Actes des congrès de la Société française Shakespeare

23 | 2005
Shakespeare et le jeu

Rencontre avec Sian Thomas animée par Jean- Michel Déprats

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/shakespeare/716>

DOI: 10.4000/shakespeare.716

ISSN: 2271-6424

Publisher

Société Française Shakespeare

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 November 2005

Number of pages: 215-229

ISBN: 2-9521475-2-3

Electronic reference

Sian Thomas and Jean-Michel Déprats, « Rencontre avec Sian Thomas animée par Jean-Michel Déprats », *Actes des congrès de la Société française Shakespeare* [Online], 23 | 2005, Online since 01 January 2007, connection on 03 May 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/shakespeare/716> ; DOI : 10.4000/shakespeare.716

Shakespeare et le jeu

actes du Congrès

organisé par la

SOCIÉTÉ FRANÇAISE SHAKESPEARE

les 10, 11 et 12 mars 2005

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COUVERTURE :

Edouard Lekston, *King and Kusun*, 2005
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conception graphique et logo
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Université de Paris III – Sorbonne Nouvelle
<http://recherche.univ-montp3.fr/SFS/>
5 rue de l'École de Médecine
75006 Paris

ISBN 2-9521475-2-3

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RENCONTRE AVEC SIAN THOMAS ANIMÉE PAR JEAN-MICHEL DÉPRATS

JEAN-MICHEL DÉPRATS: Paradoxically, given the subject of our 2005 Congress: “Shakespeare et le jeu”, there have been so far few attempts, if any, at tackling the problem of “Acting Shakespeare”. So the question and answer session we are going to have with Sian Thomas this afternoon will be a good opportunity to explore the requirements and specifics of interpreting Shakespeare on the stage. Sian Thomas was brought up on the boards, both her parents being actors who appeared in many Shakespeare roles in England but also in Canada at the Stratford Festival Theatre in Stratford Ontario. She was born in Stratford Warwickshire, a privilege that few of us share. No surprise then she has become a very famous and experienced Shakespearian actress who over the years has played ten parts in eight Shakespeare productions, namely the parts of Jessica and Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*, the part of Ophelia (Sheffield Crucible) in a 1984 *Hamlet* and twenty years later the part of Gertrude in a recent RSC *Hamlet* directed by Michael Boyd, the parts of Desdemona in a Lyric Hammersmith *Othello* also directed by Michael Boyd, of Katherine in a RSC *Taming of the Shrew*, of Queen Isabelle in *Richard II*, of Queen Elizabeth in *Richard III* and of Goneril in *King Lear*. Sian, you have just ended the season at Stratford with two parts that you played in repertoire, Gertrude and Lady Macbeth. Can you tell us first about your conception of the part of Gertrude?

SIAN THOMAS: Gertrude is a grown-up part, a mature part, not a part that you can attempt to play as a young actress. I could now play Ophelia again because I understand her character very well, but I am too old for the part. Ophelia is passive too although she is more active than Gertrude as she has a mad scene and things happen to her. Apparently, Gertrude is just watching and is

incredibly passive until you begin to work on her and that is what was so interesting for me. And as I progressed through my work I realized that she had become much more active than I anticipated at first. Indeed, for the season at Stratford, the one that has just finished literally on Saturday, I was offered both the parts of Lady Macbeth and Gertrude. I was so pleased because I thought Lady Macbeth would be great but actually I like them both very much and if you think of it, they have very strange cross references.

JEAN-MICHEL DÉPRATS: In the interview you gave to Lyn Gardner in the January 2005 issue of *The Guardian* about “What’s it like to star twice in the same play – decades apart”, you seem to point to a particular difficulty in the interpretation of Gertrude: for you the role is underwritten.

SIAN THOMAS: I was lucky in the version that we did just this last season which included a scene which, I think, is from the first quarto. Michael Boyd who directed it found a very short scene which is not particularly well written and, and by the way, you can see why Shakespeare decided not to include it, but which is very interesting from the point of view of the actress playing Gertrude. The reason is partly that she has more to say, so you are just kept in focus with the audience more. It is a little scene which takes place after the mad scenes towards the end of the play, when Hamlet has come back from England, and instead of the long letter and the scene with the sea captain, there are some urgent exchanges between her and Horatio. It is made very clear in this short interchange that Gertrude now has had a kind of deep change in her character and she is now very much on the side of her son, she has become a mother and she sees the evil in Claudius. The ambivalence has been lifted. Without that little scene you do not know how to take Gertrude, you do not know whether she is a passive witness to what is happening, and whether she even understands the situation. In a lot of performances that I have seen she has been played as some one who, by the end, is drinking a lot. But to me Gertrude does not “drink”, she is *not* a drunk. In the interpretation that I chose, I decided to make her much more conscious, so the very important crux of the character was the scene in the bedroom,

the closet scene, which becomes a huge volte face for Gertrude. She enters, still quite a vain, silly woman who has not realized her own depth, she is not a good mother, in fact she is not really a mother at all, and she is still taken up with the temporal trappings of power and sexuality. By the end of that scene, she has become a mother, not a very good one yet, but she understands that she has to become a mother, and she understands that she has to reject her lover and therefore turn her back on her sexuality. Now the pain begins, the real pain, but through that pain, Gertrude undergoes a deep spiritual and emotional development. For me this capital change in her character is helped by this little linking scene from the first quarto because it keeps her in the audience's mind and focus. But even if that was not there I do feel that she is underwritten. But having worked on her, I can write my own play, my own emotional journey underneath Shakespeare's words. He gives so many clues that even with a part that is considered to be underwritten, there is a huge mine of emotional journeys. She reaches a new spiritual understanding for instance when she comes to that beautiful poetic speech: "There's a willow grows askant the brook / That shows his hoar leaves in the glassy stream" (*Hamlet*, Penguin ed. iv.vii.166-67), to me it becomes poetry and not just verse. The basic coinage of Shakespeare is verse and very occasionally he writes poetry, and this is one of the poems. In my perception at that stage she has earned the right to express herself beautifully. At the beginning of the play, she would not be able to say those words, she would not be able to speak in such a profoundly poetic beautiful but wise way, but now she is beginning to have grace through her journey, through her self-discovery, through her pain. It is mainly through suffering she is beginning to feel empathy for other people so that she can now begin to feel for Ophelia, whom in the production I was in she had otherwise little to do with. Having watched this poor girl first go crazy, then die, and then witnessing her burial, Gertrude has now reached a deeper understanding of her own sense of humanity and mortality. At the end of the play, which I played as if she knew that the drink was poisoned although she did not have any tangible proof, she

has become so aware that Claudius is bad; she is so much in tune as she watches him. And there is one moment in the production I was in, when Claudius offers the cup to Hamlet and puts the poisonous pearl in it, as if saying “Hamlet now the pearl is yours, you must drink a health,” – as Claudius has done a few moments previously, before the pearl was put in. But this time neither man drinks from the cup. Gertrude ponders “But *why* didn’t Claudius drink this time?” For me *that* is the moment when Gertrude realizes the drink is probably poisoned and that she is prepared to die to save her son. She has reached that vanishing point in her life when she has perceived her own death through Ophelia’s and in the beautiful willow speech, she has almost thought it would be quite nice to be in that state. At that stage she has nothing left to live for except her son. In English there’s a phrase “the willing canary” that is the canary that the miners take down into the mine to sniff for the poisonous gas. In some respect Gertrude has become a kind of willing canary, and so by the end without any words, she becomes a nobler creature and has a kind of altruistic death. This is the journey I found for her, or rather Shakespeare gave me that journey for her.

JEAN-MICHEL DÉPRATS: May I go back to your childhood and earliest memories of theatre to ask you what was your first experience as a young spectator seeing your parents interpret Shakespeare? What was your first impression of the Shakespearian world?

SIAN THOMAS: The very first one was when I was four years old, by this time we had moved to Canada. My father was a very young successful actor in England with the Royal Shakespeare Company and was acting with Gielgud in *King Lear* when I was born, therefore I was born in Stratford-upon-Avon but when I was four, we emigrated to Canada and were living in Stratford, Ontario, and he was working in the theatre that Tyrone Guthrie, the great English-Irish director had founded. He was a mentor really to my father, so my father decided we would be going to live in Canada, and he remained there. The scene is when I am four and together with my twin brother; my mother is playing Lady Percy in *Henry IV* and my father is playing Owen Glendower in the same play. My father was very Welsh, he

looked extraordinary, he had the most amazing Welsh face that I have a bit of it myself but it looked better on him. And so there was no one to look after my brother and myself so we sat at the back of the theatre. I do not know if you know this theatre in Canada – the Stratford Memorial Theatre, Ontario – it is fantastic, a little like the one in Chichester (England) but architecturally much better and more exciting. The angle of the audience to the stage is quite steep and continuous – there are no “stalls” or “dress circle” etc and it is a “thrust” stage and so much more intimate and accessible than most auditoria of that size. We were way at the top of the dramatically steep house with the usherettes who were looking after us, and I can remember watching both my parents. At that age there is nothing in the way and so I got the effect just like that, I can remember particularly my father. And it made me want to do the same. Later on that day I was allowed to stand on the stage so I stood there and I thought “Yes, this will do for me!” This was my first memory.

JEAN-MICHEL DÉPRATS: Did you go to a school?

SIAN THOMAS: Yes, I did. But I did not go to RADA (Royal Academy of Dramatic Art), I went to a school which is as good, the Central School of Speech and Drama in London. I think Vanessa Redgrave and Peggy Ashcroft went there. I went there when I was 18 for 3 years and then started to be an actress.

JEAN-MICHEL DÉPRATS: How do you approach a Shakespeare role, do you go about it intuitively or do you do a lot of reading beforehand?

SIAN THOMAS: I do both if I can. It was harder for instance with Gertrude because nobody writes about her, the Shakespeare critics and commentators are not interested, but I love to read as much as I can. I am not particularly well educated and I like to learn and to know more, and it can only help you. Of course you can always reject the reading but you can collect ideas. For Lady Macbeth, there is a fantastic wealth of knowledge and essays from Coleridge right up to Harold Bloom, Frank Kermode, William Hazlitt, yes so many wonderful essays, but for Gertrude nothing although there are so many on Hamlet.

Gertrude is a weak character, that's it. So I tried for Gertrude but I had to use my instinct and dig underneath, but as I was saying, I found the journey. Whereas, for Lady Macbeth, it was a different case in that there were many fantastic essays and articles I could read. So I did read as much as I could just to get ideas, and then I began to think about what I was, because I think you have to know who you are, and the only way you could do that, is to explore every avenue. But, in the end, you cannot be all things to all people, you have to be Lady Macbeth, you have to decide who Lady Macbeth is and indeed who your Lady Macbeth is. So I read as much as I could, and then I began to choose. Rather late in fact. I came across a wonderful essay by William Hazlitt, the English essayist of the eighteenth century. It was not so much an essay as his description of the very famous English actress Sarah Siddons who played Lady Macbeth, one of her favourite and most famous parts, there are a lot of pictures of her with the candle. Hazlitt watched her performance and drew his own ideas from her interpretation. And I realized that I had myself quite a lot of the same ideas that my heroine Sarah Siddons had, so I was very pleased by that because I had arrived there instinctively. She, like myself, decided that Lady Macbeth is not a fiendlike queen, she is a human being who is led astray in some ways. That is how I began by reading and then I made my own decisions, slowly, very slowly. I found who Lady Macbeth was, and I decided she was a very vulnerable being. In some ways she had more attractive qualities to her character than Gertrude. Gertrude becomes interesting but initially she is quite weak and vain and passive whereas Lady Macbeth is passionate and loyal to her husband. It is very interesting to play the two parts of Gertrude and Lady Macbeth in repertoire, because you have a chance to compare them. At the Royal Shakespeare Company, you might do a matinee of Gertrude and an evening performance of Lady Macbeth.

QUESTION 1: Can Lady Macbeth be described as a feminist?

SIAN THOMAS: Possibly, but not completely. There are certain elements of feminism: she is a very strong woman and she in some ways is the perfect wife, and I think they are very happy. But things

go wrong, she makes a few wrong decisions on the way. But when you think of the many relationships that Shakespeare has written between men and women, you realize that in some ways the Macbeths are the most devoted and close of all his couples initially, and are only driven apart because of the murder of Duncan. Indeed every thing goes wrong once the murder has been committed, but until that moment, she talks about “the future in the instant”.

QUESTION 2: She becomes different then, she is a second Lady Macbeth.

SIÂN THOMAS: I read a fantastic essay by Pr Sanders who talks about the idea that Nietzsche had called “strong pessimism,” which had a lot to do with the way I played Lady Macbeth. “Strong pessimism” goes beyond morality, beyond good or bad, or “thou shalt not kill,” it is vitality. There is a quote from *Henry V* which says: “There is some soul of goodness in things evil, / Would men observingly distil it out” (iv.i.4-5, Arden 3, edited by Craik) so that in the centre of the dark, there is light. It is a paradox. It is like the dynamic of life, a life force, as if you stood on a precipice, or maybe on top of the Eiffel Tower, looking down, and it is that moment when you think “I could jump.” You are very vulnerable but still you are very strong, and these are the two paradoxes that are contained in Nietzsche’s idea of “strong pessimism.” I think Lady Macbeth embodies that feeling, when she says something like “we can do it.” Her husband is more cautious when he says “If we should fail?” And she goes on “but we won’t know it until we try.” And she is trying to stop time, gambling with time. There is something really attractive in that quality, it is quite sexual, but it stops once the murder is committed almost immediately, it is like someone cutting the strings.

JEAN-MICHEL DÉPRATS: I have a question about Shakespeare roles. During a former conference of our Société Française Shakespeare (published in “Théâtre et Idéologies: Marlowe, Shakespeare”, Paris, Touzot, 1982, p. 137-56), Patrick Stewart, talking about his interpretation of Shylock, said that his work was to try to differentiate his five appearances in the play as much as possible. He had the strong impression that the role was made up of a series of very different masks (“Shylock

appears in five scenes. Each scene has a distinctive quality. One approach would be to blend these qualities in such a way as to present a regular and consistent picture. On the other hand the particular characteristics of each scene can be isolated and individually played without reference to other scenes.”) What about that question of diversity and unity? Do you have the feeling that some parts are written like a series of masks with very different functions from one scene to the other?

SIAN THOMAS: You find this feeling more in some parts than others. I think the actor’s job is to attempt to find a journey underneath to link it up and sometimes to have the humility to just wear the mask and play one scene in that way, and maybe come in and do the next scene in another way and to allow the audience to join in. I think there is sometimes an arrogance if you try to bend the part into something that is more acceptable for yourself. I think it is a very English thing, I would not speak for European actors, but English actors, although they are wonderful and are my brothers and my sisters, yet there is sometimes an arrogance or certain preciousness where their “feelings” or emotional truth are concerned. And sometimes it is not Shakespeare’s truth they are after, but theirs. Yes, it is more than that, and you have to have the humility to play the opposite, to play the juxtaposition, to be brave and to offer something completely different. I would definitely say you can learn more that way as an artist but also you can give more to the audience if you are not trying to shrink Shakespeare to your own dimension, it is very important to grow to *his* dimension.

JEAN PIRONON: When you were performing Lady Macbeth or Gertrude, did you feel you were becoming the character you were playing or did you try to keep the part at a distance?

SIAN THOMAS: That is a very interesting question, but it is difficult to explain because of course somewhere there is a little bit of oneself tuning the knobs, putting out the antennae, smelling the wind, seeing what the audience is like, you are monitoring them to see if they are not very good, or too good. A bit of you is standing outside, and yet at the same time you do feel that at certain moments there are no differences, and Sian Thomas is Lady Macbeth, the two become one, but it is not a constant

thing. You come in and out of it I find, but you have to use your own sense of self. I think there is a danger to get actors who are too far away from the character and who are observing it. They are not using their own ego, their own self, their own truth in the end. There is a very famous actor who recently died in England called Michael Bryant who was a fantastic actor of Shakespeare but also of modern plays. I had the good fortune to work with him at the National Theatre in London where I work a lot. He would always maintain the sense of your own truth of yourself. He was playing in *The Wind in the Willows*, a lovely book for children really which was a very successful production at the National Theatre. They had to do a lot of classes about animals, he himself was playing the badger. In the play, there is also a toad, a rat, a little mole, so the actors were doing all sorts of interesting exercises. Michael Bryant said the audience will find that Badger is just like Michael Bryant and Michael Bryant is just like Badger. There is a truth to that: you have to begin with your own soil, your own garden, and then you can grow. I have grown hugely by planting the seeds of Lady Macbeth and Gertrude in myself, then they grow but you have to be honest and brave.

JEAN-MICHEL DÉPRATS: You are speaking essentially about tragic roles, as in the list of what you have interpreted there are more tragic parts than comic parts. Is it a matter of choice, did the directors perceive you as an essentially tragic actress, or is it just by chance?

SIÂN THOMAS: It is mainly by chance. In England, again I do not know if it is the same here, people decide about you. I have worked with many directors and the few good ones know that I am a comedian as well as a tragedian; in fact I have had some awards for my comedy – but as yet not for my tragedy! But often directors think “oh yes, she was a good Hedda Gabbler so she will be a good Lady Macbeth!” This is exactly the case with Michael Boyd who directed me in Gertrude in *Hamlet*, who had directed me as Hedda Gabbler when I was younger. He has an idea that I am a tragic actress but there is another director that I worked with who sees me only as a comedian; with him I played Célimène in *Le Misanthrope*.

JEAN-MICHEL DÉPRATS: Since you mention that, you wrote to me that you made a brief but exciting foray into French classical theatre... You played Célimène and Isabelle in Corneille's *Theatrical Illusion* (*L'Illusion Comique*). Do you have the feeling that you have to resort to a different energy or to different techniques when you tackle the French classical repertoire?

SIAN THOMAS: Different techniques maybe. I think you do have to have a lot of energy, whether you are doing modern or classical work. Comedy demands huge amounts of energy because you have to have a kind of generosity and yet you have to be very technical. You have to know how to get your laugh at the right timing, and you have to be able to monitor the audience. It is much less so in tragedy because they are coming to you more, you are inviting them in, whereas in comedy you are going out to them and so, you have to want to do it, you have to have a huge hunger which means a huge energy. Certainly for classical work, particularly for verse, you do have to know what you are doing, there are certain techniques, certain ways of handling the verse. I have been lucky as I have done a lot of classical work and I grew up with actors who, for the most part, did a lot of classical work and I live with a wonderful English poet who writes only in verse, so I have learnt a lot about verse and verse speaking. It is a dying art in England. Certainly a lot of younger actors do not seem to understand what it requires. It is not their fault as they were not taught. It is not that difficult: it is like being on a conveyor belt or on an escalator, the verse moves you up and along, and if you step off the escalator you are behind. The verse is like a corset, it focuses the attention of the audience, at least verse that is well written like Shakespeare's or Molière's. The metre actually gives you the energy of the character, and also certain characteristics of the character, not just the sense. It is full of clues, Shakespeare's particularly. It gives you many tools to work with as an artist. The poet I live with – Tony Harrison – has done many successful translations of French classical theatre, and none more so than his version of *Le Misanthrope* by Molière where in fact we first met as I was working on the role of Célimène. He talks very eloquently, and much more than

I ever could, about verse. He says that the metre is what keeps the “cat on the hot tin roof,” which is a wonderful expression, because you have to keep going.

JEAN-MICHEL DÉPRATS: So you would rather be of the “school” that considers that rhythm and verse are keys to the construction of the characters. There seems to be two rather different “schools” either in France or in England: those who have a more naturalistic approach and say that they do not care about the pentameter. It is what Vanessa Redgrave says in *Looking for Richard* if you remember the debate. Her position would be: if your emotions are right, the iambic pentameter will follow. The opposed position regards the pentameter as what leads you on.

SIAN THOMAS: I would say that you literally put the two together, you cannot separate them. For instance you cannot separate Lady Macbeth from her verse and from the play, the two come together. As I have just been saying I read a lot of essays and did a lot of historical background research, but I am also an instinctive actress. I am not an intellectual actress, and for me there is no distinction, you have to work meaning and speech at the same time. What I try to do is learn the verse and the words as soon as possible. The more you learn about the verse the more you are learning about Lady Macbeth, the two are growing together like a rose up a trellis. It becomes much more symbiotic and perfect so I don’t take one or the other, I have to do it together, I think it is the only way.

JEAN-MICHEL DÉPRATS: What is specific about a Shakespeare role apart from the iambic pentameter? When you are playing a Shakespeare play, in what sense is it different from playing Ibsen or Chekhov or Molière?

SIAN THOMAS: The first thing I suppose is the language, it is the meter. Some of Molière is in verse. The translation I worked on was in verse, as Tony Harrison always turns the alexandrine into the iambic pentameter because he says “the heart beats with the iambic.” The English language particularly suits the five beats. When you translate the alexandrine directly into English it becomes like doggerel and very boring. So he always puts it into the five beats, and then he opens up the couplets so that you still

have the rhyme in each couplet but it is not a full stop. It zooms along with a fantastic illusion, it becomes very sensuous and wonderfully tasty in his hands. He originally did a very successful first version of *The Misanthrope* with Diana Rigg at the National Theatre twenty years before I did it in a different production but in the same version. I think that first and foremost the verse is the language; it gives you an energy, a heightened sense, the verse allows you to go further into the heart of tragedy or comedy. You can look into the darkness with verse with a stronger brighter flame than if you were doing it in naturalism. As far as the people that you create, I have played Ibsen and Strindberg, they are being grown out of the garden of your own self, so they are as human as yourself. But there is just a kind of energy to characters that are written in verse. On the whole it is a difficult question for me to answer because in the end you are an actress and your job is to become this character. It goes beyond, you go through the language, and you take a different route. Ultimately you arrive at the same place but you take a different route through verse or through naturalism but they are just as alive in both cases.

QUESTION 3: According to you, do you assume that Gertrude knows or does not know about the murder?

SIAN THOMAS: She does not know. No, I am sure that she does not know. I think she would be too calculating, too hard a woman for the journey that is implicit. She is not evil and she is not really corrupt. She is vain, she is in denial, she is selfish, and I think that it is the shock that happens to her in the closet scene. Hamlet is saying to her "my uncle killed your husband." She learns it then and has to accept it, but I do not think she had any ideas before that. I think she has had some bad dreams, maybe she is uneasy, but I do not think that she knows consciously.

RUSSELL JACKSON: Let us consider Lady Macbeth's children. Were these questions that you considered when you were working on the plot?

SIAN THOMAS: Up to a point. There is that famous essay by L. C. Knights: "How many children had Lady Macbeth?" and in a way this type of question is an irrelevance, it can get in the way.

“What did she have for breakfast? Did she love her father?” ... But we did discuss the issue with Dominic Cooke, the director of *Macbeth*. We came to a kind of agreement that she had obviously had a child at some point, and it was theirs – it was definitely hers and his – and not from a previous marriage.

JEAN-MICHEL DÉPRATS: So “he has no children” does not refer to Macbeth?

SIAN THOMAS: I think it does, but he does not have any now, it died. We decided it was a kind of poetical licence because it has died. Macbeth has no children now; he does not have the absolute sense of being a father because the child died when it was a baby.

RUSSELL JACKSON: They come up with a lack which figures heavily in their relationship. In a way it drives both of them to kill the king.

SIAN THOMAS: It has to. Indeed there is something missing within the couple that, in a way, drives both of them and particularly her to want to kill the king to get power. It is funny I woke up one morning and I thought “good, I have it”: *Hamlet* is a play about being, and *Macbeth* is a play about having. To a certain extent it is true: those two want so badly to have the crown, and to have power. It is that very lack in both of them that possibly has to do with having a child that died, that cannot be filled. Of course you have to do it through yourself, not through killing other people, or even stealing the crown. There is possibly a kind of dysfunction at the heart of them: he has too much imagination, and I think she has too little, she is so positive, so clear that it is going to work. It is the way I interpret it. The moment she came back from the murder taking the daggers, she is obsessed: “give me the daggers,” and covering the sleeping grooms with blood. She looks at her own hands covered in blood, and he is down there looking at his, she has to snap back into reality, as if she was saying “keep it going.” But that moment is huge, it is like an eternity, and she goes back to that. It is when her undoing begins in a way, her kind of madness. You see the whole of the sleepwalking scene in a fractured moment: the horror of seeing that, and seeing the reality of killing someone: “[...] who would

have thought the old man to have had some much blood in him” (v.i). She is someone who is so materialistic because, as I have said, she does not have a great imagination, but she has a fantastic will. She is a very sensual passionate nature, a kind of a Renaissance creature, a creature of action. I think the wonderful irony is that the sleepwalking scene, which is like a mad scene, is just about the power of what happens to her own senses. It is all this blood on her hands, and seeing the blood of the old man. It is hearing the bell, smelling the blood on her hands, the absolute visceral senses that she is living all the time. It is very simply written, her own scene is not in verse and yet it is so powerful because she is such a creature of the material world.

JEAN-MICHEL DÉPRATS: Is there any important aspect of your work that you would like to approach here for us?

SIAN THOMAS: Just a little joke to make you laugh: I have done a very comic character sharing the stage with Madonna, that is my big claim to fame. I was nominated for an Olivier Award, the biggest kind of award you can get of the best comedy performance, but it was very easy because she was so bad!

PASCALE DROUET: How did you manage to play Lady Macbeth addressing the powers of darkness and asking them to “unsex” her?

SIAN THOMAS: “Come, you Spirits / That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here...” How do you research getting unsexed? I think she is obviously in need of wanting the blood to flow more coldly in her veins. The very fact that she asks the spirits to unsex her makes me think that she needs help in becoming evil because she essentially is too human.

JEAN-MICHEL DÉPRATS: I’ve always thought that the implications of that phrase went beyond the literal sense: make me stronger like a man. In my opinion, it may mean: let me transgress and transcend the limitations of gender and “sexuation”. Is the meaning of “unsex me here” quite clear to you here in that particular context?

SIAN THOMAS: For me it means: take away my vulnerability, take away the female attributes of my sex, “the milk of human kindness,” if you like. By the way that is an interesting phrase in itself which

is now so well accepted. I think it means: make me hard and strong.

JEAN AUFFRAY: She possibly wants to be seen as a superwoman.

SIAN THOMAS: She perceives this flaw in her husband's nature, "the milk of human kindness," as something weak. It is milky, feminine, weak. Actually, it is his sensitivity and conscience which she perceives as cowardice. He is sensitive, he has dreams, he has imagination. She misinterprets all that as weakness, and she tries to stamp out that in herself too, at least this is my theory, so that she is trying to unsex herself in terms of what is seen as womanly attributes: to be soft, to be tender. She is trying to stop that and in a way she is trying to stop being human, although she is very much human. There is a wonderful thing Harold Bloom says in one of his essays: "we are all Macbeth and Lady Macbeth," we cannot get off the hook, we can try and identify with Macduff and the good people but actually Shakespeare makes you identify with Macbeth and Lady Macbeth because they are so human. She does not become unsexed, she does commit the murder but it is at such a cost that as soon as she begins to try to suppress her humanity, she becomes all too human, goes mad, and dies.

JEAN-MICHEL DÉPRATS: Unfortunately time is running short. We have to stop here this very interesting exchange and we want to thank you all very warmly indeed.

SIAN THOMAS: My pleasure!

(Entretien retranscrit par Isabelle Schwartz-Gastine)