



An interview with a Queen Margaret



The list of Shakespeare's iconic female characters is long. Certainly, most people would include Lady Macbeth, Cleopatra, Beatrice, Viola, and Rosalind; perhaps Desdemona, Hermione, Juliet, Titania, and the shrewish Kate, too. These are the parts actresses clamor to play at least once in their careers.

Sarah Fallon believes another part should be on that list, the antecedent to all of those other Shakespearean women: Margaret of Anjou, who first appears in *Henry VI, Part 1*, and becomes queen and such a force in *Parts 2 and 3* that Shakespeare inserted her, unhistorically, into *Richard III*. Fallon played Margaret in the Henry plays over three seasons for the American Shakespeare Center at the Blackfriars Theatre in Staunton, Va., and in method and manner she played the part as perhaps no woman has done before (as a boy has, yes; as a woman, probably not).

"There's not anybody who gets the scope Shakespeare's given Margaret," Fallon said. This from an actress who has played Rosalind, Titania, Beatrice twice and Kate three times, as well as a few other strong Shakespearean women, such as Regan in *King Lear*, Isabella in *Measure for Measure*, and Tamora in *Titus Andronicus*. "And it's funny to me, too, because I feel like she's often overlooked. I think that even if you talk to Shakespearean actresses, and ask them what roles do you want to play and what roles do you admire, Margaret very rarely comes up.

It's probably because these plays are done so infrequently, and because people hear a history title and they go 'ewwww! that's got to be really boring.' But these Henry VI plays are anything but boring, and they have this great female role in it."

Most audiences have only seen Margaret in Richard III (when directors don't cut her out of the play altogether) and, based on those encounters, would tend to see her as some crazy lady with a grudge. This reputation Fallon considers totally unfair. "I believe that [the Henry VI plays] should be standard reading, or viewing if at all possible, for anyone who goes to see Richard III, especially from Margaret's perspective, to get a sense of what many of these characters have already been through—and that's a hell of a lot," she said. "Margaret is not just some crazed bitch walking around court cursing people—she has a lot of reasons why she is the way that she is." Indeed, only one character introduced in Henry VI, Part 1, is still alive at the end of Richard III: Margaret. "Shakespeare probably found her extremely interesting, and it's way more interesting to have Margaret alive than dead," Fallon said.

The few times the Henry VI plays are produced, companies often conflate the three plays into two parts (and sometimes add Richard into a three-play set) or stage all three in repertoire for one season. ASC offered up the Henry trilogy one part at a time one season after another, from 2009 to 2011, with Richard III on the 2012 schedule. Thus, Fallon, in a sense, grew up with the part. Though she first met Margaret in a production of Richard III, in which the actress played Elizabeth, Fallon had never read or seen the Henry VI plays before playing Margaret in Part 1. At the time, she couldn't reconcile the romantic young duke's daughter with the "crazed bitch" of the fourth play, and the only thing she knew of Margaret's subsequent behavior in the rest of the trilogy was that she, as queen, would be cuddling the severed head of her illicit lover in full view of the king and his lords. A year later, a year older, Fallon played Margaret as the scourge of England in Part 2, relishing the head scene most of all. "It didn't take much to get where I needed to go," she said. "It was a woman who had lost her love walking on stage with his head." Another year of the actress's life would pass before she re-emerged on the Blackfriars stage as the she-wolf with a tiger's heart in Part 3. She's now totally reconciled to being a crazed bitch next year as she's been tapped to play the queen again in Richard III.

For professional reasons and historical purposes, Fallon did not read ahead to Parts 2 and 3 for her role in Part 1. ASC performs in the world's only replica of the Blackfriars, the indoor theater used by Shakespeare's company, with the same staging conditions The King's Men would have known: namely, universal lighting, no electronic effects, and an audience all around, including on the stage (the "gallants' stools") and in the gallery above. ASC also uses the tradition of cross-gender casting, but with 21st century equal opportunity. Thus, King Henry was played by actresses, Alyssa Wilmoth in Part 1 and Denice Burbach in Part 2, before an actor took on the role in Part 3, Gregory Jon Phelps, who had played Suffolk in the first two parts. Miriam Donald played the part of her son, Prince Edward, "Ned," in Part 3. The actors also perform music—usually pop rock and country songs echoing the play's themes—before the play and during the intervals.

Furthermore, the Henry VI series was produced as part of ASC's annual Actors' Renaissance Season (which the actors call "The Ren Season" for short) in which the company replicates the production principles of Shakespeare's time. Each of the 13 actors receives only his or her parts (many double and triple roles in a single play, such as Chris Johnston playing Clifford, King

Lewis of France, and Hastings in Part 3) plus cue lines. They must memorize their lines, come up with their own costumes and props (including the above-mentioned head of Margaret's lover), and, with no director, work out all the scenes, including blocking, in a rehearsal time totaling about 50 hours per play. All of this happens in a repertoire of five plays being staged in like manner, including three by Shakespeare contemporaries, a couple of those often making their North American debuts. A prompter is on hand for any actor who forgets a line and calls "prith-ee"; it happens, at most, once or twice per play, but resulted in a genuinely sweet moment in *Henry VI, Part 1*, when Phelps as Suffolk lost his place in the meeting scene with Margaret: "Prithee!" he called. "She's beautiful," the prompter intoned. "She is beautiful!" Suffolk cooed as if confirming the prompter's opinion.



Sarah Fallon

In the Blackfriars environment and the Ren Season conditions, Fallon took on the job of playing Margaret over three successive years in much the same way the very first Margaret himself would have. "I like the fact that I'm not looking so ahead, where I'm going, 'Well, now I've got to set myself up for this' and I'm just playing what's there," she said. "I'm trying to play what's there in the story and what Shakespeare's given me and where she is."

It may be the best way to totally appreciate this character of Shakespeare's, then a novice playwright, as it comes to life on a bare stage with other players birthing their own characters and no midwife director imposing extra-contextual interpretations and inventions. What we see with this purest of Margarets is a part that not only paved the way for all of Shakespeare's iconic females to follow, but a character so popular in 1592—the first reference to Shakespeare as a playwright in London quotes one of Margaret's lines—that the playwright found a way to bring her back for *Richard III* (making Margaret a forerunner of Indiana Jones and Jack Sparrow, too; even Falstaff didn't make it to a fourth play, as Shakespeare promised he would). "You get to go through so much playing this woman, especially if you get to play her—if you are lucky enough to play her—in all three parts; and separate productions of all three parts," Fallon said.

A native of Texas, Fallon earned her bachelor's of arts in theatre at Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas, and a master's of fine arts in acting at the University of Delaware. She worked four seasons at the Colorado Shakespeare Festival (2001–2003 and 2007) and has been with ASC off-and-on since 2004, playing 52 roles in 39 productions.

On a rare moment of relaxation for Fallon—the fifth and final play of the Actors' Renaissance Season's repertoire, when Thomas Middleton's *A Trick to Catch the Old Ones* had just opened four days before—my wife, Sarah, and I sat down with the actress March 29, 2011, over wine in the lounge of the Stonewall Jackson Hotel in Staunton, Va., and afterward dinner at the Mill Street Grill to talk about Shakespeare's great Queen Margaret.

Eric Minton
September 8, 2011

Have you ever been in *Henry VI* before?

No, this is my first time. In fact, before starting *Henry VI, Part 1*, which we did two years ago in the Ren Season, I had not even read the entire trilogy. I had been in *Richard III* before, but I did not play Margaret. I played Elizabeth. So, I was familiar with *Richard III* but not familiar with the *Henry VI* plays.

And you had not read it.

Correct.

Had you seen it?

Nope. I still haven't.

How much did you know about Margaret of *Part 2* when you played her in *Part 1*?

Well, René (Thornton Jr., who played York in the first two parts of the series) is a big fan of the *Henry VI* plays so we talked a little bit about it. What I did know is that Suffolk dies and there's a great scene where Margaret's walking around with his head in her arms. But that's pretty

much all I knew about what was going to happen in *Part 2*: I was going to lose Suffolk.

I don't think she's evil. But she's got balls. She is a ballsy woman, and she is not afraid of standing in a courtroom full of men, full of very powerful men, and saying, "This is the way it's going to go, and you need to look at it from my perspective."

And it's so interesting because in *Part I*, you get the one scene. That's it. So we all are introduced to Margaret in a very different way than you're ever going to see her ever again. It's this delightful, romantic comedy scene in the middle of a history that's so much fun to play. But you don't ever see that Margaret again, and her interaction with Suffolk is this light moment. I really, really enjoyed that one scene and it was like, "I know this woman, I know who she is in *Richard*, I know that she gets everything sort of stripped away, but that is not the woman we're meeting right now." I felt like we were meeting a really young woman who is not without her ambitions, but she also knew her place.

Now doing *Part 3*, what struck me about that scene in *Part 1* with Suffolk is that in *Part 3*, there's a very similar scene between Lady Grey and Edward, a wooing-without-wooing scene where Lady Grey is saying, "I'm not fit to be your queen. I'm not of the right birth to be your queen." Margaret says the same thing to Suffolk in *Part 1*. She says, "I'm not worthy of being Henry's queen," and basically Suffolk says whatever the king wants we can make you. She doesn't push the issue in the same way that Elizabeth does, but I wonder if Shakespeare—because there's scholarly questions about whether or not *Part 1* was written last—used this kind of wooing scene where there are asides happening. They're not between Edward and Lady Grey but between Richard and Clarence over there in the corner, and the funny thing about the scene in *Part 1* is it's all of Suffolk's asides while Margaret is trying to get him to engage. She's

been taken prisoner, and he keeps talking to the audience and she's going, "Are we going to have a conversation here?" But I really noticed similarities between those two scenes, hearing the one in *Part 3* and having done the one in *Part 1*.

You were opposite Gregory as Suffolk in *Part 1*, and the one we saw he was toying with the audience and didn't even notice Reignier [her father] coming on until you motion with your head.

Well, that's a problem with the text, too, because Reignier enters above, and then he says, "I'll come down," but there's no text between Margaret and Suffolk in that time. The next line comes from Reignier. So, we had to figure out something kind of fun to do to allow for that time. In the original Blackfriars or wherever these plays were performed initially, it's quite possible that there was an easier way to get from the up above to even being seen by the audience, so it would probably be much more efficient, but we don't have that in our space. Sometimes it would be a matter of four lines before a character re-enters the scene coming from above.

So, did you move some lines to there?

No. We didn't move any lines around; there was this moment of while we're waiting for him to come down we just did this sort of, "Are you gonna ... oh, you're not gonna speak? ... are you gonna ... uh, do you have anything ... nope ... oh ... uh ... oh, you're just gonna stare at me? ... Oh, here's my dad!" There was just this kind of playful, awkward "Who's got the next line?" But there wasn't any text to fill that.

And when Suffolk is talking to himself and you're going like, "Hello," and he finally pays attention to you, and you're making fun of him...

Throw it all back in his face, yeah. So brilliant.

I know you weren't looking ahead to Margaret, but is that—Margaret is a wiley woman.

She is. She is.

Is that the first signs we're getting of that?

Absolutely. Because we start off that scene with her being taken prisoner, and here's her captor, supposedly, who is off in la-la land, and she doesn't seem to have any fear or trepidation about throwing all these things back in his face. She realizes very quickly, I think, that something's going on with him, and that he doesn't really intend violence toward her from the moment that he gets engaged by her beauty, because that's all he really knows about her in that moment.

That's all that men care about.

Really, it's all that the Shakespeare men really care about for the most part [laughs]. Are you a virgin? Are you pretty? Great, that's wonderful.

Are you rich?

Are you rich? Fantastic! [Laughs]

Do you have political means?

Wonderful! Bonus! What can you do for me?

What I find funny with you saying that you didn't really look ahead is that you were holding the [donation] basket the night we saw the play. You were answering somebody about how you were sweet as Margaret, and I said something like, "You're not going to be the next time," and you turned to me and said, "I know. I can't wait."

Yeah, yeah, again, just knowing the little bit that I did about her in *Richard*, and for Shakespeare geeks, she's one of these women who just gets people revved up. So I heard a lot, especially from René and Ben [Curns, who played Richard, Duke of Gloucester], I heard a lot of talk about her in generalities. Then, knowing where she gets to in *Richard III*, I knew that it was not sunshine and light forever, and not even for very long.

So where do you see that happening, where do you see Margaret the she-wolf evolving?

I think evolving is a great way to put it, because I do think that she is a woman who starts out with the prospect of everything: she's going to be queen, and I don't think she ever really expected that. And then she arrives and finds out the man she's marrying not only is a young boy or a child but that he's also really into God and not really into making the tough decisions that Margaret, at least, feels a king needs to make. I think it starts the moment she figures out, "Oh, this king that I've got is not a powerful man." I also think in *Part 2*, when she loses Suffolk, who has been her partner in crime and also her lover, I think that is a further descension into where she is headed and what she's willing to do and what is important to her. Then in *Part 3*, we see a completely different side of her because she's a mother now and she's got the line to protect and she has a lot of things that she believes in very strongly. She's got something to fight for as a mother, and we've never seen Margaret as a mother before, so that's a new development in *Part 3*.

"This pansy-assed kiss-you-on-the-hand, no, no, that's not the way we're going to play this out. This is Margaret, this is the woman that you're going to be with." And we hoped it would also be evocative and elicit response. And it did.

You don't just become evil. And I don't think she's evil. But she's got balls. She is a ballsy woman, and she is not afraid of standing in a courtroom full of men, full of very powerful

men, and saying, "This is the way it's going to go, and you need to look at it from my perspective." And she doesn't have a problem being the man in the relationship with her husband, because he's clearly not going to step up and do it. So I think that losing Suffolk, that's where the real loss starts, because by the time we get to *Richard III*, it's a woman who's lost absolutely everything. But it's a progression. She starts out with the world at her fingertips, she's going to be queen, and then she loses her lover, which is also an access to power for her, and then in *Part 3*, she loses her son and loses her husband, and then she's exiled, no longer queen or powerful.

Or anything.

Or anything.

In Part 2, the first time you come on stage, you see Henry. Denice is playing him, you plant a kiss on her.

Yes.

Or him, whatever.

Shim. [Laughs]

There were three things that went through my mind: Wow! That Sarah is really sexy ...

[Laughs]

Geez, that's bold of Margaret ...

Mm-hmm.

Third, you're already screwing Suffolk, what's going on there? You guys are the ones who came up with this—was it you, was it Denice, was it the two of you?

It was a joint conversation we had. There's some mention of welcoming her, kissing her [Henry says, "Welcome, Queen Margaret: I can express no kinder sign of love than this kind kiss"]. Denice took my hand the first time that we rehearsed it, and I thought, "How about if you go for that and I change it into a kiss." And she was like, "Absolutely, I love it. I love it." For that moment, I wanted to show, again, how Margaret is ballsy and how she is really kind of staking her claim here and she's saying—lovingly, also to show the affection she has for her husband, I thought that was important—but to also show that she is the aggressor, that she changes the rules a bit, that she's not afraid to do that. "This pansy-assed kiss-you-on-the-hand, no, no, that's not the way we're going to play this out. This is Margaret, this is the woman that you're going to be with." And we hoped it would also be evocative and elicit response. And it did.

Which is part of what the Ren Season is all about...

Absolutely. Absolutely.

Does that opening kiss set up the precipitous demise in Margaret's relationship with Henry?

I don't think so. I don't think so, because the Henry at the beginning of that play is not different from the Henry that's at the end of that play or in *Part 3*. And I love the speeches; Sarah as an actor thinks that the speech Henry gives on the battlefield on the molehill in *Part 3* is beautiful. But Sarah as Margaret goes, "Dude, oh yeah, it would be nice to be a f***** shepherd? You're the king. You can't be a shepherd and just sit around and count your sheep. I know that you don't want all this responsibility, but that is the job, buddy, and you have not stepped up to the job ever, and that's why we're in this situation." It's flowery and it's poetic and it's beautiful, but for a king to be speaking that on a battlefield, me as Margaret I'm like, "Whoaaa! You can't possibly be serious" [laughs]. It's very interesting to me.

But he wants peace, and that is a wonderful thing. I want a president who wants peace, I get it. But what I don't think Henry has ever been able to wrap his mind around is that that's a lovely idea but it is not always possible, nor is it always the best solution. Sometimes you have to make war for things to get better. Or to secure your seat or whatever it is, then you have to be willing to wage it for the right reasons. You have to be willing to do that.

The first time I see him get ornery is in the very last scene he's in.

Yep, with Richard, yeah. But that's it. Other than that, he's going, "Well, I'll wait for God to tell me what to do," and I'm just, "What are you talking about?"

It's such an odd match, too, Margaret and Henry. Margaret's too much of a firebrand to stand for that. That's why she does what she does. So, I think the demise of Henry–Margaret was going to happen no matter what, because of Henry's inability to make the decisions in crises that need to be made, the tough ones. And in *Part 2*, he's still looking to Gloucester for a big chunk of that play before Margaret finally convinces him, "You know what? You don't need a protector anymore. We don't need him.

And then he turns it over to you.

Yeah.

And then he turns it over to Warwick and Clarence.

Yeah. Yeah. He's just willing to give away everything, that guy, including his son's birthright.

Which, I can tell from your expression, still angers you.

Yeah, of course. Well, I still have to play Margaret one more time, too [the closing performance of *Henry VI, Part 3*, was a couple of nights away]. I've got to keep the fire going. [Laughs] But, who does that? And, again, he does it to try to keep the peace. But at the end of the day I also think it's pretty selfish what he does. He says, "Let me, for my lifetime—for my lifetime—let me reign. And let me reign in peace."

Now, back to Suffolk.

Yes.

Shakespeare gives us a lot of bizarre moments in his canon, with Titus Andronicus having most of them.

Yes.

But you get to walk on stage with Suffolk's head, making love to his head.

That's so much fun. So creepy. So creepy.

How did you approach that scene?

I guess I'll talk a little bit about it technically, first. Because it was in the Ren Season, it's my prop and we're in charge of getting our own props. We don't have a whole lot of heads to choose from. I think we need to invest in good heads. Good heads are hard. It's hard for them not to be funny.

They did a good job with Jeremy's [Jeremy West, who took over playing York in *Part 3*].

Yes. Jeremy took a mask class when he was in grad school recently, so he already had the mold of his face from that mask class. Then we got a bunch of latex and he, on some days off, made that. So, it's an actual cast of his face, which helps also. And it's a little bit further off, it's up on the balcony, so you can get a little bit of perspective there and you can get away with a little bit

more. But that is definitely one of the best heads that we have. The others, we've had to sort of make do with taking Styrofoam heads that we use to set wigs on and transforming those with clay. The two heads that came out for *Part 2* last year in the Jack Cade scene, Allison Glenzer [one of the actors in the troupe] made with Styrofoam heads, modeling clay from Wal-Mart, and jelly beans cut in half for the eyes. It was a Frankenstein from whatever we had to make it, but we don't have the resources for that kind of thing.

So I had to find a head. I used the one that we had used from *Macbeth*, which had been tarred over, so it didn't matter so much the features, and then wrapped it in a bloody cloth so it

How long has she been carrying this head around? Is this day one, is this day seven? Is it starting to smell? I'm not sure, you know? But she's still the queen, so it's not like anybody can go, "You know what, time to put that away, baby."

would be more like holding this infant. And I bloodied the cloth myself. As I made my own props, I'm already thinking about what it's going to look like, what is the picture that I want, how do I walk out that door, when is the first moment that I want the audience to see it. I walk onto the stage alone, so I came out of the door backwards and then turned around. Sometimes it got a laugh, but that was less frequent than people just kind of shocked: stunned silence.

And Margaret is clearly upset. I think that is the point where she is most out of sorts. That's where she doesn't know what to do next. She's so devastated by the loss, and doesn't seem to care that she's walking around with her lover's head in front of her husband, in front of people while wars are going on, messages are coming about troops and armies and people trying to take over, and she's not able to think of anything but Suffolk. In fact, in that scene

she says, "Ah, were Suffolk here, these people would never have a chance." She can't even think beyond the loss that's just happened to her. That's different than even you see her in *Part 3* after Ned gets killed, because after Ned gets killed, she says, "Kill me, too." When she loses Suffolk, I really don't think she knows what's next yet.

The scene after that is the scene that we played up above in the balcony; Henry is speaking, and again he's doing one of his lovely poetic, "I was crowned at nine months old, I wish I could just be a man." In that scene, Margaret has no lines, but she's written to be there with him. I thought that was fascinating. For Margaret to be in a scene where she has nothing to say is rare. That is rare. Even if she is biding her time for certain people to leave before she speaks, she ends up getting a word in. Always. There are no lines for her in this very short scene. So I chose to play that scene very despondent and not even looking at the king, just staring out forward. Being there, playing the role of, "Yes, I'm the queen and I need to stand by my king," but I think that is the point where she really is lost. And she doesn't get it back together until the end of that play when she's going, "You know, we've got to get the hell out of here," and he's going, "We can just stay," and I'm like, "No, again, now we've got to move." So she snaps out of it by the end of *Part 2*.

For getting ready for it back stage, I would just stand with the head, and it didn't actually take much to work myself up to being distraught and upset. I would stand with the head in as quiet a place as I could be, because, in the meantime, there's all of our offstage battle noises and

things like that. So I just found a little corner where I could stand, and I would very carefully wrap it and hold onto it and go on and do that scene. It didn't take much to get where I needed to go; it was a woman who had lost her love walking on stage with his head

When we were rehearsing it, Miriam Donald, who played a messenger in that scene, comes in and takes a knee, delivers her news, and then she looks at me and goes "AGGHHH!" She lost her line, and she's like, "I have to remember not to look at you in this scene because it is too freaky." She's trying to deliver this message, and I'm just standing there with the head. So in performance she would never look at me. She would make it a point to look at every one else on stage except for me. She's like, "I can't acknowledge you with that head; I don't know what to do with that."

The others are looking at you.

Yeah.

I still can picture René's look. It's this precious...

"What the hell is wrong with her?"

Yeah.

Yeah. That's normal. I feel like that's a normal reaction.

When I'm reading the scene, I'm going, "What's everybody else doing? They're all there." It's such a bizarre scene to read. And it was great to see it staged because it was like they suddenly realized what she's doing, and has she been doing this all along?

Yeah, that's what I thought about. How long has she been carrying this head around? Is this day one, is this day seven? Is it starting to smell? I'm not sure, you know? But she's still the queen, so it's not like anybody can go, "You know what, time to put that away, baby." [Laughs] "Maybe we need to bury that with the rest of the body, just have a nice monument."

[This question and answer came in a follow-up e-mail.] In that scene, Henry says, "Still lamenting and mourning Suffolk's death? I fear me, love, if that I had been dead, thou wouldst not have mourned so much for me." Margaret answers, "No, my love, I should not mourn, but die for thee." I remember being shaken by that response when you played it, seeing and hearing all sorts of double-or-more meanings in the way you said it and the look you darted Denice's way. What was going on in that line when you guys did it?

I absolutely wanted all of the layers in the reading of that line that would be humanly possible. It's such an interesting response in this surreal scene. I think that Margaret on one level is trying to placate Henry a bit, trying to remind him of her allegiance and loyalty to him and the throne, albeit while she is holding the severed head of her lover. I think she is saying that she would die for him, or at least for what he represents: power, the throne. But I also think that she is saying that she would rather die for him than have to be around to mourn properly for him. I think at this point, playing the part of a mourning queen would be just that for Margaret—playing a part. It would be an acting job that she would be up for, but her mourning for Suffolk is real—there's no acting going on there. I think that line is working on so many levels, and I am really glad to hear that some of them played for you as an audience member. It can be difficult sometimes to infuse Shakespeare's super-rich text with all of the possible meanings, but it's always a challenge worth taking on.

I want to follow up by jumping way ahead now. When you say that's where Margaret really loses it, for *Henry VI Part 3*, apparently, in the sources, after the Battle of Barnett she breaks down. There's a scene called "the Melancholy Margaret." Shakespeare cut it out.

OK.

Shakespeare didn't include that, and it seems like he didn't so that in *Part 3*, Margaret is always the tiger, always the she-wolf.

Right.

However, Henry describes her suing King Lewis as a "woman to be pitied much, her sighs will make a battery in his breast, her tears," and all that. We never see Margaret like that.

No.

Do you think Suffolk's death is the only time she is? Or does that steel her, because, as you pointed out, after Ned dies she's cursing everybody.

I think that she's definitely distraught at the end of *Part 3* when she loses Ned, but I think there's still that fierceness and the viciousness, and she is absolutely cursing. That's where you begin to see who's going to come back in *Richard III*. You really do.

Well, when she comes to King Lewis of France, he says, "What's going on, what's wrong?" and she says "It's from such causes stops my tongue and fills my eyes with tears." I think that she is milder there. I think she's realizing that she has to play a game.

I think that young boy has grown up seeing a fierce woman take control and he's learned a lot of who he wants to be by watching her. That is absolutely evident by his last scene in this play. Because, yeah, he's taunting them, he's telling them to know their place, he seems to show no fear with three grown men with weapons brandished.

I can see why Shakespeare cut ["the Melancholy Margaret"] out. I can absolutely see why Shakespeare cut it out. I think there is a part of her that is lost after that Suffolk death, but we don't get to see much of that in *Part 3*. I feel like the driving force for her is to protect her son for the majority of *Part 3*. I think that is the driving force. And she does it like a lioness would protect her cubs. She's vicious about it.

Or a tiger.

Or a she-wolf, if you will [laughs]. But I do believe it's coming from a place of, "This is what my son deserves." In the first scene when she comes out and speaks to Henry, she says, "Had thou loved him half so well as I or felt the pain I had for him once or nourished him as I did with my blood," she is speaking from a mother's point of view that no one else can have. She's basically telling Henry, "You obviously don't love your son as much as I do, nor would it even be possible for you to." I just think that there's a viciousness that's always underlying her in *Part 3*. I think that's open to interpretation, too; I guess you could play a

softer Margaret. But I just don't see very many opportunities for it in the text.

In many roles, especially in a direct comparison to your portrayal of Tamora, you combine sexuality, wiles, and will power in playing evil women. Not so Margaret. And I think you're drawing on textual descriptions of her being anything but a true woman: she's a tiger, she's a she-wolf, she's a man, she's an Amazon, she's the captain. The men describe her almost in very respectful terms, but don't want to.

Yeah, yeah.

And I kind of picked up on this when I was reading the bloody napkin scene: you're not sweet, you're not even fake sweet, you're acting just like Clifford.

Yeah.

You're not acting like a woman. Is that textual?

I think that it is. I think the last time you sort of see the sexual prowess of Margaret is in *Part 2* before Suffolk dies. That's probably where Margaret is sexiest. *Part 1* is probably where she's sweetest or funniest or lightest, I guess would be the best thing to say, where's she's lightest. And *Part 2*, I think you really start to get her sexual prowess, certainly with her lover and her ways of gaining power, but she's more indirect about it in *Part 2*. In *Part 3* I think she's just taken the reins. Edward says something to that effect: [to Henry] "Even though you're a king, but she really is." I think that's how it's perceived by the kingdom. Everyone in a position of power has seen that Margaret really is the one who rules the roost. Henry is there in name and as a figurehead and as a way to continue the line, but he's not making the decisions. She is. So I do think that she's transitioned into being much more of the masculine power, and we don't hear anything about her being a lover, having a lover, or anything like that anymore. So there's no place for her to put any of that sexual nature in *Part 3*; there's just not a place for it. There's no outlet for it.

You've brought up a couple of times the mother and mother's love. In Ned's last scene, he has this speech where he says [to the Yorkists], "You bow to me. You're a jerk and you're a jerk and you're a jerk."

That's my boy. [Laughs]

And you say ...

"If thy father had been so resolved."

Describe your relationship with your son.

It's something that Miriam and I played with a little bit, too. Because when we first started rehearsing, she would always say, "Coming, mother" whenever we were going to do something [laughs]. Then we got a little bit more into it, and once we were getting around to those final scenes she was like, "I still think there's a bit of 'coming, mother' in there, but I think it's definitely more of he is Margaret's son."

Margaret's son and Henry V's grandson.

Yeah. Yeah. And who's to say, maybe Suffolk. Who knows? [Laughs]

Have you thought about this before or did that just come to your mind?

I did think about that before, actually. I think if Shakespeare really wanted us to think that, he

would have given us more of even a hint of it. The only hint we get that he's a bastard is when Richard is saying, "Well, whoever begot you, there your mother is." But they talk s*** about her all the time. That goes on back and forth without any sort of actual real claim to validity. People are just being horrible to one another and they're saying terrible things, so you can't really take Richard's word that maybe he's a bastard. I just feel like if Shakespeare wanted us to believe that, we would have had something at the end of *Part 2*, even if she would have had a moment where she says, "The fruit of my womb," something, if that's what he wanted us to think.

Several times, the moment that I come on stage there's laughter. The audience knows, "Oh, you're in for it now. Somebody opened the cage and let her forth and it's not going to be good for you."

My relationship with Ned, I think, is very strong. There is a lot of love and loyalty there, and I think that young boy has grown up seeing a fierce woman take control and he's learned a lot of who he wants to be by watching her. That is absolutely evident by his last scene in this play. Because,

yeah, he's taunting them, he's telling them to know their place, he seems to show no fear with three grown men with weapons brandished.

And two of them are deadly.

Yes. And he's saying these really incendiary things and seems to do it with no problem at all. I think that is Margaret's son right there. I really do.

How old is Ned supposed to be at that point?

We were thinking fifteenish.

Henry isn't much of a father, obviously. He wasn't in the nursery.

No. I think that Margaret was. I don't think that this was a woman who left her son to be raised by nannies and ladies-in-waiting. I think she definitely had an integral role. And seeing as how he's the only son and only heir, she's got a lot more investment there, too.

In the three-play arc of Margaret, what was the biggest challenge for you as an actress?

[Long pause] I think that the biggest challenge in this role, specifically in *Part 3*, is finding her arc and making sure that she is not one thing all the time. It would be really easy, I think, to constantly be berating and screaming and not finding the levels of complexity with power. To be able to give it a dynamic performance, you need all of that there. And she has so much to say for big chunks of the play that I think that viciousness has got to be there, but there has to be levels to that. When does she know that she has the upper hand, when is she trying to show she has the upper hand even when she knows she doesn't, when is she making the really hard choices for Henry? So, finding the arc was the most difficult thing.

There were a couple of performances where I felt—and I say that when we've only done it eight times or something—but there was one performance particularly where I felt I slipped into a later Margaret from the first scene. She obviously comes on with gusto. She comes on

and she's upset. But I feel like I had too much too fast, and it didn't give me as much of a place to go later. So I really need to monitor those levels, making sure I'm not blowing my wad too early, because there's a lot more that she has to do. Plus, that scene is only Exeter, her husband, and her son. It's not a big courtroom scene. It's more of a family drama at that point. So, understanding that, and finding that arc, was the most difficult thing. And it's physically exhausting.

And Margaret's all you did in that play.

Yes, except for a post, I play one messenger in 4.6 who comes on very briefly.

So, even though Margaret is in only four or five scenes?

Well, she's got a little bit more than that, and you get a huge break in the middle after France. You get a huge break before you come back and it's, "Hey, don't give up in battle," and then the death of your son. But the way that ending goes, giving this sort of "Hey, don't hide your head in the sand" to the troops, and then watching your son die, and then cursing all these people who have killed your son, by the end of it I'm vocally tired. Physically tired. Sweating.

Plus you get your finger broken every night.

That's true. [Margaret swoons, and to revive her, Hastings, played by Chris Johnston, breaks one of her fingers.] That was all Chris Johnston; got to give him credit for that. Edward says, "Use means for her recovery" and Johnston's like, "What am I supposed to do? How about this?" And we're like "That'll work. [Laughs] Great! That's a choice."

Ben had his suit jacket on and walked past the women's dressing room, and I looked at him and I said, "Really?" Because he had this huge white rose on his lapel. And I was like, "Are you serious? Really? All right!" So I had to put a red rose in my hair, and Miriam had to put a red rose in her hair. It's like, "If we're drawing the lines at the concert tonight, then fine, it's on!

There are actresses who have played Margaret in one day, one season, whatever. You were playing her over three seasons. You also did it in the Ren Season where you're not looking ahead. Did that help, do you think, in your actual portrayal of Margaret?

I can't say whether it helped or hurt but I think it just leaves it open, it leaves a world of opportunity. One of the biggest pitfalls I think as an actor is if you know someone's a villain and you're always playing them as a villain, that's not nearly as interesting as showing the human side, showing the parts that are a little bit softer, showing the parts that can be a little bit more manipulative. If you're always shoving it down the audience's throat, "I'm bad, I'm bad, I'm bad, I'm a villain," that gets boring really quickly. You can't sustain that for that long. There has to be levels. And I think that is more interesting.

And not very many people are all one thing. You're not all evil. People look at Margaret as vicious and evil; well, she is still a mother and she's been loved and been a lover and she has good intentions. She's not just saying, "Let's screw with the Yorks for fun." She actually believes that she and

Henry have the line to the throne. And she's not the only one. I mean, there are people on her side, as far as that goes.

So, I think [the three-Ren-season approach] leaves it open. I like the fact that I'm not looking so ahead, where I'm going, "Well, now I've got to set myself up for this," and I'm just playing what's there. I'm trying to play what's there in the story and what Shakespeare's given me and where she is. I think that more so than any other Shakespeare female, she's on a journey because we get to see her in four different plays. That never happens. Certainly not with the women. It's very rare. And she's still alive at the end of *Richard*. She's one of the few people who's still alive; she still doesn't die.

Shakespeare was probably trying to figure out how to get her into *King John*.

Yeah, right. "What can we have her wander into here?" [Laughs]

That's what I like about the first scene that you're in in 3 [she arrives, belatedly, after Henry has relinquished their son's right to the throne]. Even when I was reading it, I was going, "Oooh, can't wait to see Sarah do this one." Because Margaret comes in there and I've just got to figure that audiences in Shakespeare's time are going, "Here she comes." It's like Indiana Jones showing up in the second reel.

Yeah. And I made a semiconscious decision not to be in that final song in the preshow, the "Fathers and Sons" that Tyler [Moss, who played Warwick] sings. Everybody else is out there, but I'm not. I kind of wanted the first moment the audience sees me to be the first time they see Margaret. I know that technically I'm Sarah as the actress singing the song, but I really did feel like it would be kind of powerful.

Now, technically, we also needed someone to ring the bell back stage [during the preshow speech, when audiences are given a sample of the bell signaling the interval]. So I volunteered for that, because originally we were doing the preshow speech within that song. We ended up changing that, and then I just didn't join into it when I could have because I kind of wanted that moment selfishly. I want the first time you see Margaret to be the first time that you see Margaret.

And we've had different audience reactions. Several times, the moment that I come on stage there's laughter. The audience knows, "Oh, you're in for it now. Somebody opened the cage and let her forth and it's not going to be good for you." And Henry knows that, too. He's like, "I'll follow you, Exeter," and she says, "No, you won't. I don't know where you think you're going." [Laughs]

Do you see Margaret the character anywhere else in Shakespeare?

[Pause] Um, I think there are—ah, hmmm... I think there are shades of her. I think there are definitely shades of her in Tamora. I think there are shades of her in Lady Macbeth. I think there are shades of her in Cleopatra. I think those strong, female women, the people who are just—I mean, Cleopatra, she is definitely—that's one that I want to play. She's another woman who's not afraid to make her own rules and be in a man's world and feel completely comfortable, whereas Lady Macbeth is a little bit more subtle and manipulative about it.

And a tad pathological.

Yeah, yeah. [Laughs]

But there's not anybody that gets the scope Shakespeare's given Margaret. And it's funny to me, too, because I feel like she's often overlooked. I think that even if you talk to Shakespearean actresses, and ask them what roles do you want to play and what roles do you admire, Margaret very rarely comes up. It's probably because these plays are done so infrequently, and because people hear a history title and they go "Ewww! that's got to be really boring." But these *Henry VI* plays are anything but boring, and they have this great female role in it. I think typically when you ask actresses what are the roles that you want to play before you die, Lady Macbeth is definitely up there. Maybe Rosalind because she's got the highest line load of any female role. So, yes I just think Margaret gets overlooked.

And now that you've played her, you're championing her.

Absolutely. Absolutely. You get to go through so much playing this woman, especially if you get to play her—if you are lucky enough to play her—in all three parts; and separate productions of all three parts, because a lot of places will conflate the plays. That, I'm sure, is exciting to do it all in one night. But because nobody is going to sit there for six hours, you're going to have to cut some things, and it's going to be hard to get the full range of what's going on with her throughout these plays. She gets to go through so much. And that's just a rare opportunity to be able to do that.

How does the fact that it was in the Ren Season affect your Margaret?

Because it's also the fourth play and, in all three years that we've done *Henry VI*, it's been in that fourth play slot, which means that you're only going to get, counting dress rehearsal and preview, ten performances of it total. That's nothing, really. Here, that's nothing. In other companies, that's significant, but here that's really nothing. So, it's different because I don't get to live with her as long as I would like to. And because we don't have a director and because we have to make these choices quickly, I have to really streamline what I'm going to do. I don't get a whole lot of time to think about the different options or even try those out on audiences. I have to make some pretty quick decisions, based on the text and based on what I'm getting from my fellow actors of what story we're going to tell. There's not a whole lot of time to just sit around and go, "Hmmm ...Well, I wonder if...." Because we just don't have the time, and we've already put up three plays, and we're looking to put up another one after that.

Do you think all of that helps?

I think it changes things. I don't know that it helps. Sometimes I really wish for more time. And I wish for more time in front of an audience. Sometimes I'm very grateful that I don't have it because, especially in a Ren Season, people can get to talking about what everybody wants, and there's no outside person to go, "No, actually this is the story that we're going to be telling. So, great, I like your idea there but we're not taking that and we're going to do this." So, when you get a play like *Henry VI* that's got all these factions and everybody is sort of volleying for what they want and what they think the story is ...

A real War of the Roses going on among the actors.

Oh, it absolutely is. We just had our benefit concert on Sunday night. Ben had his suit jacket on

and walked past the women's dressing room, and I looked at him and I said, "Really?" Because he had this huge white rose on his lapel. And I was like, "Are you serious? Really? All right!" So I had to put a red rose in my hair, and Miriam had to put a red rose in her hair. It's like, "If we're drawing the lines at the concert tonight, then fine, it's on! You're not going out there with a white rose and I go out there with nothing. A*****!" [Laughs] But it's always in the best of fun.

I thought it would be nice to just add a little bit that's not Margaret wanting to beat the s out of Henry; it's her wanting to actually have a tender moment, because she is concerned for his safety***

But when you're talking about what's the story like, there's so many factions right there that all think their thing is the most important thing. So, the fact that we have a limited amount of time, we have to cut down on that blah-ba-blah that can happen in the rehearsal room and we really have to make decisions quickly.

Plus, we've got violence to deal with. We had to make sure that we had time every day to rehearse those fights. Otherwise, it wouldn't have happened, and they wouldn't have been as good. And, they're obviously required by the text. You need something to happen. It could be two passes with the sword and then somebody's dead, but that's not as much fun. We really wanted to set up the violence of this

world. So all of that together just didn't give us much time for dilly-dallying and saying, "Well I really think that the motivation might be..." I think it helps in that way, where you are forced to streamline because time is a constraint.

There are themes, but Shakespeare was still a little shaky, and only in this part is he beginning to develop the imageries, and in *Richard III* he really is getting his act together.

Yeah.

So it's not so much a thematic arc, it's this happens, this happens, this happens, this happens, this guy shouts this, this guy shouts that, this woman shouts this. So for a play like this—I've seen *Henry VI* two other times and conflated—and to come here and see *Part 1* two years ago, I was so excited because to me I felt like I was in that first 1592 audience, because of the way you guys did it in the Renaissance style. I felt that there was this urgency, this throw-it-to-the-wind thing. And here are these big speeches; it's not at all natural for you to get up there and shout these lines about the tears and "my brother I will avenge"—Clifford [played by Chris Johnston] doesn't act normal.

No. [Laughs]

And here's York about to die and he's doing this wonderful speech that makes Oxford [played by Paul Janise] cry.

Yes. Well, it's Oxford in this. It's Oxumberland, basically, because we had to cut Northumberland out of this because we just didn't have the personnel.

So, it's Paul crying...

Yeah [Laughs].

And you believe that he would cry at this speech. That's why I'm wondering if for the *Henry* plays the Renaissance format is the best way to do it.

Henry the Sixes in particular? Yeah. I don't know how they would be different with a director

because Jim is typically our director here, and he's very open to our ideas, which is not to say that we get to do whatever we want, but for the most part if we feel strongly about something, he's open to that.

And he's a keep-it-on-the-text kind of director.

Absolutely, yeah, absolutely.

Then, there was in Part 1 when Gregory asked for a line ...

Oh, yes.

... and the line was "She is..."

"She's beautiful. She IS beautiful!"

Did he do that every night?

No. He truly went off at that moment, but if you were going to keep a pritheer for the amount of time that we have the prompter, that would be the one to do. Like sometimes there are just those moments that are golden that happen either by accident or on purpose. That one was great, I remember that night very specifically, too, because it was great. "Prithee: She is beautiful. She IS beautiful!" [Laughs] It was great. Yep, that would be a keeper if you wanted to.

I feel like we have banded together over these plays in a way that's really interesting. There are a couple of us who have been in all three parts but not very many, and not very many of us getting to stay on one side of the rose the whole time. Johnston was very upset that he had to switch to the white rose at the end of this one.

I think we're all invested. We're certainly invested in these plays, and we've set up our own themes. We've done the *Star Wars* things [before each play, the actors operate a giant scroll on which is written the background to the story in a kingdom far away and long ago while other actors play the "Imperial March (Darth Vader's Theme)" from the original *Star Wars* movie]. That was all us, and we decided to continue to do that. We've really come together as a group of actors directing themselves but thinking of the whole of the play, and I think every one in these plays really loves the plays. And I think that shows. It showed in the amount of time we were willing to spend on extra things like making that big banner that scrolls up, and the boys on horns learning how to play the "Imperial Death March." These are things that take time. And we also had a frickin' play to put up and we're giving ourselves all this extra work and making heads and making those banners. But that's because we're all so invested in these plays, and we so believe in them, and it's really exciting to see that. It's

When she says, "Oh, kill me, too," Richard goes for it and Edward says, "No, we've done too much." Oh really? The three of you killing a boy, that's where you draw the line?

harder for us to rally around a play like *Look about You* or *A Trick to Catch the Old One*, which are fun plays. But the sense of group is different with the *Henry* plays, and I think it's because we've done two parts already, and I think it's because we realize that they are great plays. And people don't actually get to see them ever, so we want to do them justice.

Are you surprised they are great plays?

Yeah! Yeah! I really am. I am. And I'm not someone who shies away from something just because it's a history, but I am surprised that all three of them—*Part 1* not being my favorite—but all three of them are great. That is very surprising to me.

You mentioned the change in the cast over the course of the three. Most significantly...

York.

Um ...

I didn't get to kill René. [René Thornton Jr. a longtime staple at ASC who had played York in the first two parts was invited to play Papa Shakespeare in a production of Carlyle Brown's *The African Company Presents Richard III* at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Jeremy West took the part of York in *Part 3*.] I was very upset with him because of that. Jeremy West was great, but...

That's not who I was going to mention.

Well, that's Margaret's concern. [Laughs] I've been waiting to kill René for years, and then René decides to not be in the season where I finally get to get my comeuppance and kill him. How dare he. He knows that. He's gotten an earful from me about that.

He had a great opportunity, you know.

I know. He did, and I don't begrudge him that. I just begrudge the fact that I didn't actually get to say that speech to him [the bloody napkin scene before York is killed].

Jeremy did a very good job.

Great job. Jeremy stepped up, yes. Couldn't have asked for anything better, but I missed my René.

The one I was going to mention was Henry.

Ahh.

You didn't play opposite Alyssa who played it in *Part 1*. But you played opposed Denice, then opposite Gregory. Did it matter to you that there was a different person playing the king?

It didn't, but I found it very interesting that in *Parts 1* and *2*, you had this younger king being played by a woman, and then later, just chronologically, finally is being played by a man. Again, I don't think that Henry changes that much through the course of these plays, so the gender didn't matter as much to me, and the fact that it was a different person didn't matter as much because I think what Shakespeare's writing is generally the same guy. I mean, he's still after the same things in most of these plays. He's really after peace and simplicity and a life that hasn't been thrust upon him. But it was interesting to finally have a man in the role. Even though I wasn't on stage with Alyssa, I certainly saw what she was doing, and then on stage a lot with Denice. And then having a man who's still a timid, meek man, and the fact that Greg played my Suffolk the past two years, too; I still get Greg but in a completely different way.

I decided to put a kiss in when she comes out in Act 2 Scene 5. It's very quick but it's right after he's delivered those big speeches about the father and son deaths, and she comes out and, again, he's sitting on the freaking battlefield, "What are you doing?" And she says, "You've got to go. Richard and Edward are coming and you need to go." Before the second performance, I said, "Would you be all right if I added a kiss there?" And he said, "Yeah." It's the last time we

see Margaret and Henry on stage together. He's going away to Scotland and I'm going away to France to try and get help. I'm like, "You go live in safety in this walled town where no one can get to you. [Laughs] Self-imposed banishment, please do it for our safety." I thought it would be really nice. I wanted it to show just one other level and that there'd be some tender moment. I also did the slap and the grab in the first scene. I wanted to put that grab in there, and he said, "What about a slap?" and I'm like, "I'm down for a slap if you're down for a slap. Let's do it."

They don't have the passion that Suffolk and Margaret had. And if you talk to a lot of people I'd imagine that they would say that Margaret doesn't love Henry. I don't think she's in love with Henry, but I think that they have been a team for a long time now. They've been in a partnership. It's not been an equal partnership, and it's not been the most ideal team. But they've

The other ladies in this troupe will tell you that after Part 2 last year, if we were going out to have a glass of wine or whatever, they were like, "Whoa, Margaret, play's over now."

been together for a long time and fighting the fights, and for the most part he does what she says. So, I thought it would be really nice to just have a moment, a really quick tender moment before I leave. After I leave, Exeter has a line that says, "Dude, we've got to go." So I thought it might help Greg to have a moment kind of like, "Whoa, where did that come from?" before, "Yeah, we've got to get out of here." And I think that it did, which is nice.

Obviously having a man in that role, that's not going to spur any illicit response from me kissing him on the mouth; we're not going to get the "Whooh!" that we got in *Part 2* [kissing Denice upon their meeting]. But I thought it would

be nice to just add a little bit that's not Margaret wanting to beat the s*** out of Henry; it's her wanting to actually have a tender moment, because she is concerned for his safety. You can interpret that as is it selfish? Is it political? But she is concerned for his safety. And she's always wanting him to not give up on himself or the throne or what is his, she believes, birthright.

[Pause] It's a good thing we don't have any Yorkists here. They'd be all over this. [Laughs]

Part 3 is really just Richard coming out.

Yeah, "I can smile and murder while I do." Yeah. People are more familiar with Richard III than they are the Henrys, but it's nice to remember that [at the end of] Henry VI, however right or wrong Edward is—because he is wrong—but he's like, "Everything's going to be great now, it's joyful; look, I've got a son, everything's wonderful." Not if your brother has any say so. [Laughs]

I think the Henry VI plays certainly give you more appreciation of Richard in Richard III.

And Margaret, too. I believe that they should be standard reading, or viewing if at all possible, for anyone who goes to see *Richard III*, especially from Margaret's perspective, to get a sense of what many of these characters have already been through—and that's a hell of a lot. Margaret is not just some crazed bitch walking around court cursing people. She has a lot of reasons why she is the way that she is. This is a woman who had everything and has lost it all. I think

it's hard to get the full effect of what she has been through if you don't know or haven't seen what she has already been through over the course of three plays.

In Part 3, you say that Henry is “the sole possessor of my love.”

Yes. Yep, to the King of France.

Is it true?

I think at this point, besides her son, absolutely. I don't think Margaret has anything else going on.

She's buried Suffolk?

I think so. When we were talking earlier about her sort of losing it, I think that there's a part of Margaret that we lose when Suffolk goes away, at least with what Shakespeare's written, because he doesn't give her an outlet for any of that ever again. So I think there's a part of her that gets buried with Suffolk. And I think that Henry has to be her only love at that point. It's a different kind of love, obviously, than what she had with Suffolk, but I do think she's more in love with her son, protecting power, protecting the line of the throne, and all of those things come from loving Henry and being Henry's queen. Where it's not the love that Sarah would define as love [laughs], but all of that is wrapped up together for her. That has been her sole purpose since Suffolk has gone, to maintain power and to hold onto that and to be a mother.

But when Ned dies, her reason for existence goes away?

Yeah.

Did that play into your reading of that speech, because, as you and I both realize, this is forecasting Margaret in *Richard III*? Or did she cross into a whole other plane?

I think she's starting to. We've not seen Margaret beg to be killed before, and she's begging for these men who have weapons to kill her. Now, why doesn't she kill herself? Well, she doesn't have a weapon in that scene. And why doesn't she kill herself later? Well, it's probably just sort of the Christian belief that, if you do that, your soul won't be saved. But I don't know. I know that Shakespeare probably found her extremely interesting, and it's way more interesting to have Margaret alive than dead. But when she says, “Oh, kill me, too,” Richard goes for it and Edward says, “No, we've done too much.” Oh really? The three of you killing a boy, that's where you draw the line? Oh, sorry, that's where we draw the line, three grown men with weapons killing a young boy in front of the mother. But no, no, no, you're asking to be killed, we're not going to do that. That's too much. That's too much. Really? OK.

But I do think that's the turning point, absolutely. Henry's been taken to the Tower, things aren't looking good for him. Being as smart and political as she is, she probably knows that he's not long for the world. Everything that she has is lost, every claim to the throne, every access to power, it's all gone. She is just starting to realize that in the desperation and devastation of losing her son at that moment. There's nothing left for her.

Is that part of her thinking, then, or is it really just the loss of her son?

Umm, hmmm.

Forgive me if I'm having you overthink it.

No, that's OK. I actually haven't thought about it in that way. I think that at least the first three-quarters of the speech is just devastation over her son. And I think where it turns something else is starting to kick in: maybe a different reason for existence. Because she comes back in *Richard III* to curse, and that's how she ends this part. So, maybe the reason for existence is starting to shift.

A lot of it at first is really just coming from a place of devastation and hurt. She says, "What's worse than murderer that I may name it? No, no, no, my heart will burst, and if I speak—and I will speak, so my heart may burst." I mean, she's making these decisions [snaps her fingers] in snap time until that curse. I think the beginning of that, she's really just dealing with the bloodshed that's in front of her and how that is possible.

Great scene, by the way.

Thanks. I loved doing it. I love every scene that she's in.

[The next two questions and their answers came in follow-up e-mails.] Going back to the scene of taunting York with Rutland's bloody napkin, where you are specifically described as the tiger and, I think, she-wolf, it has its counterpart in Ned's death scene. Did that influence your performance in any way? Especially, did Margaret realize at the moment of mourning Ned's killing that her behavior toward York over Rutland's death had come back to haunt her? You have to admit, while three adult men killing a 15-year-old boy is pretty bad, Margaret's behavior with York is ugly to watch. Seems to me that the audience would have a hard time rooting for her after that.

I don't think that Margaret is thinking of anything else in the moment of Ned's death other than the fact that he is dead and that it is at the hands of Edward, Clarence, and Richard. Any correlation to Rutland or the she-wolf scene where she kills York would be completely lost on her in this moment of deep and devastating grief. I do believe that this scene is there for the audience to make those connections and correlations, though. I think Shakespeare has given us this scene so that we can see the vicious cycle that keeps on perpetuating itself as this war continues. All the death scenes in this play should be pretty tough to watch: children are dying, men are being tortured and mocked as they die, fathers are killing sons and sons are killing fathers. While some would say that Margaret gets what is coming to her in Ned's death scene, I don't think Margaret herself is aware of any karma coming back to bite her in the ass at this moment.

As for that bloody napkin scene, I remember being pretty scared of you while watching that. What was your motivation—or Margaret's—in behaving so cruelly toward York with Rutland's handkerchief? How did you tackle that pivotal moment in Margaret's history?

This scene is so pivotal. It's so great to play. As for the motivation for behaving so cruelly, well, it's absolutely in the text. Shakespeare has yet again given the character exactly what she needs to play this scene. Clearly, she has the bloody napkin on her; clearly, she wants York to look at it. Those things are all Shakespeare's gifts to the actor provided by the words.

Now, shoving the napkin in York's mouth, that was an actor choice, and it is cruel. But I truly believe this scene demands cruelty. I don't think it would work without it. York calls her a she-wolf: I think he has very good reasons for doing so. She is a woman willing to do whatever it takes to get what she wants. In case anyone in the audience was new to the plays and the character of Margaret, if they had doubts about the lengths that she is willing to go or how seriously she takes holding on to power after only seeing her in the first scene of this play, they should be clear by the end of Act One, Scene Four.

This scene, along with Ned's death scene were extraordinary to play. I can't really explain what it felt like to be in them. I am an actor who relies heavily on my work ethic and I always strive to be professional: to know my lines, to not "go up" onstage in front of an audience. Even though we have a prompter in the Ren Season, I hate using it. In fact, I have only called pritheer once after a show has officially opened. In Act One, Scene Four of *Henry VI, Part 3*, I called pritheer on preview night. So, it doesn't count against me in my official count—we weren't open yet. I knew those lines, but I was overcome with the moment. Being an actor is a really strange thing. You have multiple levels of consciousness all at the same time. You are aware of the words coming out of your mouth, where you are supposed to move to next on stage, your fellow actors' responses, the audience responses, whatever motivations you might have in your brain—the list goes on and on; it's crazy, multifaceted stuff. And all the while, you are trying to sell that this is the first time you have ever spoken these words and that they are just coming out of a character's brain on the fly. Something else took over in this scene; I felt out of control, not in a scary bad way, but the rage I was channeling, the fierceness I felt had to be there, was overwhelming. And on preview night, I asked to be fed a line. After that, I never called for a line, but a couple of times in performance I wasn't word perfect; I kept talking, but it wasn't what Shakespeare had written exactly.

Every time I came offstage after the bloody napkin scene I was red in the face, sweating, and taking huge heaving breaths. Miriam would look at me many times after that scene and say, "You are such a badass. You were fierce." I hoped that I had been, because that means I did my job. If Margaret is anything at all, she is fierce.

You earlier described Margaret as ballsy. How did that play into your actual speeches, how does it play into your delivering the lines? I mentioned that with Tamora, you could be very sexually wiley and all that, but here you were leather-warrior person. Was that important to you to maintain a commander's presence?

It was a very specific decision to leave her in the dress with the breastplate on. I didn't want to erase her femininity. She is acting very masculine for the majority of this play, but again we have to remember that she's a mother and she is a woman, and if she could be king, she'd make a great king, but she can't be, she can only be queen and she's holding onto the power in any way that she can. She's willing to do anything, I think. I really think that there's no line that Margaret won't cross to get what she wants. I think it's in the lines; the ballsiness of her character, Shakespeare has given it to you. I think the way that she speaks, she calls her husband,

who is the king, “wretched man, timorous wretch.” She speaks with all the authority of a man in power.

And it's in the other characters' lines.

Yeah. Absolutely. Shakespeare's given you that. I think it would be a shame and I think it would be absurd to ignore it. That would be trying to make Margaret into something she's not. She's a very strong woman in a man's world. But she knows how to speak the language, she knows how to play the game.

I want to go back to Part 2. You started with Part 1, Margaret the innocent: ambitious but innocent. Part 2, she's got Suffolk protecting her and then she no longer has Suffolk. Part 3, she's the she-wolf. First of all, there wasn't really a time shift between Part 1 and Part 2. From Part 2 to Part 3 you've got a 15-year-old boy and there's considerable time.

Yeah, much bigger gap.

How did you envision coming back into Margaret for Part 2, bringing in the innocence, bringing in the protection of Suffolk and then moving her along?

Like I said, I didn't read it ahead of time. So I didn't really have much to go on for Part 1. And then just jumping into Part 2, she is queen now and she definitely has this lover. Shakespeare

I know that now working on a lot of Shakespeare and a lot of Shakespeare's contemporaries, it is so much easier to work on Shakespeare. It's easier to memorize, it's easier to understand, and that's not even in Romeo and Juliet where everybody knows the story, that's in Henry VI.

has given me these things. Every time she was in a court scene, she would wait until Henry was gone until she actually spoke her mind, and Suffolk is still there backing her up and making sure that everything's going to be OK. The assimilation time is pretty quick for Margaret in Part 2; that must be difficult to jump into being a queen, much less with this child-like king. But she's up for the job in that she has her own sort of protector. Like Gloucester is protector of the realm for Henry, she's got Suffolk. I think she's just a strong enough woman that when she's out there on her own without any of that, she learns quickly. I think she learned the game quickly, and I think she is strong enough to play on the playground with those boys.

The time frame between 2 and 3 certainly, I can't think too much about it except for the fact that I have a 15-year-old son. As an actor coming toward it, I'm also a year older, you know. My life has changed in the last year. So, what do I bring of who that actor was playing Margaret last year and who that actor is playing Margaret this year? Is there

anything I can draw on from my own life that I can put into this person? Because I'm a year older, hopefully wiser, how am I changing?

I'm not sure I answered your question.

Well, the next question will add to it, what I consider the political catfight between Margaret and the Duchess of Gloucester that basically is two very strong women with two extremely weak husbands.

Yeah.

How did you all work that out? I know you act in your scenes, but there's some degree of working as you rehearsed. Or did you just decide as they did in [the film] *The Fighter* that Amy Adams was not going to have anything to do with the sisters even off screen.

The other ladies in this troupe will tell you that after *Part 2* last year, if we were going out to have a glass of wine or whatever, they were like, "Whoa, Margaret, play's over now." Sometimes it would take you like 15 or 20 minutes to let go of that, I'm like "What? What is your problem? What are you talking about?" "Hey, Margaret, we wanted to have a glass of wine with Sarah."

We're even seeing some of that now when you're going, "Are there any Yorks around here?"

I know, it's kind of crazy. It's fun, though. It's a lot of fun. We get heated up about it in a very fun, playful way. Before *Henry*, I'll see Ben back stage and we'll walk by each other and go, "Hate you." "Hate you, too."

I think that playing a strong woman is not difficult for me.

No, we know that.

I think a lot of the women here—I don't know, it may be hard for the guys to play a man that's weak, too.

That's what I wondered about Gregory.

Yeah, because he doesn't usually play these roles either; it's sort of a different role for him. He's played the Orsinos that's kind of soft in love, but this is different. They're still charming and cool, but this is different. This is different.

The women never powwowed about it like, "This is how we're going to portray it and this is what we're going to do." Again, I think that's just a function of time. I find that in the summer/fall season, I do have more conversations like that, not only with the director but also with my fellow actors here. We just have more time to talk about, "What's going on with this relationship and how are you portraying this with your husband? What's going on between Goneril and Albany and can I mirror that with Regan and Cornwall?" but we just don't have the time to do that here, which is a double-edged sword.

But I think that naturally we've got some strong women, and naturally when you get to say the things that you do, if you can own it, then I think that it sells. I don't think a weak woman is somebody who walks around calling her husband awful names. [Laughs]

In the middle of the court.

"Would I had never seen thee, never bore thee son." That's vicious. And "timorous wretch," "wretched man."

You did not look ahead to 2 or 3 when you did 1. Did you look ahead to 3 when you did 2?

No.

So you stayed true to the part you were doing at the time.

Yeah. In fact, when we started rehearsals for this play I was off book for maybe the first two scenes. Some of those lines I was reading for the first time in the read-through. Like, I glanced at them, you know, I looked through my whole sides, but I wasn't off book for the entire play on day one.

I find it fascinating that you took each play totally as itself. And I'm wondering how that informed the Margaret that we've got. Did your Margaret grow up as Margaret grew up?

Probably, at least somewhat. But I would also say that—and who's to say what Shakespeare wanted—but I believe that Shakespeare wanted you to experience Margaret in each part, and every character that you experience. I feel that he knew he could write *King Lear* in one play. He knew he could not write *Henry VI* in one play. And that's why he split them up. So I'm always a little "... Errrrr" when people try to put them together, because I'm like, "You're trying to do what Shakespeare knew he couldn't." He put *Henry IV* in two parts because you need two parts. And he put *Henry VI* in three parts, and then *Richard* if you want to call it the tetralogy, because he knew that's what you needed to tell those stories. You can tell an interesting story if you put them all together, but it's not the same. I think he knew that. So I'm wondering if he wanted that to be experienced in that way. All the characters, the ones that are lucky enough to stay alive, are still evolving and switching sides and figuring out where their alliances are.

Even York changes. He's a different character from 1, 2, and 3.

Absolutely. Warwick. I think that maybe Shakespeare wanted you to experience them that way. As much as I would love to do all of them together, like a couple of days, I'd like to be able to sort of know them all and do *Part 1* this night and 2 the next afternoon; that would be an amazing journey. But I like the fact that there's been the time in between. A year.

Part of the experiment of the Ren Season is that you can choose to look at the whole script if you want to. There's nobody saying you can't look at all of this or you can't do whatever research you want to do. But if you want to be true to the experiment of what it is just to get your sides and just to get a couple or few words and your lines and put a character together in that way, then your opportunity to do that is really in the Ren Season. And I've done that with some of the plays. Then there are other plays where I've looked at my sides and I was like, "I can't understand what's going on unless I look at the rest of the text. I don't know who this person is. I can't even begin to start memorizing it because I don't understand where they fit into the world."

Is that true of Shakespeare plays?

Not ever.

Based on what you just talked about and your approach to Ren, what does that say to Shakespeare's ability to write characters?

He's brilliant. That sounds like such a Shakespeare geeky thing to say, but there is a reason

that our performance of *Look about You* is the first time that's been done in I don't know how many years, and it's certainly not one that is lining up at every major Shakespeare festival or anywhere else for that matter because it's not a very good play. And I had a helluva time figuring out who my characters were in that play based on my sides, and even when I was with the other people in the room, we were just like, "What, now you're who? And we? What is happening?"

I think that Shakespeare is brilliant at doing what he does. Maybe this is just because I've been doing Shakespeare for a while now and I was trained specifically in grad school to do classical theater, but I feel like almost everything you need is in your own lines, not even what other people say about you. I feel like what he's doing with the meter, whether or not you're speaking in prose most of the time or speaking in verse, where your verse goes off, where that gets irregular, I think he's telling you about your character choices there. I think he's constantly informing you with the way that he writes. If you've got a bunch of monosyllabic words one after another, that tells you something about the way the character is speaking. I just think he gives so much to you.

And in a way that is not so specific and hardened down, where this is the only way to play this. Shakespeare somehow magically has given you this amazing character that you can really get if you just study the lines and work within the story line he's given you but also the freedom to do it successfully a bunch of different ways. That kind of balance is really hard to attain. I don't know how he did it. But I know that now working on a lot of Shakespeare and a lot of Shakespeare's contemporaries, it is so much easier to work on Shakespeare. It's easier to memorize, it's easier to understand, and that's not even in *Romeo and Juliet* where everybody knows the story, that's in *Henry VI* where people don't know what's going on and you've got a lot of warring factions and you've got people who you're trying to follow: "Who are you allied to now? And who are you with?" That's complicated stuff, but that's still easier to me every single time than going to these other plays that are written around the same time by people who, frankly, just aren't as good. Still entertaining. Still, plays that are worth putting on, but I don't find them nearly as accessible as Shakespeare.

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