

DRAFT VERSION FOR DICCON CONFERENCE 2008

I am both immensely excited and immensely honoured to be here in Korea, for the first time in my life, but I must confess, I am also immensely fearful that this illustrious and important conference will require things of me that I am not qualified to provide. For instance, my twelve year old son is extremely skilled in operating the most demanding programmes on his computer, but if something is wrong, he cannot turn to me for help because I am virtually computer illiterate. Actually, I have another son who is taking a doctorate in Particle Physics at Oxford University, and I have not been able to have any serious conversation with him about his scientific work for almost fifteen years. I stand before you, then, a non scientist, a non technologist, a non contributor to the world wide web.....I am purely and simply an artist, still struggling to come to terms with the twentieth century, and altogether ill equipped for the twenty first.

The world is changing so quickly, it's difficult these days to understand how for many millennia, human beings managed to survive without mobile phones, without blackberries and Bluetooth and I-pods and downloads. I remember, about twenty years ago, seeing a programme about the legendary American writer and theatre director, George Abbott, who was celebrating his 100th birthday. The interviewer was overwhelmed by the sheer number of Broadway shows this man had created, and asked him, "What was the biggest change in theatre during your lifetime?" Abbott thought for a moment and then said, "Electricity". I was both amazed and overjoyed later that year when I shook hands with him at an award ceremony, to realise I was in physical contact with a man who had lit his theatre shows with gas lamps!

But then I remember when every lighting cue had to be set by hand with levers and cogwheels. I remember when every flying cue for scenery had to be operated by men hauling on ropes. I remember the first time a hydraulic device was used to raise up scenery slowly out of the floor, and I remember when, if amplification of voices was necessary, it had to be from a set of prominent microphones on stands along the front of the stage. And now I

take for granted computer lighting control, computer flying lines, astonishing hydraulic devices operating in lightning fast computerised sequences, and minute virtually invisible radio mics on every performer, operated by computer and allowing complete freedom of staging and movement as never before in the history of the theatre. And I ask myself if the world can change that quickly during my lifetime, how much faster will it change in generations to come?

I read recently that a scientist had predicted that everything the human mind can imagine at present – robots, time travel, interplanetary adventure – will come to pass in the next hundred years – by which time I might just have mastered sending an e-mail.

But in the most unexpected ways, my life as an artist has nevertheless taken my work to a global audience. Without intending to, I have created product which has been replicated in every imaginable language, reaching audiences in every part of the world, and over several decades, taking more money at worldwide box offices than legendary movies like *ET* or *Titanic*. These experiences, initially beyond my imagination, have convinced me of the power of theatre, of living theatre to touch the lives of people everywhere, and to unify different cultures and customs in a spontaneous combustion of shared joy, shared emotion and shared optimism.

When I was very young, I was appointed to be the head of the biggest theatre company in the world, the Royal Shakespeare Company. I was twenty-seven years old when I was appointed to take on the responsibility of running what was already a world famous organisation, centred on performing the plays of William Shakespeare. I ran the company for eighteen years, and I am relieved to be able to tell you that this period of time is still talked about as one of the high points of British theatre history, and the years when the Royal Shakespeare Company most successfully defined itself as a leading national and international power house.

The headquarters of the company was in Shakespeare's birthplace, but we also ran a large theatre in London, and not long after, I opened a third theatre to house smaller productions, then a fourth theatre for playing those shows in London too, then a fifth theatre devoted to all the neglected masterpieces of Shakespeare's contemporaries. I developed an educational wing called 'Theatre-go-round', which for almost a decade played in three hundred and fifty schools every year. I organised an annual festival of our work in the far north of England, I expanded our international touring to take in both east and west coasts of America, the countries of Europe, and then further afield to Japan and Australia. And everywhere we went, we were known as simply, the RSC. Those initials were the trademark of our brand, though we didn't use the word 'brand' back then – we talked about our house style, our identity, our image, our standards, all the things that now contribute to the idea of a highly recognisable and reliable brand.

This period climaxed with the undertaking of a very high risk endeavour. I set out to dramatise the whole of a one thousand page novel by the great Charles Dickens, in an epic show full of music and movement, but above all, full of storytelling. I used to joke that the RSC, because of all its international touring, should be re-named the Royal Imperial Shakespeare Company, so that our brand name would be RISC, 'RISK'. The risk paid off when this eight hour epic, played in two four hour parts, became an award winning phenomenon in Great Britain, before going to America and winning every theatre award available there too. Americans, of course, think always in terms of the ready words or phrase to boost product identity, like the 'Big Mac', like drinking 'A Bud' or 'A Coke' – well our show, *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby* became known as 'Nick Nick', and the eight hour running time and the hundred dollar ticket price stopped being a problem as the town flocked in to see the new catchphrase hit, 'Nick Nick'.

Mind you, I remember another wonderfully typical American reaction. There was a bookshop just along the street from our Broadway Theatre and soon after our show opened to blazingly wonderful reviews, this bookshop organised its whole window into a display of hundreds of copies of Dickens'

Nicholas Nickleby. But in the centre of the display was a big painted sign that said, 'Nick Nick? Read the book. Save ninety seven dollars fifty.' The success of the show led to a television company filming the whole eight hours, and to this day, their film, divided into one hour parts, is shown in both America and England – as recently again as six months ago – as well as being sold as a DVD globally.

I tell you these things because I must stress, the theatre, like all creative disciplines, is completely unpredictable. If anybody knew with certainty how to make a successful show, the world would be inundated with successful shows. But nobody knows, and so the projects that look like certainties so often fail, and the crazy left field ideas that seem doomed from the start, so often succeed. The failures aren't incompetent, or badly done; they just aren't happening at the right moment or in the right place or dealing with the right subject to catch the tide of popular taste. Sometimes, great successes aren't particularly well done, but they satisfy the need of the moment, and once established, they can reach a world market.

It was shortly after 'Nick Nick' that I was approached by the brilliant song writer and composer of musicals, Andrew Lloyd Webber. He said he had a proposal to put to me. Before the meeting, I was full of excited speculation. After all, he had written a show on the life and death of Jesus, and another one on the rise and fall of Eva Peron – so who could say where his ambitious ideas would take him next – perhaps to make a show out of *The War of the Worlds* or perhaps *The Life and Death of John F Kennedy*. When he said he had been tinkering with some poems for children about cats and asked me if I would like to be involved, I thought I must be the unluckiest person in the world. Other directors had got sweeping epic stories full of passion and tragedy, and now it was my turn, and I'd got pussy cats. Even as we were putting together the show, I was praying only that it wouldn't make us a laughing stock, and that it might run just long enough to avoid being a humiliation.

Well, the show ran and ran, and eventually closed in London twenty two years later, having played the length and breadth of America and South America and Canada, having played triumphantly in Japan, where it is still running, and across Australia, and in Africa and Russia, and China, and now, amazingly coinciding with my visit, it is playing here in Korea. How can such a vast success be explained?

First, I suppose, it is a show for all generations, mothers and fathers and teenage children and much younger children and grandparents too – it could speak to all age groups. Second, the cast was multi-ethnic, so it could attract audiences from every ethnic grouping wherever it played. And third, the show was so powerfully visual and musical that even not knowing the language, audiences could still have a great time. But there is something else.

What I was given at the outset was ten poems, and no hint from the composer as to how they should link and connect into two or more hours of music theatre. So, from that beginning, I insisted there had to be a narrative. We were forbidden to use any words that weren't written by the original poet, T.S.Eliot, and so I had to create a story by suggestion, through mime, through the use of subtext, and character interaction, but a story nonetheless. It was a story about the most special night of the year for cats, when it was decided which of the tribe of cats would be selected by general acclaim to ascend and return with a new life – since in England we say all cats have nine lives. Late on in my preparations, the poet's widow sent me a fragment of verse she had just discovered in amongst her late husband's papers. It was called 'Grizabella, the Glamour Cat', a verse about a once beautiful and much desired young cat who was now old and alone and unrecognisable. I realised it was exactly the thing we had been lacking, giving us an extra dimension. Here was a character facing mortality, alone and rejected, a potentially tragic figure rejected by all the other cats alike as a pariah. Now from this, there could be a story of forgiveness, redemption and starting again. From these first thoughts, a complex narrative was created, but at the climax of what I devised, as Grizabella faces the hostile tribe, she needed a song, not about

her, but coming from her. But T.S.Eliot hadn't written a poem that gave Grizabella an utterance.

Secretly, several lyricists were approached to provide words to the beautiful tune Andrew Lloyd Webber had written for me for this moment, but they all failed to understand how to make the new lyrics sound like T.S.Eliot. In despair, as the start of rehearsals approached, I finally sat down alone one weekend, re-read the entire collected poems of Eliot and feeling very in touch with his themes, I wrote a lyric myself, which I called 'Memory'. As we say in England, from little acorns, mighty oak trees grow.

The words I wrote that desperate weekend were recorded and the record was released as a single that went to Number One in the charts. Then when Barbra Streisand made it the lead song on her new album, *Memory*, it went to Number One worldwide. I had been trying to tell the story of a character in a show about cats, and by accident, became the lyricist of a gigantic pop hit. And in a way, maddest of all, I was doing it in my spare time because I was still running the RSC, and took my five weeks of holiday that year to direct what was my first show ever in the commercial theatre. I think this is known as beginner's luck!

My next madness, two years later, was to take another holiday from Shakespeare and direct another new project by Andrew Lloyd Webber, called *Starlight Express*. The madness? It was simply that all the characters in the show were railway trains, singing, dancing, fighting railway trains, diesel trains, electric trains, and most loveably, our hero was a steam train. I had the task not only of making a story, but of inventing a way of staging such a lunatic venture, especially considering that the trains had to race to discover who (or should I say which) would be the champion engine. I had no ideas, until one day, walking in a park, I saw a crowd gathered watching something, and out of idle curiosity, I went to see what was causing such interest. It was a group of young people on roller skates, circling around a track, playing music on portable radios and tape machines, and improvising dance moves as they skated, seemingly oblivious of everything and everybody else in the world. A

lot of people turned around to stare as I shouted suddenly, "That's it!" Indeed the answer, including some amazing costumes and huge metallic helmets by my colleague the designer, John Napier, the answer was roller skates. Humans could play at being machines if they were moving on wheels, they could dance on wheels and best of all race on wheels, like a roller derby for locomotives.

We were so mad, we gutted an entire theatre and built tracks around the auditorium, both on ground level and up above in the circle, we had a huge revolving hydraulic bridge that could tip and swivel, to connect tracks from any direction and any height. We had enormous film screens carrying close up images of the racing filmed by our own remotely controlled cameras there and then – the first time such technology had ever been used in the theatre – and above all, we had a cast of incredibly brave and acrobatic performers who could sing and act while travelling at forty miles an hour! The sheer impossibility of what we were doing led the press and the theatre grapevine to whisper predictions of disaster. The show ran triumphantly for the next seventeen years, also playing in America, both Broadway and coast to coast on tour, in Japan, in Australia, and it's still running after twenty years in Germany, in a theatre specifically built to house this unique show.

A critic at the time complained that this musical "had all the intellectual content of a peanut" but he had missed the point. It was an experience akin to being at a soccer match, or at an Olympic track final, it was participatory, it was visceral, it was rock n roll, it was very loud, it was a huge adrenalin rush, it was different. But throughout rehearsals, I always insisted on everybody taking the story seriously, playing with total belief, conveying the moral of the need to find self belief with total integrity and I believe it was that mixture of showmanship and truthfulness that made the show such a legendary success. Everybody soon called it just 'Starlight', it created a fan base of young people who made their own costumes and came to the show on roller skates. It also led to the setting up of a school, where young people could train to skate and sing, do acrobatic moves, and prepare themselves for the day when they

would audition to be in the show of their dreams, which by the way large numbers of them accomplished.

The show worked because the score was thrilling, because the performers were so daring, and because it was different from anything else in the market – the crazy show on skates was a must see, and once watching, audiences discovered to their amazement that they were moved to tears and laughter when they had only expected a spectacle. It was the story that transformed it from what could have been a circus freak show to a work that could win the belief and the involvement of everybody in the audience.

So, cats, trains, what next? People suggested dogs or planes, or how about a show where every character is a washing machine? Perhaps not surprisingly then my next venture into musical theatre a few years and a lot of Shakespeare later was as different as it could be, though very closely related to 'Nick Nick'.

I was still running the RSC, and despite our many successful productions, the Government decided to freeze all subsidies to arts organisations, and my company was suddenly in grave financial trouble. The only answer I could think of to fight our way out of the crisis was for the RSC to earn revenue from a successful show with popular appeal. The fates decreed that very soon after I started looking for the right material, the producer Cameron Mackintosh, who had been jointly responsible for producing *Cats*, gave me a tape of some songs in French to listen to, saying "Tell me if you think there is anything to follow up here – it's a stage version of *Les Miserables*".

I happened to have read that epic masterpiece by Victor Hugo, and my first reaction was to doubt that its sweep and its complexities could ever be contained in a work of music theatre – unless of course the producer wanted something eight hours long!

And yet, and yet, some of the music was haunting and memorable, even though some of it was awful. The story of Jean Valjean, a fugitive running

from the law, represented by the obsessed policeman, Javert, all his life, was a gripping chronicle, but then I discovered the French writers, Claude Michel Schoenberg and Alain Boublil, had only presented the story as a series of tableaux, and had stopped short a long way before the end. I realised that any possibility of going forward would depend on the writers being willing to start again on the story.

Miraculously they were. I told Cameron Mackintosh I would do the show, but only if it began life as a Royal Shakespeare Company production, using the techniques we had developed for *Nicholas Nickleby*. The RSC became financially responsible for set and costumes, and were deemed to be one third owners of the project in England.

During a gloriously adventurous rehearsal period, the show's most famous songs like Valjean's 'Bring Him Home', Javert's 'Stars' and Marius' 'Empty Chairs at Empty Tables' were written and added to the score, and I found myself once again as an emergency lyricist, this time writing the words of Eponine's song 'On My Own'. Once again the rule that nothing is predictable in the theatre held good. Through the amazingly tenacious determination of Cameron Mackintosh, the show transferred to the West End, where it is now the longest running musical show in British theatre history, as well as the longest running show in the rest of the world. That same tenacity has meant that, even more than *Cats*, the production has played in the majority of countries around the world. And of course, the Royal Shakespeare Company has earned close to twenty million pounds from it, money which first of all saved the crisis situation and which then has helped to keep the company alive and surviving during very difficult economic times.

I am convinced that in addition to the wonderfully idiomatic music of Schoenberg, the main reason for the continued success of this production is the story that it tells, a story of injustice, of the redemption of a man dismissed by society as a criminal, of student rebellion in the cause of making a better world for the future, and of the power of love, to heal, to unify, to change us all. As the show concludes, "To love another person is to see the face of God."

This story is capable of so involving its audience, that they forget themselves and identify entirely with the world they are watching. There is invariably a standing ovation at the end of *Les Misérables*, but however brilliant the cast are, it seems to me to happen not as a reaction to actors bowing, but to the words addressed directly to them, “Will you join in our Crusade?” – for justice and freedom. People stand in witness to those ideals, “Will you join?” “Yes, I will” they seem to be saying.

After making a handful of films, I then accepted the job of running Great Britain’s National Theatre and tried to make that wonderful institution more popular, more available to everybody. The National Theatre is given a big subsidy each year, without which it couldn’t survive, and the subsidy is all from taxpayers’ money. My argument was that since everybody in the country paid tax, the work of the National mustn’t only be for intellectuals but appeal with different projects to the broadest range of people. The demographic of our audience changed significantly over those years, and for me, the sight of people from every background, every income group, and every lifestyle, rising together in standing ovation at the end of a show has been the most fulfilling of experiences in my artistic life.

Both during my eighteen years of running the RSC and my six years of running the National, I tried as often as possible to get our most successful productions to appear on television. I don’t like the idea of placing cameras at a stage performance, because actors projecting to a thousand people seem to be out of style and too big for the small screen. But on nine occasions, I persuaded television companies to work with us in a studio, remaking the concept of the stage production into something cinematic. Of course, when these works were shown (and between them, they won many awards in the UK and in America), more people saw the production that one night, than in a whole year of performance on stage. I have just completed the TV version of *King Lear* starring Ian McKellen, of *Lord of the Rings* fame, and even though the production had just done a world tour for the RSC, I am excited about the thought that twenty times more people will see him and the play than in the whole year of performances he did. But will it have the same impact that it

had for people seeing it live, up close and personal? Can anything on the small screen match the feeling of contact that flows between stage and audience, audience and stage.

For me, there is no more powerful medium than the theatre when all its elements come together. People the world over react to live performance in spontaneous ways and often say that a performance has changed their lives. Theatre is human contact, direct, unfakeable, humans reaching out and touching other humans, regardless of language, regardless of background. How is that? Because theatre is storytelling. Shakespeare is the world's greatest storyteller, and we in the theatre endlessly return to learn again from his example, from his understanding of structure, from his direct appeal to the audience, from his powerful moral sense.

And so, I must conclude, and like all the stories of the plays and shows I have been telling you about, the story I am telling today has a moral. If you do a creative work that sets out to make money, it probably won't. Its cynicism and calculation will be there for all to see. The world of performed entertainment, be it in film, television, stage or song must have total integrity if it is to work and thereby to help bring about a better world.

As I contemplate the change that will inevitably occur in the next hundred years, the next fifty, even the next twenty years, I ask myself, "Will theatre survive? Will the world's greatest dramatist ever, William Shakespeare, still be performed? Will libraries fall into disuse because everything is available by clicking on Google? Will the internet breed in humans an extreme impatience with anything that isn't instant? Will television be supplanted by the net? Will newspapers be supplanted by bloggers? Will any revival of works of the past be no longer of interest, because, as I heard a teenager say, 'History, it's so yesterday'? Will the international successes of the future be no more than musical versions of pop movies, or catalogue shows fitting characters around pop hits, or, most recently, shows given gigantic box office response through televised audition shows, where the public choose who is going to be in the cast.

I hope none of these things come to pass, because if they do, I fear that it will not be a better world. But to everybody here who will play a greater part in that future than I, the non-technologist, I say whatever the medium, whatever the style, there is no substitute for originality, there is no substitute for integrity, there is no substitute for storytelling, and there is no substitute for the miracle of human contact. May your conference illuminate the way forward.

Thank you for inviting me and for listening to me.