Hamlet Final File

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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SPEAKERS

Nick, Lucie, Declan

Lucie 00:06
Welcome to series three of 'Not True, But Useful...' a podcast from Cheek by Jowl. I'm your host, Lucie Dawkins, and every week I'm chatting to artistic directors Declan Donnellan and Nick Ormerod, looking back at four decades of their productions all across the world. Together, we'll take a look at what these plays have to tell us about the messy business of being human. Our play today is Shakespeare's Hamlet, and here's a quick synopsis before we dive in. Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, returns home from university for the funeral of his father. His mother, Gertrude, has married his uncle, Claudius, who's become the new king. The ghost of Hamlet's father appears to him, revealing that he was murdered by Claudius and demanding that his son avenges him. Hamlet pretends to be mad and Gertrude and Claudius summon his university friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to work out the reason for Hamlet's odd behaviour. Claudius also persuades Hamlet's girlfriend, Ophelia, to spy on him. Hamlet realises that he's being watched and cruelly rejects Ophelia. A troupe of travelling actors has also appeared at the castle, and Hamlet makes them perform a play he has written which echoes his father's murder. At the performance, Claudius loses his temper, which Hamlet takes as proof of his guilt. Hamlet confronts his mother in her bedroom. As they argue he hears someone moving behind the curtain and stabs them, assuming it's Claudius. It turns out to be Polonius, Ophelia's father. Claudius banishes Hamlet to England with a secret letter to the King of England, asking him to kill Hamlet when he gets there. Ophelia goes mad with grief and drowns in a river. Her brother, Laertes, sets out to kill Hamlet in revenge. Hamlet, meanwhile, never reaches England. Pirates attack his ship en route and force him to return to Denmark. As he arrives back at the castle, he finds grave diggers digging Ophelia's grave, just as her funeral arrives. In this moment, he discovers that she has died. Laertes challenges Hamlet to a duel. Claudius makes a plot with Laertes is to poison both the sword and a cup of wine to make absolutely sure Hamlet dies. It all goes wrong when Gertrude accidentally drinks the poisoned cup. Laertes and Hamlet are both wounded by the poisoned sword. And as Hamlet dies, he kills Claudius too. And now over to Declan and Nick. So, hello Declan and Nick.

Declan 02:51
Hello, Lucie.

Nick 02:52
Hello.

Lucie 02:52

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So today we are talking about one of the biggest Shakespeare plays in the repertoire: Hamlet.

Declan 02:59
It's enormous. And it's early, I think it's 1599. And he's still learning to write these big tragedies. It's the first of them. It comes before Macbeth, Othello, Lear. But you know, it's not a bad learning piece that's changed the way human beings think about themselves. I mean, it is absolutely extraordinary. It's an overwhelming play.

Lucie 03:18
Well, the exciting thing about talking about this play with you is, once again, it's one you've come across multiple times in your career. You did a staged production of it in the UK in 1990, and you've also done it as a ballet with the Bolshoi with no text at all. How was it to work in a format where you couldn't use any of the words, given that this is one of the most word-heavy plays in Shakespeare?

Declan 03:43
It's fantastic. Because you know, our whole lives, we're tied to words. I absolutely love words, but also not having to use words is also fantastic. You think much more about the movement of the body. You think much more about the plastique, and about how the actors express things and how the actors interrelate. I find that incredibly important.

Lucie 04:03
So let's talk about this word 'plastique', which is a Russian word for describing acting. Can you talk more about that word?

Declan 04:10
Well, It's just the Russians are very conscious about how you move, you know, the actors on the whole tend to be very much in their bodies, and understand perfectly that text is something that sits on the back of how we move. And that's the discipline that has moulded me and Nick. So working in ballet is very obvious to me and Nick in a way.

Lucie 04:29
And that's what I've enjoyed so much about all of these conversations, is that you talk about plays as bodies negotiating space, and that text is just another muscle, another limb, with which you negotiate space.

Declan 04:45
Text is secondary to human experience. It's not central to it. I mean, I think the words that human beings say to each other are very important. But you know, if ever you have a difficulty with somebody, you should look at what people are doing, rather than what they're saying. And if what somebody does contradicts what they say, it's what they do that matters more. Just speaking from the point of view of common sense, if action and text contradict, you follow action. That means (less pretentiously) if somebody says one thing and does another thing, you follow what they do, not what they say.

Lucie 05:17
So Hamlet speaks a huge amount in the play. He's famous.

Declan 05:21

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Yes.

Lucie 05:21
It may be the biggest script a single actor has to speak in any Shakespeare play. And you always say, nobody speaks unless they are compelled to. I've heard you say that you think Hamlet speaks at such length, and does everything he does, because there's a particular thing he's afraid of. What's that?

Declan 05:42
Well, it's an incredibly boring word that's very important, which is, I think, non-existence. One always thinks of Hamlet as been the longest part - I don't think it is, I think Richard III and Iago have more words to say, but Hamlet is the one that we think talks all the time. He always seems to be in the middle of the stage, saying, 'I'm here! I'm here!' I know a story of of an actor which is always told us a funny story, that the director went to the show one night and in a crowd scene on stage he suddenly saw this actor had stood on a table. And when he asked, 'why do you stand on the table?' he replied in a little voice, 'because I thought no one could see me.' But I understand that actor. I feel for that idea that you are invisible. And I think that the reason that Hamlet demands so much of our attention is that he feels invisible. He is Mr. Nobody, he's to the side. In that first scene, he's like, he's like the odd, fat son that nobody even thinks might possibly be a contender for the kingship. And his first line, 'a little more than kin and less than kind'... I think it's very embarrassing, because it's like, a joke, a sarky joke that somebody makes that they think will get a laugh, and it misses its mark. It doesn't get quite the laugh it's supposed to get. And I think he's very frightened that he's nobody. And I think he's continually like that actor standing on the table, frightened that nobody can see him. And he goes on talking because he wants to believe that he exists. I think the best way to think of non existence is like is to think about the beginning of Raiders of the Lost Ark. When Harrison Ford pulls up a lever to get the treasure, whatever it is, and this enormous boulder comes hurtling after him, and he runs like hell in front of this boulder coming after him - that's what I think non-existence is like.

Lucie 07:32
So non-existence, it's a bit like this panicked feeling that we've got to keep running, got to keep going to earn our place, our existence, or it's going to squash us and obliterate us.

Declan 07:42
Yes, I think so, yes. We've invented an expression to describe the highest possible stakes: we say, 'oh, this is a life and death situation'. But I think we're quite strange as animals, that there is something worse than dying. And that is this thing for which there is no word.

Lucie 08:01
This thing that you call, non-existence, as kind of stand-in.

Declan 08:04
Well, non-existence is a useless expression. But it's the only one I can... you know, I'd much rather say Harrison Ford's big ball! Yeah, I think we know that there is something worse than death. We know that there's something worse than death because people do kill themselves. People kill themselves tragically, sadly, for all sorts of different reasons. And one can't possibly generalise about why people kill themselves apart from one thing. And that's that we can take that if they do it to avoid something that is worse than dying. To that poor person at that moment, they feel death is a better choice. And there seems to me to be in Hamlet a

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fear of of being invisible. And that is behind the line, 'to be or not to be'. The line 'to be or not to be' appears to refer to suicide. But I think it also is about this terror of being invisible. One of the ways that this non-existence thing is different from death is that non-existence, it doesn't just wipe out your present, it doesn't just wipe out your future as death does. It's also somehow wipes out your past as well. It undoes you. Now all of this seems maybe very abstruse and very much you know, God, you've got to read lots of Wittgenstein and things to understand what this is all about. But I don't think so. I think that when you look into the eyes of young people who are desperate to make it in the world, and I think if you look very closely at them with some love in your heart, that you'll see that it's not just something that they want, but there's an absolute dread of not having it - and failure is too weak a word for it. It's like they'll be obliterated if they don't get this thing. Of course some people have this more than other people, but on the whole the plays I direct are about people who have this an awful lot. And this is a key not just for Hamlet, it's a key to Macbeth and Othello. They are very frightened of not existing and they use that verb, 'be', in all sorts of different ways.

Lucie 10:04
We talked about it last week in Twelfth Night when Orsino talks about Olivia's 'unregardance' of him, the fact that he's almost unwitnessed by her.

Declan 10:14
Exactly. And that makes him into nothing and it tortures him that he's not granted the right to exist by her attention. Exactly. Many people would rather be hated than not seen. And the Russian form of 'I hate you' is 'ne vizhu' which etymologically is, 'I don't see you'. It's the fear of the thing that makes us keep doing the things that we're doing. It is one of the things that made us, if you like, the master species, that (God bless us) might destroy our own planet. We'd rather do extraordinary things, sometimes maybe even terrible things, just in order to make sure that we actually exist, because it's as if we don't fully believe that we do. Even tiny children in the politics of school, the terror of being not one of the 'in' crowd or not the popular person at school, not chosen for the team or being neglected by our parents not being seen through, being a bit invisible. These things fill us, when we are small, with unspeakable dread.

Nick 11:13
I think it's really hard because, covering what we've been saying about the fact that he feels himself invisible, that he feels himself ignored, and looked over and done down. He kind of sees himself as a non-entity. But inevitably, in any company, I think you're going to cast the charismatic, very capable, in fact, brilliant actor, because it's a very difficult part. So conjoining those two things is really hard, I think. And that actually makes it quite difficult to understand.

Lucie 11:48
So Hamlet really needs to be a bit of a drip.

Nick 11:51
Yes. He's 'fat and scant of breath'. He's the one that is ignored. But do you ever see that? You cast a film star on the part, and, of course, all the audience is going to be riveted on him. So he's getting maximum attention. How do you dramatically do it so that he is the character who is ignored?

Declan 12:13

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It's very difficult.

Nick 12:14
I think it's virtually impossible.

Declan 12:16
I mean, I think that's one of the impossibilities in it because you really got to feel that you somebody who's ignored and who feels he doesn't exist. The most terrible thing happens in that court scene where he's still mourning, and his mother says, 'but why seems it so particular to thee?' And I think 'why seems so particular to thee' is one of the most violent lines in Shakespeare, because it passes unremarked because it's quite passive aggressive, but my God, the hurt! It's a basic understanding when somebody is bereaved, that they're given a kind of dignity and status. To say to somebody, a member of your own family, 'what's special about you?' at that moment, is a moment of total obliteration of somebody, but done with a sort of smile and a sort of tidying away and a sort of pull-yourself-together.

Lucie 13:09
So he doesn't even feel seen or granted the right to existence by his own mother, who says, 'why are you so special?'

Nick 13:16
What you can't play nowadays is that a function of a prince in a court at that time, and earlier, of course, and really the function of an aristocrat, their job was to be a warrior. And that kind of hangs over in our royal family now, because they all dress up in the military uniforms. You know, you understand now why a prince might read a book. In those days, you wouldn't understand why prince would read a book. Princes didn't read books, they were out doing sword fighting and jousting and doing military things. A prince going to university was bizarre in those days. Bizarre.

Lucie 13:54
And this is something that we talked about last week, which is that, actually, a lot of characters are not in the place that they wish that they were in. I mean, he's been put in the wrong play. It's the wrong space, he doesn't fit. He doesn't want to be there. He doesn't have the language to negotiate that space.

Declan 14:09
Yes, I think the most important thing for too, though, for Hamlet is that he just doesn't measure up to either of his parents expectations. I mean, the father's a nightmare. I mean, really, to tell your child to revenge is a terrible thing. Nicholas I of Russia, I believe his dying words to his son, were 'hang on to everything!', which must be the second worst thing you can say to a child before you die. But the worst thing you can say is revenge. In fact you should be saying 'be free, have your own life, do exactly what you want to do'. But no. he absolutely tied to that, and we feel very much in the play that Hamlet just doesn't live up to his parents' expectations.

Lucie 14:48
So not only does he have this dread of non-existence, not only does he feel like he's in the wrong play, he feels like he doesn't even fit in the family. I mean, he's so much the sore thumb in every single scene.

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Declan 15:00
I think it's the most fascinating play. But I don't know it's the most likeable play or the warmest play. I think it's about a lack of empathy, that Gertrude seems to have very little empathy. The ghost has little empathy. And then he learns to have no empathy because of the way he talks about Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. But when we have no empathy for other people, it's not so much because we're selfish. It's because we don't have much empathy for ourselves either. It's because our relationship with ourselves is corrupt. I think that's a very important thing that happens as the play goes on. Poor Gertrude, she has that very, I find, creepy speech. When she reports Ophelia's death, starting 'there is a willow grows aslant a brook...' It's as if she's trying to communicate to a brother the fact his sister is dead, and she doesn't know how to do it, because she's so inexpert at being in touch with her feelings. And so she uses this extraordinary nature imagery. And then very inappropriately, she talks about the purple flowers, which 'our liberal shepherds give a grosser name', so presumably the flowers are called something like 'purple dicks'. And he mentions that in the middle of the speech very inappropriately, as if she's tone deaf. But because somebody's tone deaf doesn't mean they have no feelings - it means that she's speaking a foreign language when she has to speak about feelings like that. And you feel that she's never allowed herself to have any feelings. But then at the end, she says, 'which time dhe chanted snatches of old tunes, as one incapable of her own distress.' That idea of being incapable of your own distress runs all the way through the play. And you know, the the golden commandment is 'love your neighbour as yourself.' But that's very sophisticated, because it means you have to love yourself. If you're incapable of your own distress, you're lost. In the suicide of Ophelia Gertrude sees something of herself. It's like she's been incapable of her own distress because her husband's died. I mean, she's in this sort of terrible situation, she's had to cut off so many feelings, Gertrude, to do this. And she's brought up her son like that, and she's reaping the rewards now. In the closet scene she reaps the rewards of having brought up her son like that, who turns on her in that vicious way, which confuses so many parents, but it's like he's been shamed by being ignored. Because if you see through a child, if a child becomes invisible, the child becomes shamed. Because he shames her in the closet scene, that makes me think he's been shamed, and use modern words, you could say that she's very coerced by the patriarchy. She's very much like a military wife, who will urge herself and people around her to have a stiff upper lip and put best foot forward and 'onward and upward', and 'pull yourself together'. And she expects to pull herself together. But she can't quite pull herself together because she's a human being. She starts to become acquainted with her own natural empathy, I think, as the play goes on. And that is an incredibly sad thing at the heart of this extraordinary play.

Lucie 15:02
It also seems that, you know, this text in which people speak at length, seems to be an example of us speaking at length because we are struggling to put words to things, not because we are good at describing them. Gertrude speaks at length about flowers because she can't talk about feelings.

Declan 18:26
Yes.

Lucie 18:27
And Hamlet speaks forever and ever and ever to the audience, because he can't find the words. I always find the last line such a relief and so painful when Hamlet says the 'rest is silence.' Because it's almost like he goes, 'thank goodness, I don't have to try anymore'

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Declan 18:45
Yes, the ghost gives Hamlet a character, which is a revenge hero. That gives him a super-objective, which is to bring about vengeance, and he gives him an action, which is to kill Claudius. And off he goes. He's got his character, he's got his super-objective, and he's got his action, and he doesn't know what to do with it. It just doesn't fit him at all. It's like some director has subjected him to some awful acting class and it just doesn't work and he can't access anything. It makes him feel stupid that he can't actually do it. I mean, look it's very simple: 'you're a revenge hero', 'yeah, a revenge hero' , 'yeah, your action your superobjective is vengeance.' 'Yeah, I've got that', 'And your action is to kill Claudius'. What could be simpler? And he can't do it. Yeah.

Lucie 19:31
It was so fascinating watching the ballet because it seems to me, Nick, that your talent in design is about activating human bodies as as the key part of your image, and putting it on a ballet stage seemed to supercharge that. Could you describe your design for the Bolshoi production of Hamlet?

Nick 20:03
Well, the design was pretty much, I'm afraid, another empty space! So, I mean, the problem (which we worked on over a long time) was to shoehorn this massive play and make it a coherent piece within the music that we had chosen, which was two Shostakovich symphonies, the 5th and 15th, I think. We chose, over a long period of time, the key moments of the play. And then the task was to express them within, essentially, an empty space.

Lucie 20:39
These was one massive thing that happened in this space at the rear of the stage, which was that when people died or were obliterated, the back wall rolled up to reveal this enormous light box that was pouring with smoke. And as they walked into it, at this moment of death or obliteration, they started as a stark silhouette, and the closer they got to the light, the more they got swallowed by the light and the smoke, like an overexposed photograph, then this darkness would drop down again. So in this empty space, you had this one massively dramatic device that was used.

Nick 21:19
Well, fading out in white light somehow cinematically implies death. And that's exactly what that did. I mean, people walked off into a blinding white light into death in cinematic terms that's very readable.

Lucie 21:35
Nick, could you tell me about your favourite moment in staging the Hamlet ballet?

Nick 21:42
The fight over Ophelia's body in the graveyard was very dramatic and successful, I think. She was flying around, as you can imagine, a ballet dancer could be.

Lucie 21:52
It was really grotesque. Hamlet saw her body in the coffin for the first time, and hauled her out of the coffin and was embracing her and kissing her and swinging this corpse around as

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the whole court tried to wrestle them apart. And it was horrifying to watch, but also amazing because you had her dressed in white, and everyone was in black. So you could see this pale little rag doll of a body being manhandled around the stage in this violent image of grief. It made me feel sick, and was very beautiful at the same time. What about you, Declan? What was your favourite moment?

Declan 22:27
I don't know... there were rhythmic moments of the music when the whole stage was full, and then suddenly everybody would go and Hamlet would be alone, and we tried dramatise that sense of loneliness. And we had a wonderful dancer Denis Savin, who was our first Hamlet. He's a wonderful dancer, Dennis, it was wonderful working with him. I loved bringing Yorick to life too. That was wonderful. Yorick became a main character, and would appear throughout the whole thing, because Yorick one of the most human characters in all of Hamlet. But he's dead.

Lucie 22:57
So tell us more about how you put Yorick on stage.

Declan 22:59
Well, we just had a dancer dance it - Denis Medvedev. We started the play with Ophelia and Hamlet his children and Yorick entertaining them as a children's entertainer at a huge party. And so we felt very much that relationship that Yorick had with them. And so when the skull comes out, you know, we were able to bring Yorick back in the grave-digger sequence.

Lucie 23:17
And it was so painful because you do feel that that point that Yorick, this dead jester, who Hamlet loved as a child, was somebody that made Hamlet feel seen. One of the only people that makes Hamlet feels seen.

Declan 23:32
He bore him on his back.

Lucie 23:33
Yeah, and that he's dead and gone. And that's why Yorick matters so much to Hamlet.

Declan 23:39
Yes, it's one of the few tactile mentions in the whole play, 'he bore me on his back a thousand times.' It's like they've never touched. And Yorick did.

Lucie 23:49
He's good, isn't he, Shakespeare?

Declan 23:50
Yes, he's very good!

Lucie 23:52
Well, thank you very much both for a grand tour of Hamlet. And next week, we are moving from Shakespeare to Chekhov with Three Sisters. Have a lovely week.

Declan 24:05

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Thanks, Lucie.

Lucie 24:05
Thank you for listening to this week's episode of 'Not True, But Useful...' As always, if you want to look at pictures of Declan and Nick's productions of Hamlet, just follow the link in the podcast notes. If you're enjoying this podcast, don't forget to subscribe. We've got lots of great episodes coming up in the next few weeks. The music in this episode was composed by Paddy Cuneen for Cheek by Jowl's production of The Winter's Tale. Join us next week, when we explore Chekhov. Until then, stay well.

Macbeth Final

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SPEAKERS
Nick, Lucie, Declan

Lucie 00:06
Welcome to series three of 'Not True, But Useful...', a podcast from Cheek by Jowl. I'm your host, Lucie Dawkins, and every week, I'm chatting to Artistic Directors Declan Donnellan and Nick Ormerod, looking back at four decades of their productions all across the world. Together, we will take a look at what these plays have to tell us about the messy business of being human. Our play of the week is Shakespeare's Macbeth. It's a bloodthirsty psychological thriller set in 11th century Scotland. Here's a super speedy synopsis before we begin. Best friends Macbeth and Banquo emerge as the heroes of a battle to defend Scotland. As they leave the fight, they come across three weird sisters, often known as the witches, who tell them Macbeth will become king, but Banquo will be father to kings. The current king, Duncan, showers honours on Macbeth and his wife, Lady Macbeth, in reward for his heroism. He arrives at their castle to celebrate the end of the war. The pair murder him in his sleep, and frame his sons for the crime. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth become king and queen of Scotland, but are now tortured by paranoia. Macbeth goes on a murder spree to defend his power. Macbeth murders Banquo to prevent the witches' prophecies that his children will be kings. Banquo's ghost returns to torment him. As the Macbeths begin to unravel, Duncan's son Malcolm gathers an army to overthrow him. Tormented by hallucinations and nightmares, Lady Macbeth commits suicide, and Macbeth dies in the fight. And now over to Declan and Nick. Well, hello Declan and Nick.

Nick 01:59
Hello Lucie

Lucie 01:59
Hello Lucie So, I guess everybody who is listening to this podcast who might have sat an English GCSE at some point in the last two decades - so those are the exams you have to take in this country when you're 15 or 16 - you've probably had to study Macbeth, and

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you've probably had to answer a question that is something along the lines of, 'who is responsible for Duncan's murder - Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, or the witches?' And one of the things that we talk about in this podcast is the danger of trying to solve plays like this. It's something that's maybe, you know, useful to do in a classroom, but less useful to do in a rehearsal. Why shouldn't we be setting out to solve Macbeth?

Declan 02:41
Because I don't think we can solve anything, and that's why I think these plays are so great, and that's what great works of art are. The more you know them, the less you solve. The more you know them, the greater the mystery is. It's like studying physics, the more you know the more you realise you don't know. Bit by bit, Macbeth gets more and more mysterious. So to begin with, if you are teaching it, you say it's about Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, who both conspire to kill the king so that they can become king and queen of Scotland. And you start with that, and that's like the first rung of a ladder, and then you start going up the ladder. But then the problem is you realise that's not true. It's not really about that at all. In fact, it gets less and less clear about why they are doing it in the first place. And so, it's not like you go up a ladder and you can go down the ladder again. You go up the ladder, but the first rung or two you go up, they are sort of nonsense really. Who knows why they do it? They don't know why they do it!

Lucie 03:38
So, Nick, if I were to ask you, what do you think are some of the big unsolvable things in Macbeth which fascinate you?

Nick 03:45
Well, that absolute question is that they never say why they want to be king and queen. It's never part of their fantasy, what they could do when they are king and queen. They are just on this irresistible helter-skelter journey which they have somehow locked themselves on. They have to do this deed, and somewhere, you know it's going to end in total disaster. And of course, it does.

Declan 04:09
What's more and more frightening about it the more and more you look into it, it's not so much that they want it, but that they are terrified of not doing it. It's like this monstrous birth gets born (like Iago's monstrous birth), and the monstrous birth is the absolute dread of them failing to accomplish the deed. That's why they do it. It's not like they want anything.

Lucie 04:29
So, the fascinating thing about approaching the play like this, I think, is that when you are a young director, like me, I think you start out with the idea that you've got these great big huge plays, and your responsibility it to try and find reasons for everything, and try and solve everything. But you are sort of arguing the opposite, right, that what is amazing about these plays is that they touch on things that are mysterious for all of us as humans. It's about probing the edges of these mysteries.

Declan 04:55
That's true. There is one preamble I would like to say towards that, though. There is something rather irritating about hearing an old man like me talking about this because one of the things you learn over the years is what you don't need. And it's very irritating for me to say to young people, 'oh, you don't need that, you don't need that', because it's a lot of

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experience that has taught me what I don't need. So I can airily say things like make sure you don't read too much, but that's partially because I have had the experience of reading too much, and realising how little of it helped. So, when you start, you have to start somewhere. Part of the problem, I think, lies behind this magic word 'understand'. We feel we must understand, that we have a right to understand, and that if we don't understand we have a big problem. I don't thing we understand another human being, for example. I don't think that when we get to know somebody we understand them. You start to accept them, you become more familiar with their smell, you get more used to them. But the older I get, the less I understand what the word understand means (and I'm very aware that I have used the word twice in the last sentence!) Yeah. What am I trying to say? The play is mysterious because you don't know why they do it, and the reason they seem to do it is because they are terrified of not doing it. That their dread seems to be fuelled by a failure to do something rather than something that they actually want to do. I agree, that's an incredibly mysterious, and can I explain it? No, I can't. But that's what keeps me going.

Lucie 06:22
Would you say that there's also a danger to trying to understand too much, because if we explain it away, we kind of kill it. You know, they can't explain it, and there are so many things in our own lives we can't explain. We can't explain why we do a lot of things, and we often can't explain them to ourselves. So if we set about trying to explain why Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are doing what they are doing, we are kind of missing the point of the play a bit.

Declan 06:45
Yes. I think when Nick and I do a play, there are certain aspects of what we are doing that we can explain to each other. Normally, all those completely vanish, and a new structure emerges, which we are not able to explain. But that thing which we can't explain is normally the best bit of what we are doing. So, the conundrum one has to deal with is that it is our prerogative, and our drive in life to try to understand things, but to understand that we are not going to at the same time is also really important. Why would you embark on a task that's doomed to failure? The problem is, that's life! Welcome to life! We know that there's always going to be mystery, but what the mystery is changes as we go along. And that's why we can come back and back and back to these plays. The play is always completely different. It's like Shakespeare has re-written it in the last year. That's because we're changing, and we see things which are completely different in it. But what they are we can't necessarily explain.

Nick 07:39
But also the play is extraordinary in one respect. It's a very modern story about a man who gets all powerful, and consequently is absolutely on his own, and one of the major themes in the play is, simply, loneliness. Part of that of course is that as soon as they have done the murder, his marriage is destroyed. But we see him at the end absolutely on his own, and as a tyrant, of course, he has no democratic sustainability, and that makes him ultimately paranoid. Like every dictator in history, they become not only alone, but paranoid.

Declan 08:20
Yes, I couldn't agree more. I think that what Nick has touched on is the great theme of loneliness. You know, what is the theme of loneliness in Macbeth? Well, it's massive. A lot of people say, well, that's out of the text to consider loneliness. I think, well, yeah, ok, maybe, but maybe it's a key you can stick in a lock and it will open wondrous doors. There's

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something I always find very sad in that line when Lady Macbeth says, ‘has Banquo gone from court?’ It’s like the two people he’s been closest to in the world have been Banquo and Lady Macbeth. What’s sad too is that you often see very expensive flats and houses advertised with ‘great entertaining spaces’, so you’re going to fill it with all your friends. That concept of loneliness - I mean loneliness is such a taboo thing that we can’t talk about. The actual sense of being completely cut off and unable to make connection with other people, that’s a terrible problem, and these plays are very about that aspect of humanity. And he says to the lords, ‘let’s keep apart, so that we will have more to chat about at dinner’. Do you know, I don’t think I’ve ever heard anyone say that in real life if you are staying with them. A distance grows between him and other people, which is out of his control.

Nick 09:28
Well, he’s certainly lost his wife. I mean somehow, don’t you feel that the murder is the one thing that they imagine is going to bring them together in a huge sort of orgasmic act, that the murder will sort of conjoin them for ever.

Declan 09:41
Yes, yes.

Nick 09:42
And it does the exact opposite.

Lucie 09:44
We’ve talked a lot in other conversations about that scene where they come out from the murder, and you always describe that scene as they talk about anywhere but here. In almost every single line in that scene they are talking about other place apart from the place that they are in, because they just can’t bear being in the same space as each other, because their marriage is broken. They’ve done this awful thing.

Declan 10:08
Yes, I mean the rule is (as touched on by Beckett): anywhere but here, any time but now.

Lucie 10:15
So they are constantly trying to escape this terrible here and now that they have put themselves into.

Nick 10:20
Well, I think that he never leaves that room where he did the murder. And she goes into the room, and she never leaves it either. That’s proven, it comes out in her nightmares in the sleepwalking scene. There she is, back in that room.

Lucie 10:42
Now, I often feel that many of our conversations return to Macbeth, and that’s because it’s a play you have done loads and loads of times. You’ve done two big productions of it, one at the National Theatre of Finland in 1987, and most recently, a British production in 2009 with Will Keen and Anastasia Hille playing the Macbeths. But it also comes up a lot in workshops, and it seems to have kept you fascinated. And I’ve seen your most recent 2009 production, and I would love to start with talking about the witches in this production. So Nick, could you describe how you made the witches happen?

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Nick 11:17
Well, you never actually see the witches. You hear the voices and you never in fact see any of the objects, because all the objects are mimed. And the blood is mimed - you know, it's a problem in Macbeth, blood, because there is a lot of it. And in a sense, I think it's best left to the imagination. If somehow you can conjure it without seeing it, then you are being more successful in terms of the theatre of the piece. But no, the witches were imagined, and in fact, the way we played it was that the whole company played the witches and you see the witches through the eyes of Macbeth, and earlier, of Macbeth and Banquo.

Lucie 12:02
I thought that this was such an interesting choice for this production, because, you know, just like we don't see the witches, we also don't see Banquo's ghost, and we also don't see the hallucinated dagger, and we also don't see the real, concrete things in the play, like the cups they are drinking from, or the real daggers that he brings out from the chamber. And usually, in a production of Macbeth, you see the difference between what he is hallucinating, because it's not there, and what's real, because they are onstage as props. But here, because everything was mimed, it blurred the boundaries between what was real and what wasn't. The whole play became about how he was seeing the world, how they were seeing the world, and it didn't matter what we could see or not. Why was that important to you, to blur this distinction between what was real and what wasn't real?

Declan 12:54
I think it was to do with that expression, 'present fears are less than horrible imaginings'. That it's very important that they don't the difference between what is real and what is not quite real. But it's not just external objects that they don't know are real or not, it's also what's real in themselves. Somebody once said to me that Macbeth is a great play about ambition. I'm not sure that Macbeth's ambition is particularly real. I think it is even more mysterious than that, that he doesn't know why he does it. Also, it makes me think that one shouldn't make Macbeth too dependent on the witches. In fact, it's very clear from his first soliloquy, and later on, that they have already had conversations about this before the witches come along. I think that the witches are a coincidence, but that life is full of coincidences. And particularly if you are in a heightened state, you will see coincidental mentions everywhere of the thing that is upsetting you.

Lucie 13:47
And it's fairly clear in Macbeth's first speech that what terrifies him about the witches is that they give voice to something that he has already thought about.

Declan 13:56
Yes.

Lucie 13:57
That he's terrified that they have put their finger on this secret, ugly thing that's already in him, and that, in a way, he was good to go before the witches turned up. But that's what I really loved about the witches in your production, because by not showing them, by not putting onstage kind of magical beings, it became all about looking at Will Keen embodying Macbeth's total horror that his imaginings had been uncovered. It became all about Macbeth's perception of the world around him, and Macbeth's own fears and own imaginings. By not showing the witches, you refocussed the spotlight onto what's really

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going on in those scenes, the really dirty, grubby, scary human thing. And I found that really exhilarating to watch.

Declan 14:48
Yes, it was entirely about his responsibility. One of things we like to do in life, of course, is make people responsible for the things we do that are bad. But it's Othello who strangles Desdemona, it's not Iago. It's not the witches that knife Duncan, it's Macbeth that does it. We have to take responsibility for our own actions. And I can't quite say that the witches are incidental to Macbeth, because they are absolutely central to the play that Shakespeare wrote, but for me the psyche of Macbeth is somebody who was probably going to do something like that anyway. And that, do you know, he was somehow going to orchestrate his life into a disaster. I think the thing that really makes them screw up, which we forget, is how well they are doing. I mean, nothing destroys people as fast as success, and he's given so much. And success is incredibly dangerous for human beings, because success frightens people, because if you are given success it can be taken away from you. Now, gratitude is also very frightening for human beings. When we are grateful, we should feel so grateful that we are grateful. But very often, when we are given things, on the surface of course we feel gratitude, but underneath it all, if it's something really really important, you can feel angry that you needed that thing from that other person, that gratitude makes you feel a debtor, if you are not careful. At the beginning of the play, Duncan showers Macbeth and Lady Macbeth with honours, and in fact coming to stay with them in their shabby little castle is actually an enormous honour. And then there is a line which is almost funny. When he arrives at the castle, Lady Macbeth meets Duncan, and starts, 'every point twice done and then done double were poor and single service' etc etc. And then she goes on to 'we rest your hermits'. 'We rest your hermits' means that we are going to thank you so much that the hermits that you've got praying for you can take a rest because we are going to be praying so hard for you. I mean, it's impossible to decipher what she means. And you read this speech of Lady Macbeth's and you think, do you know, Lady Macbeth, 'thank you' would have been enough. It's like a speech at the Oscars which goes on for ages, but 'thank you' is all you really need to say - and she can't say thank you!

Lucie 17:00
Because she's tortured by gratitude.

Declan 17:02
She's tortured by gratitude. And that wonderful American prayer, 'for what we are about to receive may the good Lord make us truly thankful' is brilliant, because it says, do you know, the food's on the table, but do you know, I'm not grateful, because I was entitled to it. I would like the spirit to come into me, to take away my entitlement, so that I can feel gratitude. I think this is an enormous problem in the lives of all of us. To actually feel gratitude is a really wonderful thing. And it's painful, because it means I'm not full, it means I'm not self-sufficient.

Lucie 17:38
So that is also one of the amazing paradoxes at the heart of this play, that the very thing that makes the Macbeths resent and feel out of control and want to murder to Duncan, this gratitude which proves that they are weak and need something from him, is also exactly the same thing which makes them love, adore and respect him, and they are torn in two by this horrible…

Declan 18:06

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Yes, welcome to life. The thing is that once one thinks about the plays in these terms, it becomes much more like situations that you can feel closer at hand.

Lucie 18:17
And that is what I find exciting about the way that you talk about Macbeth. It's really easy to think about this play as like a pair of psychopaths who talk to witches and who end up murdering a king, but your take on it seems to be, you know, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth could be sitting next to you on the bus. They could be you.

Declan 18:35
Yeah, they could be me! Let me not be tested. My advice for directors or actors or anybody involved in the theatre is you know, look at your shoes. Make sure your shoes are staying on the ground. So never feel slightly superior to the characters or to the story or any of the events. Never, ever feel superior. We can only understand and love and share if we do things horizontally. But we don't like it very much because it scares us. So we must never go in feeling morally superior to Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. They do disgusting things, and I pray to God I never do anything like that in my whole life, but I'm a human being, and so I could. And I just have to make sure that me feet are absolutely on the ground and that when I talk to the audience I keep my feet on the ground. So just making sure that you never feel like you are a teacher, that you're never saying, 'I know something and I'm going to tell you what I know because you don't know it'. If you're a good teacher, you're sharing things with people.

Lucie 19:32
Now, I'd also love to talk about something, Nick, that you mentioned, which is the problem of blood in Macbeth, and the way that miming everything means that you've solved not having to bring vast amounts of blood on stage. But also again, I found it was an incredible refocusing of the action. Because in that last scene when Macbeth died, because there was no blood and also because there was no sword, we got to focus in on the actual experience of his body being slowly impaled by a long sword that wasn't there. We could see every rib being hit as it went into his body, because that's all we could see, was the reaction of his body, and this connection between these two soldiers in this death throe. So this also seemed to me an amazing stroke of design, which was again not about illustrating the sets or illustrating the scene, but giving the actors what they needed in order to get to the heart of the action. Design as catalyst rather than as decoration.

Nick 20:38
Well, I think not so much a design decision, but it was simple decision that all objects and as many things as possible would be imagined. But I mean, it's much more expressive. It allows the actors much more expression. If you have real swords, Then you're worrying about all sorts of complicated things like safety. And, and if you think about it, you cannot realistically murder someone with swords in a fight on stage. You just simply can't believe it if the swords are real, and it's just not possible. Whereas if you make that leap of imagination, and see him, as you say, Lucie, being impaled on this huge broad sword, he can express so much more with his body than you could if there was a real sword there.

Declan 21:29
We did, of course, rehearse with broadswords because they have a special weight. I mean, all of these objects, you need to rehearse because it has to be absolutely carnalised in rehearsal, and then you put them aside.

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Lucie 21:40
But there is also one moment that we should mention, which is that this was a completely sparse set with everything mimed and everything in monochrome, with the exception of one scene. Nick, can you tell us what that was?

Nick 21:53
Well, the porter scene is an exceptional scene in the play. It's just something bizarre in the middle of the play, and a comic interlude in some respects. And Kelly Hotton, who played it in a great big red wig, and she was sort of constrained in one of these boxes, which was a set, and like all porters, they can't move out of their little office, they're stuck behind a desk with a telephone and a monitor and whatever. And she had to deal with the arrival of Macduff stuck in quite a realistic space with all sorts of props and objects at her disposal.

Lucie 22:27
And incredibly brightly coloured. I mean, you know, that a great big red wig, but she had like posters on the walls, and a telephone and mugs - in this incredible burst of colour and detailed set in the middle of this monochrome wasteland that was the rest of the play. But it also reminded us, I felt, that that scene is so weird, in the middle of the play. There's this incredibly terrifying scene just beforehand, where they're just come out from murdering Duncan; the following scene, they're going to discover his body in the middle of the night, and you've got this weird comic interlude with the porter in between. What is it that's so interesting, do you think, about that weird shift that Shakespeare does, where he just rips the rug out from under our feet?

Nick 23:12
And he makes all sorts of obscure references, which weren't obscure at the time, of course, because it was highly controversial - these Jesuits who were on trial. I think Garnett was on trial as a saboteur, as a terrorist. But that was obviously very controversial, it was politically very of the moment when he was writing the play. And so I think that kind of justifies us in making a more vivid, as it were contemporary, point out of the porter.

Declan 23:42
But it's also I think, totally in the spirit of Shakespeare that he sort of says, you know, 'would you like a harmonious world, would you like a uniform world of harmony? Well, you ain't going to get it from me, mate!' And you can go through a play and you suddenly get a slap in the face. I love, love, love that in Shakespeare. The way that you suddenly get a song, or you suddenly get a dance or you suddenly get somebody coming on from another play, and sometimes it's very violent - as in the porter, as in the sadly normally cut clown in Othello and, of course, the fool in Lear, or Autolycus when he when he burst into the Winter's Tale - but they come from different plays, and that Shakespeare is sort of saying, 'you know, this nice view of the cosmos that we're setting up? Well, it doesn't exist!' And I feel that always very much I need to honour that. And I think it's really important that we know that people are adults, we treat the audience as adults and that people can take violent jumps in tone. A violent jump in tone really wakes people up. I love it.

Lucie 24:48
And it's also one of the reasons I think I really love Shakespeare is that the plays are badly behaved and are messy and are perfectly imperfect. They are weird in a way that makes them deeply human. And also what I love about that porter scene is that it it's not just

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arbitrarily weird as a mood shift. It also really earns its keep as a scene, I think, because it reminds us in this great sturm and drang creeping around in the dark and murdering each other, there's also a porter at the south entry who has got to get on with her job. And it suddenly throws the whole of the rest of the play into contrast, you're reminded that there's a lot more going on - a whole community of people around this warfare and murder and what happens to the king.

Declan 25:39
Exactly. Because to begin with, I remember, you know, when I was very, very young, thinking that it would be my job to somehow impose unity. I mean, how many feet my shoes were above the ground, I mean, who am I to be imposing unity or anything? Life doesn't have unity, life is full of surprises. And that is what is so fantastic about Shakespeare. And what's fantastic about Shakespeare is he doesn't hover above us. He's not trying to make the world a better place by telling us how to be better people. But he does make the world a better place by opening our eyes and sharing with us how we deceive ourselves over and over and over again, and how treacherous our hearts are.

Lucie 26:22
Now, I have a big question, which is, what do you think is most difficult to stage or tackle in Macbeth? Maybe starting with you, Nick, what's really big challenge? We talked about the blood and the witches, but are there any other moments in the play that are just real mindbenders from a design point of view?

Nick 26:40
Well, the apparitions at the end, the whole sequence of kings disappearing into the future - of Banquo's heirs. Again, we relied on Will Keen's imagination to provide those.

Declan 26:53
I think, the most difficult moment to stage is the very first moment that they have together, because their planning to kill Duncan, he's come back after a battle - and what do they do? Do they jump into each other's arms and snog? It's actually rather difficult to do that if you're actually also planning to murder somebody who's in your house that night. So that moment is really, really difficult. And the other thing is bringing the knives. After the murder, she says, 'why did you bring the knives in the place?' Unfortunately, she says it quite a way into the scene. So...

Lucie 27:02
How did she not notice the knives?

Declan 27:27
And can he hold the knives behind his back? And we've had so many different solutions. We've done it endlessly in Italy, in Spain and so on, in workshops, and some actors have an idea like knocking the daggers goes into a wooden beam at the beginning. That's really, really difficult. And if Shakespeare were here, I think I'd be...

Lucie 27:45
... oi, Will, there's a problem with the stage direction!

Declan 27:48
There's a problem with the stage direction, yes!

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Nick 27:51
It must have been problematic for him because they were playing in daylight. So I mean, what, he came on with the daggers in broad daylight? You know, we can do a bit of lighting and plunge to them into darkness!

Lucie 28:01
But it's also one of those questions that reminds you that, you know, these plays, he wrote them down to be performed and not to be published. And presumably, this might have been down to something that the original company came up with that was part of their version of this scene that's just naturally found its way into the text, and that we just don't know what they were up to with those daggers for the first half of that scene.

Nick 28:22
But the lines had to come there, because that gave her the motivation to take them...

Lucie 28:28
... back in again!

Nick 28:29
So it couldn't come any earlier. Otherwise, we wouldn't have had the scene, would we?

Declan 28:35
This is one of the terrible things about doing a play like Macbeth, is that you can spend five weeks discussing those two bloody knives. And after a while, you got to say, you know what, I'm going to guillotine this. I don't care if this moment crap, but we have the rest of the play to do - and you find something to do.

Lucie 28:51
But also deliciously, you feel that if Shakespeare had to take his GCSE English, he wouldn't pass that part of the creative writing.

Declan 28:58
No, he certainly wouldn't pass that part!

Lucie 29:02
I would also love to ask, what was your favourite moment in staging this play?

Nick 29:07
Well, my favourite moment is not in the text. It's in our production where again with Will and Anastasia, when they were still in twined around each other, and Malcolm is approaching with the forest. And so they're still very much together until the announcement that the queen is dead. And then they unwind and she walked off stage. And that struck me as somehow very much at the heart of things.

Lucie 29:36
And that was extraordinary that moment, because Lady Macbeth actually disappears out of the play after the scene where she's having a nightmare.

Nick 29:44

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Much earlier, yeah.

Lucie 29:44
And you just kept her on stage, all the way through, entwined around Macbeth, but sort of in his imagination, sort of not really there but also there, as if they were just kind of wedded to each other in this horrible embrace - that he couldn't let go of her. So the moment when they say the queen is dead, he was holding her face in his hands and she just detached herself and left. And you could actually see in that moment him realising that she had gone, and him just not knowing how to be when she was gone from his life. It was an incredibly powerful choice. And again, because it didn't really matter whether it was real or imagined, because you'd played with the boundaries of what was fact and what was important in their imaginations, it got to the heart of the real break, the real trauma that was happening between them. What about you, Declan?

Declan 30:40
Well, I used to love after the Banquo banquet scene, when the two of them were left having thrown the world's worst dinner party, you know, and they're left at the table sort of eating. Finishing a glass of wine. And they have this desultory conversation about, you know, 'how it goes the night?', 'almost at odds with morning, which is which'. It was very domestic, and it was like, they had nothing to say to each other. And you just felt that terrible separation, after the people had gone. And this sense of embarrassment: loneliness and embarrassment is another word which I think that's really useful to put into the centre of all these plays, because embarrassment will yield an awful lot of human things to you if you put it in.

Lucie 31:28
And that reminds me also of what you were saying about the scene where they have to see each other for the first time, and they're not quite sure whether they should be embracing or how to even play that scene. Like you said, there are scenes where people seem to walk in from other plays. But there's also plenty of scenes where Macbeth and Lady Macbeth don't really know what play they're in.

Declan 31:47
When something awful happens in your life, like, you know, if somebody you love is sick, and you're summoned to intensive care that night, and you're sitting in the weird blue corridor with other people, you don't know what play you're in, you don't know what space you're in, you don't what time it is, you're desperate for something normal to happen that will locate you. You want to be put back into the space. And if you describe it, you will always say the same thing. You always say, it seems so unreal. As soon as the stakes go up, if something really dramatic happens, you know neither time nor place, you don't know where you are. You want something to locate you. You want some GPS. And I think that's really important. It's really good to remember that. They're struggling to find themselves.

Lucie 32:26
Fantastic. And I think that's where we're going to end for today. Thank you very much both, and we'll meet next week for our next play.

Nick 32:34
Thanks, Lucie.

Lucie 32:41

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Thank you for listening to this week's episode of 'Not True, But Useful...' If you've enjoyed it, check out the last two series on the Cheek by Jowl website, or wherever you get your podcasts. You can also find archive images of Declan and Nick's productions of Macbeth there. We're going to have a new episode for you every week for the next couple of months, so don't forget to subscribe. The theme music for this series was composed by Paddy Cuneen for Cheek by Jowl's production of The Winter's Tale, with additional music in this episode by Catherine Jayes for Macbeth.

M4M Final

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SPEAKERS

Nick, Lucie, Declan

Lucie 00:06

Welcome to series three of 'Not True, But Useful...' A podcast from Cheek by Jowl. I'm your host, Lucie Dawkins, and every week I'm chatting to artistic directors Declan Donnellan and Nick Ormerod, looking back at four decades of their productions all across the world. Together, we'll take a look at what these players have to tell us about the messy business of being human. All play of the week has Shakespeare's Measure for Measure. And here's a quick overview of the plot before we dive in with Declan and Nick. The play takes place in Vienna, the Duke has decided to abandon his post leaving a bureaucrat Angelo in charge. Instead of leaving Vienna, the Duke disguises himself as a monk and secretly watches his city. Angelo reinstates an ancient law which criminalises sex outside marriage. A young couple, Claudio and Juliet, discover that they are expecting a baby. Claudio is sentenced to death under Angelo's law. Claudio's his sister Isabella is a novice nun. She goes to Angelo to beg for her brother's life. Angelo offers to spare Claudio if Isabella has sex with him. She refuses. Isabella visits Claudio in prison, and Claudio begs her to save his life. The Duke, in his disguise as a monk, overhears their conversation, and steps in to help them. He reveals that Angelo has an ex-fiance, Mariana, he badly mistreated. Isabella and Mariana come up with a plan to get revenge on Angela and save Claudio. Isabella tells Angelo that she will sleep with him, but only in the dark. Mariana goes in her place, creating proof that Angelo has committed the same so-called crime as Claudio. Angelo orders Claudio to be killed, and for his head to be brought to him. The Duke arranges for another prisoner's head to be sent in its place in order to save Claudio. His first candidates, a criminal called Barnadine refuses to co-operate, and so instead they decapitate a prisoner who has recently died from an illness, Isabella believes Claudio has died, and publicly confronts Angelo, who denies that he ever tried to force it to sleep with him. The Duke reveals his true identity and condemns Angelo to be executed, but only after marrying Mariana. Isabella asks for Angelo to be pardoned. The Duke agrees and ends the play by proposing to Isabella. And now over to Declan and Nick. Hello, Declan and Nick.

Nick 02:50

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Hello, Lucie.

Declan 02:51
Hello, Lucie.

Lucie 02:51
So today we're going to talk about Shakespeare's Measure for Measure, which was a production you did most recently in 2013 with the Russian company. What is it about Measure for Measure that haunts you? Nick, why don't we start with you.

Nick 03:06
It's a fascinating so-called problem play, partly because it's not obviously a comedy and not obviously a tragedy, so it doesn't quite fall into that either of those categories. But it is a fascinating play because it's about a city. And it's about actually any city. It's like a complete cross section of a city. And it is always astonishingly relevant when it whenever you play it, I think, because human beings don't change and cities don't really change. And in the cross section, you have the Duke, who is an absolute monarch, you have the government, you have prisons, you have an underbelly, the world of prostitutes and pimps. In almost every respect, it is completely fascinating.

Declan 03:54
It's also got a convent, of course

Nick 03:56
Of course, of course, I forgot that. Yes, kind of important!

Lucie 04:01
And what about you Declan, what really hooks you about this play?

Declan 04:03
One of the things I love about Measure for Measure is it's got a suite of three amazing scenes. Isabella/Angelo, Isabella/Angelo, and then Isabella/Claudio, which are among the greatest scenes ever written, and twists and turns and ups and downs and shocks and surprises and total shifts of tone. And I love them, they're like a kind of helter skelter between two people that are extended and Shakespeare keeps them going and keepsyou on the edge of your seat during the whole thing.

Lucie 04:31
Nick, could you describe your design for this production? Because it was incredibly simple and incredibly arresting.

Nick 04:38
Yes, essentially we stripped out the Pushkin's page. So those old repertory theatres have marvellous galleries and ladders and lighting rigs and things which, when lit, are incredibly atmospheric, and we placed in it really five red boxes big enough to contain I suppose a couple of human beings. The idea really stemmed from a struggle to unite the different worlds in the play which we've already touched on - the government, the convent and the prison and the city - but at the same time imply the psychological journey (which essentially the play is) of the Duke who observes everything. And in this production, he does observe everything, we kind of subjectively follow his journey. At the beginning, of course, he has a

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serious problem with power, and he actually delegates power and then chooses to disappear. But he stays as an observer on stage throughout. And the red boxes were intended to imply the interior of the Dukes brain, if you like.

Lucie 05:45
And so how did the red boxes let you do that?

Nick 05:47
Well, we discovered it quite late, because I designed the red boxes, and we really didn't know how to use them until we got well into rehearsal, if I remember rightly, but we could use them to show the Duke to various sites of anxiety for him, which were the sort of the pulling between, like sex basically, and Isabella is revealed in one of the boxes as a sort of praying, ecstatic nun. And also death, as it were: Claudio, revealed in an electric chair.

Lucie 06:19
So these red boxes had this habit of slowly turning around and revealing on that empty side, a little, tiny scene, a little snapshot of a little jigsaw piece that was going on in his head whilst he was watching the action. So we got to see two levels of perception on stage at the same time.

Nick 06:37
Yes, because it worked quite well to show his interior life. But also, we use that technique of him observing really everything that happened on stage. And so there were moments when the action froze into a sort of tableau. And he could move around the state observing these tableaus, which again, I think, we hope, put you inside his head.

Lucie 07:18
You also did one other really stark thing in this design, which was to lower the ceiling with lights. Could you describe how you did that?

Nick 07:25
Well, funnily enough, that was a hangover, because we first thought of doing this production in Sydney, with Australian actors. And if you go to the Sydney Theatre Company, you will find that the building they inhabit is lit by these hanging lights, which I simply moved to Moscow and hung them up. They seem as somehow seemed appropriate. I'm not quite sure why, but they did!

Lucie 07:50
Well, it gave it an amazing kind of louring light over the top of the stage as if they were under sickly street lights, there was something really exposing about that lowered ceiling of lights, but also the cavernous space that it let you have, yes.

Nick 08:03
Yes, well, I'm glad but there was no particular logic behind it, Lucie, I'm afraid. I rather liked them, so we kept them.

Lucie 08:10
Well, it's so interesting also to hear you talk about your designs, you know, you thought that these boxes, they seemed really right, but you weren't quite sure how to use them until late

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into rehearsal, and that you see lights in a theatre in Sydney, when you're doing a read through and put them into production in Moscow, it seems a really intuitive way of working.

Nick 08:29
Yes. I think that's true. In my old age, I become more intuitive I hope, because I remember when I started out in design I was completely the opposite. Everything was very much intellectual and worked out. I think things have become freer and and hopefully better.

Lucie 08:46
And how's that for you, Declan? How did you collaborate on this design?

Declan 08:50
Nick and I don't ever really discuss the set. And one day, he arrived with this drawing of these five bright red boxes against a stripped out stage. And I thought, 'oh, right. Okay...' I had no idea how they'd work. And we worked with them. And it was absolutely wonderful, but it came out with no conscious help from me, but all of our conversations about the play what we were doing, of course, the underbelly is there. I'd never have a rational conversation with Nick about it on a surface level. We need an entrance here we need something there. We need this - I've never talked to him like that. I was first of all a bit flummoxed and then pleasantly surprised when I realised how well it worked. Of course, like everybody else I have to come with some sort of expectation. And I fantasised that we would do an extremely verismo production set in government offices and we would alienate out of that, and we would have filing cabinets and glass doors and so on, like you might see in an office anywhere, but then they just did their etudes for me. I remember Anya Khalilulina did some fantastic thing about nuns scrubbing the floors and then they did this amazing closing down of the brothel. It was absolutely terrifying. The police were rushing in rushing down the stairs and holding the guns to the heads of the people working in the brothel, it was absolutely terrifying. And they did like four or five things like that. It's interesting because these actors have worked together so long, we know each other so well, they go there for it straight away, and present you the most amazing things, and we think, 'oh God, this is extraordinary, we have to keep this!' And this vitality that the actors produced, this is incredible intensity of experience they produce for me really threw into the shade my puny intellectual idea that I went in with. And I was delighted actually, inside, to dispatch my idea, and I realised that Nick would have to come up with something - we both realised at the same time - we'd have to count something much more fluid.

Lucie 10:43
So could you explain for someone who might not have heard what an etude is before, what does doing an etude means?

Declan 10:50
It means different things to different people. It just means 'study' French, and it's a word that the Russians use, the way I use etudes is that we'll read through the play, but I'll talk in order to draw the actor's attention to the experiences that lurk behind the text. It's not just about plot, the story is, I believe, merely a delivery system for experience. And I'll talk about these experiences, but far from telling them what to do, I will often tell stories that in an oblique way, I hope, shed some light on the things that are happening. There might be modern things that might be things in modern politics, there might be personal things, but they don't have to take my story seriously. It's just basically that they are keys that might unlock something in their imagination. And then I'll ask the actors to go off and take it away and

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present me with something. I really try to make sure they don't invent any improvised dialogue, beyond the absolute minimum, because it's not about that, it's just the actual living experience like - what is it like to be in a convent? What is it like to be in a brothel? What's it like to be in the government office? What is it like to be in prison? What is it like to be frightened and interrogated on arrival in the prison? And then they present me with things,

Lucie 12:05
And then those things find their way into the actual play.

Declan 12:08
Yeah, those things always trump our puny intellectual ideas, that we've gone into the rehearsal as a primer with. So now we just go in with the kind of flimsy structure because we know it's going to be squashed. Because the directors central responsibility is to release the actors' vitality. And that's what's going to save you. And that's my job, and Nick's job.

Lucie 12:26
Well, this is also really interesting, because when you talk about going into rehearsal, you often talk about dumping things at the door, that the most useful thing you can do is actually get rid of stuff that's holding you back. And this sounds like you actually did take your big idea and leave it at the door.

Declan 12:43
Well, I think year, I think sometimes you need a bit of an idea, so I'll talk to the actors about the experiences, but then I'll let them take it away. And then I'll see something and then Nick and I can choose it, and then Nick starts to scribble. It's very good if it is not verbal improvisation. It's just basically the atmosphere, the connection, the space - they find these spaces that live. And that's what we live off

Nick 13:04
Well, actually, in the basement of this hotel was this cellar. And they used this magnificently for introducing Pompey, who is played by Alexey Rakhmanov, into prison, and the process of putting him in prison, of taking his possessions and filing them away, and then showering him was absolutely moved wholesale into the final production. And then upstairs were perfect rooms for brothels. And I don't remember if there was a government office property.

Declan 13:36
No, well we invented that in some sort of dining room, but those were really quite chilling.

Lucie 13:40
Well it seems like an extraordinary way of working because it means that everybody has equal ownership over the ideas of the production. I mean, often a kind of standard model for for making a play is that the director is kind of leading the ideas, and it sounds here like you cook together. And then your job is to curate what comes into the show.

Declan 13:59
Yeah, I mean, my job really is to prime the actors to use their imaginations, their experience, their perceptions to bring worlds alive. And then Nick looks at it, the set is designed, and then I will direct pretty traditionally through the rehearsal period, but it's had that basis so the actors know that it's coming from them. So they have a more proud sense of ownership. And I like to think they feel they own the plays.

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Nick 14:40
The other thing I think we have, which we haven't touched on, which I think is remarkable about the production, is the use of the whole company as the chorus. And that started off as an idea again, exploring the subjectivity of the Duke. So in a way the chorus represented a cross section of his brain, as well as the cross section of the city. And the chorus were on stage throughout, and that was amazing because you have substantial actors, and they were happy to stand in a group watching the proceedings throughout.

Declan 15:12
It's so wonderful that they made themselves so available to work like that. And they work with such enthusiasm and passion. So they'd move on the stage in a kind of controlled group. And then they would dissipate and leave behind, as it were, a tableau of maybe a nun, maybe a sex worker, and then the Duke would be the only person on stage moving, and he'd walk around this still tableau, as if he's looking at elements in himself, and then they would come to life. So we could take something that was mysterious and happening inside him, which we can never explain, but actually show it in space, or to show it in spatial terms. So it's like he's moving around his own interiority.

Lucie 15:52
And there was an extraordinary first moment to this production. You opened it wordlessly with this interaction between him and the chorus. Can you describe those first few moments of the play?

Nick 16:05
Yes, the whole chorus is revealed already on stage grouped, and they begin to move slowly, and are getting faster in the space. And then they separate from the Duke. So the Duke is, as it were, born out of out of the chorus, and then the chorus mirrors what the Duke is doing. So hopefully, we get the idea that the chorus is the Duke, and different aspects of the Dukes personality.

Lucie 16:32
So in the middle of all this mirroring, with the chorus around the stage, copying exactly how the Duke was moving, and us feeling that they were two halves at the same thing - the chorus then did something really scary, which is, all of a sudden, they stopped mirroring the Duke. And this was a really creepy moment, because you suddenly felt like he was completely exposed and fractured and somehow alienated from the rest of the community in a way that he was totally out of control of, you could see him being scared by it. I couldn't quite describe why in words, but you could see the seeds of why he felt he had to run away at that point. There was something really creepy about this moment when they stop behaving in the way he expects them to.

Declan 17:18
Of course, I absolutely couldn't explain in words either. It was just to have that feeling of somebody being dislocated from themselves, which I have to say, is a major Shakespearean theme, I've discovered - how we are alienated from ourselves. He does that so well. He's so interested in that.

Lucie 17:34

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And it was so magnificently simple because he basically set up a really basic pattern, and then broke it. And in that breaking, we found the heart of the beginning of the play that he is completely dislocated from himself and from the community.

Nick 17:49
And this becomes clearer later, because in fact, the act of playing Barnadine leads the chorus, and he is the sort of dark violent side, if you like, od Duke. And later on we'll see him in a sort of wild dance and Barnadine drags him around these different images.

Lucie 18:10
So why did you choose Barnadine, who's a character who's actually very small in the script to represent this spirit of chaos, this this kind of extreme part of the Dukes character?

Declan 18:22
Yes, Barnadine doesn't have very many lines, but he has the most extraordinary effect in the play. There is a very violent entrance, it's incredibly surprising and very anarchic writing on the part of Shakespeare that really wrenches us. They need to put somebody to death - they need a head basically. So they get this guy out of death row. But he comes on stage with a huge swagger and says, you know, 'I'm not going to be beheaded today, I'm not putting up with it.' And they have a kind of fancy I suppose that he's going to be asking for some kind of forgiveness or show some sort of remorse or do some sort of whimpering on the ground or praying or asking for a priest. He doesn't do any of that. And he terrifies them by the anarchy that he comes out with, so they let him go. But it's an incredible moment of moral anarchy and in exact opposition to Angelo in the Duke's mind. This guy is the kind of the absolute bottom and Angelo's the absolute top. And so we wanted to have that dualism because of the Duke's conflicted personality.

Lucie 19:20
So in this way Barnadine represents the spirit of absolute anarchy and chaos in Vienna, and Angelo represents the spirit of ultimate control and law-abidingness. And both of those things are actually really damaging extremes.

Declan 19:34
Yes, they are, because the Duke is so attracted to Angelo's airy spirituality, his Apollonian superiority to everything, that might lead us to assume that something he's running away from, and the thing that he's running away from is something like Barnadine that will be in the Duke as well. And that's why we chose him.

Lucie 19:53
And it seems a thing that's really in the spirit of a lot of the work that you do, looking at two opposing forces creating the conditions for the play to happen in. The drama is chaos versus control. Barnadine versus Angelo, and the way that the Duke is torn between the two. So I thought it was incredibly arresting to make Barnadine such a pivotal presence on stage.

Declan 20:18
Yes, I mean, in the world of extreme order, chaos must be very powerful.

Lucie 20:22
And it's something that's also been a consistent theme in this series of the podcast that you often locate the spirit of the play, actually, in the body of a character who has very few lines.

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Nick 20:33
And in fact, the Duke releases Barnadine from prison and, and pardons him in effect. So in a sense, he's releasing his own dark side, while he takes (a few minutes later) Isabella to be his wife, or at least he proposes to Isabella.

Lucie 20:50
So we see this resolution in the Duke as he can finally let go of this terrible dualism between Bernadine and Angelo that's been tearing him apart all the way through the play.

Nick 21:02
Exactly.

Lucie 21:13
So the Duke has this fracturing of his self and he decides to abandon his post and leave it to Angelo. But Angelo doesn't see much better as a figure who is tormented by his own perception of the world.

Declan 21:26
So, yes, I mean, Angelo's absolutely rightly exposed, disgraced and punished. That absolutely right and he's a monster. He's done unspeakably horrible things. But when we are doing a play, I think it's very good if we can just suspend judgement a little bit to see what's really happening. Angelo, I think, is overcome by logic. I think he thinks that sexual desire is an evil thing, so that when his sexual desire does erupt, is going to erupt in the nastiest, violent way possible. I think one of the things that I referred to in an earlier episode, to the war between the left hand side of the brain and the right hand side of the brain. We need both sides of the brain, we absolutely need both sides of the brain, you can't say, 'well, this one's good, and that one's bad.' So the left hand side of the brain gives us logic, words, analysis, principles, and many other things like that. The right hand side of the brain gives us mercy, compassion, forgiveness, but it also gives us responsibility. It is the only part of the brain that can encounter a new idea. So we absolutely need to harness the two of these things. Principles are very important, but we sometimes discover that principles conflict with each other. It's very painful. And that's what we need the right hand side of the brain, because the right hand side of the brain admits of responsibility, and responsibility les in common sense. And with common sense, we can decide which two of these principles on this occasion we're going to let dominate. So Angelo's big problem is that he's completely geared to law, principle, logic, and he doesn't actually use his responsibility at all. He's completely irresponsible. It's like he's been kidnapped by the left hand side of his brain. Isabella comes in and says, but but it's the crime you need to condemn, not the criminal. And he says, know the criminal absolutely must be punished. And then he says, the really chilling line, I find: 'mine with a very cipher of a function, if I let go by...' whatever. In other words, what he's saying is, 'if I don't punish people, then who am I? That's my job, so I wouldn't really exist!' So we realise he's got an existential investment in the whole business of punishment, which is very dangerous. He gives himself away quite a lot later on. And finally these sexual feelings do erupt on him and he makes what he knows is an absolutely appalling advance on Isabella and gives her the most disgusting proposal. He says, 'God in my mouth, as if I did but only chew his name, and in my heart, the strong and swelling evil of my conception.' Now, yes, conception means the idea that's occurred to him, but it also refers to his conception in the womb. And it's this self hatred, which I think is connected with terrible shame. And shame is a major, major theme through the whole play. One of the great

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lines in the place when Claudio, when he's arrested at the beginning for having made his girlfriend pregnant, he says, 'why give you me this shame?'

Lucie 24:28
So Angelo's big problem seems to be that he's let the left hand side of his brain, which is full of law and logic, rule the roost, suppress his feelings, and listen to the shame that he's feeling that any sexual feeling that he has is deeply, deeply shameful. And so ruled by logic and shame he becomes a monster.

Declan 24:48
And yes, he uses logic to shame other people and he uses logic to hide his own shame from himself. He's no idea that he's shamed. One of the main themes of the play is about the terrible consequences of shame. What happens when we shame other people, and what happens when we repress our own dark sides. But when these problems start to grow in the head of the state, when it comes from the top down, when it changes laws, then we're in big trouble.

Lucie 25:17
And there seems to be a lot of characters in this play, who are super attached to playing a version of themselves that's actually deeply unhealthy. And we really saw this with Angelo, you know, he's so attached to this logical, law abiding version of himself that he turns himself into a monster - and you created this amazing image of him on stage as like the ultimate bureaucrat behind this desk with his perfectly pressed shirt, and his piles of paperwork, a little fortress out of which this little monster exploded.

Declan 25:47
It's his logic that allows him to say, 'sexual feelings are bad. I am good. Therefore, I have no sexual feelings.' It's algorithm hell. And it's a recipe for a really violent explosion.

Lucie 26:01
Yeah, it was extraordinary seeing how much violence was cooking in the body of what looked like a very quiet bureaucrat.

Declan 26:08
And he's very surprised to discover that he doesn't know himself. 'What's this, what's this?' he says.

Lucie 26:13
And it once again comes back to this idea that nothing happens without the pressure to make it happen. He's not just a monster. He's a monster, because he's straitjacketed himself into this inhuman way of living.

Declan 26:25
Yes, his little inhuman way of living, unfortunately, becomes main state policy. That's the real problem.

Lucie 26:31
And this seems to also link to something you said recently, about the fact that in Shakespeare the personal is political. It's really clear here that these tormented men have created a horrifying situation for the whole city.

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Declan 26:47
Absolutely. In that list of the actors named at the beginning, he's called the Vincentio (the Duke is). But he's never given a name, Vincentio. He's referred to as Vienna, the name of the city. So it's like he is the state, he and the city are inseparable, and the state reflects him.

Lucie 27:01
And it was so clear in that first image, I mean, him and this chorus mirroring each other, it was so clear that whatever was happening with him was rippling through the whole community around him. So a lot of this place seems to be about people performing versions of themselves, right, the Duke actually changes who he is, he puts on a disguise and becomes a different version of himself so that he can look back on his life. And Angelo is thrust into the position of playing the part of the leader, this bureaucrat who becomes the tyrant. And this seems to link to something that you were saying recently about the fact that we're actually all performing all the time. Part of being human is that we are just performing one of the many multiple facets of ourselves.

Declan 27:48
Yes, in order to say that I have to kind of strip performance of its pejorative sense, you know, the idea of performance is a bad thing. And we're just actors. And that actually, that is what we do as an actor is what a human being does, the central part of what it is to be a human being. When Isabella says to Angela, you know, 'condemn the fault, and not the actor of it.' He says 'why every faults condemned ere it be done. Mine were a very cipher of a function to fine the faults whose fine stands in record, and let go by the actor.' And it's so interesting that Shakespeare has Angelo use the word 'actor'. I think an extraordinary thing about Shakespeare is how much he got sorted so young, and he got sorted very early this idea that human beings are actors - that that's what we do, we perform different versions of ourselves. And that is not to do with lying. Plato and other people said acting was bad because acting was essentially lying. We must not lie, but we act different roles at different times. That's just what we do. Shakespeare is particularly brilliant. There's because right very, very early on like in Richard III, he's already talking about human beings being actors. And when Jacques says 'one man in his time plays many parts', he's talking about an essential characteristic of what it is to be human being. And to ditch the idea that we have the right to a single authentic self, because that's very damaging, I think, and was certainly a key that's helped open Shakespeare plays for me. So when Angelo uses the word 'actor', he kind of lets the cat out of the bag, because it implies that he has some connection or, or some unconscious understanding of the fact that an actor is a human being, and a human being is an actor.

Lucie 29:30
So would you say that true authenticity is not saying that we have one authentic self, but that we contain multitudes?

Declan 29:36
I think we do contain multitudes, and we get into trouble when we think we don't, actually. When like Macbeth, we think we have the right to be one single authentic thing. I grew up in a house without books. I would have had an Irish accent when I was four or five. My dad worked in a factory. And, you know, here I am doing a podcast about Shakespeare. And I can listen to myself and think. 'oh, God, that's so fake!' But actually, I used to think that when I was younger, I would get very worried that I was somehow being untrue to an authentic

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self. But then I realised, no, this is an authentic self. This is who I am. I'm living here with Nick, I'm directing a play, we're talking about this. Yeah, it's another aspect. It's another authentic self. And Shakespeare's maturity is because he got there much longer than I did. But it's a great danger to think you're lying about yourself because you're inauthentic, because this is who you really should be. It's really very dangerous. And it's much beloved by populist politicians, because on the whole populist politician will say, 'these terrible other people have taken away your authentic self. But if you vote for me, I'll restore your authentic self.' And the actor must reply to that, 'which authentic self?' And that's why acting is so political, irrelevant of the political content of the text. Just the actual fact that you're watching somebody stop playing themselves one moment and start playing somebody else is profoundly political.

Lucie 31:05
And it does seem that there are characters in this play who are completely wedded to the idea that there's an authentic version of themselves and the characters who do that, there is a real violence that they do to themselves. Like Angelo, as you said, truly believes that he is a purely logical, law abiding human who doesn't have sexual feelings, and that turns ugly. But you also showed it magnificently with Isabella. So she has this version of herself as the perfect novice, this woman of God, and she finds it really difficult to let go of it. So at the very end, you actually had the Duke remove her wimple as they finally came together as an embrace and agreed to be married. And she instinctively, in the last second of the play, grabbed the wimple back from him, as if she couldn't actually let go of this pure version of herself that she had been so steadfast in upholding through the play.

Declan 32:04
Well, that's a very interesting interpretation, but I hope we left room for ambiguity at the end of the play. Does she accept him or not? It has to be said that it is quite difficult to refuse an offer of marriage from the head of state, but she's a strong woman, maybe she can. What really interests me in Isabella is in the scene with Claudio, it's one of the great sense of the play - it starts so that he says 'you mustn't make the sacrifice for me' and it ends with him saying. 'please, please let me live. Sweet sister, let me live.' And then she turns on him and says, 'it were best thou diest quickly'. And you think, 'Oh, my god!' But of course, to suspend judgement for a bit, that's the sort of thing we often do when we're feeling guilty or confused. To say something cruel is a good way to distract ourselves from the fact that we are uncertain and insecure. It's the uncertainty that so terrible, because of course she is uncertain. But I think she does a performance of certainty in the scene with Claudio, with some hope that he'll say 'yes, yes.' And he'll he'll bear up her performance of certainty. And then he doesn't, and he makes her uncertain. And we don't like to be uncertain. Tolerating uncertainty is one of the great marks of adulthood. And it's very difficult for any of us to do it.

Lucie 33:17
And her very first line in the play is about this tough version of herself.

Declan 33:21
Yes, she's like a fundamentalist zealot, she opens withe her first line when she's a novice in the convent, and she says to the Mother Superior, 'don't you have any harder rules for me.' It's an interesting aspect of humanity that we absolutely love rules. Like people surf the internet and want to find rules for thought, rules for behaviour, rules for opinions, and then that's fine, they run off and they've got their rules. We look for rules all the time, but particularly when life is scary and uncertain we just need the rules. And then we can go

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against them. We can be contrary. But that gives us some sense of existence. At the beginning, it seems like Isabella has been completely captured by the left side of her brain, she can't have enough rules, and they can't be tough enough. So her first line like, you know, Othello's or Macbeths or Hamlet's makes one think, 'oh, god, this is a disaster waiting to happen.' But in fact, she confounds was that expectation, and she develops and changes. She manages to change through the play. She suffers through the play and she changes. And she's so on the ball spiritually and politically. And she says to Angela, you know, 'proud man dressed in a little brief of authority.'

Lucie 34:30
There's so many people in the news today that we could apply that to.

Declan 34:34
Oh, so much! And it's one of those interesting moments in Shakespeare, which is absolutely from her passionate centre. There's self deception, I don't think. At that moment, she goes for it, ad she's like a tiger, and not at all the nun who was wanting even more strict rules from the Mother Superior spirit at the beginning.

Lucie 34:54
And I have to say, I loved it that you left that last moment so complex and so ambiguous about what this marriage was going to be - because so often you see the end of Measure for Measure with Isabella and the Duke in this kind of resolution of marriage, and seeing her having so much agency at the end, and also leaving us on a cliffhanger where we felt like, 'oh, what's gonna happen to Vienna next?' was wonderful.

Declan 35:21
Yes, I mean, but she also does have this extraordinary moment when, in a way, she humiliates us all, when she asks for Angelo to be forgiven. I really wanted to make it very, very clear that this is a very big moment. So I had the whole company go upstage, and she turns down, and she kneels, then everybody turns to see this astonishing moment that she's knelt to beg for his forgiveness. And that's, I think, very, very strong. Many people will be angry with Isabella for thinking that she proposed to forgive Angelo - no, he should be punished, he should be punished! And that's a very good moment to think about our hunger to punish people. Look in the mirror and see if we haven't started to look like Angelo.

Lucie 36:04
And Nick, what was your favourite moments to put on stage in Measure for Measure?

Nick 36:08
The dance of death was one of my favourite moments, when the whole story of Mariana is revealed and Angelo's attachment to a previous engagement, and it was performed in a dance of death. And musically, it was fantastic.

Lucie 36:25
To just describe that moment you had Claudio in the middle playing a double bass, and this incredible movement of the whole company, looking like a mediaeval dance of death - this set piece where we see death leading everybody towards the grave. And this kind of waltz-like music as they whipped around him desperately paying the double bass in the middle. Destruction seemed to be winding around Vienna. So our final question of today is who from

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Measure for Measure would you like to invite as a special guest on this podcast, if you could? Nick, who would you like to have a conversation with from Measure for Measure?

Nick 37:12
Well, I suspect that Mariana, Angelo's ex fiance, might have a few stories to tell. I think she might be a good entertainment.

Lucie 37:23
So alongside Mariana, Angelo's ex, Declan, who would you invite as a special guest onto the podcast?

Declan 37:30
I invite Isabella with the proviso not like the beginning Isbella (because she'd be very scary, I think!) nut Isabella at the end after she's become less certain and so more mature.

Lucie 37:41
So, Mariana, Angelo's ex, and Isabella, but Isabella at the end of the play would be our star special guests if we could have them. Well, thank you very much both, and we're going to join next week to talk about The Revenger's Tragedy. Thanks very much. Stay well.

Declan 37:59
Thanks a lot, Lucie. Thank you.

Nick 38:00
Thank you Lucie

Lucie 38:08
Thank you for listening to this week's episode of 'Not True, But Useful...' If you enjoyed today's conversation, and wish that you could see Declan and Nick's production of Measure for Measure - well, you're in luck! The whole performance is available for free on Cheel by Jowl's website if you sign up for our education packs. You can also sign up to the Cheek by Jowl mailing lists to get more information about goodies just like this straight to your inbox. The theme music for this series was composed by Paddy Cunneen for Cheek by Jowl's production of The Winter's Tale, with additional music in this episode by Pavel Akimkin for Measure for Measure. Join us next week for more chats about plays, and until then, stay well.

More Tagliatelle

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SPEAKERS
Nick, Lucie, Declan

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Lucie 00:06
Welcome to series three of 'Not True, But Useful...', a podcast from Cheek by Jowl. I'm your host, Lucie Dawkins, and every week, I'm chatting to Artistic Directors Declan Donnellan and Nick Ormerod, looking back at four decades of their productions all across the world. Together, we will take a look at what these plays have to tell us about the messy business of being human. In this bonus episode for series three, we're going to be serving up some gems which didn't quite make it into other episodes. Declan and Nick call this their tagliatelle, a dish made from offcuts of pasta dough - and here are their most delicious cuttings. We've been talking a lot about the history of the company, because the 17th of August this year will mark 40 years, to the day, that Cheek by Jowl opened their very first show, The Country Wife. I started by asking Declan about an odd fact of Cheek by Jowl's repertoire - whether it's Shakespeare, Middleton, Corneille, Racine or Calderon, most of the plays that he and Nick have staged come from the same 75 year period, right at the start of the 17th century. I asked him why.

Declan 01:20
Well, I often ask myself that. I can't explain it. It is extraordinary that there's this flowering of theatre writing which starts around 1585 and finishes about 1670. And I think it's that the Reformation has allowed a freedom of thought that hadn't been there before. But then, when the Enlightenment starts, I think things shudder to a standstill in some respects. You know, the big, philosophical movement that started towards the end of the 17th century and reaches its full flowering in the 18th century. And it's logic, logic, logic, clarity, clarity. Many things are considered old fashioned, superstitious, uncool, to do with ghosts and hauntings and mystery - and they get pushed aside. Unfortunately, they are part of what it is to be a human being. And I think that Shakespeare hadn't been hobbled by the Enlightenment, he was able to think in a more free way. Because if you live in a world where all light is good, and all dark is bad, you live in a very limited world, I think. The Enlightenment has done wonderful things, we get antibiotics, you know, we get all sorts of things. But there's no gain without loss. Every efficiency makes a loss. We've just had a package delivered from Amazon - one click, smiley face, yes, thumbs up. But actually, there's incredible losses in all of this new increased efficiency - people's jobs, ways of life, all sorts of things go. And you have to think what we lost in the Enlightenment as well. And I think one of the things we lost was Shakespeare. And I think if Shakespeare had been born 100 years later, he couldn't have been Shakespeare, because there wouldn't have been an audience open to seeing things so horizontally. So if we think a little bit about Hamlet - if you're looking at Hamlet now, a modern person might say, 'but I'm not Renaissance prince, and my uncle didn't murder my father and marry my mother, so what's that got to do with me?' So first of all, I think all of us have the ghosts of our parents in us. Even if they're long dead, we remember them more vividly, often, than anything else. And things that they've said to us have passed into us, have become part of us, we've dealt with them. Sometimes they're extremely good things, useful things, and sometimes they are very bad things and are not so useful. And I don't think Hamlet was the last human being to realise that he has been destroyed by bad advice from his father. And the Enlightenment tidied up a lot of things, but unfortunately, if you get rid of ghosts and hauntings, you get rid of a lot of what it is to be a human being. I think human nature doesn't change. Whatever we do, we ain't going to redesign human nature. Some people might say, 'well, if Hamlet is all about how we live now, why don't we write it rewrite it modern English?' And I'd say, well, of course, you can do modern versions of it. You know, I've done a sung version of Falstaff, and I've done two ballets that don't have words in them based on Shakespeare. But I think that you get something sometimes by having to struggle with the language. In other words, the door is half-closed, and you have to push it a bit to open it. And I think that's very important, that we respect mystery. I think it's very

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important to try and understand things, but the fatal thing is to think, 'aha, I have understood!' As soon as you put it in its past tense, I think something's probably gone wrong.

Lucie 04:28
And here's Nick talking more about how Cheek by Jowl has developed as a company over the years.

Nick 04:36
We've developed Cheek by Jowl into a vehicle which entirely, I'm afraid, suits the way we work. It's very portable, we tour a lot, and we're able to do these plays which actually don't require much physically in terms of scenery. And we have an ensemble spirit, because Declan is particularly good at leading an ensemble company, I think. And there's no sense of stars in the company being taken apart and having notes separately from the company. Everybody gets their notes at the same time, together. I think they love that sense of ensemble. I think all actors actually aspire to that. I mean, I love going in with an idea, which then has been thrown out. Of course you go in with an idea because you have a backstop - but normally it's thrown out. So it can be quite hard over that second weekend, when you've got the production manager knocking on the door saying, 'look, if you want anything at all, you are going to have to make up your mind!' But it's exciting, and that's what we like doing.

Lucie 05:38
And now back over to Declan. We're talking about which character, in all of the plays that he's directed, he would most like to have dinner with.

Declan 05:49
I think without question, it would be Emelia from Othello. But whenever you see Othello, you always forget how major she is. She's actually the heart of the plot. There are often women who appear to be subsidiarity, who are in fact central, because they are the moral centre of the play. I always thought of that of Harper in Angels in America by Tony Kushner - I was guided by that character through it. But Emelia very much in Othello, and she's the one I'd really most like to have dinner with. I think the rest would all give me the creeps. She's the heart of the play, because she's the one who has the most common sense. She's the only person with a sense of humour, and she is the most loving, and she's in this camp with all these terrible men. And then the only woman that she has to be her friend is Desdemona. And they're talking about sex in the bedroom that night in that wonderful, wonderful scene scene between her and Desdemona, and she starts talking about men and sex, and it's fine. But then Desdemona says, 'but do you really think there are women who cheat on their husbands?' At that moment I think Emelia must get a terrible sinking feeling to think, 'oh, my God, there is only one woman here and she's so strange.' You want to say to Desdemona, 'haven't you read the Bible?' I mean, there's plenty of examples of men, and women as well, who cheat on their husbands. Then she must feel so isolated. And there is this extraordinary moment in Othello when Emelia realises that Desdemona is being framed as having had this affair with Cassio. What she doesn't realise is that it's her own husband that does it. And in the middle of all this male froth that's going on - lots of either big talking-it-up like Othello - but Iago plays the opposite. He's got a way of talking low, but it's still a sort of hokum. It's still a performance of being somebody who's tough and cunning, or somebody who's outspoken. But anyway, Emelia realises that Desdemona has been framed, and that it's a very dangerous situation. And she snorts and says, you know, this is nonsense! - 'what place, what time, what form, what likelihood?' And I've never in my whole life (I've done it so often in different languages in workshops, and I've done two productions of it) I've never seen an

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actress not scorn, with contempt, that wonderful word 'likelihood'. It really connects with people in a wonderful way. I mean, I don't know why we always forget it, but it's such a star turn. But she has such a wise, but witty way... and she never preaches, she never seems to be superior. There's just something really wonderful in the spirit of Emelia.

Lucie 08:25
If you've listened in the last couple of series, you'll notice the Nick finds his design inspiration from what he encounters during his day to day life as the company travels the world, whether it's ceiling lights from Sydney Theatre Company, riot gear from the Chilean police, or an oppressive Parisian Airbnb. I asked him how he went about collecting these inspirations.

Nick 08:47
Quite organically, if I remember them! I mean, I remember the red boxes in our Russian Measure for Measure, there was a red box, which was just a small cube in the rehearsal room, and I think it was a soft red square beanbag. And that was the source of the red boxes, I think. So these things come from funny places. Maybe they're stored up in your mind, or not. The thing that crossed my mind was that on the first production of Cheek by Jowl, which was The Country Wife, the set consisted of... guess what? Boxes! So maybe things haven't developed at all, I don't know. I mean, all of my sets are boxes, I'm afraid. But they're very useful, you know, you can store things in boxes. That was a very, very clever set, inspired by my partner here, Declan - the idea of a box as a wardrobe. There's an absolutely key scene which takes place in a wardrobe. And this was a very useful box because it could double up as sedan chairs and all sorts of things.

Lucie 09:50
Here's Declan again, talking more about why he avoids questions about the how and why of doing a play.

Declan 09:57
'How' and 'why' questions sound very plausible. 'How should I play my character? How should I play this scene? Why is my character doing this? How should I direct this play?' I get asked these questions a lot. But the real problem is in the question, because the answer to 'how should I play my character?' is that you must see through the character's eyes what the character sees. If you start to answer the question 'how', you put yourself in a slightly godlike position. The best that we can say is, 'where have I put my shoes? From what position do I stand that gives me this view of this?' If you say, 'well, how would you like me to do this?' It implies that I've got a million different ways at my disposal, I can ruffle through the chocolate box of my techniques, and this is how I'm going to do that. But really, I know from bitter experience that if Nick and I ever have a conversation about 'how do you think we should do the scene? Where do you think they should come on from?', we've gone terribly wrong. There should be no choice as to where they come from, that should be no choice as to how to play it. And if you look hard enough into the heart of the predicament that's happening, you'll realise what the characters feel is that they have no choice, you know. Nick and I would feel, I think, that we have no choice but to do what we're doing, which is to put one foot in front of another and go on working. But you know, a lot of our friends might say, 'well, there's all sorts of different things you can do!' But from inside our perception, we don't have that much choice, actually. 'Why' is another really dodgy question, because that implies that we know our motives for doing things. This is very Enlightenment, you know: 'I want to know why you did that', and you have to give an answer. We do live in a world where people expect there to be an answer to the question 'why'. And if you can't answer 'why', it's like

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you're being irresponsible, or playing stupid. But actually, I normally don't know why I do things, and the best things I've done in my work, I can't explain why. And if you ever read an interview with me, and I say 'the reason I did this is because of this...' it's probably a lie and I've got forced into a corner by the interviewer because I feel stupid not being able to say why. But the real reason I do everything that I do, the best of what I do, is I do it because it seemed a good idea at the time. But what seems a good idea at the time, of course, Nick and I do it by talking a lot about the play, doing exercises - there's a mass that goes into it, it's not just a whim, you know, it's built on very, very secure foundations. We ask the question, 'why?' and of course these questions are there for us to ask. I mean, that's exactly the question we must be asking about Macbeth. Why do they do it? But we must also be humble enough to know that we'll never know the answer to that, and that Macbeth and Lady Macbeth don't know the answer that. They don't know why they do it. It's a huge mystery. It's a mystery, watching all of the tragedies, watching people blunder towards their own destruction, when they're very bright and seem to have so many choices to us. From their individual perceptions, they don't have any. When we put on a play we must try to avoid being superior to the characters, judging the characters, being too clever about the characters, or being frightened of the characters. We need to see the characters as unflinchingly as we can. But we can only do that if we look at the position from which we're seeing the characters ourselves. Because what we have to do at the end is see the world through their eyes. We're not putting ourselves on stage. It's other people's perceptions that we're putting on stage. Of course, when we start talking about other people's perceptions, you know, we'll give ourselves away. I mean, I try to keep myself invisible in my work, but I imagine I'm pretty visible. You know, I work to be invisible, but I don't think that I achieve it very well. That's something I must do every day in rehearsal, to keep readjusting my feet so I keep horizontal with the play. It's very easy to get out of kilter. It's like, I have to wake up every day, slap myself awake, and I need to make sure that I'm seeing through the perceptions of the characters, to see what they see. What is the world? What is the world that's happening? What is the world that they think is happening? What is it they perceive is happening? Because, you know, I'm in my own delirium, but the characters are also in their own delirium. I slap myself awake, at least through the window of my work, to try to be as present as I can with what's actually happening.

Lucie 14:07
So I asked Nick, if he and Declan avoid talking about the how and why of their productions, what do they focus on instead?

Nick 14:16
What we have been thinking about is about the space and about how actors work in the space. And that has been a fascinating process, and we talk about that all the time. That has been developing during the pandemic and for many years before, but it's sort of, I think, finally coming to fruition. There will be a book - and soon I think! So listeners please look out for it.

Lucie 14:43
Last but not least, I asked Declan what advice he would give to him and Nick looking back 40 years ago, to their 20-something-year-old selves in the August of 1981, waiting for the lights to go up on Cheek by Jowl's first ever performance. This is what he said.

Declan 15:00

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I think the only advice is to be present and see what's happening. But you have to come to these things in your own time. And all advice is dodgy, it's all political. All advice is a bit, 'why aren't you more like me?' very often, you know. So I think 'it'll be all right' is the best advice actually, 'you're doing okay, and it will be scary, but you'll get through that'. And to just be told that we'd still be here 40 years later would be an amazing thing. If I could give advice, I'd say, 'you know, you will swing into fashion, out of fashion, and back into fashion. And all you need to do is survive, you know'. I think we keep our work changing, because what else are Nick and I going to do? I think what you see on stage is a result of a kind of evolving conversation between me and Nick, but we absolutely need outside people in. We're both going crazy here in the lockdown, because we haven't got people to collaborate with. The thing that sustains is, funnily enough, it's our relationships with actors that have gone on a long time. So it's our relationship with Russian actors that have gone on since the 20th century. They're growing old with us, and we love working with them. And I haven't seen them at all during lockdown, and Nick and I really feel that miss, you know. We don't drink vodka on our own because it makes us miss them too much. Looking back, it looks like we've had a great career. And there's a well-known English theatre director who said to me (he's older than me), 'oh, you two, it all looks like it so effortlessly came together for you.' I can assure you that our perception from the inside is that our whole lives have been done on a wing and a prayer! And feeling terrified that, you know, California won't drop out and you've got the actors for six weeks with nothing to pay them with in the middle of a tour. That's perennial, that's grist to the mill. I mean, there's very little comfort. And I all I'd say about careers - I do get frightened by young people asking about how they should plan their careers. And all I can generally say is, 'don't! Do what you love, be with the people you love, and it'll probably work out.' It worked out like that for me, I know that. But it was very, very hard. And I don't like to say, 'oh, God, we suffered, we suffered!' But it was very hard. It was very scary. We never knew if the company was going to close down for a long time. So we have all our plays listed in the programme, like it was all a very gentle and thought through process. But God Almighty, it so wasn't! It's so much - so much! - based on luck. It really is based on luck. When you're starting your career, you should really think to yourself, 'I must take my work seriously, but I should not take my career seriously.' That is so unfashionable now. When people are urged to take their careers seriously, honest to God, my advice, my personal experience for my own witness, is take your work seriously, but don't take your career seriously. I know it's not easy, but it's never easy. And it's taken a whole lifetime to get those conditions right, and a whole lifetime to say no to things in order to say yes to this. You know, there wasn't a job advertised in The Stage! All I can say is that Nick and I were very, very lucky.

17:57
Thank you for listening to 'Not True, But USeful...' If you're new to this podcast, then head over to the Cheek by Jowl website to find three series of interviews with Declan and Nick. The music you heard in this bonus episode all comes from past productions, composed by Paddy Cuneen for The Winter's Tale, Gianluca Misiti for The Revenger's Tragedy, Sergey Chekryzhov for Three Sisters and Catherine Jayes for Macbeth. Please remember to rate, review and share us, and we hope to be back with you soon.

Much Ado Final Update

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SPEAKERS
Nick, Lucie, Declan

Lucie 00:06
Welcome to series three of 'Not True, But Useful...', a podcast from Cheek by Jowl. I'm your host, Lucie Dawkins, and every week, I'm chatting to Artistic Directors Declan Donnellan and Nick Ormerod, looking back at four decades of their productions all across the world. Together, we will take a look at what these plays have to tell us about the messy business of being human. Our play this week is Shakespeare's Much Ado About Nothing, and here's a quick synopsis before we begin. The story takes place at Messina, at the home of Leonato, and revolves around his daughter and his niece, Hero and Beatrice. A troop of handsome young soldiers arrive under the command of Don Pedro. Claudio falls in love with Hero, while Beatrice and Benedick viciously bicker with each other. Don Pedro gets himself mixed up in the lovers' struggles. He comes up with a plot to trick Beatrice and Benedict into thinking that each is in love with the other and also agrees to help Claudio out by wooing Hero on his behalf in disguise. Claudio and Hero end up engaged and Beatrice and Benedick start to mellow towards each other. Don Pedro has a half-brother, Don John, who is consumed by jealousy of Claudio. He tricks Claudio into believing that Hero has cheated on him. Claudio cruelly rejects Hero at the altar. She passes out and Leonato tells Claudio that she's died of shock and betrayal. Beatrice asks Benedick to kill Claudio in revenge. However, the hapless local police, led by Dogberry and Verges, uncover Don John's lie and expose the plot to Claudio and Leonato. Deep in grief, Claudio tells Leonato that he will try to make up for the deadly error by marrying one of Hero's cousins instead. At the wedding, the mystery cousin takes off her veil, and reveals herself as Hero. As everyone celebrates, Beatrice and Benedick finally agreed to get married, and Don John is arrested for his crime. And now, over to Declan and Nick. Hello, Declan and Nick.

Nick 02:21
Hello, Lucie.

Lucie 02:22
This week, we are moving from a run of tragedies to one of the great comedies of all time, Much Ado About Nothing. Now, Nick, this is quite an unusual play in Cheek by Jowl's history, because it's, I think, the only production you've ever put on stage in period costume. Is that right?

Nick 02:40
Inside Cheek by Jowl, yes, I think that's correct. We've done period costumes outside Cheek by Jowl, but we'd decided on a pre-1914 setting with women wearing corsets. And of course, there is a very strong military background to that. The reason for that is that we had a morning with an amazing woman called Joan Washington, who is a dialect teacher. You could listen to her for hours about different dialects. And the immediate thought was to have a modern military background like we would normally revert to. But the language, particularly the beginning of the play, is really opaque and difficult to understand. However, Joan came along and proposed this extraordinary military dialect, which was completely sustained. You

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could carry it from word to word, almost nonstop, in a sort of, well you can imagine, like a braying. Anyway, this seemed to make the language completely transparent. And it therefore followed that we needed to junk our idea of modern military background and place it before 1914. And Angie Burns, who was doing costumes, as usual did a brilliant job at very short notice.

Lucie 03:56
And so what point in rehearsals did you decide that you suddenly needed to put everybody in really specifically pre-1914 outfits?

Nick 04:03
I think it was after two weeks. What we normally have is a two week playing period, and at the end of that we need to make a decision. And that was the decision we made.

Declan 04:13
First of all, I should say, as soon as we started working on the play, I went into a mild place of panic because I couldn't get the words to be clear. They're so knotted and so convoluted, and I've come to the conclusion that I'm much happier working in verse. And also that Shakespeare is as well, quite frankly, because it's there's more prose in 'Much Ado About Nothing' than any other play that I know of by him. So when Joan came along, we were doing these experiments. And she proposed, as Nick said, this military accent, and she dated it very specifically to around 1900 - God knows how. It's like you're speaking across a parade ground. I can't really do it, but it would be this looong vooowel like thaaat. So you don't really care because you're going to go to the end of your thought. And it's not a drawl, but it's like this long vowel of domination and taking control. And I remember when Saskia read some of her text like that, suddenly, everything became crystal clear. And they all tried this was strange accent. Not like a posh drawl, nothing like that at all. It's there's very, very different thing of 'I'm going to be absolutely clear. And you're going to hear every syllable I have to say! And I'm going to take as long to say each of these syllables as I like!' It sounds monotonous. It wasn't, it was like a key that opened the whole, extraordinary, extraordinary experience. And suddenly this whole world came alive. And so they spoke to each other with this kind of intention and insistence. And taking this time, because 'I'm in control!' 'No, I'm in control!' But I've always sort of really hated doing things like Shakespeare set at the time of the Boer War. There was a lot of that happening when we were kids in the theatre, and I never really liked it very much. With specific historical period, you start to go away from the fact that you're actually inventing a new theatrical reality. So I've always been rather prejudiced against that. But we did, and I am very glad we did it, it went very, very well.

Lucie 06:10
And it seems such an interesting way of unlocking the text, because it's very connected to what we've been talking about a lot with the way you approach words. And if actually, if anyone listening to this is interested in it, we did a whole episode in series one called 'Words Grown False' about this. But the way that you describe words is as a tool, or a limb, for negotiating space, and taking control over space. Not thinking about words as a piece of poetry that you have to embody, but words as an imperfect tool of control. And that finding this accent seems to tap into exactly that. I mean, you talk about talking across a parade ground. It's about taking up time and space.

Declan 06:47

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Yes. I mean it's interesting to think in terms of status, you know, we understand status all the time, which is how we don't collide when we're walking down a crowded footpath. Because we do these minute status changes: 'I'm going to give, he's going to give'. If both people give way to the other, then you get a terrible crash. So one person has to take the lead and one person has to step aside. If two people take the lead, of course, then there's an obvious row. But if the other person is always hanging back from the other, you can't move on either. And if you think about it, you just look at busy streets Oxford Street, or go downtown Tokyo, you know, when there's masses of people walking backwards and fowards, and they don't collide. And we never really think that's extraordinary. And it's these minute status games, and we do it naturally. I mean, you can be the person with all the money, all the control, at the top of the tree, and still play low status.

Lucie 07:38
So the whole of Much Ado About Nothing is really a waltz of status games.

Declan 07:43
Well, in a way. Yes. I mean, I suppose the thing that I'd most like to say about Much Ado About Nothing is it's like a template for all the romantic comedies that came afterwards. And many summer blockbusters that I've seen on airplanes are about a man and a woman, he drives her mad, she drives him mad, they fight and fight and fight and fight, and you see that they're going to get together. And it's an interesting thing, because if there's no pain, it isn't funny. That's the really important thing. So Beatrice and Benedick, you know, it's not that they find each other irritating. It's not that. They are overwhelmed by the horror of falling in love with the other one. In fact, their whole existence would come to an end if they fall in love with the other. So it's not a question of life and death, it's much more serious - like we were talking before about existence, that your existence is actually threatened by falling in love. It's terrible for them. And then people laugh about it. But just because all these people are laughing at them outside doesn't mean that it's not appallingly painful inside. And you know, anybody who has had the experience of being in love, and someone finding out about it, and then teasing you, that's absolutely terrible when we are young. Absolutely appalling pain. I mean, the knife can be really twisted if it's serious. So I think yes, it's this dread.

Lucie 09:00
And so do you feel it's like Beatrice and Benedick both feel like they wouldn't be themselves anymore if they let themselves fall in love, like they would just be obliterated. There would be some fundamental rip in the space time continuum if they allowed themselves to fall in love.

Nick 09:15
I think that's absolutely true. But interestingly, of course, it isn't that at all, because in fact, Beatrice and Benedick are the subplot, really, aren't they? They're almost like the comic side story. The central story is a much darker, really horrible story about Claudio and Hero. And in the process, Hero dies and then mercifully, because it's a comedy, comes back to life. But it's a really horrible story of abandonment and the play has the central thing. We always remember Beatrice and Benedict, because they are great roles, but really, the heart of the play gets darker and darker and darker.

Declan 09:58
And there are women who are caught up in a homosocial society and there's a mad love that Don Pedro has for Claudio. And perhaps Claudio is using it, perhaps it's a rerun of Antonio and Sebastian from Twelfth Night and Bassanio and Antonio in The Merchant of Venice, and

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they plan that he's going to go for Hero. So it's very demeaning and confusing for her to be with this man, because their marriage is being organised by this other guy and it's all going to be great fun and he's somehow sort of in bed with them. There's something really dark happening there. But it gets saved at the end. People are often very confused by the savagery of Beatrice's line 'kill Claudio'. If the production or the play has been read as being something lighthearted between Beatrice and Benedict, then the passion and the venom of 'kill Claudio' must come as a real assault. But actually, it's there because it's no fun falling in love. If you do fall in love with somebody, you just surrender to each other. You surrender and then it will change your life forever, and you will be remade. And we don't like it very often! It's completely terrifying, actually. Because that's actually what it means - well, that's what how I think it works. And I think that's how rom coms work, because there is a lot at stake. There's everything's play for. There's your own existence. Because the idea that I can remain the same, but I'm going to fall in love with this person, and that's going to be just an addition to the me-ness of me as I am. It ain't like that, and you hand yourself over to each other.

Lucie 11:30
And just for context, that line 'kill Claudio' is after the botched wedding ceremony when Claudio horrifically rejects Hero in front of everybody. And Benedick says to Beatrice, 'I will do anything for you, what do you want?' and she says, 'kill your best friend'. And it's horribly violent.

Declan 11:49
Yes, absolutely. The most important thing is that the actors and director and that the audience as well must be aware of the predicament. They must be aware, right from the get go, of the darkness within and how this, you know, charming war between the sexes ain't charming. It's quite violent and bloody.

Lucie 12:05
And it's the thing that we keep coming back to with Shakespeare, that the comedies actually seem to be tragedies wrapped in a funny stuff. And vice versa.

Declan 12:15
Yeah, I would say if there's no pain, it ain't funny. Not really funny. At the heart of great tragedy there's also a terribly dark sense of humour. There is a terrible dark laughter at the heart of Oedipus, there is a terrible dark laughter at the heart of Macbeth. But also, this is terrible pain at the heart of comedy. So you're entering the same room through different doors.

Lucie 12:33
So what do you say at the beginning of the play, it's almost like Beatrice and Benedick are already in love with each other. They just don't want to go anywhere near it, because they don't like it. It's uncomfortable.

Declan 12:41
And we know it's somehow the second time around. Maybe something nearly happened then nearly didn't and then didn't. And yes, I mean, I think we see that. Two people who nearly get together, and then turn and hate each other. I because you're being brought to the brink of something, which really is quite scary. And I think if it isn't scary, it isn't really love, actually.

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Lucie 13:04
What's that line at the end of that first sparring match, where we get the sense that Beatrice has been seriously burned by this before?

Declan 13:11
Well, she says, 'you always end with a jade's trick', and then, 'I know you of old'. And we should always pay a lot of attention to the runs of monosyllables in Shakespeare, when he suddenly dips into monosyllables. And he goes, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, and your heart stops. 'I know you of old' as an extraordinary line. It was interesting touring in France with our Much Ado About Nothing in English, looking up at the translation. And 'I know you have old' becomes 'je vous connais depuis longtemps' -which is the exact translation, and it's totally different. It's not monosyllables, but also the French, you know, have 'the transparent word', they often say, and we have the 'the resonant word'. And they are Saxon words. 'I know you of old'. You feel she's got her feet on the ground. I don't know, it's just amazing.

Lucie 14:19
Let's talk a little bit more about this word that you brought up a little bit earlier, which is the word predicament. This terrible thing, this dreadful thing that is already there at the beginning of the play, that they're all running away from. What's so interesting about the predicament in the middle of Much Ado is what they apparently are doing on the surface. Having parties, for example. It looks like a bunch of people relaxing on holiday. How do you balance the predicament against the light-hearted parts of the action?

Declan 14:48
Well, it's an interesting question, because I was asked by a Bulgarian journalist last week about what I thought about post-dramatic theatre.

Lucie 14:56
So for anybody who hasn't come across what post-dramatic theatre means, could you describe what post-dramatic is?

Declan 15:02
It's a term invented by a German academic in the 80s, I think. And it refers to theatre, drama, plays, that don't seem to have dramatic action. But I'd say in a way, it's always been there. It's new that it's being exploited and people are becoming more conscious of it. But always, I think, the movement or play has been to do with the predicament rather than the plot, or the plot is just there to deliver predicament to you. The dramatic conflict is only there to deliver the predicament to you, the story is only there to deliver the predicament to you. So in a way, like the difference between a thriller and a horror film, you know, people think that they are same. They are not the same. A thriller gets you frightened, you get jumps, you don't know what's going to happen next, you get very involved with the plot. But in a horror film, the plot is there to deliver you a sense of dread and unease, which is kind of important, actually. I think horror is an honourable genre if it's done well. But it's sad if you think that the only point of a play is its dramatic action, because I think the dramatic action, the conflict, is there to deliver to the experience, and experience is one of predicament. So Winnie in Happy Days by Beckett starts telling us what a wonderful day it is, but she is buried up to her waist in sand. But there's no real dramatic action in it. It's a sort of post-dramatic situation, if you'd like. But that's why I don't really like the words 'post-dramatic' because what they mean is

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plugging into the predicament. I certainly don't believe in any theatre that doesn't deliver any predicament, because that's just boring. But there is a predicament in Much Ado. What it is is probably mysterious. And in a very good play normally the people are denying what it is exactly. So yes, they're waiting for the arrival of the military. And they are at the age for marriage, there's a lot of expectation, and the head of state is coming.

Lucie 16:09
So the predicament seems to be something revolving around the fact that this is incredibly potent, basically very, very sexualized moment. We've got some young women, and we've got some young men, and they're going to turn up and everyone's expecting some marriages to happen. And we've got some people feeling very anxious about falling in love. And this is a beautifully hot mess of dread that's happening, and desire all mixed up against each other. And that seems (although we can't quite define what that predicament is) that seems pretty good ingredients for a predicament.

Declan 17:15
It is, and things will emerge from it that are quite surprising, like this misogyny on the part at least of Don John, the strange relationship between Don Pedro and Claudio, and things will arise out of this situation that we see were always there, that in a way they were disasters waiting to happen because of the disposition of the people.

Lucie 17:34
How do you help deliver that sense of dread predicament, of something wrong in the groundwater through action that is kind of a party atmosphere?

Declan 17:43
Yes. Well, the fatal thing is to say to the actors is, 'I want you to deliver a sense of predicament'. What I do is I direct the party. And I tell stories, and the stories are there to nourish the unconscious of the the actors, really. I tell stories, and ask them to prepare things and show me things. So I tell stories about what's happening underneath, but ask them not to play it. But once it's in them, it'll have its effect.

Lucie 18:09
I've heard you described this before a bit like putting a tea bag into a cup of water. When you drink your tea, the tea bag's going to have come out, but you need to stick it in there and just let it percolate and trust that it's going to taste of tea.

Declan 18:19
In a way, yes, but that means that the actors are going to come up with things that surprise me. My father had some funny joke of somebody putting in sixpence into a chocolate bar machine in an underground station, and the chocolate bar coming out of another machine. I don't know why, it was a funny story when I was a kid, but it was the the idea that you put something in one thing, but it comes out somewhere else. But that's actually kind of what I think happens in rehearsal, in a way, that I tell stories and it comes out completely transmuted in another way. It gets processed by the actor miraculously, somehow. If it doesn't come into work, I realise I haven't told the right stories. So I'll just try and do that better.

Lucie 18:53

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So this observation that you've made about Don Pedro and Claudia's relationship, I found really wonderful because it seems to tap into something that we keep coming back to, which is to use your common sense when you're looking at these plays.

Declan 19:04
Yes.

Lucie 19:05
It's really easy to say, 'oh, it's a Shakespeare play. The reason why this relationship has happening is because it is Shakespeare-land, and this is how these men interact within this play.' But you say, 'use your common sense. This is obviously unhealthy.'

Declan 19:18
Yes, I think that's really important. I don't acknowledge the independence of Shakespeare-land like that. I don't think you go through special threshold to go into it. Yeah, there are certain sorts of words we don't understand and so on. But really, you don't need to be that much of an expert to get extraordinary things when you're with Shakespeare like that. What's very interesting about Much Ado About Nothing, though, is it's also a resurrection play. There are quite a few going round at the time, that Hero dies, and then she comes to life at the end her. She has to be reborn in him somehow, otherwise ain't gonna work. And he has to let go by his attachment to Don Pedro, and Don Pedro has let him go.

Lucie 19:57
So there is a great trauma in the middle of this play?

Declan 20:01
Well, I think so. I mean, I think that at weddings, people aren't just crying for joy. A wedding marks the end of something, and the beginning of something else.

Lucie 20:07
It's something that Shakespeare loves. We've looked at a couple of plays, which have this resurrection theme in it (The Winter's Tale, most obviously) that he seems to be fascinated with this mysterious thing of having to die somehow in order to change.

Declan 20:21
Yes, I think that's quite human, I don't think you need to be particularly religious to clue into that. That's what happens every year when the days have already started getting shorter (God!). But you know, the leaves will fall, and then we hope they'll come back next year. The mystery of death and rebirth is something that we just all have to accept.

Lucie 20:41
Now, there's one character that always fascinates me in the middle of Much Ado, and that is Don John - - who is the bad guy. The thing that fascinates me about Don John is he comes straight out and he says, 'I am the bad guy'. He says, 'I am a villain.'

Declan 20:55
Yes Yes, I have met some people who quite enjoy saying, 'I'm badass'. Shakespeare's going to develop these themes much, much more in the tragedies like Macbeth and Othello. But the theme of envy is there - I mean, he envies these young people are having a great privileged time. And why wouldn't you envy privileged, beautiful young people having a

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wonderful time, you know, 'why not me?' And you have to discover the generosity and the gratitude in yourself to say 'it's great that they're having a good time.' But there are some people who will find it more reassuring to play the bad person, because that simplifies things for them. Because actually to say 'I'm a mess, and I've got the potential do good things and bad things. So I've got to make sure I do better things than worse things' - that's the sort of messy place which I think is the human place to be. And there's something a little bit childish about saying, 'I'm bad'. But there he is. But I think envy is the clue to Don John, and envy being this huge motivator all human life, that's so painful that we can't really look at it. And very often we don't see it in other people either, because if I admitted it existed in someone else, I'd have to admit it existed in me.

Lucie 22:07
And in this way, he seems like very like Iago. Iago's got that line about feeling ugly, because somebody else has beauty.

Declan 22:13
He says, 'he has a daily beauty in his life that makes me ugly.' It's a huge dark force at the heart of human life is envy.

Lucie 22:21
And Don John really troubles me as a character, because at the end, they say, 'Don John ran away, we've captured him, and tomorrow, we're going to torture him for his crimes.'

Declan 22:30
It's one of those disturbingly neat endings, and you think 'really?!' You know, that's like at the end of the sort-of-okay murder mystery on TV. In episode 10, you know, they get the bad person and kill him, that's fine. But actually, really good ones make you feel much more troubled. And we do have political fantasies, 'oh, if only we could assassinate him, then everything would be hunky dory'. I don't think so. I think problems are systemic. Certain individuals might make things worse, but the Don John problem is going to go on for people forever.

Lucie 22:59
And that seems to be the really troubling thing about the end of Much Ado About Nothing, they can't resolve anything without this terrible retribution against Don John, who's actually a very alienated outsider who nobody is willing to extend empathy to, including his own brother who's on stage.

Declan 23:15
Yes.

Lucie 23:15
It seems like a real darkness at the end of Much Ado, that they can't have a happy ending without someone being punished.

Nick 23:22
Well, that's the horrible thing about play, it should be a wonderful light comedy called Much Ado. But it ain't. It starts off brilliantly full of love and light, albeit with plenty of predicament, and ends this darkness and complexity. And so it just goes down and down and down and

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down into this hole. I mean, the opposite is As You Like It, which begins dark with all the violence and the familial hatred and whatever and ends in light. Much Ado is the opposite.

Declan 23:55
I think one of the reasons that this happens to Don John is, it's to do with the fact that (or my suspicion is that) none of us really feel we belong. The feeling of not belonging is probably pretty central, possibly, to our condition. Whether it's true or not, it doesn't matter. It's actually a very good key, I have found, to open plays. And that when we want to make somebody the victim, it gives us a sense of belonging. It's not about them, it's about the feeling, the collective feeling it gives to each other. So when somebody is humiliated and harried or whatever, through the internet or whatever, it actually gives us a sense of belonging to the people who are on the other side of the line. And I think that's one of the reasons why it's rather disturbing.

Lucie 24:35
And seems to be exactly what happens to Don John.

Declan 24:39
Yes. That's exactly what happens from Don John. These things don't didn't just arise with the internet. The internet's just a technological advance. I don't think human nature changes.

Lucie 24:47
And Nick, I know you've got a soft spot for a particular set of characters in this play.

Nick 24:52
Well, yes, it's in a sense, the third plot, the comic subplot, and these characters bring the truth - like we have in The Winter's Tale - it's that the overlooked bring the truth to the grand aristocrats. And that is Dogberry and Verges, the local police basically, who within our production, I think we dressed as policemen.

Lucie 25:16
There's a little tragedy there as well, because no one believes them.

Declan 25:19
No. It's the Cassandra complex. I think the world's most prolific probable serial killer was Dr. Shipman, who functioned out of Hyde, in Cheshire, and his patients started dying. He used to kill them with morphine. And everyone assumed that he was a doctor, and consequently, he was above suspicion. But it was the overlooked people, it was the cab drivers and the mortuary attendants who realised all his patients were dying. And they would make representations to the police or the town officials in Hyde. And they were told to begin with, 'nonsense, nonsense! That can't be.' So they were sent away. And sometimes, you know, you can be so clever you can't see things. It's like the story of the rabbi. One somebody once asked a rabbi why can no one see God anymore. And the rabbi replied, 'because no one can stoop low enough at the moment.' And I think that's quite a useful thing to remember, and you can be too clever for your own common sense. That's really, really important, to value your common sense, probably above all else, actually. In the list of the seven virtues, the first one is prudence, which is nearest to common sense, I think. I think the last is temperance.

Lucie 25:54

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So, common sense, above all! Now looking back at putting Much Ado on, what do you think was the trickiest thing to tackle in it, apart from this problem with a lot of really gnarly prose that you have to get through? Nick, what did you find a real challenge with this play?

Nick 26:43
That was marvellous masked ball fairly early on, which is one of the parties you've been talking about, Lucie. Jane Gibson did some brilliant choreography for the marked ball. And we were able, because again Angie Burns had her other job at Regent's Park Theatre, she had access to an amazing donkey head, so we put Matthew Macfadyen playing Benedick in this donkey head in the ball - which I would never have thought of, but it just turned up. It was completely brilliant, but that was a stroke of luck. The solution we came up with for the last sequence was interesting in that everybody took part as a chorus as a whole company. They were on stage, basically, throughout, weren't they, playing it in a group?

Declan 27:26
Yes, when it got going, when the darkness started to take over, we turned it into a different play, and they behaved chorally. So it was like quite outside the rather straightforward action at the beginning of the play - their bodies moved in a completely different way, and they moved quite like a pack on the stage.

Lucie 27:43
So in other words, in order to match the movement of light to dark in this play that we've been talking about, you had to find a new dramatic language,

Declan 27:51
Yes, you have to be prepared in Shakespeare that the play his writing changes as a type of play. And that it's rather silly to try and impose a unity on the play, because actually, the life very often is in the fact that the type of play he's writing metamorphoses as the play goes on. He was much more interested in getting us not only to see what's happening, but also question the form in which it's presented to us. So it's like he give you a painting, then he keeps moving the frame as you're watching it. So that makes it incredibly exciting, and much more like life.

Lucie 28:23
And we talked a bit about this in our first episode in the series about Macbeth with the porter scene in the middle of the play, that just seems to be from a different, completely different kind of play. And I've always really enjoyed how much you are willing to completely change the rulebook in the middle of your productions to match what's happening in the play.

Declan 28:41
Yes, you change the rules. Well, yes, I mean, what's an illusion! I mean, I'm not changing the law. It's interesting how we get used to rules, and how we get angry if those rules get changed. And we kind of want the evening going in the same way as it began, because then we can get more of a handle on it. But sometimes it's important to let go of the grip and surrender to something that's going to keep changing, it's going to be very hard to keep up with it. So a lot of what's described as modern art is difficult to understand, because we want to impose a narrative control on it. You think 'what is the artist trying to say to me?' You keen on asking these kinds of rule questions. And yes, you need them when you're learning to get in, but very often a great piece of art asks you to just relax on the rules for a bit and just see what's happening.

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Lucie 29:30
And my last question for today is, Nick, if you could invite anybody from Much Ado About Nothing to be a special guest on our podcast, who would you invite?

Nick 29:39
I think Beatrice, I think she would be the most entertaining podcast guest.

Declan 29:44
I mean, Beatrice has one of the most moving lines in Shakespeare, and I'm going to ask you to quote it, Lucie.

Lucie 29:49
So is this the one where Don Pedro says, 'you were born in a merry hour.' And then Beatrice says, 'no, sure, my lord, my mother cried, but then there a star danced and under that I was born.'

Declan 30:03
Yes. Saskia Reeves was playing Beatrice and Stephen Mangan was playing Don Pedro. It was the first time I'd worked with Steven, and it was a third time I'd worked with Saskia. She used to throw head back laughing and he's feeding her more and more alcohol, and she's getting drunker and drunker. And this ball was whirling around them, and she was making everybody laugh, which she usually does. And the he gives her the feed in line and then she comes out with that line, which I didn't read, because I was tear up when I read it. It's an extraordinary line. It's extremely mysterious, but it kind of elusively suggests that somehow her birth and her mother's pain is connected to her need to amuse and her need to be an entertainer, and it's always a very moving at the end when Benedick who was played by Matthew Macfadyen, we had him in the audience, and he used shout up, 'which is Beatrice?' And then he would come on stage and she started talking, being funny again, as Beatrice does. And then she comes out with that wonderful line, 'stop my mouth.' She just wants to stop talking. It's like, she's tired performing herself, and she just wants someone to stop her talking because she's sick of having to inflate this existence as funny lady anymore. I just find all that incredibly moving. It connects back archaeologically to her mother's pain. But the idea of the star dancing is so devastating. We mustn't explain the line because if we fully understand the line, that means we fully miss the point.

Lucie 31:37
So she seems to understand some sort of terrible pain in her own existence that even from the moment that she was born, she brought pain to people at the same time as being very funny. That those two things are wedded to each other inside her.

Declan 31:52
Yes.

Lucie 31:53
Well, there we have the blueprint for all rom coms. Thank you very much Declan and Nick, and we'll see you next week.

Nick 32:00
Thanks Lucie.

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Lucie 32:10
Thank you for listening to this week's episode of 'Not True, But Useful...' As always, take a look at the link in the podcast notes to find images of Declan and Nick's production of Much Ado About Nothing. The theme music for this series was composed by Paddy Cuneen for Cheek by Jowl's production of The Winter's Tale. Join us next week for another Shakespeare play when we dive into Troilus and Cressida. Until then, stay well.

Revenger's Tragedy Final 2

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS
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SPEAKERS
Nick, Lucie, Declan

Lucie 00:00
Welcome to series three of 'Not True, But Useful...' a podcast from Cheek by Jowl. I'm your host, Lucie Dawkins, and every week I'm chatting to artistic directors Declan Donnellan and Nick Ormerod, looking back at four decades of their productions all across the world. Together, we'll take a look at what these players have to tell us about the messy business of being human. Our play this week is Thomas Middleton's The Revenger's Tragedy, and here's a quick synopsis before we begin. The play is set in Milan, ruled over by a corrupt Duke who's assaulted and then killed a woman called Gloriana. Gloriana's fiance, Vindice, vows revenge with the help of his brother Hippolito. Vindice infiltrates the court disguised as a pimp called Piato. He hatches a plot to get close to Lussurioso, one of the Duke sons. Lussurioso employs him to win over a chaste virgin, and Vindice is horrified to discover that this is his own sister, Castiza. He dresses as a priest to test both Castiza and his mother with Lussurioso's suggestion, and his mother agrees to sell Castiza. Meanwhile, the Duke's stepson is condemned for raping another woman. When the Duke refuses to intervene on his behalf, the Duchess decides to get her revenge. She starts an affair with the Duke's illegitimate son Spurio. He wants to take the throne himself. To distract Lussurioso from pursuing Castiza, Vindice tells him about Spurio and the Duchess's relationship. Lussurioso tries to reveal the affair to his father, the Duke, but it all goes wrong and he ends up condemned to death for treason. The Duke eventually relents and decides to pardon him, but two of his other sons, Ambitioso and Supervacuo, intervene and change the message to the prison in order to get rid of their brother's claim to the throne. The false order gets misunderstood at the prison and the young stepson gets beheaded instead. This leads to a spiralling set of revenges and counter revenges in the Duke's family, culminating with Hippolito and Vindice assassinating the Duke, staging it as if the pretend Piato is the culprit. Lussurioso becomes the new Duke, but at his coronation, Hippolito and Vindice arrive to kill him too. Ambitioso, Supervacuo, and Spurio turn on and murder each other in the aftermath of this bloodthirsty party. Vindice finally admits what he's done, and is condemned to death. And noe over to Declan and Nick. Hello, Declan and Nick.

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Declan 02:59
Hello.

Nick 03:00
Hello, Lucie.

Lucie 03:00
So we have met this week to discuss your production of The Revenger's Tragedy, which started its life to great success at the end of 2019 in Milan. And the next stage of its life was a run in the Barbican in London, in believe it or not, early March of 2020!

Declan 03:18
On our last night at the Barbican, as usual, the actors all came around to our flat for a party - not infringing social distancing, because we were innocent in those days of March the 7th, 2020. Then the message came through that the next week the run in Madrid was cancelled, and the next run in Paris was cancelled. So they all flew back to different parts of Italy. And then later on, we revived it, and that was immediately cancelled again as soon as we started to open. And then the third time around, it was cancelled again, but we filmed it. So it was filmed in social distancing circumstances in Milan with me and Nick trying to direct on Zoom.

Lucie 03:56
So it was amazing to get the chance to see this incredibly vivid, very funny and very violent production of The Revenger's Tragedy. Now, we've talked a little bit about the Revenger's Tragedy in season one, but just as a quick recap, Nick, could you describe what the production looked like?

Nick 04:15
The production was designed for the Piccolo Theatre in Milan, which is not so much huge, but very, very wide. And the way we chose to go was to build a mammothly wide door right across the stage, leaving quite a shallow playing area of only about five metres below the door. Upstage, we were able to project images behind the barn doors, which changed according to the space and other things. And the thinking behind it was this was Vindice's own fantasy of his journey, expressed possibly in a television studio. There were producers, some of the actors played producers within that, and the actor playing Vindice led the whole ensemble and told his own story.

Lucie 05:07
Which really tapped into our involvement as the audience choosing to spend our evening watching human pain and suffering. So the whole design seemed to really call on our responsibility as watchers in this scenario.

Declan 05:22
And it's laughing at human pain and suffering as well, because it's extremely comic, so that these Grand Guignol scenes of bloodshed and terrible things are served up in a comic way.

Lucie 05:33
But this barn door I found really fascinating because it reminded me actually of a lot of the conversations we've been having about your sets in which you play with the dimension of the space that exists. So rather than creating an illustration of the space of the play, you look at the dimensions of the theatre that you're working with, and either extend the horizon or

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push it right forward, like you did with this barn door to create this narrow forestage stage. It seems to be about squeezing space, making space more dynamic.

Nick 06:02
Well, hopefully it does make it dynamic. But what it did allow is a solid background so that we could hear the actors, because I'm afraid in that space often the actors have got into the habit of using head mics, which we wanted to avoid at all costs. So it gave them a sounding board to project their voices against and we never had an acoustic problem. So part of the thinking was simply to solve that problem. But it gave us actually a very, very wide space. And that, I think, is as dynamic as giving it a lot of depth.

Lucie 06:34
It also gave you the opportunity to do something that is basically starting from Greek theatre, which is that you could roll these doors to one side and thrust on a scene on a rolling platform. Bam, it just landed on you, in the middle of the stage, it incredibly powerful to be able to do that.

Nick 06:51
Yes, essentially, I felt (and I've mentioned this before in a previous podcast) that Middleton does need help with a space because he doesn't bother with it that much. And so we did need to locate it clearly in the palace, in the house of Vindice's mother, essentially, and also a secret house where the murder of the Duke is committed - though, incidentally, that's also very confusing, because when you look at the play, suddenly, when we go back to that house later to discover the body of the Duke disguised as Piato, we discover amazingly that the courtiers are just around the corner as well. So somehow, that's in the palace, too, which nobody's commented on! I would give Middleton a few notes on that.

Lucie 07:38
So he has slightly mouldy bits around the edge, Middleton, which I kind of love. It's what makes these plays really human, I think. So let's talk a little bit more just about this head mic issue. Why don't you like miking actors?

Declan 08:00
I think any mediation between the actor and the audience is not good. You want to be in a room with somebody. And if they're miked, it's just another little barrier. It also means the actor is out of control, because they don't need to reach the audience. I get worried by mics.

Nick 08:15
You don't quite know where the voice is coming from, because it's coming from a speaker somewhere else, and then when they turn up stage, they continue speaking and it makes no difference at all. And you can still hear them crystal clear. It's very odd for the audience.

Declan 08:29
It's this idea of efficiency, of one-click delivery, and I want to hear every word. But actually in real life, you don't hear every word and in real life we don't see everything. There are certain things which are excluded from view, things have different pitches, so that the audience has to readjust. The audience has to work, I mean, you can't relax in the theatre. The audience has to work.

Lucie 08:48

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And so a lot of the work you do seems to be about making sure that this relationship between the body on stage and the bodies in the audience - that there's an electric current running between the two.

Declan 08:59
It's not a work of art, it's an act of art, and the audience is just as much part of the performance as the actors are. And the actors have to understand that it's a dialogue. So anything that comes between the two, like a microphone, is undesirable. If sometimes it has to happen for a special reason, a special effect, that's absolutely fine. But as a kind of general creeping norm, it really worries me.

Lucie 09:20
But what's interesting about this is, once again, when we're talking about design, we're starting with solving problems. You've got to solve a problem, which is that Middleton is very vague when he talks about space and you've got to solve a problem, which are these big radical scene changes between usually different locations, and you've got to solve a problem, which is that the Piccolo Theatre has got a really problematic acoustic and you don't want to use mics. And out of problem solving, you come up with sets that have such enormous potential, which you then presumably discover in rehearsal. Because then you know, these barn doors became this incredible sites of anxiety and tension as people moved from behind to in front of them. I'm particularly thinking of the scene when the youngest son realises he's going to die, and has been dragged off stage and is clinging to these edges of these doors, practically in the crucifix position, you know, trying to drag himself back onto the forestage. It's kind of like a playground for your actors, like a climbing frame.

Nick 10:22
But I think that's the joy of doing theatre, is that it is very, very pragmatic. And it's very collaborative, and you work with people, and you solve problems. I, personally, would be terrified as an artist, if I was faced with just a blank canvas. I mean, I can't imagine anything more scary. In theatre you have to start off with problems, and you need to solve them, and you've got the text, you've got the actors, you've got a whole host of them. There'll always be problems, a lot of them. And, yeah, it's a problem solving business. And it's very pragmatic.

Declan 10:54
I mean, but that's what's so cruel, say to a child, 'just create!' or just say to an actor, 'just create!' or to writer 'just create - here's a blank piece of paper, just do anything!' Because you can't, because we live in a relational world, and we can't possibly create anything unless we can see something outside us. I've got to think about the audience, I've got to think about the acoustic, I will think about all sorts of things. And the more I'm hemmed in, the more free I become. Creating from nothing is bullshit, because it's all about solving a problem. Any poem anybody writes, is not just a passive thing that I do to, you know, put under my pillow at night, it's a pretty desperate act. There's the need to communicate or a need to share. And I think a kind of fear of loneliness, really, that motivates all art. So to actually save somebody 'just do it!' is really destructive.

Lucie 11:43
And it's also, I think, one of the things that makes making theatre so wonderful, is that you get to walk into a room with a group of artists and say, 'I don't know, let's solve it together.' And I've heard you say that one of the most useful things you can say in the rehearsal room is 'I don't know.'

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Declan 12:01
No, I know. I mean, I can help. You know, when an actors doesn't know what a line means. But I'd ask the actors to explain to me what the lines meant, because I think that's the most humane thing to do. And the thing that is most likely to release the actor's sacred vitality.

Lucie 12:15
But also that it's a sort of act of anti-loneliness, that we get to walk into a rehearsal room to make theatre to explore the things that we don't know the answers to.

Declan 12:24
Exactly, absolutely. And if we could explain it will be dead, which is why you can't explain it. So not being able to explain what you've done is really good!

Lucie 12:31
Great, because it means you're touching on the mysterious business of being a human, which is what we say at the beginning of this podcast.

Declan 12:37
I think that's probably quite a good idea. And I think that's a pretty good way to think about art.

Nick 12:41
And if you can explain it, you might as well write an essay. Let them read that, you know.

Declan 12:46
What we can do is we can investigate the space of the experience. That sounds a bit of a jawbreaker. But you draw people's attention to that experience that might be there. And that's what's so interesting, because the plays are just words that are a reaction to experience.

Lucie 13:02
So if you were going to point out what you think are the great human mysteries, or the human experiences being revealed at the heart of the Revenger's Tragedy, what do you think those are?

Declan 13:13
Well, I think one of them is the problem of being right. He is holding a skull when he comes on stage - so he's quoting Hamlet, which was a huge hit. And there would have been knowing laughs from the audience. And then he talks about the incredible decadence and corruption of this court, the complete lawlessness of the state, and the fact that the Duke has actually raped and murdered his fiance. And to begin with, you can easily think, 'oh, my God, he's right, he must punish the Duke!' And then we maybe need to have a bit of pause for thought and think, actually, being right is often quite a burden. Because what do you do with right? And he slowly unhinges by doing what he believes to be right.

Lucie 13:55
So Vindice, the avenger, I mean his name means 'the avenger', he's totally right to want vengeance, but it also destroys him.

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Declan 14:06
Yeah, but that's what I'm saying. There's a big problem in being right. What do you do with being right? Is what he does with his right that becomes more and more questionable. It'squite terrifying. Then he goes out of control. I mean, it's for every individual to decide. It's really complicated. What do you do when you are right, if doing the right thing is going to make more bloodshed? And it's morally complicated. And he goes gung ho, Vindice, he involves his brother in this plot. And he does extraordinary things. He kills masses of people by the end. He gets carried away with it. I think it shows what can happen if we abandon ourselves to our self-righteousness.

Lucie 14:45
So would you say it's asking us to have a slightly more complex relationship with ourselves, to re-examine ourselves when we feel that we are right, and to take that seriously and really watch ourselves?

Declan 14:58
I'm going to steal a quote from a couple of episodes, when you said that all good plays complicate our relationship with ourselves. I think above all, yes, it asks us to look at ourselves when we are right, and when we get self righteous and we get very angry. And this terrible thing has been done to Gloriana, that's her skull that he has on stage, his fiance. He carries around in a macabre way. And in a way he is right to do that. But what do you do with right? In real life, we're called on to judge, and we're called on to hate - we get called on to hate a lot on the internet and so on. But it's really good if one can just stop hating for just a little bit, and open a little window so you can actually see what's happening. Somebody said recently about Trump and Boris Johnson, that, you know, if we can only stop hating them for one minute, we might work out why they're so popular. Nick and I, I can tell you, we are as extreme on that as anybody else, we're always yelling at the radio. But if you can just give yourself a little breather away from judgmentalism, because if you're if you're full of hate, you're really not going to see what's happening. One of the dreadful problems about being right is it's delicious. We love being right. And if it also means we can punish people that's even more delicious. And it's addictive, but it's corrupting. And we have to think about where that might be leading us. Yes, I think that's true, it asks us to look back at ourselves, you know, and if we do end up judging, then quickly stand in front of that mirror and look at it. But sometimes we have to act because there are some terrible, outrageous things happening in the world, like things that have to be stopped, that we must do something about. But very often when we get enraged about things, it's our own personal rages getting mixed in it as well. And that will weaken us. Do you know, I think that if you have a an opponent in a battle, it's quite important in a funny kind of way not to feel superior to the person you're fighting against. It's very hard to resist that. You need to pay attention to the enemy, to the bad thing that's happening in the world, and look at it as coolly as possible.

Lucie 17:00
And so these plays are really radical, if the leads, these messy leads that do terrible things like Macbeth, or in this play, like Vindice, who kills a lot of people - if you're able to put them on stage and watch them and think that could be me.

Declan 17:18
Yeah!

Lucie 17:19

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Then they are really radical plays.

Declan 17:20
Yeah, yeah.

Nick 17:21
Well, the reason these plays have survived, and we're very privileged to be able to work with them, is because there is humanity in them. And that's constantly fascinating. If they were simple melodramas, and morally, totally judgmental, they would not be played anymore. That's for sure.

Lucie 17:39
So we're watching a play where Vindice is both right, and a murderer. And those two things can coexist in the same person.

Declan 17:47
If someone murdered Nick, I'd want them torn apart with knives. But I would expect society to protect me and other people from my own worst impulses. I think if you get people to imagine that, 'oh, but the thing about me is, I'm so evolved, I wouldn't want to do anything. Why would you want to be cruel? Why would you want to punish the murderer?' Because it's a human thing to want to do! But we rely on other people to stop us doing these things.

Lucie 18:13
Well, do you think that's another thing that this play taps into, is that the very ugly human compulsion for violent justice when a wrong is done is actually something that we should question in ourselves?

Declan 18:28
Well, I think we have a drive to punish them, to be cruel. I think that does exist within us. And it's maybe it's preserved our lives in the past, I don't know. We definitely need to question it. But you question it - you don't suppress it! You take it out and look at it and stick it back in the wardrobe. And that's one of the things that we can do in the theatre. We can take out these these things, and look at them and put them back in. But the dangerous thing is saying, 'oh, no, no, I'm evolved. I don't have these feelings anymore. The thing about me, you know, is I could never be cruel.' This is I think, a very worrying thing. To a certain degree, things have to be repressed. But you have to see that you're repressing them, so I'm not going to act on it. But I think that's the healthy position that. You know, I can think, 'I would like to kill that person, but I'm not going to.' It's the 'I'm not going to' that's really important.

Lucie 19:14
So do you think this is why we have such a continuing interest in staging plays like this? I mean, this is a 400 year old play, it keeps coming back and back and back. And do you think it's something about the fact that it's actually really healthy to take a good look at the really dark parts of what it means to be human so that we can process them?

Declan 19:34
Absolutely. I mean, there needs to be a trigger warning before every play you see in the theatre that you're going to see something's going to disturb you in. It might be disturbingly funny. You know, it could be it could be all sorts of things, you know, because it's very health making for us.

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Lucie 19:48
So it's a safe place where we can sit together and admit that being a human is not a simple or clean thing to do. And if we're going to live as well as we can and evoke the most responsibility in our lives, we have to be attentive to the Vindices in us.

Declan 20:07
Yeah, we have to look after each other in society, and we have to say no to many of our impulses. You just have to say no, no. And we don't like saying no to ourselves. So it becomes a more efficient shortcut to think, 'do you know, I don't have those feelings anymore.' So like, Angelo has no sexual desires anymore, so he's fine. So he's not dangerous.

Lucie 20:26
And this is a thing that we talked about in last week's episode with Measure for Measure. Angelo, who believes himself to be the ultimate civilised man of the law, believes himself to have no sexual desires. And as a result of that repression, he erupts in the most horrifying way and does the most terrible things in that play. But the other thing that we should pay attention to and this is that Vindice has the name 'avenger'. That's what Vindice means in Italian, he is the avenger. And a lot of the characters in this play have got spectacular names, which indicate who they are - like Lussurioso, the luxurious one, Supervacuo, the ditsy son. And what do you think this play has to tell us about whether we have kind of essential characteristics of being ourselves like we have, you know, the man who is the avenger, the man who's the stupid one, the man who is the luxurious one?

Declan 21:23
Yes, I think on Middleton's part that's a kind of retro joke from the vice plays of 100 years, or 75 years earlier, when people come on playing, you know, Envy, Sloth, Arrogance, whatever you have. I think it tells us a lot, though, about transformation. Throughout the play, in order to bring about his increasingly complicated plan of revenge, Vindice puts on many disguises. And halfway through the play, he thinks it's a very good idea to catch out his mother and his sister as well. So he starts to play God in his disguises. So it's a good idea to put his mother in place too, and good idea to sort out his sister and he does outrageous things to the both his mother and his sister, because he feels superior. And that's one of the problems of feeling right, letting self-righteousness oxygenate us a lot. Getting off on the punishment, getting off on the blaming. People do suddenly become God. It's not just Vindice, it's quite a common thing to think you're God. And slowly, bybeing right, he's slightly becoming like God, because he's the guy who can dispense justice. And that's the groovy thing about dispensing justice is because it makes you feel like God. It's a great big narcotic high.

Lucie 22:30
So do you think maybe Vindice's problem is that he is trying to live up to the brand of his name too much? He's so attached to this idea of vengeance, that it actually destroys him

Declan 22:42
I mean, I think no, I think the name is just a kind of handle on him for the audience to get us into the play. I think what's happening in the character of Vindice is much, much more subtle than that and develops throughout the play. It's not as much about trying to live up to his name. I think what Middleton is showing us is how revenge is merely nostalgia, and how disruptive it is. And also, these plays that seem to be about things that are so forgotten are,

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in fact, incredibly modern. I mean, more than one film producer has said to me that Hollywood runs entirely on revenge. One thing I would like to point out about these plays, is that it's very funny whenever we do a revenge tragedy they are always incredibly popular. And people always say, 'Why? Why do you think these plays are suddenly so popular now?' And the truth is that I've been asked that question for 42 years, it's interesting that people forget that we're always doing them. I think it's due at the fact that we quite like to see the cruelty up there on stage, because if it's up there on stage, the cruelty is not going to be in my own heart. The mess is out there, not in me. But you see it on the stage, and then you maybe think about your own reaction. And it is disturbing in The Revengers Tragedy how he gets carried away. And the guy who you are rooting for to begin with goes slowly off the rails - well not that slowly, goes quite fast off the rails! - and does unspeakable things, kind of in our name, because we identified with him.

Lucie 24:04
So we talked a lot last week about how working with Russian actors meant that you were working in a creative infrastructure of having standing companies of actors who've been working together for a really long time. And that created creative opportunities and juice for you in the rehearsal room. In this production, you were working with Italian actors. Did you find anything in the Italian way of making theatre or the creative infrastructure around this Teatro Piccolo that was really exciting to work with, that you don't get in the British theatre, for example?

Declan 24:36
It was just wonderful working with them. It was a group of actors that had been working with, and we had kind of found each other because I did a series of, I think, three workshops at the Biennale in Venice over the 12 years beforehand. And these actors kind of emerged from that. We had wonderful time working there, we were extremely well looked after.

Nick 24:52
And we were able to do our 'into the woods', in a centre which the Roncone had developed in the middle of Umbria, in the heat of a boiling hot August, I remember. But we had a week or 10 days with everybody in isolated and beautiful countryside and I think at the end of that we actually had the structure of the piece, beginning with 'ai, ai, ai!'. And so we were able to come back to Milan and direct it in a more conventional way.

Lucie 24:55
So 'ai, ai, ai' was this over-the-top song, which they all danced onstage and offstage to at the beginning of the end of this production. This, I guess, can-can line of the whole company coming on and off that framed it in this weirdly comic, uncomfortably comic image

Declan 25:43
Yeah, it was sort of like Italian TV music. One of the inspirations behind the whole thing was Italian horror movies. Here we call them 'giallo'. You know, Nick and I when we were young, we see Dario Argento and things like Suspiria and so on very, often very cheap Italian horror movies with black gloves coming around a door always. And they said to me, 'ah, Declan, you mean splatter!' It's funny, we've got an Italian word for it, 'giallo', but there's this sort of cheap schlock horror, it was great fun to do that actually.

Lucie 26:30

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What do you think was so appealing to you about this kind of nearly comic schlock horror approach to terrible violence?

Declan 26:37
Well, I love as you know, that question of is it a comedy or is it a tragedy? Are we supposed to laugh, are we supposed to scream? We don't quite know what it is. And I think that's really good. I think you need experience to do it well, because you're not just laughing at violence. You're laughing and looking at yourself laughing at violence. Is it real? Is it not? You lose your bearings a bit. There's no place to relax.

Lucie 26:57
Nick, could you tell me about your favourite moment in staging The Revenger's Tragedy?

Nick 27:04
I think my favourite moment was, I'm afraid, the actual murder of the Duke because it's quite an elaborate system of a chair, and a foot pump, and a necklace of blood. We could have the whole company clustered around watching this. And some of them, of course, were involved. The actor behind could be pumping the blood as the throat was cut. So the actual detail of creating that was fun. I have to admit, it was fun.

Lucie 27:33
Everything up until that point had been like a game, often quite pastiche-y feeling, around the actual violence. And then this moment when you actually gave us blood was really shocking, because it felt like the rules had changed.

Nick 27:47
Well, you had a sequence of blood. You have the eyelids cut off first, and then you had the tongue cut out. And we needed something to convincingly flop onto the floor like a piece of meat - I think we actually used fresh meat in the end, concealed somewhere. And then his throat was cut. So it's quite a complicated process.

Lucie 28:07
And it really brought you up short because it really wasn't funny anymore. It was really horrifying suddenly that you gave us a full horror fest.

Nick 28:16
Yes, which you could half-see because Raffaele Esposito, playing Hippolito, could conceal most of the action, as he did, the cutting from the audience.

Declan 28:27
What made it particularly nauseating is that we had a camera and the closer you got, the less distinct it became. So that's very good, because the secret is to hide, you know, not to show. So it's more what the audience was imagining was happening.

Nick 28:40
It was important. It was thrown mammoth-size on the screen behind, so you could choose exactly which eyelid you're going to focus on you. But you couldn't quite tell what it was, perhaps, because it was so big.

Lucie 28:53

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And also because it was partly obscured by the doorways, we were also getting snapshots of the close up. And it was so wonderful because you appeared to be revealing everything to us with a close up camera that was uber-realistic, and at the same time still playing with how much we could see, forcing us to imagine things because it felt like you were dangling so much in front of us but you weren't really.

Declan 29:14
well, I'm glad Lucie. It's great. It's great, frightening people!

Lucie 29:17
It was the last piece of theatre before we went into lockdown, and it really stayed with me. So thank you very much for that. And Declan, what was your favourite moment?

Declan 29:26
I like it at the end when the new Duke, Lussurioso, when he says 'alla grande!', and on come dancers for what is the masque in the original, and we staged as a reprise of 'ai, ai, ai', that they all came on in this line dance, and all the murders happened out of this dance. So the whole thing degenerated into a kind of stabbing game, but they were really dying. And when the Duke when he was stabbed, he's go on dancing on the floor on his back. And there was something terrifying about this mindless 'ai, ai, ai' happening with people actually dying on stage or representing dying onstage. And I found that terribly disturbing. The actors did it and showed it to me. And I said, 'great, we'll have that!'

Lucie 30:05
Aince March of last year, you've also had to re-rehearse it. You had to rehearse it so that the actors were all socially distanced from each other, which seems an impossibility for a play like this, in which there are incredible physical struggles happening on stage. That must have been an incredible challenge.

Declan 30:25
Yes, that was quite a challenge! The sex scene between the Duke and the Duchess socially distanced was, that was quite difficult. But we have an absolutely wonderful assistant Francesco Bianca. The actors did incredibly well.

Lucie 30:42
So I always feel that you can never quite kill theatre, whatever happens.

Declan 30:47
No. Theatre will survive our best attempts to destroy it.

Lucie 30:51
And so hopefully, The Revenger's Tragedy will be back on a stage soon, I hope.

Declan 30:56
Hope so. It would be lovely. Great.

Lucie 30:58
That's all for this week, and we're going to meet again next week to discuss our next play. Thank you very much.

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Nick 31:04
Thanks very much, Lucie.

Declan 31:05
Thank you very much.

Lucie 31:14
Thank you for listening to this week's episode of 'Not True, But Useful...' As always, if you want to take a look at images of Declan and Nick's production of this play, follow the link in the podcast notes. The theme music for this series was composed by Paddy Cuneen for Cheek by Jowl's production of The Winter's Tale, with additional music in this episode by Gianluca Misiti for The Revenger's Tragedy. Join us next week when we talk Much Ado About Nothing. Until then, stay well.

Three Sisters

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SPEAKERS
Nick, Lucie, Declan

Lucie 00:06
Welcome to series three of 'Not True, But Useful...' a podcast from Cheek by Jowl. I'm your host, Lucie Dawkins, and every week I'm chatting to artistic directors Declan Donnellan and Nick Ormerod, looking back at four decades of their productions all across the world. Together, we'll take a look at what these plays have to tell us about the messy business of being human. Our play of the week is Anton Chekhov's Three Sisters. And here's a quick synopsis before we begin. The story follows the Prozorov of sisters, Olga, Masha and Irina, and their brother Andrey, in a house on the edge of a provincial Russian town. Their father, an army officer, died the year previously, leaving the siblings stranded at his last posting, and wishing they could return to their old life in Moscow. They hate the town they found themselves in and only socialise with the soldiers from their father's old regiment. Masha is miserably married to the local school teacher Kulygin and ends up having an affair with Vershinin, a colonel in the army. Olga is herself a teacher but loathes her job, while Irina her works in the local telegraph office and longs to find love. Two officers, Solyony and Tusenbach, compete for her affections, but she doesn't love either of them. Andrey marries a local woman, Natasha, who moves into the house and starts slowly taking over, moving the sisters out of their rooms to make space for her children. Andrey mortgages the house to pay for his gambling debts without telling his sisters, leaving them potentially destitute. At the end, the regiment moves on and Vershinin and ends his affair with Masha, while Solyony and Tusenbach fight a dual over Irina. As Olga and Irina comfort the distraught Masha, they hear a gunshot. Tusenbach has been killed, just as the soldiers move out of the town. The sisters are left alone, waving them off, still stuck where they started. And now over to Declan and Nick. Well, hello, Declan and Nick.

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Nick 02:26
Hello, Lucie.

Declan 02:27
Hello, Lucie.

Lucie 02:28
Well, today we're going to talk about one of the great plays of Russian theatre, Three Sisters, which you did in 2005 with a Russian company. And often when you talk about plays, you talk about something in the middle of a play which bothers you or is mysterious or haunts you, that makes you feel compelled to explore the play. What is it in Three Sisters that haunts you?

Declan 02:52
Well, to begin with I saw it when I was 16 performed by amateur actors at the Questors Theatre in Ealing, and I really enjoyed it. And I thought it was wonderful and glamorous because it was about these landowning people in Tzarist Russia, before the revolution, so they didn't actually know they were on the Titanic, and this extraordinary way of life. And I used think in terms of words like 'atmospheric'. It was very atmospheric, and part of me would quite like to have been in that house in Three Sisters. And over the years, I've got to know it, and I realise that it's an unbelievably changing play. It's quite Shakespearean, I think, in its shifts of tone, and you don't quite know what play you're in. Because it can be very funny and it can be very sad. But also the characters are deceiving themselves outrageously. And there is an event that happens in Three Sisters, sometimes people say nothing happens, or something does happen! And that is that 10 people let one of their friends die. They stand by while he's murdered. Tusenbach fights an uneccessary duel at the end of the play, and there was absolutely no reason for this duel to take place. It could easily have been stopped, but no one actually does. And that's what's interesting - that they don't do it. A word in favour of directors' terrible ideas. Stanislavski, when it was opening, had this great idea, and that was that at the end he was going to parade Tusenbach's dead body around the stage. And Chekhov freaked out, as did many of the actors, I think. And they said 'no, no, no, no, no, no!' They wouldn't let him do that. Oh, how tasteless of Stanislavski to want to parade Tusenbach's dead body round stage, what an awful thing to do! But, you know, as I grow older, the more I admire Stanislavski's impulse to do that, because actually, the plays about these people letting Tusenbach die. And that is what happens in the play, that they let this unnecessary murder take place.

Lucie 04:39
So the important thing about that last scene is the fact that they hear him get shot offstage and continue the scene without talking about it.

Declan 04:46
And they don't mention his name! And they tell Irina that her bridegroom-to-be is dead and they and they immediately start to talk about the future - what people in the future might think about them. They don't mention Tusenbach. I mean, the band plays as everybody's marching off, and then we get wound up with this music and we miss the irony that Chekhov intended. I understand why Stanislavski wanted to do something as kind of directorial and boorish and underlined as parade the body around the stage because we do forget it. And I've read, you know, people saying, well, these last lines are so moving, they're so moving.

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Well, they're moving, because it's about people deceiving themselves. And perhaps self-deception is the saddest thing in the world and the most moving thing in the world. But when they start to talk about how maybe the people in the future will think kindly of us, you think - think what's happening now!

Lucie 05:42
You're sitting here singing along with the band, or someone's just died, and you're partly responsible.

Declan 05:47
Or they're weeping. They're weeping as the band plays and they're feeling sorry for themselves, you know, 'one is going', says Masha, 'but another will stay behind'. And it's like they're going off into this hokum, anaesthesia, and taking the audience along with them. And Chekhov I'm sure thought the audience would see through it immediately. And of course we don't. And we do cry, the band plays and we bloody well cry, and we're really cross that we cry. But really, what should happen is that we should cry, and then look at ourselves crying, and think what that means. There's so much self-deception in the play. But it's that's what makes me think of it in terms of Shakespeare. You know, the big things, love, loss and self-deception.

Lucie 06:28
And what about you, Nick, what obsesses you in this play?

Nick 06:31
Well, what's fascinating, I think, is the way he treats and the space that it's set in, which is the house that in a year ago, the father died (which is the first line of the play) and it's in this house. And it's the first time the french windows have been opened to let the spring in on the first of May. And what happens to the house is completely fascinating for the sisters, because at the end of the first act, Natasha comes into the house, and she is from the town. She is from the town that they're terrified that they're going to be absorbed into. So Natasha moves in. And it turns out that she's going to marry the brother. And in the second act, they're gradually being pushed out of the house, they have to go and celebrate in the street. Whereas Natasha, who is now kind of taking over and announces she's going to go on a sleigh ride with Protopopov, who we never see, but by the end is actually in the house. And in the third act, the sisters have been pushed into a corner of the house with a fire going on in the town. And so they're gradually being pushed out of the house. And by the end the last act, they're actually in the garden, and they can't bring themselves to go into the house because Natasha and Protopopov have taken it over and you hear the children screaming in the house. And Marsha says, 'I simply can't go in there.' And that is so transparently clear what Chekhov is doing. And it's all expressed in terms of the space. The other interesting thing about the house is that of course, it turns out, they don't know who owns it. And Andrey takes the liberty, devastatingly, of mortgaging it to pay various gambling debts. You kind of imagine it's a beautiful Russian house on the edge of the town, but that's all part of the sort of sentimentality that I think Declan is alluding to about the play, which has accreted over over the years. But it's a big trap. Because they're deeply in the shit. They're deeply in a very dark predicament deluding themselves that somehow they're in control.

Declan 08:44
And of course, they talk about going to Moscow, and you might be deluded in thinking that Moscow is is really important place. 'We're going to Moscow', they say, and you think, 'no,

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you're no!'. But there is another place that poses a huge threat on them, to which they almost never refer in the play. And that is the town. And it's like these people are terrified, as many of us are, I guess, to discover that our shit smells the same as everybody else's. We're terrified to discover that we are ordinary, and it's very difficult for us to live our lives understanding that we are ordinary, we are in terrible struggles to be anything other than ordinary. And the three sisters sort of dread (but I think it's an unconscious dread) that they will sink into the oblivion of the people, of the narod, who are in this town. So it's a huge trauma for Irina (or she's very worried about the fact) that she forgot the Italian for 'window' and you think, 'god almighty!' And there's no one nice to speak to here. That's why we have the army officers around and they don't really have the best army officers because there was a problem with the father, because not many people went to his funeral. So they've got this rather dodgy Solyony and Tusenbach. And then this old rake, really, the old roue Vershinin . And who we get the impression Vershinin might have been in love the mother - 'we used to call him the lovesick major', they say. They remember him as children. But the point I'm trying to say is that we think about Moscow in Three Sisters, the great place that you can't go to, but the thing I've always tried to preach is don't so much talk about where people are running to. Look what they're running away from. And I think they're running like mad away from that small town, and they know they will be engulfed by it. And in the end, they are. Natasha takes over the house, Protopopov gets into the house, Olga becomes the headmistress. I don't know, I suppose Irina and Olga now they'll just all stay together, Masha will go on being unhappily married. And they'll be the three really weird old women at the edge of town who were very grand and don't mix with anybody in the town. And it's sad.

Nick 10:47
Well, I think they won't be in the house because I think they're going to be pushed out of the house. Already, Olga, isn't she living at the school, she's living somewhere else.

Declan 10:55
It's this study of paralysis. It reminds me so much of James Joyce in Dubliners, which I often quote, I know, of when people can't move. There's a line in a Sondheim song, in Follies, a love song, 'not going left, not going right'. You know, when you're frozen. You can't go this way and you can't go that way. It's a very moving expression. And they can't move anywhere. And they don't understand that they're paralysing themselves. I mean, Chekhov is, as Nick says, you know, often quite course. He goes out of his way to explain about the railway station in the town. There is a funny conversation, you know, why is it built so far outside town - is very clear they could get there! And the other thing is sometimes it's so interesting seeing it from an English point of view or a foreign point of view, because we think, oh, the Slavs with their feelings and troika and birch trees and snow. I did certainly when I was younger, but actually, it's very much about a family that cuts off their feelings. Olga is always saying 'ne platchek', meaning, 'don't cry, don't cry'. General Prozorov's daughters don't cry. There's an incredible repression of feelings that goes on, and results, it seems to me, in this terrible paralysis. But you know, if I was asked to advise them at the beginning of Three Sisters, what to do - you know, many years ago, just tell them to get on the train go to Moscow! But you know, they wouldn't be happy there, because they wouldn't be special in Moscow.

Lucie 12:18
Do you think that's another thing - they're terrified that if they moved to Moscow, they might turn out to be ordinary there?

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Declan 12:23
Yes, I think that they would be ordinary there. But there are people that they can not speak to in the town, you know, there are people they can feel above in the town. It's a horrible thing. But it's quite kind of quite a human thing.

Lucie 12:36
So they're worried they can turn into nobodies if they go to Moscow. And I think it's a sort of wonderful way of looking at the play, because a lot of people ask, 'why don't they just go to Moscow!' They spent a lot of time talking about going to Moscow, and in a way that looks like a typical Stanislavskian super-objective, right? The thing that's driving them through the play is they're going to go to Moscow, but they never do. And therefore, describing them as wanting to go to Moscow is not actually a particularly useful thing. In the play is much more useful to describe, as you say, what they're terrified of. That's what's driving how they're behaving.

Declan 13:08
As you know, I don't find super-objective very useful, because I don't think we know what it is. That doesn't really help us live our lives, because we don't know what our super-objectives are. What we can do in a more humble way is think of the things that we're running away from. I think we don't, on the whole, go to Moscow. I don't think we should patronise the three sisters for being paralysed, because we often don't go to Moscow, you know.

Lucie 13:33
So what was it like for both of you to direct this play as British directors with Russian actors in a Russian theatre? Do you think you bought a different perspective, coming in from the outside from a different culture to this grand play of Russian theatre?

Declan 13:49
Our experience of going to Russia is that we have always felt very safe there. But we got to know, obviously, the actors through Boris Gudonov and Twelfth Night, and then we thought we'd love to do Chekhov, and Moscow Theatre Confederation said, 'yeah, great!' And we asked to have a house. I think that was when we started to do 'the woods' in earnest, wasn't it? We actually found the house. And we inhabited that house in the woods for a week beforehand. But it was really an amazing time. And there was no embarrassment about us doing it, and there was no sense of we always do it like this, or we, you know, we don't do it like that.

Lucie 14:25
And so this was one of the first times that you did this practice of moving your whole company into a house with no WiFi for a week or two to explore the play before you go into rehearsals, which is an incredible way of going about things. And I think also must be amazing for Chekhov, right? Because these really are plays about systems of people living together. It's like watching loads of cogs in the machine revolve around each other.

Declan 14:51
Yes.

Lucie 14:52

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Which we don't really have a tradition of, without ensemble theatres here in the UK. It's very different way of looking at a play.

Declan 14:59
And it's very difficult for a Western person who doesn't really live the ensemble system to fully get into Chekhov, because Chekhov was absolutely based on an ensemble of actors. And that was what was exciting for us - it was not to do it with a cast of stars in the West End, which would have been an easier, more obvious thing to do, but to actually go and do with our with our group of Russian actors. We felt very proud of that.

Lucie 15:21
And so it's more like putting an ecosystem on stage rather than putting kind of individual characters on stage.

Declan 15:27
Well, yes. In each of these plays, Chekhov writes about a living system of people. And in a way we find it quite attractive, particularly now when we're not in groups. And as people become more isolated as the last 100 years have progressed.

Lucie 15:41
So this is the kind of wonderful thing about that very first scene is you get a huge number of people on stage at this really creepy birthday party on the anniversary of the father's death. And that must be an extraordinary thing to stage as an image and also to pace, having that many people on stage and being able to pay attention to them and letting them fade into the foreground and background at the moments that were needed. That must have been a really interesting problem.

Declan 16:10
Yeah, I mean, I loved that! I love directing that scene in the minutiae. They all have so many activities. We worked out the dinner, and it was great fun to do that. Fantastic. But you know, it took me a long time to work out that the predicament starts straight away, which his father died exactly a year ago today... and yet, we're having this big party. And when I first heard the play, my father hadn't died, or my mother hadn't died - but I know that when your parents die, on the whole, whatever your relationship has been with them, you know, the day when they comes. You watch the clock hands go round, it's very difficult to forget it. And there's something quite cut off about it, that they can do that. There's no room for grieving.

Lucie 16:54
Well, what's so fascinating about this is I think people who might have seen really bad productions of Chekhov often feel like their plays in which nothing happens, right? in which everything stands still. It's a grand old piece of stasis. But actually, it takes so much energy to quarantine your feelings like that, right, to shut out that whole part of your life. That is a brutal act that you're doing to yourself every day.

Declan 17:19
Yeah.

Lucie 17:20
We are watching these women kind of emotionally mutilate themselves through the play.

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Declan 17:25
Yeah.

Lucie 17:25
In the name of, kind of, keeping it together.

Declan 17:28
Yesh, but it's very, it's a very modern problem. Here we are sitting down in COVID days. You know, keeping ourselves together has become quite a feat, really, in a way. But yeah, that's exactly what it is. I mean, the amount of energy that we expend doing nothing. Paralysis is exhausting.

Lucie 18:17
One of the things that we talk about a lot as well in these podcasts is how important it is to pay attention to the things that aren't there.

Declan 18:25
Yes.

Lucie 18:25
And there seems to be an awful lot of that in Three Sisters. Something that is literally just offstage that is putting massive amounts of pressure on what we're seeing. I mean, particularly in the third act, where there's a massive fire going on outside, and there's two little girls at the bottom of the stairs crying, you know, all the way through it, we've always got Protopopov just off stage lurking, or we've got those two little children crying in the background. And that must have been a really fun design proposal for you, Nick.

Nick 18:55
Well, the way we treated it was well, we opened with presenting all these characters, as you say, Lucie, on stage, but with a sort of model of the house like a doll's house, really. And essentially, as you say the threat is - you don't see it, but it's talked about - is the town represented by Natasha, and you never actually go out of the house, really. Because when they do go to the house at the end, they're only going into the garden. We know quite a lot about the town, but we never go into it.

Declan 19:26
It even has a theatre, the town. I mean, all sorts of things are happening in the town. But they're in their bubble.

Lucie 19:31
And so this play also seems to be an awful lot about two words that you use a lot in these podcasts: inclusion and exclusion. It's a lot about what they're letting in and what they're keeping out. And it's a fight between those two things all the way through the play. And it seems particularly a problem with the character of Vershinin as well, who seems to be coming to this house in order to run away from something else that's going on in its life. Can you tell us more about that?

Declan 19:59
Well, yes, I mean I think the important thing always, if I say something mean about characters, make sure that my own shoes are firmly on the floor and never rise above him.

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But yes, he does deceive himself. And he much rather - rather than face up to the problems that he has at home, you know, he's married, it's his second wife he's married to, and they have daughters, and they need to be looked after, and his wife can't look after them, and that is a problem that he's got to sort out - but he'd much rather spend the night, as he calls it, philosophising, distracting himself with the sisters, and seducing one of them. And I think we may assume that he's a sort of serial seducer.

Lucie 20:35
And so we get this idea that everything that's also driving Verhinin is more of a running away than a running towards. He's trying to exclude the really uncomfortable thing in his life and go out and do something else to anaesthetise himself.

Declan 20:47
In a way, yes, and the army offers him a marvellous excuse because it keeps moving on. So he can wreck one marriage, and then he can go and presumably wreck other in another town.

Lucie 20:57
And it leads back to this idea that we keep on coming back to - with the three sisters, with Vershinin, with every character that we talk about - that the most useful thing in understanding their behaviour is what do they fear, not what do they want?

Declan 21:13
That's absolutely true. This thing isn't going to hold. I mean, first of all, it's like there's no adult - the parents died, and didn't make any of them in a way into adults. They aren't able to look after themselves, they aren't able to look after each other. And they will rot there. But I don't know what else they can do. Do they sell up, go to Moscow, face reality? Maybe that's the best thing to do. Or, you know, if a miracle happened to think, 'hey, we're going to make it go of it in the town, let's go into the town we'll teach things!' They want to be useful. They want to work, there's loads of work they could do in the village schools that were starting up at that time, there's so much things that they could do to give them a life. But they're frightened, I think, if they go into that local town that they will disintegrate.

Lucie 21:53
And so it's again a lot more about what they're running away from, what they don't want.

Declan 21:58
Yes, and also how we keep our aspirations and our ambitions, sometimes, as a defence against what we're doing now. Nevermind today, what about tomorrow? You know, and I'd say, that's our problem isn't it really. Anywhere but here, and anytime but now!

Lucie 22:13
So they can't bear to be present. It's not a play about people sitting around a country house doing nothing. It' a play about people desperately trying to avoid being in the present moment. And in amongst all of these characters, I know that you think there's one character in this play, who's our sort of heroine, who is very good at being in the here and now and being grateful.

Declan 22:35

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Anfisa, the much put upon maid! That's one that Natasha screams at and says, 'how dare you sit down in my presence?' And Olga says, 'you mustn't speak to the servants like that.' And that's a old money versus new money thing you know, that old money knows you shouldn't be rude to the servants. In the middle of all of this entitlement Anfisa comes back at the end to say hello to everybody and says, you know, 'I'm so happy. I'm in this house, and I've got my own room, and I have my own bed. And I have my own mug.' It's like somebody is actually grateful for something!

Lucie 23:08
So it's reveals all of their entitlement and all of their self-deception in one blow.

Declan 23:13
Yes, but it only works if we can see it looking back at us. A good artist, really, is looking at saying and are you so different? What's your Moscow? What's your local town? You know...

Lucie 23:25
Have you got a mug that you're overlooking?

Declan 23:27
Yeah, lots of mugs. Oh, absolutely.

Nick 23:29
Yeah, I think the problem with the place is that you never tably sentimentalise it because you're dealing with glamorous looking people: three beautiful sisters, glamorous soldiers. So the whole thing inevitably tends towards a rosy glow. But if you read if you read Chekhov's short stories, then you get his voice, and it's bleak. It's so bleak. And you realise that actually Chekhov's voice is missing. And if you had Chekhov's voice, and he was telling the story of the three sisters, you would realise that there was so much darkness and horror there.

Lucie 24:06
What I really loved about your production is the way that you really underlined the fact that in these moments of self-deception, as everybody energetically tried to avoid being in the here and now, something awful is going on underneath. I'm particularly thinking of the moment where Masha has been torn off Vershinin as he leaves at the end, and she's screaming and crying and Kulygin, her husband, come in and has to say,' well, we're kind of going to get on and stay married anyway'. And in the midst of all of this upset, he puts on a silly beard that one of his students had left, and is dancing around to make her laugh. And they do all laugh and it's a moment of levity, and they all come together. And that's the moment that you hear the gunshot, and you know that Tusenbach has died and they suddenly all freeze... and then don't talk about it. And you chose exactly that moment to rip the rug out from under our feet. Which felt very true to that hidden voice of Chekhov in the play.

Declan 25:05
There was this big cry at the end of the play when they're talking about 100 years time. And Olga says, 'if only we knew!' And the answer to he is, 'but you did!' And also so interesting what Irina says, as soon as she hears it, she goes, 'I knew it!' And I think, 'well, if you knew it, why didn't you go?' One thing I'd say about Three Sisters I find very moving is Tusenbach's last lines when he goes out. He's on his way to the duel that everybody knows is going to kill him and no one's doing anything about it. And he goes out and he comes to Irina and he says, you know, 'do you love me?' and she says, 'you know, I'l marry, I'll do

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leverything for you. But I'm like an expensive piano that somebody lost the key to.' And he says, 'say something to me.' The word he uses 'schtonibut' - tell me something, something! 'Schtonibut' mean something between something and anything. 'Schtonibut'. Andrey Kusichev who played the part of Tusenbach, used to do this extraordinary wail when he said, 'schtonibut' - that awful wail of somebody who wants something that they don't know what it is. And Irina looks at him, and she doesn't know what it is either. And I've heard that wail so often, very often between teenage kids and their parents, that sort of desperately wants something and can't have it. I think it's the 'schtonibut' moment. It's, 'give it to me give it to me!' 'What, what?' 'Just something anything!' And I've often felt it myself. And I've often I've been on both sides of somebody saying, 'give it to me', and I don't know what it is, or me saying, 'give it to me', and they don't know what it is. But it's terribly human.

Lucie 26:40
So this kind of desperate hope that someone else is going to fill this void.

Declan 26:44
Some hole - and you don't know what it is. This void, this dread nothingness, emptiness, that you're going to be able to make it all right for me. And she kind of can't because she's like a piona that's the key. I mean, she can't do the thing he wants to do. And it's sort of almost like he goes on to commit suicide. But yeah, I think the 'schtonibut' moment. Yeah, that's one of things I've most enjoyed.

Lucie 27:05
And, Nick, what's one of the things that you most enjoyed about staging this production?

Nick 27:10
Well, I think the key to it for us was to keep it completely fluid. So it tends to be (in traditional productions that I've seen) it tends to be rather heavyweight in terms of scenery. You have the house, and you tend to have the table upstage, and following the stage directions, you would put a table upstage horizontally, in some sort of porch, underneath the house, and the house would be very physically present. I mean, the Prozorov house, of course, is incredibly present. But we were able to keep it open and free and suggest it only with pieces of furniture and tables and chairs, which was fantastic.

Lucie 27:46
One of my favourite moments in the play is the moment when Irina in act one gets given a spinning top for her birthday, and it's set spinning on the floor. And because you had this long table coming straight at us at the audience, they all stood up around this table in this tableau and just stared at the spinning top. And it was sort of the first moment of stillness in the whole play, of this group of fully grown adults obsessively staring at a child's toy. There was something very uncanny about that moment. And that was a moment where you really felt they really are in the shit, because this is what they're focusing on.

Declan 28:24
Yes, yes, exactly. Yes. I mean, the hugely important thing is that we don't trust the characters, and then that we think, 'yeah, but what's my part in this?' I think that's really important. 'And am I any better. Do I not have my own version of this?

Lucie 28:37
How do I keep myself blind to the difficult things in my life?

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Declan 28:40
Yeah, exactly. Yes. What bubble am I in?

Lucie 28:43
And one of the things that I find fascinating about the title is that it's called Three Sisters. But this family isn't just three sisters, there's a brother, Andrey, who gets kind of obliterated by them in many ways.

Declan 29:00
Yes. He's always kind of pushed to the edge, never quite allowed to be one of them.

Nick 29:04
But poor old Andrey, I mean, there was so much pressure on him from the three sisters because there were all those expectations. At the beginning, they say, he's going to be a professor. And if you think about it, then I suppose at the time, women were naturally expected to take second place. And poor Andrey was supposed to take the lead and become the professor. And of course, he was never up to it.

Lucie 29:28
And there's that brilliant Chekhovian turn in the second act where he finally gets someone to talk to you about how difficult life is for him. He goes on a great long monologue about it and then it turns out the person he's talking to id deaf and can't hear a word that he said, and it's so funny, but also it's so sad because his importance is just a raised from this family.

Nick 29:52
But they don't want to erase him. They would like it if he became a professor but he doesn't have the talent or whatever. And I suspect that very pressure meant that he buckled.

Declan 30:05
I suppose the fantasy vaguely is that everything's going to go on, there will be no change in the world now mummy and daddy have died. But somehow magically, he's going to make it all right, and they'll just sort of go on in this child's house. They're living in a kind of child's house, basically, and just not facing up the fact that you have to accept change.

Lucie 30:24
And you showed that beautifully with Irina's costuming, I think, in the first act, that you had her with this great big, long, curly hair up in a bow, looking quite like a little girl.

Declan 30:32
Yeah.

Lucie 30:33
And it's her 21st birthday. And she's sort of floating around the stage playing with children's toys, and draped over this doll's house. And it's really worrying because you think, actually, she hasn't grown up.

Declan 30:46
I know! And there are great forces on her to grow up.

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Lucie 30:49
Now what do you think is the most difficult thing to do when staging Three Sisters, Nick?

Nick 30:55
I suppose the most difficult thing is the first act, which is around this long table - well, it needs to be a long table because there are 13 people at the dinner. And to allow that to be right in the middle of the stage is, I think, essential. Otherwise, it's a bit like having the balcony in Romeo and Juliet right upstage. No. You need it where you can see it downstage.

Lucie 31:19
What about you, Declan? What was a real mindbender for you?

Declan 31:23
I remember Lev Dodin from St Petersburg saying to me, 'Declan, just when you do it, watch the second act when they come around and play patience, and the wind whistles in the window and Vershinin makes his move on Masha.' But he's right, that there's a lot of centres of interest in it. But actually, I really like all that. I like difficult staging. I mean, the really difficult thing in Three Sisters is that you're pretending everything's all right, but it's not all right. But the actor can't say, 'but do you want us to look more unsettled Declan?' And the answer is 'no. I just want to play it as brightly as as you want to, as we can. I'm just telling you this, which is a sort of secret, it's something that we will talk about, we will work, we will do exercises on this.' There's only one thing you can play, and that is what is conscious. So if you start to show that there's something wrong in this house, then it'll go awry, you'll start to indicate. So the thing is to have confidence that the thing that you know is going to inform what you do.

Lucie 32:22
And so this is what you call the invisible work.

Declan 32:24
Yeah, I talked about that in The Actor and The Target a lot. Yes, there's the invisible work that nourishes what you what you play, but there are certain things you mustn't play.

Lucie 32:32
So the invisible work is everything that you prepare before you get up and actually try and play the scene. And then you just trust that it's there.

32:38
Yeah, you have to pray it will be there. And on the whole, you know, it is!

Lucie 32:41
So it's a bit like practising your scales for the piano. When you actually play the piece, you're not going to play the scales,

Declan 32:46
Yes, you have to trust that your unconscious is there. The problem (going back to what we said in earlier podcasts) is that the left part of your brain doesn't want there to be an unconscious thing there. So the left part of the brain is going to be the part of brain that panics you, and makes you say, 'this won't be clear, this won't be clear. Why am I - how should I play - how - ?' And that's when the left brain starts take over. No, you've got to calm

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down and say, 'it'll be fine!' And we try it a few times. And all of that stuff about 'schtonibut' that Andrey Kusichev did so well, that all came from these things.

Lucie 33:20
So in other words, it's the fact that underneath Three Sisters, there's this terrible amount of darkness and dread in their lives. But the actors can't go onstage and play dread. They've got to play the scene and trust that that stuff is going to be there if they've investigated it properly.

Declan 33:35
Yes, but it's like real life! In real life, we're not seeing things, we're seeing reactions to things. We're not seeing the things themselves, do you know. So whatever I say to you, it's a reaction to an impulse that I have, and I'm reacting to it. No, I mean, in one respect the structure of Three Sisters is very simple. We're on the Titanic, and we know from the first line, and it's just, you know, what time is it going to go down? And it starts to go glug, glug, glug, glug and the more it goes down, the faster they dance, and they're denying it. Or it's like 'encore une journee divine - another heavenly day!' - Winnie in Happy Days - you know, you think, 'no, Winnie, you're buried up to your waist in sand!' So the great authors are on their knees, begging us not to leave our common sense outside and have the self-esteem to understand that we can have an independent point of view. That they can say, 'listen to the music play!' and, 'one has gone and one is staying' - and we can listen to that and take a critical distance from it. And I think it puts us, like any piece of great art does, it puts us in a difficult position. It makes us feel uncomfortable. We don't feel safe. I think Chekhov and Shakespeare, they are desperate for is not leave our common sense outside the theatre. But we do leave our common sense outside, and people will hear the music playing and we will sob, but the deal is you should hear the music playing and sob, and then think, 'why the fuck am I sobbing?' You should look at your own emotional reaction to it at the same time as having it. And you think, 'what exactly am I being moved about here?'

Lucie 35:05
And it's so wonderful that Chekhov is able to do that, that he's able to completely hook us emotionally and then complicate our own relationship with ourselves as we watch these plays.

Declan 35:16
I've made it sound complicated. It isn't complicated. It's like some childhood joke. You laugh and you think, 'why am I laughing? That's not funny.' And you have a reaction, but it's about yourself, a great piece of art will put you into, very often, a process of self examination. And not because the author is clever or is above you. But they know exactly where to hit the stone to split it into, they know exactly where to put the finger into you.

Lucie 35:39
Thank you very much Declan and Nick, for a grand introduction to Three Sisters. We're going to meet again next week for more talks about plays.

Declan 35:49
Thank you, Lucie.

Nick 35:50
Thanks, Lucie.

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Lucie 35:57
Thank you for listening to this week's episode of 'Not True, But Useful...' If you want to take a look at clips and images from Cheek by Jowl's production of Three Sisters, simply follow the link in the podcast notes. The theme music for this series was composed by Paddy Cunneen for Cheek by Jowl's production of The Winter's Tale with additional music in this episode by Sergey Chekryzhov for Three Sisters. Join us next week when we get to grips with Measure for Measure. Until then, stay well.

FINAL T&C

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SPEAKERS
Nick, Lucie, Declan

Lucie 00:06
Welcome to series three of 'Not True, But Useful...', a podcast from Cheek by Jowl. I'm your host, Lucie Dawkins, and every week I'm chatting to artistic directors Declan Donnelan and Nick Ormerod, looking back at four decades of their productions all across the world. Together, we'll take a look at what these plays have to tell us about the messy business of being human. Our play this week is Shakespeare's Troilus and Cressida, a tale taken from the epic Greek myth of the Trojan War - and here's a quick synopsis before we begin. The story starts years into the war. As the Greeks besiege the city of Troy, a Trojan prince, Troilus, falls in love with Cressida. She's the daughter of a priest Calchas, who's defected to the Greek side. Troilus' uncle Pandarus arranges for them to sleep together secretly. Meanwhile, both sides argue about their next moves in the war.Troilus and his brothers, the Trojan princes Hector and Paris, debate about whether they should return Helen, the Greek queen who eloped with Paris to Troy. Hector wants peace but the young Troilus urges them to continue fighting. Their sister, the prophetess Cassandra warns them that it will all end in disaster. Unfortunately, she's under a curse, which means that she's never believed. In the Greek camp, Achilles (the greatest of all of the heroes) refuses to fight anymore, after being snubbed by the generals Agamemnon and Menelaus. Morale is generally low, and Ulysses, another commander, comes up with a plan to set up a duel between the Trojan crown prince Hector and a Greek hero. He chooses Ajax as the Greek champion, as a deliberate insult to Achilles, in the hope that this will goad him into fighting again. Ajax' slave Thersites wanders the camp mocking them all. Cressida's father, the treacherous Calchas, arranges an exchange of a Trojan prisoner in return for his daughter, and Cressida is forced to go to the Greek camp. Hector and Ajax fight their duel, which ends in a drawer. Under a temporary truce, the Trojan princes come to the Greek camp for a feast. There, Ulysses helps Troilus spy on Cressida in the moment she agrees to become the lover of the Greek soldier Diomedes for her own protection. Troilus, heartbroken, throws himself into battle the next day. The Trojans nearly defeat the Greeks, but in doing so, Hector kills Achilles' lover Patroclus and in a grief-fuelled rage, Achilles returns to battle, gruesomely slaughtering

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Hector in revenge and dragging his corpse around the walls of Troy. The Trojans returned to the city for the funeral of their hero. Declan an Nick staged this production with Cheek by Jowl in 2008, and also separately with the Bergtheatre in Vienna in 2000. And now, over to them. So hello, Declan and Nick.

Nick 03:14
Hello, Lucie.

Declan 03:14
Hello, Lucie.

Lucie 03:15
So today we're going to talk about Troilus and Cressida, which is a kind of strange, weird play. It really disintegrates as it goes through the plot, and it comes hot on the heels of one of Shakespeare's most famous hits, Hamlet. Why choose Troilus and Cressida? What appeals to you about this play?

Declan 03:31
Well, it's a play you find particularly interesting, I think, when you're young, because it's full of ideas, and it has a very clear mission. It's anti-war, and it shows how leaders who lead wars are stupid. And it's very, very clever, and it has some brilliant writing in it. I think it wasn't a popular play when it was performed - apparently is possible that it wasn't actually performed at the time that it was written. And it was written in the closing years of Queen Elizabeth's reign. England was at war, and it was at war with Ireland. And the war was very bloody and England was basically losing. And it's very much like Vietnam for the Americans in the 1960s - mentions of Ireland in Shakespeare's work are kept to a minimum because it's a taboo subject. And it was only at the very end of Elizabeth's reign under Mountjoy that Ireland was finally (well, it wasn't finally...) it was brought to heel to a certain degree - that the horrible 17th century happened to Ireland. But war was almost a taboo subject. It's very difficult for us to understand that when James takes over in 1603 he brought peace, because Elizabeth's reign was very turbulent, and people were exhausted with war, and people from all over England were losing family members, were losing sons. It was like sending your kids to the Somme. And it was hugely important an issue to people. It was an obsession, and so was hardly ever written about because the Lord Chamberlain would just not give permission for it. So this play is a very anti-war play when there would have been a lot of anti-war feeling growing in England, and that possibly accounts for the fact that it wasn't performed. James Shapiro has developed this at much greater length and much greater depth in his fantastic book '1599', which actually places Troilus and Cressida among other plays in the actual living experience of the Londoners who would have gone to see it at the time. And it's remained popular, very often through universities. Nick and I both did it at university. It's very cynical, and it's very clever.

Lucie 05:27
And so what did you both play in it at university, in your first encounter with this play?

Nick 05:31
I played Deiphobus, whose name is longer than his line. And I can still remember the line. The line is, 'it is the lord Aeneas.'

Lucie 05:40

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What did you play Declan?

Declan 05:41
I played soldier and I actually had no line. So anyway, hey ho! The play itself is incredibly interesting. It's probably the first play after Hamlet. Hamlet, in a way, is an outrageous play because it's about a revenge hero who doesn't take his revenge. And it's a play about a hero who does nothing. And in order to do nothing, of course, he has to do everything. He even directs a play! But it's about somebody who essentially is doing nothing. So in a way, there's something sort of perverse and transgressive and a little bit clever about Hamlet, but it never crosses that line into cleverness. All the evidence points to the fact that Hamlet was an enormous hit. I think it's that he had this huge success. And great failures are dangerous for an artist, but terrific successes are also bring their own danger. It's quite discombobulating, because in a way, you don't know what you have to reach for. You know, you weep like Alexander for the struggle, really. And he decided to do something even more clever than Hamlet, that was going to be even more outrageous. And so what he decides to do is to take on Homer, and he's going to take the main characters from the Iliad, and show how funny and silly most of them are. The war is being disastrous, led by the generals who can't agree, and who bicker among themselves and play silly games with each other while bloodshed is happening, and that's clearly a satire on on what was happening in England at the time in London. And when I was young, it appealed to my show-off cynicism, because it was a very clever play. It's a very kind of clever dick play. But I think it's the most un-Shakespearean of the Shakespeare plays that I know.

Lucie 07:20
So why would you describe this as an un-Shakespearean play?

Declan 07:23
Well, because from my perspective, the glory of Shakespeare is the relentless horizontality he has with his characters. He absolutely refuses to judge them. He doesn't even judge Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. And at the end, when Malcolm says 'this dead butcher and his fiend-like queen', it's a moment when we have to think, well, that's not quite what we've seen, it's more complicated than that, because Shakespeare manages to maintain this extraordinary horizontal view. The image I'd like to give, if it's at all useful, is to imagine that there's a long straight tunnel dug through a huge mountain, and that to see through the tunnel, we have to put our feet exactly in a position so that our eyes are exactly horizontal with the tunnel - and then we can see through the whole tunnel. But if we are slightly superior, in other words, if we're slightly above the tunnel, and we look down it we won't see very far. We'll see nothing. And if we are very inferior, if we're under the tunnel, we aren't going to see anything at all. You have to be absolutely bang in alignment with it to see it. And the glory of Shakespeare is that he's able to do that. Why can't we do that? Because we like judging, because we like moralising, because we'd like to make ourselves safe. But if we can spend as much time as possible looking horizontally through things, we can see that the world is a wonderful place. But above all, we have to do something very, very humble and just look where our shoes are, and make sure we're in that place where we can see through things to the horizontal end. But the temptation is to judge and punish and blame or to be bitter, to go under. And I think Shakespeare got discombobulated. I suspect that the massive success of Hamlet probably surprised him. It probably delighted him, but also made him probably feel possibly invincible, and he's got to do something to eclipse it. And as we know, there are a lot of people who have one big success early on and never repeat it, and they become victims of that. So he's not going to do that. He thinks that he's going to take on the Iliad, he's going to take on all Homer's great characters, and he's going to debunk them. And

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I think he kind of descends into satire. He's satirises these things. Now, satire is a wonderful form, but the problem with satire in terms of art is that when you satirise something, you put yourself in a position above it, and however great a satirist is, like Jonathan Swift or Pope or whatever, they assume a slightly elevated position and they flatter you into being a slightly elevated position as well, so the two of you, the artist and the observer, are looking down on the subject matter. Yeah, and it's great fun, and it's community building. And then we can all be part of the club that's looking down at these people who are under us. But I mean, the reason that Shakespeare is so important to me is that he manages to maintain that horizontality and he never goes into judgement. But I think he veers into it in Troilus and Cressida. It's got a very funny beginning. It's like he's he's is sending it up. He makes it so clear that he's being hokum. I remember Marianne Oldham did it brilliantly as Helen of Troy in our production, and it starts: 'in Troy, there lies the scene from isles of Greece, the princes orgulous, their high blood chafed, have to the port of Athens sent their ships fraught with the ministers and instruments of cruel war, sixty and nine that wore their crownets regal'. It's so obviously a send up.

Lucie 10:53
Like deliberately overblown language - 'orgulous'!

Declan 10:57
Exactly, and it's also sending up a bombastic previous style of theatre around the time of the Spanish Tragedy, and so when he sends it up, I think he opens a bad door. And we should breathe a great sigh of relief that he slammed it shot again. And then after that, I suspect he suffered after Troilus and Cressida, and he comes to write his greatest plays. And and it would be a pity if he'd stopped with Hamlet, because I think Macbeth, Othello, Lear go far further than anything that's in Hamlet.

Lucie 11:27
And so given that it's not very Shakespearean amongst Shakespeare's plays, given that it is quite superior about how stupid these generals are -

Declan 11:39
- Yeah -

Lucie 11:39
- What is it that still there in Troilus and Cressida that made it so appealing for you to put on stage?

Declan 11:45
Because it's brilliant, the lines are amazing, and it is very funny. And it's very clever. And it does give this nihilistic view of the world. I mean, it ends with Pandarus, (who's a kind of go between, he sets up this relationship between Troilus and Cressida) he comes on stage as, we assume, Troy's falling. And he's he basically says, I'm suffering from a venereal disease, and I give you my diseases. So he wishes his scabs on the audience. It's pretty strong. But at the end of the day, I found myself, as I get older, thinking, nihilism is a bit boring, really. I mean, you have to look at it sometimes in your life. But actually, you've got to stand up and live as well. There are many very good plays that tell us life's piece of shit. Very, very, very good plays, and very good works of art that just tell us, it's all just crap. But I don't know... it's not enough, you need a bit more oxygen in you than that. So even in a play as negative as King Lear, about terrible, terrible suffering and pain, that still somehow had oxygen in it, you

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can still feel good to be alive. It doesn't just say 'you're so stupid not to despair'. He'd had also a big hit with Romeo and Juliet. So many people sort of still look at Troilus and Cressida and think, oh, it will be an ancient Greek version of Romeo and Juliet. And it isn't.

Lucie 13:04
Well, it's sort of about anything other than Troilus and Cressida. In this play, they get very little stage time, and really only kind of half a scene together, where it's just them.

Declan 13:12
Well, I think it's also so interesting because in making the work, you discover an awful lot about your relationship with the work - that instead of going in with all the answers, you make a thing, and it changes your attitude towards the thing that you've made. You look at what you've made, and then you discover a lot about yourself. Well, yeah, I know. The terrible thing in the plot is that they get together in Troy while it's under this appalling siege. And then her father who defects to the Greek camp, he asks for her to be given an exchange for some Torjan prisoners. And so she goes to the Greek camp. And on her arrival, she's basically assaulted by the Greek army, and she has to go to Diomedes for protection. And that's a very brutal scene, and because it's written by Shakespeare, it's very, very, very unsettling what happens in that scene. But what happens then is that Troilus goes to the Greek camp, and Ulysses decides to tell him that Cressida in fact being false, (whatever false means!), that she's in fact now with Diomedes having sworn eternal love to Troilus. And so he takes Troilus to see a love scene between Diomedes and Cressida. But while that's happening Thersites comes on stage, and he's shows us Ulysses showing troilus the scene between Diomedes and Cressida, so you have this incredibly complex Renaissance magic box of, I'm telling you to see this person who's telling somebody else to see something else to do something else. And it's very, very clever... but I don't get overwhelmed by my feelings watching Troilus and Cressida. It's the a sort of play I would have done when I was young, because I'd want to prove how clever I was. But I've had to dismantle my cleverness, to grow older, it wouldn't really interest me so much, I don't think, to do the play anymore. When I started, I started being clever and competing with other young directors and so on and going through the supermarket of ideas, and I had to wean myself off that slowly and painfully. Yeah, of course. I mean, of course what art is, you know, we see things and the things that we see to tell us things about ourselves. And I think we should all just be really glad that Shakespeare didn't go down that satire route, and he suffered a bit and came back and became much less clever. There's nothing clever about, you know, 'who would have thought the old man had so much blood in him', and 'let him smell his way to Dover'. There's nothing clever in them. But there's a lot that's kind of clever in Troilus and Cressida. Having said that, it is wonderful! And Troilus has this amazing speech, you know, 'yet after all comparisons of truth, as truth's authentic author to be cited, as true as Troilus shall crown up the verse'. I think Shakespeare's worried (as I am) about doctrines of authenticity, the one thing that you - and it's dangerous, talking about the truth, because none of us knows what the truth is.

Lucie 16:02
So right now, this seems to be a play that you wouldn't put on again. And there are lots of plays that you've come back and back and back to, but Troilus and Cressida isn't one. What was it all the way back in 2006, 2007, when you were getting ready to put this play on - what was it then that really compelled you to do the play, that's changed now?

Declan 16:22

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I think the need to investigate it, because it is Shakespeare and he has been somebody I've pledged my trust to over the years. And I'm not disappointed by the play at all - who am I to be disappointed by something as as great as Troilus and Cressida? One thing I would say is we've always been served really well by the actors, we had Birgit Minichmayr, who was Cressida at the Burgtheatre. And we had Alex Waldman and Lucy Briggs-Owen as Troilus and Cressida over here, and we have amazing ensembles, I just sort of see it differently. And I appreciate more this great horizontality and how it is simple avoidance of judgement. And it's a simple alignment on one side of that tunnel. And I hadn't really tweaked that quite so vividly, but it's only in recent years that I realised that's what singles him and Chekhov and other people out from others.

Lucie 17:35
So Nick, what about you? What is it that you find really compelling about Troilus and Cressida?

Nick 17:40
Well, I think I, I have a memory that I think it was my, not my fault, but my idea to do Troilus way back in 2007. And I was drawn to it - apart from that there are brilliant, brilliant scenes, it's also a great play for characters, and a great ensemble play because all the characters are wonderful. It seemed to me and still seems to me is that it's very much about war, and also the delusion that war is glamorous. And I felt we needed to make that statement, which it's true for people who have never experienced war that it has this potential of glamour about it. And that counterpoint between glamour and the reality, the bloody reality, the bloody, dirty, shitty reality of war seems to me at the heart of the play.

Declan 18:30
Yeah, like later on. He has Othello talk about 'the pride, pomp and circumstance of glorious war', which is a very strange line because I've met many soldiers and talked to them about their jobs, and they never talk about 'the pride, pomp and circumstance of glorious war'. If you ask soldiers why they do it, they nearly always say, 'we do it for our mates'. And Othello (who suffers, like all of the great Shakespeare characters from now on, from a gnawing sense of inauthenticity) when he talks about 'the pride, pomp and circumstance of glorious war', you feel like it's a tabloid newspaper speaking. So it's like he's seeing himself from the outside as what a soldier is supposed to sound like. And that's a very important theme in the play, is that there is no glamour in war, and they're denying war, and they're singing love songs, and they're having affairs. And the Greeks are playing silly, childish games to humiliate Achilles and when they start playing basically silly buggers with Ajax and humiliating Ajax by playing funny games and pretending to ignore him, with them all walking past and ignoring him and they end up playing silly, childish games. They go back to being a public school, as suppose these big generals do. I suppose that's what it is they revert to, except they've also now got weapons of mass destruction on their hands and something very plausible about that. All the time that these terrible things are happening. I remember Nick, we were thinking about how to do the armour and we were on tour with the Russian actors in Chile, and we were being taken around by our guide, around Santiago de Chile. It was quite a quiet Saturday afternoon, and suddenly there were some protesters there who were indigenous people from Chile, and there was a very small peaceful demonstration. Suddenly these three police vans came up and started clobbering them. And Nick and I looked around, and there are people sitting there licking ice creams completely calmly, in a completely different rhythm. And the most frightening thing wasn't so much just the people being treated with this incredible brutality, but the silence from the crowd licking ice creams.

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But I remember we noticed the armour that the police were wearing, and it was sort of... well, how would you describe it?

Nick 20:40
It was classic riot gear, armour, but the potential for both glamour and violence in the same costume did strike us quite strongly. So that's how we went with the production here. We used this white plastic armour for the Trojans and black for the Greeks,

Declan 21:01
I'm sure is also very important for now because you know, it's an unsettled alliance of Western nations joining together to invade the Middle East, and to get back by Christmas. And then you're not back by Christmas, and everybody surprised again. So how much time do you need for wisdom of hindsight to pass? The other really important line is when, during the Greek rows about it, they say, 'Troy in our weakness stands, not in her strength'. In other words, it's not because Troy is strong, it's because we are weak. And I think at election time it's a very good idea to think about that. Did they get in because they were strong, or did they get in because we were weak? It's really interesting to see how theatre and the politics that are happening at the moment can intertwine. Nick and I were doing it at the Burgtheatre in Vienna as the 20th century became the 21st century. And I remember standing on this very impressive balcony at the front of both church at midnight, looking out over this huge square. And Nick and I went to a demonstration to boo Haider, who was being inaugurated as the Prime Minister by the chancellor. He didn't last long, but he was the first of the populist politicians to come along, and there have been horrifying election results. And in recent years, particularly the terrible year of 2016. And sometimes I think we need to repeat to ourselves that line, 'Troy in our weakness stands, not in her strength'. We came back one day and we discovered that dressing rooms at the Burgtheatre and the corridors were completely packed. And the stage doorman had let in the armed police, the police that we're patrolling the demonstrators, and we said, 'so what what are they doing here?' and they said, 'well, we let them in because it's cold.' I said, 'yes, but the demonstrators are in the cold as well!' We went down the corridors, and they're so aggressive, those riot shields and guns and God knows what, and they were packed down the corridor sheltering from the snow, and actors were going past them on stage. And I couldn't handle it, actually. And I said, 'I'm sorry, I have to go, or we'll have to cancel the performance.' It was very uncomfortable, the idea of having the police inside or not the protesters, and I don't know, it just completely shone a light into the heart of what was happening in the play of Troilus and Cressida.

Lucie 23:18
The other thing that seems to be really unhealthy in the heart of the Troilus and Cressida relationship is actually something that we encountered last week with Much Ado, which is that there's a third person in the relationship with them. Last week, we talked about the fact that Don Pedro is really the one brokering the relationship between Claudio and Hero. And that that is really unhealthy, and they have to detach from him by the end of the play in order to keep going. But here Troilus and Cressida do not exist as a couple without Pandorus.

Declan 23:47
Yes, he's brought them together. And he gets off on the fact that he can control these people by facilitating their love. But he should introduce them, and then bugger off and leave them, you know? Yes, that is very unhealthy.

Lucie 23:59

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And it seems to be something that that Shakespeare is fascinated by, because he keeps on reforging this pattern in lots of the plays. I mean, you've got the nurse with Romeo and Juliet, who's facilitating in ways that are really problematic. You've got Don Pedro and Much Ado. And here, it seems to be the most extreme version of it, that Pandarus' interest in this relationship seems really troubling. And you see within it a very sad and lonely man.

Declan 24:25
No, I think that's something arguably dodgy about any matchmaking, because it's often to do with people who are older, and they want to live again through this. But then it's like they want to be central to the whole thing, and they have to be excluded in order for that couple to work. So yeah, but it's quite human. I think the nurse in Romeo and Juliet, though, is to do with the fact that there's another big Shakespearean theme about where are the parents? Where are the adults? There's no one to look after anyone anymore.

Lucie 24:56
So Declan, there's a really interesting piece of double casting in this production, which is that you had Marianne Oldham playing both Helen, the woman who's caused the war, who stormed through the middle of your production as a source of ultra-celebrity in an incredible gown, but she also played Cassandra, the prophet that no one listens to. Why have one actress playing those two parts? I think it was the only piece of double casting in the production.

Declan 25:23
I don't think it's actually fair to say that Helen has caused the war, when the men have caused the war!

Lucie 25:29
I completely agree, as the part of the Iliad which I would always rewrite - Helen is not the cause of the war!

Declan 25:34
The men use her to cause the war! I think you've explained it already. It's because the Helen was was always with Paris, and they were always being photographed in it. They were they're doing a magazine cover with lots of makeup artists and so on. And he was in his military uniform and she was hanging on to him, exactly like one might expect on a cover. So there was that whole celebrity camp, the hokum that surrounds war. And then Cassandra, who's the person who sees the real thing that's really going to happen, and she's going to be terribly destroyed afterwards, and that no one will listen to.

Lucie 26:08
So Nick, I think you've got a real talent in pointing out within scripts things that are sometimes overlooked, or maybe small in the text, that are actually really pivotal in the world of the play. Was there anything in Troilus and Cressida that you felt was really important to point up in that way?

Nick 26:27
Well, I'm not sure it was my decision, but Thersites a particularly vivid character, I think, though he may not have that much to say, and we played him with the wonderful Richard Cant as a drag queen. And I think what that does point up quite strongly is the homosocial nature, particularly of the Greek army. And there was one sequence (again, I don't know

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where it came from) but all the men in this hyper-male camp, actually simply danced with each other. It was ballroom dancing. And it was very touching somehow, because you got a strong sense of these isolated men together, unselfconsciously dancing.

Declan 27:11
Yes, we did that to point out the absence of women, you know, women sort of become present by their absence. I remember once doing a workshop in a prison in Rio, and being taken around. I did a drama workshop with them, and they were taking me around to show the cells. And I can't explain it, but it was very moving. The way that the men had, each of them, had tended to their cells, you felt very much the presence of women. It was like they were trying to make women happen, somehow, unconsciously. It was just something in the cells that looked like their mothers had made the beds, I don't know what it was, it was a sort of domestic feel to it. But I found it quite incredibly moving. And I think that was why we had Richard dressed as a woman singing the song and the men all ballroom dancing. It was the missing of women.

Lucie 28:04
Do you think it was that by putting this figure that crossed genders, that broke down the barriers, who created these opportunities like this intimate ballroom dancing to appear, and to see the underside of this highly heteronormative highly uber-masculine, highly violent atmosphere (that actually involves denying quite a human thing that's going on underneath) and it breaks through when Thersites is on stage?

Declan 28:30
Yes, I think so. I think that Theristes is is the most obviously queer character, although Patroclus and Achilles are clearly lovers. But in the play, he's referred to as 'his masculine whore'. So it's it's still pretty, if you like, heteronormative. There's nothing particularly equal about the Achilles/Patroclus relationship. But that transgression came from the way we treated Theristes. And in the end, he is going to show us what's really happening. We see Ulysses basically destroying Troilus by showing him Diomedes and Cressida.

Lucie 29:02
Because Thersites comes on to show us Ulysses showing Troilus seeing Cressida, we get this moment where once again, Thersites is the person who draws back the veil and says, 'watch out, this is what's really going on.'

Declan 29:15
Yes, but again, he's also an unreliable narrator. People talk about the invention of the unreliable narrator in the 19th century novel. But actually, all Shakespeare's characters are unreliable narrators. Don't leave your common sense outside. I have heard extraordinary things said about the Ulysses speech. Ulysses has this great speech of degree, saying that everyone has to be kept in their place and that there's a strict hierarchy, and once we don't observe that hierarchy, everything falls apart. I've heard many people say that this is Shakespeare's point of view. Of course it isn't! It's Ulysses point of view. And he's talking about the kind of chaos I think that results from having this very rigid social structure. That's the point of view of Ulysses. I mean the whole thing is heavily ironised. The idea that Shakespeare suddenly unveils himself, steps forward, and makes a speech on behalf of the old Tory party about some feudal hierarchy is quite deranged!

Lucie 30:12

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As we often talk about in these episodes, you're both quite averse to solving a production, and giving us a nice tidy up message to take away at the end. And that seems particularly true of the way that you finished this production of Troilus and Cressida with Pandarus' final speech. Nick, could you describe how you staged that?

Nick 30:30
Pandarus is on stage on his own, coming out with his appallingly terrifying lines about disease and war, and in the background, the delusional, triumphant, jolly military band is playing, which in a sense is a little bit similar to the end of Three Sisters, with the irony of the jolly music against the misery of the three sisters, and Pandarus is miserable. And in our production, he shoots himself. And again, this jolly music playing in the background.

Lucie 31:08
And I often find that for you guys, it's all about context. You know, nothing is sad unless it's in contrast to something else that looks like it's happy. And the discomfort of at end only exists because it's at right angles to this party that we're hearing offstage.

Declan 31:22
Yes, we live in a relational universe. And in order for there to be light, there has to be darkness. And in order for their to be darkness, there has to be light.

Lucie 31:31
Well, thank you very much, Declan and Nick. And that's what we're going to finish for today with Troilus and Cressida.

Nick 31:37
Great, thanks very much Lucie.

Declan 31:38
Yeah. Thanks, bye Lucie!

Lucie 31:49
Thank you for listening to this episode of 'Not True, But Useful...' If you want to take a look at some images and footage from Declan and Nick's 2008 production of Troilus and Cressida, you will find a link in the podcast notes. The theme music for this series was composed by Paddy Cunneen for Cheek by Jowl's production of The Winter's Tale. This was our last episode in this series, but we do have some bonus material coming your way. Keep an eye out on Cheek by Jowl's social media, newsletter and website for an exclusive new release next week.

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