

# Q & A with Antony Sher

London's leading actor on playing Tamburlaine.

BY GERARD RAYMOND

**A**ntony Sher is a British star with huge box office appeal in London, whose work has not been seen on the American stage. Ironically, the South African-born actor is better known in the States as a writer, the author of two novels and a diary of a famous production of *Richard III*, in which he played Shakespeare's notorious villain on crutches. He is currently starring in Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great*, directed by Terry Hands, and Tom Stoppard's *Travesties*, directed by Adrian Noble, both playing in repertory at the Royal Shakespeare Company. Well known for his highly physical approach to acting, Sher gives a bravura performance as the barbaric warlord in Marlowe's epic, delivering, at one point, a key speech while hanging upside down on a rope. In *Travesties* he plays Henry Carr, the low level English consular officer in Zürich who boasts about his real and imaginary relationships with James Joyce, Tristran Tzara, and Lenin.

**TheaterWeek: Is Tamburlaine the most physical part you've played since Richard III?**

**Antony Sher:** This is more demanding. I am also ten years older now, so I'm noticing I haven't quite got the puff really to do some of the physical stuff. I want to play parts now where I just sit quietly in a chair and say witty things!

**You have often complained that British acting lacks physicality.**

It is something that I am passionately keen on, and it excites me to see actors using and transforming their bodies.

**But should an actor be asked to do the gymnastic feats you perform in Tamburlaine?**

It wasn't a case of being asked to do those things. Long before the rehearsal stage [the director] Terry Hands and I were talking about cutting the text, because, as you know, *Tamburlaine* is two massive plays and it has been accused of



Antony Sher as Tamburlaine at the RSC. Ivan Kyncl

being rather monotonous. You have those scenes where Tamburlaine meets a new foe, they kind of boast at one another, there is an off-stage battle and Tamburlaine comes on victorious. We had to try and create unique battle scenes, make the fights genuinely exciting. And we had to create a sense of Tamburlaine having very special physical powers as a warrior. You had to have a slight sense of him as Superman or Terminator II, whatever. That is when we found this amazing eighty-year-old man, Johnny Hutch, who specializes in teaching acrobatics and gymnastics. He began to train me and we began to look at what was feasible for me, as a non-acrobat and non-gymnast, to learn in the space of six to eight months. So gradually we came to things like the rope and the various other things that I do.

**How safe are these acrobatics?**

It is safe if you train to the extent that I have and if you have the back-up I have. I had several injuries and I went straight to the physiotherapy people who deal with the English football team. What I have to do, and luckily I have got the sort of clout if you like, is to put it in my contract from the start that the management will pay for physiotherapy or massage and my medical bills.

**What about the vocal demands of the**

**two plays? What's it like alternating Marlowe and Stoppard?**

Well, I guess, while I can criticize British Theater for not being physical enough, I have been criticized for not working on my voice enough. Before *Tamburlaine* opened last year at Stratford, I went into training both physically and vocally for about 6-8 months. Marlowe's verse is really difficult stuff.

**I understand you worked on removing the Englishness out of your voice for Tamburlaine.**

Yes and for *Travesties* you try and get Englishness into it. Tamburlaine, this shepherd, this peasant, has got to speak this poetry and I felt I needed a rougher voice. One of the things I worked on with various vocal coaches was reaching back to my South African accent which I had lost, not so much through going to drama school, but out of shame of being a white South African. I regret that now, because I think it is very useful to have your own accent that you can go back to. The way I speak now is not a genuine accent. It was almost like therapy really, going back and digging out. Not that I play the part in a South African accent, it is just getting some of that coarseness back.

**What are the challenges of Travesties?**

Stoppard is just amazing. Some of his sentences are like tongue twisters and they have to be done at such speed. Half the time your tongue and lips are doing their own gymnastics. Very few modern playwrights that I have experienced require that deftness of articulation and phrasing. It's almost like classical writing where you have just got to learn where to breathe. Often, you won't get the laugh at the end of line unless you have breathed correctly.

I have never surfed, but I imagine the exhilaration of surfing must be like this [performing *Travesties*]*—riding these waves. You just feel this thing happen and all you have to do is ride on top of it. TW*