

London's Globe Theatre to stage Trevor Griffiths' *A New World: A Life of Thomas Paine*

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Trevor Griffiths' new play *A New World: A Life of Thomas Paine* will open at London's Globe Theatre in August 2009. Griffiths, who is perhaps best known for the screenplay of *Reds*, which he wrote with Warren Beatty and for which they won an Academy Award, is adapting the play from his screenplay *These Are The Times*.

Griffiths wrote *These Are The Times* for the director Richard Attenborough some twenty years ago, but the project has never secured studio backing. So concerned was Griffiths that the theme should gain an audience that he took the unusual step of publishing the screenplay, something which is rarely done.

Paine's is a voice that still speaks to our times. He played a key role in both the American and the French revolutions. The writings he produced in the course of those revolutions have an enduring relevance, dealing as they do with questions of social equality and political rights in an age when public life was dominated by a wealthy oligarchy that monopolised political power in its own interests.

Last year Griffiths' screenplay was produced as a radio play by the BBC, but the new theatre production will be a radical departure from the original text. As Griffiths explained at the launch of the Globe's new season, the changes have been partly determined by the special demands of this unusual theatre. The Globe is a reconstruction of Shakespeare's Globe Theatre that stood on Bankside next to the Thames from 1599. Archaeologists from the Museum of London excavated the site of the Globe Theatre in 1989, and evidence from this excavation and that of the Rose Theatre, along with contemporary illustrations of Elizabethan and Jacobean theatres, allowed the Globe to be recreated. It was the brainchild of the American actor and director Sam Wanamaker. Unlike many other London theatres it receives no government subsidy.

This thatched building that stands within sight of Canary Wharf, the Gherkin and other iconic modern buildings of London's financial district across the river creates a unique performance environment. Despite its thatched roof, there is nothing of the "heritage theatre" about the Globe. It has earned a reputation for itself not only with its Shakespeare productions, but by producing new writing. This season has the world premiere of Griffiths' *New World* and Frank

McGuinness's new version of *Helen* by Euripides, while Ché Walker's *The Frontline*, which was written for the Globe last year, is returning for another season.

Griffiths explained some of the distinctive features of the Globe and how he is going about adapting his play when he spoke to the press in the Tiring House at the back of the stage.

"The play is long and it's all joined up, so one of the things I'm doing is untying it and getting rid of all the contiguities," Griffiths explained. "And I'm putting in their stead a narrative song device and a narrative *narrator* device. [Benjamin] Franklin, who does a bit of narrating in the screenplay, is going to narrate the play the whole way through."

As it stands, the screenplay would make a film of four and half hours. Griffiths is making more changes than he did for the radio play. He explained how he is approaching the task.

"I've got two cutting points, because this is a play about one person in a maelstrom of several societies, and when you're following that one person there's no cutting point. You can't cut from him to another action. There is no other action—it's just him. So it's useful to be able to get away from him and to say: these things happened between June and August. And then, and then...a bloody, gnarled piece of writing comes up which tells you what happened in August."

He continued, "How else am I doing it? Carefully. You know more than one and a half hours is a lot to lose. It's a lot to lose, and to me it's all gold."

The Globe's artistic director Dominic Dromgoole, who will direct Griffiths' play, explained why this is the ideal theatre for the work.

"There's a contiguity between this place and film and between this place and the epic film because you can achieve anything out there." He gestured to the stage just outside the Tiring House. "You just have the actor and the actor's voice telling a story and saying, 'Now we are here,' and you go there. That's what Shakespeare originated. So it's not about making something literally. It's about how do you convey the real simply through an actor saying this is where we are. And this is an ambition that's breathed through all the new plays that we've done since I've been here. It's one of the most liberating things about

this space that a writer can write a \$200m movie and put it on, and the audience will go there in their imaginations.”

Dromgoole expanded on the comparison between the way in which a film works and the way in which the Globe works.

“In terms of cutting, this place has always been about cutting just as a film cuts, because you move quickly to whoever’s speaking, and the scene occurs where people are speaking. So it’s the eye that’s the natural editor in this.”

“It’s very interesting,” Griffiths added. “Because for a contemporary audience this place could be a nightmare. Why? For a very simple reason, it’s pre-electric. There’s no light to tell you where to look. Light plays a phenomenal part in training the audience to see where it should be looking. Here, you can look just anywhere. I mean just anywhere. There’s an action over there; there’s an action down there; there’s an action up there. And I’m writing these out of my screenplay, and it’s terribly exciting, and I’m thinking I hope people know that when he lifts the telescope here in the graveyard, three months later through that same telescope he’s seeing the woman he loves, who he’s no longer with, and her daughter. I want them in the audience, at the back up there where people sit, in the expensive seats.”

The seats at the Globe are not, in fact very expensive by the standards of London theatres since the most expensive are only £35. It is in comparison to the £5 standing tickets that have made the Globe a theatre that attracts enormous numbers of young people that the seats are more expensive. This summer some 10,000 schoolchildren will see productions of *Romeo and Juliet*, and 90,000 young people pass through the theatre’s education department every year. Even as the press conference was going on, party after party of school children were sitting in the lower gallery listening with rapt attention as guides from the theatre spoke to them.

Ellie Kendrick, the 18-year-old actress who will play Juliet in this year’s production of *Romeo and Juliet*, was also at the press conference and stressed the importance of the Globe for young people.

“I’m absolutely thrilled to be able to work in this space, because there are so many young people who come here. I’ve seen a massive amount of young people getting into Shakespeare here, and I think that’s something rare that we should encourage. So I’m delighted to be able to work here.”

Ellie, who won plaudits for her recent role in the BBC dramatisation of *The Diary of Anne Frank*, first came to the Globe as a birthday treat just six years ago. She said would never have imagined then that she would ever set foot on the stage. She finds the prospect daunting but intensely interesting, because they are already finding fresh ideas in the text.

The 2009 season is entitled *Young Hearts* which, said Dromgoole, “is very suitable for a theatre that is itself only 12 years old.” In that short time the Globe had imprinted itself on the minds of everyone, Dromgoole said, “Young people fall in love with it.” The structure of the theatre plays a part in that.

“Shakespeare didn’t write plays for proscenium arches,” said Dromgoole, “It has rejuvenated the performance of Shakespeare and what we understand as a theatre event.”

At the Globe a large part of the audience stand with their heads level with the stage in the yard, which is open to the sky. They are close enough to reach out and touch the actors. Even the seats are no more than 19 metres from the stage. Actors and audience can make eye contact. This proximity creates a deep emotional involvement with the action that is increased by the fact that the theatre is lit by natural light. The audience are not in the dark watching a lit stage. They are aware of each other as well as the actors, which can create an explosive atmosphere.

One of the ways in which Griffiths has responded to the Globe is by using music as a narrative device. Stephen Warbeck, who won an academy award for the music he wrote for the film *Shakespeare in Love*, is writing the music for *A New World*, as well as for the Globe’s production of *As You Like It*.

For a writer like Griffiths who loves television, and whose television work is rightly revered, the Globe may seem an unusual venue. Griffiths himself regards television as “a much more important field, in terms of popular education, cultural understanding, much more important than cinema.” Ironically the very lack of technological sophistication at the Globe may prove to be an advantage to Griffiths because it will emphasise his use of language and allow him to be far less naturalistic than television often demanded.

Dromgoole praised the “muscularity of language” and the “historical intelligence” of Griffiths’ work, which is very true, but in *A New World* Griffiths will have some help from Thomas Paine. Griffiths and Paine together make a powerful combination. Paine’s own language is still vivid and powerful and speaks as relevantly to an audience in the year that marks the 200th anniversary of his death as it did in his lifetime. Working on the play as he came down on the train, Griffiths said he had come across a quotation from Paine that he had not seen before. “Hunger is not a postponable want,” which “is perfect for the days we’re in.”



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