# PREFACE

Pete wanted this book to be written. As his health deteriorated he recognised that he would need help to complete his story. The writer Andy Richardson came to his aid, and through conversations with Pete and others he achieved this. Had Pete lived long enough to write all of this himself it might have been a different book; but then had Pete lived longer it would also have been a different story.

ONE

# Climbing the Eiger

If the dots of the matrix line up, what else can you do but join them together? We're here today and gone tomorrow, we have to live every moment as though it were the last. Letting fear get the better of you, or finding a reason not to do the thing you love the most, is as pointless as refusing to dream.

The dots of the matrix aligned for me when Liverpool was named the European Capital of Culture for 2008. 'Great,' I thought, when I heard the announcement, the cogs in my brain already whirring into action. 'That'll be great for the city, for its people.' Little did I know that I would be asked to play a major part in the event.

Before we go any further, I should explain this much: Liverpool is central to my story and throughout my childhood I felt the city's gravitational pull. As children, Liverpool, rather than Manchester, drew us in. It was an exotic, otherworldly, mesmerising place, and trips into town were as welcome as presents on Christmas morning. I remember once as a kid in Warrington hearing a story: 'You

go to Liverpool, and when you get onto the staircases in the shops, they move, they actually move, you don't even have to walk up, they take you right to the top.' It was an interesting description of an escalator.

My home town of Warrington was like a minor planet, orbiting Liverpool's great sun. The city had stunning shops, great places to hang out, fashionable clothes and an amazing arts scene. My dad was from Bootle, so we had always supported Liverpool FC anyway, not Everton … and, of course, we were Catholics. We'd go for days out at New Brighton, which was a massive trip for us; we'd come in on the steam train from Warrington and then catch the ferry across the Mersey before going to the tea shop and the beach.

I was born soon after the end of World War II and as a teenager, at the start of the 1960s, I watched the first three professional plays of my life at the Everyman, on Liverpool's Hope Street. I saw *Waiting for Godot*, *Look Back in Anger*, John Osborne's iconic kitchen-sink drama about real people in modern Britain; and *Murder in the Cathedral*, a sublime verse/poem. They were all by the same company, with the same actors playing different roles.

I went to see those plays with my friend from sixth form, Davie Broadbent, and we'd sit in the stalls, feeling the magic of the performance. We were captivated by the excitement of the drama; we relished every nuance, every twist and turn. For two hours, Davie and I would be transported from the humdrum of our normal existence to a different reality in which anything could happen. 'This is realer than real life,' Dave would say.

One evening, as we were making our way home on the bus, I remember turning to him and confiding in him. 'Dave,' I said, 'I don't know what it is they do up there … but I have to do that. I'm going to do that some day. I want to be an actor.' Some forty-odd years later, during the

run of *Lear* in the same theatre, he reminded me of this conversation!

The Everyman hadn't done with me, however, and more intimate engagements lay in store. During the early part of the 1970s, at the start of my acting career, Liverpool's magnetism pulled me back again. At that time, the city was still the most creative, vibrant, exciting, dangerous and magical place on earth. It was a carnival of delights, a smorgasbord of thrilling excitements. We'd been through the swinging sixties, a decade in which the Beatles and Merseybeat had dominated the world, and the region remained at the cutting edge of contemporary culture. Quite simply, there was nowhere else like it. Forget California's counter culture or London's vibrant clubs, forget New York's art houses too; Liverpool was where it was at. The city's painters and musicians, actors and writers were mavericks, re-imagining the world for a population that was eager to escape the harshness of their daily lives. The economic troubles of the times were grist to the mill, they fuelled our creative fires.

By then, I'd been through drama school at Bristol and was on my way to becoming an established actor. In that small, tatty, derelict little theatre in Hope Street, I learned my craft with Bill Nighy, Jonathan Pryce, Julie Walters, George Costigan, Matthew Kelly, Antony Sher … the list goes on and on. If you looked at that roll call of names now you'd say they would never be in the same room, building, county or country together, let alone in one small creative space: it was an absolute pantheon of stars.

Those years were a magical mystery tour. They were some of the most illogical, demanding and potent of my life. They taught me why I wanted to be an actor and showed me that acting wasn't just a silly game, that it had meaning and could change people's lives for the better. I'm forever grateful to the Everyman because it changed my perception of

life and taught me that drama was substantial. In my eyes, there was never any doubt at all; the Everyman was unique.

Defining those times is a joy because they were limitless and enchanting. Each time we stepped through the heavy front doors off Hope Street there was a feeling that something special was in the air. My digs in those days were nearby, in Canning Street, where I had a small flat, and I remember standing on the opposite side of the road from the Philharmonic, just thinking: 'This is it, this is what I want to do, there's no going back.'

It was an exceptional time in the Everyman's history; to be honest, that golden era still ranks alongside the greatest of times that any theatre in the world has experienced. We were part of the city and the business of doing plays made absolute sense in terms of the community. It didn't matter whether we were doing Shakespeare or Brecht, if it didn't relate directly to Liverpool and the surrounding community then it was out the window. 'Acting's a worthwhile career,' I thought. 'There's a reason to pursue this.' Everything had to be done very much on a budget and we had to find a way in which the local community could identify with the work. One of our theories was that 'we may be cheap but we are not shoddy'.

There was less division between the theatre and the real world than in other, more formal theatres. The cast of the Everyman felt as though it belonged to the city, as though we were the people's players. 'Ar ay, lar,' someone would say to us, after we'd finished a play that we'd adapted to more accurately reflect the lives of our constituents. 'I really got that, you know. That really said something to me about my life.' Such moments reaffirmed my love for the stage.

There were times when as actors we had no money, not a shilling, but we were forever being helped out, either as individuals, or as a company. On one occasion, Trevor Eve and

I couldn't afford to make ends meet and hadn't got enough money for food, but a local grocer came to the rescue. 'He'yar, lads,' he said, handing over ripe green avocados. 'Eat these, they'll be good for you.' And we did, we subsisted on a diet of donated avocados. I'll tell you something else, they were delicious.

Liverpool felt like a spiritual home and I returned to it at other times. In 1981, we did a TV play called *The Muscle Market*, with Alan Bleasdale. I played a character called Danny Duggan, who was an out-of-his-depth building contractor. In one scene, I had to escape retribution from a gang of thugs by hanging on to the back of a bus as it sped through the city streets. The director, Alan Dossor, who was directing for TV for the first time, filled the vehicle full of extras and I had to cling on to the outside of it as it swung wildly down the road to a particular tune. I remember it even now: it was 'Yesterday', by the Beatles. A police car watched us for a little while, and then gave chase, imagining that I was a ne'er-do-well who was up to no good. As the cop car came level with the driver, the policeman shouted 'Eh, mate, there's a fella hanging off the outside of yer bus.' The driver, a Scouser, fired back: 'Well, there's no room inside, where d'ya expect him to go?'

It wasn't that things like that don't happen anywhere else, it was the sheer amount of them and the way people revelled in a bit of repartee. Liverpool seemed to thrive on its ribald humour, an ability to see the good in bad and to laugh at things that outsiders might not have found funny. It's a phrase stated so often that it is practically a truism; but Liverpool is genuinely unlike anywhere else. So when it was named the European Capital of Culture, I knew that I had to be involved. Macca, Ringo, Sir Simon Rattle and countless others were on board. Another Everyman alumnus was also planning his own performance: the actor and

presenter Matthew Kelly was due to play alongside his son, Matthew Rixon, in Samuel Beckett's classic *Endgame*. I didn't want to let the event pass without making my own, meaningful contribution. My friend, the theatrical director Rupert Goold, conceived of an idea. Throughout my career, I'd always coveted one theatrical role above all others: King Lear. So when Rupert telephoned me and suggested that we take a production to the city, it seemed like the perfect plan.

I'd appeared in various performances of *King Lear* at different times, from a formative production during my early days at teacher training college through to a stirring RSC run in Stratford-upon-Avon in 1982. The Stratford performances were particularly notable: I appeared alongside a then-fortysomething Michael Gambon, who gave a stupendous performance as the doomed King. My Everyman friend Antony Sher played a brilliant red-nosed Fool who sat on his master's knee like a ventriloquist's doll. I played Cornwall, opposite Jenny Agutter, who was sublime. I also understudied Michael's Lear. I adored the role, it seemed the most complete characterisation in all of Shakespeare. No, scratch that, it wasn't just the most complete part that Shakespeare created, it was the most accomplished, four-dimensional role in all of theatre.

I'd always viewed Lear as a role that an actor 'had to' play, rather than one that an actor might consciously choose. It was in my blood. I longed to test myself against Shakespeare's moving and complex text. The play was a great gift from the Bard; in my mind, there seemed to be no greater examination of an actor's skill than the fragile, tormented, doomed king. If I'm really honest, Lear had always been in the back of my mind from the start of my career, even though it may seem like an obvious choice. Above all else, the reason I wanted to play Lear was because I thought I understood it.

I'd worked with Rupert Goold before, during a successful one-man play called *Scaramouche Jones* that we took to Australia, New Zealand and Canada. We spoke to Gemma Bodinetz, the artistic director of the Everyman/Playhouse, and she loved the idea instantly. 'That would be a real coup,' she said, brimming with enthusiasm at the prospect. 'Pete, you playing King Lear at the Everyman during the Capital of Culture Year would be the right play in the right place at the right time.' There was nothing more to discuss. And so began my ascent of theatre's most challenging and perilous climb. I was interviewed by the local paper, the *Echo*, about my forthcoming performance. 'It's the acting equivalent of tackling the North Face of the Eiger,' I told them, and that was precisely how it felt. 'Doing Lear is a big, big privilege – terrifying and exciting at the same time. If we can do something special on that stage, then we will have fulfilled our dreams.'

It's impossible to underestimate the excitement that we felt about that production. Once Gemma had agreed to our idea I started to immerse myself in the project; it was a chance in a lifetime to deal with something like that. There was, of course, an equal measure of pressure that went hand-in-hand with the anticipation. It was as though somebody had said to me: 'Here's your chance to paint the Sistine Chapel, you can do the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.' And I thought: 'What, have I got the guts to do that?'

I returned to my home in Shropshire to plunge myself into the work and, just as importantly, to grow an enormous beard. I wanted my Lear to be hirsute, so I stopped shaving. The beard came with the territory; my portrayal would be of a wizened old man ranting and stumbling around on a ferocious heath. I couldn't imagine Lear would have been paying too much attention to personal hygiene; he had other things on his plate. I could have stuck a beard on, but that

would have looked phoney. No, if Lear was going to have a beard, it was going to be a proper one. It was nine months in the growing and I hated it. 'It's a bit sackcloth and ashes,' I thought to myself. 'But it's the price for the privilege of saying some of the finest lines ever written; I have to live up to them.' The regulars in my rural local gave me some stick. 'What's that stuck to your chin?' they'd ask, as I sat in a quiet corner, buried beneath a hat and huge scarf, supping my pint of Guinness, and filling in my *Guardian* crossword at a quiet table. 'Can't you afford a razor?'

One afternoon, I took a walk along our local high street and popped into a charity shop. I'd been studying the text and I'd misread a line, in which I thought it had said Lear has a 'dress of flowers'. I went to pick up some laundry and in the hospice shop, hanging up on the rail, was a dress covered in flowers. I went in and said to the lady on the counter: 'How much is that dress?'

'Two pounds fifty,' she said, looking at me curiously.

'I'll have it.'

A flash of delight darted through her eyes: 'Oh, you'll look very nice in that, dear,' she said.

'I hope so, I think it'll be a perfect fit.'

She gave me an old-fashioned look. I left the shop thinking: 'Great, now it's going to be all round town that Pete Postlethwaite dresses up in women's clothes.'

I was familiar with *King Lear*'s script but I re-read it at home as though it was the first time I'd ever seen it. The words ran through me as though they were electric. Every line, all eight hundred of them, was slowly confined to memory, and I started to understand the structure and form of Shakespeare's narrative. The play is a profoundly dark and notoriously unforgiving work. The character is the most troubled of Shakespearian souls, written to capture the extremes of the human condition. All of the double-crossing,

manipulation, evil scheming and madness started to make sense and I vowed that my Lear would be the real deal. He would be tortured and borderline insane. No stone would be left unturned.

We got through rehearsals, working hard and making sure we made good progress. Being in the city during the Capital of Culture Year was a great experience because every day there was something new and unusual, something unexpected. At one point, a giant fifty-foot spider was attached to an office block to launch a five-day festival of street theatre. It was made from steel and wood and operated by twelve people who were strapped to it. There were lots of other things going on, it was just like being back in the melting pot that was the seventies. Our production was described as being a 'hot ticket', a phrase which made me laugh. I imagined myself picking up the stub for my seat, and getting burned fingers. We tried to take such flattery with a pinch of salt. We were simply part of Rupert Goold's team in *King Lear*. Besides, nothing we could do could top the giant spider.

Walking through the city was an eye-opening experience and the people I met on my way into Hope Street were tremendously hospitable. It was energising to be back. On one particular day, two different ladies came up to me in the street, one was aged about forty-five and the other was about seventeen; they both stopped me, just out of the blue, on Hope Street. The elder lady came up and said, 'Can I give you a hug?' and I said 'Why?' 'I'm for peace and love,' she told me, as she wrapped her arms around me in a warm, comforting embrace. She had no idea who I was. The other wanted to kiss me and I asked why she wanted to do that. She paused for a moment, looked into my eyes, and declared: 'Because you're you.' I felt very humbled and glad to be so warmly welcomed, the response was unbelievable.

The people of Liverpool seemed to be so kind to me because of my long-held affection for, and association with, the city. It seemed as though the work we did back in the 1970s was still remembered, people seemed to recall who we were, what we were and how we behaved. The connection was very special. Although I'd long since departed, I didn't feel like an outsider coming in and doing something before jetting back out, I felt like somebody who belonged.

There were ideas knocking around to create a huge new theatre in Liverpool and inevitably we were asked to offer our opinions. The plan was to knock down the Everyman and rebuild it as part of a £41 million project to revitalise theatre in Liverpool. Its sister theatre, the Playhouse, was also told it would be given a complete refit amid warnings that both venues faced a long lingering death if the money wasn't found. The Everyman had apparently been declared 'unfit for purpose'. I disliked the idea of a supertheatre, big enough to accommodate popular shows on a regular basis. Liverpool already had terrific theatres. Big wasn't always beautiful. I've never believed that hugely expensive productions mean that the quality is any better, although it's nice not to have to share a dressing room with a goat, which happened to us during one early Everyman production.

The Everyman itself had changed by now and the stage was close to the people. I loved that because it meant there would be a strong connection with the audience. When I first started in the 1970s, things were completely different. There was a cross-arch stage and there was also a gallery. At one point the stalls were covered over and it became an arena; there'd been continual development over time. But the latest incarnation was my favourite of all. I loved being inches away from the people in the front row, to be among the audience and not be divided by a fourth wall was brilliant, it was an exciting prospect.

As we got closer to the opening night, our work intensified and a round of media interviews began. The critics began to hover for interviews and they drew parallels with roles that I'd played before. One of the themes that kept recurring was that I was well suited to the role of the flawed patriarch. Writers and broadcasters reasoned that some of my better-known roles had been difficult, proud men who had made misjudgements or been forced to explore their own personalities in extremis. Characters like Giuseppe Conlon, in *In the Name of the Father*; the bandleader Danny, in *Brassed Off*, and the violent, abusive, alcoholic dad in *Distant Voices, Still Lives* were all corralled into a one-size-fits-all theory. Parallels were also drawn with Max, from Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming*, whom I'd played a few years earlier. He'd also been a flawed father with three kids, just like Lear.

The theories were neat, but I didn't buy them. You see, if you look a little more closely at those characters, you realise how different they all are. The father in *Distant Voices, Still Lives* was a drunken aggressive wife-beater, Giuseppe Conlon in *In the Name of the Father* was one of those Northern Irish, Catholic working-class men who was full of integrity. Giuseppe was basically a saint-like figure who went through the world and the events that affected him and his son in an extremely honest and stoical way. Danny in *Brassed Off* was actually a fascist fanatic in terms of the music, even though he had a big change of heart towards the end. So they were three very different characters. Of all of the patriarchal figures that I'd been involved with, however, Lear was the one most riven with complexity and malfeasance, he was the ne plus ultra. His problems were of his own making, they were his responsibility. He'd brought them all on himself and caused his own chaos. What sort of man makes his daughters compete for their inheritance

by asking them to make public declarations of filial love? It didn't help his cause that he was a king, of course, because kingship is a malady; as the script said: 'To say aye, or no, to everything I said.' Power corrupts, just look at some of our recent prime ministers.

My Lear was going to be bad, mad and sad. In my eyes, he was misogynistic and fixated on femininity, hence my decision to wear 'the dress of flowers' from the charity shop. His description of the vagina, for instance, was quite remarkable: 'There's hell, there's darkness, there is the sulphurous pit, burning, scalding, stench, consumption …' Lear couldn't bear the feminine side of himself for some reason and I wondered if his madness partly came from his lack of self-knowledge. Certainly, his two scheming daughters, Goneril and Regan, were on to him: he has 'ever slenderly but known himself', one of them said. So that's where I was coming from. I corresponded with a professor of English at Oxford, who also had his own theories; he basically agreed with a number of my observations. He had very elaborate ideas, really highfalutin stuff, and his observations became part of my research. Like the rest of the company, I wanted to make sure that our interpretation of *Lear* would take the audience on a journey, that it would resonate with something deep within everybody who came to see it.

Our rehearsals for *King Lear* were a huge challenge. We tried to inject our own blend of humour, which was very dark and wild, and that aspect was crucially important to me. Though I no longer had my Catholicism, my faith had left an indelible imprint on me, and I wanted to find some redemption in the story, but it proved to be a tough play to find any in. I took comfort from the fact that we were doing it on Hope Street, instead.

But gradually, comfort started to feel in short supply. As a company we found ourselves divided over the way we

were approaching the production. The kitchen sink was being thrown at our performance, with props, songs, overt politics and more besides. We were due to transfer *King Lear* to London for two months following our month-long run at the Everyman and at one point I got the distinct impression that all of our work was focused on getting it right for the capital city. During a discussion with Rupert, I told him I felt we'd got parts of our production wrong, that we were not being true to Shakespeare and that we were short-selling Liverpool. There was a lot wrong with our *Lear*, there was too much gimmickry and I told Rupert as much. He explained the reasoning behind the production and suggested it would improve as we went along. He seemed to have a view that by the time we got to London, for a two-month run at the Young Vic, we'd be flying. The critics would return and garland us with praise. But that infuriated me because the whole point of doing *Lear* was that it was back in Liverpool at the theatre that had helped to shape my creative life. To my mind, we had to get it right for the Everyman, not London, it shouldn't have been a work in progress, it should have been right from the very start. Liverpool shouldn't have been used as a 'try out' place.

As we moved closer to opening night, the fear inside me built. The performance was so important to me, I was working with a great group of people and we all wanted to get it right. On the night before our preview performance I'd stayed with friends to relax and prepare myself for curtain up. But suddenly my tongue started to swell. The swelling became worse and worse until my tongue was double its normal size and I literally couldn't speak. 'Pete, we're going to have to take you to A&E,' said my friends, as they ushered me into their car and rushed me to the Royal Liverpool University Hospital. The doctors told me I'd suffered some kind of allergic reaction. 'Jesus,' I thought. 'This wasn't in

the script.' I was given steroids and an adrenaline injection, which reduced the swelling. 'Great, I can talk again,' I thought. 'Lear has a voice.'

But for all of the relief at being able to go ahead with the opening performance, the tortuous feeling of unease remained. My stomach was a knot of worry and stress. It felt as though a surgeon had performed some nefarious operation while I was asleep; replaced everything inside with steel cables that had been twisted out of shape.

I disagreed with the doctor's textbook diagnosis that I'd suffered an allergic reaction, that seemed too simple an explanation. I'd done nothing any different to any other day of the week, so it had to be something else. This is how I see it. My return to the Everyman created tremendous expectation among the media, people in Liverpool and the audience. I'd become a big story with interviews on TV, for radio and in the national and local press. The preparation to our opening night, however, had been far from perfect. We'd thrown everything at the production but there were a lot of aspects that I wasn't happy with – and there was no time to change them. I had to put a brave face on things, try to downplay the hype while simultaneously being outwardly confident. It was a tough balancing act. 'How does it feel to have men in pubs talking about your performance as King Lear?' asked an interviewer from Radio Merseyside. I dealt with the question, but the expectation was almost overwhelming.

We were all so keen to get it right that we created a cauldron of pressure and there were continual disagreements over the production of the play, with changes being made up to the opening night and then throughout the first week. Being King Lear became difficult, really hard. You can't have someone playing Lear who doesn't endorse every single bit of that production. Psychologically, I was between a rock and a hard place. I couldn't speak, I literally couldn't

speak. My tongue swelling seemed to me like a physical manifestation of the things that had been going on in my head and in my heart. Here I was, playing a great, doomed king, and the power to make my voice heard seemed to have been taken away from me.

The confusion that we faced over our work was mirrored by a private disorder, the magnitude of which I had yet to comprehend. A tumour had started to grow inside me, on my kidney; I had cancer. In many ways, the external discord over the play was matched by the internal tumult of my health. My weight had dropped from eleven stone to nine and a half stone and I was exhausted, both physically and emotionally. As a team, we'd worked relentlessly to make the play as good as it could be, even though we had failed to unite on one vision. Outside, turmoil was being created, but inside, there was turmoil too. The production of *King Lear* seemed to be falling apart, as was my body. I knew about one, but not yet about the other.

On the night before we launched, I stayed in hospital overnight for observation and managed a little sleep, but by the morning, I just needed to get out and get back to the theatre; I couldn't let myself down, or the theatre: I was responsible to the cast. 'Are you okay, Pete? Is everything going to be all right?' The people at the Everyman were understandably worried that the opening performance would be cancelled, but I couldn't let that happen. 'I'm fine,' I lied, though the truth was, I was despairing. We had to get off to a flying start. On the first night there seemed to be almost as many critics in the stalls as there were members of the audience. Somehow, we got through it, but when I opened the papers the next morning, my dreams of a triumphant homecoming crumbled to dust. 'Terrible,' was the almost unanimous view of critics. They hated the fact that we'd opened with a clip of Margaret Thatcher quoting from St Francis of Assisi:

'Where there is discord, may we bring harmony.' In truth, they weren't alone on that, I wasn't the only member of the cast who'd thought that an odd way to start. They didn't like the fact that the Fool performed 'Singing in the Rain' in the middle of one of Shakespeare's darkest tragedies. Reading their reviews, it was clear that they didn't bloody well like anything. The production was assassinated while the performances didn't fare much better. 'Self-indulgent' and 'clumsy' were among the kinder phrases employed. The director came in for particularly heavy criticism. 'Goold's bright ideas often seem self-indulgent and reductive, drawing flashy attention to the director's role of theatrical razzle-dazzle without serving the text,' wrote Charles Spencer in the *Daily Telegraph*. 'It lacks dignity to a degree and is flawed by numerous misjudgments,' noted Christopher Hart in *The Times*. I sat stupefied as I read those words. They'd been similar to the thoughts that I'd tried to convey to Rupert. The reviews made for uneasy reading in the dressing room on Hope Street. Digesting phrases like 'For anyone who knows and loves the play, some scenes are truly painful to behold' increased the pressure tenfold. Even my own paper, the *Guardian*, didn't like it. Its reviewer, Michael Billington, was particularly acidic, saying something like: 'Postlethwaite's Lear falls from a very low height.' To be honest, it was difficult not to agree with many of the reviewers. We'd talked over and over about our differences, but we seemed to have been lumbered with a production that we didn't really want and didn't really believe in. Going into a show like that, it was no surprise that we came in for such excoriating criticism. In some ways, I'd almost been ready for the kicking.

After that terrible first night, we got one good review, which was from my local newspaper in Shropshire. I read it with immense relief. The writer had seemed to understand

what it was we were trying to convey. He had ignored the needless tinsel of the production and connected with the performances of the players. He noted the 'heart-rending terror of madness' that I'd tried to convey and admired some of the interplay between members of the cast. He seemed to join us on our journey into Lear's dark heart. I cut out his review and pinned it on my dressing-room wall, to keep me going. I needed a chink of light to keep my spirits up. During that first week in Liverpool the pressure was all-consuming. Fear is good, in small doses, but the level of fear I felt was unhealthy. I was thinking, 'I'll fall down any set of stairs I can find. I'll get out of this one way or another.' I did not want to go on. I have never felt so despairing. It was nadir time; horrendous, really horrendous. Going to the wall to portray a character like Lear is a big ask of any actor, but to walk that line when you don't believe in what you're doing is insidious. The doubt and self-recrimination creep up on you like terrors in a dream.

The first week of *Lear* was a blur. What I needed most was my own sense of rightness and my own ability to concentrate. But I didn't have that. I didn't quite know … I just knew I had to get through it. We were old enough and wise enough to get up to speed with the critics. For instance, it was easy to see why using the Thatcher clip, for instance, was a mistake. The first thing you want to hear in a Shakespeare play normally, I would have thought, would be Shakespeare. You don't come in with something other than those first lines. It was symptomatic of the way in which we'd misjudged a number of elements. So, during the first week, we changed things around. We ditched the Thatcher clip, got rid of some of the ephemera and took the play back to the Bard's original vision. The politics – left, right or indifferent – were abandoned and we accepted that they had no place in the play. We stripped out everything that distracted us or

seemed in any way unhelpful. We honed in on the themes of the play, on a purer interpretation of Shakespeare's words, and the response from the audiences was great. We went from being an unhappy, despairing band of actors to a very happy bunch of bunnies bounding onto the stage every night, being enraptured by one of theatre's great stories.

A little while later, once we'd accepted our shortcomings and improved the quality of the production, I went onto Radio 4's *Front Row* to talk about our version of *Lear*. 'We were overwhelmed, I think, by the ideas,' I told them. A number of elements had been jettisoned since the play opened. The most expensive props that we'd bought had been ditched. We'd spent money on what looked like three large tables, on wheels, they were similar to the ones that architects use to create models of towns and villages. They went; the play was better without them. Anything that we found unhelpful, distracting, not true to the story, was washed away. It was like a bonfire of vanities. Publicly, I accepted that the critics were right and that the production had lost its way in adapting Shakespeare's great tragedy. Rupert was also bold enough to say, 'Right, that didn't work,' as we pared back on some of the grander ideas that had no real relevance to Shakespeare or Liverpool. There was no temptation on our part to beat ourselves up for the sake of it. As a group, as far as we were concerned, it wasn't all bad, there was a lot of really good stuff going on, bubbling underneath, that just needed releasing. I don't suppose I won any popularity competitions by speaking out publicly, but it was something that needed to be done. We needed to let the people know that we acknowledged our shortcomings and had addressed them.

When the run ended, just before Christmas, I returned home to my family and enjoyed a well-earned rest. 'Cheers, Pete,' said the guys in my local. 'Welcome back.' There was

time to spend a delightful Christmas at home. It was heavenly to be back among my family and friends. I gained a sense of perspective on my portrayal of King Lear: it had been a redemptive experience, the light had followed the darkness. As the New Year began, it was time to get back to it as the production shifted to London, to the Young Vic. The crew reunited to rehearse in the Jerwood Arts Space before we opened. It was as though we'd only just started, as though those days in Liverpool were a nightmare. I was exhilarated, elated; I knew *Lear* was within our grasp: I knew that we wouldn't experience the traumas of Liverpool. My only thought was, 'Bring on London, bring on the Young Vic, mate.'

When the show opened, the response was incredible. Having come through the experience of an unsuccessful opening, the success was actually sweeter. Had it been handed to us on a plate … I don't know. I'd shuffle into the theatre each day, with my carrier bag of sandwiches, wrapped up against the cold in a huge, warm scarf. As we waited for the performance to start, we'd be rapt with nervous anticipation.

During one of the early performances, I also learned a very important lesson: Playing a good Lear involves more than intensity, poise and terror – it also requires a good pair of shoes. At the beginning of the run, I decided to play Lear barefoot. It seemed like the sort of thing the character would have done. Lear was a madman, consumed by insanity, he wouldn't have been getting up each morning looking for his hand-stitched loafers. He'd have pulled on whatever clothes he could find before stumbling into the wilderness. In one scene, I had to carry Amanda Hale, who was playing Cordelia, across the stage. 'Shit,' I thought, as I slipped in a puddle that had formed on one of the stage's steps with Amanda still in my arms. There were gasps of horror as the

audience realised a very modern tragedy was about to unfold. We'd been using stage rain to evoke a wild, untamed environment. The elemental conditions, however, almost did for me. As I descended the watery steps – badum, badum, badum – I just about recovered my footing and stopped short of falling. I mean, I couldn't have done, could I? However mad Lear was, he was a king and kings have dignity. They don't fall over, especially not when they're carrying their most beloved daughter in their arms. The experience taught me a valuable lesson: I made sure Lear had a pair of shoes to wear for every remaining show.

The negative opening in Liverpool was quickly forgotten. The production got better and better and better and by the end of the two-month run we felt as though we were invincible. 'Pete, we've had offers to extend the run and move it to a bigger theatre in the West End,' one of the producers told me one morning. We were thrilled by the interest but turned them down. 'Tell them thanks, but no thanks,' we said. Four of the cast had got other work in different productions and though we could have replacements, there was no way any of us would continue without them. We'd come so far together that the idea of bringing on board people who hadn't completed the first part of the journey with us made no sense at all. It didn't matter to us that the offers were very good, that they involved bigger stages further into the West End and more money for the cast and crew. What mattered was how we felt. If we'd accepted, it would have seemed as though we were going backward, almost as though we were betraying ourselves. We were like musketeers, all for one and one for all.

Throughout the production of *Lear*, I hadn't thought about anything else. I remember one interviewer asking me: 'What's next – post *Lear*?' I didn't have an answer, it had been difficult to look beyond *Lear*. I just wanted to do that

and then see what happened. There was no goal other than the performances at the Everyman and the Young Vic. The interviewer looked at me, expecting more. 'Truthfully,' I said, 'there is no other goal.' From the outset, we knew that *Lear* was going to be a hell of a climb and we had to commit one hundred per cent to that. Beyond *Lear*, I thought about my daughter's birthday and whether or not my dog was in good health, but in terms of work, well, I didn't have any further plans. When the final curtain call came on 28 March, I was exhilarated but exhausted. Lear had always been my biggest ambition. I'd overcome my fear and reached the highest peak.