

Justin Davis, actor and writer for Black Stripe Theater, interviewed July 5th.

Why is theatre important to you?

It is just something I really enjoy doing. It's escapism for me. The chance to escape my own problems, escape real life and just become someone else and tell a story. I was raised on a council estate. I come from a single parent family. I think for me it was a chance to live an imaginary character and *play* – and expressive myself because I was a really shy kid and it was the only way that I could really express myself.

When did you decide to become an actor?

I think I decided very early on when I was three or four years old. However, my first production was not until I was eleven years old when I got involved in a local community theatre group. I auditioned just thinking I would get a small role and I got the role of Charlie in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. That was the first play I ever did.

Did you study Drama at high school and sixth form college?

Yes, I studied Drama in high school. I used to do something called the Norwich Theater Arts Course on Friday and Saturday nights. I also joined the National Youth Theatre of Great Britain and did their productions in summer.

Can you tell us a little bit about your professional experience?

I was born in America, but I was raised in the UK, and when I was 18 or 19 I decided to move back to America, just for life experience really. I wanted to take some time out to discover who I was and where I came from, but then I very quickly slipped back into the acting and became a kind of working actor doing lots of waiter jobs and various other jobs in between. A mixture of regional theatre, commercials, TV extra jobs – all kinds of stuff.

Is there any difference between acting styles in America and London?

The style is different. There is definitely an American-style based on Stanislavsky or The Method. I found the intensity was greater. On the business

side, American actors are very good at promoting themselves, which is something I'm still not very good at doing.

Who are your influences?

Peter Sellers. I love the way he was able to play multiple characters. Philip Seymour Hoffman is one of my favourite all time actors. Gary Oldman, just because of his versatility. I watch a lot of Mel Brooks, Peter Sellers, Ben Elton – a lot of British comedy.

What brought you to Tokyo?

I had no plans to move here. I met my then girlfriend, she's now my wife, in a pub in London. I was writing a horror film at the time. I was commissioned by a production company to write a horror script, and I decided to base it on Japanese horror, so I went along to this event where they were going to be showing some Japanese films in the background. Anyway, this event was cancelled, there were only three or four people there, and my wife was one of them, and that's how we meet. A few years later I moved here, and we got married. I sort of accidentally moved here, I had no plans originally.

How did you get involved in theatre here?

The truth is I hadn't done theatre for a number of years. I had been in England and I must have toured for about three years in a row, and by the end of it I was sick of being on the road. I wanted to take some time out and focus on TV and film. But I kind of missed the buzz of being on stage, and when I heard about the audition for *Dealer's Choice* (by Patrick Marber staged by Black Stripe Theater in 2017) and read the script, I just loved the opening scene. That's what sold me, the opening scene between the characters Mugsy and Sweeney. And then I auditioned and was cast in the role of Mugsy. So that's how I got back into theatre. It was the first time in five years since I had been back onstage.

Do you have any difficulties living as a freelance actor here in Japan?

Not here. I work to survive. I do a mixture of acting and drama teaching and it

is definitely enough to survive. When I was in America it could be a real struggle. You might get a job every two or three months. One year I was on fire, I kept getting these jobs, and then the following year: nothing - just one or two jobs. It was very much up and down, I was living on the edge, living on people's couches, and living the life of the struggling working actor.

Tell us about one of the jobs.

In America I did a job for a year, I signed a year contract with Renaissance Theater. It was a medieval setting. They had stages with different shows – music, musicals, plays, dance, Shakespeare – and we had to rehearse for all these different shows. The place would open at ten in the morning and it would close at seven or eight. We were performing the whole day, you'd go from one to the other, and then in between the shows you interacted with the audience as a character. We even did a jousting show and there was sword fighting and people jumping off buildings. That was an amazing experience. I learnt a lot from that.

What about some of the work you have done in Tokyo?

I have done a lot of TV here, TV dramas playing cameo roles. I recently did an Amazon drama. And I used to have a reoccurring role on *Vocab Rider*, a Japanese comedy-drama. I have done a lot of TV, commercial and narration work.

What has been your favourite production to date?

A few years back, I did *The Wind in the Willows*, a regional theatre production. It was such a tight cast and well done. Everybody clicked. I played Mole which I really enjoyed, and I was able to apply a certain style to it and everyone was on the same page.

Have you had any bad experiences?

I have been involved in hundreds of productions. I have had four or five bad experiences. I was on tour once doing *Romeo and Juliet* and one actress, playing Juliet, didn't like the theatre company. There were a few problems and she

wanted to write this snotty and aggressive letter to the office. There were three other actors on tour and they were all quite intimidated by this actress, and I told her it is better to go to the office and talk about the problem face to face and try to sort it out. She didn't want to do that, so she wrote this very nasty letter and I refused to sign it, but the problem was it was the beginning of a four-month tour and after receiving the letter the theatre company would only communicate through me, so I became the person in the middle who everyone resented. It was a very uncomfortable experience. But as an actor you are thrown into these very intense situations together with some very strong personalities and you are not going to get on with everybody. I just believe if you are professional and you care about the work then it is going to be ok.

What is your role in the theatre?

If I had to give myself a title I would say I am a 'co-artistic director', but I'm also the house writer and I design the posters and publicize the shows. I would say it is a group where everyone works together, and no one is above anyone - like a band.

What do you think of Black Stripe Theatre's idea of taking shows into schools and universities?

I think it is a really great thing because theatre can really change people's lives and motivate them to do greater things. So, for me, it has been great fun to go in and try and inspire young people especially in the schools. And I love being on the road and touring as well. I got the feeling back to tour! Luckily for us students study English and schools like to bring in an English-speaking performance for their students. I have deliberately adapted books which students study on the syllabus.

Can you tell us about the *A Christmas Carol* tour of 2017?

Originally, I wrote the script for two actors, one person playing Scrooge and the other actor playing all the other roles. But then I adapted it for 4 actors. I think it works very well with that. When Dickens used to do it live he used to play all

the characters himself with different voices, so it almost suits that style well, with actors playing multiple roles.

We did eight or nine different schools. It was a really great experience. You'd turn up an hour before the show, set up very quickly, do the show - it was about an hour long - and then we'd take questions from the audience and do a workshop. We got great feedback, and I wish we had got to do more as several schools wanted to book us, but we were unable to secure dates.

Have you picked up more gigs this year?

We have more drama workshops and shows, and we are taking shows to the US bases for the military families. We are also trying to target the Asian market by approaching schools in Hong Kong, Singapore and Indonesia. We'd like to expand and bring English-speaking theatre to people that don't always get the opportunity to experience it.

How do you approach a role?

It depends on the role. Sometimes I'm inspired by music. Sometimes the character might come from the words, or a prop - shoes or glasses or something like that. Sometimes I do use Stanislavsky, working with objectives, and I try to make it a matter of life or death, what or who is this character fighting for. *Hound of the Baskervilles* (2018) is a lot of fun, it's kind of a vaudeville pantomime, so the characters are a little bit over the top. Dr Mortimer just came from a voice, I just kept trying different voices. Barrymore came from a limp and a crunched over posture. Stapleton comes from a way of standing - straight and erect. It could be a voice, a movement, or just come from the script.

Are there any differences in the way you adapted *Hound of the Baskervilles* and *A Christmas Carol*.

When we did *A Christmas Carol*, which was our first tour, I was very true to the book, so a lot of my material came from the original source, and I tried to honor the book because Dickens's writing is so good. *Hound* is almost the

opposite as I decided to abandon the book. I kept the same structure and plot, but it is original dialogue. I might have seen something on TV or film or an idea might have popped into my head for a comic moment. It's a collage of ideas. There is a lot of physicality in *Hound*. In one of the scenes an actor mimes riding a carriage. It really relies on the actors' reactions really selling where they are - this is Baskerville Hall, this is the moor - and bringing the audience in. We have no set, it's very minimalistic. Costume changes are quick. I play Mr. and Mrs. Barrymore who both appear at the same time. Mr. Barrymore comes on and he's got a limp, a hump on his shoulder and a beard. When Mrs. Barrymore enters I just lift the beard up and go into character. We're trying to make it obvious to the audience that the same actor is playing multiple roles.

How does an awareness of an audience affect your work?

I don't think it makes that much of a difference, but you just have to be more defined and clearer because English is a second language. I think most of the time they do get it if the acting is strong enough, especially with *A Christmas Carol* because the characters are very distinct.

What do you think about English Theatre in Tokyo?

I think it is like a small community. Everyone seems to know everyone, and are friends, and they seem passionate about theatre and putting productions on. I have never worked with any other company. To be honest, it's too time-consuming, and sometimes it can be a mixed bag. You don't know who the director is or who the other actors are, so a script can be good, a character can be good, but it's a team effort and you can be let down by elements. Too many times when I was young I was involved in productions that were a bit like that and it's a bit tiresome. I want to know what I am in is good or it has the potential to be good.

Do you think theatre is a tool of learning?

I think it can make something real and engaging, and it can inspire. I remember I always wanted to be an actor, but I was really intimidated by Shakespeare. I

suffer from dyslexia, so I thought it was really complicated and scary. I remember in English class the teacher informed us we were going to have a drama lesson and perform the three witches' scenes in *Macbeth* and that we were going to get up and perform them. I fell in love with Shakespeare. When we read it off the page in class I was really intimidated by it, but suddenly I realized how much fun it was to do Shakespeare. I did a lot of Shakespeare when I was a teenager. I've played Lysander and Flute in *Midsummer Night's Dream*, Edgar and Oswald in *King Lear*. I think of Shakespeare as a song, it has a certain structure to it. You must keep to the structure, but you can add variation.

What else do Black Stripe Theater have lines up for the future?

The next one I have adapted is *Macbeth* for the 2019 tour. *Macbeth* is to introduce students to Shakespeare. It's simplistic and short, only 40 minutes long, and hopefully it will inspire and make them realize Shakespeare is not as terrifying or hard as they might think. After that, there's talk of a play based on the Olympics for Tokyo 2020.