Episode 1: *The Winter's Tale*

Lucie 00:13

Welcome to Season Two of Cheek by Jowl's podcast *Not True But Useful*. I'm your host Lucie Dawkins. These episodes are going out into the world at a time when theatre is in suspended animation, so as an antidote I'll be chatting to Declan Donnellan and Nick Ormerod, the director designer duo behind Cheek by Jowl. They are going to share life lessons that they have learnt from staging great classic plays, which might help tide us through these strange times. We can't promise that any of these lessons will be true, but we hope you find them useful.

Hello Declan and Nick.

Declan & Nick 00:59

Hello Lucie.

Lucie 01:00

So we are recording today on a really odd day, because we have just discovered that some version of lockdown is rolling back into London. We are at opposite ends of a long table with a set of mics, but getting back into the theatre seems ever more distant. How is that making you think and feel about the job that we are doing, or, at the moment, that we are very far away from doing?

Nick 01:23

Well, I think we are just desperate to get back to doing what we do. It's very frustrating. The essence of theatre is that you are together with live people, and that's what we can't do at the moment. And we need it. We absolutely need theatre, and we need to be together with people.

Declan 01:41

So Nick and I are watching a lot of television. We do normally anyway to relax, and now we have to. And it's made me think very much about how in order to do something important with somebody else you need to be in the same room with them. And, you know, we can laugh and talk about the internet as a new technology that's taken over, but actually words are new technology, and we need to really meditate on the big lie that in the beginning was the word.

Human beings communicated very well for millennia before words came along, and we live with our mothers just after we are born. There are no words and you actually have pretty sophisticated communication in many respects. So when we are with people in the same space we have many different ways of communicating with each other, many of which we are unconscious. There are all sorts of science-fiction things written about extrasensory perception

or ESP, as if there is some magic thing about having more than five senses. But of course we have more than five senses, that's why you want to be with a friend, not just Zooming it into them.

Particularly for those of us who love theatre, a film can be bad, TV can be bad, but when theatre is bad it's *really* bad. When theatre is bad the assault is much deeper because the communication is so much more multifarious and profound. And when we do theatre, particularly live theatre, we are in a space where we are affected by and we affect back what is happening. The performance has to be open to interference from the audience, however slight. That's everything, it's not just a small detail, it's actually everything about how we live. And it's made us think about how incredibly important live theatre is. To be in a real space, with real people, in real time. Taped, videoed, filmed performance, watching that is really interesting, but it's a completely different art form. It can be absolutely wonderful, but it's no substitute for the real thing. You can't bring up a child by Skype.

Music

Lucie 03:41

Our play of the week is Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, which is as good a story as any about the hope that life will go on after a difficult time like this. Declan and Nick have tackled this play in two languages, once in Russian, and once in English. In fact, the music that you are hearing in this episode was composed by Paddy Cunneen for the recent British production. Here's a quick recap of the story.

At the start, Leontes and Hermione, the king and queen of Sicily, are expecting their second child. Leontes falls into a jealous mania suspecting that his best friend Polixenes, the king of Bohemia, is the real father of the baby. He convicts Hermione of treason and she pleads her innocence. Leontes separates her from their son, Mamillius, who then dies suddenly from the trauma. Hermione goes into early labour when she hears the news. Her friends, Paulina and Camillo, smuggle the baby girl, called Perdita, out of the castle and into Bohemia. They tell Leontes that Hermione died in childbirth.

The baby Perdita is found and raised by shepherds. Sixteen years pass, and she falls in love with a local teenager Florizel, who is in fact the Prince of Bohemia in disguise. In other words, he is the son of Polixenes, whom Leontes had accused of having an affair with Hermione.

As a sheep shearing festival, Polixenes catches Florizel with Perdita whom he thinks is a shepherdess. He orders his son to end the relationship immediately. Florizel and Perdita elope to Sicily, where Perdita's true identity as the Princess is revealed. Perdita and Leontes meet for the first time, Leontes and Polixenes are reconciled, and Perdita and Florizel are allowed to marry.

In the very final scene, Paulina brings them all to see a statue of the dead Hermione. It comes to life and mother, father, and daughter are reunited.

So, this is a play you have done not once but twice. What is the thing in it that initially hooked your attention, that set your imagination running, and made you really want to put this play on stage?

Declan 05:58

It's hard to say, because we play games with ourselves and tricks on ourselves. We think of what it is that we could do well, that we have good actors to do with? So in our conscious mind, we are very practical in the plays that we choose. Then afterwards, when you're coming out of it, and you're doing it with the actors, you realise that it's actually speaking to something that goes very deep in you. What slowly reveals itself to you when you do the plays are things that you never knew were there. And that's why whenever you do a play, it's always different the next time round that you do it. So there is very little that we carried over from the first to the second production, apart from the things about Mamillius.

Lucie 06:38

So, Nick, what's so fascinating about Mamillius in this play?

Nick 06:43

Well, Mamillius is the young prince who suffers at the hands of his dysfunctional parents, and he dies, and that is a hinge on the play. From thereafter Leontes goes into an enormous withdrawal in grief but is finally somehow redeemed and Hermione returns, initially as a statue, and then is brought to life magically. Our first conversations about the play were always about the death of Mamillius. I remember, Declan, that you said that this was key.

It's not very strong in the play. It's simply announced, we don't see him die. It's announced from off. But that was the key to designing it, to make that much more concrete. I designed this large crate which explodes and reveals the dead prince.

Lucie 07:36

I have to say, I found that moment totally devastating. That box, the long box that filled most of the stage, made the stage seem much narrower than the stage actually was. At that moment when all the sides fell down and suddenly the literal horizon expanded, you could see all the way to the back, and this tiny little body, fragile, left in the middle. You just, with such a simple gesture, completely changed the rules of the space. It was like the dimensions expanded in a second. But it also reminded me that there is something that occurs in every Cheek by Jowl show that I have seen, which is that you both tend to point out a part of the story which we would otherwise overlook.

Declan 08:16

There is no secret to that apart from a negative secret, which is about what you get rid of. The important thing is to suspend your judgement. So if you can delay that slight gratification, if you can just delay that moment of delicious judgement and unconscious punishment, then actually the world becomes much clearer. We make ourselves stupid by judging too soon.

One of the things that happens in *The Winter's Tale*, is that, yes, the boy dies, but Leontes goes on and on afterwards like it's all about him. It's like it's all *for* Leontes, these terrible things happened to him, that his son has died. Sackcloth and ashes are really easy to do, but pain is a defence sometimes against actual experience, that Leontes not only kills his wife but he also kills his son. And they kind of forget about him, really.

Lucie 09:06

It's what I love so much about the final moment of the play, where the surviving members of the family, Leontes and Perdita and Hermione, are finally reunited. You had them all in this beautiful, kind of sculptural embrace in the centre of the stage and the little Mamillius suddenly appeared in the corner and the only person who saw him was Leontes. And that fabulous moment of realising that nothing was fixed at the end of this play. And again this is a really consistent idea, especially at the end of your productions, where you tend to reveal something to us about where we haven't been looking. I remember you did it in your production of *Twelfth Night*, when you gave Malvolio, 'I'll be revenged upon the whole pack of you', you took his last line and you made it the last line of the very whole play. We suddenly realised that as the audience we hadn't been looking hard enough in the right direction.

The way that you reveal these hidden moments, this negative space, calls on our responsibility as the audience a lot more. It makes us complicit in the play. So there is a very active relationship with the story that's happening in front of us.

Declan 10:17

Of course, it can happen in movies and TV. But it's the lack of passivity of the theatre, the fact that you are involved, and that's why when theatre is not very well done, you feel so aggrieved.

Lucie 10:28

Can we talk a little bit about how your ideas change when you go to rehearsal? So I've often heard you say that you throw out ideas as soon as you get into rehearsal. So whatever ideas that you take in with you, you tend to shed as soon as you find bigger and better ones with the actors.

Declan 10:41

Yes. Really ideas are cheap if they are not born organically. And what arises from the rehearsal room changes us. So it's not like we change our ideas. The thing is to make sure that your ideas are something that are disposable, otherwise the thing that was a fortress is going to become a prison.

Lucie 11:00

Now, I know that particularly in Scene One of this production, you had a huge change quite late on in rehearsals. You started this scene with a huge waltz with the whole of the court, and it changed to a very simple but very effective rendition of the scene, where they were sat on long benches facing out at the audience while Leontes presents this psychotic vision of what's going on with his wife and best friend. How did that change happen?

Declan 11:30

Well, I think we went in with a hangover from the previous Russian production of having a group scene, and we thought we were going to begin with the waltz. We did a lot of work on the waltz. Actually, while we are waiting for life to break out in the room, we do work on movement, music, song, dance, not on the meaning of the words. The worst thing you can do is start a rehearsal trying to fix the meaning of the words, because words don't have fixed meaning. So you have to find all sorts of ways around and about the play to go in.

So, we had this idea of starting with a waltz. It was going to give us a sense of nostalgia for later on, it was going to give us a sense of passing time. But then Nick had this idea. I don't know where it came from, it was quite late on, and we brought the rest of the actors on later, and the protagonists just faced us from the front row.

I have to say at this moment though, that Nick and I talk as if it all comes sort of neatly from our collaboration, but actually we collaborate with a lot of people. *The Winter's Tale* was the last time we worked so purely with our usual collaborators who are Paddy Cunneen, who composes our music, Jane Gibson, who does all of our dance, movement and choreography, and indeed Judith Greenwood, who does our lights. The ideas arise from these people, and what you see on stage is very much what has arisen from them and of course what has come from the company as well.

So, sometimes things are gotten rid of. We did a lot of work on the opening waltz, it was going to be this kind of sad waltz that came back and back, and we felt it would hold the whole evening together. But all that work that people had put into it was still there, it was kind of pregnant in those still forms. Behind all stillness there is movement.

Lucie 13:19

How do you digest these changes in ideas? What is the process for that?

Nick 13:25

Under the conditions that we have at Cheek by Jowl it is possible to change things. The people that we work with are brilliant at changing things. Angie Burns who does the costumes will take on board total changes after two weeks, leaving her only four weeks, perhaps, to entirely redo the costumes.

Declan 13:45

And Jane and Paddy too have many thousands of years in purgatory to face terrible last minute changes where they have said, ‘OK…’

Nick 13:59

And I still can't really understand why it worked, but the more they became attached to the bench, the more it seemed to work. As soon as they lost that anchor in the space, it became a bit fuzzy.

Declan 14:14

Yes. I've noticed that too, that very often a line is dead, but sometimes if the actor touches something, like another person or a chair or the proscenium arch, that life can come in. I've tried to analyse it, I thought things like they have to root themselves in space, they have to locate themselves, they have to be somewhere - but at the end of the day I can't really explain it. We must be very careful not to think that anything I don't understand doesn't exist, or that anything that I don’t understand is magic.

Just because I don't understand something doesn't mean to say that it's magic. I need to try to understand it because it's how we are bred, to try to understand things so that we don't make mistakes. But the best way to understand is to know that if it's in any way important, we’re never going to have a full understanding.

So yes, sometimes touching, but sometimes not touching. I can't make a rule.

Lucie 15:13

We were talking about this the other day, about the fact that it would be so reassuring if we could have a written toolkit: directions for directing.

Declan 15:22

I always think that Moses was sent up the mountain and God said, ‘you know you're doing fine’. But the people said, ‘no, we want rules!’. God says fine, and Moses came down with two.

Number one and number two. And the people say, ‘that's not enough, we want more rules. If we don't have rules how can we live?’ And God says, ‘no, you're not having any more than two.’ Then Moses sits on the mountainside and carves another eight out. He says, ‘there you go, how about ten?’ And the people say, ‘can't we have more about property and sex?’ And he says, ‘no, that's your lot!’

And that's how it starts. It's to do with how we are. We love the rules. It's a permanent human problem to want freedom but not responsibility. It’s a very problematic part of our makeup.

Nick 16:05

But funnily enough I think this is a good rule! And if young directors want a rule for auditions, actors come with a speech that they've learnt, they stand in the space and they come out with the speech. The first thing to say to them is: go and touch something. Go and touch a chair, or get a chair, or touch the wall. And it transforms them, it's quite extraordinary.

Lucie 16:28

Well that's what was also so fascinating about doing that scene, because the impression that I got from the audience was that Leontes was holding onto this little life raft, this tiny little image that he couldn't get rid of, and he was literally clinging to it, because he was stuck to this bench. And it's so exciting to hear about a process where there is a hunch about why it works, and it creates such a clear image for the audience, but it's not an image that’s prescriptive. I'm sure that the person sitting next to me took a different message from that.

Declan 17:00

Yes, it's connected to gratitude. You need to be grateful for when something works. But then what we tend to want to do is analyse it so we can make sure we can have it on Tuesday and Wednesday and Thursday. But the problem on Tuesday and Wednesday and Thursday is that we will have to be grateful again, because we're not completely sure. It's like Leontes can't be grateful that Polixenes has been there and he’s now going to go, and the pain of that is so awful that he'd rather invent all sorts of things as a defence. It’s a protection mechanism to think that Polixenes and Hermione are having an affair. It protects him from the real humiliation of feeling this incredible pain that his childhood friend is leaving.

I mean, I don't know. I just assume it. It helps me into it. Maybe if we do the play in twenty years time it will be different, and seem different again.

Lucie 17:49

I think that leads us nicely into our next question, which is about leaving room for mystery. So this play has got a very famously mysterious moment at the end, when we meet Hermione who apparently changes from a sculpture into a living, breathing, human woman again. Lots of

productions try to solve this, they try and create a version where Hermione has actually been in hiding all of these years and it's a kind of visual trick that she is doing. Other productions stage it as an out and out piece of magic. What I loved about your version of it is that you didn't solve that for us, you simply showed it to us. How did you get there? Why did you choose to do it that way?

Declan 18:32

I have to say that at the end of *The Winter's Tale*, and perhaps *The Tempest* and *Cymbeline* and so on, there are these extraordinary moments of transfiguration and the kind of epiphanic revelation. But actually, all Shakespeare's work is like that, it's just that very rarely he puts mystery on stage in such a very clear way with a great big arrow pointing at it, and asks us, 'so what do you think about this?'

But earlier in the play, you see, we've had the big mystery of why does he think that Polixenes and Hermione have been having sex together. And I think it's possibly because he has a psychotic interlude, he clearly does. I think, personally, that what precipitates it is Polixenes leaving. I don't know that for sure. I'm not there to judge.

But I am there to contemplate the huge mystery of why people might suddenly lose it and destroy their lives forever. That is very interesting, and a pretty daily occurrence actually. You know, when people do things that are self-destructive and you don't understand why. What is good about Shakespeare is his articulation of mystery, which is why I go on about *Macbeth*. *Macbeth* is not just a good thriller. It uses that form, but actually it articulates enormous mysteries, like why do we destroy ourselves so relentlessly? That's perhaps one of them. I don't know, I can't even say what the mysteries are in it.

But in *The Winter's Tale* it comes out fore stage. Paulina says those incantatory lines, 'it is required that you do awake your faith'. And you have to sit with mystery, which involves sitting with uncertainty, and it's the last thing that anyone wants to do. And that's why people like to control mystery and sell it to us in the form of packaged religions, because you can make a lot of money out of it. But then it's not a mystery any more.

Mystery is a huge human thing, and all we can do is gaze at it together and possibly hold each other's hands while we do and say, 'does this frighten you? It frightens me.'

Music

Lucie 20:38

So as we said, this is a play that toured all over the world. I actually saw it in America at BAM, which is a massive stage with a hugely high proscenium arch. It is very different from the Barbican stage where I know it was performed here in the UK. And a lot of the design is playing with dimensions and space, and changing our perception of the horizon through the use of this

box. As the play talks, did these different spaces inform the images differently or change the feeling of the production?

Nick 21:10

Yes, the space itself, the concrete space that we play in can give huge energy to the whole piece. I remember in BAM at the Harvey, that's an amazing space. It opens up right back to the famous red ochre wall.

Declan 21:28

When we did *Measure for Measure*, the first English *Measure for Measure* in 1994, we used to strip out the whole stage and completely change the mise-en-scène according to the theatre. Once they've emptied out the theatre we had all these wonderful gangways and fire exits and things on stage that people can make exits and entrances through, and we loved doing that. So that's a normal thing that we did very often, actually, exploiting the venues where we've gone to.

Lucie 21:57

And I've noticed that you often like playing with the scale, stripping out the stage that you've got a massive cavernous space around these fragile and ardent bodies that you are putting on stage. Why is it that you enjoy that so much, do you think?

Declan 22:10

We don't like the auditorium to be so big that the audience can't hear. So as long as the person furthest away could hear what's happening without microphones, we're absolutely fine. But we adore a huge football pitch stage so that people can really run across it. And one of the reasons, funnily enough, is to see people run. There is something very depressing about a stage that is so small that a human being can't run on it. You know, if you go to a West End theatre and see a realistic set taking up the space you think, OK, there's going to be no explosion of energy on stage tonight unless something extraordinary happens. We love people to be able to run, to have the choice to run, even if they are going to remain very still. The fact that there is a possibility that they might tear across the stage is wonderful.

Lucie 22:50

Also, what is interesting about looking at this particular production with both of you is that you have done this twice. It has changed over time. You did it with a Russian company and then you did it with a British company. Looking back on that process, what can you tell about what changed for you in this play?

Declan 23:09

Well, I think first of all we were in a city that was changing its name from Leningrad to St Petersburg, so we were very full of what that was like. You know, ’96, ’97, a new Russia was being formed and being very much, one might say, ignored by the West. So what we felt on the streets was coming in. So one of the very few long discussions we had was that I thought it would be an idea if Hermione came on like Lenin, because the whole system is really predicated on the Soviet shame of death. A very materialistic religion like the Soviet religion can't deal with death, so they are very embarrassed when the leader dies, and finally he's embalmed and that solves it. I thought it would be very good if Hermione did that. Nick didn't, and he was quite right. You know, the director is making a sort of clever idea statement. I thought it would be a great theatrical coup. I've got a bit weaned off that, because I think it would've been rather clever. You would've suddenly noticed the fell hand of the director in not a good way. Do you remember that conversation?

Nick 24:06

Yes, yes. That's an image of death as opposed to potential life, as it were. And a statue isn't portrayed lying down. A statue is – well, in our case, in both cases, sitting.

Declan 24:21

Yes, that's because in both cases we felt that the dramatic action is in the eyes of the people apprehending her coming to life. So you think that the centre of the scene is Hermione coming to life, but it's actually to do with what that means to the people watching her coming to life. That's where the real miracle takes place, in a way.

Lucie 24:39
Declan, can you share with us your favourite line in *The Winter’s Tale*?

Declan 24:44

Well, that's very hard because there are so many. I do have lines going round in my head that mean a lot to me because they are mysteries. I think that occasionally, sometimes doing things in a foreign language helps because you realise when you have a translation that doesn't work it helps you realise why Shakespeare is so profound. So in the Gnedich translation of the Russian *The Winter’s Tale*, when Paulina sees Hermione dying, she says to Leontes, ‘look, she’s turned quite cold.’ Shakespeare's original version is ‘look down and see what death is doing’. The second one is infinitely better because it's dynamic, it's felt, it's about death as a process. Paulina is very good at getting us to actually shut up. Just shut up, and see what's happening. That's what she is saying at the end when she asks us to be silent. Stopping talking is always very important in Shakespeare.

Lucie 25:32

What about you Nick, what's your favourite line in the play?

Nick 25:36

Leontes welcomes Florizel and Perdita with the line, ‘welcome are you as spring is to the earth.’ I don't know, it kind of encapsulates the whole redemptive nature of the play. It's about life from death.

Music

Lucie 25:57

And on that hopeful note, that's all from us for this week. If you want to see images of Cheek by Jowl’s productions of *The Winter's Tale*, check out the archive on the website. You can find it in the podcast notes. Join us in the next episode as we dive into John Ford’s *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*. Until then, stay well.

Episode 2: ‘*Tis Pity She’s A Whore*

Lucie 00:13

Welcome to Season Two of Cheek by Jowl’s podcast *Not True But Useful*. I'm your host Lucie Dawkins. These episodes are going out into the world at a time when theatre is in suspended animation, so as an antidote I'll be chatting to Declan Donnellan and Nick Ormerod, the director designer duo behind Cheek by Jowl. They are going to share life lessons that they have learnt from staging great classic plays, which might help tide us through these strange times. We can't promise that any of these lessons will be true, but we hope you find them useful.

This week, our play is ‘*Tis Pity She's a Whore* by John Ford. It's a gory Jacobean revenge tragedy from the 17th century about an incestuous relationship between brother and sister Giovanni and Annabella. Here's a quick recap before we begin.

Annabella’s nurse Putana encourages the siblings to have sex. Meanwhile Annabella is being pursued by several eligible bachelors. She agrees to marry one called Soranzo, knowing that she can never allow her affair with her brother to become public. Soranzo has jilted a former lover, Hippolyta, who is plotting with Soranzo’s servant Vasquez to murder him in revenge. Annabella discovers that she is pregnant with Giovanni's child, and, on the advice of her priest, speeds up her wedding with Soranzo to cover up her secret. At the wedding Hippolyta attempts to kill Soranzo by getting Vasquez to poison his wine, but Vasquez decides to stay loyal to his master and poisons Hippolyta instead. She dies horribly at the wedding feast, cursing the newlyweds. Soranzo then discovers Annabella’s pregnancy, and locks her in her room, planning revenge on her and her secret lover. Putana reveals that the father is Giovanni and Soranzo tears out her eyes in punishment for encouraging their incestuous relationship. Annabella tries to warn Giovanni by writing him a letter in her own blood. Giovanni arrives at the house and kills her as he kisses her. He then walks into a party that Soranzo is throwing, with Annabella’s heart

on his dagger, revealing their relationship to everyone. He kills Sorrento and then is fatally wounded by Vasquez.

'Tis Pity She's a Whore is the first show that Declan and Nick worked on together as director and designer at the start of their careers, and they did another production of it in 2011. The music you're hearing now was composed by Nick Powell for that production. And now over to Declan and Nick.

Well, we are sitting here over a cup of tea with today's play, *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*. And this is quite an important play in the history of Cheek by Jowl, because it was the play that launched you as a company, and which you revisited again several years ago.

Declan 03:14

Yes. We did a version a long time ago for a theatre company run by Angelique Rockas. It was called the Internationalist Theatre Company, I think. And it was out of that we found the confidence to launch Cheek by Jowl and our first tour with Cheek by Jowl was *The Country Wife* the following year.

But it's an extraordinary play, *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, and it's clearly inspired by *Romeo and Juliet*. But the balcony in *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* is the fact that they happen to be brother and sister.

Lucie 03:41

And what is it that first drew you to this play, do you think?

Declan 03:43

It's beautifully written, I mean it's very clear, the lines of dramatic action are very clear. But there is still of course, at the heart of it (which I am more attuned to now that I am older) a great mystery - which is why do they actually do it? I mean, they're not going to survive it. Why do we do the things that we don't want to do? The first time we did it, I felt very much that it was a story of forbidden love, and I was very much on the side of the two lovers against the awful oppressive world, and it's a world in which the women are very much oppressed by the men, and that was very much at the forefront of our minds when we were doing it in 1981.

When we came back to it, of course, the world seems different to me. My eyes just seem very different. And I felt that the very important thing is that the women have huge agency. They transgress, but the punishment for the transgression has got nothing to do with the transgression, it's to do with the men's desire to wield power. But the women have great desire for power too, and the women have fantastic agency, so that the women aren't victims in a passive way. I think that's very vital.

Also I felt much less sentimental about Giovanni and Annabella. As I've grown older I've been able to suspend judgement better, and see things more clearly. I don't think you bad, him good. I don't think like that so much anymore.

Lucie 05:01

So this first production of *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* is also the first time that you two sat down together as a director and a designer to put a show together. Can you describe that first design meeting, which I believe happened over a kitchen table?

Nick 05:16

It did indeed. We were playing it in a very small theatre called Theatre Space, run by a woman who owned a lot of cats. But it was tiny, it only seated about 50 people.

Declan 05:27

This woman was very important, she was called Anne Fen, and she was an enormous unsung heroine of British theatre at the time. She kept this theatre going against all odds, did Anne.

Nick 05:37

There was, I think, only really one other fringe space in the West End, and that's since been turned into a nightclub. We had a small company, and we basically decided on three benches. The set was three benches which could be bolted together for the second half into a bed, and the company processed on the bed with Giovanni and Annabella on the bed. And it was a moment together that we realised that we could do something together, and that the mechanics of it and the aesthetic worked.

Lucie 06:14

So this was the beginning of the famous habit that you both have of not really having official design meetings, which I suppose started with this production, right? It happened over your kitchen table with some matchstick benches.

Nick 06:27

Well, except I suppose that in a sense that was a design meeting. We didn't have anywhere else to meet except our kitchen.

Declan 06:33

It was our first and last design meeting, actually. One funny thing I should say really is that obviously we wanted to work together, we were very young and we had lots of that hormonal

energy of wanting to make it, wanting to do something, wanting to work together - but when we actually did it, it was a bit like the miracle of plane flight. There is nothing in the aeroplane that makes it go up apart from going forward.

My own feeling of it is that some sort of lift happened and we were doing it, and we couldn't quite work out how it was that we got to the place where we were doing it. It really seemed to come from somewhere else. There was a desire to do it but the capacity to do it just seemed to come from completely left field. It was like a coincidence that we could do this thing which was to work together and make a big baroque play work with a sheet and trestle tables like we did. So we need to be grateful for that, rather than think that we earned it.

Lucie 07:31

So that gives rise to what is a really unique collaboration between the two of you, in which you create these shows symbiotically together, in a way that is very fluid and has both of you as equal theatre makers, rather than siloing design and directing, in the way that many other collaborators have to.

Declan 07:53

Yes, and we are very lucky, because we've only done a couple of shows a year, really. So we've been able to think about them and see them a lot. I would like to say that this business that people say it's amazing we don't have meetings. All that means is that we don't use words with each other.

It's incredibly important to remember that most of our communications are non-verbal. That's not just between me and Nick, it's not that we're just magic weird people, that's just how we are. It's like a mother is with a child. And that's why I'm at pains to always point out that words are modern technology like the Internet, and before words came along human beings were able to communicate with each other through all sorts of other means. Now, of course, because words are so centralised in our culture, people think, ‘oh, if it's not through words well then it must be magic’. But that's thinking that something is magic just because you don't understand it. There's lots of highly rational ways that human beings communicate with each other, which is why live meetings with live people in a live space is so important. We are all so confused about why Zoom conferences are so exhausting. Of course they're exhausting, because it’s a simulacrum, a fake reproduction of what it's like to be with another human being in a room. So of course it is exhausting, because it's anti-human to do that for too long. I mean, of course, you can make limited communication with each other through words alone, but they are limited, and the great writers who use words really well use the limitations of those words, like Shakespeare shows the space around the words that he manipulates. But actually being able to communicate without words is something that we manage very easily. It's sometimes like kids saying, ‘how did you manage to communicate with each other before the internet and before mobile phones?’ And you think, well, we managed. And humans managed before the advent of words.

But it's very interesting, this point, because it's to do with how an actor who is acting well works. We doubt the process that happens, and so we pretend the verbalised process is the only process that matters. So education gets reduced to an acquisition of skills, and actually a proper education is to do with being in a room with another person and being infused by that spirit.

When Nick can do it, I'm very happy. If we were to be thinking, ‘hmm, we could do it this way, we could do it that way…’ if we were hovering on the outside of the world of how, it wouldn't be very good. You need to think about it, read it, feel it, tell each other stories about it. Then there is a moment when it sort of sinks in. It sinks into Nick, really, and then out comes this thing. And then it seems inevitable to me. It's very dangerous to think you've got a choice, because, in a way, if you're making art and you feel you got a choice you are doing something wrong.

Lucie 10:37

And Nick, in your most recent production of *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, I noticed something in the design which was really featured in the first season, which is the importance of another space, a space just outside the walls of this space that is exerting pressure on the space that we are seeing. And you brought two of those into the design.

Nick 10:54

Well, that's true, but I think we should start with talking a little bit about the space that we started off with. And that did come out very early on in rehearsal in the first two weeks. That set was designed very fast, and ambitiously, because it was a room with a bathroom and another space. But I remember that we were just working with the actors and it became clearer and clearer that actually the play is so much about Annabella.

Annabella is right in the middle, so it became a play about an adolescent girl in her bedroom fantasising about her brother. And actually, it remained a fantasy because we were able to bring her back after she had been cut up in the bathroom, as it were. We were able to bring her back on stage still alive, and that's one thing that you can do in the theatre which is wonderful.

From the very beginning they're talking about her - well in fact, it's a scene between Giovanni and the friar - and about his relationship with Annabella, and it worked. It was one of those things that worked, but he was actually cavorting with Annabella who wasn’t, as it were, in the space but who is this space and the friar is trying to communicate something to Giovanni about basically how bad an idea it was. And that just kind of worked.

Lucie 12:15

So you had these two really remarkably charged spaces that were just glimpsed through doorways in the back of the stage. One of which was this pristine bathroom which then became blood-soaked towards the end of the play, and the other was the corridor to the rest of the house. And those two spaces kept on exerting pressure on the space that we were in, and we

were aware of this incredible tension which was always happening with those spaces. How did you arrive at those two doors?

Nick 12:43

Well, having decided that it was going to be her bedroom, it seemed obvious that you need one entrance into the bedroom from the rest of the house, and also they were a rich enough family to have a bathroom ensuite. So she had a bathroom. Bathrooms are very good for half-seeing violence in because they are pristine and white, and yes, we were able to soak it in blood, which you half-saw. You never fully saw the bathroom, but you just saw the shower splattered with blood where he had torn her heart out.

Declan 13:16

The bathroom is the only room in the house with a lock on the door, and that's kind of important in a Jacobean tragedy. It's a place where you're naked, where you perform bodily functions that you don't want other people to see. It's a very interesting other space to half glimpse. And so the secret is not to show the violence but to suggest it.

Lucie 13:38

And I think that's something that is a common theme in lots of your plays that when something terrible and violent happens, you're very good at giving us a half glimpse, like in *The Changeling* through that little glass door where you could see bloody handprints appearing, or here in *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* where you see a glimpse into that horrible bathroom. It's always an incredible moment because you remind us that we are doing it in our imaginations, and that we are grotesque and that we are participating in the horrible masquerade.

Declan 14:10

Yes. I'm always fascinated that when you go to see a horror movie, in your teens particularly, if you see a good looking young couple holding each other giggling at night, running into a car, not going into the front seats but going into the back because they're going to make out together, you don't think, 'oh, I'm so happy this is the beginning of a love affair,' you think, 'oh my god, they're going to be dead soon.' And then sure enough you hear the dum dum dum of the kind of *Jaws*' music, and you see somebody in a black hood emerging, and you're thinking, 'please don't kill the beautiful young lovers, I identify with the beautiful young lovers!'

But identification is very dodgy, because actually it's the predicament that you identify with, which is very different from identifying with the people. We're not just a beautiful young couple in the back of the car, we're also the person coming with the knife to end their pleasure, and they are going to be punished for having a good time that we don't have. Because we dread that we are the murderer. When we see procedural crime series, at the end there is a slight amount of relief that the detective doesn't discover that it was us who did it, because there is a kind of

primordial guilt at the base of all of these things. You can't say it's either bad or good - it just is. And we can tell it is because we are so incredibly compulsively drawn to these things. Some people don't watch them but an awful lot of people do.

That's really important to know when we're watching violence, but it's what we're bringing to it that matters. Am I saying that we're all basically violent and cruel? Yes. That is exactly what I'm saying. I am saying that we all have the capacity to be violent and cruel, and we need to keep an eye on it. If we keep an eye on it, then things will be better. It's when we don't keep an eye on it that problems can happen. We don't do it to make the world a better place, we do it to see it, to see it outside ourselves. When we see it outside ourselves then we are a bit more comfortable with it.

Lucie 16:03

So would you say that that is why we have such an appetite for plays like *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* which are full of incest and violence and jealousy and in many ways are deeply un-redemptive? It's because it puts into light the part of us that we're not willing to talk about very often, and that is uncomfortable but it's also something that we have a real drive to do.

Declan 16:26

Yes. But let me make it very clear, I'm not saying this is who we are, full stop. State not process. I am saying process not state. This is who we could be. And we need to pray we never do these things, that we are never tested, that we are never pushed into these situations. But it's important to understand that we have this capacity, and insofar as the horror films or the Jacobean blood tragedy have that effect, then I think in a funny way they are redemptive, because we see that we have a choice in our lives. People in these plays often get into the nightmare situation where they believe they don't have a choice, but we are on the outside choosing. It helps us have some distance between us and what happens.

Lucie 17:09

So in that way it helps us look back at ourselves. All of these plays at some point turn around and ask you to look back at where you are viewing them from.

Declan 17:20

Yes, it depends where you stand. You know, it's the young couple getting into the back of the car, I mean someone could look and say, ‘who would want to kill the prom king and queen?’ You know, the people who have been elected by the school authorities to be the best looking and most successful young people, who are going to be crowned at the prom dance. My reply, I'm afraid, is ‘who wouldn't want to kill the prom king and queen?’ Then you might look very shocked, but I think that it's a propensity in us. We need to look at that rather, I think, than pretend it doesn't exist.

Lucie 17:50

So there is a huge value in staging ugly stories sometimes, would you agree?

Declan 17:57

I would, but that's not why I do them. I do them because I don't know why I do them. I don't know why I watch procedurals on TV. I know that people like to watch them, and I feel part of a common humanity, and I'm not showing people what life is like. I'm saying to people, 'this scares me, does it scare you as well?' And then we stand together watching something in awe, saying, 'I wish I didn't find this fascinating, maybe you do as well?'

Lucie 18:23

Let's talk a little bit more about Annabella's fantastic bedroom, which had some really excellent posters in it. What was your inspiration for Annabella's interior design choices?

Nick 18:32

Well, it was very much in the air at the time, that vampire thing. *Twilight* and *True Blood,* which was one of the posters as I remember. It was just very much in the air at the time, and so we used them. And we painted the room blood red and had all the sheets blood red. She was in the red room. It came from her imagination, the whole affair.

Lucie 18:55

So this sort of contemporary fascination, which actually goes throughout history, of the connection between violence and sex.

Declan 19:04

Yes, sex equals death. But there is something that I should say about this that I think is very important, that whenever we do a Jacobean tragedy people say, 'why do you think there is such a fashion suddenly for doing Jacobean tragedies?' And now I can say, 'do you know I was asked that question five years ago, I was asked that question 10 years ago, I was asked that question 40 years ago?' It's actually cyclical. So what's not interesting is why are they so fashionable, what is interesting is how it is that we managed to forget that people are really fascinated to see things like this? That's what I find very interesting. When you are young you haven't seen the cycle go round so often, but now I have and they're just always fascinating.

Lucie 19:43

So we talked in our last episode, about *The Winter's Tale*, about how you often point out something that is hidden or offstage or un-looked at in every production. What do you think that was for *'Tis Pity She's a Whore?*

Declan 19:59

I thought it was her retreat into this bedroom, and all of these things under the bed and things she would throw under the bed. And then these servant figures that you have, in *Romeo and Juliet* and *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, who are facilitating a really bad decision by the young people. Like there are no adults, and such adults as there are appear to be infantilised, and there is actually no one to offer proper parental guidance in any way to these people. They are growing up in a world bereft of adults and parents.

Nick 20:28

There is no mother and there is no father. There is a completely irresponsible father.

Declan 20:33

And that's why the bedroom becomes such a territorial space for so many adolescents. And some adolescents do go so far as to put a lock on their door, and get very angry when people come into their space, which I totally understand. But there's also a sense of bad boundaries in it. All the suitors would come round, and then after a fight one of them would go into her shower and come out with a towel around him. And also it's a bedroom in which she could be anybody. So she was putting on cliches of cool that weirdly never seem to change. She would do bits in an American accent, and Putana would go along with that, and perform as being a maid and she would perform as being the young mistress. The whole thing had a low-level hysteria to it that that life was a kind of performance, that there was a deep disconnect from reality. And the only things she seemed to eat were from a box of chocolates and crisps, and other people would have the crisps and so on. So what I loved was that dreamlike melding from one space, one set of relationships to another.

Lucie 21:33

And you started the production with an epic teenage dance in a bedroom.

Nick 21:39

Yes, choreographed by Annabella played by Lydia Wilson, absolutely. And she loved to do it herself and Jane let her.

Declan 21:46

Jane Gibson, our choreographer and director of movement and associate director. She let her do that, and so Lydia was able to take power over the company and instruct them in this ferocious dance.

Music

Lucie 22:09

And it's something that you often do, actually at the beginning of your productions, which is to start with a highly tense and charged dance scene, before you even start with the text. Why do you think you've got such an appetite for that?

Declan 22:23

I love dance. It's no coincidence, I think, that we've ended up not so much directing opera, as some theatre directors do, but ballet. In the beginning there wasn't the word, there was movement way before then. It's very good to start a rehearsal with people dancing and singing. They feel confident in the space, and it's great to see the body liberated like that. But I think that dance is very basic to the human soul, and it's good to look at that and use it and be nourished by it and not necessarily understand why. So most rehearsal periods, we begin with a dance and a song, and exercises of motion, well before we start to look at the text.

Lucie 23:02

And I've also noticed that this is very true of *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, in as much as you had actually everybody on stage most of the time around her, which created the image of the whole system in which she was imagining her life, and also that the whole community was kind of responsible for what was going on. Everybody really kind of knew what was happening. And you often do you start plays with these dances that bring on stage the whole community of the play at once, so that we see the magnitude of it.

Declan 23:36

The trick is having nothing up your sleeve. The trick is that we declare our stuff rather than bringing in strange bits of scenery from the wings. I think that thing about bringing everybody on stage is really important because in the society in which we live it's very useful for advertisers and politicians to pump up our narcissism. You sell things by making people feel more that they are at the centre of the world, and that we have lots of choice, and we know that we are free because we can choose between Pepsi-Cola and Coca-Cola. The conspiracy is that you are the centre of things and that feels important. But it's what you feel in connection to that matters as well. And I think that was something that was suggested in the production.

Lucie 24:20

I have to say I thought that that was what was so powerful about the design and the way that it invited us to participate in the violence of it, because you showed us your hand very quickly. There was this space, two rooms that you could glimpse, and a whole company. It was like you showed us the deck of cards, and then showed us what we were going to do with it - which was delicious and terrifying. And that's often the case in your designs, Nick, that you show us your hand very quickly.

Nick 24:51

Well yes, I wouldn't say that that's a principle, but partly that is about being pragmatic. We have very little on stage, therefore the more objects you can use in more ways than one the better. So Annabella's room is used for Hippolyta's room, and we see scenes which sort of happen in Annabella's imagination, but are actually happening or not. And so the same bed has different functions.

Lucie 25:20

And that was also delicious, this idea that you were calling on us to understand how we were viewing the world, because you were showing us how Annabella was viewing reality. Reality was always one step removed through the filter of how someone was looking at it, which drew us in as well.

Declan 25:38

Yes, but we forget that that's the basic nature of things. At the end of *Troilus and Cressida*, Thersites comments on Ulysses who is showing Troilus how Cressida is being unfaithful with Diomedes. So we are looking at someone looking at something looking at something looking at something, and it goes on. And it's wonderful because it gives you a sensation of not unreality, but it makes you understand that reality isn't quite what it seems.

Lucie 26:12

Absolutely. So here is my favourite end of the episode question. What is your favourite moment or line from *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*?

Declan 26:20

I can't think in terms of lines and moments, but I think the atmosphere between Putana, the servant, and Annabella, her mistress, quite interesting because it reminds me slightly of Genet's *The Maids*. Am I protecting you, am I imprisoning you, are you looking after me and making me safe, are you suffocating me? And the play between the two of them. We had wonderful wonderful actresses to play those parts, and it really did seem to come alive, that relationship, which is extraordinary really.

Lucie 26:52

Well, thank you both for a grisly discussion this afternoon, and I look forward to our next episode.

Music

Lucie 27:08

We hope you enjoyed today's episode. If you want to check out pictures of Cheek by Jowl's production of *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, take a look at the archive on the website. There is a link in the podcast notes. This series theme music was composed by Paddy Cunneen for Cheek by Jowl's production of *The Winter's Tale*, with additional music for this episode composed by Nick Powell for *'Tis Pity She's a Whore.* Join us next week, when we will be discussing Alfred Jarry's explosively absurd play *Ubu Roi.* Until then, stay well.

Episode 3: *Ubu Roi*

Lucie 00:13

Welcome to Season Two of Cheek by Jowl's podcast *Not True But Useful*. I'm your host Lucie Dawkins. These episodes are going out into the world at a time when theatre is in suspended animation, so as an antidote I'll be chatting to Declan Donnellan and Nick Ormerod, the director designer duo behind Cheek by Jowl. They are going to share life lessons that they have learnt from staging great classic plays, which might help tide us through these strange times. We can't promise that any of these lessons will be true, but we hope you find them useful.

Our play of the week is Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi*, sometimes translated as *King Turd*. It was first performed in Paris in 1896 and it was famous for tearing apart theatre conventions of its time in a performance of bizarre and grotesque violence with puppets and music. It was a satirical critique of the way that power corrupts and it was so outrageous that a riot broke out on its opening night, although it seems that Jarry might have paid the rioters as a way of drumming up publicity. Declan the Nick staged *Ubu Roi* with a French company in 2013. Here's a synopsis, and be warned - it's a wild one.

The play opens with the characters Père Ubu and Mère Ubu who are plotting a bloody coup against the king of Poland. The murder him but the Queen and Prince, Bougrelas, managed to escape. The king's ghost tells Bougrelas to avenge him. Meanwhile Père and Mère Ubu are revelling horribly in their power, executing the judges, murdering nobles and stealing their wealth, and taxing the poor. This, unsurprisingly, is not popular. Ubu's second-in-command, Captain Bordure, escapes to Russia and persuades the Tsar to declare war. While Père Ubu leaves to fight the Russians, Mère Ubu tries to steal all the treasure in the palace. However, she is forced to run away when Bougrelas turns up, leading a revolt. In Russia, Père Ubu is defeated and then gets attacked by a bear in the wilderness. Mère Ubu finds him and pretends

to be the angel Gabriel in order to make him forgive her for trying to run off with all the money. As they fight, Bougrelas appears in order to try and kill Père Ubu. Père Ubu uses the body of a dead bear to knock down Bougrelas and he and Mère Ubu escape to France. Imagine all of that with lots of blood, sex, and sausages - and that's *Ubu Roi* in a nutshell. The music that you're hearing now was composed by Davy Sladek for the Cheek by Jowl production. And now over to Declan and Nick.

Music

Lucie 02:58

Hello Declan and Nick, how are you today?

Declan & Nick 03:00

Very good Lucie, thanks.

Lucie 03:02

Marvellous. So today we're talking about Alfred Jarry's bizarre and wonderful play *Ubu Roi*. And I'd like to dive in by asking how you started work on this play and why you chose it, because for me I find it one of the most confounding and difficult plays that I've ever seen as a script. So what first invited you into this amazingly weird and grotesque world?

Declan 03:25

Well, it's a play much beloved by students. It's written in a strange language by Jarry, with lots of childish insults, lots of violence, lots of blood. But it's really seen through a child's eyes. He and his friends at school when he was 11 or 12, Ubu was the name that they gave one of the teachers. It's like it grows out of very childish games with words that kids play, and so on.

Lucie 03:45

And what is it about that that appeals to you? This mix of childishness and extreme violence?

Declan 03:51

Yes, I wouldn't say that childishness and extreme violence are in different categories actually. I think they are very much the same thing and most parents that I know, particularly when they were young and had young kids, were often quite appalled at the violence of their own children. And I think that's an important thing to remember. Rather than, I think it's really dangerous to think that there is this thing called innocence when before the child knows violence. I think that in many respects innocence is about being in tune with your violence. Yes, I don't think that innocence is a very useful category. A memory that I have that I think went into doing *Ubu* - I

remember once being on the Metro in Paris, and I managed to get a seat, and suddenly plonked opposite me were two kids from the American school. And they were in the middle of a conversation, and they assumed that nobody spoke English around them which was wrong in my case. They started, and one said to the other, 'I'd like to take his head off', and the other one said, 'yeah I'd like her to get a screwdriver and put the screwdriver through his eyeballs'. They were talking about somebody at school, but the mutilations they were talking about were getting worse and worse, and their eyes were bulging more and more with fury, with murderous rage. And it was a very intense moment, because I was caught in the middle of this very savage and intimate conversation about someone I didn't know. And I think that found its way into the play somehow.

Lucie 05:15

So, I remember walking into the auditorium to see this play, expecting a sparse open stage, maybe a box, maybe a bench. And I was taken aback and surprised and excited to see possibly the most realistic set I have ever seen in a Cheek by Jowl production, paired with the most surreal script I think I've ever seen you tackle. So Nick, could you explain how that came about?

Nick 05:40

Well, everything was very much interconnected because we were puzzling how to approach this play. And we realised that of course we had a wonderful actor called Sylvain Levite, who was in *Andromaque*. He didn't have a line in *Andromaque*, but he played a young boy, and we thought that he would be perfect, as it were, as Jarry, the young Jarry, the 14-year-old adolescent who comes out with all this appalling stuff. And so from that leaping off point, it was through the eyes, through the imagination of this 14-year-old boy played by Sylvain. And if you start from that premise, you quite quickly move to the fact, well, where do they live? His parents, and that's quite interesting, because if you start to analyse the play you realise it's not about his school teacher, it has to be about his parents, his mother and father. And they become Mère Ubu and Père Ubu. It's an easy development from that to arrive at the apartment that we made, and they're giving a dinner party, and the other guests arrive, and through his eyes we leap from the grotesque world of *Ubu* to the very refined dinner party that dynamic continues through the whole production.

Lucie 07:05

And you included a really clever use of a camera here. So our 14-year-old in this production is equipped with a video camera, and through that video camera, reality warps through his imagination. So, I remember you starting it with him pottering off through doors backstage, with his camera and us seeing shit stains in the bog and him filming his parents preparing dinner. And as more and more people came in, this camera activated this jump to this grotesque world, in which they are all speaking in violent gobbledygook and ripping each other's brains out. And what I found so interesting there was that the camera became an active character in the performance. We are very used to seeing cameras and live film on stage nowadays as a way of

illustrating things we can't see or magnifying things, but in this case the camera actually warped reality.

Declan 07:57

I think what was important for us was this adolescent rage, and that particular adolescent rage that people feel when they perceive their parents to be playacting, and they see the pretend adult syndrome of it all. The energy in the play, the energy in that language, the vituperation, the violence of it, people really having their brains mashed up on stage, has to react from somewhere. Nick and I happened to have a nice apartment rented for us in Paris, which looked lovely, and it was all painted white and so on. And then when we arrived, there were little notices saying, ‘you can't walk on the floor before 9 am’ and ‘you can't pull the flush after 11 o'clock’. It was this flat with masses and masses of rules in it, in this bourgeois space. And we kind of reverted to the Ubus, me and Nick in the flat. There was a big piece of art on the wall, which was white on white. And we thought, ‘wouldn't it be wonderful to spray it with tomato ketchup…’ and then we did it onstage.

And bits of it we did actually film in that flat. For me the central thing is the toilet which looks so lovely and then you get closer and closer and you realise it's not quite clean. And it's that idea of having that hyper realistic view of your parents. It's watching your parents put on an act, I think that’s really important, and you kind of know that you're going to have to do a bit of that act yourself, or you’re starting to do another act so actually they're not the only people in the world who are performing, you end up performing yourself. But there is also this idea that the constrained metropolitan elite life, what it throws onto that carpet that is struggling to come out. What do you lock in the closet that's trying to come out? And that was basically about a dichotomy, and trying not to be judgemental about it. Afterwards, we did it in London and we had some close friends who came and said, ‘wouldn't it be awful if you had a child like that?’ And I was thinking, ‘no, wouldn't it be awful to parent like that?’ And I'm very glad that people have conflicting views about how to judge it. But I think the whole thing of what life keeps under wraps is very very important.

Lucie 10:04

And I'm so interested to hear that the set was inspired by the flat that you were staying in in Paris, because we've talked about this before, about suspending setting ideas before you get into rehearsal, and the way that you draw on the world around you, the streets that you're walking down as you walk into the rehearsal room, and how that's informing the life of what you're creating. It sounds like you found your *Ubu Roi* when you arrived.

Declan 10:29

We must've had the idea beforehand but the actual fruition of it was the flat that we had. It was amazingly easy to rehearse. So with those actors we had done *Andromaque* by Racine, which is about engulfing passions being held at bay in the form of the Alexandrian. And we got to

know them very well, and we had a wonderful time with them, and I could see that they were all dying to be funny, that they were very funny people. And so we did *Ubu*. But you know, they're not so different. In a way they seem utterly different, but actually they've got one huge thing in common, and that's what do you do with chaotic feelings when they're imprisoned in this Alexandrian in the Racine, or in this apartment in Ubu. But I think the rage that Jarry feels coming out, this trampling on what it is to be an adult - you know saying, 'I want to be the king of everywhere because I want to eat lots of sausages!' It's the revelling in that childishness, I think that's completely fascinating.

Lucie 11:22

So this production required something quite special from the actors, because you were veering between a highly realistic bourgeois dinner party and these incredible, grotesque toddler tantrums when they were being seen through the eyes of your young Jarry character. How did you manage that in rehearsal?

Declan 11:41

That was actually very simple. The really difficult thing was to get the bourgeois dinner party right, because it's not really how I would direct normally. And they had to have character biographies, and I would interview them in character - the sort of things I absolutely don't believe in. And they'd write up biographies. I remember Xavier Boiffier was a Canadian dentist, and of course when he said, 'je suis un dentist Canadien', we all burst out laughing. And then we had to stop laughing because we had to make everything very very serious. And they were absolutely brilliant doing the improvisations, with the exception that they used to burst out laughing. What they had to do was achieve consensus at the dinner party so that everything is to not ruffle the feathers of the other person. So the dinner table chat was different every night, it was improvised every night. It was never written. But they would say things like, 'sometimes I like to live in the country, but sometimes it's good to be in the city, because in the city you have theatres and many restaurants to go to. But in the country you have nature and you have birds and you have the sunshine and you have fresh air'. 'Yes I agree.' So they talked like that. And then Christophe one day I remember saying, 'dans la cuisine ma femme est reine, mais avec la barbecue, c'est moi!'

Lucie 12:53

Which to translate for listeners who don't speak French…

Declan 12:55

'In the kitchen my wife is queen, but when it comes to the barbecue it's me!' And instead of being boring, it was just screamingly funny. What they couldn't do is do it without laughing, and they had to achieve consensus. And so basically I would scream at them if ever they burst out laughing, and so broke that reality. Or if they ever got loud enough for the audience to hear what

they were saying and the audience laugh. So they had to do this really tricky thing of keeping it animated, but it had to be just like the conversation at the next table in a restaurant where you can't quite hear what they're saying, so it had to be just kept under a hubbub. And I swear to God, 90% of my energy was maintaining that. The mayhem, the blood, the destroying the set, the throwing food everywhere, all of that was so simple. They just did it, because they had been driven so crazy by this table, that they were just prepared to go anywhere and do all sorts of extreme things.

But you know what was interesting? What was funny was never the outlandish things that they did, the mixing each other's brains and so on. They would laugh a bit, but the real laugh always came when they returned to the table, when they returned to normality, because you had this flash of, ‘oh my god, that's there underneath the surface.’ That was the recognition that the audience made.

Lucie 14:11

And I think what was also so delicious about that, those grotesque parts where we saw these brains being mixed and ketchup going all over the walls to make mountains, was that it was once again what we were talking about in our last episode with *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, which is that Nick, you showed us a very clear set of cards at the beginning - this is a bourgeois apartment with a very nicely decked out kitchen and some tasteful interior design, out of which you gave us international warfare and bloodshed and corruption and executions. That must've been quite delicious as a process.

Nick 14:47

That was great fun in that having made a choice that you're setting it in an apartment, then you’re limited, you're wonderfully limited to all the objects that you have in the kitchen and in the bathroom and in the rest of the flat. And so you can do whatever within those limitations. So you have ketchup which becomes blood all over the walls, and the food mixer for stirring up somebody’s brains.

Declan 15:10

And then he has a coronation…

Nick 15:12

…with a lampshade, so you could stir his brains through the top of a lampshade, and you wouldn't see what was happening, but you'd imagine his brain is being stirred up by this mixer.

Declan 15:20

And then they would taste it to see if it was OK, and at the moment when he gives them lots of money they'd got kitchen foil. Of course 'argent' means money in French, and also silver. So they took a tail of the silver foil from the kitchen and ran around it screaming, 'argent, argent!' - 'money, money, money!' with the silver foil. That was wonderful and the actors came up with most of those ideas. We all love doing that, but the real grind was getting back to that table and having this incredibly boring conversation, which also managed to be very very funny. One very strange thing about *Ubu* is that Nick and I used to schlep out to see it wherever it was playing, and I never had to give any notes. It was amazing. It had this incredible autonomy, it just looked after itself. I don't know what it is, it's like there is some monstrous mechanism in that world of farce.

Lucie 16:10

The other thing that I'd love to hear more about is how you tackled the text in this play, because the actual non-improvised text in this production, Jarry's actual text is just gobbledygook, a lot of the time. It's deliberately childish language.

Declan 16:26

Well, yes. But we do it in the same way that we approach all text, which is that they have to do the syllable exercise.

Lucie 16:31

So tell us more about the syllable exercise.

Declan 16:34

Well, it's whatever you say, before you go for the meaning of the words, or at the same time (but you must do it as an accompaniment) you must divide each word into its constituent syllables and say them aloud as if they're separate. And after you've said them separately, and felt them a bit separately, then you can put them back in with words. But always, you come back to the words so much better if you've gone through the separate syllables of the word and listed them on your fingers like 'ab-so-lute-ly'. If you list the syllables and sound them separately, it does incredibly invigorating things. So that was how we approached it, like we do Shakespeare, like we do Racine, like we do Pushkin, like we do Chekhov, you absolutely separate out each syllable and you learn an awful lot from that. And I think it reminds us of the primitive sources of language that are actually prelinguistic. We communicate first of all through sounds. You get wonderful unexpected spins on words if you do that. But the very worst thing that you can do to rehearse any play, never mind by Jarry, is sit down and determine meaning.

Music

Lucie 17:53

Now, there was one scene in this production which has haunted my imagination ever since. It was one in which you had an actor and actress together, and the actor was licking the foot of the actress which was covered in an actual stocking, I think, whilst being filmed up close. And there was something about a pure physical act that was happening there, of seeing a tongue hitting this horribly abrasive surface and then expanded hugely. It was not a pretence of doing something. It was a real tongue licking a real stocking. And that brought us back to ground zero. In the middle of all this pretence and grotesquerie and skewed realities, there was a moment that was just unbearably and simply real. And it was deeply unsettling because you kept on feeling like you're a fish on a hook being yanked between different levels of perception and realism.

Declan 18:53

Yes, that was a very important moment to us. They were wonderful, Camille and Christophe, they would show me all sorts of things, we could do it this way, we could do it that way. They unselfconsciously showed me the most extraordinary things. It was like destroying their inventiveness through this bone-crunchingly boring dinner party, it kind of released it afterwards. I imagine that after this confinement we were all going to run around jumping on each other, and kissing each other and hugging each other, because we've just been so withheld by this enforced separation. But that's kind of what happened in it. And bringing the camera made it hyper real, and I think that's really important.

Lucie 19:35

And again it returns us to something that we were talking about last week with *'Tis Pity She's a Whore,* which is that you were playing with levels of perception, and where reality was at any one point. We were seeing the world through the eyes of this extremely tortured 14-year-old, and we ourselves were seeing the play through our own eyes. And playing with where we stood in relation to what was happening, and turning it back on us, seems to be something that was very alive in the heart of this production.

Nick 20:05

Real life is theatre, and if you think about the theatre of power, for example, which, I mean, Ubu is concerned with, he wants to become king, think about the theatre of the absurd, the crown and those capes that they wear in the House of Lords. It's completely ridiculous. They're totally theatrical, they're just theatrical props, I mean they are jokes really. We can take them seriously, or we can see them for what they are. I mean they are props, they are theatre props, and we can laugh at that, but that is how power functions.

Lucie 20:36

And in your play, instead of real crowns we end up with lampshades.

Nick 20:40

Exactly. And there is no difference really, in the mind.

Declan 20:43

Yes. It's all about the *Wizard of Oz*. You pull down the curtain and there he is, just pulling his levers. However, having said that, we need ceremonial, we need ritual, we need respect, we need dignity. We do need those things, but they quickly become hokum so we need to keep a cold eye on them.

Lucie 21:00

I'd love to go back to a word that you used, Nick, which was you need the 'limitation' of the realistic design to create this key into this incredibly grotesque world. And it seems that this is something that actually runs through this production. The limitation of the bourgeois dinner party creates the explosion of the grotesquerie when they enter Ubu-world. And this seems to be something that is fascinating in your work, which is that nothing ever happens without understanding the flip side of what is going on. The limitation, the straitjacket out of which the energy is created. And that's quite an unusual way of looking at plays I think, which is that you look at the negative space that creates the conditions for the thing to happen.

Declan 21:43

Always, yes. Nothing is but that it is not. So you have to have the opposite to create the positive.

Lucie 21:50

You can't have this incredible grotesque pantomime without incredibly boring realism.

Declan 21:56

No, you can't. Nor with the child Jarry's rage exists if you didn't have something to rage against. So you have to think, what is it overturning? So you have to think about what is the action that creates this reaction. Nothing that we do is an action, everything that we do is a reaction to an action that happened before. And that action that happened before is also a reaction. And it turns out that even the Big bloody Bang was a reaction to something before. So there is no originating moment that we can make out.

Lucie 22:23

And that's what I love about talking about any of these plays with both of you, which is that you always talk at a door which I've never really approached to play through before, which is what is

the opposite of what is happening? What's the flip side, what's the space between the words? What's outside that's allowing us to see this thing happening in front of us?

Declan 22:43

Yes, space is always a journey between two points. It's not about the point. So you can't put a space on stage unless you're saying it's not another space. No space exists without what it isn't. There is no inside without outside, there is no up without down. It absolutely requires the other thing to be made. And sometimes you think, 'well, no that's a bit boring, I just want the up, I don't want the down.' Well, sorry.

Lucie 23:11

There is no Ubu without a Canadian dentist.

Declan 23:14

No. Indeed not, no. I am sure there are excellent Canadian dentists.

Lucie 23:20

I'm not sure if there are excellent Ubus. I think they're probably all despicable. So we've reached the inevitable end of the podcast question, which is what was your favourite moment or line from this show?

Nick 23:34

My favourite moment was the food mixer in the brain, because somehow it keyed into French culture, because French people, I have found, often talk about food and somehow, in fact the whole production, keyed into something very very French.

Declan 23:55

One of my favourite moments was when Bougrelas is lamenting over his dead mother and there was a long scene like a melodrama and we backed it with some La traviata playing. It came over the loudspeakers, and he sobbed and wailed in a very hieratic and rather fake way. And then there was a segue and the people in the *Ubu* play went back into the dinner party, but we realised that they were standing up and they were listening to a CD of their favourite soprano singing Violetta from La traviata, and the father picked up the CD sleeve, and they'd pass it around and they'd nod sagely in a rather superior way about it. I loved that moment because it was like the commoditization of culture, the canning of it. The precious process of how we communicate with each other can be sold. There's also that sense of cultural superiority to it. Another moment I really liked was just before the guests arrived at the dinner party. Christophe as the father looked around the room and smiled as if he was saying, 'gosh I've done really

well.' He did it brilliantly. This terrible complacent smile. And I felt like the son that wanted to destroy that totem of complacency and smugness.

Another moment that I was fond of was when Christophe as the father would go into the kitchen to get something and he'd come back with an apron and take out the guests. There were three guests and he would take them in three groups of three as Ubu. The first were the bankers, and he'd take them into the kitchen and you'd hear this…

Nick 25:33

We had a chainsaw in the kitchen, the sound of a chainsaw.

Declan 25:37

Yes, there is a terrible chainsaw in the kitchen, and terrible blood curdling screams. And he'd come out again with the apron covered in blood. At the other door the same three actors would come in again, and this time they were going to be news media people, and he'd ask them some questions, and then he'd say 'à la trappe' - 'à la trappe' means 'down the hatch' - and he'd take them out and there'd be even louder blood curdling screams as he'd dispatch them out of sight. And then he'd come back again with even more blood on the apron. And the last one was the judges. It was extraordinary how much the audience loved those blood curdling screams. And the louder the screams were, the more the audience laughed. And it's interesting because of course the route of comedy is pain, whether we like it or not. We have empathy towards it in a tragedy, but in comedy on the whole we end up laughing at other people's pain, I'm afraid. Basically what happens is that he was killing off any possible opposition in the country, and he was dispatching with his potential enemies or any potential opposition.

Something we borrowed from mediaeval mystery plays, which is when Herod rages in the crowd, we had Ubu come offstage and he'd have a quick rage around the audience, and throw insults at whoever was hosting us, in whatever country be it Mexico or Moscow, or whatever. But in New York in 2016, we had variations on the theme of 'you're laughing at me now, you won't be laughing any more after you've laughed Trump into the White House.'

Music

Lucie 27:05

And that's where we're leaving you for today. If you want to check out some photos of Cheek by Jowl's production of *Ubu Roi*, take a look at the archive on the website. There's a link in the podcast notes. This series' music was composed by Paddy Cunneen for Cheek by Jowl's production of *The Winter's Tale*, with additional music in this episode by Davy Sladek for *Ubu Roi*. Join us next week when we will be discussing William Shakespeare's *As You Like It.* Until then, stay well.

Episode 4: *As You Like It*

Lucie 00:13

Welcome to Season Two of Cheek by Jowl's podcast *Not True But Useful*. I'm your host Lucie Dawkins. These episodes are going out into the world at a time when theatre is in suspended animation, so as an antidote I'll be chatting to Declan Donnellan and Nick Ormerod, the director designer duo behind Cheek by Jowl. They are going to share life lessons that they have learnt from staging great classic plays, which might help tide us through these strange times. We can't promise that any of these lessons will be true, but we hope you find them useful.

This week our play is William Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. Declan and Nick staged a seminal production in 1991 with an all male company, led by Adrian Lester as Rosalind, which then went on to tour the world. Here's a quick synopsis before we begin:

The story follows the adventures of cousins Rosalind and Celia. Celia's father, Duke Frederick, overthrew and exiled the former Duke, who happened to be Rosalind's father. The old Duke has fled into hiding in the forest of Arden. A young man called Orlando wins a wrestling match at court, and he and Rosalind fall in love at first sight. Orlando finds out that his brother Oliver is plotting to kill him, and he too runs away to the forest of Arden. Meanwhile, Duke Frederick flies into a rage and banishes Rosalind from the court. She and Celia decide to run away in disguise. Rosalind dresses as a man, calling herself Ganymede, and Celia pretends to be his sister, Aliena. They head off to, yes you've guessed it, the forest of Arden.

In the forest, the former Duke is living happily with a band of renegade lords, enjoying a simple life away from the pressures of court. Orlando joins them, and spends his time writing love letters to Rosalind and pinning them onto the trees. He runs into Rosalind and Celia, pretending to be Ganymede and Aliena, and fails to recognise the woman he loves under her disguise.

Rosalind decides to test his love. As Ganymede, she tells Orlando that she can cure him of his love sickness. If he comes to her every day and woos her as if she were Rosalind (which of course she actually is), she will teach him to free himself of his desires. At the same time, Rosalind and Celia get caught up in the romantic adventures of some shepherds. One of them, Phoebe, rejects the lovelorn Silvius and falls in love with Rosalind believing that she is a man. Rosalind finally decides to end the mess. She gathers all of the various couples in the play, telling them that she will wed them to the right person in front of the old Duke, her father. At the marriage ceremony, she reveals her true identity, is reunited with her father, and marries Orlando. As they all celebrate, the news arrives that the Duke Frederik has decided to abdicate his throne and return it to his brother. In the Cheek by Jowl production, the old Duke decides to stay in the forest and makes Orlando the new Duke, and Orlando then passes it on to Rosalind.

The song you are hearing now was composed by Paddy Cunneen for this production, performed live on stage by members of the company.

Music

Lucie 04:06

To start at the very beginning, why don't we talk about how you cast Adrian Lester in this production. Am I right in understanding that he didn't originally come up for the part of Rosalind?

Declan 04:16

No, we were also open-minded about it, about whether or not to do it all male, do you remember that? I mean, we thought it would be a good ruse, but if we couldn't find the right person we wouldn't do it. We saw Adrian, and asked if he was interested in reading for Rosalind, and he said, no, he would rather read for Orlando. And then he went away, and then he phoned us back, and asked, 'do you mind if I come back and read from Rosalind?' So, no, he was just wonderful for the part. We were incredibly lucky to have him. And in fact we owe an enormous amount to Adrian, because Adrian agreed to come back to do it a second time around two or three years later. It's the only time we've ever been able to bring back an English show after three years, unlike Russian or French stuff. So *As You Like It* had this extraordinary history, going around basically all of the world.

Lucie 05:02

Let's go back about why you chose to do an all male production. So you were open minded at first about whether you were going to do one. Was it Adrian, casting Adrian as Rosalind that tipped the balance for you, it was an all male production always at the back of your mind for the show?

Declan 05:17

I have to say it was a hunch that it would be an interesting thing to do, and it would offer possibilities for life. As all of our work we didn't do it in order to say anything. But I think sometimes that's the best way to say things, is to not know what you're saying, funnily enough, sometimes, particularly if you are an artist. Then extraordinary things come out of it according to people's interpretation.

Lucie 05:38

Well you had an extraordinary moment at the very beginning of the show, where you took Jacques' speech and implanted it in the very first lines. He said, 'all the world's a stage and all the men and women merely players.' And all the actors, all the male actors playing men, went to one side of the stage, and all the male actors playing women went to the other side of the stage. And that began a great big long play with identity and gender, that ran all the way through the show. Now, could you tell us a little bit more about that, about why that interested you?

Declan 06:10

It's very difficult to do that, because again it's all on a hunch. So I don't understand it. I don't actually understand my work. You go in on a hunch, rather than thinking this is going to make this point, that's going to make the other point. I mean at the back of our minds, yes, the streets that we walk through on the way to rehearsal, there is the whole Clause 28, and a lot of very unpleasant dark storm clouds in the sky. So that makes your awareness up. But we don't put that directly into the play, any more than we did with *Angels in America,* which we were directing at more or less the same time. It's there in the ether, it's there in the zeitgeist, but no, we're not left brain people, and we're not using our work to make clear points.

Lucie 06:53

So Nick, looking at the design of this production, it's almost the polar opposite of the production that we talked about in the last episode, *Ubu Roi,* which had a very realistic set. Here you had an almost entirely empty stage, with two entrances from the front, two entrances from the back, and at one point green streamers for trees, and occasionally a prop brought on. How did you arrive at this design?

Nick 07:18

Well in essence, it comes back to - what do you need for the play? And actually you don't need anything apart from, as you say, a suggestion of the seasons changing, which were the green streamers. So in the second half it becomes spring and summer, in the first half we are in winter, and we're in the forest, and to suggest that we had a brazier with burning turf, and all the men were in overcoats. And so essentially, that's all you actually need for the piece, and the actors can do the rest.

Declan 07:52

Yes, I think you have to point out, as you said, you have to point out the space, the inexorable quality of the space as it falls into two – there is the space, and the non-space. So there is inside and outside. And one here is the court, and then the country, the place where people go to lose themselves and find themselves again. Nick chose to do the difference between court and country in the costumes and not in any scenery.

Nick 08:16

But it's also worth, I think, pointing out that we were very careful not to introduce feminine clothes too abruptly. We made the transition by presenting all the actors as male actors, with trousers and white shirts. And then only very gradually we see the first two women, Rosalind and Celia, dress not really in women's clothes. They were sort of dressed as priests, almost, in robes. I feel that to introduce them immediately in women's clothes is to a contemporary audience asking for a laugh, basically. So to introduce the idea quite slowly, and display your

cards, you know. So we show them all as men, and then suggest they are going to play women, and then eventually we do see them dressed as women.

Declan 09:07

Yes, it was a site of anxiety, it certainly was in those days, you know, it was 30 years ago, men dressed as women gets a laugh. It's also a comedy. So you have to be quite disciplined to make sure that people laugh at this and not this. So you have to steer the audience that way.

Lucie 09:25

Well, I think it also set us up for a moment that profoundly shook me in the production - which is at the very very end, Adrian removes his earrings in the epilogue and drops his voice very slightly (he hadn't been speaking in a falsetto but just a slightly higher voice) and we'd had the slow bleed into more and more and more feminine dress, the slow shifting of gender presentation towards the end. And then in one movement, he got rid of it, and became Adrian Lester the actor talking to the audience in the epilogue saying, 'if I were a woman….' It was something profoundly wonderful because it was the moment when he said, 'look, I can be many, many different people. All it takes is removing my earrings. And guess what, you can be lots of different people too, and there is no such thing as authenticity.'

Declan 10:15

No, exactly. Any authenticity which promises that we are one thing makes an endless misery. I think what Shakespeare understands is that what is authentically human is our capacity to be many different things.

Lucie 10:28

And I think what was so brilliant about that moment was that you managed to achieve it so simply. It was the tiniest of gestures and the smallest of voice shifts. But only because you set all of those dominoes up all the way through the production of this very slow shifting, until Adrian ended up in what was a very sexy wedding dress, doing the tango. And then he suddenly changed back, and your hairs went up, because it made you look back at yourself, I think.

Declan 10:56

Yes, that's the great effect, the fact that you're seeing it and then you see it seeing you back. And you think, well, what's my part in this? But of course it's not our job to define meaning. In fact I don't think it's our job to think in terms of meaning at all, actually. We have to leave that to critics or academics or audience members who wish to think in that particular way. Our job is to do something else, and to be open, but to be brave enough to work on hunches.

Lucie 11:22

And as part of preparing for this episode of the podcast, I also looked at an interview that you gave for this production at the time of doing it, in which you said something very much along these lines. You said the important thing is not to judge any of the characters, the goodies and the baddies in the play, but leave it wide open so that the audience can step in with their imaginations and empathise where they want to, 'as they like it.' And this seems very connected to the idea of you avoiding defining meaning for the audience.

Declan 11:53

That's very important, but the most important thing behind all of that is that for God's sake you have to avoid judgement. We judge at the very last moment in a court of law. We need to really reserve judgement until the last moment. And I think one of the reasons that we like to rush to judgement, is that it protects us from sadness. You know, one of the things that happens in the great tragedies, as well as the great comedies, is that we watch people very often defending themselves from oceanic sadness, and understanding that we are, in our grief, totally separate. There is no such thing as communal grief. We can support each other, we can stand with each other, and it's extremely important that we do. But sadness is painful and quite isolating, and we jump to judgement as a defence against feeling all sorts of other catastrophic emotions that we fear will overwhelm us.

Lucie 13:50

And that's also what I really enjoyed about watching this production. You gave unexpected twists to many characters who are usually shown in quite black-and-white ways in this production. For example, Celia, who in this production has a lot of thoughts about Rosalind, and is not entirely happy about what happens at the end of the play.

Declan 13:11

No, and love is very painful. I mean, if it's not painful, it ain't love! I think that's really important, and the idea that you can have pain-free love, that you can have a pain-free life… but you can make a lot of money out of selling pain-free love and pain-free life.

Lucie 13:26

And that's what I think I enjoyed so much about the design here Nick, that by keeping the stage so completely open, with all of these bodies moving around it, that when something happened, you could always see the other space happening. You know, you could always see what happened to Celia in her reaction because of what was going on to Rosalind. You could always see that flip side, because you left it so open to us.

Nick 13:51

Yes, any production of *As You Like it,* Lucie, needs an element to attach letters to, and to divide the space in order to allow certain people to overhear other conversations. And our green strips of silk which stood in for trees allowed for maximum space with minimal clutter.

Lucie 14:11

Again, because it was so sparse, there were so few props, and when the props did come on stage, they tended to be imbued with an enormous amount of significance. I am thinking particularly of the Duke's cross that showed that the Duke was in power. So at the end of the play, the cross arrives to be given to the old Duke, and he decides to give it to Orlando, and make Orlando Duke. But then you added an extra moment, outside the text, where Orlando put the cross around Rosalind's neck, and made her the Duke. And she hesitates before letting him do it, and it was actually a beautiful mirror image of the very beginning of the play, where she puts her necklace around his neck as a sign of love. How did you go about working to make these props so imbued with dynamism in rehearsal?

Declan 15:00

In order to get somebody to see something, you need to make sure you don't distract them. It's the outside space, it's what you don't see, so that when you have something it has more significance than if you have a load of things. So when you want to hide something on the news at the moment, you hide it amongst all sorts of other things. So the obverse of that is that if you want people to see something, you have to make sure they're not looking at anything else.

Lucie 15:23

I think this also connects to what we were talking about with Mamillius in *The Winter's Tale*, about the way that you both have the tendency to find the shadow that the light is causing. The thing that you're not looking at, the unseen flipside of any event. And Celia sees her dearest friend in the world, who is described as more than just a friend at the beginning of the play, turning into, in your production, the new Duke. You had everybody on stage and kneeling at the same time, apart from her, sinking slightly more slowly than everybody else, in this moment of horror about having lost her best friend, essentially, but also her having got something that she really shouldn't have had. Because if it had worked out otherwise, Celia would have been the more important one.

Declan 16:11

You know, Shakespeare is a great writer because he is so exhaustive in his treatment of human love. You can't do love unless you do loss. And I don't think that we can say that loss is the shadow of love. I think what you have to say is that love and loss come together. I just think it's really important that you always look at the other space at the same time. Like, what has the photographer left out of the photograph? What are the words that Shakespeare hasn't used, or that we don't use? It's not like a hidden something. If you're downstairs, does that mean upstairs

is hidden? No, they have to exist at the same time. So you love, and you think, ‘oh my God there is loss!’ No, the loss is intrinsic to the love. I am alive – so I'm going to die. That's not a terrible surprise because they are both in each other. I think Shakespeare keys into that, and I think he is very aware of that. So his great love plays are all about loss. They must be. You know, the fact that Rosalind’s great dread with Orlando is the same as Juliet's great love with Romeo. I do think that the important thing about falling in love with somebody is that many people, when they fall in love, say, ‘he makes me feel so safe’. And I recognise that, the feeling of being made safe. And I think it's because when we have that moment of falling in love, it takes us back mostly to our mothers I think. I think the first person that anyone falls in love with, on the whole, is their mother. Our mother gives us that sense of being completely safe. I think the problem is that we crave to get back to it, and we have to lose that. So we have to have the love of feeling absolutely safe, and then the loss of realising, ‘oh my God, I'm not’. And I think when we go back, and we have this profound feeling of falling in love, we recognise something and go back in time. It presses a button on us. And I think that's why we have the feeling of being safe.

And I think that's happening in Rosalind and in Orlando, and that she fears… and I mean really fears, it's a big fear, it's not a million miles from *Lear* which is the sort of shadow play to *As You Like It*, in some respects - it’s about, you know, the ruler out in the wilds, and there is the theme of nothing which he develops so well in *Lear*. It’s present as a shadow through *As You Like It* that there might be nothing, and she has to make sure that Orlando does love her. And I think that she understands that the centre of true love is something quite cool, actually, it's a kind of cool empathy. When she talks about scouring his heart so that there is none of this love left, she wants to test it. She does want him to love her, she wants him to love her passionately, but she wants it to be more real. The heart is a treacherous place for every human being. None of us are experts. But it's the same problem, I think, that Juliet has, which is trying to probe and see what it actually is behind all of this hyperbole.

Lucie 19:04

Well, it's what I find so awe-inspiring about Shakespeare's young female characters. They are far further along understanding that than the young male characters are. Rosalind understands it much better than Orlando, Juliet understands it much better than Romeo. And I find that quite astounding, the trust that he places in teenage girls.

Declan 19:23

Yes, he does. He had one of his own, Susanna. But they nearly always disobey their fathers. Yes, he writes fiery independent women. It's very much an active love, and they have to educate the men. And they're much older than the men, it's like Juliet is about three times older than Romeo. They are incredibly ill-suited in a way.

Lucie 19:46

Yeah. That was the wonderful image of the very last scene, again with this moment of the medal going around her neck, is that you can see him realising that he had to step up to her.

Declan 19:58

Yes, he loves her, and if anyone is going to rule this kingdom it has to be her, because she is so much more capable than he is. Salvation is understanding that we have something to learn. The problem with knowing everything is that if you know everything you can't learn anything. And Orlando does know that he has a lot to learn, and he is desperate for Rosalind to teach him.

Lucie 20:19

And you gave us at least five seconds of tragedy, where she finally reveals himself to him, and the way that you staged it, he walked away. He couldn't deal with it. Eventually, they have their resolution, but you did give us the tragedy.

Declan 20:34

The really important thing in it for me, though, it's something incredibly sad to do with her father, who doesn't recognise her. And then Orlando doesn't recognise her. And there is something mythically terrible about not being recognised by the person who loves you.

Lucie 20:51

So, we have reached our final question of the podcast, which is always: what were your favourite moments or lines from this play? Nick, why don't we start with you.

Nick 21:00

My favourite moment is the song, when they're all sitting in a row on the front edge of the stage, and Audrey is yodelling for her goats. That was both hilarious and really quite touching.

Music

Lucie 21:58

It was wonderful, that moment. What about you Declan?

Declan 22:02

It’s when Orlando fails to recognise Rosalind. She sets it all up as a great joke, and then the joke backfires, in a way, because wouldn’t it be funny if he didn’t recognise me? And she hasn’t thought through what the emotional consequences of him not recognising her would be. Then she learns it, sharp, that it’s a nightmare if he doesn’t recognise her. It’s a kind of ‘nothing will

come of nothing' moment. It's not there on the surface of the text, but it is underneath it all. I think you can feel it in the text, because she is absolutely furious afterwards. She humiliated herself in front of herself. The last person we really don't want to be humiliated in front of is ourselves. And I think that's an extraordinary moment for me. Adrian did it so amazingly.

Lucie 22:56

What I loved about that moment is how quickly Adrian let Rosalind see that, and then have to put herself back together again to do the next bit.

Declan 23:06

As if it had all been intended!

Lucie 23:08

Yes! Seeing her struggle to keep herself together.

Declan 23:11

Yes - 'did you notice my deliberate mistake?' Exactly. That, for me, is quite moving.

Lucie 23:17

We have heard your favourite moments. Could you now share your favourite lines? Let's do it the other way round. Declan, you're up first.

Declan 23:24

I think it has to be when Rosalind says, 'I can do strange things'. And that's an extraordinary moment of power and mystery...

Lucie 23:37

And what about you, Nick, what's your favourite line?

Nick 23:40

It's part of a line from Celia, which is 'was, is not is.'

Declan 23:48

I am afraid we do say that…

Nick 23:51

We use that often.

Declan 23:55

We use that quite often!

Lucie 23:57

So ‘he was in love with me, but is no longer in love with me.’

Nick 24:00

Exactly.

Lucie 24:01

Oh, that’s devastating!

Declan 24:03

It’s very good.

Lucie 24:04

Well, thank you, Declan and Nick, for a masterclass in love this week. And next time, we are going to be diving into *The Tempest*.

Nick 24:13

Thanks Lucie, bye bye.

Music

Lucie 24:22

Thank you for listening to this week’s episode. If you enjoyed what you’ve heard and want to find out more, check out the archive on the Cheek by Jowl website, where you can find images from this production. There is a link in the podcast notes. The theme music for this podcast was composed by Paddy Cunneen for Cheek by Jowl’s production of *The Winter’s Tale*. Join us next week, when we will be bringing you another dose of Shakespeare. And until then, stay well.

Episode 5: *The Tempest*

Lucie 00:13

Welcome to Season Two of Cheek by Jowl's podcast *Not True But Useful*. I'm your host Lucie Dawkins. These episodes are going out into the world at a time when theatre is in suspended animation, so as an antidote I'll be chatting to Declan Donnellan and Nick Ormerod, the director designer duo behind Cheek by Jowl. They are going to share life lessons that they have learnt from staging great classic plays, which might help tide us through these strange times. We can't promise that any of these lessons will be true, but we hope you find them useful.

Our play of the week is *The Tempest* by William Shakespeare. Here is a quick synopsis before we begin. This is supposedly Shakespeare's last play, and it tells the story of an isolated island, occupied only by a magician, Prospero, his daughter, Miranda, and his two slaves. One of them is a spirit called Ariel, and the other is the island's only native inhabitant, Caliban. Twelve years beforehand, Prospero had been Duke of Milan, but his brother Antonio overthrew him with the aid of Alonzo, King of Naples, and Alonzo's brother, Sebastian. They put Prospero and his baby daughter, Miranda, out to sea, and they washed up on this island.

At the beginning of the play, Antonio, Sebastian, and Alonzo, along with Alonzo's son, Ferdinand, are sailing past the island. With Ariel's help, Prospero summons a storm to cause a shipwreck. The various survivors crawl to land on different parts of the island, each group believing that the others have died.

On one part of the island, the young Ferdinand is washed up onto a beach. Miranda finds him, and they fall in love. Prospero tests Ferdinand by forcing him to do a series of exhausting physical tasks. On another part of the island, Ferdinand's father, Alonzo, King of Naples, along with his brother Sebastian, make it to land. With them are several other nobles, and Antonio, Prospero's brother, who had usurped him as Duke of Milan. Prospero plots revenge on them. On a third part of the island, two other survivors, the jester Trinculo and the butler Stefano meet Caliban. They all get drunk together. Caliban tells them about Prospero, and they plot to kill him, so that they can rule the island themselves.

At the end of the play, Prospero allows Ferdinand and Miranda to marry. He then uses Ariel to bring all the other survivors together. He plans awful vengeance on Antonio, Sebastian, and Alonzo, and averts Caliban's plot. At the last moment, he relents and decides to forgive them all. Antonio returns his Dukedom to him, and Prospero frees Ariel in gratitude for his service. They all return to Italy together, leaving Caliban alone on the island.

The music you are hearing now was composed by Dmitri Volkov for Cheek by Jowl's recent production. And now over to Declan and Nick.

Music

Lucie 03:32

So hello Declan and Nick. We are meeting remotely online today, with a cup of tea, in possibly the wettest day of the year, which I think is exactly the right day to be discussing *The Tempest*. How are you both doing?

Nick 03:45

Very well, thanks Lucie.

Declan 03:46

Very well. A great squall of rain has just gone over as you said that. Yes.

Lucie 03:50

It's perfect for a play which starts with a storm. And so this is a play which you two have worked on twice. In 1988, with a British cast, and then in 2014 with a Russian one. So what is it about this play that has kept you hooked over the course of nearly two decades?

Declan 04:07

Well, I think like all Shakespeare's plays, it's like a diamond. Every time you look at it, it reflects back a different series of colours that are changing all the time. So nothing remains fixed in a Shakespeare play when you look at it again. And for all that, they are not perfect, which is even greater. They are all a very human artefact.

There are extraordinary things in *The Tempest*. For me, I think it's the bitterness of this old man, you know, who has got a very long list of self-pitying rages. There's a kind of myth that this was Shakespeare's last play, but that also somehow that he knew that it was his last play, and that in the lines that he gives to Prospero he makes his farewell to the theatre. I don't think so. I think that's a little bit sentimental actually. I don't think that he would have known that it was his last play. I think he went up to Stratford and got caught with cholera, I think that's what happened to him. He probably died in that epidemic which spread through Warwickshire at that time. I feel in my own way very strongly that that isn't the case, because I don't think that Shakespeare ever puts any of his own words into anybody's mouth, because that is totally against the spirit of Shakespeare. The triumph of Shakespeare is his capacity to totally objectify and leave himself outside the picture.

I don't think there is anything particularly admirable about Prospero. He's very clever, but he's extremely bitter, and he can't forgive his younger brother for having stolen his birthright. And it's pretty clear to me that he wasn't the greatest leader, that he was stuck in his books, and was quite easily overthrown, in the same way that you might work out that there were probably very

good reasons why young Prince Hamlet wasn't elected to be leader of Denmark. They think it's their birth, their entitlement by birth, but they got it and they weren't able to hang onto it.

But there is something in the quality of Prospero for me that is very angry, and he is in desperate need of redemption, as if redemption is something you can get that easily. It's not. It's something you have to work at every day, if you believe in it. Prospero is eaten with bitterness. He just goes back and plays a violin behind himself, 'look at this terrible thing that was done to me. This person did a terrible thing to me and that person did a terrible thing to me.' He builds it up into a kind of bubble of bitterness against the world. And his poor daughter is locked in with him, and that's a very unhappy position to be in, to be locked in with a bitter parent, with no-one making sure that there are boundaries being observed. Psychological boundaries, I mean.

Then, at the end of the play, for various reasons, many of which are mysterious, he manages to overcome that bitterness, and he does so through the act of forgiveness, and it's an extraordinary moment. I think that is what the play is about. It's not about somebody who has harmoniously achieved the end of their life, and at the beginning of it he is putting his papers in order because he's done well, and he's coming to the end, and he is completely in control. That's nonsensical.

It's like looking at one of those vast court portraits of Elizabeth I or Henry VIII, and they look so much in control. Of course they weren't in control. They never knew if they were going to be murdered in their beds that night. So these official portraits, it's not how things were. It's how they would like things to be. I think we must always never ever ever ever dump our common sense when we look at a play of Shakespeare. Prospero of course pretends to be completely in control, but somebody who is so bitter, so full of hatred, is out of control of themselves.

Lucie 07:39

And what about you, Nick? What has hooked you about this play for so long?

Nick 07:43

Well, there are many things. Our approach the first time around was entirely different from the second. The first time we took a metaphor of theatre. Prospero, played by Timothy Walker, was kind of a leading actor. He stayed onstage, and had his makeup table onstage, and that works, in terms of the piece, incredibly well, because in it there is a play within a play. The masque, which was very fashionable at the time in Shakespeare's England, as a private entertainment, and everything about it has a theatrical edge to it, if you like. It seemed to us at that time to work really well.

But now when we came back to it with the Russian group, we were in a beautiful, remote part of Russia, which was very hot, with a lake, and for a week we were able to play by this lake with a lot of water, sand, and textures like that. And it seemed very natural to bring them very concretely into the production.

Lucie 08:44

So, going back to that first 1988 production - we will come back to the Russian one a bit later - this one was remarkable because it went on an international tour behind the Iron Curtain. How was this production received differently in different countries on either side of that divide?

Declan 09:00

Well, in that 1988 English production, Annie White played the King of Naples as the Queen of Naples. And in England, it was very much seen as being a satire on Thatcher and Thatcherism, because it was one woman surrounded by her ministers. We didn't intend that at all. However, if the audience wants to bring that to it, that's absolutely fine, because we don't have a 'meaning' in that sense. The work that we do has an openness, we hope, and people bring their own meanings to it.

But the idea that they have to get our intention, or 'what are you trying to say by saying that?' It's not really like that. It's more like an open question.

Nick 09:39

But that had an irony, because when we did go abroad, we went to Romania…

Declan 09:45

It was an extraordinary thing, because Romania was very much in the iron grip of the Communist regime run by Nikolai Ceausescu, very much controlled by him and his wife Elena. And there was a gasp when she came on…

Nick 09:57

And they said they couldn't believe we had portrayed Elena Ceausescu so accurately!

Declan 10:04

When she walked onstage with her handbag and her suit and her high heels, there was a gasp, and we heard people saying, 'Elena! Elena!' and people were actually quite frightened. And the story goes that the head of theatre was reprimanded for having allowed us in.

Nick 10:20

In the masque, the actors ran at the audience shouting, 'High-day, freedom!'. Now this turns out to mean, in Romanian, 'freedom, go for it!'

Declan 10:32

We had no idea there was going to be a revolution, and nor did they. Nothing would ever have happened to me and Nick, we don't think. As always, during the late 80s, it wasn't us, it was the people we spoke to, they might get into trouble. People would come and see us in our room, and would search it for bugs and so on, so it was like we were in some kind of spy thriller.

Lucie 10:51

So this seems to be a good moment for us to jump forward in time to 2014, when you did this production in Russia. This next question coming up is one I know you get asked endlessly, but I am going to put it to you again. How does working with the same play in another language make you think about the text?

Declan 11:09

The long way I would like to answer that question is the important way, which is our obsession with words. When the actors are onstage, and people are in the audience, it's not just the text that you understand. There are all sorts of other living things that you understand. They get filtered out when you do film and television. There is a huge tranche of human communication that is completely filtered out like that. It's like orange juice without the bits.

It makes me realise just what a word-dominated culture we live in. So whether they speak English, French or Russian… yeah, sometimes you have to stop every now and a point has to be clarified, but that's about two or three percent of communication between me and the actors, the actors and each other, and the actors and the audience. People continue to be very surprised, saying, 'it was extraordinary. I stopped looking at the subtitles after a while and just looked at the stage.' So all I would like to say is that the fact that it is in a different language isn't the problem. The problem is that it is in any language, because words are misleading.

By and large, the actual business of acting is human, and the rules of acting are the same in every culture. What is different is that groups tend to have different dynamics, and different cultures of being together, very much in Russia as you can imagine, but everywhere, people come together in different ways, but the actual basic fabric of human life - you know, my heart beats, my lungs breathe - those are absolutely the same from one culture to another. And over all our years of working in different languages, and different cultures, and doing workshops and seeing audiences and different things, it's not the difference which strikes us, it is what's the same.

Every human being is different, but human beings tend to have certain qualities in common, and that is how I am able to direct a play. I can rely on those qualities - only probabilistically, I certainly can't be certain or right, but it's the things which don't change that are so extraordinary.

Lucie 13:08

So Nick, could you describe your design for this Russian production?

Nick 13:13

The design is a wall, a white-ish wall, and in it are three doors. The doors open in two ways, so they're like a restaurant door which swings both ways, and on the floor are slatted panels of wood, which allows us to use water, because the water could flow through the floor and be collected underneath.

Lucie 13:37

I loved those three doors. I thought they were genius. So there are a couple of scenes in *The Tempest*, which in lots of productions they put centre stage, and tend to be a bit pants as a result, because they are so big that it's very difficult to illustrate them. One of them is the shipwreck, and the other one is the great big magic feast at the end of the play. But you staged them behind these doors, so that we got these little glimpses of them as the doors flew open and closed. A massive shipwreck going on, or just glimpses of this opulent table, which forced us to use our imagination to fill in these gaps, much more effectively than if you put them right in the middle of the stage. And it seemed to me that this sort of recruiting process, the way you get the audience to plug in as co-creators to your stage images, is a bit of a bedrock of the Cheek by Jowl approach.

Nick 14:25

Well, I would agree with that, but, having said that, that is the essence of theatre, because you want to make demands of the audience, for them to use their imagination and just a little bit of suggestion. They can fill in whole acres of shipwreck, just with a glimpse of a rope and some water dribbling from the ceiling.

Declan 14:46

Yes, it's not a work of art, it's an act of art. The artefact, the facsimile, the production, is something which stimulates a conversation with the person who is watching it. And the actual art takes place in the imagination of the observer. So if the observer hasn't got the imagination or is not able or isn't in a good place that day, then it's not actually a good work of art. You can't say, 'It's a good work of art, it's just that the audience member was in a bad mood so he couldn't take it in.' I think it's really better to think that there is no such thing as a work of art. The actual moment when it becomes live is when it is watered with the imagination of the person looking at it. Then an act of art takes place. That is the important thing. The person watching it is absolutely central to the experience. I think it is very dangerous to hobble the audience. It's like a parent bringing up a child, and hobbling the child by always cutting up their meat for them, always feeding them, always putting on their clothes for them. We have to wean, we have to grow up, and we have to be able to do things for ourselves. So I am not saying that the artist is

a parent to the audience member who is like a child, because that would be terrible and patronising, and you would lose the equality through which the love flows and through which the art flows. We have to be horizontal and equal to the other person. But also, they have to do their bit. They are part of the act, they are generously part of the act. And if you don't put something into it, you actually get quite bored.

Lucie 16:10

It really strikes me, this image of it being a problem if a parent cuts up all their child's meat, and doesn't let them fly, and doesn't let that child become weaned from their dependency on the adult, because it appears so clearly in your Russian production of *The Tempest*, where Miranda is still being washed by her father, and is still creepily dependent on him for basic adult functions, even though she is now a grown woman. And this image was incredibly unsettling at the same time as being extremely tender. What was it about that that fascinated you?

Declan 16:48

I mean I think that the parent has to help the child, and then the child has to be encouraged to walk free. Sometimes, we are not so well in our heads, and we like people to be dependent on us, and we don't like them to be able to walk free. And sometimes we don't want to walk free, because we are scared of walking free.

Lucie 17:05

Another thing that struck me about the beginning of this play was that over the course of these podcasts, we've been talking a lot about the Titanic, about films of the Titanic and the predicament of the Titanic, which was that people were dancing as the boat went down. The awful realisation in the audience watching a film about the Titanic is the disconnect between the terrible thing that is happening and the fact that people aren't realising it. And what I loved about your storm was that you basically staged the Titanic behind those doors. We kept on catching glimpses of waiters balancing champagne glasses, and a party going on in the face of this massive storm - which was really scary, actually, to watch that going on, to understand more in the audience about what their predicament was than they understood, and again to recruit the audience into this awful moment of the boat going down.

Declan 17:57

Yes. I think that the Titanic is an overwhelming myth, like us all going down together. The two things you needed, one was to have a first class ticket, and the other was to admit that the boat was going down. It can't be happening, so it isn't happening! It's a daily mistake, I think we all make.

Lucie 18:18

You got beyond the point of ‘how do we stage a storm?’ and got right into the heart of ‘how would a human react to going down in a storm?’ You got beyond that first step of ‘it would be terrifying’ and into the real human reaction, which is that when things are terrifying, we bury our heads in the sand.

Declan 18:37

Yes, I think often the audience gets irritated in the first scene of *The Tempest* because it is impossible to work out what is going on, because Shakespeare gives you a form of chaos before he begins this rather unusually trendy play - because after that point it is more or less written in the three unities.

Lucie 18:52

So just remind us of the three unities for listeners who might not have heard of them before.

Declan 18:57

Well, it was a baroque idea, and it was to do with Classical teaching that had got rather moulded to suit themselves. I think it’s a kind of horror of the randomness of real life, and Baroque theatre had to be somehow ennobling. Baroque theatre was definitely there to make the world a better place, and to get rid of chaos. In order to do that, you need to have good manners. Bad manners in the theatre is having fourteen year intervals like in *The Winter’s Tale*, and having massive violence onstage, and multiple plots and comic subplots particularly were anathema. The polite, ennobling new play that was going to be educational and do a lot of good had to follow strictly the three unities. These were unity of time (so the action should take place within 24 hours), unity of action (which meant there was only one main plot that we saw throughout the whole thing), and unity of place. That was a kind of form that people imposed upon themselves.

Lucie 19:57

Great. So, audiences tend to get annoyed with the first scene of *The Tempest*, you were saying, because it’s so chaotic that often it’s just a lot of people shouting.

Declan 20:05

Yeah, you see a lot of people running across the stage saying ‘master!’ and ‘bosun!’ And you don’t really know what’s happening and you can’t make out the characters. But I think that’s good, because you are about to have a very long speech from Prospero after it's over, and it sets the chaos, movement, and suffering for the play.

Soundtrack

Lucie 20:30

In Season One of the podcast (talking of this shipwreck), we mentioned the way that you developed the show in its very early stages in a process which you call ‘going into the woods’, which is essentially going off-grid with your actors for a development period for a few weeks into a woodland somewhere. And in this process, as we mentioned a bit earlier, you went to a place next to a lake where there was actual water, and the actors used that water when they were exploring the production. And that resulted in a lot of water onstage in this production. You reminded us of the real physical dangerous presence of the elements. This water appeared everywhere. You had the shipwrecked characters came onstage completely sodden, but you also had buckets of water being thrown over people, and an incredibly powerful moment when Ferdinand, having essentially been tortured and enslaved, was finally allowed to have a shower in front of Prospero, and showered naked with this water pouring over him, in this ecstatic light in the middle of the stage. There was something really powerful about this, seeing the actors’ bodies actually at odds with the physical world around them. Not pretending or giving an illusion of it, but this real, what you call carnal presence. Can you talk more about the importance of this idea of carnality, of real concrete presence onstage?

Declan 21:48

Yes, it’s the central mystery of theatre, which is the fact that we live in an abstract world, which is why death is always so surprising, and the more abstract the world you live in, the more the common realities of life strike us as being faintly surprising. This comes back to a thing I was saying about King Lear. When he sees Edgar in the hovel, Lear says ‘thou art the thing itself’, because he understands that words collapse, because words cannot convey the carnal experience of life full stop. They simply cannot do that. However much they pretend they can, they can’t. We have to try and share the carnal experience of life as well as we can, and that is one of the things that art does. One of the functions of art is to take us back to reality, because the delusion of ‘real life’ takes us away from it. In that respect, theatre is more real than real life, because real life isn’t particularly real. Real life is realistic, and then we have to understand that ‘realistic’ is very different from ‘real’.

Lucie 22:47

But there was something tremendously affecting about seeing a naked human body growing cold under cold water, exposed in the middle of this stage, as he tried to clean himself. There was something totally exposing about that moment that was beyond the text.

Declan 23:04

I think that is very important, the whole idea of nakedness, and being unclothed and cold and shivering. I sometimes think that one of the reasons that we eroticise nudity in the modern world (in the Middle Ages, nudity always stood for innocence, never for carnality - carnality was expressed by luxurious clothes), but actually I think it’s a defence against the fact that we are born naked and after we die we may be buried in a lot of clothes, but they soon rot away. There

is something very truthful about that, about the simple interface of our body with the elements. I mean it is the function of all art to try and put us back into our human, blooded, breathing cells, with bones and nerves and sinews and marrows. And it's so easy to abstract ourselves where there's a world where we don't feel that much, or where we think away our feelings, or we're in our own personal episode of a reality TV show, so that if we are performing it we are not really feeling it. But at the end of the day it's a lonely journey, and when we die hopefully somebody who loves us will hold our hand, if we're lucky, but we are still going to have to jump off that diving board on our own. And I think that's one of the things that happens in theatre, that we understand the isolation of feelings. And I think shivering under cold water is something that makes us feel very alone.

Lucie 24:23

And then makes us feel very together, because we are witnessing what it means to feel alone and human in a great big group of hundreds of people.

Declan 24:29

Well exactly. You're saying, 'God, do you feel that? I feel that', 'really? Do you feel that?', yeah, yeah, I feel that', 'so do we all…? Oh god!'

So we see these things and feel a bit less alone. I think any good piece of art is a voyage into loneliness, and it has a therapeutic effect, because to be lonely amongst lonely people is a little bit better than being the weird one, the only one who ever feels lonely.

Lucie 24:51

An actor I know describes all of Shakespeare's characters as 'not quite like the other children'.

Declan 24:57

Well, yeah.

Lucie 25:01

They are all a bit lonely, and all a bit weird, and all a bit off centre, and that's the thing that makes these plays so wonderful, because we recognise our own loneliness.

Declan 25:10

With respect to your friend, I know what he means - but I don't think we should drink the Kool-Aid that's proffered by society. All children are weird children! All children are lonely, all children have a problem fitting in. In fact, if my work has shown me anything, it's that we are all weird in a little way. We like to get over that when we go to the theatre, and we see things and

we share things together and we feel less alone. We are alone, but we feel less of a victim of being alone.

Lucie 25:37

So in 1988, you re-framed the action in *The Tempest* by casting the King of Naples as the Queen of Naples. And in the 2014 production, you also re-framed the story somewhat, outside the bounds of the text, in your relationship between Miranda and Caliban. Could you talk a little bit more about that?

Declan 25:56

Well they say they are going, and Ferdinand takes off with Miranda and all the notables, back to civilization, away from the island, and they leave Caliban on his own there, and they go, and the big surprise is that she runs back and screams, wanting to be with Caliban. Because in many respects, Caliban has been rather more human than her own father has. Also, Miranda has lived on the island with Caliban, and he's been the only other human being she has known for her whole life. I don't think it would be that easy for her to say goodbye to him. Just because she screams insults at him and he screams insults and threatens to do terrible things to her at the beginning doesn't mean they don't love each other as well. I don't think you can have that sort of propinquity without some incredibly deep attachment and love. And she will never see Caliban again. She is saying goodbye to her whole past. Even if our past is painful, we are still attached to it.

And then he is left on the island with Ariel, who he can't see, but Ariel puts a hand on him - so you think Ariel is in some way helping him, and he's not quite alone, he's got Ariel. And Ariel is not much, because although Ariel is brilliant, and can write out 150 lines of equations of quantum physics in a second, he can't forgive anyone. Ariel doesn't shit, and that's why he's not human. He can't forgive, he can't bleed, he can't do any of those things. Shylock says, 'do we not bleed..', and that's what Ariel can't do. So it's not much, Caliban's got no human being, but he's kind of got something.

Lucie 27:25

You staged the play all the way through with Ariel completely struggling to understand human interactions, all the way through the play, backing off whenever somebody got too emotional, or cross, and hiding in the shadows. It was also, in this last moment, the first time that Ariel tried to make an actual human connection with somebody. It was tiny, but it felt massive to watch him do that.

Declan 27:49

Yes. I think the thing about Caliban and Ariel is that we all have Caliban in us. We've got that Ubu capacity in us. In fact, it's important to shake hands with Caliban, but be careful not to act

on it. You see, I think also, we have got a bit more Ariel in us than we would like to admit. Ariel is cut off from feeling. He doesn't feel anything, he doesn't understand what feelings are. It reminds me a bit of his mirror image, in much earlier writing of Shakespeare's - Puck, when he says, 'Lord, what fools these mortals be'. And we had Ariel going up and touching people's tears, and couldn't understand these jealousies and rages and desires to destroy each other. He is completely fascinated by the whole strangeness of being human, and the whole illogicality of being a human. He's a triumph of the left brain, Ariel. But there is a bit of Ariel in us. We have to love the bit of ourselves that is the opposite extreme to Caliban as well, which is the bit that's cut off, the bit that doesn't cry. You know, the bit of us that scares us all. Maybe our rages scare us, but sometimes if we hear someone is dead and we feel nothing, that also scares us, but we don't admit to that so much. I think we have both of those capacities in us, and a play like this helps to shake hands with them, and not think they are necessarily problems that other people have.

Music

Lucie 29:38

And this brings us to our last question of the podcast, and I am going to bat it at Nick first - which is, what is your favourite moment and/or line from either of these two productions of *The Tempest*?

Nick 29:51

My favourite moment in *The Tempest*, which I think we have already discussed, is that marvellous moment when (it's completely out of the text), but Caliban is sitting on the ground, and Ariel is left. They are left alone on the island, and Ariel, who is sitting next to him, just places his hand on his head, and he sort of senses it.

Lucie 30:13

And what about you, Declan, what's your favourite moment or line?

Declan 30:16

My favourite moment in all of Shakespeare is when Prospero has got all of his enemies all into one place. He's got them all together, and they have all done terrible things to him, and he's got a list the length of his arm of all the injustices, and how bad they've been and how much of a victim he's been of them, and how bad they are, and how he's going to make them really, really, really sorry. And he gets them there and he looks at Ariel and says, 'what would you do?' And Ariel says, 'well, if I were a human being I would forgive them.' Yeah. To me, that is the supreme moment in all of Shakespeare, because he reminds us that if you are a spirit, you don't have this dimension. In other words, if you can't shit, you can't forgive. They are different sides of the same coin.

Lucie 31:02

Well, thank you so much Declan and Nick, and please stay dry in this tempest of a day. And I shall see you next time, when we are going to be talking about *The Changeling.*

Music

Lucie 31:16

Thank you for listening to this episode of *Not True But Useful.* If you want to find out more about Cheek by Jowl's productions of *The Tempest,* take a look at the archive on the website. You can 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,* with additional music in this episode by Dmitri Volkov for *The Tempest.* Join us next week, for a dose of Thomas Middleton. Until then, stay well.

Episode 6: *The Changeling*

Lucie 00:13

Welcome to Season Two of Cheek by Jowl's podcast *Not True But Useful*. I'm your host Lucie Dawkins. These episodes are going out into the world at a time when theatre is in suspended animation, so as an antidote I'll be chatting to Declan Donnellan and Nick Ormerod, the director designer duo behind Cheek by Jowl. They are going to share life lessons that they have learnt from staging great classic plays, which might help tide us through these strange times. We can't promise that any of these lessons will be true, but we hope you find them useful.

Our play this week is *The Changeling,* a bloody Jacobean revenge drama by Thomas Middleton and William Rowley. Before we hand over to Declan and Nick, here is a quick synopsis.

The play takes place in the Spanish town of Alicante. It follows the story of Beatrice-Joanna, a beautiful young noblewoman who is awaiting an arranged marriage with a man called Alonzo. Unfortunately, she has fallen in love with another man, Alsemero. Beatrice-Joanna's father has a servant called De Flores, who she knows is in love with her, even though she finds him repellent because he suffers from a terrible skin condition. She persuades him to murder Alonzo so that she can marry Alsemero, manipulating him with a false promise to have sex with him if he agrees. De Flores assassinates Alonzo, and then blackmails Beatrice-Joanna into giving him his promised reward.

Beatrice-Joanna and Alsemero are then free to marry. Alsemero is tipped off that Beatrice-Joanna is no longer a virgin, and decides to put her through a bizarre medical test to prove it one way or the other. She manages to pass this test by faking the correct responses,

and then arranges to put her virgin servant Diaphanta in her place on the wedding night. She also admits to De Flores that she has, in fact, fallen in love with him. However, the plan goes wrong, and De Flores and Beatrice-Joanna end up killing Diaphanta in order to cover their tracks. Alsemero finally discovers the truth behind their murderous spree, and De Flores stabs himself and Beatrice-Joanna, so that they are finally united in death.

Interwoven into this story is a second subplot, which takes place in Alicante's insane asylum. Two aristocrats, Antonio and Franciscus, have admitted themselves to the asylum, pretending to be mad, in order to get access to the doctor's attractive wife, Isabella. Through a test in which she disguises herself as a patient, she proves that their love is fickle. When Alonzo is killed, Antonio and Fransiscus' disappearance from court means that they are initially assumed to be the murderers. They are finally let off the hook when Joanna-Beatrice and De Flores admit their guilt.

The music you are hearing now was composed by Catherine Jayes for Cheek by Jowl's 2006 production. And now over to Declan and Nick.

Music

Lucie 03:22

Hello Declan and Nick. Are we all well charged with a cup of tea?

Declan & Nick 03:26

We are! Hello Lucie.

Lucie 03:28

Excellent. It's a really wild ride, this script. So I would love to know, first of all, what first drew you to *The Changeling?*

Declan 03:35

Well, the thing I particularly love about it is the thing that is often considered the problem in the play, which is the shift in the world between the aristocratic rulers and the madhouse, and people sometimes say. 'you can easily remove the subplot of the madhouse'. I don't think that the madhouse is a subplot at all. I think it is continually informing the main plot, that they sing off each other. And it was the union of that that really excited me.

Lucie 03:57

And what about you Nick? What was magnetic in this play for you?

Nick 04:00

Well, it is a wonderful play, but the central problem, as Declan has indicated, is exactly that. There are two worlds which need to be distinct, and yet happen on the same stage, and you need to be able to move very quickly from one to the other.

Lucie 04:15

Could you describe how you managed that, as a designer?

Nick 04:18

We used the door of the rehearsal room we were playing in, which was at the Jerwood Space, and it happened to work extremely well in rehearsal. It was like an air pod, that you could go into and come out again. So actors could come into the space, and come out in a different space. So it was just the one door, which seemed to be the key. So I decided to use that exact door. And essentially, the actors stayed onstage. In an instant they became mad people, and the desk that belonged to De Flores as a sort of security man/chauffeur figure became the desk that belonged to the madhouse supervisor, so that you got a direct parallel there. But essentially, the actors didn't really need to leave the stage.

Declan 05:05

We also wanted to suggest in a light-handed way a sort of modern world of surveillance. There is just one camera through which you can't really see what is happening on the TV monitor, but you are aware that something is there.

Lucie 05:16

So there's this little flickering TV monitor that gave us little glimpses of what was going on behind that door, which reminds me very much of the last show that we talked about, your production of *The Tempest,* where again you had these tantalising doors with glimpses of what was going on on the other side, which really fired up the audience's participation in the piece, as creative imaginers of the space you were making. I also find this extraordinarily inspiring because a common theme that we are coming up against a lot in this series of the podcast is the way that you feed on what is literally around you in your rehearsal period. We talked about the place you were staying in Paris, which essentially became your set for *Ubu Roi,* and the way you take what's on the streets around you and the world you are walking through and allow it to feed into your rehearsal process. I find that amazing.

Declan 06:06

Yes, and I think that happens politically and philosophically as well. You imbibe what you encounter on the streets on your way into the rehearsal room. In a way, you have to be open to things.

Lucie 06:15

It also occurs to me that this process of just keeping yourself open to the very basically creative things that are in front of you - like, ‘that door has a lot of potential’ - rather than fixing what you are going to do before you start rehearsal on day one, which is how a lot of design processes necessarily have to work because of the way that rehearsal processes work in this country.

Declan 06:35

That’s right. I think one of the things about the hidden door or the hidden space or the other space, the space that you can’t see, is that in order for the audience to be included, they have to be excluded, and that is something we really do need to think about. There can’t be any inclusion without exclusion. So the intimacy onstage is because there is a world which is being excluded outside. And it’s being aware of that excluded outerworld that gives us the feeling of being included with what is happening on the stage. You can’t have one without the other. The photographer cannot include everything in the shot. It’s about what is excluded, and that’s what includes things. And that’s why the other space is really important. The space is always a binary. It’s always ‘here’ and ‘the other place’.

Lucie 07:18

The other thing that I found really fascinating was the way that you layered these two places on top of each other. So we had the supposedly ‘sane’ world of the aristocratic court, literally on top of the madhouse. They were operating in exactly the same space, with no scene changes at all. This meant there was no clear division between the two. Eventually we actually saw the same things being enacted, being resonant between those two worlds, which I thought was a fascinating move, that you actually started to blur the boundaries between the two of them.

Declan 07:49

Oh yes, that was very conscious. There would be a quick, sharp change between the two worlds, so that you would have to decide the boundaries for yourself. Juxtaposition is very very important. It’s like editing in a film. You know, the juxtaposition - you get a lot of information from just bringing two events close together in time.

Lucie 08:06

And it seems to me that in that juxtaposition, light seemed to be a really important factor in this production. So you had the madhouse being very brightly lit in hospital lights, and then exactly the same space, the same stage space that represented the aristocratic court at Alicante, being

very dark with figures melting into blackness at the rear of the stage, and these figures held in candlelight, almost like a Caravaggio painting, an artist who often comes up in our discussions. So, could you talk a little bit more about the importance of light and dark in the way that you think about the theatre, and how that came to bear on this show?

Nick 08:43

Well, we worked a lot on it with Judith Greenwood, our lighting designer, but clearly we needed a very precise distinction between the world of the hospital and the rather mysterious, dark world of the castle, or the cathedral. And that is how she lit upon this strong side lighting, essentially, for the aristocratic world, and a more brighter abrupt world of the hospital.

Declan 09:13

Everything we see is determined by light. One can say that there is no such thing as the dark, there is just an absence of light. I used to think that. I am not quite so sure now. I am beginning to think that dark and light are held in permanent binary with each other, that you actually need the two to see things. Also, in the darkness, there are things that the audience can imagine.

Lucie 09:31

So what I find so interesting about this idea is that it always comes back to the starting point of what you need. You need to create a distinction between the madhouse and the court and the cathedral, and so you hit upon this very simple and wonderful lighting solution. But then when you go back to what you need, you find solutions that are so simple that they hold massive amounts of metaphor and meaning, and allow us as the audience to step in. So I took from it the idea that in the asylum, where people's minds are supposedly clouded, or not seeing clearly, everything is in a bright light, and in the court at Alicante, where people are supposedly sane and have clarity, they are actually in darkness - I read a huge amount into that lighting change, but what was wonderful about that it was so not prescriptive. You weren't telling me to think that, and I am sure that someone next to me would have thought something completely different. So I am really inspired by these choices that you make which are essentially about need, but open the door for us as the audience to step in with you and shape the play.

Declan 10:28

Yes, we do not give meaning. I am not sure if I believe in meaning full stop. It is for audiences to exercise their imaginations, and audiences, in a way, have to make the evening. Audiences have to make their own entertainment. And we give them the shovel and show them where to dig. We are not crossing 't's and dotting 'i's, we are not pre-digesting things. We are entertaining adults, and it's very important for me that we do entertain adults, that we are not making things simple, we are not teaching people, we are not preaching from on high, we are sharing something with somebody who is at our level who is an adult, and we ask them if they feel the same sort of things about it that we think we do.

Lucie 11:09

Another thing that seemed really important in this production was the operation of religion. So, it opens in the middle of a cathedral, where there is a highly erotically charged moment where these two lovers see themselves across a sea of people praying. And then after the interval, you opened it with this incredibly ritualistic, Catholic wedding. So could you speak a little bit more, Declan, about how Catholic imagery permeates this production, and actually your work in general?

Declan 11:35

Yes, well, I was brought up as a Catholic, and that imagery has gone into my DNA. I'm what is normally described as a lapsed Catholic, but certainly the imagery and the way of thinking has imbued itself in me. Sometimes I wished it hadn't, but it has very much altered how I see the world, and I am not going to get rid of that. Bits of it are also very very useful. It's a sort of system of living, really, it's a methodology of viewing the world. So that's just for me, and so inevitably that imagery comes out.

I think a lot of Catholic imagery, though, is quite universal in a way. I think if you want to express a ritual for grief, it naturally occurs to me to use my Catholic forebears, and the funerals that I have been to with people saying the Novena. It's a place where I understand ritual, and the sacraments which help you in and out of life. Catholicism has proved itself to be very popular because it's there for the big moments. It will sacramentalise and give some consolation to people.

I think it's very useful, but of course these plays are about little Protestant England looking at the gigantic threat of Catholic Europe, be it from the might of Imperial Spain at its absolute height, or the Vatican, and the fact that the government might be overthrown at any moment by a Catholic plot. It's incredibly difficult for us to read the plays until we understand that the terrorism in London at the time, and the dread of terrorism, was absolutely enormous. And the other thing that is invisible in all of these plays because the word was taboo was Ireland, and Ireland was a potential Catholic invading point for England and through this whole period it was like sending kids to the Somme. There were young men going over to fight this pretty unwinnable war in Ireland, and dying by the cartload, so nearly every family was touched by this very clear and present danger from Catholic Europe.

So when one is watching *The Revenger's Tragedy,* or *The Changeling,* or nearly all the plays - and Shakespeare very interestingly never does that propaganda - but when you are thinking of any of these plays they are nearly always set in a Mediterranean Catholic court, nearly always there is an evil cardinal or prelate of some sort motoring the script, and it is very much like 'take back control!' You know, the existence of England was very much predicated on having this terrifying 'other'. It's like what Communism did for America, except England was much less

powerful than Catholic Europe. So when you look at the plays, and this Catholicism in the plays, you're thinking, 'hm. Part of this is a propaganda exercise'. And that's interesting.

Lucie 14:10

So one of the extraordinary things about this production was that it was a young actor called Tom Hiddleston's first major casting out of drama school. What was it that you saw in Tom Hiddleston that drew you to him for this part?

Declan 14:24

He has this extraordinary vitality. Actors can be talented, but there is this quality of vitality that some people have and some people don't. Like all important things, there are no words for it, but when we see it we tend to recognise it. Yes, he's enormously talented, and it was wonderful. We did two plays with Tom - we did this, and we did *Cymbeline,* very much finding a good part for Tom in it, because we so much loved working with him.

Lucie 14:48

And that's how you often go about choosing your next productions, right? That you choose it by collaborator, often. You see in people work that you would like to make around them.

Declan 14:56

Yes, many of the people in *The Changeling* we had worked with before, like David Collings and Tobias Beer. We hadn't worked with Olivia Williams yet, but we knew Olivia and I liked her very much and we wanted to work together. It's very important to us to work with the same group of people, or at least a core of people we have worked with before.

Nick 15:15

And Will Keen went on to play Macbeth.

Declan 15:18

That was our first time to work with Will, and that was an extremely happy collaboration with Will.

Lucie 15:23

He was playing De Flores in this production.

Declan 15:25

Yes. We very much chose *Macbeth* to do with him and Anastasia Hille, our Duchess of Malfi and our Isabella. And we loved doing that, to get inspired by somebody rather than thinking, 'what play would I like to do? What is my idea? What play would be good to do now?'

Lucie 15:42

This seems to be very connected to something we talked about a lot in the first season, which was your advice to actors to find all their inspiration outside themselves, from what is around them. This seems to be very true of your creative process too, that what you choose to do and what you choose to make is about what's around you and what's outside you that you are taking in as part of a collaboration, rather than generating an internal idea about what you are going to do next.

Declan 16:05

In general, I think that is true, yes. So it's important for us to be open like it's very important our work is influenced by what we see on the streets. I imagine that De Flores' surveillance kit and sink and funny desk with a light on it was very inspired by all the security we have to go through when we go backstage in theatres now. So those things get into us, and it is very important that we are open to those things, and it is important that we are porous, and it is important for me and Nick that we are happy when the sun shines and that we are depressed when it rains. You have to let yourself be influenced by the outside world. Otherwise, in a way, you are not alive. That is why Covid is such a terrible time for us because we have to be infected by life in order to live.

Lucie 16:44

So another thing which is unusual about this particular script is the fact that it contains an enormous number of soliloquies, where the actors turn out and talk to the audience. Can you describe more about what you think the contract is that is happening here, the connection that is being forged between the stage and the people watching?

Declan 17:02

Yes, I often think that the soliloquies are like the most important thing, and it's very important to me that the actor is capable of speaking to the audience, and isn't frightened of the audience, and often likes the audience - so the actors can actually speak directly to the audience. I absolutely hate any concept of a fourth wall (unless you use a fourth wall like we do at the beginning of *Ubu,* and then we destroy it). The audience is party to the act. Even a little aside implies 'you are on my side, I want you to be on my side. Are you on my side? How do you feel about all this?' So we go on with them as we kind of do in real life. We hear terrible things on the wireless every day and don't do much about it. What's my part in this? It's very upsetting. Not that we can jump onstage and do anything, nor would I advise anyone to do it. It would be

terrible if we did. But it should make us feel uncomfortable when we are watching that, and these people are talking to us as if we are their friends.

But the soliloquy is absolutely central and it's really important that the actor speaks to the audience and doesn't believe in some fourth wall, otherwise it is like the audience is coming to watch some kind of Fabergé egg, you know, some sort of perfected thing that is going to go on even if someone dies in the audience. The important thing about theatre is that you could alter a performance if you died in the middle of it. If you die in the middle of a movie it's going to go on just as normal, and that's a big difference between the two. It's the fact that my energy is part of this space, and my energy is part of this life.

Music

Lucie 18:39

Now, an enormous theme in this play is that of self-delusion, of characters persuading themselves to see what they want to see. This particularly draws to mind the scene between Alsemero and Beatrice, which is a particularly weird virginity-test scene, where he gives her a special potion to prove whether she is a virgin or not, and she has to fake the symptoms, which are ridiculous. She has to gape, then sneeze, then giggle, and then cry in order. And she really struggles to do it convincingly, and she sort of hates the fact that she is having to do it, and you showed us very clearly that it was a deeply unconvincing performance that she was putting on. And that he was just thrilled to watch it, because he wanted to believe what he was looking at. And that's just one moment of many in which self-delusion is at the forefront of the scenes. Could you talk a little bit more about the importance of the idea of self-delusion, in this production and in theatre in general for you?

Declan 19:38

I think it's something in connection with all the great pieces of drama, actually. They are nearly all about self-delusion. We often think they are about people deluding other people, like Iago deluding Othello, but actually it's about Othello deluding himself. And I think our capacity to delude ourselves is really frightening, and I think that's one of the reasons why we need art. And it's really difficult to live with each other in a civilised way without repressing all sorts of violences and rages and envies and so on, to enable us to get through an ordinary day. When we go to the theatre we get to exorcise these things, and often the subject matter of theatre is people who are deluding themselves. And it's incredibly naive to think that when Hamlet comes to the front of the stage, he's just telling us the truth. He's telling us probably what he wants us to believe to be the truth. And we see people like Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. They are so clever, but they haven't ever owned up to the fact that they are killing this old man. Hamlet finds it very difficult to own up to the fact that he is trying to kill Claudius, and he doesn't really want to. He doesn't live in this sort of revenge tragedy world. It's all weird. He's a student from Wittenberg with a scarf and instant coffee in his room. He's got to go through this other strange world. And that is very much what happens in *The Changeling.*

Lucie 20:57

And this takes us towards the ending of the play. Now, one of the things I love about every Cheek by Jowl production is the last five seconds - which sounds like a very snarky review, that my favourite thing about your productions are their endings - but actually, I think you two are the masters of an extraordinary ending. You tend to serve us something right in the last final moments of a production that unsettles us or throws us off or flings a door to a huge idea open for us. And at the end of this production, there is a soliloquy, in which Tom Hiddleston tells the audience that we all experience loss and grief, and during that time, the entire company rearranged themselves, covered in blood, having gone through these awful things, they rearranged themselves back into the very beginning image that you started the whole play with. So this whole little ritual that was about grief at the end linked right back to this ritual at the beginning which was about a budding love happening in this church. There was this horrible cyclical moment where we saw everything kind of resetting. Could you talk a little bit more about how you shape endings, and maybe also what are the important ingredients in a good ending - or the ingredients of a really bad ending to a production?

Nick 22:20

I suspect the answer is quite pragmatic, Lucie, in that it is really useful to have the people onstage for Alsemero at that point to talk about. So to end like that was kind of a decision which comes completely naturally. It's great if you can read into it something beyond a way of finishing.

Declan 22:41

When we are asked why we have done things, we will often come up with just very practical reasons why we have done things. But in fact, there is a whole world as well which is coming out through those practical things. It is through what you do that things become manifest. But if you are thinking when you are doing something, 'I am doing this in order to make something manifest', I don't think it's really going to work very well. And we will talk about it in a very practical way. But the practical way we talk about things is in fact very misleading, but things come through your work that you can't really put into words. And that's very important, because the whole point of making art is that you are sharing something with somebody that cannot be put into words. It's good you are asking us, because it puts me to the test to answer the question, but at the time, as Nick says, yes, it seems completely practical, because we want everybody on stage and we wanted him to talk about them. But an enormous amount of other things happen, like the terrible sadness which is barely mentioned in the play, this terrible oceanic cold sadness that is underneath the whole thing. And many of these mad things are done so that people avoid that. That comes out. It would be terrible to say, 'we did that because we thought we were going to show the monumental sadness that underlies all human action'. If we did that we wouldn't be able to do anything. I would become completely tongue-tied.

And Alsemero talks very interestingly at the end about grief and being alone. I think it's that grief, like any intense emotion, tends to isolate us, because we have to do it alone. And when we die we have to hope to have someone who loves us holding our hand, but at the last moment, we are going to do it alone. But that's one of the things he talks about at the end, about how lonely we are in our extreme emotions, and how much we depend on other people to stand with us at those moments. Those are colossal things which are there and immanent in the end of play. But not for one second to do Nick and I think, 'this is what we are going to give voice to in the last moments of the play.' It'll be trying to find a way to end the play. But that will be informed by other things. I think that the way I direct is to talk about these worlds, these very big things to the actors, and then give a very practical mise-en-scène with the understanding that that will cling through the invisible work, and these things will come out through what they say, without either me or the actors trying to control meaning.

Lucie 25:01

And this leads me to our inevitable last question of the episode, which is - what is your favourite line and/or moment from this production. Nick, why don't we start with you?

Nick 25:10
I am afraid my favourite moment is a visual one, Lucie, which I never predicted, but the bloody hand on the glass door stays with me.

Lucie 25:20

Yeah, so this extraordinary moment, De Flores and Beatrice are behind this door and there is a moment which we are not sure is sex or murder or both happening at the same time, and this one bloody hand print trails down this glass door, and we are asked to imagine what is going on.

Declan 25:37

Yes, and that's never planned. Nick and I look at each other and the words we might use in verbal communication are, 'that's good, yes that's good', but not for one second do we think, 'this is great because it confuses the region between love, sex, and death.' I mean we don't think about that. If we thought about that we wouldn't be able to do anything, you know.

Lucie 25:54

And what about you Declan? What is your favourite moment or line from this production?

Declan 25:57

My favourite moment is Will Keen playing De Flores after he stabs Beatrice-Joanna, and calls her, familiarly, 'Joanna'. He says, 'fare thee well, I'll not be far behind'.

Lucie 26:09

They are going to meet each other in death, on the other side.

Declan 26:12

Or wherever it is they are going. They are going there together.

Lucie 26:15

I am going to throw in my favourite line from this production. It is another De Flores and Beatrice-Joanna moment, and it's a moment where he stops in his tracks and he looks at the audience and he says, 'she called me fairly by my name', and it's the first moment where she speaks kindly to him. And it completely revolutionises his life. And it is going to lead them down a terrible trail of destruction, but that one moment is so naked and stunning.

Declan 26:43

You are absolutely right. It is very significant. In England, for example, the culture is to avoid people's names, and normally you are called 'you'. It's a very significant moment when someone calls you by your name. I find that very moving, that moment, if somebody calls me or Nick by our name. We get called 'Declan and Nick' a lot in Russia, people use our names quite a lot, and less so here.

Lucie 27:05

Well, on that note, I am going to call you both by your names, and say, 'thank you Declan and thank you Nick, for another discussion over a cup of tea, with a literally bloody good play'.

Declan & Nick 27:15

Thank you Lucie.

Music

Lucie 27:20

Thank you for listening to this week's episode of *Not True, But Useful*. If you want to find out more about Declan and Nick's production of *The Changeling,* check out the link in the podcast notes, which takes you to the Cheek by Jowl archive. 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 Catherine Jayes for *The Changeling*. Join us next week, when we will be discussing the great Russian saga, *Boris Godunov.* Until then, stay well.

Episode 7: *Boris Godunov*

Lucie 00:13

Welcome to Season Two of Cheek by Jowl's podcast *Not True But Useful*. I'm your host Lucie Dawkins. These episodes are going out into the world at a time when theatre is in suspended animation, so as an antidote I'll be chatting to Declan Donnellan and Nick Ormerod, the director designer duo behind Cheek by Jowl. They are going to share life lessons that they have learnt from staging great classic plays, which might help tide us through these strange times. We can't promise that any of these lessons will be true, but we hope you find them useful.

Our play this week is the great Russian epic *Boris Godunov* by Alexander Pushkin. He wrote in 1825, and it is based on a real set of events in Russian history. Here is a quick synopsis before we begin.

At the start of play, Boris Godunov is crowned Tsar of Russia, after the death of the incompetent previous Tsar, Fyodor Ivanovich. Boris has been plotting his ascent to power for years, and assassinated the true heir, Fyodor's little brother Dimitry, in order to clear his path to the throne. Boris starts a reign of terror in Russia. However, a young priest called Grigory Otrepyev, also known as Grishka, decides to impersonate the dead Dimitry, overthrow the brutal Boris, and claim the throne for himself.

Grigory heads for Poland, masquerading as Dimitry, and persuades the Polish nobility that he is the true heir to the Tsardom of Russia. He arranges a tactical marriage with Marina Mniszech, the daughter of a powerful Polish warlord. With the Polish army behind him, he invades Russia, and takes control of Boris' palace. Boris dies from a heart attack, and Grigory takes the throne as the new Tsar.

Cheek by Jowl staged a Russian language production of *Boris Godunov* in 2000. The music you are hearing now was composed by Maxim Gutkin for that production. And now over to Declan and Nick.

Music

Lucie 02:35

So once again, we are convened over our cups of tea, to talk about love, power, death, and grief in the back history of Cheek by Jowl's productions. And this week, we are going to Russia with this fabulous play! Now this was a really important production in Cheek by Jowl's history. Can you tell us a little bit more about that?

Declan 02:52

Well, we were asked by Valery Shadrin to do a play in Moscow for the Chekhov festival in 2000, I think it was, or 2001. We had been to Moscow on tour with our *The Winter's Tale,* the Russian *The Winter's Tale,* and he asked if we would come and reform a company of actors and do this play with them. And then we did do it, and then the actors all wanted us to do another play with them. So it was wonderful, there was a sort of gravitational pull from this group of actors that we'd found. And that was the beginning of our Russian company. And then out of that company we did *Twelfth Night* and so on and so forth, and then all the others grew from that. But it was out of that first performance *Boris Godunov* in a very very different Moscow, twenty years ago.

Russians have an extraordinary love for Pushkin. It's not a reverence, it's a kind of really affectionate, horizontal, equal love for Pushkin, because they get used to Pushkin when they are small children, because he writes for children as well as for adults, so he kind of accompanies them through their life. And his writing is extraordinary because it's not pompous, it's not pretentious, but it's very simple and transparent. So it's very difficult for foreigners to understand, because as always it is the simple, transparent things which are impossible to translate. But it's an incredible play for now, because it's about the legitimacy of rule and how dangerous populism is. It is absolutely about now, *Boris Godunov.*

Lucie 04:11

So what was it that first drew you to this grand play?

Declan 04:15

Oh, I think it was its epic sweep, its capacity to look at all sorts of different aspects of Russian life, it talked about the legitimacy of rule, which is always interesting, and it has a sort of Shakespearean scope, really. There are very funny scenes and very frightening scenes, and scenes of acute psychological insight, and I often think I would be quite anxious doing a play with two sofas on the stage and people talking from them. I much prefer when there are great spatial problems to solve.

Lucie 04:49

And what about you Nick, what was delicious in this script for you?

Nick 04:52

Well, the possibilities of staging. We decided to play in the traverse, really, in order to create the sense of the 'narod', of 'the people', which is another huge character in the piece. And continually the characters are referring to and talking to the people, which is very Shakespearean as well. But we decided to play in the traverse because in a way it solves a scenic problem, that you do not need any scenery, and the idea of playing this play in front of scenery always seemed to us really… you can't conceive of scenery for it, because it is so epic,

so sweeping, and moves so swiftly from place to place that if you brought in anything to interrupt that flow you would be up shit creek.

Lucie 05:40

An extra hour of scene changes, right there.

Declan 05:43

Yes, exactly. But also, the chief character in *Boris Godunov* is the people, the 'narod'. The last line, of course, is 'the people remain silent'. And it's about this very very sinister thing, that we like to sentimentalise things, and we like to blame evil rulers who are oppressing the good people, but sometimes the good people have quite a lot to do with the ruler that imposes on them. And it's the mystery of how the people behave as we are facing with our elections at the moment, it's not just a problem with the rulers, it's a problem with the people who want those rulers to be there, and why and how they are manipulated, and so on and so forth. So there is a big mystery about the power of the people, the power of the 'narod'. And so the traverse staging was so that the audience would be looking at each other, and they would be understanding that the play was about the other people they were seeing looking back at them, with the action taking place as a kind of frieze, up and down the middle. They had to think of each other, and see what we do with our votes, or our non-votes, or our compliance or our non-compliance.

Lucie 06:47

That's what I so loved about the last moment of this play, that this traverse setting, with two sides of the audience looking at each other and the stage running in the alley down the middle of them, is that last line, 'the people remain silent', that the people have been complicit in this terrible power struggle, and then then next think we have to do according to the social contract is applaud, and our applause is actually condoning exactly what has happened. It was a wonderfully uncomfortable piece of making us completely complicit in the action.

Declan 07:19

Yes. They are asked to cheer for Grishka, you know. They are supposed to hail him at the end, and they just don't do anything. But does saying nothing mean yes, or does saying nothing mean no? Is it a silent yes, or a silent no, or a silent maybe? It depends how you look at it.

Lucie 07:35

And that is why I think Cheek by Jowl productions tend to put audiences in the hottest seats in the theatre. We tend to sit there, and our responsibility is invoked consistently throughout these productions, which is just wonderful. But we should also go back to this point which you have both mentioned, which is that this play is surprisingly Shakespearean, and that actually Pushkin himself said when he was writing it that he was inspired by Shakespeare's characterisation and

Shakespeare's massive plots when he was putting this play together. So in what ways do you think that this play is like the many Shakespearean plays that you have staged?

Declan 08:08

I think that there was huge fashion in Europe from the mid-18th century onwards for Shakespeare and I think that what's incredible is how much Pushkin absorbed. And the thing that's really amazing about Pushkin, miraculous really, is how brilliant his theatrical structure is. A lot of Russians say to me, 'no, there are great problems with *Boris Godunov,* because it all falls apart'. But I think it is brilliantly put together, because if your home territory is Shakespeare, none of it presents a problem, and you can see how brilliantly Pushkin has contrasted one set of scenes with another. And the fact that you have got comic scenes against serious scenes - no problem at all, that's fantastic. Those things sing in contrast with each other. And what is incredible is how quickly this great flame of talent in Pushkin came, and how quickly it went out, and he never wrote anything like that again. He wrote other small plays called *The Little Tragedies*, which are actually also brilliant, but he didn't write at that scale for the stage again. The fact that Pushkin could do this straight off, with no experience of working in a theatre…! I mean Shakespeare at least worked as an actor, and knew a lot about stagecraft. Pushkin didn't. Incredible.

Lucie 09:21

So, there is one character in this script who I particularly love, and that's the monk Pimen, who is a writer, and who you also double cast in this play as one of Pushkin ancestors, who Pushkin sneakily stuck into this play. But Pimen is writing the story as the story is happening. And you had this wonderful first scene where Pimen is at one end typing the story as the story starts to unfold. So you are watching the story through your eyes, but you are also watching him watch the story and turn it into another work of art, or another piece of writing. What does this fracturing of perspective do to the opening of the play, do you think?

Declan 09:55

I think it is really important, because it reminds us that all history is made up, and (talk about not true, but useful!), no history is true, but some of it may be useful. So any history is just somebody's version of what happened, normally tidied, neatened, edited, slanted. There is no factual reportage, not even in a newspaper. And of course, very often the most biased people are the people who think they have an open mind. But there is Pimen who is writing it all down, and it is from monastic chronicles that we get many of the stories of this time.

Lucie 10:29

Now, one of the scenes we have to talk about in this production is the fountain scene, which is one of the most famous scenes in this play. So Grigory and the Polish princess Marina enter into this sort of erotic power pact to overthrow Boris, in the middle of the night, which takes place

around a fountain in a garden. And in your production it is completely breathtaking. Nick, can you describe what your design approach was to this?

Nick 10:55

Well we did feel we needed water, I mean, because it takes place around a fountain. But how this was going to be used, we had no idea. So the platform is raised up about a meter, I think, and so we are able to open up a swimming pool, a small swimming pool in the middle of the stage.

Declan 11:12

I think that when you fall in love there is something very serious that happens to your identity, and although the love between Marina and Grishka is certainly ambivalent, the whole thing, for us, revolves around his re-baptism, which is part of the plot of the scene. It is the most wonderful scene because she thinks he's the Tsarevich, and that he is going to inherit the throne of Russia, and her father is going to help him invade Russia and claim the throne for himself, because the succession to the throne is cast in doubt. And he claims to be the son of the dead Tsar. So she thinks she is going to be the Tsarina of all Russia. She meets him, they are going to have this big seduction scene, he's going to propose and so on. And then he says to her, 'just imagine that I wasn't the Tsar's son. Just imagine that I am some smelly little monk who is pretending to be the Tsar. Would you still love me?' And then basically, she explodes and says, 'that's outrageous, is that what you are telling me?' They have this huge row in the middle of it. And then basically he says, 'well, fine, I brush you off. I am going to be the Tsar and I am going to get Russia back and you do whatever you like.' And then she realises that he is passing out of her hands, and that he is a winner. And she says, 'I think you are the real Tsar, because only the real Tsar could speak like that.' And then basically they get into the fountain, and she baptises him, she re-baptises him as the Tsar.

The water is very important. The fountain becomes a symbol of his changing identity. Water is a place where things get washed off, and where famously people get baptised, and to be baptised you are supposed to be cleansed of your sins and then reborn in grace, or whatever. And he gets renamed, and you get given your name very often at baptism because it shows you have become a new person. And that's what happens in the scene. So we thought it was important, so that you thought about how he changed, and went into the water as one person and came out as another. But the scene has so many ups and downs. It's like riding a rollercoaster the whole scene. You think, they're together, they're not together - is she going to kill him, or is she not going to kill him - is he going to walk off or is he not going to walk off? The two of them played it absolutely brilliantly, Irina Grineva and Evgeny Moronov, they were just wonderful. I feel so grateful to have been able to direct that scene with these two wonderful actors in it.

Lucie 13:28

You can't have had that water in the rehearsal room, I assume. That must have been at the last minute that you must have got that.

Declan 13:33

No, we really twisted the producers' arms for that. 'Basseyn' is the Russian for 'swimming pool', and they would always say 'nyet, Declan, bez basseyn, bez basseyn' - 'without swimming pool, without swimming pool!' And we would say, 'no, no, we have to have the basseyn'.

He'd begin the scene waiting for her to come, before she arrives, throwing coins into the fountain, as one might to make a wish. And then after he has got his way and she has decided that she will accept, even though she knows that he is this smelly monk, she'll pretend that he's the Tsarevich, and she goes off. And what he used to do was look at the audience, spout water at them, then dive under the water. And then he would start picking up the gold coins he had thrown, because he was so mean. And it was the picking up of the coins that used to get this appalling roar of laughter from the audience. So it was very funny, but also terribly sad and very frightening, and it was again about that big theme about authenticity. You know, I'll be whoever you want me to be, and the terrible sadness of that.

Lucie 14:35

I think this is the amazing thing about the comedy in all of your productions, which is that the big laughs that you get from the audience tend to hide moments of actual terrible human tragedy and frailty. Like this image of a quite vulnerable little man picking up the gold and putting it in his pocket on his way to becoming Tsar, because he is forever going to be the person that he started out with, however much he changed. I laughed and wanted to hug him at the same time. So, we should also talk about this approach to Grishka's character, because he metamorphosizes through the play, because you showed him going through many many different chrysalises and emerging as lots of different kinds of people. He started out as a young, Rasputin-esque, devout Orthodox monk, and turned into this glamorous celebrity charmer after his re-baptism in the pool. Why was this important to you?

Declan 15:25

I think you've just said it all. I think we see this man like a chameleon, changing into whatever person he needs to be, in order to get power. And he's fascinated hearing, first of all, clattering out of Pimen's typewriter, how Boris usurped power, and he thinks, 'if he usurped power, why can't I usurp power?' And that's how it begins, and then he will become whatever it takes to get that, so that he is guided by one principle, which is that he will become the Tsar, and he will do whatever it takes to get there. And he will be anybody to get there. It's completely fascinating to watch a human being transform like that.

Lucie 16:03

That seems very connected to something we were talking about recently, about the reason why we make theatre, which is that it reminds us that we are not authentic people, we contain multitudes, that we change all the time, that we wear different masks and put on different performances in every second of our lives, that actors are just doing a refined, onstage version of what we are all doing every second of our lives. I feel that this production really revealed that.

Declan 16:30

I think so, yes. I think that one of the reasons that it is quite consoling to go to the theatre is that we see actors doing something very clearly (and being paid for) that we do quite naturally and don't really like to admit. It is very difficult for us to admit that performance is central to our lives. One of the things that stops us, say, doing something that's mean is partially empathy, because you don't want to hurt another human being and you can imagine yourself in their shoes, and you wouldn't like to be hurt - but there is also the performance aspect of it, which is that you don't want to perform an action that you see yourself doing, because the most important person to give you a round of applause is yourself. And you don't want to feel ashamed of what you are doing. So it is actually quite normal to be watching yourself performing.

Lucie 17:13

And that's what also felt so powerful about the ending, and that last line, 'the people are silent', that he had gone through all these magnificent performances to reach power, he's finally been crowned, and you had him surrounded with this great echoing silence. He's not getting his applause, and you can see him watching himself, and watching himself in relation to the people around him, having gone on this great big epic journey and maybe not really won anything at all.

Declan 17:39

Yes, it's extraordinary. But the really extraordinary story is what happened to Marina Mniszech afterwards, because she was first of all thrown into a convent, escaped, and found someone else who was actually the real emperor. I think she did it twice. I think if you look it up you'll see that the real story of Marina Mniszech is like a TV series, full of completely implausible things, but in fact it happened. That's who Marina was.

Lucie 18:01

Once again, I would like to talk about light. What I thought was so powerful in this play is the way that you used lighting with a very few simple ingredients to reveal some truly astounding moments. So, you had moments where you brought lights up on the audience, to remind us that we were looking at each other, and that the audience were casting each other in the play, and the play was casting the audience within the play itself, and that these lights were revealing everybody in the space of the story. But also these amazing candles that were lit and that were processed around the stage in these Orthodox Russian ceremonies, and were brought in closer to make little circles of light, and out again to expand the circles of power. And then very simple

wash lighting across the stage that went from cool to warm to indicate changes of spaces. And they were so simple but they opened up massive worlds in the play. And I know you worked with Judith Greenwood on this production. So, how did you go about that collaboration with Judith on this production, and talking about the light in the play as you were putting the play together?

Nick 19:02

One of Judith's great strengths is refining a grid so that it has advantages, and so that you can tour it, because it's probably simply only 90 lights or even less. And her genius is to reuse the same lights in different ways and keep it simple. And that chimes in very much with our own ethos of design, I think. Keep it simple, down to absolutely what you need.

Lucie 19:27

The other thing that this traverse staging seemed to be particularly successful at doing was something you talked about in another podcast episode, which is that it gave the actors the possibility to run a long distance, because of this long alley. So we could see bodies in real physical motion, and that was something you used a lot in this production. Why is that important to you?

Declan 19:48

I don't know, I just get depressed if I go in and I see the space being so small that the actors can't move in it. I don't know, it makes my heart shrivel a little bit. Just the fact that there is a potential for movement is very important. And I think that stillness onstage is very important, but behind stillness, I believe that there is movement, while we are alive, and it just makes my heart sing to be able to see somebody moving fast across the space. Being able to move at different rhythms - you can move fast, you can move slow, but above all you can *move*, because we learn so much about each other by how we move. So much more.

Music

Lucie 20:51

So a consistent theme in our talks in this series of the podcast has been the amount of ritual that appears in your productions. There is a huge amount of ritual in this production. Crownings, and baptisms, and this one also had a lot of monks and priests parading around. What was it about ritual in this play that helped open up the action for you?

Declan 21:12

We tend to have ritual in order to protect us from chaos. And even in a very small way, you know, Nick and I, we're like everyone else, we are coping with being locked in, and I realised that our meals are becoming a bit more ritualised. We light a candle and set the table, and those

little rituals that demarcate the hours of the day become more important the more scared we are. We clutch to rituals, particularly at times of pain or fear - religions always do very well at extreme moments like birth and death and marriage. The church obliges by providing a ritual that helps you through these thresholds, these liminal points. I think ritual is the other side of chaos. They reassure us, they order us. I think so much of Yeats' line in *The Prayer for my Daughter*, written at a time of civil war in Ireland, and he wanted to be in a house where 'all is accustomed ceremonious'. I don't know, I just find that very moving. I can understand that if you do have a child you might well want them to be protected by ritual - but not suffocated by it. And where you draw the line, that depends on your common sense.

Lucie 22:25

Well, talking about these juxtapositions, such as between ritual and chaos, one really stark image of juxtaposition in this play was the fact that you had the body of a very small child in it. The murdered Dmitry was actually a little boy in your production who appeared onstage. What was it about casting him so young that you thought was important for this production?

Declan 22:48

The whole world turns on the fact that the Tsar's heir has been murdered. The real Tsarevich, the real Dmitry, is the little boy, and there is a terrible power vacuum. And it was a terrible time in Russia, it was called The Time of Troubles - roughly the same period as the end of Elizabeth's reign in England, you know, roughly the period of Shakespeare's writing, actually. But the little boy is central, because people are pretending to be him, people are taking his throne, taking his name. He wanders through the stage like a ghost in our production, because he is the pivot around which the whole play revolves. He functions a little bit like Mamillius in our production of *The Winter's Tale.* There is this invisible presence of the child who is dead, who gets ignored. In a way, in *The Winter's Tale,* he gets no attention, and that is how he is removed. In a way the dead child gets so much attention in the middle of *Boris Godunov* that he gets no attention at all. So actually, you can disappear under a mountain of fake attention. I found that figure of this ghost boy very important in it.

Lucie 23:49

So, this play has a really interesting production history in Russia, because when Pushkin wrote it, it couldn't get past the Tsarist censor to be performed on stage. So it was actually performed mostly as a chamber play for 30 years after its production, which basically meant that small groups of friends were reading it together in private settings, and it didn't get a full production until 1866. And then after that, it had a pretty patchy history in Russia - it was this great Russian play that never really had a grand introduction to the Russian stage. And your production in 2000 was in many ways one of the first great productions of this Russian play, but created by two British theatre makers, which is kind of an extraordinary moment with this script.

Declan 24:35

The interesting thing, the sad thing is that I am afraid it wasn't just the censors. One of the things that happened was that his envious friends didn't pay it very much attention, and he got the impression that it wasn't really that important. Pushkin himself thought that it was the best thing he had ever written, and he was very deflated when other people didn't agree. So he never went on to write anything as magnificent as that again. It was like this one-off, amazing introduction to a Russian epic theatre that never happened. But it wasn't really the censors, it was the friends, actually.

When we came to do *Boris Godunov,* it was a very interesting point in time. It was 1999, Russia had been having its own period of troubles, and when we planned it I remember distinctly at the press conference in 1999 talking about this play that was about this incompetent ruler of Russia called Boris. And actually, I didn't mean it that consciously, but this great sigh went up from the audience, and they were thinking about Boris Yeltsin, who at that time many people felt very cynical about. Anyway, we went into production, and in 2000 Yeltsin made this surprise speech saying that he was tired and that he was going to stand down, and he found this person from nowhere, this unknown apparatchik, who was going to temporarily run the party, and that was Vladimir Putin. And in fact, Putin was just voted in before we opened, so it was around that whole time of transition that we were doing this play. Boris, in the play, is a leader who has a problem with his legitimacy, who finds it hard to hang onto power, so is taken over by a completely new generation, someone who was a complete newcomer to power. And perhaps we should ask ourselves if Russia is not the only country to have found itself governed by a chancer called Boris.

Nick 26:19

It is bizarre, because Russia at that time was pretty much like Russia now, let's face it. Basically, I designed the costumes in an afternoon, because you drove to three centres - one where you bought suits, and mothers were there with the young men, dressing them in business suits, and you chose a fabric and you say, 'that style', and we ordered that afternoon. You then took your car through another traffic jam to the church facilities, which were about ten acres worth of workshops where you bought church vestments, church tat, anything you could think of.

Declan 26:57

Didn't you see a bishop in there, being kitted out in full regalia?

Nick 26:59

Yes, there was a tiny little old man, incredibly old man, being dressed in these magnificent robes. Just amazing. But again, about ten acres worth of workshops. Then the third place you went to was the army display, and you bought the army stuff, which were the anoraks and stuff. And you could choose different styles. It was so weird as a cross section of Russia: business, the army, and the church.

Lucie 27:25

So this leads us to our last question of today's episode, which is, as always, what are each of your favourite lines or moments from this production?

Nick 27:37

Well, I remember when Evgeny Moronov had the idea of the coins in his pocket, because he was looking, like a good Russian actor, for an activity. What do you do when you are waiting for your loved one to arrive? And he had this idea of the coins. And I think the point about the coins is that they are not gold coins, they are worthless. They are like single kopeks, and then at the end the whole scene turns at the very end, after all those shenanigans, he remembers to pick up these worthless coins out of the pool.

Declan 28:07

Yes, and it also mirrors another moment in the play when the holy fool character - the little boy takes his money and he says, 'he took my kopek!' It's a very famous line in Russian.

Lucie 28:16

And so what was your favourite moment, Declan?

Declan 28:19

Well, I like it when Boris says, 'how heavy art thou, crown of Monomakh!' He realises that power is really difficult.

Music

Lucie 28:33

Thank you for listening to this week's episode of *Not True But Useful*. If you want to find out more about Declan and Nick's production of *Boris Godunov,* check out the link in the podcast notes, which takes you to the Cheek by Jowl archive. 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 Maxim Gutkin for *Boris Godunov.* Join us next week for our final episode in this series, about William Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*. Until then, stay well.

Episode 8: Cymbeline

Lucie 00:13

Welcome to Season Two of Cheek by Jowl's podcast *Not True But Useful*. I'm your host Lucie Dawkins. These episodes are going out into the world at a time when theatre is in suspended animation, so as an antidote I'll be chatting to Declan Donnellan and Nick Ormerod, the director designer duo behind Cheek by Jowl. They are going to share life lessons that they have learnt from staging great classic plays, which might help tide us through these strange times. We can't promise that any of these lessons will be true, but we hope you find them useful.

Our final play in this series is William Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*. It's another wild ride of a story, and as always, here's a super-fast synopsis before I dive in with Declan and Nick.

It opens at the court of the British king, Cymbeline, who has a daughter, Imogen. Many years before, Cymbeline unjustly banished a nobleman called Belarius, who took revenge by abducting Cymbeline's two sons, Guiderius and Arviragus. They are missing, assumed dead. Cymbeline has married a new queen, who has an idiotic and entitled son called Cloten. The scheming queen wants Cloten to marry his new step-sister Imogen, but Imogen is in love with another man called Posthumus.

When the queen finds out about Isabella's love for the lowly Posthumus, she manipulates Cymbeline to send Posthumus into exile. Posthumus travels to Italy. He meets a trickster called Iachimo, who leads him into making a bet that his beloved Imogen will never betray him. Iachimo goes to the British court, hides in Imogen's bedroom, steals her bracelet, and uses this information to make Posthumus believe that they slept together. Posthumus sends his servant, Pisanio, to murder Imogen in revenge. Pisanio instead joins with Imogen, and helps her disguise herself as a boy and escape the castle, in order to find Posthumus and reconcile with him.

Imogen, in her disguise, gets lost in the forest, and stumbles on a shepherd and his two sons, who in fact turn out to be Belarius and her long-lost brothers Guiderius and Arviragus. The three siblings immediately feel a strong connection, although they do not yet know the truth about their parentage. Cloten chases Imogen into the woods, but Guiderius kills him in a duel. Imogen mistakes Cloten's body for Posthumus and believes that her true love has died.

Back at court, the queen plots to kill Cymbeline.

Then the Roman army invades Britain. Posthumus and Iachimo the country among their troops. Posthumus switches sides, fighting for the British. He seeks death on the battlefield, tortured by guilt because he believes that Imogen has been murdered under his orders. However, he survives. Belarius, Guiderius, and Arviragus fight bravely for the British, turning the battle against the Romans in their favour.

The British end up winning the war and all the various players are brought before Cymbeline. All the lies and disguises are uncovered. The princes are returned to their father, Belarius and Iachimo forgiven for their sins, and Imogen finally drops her disguise as a boy and is reunited with Posthumus.

The music you are hearing now was composed by Catherine Jayes for Cheek by Jowl's 2007 production. And now over to Declan and Nick.

Music

Lucie 03:46

Hello Declan and Nick.

Declan & Nick 03:47

Hello Lucie!

Lucie 03:49

Today we are looking at *Cymbeline,* which is one of my favourite Shakespeare plays because it is so badly behaved. I often think that *Cymbeline* is like Shakespeare's greatest hits album - all the narratives of all of his best plays mashed into one great big plot. You've got trying to kill a king, and long-lost siblings, and women disguised as men, and extraordinary things happening in the woods. There is sort of something for everybody in this play, but it's also well known as one of Shakespeare's 'problem plays', as in a play which defies categorisation. It's down in the First Folio as a tragedy, but it's really more of a comedy or a romance. And I know you are both really drawn to these problem plays, because you have staged a lot of them, like *Pericles* and *The Winter's Tale.* What is it about these great big messy plots that appeals to you?

Declan 04:34

Well, I get fed up sometimes doing tragedies if they are nihilistic. And I love Shakespeare, because even in his grimmest tragedies, like *Lear,* there is still some oxygen. But something that comes to an ending that's never happy, never cheesy, but always ambivalent. And that's why I love those plays, because they have flickers of light in amongst the darkness. Like at the end of the comedies, there are flickers of darkness in amongst the light.

Lucie 04:58

And what about you Nick, what appeals to you about these problem play scripts?

Nick 05:02

I don't know who categorised the problem plays, presumably academics over the years have discussed problem plays. But what are they? They are just a play, really. They are neither directly comedic, and they are not directly tragic, because not many people die. In fact, nobody dies at the end of *Cymbeline.*

Lucie 05:20

Apart from Cloten.

Nick 05:21

He does die, but no-one can pretend it was tragic. People die in plays all the time, don't they? But what makes it a problem? Apart from the fact that it is very difficult to do.

Declan 05:31

The thing that I find useful is the idea that there are some plays that he wrote at the end of his life (unfortunately, not enough), which are called, vaguely, romances - like *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest.* And these are plays that promise some sense of hope at the end. It gets very very dark, it gets darker than in any of the comedies, but at the end, there is some glimmer. People have died, but there will be people who live on.

Lucie 05:55

So, would you say that you can see Shakespeare's focus shifting over time? That these plays, at the end of his life, have a very particular kind of sentiment and interest in them?

Declan 06:06

Well yes, I think at the first of all, 'at the end of his life' is an expression we should examine. He was only 52, for God's sake. He had no idea that it was the end of his life. He probably got a bit fed up, I think he wasn't so fashionable any more, and he had done quite well out of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet* and a few others, and he went back to Stratford, I imagine with mixed feelings. But I don't think he knew he was coming to the end. But I think his feelings changed really, and he must have felt slightly like yesterday's man in the company. I suspect he wasn't a groovy young writer like Middleton, turning out city comedies, or Dekker, or somebody like that. He had another sort of taste. When he wrote something like *Cymbeline* it must have felt woefully old-fashioned at the time, because the three unities were becoming very trendy, and a sort of cynical, city-set play was becoming very popular.

Lucie 07:01

So that's the three unities of time, space, and action. That it's all got to take place in 24 hours, in the same place, with a unified plot line - which is absolutely not the case in *Cymbeline.* It runs about all over the shop. It goes from Rome to England, from a palace to a forest, and practically every scene change is a wildly different location. And that's quite a big design challenge. So Nick, could you talk about how you went about approaching this.

Nick 07:28

Well, in the most simple way possible, which is not to try to do it, Lucie. There are objects on the stage, kind of from all different parts of the play, and they stay onstage, like the chest that Iachimo climbs out of. It's there all the time. The sofa she goes to sleep on is there all the time. I think it's possible to simply, as in Shakespeare's time, play the whole thing without trying to achieve those scene changes.

Declan 07:54

Again, it's very important to remember that it's not a work of art, it's an act of art, and the act of art takes place chiefly in the audience's imagination, and that's what has to be stimulated. So the audience is implicated, because they have to invent things.

Lucie 08:07

And it also seemed to me that it allowed you to have these amazing merged scenes. You would have one scene in a forest, and then suddenly the next scene would literally walk into the previous scene and we would be back in a palace again. So you allowed all these scenes to butt up and juxtapose against each other. It allowed us to jump but also to see how the scenes sung with each other, rather than ending one and giving us a barrier and starting the next one.

Declan 08:30

Yes, I think the really important thing is how you get the actors onstage and how you get them off again, because entrances and exits are sites of great anxiety. Just getting in and getting out is really difficult. When you are making a movie or a piece of TV, you just cut, so the anxiety ends up on the floor. But actually, the anxiety is really really important. You can do an enormous amount by juxtaposing scenes, and having people walking into other scenes. It's not an energy to be embarrassed by, it's an enormous opportunity to be mined about people coming on and people going off, where they are coming on to and from and so on. That's all very very important.

Lucie 09:09

The other thing about this great big empty stage, and the way that you used lighting was that it allowed you to create this very sculptural effect with the actors. So you could pick out individual bodies with one light, and this great big black void on this dark, stripped-back stage with no scenery in it. What appealed to you about this kind of image, and what effect did it have on the action of this production?

Nick 09:32

Well, we always try to use the spaces that we play in. And in that particular case we were able to put a much smaller audience into the Barbican theatre main stage. That was enabled incredibly generously by the Barbican itself. The elements that you see are in fact structural. There are huge huge pillars supporting the roof of the Barbican, on the stage. And it seems kind of odd not to use them, because they are very powerful elements, and they give energy to the actors.

We do soften it. These large blue baroque-type drapes hang above the action like clouds, implying a sort of spiritual aspect to the whole piece. And then we used them more concretely in the palace later.

Declan 10:23

In the end, when it's Buckingham Palace, as it were, at the end of the war.

Nick 10:27

I think for the boy-band moment, when the three boys come out and sing their song.

Lucie 10:32
Yes, let's talk about that boy-band moment. So you had Tom Hiddleston playing Cloten doing a serenade under Imogen's window, which was done as a full boy-band set up in front of this blue curtain, and it was hilarious. How did you get there?

Declan 10:47

Well, it wasn't very difficult actually.

Nick 10:50

They did it at the drop of a hat! Where did the idea come from?

Declan 10:54

Well, it comes from Shakespeare actually. Believe it or not, he has Cloten serenade her noisily and unpleasantly and raucously, and I think it took us about 15 seconds to work out how to do that. And another 15 seconds to execute it. That's exactly what Shakespeare intended.

Nick 11:14

And he wrote the lyrics of the song!

Declan 11:16

And he wrote the lyrics of the song, and Imogen is there screaming at him to go away. So it was there, it was actually very much part of the story.

Lucie 11:24

And I have to say, kudos to Tom Hiddleston there for pulling out some great dance moves.

Declan 11:27

He was amazing, Tom. That was the most amazing cast, and Tom was absolutely amazing in it.

Lucie 11:33

Well that is one thing we should talk about, because there is one single piece of double casting that you did in this entire play, and that was that Tom Hiddleston played both Posthumus, who is the sort of troubled hero, and Cloten, who is the buffoonish clown who meets a terrible end in the woods. And both of them are in love with Imogen, or wooing Imogen. So why did you make this choice to double cast just Tom Hiddleston in two parts, and what does it reveal about the play?

Declan 12:01

Well, there is a very odd thing in the play about the sudden disappearance of Posthumus, and his energy and weight leaves the stage. And when he comes back, you have almost forgotten who he is. So there is a kind of emotional flaw at the heart of it, or something that makes the story very difficult to tell. I think that there is something quite interesting to unpick about what a character is. I mean a character isn't one thing. Characters are paths. A character is something that is in transition. I think the fact that Tom is playing these two different masks is very important. It wasn't like Cloten was mask one and Posthumus was more like him - he had to understand that they were both separate masks that he played, and he did that exceptionally well. And he actually changed onstage from one character to another, mid-scene, and he did it with remarkable clarity. But I think they are two different aspects of the lover of Imogen. Nothing we do is to teach anyone about anything. We don't know anything better than anybody else. But we can make juxtapositions and suggest questions. That's all we can do. That's what that was about.

Lucie 13:07

And it hugely reminded me of a lot of something we have been talking about all the way through this podcast, which is your assertion that character, a fixed character, doesn't really ever exist. A character, as you say, is a fluid thing, but also a character is what it is not, and a character is always in transition between two points. The fact that you saw him play almost opposite versions of the same character reminded us of the little bit of Cloten that was in Posthumus, and the little bit of Posthumus that was in Cloten. I found that very moving, that you could see in

Cloten, actually a lover who was very sincere, and you could see in Posthumus, somebody who was actually incredibly impulsive and pretty self-centred at times.

Declan 13:49

Yes, there is darkness in Posthumus as well. I am very glad you said that, because I would be horrified if the all-male cast of *As You Like It* or the doubling of this part here of Tom as both Cloten and Posthumus - it would upset me to think that they would ever seem 'clever', and people say 'oh that was a clever idea'. I hope that the end won't be clever, that the end will be that it's moving. Because I think that really, really, the only things that really matter to us are, I think, the things that move us. And you know, some people can be moved by a mathematical equation, some people can analyse a painting or a symphony. It doesn't particularly matter, but it's the moment when it moves you that strikes me as being very important. So I am glad that it was moving.

Lucie 14:27

It was very moving, and his shift, as you say, between the two characters was really remarkable, and happened onstage. At one point he walked off as Posthumus and almost immediately walked back on again as Cloten. It was a performance that was so remarkable that he actually won an Olivier Award for it. How do you go about building this in rehearsal, because as you said, you don't really think about 'building character' - that's not really the way that you approach plays. So how would you help an actor to shift between these two very distinct places?

Declan 14:54

Well, for me the thing that is very important in character is that a very good actor instinctively immerses themselves in the predicament. Let me make one thing absolutely clear. The great, fatal error is that the actor thinks, 'I must immerse myself in this character'. That is no good. What is really important is that the actor immerses themselves in the predicament that the character faces. In other words, you don't immerse yourself in the other person, you immerse yourself in the space that the other person moves in. In other words, to develop empathy for somebody you have to walk in their shoes, which is rather different from becoming them, because to become them is a vanity. But you can imagine what it might be like to walk in their shoes. So that when you approach a role, I think it's about getting steeped in a thing - but the thing you get steeped in is, emphatically for me, *not* that character, but it's the predicament, the dangerous circumstances within which the character finds themselves. It's not some cold theory I have evolved, it's something I have seen watching great people acting over the years, in film and in theatre.

Lucie 16:00

So, if we were to look at the beginning of *Cymbeline,* from a very logical, factual standpoint, effectively Posthumus and Cloten are in the same world, they are living in the same palace. But

subjectively, those are two completely different worlds around them, two completely different points of view. Could you explain a little bit how, for example, Posthumus' point of view and position and predicament are different from Cloten's, even though they are standing in the same room at the very beginning of the play?

Declan 16:27

Yes, I just should point out that the fact that we all live in the same real world is merely true. It is not useful. The important thing is to have the humility to understand that we only live in worlds that we can perceive. To Posthumus, the court is the space from which he is excluded, the world of power from which he is excluded, the nobody, the nebbish going around the corners of the court and knows he is worth more than that. Cloten is the very entitled son of the woman who has become the queen, and he sees a world in which people are eager to obey him, and that changes him correspondingly. The really important thing is what is the world you see, not who you are. What is the world you see? Because the world you see is the thing that is going to change who you are. You cannot become somebody else as an actor. All you can do is see through their eyes, through the eyes of that mask, into the world that that person sees.

Lucie 17:19

And I think what was really remarkable about Tom Hiddleston's performance here is that there is a very distinct scene in this play where Cloten actually dresses up as Posthumus. So he's playing Cloten in exactly the same head-to-toe costume that he wears when he is playing Posthumus, and yet it was absolutely clear that he was Cloten at that moment, because of the way that he was interacting with the world around him and letting the world affect him, as opposed to Posthumus, through his little pair of glasses, who always had a different relationship with the world around him, because he was always the one who was on edge, out of place, and uncomfortable, in a way that Cloten wasn't.

Declan 18:03

Yes, exactly. I love those moments, because they challenge the great lie of authenticity. It reminds me of *As You Like It,* when at a certain moment a man is dressed as a woman who then dresses as a man who then dresses as a woman, and you go through these four frames, these four thresholds - and you think it will be like a cold exercise, and it isn't. There is something very moving about the fact that we can be many different things.

Lucie 18:29

Now, I have heard you say before that what Shakespeare is so good at is putting his finger on a nerve of human experience. What are the nerves that you think he is poking at in this play?

Declan 18:41

Why do the play? Because it's absurd, in many respects. I think you do the play because of the final scene, where all of these extraordinary different recognitions and reconciliations take place. And because we all want to believe that people we have lost we will find again, that parts of ourselves that we have lost we will find again, that we will stop seeing through a glass darkly, and we will see face to face, and that we will actually see and be seen. And so you have this, in many respects, ridiculous plot, purely to yield that. It's like a sort of strange fruit that yields this fantastic juice at the end. Jodie McNee, who plays Imogen brilliantly, says, 'I have found the world, I don't need any more world'. That's an extraordinary moment that Shakespeare has given us. He has given us the opportunity to share these extraordinary experiences. And they are things that move me and upset me, and all that I can do as an artist is offer to share them, but not instruct or be clever or tell people this is what life is like. It's just they frighten me, and I wonder at them as well. They move me and they make me feel full of joy as well, and you hold them out, and you want to feel that you are not alone.

Lucie 19:59

And Nick, you did something quite extraordinary with the setting of this last scene, which is that you put a massive space just out of sight, which was hugely pressurising this scene. So we've got this scene with all these different recognitions and resolutions of terrible mistakes - you know, families coming together and lovers solving their problems - but you put a massive other space just outside the window. What was that?

Nick 20:23

It was the space where the whole country was celebrating the winning of the war, and it's kind of a direct reference to VE Day, where one can imagine what was going on in the palace. One has no idea what was going on in the palace, but then of course, they come out onto the balcony, and the crowd go wild. It meant, basically, that the more important space, if you like, was the fact that the whole country was celebrating the winning of the war.

Music

Lucie 21:07

It also created an incredible undercutting of the scene, because you had all of these silent, shocked moments in that scene, where people look at somebody else across the room and realise that they are completely different from who they thought they were. And these moments of silence were underpinned by this fantastic oom-pah-pah band that was happening, muffled, through the walls. That the joy of what was going on outside was butting up against the horror and tension and relief that was happening inside this space. And we got the feeling they were just a sidebar story in a much bigger thing that was going on outside.

Declan 21:43

Yes. I think what is moving is always the liminal space, it's the collision of the two worlds. And unless you know the world that you are excluding, the world that is outside the room, then nothing can be happening inside the room. And that's very important.

And the idea that the whole country is celebrating, there is something else happening in counterpoint to it. In other words, the whole world doesn't conveniently stop for this. But the world does go on despite our domestic sadness.

Nick 22:16

There is a similar moment in *Troilus and Cressida,* the end of *Troilus and Cressida,* where (in our production at least) you hear the cheerful band music of the heroes arriving back in the city, and we are with Pandarus, who has the most horrible poetry about death and venereal disease.

Declan 22:36

Shakespeare is far more shocking than anything we could do!

Nick 22:38

Yes! He curses the world.

Declan 22:40

And he gives us his syphilis basically. That's pretty shocking.

Lucie 22:46

And you had another moment in the play that was just like this, when Posthumus after the battle basically commits himself to death, feeling completely wracked with guilt. And you had him kneeling in the centre of the stage just gently lit up, dreaming of his parents who were hovering in the dark in the background, and this incredibly powerful, very alone moment. And then suddenly being cut across with a conga line and balloons falling from the ceiling, as the end of the war was celebrated. And it was a brutal inter-cut of two very different moods.

Declan 23:20

Well, I think it highlights that thing we were talking about earlier, about coronavirus making us feel so out of control. It's always good to be reminded that, yeah, we are out of control, there are very few things that we can control, but there are many very big things that we can't control, like we are going to die, and everything we have we are going to lose. And that's one of the things that the play puts its finger on. I also noticed, doing the play, that he meets his mother. If you count in the play there are four dead mothers. The first starts alive - and that's Imogen's stepmother, Cymbeline's second wife, the queen of England, played brilliantly by Gwendoline

Christie, who was fantastic. And she dies at the end of the play. There's Imogen's mother, who has died. Astonishingly, the two boys have their stepmother, whom they loved - she never even comes onstage - but the very famous dirge 'fear no more the heat of the sun' is actually to her, this character who has no stage body at all. And then, of course, there is Posthumus' mother who comes back from the dead. And then you realise, 'oh, Shakespeare's mother died that year'.

Lucie 24:26

And she's all over this play. All of these lost sons.

Declan 24:30

I think so, yeah. In the play, there is something not quite right about it. There is something discombobulated in the play. The way it is written is quite opaque, and you would have thought, 'oh my god, in some respects, there is something quite off-beam about Shakespeare in it'. And clearly, also, there is the 'political' aspect to it. 'Political' in inverted commas. You know, it is about Britain, and James has come to the throne and like King Lear, they are celebrating this ancient sacred union of the island of Britain as one, and Britannia was basically a revolutionary new concept. So there is that being put together, and then this searingly personal thing of Shakespeare stumbling almost around this plot, but it's very emotional, and it really hit me straight in the stomach.

Lucie 25:22

But I think that is also what is so touching and moving about Shakespeare, is that he is imperfect. He is an absolute genius, and there are all of these weird mouldy bits that don't quite work, that are a bit absurd and weird, and he does sometimes need to solve a plot with pirates, or the intervention of a lion, or somebody getting struck down by lightning like in *Pericles,* or these big weird plots. And I find that that just reminds us that he is deeply human.

Declan 25:51

Yes, but also at that moment I feel like he is looking at us and saying, 'what do you expect? It's a play!' I mean in real life, if you see a car accident on the road, if you ever have that terrible experience of seeing somebody dead on the pavement, everyone always says the same thing. They always say, 'it looks so unreal!' And I think there is a very big reality check for us, because I think the thing is that reality is not realistic. And the reason that reality is not realistic is that realistic doesn't mean anything. Realistic is our fantasy of how reality will look, and it just doesn't. It's our problem that it doesn't look realistic, and we have to really work on ourselves to think about how we have defined 'realistic'. It's very, very interesting. Why should it be realistic? Realistic is what you call a plastic flower. I mean realistic is a word you ascribe to something that's fake. So of course real life isn't realistic.

Lucie 26:46

Well, talking about facts and realism, there is one scene in this play which gives me a real headache as a director, and that's the first scene. And that's because it is one massive piece of exposition in which we find out about all these bizarre things that have happened before the play has begun - you know, lost princes and abductions and love stories and missing queens and all sorts of things. And I always find exposition really hard to put onstage in an interesting way, because essentially nothing dramatic is happening there. But your exposition scenes are always really electric. How do you go about approaching a scene like this?

Declan 27:22

Well, the first thing is that I think you have to look at the play and think, you know, 'it's my job as a director to make clear what ought to me made clear, and not to make clear what cannot be made clear. So it is not my job to make everything absolutely clear, it's my job to make clear as much as I understand, which may not be that much'. You don't want the audience to waste their precious attention on thinking, 'is he the brother or is she sister? Is that the lover or is he the king or is that the leading general?' I mean, that is not interesting. And when I bang on about the importance of mystery, I absolutely do not let any of us off the hook of making sure that certain things, certain mechanical things, have to be made clear. So, you know, we have worked on ways, devices over the years, to make the exposition scenes clear. I think that the first ten minutes is possibly the most important ten minutes, actually, because people have to pick up the thread at that moment.

You see, people have come to sit in a dark space for three hours, and they are giving you their attention, and this is possibly the most precious thing another human being can give you. And you have really got to respect that. Right from the get go, they have to be involved with what is happening, and a certain amount of spoon feeding is essential. I find that I need to know my story, and I get very cross if I don't know what the story is. So you go into the theatre, and as soon as the audience sits there in the dark, as the director, the writer, or the actor whatever, you have the advantage over them, because you know the story, you know the plot, you know the characters, you know who is who. But you know, you need to get that out of the way fast, so that you can become equal. It's very interesting to think about it in terms of politics and in terms of what is happening at the moment and elections and things - how fatal it is to ever appear superior, because if you are not equal, no love can pass. If you're not equal, you can't make good art. If you're not equal, people will turn off and quite correctly not want to listen anymore.

Lucie 29:24

Now, in preparing for this episode of the podcast, I got the chance to see some documentary footage of you two both working on this show in 2007, and in that documentary we see you in rehearsal. And you use a very simple technique in that rehearsal, which I have also seen you use elsewhere with actors, which is that you give a note to the actor, and then you count the

actor in from ten, and once that count has finished, they start the scene. What's the point of doing that?

Declan 29:51

You can't say to the actors, 'and when you are ready, we'll start'. That's really terrible. It would be like saying to me, 'Declan, when's the opening night?' 'Oh when you're ready, you can have the opening night.' Well, then we are never going to be ready. We have to know when the opening night is! I don't think you can say to the actors, 'and when you are ready, we will start', because if you're ready, you're late. The moment you know you are ready, you are probably late. So I'll count them a number, and they will know that on that number, they have got to go. And that's fine - you know, we can start as many times as they like, but what's terrible, I think, for them is if they have to vaguely bleed into the scene. I think that is rather depressing, and a lot of energy can get wasted.

Lucie 30:32

Let's talk a little bit about exercises, because everyone who is listening to this who works in the theatre will know that exercises are traded around like magic spells in the theatre industry. There's a lot of gossip about 'this director uses this kind of exercise', 'that kind of director uses that kind of exercise', 'we had to do it without words', or whatever. How do you like to think about exercises, and how do you come up with them?

Declan 30:55

Well, I mean all the exercises we use change all the time. But there are no magic exercises, and I would say to young directors who might be listening to this and want to hear something from me about it - I would say that you have to invent your own exercises, because there is no magic exercise. There is no manual. You have to understand what the principles of acting are, and how to liberate that acting. And you have to contemplate the basis of what is happening, because some sort of magic sprayed-on exercise is not going to help anybody. You know, I have heard of people who have been tortured by exercises I put in *The Actor and the Target.* I say over and over again, this is only to help you if you get blocked! Do not use this to direct a play. Directing a play is very very different. If an actor privately feels blocked, this is something that might open them and get some flow going. But their flow is more important than anything I can say. So there is no magic exercise. And there are some exercises that people can sometimes give that you might find useful, but in the end you have to bring your own heart to it. So, yes.

Lucie 32:03

And we have reached the inevitable final question of the episode, which is, for both of you, what are your favourite lines and/or moments from this production?

Nick 32:12

Well, I must say, like Declan, I was completely bowled over by the last quarter of an hour, which is very moving. But the moment I love most is at the very end when the royal family run out onto the balcony, away from the audience, and the crowd outside goes wild, leaving Imogen and Posthumus alone together, I thought was, yes, my favourite moment, which is the very last moment of the production.

Lucie 32:39

And it's the only moment in the whole production where nobody is looking at Imogen and Posthumus. They are so on display and everyone is always looking for them or tracking them down, and they are always at court or always performing for other people. And it's the first time really that they are alone together. We get that one moment in the beginning where they have a secret conversation, but they are always waiting for someone to walk in, and it's the first time that they are just in each other's presence.

Nick 33:04

Yes.

Lucie 33:05

What about you, Declan?

Declan 33:06

Well, I think what is interesting about *Cymbeline* is that it doesn't have what I'd call 'heart attack' lines, like I said earlier, Constance's 'grief fills up the room of my absent child'. They are those moments when something goes straight into you, and you think, 'oh my god, that writing is brilliant.' But you know, you don't get that in *Cymbeline. Cymbeline* is more humble. It has no cleverness, you know. I feel it's like something terrible had happened to Shakespeare, or something that he perceived as terrible had happened, and he's stumbling around in the play trying to share something with us, and there aren't quite words for it.

Lucie 33:44

And that is where we are going to end for today, so thank you very much Declan and Nick.

Declan & Nick 33:48

Thank you, Lucie.

Declan 33:49

Take care.

Music

Lucie 33:53

Thank you for listening to the final episode of Season Two of *Not True, But Useful.* If you want to find out more about Declan and Nick's production of *Cymbeline*, or about any of the plays that we've talked about in this series, check out the link in the podcast notes which will take you to the Cheek by Jowl archive. 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 *Cymbeline*. If you enjoyed today's conversation, you can find all the episodes for the last two seasons on Spotify, iTunes, or wherever you get your podcasts.