



Anne Washburn & Robert Icke: Oral/Aural Remains

[00:00:23] INTRO

Duška Radosavljević: Hello and welcome to the Salon.

Our guests today are Anne Washburn and Robert Icke, the playwright-director team behind the 2014 critical and box office hit *Mr Burns: A Post-Electric Play*, at the Almeida Theatre. This play, as noted by Lyn Gardner in *The Guardian* at the time, ‘celebrate[d] the power of storytelling, the imperfections of memory and ask[ed] what might endure [after a catastrophe]: Homer or Homer Simpson?’

Anne Washburn is an internationally renowned experimental American playwright whose plays include *Mr. Burns*, *The Internationalist*, *A Devil at Noon*, *Apparition*, *The Communist Dracula Pageant*, *I Have Loved Strangers*, *The Ladies*, *The Small* and a transadaptation of Euripides’ *Orestes*. She has won a number of awards including a Guggenheim, an NYFA Fellowship and a Time Warner Fellowship, and was a Susan Smith Blackburn prize finalist in 2020 for *Shipwreck*.

Robert Icke is an award-winning British writer and director, and former associate director at the Almeida in London. In 2018, he won the Kurt Hübner Award for his debut production of *Oresteia* in Germany, and was elected Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. He won the ‘Best Director’ Olivier Award for his 2015 production of *Oresteia* at the Almeida and the West End, which also won the ‘Best Director’ prize at both the Critics Circle and *Evening Standard* Theatre Awards. His production of *1984* won ‘Best Director’ at the UK Theatre Awards 2014 and ‘Best Director’ at the Liverpool Arts Awards 2013.

Washburn and Icke are reunited in this Salon for a chat about the ‘pandemic apocalypse’ – but this is also a conversation about theatre, history and culture now. What are the responsibilities of creatives at a time when sociality is banned and the circulation of ideas increasingly mediated? What sounds will be remembered from this time? What will remain as the preserved stories of our civilisation?

This conversation took place between London and New York and was recorded on Zoom on 18th December 2020.

[00:02:42] SALON

Robert Icke: We have begun. How are you, Anne Washburn?

Anne Washburn: I’m just fine, as everyone says these days. How are you?

RI: Yeah, I’m all right. So we have to talk about *Mr Burns* – and I haven’t asked you this, but you must be undergoing a huge amount of *Mr Burns*-related pandemic apocalypse interest.

AW: No, at the start of it, there was a certain percolating amount of discussion. To me it feels like such a completely different kind of pandemic, which has been a little bit disorienting, honestly – just because there were a number of years where I was in the room with *Burns* a lot, and that’s such a specific catastrophic pandemic, and I feel like without realising it, I began to feel a little bit expert about the mental space occupied by pandemic. And this is so different from my imaginary pandemic experience!

RI: Your imaginary pandemic was detailed down to the day, wasn’t it, when we did it? Like you had, I remember there were moments on the timeline where Obama addressed the nation and where the channels went down, and you had it really – I think at the insistence of the actors – but I think you did have it like on a day-by-day breakdown.

AW: That wasn’t something I had created before writing it. That was just the actors demanded it and so it was kind of a fun – it was a fun thing to sort of make up. But the whole point of that pandemic was that it was absolutely catastrophic, which meant that it was really clean, do you know? Like, I don’t remember what our timeline was, but it was a couple months, right, and then it was done and almost everybody was dead, and everybody else was coping. You know, instead of this really ragged, messy



– some chunk of society has really just been taken out by this, and other people are kind of fine, and yeah – it's different. All of my pandemic coping skills are not quite in order for this one. But what about you? Because you spent time also with this imaginary pandemic. How is this one treating you? Do you have any bleed-over from that time, or is it just a completely separate – it must be, right?

RI: You know what, there is a bit of bleed-over. There was a sort of – there's something about the hoarding of toilet roll that really speaks–

AW: [Laughter.]

RI: –to the moment. Like really thinking about *Burns*, maybe more than anything else I've ever worked on, it's got sort of – you have to kind of get into the headspace of the society level psychology, not just the individuals in the play and their actions and why they behave like they do, but to kind of go: the whole picture is dented and traumatised in the following way... And there was something fascinating about – because we were, as you know, I think, in Amsterdam, when the first proper kind of downhill slide towards lockdown happened, and everyone was hoarding toilet paper, like the Dutch were hoarding toilet paper as well! At the same time as we were getting messages from friends in London going: 'Oh my god, there's no toilet paper, like the shelves are empty!' It was interesting watching the personalities who, I guess, were more given to resisting what feels like authority when it comes to pandemic. You know, you go: 'Well, I'm not that sure if it's going to be a thing.' And like, other people go: 'Well, it'll be a couple of weeks and then...' And like, one by one, these people have to give up their resistance to it, and go: 'Okay, well, we better – we're not doing that show, are we?', or: 'That's going to have to close down', or whatever. And there's a sort of odd equalising quality, isn't there, about the moment of total lockdown. If no one can buy toilet paper because it's all gone, and–

AW: Right.

RI: –no one can go: 'Well, we're going to do our show actually – bugger off, everybody else.' You just can't, because there's no way of resisting a sort of national level event. That felt *Burnsian* for me, you know, that it's like no one's got any Diet Coke, nobody has any way of providing cheap indoor heating or electricity or digital technology.

AW: I would say a huge difference, and one of the many differences is the degree to which, you know, some people had the ability to indulge paranoiac overspending on things like toilet roll – and some people did not. Okay, here is something that does remind me of *Burns*, which is that part of what *Burns* came from – which I think we talked about in the rehearsal room – was watching after 9/11 (which was one very clear single event with these sort of huge ripples), being in New York at that time and just watching everyone perform the same etiquette at the same time, which I had never experienced before. So just like: when people talked about what part of it, what people said, what they didn't say, there was a – to a degree to which I think we never think about because it's just not something we have a lot of vocabulary around – so much of our social experience in normal life is, I don't know, mixing and mingling and talking amongst people and who's on what page. You know, and we're all on slightly different pages, and getting with the people whose page you're on and avoiding the people whose page you're really not on, and negotiating all the necessary different pages. But everyone in New York was on the same page, for three days absolutely the same page, and then, as it spiralled out, like I was just – like the group mind around it, I had never experienced before. And I will say this is something that I have been reminded of in the pandemic.

RI: It's really interesting, isn't it, because one of the key dramatic actions in *Mr Burns* is the urge to hoard, except that it's culture that's being hoarded and lines from *The Simpsons*, but it's actually not that different from a big stack of toilet roll. It's a thing you think you might need at some point in the future and you don't want to have to be entirely without. I don't know about you, I've been quite surprised by the non-role of culture, if that makes sense. Like, I've not noticed any – I'd be interested to know what's been streamed on Spotify the most. What have we turned to, and is it the thing that is most comforting? Because of course we've not been deprived in the same [way]. We've been deprived of the collective experience in terms of theatres and in terms of cinemas, but actually, because everyone's got Netflix and everyone was doing more Netflix anyway than they were doing theatre or cinema – I'd be interested to know what culture got consumed at the sort of spike points of the pandemic when everything was locked down.



AW: Oh, that would be fascinating! And surely it's accessible and graphable. Although at the same time – I don't know if you've had this experience, I have – you know, for all that we now have all the time in the world to stay home at night and watch TV, which used to be a delicious privilege, honestly: a night at home, pizza, television – we aren't doing so much of it and we're not doing very much new content. We're doing hardly any movies, very little streaming theatre in its various forms, like either contemporary or archival. And that's been the experience of a lot of people I've talked with. I mean people actually seem to be consuming less than they used to. They, sort of, don't have the bandwidth for anything new in an odd way, whatever it is about this continual ongoing crisis that drains away half of your attention by the time you hit nightfall.

RI: I really recognise that. And the sort of re-watching of things. I can think of a couple of occasions when I've been overjoyed to realise my partner hasn't seen a film that I'm quite happy to re-watch. Do you know what I mean? And like, rather than try a new film, I've gone: 'Oh you've never seen that? Let's watch that.' And there's something – I've found myself even less tolerant than normal of being bored, because actually there's a sort of ambient boredom, does that make sense? Like, I'm just not willing to stick with it, with a box set that's not doing it for me.

AW: I think patience takes strength, yeah? And boredom is a form of patience in a way.

RI: [*Laughter.*] That's a lovely way of putting it. Yeah, exactly. But I guess normally I'm distracted by: there are people to call and there were like rehearsal rooms to be in and there are things to check up on and there are places to go. And then suddenly you're not. Suddenly you're in the flat and dealing with things from here, but there's nothing to plan in terms of future productions, because no one knows when the theatres are going to be open again, and so you sort of – I'm like 'Okay, well, literally all I can do is deliver those writing commissions I took on.'

AW: But I would be really curious – I mean, this again is something that could be graphed – I'd be curious to know how the novelists and poets who already are in a world where they're meant to spend all day kind of hunched over the thing – whereas I feel like the thing about being a playwright is that it's a weird combination of the times when you're writing and then the times when you're out and about and rehearsing or, at the very least, seeing plays. And you know, it's a more social profession, so you don't have... I don't write steadily, and I'm not entirely convinced that it's weakness of character. I think it may have something to do with, I don't know, I think plays maybe need to be created in a bit more of a cataclysmic series of moments than something like a novel where you really need to be steadier about it! Just, repeatedly, like – I feel like the novelists I know who make it work, work every day and work for long periods of time and really accumulate something. And I feel like I know very few playwrights who... Some people write really steadily, but they'll sort of switch back and forth and do different kinds of things, and I know a lot of playwrights who write – I mean, it's the danger of that particular profession, because up to a point it's good, I think it brings you to it fresher, and after a point it's a squandering of everything. It's that whole question of: to what point is procrastination actually a really good piling up of impulse and desire and horror, all of which you know funnels into something which has a lot of zoom and velocity to it, and at what point is it just, yeah, waste?

RI: Not doing any work, yeah.

AW: Yeah.

RI: At what point is it just not doing any work when you could be doing some work?

AW: Do you know anyone in this time, who has been able to do what the time promises and just like super steadily apply themselves with—?

RI: I think no. I mean, I've not spoken to anybody who's had a hugely productive year, I guess. But I find that – and again maybe this is novel-to-play different – I think, because all of the work for us has to ultimately meet a live audience in the live room, it feels to me – well, maybe this is just personal, but I was going to say, it feels to me it's difficult to do that job without keeping in touch with the world.

AW: I mean, I feel like we lose the habit of each other, for sure. On the other hand, just not being able to jostle up against each other, nobody feels right about that. And as someone who spends most of her time, you know, trying to get time alone, trying to get time away – enjoying obviously, or I wouldn't be a playwright, enjoying the whole thrum of humanity, both general and particular – I'm just, on a sort of



nerve-ending level, just feeling there's an odd kind of continual thirst or lack of nourishment of some kind.

RI: Definitely.

AW: You know, that's happening.

RI: It feels like there's not really been events either. Like, the couple of cultural events I can think of have been things that were made and finished before the pandemic, you know, and have been released onto the pandemic gratefully and very quickly consumed, and then gone. I don't know, I'm thinking of the sort of atmosphere when the Olympics is on, or even for us a bit – and maybe it feels different to you – when there's a general election. But the sense of a kind of another sustained narrative that isn't just Covid rights and Covid rules, because it felt like the election was subject to Covid rules in the way that it felt very much a Covid general election for you guys. Is that fair?

AW: I think it was... No, I mean, it was dominated by that topic and Covid, obviously, it accentuated everything. But, no, I mean I feel like we've had Covid this whole time but the protests felt enormous. For months, and the discussion is still happening, but that sort of feeling of huge civic events was really dominating for a while.

RI: Around Black Lives Matter, you mean, not–

AW: And I will say that part of that – it was everything around it and everything: it was the discussion, it was our history, it was all of that, but it was also just the collection of people. Again, the sense of like there was a brief period of time where people were together. Just that sight, just to be in it or near it felt hugely affecting – and relieving, in a way. But I will say also that I felt like our election was... Covid was running through it, but it was a hugely dominating other event and much more dominating than it would have been normally. I mean, there are all kinds of reasons why turn-out was massive, but I think, you know, among them hugely is that you know people's bandwidth is freed up to really focus on a thing. On a real-life thing, and not so much on a screen thing, which I think is not just because we all had screen fatigue.

RI: Yeah, the desire to get out onto the streets becomes double, doesn't it, because it sort of... Did you have the – did America do applause or the equivalent, for the healthcare workers?

AW: Yeah, we did, we did.

RI: Is that still going on there?

AW: No, that stopped around the middle of June. I mean it was funny, because on my street – I live in Prospect Heights, it's like a brownstone block which means it's three to four-storey high buildings with a sort of a narrow – yeah, you've been on our street – with a sort of a narrow street between them. So everyone would – not everyone, but many people would come out of their windows at seven o'clock and clap, or we did pots and pans. Our whole building somehow got addicted to pots and pans, that was our contribution. Somebody down the block was doing a drum. And that happened for a while and then it just petered off pretty quickly. It was kind of a civic training that we retained. I mean, in Midtown, I had a friend in Midtown who said, you know, musicians were coming out on roofs, like it was sort of a huge thing. But the first time we had a protest go down our block, instinctively, in a way that we never would have done before the pandemic, like instinctively everyone up and down the block went to their windows and – we're banging pots and pans and clapping. We were sort of in that mode, and then again with the election, the moment when it became clear that Joe Biden had won – I found out about it, I was, you know, in my front room and I suddenly heard pots and pans going up and down the block.

RI: Oh wow, interesting!

AW: So I knew instantly. And my first instinct was to run, grab a pot and pan, open up the window and we all participated in this odd town crier moment. Pots and pans and then cars started honking, people started gathering on the side of the road and applauding the honking cars. And it was this odd kind of – you know, it went on for 12 hours, spontaneous cheering all over the city, in a gesture which was like genuine–

RI: [*Laughter.*]



AW: –like it was the most genuine, and it was also performative. Like, we were all taking photos and videos of people doing the thing, but it was also just like – yes, it was sort of non-stop stream of celebratory energy. So again, like, group–

RI: I'm guessing it wasn't like that... What was it like when Obama first got in?

AW: It was not dissimilar, although I was in a different neighbourhood with friends in their basement. It was sort of a party in their basement, watching the returns come in. So we were in a quiet neighbourhood, we were all very jubilant in the basement – and then we took the Subway to Union Square, I think around 11.30 or midnight, and there was still kind of a party going on in Union Square, which had been taking place apparently all over the city. So, similar in that it was sort of a big group event, but different in that it was – it was less complicated. Do you know, it was just jubilation.

RI: Yes, yes. I sort of find it interesting that one of the soundtracks of the last year is pots and pans and clapping. I think you're right that there's something very performative about it, and then you always saw people with their phones but filming along the road. I don't know – I kept thinking in a strange way, it's that, isn't it, those are the videos you look back on and go: 'God, oh yeah, remember when we were in lockdown!' Because the day by day, beat by beat experience of lockdown is actually just kind of boring, sort of like: ambient anxiety, boring days without the same amount of – but there's something about the, like, everyone on the street thing where you go 'Okay!'

AW: When you guys did the clap, how long was it? Was just once a week? How long was it for and when did it end? And did it like end or did it peter out?

RI: No, I think it did end here. I think the lady whose idea it had been to clap for the NHS – I forget quite how, but I think the lady, presumably on social media, said: 'Okay, done now, that's it. We're not going to do this anymore. It was great, we're now going to stop.' And everybody stopped! But it went on for a while, I couldn't tell you quite exactly how long, but it certainly was – it wasn't just like three weeks, you know, it became part of the rhythm and ritual of lockdown number one here.

AW: And were you all clapping physically or were you pot and panning?

RI: You got to do either, I think it was up to you as to what you did. I mean we were just clapping politely at the window. But like, I'd be interested in – we've got one neighbour, in the house we live in which is split up into flats – there's one person you kind of, we know she's there but you never see her, and she doesn't really communicate with anybody else, and like the other neighbours talk to each other but her less so. And of course, I couldn't see whether she was joining in. And I got really interested into like whether, if you're naturally not given to other people or conversations of any sort, is that also something–? Because I felt like that a little bit – I was a bit like: I don't feel like this kind of social community occasion is the sort of thing I quite know how to be in!

AW: Did you ever figure out if she was joining in?

RI: No, no, because I'd have to, I'd have to get like...

AW: [*Laughter.*] You'd have had to have gone on the street if you really wanted to! I mean, I think that's been the other interesting thing that I found about the pandemic – I mean, if you want to talk about human impulses: the impulse to hoard, which I think predates capitalism.

RI: Yes, I agree.

AW: And the impulse to police other people. You know, all the stuff around masking, no masking, in prospects when you're in this big park and a lot of people jog around the park, and for a long time, there was this, you know, strange deadly silent war between the people who thought the joggers really should be masked–

RI: Because it became political as well, didn't it? It became a kind of like when Trump decided he didn't like masks–

AW: Yeah, no, that aided – I mean, there's a degree to which compliance – mask wearing in my area of Brooklyn, which again is a complex set of neighbourhoods, everyone's masked. And I feel like if it weren't for the political aspect around this time – I mean, you know, to be masking on the street, to be masking in a store: utterly sensible. To be masking on the street, there's a kind of a logic to it, were someone to quite suddenly cough or quite suddenly sneeze or quite suddenly grip onto you and start



shouting in your face. I mean, it's not entirely insane but it's basically performative, that everyone's doing that performance. Whereas I feel like the normal sort of New York ethos, you know, long around about now, people would have said, you know: 'Fuck it!' this is variously inconvenient and/or not actually necessary, and there's a lot of group spirit around masking.

RI: Well then, I think in that sense, and I think I can segue from here to *Mr Burns* again because it's like there's a thing about that group spirit thing that feels very of this cultural moment: that there is a kind of desire to belong to a group, and they're the group that is 'for', that define themselves against the group that it's 'against'. It's all sort of very Jonathan Swift territory. But that there's a kind of chorus energy of going: 'Well, we all think this!', and the masks really do tap into that, don't they? They're an ID badge of another sort. They're a profession of belief and faith and loyalty and fidelity to a certain set of ideas. In the same way, I imagine – I don't know what you have to put in your Twitter handle to signal that you know the truth about Pizzagate and the paedophile rings and things – but I would imagine it's the same there, it's just the ID badge is a bit different. But it's the same thing isn't it, it's a tribe with a collective set of beliefs, and it feels like that was coming more and more into the culture anyway, as a sort of intellectual/political way of being, or at least the forcefulness of that was hotting up and it feels like the pandemic and the various allegiances it's created have really helped that along.

AW: Well, it's all gotten kind of mythic, right? I mean, we're living in a mythic time, or a time which wants to find the mythic in the time. I mean, especially if you want to talk about, yes, Pizzagate, the symbol seems to be a lion.

RI: Oh is it? I didn't know that.

AW: Yeah, yeah. A big Aslany lion. I mean, it's mythic for everyone right now, but over on that area it's kind of incredible how mythic it is. I think another way of connecting it back to *Burns*, the thing you talked about when we were talking earlier about not wanting to look at new things, not wanting to look at new TV programmes, or not being as inclined to look at new work, kind of falling back on the comfort of the old. And this idea that, you know, in Act One people are telling *Simpsons* stories, you know, it's to make themselves laugh but it's also comforting. And the thing we talked about a lot was that in Act Two, it's seven years after this catastrophic pandemic, and people, you know, they aren't ready for new content. So the real currency is old stories, it's *The Simpsons*, it's *ER*, it's – I mean, now I always think you know, if the pandemic had hit one year before the ending of *Game of Thrones*, I mean of course that's what everyone would have been doing: it would have been massive numbers of epic *Game of Thrones* series, or whatever hugely infectious series had not completed when society ended. Like that would really be what people would be doing, is finishing up stories and you'd have rival finishes to the same story which people found more satisfying. But we did talk about – in Act Two, the main content has to be familiar, it has to be *The Simpsons* and as accurate as possible so it's become currency, you know, that when you're anxious you want it to be the thing it was in the way that children when they're having bedside stories read to them, they want you to tell it the same way every time and they'll correct you if you don't. Like, that's really important to them. But that in Act Two you had these sort of intermissions, you had the music break and you had the commercials, which were not quite commercials of yore, and it was weirdly in these commercials, which everyone took comfort from because you recognise commercials – that's where you talk about objects and hoarding and sort of get that instinct fulfilled – but that, weirdly, that would be where the creative impulse was starting to creep in, under the guise of the thing which is most heavily structured.

RI: Which is just myth, isn't it? It's just going: 'Oh, I take – I know the story we all tell about Orestes, here I am retelling it.' Like, that's very Greek, isn't it, as a sort of: we, the new world reflect on the new world by referencing back to the old world. We look to the stories of the heroic age to secretly tell stories about ourselves.

AW: But isn't that – I mean, you talk about 50 years in Athens, it's a republic, which takes a great deal of energy and bandwidth, and the point of those stories is that you're telling the same old story but you're putting a twist on it. You know, you're reinterpreting it, you're rethinking it. Which I would imagine, in a more archaic age under a kingship in a time of greater – I don't know if it's less leisure, I suppose for a certain class of people... I feel like the old stories stay consistent for a long time. I mean, obviously there's variant and ballads shift and change and thing and thing, and there's more manoeuvring than we think, but for all that the *Iliad* must have changed a ton before it became written down, at its core



was a story that could be repeated and repeated and repeated and repeated and repeated and make it through pretty much intact.

RI: I remember really thinking when I had that crazy idea when I was at the Almeida to read out the whole of the *Iliad*... And in 2015 I had like a team of lovely people [*laughter*] working out how we could do all of the *Iliad*, and two of my assistant directors jumped on board and helped. And one of the things they were doing was cutting the *Iliad* up into sort of actor-able chunks: 'Okay, well, you sort of wouldn't want to break the story there, but you could break it there.' Sort of like bite-sizing it so that you could go – and then those bite-size chunks were numbered and then those bite-size chunks started to be handed out to actors depending on when the actor said they could come and read a bit of the *Iliad* in the, as it turned out, like 17 or 18 hours it took to read all of the *Iliad*. But there was one bit which was bit number four or five or something, really early on, which is the description of all the ships arriving, and basically, it's all nouns, it's all place names because it's like: 'All the ships with people from this place and this place and this place and this place, and they all arrived together on the tall black ships and there were soldiers from this place and this army and this place and this place', and like all the names are really difficult to say. And so there's like two pages of like incredibly hard Greek pronunciation, and I remember just looking at that and thinking: 'Oh, we can't! Unless we can find an actor who already knows their Classical Greek and knows how to do all of this.' I said we've just got to ask Simon Goldhill, who was the sort of consultant and Ancient Greek academic person on it to do that bit. And he did – that's what we did, and that's what he did very brilliantly. And the thing that was so interesting about it when you heard it back was that the phrase which recurs, which is: 'On the tall black ships' in the translation we did, became – it was almost like a pantomime, and in the second of hearing him do it in the British Museum, I thought 'Oh, of course, that's what this is! It's a bit of audience call and response.' And it's because he does all the place names and then everyone presumably says: 'On the tall black ships.' It's the same structure you use with kids. You know, at the end of the verse of the nursery rhyme, same little old kick that everyone says together, and I really thought: 'Oh yeah wow'... Like, one of the many things, I guess, I figured out about the *Iliad* by running that performance of it was to kind of go: oh you really heard the moments at which it code-switches and at which it recognises the audience are now ready for something else. I guess I'd always thought of it as a sort of consistent style, and it really isn't. It really is quite choppy in a great way in that it'll go – you'll be really focused on this thing over here and you'll be thinking about the armies on this beach at this moment, and then it just cuts back to going: 'How's Achilles doing? Is he still in his tent? Is he still really angry?', 'He's still really angry. He's still not coming out!' And so there's this – the way it does its kind of long-form dramatic tension in terms of going: 'Achilles ready to come out?', 'I think Achilles is going to come out.', 'Achilles is not going to come out.' 'Achilles is still very angry, still not fighting.' But you're aware that at some point that is going to change and that we're going to check back in with Achilles and he's got to come out of that tent and do some fighting. But that he actually – the mode in which that prep is done for the moment of: 'Today he's coming out, he's got to fight now, come on guys, big battle!' is really very clever and really – I was like: 'God, yes it's really good storytelling!' I remember reading, or maybe we went to hear her, the American novelist Jennifer Egan talking about the brilliant novel *A Visit from the Goon Squad* and her saying that her two big inspirations for writing that novel were *The Sopranos* and Proust. And Proust because of its relationship to narrative over time, and then this thing that I've never been able to forget about *The Sopranos*, which is that its narrative – and I'm paraphrasing – but like the narrative structure has too many plots and so you can't quite get ahead. There's too many characters in it. So the narrative sort of spreads from the centre, rather than moving along lines and so that suddenly they go back to plot number 'G' and something huge happens and you go: 'Oh god, of course, yeah, of course, that person was going to get killed at that point!' But you've forgotten about it because you've been too busy on plots 'A' to 'F', which is what they've spent the last two episodes on. And that she really wanted that quality in the novel, which I think she really gets: where you're storing information about character and narrative but then you've forgotten about it, and then something happens that is to do with story number 'C', and you go: 'Oh god, yeah, yeah, yeah, that person, of course that person now intersects with this story, that makes total sense!' And the *Iliad* had a kind of a really very well-developed version, a very comforting version of how that happens in long-form TV which I was really surprised by. And like it's to do with the comfort, isn't it, of expectation being in some way satisfied: that



you've been there all the times Achilles doesn't come out of the tent, and so the time when he does, you really feel like you were watching the webcam at the moment the eagle jumps off.

AW: Oh, wow, uh-huh, yeah.

RI: And that the longer the narrative, the bigger the effect of that, if it's well constructed.

AW: Yeah, yeah, yeah...

RI: I don't know about you, [*laughter*] but I feel like we shouldn't forget the sound cues.

AW: Well no...

RI: Do you want to go? Do you want me to go...?

AW: I think why don't you go? You've got actual material, right?

RI: Actual material. I've got a bit of – brilliant Robin Fisher at the Almeida, used to capture the performances from literally a camera stuck on to the front of the circle – and I have most of the stuff I made at the Almeida via Robin having very sweetly given me effectively bootlegs of it. And I checked and I have *Mr Burns* and so I was going to just – and because obviously there's no formal recording of *Mr Burns* and we never did, which I really wish we had done now, looking at it. I kind of go, we were daft to not soundproof that rehearsal room and drag them all in and make them sing it all. And just like, given the amount of time they spent learning that music, the fact that we didn't ever get a recording of it at high quality seems now like a ridiculous oversight! Given – and you must get it as well, but I certainly get a lot of people going: 'Oh, I'd love to have a copy of that, like I'd love to have access to that.' So I thought I would just play a bit of – I won't play all of Act Three but I'll just try and play a little bit of the first bit of Act Three. Again, it's like people all doing the same thing, because – and you can't see but I can see it – there's all these people wearing all sort of identical, other than the hair, yellow outfits. Okay, I'm going to play it so here it goes.

[00:36:50 to 00:41:34] Excerpt from *Mr Burns* (2014), Almeida Theatre

RI: That is like a good place to stop it! [*Laughter.*]

AW: My god...

RI: How do you feel hearing that back?

AW: I mean, I had completely forgotten that section! Because there were two – I've had two different soundtracks in my head and I remember some from one and some from the other. That's very intense. I also remember feeling that if we'd had more time, it would have been good to pull some of the plot out of that a little more. It goes by rapidly but it's kind of astonishing, I mean it just brings back so many visuals. At the time you're so busy trying to piece out everything in the show you don't have, so there's sensory pleasure in hearing it, but also such a strong memory of that process of trying to factor in six different things at the same time. So I don't have a good visual memory and I don't strongly remember the visuals at that moment – I remember the visuals more strongly later on. But I remember what it was to sit and watch and be, on the one hand, super appreciating, on the other hand, like, just trying to make sense of how it makes sense as a whole. What is it like for you to listen to it?

RI: I guess it's all inseparable in my head from – the main thing I sort of see is the amount of effort that went in from those guys, Mike [Henry] and Orlando [Gough] who wrote it all music-wise. But also just a genuine mixture – set of performers, some of whom were really used to rehearsing music, and some of whom really weren't and who understandably found picking up that kind of more or less unaccompanied harmonic singing – you know, they're being accompanied by someone playing a plastic bin and, like, there's no support for them, that's kind of a cappella vocals meeting percussion effectively... And I remember really clearly how hard everybody worked to get that job done, you know, like within a limited rehearsal time.

AW: Yeah.

RI: To get that music down and get it good and then perform it consistently. And I'm actually kind of – yeah, I feel really proud of them. Like, I watch that back and go: 'God...', like, what I've just played is a bit of presumably just some random night, that's not press night or anything, that's just some random night when they turn the front of the circle camera on, and like they're really bringing it and it's quite intense, and it's sort of full of strange sireny noises made by vocals when people aren't singing the



lyrics, and it sort of is genuinely – I guess, in the way that I always hoped it would be and I always saw in your play – it does seem genuinely other. You know, like it's quite crazy in terms of its mixture of influences. And even then, like, I find it hard to [laughter] – which is maybe ridiculous and has perhaps always been my Achilles heel as far as being the director of your play – but like I find it hard to find it funny when they sing Ricky Martin there. I'm like – it just, it seems to me like it has a kind of strange kind of Stravinsky power repurposed in that context.

AW: I mean, that was part of the supersonic richness of it and the way it was able to hold their seriousness of intent, but at the same time you could, and people did, laugh at it because to us it's funny. I remember near rebellion in the rehearsal room because it was an enormous amount. I mean, in an odd way the task of that section of the play was to ask people – you know it's meant to be something that people have had, you know, probably part time in between harvesting crops or whatever, but people have been able to spend a great deal of time, including generationally, putting together this performance [laughter], and to get that effect in, was it six weeks or five weeks?

RI: No, it was five weeks! I think it was maybe even five weeks with a few – I seem to remember that was one of those times when the British subsidised theatre's resistance to working on bank holidays, because they had to pay the actors double... And I seem to remember there was like a ridiculous number of bank holidays that slightly drove me crazy in that period. But yeah, I mean there were definitely moments in that I remember having to lift the room from a feeling of: 'We will never do this. Like, we need to simplify the task in hand.' I remember having to go in really with genuine – which I always believe – but with genuine commitment on a kind of like: 'Guys, you can do this, like this is totally possible and you will get it. It will just require a repeated application.' There's a thing in British theatre that I find – which makes me feel sad – which is that I think there is a kind of love of what I would characterise as a kind of posh amateurism, that you're just sort of like: 'Oh well, you just throw the show on and then we'll all go to the pub.' There's a sort of interesting thing in the culture, partly because nobody is paid properly – but there's something interesting when something is very difficult, when there's a really hard scene to do or somebody has to do something genuinely virtuosic, and I can really feel, even just listening to it back, I can really feel the journey of when they started getting proud of it, that group of performers. They started going: 'Okay, now this sounds amazing, we're nearly there then.' And then, of course, they started resenting poor old Mike Henry, who was going: 'Yeah, that was good. But that was off and the pitching of that was wrong and we timed that a bit–' Well, you know, and he will be like: 'Okay, no, no, let's go up the next level.' But I think it's sort of – I mean, we haven't talked about any of the things we were supposed to talk about, have we, in terms of – it makes me as well go: music is huge for me in terms of making work. Like, yeah, I sort of go: 'Yeah, it would be amazing to make something where there was loads of singing in it, if only it didn't have to be a traditional musical or opera.' [Laughter.] It's kind of – there's something so exciting about the ingredient of – and I've seen that must be slightly copyright-dodgy, I was sort of listening to that back now and going: 'We can't have had the rights to all of that?'

AW: No, it was British law changed about a week before we started rehearsal, which had been, I mean, I didn't realise – [laughter] I just kind of walked into it! But yeah, it wasn't covered under the previous law and under the new law it was covered under – oh, there was a specific term, 'pastiche', but I don't think that was it.

RI: That's right. That comes back now – yeah, that you had a sort of legal right to be able to parody or pastiche or sort of, yeah...

AW: And it pulled together in that way, which was like – but literally a week before! You and Rupert [Goold] kind of dodged a bullet with that.

RI: There's something about it, isn't there, there's something about the nature of that show that I would imagine will have been true whenever people have done a production of it, that – and even down to *The Simpsons* doing their namecheck of it in that episode with their little sort of tip of the hat, like: 'We know you're there, Anne Washburn.' Because it's mentioned, isn't it, just to flesh that out, it's mentioned in a list that flashes up on the screen in a *Simpsons* episode written since the play?

AW: It was – yeah, they're in a movie theatre. Homer and Bart are in a movie theatre and there's some sort of preview and, I don't know, Homer says something about: 'Oh, a post-apocalyptic film, that's wonderful! There are none of those or very few!' And then they start to list every single post-apocalyptic



film ever and they include *Mr Burns: A Post-Electric Play* by Anne Washburn. I was not watching, but I immediately got many texts and it remains, I mean, one of the greater honours that one could possibly have in a lifetime!

RI: Totally. Homer Simpson has seen – the actual Homer has seen the actual title of your actual play. I don't know, there's something about it, the whole gesture, which is to do with – people are moved by, I always think, or at least the sort of part of the emotional journey of the players: Act One, they do the read-through; Act Two, they sort of do a version of the rehearsal; and then Act Three is the performance. And there's something in the play itself, I think, that is moved by the necessary sort of birthing struggles of getting something on at all. It's just that you watch it spread out over many years, but that it has that sort of flavour of the effort involved in producing anything. It's also interesting, having talked about pots and pans, that there's loads of like what sounds to me like pots and pans – you know, like sort of non-regular orchestral percussion going on, because I remember being really strict about how I didn't want it to be full of synthesisers and I was like: 'No one's going to have a piano in a post-electric world!', whatever we are by then, a hundred years past. Like pianos are not going to survive because piano strings snap if temperatures change. I remember I had a whole thing about how there couldn't be a piano and that even guitar strings were going to be super rare, and so would they risk them? And the a cappella was the only way forward, which made total sense to me at the time, but then [laughter] I think the labour necessary to produce that effect kind of fell harder on the actors than it did on us! I guess the other thing to say about where the singing comes at that moment of *Mr Burns*, we've talked about culture and ritual as being in some way consoling or comforting, and the familiarity of, in that sense, kind of popular... And again I find I can listen to – the other weird thing about listening to that back actually is that I find I can listen to it back and hear it as if it's original, if that makes sense? I don't hear a sort of Frankenstein's monster of stolen repurposed pieces, even though I know that's what it is, even down to the 'waa-waa-waa-waaah'. It's a sort of like even intervals are borrowed from things you've already heard in the evening. But I guess there's something interesting about that much song at the end of an evening, like you go in, you've done at that point two of three acts, and it's been mainly talking and in the first act you've had no song or very little song, and then in the second act you've had a little bit but you're really not – like the majority of the second is them talking, and then suddenly, it's like there's no more talking. [Laughter.] Do you know what I mean? And I think part of the effect of it is the way that the music has taken over the dialogue. And then by the time you hear the bit we've just heard you're never getting dialogue back, no one is going to say, an unaccompanied musical – there's going to be no bit where there's not music for the rest of it, right? It's going to be – I don't know where you stand on this, I know there's some people who, and I get it on some level that what people are going to want, what the audience – and I think to a large extent, there's certainly a big chunk of theatre culture here that I think doesn't really care about what the audience wants or thinks, but it will be interesting the moment when the theatres are able to reopen as to whether they want feel-good comedies, do they want the rom-coms or do they want – like, or will the fact we've all been a bit bored and shut in our houses make us desperate for depth?

AW: Right, that is such a good question.

RI: I guess I feel like I'd be much – but again, maybe that's a taste thing – but I'd be much less up for something sort of frothy and thin and fun. I'd be much more up for going, okay, I'm going to see 11 Greek plays compressed into a seven-hour epic evening of denseness. I feel like I'm much more ready for that than I was a year ago.

AW: I mean, it's also about the first show you see, the second show you see, the third show you see. At what point, if we go back to our habits – I remember after 9/11 people quite seriously saying they thought that irony was dead, which was of course not true at all.

RI: Really?

AW: Yeah, yeah, yeah that was a serious statement! That we weren't going to be ironic. Even at the time that seemed from my end like an insane thing to say, but I think many people actually genuinely seemed to feel that. I mean, I don't know, I wonder if we won't, if the determinant on that won't be identity, do you know? Because we will be reasserting our identity in a group or re-finding our identity as it relates to that. So I don't know if that means then you know, that if you identify as a person who really loves a really well executed frothy musical, will that be the thing you want most? Or in this time



where the boundaries of self have been a little bit nudged at, will you be more open to something than you would have been previous? Or, you know, will people double down on whatever their, I don't know, their entertainment or their culture was? Or will it be more fluid? Seems like a question. And, you know, it's not like our bandwidth is going to snap back all at once, or will it? Do you know, will we just go for the – will we be full of weird pent-up energy, or will we still be on sort of low wattage, whatever low wattage means to us. For some people it's easier to see, you know, a complicated 12-night Greek cycle because that's so intrinsic to who they feel they are, they're just going to default to that? I don't know.

RI: I sort of feel like there's the other thing that's going to happen, which is going to be revealing, I think, we're going to find out, in the subsidised theatres I think, we're going to find out how much the audience have missed it, you know? Because I think in the commercial theatre, there's a sort of like shop window approach. Like, when you walk down Shaftesbury Avenue and the theatres all – the lights are all off, you're really like: 'Wow, this street is bleak. Like, this street with no theatre is bleak!' Because either the audience are going to go – this is a ridiculous comparison but we have this really good little kind of greengrocer's around the corner where we get our fruit and veg, and there was a real worry in this household but also around this area at the idea that they would maybe struggle in the pandemic. And so people were queuing, kind of like making a real point even more than normal of going to the good greengrocer, because it is good and it's all like non-pesticide and stuff. And you know, nobody liked the idea that that might not be there because it could get more difficult for them. And I actually suspect they've probably had the best – because there was a real expression of need, the community said: 'We want that thing there. We are prepared to kind of demonstrate how much we want this to stay.' And I think it's going to be a really interesting moment when subsidised theatre comes back, and again I separate it from commercial theatre because I think commercial theatre is always in this transaction anyway, which is very direct, which is going: 'Are we making enough money this week?' And if the answer is not, then it's not going to stay on. And it's going to quietly go away and something else will come on that will play the same set of questions, i.e. 'Are we making enough money this week?' and like, the determining relationship is pretty clear. But I think in the subsidised world, and I suspect the same thing is true for orchestras and dance, you kind of go: how much of the audience at the moment when they can express 'thank god you're back', like, where will they vote with their feet? You know, where are they going to go like people who live on our street did with the greengrocer's? Where are we going to really see gratitude that something has survived? Because of course, like we both work within a tiny community of people who live and breathe it and talk about it and know everything that goes on, and it'll be really interesting to see what happens in the broader community. Do you know what I mean? Like what if you lived in London and you had nothing to do with the theatre, or you lived in New York and you had nothing to do with theatre, how much would you have noticed that it's not there? You know, how much of a real perceptible difference would it have made to your year that you might have been... Obviously if you're the sort of person who went 40 times a year, then it's going to make a huge difference, but if you're the sort of person who went three times a year, how are you feeling about that, and how much have you missed it? And there's some part of me that really wonders what the result of that particular referendum is going to be, if you know what I mean, like when the audience has the ability to make that demonstration, what will we hear? What will we see? What will they tell us about how this year has been for them?

AW: It's also honestly going to be about, I mean, again this question of crowds. Like, do we retain aversion to crowds? Is a year long enough so that in a permanent way people will feel nervous? I mean, generally you know if you eat a food and you get sick from it, you're off that food for quite a while, you have to bring yourself back to it. Will we have that response? You know, the response to poison and illness is really instinctive. And/or is that countermanded again by this thirsty appetite for direct physical human contact? Is it going to feel like a luxury to get to be in a room, you know? And will that sensation of like luxury and appreciation go on for a while, or will it just dispel like a cloud? You know, are we going to snap out of the pandemic, provided we aren't plunged into a massive chaos somehow or another? Are we going to snap out of it and everything will be like normal? Or will it be a slow, weird, dreamy, difficult process?



Clips Summary

[00:36:50 to 00:41:34] *Mr Burns* (2014), Almeida Theatre

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