

An Interview with Michael Maloney

Michael Maloney has played a wide range of classical roles over many years for some of the most famous theatre companies in the UK. At the Royal National Theatre, he has played Benjamin Britten and Lewis Carroll, as well as Hal in Henry IV parts 1 and 2. For the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC), Michael has played Romeo in Romeo and Juliet and Edgar in King Lear, under the Japanese director Yukio Ninagawa. He has also played Hamlet twice in various theatres around the country and at the Barbican, the second production of which was for Yukio Ninagawa once again.



On film, Michael played Rosencrantz in Mel Gibson's version of Hamlet. He has also worked on many occasions with Kenneth Branagh: he played Laertes in Branagh's version of Hamlet and took the lead role in Branagh's film In the Bleak Midwinter, about a group of actors putting on Hamlet in a church hall. He has also starred alongside Branagh as the Dauphin in Shakespeare's Henry V and played Roderigo in Othello.

Michael has appeared in lead and supporting roles in more than 150 television shows and 200 radio programmes.

He is best known for his role in Anthony Minghella's Truly Madly Deeply and more recently for his roles in the English films Notes on a Scandal and Young Victoria.

Michael plays the part of Macbeth in the Macmillan Readers series.

When did you decide you wanted to be an actor and why did you decide this?

My dad was in the Air Force and we moved house every eighteen months. So I was sent to boarding school at the age of seven. When I was about ten, my mother, who had been to drama school, was determined for me to act in a school play. Funnily enough, I did *Macbeth* at the age of nine, I think. I got nervous and it was terrible. Then the next year I was in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and that was very successful.

How did you get into professional acting?

I went to the same drama school as my mother – LAMDA (The London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art). Before that, I'd left school at sixteen because I was very unhappy and I worked for a theatrical agency booking extras¹ for television shows. Then I became a stage hand at the New Theatre, Oxford.

I worked at the New Theatre for about six months and my first job was getting all the equipment for the rock band, Queen. They were doing a concert that day and they asked me to be a bouncer² in the evening. But I was only sixteen years old and five foot³ two so I wasn't a very good bouncer.

And then at eighteen I went to drama school. I did one audition⁴ on my own but I wasn't successful so I found a teacher who told me to stand up straight and speak clearly. And that's how I got into drama school. I graduated when I was twenty. Two weeks before I left drama school, I got a TV job which lasted about seven months and after that I worked continuously. So it was all very good and very easy, although at the time I thought each job I took would be my last. I was very fortunate that I found work before I left drama school. If I'd had six months of unemployment after graduating, I don't think I would ever have been an actor. A lot of people at the time were very supportive of me. I was lucky. That gave me the confidence, after about four years, to understand that I could actually attract work.

You have done a lot of Shakespearian acting. Did Shakespeare choose you or did you choose Shakespeare?

You can't go far in the acting profession without doing a Shakespeare project. When I started in the late '70s, actors had the chance to join one of fifty theatres around the country that had year-long programmes. There would always be a classical play or a Jacobean drama of some kind. Indeed, my first Shakespeare was in a place called Leatherhead, at the Sybil Thorndike theatre. But really I chose Shakespeare because I thought it would be good for my career. However, in one way I regret that. The thing I was really attracted to was modern writing. I wanted to see what was going on and what people were trying to express. After my first sixty-week contract had finished with the Royal Shakespeare Company, four years after I had started acting, I felt I'd had enough of Shakespeare and the Shakespearian 'industry'. The problem is that there are too many 'experts' on Shakespearian verse. They all talk about how to interpret⁵ it, how to act it, how to speak it when it is actually very simple – the acting of human emotions through beautifully-written verse.

Which is your favourite Shakespeare part – of the ones you have played and the ones you'd like to play?

My favourite Shakespeare part is Hamlet. I've played it twice. I played it at Greenwich Theatre and the West Yorkshire Playhouse and it was directed by a man called Philip Franks. The second time I played it was on a national tour for the internationally famous Japanese director, Yukio Ninagawa. Then we did a period at the Barbican Theatre in London. I liked Hamlet because it's the biggest part you could possibly play. Before I played Hamlet I saw seven different actors play the part and I decided I just wanted to tell the story – so I made a decision that *Hamlet* was a revenge play. Everything in it was real. I decided that Hamlet really did meet his father's ghost, his father really *was* poisoned, and the person who poisoned him was his father's brother, Hamlet's uncle. So it was very black and white in that sense. My intention was to make the story as clear as possible.

The role I would really like to play on stage is Macbeth. It's such a challenging part it would be very, very exciting to do. There's something I've always wondered about Macbeth ... Why didn't he just sit down and shut up and wait for it all to happen? He didn't have to make anything happen. It was prophesied⁶ that he would be king so all he had to do was sit and wait and watch people fall down in front of him. But he and his wife couldn't do that. They had to push it, they had to push his career and his life – until he became a victim and was killed.

I wonder if Macbeth was Hamlet's next role, before going on to play King Lear. *Macbeth's* a thriller⁷, but it's also about doubt and confusion. It's very dark and in that sense it follows one track. You know, there's not much else to say, we know that that person is going to die. *Hamlet* is a much more complex play. I'm not sure what is more complex than *Hamlet* – *King Lear* perhaps?

In our Macmillan Reader recording you play Macbeth. Do you think Macbeth and his wife are sympathetic characters or do they get everything they deserve? Do you think that *Macbeth* is still relevant for our times?

You need to do two things when watching a play. You need to be objective⁸ about what you are watching and sympathize with the people in the story. I think that is the nature of storytelling: you are removed from the situation you are describing but, at the same time, a part of your brain honestly believes that you are the characters' friend. When you see what is happening, you have a lot of sympathy for Lady Macbeth, who has gone mad. You may also have a great deal of sympathy for Macbeth if he is played like a hero.

I think ambition⁹ is always going to be relevant for our times. In people's hurry to become famous, to become powerful, to become rich, they are prepared to achieve those ambitions at any cost. If a Chief Executive of a company said to a young man or woman joining the company, 'I want you to be Vice President in five years', and the young person knew that they had their support, I'm sure the young person could be much more ruthless¹⁰ than they ever intended to be – and heartless. It doesn't have to be a story of magic; it just has to be a story in which you have some sort of support, where someone is prepared to support you and you do terrible things.

You have played *Romeo and Hamlet* – both are young men who suffer in love. How do the two heroes compare and contrast?

Romeo is very young, he's sixteen, and I think Hamlet is thirty. With Romeo everything is extreme and immediate. He gatecrashes¹¹ another family's party, sees a girl, Juliet, and thinks 'I love her' – not 'I fancy¹² her' or 'I like her', but 'I love her'. Or at least his language says that. And then Juliet does all the right things to make him even more attracted to her. He becomes so attracted to her that he climbs up on to the balcony to speak to her that night. Everything is so exciting; the romance and the decision to marry is over in twenty minutes. That's it. You cannot make the balcony scene any longer than twenty minutes. And there's probably been about forty minutes before that. So the happy part of the story is over in sixty minutes. That never happens in any other show.

From then on it's just a series of bad timing and that's the tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet*. Everything goes wrong. People give the wrong advice. People do the wrong things. For example, the friar should never have married that boy and girl. You know, he should have said, 'Come on, come on now, you're only fourteen and you are only sixteen years old – we have got to talk!' Instead he thinks, 'No, no, I know, it will be good for my career if I marry them, as we'll make a strong bond with Verona.' And then, of course, at the very end Romeo comes in, sees Juliet and thinks, 'Oh no, she's dead! I'll kill myself!' ... But wait a minute, she's not dead! Then she wakes up and thinks, 'Oh he's dead! I'll kill myself!' It's very, very tragic.

In fact I think Juliet is the bigger part in the play. Romeo does some great things and is rather heroic, but Juliet feels terrible guilt. I would advise all students to go and see *Romeo and Juliet* and watch the part of Juliet, especially all young women because that's an incredibly heroic story, and a tragedy.

Now Hamlet – he's thirty years old, he's been to university, he's even a mature student. He's sophisticated, a gentleman, he is trained to become a prince. Romeo is a young lad and he's the son of the aristocracy¹³ and possibly has a cultured background, but Hamlet is going to be king. He is very, very intelligent, which is a big problem for him. Hamlet is Romeo when he's grown up.

Hamlet's problem is that he can't find any stability in his life. The story starts as the whole base of his life is taken away from him: his father has died and very soon after his mother is going to marry his uncle, and everybody acts as though that's perfectly OK.

Ophelia could be the same age as Juliet. She is a product of the court, a victim of the psychological games played by the other characters. Like Juliet, Ophelia says 'I will do my duty and nothing more', but then she wakes up, realizes what is happening and it makes her go mad. Then she kills herself.

You have played the part of Romeo. How do you feel about some of the modern day versions of this – for example, the Baz Luhrmann production of *Romeo and Juliet*? How do you feel about the treatment of Shakespeare in these modern productions?

I watched a bit of the Baz Luhrmann production recently. I loved it. It is a show that works, that is fast, clear and immediate, and has been made with so much love.

When I was playing Romeo, I went to the Royal Exchange in Manchester and saw the British actor Michael Sheen play him. He was a young actor, no one had heard of him, and he was fantastic. He had a clear idea of how he wanted to play Romeo and no one had told him he should play him in a certain way. What he brought was his own personal experience from his youth and he put it out on stage. I loved it.

Why do you think Shakespeare’s language is so special? Why is it so important that students should study it?

You could say that Latin is interesting to learn as well because it forms part of our language and culture. I did learn a bit of Latin when I was a schoolboy and, of course, we always said, ‘Well, there’s no point learning Latin because this language has died’. But in fact Latin is the foundation of English as we speak it today. It can be very, very useful. It can help you to understand our language better.

In Shakespeare there will be huge amounts of language which the reader doesn’t understand. But they will still understand the story and find there are moments that are very relevant to their own life and experience. Shakespeare is incredibly important. It’s enriching¹⁴. But this is true of any kind of music, any kind of poetry, in any shape or form, contemporary or traditional. If you can absorb it, it will improve your own style of writing, your own expression and your own way of relating to people.

Why do you think that Shakespeare is still thought of as the greatest writer of all time – more than four centuries later?

It’s very difficult to say. In the 1980s the University of Essex refused to teach Shakespeare because they said his work was sexist and racist. They never saw it as someone trying to show what it is like to be human. Samuel Johnson, two hundred years ago, said that Shakespeare was ‘the equivalent of a pot boiler’ – he meant that he was just a cheap storyteller, that he was sensational, full of blood and exaggeration. People criticized Charles Dickens for the same reason. He was a ‘soap¹⁵ writer’ basically. Sometimes Shakespeare is in fashion; sometimes he is out of fashion.

Other people have said that the English language and English civilization would not be possible without Shakespeare! I think that’s a bit extreme. But it is true that his language is very, very rich, and that he wrote a huge amount. However, each culture has a writer like that. He’s ours. Molière or Feydeau in France perhaps; Lope de Vega in Spain – he wrote two hundred plays. The way Shakespeare uses language, everyday prose¹⁶ is poetry. I don’t mean that it all rhymes but each line has ten syllables; it has a beat to it – like rap music. In rap music, each line can be between three and eight syllables long. I think, for English speakers, Shakespeare’s ten syllables make the mind dance along on the top of the words. The fact that it is in poetry probably means it’s easier to understand.

Then there is the punctuation. In the original script (the first folio) the punctuation really helped you understand where the character was pausing, thinking and hesitating. A lot of the original speeches, especially in *Hamlet*, would be ten to fourteen lines long, without a full stop – this wasn’t a printing mistake. The complex sentence showed a complex thought, which came from a complex emotion.

Sometimes young actors with no experience of speaking Shakespeare will break those complex sentences down into simple sentences. I think over more than two hundred years of Shakespeare, most specifically during the Victorian times, a lot of people have said, 'No, no, no, Shakespeare couldn't possibly have meant that – this is what he meant'. And as a result words have been taken out and replaced. Endings have been changed – for example, *Romeo and Juliet* used to end happily in the Victorian times.

What do you most enjoy about being an actor? What aspects do you find most difficult about the life?

Simply acting is great. I like acting in movies best. The most difficult bit is the unemployment. This particular year (2009) has been the most difficult twelve months I've ever experienced. I'm lucky because I always get work in some way but it's in smaller bits, there's nothing of any great length. I also have a daughter to look after now so I can't work in the theatre because I wouldn't see her and I certainly wouldn't be able to support her financially. So that's quite challenging really.

One of the disadvantages of being an actor is that I don't create my own work. I attract work, and I look for work, but I don't produce plays, I wait for other people to employ me. And that can produce a sort of tiredness which can make me think that I'll never work again, or 'It's over!', or 'I'm not good enough', or 'Everything has moved on and someone else is now a proper actor and I'm no longer a proper actor' etc, etc. You start to think 'This unemployment will last forever'. But nothing has lasted forever. Everything changes. That's the only thing I've really learnt.

Which do you prefer, film or theatre? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each?

When I can, I go to the movies. I don't go to the theatre. The movies that most hypnotize¹⁷ me are the European ones, where their language is not my first language and we're looking at a completely different pace of life. As we sit here I have my London Film Festival brochure and I'm ticking off the French, Italian and Japanese films I'm going to go and see. These are films I'll never see again in this country – that will only be shown for this particular fortnight. The effect of film on the audience, of carefully produced imagery, is much more powerful than TV. TV usually has to work to a tight schedule on a very limited budget. The size of the budget decides how little you rehearse, how much is prepared beforehand and how much you know before you start filming.

What is your favourite film?

My favourite film that I've appeared in was called *La Maschera* (The Mask). It was a 17th century story about a gambler who finds love, and it was just an amazing experience. It was shot in Italy with a crew from three generations – there were grandfathers, fathers and sons; grandmothers, daughters and granddaughters working on that film. That's normal in France, Spain, Germany and Italy. They all have families who have been involved in film-making since the beginning of the century, and it has become an art for them. That was very important for me.

I don't really have a favourite film but I liked the French film *La Reine Margot*. It's based on a true story about the French monarchy¹⁸ in the 1600s where a Catholic princess is going to get married to a Protestant prince. The Protestants come from their area of Protestant France to Paris to attend the wedding but they are all taken away and killed by the Catholics. I thought it had a European passion that the English don't have.

Which part would you most like to play?

The part I would most like to play is in *Ben Hur*, because I saw it when I was twelve and it was on a screen called a 'Cinerama screen' which meant it was incredibly wide. I think the film was 125mm wide, which meant they had three projectors running at the same time to give a huge panoramic vision. It never became popular because it was too expensive, but it was an epic, sword-and-sandals tale.

How does radio work and work on audio books compare to TV and theatre? Is it easier or more difficult?

I'm lucky because I have been acting for about thirty years; radio and audio recordings are all about language and, through my work in Shakespeare, I have become a specialist in language. I read an enormous amount of poetry. I do poetry evenings at literary festivals for people. I love the writings of John Keats – of all the romantic poets. My passion is beat poetry from America, and I act Shakespeare for a living, so it's all about language.

So when you come to radio and audio recordings, it feels like a pleasure to do and it's very natural. The language often explains exactly who you are and what you are, what your tastes are, what motivates you, what you don't like and what you do like.

What are you doing next?

I'm in a movie that's coming out and it's about a band called *Ian Dury and the Blockheads* from the 1970s and early 1980s. Ian Dury was known as 'The Father of Punk'¹⁹. I don't know if that's true but he wrote some extraordinary songs, yet he was very traditional in his use of language. If punk hadn't existed, Ian Dury would have been a poet and singer/songwriter. He is so theatrical and the way he writes things is so traditional. I play an MP (Member of Parliament) who wants him to help people who suffer with polio²⁰. Ian Dury himself suffered from polio when he was a ten-year-old boy.

The movie is being edited now. I have got a tiny part in it but Ian Dury is played by a man called Andy Serkis, who played Gollum in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, so that might be a good reference point for everybody.

Glossary

- 1 someone who has a very small part in a film, for example as a member of a crowd
- 2 someone whose job is to make certain that no one causes trouble in a bar or club, for example by not allowing particular people to come in
- 3 a unit used for measuring length, containing 12 inches and equal to about 30 centimetres
- 4 a short performance in which you sing, dance or act so that someone can decide if you are good enough to perform in a particular play, concert etc.
- 5 to understand an action, situation etc in a particular way
- 6 to describe a future event using religious or magic powers
- 7 a book, play or film that tells an exciting story, especially about something dangerous like a crime
- 8 based only on facts and not influenced by personal feelings or beliefs
- 9 something that you very much want to do, usually something that is difficult to achieve
- 10 willing to make other people suffer so that you can achieve your aims
- 11 to go to a party or other social event although you have not been invited
- 12 to feel sexually attracted to someone

- 13 the people in the highest class of society, who usually have money, land and power and who often have special titles, such as 'duke' or 'countess': can be followed by a singular or plural verb
- 14 making something better or more enjoyable
- 15 a television or radio series about the imaginary lives of a group of people
- 16 written language in its ordinary form, as opposed to poetry
- 17 to put someone into a state similar to sleep in which they can still hear and react to suggestions
- 18 the king or queen and their family in a particular country
- 19 a type of music that developed in the 1970s from rock and roll, consisting of simple tunes played quickly and loudly on electronic instruments and words that often express anger against society
- 20 a serious infectious disease that mostly affects children. It destroys muscle and can cause lack of movement in your legs and arms.

Definitions adapted from the Macmillan English Dictionary 2nd Edition © Macmillan Publishers Ltd 2007
www.macmillandictionaries.com

Photograph by Rex Features