



NATIONAL
ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS



Select a page ▼

Home » Art Works Blog

ART WORKS BLOG

Art Talk with Actor Jonno Roberts

April 22, 2016

By Paulette Beete



Jonno Roberts. Photo courtesy of the Shakespeare Theatre, Washington, DC.

“I wish the angels would descend more often with me, and I wish I wasn't quite so afraid of them.” -- Jonno Roberts

As a young man in his native New Zealand, **Jonno Roberts** 🇳🇿 figured out that he was meant to be an actor. But it wasn't until he studied at the Moscow Theatre School--during graduate-level training under the auspices of Harvard's American Repertory Theatre--that he discovered he was also an artist. As he put it, "I wasn't able to call myself an artist until the Russians told me that that was okay." Roberts may be familiar from the feature film *The Elephant King* or from numerous TV roles, including stints on *Bones*, *Flight of the Conchords*, *Law and Order*, and *NCIS*. He's also been on Broadway in Richard Greenberg's *Take Me Out* and appeared on stages around the country in shows such as Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Tracy Letts' *Bug*, and several by the Bard, including *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Hamlet*, and *King Lear*. We talked to Roberts when he was in Washington, DC to play one of Shakespeare's most enduring villains--Iago--in the Shakespeare Theatre's recent production of *Othello*. Here he is on why acting is like mountain climbing, what he thinks we've gotten wrong about Shakespeare for 400 years, and why he's frightened of success.

NEA: What's your origin story as an artist?

JONNO ROBERTS: I did my first play when I was about six. I liked it and I did them through high school. I didn't study

acting in college but I became part of the theater company, the Free Theatre Christchurch. I got stuck into a room for six months with Jerzy Grotowski's *Towards a Poor Theatre* and three other actors, and we were told to come out in six months with something. In that research, in that work a whole different vista opened up to me that acting wasn't about putting on makeup and costumes and trying to get laid. It was about something entirely different. It was at the Free Theatre that I discovered that [acting] was actually what I needed to do. I worked in New Zealand in TV and in the theater and then came over to America for graduate school at Harvard at the American Repertory Theater and also at the Moscow Art Theatre.

In Moscow, you said you were an actor and the immediate response was, "You're so lucky. What an amazing thing. What a wonderful thing. You're an artist!" I discovered that acting was an art form at the Free Theatre when I was young, but then I wasn't able to call myself an artist until the Russians told me that that was okay. And there's something very precious about that.

NEA: To borrow a term from the nonprofit work, what's your mission statement?

ROBERTS: My mission statement is to explore the truth in all of its uncomfortable forms. I like discomfort. I like to shake things up.

NEA: You have a fair amount of Shakespeare on your resume. What attracts you to his work?

ROBERTS: The stories are great but it's the language. It's that astonishing capability to create entire human beings and entire new ways of being human beings for his time, but that's all in the language.... As Tolstoy said, "If you take away the language of *King Lear*, the story of Lear is just the story of a silly old man locked out of the house on a windy night." It's the language that gives it power and, for me, it's one of the world's greatest minds stretching language to its absolute limits to try to express the breadth of human experience. That is the general task of poetry, anyway. But it's that astonishing stretch and then trying to wrap my mind around the work of someone who I think to be one of the great minds. Having to do that every night in performance anew and having to find a new way through it every night through this incredible language, that's what draws me back. It's like climbing a mountain every performance.

NEA: This year, there's a 400 Years of Shakespeare celebration. You just talked about what attracts you to his work as an actor. Why do you think we return to his work as audiences?

ROBERTS: I think we always go back to Shakespeare because there's going to be something new revealed each time, hopefully. We have this certainty that we're going to see something in a different way. I think there is an equal issue with the fact that we go back to Shakespeare because we think of him as being a sort of cultural All-Bran—like that breakfast cereal, Shakespeare is, as someone once said, hard to chew, basically distasteful, often a little bit fruity, but in the end, sort of good for you. So we have to keep doing it. I think that a lot of people go back to Shakespeare because they have some idea in their head that it's good for them; it'll keep them culturally regular. And that's the attitude that terrifies me.... I think it's time to put that particular attitude to rest.... We should be exploring how dangerous Shakespeare is, not how good he is for you.

NEA: How do you think we do that?

ROBERTS: Hopefully by shattering our conceptions of him. People still ask me, you know, "What on Earth were Iago's motivations?" And I go, "Read the play. He says them over and over again." We have these accrued ideas of what the plays are about and they're not. *The Taming of the Shrew* is one of my favorite examples. When I first played Petruchio, a friend of mine offered to send me a bull whip; one of the traditional characteristics of Petruchio is that he carries this bull whip. I was stunned because if you read the play, what Petruchio very clearly says is that one: he would never lay a finger on Katherina. He'll beat everyone else up because nothing's good enough for her, but he would never lay a finger on her. And two: that he's just left home for the first time ever, apart from going to school. And for 400 years, we've played Petruchio as this wife-bashing, slap-her-on-the-behind kind of guy who drags Kate around, someone that is this worldly heroic kind of character. That's the accrued crap of 400 years of tradition as opposed to actually looking at what's in the

play. I'm a little Scalian in my approach to Shakespeare, I'm textual. <laughs> I'm the conservative that's saying, "Let's go back to the plays. Let's look at them." I think they're far darker and far more interesting than the way they have traditionally been looked at.

NEA: Given those 400 years of tradition, how do you then tackle an iconic part like Iago in *Othello*, which you're now playing?

ROBERTS: You vomit over everything that's been done before. For all the Shakespeare talk, I'm actually not a huge Shakespearean guy. I love his plays; I love doing his plays. I think I've read most of them, but a lot of them I have a very passing understanding of. *Othello*, I'd seen once, so it was very easy for me just to ignore what people do. I was like, "Well, I don't really know what the play is about." And that's the first step, for me. I think in Eastern philosophy, it's called beginner's mind. It's just to show up and go, "I don't know anything about this. So what is happening? What's he saying? Why on earth is this guy talking with ten-syllable lines? Why would he have chosen that particular way to communicate?" That way, I can just draw from the text. When I'm working and I'm thinking about Shakespeare, I tend to just think of him as Bill. Because if I put the big "S" in front of it, it begins to be daunting. Whereas if I think of this actor called Bill, who also writes plays, then I don't feel quite so daunted. Then I can actually just look at what Bill's written and go, "Why have you done that? I don't know if I get that, but I'll try it and see if it makes sense at some point." Because I trust him; because he's an actor. Never trust an actor <laughter>. But I think I trust him because we're of the same profession.

NEA: What's the most important thing you took away from your years of training to be an actor?

ROBERTS: One, how to talk loud enough. That's a highly underrated skill when you're in a 750-seat theater to actually be able to speak. I was taught that both by my voice teacher Nancy Houfek, who's incredible, and by David Mamet who said that as well. David, one time, was like, "There's some bloke in the back who's just spent a lot of money on dinner and tickets to a play that he doesn't want to watch. But he's got a girl with him. He's trying to impress her. You owe it to him to let him at least hear what you're saying."

I also learned how to grow as an actor from my training. I came out of my training worse than when I went in, but that was because I was just this big mess of ideas and concepts and instruction. But from there, I got a whole bunch of climbing tools and I would have fallen off the mountain, otherwise.

NEA: As a teacher yourself now, what's the most fruitful piece of advice you give your students?

ROBERTS: Don't be an actor. It's a very good piece of advice that I was given by one of my teachers. He was like, "Can you do anything else? Then don't do this." One: I always tell my students, "Work harder. Be honest with yourself. Could you do more? Could you have been more diligent in your approach to the role?" Two: they're called plays. Actors act in plays. So these are the two most important words. Acting is about action; know what you're after. But it's a play; stop taking yourself so bloody seriously. Have fun. If the audience walks in, and even in the deepest, darkest tragedy, if there is a sense that you are enjoying putting on the show for them, they are so much more receptive to what you do. No one wants to sit in a room with someone that's just miserable; it's uncomfortable, and it's just not pleasant. Whereas if there is joy in everything, if you can finish the deepest, darkest scene and at the end of it have this little part of you where you're just like, "God, that was fun," then you know you've done something good, at least something watchable. So I think the biggest piece of advice I can give anyone is enjoy it. Otherwise, you're boring.

NEA: Every artist has to deal with the idea of failure in some way. How do you think about failure? How do you think about success?

ROBERTS: There is no failure worse than the failure of not living up to your own expectations, which again comes back to diligence. As an artist, the only times I've failed are when I've let myself down and then hopefully I can go back and learn from that. Because failure is always the mother of growth. As for success, I don't even know what that tastes like. That sounds like a very dangerous idea to me. If you succeed at something, then what's the point of still doing it? I hope I never succeed. Success scares me far more than failure does.... All I have from moment to moment is exploration. I

believe that my job is to get to the starting line, which is the entrance onto the stage, I guess, and be completely full to bursting with need and thought. The basic transaction is that you have all of these people that spend far too much money to sit in a dark room and watch us tell a story. Our job is, therefore, to be worth that money, to be worth that time and that effort that goes into that person being in the theater. So we'd better be interesting. If I start thinking in terms of success and failure, I don't think I'm an interesting human being. I think I have to be there and just be alive, be more alive than they, perhaps, are allowed to be in their lives. Failure would be, to me, to have let them down in some way—to not be worth the energy that they have expended to sit in that dark room. And that would make me very sad if I thought that that was the case.

NEA: What's your superpower as an artist?

ROBERTS: My god, I love that. I have no morality <laughs>. My superpower is that, you know, you want me to be the child molester? Absolutely. I'll make sense of that. I'll go there. I believe that every human being, and this is such a core belief in me, that every human being has within them the capacity for all human experience and behavior. So my superpower is no matter what the situation, I can make it rational and reasonable to myself.

NEA: What do you wish you were better at as an artist?

ROBERTS: I wish I was more fearless. I still have an internal voice that slows me down when it comes to certain emotional moments and roles that I'm working on.... It doesn't matter what I feel; it matters what the audience feels. So who cares if I'm happy or sad, you know, apart from the joy of performance? However, if the angels descend and do touch you with something emotional in the moment, that can be useful for the performance. I wish the angels would descend more often with me, and I wish I wasn't quite so afraid of them.

NEA: Why do you think the arts matter?

ROBERTS: The arts matter because truth matters.... I think that the arts are important because they dance in the realm of the revealed, and great art reveals things, uncovers things that fact cannot. And I think that's the actor's job, certainly the way I see my job, to challenge and reveal truths on stage. And as I believe that actors are artists, I believe that the higher cause of all art is to reveal something that is beyond the factual truth of the world—something that is a more poetic truth, a more human truth. Facts are cold; humans are messy. We're squishy and pulpy. And we're violent and we're horrible. And we're delightful and we're spirit. I think art matters because art is the only way that we can dig into that soggy, splashy, messy, joyous thing.


NEA: What's a question I should have asked you?

ROBERTS: Do I think that what I do is worthwhile? I think that's a good question. And I think my answer would be: I don't know. I deeply, deeply hope so. But I don't know.

NEA: That's a terrifying question.

ROBERTS: Isn't it? I think it's sad that we don't all create constantly. I think it's sad that our expression of the creative impulse is not to carve a beautiful spoon but to go and buy one from IKEA. I think that what I do, being a theater actor of Shakespeare, is in certain ways utterly nonsensical in the face of everything that's going on in the world. In the face of climate change, what's the point of doing *Othello*? And with children drowning in the Mediterranean, what's the point of talking about iambic pentameter? And yet, in my own small way, I think that if I can pluck my soul into the soul of someone in the audience, that that communion could change the world. Someone once asked Bono and the Edge, "Are you still stupid enough to think that your music can change the world?" And Bono replied, "What the hell do you mean? It's changed ours." So is what I do worthwhile? No, not even vaguely. Not in the slightest. Is it the most worthwhile thing I can do? Yeah.

Throughout 2016, theater companies and artists around the globe are celebrating the enduring relevance of Shakespeare and his works. Many NEA grantees are commemorating the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death with

special programming, including performances, lectures, events, festivals, toasts, and all manner of rustic revelry. Check out the list of events taking place across the country **here**  .

Category:

Art Talk

Comments

Hi,Thanks for interviewing

Submitted by **James Spencer (not verified)**  on Mon, 2016-04-25 10:41

Hi,Thanks for interviewing Jonno! Btw, his voice teacher's last name is spelled "Houfek" - , Nancy Houfek. I know, because I was in that class too.

reply

Thanks! We have corrected it.

Submitted by Don Ball on Tue, 2016-04-26 15:58

Thanks! We have corrected it.

reply

Add new comment








Your name *

E-mail *

The content of this field is kept private and will not be shown publicly.

Homepage

Comment *


B **I** **S**       

Disable rich-text

☐ Notify me when new comments are posted

☐

I'm not a robot



reCAPTCHA
Privacy - Terms

Save



ABOUT THE BLOG

- About Art Works
- Comment Policy

SEARCH THE BLOG

Search

RECENT POSTS



**Art Talk with Gina
Duncan**



**Wednesday Wisdom:
Poet and NEA
Translation Fellow
David Shook**



**Pairing Museum
Exhibitions with
Children's Books**



**From the Archives:
Moving Images in Rural
Iowa: A Look at the
Documentary "Saving
Brinton"**



Five Questions with

CATEGORIES

- Select Category - ▼

ARCHIVES

- Select Month - ▼

LINKS

- [Blue Star Museums Blog \(Archive\)](#)
- [The Big Read Blog \(Archive\)](#)

STAY INVOLVED

- [RSS Feed](#)
- [Send us an email](#)