarded *Political Shakespeare* as 'a perceptive book' in which 'the contributors analyze the underlying radical political subversion contained in Shakespeare's work',<sup>9</sup> and acknowledged that as a director he was 'consistently sensitive to new critical thinking – new historicism, cultural materialism'.<sup>10</sup> New historicism is based on the theory that literature should be studied in the context of the social, political, and historical milieu in which it was produced. Richard Wilson notes that the movement began 'punctually at the beginning of the 1980s', but that its existence was preceded by 'a number of prior *discourses*, or ways of speaking, about literature and language, and not by inspiration of any single individual'.<sup>11</sup>

Cultural materialism represented, according to Jarvis, 'a more major influence' on the director,<sup>12</sup> who was concerned about oppression, state power, and resistance to it. As Jarvis and John Drakakis note:

It was Dollimore and Sinfield's championing of what . . . they had called cultural materialism, a peculiarly British inflection of Marxist thinking, that most attracted Bogdanov.<sup>13</sup>

Jarvis stresses, however, that although these theoretical movements influenced Bogdanov's 'thinking and practice, he developed a political take that was specifically his own'.<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, the collection of Bogdanov's personal papers at the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust (reference GL22) consists of over two cubic metres of the director's papers from the period 1965 to 2010, including annotated scripts, production records, prompt books, reviews, programmes, and unpublished manuscripts – documents spanning Bogdanov's entire theatrical career.<sup>15</sup> I will suggest how these materials might shed light on the ways in which Bogdanov stimulated and inspired new readings of Shakespeare's history plays.

## The Henrys

In 1986, Bogdanov and Michael Pennington founded the English Shakespeare Company as 'a radical alternative to the Royal Shakespeare Company'.<sup>16</sup> The Company's inaugural productions took the form of 'highly politicized versions' of 'The Henrys' i.e. *Henry IV Part One*, *Henry IV Part Two*, and *Henry V*.<sup>17</sup> The plays opened at the Theatre Royal, Plymouth, in December of that year.

Although the company received funding from the Arts Council of Great Britain, the English history plays were fundamentally, as Carol Chillington Rutter points out, 'a protest against government under-funding in the arts that was starving regional theatres up and down the kingdom'.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, in his review of 'The Henrys' at the Old Vic, Stanley Wells acknowledges that they were performed at a time when 'the government made clear that funding for the arts would



Above: Michael Bogdanov. Below: a rehearsal of *The Henrys* (photo: Laurence Burns).

depend increasingly upon the private sector – including people who pay for tickets'.<sup>19</sup> It is hardly surprising then that 'Bogdanov's direction is everywhere inflected by a contemporary scepticism about all political

action and by a profound pessimism about Thatcher's Britain'.<sup>20</sup> Donald Trump has proposed the elimination of funding for the National Endowment for the Arts, as well as the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, and



the National Endowment for the Humanities. It seems that the political climate in which the Public Theater staged their production of *Julius Caesar* is not dissimilar to that in which Bogdanov staged his history plays. As Bogdanov puts it: 'All art is political. It is protest.'<sup>21</sup>

Bogdanov appropriated Shakespeare's *Henry IV* and *Henry V* texts as a means of protest 'by associating the events with contemporary politics', and thereby allowing 'the plays to breathe'.<sup>22</sup> He states that 'There were areas of Shakespeare that it seemed to me were much more insurrectionist and much more radical' than had been evinced in Royal Shakespeare Company productions, and that 'the humanist side of' Shakespeare's 'politics was never properly explored'.<sup>23</sup> As Michael Pennington notes in *The English Shakespeare Company: the Story of 'The Wars of the Roses' 1986–1989*, co-authored with Bogdanov, Shakespeare's history plays reflected the 'schisms (uncannily like those of the eighties) of the nation',<sup>24</sup> a nation that was 'now the wrong side of the Falklands conflict, so Henry's self-justifying foreign invasion, drowning discontent at home in its patriotic clamour, looked uneasily different'.<sup>25</sup>

For Bogdanov, as for Alan Sinfield, Shakespeare's works were not fixed entities, for 'different aspects' of the plays 'are suddenly highlighted by contemporary events, shifts in global balance of power throw new light on old characters'.<sup>26</sup> He therefore encouraged his actors 'to think politically',<sup>27</sup> and his rehearsal processes would 'start with the politics, identify the social structure, the protagonists, the status quo'.<sup>28</sup> Jarvis notes that Bogdanov inspired the company to believe 'that we can change the world, if we can only commit ourselves fully and unconditionally to the act of theatre as a tool of social and political change'.<sup>29</sup>

The director points out that 'Bolingbroke's dying advice to Hal' is to 'deflect the country's attention away from the problem of unemployment, taxation, homelessness, with a "just war". Thatcher triumphed domestically the same way' through the Falklands War in 1982.<sup>30</sup> Bogdanov elaborates that 'Heading for disaster in the polls, she . . .

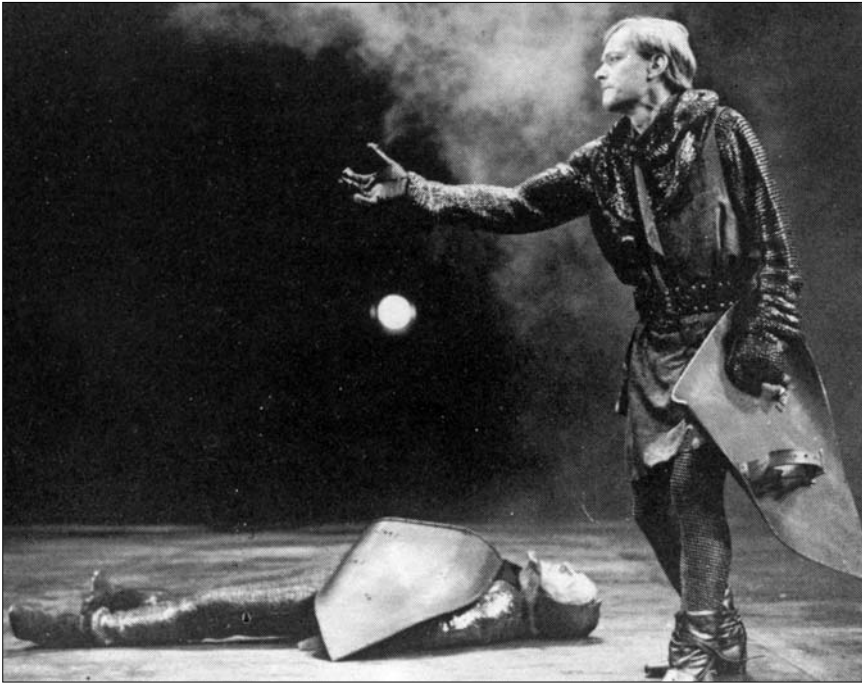
returned to win a resounding victory in the following election'.<sup>31</sup> Hal's 'first lesson in politics' is therefore, as Tony Church acknowledged in 1985, 'advice that has sounded down the centuries and in England is now known as the Falklands Factor'.<sup>32</sup>

### **Bolingbroke, Hal, and a Police State**

In his book *The Director's Cut* Bogdanov links Henry Bolingbroke (played by John Castle) to Margaret Thatcher, thereby illuminating different aspects of Shakespeare's character by associating him with a modern political figure. He states that Bolingbroke 'nicked the crown' and is a 'devious, austere philistine' akin to 'Thatcher after the sixties, suits instead of flares'.<sup>33</sup> Shakespeare's kings therefore utilized the same duplicitous tactics as modern politicians by attempting to divert their 'enemies away from the problems at home with a trumped-up war of expediency'.<sup>34</sup>

Notably, the prompt book for this production marks for deletion several lines that emphasize the notion that, as monarch, Bolingbroke is ordained by God, such as, 'Whose soldier now, under whose blessed cross / We are impressed and engag'd to fight' (*1HIV*, I, i, 20–1), and the phrase, 'like a robe pontifical' (*III*, ii, 56). These deletions suggest that Bolingbroke's intended pilgrimage to Jerusalem is not an act of genuine remorse for the execution of Richard II and the usurpation of the throne, but rather a chosen device to 'keep his critics and opponents quiet'.<sup>35</sup>

The English Shakespeare Company portrayed the world of the *Henry IV* plays as a police state under Bolingbroke and his son, with characters such as the Sheriff and Carrier acting as modern policemen. This was most demonstrable at the end of *Part Two*, in 'the carting of Doll Tearsheet and the committal of Sir John to the Fleet' – which 'suggested that Hal', having gained the crown after his father's death – had also 'become head of a police state'.<sup>36</sup> That Bogdanov considered these 'plays for today' to be an act of protest against Thatcher's Conservative government<sup>37</sup> – a regime



Hal (Michael Pennington) in the midst of battle. Photo © Laurence Burns/ArenaPAL.

tainted by images of riot police, such as those called upon to deal with protests by the miners and against the poll tax – was further emphasized in that ‘the rebel cause was implicitly endorsed’.<sup>38</sup>

Bogdanov’s reading of Hal was heavily influenced by Stephen Greenblatt’s chapter, ‘Invisible Bullets: Renaissance Authority and its Subversion, *Henry IV* and *Henry V*’, in *Political Shakespeare*. For Greenblatt, these plays confirm the ‘hypothesis of the origin of princely power in force and fraud even as they draw their audience irresistibly toward the celebration of that power’.<sup>39</sup> He considers Hal to be a ‘conniving hypocrite’ and ‘the power he both serves and comes to embody is glorified usurpation and theft’.<sup>40</sup> In *The Director’s Cut*, Bogdanov laments the fact that Hal leaves behind ‘a trail of wrecked lives and the deaths of those with whom he purported to be friends’ (the friends also representing Britain’s binge-drinking culture for the director), and rejects ‘a class of which he purported to be the champion, and whom he treats with contempt’.<sup>41</sup>

He cites the exchange between Hal and Francis the drawer, in II, iv, 58–67 of *Part One*, as a ‘cruel exercise in class power’,<sup>42</sup> just as Greenblatt writes of ‘the odd little scene in

which Hal . . . reduces the puny tapster Francis’,<sup>43</sup> and therefore demonstrates an ‘ability to conceal his motives and render opaque his language’,<sup>44</sup> much like a savvy politician. After all, ‘Boardrooms may have replaced the Palace at Westminster, chairpersons (mainly men) replaced monarchs, but the rules’ in the 1980s ‘were the same’ as they were in Shakespeare’s time, and the same as they were in Henry Bolingbroke’s reign of 1399–1413.<sup>45</sup>

### Exercises in Class Power

Bogdanov’s production, like Greenblatt’s essay, focused on the ruthless and imperialist side of Hal, and just as Bolingbroke is unable to call upon religion as an excuse for his actions, Lancaster’s speech, ‘I like this fair proceeding of the king’s’ (*2HIV*, V, v, 96), is marked for deletion in the prompt book, thus rendering Hal’s actions (in this case, the banishment of his old friend Falstaff) both devastating and inexcusable. As Jarvis and Drakakis put it: Bogdanov ‘was absolutely clear that this was not a play about the Tillyardian education of a king, but rather an exploration of the imperial imperative of monarchy’.<sup>46</sup> For Jarvis, who played the

Dauphin, the production of *Henry V* offered 'a valuable opportunity to observe Bogdanov transforming the play's manifest political ideology into a theatrical truth that imperialist readings of the play had either hitherto obscured, or transformed into . . . warmongering jingoism'.<sup>47</sup>

The English Shakespeare Company therefore highlighted striking connections between Bolingbroke and his son's reigns and Thatcher's government, at a time when Bogdanov was 'burning with anger at the iniquity of the British electoral system'<sup>48</sup> and pondering: 'How could the plays not be understood in a contemporary context?'<sup>49</sup> However, though the costumes, designed by Stephanie Howard, were 'mainly of the twentieth century', they were also 'eclectic',<sup>50</sup> resisting labels such as 'traditional' or 'modern'.

The English Shakespeare Company agreed to free 'the audience's imaginations by allowing an eclectic mix of costumes and props', with 'modern dress at one moment, medieval, Victorian, or Elizabethan the next'.<sup>51</sup> The costumes thus 'spanned six hundred years stylistically',<sup>52</sup> which represented something of a departure for Bogdanov, whose Shakespeare productions had been exclusively modern dress from 1976. In Rutter's view, this maverick approach to costume is one of several reasons why Bogdanov was 'perhaps the first post-modern director of Shakespeare . . . working by pastiche, using Shakespeare's histories as Shakespeare himself used history, anachronistically, inaccurately, deconstructively'.<sup>53</sup> The director was inspired to 'break the stranglehold'<sup>54</sup> that exclusive modern dress had on his productions by the 'eclectic theatre of expediency as practised by the Elizabethans'.<sup>55</sup>

The eclecticism of these productions was also reflected in the music: 'Snatches of classical music – a Bach organ toccata, a Handel Coronation anthem – and sometimes the striking of Big Ben introduced the scenes' concerning the English court.<sup>56</sup> Conversely, scenes featuring the rebels 'were introduced by urgent, strident, modern music'.<sup>57</sup> The English Shakespeare Company's refusal to

offer a 'traditional' and homogenous take on Shakespeare's history plays appealed to new audiences. As the theatre critic Dominic Cavendish puts it:

For a schoolboy who had mainly encountered Shakespeare in iffy school productions or hunched dutifully over texts in stuffy classrooms, the trilogy was a revelation. Words freighted with scholastic anxiety became the stuff of lucid, boisterous intercourse. Names that sat flatly on the page were given full-bodied life: here was Prince Hal (played by ESC co-founder Michael Pennington) in jeans and neck-scarf, sipping coffee, swigging beer; here was a punk Pistol, sporting 'Hal's Angel' on his jacket and a swastika tattoo, a gun-toting liability.<sup>58</sup>

### A Purposeful Disjunction

For Cavendish, Bogdanov's productions thus 'brought home the bellicosity both of the eighties and the plays'.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, the audiences' imaginations were freed by the productions' use of 'simple settings (by Chris Dyer)', which 'suggested locations by the use of minimal properties, hangings, scaffolding, and a movable bridge which provided an upper acting area'.<sup>60</sup> In this respect, the productions adhered closely to the texts by relying largely on Shakespeare's verbal scenery.

The English Shakespeare Company's production of *Henry V* was also eclectic and relevant to modern audiences, with Henry's troops dressed for Ulster or the Falklands. James N. Loehlin suggests that:

Bogdanov's interpretive approach for *Henry V* actually had two layers: he physically updated the production to suggest links with contemporary society and events, and he morally and politically updated it to force the audience to evaluate actions according to contemporary standards. The first level of updating served Bogdanov in two ways. First, it provided clarity for his young, unsophisticated target audience through recognizable modern reference points: Henry's council of war is like a board meeting, the French are effete, wine-drinking snobs, Pistol is a biker. Second, Bogdanov's updating provided a kind of dramatic excitement and entertainment of its own, calling attention to its own cleverness through the disjunction of the modern image and the antiquated language it supported.<sup>61</sup>

Loehlin's observation that Bogdanov's emphasis on contemporary events helped to illuminate Shakespeare's text for younger audience members echoes Cavendish's recollections above. Bogdanov was able to introduce Shakespeare to new audiences as a writer whose political and ideological arguments were at home in the 1980s, and indeed any preceding era. For instance, MacDonald P. Jackson observes that through a mixture of 'costuming, scenery, and props, Bogdanov ransacks the whole twentieth century and much of the nineteenth for parallels to the era of war, political intrigue, and civil unrest'.<sup>62</sup> For Jackson, 'the whole kaleidoscope of battle and power politics' in Bogdanov's production 'images a nation's, not to say a world's, history', and the blend of 'high-minded patriotic fervour and thuggish jingoism nearly catches the play's ambivalence'.<sup>63</sup>

Bogdanov drew parallels between battle and 'chanting football hooligans bound for the European Cup Final', thereby demonstrating that 'while arenas change, patterns of behaviour persist and historical processes recur'.<sup>64</sup> The production's depiction of war fused numerous provocative images in the director's mind: 'The last night of the Proms, the troops getting the blessing at Portsmouth, football fury'.<sup>65</sup> Such 'contrasts and oppositions created by setting, costume and stage business' – wrote Andrew Rissik in a review article in 1987 – 'force us to watch historical violence, greed, and avarice with the critical alertness we would bring naturally to a contemporary subject'.<sup>66</sup>

Greenblatt sees Henry V as being 'almost single-handedly responsible for a war' that causes 'immense civilian misery',<sup>67</sup> asserting that Henry 'deftly registers every nuance of royal hypocrisy, ruthlessness, and bad faith, but . . . does so in the context of celebration'.<sup>68</sup> For Bogdanov, Henry's war does not provide cause for celebration; rather it 'has decimated a land, a people, and its culture'.<sup>69</sup> It is 'a war of political expediency' that 'was won more by luck than judgement'.<sup>70</sup> It is a war comparable to those that took place during Thatcher and Tony Blair's regimes, the latter leading to 'the slaughter

of thousands of innocent Iraqi civilians. When big men fight it is the little who get caught in the crossfire'.<sup>71</sup>

The violence of Henry's reign was accentuated in Bogdanov's production in such moments as when Henry orders his soldiers to kill their prisoners. The prompt book for this production provides a harrowing stage direction suggestive of a war crime: 'C. cuts Solds Throat; Throws him off DSL'. Furthermore, lines that could be interpreted as endorsing Hal's character transformation and his actions in war, such as Exeter's speech, 'As we his subjects have in wonder found' (*HV*, II, iv, 135), are marked for deletion, thus emphasizing Henry as a vindictive ruler who will 'make your Paris Louvre shake' (II, iv, 132).

The jingoistic moment in which John Price's Pistol enters, singing 'Bluebirds over the White Cliffs of Dover', seems bitterly ironic in this context. As the director asserts: 'Imperialism encourages jingoism. So the Falklands. So Agincourt'.<sup>72</sup> In his portrayal, Pennington regarded Henry as a character with 'chilly political clear-sightedness', whose 'violence becomes legalized and heroic when he becomes the implacable Warrior King'.<sup>73</sup> Unfortunately, as Leonard Tennenhouse has pointed out, this warrior's triumph, gained at the expense of civilian lives, is temporary, because 'he alone embodies the contradictions that can bring disruption into the service of the State and make a discontinuous political process appear as a coherent moment'. Thus the Epilogue reminds 'the Elizabethan audience that the very marriage which secured the peace with France' also 'led to the Wars of the Roses'.<sup>74</sup>

### 'The Wars of the Roses'

In 1987 the English Shakespeare Company added *Richard II*, all three *Henry VI* plays, and *Richard III* to their repertoire, touring worldwide for two years. In the first play, the 'politically incompetent' king,<sup>75</sup> a mere 'petty tyrant' engaged in 'slashing the fabric of his society',<sup>76</sup> was outfoxed by the savvy Bolingbroke, whose violent tendencies (like his son's) were given emphasis, such as in the



moment that Bushy spits at him, only to receive a blow to the stomach. As Bogdanov muses: 'Once force is used, where does it stop?'<sup>77</sup>

The onstage violence depicted in these productions showed little signs of subsiding with the addition of the frequently bloody *Henry VI* texts and *Richard III*. Although, historically, the Wars of the Roses took place between 1455 and 1487, Bogdanov's productions drew unmistakable parallels with modern society. For instance, Jackson notes that Queen Margaret 'has a hairdo and manner that bring to mind a more recent iron lady also named Margaret'.<sup>78</sup>

We might recall the controversy discussed earlier concerning the onstage depiction of Trump. As Randall Martin puts it: 'Faced

with' Thatcher's 'open contempt for the performing arts and her government's funding cuts', the English Shakespeare Company 'could not resist satirizing the she-warrior of the Falklands through Margaret of Anjou, and for some critics and spectators, this political analogy was justifiably timely and appropriate'.<sup>79</sup> Thus in Bogdanov's view, the 'fractious rivalry and petty squabbling' of the York and Lancaster houses mirrored the 'Conservative and Labour parties', and the 'lack of belief in collective achievement' evinced by these houses and parties 'paved the way for both Richard III and Margaret Thatcher'.<sup>80</sup>

Bogdanov was determined to show that, under Thatcher's government, the 'lessons of history' went 'continually unlearned',<sup>81</sup> and





Bogdanov's production of *Richard III*. Opposite page: Charles Dale's Richmond in combat with Andrew Jarvis's Richard. Above: Richmond addresses the nation at the play's conclusion. Photos © Laurence Burns/ArenaPAL.

that 'the decline of Britain in the fifteenth century mirrors that of the twentieth', as 'internecine squabbles have riven our two political parties'.<sup>82</sup>

The English Shakespeare Company 'subjected' the *Henry VI* texts 'to some adaptation but nothing drastic'.<sup>83</sup> Lines were interpolated by Bogdanov in order to clarify the complex plot, such lines being referred to as 'Bogspeare' by members of the company.<sup>84</sup> The character of Sir William Lucy (portrayed by John Darrell), who plays a largely choric role in the text, was thus expanded and integrated more fully into the play's action. The annotated script kept at the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust assigns him lines intended for characters such as Talbot and Bedford, and rather than featuring in only three scenes, as he does in the text, his was a role 'riddled with quick changes'.<sup>85</sup>

Lucy's primary purpose in the text is 'to foreshadow that the factious English nobility, not the might of France, will be responsible for the loss of the dead king's French

conquests'.<sup>86</sup> By integrating the character into the play's action, the company avoided this partisan interpretation of England's losses, articulated by Lucy as choric authority.<sup>87</sup>

### An 'Umbilical Cord' to the Present

Bogdanov also embraced the protean quality of Joan la Pucelle (played by Francesca Ryan) by balancing 'the English belief in Joan as a divinely inspired saviour'.<sup>88</sup> The production therefore evaded the jingoistic faith in England's superiority exemplified throughout this play, and it is worth noting that 'the general, late sixteenth-century attitude toward' Joan 'had no love for a character who is Catholic, French, and a woman'.<sup>89</sup>

Unlike in the original text, no devils appeared to Joan in this production. Rather than portraying a categorically divine or supernatural figure, Ryan's Joan countered 'the imperial depiction of war' as a 'one-woman independence movement whose

spirit reflected Bogdanov's own wish to redefine English nationalism'.<sup>90</sup> Joan defied the toxic masculinity of the imperialist English soldiers, although she eventually fell victim to 'necklacing' (as opposed to being burned at the stake) by having a rubber tyre forced around her chest and arms, in an image reminiscent of the summary executions performed by supporters of Winnie Mandela.

Thatcher was the first British Prime Minister in over twenty years to host an apartheid head of state, having met P. W. Botha in June 1984, and thus could be seen at the time as potentially colluding with the apartheid government. Richard Dowden argues that Thatcher 'helped end apartheid – despite herself', and 'she opposed apartheid more on the grounds that it was a sin against economic liberalism rather than a crime against humanity. She also was bitterly against sanctions of any sort – they were a crime against free trade.'<sup>91</sup>

Another victim in Bogdanov's production took the form of a peasant French woman, who was raped offstage following Talbot's death. The English Shakespeare Company therefore provided a harrowing account of war in relation to the brutality routinely seen on television news, including events taking place under the apartheid government of South Africa.

Bogdanov believed that theatre should 'have both an umbilical cord to the street and reflect the day's headlines'.<sup>92</sup> The interpretation of the rebellious Jack Cade in the second part of the trilogy provided just such 'an umbilical cord'.<sup>93</sup> Pennington's Cade, with his 'spiky red hair and a Union Jack vest',<sup>94</sup> and his followers represented 'today's dumbed-down yob culture'.<sup>95</sup> Bogdanov noted that 'Europe certainly doesn't believe such groups could never take over the country',<sup>96</sup> and he could discern a real threat in figures who appeal to a 'patriotic, xenophobic fear of foreigners'.<sup>97</sup> The depiction of Cade thus 'combined punk imagery with National Front style politics'.<sup>98</sup>

Bogdanov believed that 'Thatcher would have loved' the 'drink-sodden, totem-twirling . . . Doc Martened' figure of Cade,

and that he would have become 'Home Secretary in no time'.<sup>99</sup> Paradoxically, the director also compared the Cade insurrection to 'the Kent miners' of the 1980s, who 'were the last to capitulate' in the face of pit closures under Thatcher's regime.<sup>100</sup> He also associated the rebels with football fans involved in the Heysel Stadium disaster on 29 May 1985, in which Liverpool and Juventus supporters were injured and killed during a confrontation.<sup>101</sup>

The popular revolt of 1450 therefore seems to have offered a curious mixture of parallels for Bogdanov, which meant that the presentation of these insurrectionists deriving from Kent and nearby counties, choreographed by Malcolm Ranson (with Charles Dale as Fight Captain), was open to interpretation by Bogdanov as analogous to street brawls or football hooliganism in that dustbin lids and chains were occasionally used as weapons, ensuring that associations in audience members' minds were highly likely to be modern and provocative.

### Richard III and Thatcher as Machiavels

As we have seen, Bogdanov associated the ruthless Machiavel, Richard III, with Thatcher. As depicted by the English Shakespeare Company, his was an even crueller regime than those of Henry IV and Henry V, highlighted in the production's prompt book by such directions as 'kick him in the face U/R' when Clarence is murdered, and the cutting of Hastings's throat immediately before the interval.

Bogdanov acknowledged Richard as the 'quintessential man of action'.<sup>102</sup> As Tennenhouse puts it, Richard is able to 'ride into power', for 'these chronicle history plays demonstrate . . . that authority goes to that contender who can seize hold of the symbols and signs legitimizing authority and wrest them from his rivals', thereby 'making them serve his own interests'. However, Richard, like his predecessors, must 'struggle vainly in order to remain' in power.<sup>103</sup>

In an interview with Charles Grimes for the 1988 *Hong Kong Festival Souvenir Book*, the director echoes Tennenhouse when he

describes *Richard III* as 'the ultimate political power play – the Nixon, Thatcher, Reagan play . . . the surge to power, the clinging tenaciously to the throne'.<sup>104</sup> Interestingly, the production suggested at the end a successful election result for Henry Richmond rather than a victorious battle. As Jackson notes:

Three monitors screen Richmond's image in a head-and-shoulders close-up while the new leader delivers the play's last speech as a prepared newscast to the nation.<sup>105</sup>

Bogdanov's production, with its very modern conclusion requiring, as the prompt book reads, the 'full company for TV studios', thus seemed to offer hope for those who opposed Thatcher's Conservative government. A new Prime Minister would one day address the nation.

The fact that Bogdanov's history plays presented 'a sort of chronology' in terms of costume, progressing from 'Regency period to modern',<sup>106</sup> meant that *Richard III* offered perhaps the most striking correlations with the Conservative government as a result of its up-to-date setting (with the exception of medieval armour being worn in the final confrontation between Jarvis's Richard and Dale's Richmond). And in this production Richmond was not divinely appointed to end the bloodshed initiated by Richard II's deposition and murder, as Tillyard had argued in 1944.<sup>107</sup> Whereas Tillyard's theory that Shakespeare's plays advanced the Tudor myth deeply influenced Hall and Barton's interpretation of Shakespeare's first tetralogy for the RSC, Bogdanov rejected this interpretation in favour of a more humanist approach to Shakespeare's characters and politics.

Bogdanov pointed out that Shakespeare 'analyzed the political and social quicksands of his own time, reflecting what he saw as iniquitous and scurrilous'.<sup>108</sup> This observation encapsulates how the director interpreted Shakespeare for the modern stage. He transferred Shakespeare's observations on the political climate of his age to the 1980s, while highlighting parallels between the English history plays and events occurring

throughout the centuries, in order to demonstrate that the lessons of history continue to be ignored.

As a result, his iconoclastic productions enabled Shakespeare to breathe again, to appeal to modern audiences, and in an authorial and political sense to be, as Ben Jonson puts it in the eulogy appearing in the 1623 First Folio, 'not of an age, but for all time',<sup>109</sup> even if that meant 'wresting contemporary meaning out of Shakespeare regardless of whether or not' these 'readings were historically authentic'.<sup>110</sup> As Jarvis and Drakakis aptly put it:

Bogdanov was a revolutionary, who challenged the settled proprieties of theatre in a manner that forced a rethinking of the 'myth' of 'Shakespeare', at the same time that it sought to instil a new kind of respect for the social truths that the texts could be made to express.<sup>111</sup>

In many respects Bogdanov was ahead of his time: the linkages observed by theatre critics between characters such as Queen Margaret and political figures like Thatcher anticipate the kind of biting satire displayed in the Public Theater's production of *Julius Caesar* in 2017. It seems fair to claim that Bogdanov's contributions to political theatre are as enduring and relevant today as when the English Shakespeare Company's productions were first performed.

## Notes and References

1. I am grateful to the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust for funding my research in the form of the Louis Marder Shakespeare Centre Scholarship. I am also indebted to Paul Edmondson, Stanley Wells, Andrew Jarvis, Laurence Burns, Madeleine Cox, and Philippa Vandome for their assistance and correspondence during the course of this project.

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