

Five Edinburgh Festival Fringe Questions with... Jonathan Holloway



*A Tale of Two Cities: Blood
for Blood – playing at this
year's Fringe*

In a timely production, acclaimed theatre company Red Shift are bringing an adaptation of *A Tale of Two Cities* to this year's Fringe in association with Chung Ying Theatre Company and Seabright Productions. In *A Tale of Two Cities: Blood for Blood*, multi award-winning writer-director Jonathan Holloway thrillingly reimagines Dickens' classic of heroism for a contemporary audience.

Jonathan took some time to talk to *The Edinburgh Reporter* about the play.

1. You're bringing an adaptation of *A Tale of Two Cities* to The Fringe. Dickens' novel begins by noting how similar the time of the French Revolution was to the present time – for Dickens, the mid-nineteenth century. What made you want to bring the story to a twenty-first century audience? What parallels do you perceive among the eras?

A Tale Of Two Cities works for me because it offers a vehicle for exploring two types of grief – the loss of a child and lost love. These are two things that colour many lives. The loss of a child in a time of conflict can become the conduit through which grief morphs into revenge and the envelope of a broader religious/territorial conflict provides the means of bringing that hatred to life through acts of violence. Falling in love is both a remarkable gift and a curse. I adapted

Wuthering Heights for the BBC and, for me, it became a salute to overwhelming, obsessive passion. I took my cue from that regarding Carton's ability to sacrifice himself for the entirely abstract idea of Lucie's happiness. It is both wonderful and terrible, loving and also in its own way abusive. The show is visually located in the late 20th century and, as far as it being an adaptation is concerned, it's both respectful and casual – there are, I think, only six lines from the book in our show.

2. As you say, your adaptation uses very few of Dickens' original words. What led you to change the language, and how did you find this changed the nature of the *Tale*?

I think the term 'adaptation' is itself problematic. Traditionally it is assumed to mean a fairly straight-forward process of literally staging scenes from a book or film in the same order they occur in the original and consequently presenting a kind-of comic book version of the source material. That's not what I do. I regard the act of adapting as a conversation between the originating author and myself. I believe we have equal status in that conversation. The past is 'another country' to us, and its true nature is obscured. Similarly the voice of the author is in the modern day muted by cultural change. We are both disabled by our situation, and must counter that. I feel my job is to make room for myself in the original work, and to use it as a tool to provide new kinds of interest and debate. This is a new version of an old story which focuses on those aspects of the yarn that matter to a modern audience.

3. While it's been said that *A Tale of Two Cities* has fewer characters and subplots than typical Dickens' novel, it is still dense with characters and event, and sprawls over many years. What challenges did this pose for a theatrical production with six actors?

The challenge isn't to replicate the particular complexities

of the original, it's to make a new work, tailored to a different art-form, and take inspiration from the original guiding principles with which Dickens worked.

4. This is the show's European premiere, direct from an acclaimed Hong Kong season. How has the show changed, for you, from when you completed the script?

I think this is an unusually stable production. The rehearsal process was very rigorous. We set a series of rules and stuck to them. The chairs, which are such a prominent feature of the show, must always remain chairs. They are never transformed into something else. The lines must always carry truth. They're not conjured just for effect. Each actor must always know why they are saying what they're saying. The production needs to be nimble, tripping from dark to light and back again. Our job was to create a show which declared its credentials as contemporary theatre making for the benefit of an HK cultural community which is, in some ways, isolated from contemporary practice elsewhere.

5. Do you have any desire to return to the Dickens well? After covering espionage, revenge, and hotel room fixers, are other topics beginning to exert a pull for your future work?

As the world turns, our interests change. I used to put together three year plans when Red Shift was Arts Council funded. They were always, to some degree, works of fiction. I am sure I shall return to Dickens when opportunity and curiosity are supported by financial and cultural circumstances. When and what the yarn will be, who knows?

A Tale of Two Cities: Blood for Blood, Pleasance Courtyard (Venue 33), Previews 3-5 Aug | 6-9, 11-16, 18-23 and 25-28 Aug | 14:40-16:10 £13/£12 (Concs)