

## The challenge of *Coriolanus*, and the challenge of language:

Mark Bolsover [MB], with Daniel Hird [D], and Michael Cooke [M]

I met with the lead actors of ‘Vox’ and ‘Out’, Daniel Hird and Michael Cooke, to discuss their interpretations of the characters of Coriolanus and Aufidius, the challenges of portraying them on stage, and the challenges of adapting Shakespeare and using his language. ...

### Who are Coriolanus & Aufidius? ...

**MB:** You are both role-sharing for the two plays, ‘Vox’ and ‘Out’, of *Sons of God*. Daniel, you play Coriolanus in ‘Vox’, and his mortal enemy, turned ally, Aufidius in ‘Out’. Michael, you take on the opposing roles of Aufidius in ‘Vox’, and Coriolanus in ‘Out’. ...

—Did you have any previous knowledge of Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*?

**Had you worked on the play before?**

**D:** Yes. I had read the play before, just in my spare time, not studying or performing it. I had also seen the recent adaptation with Ralph Fiennes and Gerard Butler.

**M:** Yes.

—Actually, I did have previous knowledge of it. ... —I had performed in the play—in the role of “1<sup>st</sup> Citizen”—with a theatre company in Glasgow.

When one of the leads had to leave the production, I’d actually been offered the role of Aufidius, but I had to turn the opportunity down at the time, so it’s quite cool to have the opportunity to play it now. ...

**MB:** So how would you describe the character of Coriolanus?—What are his defining characteristics, his motivations, and his key relationships?

**D:** In the original Shakespeare, of course he’s very different from the versions of the character that Michael and I play in ‘Vox’ and ‘Out’, but there are some obvious similarities.

...

The first one I’d point to would be the really strong connection he shares with his mother [Volumnia], and her quite domineering role in his life. She... pushes him along in life, not really letting him make his own decisions, and Coriolanus clearly loves and respects her very deeply, and he follows her—obeys her, almost—out of a strong sense of... “sonly duty”.

...

In the original text, he's a very clever man, but only with regard to certain, specific areas... —He's a military genius, he's a tactician, a strategist. Physically, he's very strong, he's very capable, but, in terms of social graces and social conventions, he's (seemingly) almost completely void of knowledge and experience. He's very arrogant, he's egotistical, but he has this very strict moral code that he *never* betrays, and those, I think, are the key elements of the character that we're taking into both of these new adaptations.

**M:** [—in response to Daniel, and perhaps warming up for their on-stage confrontations... ]

... I kind of disagree on a certain level. ...

—I think that, on a certain level, he *is* misunderstood, and I don't think he's the antagonist that some scholars, critics, directors, and actors have made him out to be. ...

—I think he has a legitimate grievance with the people of Rome, because they have this problem with him.

He feels that everyone is bound to their duty to Rome, and he does what he feels is right... —is for the good of Rome, above all else.

I think he struggles with and against the people of Rome because, as he sees it, they don't contribute to the state, but they complain about the state of things.

**D:** I do agree with you. ...

—I don't think that he is an antagonist. He is misunderstood, but he is misunderstood because his political and social views don't fit with those held by the populace—the majority.

**M:** He would want to live (if he *had* the choice) as a private citizen.

—He's been to war, and he's done his duty, and now, I think, he wants to live in peace and to raise his family.

Clearly, the way he addresses the people is hard, but he doesn't want to mix with them. He's saying: "Right.—You go do your thing, and I'll do mine. ...".

**MB:** Is part of the issue with Coriolanus, then, a stark distinction between the spheres of the public and the private?

**D:** For himself, I think there is, yes.—The people expect more of him than he is prepared, or perhaps *able* to give, as a public figure. ...

—It's actually very relevant to what happens now with "celebrity" status. ... —The people want him to be the perfect politician... —the perfect public figure. ...

**M:** If you look at Coriolanus in terms of politics, he's clearly right wing, I think.

I think what bothers him is: “You don’t contribute anything, and yet you’re complaining about your situation. ... —Why don’t *you* do something about it, rather than depend on others to sort it out for you?”

—There is a lot of anger and frustration in Coriolanus.

He’s angry, but most of all he’s frustrated with the people, and he doesn’t think that they can or will change,... —that there’s any real will to change in them. ...

**D:** They expect him to be something he’s not, and when they try to force him to be that—to change—I think that he reacts in the only way he really knows how, which, as a soldier, is aggressively. ...

—It’s like trying to judge a fish on how well it can climb a tree. ... —Coriolanus just isn’t *designed* to be a popular politician, but he’s forced—obliged—into it. ...

**M:** I think part of what bothers him is what he sees as the people’s ignorance toward politics, and toward the system. ...

For example, he says:

With every minute you do change a mind  
And call him noble that was now your hate,  
Him vile that was your garland.  
(Shakespeare, *Coriolanus*, Act I., Sc. 1)

He thinks that the people are fickle and self-interested. He is saying: “Think for yourselves”.

He gets so frustrated with the people.

Because, remember, they *are* always changing their minds (in the play).

The Tribunes [—Brutus and Sicinius in the original Shakespeare] are always *prompting* the people: “*Did he* do this?” or “*Did he* do that?”, ... sowing doubt, and playing—putting a spin—on Coriolanus’s words and actions, manipulating the people’s judgments, and Coriolanus responds: “You *sheep*”. ...

**MB:** ... —Do you *like* Coriolanus? Is he a relatable character, do you think?

**M:** Yes.

—Is the audience meant to like him... —?

**D:** I don’t think he’s necessarily relatable—as a character,... but his *situation* [—as a soldier who has performed what he sees as his sacred duty to Rome, and who has been betrayed and ostracised by the people] is relatable.

**M:** As a person, the thing I feel I can relate to in Coriolanus is: We don’t *need* to like him, and he doesn’t *care* if he’s liked.

**D:** His function in the play is not as someone the audience likes (necessarily), and wants to... latch onto (emotionally). He's there as a kind of Guinea Pig (—a thought experiment): to see how he reacts to his situation, and that's where the story and the action of the play come from.

Like we've discussed [—to Michael, on their preparation for the role... ] He doesn't have an *arc*,... —He doesn't change

**M:** He doesn't see himself as a "hero". ...

—He's just... *a man*. ...

—A man doing his duty.

**D:** That's why he shuns all praise.

He's out of the room for all of the speeches praising him in the original Shakespeare.

**M:** I don't necessarily think that that's because he hates being praised, but on this particular subject [his military successes], he doesn't understand people's fascination with his scars, singing praises, and with plaudits.

—It's a *duty*, and he thinks that everyone should perceive in the same way: as a duty owed, and paid, to Rome. ...

—“We should all serve Rome, instead of you idiots, who only serve yourselves”.

...

In his speeches to his men, particularly, he has got charisma. ...

**D:** He's got a community and a camaraderie with other soldiers.

**MB:** In the original Shakespeare, in the initial conflict at Corioles, is he not having to *push* the men into the battle?

**D:** He expects better of them.

**M:** It's the only time in the play I see him saying: “Come on my fellows, you're the same as me.—*Come on*. ... ”.

**D:** He might be imposing,... —cajoling the men, and haranguing them into battle, but the language he uses is that of camaraderie and honour.

**M:** He's motivating them.

They are the values he has.

**MB:** If we think about Coriolanus's enemy turned ally Aufidius in those terms, then. You're both playing different versions of Aufidius in 'Vox' and in 'Out', but how do we read Aufidius?—Do you see him as being the *same* as Coriolanus?

**What are Aufidius's motivations and relationships?**

**M:** He's the same as Coriolanus, I think.

—He's Coriolanus, but from a working class background.

Coriolanus went to private school, the best of the best. He was born into the highest class—the richest and most prominent part of society.

Aufidius, by contrast, has had to *work* for *everything*. He's working class. He communicates with his men on a different level than that of Coriolanus.

**D:** I think Aufidius sees the scope of his actions before he makes them.

Coriolanus follows the *order* to take Corioles, not for the praise or honour of it.

Aufidius is just as capable as Coriolanus of planning a military manoeuvre or strategy, but he'll look for the *outcome*, beyond the success of the battle or campaign, as well.

**M:** He's got a conscience.

**A:** Yes. But he's also got self-awareness, and a deeper relationship, I think, with his men. He values other people, and not simply his own input or work.

**M:** He's a leader.

He knows what he's fighting for, he's fighting for something *real*, whereas Coriolanus is fighting for an ideal.

Aufidius has a goal.

I'm not sure that Coriolanus knows what is at the end—for him.

There's a point where the fighting ends for Aufidius. Whereas, for Coriolanus, I think, he could simply go on fighting for the rest of his days.

...

### **Language and Adaptation:**

**MB:** Okay. Now we've got a sense of the characters, and the interpretations or senses of them you are both taking into 'Vox' and 'Out'. We've already talked a little about Coriolanus's language, in puzzling out his character, so let's talk more about that.

**Both adaptations: Jen McGregor’s ‘Vox’, and Duncan Kidd’s ‘Out’, use contemporary language, as well as incorporating passages and lines from the original Shakespeare, in the original iambic pentameter. How does it feel to work between the two different registers? What are the challenges, and do you feel that the Shakespeare is accessible to modern audiences?—Do the adaptations and their incorporation of original Shakespearian English/pentameter help in the regard?**

**D:** I think one of the challenges is making sure that Shakespeare’s original language remains as accessible as the contemporary language we use.

They *do* work very well together in both scripts, and that is a real testament to the continuing universal appeal of what Shakespeare was writing about, I think... —How his themes, and plays, and characters, *are* relevant in and to all times.

—The situation of *Coriolanus*, for example—

...

Switching between the two has been a lot of fun for me, because I find that, by marrying the two together, even though an audience might struggle with Shakespeare’s language, —“You common cry of curs” [Act III. Scene 3]—by *framing* those lines through the contemporary language, the scripts are able to provide a kind of context for reading them... —a way, I suppose, of paraphrasing Shakespeare, and helping the audience read and understand Shakespeare, and bring out the meaning.

**MB:** In Jen McGregor’s ‘Vox’, it seems to me that there is a particular shift in *tone* between the contemporary—conversational—language, and the more formal, socially performed Shakespeare. ...

**D & M:** Yes.

**MB:** Does that help you as performers to be able to balance the two registers?

**D:** Yes, definitely.

It gives a definite kind of *weight* to the way we use the Shakespeare. The Shakespeare is used in moments of formal address and of heightened emotion particularly—attempts to engage with people for effect, and to express (deeper) passions.

**M:** Yes. Because his writing is so *descriptive*.

I think it’s very clever the way both writers [Jen and Duncan] use it.—It isn’t too complex,... —As Daniel says, you’re made to understand it, and its importance (to the characters, the *importance* to them of what they’re saying), from the wider context of the contemporary language

I find that in contemporary adaptations that attempt to “modernise” Shakespeare, they tend to go for “Shakespeare made easy”... and it’s like a bad translation.

Here, we have the same subject as Shakespeare, but we're building from his work, and not trying to *translate* it.

**D:** Yes. I think that's an important distinction to make, because we're not just trying to stage Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, in which case we would just work from the original text. ...

—We're trying to tell a very similar but different story, and I think that shows how frequently appropriated a writer Shakespeare is, but his words can be used in different ways, and it's the context that gives the explanation.

We don't want to spoon-feed the answers to the audience.

M: [summing up nicely for us. ...]

Yes.

—You can't out-write Shakespeare.

...

### On 'Out' and 'Forum' Theatre. ...

**MB:** Tell us a little about what 'Forum' theatre *is*, and about how it was to work with it in 'Out. ...

**M:** The thing that's so *fun* about the 'Forum' theatre is, in a way, it's [the way 'Out' uses (and abuses?) 'Forum' theatre] *not* Forum theatre, but it *is* Forum theatre. ...

—We [the actors] will be pretending to offer the audience choices about what is happening, but we'll be making the choices for them really. ...

**D:** Yes.

And, in a way, that's very relevant to Coriolanus's situation (—the situation in *Coriolanus*)... —The manipulation of Coriolanus by Volumnia, and the manipulation of his language (—his words), and of the people, by the Tribunes. And I think that that's part of the fun we get of doing this as 'Forum' theatre... —just fixing the outcome to what 'we' [—the actors, and the characters of 'Out'] want it to be.

**M:** Yes, because part of the situation of Coriolanus is the people having a *false* sense of democracy. ...

—It's not really there. ...