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PROJECT ARTS CENTRE, DUBLIN  
11.45AM – 1PM OCTOBER 4<sup>TH</sup>, 2007.  
SESSION 2 ~ ENSEMBLE THEATRE - THE VISION/THE REALITY**

**ENID REID WHYTE** (Chair) – Theatre Specialist, Arts Council of Ireland

**ANNE BOGART** – Artistic Director, SITI Company, New York

**MÁTÉ GÁSPÁR** – Managing Director, Kretakor Theatre, Budapest

**MALCOLM HAMILTON** - Blue Raincoat Theatre Company, Sligo

*ENID REID WHYTE:* For those of you who don't know me I'm the Theatre Specialist consultant to the Arts Council here in Ireland. I'd like to introduce the panel to you first of all.

This is Máté Gáspár who is from Budapest. He studied at the University of Paris and the Eötvös Loránd Faculty of Arts in Budapest. He is a director, editor and writer, and has been Managing Director of Kretakor Theatre Budapest since 2001. He is the 2007 recipient of the Hungarian Republic's Golden Prize of Merit.

Anne Bogart you are meeting again, but to remind you, she is the Artistic Director of the SITI Company, which she founded with Japanese director Tadashi Suzuki in 1992. She is also a professor at Columbia University where she runs the graduate programme in Directing.

This is Malcolm Hamilton who some of you will know, who is the Co-Founder and Writer In Residence of Blue Raincoat Theatre Company here in Ireland. He is a native of Sligo and has 25 years experience of arts development work in his hometown. He was a director of Sligo Arts Festival from 1983 to 1989 and a founding director of the drive to establish an arts centre in Sligo from 1989 to 1991, which is now the Model Niland Arts Centre. You will know Blue Raincoat's work and you may know that Blue Raincoat is the one full-time ensemble that we do have here in Ireland.

The question of ensembles has been bubbling up in the Irish theatre sector for quite a while now, the last few years certainly, and it's something that I've taken a great interest in. In that context you may have noticed that the Dublin Theatre Festival this year is programmed with that in mind. A number of companies are in fact producing more than one work in this year's festival, so that we do get a real sense of company. A sense of what company can do across at least more than one production.

We begin by asking all of our panel members to speak a few words about their own ensembles. I have asked them to talk a bit about the economics as well as the artistic pros and cons of working within company and ensemble. Every one of these companies will, I'm sure, have it's own personality and characteristics. I'll ask Máté to come in first, if you would please. Then we'll break after all three panel members have talked for questions from you. I'll try for once to keep my own mouth shut.

*MÁTÉ GÁSPÁR:* First of all I really would like to thank you for this occasion in the name of the whole company because, as you said, it's very particular and very relevant for us to be here and present two different shows. I think the most interesting part of the whole thing is if you come to see the see the shows, not just talk about them. We present with Kretakor two very different shows with the same cast and the same director, Árpád Schilling, who is the artistic leader of the company. I think these two performances that you have the occasion in Dublin to compare, one week to the next, can speak much

better about this topic than I can with my English which maybe will not be good enough to explain everything that I would like to.

In Hungary we are at the other side of the bubbling topic. I don't know if this word exists but it is debubbling now. As you may know in these post-Communist countries theatre work in an ensemble is a given. Like the sun rises and sets. When you work in theatre, you work in an ensemble. Full stop. There is nothing else. It has been the routine since the early 1950s when the theatres were all nationalised by the communist State and it remained like that after the change of the system in 1989.

In Hungary the particular situation was that because of the very strong lobby of the big generation – I mean the generation born around 1940-45 who were very representative of what we can call the big pseudo-psychological realistic Hungarian theatre tradition. One outstanding example was presented in these last days in Dublin by the Katona József. These very important artists who are directors and who are also at the head of these institutions, they could preserve this system which survived as if nothing had happened in our country over the last twenty years.

On one hand it's fantastic because when you come to Budapest, for example, you have a choice of forty or fifty different plays in very different venues and quite often you can see good quality acting and a very wide repertory. On the other hand, and I would like to pick up a word that you mentioned, there is this certainty or uncertainty of being and how it relates to being an artist. I have the feeling that on the other hand that this certain position of being in an ensemble and working regularly as in a sort of factory can affect - and in Hungary I can say that it does affect - the quality. People working in these State theatres have the privilege to feel that they are in a very closed and safe circle which has not too many things to do with the radically changing social context. That makes our theatre more and more at a distance from the reality and it makes the status of the theatre and of the artists or actors in this ensemble work more anachronistic.

That makes us in Kretakor, which is an independent company so we are not in the institutional system, think about alternatives and try to propose alternatives. It has obviously two sides: the artistic side that Árpád would be better placed to talk about, and also the economic and administrative side that I am running for the company for nearly ten years.

I don't have time to go deeply enough into that, but just to tell you that from the Eastern European side I consider the situation more and more fragile. Although it looks very established in fact it is not. It is not a question of money because the State keeps on subsidising this system pretty well, but it becomes fragile from inside. This is because of these two stages of artists who therefore are not doing their best to get as close as possible to get to the actual social, economical context of the country or the Hungarian society. That makes the responsibility of the form like our company even bigger due to our flexibility and mobile way of existing because we don't have a theatre, we don't have a venue, we don't even have a rehearsal place. We are on a constant tour even in our own city and also pretty much in the countryside and abroad. This makes us discover slowly – because we are still rather young. Árpád was twenty when he started, so now twelve years later we are still relatively at the beginning of this career. Our task is not only producing good performances that can be sold to big festivals like here but also to think about and propose models to make the whole system more flexible and to assure a small place at least for non-institutional, non-state directed artistic forms, which is absolutely not evident.

I think I should also think more and more about what you said about attitude. I think it's mainly about the attitude of every single actor or person who plans his or her future in the theatre to find their right position and the right attitude towards this situation. That's why for example the workshop that Árpád is taking at the moment with the Next Stage programme with 15 or 16 very interesting theatre makers, for us it's a big experience and that's why he asked me to come because he prefers to be with them and discuss

and discover each other more. For us it's really relevant to see people so autonomous and so adeptly thinking about their future plans, which is absolutely not the case, unfortunately, in our theatre system. Even in a company like ours we have to force actors to keep on thinking, to keep on asking questions, to keep on provoking each other, because of the relative comfort of the whole thing makes us sit back a little.

*ENID REID WHYTE:* Thank you. Malcolm?

*MALCOLM HAMILTON:* I was fishing around for a few reference points before coming here today to just start off. One that came up was reading a bit from Peter Brook who was talking about his trials and tribulations in staging Genet's *The Balcony* in Paris. In spite of the fact that he was very popular in Paris at the time he couldn't get any theatre to touch Genet's work. He also got a few threats from the police about putting it on. But the biggest obstacle he felt was that Genet had insisted that only an ensemble group that had been together for a very, very long time would have the necessary skills to master Genet's intricate work. Which Brook of course thought was slightly pretentious and I suppose most people here would agree with that. Nonetheless he did see some merit in the idea and set about creating an ensemble. For a director who, up to that, all his successful plays had taken him little more than four weeks to direct, one imagines that the creation of this ensemble probably took him two or three or four weeks extra on to his rehearsal period.

The point I'm making with that is that the idea of what makes an ensemble seems to be a very movable feast. I suppose that's rightly so. How long does it take to create an ensemble? How many people should be involved in it? What methodologies do they use? All these are questions. There is no meritocracy it seems in any of that. Ensemble, I suppose, rather than being a catch-all phrase or an end in itself is probably a phrase you can use to describe certain things that are already in existence. You can describe a play with a group of people who are on a stage who've only been together a few weeks putting on a performance as being an ensemble and giving an ensemble performance. I suppose really the only useful thing, with that in mind, that I can do is talk a little bit about *Blue Raincoat* and why we were set up the way we were from the outset and why we function still fifteen years later still in that regard.

There are a few bald facts: first of all, the company has got twelve full-time employees and three part-time employees. We also have our own theatre space called *The Factory*, which we opened roughly six months after we had done our first production in 1991. The twelve member group is comprised of a six member core group of actors, at present. Two of those actors, together with the Artistic Director and myself would have been in the company since 1991. Another two of those core actors would have been with us since 1995. There's another two actors, the rookies of the company, who are with us since 1998 and 2001. Our company manager, and although I'm an atheist I can confirm that there is a god, has been with us since 1998. Within the fifteen year period of time there would have been another four actors that worked with us between three and eight years. I think all together, I was trying to tot that up earlier, there's about 108 years of career experience amassed between all those people being together in the one place at the one time.

That group functions as an ensemble at a number of levels within *Sligo*. First of all we're a group of people who every day, more or less, for the past fifteen years have gone to work, rehearse, stage performances together in one particular venue and to try and carve out a relevant niche for ourselves in Irish theatre. It seems within the group there is not really a demarcation existing between what we would call the artistic ensemble and the management administration ensemble. Everybody within the company, because we have our own venue, has got a myriad of jobs that we actually do. So when we're not in production we're engaged in a lot of other activities such as developmental work, working with different groups in the community, actually running and maintaining the venue, fundraising. Everybody works at a number of levels within that group, just to make the thing possible and to keep it ticking over. So, in that instance, as an overall group we are an ensemble that get along and informs each

other etc. When we were setting up back in 1991 one of the key models we had of course was just down the road, that was Druid, who had seemed to have done all that before and still are doing it to this day.

Within the company then, delving down a little more into the artistic fabric of the group, all of our actors are trained in a variety of theatre disciplines. Many of them have actually been over with Anne's company in New York, learning Suzuki Method and Viewpoints. All of our actors are trained. Four of them are trained to three-year full-time diploma levels in the discipline of the French master Etienne Decroux. Decroux, for those of you who aren't familiar with him, is a guy who spent his whole life developing a corporal grammar for the actor. It's a specific, highly honed and highly tested idea. For instance Marcel Marceau, who recently died, would have been one of Decroux's earliest students. So four of our company are trained to a three-year diploma level at the Ecole de Mime Corporel Dramatique under Steven Wasson and Corinne Soum who are actually Decroux's last assistants. That provides us artistically with a bedrock language that unites the company and, crucially, allows us to develop each of our works to the optimum possible at any given time.

From the very outset it was our intention – we felt, setting up in 1991, that if we were to succeed or to become in any way relevant within theatre, we would have to create a bit of space and time. Time came in the form of people who are committed to working over a long period of time, and the space ultimately resulted in The Factory, which opened in 1991. I suppose other than that, there is a plethora of things that result from that group now being so strong and being in place, which in the last six years we're only really getting to grips with.

One of the main advantages we find as an ensemble – a bit like Enid was saying with the idea of repertory companies being here and bringing a number of works – we have developed an ability over the last six years in particular, an ability to hold works alive and vibrant over a prolonged period of time. Earlier this year we would have been touring one play over to Spain which was first staged in 2002, we did a national tour of two plays simultaneously throughout the spring of this year and one of those productions was a play that was first staged in 2001. The second was a play that was staged in 2005. So you have this opportunity with each of your pieces that they become part of your culture and the fabric of the company. That gives you great flexibility when it comes to touring and also within the company it gives you a great dynamism that you can employ for your actors. So there's a great variety in what you can put on, where you can put it on, and even in terms of ringing up venue managers you've three or four different productions that are available to tour. Or venue managers ringing you. So you have great flexibility, depth and scope. You also have the ability to go back and continuously develop and readdress those works and to try and get them better and better. Things you missed or things you didn't quite achieve, you get a chance to go back and achieve again.

In a broader sense, in terms of Enid's issue of economics, one of the things in the early days of the company, and still today, because of the lack of resources you were always looking out for different things to do to augment your finances. It's more the case now that there's a lot of work that we do that has come to us that we're really pleased to do because it helps develop us further. Schemes that you get involved with, through which you can actually augment the salaries and augment the finances of the company a bit. These would be key developmental works. We'd be working closely with Sligo County Council, and various concerns like that, developing the arts in the region.

Other than that I'm not sure what else I can add about the company and its dynamics. I suppose afterwards if there are any questions I can hopefully answer them a little bit clearer in terms of how we have managed to work and keep things going for the last fifteen years.

*ENID REID WHYTE:* Thank you Malcolm. Anne, one more time.

ANNE BOGART: So Druid is still an ensemble?

MALCOLM HAMILTON: Yes.

ANNE BOGART: So you're not the only ensemble?

MALCOLM HAMILTON: I would regard them as one. Druid today has Marie Mullen and Garry Hynes who are still the key people involved in their current production here in Dublin from 1975. There's a sense, I was thinking yesterday, in a country the size of Ireland with 4 million people – we're probably the size of Birmingham – there's a theatre community that's probably 4000 or 5000 professionals. You'd know better Enid, is it bigger?

ENID REID WHYTE: Smaller. There's about 2000 in total.

MALCOLM HAMILTON: Ok. So when you look at all the people that Druid work with and have worked with through the years there's a sense that Ireland is an ensemble. There's a very small base which we're drawing on that we're all a part of. It's like a university more than anything else, would be my feeling. But I would regard Druid as an ensemble through and through, in my opinion. How you do define it?

ANNE BOGART: Speaking subjectively I would imagine I'm in a room and people come in to that room and then leave, and some stay. As a young director I had no means to create things, but I always felt I was in a room making something. Actors would come in and people who would help produce, and then leave, and others would come in and started staying. It always seemed that actors were the key ingredient for me. They stayed the most.

Somebody once said, Anne who do you get crushes on? I said, oh, actors, all the time. I started asking different directors who they get crushes on. There are some who get crushes on playwrights and some who get crushes on designers. They want to hang out with the designers. Maybe that's the reason why the first strong, steady room was a room full of actors and myself with the SITI Company. We had really lousy management – lovely people – but lousy management and lousy stage managers and lousy fundraisers. But we had a really wonderful room full of actors. Little by little we started finding quality stage managers who ended up staying in the room, and then administration that ended up staying, and suddenly we feel whole. That everyone is top quality. But it took a long time. I think we went through eight managers in fifteen years?

[from audience]: More. More like eleven.

It's really scary. There were some scary people and some very nice people. Someone once said to me, and I wonder how you feel about this with Árpád. Someone in Prague once said, being a manager to an artist driven company is like being the janitor of the soul. It's difficult right? But you do your own directing also.

MÁTÉ GÁSPÁR: I used to.

ANNE BOGART: See? But the SITI Company is nineteen strong and now fortunately with a very strong management, which is really the key I think. To find partners. We've only lost in fifteen years two people. Which is extraordinary.

I think there's several reasons why we lose so few company members. Number one was because when I started it I was not a spring chicken and I didn't want to only work with spring chickens, so I said everybody has to get paid. Number one priority is that actors need to get paid. In New York City it's abominable. On Broadway you can make some money. But actors working Off Broadway can make some money and Off-Off Broadway can get paid nothing. True right? I think most of the really big name theatres pay like \$200-\$300 a week. I find that horrifying. The Actor's Equity allows that only in New York because supposedly it's that horrible word, showcase. A sickening word.

So the first this I said was that people who work in this company actually have to get paid a decent salary. Now immediately we lost a lot of work because people would say, do you want a project here? And I'd say well, how much are you paying the actors? And so there was a lot of sacrifice. To tell the truth what actually happened was that we ended up either getting paid decently or nothing. The actors would sometimes say, we just want to do this gig. It's not that everything was well financed, and continues not to be. But I think one of the reasons why the company stays is because one of the number one principles is that actors and company get paid decently. Now 'decently'. That's a big question.

Another reason, I think, that people say is the view about the roles, what one does. In other words, in any rehearsal situation there's a director, there's an actor, there's a designer, there's a dramaturg etc. People tend to think I'm the director, you're the actor. You do what you do, I do what I do. You tell me what to do, when. If there's any threat of crossing lines it gets dicey. I tend to think that roles such as Actor, Director, Manager, Stage Manager, Sound Designer are like windows, or like shoes. You can look through a window that is a directorial window, you can look through one that is an actor window, you can look through the sound design window, you can look through the stage management window. It's fluid. People can change windows or put on those different shoes. They are ways of looking at the thing one is making. Therefore, if you come to watch a SITI Company rehearsal, I'm not the only person directing. Somebody can take a look at the show from a director's point of view. I might step into an actor's point of view. The sound designer quite often steps into the director's shoes. It's a very particular way of looking at the play, that those roles are fluid. Therefore there is not a stratification in the company in terms of who does what. Therefore there is a sense of ownership. Personally I'm not a micro manager. I can't stand that. I'm the opposite of a micro manager. Everybody has to kind of scurry to keep the company in existence, which I think can be good, as opposed to being on top of everything.

In terms of economics – this is shocking in the US system – we are 80% earned income and 20% unearned. That horrible word. It's usually the reverse in most companies in the United States. I don't think it's a great thing. It means we don't raise a lot of money, but we do earn most of our money, through touring – Harold Norris sitting right up there is our touring agent. You can speak to him any time. It's also because all of the company also teach. We do two training methods: Suzuki training and Viewpoint training. Actually three: Composition. All of the actors also teach, so we have a spring training programme, a fall training programme and a Saratoga four-week international programme. Also universities call all the time and say can you send an actor to do a two-week workshop. So the actors can, if they want to, have a salary pretty much all the year round because there's enough work. So when they're not rehearsing something or touring something or opening a new show they can also be teaching. That is what keeps us together.

*ENID REID WHYTE:* Thank you, all of you. Just a few things before we open it up, and I really would like to open it up quickly, just some words that we heard. When I said that Blue Raincoat is a full-time company, and that is the difference, it's not to say that anybody else doesn't have an ensemble of some description to the best of their ability. Blue Raincoat has hung on to one group of people for quite some time and they do work very full time at Blue Raincoat.

I think there are several things that have arisen. Our notion in Ireland about ensemble also has come from a 'debubbling' because there was the Abbey Company that was disbanded in the 1980s and there was a strong tradition of what were called her the 'fit up' companies that were touring around Ireland that were mostly made up of people that stayed together for quite some time. We became a very, very freelance country in the 1990s and very much mirroring the way Britain and the United States work, in that regard at any rate.

So when we talk about the nature of ensemble there are a lot of words that come up. One of the words we've heard from the panel quite a bit is training. When we talk about training I think we're also talking about methodology. Companies choose a way in which to work and those ways are not so obvious in mainstream Irish theatre. But I would say for the most part that you can identify a Druid show when you see one, you can identify a Rough Magic show when you see one, even though you might call those 'mainstream' theatre companies, for want of a better word. Either doing new work or work from the canon, but generally text-based. That would be perhaps different when we look at companies that would work in more physical ways and we have a better notion of what an ensemble is in that regard.

An ensemble is lots of things. I think the moveable feast, the debubbling, the ideas of what an ensemble may or may not be is an important one for us to think about here in Ireland. It's also important to think about the things that Máté said about the sinecure: the security removing some of the hunger and the desire to change, move and push. How do we keep those things fresh? I think the methodology thing is important, because we haven't really, I don't think, have developed one that is clearly ours, that is clearly Irish. I say that as a long-term resident and most of you know that I come from the States originally.

Other words I've heard is how the organic quality and the not organic quality in which those ensembles are formed. How do they get formed? Do they have rigid roles or are they like the SITI Company where things are fluid, or Blue Raincoat where things are multi-tasked? Which would be my ensemble experience too, the multi-tasking one, many years ago in my nefarious past.

I'd like to open it up now.

*SPEAKER 1 (MELISSA BAKER):* I'm Melissa Baker from the MoVe Trans Theatre Company based in Lille, France. I have a question that goes back to what Anne was talking about this morning and hopefully will tie in with this afternoon. What you were saying, Anne, about uncertainty, when you were talking about 9/11 and you said how people were really uncertain after that and all of a sudden they chose patriotism and they became certain. I guess what I understood from that is that there was a kind of closing down, a kind of death, and a conviction that leads to violence. You were saying that, and talking about how as an artist you need to preserve your uncertainty. Yet I know from having been in your workshops before and reading your books that you talk about as a director having to be very certain. And that it's a violent act but it's a very necessary act. When I'm listening to the different people from the different theatre companies I was kind of getting a sense in Hungary of this kind of ease that you get.

I'm a director and one thing I really struggle with is how do you keep that balance of being open and having that space and letting things develop in the company. Letting people come in and go out. How do you go from one position to another? Letting people have more power than you in the sense that the actors can participate here and they can say no and they can say yes, and designers as well. How do you do this very trusting, confident, we're all in this company together thing, and yet be violent and say this is the artistic creation that we are doing? This is it. How do you do that?

*ANNE BOGART:* I'll jump in first. I think that's a very good question. I have a theory that all great questions can be answered in the exact same way. Your question is how do you stay open and decisive at the same time. It's a great question. The answer – and please don't be frustrated – is, *exactly*. That is the paradox, that's the state of uncertainty.

I think the trick to being an artist is very simply, from a state of uncertainty to be exact. That's an amazing thing. Why is an actor inexact? It's because they don't know what they're doing. Because I don't know what I'm doing I'm not going to do anything in particular. But if from that state of not knowing what the hell you're doing you are exact anyway, it creates presence. So that a gesture has a particular presence. Or a way of speaking. We are not exact because we think we don't know what we're doing, or we

think we don't have the right to know, or I haven't done enough research. But being right is not being right. Being right is being exact. If you can be exact and at the same time let yourself not know what the hell you're doing then you create moments of great presence.

*MALCOLM HAMILTON:* I can probably only answer the question this way, in that it would be my view that there would be difficult times within our own ensemble. It can be very demanding, sometimes, working on the plays. It seems to me that whenever things threaten to go pear shaped, when those problems come as far as me, the issues have to be sorted back with the actor or the person who the problem is with. It has to be valid for them to work in this particular environment in this particular way at this particular time. If it's not valid or it's not relevant anymore they can see out the play or whatever, and after that maybe it's just not the right place for them and somebody else eventually comes in. I think within our own ensemble the key thing is that you have got a number of individuals who are totally responsible for themselves within that group. And are as equipped to leave it or stay within it, as they would see fit. That would be how I would feel about that anyway.

*ENID REID WHYTE:* I think it comes back to Anne's word, context. When do you need to be open and when do you need to be decisive? Choice is the word we use in the arts, isn't it? It's not right or wrong. It's choice. This choice is right for this play in this time in this place for this audience.

*SPEAKER 2 (DECLAN GORMAN):* I'm Artistic Director with Upstate Theatre Project in Drogheda. A question to nobody in particular and perhaps to all of you. Can you talk about the experience of brining in newcomers or particularly bringing in guests? I presume that not every play that Blue Raincoat has toured can be achieved by the six regular performers only.

I'd also be interested in examples of failure as well as success. What can be the problems? If you've got a really good regular methodology that works for you as a director, that works for your ensemble company. For many of the rest of us out here we don't have ensemble companies but you might have a method that you share with a group of associates. You've worked with the same people on a couple of productions. There's a lingua franca. You do good group work with them, you get there, and suddenly you're in a new context with some new people. I'd just be interested to hear how that has worked, both success stories and failures.

*ENID REID WHYTE:* Máté, you have some guest artists in the company, don't you?

*MÁTÉ GÁSPÁR:* Very rarely. In our company there are twelve members who are permanent, I would say. Permanent in the sense that they are performing in the whole repertory.

Maybe to give my answer to the previous question about the flexibility and how to stay open. I think the main question from our perspective is about where the rules are coming from. Very often in our structure these rules are coming from outside. You were talking about training. Hungarian theatre companies are trained by the repertory system. This is the main training. The fact that you have six, seven, eight, nine, ten performances that you play from one night to the other. This keeps the whole together. Plus the building. This is 90% of the whole and 10% left for the rest. From our perspective this should be the inverse. It is the main thing, the artistic wish. The vision of the director, the artistic leader of the initiative and the common vision of the ensemble who creates it. Even for us it is very difficult to deal with these two things because these contextual barriers are really structuring our daily life. After that it is very easy to forget what we are looking for inside. Our constant fight is not to forget what we are looking for and that we would really like to stay open and violent if is needed. Violent against these structural rules.

That means also that when Árpád decided to form the company he talked to these, first of all seven, then eight, then twelve actors to come. The rule was that we sort out



everything together. There is not a question of being old or young or tall or short. We have to sort it out with this ensemble. After, when we opened out our circle – Kretakor means Chalk Circle. Our politics in the last five years was to enlarge the circle more and more, so we started by inviting other directors to come and work with the company, so sometimes they had some actors they loved who they wanted to introduce to our company. Like that one by one a couple of people came to work with us, and as we have a principle that if we invite a director to come to work for the company once there has to be a second time too. This is a rule because the first show can be very successful or unsuccessful but it doesn't mean anything so the second meeting is very important. So they came back for the second time and they brought back also these actors, so in a way they became a part of the repertory. For example in *Blackland* we have two actors who we call guests, but guests in the sense that of the eight plays that we now have in the repertory they are playing in only two or three.

*ENID REID WHYTE:* Malcolm, how about you?

*MALCOLM HAMILTON:* I suppose we'd work with a lot of guest actors, directors and writers who'd come in and out of our productions. Some of those might have worked with us over a number of years on several different projects and I suppose to a degree you constitute that then as being a successful relationship though they mightn't be core members of the ensemble. That can be difficult to define, but you work with them over a long period of time because you like them and they get on with you and you get on with them. It's an open company in that regard. Indeed, last year when we did *The Chairs* we did it with two members who weren't in the ensemble at all because we were touring another Ionesco piece at the time. It suited us to be that way. We had Mikel Murfi and Ruth Lehane in with us.

I can't remember there ever being a disaster in the way that you might describe it. You would put on a show and maybe it would be that you mightn't work with somebody again because the particular styles didn't meld or blend, but it's never been the case that somebody would have left or came in and didn't really gel with the company. Again, I suppose, because we're in Ireland and a lot of the people we would wind up working with would be people that we'd actually seen and would know us. It's an organic relationship like that that takes place.

*ANNE BOGART:* The only disaster I can think of is what we call in the States EPAs. Equity Principle Auditions. Where all the actors are union actors and we have to three times a year do auditions for actors. It's insane and sort of a disaster because, although the company does it and it's quite a beautiful experience when they lead the auditions themselves as opposed to me, or from a directing chair. All of the actors who come into the company as guests or are brought into the company come through intensive long workshops. Four-week training programmes. That's how we get to know each other, which I find much preferable because it becomes a mutual sussing out. The actors can figure out if it's really what they want to be doing and we can figure out what it's like to live with this person for four weeks. So the workshops, the training programmes are really important for us to locate young actors coming into the field who share a sense of adventure that seems similar. So the EPAs are disastrous. Each one is like 15 minutes. We bring in ten or fifteen actors and say go up and down in ten. It's silly and really a disaster. Other than that there's no disasters so far.

*SPEAKER 3 (ANNIE RYAN):* I have a company called The Corn Exchange, which is an ensemble company made up of freelance actors. Whatever that means. It essentially means we are only allowed to be a company when we can afford to hire people. I've a loose company and have been dealing with the question of how to have an ensemble for so long. I guess my question to you is how do you deal with losing people to film?

*ENID REID WHYTE:* Do you lose people to film? Or TV?

*SPEAKER 3 (ANNIE RYAN):* Maybe you don't.

*ENID REID WHYTE:* Not an issue with the panel I'm afraid. Is there anybody else in the house working in Ireland and having the issue around losing people to film? I know you do, but then there is there already the odd ethical actor out there who says, no I've already signed a company for seriously less money but I'm going to stay with them anyway.

*SPEAKER 2 (DECLAN CONLON):* I'm losing more people to family than I am to film.

*ANNE BOGART:* Now that, yes.

*ENID REID WHYTE:* That is an interesting dilemma. You may not know but we have a recent socio-economic study in Ireland that tells us a lot about that. But then again an ensemble is a society, is a family. Can be functional, can be dysfunctional. I think Anne brought out all that very well earlier.

*SPEAKER 3 (ANNIE RYAN):* If I can maybe change my question. I don't even know if it is a question. It's more an issue and I don't know if it's something people want to discuss over the two days. Most of our actors in Ireland are freelance and so when you talk about Druid, there's maybe a few of them who are starting but they don't have an actor's company who train together, which is what my idea of ensemble really means. That the methodology of the work is possibly as key as the fact that you have the same people working together all the time. What are you practicing. I guess one of the things that keeps stopping me, one of the things that pulls me back is to do with attitude. I don't know if there are any actors here, are there?

*ENID REID WHYTE:* We try to keep them out, Annie. They get in the way.

*SPEAKER 3 (ANNIE RYAN):* There's this idea of the freelance mindset. Do people want to commit? I'm sure Rough Magic and Druid, and I'm sure because we're here everyone's going to want to become ensemble companies from now on or something. But it's a very serious thing, you know, when you present an actor with a contract they have a lot of power then to decide whether to take the gig or not take the gig. And if it's a long-term contract like for a year, it's a tricky one to do in a country that's mostly made up of freelance actors. Also I don't think culturally they're used to having power, or wanting power even. Most of the people I've worked with unfortunately – like I've literally had core company people ask me 'Just tell me where to stand'. That's heartbreaking for me.

*ENID REID WHYTE:* I think the issue which is Irish and certainly may have resonances to all of you really does lie around two things. One of course is the economic factor and the ability to earn. We do know that theatre in Ireland, in terms of its individual practitioners, is highly dependent on the subsidy of the film, television and commercial media to provide a living for our performers that is something closer to reasonable. We all know the figure that the accrued income, the total income, not in your specific area, is very low in Ireland. For performers it's at the lowest at €7200 a year. That goes even lower when you're talking about just their acting work. It's pretty bad. They subsidise that through all kinds of ways. We do know the role of film and television in that, and we also know the role of partners, spouses, mothers and fathers and the State in all of that. That is a big issue here of course. That and the climb to fame one can presume has something to do with it, but there is also a serious interest in working in film and television. We can't deny that either.

That is a problem here; I'm not sure that problem is mirrored in the United States or in Hungary, or even in Sligo quite as much. It is a bit more of a Dublin centred problem one presumes. I don't know if anyone in the audience wants to talk about that. I would say, Annie, and I would love to hear the panel talk about this a bit, that many actors return and return and return to the stage, even the big, famous, global celebrity types who appear in magazines and whatnot, do try and get themselves back on the stage. You have to ask what is the motivation with that. I'm sure it has a lot to do with audience and being live and having a conversation in the room, rather than looking at a camera. It is an issue in Ireland, and it's one that could potentially be addressed by the

economics of a company, if the desire and will is there. But I don't suppose we'll know if the desire and will is there unless we can make – if we can make – ensemble and company a reality.

*ANNE BOGART:* You say you have the desire and the will but it's not working, right?

*SPEAKER 3 (ANNIE RYAN):* It's very tricky to finance. Very tricky. We can do three-week runs here. It's so highly subsidised. Also, your actors teach ... We've a very tiny pool ... I don't want to go on.

*ANNE BOGART:* I think the only thing is if you can think of it as a spiritual issue rather than a financial one, because if people gather around a spiritual issue the finances come by themselves. If you gather around a financial problem you just continue the problem somehow.

*SPEAKER 3 (ANNIE RYAN):* Amen to that.

*SPEAKER 4 (THOMAS CONWAY):* I'm working with Druid as the Literary Manager. I just want to ask about programming. Who gets involved in the decisions around programming and how you get to choose the work you do? Do actors get involved? It is related because again, in relation to the power the actor can have within their own career, can they contribute to the programming? Even if you are programming knowing that you have these actors to draw on are they part of that decision in any way?

*MÁTÉ GÁSPÁR:* In our experience we always thought from the very beginning that we are not interested in staging plays or particular writers or whatever, but that we were always feeling the needs inside of the company or where it was urgent to talk about some issue. Then we were always looking for the appropriate material for that particular issue. Of course if it's a play, if it's a classical play or a contemporary one we commission to be written, or it's a devised play created by the company, after the decision of course we discuss very closely about what and how it can be made. We keep on being very sensitive to all the inner resonances inside the company. For example, the *Blackland* show that we are playing here came out of a climate which was very frustrating in 2004, which was an election year in Hungary. Everybody was fed up. We were so nervous and so frustrated about what was happening in the streets and the political campaign and so on. It was an obvious choice to do something about that. After, Árpád proposed the roles and it became a devised play that everybody participated in creating.

Years ago we did the three plays of Büchner because it was also something we felt it was time to do. The company was still at an early age and we were relatively young, it was the old company of seven members. We thought that now it's time to meet this genius writer's oeuvre in its totality. So we did the three and everybody was very happy to participate in it. So we are not building a repertory because of the titles or the structure of it.

*ANNE BOGART:* It's usually me interested in something, and I think of interest as a disease that other people catch. It's my job to be interested. Although one of our company members is Charles Mee, Chuck Mee, and sometimes he'll propose plays that he's written and he's thinking about for the company, in which case we all get excited about working with him.

Leon up there – I keep pointing at Leon – he's a director as well as an actor, so he's starting to create projects that he initiates. That's a new direction of the company though; it's usually moi.

*MALCOLM HAMILTON:* One of the things about having a group like ours is that you have to plan both strategically and tactically for long years ahead. Our current artistic policy takes us up to 2011. A lot of the performance time and touring time we'd have already envisaged. We'd know pretty exactly what we're doing for the next two years and we'd

have a good outline of what we'd be attempting to do after that. I suppose at the end of the day the de facto decisions on the plays that are done rest with the Artistic Director Niall Henry, but there's an awful lot of stuff that's taken into consideration within that. Because we're an actor-based company the primary issue is the needs of the actors. Where they are in their careers and, as I was saying earlier, the dynamism in the programme, the variety that they get to do. There's also the issue of where you want the company to be after a particular period of time. What you hope to achieve in it and the issues of resources as to what can be done.

*ENID REID WHYTE:* But don't you start off with a basic philosophical, for want of a better word, exploration in that time period of artistic direction?

*MALCOLM HAMILTON:* For sure, yes.

*ENID REID WHYTE:* That thing you want to explore changes through these different periods of time.

*MALCOLM HAMILTON:* Yes, but it would change from a number of viewpoints. Say if I was writing a play, that might be two or three years in gestation. That idea would be introduced early on, having worked maybe with Jocelyn Clarke a lot. Jocelyn would be coming forth maybe with ideas, that this might be interesting at a particular time for the company, so it might be two years or three years before that an idea is introduced and gradually it grows into the company. Ideas would be introduced by the actors, as well, and they would sort of evolve. When we did *The Strange Voyage of Donald Crowhurst* that was somebody's dad who had this really interesting story about sailing and said you should do something about this, back in 1996. We did it in 2003. There's kind of an accretion of areas that you work in and out of that you're kind of strategically, tactically planning to use that to the best effect. To be able to tour it and to optimise the best performance and optimise the variety for the people that are in the company. But the key consideration that that comes down to is always the actors. How long are they going to be on the stage, how many plays they can do, how will it bring them on, how will it develop and enhance their careers or their work.

*SPEAKER 5 (WILLIE WHITE):* Artistic Director of Project Arts Centre. To observe in the questions – and to ask a question – there's kind of a tectonic pressure between the way that ensembles work and the way that typically theatre seems to be made in this country which is about a fairly rigid hierarchy with the director at the top of the hierarchy. At a discussion in Edinburgh this summer, Elizabeth LeCompt of the Wooster Group, another ensemble of long standing, was asked pretty much the same questions, like how do you get things done when everyone has an opinion. She said, actually I don't have the answer sometimes so I just ask do you guys have the answer. It seems to me that the ensembles that are successful kind of let go a bit of this old fashioned literary theatre type hierarchy and are a little bit looser about it. Ok, the director's not going to get up and act in front of the audience, for sure, but they're a little bit more relaxed about it.

But I want to go back to something that Anne said in the first session because in Ireland ensembles are kind of like the Holy Grail. If only we had loads and loads of time the work would be amazing. I don't really believe that. My question is how do you prepare for those three weeks? The work doesn't happen in those three weeks. There's all kinds of preparation. Partly it's achieved by familiarity with the group, you've got common understandings, you've done lots of work together. But how is the work actually organised in the room for the three weeks, even if you get to go on working on it for another three years?

*ANNE BOGART:* For most plays, except for the ones that Chuck Mee writes, I usually prepare for two years in advance. I study. I mostly talk things into existence. Sometimes much to the annoyance of my company. We'll be in tech for one show and I'll walk in in tech and say, oh my God Orson Welles is amazing. We should do a play... and they say, Anne concentrate on the play we're doing now.

There's a theory that you can be a good beginner or a good middler or a good ender but you can't be all three. I'm a really good beginner and I'm a lousy ender, which is why I work with fanatically good enders as actors and designers, because they put their attention there. I'm already on to the next thing. So most of my time is spent ahead of the time. That's my job really. The other thing that helps is a really great stage manager who asks me annoyingly, months in advance, what are you going to be needing? Same thing with a brilliant managing director who will ask me questions before I'm ready to answer them, which actually force the issue, because they have to start fundraising for it. We all have to start fundraising for it. It's really a team effort to think ahead of time so that – exactly as you say - when you hit the first day of rehearsal you're running at top speed. Everybody's on board.

What I do also on the first day and sometimes it takes two days of eight hours of me talking, is I upload every thought that I've got. Every reference, every idea, every notion that might possibly happen from the two years of study, and then I let it go. Whatever stays, stays and whatever doesn't, doesn't. I don't hold any secrets back. It's all in. Then we start to create, and in the creative process that means not sitting that means actually staging. Basically saying, ok, start. It's scary for an actor. Start. Make a choice. In that crisis – and a rehearsal should be in a state of crisis, everybody in a state of crisis – you try to find grace inside of that. But first you have to fill yourself up, so it does take a tremendous amount of time and preparation from everybody. In particular the management side of the company and myself, and then the actors sort of grab it and run and they hammer it in the end, in ways that I lose interest in.

*ENID REID WHYTE:* Máté, how long would the creative process be in your company?

*MÁTÉ GÁSPÁR:* We don't have this three or four weeks rule, so I really cannot add to that.

*MALCOLM HAMILTON:* I suppose I'd be the same. There isn't a rule. Something becomes part of the consciousness of the company that you're going to do it. Because the group is there for months or a year before it's kind of been read in, and gradually by the time you're heading in for maybe eight weeks of specific rehearsal before a show would open, though we might have workshoped it a year before. It's impossible to say if there's a point where you walk into the rehearsal and the door closes, is there a difference between that and being outside the door and chatting about it relentlessly over coffee. I suppose that's one of the advantages that you do have, that a piece becomes part of the culture and the fabric of your group of people before you actually wind up in the rehearsal. There's already a degree of understanding. And then huge surprises as you find out that's actually not the way it's going to work.

*ANNE BOGART:* I just want to throw in one more thing? That is a huge part of the thing: we do workshop plays say in Saratoga with participants who come to train with us. Actually the actors in the SITI Company watch our students have the first stroke on the canvas. As we always say, you're going to be making all the mistakes that we get to avoid, so please make work on this subject. It is useful. That is usually at least a year ahead of that three-week start.

*MÁTÉ GÁSPÁR:* From our experience, just to confirm, I think it's very, very important and useful to plan workshops. Even inside of the company. For example a play like, again, *Blackland* or even *The Seagull* it was staged in four weeks actually, but this is because we always make workshops also in a summer residency where we do ten or fourteen very intensive days where we are very far from the capital, just with the company and a lot of improvisation and 24 hours work. The whole experiences that they have gathered allow us afterwards to make the performance quite quickly, even for Hungarian standards.

*ENID REID WHYTE:* It all sounds a bit like theatre heaven, doesn't it? I would like to thank our panel very much and I hope you enjoyed them as much as I did. Thank you.