

THE THEATRE SHOP CONFERENCE

Friday 4 October 2002

Liberty Hall, Dublin

The 9th annual Theatre Shop conference opened with an interview of the internationally acclaimed theatre director Declan Donnellan by Harold Fish, former Director of the British Council in Ireland.

With designer Nick Ormerod, Donnellan founded Cheek By Jowl in 1981, and has directed the majority of their productions. From 1989 to 1997, he was Associate Director of the Royal National Theatre. In 1997, he became the only British director to stage a work with the Maly Theatre Company in St Petersburg, when he directed *The Winter's Tale* in Russian and the following year he directed for the Avignon Festival, where he formed a company of French actors to play *Le Cid* by Corneille.

Among other international credits, Donnellan directed *Troilus and Cressida* at the Burgtheater in Vienna (1999) and *Boris Godunov* in Moscow with the Russian Theatre Confederation and the Avignon Festival (2000), which toured England and Europe during 2001 and 2002. December 2001 also saw the opening of Tony Kushner's new play *Homebody/ Kabul* which he directed for the New York Theatre Workshop. In 2002, he became the first Director of The Academy, set up by the Royal Shakespeare Company, and Donnellan also published his book, *The Actor and The Target*.

Harold Fish

I started off life as a teacher, and one of the things you have to be prepared for, whatever you planned, it's not going to work. So, chapter one: Improvisation.

Declan Donnellan. It is very, very difficult to know where to start, so I thought I'd start with a couple of quotes. Because we're an international session, I didn't think it would be too out of place to start with a Spanish quote.

I think it was *El Mundo* that described Declan as 'el Ingles Errante'. Those of you who know Spanish will know that more or less means 'the Wandering Englishman'. The trouble is, 'errante' has much more to do with Knights errant than with wandering. 'Errante' still has that association of dignity and chivalry and going around the world sort of knocking off

dragons and things like that, and looking for the development and protection of good. There's nothing sort of errant in the Spanish term 'errante'.

They described Cheek By Jowl, Declan's company, as a quasi-itinerant company. But I think they are two extraordinary sort of epithets to describe Declan and his company, because both those epithets, in Spanish, have this incredible ring around them about of good, and of the search for good in this world. Of course, if you say 'errante' in Spanish, most people will associate that with Hidalgo Errante, and most people will associate that with Don Quixote. Now I don't want to go to far down that line, but Don Quixote happens to have been a hero of mine, and so is Declan.

If I take one step aside to go back a little bit to my days in the British Council and why Cheek By Jowl with Declan was such an attractive thing, someone has written of Cheek By Jowl that you can get most of their sets into an overnight bag, but the sets are still dramatic.

Declan also somewhere is quoted as saying, for him, 'Good theatre is about actors, and a good theatre and the actor must be given freedom, and the actor must have discipline to take advantage of that freedom.' Declan, perhaps that might be the best place to start, because I'm only quoting you, would you like to take up that idea? Well, there are several things: itinerant, actor and freedom.

Declan Donnellan

I do think that good theatre is the actor's art, first and last. I think that's very important. And I think we live in cultures, particularly in Britain and in Ireland – one of the things that is always particularly painful for these two islands is to bear to examine the things that we hold so much in common. I think that a lot of the fury that one island engenders in another is because of that extreme closeness. I don't think that's sentimental, I think that results in a lot of bloodshed, but it's got all the charm of a row over a family Christmas. I think that Britain and Ireland are both countries with fantastically strong acting traditions. By that I mean, yes, Ireland has a great writing tradition, but so does Britain. I think the actor is in a very strong position, particularly in Ireland, where people actually know about good acting. I saw a fantastic performance last night of Glengarry Glen Ross which was very, very well acted, brilliantly acted, and I could hear people talking – I was sadly on my own, so I was able to

hear what people were talking about at the interval – and people were talking with animation about how wonderful the performances were. I love that. That to me is something that is so true: right to the other extremity in Europe, in Russia, that's one thing that we have very much in common, which is a great love of acting, and the knowledge that the actor has an extraordinary power.

What I like to do is to consider – when I work, I form a group of actors, and then I work with them on the play. What I always feel is, after you've chosen the space you're going to perform in, and after you've chosen the actors who are going to be in a play, all concepts of interpretation are banal because creation has already interpreted quite enough for you. Any bit of creativity is solved in the amassing of those particulars.

The rest is really problem-solving. Problem-solving can be sublime, but it is more to do with problem-solving rather than having ideas, and rather than, heaven forbid, trying to be creative. I'm a great disbeliever in creativity. I think it's very bad for us. None of us should try to be creative. It's far more important to be curious. And I think we can make some distinctions in life. I'd like that if it's interesting, it should give you some uncomfortable choices between concepts you often think you can have both of and you can only have one. One of these is creativity and curiosity. I would say, please don't try to be creative – that's what I say to the actors, anyway. Because as soon as you start trying to be creative, you end up like everybody else. If you've curiosity and are actually trying to see what's outside you, then you end up fulfilling your true individuality. But you can only apprehend your true individuality by perceiving the thing that is outside. That's why curiosity is such an incredibly important factor for the actor. And we know too, that when we're depressed, and we're always depressed, but when we're very depressed, the first sign of that is our lack of curiosity, everything seems so mundane. You've glimmers when things are getting better in your life, you think, 'Oh, I'd like to read that book. I'd like to see that. I'd like to do that,' how curiosity starts to kick in.

Harold Fish

The Cheek By Jowl website mentions something like having worked in 40 countries and 300 cities.

Declan Donnellan

And we can't go back to any of them!

Harold Fish

Most of that touring work has been the classics, and not just, as it were, the English classics, but you've worked in French and German and Spanish. I would like to ask you whether you think there's some kind of connection between the great range of your international touring success and the fact that you work on the classics in a particular way.

Declan Donnellan

Yes, I think that's true. I always used to feel a slight guilt, the sort of general guilt of the necrophile, by not doing new writing. But then I did do three premieres of Tony Kushner's plays, Millennium Approaches, Perestroika, and Homebody/Kabul, and I used to have a full head of blonde curls before I did, if you can imagine, so I feel I've paid my dues. They were wonderful experiences but very exhausting, dealing with all those words. And a great privilege to work with Tony.

I think I do actually like working with the classics because I like working with actors, and I choose the plays I choose because they seem to me to offer the greatest amount of freedom to an actor. I think, for me, that one of the defining glories is if you like a Shakespeare text or one of the other great plays – great is such a horrible word, isn't it, it sounds so poncey, and so elitist, but I can't think of another one – moments in Hamlet or Lear or what have you, that there's a feeling that the actor at certain given moments is completely free to do anything. There are extraordinary moments in King Lear or in Hamlet that the actor might do anything, the plot might go anywhere. We know what will happen. We've all read those endless essays about the ineluctability of fate – it doesn't really work like it's supposed to in the books. There are extraordinary moments, even in the most tedious scenes of Laertes and Claudius arguing over the poison that seems to go on for about half an hour, but during that sequence you still feel that anything could happen, and that's one of the extraordinary things about Shakespeare.

I think the more interesting thing that you'd like me to get on to is the business, that I've enjoyed performing abroad, but not as a culture for export. It's very much not that, our work

was premiered in Britain and we tour around in Britain, but really to think of having a wider audience and what's important for me is to discover what is truly human. Theatre's a means of discovering, of making some small, blind step in the dark, stumbling and inelegant, but still some attempt, to find out what it is to be human. To me, theatre – the theatre that I like, I can't say what theatre must or mustn't be because there are a million sorts of theatre, and I can only talk about the theatre that I like, and indeed, talk about the theatre that I think I like at the moment because I hope and guess that's developing – but for me theatre always must have a human proportion. Because it's about human beings and it can be contained in somebody looking in a way that opens up a world for you. Dame Judi Dench, who was in a production of *The Seagull* which I didn't much enjoy, but Judi had one moment, I suppose most of you know *The Seagull*, during the head-bandaging scene, one of those great mother-son battles. Constantin was bandaging her head, during a lull in the fight, and he said to her, 'Don't you remember those people you were nice to when we were in digs in Moscow?' She says, 'Who?' and he says, 'Those dancers.' And then Judi went, 'Oh, *them*.' And, just on those two words, what she saw so clearly was two outrageous queens living in a flat above her in these really seedy digs – and she just saw something. And it would probably not be noticeable to very many people, it sort of lasted a millisecond, but she actually saw something outside her. And for me that was one of the greatest moments of acting that I've seen, it was just a little tedious corner of a performance, but just that ability to actually see, to see another reality.

I think that's what an actor does, an actor is somebody who sees. Not in too much of the creepy way of a seer, somebody's who's going to shamanistically take you into another world, but yes, take you into another world. The actor draws you into the flash within their own body, within what they're doing. I get very upset, too, hearing people dissect performances afterwards, 'X was good, Y wasn't so good, I thought S—' This is how, very often, Hollywood producers talk when you meet them for a film. They always assume actors want to be in their film. They go, 'Do you think Nicole Kidman's sexy enough for that role? I don't think so,' and you have all these sort of bizarre conversations about people that they could never begin to be able to work with. I hate that kind of chocolate-box choosing of actors, the sort of theatre I love is rooted in acting but rooted in ensemble acting, in other words, and the director is very important in that acting. The director isn't somebody who says humble things in public and gets lots of awards. The director is somebody who looks after the

ensemble, which means the director looks after the spaces that happen between the actors. I once had a rather disturbing conversation with an Austrian director. We were talking about some actors, mostly German actors in a production, and I was saying, 'Well, the problem is they can't act together,' and she was saying, 'Yes but you must admit, they're very good actors.' And I was saying, 'Yes, yes, no, they can't actually act together, they can't play the scene together,' and she says, 'Yes, I know, but you must admit, they are still very good actors.' 'But they can't play the scene together, they can't play together.' "Yes, but you must admit—" It really went on for some time. We were in Austria, and Haider was just beginning, and I was beginning to think of a different species, rather frighteningly, in these racist times, and the conversation just went on and on, with me completely not understanding her, and her completely not understanding me. But the thing which we didn't understand in each other was really quite frightening, if you analyse it. I'm not saying that I'm good, she's bad, or that she's good, I'm bad or whatever, but that's quite a trench for me. It's quite a trench for me. 'They're good actors but they can't play together' is not something that in any way computes.

What I love is helping actors – not as a teacher, but as a coach, because they can do things I can't do – to help them to be able to be confident enough to work with each other so that they can take things from each other and give things to each other; take things from the audience and give things to the audience. So that above all, they can be present, because that is really all an actor needs to do is be present because we then must start to admit the terrifying reality that we are anything but present, and that we have tiny little flickerings of presence in our lives. Like, for example, when you see a car accident and the world goes into slow motion just as you think you're about to die or you think that somebody else is about to die, and time appears to slow down, and afterwards, 'Wasn't that extraordinary, it seemed to last half an hour and it only lasted a couple of seconds?' as the kid flew in the air on the bicycle in front of the bumper. I do think that's true, that's what time is like. I think that our lives are thousands of times longer than we dare play them, but we make ourselves absent for all sorts of reasons, and it's the 'making ourselves absent' that gives us this sense of time going fast. I think as we get older, we're very aware of the amount of time that we've wasted. Not wasted because we haven't become Taoiseach or wasted because we haven't made a hundred million, but just wasted because we haven't been properly present. We've been worried or anxious or ambitious or hopeful, but we've never been, we've never actually seen, we've just never been present.

Of course, we are present, we can only delude ourselves that we're absent, but it's a terrifying illusion and one that I think we suffer from. But that's one of the reasons why theatre is a very serious art form.

Harold Fish

Declan, can I come back to the classics, in a way, but try and get hold of the international side again, because the very notion of international does suggest a lot of differences, that somehow Russia is different from Spain, and Germany is different from France, et cetera? What you have done through the classics, whether they're Russian or Spanish classics, you've gone in search of sameness, for that common, human element.

Declan Donnellan

When I'm interviewed about the differences between, say, performing in Moscow and in New York, people always want, journalists normally want twee, cosy, understandable, frameable differences, like, you know, they were playing the balalaika in one place – and of course that to me is completely boring and not true, because what's moving to me is what's completely the same in both countries. Even the most, I'm not talking about the noble moments, I'm talking about the moments when Lear perceives that his daughter has been hanged. I'm also talking about very simple comic slapstick. I remember in Moscow, myself and Mick explaining what a double-take was: he's on the stage, he looks round, he sees the other person there with a knife, he looks back, then realises that the man has a knife and he looks round again, you know, a double-take. We spent some time explaining this fairly embarrassing piece of Ealing comedy to these very grand actors. At the end of it, there was a silence and they said, 'How do you know so much about the Russian sense of humour?' And I said, 'Call me a genius, I don't know.' So you can learn an enormous amount just watching Carry On films, because I don't think we should sneer, there are eternal things there, too.

I think one of the things I hate doing classics, I hate being tied to dead people, which I am. The advantage of being handcuffed to a dead person is that they don't fight back. But I mean, I actually sort of hate the museum side of theatre. I have to say that theatre museums always make me feel nervous and I want to run and do something terrible on the pavement outside, and I think that they're very noble and wonderful things, and I'm sure that they get lots of

letters saying how disgraceful it is that there's some somewhere that's not been given their funding. But privately I always feel my heart die a little bit – it's like watching old hair clippings, or old props, you know, 'This is the prop that X used in—' I just get depressed. It reminds me of some sort of terrible death. The fact that these plays are written by dead people and that they're just black squiggles on white paper is a challenge, but the challenge is that the actors should make it look as if they're writing that play in the very heat of the moment, specifically for that audience that night. That the audience doesn't go to see Shakespeare or Pushkin or Corneille, the audience goes to see words being made seem inevitable. That is where the actors' imagination has to be because the audience goes to be in the presence of a living imagination that can see things. Even imagination is almost too pretentious a word. I'm just talking about seeing things, just to see what it is that Lear sees when he sees that his daughter is dead. It has nothing to do with feeling. When actors try to portray feeling, they inevitably do terrible things to themselves, because as I say in my book, you can no more express emotion than you can shit through your ear. You can push and push, the tubes don't connect, that's all. Actually, we are full of emotions, whether we like it or not, and like it or not, we are all emotionally illiterate. The great writers of the past understand our emotional illiteracy, understand that when Creon is told of the death of his wife and his niece and his son, he has to be given terrible details, like 'the knife went in beneath the liver', he has to be given the most grotesque details because he needs to be made feel. One of the things that shames us all is when we're told that somebody very dear to us has died, suddenly, shockingly, for example, the real problem is that we feel nothing at all, I think. Or whatever we feel, we don't know that we feel it. There's an incredible sense of shame. Now, what I've said isn't true but it's useful. There's an incredible sense of shame because we don't 'feel to order'. That's why funerals are such bizarre occasions, because very often the people who can weep the most fluently are those who are furthest from the dead body, whereas people who are closest can often be worried over the shape of the coffin or trying to sip brandy on the floor of the taxi. You are caught up in something like that and I think great writers understand that we are emotionally illiterate. We're very, very emotional, but we have no idea what we're feeling. And as the stakes go up, the more our illiteracy, our incapacity to put names on our feelings, increases. Now an actor, I think, has to admit that. So one of the terrible questions an actor can ask me in rehearsal is, 'Well, what is my character feeling here?' And the answer is, you know, 'My child has died,' and the answer is 'Well, God knows what you feel.' But that person has not been in that situation before and we don't

know how we react. Very often we want to be told how to feel. And I think that one of the things that theatre does is just helps us to be a little bit more literate.

I read recently a very interesting book by a woman called Eileen Scarry about torture (I think every director should read one, that was a grim joke, people without irony, pretend I haven't said that, no one from California listen to that) and she was saying that the function of torture is to destroy thought and to remove names from feelings. It's a very interesting way of looking at what tortures does, it destroys our ability to think. I think a work of art does something the opposite, which is that it enables us to think. Not to put a label, because I think a work of art makes us see very specific things and helps us to feel about them and to see what we feel about them.

Above all, what is very inspiring, a rabbi once said, when asked why nobody can see God any more, 'Because nobody can stoop low enough.' That's very important and very simple, and pleasantly simple for us to think. The imagination is to do with the minutiae – small looks, small moments. If a television were asked to give us images of feats of human imagination, they'd probably show space rockets going off, or gigantic dams, and great feats of medical and technical achievement, but I think that the imagination is just being able to see something as it really is.

Harold Fish

Can I pick up on that imagination spot there and link it to sameness and link that to some of the way you've cast your shows? There's a wonderful misprint on the British Council's Czech cultural ministry's website for the Cheek By Jowl As You Like It. It's described as the 'all-mate' production. You have an 'all-male' production. You have black Spanish queens and black Spanish heroes.

Declan Donnellan

I think I should add that he meant 'royal queens'. I've always pursued a policy of colour-blindness in casting. I mean, I think the best thing to do about integrated casting is – this isn't very politically correct, I have to say – I think it's important to do it and shut up about it. Which is very different from what happens, which is to talk about it a lot and not do it. It's like being all mouth and no trousers. I make no discrimination against black actors. There

happen to have been black actors playing some major roles or minor roles in all of the plays I've done, and I do that, I choose them because they're the best actors for the roles. I'm just not quite so sensitised to their colours as some people are. In France, I remember, I was always being interviewed about this, on television. It was considered very exciting, and me and this poor guy William, we were on television one night, and the interviewer said, for the 19th time, 'Mais Monsieur Donnellan, pourquoi á ces noirs?' I looked at William and I said, 'You never told me you were black!' And it didn't get a laugh either, which is quite frightening. All over France, sitting rooms went silent. They thought it was a marvellous piece of political correctness to have a blind director.

I couldn't give a toss about it. I get terribly worried by earnest people talking about racial prejudice, and how terrible. I must tell you a horrible story about this. It's a really unpleasant story. But I like to tell it because I like to upset people, it's part of my brief in life. The National in 1991 was the first time that integrated casting had been used there because black people had been used before to be black people, like servants or thieves or whatever, and pimps, you know, all those things they get at the work centres. The rumour went around the company that our visit to Spain had been banned because the Spanish are so racist. I'd been in the green room in the National, 'Oh it so terrible, it's so awful, they're so racist, the Spanish, we can't go because you're black, so so terrible. I feel awful, it's so dreadful they way we're being discriminated against.' I was saying, 'Well, actually, no, we've never been invited to Spain so I don't know what this conversation's about.' Everybody was being sort of trendy about saying how terrible it was that we weren't going to Spain because Isabella La Catolica was being played by – so this went on and on. I noticed that some of the black people in the company were feeling rather edgy, as indeed was I because the story was about how awful that we were being stopped going to Spain by this dreadful movement on the Spanish government. The whole thing came from nowhere, there was no origin to the rumour. I talked to the company, and it would come back again, from nowhere, over months and months and months. And felt powerless because there was nothing I could do to stop this being discussed avidly in the way that actors can, that bitter conversation. I expect that the Spanish are racist but so are aspects of English society and so are aspects of right-wing society, so are aspects of left-wing society actually. I worked out afterwards what happened, and this is what I think was happening: that the more trendy or more politically aware members of the company who intellectually and appropriately and correctly abhorred racism,

consciously could not deal with their own subconscious racism. So they had to project out, onto another imaginary person, this racism that was coming in at the company.

Does that make sense? So that actually, the reason that it could not be cut off, like a dandelion, it just kept coming up and up and of course it kept coming up from the subconscious. Because one of the things that we can't bear to see is our own racism. And I have to see my own racism, I have to see my own homophobia, I have to see my own sexism, the more I actually try to scour myself and see those things in me, then the less these things become a problem. I think it's much more important for me as a gay man to understand how much homophobia comes from within me. As I think it's important for all feminists to see how much anger comes from hating their own mothers. These are very, very, very uncomfortable – I'm saying that there is homophobia, there is terrible sexism, there are fights, but I think we castrate each other in these fights, we immobilise ourselves in these fights until we realise exactly how much of a problem is actually being internally generated. That involves in each of us quite an act of humiliation. But I think humiliation should be welcomed by us all because it's only when we are humiliated... I think it's a very good sign that our identity is being lashed, and who we really are is starting to come to the surface.

Harold Fish

I suppose we talk about sameness or universals and I was hoping you would something like you said last night or something I read somewhere, that, as you say, 'You didn't tell me you were black.' In the end, theatrical experience, the actual physical appearance of Queen Isabella, or Rodrigo doesn't matter because the universal essence goes way beyond such superficialities.

Declan Donnellan

Yes, of course it does. I think, too, that when the work is good, one doesn't notice those things, but when the work is bad, you start to notice all sorts of weird things that might explain why the work was bad. It might not necessarily be those things.

Harold Fish

I'd like to quote a quote which has been attributed to you in terms of that last story that you've just told, which is rather sad, and a bit depressing. This quote is in the same area but it

has got a different ending. It was when Lyn Gardner interviewed you. You've claimed to have said, 'We think we are much worse than we really are and put ourselves into terrible states of control that we call civilisation. And that makes us very unhappy. It's time to turn over the stone and see whether what's underneath is really so terrible.' I suppose you believe that there is a fear to go into that side because we fear it is going to be much more terrible than it really is?

Declan Donnellan

Oh, yeah.

Harold Fish

And what you think you're going to find under the stone is what Quakers call 'the spark of God in every person'. But the trouble is, we don't go looking for it.

Declan Donnellan

No, my simple job as a director, to make this very practical, with myself, and with the people I work with, is – the problems in rehearsal in my experience are never to do with anger or disagreement, there's hardly ever any disagreement. No, the problems in rehearsal have to do with anxiety. That people are very, very, very, very anxious. I'm anxious too, and my job as a director is to try and defuse that anxiety so that we can actually start to live and see a little bit more. You have to use yourself, what you've been given by God, you've got to use yourself to do that. I do think that one of the reasons that we all lose that so badly is because we are in incredible and unconscious states of control. By an unconscious state of control, a taboo is a collective unconscious state of control, you know, those that have to exist like going against having sex with certain members of your family is a taboo, it is an unconscious control, it is a control we're not aware of, and it's passed into us to feel us with feelings of revulsion. Well that's fine, I'm very glad that there's an enormous amount of controls, conscious and unconscious... I think, though, that we have many, many, many unconscious areas of control which simply hobble us in real life, and our parents, their parents and their parents before them, and the State, the Church and our friends get us to control ourselves by implying, in one way or another, that we're somehow bad and that if we did whatever we liked, something terrible would happen. So most of us are brought up with the feeling that you must control

yourself because if you did whatever you liked, you'd just be selfish and hit each other, and steal each other's food and run away, and do terrible things to each other.

I'm not so sure that's true. These sort of huge things have to do with politicians and priests, and politicians talking about teaching people the difference between right and wrong. All I know is, in the safe atmosphere of rehearsal, I'm trying to stop actors from thinking in terms of right and wrong because the actor is completely hobbled by self-judgement, so one of the things that can most ruin a rehearsal, which I've got to dismantle, is the actors thinking, 'Oh my God, that's terrible, I'm so sorry, that was awful, wasn't it?' It's not necessarily said like that but it's sort of there. I can see people almost doing something that they're just sort of sensing from doing, and I'm talking about things like going into rage or flirtatiousness or simply parts of experience that we're taught to pull back from. I think it's important to have an atmosphere where people can explore things without being shouted at. The terrible fear, if we're allowed do whatever we like, is that we will do unspeakable things. And the press, of course, sell themselves lots of copies by convincing us that that's just the case. So we have to buy newspapers to remind us, by looking at photographs of Myra Hindley, that it's bad to kill children. I suppose that's the deal – they sell lots of copies on that photograph that somebody found once, 30 years ago. I'm not sure that we need to be reminded of that, on the whole we know it. I just think it's really, really, really important to look at the ways that we are disciplined and controlled, almost out of existence, by society. For example, I want there to be police on the streets because I don't want to be beaten up going home. On the other hand, our civilisation hates all forms of violence. Now the problem is that part of us is violent, whether we like it or not, and one of the things that theatre must address, and at its best does address, is 'What do we do with our violence?' in a civilisation that does not want us to be violent. So what is it we do in a civilisation that hates our very essence? I mean, if you hate part of somebody, well, it's really quite a serious thing. I hasten to add I have absolutely no answer to this. But we are violent people and our violence isn't necessarily a bad thing but it is a taboo thing in our society. And it's something we aren't going to solve by shoving it under the carpet and bombing people a long, long, long way away.

Harold Fish

There was a section for questions and answers. We're going to have to reduce what we'd originally planned for that but I'd like to ask at this point are there any questions to Declan?

Declan Donnellan

I get really embarrassed in silence. I come from a western Irish family and everybody had to talk all the time, otherwise it meant that somebody was going to die. And I did stop talking once and three aunts died that afternoon so I never ever let it happen again.

Harold Fish

Well, Willie is clearly on your side.

Willie White, Artistic Director, Project Arts Centre, Dublin

I have a question, for reasons of curiosity, not of political correctness, but I'm really interested in this idea of universality, whose universality, and how universal is universality because it seems pretty much what we're talking about is western, northern hemisphere, Judeo-Christian universality – so how universal is universality?

Declan Donnellan

All I can say is that I personally find it moving, not as a teacher but as a learner, to go from one culture to another, and see what moves people. I remember going to Katmandu, which most of us would agree was not the most suburban city in the world. We did *Midsummer Night's Dream* and we had a gag that when Bottom and Flute went into their roles of *Pyramus and Thisbe*, Flute was in very modern dress, she was a rather pretentious actress, and she had an RSC diary, and as soon as she'd start to speak, she'd go into one of those slurs that were terribly fashionable, very 1980s, at the Royal Shakespeare Company. So we go to Katmandu where, poor things, they're sort of denied many of the more exciting aspects of our culture like the slurred RSC 's', and we went to help them. So we came on stage to a colourful audience, and they all did burst out laughing. Of course, they had no idea of the specific reference but they understood affectation, and they laughed and laughed each time seeing this woman speak completely normally and then in the scene when she'd turn and make this bizarre baroque noise. But loads of things don't work at all. People still argue about *King Lear*, how awful the daughters are, or how awful *King Lear* is, and those arguments are rather wonderful really, because they're about the play, and it's great when people get heated about the rights and wrongs.

But I think you're absolutely right. I also think that behind what you're saying, though, if I may say, there might be an element of... I don't think there is this behind what you're saying, may I say, but if there were: just because we can't be completely universal doesn't mean we shouldn't have a try. I would like to say that perfectionism is the most terrible vanity and perfectionism is a very cruel vanity. I'd advise you all never to work with perfectionists. And that's all I can say, just because we're all doomed to failure. All words fail, that's an essence of acting technique, every action is not completed, nothing is achieved, everything that we say says 'no', and everything I say to you fails, and I don't realise it's failed so I try something else and that doesn't work either so I try something else. Our life is one of incompleteness rather than perfection and completion. So it's very important that people should be encouraged to go out and be imperfect, to do things and not to be too ashamed of elitism because theatre is very elitist. This is a very elitist space, we've divided the world into 300 or 400 people who are inside this room, and millions and millions of other people who are outside of this room. So we've already committed an elitist act. Do we beat ourselves over the back for that? Well, we can. It's what people do actually – but life is very short.

Harold Fish

Is there another question? You're going to test my silence tolerance, aren't you?

Declan Donnellan

Shall I give you some more uncomfortable choices? Just to give you an unpleasant afternoon?

Harold Fish

If an uncomfortable choice could be something to do around the artist and the frame and the focus on ambiguity within the frame?

Declan Donnellan

No, that's something I'd say only that, I think, we all have different definitions of a work of art. I think a work of art is something with a frame around it and somebody has put a frame around something and by virtue of the fact that a frame has been put around something, then it is a work of art. I think you can't define it otherwise. I think the function of a work of art, what the work of art tends to do is to draw our attention to the ambivalence of what is within

that frame. So the work of art divides the world into two things: everything outside the frame and everything inside. We outside the frame are going to look at and assess – well, in one way, it draws our attention to the ambivalence of what’s in the frame. This does bring me on to an extremely important, uncomfortable choice for the actor: which is attention or concentration. The actor must never concentrate. Concentration is a terrible thing, because concentration is all about ‘me’. Attention is all about the other. Of course, we can’t try to do anything because when we try to do things, trying to pay attention to somebody, when somebody is aware they’re not giving enough attention to their children, you know – spoilt child syndrome, the spoilt child is the most neglected – the more we try to pay attention to somebody, the more we merely end up concentrating on them, and concentration is much more safely about ‘me’ and attention is much more about the other person. So it’s extremely important for that actor to try and make a distinction between attention and concentration, and know that you can’t have both, you can’t concentrate a bit and pay attention a bit, it doesn’t work like that. Concentration actually destroys your ability to attend. It’s very hard, and it’s not to be achieved, but it’s a path rather than a goal.

Harold Fish

Declan, there are just one or two points I’d like to sort of pick up, to round things off – or not. I was going to ask you about humanity because it was amazing, looking through the various reviews in various languages of your work, how often the success of your humanity aims, how great that success was. I mean, there was an Italian review of Falstaff, talking about giving your characters a human face, which goes way above the comic. I think somewhere in Bouffes du Nord, they’re talking about your giving the characters in El Cid a flesh-and-bloodness of humanity, which is in the classics. Judging by the reviews I’ve seen, certainly you’ve shown humanity’s side, irrespective of the country in which these shows were being performed.

Harold Fish

But what struck me is very much the point of what Willie’s brought up, that universality. I was trying to find an expression to describe Declan, an expression that might explain why Declan as an international director, and as a director of a touring company with so much international experience has been so successful. I think, in spite of Willie’s preservations about whose universe are we talking about, it is the question of universalism that comes

foremost to mind. I was asking Barbara, my wife, about looking for an expression for a sort of universal spirit and she said, 'Oh, well, then you've got to go to Jung, he's got something about that.' I then went to the internet again and found the universal unconscious. I think it may just be, one of the reasons for your success, for Cheek By Jowl's success, is that you have found that kind of universal unconscious in the classics, but not only in the classics. And you've managed to demystify all the classics in such a way that the human element comes out. Now I would want to underscore what Declan said, that without believing we're ever going to get there, it is our job as human beings and certainly as human beings in the arts, to always strive towards that greater understanding of what we all have in common, whether we're in Timbuktu or Tipperary. I think that one of the reasons for Declan's success is not just the incredible professionalism of his work and the sheer quality of it, but this relentless search for that universal unconscious Jung has described. There was a review of the all-male *As You Like It* that said that 'As You Like It was about love, not sexuality, it was a love that transcends sexuality and includes it.' I think Declan himself is a kind of universal human spirit that transcends various minor cultural differences but actually includes them. □