



KING OF ARTS

Ahead of his two appearances at the Hostry Festival, Rowan Mantell talks to Melvyn Bragg about the lure of King Lear and the frivolity of string theory

HE MUST be one of the most well informed people on the planet. One week he is discussing the discovery of penicillin, the next Mary Magdalene, the Californian gold rush, a classic novel or the workings of the eye. And his gentle, but intelligent, questions tease out facts and philosophies so that his audience feels it is not only part of the conversation, but is also being both educated and entertained.

Talking to Melvyn Bragg is strangely distracting because his voice is so distinctive and familiar. It is the calm, clever voice of BBC Radio Four documentaries and the South Bank Show. It is the voice that persuades experts to translate their mind-blowing science or flights of philosophical fancy, into something to be understood in just a few minutes by people going about their normal lives.

"I like learning stuff and it would be amazing to remember all of it, but I don't retain much of it for long," admits Melvyn. "My job is not to remember it, it is to bring together three of the world's experts to explore a subject."

He spends the week before each of his In Our Time radio shows learning about the subject to be discussed, topics emerging from chats over coffee with the production team. And is it all relentlessly highbrow? "What could be more frivolous than string theory!" he shoots back. "And I have done a whole programme on zero squared."

But this is not his only job. Melvyn is also a novelist, broadcaster, working peer, writer of musicals - and playwright.

"I don't go fishing, I don't play golf; I write, I read, I do my work in the House of Lords," he says.

And this month his reworking of his only stage play, King Lear In New York, will headline Norfolk's Hostry Festival.

"It was very flattering to be asked," says Melvyn. "I was at the University of East Anglia, talking about my latest novel, and this man turned up out of the blue and asked whether he could produce the play."

The man was Hostry Festival co-founder and artistic director Stash Kirkbride, who had seen the play 24

years previously and wanted to produce it ever since.

"It was very flattering!" says Melvyn. So he not only agreed that the play could be performed, but offered to rewrite it for a Norwich run too.

It tells the story of an actor who has longed to play King Lear, but when his chance comes, he simultaneously lands another role in a Hollywood film. At the same time his marriage is breaking up and he is pitched into a quagmire of choices, chances, regret and complications. The play is inspired by Shakespeare's masterpiece, but set in the 1980s. Melvyn is intrigued to learn that Stash is moving the action to the present day. "The reason I set it in the 1980s is that drink plays a part in the story," he explains. "To a certain extent the character is based on Richard Burton. I wrote a big biography of him which was a bestseller. His wife heard I was writing a book about him and contacted me about these tea chests of notebooks she hadn't

wanted to look through. So I went over and looked through them and told her she had ruined my novel based on his life, but helped me enormously with a biography!"

Melvyn's conversation is littered with the names of the famous, but not in a name-dropping way. This is simply his life; although he never actually met

Richard Burton. "I nearly met him!" he says. "I wrote a film for him called Under the Volcano. He had to pull out and Albert Finney took the part."

He will see his rewritten play revived at a gala night in Norwich on October 26. That afternoon he will also be chairing a panel of poetry experts, following a performance by Norwich Theatre Royal chief executive Peter Wilson, of TS Eliot's Four Quartets.

So what can audiences expect of the play inspired by Shakespeare, written and revived by Melvyn Bragg? "A sensational evening!" he promises. ♦

King Lear In New York, by Melvyn Bragg, is at Norwich Cathedral Hostry from October 25 to 29. The playwright will attend a gala show on Wednesday, October 26, taking part in a 20-minute Q&A session after the performance and then signing copies of the script, published through the Hostry Festival and the Ten Group of academies in Norfolk. ▶

"It's a domestic, humorous, moving and touching drama, about family, fame, friendships and human frailty"