correspondents at large

Interview with Jonathan Kent

FIONA MACINTOSH

Fiona Macintosh: I'd like to begin by asking whether it is significant that you've worked with Greek tragedy and with opera and whether your work with one has fed into your work with the other.

Jonathan Kent: Of course, there is an epic dimension to opera, which is useful for Greek tragedy. I've also done musicals, and I think *Oedipus* is a sort of musical, and one has to find ways of integrating song and language as you have to in musicals—less so in opera, obviously, because it's sung through. I did *Oedipus* with a chorus of fifteen. When I did *Medea* and when I did *Hecuba*, there were financial constraints, frankly. We did *Medea* with a chorus of three. For *Hecuba* they could only afford one, which is not ideal. But then what excited me about going to the National Theatre to do *Oedipus* was the opportunity to work with a really large and proper-sized chorus. I'm interested by crowd and by the way a mass of people, while retaining individuality, also have to be part of a corporate whole, and that's one of the things that particularly fascinated me about doing *Oedipus*. I worked with the composer Jonathan Dove, and the translator was Frank McGuinness. What we did, or what I was very keen to do, was move seamlessly from language into song and back into text and try and find a way of not changing gear, so that the music would seem an emotional extension of language. I've had the opportunity with opera of working with a chorus, but it's very interesting to use it in a theatrical environment.

Macintosh: I think it felt very much like a community voice with your *Oedipus*.

Kent: In *Oedipus* that was what I very much wanted: this group of men reflecting the crisis of the situation, and they were onstage throughout—that was also important. They were absolutely party and witness to the event.

Macintosh: I'm curious why you chose *Oedipus*—presumably around 2007, when it was staged at the National. Was it a commission from the then artistic director, Nick Hytner?

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Kent: No, no, no . . . Ralph Fiennes and I suggested it to Nick Hytner, and he was very happy to do it. Unlike *Hecuba*, which was very much a reflection of the time in which it was done—it was after the Iraq war, and I felt this is a play that speaks of the collateral damage of war more acutely than almost any play I know—*Oedipus* was because Ralph and I, who have worked together a lot (six or seven times) . . . well, I was very keen for him to play it, and he was too. So really the choice was focused on the performance rather than the time of the play.

Macintosh: So you're saying it was the actor who dictated the play. Clare Higgins, who was obviously an extraordinary Hecuba, returned as Jocasta at the National Theatre. Is that how you like to work?

Kent: I very much like working with people over and over again. You arrive at a sort of shorthand and a sort of trust, which I think is very productive. You can short-circuit a lot of sniffing each other in a way one does with new acquaintances or new collaborations.

Macintosh: We've mentioned already that the chorus, the choral voice, in your *Oedipus* felt as if it were part of a community, and in that sense the production felt political. But at the same time you did something bold in making Clare Higgins into a very alluring and very real, sensual Jocasta.

Kent: That was important. I'm ashamed to say I've never seen *Oedipus* apart from my own production. I don't know why. I've seen film versions of it but never onstage. But I think it has to be about desire, fatal desire, as much as anything else.

Macintosh: You've mentioned that your *Hecuba* was very of the moment. What about *Medea*?

Kent: It was a very interesting oddity in that it began at the Almeida and was simply for the Almeida, a small, three-hundred-seat theater. But the Almeida is an epic space in miniature, which is why it can accommodate plays like *Medea*. A year later, we redid it in the West End, and it was an unlikely play to fill the Wyndham's for three or four months and even more unlikely to go to an eight- or nine-hundred-seat theater on Broadway and fill that. I think that's what's so astonishing about these plays, that they're not of some esoteric interest. They are the lifeblood of drama. It's not just that they've filled our culture; they formed us, and we understand them in ways which spread across any narrow education or interest. These are great universal plays which speak to us just as acutely as I assume they did when they were first done, and that's what's moving and thrilling about doing them. Of course, it's always important to have contemporary versions or translations of them. What you don't want is for these plays to disappear behind the veil of historicist re-creation. The danger of that is they become medicinal—they're good for you—rather than speaking directly to you. I'm sure I'm saying the obvious, but it's important to do them so that there is a direct connection with the audience and the plays.

Macintosh: I'm interested in your interpretation of *Medea* at the time. In the early eighties in particular, Medea had been discovered in a number of provocative productions as someone who could speak for what was then a London very conscious of its multicultural members and of the disenfranchised in general. But your production made a very interesting other contribution: Diana Rigg as a cerebral Medea. This was maybe again what we were seeing in your Hecuba, a really interesting study of revenge.

Kent: Revenge, yes. And also obviously of women . . . disempowered women. That was the important element, I think, for Diana and for me. The rage and the sense of injustice in *Medea*, with the terrible destructive consequence.

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Macintosh: Absolutely. And it transferred unexpectedly, as you said, from a small venue into the West End and, I think, was the first of the major exports (particularly of an ancient play) to New York.

Kent: Yes. And there'd been Olivier's *Oedipus* in the forties, but not much before. Fiona Shaw did *Medea* later, which was a very good production. But I think because we were lucky enough to be the first, it was an astonishing response. What used to hearten me about America was that people would stay in the auditorium afterwards and argue about the rights of women. *Medea* became a play about what rights a woman has over not only herself but also her children; it became a contemporary play, which I was absolutely thrilled by.

Macintosh: One of the things I remember, and I think anyone who saw it would find unforgettable, is how you used the extraordinary metal set, which clanged and crashed so expressively in the production.

Kent: It was a steel edifice which went right up to the flies . . . a sort of courtyard of this great steel edifice. Sheets of metal eight foot by four formed the carapace, and we miked them, so if you hit them, they reverberated. And at the end when Medea arrives in excelsis to wreak revenge, all the walls fell down. These walls came pounding down. She was left against a sky, having brought the world down. That was something you have to find a way of translating. It was absolutely not what the Greeks would have wanted or expected, but I think you have to find some way of eliciting interest from a contemporary audience, and I was very proud of that.

Macintosh: I once heard you say—maybe it's particularly relevant to what you just said—that you come from a family of architects, and clearly in that production the design was essential.

Kent: I do come from a family of architects. Well, actually, I came to the UK (I grew up in South Africa) to be a painter, but I became an actor for a while. When I became a director—and I have to say I was much happier directing than I ever was acting—so many elements made sense. I'd grown up with architecture, an important element if you're going to direct. The way I investigate plays is through working with a designer. . . . Directing a play, for me, is like building a house that the play can live in. It's the building of the house that tells me about the play. So this ferocious interior for *Medea*, this hard, unyielding interior, seemed very important. But when I came to *Hecuba*, half the set was water. Polydorus at the very beginning—as I'm sure you all know, the ghost of Polydorus—arrives, and he rose up out of the water.

Macintosh: That was a genuine coup de théâtre, quite extraordinary. Could you tell us how you did it?

Kent: Well, the back of the set was the land sloping down into water, and the front of the set was all water. Eddie Redmayne, who has now gone on to very starry stuff, was Polydorus. The water went under the set, and he would sink down into the water, swim underneath the lip of the land, and then come up out of the water on the other side. It was testing for him, poor boy. But I thought it was important because in *Hecuba* nothing is certain, which is what I find so interesting about it. Your protagonist elicits sympathy, and then she elicits terror. No lines are straight through water, and water seemed a very important element in an exploration of the morality of the piece.

Macintosh: You said at the beginning of our conversation that what was wonderful about working on *Oedipus* was that you had a chorus, that you were in a rather privileged theater sector with the resources to allow you more than one or three chorus members. In an ideal world where you had the resources and so on, is there a Greek play you would like to work on?

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Kent: I was going to do *Oedipus at Colonus*, which is the supreme chorus piece, and then we were going to put it with *Oedipus*, but I don't know if we will. But that was something I was very interested in.

Macintosh: It's a play many people would shy away from. Could you expand on that?

Kent: I'd like particularly to try and make that chorus work. It's a great lament for life, the most heartbreaking play. But it resides so much in the music and the chorus, so it's a question of how to make that work. I'd be fascinated to try and do that.

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