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PRACTITIONERS' PERSPECTIVES

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Mike Alfreds on adaptation

Having discovered his love for theatre at the age of 10, Mike Alfreds has devoted more than 60 years of his life to it. He has run theatre companies in the United States, Israel and the United Kingdom, as well as freelancing as a theatre director and teacher around the world. In 1975 he founded Shared Experience, which he ran until 1987. He was Associate Director at the National Theatre in 1985 and between 1987 and 1988. In 1991 he took over Cambridge Theatre Company, renaming it Method and Madness in 1995, and running it until 1999. Since then, he has directed at Shakespeare's Globe, the RSC and internationally, as well as giving frequent workshops, master classes and seminars.

Alfreds is an actors' director. Sheila Hancock believed him to be 'the perfect director to coax a performance out of [her]', while Ian McKellen described him as 'one of the three best directors in the country' (Benedict 1996). In a Foreword to Alfreds' 2007 book *Different Every Night*, actress Pam Ferris notes not only the sense of freedom and personal growth an actor derives from Alfreds' approach, but chiefly 'the pursuit of excellence' that characterizes his career journey (2007: xii).

Observing him in rehearsals in the mid-1980s, David Allen was struck by Alfreds' directorial style, which was more akin to a 'coach', 'prompting from the sidelines' rather than 'working for results' (1986: 328). His ultimate aim

as director is summarized as being about creating a 'world which has the soul and essence of the original play' (1986: 321), although it should be added that the same applies when he works on adapting prose.

In addition to his directorial creations and adaptations of novels, Alfreds has also made his own translations. Most recently, Alfreds translated Pierre de Marivaux's *The Surprise of Love* (2011), which was directed by one of his past collaborators Laurence Boswell at Bath Theatre Royal. In addition to multiple BTA and TMA awards in the 1980s and 1990s for his productions of the classics, Alfreds' productions of Philip Osment's new plays were nominated for the Writer's Guild Awards three times, and awarded in 1993. His second book about theatre-making under the title of *Story-Theatre* is due to be published by Nick Hern in 2013.

This interview took place in November 2011 and is a companion piece to a longer conversation that is included in a new Routledge collection of interviews *The Contemporary Ensemble* (2013) edited by Duška Radosavljević.

DR: Has your work often entailed adaptation?

MA: Yes, I do a lot of adaptations, because I find that a wonderful source for discovering new forms. Non-dramatic material forces you to invent ways of working and that can be very exciting – and refreshing. So it's exactly this: here's an empty space, here are the actors, how are we going to do this? Are we going to tell you about it, demonstrate it, act it out, live it? It demands that you look at all the possibilities for what would be the best way to make this piece of text work. Depending on the nature of the language and how the story is constructed, you say 'How can I take those literary devices and find equivalent theatrical forms for them in order to be true to both the spirit and word of the story?'

DR: Could you describe how you would approach an adaptation? Maybe we can talk about an example of a production you've done where you've had to adapt a piece of prose – would all the actors have to read the original and then go into rehearsal? Where would you start from?

MA: It depends on what the piece is. I usually start from the language – the way the words are placed on the page: how they sound, the sort of vocabulary and sentence structure. *The Arabian Nights* was our first show. There were lots of translations – most of them rather conventional in the style of rather bland fairy stories – they had been expurgated, heavily censored. Then I found a translation by Sir Richard Burton, one of those mad Victorian explorers. He supposedly spoke 27 languages. I don't know how accurate his translation is, but it sounded Biblical – rather like Solomon's *Song of Songs* – and it had been published in a private edition, totally unexpurgated. The language is voluptuous, erotic, amazingly direct: 'When she gazes at the moon, two moons shine at one moment'; 'When she walketh away her hind parts are like unto mighty waves smiting one against the other in the stormy ocean'; 'His eyelids were languorous as those of a gazelle, his eyebrows were arched like drawn bows' and so forth ...

The challenge for a production is to find a suitable physical, visual and aural three-dimensional world that will bring to life most appropriately the world of the language. This language is clearly elaborate, ornate, hyperbolic, connecting humans metaphorically with elemental nature. Our response was to find a form of stage life that reinforced this language. Since the language

takes its time to make its point, it seemed right that no character's movement should take the shortest distance between two points. It should avoid straight lines and favour curves and circles, different parts of the body often moving in different directions at the same time. As both the language and the stories are uninhibitedly sexual, we did our homework on eastern erotic art including really serious research into the *Kama Sutra* (1883), the *Ananga Ranga* (1885) and *The Perfumed Garden* (1886) – all also obligingly translated by Richard Burton. Their meticulous instructions for the gratification of all five senses and for athletic, not to say acrobatic, sex were incredibly detailed. It encouraged us to develop an overall movement style of virtuosic voluptuousness. Because of the frequent references to nature, we decided that the actors should, when required, transform themselves, singly or in groups, into scenic elements. They became oceans, mountains, trees, thrones. The actors did a lot of training in carrying, lifting each other and generally moving together in various combinations. As the culture of the stories was predominantly floor based, the company explored ways of using the ground, moving along the floor, as well as getting on and off it in the most flowing, natural ways possible.

All this work was reinforced by the structure of the plot itself, which was about separated lovers who wander the world in search of each other. The plot was consequently bifurcated and episodic, sprouting erotic tributary stories which contained other stories within them, rather on the principle of Chinese Boxes. So the structure, like the language, was ornate, elaborate and indulgent.

The indulgence of the structure and language, reinforced by the overheated self-dramatization of the characters, found them constantly in the throes of intense emotions of one sort or another – passion, grief, stubborn determination, ecstasy, you name it! The narrative was in the third person from within the action, so that the characters both narrated about themselves and played their scenes with extreme intensity of feeling, taking themselves and their descriptions with total seriousness. They remained in character at all times. They wore clothes that they might have worn themselves at that time in the street. This was the period when tie-dyed shirts, Indian scarves and harem pants were in fashion. So these loose flowing clothes in rich colours paralleling the glowing colours of Persian and Indian miniatures were fortuitously ideal for the nature of the stories they were telling. They worked barefoot. They used the space freely and expansively. We studied Middle-Eastern music and mastered some of their intricate rhythms and cadences, recreating the sounds vocally and by percussive use of the stage floor and the actors' own bodies – that is, totally without instruments. There was nothing onstage except the actors. The performance evolved into a highly eroticized romantic, melodramatic world. For the audience, it became charming, sexy, very funny and rather wonderfully – something we hadn't expected – very moving. This was, I'm sure, the result of the actors always playing with truth and utter conviction, even in this heightened and somewhat exaggerated reality we'd developed.

DR: So did the actors learn the words from the outset?

MA: Not from the outset, but – as normal – as we rehearsed. Because we were adapting, there were constant textual changes and adjustments, so it would have been wasted effort for the actors to have learnt the text too early. Anyway, it's better if the actors absorb the text through the work, rather than learning it like parrots.

Then we found another Arabian Night story, which was a very long shaggy dog story. It was about the widow of the Caliph's pigeon keeper who thinks she's going to inherit his job. But the Caliph kicks her out of the palace and she's furious. She decides to prove to him that she's the cleverest person in Baghdad. So she goes around the streets playing tricks on everybody in order to attract his attention so he'll have to give her the job. The situations pile up – it becomes a bit like one of those silent movie Keystone Cop chases with more and more people she's cheated chasing after her. There were five actors playing about 100 people constantly on the run. Unlike the first show, this one was entirely improvised. The actors created their own narrative and had to find the personal stand-up comic inside themselves to create their own comic delivery. In the scenes they played, there was a starting point and a finishing point, but how they got from A to Z was really up to them. They had to improvise every night. And they were brilliant. I'd love to do another show like that because it was so, so funny – people wept with laughter. But again, it was very hard work and required a lot of discipline. The show had a very rough presentation, very different from the first piece; actors were leaping in and out of character extremely rapidly – and occasionally an actor ended up playing scenes with him or herself.

The third story was very austere and much more emotionally based – so the form of the show was always what the content of the story and the language of the story dictated. And the form arrived by a lot of trial and error, rarely by a preconceived idea.

The next thing we did was a Dickens novel, all 1000 pages of *Bleak House* (1852–53). It performed for ten hours over four nights. When we started, I didn't cut anything; we just came to rehearsal with these big paperbacks in our hands and cut a sentence here, a sentence there. And when we got to our first run-throughs, everything was twice as long as it was meant to be, so the poor actors had to forget half of what they'd learnt. There was a benefit from this, however: they knew that novel inside out, in great depth. But it was a painful process. So I realized I couldn't approach an adaptation like that again. A big learning curve for me.

DR: You went through the book chapter by chapter?

MA: That's right. I broke them down: whether there were 'scenes', and what sort of narratives, whether they were set pieces, or passages of social criticism, or descriptions of place or character or action. I'd write a synopsis of the story in a chapter. There were several plots going through the book and I noted which plots were touched on in each chapter, what themes were dealt with, which characters appeared – so that when I had completed this, I had a much clearer idea of how the book was structured and how to focus our work.

DR: How did you cast it?

MA: I got together six actors whom I really liked working with. It was impossible to conceive of casting over 110 roles. I needed actors who were flexible and versatile. I had to work out which characters met which characters, and then make up groups of characters that didn't meet each other and assign those groups to each of the six actors. They had about twenty characters apiece. In theory, any actor could have played the characters in any group. I believe in the essentially protean ability of actors to be many sorts of people, if only they are allowed the opportunity – instead of always been typecast.

We had exceptionally long rehearsals and they created their characters fully, in great detail – even those that only appeared for a brief scene. And the characters were full and very detailed. Some were very funny and some were very moving, and some were both; the book was full of drama, melodrama, comedy, farce, satire, political diatribes – it was very, very rich! – and the actors had to embrace many different levels of reality. We worked on that for a year in 1977/78, and it was wonderful to rehearse. Every time a new batch of characters appeared, I became terribly excited to see what the actor would do with this lot. The material seemed to stimulate them all to incredible imagination. As an example, one of the characters, called Phil Squod, is defined as being totally accident prone. Amongst other disasters, he has been blown out of a window working in a fireworks factory. He can't walk straight and has to aim where he is going by ricocheting off walls. He is physically a totally damaged person (although very cheerful by nature). The actor playing him came up with the brilliant idea of expressing the damage he'd experienced by only being able to talk while breathing in – which is technically incredibly hard to achieve. But he managed it, and it was both very funny and very touching.

DR: Did you ever script it?

MA: I'm ashamed to say I never kept a script because we were changing it all the time. No, practically none of my adaptations have a final script, because they were always in process. I do have a script of one of *The Arabian Nights* – which other people have used. Also of *A Handful of Dust*, the Evelyn Waugh novel I did a few years later – which has also been performed elsewhere.

What I do now with a novel is to trim it down to a reasonable length – I won't make any major decisions – I'll remove what clearly isn't necessary: repetitions, bits of plot that wander away from the main line. Then I'll work with the actors, and gradually we'll shrink it. What I try to do is not cut – but compress, distil the text. So instead of hacking the text to pieces, you reduce it like a good sauce, you retain the essence. It's a slower process, but this way you keep much more of the writer's unique voice.

DR: And the actors come with their copies of the novel as well?

MA: Oh, yes, they must read it, of course! And we all do our research.

DR: How long is this process of adaptation in rehearsal then?

MA: I do want twelve weeks minimum. With *Bleak House*, it actually took more like 24 weeks. You need time to find the form. When I did the Evelyn Waugh novel, there were all sorts of discoveries we made. I had ten actors for that; it was about English upper-class society in the 1930s, café society, and there were always parties in nightclubs and restaurants. And we had to create the illusion of many more people onstage than the ten. The audience believed they were seeing more people than were actually there by particular techniques we discovered. But to achieve these took a lot of trial and error.

What I love about this sort of theatre is that, if you really work at it, you can make the audience see almost anything for themselves. With *Bleak House*, we just had six black folding chairs, and we worked on a flat floor. But there are scenes where someone at the top of a staircase is talking to someone else at the bottom. And we found techniques for that illusion. We had to explore the physicality of how you do that. Often, it wasn't at all what you'd

do in real life. But the audiences really believed they were seeing someone on a staircase. We worked in constant white light, no cues at all – and audiences were convinced we had a rich and complicated lighting plot – they swore they saw candlelight, gaslight, firelight, chandeliers, fog and so on. What they were doing was imagining worlds of their own; they saw their own show.

This leads me to what I haven't talked about yet that is so important – why live theatre can be so rich and fulfilling for the audience. If you keep things open, work on what is essentially an empty space, you allow the audience to create their own performance, imagine their own show. The audience becomes creative. Most productions I see, the audience are shown everything – this is what it looks like and this is how you've got to react; this is what it's about. They are giving you their interpretation and telling you how to react: cry now, laugh here. Whereas I'm not going to tell the audience how to behave or what to think or what the play is about – it's up to them. Nor will we show them a complete picture. We will give them the best we can of what we've understood from the material; we will suggest and let them create and see their own images and make their own interpretations. So every member of the audience sees the performance through their own personal frame of reference. Theatre is essentially metaphoric.

When I first started *Bleak House*, I asked myself 'How shall I do it?' – because it has so many strands and layers; it's very political, very satirical, it's also a thriller, a mystery story with a detective, it's also very comic. And there's the sentimental, very emotionally felt story of a young girl growing up and finding her identity. It's also a savage attack on the iniquities of the law – a lot of the story is about people getting caught up in law cases, which go on unresolved for generations, while people die waiting for money that never arrives. And you think: 'Well, I could do a Kafkaesque production – very expressionistic. Or I could do the show in a sort of caricatured manner. Or I could do it as a piece of noir'. But I concluded any such choice would be reductive and we had to do everything that's in the novel to the best of our ability. What was gratifying is that people would come to me after the show and say 'Oh, what a wonderful thriller', and then somebody would say 'Oh, it was so funny, I haven't laughed like that for ages ...' and then somebody would say 'God, it's so politically right on now' and then somebody else would say 'it's like Kafka, isn't it'. And a French woman, funnily enough, came up to me and said: 'Thank you so much for allowing me to see my own show!' The audience come with their own frames of reference, their own cultural background and so you allow them to use their own imaginations, their own memories. In this way, the audience is genuinely participating in the performance. If you say, this is a chair in a room in a stately home, the audience will see their own room – each person's idea of a stately room is different, so allow them to see it, don't tell them. We called the company Shared Experience, because that was exactly what we did – we shared the experience of our imagination with our audiences. We suggested and evoked, and they ran with the suggestions and the evocations.

DR: Would you say that it's easier to do that with adaptations?

MA: To a certain degree, but not exclusively. An adaptation gives you more freedom because a play is a play. It's come with its condition of being written for theatre. So you get trapped in certain conventions, requirements, a limited number of characters, limited number of locations, it's usually chronological.

Whereas if I've got a novel it could be 2000 years in the past, it can go into the future, it can spin into space, it can move anywhere as frequently as it wishes. *Bleak House* dealt with a broad range of English society from aristocrats to the bitterly oppressed, to the law courts – a vast, vast structure. Thrilling. But no one would write a play like that. I find it stimulating. In fact, Lev Dodin of the Maly Theatre writes exactly that – when you do adaptations, you are creating new forms of theatre. And with every show I do, I've got some little goal I'm reaching for, something I've never done before – it could be something quite small, nobody has to know about it, it's not for the audience to know. It's something for me to work on. It both focuses me and releases me tremendously. But you mustn't get me wrong! I do love doing plays too – directing Chekhov for me is being in seventh heaven.

DR: So adaptation is the topic of the new book?

MA: Yes, it's part of it. It's essentially about storytelling, and big chunks of it are about adaptation. It's about improvising and/or working with text. It's taking language that is non-theatrical, not meant to be spoken, and making it spoken. The exciting thing when you do the novel is not the dialogue – because those parts of a book are like a play – it's about turning narrative prose into something theatrical.

As I've already said, when I was doing the Dickens, I'd break down a chapter like that: plot synopsis, character, scenes ...

DR: There are 'units' and 'scenes'?

MA: Of course! The unit would be, let's say, a description of a room, then there's a scene (which is also a unit), then there is a unit of commentary, then there's a unit which describes an event ...

DR: A scene is something with dialogue in?

MA: Yes, a unit with people having a conversation.

DR: So you do a lot of preparation?

MA: A huge amount. Yes, in order to be free you have to prepare. There's no freedom without discipline! But to get back to the matter of transforming chunks of narrative prose into theatre – without changing a word, I should add. Here's an example: in *Bleak House* there's a character called Lady Deadlock who is described looking out of a window at the rain-sodden landscape of her country estate. It's actually a description of the landscape and not of her. But what Dickens has done so cleverly is to suggest that what she is looking at is a reflection of her character, her feelings and her situation. So it became less about what she was looking at, more about how she was feeling; it became a passage of psychological insight for the audience technically. The actor playing Lady Dedlock narrated this piece of narrative about her own character in the third person, that is, she narrated *in* character but talking about herself as 'she'. But by the manner in which she did so, the literary description of scenery had been transformed into a character experiencing a complex set of feelings.

Another example: her husband, Sir Leicester, is described in considerable detail as an essentially good man, honourable, true to his word, courteous, but he is also pompous, paternalistic, stubborn and a snob. The actor who is playing that character is – as his wife above – narrating in

character about his character in the third person, as 'he'. But this time, he is embodying his character, presenting himself both physically and vocally very much from his own point of view, but *at the same time* implying through the manner of his narration that we shouldn't take him completely at his own estimation. The actor was both playing the character (from a subjective point of view) and commenting on the character (from an objective point of view). A difficult skill, but it works wonderfully when the actor can present both sides – the subjective and the objective – simultaneously. So those are just a couple of the ways in which you open up narrative into a dramatic form.

DR: *And that's also a means of engaging the audience with the rules of the game.*

MA: Yes, that's another big obsession of mine – the rules of the game, the conventions of this unique world we're creating. For me, that's what the rehearsals are about – discovering what the rules are for this particular game we're going to play. If it's football, we can't use the rules for cricket, or those of tennis for golf. I'm absolutely rigorous about conventions. If we're talking to the audience, how are we talking to the audience, why are we talking to the audience? Should the other character/actors know or acknowledge that someone is talking to the audience? And if so, why and how? Are we going to use props or are we going to mime them. And if mime them, why? And at what level should they be mimed – realistically or sketched ... and so on and so forth. Endlessly questioning our choices. How are we using chairs? Are they to be transformed into other objects or are they just things to sit on. In *Bleak House*, we had those six chairs and we decided we were not going to turn them into objects; they would only be things to sit on. They could also be horses or carriages, or benches; put two together and this could be a bed, but they were always things to sit on – and that was that particular convention. Then the audience knows where they are. We decided on this because the story was so rich and so serious that we didn't want to distract the audience with whatever inventiveness or 'clever ideas' would have occurred if we had started to transform the chairs into what else was needed. It felt too cute or gimmicky. Also, chairs couldn't have been transformed into every prop that the story mentioned – so we would have ended up with a dissatisfying, messy mixture of some things being mimed and some being suggested by the way we handled the chairs. The objects that we needed to show were mimed very naturalistically. You try to create an artistic world with its own consistent rules and truths. But nowadays, I rarely, if ever, see that rigour; I don't think it's even touched on in rehearsals.

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