

RICHARD III & DISABILITY



Disability Action Research Kollektive

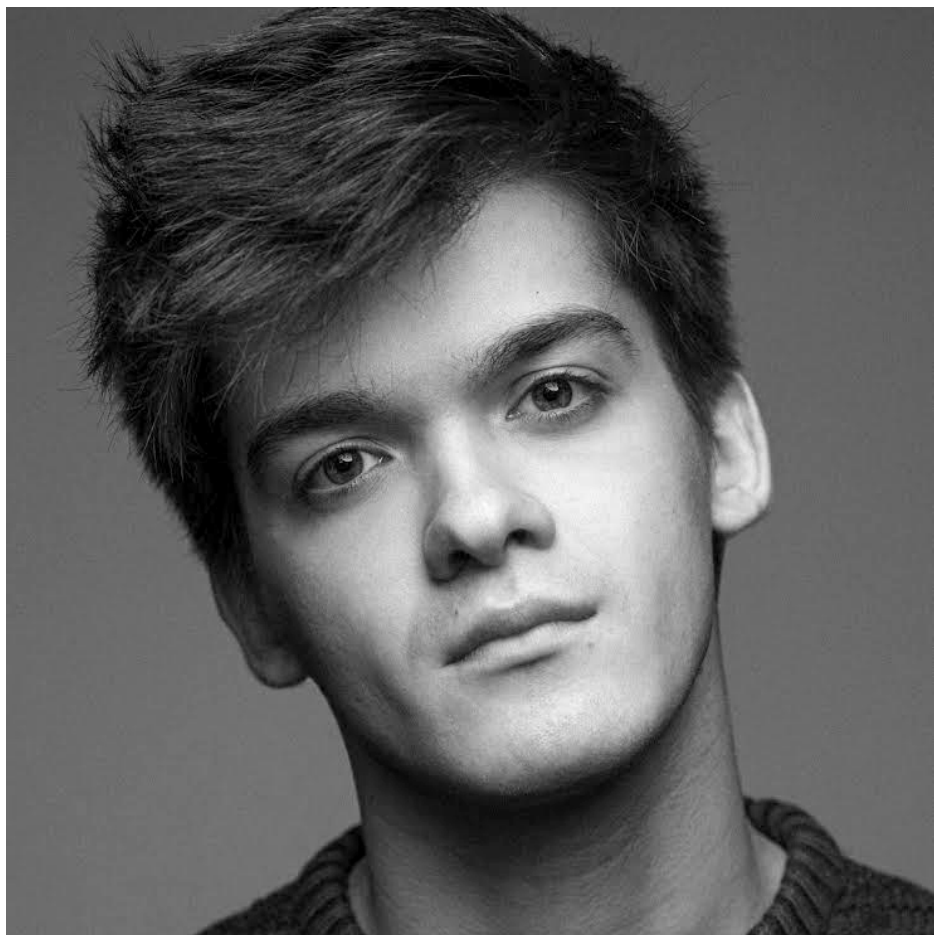
Philip Milnes-Smith interviewing **Mat Fraser & Zak Ford-Williams**

With art from the Victorian Illustrated Shakespeare Archive

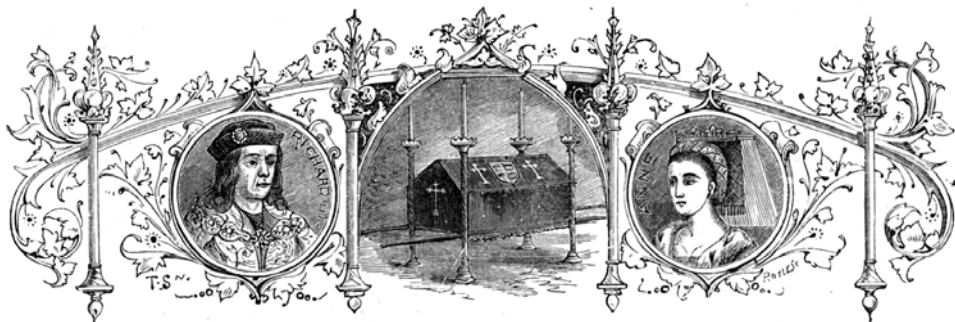
At the heart of this zine are the voices of two disabled actors who have played Richard III:



Mat Fraser is a 64 year old actor, writer, and musician (OK, drummer) with Thalidomide induced phocomelia (shortened arms). Screen credits include C4's Cast Offs, FX's American Horror Story, Netflix's KAOS & Loudermilk, BBC's Best Interests, and stage credits include RIII (Hull Truck), & a UK tour as Puck in The Dream (KAOS). Mat wrote the book, lyrics and music for "Thalidomide!! A Musical" (UK tour x 2) and has written performed and produced 2 LP's.



Zak Ford-Williams is a 26-year-old, northern actor with Cerebral Palsy. His screen credits include BBC's *Better*, Channel 5's *The Hardacres* and Netflix's *Bridgerton*. His stage credits include *A Christmas Carol* and *The Real and Imagined History of The Elephant Man* at Nottingham Playhouse, and *The Tragedy of Richard III* at Lyric Theatre Belfast. Mat played Richard in Northern Broadsides' 2017 production conceived as part of Hull's UK City of Culture celebrations. Zak was one of two actors sharing the role across a run at the Lyric Theatre Belfast in 2024.



Life and death of Richard (1452-1485)

To understand the life of our Richard we have to understand that he was descended from Edward III, who had been succeeded by his grandson, Richard II, in 1377. That Richard was deposed by his cousin Henry in 1399. As Henry IV, he had died in 1413. His son Henry (V) died in 1422, leaving his son, less than a year old, as king (Henry VI) under the regency of his uncles John and Humphrey. The year our Richard was born at Fotheringhay Castle, his father, the Duke of York, had proposed himself as the heir of the then childless Henry VI. Our Richard was three years old when his father declared himself Constable of England, with Henry VI as his prisoner. His older brother Edward (IV) twice deposed Henry VI, who died in 1471. Richard had actively supported Edward IV's military campaign to recover the throne, participating at the battles of Barnet and Tewkesbury. He held a variety of offices during his brother's second reign and became Lord Protector of his nephew Edward (V) in 1483. The legitimacy of Edward V's birth having been disputed, Richard was crowned in 1483. His short-lived reign ended at the Battle of Bosworth Field and it is difficult to judge what his reputation would have been if he had won.

The discovery of his remains in 2012 (in a Leicester car park on the site of Greyfriars Church) revealed not only that he had scoliosis and perhaps a roundworm infection, but that he had been subject to a number of perimortem injuries from the supporters of his successor Henry VII. This Henry's father was son of Henry V's wife, while his mother was descended from Edward III. Henry married a daughter of Edward IV, ending nearly a century of instability.



Shakespeare's Richard

For many years, the disability of Richard III was considered by some to be a slur on his character, invoked by supporters of the successor regime (the Tudors) and perpetuated by Shakespeare. It seems to have been a popular success, and, in print, there were eight Quarto editions in addition to the First Folio. Shakespeare's portrayal explicitly links his Machiavellian behaviour to his disability. However, while a disabled person being a villain is an ancient archetype, his characterisation suggests a more complex causality than simply a "deformed" body inevitably housing a deformed spirit. Partly, Shakespeare's Richard is responding to the ableism of those around him (even including his mother), who stigmatise him because of his appearance. Internalised ableism would not be an unexpected response to this treatment. Although he is a successful warrior and politically savvy enough to get the crown, he puts himself down and sometimes seems surprised at what he has been able to pull off (e.g. "she finds, although I cannot/Myself to be a marvellous proper man").

Performance history

Colley Cibber's autobiography reports that someone thought his performance as Richard was rooted in the "Look, Gesture, Gait, Speech, and every Motion" of a contemporary actor named Samuel Sandford who was usually cast in villainous roles. Cibber suggests that, had he been alive in Shakespeare's day, "his Judgment must have chose him above all other Actors to have play'd his Richard the Third" noting that he was "naturally made for it." Antony Aston described his figure as "diminutive and mean (being Round-shoulder'd, Meagre-fac'd, Spindle-shank'd, Splay footed, with a sour Countenance, and long lean arms".

George Frederick Cooke was considered in his day to be "the ablest representative of Richard", and was an alcoholic and sometimes unable to act through playing "the madman in real life."

In the late 18th century Edmund Kean chose the role as his favourite when still a child. A biographer suggests neglect in early childhood was to blame for the fact that his "legs became almost deformed, and were subsequently only brought to their proper shape by the use of irons." It was also one which a critic felt apt "as his person is suited to the deformities with which the tyrant is supposed to have been distinguished from his fellows." He may also have been neurodivergent. By chance, we have a review from a physically disabled audience member (Lord Byron) who asserted: "Life, nature, truth, without exaggeration or diminution. Richard is a man, and Kean is Richard."

John Henry Brodribb, who went on to become the famous actor Henry Irving, the first actor to have been knighted, "had two serious defects, which he set himself with strenuous will to overcome a stammer in his speech and an exceptionally halting stride". In his 1878 portrayal of Richard III, it was suggested that "his very tricks of speech and stride enhanced his every act."



Mr Kean
in the Character of Richard the Third.

Mat and Zak on Richard before playing Richard

Mat: So my experience of Richard III, the man was limited. I'm struggling to remember whether the car park had happened in by 2017 or whether it had not. Because that was the real game changer I thought in terms of the real person, you know, I've got that wonderful picture of his skeletal scoliosis skeleton that's in my iconic disability images folder. It felt really, I don't know, joyous to find out that he was a real disabled person.

My experience of previous people playing him, however? We did a lot of research before I took on the quite scary job. Al Pacino's Looking for Richard – my review is he didn't find him. I've got some years on Zach and the poor guy's going to go through pain sometimes watching depictions of disability that are shit. I have done that so many times. I just don't even go to the theatre if I think it's going to be like that. I'm done. I hadn't read the play. We didn't do the play. But I had obviously looked at the speech a lot because as a disabled actor, you think 'Oh, I should have that in my canon for audition speeches.'

Zak: There's a lot of similarities, actually, in my experience, because I had sort of felt that it was ableist and I'd seen a lot of productions. I'd seen mostly recordings. I've always loved Shakespeare and like Mat said, I found productions of Richard III. The mimicry stopped me getting into it. I would avoid those recordings and those bits. I heard a lot about these debates of whether it's ableist or not and I felt the productions were ableist. But one time, I think it was first to second year of drama school. I decided to just sit down and read the play, and it was a profound experience because I didn't find the play to be ableist. And that was so interesting in that I saw so much of my own experience in that play. And it felt so true in the way that Shakespeare is – the clever bugger. But I didn't see that truth reflected in any versions or almost all the versions that I had watched. And that was fascinating in that the people doing the versions of it aren't as clever as Shakespeare. You know, it's missing the stuff that was in there. So many of the lines, when reading them, I could see how this might

have actually been meant. And then I think for my final sort of essay dissertation in third year, I did a comparison between that and *Me Before You*, because I was fascinated by how this play from hundreds of years ago, seemed to get it right, whereas this new, at the time new, thing got it so wrong. How strange and interesting is that? And then it became a proper obsession with that play *me*, the one that I had almost rejected, and struggled with, then became my favourite, after actually just sitting down and reading the words.

Mat: I agree it's easy to inhabit him when you're disabled and you've had the disabled experience because you recognise a lot of it. It speaks a lot of truth. Yes, the world is ableist that he inhabits, and people are ableist around him, which is why he has a certain malevolence within him, that results in his retribution.

Zak: I don't think this is a unique experience of my own. But, you know, growing up, it took me a while for me to speak and there were a lot of times when I couldn't like articulate myself, where the world had gone around me and as a lot of people disabled people do, I experienced that sort of profound loneliness and isolation, and the play took me back to that time of being a little kid and just watching everything. And the world seeming to be unaware of how aware I was, and this little thought occurring to me, very powerful, of 'One day I'll make you all pay for this. One day I will make you all pay for this!' That's something I've dealt with and reckoned with. And Richard is that distilled. That's something I felt when I was young, which I think is a relatively universal feeling for a lot of disabled people. That feeling isn't positive. That's like, you know, 'Fuck you all' – it's that. purified. And that I think was the really profound thing, reading it. It was like, how does this non-disabled man from hundreds of years ago understand that feeling when writing this?

Mat: I agree totally with what you said Zak. But sometimes I'll be standing in the middle of the lines of a play and have this kind of out-of-body experience of 'Here I am, again, speaking the lines of a non-disabled man about disability. You know, this is the apex of my

Shakespearean career, but it's the same as everything else. But he does manage to capture that essence and some non-disabled writers have the scope of imagination to inhabit other experiences. Some do it better than others, and Shakespeare was clearly rather good at it. It would be fascinating to find out that he was impaired in some way or had some sort of disability – that could easily have been erased through the history books. But yeah, he did have an extraordinary ability to understand the experience of certain people. The two productions - rehearsal and performance

Zak: I came on board to that version of Richard through Mick. I was terrified to do it because I'd always thought I would love to play Richard when I'm, you know, in the 30s and 40s. It was really something that I didn't feel that I was sort of ready for. But, you know, you'd never feel ready. I know, that's how it works. But then this came along because of Mick's condition and how it progresses and that it was terminal. That he wanted to spend, you know, some of his remaining time doing Richard, is to be honest, part of why I wanted to join this version: 'Oh my God, that's incredible. I want to see that, to be in that room.' I sent off a tape thinking I would never get it, but desperate to sort of see it. And I got it. And what was wonderful, actually, because our conditions are very different, our life experience is very different, they sort of let me do whatever I want. It was my Richard and his was his.

We sort of split the performances almost in half, but we did completely different things with that character. I thought they might want me to just do what Mick was doing, which was brilliant. But no, they were like, 'We want you to find your own stuff' and thank God they liked it. With us having such different experiences - him being newly disabled as well as his condition being terminal and progressive, in the ways that mine wasn't, gave our Richards [distinct characters], apparently, according to the audience. And we, we both watched each other as well. We often we were in the audience watching each other's work and there was this lovely thing of, sometimes he'd do a bit. I was like, 'Oh, I might steal that.' And he told me that he would do the same with mine as well. He, he, he watched me, thought, 'Oh, I might steal that'.

And there was this lovely collaborative work that came from both our very different life experiences. Why it felt so unique and interesting and special. Terrifying. Oh my God. I was very aware that I was very young and that the audience might look at look at me and go, 'He's very young' but they seemed, the feedback was really good. I was able to bring a lot of that stuff that I thought about in theory and writing into that version. I'd still go further with stuff actually.

It was wonderful working with Mick. He brought a level of humour and energy to Richard that I'd never seen before or since, something that I and the audience loved. I even took various bits and added them to my interpretation of the character! He carried that energy and humour with him everywhere. He was a wonderful actor and a great friend. I miss him.

Mat: I was asked by Barry Rutter, the legendary director of Northern Broadsides. Barry's last directing for that company was to be Richard III at the now swanky Hull Truck during them being the year of European City of Culture. And I mean, wow, I was terrified like you. Never actually done a full Shakespeare. Well, I played well. I did Puck. I'd done Puck. But you're not on all the time and you know you're on all the time with Richard. I think it was, 'Fuck, we'll have to ask a disabled person because that's right now. We should do that now. Who is there?' I mean, they're obviously asked the good ones and when they got with me, I could barely get through. I did the speech. I wasn't very good. I think he was desperate.

We had six weeks to rehearse six weeks and I was terrified. So, I dropped everything as soon as I got it. Because we weren't starting rehearsals for another six weeks, I spent every day on it and learnt the entire script for day one of rehearsals because I knew I would need all my energy for doing the acting rather than boning up on lines and lines. You know, I'm not usually the first person in the company to be off book, shall we say. So, I wanted to get the jump on that. When I got there, they were all Shakespearean actors who've done loads of it. He was like I will, I will need you to do it in a northern accent, Mat. I was

like, 'Well ok, but you've got to give me pointers along the way.' He was very much, 'The thought is the word. The word is the thought. There's no fucking back story. It's Shakespeare, right?' So I was like, 'OK, that's how I'll approach it' And in a way, because we only had six weeks, there wasn't time for 'But do you think if I maybe look at it in the...' We didn't have time for any of those rehearsals. It was blocking: do it and learn it and get it right. That's what we had time for. So that's what we did. And I suppose what I'm saying is I actually enjoyed the rigour of him knowing how he wanted it, getting how he wanted it and delivering. If I ever did it again, sure, some exploration would be fun, but at the time I really enjoyed it. And that's what I signed up for and that's what I wanted to do. And it was a whole world of Northern Theatre that I hadn't experienced before, that I was really grateful to. And it taught me one thing: the cultural apartheid of theatre in this country in England. My God, if you're below Birmingham, good luck to you. If you're above Birmingham, no one gives a fuck.

Zak: Oh my God. Oh my God. It's alarming. Honestly. Like, it's a bit of a tangent, but it's not just theatre, it's TV and film as well. They're all posh. Just something that alarmed me. I'm sort of used to, at least with my voice and everything, feeling sort of quite at home, even my drama school was northern – I went to Manchester – so going into the theatre world and that still being the case in today's day and age is alarming. We had this sort of typical four weeks rehearsal period and with two Richards, the rehearsal was sort of split in half. Mick and Oisin, the director, were doing their own sub-version of the scripts and making these changes and rewrites, most of which I agree with.

Mat: Because I hadn't acted all year. I got offered an audio version of Richard III with an American company with a large amount of Hispanic actors in it. And I was like, 'I'm in'. And then I found out it was set in a Latin punk club in 1977 and was written by transwoman Migdalia Cruz, who did an adaption and some of the lines, she modernised some of the words (so Clarence isn't "closely mewed up", he's banged up). And of course I mean OK, if it scans the same and it means younger people can understand it, then no harm done. And Migdalia kept the metre,

kept the pentameter when she changed lines. And also because we had some Spanish actors, some delivered their lines in Spanish and everyone else had an American accent. So it was really right out there for what I was prepared for, and I still enjoyed it. It was still really good. I still couldn't wait to do this thing with again, you know, that jousting scene and the other one with Elizabeth where he thinks he's still jousting, but he doesn't realise it's over for him yet? And I'm, I don't know, I really enjoyed it. So, if I was ever offered it again, I would. You know, with all the other provisos in place: close, enough money, good people, yadda yadda, I'd totally consider it again.

Zak: I think there are certain circumstances that, if I turned up, I might find it difficult. I did what I wanted to with Richard, but there's things where I would go even further because, of course, I had to stick with the blocking, and also using the wheelchairs which were fascinating and brilliant. I'm a part-time chair user as well, but using more my physicality and my ideas for blocking that would be brilliant. As long as there's sort of open dialogue, and this is probably true for a lot of jobs. If I feel like I'd be ignored – and that's not in terms of not me saying I want my way or the highway – just like in terms of if someone came with a vision of Richard that I felt was just patently wrong and wanted me to do it and wanted me to do it in a way that did not feel truthful, or authentic, or fun, that I would struggle with. I'd probably still do it. I rely on it for my income. You've got to take the jobs you get. But I might struggle with that, if that happened.

Mat: Yeah, as an addendum, I agree with Zak. I was entering into a Northern Broadsides Shakespeare production. They were known. It was 'Take it or leave it'. You know what you're entering into. And this time we're doing Richard III, and they've upgraded and they want a real Richard. I put on the hobnail boots and got on with it. I know that sounds really northernist. But they actually do clogging for all their battles. I mean, because I'm a drummer as well. I was a drummer for thir-, you know, I'm still a drummer. You never stop. They always do their battle scenes with drums and clogs, so that actually worked in my favour, because I could do some like flashy drumming at the end. So, I

knew what I was letting myself in for. It was going to be a certain way, their style and I entered into it happily. With an un-, more unknown situation, like Zak's, if some shitty aspects start coming to the fore, that could become problematic. Plus I'm too old, man. I'm 63. I'd love to play him, but I'd rather have Lear. I'm not age appropriate for Richard. I think it needs slightly the anger of somebody who's under 50. You know that slightly less reasonable anger that youth tends to encompass sometimes.

Zak: Yeah, I mean, I'm speaking from, I'm 26. I'm speaking from very little comparative life experience and a lot of that anger, you know, that I talk about is so comparatively like recent to tap into. So yeah, there is a sort of youthful tint to his anger. One thing I've found, I mean, it's been a bit of a revelation for me, in the past year I've been diagnosed as autistic, which I never knew I was. Apparently, it wasn't news to everyone around me, but it was news to me. I was in that anger of not being understood. I did Richard before I knew that. One thing I'd bring into Richard, now, I'd probably bring more of those elements into him now, that I didn't bring him first time around because I thought I was just struggling in various bits that no one else is. And now I know, I'll be like, 'Oh, I'd have that for flavouring as well'. And I want that to be a part of it and all a dialogue, just a dialogue about that. I'd want to have a lot of control. I've got a lot of ideas that I was unable to implement. Given the time and everything, I still have a lot of unused stuff that I think would be brilliant, and I if I do ever play him again – please, you know, all the powers that be, I would love to add that.'

Mat: I think in terms of the production I was in, it was probably a tiny bit quick in the lead up to it. But they knew what they were doing. I accepted that. I jumped on into the boat, and we sailed down the river as planned. And it was awesome and a really good time. I still do love the production I was in. I can't think back and think, upon reflection, 'That was bad.' No, I'm fairly fixed in my opinion of it, because it was fairly fixed in its opinion of itself and was a thing that you either took or left. Would I like another stab at it to do it better? Yes, but because I'm old I accept that that probably may not happen. I'm a bit old for that part now I think.

Zak: I feel the same. I thought the production I was in was incredibly unique and genuinely brilliant. I don't think I'll ever work in in that same way ever again. It was amazing to work in that way. I, of course, have my own ideas, my own music, things that I'd love to put those into practise and have another crack because there's a lot that I would choose to do that I was unable to do in those circumstances, but I loved it.

Mat: In the Halifax Theatre, which was traverse and badly ventilated, Catesby [Matt Booth] was standing next to me. I think it's Catesby, isn't it? Who helps dress Richard for the for the war, for the battle. And I did a deadly pause, self-indulgent actor pause and Matt went 'Hold on' and that's clearly not in the play. So, I looked up and a man had fainted and had just fallen forward. Just ding onto the stage face first and lost a tooth, right? And he was like I better go do something. The audience didn't know what to do. I was like, 'So yes, Ladies and gentlemen, don't worry, everything's fine.' So, I've seen Matt Booth and this other fella dragging this unconscious man up the hallway up to the front of house because you can see, if you lean that way from that part of the theatre. And then I saw that he was OK.

OK. So he's fine. Matt Booth's here. Catesby's back. Right, I think, 'Generally, everybody we just take one big deep breath in, out again and we're back in the play, because we've only got 10 minutes.' And everyone agreed, right? So, I think to myself, 'You did really well there Mat – well done.' Lethal for any actor to think at any moment, right? And I was just about to do that. Matt Booth went, 'Hold on,' walked onto the stage, lent down, picked up a tooth, walked off, and went 'All right. Carry on now.' That was so Northern BroadSides. Oh, my God. It's one of my favourite theatre stories of all time that's happened to me, because I've got some horrible ones too. But that one was just fun. And it also taught me it because it was just at the point where I was probably doing a self-indulgent pause. And you know, I'm always of that adage, is that pause necessary? Is that move necessary? No? Well, don't do it then.

Understanding Richard from lived experience and performance

Mat: I hesitate to say this because I don't want Barry to get a bad name. But it will only endear people to his reputation anyway, if I tell you that we negotiated impairments. He was like. 'Now, Mat, there's traditionally a hump and a limp. I don't want the hump, but I do want the limp.' He said, 'Obviously, you know, you've got your own deformity, so we know we won't need that.' Then at home I was like, 'This is a perfectly fine conversation to have'. It's I mean, God forbid, more sensitive people hear this, but I'm not. And I got him and he was shooting from the hip, and he was saying what he meant.

What I did – and we've never spoken about it – actors will tell you they get a really sore leg after about three days of pretending to have a limp and my hip and knee were like, 'Fuck this for a game of soldiers.' So on about day five, I just started phasing out the limp and by about five days later, I just wasn't limping at all. But no one mentioned it, and I think everyone was too scared to talk about it again. So, I got away with it.

Zak: It was terrifying. Basically, I used myself, you know, making myself small, the thing we do of trying to be unobstructive. Then I just basically used the anger and hate that I have inside – I just used that. I turned up and did the play in front of them, and they loved it and I was like, 'Thank God, thank God you do.' So, it felt almost like a challenge room version of it. But I got to create a version of the character that just felt like the worst aspects of my own psyche. And that was fun.

MF: 'Behold my arm. It is the work of the devil.' I mean, we're getting right to the crux of Mat Fraser here. You know, I have been told on the street over 1000 times in my life that I am the work of the devil, because my deformity proves that. And there you are actually saying the line. You know you just got to go with it, I think lean into it and deliciously do it. Don't fight against what's been written in your character.

Zak: You know you can hear it when an actor doesn't like the line or can't make sense of it, or and he's trying to find a new meaning,

because it doesn't fit their image of the character and it's like, no, people are opposites and people are full of contradiction and confusion. It's all the character and it is all truthful and part of it. I totally agree with you there.

In terms of lines that really got me, I love the nightmare speech, after receiving the worst curse, a psychopath could get – and I believe the character of Richard III is a psychopath – the worst thing you could be cursed with is conscience, and a sudden awareness and empathy of what you've done. Amazing. Fucking brilliant idea for a curse. And that idea of all of this stuff and all of this fighting and what's been shown him? 'I am myself alone.' You know, that always made me burst into tears. I think, because it makes me think of my youth growing up as a disabled person and being so alone after all of this, you know, and this destructive thing that only leads to destruction, destruction of those around you and the nightmare thing I think really is for me the key to the whole thing. I loved how we did it. I was in my underpants, sat on this – the stage felt very cold – and all these eyes looking out of the audience there.

There was a thing about another production. They used in the marketing 'Alack, I love myself.' And I was like, look at the context where that bits from he goes. He's trying to convince himself in that speech, and it's like, 'Why have they used that?' The whole thing is he doesn't love himself, but he's trying to convince it. It portrays a complete misunderstanding of that character. And that speech, particularly, the nightmare one, always hit me quite profoundly.

Mat: I've found, not having to do disability acting, I could just get on with being Richard. And I was like, 'Now watch what I'm going to do'. There's a real glee in his malevolence and his accomplishments. I really enjoyed those bits and played them straight down the line for fun. Like, I'm having fun here. You can join in my fun if you enjoy an evil baddie having fun about being a baddie. Come on, let's have fun. I just played it straight like that because I that's how I perceived it. I thought it is fun. He is having a laugh, especially at the front end of the play, you know?

Zak: I totally agree. And, actually, that's one of the things you know, it's that classic thing about acting. So comedy, you know, you play it straight. The character doesn't necessarily know they're being comedic. And there's a sort of almost a camp joy and he enjoys his own performance and manipulation. And playing that straight, because it's naturally in the words, playing that straight and authentic makes it funny. You're right about the difference between the two acts. Something I really tried to put into to my Richard was a real shift has happened since he's got the crown, and it's not gone how he wants...

Mat: Yeah, it's the point. It's the pivotal moment, isn't it? Yeah. Furthermore, what about the wooing, Zak?

Zak: It's always a difficult one to play it, and you seem to see it different every time. But I tried to play that honestly and not for like laughs or whatever. I don't know whether I succeeded, and I would definitely want to give it another go. I hope I succeeded, but I want the audience to be. If they didn't know that he was manipulating people, they would believe what he's doing. I wanted the audience to look at the wooing scene and really believe that this is real, because that's really disturbing. If you didn't know better, you'd be taken in by someone's manipulation and someone's performance. And I think that's the key to Richard.

Mat: Yeah, I too tried to play the Lady Anne scene straight and passionate and ardent and all the things he performs to her that he is. My jury is personally still out. I actually don't think Lady Anne was ever conned by it. I just think she was saving her life. Personally, I just can't believe that she would fall for it. I think she'd realised she has to go with it. I can't imagine doing the bitter Richard III in that scene. I just can't imagine it working when she says, 'I've said it already' and he goes, 'But that was in thy rage.' I felt with a more soft, more ardent and romantic approach you get the pay off at the end.

Zak: He's like a really good actor. You want to give him that same feeling, I think. And he delights in being a really good actor.



Mat: Yes, he does. And then he tells everybody ‘I was really good there, wasn’t I? Well now watch me.’ Yeah, I love that aspect of him. It is my opinion that in order to portray the Richard III that Shakespeare wrote, you have to have hate, understand hate. I have so much. It was very easy for me to access. I really believe there’s a kernel of the, the nastiest, stickiest black tar hate in him. And you have to have a bit of that in you, or find that part of you, to properly give Richard that viciousness that he has.

Zak: I would agree. I know, I think that’s why Richard can be so refreshing. It’s not necessarily something that just happens to disabled people (I think other marginalised groups are victims of this as well) – we take our oppression and marginalisation nobly. And it can be refreshing to be vindictive, to be cool, to build up all the things that we, as disabled people, accept, and swallow and doff our caps and say, ‘Thank you very much. I’ll accept this stuff.’ That stays, that builds, you know. It can be refreshing and interesting and difficult for an audience to see that that hate and anger is there.

Mat: I often think it’s a shame there isn’t another straightforward public address from Richard towards the end of the play, because they stop. You’re basically saying hey audience, ‘You’re in on this. They’re not,’ and that’s really fun. I suddenly thought, what if the whole audience were disabled? I’d be like, I do the deed, and then I do the thing – the joy, the level of joy – you know what it’s like, right?

Zak: But I think there’s the idea of wanting to be seen and wanting to be known. And this desperate idea to, to also be reassured that what I’m doing is, is, is right. And I want to be known as sexy and charismatic and performative, and I want to perform. I don’t want to be shut away “in this weak, piping time of peace.” I’ve been shut away, but I need to perform.

But the audience also become, at least sometimes, Richard’s conscience and his reassurance. But the power dynamic can shift. Sometimes it’s like there can be judgement there, but it is like a secret observer he desperately needs to have, and he tries to control

everything to show of, you know, 'How wonderful am I?' Incidentally, my rationale for stopping talking to the audience, particularly towards the end, is I think when he's king, he thinks he doesn't need people. I think he doesn't need Buckingham. He starts discarding people and I think the audience, and whatever the audience is for him, is also a thing that he thinks he doesn't really need any more. And then with the nightmare speech, it's like they are also party to his guilt and his conscience that he wants to shut out.



Staging Richard without disabled actors and disability

Mat: Just fucking limp around and do the hump, if you've got to do that, guys, like able-bodied guys, but with all the sticks and making him into a spider with Anthony Sher. And then the weird extra leg braces it's very much, very much obviously a fetishization of the performance of disability and not about delivering the man, Duke of Gloucester's ascension, life. But I find it really hard to get beyond the mimicry of disability and the actors' indulgence in that mimicry. I find it almost impossible to get to the character when that's put in front of my face.

Zak: I never saw the Globe production because I just knew it would make me angry. And I'm maybe at the stage of my career where I'm trying not to piss too many people off. I just didn't want to put myself through that that, you know. Writing that thing about *Me Before You* was putting myself through it probably. I just don't want to spend money. If I can watch it for free, maybe I'll watch it. But I'm not giving them money. I'm not paying for this. I'm not paying to be put through this and watch our experience being paraded around.

This is what gets me about, you know, marginalised communities. I would never equate disabled experiences with that of other marginalised groups because even though we are all sort of, you know, oppressed marginalised groups. There's a lot we could do, I think, to focus on what brings us together at the same time, all of our types of marginalisation are different. And so, it's so frustrating to feel like that, for then someone else to just turn around and go 'Oh no. But your thing is the same as my thing,' as so often happens with disability. It's just submerged into the others, and that's infuriating.



Staging disability more generally

Mat: Well, I mean, my limited experience of being an actor with Graeae because mostly I've been a patron of theirs and stuff in the last 25 years. But I started, you know, nuts and bolting it. We did a production of *What the Butler Saw*, where every actor was disabled. We did use impairments for a gag, so when Doctor Rantz it was played by Dave Kent, a blind actor. It's it's a very old fashioned British farce, so it ends up with people running around shouting, imagine John Cleese shouting at everybody. And that sort of thing. And then he picks up a gun. Well, you know, it's a blind actor picking up the gun. So everyone fucking ducked as soon as he, which wasn't in the script, and we all talked about it. He thought it was funny. We all decided to do it. So that was back in the 90s when things were a little looser in terms of political correctness and stuff.

It was really different working with other disabled actors. One of the differences was I wasn't special anymore. That's not, that's not the one we think of, but it's the one we feel. It's one we feel it's really great to be on a level playing field and everything but oh, I can't get any favours now. Well, and then with Graeae, properly subsidised theatre. Proper six weeks rehearsal, Equity minimum. Nice week doing tech. You know, gentle opening, all of that business. So no, no, no like, fringe behaviour there. Proper funded theatre, which was very nice. Thank you very much. But predominantly being with other disabled professional actors and the director, and the whole atmosphere. What was wonderful, because you could relax and all your little barriers and things that you put up to cope with the world, you can just put them at the door and just forget about it.

Zak: With my experience like in in terms of my own emotional experience, and I can only speak from my own experience, which again is the trouble with directors because sometimes they ask you as a disabled person to answer for everyone. I'm like, I don't know mate. I can only talk about me. But I was not with, you know, any other disabled people at drama school or any other play I'd done or on screen

or on stage. I've never worked with any other disabled people and I hadn't really grown up with many other disabled people. I'd spent – like Richard, you know, 'I am myself alone.' – I'd spent the majority of my time being alone, and I found Elephant Man with it's a majority disabled cast to be a profound, a really emotional experience. In a way I'll try not to get emotional when talking about.

I finally didn't feel alone. And I finally felt listened to, and that I could be myself. And like you say, put your guard down, both in terms of my disability and I could move how I move and my now realised neurodivergence. You know, we had the director was diagnosed autistic as were lots of the other actors and there was that as well, that looseness, and everyone was just themselves. And I've found it so profound, in a way that I've struggled with afterwards with other jobs. I've only had one of those experiences and that job remains my favourite job because of that, and I found it really difficult to put those barriers back up in future jobs.

Mat: What I really saying was non-disabled theatre companies are a little bit more cool with disability and aspects of it these days than they were in the 90s. But, but there's still going to be a huge difference if something is disabled-led, or disabled and ally led, that makes a big difference, I think. But yeah, for sure I mean that the putting the barriers back up, that's something we all recognise, mate.

Zak: Yeah, it was a very, very tough experience I went into. I went, I had one day, between Elephant Man and another job, which was this filming and was very different. I went on to it unmasked and very quickly found that that was a big issue, and I had to put those back up.

Mat: With television man, I mean television. I'm only talking about theatre companies here. I am not talking about television. When I did my episode of Silent Witness. Thanks, Liz [Carr]. When I did my episode of Silent Witness, I wouldn't have got it any other way. She had her own trailer. It was one of two wheelchair accessible trailers in the whole United Kingdom.

Zak: There's still only two, I think.

Mat: Yeah, well, this was four years ago. And she only had it because she's one of the four leads in the show. So the recently she just did something else and she was back in the room next to the canteen in the main building and makeup had to come to her. She wasn't part of the morning chat in the makeup room. She wasn't included, you know – all those otherings that inadvertently happen when it's not accessible on a set. So, I think one of the big differences is actually between theatre companies and television companies. Theatre companies, on the whole, are trying to learn. I don't see that in television. I just see money rolling everything and access only being begrudgingly given when you've insisted on it.

Zak: I've maybe had some slightly more positive experiences in television. I do believe there are certain production companies I've worked with, and certain people, in fact, I've had very good experiences. But I still would, like you, put the two very different, very far apart. It's like the theatre, culturally in its attitude towards disability, is so far ahead and accepting and willing to roll with it. It's a shame really, because it's not even that good and yet comparatively, it looks better. I struggled to, I won't accept scraps, and I struggled to give people their due for doing tiny things, which I think we're kind of in danger of doing at the moment. You know, the data, when you look at the data – it can make their organisations look bad. They don't like to be shown what the actual data is about the amount of disabled actors being cast in theatre. It's dreadful, unacceptable. I wish I had some figures on the top of my head, but I don't want to get any figures wrong, so I won't say it.

Mat: I just. I saw Oliver. It got Sweeney Todd. It's all out with the East End and it's dark and edgy and a little bit cold. And then two nights ago, I saw the Cable Street musical. Set in the East End of London in 1936, where there was a Jamaican communist. Great mate. Depict history however you want. But there wasn't one fucker who's disabled. And do you know how many people had rickets in the 30s in the East End? I mean, do me a favour. I'm a believer in the quota system and the

only reason I'm a believer in the quota system is because the opposite doesn't work. We've seen it time and time again. It just doesn't work. There's still no disabled kids in Oliver in the East End, and there's still no disabled people in the Battle of Cable Street. I mean, this is easy casting. There should be, 'Well, of course we're going to have at least two disabled people in the production. What are the two best roles for them?' I'd like that to happen with Shakespeare companies, particularly, because I don't want to only be thinking, oh, well, I've done. Richard, maybe I can get Caliban one day. Fuck that shit. I want King Lear or, you know, access to the equality of being allowed to do that. I'm not saying I'm a good enough actor to play King Lear. I'm not. I'm not saying that. I'm just saying don't only want to play the disabled roles in Shakespeare. Please. You know, to be fair, the Globe are, you know, mixing it up a bit from what I've seen. It could be a lot better, but there are attempts that have visibly been tried.

Zak: Yeah, there are attempts. I just, I think also with me not being in London, perhaps my view is skewed more with what I can see and get sort of access to and read about. It's just the attempts are attempts but a lot of the time, they just they do feel like appeasement.

Mat: It can be ill thought out. But, you know, better that to create a discussion about how to do it better than not be able to have the discussion at all. Yeah, here we are, absolutely doing what you just said, Zak, celebrating piecemeal.

Zak: What have you done? What have you done to me? Usually, I'm so polite. I'm so even headed. I don't know what you've done, but it's like you've ignited...

Mat: Don't blame me. Come on. It's in you. It's in you.

But I'd love to see a study, a film, you know, a film called Richard III where the disabled actor arrives at rehearsal. You know, I know we're luvvies and we love seeing films about plays, but they speak so hard about culture. They say so many things about society, you know, plus you get all the fun of, like, being in the wings and all that silliness, you know.



An intricate black and white line drawing of a rectangular border. The border is composed of a grid of thin lines, with each intersection and the center of each side featuring a decorative floral or vine motif. The motifs include leaves, small flowers, and stylized vines that intertwine with the grid lines. The overall style is reminiscent of a woodcut or a detailed engraving.

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