

Hamilton Dramaturgy's TheatreNow! Interview with Rae Smith

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Hamilton Dramaturgy's TheatreNow! Interview with Rae Smith, Set and Costume Designer (Season 3, Episode 2, Recorded January 13, 2012)

Anne Hamilton: AH: Welcome to [Hamilton Dramaturgy's TheatreNow!](http://www.hamiltondramaturgystheatrenow.com) This is a podcast series featuring some of the most exciting women artists working in the theatre today. I am your host, Anne Hamilton. Today, our guest is [Rae Smith](#). This Olivier and OBIE award-winning British designer works regularly in a wide variety of styles and genres. This diversity has taken her from Slovenia to Broadway. Her theatre designs are frequently seen in Britain in the West End, at the [National Theatre](#), the [Royal Court](#), the [Lyric Hammersmith](#), the [Royal Shakespeare Company](#), [Theatre de Complicité](#) and in a variety of experimental theatre companies. She also works regularly in some of the world's great opera houses. She won the 2012 Tony ® Award for Best Scenic Design of a play for [WAR HORSE](#). Welcome Rae!

RS: Thank you.

AH: I have to warn you about something that's funny and odd. I don't know whether Paule [Constable, lighting designer for WAR HORSE] told you, but I couldn't see your show because I'm afraid of horses. [Laughter.] And also, I'm afraid of war. So when I talked to Paule [to record TheatreNow!, Season 2, Episode 3], I was so nervous on the deepest level that I completely forgot to record the phone call the first time. But this time it's being recorded. [Laughter.] We didn't call back, I went to visit her in New York City and we saw one another and it was really wonderful.

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Rae Smith: She's great person, isn't she?

AH: Yes, yes, so shining. She shines.

RS: Yes, she's lovely. And it's interesting because I wonder whether puppet horses will impel you to the same level of fear as real horses.

AH: Yeah, I'm not sure. I used to cry at "Lassie". You know that TV show, "Lassie"? Anything with a little kid and a pet just...

RS: You won't stand a chance!

AH: No, I know. As much as I really want to see it, it's so hard. And now of course the movie's out, so I can't watch that.

RS: No, don't watch it.

AH: Yeah.

RS: I saw the movie a couple of weeks ago and yeah, it's quite interesting. So they used a lot of the action sequences, and actually some of the script is directly lifted from the stage play. So it's very odd to see the work that you know all of a sudden be transformed into a commercial film. And it's a puzzling experience watching the film because, on one hand, some of it is really exciting, and on the other hand, you're thinking to yourself as you're watching the film, " 'I know this very well', so you're thinking to yourself, 'Oh, I didn't make those decisions there?' and 'How did they make those decisions?'" And you're actually questioning their decision-making, the creative process of making the film, as you're watching it. It's quite interesting.

AH: I think that experience is really a unique one.

RS: Yes.

AH: Not many people in the world can say that, especially not many women in the world can say that her work was picked, filmed, chosen to be filmed by Steven Spielberg.

RS: Yes.[Chuckle.]

AH: And then can sit in the theatre and have that experience.

RS: Yeah, I think it's an odd thing. The other odd thing is that the theatre is absolutely so naturally a collaboration, meaning that all of the creative chain had to collaborate with each other in order to get it done. And you absolutely know that, of course they do that in the film industry, but it's a much more a pyramid management system there.

AH: Yes.

RS: So their decisions are made and done in that way, through orders from on high that filter down. And our decisions were often made in a much more elliptical fashion [Laughter]. So we couldn't

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make a decision about the text without taking on board the action of the puppets.

AH: Yes. Also in the film, it's not always the artist making choices, it's the executive. I don't know about a Spielberg film, but it's coming from a different place, a totally different place.

RS: Yes. I think that's really interesting as well. There's a sense of nailing it down in the film, which we don't get in the theatre.

AH: Yes, "Let's get this take."

RS: Yeah, and also nailing the ideas a bit as well.

AH: Yes. That's what I like about the theatre - that we allow those people to think for themselves a lot more than in the film, which tends to be formulaic.

RS: It's interesting. The film experience is a type of super-saturated visceral impression on you because of the camera's point of view being the point of view of the story. But the theatre has an entirely different impression that works on you. You go to see the horse - the first one you see is a baby horse. And you think, "Oh, that's a puppet." Then you think, "It's a horse," and then you're tickled through observation into being caught by this puppet by your emotions and your impressions that it is a real horse. So in those few moments, even the greatest cynic will have to somehow have a relationship with this inanimate object that's being moved by three people, and in that, it's kind of [a metaphor] for why theatre works.

The film of HORSE doesn't have that same experiential tickling. [Laughter.] Someone had to say it in another way, but there's a kind of magic that goes on in the theatre production that is to do with theatre. It is to do with the experience of being with the actors over that amount of time and thinking about the horse through your connection to the puppets, strangely enough.

AH: I would think that a viewer would have a self-reflective experience...

RS: Yeah.

AH: ...Through watching three men or three puppeteers handling a horse.

RS: Well, what's really interesting about that is that the men disappear and then the horse is present in your mind's eye. And also, because the war happens to the horses, somehow your emotions are caught up in them, the way they feel. It's not indeed how they feel, it's how you feel. It's not entirely through projected emotions, but it's to do with a sense of compassion towards the animal because you've been tricked into making it come alive because there's a real part of you that thinks it's a puppet as well.

AH: I wonder if that's why most children's stories have talking animals in them, and whether that phenomenon helps young children to have more compassion on animals.

RS: I think so. Michael Morpurgo, who originally wrote the story of WAR HORSE, I think he was struck [by that notion]. He has a he has a farm for children who have got such problematic backgrounds or they have sort of inappropriate behavior issues, [and they] can go and visit his farm.

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That's one of the things he does. And there was a boy, I believe, possibly, [who] was autistic or within the autistic spectrum, and he was unable to speak with adults, basically. And Michael observed him having a deep conversation with the horse. [Chuckle.] Because he felt - not because horses happily listen to you - but because the child felt that he could.

AH: You know, here in the States we have this thing called, "Reading Goes to the Dogs".

RS: Yes.

AH: And they take dogs that are trained as therapy animals.

RS: Yeah.

AH: They take them in to the libraries and give books to the children, and let children read books to the dog because the dogs don't have any kind of judgment towards the children, and it allows [the children] to open up and engage with the book.

RS: Yeah. That's very clever, isn't it?

AH: Yeah. [Laughter.] It's wonderful to see dogs lying on the floor of the library. [Laughter.]

RS: Well-read dogs.

AH: Yes. [Laughter.] They are well-read dogs. No bestsellers or potboiler fiction there. [Laughter.]

AH: Well, we were all very excited to receive the production that you worked on here in the US. And I understand that you've just returned to the U.K. from the U.S. Could you tell us what you were doing here in New York?

RS: Yes, surely. I was just popping in to see the recast. WAR HORSE has been happening at the Vivian Beaumont now for about a year, and 22 of the actors' contracts came up and they left. So they were replaced by new ones, which meant the American associate directors and the English directors recast and rehearsed and put them in. So, it was an opportunity for me and Paule Constable, the lighting designer, to pop over and do some little bits and pieces in the technical [sense], just to smarten the show up and be in a different context than we were before, which was under pressure to put the show on almost a year ago.

AH: Do you happen to make any technical changes because of the new cast? For instance, the height of the actors, or the look of the actors, or anything like that?

RS: Little things, detailed things. Costumes perhaps, but mainly it's our shot at just polishing. What's interesting to me in this production is [this]. Commonly [what I'm interested in], in the sense of what designers can do, is the scenery, which is a background to the show, and/or the costumes, which is put what they wear or props and things like that. In this case, that's indeed what I'm involved in. But also, because of the nature of it, I'm also involved in the relationship of the acting space on screen, which is floating above the acting space. And on that screen there are drawings which help to take us from one location to the next.

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So when I come over, I'm interested in seeing whether the relationship with the actors on stage and the screen is good, and how they're dealing with the space. It's also a composite space - so there's many little spaces inside of that, and those spaces are made with light and people. So, it's like sculpture more than it is actors standing on a set. That's the kind of thing we're checking up on, and also the pace of scene changes and the focus of the scene change. As one scene fades out into another, it has to go really fast and also be interesting for the audience to see. And the other thing I get involved in is the visual storytelling, the action of storytelling visually; what is clear about that. And so, for me, that's my kind of contribution, which I think is a tiny bit different from what a more straightforward designer would do.

AH: Are the drawings yours?

RS: Yes, they are. When we began working on WAR HORSE, it came about because it was pretty much devised, in the sense of [the fact that] we had a series of workshops where we would have sort of prototype models of the puppets, actors, and the script and the story. And we would be trying to work out questions like, "What do the actors do? What do the puppets do? How are they dramaturgically different from each other?" And because it was a show about horses, it wasn't going to be in an interior or in a box. It was going to be in a space that was mainly outside, so it was going to be more like a landscape space. And we were also very keen at the time on shadow puppetry, so we needed a big old screen of some kind.

So, as I was trying to work out how the space was being used, and when you read Michael Morpurgo's book, WAR HORSE it is a page-turner, so you're just ripping the pages forward because you want to know, "What's happening next? What's happening next?" It's quite exciting. We wanted that kind of feeling in the show as well. So, I was very aware that anything I designed, scenically, couldn't ever hold up the pace of the storytelling.

And as the storytelling was initially based around puppetry and visual storytelling, I would have to design something that was magical in the sense [that it] moved very quickly from one place to the next. And it occurred to me that the actors' bodies and the horses' bodies were doing that. Therefore, the type of backgrounds or context I was designing for would have to be like quicksilver, like move really quickly. And at the time I was drawing, I was going like, "So, this is the town - quickly draw it on a piece of paper. And this is the Devon landscape - quickly draw it on the piece of paper." And it came that I tore a big piece of paper out of the sketchbook and stuck in the model box. And that big piece of paper became what is later on a big strip of paper which is a 26 meter screen above the set.

So, very quickly, just through the act of drawing, the design was coming about. And I didn't quite have the confidence to think that the drawings were going to end up being the background scenery. But they did somehow, and I sort of took myself away from the working process with the team and sat in my studio for a couple of weeks and drew the story from the point of view of Captain Nichols, who's a First World War captain. He's also a war artist, so he has a journal, and he draws the Devon countryside. He draws his transport over to France, and he draws what happens to him in France. So it's a very personal point of view, on one hand, but all his drawings provide a scenic background because they're projected onto the large screen to give a feeling of rural Devon in 1912 and then the French battlegrounds of 1914-18.

AH: It sounds like you were quite well steeped in history. And, really, it sounds like an artistic

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experience not only that you had, but that someone would have coming in and watching the show.

RS: I think that's absolutely true, actually. And that's what's beautiful about it, because I think, perhaps, it was initially the inspiration of working with Basil [Jones] and Adrian [Kohler] from Handspring Puppetry that gave all of us, as a creative team, a lever, if you want, to approach it from an artistic point of view -- to approach the project from an artistic point of view and a collaborative point of view, to make something that was as alive as their puppets come to life, if you see what I mean. So, I think that intention does come out in the performance because it's an eclectic piece of work as well.

AH: It sounds so exciting, like a Park Avenue Armory show, you know, where you could walk around. But it sounds like you've done the walking for the audience. [Laughter.]

RS: Well, what's really nice about it is that it's unusual. What I believe is important is to approach every project in a different way and also to use your own knowledge to shine a light on the project. And WAR HORSE is a very strange example of that.

But I think it's quite personal. For example, a lot of the Devonshire countryside is actually my home in Shropshire. And Captain Nichols's character is based on my great-grandfather, Charlie White. Also, Captain Nichols's drawings. And I do draw a lot, but I never normally use it as part of the practice of theatre design - a bit, but not really. You might draw storyboards or costume design, but you never really draw so that it becomes part of the production. But this just happened that way for some peculiar reason.

And so what I was able to do is show an idea, which is that Captain Nichols starts drawing very traditional, rural, ideal, kind of drawings of that time. And then, as he is in his army maneuvers, things get more sketchy and faster because he's moving. And by the time he's transported in a ship over to France, his drawings have got this kind of charcoal. The pencil's been dropped, and he's using charcoal. And it's a bit full of foreboding and fear, the drawings, because of the moodiness of the charcoal and the dark clouds and everything.

And then by the time he's in France, you see a French countryside similar to Devonshire. And as the countryside gets blown up and transformed into what we know as those iconic pictures of Passchendaele and the Somme, his drawings become Vorticist, or expressionist, or futurist, like [Paul] Nash's drawings, because the battle landscape has become so alien, sometimes looking like a Martian landscape rather than a French countryside. And the experience of the war - literally, gunshots and explosives - give you a kind of surreal quality.

And I think on a wider context, that reflects the art movement of the time, going from traditional pictorial landscapes of gentleness and order, into this huge futurist machine which slammed itself into the battlefields of France and mashed the blood and bones of people. And you see that as the old order of Europe crumbled and the Futurists declared war with technology and people like [Eadweard] Muybridge began to photograph movement and dynamic. Everything was speeding up at that time and you very much see it in the paintings and the art movement at that time. So, what I was trying to do by showing Nicholas' style of drawing changing was just sort of hint at the wider social context that was happening throughout the war.

AH: It's an incredibly rich palette both artistically and historically. And it seems like you had an

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experience of total immersion in this show. I mean, we always give ourselves over to a show completely, but did this one feel any different to you?

RS: Well, yes. The working method was different and it had a series of workshops over a couple of years. So you'd work really hard together and then you'd have some time out to think. And then you'd work really hard together again and then have some time out to think. So there was a sense of immersion, but there was also a sense of working together as a team and then some quiet reflection on your own and then coming back.

AH: Well, thank you so much for sharing your artistic process with us.

RS: It was really good fun talking to you and making contact with you and I think I learned quite a lot from what you've been saying to me over the last few minutes as well. Thank you.

AH: You have been listening to Hamilton Dramaturgy's TheatreNow! We have been speaking today with Rae Smith. You may read more about her on her website, which is <http://www.raesmith.co.uk/>. You may read a transcript of this interview and download this podcast on our website, which is www.hamiltondramaturgystheatrenow.com. The podcast is also available on Soundcloud. Our theme was composed by Nancy Ford. Otto Bost is the sound designer, and Cate Cammarata and Walter Chon are the program assistants. Helaine Gawlica is our archivist and web developer. I am Anne Hamilton, your producer and host. Thank you for listening.

This episode is dedicated to Tyler Ferreira, in thanks for his generous support.

TheatreNow!'s Sound Editor is Otto Bost (www.folkdude.com) and our Program Assistants are Cate Cammarata and Walter Chon. Helaine Gawlica is our Archivist and Web Developer. Nancy Ford composed our theme. Anne Hamilton is the Producer and Host. Visit www.hamiltondramaturgystheatrenow.com to subscribe to our RSS Feed and get notifications when new podcasts are released. The podcast is also available on [Soundcloud](#). [Hamilton Dramaturgy](#) is an international script development consultancy located on the east coast of the United States. You may contact Anne Hamilton at hamiltondramaturgystheatrenow@gmail.com. © 2012 Hamilton Dramaturgy.

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