Maria Shevtsova

# On Directing: a Conversation with Katie Mitchell

One of Britain's foremost directors, Katie Mitchell's career embraces a formidable repertoire of play and opera productions. She has a taste for Greek tragedy – her *Phoenician Women* (1995) won the *Evening Standard* Best Director Award – and takes in Gorky, Chekhov, Genet, and Beckett, as well as such contemporaries as Kevin Elyot, whose *Forty Winks* she directed at the Royal Court in 2004. She has worked in Dublin, Milan, and Stockholm, and is an Associate Director at the National Theatre. This interview with NTQ co-editor Maria Shevtsova shows Mitchell's lucid and passionate engagement with her craft. It took place in London in several stages from December 2004 to July 2005, during a period of intense activity for Mitchell. Maria Shevtsova wishes to thank her for so generously giving her time.

**Maria Shevtsova** *What drew you to the theatre? You were at Oxford and you had a literary training. Did you act as a child? Did you dance?*

**Katie Mitchell** My great-grandparents were in the music hall. My great-grandmother, Lilian Kennel, was a Tiller Girl and my great grandfather, Frederick Norfield**,** worked with Fred Karno and Charlie Chaplin. This part of the family history was not withheld, but just wasn't talked about because my father, who came from a working-class background, had made a middle-class marriage. So it wasn't something in our family culture.

In a way, my choice of career was an aberration because my parents didn't have a theatre background at all, but I think I just probably carried the gene through – into a different place, obviously. I'm not doing musicals or comedies, although my granny always wanted me to. However, what I really wanted to be, when I was fifteen or sixteen, was an artist. I wanted to paint, but I wasn't very good at it. When I was about seventeen, I realized that I wasn't going to be able to deliver in that field. By chance, I became involved in theatre, which at the time I thought was like painting with people. But very quickly I became addicted to it. This addiction has not left me. I find what I do constantly fascinating.

*Did you stage productions when you were a student at Oxford?*

I did a lot of theatre at Oxford. I acted Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet* and Celia in *Volpone*. I was the president of OUDS [Oxford University Dramatic Society] and I was also in a feminist theatre group called Medusa. It was where I started to learn about directing. Amongst other things I directed *Façade* by Edith Sitwell, *Vinegar Tom* by Caryl Churchill, and later productions in the Oxford Playhouse: *The Good Person of Szechwan* and *The House of Bernarda Alba*. All of this was very useful. I was doing that more than studying.

*When you finished your degree, did you start directing straight away? Here you are, a young graduate in a difficult, predominantly male world. How did you start working in this world?*

I didn't have any money and ended up in Islington, sleeping on someone's floor. Someone very generously let me do that. The nearest theatre was the King's Head. I could touch type, and wasn't bad in a kitchen. So, I typed scripts at the King's Head, worked in their kitchen, and did some assistant stage managing. Then I applied for all the assistant and trainee director bursaries available and didn't get any of them. I wasn't very articulate about what I wanted to do. I also met several

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theatre managers and directors, but nothing really happened.

Then I met someone called Pip Broughton on one of those bursary panels, and she ran a company called Paines Plough. She gave me a job as an Assistant Director and I worked for the company for a year, touring the provinces with new writing. And then I got a job at the Royal Shakespeare Company as an Assistant Director for two years, working with mainstream directors like Di Trevis, Adrian Noble, Ron Daniels, Cecily Berry, Deborah Warner. After that, most importantly, I went to study in Eastern Europe. I got a grant from the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust to go to Russia, Poland, Georgia, and Lithuania to research director training. I had always wanted to see how theatre was made in those countries.

*Why?*

I had my own little company, which I started when I was at school, and which I took up to the Edinburgh Fringe in the mid-1980s**.** Whilst there, I saw some work from Poland. I don't recall it in much detail, but it made a very powerful impression on me. There was a female director, whose name I cannot remember, who tried to do *The Maids* in a really weird place, a performance by Tadeusz Kantor and Theatre of the Eighth Day. Later I saw work in London by directors such as Lev Dodin, Anatoli Vasilyev, and the Polish company Gardzienice. I decided to go to Eastern Europe because I was looking for a different type of theatre to what I saw in Britain. There was something – and I couldn't put my finger on what it was – that was absent, if you like, here. And I had a hunch that I would find it in Eastern Europe. This hunch was based on what I'd seen of theatre from those countries, particularly the work of Gardzienice with whom I spent a lot of time subsequently.

*What was it about Gardzienice that interested you so much? Was it the fact that they didn't work with a pre-fixed text? Was it their physicality? Their singing? Their ritual quality?*

Wlodzimierz Staniewski had worked with Grotowski in the 1970s and then set up his own company in a village in eastern Poland. Staniewski took some of the discoveries from Grotowski's early paratheatrical work into his own practice. Going to observe his work was probably the nearest you could get to a practical understanding of the physical and vocal work that Grotowski had written about in *Towards a Poor Theatre*. Grotowski was very influenced by Stanislavsky's later work on physical actions. This influence on him is fascinating, but, sadly, often neglected. Stanislavsky's work on physical actions is a very important and practically useful part of his work, and the fact that the Method people in America didn't accept it is quite extraordinary.

*Why do you think they didn't?*

Because it made redundant the structures that they had set up, based on Stanislavsky's early work. Stanislavsky was curious to the end and able to throw things away, change, and move forward. He was a really brave artist. He is like the Picasso of the theatre world.

*That's what Lev Dodin says about Stanislavsky.*

Apparently, even when Stanislavsky was very sick, he was looking at colour theory, and he had all these differently coloured light bulbs, which he had rotated so as to see what emotions were created when you looked at different colours**.** I went to Russia before I went to Poland.

*Where to, and what did you see?*

I went to Moscow and Leningrad, as it still was in 1989. I had already been to Leningrad in 1988 on an architecture tour and had managed to get into the Maly Theatre. I sneaked off from the tour when our guide's back was turned because I really wanted to see the work of Lev Dodin, which I had read about in the UK**.** I saw *Stars in the Morning Sky*. Dodin's wife, Tatyana Shestakova, whom I had already seen in Klimov's film *Come and See*, was just remarkable in it. Indeed the whole production was extraordinary because it was fully imagined by the actors. It wasn't a discreet, mediated, modified version of human behaviour. It was a fully imagined



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version of it, probably closer to how we are with all our bumps and rough edges and ugliness and cruelty. There were no theatrical clichés in the acting. It was just fully and accurately imagined. If you were in that situation, you could understand perfectly why you might behave like that. It seemed to be very, very logical.

I should also add regarding my interest in Eastern Europe and Russia and Poland in particular that I had seen a lot of films and read a lot of books from those two countries which had made a deep impression on me. For example, I was introduced to the films of Tarkovski at university, and the combination of subtle acting with poetic images in films like *Mirror* and *Nostalgia* had a lasting impact on me. As did Klimov's *Come and See* and his wife Laura Sheptiko's film, *The Ascent*. *Come and See* remains my favourite film of all time.

*It is awesome, as they say. Truly awesome.*

Then there are Solzhenitsyn and Tolstoy. I read a lot of Russian literature as an adolescent, so I was immersed in nineteenth-century Russian culture.

*Why Tarkovski, Solzhenitsyn, and Tolstoy?*

I love the wilfulness of these artists. Tarkovski manages to get out precisely what is in his head, frame by frame: accurately, precisely, it obeys his own logic. His work is immaculate and he is a constant master of his medium. And, he's interested in very big ideas – hard ideas, in terms of human experience. Tolstoy: I just loved *War and Peace*. His humanity reminds me of Homer. They are just the same. They are right about war, and they judge no one. They have a very big prevailing idea, which is, finally, that they are pacifists. Tolstoy's exquisite drawing of human detail. The way the gunshot hits Andrey, and how everything goes slow and he falls back, onto the ground.

Ah, I've opened Tolstoy, and guess who's walked through? Dostoyevsky, of course! Straight through! Well, now, I'm going to *The Idiot*, which is my favorite Dostoyevsky novel. Solzhenitsyn? I was quite interested in him politically, in what he had suffered. *The Gulag*



Katie Mitchell during rehearsals of *Three Sisters*. Photo: Ivan Kyncl.

*Archipelago* was my first entry into his writing. I realized that he had done in *August 1914* what Tolstoy had done in *War and Peace*: it was exactly the same novel, the same form, the same idea – only much later on. Again, it is just so thorough and precise, and looks at human beings without mercy, forensically, as much as it is possible to do this.

*You said that politics were very important to you. Did politics take you to Eastern Europe as well?*

The Berlin wall had just fallen when I travelled to Eastern Europe in 1989. I think I flew in a week after that had happened. The visit was therefore completely remarkable in terms of life experience as well as cultural discoveries. In Tbilisi, for example, I couldn't do much studying at the drama school on Rustaveli Avenue because it was being defumigated and redecorated following a recent public demonstration. The communists had used a gas which was highly toxic to disperse the crowds. It was also a time when all



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the artists I encountered were beginning to come to terms with the social and political changes taking place. Their old ways of working, with long rehearsal periods, and so on, were still intact and they hadn't suffered the financial difficulties many later experienced as they were catapulted into capitalism and their funding was cut or severely reduced.

*What is striking about everything you have just said is the recurrent motif of war. Is your concern with war behind your decision to turn to the Greek tragedies* – Trojan Women (Women of Troy *for your production*) *in 1991 and later* Phoenician Women *in 1995,* The Oresteia *in 1999 and then* Iphigenia at Aulis *in 2004?*

Those productions were responses to very specific wars going on at the time. *Women of Troy* was a response to the first war in the Middle East and the Russian invasion of Lithuania; *Phoenician Women* and *The Oresteia* were responses to the Bosnian war; *Iphigenia at Aulis* was a response to the 2004 war in Iraq.

*Which of the four did you find the most challenging?*

*The Oresteia.* I was in charge of the first play, *Agamemnon,* which is relatively straightforward. I struggled with the second, *The Libation Bearers,* and I didn't have a strong idea for the third. I realize in retrospect that you can only direct *The Oresteia* if you have a very clear picture of what you want to do with the *Eumenides,* because it's the climax of the whole work. What happened in my production, and I imagine this happens in other people's, is that the climax comes with *Agamemnon* and then, after that, it's a matter of diminishing returns.

*Of course the big climax happens when Athena comes down to earth.*

It should, but we didn't have a strong enough idea for that arrival to work dramatically.

*I was very struck by the fantastic sense of flow in your* Iphigenia, *by its dynamics, energy, rhythm, and pace. You kept up the momentum, and all your actors kept it up. How did you work with them to achieve this? Such a strong sense of the movement of a production is a relatively rare quality on the British stage, although not so rare in the Russian theatre.*

It is very difficult to talk about it without going through all the steps of the rehearsal process which create the layers of what you see in the final production. All the actors are working with several very specific, concrete tasks all the time. Most of them have three or four very difficult tasks, and these are supported by changes in light, sound, and design.

Also, there were sections of free improvisation in *Iphigenia,* which required a certain type of focus. For me, everything is in the planning before you get to the rehearsals. So, you analyze the material very carefully – not its surface detail, but the deeper structure underneath the text. You look for the turning points in the text, which I call 'events', and then you look for what people are playing in between these 'events'. You are looking for the structure of ideas in the play. What is it actually about? I think the themes of *Iphigenia* are war, violence, political expediency, the family. It is hard to talk about process because it involves so many simple, concrete tasks.

*Maybe you could give me an idea of how you do it by breaking it down a little, step by step?*

There is the pre-rehearsal analysis, where, as I said, I analyze the events and intentions and the idea structure of the play. Also, I analyze the characters' histories, from when they were born up until the beginning of the action of the play. I work alongside the designer to make choices about the environment that will help the actors play the text – not just any environment, but the one that will actually help them play the text as I have analyzed it.

Then, obviously, there is research. One needs to know who Euripides was, why he wrote the play, and what was happening in his country at the time. In the case of this script, I needed to do a lot of tiring textual-genesis research because Euripides died before he had completed his text. He had written all the Chorus lines and about sixty per cent of the scenes in total. His son or nephew then



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did some additional rewrites before it was performed. Then, a hundred years later, someone called 'the reviser' – frightening name – came along and changed what was there and added other material. So even trying to find your way through that to work out what play Euripides wanted to write is quite a job. That is the bulk of the preparation.

Once in rehearsals, the first thing we do is read the play. No one reads their own part. We read it in a circle with each actor saying a line at a time. They are encouraged to read it for the sense only. Then we list the facts. This is the information in the text which is non-negotiable. For instance, it is Greece; Iphigenia is the daughter of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon; Helen is in Troy with Paris; there is a town called Aulis; and so on.

Then we list the aspects of the material which are less clear. These are put in the form of questions. When did Paris take Helen to Troy? When did Agamemnon and Clytemnestra get married? How old is Iphigenia? Where is Aulis? We keep to very simple facts and questions all the time. And, then, different actors will be set different tasks so that we can begin to answer some of the questions. For example, the actor playing Agamemnon will research the number of ships in the Greek fleet; the actor playing Clytemnestra will find out about the walled city of Argos where the family lived; the actors in the Chorus will start to do research into where Aulis and Calchis are. Wherever possible these research tasks are tailor-made to fit individual actors so that they only research what they actually need to know in order to play the scenes in the play.

The first thing to emerge from this work is a sense of place. Very soon the actors will have drawn a map of the area. In this case it included Greece and Troy (part of modern day Turkey). They would have a more detailed plan of the cities of Aulis and Calchis. Each actor would then build a plan of the house where they lived, room by room, and the immediate environment.

Every actor then has to organize the facts about their character's history in linear order and look for the gaps, which, over time, will have to be filled in. In order to pin down the precise years in which events took place the actors have to start to work together with those actors playing characters with whom they share a history. A consensus is reached by reading the text, talking about the impressions it gives and historical research. Then we do improvisations of the main events in all the characters' biographies. We start as far back as we need to and then do the improvisations in the order in which they happened. As far as I remember, the first improvisation we did was about the death of the father of Menelaus and Agamemnon, the loss of the kingdom and the war the two sons had to fight to regain the throne, which happened about thirty years before the action of the play begins.

Sometimes the actors also have about twenty minutes a day to work on their own character. They can work on whatever aspect of the character they choose.

*How do they do that?*

They have to choose a specific time, a specific place, and a specific activity or idea to investigate. The only caveat is that the character has to be on his or her own. For example, one of the women from Calchis, which is where the Chorus comes from (Calchis is opposite Aulis), could decide that she wants to investigate the theme of war and how she talks to the gods. She would decide to be in her prayer room, she would choose a specific god to pray to, and she would ask that god to stop her husband going to war. It would be eleven in the morning, her son would be at school, and the servants would be out shopping.

*Does the action necessarily have to be verbal? Could it be mime, or purely movement?*

It just has to be the behaviour of the character in a specific time and place. In some situations people don't talk, they just think. In other situations they might talk to themselves or just do a banal activity, like cleaning their boots. The actors' task here is simply to enact a slice of their characters' life. All the actors do the exercises simultaneously in the rehearsal room. That way they feel less scrutinized by me and their peers, and can get on



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with filling any gaps they have in the picture of their character.

Alongside this, we do practical work on the themes of the play. I would ask the actors to think of a situation from their own lives which relates to any one of the play's three or four themes. These slices of life are re-enacted in front of the group and help us see the actual meaning of the intellectual ideas behind the play. So, for instance, we measure the idea of violence against a very practical exercise where someone enacts something violent that happened in their real life. For example, one actor had been going out with someone from Belfast and they were stopped by the police. We look at what really happens to human beings physically, mentally, and psychologically when they are in life-threatening situations.

Recently I did some research into the biology of emotions and this work was also fed into our rehearsals of *Iphigenia*. Science defines six primary emotions: anger, fear, surprise, disgust, happiness, and sadness. We studied the negative range because those are the ones that dominated in the play: anger, fear, sadness, and surprise. For scientists, the definition of an emotion is a change in the body, internally and externally. So we did improvisations based on specific emotions and we looked at what happened physically to the body when these emotions occurred. At the end of each improvisation, I would ask the actors 'What did you notice?' and encourage them not to project psychological readings of these situations, but simply to notice what happened physically. How did the person clean their shoes, fast or slow? How were they breathing? Was their head to the side or not? What about their hands? Were they twitching?

As well as primary emotions there are also social emotions – like jealousy or envy – and background emotions, which are physical changes taking place at a low level, like when you feel 'a bit under the weather' or 'a bit low'. Later, when we came to work on the scenes themselves, we would often decide on the primary emotion generated by a turning point in the action and ensure that it was played precisely physically. The Chorus, in particular, did a lot of work on physicalizing emotions accurately. This work might well have contributed to what you described as the 'energy' and 'momentum' in the performance.

Every day the actors also do movement work to prepare for acting and, in the case of *Iphigenia*, they danced the foxtrot daily because it was a big ingredient in the production. I try to break the day into a balanced diet between movement, dance, improvisations (such as the ones I have described), research, and text work.

After about two weeks of this diet we return to the text to analyze the events or turning points in the machinery of the play. We then give names to the events and the sections in between the events. Next I start to ask the actors what it is that their characters are playing in between the events. There are lots of different words to describe this, like objective, intention, task. But I tend to avoid these terms as much as possible and instead ask, 'What do you want to make the other people do?' The answer to these questions are then noted down. When we first do the first-scene rehearsal, we concentrate on the events and tasks. These are the deeper structures that run beneath the surface of the words. In that first rehearsal the actor practises these structures. It does not matter if the actors do not remember the precise words of the text. They only need say what they remember of the text or invent other words to make other people do what they want them to. This way of working is incredibly useful for actors because they play the play at its deeper level. They do not play the surface of words, which, as we know, is such a small part of what actually happens between people. This is a Stanislavskian way of doing the first-scene rehearsal, and I think Dodin works in the same way, too.

*He does, absolutely. How did you come to this approach?*

Much mainstream theatre here is very preoccupied with words and hearing them spoken clearly. There is less interest in representing human behaviour accurately, where words take more of a back seat. Expressions of human behaviour in theatre tend to be either exaggerated or too discreet or made



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Kate Duchene as Clytemnestra and Hattie Morahan as Iphigenia with Chorus in *Iphigenia at Aulis* at the National Theatre, 2004. Photo: Ivan Kyncl.

up of self-conscious and artificial gestures and sounds. This type of theatre does not interest me. When I went to Eastern Europe in 1989, I started to see another type of theatre that was not interested only in speaking words clearly or characters behaving artificially.

I was lucky enough to watch two Russian directors, Lev Dodin and Anatoly Vasilyev, training young directors. I spoke to the Lithuanian director Euimentas Nekrosius, and I watched three of his productions. I met the Georgian director, Georgi Tumanishvili, and watched him teach students for a couple of afternoons. These are extraordinary practitioners, all of whom, I discovered, practise a different version of Stanislavsky. Since then, I have tried to understand, practically, how to make that type of theatre.

Many people have helped me on this journey, some taking a lot of time to teach me different aspects of Stanislavsky's system at different points in my career. There is a woman called Tatyana Olear, who trained as an actor with Dodin and then performed in his productions of *The Cherry Orchard* and *Claustrophobia*. She came twice to the UK to do two two-week workshops with British actors and myself. The director James Macdonald and I were watching, and then she would set us directing tasks, many of which we found very difficult. It was rather wonderful. There we were, in our forties, and unable to set up an improvisation efficiently or diagnose the idea of Chekhov's *The Seagull*. Those four weeks were a tremendous influence in my working practice. Tatyana also saw productions over a period of two years, giving very useful notes on the work.

At around the same time, in 1999, I met a director called Elen Bowman who had trained at the School of the Science of Acting set up by Sam Cogan. Cogan had combined a training in Stanislavsky at GITIS, the prestigious drama school in Moscow [now known as the Russian Academy of Theatre Arts], with work as a psychiatric nurse before coming to the UK in the 1970s. His very rigorous director's training reflected both fields of interest and



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entailed a high level of psychological self-scrutiny. I trained with Elen over two and a half years in one-on-one sessions or together with the actor Robbie Bowman. It was incredibly useful because, as Elen said, in order to get better at directing, you have to study yourself in life. This helps you analyze a character and makes you learn how to help an actor to get into the skin of a character.

For the last three years I have had a Fellowship from the National Endowment of Science and the Arts (NESTA). I have recently been studying neuroscience through the books of Antonio Demasio, a Portuguese-American neuroscientist, and with the help of the neuroscientist Mark Lythgoe.

*Does your NESTA research have to do with body functions?*

No, it did not start out like that. James Macdonald and I were invited to apply for the grant, and in our application we put down different disciplines related to the theatre which we wanted to research: dance, visual arts, architecture, psychology, and music. Our aim was to see whether the investigation of any of these disciplines would enhance our ability to direct. I found most of the disciplines relatively easy to investigate but psychology foxed me. It's now such a wide field, and I found it quite difficult because whenever I read a book about psychology, I just thought it was another meaning structure. There were just so many possible pairs of glasses that you could put on your eyes to look at the world – too many pairs.

I stumbled across biology by chance at a dinner party. Somebody said, 'If you are having problems with psychology why don't you step back and look at biology? Neuroscientists today, having neglected the biology of the emotions for years, are coming around to it because they think it is the gateway to consciousness.' So I started to read in the area and found it enormously useful. It is the removal of the skin, if you like, of psychological reading and getting down to the nuts and bolts of brain scans and what the body does. But this came right at the tail end of the research.

*How did the actors, when working on* Iphigenia, *find this research useful? One concrete example, please.*

I have to go back one step, and then I'll give you the example. The neuroscientist Antonio Damasio defines an emotion as a change in the body which is legible to someone looking at you. Of course there is also change inside the body which accompanies the external change, but that is pretty invisible. When you receive a stimulus which triggers a strong primary emotion there is a half-second delay between the stimulus and your becoming conscious of it. There are bodily reactions to the stimulus in that half-second. If it is a very life-threatening thing, like a bear, you could jump back five metres. But, because we are not conscious in this half-second, we do not always remember it. So, sometimes, in our acting, we edit it out. This means that the audience cannot read what is happening.

In *Iphigenia*, for example, Achilles, the young hero, prepared his whole life to go to Troy and fight in the war. He is not interested in women or in getting married. In fact, he is sick of them because all the mothers in Greece keep throwing their daughters at him. He is then told, out of the blue, that he is about to get married. In our production, the actor took the risk of taking a three-metre leap backwards in surprise at the news. The leap filled that critical half-second and everyone in the audience knew that the emotion the character was experiencing was surprise. Throughout the performance we tried to add in all these extra physical frames: the frames of what happens physically in that half-second between stimulus and becoming conscious of the emotion. These are involuntary bodily reactions. They are like the reaction that happens when you blush.

There is a lot of surprise in the play and you have noticed that the Chorus often physically jumped to mark that surprise. This was something they had to practise. We studied the emotion of surprise quite a lot and how it affected us physically. Of course we were working outside in and inside out, both at the same time, and both methods were feeding the process. All the work on the physi-



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cality of emotions was designed so that the emotion targeted would occur in the audience. Sometimes for the emotion to occur you just have to replicate the physical responses accurately and not try to repeat an inner emotional state.

*It is astonishing to think about it in these terms. I think the audience was totally stunned.*

The actors were all working to unsettle you, and they were primarily doing that physically. So, none of the charaters was ever allowed to settle physically. The background emotion, as the scientists call it, which we were aiming for was anxiety. (A background emotion is a low level of bodily change, like when you say, 'I feel a bit low.') You'll notice how in life you are always shifting, moving, fiddling if you are anxious. There was no stillness until the little girl, Iphigenia, arrived. To enhance the stillness we had all the action go into slow motion for her arrival.

*This may account for my sensation, as I watched the production, of its perpetual motion.*

Yes. It was constructed, of course.

*Well, presumably yes, because the actors were all jumping and moving and working on surprise.*

Absolutely. They all knew the event which surprised them, so everyone was going to jump, to a greater or lesser extent, depending on the impact of the event on their character. When you are watching this occur, the effect that you immediately get is change. Then there is another event, and another change. What creates the sensation of motion that you refer to is probably due to this and due also to the very strong emphasis on time and place in the production. The actors had to play the time-pressures for real. In some cases the characters could barely communicate what they needed to communicate because they were under so much time-pressure. They



Kate Duchene as Clytemnestra in *Iphigenia at Aulis* at the National Theatre, 2004. Photo: Ivan Kyncl.



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also played place. They really imagined the place they were in and really imagined that there was an army of thousands stationed through the door of the building where they were standing.

These are really simple ingredients. I am not saying anything new at all, but, sadly, these very simple concrete tasks, like time and place, which are demanding to play, are often omitted from pieces of work and the result is that nothing happens in real time or in a real place. Instead, we get a mixture of everyday behaviour from real life, where time and place affect our actions, and behaviour derived from stage conventions. When the two types of behaviour get mixed up in a production, which is often the case, it is very hard for the audience to read what is going on because the two types of information come at them – one artificial and one lifelike.

*How did you sensitize your actors to playing time? Did you have time exercises?*

Oh, it is very straightforward. If I said, 'Maria, you have only got five minutes to do this interview with me' – this would completely determine how we speak to each other. As a director, you set different time tasks depending on the effect you want. And you set different tasks about the place. You make them imagine different things about the place.

*How about the production's rhythm? Did you have the actors pace around or do something offstage so that they could come back in with great momentum?*

Oh, yes. That was interesting. The actors never stopped acting, whether they were on stage or not. They had booths offstage in which they could improvise and, in some cases, the booths had microphones in them so that their offstage improvisations could be relayed on to the stage to interact with the action in the scene. For example, Clytemnestra and Iphigenia would go through a backstage door into a booth which had furniture, objects, and a table – it was the room in which they were staying in the hotel. They continued the actions that they would have done – getting changed, nattering to each other, or whatever – and these improvisations were relayed through microphones back into the room for the Chorus to react to.

Even before they both arrived in the hotel before their first scene, Clytemnestra and Iphigenia had a separate booth, which represented the carriage that was taking them to Aulis. They started improvising the journey in the carriage at the beginning of the show, but did not come on stage for their first 'scene' for about twenty minutes. Then they arrived, did one scene, went off, and kept improvising in the booth until they came back on. They never stopped acting, even though we did not see every bit of their acting.

Similarly, Agamemnon, the Chorus, and everybody else had booths or places offstage where they could either prepare for their first scene or continue the action in between scenes. I am sure it is a big thing to ask actors to do and there are certain types of actors who might not have done it. It was all structured backstage like that so that the actor could keep acting, because then the audience gets a higher quality of work.

*You can see the war motif in the costumes: these are women of the 1940s. What inspired you to have the Chorus – all women – dance the foxtrot?*

We wanted to bring the production as close to our time as possible. However, we could not bring the action any further forwards than 1940 because the arguments made by a woman (Clytemnestra) to save a child include womanly virtues, like good housekeeping, which are anathema now. The 1940s was the latest we could set it. The gender politics in the play would not be credible if we set it after the 1940s.

*Why not?*

Because they would be making arguments in modern-day clothing that we would find extraordinarily stupid. Now we would make different arguments to political leaders in order to stop children from being killed. I mean, obviously there are some basic arguments like, 'She's a child', 'She's our daughter', that make sense to us. But, there are other ones like, 'I keep my house so well', or,



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'Everyone who comes to my house for dinner parties has such a wonderful time', or, 'Your palace is always clean', which would, I think, make people laugh. Also, I think that the visual language of the 1940s is still very powerful. We simply cannot leave the Second World War alone. It still has quite strong meaning for us.

Foxtrot? In the ancient Greek productions it is said that the performance moved from the sung or spoken word to dancing, especially in the choruses. We wanted to find a way of being faithful to these formal switches in the original, without donning jesus-sandals, masks, and doing strange arm-movements from old vases. We were also keen to keep the audience stimulated by changing the form through which the ideas of the production would be communicated. One of the big ideas in the play is power, and we were keen to find a way of investigating this in the choruses. In those scenes, we worked on the idea of these women's powerlessness in the face of latent male violence. We continued to do this in the choruses, but using the form of dance. The women were, if you like, dancing at gunpoint in front of a faceless male audience. The change of form into dance stimulated and surprised the audience and kept them more engaged in the ideas of the production.

Originally I thought it should be waltzing, but my movement director said, 'No, women of that type and class are more likely to foxtrot than waltz,' and he was right. We also needed a form of social dance that would feel inappropriate in the circumstances. Then there was the influence of Pina Bausch working on our thinking. She often uses social dance to provide a structure to movement which is repeated, or breaks down, or is inappropriately executed.

*These women are without partners, dancing by themselves, as widows, or whatever, of war – lone women.*

Many people have very different readings of this. The performers were given very simple, concrete instructions to achieve the effect. They were told that the lights suddenly went on and they saw hundreds of men sitting in front of them, leaning back and smoking. The men said nothing, they just looked at the women. It frightened the women, who finally came to the conclusion that the men were expecting something of them. And, then, dance music was suddenly pumped through the PA system in the room where the women were and the women felt that they were being instructed to dance. However, they had no partners and they were afraid, so they didn't always dance well.

*I also particularly liked your sound score, with sound coming in and out, giving different perspectives of sound.*

That's Klimov! But, Gareth Fry was a fantastic sound designer.

*You must have worked closely with him on it. You would not just have let him loose.*

Oh, of course. We have worked for many years together and realized, over time, that you can use sound as powerfully as visual information or acting. It is another tool to work with on creating emotion in the audience and, therefore, communicating the idea of the play. Obviously, in this play, we wanted to unsettle and disturb. Sound working on a subliminal level can really do that. Much of the sound was played at quite low levels. And it supported the physical work the actors were doing on anxiety. When there was an event in the scene, the sound would change with the event. The sound designer followed the map of events and intentions that the actors were playing. He was working hand in glove with the actors, deepening and supporting their work. He was also in rehearsals for a few weeks before we did technical rehearsals in the theatre so the actors had an opportunity to work with the sound.

*Clytemnestra is a tough role to play. An actor playing it could let a lot go.*

It would be very difficult for anyone to 'let go' in this production, become vague or confused or get lost, because everyone was playing a pre-agreed structure. So, Kate Duchene



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as Clytemnestra never played a choice on her own outside this pre-agreed structure.

Actually, I think the hardest role is the Chorus. They are there all the time and have to imagine everything that is going on. It is like a really difficult acting exercise. You are permanently present in life-threatening circumstances, and you have to keep imagining the situation, time, place, relationships, and character background fully. You are with six of your friends. The queen shows up. There are children about to be killed. There are armed men crawling all over the building you are in. It is a really difficult acting challenge. Then they also have to talk directly to 'the audience'. The Chorus are the ones who could really drop the play on the floor because, nowadays, we are not very interested in the long poems between scenes. But their instruction was to disregard the meaning of the poetic text altogether. I said that I was not interested in it.

*How did they respond to that?*

They were a bit surprised. I said the text was irrelevant and that they could as well be talking about their shopping lists. I said: 'You have just got to keep talking because there are these men sitting there, looking at you, and, if you do not keep talking, they might do something really ugly to you.' That, I think, is a hard acting task, particularly in British theatre, because here the text is often seen as sacred and it is a risky business not to speak it very clearly in a production. I was asking them not to obey the Rules of Clear Speaking and to do the production in the way I had chosen. To their credit they went with me.

*You have placed a great deal of emphasis on structure. How much freedom do the actors have to make individual choices in the structure? I am sure that you do not say, 'You do this, you do that.' You are not a mechanistic director, but how much leeway do they have for their own fantasy?*

Well, an actor's fantasy is very dangerous! I call their fantasies affinities. This is a word which Elen Bowman taught me. But if, for example, there are four themes in a play, a director will have an affinity with one theme, possibly with two. If you just direct one or two of the four themes, you will be directing only fifty per cent of the play. It is the same with the characters. The actor reads the character and turns it round like a three-dimensional object, and, unconsciously, is drawn to the side that he or she likes or has the greatest affinity with. For example, the actor playing Clytemnestra might notice several sides of the character – mother, queen, wife of an army general – but most likely she will be drawn to mother more than the other two aspects of the character. If she were only to play the mother, which is the easiest to reach and probably chimes personally with her the most, then she will neglect the rest of the character and her performance will be unbalanced.

The worst thing that can happen is that the actor sees some side of the character to play which isn't even there. So, for me, the fantasies of actors – or directors – are not always useful if they manifest themselves in affinities. I think what is always useful is to find a way of playing the playwright's ideas of what the character is or at least looking for that idea. When affinities get in the way of the actors, I tend to draw them back to the writer, and the writer becomes the mediator. I say: 'It is very interesting that you, as the actor, have this thought about your character, but what does the playwright mean when he or she says . . .' and I refer them to a bit of the text. I could say: 'I know you might find it distressing, but, unfortunately you are going to have to absorb what is there in the play.' A lot of it is helping actors to see the three-dimensional structure of the play and the character so that they play everything, not just one little muscle of it. However, I do not tell them where to stand, or, if I do, I do it much later on in the process. Mostly, as long as they are acting logically in the situation, I do not mind where or how they do it.

*Well, that is freedom of a limited kind.*

What they have to play is their intention, time, place, the events, all the facets of their



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character and all the relationships that their character has. You know the actor who is in a room of ten people and who only plays one relationship, as opposed to ten. You have to play ten. It is more stimulating.

*Why did you choose the translation by Don Taylor?*

I rather liked the passion with which he wrote it. I had used it in a production of the play I did at the Abbey Theatre a few years before and found it really good for actors – clear, direct, and powerful. Also modern.

*How, in these recent years, have your productions affected your sense of your work as a director?*

I'm not sure directors think like that. If you stand on the outside, you can think like that and put it together. If you are on the inside, you do not make measurements. Or, the measurements you make are so fine, and about a specific aspect of the working process. You never come up above your work and look down upon it as if it were a map of a city and go, 'Oh I see now how that happens.' There are, however the odd moments of insight. I once realized that I only directed plays about war or family. That dawned on me when I was updating my CV one day. But, that was a chance occurrence. I'm pretty sure that directors do not try and create meaning in that way for themselves.

*Let me try to put it this way. You know how, in everyday life, with time, we slowly become more and more conscious of ourselves and see patterns emerging in what we do. And, slowly, we can articulate something about ourselves. Call it self-consciousness, or self-awareness, or introspection. Does a director slowly build awareness of how he or she works?*

That definitely happens. You can have this wonderful moment when you do not have as much time as you need to prepare but you know you are prepared because you know exactly what tasks the actors need to focus on in order to do the play.

*And you know how to pose the question correctly and communicate it accordingly?*

Yes. It is not that you are without fear, but you have the right amount of fear.

*And you have some kind of hinterland behind you. So you might have fear, but there is something sustaining you.*

They call it a body of work, don't they?

*They do. I call it a hinterland, which is bigger than a body of work.*

It is a much nicer word. Yes, you do feel that, but, with the knowledge, all the time, that you are only as good as your last piece of work. So, it is slightly contradictory. You get a sense of clarity of purpose, which is offset against anxiety about failing so badly that you will not get another job. So the former can never outweigh or remove the latter. Perhaps it does with time and age.

*Let us return very briefly to the Russians. You staged Gorky's* Vasya Zheleznova. *You went on to* Uncle Vanya, *and I saw your* Three Sisters. *Is it true to say that directors always feel that, at some point in their life, they should tackle Chekhov?*

I warmed up for Chekhov on Gorky, but I suppose every director wants to direct Chekhov.

*Or is it just the romantic idea of Chekhov being so elusive, so difficult?*

Well, he is difficult because he is not a playwright.

*Oh? Go on.*

Sometimes he is a playwright and sometimes he is a prose writer. Therefore, sometimes his plays are relatively straightforward to do, and at other times they are near impossible. Normally, the impossibility comes in the more lyrical fourth acts – in *Uncle Vanya* and *Three Sisters*, for example. So, I have a love-hate relationship with Chekhov. If I was just reading the material as literature and did not have to put life in front of an audience on stage, I wouldn't mind at all because he is so accurate about human behaviour and has a forensic, merciless eye. But he is not always formally accurate. He starts writing a play and it slides into a novel and then back into a



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play. I can show you the lines which I think should go because of that in many of his plays. It might just be my taste, but I really find some of them a bit crude for theatre, especially when people say things that they would only think. So I think it's a good idea to have your scissors to hand when you're about to direct Chekhov.

*What did you scissor in* Three Sisters*?*

Not as much as I would do now. Often you only know what to cut after you have done a piece. Cutting a text can also be a perilous business. By mistake you can cut through major arteries! Scissors are very dangerous. I understand now that it takes hours of work to analyze Chekhov in order to direct it because you cannot see the deeper structure easily. You look and look, and think, 'Where is the event?' 'Where is the turning point?' 'What intention could possibly link all the words the character is saying in that unit together?' It is terribly hard.

*Three Sisters* was a labour of love, of analyzing line by line. Even so, there are sections of Act Three which I think are weak. I do not know what some of the characters are playing. I have no idea why Irina has incredibly long speeches in that room, at that time, to those people. I still do not know. Sections of Act Four feel expositional. I think it is really challenging and, if you do not get the deeper structure, it is like walking through a snowstorm. You cannot see anything. Audiences see a lot of bad Chekhov, don't they?

*They do.*

I would only go there again if I had a lot of time to prepare.

*What about the last play by Kevin Elyot,* Forty Winks*, which you premiered in October 2004 at the Royal Court? I thought the play was rather strange and disturbing. Your production sculpted it and it was beautiful to watch, but quite at odds with the text's gruesome subject. Or, am I saying this because I cannot stand the idea of child molestation?*

That is not what the play is about. It is a by-product of watching the play, which is about how you cannot escape the past. But the idea is embodied in such a potent metaphor, particularly now, that it is very hard for the key idea of the play not to get lost in its by-product, which is paedophilia. The writer is writing about how some people cannot escape the past, and are diminished by it, and do not live a full life because of it. Because of this they can commit acts which are wrong and would be abhorrent to them in any other circumstance. It's also important to say that the play is not condoning paedophilia in any sense. It is also about the family, death, and frustrated desire. It is formally very difficult, too, and has some lovely hoops for a director to jump through.

*And* A Dream Play*, which began rehearsing in December 2004?*

We have spent most of our time looking at dreams. People have brought in their dreams, and we have tried to re-enact them. We have studied how dreams operate and are trying to apply those rules to the text, which is fascinating. We are devising material as well as working on Strindberg's text.

*Do you mean 'devising' for this in the sense in which you meant the term earlier?*

No, it is bolder. In *Iphigenia*, the text goes along and then there might be a two-minute improvisation within an agreed intention and purpose. The actors go off the text into improvisation and then back onto the text, whereas with *Dream Play* we go off the text for much longer into devised material and also have cut substantial swathes of the play. The overall map of Strindberg's play is there, with its big themes and ideas, but we have added material from our dreams to it.

We are also bookending the story with two scenes about the person having the dream in the waking world before he falls asleep, because there is nothing worse than not knowing whose dream it is. I am sorry I am so literal, but I need to know who the dreamer is. It could be one of three people. Some people argue that it is three people dreaming simultaneously, but I do not think that happens in life, and I think there would be a



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credibility issue for the audience because of it. So we are adding two new scenes which take place in the waking world. We see the character who is about to have a dream, and what his life is like, and why he had the dream. We understand why he had the dream and then we wander inside his psyche.

*It appears from the dance sequences of* A Dream Play *that you are paying homage to Pina Bausch. Has she influenced your thinking about staging, and how?*

I first saw Pina Bausch's show, *Nelken*, in Paris when I was twenty-three. It was breathtaking, and her work has influenced many productions. The influence was originally to do with costumes, psychology, and her articulation of male–female communication (or non-communication). Later I studied her work on video and noticed the attention she pays to design, space, and light. These observations subsequently influenced my work with designer Vicki Mortimer over the last five years. And, yes, in *A Dream Play* the dance sequences were a quiet homage to her.

*How different is Caryl Churchill's rendition of Strindberg's text? Did she consult you or work in collaboration with you as she was writing?*

In our production of *Dream Play* we used about forty per cent of Strindberg's text in Caryl's version. The rest was devised material from different sources, mainly the actors' dreams, Jung's book on dreams, and Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*. At the point that I asked Caryl to do the version I had no idea that I would only use such a small proportion of the original text. However, I had a hunch that I might chop some of the text and add new material. I told Caryl this. When Caryl was working on the version, we had several meetings where we went through her version together. So it was a collaborative process at that point. Afterwards, Caryl came to several rehearsals and, when she wasn't able to, we kept her abreast of all the changes and cuts we were making.

*Did her version pose any particular questions or problems for you from a directorial point of you?*

No. She was very true to Strindberg's original material, so the problems that we faced were those inherited from Strindberg. If anything, Caryl made our job easier by finding a more compressed form of words that mirrored the Swedish better and using anachronisms that communicated the original ideas more effectively to a British audience today.

*Now that several months have passed since you staged* A Dream Play *and you have the benefit of hindsight, do you see any particular aspects of your work as a director emerging from it?*

Not really. That's probably something you can judge better than I can!

*Did you have any particular difficulties staging* Jephtha [*May 2005*]*? I know you have staged operas before, but did this oratorio, which is a different form from opera, pose any special challenges for you?*

We made the piece originally in Cardiff two years ago and the ENO production which you saw was, in effect, a revival with two different cast members, a different conductor, and different chorus. When we were working on it originally in Cardiff, the main problem was finding a style for the acting and motivating the choruses so that they were credible psychologically. In the end we opted for realism, which was a strange solution given the formality of the music. The chorus of forty were given individual characters, backhistories, and clear functions in each scene in which they appeared. This was a challenge which the original Welsh National Opera chorus rose to with gusto and, in many ways, it was their absolute commitment to the characters they were given, the world we were making, and the issues at stake that made the production work. In many ways, it is about a community as much as it is about individuals.

As far as the protagonists were concerned, we worked as I would have worked with actors on character, relationships, time, place, and so on. We also watched Kieslowski's film *A Short Film about Killing* to give them an idea of the style of acting required (quite different from their normal expectations) and



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to search for ideas as to how to stage the final scene of Act Three precisely. It mattered to me that it was credible that Iphis was going to be killed, and this meant that not only Iphis but all the performers had to believe in her imminent slaughter.

The overriding challenge was to present the story, characters, and events so that an audience would believe that they were happening in real time to real people. It was made in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq and we wanted the production to have a conversation with that situation.

*Do you see* Jephtha *as a musical continuation of your production of* Iphigenia at Aulis*? How?*

Not quite a musical continuation – rather, it's just another version of the same story, a story which fascinates me. There are some parallels and some major differences. I did my first production of *Iphigenia at Aulis* in Dublin in 2000 and then I did *Jephtha* in 2002 before directing *Iphigenia* again last year. Perhaps the experience of *Jephtha* did help sharpen my understanding of the story and the kind of tools I could use to articulate it in 2005, especially when it came to light, colour, and staging.

*How did you work with the singers? How different was this work from your direction of actors in plays?*

It was, as I said, exactly as I worked with actors, except for a few things. The rehearsal periods are much shorter in opera – five weeks compared to theatre's eight weeks – and much of the time can be taken up with musical concerns. We therefore did less work on areas like backhistory, improvisation, and textual analysis. After about three days of working on these things, we moved on to working on the scenes themselves. So much depends on the conductor's contribution and it is impossible to measure the nature of that contribution unless the singers are actually doing the scene. We ended up working more on the hoof, but always insisting that the actors adhere to the values of fourth-wall realism.

*What do you think might be different in your staging of* Jephtha (*and also of opera*) *from your staging of plays?*

If you have a chorus of forty people, you simply can't ask them to improvise on a nightly basis. You have to fix what they are doing. Neither can the singers improvise very much since they need what they are doing physically to be pretty fixed, so that they don't worry about how to sing and move at the same time. Therefore what happens on stage tends to be more planned when I work on operas than when I work in the theatre. For example, when working on the design of a play, I will concentrate on making a world and leave the minute details of how that world is used until very late in the rehearsal process. The use of space evolves with the actors. In opera, I tend to have worked through the use of the space in much more detail. The operas will always be more choreographed by myself and the movement director than the plays.



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