

UPSTAGE

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Interview with the Director: Maria Aiken

“All I care about is doing it well. I’m just always desperate for it to be as good as it can be. That’s my own way of working.”

So my question to you, because I’ve done a little bit of reading about the history of this project. It seems that there were other writers, and was there a different director at one point, too?

There were these two men. God, it was the funniest thing. What happened was our producer, our English producer who was called Edward Snape saw these two men and said, “I want this property.” He bought it from them, which is why they’re credited, and took it to a comic writer in England who is also a very well known comic performer named Patrick Barlow. Through this he created the National Theatre of Brent. They tackled the largest works possible like *The Ring Cycle*, *The Bible*, *The Joy of Sex*. They’re suburban nerds. They can’t even talk English properly but they’re determined on taking on the biggest classics/projects. Barlow, the director of the National Theatre of Brent, his alter ego is called Desmond Dingle, and he is the most pompous creature. He’s then given the opportunity to deal with *The 39 Steps* and managed to turn it into a four person play. Then it was produced in the North, I think a short tour, but for some reason it didn’t come to London. Then I was hired by Edward Snape to do it again in a theatre in Brent, which is an off-off Broadway kind of a theatre, in the hopes that it would go to the West End. There were some wonderful things there already. It’s been a very collaborative thing. Every time I do it it’s different. The American version is definitely different from the English one because I have American actors. It’s like a mad mutating baby. It just goes on assuming a new shape. This show has been done in Boston, New York, and Australia, Israel, and Italy.

Considering the origins of this material, the spy novel, Hitchcock’s movie all of these adaptations, what do you think it’s about?

Well, I think it’s something to do with patriotism: an unfashionable thing. It’s to do with heroism. It’s an on-the-run story set in the Scottish islands of a man who’s not guilty of what he’s being pursued for. But there are no women in it. The Buchan family will sue me for

saying this, but I think it’s kind of lightly homoerotic. He’s always jumping into workmen’s clothes and passing himself off as a great Scottish bush creature. In the film he wears his tweed suit all the way through. We’re nothing really to do with the book. We’re based on the Hitchcock movie very closely. We watch it lovingly. Every time we watch it we feel something else; we see some tiny detail. I put one in today that we never had before. When they’re in the moor, on the run, Hannay just takes something that’s caught in her hair. Without even noticing what he’s doing, he takes it out of her hair in the middle of their argument.

Is that where you start with the new cast? With the film?

Always.

I’m just curious about the challenges of this piece.

There’s a great difficulty in doing a big show with four people and their characters. The leading man says “I want to do *The 39 Steps*. And I will play Richard Hannay. And I am too grand to change my clothes a lot, or push furniture about”.

The leading lady is seduced by the idea that she plays three women. Occasionally she will push a set piece around, possibly in character. Then there are these two old vaudevillians who are called Man 1 and Man 2, and their bite factor is that they’re going to get paid. They have to save the story, they have to play everything, and they do. They’ve got all the other parts. Occasionally, because they are vaudevillians they get trapped in routines. The actor who is playing Hannay has to say to them, “Stop it! Just stop it. Let’s get on now please.”



Does this make it a very British piece, and the humor is very British?

I would have said yes if I hadn't seen so many Americans laughing at it. In England, the Americans really love it. We were really worried about Boston, but they seemed to get it completely. I don't know whether it's too British, but it's certainly not exclusive.

What were some of the other challenges in directing this piece? Would you say it is about the casting or the rhythm of the piece?

Casting is crucial, but then when isn't it? It's all about rhythm, but the rhythms are all on the page if you can find them. There are huge technical problems, too. There's a Scottish marching band in the movie and it's not in our scene, but we really wanted to put in the new version. There are things like that to work out. It is a play within a play, and there's evidence of incompetent stage management, as well.

So for you, this was a challenge because you'd never done anything like this before?

No I hadn't. I don't think anybody has. We've all done bits of it. We've all done aspects of it before.

And is that the reason you took the job?

Yes it is. I didn't particularly want to inherit the set and costumes although it was interesting working from an existing pattern which consisted of an empty theatre and three trunks and two ladders. I was given some boundaries and I was very glad for them. They were well made decisions, the ones I didn't take. It's incredibly collaborative. I have a wonderful movement director, fantastic sound, which is the making of the show really. It's very sophisticated in sound and light, and it's actor-driven in every other department.

Having such an abbreviated rehearsal period, does this make you anxious?

No more than usual. All I care about is doing it well. I'm just always desperate for it to be as good as it can be. That's my own way of working. As much as I admire and respect Broadway, I'm not sure if I can get more frightened.

That's interesting because I was talking with the *Sunday in the Park with George* actors and they were very anxious about how they would be seen on Broadway.

It's maybe because I'm the director, I'm not an actor. I think that makes a great difference. Maybe it's because I live here. I'm married to an American, so I don't see that the divide is so great.

I wanted to end this by asking you to talk a little bit to young people who want to direct. What would you advise them to do?

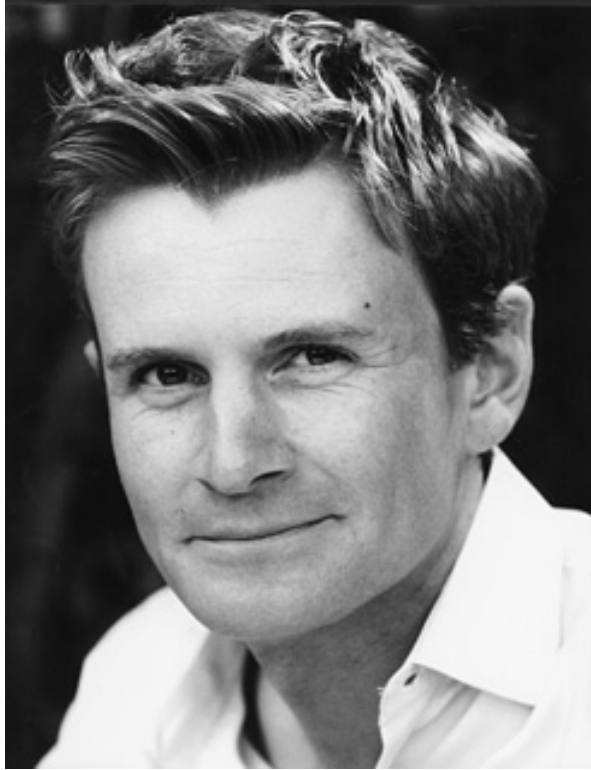
I'd advise them to get engaged in the theatre in any form possible. Actually, preferably acting, the reason being that I know what works on a very practical level. I am rather sympathetic for directors who've gone through the school of academia. They've never actually been on the receiving end, and I think that's the way to learn. It's just incredibly useful to have gone through the mill of being directed badly or well. I know that I've stolen from so many wonderful directors.

I've got to tell you, it's hard to trust a director who hasn't acted.

It is. You can never really believe that they understand your predicament. My wonderful actors in this are almost tender about some of my opinions about their acting because I've been through it. It wouldn't be the same if they didn't know that I understood their dilemmas. Also I understand that actors work in different rhythms and in different ways. All of that requires exposure. You can get that exposure in different ways, but the idea that you simply go through some academic preparation for directing seems to me to be not enough. It's not wrong, it's just not enough.

One of the greatest pleasures I've had from this play, which is a great deal, is when I sit in the audience. I see usually a young head and an old head together. I see grandfathers with their granddaughters. I see an incredible range of age. When I watch an audience, I am incredibly happy. What I'm saying is that if you want a kind of play where you could go inter-generational and have a good time, this is a good one for that. I don't think I've directed a play where I could say that before.

Interview with the Actor: Charles Edwards



Can you tell me a little bit about how you prepared for this role?

The first day of rehearsal the four of us and Maria sat down and watched the movie when I played it back in London. That was the initial preparation. She encouraged a very collaborative process, which has been the hallmark of this production from its inception in Summer 2006. The preparation also involved trying to get nuances of those 1930s movies in order to get an essence of that kind of action hero and of that kind of film. And I'm also very inspired by a British comedian called Harry Enfield, who does very spot-on spoofs of those black and whites of the period.

Can you tell me a bit about the challenges of playing this type of material?

The particular challenge of this show is its unrelenting nature. We are all very busy in this show: particularly the two guys are working their socks off, as is Jennifer. I'm also on all the time. Since it's my story, I'm the one being chased by everybody and from just purely from a physical point of view it's very tiring.

When I'm doing the show, I don't bother with my cardio workout because I get one every night.

Is there a particular moment in the play itself that you have to gear up for the challenge?

There is a moment when I feel the most exhausted in the evening which is about three quarters through the first act. I love this act because once I realize I'm on the run, I just run.

"You have to believe in yourself. It's a cliché phrase, but it's true, and I believe it can help you."

There's one moment when I arrive at the front door of the Jordan house and I stop there and ring the bell. Mrs. Jordan comes out, played by Cliff Saunders, and I cannot even speak because I'm so tuckered by that point. The next scene I get to sit down for a little while, so I calm down a little after that. Following that it's the interval, so I have 10 minutes of lying down, which is very nice.

Why do you think this material is so popular? I understand that it started as a novel, and then Hitchcock made it into a film, and it has since been made into 2 remakes.

I think that when the novel was written, which was 1915, war was brewing. Hannay is a gentleman adventurer, and I think he's very much a thing of his time. Laying aside the movie for a moment, I think it's a very nostalgic time for us to look back on, perhaps a time that never really was. You know, this tweeded chap who out to save the country. It's the forerunner of James Bond, that kind of spy, with never a hair out of place, effortlessly saving the country and winning the girl. I think that's of great appeal to us nowadays. And, of course, with the added thing of the Hitchcock movie and with our spin on it, which is a very comedic spin, I think it adds a whole layer of appeal.

Do you still watch the film?

I don't watch it religiously at all because I know it backwards now. Every now and again I will review it

when I'm stuck on a moment since I'm still working on it, even though I've been doing it for a year now. With new actors and new impulses, you change and your performance changes, which is fantastic for me because it keeps it fresh. But if I'm ever thrown or think, "What can I do here just to fill this little gap," I will remember the movie and look at it again to see what he does. I might do it or I might not, but I will always go back to the movie as a source of inspiration.

How is this piece different from some other work you've done?

First, this play is unique. I've never done anything like this before, primarily because of the physical nature of the role. You really just have to get on and do it. It is very tiring. The other thing for me is that I'm extremely fond of it, because I was there at the beginning and helped add to the creation of it. Maria was very welcoming with suggestions. She would encourage and consider many of the actors' suggestions. It's something we all feel we own a little piece of because we were there at the beginning. To see it come from 280 seats at the Tricycle Theatre in London to

Broadway within the space of a year is very exciting, and we're all very proud and fond of it. It will be difficult to let it go. The time will eventually come, but I'm not quite there yet.

What kind of advice would you give to someone who wants to be an actor?

I'd say that if you believe you have the confidence to do it, then you must do it. If confidence is an issue, then think twice, but the most important thing is to believe in yourself and believe you can pull it off. Obviously, you have to keep reminding yourself of that to gear yourself up and bolster yourself every now and again because it can be hard when there's no work around. You have to believe in yourself. It's a cliché phrase, but it's true, and I believe it can help you.

And where were you trained?

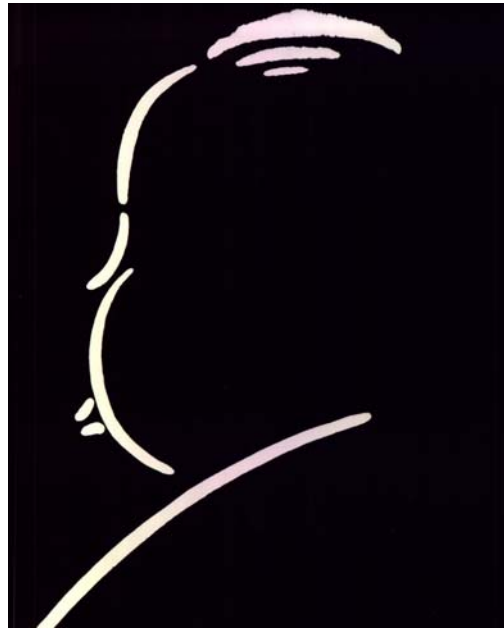
I was trained at the Guild Hall School in London, which is primarily a classical theatre course. It's a big conservatory: its opera, its music, and they have a very good three-year theatre course which I did.

About Alfred Hitchcock

"I am out to give the public good, healthy mental shake-ups."

Thriller. Suspense. Today we are well acquainted with these words in relationship to film. We have pictures in our head of what they look like. We know how they make us feel. However, do we know where these images and preconceptions come from? Most likely what we think of as thriller and suspense have been influenced by Alfred Hitchcock, one of the most innovated directors of film. Born on August 13, 1899 in London, Hitchcock was exposed to theatre at a young age. This led to his interest in film, particularly American movies. At fifteen years old, he began working as an advertising artist. Shortly after, he started writing captions for silent movies. He was later promoted and directed his first film in 1925. In addition to *The Thirty Nine Steps*, some of his most famous movies include *Psycho*, *Vertigo*, *The Birds*, *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, and *Rear Window*¹. In his films he tackled themes such as physiological disorders, murder, moral crisis, and guilt. About his work in

film he was quoted as saying, "I am out to give the public good, healthy mental shake-ups"². Alfred Hitchcock was known to be very meticulous and methodical when it came to his work. Hitchcock was very focused on style and planned each shot so that filming would go smoothly and he was in complete control of the end product³. Due to his great attention to detail and innovative filming techniques, Alfred Hitchcock is one of the most influential directors of thrillers and suspense films.



¹ Gale, Thomas. *Contemporary Authors Online*. Literature Resource Center, 2003. [Print Volume 159]

² Gale, Thomas. *Contemporary Authors Online*. Literature Resource Center, 2003. [Print Volume 159]. Quoting *Hitchcock on Hitchcock: Selected Writings and Interviews*, edited by Sidney Gottlieb, 1963.

³ Gale, Thomas. *Contemporary Authors Online*. Literature Resource Center, 2003. [Print Volume 159]

⁴ N.Y. Library Picture Collection, #19, 413, cc 1981.

Vocabulary

Film noir – a term to describe stylized Hollywood crime dramas from the 1940's and 50's (French for "black film")

Flat – British term for apartment

Gluttonous – greedy, unable to be satisfied, especially pertaining to food or drink

Gorse – a specific type of spiny bush which grows in sandy soil

Imbecile – a stupid or silly person

Jeopardize – to put at risk

MacGuffin – a plot device that motivates a character, but has little or no relevance to the plot

Moor – a broad area of open, poorly drained land, usually overgrown

Pound note – a British currency

Scotland Yard – the local police precinct

Spy novel – a popular genre of literature about crime, spies, and secret agents, dating back to before World War I

Supernumerary – more than necessary or needed

West End – neighborhood in London where Richard Hannay lives

Theatrical Devices

Parody is a term for a work of art (theatre, film, visual art, or music) that imitates and makes fun of something else.

Satire is an artistic genre, usually humorous, that ridicules societal problems through imitation. Satire is often an attempt to improve the situation it imitates.

Vaudeville was a type of popular theatre popular from the late 1800's through the 1930's. It consisted of a variety of entertainment acts such as musicians, comedians, and dancers. The Vaudeville shows would consist of a number of different performance acts each night.

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