WRITING THE PLAY: Interview with Davey Anderson

Did you choose to write this play in this form? Or was it dictated by the fact you had been commissioned by the National Theatre's Connections Festival and had to fit their criteria?

DA: The honest answer is that was the requirement from the National Theatre. However, I feel like it's the right match of content and way of approaching the content in terms of a flexibility around who is speaking at any given point, and who is being spoken to. I think that's crucial for the content of the piece. I wanted something that could be done by one person or a community of people. The interplay between the individual and the collective is part of the theme of the piece for me. I'm also interested in something that isn't prescriptive in its staging. From a writer's point of view, I want the input of the creative team and the actors. I want to create the space between the lines where they have to ask questions because the whole point of the play is that it sparks conversations and get people thinking and debating with each other.

Do you think this style of writing the play is good for young people, allowing them to fill in the gaps with their own interpretation of events?

DA: Yes. I think it's unusual in the space that it gives and also in the tense and the mode of it where it's not in the first person's voice, it's in the second person. We kind of cast the audience to put themselves in the place of the central character. It asks the audience to do a little more imaginative work I think. I want the creative team and the performers to be really active in the process, as well as the audience as they receive this play.

Do you think the director and actors need to decide who James attacks and tries to strangle?

DA: Yes I think they do. But I don't think they have to communicate that to the audience.

Does it matter who they believe the victim is?

DA: I don't think that matters because it's been fictionalised. The text is not just a documentary. It's been told in a way that relates to a lot of situations, not just one person's situation. So that's the important thing. I don't want it to be treated as a documentary. I want it to be treated as a drama, which raises important human questions and seeks a different kind of truth. The origin of the play is that I was asked to have a conversation with someone who was being mentored by Barnados, the children's charity – with someone who was serving a probation sentence and was still in the middle of that sentence. So I had an interesting role: someone who was the perpetrator of a crime but someone who [Barnados] see very much as a victim of the things that had happened to him. So there was an element of protecting him.

Do you want us to sympathise with James?

DA: As a dramatist, one of my ambitions is that you should be able to empathise with every character; to put yourself in their position and understand the choices they have made, even if

you don't agree with them. And in terms of argument, for me there are definitely always two things going on: there's someone's context and circumstances and there's the active agency of the individual within that. One is not more important than the other. I'm not saying that an individual's moral choices are more important than their social circumstances; or that someone's socio-economic circumstances dictate and limit their choices. Both things are alive within the piece and I'm interested in the discussion you can have after the play about that.

What do you want to say in the play to young people who do not identify directly with James because their circumstances are not like his?

DA: The most important thing is to spark curiosity. It's not about knowledgegiving or about teaching how other people live. It's an encouragement to enquire. I think teenagers have that strong sense of enquiry. So, what I can do as a dramatist is encourage deeper, further enquiry. I think that's part of my job.

How do you achieve a balance between talking about important social issues in your plays while avoiding lecturing young people in ways that don't interest them?

DA: That's something I wrestle with all the time. Between wanting to be polemical and wanting to make an argument, to direct people towards a certain conclusion. And another impulse of wanting to be someone who listens, who uses theatre as a tool to put me in a space with other people who have something to teach me. I think that's something that theatre does do very well. When you're telling a story, rather than constructing an essay, I think all of the arguments are still open or you can have multiple perspectives on the same series of events. And so you just have the events laid out very clearly and you can interpret them in different ways. Then when you are encouraged to express your interpretation of events, and someone else has a different point of view, then you have to try and be clearer about why you think this is why he did what he did, or this is what led her to that, or this is what other people could have done or this is what we should do now. All of those things have to be brought into the room. You don't have to necessarily say those thematic things explicitly. You just tell the story.

Some audiences might feel James reaches a point of understanding and self-discovery too easily and that realising he just needed someone to talk to is not a realistic response. What would you say about that?

DA: I think the question James asks himself is "What do I do now?" I think that's a genuine question: "What do you think I should do?" Not, "What have you got to offer?". This is not necessarily the end of his story. He still has his whole life ahead and there are lots of sequels to this. Even though there is a set of instructions or statements at the end of the play, i.e. "You go back to your house, you apologise…", those statements were in fact questions for the group of young performers who I first worked on the play with. "Is that what you do?" I like the ambivalence and the open-endedness of him going to bed at the end of the play. He is going to wake up the next day, and then what?

Do you think some people might thing James is being radicalised, in the sense we understand that today? And if they do think that, how do you feel about that interpretation?

DA: I think this character is someone who is searching for an identity; he wants to know who he is, he wants to know where he belongs, to feel at ease rather than a sense of insecurity. So maybe there is something suggestive there to the process of radicalisation – you get to be

someone with a purpose. There's a sense of higher purpose that you can tap into. But it's not quite a story about someone who finds a group – he is still on the fringes. There is a feeling of abandonment and isolation and a desperation that comes from that. Some of the characteristics of the skinhead identity are not that far from what his granddad represented, except they belong to a warped sense of an idol he looked up to. Not necessarily counter to that.

What are you hoping teachers will gain from the experience of the play and workshop with their students?

DA: One thing it's not is a moral lesson. We're not telling teenagers how to behave. But it's a story that demands a response from those who work on it, so it's a real opportunity for teachers to learn what their students think about these issues and I feel like that's a step towards encouraging empathy; seeing things from another's perspective, because you offer that yourself as a teacher. It's a chance to facilitate a discussion about what choices people make in life; what is the balance between circumstances and people's agency. It's less a chance to come to a conclusion, more a catalyst for a conversation. I have a real problem with theatre people being experts. Who are the experts in the room? The young people are. They know things I can't know. The theatre is a route towards a deeper conversation. So we need to ask them did this resonate with you? What's missing here. Tell us about how you felt watching it – what's different now