

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Grahame Morris – interview transcript

Interviewer: Laura White

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Ex-chairman of Sheffield Theatres on the rationale for their programming.

Laura White: I'd like to start by asking you about the Caryl Churchill season, programmed for June next year. It's going to be made up of three of Churchill's plays, am I right? Far Away, Fen and Cloud Nine.

Grahame Morris: That's right.

LW: My questions are, why Churchill? Why these particular plays? Both in individual terms and in terms of how you envisage them working together as a season, and why now?

GM: I don't think there are any definitive answers to any of those questions. Caryl Churchill is a major playwright and she's a rarity in this country in that she's a major female playwright. There aren't many, there are not enough. And she's a writer much admired by the creative people with whom we work here regularly, Michael Grandage, Anna Mackmin, and so on. We, as you may recall, last year, undertook a festival of the work of Peter Gill, who is another very distinguished theatre writer, perhaps less well known than Caryl Churchill. And whilst this year has been slightly different, that experience of building a festival of performances and supporting activity around the work of a major figure, a major contemporary figure, we felt was very valuable. And if you get it right those kind of festivals become greater than the sum of their parts, in terms of the impact they make, in terms of the breadth of the experiences they are able to offer. So, we felt it was right that a Caryl Churchill play should be produced here. Only one has been performed, as far as we know, in the Crucible's history over the last thirty years, which was Top Girls, which is probably her most well known play, I guess, some years ago. We wanted, in choosing the plays that we were going to do as part of this festival, to have a spread in terms of time across her career a little, so the plays come from different points in her writing career. And we were very keen to find, in the Studio in particular, a way to make the Festival financially sustainable. And we've done that by combining two plays, Fen and Far Away into a single evening, using a single creative team, and basically a single cast, as well. It will, I hope, not be too uncomfortable a way to do it, for 'the work' and the artists involved, but I am very clear that it's an unusual way to do it.

LW: So is that then, in terms of how you see it, a financial decision to put them together and not an artistic one?

GM: Not primarily an artistic decision, no.

LW: That's very interesting. You mentioned then the Peter Gill Season and that's something I'd like to ask you, the fact that you have, in this particular slot of the whole

programme, for the last couple of years you've done a 'season' of combined works. There was the new writing season last year and the Peter Gill season. I wonder if you could expand a bit on what this means to the kind of 'big picture' of Sheffield Theatres as a whole. And how perhaps you see this in terms of, what I'll call the 'flagship show', that the Crucible seems to have, which makes big press and seems to be aimed at transferring to London, I would suggest.

GM: We don't produce any shows with an aim of transferring to London, and if you were to say that to Michael Grandage you'd probably get a very rude response. If shows are successful and get picked up by a commercial producer and go to London, so much the better. But we produce the work we produce for Sheffield, and that is true of the 'flagship' projects, as you call them, as well as some of the perhaps lesser well known, or not quite so well know, plays, or companies that have worked here. Some of whom also get picked up and go to London. So, for example, World Music, Steve Walters play, new play, that was here in June of this year will be opening in the Donmar Warehouse in London in February and that's just as thrilling, if not more thrilling for us as a theatre than something like The Tempest with Derek Jacobi, which is a show that clearly has commercial potential, being taken to the Old Vic very successfully and now, we hope, onto North America as well, in the future. To have a new play like World Music taken on to a further life is very, very exciting for us. Sorry I've forgotten the rest of your question.

LW: I was suggesting, perhaps wrongly, that there seems to be two faces to Sheffield Theatres. This face that I say is about a flagship show, which definitely seems to be trying to attract a star casting in a way, and how that compares to these seasons that you are promoting, like the Caryl Churchill Season, and how that's a slightly different side to Sheffield Theatres and a less commercial side.

GM: Yeah, we're not a commercial organisation. We do not make profits. We are a subsidised organisation, and we feel that our objectives as a company are not primarily financial objectives. They are cultural and social objectives and education objectives as well, and they're very important to us. So, given the scale of this organisation, our ability to develop a number of different strands of programming is very important. We also have three stages in this organisation. The Crucible, being a very large open thrust stage, as you know, demands, at least for part of its life, demands a sort of epic quality to its work that means it is very suited to Shakespeare. You could say it would be suited to Brecht, it would be suited to large-scale epic theatre, theatre with epic themes. Not exclusively, but that is an important part of its physical identity and something that needs to be nurtured through what you've described as flagship projects. They are large-scale pieces of epic theatre and that's, I guess, how we prefer to look at them. They don't all have, they don't all come with, marquee names over the top of them. So Michael's production of A Midsummer Night's Dream, that was here in October and earlier this month, had no big names. But it was a large-scale piece of theatre out of the same kind of genre as some of the work that you were referring to. So that's one side of our work, but another side of our work is very much about contemporary theatre and very much about new work. Whether it is actually new writing, we have an active programme of commissioning and developing new work for our stages, or whether it is simply work by contemporary writers that we feel is of importance to the world in which we live. Either through the themes that it's discussing, or the ways in which it chooses to discuss those themes. New work has become increasingly important to us and new work, of course, financially is very risky. But it's not something we're going to back away from, quite the reverse, I think it will go on assuming a greater importance. You could add into an analysis of our programmes different kinds of strands. The Firework Maker's Daughter, for example, a Philip Pullman adaptation, that was on the Crucible main stage

in March of this year introduced, at least in modern times a new strand into our programme, that you might crudely call family shows. Something that people can bring their children to, and did bring their children to, in significant numbers. That's something we want to go on and explore further. But we won't do them in a formulaic way. Michael, in particular, Michael Grandage, is very clear that we won't say we're going to do a family play because we want to do a family play and now we'll go and find one and hope it's good enough. We'll only put one on when we've found one, commissioned one, made one, developed one, that we feel is of a sufficient stature, and sufficient quality to justify its place in our programme. So we are a multi-faced multifaceted organisation in our programming. And, as I said before, because of our scale, because we have three stages operating for over 40 weeks a year, we have the ability to present a wide range of work to different audiences throughout the year.

LW: That's very interesting. The way you talk about the diversity of Sheffield Theatres and the fact that it is these three different spaces, and the very wide range of work that you are putting on. But also interestingly, the name Michael Grandage obviously comes up quite a lot there, whereas I'm only really aware of his influence on the Crucible main stage. One of my questions is how important is Michael Grandage to the big picture of Sheffield Theatres as a whole? Both in terms of how the Crucible theatre is perceived externally and then in terms of his role in the internal workings of Sheffield Theatres.

GM: Michael is very important to the whole operation really. I suppose the one area of our artistic life that Michael doesn't engage with to any great degree is the touring programme of work that goes through the Lyceum in the course of the year. Now, he does have an engagement with the Lyceum as a building and indeed is going to direct, himself is going to direct, our own first drama production in the Lyceum.

LW: Is that the Tennessee Williams?

GM: Yes that's right Tennessee Williams, Suddenly Last Summer, in February. Now that's the first time that we as a company have produced a piece of drama in the Lyceum for no reason other but that we want to.

LW: Yeah, I'm interested in this as well. In the years that I've been familiar with Sheffield Theatres, when I started coming here it was very much the Crucible main stage which put on Crucible productions and nothing else, I'd say, exclusively put that on. Then in the last couple of years the Studio started to get Sheffield Theatres productions, in the beginning it was involved in these seasons, and then last year it was diversified even more and now this year both Crucible productions are put on the Lyceum, in fact in all three spaces, but equally a number of touring shows have been on in the main house, the other week, am I wrong there?

GM: The word, 'a number' is the only sense in which you're wrong. There has been one touring show in the Crucible this year, which was Swamp Circus who are a local company. There would have been another one, had the tour of a Russian company come to fruition, but it didn't, so that didn't happen. But it's interesting, as our fortunes as a company, as our prosperity has increased and as our ambition has increased over the last six or seven years we've begun again to produce more work of our own. That's what gets our juices flowing and that's what gives the organisation whatever uniqueness it has. As opposed to the touring work which you can see this week in Sheffield and perhaps next week in Leeds, or Manchester, wherever it happens to be. So touring work has actually got squeezed out of the Crucible programme increasingly in recent years. When I first came here in '96, there wasn't much touring work. By '98-99 there were probably three, four, five weeks a year perhaps of touring work coming into the Crucible. Now we're down to one or two. Next year there will be maybe two, if we're lucky. One of them jammed in to the end of July because that's the only date at which

Knee High Theatre from Cornwall, who are one of the most exciting touring companies in the country, can come. So we will do that, but touring work has increasingly been squeezed out and one of the problems we have now, and it's a nice problem to have, is in the Studio where the mix of touring work, chamber music, promoted by Music in the Round, and our own work has now reached the point where we're bursting. And in the 2004-5 season it is quite likely that we will want to do four productions of our own in the studio. Now that will take 20 weeks out of the year, if you add into that probably 15 weeks for Music in the Round that's 35, another five weeks for our good friends from the World Snooker Championships that's 40 weeks before we've even talked about any visiting work going into the studio at all. So there is pressure on those schedules

LW: And is this the reason that Anna Mackmin has been made the Artistic Director in charge of the Crucible Studio this year?

GM: Anna has joined the team basically and I would want to portray Anna's role primarily as a generalist member of the artistic and management team here. Yes she does have a particular interest in work in the studio, but not exclusively so, and her own work as a director has actually not been seen in our studio. It's been seen on the main stage at the Crucible and will be again in the spring of next year. Anna's done important work for us as a Literary Associate, she has been, up until now she has been one of two literary associates. She has great gifts in her ability to work with writers on the development of texts for performance. So she's done tremendous work. Over the last year for example with Lesley Glaister, a Sheffield based novelist, whose first play, Bird Calls, we commissioned, Anna commissioned and saw through development to a very successful production that only closed a couple of weeks ago. That's an example of the kind of work that Anna is particularly gifted in. But her role, she has a general role in our artistic planning, in our artistic framework. As well as, yes, having particular responsibility, in the way that Michael Grandage has a particular responsibility for the work on the Crucible main stage and the shape of those seasons, and the planning of those seasons. Anna has that sort of role in relation to the studio, as well as being an artistic support to the education programme here. Which used to exist out on a limb, and increasingly we're trying to bring into the centre of the organisation and we feel that by giving Anna an artistic responsibility to support that education work, it brings that work again one step closer to the heart of the organisation.

LW: You seem to be emphasising there that Anna Mackmin is becoming part of the framework of Sheffield Theatres.

GM: Correct.

LW: And you mentioned her directing on the main stage. Indeed, she was the only director to direct two productions last year on the main stage, was she not? And I wonder if this suggests that Sheffield Theatres is, not in the immediate, but in the relatively short term preparing for Michael Grandage perhaps to leave.

GM: No, not at all. One day that will happen. No, very few, artistic relationships last forever. You could argue about Peter Brook in Paris, that's now a very long-standing, well-established relationship. There have been examples, historically, in Eastern Europe of course, of companies and directors who have stayed together for many many years, generations, on the back of a system of subsidy that meant in some cases those companies never had to perform at all if they didn't want to. However, that model is breaking down in most of Eastern Europe as the economic model that supports it breaks down. And in this country the relationship between a resident artistic director as opposed to an associate director, which is what Michael is and always has been here. A resident artistic director and an organisation is a semi-permanent one it's not something that people sign up to for life, by and large. And Michael's relationship to Sheffield

Theatres, and his commitment to Sheffield Theatres, I would argue, is no more and no less than that of an artistic director to a particular institution at a particular time. So I don't know when Michael will need, want, express the need to move away from us. My hope would be that it wouldn't happen suddenly, that it would happen over a period of time. But there's an awful lot going on in Michael's creative life and his artistic horizons will continue to expand over the coming years. He's artistic director of the Donmar Warehouse in London, he's turning down opportunities to direct opera to direct musicals, because he's an extremely talented man, and he's at a point in his career where opportunities are opening up for him. So it will happen one day. But no, Anna's appointment is absolutely not a preparation for Michael stepping away. It's very much about adding to the critical mass of our artistic effort, if you like.

LW: Does it then rather suggest that Sheffield Theatres is becoming much more, even more so than before, a producing company?

GM: Yes, yes it does, absolutely. I mean the programme of touring work, in particular in the Lyceum is and will continue to be very important to us, in all senses, including our artistic sense. But, as I said before, the thing that gives us our flavour as an organisation, our uniqueness, our place in the world, is the work that we make ourselves for our audiences here. Because that's the uniqueness of us and we have re-inflated our artistic economy here over the last five years quite dramatically. We have more than doubled the amount of investment each year, we put in directly, into the making of our own work and that process hasn't yet reached, in my view, it's optimum. It may well do that in the 2004-2005 season, where we're planning more productions, bigger productions. I don't know beyond that how much more we could sustain really, without a dramatic change to our subsidy base and perhaps to the scale of our organisation. So we're getting there. We're getting to a point where we will be producing the optimum amount of work and scale of work that we can logically sustain. But we're not there yet, so we are still climbing up that growth pattern, there's no doubt.

LW: That's fascinating, the way you're seeing the most exciting things happening in a couple of years time. What's even more fascinating, perhaps, at this time you're set to leave Sheffield in April?

GM: April, that's right.

LW: I was wondering, as you're leaving at one of the most exciting times in Sheffield Theatres history, there's the £15m expansion scheme for the Crucible,

GM: £20 million, and we don't have a ha'penny of it yet.

LW: Right, I wondered if you could tell me a little more about that scheme, about what it means in real terms for Sheffield Theatres. And also I'm intrigued by these mystery American backer's, so maybe you could tell me a little bit about them, I've read about in the press.

GM: Oh well, it must be true then! Talking about the plans to re-develop the Crucible, if we go back to the mid 1990s when the Crucible was arguable a wildly under-utilised resource beset by difficulties on all sides, when we put together the first plan to take the Crucible forward, there were three planks to it. First of all was a business plank, that is to say we have to stop haemorrhaging money like it's going out of fashion, we have to stabilise our business, we have to demonstrate, to ourselves and to our stakeholders that we are capable of managing our own affairs. And we did that in a period of two or three years. The second phrase was to begin the process that we have been talking about, of re-inflating artistic ambition, raising artistic horizons and sustaining a level of increased financial investment in artistic work here, and we are in that phase. We have demonstrated some success in that. The third phase was to try and do something about

the Crucible building. The Crucible was built in 1971, it was built very cheaply, it cost less than £1 million to build the Crucible in 1971, that was 30 odd years ago, but nevertheless it was built economically, I think it's fair to say, and it's very much a design of its time. So not only is the fabric of the building, in some disarray, bits of equipment and things here don't work, haven't worked for a long time: the roof leaks, the doors blow off, what else can I tell you, the sound system is a disaster, the lighting system was a disaster but we managed to sort that out, the fire alarms are just having to be replaced, in order to keep the building as an insurable risk for an insurance company. That's £50,000 worth of work. So the fabric of the building, the condition of the building is an issue, but it's not only that. It is now that the design of the building does not meet the needs of a wholly different generation of theatre artists, audiences, those taking part in artistic activity here. The facilities in terms of scale and accessibility are not acceptable any longer. And if we're going to maximise, if we're really going to maximise the potential that we've begun to demonstrate, I hope, over the last few years then we need to go on with a development of the building. Not just a refurbishment of the building, not simply replacing all the stuff that doesn't work and cleaning it up, but actually changing the scale and the nature and the position of some of the facilities and spaces available within the building. The one space we are not going to disrupt radically will be the Crucible theatre itself. Which was design by a magical woman called, Tanya Mosiewicz, who died earlier this year at the age of 88. This was the culmination of her life's work, she spent a good part of her life devoted to trying to design, understand the dynamics of thrust stages, open stages. She worked for a long time with Tyrone Guthrie. She was responsible for several quite famous theatres in North America. She was also responsible for, to some degree, for Chichester Festival Theatre in this country. This was the last one, this was her masterpiece, if you like, this was the one that she maintained, for the rest of her life, that they got, pretty well, absolutely right, in terms of its relationship between the performer and the spectator. She would argue, probably, that we are not using the stage in the way that she foresaw best.

LW: How do you mean?

GM: Because her thinking was very much that you used, you should use, a moat, in effect, around the stage, between the stage and the audience. And we very rarely do that.

LW: Why did she feel that? Do you know?

GM: Because, the stage itself, in her design had a very narrow platform that was then stepped down into a moat. It's like an Elizabethan model, in a way. We don't do that very often, usually we play the full width of the stage. She probably wouldn't approve of that. But other than that, this is her masterpiece, so we're not going to disturb that, but everything else is up for grabs. We want to increase dramatically the amount of space we have available to devote to education work here, to active participation spaces, and we want them in the heart of the building, over here, not scattered around. We need a new rehearsal studio. We want some new trading opportunities front of house. We want full access for people with all manner of disabilities which the Crucible is a disaster area at the moment. We want meeting rooms front of house. We want corporate hospitality facilities. I could go on. I mean, the vision is endless. There's lots of things we'd like to do. In the end we won't be able to achieve all of it, for financial reasons I suspect, but we need to raise something between £15-20 million over the next three to five years in order to realise that vision and that's a task that we have just begun. The 'mystery American backers' to which you refer are, we have, unlike pretty well all regional theatres, I guess in this country, we have some connections in North America. That arose here because of Kenneth Branagh and the 'friends of Ken', as they were called, who are almost like a fan club for his work in America. And they came and camped in Sheffield

for a fortnight when he was here and they decide they liked us, and we decided we liked them, very much, and those contacts have continued. I mean it will be almost two years now.

LW: And have they come to see any other shows? Will they be at the Churchill season?

GM: I doubt they'll be at the Churchill season, but we have kept in touch with them. And because our work, some of our work, has the high profile that you were talking about earlier on, we hope to be able to make use of that in raising money to help the refurbishment process, or the redevelopment process, here and in North America. It is very likely now that *The Tempest* with Derrick Jacobi will go to both Los Angeles and New York in early 2005. If that is the case then we would like to use those productions, that production making those visits, as opportunities for us to undertake some fundraising in America and we've established an appropriate charitable vehicle in America to enable us to do that. It remains to be seen how successful we can be, but we have a few friends and we know we have some supporters in America and we want to just explore what the potential for that may be. But I don't have up my sleeve at the moment a mystery multi-millionaire just waiting to sign a big fat cheque.

LW: Okay then, one final question, if I may. We've just discussed Sheffield Theatres' big future, I wonder if you can tell me anything about your plans for the future?

GM: I don't have any plans. I'm going to stop doing what I'd doing, in April and I'm going to take a minimum of three months off to do nothing and then I'm going to think about my life from there. The only reason that I'm leaving, I mean, I've had the time of my life here, this has been an extraordinary adventure, the most exciting adventure, but I'm not getting any younger and my life, my professional life goes so fast working here, life is so hectic working here, there really is no time to think about anything other than the theatres the business, what's happening, where we're going, and I want sometime to think about me. The next professional decision I make might be the last one, you know, if I'm going to have a major change of career, and I don't know whether I want to do that or not, I have to do it soon. So I want to just step away, take sometime, think about me and my family and what I want to spend the next 10 or 15 years of my life doing. And, you know, I may well decide that I want to go on in theatre and then I shall probably regret leaving Sheffield Theatres enormously, but maybe not, maybe it'll be something completely different. I don't know. I'm trying very hard not to think about it at the moment, because if I think about it now, from where I am today, on the 26th November, all I can think about is theatre. And if that's still the case, after I've been digging my garden for 3 months, which is what I intend to do next summer, then I shall know that theatre is where I'm heading back to. But there may be other things, I'm not sure.

LW: Well Grahame, it's been an absolute pleasure to talk to you, thank you very much for your time and very interesting facts.

GM: You're very welcome.