**Why I love Jez Butterworth's Jerusalem**

The chewy language, the characters' sad bombast and above all the sense of place: England. This play is a chronicle of us, now



'He could be telling the truth of this land' … Mark Rylance as Rooster in Jerusalem. Photograph: Geraint Lewis/Rex Features Geraint Lewis / Rex Features/Geraint Lewis / Rex Features

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The [Jerusalem](http://www.jerusalemtheplay.com/) we have seen so widely feted – from the West End to Broadway and back again, isn't the Jerusalem [Jez Butterworth](http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2009/mar/24/jez-butterworth) first began. Earlier attempts to "write something that concerned Englishness" were, [he told Radio 4](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b0167zjy#synopsis) recently, "stuffed birds … they wouldn't fly." It took a little distance – a relocation to New York, in fact – to find the perspective Butterworth needed to write this tale of identity and nationhood and belonging, set in a fictional Wiltshire village on St George's Day.

There are many things that make this production magnificent: [Mark Rylance's](http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2010/jun/15/mark-rylance-interview-la-bete) thrilling turn as Johnny "Rooster" Byron of course, as well as [Ian Rickson's](http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2011/jun/14/ian-rickson-betrayal) superlative direction, and a supporting cast that seems to relish the licoricey chew of Butterworth's script. But one of Jerusalem's most affecting qualities is, I think, its stirring sense of place.

Butterworth's England is simultaneously whimsical and robust. It is the country we recognise, scruffed right up against that dreamy, idealised place of popular imagination – that scepter'd, green, and pleasant land, stewed with an island that is squat and gristly and fierce in a great mingling of giants, William Blake, pet tortoises, [morris dancing](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RZjLATAUwao), bacon barms and Girls Aloud. It's bus stop-drinking, wet sponge-throwing, new estates, over-zealous district councils; but also those deep, dark leaves that canopy the stage, the rich earth on Rylance's hands, the faint scent of woodsmoke and mulch that drifts across the theatre. It's the cool, crisp voice of Phaedra [singing Jerusalem](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UQ0oCmDXrVk), of course, but it's also the hedonism and debauchery of fair day, the drugs, the drink, the mobile disco. And every bit as much as all of that, it is [Rooster pouring the milk in first](http://theenglishmanner.wordpress.com/2009/11/23/are-you-a-pre-or-post-lactarian/) when he makes a cup of tea.

Rylance described Jerusalem as "satisfying a hunger in audiences for wildness and defiance. There's a feeling that they've eaten something they haven't eaten for years – something they'd forgotten, that's really needed for their health." And certainly to watch this play is to experience a kind of reawakening: a rekindling, if not of nationalism, then certainly of a sense of belonging; to see it, to understand it, feels as if Butterworth has struck the ore of our national identity.

The play's title, of course, is a nod to [Blake's 1808 poem](http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/and-did-those-feet-in-ancient-time/) that begins "And did those feet in ancient time," a work that responds to the apocryphal story that Jesus [once visited England and travelled to Glastonbury](http://www.storyline-features.co.uk/glastonbury.htm). But this isn't the only legend that Jerusalem conjures – in the figure of "Rooster" Byron, there are resonances of Robin Hood, [Will o' the Wisp](http://www.mysteriousbritain.co.uk/folklore/will-o-the-wisp.html), Puck, John Barleycorn, [the Green Man](http://paganwiccan.about.com/od/beltanemayday/p/GreenMan.htm), George and the Dragon – the play layering them, matting them down, into a great loamy fable. And so we feel the weight of his Englishness, its texture, its ancientness.

It's there in the language too, all those feather-spitting expletives butted up against the sublime. In fact what I love about Jerusalem is everything I love about the English language; its wealth and its wildness, its illogicality, the strange, rousing music of our sentences.

And in the character of "Rooster" Byron, we find an emblem of both England and the English language. This flexible, muscular, yet hobbling figure; an island of a man, fuelled and attacked from all sides. We see him now puffing out his chest to seem just that little bit larger, a man who legend tells us was once unstoppable, immense, capable of leaping [lines of double-decker buses](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-lPCK8hptg8) at Flintock fair. But now, empire-depleted, he is about to be evicted from his ramshackle caravan in the woods, and his reputation has dwindled to one of famed debauchery, drug-dealing, the only man barred from every pub in the village. Where once men gasped and women swooned, now youths film him on their phones, drunk in the dirt, soaked in his own piss.

Despite his reduced circumstances, there remains a defiance to Rooster, a faith that he will win out. Even faced with the disbelief of his gang of merry men, he continues to set down the legend of his own life: that he was conceived immaculately on a bullet; that he was born black-eyed, with his own cape and all his own teeth; his pure Gypsy blood; his encounter with the giant as big as a pylon who [built Stonehenge](http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/daysout/properties/stonehenge/); the golden drum that will summon the ancient powers to his side.

And for all the outlandishness of his tales, there lingers the unshakeable, unsettling feeling that maybe it isn't all bombast and bluster. Maybe there truly were giants and bullets and fairies and dragons. Perhaps, in all the fable and folklore, and in the fire and fathom of those eyes, Rooster might just be telling the truth of this land.