

## **Why Ian McKellen, Noma Dumezweni and more are shining a light on political speeches with the Almeida Theatre**

*Anthony Almeida, the director of the Islington theatre's new digital Figures of Speech project, explains why we should celebrate history's best orators*

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From Moses to Mandela to May, leaders have stood up, and armed with words only, have spoken out to inspire, to persuade, to carve a path into the future and change the course of history. Just what is it about the power of words to move hearts and minds?

And in a time of ever-increasing scepticism about our political class; where all things are wrapped up in a blanket of cynicism woven by distrust, manipulated statistics, personal agendas and social media soundbites, what do we wish we were hearing from our leaders?

At the Almeida Theatre in Islington, we've been interrogating this and more in our latest digital film project, Figures of Speech. Some of our finest actors and actresses have reimaged for camera the greatest speeches that feel vital again, now. Then together, we've gone into community spaces, delivering the speech to groups who connect with the theme, and debating (always thought provoking, sometimes heated!) how far (or not!) we've come since the speech was first delivered. We're also looking to the future: mentoring passion-filled, idea-rich, young people to explore the craft of rhetoric and deliver their very own speech as an online film.

The idea took root while Barack Obama was preparing to leave office as US president. Rupert Goold, the Almeida's artistic director, was remembering how he'd found Obama's Reverend Pinckney eulogy, in which he sings Amazing Grace, incredibly powerful as a piece of theatre. It struck us: we'd be losing this great orator, whoever wins the election at the end of the year, whether it's Hillary Clinton or Trump. Maybe we could do something useful and interesting by resurrecting exemplary pieces of speechmaking...

Closer to home, the idea of personality in politics has become synonymous with duplicity, like acting. The two people who were exemplary in the British culture were Boris Johnson and Tony Blair. Boris, arguably, took us out of Europe through force of personality and Blair took us to war through force of personality.

It feels like, in the aftermath of those two, the idea of someone speaking to us with passion and charisma now seems like lying. That's dangerous, because in our viral age, and as Shakespeare knew, there is nothing more powerful than someone on a stage speaking to you with passion.

Theatre's potency is its present-tenseness. It's here-and-now immediacy in one breath, and fragility in the next. Our endeavour has been to capture that in concentrate, in how we reimagine the speeches for film.

Our first series went out in May at a time where the whole country was acutely feeling the fallout of a shift in politics: a divided nation, a divided people: we'd never, it seemed, needed leaders more. So we assembled a rousing antidote of sorts, five speeches geared around what positive, practical hope might sound like.

Ian McKellen filmed Harvey Milk's landmark Hope Speech; Fiona Shaw breathed life back into Virginia Woolf's playful argument Women and Fiction; Nicola Walker put centre stage AIDS activist

Elizabeth Glaser's challenge that we have a Crisis of Care; Lucian Msamati reminded us of Nelson Mandela's profound defiance that, for his belief, he was Prepared to Die. And Ashley Walters deftly reignited the rage and rhythm of a classic Neil Kinnock.

But now the narrative across nations of the world – not least here in the UK with Brexit – feels as though it has shifted from one of division, to one of uncertainty. At such a time, what does conviction sound like? Are we hearing that from our leaders?

Our second series stages the lone wolves of history: voices who stood up against the masses, faced-off hostile reaction, and whose speeches remain both divisive and provocative to this day.

Cush Jumbo delivers a Malcolm X spoken just after he survived his house firebombing; Noma Dumezweni revives birth control pioneer Margret Sanger; John Heffernan speaks Harold Macmillan's Wind of Change; Derek Jacobi takes up Socrates just after he's been sentenced to death; and Russell Tovey delivers a controversial Charles Lindbergh speech, the famous U.S. aviator whose vocal opposition to the States joining Second World War led him to coining the idea of "America First".

With themes of justified violence, eugenics, nationhood, isolationism, death – it's an offer that seeks to unpick how, you might win an argument, but it doesn't necessarily mean you're right.

How do we measure our current leaders against these past trailblazers? What's your favourite soundbite zinger? And which speeches demand to be heard again, now?

All films are free to watch at [speech.almeida.co.uk](http://speech.almeida.co.uk) and you can join the debate at [@almeidatheatre](https://twitter.com/almeidatheatre) #FiguresOfSpeech