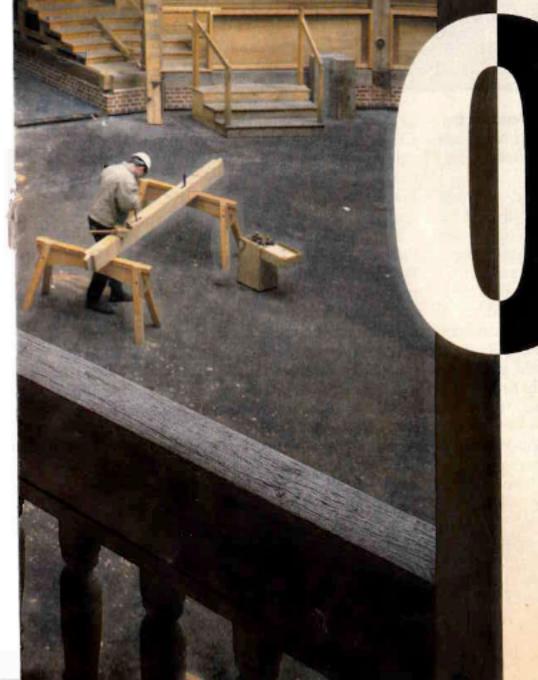


Global ambition

Applause greeted the appointment of Mark Rylance, the former RSC actor, as artistic director of the reconstructed Globe Theatre in London. But if anyone thinks he is going to create a kind of Elizabethan theme park, they can think again. Interview by Edward Fox. Portraits by Richard Waite



NE THING you'll eventually notice, if you spend any time with Mark Rylance,

the brilliant actor who is the artistic director of the reconstructed Globe Theatre, is that he has some very strange ideas about Shakespeare.

Leading a group of bright-eyed, camera-laden Americans from Oberlin College, Ohio, on a tour of the immediate area of the new theatre on Southwark bankside, he points out a bronze plaque indicating the original site of the Globe. The late American actor Sam Wanamaker who, as director and producer, led the 25-year project to build the new Globe, wanted to put it on this site but couldn't because of an order preserving it as a National Monument. Effectively, it is preserving an old, 3ft-thick slab of concrete, building foundation.

'That's the thing about Shakespeare,' said Rylance. 'He leads you up to a certain point, and then says, "Stop. Now you have to use your imagination!"

I don't know what the Americans made of that. It seemed as though he meant that Shakespeare was a sort of immortal demiurge who had put the concrete slab there himself earlier this century as a practical joke for the rebuilders of his 400-year-old theatre. It turns

out that this is exactly what Rylance meant.

If anyone thinks the rebuilt Globe is going to be a sort of Shakespeareland, a Disneyesque heritage theme park for rubes and tourists, Mark Rylance is a living guarantee that such fears will prove unfounded.

What we are likely to see in the Globe's three-week Prologue Season (in which Rylance plays Proteus in its first production. The Two Gentlemen of Verona, which opens on August 21) is the unpredictable result of a collision between the antiquarian interests of those who want to reproduce with as much historical accuracy as possible the experience of playgoing in Elizabethan and Jacobean times and the ideas of a man who looks into Shakespeare and sees a world of mystical archetypes.

Rylance doesn't even believe that William Shakespeare, the actor from Stratford who died in 1616 at the age of 52, wrote the plays of Shakespeare – but more about that later. For the moment, let us just say that he sees the towering genius of English literature in the same way as the Aborigines of Australia see Ayers Rock, venerating it as something sacred and supernatural because of its aweinspiring, solitary vastness in the landscape.

The other thing you notice if you spend any time with Mark Rylance as he goes about his business in his first administrative job, with an office and a secretary, is how unlike the stereotypical histrionic thespian he is in manner.

He doesn't clamour for attention. He listens to people. In conversation, he always looks you steadily in the eye as though he is trying to escape from himself into another personality – a good instinct for an actor, but unusual. He speaks slightly out of the side of his mouth, as if speech were a trick he has just taught himself and is still practising, like juggling. (He has a slight American accent, having grown up in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where his father was an English teacher). He focuses on every conscious moment, yet his quiet manner suggests the trait of the most determined people – of knowing instinctively how to keep his energy carefully in reserve for when it can be used most effectively.

Rylance's ideas about Shakespeare may be strange, but the job itself is pretty strange, too, and calls for someone with a certain originality of outlook and creative resourcefulness.

The centre of the operation, the Globe Theatre itself, is a peculiar-looking wooden circle with a thatched circular roof, which leaves a round opening to the sky, and walls covered in plaster made of ground limestone and goat hair. This structure is presently surrounded by cranes, cement mixers and scaffolding and by a complex of buildings designed to suggest the original Globe's Elizabethan architectural surroundings. The purpose of all this is to provide an historically authentic setting for the performance of Shakespeare's plays in a way that Shakespeare would have recognised.

The design of the theatre itself, in the absence of original plans, is the result of scholarship and informed guesswork. How the actors would have acted in Shakespeare's era, no one knows. Rylance's job is to conjure this up in a convincing way.

Rylance got the job because conjuring was on his CV. In 1991, while performing Hamlet at the RSC, he and his wife, Claire van Kampen, a musician, came upon the notion of performing a ritualistic theatre based on the ideas of alchemical transformation and sacred geography.

Performing Hamlet, he says, was 'an Orphic descent into the underworld, followed by a return to consciousness that was very useful to me'. No one at the RSC shared these enthusiasms, however, so he formed his own company, Phoebus Cart, and mounted a production of *The Tempest*, which they took on tour around the country one very rainy summer, playing inside ancient stone circles and on





GLOBAL ECONOMIES Mark Rylance, artistic director of the new Globe, says everyone — from star to stage hand — will be paid the same. He himself took a 50 per cent pay cut

spearian scholar who is chairman of the Globe's academic directorate, wrote, 'While there is no evidence for any particular significance in this fact, it might well be unwise to ignore it.'

Indeed it might, for this is the imaginative universe from which Rylance's ideas of an 'authentic' performance of Shakespeare will emanate. Note that his production of Macbeth last year. which was beaten up by a gang of angry theatre critics, is defended by Rylance (albeit somewhat defensively by now) as an 'authentic' production in the sense that it approached Shakespeare's original shocking intention, as Rylance perceived it. He believes this intention was lost over the centuries by 'purist Shakespearian scholars and producers' - Rylance's bugbear. This was the production in which Macbeth (played by a shaven-headed Rylance) and Lady Macbeth acted like members of a sinister New Age cult. mumbling like brainwashed zombies.

As Rylance puts it, his aim in reconstructing an authentic performance of Shakespeare will succeed if he can create the same intense and vital relationship between the actors and the audience that existed in Shakespeare's day, where the play speaks urgently of the issues of contemporary life. 'I don't see that there's any authenticity in going back to doing Shakespeare's plays as if we had an Elizabethan audience dressed in Elizabethan clothes, with no reference to what's happening today.'

Besides, what most people think of as Elizabethan dress is standard Elizabethan-style theatrical costume, which is not the same thing.

'No one has ever seen authentic Elizabethan costume,' he argues. 'What you tend to see is a single garment made of curtain material and held together with Velcro, which is

like copying the outfit of a rich businessman in the City – the Italian suit, the shirt, the tie, the jewellery and even the underwear – as a single garment made sites associated with ley lines – mysterious features of the landscape thought to radiate electromagnetic force. Rylance played Prospero, the magician. To finance the project, he mortgaged the flat in Brixton, where he lives with his wife and two young step-daughters. If the project bombed, they would have been homeless.

Imagine Kenneth Branagh – Rylance's peer at the RSC and one of the few living actors in Rylance's league – touring Britain in a van (which was later stolen), playing Prospero in the rain at sacred sites in an attempt to bring fertility to the land. While Rylance was practising alchemy in the fields, Branagh was probably slurping daiquiris on a banquette in the Polo Lounge of the Beverly Hills Hotel, making money.

As the tour neared its end, Phoebus Cart found itself performing on the empty riverside building site where the Globe now stands. Sam Wanamaker gave them use of the site, which Rylance favoured because it had the same 100ft-diameter as Stonehenge and the Rollright stones in Oxfordshire.

'It was looking like we were going to lose our flat,

because it had been raining every day,' Rylance recalls. 'It was very bad. The site generally had an inch or two of water on it every day, so there were about four hours of sweeping the concrete before a performance. I used to sleep in the van and get up every few hours and walk around the site because it was all open and there was no security guard.'

One wretched night, the tent storing the costumes collapsed under the weight of the rain and Rylance struggled to fix it, raging and cursing the gods that had betrayed him. 'That's what usually happens in Shakespeare's plays,' he concluded later. 'They put you through some kind of test.'

Having presumably passed this Shakespearian test, Rylance was invited by Wanamaker to join the Globe's artistic directorate. Last year, following the death of Wanamaker in December 1993, the artistic directorate elected him its sole artistic director. And now he is working in a theatre that is aligned, like Stonehenge and the Rollright stones, towards the Midsummer rising sun. On this point, Professor Andrew Gurr of Reading University, the Shake-

out of thick curtain material.' He has a vision of fine, lightweight clothing, billowing in the breeze of a summer's night.

The door to Rylance's office at the Globe bears the sign 'Sam's Room'. It had previously been Wanamaker's office; Rylance has inherited it, but reverently left Sam's name in place. A bronze bust of Wanamaker, his hand thoughtfully supporting his chin, stands on the conference table on a child's plastic placemat depicting the solar system. From this office, Rylance deals with the issues - the endless questions of intuition versus historical literalness - involved in recreating the Shakespearian playgoing experience. He does much of this by means of ungrammatical memos and faxes that read like communications from the spirit world, channelled via automatic writing.

One day, for example, he had a meeting with an architect to discuss the actors' dressing-rooms, which are still under construction. Rylance was determined that there should be no first-class dressing-rooms for stars. His fax to the architect had gone into considerable detail about what he

wanted. 'I like the use of some wood, if we can't have a complete wooden surface. I hate linoleum,' he wrote. 'A good dressing-room has a sense of the history of previous players, and wood holds history more gracefully than linoleum.' He meant Formica, a plastic laminate from which historical residues can be wiped off with a damp cloth.

'Wood counters, surrounds and divides would be very popular, as a lot of actors are asking if the dressing-rooms are going to have any relation to the original at the Globe! No. I know they can't, but the more wood, the more we connect the preparation place with the playing space, which is actually important imaginatively. A space that is divorced from the playing space will encourage newspaper-reading and other bad habits rather than the necessary engagement with the imagination.

'Shakespeare,' he concluded, 'requires dark and chaos in balanced proportion to light and order.'

In the same way that there will be no star dressingrooms (standing-only tickets will be an affordable £5), Rylance has seen to it that everyone in the Globe's acting company, from stars such as himself to the stage attendants and understudies - mere green graduates - will all be paid £350 a week. The men with the cheque-books and calculators at the Globe tried to argue, slyly pleading the cause of historical authenticity in order to keep costs down, that there was no such thing as parity pay in the Bard's day and that the leading players - Shakespeare, Kempe, Burbage et al. - worked as shareholders and received a share of the profits. The rest worked as 'hirelings' for a pittance. But Rylance refused to budge on this, and eventually prevailed, succeeding in giving himself a 50 per cent pay cut in the process (a policy that should be noted in any forthcoming official study of executive pay).

The day after the meeting with the architect, Rylance went to look at jigs in Wakefield, where a university drama department was mounting a programme of them after careful reconstruction.

For some years during Shakespeare's working life, there was a fashion to follow plays with a short knockabout skit that involved dancing, music and a simple dramatic story about love, lust, infidelity, courtship or the like. They were often associated with a particularly well-known comic actor, such as Will Kempe of Shakespeare's own company at the Globe, the King's Men; or Richard Tarlton, the Tommy Cooper of his day.

The jigs were jolly, demotic entertainments popu-



MAGIC CIRCLE Rylance as Hamlet and Rebecca Saire as Ophelia at the RSC. Later, Rylance formed his own company and toured the country performing 'The Tempest'

has a certain literary-critical usefulness, in that it strips away 'Bardolatry' to emphasise the plays and how they might have fared as working dramatic texts used by actors, rather than seeing them as the works of an individual genius whose only relevant context is the biography of their author.

The seminar took place in a 15thcentury Tudor house reputedly once used for meetings of the Rosicrucian Order. The speaker, a tall, cheery man wearing a rainbow-coloured tie, took everyone through the 'hidden meanings' in Shakespeare, finding symbols and meanings from the cabbala, freemasonry, Rosicrucianism and Baconian philosophy.

'Two Shakespeares are being talked about,' he explained. 'Shakespeare the actor and Shakespeare the playwright. They are polar opposites as characters. Once you've got that key, it's all clear and the plays become a school of initiation into consciousness that you can go through.' At the end, everyone had to hold hands in a circle and blow out a candle while thinking thoughts of love. It was the weekend of the summer solstice.

In Rylance's mystical Bardology, it seems that Sir Francis Bacon was the earthly incarnation assumed by the Shakespearian miracle, a belief partly based on the similarity of the neo-Platonic ideas to be found in 'Shakespeare's' plays to the neo-Platonism of Bacon's philosophical works, and partly on a trail of cryptic clues based on Shakespeare's name.

When this name first appeared in print, on the title page of the poem Venus and Adonis in 1593, Rylance points out, it was hyphenated: 'Shake-spear'. This Rylance takes as a reference to the spear of Pallas Athena, a Greek goddess who was prominent in Bacon's philosophy. 'In

fact,' writes Shakespeare scholar Professor Jonathan Bate in his forthcoming book, The Genius of Shakespeare, 'this form of hyphenation was a fre-

quant printers' vagary of the period'

The jigs were jolly, demotic entertainments popular at theatres that attracted an audience of mixed social classes. One of the mysteries of Elizabethan/Jacobean playgoing is how an audience would have reacted to seeing a tragedy – with dead bodies scattered all over the stage and an atmosphere of pity and terror in the air – being abruptly followed by such a radical shift in mood, with clowning actors leaping about. In the absence of any real knowledge of how the original audiences thought or to what they were accustomed, Rylance has to work out how this could possibly have made theatrical sense.

The jigs could just look weird and primitive. His initial solution to the problem was intuitive rather than academic, of course. 'I could put one or two of them on the stage,' he said, 'and it would be interesting and delightful in the space of the Globe, but I would soon really want to have a new writer write new versions' . . . about life in contemporary south London, where Rylance lives!

It might work and it might not, and even if it doesn't the result will be interesting. There might not even be enough money for jigs. But however the matter of jigs resolves itself, you can be sure that

company and toured the country performing 'The Tempest'

Rylance will have applied to it his characteristic uncompromising faithfulness to whatever idea has captured him – whatever the consequences.

Which brings us to why Rylance doesn't believe that William Shakespeare, a middle-class man from Stratford who had not been to university, wrote the plays of Shakespeare.

A few days before his trip to Wakefield, Rylance attended a four-hour seminar in Islington on 'the symbology and hidden teachings within the Shakespeare plays', presented by a man from the Francis Bacon Research Trust. For those of a sceptical, rational outlook, the term 'hidden teachings' evokes conspiracy theory and soggy esotericism, or, to use the precise technical term, mumbo-jumbo. Also note the use of the term 'the Shakespeare plays', rather than 'the plays of Shakespeare'. The Francis Bacon Research Trust are heirs of the century-old tradition that holds that Sir Francis Bacon, the Elizabethan courtier and philosopher, is the true author of the plays of 'Shakespeare'.

To be fair, to call them 'the Shakespeare plays'

Shakespeare, 'this form of hyphenation was a frequent printers' vagary of the period.'

It is not as if Rylance is ignorant of the history of playgoing in Shakespeare's London: he knows all this backwards. But he sees the figure at the centre as a Protean creative force, a genius that could not be encompassed in mortal form.

According to Jonathan Bate, since the 'anti-Stratfordian tradition' began in the late 18th century, 'no major actor has ever been attracted to anti-Stratfordianism.' Until Mark Rylance, that is, for whom it has become a kind of private religion.

Why would anyone doubt that Shakespeare wrote Shakespeare's plays? One might call it a folkloric, non-academic response to the gigantic shadow Shakespeare's genius casts over English culture. His plays are a kind of miracle; therefore, they could not be of mundane origin. That no original manuscripts survive, nor any letters in his own hand, only embellishes the mystery.

'It seems I have put myself forward as an anti-Stratfordian,' says Rylance. 'I'm not anti the Stratford man at all. I think it's a wonderful story. And if it's true, it's great.'