



# How cool — two Nobel Laureates bonding over their art

Derek Walcott on directing Seamus Heaney's great play  
at the Globe — and on being back in London town

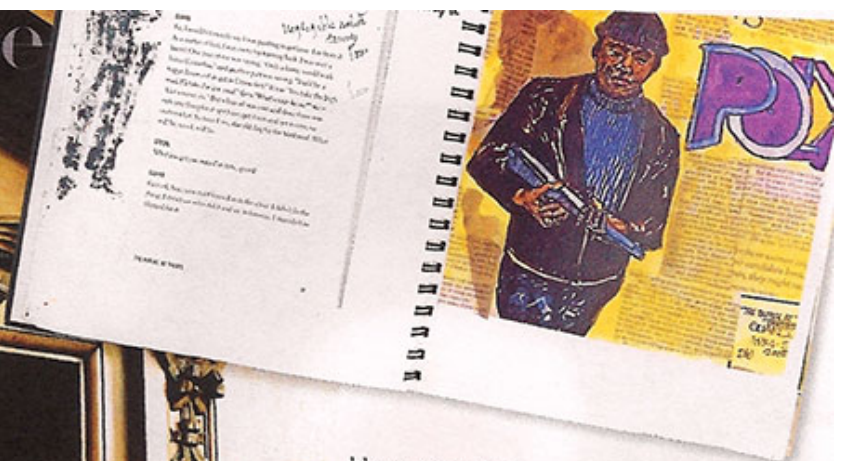
## 9 September

You know how, coming around the corner to the Brunelleschi hotel in Milan, just yards from the Duomo, you feel that you're coming home? Well, it is almost that way in London, turning into the street where Durrants hotel still is, with the curious space where the cab can park and let you out, where the feeling of England begins, right next to the Wallace Collection building where your favourite Barrington watercolours still are and where London begins its London-ness, its pseudo-modest theatricality, all its movie and theatre clichés, its filmic lounge with its punctilious porter and where you are the only one without an accent, and where you may stay for a long time before you begin rehearsals before opening at the Globe. *The Globe?* You mean...? Yes. So mantle your modesty in the necessary, in the exterior concoction of a director. Settle. Find your rhythm. Establish your affectation.

## 10 September

To be in England for a month! To be in London! Last night the city seemed infinite, every lamplit perspective sectioning itself into districts whose names you have heard but can't identify, because there is no memory of them, because the old is new to you. You hear their names from a friend discussing directions with the taxi driver and every name sounds faintly hallowed because you have read it or heard it in a film.

What is happening is spectral, it is a process of dissolving and becoming. The distancing that happens is not *merely* geographic. ▶



Walcott and Heaney. Top right, Walcott's sketchbook for his production of *The Burial at Thebes*

blown away. And even you, non-English, but a writer and speaker of the language, can admire the heritage without sharing it. Smoke can become a burden, like an abstract reputation. That is how you feel. Spectres and great speeches haunt the mirrors of your hotel room.

So, what are your qualifications? What about age? Aren't you too old to enjoy Milan or London? You have a life as blinkered as a carthorse's. You read and write. You are not a sightseer, not even a museum haunter. You don't really fit into any city. You're in the age of retirement ('His golden locks Time hath to silver turned'), but a few words on age: I place no special value in either youth or age; everything is immediate to me. It is poetry before it is a play, its choruses more moving than its plot, its respect for awe more moving than its action. I suppose this was true for the Greek audiences of many thousands of years ago. The poetry was new and not the story. Fiction in theatre is the negligible thing.

There is a pastoral London too, in its parks and plane tree-shaded lanes and, with autumn brilliantly coming, a Globe, a London, that recalls Justice Shallow and the usual froth-bearded, ale-bloated Falstaff at home in an orchard, the force itself with the

silent metre of falling leaves, feathery skies over the famous river and the elegiac idea of the great wooden O that you remember as a schoolboy, even if the theatre was somewhere else.

Along the river everything is autumnal, even in spring, but you will not be doing Chekhov or the autumn-hued prose of *Henry IV, Part 2*, rather a play you have cast in a hot, searing glare: a desert and tropic light with shadows black in the brightest day, not in a climate of veils and violence, but of rigid emblematic palm-fronds, of turgid rivers and the faint reek of corruption, of a corpse sprawled in a street of Thebes nuzzled by mongrels. Heat and quick corruption, the taunted sky of a tyranny. *The Burial at Thebes* would not work in a contemporary dramatic context. Its politics is, at least in a visual design if not in morals, foreign to the city of postcard steeples, serene walks and somnolent barges.

13 September

The nip in the air, the knife-blade edge of a breeze down George Street (it ought to be two syllables for the rhythm), as architectural styles go past: Georgian, Bauhaus, Forties modern, towards the rehearsal places – far off and, presumably, bleak. The landscape and the city carried in the head in a funeral taxi is blazingly bright, in contrast to the horrible events to come. >

Mer, the sea, is contained in the pun, in the adverb, because I now have to pay mental homage not to the sea but to a great river – with its banks and buildings, its tugs, cranes and barges, its bridges and, again, that element time, meaning history that flows past and under them. The theatre flows with that slow current, flows past solemnly, funereally, but it flows backwards, back to (if that was its original site), the Globe. At the sight or mention of the name, the pit of the head swarms with echoes, resounds with pentametrical curves. It is a little frightening to occupy both tenses, the present and the first Elizabethan present, to establish the moving lineaments of your body in the fog of such history.

I hope history will recall that on 11 October 2008, a play called *The Burial at Thebes* by Seamus Heaney was staged at the Globe. Without false subtlety the phantasmal roll-call will unscroll itself to mute cornets and quick genuflections towards the Mecca of English theatre history (or rather religion, since Shakespeare is another form of religion). You will be standing, if not on the actual hallowed ground, on a replica of the actual wooden temple that outsoared its conflagration and in whose smoke great speeches roiled, dissipated and were

**Aren't you too old to enjoy Milan and London?**