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The no-star system

Cheek By Jowl puts on top-class theatre with no big names. Yet its methods have launched a host of stars. Lucy Powell asks its director how he unearths talent

Are stars born or made? I'm sitting in a smoky café in Hampstead with the theatre director Declan Donnellan, trying to find out.

For Donnellan – among his other achievements in 26 years of Cheek by Jowl, the company he runs with his partner and designer Nick Ormerod – has discovered more than his share of big names. Michael Sheen, Daniel Craig, Adrian Lester, Matthew Macfadyen and Saskia Reeves are just some of the talents who have graduated from the company's unofficial school of proper acting. A school in which style is subsumed by substance, and performance is pared down to its essentials, but from which great actors seem to emerge year after year.

"What exactly do you mean?" he replies to my question. Hung over from a drunken night on a coach from Newcastle to London with the Russian cast of his rapturously received production of *Three Sisters* – "They produced magnums of vodka the likes of which I've never seen. It was ridiculously Russian" – he is in no mood for waffle. He apologises if he sounds curt.

Luckily, I had worked out my definitions earlier, in conversation with a Cheek By Jowl graduate, Michael Sheen. Sheen was cast, not long out of RADA, in a Musset/Ghelderode double bill in 1993 that he says effectively launched his acting career. Now playing the Frost half of the *Frost/Nixon* equation to great acclaim on Broadway, Sheen suggested that a star is "someone who the audience agrees to shut up and watch; someone who can carry an eponymous role; someone able to magnetise an audience". Precisely. Someone too famous to do their own shopping any more.

But are they born or are they made? Sheen chuckled ominously down the crackling long-distance line: "Have you asked Declan that?" Not yet.

Donnellan, 54, may find the talent, but the show is always the real star for him. His production of *Cymbeline*, which arrives for a month-long run at the Barbican on Thursday, boasts few names known to those who don't study the annual graduation lists at RADA. His *Three Sisters* sold out last week's Barbican run before it even opened. And it was three hours long, performed in Russian, by the company that the bilingual Donnellan runs in tandem with his English-language productions. No Billie Piper or Daniel Radcliffe to sweeten this theatrical pill. Not even the more sensible classical clout of a Patrick Stewart or a Dame Judi.

So perhaps Donnellan is out to protect the star status of his company with his predominantly starless casting. Do established stars, in fact, disrupt the egoless equilibrium of good ensemble theatre? “Actually,” Donnellan says, “a lot of the Russians in our company are very famous. They generate ginormous stars in Russia, and take their stardom very seriously indeed.”

“I have no political problem whatsoever with casting what you mean by a ‘star’ in my work, so long as they are also actors. But because of the exigencies of our touring schedule, most stars in the West would have a problem working with us. Two episodes of *Casualty* in the offing and Chekhov goes out the window.”

Thea Sharrock handled the biggest “star” currently appearing on an English stage when she took Daniel Radcliffe, better known as the bespectacled Harry Potter, and stripped him for her production of Peter Shaffer’s *Equus*, playing at the Gielgud. “Let’s start by saying that you don’t have to be a ‘star’ to be a good actor,” she says. “And you don’t have to be a good actor to be a ‘star’.” Agreed.

Sharrock – at 30 the youngest director in the West End – sounds like the most sensible woman in theatre. “Judi Dench is a star. She is also an actor. Madonna is a star. She is not an actor.”

And how does one define their difference? “Within a minute of Judi Dench appearing on stage, you’ve forgotten where else you’ve seen her. She is the character she plays. Madonna remains Madonna. The question all the critics were asking of *Equus* on press night was which side of the coin Daniel would fall.”

But as to whether stars are born or made, whether Donnellan’s knack for unearthing talent is due to his taste in the audition room or his technique in rehearsals, Sharrock wouldn’t like to say. “Probably there is something innate in a star performer that you can’t teach, a kind of magnetism. But it isn’t quantifiable.”

Michael Sheen – when he stopped chuckling over in New York – was kind enough to suggest why Donnellan is so good at unearthing talent. “Being a ‘star’ on stage asks different things of an actor than on screen. On stage you have to be able to dominate a room full of real, breathing people every night. That takes balls more than anything.

“Can you teach confidence? Not really. But you can unlock it, and Declan does.”

Indeed, but how? Donnellan wrinkles up his nose in distaste at the question, which he eventually brings himself to answer: “Well, I vehemently don’t think stars are born. People say it is this rare, mystical inner quality. I think that’s awfully misleading. We’d quite like it to be the case, because then we could relax. We have to understand our limitations. And training is vital. But I think that stars are made, and we make them as directors by allowing people to be themselves.

“Most of my job is about getting people to relax. To be unafraid. Most acting is about defences, building up barriers in order to protect the actor from the audience. My work is about making people feel safe enough to let those down. So that they can be absolutely present and attentive on stage. Then they become vital and alive and beautiful. Being a star mercifully has no meaning in that context.”

He smiles, worried that this might sound pious from a man still sweating last night’s Stolichnaya. “But then, that’s not really a secret. Is it?”