

***The Simpsons Do Shakespeare:
An Interview With Rick Miller On MacHomer***

“Is that a dagger which I see before me?... or a pizza?” (*MacHomer*)

Introduction:

I met with Rick Miller in May of 2003 to discuss the history and adaptation process for *MacHomer*, a play that adapts *Macbeth* to popular TV culture via *The Simpsons*. Miller, a trilingual multi-disciplinary theatre artist, combines classical Shakespearean text, pop culture, and technology in his one-hour family show called *MacHomer*. Miller’s *MacHomer* is a multi-media retelling of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* – complete with 85% of the classical text and all of the original characters. Miller, the adapter and sole performer of *MacHomer*, mimics forty different *Simpsons*¹ character voices as they speak in iambic pentameter. *MacHomer* has been touring nationally for over six years and will continue to do so having already been booked across Canada for the next two years.

Originally from Montreal, Quebec, Miller now currently resides in Toronto, Ontario. He received a Master’s in Architecture from McGill University before pursuing a career in theatre. Miller is the artistic director of WYRD productions,² as well as an active member of the Soul Pepper³ theatre company. Miller has also worked extensively with Robert Lepage⁴ and his company Ex Machina in the production of innovative multi-media and image based theatre. Miller’s has recently written and performed in a stage adaptation of J.R.Tolkien’s *The Hobbit*. Miller also starred at the Manitoba Theatre

¹ A popular animated Fox series entitled *The Simpsons* revolving around a “dysfunctional” American family.

² WYRD productions is a Toronto based theatre company founded by Miller. See <http://wyr productions.com>.

³ Soul Pepper is a Toronto based theatre company. See <<http://www.soulpepper.ca>>.

⁴ Robert Lepage is an internationally reputed multi-disciplinary theatre and film director. He is the artistic director of Ex Machina – a multi-media theatre company based in Quebec City.

Centre⁵ in his new play entitled *Bigger Than Jesus*, which explores Catholicism in the technological age.

Interview With Rick Miller:

MM: I have two questions regarding the development of the *MacHomer* script. I read that *MacHomer* was originally a skit, which you devised while you were acting in a production of *Macbeth*. How did this idea originate?

RM: #1 - I had too much time on my hands backstage. I was playing Murderer #2 in a production of *Macbeth*. I had six lines and three months backstage to concoct this crazy play. It was a cast party joke. Really, it was a one-joke thing. And to me it is still a one-joke show.

But, it came a really long way. So, I really just thought, “You know what? *The Simpsons* are becoming really popular and I have a voice that can take on a lot of different cartoon ranges.” And I decided I was going to make fun of the cast. We had a big blustering *MacDuff* who turned out to be the director of *MacHomer*. He was all about Barney to me.

Our *Macbeth* was slightly Homer-like, I suppose. Mostly it is the character of *Macbeth* to me – the slightly ambitious, but slightly misguided and the faulty ambitious type of character- that read Homer [I identified with]. Drunken Porter had to be Krusty the Clown. It all sort of made sense to me. But, initially there were a lot of in-jokes. It was very subjective. It was “our” cast. And there is still some of them in there. So, the people from the original production of *Macbeth* seeing *MacHomer* for the first time still get that initial sense of a cast party joke.

MM: Did you end up performing it for the cast party?

RM: I thought that it was too stupid. I actually never did. I had cut out these little hand puppets. I had ten little hand puppets. I was an apprentice that year. I was just out of school and I wasn’t making any money. I was one of the lowly members of the cast – “murderer number two”. And I thought, “Naw, you know what? I’m going to embarrass myself.” And then I told people about it after and they said, “This is great.” I had recorded a little sound excerpt from it and it got circulated around, sort of a “black market” kind of thing. Next thing you know, I was in the Fringe Festival and it [*MacHomer*] was huge. It was sold out for the first three years of its life. And it’s still continuing to be played in bigger and bigger theatres. It’s what some people would call a “phenomenon”. I just still think it’s a big joke. But, it has more meaning than I originally gave it credit for.

MM: What was your first step in the writing process for *MacHomer*?

⁵ The Manitoba Theatre Centre is a theatre company located in Winnipeg, Manitoba. See <http://www.mtc.mb.ca/f/intro.html>.

RM: I think the first step in the joke was to take the lines from our play [*Macbeth*] and to make a little five or ten minute joke. Then when I realised I had to create something that was twenty-five minutes or an hour long, I took Shakespeare's script and I edited it down. That was the first step – to get the story across. Homer is playing Macbeth and he can't remember his monologues anyway, so just "whish." I cut them out.

And then it was the casting. Once I cast it, then I had to learn the voices. Not only learn the voices and do the lower larynx Homer (*Miller imitates Homer*), but to switch between Marge (*Miller imitates Marge*) and Homer (*Miller imitates Homer*). You know back and forth. And then it was having to speak Shakespeare, which is a particular thing even just speaking in your regular voice. So, yeah, there were a lot of challenges, but I had six months. I was unemployed. I was an actor.

I found time to put it all together into what seemed to be a satisfying little package. And it has changed a lot. I keep going back to *Macbeth* because *Macbeth* is what it came from. And it could easily go off into...I mean Shakespeare's language is difficult. A lot of places where I toured it was family shows, so going the paraphrasing route as opposed to speaking Shakespeare words is an easy way. And I keep trying to make it sort of back to Shakespeare because that's the point. It's hearing these pop culture characters speak in Shakespearean verse. That is what is interesting.

MM: In *MacHomer*, you mix two vernaculars: *The Simpsons*' language and Shakespearean verse. I read that 85% of the lines are taken directly from *Macbeth*⁶. But, there are also a lot of familiar *Simpsons*' lines and expressions throughout the play. By mixing two vernaculars, how did you hope to affect your audience? Did the audience respond in the way you expected them to?

RM: It was pretty intuitive as opposed to an intellectual thought at first. I put a lot of thought in to it after it because I had read a zillion reviews where people have researched more into it. It was really more of an artistic impulse that I initially did. I realised that yes, there was something to it. But initially no. It was really just what voices sounded funny saying what lines? What characterizations made sense? And who could I make fun of?

Because of so many great male characters and because I have a guy's voice, I had to cast more males in *MacHomer*. So my witches were males. And we had a guy witch [in the original cast] as well, so I thought, "Well, that's appropriate." So, no, it was more intuitive in terms of the vernaculars mixing. It was more one dysfunctional family does another, as opposed to pop culture meets high art and we need consciously to figure out the language.

⁶ See <http://www.machomer.com>

In retrospect, there was something deeper. The reason it still works is because Shakespeare was pop culture at the time and there is something about the pop culture mixing with what was once pop culture that resonates with people. And the fact that *The Simpsons* is so well-written. They have what I call “tragic nobility” to their characters. There’s a pathetic quality that makes them extremely loveable. It makes them, hence, fit into a tragic epic – better than say *South Park*⁷. Barney has the soul of an artist. There is an episode where he makes a very dark art film for the film festival. He quotes from *Othello*. And it ends with, “My name is Barney Gumbo and I’m an alcoholic,” and the last line is, “Don’t cry for me, I’m already dead.” And it’s just great. There’s something beautiful in that. So in my play Barney plays MacDuff - the most tragic role. He has his family slaughtered. That speech is always where the audience realises, “Wait a minute, this is a tragedy. Are we supposed to be laughing or feeling?” And I love that – I love that tension.

MM: Could you discuss the value of the soliloquy in *Macbeth* and the role of the soliloquy in *The Simpsons*? Is there a parallel between Homer’s musings and *Macbeth*’s reflections?

RM: Right, well a TV show rarely has the thoughts inside a head. And in Shakespeare you are – the audiences is - presented with thoughts one-step at a time. From one punctuation mark to another. Homer often does go into his head and it fits nicely, so we have a lot of back and forth between in his head: (*Miller imitates one of Homer’s monologues*)

“Oooh, I see.”

“Okay, brain don’t say anything stupid.”

“Lousy Thane of Cawdor.”

“The greatest is behind.”

“Did I say that last part or just think it?”

You know that back and forth kind of thing that happens on the show sometimes. So, I think it fits. In terms of the actual monologues, Homer actually digresses quite quickly. You know the: (*Miller imitates Homer*) “Is this a dagger I see before me, or a pizza?”

You know the whole thing [the idea of a soliloquy] is cut right there because Homer can’t quite remember his lines. Yeah, so I think there is room for the soliloquy in *The Simpsons*, but I’m not presenting them on TV. I’m presenting them on stage, and of course it’s easier because there’s an audience there.

MM: Shakespeare often uses a “fool” character to enlighten other characters in his plays. Are there any similarities between the fools in Shakespeare’s plays, the fools portrayed in *The Simpsons* sitcom, and the fools in your adaptation?

RM: I think so. *Macbeth* doesn’t really have a clear fool other than the Porter, I think. Usually, the King has a sidekick that is the fool and in *Macbeth* there isn’t. The

⁷ An adult-rated animated comedy series. See http://www.comedycentral.com/tv_shows/southpark/.

Porter is Krusty the Clown. Because he's a hard voice to do and he's very subjective, I can't have him going on and on. I sort of get rid of him quite quickly, and it works for Krusty because: (*Miller imitates Krusty*) "Urgh, God, this role sucks!" It's this kind of, "I want to get out of here."

I think all the characters in *The Simpsons* are rather foolish at times, except for maybe Lisa who is the conscience of the show. So, I think there is great room for silliness in *Macbeth*. Part of the reason, Shakespeare works so well is because he combines the tragedy with these elements of comedy or of slapstick. In almost every play that Shakespeare wrote, he plays with both. And I did try to play with that in *MacHomer*. But, every character has their silliness...it's really not just Krusty.

MM: *MacHomer* seems to have roots in many different cultural backgrounds. The plot line originates from *Macbeth* - a canonized Shakespeare play that is rooted in British colonialism. But, the characters are appropriated from an American sitcom and the play-script is created, written, and performed by a Canadian. Do you think this play parodies or reflects a Canadian identity in any way? How is it reflective of your own identity?

RM: The Canadian identity... because I tour around the States a lot, is something I get asked about a lot. It's difficult to say that we actually have a clear identity that is in reflection to other identities. We are clearly influenced by Western culture and in particular the U.S. And *The Simpsons* is something we embrace. If you go to small town Ontario or Quebec, you find cities like Springfield. There is something that resonates in our sort of Wallmark culture that works perfectly well with that.

In terms of what we do as Canadians best, is that we can sit back and often we're colder than others, so we're better at watching and at parodying. We have people masters at that genre...people like Jim Carrey and Mike Myers. That sort of brand of satire and parody works better because we're more able to laugh at ourselves. I think that is precisely because we don't have as much of an identity as the Americans. You know there is a sense of patriotism that you get all over the U.S. despite having completely different geographical and demographic representation. In Canada, we have as much, but we don't necessarily have that identity. So, what we can do is look at others and we're just better at listening and watching, and hence observing and commenting. That is what *MacHomer* does.

MacHomer is a blend of many things and I think that with culture these days... you have to embrace the fact that borders - be they through globalization or the internet or whatever, they don't matter as much: political borders, geographical borders. You've got access to everything, so you might as well see what hits and what's interesting. That's how I find media interesting. I like using media in other more serious shows to comment on the fact that we have all this media and we have all these different things. So, let's see how we can go into the theatre and still be surprised or find some sort of magic in it with all these different things. The unexpected I guess.

MM: How is this play received in other countries? Do audiences think that it is reflective of a certain cultural identity?

RM: The U.S. loves it because they are getting better at laughing at themselves. Mainly, through vehicles like *The Simpsons* where it clearly holds a mirror up to society and says, “Ha, this is what some of us are like.” And then it goes into gross exaggeration and stereotypes - even racial stereotypes. But still people can laugh at it.

Scotland was best. Because in Scotland *Macbeth* is pop culture. Everyone knows *Macbeth* like we know... we don't even have a *Macbeth* in Canada, do we? We know *The Simpsons*! I think Scotland worked brilliantly because every word I was saying had some sort of resonance. Australia was good. There is a sense of universality in the world. People love to laugh at Americans and that's what makes *The Simpsons* so popular.

And when they translate *The Simpsons* into Greek, for instance...I've had people all around the world ask whether I'm going to translate *MacHomer* into their language. I haven't said yes yet, but in Greek they translate *The Simpsons* and add in local references and local jokes. In Quebec, they do that too. So, it always feels like something that is part of one's own culture. And reactions so far have been great. I haven't been to Asia. I've been to South America, I did it and they love it. I think just because it's so pervasive so far.

The Simpsons have really gone far, and they've promoted the heck out of it. I mean they have merchandise from underwear to...some of which I've received. You know all over the place too. I have a whole collection of *Simpsons*'s memorabilia. But, they're all over the place, and there's something universal in it - in each character.

MM: *The Simpsons* seems to thrive on adaptations and Name-offs. They have done a lot of adaptations: *The Raven, The Tell-Tale Heart, A Streetcar Named Desire*...

RM: And they bring in a lot of Canadian content and references as well. There's regularly a Canadian who works on the rotation of writers. So that's why there are several little jabs at Canada. I remember Homer at one point reading, trying to... Marge was blabbing on about something and Homer was reading a paper, which he never does and he says, (*Miller imitates Homer*) “Ouh, look Quebec had another referendum.” Or something like that...you know. It was just great because no one in the States would get it. But of course, I think there is an awareness of Canada throughout *The Simpsons*. And parody is part of what they do. It's part of why Matt Groening loved the idea and he's seen the video of *MacHomer*. He hasn't seen it live. Because it fits into what they are doing. It's like a distorted Halloween episode or an extended Halloween episode for them – *The Simpsons Do Macbeth*. It takes the characters and puts them into a bit of a different context. You can play around with them and come up with something that is weird, but pleasant and still tells a story. And I think most importantly opens up Shakespeare to a lot people who would otherwise never give it a chance.

MM: You have done a lot of school tours. How have students reacted to it?

RM: Great. It happens despite themselves, I find. They embark onto it. Sometimes students have a real prejudice against Shakespeare's words. And if you get them speaking it on the one hand, that always helps because it's difficult to read it and to study it as opposed to playing it. *MacHomer* is all about play. It's about energy and spirit. Yes, I'm speaking these words, but all of a sudden the students understand a lot more than if they just read it or when it's forced on them. So yeah, I think it's had a great effect for a lot of kids who have said, "You know what? I'm going to try auditioning for the next Shakespeare play."

It can be, not just fun, but it can have meaning and what's *Macbeth*? It's an actual story. And you can find *Macbeth* themes in any movie that's out there today. It resonates. And I ask kids to write to me, to correspond. I try to write to everyone and to encourage them not to be afraid of it...that it is just happens to be something that is better written than anything we have these days and that they should just open their minds to it.

MM: What are or have been the greatest creative influences on your writing and acting?

RM: These days having a child. You sort of look at things a little differently. On one hand, you are obsessed with diapers and that sort of thing. On the other hand you ask, "Okay, what kind of a world do we live in?" And I have always been more of a larger thinker, than a smaller thinker. I'm very much influenced by other people's ideas, but I'm starting to develop my own critical thinking of the world. And I get angry at certain things. But also at the general absurdity of what we're doing here...in the arts, but also in general here on this planet.

So, I'm influenced by life in general, but also by popular culture. I find fascinating. I find it extremely interesting in a sort of Marshall McLuhan kind of way. To just try and understand popular culture and to understand technology. Because I've learnt that I don't like being scared and the more I understand government and arts and technology, the less frightened I am of it and the more in control.

I'm influenced in particular by people and by artists who combine media. People like Peter Gabriel. He was a big influence on me. He was the mentor of my mentor [Robert Lepage] in a way. Robert Lepage is a Quebec theatre artist who is extremely multi-disciplinary. He's really a Renaissance man of the arts and that's always what I've wanted to be. Because I've never wanted to be great at just one thing. I have two architecture degrees and half a theatre degree. I have music training and I've wanted to be able to do everything. And he's been a great influence on me because of the lack of borders. He doesn't see borders. He sees this openness and the fact that there is art to be created everywhere. You just have to feel what is out there.

I'm usually drawn by, "What am I interested in reading these days?" And I've found for the last couple of years because I grew up Catholic and maybe because I'm turning thirty-

three that I've had this Jesus fixation. I'm reading about religion. I'm reading because I'm fascinated by what Catholicism has become. And so that became my work. It became a play I just finished two weeks ago. And that is now going to tour all over the place next year. It's called *Bigger Than Jesus*. And that was what influenced me then. It really is kind of an intuitive thing. It's a long-winded answer, but basically I'm influenced by everything except I have to narrow it down to certain things at a certain time because I have to create and to focus.

MM: What is your background training and how has it affected your performances?

RM: I always knew I was good at science. I have a very rational side to my brain. My father's Austrian and that sort of helped. My mother's Irish, so that's where the passion came from. The two sort of mixed into an arts and sciences for me. I was a good singer, and a good visual artist. And also, I loved math because you could find answers. Clear answers in the sciences that you couldn't get on English papers. So, I found - when I chose college - I actually chose between actuary school or architecture. And I thought, "Oh, it's got to be architecture school." Because that combines the two. It's the clearest profession that combines the two.

And I realised after a couple years of university - when you're just waddling around a little bit - that maybe it wasn't right for me. When Lepage came to speak to us - it was a theatre guy speaking to architects. It completely changed my way of seeing the arts. I took it a lot more seriously. I realised that one doesn't have to be limited to one art. You don't just have to be an architect. You don't just need to create architecture, as an architect. You've learnt so many things. You've learnt how to see things. You've learnt how to design things. You can use that degree in theatre. And I guess that's what I've tried to develop. So, I studied architecture. I continued in architecture even though I knew I didn't ever want to be an architect. I have a Master in Architecture - what is now called a Masters in Architecture - it's a graduate degree. I stayed in because I wanted to keep learning and I was in a beautiful environment at McGill and there was a very small teacher to student ratio. And I could do whatever I wanted. My thesis was writing a play and designing a building...writing a play that would fit into that building. It was completely useless in the end for the architecture profession, but great for me because I could explore. So, I stayed in it. And in the meantime, I studied theatre at McGill, which has a "so, so" theatre program, but some good teachers that I continued training with afterwards.

MM: What are your plans for the future? What are your plans for *MacHomer*?

RM: Keep rollin'! *MacHomer* is very successful and it continues to grow in the entertainment market. It was listed in *Entertainment Weekly*'s top 100 things...blah, blah, blah. I think it has a life in the sort of off Broadway kind of fashion. I don't want it to become the kind of show that is franchised and that has the national tour of *MacHomer*. You know with "Jo Bob" playing. It's so personal that I want to keep doing it. And as long as I can do it and it's enjoyable, I'll keep doing it.

I think *The Simpsons* have helped because they're still incredibly popular and they're still a good show. Obviously, if *The Simpsons* fade, then *MacHomer* will fade as well. I see at least, well we're booking in two years in advance. I'll keep doing it three, four months in a year because it helps fund other less commercial projects that I do. And that's just the reality of it. It's a very successful product that I still feel has worth - both as an artist performing it and as a piece on its own.

To me it does good things. *The Simpsons* like it because it does good things. Schools like it except for the occasional teacher who hates *The Simpsons*. As long as I can keep it fresh and I do that every year or so by radically re-visioning it, by changing the format of it and by updating it so that it fits into larger thousand-seat theatres, as opposed to doing the comedy sketch that it used to be. I was standing at a mic doing the script and there were slides in the background. Now it's all on DVD. You know, it's much slicker now. It's a production of *Macbeth* with smoke and lights and video cameras. It's fun for me to do even for only an hour. And you know it's hard to turn something down when after a show you've got a thousand people standing. It feels good.

MM: And your new play is called, *Bigger Than Jesus*. Is it opening anywhere?

RM: It premiered at the Manitoba Theatre Centre. I tend to premiere things in Winnipeg because I have a good audience there and it's out of the way enough to be able to tinker a little bit before you bring it to bigger cities. So, that was the first stage of the play. It's co-created with Daniel Brooks who is one of Canada's top directors and a real believer in process. He believes that it takes longer than three weeks to create any lasting interest.

So, this play is about Christianity, but it's also about...it's reverent, but it's also irreverent. It's partly an exploration of my Catholic roots, but more importantly - What does the concept of the Messiah and Jesus mean in this mass market, mass media, technological culture? What is the cross? Is it a corporate logo? It's playing with all these things that have a lot of resonance with people, but in a way that opens it up. To me there is a similarity between church and theatre. These are two places where we go to commune with people and with someone on stage. To try to find a link between the two and to open up what I find very fixed and limiting in church and to open it up in the context of the theatre.

MM: What kind of theatre in Canada interests you as an audience member or as an artist?

RM: A lot of what happens in Quebec... Québécois, the French side have a great sense of the visual. And I guess I grew up architecturally. I tend to appreciate what is theatrical in theatre. I'm not as much into the inherited Anglo-Saxon emphasis on text - only on text. I find it boring theatrically. I could easily watch that on television or in a movie and it would give me nothing to see it in the theatre.

So I'm a little distraught by the Canadian theatre and the Western theatre in general. I find Eastern theatre that is when you get to more Eastern European influences, but also the Japanese theatre. I find it much more meaningful. It has less of an emphasis on the perfect word and more on the image presented. Images on stage. So, that's how I feel right now.

The companies that I like are little more experimental. Obviously, I like Lepage's company [Ex Machina]. I like companies like the Wooster Group⁸ in New York. They constantly challenge themselves. Willem Dafoe can make a zillion dollars. And he does it so he can keep working with the Wooster Group. Because it's challenging theatre. And companies across Canada that aim for an international reputation. I don't just mean Stratford going to New York. I mean One Yellow Rabbit⁹ or Daniel McIvor's Da-Da-Kamera¹⁰. People that try to challenge what theatre is. Because it's a living, breathing entity and it's not something that should be static. Sometimes the Stratford and Shaw plays are wonderfully performed and they're really good, but that's not what I'm after. I don't necessarily want to be a company or ensemble member for a theatre. To me Soul Pepper in Toronto, who I'm a part of, they try and bring in international directors and they try to do something a little more daring, I guess with certain plays. And that is sort of where where I lie – somewhere between the avant-garde and the daring classical theatre.

And where does *MacHomer* fit into all of this? *MacHomer* is a bit of a joke. Again, it's just something that I love to do. And Lepage has come to see *MacHomer* and he loved it because his plays are very...he's not the kind of performer that emotes and sweats a lot on stage and he knows that I am the consummate entertainer. And *Bigger Than Jesus* is all about spirit and entertainment, so he likes that in me. And he thinks *MacHomer* does a great thing. And that's why he hires me because I can do a lot of things. Things like *MacHomer*, which he can't necessarily do. But I also have a more serious artistic side that can take *MacHomer's* energy and do something like *Bigger Than Jesus*, which resonates a little more in terms of the feelings, as opposed to just the laughter.

MM: Lepage has done a lot of Shakespeare adaptations. Do you think the concept of “mainstream” Shakespeare is deteriorating?

RM: I'm sort of weary of those kinds of borders because I find... often you have Shakespeare presented that is so heavily conceptualised and the director comes in with an idea that does not serve the play. I still think with Shakespeare you have the writing there. It's good writing. If you're going to come in with a concept and set in Nazi Germany, then it has to serve the writing. You still have to tell the story. So, I don't know.

⁸ The Wooster Group is an experimental collective theatre company operating out of New York City. They are ensemble based and often do multi-media installations and performances. See <http://www.thewoostergroup.org/twg/about.html>.

⁹ One Yellow Rabbit is an adult theatre company in Calgary, Alberta. The website is currently under construction. See <http://www.canuck.com/oyr/> for further direction.

¹⁰ Da Da Kamera is a Toronto-based theatre company that focuses on the creation of new Canadian plays. See <http://www.dadakamera.com/history.html>.

I find what they do at Stratford sometimes interesting, but they're so commercially oriented there. Most of the time because they have such a big machine to run, they take the easy choices. They'll just get the really good actors working for that length of time and delivering the lines beautifully. But, overall the Shakespeare [there] doesn't necessarily satisfy. I prefer seeing something "fringier" because although sometimes it's completely misguided - there is a sense of...something's alive there. So, I don't know if that answers your question.

Yes, Lepage's Shakespeare has been as panned as it has been praised. Because he often has a disregard for text and text is not his main priority. And with Shakespeare - there's words there and you have to be able to deliver properly. And again that's not the first emphasis in his work. But, visually he'll do incredible things to it that open it up and that keep it alive, so I forgive the text because I find what he is doing is brilliant. You'll see *The Tempest* in a completely different way.

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