

## Winter is coming: A one-man broadside



Conrad Nelson at the Harrogate Theatre. Picture by Bruce Rollinson

- For some taking the lead in a Shakespeare play would be enough. Not Conrad Nelson. He tells Nick Ahad why he is not only starring in, but directing and composing the music for *A Winter's Tale*.
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**A few years ago Lenny Henry presented a television show in which he talked about his relationship with Shakespeare.**

It began, he told viewers of the ITV show, when Northern Broadside's supremo Barrie Rutter approached him to play the title role of *Othello*. The comedian and actor took on the challenge to great applause at West Yorkshire Playhouse in 2009. Directed by Rutter, playing Iago opposite Henry was one Conrad Nelson, Rutter's Number Two at Broadside's.



Conrad Nelson as Iago with Lenny Henry as Othello in Northern Broadsides 2009 production.

When the ITV show was broadcast, there was footage of the brilliant Nelson playing Iago and at the time, while watching the show, I tweeted that I thought he was one of the most under-celebrated actors of his generation and the response was really quite something. Dozens of people who have seen him act got in touch on Twitter to agree that Nelson was something quite special.

He is a man of great talents and it's fair to say that few things are beyond him.

Having said that, it's easy to wonder if his current project might be a step too far even for him. Nelson is creating the music, directing and acting in a Shakespeare play – and not one of the most popular and well-known ones – surely a stretch? Or perhaps it belies a touch of megalomania?

“Definitely not megalomania,” insists Nelson.

“I’m actually approaching this with bated breath. I’ve got some regular, trusted Northern Broadsides actors in the show, plus there’s a whole middle section where the story moves to Bohemia, and Leontes, the character I’m playing, isn’t in it at all – and I’ve no intention of putting him in that section. Directing and acting isn’t something I want to be doing all the time.”

The first time that he has directed and acted in a Broadsides show, Nelson is well accomplished when it comes to both those skills individually.

What's particularly interesting is that he has decided to take on the dual roles in, of all Shakespeare plays, *The Winter's Tale*.

It's fair to say it's not one of the easier plays to get to grips with.

"It's thought of as a problem play because it's a play of two halves. It pulls you from one world to another, goes over 16 years, starts in one place, ends in another and the thing that bridges the two worlds is the daughter who is born," say Nelson.

"The other big problem is of course the famous stage direction. It's a painful thing to read and when you see it, you just think 'how am I possibly going to do that?'"

The famous direction in *The Winter's Tale* is easily one of the most problematic – exit stage left, pursued by a bear.

The story of *The Winter's Tale* itself is also an odd one. It begins in the court of King of Sicilia, Leontes, and his heavily pregnant wife Hermione – that the queen is heavily pregnant is relevant – Leontes' childhood friend Polixenes has been visiting his friend for nine months.

Leontes becomes convinced that his wife has been having an affair with his best friend and plans to poison Polixenes, charging his courtier Camillo to carry out the crime and to leave the queen's new-born daughter on a beach, alone. The queen is tried for treason.

That's when things take a turn for the slightly odd. The daughter, abandoned on a beach as ordered, is discovered by an old shepherd and raised as his own.

Sixteen years pass. Everyone comes back together – you can probably fill in the rest. At the end reconciliation, tears, redemption. It is a particularly odd play.

"I think this play shows a mature writer who is taking risks with styles and it's really great to see a later stage Shakespeare play and to allow yourself to be surprised by him," says Nelson.

"I understand why you say that people might stay away because of the title, but I don't think they should – you could argue that they stay away from something like *Coriolanus*, but you have to do these things. They are still pretty high up in the repertoire; sure it's not a *Midsummer Night's Dream* or *Hamlet*, but I think they are still quite popular, so hopefully people will take the chance and come see it.

"I do often wonder where the prejudice against the play has come from – people openly admit that they haven't seen it – well, if you haven't seen it, you can't be prejudiced against it, surely. Isn't that the argument for all prejudice? I think the play takes you and surprises you."

It's easy to imagine that Nelson will also surprise his audience when the play opens at Harrogate Theatre Royal next week, given his choice of setting. It begins on the turn of the millennium and traverses time to bring us bang up to date.

"Whenever you do Shakespeare people want to know where you're going to set it, what you are going to do to identify the piece. Well, we're going to open the play on New Year's Eve, 1999," says Nelson.

“For me, New Year’s Eve is a time of reflections, looking back at what you’ve done and resolutions, looking forward to the future. For those old enough to remember it, New Year’s Eve 1999 felt like it was that feeling for everyone, multiplied. Everyone was looking back not just on the last year, but reflecting on the passing of a century and looking forward to a new millennium. It felt like it was full of potential and possibilities – I felt like I wanted to start the play on that knife-edge of looking forward and back.

“The fact that the play traverses 16 years it means we end up bang up to date in our production. That doesn’t mean an overwhelming amount of contemporary reflections – we’re not going to suddenly have an election in the middle of the piece – what it does do is give us the opportunity to say at the start of the play that we are starting in this fulcrum moment.”

As well as having to think about where to set the production, compose the songs – as he generally does for Northern Broadsides productions – *The Winter’s Tale* marks Nelson’s return to the stage.

While Rutter is categorically the man in charge of Broadsides, Nelson has been his right-hand man from the very early days. His roles, from Iago to Richard III, have always been met with acclaim, so it is a surprise when he reminds me when audiences last saw him on stage with the company. “I’ve not done a part with Broadsides since I played Iago in *Othello* in 2009,” he says. “I’ve played one of the Alan Bennett Talking Heads – *A Chip in the Sugar* – at the local theatre in Stoke and I’ve done quite a lot of radio, but I have been concentrating on directing more recently.

“While directing and being in plays at the same is not something I’m going to be doing regularly, it felt like the right thing to do this time. I was looking at the play and I thought if I was directing and casting this play, I’d be looking for someone like me to play Leontes – or if not someone like me, it’s certainly a part that I could play. It just felt right within the life of the company as a whole for me to show my face on stage again. So those two things combined meant it made sense at this juncture for me to go back on stage with this part.”

The cast will include Broadsides popular regular Andy Cryer and Mike Hugo, who audiences might have recently seen in the Hull Truck production of *The Ladykillers* and as the Anarchist in Broadsides’ brilliant *Accidental Death of An Anarchist* several years ago.

So you have a cast of proven crowd-pleasers. You have Nelson, a hugely respected and well-loved actor. You have Nelson the director in charge. But there’s no getting away from the fact that *The Winter’s Tale* is a tricky old beast. Nelson reckons that you have to remember this is a Broadsides production and Broadsides’ whole *raison d’etre* is to make the plays of the greatest writer that ever lived available to everyone.

“The most straightforward thing to do is to make Shakespeare accessible, to take away the mystery,” says Nelson.

“And that’s often to do with telling the story and making it as simple as possible. It’s actually the easiest thing to do.

“When we take away the right of people to see Shakespeare and shroud it in mystery and poor delivery, make it so removed from its working class beginnings, that is unforgivable. Everyone should be able to have a taste of Shakespeare.

“People worry about the fact that they might not get it, but the truth is, no one gets all of it all of the time. In terms of a linguistic journey there are some passages that are extremely easy to read, straight off you get it. Some of it is a bit more difficult, but we need to let that happen to us, to sometimes not understand every word, not have every word given to us on a plate. If the narrative is clear you’ve got good actors who can transfer the script then really you get every word because you understand the story and that’s what drives the drama.

“There was once a newspaper story written about *Broadsides* and the headline was ‘accessible to all’ – and I’m proud of that. I want people to say “I understood it, I got it”, that’s a success for me, not something that is shrouded in secrecy. If there are people you can’t understand on the stage, they are just not doing their job properly.”

• *The Winter’s Tale*, Harrogate Theatre, tonight. Lawrence Batley Theatre, Huddersfield, October 13 to 17. Stephen Joseph Theatre, Scarborough, October 20 to 24, The Viaduct, Halifax, November 24 to 28.

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