Verse Final

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SPEAKERS
Lucie, Declan

Lucie 00:07
Welcome to a new series of Not True, But Useful, a podcast from Cheek by Jowl. My name is Lucie Dawkins, and in these episodes, I've been chatting to the company's artistic directors, Declan Donnellan and Nick Ormerod about their work in the theatre. And in this series, we're answering your questions. Hello, Declan. How you doing?

Declan 00:34
I'm doing fine, Lucie.

Lucie 00:36
So we're taking a slightly new direction in these next few episodes of the podcast, and we're answering some questions which listeners have put to us. So we're going kick off today with a really great question that's been put to us about how you deal with verse - because the vast majority of the work that you do happens to be in verse. You love working with verse plays. And what I find really amazing about watching your productions is that all of the actors speak verse in a way which sounds like it's completely normal speech. I find that kind of miraculous in watching Cheek by Jowl shows.

Declan 01:08
Well, thank you very much, Lucie. In a way, I think it is completely normal speech. One of the things we have to watch in life is where the goalposts are set. And one of the extremely important things, political things you've sought out is where the goalposts of 'normal' are set. Now, I think a lot of our world is based on a basic lie or something that's very misleading, which is that there's a sort of normal world of prose communication, such as I'm chatting to you now, not much particular interest in the beat, not much particular interest in the imagery. But then when you do a play by Shakespeare, or Calderon, or Sophocles, that you have to kind of build yourself up to a level, as if normal speech in prose, is sort of ordinary and normalm and then this add on luxury thing of verse and the poetry that very often implies. I think this is really, really, really dangerous. And it's an intrinsic lie of our civilization, it goes way beyond theatre. The thing is, who gets to say what's normal? But I think that the interior of our brains, I think, the interior of our minds, the interior of ourselves, hasn't really got very much to do with this world of prose words at all, that our interiority is much more to do with epic, verse, imagery, poetry. And I think our most intimate thoughts are nothing to do with prose at all. And in fact, you have to continually translate into prose. So really, I think, as I said before, I think when we speak to each other, we are using a form of Google Translate. And the original language is much more to do with verse and poetry than we understand. So

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that when I do a verse play, I think I'm going back to something that's more atavistic in which the dramatists allowed people on stage to speak to each other in a way that's much more to do with the interior of their minds. That our interior minds are much more to do with this world of verse and poetry and music and dance and all of those things that we come to way before we start inventing words.

Lucie 03:14
So I find this really useful as a way of thinking about verse place - to think it's not that we have to somehow translate prose into verse, we have to find that way of stepping up into verse, but actually, that verse is something that's really common to the way that we experience ourselves in the world. And it's about giving ourselves permission to go back into verse in many ways.

Declan 03:34
Yes, basically, people often say it has to be heightened to go into a verse world, I think that's a very mistaken way of looking at it. I think, if anything, we have to invent a lowered sort of way of looking at things to go into the world of realism. I keep banging on in these episodes about the fact that there is nothing real about realistic. In fact, I'd almost say realistic is a defence against the real. But what's real, in terms our internal experience, I think, is much more to do with the poetry and images and dance and so on.

Lucie 04:05
And so, that said, dealing with verse is like playing an instrument. It requires some technical skill. And a lot of that's to do with understanding how you deal with beat and with rhythm and with breath. And the question that we have about verse today is quite a technical one. And it comes from an actor and a voice teacher called Patrick Klavins, who says he'd love to hear your opinions on Shakespearean verse, specifically looking at line endings and enjambement. So line endings are the idea that the line comes to the end on every 10th beat because Shakespeare right writes in iambic pentameter - and enjambement is when the thought runs over the end of that line and goes into the next line. And Patrick refers to the great late director Peter Hall, who always prioritised the metre and form of Shakespeare, the idea that you should breathe or pause at the end that verse line. And he says he's been wrestling with this, as an actor and voice teacher, about whether an actor should adhere to this quite traditional way of playing Shakespeare, or whether the line should run over in order to preserve the length and sense of the thoughts. What is your approach to this?

Declan 05:17
Well, thank you, Lucie, before I start to answer that question, I have to register quite strongly my sense of intense discomfort trying to answer a question like that, because it's as if I've got to enter into that playing field. I mean, all this technical talk really worries me. But we got into this position because we love rules. We love rules. And we don't like to think we love rules. That's the really embarrassing thing about being a human being. I just keep thinking of when the monarchy was restored in Spain, after Napoleon had brought the revolution to Spain. And finally, the old Spanish dynasty was restored. And the people yelled in approval, and were shouting the chant 'vivan las cadenas'. 'Vivan las cadenas' means 'long live the chains'. So we love rules, we love roles. We love obeying rules, and we love making other people obey rules, we love them. It just always makes me feel uncomfortable, because I don't much like giving rules about things. But the most important thing that I think I can say is that I think it's fatal ever to stop at the end of the line. And it's deadening. It's absolutely completely deadening, and you lose the flow. But what is to be said is that that there is an

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exchange of energy that happens at the end. I think, rather than a full stop, you should think about it as being a change of direction. And that something interesting happens between the last word of every line and the first stressed syllable of the new line. And we have many exercises we've evolved over the years in Cheek by Jowl - so we get actors walking on the beat, touching the wall at the flat of their hand on the last word of the line, and then turning on a point to the other wall for the first stress syllable of the next. And extraordinary acceleration, a new pulse of energy happens. Now how the actor interprets that is entirely down to the actor.

Lucie 07:05
What I found really interested about this point about the first stressed syllable of the next line is that it's the same idea, which is noticing where the where the line ends, where the end of that iambic pentameter. But almost your advice is don't pause, find the turn that accelerates you into the next line there. It is the same idea: the verse is there, the line end is there to help you do something, but it's not a stop. It's almost like the next hurtle on a roller coaster that takes you down.

Declan 07:36
Exactly right. And you have to find the acceleration that goes into the new thought, and it has to actually, the seed of it has to be in a way within rhyme, the last word is going to take you into the new idea. Because nothing that we say works. And the problem with rather perfect verse forms is that it's like what I said worked. And you think no, it didn't, nothing work! If you want to said worked, you wouldn't need to say something else, would you? That's basically how speech works, that everything we say is a failure, and we go into the next thing. So say you are Juliet in the balcony scene, and you're saying to Romeo, 'thou knowst the mask of night is on my face/ else would a maiden blush bepaint my cheek.' Now, the last words in those two lines are 'face' and 'cheek'. And we need to do the last word exercise - that we just say the last words to ourselves. And when you put them together, they become quite magical. They become a kind of undercurrent.

Lucie 08:33
So those are the last words in every single line that popped out at the end of the iambic pentameter line. So shall I read out those last last words, I've got them right here? So we've got 'face - cheek - tonight - deny - compliment - eye - swearest - perjuries - Romeo - faithfully - won - nay - world - fond - light - true - strange - confess - where -me - love - discovered'. And you can hear it! This is a speech about love and a promise and a fear of betrayal and death.

Declan 09:12
Well, all sorts - there's masses of death in the balcony scene. I mean, it sometimes occurs to me that Romeo and Juliet are the progenitors of Lord and Lady Macbeth, that there are another couple who love each other who basically kill each other. They don't look after each other. But the seeds about death are there right from the beginning, that through the whole scene, we'll see this extraordinary pattern of death imagery emerging, normally through that last word exercise. And in a way, it's not good to make into a poem to analyse, it's good mean to a poem to let the poem haunt us. Because I don't think understanding things is always the best idea. Letting ourselves be haunted by a work of art is probably the best thing. And these words just come together and they take us into another world where we're not quite in control, where Juliet's not quite in control.

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Lucie 09:57
Because I suppose if we were to read this out with the version which is leave a pause after the end of the line - it does sound unnatural, right? 'Thou knowst the mask of night is on my face - else would have maiden blush bepaint my cheek - for that which thou has heard me speak tonight...' No one speaks like that! We don't break up our our thoughts like that. It doesn't sound alive.

Declan 10:20
Yes. But there's another set of words, which are the first stressed syllables of each line. It's actually the interval of time between the last word and that first stressed syllable. And something happens in that time, which means that the actor should change direction. If you do, you'll find a whole new pocket of energy there,where you least expect to find it. But my warning is this, do not try to find the pocket of energy in the big last words - cheek, face, etc, etc. Those are the words that people tend to want to paint. And they want to have a good old emote on those words. My advice is - please let them look after themselves. Say them, by all means, feel them, by all means, but don't indulge them. The thing that you need to look after is that boring little first stressed syllable, because that's the key to the whole thing.

Lucie 11:08
So that said, let's think about this first stressed beat, and how useful it can be in every line. So if we look at this pair of lines that you've brought up, 'thou knowst the mask of night is on my face/ else would have maide blush bepaint my cheek'. So we've heard the version where you would put a pause in - the old traditional way. But you're saying the most interesting place is that first stressed beat in the next line, which is 'would' - 'thou knowst the mask of nighters on my face/ else WOULD a maiden blush bepaint my cheek/ for THAT which thou has heard me speak tonight/ fain, WOULD I dwell on form, fain, fain, deny'.

Declan 11:47
Of course, that's good just get out the form. It's for the actor to make it alive. So that is the basic schema.

Lucie 11:54
And so this, I suppose, relates to a much bigger question about breath. Again, this kind of traditional way of speaking, the verse and Shakespeare suggest that the breath should come at the end of the line, but you have quite different thoughts about breath.

Declan 12:08
Well, my big thought about breath is we shouldn't think about it in a way while we're acting. In fact, if the actor ever has to think 'should I be breathing here?' we've already gone very much wrong. I think the very good exercise the actor can do is to try and see how many words the actor can say on one breath, just just to start like that, to see how many words you can go to, and increase that number every day, to try and see out long you can keep that slow exhalation of the breath. The reason is because we breathe naturally on the thought. So, what I'm saying is that breath is unbelievably important. The breath is more important than the word. That's what I've said, the breath is more important than the word. And I said before: if you can't breathe it, you can't play it. So take the breathing really, really seriously.

Lucie 12:57
So it sounds like what you're saying is, the actor needs to be able to train their breath, to know that they've got enough bellows in their lungs to get through big and complex thoughts,

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because we don't naturally tend to breathe until we've reached the end of a thought. And a lot of characters in Shakespeare tend to have really long thoughts, right?

Declan 13:17
Yeah, but when the stakes go up, we all do. So, it's amazing what can happen when we're under stress. I mean, Lucie, if a lion ran into this room, now - I know you're much fitter than I am, but I swear to you, I could probably outrun you. I could run so bloody fast, when under threat very, very fast indeed. The difference between me and you is that tomorrow, I wouldn't be able to move. And you'd probably be absolutely fine. Now, some people might say, 'oh, but you know, these things happen in real life, and people don't train for their breath in real life.' And I say 'no, they don't. But then they don't get to move after they've been chased by a lion either, like me.' But the actor has got to do that over and over and over again. So you need to train that breath so you don't damage yourself. Because, in a way, to have that long breath comes naturally to us when the stakes go up. My point is you do not have a choice to do shallow breathing when the stakes get higher. You body simply won't let you do it. So you have to be very, very well prepared for it. And I'd say it's the only technical thing that you need to do when you do verse plays, when do Shakespeare. You have to make sure you've got masses of oxygen in your body and that you don't start running out. So I think it's really good idea for the actors to do their text running, see how many words they can get out all on that one breath. You have to let your breath out very, very slowly over a long period of time. And very often, it's quite lamentable watching somebody playing a very dangerous situation. They think they can just do it. They mistakenly think they just have facility to just turn it on. You don't. It's the breath that gives you away. That's how we can tell when people are lying. There are all sorts of modern technological advances, we think, oh, that's amazing, like the polygraph. And actually, if you examine that, we've always had them. That's why you have juries. If you're really attuned to other people, you can tell when they're not telling the truth, because you'll detect changes in heartbeat, and you'll detect changes in breathing. We are naturally hyper vigilant to these things. And you can tell that when you're listening to people acting that sometimes you don't believe and sometimes you do.

Lucie 15:14
Absolutely. And so, when we're looking at this Juliet speech, for example, it does sound weird to put a pause after that 'face' at the end of that first line, because it doesn't sound human to talk like that, because she hasn't reached the end of the thought.

Declan 15:30
No. But also, the important thing is to understand how we think. Thoughts are in terrible competition with each other, particularly when we get excited. It's always a question of interruption. And you know, if you're having a drink with friends, and you're remembering some funny thing that happened, you'll start interrupting each other frantically. The new thought always tries to slay the old thought, because the new thought thinks it's more important than the old thought. Yes, they are in competition with each other. That's how we live.

Lucie 15:58
And so every single thought in the speech is being usurped by the next.

Declan 16:03
Yes.

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Lucie 16:04
And in terms of what that does to your breath...

Declan 16:06
yeah,

Lucie 16:06
... you're trying to breathe out the thought, and then snatch enough air in for the next thought to take over. And that that's actually really alive and organic, and thinking of breathing really regularly at the end of every line interrupts that livewire energy that happens when you let the thoughts dictate the breath.

Declan 16:29
It's total death. That's where 'vivan las cadenas' gets us. We just love the bloody rules, because then I've got it right. But there is no right.

Lucie 16:37
But what I find really useful about this whole approach is you're not saying therefore, ignore all of this information that Shakespeare is giving us by arranging this as a verse form. He's popping words out at the end of the line that help us understand the images of the speech. He's giving us that second stressed syllable that accelerates your breath and your thought and gives you even more energy. So you're not saying ignore all of these formalistic things, just think of them as energetic offers, rather than rules that are restricting how you can say it.

Declan 17:10
Yes, what I really advise you to do, if you want to do verese, is to write your own verse, to write your own blank verse. If I get bored watching a movie, I often try and see how many lines actually go into blank verse, and it's quite amazing how many do. And once you do like three or four lines together, you'll find that naturally, the last word is the most interesting word. And that the steering first syllable of the new line comes in naturally. It's not like Shakespeare is a super genius. It's quite possible Shakespeare wouldn't know what I was talking about. Because it just it was something that was so ingrained into him that it came naturally to him. I think a good image to think about is that of jazz: jazz is about syncopation. But in order to syncopate, you have to have something to syncopate against. We sometimes forget that in jazz is there is actually a very, very regular, quite boring beat, 1-2-3-4 1-2-3-4, going on all the time. And the jazz musician, the jazz singer, is syncopating against that imagined beat, and you might never once hear that regularly. But it will be there, the rule has to be there to be broken. Otherwise, there's no energy. And that's why in verse, you have to imagine the regular beat, because you might always be syncopating. And I think that's the other wonderful thing to notice is that Shakespeare actually breaks the iambic pentameter much more than he sticks to it. In general, there's usually an extra beat on the end of the line, a weird break in the middle of the line, a moment where a line is suddenly all monosyllables, and everything slows down. So the iambic pentameter is only really there for you to play against, right? It's an expectation that you can break. It gives you surprise to play with. Yes, it's an expectation to be broken. And he gets more used to playing with that more and more outrageously as he matures as a writer.

Lucie 18:55
And so I always love hearing you talk about verse and seeing you support actors with verse in rehearsal rooms, because it becomes less about the verse being a prison, or the verse

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being a structure, that we have to somehow make this play live inside. And more like the verse is a series of offers, a series of stimuli for your imagination, and your breath, and your body, that is only going to propel you through the scene. It's almost like use the verse as a starting point for exploration. Don't try and fit yourself into the verse.

Declan 19:31
Well, it depends. Yes, we do need rules, then we have syncopate against them. You can't lose too much sight of the rules, but you can't obey them too much either. So always we have to be developing our common sense, so that we can answer the big question no-one wants to answer which is: how much is enough? And the answer is, that depends. And no one wants to hear that answer, but it's the only honest answer.

Lucie 19:54
So you do need to know some technical information about iambic pentameter. You need to know about line endings you need to know about the beats, you need to know how it's structured, but only so you can break the rules, right?

Declan 20:06
I think rules in general is quite an ambivalent thing. I think very often you'll learn them in order to break them. You can't just break them without knowing what they are. So one has to go bit careful there. You can't do whatever you like. You need to know, kind of what should be before you can propose something that isn't that. That's my advice. The important thing is that you only need to know so much. And then your common sense will tell you everything else. And basically your body knows more than you doo. We might have to train your body, but even so your body probably knows more than you doo.

Lucie 20:35
Fantastic. So that's our answer for Patrick, thank you so much for your question. Trust your common sense. And we're going to be joining again next week to answer more questions from listeners. And in the meantime, thank you very much Declan.

Declan 20:48
Thanks Lucie.

Lucie 20:54
Thank you for listening, and to all of you who've posted us questions. If you'd like to hear more gems about theatre from Declan and Nick, you'll find many more seasons of this podcast on the Cheek by Jowl website or wherever you get your podcasts. The music you're hearing now was composed by Sergey Chekryzhov for Cheek by Jowl's production of Three Sisters. Join us next week as we answer more questions from listeners.

Advice to Self

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS
actors, rehearsal room, design, advice, work, jowl, nick, superiority, talk, designer, declan, question, happening, space, predicament, give, production, idea, smuggles, shutter

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SPEAKERS
Nick, Lucie, Declan

Lucie 00:06
You're listening to Not True, But Useful, a podcast from Cheek by Jowl. My name is Lucie Dawkins, and each week I get together with the artistic directors Declan Donnellan and Nick Ormerod, to talk about the art of making plays. And in this series, we've been answering questions put to us by you. Hello, Declan and Nick, it's great to have you both here today.

Declan 00:35
Hi, Lucy.

Nick 00:35
Hello, Lucy.

Lucie 00:36
So today we're going to continue answering questions which have been put to us by listeners. And we've got a great question today from someone on Twitter @bohemianburbage and they ask: 'what's the best bit of advice anyone has given to you over the whole span of your careers? And to this day, you still find useful?' That's a great question, I think, what advice do you still keep in the forefront of your mind when you're making work - even after 40 years of doing what you do? What advice do you still give yourselves? Nick? Why don't we start with you?

Nick 01:07
Yes, I try hard to give myself the advice - and it yes, I do do it every time and it doesn't always work - and that is to be ruthless, over what is needed, and what isn't needed, and what is decorative, and what is actually part of the action and needs to be there. And each time I do this, I fail. You know, in each production I come to I find myself wanting to design stuff, things. And then whenI come to it, I realised that I didn't need it. For example, we've just done Oedipus in Craiova in Romania, and we cast two young girls as Oedipus' children. And they had to be revealed behind a shutter. And my first thought was, of course, to design stuff, so they were going to be seen in a playroom with lots of toys. And I got the actors to start collecting toys, so we can have stuff for them to play with, and be somewhere specific. But then when it came to it, the shutter went up. And it was so clear that we didn't need any of that stuff at all. All we had are the two little girls running around in the space. And that was much, much stronger than anything I could have designed. So essentially, yes, that was the last production I've done. I have to give that advice to myself every time I work: make sure that what you design is what you need, as opposed to any sort of decoration. And it's hard, you really need to think hard, I need to think hard. I mean, I remember doing Angels in America, and you design a load of stuff, which a lot of people put a lot of work into. And I remember one particular scene which was meant to be, I think, in heaven or hell or somewhere. And I designed a lot of sort of office furniture and a stack of filing cabinets, and it was made and, appeared. But it kind of never somehow worked for me because it was an entirely an idea that I had added. We didn't cut it, we used it, but it was simply decorative. And I somehow felt that it never had a role. You never quite understood it, because it was never used. It was an intellectual idea or design idea, which really wasn't rooted anywhere. But I felt we needed an image, you know. I think I was down the wrong path. I don't know what the right path would have been. But it was never cut, we had it in the show. Nobody ever noticed, but I noticed I think!

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Lucie 03:54
So these very stripped back design seem to be all about empowering the actor, and their ability to transform the space before the audience's very eyes. But that seems to involve a really deep collaboration between you as a designer and the actors. How do you invite the actors into that collaboration? How do you empower them within that?

Nick 04:12
I think you need to be there with the actors from the beginning working with them. I mean, and often we have this absurd tradition and Cheek by Jowl of playing silly children's games, which I do, that's my job at the beginning of rehearsal. And in that sense, I kind of bond with the actors as much as possible. And because we've created the company together, I think they do trust me, and they obviously trust Declan. And, and therefore they feel free. And I feel free to work with them and come up with things. And that has become part of what we do together, and we love being there together in the rehearsal room. And that happened from the very beginning. I don't talk to the actors about how they act, Declan does that, I just talk with them maybe about their costume and their space and, and how it's how it's going to work. I mean, I think it's crucial, particularly if you have designed a detailed set, that you are there as a designer in the rehearsal room because otherwise, nobody else is going to make it work or nobody else is going to introduce the actors to the space and work with them. And sometimes you see productions where you feel that all the decisions have been taken by the designer. And that is absolutely, that's absolutely a danger, I think. Really, what I'm saying is that the designer needs to be eagle sharp, on what is necessary, and what can be delivered by the actors without stuff, you know. Because ultimately, it's their imaginative journey, which is going to make the evening. And the more that they exercise their imagination with the audience, the stronger the experience for the audience will be. And by closing down their possible choices, you restrict the possibility of the theatre itself, I think.

Lucie 06:20
So there's a lot of collaboration going on. You as designer and director are in the room together all the time. Do you ever find yourself giving advice to each other?

Nick 06:29
I think we don't give advice to each other in the rehearsal room.

Declan 06:33
I think we have a dare give each other advice!

Nick 06:35
Maybe we do after the end of rehearsal...

Declan 06:38
No, I don't ever remember giving you advice about anything! You know, I mean, it's largely to do with acceptance of what you're given and dealing with what you've got, rather than wishing you had something else really. So yes, I don't really think we do do that. Oh, we do like on driving home from the rehearsal, or whatever, we do sometimes. Nick does sometimes, say why don't you do blah? Occasionally, not very often, actually, funnily enough, yes. No we don't really directly interfere with each other that much, I must say, no. There's no problem that can't be made worse by talking about it. If we end up talking a lot it's probably a sign that something's gone wrong. I don't think we do talk to each other that much

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about our wor. We talk a lot about choosing the play. And we talk about a lot about the actors and choosing the play and choosing the actors. But then Nick will sort of on the whole decide how we're going to use the space. And then everything starts to be determined from that point.

Lucie 07:31
Well, let's turn the question over to you, Declan. What advice do you still keep giving yourself in rehearsal rooms? What do you keep reminding yourself about to help you do your best work?

Declan 07:41
It's actually quite simple. I need to watch it if I start directing too much - like Nick needs to watch it if he starts designing too much. But we monitor ourselves with that. So if I ended up thinking to myself, 'oh, why doesn't he sit down, now? Why doesn't she move there or why something like that?' it's normally a sign that things have gone very wrong. And that I need to get back, I need to go back to basics. And that my real job is to talk to the actors, work with the actors, maybe do some impromptu exercises, which I invent on the spot with the actors, about what the predicament is. And if I do that, things tend to work out. And they'll find much more interesting places to sit down, ornstand up, or walk around or whatever - they'll actually do all of that themselves. But I need to sort of make sure that people are seeing the predicament in all its complexity. I think one thing that's really important, if you take a very simple piece of advice to yourself, a director might say: 'well, now what's going on here? Let's sort out what's going on here.' That's quite a dangerous question, actually, because it's smuggles in a weird sort of superiority. Because no one knows what's going on here. Each of those characters will have a completely different impression of what's going on. That in each of those pairs of shoes on the stage, they'll be each facing in different directions, and there'll be each perceiving different threats or possibilities in the situation. Any superiority ruins your ability to access that. That's what's really, really important. I go on about superiority. And I'm not only talking about ethics, I'm talking about making your work good, and that if you're either above or below what you're looking at, you can't see it properly. You have to ask yourself about each of the different characters, what is it that they see? Or what is it that they're trying to see? And also and above all, actually, what is it they're trying not to see? They're each trying to deal with what they're not trying to see. And they're each not trying to see slightly different things. So the really important thing is that you just are able to stand in the shoes of the people who are on stage and see what it is they see and it will be different from each other. It'll be different from you, and none of us has any access to the god shot. You know, what is the truth here? None of us knows that! The reason I put that under what advice do I give myself is that it's really shocking how one smuggles in sentences, questions like, 'now what's going on here?' Because it sounds quite humble and plausible, but it isn't. I need to see what's blocking my view, and most of the time, if I'm honest enough, the thing that's getting in the way of my vision is, I'm afraid, I've got in the way. I'm occluding, the view of what I should be seeing. But how does that happen? It happens with thoughts like, 'oh, is this dynamic enough? Is this exciting enough ?' I have slightly, outside, god-type views of what ought to be happening, And that really, really doesn't help me - that actually tends to block me. I've just got to keep asking the question that I said to you, you know, 'what's it looked like from those shoes?' And then the only way to unblock yourself is to unblock yourself. That isn't quite as banal as it sounds. You have to take the blockage away, and the blockage is me looking at myself, normally. That's normally how I get blocked. And if you get into a panic, of course, then you start thinking, 'Oh, maybe this should be more, maybe this should be this, maybe this should be that' But in a way, if you analyse it, you'll see that you're actually just thinking about yourself. You need to kind of get

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rid of that and actually see, as well as you can what you think might be happening in the outside world. You'll never see exactly what's happening in the outside world, but you can have a better stab at it. Can I just say one thing about advice that I think is really important, and that is thT positive advice is really quite dangerous. So if you're going to an interview, and somebody says, Be yourself, that's really pretty toxic advice. Because the real answer is, which self? You know, I also think that the priests were really cruel at Delphi, you know, saying: 'man, know thyself!' And you think that's really unhelpful. It's much more useful to say, 'don't deceive yourself about yourself.' It's too many syllables. It doesn't make a good slogan, I know. But it's actually a little bit more helpful. Because none of us can know ourselves, but what we can try to do is try and deceive ourselves a little bit less. I think every single piece of positive advice is really bloody dangerous. So be strong, be wise, be intelligent, be this, be that. They're all dreadful, because they really don't help. The only thing that I've ever found in my life to help is to try and not do the negative thing. You know, instead of saying rather than direct well, trying not to direct badly is actually rather better. Try and think about why you're getting in the way of what you're trying to do.

Lucie 12:41
So it sounds like it's really important to both of you to let yourselves be open to instinct, to reacting to what the actors are giving you, not to cook too much in advance not to control too much. Ltting yourself be open to inspiration and to hunches. Nick, do you find that there's anything that you can do that helps your imagination stay open and free like that while you're working?

Nick 13:04
Yes, I was hoping you wouldn't ask me that question. Because I think the way my mind works is that I have the idea - if there is an idea - for the set, or for setting outside the rehearshal rool, kind of in one leap - just an idea comes to me. Together, we tend to do probably at the maximum two productions a year and it gives you a long time to allow them to sort of vegetate and grow in your mind. And that has been a great privilege over time that I've never been faced with, you know a deadline. Oh, my God, no, I don't know what I'm doing. I've got to produce this design! Never, no, no, that's never happened. More so recently, we've come up with more elaborate settings which have required to be designed in advance. But often, we've gone into the rehearsal room with nothing. And I've allowed - and technical department have allowed me - two weeks to come up with something.

Declan 14:11
I think that's very important, actually, that it's the dream time that really matters. But the important thing is that you let your mind wander in a way as well, you it's not - the idea of sort of scrutinising the text, I think doesn't tally with my experience at all. You read the text and then something happens in the space. Not necessarily that you fantasise on the text but the text suggests all sorts of things to you. If you give yourself some air to think about it. That I think, is really important. The problem isn't having ideas. The problem is you have too many ideas, and you have to keep chucking away ideas. So if you're going to direct well, you've just got prepared to chuck away lots and lots of ideas. Don't be thinking oh, the problem is not having any ideas. The problem is just getting rid of them. And you need to put yourself in a space where you have ideas that you can throw away. That one can't be in thrall to the idea.

Lucie 15:05

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Well, thank you very much both. I think that's where we're going to end for today. And we're going get together next week to answer more questions from listeners.

Nick 15:12
Thanks Lucy. Bye bye

15:20
Thank you for listening to this episode of Not True, But Useful. And if you've enjoyed what you've heard, then head on over to the Cheek by Jowl website or wherever you get your podcasts, to find lots more gems from Declan and Nick. The music you're hearing now was composed by Sergey Chekryzhov shop for Cheek by Jowl's production of Three Sisters

Spontaneity

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SPEAKERS
Lucie, Declan

Lucie 00:07
Welcome to Not True, But Useful, a podcast from Cheek by Jowl. My name is Lucie Dawkins. And in these episodes, I've been chatting to the company's artistic directors, Declan Donnellan and Nick Ormerod, about their work in the theatre. So hello, Declan.

Declan 00:30
Hello, Lucie. So we've sat down again today to answer some questions from listeners to the podcast. We've got a really great question today from Dave Burnett. And he's asking about the relationship between spontaneity and continuity. I think this is a really good question. It's such a tricky thing for an actor. So he said, especially when he's filming, he's found that the tension between these two things sometimes really difficult to manage. For example, feeling struck by something new in the moment, and then picking up a prop or a glass of wine at the wrong time. And I think this applies to theatre as well. So how can you serve, for example, structured choreography that's arisen from previous choices in rehearsals? So how can you hit marks that have worked well before, while not being untruthfully tethered to them? I think this is a really great question about the nature of rehearsing. What do you need to fix and keep repeating and needs to be the same each time, and what needs to change? And how do you keep fresh the thing that you do need to repeat? There are two questions there. One is what is it that you need to fix, what needs to be the same every night? My advice always is - you need as few rules as possible, but they need to be good ones. In other words, you need as few fixed points as possible, but they need to be very important ones. So the more that's unfixed the better. But the actors obviously do need anchors to get them through the evening. That's definitely true. But the second part of the question about spontaneity is the central question of theatre. And I suspect also it's a central question of life itself, actuallu. Take a big guess: there's no easy

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answer. Anybody selling you a simple answer to the question I'd give a wide berth to, because there's no simple answer to how to do that. It is the actual central problem. I'm completely familiar with the problem. I mean, I have to face it everyday when I give notes after the show, trying to rediscover the way in which something might be brought into spontaneous life. That's my job, basically. That's the centre of what I tried to do with the actors. Well, I can give you some guidance that has proved useful for me.

Lucie 01:30
That will be great. How do you help actors do that?

Declan 01:50
Well, the first thing is, what do I not do?

Lucie 01:54
Okay!

Declan 01:55
Because I'm always taking away things, I'm always doing the negative.

Lucie 02:38
I think it's one of the most repeated phrases in this podcast. It's not about what you give, in rehearsal, it's what you take away.

Declan 02:44
And what I want to take away from you is any sensation whatsoever that you might find the spark of spontaneity deep within yourself. Don't do it, it won't work. Spontaneity is not an inner, ownable state. Spontaneity is entirely to do with your relationship with something on the outside. So it could be the clock in the corner of the room, it could be the person who's just said they're leaving you, it could be your own fear that's gripping your soul. But always it's about you in relation to something else. There is no inner spontaneous spark. Now, I've seen people so often punish themselves, because they're trying to find this inner spontaneous spark. When they talk about it, they'll use words like 'truthful' . I mean, please don't open that door. I mean, if you want to then do so I can't stop you. But you'll end up suffering. If you do that you'll beat yourself up. What you need to do is to not distract yourself with what's going on inside. You forget all that, just try to see outside you. Now the problem is, I've already put you wrong, because I've used the word 'try'. Because as soon as you try to do something, you end up concentrating. And when you end up concentrating, you end up killing yourself, basically, because you become self-referential. The important thing is that you pay attention to the thing that's outside you. Now, everything that's outside you is continually changing. That's just a fact of life. But very often, we don't see that. We don't see that something is surprising. But it's not the problem of the outside world. The problem is that we have closed something down inside ourselves. We do this for the best reasons. We do this to hibernate ourselves. We do this to make ourselves safe.

Lucie 04:27
I think it might be useful for us to just stop for a second and talk about this word hibernation.

Declan 04:31
Yeah.

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Lucie 04:32
It's a word that pops up quite a lot in our conversations. And just to recap what I think you mean by it - is it the idea that the world is very chaotic, the space around us tends to actually be very dangerous and difficult to manage. And we, as humans, like to put in place all sorts of little pieces of self-deception, barriers in our minds, that help us to convince ourselves that the space is stable, that we're all fine and that we're all in control. Which is a lie, we're never in control, right? And this is what you call a hibernation, right? This process of self anaesthetising ourselves to feel like we are safe.

Declan 05:09
Yes, exactly. And that's to do a lot with our feelings, because sometimes our feelings are very dangerous, and we have to close them down. And, you know, Freud said, when we were little children, we have so many murderous feelings. That's one of the reasons why we have no memories before the age of four - or very, very few. Because they've been so suffocated by us because we're so horrified by the fact that we might destroy the world. We get so angry when we're little children, because the world does not do what we want. The problem is that we convince ourselves when we're older that we're now okay with the fact that the world doesn't do what we want. And I don't think that's quite right.

Lucie 05:45
So are you suggesting that one of the reasons why it's actually really difficult for the actor to be spontaneous is because we're naturally hibernating all the time? We don't want to let ourselves see how dangerous the space is, and how spontaneously we need to react against it. Because it's really uncomfortable to actually see that and it's uncomfortable to let your character see that. It makes you instinctively feel out of control.

Declan 06:06
Yes. And to put it more simply, the actor says, you know, 'I want to be spontaneous, how can I be more spontaneous?' And my answer to that is, you can't be more spontaneous. What you can do is stop yourself repressing it, stop yourself taking your spontaneity away from yourself, because that's what we all do all the time. There is a problem with spontaneity in the world that's very deep. And we all sort of know it somewhere. And it's not new. It starts at the beginning of civilization. It starts from as soon as 'thou shalt not kill'. 'Yeah, but I want to kill' - but thou shalt not kill. 'Yeah, but I want to' - so imagine that you don't want to. And we have such policed imaginations, it's very difficult for us to know what we feel. What am I saying practically to the actor? I didn't mean that to be quite such a homily. But you have to see that you are spontaneous, and you can't make yourself spontaneous. There's no extra ingredient that you can add that's going to bring out that spontaneity in you. So for example, he speaks about a film set. Yeah, sure. I mean, one of the things that hinders your capacity to be spontaneous is if you're either afraid or angry. These things take you away. So that means you actually can't see it, because you get yourself in the way - your feelings come in the way of being able to help, to let you see what you need to see. So you have to find a kind of way of dealing with your fear and your rage. Probably not by repressing them, it's probably better to see them and know that you don't need to act on them. We have to understand that it's a basic kind of given of our lives, that we're always having our spontaneity removed from ourselves. We all dread the moment of madness that could undo everything, and we keep it well, well under wraps. So under wraps, so we don't see it anymore. I mean, when the actor says to me, you know, how can I be more spontaneous, I completely understand it, I completely feel for that predicament. God, you know, I'd like my work to be spontaneous, too. But the problem is, I need to get my own form out of the way of that of the light. And I have to say, unfortunately, same thing to the actor as well, is that the

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only thing that's stopping you being spontaneous is you. Spontaneous is what we naturally are, but we curb it at an early age, in case we murder people - but if you close down part of your spontaneity, you'll tend to depress the whole lot. A talented actor is somebody who manages to call off that act of repression, that act of hibernation, that they have for the rest of their lives for the time of their performance. It's a question of not doing something, it's a switching off of an electric light, not the switching on of an electric light. The problem is, that's very difficult to isolate and to do and people would much prefer to be given something to do. Please just give us something simple to do, a simple technique, a simple thing to do! And know it's something that you are doing that takes the spontaneity away from you. Now, I can try and help us do that. But the first thing is that we actually understand the process. On the whole, we're on the right road, but facing in the wrong direction: that actually, your destination is behind you! And I totally understand the problem of 'why I can't be spontaneous?' and yes, not only is it really difficult, it's the central difficulty. But we survive in our civilised socialised world by repressing ourselves, I'm afraid, I mean, part of civilization is repression, because we are so full of violent thoughts, because the world doesn't do what we want it to do. And that's why we go to see these plays like a Oedipus with these extraordinary situations and predicaments of tremendous violence and repression and conflict. Because that's happening inside us. It's yeah, it's that those things are inside us, but they are repressed.

Lucie 09:37
And so there seems to be our first step which is: acknowledge what's going on. You're probably numbing yourself to your own spontaneity. The spontaneity is already there. You're just putting a massive roadblock in the way of it because it's gonna make you feel comfortable, in a way that will be completely instinctive. We do that because it makes us feel safe and that's difficult to switch off. But then the next step is to go back and say: look at the outside world and assume that it is surprising and changing all the time, that when you see that wineglass it's going to be new each time regardless of what you do, and you just have to let yourself be open to that. See it anw

Declan 10:16
Yes, exactly. Every time you walk into the room, you know well, yes, it's familiar. But also, it's, it is slightly different, particularly if there's a new person in it, particularly if big events have happened, and the whole space changes around us. And we have to be alert to that, when every day starts to look the same. It's not the problem with the day, the problem is that you are closed down to change in case the change hurts you.

Lucie 10:39
What I also find really interesting about this question is, I think it's actually also about another thing that we talk about, which is flow, and the fact that you need the right creative ecosystem for flow to happen. And actually, that's not just about the actor, that's about everybody setting up that rehearsal room or that film set. You also need a director who doesn't want to block every half second that the actor is going to do. You direct in such a way where, as you said, there are as few anchors as possible for the actors to bounce off. So there is as much room as possible for their spontaneity, that they have room to make instinctive decisions. But that's not how all directors direct - and you know, different horses for different courses, everybody's creative process is different. But it can be, I think, pretty suffocating for an actor, when you're being blocked to such a degree of like, 'sit down on this word, pick up a glass on this line'. Because you're having a huge amount put on top of you, that you then have to keep struggling to see anew every single time. It leaves less of a playing field for your instinct, would you say that's true?

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Declan 11:47
Sort of except, you know, when you get a script by Shakespeare, you know, there are five words in 'tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow'. And you can't just decide to save for one night because you feel like it. I mean, you've got quite a lot of very specific things that you just have to make happen. And the deal is that's the job. But what I would say to you, things that I hope are helpful - and that is you can't see the same thing twice, and if you see the same thing twice, it's because you're a bit hibernated. And all I can do in a rehearsal room is make the space as unthreatening as possible, which often means making it very disciplined so that veru often if it's disciplined, it feels quite safe. And that people can feel somewhat playful, and that people don't feel too judged. I can do that. And I can encourage the actors to try and take care of those feelings in themselves that get in the way of what they're doing. But I did say a big thing earlier on, and I just want to repeat it: spontaneity has got nothing to do with you. The actor has just got no business beating themselves, because they're not spontaneous, because spontaneous is about your relationship with the outside world. And you're seeing the outside world that exists before you in time and space. And you have to relate to that. And your existence as an actor is purely relational. It's only to do with the relations you have with the outside world.

Lucie 13:04
So there's quite an interesting question hidden inside Dave's question as well, which is about the fear of doing something instinctively, and it being wrong. For example, on a film set, deciding, 'oh, I am going to pick up the wineglass in this moment'. And actually, it's not what the director asked for, and the shot is in the wrong place to catch it. And acting on that instinct is actually not going to work for everything else that is set up. I mean, that's a really complicated question, because is that the actors responsibility? Is it the directors responsibility? How can you create an environment in which there's room for that kind of instinct, but you're also needing to hit the fixed stuff that you have to do?

Declan 13:45
Oh, I can't possibly say. Everybody's very different. I mean, I know somebody who says, you know, you normally get three takes, and she says, 'I'll do exactly what you want for the first to, but on the third, can I try something in another way?' And normally, they say yes, and occasionally, they even use it. Certainly, that's one way, I'm not saying that's how to do it. And there's no book on it. I mean, I just say to directors out there that you have to use yourself and your common sense in the end. And every director is going to be very different, as every actor is going to be different, as every human being is very different. I really think it's a good idea not to think anything's wrong. I understand if it's a film with a lot of money riding on every minute, then it's very, very difficult. It's very difficult not to be frightened. And even if you're doing the most wonderful work, you still are going to have specific things that you have to hit. I mean, I'd advise you very much not to make a big change on stage without having tried it beforehand. Everything that you do on stage will be slightly different every night. It's like looking at the wings of an aeroplane: they have to move otherwise the plane is going fall out of the sky. So it has to be different every night. You don't have to make it different, it's going to be different whether you like it or not. So you have to observe that. I'd very much recommend against thinking I've had this idea. I'm going to try this tonight. I think it's much better if you allow changes to happen organically. It's very difficult to explain what I mean by that, but to come in with an idea is often rather artificial. An certainly if you are going to try out some new idea, you ought to do it beforehand. However, it is going to change slightly every night. And that's fine. And that's part of my job, I just see the play regularly and just very often encourage them in the different changes that they're making.

Lucie 15:13
And it's interesting what you said. You know, you said, the first thing is, try not to feel like things are wrong. Try not to feel terrified of getting things wrong. And actually, that's not just up to the actor, that is also up to an entire working environment where you set up things never being wrong, just some things being more alive than others. And that's actually also about how an entire creative ecosystem is managed. So, you know, there's what the actor can attend to on their part of that collaboration. But actually, it's about everybody helping the actors to do their best work. So how would you, when you step into a rehearsal room help actors, therefore get out of the way of themselves- to reduce some of those fears and those worries so that they are in a place where they can really play?

Declan 16:02
Well, I'd set up exercises, I'd set up things for people to do, so that the actor feels that I'm looking at the exercises rather than at the actor of themselves. I mean the awful thing is for the actor to feel always under scrutiny. That's a really awful thing. Like me, as a director, feeling I'm under scrutiny all the time. We have to be doing something together and trying to make the thing that we're doing together better, rather than evaluating each other. That's really, really important.

Lucie 16:26
I've also noticed in Cheek by Jowl rehearsal rooms, we often just get quite silly, very early. Like everybody walks into the room feels quite nervous, and within five minutes, everyone's playing a children's party game. And actually, that's quite a good way of everyone feeling like they're in the same boat, right. And that actually, it's quite an open and free and creatively relaxed environment, I guess.

Declan 16:48
I really think a lot of the problems at the beginning of rehearsal can be solved if you encourage the actors to breathe and move as soon as possible. And to do anything other than sit on their arses on chairs around a table fretting over the script. I think that's absolutely terrible, to me. The most important thing is you start moving, you start with some sort of exercise, anything. You might start with games, whatever, but keep everybody moving and breathing. The body has to come first, and breathing and movement has to come before the words

Lucie 17:13
Fantastic. So it seems to be returning to some of our old and favourite bits of advice, which is trust your body, try not to be afraid, and get out of the way of yourself.

Declan 17:23
But the really serious answer is do not try to find the quality of spontaneity inside yourself, because it doesn't exist. It's not an inner ownable function that you have. It's entirely with how you relate to things that are outside you. That's all I've ever got to say.

Lucie 17:40
And it's not easy. It's a lifetime's worl

Declan 17:42

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No, it's not easy, because we have so many things built into us to stop us doing just that. But those things are the enemy. The horrible thing is to think 'what can I do to bring this about? Could you sell me a technique? I'll pay any amount of money to you is you will sell me a technique as to how to be present!' Well, actually, we can't really do that you are present. You know, you need to find ways of uncovering the actual quality of presence that you're desperately trying to deny.

Lucie 18:07
But also, I think that's what makes this entire business so joyful to do as a career because you're constantly grappling with this massive human mystery of why do we shut ourselves off like this? How can we be more alive? How can we put ourselves into this unstable process and discover anew each time? And actually, that's a wonderful thing to never solve, because it means we're going to have work for a lifetime as theatremakers. Yeah. And we have to integrate that there's no progress. And we're just going to have to keep on starting work tomorrow. Thank you very much. And I'll be joining you next week to answer more questions from listeners.

Declan 18:43
Lucie, thank you very, very much. Thank you for listening. If you'd like to hear more gems about theatre from Declan and Nick, you'll find many more seasons of the podcast on the Cheek by Jowl website or wherever you get your podcasts. And thank you to Sergey Chekryzhov who composed this music for Cheek by Jowl's production of Three Sisters. Tune in next week for more.

Edit- Etudes - 08:09:2022, 18

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SPEAKERS
Lucie, Declan

Lucie 00:07
Welcome to Not True But Useful a podcast from Cheek by Jowl. My name is Lucie Dawkins, andnd in these episodes, I've been chatting to the company's artistic directors Declan Donnellan and Nick Ormerod about their work in the theatre. And in this series, we've been pondering questions that you've put to us about the art of making a play. Hello, Declan. How you doing today?

Declan 00:34
Very well, Lucie.

Lucie 00:35
So today we're going to turn to another question from a listener. And this is a really great question for specifically this week, because you've just come back from what you call 'going

to the woods', which is where you disappear off with a company into the middle of nowhere, where there's very little WiFi reception. And you basically research the show in three dimensions for a week before you start rehearsals. And you're working on Life as a Dream in Madrid at the moment. How was the woods? How did it go?

Declan 01:05
Well, it went incredibly well, because I didn't know any of the actors, and we were all strangers. And it worked incredibly well. I mean, it's very moving to see what happens when you put the actors into nature, with a lot of silence. And they had a ball of a time. And they show us the etudes that they did. And it was it was really fantastic.

Lucie 01:26
Well, you've just mentioned a word that is the word that we're going to talk about today, which is an etude. It's something that's come up a few times before in our past podcasts. But an etude is essentially a sort of theatrical experiment, right. It's where you create a kind of structured improvisation for a scene to sort of work out about a human dynamic that's at play somewhere in the middle of the play. Something that is important about the way that that social structure works, or that those relationships work, or that a particular environment in the play works. And you sort of give something to the actors, you give them a prompt, and they go away, they make something for you. You come back and see it, and then you use it to help you inform your thinking about the play.

Declan 02:09
Yeah, that's exactly what we do.

Lucie 02:11
Great. And so our question today is about etudes - like how do you set up an attitude with a group of actors? And this question comes from John Pashley, who says, 'how does Declan decide which attributes he asks the actors to prepare when you go into the woods.' He says, 'I've loved the examples he's given about work that companies have produced, and I'd be interested to hear the kind of prompts and questions and provocations they were responding to.' So how do you fire up the actors to do an etude?

Declan 02:43
Well, for example, we're doing Oedipus, as you know, in Romania, and I asked them to do an etude about what happened the night when Jocasta gives a little baby Oedipus away because she has a child exposed on a hillside in order to defeat the prophecy that they've heard. A wonderful actress Ramona Dragulescu, who plays Jocasta, and drew this little bundle in her arms. And it was unexpectedly upsetting, because it made me realise that Oedipus isn't the only person with a guilty secret from the play. Jocasta has a huge guilty secret which is she gave up her child to be put to death, in probably, I think, the most cruel way imaginable. They don't want the child to live, she's been persuaded or what have you, but the husband, or forced by the husband to give up the baby. But still the trauma of giving up the baby, I don't think you'd ever recover from it. Or if you did recover from it, you can only recover from it by going mad, in a way, because you'd have to cut something off so basic and yourself. She can't ever be fully available because she's got this terrible guilty secret.

Lucie 03:48

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So one of the things you clearly do is identify to the actors a hunch about a moment. Like this crucial moment where Jocasta goes from holding a baby to not holding a baby.

Declan 03:59
Exactly.

Lucie 04:01
So sounds like one of the things you do is you get everybody together and you talk quite evocatively about a moment. Crucially, I think what people might not understand when you talk about etudes is that you don't direct them. You give them a series of prompts, and then your Nick go away. And then you come back, and you see what they've made. Sometimes they'll take hours making something to show you. Sometime they will go off and find props and bits of costume, and sometimes they'll put you in a different location. Sometimes they'll tell you to go away again and come back. But what is that thing that you give them? What are the ingredients that prompt a good etude?

Declan 04:38
Well, it knows it's reading the play and understanding there are things that I don't really understand or feel about it or a hunch that's going to prove very powerful and important in a way that I don't understand. It's crucial that I don't direct the tetudes because they'll point to them is that they're to surprise me. And also it's valuable moment when I can't talk anymore. You know, as people who've weathered one of these podcasts, can you imagine, I can quite easily. And it's quite good if they just have silence from me for a bit, and they're thrown on their own devices. But they will be kind of crisis moments in the play that very often aren't in the script, or that are alluded to in the script, must have happened in order for the script to take place, and which needs some investigation. So very often, it will be something that the writer has hidden from us, or that we don't see. But something that's crucial for the plot.

Lucie 05:26
So recently, you just went into the woods with a group of actors who don't know you, many of whom haven't worked with each other, none of whom had ever done the kind of etude that you do, right? So what is it that you actually do to set them up for this? How do you introduce them to this idea?

Declan 05:41
Well, the first thing is you have to establish flow. And you've got to understand at the beginning of rehearsal, the flow in the room is absolutely terrible. The thing that's horrible in the room is the absence of flow, which means that people are very anxious, and communications with each other are quite staccato. And there's lots of tense laughter. Well, first of all, Nick starts with games, we do some games, very simple games. Bit by bit, the actors get used to each other, and they laugh a lot during the games and so on, because they are children's games, it kind of gives them permission to laugh a bit, and to move around, and to fool around a bit. And then we move on to more sophisticated movement exercises. And then at the same time as this sort of free fall thing, I'll be getting them to do exercises on the basic structure of syllables, and the sounds that have to be made in the play, and to just deconstruct the words and get us away from meaning. In the name of God get us away, as far away from meaning as you possibly can to begin with, because that'll come in later. And if we go on into 'what what does it mean, what does it mean?' toosoon, we're screwed, basically, because it just completely blocks the mind. So you have to come from somewhere else. You know, I've had a lot of lessons to learn. But I remember trying to

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do some etudes, and I did it too soon. And the actor said, 'well, what happens if we disagree?' I realise it's actually quite reasonable to be very anxious about disagreeing, and is my job really, to create an atmosphere within which they feel they can do that and be happy doing that, and becoming free in the room, in the space. And then when the time's ready, you ask them to, and they'll just prepare things for you. And you cross your fingers and hope they don't say, 'well what happens is we disagree with each other?' So I think I've got the timing about right, because you don't want to waste too much time either. But normally actually works very, very well. It has done for the last 25 years for me, like that.

Lucie 07:28
And there's always I think quite a strong element in Cheek by Jowl companies of many ways of the company becoming a community quite early on - sharing food, sharing a drink together. I mean, I remember sitting down under a tree around an open fire and eating pizza was a really pivotal moment in looking at Macbeth last summer, for example. Like it's a moment where everything loosens up. And the work the next day is is different. And so part of also getting away together, I imagine, is getting this flow getting - like you've got the company living, breathing, eating, chatting, in a kind of magical place away from the rest of the world.

Declan 08:07
Yes, it is worthwhile analysing what it means by 'away from the rest of the world'. I mean, one of the things to get people away from the city, and the city with all of its structures and fame and success, the city can convince us that we're bigger than we are. And the great thing about going to the country or to a remote place, is that in a funny way, nature doesn't give a damn about us. And that's very reassuring, you know. You sort of shrink in the face of nature. And it restores proportion fantastically. I think it was Emerson who said, you know, we like to be in nature, because it has no opinion concerning us. I think that's very important. And when you feel small like that, you feel held and you feel oh, it's gonna be okay. But when you're, you know, you're coming off from a phone conversation with your agent or whatever, or you you're on the metro or whatever it is, it means you have to get to rehearsal, you can arrive very, very stressed. And it's not very good start rehearsals like that. This just gives us a breather to start. It's amazing what happens sometimes by the by taking something away. And I hope I've managed to make that point in many different ways - that it's the removal of something very often that gives the power not the addition of another thing. Just take away the city, the city doesn't do you any good there. And it's incredible how much you work and how fast you work and how deep you work under those conditions.

Lucie 09:30
So I mean, part of the long answer to John is part of doing etudes in a really exciting way is getting the right ecosystem for etudes to happen in. You can't jump in on day one and expect people to make stuff together if you haven't got flow going between them. You need to sort of get the gears going. You need to get everybody working as a team before you can get there. But then it also sounds like you're quite light touch with your actual instructions about etudes. Here's a moment that you want to explore and you want them to to just show it to you, is that right?

Declan 10:02
That's right. Yes, I mean, the thing, flow comes first, and it has to be respected. So I have to very much respect flow. And I have to suggest things, as you say, with a light touch, and not indicate too much kind of what I want. But I might talk through a piece of the story. So for

example, in Life is a Dream, the central character Sigismundo is imprisoned in a tower. And we just slowly discovered why he's been imprisoned in the tower. And he's discovered by Rosaura, who's part of a very very complicated plot, and she ends up in Poland, coming across this tower. Sigismundo is in that tower with his prisoner Clotaldo. And I wanted them to do an etude for me of what it's like to be a prisoner. And many things emerged from that were very surprising. One of the things is how attached, of course, you become to your prisoner, and you're screaming to be free but part of you, of course, doesn't want to be free. And the play is very much about his chains. And you know, he has an ambivalent relationship to those chains, you know. Anyway, that's what we explored. They did some very strong etudes of the daily life of looking after this guy, and making sure that he doesn't get out making sure that nobody sees him. He's keeping this guy's with this terrible secret in this secret tower, and what that experience might be. And they did it really well, and quite searingly.

Lucie 11:27
I think what's so brave about this is also for you, as a director, you seem to be identifying the moments where you don't necessarily have an answer. Or if you think that you do have an answer to what's going on in the moment, keeping it out of the space in which you're talking to the actors. Like letting yourself be in a state of not knowing, of being surprised, of not having to be the kind of director who has got a ready cooked answer to every single question, but is leaving gaps for your own curiosity, and also handing over authorship to the actors as well. And saying, you're going to have the best ideas about this.

Declan 12:05
Yes, or they're going to have different ideas. I mean, the subject of the are things about which I can't know. And normally things that are important in the story, but the author hasn't given us, and hasn't had time to give us. So it'd be like, what is life like in that tower? And I could talk endlessly about what it's like to be a prisoner imagining, you know, from all the books I've read - but you know, it doesn't do any good, you've actually got to do it, to feel it. That's the very important thing.

Lucie 12:33
The other important practical ingredients to putting an etude together seems to be time, you know, not saying you've got to give me something in 20 minutes.

Declan 12:43
Oh no, you go away - and we don't come back until they say come back. One of the reasons why it's great to have 'the woods' is that it severed from the main rehearsal period. And so that time's winged chariot isn't hurrying near them, and they're not in a sort of 'Declan, we open in six weeks time!' and that sort of slow hub of panic, or 'how's this going to be used? And how can we make this clear? And what will this mean?' So it is a sort of island away from that when we can explore things and then put them together. And if it can be severed from the main rehearsal period, that's much, much better, because it means that people are much freer. And when we're free, we can take responsibility. And when that happens, much more extraordinary things can happen.

Lucie 13:25
Let's also think about the flip side of this question, which is about what can get in the way of an etude being really live and exciting and exploratory. One thing we've mentioned before, with, the way that you like to set up etudes, is that having as few words as possible is really

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helpful, so that the actors aren't having to basically improvise a script on the spot, they're just looking at the actual human interaction that's going on. So no words seems to be a helpful piece of guidance. Are there any other things that are helpful structures that stop the actors getting in the way of themselves when they put in an etude together?

Declan 14:03
I think it's important to have as few words as possible, because normally we've got a shedload of words to put on stage. And the last thing we need is more words. And frankly, the last thing we need is more ideas. Because normally these wonderful plays are full of ideas. You don't need another idea to help you do Life is a Dream or Macbeth. You need to see what's there. But what you kind of need is to inhabit, somehow, those experiences. And I'd say to the actors to know that they don't know and just imagine what that might be like. But you know, they do it naturally. That's the incredible thing that we've discovered this time in particular, is that you take the pressure off and it's amazing what's there that the pressure just conceal. You didn't really do very much at all. But what I have to do is not control. If I've learned anything over my years as a director it's to just control less, or rather to choose more carefully what I don't control. Because to begin with, I wanted to control everything and be very clever. I just think that less and less and I've let my hands relax and try and go for the few things that really do matter.

Lucie 15:04
Absolutely, absolutely. And I really enjoy not being clever with the play sometimes. When you get to sit back and let it astound you, but that does involve letting go of the reins a bit, which is also quite a scary thing to do, letting go of surety.

Declan 15:21
Yes, but that's scary in life as well, you know that we just have to let go of things, because in the end, we're going to lose everything. So we might as well stop practising.

Lucie 15:29
So if we were to sum up an answer for John and his question, in how do you set up an etude, what are the kind of questions and prompts and and provocations? It seems to be, firstly, make sure you've got the right environment to do an etude in - make sure you've got a company in flow, make sure they're ready to work in this way. And let that take time. And let it be the right conditions. And then identify something which bothers you, and get out of the room.

Declan 15:58
And get out of the room! And I think you should let the etude tell you what it's about really. I mean, it's a bit silly saying, 'well, I want to do this etude because I want to discover this and this and this.' Don't think like that, because you don't need to know all that. And it'll get in the way of things and you'll start rushing to meaning too soon. As I've said in earlier podcasts, there are many things that happen off stage that are really important, so it's very good to stage them sometimes so that you investigate them. But this is something else, the etude is something else, it's to do with a moment in history, about something that's crucial for the plot, like, for example, the giving up of the baby, like for example, the imprisonment of Sigismundo - and, you know, it's mentioned in the play kind of intellectually, it sort of goes past. But you need to think 'wait, wait, wait, what, wait, wait, stop there, stop there!' When you read the text, you need to develop a hunch, you need to develop a strong sense of what's not being said, what's not being shown, what can't be shown, what's important that

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maybe we can't show in the play, but we need to somehow live it. Because it's going to have a huge effect on what happens on stage. And we need to inhabit it somehow. And it is the unknown that's the strongest bit. It'ss the bit you don't know that matters more than the bit you do.

Lucie 17:11
Fantastic. Well, thanks to John. And thanks to you, Declan.

Declan 17:14
Thank you, John. I hope that solves something for you, helps you a bit.

Lucie 17:18
And I can't wait to see how this latest venture into the woods does play out on Life is a Dream later this year. And thanks very much for all your advice Declan. Thank you for listening. If you like what you've heard, then head on over to the Cheek by Jowl website or wherever you get your podcasts to find more seasons of gems from Declan and Nick. The music you're hearing now was composed by Sergey Chekryzhov for Cheek by Jowl's production of Three Sisters. Join us next week as we answer more of your questions.

SEPERATE DEMONS

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SPEAKERS
Lucie, Declan

Lucie 00:07
Welcome to Not True But Useful, a podcast from Cheek by Jowl. My name is Lucie Dawkins, and in these episodes, I've been chatting to the company's artistic directors, Declan Donnellan and Nick Ormerod, about their work in the theatre. Hello, Declan. How you doing today?

Declan 00:31
Hello. I'm fine.

Lucie 00:32
Thank you so much for meeting again this week to talk through questions from listeners. And we have a really great question from a listener this week about dread. Now, Dread is a word that listeners to this podcast will hear a lot. And this particular actor is talking about it in reference to an episode that we did about Chekhov's play Three Sisters. And basically, dread is something that you think motivates characters far more often than things that they want or what they desire: that dread is just a really useful ingredient in a play. And before we get on to exactly what this actor's question is about dread, it might be useful to have just a

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quick recap of why it is that you think dread is so useful. Just to catch any up any listeners who might not have heard that episode.

Declan 01:20
Well, good. Well, ultimately, I can't really explain that, of course, is just something that seems to work. And it's a very useful question to ask, and for the actors to ask themselves about the character. Is there something that this character dreads? And that just seems to make the rehearsal go faster and deeper. Dread is slightly different from just what you don't want. What you don't want is something that's in your power, you know, I don't want ice cream, I do want fish and chips. They are things that you can control. Dread is different. Dread is something that's bigger than you - that's why it's so frightening. And I talked earlier about the Macbeths, that they become full of dread, they can't control what's happening, it just becomes bigger than them. Dread is something that kind of looms bigger than you. And you can't always say what it is. A way I have a looking at it (which is not true, but useful) i s that we kind of are born with a capacity for dread. The dread of something is something that invades your dreams, it invades all of you, it surfaces in different places. Yes, we can say dread is irrational. But I don't know, sometimes I'm not quite sure what irrational means actually. It's real. It's part of us. I suspect, it's part of our survival mechanism. Certain times in our lives, it can really spike. And it seems to me to be an enormous feature, and overwhelming feature of many of the great plays. That's, that's all I can say. And many of the great stories, many of the great novels, that there's a sense of dread in them, and people avoiding it.

Lucie 02:52
So dread is really useful, because it's there all the time, we're always got this uncomfortable thing that's happening that's keeping us alive, right? This discomfort is about keeping us attuned to danger. But dread is also a bit complicated, because we don't like to admit that we're scared all the time. We like to think that we're okay. We'd like to try and convince ourselves that we're okay. And so, most of the time, we're both fueled by dread, and convincing ourselves that we're not afraid at all. And so dread is often sitting kind of in the groundwater, unacknowledged a kind of ghost that's haunting the space, but that we don't necessarily want to consciously admit is there. And that makes quite a bit tricky, because a character might not even be aware of their own dread or willing to admit it even to themselves.

Declan 03:44
Well, Lucie, as you know, I'm speaking to you from Madrid, or I'm rehearsing Life as a Dream by Calderon - La vida es sueño - and there's a lot of dread that's absolutely clear on the surface. It's about Basilio, the King of Poland, who receives a prophecy that his son is going to grow up to be a complete monster, and destroy not only that country, but also destroy him. So instead of having the child murdered as happens in Oedipus, Basilio orders, his son Sigismundo to be put in a prison, he's jailed by somebody called Clotaldo, and he is kept there all his life until he's left out. And that's sort of the crisis moment of the play. But clearly he suffers from a dread of his son, part of which is rational because to do with the prophecy, but the way he talks about it you realise it's been built up into something much, much bigger in his mind. There's also another character in it. I was rehearsing with Rebecca this morning, who plays Rosaura, and Rosaura has come to Poland because she's been dishonoured. Her honour has been taken away from her by a Russian nobleman called Astolfo. It appears to be at least he had sex with her saying he was going to marry her. And she comes back to have her honour restored, I suppose by revenge or possibly by marrying him, which is in fact what happens at the end of the play. But there's a driven-ness to her

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act. And that's interesting because although something terrible has been done to Rosaura in a completely factual, if you like, rational way, there are also other things about it, like she was abandoned by her father and her mother when she was very, very young. And there'll be huge traces of this in people, there must be some enormous dread in her of being abandoned by people, of being let down by the person that most loves her. And it gives a sort of edge to the whole plot of Rosaura. And we were working on that this morning. And I was thinking that, you know, that the obvious thing, that the stated, if you like, objective is to get revenge on the guy who's so betrayed her. But you also feel something else going on underneath the surface. There's an incredible sense of hurt and rage. And that's also part of what's coming out. I mean, I think she's not alone, I think many of us dread being abandoned by the people we love. And it's kind of there. And I think it affects a lot of our actions, the dreads that we have. So this all leads on to the question that this actress put to you, which is the problem of - how do you let dread stimulate your character's system? If the character is motivated by dread, but this dread might be something that they're denying or something that they don't hold in the front of their minds, something that haunts them, rather than something they're conscious of - how can an actor go about getting this dread into their bones and into their body when they're going about the process of rehearsing a play? As they're stepping into the characters world, how can they step into this sometimes slightly formless, sometimes inexplicable, sometimes hidden dread? It's quite a challenge. Basically, how do you cook with dread in rehearsal, I suppose is the question. I'm afraid part of my answer is going to be I wouldn't talk about it too much, or rationalise it too much, because otherwise, you'll kind of commoditize it into jargon or technique. It's something to be aware of. And you will get it from reading the play, and let these things occur to you elusively. So for example, Rosaura is very determined to get her honour restored to her. But that must also mean that she suffers hugely from the sense of being shamed. And so does Sigismundo, whom she meets, and these are two people who have been shamed. And we've just been doing some work on that, and have very, very difficult is to do. Which is ironic, because I think shame is something that most people unfortunately understand all too well, and our dread of being humiliated, and our dread of shame goes very, very deep in us. And but very often, that's a very good way into a character. We say one size doesn't fit all. No, that's true. But by and large, there are certain things that do unite us as a species. We don't like being abandoned. We don't like being humiliated, which is a very interesting one to look at. We don't like being shamed. You see, I don't really think an animal can be shamed. Only humans can be shamed. You know, somebody once said, you know, if you put a top hat on a pig, you don't humiliate the pig, you humiliate the guy who normally wears the top hat, that it's only the human that can be shamed.

Lucie 08:13
I think it's also an interesting challenge about how you get to grips with the particular dread of your particular character with a particular bit of script that you have. And one thing that I noticed you talking about a lot, is framing things always in pairs of binaries. You know, if someone spends an awful lot of time telling you they want something, it must be because they're afraid of something else. Or if somebody is pointedly not mentioning something, it's because that thing that isn't being mentioned, is really important and it's hanging over them. And so your approach to finding the dread often involves thinking and imagining quite expansively around a play. Thinking in opposites, thinking about what isn't there, thinking about nothing being one fixed thing, but always just one end of a binary of two things.

Declan 09:01
Yes. I mean, I talked about it extensively before in a podcast about Macbeth. They studiously don't say, 'kill the king' in the scene, which they get together to plan killind the king. It's quite

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a tour de force to get to the scene without that. But you get something interesting in that because there's a dread about what they are going to do. I mean, I think what's moving about that is that you understand their incredible sense of shame about what it is they're going to do. And that's something that you read in by its absence, because they never actually can say the words. There are many times when we can sort out things like that, things that are howling by the absence. I just think that it's quite good, though not to legalise dread too much. And say 'this character dreads this and this character dreads that', because what we do dreads changes, you know. And dread is very much like an onion, like Peer Gynt's onion rings, you know, you take off one layer and underneath, it's another layer, and underneath it's another layer. And we never quite know what the centre is going to be.

Lucie 10:03
And this actually also has, I think, a great addendum to this question, which is - what is the process by which an actor can get this dread into their bones and into their body, without feeling like they have to understand it? How do you actually go about letting that dread feed you in a muscular way when you're rehearsing a part? I mean, you've just just told us that you're working with two actors in rehearsal on this - how do you help them get this into their bodies?

Declan 10:31
I think the actor has to prepare the groundwork, so they're ready to be inspired. Like today, I was talking to them about something like this, about what it's like to have this rather strange dark energy in you that's pushing you forward. But at the end of the day, it's something that their imaginations have to possess and ignite. I'm not sure there's anything that the actor can actually do, apart from think about it, really. Maybe invent some small exercises for themselves, but really just try to let themselves see through that mysterious journey of empathy, to see that somebody's not like you. But that this person is actually really frightened by something, really haunted by something, and to imagine what that might be like, to imagine what that might be like to be in those shoes. So this morning, I was talking to the actor playing Sigismundo, today that he's been brought up by this jailer in this dirty little tower. And he hasn't been allowed to see anybody, he's never met his father. He's just met his jailer, and a couple of guards. And he's discovered by Rosaura. And he must feel many, many, many different things. But one of the things he would feel is he would feel shame of his condition. He'd probably feel guilty that he was part of this, that this terrible thing had happened to him. But somehow partially, it must have been his fault. And indeed that's what he's been told for his whole life. Sigismundo comes out, he realises that Rosaura and Clarin are there looking at him, and he's never seen people before. And these are the first strangers he's ever seen. I was trying to think of the different things that he would feel, and it's written quite cleverly by Calderon that he says, 'you know, I've an impulse to go towards you, and I've got an impulse to hide from you'. That it's very difficult to imagine, first, what would it would be like just not to have seen anybody, not to very much idea of himself apart from the fact that he'd done some terrible thing, that he doesn't know what it is. And no one seems to know, what it is is, it seems to be shrouded in mystery. But it's a reason why he has to be kept from everybody. And he has to be kept in chains. Because there's something terribly evil at the heart of his being. And it's difficult to imagine. On the other hand, sometimes I think the problem is, it's not so difficult to imagine that, you know, he believes himself to be marked, and what that will be like for his first conversation with another human being. We've done a lot of work on that day, and I'm sure we could do a lot more work on it in time to come. But we need to put ourselves in positions where we un-know things, where we subtract things. His relationship towards language can't be that settled. But also, he sees her and he sees her seeing him. And what does she see when she sees him? One of the

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many things he must feel is very ashamed of how terrible he looks. And we've been working on that this morning. And all I can say is it's very difficult to do. Do you know, I don't know that there's a process. The answer to that question is what we were doing this morning, and I'm afraid doesn't acquit me to say that there is no answer to the question - that you just try your best, and see when something ignites. The problem, let's face it, in any play is that, you know, the play tells a story - but the story isn't enough, the story is there merely as a delivery system to share experiences, and that's the thing that we have to supply. And that's not just there in the words on the page. So this morning, we've been trying to work out how to do this extraordinary meeting between this woman with an enormous agenda, and Sigismundo with his bizarre history. And it'll take us a long time to do it. Rebecca and Alfredo who are doing it are absolutely wonderful. And indeed patient. And we've tried one way and another way. But I think that's the only way to do it. There isn't a simple technique in it I have to say. If there is please tell with me, and I'll go back and I'll use it tomorrow.

Lucie 14:18
And in this way, I feel like the things that you have to share for actors and directors, anybody making theatre, are less about a series of techniques, or more about a philosophy, essentially, that you're asking people to pay attention to a particular way of thinking about the world that might be useful for bringing things to life. So you're right, there isn't a process by which you can cook dread up in a scene. But assuming that the dread is there, looking for what shadows are being cast over the scene means that it's going to ignite your imagination. Basically, it's just opening yourself up to seeing if it's going to work for you, I guess.

Declan 14:56
I think that's right. And when it comes, when we get that inspiration, we have to be grateful and pray it comes again tomorrow, that's all. But it is. hard work. And I don't think there's an easy solution. And the words I've invented like dread and so on, they're not perfect words. I think we know dread in ourselves when we suddenly start to dread something, and it gets a kind of magical possession over us. We may not be able to explain it, but by God, we know if it's there.

Lucie 15:23
I think the really hard work in what you're asking actors to do, is that actually to think about the world like this involves taking a look at yourself quite hard. It involves acknowledging that we're often deceiving ourselves about how OK we really are, often involves acknowledging that as a human being, what we often do is sweep things under the rug and let them fester. And that if we're going to be able to see that in a character, we kind of have to admit it about ourselves. And that's the really hard work in approaching this kind of thing. It's about actually getting rid of some of our own assumptions and self deceptions and self deceits in order to really get into the guts of a character.

Declan 16:01
Yes, sometimes during a play, we realise how much has been cleaned away in life, rather disastrously - that we've tidied away so much mess, we've swept so much into the corner, and to actually have this encounter between this extraordinary encounter between Rosaura and Sigismundo that happens at of the beginning of the play, that it's actually difficult for us all to think like God, what would that be like? And that sort of massive act of empathy, really, for people who are fictitious, but it's an exercise to do that.

Lucie 16:30

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Again, when we go back to saying, like, what's the process of doing this? There isn't really a process, there isn't a series of boxes you can tick and go through to help get dread into your body as you prepare a character - but you can assume a bunch of things that will be really useful. And I think one of the things that we keep coming back to that's really useful to assume is that the character is actually very close to the fine line of not being OK, all the time.]

Declan 16:55
Yes, that's true.

Lucie 16:55
Your character is never, never all right. And really sees the looming of being not OK, right next to them all the time. Even, and sometimes, especially, the characters who seem the most secure and the most all right and the most in control - they're feeling like they're holding on by, by a thread.

Declan 17:15
Yes, that's very good. Can I just make a point there about assumptions, you mentioned assumptions. And there's an old saying, you must never make assumptions. But this is nonsense, because if we didn't make assumptions, we wouldn't know to put our feet on the floor in the morning in case the floor wasn't there. Then you have to assume that there'll be a world outside the front door when you walk out. We proceed all the time on assumptions. We have to make good assumptions. So you can't direct a play, or you can't make a piece of art without making certain assumptions of things that we may or may not feel together. They may be very faulty assumptions. But, you know, I think by and large, the majority of people don't like to be humiliated. I think by and large, most people will do a lot to avoid shame. I think by and large, nobody likes to be abandoned. I think by and large, nobody likes to be picked up and dropped. And you can legalistcally say, 'oh, but that's not true for everybody'. No, but you know, it doesn't have to be true for everybody. The universe is probabilistic. Apparently, we only recognise other people on the basis of probability that they look like the person I saw yesterday, so it's probably them. I think the most important thing is to know that dread is important. Dread is a fast way to get there. But it's like the witches in Macbeth, it will not be commanded. Dread is going to take hold of the character. The dread should not take hold of the actor - that when you're acting the character, you don't want to be invaded by the same dread as the character, otherwise, you won't be able to act them. But you need to observe that this person is pursued by these demons. You're not pursued by the dreams, you watch them being pursued by the demons, and then you act as if you're pursued by those demons. That's what you do.

Lucie 18:53
And I think this is also a wonderful piece of advice to help actors preserve their own health within a rehearsal room -you know, like, you don't have to become your character. You don't have to be traumatised by the same things that they're traumatised from. They are different from you. And you can have a distance there and still act them really well.

Declan 19:13
Yes, I'd like to say something more severe than that, if I may, which is that if you are having the same feelings as your character, your performance will not be any good. That there must be a distance between you otherwise you're not going to be able to play it. I think you need to be curious, investigate, explore, make the empathic leap and realise what demons are

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pursuing this character and not confuse them with your own demons. Keep them very, very separate.

Lucie 19:39
Fantastic. Well, that's where we're going to end for today. Thank you very much Declan. And best of luck with the rest of your rehearsals for Life is a Dream.

Declan 19:48
Thank you so much, Lucie.

Lucie 19:56
Thank you for listening. If you'd like to hear more gems about theatre from Declan and Nick, you'll find many more seasons of the podcast on the Cheek by Jowl website or wherever you get your podcasts. And thank you to Sergey Chekryzhov who compose this music for Cheek by Jowl's production of Three Sisters.

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