

La Vanguardia (ESP)

“England is going through a revolution”

by Justo Barranco

Declan Donnellan, Theatre director, Winner of the Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale

Declan Donnellan (b. Manchester, 1953) is one of the most acclaimed theatre directors of recent times.

Time and again he has brought Shakespeare's work to the stage in dazzling, vital productions with his company Cheek by Jowl – based at the Barbican, but continuously on tour throughout the world – in which the actor is always at the heart of the work. Since 2000 he has also directed a company of Russian actors, with whom he presented *Measure for Measure* at the Temporada Alta Festival in Girona last year. And now he has just picked up the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement in Theatre at the Venice Biennale (directed by Àlex Rigola).

What does it mean to you to receive the Golden Lion?

I'm delighted. Making theatre is always a struggle, even at this stage of my career. Sometimes young people say it must be wonderful not to have to struggle to make theatre any more. And I reply 'Sadly that is not true!' The struggle never ends, unless you choose to lead a major national theatre, but then you have bigger problems.

But – what do you struggle with?

Getting money! Theatre is permanently going through an economic crisis; in my lifetime it always has and I fear always will. Being a freelance theatre director is a financial nightmare.

Does this award lead you to reflect on what your career has been?

My advice to young people is to take work seriously but not your career at all seriously. It is sad when it is the reverse: when people seem to be worried about getting the next job more than doing the current one well. You have to be present. That above all.

This being said, can you see an evolution in your work?

Oddly enough I have remained exactly the same over the years, it's just the rest of the world has changed - including the man looking back at me in the mirror! is; I had the great luck never much to care whether what I'm doing was original or fashionable. Only that it be alive. Or at least that was my aim. And that is hard. I put aside other fantasies; life is my most important priority. Theatre is not primarily about the text, the story: what matters is the living experience you share. It's about people watching other people creating illusion. We must never be vain enough to imagine we are presenting 'the truth'. We don't know which truth to pick; only priests and politicians claim to know. Once I heard an actor say he had devoted his life to truth and felt enormously depressed. If you start talking about truth, it can sound quite stirring, like Republicans talking about Liberty. But you learn that sooner or later someone's going to get punished.

When collecting your award you said you were worried by the current political situation; how today we confuse sympathy with empathy.

Yes sympathy is saying to someone who has just hurt themselves, or lost a loved one, 'I know how you feel, because the same thing happened to me.' You feel what I feel, and I can only recognise in you what is already in me. Sympathy does not imply imagination. 'I like you because you're like me'. And consequently and inexorably 'I don't like him because he is not like me'. In that sense, sympathy leads to hatred. This happens very often in politics. We sympathise with certain people's ideas and not with others, so we hate them. But we have to listen to people with other points of view or we're headed for disaster. Listening to another's point of view is the sense of politics. Screaming slogans is apolitical. We're already there. There are people in the US screaming that there is no difference between Hillary and Trump because their allegiances were with Bernie Sanders. Bad movies tell us we're better off running away from bad people, from Nazis, preferably ugly ones with scars, as fast as we can. But they don't dare tell us that we'd better run from 'pure' people even faster. Life is not pure.

Why did Brexit happen?

For a lot of different reasons. But basically it is a re run of the Bush victories. One of the reasons that the right gets in is because the left patronises them. The American left laughed a Bush into the White House four times. A lot of people are very worried about immigration, and it's almost impossible to talk about on the left. It's a taboo. But we have to talk, understand. You can't say that because people who voted for Brexit are evil, or stupid, or even been misled by corrupt politicians. We have those. Yes, and they lied about Brexit. But I don't think some of the people needed to be misled; the liars were wasting their energy. I think some really wanted to leave. Some commentators claim that so many voters wouldn't have voted for Brexit if they'd known they would be poorer for it. Some wouldn't. But others didn't mind paying money just to put a bomb under Parliament. England is going through a revolution. And England has the gold medal in self-deception when it comes to revolution denial. England has had a lot of revolutions and manages to underplay them all. 'Turbulent history' is reserved for the Scots and Irish. The English are astonishing at being able to convey a sense of calm continuity. It is mostly spin. In the first world war the United Kingdom had an internal civil war, the army stood up to the government, the government backed down, many died and the country lost a fifth of its territory. And still the UK sailed out of the First World War a beacon of constitutional continuity and serenity... What's going on now is terrible, with the Labour and Conservative parties both completely divided, and both pretending otherwise. Those divisions have widened. And there has been this wave of amnesia. We have forgotten the reasons behind the European project. The avoidance of war in Europe was a major factor. Just look at who's happy about Brexit.

ON LACK OF EMPATHY

"We have to listen to people with other points of view, or we're headed for disaster."

AN ETERNAL CLASSIC

"Shakespeare is the best of our living writers; he's not dead."

You have said that theatre can give us the empathy we lack.

Understanding that people are different and have different points of view is something you do by being present and alive. Listening to what people have to say, without interrupting all the time.

We're very ignorant about other people. *Theatron*, the original Greek word, means 'a place for seeing.' Every human being lives in a different world. We have to try to see these worlds. That's why theatre is so important.

What have you learnt about Shakespeare?

He's the best of our living writers; he's not dead. If anyone wrote as well as he did about today, I would stage them. He works on so many different levels; he has such complexity, and that is what I need or else I get bored. Human beings are not straightforward, much as we spend a lot of time pretending we are. It's not that we're concealing anything either, it's just that we don't know who we are. At the beginning of *Richard III* Shakespeare talks about men like they were actors. A human being is an animal that acts.