

**Martin Wylde, Theatre Director  
in interview with Lorna Hardwick  
Milton Keynes, 15<sup>th</sup> February 2000**

- LH Martin, I'd like to ask you about the performance of the *Odyssey* which toured from the Gate Theatre in Autumn 1999 and which you directed. Can you tell us, when you initially had the idea of Staging the *Odyssey*, how did you set about selecting the parts of the poem that were going to be used?
- MW What happened was when Mick Gordon, who is the Artistic Director there at the moment, took over at the Gate, we met each other at the National Studio a few months before and got on quite well, and he asked me to come in and he gave me that very unusual brief for a director which was 'What would you like to do?' A completely blank canvas which doesn't come about very often. I was keen at the time to try and do a Greek play, it was just a period that I had never really worked on before but which interested me and so then it was about setting about to find which play or piece to do. So I had spent two or three months reading lots of Greek plays in translation and Greek poems and decided that the *Odyssey* was something that interested me and it was really the narrative of it that I thought was a fantastic story. So I'd read different versions of a poem and also a couple of the already existing stage versions like Derek Walcott's. And I thought it was a story that appealed to me, for several reasons really. Whenever I do a piece I want it to have some sort of contemporary relevance to the here and now, but that doesn't mean that when we finally do the play that we'll set it in the here and now but I think it has got to say something to us today, and I think there were several things in the *Odyssey* which interested me. Firstly, was the portrayal of a particular family, a family where a father has been away for twenty years and comes back and finds a mother and son who have lived without him for that period time. The son since he was a baby, and the mother has looked after that kingdom in his absence, and has had all sorts of pressures to do with relationships from outside and that seemed very relevant to a society today where families seem to be revisited really, or the structure of families today seems to be rather up for grabs. Those clearly defined roles are changing. So there seems to be a connection there which I found fascinating. I thought it was a really good yarn as well, I thought it was a very good story. Without wanting to focus on this too much, there was a sort of millennial feel to a journey home and a vast journey which was of self discovery as much ... there was an internal journey of self-discovery as much as the epic journey itself. So that was what initially attracted me to the story and after I had read these things and I went back to chat to Mick and we agreed that it was a good piece. We had originally before that both sort of agreed that we would both like to do a tour. The Gate hadn't done one for several years; I was interested in classics – touring on the small to medium scale. I didn't feel that there were companies doing that, I didn't feel that people outside of London and the big cities were having access to those stories which I thought were important to be heard. So when I was searching for a piece I did roughly in my mind have the idea of trying to create a small or medium scale tour which also meant that we had to have a diminutive size cast and that the production values were also going to be to an extent self-determining. So that was the initial condition... conditions under which it came about. At that point I had to look for a writer to write this adaptation. I was keen to do it in verse.
- LH Why was that?
- MW Partly because a lot of my background is in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama and I have this sort of theory that for any English drama, iambic pentameter is the best form for it and I was quite interested to see whether we could take a piece which had been written in a different verse structure, and written as an epic poem, and then put that into play form. And whether at the end of that process I really still believed that iambic pentameter is the best.
- LH So, actually having verse was crucial to you in trying to transfer the epic genre onto the stage?
- MW Most definitely. I'm very much part of .... I guess a school of a type, which thinks that realism really is better than film on TV but theatre strengths are feelings which are somewhat more

heightened, even when those are on an initial glance realistic and that verse form was part of the heightening of a piece for me, part of that epic nature. And I was quite insistent from the start that we would do this in verse. And it was also part of the adaptation process for me, and also I hope for Peter who eventually wrote it was, if we we're doing an epic poem, then our stage adaptation would benefit from the extra created heightening by having verse form in the writing for that as well. [Ed's note: Peter Oswald]

LH At that point, had you decided what part of the poem to focus on? I mean the Walcott version for instance covered the whole poem, whereas yours didn't.

MW No. I did.... I was particularly interested in that personal journey and the element of that family so I did bring that to it. But really in a more concrete form which didn't need to be chosen but came when me and Peter, the author of the adaptation, started having conversations between us.

LH So to what extent were you, as it were, collaborating directly with the writer to produce the version to be performed? Were actors involved in that as well?

MW There was a strong collaboration between Peter and myself which I'll try and describe in broad terms how that came about. I'd heard another of Peter's adaptations of *Oedipus* which was performed in the dark at Battersea Arts Centre where his play was performed with a live cast and audience but in completely pitch black surroundings. And I went along to that, thinking well, isn't this just a radio play? I discovered that it really wasn't because they used guide ropes so that they stationed and shifted the actors but it did focus very clearly on the words. So I knew something of Peter's work from that time and I'd also seen other plays both original and adaptations of non-Greek work that he'd done before so I knew Peter's work. So I approached him and said I'd like to do this production of *Odyssey*, it's going to be at the Gate, and I want to do a tour – is this a piece that interests you? And he did, he liked the idea and jumped at it and thought it would be very interesting project to work on. Once he'd agreed then, in principle to that he went away and read a few versions of the *Odyssey*, as did I, and then we met back for about a day or so and we started kicking around ideas, you know, bounced them between us. The first thing we decided was which version... which translation of *Odyssey* we would base our adaptation from, because neither of us could go back to the Greek original, neither of us read Greek, so we had to base our version on another version. We'd read several, and we did use several but the one which became our, sort of, key Bible for making this adaptation was Richmond Lattimore's, which itself was in verse which we basically agreed to use as our main....

LH And that's very much a line-by-line treatment rather than a free version.

MW Yes. It's a line-by-line treatment but it *is* written in verse form so it's not literal - in that sense, if you can have a literal translation. So that's what we used as our starting block. The practical limitation of our tour meant that we could only have a cast of about half-a-dozen. And also the traditions and genres we wanted to draw on, meant that we were quite keen to have a small cast in line with many of the Greek tragedies. So we decided on a cast number and so we started allocating key parts and which parts were vital for them to be in and which parts weren't. Once we'd done that, we then started on this question of what we want in and what don't we need. I think it was Peter that originally came up with saying, well actually we're interested in the personal relationships of this family so why not concentrate on what happens on Ithaca? The bit of the story which most people know, even if it's only a children's book of stories, tends to be the adventures on the seas bit. While that's fascinating, that... as we saw it at the time... really is a metaphor for the personal journey that Odysseus goes on. So we fairly quickly agreed on that as a format... we'd start from where Odysseus arrived back at Ithaca but we would tell the story of his return, his meeting with his family and with the suitors and we would only refer to the adventures that happened beforehand and then only as a metaphor for the personal journey that Odysseus went on. So that was the where, when and how the key selection of the material came about. From then on what would happen was that Peter would go away and write a drama which he would then send me, and I would have no involvement in that. Then I would send back, sort of, notes and ideas on three or four pages of paper about what I thought, what changes, that maybe we could do this or that and then Peter would go and write another draft, and so there was... that was the way it, sort of evolved. There was one.... after about the second draft he had a play of about 130 or 40 pages long and there was a major cutting round and slight changing about and

that was the key point where I'd saw something in how he was writing the chorus which I wanted to pick up on. The bits of the chorus which were working, as far as I was concerned, were the bits which were internal manifestations of Odysseus' turmoil, rather than external comments of people watching.

LH Because using a chorus in staging Epic is a new convention isn't it? You're using a convention from fifth-century tragedy and transplanting that into a different situation. Why did you decide to do that?

MW This was a choice which Peter and I both agreed on from the outset which is that there is no point in doing an adaptation where you try and reproduce conventions, because conventions can never be reproduced because the cultural situations in which they are used will not be the same. But what we were interested in was on drawing on lots of different conventions from different places and using them today to create interesting drama and that meant sometimes clawing against conventions, sometimes deliberately breaking them, sometimes pointing them up. So our conventions were a mixed barrel which came from a lot of places. We were interested in Greek and Epic, and that's why we used poetry, but that poetry has as much to do with the verse dramas of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama as it did the verse of Homer's poems. The Chorus was not like the Greek chorus in some sense but what we're saying is that it was expressionistic. What we were seeing in our play was the inward arguments that were going on in Odysseus' mind. In a way there were two choruses in our production. There were the chorus that wore the masks and which were inside Odysseus but also the actors when they were not directly playing a part in the play were sitting watching the play and in some ways that chorus was more like a traditional Greek chorus of people watching and being seen to watch. So there were two different types of choruses going on at once and the conventions that we used for that, we used masks, but the masks weren't traditional Greek masks, we used half-masks. Actually we used see-through masks which were just layers of gauze so that you could see the actors' face behind that mask. That was partly a practical thing, a way of making speaking easy using the mask. But we also, when we were rehearsing, the chorus was formed out of both individuals and a collective. When the person spoke as a chorus they were speaking for the whole group as a chorus, but each individual we worked out a personal story. So that when different people played the chorus, they invested it... or came at it from a slightly different point, even when they were speaking as a collective or as an individual. So the conventions were very complex in this production and some of them were considered beforehand, and some of them evolved during the rehearsal process. It was very much a case of evolution rather than reproduction, and that was something I was very keen ... a sort of rule I'd set myself. So, when we'd passed this backwards and forwards for three or four drafts, we had a script which was more or less what we would take into the rehearsals. We had no real involvement with actors until quite a late stage, when we did just a reading at my house one evening with some of the actors from the Globe Theatre, who had just been working on Augustine's Oath, an original play based in an historical context which Peter had written for the Globe Theatre and some of the cast there came and, over a bottle of wine, read the play out loud. That was the first time me and Peter heard the play and that led to some more refinements. Then we took that play into rehearsals with a completely new set of actors. There were some minor changes during that rehearsal process, but not significant really, most of the work had been done between me and Peter beforehand. So, that was how the script developed.

LH Can I ask you now about the performance space? Obviously, if you were touring, you had to be prepared for various venues, presumably varied shapes of playing space and so on. How did that affect the way you developed the design, the movement, the relationship of the actors?

MW It's always an interactive thing. I mean, when you know what the space is, or the space isn't ..... partly you can use spaces with the production in mind, partly they are given to you and they offer opportunities and limitations. Which is quite a useful thing to have as a director because they help make decisions and they inform and actually if you have too much freedom sometimes chaos comes out of it, so to have a set of limitations is good. We were going to small scale venues, and the set had to be got in, and got out very quickly some of them we were only doing one night performances. So the set had to be simple, it had to go in the back of a Luton van, two stage managers had to put it up and take it down. Because it was at the Gate Theatre which is a fringe theatre with not a lot of funding, even in theatre

terms not a lot of funding, we had a very, very tight budget for the set. So all of these were limitations, but all of these provided us with opportunities. What Peter and I decided on was that we would like a set that very much would cross the boundaries between men and men as it were. We wanted to create a feel of a space which was fairly neutral which could be transformed by words and light, which felt that it came from a Greek place as we understand it now. So we're not saying that this is a place that actually existed, but just our understanding of which came from the words. And what we came to was something which was a beige colour which could both be stone and sand which had elements at times of a building that could be lit so that it was outside and also said to be a neutral space. Part of having this second chorus of the actors watching it was given to us because of the touring different venues have different actors and actresses it's a lot easier if you have people there on stage a lot of the time. So there is a practical drive to that as well as a desire for me to see them watching. So the design evolved partly from the text, where it should always start I think, but also from some of those limitations. The only two divine areas that we had, was that we had a podium which was Athene's "home" in inverted commas, and that was because we didn't want to try and pretend that the goddess was anything other than a goddess. We were up there in a world where gods and goddesses existed and walked and talked. One of the interesting play on conventions was the relationship between Athene, who was a real goddess, and the chorus who existed only in Odysseus' mind – what relationship there was between the two of them – and the actress playing Athene played the chorus at key points in the play. So what wanted was something that began in the period but wasn't locked in it. The way we hoped to achieve that was that a lot of the set was lined with metal, just to try to get that modern context and to cross those period boundaries.

LH And you had the symbolic objects – you had the oar and Odysseus' bow.

MW Yes, these were key objects. I think the oar was my idea and I just wanted.... It was part of that journey ... and I wanted it very much to be present on the stage the entire time. And that was partly because of where we decided to end the piece, which was my attempt to leave it open. To have it both ways really, to have an opening and a closure at the same time.... that this goes on but it is also at an end. The bow was a very practical one really, because that's a scene.... well there are all sorts of things when as a director you read that piece you decide you want to do it and you go Oh, no, how am I going to stage that? Dead dogs came to mind and we avoided that one, completely. The oar and the bow both had a symbolic presence and the bow perhaps was also for the scene where Odysseus was tested.

LH You decided not to pursue that aftermath of that scene, you know, the cleansing of the house after the death of the suitors, and the hanging of the serving maids, and so on, which were such a feature of Walcott's adaptation for instance. Why did you decide to leave that out?

MW You know, it's such a great piece you could argue for everything to be included and to some extent it's just where do you draw the line. Partly because the maids and servants didn't appear elsewhere so to try and suddenly bring them in because this is a dramatic scene, would somehow pull against the story we had just told which was about the family and with that in mind, we only ever saw one of the suitors in our production as well, even though ... (you could argue he was another chorus again) ... he acted as a representative of the whole group of suitors. Partly because what we'd also done was, at the beginning we'd used the same space, the same location on stage to be the spot for both fire and water. And I'd used the cleansing of the house as a sort of pre-show in the play, where people had washed and cleansed there. You may say it's at the wrong part in the piece, but I sort of felt that I had covered that ground and that the fire was representative for a real fire. It was also a symbolic fire for both Athene and the Chorus as well. So we'd covered that cleansing and purification before. And also because we did actually twist and change the story and a few key points. One which we changed during the actual production run. Early on in the production run we ... there had been a bit where Odysseus had killed Antinoos, just purely strangled him to death on the stage. Later on in the run we decided that Athene was going to be present, which isn't written in the poem, so that death was partly caused by Athene's presence. So you may say these are subtle differences, but they were active choices to change, to change odd moments in that story because... I don't think we even had a reason for doing it.... Because it seemed the right thing to do in this story. As director we made active choices

which changed the meaning in the way we staged it and the bits we chose and so thus an adaptation and not a translation.

LH Obviously you were aiming at a wide, broad-based audience. How did you feel about the kind of audience reception and the critical reaction that the staging had?

MW I was wary of my audience. I'd guessed that what would happen was that it would essentially appeal to an older audience, plus an audience that was comprised of people studying the Classics or Theatre Studies in some way shape or form. But our audience was actually a lot wider than that, ranging from, on one occasion, ageing from about five or six to someone in their nineties. That was about as wide as you could get. I did the work because I was interested in it. I think you can sometimes try and guess too much what audiences want, or would like. But I was surprised at quite how warm a reception, how well the production sold, over the whole run – 85% I think.

LH That was very noticeable at the performance I was at, which looked virtually a sell-out.

MW 50 or 60 percent of the performances were sold out. And we've had a generally warm reception. I think, critically we had two or three, you know, two or three critical reviews we had. One review in the *Guardian* clearly didn't like the production, but most of the reviews were very, very strong for this. Although amongst that, they picked up on very different things. We'd done quite a lot of research into post-traumatic stress disorder, though we haven't labelled or hit it on the head, or put it in a modern context some critical reviewers concentrated entirely on that. Some criticised the fact that we weren't doing a literal adaptation. Criticism came from very different perspectives that was largely very positive. The reviews, definitely in London, helped us out in the production there. We had, sort of, 'Critics Choice' in *Time Out* and a lot of favourable reviews in a lot of broad-sheets as well. And the reality today is that those help sell tickets.

LH It seems that there is a great revival of interest in Greek material in the theatre over the last few years. Do you think there are particular resonances which people feel now for Greek material? How do you account for that?

MW I don't know that I do think that there's a particular... I think there's an affinity for stories which are told well and which a certain sort of universality in a broader sense which is about how people react to different situations .... particularly those which have got strong emotional drive to them, and which to that extent are universal. I think that there is just a re-appraisal... I think there is a lot of searching for any good writing going on, wherever that comes from. It's interesting that these things tend to be cyclical in my experience . So at the time this particular production came out there was also the *Oresteia* going on at the National, and *Antigone* going on at the Old Vic. Both of which projects.... you know, I know the people, the directors involved but we'd come up with these projects completely separately, and we weren't aware until well into our own individual processes that had been going on. I think you'll find that there'll be a few years gap where there's relatively little Greek work going on and then it'll come around again. And I think that this is ... some of this is ... to do with context. You know, if a war becomes particularly significant and then there are plays which are to do with war, then they are likely to be brought up again. I think you'll find that that's cyclical. And also because audiences like to see something new or different for them. So if there hasn't been a Greek play on for a few years.... they'll suddenly go 'it would be great to see a Greek play'. And then once they've had five or six Greek plays that they've seen, they'll all go 'God, I don't want to see a Greek play again, I want to go and see a new play', you know, and then there is an element of fashion.

LH As far as your own work is concerned, are there other Greek plays or poetry that you would be interested in working with.

MW There's lots which I find interesting. I'd like to do this play again at some point, because I still think there is stuff to uncover in this play. I think Peter's done.... has written a very interesting text. I find the Oedipus myths fascinating, I'd quite like to do something with them at some point. I find *Electra* quite interesting, the *Oresteia* is interesting. But when I'll come around to working on them again, I don't know at the moment. But in the next year or so..... I haven't got any plans in the foreseeable future to do a Greek piece, but I will do one in the future.

LH So, for the next year or so, what are the current projects.

- MW I'm going to be directing *Desire Under the Elms* by Eugene O'Neill. Which is interesting actually, because there are a few Greek resonances in the tragic structure of that play. He also wrote *Mourning Becomes Electra* with its obvious Greek influences. So, maybe there is something which unconsciously in my decision at work there, which is linked to what I've just worked on. Often I think that happens. Then I'm doing a newly commissioned community play in Lincoln with a cast of hundreds, which is a very different sphere of work. And who knows after that, really? This is one of the great things about working in theatre, is that you are allowed access to so many different types of world. Much of which I wouldn't have looked at in any depth without doing the play. I can remember a couple of years ago I was assistant director on a play which was about Down's Syndrome and abortion and it was fascinating to work on that. And then I did a play set in a 1950's bus canteen and then I did a Shakespeare play. How else would you get paid to explore at such diverse world's? It's one of the aspects I love.
- LH Martin Wylde, thank you very much indeed.

[Editor's note: This interview was recorded in 2000. Subsequently, Martin Wylde did undertake further work with Greek-inspired material, notably Colin Teevan's play *Alcmaeon in Corinth*. It premiered at Live! Theatre in Newcastle (as *Cock of the North*) and is published by Oberon Books (2005). See <http://www.colinteevan.co.uk/alcamaeron.html> for further details.]