



Sheffield Theatres Getting In Podcast

Episode 1: In Conversation with Paul Foster (January 2019)

Lauren: You're listening to the Sheffield Theatre's podcast. In this episode, I sit down with Paul Foster, the director of our 2018 Christmas musical, *Kiss Me Kate*. We'll be discussing Paul's early life and introduction to theatre, his process as a director, and how he tackles presenting a classic, golden-age musical on our iconic Crucible stage.

Lauren: Hi Paul –

Paul: Hello Lauren.

Lauren: Welcome back to Sheffield.

Paul: Thank you very much. Lovely to be here.

Lauren: So you were here back in 2016 with *Annie Get Your Gun* –

Paul: That's right

Lauren: Which was absolutely phenomenal, I've heard so many –

Paul: That's kind of you

Lauren: – great things about it. And now you're here with the absolute monster that is *Kiss Me Kate*.

Paul: That's right

Lauren: How does it feel to be back?

Paul: It's lovely. I'm sure anyone listening to this would have an interest in Sheffield Theatres, and it's the most wonderful space. I'm sure what a lot of people say about theatre, and it feels particularly so here, is that the city really enjoys having these three theatres on its doorstep. And I think the Crucible audience in particular are so loyal and so discerning and it's lovely to meet... I was

very lucky on *Annie Get Your Gun* that I met a mixture of regulars and first-time audience members. And it was lovely to chat with those about what they thought of the show and how proud they are to have this theatre on their doorstep. Particularly on that show, and I'm sure it's the same on a lot of the Christmas musicals here, is that you heard it was a family's Christmas treat or they'd open the card and three generations would come see the show. And that's lovely to see – grandparents sat alongside grandchild. It's a real thrill to be back.

Lauren: These sorts of shows – *Annie Get Your Gun* and *Kiss Me Kate* – they can be, for some people, their first introduction to theatre, which is fantastic. What a way to be introduced! So I just want to learn a little bit more about you. What was your first introduction to theatre?

Paul: Well, I'm from the Lancashire/Cheshire/Merseyside borders. I'm from a small town called Newton-le-Willows, which was a mining town primarily near Warrington, near St. Helens – rugby league country. And I wasn't taken to theatre as a child, that wasn't necessarily what we did as a family. I remember when I was a teenager, I got the theatre bug, and I came to see a couple of shows that toured into the Lyceum. I remember seeing Don Pleasance in *The Caretaker* and I remember seeing Nigel Hawthorne in *The Madness of George III*. That would mean a train to Warrington Central, train to Sheffield, a matinee, change then go back home. But, no, I wasn't surrounded by theatre as a child. My Dad's a big sports person, both my brother's are into sports so I just found it really and I'm thrilled that I did.

I went to a state comprehensive and we were very lucky in that there was a Head of Drama when I – I still say first and second year, but I know it's probably year 7 and 8 now – called Mrs. Howard. Carol Howard. And she directed brilliant, brilliant productions of *The Crucible* and *The Accrington Pals* and, particularly when I was about 14 she directed... I've never told her – well maybe she's listening – she directed a production of *Blood Brothers* and they must have been allowed - I'm going back frighteningly about 26/27 years – and I remember that being a pivotal moment. Seeing people that I'd seen around the corridors in the school suddenly taking on these amazing, tragic parts.

I'm very lucky in that I grew up near Manchester, Liverpool, Chester, and Bolton... and saw theatre there. I didn't go to the theatre in London until I was about 16/17, and that was a saving up money kind of thing. I was lucky to grow up with a school with a good drama department and all these local theatres with discount rates for children and I still to this day try, when I can, to go into state schools and do drama workshops. Because I know the cuts that have been involved in the arts and education are so swingeing, that I think anything that we can do to try and have some outreach is a bonus. Because it can take just one flicker and then somebody sees that there may be a root to a career in the arts. And sometimes, in a lot of communities nowadays, those lights are being snuffed out aren't they? So you try and give a little bit back if you can.

Lauren: So what was it that first drew you to directing?

Paul: I trained as an actor, I did an English and Spanish degree at Leeds and then I went to LAMDA, and I trained as an actor and I acted for about 9 years. Then I moved into directing wholesale when I was 30. My route into directing was, as I'm sure many people's is, I didn't do a course in directing, I assisted. I was an assistant director for a while working with a wide variety of directors and one of

the people that I was lucky enough to work for was Marianne Elliott. Because I'd grown up near Manchester, I'd seen some of Marianne's early work at the Royal Exchange and I remember then thinking that she was incredible. And to get to work with her 10-15 years later totally lived up to – exceed expectation.

I think I should have directed earlier, if we could turn back the clock, to be absolutely honest. For me it wasn't "oh that light looks wrong" or "that person's stood in the wrong position" or "we should shuffle that", it was more a way of trying to synthesise a whole team of people to tell a story. And I think at a time - without getting too political - at a time where when we're being encouraged perhaps to turn in on ourselves, theatre's a wonderful way of looking beyond your borders, horizons and usual interests. I think we need that more than ever and it encourages empathy.

One of the great things to learn as a director, and I'm very much still learning, is collaboration. On this point particularly with the designer, it goes back to preparation. I don't want that to feel like it's physics homework on a Friday sort of thing – it's really enjoyable preparation. On this production Janet Bird, who designed *Wizard of Oz* at the Crucible last year and obviously is doing *Kiss Me Kate* this year, began meeting in February at fortnightly intervals where we would have read the play and just come back with our initial ideas.

Then the challenge, if you know the Crucible space, is that it's a thrust auditorium so the audience sit on three sides as opposed to a conventional proscenium arch, end-on, presentation which this title in the late 1940s would have been written for. So when you get a space like the Crucible you're regularly adapting pieces, if you're doing classic work, that were written for a different space. And whilst that is something that you sometimes feel burdensome, the challenge is that you have to overcome and it's in overcoming those challenges that you can make a discovery which you wouldn't have done in a more orthodox space. The space dictates the way that you're going to treat the work and what you always want to do, I think, is that no member of the audience ever goes and says "oh, well that would have been as good on radio." That you're always trying to deliver something visually arresting to match the sound world or to match the storytelling, and it's a really challenging auditorium. An incredible atmosphere is generated in the Crucible I think, especially at Christmas time.

Lauren: What do you think is the most important thing for a director to have, or for a director to be considering, at all times?

Paul: To be able to hold your ground. If something is important to you as part of a process, or as part of the rehearsal process or a decision, if it's important to you hold on to it if you really want to. There's a lot of voices, and it's absolutely a collaborative medium, but I think you do need to steer the ship on occasion. So you mustn't be frightened of saying "no, this matters and we're going to try and work around this so we can maintain this." Have a degree of flexibility, of course, but I think actors actually respect a firmness of approach sometimes, knowing what the parameters are and knowing what journey they're on. Rather than, "we don't quite know what we're striving towards." For me, it's about wanting to be in the room and wanting to participate in something bigger than ourselves.

Lauren: What would your parting words be to anyone listening to this that perhaps would like to forge a career, or maybe for those who have begun a career in the arts and maybe feel that there's some sort of roadblock?

Paul: Full disclosure, I'm 41, and I've been in theatre either as an actor or a director, or unemployed as either or those two, for coming up to 20 years and to imply that it's been smooth sailing and an upward trajectory from the start would be a total lie. There's been some times where I've wondered if I was on the right path where I wondered if, actually, there's a life where you can book a holiday, there's a life where you can be a little bit more financially secure. And as a parent it can be a very tough set of working structures. I know people are trying now, in a very welcome way, to address those but for various reasons it's not been plain sailing for me.

So to look back over those 20 years with what I know (if I know anything now), it comes back to perseverance, it comes back to tenacity. If you have the drive to do something, that's a very potent thing. That's something that can't as easily be taken away from you than if you couldn't care less whether you carry on doing it. So anyone listening who's maybe hitting a wall, really revisit what it is that makes you want to do this as a career. Whether that be a costumier, whether that be a writer, whether that be a director – what is it that you are passionate about? And try and key back into that. When times are tough, try and reconnect with what you are passionate about and that might help you surmount other obstacles.

My other piece of advice would be keep going to theatre if your funds allow you to - whether that's standby, whether that's getting to see public dress rehearsals here at the Crucible, whether that's to see amateur dramatics. If you're still engaged, then storytelling is something you're still being surrounded by and you're still being inspired by. So keep connecting with people, because one of them ultimately might be the conduit to you getting to the next stage. Keep having your antennae up really.

- END OF INTERVIEW -