

Interview - David Parry

Written by E-International Relations

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Rev. David Parry is an award-winning theatre director, producer, author, poet and Valentinian priest. He gained his BA in Religious Studies from King's College London, and MA in Pastoral Theology from Heythrop College, University of London. Currently, he is completing his D. Philos at the University of Bergen on Henrik Ibsen's *When We Dead Awaken* as Liturgical Stagecraft, as well as his fourth book, *Catholic Communism: Essaying Giordano Bruno's Ideal*. His published works include two poetry-sagas, *Caliban's Redemption*, and *The Grammar of Witchcraft*, while his main theatrical performances, as Director, comprise *The Botanist Monsieur Jordan* and *The Sorcerer-Dervish Mastali Shah*; *Shakespeare: A Comedy in Ten Scenes, both Serious and Tragic*; *Citizens of Hell*; as well as *Shakespeare Tonight*. His work often explores the interplay between religion and conceptualist theatre, with a particular focus on unlimited semiosis in morality dramas.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

That's actually quite a complicated question. Certainly, a lot of "Fringe" and "Off West End" productions at the minute are very interesting and are starting to catch the attention of cutting-edge scholarship. A phenomenon not only explained by the fact they are overtly political, but also clarified through them being extremely imaginative. What is more, phrases like "found objects as stage props" and "character liturgies", both of which I am very interested in personally and each one of which influences my own work as a playwright, are openly discussed by these two groups nowadays. Along, that is, with books like *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* by Keir Elam, which has guided me a lot. In addition, the intriguing contributions made by Mark Ravenhill, Sarah Kane and my colleague Victor Sobchak demand our attention. For me, of course, unlike these playwrights, theological issues directly interweave with vernacular productions in the miracle and mystery play genre; a blatantly working-class style of staging, which originated in our European Middle Ages, while still having an almost knee-jerk impact on current moral sensibilities.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

Overall, I am not sure it's changed as such through time, but, without doubt, it has deepened. After all, there is a literary "odd couple" that has influenced me; Machiavelli and Joseph Francis Fletcher. So, obviously, Machiavelli has a certain type of pernicious reputation, whereas Fletcher's idea of Situation Ethics has had a huge impact on nearly everything I undertake. Indisputably, "what would love do" in any given set of circumstances is challenging and thought-provoking in equal measure, although, unlike Fletcher, I never felt the need to abandon civic institutions of any sort, or for that matter a gravitational pull towards atheism. Instead, I discovered a new freedom to explore the often half-formed motivations behind so many of our human actions. So, through the years they cross-fertilised each other for me. On one hand, they seemingly oppose one another, but I think they equally shed light on each other, which is exceedingly interesting. And for me it has proved a very, very, productive interplay throughout the years.

What is conceptual art? In Britain, is this intrinsically political?

On the most fundamental level, art is everything. It is me. It is you. It is Existence. It is Theatre. That is Conceptual Art. You know, the idea that the concept – the notion – is primary; not financial concerns, not design concerns, not technical concerns, but rather the basic hypothesis itself is truly radical. So, this type of creative enterprise is driven

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by concepts. I think this is a very modern view. It's a Modernist stance. On a related note, conceptualist staging seeks to blend pure abstraction with multileveled entertainment. An undertaking whereby each "show" attempts to dissolve the boundaries between expectation, performance and experience. In this respect, every creative image, or belief, becomes a mechanism within which art is manufactured. All meaning, decisions and planning are taken beforehand, while physical execution is an entirely different affair. Consequently, whether you are actually a political progressive, or not, you tend to be put in that category by critics, by word-of-mouth, by advertising agents. I have actually got some sympathies with Traditionalist viewpoints, but I notice I have been placed in this Modernist category even though I have openly said this throughout the years.

Do we still need to read Machiavelli's oeuvre today?

Well, I would not go as far as to say he should be on a required reading list. But, certainly, his relevance is never lost. He deals with matters that still concern us. Most people form their judgements and opinions based on *The Prince* and *Discourses*, which is a shame. People tend to forget Machiavelli was also a poet, a playwright, a songwriter; and one well-known in his period. Furthermore, for every "Machiavellian precept", for every sinister comment, there are at least three, or four, others that counterbalance them. At one minute, he appears to applaud oath-breakers, whereas in the next he goes on to praise the fact "victories are never secure without some respect, especially for justice". Undoubtedly, my own awakening to these ambiguities started when I realised his attention-grabbing phrases had distorted the critical reception of his corpus. Accordingly, it is a real shame that this "alternative" side of his collected scribbles remains largely unknown, since that would add a necessary equilibrium to people's views of Machiavelli's position in the sphere of European letters – and who he is as a once living, breathing, man.

Deception is the central theme of Machiavelli's social-comedy "The Mandrake". In which case, is it fair to say this is a lens through which his political outlook can be discerned?

I suppose the answer to that question is "yes and no". It harks back to what I was saying before. There is a lot more to him as a writer than simply a political theorist; and that's not taking away anything from political theorists. On top of which, different translators have given a different emphasis to the magnitude of deception in this play; apart from the fact everybody is doing something different. You know, one character wants a financial reward, while another wants sexual pleasure. Thusly, it's not one type of deception. A number of things are going on simultaneously, while we must never forget this isn't a political work. It's a satire. It's a play. It's a comedy. Indeed, various critics have asked if the script is promoting a sinister, odd, political thesis which claims doing bad in the world will get you what you want in the end. Others have queried if it is just a bitter humanist lamenting his lot in life. Again, others have enquired into the possibility it is merely the penning of someone who had been stabbed in the back when the Medici's returned to power and who subsequently wants revenge. Or is it, in the final analysis, Machiavelli laughing at everything, because there is no diplomatic room left for him to manoeuvre? In other words, is it radical disillusionment that reigns behind this play, more than politics? Be it one way or another, as a dramatist myself, I would not really see any of these overarching intentions as constituting a central comedic design, or an understandable, emotive counter-attack on his enemies. To be honest, I think it is the "attitude" of world-weary disillusionment which provides the best understanding of this apparently carefree, but sophisticated, romp.

Could it be said that "The Mandrake" is a defence of Republicanism?

With hindsight, I reckon contemporary audiences are ill-served by fashionable "performance models". It's always unwise to forget timeframes. At the end of the day, Machiavelli lived a long time ago and notions of "realpolitik" and "republicanism" were very different in those days – in a period before two World Wars and unprecedented humanitarian atrocities. In one sense, therefore, he lived in a much more innocent world than ours. Further, we often read his work through our current lenses, through our contemporary glasses – and we have got to be careful that we are not infusing our own embittered interpretations into his work, rather than discerning those viewpoints forming the spirit of his era. From a slant, dare I suggest, obscuring his insistence that "manly ambition" is a virile call to embrace life in all of its endlessly cosmopolitan totality. To my mind, agreeing with the Cambridge School, republicanism rages throughout the whole of his collected works, but he uses a sort of medieval language to express himself. He talks about chivalric values like "prowess", like the "heart", like "courage", while transparently drawing on medieval Italian

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literature, at the same time as employing classical authors such as Sallust to legitimise his arguments. Significantly, he is in a continuous literary tradition and far from being alone in that respect. And yes, republicanism is very strongly present in his body of work.

What is Machiavelli's interpretation of Power, International Relations, Goodwill?

I think the best way of approaching this is through the litmus test of his humanism. Unquestionably, Machiavelli would have considered himself something of a classical humanist, while at that time, he would have meant this assertion as a scholarly appeal to pre-Christian values and virtues. Therefore, he is against Christianity, I suppose, because he rejects any faith perceived as weakening our general human resolve. Instead, for Machiavelli, we need to get back to a previous virile, healthy, "manly" moral order – and, for him, this previous ethical order tended to be chivalric in essential composition. Thus, you actually have quite a recognisable picture at this point. A powerful government – a powerful ruler – is one which is more likely to make good relations, international relations, social relations, between fellows, between different nations, different states, different peoples than a weak institution, or individual monarch. In which case, goodwill naturally develops out of this vigorous situation. To be sure, there will be a union, a brotherhood, between nations, tribes, city-states and the subject people's within them when guided by their potent prince. So, in one weird sense, he is quite idealistic. As I was saying earlier, for every "Machiavellian concept", there are at least three, or four others, which outbalance them if we remember his gathered writings correctly, while clearly, his overall stance seems guarded, albeit on closer inspection recklessly idealistic. All contextualising the reality that his supporters – particularly his friend Guicciardini – were eager to remind their listeners that the same means could be used by an ethical man to achieve good ends. An unanticipated evocation of compassionate experience for those unfamiliar with this style of thinking.

What was Machiavelli's attitude to social cohesion and religion?

Across the decades, I have myself had a testy relationship with organised religion masquerading as Church. Confessed so, I tend to have a natural sympathy towards anyone who has also been on the receiving end of this institution. Hence, in Machiavelli's case, it is easy to assert he obviously had a highly complex attitude, although a very, very, telling one. Certainly, Joseph Fletcher was equally puissant in pointing out there is more to religion than just acting in an unthreatening way, or being a nice guy, which is basically Machiavelli's problem with religion as it was taught in his day. All in all, he would have seen it as weakening someone's dignity. It didn't have knightly determination; a knightly perseverance in the face of fate. You know, it was a way of enfeebling people, by talking about "higher-order" qualities and so on. Contrarily, he was very clear, even though he thought religion was utterly man-made, that it was very useful. The prince should use it whenever he can for the cohesion of the state and, if possible, religious sentiments should be transferred from God to the prince. Patently, a very, clever way of binding his theses together and making them into a coherent whole. Anyhow, for quickly discernible reasons, I can only meet him halfway on this specific issue. Quite apart from the evidence demonstrating there is manifestly much more to full religious witness than naïve social unity.

Are you planning to stage any future projects based on Machiavelli's artistic contributions?

Well, it's curious that has come up, because, actually, I am planning to stage *The Mandrake* myself as the Director in the near future. Probably late spring, or early summer, next year. It is already under discussion. And, since I think he is such a timely writer at the moment, I am additionally planning to reintroduce some of his poetry and maybe some of his songs myself. I also perform from time to time. Thence, I think these materials need an airing on stage to get a more cogent view of Machiavelli, while it's also fascinating to examine what else he did as a creative. In this respect, I will be relying on current concepts of "performance" (a conceptualist approach to staged scientific ideas), along with the notion of "postdramatic" theatre. Outlined so, these projects will be conceptually richer than their predecessors, while simultaneously offering a robust response to pundits like Robert Hughes when he commented the only problem with conceptual art to date was the quality of the ideas being examined. Undoubtedly, a little too harsh, even though wordy phrases like "aesthetic contestation" and "theatrical semantics" applied to an unmade bed prove far from helpful.

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What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars?

I think young scholars are basically in the same position as young theatricals, which is astonishing in some ways. You know, there is a resistance to genuine experimentation at the moment, due to a supposed lack of resources. They are supposedly thinner on the ground than ever before, which is a shame; if not plainly shameful. Hence, my own advice would be to go back to primary sources. Devour them, because otherwise there will be a real danger of misunderstanding the manner whereby arguments evolve from them. Looking back, one of my past strategies in unlocking blatantly esoteric tomes was to research the biography of a writer before exploring their books. A personal practice allowing me to see them as a fellow human being and thereafter gather inspiration from their publications; whether it was a “hot topic” doing its fashionable rounds, or a volume which had already stood the test of time. And without such real heritage, we don't really know, we don't fully understand, how creative, conceptual, authors, or for that matter analytical commentators, arrive at what they are stating. So, it's a vital recovery of the original, of the original texts, which pays dividends.