

Holly Race Roughan—the fourth interviewee in my [chain interview experiment](#)



Holly was introduced by my third interviewee, [Mala Savjani](#). This is what she said: ‘I suggest my friend, Holly who is a theatre director. Feminism and climate change are important issues for her. She’s currently working on a National Theatre production and is a very interesting woman indeed.’

I met up with Holly in the Royal Festival Hall café on the South Bank in London. Now in her mid-twenties, she’s working her way up the theatre ladder and is associate director on a play that recently won an Olivier Award for Best Actress. It’s had outstanding reviews. She told me about the highs and lows of her career, so far.

What are you doing at the moment, Holly?

I’m associate director on *People, Places and Things* which started at the National Theatre, and is now at the Wyndhams Theatre in the West End where it runs till mid-June. Once a show is up and running then the director goes off and directs other things but you still need to sustain the quality of that show whilst it’s on. So, as associate director, that’s what I do. It involves various things like rehearsing understudies and also watching the show once or twice a week. I take a load of notes and then disseminate them amongst the actors. It’s important to keep everything alive and fresh because shows get stale very quickly when they’re on eight times a week.

It’s an amazing play about addiction and also about therapy. We realised quite quickly in the rehearsal room that almost everyone has a story about addiction whether it’s their own story or their mother’s story, or a friend of a friend. We could have made a version of this play that used those experiences and which presented some kind of truthfulness on stage. But this subject is a matter of life and death for people and we’re in a context where it’s being served up for entertainment. It felt really important that it was grounded in research. So we worked with two rehabilitation centres; one’s a tiny place in Catford which is massively underfunded and the other is The Priory which is a private clinic.



People who’ve been through the AA programme are so practised at opening up and sharing; you get a huge amount of generosity in those environments and the willingness of people to wear their heart on their sleeve is dumbfounding. It makes you realise how private most of us are and how going through the AA steps gives you an opportunity to really get to know yourself. Perhaps everyone would benefit from this. Before the play opened we invited groups from both centres to watch a rehearsal room run. That’s when it’s just the play; no lighting, costumes or special effects. Denise Gough is the lead and the way she rages against her rescuers is so accurate and truthful that you can’t quite believe it’s fiction. To watch it with those people was staggeringly moving.

Is the play about drug addiction or alcoholism?

Ah that's interesting. It's about both. The generation above me tends to distinguish the two, but my generation just seems to talk about addiction. That's because if you get through being an alcoholic, say, then often you are susceptible to other things and you shift to some other kind of addiction like sex, porn or just loads of late night television.

Another thing I discovered is that addiction is not discriminatory. If you sat in a room with The Priory and Catford clients all mixed together you would struggle to divide them into their groups. I'd guessed in a middle-class, naïve, prejudiced way that addiction is something that affects people when they hit rock bottom. But what I learned loudly and clearly is that addiction is completely indiscriminate. Just because you're homeless doesn't mean you're going to become an addict. It takes a specific kind of wiring in your brain to be susceptible to that.

How did you get into theatre directing?

I guess it started with my dad. He's always been interested in theatre and as a child I got taken to some really whacky fringe things. So for me, theatre was a bit like reading—it was something I knew how to do. I joined a drama group when I was at primary school and discovered quickly that I possessed a muscle that was about seeing the big picture and knowing how to improve things. By the time I got to secondary school I started to realise that this might be directing, and when I got to university I thought, "That IS directing." I ran the drama society there and by the time I left, I was very clear that I wanted to be a director.

Then someone told me about the directing course at Birkbeck, so I applied on a bit of a whim and got a place. There were various group emails over that summer and I had an inkling that I might be the only woman on the course and sure enough when I arrived in September, it was me and nine men. I think that was just a quirk as another year they had nine women and one man. But it *is* the case that the theatre industry is dominated by white Oxbridge-educated men and a lot of my class were white men who had just graduated from Oxbridge. I think that men often have a sense of entitlement about getting into directing and that makes it easier for them.



Photo: Phototram

Anyway, I had an extraordinary two years. I'd studied English at university which was very female heavy and on this course I spent a lot of time with men. And I'm so grateful for that experience. Firstly, because I've now got a whole load of clever, brilliant friends but also because I had to examine the way that I behave socially in such a microscopic way that it propelled me into feminism.

One of the key moments was sitting in the pub with those nine boys having a very heated discussion about pornography. And realising that all of the men in my life, bar probably my dad, have consumed pornography regularly and I was just clueless about it. Genuinely clueless. I thought that pornography was something that a few people did from time to time. I just didn't realise that it was a daily part of the lives of people that I love. I spent over a week feeling betrayed by the other sex and out of that anger came a need to talk about gender. This year I've directed two plays specifically about porn.

How was the course at Birkbeck?



Photo: Royal Exchange Theatre by David Dixon

The attitude of the course is ‘We can’t teach you how to direct but we can teach you how to collaborate with all the people you need to work with.’ It was a crash course in learning what all the other artists do—the set designers—the lighting designers—the sound designers—the movement director, and everyone else. The first year is seminar-based and the second year you have a placement in the industry. I went up to the Royal Exchange in Manchester.

It was the first time I’d been an assistant director and it was really hard for my ego. I’ve always had problems with hierarchy and authority and that really flared up there. It’s taken me four years to learn what assistant directing is, to appreciate it and to see it as a time to hone your craft.

What impact did that time have on you?

It made me let go of the reins, massively. And I think I learned how to collaborate. When I was at university, it was me and my vision. I knew the right way and I couldn’t listen to other people’s ideas whereas I now know that you’re always stronger when you take the best idea in the room. That best idea might come from your stage manager or an actor or anyone else who is bubbling and thinking. I found it all very emotional but I was extremely lucky as I assistant directed a lot of really wonderful women who have since looked out for me within the industry. I didn’t realise how badly I needed a female role model until I was given one. Like we all do, I left university thinking that I could change the world and do whatever I wanted. I naively thought, “I’ll write to the Royal Court and tell them I’m a director.” But going into the workforce taught me that people don’t see youth that way, and I learned about the industry as much as about the job. I think I’m now very savvy about it—the politics and the networking.

What are you most proud of so far?



I worked with the final year students at Royal Central School of Speech and Drama and directed *The Low Road* by Bruce Norris. This is a contemporary play and is really deep. With every single sentence you can unpack imagery and metaphor. I worked with twenty keen young actors and they were a very political group. I wanted to bring my own political ideas into my working life and we did some bold things. It was an exciting time. We set up a mini-Occupy camp in the garden area outside the theatre, with no explanation. So when people arrived it looked like there was a student occupation going on. And during the performance a group of protesters took over the conference that was in the play. It was really interesting that some people at Central worried about us setting up this protest without a piece of cardboard that said, ‘This is not a student occupation; this is a piece of art.’ They were very

rigid about it and put real constraints on what we were allowed to do. And we felt like it was important *not* to do it like that.

I also had lots of personal discoveries during that time. I've always thought I was good at the psychological side of directing—carefully micromanaging the relationships between the characters on stage and analysing their conflicts and desires. But directing *The Low Road* with so many actors made me realise that I have a hunger, and also the skill set, to make broader brushstrokes— to create images and atmospheres. It's about zooming out and realising that I have to trust my actors to make the micro-psychological decisions. My job is to look after the bigger picture: the dramaturgical side of the storytelling.

What has been the most difficult challenge?



Ah, that's a good question. I recently worked with a writer and we got the idea for a show from a Daily Mail story. It was about a young woman who went to Magaluf and gave twenty-one blow jobs to men on the dance floor in exchange for an exotic holiday that she thought she was going to win. But 'exotic holiday' turned out to be the name of a cocktail. The media went crazy – there's a video of her doing it that went viral and she got absolutely slut shamed. Yet there's never been any coverage of the men who participated. No-one knows who they

are, and why aren't they being slut shamed? So Milly, the writer and I made a play about a young woman called Nicola who goes to Ibiza and does something very similar. When she gets back home, the press is camped outside her house. But the twist is that we wanted to explore what would happen if at every point, the central protagonist, Nicola, doesn't do what society expects a female to do. So she never breaks down, she never says that she's disgusted with herself and she very confidently sets up a porn booth business in London; like photo booths but where you can go in and make a high-quality home porn movie.

Anyway, we made this show above a pub in South London and suddenly in the build up to the show, the press coverage went insane. At one point we were the fifth most clicked-on link on the BBC website. The tickets sold very well and people wanted to do interviews with us. Then over a period of about two weeks we got some terrible reviews and simultaneously the show sold out. It was horrendous to be told by some of the press that this was bad but to know that two thousand people were coming to see it. There's something ironic about experiencing public shaming whilst making a piece of work which is about public shaming. I have to admit that some of the reviews were spot on—there were dramaturgical problems that we hadn't addressed. And I learned a brilliant lesson which is not to get into bed with scripts that aren't ready. But I felt that the reviews tended to be very sexist. If I'd been a man and made that show, I might not have got any more stars, but I'm sure I wouldn't have got the same write up.

I'm through the emotion of it now but it really damaged my self-confidence as a director. It was a rite of passage and was going to happen at some point, but it was very early on in my career. A friend who is a brilliant director said, "Welcome to the real world, Holly. My review carnage was on the Olivier stage at the National. It happens."

I've survived it. I'd survive it again. I have to—that's the name of the game.

What are the best and worst things about your work?



Photo: Royal Court Theatre by Yekaterhina

At its best, it's about being in a room with amazing, creative people and thinking, "I'm getting paid to do this. We're making art and people are going to turn up and engage with it." And I think that the theatre industry is starting to shake itself up and that's really exciting. There are a few amazing women in positions of power such as Vicky Featherstone at the Royal Court and Erica Whyman at the RSC. At its worst, it's a freelance, unstructured lifestyle with odd hours and like all freelance artists I live in fear that I'll never work again. Though I am planning to take this summer off and try to be guilt-free about it.

What do you want to do next?

At parties people will say 'Oh My God, you're a theatre director. That's incredible.' So it's easy to think that you're quirky and that you're doing something alternative, but actually within the theatre industry I've followed a very mainstream route. I haven't consciously done that but I *have* had a sheep experience: this is how you succeed at school—this is how you succeed at university—this is how you succeed in a career. Then recently I thought that if I just carry on ticking boxes in my career then my twenties are going to evaporate. I need to be brave and step off the treadmill. I'd like to be directing plays that I feel are cleverer than me; texts that push me intellectually and conceptually and which change society.



There's a real wave of German-influenced theatre in London at the moment. German theatre is very distinctive and bold and outrageous. Animalistic—sexualised—transgender—not binary. In English theatre we might read a play and think, "Oh it takes place in a living room so that's what the set will be," whereas in Berlin, they might read it and say, "This feels like it's to do with freedom. Let's set the whole thing in cages and wear things on our faces that stop us speaking." They come at things from outside the box.

At the moment I work in prison twice a year, and I'd like to continue doing that. It's emotionally expensive but it's very fulfilling to be working there with a professional set of skills. When you're at the top of the theatre industry you make brilliant, polished work for middle class audiences that are very used to enjoying that kind of thing. And that's as far as that show goes. Whereas working on plays with pockets of society that aren't your average white, middle class theatregoer then you suddenly see the power of theatre in really visible terms. When it's in its own little bubble being self-referential, and fulfilling a certain demographic's expectation of what it should be then it's easy to lose sight of that power.

When you work in prison you see people learning lines and performing and being part of making something. And it recharges their self-confidence in a way that it doesn't for your average actor. I

was in Brixton the other day having coffee with a friend and I heard, 'Holly Holly'. It was one of the boys that I'd just finished a project with and he's now out of jail and working in music production.

Would you take on the direction of a Noel Coward play, for example? Something that's very established and middle class.

No I think I'd find it boring.

Thank you so much Holly. And who are you going to pass me onto for my next interview?

I'd like to recommend Susan Wokoma who is an actress and lives in London. She's currently filming for a big television series. I've worked with Susie three times, twice at the Royal Exchange in Manchester and once at the National Theatre and she never ceases to inspire me as a person and as a craftsman.