

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

It's a real pleasure to be sitting down with Kimberley Sykes, the director of this vibrant and hurtling new production of *Romeo and Juliet*. Welcome, Kimberley. I wanted to start by asking you this, Given that *Romeo and Juliet* is one of the most famous and most performed plays in world drama, how did you go about looking at it afresh in this new production?

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

I think with classical texts as well as new writing, that first read, for me, of a play is really vital to as objectively as possible just read the play with as fresh an eye as I can find and to just allow whatever is impulsively and instinctively coming to me, to just allow that to, kind of, come out somehow.

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

Sure

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

So what I often do, after reading the play for the first time, I'll get my notebook out and I'll just scribble down whatever is coming to my head.

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

Well, I presume you've read it before this, but what were your impulsive scribbles? What did they say?

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

It read Four Days. Four Days exclamation mark, exclamation mark, exclamation mark!

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

Yes

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

How do five young people and one parent end up dead in the space of four days, in one small community?

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

Yes

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

What's wrong?

LAUGHTER

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

What on earth is wrong with Verona was a big question I had and I guess those are the big ones. It's all of my questions, rather than trying to jump to an answer or an idea or a concept

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

Yes

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

Or this is what I think the play is about after one read.

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

Yes

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

It's all of my questions that I'm putting down and I try to keep them alive as much as possible.

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

And is your aim by the end of rehearsals to have answered those questions, or to have shared the questions with everybody else involved in the production?

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

I think the sharing and keeping the question mark alive is really important.

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

Yeah, I like that, yeah.

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

And I think the audience as well.

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

Yes

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

It's really vital to not try and tie everything up with a nice pretty bow at the end. And I'm not interested in delivering an on stage essay

Laughter

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

Yes

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

It's, I think theatre lives in audience members for days, for weeks, for months, for years after they've seen a show and, for me, I'm always trying to make a production which has longevity for each audience member.

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

Yes

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

That keeps it alive for as long as possible.

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

Yes

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

So, if I start the process with questions and if I go into the rehearsal process with questions and then I'm asking the audience questions and asking them to ask questions. Then, it just keeps it alive.

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

Rather than right, we've done the thinking, it's all in a sealed box. You're keeping it vivid and absolutely, I like the sound of that very much. This might be a bit of an ask. But could you possibly sum up your take on *Romeo and Juliet* in a line, or two lines. What would the tagline be? Or is that a ridiculous and reductive thing to ask you to do?

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

It's not. It's something that you're asked to do quite a lot as a director and it's really important, you kind of go through a process of can you put the play into a paragraph, can you put the play into a sentence, can you put the play into one word. It's always a challenge, it's a really important exercise for any director.

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

Okay

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

If I were to put this production into one sentence, it would be "A *Romeo and Juliet* as a warning play that asks the audience why do we keep making the same mistakes over and over again as a society and are we going to change".

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

Right, okay. And do you have any answers to that, having worked on it for so long?

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

Yeah, I mean, I think the big clue is about listening, is about perspective and those characters in the play who throughout the four days go narrower and narrower and narrower in their perspective and those characters in the play who go wider and wider and wider in their perspectives.

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

Give us an example of maybe one of each of those two camps. Who's in the narrow, who's in the wide perspective?

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

Yeah, I think Lord Capulet I would put in the category of getting narrower and narrower.

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

Yes, he seems to get, sort of, madder and madder as the action goes on, doesn't he?

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

Way more manic, and you can hear it in his language, becomes really syncopated and he's changing his mind all the time.

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

Yes

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

Literally in one scene he can change his mind four or five times.

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

So he goes narrower

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

He goes narrower, he begins the play by saying, to Paris “Woo her”

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

Yes, that’s right

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

It’s her choice. My consent is but a part. It’s her choice that matters. He ends the play

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

In the end he’s doing all the catering for the wedding and stuff

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

He’s doing it all! And he says “You will marry Paris or I’ll get you to church on Thursday or I’ll drag you thither”

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

Yes

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

And you go “What’s happened there!” in four days, what is that pressure on him? And I don’t think there’s a baddie in the play and I try never to paint baddies, especially in Shakespeare because I don’t think – I think he’s way more humane than that.

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

Yes

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

So I was constantly asking “What is happening to Lord Capulet that’s making him do this?” And there’s something in the pressure of the Prince and Paris and their power.

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

Yes

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

Because we all think of Lord Capulet and Lord Montague of being the dons.

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

Yes (laughs)

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

Actually there are two people above them in the play

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

There are super dons above them!

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

There are super dons and they are politicians and money.

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

So that's what. Yeah. So he's going narrower, who's doing the opposite? Who's going wider with their perspective?

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

Juliet.

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

Juliet. Yes

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

Absolutely, that's her journey.

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

Yes, she is. This is a podcast but Kimberley is beaming as she says Juliet. With knowledge and self-awareness and awareness of the world and the disappointments of the world. And how grown ups – yes, you're right, she's absolutely, she's discovering a lot. For those who've not been lucky enough to see your production – I wonder if you might tell us, first of all, what your Verona looks like and where it sits in time, and space? What's the context?

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

Yeah, so one of the first things I wrote down in my stream of consciousness, reading the play for the first time, just scribbling down everything was, there was an earthquake 11 years ago.

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

What?

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

I'd never read that in the play before, I'd never seen a production that had talked about that. Often it's cut. As a line. The Nurse tells us in Act 1 Scene 3 that eleven years ago there was an earthquake and on that day, Lord and Lady Capulet were away in Mantua and she talks about Juliet falling over and breaking her brow and this joke that her husband told in the moment. And then there was this earthquake which shook the whole house. And in the same breath she also talks about the death of her daughter, Susan. And then goes on to talk about the death of her husband. And I found that chunk of text really fascinating. And it made me ask question about how bad this earthquake was. Is that the place, is that the time where she lost her daughter and her husband? If Lord and Lady Capulet were in Mantua and she was looking after Juliet, then was she a part of how Juliet has managed to get out of the earthquake alive?

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

Right, okay, yes.

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

Is that why they've got the relationship they do? And it made me think a lot about what eleven years after a tragedy looks like, and how a society recovers from tragedy?

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

And your Verona is eleven years on from this, and so what does your Verona, eleven years on look like? How has it recovered? Or indeed, not recovered as the case may be.

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

Hmm, the stage floor is earth.

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

Right

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

There's lots of references to earth

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

Okay so they haven't done all the rubble clearing, the rebuilding.

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

They haven't, it's kind of. You know when you look at images when tsunamis have happened and earthquakes have happened, there's often areas still, twenty years later that have been left and I think what often happens in those areas, and there's a metaphor for society recovering from a tragedy. Is that, we don't really look at the actual crack, the place where the earth cracked, or the rubble we plaster over it and we want to build on top of it.

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

Right yeah.

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

So, on top of our earth structure which has the crack running through it-

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

Right Okay

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

-Is three storey scaffolding structure that is purposefully kind of liminal and it's definitely not wobbly
-

[Laughter]

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

But it's meant to look like there's been an attempt at recovery but it's almost been abandoned and the scaffs still there – it's a temporary structure.

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

Well, you were talking about scribbling in your notebook. When I saw the lovely production, in my notebook I scribbled about the set. I wrote – it's particularly striking. This blasted industrial look so it's from recovery, from this great natural disaster and it looks blasted, the set. Doesn't it.

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

Yes, it does. And you know, I think I was interested in juxtaposing the set with the natural lushness of Regent's Park Open Air Theatre as a site and this incredible park and this luscious space.

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

Yes Yes.

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

With something that felt like it was, that kind of brutal quarry like space. That because when Shakespeare says Fair Verona – I was really struggling to understand what was fair about this Verona.

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

Yes (laughs) Yes

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

My reading of the play

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

Not very fair

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

No. It's really dysfunctional.

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

Yeah

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

And the people within it, the characters within Verona, I think, are extraordinary and I wanted to create a space where the characters felt vibrant and felt alive.

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

Yeah. They're vibrant but the landscape surrounding them has obviously had a very hard time. I think we'll come back to that. What I wanted to ask you – I'm sure our listeners would like to know. About the casting. What were you looking for when you were working on the casting? And, in particular, the actors who would play the title characters, Romeo and Juliet. What, in particular, were you looking for through the audition process?

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

Yeah, so with Romeo. You know, when you read the play everybody loves him. Everybody is always asking "Where is Romeo", "have you seen Romeo today?" "Romeo, where's Romeo" "Romeo do this" they all want a piece of Romeo, they all want to be around him and so you need somebody who's quite special to portray that. Somebody who has an innocence and a vulnerability to them and yet so much potential. Because when I read Romeo, I hear somebody who is struggling through the world, who at the start of the play is really suffering in terms of his mental health and finding his way in the world, and goes through a process of real enlightenment that comes from his relationship with Juliet and what he discovers about himself. And so I wanted to find somebody who had that kind of rigour of thought and it is always important for me to find actors who are, who are really socially and politically aware as well. Who are active in the world. And Joel McCormack came in and made me cry.

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

Oh wow, okay, sure

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

And sometimes I don't quite know what I'm looking for in an actor

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

But when you see it you know you were looking for that. And what about the casting of Isabel as Juliet.

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

Yeah, Isabel is. She is, she's so complex and quite hard to pin down.

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

Right

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

And I love that. And I love that about her, I love that she, I mean, she is rigorously intelligent and

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

And that shines through in her performance

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

Doesn't it

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

It sparkles from the stage

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

Yes, really sparkles. And yet, Juliet isn't as gregarious as Romeo.

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

Yes

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

There's something a little bit more protective and secretive about Juliet and I feel it's something that she has had to learn to be in the family she's grown up with. And I really felt that when I first met Isabel. That there were secrets there and I was really excited to get to know those secrets, or to leave some of them

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

Dangling

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

Dangling! And untapped and I think there's great strength in somebody who can – who feels very sure of themselves and their own mind and yet is still open to so much questioning and learning and also you know what's really hard with Juliet is finding somebody who kind of, can pass for a fourteen year old girl

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

Yes absolutely

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

And not that it needed to be a literal interpretation of a fourteen year old, because that often feels like a lie when people try and do that with Juliet. But that the innocence.

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

Yes, absolutely. The innocence but the learned wariness about life. Yeah. Isabel captures that so beautifully. Now, two of your key characters, Tybalt and Benvolio – now Benvolia have been re-gendered. Now, why was that important to you? Why did you make that choice?

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

A few reasons. When you look through the cast list as traditionally played there are very few women in this play and, as a female director, but also I think a lot of male directors would look at that and find that problematic. Because if Shakespeare was writing today do I think, in my understanding of him as a writer that he would do that? No I don't.

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

Yes, yes.

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

And because I was interested in doing a modern production, or a contemporary production set ten or eleven years in the future. It had to represent the world that is in front of us right now. And then, you go on the process of where would it be interesting to re-gender characters.

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

And why did you pick these two?

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

Benvolia. So first time I read the play, I read her as a woman.

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

Okay

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

I, she just always felt female to me. And, not that there are traits that aren't absolutely in men as well. But there's something about Benvolia as a young person in this world who's trying to be a bridge between the younger generation and the older generation and trying to be a peacemaker and trying to – but also trying to please everybody. And spinning so many plates and having a lot of demands made of her because people trust her, and so she's always involved somehow in a fight. And then the minute that fight happens an adult comes in and says "Benvolia tell us what happened."

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

Right. She's the one who's got to be answerable/

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

Absolutely. And that's exhausting

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

(Laughs) Yes

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

And really interestingly, Benvolia leaves halfway through the play and that was always a really big question for me. Where does Benvolia go – why does she leave? She just always felt female in my imagination. And that’s probably to do with my imagination and my experiences of the world as well.

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

And what about Tybalt?

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

With Tybalt. Michelle and I have spoken about this a fair bit. Representation of violence from women and within women is so rarely talked about and when it is talked about, it’s talked about as some kind of phenomenon. Like “Women who Kill”.

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

Yes Yes.

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

Violent women – like there’s something ridiculous and unnatural and against all human nature for a woman to be violent and so we were really interested in exploring that and tapping into what that instinct, what that impulse is in women too.

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

Yeah

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

And also, what always, again, Tybalt is often played as a kind of baddie with not very much compassion, but the more I read the play the more I thought. Tybalt’s actually really good at what she does. Some of the others in play going around brawling in the streets. Tybalt’s really clever and she’s disciplined and well practiced and Mercutio tells her she’s a duellist. And it made me think about what it is to be a woman who’s trying to fight for, for your place in the world and especially in a world of violence. The homework that goes into that. The amount of work she’s had to put in to being considered on the same level as the men in her family. And that even as the best fighter in Verona she is still massively disrespected and completely humiliated by Lord Capulet which is one of the reasons for the tragedy in the play because if Lord Capulet hadn’t publically humiliated Tybalt in the party in front of everybody Tybalt wouldn’t have had such a beef with Romeo and then gone out to try and kill Romeo.

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

Right, so cause and effect.

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

Yes, cause and effect is massive.

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

Following on from that. There’s a wonderful essay you’ve written in the programme for this. And you’ve written about how the long term hatred between the Capulets and the Montagues is what

gives all the young people their agency and their identity. I was fascinated by this. Perhaps you could unpack that idea a little bit for us because it's fitting in with what you've said about Tybalt and so on.

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

It does. When you read the play and think about the young people – they don't seem to be doing anything.

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

Laughs – no.

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

They don't have jobs, they don't go to school

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

They're all just hanging about!

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

They're all hanging about! What are you doing? They're not doing anything!

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

Don't they have Latin homework or something to be getting on with?

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

Laughs Absolutely! They're not doing anything. And it made me think. What have they got to do? What agency do they have? And I was

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

It's a pretty constricted society isn't it?

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

It is. And sometimes you look around the world today and you look at decisions that are taken out of a younger generation's hands, like climate change. Like leaving the EU. That then young people are going to be left with the responsibility to continue and that's their future and it felt like that in the play. Like lots of decisions were being made. Prince Escalus comes on in the first scene and says the next person who fights will die. He introduces capital punishment in a breath, so they've got no – all of their control is being taken away from them constantly.

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

And that idea of the inherited hatred – it made me think of some alarming parallels with some of the contemporary situations in Northern Ireland for example. Two groups of young people who can be divided by generations old hatred and they're stuck in the system of it. I've thought about it and that a lot when watching your production.

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

Yeah, I think if you really asked any of them why does this hatred exist, I'm not sure whether they could explain.

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

It exists because it exists. We're here because we're here.

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

Yes – it's the way it is. It is what it is

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

It's never questioned, it's just an unmoving monolith isn't it.

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

Yes, and to stop that cycle it needs an adult generation to make a change.

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

Yes

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

And what strikes me – so I'm often asking myself. Why these four days? Why does Shakespeare choose these four days in Verona if the Capulet and Montague war has been going on for generations, why these four days? And I guess the only answer I have for that, is at the end of it. Romeo and Juliet die and with Romeo and Juliet's deaths is the death of the Montagues and the Capulets because there is no bloodline.

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

One just wonders if the second cousins and hangers on will continue the feud. One hopes not. But we've so much to talk about. I'd like to ask you, perhaps if we can talk about the sound and music choices you made for the production because I found them fascinating. Perhaps you could tell us a little bit about them.

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

So, Giles Thomas the composer and sound designer is somebody whose work I've admired for a long time, and wanted to work with for a long time. And we met and he is also interested in challenging assumptions and not making any choices because that's the way it's always done and he's a radical artist and that was something that I really connected with in him. And we talked about "what does tragedy sound like"?

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

Oooh okay.

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

And I'm not the kind of director who can go to another creative and say "it needs to be this exact genre and I want it in this tempo and in these keys!

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

(laughs) And I want it all in B flat!

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

(laughs) I don't work like that

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

You're not that specific about the sound of tragedy

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

Absolutely – whereas what I'm really interested in is sitting down and talking to another creative about what tragedy sounds like.

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

And what did Giles say tragedy sounded like.

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

(Laughs) Not very much apart from – I'm going to go and send you some stuff.

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

Okay

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

Because Giles' way of communicating is through music, so we explored lots of Spotify playlists and we just sent each other stuff all the time and we got closer and closer to it through our ears.

[MUSIC PLAYS)

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

Music's really important to me. I grew up in a musical family. My step-dad's a semi-professional jazz pianist. I played the violin to quite a high standard growing up and read music and so music's very important to me and I'm always interested in the relationship between music and theatre and pushing those boundaries beyond just transitions.

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

If you could sum up again, very briefly. What would you say you decided upon for the music. The idea. How does it sound if you could say in words what the music sounds like briefly.

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

Yeah. It's relentless.

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

Okay yeah.

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

There's this constant beat that's taking you closer and closer to the tragedy and it gets faster and faster and faster.

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

Yes, it's heart palpitating.

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

It's a heartbeat and we also have sounds of the earth moving within it, so every time somebody dies the earth tremors.

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

Wow

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

When Romeo and Juliet fall in love the earth tremors.

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

Yeah

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

So it's this constant sense of we are hurtling towards this tragedy and because we play without an interval at one hour forty five.

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

Yes

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

It's about saying "stay with us, because we're getting there."

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

Well, you lead me, very neatly onto a question I wanted to ask you. Your production does stick to Shakespeare's promise of the Two hours' traffic of our stage. A lot of productions of Romeo and Juliet do not do this, so very well done to you for doing it! Why did you decide on an hour and forty five with no interval and what did you have to cut to get down to this? First of all, why did you decide on that as a running time?

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

I wanted to create that sense of the kind of seat of your pants, rollercoaster ride that is one thing happens and the next thing happens and the next thing.

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

The momentum, the pace – too often the pace if it stretches out the sense of the relentlessness, the relentless inevitability is allowed to go very flabby and baggy whereas this, you're just in it, aren't you.

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

The whole point is that there is no time to think in this Verona. If we were to give the characters time to sit and reflect, I don't think the tragedy would happen.

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

No, because again, this lovely essay of yours in the programme, you point out. "Everyone is in such a perpetual hurry" now you touched on this earlier when we talked about Lord Capulet. Everyone makes weighty decisions in great haste. Now, I'm quoting. I'm going to quote you back at yourself "They seem to make really big decisions really quickly in the middle of a scene. They change their minds all the time. Capulet decides that Juliet will marry Paris on Thursday. Oh No, Thursday feels like it's a bit too soon. Oh what day is it today? Oh it's Monday. Well in that case she'll get married on Wednesday. And you're like whoa whoa whoa. Stop everybody. Please slow down! Why is Verona in such a frenzied haste all the time?"

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

(Laughs) That is exactly my question!

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

Considering nobody seems to have anything to do!

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

Exactly! The first thing I wrote down was “How does all of this happen in four days – why is everybody in such a hurry” and I think there’s a fear, we react and we try to do things quickly when we’re scared.

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

Yes. Yeah

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

And when we’re not feeling very confident or,

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

Not particularly measured about things.

[KIMBERLEY SYKES]

Absolutely and we can talk about that right now. As a society we can talk about reactionary decisions and making decision in haste but there’s also something about having to make decisions in haste.

[FIONA MOUNTFORD]

Yes. Now Kimberley thank you very much for your time. We’re about to be joined by three very special guests so we will continue our discussion.