

**Such Stuff podcast**  
**Episode 5: The Past and the Present**

[Music plays]

**Imogen Greenberg:** Hello, I'm Imogen Greenberg and welcome to another episode of Such Stuff, the podcast from Shakespeare's Globe.

This weekend our glorious Summer season draws to a close.

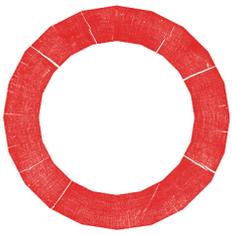
And the last show to open on the stage this summer did take a darker, wintrier turn...

Eyam, a new play by Matt Hartley, tells the true story of a village in the peak district that faced an impossible choice. In 1665, the plague broke out in the town and the villagers had to decide whether or not to quarantine themselves, to prevent the disease from spreading. It's a story that centres on community and sacrifice and resonates with enduring uncertainties about how we live together.

So this week on the podcast, we'll be taking a look at history plays, new and old, and asking why we turn to them in times of crisis. Why do history plays continue to speak so deeply to our contemporary fears and anxieties?

Here's Farah on this relationship between past and present, and why it works so well in the Globe theatre...

**Farah Karim-Cooper:** The Globe is a really interesting space to present history plays because the Globe is itself a piece of history and so the past and the present fundamentally meet, 'cos while we can recreate Shakespeare's theatre, we can't recreate Shakespeare's audiences, so modern audiences come in with their own sets of ideas, modern ears, we see differently, we think



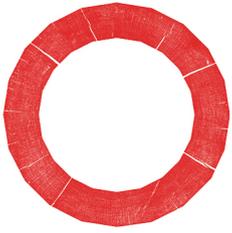
differently, and so we have to recognise that there's a convergence of the past and the present happening at the Globe every time there's a performance 'cos we're not a reenactment society, we are a live modern theatre. The Globe is a really great place to present Shakespeare's history plays. Some of those plays were written for a space like the Globe and so they land in that space quite naturally. The Globe is a very large-scale space so you get a real sense of the epic nature of Shakespeare's writing of history. The characters, these are characters like Richard III, Richard II, Henry V, that still live in the English imagination, and so people are... want to engage with history all the time, that's why there are epic history narratives in film, in television, period drama. But Shakespeare's history plays have a particular character, in that at the same time that they're celebrating a particular kind of past and nostalgic about the past, there's an interrogation of the present, so in a play like Henry V, Shakespeare's asking: what is a good king? He asks that question actually all the way through: what is leadership? What can corrupt a political state? What kinds of sinister or insidious people that surround a king or a monarch or a leader are there? And are there continuities with our current governments or political situations? And I think you can always find something in Shakespeare's history plays to connect to something historically profound or politically profound that might be going on now.

[Music plays]

**IG:** Stick with us to go behind the scenes with the cast of plague play Eyam, and to hear a preview of what's coming next from Michelle Terry...

First up, as part of their preparation for the play, the cast and creatives took a trip to Eyam to explore the village.

[Sounds from Eyam]



**Adele Thomas:** What can you see up there?

**Luke MacGregor:** At the moment nothing, I've got to go over another ridge. I'll report back...

**AT:** Isn't it amazing that you can have a conversation...?

**Jordan Metcalfe:** Luke, Luke, I dare you to run down as quick as you can...

[Laughter]

**Rose Wardlaw:** Naked!

[Laughter]

**IG:** Here's writer Matt Hartley on why he wanted to tell this extraordinary story, and the cast of Eyam getting to know the streets where their characters lived...

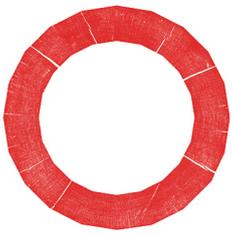
**Matt Hartley:** Well firstly, I grew up very close to Eyam, so it's a story that I've known for so many years and the story itself is just, well it's a fascinating story. What's at the heart of Eyam is about isolation, about community and how those two work together and it poses a question: what do you want as your society? Where do we want to be going, going forward? And that fundamental question: what would you do, when placed in a situation?

[Sounds of church bells]

**MH:** For me, you know, we went to Eyam...

[Background sound of Eyam village]

**MH:** ... and the sort of, the landscape I think defines all of the characters, it's a tough... like, actually bizarrely the day we went,



having lived and grown up in the Peak District, I've never known it to be as beautiful as on that one particular day so I thought it was a bit of a red herring for them, but if you work on that land, it's dry, it's just riddled with stone, you get a real appreciation for how isolated the village was, you know you can walk from corner to corner and get a sense of how small their world would have been. For certain characters in the play like the Hancock's who are farmers, you know there's a sense for them about pride in land, and you know you stand on the top of that hill and you look around at your surroundings and you're going: yeah, I would probably fight for this because, these are people who have close connections to the land but also to God. And if you look at that, you go: where else would you want to be? So I think there was something about that, that I was really keen for the cast to explore. And also to get a feel, to look at their cottage, and just the proximity so you get a sense of when the plague starts, it starts in this house, OK so the next family that falls, they are your direct neighbours. You get a sense of how the village would have operated. You know, knowing and having grown up with that landscape, I thought it was really important for everyone else to sort of experience that.

[Sounds from Eyam].

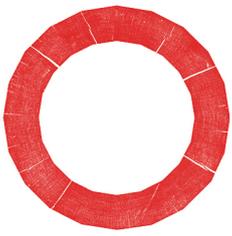
**AT:** This is the Delph. So this is where Roland and Emmet would have stood either side here, and talked to each other...

**Sirine Saba:** Is that Stoney Middleton down there...

**AT:** So Stoney Middleton's over there...

**SS:** So he'd come up that side...

**AT:** Yeah and then he would have stayed there, maybe chucked some food down the hill for her and then they would have talked here.



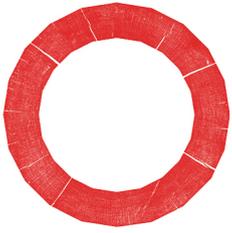
**Ensemble:** Cheese... rolled a cheese...

**AT:** Rolled a cheese! And [laughs] that is where William held church services when they went outside. So half way through when he makes his decision to pray outside, he's stood there and shouted across to people on the other side of the Delph.

**SS:** And are we... and is the reason that we're here, so that we can be really spread out and then we don't infect each other?

**AT:** Exactly!

**MH:** The reasons why I'm doing it now has probably evolved from the moment when I started writing it. I think at the time when I sort of first had the sort of green light to go with it, we were sort of at a point in time when we were in a coalition government and the idea was these two figures in the village are very polar opposed and they have to unite so that was sort of it's IP at the time. But now, as time has progressed and the play's evolved, and certainly now it's in the Globe space, it's been about community, because I think that to me is what's important and through the process of writing it has really been about trying to give voices to people that I feel are unheard from, and so that's where it's come from, so we're talking now about a community, and at the Globe obviously, it's a really civic space so it sort of suits that and that sort of conversation between actors and audience can really exist and that sense of 'we're all in it together'. It feels like a perfect sort of home for that. As we're now in a sort of period of time where we really don't know what's happening, we're sort of uncharted territory, so kind of was Eyam. At that point in history, there'd been such changes in the political landscape, kings being exiled, returned, we had Cromwell. And this is all in the last 20, 30 years of the point of time when the story of Eyam takes place, and so because of this, these villagers, they're completely in flux and they're sort of

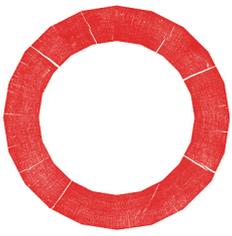


rudderless and at that point in Eyam, you know, religion played a really key part and so when people were being removed from positions of power due to political decisions, it sort of felt like 'OK, we just don't know what's happening'. And that sort of... I think the parallel that, if there was one to be drawn, that's what I'd look for and that's what we've tried to mine in the play.

[Extract from Eyam]

Sam Crane: What I suggest I know will not be easy. I'm not asking you to walk blindly. Look around you, husbands, wives, daughters, sons, neighbours, even those you thought you'd never miss. Many will not fill the space they stand in now. Lives will be lost. Many, many lives. Summer will be our enemy. We will pray for cold winters and winds that chill the soul. But do this and we embark on something bigger than ourselves, a true purpose. Together, we can show the true beauty of humanity. Now I ask you, will you stand together?

**MH:** It's the first time that I've ever sort of dipped my toe in this sort of water so yeah, it was a really conscious decision, I really wanted to do something that I felt a connection to. We don't really change, time is pretty much the same, we're still doing the same things as we were doing, history is just repeating itself over and over, and we don't tend to learn from anything. By looking at history, and looking at where we are, there is that sense of 'crikey, you know, we're still in... we're still committing the same stupid things or we're still not learning from our actions'. You know, every... Eyam could be told in twenty different ways and I think that's what makes a history play really exciting. Why do it? And I think the ones that are really successful, they feel very... that parallel that they're drawing, and you know the good ones do it really subtly, just means it has to be written now, and it's the perfect thing. And often they're so filled with bold and bright and vibrant characters that it's a gift anyway. That's my sort of look at



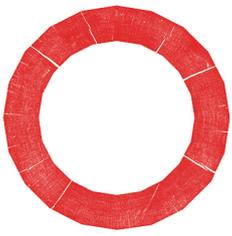
a history play. But I think distance often provides us a lot more ability to examine the present.

**IG:** As Matt says, history plays offer us distance with which to tell stories with contemporary resonance. Well, what about Shakespeare's history plays? I sat down with Michelle to talk about the history cycle that kicks off in the winter season with Richard II and what programming Shakespeare's history plays might have to say about us now.

**Michelle Terry:** I think we are in a particular moment in our own history; this will be a period that people look back on as a defining moment as we leave the EU. So it felt appropriate to go 'OK, what does our sceptred isle look like now?' and do that through the prism of Shakespeare also looking back on his own sceptred isle. And so Richard II kicks off the Henriad of Richard II, Henry IV Part 1, 2, Henry V, then Henry VI, Richard III and Henry VIII. So it makes sense to start at the beginning and see where we end up.

**IG:** When you're sort of thinking about programming, what is it about history plays that offer a dialogue?

**MT:** I think there's no doubt that we, very particular to this theatre, that we are a sort of intersection of then and now, the fact that people walk into the building, into the Globe or the SWP and immediately what it was like then to be a groundling, or what it was like then to sit in a candlelit theatre, but actually they're sitting in one theatre that's twenty one years old and another theatre that's five, six year's old. So it's always a dialogue between then and now, and then even when you're in the plays, you can't not be now. Theatre is the most present art form you can have, 'cos those people are actually speaking now to those people, standing or sitting there listening. And I remember doing Henry V and it was a gender equal company, so we were all playing... er men were playing women, women were playing



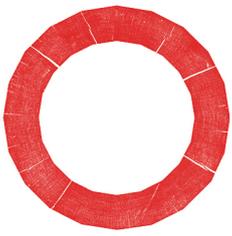
men. For a while, that became the thing that people were concerned about, you know, what was, what would Henry V be like played by a woman? And then I remember on our press night, that was the day that we, that the referendum happened and the following morning I think we all believed we would be waking up to one particular result and we woke up to something we weren't expecting. And suddenly lines in those plays, where we thought the concern would be about the gender switch in the play, very much became about hearing those lines at the end of the show, which are: 'We've lost France and made our England bleed'. That's a really... through the prism of now, hearing those words written then, that's a different light being shed on them. And then the following week, the Chilcot Inquiry came out, so lines like 'May I with right and conscience make this claim', again is heard through a different prism. And then the following week Theresa May became Prime Minister and women were granted the right to be soldiers on the front line, and in the show, the four soldiers, the English, Irish, Welsh, Scottish soldiers were all played by women. So we could never have predicted that a collision of events that happened in a particular moment in our history also resonated so profoundly with moments in time, written four hundred years ago, which were also about moments in history. So that's why it feels essential to programme history plays.

**IG:** And I guess there's a sense then that when we go through this full cycle, we don't really know what's going to happen...

**MT:** Not a clue! [Laughter] We have no idea what's going to happen, which is amazing, because we have no idea how we will receive those plays now.

[Music plays]

**IG:** If we perform Shakespeare's history plays with one eye on the present, what was Shakespeare himself up to? Most of his



plays were already dealing with the distant, or sometimes not so distant, past. Research Fellow and lecturer Dr Will Tosh sat down with Professor Lucy Munro to talk about what history plays meant in Shakespeare's time and to take a closer look at the performance history of Henry V, and why we turn to it time and again in moments of national crisis.

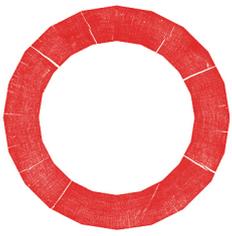
**Will Tosh:** So Lucy, what are the ways in which Shakespeare was working both with the past and the present when he sat down to write a history play?

**Lucy Munro:** History plays are a really interesting kind of way at getting at that relationship between past and present, and I think in Shakespeare's histories it's always a really dynamic relationship. So he's reading history books, he's reading Holinshed, he's reading other kinds of sources, and he's pulling these narratives about the past but I think he's doing so with an eye to what will resonate in a contemporary moment.

**WT:** So how stable is the idea of history as a category for early modern men and women? Is it, is it really distinct from fable or morality tale?

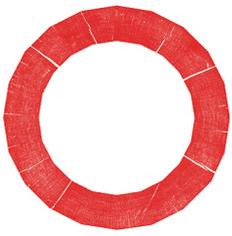
**LM:** Yeah, I think that's a really important point because if you look at Holinshed, it's everything from what we would think of as mythical or legendary right through to things that were very recent past that people would have been able to remember, things that were within living memory. If somebody's reading Holinshed and they're reading about Richard III under Elizabeth, there were people alive who could have remembered that. But also the term history is really unstable. So when history is used in relation to drama, it often just means story.

**WT:** Lucy, you spoke earlier about a play like Richard III also having present day resonance for a Tudor audience, and clearly if you look at a play like Richard II which is much earlier in history



but is also dealing with ideas of a king without an heir, usurpation, what a kind of bold aristocrat should do when the monarch is weak, which might have had contemporary resonance for Shakespeare's first audience... can you tell us a bit about what he's doing with those ideas of, for him, contemporary resonance and what we should do with them as audience members and theatre-makers today when actually we're just looking at two layers of history?

**LM:** Under Elizabeth, and actually earlier in the 16th century, there's a tendency to read history dialogically, so to read about the events of the past while thinking about the present day and thinking about analogies between past and present and correspondances between figures in your moment and figures from the past, and one of the earliest Elizabethan history plays is a play called Gorbuduc, performed at the Inns of Court, which commented really directly on Elizabeth's marriage plans at that point, using early British history to do so. And I think by the time you get to Shakespeare and you get to the 1590s, that kind of tendency is intensified and there's a reason why history plays seem to be very, very popular and that has quite a bit to do with the political situation. You've got a Queen who's reign has been relatively stable in lots of ways but who doesn't have an heir and a situation in which you're not allowed to talk about the succession explicitly and so, setting something in the past is a way of thinking about the politics of instability, civil war, fragility around a particular dynasty without directly commenting on the present moment. And you mentioned Richard II and one of the most famous moments in a way in we're thinking about the relationship between Shakespeare's history and the present moment, is the way in which the supporters of the Earl of Essex, just before the Essex Rebellion, seem to have commissioned a performance of Richard II in order to get Londoners thinking about fragile, despotic rulers who need to be, you know, counselled properly and maybe need to be detached from, if not



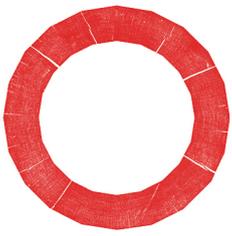
their thrones precisely, then from their ministers who are giving them the wrong kind of advice.

**WT:** Fast forward four hundred years and we've got a whole extra bunch of layers. What are the challenges and opportunities when a contemporary company puts on a history play?

**LM:** I guess one of the first kind of questions is, well, where do you place it? You know, do you go for medieval costume, do you go for early modern costume, so really make you think about that Elizabethan or Jacobean moment that those plays come out of, or do you go for modern dress kind of option?

**WT:** I was thinking when you spoke about resetting a history play in a very specific moment, the Nick Hytner [production of] Henry V from more than ten years ago now, which sets it sort of very explicitly in the second Iraq War... what are the benefits but also perhaps pitfalls of that sort of historical specificity in a particular moment?

**LM:** It can give you a really powerful resonance around a production and it can bring out particular ideas and points of pressure from the original play. So I remember seeing that production and one of the things it brought home really strongly was that question, almost of reportage, of what gets remembered from a particular historical or current event, the ways in which the story is told, and the fact that the chorus in that production was dressed as if she was a sort of history teacher. But of course if you layer it onto the Iraq War then you're working with the perspectives that people bring with them, and presumably a number of people in that audience would have been opposed to the policies that led to the Iraq War, you know, British participation in the Iraq War, presumably some would also have supported it. So, how do you deal with that different set of ideas and opinions that people are bringing towards it? The



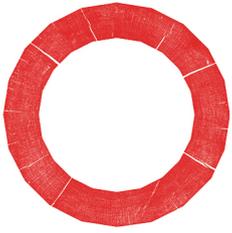
choice of Henry V at particular moments in time often has a kind of charge to it.

**WT:** Do you think that's because of something about the play and its long history or is it a kind of post-Olivier film... it's now seen as a play and then a film that has something to say at moments of national crisis...?

**LM:** That's really interesting, and of course, you know the elephant in the room when I was just talking of course was the Olivier film, you know made during the Second World War and funded as a propaganda piece. So we do have that kind of baggage with Henry V but I think it goes back even further with Henry V that there's a tendency to reach for it at moments of either kind of national celebration or national crisis. And of course that question of whether you perform Shakespeare's histories as cycles or whether you perform them as individual pieces, that Henry V can read quite differently when it's placed at the end of the cycle. And if you pay attention to that epilogue which basically says, none of this lasted, his son was a disaster. So in a way that goes back to that point about the history play as a kind of form, that you know you can string them together, you can explore really long processes of rise and fall and rise again. And the sort of rise of a dynasty.

**WT:** And what is it about history plays that seem still to offer a way to interrogate the present, there's something political about them that seems still to have charge. What might that be?

**LM:** I think there's maybe two things. And one of them would be, almost a question of form, of what kind of play the history is, and the history play has a great advantage in that it can turn itself to historical or comic kinds of narratives. There's something about a history play, and actually about sequences of history plays which enables you to do quite complicated things with form. And the other side of that would be that political resonance, that dealing



with history, often actually enables you to be more tough minded with the way that you get at contemporary concerns, precisely because you can displace them slightly and you can re-orientate them slightly and you can take a bit of the emotional heat of the present moment out in some ways without letting go of it completely. And almost encourage people to think about contemporary politics from a slightly different viewpoint.

[Music plays]

**IG:** So that's it from this year's summer season. Fear not, we'll be warming up indoors in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse. This episode was presented by me, Imogen Greenberg, and Dr Farah Karim-Cooper. Our theme music is from the album *Mali in Oak* and was recorded in our very own Sam Wanamaker Playhouse. To find out more about Shakespeare's Globe and what's on, follow us on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. We'll be back with more stories from Shakespeare's Globe so subscribe wherever you get this podcast from.