

# Conversation with Alexander Dodge

*By Darko Tresnjak*

## **On Williamstown**

Darko Tresnjak: We go back a long way. I think we met at Williamstown. There was a production called "Matchmaker" and William Stone approved four realistic sets. For each act there was a complete box set and it was daunting. I was directing a show with non-equity actors, I had a cast of 25, and I thought "this is crazy, let's just volunteer." So, we all showed up ready to go the whole night to help. It was pandemonium. People were painting random things, it was crazy. But that was the first night I remember hanging out with you and I thought, "he seems sane."

Alexander Dodge: It was it was one of the longest times I've never slept because yes, every department was helping paint. Michael Ritchie, the artistic director, was driving the scenery truck from the shop back and forth to the theater because the TDs couldn't do because they were still building stuff that was just never going to happen. They canceled several performances and one act just ended up being curtains. Harmonia Gardens I think was just curtains and some chairs.

T.: It's still the greatest acting I've ever seen because Kate Burton walks into Harmonia Gardens and says, "Oh, it's so enchanting and beautiful." She sold it and then the next moment you notice that the walls are shaking because apprentices are holding up the flats. I still think it's the greatest acting I've ever seen on stage. That summer was "Chaucer in Rome" which was just beautiful. There was no seat for me in that design so I don't recall seeing the play. Because that was that 100 seat theater, the old Nikos.

D.: I remember watching several shows from the grid. Because you couldn't get in so they handed out 20 or 30 grid tickets and there were a whole bunch of us in the grid watching the show.

T.: It was amazing that it was allowed to because you had to go up that crazy ladder through the booth.

## **On Heartbreak House**

Darko Tresnjak The first show that we did together was spectacular. We did "Heartbreak House" and I freaked out because at the end of the play Hesionne says, "I hope they come back" and 9/11 happened when we were planning. Nikki Martin was like, "Well, this is why you have to do it." Enron happened right before. At that time my career was mostly revivals and that production felt so startlingly alive. All of those themes in that shocking line when Hesionne says, "I hope they come back." Alexander designed a set that was out of this world but the most outrageous scenic shift.

Alexander Dodge: We thought, let's do the whole thing as if the former captain has just gone out. So the first act was in his room that looked like the back of the poop deck of one of those old galleons, and then the second act we actually did on a poop deck. The ship came on during the intermission and it was Dave who was the TD I'd worked with in Williamstown years before. It was automated to pieces and all of a sudden you were looking at the back of a galley with the captain's quarters.

Darko Tresnjak: Pointed straight at the audience there were four cannons.

Alexander Dodge: It was amazing. I don't know how we afforded it all the automation but Dave was like, "Oh yeah, no, we just track the old set upstage and then bring the other two pieces down."

Darko Tresnjak: At the Huntington Nicky was like, "Oh, well, the set is \$50,000 over budget but the idea is just so exciting that we'll just swallow it."

Alexander Dodge: It was his first or second season there and the Huntington had been known as a pokey little regional theater without a real national presence and then he put it on the map.

Darko Tresnjak: The first two acts of Heartbreak House" are set in that living room that's like a poop deck. I asked Dana Ivey for advice and Dana said, "pay attention to the stage directions." I called her back and said, "Oh, the captain is an alcoholic. You have to time out his entrances and exits according to his need to drink" and she was like, "Right." And I was like, "Got it." The question was how to create a space that demands opening up those conversations and rhetoric. The end, you know is very brief, very dark, and we set it on the back of this ship. It's the first time that humanity sees the planes overhead and witnesses an aerial attack and it called for something else. I thought, "It's brief, I think we can do it on these balconies." It was an outrageous gesture I kept thinking about that. I asked Alexander to craft an outrage and he came up with something outrageous. Like, "let me test that against the language." We can pull this off and it's very fun and rewarding.

### On "Bell, Book and Candle"

Darko Tresnjak : When I'm working with Alexander I don't feel alone. My father was an engineer and I studied set design. At Hartford I designed a number of Shakespeare plays myself because I thought, "No, there isn't room for anybody in this" because the idea was too clear or too simple. That's not fair to anybody.

Beyond the design work, his timing is impeccable. I remember one instance at The Old Globe where we went to a bar on Bankers Hill. I said, "What's missing? Give it to me now, right now, we're out of tech." And "Bell, Book and Candle" came out of that and became one of our most ripped off shows, to the point where we had to close a production. That is a whip smart play and we did this really sharp production.

Alexander Dodge: It was in the round at The Old Globe in one of those rare, very small in the round spaces. I'm not a big fan of in the round spaces generally. But that space is very intimate and you really feel like you're part of it – it has really great proportions. And so we did it in there and it was fantastic. We were also blessed by a fantastic cast. And we did it again at the Long Wharf – no longer in the round but in a thrust – and then we did it again at Hartford. And we had very specific things that weren't called for in the script. Then out of the blue, somebody else did the same play with the same color palette.

Darko Tresnjak: They had studied the placement of every prop and gave it that red conversation pit look. There's nothing remotely about that in the published script. Now when I work on new musicals, I insist that none of my staging ends up in the published script, it's the only way I can protect myself. I don't have the resources or patience to close down all of the productions of "Gentlemen's Guide" that have ripped us off moment by moment. But if I wanted to, I could. "Do not put any of my staging into the stage directions" is the only way I can be protected. This design thing was ridiculous, so we made a stink and the show was closed the day after.

### **On “Samson et Dalila”**

Darko Tresnjak: I think the set design was absolutely dazzling. I treasure it for my collaboration with Alexander and I'm so proud of his work on it. That third act especially is extraordinary.

Alexander Dodge: We were lucky that we started the season on that show. The way the Met works, often you'll be teching something six to nine months before it actually happens because of that repertory opera schedule. You don't get a lot of stage time, we were on stage maybe 20 hours before we had our first audience and it's not a preview audience, it's opening night, so your time is incredibly limited.

Darko Tresnjak: There's no safety net in opera and I've had improbably great experiences and improbably embarrassing disasters. I think one has to embrace it because there's absolutely no safety net in the design area.

Alexander Dodge: With theater there are a certain amount of previews and a vetting process of trying things out and having the audience respond and reacting to them. With opera it's just go. I'm amazed that anything comes out of this process that's any good sometimes. So often in opera it's been cast six or seven years in advance. Because there's a handful of people on the planet who are trained to sing some of these roles and they're booked. So you're one of the last to arrive on the on the project.

Darko Tresnjak: I've directed about 30 operas but I've never met a woman who didn't want to engage in every way. I've never actually met a diva. I think that word is used to put down women if they want to be seen as more than muses.

## On “The Thirteenth Child”

Alexander Dodge: I was on this abandoned castle tower staircase with my kids and everybody was obsessed with staring down into this empty tower with a metal staircase and I thought, "What a crazy view." And I really didn't think Darko was going to go for it, I just threw it out there. And then he said, "Okay, great. Let's do that." And I thought, "Fuck, how do I how am I going to make this?" I was just riffing.

It was a tricky piece. It was a new opera and a big cast and and working outside in Santa Fe involves the elements.. Before the sun sets and you're staring into the distance through the set. You can see Los Alamos where they made the atomic bomb and almost every night there's a giant thunderstorm that either comes over you or is in the distance. It's spectacular. Nature plays a part of it and everybody just rolls with it.

Darko Tresnjak: Seeing "Vertigo" at the age of seven was a defining, life-changing experience for me. It is the ultimate movie about directing and observing and it is still religion to me. Alexander remembered that. So when I understood that things could be done architecturally with that stairwell to create a Hitchcock "Vertigo" effect I thought, “cool.”

My love of Hitchcock enters into every part of the work. If you can seduce an audience you can take them anywhere. I talk about seduction in all of its form – first seduce them then slap them around.

## On “Rear Window”

Alexander Dodge: Hartford Stage used to have half a trap space under the stage and the other half was a parking garage. Finally during a renovation they bought those parking spaces. In part of the trap room one the columns still said "Parking Area B." So we thought, “What if the two side walls went away, the top went down, and then the back wall sunk into the ground?” The set goes away and we iris out and explode.

All of a sudden we got that famous Hitchcock zoom. It was even used in Michael Jackson's "Thriller." There are so many so many moments where you're zooming in on the character as the physical camera is pulling back. What it ends up looking like is the person is in the same spot but their background is coming at them. It's this very cool effect. You are looking through the windows of the apartment and then all of a sudden you see the entire back courtyard of this of this building. Darko and I have tackled the challenge so many times of how to figure out how to do a cool thing the camera does on a stage.

Darko Tresnjak: We're talking about a relationship between film and how it influences us in theater. We're talking about projection design and how it's evolving. None of it is the enemy and every theatrical age has used every device available.

## On “Anastasia”

Darko Tresnjak

There was a moment when I was on stage facing the audience during the train station scene and everybody sighed. There was this moment. I could just feel that something was happening behind me and I slowly turned around, and I thought, “Okay, we're there.” Projections can be

innocent, projections can be romantic. I banked on it and waited for that breathtaking moment when Alexander, Aaron, Linda, Don Holder – everybody's work melded together. It felt innocent, you know.

### On “Gentlemen’s Guide”

Darko Tresnjak: Because I'm a director and because for a long time I was an artistic director, the way it usually works is I approach Alexander with a project. Alexander can break down the script like nobody's business, Linda Cho does the same thing. I can't work with people who don't do that. On "Gentleman's Guide," I remember one of the authors mentioning Victorian toy theaters. I did a workshop and I had to figure out all those murders and how the bleeding man changes costumes while never leaving the stage. Jefferson did things that were so funny in a series of workshops that we thought, "well, we have to incorporate his imagination into the design."

Alexander Dodge. It was a real collaboration. Often the poor actors are given everything but he actually had input. This is one time where a limited budget was really helpful because we had this box and all these murders that have to happen in different places. By changing the look of what was inside the box we felt we've gone to all these different places.

Darko Tresnjak: We're an accommodating combination. I mean, if allowed, we know how to spend money like nobody's business.

Alexander Dodge

When "Gentleman's Guide" was doing the two regional theaters and then Broadway we still had an array of old school projectors behind a screen. We went down to Aaron's studio in Tribeca and he showed some new technology of we might be able to use soon. All the billboards in Times Square were using this new technology and it was only affordable by ad agencies. But suddenly all the old technology that was previously completely unaffordable became available because nobody wanted it. It was easier to install, it was easier to transport, it was quicker to set up. Getting those many projectors aligned took several hours every day because they would just get out of focus. And now you had these tiles with these little diodes and boom.

Darko Tresnjak

I feel like the music that interests me is the playwright's music and no other. Whether it's a musical or an opera or a play, the music is the music and I don't like set design that breaks up the playwright's music. I don't like costume changes that break up the music of the playwright's work. Linda can show the passage of time without ever going off the beat of what the playwright is trying to do.

I had a rule for myself from when I was 18 years old and I directed my first show: no blackouts unless it's the end of the play or intermission. If you can't transform it, it's defeat. So we've never done one in our collaboration. I just refuse.

Alexander Dodge

It's also the one moment in the show that doesn't belong. It doesn't belong to the playwright, the playwright has not written anything. And so we get to control it. Why would you bother doing nothing when you have complete control of it? Why throw that opportunity away? It's a fraction

of a moment but you can make some beautiful thing happen. Sometimes a transition is a few beats, sometimes it's nine seconds. But why go to black and do the thing in darkness when you can make something lyrical?

Darko Tresnjak

I call musicals “the art of the suck up.” You grab the audience's heart and you don't let go until the end. When a good musical comes along and you get a chance to grab the imagination, it's wonderful. Ideally, you don't let go. And if you do let go, then you lose them and you have to start again.

So with "Gentleman's Guide,” with nine murders, with the juggling of the love affairs, with the violence, more than visuals, I kept thinking about the rhythm. How does this want to travel? I knew that we could compress it and we needed to – with the author's permission – but that was also reliant on our collaboration.

### On “Russian Troll Farm”

Darko Tresnjak

We've gone in so many different directions and this show that I think is going to come to New York over the next year, "Russian Troll Farm," we've never done anything remotely like it. Alexander came up with a set proposition and really fortunately because of the complexity of the play – it's about technology and how we use Twitter and Facebook and Instagram and how they influence our elections. I've seen those plays that take place on the internet that visually weigh you down. My question was, "how do we make this important subject come alive?" Alexander came up with a proposition and we did a workshop in the fall and it works. I pretty much staged the play in six days of the workshop.

Alexander Dodge

We use projections a ton. It becomes like you're in the computers and the landscape is the web at times. Linda Cho and I were sitting slack-jawed watching.

Darko Tresnjak Jared can program things like a jazz musician.

### On Collaboration

Alexander Dodge

Relationships like this are not that common in what we do. Ming always said, "It's like a lover." He always made everybody giggle and titter but it's true. You go through the similar emotions and you don't want to be jilted. There an excitement when you get one that works. It's always great working with all sorts of people but coming home to something where you know is fantastic.

Darko Tresnjak

The goal of those collaborative relationships where you work with somebody so extensively is not that you're easy on each other. It's actually so you can be hard on each other, but what's behind it is trust and affection. The process might get more fluid, but it's not sucking up to each other, actually people can dig into each other.

As I get older, if it doesn't work I just have to get through the two months of rehearsal process then goodbye. But when something like this happens, the beautiful thing is that you can really be honest with each other.

With Alexander, there are certain things he does that are a gift. We've done those mid-century plays like "Bell, Book, and Candle" and this very subversive play called "The Pleasure of His Company" by Samuel Taylor, and Cornelia Skinner and these interiors that he can design are just a gift.

Darko Tresnjak

It's often the three of us: me, Alexander, and Linda. I met her in '96 and I've done 70 shows with her. Alexander's catching up.

Alexander Dodge

You met her in '96, I met her two or three months later in the fall of graduate school, and then you and I met each other the following summer. So within a year or 24 months, we all got to know each other.

Darko Tresnjak

Both Alexander and Linda are incredibly courteous and kind people but they're also really tough. And I never feel abandoned. I don't have to fight every battle on my own. Especially when we moved into the Broadway arena. The two of them have much more experience there. I've been in situations with collaborators where I think: I'm really loyal and asked you to do this with me, but somehow along the way, I don't know what I did wrong. But you just became the victim and somehow it's my fault and I have to fight all the battles. That never happens with Alexander and Linda.

## On Aesthetic

Alexander Dodge

I feel like I've become darker in my aesthetic. Darko mentioned that the process varies significantly from show to show. Sometimes he approaches me with concept or an idea or a piece of research. I spent time at Williamstown and had many years where I had to make do with, "All right, this is what we have, how do we make something with these pieces?". Sometimes that's easier. I think it's often harder when you have unlimited budget and the sky's the limit. We've had a lot of success when we don't have a fly loft, or we don't have trap space or our budget is not large, where we're going to have to make do.

The professor Ming Cho Lee at graduate school was known for white box sets. So I rebelled against that and did everything in color. And lo and behold, Linda Cho is around and she loves jewel tones so we just went off on it. To the extent that now I think, "Oh, should I make a white set?"

I think it's more interesting when you see a variety of things. If I'm lucky, I get to do an opera and a musical and a play and maybe some dance and then I'm the happiest. I think we all enjoy doing this business because it's not it's not the same thing for 25 years.

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