

Our women on our stage, as told by Erica Whyman

Theatre director, active feminist, self-proclaimed optimist and Deputy Artistic director of the Royal Shakespeare Company Erica Whyman begins our interview proudly showing me memorabilia from her most recent triumph, *Miss Littlewood*, a production labelled by The Guardian as a 'seamless mix of story, music and movement.' With this musical success in her back pocket and the continuing season of *Romeo and Juliet* soon to be transferred to London I wanted to find out how she manages to keep theatre and Shakespeare so relevant in a world of ever changing politics.

Two years ago, the world witnessed a strong presidential candidate battle it out to become America's first female president. Not only did Clinton face backlash and scrutiny purely based on her gender but also experienced levels of misogyny that compelled her to be seen as less 'legitimate' for the role. Whyman recognises and argues this attitude with her casting of the Prince in *Romeo and Juliet* as female. We see an ambitious and driven woman take political control of Verona. Whyman was keen to bring a woman on stage who didn't fit the typical Shakespearian female archetypes of a witch, wife or femme fatal. Through this we watch a woman represent the modern female: a person driven by her career and wanting to make a change within her society. Between 2007 and 2012 birth rates amongst women declined by 15%, this is often by choice rather than circumstance with more women being driven by their career than ever before.



Erica Whyman. Photo by Ellie Kurtz © RSC

However, women who go on to inhabit 'male' roles are, according to Jennifer Berdahl of the *University of British Columbia*, targeted for sexual harassment. As Whyman adds there is no doubt that even in 2018: 'we still think that what they're doing is occupying a male space'.

The fear of over-sentimentalising or romanticising aspects of womanhood is proving to become increasingly present within popular culture today.

With that in mind Whyman's production of *Miss Littlewood*, based on the life of notorious playwright Joan Littlewood, represents a young woman faced with the dilemma of becoming a mother or endeavouring to pursue her career. Except for her it is not a dilemma, the decision is clear, her future certain. The audience refreshingly sees a woman knowing motherhood is not for her, there are no tears, no doubts and no fear. Without question, this portrayal is stimulating despite the natural lack of maternal instincts feeling like 'a radical act'. Whyman adds 'it feels rare to see that portrayed on stage or screen, we still sentimentalise the idea that women are made to have children.'

Whyman herself speaks about her experience of becoming pregnant at 42,

which she goes on to describe as a 'miracle'. For many 42 would be considered late to have a child which was indeed the preconception she faced. The notion that a woman's life is incomplete until she welcomes her first child is met with disagreement from Whyman who explains from her own experience: 'I wasn't actually sure if it was what I wanted and people project onto you that if you're 42 and haven't had a child then something is missing and I'm not sure that it was'. Whyman's clear snub to the expectation that women still face to reproduce is met with the lyrics spat out by Joan who sings: 'to think that I could just be somebody's mother...someone's wife.' Two archetypes more of us are beginning to rebel from.

The importance for making both *Romeo and Juliet* and *Miss Littlewood* accessible for a younger demographic and representative of our society today was especially poignant for Whyman who made it clear both her productions strove to emulate 'a season which spoke directly to young people.'

All the while tapping into the notion that to make these plays accessible the women needed to be representative of the nation; they needed to be 'strong, wild, vulnerable or in control.'

That being said, elements of *Romeo and Juliet* could be argued to have strong male dominance undertones.

Act III scene 5 is one of the key moments of a male power struggle within the play. We see Juliet's father outraged at her denial to obey her parent's wishes of marrying Tybalt, what comes with this in Whyman's production is a clear nod towards domestic abuse. We see a man who's 'fingers itch' but interestingly does not touch Juliet. Whyman explains: 'we have a lonely man who is not in a happy

marriage, we also know that when people lash out it's because they are unhappy and have no way of expressing it.'

She goes on to add that none of this is excusable for domestic violence within a home but through this representation we can recognise Whyman's attempts at making a clear acknowledgement to the 1.9 million adults who experienced domestic abuse in the last year, according to the Office for National Statistics. Despite this uncomfortable scene of abuse, we still see a young woman showing strength to try and reason with her father, a sign of courage despite Juliet knowing the potential her father has to cause harm.

Similarly, in *Miss Littlewood* we see seven different actresses, all playing Joan, a woman who 'any audience member can find themselves in', this artistic choice was thought out to represent the different personalities of the protagonist but also to highlight the rarity of seeing a woman on stage saying, 'this isn't what I want.' Again, a sign of strength, of certainty.

What is evident in both these productions directed by Whyman is there is no hiding from the power of passion, whether it be love, family or career. The message is clear: Whyman is not afraid to challenge the perception of gender, nor the attitude of our culture.

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