Clive Mendus
in conversation with Maria Shevtsova

'Competitive Co-operation': Playing with Theatre de Complicite

Clive Mendus joined Theatre de Complicite a year after its formation by Simon McBurney in 1983. Born in Cumbria in 1954, he shared classes with McBurney during training at the Ecole Jacques Lecoq in Paris, before returning to Britain to develop his acting career. In this interview with NTQ Co-Editor Maria Shevtsova, held in London in December 2004, Clive Mendus discusses aspects of his work at the Lecoq School, while his account of playing with Complicite – particularly in *The Street of Crocodiles* (1992) and *Measure for Measure* (2003) – sheds light on the improvisation processes which are characteristic of the company, as well as on Mendus's sense of himself as an actor. *Measure for Measure* toured Wroclaw, Madrid, Mumbai, Bangalore, Milan, Grenoble, and Berlin in 2005. Apart from accumulating a range of theatre experiences, Mendus has worked in film and television, including such television series as *EastEnders* and *The Bill*.

Maria Shevtsova *How did you become involved in theatre?*

Clive Mendus Probably when I was four or five. I remember, at school, we did a show and I was given a bamboo pole with a skull-and-crossbones flag attached. I got to wear an eyepatch, and I just thought this was the best thing that ever happened. So, I was dressing up and I kept on doing it, and I haven't really stopped!

But where did the formal dressing-up and training start? I know you went to the University of Dundee.

Yes, I did a degree in English. It was a four-year course and at the end of the third year I had to start thinking about what I wanted to do. The only other thing – apart from plays, which I'd just done all the time at school and university – the only other thing I had really enjoyed was working for a local farmer. I thought, 'Well, you don't want to be a farm-hand all your life,' so I went to the Careers Department and said, 'I'm thinking about becoming an actor.' Their jaws hit the floor and they said, 'You're the first person who has ever said that!' I found about three or four courses, and I auditioned miserably for the Bristol Old Vic. I didn't have any idea. I didn't have a tutor or anything like that. Then, eventually, that same year, I got onto a postgraduate course at the Sherman Theatre at Cardiff University run by John Linstrum. It was a very broad course: you did stage design, lighting design, sound recording, operation, directing, stage management, and movement and voice classes. I turned up for my first ever movement class in my rugby kit, shorts and a striped top! Of course I was laughed at, but I didn't care. It was the beginning for me. Those movement classes were with Molly Kenny, who used to be a Graham-based dancer. They were a revelation. I first saw through her how movement reveals the story of the body and how that connects with emotion.

Where did this movement work take you? What was your next step?

A man called Geoffrey Buckley came to do a two-day workshop. He had trained at Lecoq in the 1960s, and had done a lot of work in America. I was fairly good at mime and, having done loads of theatre, I had a sense of how to be on stage. He came back towards the end of the year and we did a three-week

 © cambridge university press doi: 10.1017/s0266464x06000467

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X06000467 Published online by Cambridge University Press

project. We made an absolutely classic piece of terrible mime called *The Box*. It was the shiny white unitards, white face, red lips, the whole shebang. But I was really good at it, and thought I would like to go to Lecoq. After the course ended, I became a stage manager for a year, working with the Actors Touring Company, and tried to get my Equity card. I was going to leave because I wanted to be an actor, and they said, 'Well, we'll give you some acting, as well,' and I did *Measure for Measure*. That was in 1980. Then I left and went to Lecoq thinking, 'I hope this isn't a mime school. I want to be an actor.' Lecoq was very rude about classic bad mime – you know, everybody picking roses and stuff, all based on Marceau. Though, of course, Marceau himself was an original, and absolutely amazing.

You can see what Lecoq was saying – about the Marceau 'clones', as we'd say today.

Marceau used ballet training and it is much more formal and precise. Lecoq had a much wider view of theatre that begins with the human being's connection to the natural world – our human presence in the world of nature, if you like. The first year of Lecoq training has a very broad outlook, involving a lot of play with masks, particularly the neutral mask.

Working with Lecoq

What was your first impression of the Lecoq School? How did it hit you, coming out of an English training?

Well, I thought I fitted in, no problem at all. It was only after some point in the first term that people started going, 'You're so English.' And I'd go, 'What do you mean?'

And what did they mean?

I think they meant that I was quite emotionally reserved – but also my dry, ironic sense of humour. England is known for producing comics and clowns, and I was always good at that kind of stuff. When I was thirteen I played the King in *The Island of the Winds*. I had to tell off a character and the audience laughed – inappropriately, I felt. Well, I was annoyed by this and looked at them like they should not be laughing and they laughed even more. I have often played the idiot in charge ever since.

How did you work at the School? There was movement and mask work and, clearly, you did a lot of clowning. There must have been a good deal of improvisation.

Yes, lots of it! Every week for two years we worked in groups of five to seven for an hour and a half a day and would present a piece at the end of the week / fortnight / month on a given theme. The non-technique classes were also based on improvisation. The key things that remain for me are the plasticity of the body in space, and the ability of the actor to transform any space and to represent anything. Obviously, as an actor you are principally concerned with recreating other humans, but I can remember I did a short role in *Perfect Strangers* by Stephen Poliakoff. I met him at the casting, and he picked out that I had played Shere Khan in *The Jungle Book* at the Young Vic. I told him it was an interesting time because the whole idea was to try and get down to the direct simplicity of an animal and an animal's need to eat – to kill to eat so as to live, this really governs everything. It was a great contrast to playing a human being, where your interest is in creating ever more complex layers of psychology, depending on what the role requires. It was important to find something visceral and direct for a predator like Shere Khan.

Lecoq used to ask people to be animals. How much animal work did you do with him? Did it develop your sense of your own movement in space?

My memory is always rather weak as to the exact details, but I think we spent something like one month to five weeks going to the zoo and observing the animals. So we started off by trying to find the breath of a lizard, which is incredibly immobile. Just the movement of the breath. And we moved from representing the animal to trying to find its rhythm. I remember trying to gallop on all fours around

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X06000467 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the huge rehearsal hall at the School to replicate the movement of a horse, which is very difficult for us ape-like creatures. We did these animal improvisations every week, and eventually moved from the animal to the human, bringing the animal qualities into the human. A 'bear-like' man is the most obvious example, or you do a man with a reptilian nature. You can create something really fascinating to see by this conjunction of the animal and the human.

Before Complicite

Is this what took you to Complicite? Did you work with other companies before you joined up with Simon McBurney?

I did. Simon started the company and asked me to join him. We were in the same year at Lecoq and worked together a lot of the time. When he started the company, I was married and concerned with money to keep a family. Starting with Complicite and doing it for nothing just didn't seem an option. Plus, we had spent two years in each other's pockets. We left Lecoq in 1982 and did a two-man show in 1983. He started the company at the end of that year. I went off to use my training anywhere I could. I went into Inner City Theatre Company in Hackney, which used to tour around community centres. We did a show about Dr Jelly, a real-life character about whom a music-hall song was written. He was a doctor at the time when doctors charged a shilling, but he was known as the 'threepenny doctor'. He went on record for saying, 'I don't want your money. Go home and buy a steak and a pint of Guinness. Your health is poor, you need to improve your diet.' He sounds like a philanthropist but he made a lot of money. That show played at the Old Red Lion and in old people's homes. We toured another called *Monster Splash*, playing it around London swimming pools.

So the kind of theatre you were doing was really quite physical.

It was, and the music-hall stuff was great. I think John Lennon got it right when he said that life is what happens to you when you are busy making other plans. I just kind of followed my nose and, when the work appeared, I did it. Eventually, I joined the Medieval Players led by Carl Heap and Dick McCaw, who had been with the Actors Touring Company. I thought the group would allow me to synthesize what I had learned at Lecoq with what they were doing – trying to recreate the multi-skilled medieval performer, the jongleur. They were without formal dramatic training, and were fantastic jugglers and stilt-walkers and good comedians; and they were very popular. We went on tour and we'd go into village halls where there would be 120 people, which is a lot for a small place. We had a real following, but then we'd come to London and do The Place, and nobody really liked it much. We toured for three months in 1985 in Australia, playing Chaucer in Middle English. We went back the following year, more or less on a commercial tour, and sold out a 900-seat theatre in Perth for a week with *The Taming of the Shrew*.

What happened to the Medieval Players?

The company struggled with funding all the time. Every two or three years it would get knocked back on its project funding, and, of course, it was carrying all the deficit forward, and, you know, you can't afford to stop when you've got a deficit until you've cleared it. I think eventually Dick was worn down by it all. He became responsible for the deficit. It was a pity because the company was popular and was doing well, but it was never really rated by the arts organizations.

When did you start working with Complicite?

Although I was looking for work as a jobbing actor, I was keen to know what Simon was doing. I remember going in 1984 to Complicite's rehearsals for *A Minute Too Late*, whose subject was death. Because it was a devised show, there were lots of little bits. So, they'd go, 'Well, let's do a scene in the DSS where you have to register the death,' or, 'Let's do some scenes in a church.' There were all these little scenes and they were anxious in the run-through that it might not hang together.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X06000467 Published online by Cambridge University Press

I remember thinking that it didn't hang together, but that there was nothing wrong with that kind of juxtaposition. When it finally emerged it was an incredibly moving piece. It went from comic to tragic.

Early Days

What was your first show?

Complicite toured to Chile in 1984-85 after Pinochet had overthrown the democratically elected socialist, Allende, in a coup d'état. To go there at all would seem to be supporting the fascists. Eventually the company decided to go with the secret intention of playing some street theatre as well as in the working-class suburbs. There were soup kitchens run by the people for the people where they also performed. When it came back, the company did two or three benefits to raise money for the Workers' Educational Groups being set up in Santiago. One was a version of *Alice in Wonderland* at the Albany Empire with twenty-three Alices in striped tights and dresses and Alice bands. There was a real cross-section of theatre makers involved: Neil Bartlett, Emma Thompson, Annie Griffin, Celia Gore-Booth, Rose English, Penny Dimond, and others. Jan Pienkowski designed it.

But I suppose that the first 'big' thing I did with Complicite was *Burning Ambition* in 1987, which was a BBC2 screenplay. We spent eight weeks devising in a rehearsal room and then another four weeks rehearsing what we had devised. It was a difficult project because the company was not really known at all and we had problems finding a film director. The story was a crazy one about two coach drivers doing a guided tour of the M25, which took in Gatwick, Heathrow, and Stansted airports. During it an old lady died. We created some characters and put them in a bus. It ended with the passengers hijacking the bus and putting the drivers on trial for murder.

How did you improvise for the production?

We tried to find a language in rehearsals that we could share, and it was based on the teachings at Lecoq. That is very much part of Simon's process.

Could that language be a movement, or a gesture, or a sound?

Yes, and it could also be about text. We are now twenty years down the road and more experienced as actors; there is a lot to say about texts, Shakespeare in particular. Also rhythm. We always look for what is playful – we play with a situation or an object. We also work on chorus movements to move together as one. Simon has done that with everybody. It doesn't matter how well known they are. Once they are in there, they are in the team and everybody plays together.

Working with Text

Could you elaborate a little on 'text' – taking, say, Measure for Measure *in which you performed in 2004?*

Simon's principal ambition from before we got into the rehearsal room was to have the text flow like a river of words. So the idea was to start with the first word of the play 'Escalus', and the river was to flow right until the last word, which is 'know'. Taking the first and last words of Shakespeare's plays is an interesting game, because you get some good pairings of words which can be succinct descriptions of the whole play. Shakespeare is too clever a man for this to be accidental. I mean 'Escalus knows' . . . that actually sums up the play in one sense, because Escalus is the only one who actually has a grasp of what is truly fair. He's the practical man of the story, the practical dispenser of justice and common sense.

But to return to the question. Simon was very keen that there should not be any scene endings, scene changes, or scene starts. He wanted a continuity so that, as one scene ended, the next one kicked in. He always thought that he could cut *Measure for Measure* and play it through in one sitting. There is a natural place where an interval is usually taken, before Mariana comes on with her sad song. Simon didn't want to do that. He generally does not have an interval anyway because, if you put an interval in, people go out and discuss what they've seen and usually become removed from the experience. There

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X06000467 Published online by Cambridge University Press



Clive Mendus (above, first on left; below, second on left), in rehearsal for the Complicite production of *Measure for Measure*. Photos: Sarah Ainslie.



https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X06000467 Published online by Cambridge University Press

is something about the drive in this play, which happens over about three days, and interrupting it messes up your apprehension of time. It isn't helpful to your experience and understanding.

Then there are some basic rules of verse-speaking, with half-lines signifying a pause or an interruption. I remember we spent an hour or so playing with how you say 'Oh'. My stepson is studying *Macbeth*, and he saw 'Oh' on the page, and to him it was just ludicrous. To a young fourteen-year-old's ear it is just comical. Well, how *do* you say 'Oh'? Try 'Oh', fall to the floor wailing and mashing your teeth out. How do you say it? We spent a lot of time finding where the stress on the feet falls. The stress falls on the tenth, on the last word of the line in the poetry, so you don't drop that. The line aims towards that word. We were looking at the complexities of verse speaking, essentially, and the flow.

How much leeway did Simon give for individual use of flow, given that you all played with the sound? Or, did he, in the end, lead all of you towards something he was really hearing himself?

He never stipulated: 'I want it to be said this way.' Basically, he wants everyone to understand and agree that there are ways of speaking the poetry that will carry its meaning across, and we had a great example in David Troughton, who played the Duke. It was fantastic, in the first two days of rehearsal, just to hear a man who has done loads of Shakespeare speaking the text. He was so intelligible and so clear. He was very accustomed to having these words in his mouth. We did some work with Patsy Rodenburg, who talked about the muscularity of the speech and how you have to get the words into your mouth; how you cannot deliver speech in the modern manner with soft mouth, soft lips, and soft tongue because it won't carry across. There was a lot of focus on text. Then, Paul Rhys, who played Angelo, had some very interesting ways of reading the text, and Simon just let him do it. Sometimes they would have discussions about where the meaning was going, but Paul was always so incredibly intelligent and acute about what he was doing.

'Turns and Twirlies'

Whom did you play?

First Gentleman, Froth, Abhorson, others. Simon knows me very well and trusts me. I've played a string of roles before. Right back in 1984, when I did the Doctor Jelly show, I played a little string of about six or seven characters. It is almost my stock in trade. I say that slightly reluctantly because I would love a director to say, 'Here's a main role. Just do that one role all evening, please,' but, you know, I don't refuse what I am good at. When we did *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (1997), I played about seven roles. When we played *The Visit* (1989), because it has a cast of thirty-five and there were eight actors, I again did five, six, seven roles. You become very adept at switching quickly, physically, vocally, emotionally from one role to another, and drawing a quick sketch; at doing quick characterizations with something simple, and then you're off. The emotional story is carried by the protagonists, however many there are. These other roles are almost like 'fill-ins', but they are very important and they keep the rhythm, which is crucial – and the entertainment, as well.

I loved the lighting designer, Paule Constable, who first introduced me to the phrase 'turns and twirlies'. She came out of rock and roll and went into dance and then into drama. I liked the idea of being a 'turn'. It is a music-hall term, and it is kind of what I do. I'm very at ease doing it.

You said that Simon knew you very well. Does that mean that he already knows what he can draw from you easily?

There was a moment in *Measure for Measure* where I got to sort costumes. We had been trying on clothes. For Abhorson, the hangman, it was a butcher's apron and big rubber gloves. And I thought, well, so far so obvious, that is fine, but, I wonder if there is something more interesting to be found. And then I had a little secret idea. I had the stage management get me a pair of very thick bottle glasses and I thought, 'I'm going to wear a suit as the executioner.' Simon runs

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X06000467 Published online by Cambridge University Press

whole sections all the time, which means we do not stop and rehearse bits. He's always interested in the greater drive, and comes back later to work in more detail. But, he relies on his actors to be able to fit in with that. So, I presented Abhorson in the course of a run-through and the reaction was powerful – Abhorson as Dr Crippen.

The Street of Crocodiles

Let's go back in time, to 1992, and look at The Street of Crocodiles.

The Street of Crocodiles is not a straightforward naturalistic piece. It is very surreal and absurd. Some of the stories in Bruno Schulz's collection are very cartoon-like. Schulz does not write in metaphors – 'as if this happened' – he says, 'This happened.' Take 'The Gale', which came and the rooftops lifted off the houses and all of the pots and pans danced off into the sky. This is a completely Disney cartoon image. We know that Schulz saw early Disney cartoons, which used to tour around the small towns; so he saw Mickey Mouse back in the 1930s in a small town in Poland. Or take his aunt, who, in one of the stories, grew so furious that she became a spider and ran up the shelf and then burst into flames; and all that was left of her was a pile of ashes on the kitchen shelf. Absolutely extraordinary images, and some of them translated well into theatre.

Simon asked the National, when Complicite was performing *The Visit*, if we could do a research project on *The Street of Crocodiles*. We worked in the National's studios for a month. At the end, we had an hour-long piece based on Schulz's stories which we presented to an audience that included Richard Eyre. Eyre commissioned it the following year. Some central parts of what we had done remained in the final project. Simon shaped a beginning and an end and various moments, which we reworked and developed.

The show opens with Schulz himself, doing the job the Nazis gave him, which was to sort good books from bad books – ironic, for a writer! Then, out of the reminiscences prompted by the smell of one particular book that he was looking at, came a crowd of memories in the shape of his family as well as other people. Simon is very good at using all the dimensions of the theatre space. I think this has its roots in Lecoq, where we used to talk about the vertical, the horizontal, and the diagonal – these lines of force and power on a stage which often get lost in more realistic or naturalistic forms of theatre.

Simon had the wonderful idea that Bruno is reading this book downstage front and then, suddenly, a light appears up right at the top of the theatre and a man is walking down the back wall on a completely different plane, as if in a different universe. This sets the tone for the evening, because it happens after the audience has been brought in very gently into a very naturalistic setting, then suddenly the whole thing flips. One six-foot tall actor emerged from a two-foot high bucket and poured water out of it. And all the other characters appeared gradually.

Everybody asked, 'How do you do that? How does the man walk down the wall?' Well, he has a harness and somebody lowers him down by a rope. A man comes through the stage from a trap door. These are old theatrical things, but people looked at them and were amazed. Which is great, because it would be a shame if they understood everything. It would take away or reduce the power of the thing. We worked through lots of improvisations, and we sat around and read the stories.

Playing Surprise – and Boredom

Did you read them together?

We would sit in a circle and read the stories through together and then discuss them. Then Simon would start working on one or two aspects. Usually, we would go away in groups of three to five – sometimes in pairs (there were ten in the cast) – and work out something that Simon had asked us to do. We then presented it, trying to transpose it theatrically so that, say, we were not simply having a dinner, but were a family having a dinner on the theme of boredom or surprises, always in the style of Schulz.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X06000467 Published online by Cambridge University Press

So, you would take a theme like 'surprises' and work through surprises?

Yes, but in a specific situation. I think that is the crucial thing about improvisation. The stricter the parameters you can put around an improvisation, the better the results will be. So you do not improvise in a void like 'Let's do something about love.' I think we finally kept only one thing out of the two and a half hours work that we did on the dinner. This was the moment when everybody had the cutlery and the plates hidden about their clothing. Suddenly a plate would come out and set off the appearance of another plate, and a chain reaction developed until it came down to me, and I produced a bottle – a surprise at the end! If it worked rhythmically, the sequence produced a great laugh from the audience.

The table of boredom was a routine family meal. Two characters were watching, swinging their legs metronomically. Suddenly, they would stop and everybody would be frozen and suspended, literally, with a collective intake of breath at a precise moment. Then it would release and carry on, and everything would happen very slowly. So, although it was a table of boredom, it was not boring! That is always the challenge – how to *present* these things without *being* the thing.

The Telepathy of Ensemble

I remember Anatoly Efros talking about this problem years ago in Moscow. He said that the trick was to play boredom without being boring.

Yes. What we found was that it became incredibly minimalist, but very concentrated. One of the beauties of the show was its dynamic range from a sort of naturalistic opening to flying around the stage with books, like a flock of birds that breaks up and flies all over the place before the actors resume their seats, reading. Going from this incredible compression at the table to huge movements like those with massive cloths at the end, and with very loud music, and actors shouting and screaming. It was a big dynamic range within the same performance.

What did you get most from this experience?

What I most got was twofold. It was the pleasure of working with an incredibly powerful ensemble. I remember, at one point, looking around at the ten of us and thinking that every one of us was more than capable of holding the stage in a one-man or -woman show. The other thing was the way the ensemble functioned. There was an extraordinary moment in rehearsal when Antonio Gil Martinez was at the front of the woodwork class and dropped a piece of wood. The actor playing his father at the back of the class, Matthew Scurfield, suddenly stood up and said, 'Wood is alive.' The father's philosophy in life was that everything undergoes a process of change. A wardrobe was once a tree and will become dust, and we are the same. There is this constant process of evolution from one form to another. When the father says this, the wood jumps back up onto his desk from the floor, which is a lovely little trick. People couldn't see the thin piece of fishing wire attached to it. We'd been rehearsing this several times and were all sitting around at our desks in the classroom, and, of course, we started behaving like children because we were bored. You know, it was not our bit. One time, when Matthew said his line, we all suddenly started throwing our wood and our tools – there may have been a fraction of a second between us, but nobody knows who started it. Suddenly, all the bits of wood and tools became alive. We rushed around gathering them in, and all sat down together.

Like schoolkids!

Yes! Simon was standing there and just took a few steps backwards and said, 'My God,' because something had happened. I don't know – symbiosis? What is the right word? A kind of telepathic communication happening. I had never had that with another group of actors before. I've have some great experiences in rehearsal, but nothing quite as astonishing.

How long had you been working together to get this kind of unity?

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X06000467 Published online by Cambridge University Press



Clive Mendus (third from left) in the Complicite production of *Street of Crocodiles*. Photo: Joan Marcus.

Five or six weeks. Some of us had worked together before, as well.

The Creative Monster

So there were those years before, which gave you a cumulative awareness of each other.

Yes. I remember at the funeral of a close relative of one of the company singing one of the Georgian songs we used in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. A singer who was there came up and said, 'You could hear a thousand shows' worth of experience in that singing.' By working together a lot, you build up an intensity of communication and understanding; and, of course, there are always new actors, young and older, who join the company and bring their own sense of what the power of ensemble might be.

The final image of *The Street of Crocodiles* is where Josef / Schulz is passed in his underwear along the line of the family, almost like the community embracing his memory, and then we all leave together through double doors. It is just an exit, but, of course, it is, in a sense, like people disappearing from history, or going into the gas chambers. All sorts of images sprang into people's minds as they watched it. The show is incredibly scored with music by Martynov, Shostakovich, Schnittke, Janacek, and a bit of rewritten Handel. It moves from comedy to tragedy as Josef / Schulz's recollections of people are taken more and more out of his control and his dream turns into a nightmare.

How did the production stretch you as an actor? You came to it with a good deal of experience behind you, with your gift for comedy, and your plasticity.

Devising an ensemble show tests your generosity. With any devising process, you play on the stage what you had created in rehear-

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X06000467 Published online by Cambridge University Press

sal. I remember one of the actors who joined us for the show asking, 'How would you describe the way the company works'? And I said, 'Competitive co-operation.' The idea is to compete for the quality of the show and your own work and to co-operate in order to do it. Often, in a situation like this, you have to hold on to the monster inside you who says, 'I haven't got enough to do and I'm not getting enough focus.' You have to say, 'No, I can serve the ensemble and it is the overall success of the piece that will provide satisfaction.' But you still need your moments, and Simon needs actors who can step up to the mark in an instant and hold the stage. I was gratified when a reviewer picked me out. But so much of what I was doing was to serve the greater good.

I think you are like that as an actor. Your sense of commitment to the whole does not wipe out your individuality. And you draw the eye. Did you choose a particular character in the family on whom to test yourself?

I chose Uncle Charles. He features in one story where he sends his family away to the country for the summer because it is too hot in town. He wallows around in his sweaty bed and goes to work and comes back and, eventually, looks in the mirror and watches himself disappear. I just thought, 'How extraordinary.' It was so rooted in the banality of life.

And the horrors of the 1930s. Disappearance was already there, so disappearing into the mirror makes sense.

Well, Schulz could not have known what was coming, but he obviously sensed something, and it comes through in his writing. It gets very dark at times, as well as being fantastically comic.

I look to be stretched as an actor. I did a two-hander at the Contact Theatre in Manchester with Maureen Beattie, and that really was a challenge for me. It was a show about an actress who was shot by the fascists. I played her partner. The role required a huge emotional range. This was a Spanish play called *¡Ay, Carmela!* by José Sanchis Sinisterra. The play starts in the present so you do not realize at the beginning that she was shot and that it is her ghost visiting him. It was incredibly challenging in acting terms.

Because?

You were moving between 'acting' and 'being'. There is a little revue section at the end of the play in which she is shot. It is comic and takes place in the past. It requires a great lightness of presentation and, then, great emotional truth to show the depth of the relationship between this woman and man. There were scenes only about what they felt for each other. I had not done much work like this. It is not what people normally want from me. But, of course, it is fascinating to me because I believe that I can do it as well as anybody else.

What do people normally want you for?

Well, as a physical actor who is a good team player and has a comic touch.

Marrying the Physical and Psychological

Fine, but what are your hidden acting selves that you would like to be used more often?

I suppose what has become increasingly interesting to me – partly, I think, as a result of getting older – is to play parts with greater psychological complexity. There are some things that I know I can do, but I wonder where the more challenging work is for me, work that isn't merely a repetition of what I know. This is about continuing to stretch and develop your performing abilities. It was interesting doing *Measure for Measure* recently because I really saw the complexity of delivering that text and I wanted to learn from people who have that skill.

Are you moving towards a sense of how you might use text differently now that you know what you know physically?

I think that has been developing in me since the late 1980s. I had no real textual training of any sort, or, indeed, any training to do with the presentation of psychological reality, par-

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X06000467 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ticularly 'actioning' a text, as Max Stafford-Clark does. But I think that 'actioning' every single line you utter is too mechanistic. I am interested in marrying the physical and the psychological or the intellectual. I have done a lot on the physical side, and it is the other side that is coming slowly, particularly as my physical abilities wane.

Would you say that Measure for Measure *has been important in allowing you to marry the two?*

Actually, the work I have done with Annie Castledine has a lot more to do with the combination I am looking for. She also uses the idea of 'actioning' a text.

Can you give an example of what that phrase means?

It means taking a phrase like 'Would you like a cup of tea?' and actioning it by using verbs of action. It is subtext, really. What you are really saying is, 'I reject you,' or you are saying, 'I love you.' It could be any verb that is active in this way. If you cannot give the verb a subject or an object, it is the wrong verb. You can deliver the same line in a myriad of ways. What you are looking for is the way of saying that rings true to the situation and to what you are trying to do to the other person. This is the key. There is no such thing as a general line. Everything in this world is very specific and aimed at somebody in order to do something to them, to change them in some way. Once you start thinking like that, text becomes incredibly rich.

What have you done with Annie Castledine?

I did a musical at Stratford East called *A Better Day*. I laugh horribly because it predicted and anticipated a Labour victory in 1992. I was rehearsing *The Street of Crocodiles*, then jumping on the tube to Stratford East to do a show in the evening. I felt like one of the old music-hall entertainers. Later I did *India Song* by Marguerite Duras with her at Theatr Clwyd in 1994, which was a fascinating piece. It was all recorded, so all the action on stage was silent.

During the past five years or so I have worked with her at the Royal Court during the International Writers' Workshop Festival, which brings writers from abroad. Annie has collaborated with Complicite for the last fifteen years, as a kind of text adviser. She helps Simon with his performance when he is acting as well as directing. She is an outside eye.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X06000467 Published online by Cambridge University Press