

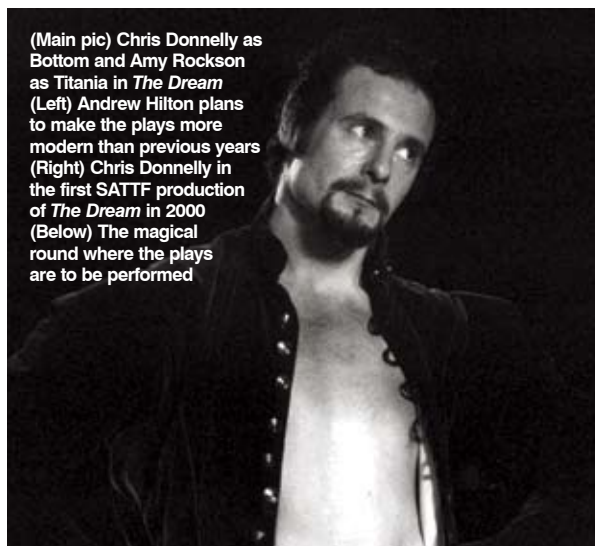
Art to enchant

As Shakespeare at the Tobacco Factory returns for its 11th season **Laura Rowe** speaks to acclaimed artistic director Andrew Hilton and regular SATTF actor Chris Donnelly

Two plays – marking either end of the great Bard’s career – *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *The Tempest*. Both inextricably linked by the sublime, the magical and the enchanted. And now, both to feature in the Shakespeare at the Tobacco Factory’s 11th season.

Ten years after its first pair of productions, and with seats on bums jumping from a measly 12 to an astronomical 22,000, Shakespeare at the Tobacco Factory (or SATTF to its fans and friends) undoubtedly has become more successful than its fans, its numerous casts, or indeed even its founder, Andrew Hilton, could have ever imagined. So what’s the secret?

“This will be my eighth out of the 11 seasons and every year there are people you’ve worked with before who make it feel like home. And every year there are new people with the same ethos and drive and sensibility. It’s wonderful, it really is,” says Chris Donnelly who not only played Puck in the original SATTF *Dream* production back in 2000, but returns this year



(Main pic) Chris Donnelly as Bottom and Amy Rockson as Titania in *The Dream* (Left) Andrew Hilton plans to make the plays more modern than previous years (Right) Chris Donnelly in the first SATTFF production of *The Dream* in 2000 (Below) The magical round where the plays are to be performed

as Bottom, and Stefano in *The Tempest*. For him, the success of the company is as much down to founder and artistic director, Andrew Hilton, as the plays themselves.

“[Andrew] is a fantastic director and it all comes from the text. We don’t have anything else. He studies the text, it’s his life’s work and he has this incredible capacity, being an actor himself, that he doesn’t interfere too much with the process of being an actor. He always manages to let you play as much as you can so you come out thinking it’s your performance. Whereas actually he has a lovely ‘plan b’ should you get stuck.

“He’s very open and honest and will say if he’s struggling with a scene so you really feel like it’s a collaboration. I think that’s one of the reasons why he’s so special.”

The highly revered Andrew returns this year with *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and a play which Andrew had previously said he’d never attempt, *The Tempest*.

“We’ve now done 18 Shakespeare plays and the time has come to start throwing in a few repeats because I’ve got no intention of doing all 38!” says Andrew (*The Dream* will be SATTFF’s first revisit in ten years). “Despite being at either end of Shakespeare’s career they have an enormous amount in common (something I’m discovering every day) in terms of language, story and style. And so they kind of shine off each other in very interesting ways. We’re very much looking at them both together and some of the casting will reflect from one play to another, as will the design, and all sorts of things.”

I grab a few minutes with Andrew before rehearsals start. He seems confident that SATTFF has not only learnt more about Shakespeare, but about its ever-increasing audience.

“In the interim I think we’ve learnt a great deal about Shakespeare. We’ve evolved slowly and just grown up. We’re the same but

“There won’t be any Kalashnikovs or mobile phones”

different. I can’t point to major sources of revolutions along the way, I hope it’s just been a process of greater understanding and greater richness and ease with it. We’re just ten years older and wiser really.”

And, in a move from the original production, this year both plays will, in Andrew’s words, “be released from a specific period” with references to both the Elizabethan and the Classical period.

“[The productions] are slightly more modern but rather more imaginative than literal, which is an exciting thing to do. There won’t be any Kalashnikovs or mobile phones or any of that stuff but these two plays do lend themselves to something much freer.”

As for *The Tempest*, Andrew has seemingly let go of his previous reservations.

“It’s our first go at *The Tempest*, which is perhaps one of the greatest plays we haven’t looked at yet really, with the exception of the English Histories which I’m hoping to come to next year.

“It’s a play I’ve struggled with for many many years, but I decided six months to a year ago to get stuck in to it and the penny just dropped. I was absolutely fascinated by it. It was slightly intimidating – it is a difficult play



from a direction point of view, although a very entertaining one for the audience.”

But what will the next decade hold for the South West’s finest theatre company? Andrew nods to his interest in the Histories, and even reveals that the esteemed Sir Jonathan Miller will be returning as a guest director next year. But where does he see the company progressing?

“We do want to spread our wings a bit. We want to do three productions a year at least and that one done elsewhere will be a non-Shakespeare. We don’t want to become some kind of national corporation. I think theatre is something that should be done by relatively small groups of people with a passion for what they are doing and when that passion begins to die they should stop. I’m rather against big institutions in the theatre and I certainly don’t want us to become one. But, at the same time, 12 weeks of performance in a year is not enough. We’ve got the energy and interesting ideas to do more than that.” 🐾

A Midsummer Night’s Dream will be performed at the Tobacco Factory on 11 Feb – 20 March; while *The Tempest* will be showed from 25 March to 1 May tel: 0117 902 0344; www.sattf.org.uk