NOT TRUE, BUT USEFUL

Transcripts from Series 1 of Cheek by Jowl's podcast – Edited versions

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Introduction

Thank you for downloading the edited transcripts of Series 1 of **'Not True, But Useful…' – a Cheek by Jowl Podcast**.

In April 2020, during the COVID-19 lockdown, Artistic Directors Declan Donnellan and Nick Ormerod teamed up remotely with director Lucie Dawkins to record a series of creative conversations. The resulting audio podcasts of the series were released in April-July 2020.

Following their release, we decided to create an edited version of the transcripts that would stand alone as a written educational resource, accessible for free from the Cheek by Jowl website and available in several languages.

We hope you enjoy them and find them 'useful'.

If you would like to find out more about the plays we discuss in each episode, or listen to further episodes, please visit the podcast hub on the Cheek by Jowl website. On each episode page, you will find the show notes, as well as links to images, clips, further interviews and archive materials from our shows.

The music used in the audio podcast of Series 1 was composed by Pavel Akimkin, as part of our Russian production of *Measure for Measure*.

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Episode 1

Thoughts from Inside Quarantine

Lucie
Welcome to Cheek by Jowl's podcast 'Not True, But Useful'. This is episode one: Thoughts From Inside Quarantine.

Hello, I'm your host Lucie Dawkins, and over the course of the next few weeks I'm going to be interviewing Declan Donnellan and Nick Ormerod, the designer and director duo behind the internationally-renowned theatre company Cheek by Jowl. This podcast is going to take you behind the curtain to find out more about their unique creative process and how after nearly four decades of extraordinary productions, their practice continues to evolve. In this first episode, we're going to be talking about the challenges of thinking about theatre during the corona quarantine, and how Cheek by Jowl's philosophy has developed since the publication of the seminal book, *The Actor and the Target*. And it's a great pleasure to be here with the author of that book, Declan Donnellan. Hello, Declan.

Declan
Hello. Hello, Lucie.

Lucie
So we're coming to you with a remote recording from deep inside the COVID-19 lockdown. So we're calling this podcast, 'Not True, But Useful'. I've heard you say that a lot. Can you tell me what that means to you: ‘not true, but useful’?

Declan
Well, I don't think anything I say is true. When I say things, it's only to try to help, to advance us to make sure that the piece of theatre we're doing has perhaps a bit more life in. As I say in *The Actor and the Target,* the metro map of a city is not true, but it's useful. So although it doesn't bear any resemblance to what the city actually looks like, it's a grid that helps you go from one place to another. These guides are just temporary models that may help us.

Lucie
I've heard people talk about a Donnellan system of approaching plays after *The Actor and the Target*. Do you think there's a Donnellan system and if so, what is the Donnellan system?

Declan

Well, I certainly hope there isn't! I went out of my way in *The Actor and the Target* to say: if acting is good, don't try to fix it. It's only if you get blocked, you might use this. It's certainly not a book on how to direct or how to act. It's something that you might use if you get into difficulty, if you get into a particular sort of difficulty, which is a panic block, when you can't think to put one foot in front of another, and you feel frozen. And that's what *The Actor and the Target* is about. That's the main thrust of the book. It's certainly not a testament to how to direct or how I direct.

Lucie

Do you think it's a bit dangerous to have a system when we're approaching a rehearsal room?

Declan

Personally, I think so. But I don't know. There's a million ways of directing a play, there are a million ways of making good theatre, there are many kinds of good theatre. I don't know all of them!

I can only know my way, and the way I have is not to have a way. Our only way is that Nick and I are in a room looking at actors and we're trying to make it better. And what constitutes that 'better' does change from time to time. However we do have one priority, which precedes all other priorities, which is that what we do must be alive. Everything else comes secondary to that. It's normally pretty obvious when something's alive. What's not so obvious is how to make it alive. And then the secret is you can't make it alive. But what you can do is try to stop killing it. We need to learn how to take away the blockage. It is a question more of removing than adding things. And that's a basic principle for us.

Lucie

And we're in a really bizarre circumstance right now. It's very unusual conditions in which I think all of us are reassessing what it means to do the jobs that we're doing. And I'm fascinated to know a bit more about what's being preoccupying you as a director.

Declan

Well, it is a dreadful time. People are dying, people are losing their jobs. Many people will be pushed into poverty. And the real suffering probably has not yet begun. So it is not good to speak of a silver lining.

Now that we look at our leaders floundering around on television, we see bit by bit that, of all things, nature impinges itself on our consciousnesses. The very authority that seems to be lacking in so many leaders seems to be coming, in a strange way, from nature. The birdsong where I'm living is getting more deafening every day. Many are more conscious of the mystery of nature and silence. So who knows what the world will look like next year.

Lucie
So I know you've been spending part of your extra free time tackling your new book, which I'm very excited to see when it comes out.

Declan
You won't be half as excited to see it as I will be! I'm dying to expel this monstrous birth that's been growing inside me. The reason I'm having trouble writing it is not because of the matter inside, but it's hard to organise it in book sequence. It's like an immense matrix. Everything connects with everything else. I'm always trying to flatten it out into a logical line so the reader might find some coherent path through it. Chatting about it is probably a step to it. So it's nice to be able to talk to you about it!

Yes, an obvious thing with the virus, this strange lockdown... Is that we realise how much we miss being with other people. And particularly, you know, the theatre experience. We can watch endless TV, but the actual experience of being in a room with somebody, hearing them breathe, smelling them, feeling their heartbeat, god knows. Looking at them spitting on stage, we miss actually being in a carnal space with other people. This call seems to come from a deep genetic demand. We were not born in a capitalist system of self-reliance, we were born in a system of group reliance. And we want to get back into spaces with people.

On the other hand, a little bit dryly to add, is that, in fact, we've been practising social distancing for hundreds of years, because one of the things that we do is, we titrate the distance all the time between us and other people: not too close and not too far. We dance that lobster quadrille through our lives. We do that dance in terms of intimacy, in terms of friendship, in all sorts of terms. I think that whole business of making sure we keep apart is really basic. And now it's been brought sharply into relief because it might kill us if we don't maintain proper distance, or it might kill somebody else.

So that makes me think about a word that I use in rehearsal, which is 'encounter'. I think that when we go to the theatre, we go to witness an encounter. There are various encounters. One is our encounter with the actors who are on stage. And secondly, that is the first

theatrical experience, the second theatrical experience is the character's encounter with the things that they see; the scenes that they play with their partners, the predicament. I mean, in some way, we also really want that encounter to be raw, or in some way intense, in real life, we are always mediating the difference between us and other people, and many people end up having great problems and they have problems with intimacy or bad boundaries. And we have many ways around that - we can have 450 friends on Facebook, but it doesn't really prove anything about our contact with people.

It's useful to think a little bit about what happens in an encounter. Well, a first encounter is with our mothers in the pram. The mother says to the baby "I see you and you see me" and we learn to feel safe and grow by waving, by smiling, by copying facial expressions. But the very important thing in an encounter is to understand that when I see something, it also, at the same time, inevitably, sees me back. And that if I see something, I change it by seeing it, but it also changes me. For example, as kids or as adults, we often see westerns or cop series with shootouts at the end. And you will see people running around a city with a gun and someone else chasing them with another gun and then they normally get to the corner of a building and shoot around the corner. So one person shoots around the corner and they duck and dive, because the other shoots back.

What always surprises me about these sequences is that I dread when they come as they are normally relatively boring, and yet somehow they are essential. But if you think about it, it's an interesting rhythm/myth of they want to see the person they're shooting at, but not long enough for the person to be able to take aim back at them. It's a kind of dance in real life. It's trying to have the encounter without being seen. We keep things under wraps and when we go to the theatre, we go to see those wraps taken off. So we, in a way, go to see people having encounters with things that we can't encounter in real life. It's like a shoot out. I can see what the characters are up to but they can't see me.

Or can they?

Nietzsche said "Don't look into the abyss for too long, or the abyss will look into you." And we all go 'oh, that's so scary!' And a lot of horror films have been started with that quote; it gives it a bit of class. But actually, it's not really that disturbing. Of course if you look into anything long enough, it's gonna look back into you. If you look into a baby's eyes, they will look back at you and often you will feel the better for the seeing and the having been seen. It's a two way process. And that's very, very important in the theatre that we must absolutely commit to the fact that theatre is something that takes place between what's happening on

stage and in the audience. It's not a work of art, it's an act of art. And it exists not as a state, but as a process between the two things. For me, that's a very important aspect of ‘encounter’. The action cuts both ways. This is crucial because this mechanism is the fertile ground out of which many aspects of theatre will grow.

Lucie
I think what's interesting about the time that we're finding right now, where there is no encounter in a space with anybody other than who you are isolating with.

Declan
Yes, but that's also an experience before COVID! As when we seal ourselves in an intense echo chamber and make sure we only hear the news we want to hear! We have been doing that in different ways for centuries!

Lucie
If you're lucky enough to be isolating with someone else, it's forcing, I think, all of us who make theatre to reassess why theatre is so important. And it seems to me that the encounter, this piece of radical empathy, is what makes theatre vital.

Declan
Yes, I would like to say now though, I don't have a reason why I do theatre. I do theatre because I love it. The greatest love poetry is sometimes supposed to be in *Romeo and Juliet* but to me, that's not the greatest love writing. The greatest set of words describing love that I know were written a couple of decades earlier by Montaigne. He had a great friend whom he loved very much, but this friend died when they were still both young. Montaigne lived on for decades but never fully recovered from the loss, and he said, ""If you force me to explain why I loved him, all I can say is, "it was because it was him, because it was me". And that, I think, for me is the nearest we get to describing love. In other words, there's no reason for it. It's just because "it was him, because it was me".

The subtle thing to notice is the opening of that "If you force me to explain why." And I feel a little like that about the theatre, actually. I don't know why I do it. I have no reason. I can find one to justify myself if forced. But it's not the real 'reason". There is no reason. In fact a motive really is only a way of explaining what I've done. I think motive is dangerous for actors to think about. Maybe we sometimes need them as a very first or second rung of a ladder. But then we need to really wean ourselves off believing in them. Motives are only our way of explaining things. Now, I can find lots of reasons to justify why I do the theatre, but

they're all fake. The real reason is that I have no real option. It's the thing that I most love doing.

Lucie
But it's also interesting that you say that's a dangerous thing for an actor to be asking or a difficult thing for an actor to ask, because after Stanislavski was so used to asking that question in rehearsals; asking an actor 'What does the character want?' Is this in fact not a useful question?

Declan
I think 'what does the character want?' May be a useful question but only ever to begin with because it's not life. Sometimes the question can actually block an actor. For example I can't think of a faster way to block a Romeo than by asking him why he loves Juliet. It doesn't mean the question isn't interesting for an outsider to ask. But it could be blocking to demand that of the actor, who needs to find the experience, not answer an essay question.

To get us started I may use some traditional questions. Never just 'what do you want?', but always giving precedence to 'what is it you don't want?' I fully understand that some actors may feel more comfortable with character and action and need to start with that. Personally I do not like to talk too much about concepts like character. After a while, we get the scene up. But that skeleton doesn't necessarily bring life. And so you get something that's working quite well, it is clear, but it is merely efficient. There's another place that you have to take it. And that involves a kind of different vocabulary.

Lucie
And is that vocabulary about understanding that we don't always know what we want?

Declan
Indeed it is, yes. But I think I'd probably start, you know, the scene when Lady Macbeth comes to her husband in the middle of dinner: 'why did you leave the chamber?' I would first probably talk to the actors about them wanting to kill Duncan and becoming king and queen, I'm sure I would. I think I'd want the actors to start there. I wouldn't want to confuse them about that. It would not be helpful to start on the first day and say "well you want to kill Duncan, or, in fact, do you?!" It would be unhelpful and discombobulating for us all. We need to make the rule before we can break it.

So. Nick would set up very clearly where Duncan is in the room next door, and then we would talk as little as possible about it but spend more time investigating it spatially, very simply. Yes we may have to answer questions about "what they want", although the sooner we can get on to "what they don't want" the better. And after a while we're going to discover that the profound mystery at the heart of Macbeth is that we don't know what they want. And that is because they don't know what they want. And worse, they don't know that they don't know what they want.

We have no idea why they do it. It seems to be clear, but it isn't clear. We assume they want to be king and queen, but do they? Actually there's no actual sensual, plausible feeling for that. As soon as the idea occurs to them, they're both terrified that they won't do it. He's never happy from the beginning. He doesn't think 'Oh, great, I shall be king!' He never ever thinks that. 'Your children shall be king'. It makes him miserable from the beginning because it sets up a violent inner conflict in him. And that's how we begin.

And they launch in on this plan but it seems increasingly clear to me that they don't really want to do it. And worse, they never did! And the mystery is, "but why on earth would anyone do something they don't want to do?!" And the answer is “let's look in the mirror!' Because we do it all the time, and why we do things that we don't want to do... It's good to think about it.

Lucie
And is that part of what is so extraordinary about the idea of an encounter in the theatre from the audience's point of view, that you have to with the great plays encounter the problem that actually you don't know, a lot of the time? And that's a very uncomfortable truth to acknowledge about yourself. We don't know why Macbeth does what he does, really, by the end of the play. And so you have to acknowledge that you don't always know what drives you to the most extreme behaviours in your own life.

Declan
Well, if we're foolish, I think, we’ll think: ‘oh, these are just two weird Scots in the 10th century, it's got absolutely nothing to do with me! I'm not going to kill the King of Scotland! And I don't talk in poetry and I don't use hyperbole.’

But actually, we do actually, when normally when we're going to do something we don't want to do, we have wonderful arguments to explain why it's in fact a very good thing to do. And the more we actually look into it, the closer we get to it, quite disturbingly so. There's a joke

in *Twelfth Night* and it's picked up in *The Changeling* as well. They refer to the picture of 'we three'. The Fools say: did you never see the picture of we three? 'We three' was a picture of two fools. And the people seeing the picture were supposed to query the plaintiff's title, "I can only count two figures in the painting, so who is the third ‘fool’ in 'we three'? And the answer was: you who are looking at it. And you may think 'Haha, what a not very funny joke'. Well that's odd, a whole oil painting devoted to a one-off cartoon gag of 'who's the third fool?' And you think, how weird that the Elizabethans spent so much effort on a one-off laugh... But sadly, it isn't a one-off laugh. If only it were! That is what all the great acts of art do. They're continually showing us the two fools and asking us where the third one is - they implicate us. We are unguarded, because we are in an encounter.

Music

Lucie
So in this part of the episode, we're going to think about how we can apply some of these ideas to an actual play. So we've talked a bit about *Macbeth*, so let's take *Macbeth*. And I know you've directed it and worked on it lots in different ways with Nick over the years. And you suggested that we should focus on Act One, Scene 7. So for those of you who haven't seen or read *Macbeth*, this is the scene when Macbeth has escaped from a dinner party that he's hosting at which the guest of honour is Duncan, the King, who he’s planning to murder later that night. And the struggle of keeping his poker face on means that he's left the dinner suddenly. And he first explains to the audience why it's a reasonable idea to kill Duncan. And then by saying it out loud persuades himself that it's not such a good idea after all. And then Lady Macbeth comes to find him and changes his mind back again. You can find the text of this scene in the podcast notes. And there's also a link to the archive images of Declan and Nick's 2009 production of it. So how can we apply the idea of, say, it being a problem to always know what the character wants to this particular scene?

Declan
Well, let me try to be practical. Nick and I would rehearse it, we'd have a strong sense of space, we'd have a strong sense of where Duncan was, and also where the other room is, but what is happening in the "other" room is often far more important than what is happening on stage.

And if we talk too long about what they want, what their motives are, we will let other more pressing concerns fall off the shelf.

Now, sometimes people say *Macbeth* is the greatest thriller ever written. But it's sad if we think it's just a great thriller, which happens to have a lot of poetic language. For the language is not just sprayed-on. The poetry is not some underscore to heighten the plot, like in some TV series. For these words run against the plot! Here the scene is about the language in conflict with the action. Or more simply, what they do is different from what they say. That is a basic mechanism in most great drama. This distance between what the characters say and what the characters do actually *is* the dramatic action. Here the dramatic action is that they're using weird words to hide from themselves what they want to do. So for example, in *"if it were done..."* Macbeth says to the audience: it's really easy, I want to murder the king, but then I'm not so sure about murdering the king. Maybe it's not a good idea to murder the king. Then she [Lady Macbeth] comes on and he says to her, I've decided not to murder the king. She says 'you must murder the king' and he says 'I don't want to murder the king', and so she says 'this is why you must murder the king'. And then they both agree: right, we'll go off and murder the king.

But what we may come to notice in the scene is that two words are missing, two words that matter: one is 'murder' and the other missing word is 'king'.

But the whole scene is about murdering or not murdering the king. And if we look, we see they invent an extraordinary set of substitute words for "murder the king" and the first one is 'it'. *"If 'it' were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well It were done quickly*". And 'it' there, what does it mean? It sounds like he's giving instructions as to how to make an omelette. But in fact, he's talking about murdering a king. Not only a king, a very old man, and an old man who has just been deeply generous to them, and who is sleeping in their house and they're gonna have to sneak into his bedroom while he's snoring and knife him. It couldn't be shabbier. And so he refers to it as 'it', then it becomes 'the assassination' and it becomes 'this business'.

And then the "it" waxes through all sorts of different metamorphoses. The couple create a tissue of bullshit through the whole scene, which starts to seem like a game about all the different ways we can have of NOT saying 'murder the king'. And the bullshit climaxes when Lady Macbeth refers to the shabby little knifing as 'our great quell', which is total nonsense.

I mean, 'our great quell'? It is meaningless hokum, just sound and fury. (But we should beware for "sound and fury" can kill people). Here it's anything other than saying 'murder the king'. And sounding grand and special and 'above'.

This is an example of something we can be too clever to see. You don't have to be brilliant to be able to dig into the depths of this secret that Shakespeare has hidden from us. It's more as if you get an unpleasant sense that they're not really facing up to what they're going to do. And if we think about it, they don't really want to do it. And then the question is, why do they do what they don't want to do? But 'why do we do what we don't want to do' is a basic, basic question that we all need to ask ourselves. For example, we may look at some friends and think: God, they complain of being lonely. But it is so clear to see that they're organising the terms of their own loneliness. Every day we see people doing all sorts of self-destructive things. And then we may get brave and ask what self-destructive things we ourselves are doing. And it's really a mystery as to why we really do that. You can try and help people but it's very, very upsetting to love somebody who's bent on destroying themselves because it puts you in a very difficult position. That's one of the things that Shakespeare does to us in each of the tragedies. The heroes or heroines address us, we bond with them. And then too late we realise that Shakespeare has handcuffed us to a maniac who's going to drag us through five acts of pure hell.

Incidentally that hell is always going to be built on logic. That's something that we should notice. The hell is always built on logic unfettered, with no redeeming sense of responsibility to save them.

Lucie
So the logic in the case of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, I suppose, is not the reason why they want to do it. They're using logic to run away from the fact they have no idea why they want to do it.

Declan
The most important thing is that the play takes place on a level of self-deception. It's using, well, Shakespeare says it brilliantly: “full of sound and fury, signifying nothing”. They build up on this noise. And as a result of that noise, the couple end up murdering this old man that they don't want to murder. The problem is that they love Duncan. The most boring way you could look at *Macbeth* is to think it's about two psychopaths who have no feelings who commit a murder. But a "psychopath" interpretation of Macbeth is not only boring - it doesn't explain most of the words!

The Macbeths both love Duncan. And also they both seem to think they love each other, or at least need each other. They've got a full gamut of tender feelings. They just don't want to have some of those feelings. They have a fantasy of what it is to be a doer, a 'winner', and

the corresponding dread of being a ‘loser’. And, for them, the loser is somebody who lets their feelings get in the way of ‘what they want’. And so they try and say to themselves, it’s alright, I can be practical, I can be simple, “*if it were done, when it were done, then 'twere well it were done quickly*" - so no problem! And Lady Macbeth has already assured us, at great length, how she's going to sort out her feelings of pity, compassion, mercy. She's sorted, she claims. But she isn't. She can't. The grand operatic invisible presences she calls. It's all total nonsense. It's like an adolescent fantasy. She is more like the lonely little girl in the playground who has to eat her sandwiches alone. She isn't some big evil diva. She is full of human tenderness. She has copious feelings of love. She can't just cut them off. And they come back, and they come back again. She does some terrible, terrible thing to herself, by imagining that she can cut off her feelings of mercy. But they come back.

Lucie

Macbeth practically says it outright when he says all he wants is the 'be all and end all' of the complicated feeling of wanting desperately to kill Duncan and being horrified of it at the same time. He doesn't say he wants to kill him. He says he wants to stop feeling complicated about killing him.

Declan

Yes, like Othello: "Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore". It's the doubt they can't bear. That's the profound immaturity of many of the heroes. They cannot tolerate uncertainty. Macbeth actually can't stand that. They all try to cut off, well I'd call it the right side of the brain. We have a left side of the brain that gives us language, principles, analysis, and is broadly speaking, referred to as the more rational side. But we've got a right hemisphere of the brain which is more intuitive, and it gives us many valuable, but often less " provable" things, including plain common sense. It's also the only part of the brain that can encounter a new idea. And it's the only part of the brain that might give us feelings of forgiveness, redemption, love. However we must absolutely not moralise the difference. We need both sides of the brain. It's absolutely pointless saying, 'Hey, I'm just a crazy mad cap artist, and I'm just a right brain person. I was always terrible at maths.' We can't say that. We need both sides of the brain to fully function as a human being. We wouldn't be able to make sense of any of these words if we didn't have an analytic left side of your brain. We need to use them both in concert so that we have principle, but we also have responsibility. Under certain circumstances, for example in times of danger, personal and political, we might be tempted to dodge responsibility and untamed logic can appear to make choices and living clearer, simpler and more efficient. This is what happens if we cut off the right side of the brain. And just "do" logic.

Very often in Shakespeare tragedies it may just seem that characters get kidnapped by the intuitive, wild, irrational side, the right side of their brain: Othello and Macbeth. But not a bit of it; it's the exact opposite. They both get kidnapped by logic, it's logic that marches Othello into Desdemona's bedroom, and it's the logic that takes the Macbeths to the point of horror 'To survive, we've got to put Duncan out of the way, it's completely logical'. But to do that they have to perform surgery on their humanity. They have to cut out part of their brains, part of their hearts, this part of their selves, this part of their ordinary common sense of forgiveness and mercy and human feeling. Of course, there is no such surgery, it's just an illusion. The "cancer" of their ineradicable humanity will go on breeding, even if it is shrunk to almost nothing. And when Lady Macbeth's humanity finally floods out, it will flow in the blood of her nightmares, and she will kill herself. You can't "stop up th'access and passage to remorse" for a full five acts of life, it seems.

The abiding problem with the logical part of our brain and the problem with that logic is that it tends to want to take over the whole brain, which it can do. In *Macbeth*, only temporarily. But long enough for atrocities to happen.

Logic is like fire, it is a good servant and a bad master. Logic is not our friend, it is our servant.

So there's Macbeth trying to give you his logical plan of making the omelette, killing the king, no problem, no problem, but unfortunately, a baby crashes through the ceiling, as in a Caravaggio painting, and makes him suddenly exclaim "Pity like a naked newborn babe, striding the blast." It's like a message from Macbeth's unconscious, banging its way into this banal pretend cookery programme, shouting: ‘But this is mad, what you're doing is completely bloody mad, you don't even want to do it!’

The baby crashes in to ruin his act, ruin his speech, but to save them. But he doesn't listen to the baby. He cannot listen to himself. But that's what happens. So he's trying to be rational and trying to convince us that the universe is a rational place that follows logical clockwork principles: I want, therefore I get. But actually the possibility of redemption, even at this late stage, also comes from somewhere inside himself. There are other sides of him. Messy sides, of mercy and compassion and he's got to try to kill them all. And one of the duels that happens through *Macbeth* is Macbeth and Lady Macbeth trying to silence this other part of themselves.

Lucie

And Lady Macbeth trying to silence it in Macbeth. That amazing bit in her first scene, when she says I'm going to have to persuade him to kill Duncan. His nature is too soft to see the most obvious way, or allow himself to do the most obvious thing which would be to kill Duncan. She knows that she's going to have to coach him through this dreadful piece of logic and that his brain is full of pity and compassion, just like hers is.

Declan

Yes, just like hers is. In fact, it's all projection, because the person who's too frightened to kill Duncan is Lady Macbeth herself! She speaks to us as if she's auditioning for Verdi's *Macbeth*, she comes on as if she's some horror film diva talking to "spirits that tend on mortal thoughts". But in fact, what's really going on is that she's afraid that she's the loser. She's afraid she isn't this ‘ubermensch’ with pure will, which is what she'd really like to be. And she projects it into him. So very often when we make another person our project (which is often a tragedy), we think we want to change them, but in fact it is a defence against realising that the real problem we need to change is in ourselves. So the real problem is that she's the one who wants to cut herself off from her compassion. The compassion Lady Macbeth dreads within herself will make her a "loser".

A compassionate image that goes all the way through Macbeth is "Pity like a naked newborn babe" - these images crash into Macbeth consciousness and they are extremely inconvenient for him. They totally upset the efficiency of the plan he has created. They are unnecessary imaginings. They are not result-oriented. They include the inconvenient dagger, Banquo’s inconvenient ghost, all these bloody nuisances keep tripping him up in his tidy organisation. He keeps on trying to control his conscience, keeps on trying to control the loving part of himself, but the loving part of him is too strong, and it fights back and it fights back and it fights back. And we see somebody whose logic mounts a monstrous attack against each resurgence of his capacity to love.

Lucie

Thank you very much, Declan, we're going to end there for today. And I can't wait for next week when we're going to be talking about what space has to do with Shakespeare. And in the meantime, I hope that you and Nick have a safe week of quarantine.

Declan

Thank you very much. You too, Lucie.

Episode 2
Space and Shakespeare

Lucie
Welcome to Cheek By Jowl's podcast, Not True, But Useful. This is episode two, 'Space and Shakespeare'.

Hi, I'm your host Lucie Dawkins and in this podcast I'll be interviewing director Declan Donnellan and designer Nick Ormerod, the Artistic Directors behind the theatre company Cheek By Jowl. This podcast is going to take you behind the curtain to find out more about the ideas that they find 'not true, but useful' in their creative process. Together, we're going to be talking about the way that they think about space and Shakespeare. And today I'm very pleased to have both Declan and Nick on the other end of the line. Hello hello.

Nick
Hello Lucie.

Declan
Hello Lucie.

Lucie
There's been some great quarantine distractions available in the last few days, because the Maly Theatre in Moscow has been live streaming some of your past productions with them. Declan, is it an odd experience to watch shows from your past?

Declan
Yes, the Maly did one, which is *The Winter's Tale*, and the Theatre Confederation did three. It was extraordinary to see them, actually, because they're quite far in the past now. I was sort of overwhelmed really with how good the actors were.

Lucie
So, Nick, when you watch these productions, from sometimes a couple of decades ago, do you notice the way that you've developed your approach or your interests over the years?

Nick

It's very, very hard to say. Obviously, you look at certain things and you think, I wouldn't quite have done it like that. But on the whole, I think it's really hard to say. I think other people have to judge that.

Declan
I think, yes, I think you've got to kind of respect the past and think, 'that's how we did it.' And, you know, I have done *Macbeth* once, twice in our lives - three times. And each time you do it, it's different because there are different actors, it's a different space, different time. And it just comes out differently. And I've done *Measure for Measure* now twice, and *The Tempest* twice, and I quite like doing them again. It helps if they're in different languages the other time, because then you get a totally clean slate - you very rarely hangover an idea from one show to another, but then again we very rarely hangover an idea from before the rehearsals into the rehearsals.

Music

Lucie
So, today we're going to focus on the way that you think about space when you stage your plays together, both in terms of what it means for the actors, and how it influences your design. And later in the episode, we're going to use *Measure for Measure* as a test case, and I suspect we'll probably talk a bit about *Macbeth* as we go along. But let's start at the very beginning. Why is space so important to you?

Declan
It's very difficult to explain what we mean by space. I can put it in this form, I can say that what happens when we die? When we die, the space gets taken away from us. So the space is an enormous thing.

Lucie
So what has space got to do with acting?

Declan
Everything. It's got to do with our whole existence.

Nick
Human beings live in space. They've spent their lives dealing with the space, they are formed by the space, everything. The character (Macbeth, for example) lives in a space, a

changing space from second to second. Each character has their own special space. And it's very subjective. You look at a chair, perhaps your mother sat in that chair, that chair means something to you in your bedroom. The character deals with the space. And we as human beings spend our lives dealing with a space.

Declan
Yes, sometimes it's a criticism, a lot of people say, oh, you know, 'he's at the centre of the universe. He thinks he's the centre of the universe.' And of course, it's very annoying if somebody's self-obsessed like that. But unfortunately, we are at the centre of our own universes. We invent the world that we see. There is a reality, I'm sure, but we have no access to that reality other than through our imaginations. Nick and I are looking at a microphone now but we'll see different microphones. The microphones we see we have to invent somehow in our heads. One can't explain these things, but we can get used to these ideas. And we can say things *about* the space, which is different from defining it.

Lucie
How does the space influence the behaviour of a character, for example?

Declan
Well, there would be no character if there were no space. And the thing is that, in a mysterious way, we are not independent of the space, we only exist as part of this big binary. And that's the very hard thing to get one's head around.

Lucie
That's a striking statement, that there's no character without the space around them. So, let's unpack that a bit. How, for example, does the space define *Macbeth* in the scene we talked about last week, Act 1 Scene 7, when he leaves the dinner party in the next room offstage to talk to the audience about why he wants to kill Duncan.

Declan
I think that first we shouldn't in any way have the idea that space is something that only afflicts Shakespearean characters. You know, Nick and I are sort of hunched over a microphone and we're looking at your face, and we've the laptop open, and I'm trying to not make noise on the table. And I'm pinned in space.

For *Macbeth*, there's a million different ways of doing it, but the space will be central to all of them. There is no world, there's no life beyond the space. The space is what gets taken

away from us when we die, and death is what happens when the space gets taken away. Macbeth gets the feeling that he has to leave that table. Yes, we can interpret the stakes: because he feels suffocated; because there's no air in the room; because he has to get away from the man he is murdering; he needs space to think - and he comes out, and maybe doesn't want to speak to anybody, and maybe he sees us, and there are all sorts of stories that one might evolve in order for him to do that. But whatever solutions he comes up with, these will all be absolutely dependent on the space, and on him allowing that space to come before he does. That is the important thing. So it's not me and I spray a space around me - it's that is a space and I'm in it. I try to control that space. And so I imagine it to be all sorts of things other than it is. But it's going to be there before me, during me, and after me, and my perception of it will be continually changing.

If we need to break it down into steps, we can say - it's a bit leaden - but if we run into difficulty, we can say that one of the shapes of life is that I'm in a space, I have an impulse to cross a threshold to go to another space to find something which turns out to be different from what I had expected. And that last one gives us life, the fact that it's a continual surprise. When we look at any space, we see it's just one long transition from one space to another. There is no state of a space, the space itself is transitioning, and we are normally trying to keep up with that space that's changing much faster than is comfortable for us. It's like, you know, we think that the world is spinning too slowly. Actually it's spinning uncomfortably fast. And in all of these plays, events run out of control, and that they're trying to slow things down. It's rather sad to say to actors, you know, you must drive the play, because actually the space, the thresholds, the predicament, drives the action. And the characters are struggling to keep running with this thing that's running wild and out of control.

Lucie
So, one way of looking at what's driving this character through the space is that there's a problem in one space, it drives them into another space, but the new space only keeps presenting him with more problems - that the character's journey through the scene is dealing with the problems that the space is serving up to them.

Declan
That's exactly right. Yes, the space is never what he wants it to be. The space keeps presenting new challenges. And we all think, oh wait, if only the threshold changing would stop, if only the carousel would stop, then I can deal with it - if only it would stop! But it

doesn't. It just keeps going. And there we are. And that's what we do. And yes, he's continually dealing with the new things that he sees.

Lucie
So it sounds like the space is never static because the problem keeps changing all the time. I guess the longer he's out of dinner, the more he realises that he's going to be missed, and it looks suspicious, and the bigger his problems keep getting, and every face that he speaks to in the audience presents another source of discomfort, as if he's trying to persuade each one that the murder is a great idea. So the space is always changing, either serving up new problems or letting the existing ones grow worse.

Declan
Yeah, and then his wife flies in and Macbeth just says, ‘How now, what news?’

Lady Macbeth must think: ’News? News?! What news!? We've got the head of state next door!’

It must strike her as unbelievable that her husband cheerily asks her ‘what news?’ As if she's just been reading the paper! She must want to strangle him, that now, at the very last minute, he is going to screw up their minutely organised plan.

Mind you that’s only how I would tend to look at it. There will be many, many different ways of doing it. But I'll tell you what can never be different, and that is they're continually dealing with a new situation, crossing thresholds into new spaces, and seeing something that's new. And that is irrespective of any interpretation.

Lucie
So really, one way of rehearsing the play is to think, like you said, that it's a carousel of a space that's constantly, constantly, constantly putting the character in hot water.

Declan
Yes, or even better than the carousel is the idea that there's a bus running down a hill with no brakes, and your whole family's on it, or everyone you know is on it, and you're trying to jump on the bus to grab the wheel to steer it. So the energy is always coming from the outside, never from inside.

That's very important. It's not a dead situation, and we have to energise a dead situation. No. The situation is tumbling madly out of control, and I have to steer that energy. But the actor has to believe the energy is presented there by a disastrous situation.

Lucie

Nick, I've heard that part of your work as a designer in rehearsals is to help set up situations and études for the actors, to help them understand how the space is pressurised around the character. How would you do that in *Macbeth*, for example?

Nick

Well, for that particular scene, when Macbeth leaves that dinner, it would be incredibly useful to set up the dinner and use the rest of the cast as dinner party guests, so the two of them get some strong sense of what the dinner is like. And I think on occasions, we have had the cast actually talking off stage.

Declan

Yes we nearly always do that, we set up the full dinner party offstage.

Lucie

So you can almost feel the pressure cooker heat of the *other* scene in the scene that's being played.

Nick

There's a very natural tendency of actors to play the scene very much with your partner, so it becomes the scene between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. It's in fact a scene between Lady Macbeth and Macbeth about what's happening in the next room. And it's very easy to forget that, actually, the energy of the scene is coming from the next room.

Declan

I think this thing about the secondary space that Nick was talking about is so important. The danger is that the actor thinks that the scene is the scene. And it's not, the scene isn't just the scene, the scene is also the pressure being put on it by the scene outside.

Lucie

So without the pressure of the other space, there’s no point in the characters being here on stage in front of us. I think it's something that we will bizarrely familiar with right now, because we're all penned in at home under great pressure, feeling tremendously high stakes

because the space outside our front doors is filled with a pandemic. So outside is exerting huge pressure on us.

Nick

Exactly. If we jumped to another scene in *Macbeth* after they've done the murder, and he comes down the stairs having killed Duncan, and we have a quite - well, very complex - scene, again between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. But if you analyse it, Macbeth in particular never leaves the space where he's done the murder. The whole thing for him is about the space he's left, the horrible space where he's murdered Duncan. But it's very tempting for the actors to play what appears to be the important scene, which is between the two of them. Whereas in fact, the whole energy of the scene comes from what's happened.

Lucie

Great. So when we look at every scene, there's always going to be another space that we can't see - the space that they've just left or the space they need to go to - that's supercharging what's happening in front of our eyes.

Nick

Absolutely, and that's true of every scene you choose to discuss. If you look at *Three Sisters*, the space of the house that they're in is defined by the other space, which is the town, the small town where they live. At the end of the first act, one element of the town walks in, and that's Natasha. And it turns out that she's going to marry into the family. So the external pressure of the town walks into the space, and that pressure drives the whole play. And by the end of the play, the town, in the form of Protopopov, has actually taken over the house they live in, and they're very driven out of their own space, into the garden outside the house.

Lucie

And in fact, all the way through the play, they are sort of caught between spaces. They're tethered to this house, which is not what it used to be, not as it was when their father was alive. It's full of his memory. And they're also constantly wanting to be somewhere else - to be in Moscow. They're trapped in an in-between space, they're caught between longing for what this space was and wanting to escape to another space. So they're trapped in a space they don't want to be in.

Nick

Exactly. And so, yes, the other space is exactly as you say - what that space was like when the father was there and it was full of officers. And so there is, again, another imaginary space. So those spaces are incredibly complicated for all of the different individual characters.

Lucie
Declan, one thing that I've once heard you tell an actor (which sounds definitely not true, but useful) is that the character has no internal life and is only dealing with external circumstances. So this seems, in some ways, very radical, and in other ways, extremely obvious. Can you explain what you meant?

Declan
I wouldn't like to say *no* internal life, I'm saying your internal life will be fine - you'll get masses of internal life, just actually worry about dealing with the changing space, and then you'll get as much internal life as you need. The important thing is not to consciously worry about your inner life, because if you do that will become a defence against you interacting with the outside world. And the problem with that is that's precisely what we all want to do, because the present moment is terrifying, as Beckett would make clear.

Lucie
I think I find it a really useful approach because there's lots of ideas about acting and directing which involve trying to summon internal emotions, and which have always seemed to me as a director not particularly useful, particularly because, as we know, talking about motives can be quite treacherous (and we covered that in the last episode), but also because it becomes very quickly subjective and often quite clichéd. But it's very practical to say that the character is in reaction to something outside themselves.

Declan
Yes, I'd say any direct tampering with your inner life, like, 'I need to be sad here, I need to be this here', is wrong. Always. It's a disaster. That's what I'd say. Let me come off the fence. It's a disaster. And thinking in terms of your internal life is a disaster.

Sometimes we'll say, 'oh, that actor is no good on screen because he's got no internal life'. Well, I know what they mean. But if you actually look at the great screen performances, you'll see that the so-called 'internal life' is in fact always somebody reacting to an impulse that's outside them, that there's a symbiosis between themselves and something from the outside. If you're astute, you'll just worry about the external impulse, you'll just worry about

the external space, the thresholds or whatever, you'll worry about those structures. And if you think, you know, ‘I need to keep a balance, it's a bit of me and a bit of it, you know, it's a bit of the space and a bit of me inside, ‘come on, let's be fair’, then you'll probably have a disaster because the internal bit is going take you over. And what you really need to do is to empty yourself as much as you can, to seeing all the different things that the character sees.

Now, you have to of course study the mask before you spin the mask. And you have to see that the world that the Macbeths sees is very different from the world that the actor sees. So for example, the Macbeths, in different ways, have fantasies about Duncan, they have to kill him. There's only one motive and the motive is to avoid the bad feeling. That's our motive. And they get a bad feeling. They think about Duncan going on living, they get a bad feeling when they think of not seizing this opportunity that he's in the house that night, they get a bad feeling that they will turn up their one great opportunity to become king and queen. They get a bad feeling. They think they're going to be forever losers. They think they're going to kill Duncan, and that's going to be a disaster for their eternal souls and they get a bad feeling about that. So they're actually ricocheting from one bad feeling to another feeling. That's the motive they have.

Lucie
I've often heard you talk to actors about the idea that feelings can actually take on clothes and exist outside the character, in the space, rather than inside. It's a bit like, I suppose, in *The Cherry Orchard* where the presence of this dead child, Grisha, is everywhere and his memory is embedded in the furniture, in the walls, and the trees outside. And we could talk about the feeling of grief that the characters have inside them, or we could more practically work on them constantly, constantly, constantly having to encounter objects and spaces which are completely invested with Grisha. So the grief becomes part of the physical, external space.

Declan
It's like there's a couple, and they are having a problem and one's doing the washing up and says, ‘so I really think, you know, we need to talk a little bit about our relationship. I'm not sure that it's quite working out the way I hoped it would. And I am beginning to think that maybe we need some time apart.’

And then bit by bit, you know, you maybe think about a divorce. But very soon something strange happens between people. It is no longer just the two of them. The divorce, or the separation or whatever, starts to take flesh unto itself and it becomes like a third person. We

tend to incarnate ideas after a while, or incorporate is another word - to give flesh to something.

Lucie
So just like in *Macbeth*, as soon as they imagine the possibility of the murder, it becomes this horrible looming presence in the castle with them. It's sitting next to Duncan at that awful dinner party. So of course, Macbeth feels he needs to escape outside to talk to us.

Declan
Exactly. It's now in the space, and from now on, everything that they do is going to be in relation to that. So they no longer have the freedom of what I want and what you want. It's like, what does *it* want? What does the murder want? It starts to exert its own gravitational pull.

Lucie
I think it would be useful at this point for us to go back to another important word that you use, which is ‘threshold’. You seem to use it both when you talk about crossing from one space into another, but also when the space changes in front of the character’s very eyes, and they have to cross into a new predicament in the space

Declan
These things happen so quickly. You see, the more we examine the space, when we look into the pixels that make up the photo, we realise that the space is actually one endlessly changing threshold. I think it's really important to use the word space to begin with, because it's not just a generalised blob of goo, experience. It's not like, ‘urgh, the whole thing's moving anyway, why bother to talk about it?’ The whole thing's moving anyway, and we *need* to talk about it. Because it's absolutely vital that we understand that it changes.

So I would say that if you really slow things down, what happens every moment that we're alive really is that I'm in a space, I have an impulse to cross the threshold to go to another space, which is different from what I had expected. That's the most important one. So the idea is always an expectation that's always challenged, denied, challenged - maybe pleasantly, maybe not. But that is that moment of surprise. That is actually the moment of life.

Lucie

And so what we're trying to do when we set up rehearsals is create anchors, so that we can create as many surprises for the character as possible. So setting up the space is crucial to getting going with the play.

Declan
Well, I think what we do in rehearsal is that we set up a skeleton, but the skeleton isn't the living thing. We set up a skeleton which is very often like the skeleton of a life form like a lobster in which we have only the external skeleton, not an internal skeleton, like in a mammal. So it's something that holds use and then we are going to allow flesh to grow within it. So we do need a structure of space and some sense of big thresholds and so on. But at the end of the day, yes the space is always changing.

Lucie
And so, Nick, in your work with the design does that preoccupy you a lot, setting up thresholds, creating a space that's full of this lobster skeleton that we can grow life in?

Nick
Well, no, in fact, it's my preoccupation to make sure that the space is free enough for them to be able to imagine this space, and doesn’t constrict them. So if I were to provide all those things like the staircase they’ve come down, like the door to the second bedroom, I think I would have strangled the play because it would have made it completely concrete. And they need to imagine those spaces, I don't need to provide them, thankfully. I think I would actually destroy the play by over-designing it.

Declan
But the actors do have to imagine concrete things. And they absolutely have to imagine they've been somewhere and they're going somewhere else.

Lucie
So this seems to be a really useful set of offers for an actor in a rehearsal process, that they're dealing with this rapidly changing space. So the character comes into view, propelled by the pressure from the space that they've left only to encounter a new space, which is not what they were expecting, teeming with thresholds and surprises and invested fears and ideas that have taken on flesh. So they basically go through a series of encounters with things outside of themselves. They only have to deal with the space and not with worrying if they're feeling enough or not feeling the right thing.

Declan
I have to say that I do feel a bit sick, though, at the prospect of making the actor in any way feel that they're responsible for all of these things. I think it's much, much better if the actor thinks that all of these things are available to the actor, as opposed to something that they must do. And it's just a way of thinking. But what I'd like to remove from the actor's shoulders is the responsibility of creating internal feelings, creating a character.

Music

Lucie
In this part of today's episode, we're going to have a chat about Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* and how the space was important in your work on it. For all our listeners, Declan and Nick's Russian language production is available from the Cheek by Jowl website. Simply sign up on the Education Packs page to gain access to a recording of the full show. So Nick, could you describe your design for this production, and tell us about the way you were thinking about space as you went about it?

Nick
Well, what you will see is an abstract space with very few elements - in fact, five red boxes. And that came about as part of our process, which we call 'in the woods', which is a week's or 10 days' preparation in advance with the actors, where they showed us études, as it were improvisations, about the different worlds in the play. And they're really quite complex, these worlds. There's the world of the government, which Angelo and the Duke are part of. There's the world of the prison. And there's the world of the underworld of the city. There's the world of the city itself, and the world of convent that Isabella leaves, and then there's the world of the prison, where Claudio, the brother, is in prison. And we worked on these different worlds, and we tried to find a space that could accommodate all of them. And we ended up with this abstract space with really only one element, which is the table, which is used as a sort of symbol of power for the government and a symbol of power for the Provost to run to the prison. And it suggests a prison cell when Claudio meets Isabella in the prison.

Our way in was to take the play as a psychological journey for the Duke, who begins in an uncomfortable place because he can't tolerate being a Duke, and he gives up and hands over power to Angelo, his deputy, and then watches almost all the proceedings of what happens. So we treated it as his psychological journey, almost like a dream, and in fact, we've been talking about thresholds, but the way we approached it was in fact to remove all thresholds, more like a dream, so that we jump from space to space. The spaces are

presented to him, like Angelo and Isabella, without them crossing a threshold, ironically. Though this we kind of discovered quite late on in the process, how in fact actors come on stage, because we present the whole company almost as a personification of the Duke's personality, and there are different elements. Barnadine, who he releases at the end of the play, is kind of representative of his dark side, and Isabella of his more spiritual side, so that the body of actors represents different parts of himself. And to begin with, they mirror him, which suggests that they are him. They are in fact on stage throughout, and then they create these images for him. And so we follow his psychological progress through an abstract space.

Lucie
So it sounds like you set about building a space which catalysed his dream-like progress through the play, rather than building a space which specifically illustrated a dream.

Nick
Yes, exactly. I think it allows all those elements to exist. And hopefully vividly, because the actors, of course, are incredibly expressive. And hopefully the ideas have sparked off in the imagination of the audience.

Declan
It's just important for anybody listening to this to not think that Nick and I have this conversation beforehand and that we know what we're doing. And so, yes, it's all about the dissolution of thresholds. But I think that's something that we see now looking back on it. I don't think we ever had a conversation about wanting to dissolve thresholds - we would not think about it in this explanatory way. So, in a way, you can take a note from acting perhaps from what we're doing now, which is I think a motive is our way of explaining what we have done, not with what we are going to do. And that's why it's very, very misleading asking an actor, 'do you know what your motive is?', because it's dodgy. And we tend, actually, I don't know if Nick will agree with me, but we don't actually discuss it in that way at all. We work very instinctively together.

Nick
Yes, I remember the moment we discovered Escalus being delivered as a character by the chorus was very pragmatic. It was really a matter of solving how to get the actor on stage as the character. But it released that idea, which subsequently we can interpret as dissolving thresholds. Sounds very good, but I mean, it was actually quite a practical process and pragmatic process of doing the play.

Lucie

That’s one of the things I really admire about your designs, this less-is-more approach. They often have a stark simplicity with just a few elements which fire up the space, like providing a climbing frame for the actor's imagination rather than strictly illustrating an image. So do you deliberately set out to only include the few elements you really need for the scene, or do you find yourself taking stuff away as you go?

Nick

Well, I think part of the origin of our work is that we have developed from touring, which requires simplicity and being lightweight, and we started very early on, you know, with virtually nothing in a small van and just the actors. I mean, I think you said the word actually is ‘need’, and I think in theatre, ‘need’ is a very good coordinate, because I don't like to think of theatre designers as - there’s a horrible French word of ‘decorateur’ - of anything that is actually decorative. And it takes quite a lot of mental discipline to analyse what is decorative and to remove it, frankly, and to make sure that everything on stage is actually needed. And if you analyse a great production, any production, you will find that what is there is rooted in need, even the most spectacular musicals.

Declan

To begin with I’d gone into rehearsal with an idea that I'd quite like to do it in a very real way, to make the government offices very real and to have, you know, proper doors and everything. Then Nick patiently pointed out that this would not be sufficiently fluent for the easy passage from one scene to another. And that's how we ended up with it. But, I mean, I think Nick’s got a different version of this from me, but you know, he did present me with the five boxes and the desk and the chair. I liked it, and it worked and we worked with it together. But it was kind of from Nick’s subconscious, you know, he couldn't explain it. I couldn't explain it and, you know, it was kind of character-building looking at it.

Music

Lucie

In this part of today's episode, we're going to be answering some questions which the listeners have asked for both of you. One listener wants to know that with the new live stream and live captures that are going out in isolation from various theatres, has it changed the idea of what the space means to you, now this online performance context is developed?

Declan

No, I don't think so. I've noticed, it's another space, the livestream, but then we see a lot of the great stories in the world are about the spectacle of somebody telling a story. So somebody starts by telling a story to somebody else, like the Mahabharata. You know, someone's telling someone else a story, and you're watching the spectacle of that story being told. So, there's grand historical precedence for eavesdropping on a story that somebody else is being told. And I think that's what happens in the live stream, that you're watching actors performing to a living audience, and you're going to be the Oedipal third. It'll be different, it doesn't necessarily need to be worse.

Lucie

We also have a question from a listener who'd love to hear about your experience or your advice about adapting novels for the stage, given that one of your very early productions was an adaptation of *Vanity Fair*.

Nick

Well, the wonderful thing about the novels we have chosen to adapt is that they almost adapt themselves, in that you can take the language of the novelist and turn it to your advantage. Actually, in both cases, in *Vanity Fair* and *Great Expectations* (which we did for the Royal Shakespeare Company), we simply structured it and used the voice of the novelist, which is incredibly powerful. In fact, I can't imagine doing this work, particularly *Vanity Fair*, without using his voice because it gives layers of irony and humour. And the same with Dickens. His own voice is unbelievably distinctive and energetic and gives a power which you cannot replace by straight character dialogue, I think. So I'm afraid to say the skills involved in adapting the more to do with scissors and paste. That's what it was about for us.

Lucie

And finally, we've got lots of questions coming up about the new book, and when it's coming out. Can you tell us more about that?

Declan

We've changed in the 21 years since *The Actor and The Target*, the world's changed, everything's changed. So we see things in a somewhat different way. But we can't explain it - if you say, 'how is it different?', we can't say how it's different. It's just there are certain words we use less, and certain other words that we use more. All the words are imperfect. And it's a sort of way of looking at things. The reason I'm having difficulty in writing the book

is that the matrix thing that we talked about in *The Actor and The Target*. You can't really isolate one of the spider's legs from another. Each of the difficulties are mutually affecting each other. I actually use the word quarantine, you can't quarantine one of the problems from another (but quarantine has become a bit too fashionable at the moment). But that's even worse than the second book. In other words, it's so incredibly difficult to have to find a coherent step-by-step path. But it would be dishonest, maybe, of me to try and impose that on it because it's not that sort of thing. It's not even like a circle. It's more like a sphere. And it's hard to extrapolate a step-by-step page-by-page process. Nevertheless, that's what we're going to try to do.

Lucie
Fantastic. Well, we are looking forward to Declan's spherical book.

Declan
Before then you're going to get spherical Declan, because I can't tell you how much I'm eating and how little I'm exercising. So yes, I'm actually going to be the shape of my book.

Lucie
Fantastic. Well, on that note, that's where we're going to end for today. Thank you very much, both to Declan and Nick. And everybody stay safe and well in this next week of quarantine.

Episode 3
Into the Woods

Lucie
Welcome to Cheek by Jowl's podcast 'Not True, But Useful…' This is episode three, 'Into the Woods'.

I'm your host, Lucie Dawkins, and in this podcast I'm going to take you behind the scenes with a series of interviews with Declan Donnellan and Nick Ormerod, the co-Artistic Directors of the internationally renowned theatre company Cheek by Jowl. They're going to be sharing the ideas that they find 'not true, but useful' in making their work. In this episode, we're going to be talking about Declan and Nick's symbiotic collaboration as director and designer and how they've developed a working practice together. I've got both of them here today as we record this episode remotely from across the coronavirus lockdown. How are you both doing this week?

Nick
Very well thanks Lucie.

Declan
We're fine, we're surviving. We're doing rather well actually.

Lucie
I know you've been doing these virtual conferences and seminars and master classes in lots of different countries this week. What's been your advice to young theatre makers in this weird time?

Declan
I think it's a great time to suspend your FOMO, your fear of missing out, because everybody else is locked down too. And to see if that can decrease some of the panic that gets inculcated in us all. It certainly did when I was young and more so now - I think it's a general trend. And see if you can just be with yourself a bit better and think a bit clearly and not feel too much punishment from people who are advising *'you must use this time, you must use this time!',* because you can punish yourself and shame yourself into prodigious feats of self-improvement. And leave you empty afterwards. Whereas, in fact, just actually relaxing and

paying attention to the world outside and to yourself and to the people who are immediately there is actually a very good thing, and sometimes we get pressured not to do that because of imagined pressures outside.

Lucie
In today's episode, we're going to focus on one thing that makes Cheek by Jowl's work unique, which is the equal collaboration between you both as a director and designer. It's incredibly rare for a director and designer to work exclusively together over the course of a lifetime, as you do. You literally live and work 'cheek by jowl'. Later in the episode, we're going to look at one of your latest productions, *The Revenger's Tragedy*, a case in point. But first, Nick, can you tell us where it all began? What was your very first production together?

Nick
Well, our very first production together was on the fringe in London. It was actually set in Charing Cross hospital morgue, which has since been demolished but it was a theatre space called 'Theatre Space'. It was one of the first fringe theatres in London, run by a woman called Anne Fenn. And it was a production of *Tis Pity She's a Whore*, which we've since done, but in a completely different way. That event - actually, we were talking about it earlier - was remarkable for us because we were driven back onto absolute minimal resources. And the production was made with three benches, which bolted together into a bed. And there was an image of the two lovers being processed by the rest of the company, carried around in a procession on this 'bed'. And it somehow just sort of happened like that. We thought to ourselves, somehow our partnership was created kind of out of nowhere, and it was that production which started us working together.

Lucie
And it's funny to see those benches turning up again over the decades. In *The Winter's Tale* you had benches that slotted together and moved around the stage as well.

Nick
That is perfectly true Lucie. It is also true, and I do confess it openly, that I've only ever designed really basically one set. And that's involved a lot of boxes. We used to be called Crate by Jowl. And I admit this openly. I've only ever designed one set.

Declan
It basically came down to solving problems, and then Nick had the idea of the benches to be connected and the sheet to be deployed as a wedding dress as a winding sheet that we

started to use to make different spaces on stage. But to say where the idea came from, we wouldn't really know. It was just suddenly, magically there. I've noticed you can sweat, sweat, sweat in rehearsal as you concentrate. Then sometimes instead you relax. And then in that moment of relaxation, attention can happen. And then, amazingly, you're standing there having a cup of tea (or in the old days having a fag outside) and something comes to you - and often, frankly, it seems to come from nowhere.

Lucie
And I know that before you worked together as director and designer, you worked together as actors. Could you tell us a bit more about that?

Nick
It is perfectly true. We met on, funnily enough, a touring theatre company at university, which toured Europe called the European Theatre Group, which we have done ever since, but in different roles. And it was a production of *Macbeth*, where Declan played Lennox, and I played the Second Murderer and the Scottish doctor. As the Second Murderer, I was terrible, but as the Scottish doctor, I believe I was definitive.

Declan
The other strange thing is that Nick and I met touring Shakespeare in Europe, but it was money given to the university or to the group by Europe to celebrate Britain's entry into the European Union. So we'd be there with our anoraks and there would be ‘do’s afterwards. That was our first experience of the ‘do’.

Nick
We are talking antiquity here.

Declan
Antiquity, with Britain entering the EU.

Nick
And now we're leaving.

Declan
This was ’72, and now we're leaving. Leaving the European Union creates a great sense of loss for us and for many, many, many people. But it is weird that that was when and how we began.

Lucie
And I also know that you both had careers in the law before you came into the theatre. So what gave you both the bug for the theatre?

Nick
Well, I studied law at university for three whole years and realised quite soon that I would make a terrible lawyer. But I was drawn to acting, which is exactly what we've been just been talking about. And that made me stage struck. So that was it really. However, Declan's never let me act.

Lucie
Yet...

Nick
So I had to end up designing!

Declan
I started reading English, and I met Nick then. And he was a year older than me, and I decided I was going to do law as well, like Nick. And I stuck at it. And then we both became barristers. I mean, it's grotesque now, if you look back at it.

Nick
But I never actually practised.

Declan
But you were called, weren't you?

Nick
I was called to the bar.

Declan
So anyway, I went on, ate my dinners and got my wig. Sadly, I never took a photograph in it, because I don't think anyone ever believes it. They think I'm raving when I talk about the past. But I did have a wig, and I did actually go into court. I never defended anyone. I was only ever a pupil. But it definitely is a small part of me, and part of me at a very formative age.

Lucie
And apart from the wigs, what else has transferred over from your time as a lawyer into theatre?

Nick
Very little that I think I've spent the years subsequent to that trying to unlearn that mode of thinking, and I still probably haven't quite succeeded.

Declan
Oh, I think you have. To be really frank, it always seems to me that I've learned nothing. I still go through something and I feel like I've been a seed going through the digestive process of a bird. I know I'm different somehow. I haven't so much as actually 'learned' something, it is just that I've changed, but I can't really see the change. So it's very hard to say.

Lucie
So, can you tell us a little bit more about how Cheek by Jowl first formed as a company?

Nick
Yes. We were supported very early on by an absolutely remarkable woman called Ruth Marks, who died very sadly at the age of 40. And with others she had created a circuit of small theatres around the country and encouraged theatres like Portable Theatre to service these studio theatres. She encouraged us to tour and she saw that production of *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*. And for our next production, she gave us a small grant, in fact, I think was £5,000. And we were able to pay, well not pay equity minimum but sort of somewhere near that. And we toured *The Country Wife* with a set of a large box. This box had wheels, which was a huge progression. It had hinged windows and doors. And it substituted as a wardrobe and all sorts of different things in *The Country Wife* and that production sort of set us off on the road touring and gradually we built up from one night stands, to begin with, over the years. On one tour we played 18 consecutive one night stands. That was in the middle of a much longer tour from one side of the country to the other. The poor actors, sitting in this van - everything was in the van, the six actors and this wardrobe. And they were criss-crossing the country like fury. So those were our early days. And it seemed a huge success if we managed to get two dates in one place. And then three days - that was amazing. And then we became, after many years, we became what was called 'a middle-scale company',

and we could play whole weeks and that felt like a total triumph. But we're talking, you know, developing over, how many years now, since 1981.

Lucie
And so how could you describe the way that you would talk about the design and the play in your very early days as a company, for example, for *The Country Wife*? Or for *Othello* in the early 80s? What did those conversations look like?

Nick
Brief.

Declan
Yes. I mean, really, it is really difficult for us to answer that question. And it's like asking what's the mystery? What's the secret? And we don't really know. We talk about the play, talk about actors, talk about things that are happening in it. And then on the whole, Nick would do sketches and present me with, basically, a space. I never think of Nick's sets as being decorative in any way. A very important thing in design, in directing, is 'what's **not** there'.

If you think of a good photographer's work, there are two things that are important. There's what's been put in the photograph, and just as important is what's been left outside the photograph. We often think that it's only what's inside that matters. And it's not - it's what's *outside* that matters equally. In fact really for the artist it's actually useful to think that what is left out matters *more*. What is excluded creates what is included. And that's very much true in something like stage design. I must say, personally (as opposed to Nick) I don't like to think of us as being director and designer. I like to think of it as us being joint theatre makers.

Nick
And it's true that we choose the company together. So there is always both of us in auditions and choosing the actors.

Declan
And the most agonising moment in our relationship, I must say, artistically, seriously, is choosing the play. Because once you've chosen the play, and then once you've chosen the actors, then the bus is rolling down the hill, and you've got to jump into it and grab the steering wheel and steer it. So many decisions have already been taken in the name of the

play and the actors. And then there are other ones, like the spaces it's going to perform in and so on.

Nick

And well, from early days, I mean, it had to be incredibly portable. To do one night stands, you need that discipline. You learn that discipline of discovering what is actually needed. Absolutely, the word *need* is really at the heart of it.

Lucie

And how do you go about choosing your next script to work on?

Declan

That really is such a big question. And we really wish we knew the answer.

Nick

Sometimes we've had a list but we've never chosen to play off that list. It's always been from side field.

Declan

The chief reason we love to work in Russia is that there we've got some actors that we love, and we are continuing to work with them, and we expand with them and they expand with us, some of them like Sasha Feklistov, you know, we've grown old with. And then we'd really like to think of a play to do for that particular actor, you know, something that they'd be particularly good at, and then that's great because it's not just being generous, it's using something that will give us a sort of hook, because if you can choose anything you can choose nothing. You know, it's not really fair to say to a child, ‘draw me anything.’ And the child will often say, ‘what?’ - ‘oh anything!’. And actually, it's quite lazy. It's much better if you say, ‘well, draw me a tree’ - ‘No, I want to draw a house!’ - ‘Okay, draw a house.’ So if we can give ourselves some rule, then that narrows the field and that field narrowing is very useful for us. That's a great consolation.

Nick

That's the nature of theatre, is that it's never a completely blank canvas. I can't imagine anything more terrifying than a blank canvas. All sorts of things, you've got to service the play and service the actors, you've got to service the spaces you're going to. It's really pragmatic when it gets down to it.

Declan
Yes, except we do make a choice of the play.

Nick
But we don't make a choice of the spaces we go to.

Declan
No, we'd like to have some more choice about where we go to and we're very happy with where we go to, but it's quite touch and go.

Nick
And also it needs to be flexible. I mean, the pressure now, absolutely, from producers, (if we are working with a producer, like the Chekhov Festival) is that they need to be able to get it in in one day.

Declan
But Nick's taste is always for very simple things. And I remember in 1986, I think it was the first time we were asked to work abroad. The head of the National Theatre of Finland came to see us and asked us if we could do a show for them. And we chose *Macbeth* because we had actually never done *Macbeth*. I can't believe there was a time when Nick and I had never directed *Macbeth*, but there was! And it was very scary for us. And these are big theatre institutions, the Kansallisteatteri in the middle of Helsinki, and Nick said, 'what's the budget?' and they looked confused. They asked, 'how do you mean, budget?' - 'Well, how much money can I spend on the set?' And they said, 'what you need!' And then I asked what the rehearsal period was and they said, 'well, it's what you need.' So both of these things became problematic for us because we no longer had things to wall in our imaginations. For our imaginations to have to fight to break through. So Nick, who could have had gold plated the set as far as we can make out, came up with, without question, his simplest design. I think there was actually nothing on the stage whatsoever. Is that right?

Nick
It is true, yes.

Declan
Basically true. There wasn't even a single prop, the whole thing was mimed. And then around week six or seven, I realised that there was a gear change at that stage that you could always rely on with English actors, which was the panic about the opening night. And

it's deep wired in us all that now we're going to work faster and faster. English actors naturally have a rhythm. You start in a slightly more slow way and then you gear up and gear up and gear up and you work harder and faster - but in Helsinki it seemed that didn't exist! And so I said to the actors, ‘look, this play’s got to open you know, we've got to start shifting up a gear!’ And they said, ‘well, actually, no, it doesn't have to open at any specific date. It'll open when we're ready.’ And I thought, this play will never be ready, because there is no urgency in our work. So we had to artificially set an opening date (it was still a massively long rehearsal period) in order for that to happen. Oh, and the Finnish show didn't have to tour. That was very important. So we had enormous amounts of stagehands and so on to do any complex set changes. But we just decided we didn't want them anyway. Strange, when a luxury seems superficial. So it's something that had become basic to us, rather than being forced on us.

Anyway, it was wonderful, *Macbeth* came back another year there and so on. They asked us back and we had a long deep relationship with Finland. I remember that. So afterwards, we realised about ourselves that the limitations that we had got used to had got hardwired into us, like with Nick with his simplicity.

Lucie
Could you describe what your ideal process for working with actors looks like?

Declan
I think our ideal working process is one we're only really able to do in Russia, because it offers us those conditions. We know many of the actors in advance - not all, some will always be new in each production, but there will be a large core we have worked with before. And we ask to do *‘the woods’.*

In ‘the woods’, you take the actors outside the city centre and you stay in some sort of basic hotel (trees are an advantage, quiet is essential, a lake is a plus, and internet access a minus!) And it's amazing how much work you get done. You sit around the fire at night, sing songs and roast sausages for yourselves and it's great. But during the days you are so relaxed you steam through masses of work.

There’s no mystery, we don’t function as a druidic cult in an oak grove. It’s just like an ordinary rehearsal. I'll talk about the play, and we might even read a bit of the play. Nick's always present with his sketchbook and then I'll get the actors to prepare what we call études, or studies of bits of things in the play.

We love it when finally the actors say excitedly, *'go away, go away, go away! We want two hours, we want two and a half hours. - let us show you something! '* So they shoo me and Nick away.

Nick
Which is great for us, because we go off in the morning.

Declan
Yes, we go off on a long walk around the trees. We come back and find they have set up two chairs for us, and then they show us something. And it's amazing how many of those things we've used. In fact, nearly all of them.

In *The Tempest*, again after we had discussed the play as usual they said, *'go away, go away, go away'.* And I had talked (probably too much) about a specific expression in the storm scene which is '*we split'*. I remember being specifically exercised that the characters say we *'split'* and not for example, we *'sink'.* The boat, as it were, splits in two, and that split is going to get healed by the end of the play. The halves reunite. And after they had shooed us away and we waited and waited and finally they brought me and Nick to the side of a lake, and, lo and behold! they had actually lashed two boats together, two rowing boats, and rowed this creation out into the middle of the lake. Which was quite a big lake. And then they acted the storm and suddenly they did the whole splitting in front of us, they cried: *'We split! We split!'* Whereupon they did actually 'spilt' the boats and, yes, they all fell into the lake. And then, coughing and spluttering, they each crawled slowly out through the mud, and staged a full scale amphibious landing onto the shores around our chairs - and it was overwhelming. It was so surprising and powerful. They're all covered in mud and writhing and full of water. You know, I was going say that's where we had the *idea* of water. But on re-consideration that expression is a lie. Maybe this is the deepest lie for making theatre. 'The **idea** of…' It's **not** just an idea of water. It **IS** water. To quote Lear, it is 'the thing itself'. It's the actual embodied presence of water. That's completely different from the idea of water. That distance is totally central to everything we do. Or try to. To remember that the *idea* is not an approximation to life. The i*dea* can become a defence against life. And just to see that in the slimy flesh and bone moved us. And so Nick used that.

Nick
Well it was our suspicion - in the play, in fact, Shakespeare excludes the possibility of wet clothes because good clothes at that time were so expensive he couldn't afford to have them

wet. But we believe that in the spirit of it, the group of lords with the king should come on soaking wet. So we designed a set which enabled them to come on soaking wet.

Declan
So you know, that is a good example of the letter of the law versus the spirit of the law. If you follow the letter of the law, sometimes, like here for example, it may be a great heresy because Shakespeare has one of the characters saying, ‘gosh, we've had a shipwreck, isn't it amazing? Our clothes are just as new as the first day we put them on!’ And indeed, the first time we had done *The Tempest* (in English in 1988), we scrupulously followed the letter of the law.

Then after years pass you slowly start to realise, actually, no, sometimes the letter of the law is not as important as the spirit of the law. And that at the moment when the spirit of the law and the letter of the law seem to conflict, you always choose the spirit. The really important thing is that you give the audience the experience of the experience itself, as well as you can, here - of what it actually feels like to have been tipped into the water and to survive, to have to drag yourself out onto dry land. So this time our ‘best’ was to cut the line and have the court crawl onstage soaking wet, struggling with their suitcases and clothes, and then they had to sit uncomfortably and rinse them out and so on.

Nick
And then during that pause after that it's my job to design the set, and it gives the builders time because things take slightly longer in Russia to build it in time for rehearsal.

Lucie
Great. So do you then have your set available to you in rehearsal?

Nick
Well, having said that, we don't manage that on the whole, do we?

Declan
No, only occasionally. But the model that Nick then presents at the early part of the rehearsal period has actually grown from the grassroots up, so it's a much more organic thing. It's not like something we impose from our secret director/designer discussions! **Not** something that's been born like the goddess Athena perfect and fully formed! Instead the birth of the design has been bubbling in mud and slime on the banks of a lake somewhere. And it has the authority that comes from organic things that are allowed to grow. Real

authority derives from experience and not from theory. And after that beginning we may well rehearse perhaps sometimes quite traditionally in many respects, but we've got a place to start from that's rooted in embodied experience.

Obviously, in England, we can't do that - because we can't possibly get the actors together for a period before the contracted rehearsal period, because that's simply not how the contract system works there. So in London for example, we need to make a slightly longer rehearsal period, and we try to do all that exploratory work crammed into the first two weeks of that. This presents a challenge to Nick to get it all together by the second weekend of rehearsal, and he has to keep his eyes on the practicality of what can actually be built between now and the 3 and a half weeks time before we open. So it's more stressful if those periods of research, the woods and the rehearsal have all to be squashed together. I know very well that these are luxury conditions, and it's taken a long time to achieve them. And we're very grateful for these conditions when we have them. But that is just our ideal way of working.

Lucie
And I've heard that sometimes the actual space of your rehearsal rooms affects the design. Could you talk a bit more about that?

Nick
Well specifically, we rehearse quite often in the Jerwood space, which is in London, and we were rehearsing *The Changeling* there. And *The Changeling* is complicated, because you have to somehow bring two worlds together, one of which is the world of the aristocracy, and apparently unrelated is the world of the madhouse. And I was struggling to imagine how this would work together. And it just turned out that the actual door in the rehearsal room work was working really well. So I thought, well, why not use that door? And so we built it. I got the builder in and said, *'look, let's have that door'*, and it had a glass panel in, which you could half see through, and I think was effective in terms of bloodstained hands on the glass door, and people dying behind the door so you didn't quite see. Anyway, it worked. It worked very well in rehearsal. And I couldn't see a good reason not to have it in performance.

Declan
It was funny arriving in the big formal theatres of Europe, to discover the Jerwood rehearsal room with its green exit sign over the door, exactly reproduced - often many times over because often the local theatre would build a whole new set in situ.

Lucie
So any London-based actors or theatre makers listening into this who work in the Jerwood space, that's the door to Studio One. Next time you see it...

Nick
It's actually Rehearsal Room 3!

Lucie
Starring role! I hope it got a credit in the program.

Declan
Well you might, if you see any photos of *The Changeling,* behind Olivia Williams and Tom Hiddleston there in the background seems to be the Jerwood Space door. But in fact it's the fake door that we toured with.

Lucie
The way that you work is quite different to the way that a lot of theatres operate. So many theatres, for example, tend to ask for a design presentation before rehearsals even begin, or don't have the infrastructure like in the UK contract system for 'going into the woods'. And I know you have an amazing team of humans in the Cheek by Jowl offices who support your process. But how do you advocate for what you need and your way of working? And what's your bottom line of compromise?

Nick
Well, it's not so much compromise, I don't think. It is true we've been working with an amazing team in the office, but also with Angie Burns, for example, in costume, who's quite used to our way of working. She works as an independent artist. And she knows what to expect in terms of costume, which is, in fact, very last minute. Technically I'm used to the fact, and have developed an instinct so that I know what can be built. I hate to come back to boxes, but they're quite simple. And they need to be flexible and lightweight and break down, you know, to go in airplanes etc, it's an instinct for what's possible. Actually not so much an instinct than what's built up over experience.

Declan
You know, it's a political issue really in a way because you have to work out what's possible and what can be improved, and always you have to work within the constraints and try to

transcend them. Ignoring limitations is the best way to become a victim of them. You have to see the limitations, and then see in what way you can transcend them.

Lucie

As always, in every episode, we take a specific play or a scene that Declan and Nick have worked on to do a deep dive into the ideas that we've been discussing. And today, it's the turn of *The Revenger's Tragedy,* which is one of Cheek by Jowl's latest productions with the Piccolo Teatro in Milan. And you can check out clips and images from this show in the Cheek by Jowl archives. And as a quick summary, Thomas Middleton's play follows Vindice who's drawn into a terrible helter-skelter of punishment in a corrupt Italian court as he seeks revenge at any cost for his murdered fiancé. So Declan and Nick, can you describe what first drew you to this play?

Declan

Well, again, it's one I've been in at university, and which I had read for A Level. My A Level is so long ago it was said to be by [Cyril] Tourneur, and it's actually been re-allocated since then to Middleton. I've always liked the play. He's got some wonderful scenes in there, and it's about some very disturbing themes.

Also we had to be able to do something with the Italian actors that made sense in an Italian context. And there are enough Italian themes in it, it's set in Italy, there's a Duke in it, but it's also about the legitimacy of the state, and corrupt legal practices. And it's about kind of the corruption of fashion and high consumption, and there in Milan we were in the centre of world fashion. It just felt very close. I mean, nearly every country we work in has those problems, and that's indeed why it was able to work in sixteen-oh-whatever-it-was in London, but of course, wherever you are these great plays take on a particular colour; it felt right.

But the most important thing was the wonderful actors we knew. It was our first play in Italian. (We had done *Falstaff* also in Italian but that was with singers.) We had worked with Pia Lanciotti before in France in a workshop which we did thirty years ago for The European Theatre Union, and Fausto Cabra and some others Nick and I had worked with over a period of years doing workshops at the Biennale in Venice. So slowly there emerged a group of actors we wanted to work with, and the Piccolo in Milan, where we had toured for years, had already given us an open invitation to come and do a show, and so one day finally we said, *'OK, how about we try to find a show that would accommodate those actors, which makes sense in Milan?'*

Lucie

And what were some important ideas for you in your initial conversations about how you wanted to go about doing *The Revenger's Tragedy*?

Declan

Well, what we thought is, there's something very *performed* about it. Disguise and the performance as self. And Vindice's relationship with the audience is central. And it has a very strong feeling to me like people performing themselves on television, in so-called reality television. How people see, are seen and are seeing is always important. It's the performance of ordinary life. Sometimes people will go on TV often talking about their personal lives, and the awful thing is that it is both true or authentic (whatever the words true and authentic mean) but at the same time this 'truth' is also managed by producers and agents. So yes, It's both 'authentic to their experience' but also they're performing it for you as well, which strikes me as rather creepy.

So we thought early on to suggest that the whole thing takes place in a television studio. But we don't turn on the video until very late. What was important to us, was this sense of holding reality at a distance, titrating reality, and then the idea of reality being virtual. Philosophically, that's an important point. Because it's not just to do with the phenomenon of reality tv or the internet, it's not just to do with television. We always have to remember that the world that we see must be subjective because we can't see anything that isn't subjective.

Lucie

So, Nick, could you describe the design you came up with and why you chose those specific elements?

Nick

Well, there is not a single box, for once.

Declan

There isn't. Oh, yes, there is the one in which the head goes!

Nick

Oh, yes, a little box. But we were starting off in a very wide theatre, the Strehler Theatre, which is enormous. And acoustically, it was a worry, so I felt we needed some structure to bring the actors forward to connect with the audience. So we ended up with a barn door

across the whole width of the stage. But the other problem is with the writer, with Middleton, which we've touched on with *The Changeling,* is that he's not so great on space. He is not Shakespeare, who thinks spatially and who normally places you very clearly in a space for every scene he does. Middleton is sometimes confusing. For example sometimes he has ordinary people, walking into palaces when they really shouldn't be there. So that I felt that we needed to articulate more clearly where each scene took place. And you needed to make it clear that, for example, Vindice's home (because his mother features very strongly) should be in a much less aristocratic space than the palace where the Duke lives. And I just felt we needed flexibility to root each of the spaces.

Lucie
So we've talked a fair amount about designing sets. But Nick, I'd love to know more about how you design your costumes and whether the actors have a large role to play in that.

Nick
All the time. In fact, I think there were no costume drawings (because I was trying to find one!) - I don't think I did any drawings for *The Revenger's Tragedy*. They were all adapted around the actors that we had.

Lucie
I've heard stories about one of your productions of *The Tempest*. The actors in it described you constantly changing their shoes depending on how much they were jumping around on stage, and watching what they were doing in rehearsals and then responding by choosing the thing that would help them do that best, rather than presenting them with the costume design.

Nick
Yes, I certainly never present costume designs at the beginning of rehearsals. There may be a model of the set. Sometimes there is, depending on the situation. Sometimes there isn't. But never costume designs unless the costumes are so elaborate, which is fairly rare in Cheek by Jowl's case. In fact, never. I think the one time we moved to a distinct period was with *Much Ado About Nothing* when we chose to set it before the First World War and that entirely came out of rehearsal. So again, Angie Burns was faced with quite an ambitious costume make, because we decided to put everybody in that period (about 1905-1910) after the rehearsal period had begun, so that was, I think, quite an achievement for her!

Declan

I should say that, inevitably, (and it's a good thing, I'm not complaining!) he talks to the actors much more about their costumes than to me, and very often, I'd say frequently, I'm quite surprised when I see what the actors come on stage wearing. And it's always been thought about much more deeply than I ever thought about it. And Nick very often discusses the costumes only with the actors.

Lucie
And particularly for *The Revenger's Tragedy,* could you describe how you work together in rehearsals?

Declan
I think if you sat beside me and Nick in rehearsal, you wouldn't notice anything very unusual. Nick is normally still sketching, and often I just tell a lot of stories, perhaps to unlock a moment. I never ever give a line reading. Sometimes student directors want to know how we rehearse, and hope we can give some techniques. But it's not like that. How we rehearse is based on a conscious/unconscious philosophy of a conversation between us that's about many things. It's as much about politics as anything else. But it's the sort of substratum of our work. And that changes all the time. It's a kind of permanent conversation.

Lucie
And I think that's been something that's really coming to the fore in recording these podcasts, is that your work together in Cheek by Jowl is less based on a strict set of methodologies and more on a kind of shared philosophy that you two have built together. Are there any core tenets that share for shared philosophy, do you think?

Declan
Well in a way we feel we have no methodology. I wouldn't recognise a methodology if you wrapped it in pink paper and gave it to me. I wouldn't. We don't think in terms of methodology, except of course we do have one, because there's no methodology-free view of the world. But of course that's the one thing that you often can't see, the unconscious method by which you're living your life.

You know, when the mother sees the baby, the mother waves at the baby and the mother says, *'I see you, and you see me,*' Let's examine that a little. I /see /you - you've got three things in that. And the baby, to begin with, needs to start with some rules in order to develop. Anything - something to cling to.

But we do finally have to wean ourselves off this. For the problem is that what the mother doesn't say is that ‘First, *you* are changing, Second, *I* too am changing, and thirdly *see* is changing’. The very way we see each other is itself in permanent flux. So the three words in *‘I see you’* are all changing.

And that's really difficult to wean off, even for a 66 year old man like me to deal with, never mind the baby in the pram. But nevertheless, we do have to try and accept the unacceptable and deal with the fact that the world is in a state of flux. Nothing is constant, ever.

Nick
I think there are certain things one can say about our theatre. I think one is that we do believe in total theatre, in that no aspect of a theatre production should stand out. And you shouldn’t be able to say, ‘Oh that was a marvellous piece of direction but the design was dreadful’. We shouldn't notice any aspect. That should be the aim is that you go in and you have a total theatre experience, and you come out thinking ‘incredible!’

I think there are certain things we don't do - well, there's one aspect that we definitely like to do, and that is get it up and moving before you do too much talking. To avoid this syndrome, which seems to happen quite a lot, with everyone sitting around a table, discussing the text in detail *before ever moving*. The dangerous idea that we must get ‘the word bit’ right first. We try to get it up and moving and at the same time start working on it. And how we work on it from there is not something that we can easily analyse.

Declan
Yes, I think that's true. That seems to emerge, that we want to make a skeleton but always accepting that the skeleton is only a model; it's a temporary model. And then bit by bit we might even use traditional methods by talking about, God knows, beats and events and actions. But then soon those have to be dismantled, because the fortress becomes a prison and all you want is an *encounter*. Often it’s easing the actors and everybody off that skeletal structure. That's very important and not always easy. You start by doing it as well as you can. And then bit by bit, you’ve just got certain bits of structure which are actually not helping anymore. They're actually getting in the way. That's what you're doing with design, you get rid of things that you don't need, very often, don’t you?

Nick
Yes. Often, you've done that, as it were, in advance, so that you only put on stage what you think you need.

Declan

And very often with the actors you're trying to get them to get rid of information. More and more, I think that head hygiene is so important, keeping your head properly empty. And if I say ever to students, 'please don't read too much', It sounds like I'm being jokey or facetious, but we forget that information can stupefy us. There is a lot of dreadful advice that passes as gospel. For example, *'you can't ever have too much information.'* That's a huge lie, and a common delusion. Because if you have too much information you can't think. And the reason that the Pope couldn't deal with Galileo's idea that the Earth was not still, but that the Earth was in fact moving, *wasn't* because the Pope had an empty head. It was because his head was just crammed with information. And there was no space for him to learn anything. If you know everything then you can learn nothing.

Marcus Aurelius warned us not to read too much and I'm with him. The internet age has continued the process which pickles our minds with words and information. It is a very useful technique to build a consumer society!

Lucie

Can you describe any favourite moments from *The Revenger's Tragedy* rehearsals?

Nick

I remember 'in the woods', the discovery that the dance could open that performance, and then also close the performance. So the masque, which is a real problem in the tragedy, because everybody kills each other suddenly happened in the middle of a song: it became a piece of wild individual choreography - and that was exciting.

Declan

Yes, and it started to mean something else because the actors are all dancing to the same tune, singing, 'ahi ahi ahi ahi', but they're also totally dislocated from each other. Seeing these people coming up with dancing around in unison, but in completely different worlds. And we did hardly any choreography on that. That was more or less self-choreographed, I have to say, as they came out in this line, and they gave themselves their own dance steps. It was a powerful image of self involvement!

Lucie

Yeah, the experience of watching it was busting my sides laughing while feeling sick. There's something really distressing about watching people hurl themselves body and soul

into something that's actually profoundly upsetting to watch, which is them torturing their bodies through dancing in complete dislocation from each other. It was wonderful.

Declan
Once you start to dissect comedy and tragedy, they become not just similar, but sometimes nearly the same. Often the more you get down to it, it's incredible, sometimes many things that seem opposite are, in fact, similar… if not actually the same.

Lucie
So in this part of the episode, we answer questions that listeners have for Declan and Nick. So first up, Nick, what is your favourite Chekhov play? And why?

Nick
I think I have to say *Three Sisters*, which was the play we've done with our Russian company. I mean, and it is a wonderful play, incredibly rich in terms of the space; we often touch on it in these podcasts. It's so much to do with the space that these three young women find themselves in. Their predicament is very, very rich, and the characters are incredibly alive. And it's full of joy and sadness, and everything that you could imagine.

Lucie
Now, the last question is a little cryptic, but do you work with rhythms - rhythms of the scene or the characters or inner rhythms, and do you have any secrets to share about that?

Declan
I can answer first of all, very easily, that I have no secrets. I really have no secrets. There's a story that's probably untrue, but I will tell it anyway! As soon as the KGB had murdered Meyerhold in the Lubyanka, Eisenstein ran straight to Meyerhold's flat a few blocks away and rifled through his personal papers because he wanted 'to discover Meyerhold's secret'. But of course, there wasn't one. That's the point of the story. Meyerhold was just Meyerhold. So there were no secrets.

However, to come back to the rhythm thing - yes of course rhythm is incredibly important, of course. We change our rhythm when we cross thresholds, when we see the outside world, when we get a surprise. The outside world affects us and we move in different rhythms, we speak in different rhythms. But it's not really a word I use. First it's more useful to imagine that we never change rhythm. It's the external stimulus that changes that for us. Let me put it this way. I try to keep words to a minimum, because words conceptualise, none of them can

help it, it’s just what they do. So I try not to talk too much about threshold and space. I end up doing it, of course, but I try to be careful because if something becomes an idea, you inject it with formaldehyde. A living idea is an oxymoron. As soon as you’ve got an idea, you tend to paralyse yourself and sadly often you can punish somebody with the ‘idea’. So I try to keep the ideas to an absolute minimum. So I avoid words like rhythm. But of course, the theme of changing tempi is incredibly important. But it's not a way my mind particularly works when directing. To myself, I would probably think, *‘this is all very legato, and something sharp needs to happen here.’* I might think that unconsciously myself, but I certainly have no secrets, and I've no pre-organised structure for that sort of thought.

Lucie

Thank you so much, Declan and Nick. I think that's all we've got time for today, but I look forward to talking more next week.

Episode 4
Scenes and Sandcastles

Lucie
Welcome to Cheek by Jowl's podcast 'Not True, but Useful'. This is episode four: Scenes and Sandcastles.

Hi, I'm your host Lucie Dawkins. And in this podcast, I'll be interviewing Declan Donnellan and Nick Ormerod, the director and designer who lead Cheek by Jowl, a theatre company whose work has been performed in more than 400 cities across six continents. In these conversations, they will be sharing their creative philosophy of ideas that they find not true, but useful in making theatre. Welcome to today's episode, in which we're going to be talking about 'thresholds'. So hello to both Declan and Nick, how are you both doing this week?

Declan
Fine.

Nick
Very well. Thanks, Lucie.

Lucie
You're now in the seventh week of lockdown. And I was wondering, Nick, how do you manage to keep your creative brain ticking over in this time of suspended animation?

Nick
Well, I'm reading. I'm reading a book about quantum mechanics, much of which I simply do not understand, but it's certainly stimulating. And I'm eating, and that's feeding the brain. And I'm doing the occasional Zoom seminar - I will be doing one with Theatre Design students in Cardiff.

Lucie
And what about you, Declan? What's keeping your creative juices flowing?

Declan

I'm looking at his book on quantum! I'm getting him to read out the racier bits of it, but I've read a bit of it myself. I find it very difficult to settle during this strange time and find it hard to read anything properly.

Music

Lucie
In today's episode, we're going to be discussing a word which comes up a lot when you talk about the way that you make theatre and that word is ‘threshold’. We touched on this word a bit in Episode 2: Space and Shakespeare, and today we're going to dig a bit deeper into it. So for a quick recap for our listeners: in Episode 2, we talked about how Declan and Nick use space to think about plays, and an important ingredient in the space for them is ‘thresholds’, or ‘crossing places’. Now Declan, you sometimes share images which you describe as haunting, images which resonate with you as ways of explaining your ideas. And when you talk about thresholds, the haunting image of sandcastles often crops up. Could you tell us more about sandcastles?

Declan
I love sandcastles - or I used to love sandcastles. I'm far too old and self-conscious now to sit down on my arse on a beach and make them but I always remember them fascinating me as a child. We used to go on holidays as a child to Margate, and when you walk down a tidal beach you see the ruins of yesterday's sandcastles.

I don't find them mournful, they seem incredible monuments to the human spirit. But what is interesting about the sandcastle is not about the central castle bit at all. The bucket shaped ‘keep’. What the sandcastle actually *is*, is the *moats*. It's the system of walls and defences. It's as if the child chooses that space to build the sandcastle because what's fascinating isn't the castle at all - it's this mighty oceanic force that the child in some small way is going to attempt to control. This gesture of control is completely futile because the sandcastle will be engulfed. But that doesn't matter at all. And what's so beautiful about the child is that they are saying to the parents silently: you can build for posterity, but I'm going to build for life.

For the little sandcastle you need a mighty tide, so the beaches of the North Atlantic are excellent.

The real interest in the sandcastle-building is in the space, here at the edge of the sand, where there is the almighty encounter between the land and the ocean. And I think that the

child gets attracted to that liminal space, because it's temporary, and because there's a playing with dread in it, that the ocean is sort of dreadful and enormous, and the child plays with the fantasy of having some kind of temporary power over that. But we can already see many, many shapes in the sandcastle that will help us when we make art, when we make theatre, when we direct and when we act. One is that it takes place in what people call ‘the liminal space’. I hate the word ‘liminal’ because it's a bit frightening. I never knew what it meant for years, and it is basically referring to the threshold. (Limen = threshold in Latin). So it basically takes place in the threshold space, which is the ocean (and which may well be the place that is our origin).

It will be a danger to look at the sandcastle and think ‘Oh, it's such a beautiful sandcastle. Isn't it a pity that the danger of the ocean is going to destroy it?’ For it is the very presence of the danger, it is the menace, it is the threat, that invites the child to play with it, to see if this can be in some way mitigated by the collection of moats and runnels around which the water is going to be tamed, temporarily. Like many useful things, like the stories that become myths, if it's any use we will only know if it manages to *haunt* us. Haunting is central to our experience of ourselves. It takes over when understanding fails us. If we manage to understand the story, if we struggle to tame it, we can probably succeed in killing it for us. We struggle to make the myth safe by explaining it, but if I get anywhere with my understanding, I will almost certainly find a mystery much bigger than the one that I went in with. And that's what happens to physicists, great physicists, and they are exemplary for us all in this, they understand that they're not going to understand fully, and perhaps there may be some things that we will *never* understand.

A practical use of this, if any student directors are listening to this, I always think my job is to make everything as clear as I can, expecting that if the play is any good, it will have some central mystery. And that central mystery will be as inexplicable, as it is crucial.

Lucie
So why are thresholds and sandcastles useful for actors to think about?

Declan
The last thing I want to do is create another set of rules that people can use or adhere to. All I can say is that the thought-shape of ‘threshold’ has proved very useful. I may in this episode bang on about the word ‘threshold’, but really it’s just because it seems a more helpful word than some other words, that's all I can say.

If you feel very stuck, blocked, a good ‘stent’ when you're onstage is: *‘An impulse makes me cross the threshold to go into another space, with an expectation. But what I find there* ***is different from what I had expected’****.* The last one is really crucial, because we can never see what we expect to see. Ever. Unless we are deluded. An important aspect of the threshold is it’s something that helps the actor outside the actor’s self. So that a threshold is clearly something which presents you with an obstacle that you have to get over: so I open a door and I've got to pass through the passage of the door into the next room. First step. Later on there will be many doors, endless doors, endless thoughts, endless conversations.

When somebody ‘goes too far’, an expression we use is, ‘crosses a line’. But only if something we do not like is happening. If we manage to suspend judgment, and if we get a microscope on a conversation, we'll see that we’re always ‘crossing a line’. You might think there's no use getting a microscope out, but sometimes there is, particularly if you feel blocked or paralysed, or if you start to indicate feeling. If you feel lost, you know, why not give it a try? For actually, rather than thinking ‘I'm thinking a new thought’, it’s that ‘I go through a threshold into a new thought, and the new thought I'm going to have isn't quite the thought I thought it was going to be!’ So we're always surprised by what we find on the other side of the threshold. The threshold gives us a precious sense of motion. It implies that standing still is not an option.

The more we look at a space, the more we see it's not in fact a still space. It's not as stable as we would like. It is, in fact, a moving threshold. It's certainly a place of change and sometimes of some danger.

Lucie
So is that what is so important about thresholds and scenes, that they're places of change and danger?

Declan
I think maybe let's go back to the first threshold, or one of the first thresholds. The baby emerges into the world through, indeed, the mother of all thresholds, and goes from a very dark tight place into a place full of mysterious substances, which we later identify as light and sound. I've only seen videos. (Sadly, I've never actually witnessed a live birth.) But often, it seems to me that the babies look pretty troubled by the time they actually come out. We don't know what a baby is feeling, nobody actually knows. You can't really tell what the baby’s facial expressions mean because they haven't yet had any mirroring. But sometimes

the new person arrives seeming unhappy. Some psychologists think that perhaps the first thing a baby intuits is the possibility of its own end.

Some parents swear that their children come out beatifically peaceful and maybe that's true, but probably the baby comes into this strange new world needing to be reassured. The big thing that the mother needs to do with her cuddling and holding of the baby is to make the baby feel safe. It's the mother's way of saying *'you're absolutely safe, you're totally safe.'*

Now the big problem is, one of the biggest problems perhaps ever, is that this of course isn't true. It isn't true because, for example, an asteroid could land on them. But few would thank their mothers who had said *'I'm holding you now, but we're not really safe because who knows what will happen, an asteroid could land on us'.* We need a beautiful lie to begin our lives.

And then, day by day, year by year, decade by decade, we have to unpiece the fact that mummy wasn't strictly speaking the truth. No! After all we're not actually completely safe in the universe as we had first been promised, it turns out to be a pretty tricky place! And so we start to go through the painful loss of growing up.

That was the first threshold.

The word 'threshold' can give comfort to some actors. If you just think that the space is a series of thresholds and that the threshold itself is connected somehow to this more unsettling word, which is 'predicament', that fact that what is happening, we do not like.

Lucie
So in other words, thresholds are a way of structuring a character's journey through a scene, constantly providing places of dangerous change, on the other side of which they find themselves like that baby, taken aback and profoundly out of control of the situation.

Declan
Yes. We just *are* mostly out of control. And we do appalling things to ourselves and to other people and to our country, and other countries, all sorts of things *purely* to convince ourselves that we are in control. But in fact we are continually keeping up with a changing world. And also, ourselves as well, we're also changing. We just want to yell sometimes '*Stop, stop, stop, I just want to be in a safe, unchanging space!'*, but that's simply not going to happen. So we make comfortable homes, we do all sorts of things to make us feel a bit

safe (r). I mean, I do that. We *all* do that, and it's absolutely inevitable. If you have a child, you absolutely must do that. At the beginning of a rehearsal period, we also have to do that. We all have to reassure each other, actors, directors, everyone. We all have to feel safe, and only then we're going to build something together.

Lucie
So it sounds like thresholds aren't just literal entrance and exit places, or doorways. But you use the idea of thresholds all the way through scenes.

Declan
Yes. The threshold isn't an idea. It actually is basically all that we know. This terror of this place in continual change. Yes, that's how it is. When we're having a conversation, when you're with somebody at any given moment, you're continually crossing through thresholds. I don't think we should delude ourselves into thinking that thresholds are something that happen occasionally.

First of all, we need to stabilise ourselves and see that we live in the space. And that's good. But it is a temporary first step. Then we need to look a little bit deeper and realise that space is a relentlessly changing threshold that we are all trying to keep up with.

Lucie
So it's very useful for the actor to think that they meet a threshold and what they get on the other side is very surprising to them and puts them out of control of the situation. So they may try to make another change, and they meet another threshold.

Declan
In a way, yes. But they need also to admit that they had an expectation before they crossed. That's the thing that we sometimes miss out. We often do not like to admit that our expectations have been denied. That would make us realise that we are out of control. Actually we have expectations of what's going to be on the other side of the door. But the useful rule is that this expectation is always faulty. Of course it doesn’t seem so when we turn the key in the latch after a hard day at work. This rule of the expectation thwarted becomes increasingly important as the stakes go up. That's how horror films work. You have an expectation that there's going to be a monster or not, and there is an expectation that's denied. So that's just worth remembering. It happens naturally in real life.

Lucie

And so the useful way of thinking about thresholds is it puts the character constantly in flux, right? They're constantly out of control, constantly having to address the fact that they're not getting what they thought they were going to get.

Declan

Yes. Just to clear up a point though. I think it's never useful for the actor to think: *'I'm changing'* - although that's true. It's true, but not useful. What's more useful is for the character to imagine; *'I'm the same, but why does the world keep changing?'* The space outside is in a continual state of surprising change, and that everything you expect is different from what you had thought it was going to be.

Lucie

And I've heard you say to an actor that an actor in good creative health is one who is seeking thresholds and not backing off from them in a scene.

Declan

Did I say that?

Lucie

Yes, you did!

Declan

I think if you're quite healthy, an actor seeks an opportunity to move and seeks a change. It's quite good to accept an opportunity to move. And it's quite good to accept change, because there are no plateaus. See, we'd love to have plateaus in our lives, you know? We look back and fantasise about our childhoods, and we think of a plateau period when things were safer and better, or whatever. But they weren't plateaus. They were always periods of super fast change. They were often bumpy times of enormous agony. I think people are very unfair to young people. And one of the reasons is that we old people forget how frightening it is to be young. They forget how bumpy the world is, and how surprising it is, and how difficult it is to deal with this endlessly changing universe.

Lucie

I think it's a dangerous fantasy that we can have in rehearsals, because we have to create a show that is roughly replicable every night and that people will end up in the same spots on the stage for the lights etcetera. That we're trying to control exactly where everybody's going

in the space. But actually, this fantasy of trying to put the character in control of the space is actually pretty deadening to the scene.

Declan
The character can never be in control of the space. Of course they may fantasise that they are. And drama often asks us to watch as this certainty peels off.

And one of the things that the character can't control is the feelings that the character is having, because those feelings come from the space as well: my fear, my desire, all of those things. They're like those aeroplanes that strafe Fay Wray at the top of the Empire State Building at the end of *King Kong*. It's like we're being strafed by little aircraft shooting bullets at us, as we shake our impotent fists back. (Kong feels powerless and hurts the one he loves.). That's how our feelings strike us. As Orsino says: "*My desires, like fell and cruel hounds / E'er since pursue me."* The desires, the feelings, come apparently from the outside and it's just really difficult to keep up with these things. So yes, I don't think the actor should think that the character is changing. That may be true, but after the mask is spun, the character sees through the eyes a world that is continually changing and is growing far faster than the character wants. And they just try to keep up with it.

Lucie
What you're saying reminds me of the image of a duck gliding along on the surface, with their legs paddling frantically underneath. Encountering thresholds means that the character has to make an effort to avoid the panic of being out of control, and that seems to electrify a scene sometimes.

Declan
That can be, yes. I think it's a pretty fair rule of thumb. I suspect that on the whole we humans are far nearer to terror and panic than we like to admit. That actually, it doesn't take that many taps on the computer of our mind to deliver us into a place that's really quite frightening.

Lucie
And what seems interesting about this is that that naturally generates an emotional life. As you said in our last episode, we shouldn't be trying to generate fear, panic, sadness, joy, tears. If you cross the threshold and deal with the scene, then your internal life will take care of itself.

Declan

Yes. We can generate nothing. And it's really sad when we delude ourselves that we can. We can steer. We can stop blocking things. We can stop ourselves from getting in the way. We can try to influence. But we can originate nothing. We can create nothing. Nothing will come of nothing, Lear is right. But we can help, nurture, destroy…We live in a world and we have to deal with that. And we can steer some of the things that are given to us, but not many of the things, and the huge things like dying and so on are very, very difficult to steer. And that myth is somehow being enacted by the child with the sandcastle. That it is an enormous thing, and we are going to make an attempt somehow to control the waters. And the fact that ultimately this is futile really doesn't matter. It really doesn't matter. It's just what I do as a human being.

Lucie

And this idea about thresholds also seems a really practical way to circumnavigate the danger of always talking about motivation, which as we talked about in recent episodes can sometimes be really treacherous. Again, we can practically talk about thresholds, we can say this is a crossing place of danger and change, and that you need to deal with that, your character needs to deal with that. And what do they want to avoid? What do they expect? How is that denied to them? Or how is it different from what they expect? And that generates a whole electric shock of life that talking about motivation doesn't often do. And so thresholds are one way of helping us get to that place of total breathtaking, adrenaline-fuelled dealing with the present moment.

Declan

Yes, Beckett very often talks about our complete terror of the living moment. And actually in rehearsal everybody, in every play ever, has the problem of dealing with the present moment. That's what you're trying to do. Very often in the present moment, we don't really think in terms of motives. We have other ways of thinking. Motives, I'm afraid, are just a way of explaining why we do things after the event in a way that may make us feel more comfortable.

Lucie

So, Nick, in your work as a designer, how do you go about helping actors to populate their space with thresholds?

Nick

Well, I think any space that I create needs to allow space for them to imagine different spaces. So in a sense, if there's nothing, maybe we need some evocative object or other which will help spark a sense of that space. But on the whole, I think we've found in our experience in making particularly Shakespeare plays, that an empty space is what they need, and anything large or substantial tends to block the imagination because ultimately, the space is an imaginative thing. It's entirely personal to each character.

Lucie
And within that imagined space, is the task in rehearsals to explore thresholds, which makes sure the character is always surprised?

Declan
Yes, the threshold is the way that we experience things. We're in one space, we leave and go into another - which is different and surprising. So thought is a series of thresholds. That's what I like to think. You're not in a still space when you think. Thinking itself is a series of spaces.

Nick
Humans live in spaces all the time that are either in the concrete present or they're imagining them somewhere else. We think in terms of space. Our memories are always in terms of space. That is how human beings function. There's no getting away from space. And then, having established that, all spaces have thresholds. So threshold and space are unavoidable in terms of how human beings live.

Declan
They are the operating system by which we access not only the universe but also ourselves.

Lucie
In this part of the podcast, we always take a play or a scene as a test case for explaining today's topic. So today we're going to look at *Macbeth*, Act 2 Scene 2, and why thresholds are important in this scene. You can, as always, find the text of the scene in the podcast notes. As a quick recap for anyone who hasn't seen or read *Macbeth* lately, at the top of the scene, we see Lady Macbeth in the middle of the night, waiting in terror outside the king's bedroom door whilst Macbeth murders him inside. Then Macbeth enters. He's carrying two bloody daggers, and he's tormented by what he's done. And he's hearing voices coming out of the walls condemning him for this murder. Lady Macbeth has to deal quickly with her unravelling husband before he gets caught. She has to get the daggers off him, take them

back inside to plant them on the king's guard, and then whisk him offstage to get cleaned up before anyone finds them covered in blood. So, what are some important thresholds in this scene?

Declan

You explained it incredibly well, Lucie! Well, it's one long bloody threshold. It's like a continual series of surprises that he starts to unravel. Perhaps she thinks, '*Is he mad? Is he **that** mad? Oh my God, he is!'* And it's very difficult for her to keep up with the unravelling predicament of her husband who's falling completely to pieces. So the whole space is changing for her, all the time. I think Nick and I once counted 13 different concrete spaces. (Never mind the countless more in the imagination.) How many concrete spaces was it that we counted? I can't remember, and you count them differently every time. But there's the owl, the 'fatal Bellman', outside, the second chamber with Donalbain; the place where the strange noise comes from; the bedchamber itself; the place from which the sleeping guard cries "God bless us!', then later the knocking at the south entry, the place where the water is… And other spatial aspects help like the upstairs versus downstairs binary. One of the aspects of Shakespeare's genius is that he is obsessed with space, and he's continually giving you clues that the whole thing is located. He roots everything in space.

Lucie

And it seems to me that that Macbeth entrance is a pretty good example of crossing a threshold and not seeing what you expect to see. Because he comes out expecting to find where the voice is coming from, right? That he's chasing this weird sound that's coming out the walls, and he enters into the space and he doesn't find it.

Declan

My feeling is, I suppose what I feel as a person and not so much as a director, is that he was expecting that this was the great moment of 'this will be the ultimate connection between me and my wife'. It's like the ultimate coitus between them. It's the moment of total fulfilment of everything between the two of them. And he comes in, then, and, oh, it's not like that. And so he's surprised. And slowly he realises that he is devastated. *She* has gone, *he* has gone, and worse than all that the **'we'**, so hard won in Act 1 Scene 7 has suddenly disappeared forever.

However, way down the rehearsals, perhaps even later in the performances, after everyone's feeling safe in what they're doing, we have to grow up and let ourselves realise that he is 'surprised' by *what he always knew***.** And that's the almost unbearable sadness in

all of the tragedies. That people have these huge surprises, to learn… what they always knew. And I think once one keys into that, then the plays become incredibly sad, that somewhere he always *knew* it wasn't going to deliver what he hoped it would.

In *Three Sisters*, when Irina hears her fiancée Tusenbach has been killed she screams *'I knew! I knew!'* But they all 'knew' and 'didn't know'. What surprises us is not as important as what *continues* to 'surprise' us.

And the two Macbeths don't really know how to 'play the scene'. Of course they're both now more terrified than they have ever been, but a tiny little thing that I'd like to mention in the scene - something that seems offensively banal and anti-epic, a word I find quite useful – it's that they're *embarrassed*. They don't know how to 'play the scene' with each other. It's just **embarrassing**, because suddenly they don't know how to be with each other, they don't know how to touch each other, how to look at each other. How to see the other's eyes seeing you back. Everything's utterly different for them from now on, and can never be the same. 'We' is dead.

Lucie
So there's a literal threshold in the scene, which you could point out on the stage, which is that doorway, which causes massive change every time they go in and out of it, every time they go in and out of the scene of this murder. But then there's all kinds of other thresholds in this scene. For example, Lady Macbeth, suddenly realising that they can't take the daggers away with them, crossing a threshold to '… and now how do we deal with the daggers?' So there are thresholds you can point at that are an actual doorway, and thresholds that are happening in the space as well.

Declan
The thresholds are not some monumental truth, they are a pointer helping us to structure our thinking. It's a temporary scaffolding for rehearsals, and, like all scaffolding, like the one that supports the new ship, it must be got rid of in time. It's like, for example, the structure around a rocket before it takes off. There's a kind of scaffolding structure that gets burnt up in the ascent of the rocket. However, it has to be said that later in a run, if things start to go dead, there are various things that one might use to see if life can flow again. And occasionally, even at the end of the run, you might well start to think in terms of elementary structures like thresholds.

Nick

I think this scene that we're talking about is more useful in terms of actual space, because the space is so complicated. I think if the actors simply work out what the space is, it makes playing the scene infinitely easier. The thresholds are of course there all the time, but really if they can just commit to the space, like just the owl that shrieks, for example. We don't want to see Lady Macbeth's feelings when she hears the owl, we just want to see Lady Macbeth hear the owl, and from where the owl is coming from. We want to get a sense of where it is outside. And each line is precise about the space. They only speak about the space. Macbeth only talks about the room, that horrible room that he left covered in blood. That's all he talks about. And indeed he will never leave that room. From then on there's no connection left between them. So he's in another space, he's in the wrong space.

Declan

Yes. precisely. It may comfort the actor to remember, *'We are not looking at you. We are looking at what you see.***'**

So here Macbeth and Lady Macbeth have an enormous problem. That is that the murder room, the room where Macbeth has murdered Duncan, they will actually never leave. There's no amount of therapy, there's nothing they can do, they're going to be stuck in that room for the rest of their lives. And they're going to have to deal with that. The guilt is not some sort of intellectual diagnosis of a state of mind. It's not a theory. Guilt is no*t a theory and guilt is experienced spatially.* 'The look on his face when I said that spiteful thing'. And that's what happens with the Macbeths. They'll never get out of that room, because they've done a terrible thing in it.

And do you know what one of the worst things about it all is? That is that they never wanted to do it **in the first place**. And that'll be an aspect of it for which they will never forgive themselves.

Lucie

I've also heard you talk about the end of every line being another threshold, because every thought is a threshold and every line that you say never quite works. So you have to say the next line.

Declan

That's mostly useful. But I really wouldn't want the actors to run around with a pencil trying to find the thresholds, because the whole thing is a threshold. The threshold, anything we say is only helpful if it helps you feel more free, less weighed down.

To return to the play, when Lady Macbeth says, *“I have given suck”,* you feel that she's crossing a huge threshold because the line comes from nowhere. I feel that she's breaking a taboo, like *‘we do not mention the dead baby’*. And the way that she says it means that she's going to really up the stakes, you know, *‘I'll raise you 500’.* She really ups the stakes and when I'm watching that scene, it always seems to soar at that point; the scene turns. And yes, I would say that is an enormous threshold. She crosses a dangerous line when she says that. Crossing a line is a threshold. Everything that you say is. You can never say the same line twice (no, not even the next night in the same play!) because you're continually crossing into a new space. A new thought is a new space.

Lucie
What I find so useful about the way that you talk about thresholds is that, as you say, it's not for the actors to diligently mark into their scripts with a pencil, but kind of like crocodile clips that you can use to jumpstart the engine when you need it.

Declan
Yes, there’s no dogma that I have. All I'm saying is that certain words have proven themselves in rehearsal to be more useful than some other words. Certain words tend to make the actor feel more trapped inside themselves and tend to make the actor feel more trapped, while certain other words tend to open the space to help the actor breathe naturally.

Music

Lucie
In this part of the podcast, we answer questions that listeners have put to Declan and Nick, and this week's question is: what are your criteria when you're choosing your next production?

Nick
That's a hard one. I don't think we have any criteria, at least not conscious. In terms of lists of plays, you always have a list in your back pocket on the plays you think you'll do, and you'll always end up doing something which is not on the list. And so in terms of criteria, we've worked with these old plays a lot because they've stood the test of time and they are about human beings in a profound way. And that's a very rich thing to be able to work on.

Declan

It is without question the most agonising decision that we make, which is: *'what is the title of the play?'* We have no technique for that. We don't know how we do it. Every time we think we're never going to find another play. So the great thing is to think of actors that you love, like Anya Khalilulina, and I love Sasha Feklistov, and Andrei Kuzichev in Russia, we're always thinking of plays for them, thinking '*oh, she would be good, he'd be good. That'd be great. We must do that with them.'* And that gives us a reason to get into the play. So I suppose that's our happiest way of choosing a play, but to say *'what play do **you** want to do now, because of what it's about?'* would not help us. On the whole, we choose 'great plays'. But then 'great plays' have a strange habit of making themselves not about the past, but about what's happening now. And that seems to work whether you foresaw it or not.

Yes, it is quite remarkable that you choose to play and suddenly the politics seem to gear around to fit it. Of course, that's not 'true'. It's your own imagination that's changing. But we have that strange experience over and over again, haven't we?

Nick

Well, with *Measure for Measure* when we first did it, during the 'back to basics family values' period in the early nineties it did not appear very relevant until we started when almost instantly the personal morality of politicians came into focus.

Declan

We didn't know it would yield those political relevances when we chose it. But it was great that it did! What often happens is that we feel we discover the political relevances while we're doing it. But the coincidences are so frequent sometimes I wonder if we have not got some unconscious sense. Even if we find a play and we think it's very connected to now, any idea Nick and I have ever had before we go in is nearly always jettisoned once we get into the room. It becomes about something else, something much better, something much more disturbing, something much more profound, and something outside our control. So the principle is that we can never control the meaning. What happens is that it controls us.

Episode 5
Words Grown False

Lucie
Welcome to Cheek by Jowl's podcast 'Not True, But Useful…' This is episode five: 'Words Grown False'.

Hi, I'm your host Lucie Dawkins, and in this podcast I'll be taking you behind the scenes with Declan Donnellan and Nick Ormerod, the director designer duo behind Cheek by Jowl, a theatre company which over the last 40 years has performed in over 400 cities across 6 continents. They're going to be sharing with us their philosophy about what is 'not true, but useful' for making theatre. And we're recording this episode 100 miles apart from across the coronavirus lockdown. Hello Declan and Nick. So Nick, our first question today is for you. How are you distracting yourself in this week of lockdown? What's on your quarantine reading list?

Nick
Maigret by Simenon, which is a wonderful, fascinating series of detective stories which I hadn't read. And he takes you, in each of the different stories, each like a short novel, into another world. And through him you absorb these different worlds, which are fascinating.

Lucie
Brilliant. Have you ever been tempted to adapt it for the stage?

Nick
Well, again, I think they're very subjective. I can't imagine them on stage. They're much more filmic in a sense.

Declan
Simenon is an extraordinary writer. There are two things in it that I think are inspiring for a director. One, he suspends all moral judgment for as long as he possibly can, he doesn't divide the world into good guys and bad guys. He keeps himself morally neutral for as long as possible, in a world where people are hurling insults and a very judgmental press. The second thing that inspires me about Maigret, is that he maintains his own ignorance. This is really important. He keeps on remembering that he *doesn't know, a*lthough officials and journalists pressure him for answers. And we find it very difficult, particularly when young, to

accept that our wisdom feeds off our capacity to accept what we *don't* know. But, you know, they are detective novels, Simenon was never pretentious, he doesn't parade as grand literature. But these stories are deceptively alive. And they move me because they prove that art does not need to be 'high brow'.

Lucie
And how did you end up getting on with the book you were talking about in last week's episode, on quantum physics?

Nick
Well, I got to the end of the book! I don't pretend to understand even 20% of it. But it was fascinating at the time.

Declan
I think the point of quantum physics is that you can't really understand it. You sort of get used to it, and each time you come back you start to accept it more, don't you think?

Nick
Yes. And occasionally you read sentences in this particular book, and you think, *'that's astonishing - it's about acting!'*. It's weird.

Lucie
So what tips can you share with us from the quantum school of acting?

Declan
Oh, saying you know, a living organism is one that maintains its own existence by being in perpetual contact with the outside world. So, for example electrons, don't exist until they come into contact with something else. That's pretty good for an actor. I love the idea that the living thing has to maintain its own existence. It needs to be in connection with things. So the coronavirus is a challenge because we have to limit the contact that we have, and learn to make new contacts. But we have to be in some sort of contact – it's fascinating - merely to *maintain* our very existence.

Lucie
So for this week's topic, we're going to be expanding on an idea which we've touched on in previous episodes, which is that words can be treacherous. And the title of today's episode is nicked from Feste in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, when he says, *'words are grown so*

false I am loath to prove reason with them'. So, Declan, what is the problem with words? Why do they 'grow false' sometimes?

Declan

One of the problems with words is that they come from the logical part of the brain. And that should be fine except for the fact that the logical part of the brain wants to take over the entire brain and convince us that only logic exists. A temporary map of the brain, or a primitive map (not true, but useful) is that we see there are two hemispheres. The left hemisphere appears to be the control centre, in general, for logic, analysis, principles and words. These functions tend to be the domain of the left hemisphere. But there are other elements that are only in the domain of the right hemisphere: for example it gives us intuition; many other things and most importantly, it's the only part of the brain that can encounter a new idea. So without the right part of the brain, the left part of the brain would be sterile.

The problem is that one may say, *'Hey I'm just an intuitive kind of person. I was no good at maths, I must be all about the right side!'*. That does not work. We absolutely need both. You need the left side to say even those words. You need the left side of your brain to put your clothes on in the morning or you'd put your underwear on last.

Although the left side gives us principle, only the right side can give us responsibility. The left side might give us analytical intelligence and cleverness, but only the right hand side of the brain can give us common sense. We're all born with this duality. Which would be fine, apart from what some might say was a design flaw. They say that when God designed the hand it was a great day, but the day he made the knee he had a hangover. He must have had a truly dreadful day when he designed our capacity to endure loss and the left side of the brain gives us an even bigger problem. The problem is that although we need both hemispheres equally, the uncomfortable fact is that the left hand side of the brain *wants to take over*. It is a predicament born into every baby. So no, *we never inherit a neutral set of circumstances.*

'Oh, I've got the left hand side of the brain that's giving me analysis. Oh, I've got the right hand side of the brain encountering new ideas. Isn't that fine and dandy?' No! It's not neutral 'circumstances', it's a bloody predicament! And the reason it's a predicament is that the left hand side of the brain always wants to take over.

The problem is that we should always remember (and I'll come back to this again and again and again) is that logic is not your friend. Logic is a servant, and a useful crucial servant. But

logic will quickly get the upper hand. And that's how logic marches Othello into Desdemona's bedroom. Othello doesn't tumble into the madness of Dionysus. He tumbles into the far scarier madness of Apollo. Chaos is bad, but a super-flux of reason is just as dangerous.

In farce, the biggest laughs are when characters get imprisoned in their logic. It has been said that the funniest line in the English language is in *See How They Run* and goes: *'Arrest most of these Vicars!'*

It's funny… but only if you're not going to end the world. It's not so funny when Othello marches into Desdemona's bedroom, but it's the same un-tamed logic. We need logic, but only in its place, left unattended it's like fire, it's dangerous. Again, it's a good servant, and a bad master.

Lucie
So are words a problem because they are the ambassadors of this controlling left hand side of the brain?

Declan
Yes. The problem is that every word is itself a Trojan horse for logic. You form or invent the word, but actually a whole logical way of thinking about the universe spills out and tends to drown everything else. It's important to realise that words actually *are* treacherous. All words. They have another agenda. They don't really want us to admit of a world that's intuitive, or that opens us to a new idea. That world of logic and analysis is essentially conservative - it keeps us within a closed system. Words work more or less fine when we are just swapping fact.

So as soon as I verbalise a word like 'blood' for example, it becomes an abstraction. Whether I like it or not. Yes, it is frustrating, essentially frustrating!

There are many things that you can never explain. And if you do explain them, you may well feel you have betrayed something very precious in yourself. Then sometimes we feel *'but that isn't what I meant at all!'* And then the danger is that we may feel stupid because we cannot properly express ourselves. But nor can the cleverest person in the world.

Just because you cannot properly express important things fully with words does not mean you are stupid. Anything truly human will distort when viewed through the prism of words.

Poetry is a process where people use words to try to transcend their essential abstraction. Poetry tries to catch words off guard.
So Constance's extraordinary line about her son in *King John, 'grief fills the room up of my absent child',* seeks to share all sorts of things with us but not so much *in* the words but *around* the words: shadows and senses that shift and flit around the words, ghosts that haunt the edges of the words.
The most important things are unsaid; purposefully hidden as in a lie, but the most important things of their very nature are unsayable. These 'things that are missing'; can be alluded to; to *fill up the room*? 'Room' sounds like 'womb'; to fill something up with something that's absent. The image may put you in touch with something that's enormous and, miracle of miracles, although we do not understand it still we can share it!

For the most important human things there are no words. And if you actually try to 'translate' *'grief fills up the room of my absent child'* and paraphrase it, it must become banal because we reduce the poetry to just swapping fact. Most human communication has nothing to do with swapping fact.

There's a great danger to think of the plays of Shakespeare, or of any great writer, great stories, rattling good thrillers, sadly bound up and hidden in poetry, covered in the dust of the past. And if only we could strip off the poetry, you'd be just fine and dandy and you'd expose the great thriller plots that are the real heart of the plays. Nice plot, shame about the poetry. And, you know, sometimes there are enthusiastic school teachers who want to start their charges off doing that. And maybe that's a very good thing - there are all sorts of first steps that one has to do. But it is a good idea to wean ourselves off first steps. At the end of the day, *Macbeth* is far more than a thriller. *Macbeth* is about many enormous things, many of which are mysterious and cannot be explained, which actually defy explanation. Although they can't be explained, these *'things that can't be explained'* are the most important things that we share.

Lucie
Could you talk more about that? Do you mean that there's something else going on in *Macbeth* underneath the literal meaning of the words?

Declan
Yes! The thing is, you know, if I say to you (which is true), *'it's a lovely day, Lucie'*, it's not really about the day. It's about the fact that I want to share something with you within it. There's a gesture of control. So I'd like you to think that I'm happy at the time, well

intentioned at the time, optimistic. But whatever we're doing seeks to control. It does not need to be sinister. (We need to defer judgment and leave moralising till later.)

For, unfortunately, ‘control’ can also be a bad thing. Yes it can be full of love. The mother reassuring the baby and saying you're completely safe and rocking the baby in their arms - there is a control in it, and control is absolutely fine emotionally, as long as it's open. And we have a moral compass and need to be aware of what we're doing. But the reason I'm banging on about this is that we mustn't think that words are somehow innocent descriptions. Because if I say to you, *‘it's a lovely day’*, it's never an innocent description of the day. It's something else between you and me.

Lucie
So would you say that speaking words is part of the human attempt to control the environment around us?

Declan
Yes. Every uttered word is used to change the outside world. No uttered word describes our internal state. Every word is to do with changing the outside world. Any change implies some degree of control. Sometimes we like to think that things are neutral, but one of our problems is there's not really anything that's neutral. Absolute neutrality is a delusion. As soon as you say something, you've announced a relationship, or you've announced something that isn't just to do with the word. It’s certainly got nothing to do with perfectly formulating a thought. And, you know, when I'm talking, I mean, you know, I’m talking to you now, but if on the other hand I believe *‘I'm perfectly formulating the objective thought’,* it’s a perfect warning that I'm talking perfect bullshit. The real effort to communicate is kind of sweaty and imperfect.

Lucie
So I've heard you talk to actors about characters who anaesthetise themselves with words and use them as a drug to stop themselves feeling dread. Can you tell some more about that?

Declan
Many great plays are about people who drug themselves with words. So in *Three Sisters*, for example, Vershinin drugs himself with a lot of very clever words, and entertains us with some fascinating philosophy (well, sort-of-fascinating, sort-of-philosophy), but what's actually happening is that he's left his kids at home with a suicidal mother. And I think Vershinin’s

daughters are absolutely central to the play of *Three Sisters*. The fact that they're kept carefully off the stage by adults who like to talk: in a way the erased children are almost the principal characters.

Lucie
Did you reckon that's why Vershinin is talking so much - that it helps make the present moment more bearable for him, given the deeply uncomfortable underlying reality that he's betraying his family?

Declan
Yes, he's talking ninety to the dozen because he just doesn't want to acknowledge reality. And he uses philosophising and chattering to help him evade his responsibilities. We see this with Lady Macbeth and Macbeth who come out with all sorts of brave words and all sorts of brave ideas, but basically they're plotting a shabby little murder. So in a way Lady Macbeth wants to convince herself and convince us that she is the star of some big melodrama, in which she plays a daring adventuress who will stop at nothing, who's brave and who can do deals with devils and creatures of the night. And it's all really to distract her (and us) against her ordinary terror, her more ordinary fear that she shares with much of the rest of humanity. The problem for her, and for many of us, is it's often hard to admit that we are basically quite ordinary.

This mechanism connects all the major characters in the tragedies, and, funnily enough, with many characters in comedies as well. It's the frantic efforts that we use to keep ourselves away from the reality that although, yes, we are each specific, each of us is a one-off, but also we're all actually quite ordinary. Lady Macbeth and Macbeth try to deny this, and anaesthetise themselves with what I'd call poetics, or *hokum*. (It is absolutely essential that we each measure the distance between poetry and poetics. The second is a fake to look like the first.) A simpler, more unkind word would be 'bullshit'. They use grandiose euphemisms like *'our great quell'* to put us off the scent. Actually, to put *themselves* off the scent. Well, if it's grand it can't be bad. There's all sorts of ways that we use language to make something grubby sound less grubby. We may use inflated talk to distract attention from what we are doing, and not only to confuse other people, but also to confuse ourselves. There is little as frightening as our capacity for self-deception. Macbeth offers us a feast of this, but we see this all the time in politics. Grandiose expressions like 'Marshall aid', 'Monroe doctrine', 'manifest destiny', 'terra nulla'... There are ways of using words that elevate actions so that we actually *dis-experience* them. *'Dis-experience'* is a word we use a lot. A very important aspect is that all words not only convey the experience, but they can also *deaden* the

experience as well. Words clearly are intended to help us share an experience but all of them also smuggle in a dose of dis-experience. They can't help it. So we need to keep a cold eye on how words work.

Lucie
Do you mean that all of the Macbeths' poetry and operatic language and these great flights of speech are all about the fact they're actually scared that they're not brave enough to do the murder?

Declan
Yes. hiding that but mostly the fact that they disgust themselves. I have an expression which is 'Pretend Adult Syndrome', and you see it in the daily briefing when a politician in a suit rocks up to the microphone, and then it makes me think, 'well, what is an adult?' I suspect being an adult has to do with tolerating uncertainty, enduring ambivalence, and developing common sense and responsibility. But the problem is that 'adult' is not a state. There are no states, there are only processes. Being an adult is a process you have to wake up into every day. You don't get a diploma to stick on your wall. None of these plays make much sense if you just take for granted that these characters are adults. There **are** no official permanent adults, that we're just hoping that we will make decisions that are more adult as we go along. But really, the plays don't make much sense unless you see they are more like kids out of their depth. It is always scary watching people who bite off more than they can chew.

And that's what the Macbeths do - if you look at the imagery that they use at the beginning, they do a lot of, *'I'm so adult, I'm so grown up, me man, you woman.'* And then the cat flies out of the bag when Lady Macbeth snaps, *'it is the eye of childhood that fears the painted devil',* and they go back in time to their childhood. So when she later admits, *'had he not resembled my father as he slept, I had done it',* it's like the little-girl-Lady-Macbeth walked in and saw the mystery of her father sleeping. You feel that childhood coming up throughout, like a painted out graffiti appearing again into view. At the end of that scene when they shock us with, *'What might we not perform upon the unguarded Duncan!?'* It's not like adults, it is like two kids plotting horror, half assuming they will be caught.

It is as if the Macbeths are two adolescents who dare each other one night to go into the haunted wood. They screw up their courage, hold each other by the hand, and creep into the wood. Inside it gets darker and darker, the night gets thicker and thicker. Slowly we notice that two specific things start to happen to the trees. First, the trees start to lose their outline, and second, the trees start to get bigger. (It is useful to remember those two processes for

any journey into danger. If we think about it all good plays tell the story of a journey into danger - even if the protagonists never move.) But in their fear, these two child Macbeths lose each other's hands. Then they get more anxious and call to each other but their little voices get fainter and fainter. They can't make out any shapes anymore in the undifferentiated night and so they stray deeper and deeper into the darkness. That's my image for *Macbeth*.

Lucie
So all these words that they're using to make themselves feel better and to egg each other on actually just have the effect of getting them even more lost.

Declan
Yes, exactly. They're using words *not* to see the problem, but the problem is always there. And that's why they have to use so many words, to keep shielding themselves from this great big problem, which is that they don't want to do it because the right part of the brain, the part of the brain that gives them compassion, actually never mind compassion, just plain common sense, mercy, pity, that all has to be drowned out by the left side of the brain. It's like MPs cheering behind their leader in the House of Commons, to drown out the argument of the Opposition. It happens in their brains, but logic can cheer very, very loudly.

Lucie
It's like they're using words as a costume as part of this attempt to make themselves feel more adult and in control.

Declan
Absolutely, they enrobe themselves in high-sounding words. But we have to be careful because all words tend to take us away from experience. Let's look at this. Parents sometimes say, *'you have to teach your child the difference between right and wrong.'* Now, one of the things I notice and remember is that a child from a very early stage has a very strong, passionate, sense of what's fair and what's not fair. An indignant sense of when something is 'unfair'. Maybe they need to be taught right and wrong, but the fair/unfair function seems to arrive already installed. But then it's difficult to talk about what is fair and not fair, because it's quite a lot of words. So instead we like to talk about 'justice'. Now, justice is a great way of talking about what's fair and what's not fair. Well, sort of. But the real problem is that the thing that helps us to do the thinking, like the word 'justice', sometimes can actually confuse us as to what's fair or not fair. We can symbolise Justice as a human being, dress her up as a Goddess, put a blindfold on and give her scales.

A play that ends with a court case under the figure of Justice is *The Merchant of Venice*. 'The quality of mercy' speech is so famous that we can forget that it fails. It fails in court before 'Justice'.

Portia only rescues Antonio by the application of one more ghastly layer of logic. One can see it as a triumph. But logic here drowns out compassion. It is not a reassuring play.

When Abraham Lincoln was trying to pass the bill to outlaw slavery, there was a massive talk about justice. There were lawyers for and lawyers against, and they were all arguing about justice. Justice and rights and liberty and rights and justice. 'Fair and unfair' got drowned out. Justice and rights support fellow principles, and can be twisted to taste – it's the liberty of the individual to hold property (slaves), the liberty of the individual to transport property (slaves). Finally Lincoln exploded in frustration realising he couldn't escape this ghastly prison that logic had built, '*if this isn't wrong,* ***nothing*** *is wrong!'* And it was a wonderful moment when he tore the nonsense of the logic apart. Or rather fair/unfair ripped up the nonsense of conflicted principle.

That's an example that connects back to how words are dangerous, because we've invented lots of words to help us think about things. Sometimes they do help us to think about things, but sometimes they can be used as a barrier to experiencing experience. So theories of justice are useful but can sometimes blind us to what is actually fair and what isn't fair. Not always. You need common sense to tell the difference.

Lucie
So, to put it another way, words help us spin experience into kind of airy concepts which have the inverse effect of actually taking us away from the living and breathing experience of the thing.

Declan
Exactly, they *can* do. They can take us away from the thing itself. And you can see this wonderfully in Shakespeare. I think what's fascinating in Shakespeare is that Shakespeare knows very well that there are no words, like he's meeting us across a grave. He says often, like one sometimes says at a graveside, *'I've got no words.'*

King Lear shelters from the storm in a random hovel, his grandiose life shorn and now suddenly he's destitute, thrown out, humiliated and stripped of his pomp. Suddenly in the

hovel, a strange tramp appears before him, Edgar. He encounters this poor wretch, shivering and unclothed, freezing his arse off in the cold. And Lear is standing uncomfortably close to him, within smelling distance. And how does Lear describe him? Or rather 'How can Lear describe him?' He cries out *'thou art the thing itself.'* Lear is suddenly overwhelmed by the carnal presence of a suffering human being. Experience just will not fit itself neatly into words, Lear must sit with this immediate human suffering. Yes he recognises that he's part of the system that allows this man to suffer like this. But guilt can act as a defence. The problem is to feel, to experience. And no, there are no words. Lear suddenly feels the utter collapse of language. Words have let him down. There is no bloody word for explaining the carnal presence of life. Because words are dead things. There's no such thing as a living word. Words are dead things that we use to try and bring us in connection to a living thing. So Lear sees the living organism and there's no word for it. And all he can cry is, *'Thou art the thing itself!'*

It is not just to do with calamity. Life is also at its best when we run out of text. You know, when you can be silent with someone or something, you just run out of text. I'm not saying all text is bullshit. I'm not saying that at all. There are very important communications we have to make to each other. But we must accept that not everything can be communicated in words. Words are a very, *very* limited medium. They may be the best we've got, for some things, but they're limited.

Lucie
I find it so refreshing to hear you speak like this, because we're so used (here in the UK particularly) to revering Shakespeare as a sort of genius of words and the height of human expression. But it sounds to me like you've got a different take on what makes him so exceptional, which is that he absolutely understood that words are very limited, and they're not about a perfect expression of our internal state. But they are imperfect tools for a character to battle against the world and the predicament and themselves and other characters, and sometimes to run out of them, and sometimes it's about the space between words. But he knows that words are imperfect.

Declan
Yes. So, for example, sometimes you nonsense about the 'ineffable nobility' of Othello and his heightened verse. But when he goes to murder Desdemona with the lines, *'it is the cause, it is the cause, my soul, let me not name it to you, you chaste stars.'* We may think, *'Woah! ineffable nobility?! I don't think so!'* He's actually strangling a young woman whom he's brought hundreds of miles away from her friends and her family. He's committing a

horrible shabby little secret murder, which he *knows* is shabby because he's frightened he will be overheard by Emilia. And so he drugs himself not with chemicals but with words, poetics, with hokum. Frankly, bullshit, a better word for that speech is bullshit. Here Othello needs to keep on upping the hokum dose as the effect wears off. Like with all addiction, a pretty sure sign is when you have to increase the dose. Desdemona's line *'kill me tomorrow, let me live tonight'* is so heartbreaking not just because of the simplicity of these ten syllables, it is because those tiny words make a tiny pinprick in the middle of his vast barrage balloon of bullshit. And that line shames him linguistically, you know, that you don't need all those words to be a human being. We would be wrong to say people are always talking bullshit, always talking trash. But when we 'go high', we ought perhaps to be a little bit suspicious, and let some amber if not red lights go off in our imaginations, thinking *'why is he making this so complicated?'*

Lucie
So all these words are truly treacherous, as you say. They're hiding so many things beneath the surface.

Declan
Yes, I think there's a word that it's quite good to try to define and be a bit stiff on, which is 'irony'. Some people will say *'I hate irony',* Perhaps here, by 'irony' they mean they hate when someone tries to be superior or clever uses a sort of mocking humour used to establish status. The 'drye mock' as a Canadian novelist, Robertson Davies put it. I feel exactly the same.

However, the problem is that if on the other hand irony is using a word to play on its ambivalence, a word that does not quite mean what it says, then every word that has ever existed is 'ironic' because no word can convey experience. Words are there to help us to convey experience, but experience cannot be conveyed. So words are essentially, by that definition of the term, ironic.

Lucie
So, we've reached the part of the episode where we do a deep dive into a scene with today's topic, and the scene we've chosen today is the very first scene of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. And as always, the text of this scene is available in the podcast notes. To quickly sum it up, in it we meet Orsino, who is an indolent aristocrat who fancies himself to be madly in love with the Duchess Olivia who is refusing to return his advances. In this scene, he's waiting for one of his messengers to return from her latest chilly response, and is passing

the time by waxing lyrical on his torment and demanding his court to distract him with music and entertainment. And it starts with the words, ‘if music be the food of love, play on’, and is often quoted as a sublime piece of love poetry. I suspect, given our conversation, Declan and Nick, that you have a different take on it. Why shouldn't we trust Orsino’s words?

Declan

It pretty much defines what hokum is, this speech, really, because it's got nothing to do with love. It's got a lot to do with self-obsession. It's got nothing to do with self-knowledge because self-obsession is a defence against self-knowledge. If Orsino knew himself better he wouldn't be talking like this. I'd be very scared for Olivia, if she ended up marrying somebody who ‘felt about her like that’, because these ‘feelings’ of love are all about **him**. And he gets locked in himself. He gets locked in a chamber with nothing but mirrors on the walls. That is a terrifying prison. And he uses ‘art’ as a narcotic. He uses ‘art’ as an escape from the misery of being himself. Whereas in fact ‘art’ doesn't offer us any escape - real art offers us only an escape *back* into the real world. And mind you, a dose of the real world would do Orsino an awful lot of good. The real world that is transforming and transformative. And the real world comes in the form of Cesario, who is neither man nor woman. Certainty is unreal. Reality is ambivalent. This really challenges him (as well it might, it’s challenging for us all). And slowly and painfully he starts to have feelings for somebody who's actually present in front of him. A real person who has as many facets as a diamond.

Lucie

So it's kind of bullshit, as you say, because he speaks as if he's an expert on love, and yet his own desires are evidently pretty opaque to him. He's convinced that Olivia is the one and only, and then he's confused to find himself readily falling in love with this handsome young man who appears out of nowhere.

Declan

Well, I personally feel that one shouldn’t get too excited about the idea that Orsino might be gay or might be straight, or is he confused between the two? Elizabethans had different categories. But his problem is even more fundamental than a question of sexuality. He could do with just having an ordinary friend, he could just do with anybody to hold him or anybody just to be present with him. He can't have any relationship with anybody. And slowly by the end, we hope that perhaps he can start to begin to do that.

Lucie

We've reached the final part of the episode, in which we answer questions that listeners have put to us. And if you would like to ask Declan and Nick a question, get in touch with us on Cheek by Jowl's social media, and we will try and answer it in a future episode. Today's question is: does working with Shakespeare in translation illuminate it in new ways for you, and why do you choose to work in other languages so often? I'm going to pass this one to you first Nick.

Nick

What you realise after a bit is that the words are only a very small part of the experience. With good actors, almost everything is expressed by the thought and the body. And the words are only a small part of the experience. People who come and see our performances in foreign languages quite often come up and say they've given up on the surtitles to watch what happens on stage. For us that is wonderful. I mean, of course you lose in Shakespeare's great language, but at the same time, sometimes you can even get more directly into the experience when you're not worried about the language.

Declan

Sometimes in real life (by 'real life' I mean not in the performance space!), it's quite important not to be distracted by the words and just sit back and think, you know, what, what are my other senses telling me? For we so easily get whipped along by the words, and the words are such a tiny proportion of how we communicate. And I think if Nick and I have learned anything over the years, it's the relatively small importance of words. Words are important. Words can kill. But words seem to take increasing precedence in our culture.

And there's so many foundational lies like, for example, *'in the beginning was the word'.* No! Before the word there was breath, there was movement, there was music, there was dance, there were all sorts of things before the word ever came along. And whenever we get asked what's it like working different languages, the answer is: *'Not which language!* ***Any*** *language is the problem!'* Never mind whether it's Finnish or French or English, you know, it's the fact that people are reduced to trying to share huge things with these imperfect instruments.

Lucie

And can you tell us more about why you choose to work abroad with great English classics in translation so often?

Declan

Well, we’ve been doing it so long that so many of our closest friends are in Moscow or in Paris or Madrid, or all sorts of places where we have very close relationships that now go back a long, long time. And also, particularly in Russia, we have been working with the same actors since the last millennium. You know, we’ve actually grown old with some of them!

Lucie
And that's where we're going to wrap up for today. Thank you so much that Declan and Nick, and I can't wait to talk more next week.

Episode 6
Why We Do What We Do

Lucie
Welcome to Cheek by Jowl's podcast 'Not True, But Useful...' This is episode six, 'Why We Do What We Do.'

Hi, I'm your host, Lucie Dawkins, and in this podcast, I'm going to take you behind the scenes with a series of interviews with the Artistic Directors of Cheek by Jowl, as they share their philosophy of life and the theatre in a series of ideas that they find 'not true, but useful'. And today, I'm talking to Declan Donnellan, about what makes us do what we do. And it's great to have you on the line, Declan.

Declan
Hello, Lucie.

Lucie
So we've now been out of rehearsal rooms for over two months. What are you really missing about rehearsals?

Declan
Oh, I just miss the contact with people. I miss the jokes. I miss the coffee breaks, I miss the, you know, the moments when you discover things with people. I mean I miss the whole collaborative nature of it.

Lucie
So has lockdown changed the way that you think about theatre at all?

Declan
In Britain, there is a useful but sometimes overpowering imperative to be practical. And very occasionally it can be useful to do nothing. So thus far we have used this enforced quiet time to take something of an overview. We can think about the position from which we view the work that we do and, as always, try to see the still earth I am on. I think that's a very important thing for us to always think about, to know that we're each on our very own still

earth. Particularly important then is to consider the still earth from which I view the job that I do.

Lucie
So when you say what ‘still earth’ we are on, do you mean that it's a good time to question our assumptions?

Declan
Yes. But it's more concrete than your assumptions. It's the actual position from which you see the world. You occasionally hear things, and we realise that the person is viewing the situation from a completely different place. And we say, ‘oh, yes, well, they have a different point of view.’ I think a more useful way of putting that it’s the *position* from which they see the world.

The Pope thought the earth was still, but scientists started to see that in fact the earth was moving. A legendary row between Galileo and the Pope began. I say ‘legendary’ because the story is a foundation myth of our civilisation. We waste myth when we do not allow it to haunt us. We hobble the myth when we moralise it, we moralise it away by saying: *‘Bad Pope! Good Galileo!’*. But we should try to keep a more open mind and go easy on the judgments. In fact it's quite good to have some compassion for the Pope, and start to think it's actually very difficult to ‘understand’ that the earth is moving. And then to take a little dose of humility and think, *‘But what still earth am **I** on? Am I really so superior to the Pope just because I now know the earth is moving? Am I so superior to other people? Are there other positions from which I can see the world?’*

Lucie
In today's episode, we're going to be talking about motivation, or why we do what we do. This is a big question in different theatre methodologies over the decades, starting with Stanislavski, and his idea about identifying what a character wants at any given moment in a scene. It's a way of making theatre which is inspired by research on human psychology and applies it to the creative process. Now, Declan, I know that you have a particular approach to this question of why we do what we do, which, as ever, focuses on what is not necessarily true, but definitely useful. Why don't we start with one of your haunting stories, which we often use to help us get to grips with the day’s topic. So, what is today's haunting story about motivation?

Declan

This isn't a myth or origin myth so much, it's just an image - a father is going to take his small son fishing. The son's been dying to go fishing, but it's starting to rain and his Dad says, *'well, the sky is very grey, it's throwing down, and I don't think we should go…'* But his son insists, he's absolutely crazy to go fishing. And as they park the car, they get out and the father realises that the river has totally overflowed its banks. The current is racing, crashing past the bank, dragging debris along. And he tries to stop his son, but the son runs ahead. At the last minute the son trips and falls headlong into the river, when the father, quick as a flash, grabs the son's heel.

So, there's the dad holding the son's heel, the son's in the river being dragged forwards by this incredibly powerful current, his other hand is reaching and first of all, the father grabs a tuft of grass, and then the grass gives way… and he manages in time to grasp a piece of thorny gorse, and his feet are also slipping in the mud.

So that's a situation. A better word might be *predicament*. So if we say, you know, why do you think the father is doing that? What's his motivation? What's his action? What's his desire? It's to save his son's life. Why? Because he loves his son. He's saving his son's life because he loves his son.

But I don't think that's the father's experience at all. I think if we actually see the world through his eyes, the father has no reason to hang on to his little son's ankle. He's watching the sock slide off in the wet, watching the little ankle turn blue. He's hanging on for dear life. He's not doing it because he loves his son. He's doing it simply because there's *nothing else that he can do.* He has no choice. It's all that he can do. He's in a world beyond motive, beyond character, beyond anything like that. Everything, time and space, all suddenly focus on this one point for him.

And he will never ever forget that moment for the rest of his life. He'll never forget the space, he'll never forget the river, he'll never forget the mud, he'll never forget the ankle. Every single atom of him is focused on that. And at that moment, we can't really say he has a motive. Afterwards, we can. If he's interviewed by the newspapers, people will say, 'you were very brave, you're very strong, you have extraordinary endurance to hang on for so long. You must really love your son.' And he says, 'yes, yes, I love my son.' He'll agree that he loves his son, but that wasn't his motive. It was not his experience at the time.

It is a useful moment to think about, because, first of all, it makes clear that a motive is our way of explaining something, but not necessarily the cause. It's just a way of explaining

something. In a way, it's something that makes us feel more comfortable. This is important because that moment, that extreme moment, when everything is stripped away, and you're there, I would say, in the naked encounter with the predicament - that's so much closer to us than we dare think. And it wouldn't take too many taps of the computer in our imaginations to get us there. And we console ourselves with reassurances that we're a long way away from there. And we will do anything to give ourselves the delusion that we are in control.

Lucie
So, like this man with his son, do you think that our actions are driven more by dread than by what we want?

Declan
I think so. I think what's not true but useful is that there were some apes who saw a sabre-toothed tiger and ran. But we're not descended from those apes. There were other apes who started running and one said to another, 'why are we running?' And the other ape said, 'oh, it's because we've just seen a sabre-toothed tiger.' Those are the ones that we're descended from. In other words, we're descended, I think, from the ones who have the dread good to go. As the Americans say, *'you're good to go with it'*, it's there. It's just two or three taps away and you're good to go. Your body can start reacting *before* your brain has had time to assimilate.

Let's come back to the origin of any action. Why do we do anything? Why do we get out of bed in the morning? Well, we get out of bed in the morning because maybe we want to pee or we get hungry, or we feel slovenly in bed, but on the whole we'll get up because we'd feel worse if we stayed in bed. We feel that we would feel worse. The safest way for the actor to look at it is that you get up, you wake up, you get out of bed, you do things to make better, the bad feeling - to somehow ameliorate, to somehow mitigate, to somehow soothe the bad feeling, *which is already there*.

I was very impressed last year reading Sally Rooney's *Normal People*, now a very successful TV series. I have only read the novel, but what appears to be a complex teen romance story is, in fact, much more deep than that. It struck me largely because of the enormous amount of dread that Marianne and her boyfriend have to deal with; his dread of breaking his social norms, and all the different dreads that attack them. But the dread of putting yourself outside your pack is a. Rational, but also b. Mysterious.
The motivations do not quite add up in the logical world.

Lucie
And how do you use this idea to help actors out in your rehearsal room? It almost sounds like the flip side of Stanislavski's coin, that the useful question might not be what we *want*, but instead the opposite.

Declan
The question is, where is the dread? In other words, the actor shouldn't be thinking about desire at all, as in, *'What do you want?'* Instead it's *'What do you want to **avoid**?'*
So thinking more in terms of defence rather than in terms of desire is very useful for the actor.

Yes, here the negative is more useful than the positive. This has a colossal advantage, as you go into the scene with a huge power pack already there, ready and waiting to be avoided, defended against. So that the Romeo actor must not think, *'I must love Juliet, I must love Juliet, I must love Juliet!'* That is always a disaster. Even the greatest acting talent could not survive that feat of concentration. No. The actor instead thinks along the lines of, *'I must do everything not to lose her! If I lose her the world will end! What can I do!? What can I say to prevent this otherwise inevitable catastrophe?!'* And if you do that, if you react against the negative, you get much, much more energy for free than if you go and try to turn yourself into a little factory of positive volition.

Lucie
It seems like such a good approach because answering the question of what we want can sometimes be very anxiety inducing. I think I rarely know what I want.

Declan
Yes, from my personal experience, you know, a friend says to me, *'Now Declan what do you want in your life? What do you really want? Now getting you're old, what do you want?'* I can get very frightened because I don't know what I want. But if they were to say, *'what do you dread most?'*, I could hold forth for hours! I don't want to get cancer, I don't want to die, I want to be able to go on with my work, I want to go on being needed. I can give a lot away about myself by listing what I *don't* want.

Lucie
The other thing that I find particularly useful about this idea is that the question of what you want is always about something that's in the future, something that doesn't yet exist,

whereas what you dread is already with you right now. So it forces us to engage with the present moment in rehearsal, which is often what we're trying to do.

Declan

Yes. All I can tell is that great relief tends to pass over the actors when they realise that they can find out what it is that they dread that they're trying to avert. And then it's like there's an originating energy which comes from **somewhere else**. So the real nightmare is when the actor feels it's down to them to energise the scene. And a very unhelpful criticism of acting is *'oh, she didn't drive the play!'* Well, nobody should be bloody *driving the play*, the *predicament* drives the play, actually actors are always acting against the predicament. The characters are normally trying to 'tame' the play. The energy is already supplied at the beginning from somewhere else. So the actor should never have to fabricate that energy. The actor has no responsibility to make energy. The actor has to see that energy outside and then try somehow to steer it, divert it, convert it, to bring it under some form of control. The problem is already there. When actors realise that they may become slightly more relieved.

Lucie

So the one thing I'm intrigued about is that we're not always in dire circumstances like this man trying to save his child at the river. Sometimes we have to think about how to create life on stage with lower stakes. So how does your idea apply to life and to scenes which are not such extreme naked encounters with the predicament as you put it?

Declan

I think there's two ways of looking at it, that *'the bad feeling'* is something mild. But it is still already there. You do not make it, you discover it. It's like you're feeling hungry in the morning, you need to get out of bed to fry yourself an egg. You're feeling a bit depressed so you want to phone up a friend and have a bit of a chat. You go for a walk because you've started feeling slightly stuffy at home. Actually, the wanting is always better to trace back to a bad feeling already there which we are now trying to overcome.

The difference between the bad feeling and dread is scale and also that you have some measure of control over the bad feeling. If you don't want to stay in bed, you can get out of bed. Dread is something different, dread is something that controls you.

It's what is described in that speech of Macbeth's. *Macbeth* is a great play to look at if you want to consider the operation of dread because it's out there, in your face. And the

characters actually start to talk about dread - as if they know what they're talking about. Macbeth's first soliloquy is that he talks to the audience after the prophecies come true. He's become Thane of Cawdor, and he feels it is creepy because it means maybe the predictions of the witches are true. He says:

'This supernatural soliciting
Cannot be ill, cannot be good. If ill,
Why hath it given me earnest of success,
Commencing in a truth? I am thane of Cawdor.
If good, why do I yield to that suggestion
Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair
And make my seated heart knock at my ribs,
Against the use of nature? Present fears
Are less than horrible imaginings.'

It's an extraordinary description of a body in the grip of dread. He grabs the essential characteristics of dread, which is that it's unseen, boundaries are blurred, it's bigger and darker than he is, and it's more powerful. *'Present fears are less than horrible imaginings',* that there is something specific I might be afraid of now, but it's not nearly as bad as the horrible imagining. The 'horrible imagining' is actually the dread that we all know.

I suspect we all know what dread is. It's not easy to share. It is something that's bigger than us which can grab us. And as I said before, what happens in *Macbeth* is that two kids walk into the woods, the trees get bigger, darker and lose their shape. And they get bigger and bigger, and as they get bigger and bigger, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth get smaller and smaller and smaller and smaller. That's the important thing, the actors have to have the generosity to let their characters shrink in the face of the dread. They have to let themselves be dwarfed by the predicament. But every atom of our being fights against powerlessness. That is the genius of the actor, the mystery of acting. You switch off the life support system. The primitive part of the brain does not trust this. So we do not always act well.

Lucie
And I think what I love about that line, just as you were saying about the fisherman and his son, that moment seems to make time collapse into just the present second. And that thing he says about present fears are less than horrible imaginings, it's like the past and future are just collapsing into this horrible moment that's in front of him.

Declan

And it's interesting because Lady Macbeth picks up that theme when she says, '*I feel now the future in the instant.'* And then we might say, *'could you stop there, please?!* Because that's exactly what you're *not* doing! Exactly what you're *not* doing is *in any way* imagining how this is going to play out down the line. You're only thinking about now!'

Lucie

Sometimes we feel we can judge and explain a character's behaviour as we observe it from the outside. But in fact, the internal experience of that character in that moment is often radically different.

Declan

Yes, I think so. I remember once a bad patch when I became increasingly terrified of flying. It was in the 1980s. It's connected with this. There's a very simple principle. So for example, if you are in the throes of a paranoid attack, there's two positions, two still earths you can see it from. There is the point of view of the person who believes that the flight might crash, and the other person, the friend, who sees that it's irrational. But the thing is, that when you're in the grip of a paranoid attack, it doesn't *seem* irrational. It seems absolutely logical that it could crash. And inside, inside the delusion, inside the irrational moment, *always* inside what appears to be irrational, you'll find the most appalling cathedral of logic.

Lucie

And so how does suspending your judgment and thinking about this undercurrent of dread help you to think about plays as a director?

Declan

I think first of all, in these great plays (particularly if they're comedies as well) we'll see that the only motive for the plot is the avoidance of dread. And I think that when you look at a play, particularly a great play, it's a very good discipline to find the dread.

Oscar Wilde, for example, in something like *The Importance of Being Earnest*. The one way of looking at the characters in the play is that they are absolutely terrified, like the Macbeths, of being ordinary. And they speak in this self-regarding way, you know, Gwendolyn impressing Cecily says about her diary, *'I always bring something sensational to read on the train.'* And they have a strange grand way of speaking - you have Miss Prism's line, *'you may omit the passage on the fall of the rupee, it is somewhat too sensational.'* But one of the things that unites these characters, I think, is their absolute dread of seeing how ordinary

they are. They are absolutely terrified to discover that their shit smells the same as anybody else's. This is a pretty universal human problem. It's a problem that we give ourselves. It's so difficult to grasp our own ordinariness. And they will speak very cleverly, they speak very archly, and they'll dress it up in a lot of camp hokum, but it's to do with their dread of being ordinary. No one dies and we laugh at their foibles.

And of course, all romantic comedies are predicated on the existence of dread – '*I must not fall in love!*' And if it's just that the character doesn't much want to fall in love, the films are not very funny. They get funny only if the character absolutely *dreads* falling in love. Someone who feels their existence will vanish if they fall in love. Like Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing* dreads falling in love with Benedick. She dreads that whole awakening in her. She doesn't just *dislike* it.

Lucie
So motive, then, is one more of those words that we should view as a little treacherous when rehearsing a play, because it can distract us from this vital engine of dread.

Declan
Yes. I'm quite addicted to television. I watch a lot of cop series. But one of the things that the detectives do on TV is they establish motives. They try to find the motive for the person who did this appalling crime. The problem is, that is a fairy story. However gritty, and however much the streets of Stockholm and Copenhagen look scary at night and sophisticated and adult, it's actually a fairy story because motive isn't that interesting to the police. It's very uninteresting to the judges. And English law makes no mention of motive whatsoever. Lawyers aren't particularly interested in motives. That is until the case comes before a jury. And police and counsel become interested in motives because *juries* like motives, and juries are people like me, who watch TV, and we like a story to have a beginning, middle and end. We would like the mystery to be explained away. TV series about serial killers are popular as they tend to reassure us that there's an explanation for suffering, that there's an explanation for horror or monstrosity.

The really great detective stories, of course, don't. They leave you with more mystery than before. Like a great scientist will expose the theory to you and help you see that the more we understand, the less we understand, and seeing how little we understand is the best sign that our understanding has got greater. 'Understanding' everything is a sign that our so-called 'understanding' is really quite banal.

We get bombarded with motive on TV. However scary the murder looks, we reassure ourselves each time we feel we have explained away the mystery. The invisible is accounted for.

Lucie
So is it perhaps an uncomfortable truth that overwhelming dread is just part of the blueprint of our lives, but we love to reassure ourselves that we're in control of it?

Declan
Yes. Let's think of a little girl pretending to be a ghost. What she'll do maybe is throw a sheet over herself and run around the house going, *'Whooo! Whooooo!'* You might ask, how come the sheet becomes the cliché notation for ghosts? The answer is important. It's because we imagine that ghosts are invisible, and in order to make them visible, they need to put clothes on. They need to *vest* - and that's the white sheet. I was fascinated as a child by *The Invisible Man* TV series.

But that's what dread wants to do, dread wants to dress itself in the things, to explain itself, to vest itself in some plausible outside thing. And we tend to help it do that. And of course, politicians can say, *'the real thing that you dread is over there, it's these people, or those people.*' When you see somebody who's very neurotic, you can sometimes see the thing that they dread changes from one thing to another. Traditionally, the hypochondriac will find a lump on one foot one day and then when the biopsy proves its nothing, they may find another lump on the other foot next week. This is because it isn't the thing it says it is. It's the dread seeking to vest. The dread seeks to vest, it needs the child's ghost sheet. Possibly it is still useful. We can only hope to contain it and own it as our own. As Prospero says of Caliban: *"This thing of darkness, I acknowledge mine."* I suspect it's a part of us and that we need to make friends with it. Perhaps we have managed to get here because of it. Perhaps it still helps us in dangerous situations. It probably helped our ancestors escape sabre-toothed tigers. But none of this need be true, just useful.

Lucie
So before we move on to take a deep dive into a scene from *Three Sisters,* have you got any final advice for actors in tackling the question of why characters do what they do?

Declan
The big thing that I'd like to say loud and clear is that it's a really good idea to let the actor off the hook from the feeling they have to originate desire from nil. The despair of feeling that

you have to start the car on a cold day on a horizontal surface. If you do have to start the car on a cold day, it's much better if it's at the top of the hill pointing downwards, so that there's already potential energy. But I think when we have forced time off, it's good to think of what we're doing and those shapes, I think, are useful.

Lucie
In this part of the episode, we take our topic for the week and use it to unpack a scene from a play. And this week is the turn of Act 1, Scene 1 of Chekhov's *Three Sisters*. And if our chat today interests you, you can find the text of this scene and links to photos and archive materials of Declan and Nick's production of this play in the podcast notes.

Three Sisters follows the lives of the Prozorov siblings, Olga, Masha, Irina, and Andrei, who get relocated from a metropolitan existence in Moscow to a rural town with their father's army regiment. A year to the day before the play starts, their father died, leaving them stranded in a crumbling house. The play opens on the anniversary of their father's death as they throw a tea party for the local soldiers. At first glance, this scene appears to be quite low stakes: it's a tea party. So Declan, how does finding the dread help fire up the action?

Declan
I think a way to begin the scene is to think, you know, what are the circumstances of the three sisters and the brother in this house? Chebutykin is a lodger in it, and they're celebrating Irina's name day with a party and having the officers round. And by coincidence, it's the first anniversary of their father's death. Anyway, so that's if you want to think in terms of circumstances - given or changing circumstances - that's what it appears to be. But I don't particularly like the word 'circumstances' because it smuggles in a faint whiff of neutrality and permits us to remove danger from the equation. 'Circumstances' is adequate only if you add a strong dose of instability. A word I have found more useful is *predicament*. And the way you find the predicament is you find the dread.

It's completely hidden there, and they're probably unconscious of it. I have known the play since I was a teenager and nothing seemed particularly unusual about it until my own father died, and later my mother died. And one thing I do know is that on the first year's anniversaries, you see or try not to see the calendar coming around. And on that day, I remember waiting for the clock coming around. For me it was a very strange time. And I reckon I'm not alone. You can't explain what it is, but it's a big old time - and chattering about it and also throwing this party on the first anniversary of the father's death, which of course is coincidentally Irina's name day, after a while you think that's *odd*. Then there are more and

more clues in the scene that they're in a dangerous situation. There's nothing comfortable about this. There's something very peculiar. You notice after a while that Olga says some subtly cruel things to Irina, and then to Masha, and then she's quite cruel to herself as well. And then the soldiers come in and they chat and you realise something unsettling is happening. They have this fantasy of going to Moscow, but for me there's a huge menace in the play in the situation.

The word I prefer to use is 'predicament' because it implies more that they're on the Titanic - because that's where they are. They are on the Titanic, and it's going down. And they could mitigate that. There were two things that could help you on the Titanic. One was having a first-class ticket, and the other was admitting that the boat was going down. We can't always have a first-class ticket, but we can know that the boat is going down. They don't really want to see that the boat is going down. They know everything. There's no information they need to have. Like the Macbeths, they kind of know it; like Oedipus, they know it, but they don't really do anything about it.

And I think one of the huge energies for the actors is that the real dread really hasn't anything to do with Moscow, I don't think. That's partial, but the real dread is the town - that they're going to be subsumed by ordinariness. The thing that I think is very important in many, many characters. Here perhaps they dread becoming another three weird sisters living in their funny house at the edge of town with their funny fat brother, and horror of horrors, they will be just ordinary. But they want to keep themselves feeling superior and special. Irina confides that her great trauma is that she forgot what the Italian for 'window' was, and I just dread to think what the people in the town think about the three Prozorov sisters and their brother living in that house. They must seem very snooty.

You realise that slowly they are going to be taken over by the town. The thing they most dread is going to happen, and they're going to become ordinary. They're going to become like human beings, and they get stripped of pretensions. And they experience that prospect as a disaster. These self-deceptions require enormous energy to maintain, and they distract themselves from far more serious issues, Tusenbach gets killed, and nobody does anything to stop it. And it's very sad. It's not so much about inaction. I think it's quite an energetic denial. The situation is one of extreme danger.

To rehearse it, a useful question to ask is: *'where is the dread?'* My advice is not to say *'I must keep an open mind'*. Do not imagine, *'I go in with a completely open mind, maybe there will be dread here or not. Let us explore!'* That's what I think we need to start to be real. No

one has ever had an open mind. What we can do is *to try* to have an open mind, but we shouldn't park our common sense outside. If there's no dread it's not particularly interesting. The predicament (we'll come on to talk about the predicament another time) - the predicament is the thing that makes the story worth telling. A story is no use unless it has a predicament. If you're watching a series on TV, and you get through the first 25 minutes, and there's no predicament, you switch off. People sometimes think it's sympathy for the leading characters, or an interesting plot. Producers who mistake the symptom for the cause will often insist on 'increasing sympathy for the leading character' But they are wrong. We sympathise with people because of their predicament. We don't fall first for the characters of *Romeo and Juliet*, we only become interested in them when we recognise their awful predicament. It is only the predicament that hooks you, everything else in a story is secondary. It's the predicament that helps us to empathise with other people. It hooks us in. But we need to look at predicament later!

So I think slowly we learn that the three sisters are in a terrible position. They are in an extraordinary state of denial.

Lucie

I love what you say about *Three Sisters* being about energetic inaction, because otherwise it's really easy to misread this play as being about people being bored in a country house. But if we look at it your way, it's actually a totally frantic, dread-fuelled limbo that they're in.

Declan

Exactly. There's a quite a scary line in Lampedusa's novel *Il Principe,* when he says, *'everything must change so that everything may stay the same.'* So actually keeping things the same is very energetic. If somebody is preserving their beauty or their youthful looks in old age, my god, there's a lot of work often involved! There's a lot of 'existence-maintaining' going on, and it's frenzied in *Three Sisters*.

Lucie

We've reached the last part of the podcast, in which we answer questions which listeners have put to us. So Declan, today's question is, do you find that you direct differently when working with actors in different languages and cultures? Does working with a French or Russian cast change your creative process?

Declan

No, not self consciously. I don't think, '*I'm now in Russia, I'm now in France, I'm now in England.'* I mean it's more specific than that. It's like this particular group of actors who are in the room with me. And I need to think of the best way of doing these words with them. I come to a lot of the same conclusions. I can't explain it, but certain things will seem appropriate and certain things won't seem so appropriate. Russians need a lot of cigarette breaks and the French need a long time for lunch. So there are certain local differences. But basically, it's very similar. Having said that, you know that the work we do, Nick and I, we walk to rehearsal and what we see on the streets will probably go into that rehearsal that day. You know, what we've seen on the news the night before might go in. We're continually influenced by what we see. So if we are rehearsing a play in Moscow, what we see on the streets in Moscow will probably go in. We try to be quite open to these things and not just keep everything out.

Lucie

Thank you very much, Declan - and that's where we're ending for today. Have a great week.

Episode 7
Design Deep-Dive

Lucie
Welcome to Cheek by Jowl's podcast, 'Not True, But Useful...' This is episode seven: Design Deep Dive.

Hi, I'm your host, Lucie Dawkins, and over the course of these podcasts, I'm going to be interviewing Declan Donnellan and Nick Ormerod, the director and designer who lead Cheek by Jowl. Over the last 40 years their productions have toured over 400 cities with explosive retellings of classical plays. So today, I'm on line with Nick Ormerod. Hello, Nick.

Nick
Hello, Lucie.

Lucie
And how are you doing today?

Nick
Very well, indeed. The weather's beautiful.

Lucie
What's keeping you busy at the moment? Are there any plays on your bucket list that lockdown is giving you the chance to read?

Nick
Well, *King John,* which I've never read and is definitely worth looking at. But I find it difficult, frankly, to get into - the plot seems to be unbelievably complicated.

Lucie
Yes, it's quite a design challenge for *King John*. There's that moment when you have to get Arthur to fall off a castle.

Nick

Yes, but challenges like that in a play are always rather exciting because they give you problems that have to be solved. And that's central to design. If there were no problems, it would be much more difficult.

Lucie
In today's episode, we're going to go on a deep dive through your work as a designer, and through Cheek by Jowl's uniquely collaborative design process. Now, we found out in episode three that you actually started your collaboration with Declan as an actor at university. So what made you move tracks from acting into design?

Nick
Well, I'd always been painting and drawing at school and at home so that was a sort of parallel activity. And then I discovered acting at school and became completely stage-struck, and that carried on into college with Declan. But to be honest, I found a little encouragement as far as my acting was concerned. So I moved over to design, which I haven't regretted. But all the same, I'd love to act.

Lucie
Is there a part that you've never played that you'd love to?

Nick
No, actually, no, I've never thought that. But actually any part I'd be quite happy with!

Lucie
So we also heard in a previous episode, that after your initial studies as a lawyer, you went on to train at the Wimbledon College of Art. So how did your time at Wimbledon affect the way that you think about design?

Nick
Well, 100%, I mean, it changed everything. I had no idea about design, and I learnt everything at Wimbledon. So, you know, I was starting from absolute scratch from studying law moving over to theatre design. So it was a major change in the way I thought, which I'm still working on! That was three years of really having to adjust my mental processes. I had to really dismantle trying to be clever, and taking sort of circuitous, intelligent routes into designing. But I think that 'cleverness' needed to be basically dismantled. It was a radical change, which was wonderful and very exciting.

Lucie
And were there any of your teachers at Wimbledon who had a particular influence on you?

Nick
Well, there were some wonderful teachers at Wimbledon, Malcolm Pride, who died, and David Burrows taught me a lot. There were some wonderful teachers and you learned great skills like scene painting, and practical hands-on lighting design, and costume if you wanted to. Virtually any aspect you could be submerged in, and you came out with skills. So, no, it was a wonderful training. And then I got an actual job once I left Wimbledon and I worked with a wonderful designer called Mark Negin up in Edinburgh for a season and that again, I learned a huge amount.

Lucie
What do you think were your biggest lessons that you learned in those first professional design jobs?

Nick
Well, again, it was just the experience of being in a theatre, in a busy theatre, and working with him because he spent most of his time with costume, and so left me with a lot of the fundamentals of the sets. And we did a lot of work. You know, we were doing new productions every month, I should think. There were two spaces, there was the Royal Lyceum, one of the most beautiful theatres in this country, and it had an attached studio theatre. And both were very busy, so we did a lot of work. And very quickly you learn a lot. You discover (particularly if you start a very small like we did with Cheek by Jowl) you learn what you need. And you also discover that you can do a lot with a fairly minimal amount of objects. But what I did learn was that you design for a space. There was a wonderful theatre at Wimbledon with an amazing space, and you could throw yourself on the theatre space itself, which provides a lot of energy.

Lucie
Yeah, I think that's true, of some of my favourite designs for the theatre, that they don’t just design the space for the play on stage but activate the architecture of the entire auditorium.

Nick
Exactly. And some of the great theatres - I think of working at the Maly Theatre in St. Petersburg: it’s a tiny space but extraordinary, and the architecture is slightly odd and

unusual. But the shows that come out of there, which are influenced by the space itself, are always fascinating.

Lucie
So we've talked before about how your first design for Cheek by Jowl was influenced by the fact that it was in a tiny space in London which used to be a morgue. Are there any spaces that you've worked in which have had a particularly strong impact on your work?

Nick
Well, I think every space that you work in changes what you do. I mean, at the moment, we're based in Moscow at the Pushkin Theatre, and that's a very traditional Italian box - they like to call it an 'Italian box' in Russia. It's a traditional repertoire theatre, but if you strip out everything on stage you have this wonderful space of ladders, and old bits of mechanics and radiators and things, which create a really atmospheric type of space to work in. And I think we were able to use that in *Measure for Measure,* for example - everything was stripped out. So you have the actors in this amazingly sculptural space, which worked, I thought, really well for the prison and for the city.

Lucie
Yes, I love the way that your designs often expose the bones of the theatre around them. I mean, even in the *Knight of the Burning Pestle*, which you did with the Pushkin Theatre, where you took us all the way backstage via video link. You take us right to the limits, to the very walls of the theatre often.

Nick
Well also, if you find that actors are able to touch concrete objects as opposed to scenery that helps them hugely, like being able to touch the proscenium arch. It gives enormous energy. And often we've exploded out of the pros into the auditorium, but if they can actually make contact with concrete objects, it's extraordinary how much energy that gives an actor. It can be like an electric charge.

Lucie
I remember that very first moment in Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy*, which was recently at the Barbican, we're right at the very beginning of the show, you put the lights down really, really, really slowly. So you get this hair-raising moment in the auditorium of something about to begin. And then that first actor walked out and turned on the lights on a

switch on the proscenium arch. And so she was touching something that was concrete in the world of the audience just as much as it was inside the world of the play.

Nick

That, funnily enough, was very last minute, because of course, it's I'm afraid false, because it's not a real switch. There was a sound effect and a fake lever, which we did very much on the last minute because the whole idea of *The Revenger's Tragedy* is kind of set in a TV studio. And we wanted the sense that it was a practical working space, and so they were coming into an empty space to turn the lights on to bring it alive. It happened to be a very last minute decision, but I'm glad you think it worked.

Lucie

Yeah, it was fabulous. And talking about space, are there any spaces that you haven't worked in yet that you'd love to design for?

Nick

I've sometimes had a hankering to do site-specific work, where perhaps you move the audience around through different spaces. So maybe you incorporate the space to actually see the other space and move through it. So that's always been a slight hankering of mine. When we made a movie I loved finding locations and then using them, often in ways we had not predicted, which is exactly the same process.

Lucie

So what for you are the ingredients of a really good theatre design?

Nick

Well, I think every piece of theatre should work as a unity. You should experience it without thinking 'what an amazing piece of design.' I think a great piece of design disappears into the whole. If you come out thinking, 'what an amazingly beautiful set, but I really didn't much like the performance' then I think you've failed. I'm not saying it denies great images, I think you can have great images, and there should be great images. Theatre absolutely needs spectacle, but it must arise organically and naturally. If it is imposed, it will be empty.

Lucie

So, in our episode on 'Space and Shakespeare', we talked about a not true, but useful idea, which has been heavily influenced by your work as a designer - and that is that the next door space to the one that we see on stage is the most important one for the character. In other

words, the other space is exerting pressure on the one that we can see on stage. So could you speak more about how you've developed that idea?

Nick

Because we've been out of the rehearsal room for quite a long time now, and now in this lockdown, we've been thinking a lot tangentially about threshold and space. It came as a sort of eureka moment. I think that there is always another space but the actual importance of the other space came as a blinding realisation, and that it's a great key for actors, because inevitably, actors tend to concentrate on their partner, working with their partner, the exact nuance of how they work with their partners, the present space that they play in. And it's very easy to forget that almost every scene is about *another* space.

Lucie

It's one of the things I find so exciting about these conversations with you and Declan, which is that your collaboration is truly unique. I don't think I know another director and designer who've worked together in the way that you have for so long. And it's fascinating to see the sort of universal theatre philosophy that you've built together, where space affects the acting, and the acting and directing all about the space. And everything is intertwined, not siloed into different disciplines, which they often can be in theatre processes. So have you got any advice for emerging designers about how to go about setting their own terms of engagement for their creative process, just like you have?

Nick

My advice would be to be in rehearsal as much as possible. And that's not always possible because sometimes, in particular, the director doesn't necessarily want the designer there very much. And of course, the design has other concerns, which means that he or she can't be in the rehearsal room all the time, because they're dealing with costume or the set or whatever. But my advice would be to get in there, get in the rehearsal room. And if you've designed a set, you're the one who understands how it works. You need to persuade people and show them how it works. Just be there!

Lucie

If you were to look back at the beginning of your career, is there any advice that you wish you'd been able to give yourself then?

Nick

I think I'm not necessarily the easiest person to deal with. I mean, partly because I've been spoiled by working with Declan, I think I probably have become rather entitled in terms of my contribution. So if I was working with another director now, I think they probably wouldn't put up with me, probably not for two seconds! But I've been really lucky because I've made mistakes along the way, and learned from them - but again, I hope in fairly small ways. So by the time your work gets more exposed, you know, you've made your worst mistakes in the past. And also we've been incredibly lucky and that we haven't had to produce too much work. Most designers, I think, have to do many productions a year. And the way we work together, Declan and I, has meant that we have more time to think. Yes, my advice would be to try and make sure that you have time to think!

Lucie

So we found out in episode three that you and Declan like to do what you call ‘going into the woods’ with the actors, which is a couple of weeks of experiments with the actors several months before rehearsals actually start, which allows you to create a design based on what the actors offer, which is a pretty remarkable way of going about it. Now, here in the UK, that's a little tricky, because acting contracts here don't easily allow for this process. So how do you circumnavigate this problem and still find a way of designing around the actors' work in a UK rehearsal period?

Nick

Well, in Cheek by Jowl, that period has to be at the beginning of the rehearsal period, for normal rehearsal periods. So, what we used to do and still do is basically give ourselves two weeks of playing and discovering things. And then it has to be designed fast. That's quite trying, particularly for people who have to execute the costumes and the sets. It means elements tend to be simple but they need to be simple anyway, because we're touring and things need to be portable. But yes, the huge advantage of having that time period between the woods and rehearsal is that this process of assimilation can happen in that period of time.

Lucie

So this is very different from the way that theatre design usually happens in the UK, where a designer will often have made a set box and a completed set of costume designs by the first day of rehearsals. How did you go about shaping a process with Declan which is particular to your preferred way of working? Is it something that you've had to find together over time?

Nick

It’s found over time in the sense because we created and made Cheek by Jowl to be a vehicle largely to cope with that process, because that's the best way we like to work. And when we are working for bigger theatres, which we have often done - then, of course, this process is much more difficult to achieve because most bigger theatres require pieces of scenery or large objects to be designed well in advance. It almost always has happened that I've gone in with an idea and come out with a completely different idea during the rehearsal period. Part of the process I have found is working out what problems only I as the designer can solve and what can be solved by the actors. And you learn that difference with experience.

Lucie
It seems like such an exciting way to work, to leave yourself open to what the company is giving you in rehearsal and then design responsively rather than pre-deciding everything in advance, which is a natural outcome of the British theatre system due to the tradition of much shorter of rehearsal processes here than in, say, Russia or Italy. When you sit back and think about it, fixing a design in advance doesn't actually seem that productive because you end up having to paste the play on top of a design in which the actors have had no input.

Nick
Yes, and I find it's clear when that has happened sometimes when you watch productions. And it is true, I think, that design can make a production, but sometimes too many decisions have been made too far in advance and too much has been preordained. How I see it is to keep myself out of the way, to allow, as it were, the space to be imagined by the actor, rather than providing the concrete space itself.

Lucie
Can you tell us a little bit more about how you collaborate with Declan? What does your preparation for rehearsals look like together?

Nick
The way Declan and I work together is quite unusual because we very rarely have meetings. We rarely actually discuss what we're going to do. And of course, that's simply not the case on the limited occasions I've worked elsewhere. Of course, you'll have more formal meetings with other collaborators, for example you present models, you present drawings, and that's as it should be, and is necessary. But Declan and I quite quickly, I think, developed a sort of shorthand that we worked best without any of that formal process. And actually, he hates

looking at model boxes, he only really understands when it comes to actually working with the actors in the space - which is a little bit of a burden and a little bit of a worry because I have to get it right, because he doesn't really experience it until we get in the space. But experience over the years has allowed me to predict how things are going to work and *if* they will work.

Lucie
We discussed in our episode on *Measure for Measure* the way that you changed Declan's initial hunch about how you'd go about doing the play. Has the opposite ever happened to you?

Nick
Well, the problem with working with Declan sometimes is that he has very good ideas but very late on in the process and he notoriously hates looking at model boxes, and only really likes working with actors in the space. So consequently, he often has ideas rather late on in the project. Sometimes weeks into rehearsal, he'll come up with this blindingly good idea, and you think *'oh my god, that is a good idea.'* So somehow you have to execute it. You go heart in mouth to see Angie Burns, who's doing the costumes, and probably the technical director and say, *'look, we have this idea that everybody's going to be dressed in x'*, and they look at you for a moment. And then they say, 'okay, okay…'

I remember the Wexford festival once years ago, in 1985, where you have only one week's rehearsal, and then you're on stage. And he had this idea in the middle of the week (the only week's rehearsal there was) to dress everybody in dinner jackets, I think it was. It was a brilliant idea, and well before such a thing became a cliché. But that was problematic, which we managed to deal with. I think the wardrobe supervisor was brilliant when I went in one day and said, *'look, I'm sorry, we have to have 30 dinner jackets, like tomorrow.'* I think she blanched slightly, but then we managed.

Lucie
And what was the show?

Nick
Mahagonny, by Brecht.

Lucie

I've noticed with your most recent designs that you often include an extra entrance somewhere centre stage, as well as from the wings, I suppose much like in Shakespeare's Globe, or the stages for the first Greek tragedies which had large doors upstage centre. So what appeals to you about this configuration?

Nick

It's not so much having a centre entrance. There's the potential of a centre entrance there, but then the actors can come out and make an entrance from the side. But basically they're funnelled in from behind an object and then come out from either side or through the centre. But it just helps, and I've used that several times recently. It stops that terrible sense of actors coming on from the wings. They still can do a stage left or stage right entrance, but they're being funnelled on through one centre entrance at the back. And that takes away that slight odour of death when actors have to vaguely emerge from undefined places out of darkness. It's not really an attachment to a centre entrance. It's an attachment to not having actors pushed on from the wings.

Lucie

And has that got anything to do with the importance of thresholds, which we spoke about a couple of weeks ago, giving the actors a really clear divide between here and there, inside and outside, onstage and offstage?

Nick

I think that's definitely true. I think actors appreciate the fact that they're either clearly on or clearly off, but there can also be a certain magic in that they appear from nowhere, if they all come from the centre and fan out. Like in *The* Kn*ight of the Burning Pestle* the actors come out from a single point almost like quite magically from the centre and you don't quite know where they've come from. It's a process that I'm sure I will use again.

Lucie

Each week we focus on a play or scene to examine in depth, and this week we're going to talk about Nick's design for Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, which in the last few years has done a world tour with British actors. Declan and Nick also did a Russian production of it a while back, but we're going to focus on this most recent version in this podcast. You can see Nick's designs for this production on the Cheek by Jowl website if you want to find out more. For a quick recap of the story, it starts in Sicily, where king Leontes is consumed by jealous suspicion that his pregnant wife Hermione is having an affair with his best friend Polixenes, King of Bohemia. They have a young son, Mamillius, who dies from distress

when his mother is put on trial. Hermione then apparently dies in childbirth and her loyal friends sneak the baby girl Perdita out of the palace and take her to Bohemia, where she's raised secretly by a shepherd. When Perdita grows up, not knowing her true identity, she falls in love with Florizel, Polixenes' son. They elope together to Sicily, where Perdita's identity is finally revealed, and she's reunited with Leontes. In the end, Paulina, Hermione's friend, reveals that she's been keeping a statue of Hermione. When Leontes and Perdita encounter it, it magically comes to life, and so mother and daughter are reunited. So Nick, could you start by describing your design for the play?

Nick

My design for *The Winter's Tale* is a big box, a slatted box if you like, wood panels, which fall down and crash onto the ground. And that stems from the very first conversation I had with Declan, which was that the overwhelming event of the play, the point of no return, should be (and that's where I've worked from) the death of Mamillius, which is cataclysmic. So the panels that clad this box crash down and reveal the dead prince there. And in the text, it's very weak, actually, Shakespeare doesn't help you - he just has someone coming on announcing that the prince is dead, so that the nature of the event has to be in the horrified reaction of the actors. But if you have the whole set collapse, the cataclysmic nature of the event is embodied in quite a concrete way. So that design stemmed from that one brief conversation that we had. I can't remember where it took place, but some months before, and that meant that actually I did design that before we started rehearsal to reveal that one particular event.

And then in rehearsal, since we did have the box, we could discover how else to use it, because we had this other idea that Bohemia was set in Ireland. So the idea was that the sheep-shearing scene should take place indoors while it is raining outside, and that the actors would come in through the rain. So the other advantage of having this box is we could bring rain onto the stage. The actors came through the entrance under umbrellas into the space of the sheep-shearing.

Lucie

Yes, I remember some excellent wellington boots.

Nick

Yes, exactly.

Lucie

Now, *The Winter's Tale* has become famous for some challenges for any company, particularly when it comes to design. The first is that you have to switch between two countries, Sicily and Bohemia, which have radically different moods and atmospheres. How did you go about doing that?

Nick
It was achieved basically by the actors, with very little addition from my point of view. I mean, I think the basic dynamic was between the contrast of the rather formal court and the entire company transforming into Irish country people. So you had Joy Richardson, for example, playing Paulina as a courtier transforming into Mopsa or Dorcas, and you had Orlando [James] playing Leontes in the background playing his guitar. So you had the entire company playing the absolute inverse of the court. And then the arrival of Autolycus as a sort of Jerry Springer type TV presenter, that if I remember rightly was a very last minute Declan idea. That was certainly not pre-planned.

Lucie
So that was one of Declan's last minute discoveries.

Nick
Yes, exactly. That didn't require anything physical, but was quite a lot to take on board that basically the sheep-shearing scene was going to turn into Jerry Springer. Interestingly of course, somebody pointed out recently that it actually was a direct parallel to the courtroom scene earlier when Hermione is condemned**,** and of course you don't realise that at the time, but that's actually what we were doing. We don't think diagrammatically. But shapes like mirroring do emerge. Probably, in fact, the shape is more powerful when it is unconscious.

Lucie
Is that part of the perk of the job when people point things out in your work and reveal new things to yourself about it.

Nick
Absolutely wonderful, yes! Because of course, half the time you don't know what you're doing. In a way, you must not completely understand your work. You're just acting on the spur of the moment. Often I found in design it's very frustrating that the most striking images are the ones you never plan. They just happen accidentally. And that's quite frustrating because you can spend a lot of time designing things and you can convince yourself it 'sort

of works'. Then something very simple happens by accident. And you think, *'oh my God, that's amazing.'*

Lucie
So the second big challenge in *The Winter's Tale* is that you have to make 16 years pass in only two minutes in a speech delivered by an actor playing the part of Time, in this case, the actor Grace Andrews. So how did you go about solving this problem?

Nick
Well, I have to admit that it was based on the idea that we had in St. Petersburg, which worked well then: a wonderful actress, Tanya Rasskassova played a little grandmother babushka, who, as it were, lived on the stage and swept the stage and she swept the action off when time changed, and then revealed herself as a 22 year old girl. So the idea of the old woman transforming herself into a young woman implied time, or the reverse of time if you like. And so again we used sort of the same thing - Grace Andrews played Time as a little old woman who then reveals herself to be this beautiful young woman, and at the same time revolving the box to imply the change of time.

Lucie
Now, we have reached the part of the podcast where we answer listeners' questions. Do remember, if you have any questions for Declan or Nick or want us to talk more about anything that you've heard in these podcasts, get in touch on Cheek by Jowl's social media, and we will answer them in future episodes. Today's question, Nick, is: are there any designers, past or present, who have influenced your work?

Nick
Many, many. I think there are all sorts of wonderful designers and I wish sometimes I was anything like as good as they are. And I think people like Maria Björnson, who died; Philip Prowse, who was up the Citz in Glasgow for years - amazing work; Ralph Koltai; designers like Chloé Obolensky, now - still working. And the great David Berovski who died when we were all together in Bogota. There are many, many, many designers - and everything you see, of course has an influence in one respect or another.

Lucie
What was it for example, about Philip Prowse's work at the Glasgow Citizens Theatre, which so inspired you?

Nick

It was extraordinarily exciting work and his sets were visually absolutely stunning. Every production was a complete contrast, but at the same time, each design suited the piece remarkably well. So that has left me with amazing images in my mind, which have been extremely influential.

Lucie

And that's where we're ending for today. Thank you very much, Nick, and have a great week.

Episode 8
Encountering the Predicament

Lucie
Welcome to Cheek by Jowl's podcast, 'Not True, But Useful...' This is episode eight, 'Encountering the Predicament.'

Hello, I'm your host Lucie Dawkins and in this podcast I'm holding a series of interviews with Declan Donnellan and Nick Ormerod, the director and designer who lead the theatre company Cheek by Jowl. Over the last 40 years they've toured all across the globe with electrifying retellings of great classic plays. They're going to be taking us behind the scenes to share their ideas which are not true, but useful in approaching life and theatre, following on from Declan's book, *The Actor and the Target*. And today I'm on the line with them both. Hello Declan and Nick!

Declan
Hello, Lucie.

Nick
Hello, Lucie.

Lucie
So we're meeting once again over laptop screens as the COVID-19 lockdown continues. Declan, how has this move into the virtual world been affecting your thoughts on the theatre?

Declan
I would say how important I think acting is at the moment. Live acting in front of live people is unbelievably important. We infect each other with humanity. We can't do it virtually, we have to be in the same space. There are many things we can't do over a screen, and one of them is making theatre. Making theatre together is a very basic thing, and we desperately need it.

I'm not just talking about the COVID-19. I'm talking about a world which is increasingly embracing the virtual because it's easier to sell. It's cleaner, it's more manageable, and you can reproduce it, you can mass produce it, and you can turn a process into a state. Actually, live theatre doesn't do any of those things. And the most important moment in theatre, I

think, is when we all assemble there, and the lights go down and the audience hushes. Then an actor walks onto the stage. And it's that moment just before, when everybody's united together. That's the central moment of theatre from which all the theatre derives its authority. And it is powerful. And beautiful.

Lucie
And how have you been finding it, Nick?

Nick
We have been thinking a lot about theatre, as opposed to actually doing it - so that we've been carrying on this conversation in many ways about the space and about all sorts of things like the threshold and the predicament. So it has given us an opportunity to think as opposed to actually do it.

Lucie
Today's topic is linked to an idea which will be familiar to many theatre makers, and that is the given circumstances. This is a tool which is often used in rehearsal rooms to give us a place to start work. To sum it up, given circumstances are facts around and about a scene which will influence a character's behaviour. For example, in the play *Macbeth*, useful given circumstances include the fact that a civil war ended yesterday, that the Macbeths have recently lost a child, and that we're in the middle of a cold drab castle with a storm going on around it. All of these circumstances will inform how the character's body moves through the space and interacts with others. So Declan, I know that while you find the idea of given circumstances useful, you prefer to use another word. Could you tell us more about that?

Declan
Well, of course, considering the given circumstances, the developing circumstances, the changing circumstances, considering those things is a crucial and wonderful way to begin a rehearsal period. Having said that, though, no word is perfect. All words are dodgy. As I said before, I find ‘circumstances’ a somewhat more dodgy word than ‘predicament’. The reason for that is that ‘predicament’ implies danger. It implies something that's in peril, something that's in jeopardy, something precarious towards which you cannot truly remain neutral. And to me, ‘circumstances’, things that stand around you, is something that could imply a certain degree of neutrality.

The problem is that we will do anything to be reassured that we live in a world of neutrality. And this is the sort of demon at the heart of making theatre. Which is also the demon which

drives us to make theatre! I think one of the things that depresses us and brings us death and makes us hibernate early is the idea that any space can ever be neutral, that a human being can be neutral. The fact is that there is no neutrality, there is no stasis, everything is in flux. But that in itself is not the most important thing, no, the most important element, from which derives our unending human predicament, is that although this is so... ***we don't like it.***

A simple way to try to describe 'predicament' (which like everything important resists definition) is that the predicament is the thing that makes the story worth telling. We simply wouldn't bother to put a mere set of circumstances on stage. But look at any circumstances with enough attention and you will find predicament because that is what makes a story worth telling. Sometimes when people fantasise a story, sometimes producers and writers will think that it's the character and the story that gets us hooked, but it isn't - it's the *predicament* that hooks us, it's the circumstances *in danger*. We think maybe that we identify with the characters of *Romeo and Juliet*, but what we identify with in *Romeo and Juliet*, what touches us, is their predicament. It's the balcony, in a strange way, that hooks us in – it's the fact that she's on one side, he's on another and they're doing a forbidden thing together. And it's a myth that we can't fully understand, but it's the predicament that hooks us.

Like in *Breaking Bad,* Walter White, played brilliantly by Bryan Cranston – it's the predicament, the fact that he's dying of cancer, that he hasn't got enough money to look after his family, and *that's* the thing that hooks you into him. We think we get hooked by the characters - I mean, we do, but that's a secondary phase - but the first thing that first punches a hole in us is 'predicament', because we can imagine what it would be like to be in that predicament.

It's not so easy to imagine we are another human being, the act of empathy is difficult and complicated. But a first step, the first humble step to empathising with another human being is trying to imagine, *'Oh my God, I could be in that predicament too.'* And that's often how we connect with other people. We identify with the predicament. It only seems as if we identify with the characters as we often confuse the symptom with the cause.

Lucie
So what do you say that the predicament is one of the things which drives a character in a play forward through the action?

Declan

Yes, exactly. There are many variations. For example a classic mechanism that the hero thinks the predicament is one thing and then discovers that it's something else. So like Oedipus, he thinks that the predicament is the sickness in the city. But then afterwards he realises the predicament actually is in himself. But in Walter White, we realise that as well - he thinks the predicament is in his cancer, in the bitterness that he's had his ideas stolen by a competitor, the fact that he was bullied and treated so badly at school, etc, etc. But in fact, after a while you realise at the same time as he does, that Walter White goes on to do these appalling things because he *wants* to do it, and that was the underlying thing all along, because of the fact that he doesn't want to be him, he wants to be somebody else. He is his own predicament. It's the desire to shake off a chrysalis and emerge as this new Super-Walter, that's what destroys him.

Lucie
So it sounds like the struggle we have with our own selves is part of the predicament of being a human being. I mean, for example, we've talked about *Macbeth* a great deal recently. Is this the case with the Macbeth would you say?

Declan
Yes, to begin with, the Macbeths think, like many of us, that the predicament is in the outside world. It's, *'are we going to kill Duncan or not?'* But clearly, the real predicament is themselves, it's that they are their own worst enemies.

And you often see that right from the beginning - from the very first lines of Othello, 'put up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them'. You think, 'oh yeah…' then you may think, *'actually, do you know, real soldiers don't talk like that'.* And actually movies in which somebody says tough-guy cool lines like that make you think, *'really?!'* It puts its finger on a problem at the heart of how Othello sees himself.

Also Hamlet's first line, *'a little more than kin, and less than kind',* it draws your attention to the fact that he's the odd son on the side, trying to get attention, trying to be funny, and nobody laughs at his joke, because it's not really very funny - but he says it anyway, hoping for a laugh. Shakespeare can do good jokes if he wants to, but that line can make you feel very uncomfortable. And, bit by bit, you piece together why he was not elected King of Denmark.

Lucie

So therefore every character in a play is encountering huge danger and a jeopardy-filled set of circumstances, and everything that they do is in reaction to that.

Declan

Yes. The other thing that's important is - the more we think of the predicament, the more we shrink, we get smaller in comparison. And again, the crucial step we love to forget, we don't like it. We feel increasingly powerless against the scale of the predicament. The predicament should tower above so that the characters start to shrink. But we don't like shrinking and we fight back whether we like it or not. Considering the predicament can be like electric shock treatment for actors to open the scene. Once you see that the predicament is there, and it's about to gobble you up, it works. It's sad if one gets too tied down with 'motive'. We choose to think of motives because we don't like shrinking. They give us a semblance of control. I do it because I want to do it, because I will it. But in the theatre a large part of our job is to share what humans prefer to deny. We don't like to see the predicament because it makes us feel small.

A word that's interesting here is *'cool'*, and what it means to be *cool.* It's like you're not bothering to deal; it's like you are the person who gets to do things at your own rhythm; you don't sweat very much; you're needless - that's very, very important, the concept of *'needlessness'.*

So we want to ensure that we are either the same size or even bigger than the problems we're going to encounter. Any script written like that is boring – it's a very boring movie if you're watching people dealing with things they can deal with. I mean, that's a really boring action movie if you're watching people deal with things effortlessly.

But it's the struggle - to see people dealing with what's thrown at them, the thing that is bigger than they are, and the situation always going faster than they want it to, and always being outside their comfort zone. That's really important. And that's why Othello would like to convince first himself and then everyone else…(note well that sequence) that he's well settled into his comfort zone – that he's more than grown up, he is assured, powerful, he can talk cool on his first line, he's presidential - but he's **not!** He's a little kid who's too frightened to throw away his mother's handkerchief. How much Othello lets himself be conscious of that is a moot point.

Lucie

So turning to you, Nick, much of your work as a designer involves firing up the space around the characters. How does this idea about the predicament inform the way that you think about space?

Nick

The predicament is, I think, very much in the space. It's very concrete, but it's kind of underwater, often hidden from you, and every now and then you glimpse its broad dark back breaking the surface. And probably during the play, it will become apparent, at least to the audience, even if the characters don't realise finally what their predicament is.

I'm thinking of *Three Sisters* - the predicament is huge for them. They're stuck out in the small town. They think of themselves as sophisticated young ladies, but here their only entertainment is these rather flea-bitten soldiers. As the play progresses, we realise that that brother is a gambler, that he's mortgaged the house and they don't really know who the house belongs to. So the predicament is gradually unravelled. They probably never fully realise what it is, but it's there, my goodness, is it there! It's huge, and it's sort of submerged. They half-glimpse it every now and then, but it's massive and unchanging and massively in the space.

Declan

The audience does need to have a sense of the immensity of the predicament. But they don't need to know what it is. There are no marks for being clever. We may see that the Macbeths and the Prozorovs are deluding themselves. But it is rash to feel we have the answer. A great play helps us to heave open that mighty door and we may realise that although we are different, we are not so very different. We may discover some compassion for these people and even for ourselves.

Lucie

It sounds to me like all these ideas that we've talked about in the last few episodes of this podcast all influence each other. The predicament informs the space and vice versa.

Nick

Yes, I mean all these elements – threshold, predicament, encounter - they're all wrapped up in each other like tagliatelle, like spaghetti. They're all completely inseparable. And it's misleading to take them apart and talk about them one by one because they're all kind of mixed up in a great big skein of wool.

Lucie
Exactly. And Declan, it sounds like what we're talking about today is also all tied up with what you were saying in episode six about dread being a great rocket fuel for understanding a character's motivation. So finding those negative forces like dread and danger and jeopardy can be really useful for creating life on stage.

Declan
Yes, I think if a text, a play seems to have no dread in it, then I just say look again - and then if you can still find no dread, I'd say do another play, because it's not going to work for you. As a corollary. There's no such thing as a work of art. What there is is an *act* of art, and the heart of any art is a connection between people, mediated by an artefact that one has made. A poem, a song, a performance. So the act of theatre does *not* take place either on stage or in the audience, it takes place *between* the stage and the audience. It's really, really important for us to always remember that.

If you buy a Caravaggio for gazillions of pounds, and you stick it in a bank cellar, it stops being a work of art until somebody revivifies it with their gaze. And then between that and the person looking at it the act of art starts to happen. So we should make a big distinction between a *work* of art and an *act* of art and realise that we're all dependent on the person who witnesses us, actually.

Lucie
So one word which is surfacing a lot as you talk about the predicament is encounter, as in 'encountering the predicament.' Now, as you said, words are imperfect tools. But what is it about this particular word, 'encounter', which fires up your imagination when you think about plays?

Declan
Well, there are two ways to think about the encounter that concern us here, two important but different ways. One is the encounter that the character has with the predicament. But there's another encounter, and that's the encounter the audience has, as they watch the actor enacting that for them.

The first thing I should say is that the most important thing about the encounter is that the thing that we see is going to see us back, it's open at both ends. And that's what happens in watching a good piece of theatre (or any good piece of art or any good conversation or any good meeting with people) is that we see, and *we are seen back***.** And we're frightened of

being seen back. And that's one of the reasons why, for example, falling in love can seem so scary, because we get frightened to be seen.

The most important encounter that we have is our encounter with ourselves. I myself am in the space, and I have to see myself. And the reason that seeing myself is so crucial is because, to a large degree, I *am* my own predicament. I need to see and accept that as well as I can, with major allowance for the fact that I'm *never* going to see it completely because, ultimately, large tracts of myself are going to be mysterious to me.

Encountering yourself is absolutely central to all of these great plays. The characters encounter something and that encounter with something else makes them see themselves. So we can think about the character encountering the predicament, and how it changes them. Hamlet, Othello, Macbeth in different ways have to encounter a predicament. They see something, and in what way does it see them back? Well, in each of these cases, they sort of fracture - they disintegrate into extreme self-questioning. Their personalities go through a form of total distortion after they've seen this extreme thing. They don't remain intact. They don't retain their integrity, whole. Now and forever they are utterly changed and we watch them changing because they confront an extreme thing (the predicament, if you like).

But there's another way of thinking about the encounter. It's the most important one, and it is our encounter with the play. What happens, I think, when we go to see theatre, is that we're looking at the individual pitted against the predicament, whatever it may be. But in the end of all of that, if it works brilliantly, well, you start, in a strange way, to encounter yourself. This is because you start to realise, *'oh, what am I myself bringing to this situation? What is **my** part in this? How much of me is in this?'* You're put in a somewhat painful and awkward position because you've got to question *the position from which you're viewing things*.

Like Montaigne's cat - Montaigne used to like to play with his cat. Then afterwards, he asked himself, *'actually, is that right. Or is in fact the cat playing with me?'* So I think a really good work of art has the capacity of entrapping you, in a way, implicating you, and then asks you to look back at yourself 'seeing'. And asks you: '*What are **you** doing, standing there?.* It is not the job of art to make you feel comfortable. Art isn't there to support the status quo - it is questioning and active. It is not supine. So, the expression 'decorative art' is frankly an oxymoron.

Very often when we're seeing or when we are seen, we often need to slightly readjust our feet, for example, just to make sure that we're seeing it from a slightly better position. As they say affectionately in Ireland, *"Will you get up till I see you!'* And that's a very healthy thing to do. So when we're seen back, we often have to adjust because we're not quite comfortable in that position.

So for example, when Macbeth comes out with *'If it were done…'* He talks with us like we're his best friends and he chats away to us as his confidantes. And it's very flattering for us, really. And then after a while, we realise he's talking to us about something absolutely, unspeakably abominable, about killing this old man, and we get worked into it. So you become an actor in this thing that's happening, you have been manipulated. But soon you may have the sickening thought that maybe there *is* no abstention. Maybe I'm part of this system. Where am I in all of this? Where am I when Macbeth says these things to me? And that's one of the things that great art does. It implicates us. And why art will always be more truly political than any slogan.

Lucie
And how do you think that this idea of encountering the predicament can help inform an actor's work in a rehearsal room?

Declan
An important thing we need to accept is that the act of theatre is watching somebody encounter the predicament. Someone else. But soon we may feel the problem in ourselves. And as I have said, if there's no predicament, there's no real play. Predicament is not necessarily a dramatic *action*. So, for me, one of the greatest scenes in Shakespeare is quite remarkably postmodern. And it's a scene in which there is actually next to no dramatic action. And that is the scene between Desdemona and Emilia before Othello comes into the bedroom, and they have a conversation. And nothing happens in the scene, I mean that there's a couple of lines like, *'unpin me here.'* So yes, I've done it a few times, and each time it's staged as Emilia undressing and preparing Desdemona for bed. It doesn't actually need to be that; you could do it in all sorts of different ways.

And, in a way, nothing happens in the scene, but my god, there's a predicament in the guts of the audience. And when Desdemona says, *'my eyes do itch, does that bode weeping?'* You feel sick. And then they talk about men, they talk a lot about men, but in fact, there is a real, very violent man who's about to come through the door, which we in the audience know very clearly – but Emilia and Desdemona, the characters onstage, maybe they know it but

they also don't know it. And they're caught in that horrible twilight of knowing and not knowing. The scene goes on without dramatic action, and with the most enormous amount of predicament. And that to me proves the fact that the essence of theatre is not action but predicament.

So let's look at, say, *Happy Days* by Beckett. It begins with Winnie chatting cheerfully to us about what a great day it is. And it's very, very cheerful. And the first line is, *'another heavenly day!'* But then we notice that she's buried up to her waist in sand. So you may start thinking, *'how wonderful can it be?'* And then if we miss the point we go for the interval, have a drink and we come back and then find that now she's buried up to her neck in the sand. And you realise that she's in a deteriorating situation, a set of circumstances which is getting worse. A predicament. It's not neutral, that sand is creeping up her. It's not the dramatic action in *Happy Days* that keeps you hooked, it's our encounter with the predicament.

As we will touch on later we may use 'understanding' as a defence against experience. Feelings can hurt. Like most brilliant plays *Happy Days* the menace in the play is both elusive and simple. Like a ghost. Yes we may worry about 'meaning' and symbolism but that may be our feint to avoid the horrible simplicity of the play. The most pregnant image and unsettling question is '*But what pile of sand am **I** buried in? What still earth am **I** on?'*

Do you know, you don't even need to have an actor in shot or on stage. There's a film from the 1950s, I think, a black and white movie about the Titanic called *A Night to Remember* with Kenneth Moore. And there's one scene when all of the diners in the first class restaurant have gone upstairs and you hear they are dancing. Then you hear a muffled bump, but the distant sound of music still goes on, uninterrupted. And then... we just glimpse the cheese trolley, unattended, slide gently across the empty dining room. And you, the audience, with the wisdom of hindsight, think 'o*h my god, that's it! That was the iceberg we just heard!'* And you feel again, 'a bit sick' but there's no-one in shot, there's not a single human being there. It's just us and the predicament. That's a clear example of what happens in a lot of plays. You're listening to the merrymaking upstairs of people dancing, but you're watching the cheese trolley rolling across the floor.

Lucie

So all in all, this idea of encountering the predicament sounds like one way to open up our thinking about a play and help us find new ways of holding it up to the light.

Declan

What I'm really hoping is that words like predicament will just suggest something to the actor, and to the artist, that will give them some sense of freedom, as opposed to a technique to follow, you know, a kind of a step-by-step analysis of what you must do in order to get success. These ideas are not magic, but better than our understanding them, they can *haunt* us. Words like ‘predicament’, ‘dread’, encounter’, ‘space’ should not be seen as monuments. They are more like pointers, signposts.

Lucie

In this part of the podcast, we take a deep dive into a scene from a play to help us unpack our topic. And today we're going to talk about Act 5, Scene 5 of *Macbeth*, which is one of the many devastating moments in this play. After murdering not only the King of Scotland, but also his best friend Banquo, and the wife and child of his rival Macduff, Macbeth and his wife have been slowly unravelling, tortured by what they've done. In this scene, Macbeth discovers that Lady Macbeth has committed suicide while an avenging army closes in around the castle. He delivers a speech in which he admits the utter futility of life. Now, in this season of the podcast, we've discovered that Nick is an actor at heart. So Nick, can I ask you to step in and read Macbeth’s extraordinary speech in this scene.

Nick

She should have died hereafter.
There would have been a time for such a word.
Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time,
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

Lucie

Thank you, Nick, that was beautiful. So Declan, what does this speech have to tell us about the predicament as Macbeth finally faces up to the dreadful circumstances that he himself has created?

Declan

In a way, it's the kind of textbook classic. He's facing the predicament. He's facing the end, and he's encountering, if you like, this thing that he thinks of as being the 'Big Truth'. But it's a great mistake to assume that the tragic heroes learn anything during the plays. He ends as he began, in a way, because 'tomorrow and tomorrow' is all about despair. He shits on all life, to say that all life is just a tale told by an idiot. You may think, actually Macbeth, it doesn't really need to be like that. We do despair but we have to pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off, very often forgive ourselves, and try better tomorrow. And there's no way that Macbeth's going to do that. He gives in to his despair.

Lucie

It also sounds to me like this is connected to what you were saying earlier, that the predicament is huge and tends to make the character shrink in the face of it.

Declan

Yes, Macbeth is very, very small in the face of the predicament. That's in the nature of the predicament - you know, the Titanic is bigger than the passengers. That what he's done and the accretion of what he's done, the suffering that he's caused, it's so much bigger than him. He's made tiny by the size of it. Now, at the end, he's going to talk down the human predicament and say that all life is meaningless.

He is going to force us to join his despair team. But as so often with Macbeth, he can 'speak better than he knows'. He wanted to say something cynical and tinny but it's as if the words come out with such depth of feeling. He is the sort of man who could roar that he has no feelings, but you may see a tear glint at the corner of his eye. His unconscious is, like everybody else's, quite out of his control. And as we all do, he tries to control how he speaks to us. But you get an extraordinary sense of depth of texture in *'till the last syllable of recorded time.'*

He wants to sound clever, fashionably empty of hope. It is as if he is running around a dark room with only a few candles left burning, and he's furiously blowing out each one in front of us yelling, *'look, I'm master of my situation, I'll be the guy who gets to blow the candles out. If anyone's going to pull the switch, it's me! Look, I'm blowing another candle out!'* But the texture of the words tells a different story and makes us really feel for him. Probably the opposite effect he had intended. Perhaps if only Macbeth could ever have let himself be held, but of course he can't.

Lucie

So would you say that in this speech, Macbeth betrays himself? He's trying to be cool and cynical about this dreadful predicament of human life, but the rich poetry leaks out and betrays the massive depth of dread and human feeling going on underneath. It shows his desperate struggle to hold on to something, to talk himself into control of this massive, incomprehensible, terrifying set of circumstances, which are all the more terrifying because he himself is the one responsible for them. It's a pitiful and magnificent act of denial and control.

Declan

He's trying to make his shabby little end seem epic. But one thing that's so tragic for me in *Macbeth* is the huge propensity for love that surges in Lady Macbeth and Macbeth and screams for release but you feel that for most of the play they are struggling to stifle it. The redeeming love they have in themselves that they decide they have to cut off. And it exhausts them. They absolutely are **not** empathy-free psychopaths. They are stifling love, but it keeps coming out of them. It comes out in the children images, in all sorts of images that come out of them. I think it even comes out in the diction in this speech, that he has to cut it off, cut it off, cut it off, control it, control that loving impulse. I think that's so heartbreaking.

Lucie

And, Nick, when you were working together on your production of *Macbeth*, did these ideas about the predicament inform any of the stage images that you went about composing with the acting company?

Nick

Yes. When it's announced that the queen is dead - in fact, she was sitting on his lap, I think, on stage when we'd already know she was dead. And then it was announced that she was dead, and then she moved away from him and we realise that, in a sense, their terrible predicament was their relationship, their marriage. It was absolutely fundamental to them, and somehow their actions profoundly damaged it. The murder that they plotted together was the end of their relationship. Just that physical movement seemed to me to express that deeply frightening predicament.

Lucie

We've reached the part of the podcast where we answer questions that listeners have put to us. And today's question is in response to episode six, ‘Why We Do What We Do.’ This

listener asks if fear is such a good power pack for a scene, then what place does hope and positive emotions have in motivating human behaviour? Do you think that joy ever drives the action of a play?

Declan
Yes, quite possibly. Personally I am convinced that there is always love somewhere and always joy. In fact these two probably are part of the motor that drives us to art, to theatre in first place.

But remember, I'm not talking about ‘Truth’. I'm talking about what's useful, and what's useful is to ‘play’ - instead of, say, love - you play the dread of losing that love. Many Romeos come unstuck indicating joy up to the balcony. It is far more human to stifle the joy for fear that, say, this present moment will pass.

Instead of joy, you have the terror of losing it. You'll find much more energy in that. What I've discovered is that when you try to show positive emotions, any emotions, you run out of energy very, very fast. I think it's why Milton found it easier to write Satan than the good angels. The negative side automatically puts us into conflict. And we should not always be frightened of the negative, of the conflict. It's only really in conflict that we discover who we are - that the living organism only recognises what it is when it comes into conflict with something else. And also the essence of life is friction, and friction implies a certain degree of discomfort. Thinking in that place is more useful. The fact that there can be no love without loss is not agreeable in our private lives, but it is very useful for the actor. Art is not about the world we would like to exist. It is about our world.

Of course, I’m not here as a truth-sayer - but it's a very interesting question. To what degree do true positive emotions help? I just don't think they do. But I'm only speaking from a practical point of view. For what it's worth, you know, I do think there is joy, I do think there is love, I do think there is hope. As an individual, I do believe those things as profound spiritual givens, actually. But my job at the moment, as far as I see it is, is to help. And I just find that trying to indicate the positives never really helps. It actually helps much more if we are trying ‘to avert the bad thing’.

Anyway, imagine a text about people being permanently happy and present. We wouldn’t watch it.

I've come to this, though, through trial and error over decades of work. And that if you play a love scene for just joy, trying to find love for each other during the love scene, I've discovered doesn't really work. It falls apart and it tends to become sentimental. It always needs the edge, it always needs the negative of *'don't leave me, don't betray me, don't let me down, let this moment last forever, don't let this moment end!'.* If you find the negative in it, it works. So for example, the word that you can't act, I believe, is 'yes', unless you put a 'no' in front of it. In *The Actor and The Target* there is a big riff on the fact that all text says no. And I still absolutely stick to that. Even if you've got to say 'yes', you have to find your 'no' in front of it. In other words, *'no, I mean, yes'*, because you need the friction to give you 'the life'. No conflict, no existence.

Episode 9
Character and Process

Lucie
Welcome to Cheek by Jowl's podcast 'Not True, But Useful...' This is episode nine, 'Character and Process.'

I'm your host Lucie Dawkins, and over the course of this podcast, I'm holding a series of interviews with Declan Donnellan and Nick Ormerod, the artistic directors behind the company Cheek by Jowl. Over the course of a 40 year collaboration, which has taken them all over the world, they've developed a creative philosophy which they describe as not true, but useful in approaching life and the theatre. Today, I'm on the line with Declan Donnellan, and we're going to be talking about how to think about building a character in rehearsal. Hello, Declan.

Declan
Hello, Lucie.

Lucie
So we're recording this in early June of the COVID-19 lockdown, and the big question going about the industry right now is what theatre is going to look like on the other side of this, and how we're going to survive this unprecedented threat to live performance. What are your thoughts about that?

Declan
Well, we have no idea what the economic structure for subsidised theatre is going to be, or indeed commercial theatre is going to be when this finishes. And we must argue very, very vociferously indeed for the government to support our large and small art structures, it's important to do so. Let's do that passionately. And it won't be very easy - we'll have to argue also on grounds of economics, for example that theatres are good for tourism, all of those arguments are important.

But it's also extremely important for the mental health of people. Like any other art, theatre is an illusion. An *illusion* is utterly different from a *delusion*. Art is an illusion. So it's theatre that offers us the possibility of getting back, however briefly, to a more real world. The problem is that the world that transforms seems increasingly delusional. It always has been. The

ancient Greeks prove it. But just now, to our own pinned-in-time experience, it seems to be getting worse. The internet makes technological advances which may also serve to intensify our profound drive to delude ourselves. Art, on the other hand, is a way of getting back to some real things. And that's why we need art very, very, very much at the moment.

Art is a giant reality check.

Lucie
So today we're going to focus on the idea of building a character, which is a thorny problem at the heart of any theatre process. How does an actor step into the shoes of another person and embody them onstage? And how do we go about supporting this in a rehearsal room? So Declan, what are your thoughts on character?

Declan
I think 'character' is a potentially scary word. It can be a frightening prop to scare actors with – *'my character wouldn't do this' – 'would your character do that?'* At times of stress my own 'character' often does not know what my character might do. The first thing that we have to remember about character is that there's no such thing as a character - if you think of character as a state. There's a very, very important rule that underpins this. I hope I don't come out with too many rules, but there is a rule and the rule is this:

There is no such thing as a state. There are only processes…

In itself that presents us with no predicament, that is unless we add the five magic words: '**and we don't like it'.** Ignoring those five words or taking them for granted makes misery.

So here, the problem is that we *want* there to be states. But we know we're only here for a temporary time. We know that everything's in a process of growth and decay. Anything that's alive must die. We kind of know that *and we don't like it.* So this is the problem, not the 'We must die' bit. It is the **'***and we don't like it'* that is the big problem.

The idea that somebody is, or can *be*, a character is delusional. Macbeth has a really interesting line at the beginning when he says, '*shakes so my single state of man'* - you know, that the prophecy is coming true – 'shake so my single state of man.' But Macbeth, *what* single state of man?! It's as if he's got some right to be one thing, and that these prophecies have disturbed him and so somehow deprived him of his inalienable right to be a

‘one authentic thing’. It's very important to realise that we're never one thing, we are each a potential to be many different things.

The most important aspect of acting is often neglected. That is that the actor does something very revolutionary in front of the audience. The actor proclaims, ‘*Sometimes I act being me, but now I'm going to act being somebody else’*. And it's that moment of the act of transformation into somebody else that is so moving. And so health giving, I think, because we really need to be relieved of these fantasies of authenticity which we get sold all the time. And we have to accept that we can be many, many different things, and the actor enacts that in front of us, and that's why the actor is very, very precious indeed. We can be all sorts of different things. That doesn't mean to say that we're liars - although that's what Plato thought. Plato said that actors were professional liars and shouldn't be allowed to vote. But we all are very different things and it hurts us, and we don't like it because we don't like to think we're so motile, because that might mean that things come to an end. That might mean oh, that I come to an end.

We can see here how we can use judgmentalism to keep us in the dark. As Jules Maigret knows, you discover nothing if you go in in a judgmental frame of mind. A huge judgment is that people who are one thing are good and people who are many things are bad. So Iago is ‘bad’ as he ‘plays the villain’ But Othello thinks he is/wants to be ‘one big beautiful thing’. Except it collapses, and his fantasy of being one thing destroys him.

We mostly start life with the basic beautiful lie of the mother to the baby soothing us with, ‘*I see you, you see me.’* The assumption here is that *I* am constant, *you* are constant and *seeing* is constant. ‘I see you, you see me.’ Three unchanging constants. I, you, and see. (only to be questioned in later games with the more sophisticated *‘Now you see me, now you don’t’).*

Now we would not be grateful to a mother who told us the actual truth, which was ‘I see you, but we must remember the *I* is always changing, *you* is always changing, and that sense of perception between us is always also in flux.’ You wouldn't be very grateful to your mum if she told you the legal principled logical ‘truth’ too soon. So we have to set about that most painful task, unpicking ourselves from that place of illusory safety. And it can take decades, perhaps we never do. And why not? It’s a very pleasant place to be - a sort of place which is completely secure and nothing ever changes. And when we grow up, we still get intimations of that. When we grow up and fall in love, we often know it’s love when their presence makes us feel safe.

Now, how on earth does all this affect character? Well it's unwise to look at another human being and think, *'oh, I know their character. I've got him sussed. I know what makes him tick!'* We cannot *know* that, for each of us is always going to be a lot of different things. We can't freeze ourselves into some concrete unchanging one-ness.

I guess nobody knows my character better than me, but under extreme circumstances I simply don't know what I'm capable of doing or saying. I don't know. I have my hopes that I would behave well and fears that I wouldn't. But I just don't *know*. No predicament there unless we add the '*and I don't like it!'*

To repeat (as always this is not true, but it's useful, it's not true, but it's useful), one of the things that we can usefully say about Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, or about Othello or about Hamlet or about King Lear, is that they have something in common. Something huge. And that is that they spend their lives trying to keep themselves together. In other words, that a character is a human being is an animal who's trying to stop themselves from disintegrating. That may sound extremely bleak, but I have found it extremely useful.

Applying this way of thinking in something like the *Three Sisters*, can help the play burst open.

Of course, there are many moral objections one can raise saying, *'are you saying there's no peace?'* To which one might reply, *'Yeah peace is great! And maybe there's peace. But sharing a sense of peace isn't normally the problem of what we are trying to put on stage.'*

The stage normally shows people who are brought to the edge, where we see people approaching the rim of control, where they are desperately trying to keep themselves together. Not just to overcome the obstacles presented by the external world, but also and even more importantly, containing the threat of *internal* chaos.

Many foreign wars are started to keep civil war at bay. All wars must be fought on at least two fronts. External violence but also the internal aggression, often covered with thick layers of propaganda. Why is this important for 'character'? Well, human individuals operate very much like the state. Or rather the 'State' tends to mimic the internal workings of a human. Great plays often show this mirroring.

In a really good script, most of the energy of the protagonist is spent on trying to stop themselves disintegrating, I have found this practical and useful, because it means when you put on a play that you start off with an extraordinary pack of energy.

Don't go in with an 'open mind'. For an 'open mind' is a vanity. Yes, of course we should try to keep our minds as open as possible, but the best way to do that is to be honest with ourselves what prejudices we are using. The best way to close your mind is to imagine it is open.

Sometimes, when we look at people, we may think we know about them. Sometimes we may look at a person who might cross our path, sitting opposite us on the bus, and we might make immediate judgments about them. It's useful perhaps to think instead that maybe that person, just may be a hero struggling to stop themselves from disintegrating, struggling to keep themselves together. Perhaps they feel they are at the centre of a struggle to survive, which they perceive in some way to be epic. Perhaps people like epics, because they seem to reflect our own inner lives. However humble we may feel our lives to be, we will always tend to perceive our lives as a struggle which is, in some way, epic. Epics are near our centre and are not an escape to somewhere else.

Of course, I'm not saying that people walk around the streets consciously terrified that they might fly apart. But perhaps it is there. Indeed we are often surprised to discover *in extremis* that this unpleasant sensation of being about to disintegrate is already 'good-to-go'. And more, that we find this strangely **un**-surprising. As Irina screams when she hears Tusenbach has been shot, *'I **knew** it! I **knew** it!'*

I think on the whole our internal lives are more bumpy than we care to admit. And of course, we disguise this from ourselves and from each other by playing Pretend Adult Syndrome. Similarly characters may only rarely be aware of the dread of falling apart, but if you supply this key to any character, it is amazing what riches it may yield. There is an already unconscious threat in the Prozorov sisters or in Lady Bracknell or in Benedick and Beatrice - the indignation of these characters implies that one false move and their existence will explode. They are powered by a dread of disintegration. There's always a threat having to face some enormous menace to their identity. Now watching somebody in the *process* of disintegration, is clearly not a *state.*

Lucie

So in other words, if a character is struggling to keep themselves together, then they're not a fixed thing that we can define, but an identity in flux. So it's a losing battle to try and pin down who a character is. But then I suppose the problem is that if we can't go about capturing a character, how can we go about approaching one in rehearsals?

Declan
What absolutely doesn't work is this: the idea that character is something that's neutral until something acts upon it from the outside. That is *useless* for the actor. As soon as we meet them the character and the circumstances are already full of problems. These problems will almost certainly grow, but they never arrive as a blank piece of paper. This is less obvious in the relatively low stakes of the rest of our lives. But the more we come to encounter the predicament, the more those things become true. They emerge like a design on old wallpaper through the paint.

Practically speaking, humanly speaking, we all have to begin an exploration of work with a version of the 'beautiful lie'.

To begin with, yes, maybe you have to start with a simple story, as we would in the first few days of rehearsal - but then you have to kind of let the play happen to you, and not always be trying to control the play. And in a great play, like *Macbeth*, you start to realise creepy things - like the fact that are they plotting to kill Duncan? Or are they just *performing* as people who are going to kill Duncan? There's an extraordinary sense sometimes of them also watching their own performance. I think that's very human.

And it goes right down to the heart of Shakespeare, which is why he's always modern, which is that he gets down to the essential **in**-authenticity of what it is to be a human being. He actually dares to go into that place. A personal place where much shame lurks. Many of the characters - even Viola calls herself *'poor monster,'* and she and Iago in different ways both say *'I'm not who I am.'* There is a sense that people don't know who they are. They lose their identity. Or they wake up as in Buñuel's great movie, *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*, as if they are on a stage! Am I a real thing? Or am I just watching myself perform being somebody? And it's why Shakespeare connects to us in such an important way that's both chilling and very warm, actually, because we very often feel less lonely. So in the end that we have a greater capacity to relate to each other with love, I hope.

Lucie

So it sounds like we should be cautious of thinking about a character as a fixed identity. Because struggling to even define your own identity to yourself is part of the experience of being human. And that's a never-ending process.

Declan

Yes, there's no such thing as a fixed state. There's only flux. We have two modern expressions which are very useful. One is *'he can't really hold himself together anymore.'* It's very interesting. It's very accurate, I think, because it implies that there's an already existing force to explode outwards, and that you're kind of trying to hold something in. When I was a child I used to love the Superman comics, particularly the cape that he throws over bombs, so his cape could enclose the explosion and make us all safe. And I think that's an interesting mythic shape that you're trying to keep it together. The other very interesting expression that's a corollary to that is *'he's lost the plot.'* It's quite an interesting line too.

So let's go back to Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. They're struggling to survive. I think they're just struggling to maintain their life. I don't think they are killing the King of Scotland because they want promotion, or because there's something they see that they want. I think at the end, it's not that. I think they feel, madly, that *if* they don't do this, they're going to blow apart. It's all to do with the negative, they're going get him because if they don't get him, they'll blow apart. And the terrible thing is, he's there that night, and that means they'll really blow apart - and if he goes in the morning, and they haven't killed him that night, then they'll really blow *apart*. Everything seems to add to this energy of the fact that there will be total cataclysmic disaster unless they act *now.*

Lucie

So if we spend rehearsals trying to define a character, we're probably missing the point.

Declan

No, you can't ever define a character. It is always moving. It sounds a bit bleak. You know, we're always trying to solve an unsolvable situation. But sing it as it is! You know, we can solve it for a bit. And solving it isn't necessarily a bad thing to be doing and, you know, trying to solve it, or finding temporary solutions isn't necessarily a bad thing. But feeling that we have solved it - that is a danger, I think. People do, all the time, think of things as being a state. But of course, we tend then to have to suffer the consequences of that delusion. There is no state, everything is changing all the time, and there is no neutrality. We have fantasies of neutrality. We have fantasies of unchanging-ness. And we pay hugely over the odds for this delusion.

Lucie

It sounds like trying to capture a character is like pinning down a butterfly: by catching it, you kill it. So how would you go about working with actors to keep this butterfly alive when building a character?

Declan

What I'm trying to say is I don't really believe in character like that. It's barking up the wrong tree. I think that as usual thinking where the dread might be normally helps you to get close to someone. And not *'What **is** their dread?'* But instead '*What do they **think** they dread?"*

When we are examining Lady Macbeth we may say *'Well, she's ambitious.'* But it's better not to play the positive feeling of, *'oh, I want to be Queen of Scotland.'* It's more useful, I think, to dread *failing* to be Queen of Scotland, or to dread being too weak to push her husband into doing what she feels he really ought to do. It's this *negative* that tends to move us along, often the mysteriously overwhelming dread of *failure*.

Thinking about dread is always quite a good tool to enable us to walk in another person's shoes. We can never fully sympathise with another person. We can never be another person, but we can try to empathise with them. And although we can't become them, we can imagine what it might be like to walk in their shoes. And that means walking in their predicament. And that means considering their dread.

And that means considering their dread without passing judgment, and without patronising them. To look at them in the eye, as equals, horizontally. It sounds so easy, but the problem is that we just love being judgmental. It offers enormous pleasure to pass judgment. And sometimes giving up our right to judge can make us angry.

There are lots of different types of good acting. There are lots of different ways to rehearse. There are all sorts of things - it depends what works for you. All I'm saying is, I think that there's a level beyond thinking in terms of character. And the thing that I don't much like is that when words like 'character', 'action', 'objective', 'super objective', when these become things, solid things, things that start to resemble stable states, then they can start to frighten some actors. They certainly frighten me! Now the words that I use, which are words like 'encounter', 'threshold', 'predicament', these could also, of course, become static things, monuments of yesterday's sandcastles, and that will make me very unhappy. What I'm saying is that for now, they work for me, and I personally myself get a lot of comfort from

thinking of those words in that way. They give me a certain energy and a certain hope, actually, and a sense that I can breathe and can move on.

Lucie
It's really reassuring to hear you talk like this, because this sounds like another idea which is not true, but useful. Not a theory to bash ourselves around the head with, but another way of approaching the work which might open up our imaginations a bit.

Declan
Yes, but the un-reassuring thing is the horrible principle that only real adults can hear is that nothing works twice! Well, not exactly it doesn't. So we have to build up common sense and we need to forgive ourselves, we need to go forward with some sort of sense of humour, and try a bit better next time. These then are some things that have worked for me and they give me a bit of a breathing space. The important thing is to open a space in which one can breathe, and not to frighten myself or the actors (or the writers or whoever it is) with too many concepts that constrict our capacity to live in a space and so to breathe.

Lucie
It's also interesting that as we come towards the end of this series of the podcast, we've encountered lots of useful terms which you use in rehearsals, but not once have we talked about the word 'target', which is a word you used a lot in your book *The Actor and The Target.* It's fascinating to hear how your approach is always changing.

Declan
Well, thank you. No, I don't use the target word very much in rehearsal any more, if ever. Not because I think it's not useful, but because it just makes me feel a bit self-conscious. The things I'm talking about now I wouldn't say in rehearsal, you know, Lucie. These things I'm talking to you about now, there's no place for them in five or six weeks of rehearsal. The actors wouldn't thank me very much with a deadline so near.

I might talk to some actors about it, particularly if they've been in a show for years, you know - then I might talk a bit more philosophically like that. But I always think it's quite useful to think like this almost when we're not working because it aligns us a little bit better and maybe pumps a bit more blood through our veins for when we do work…. And to have this at the back of our minds.

Let's put it this way - you know, when I get disillusioned and depressed and feel sometimes a bit futile, and start to wonder what on earth I'm doing, Nick sometimes looks at me and says, *'You know, what you really need to do is read your own book',* because he always feels it's a really good piece of advice for myself. So I can't possibly say those things as a preacher man - you know, I need to listen to myself. *Physician, heal thyself!* There are ways of looking at things that cheer me up when I feel at an impasse, and I offer to share them, that's all. They're not a magic way. These words will become defunct after a while and will become ossified. Things do become ossified and then they need to be re-examined. They might not work for everybody. I found them useful. I mean, maybe you won't. But off you go!

Lucie
Yes, it reminds me of something Stanislavski said in his own writing, which was that what he was sharing was his tools, but the most useful thing people could do was to come up with their own.

Declan
Oh, he's absolutely right. Yes, it's the *spirit* of Stanislavski that's so triumphant, and you know, one should always remember with him (or with any of people who've written great texts that are there to help us) that it's the spirit of them that matters, not the letter of them. So the really important thing with Stanislavski is his absolute spirit and his love of life. And I think you get an awful lot more out of *My Life in Art* than you do from the other books, actually. That's the spirit.

As for the spirit, what he says about many things will always be pertinent for actors, but as for the 'letter', well, I really don't think fourth walls help often these days - there are lots of things that were to do with the conditions of the period in which he was writing just before the moving image, that are perhaps not so relevant now.

Lucie
So let's go back to thinking about character. So would you say that part of the joy of trying to embody a character in a play is that we can't define something entirely, that there will always be something deliciously mysterious about a character?

Declan
Yes, when we try to get to know other people, we do make generalisations about other people. You know, it's like in real life, you see couples, you may think, *'oh, I can see what's going on there',* but you never actually *know***.** We are a mystery even to ourselves, we never

understand ourselves fully. There's a whole set of things about other people that we can't possibly know. The greater part of loving someone, I sometimes think, is respecting their mystery.

But there are parameters, you know, that different characters do different things. And we need to look at what people *do* really, rather than what they *say*. This is the really important thing about character. Really, what people say is merely interesting, but it's what they do that really matters. What's hugely interesting is the gap between what they say and what they do. So, you know, between *'our great quell'* and murdering a little old man in the bedroom upstairs is quite a big distance. That is the distance we all have to respect. That's possibly the central part of Lady Macbeth's 'character' and Macbeth's 'character' – they are not facing up to what they are doing. And continue in that process. What the character says is important. But never remotely as important as what we do. Yes we can go crazy with asking - what do they think, or what do they think they think? Those questions are all 'legitimate', but they can really confuse us. Save time and brain cells and look at what people actually *do***.**

From what the Macbeths say you can intuit what they may most dread, who they don't want to be, their dread of exposure. But what they do and they don't do is *much* more important. *They do actually kill him.*

There are many ways that you can begin. To feel safe you can begin traditionally, but know that in the end of the day, what the characters do is probably stopping themselves from disintegrating.

Few of us live near that point. But all of us can get to that point. Just imagine that we're very insecure. Just imagine that we are part of this epic struggle. Just imagine that most of the energy we expend in the days is just to keep ourselves together. Imagine if that was a model for how a human being is - would that be useful? And all I can say is, I found that quite useful.

I think many concepts we have of motive, character, circumstances come in because we want to control things. And we want to freeze dry them into own-able 'states'. When we go to the theatre, we go to see people face something that's out of control, and try to bring it into control. Yes, every rehearsal period will be different. Every actor's insights will be very different, and every director's. The space will be very different. There will be all sorts of different energies coming up. There are huge mysteries at the heart of *Macbeth* and people

will continue to try to solve them in different ways. Just let's be careful that we ever feel we have completely solved them! We need to explain enough for the audience to be able to follow but at the end of the day, I hope that we're still all going to contemplate a mystery together.

Lucie

In this part the podcast we go into deep dive through a scene to help us unpack today's topic. Once again, we've chosen Act 1 Scene 7 of *Macbeth*, because it's a scene so packed with brilliant human interactions. As a quick sum up for any listeners not familiar with this play, this is a scene where Macbeth has left a dinner party which is throwing for the King of Scotland, and which is taking place just out of sight offstage. He intends to murder the king that night and tormented by the plan, he's escaped to talk to the audience about whether he should call it off. The text of this scene is in the podcast notes. But Declan, could you kick us off by reading this amazing speech?

Declan

One thing that is interesting about this speech is that we actually witness Macbeth disintegrating in it. Already - and he has barely started. He begins his speech by telling us, *'look at me! I've got it all under control and everything's cool. I'm not emotional, me, I know exactly what I'm doing!'* And we watch him disintegrating from that point. He's on auto-destruct. Macbeth comes on and says:

If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well
It were done quickly. If the assassination
Could trammel up the consequence, and catch
With his surcease success; that but this blow
Might be the be-all and the end-all here,
But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,
We'd jump the life to come. But in these cases
We still have judgment here, that we but teach
Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return
To plague th' inventor: this even-handed justice
Commends the ingredients of our poisoned chalice
To our own lips. He's here in double trust:
First, as I am his kinsman and his subject,
Strong both against the deed; then, as his host,
Who should against his murderer shut the door,

Not bear the knife myself. Besides, this Duncan
Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been
So clear in his great office, that his virtues
Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued, against
The deep damnation of his taking-off;
And pity, like a naked newborn babe,
Striding the blast, or heaven's cherubim, horsed
Upon the sightless couriers of the air,
Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,
That tears shall drown the wind.

Lucie
Thanks, Declan. There's so many places to begin here when we talk about character - but it does seem to reveal exactly what you were saying about a character not being a state but a process. It sounds like Macbeth in this speech would love it if he could fix himself into a state to make up his mind and feel secure. But his problem is that his own thoughts and his own self are changing so fast for him. He can't keep up. He's struggling to control it. Would you say that this is a portrait of a man in flux?

Declan
We can think about that in several different ways. The first most useful way is always to think spatially: space depends on inclusion versus exclusion. So to begin with he tries to make a safe space with us. And of course, he wants that space to be neutral so that he can talk in the way that he wants to talk. He wants to be able to control the rules of the game. And he hopes to get rid of the wonderful mess that we have in our minds that makes us human.

The really bizarre thing is that, for the first line and a half, you would be forgiven for thinking he is teaching us how to make an omelette. *'If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well it were done quickly'.* It's the most trivial way of discussing this disgusting plan, and for which he seeks our permission, our sanction, our absolution, not for the past, but for the *future* sin.

But it is as if he cannot quite believe what he just said, and then he starts to unravel grasping at overblown words like *'If the assassination/ Could trammel up the consequence, and catch/ With his surcease success.'* It's almost funny reading some of the editions, when they explain what *'surcease success'* means, and they try to unravel the meaning. But the whole point is that Macbeth doesn't *want* us to know what he means. *He* doesn't want to hear what he is saying! He's using words in a preposterous way. *'Surcease success'?!* It's

barely English! All of those sibilants leads us to think, *'Hey! what are you* saying*?'* He doesn't really want us to hear his intent, he's trying to hide behind clever words. The sort of words that a grown-up might use. Macbeth is trying to control his encounter with us in the audience. He is trying to take control of the relationship. As so many have said and will continue to say, just before they step off the cliff, *'the thing about me is, I'm not a loser. I'm in control. I know exactly what I'm doing.'*

This is something we talked about, I believe in episode two - we must remember that no scene can take place without pressure from another scene threatening to break in. And the scene that is bursting in is not only Duncan laughing next door, it is also the astonishing images that are going to crash in to our private tête-à-tête - the naked newborn baby is going to crash through the ceiling into the not-so-safe space that he's trying to eke out with us. He tries to clear the caverns of his messy imagination.

One thing that is heartbreaking is that we sense how much he adores Duncan. You hear how he loves Duncan, he'd like to live up to Duncan – '*he hath borne his faculties so meek',* he hasn't been overweening or corrupt. He hasn't been a tyrant. And if anyone should dare to harm him, his *'virtues will plead like angels*'. And then as soon as angels crash into his imagination, they smash this rickety pretend safe space that he's trying to build just for himself and us at the beginning of this speech. He would probably have liked us to know that we would always be most welcome in his delusion. But the angel comes crashing through the ceiling - 'the angel that he's been trying to keep out of his conversation' just crashes in.

Now, let's just think of one thing spatially: where does the angel come from? Well, it comes from Macbeth. But it's another part of Macbeth, like he's trying to keep a part of himself out of his new relationship with us. So in order to have this relationship with us he has to cut off his mercy, he has to cut off his guilt, he has to cut off his feeling. It's bloody hard work, for anyone, cutting off all of those things. He has to keep these out of the structure of what he's saying to us. And he can't - the angels just start crashing in. So really it's part of himself that's crashing in - he's tried to clear something in himself and he can't actually clear it. And he falls apart in the speech.

The 'I' in Macbeth, the little, tiny, weeny bit of 'I' that's in each of us is running forever to keep up with the changing space. That's partially him - *he's* changing all the time. So he tries to take control. He thinks he tries to take control of his life by saying, '*look, it's rational, it's efficient, there's no problem. I'm just going to kill him. It'll be simple – a bit of blood, but no mess. There will be no feelings, it will be absolutely fine, efficient, efficient, efficient,*

efficient!' But it doesn't work, because the natural human mess we share with him starts flooding in and drowning him and he keeps trying to lock it out.

Lucie
We've reached the last part of the podcast in which we answer questions that listeners have shared with us on social media. Our question today Declan is: are there any writers who have had an important influence on the way that you think as a director?

Declan
Well, so many writers have influenced me in so many very different ways. But for example, Beckett, of course, and Joyce. And mostly, I think Beckett as you said, has a terror of the now. Beckett has a profound feel for predicament. Often naked predicament, shorn of any 'plot'. Sometimes academics describe Beckett as post-dramatic, there appears to be little or no action. But the Desdemona-Emilia scene has many similarities in that respect. In *Happy Days*, Winnie's doom is not so imminent but whatever it is, it seems inevitable.

Beckett shares with us people who are caught in overwhelming predicament. And as soon as you key into that, that theatre depends on predicament not on dramatic action, then it starts to take your head off. The action seems to be the motor, but really the energy comes from the predicament and our puny efforts to control it. And they're unbelievably powerful. They remain with me always, those plays.

But also James Joyce - I'm particularly fond of James Joyce's short stories, *Dubliners*, which he wrote when he was very young, and they end with an 'epiphanic revelation' of predicament which has hitherto been veiled. What does that mean? Well, you go through the story, and at the end Joyce suddenly punches you in the face with an image. It helps you not so much to 'understand' as 'feel' what's been going on through the whole story. You have to sit with a multi-layered feeling, all your own, manipulated by Joyce. Sometimes sad, sometimes tender, always surprising. Reading these stories helped me to direct. You go through the story and you have a revelation - but the revelation is of the profound mystery that's been taking place through the story. As always the narrative is just a delivery system for the experience, the epiphanic revelation, the predicament. No, there is no left brain triumph of 'Eureka!' Finally I understand. Beckett and Joyce know so well that words are essentially ambivalent. Our servants and not our friends.

There are extraordinary lines, but I couldn't say I 'understand' them at all. They're a mystery, and seek to communicate something unfathomable but human. At the end of the last story

The Dead, there is an image of a disillusioned man who suddenly feels very alone. Clusters of words like these have made me want to spend my life as an artist because they protect and share something that's pressing, invisible, and enormous. And something we can so easily pretend does not exist. I have no words and would be hopeless teaching Joyce!

So let them speak for themselves!

"A few light taps upon the pane made him turn to the window. It had begun to snow again. He watched sleepily the flakes, silver and dark, falling obliquely against the lamplight. The time had come for him to set out on his journey westward. Yes, the newspapers were right: snow was general all over Ireland. It was falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly upon the Bog of Allen and, farther westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves. It was falling, too, upon every part of the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Furey lay buried. It lay thickly drifted on the crooked crosses and headstones, on the spears of the little gate, on the barren thorns. His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead."

Episode 10
Tagliatelle

Lucie
Welcome to Cheek by Jowl's podcast, 'Not True, But Useful...' This is episode 10: 'Tagliatelle'.

Hi, I'm your host Lucie Dawkins, and over this season of the podcast I've been interviewing Declan Donnellan and Nick Ormerod, the artistic directors of the theatre company Cheek by Jowl. In these interviews they've been sharing their philosophy on life and the theatre, drawn from a 40-year collaboration which has taken them all over the world. They call this philosophy 'not true, but useful', a set of ideas which are helpful in the tricky business of making a play, and which are also constantly developing and changing as they discover new depths in their work. This is the last episode in this season, in which I'm going to be sharing some bonus material from the last episodes, which Declan calls 'tagliatelle' after the Italian meal which (legend has it) was originally made from pasta off-cuts. Here's the tagliatelle from our recordings in the last few weeks, with some delicious thoughts which didn't quite make it into other episodes and which we are serving up to you now.

Our first piece of tagliatelle comes from a conversation in which Declan said that good theatre implicates us and makes us examine our own standpoint. I asked him what had first given him this idea, and, surprisingly, found out that it wasn't at the theatre but at an art gallery, looking at the works of the Italian painter Caravaggio.

Declan
Well, Caravaggio is very interesting because, of course, he's brilliant. Many will say *'oh, he's brilliant, because it's so realistic. Look, the toenails are dirty and cracked, and they look like real people!'* And then, of course, you can also talk about the 'chiaroscuro' - where the light source is… and these are indeed extraordinary talents. Also, another figure, an angel perhaps, may be seen plummeting in space, and yet at the same time also monumentally still. And then there is the intense darkness which seems both to dissolve the space and also accentuate it.

But great art isn't just 'talented'. It is something beyond that. It is not just a super clever technique, although clearly he is outstanding in his much-copied effects. But there is

something else, something mysterious and elusive which dwarves even these ‘accomplishments’.

For soon we, the observer, may have the unsettling thought: ‘*This is all very well, but am I also in this room?*’ ‘*Why am I here? Where am I in all this?’*

In other words perhaps the virtuosity is just a delivery system, yes an astonishing one, but still a delivery system to get us to question precisely where we have planted our feet.

You just become slightly more aware of your own position in the universe – and that's the extraordinary thing, that Caravaggio nudges not only your own position, but also makes you sense the *arbitrariness* of your position. *‘Why here? Why now?’* You're there present with the figures and slowly you start to wonder what exactly you're doing there, and why you are looking at them from this particular angle. So after a while you stop being interested in the intricacies of what's happening in the painting and start looking at yourself as being an actor in the painting. It’s not necessarily that you’re thinking *‘I have no right to be here’,* but it's more like thinking, *‘from what position am I watching this? What is **my** part in all of this?*’ In fact any good work of art always looks back on you; art may look at you and measure where you are. And that's when it's really good - when art works really well it's invasive.

It seems to me that great art is a delivery system asking us *‘Are we aware where we stand?. What would it be like to stand somewhere else?*’ Note, not *‘how do I see this?*, but ‘*where do I stand?*

In fact we need to exercise caution with that innocent and helpful seeming word - ‘how?’ Sometimes it is useful, and sometimes not. As it is more often common sense, not logic, that helps us prise open the difference.

‘How’ implies you have a lot of choice in how you choose to see things. ‘Where do I stand?’ reminds us that our choices will always be limited by where we stand.

A danger of ‘how’ is that the word can make seem plausible rather preposterous questions - as in *‘how should I direct this play?’ How should I play this scene?’*

They sound so humble, those questions. But we need to think about the subtle sense of power they smuggle in. ‘How’ is a useful shorthand word but can give us subtle delusions of power. ‘How’ seems helpful. But ‘how’ tends to smuggle in a vague sense that we can

control more than we can. So ‘how’ is best used with discretion. ‘What?’ and ‘where?’ are more robust friends.

Lucie
In this next piece of tagliatelle, Declan talks about the danger of trying to understand too much when we're approaching a play, in a conversation we were having about Shakespeare's play *Macbeth*.

Declan
If we struggle to understand the story *fully*, to grasp it thoroughly, we will probably succeed in killing it. We often struggle to make the myth safe by explaining it. That is quite human. We do not want to be the victim of myths. But sometimes the myth is helpful. Myths often remind us of our limitations. Now, yes, we need to try to understand things as well as we can - yes, every child and every adult wants to understand. It is entirely natural and human. But if I hope to get anywhere in my ‘understanding’ I will sometimes find a mystery much bigger than the one that I went in with.

And that's what happens to physicists. Great physicists have had to learn an enormous amount of humility in the last 120 years. They set us an example in understanding that they're not going to understand, and indeed in their understanding that there may well be some things that we will never understand.

In fact it is useful to use the word ‘understand’ sparingly. ‘Get used to’ and ‘accept’ are humbler and often more useful.

But let’s talk about rehearsal. Yes, we have to say that we go in and try to see the Macbeths. OK so far, but as soon as I say I actually ‘have understood’ Macbeth, then I've really stepped over a line. We should observe the position of that line. Yes, we have to try and ‘understand’ ourselves, but it would probably help to accept that we never will - fully. Ultimate defeat is inevitable. But that is no reason to give up the struggle. I find it quite useful for myself when doing a play that we need to try to understand ‘enough’ but accept that ultimately, it’s going to be impossible to understand. After a while the terror of not understanding fully starts to pass away. Understanding is a form of control. And like control, it is useful only sometimes.

To put it practically for any directors in training who may be listening to this: I always think my job is to make everything as clear as I can, accepting that if the play is any good, in any

way human, then it must have some central mystery. My job then is to make clear not the mystery but the thresholds of that mystery.

So deliberate obfuscation is always appalling. The audience should not have to waste their valuable attention on, for example, who is married to whom, who is whose daughter. That is not what I mean by ‘mystery’. The ‘mystery’ meant here is at the heart of all art. I think a function of art is to help us accept the fact that certain things are not understandable, but that must not let us off the hook of trying to understand them.

Mystery isn't something particularly esoteric, it's just part of our everyday life. You know, *why do we destroy ourselves? Why do we make ourselves unhappy?* All of these things are mysterious. (Often so much clearer in other people!) Yes, we should try to understand these processes, we should never give up our effort to understand. I think we should be trying to ‘understand’ as much as we possibly can understand. But we also need to know that the moment we think, *‘oh, I have understood, I've understood perfectly!’* then we have gone wrong. Accepting that there is always going to be some mystery strikes me as sensible.

It also helps keep us equal with other people. We should not feel ‘better’ than Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. More useful for us to pray that we never get tested.

And that’s alright, because when we love somebody they haunt us. We don't love people because we understand them. We love people because we are given some fantastic luck to accept them. And part of the thing that we have to accept in other people is their mystery. Like the love between the Macbeths - (Perhaps she doesn't really love him because he's her project, and you can't love somebody that you want to change. And neither of them love themselves much either. They always want to be different). The greater part of love is acceptance. We can't explain everything away.

However, as I said we must be careful we are not adding some spurious sense of hokum ‘mystery’ to things. Indeed if you can add it, it is not a mystery. It’s a bad idea. It's very unfair, actually, because we're all trying to sort out the superabundance of mystery that we have. And to pretend something extra is mysterious when it isn't is a pretty awful thing to do. On the other hand, pretending there is no mystery because ‘I'm so clever I can explain everything’ - that's another extremity. We have only our common sense to find that balance.

When we make art, we draw each other's attention to things that we find mysterious. Because things that are mysterious can make us feel lonely. In a work of art, we're often

drawn together in a group to share a collective awe at things that otherwise might make us feel separated, lonely, engulfed. We recognise that, although we are alone, we have a common shared humanity - we can stand with each other.

Lucie
In this next snippet, Declan talks about leaving room for the unknown, and the dangers of trying to explain everything in a piece of theatre or a piece of art, because explaining everything means you can explain the mystery away.

Declan
There are many ways to destroy an artist. One way is to criticise and rubbish the artist's work. That's pretty good. But an even better way is to ignore the artist's work. More passive aggressive, more silent and more deadly; and so that's an even better way. But the very best way of all, the gold medal way, is to force the artist to *explain* their work. That's the really nasty one. You get them to explain it and then the work will be completely dead. And then, even worse, you give extra marks to those artists who *can* explain their work. That's really fatal.

A favourite film director of mine is Robert Bresson, and he famously never gave interviews. There was as usual much consternation and indignation that he didn't want to. And he was criticised as usual for cultivating an aura of enigma. One very funny interview question asked to Louis Malle was, *'Why is Bresson so mysterious and secretive about giving interviews?' 'Why oh why is he so mysterious!? What is the big secret?!*' Louis Malle retorted: *'What are you talking about?! None of us would ever give interviews if we had the option. Robert doesn't give interviews because he's the only one of us who can get out of them!'*

There's an 'extra' in one of those DVDs of Bresson's work. Two Dutch film students from the 60s or 70s with long hair and flared jeans have been trying to track down the director. Their short movie is about their quest and to start with we are with them - and getting frankly annoyed by why this old man is so elusive. *Does he think he is better than us?* They hunt him all over Europe. Finally they corner him in a hotel in Cannes where he's at the film festival. They push the door, it slowly creaks open and there you see Bresson, like a magnificent old lion at bay. He seems not to have much longer to go, with huge eyes, vulnerable, leaning over the desk in the room. The two young guys loom above him, draw in their breath and say, *'Monsieur Bresson, there's a question we have to ask you.'* And he says, *'yes?'* And they continue: *'We have to know the answer to this question!' 'Yes go on ask it! '*

*'What does your work **mean?'…***

And I felt so sad. I can't even remember what he replied, because, of course, he had no answer to that question.

Can you imagine going to Shakespeare and asking, *'What does your work mean?'* The idea is grotesque. I mean, imagine saying to a parent, *'what does your child mean?'* the question is bizarre, isn't it? *'I don't think my child has meaning like that' – 'Aha! so you're saying your child is meaningless?' – 'No, I'm not saying that either!'* Life just doesn't exist in that binary of meaning and meaningless.

Lucie
In another one of our conversations, Declan returned to this problem of understanding too much. I asked how you could find a balance between understanding too much and understanding too little when approaching a play.

Declan
One of the terrible lies of the modern world is that you can't have too much information. In fact you can easily have too much information. A large part of intelligence is discarding excess facts. Indeed if you have too much information, you become stupefied. I don't think you become actually stupid. (I think 'stupid' is a word we should use very, very rarely. We should have to apply for a license to use that word.) 'Stupefied', though, describes when we are flustered because we can't see something. When we are flustered it is not because our heads are empty. We become flustered when our heads are too full.

Let us think of light. If you're making a movie and you want to light somebody's face, then first of all they're in complete darkness. You can't see anything at all. And then slowly, you bring on a little bit of light - and slowly, slowly, you start to see a bit of a nose and a bit of a chin; a bit more light, then a bit of a cheekbone, something of the hair; a little bit more light, you'll be able to see a glint in the eyes. At a certain moment, you'll see that, *oh yes, this is a person!* So far, so good. Light helps me to see! And so 'dark is bad, light is good': 'dark - I can't see; light - I can see'. And in fact, many sacred texts use the image that God is light and light is good, and dark is bad and dark is the devil.

So can you have too much light? And ask again with Rosalind: *'Can you have too much of a good thing?'* Well, let's see. Let's go back to the camera set-up, if you do go on pumping

light onto that face, the features will come more into focus… but then they start to change. You'll see that the face tends to flatten and slowly the face starts to merge again with the background. Soon the nose loses its shape with enough light; and then the outline of the head loses form with too much light; and with enough light, the whole screen becomes completely bleached. And indeed that 'bleach-out-to-white effect' has become cinema shorthand for death - normally a good death of somebody you don't want to die, but still…. death. So with too much light, you can't see properly either.

So then the question is, *how much light*? And back comes the implacable answer, *'there ain't no principle'.* You have to judge it for yourself, because for example what's enough light for one person won't be for another. So the number one priority is to start developing common sense. You need to develop and use your responsibility to judge how much light is enough. Not too little, not too much. And that's very important with information. And it's also important in terms of understanding. Sometimes we can 'understand' things actually as a defence against experiencing them. Normally it is better to feel things and only then understand them. But feelings can be scary so maybe we can cut the feeling and jump to the 'understanding' bit. Just as talking about a problem can become a defence against solving it. Can. Not always. And we need to be alert to notice the difference.

So we're putting on a play. We need to understand as much as we can, but understand that maybe the most important things in the play are going to be things that we're not going to understand - things that are going to be invisible. There emerged a strain of philosophy that said that if a question has no answer it's not worth asking the question. Another strain objected, saying that the questions which seem to have no answers are the most important questions to ask.

But there is a strain of thought in everyday contemporary life that if you can't talk about it, if you can't describe it, you can't understand it, then there's no point in thinking about it. *'Algorithms can solve everything because they are logical. And logic can never go wrong, can it!?'*

Art may come to the rescue and says very clearly that it's very often the things for which we have no words that are the most important things.

Lucie

Throughout our interviews Declan had a lot of not true, but useful, advice for actors and directors for when you get stuck in rehearsals. Here are his thoughts about how to use the space to bring a scene to life.

Declan

If the scene is not going well, if the actor or director feels that it's a bit dead, it's normally because the elements in their imaginations are not embodied. What might this mean? What does 'embodied' mean? It means here the actual reality of a thing, and the opposite of the theory of that thing. It is hard to make this distinction clear in words. Because words do not want this distinction to be clear. Because the distinction collapses language itself. As so often, Shakespeare gets there first. In a flash of insight Lear exclaims of Edgar, *'thou art the thing itself!'* Lear has no word to describe the thing itself. (That is because there **is** no word to describe the 'thing itself'. That's why we are reduced to using idiotic expressions like 'the thing itself'.)

Most importantly, Lear sees suddenly that, until now, he's been talking about humans as if they were theories. This is not just Lear's problem. It is a painful process for us all. Empathy is often a painful birth. A problem we share is that we don't realise how we tend to theorise our lives. We live more in theory than we dare know.

For example, all Macbeth actors will know that, yes, of course, *Duncan is in the next room*. All will also know that this fact is very important. But there is a problem. Often these two elements remain only a theory.

For example, we read statistics of terrible human suffering. But very often those statistics remain a theory. A sudden shock may help us realise that the person who died has a brother, actually had a mother. It is a challenge that we all face. Exceptional actors seem to be able to see fully embodied that 'other thing'. Great actors only seem to be amazing because of what's going on inside them. But it is not that at all. Their greatness is in what they make exist outside. Not all will see that distinction. It just comes naturally.

So turning from Lear back to the Macbeths, it's easy to understand that when Lady Macbeth speaks she realises there's an owl hooting outside, it's easy to understand that the king is up in the bedroom - but 'understanding' is not enough. Actually to 'let 'that-thing-that-is-not-you' live beyond your control, to let 'that-other-thing-that-is-not-you' exist, does not always happen. (And cleverness is no help.) In the hovel, Edgar suddenly appears for Lear and his carnal presence, full of blood and bones and tears and nerves blasts Lear out of his theory.

We do inhabit a real world. But our only access to it is through our perceptions. And perceiving another human as an independent (possibly suffering) animal is not given to us all, all the time.

(Yes in the plot Lear is surprised to see Edgar in the hovel. But in a way that is the first of two surprises. The second surprise is the miracle of discovering that *'No I am not the only thing in the universe and so I am not alone.')*

It is easy for the actor to 'understand' that Duncan is in the next room, and it is easy to 'understand' that this fact is important. And yes, it's relatively easy to 'play' that. And yes, that will tick lots of boxes. But if the actor actually really imagines, really sees, really believes that Duncan exists in the next room, you will know. And you will only know because this time your hair will stand on end. It hits you in your very own body. Anybody can 'understand' it. But experiencing it is beyond understanding. In a way, we've got to go through the threshold of understanding into the space beyond. Yes 'understanding' is a rung on a ladder, and sometimes a necessary rung to climb past, but however much we congratulate ourselves it's a pretty low rung, actually. In fact cleverness is often a hindrance in climbing up the next steps. The artist's job is to see that in real life we often use understanding as a defence against experience. We desperately need art to reconnect us to reality. To reconnect us to experience, which we've sometimes 'understood ourselves away from'. Art is not an escape. Art is a reality check.

We live in a world where 'understanding' is considered a universal panacea. But we have to be very careful having 'universal' cures. For the problem with all medicines is that they can be poisonous if taken without common sense. And understanding is one of those things that can become toxic if it actually takes us away from a world of experience. And, returning to Macbeth, to experience that it's a real owl, it's real blood, it's a real old man, it's really cold outside. That is the task of the actor. And it's really, really hard at any time to see an embodied world. But the actor must see an imagined embodied world. How hard is that? It's hard enough in real life!

And secondly, and crucially, it is hard for the actors to imagine an embodied world that is bigger than the characters themselves. An embodied world that is bigger than the Macbeths. Bigger than the actors. An embodied independent world that does what it likes. Reality takes no command from the Macbeths (nor from any of us). Like the weird sisters, the real world *'will not be commanded'.*

‘Belief’ is perhaps not as useful a word as acceptance. Never mind belief, accepting will do.

The Macbeths set a chain of events going, but the consequences have a mind of their own. The consequences loom bigger and bigger and bigger. They struggle to control it, to contain it, to steer it, but this world is veering wildly out of control.

But for the actors, the important thing is to imagine this terrifying world by giving blood to it.

It is not enough to *understand* what they must imagine. The actors must imagine it incarnated and full of blood. And that's not very easy because all of the language available to talk about this is misleading us.

Lucie
Another piece of not true, but useful advice that Declan shared was to avoid psychoanalysing a character too much in rehearsals. We came across this problem when talking about the dagger scene in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, when Macbeth hallucinates a bloody dagger hovering in the air on his way to murder the King of Scotland.

Declan
What sometimes happens is that the actor will say, *‘I think the character is paranoid. I think Macbeth is having a paranoid attack.’* And then it’s my job to reply, *‘Never mind about the paranoia. Tell me what the dagger looks like.’*

If Macbeth were to go to a psychoanalyst, he may say: *‘I have this terrible problem, I keep on seeing a dagger.’* And then the analyst would probably think, yes, this patient is suffering from paranoid delusions and then try to sort out why he's suffering from these delusions.

But this is a very good moment to re-stress that our job in the theatre is the exact opposite of psychoanalysis. What we need to share with the audience is the carnal, concrete, immediate in-front-of-our-eyes, image, event, experience of this guy seeing this dagger, which to him is absolutely real. And the actor must see that dagger at that moment. And that's one of the mysteries of acting. And actually, no, it’s not for us to interpret that. We leave that to the audience.

We can see on ancient Greek vases actors studying the mask and in other images we see the actors wearing the mask and playing through the mask. But beware. These are two totally separate moments. Between them comes another moment, a process, which I think is

absolutely crucial, and I think we need to meditate upon it every day. This middle step is ‘spinning the mask’. So, yes, when we play a character we should not judge that character - she is good, or he is bad, we have to see through the character's eyes, because judging the character will make us stupefied. While we are judging we can no longer see so clearly.

Let’s go back and see the difference between step one and step two.

Step one. The actor prepares to play Macbeth. So the actor spends some time studying the mask.

What is the ‘Mask’? Well many things. For example we have to see that Macbeth does the most monstrous things - he murders Duncan, and then he goes on to murder Lady Macduff and her children, and he wages war. He does unspeakable, disgusting things. And we need to see that and measure up to that while we are studying the mask. And only then.

That step needs to be completed. Then the important moment, this middle step, when the actor ‘spins the mask’. Then after the mask has been fully spun, only then can the actor start to see through the eyes of that mask. The ‘study’, any judgment, must be now safely ‘forgotten’. Part of the mystery of theatre is that the memory of that study will remain. It does not remain consciously. It remains in the ‘invisible work’. For now the actor must have such total confidence in the mask that, in a way, the actor lets the mask ‘remember’. In other words, the actor can rely on the fact that those things that the actor has learned about the character will remain. For the actor must never play a moral judgment on Macbeth. The actor may discover reasons. And possibly not. That can be okay too. But whatever detective work he does, the mask must be spun and it goes around the full 180 degrees. The actor sees first the mask and then the actor spins the mask, and then, separately, the actor sees through the eyes of that mask; these are totally different, separate modes and they must never be allowed to mix. If they do mix you're in real trouble.

Lucie

In this next round of tagliatelle, Declan is talking about how to deal with verse. Cheek by Jowl is famous for staging explosive productions of great classic plays, including Shakespeare, Middleton and Racine, who all wrote in complicated verse forms. I asked him how he helps actors make high verse sound so convincingly like contemporary speech.

Declan

There's nothing particularly grandiose or highbrow about verse in itself. Let's just think calmly about verse. Verse is connected with intonation, so I naturally will stress some syllables rather than others. We use stress and consequently the basis of verse all the time. So you could say for example, 'that actress is **ab**solutely fantastic', or you could say 'that actress is absolutely fan**tas**tic.' And you may or may not separate out the syllables. it's to do with how and when the stressed syllable falls.

Now, in blank verse (which the English and the Russians more or less share, interestingly) it's very often built on an iamb (ti-tum ti-tum). What happens in the verse is that the audience and the actor acquires an expectation of a rhythm, which may or may not be satisfied. So it's a bit like jazz. Jazz is absolutely dependent on square time, four-four time, because it's only the breaking of that expectation that gives the energy to the music. So you have a form that you can break.

And verse works exactly like that. Verse in iambic pentameters has the expected ti-tum ti-tum ti-tum ti-tum ti-tum, and then the writer or the speaker plays on that theme, they vary the theme or they go into counter-point - they go against that theme. But it's the expectation of a rhythm that is obeyed or denied.

You have a lot more choice in verse. And it's the difference between the expectation and what's actually delivered, that's what gives you your strength.
Verse manipulates an anticipation.

All I'm trying to say is don't be frightened of verse. It's actually something we do naturally.

Another thing I have found extremely useful is the 'Syllable Count'. So, after the actors have sorted out what their text means, or at least a superficial understanding of what the words might mean, they might try this...

Rather than fretting and concentrating more and more about meaning and understanding, it may be more useful to stop and do a simple exercise. And like many good exercises they are deceptively simple. This exercise is to divide all the text into separate syllables and ignore any sense of meaning. We can wax anxious when separated from our precious meaning, even if it's only temporary. The actor makes sure to count off each syllable. No they don't need to remember the number, but they do need to separate precisely the syllables and then the actors need to say the syllables as if they each had a separate

existence. An existence quite independent of any meaning. Holding back on meaning and pressing the pause button on understanding can be very liberating.

The separate syllable exercise helps the actors to get into the sound of the word and the sound of the word can do amazing things for the actors. To begin with the actor may feel self-conscious and silly. But you don't have to try anything, you don't have to understand anything - you just let the sound occur to you and incredible things may happen. This exercise is not just for verse it is also useful in any script.

But you do need to notice the amount of syllables that you're using. Syllable count is very important because sometimes there are bits of text where the actors don't quite want to say all those syllables, and they don't have enough of an impulse to get through all those syllables. But if you don't have enough of an impulse to get through all those syllables, you can't actually say it. So counting the syllables sharpens the actor's mind.

One thing I'd like to draw your attention to, though, is that politicians on TV, it's quite fun watching them – well, it's not fun watching them, actually - but if you have to watch them, you can switch off and do a syllable count. A wily politician may bamboozle you by using long words, but that trick doesn't work so well anymore because it's too obvious. Sometimes they bamboozle you by giving a lot of out of context statistics, like 3 million pieces of PPE, and the numbers don't mean anything to you; but the best way of all is to use too many syllables to get across too little information. The information/syllable ratio is a powerful tool when you need people to get tired. If someone starts to use too many syllables, you may not immediately notice but your attention, and therefore your discernment, will start to wander. It is a strange effect because for example to say *"Be that as it may, it stands to reason, that when we think…'* It sounds so simple and plain. All the words are understandable, nothing technical. But with enough syllables you will lose interest, and getting people to lose interest is a powerful political device.

Lucie
So how does the verse help you think about the scene as a director?

Declan
We could talk a little about Racine who used the Alexandrine verse form, which is a strict form of two lines of 12 to 13 syllables and there's an A-A rhyme at the end of it. So Orestes at the beginning of Andromaque says, *'Oui, puisque je retrouve un ami si fidèle/ Ma fortune*

va prendre une face nouvelle…', and it goes on. So there's fidèle/nouvelle, there's the rhyme.

You can get away with that in French because French offers more rhymes than English does. Otway writes great plays with rhymes, called heroic couplets but in other hands the rhymes tend to sound a little bit Christmas-card-y. In fact very often Shakespeare uses them to indicate insincerity, or sometimes to indicate a scene ending. Rhyming in English is very different from rhyming in French. It's much easier to rhyme in French.

But there are many complexities in the French Alexandrine that are not so obviously useful for actors from other cultures. There are the conventions which can seem a little technical, but there is a huge practical lesson any theatre maker in any language can take away. Now, the problem is that this form sounds so clever, and it also sounds so contained. It sounds neat and clean and precise and complete. And it also sounds like we really know what we're doing. It sounds like we're really grown up and we're not kids dressed as adults. But actually, the glory of Racine is that he's writing about caged beasts. Or murderous children. These people are in the midst of extreme personal chaos, terrible self-destruction and manipulation and self-pity and self-obsession and screaming wordless inarticulate panic. Their problems are overwhelming but, and it is a big but, they can only express themselves in this rigid, rather polite form. And what's wonderful about it is the occasional constipated nature of the rhyme makes you realise *'This is mad - what are they talking about?!'* So you get an enabling tension between the wall that's keeping the energy in and the energy that's bursting to get out. So Racine is extraordinary, I think, because he articulates so well a primal scream, because the primal scream is held in this incredibly tight form.

Another danger, all too clear in the Alexandrine, but which is useful for all actors, is that the cleverness of the form might mislead the actor to think that the words are describing a past feeling or a past thing. This is a problem every actor has to face but they are exacerbated by texts that seem 'clever'. It is always the job of the actor to boot the text into the present tense. And if the text ever sounds perfect, it can sometimes take on the quality of reportage, like I'm telling you about what I felt. So if I say 'I love you', it's got to be about what's happening now, as opposed to a description of something that I cooked in the oven five minutes earlier. It's not a description of something that has already taken place. The rhyme in the Alexandrine is quite tricky, because it can make things look like they were pre-cooked. No dramatic action takes place in the past. All dramatic action takes place on the stage before our eyes. The action takes place now. The dramatic action of Oedipus is *not* what he did in the past, the dramatic action is in him meeting this information now. The actor has to

work hard to make sure that everything is forged in the furnace of the imagination at the now, the big old now.