SEASON 4 TRANSCRIPTS

Bonus 1 – Character Revisited

Lucie Dawkins: Welcome to Not True, but Useful, a podcast from Cheek by Jowl. I'm your host, Lucie Dawkins, and over the course of these series, I've been chatting to artistic directors Declan Donnellan and Nick Ormerod about what they have learned about life and theatre in four decades of making plays all over the world. You're listening to a bonus episode of behind the Scenes Recordings, and today I've joined Declan for a chat. So hello Declan.

Declan Donnellan: Hello, Lucie.

Lucie Dawkins: So we're sat down today to talk about a topic which we actually covered in the first season of this podcast, and that is the subject of character. And I know that your ideas have been changing since we first talked about character on this podcast a year ago, so I'd love to have a chat about it today. But it's also part of what I really love about these conversations is that you're constantly reframing and reshaping and perfecting your ideas as they go along, which is really refreshing.

Declan Donnellan: Well, yes. I mean, I don't know that I've covered character. And also I would never think of myself as perfecting something because that which is perfect is dead. I'd say shifting my position to see it maybe a bit more clearly.

Lucie Dawkins: Well, let's shift our position about the idea of a character. Now, what's the problem, do you think, with character?

Declan Donnellan: Well, there's nothing really the matter with it in itself. It's just it becomes a kind of false friend in a way. It becomes something that makes us feel comfortable, or it becomes a large monument: something that you have to build, something you have to fret about, something you have to get anxious about. Also, more frighteningly, something about which you can do a lot of research. And if you do enough research, then bingo, it'll be alright. You'll pass the exam and you'll get character. But that isn't really how we function as human beings. We have to know something about the background story. That's definitely true, but I just get worried sometimes that character has become a monument, particularly when it's used in expressions like building a character or finding the truth of a character. And it starts to worry me. And I believe it makes some actors quite anxious as well.

Lucie Dawkins: And what I find really exciting about this approach to the idea of a character is that it allows for characters to be deeply unstable and unpredictable. Then a character is not a blueprint of a human being or a set of rules that we follow about how they would behave in certain situations. You're suggesting that characters are much more mutable and shifting than that. They're not like fixed, immutable commodities that we can get.

Declan Donnellan: No, we're not. We're very much not. I think what passes for character is, in fact, our solution to the problem in the world as we see it. And we go on trying to fix the world, mend the world, make things a bit better, sort of make ourselves more comfortable, whatever it is we're trying to do. But that actually is basically what our character is. It is true, however, that when we're young, we get into habits of fixing the world outside us, and these harden and

fossilize into habit. And sometimes these aren't very helpful when we're older, and sometimes they're very, very helpful when we're older. It all depends. So I just think it's very good to see character as being something that's shifting, but something else, and that is Shakespeare's brilliant and maddening foresight because he understood the idea that the human being was an actor very, very early on in his career. And he talks about people acting all the time. And I think that is what we do. We have different parts that we play. It doesn't mean that we're liars, but it does mean that if we say we're one thing, if we get frightened, we should be one thing, we can end up feeling fraudulent, and that's very, very bad. We start to feel ashamed of the fact that we can be many different things. It's not good. And that's one of the reasons why there's something very healthy about theatre, that there's something actually quite healthy about the process of being an actor, of acting. Because in a way, you're kind of forced into understanding that we can be many different things. And I think some people suffer from a lack of permission to be many different things.

Lucie Dawkins: And that seems like a very human thing. Right, right. That we actually contain multitudes and sometimes we don't know ourselves very well. I mean, there's all sorts of occasions where you'll suddenly find yourself thinking, why on earth did I do that? Or surprising yourself in your reaction to something. So the idea that even we have a character that we can understand and grasp is a bit ludicrous.

Declan Donnellan: I think so, yes. I mean, I love that prayer, you know, Dear God, don't put me to the test. You know, may I never be tested, because I don't know what I'd do under extreme circumstances. I could be incredibly brave. I could be incredibly cowardly. I don't know which I would be. And if you do get put to the test, you hope you'll be okay.

Lucie Dawkins: So a character isn't like a fixed sculpture of a thing that we need to make. It's more like the sum total of all the solutions that an individual breathing body has to the space around them. That's what makes up your character?

Declan Donnellan: Yes, I guess so. I mean, I don't think there is a sum total. It's interesting to understand why we have a resistance to this mutability of character and why we don't really want to think we can be many different things. And it raises the ugly head of lying. You know, he's pretending to be one thing, but he is another. Of course, sometimes we lie, and sometimes, of course, people are putting on an act. Sometimes people are fake. Of course they are. But just because we can be many different things to different people doesn't mean we're necessarily lying. It might mean we're lying, but it doesn't necessarily mean that. In fact, the one lie I think is to think I am one thing, and I will remain that one thing. And if I'm not that one thing, it is an absolute disaster.

Lucie Dawkins: But presumably you're not actually saying that there's no such thing as character at all. I mean, I, Declan, am not you and you are not me. And we are clearly different human beings and we have different characters. So it's not to chuck the idea of character out the window wholesale, I'm guessing. It's just that this focus on getting a character can sometimes actually just block life.

Declan Donnellan: It's that if you were acting me or I were acting you, we'll never discover everything. We can't possibly fully research another human being. But I think it's good to go in understanding there's going to be mutability and that we'll never actually get there. Those are

two things that are really important: that it's a path that will never arrive at a destination, and that the path is going to be continually moving. Those two things are great. When you go on the journey to see the world as another person sees it, I'm always slightly worried when people use images about, oh, he has to get inside the skin of that character. I think that's okay as long as you remember that you're only inside the skin because you can see through the eye holes, the world that's outside. You know, the mask is only useful because it's got two holes in it. The mask alters what you. You see the world outside you. Of course, none of us are born as a blank canvas. A lot of us will have genetic predispositions to certain things inside us. But a lot of what passes for character is to do with survival mechanisms that we develop when we're young or our way of dealing with the world. And these become habits. And quite a lot of what we talk about, we often talk about people's character. A lot of what we're talking about is in fact, just the habit. The habit of being me, the habit of being you. But in the heat of the moment, all the actor really can do is see what the character sees and respond to it.

Lucie Dawkins: So it's that a character is really all about their space, then it's about what they see in the space around them and how they react to that. It's actually really practical. The character is made up as a series of reactions to problems, Right?

Declan Donnellan: Yeah. It's a useful rule of thumb for the actor to think that the only thing that the actor can do is to relate to the people that are around him, to the things that are in the actor's head, to the things that are in the audience, to the words that he's about to say or has said. So it's all in the relation that the life of the actor exists. It is not a thing in itself.

Lucie Dawkins: So this reminds me of a previous episode when we were talking about Immanuel Kant, the philosopher, and he says that reality is a bit like walking around wearing green sunglasses. If you've only ever worn green sunglasses, you're going to think the world is green, even if it isn't. So in other words, it's completely subjective, completely relative. And so the best that we can do for a character, it sounds like, as you said, look through the eye holes of their mask. What are their green glasses? How do they see the world? And that's really the only thing about a character that we can get in inverted commas.

Declan Donnellan: Yeah. What I'm saying is, I think goes even further than that. I think it's more than just the fact that we see the world in different ways. It's that all that we are is the position from which we see the world. I don't actually think there's any more to us than our relations. That's all we are. Whether that's true or not doesn't particularly matter. All it needs to do is to be useful for the outage. And I believe it genuinely is that your only existence is based in your relations with the things that are outside you. We are never one stable, immutable, calm thing that you can depend on. We're not that. We're just never going to be that. What we are going to be continues. We are condemned to have a series of relationships, which is fantastic.

Lucie Dawkins: What I love about this is it sounds like a lot of theory, Immanuel Kant and the world being relative, but actually it's pretty simple and very basic, which is that you can just rely on the space to define how the character is going to behave. So long as you turn your cameras out, look at the space of the world, the space of the scene, the space of the play, and how the character sees that space, then the character will be formed out of a series of reactions to that space. That's it?

Declan Donnellan: Yeah, that's it. And we have a lot of resistance to that because we want to feel we can exist separately from the space. We don't want to be so dependent on the space, but we are. We're completely dependent on the space in which we are. I think that is our only existence.

Lucie Dawkins: But it's also incredibly liberating because characters are so profoundly unpredictable. I mean, thinking about Macbeth, for example, he's a character who, at the beginning of the play is described as literally disembowelling somebody without blinking an eye. He unseams someone from the naves to the chaps, you know, on the battlefield. He is utterly bloodthirsty, and that's just part of his day job. But then one day later, because it's a different context and a different relationship, because it's Duncan, the older man that he adores, a much smaller shedding of blood profoundly traumatizes him. He's not a fixed character who's going to react in the same way each time. The way he reacts to the context and the space, the way that changes, makes him profoundly unstable.

Declan Donnellan: Exactly. We know that Macbeth has done terrible things. For example, to the thane of Cawder, who was ripped from the nave to the chops, and he's had his head cut off and stuck on the battlements, you know, so we know he's a scary person, Macbeth, and that he can do all this with his feelings cut off. But what totally astonishes Macbeth is that the sight of Duncan's blood is completely different. He didn't know that. He didn't know that about himself, otherwise he wouldn't really have done it. He suspected it might be the case, but he didn't fully know that until after that he'd experienced it. And it surprised him and his wife that his reaction to that blood is so completely different. There's another Macbeth that he wasn't aware of. He was trying to hide in the wardrobe, hide in the attic to do what he wanted to do. But out it comes, which is the Macbeth that has compassion. And that's the part that drives him crazy.

Lucie Dawkins: And that's such a wonderful point as well, that often characters are completely surprised by themselves. There's that wonderful line in King Lear that he doth know himself but slenderly. But actually, we all know ourselves but slenderly.

Declan Donnellan: No, I know. I think it's a bit of a cheek when Goneril says he hath ever but slenderly known himself. Because we don't really know ourselves. And we are full of surprises. And we know ourselves if we're, you know, if it's an ordinary day and you're ordering a coffee. But actually, as soon as the stakes start to go up, you don't really know yourself. And we are doing more and more unexpected things, and we react in the most surprising ways to events.

Lucie Dawkins: And so are you essentially saying the character cannot exist independently of the space? The actor can't go away, prepare a character, bring it into rehearsal and sort of launch it into a scene? The character is only forged in relationship to the space.

Declan Donnellan: Yeah, we're completely creatures of the world in which we inhabit. And if we'd lived 50 years ago or 50 years in time, we will be completely different people. So, no, no, I'd always be me, no matter what the context was. No, no, you'd be completely different. We'd be utterly different. We've been formed by totally different pressures.

Lucie Dawkins: And so the space is like a crucible which creates the pressure to form the character.

Declan Donnellan: It is, but the character is not formed once. Character goes on being formed. And reformed. And reformed. But, yeah, no, it's continually changing. Our character. Our character is a solution to the problem. It's no more than a solution.

Lucie Dawkins: But this also feels like potentially quite a challenging thing to introduce into a rehearsal room because it's actually very comforting to hold onto the idea that there's a character which you can get, you know, a thing that you're trying to build and present to the audience. What do you offer to the actor in place of that thing?

Declan Donnellan: To hold onto their relations with their imaginations, with their relations with the audience, their relations with the words, with the sounds that they're making, the sounds they're hearing and with. They're partners, but with the other characters they have to deal with on stage. I mean, there's a whole complex world for each character to sort out, full of delicious, terrible problems that need to be fixed and mended and put right. So the space is never neutral. The space always makes for work for the character, and it's never easy. And that's what I'd offer them instead. Because the energy from the outside is liberating. The energy from inside is toxic.

Lucie Dawkins: And I have to say, I've noticed this in rehearsal rooms with you. When you're asking questions of an actor, you'll often ask questions that focus on concrete things in the space around them. So questions that start with things like what, where and who. You know, what can you see? Where are you standing? Where have you come from? Who are you talking to? Which are questions about space and questions about reacting to space. And you don't tend to ask questions that start how or why?

Declan Donnellan: No, I hate why. Because why lifts your feet off the ground. And the idea that you might know why things are happening is really quite strange, you know, I mean, you, you, you. The characters may think they know why they're doing things. The Macbeth might think they know why they murdered Duncan. But I don't think they do know. The more I look at the play, the less I know. Also, how is a very dodgy question for the actor. As in questions like, how would you like me to play this scene? How should I direct this play? Because it's put us into a ridiculously godlike position, like, oh, there are all sorts of ways we could do. We could do this, or you could do it that way, as you've got to keep looking at the thing itself until you have no choice left. I mean, the advertiser's great mantra is we never forget you have a choice. And I think for me, the important thing is to make sure you have no choice when you can't, because if you've got a choice, you've gone wrong. Because on the whole, when the stakes go up, we end up being cornered and thinking, I don't really have a choice. In fact, there's always a choice. I mean, I could always choose not to murder Duncan. But what's weird and wonderful and human is putting on stage the fact that they get conned into the idea that they have no option but to do it and do it now. In fact, do it five minutes ago. It'd be even better.

Lucie Dawkins: It sounds like it's such a slight reframing of the same idea. What do you see that's making you react like this?

Declan Donnellan: Yeah.

Lucie Dawkins: As opposed to, why are you acting like this? Yes, it's essentially about the same thing. But it's the flip side, what's outside that's making you do this, rather than what are you doing from the inside of the character out?

Declan Donnellan: Yes, it sounds small. Actually, it's the most enormous difference in the world, because why means I might have an overview as to why I do things, and I don't really. And people will say, why did you do that? And you'll have to end up saying very often, well, I don't know, I just did it. I've been in very funny rehearsals with people asking, having actual conversations about why does Juliet fall in love with Romeo? And so on. And, I mean, you can have them, but it's not much more than a parlour game. We can. Afterwards, we can analyse it and think, she wants to get out, away from those terrible parents and terrible Paris and get out of that ghastly world and the interfering nurse. Yes, exactly. But if we have a nice why and how chat. If we have the why chat. For example, you know, why do you think she does this? Why do you think he feels this? Why do you think this might. It's fine. But actually, if you look down, you'll see your feet are slightly off the ground. Because we're making godlike judgments about motive, about which we can't really know very much. When we look at other people, when we look at other people's lives, we think they have such a multiplicity of choices, you know, but I don't think that's the interior of a human being, in my experience, of my friends or people I love, you know, that we do the best we can. We don't feel we've got a lot of choices.

Lucie Dawkins: So do you think it's fair to say that it's not that you don't think character doesn't exist, it's just that we shouldn't fetishize it and that it's not much without the space around it.

Declan Donnellan: It's nothing without the space around it. So that's the first thing. It doesn't exist at all without space around it. And it's fine to mention it from time to time if you really want to, but I don't think. I don't think it's to be taken that seriously. It's not as serious a business as the space.

Lucie Dawkins: Fantastic. And I think that's where we're going to end for today. So thank you very much, Declan.

Declan Donnellan: Thank you very much, Lucie, on this great day. Thank you.

Lucie Dawkins: Thank you for listening to this bonus episode of Not True but Useful. The music you're hearing was composed by Sergey Chekryzhov for Cheek by Jowl's production of Three Sisters. Join us next week for another bonus episode to enjoy in the run up to Christmas. Until then, stay well.

Bonus 2 – Body and Meaning

Lucie Dawkins: Welcome to Not True But Useful, a podcast from Cheek by Jowl. I'm your host, Lucie Dawkins, and over the course of these series I've been chatting to artistic directors Declan Donnellan and Nick Ormerod about what they have learned about life and theatre in four decades of making plays all over the world. You're listening to one of our special bonus episodes to celebrate the run up to Christmas. I sat down with Declan to talk about one of his theatrical pet peeves. Hello, Declan.

Declan Donnellan: Hello, Lucie.

Lucie Dawkins: So, Declan, we've been talking a lot this week about the problem with the words. Body language.

Declan Donnellan: Yes.

Lucie Dawkins: Why don't you like that phrase?

Declan Donnellan: I don't like the expression body language because it slightly patronizes the body and slightly elevates the word, the language, as if, oh, isn't the body clever? It can almost speak, you know, it implies that it's a kind of, it's at some sort of lesser level than language. And this is all part of the con of, you know, I guess, the necessary con of civilization, the idea that language comes first and the body comes second. Actually, there'd be no language if there wasn't a body. Language is a development out of the grunts and noises that we make with our mothers when we're born and we communicate with them quite well, I think. And then these get developed into language and then language develops again and then the language and analytic side of the brain starts to take over. Words are an essential part of our operating system, but unfortunately they have the tendency to take over. The thing is that our internal life is much more complicated and much more mysterious than words can ever possibly contain. So this means effectively that when we talk to each other, we're always using a form of Google Translate because words can't possibly fully sum up what's going on inside our heads. This becomes particularly true as the stakes go up when words become a decreasingly useful tool for sharing experience with other people. The more the stakes go up, the more inaccurate that translation is going to be. Words are useful, but we can't depend on them. The danger is that we'll think that the main communication takes place in words and sort of gestures and movement and breathing and so on are kind of add-ons, but really that's the wrong way round. Words are only part of the physical way that we communicate with each other. Body language, we have to remember that language is just a function of the body. Everything is just the function of the body. And it's a very important distinction to make and that the body comes first and the body calls the shots.

Lucie Dawkins: And I find this such an interesting way of thinking about plays because I think, particularly in this country, we really fetishize text in plays. There's a really strong tradition of, like, really loving text, from Shakespeare to new writing. And sometimes that obsession with text can get in the way of actually examining the bodily event in a play.

Declan Donnellan: It can. I mean, let me say, I love words. I've always quite enjoyed using words. I come from a family where we talk too much and, you know, it's important to be articulate. And, you know, I talk far too much and I use a lot of words and I love words and I love poetry. But the idea that the body somehow can get up to the level of language, it has its own kind of, not so quite good way of communicating as language is appalling, really. And it's to do with, it's only a symptom of a huge malaise, which is the demotion of the body. What I think is very useful if you're making theatre, is to put two things in opposition. They don't seem to be in opposition, but to—again, not true, but useful—just think that there are two things that are kind of basically in conflict with each other, and one is meaning and the other one is the body. And we often use meaning to hide from the body. Any insights I should say that I've had into Shakespeare have not come from me or me and Nick. Thinking about the meaning of the words and talking about the meaning. None of the insights that you've heard here have come from that process at all. They've come from the collision of actors on stage. They've come from the collision of the words with the world. They've come from the embodied experience that's incredibly important. It's only by embodying the experience and then meaning can come out.

But meaning follows the body. I'm not saying we should mistrust meaning, but we should keep it in its place. What does it mean? What does it mean? The idea of asking Shakespeare what his plays meant, what do these lines mean? It's quite dangerous because it often overrides the body and the body frightens us. Frankly, everybody's body frightens them because one day it's going to say, time's up. I think what the artist does, a director, for example, or an actor, you have black shapes on white paper. These are kinds of ideas, and our job is to embody them and we can say, yes, we have to know what the words mean first. And you think, yeah, you have to know what the words mean a bit or enough to start. But it's only through experiencing the words through the body that any real meaning is going to come down to you. And, you know, I work a lot on Macbeth, and it means more and more to me, but not because I read the play over and over again. I never read it. I'm terribly misquoting it by now. But I watch it in workshops in different languages and so on, and it's what it does to people's bodies that really interests me.

Lucie Dawkins: And in the last few weeks, it's been an interesting time for Cheek By Jowl, because you've been doing a lot of auditions, and there's something kind of magic that you do in auditions that I've seen you do, which is that when an actor is a bit adrift, you just get them to go and touch the wall and then start speaking again. And it seems so simple, and it completely changes the whole performance. And it seems to be something about reminding the actor's body that it's an interaction with space. It's a bodily event happening in three dimensions with the space around them, not just a text that they have to get a logical meaning across with.

Declan Donnellan: So, yeah, I often ask the actors to touch the wall, and then it seems completely different afterwards. But it's not magic. It's just simply reminding them that they're in a space and that we can so easily forget when we're acting, when we're doing theatre, when we talk, particularly when we start talking about meaning, we cut off from the space very, very easily. There are other things that we do as well to take something away from people, which is the idea that they can be independent of the space, because, of course, nobody can.

Lucie Dawkins: And we love to obsess about the meaning of, for example, Shakespeare's plays, because we're rewarded for doing that in our education system. You know, you're going to have to sit an exam in this country at some point in which you analyse Shakespeare's plays and get points for understanding the meaning. But that seems pretty deathly when we actually get into a rehearsal room.

Declan Donnellan: Yes, well, the body is profoundly transgressive. And one of the reasons, I think, we have exams is that it's a way of controlling and somewhat commodifying and measuring somebody's understanding in something else. And the idea that you go through your life and because you get cleverer, because you absorb more information, then you understand more things. It doesn't really work like that at all. You know, you have to get rid of things. As you go through life, you're continually realising you're hoarding crap in your head. You've got to empty the flat of your head out frequently.

Lucie Dawkins: And I remember we were talking about this divide between the body and the meaning, the distance between the two, when we were thinking about Olivia in Twelfth Night. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

Declan Donnellan: Yeah. So, for example, after she meets Cesario and she says, how now e' en so quickly may one catch the plague? So she says that to the audience, it would be a huge

mistake to think that perfectly describes the interior of her head. Of course it doesn't. She's suffering this enormous collapse, upset turnaround, she's got no words for it. It strikes her, to her astonishment, she's fallen in love. And amazingly, she discovers that falling in love is quite an unpleasant experience because it puts you out of control. And she's been Mrs. Control, as we know, and she's employed Malvolio to be uber Mr. Control. So like everybody else, she's using Google Translate. To us, she can only describe it as like the plague. And it's interesting, it's like the plague because it's the whole body, you know, she's got the full symptoms. I have to say, I was sick the other night. I ate something that disagreed with me. And Australians have great expressions for vomiting. One is, of course, the famous Technicolor yawn. But the one I most love is shouting at God down the big white telephone. It's quite interesting, you know, you're genuflecting, you're kneeling in front of the loo with your head into it, trying to get this terrible thing up, whatever it was. And you see the different layers of everything you ate that day coming up. It was that. It was that. But the body kind of humiliates you. And every muscle in my body, my shoulders, everything, it's just awful. And it's wonderful, actually, to be humiliated by the body in a way. It's like your whole identity gets taken down a notch or two and you get this kind of really quite useful correction of your ideas about yourself, you know, and the body calls the shots. The body's gonna tell you when you're gonna die. The body's gonna tell you there are all sorts of sprites in our bodies that are gonna jump up and get us, and we don't know what they are and when they're going to come. But that night I was just shuddering and thinking about this point that our bodies are quite frightening to us. Cause they have so much control over us. Of course, we have choice about what we do with our bodies, but they are quite frightening things.

Lucie Dawkins: And so the amazing thing about that line with Olivia when she says, how now, even so quick, may one catch the plague? It's not useful for the actress playing that part to think, I need to get the meaning of this line across.

Declan Donnellan: No, salvation by meaning is one of the saddest things. You can see that the actors think all I need to do is really mean the lines and everything will be okay. That's as mad as thinking, it doesn't matter what I do as long as I've got love in my heart. You know, incredibly wrong. I mean, you need enough meaning to get through it, but you have to experience the whole thing. And the interior of what you're experiencing is going to be completely different. So in her moment of upset, she's lonely. That's important. She feels on her own because she needs to speak to us. So she's actually making a desperate gesture of connection towards us and asks us a question. Can you catch the plague so fast? My whole body seems to have changed and she's shouting at God down the white telephone. In another way, her whole body's been taken over by this feeling. On this point, I should say that everything we say effectively is a lie, actually, because you're trying to describe something that's indescribable. So when she says, even so quickly, may one catch the plague, it's her best way of describing the fact that her body is out of control. Her body is calling the shots.

Lucie Dawkins: And so the meaning of the words, such as they are, are just her desperate and kind of inaccurate attempts to try and explain what that bodily experience is.

Declan Donnellan: Meaning, I'm afraid, is a paltry thing because it can't possibly reproduce the effect of experience. Nothing that I say can possibly reproduce experience. But my job as a director is to take these black shapes on white paper and give them a body and embody them with the actors. Because it's only through the body that they live. So, yeah, words aren't alive. Words are like dead hair on the hairdresser's floor. That's what words are. And we have to give

them life, we have to give them a body, we have to give them oxygen and flesh and blood. And that's what we have to do. That's our job. So people sometimes say, it must be so strange working in a foreign language. And I say, well, actually, when I'm working in English, it's also a foreign language. Because it doesn't really correspond to the interior of my head. One of the reasons I think we're attracted to verse and poetry is the fact that I think that verse and poetry are nearer to our inner experience of ourselves than anything else.

Lucie Dawkins: So we live kind of huge lives, which are pretty inexplicable. And verse and poetry, which deals with the boundaries, I suppose, of what we can explain. It's closer to that kind of epic magnitude of how we're experiencing things.

Declan Donnellan: Yes. Inside us. I think we're all at the centre of an epic, with Odysseus on the high seas. We tend to experience our lives as an epic. Even if we're overwhelmed by a sense of our own futility and insignificance, even our insignificance can take on a sort of epic quality. So I think that we keep coming back to verse plays that use poetry. Because I think they come closer to the experience of what it's like to be inside our heads. But, of course, it's not that close. But prose is a long way away, you know, but prose is yet another step away.

Lucie Dawkins: And what I think is so wonderful about looking at plays like this is it makes you realize how much the characters are struggling against the text in many ways. That it's not just about trying to get the meaning of the text across. The text has often not got enough meaning in it for them to explain the thing that's going on. I mean, I think you once said Hamlet only speaks so much because he can't find the right words for it.

Declan Donnellan: Yes. That's why he goes on and on. Because he can't find the right words for it. And at the end with the rest is silence. He's so relieved. And as Beatrice says to Benedict, stop my mouth. Because actually, I'm sick of these words. Because they just don't do what they're supposed to do. Because she's so tired. Tired of being witty. She's so tired of being Mrs. Funny that she'd love the rest of silence. She'd love to be very quiet for the rest of her life, I think.

Lucie Dawkins: And actually, Shakespeare knows that words are torturous. I mean, isn't that what Caliban says to Prospero in the Tempest?

Declan Donnellan: Yes. It's perhaps the angriest thing that Caliban says to Prospero in a play of a lot of insults. He says, you taught me language. And From Caliban's point of view, that's the moment when Prospero took his innocence away from him. It's very important to distinguish between sounds and words. As soon as we're born, we start to make noises, different sorts of noises. We communicate with our mothers through these noises. And they're connected with heartbeats, they're connected with breathing. They're connected with physical affection, physical closeness, but through these noises. And our mothers start to talk to us by making noises as well. They know they can't speak in words. And we naturally communicate like that. We communicate actually really rather well. I think it's arguable that we never get back to that level of dialogue, really. But we need words in order to organize our feelings. There's all sorts of reasons why we have words, but they're also very misleading. When we do plays, we normally start by breaking down the words into syllables and sounds say to them, moving in the space, say to them, maybe touching each other. You touch each other on certain syllables. You play with the sound of the words. You feel the sound of the words, and then you reassemble them. And then it's interesting how much extra meanings the words acquire if you do that. And that

process is faster and deeper than being immersed in dictionaries for hours on end. The actual sound of the words is unbelievably important. And it communicates so much, so vividly and so violently to us. And it's very important that we approach language sensually. But the important thing is to not get obsessed by the meaning, because the meaning can become a defence against living, and meaning can become a defence against the body. And the verse has to be discovered sensually through the body. So, yes, you have some idea of what it means, then you break it down. Then you do it in different situations. You might do it moving in different ways, but you keep trying to get rid of meaning, to just sound the syllables. Then when you put it back together again so that it has meaning, it's amazing the different meanings it takes on having been broken apart. You have to disassemble it.

Lucie Dawkins: And I've seen these exercises in action where you basically divorce the meaning from the sounds of the words and let the sounds exist as muscularly in the space.

Declan Donnellan: You have to strip the words of all their meaning. That's the first thing. You have to strip the words of their meaning. You have to disassemble the sounds. You have to break up, dismantle words into syllables, and you just sound them separately and see what they sound like shouted across the room or whispered in a corner of the room. Or done on the run. And then you put them back together again and see what they mean. And you come up with all sorts of completely different meanings, much richer, much more extraordinarily different meanings that you would have found than if you had sat around a circle with pens and a cup of coffee marking your script and think, what does this really mean? What does this really mean? Open that dictionary, see what that really means. Dig, dig, dig into the deep meaning of this. You can do that. It takes a long time and it doesn't get me very far. I must say, these exercises with sounds work faster and deeper.

Lucie Dawkins: And this is what's so interesting. I think about looking at Cheek by Jowl rehearsal rooms. I mean, so many rehearsal processes traditionally start with what's called table work, where you do sit down around a table with a script with lots of highlighters and post it notes and pencils and pens and talk about the play for, you know, sometimes weeks. Some productions will do that, but that's anathema to the way that you work.

Declan Donnellan: That's complete anathema to the way that makes me feel quite ill thinking of the actors sitting around. I'm sure that works for other companies and other people who produce great theatre like that. I think table work probably works very well for some people. It's just not what we do. Meaning only gets you so far. The body will get you further. Yes, you need to come back to meaning, but it needs to be continually reborn. Every word needs to be continually reborn through the body, otherwise it atrophies. It atrophies, it atrophies. It's just like a sea lion or a human being underwater coming up for air. You come up for air by reconnecting to the body and if you disconnect from the body too long, you'll drown.

Lucie Dawkins: I think it's also such a human way of looking at these plays. I mean, the writer Emma Smith talks about what makes Shakespeare brilliant is what she calls his gappiness. That actually the texts defy being pinned down to mean one thing. They're full of gaps for you to step into with your imagination. And actually what Shakespeare is doing a lot of the time is writing text that is deliberately ambiguous. That's the joy of these plays.

Declan Donnellan: Yes, sometimes he's deliberately ambiguous, but the thing is he doesn't really have any choice because the words are actually. And words mean all sorts of different things depending on the intonation behind them. So it's the actual sound of words that affects us. We're actually affected. We're actually touched by the words that are vibrations in the space. And they affect our bodies. They enter our bodies through our ears.

Lucie Dawkins: And I've seen you do it before. I've seen you say to actors, okay, now you've got to do the whole scene with no words.

Declan Donnellan: No, quite. I like them to do etudes in which they try to play the scenes in silence. And we see what happens to their bodies. And then we'll do bits of words or bits of lines, mostly bits of words to hear what they sound like. But this is very interesting. When you put them together again, it's sort of like it sounds like magic to begin with. How did it get so many different meanings? But it's because of this vanity in the expression body language that we forget that the body calls the shots. And we forget in words that the sound of the words is much more important than the meaning. And we can forget it and forget it and forget it. But that's why people love song, because it understands that.

Lucie Dawkins: And it seems like quite a good discipline as a director sometimes as well, to remind yourself not to hold on to what you call black shapes on white paper as the paramount thing about the play.

Declan Donnellan: Well, there can be a holiness about the text. You know, a halo can rise above and say, it's all in the text. It's all about the text. One thing the text is connected be is sacred. Only the spirit can be sacred. But that's going to do with the meagre thinness of verbal meaning. And that's why Caliban's quite right to be outraged that Prospero has taken his innocence away from him.

Lucie Dawkins: Thank you for listening to this bonus episode of Not True, but Useful. The music you're hearing was composed by Sergeant Chekryzhov for Cheek by Jowl's production of Three Sisters. Stay tuned for more bonus episodes to come. And until then, stay well.

Bonus 3 – The Element of Surprise

Lucie Dawkins: Welcome to Not True, But Useful, a podcast from Cheek by Jowl. I'm your host, Lucie Dawkins, and over the course of these series I've been chatting to artistic directors Declan Donnellan and Nick Ormerod about what they've learned about life and theatre in four decades of making plays all over the world. You're listening to one of our special extra bonus episodes to tide us through the cold winter months. And in this episode, I sat down to talk to Declan about the element of surprise. So I'd love to talk a bit today about a difference that you like to make watching actors on stage. You call it a difference between heightened behaviour and acting. What do you mean by that?

Declan Donnellan: I can describe it, but I can't really explain it. And it's something you have to watch and watch. And then there's a penny drop moment when you think, oh, God, they're not really acting, that's just heightened behaviour. You see it sometimes on stage and you see it more often on film and particularly on television when they're having to film too fast, where

you're looking at the actor and it seems incredibly realistic what they're doing. They seem to be, they look fantastic, they're reacting, everything's nuanced, but they're kind of cut off from the outside world in a funny way. And they're, they're behaving as if. They're behaving as if, which is different from acting. As if. All of theatre is about a big as if. But there's something different between acting because you're in an actual connection, you're in an actual encounter with the outside world and building something to give the impression of something. So you realize that you're actually not watching somebody acting. You're watching a simulacrum of what it is to be a person. And it's a very disturbing moment. And it's more easy to fall into in filming and on television because the actors have to keep themselves going between shots and they have to keep themselves going between all the different takes. And so often they can become, I mean, the old fashioned English expression really was internalized. It's when you know what you're doing. That's quite a good example. You're probably going to be doing heightened behaviour because you've removed surprise from the thing and you've actually removed being surprised by what's happening in the outside world. And then of course, people can sort of act surprised and they can kind of commoditise surprise and say, this is the moment when I'm surprised. But acting is more human and more mysterious than that. It's about being open to a surprise and it's incredibly difficult to rely on it. The thing is to allow yourself to be surprised, which is really hard to give yourself permission for that, even if you know what's going to happen.

Lucie Dawkins: And so in other words, would you say heightened behaviour is about creating a portrait of what looked like realistic human behaviours, heightened dramatically, but in a way that looks very convincing but actually cuts you off from being able to react to the world around you and that. That's the foundation of any kind of drama.

Declan Donnellan: Yeah, you're not really open to the vagaries of the outside world. And then the great conundrum of acting, the great huge mystery of the heart of it is how can. How can you be surprised when you're not surprised? And yeah, that has to struggle with that all the time. But I'm afraid the solution really isn't to. I don't think is to sort out exactly what I'm doing, know exactly what I'm doing, work it out scientifically. It can't be that. There must always be the bit that's the improvisation in the moment. There must always be some moment of cadenza, some moment when you can be genuinely surprised. Different types of different ways of doing this. And of course it's a mystery to me. I mean, I don't know. I can't possibly say to an actor how they might do that, but it is the capacity to actually be surprised as opposed to manufactured industrial surprise. It's very difficult to talk about. It's just really important to kind of watch. And there are many penny drop moments of thinking it looks like it, but it isn't actually it.

Lucie Dawkins: So in other words, is it something like that the actor isn't allowing the character to be in a position of true instability, of coping with the present moment, constantly trying to deal, constantly reacting, constantly bouncing off the ever changing world around them and has instead basically created a fossil of a performance, you know, a thing they cooked up earlier and is now.

Declan Donnellan: Yes. I mean, you know, actors have a hard job, you know, it's extremely difficult. But the real problem that I think no one really wants to hear is that if you fully know what you're doing, you are cut off. That's a problem. But it's very uncomfortable and it's very disagreeable to not know what you're doing. But you have to find a kind of balance and you have to make a space to be connected to the outside world.

Lucie Dawkins: And it's something I've actually heard from Cheek by Jowl actors who've told me that you on tours will come in and give a note before the last night of a performance after a month or even years long tour, a note that might be something as small as walk round the other side of the table this time. And presumably, I'm guessing that's in order to make sure that they are constantly finding their bodies in a state of surprise.

Declan Donnellan: Yes. I mean, I don't think I like to trick the actors. I don't think I ever change things for the sake of changing them, to trick them into being alive. But I don't know, I try to be open and alert and present with the actors on stage and they, oh, God, if they move that way, maybe that could, maybe that might release something. So I don't really get actors to do things because of an effect. You think that might release them into having a more alive reaction to that. And sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't.

Lucie Dawkins: So this is a really lovely way of thinking about notes, I think, because often we think of giving notes in a rehearsal as a way of perfecting a performance, but you seem to think of notes as a way of reopening channels to life and surprise, rather than aiming the actor towards creating an end product that you want to see on stage. Does that sound about right?

Declan Donnellan: Yes, that's true on this point. I once had a somewhat unhappy experience working in a theatre, not in this country. And I phoned up my assistant to say, how did the show go tonight? And he said, how do you mean, how did the show go? I said, well, how did it go? And he said, they are still obeying your instructions, if that's what you mean. I thought, no, no, that really isn't what I meant at all. That really troubled me. But I think all actors understand the question, how did the show go? Making a movie? And I'd say, somewhat, I realize now it's all naively the crew. I said, well, we had a good day, I think, didn't we? And sometimes they'd look back and say blankly, yes, but did you get what you wanted? I'd say, yeah, I think so, yeah. Thanks. And it's just a kind of different world, really, of having a sort of rather closed idea of what you want.

Lucie Dawkins: And this is an interesting point because you've worked in both theatre and as a film director with Bel Ami, and you talked earlier about how this kind of heightened behaviour pattern tends to happen much more in film and TV because actors are having to tide themselves over between shots. But sometimes they're acting to nobody, straight into a camera or in a weirdly cut up environment. How do you help actors when you're filming to help with this unstable position of surprise or rather than pre cook titan behaviour?

Declan Donnellan: Well, all the actors I work with on Bel Ami were really up for playing the scene live and they were always there for each other's close ups and so on. So there was none of that nonsense you hear sometimes of people saying, you know, he doesn't need me there to play the scene with me. And actually I loved the making of that. It was a wonderful thing. How does one help the actors? I don't know. I'm still learning how to do that. What I'm saying is that the heightened behaviour problem isn't just to do with films and tv. It's sort of always there. And it's to do with the reassurance of being realistic and the reassurance of knowing what you're doing and we can't fully know what we're doing. Actors can work however they like. I don't mind in a way what their processes are, that's absolutely fine. But they do have to be able to play with each other and with the audience and they have to be able to play live and in the moment. And that's when I'd step in. What I'd say is that you need to see if you can empty your head enough so that you can be permanently plugged into that world that you describe. But you will find you

wander away from it. Then you need to notice it and then you need to plug yourself in again. The important thing is not to beat yourself up, but to just see if you can put aside certain thoughts that's going to enable you to actually connect to that world of danger outside. It's nearly always to do with a letting go rather than adding something. It's a taking something away that matters. And you know, that sort of masochism that you can see sometimes in people saying I was terrible tonight, I was terrible. Try not to think that and just try and pick yourself up and start again tomorrow and just try not to let those thoughts come in. I'm talking about this because I think it's quite interesting because I do like watching television and I often like watching things and afterwards sometimes I get disappointed because something that looked marvellous after a while you realize, yeah, but it's all precooked. The thing about heightened behaviour is it's dependent on being realistic for its effects. Because you're always comparing. This looks almost like a human being. It's a little bit to change the subjects. Like artificial intelligence that can do everything that we do analytically and logically much better than we can. And then people say, but there are other functions. And people will say, like sort of mercy, forgiveness and so on. People say, no, no, it can do that as well, actually it can ape us when we do things like that, but it can't ever fully take over those functions. In a way, heightened behaviour is slightly like that, that you're reproducing something that looks realistic. So very often I notice heightened behaviour in an actor when normally it looks marvellous and there's a lot of intelligence and there's a lot of thinking about things and there's a lot of complexity. But very often you notice that the character doesn't seem to need anything from outside. And if they don't really need anything, it's kind of quite difficult to get involved with the predicament of somebody that they don't really need anything. When you think in terms of acting, in terms of heightened behaviour, the realism doesn't really matter that much. And being handcuffed, being realistic, I think, is really, really sad. It very much limits what you can do.

Lucie Dawkins: I'm also really struck by what you started with, which is that you can't really define the difference between heightened behaviour and acting. That it's a bit of a grey area and you just suddenly feel it when the penny drops. Which is a great reminder about the fact that all of these creative processes are not paint by numbers. You can't suddenly say, ah, this is the moment that it's become heightened behaviour. But it is about tuning your attention and listening to your gut, I guess in rehearsal rooms.

Declan Donnellan: Yes, it's exactly about that. I mean, one of the saddest things like doing theatre or teaching theatre or what have you is that just because you understand something doesn't mean you can do it. And that's really painful. When somebody so brilliant completely understands it and can't do it. And it's completely maddening the opposite. When somebody's just so naturally talented, they do it and there isn't a thought in their heads and you think, oh, my God, then the danger is partly that somebody might think, well, you know, she hasn't warmed up, she hasn't read the play. You know, that's the way to do it. And you think, no, no, don't ape that.

Lucie Dawkins: And that's also a great reminder that sometimes the most deadening thing that you can do is try and build a strict process around trying to make this thing happen. Right. That if you, again, try and paint by numbers, set up a series of rules that's going to make this work and then talk about it too much in rehearsal, that's also pretty deadening as well.

Declan Donnellan: Yeah. I mean, I always feel a bit sick when people say to me, you know, often emerging theatre directors, what exercises do you think I should use? And it always makes

me feel a bit panicky, thinking, well, you have to invent your own exercises, because people sometimes think the exercise is the magic thing, and actually it isn't. You've really got to know what you're trying to get, you know, so there are things that I do, then they change from time to time. But there are only routes to help the actor really, to open up to the world of surprise that they have to be able to access somehow.

Lucie Dawkins: And what seems to be the thing that you're looking for consistently is something about this realm of surprise, of reaction, of letting the character be unstable, of letting the actor be secure enough in what they're doing to allow the next moment to become unpredictable. And that's quite a challenge to achieve because it involves letting go of all your comfort blankets, essentially. Right. It's a really vulnerable position to put the character in, but actually, it's thrilling to watch.

Declan Donnellan: I hope so. I mean, I'm very grateful to all the actors I've worked with for exactly that. And that's what we live. To me, it always is that the actor has to allow themselves to be minimized by the predicament. They have to let the predicament tower over them and they have to feel small in the face of the predicament. And by predicament, I mean the dangerous problem that the space presents to them, that they have to deal with. If you think of the, you know, old cave paintings, we often see the hunter with a spear facing up to some big, I don't know, mammoth or whatever, some huge beast that they're trying to slay. And that basically is the basis of theatre, really. It's standing up to the predicament, to the danger that's outside. If there's no threat, there's no play, there's no drama. One of the problems in rehearsal and one of the problems trying to do these plays, you're always talking about somebody who's in a very dangerous position, even if it's a love play, a romantic play, a comedy, there needs to be the pain, there needs to be the menace, there needs to be a threat outside, otherwise it's not going to be funny. So why do we find it so hard? Why do we find it so hard? That's sort of interesting. I remember a story I know about an actress who was on a film set and she was having to be dead and was lying down on the floor and her little son ran up and said, mummy, stand up, stand up. And then she said, no, you have to leave me alone, I'm acting. I think that happens inside us, that we've all got the little boy saying, stand up, stand up. That we've all got the bit inside us that's going to protect us. We've got that in our heads, I think, in the very primitive part of our heads, somewhere in the very basic self preserving system, that it doesn't actually want us to be in a dangerous situation. And it does so by reflex and it short circuits the part of the brain that's to do with our will. So we can demonstrate this to ourselves. Because you cannot commit suicide by holding your breath, you can't, because a part of the brain's going to take over, say, no, sorry, I'm not letting you do this dangerous thing. I sometimes think that that operates in the heart of all of us, that we are very, very programmed to avoid danger. That part of our brain is very important, that's why we're here and to avoid danger without really thinking about it. So the fight flight gets activated before we have a reason to think, I must fight, I must flee. And I increasingly think that those of us who, for example, are involved in theatre, but the actors and the directors as well, is that although we are willing to embrace the danger in our wills, that actually we tend to blunt it because it's dangerous and parts of our brain are taking over to protect us. And we're like the mother on the floor shouting at the little boy, saying, go away, I'm acting, go away, I'm only acting. And that primary part of the brain, I don't care, I'm looking after you. There are primitive processes that will swoop in to protect us and override our wills. So the actor wants, in their will to act. Well, I don't know. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth being really frightened that they will be overheard planning Duncan's death with the whole government having dinner next door. And their will wants them to submit to that, you know, frightening situation. But a primitive part

of the brain runs up to me and says, no, no, no, we're going to avoid this danger. And I just continue saying, no, no, no, it's all right. This is a safe space. And I'm doing something dangerous which is not really going to hurt me. And I think a part of our brain just doesn't want that. A powerful but primitive part of our brain just doesn't. I don't care what you want to do. I'm looking after you. And I sometimes think that that's one of the things that makes our job so hard, that you need to turn that off. But that says, I'm not going to be turned off because I'm going to protect you always, forever and ever and ever. The job in rehearsal is that the actor must feel safe so that the character may be in danger. A rehearsal is not to make the actor safe so that the character is safe, too. That's kind of like the end of the world as far as I'm concerned. But there are all sorts of forces trying to keep us safe. Human beings hate being out of control, and we hate being powerless. And there are very few bits of control we have and very, very little power that we have, but we all hate it. And when we go to art, I think we go in a way to touch base with that basic thing that we share, that we are out of control, we are powerless, and we don't.

Lucie Dawkins: Thank you for listening to this bonus episode of Not True, but Useful. The music you're hearing was composed by Sergei Chekryzhov for Cheek by Jowl's production of Three Sisters. Stay tuned in for more bonus episodes to come, and until then, stay well.

Bonus 4 – To Be or Not To Be

Lucie Dawkins: Welcome to Not True, But Useful... a podcast from Cheek by Jowl. I'm your host, Lucie Dawkins, and over the course of these series, I've been chatting to artistic directors Declan Donnellan and Nick Ormerod about what they've learned about life and theatre in four decades of making plays all over the world. In this episode, I sat down to talk to Declan about Hamlet. Hello, Declan.

Declan Donnellan: Hello, Lucie.

Lucie Dawkins: So we've been talking a lot recently about one of the most famous speeches in all of Shakespeare, Hamlet's speech that starts. To be or not to be, that is the question. Tell us more about that speech.

Declan Donnellan: Well, what's interesting is that Shakespeare manages to have Hamlet say the most famous line in all of world theatre. Everybody knows it, you know, people quote it at you in different languages, you know, and so on. But what's interesting to notice is that Shakespeare makes the most fascinating line out of the most boring words in the English language. And first of all, it's a shattering run of Shakespearean monosyllables we should notice. I always think that's really interesting in Shakespeare, but the verb of being, it's very difficult to be present with it for very long because we've got nothing to grasp onto. I have to come out and say that words of being and existentialism to exist, I find the actual word, it's like that. It's laced with an anaesthetic. It puts me to sleep. And anytime anybody talked about existentialism at school, I'd start to fall asleep before the end of the word. I don't know what it is. It's just there's something about the idea of being that's so impalpable, you can't get your hand on it. Now, what happens in the speech is that when you play it, on the whole, the actor has to translate be into live, so that's it. Very often that happens and it works quite well. It's live or not live. Because then when he talks about suicide in the next line, whether it is noble in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, he seems to be debating the pros and cons

of committing suicide. But that actually isn't what he said in the first line. And that Shakespeare could say what he wanted to there, and he could have said to live or not to live, that is the question, and it would be easy peasy. But he doesn't say that. In fact, he comes out with a question about the nature of existence that puzzled philosophers from basically before philosophy began, before Plato, and troubles people over and over again and different people think they've got rid of it. But it comes back and back to the question about existence. What is existence? And I'm very aware that, you know, it's an incredibly boring word, existence. And an actor, a young actor particularly might say, yeah, yeah, yeah, but you know, I've got to deal with the here and now, Declan. You're always talking about the carnal, embodied space and so on. So why so worried about existence? What, what's that to me? Isn't that kind of like a bit, you know, grand, a bit esoteric? But actually the problem is that it's extremely important from us right from the very, very beginning. And I can only explain it by telling some stories, if I may.

Lucie Dawkins: Please do tell us a story, Declan.

Declan Donnellan: Well, I was once sort of somewhat cajoled into doing a talk for a very expensive boys school. And these are the sort of six forms and they're very interested in theatre. And I was about to go into a room of extremely entitled young people, you know, born with gold and silver spoons in their mouths and what have you, and expected to walk straight into a great job. And I was very prejudiced, but I don't know, I got the grace at the moment when I walked into the room to suspend my judgment, which I really should do more often because judging people like that just makes me very stupid. And I was able to see them for the first time, these kids. And the eyes were like the shark eyes of ambition. They're sort of glittering and they had elbows up. But I just sort of looked at them and I realized it was a kind of watershed moment in my life because they were so frightened and all of that shark eyed stuff just came from absolute terror. And I was thinking to myself, terror of what? And I think it's terror of a sort of failure, but it's a kind of terror of not happening. It comes out as a desire for success. And we've all known very ambitious people do anything for success. We mark it down, judge it, don't like it. But I think that behind it is a terrible fear of something much more negative. And that's very, very difficult to explain, but it's really important that we do so because that is what makes these plays happen. It's to avoid this dread. The other story I'd like to tell at the other end of the age group from these young kids who wanted to go into theatre was a friend of mine, was looking after an old woman who had dementia and he was talking to her. And she got very panicky and said to him, are you there? And he said, yes. And she said, am I here? Am I here? And I don't think it's all right to write that off as sort of madness from somebody who's sick. I think it's a really important question at the heart of us all. Because it was, I think, the same question that was behind those boys eyes actually. It's like, am I here? And how am I going to prove that I'm here? And this is not true. But useful. I think it's useful to imagine that perhaps human beings are animals who are born with a doubt that they exist. Perhaps that sounds incredibly pretentious, but you know, if it opens the door for you, use it. Because in a play like Romeo and Juliet in Macbeth, we see people doing completely crazy things that are going to end in their self destruction. And we need to ask why. Bit by bit all sorts of things start to fall into place. Once one uses that as a key that I don't really think I'm here, like that old lady, am I here? I'll do this. If I kill Duncan, then I'll be here if I murder somebody. And even though it's going to result inevitably in our deaths, at least I'll know I existed. I made a decision. I'll know I existed because I did something. I can cause massive damage and then I'll know I was here. I can burn down a building and then I would know I was here to do things. To kind of prove that you're here is incredibly human. And some people have to say they're here by talking very loudly, playing music very loudly, taking a lot of space. We

know all that. It's just that the absolute terror of not existing is really important to do with why we do things. Why do people dementedly do their career? Why do we put so much energy into doing so many extraordinary things? And maybe that's what somebody needs to do to give them some sense of existence that we don't really know why we need to do the things that we do, we just know that we need to do them because they make us feel like we're there, feel like we're there. And when we can't do what we do, what do we do? So I direct plays in order to feel like that. Now I can't direct plays because it's Covid, but I mean, I get these great tsunamis of futility that come over me and I'm sure everybody, I know other people do as well. And think, oh, it's all, you know, nonsense. But I keep it at bay by doing these podcasts, workshops, doing a bit of teaching, writing a book. Yeah, writing a book. And then I watch pretty questionable TV series and I distract myself. It's that feeling of futility that takes over us so very easily, and I think we're prone to it. And I think the danger is that your belief, you know, that man is born free and is everywhere in chains. We're not born free. We are so not born free. We are born with a set of needs and if they're not met, we go crazy. So we're not born neutral, we aren't blank checks, we aren't neutral canvases. We're born with a lot of needs, well, not maybe a lot, but very specific needs and they need to be addressed. I'm almost starting to think that this predisposition to doubt that we exist is somehow genetic. I have no idea. I don't need to know, because the truth doesn't really, in a way, as far as my work is concerned or my teaching is concerned, it doesn't matter as much as whether or not it is useful and somebody else can use it to do something that opens doors for them.

Lucie Dawkins: And it does seem a very useful way of thinking about every character in every play, not just Hamlet.

Declan Donnellan: No. I think, though, that this thing about existence is very, very important in comedies. If we take a classic rom com, and I always talk about Beatrice and Benedict in Much Ado because I know it's a very sort of old Shakespearean rom com, but it's still the basis for a lot. Or we can talk about, you know, Jane Austen. You know, it's sort of early 19th century novel, actually. At the heart of those great plots, the lead characters have to die and be reborn. There's like an old self, an old person, the person I'm clinging to for dear life. My existence depends on being this person who doesn't love, who has to resist love, who can't, who doesn't do this. And normally that old self is humiliated very painfully in such a way that we roar with laughter and they get reborn as somebody who can love. So you actually witness a kind of immolation and rebirth in a comedy. And if it isn't painful, as I will say, it isn't funny, you know, that's the absolute test of it. But that you're still watching with this grappling of existence of people who just cannot fall in love, they who can't make Friends who insist on being shut away on their own. So, for example, we have, you know, we've talked about character, but I think sometimes we cling on to things about our character because at least they prove that I exist. At least I know that I exist.

Lucie Dawkins: And it's such a wonderful way of even looking at the smallest characters. I mean, I know we talk about the mechanicals in Midsummer Night's Dream a lot, but when you think of, I don't know about Peter Quince, who is, you know, a backstreet tailor who has ambitions to become artistic director of the National Theatre of Athens, and, you know, the lengths that he goes to, to put together his band of scrappy actors to make a piece of art. You think this is a man who's terrified that no one could see him?

Declan Donnellan: Yes, I think that's absolutely right. And I think words like narcissism are very dangerous because they lead us into judgmentalism. But actually, we do. We do need to be

seen. And the greatest hurt we can do to each other is not to see each other, is to pretend we don't see each other.

Lucie Dawkins: And overall, I think that makes for a really radical reading of that incredibly famous speech by Hamlet, because so often it's assumed that to be or not to be, that is the question. The next thought logically follows on from it. Whether it is nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. When he starts talking about suicide in the next line, you're actually suggesting there's a jump. He's talking about one thing in the first line, which is existence, and something else completely different in the second line, which is about the much simpler question of suicide. That for him, the question of whether to live or die is easier to think about than the question of do I even exist? Or.

Declan Donnellan: Yes, of course, I think the second line starts the COVID up in that speech. Exactly the same thing happened in the 20th century when phenomenologists said, you know, why should being happen? Why should things be rather than not be. And some English American colleagues answered back, well, there's no answer to that question, so there's no point in asking it. And so they replied again, well, actually, it's because there's no answer to the question that it's the most important question to ask. To say it's puzzling to philosophers is an understatement, but it's an important question to keep asking, you know, why should I be rather than not be? And yes, it does. It sounds airy fairy, it's a terrible thing. As soon as you start talking about it, it becomes so boring. Why should I be? I'd rather not be. Oh, for God's sake, just, you know, where do I stand? Where do you want me to move? You know? But actually, this idea that you doubt that you exist, so you do things, of course, on the whole, we're not really aware, of course. So, for example, for the very ambitious young man, young woman going into the world who have a sort of killer ambition, they will probably see primarily that they want things. They'll think they want things. They're the alpha males and females who have a lot of will, and they're going to get their ideas forward and they're going to achieve. But they also have in their peripheral vision: not like that loser over there. Not like that loser over there. As Gore Vidal said acerbically, it's not just important that I win, it's important that somebody else fails. It's really horrible. But we're thinking about, even though it's horrible, I think it's really important to feed it into the rehearsal room as an idea quite early because it gives the actor some sense of the energy with which that character is pursuing their ends. You see, I think wanting things is not enough. It's the dreading, losing things that tends to get you there faster and deeper. There's not enough energy in wanting. No, I really want this. I really want this. But if you look at it again, you'll see it's actually a dread of losing it. And that's where the energy comes from. So, yeah, somebody who's very ambitious may have lost sense of their dread of failure. I don't know, though. I think not. I think somewhere the ghost is still there that haunts them.

Lucie Dawkins: So, for example, how would you introduce this into a rehearsal room to help energize the process?

Declan Donnellan: I think I'd talk about it and see if it ignites or kindles something in the actor and sort of hope they don't reject it and think that it sounds pretentious or esoteric or overly psychological in some way, you know, too cleverly deep. But I think it's something to face, and I think it's the only way that we can get that spark in the eyes. We can talk about it as a fear of failure. You know, that Macbeth starts by telling us that he's afraid that he will fail to murder Duncan, and that's the word he uses to his wife. But if we fail. But screw your courage to the sticking place, run of monosyllables coming, and we'll not fail. But I think even failure is covering

up for this sense of non existence. Let me explain the way I think we should think of this non existence thing. The way that might help not just you to get annihilated in the present. It's not just that you get annihilated in the future. It's also somehow that your past gets written out.

Lucie Dawkins: So it's not as if this fear is just about not existing in the present. It's as if you will have never existed at all, ever.

Declan Donnellan: Yes, it's exactly that. And it's very difficult to explain that in words. You've done very well. It's not just, I'm afraid I'll be annihilated in the present. It's not just my future is going to be rubbed out, but my whole past is going to be cancelled out as well. In Andromaque by Racine, one character says to another, when they're separating, actually, I never loved you. And that's the final kind of hating cruelty, really, that the past didn't happen either. And it's difficult to explain why that matters so much. But it does matter an awful lot somehow. And we don't even need to know why. We can. It's good to ask why, but I don't think we necessarily need to know that we'll find an answer to that question. But the idea of the past being annihilated is really very important. A lot of imagery about love. It's like, I love you, I will always love you, and somehow I always have loved you. That there's this great need in declarations of love to use intimations of immortality, eternity. I mean, it's the stuff of all sorts of love songs and. Or I always think of that song, you know, Fame, the second line of it from the musical Fame. Fame, I'm gonna live forever. That there's a time defying. It will always be. It is and it always was. But this idea of removing the past. So we actually never had a past between us either. There was nothing. There was never anything between us actually. Nothing ever actually happened.

Lucie Dawkins: So it's like almost just trying to make a notch on the universe. That's what every character is trying to do. Just make themselves exist in the vast, overwhelming terror of time and space. And feeling really scared that you don't matter at all.

Declan Donnellan: Yes. I find a useful way to think about a life is as being like a wave in the sea. That we come from something, we have a difference from it. And Then we go into it again. So we have a period of time when we have a being, an existence, a separateness, and we put a lot of energy into maintaining that distinctness. A huge amount. In fact, most of our energy is in maintaining that distinctness. You'll notice I didn't say before you go back into the ocean because you don't quite go back into the ocean because you've minutely existed. The ocean is going to be minutely different when you go back into it. And whether you're the biggest tsunami or the tiniest ripple, you will go into the same ocean. And one water molecule is very much like another. And so that mighty ocean, however minutely, is going to be changed by the fact that we have existed. I find that useful. I don't say it's true, but I find that a comforting and calming thought, that we sort of face that entropy together, hand in hand, no matter what our contribution's been.

Lucie Dawkins: And the huge fear fuelling every character in every play is the worry that things won't have been minutely different because they were there at all. And they get up to the most ludicrous things just to prove that they are changing the universe.

Declan Donnellan: Well, Lucie, that's what I've found useful. I mean, maybe to some people it sounds absolutely preposterous, but, you know, it's helped me for the last, you know, four decades of work to get through.

Lucie Dawkins: Thank you for listening to this bonus episode of Not True But Useful. The music you're hearing was composed by Sergei Chekryzhov for Cheek by Jowl's production of Three Sisters. Listen in for more bonus episodes to come, and until then, stay well.

Bonus 5 – Shakespeare and Love

Lucie Dawkins: Welcome to Not True, But Useful, a podcast from Cheek by Jowl. I'm your host, Lucie Dawkins, and over the course of these series, I've been chatting to artistic directors Declan Donnellan and Nick Ormerod about what they've learned about life and theatre in four decades of making plays all over the world. In this episode, I sat down to talk to Declan about Shakespeare. Hello, Declan.

Declan Donnellan: Hello, Lucie.

Lucie Dawkins: So today we're going to talk about a pair of Shakespeare plays and the relationship between the two of them. One of them is Romeo and Juliet, and the other one is as You Like It. And I know that you think one feeds into the other. Can you tell us more about that?

Declan Donnellan: Yes. I was thinking about how art exists on the road between, you know, whatever the piece of art is and the person who's viewing it or taking it in. So it's not work of art, it's active art. And the act of art is a living thing. So in a way, Chekhov or Shakespeare can't own Chekhov or Shakespeare plays. It's the passage between them and us that matters, that will always be changing, and not just from production from production, but from night to night, from audience member to audience member. So there are certain things they can't control. If we stop just thinking about Romeo and Juliet, we become so sentimental about Romeo and Juliet that we think of them as being good people caught up in a sea of awfulness, which is this mad row between the Montagues and Capulets. But actually, the people who destroy Romeo and Juliet are in fact Romeo and Juliet. And in the balcony scene, it's very clear to me that the love they have for each other, they have plenty of warm feelings for each other, but they pay no attention to each other at all. You know, she's like the east and Juliet's the sun, and he comes out with all sorts of extraordinary notions, and her bounty is as boundless as the sea. And Shakespeare often uses sea imagery, like with Othello, with Macbeth, with Orsino, when he goes into trying to show somebody who's in the grip of a kind of self obsession, normally about, well, about love very often. And at the end, they pay for that. You know, they pay for the fact that it's very dangerous to have to be in love with somebody, just to keep it at the warm bath feeling and not let it develop through attention into seeing who the other person is. And I think that Romeo and Juliet, at the time, there's some evidence to suggest it became incredibly popular with people quoting it as the greatest love poetry ever written. But I think there's a great irony at the end of it that it's largely because of their self obsession that they're dead. You can't just blame the other people. They've done something that was really ill advised. It's not like love can become toxic if it's not coupled with attention. Love is toxic if it's not coupled with attention. It'll come back to consume you and the person you believe that you're in love with. So we're sent these massive hormonal feelings of being in love to begin a relationship with new babies, for example, with the new thing we get sent for free in this honeymoon period. But the deal is that out of that we develop through attention and we can actually allow ourselves to become closer to the other person rather than always just traveling around with an image of that person in front of you. And that's absolutely a terrible thing. So it's not sometimes toxic. Love without attention is always

toxic. And I think that's what Shakespeare is saying quite clearly in Romeo and Juliet. But of course, you know, we like goodies and baddies and we love judgment. And of course, you know, we can make the Capulets and the gangs all the evil heart of Romeo and Juliet. And Romeo and Juliet are the sort of good people who suffer because of these outside pressures. But I don't think that's what happens in the play at all. Anyway, Shakespeare did very well out of Romeo and Juliet. We know that it was a huge success and people going around quoting it. And it was like a huge commercial hit at the time and still always is, actually, even if it comes to us in terms of West Side Story or what have you. And then I think Shakespeare thinks, and he writes As You Like It. And I think As You Like It is a response to Romeo and Juliet. Because the whole central section of As You Like It, it's like Juliet is teaching Romeo what love is.

Lucie Dawkins: So in the middle of that play, instead of Romeo and Juliet, we've got the pair of lovers, Rosalind and Orlando. And the plot device there is that Rosalind is forced to disguise herself as a boy for her own safety and Orlando doesn't recognize her in disguise. And in this disguise, she ends up teaching him lessons about how to love her. It's an extraordinarily weird, wonderful little plot device.

Declan Donnellan: Well, to begin with, Rosalind is absolutely over the moon that Orlando's in love with her. And she does this by, he's been putting poetry on the trees. And she's so delighted, she doesn't notice how terrible the poetry is. But Celia does. And after a while, she realizes there's a problem, that he's sort of in love with love. Like Orsino, like Romeo and Juliet. And he can't really see her. And he can't see through her disguise. She's probably not in a very good disguise. But he can't actually see who's in front of him. But it's not just the fact that she can't really see who's in front of him. It's the fact that he's in love with himself being in love. And he needs to really pay attention to her. Otherwise it's just going to remain as the warm bath that goes cold. And so she gives him desperate lessons through the play in the guise of this young man who he still fails to realize is her, of what it is to truly be in love. And she gives him lessons on how to really be attentive to the person whom you love. And how to use the gift, that big sort of hormonal whatever, that big, warm, wishy feeling that you're given. How to use that to come closer to another human being. And that's not so easy because everybody loves that feeling. Why wouldn't they? You know? But you've really got to do something with it, otherwise it's going to go sour and have terrible consequences. And that's the kind of really important lesson, much more important than life or death, that she has to do that. And we hope at the end of the play that he has learned. He does seem to suffer some sort of change. He can change his position and see. Yes, the important thing in loving you is I pay attention to you. And the whole comedy, the wonderful, wonderful thing about that play is this series of lessons that she gives him. Sometimes they're very witty. They're about her dealing with something who's impossible. And there's that wonderful quote about how nobody ever died for love. You know, men have died from time to time, worms have eaten them, but none of them for love. That, for me, is absolutely mighty and is a kind of, It sets right what went a bit amiss, I think, in Romeo and Juliet. She's just trying to get him to pay attention to something. She's trying to get him to see the world as it really is and to see a world outside him. And it's an uphill struggle. And the lessons go on and on, and they don't work. And she gets fed up. But she's always bent on getting him to understand the greater part of love is paying attention, and most importantly, paying attention to her. It's the wonderful thing, I think, about looking at this section of As You Like It, that is it gives Rosalind so much to lose in these lessons that she's teaching. I mean, if he doesn't get the lesson, this isn't going to work. No, it's more than that. I think that if she doesn't manage to do this, her whole cosmos will come to an end and in a way, she will never have existed. So the

stakes are really high. He must learn this fucking lesson. And she goes on and on and on to try and get him to see in different ways, she's very funny. She can be skittish, she can do this, she can do that, she can sulk, she can be very intellectual. She can do all sorts of things to just wake this guy up. And he does sort of seem to wake a bit.

Lucie Dawkins: But it's also something that I think you're amazing at doing in everything that you put on stage, is making it very dangerous for everyone on stage, that the breathtaking stakes of what there is to win and lose are the highest they possibly can be. And in a way, that is exactly what makes these scenes heartbreakingly funny.

Declan Donnellan: Well, thank you very much, Lucie. I'm delighted to hear you say that. That's exactly what we try to do. And that's why what I was talking about in the last episode about existence really matters very, very much. Because the alternative isn't just that she's going to lose this nice looking young guy in the forest. It's not that. It's that her whole existence is going to come to an end. Everything absolutely depends on it.

Lucie Dawkins: And that is also the intoxicating thing about love is it makes you feel witnessed. I mean, one of the things we were talking about in the last episode about existence is that there's a fear that every character in every play has, that they need to bring themselves into existence. They need to make themselves matter in the universe all the time. And they are always afraid that if they don't do what they feel compelled to do, then they will never have been. They won't be, they won't even feature as a blip on the universe. But if someone's in love with you, then someone sees you and then you exist. The feeling is intoxicating, but also you have to fight for it.

Declan Donnellan: I think you're absolutely right. I think it's one of the most terrifying things is it often happens between parents and children, actually. Children, you know, having terrible rows with their parents. And what's really happening in the row is the kids are saying, I want you to see me. And the parents are saying, how do you mean you want me to see you? I love you and I just want you to see me. But I love you. But I want you to see you. But I love you. Those rows erupt and they are desperately important. And there's something terrible at stake to be just not seen. Just sod your love. Just see me. And that's what she's saying. Enough already with the love. Just see me.

Lucie Dawkins: Because Romeo and Juliet don't see each other and they end up dead as a result.

Declan Donnellan: Yeah, but also, you know, it doesn't have to be as dramatic as that. I mean, you know, you know, we're lucky if our parents can see us and some can see their kids better than others and vice versa. And to see the people that we love, to sort of see them. And the thing that stops us seeing each other, I guess, is our self obsession or our fear or whatever it is. There's lots of things. But why don't we pay attention? Why is it so hard to pay attention? And I think that to pay attention to something else involves a kind of risking losing something of yourself because you're saying this thing outside me can be different from me. And you're kind of risking quite a lot because you put yourself slightly out of control. If you pay attention to something, you allow something to surprise you, to allow yourself to be surprised. You put yourself out of control to be grateful. That's connected with attention. You. You put yourself out of control because you're saying, I wouldn't have had this if it weren't for you. And you admit of

the fact that you're not complete of yourself. And that's one of the reasons why attention implies that you're not full in yourself. I'm not a total good to go. I'm not a complete human being. I'm paying attention to you because you can surprise me and that will change me. So you make yourself very, very vulnerable, really, when you pay attention. And that's why it's uncomfortable in a way.

Lucie Dawkins: And that goes back to something that I think is a touchstone of nearly everything that you say in every episode, which is. It is most exciting to watch a play when the characters are profoundly out of control.

Declan Donnellan: Yes. When the character's out of control. And the actor's in control, but they're strong enough to let the character be out of control. Yes, that's wonderful. And the most wonderful joy as a director is to work with an actor to enable that to happen. But you're going to be setting up something with an actor that's going to be surprising every night. So you can't, you know, you can't create a machine that's going to work. You're going to have to sort it out in another way.

Lucie Dawkins: So is your proposition that Shakespeare saw that Romeo and Juliet had basically been misunderstood, that the irony, the lesson, if you will, at the end of Romeo and Juliet had been overlooked because the audience prefer to see it as a glossy romance, which it's not. It's about two very self obsessed teenagers who do something completely destructive to each other?

Declan Donnellan: Yes, I think so. I mean, I don't think any artist, you know, so, you know, it's such a pity your play was such a huge hit, you know, sorry you had such a hit because it's so misunderstood. But you know, thank you. I very much like the fact that I've had a hit, thank you very, very much. But I think it would have given him a chance to and time to reconsider what he really wanted to do with his life. And thank God he did. And that's my way of looking at it. I'm not saying it's the truth. It's something that I find useful to think in terms of the play As You Like It. It kind of speaks to Romeo and Juliet.

Lucie Dawkins: And I think that Shakespeare really points it out at the beginning of Romeo and Juliet. I mean, Romeo is absolutely in love with another woman.

Declan Donnellan: Yeah.

Lucie Dawkins: Called Rosalind. Called Rosalind. And he makes it very clear at the beginning of the play that Romeo is blindly and inappropriately in love in a way that is not about this woman at all. And then when he drops that love at a second's notice in order to fall in love with Juliet, why should we think that it's any different? You know, he's already told us how Romeo loves at the beginning of the play. Why should we let him off the hook in this second relationship?

Declan Donnellan: Well, I know and with Mercutio we think, oh, he's very witty, he's very funny, he's very charming. But of course he is a cynic in the Queen Mab speech. It's sort of a cynical speech. But you know, in a way he's kind of right because his friend Romeo is going to die. And actually it is too rash, too sudden, too well advised. They have no idea about the other person. My, my short term advice is if somebody loves you, somebody tells you their bounty is as

boundless as the sea, run like hell because you're in trouble. That's what I'd say. Call me cynical, but I wouldn't go for that.

Lucie Dawkins: So when someone says something like my bounty is as boundless as the sea, like Juliet does, that's the kind of love that is so over glamorized. It's a kind of fictional idealized question.

Declan Donnellan: But the operative word is my, my bounty. And also, you know, I love you more. I love you more than anybody can else love each other. I mean he sends it up with Goneril later, Goneril to King Lear when she says, you know, I love you more than words can wield the matter. We can't say I love you. I will love you unconditionally forever. We'd love to do that. We'd all love to be able to say that. But that isn't how it pans out, it's not how it works. And it changes. And you do have to develop attention. None of us are let off that particular hook. And it's actually quite funny in, in the balcony scene when Juliet asks Romeo to swear and she gives up and she's oh, do not swear because he keeps, keeps on coming out with the same old Romeo stuff.

Lucie Dawkins: Juliet's actually quite perspicacious and sees that Romeo isn't really seeing her. She says, don't swear by the moon.

Declan Donnellan: I swear not by the moon then. Constant moon that night. Yeah, exactly. Yes. It changes so much. Don't swear by something that changes. And you think okay, but of course, like us all and I'm the first to say I'm guilty. It's far easier to see faults in other people than it is in ourselves. And very often when we point the finger, we have to see that three fingers are pointing back at us as well. That what I'm saying about you is actually about me.

Lucie Dawkins: But something that seems to constantly come up through all of these podcasts is that Shakespeare's attitude to love is suspicious. Like he sees the potential for love to be something incredibly dangerous, incredibly destructive, which unless handled with care and respect for the other person can be a real sinkhole. It's a kind of wonderfully frightening view of love that he has.

Declan Donnellan: Yeah, I think for me, I think it's a great view of love because I mean, love is very, very hard. And it is the most dangerous thing because in a way, the heart is a treacherous place. And we can easily fool ourselves about things and we can have enormous feelings for another person. But it doesn't entitle us to say that we'll be there forever. We can say, I'll do my best. I think we can make vows and try to. And do our best to uphold them. I mean, that's a good thing. And you sort of set a benchmark for how you're going to be, but it's going to be different. And you have to understand that people change and that you change. You know, I'm growing old now and I see a lot of things in the world changing. And it frightens me to see a changing world. But I sometimes think it's a defense against seeing. Actually the thing that's changing I'd like to stand to is in fact me, because I'm changing too. And it's discombobulating. And I'd love to be able to make sort of these big things I used to when I was younger. Oh my God, I certainly used to. I'm sure my bounty was boundless, as he often said. But actually, 50 years have passed. And I mean, people saying, are you saying that love is ambivalent? The answer is, yeah, of course it is. It's a feeling. And it's a feeling that should help us to pay attention to somebody else and not destroy them. But you can love somebody and destroy them.

Lucie Dawkins: And what's so interesting about comparing the plays like this is that we sense Shakespeare's sort of taking a lap around the same idea. He's coming back and re excavating this thing about the potential destructiveness of love and how dangerous it can be. And what's delicious about this is it feels like it gives us a little glimpse of Shakespeare. This kind of enigma at the heart of all these plays that we know so little about gives us at least a bit of a glimpse about him as an artist.

Declan Donnellan: Perhaps. I think so, but I think it's probably more to do with the fact realizing how his work is taken by the audience. He will have sat in that auditorium and heard them and felt the audience and see how they hear, how they receive the play. And you have to build that in as an artist. You know, you can't just cut off the person who's going to receive it. You have to have some sense that what I'm offering is going to be part of a relationship and isn't going to come into its full life until somebody waters it with their attention outside. And I think he thought about that. Having seen performances of Romeo and Juliet, he'll have wanted to, I think, seal up the doors. Difficult to explain what I mean, but it's an important point because we very often want to smuggle in a fudge, you know, because we want to have the nice happy ending, a nice judgmental thing. He was bad, he was good. And Shakespeare doesn't kind of want to give us that possible way out really. And I think in As You Like It, he's more hard hitting, he's shrewder, if you like. And he has a better idea of his audience and knows how to really focus the audience's attention, what he really wants them to see, and that is this miracle taking place when Rosalind gives Orlando instructions on paying attention. And it's quite funny because he doesn't see she's there. And that's so terrible.

Lucie Dawkins: So in short, would you say Shakespeare is a very good teacher about love, but maybe not in ways we've been taught to believe.

Declan Donnellan: I think Shakespeare really wants us to grow up and pay attention and that love's great, but actually it's the attention that really matters.

Lucie Dawkins: Thank you for listening to this bonus episode of Not True but Useful. The Music youc're Hearing was composed by Sergei Chekryzhov, a Cheek by Jowl's production of Three Sisters. And if you want to see documentary footage of Cheek by Jowl's production of As You Like It, you can find it on the company's YouTube page. Stay tuned in for more bonus episodes to come. And until then, stay well.

Bonus 6 – Not Seeing

Lucie Dawkins: Welcome to Not True but Useful, a podcast from Cheek by Jowl. I'm your host, Lucie Dawkins, and over the course of these series, I've been chatting to artistic directors Declan Donnellan and Nick Ormerod about what they've learned about life and theatre in four decades of making plays all over the world. In this episode, I sat down to talk to Declan about their next. Hello, Declan.

Declan Donnellan: Hello, Lucie.

Lucie Dawkins: So today we're going to talk about your next production, which is taking place in Romania, and that is Oedipus.

Declan Donnellan: Yeah.

Lucie Dawkins: What is it about Sophocles that really appeals to you?

Declan Donnellan: It's difficult to say. There's something transgressive and something that's very subtle about him, and it again comes back to this business of judgment that I'm always going on about. He does suspend judgment and he doesn't allow us to blame very easily. And people are very often in these extremely intense situations and he sees them quite objectively and he asks us to see that as well. So I think it's a great tonic. Also, the plays are very, very exciting. They're very kind of political. They're very, very interesting about families and about politics and. And they start off, as does Aeschylus, actually, this incredible thing between, you know, my relationship with myself, with my family and with the state, and why Oedipus in particular. The play's always fascinated me. There's an extraordinary thing about Oedipus. Whenever I see it, I've seen it so often in so many different countries, so many different languages, and I don't know why, but I know the plot. We all know the plot very well, but it still always manages to surprise me. It's extraordinary. I don't know how Sophocles pulls that off, and he puts you through the process that I think Oedipus goes through in the play, which is you discover what you already knew. And that's what I find really frightening about Oedipus and really important, is the way that we deny things that we know, cover them up and we kind of know them, and then we discover them. They're a big shock. But then you think: but somehow I kind of always knew that, didn't I? Did I? And that's the most extraordinary thing in Oedipus. Just to do that is a great privilege, to be able to do that.

Lucie Dawkins: So do you think that part of Oedipus knows from the very beginning of the play exactly what he's done, that he knows what the reality is that he is sleeping with his mother and that he's killed his father and that the source of the plague of the city is him. That some part of him recognizes that, and he's just trying to run away from acknowledging it.

Declan Donnellan: Yes, that's exactly what I think. That somewhere, I think they all know. And that's what's so creepy about it. Because if it was a big shock, you know, like in a murder series on tv, you know, oh, he did. Doesn't have that unsettling effect. That's deeply shocking. So there's such a misleading thing, I think, said about Greek tragedy, which is that in Greek tragedy, the dramatic action always takes place off the stage. And on stage we see people reacting to the dramatic action which has taken place offstage. That's complete nonsense. The dramatic action of Oedipus is his slow realization of what he's done. That is what the dramatic action is. It's not the fact that he's sleeping with his mother and has murdered his father. It's him realizing it. It's him bringing it into his conscious mind in front of us and his terrible, desperate, increasingly wild attempts to deny what he already knows. I find that incredibly moving in Oedipus.

Lucie Dawkins: And so Oedipus is also a very good post pandemic play because it starts with the plague.

Declan Donnellan: It's true. If we are post pandemic. Yes, of course it is. And that's why he starts on this thing. He's desperate. He has to find the cure for the plague, and then he's going to discover that in this strange way he is somehow responsible for this disease. Nietzsche brilliantly said that we invented guilt, humans invented guilt in order not to feel out of control. Because if we felt that we brought something like the plague on ourselves, that didn't mean we

were the victims of some random universe, that we somehow had a say in it. And I think there's a lot to be said for that, that we will do anything to give ourselves some sense of control. But it's definitely implicit. There's a magical thing implicit in the play that what Oedipus has done is somehow responsible for the plague, and that his denial of what's happened is causing this huge disease to take over his city, and the city is somehow him.

Lucie Dawkins: And I know you've got a quite interesting hunch. You want to put two characters on stage that don't have any lines in the original Sophocles play.

Declan Donnellan: Yes, I sort of hate talking about it because it's in the future. But at the moment, what I think is that his supposed parents, who are called Polybus and Merope, are alive and well. When we've cast two actors, we're very lucky to have two wonderful actors to play those parts, but they will be mute. The real problem is that one of the reasons we can never get a new idea into our heads is because there's an old one already there that we can't get rid of. And the reason that Oedipus can't, one of the sort of stoppers that keeps his bottle blocked is that he doesn't need new parents, because he's got a perfect good set of parents who are Polybus and Merope, who he's left back in Corinth. And he believes that these are his biological parents, and in fact, they're known as adoptive parents. And his real parents are Laius and Jocasta. So he can't get the new idea into his head because he's so obsessed with his parents, as so many of us are, but he can't get them out of his head. He can't let the new thought in because there's an old one in its place. And it's to do with kind of shifting old certainties. And that's one of the reasons why he's frozen. And he has to give up this idea that these are his parents. And that's why they are, I think, central to his experience of the play, because they're alive and he's run away to save them. And like a lot of terrible things that happen in the world, they're done to protect the ones we love. And so that's something also to be thought about, that just because you're doing something to protect the one you love doesn't mean to say you can't be doing terrible damage as well.

Lucie Dawkins: And what excites me about this idea of bringing them on stage is something you said several times before in these podcasts, which is that an idea doesn't exist on stage unless it's embodied. It has to live in bodies for it to be legible. So bringing them on stage as living, breathing bodies means you can actually create that dynamic potently in the middle of the play.

Declan Donnellan: Yes, that's exactly what I'd like to do. I'd like to make them carnal, living things, because they are in Oedipus's imagination. And it's very important that I put on stage somehow what's happening in each of his imagination. And he's absolutely obsessed with these two parents, and he has heard the prophecy that he's going to murder his father and sleep with his mother. And he imagines it's these two people. And that's a complete fixation for him through the whole play. And so he can't let them die. His identity is bound up with the fact that he mustn't do this terrible thing to his father and he mustn't do this terrible thing to his mother. And he's so wound up in the catastrophe that might befall him if he does these things that he can't actually see the slow catastrophe that he's bringing about in the present moment. So it's like he's so frightened of this catastrophe in the past that he can't live responsibly in the present. And yet some part of him really knows what's happening all the time. Yes, a part that he can't admit to. You know, the one thing that I think I say to directors when I'm teaching them, which I've started to do now, is terribly unpopular. And I say the problem is you probably know already all the information you need, but you possibly need to learn to reorder it in a different way.

There's no kind of new magic thing I'm going to give you, but I can maybe reorder things that'll help you maybe think about things somewhat differently. So, yeah, that's very important for me.

Lucie Dawkins: And I know you've also got another hunch about this play. It's going to be a play that moves.

Declan Donnellan: It's going to be. But I'm going to. It is. Yes. And we haven't worked it out yet. And they can, I notoriously, notoriously change our minds at the last minute. So it could end up being absolutely static. I never. I never know how it's going to work out.

Lucie Dawkins: So without any promises that it's going to move, what was the hunch behind exploring that route for this play?

Declan Donnellan: Oedipus himself is on a journey, and he's on a journey to discover himself, and he doesn't know that he's on a journey to discover himself. So it's good if he can displace and move in the space and the audience moves with him, but maybe we can't do that. We'll do something else. We'll discover something better.

Lucie Dawkins: We've been talking a lot in these podcasts about this idea of thresholds, either literal or metaphorical places in the scene where everything changes. And you talk a lot about how in theatre, crossing a threshold is a very stressful thing to do. Like just getting people on and off stage. Yes, because so much is at play. Whenever anybody enters or exits a space, it completely changes their body. It involves either an escape or being pushed. And there's something really exciting in this idea of following Oedipus around as he crosses into new spaces.

Declan Donnellan: As we cross new spaces.

Lucie Dawkins: Yeah. You have to go through a series of escapes with him as he tries to find a solution to the situation.

Declan Donnellan: Yes. Just pick up that point for directors, particularly, that getting people on stage and off stage is almost as important as the actual scene.

Lucie Dawkins: Isn't it, though?

Declan Donnellan: It's really. I know. Well, you know, Lucie. But, you know, I must say that Nick always solves that for me because he, and we don't ever even talk about it, but it's like where the entrances are and it's sort of always sort of there somehow in this very simple set, like the three boxes in Measure For Measure, that people wouldn't move around. It was incredibly clever, and I hadn't really worked out how useful it was until after I'd started to use it. The implication of where you enter from is really important. When we did Malfi, we had, it was like a chessboard on the floor, but it was skewed to one side so that everybody was standing at an angle. So everybody had to kind of come onto this chessboard not full square to the audience, which gave a kind of sickening feeling to the whole thing that nobody ever stared out full front, or if they did, it was very unusual. But people always met on this diagonal. So just the getting people on and the getting people off is really, really difficult. But it can open the whole scene.

Lucie Dawkins: Absolutely. And there's nothing worse than a dead exit or a dead entrance because there's so much potential there to basically create the starting gun for the next moment.

Declan Donnellan: Exactly. And in a movie you don't have that because people can suddenly start in the scene. But what does matter in the movie is the cut. The cut's the threshold. And it's absolutely crucial. The moment you cut, not too soon, not too late. Where, from what shot do you start with? It's incredibly important. And you can completely destroy or completely make a movie in the cut.

Lucie Dawkins: And what's so interesting about having this conversation now, actually, is that you were thinking of doing Oedipus a whole 18 months ago. Completely different production of Oedipus with a completely different company.

Declan Donnellan: Yes, yes.

Lucie Dawkins: And there were some early hunches for the design there, which couldn't have been more different from this production of Oedipus, really.

Declan Donnellan: I can't remember the design Nick was suggesting.

Lucie Dawkins: Putting them on a white background and doing sharp blackouts between scenes. So you never saw entrances or exits. You just saw something.

Declan Donnellan: I remember that.

Lucie Dawkins: Which is almost the exact opposite of this approach to Oedipus.

Declan Donnellan: Yes. I think I've got to try. I suppose it's a survival mechanism. I sort of wipe previous versions out of my mind. Otherwise I go crazy because I have to commit to the one that we're doing at the moment. But we'll go along with this idea and throw it around with the actors and see what happens and see how well it works.

Lucie Dawkins: But it's another joyous thing about having conversations with you and Nick about the work that you do because you are so playful and free in the way that you will light upon a really powerful idea, explore it inside out, and then chuck it over your shoulder if it's not going to work for what you need in that moment, or if your interests change or if the company gives you something else to work with than you expected. You hold on tightly to things, but you let go so lightly. That must be really difficult to do.

Declan Donnellan: I think in a way it is, but I know, I think nothing gets thrown away. All the different ways you've done it all go into a stew in your imagination. Your imagination is continually being nourished by all of these things. So in a way, I'm afraid, I'm not sure we ever can throw anything away. I think on the whole, we forget nothing.

Lucie Dawkins: And you're right, because in a way, these two opposite ideas are in fact running laps around the same fascination in the play, which is the entrances and exits in Oedipus are breathtakingly crucial. And the two radically different approaches that we're talking about, one

in which the audience follows Oedipus through every entrance and exit, and the other in which you never see the entrance and exit at all. You just see the jump cut between the two. Both of them. You're actually circling the same.

Declan Donnellan: Yes, there's the same kind of sight of anxiety, which is the coming on and the going off.

Lucie Dawkins: But it's something I find really inspiring because it's so deliciously appealing to have a great idea and then hold onto it. It's very. It can feel very comforting as a director, in a way.

Declan Donnellan: Yes. Actually, what I would say, though, is that a great idea is a kind of oxymoron that ideas aren't that much. It's life that's important. And I think there's no such thing as a great idea, that actually they come, they go. Theory's cheap. The important thing is life.

Lucie Dawkins: And there's also a kind of haunting thing in this play that I'd love to talk to you about, which is that once Oedipus discovers the horror of what's really happened, and once he finds the body of his mother and wife, Jocasta, hanging from her own underwear in their bedroom, he doesn't choose to kill himself. He chooses to blind himself. Why do you think that is?

Declan Donnellan: Well, first of all, it's a very discomforting play because Oedipus's truth cost Jocasta her life. So I think it asks us questions. Is it always a good idea to be a truth champion? On the whole, we feel it is because the truth is good and lies are bad. But there is collateral damage. I think the terrible thing about the blinding of Oedipus, it reminds me of a line in As You Like It when Rosalind says to Celia about Orlando, I cannot live out of the sight of Orlando. It's like the image of her in his eyes keeps her alive. That's such an extraordinary image. And that's the terrible thing that happens when somebody that we love dies. Because they don't just die. They take the image they had of us with them into the grave. And so part of us dies with somebody because we'll never see that person smile again. Oedipus, I think he cannot bear the sight of his children seeing him. And he blinds himself so that he can't see their eyes seeing him back. That's why I think he does it. And I think that's incredibly moving because it does remind us how relational we are. But it's like he can't live without the loving look of his. Of his daughters, his mania. And Antigone, he can't deal with that and he blinds himself. So you won't have to see them. You won't have to see that facial expression. And I find that incredibly moving at the end of Oedipus. And we imagine things in people's eyes when they see us. The look, the expression in other people's eyes when they see us, it gives us life and it gives us death as well.

Lucie Dawkins: Thank you for listening to this bonus episode of Not True, but Useful. The Music you're hearing was composed by Sergey Chekryzhov for Cheek by Jowl's production of Three Sisters.