

16 December 2009

I am currently undertaking a PhD in Drama at Exeter University exploring approaches to and the processes used to adapt Shakespeare's plays for casts of nine or less.

I started my research in February 2009 and am expecting to complete it in February 2012. During that time I will be conducting research into the work of theatre practitioners engaged in creating small, touring interpretations and adaptations of Shakespeare's plays in Britain

As part of this research, I will need to conduct interviews with theatre practitioners who may be able to provide information that will help to inform my understanding of the development process of their production and the factors that affected it.

The interviews will be recorded on audio tape. Material from the audio recording may be used in publications directly associated with the PhD. This may include quotations within the thesis itself, a transcription of the interview included in the appendix of the thesis, and use of quotations in conference papers, articles submitted to academic journals and any future publication of the thesis in book form which would be available to the general public.

I will make every effort to inform those who have contributed interviews of any publication details. I am bound by the code of ethics for researchers established by the University, and overseen by its Ethics Committee.

Upon completion of the interview I will undertake a transcription of it and send this to you to enable you to check that I have produced an accurate copy of your answers. Once the transcription has been agreed by you and signed to this effect, I undertake that any quotations used for the purposes laid out above will be accurately quoted from this transcription.

By signing this form, you will confirm your understanding of the research as explained above, and your willingness to participate in the interview process and to assign copyright over interview materials to myself only for the purposes laid out above.

I would like to take this opportunity to express my sincere thanks for your contribution.

*Sarah McCourt*

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- I confirm that I wish to participate in the interview process for the research as explained above.
- I assign copyright over the audio recording of the interview to Sarah McCourt for the purposes laid out above.

Signed: .....

Date: 16/12/2009

Name: Jonathan Holloway (please print)

JH Over the years Red Shift has done productions of Shakespeare plays every three to four years. There's not any kind of grand rational plan behind that; there isn't like a sequence of plays that the company has been determined to work through; but what has happened is occasionally events in the world at large have thrown up the obvious suggestion that a certain play is pertinent to what is going on, and you follow your instinct. And as a result of that you surprise yourself because you're suddenly programmed to play Timon of Athens that you wouldn't have touched in a million years otherwise.

But the response has been interestingly varied from critics. The most recent Shakespeare before the Much Ado About Nothing you wanted to talk about was we did a version of the first quarter Hamlet. Now, actually the production was quite faithful to the first quarter because of course it's very short. What I wasn't anticipating was how many of the broadsheet critics were not necessarily appalled by the production, but were appalled by the fact that we were doing it; because the text itself is regarded as being worthless. And I sat in the Bloomsbury Theatre in the middle of town two rows away from Michael Billington, and I watched him during the show and he didn't look up at the production; he was just listening to the text and writing his review from his listening to the text.

I hasten to add that that production was, in terms of audiences and venues that booked it, enormously successful. But it's quite difficult in retrospect to find things from the archive that you can pull out and use it that praise it in the Times and so on and so forth.

I mean, the Guardian loved it, but then Lyn Gardner is – I mean the Guardian other than Michael Billington – but Lyn Gardner is a kind of different kind of creature.

But there's an interesting story about the Timon of Athens that we did because it was one of those occasions when you walk into the rehearsal room and you start working on a play, and all of the decisions

that you've made up to that point seem to be very sensible, but when you actually start working on the play the ground kind of opens up underneath you and you think: oh my god, there isn't actually a play here. And that was very much the case with Timon.

So, in order to get a show out of it – because Red Shift's identity is always poised somewhere between artistic aspiration and showbiz really; I mean, primarily I think of the company as a sort of left field entertainers – and what we effectively did was we cut it to 80 minutes, and we picked up on the kind of historical connections there are between the play and the masks, and we made it effectively a mask, a kind of cabaret mask event which we stuck two different endings on the end of: so a happy ending and the ending where Timon digs a hole for himself on the beach, lies down in it and waits for the waves to come.

But we were primarily concerned with the senses and how you appreciate what's going on around you or don't, and the fact that something which is absolutely clear to everybody else can be invisible to you. There is a lot about that sort of thing in Timon.

Anyway it was a really peculiar journey because the show opened, and the reviews were so terrible, I am not kidding, I found it difficult to go out of the house; because going out of the house meant walking passed a newsagent and they were full of newspapers with reviews in it that said it was absolutely dire.

But by that time the Late Show, BBC2, had already committed to doing a special on it. And I don't know if they were even really aware of what was going on, but they didn't pull it. So, we found ourselves spending a day with them while they filmed sections of it. And the musical score for it was done by a guy called Adrian Johnston, who is primarily a movie music composer now; but he did some of the soliloquies, effectively like Acapala Supremes numbers really. And it was all in Italian Renaissance garb. It looked very beautiful; it was a very elegant show.

Anyway, the week after all these reviews had come out the Late Show broadcast a 20-minute special on the production, and their guest reviewer was Germaine Greer. And she absolutely adored it, and she sat there on TV saying it has a marvellous electric presence; it's the best designed Shakespeare I've ever seen, and so on. And I'm not kidding you, the next weekend the Sunday Times had it in their critical list, and their strap line was: this much celebrated production.

So, what does that tell you? I think when it comes to productions of Shakespeare there's a group of critics – and they're not all old either; some of them are quite young – who assume that they're marking the production in a way they wouldn't treat newer plays. They don't ever talk about choices; they talk about things you got wrong, or they imply you got things wrong, or you made mistakes, or you didn't understand the play. Which I'm always outraged by because if you spend five weeks in a rehearsal room – and I find it difficult these days to rehearse a play of any decent size in less than five weeks – you're making decisions and then you're reversing your decisions and you're building the piece up in layers, and you're kind of falling out of love with what you do and going back and changing things. I think one of the interesting misconceptions that people have is that plays are directed in linear fashion, so that in the first week you've done Act One, and the second week you've done Act Two and so on. But what we know, of course, from doing it, is that you do the whole play, then you go back and you do it again, then you go back and do it again and again and again. So, that what you're doing is you're kind of building up your experience of it and your understanding of it so that the thing gets thicker and thicker and deeper and deeper.

But I've not experienced that with other authors; I've only experienced that in relation to Shakespeare. Even when, way, way back in 1983 we took a part the Duchess of Malfi, and it interpolated news material from the newspapers about Roberto Calvi and the P2 affair, and Banco Ambrosiano and so on, and put all that into it, because it seemed

absolutely right. Nobody had a go at it because John Webster obviously isn't as precious as Shakespeare is. I don't know; I kind of feel as though I'm getting a phobic about it really this days.

I saw an interview with Bill Nighy the other day, who I've worked with in the past, he's been in a couple of my radio days, and he just puts in this interview that he thinks he's given up Shakespeare. And the interviewer said: what do you mean, going to see it. And he said: going to see it or being in it. And I think, I genuinely do think that in terms of the primacy of the text, it's about the only area of British theatre where that absolutely rigid Oxbridge notion that the text is everything and we're here to serve it, which admits no consideration that a theatre text is a multi-layered, multi-dimensional thing, which is invented in the rehearsal room and the text is apart of it, but it's not the whole... the written text is a part of it, but it's not the whole thing by any means. That notion suddenly gets kicked out when you're doing Shakespeare.

Peculiar, isn't it, don't you think?

**SM It is, definitely. Yes, because I've had to look into authenticity as my background to this, and look into the English and people's ideas of the authentic text and whether you can change it or not.**

**I think one of the things that I've been looking at and struggling with in relation to Shakespeare, because it's very clear in some other areas, is the notion of the difference between interpretation and adaptation, because there seems to be no hard and fast rule when it comes to Shakespeare. I was wondering, for you when you're dealing with a Shakespeare production, where do you draw the line between adaptation and interpretation? Or is there a line?**

JH One of the things is that I don't use the Equity ITC contracts anymore, because there's an element of what goes on in the rehearsal room which isn't contained in those contracts, and that is the certain willingness of the actors to relentlessly pursue whatever objectives emerge in the rehearsal room. And I think that's a very tricky one,

because that means that if one afternoon it becomes apparent that we all need to sit there and confess the worst excesses of our private sex lives to each other then we would need to do that; or if, on another day, if we need to talk honestly about our experience of violence, then we need to do that.

And I can't really anymore go into rehearsal rooms where the process is prescribed by a notion of what is reasonable "professional demand" on the people in the rehearsal room. I sort of feel as though we have very quickly to become entirely honest and trusting. I think that connects with your question about what's adaptation and what's interpretation, because you might start off by attempting to reinterpret a role, but then, as was pointed out to me by an actor one day, having reinterpreted his role in a certain way, that then had a knock-on effect through the rest of the play because it just didn't make sense to have witches appearing; because actually if the psychology of what is going on is borne out of Macbeth's Scottish class hatred of the English, to then have people forecasting things with runes and so on, just becomes irrelevant to that. So, when we did Macbeth we cut the witches and we cut the whole supernatural dynamic to it; and the play was rooted in the class difference between the English in Scotland and the native Scots. So, Lady Macbeth was very clearly Anglo-Scots and had no accent and had been to a very good independent school, and she had married a non commissioned officer who had come up through the ranks. And that was how she was able to intimidate him.

That then flowed through into everything and it made sense of everything: it made sense of why he would want to get rid of the king, and why he would detest the children of the king who were living in England. We also put on the front end of it – it's nothing new because lots of people have talked about it previously - but it started with the funeral of Macbeth's child so that, if you like, the notion that they were part of the big story of birth and death and so on had been truncated. So, of course, all those emotions had to find another course.

But that production was essentially inspired – which kind of goes quite neatly to *Much Ado About Nothing* – by what was going on in the former Yugoslavia at that point. In fact you wouldn't detect it; the production was in our heads set in Romania. And the end was like the end of Ceausescu, Mr and Mrs Ceausescu. I don't know if you remember, but Ceausescu and his wife are sitting behind a Formica table in the last few minutes, kind of bargaining for their lives before their shot, and I think Ceausescu has got a flak jacket on; and that is sort of how we did the demise of Macbeth.

But I would feel that you have to preserve the kind of notion that, if necessary, you'll be making textual adjustments at the same time as you're making interpretative adjustments.

As a writer my plays crop up on the internet being done in high schools in America and things – and I've heard nothing about it and I don't get any money, because obviously they've picked up a text and they've just decided to do it and they've put it on their website – but I kind of feel that it has always been the case, however much we might have railed against it over the decades, it's always been the case that everything is up for grabs. While I think it's true that if you really want to do something completely different to what is contained in the play, you ought to choose another play or write it yourself. At the same time, I don't think there's necessarily anything wrong with thinking of Shakespeare as a tool for cultural intervention, because actually you'll get lots of people there to see the show, because they're studying it or whatever, who might be surprised on your take on the story, and they might learn something different about that text; or even not about the text, just be transported or reminded of some profound things that they've forgotten. But they wouldn't have ever come into the theatre if you'd done something with a title that they'd never heard of.

So, I kind of feel that the whole issue of familiar titles is one that I've never been afraid of or balked at because of the kind of Trojan horse opportunities that they offer really.

I mean, our production of *Vertigo* couldn't have been more different to the movie, not least because the novel from which the story came is a French gothic thriller dating from the 1940s.

Sorry, that was very long-winded.

**SM** **It's interesting. Thinking about, because you've obviously done a lot of writing and a lot of adapting, is there anything you find specifically different about adapting a Shakespeare text to some of the other texts that you've adapted?**

JH Well, let's start by talking about similarities actually. People never know texts as well as they think they do. I can remember with *Mill on the Floss*, *Crime and Punishment*, *Les Miserables*, because once you try to re-render a literary work as drama you find that the constructions that were okay on the page for a novel aren't going to work as drama; so you start to restructure. And in all of those, and indeed in *Death in Venice* – I mean *Death in Venice* had chunks of *Wooden Brooks* in it, and *Crime and Punishment* had bits of the *Brothers Karamazov*, and *Les Mis* had bits of *Notre Dame* in it and so on.

Because what you do is you want material that is very much stylistically in sympathy, but which provides the connective tissue for the narrative and kind of gets you over the holes that you create when you start lopping bits out; or indeed the gaps that open up when you start filleting the narrative for through lines.

I've forgotten what your question was now.

**SM** **To do with the similarities and the differences between adapting Shakespeare.**

JH And the same is true of Shakespeare because I've actually written original material that has gone into some of these plays and people don't notice it; they just don't notice it. Not a lot. But in the summer I did a show which had some big chunks of *Paradise Lost* in it, and

some of that was rewritten, just because it didn't fit properly; it needed a bit of moving stuff about; or it didn't make quite the right point to quite the right time.

I don't think it's vandalism. Somebody once said to me: I don't know why people get upset about it because you can always go to the library and get the original out and have a look at it. Simply because you do a production in which you take a text apart and remodel it in the image of the guiding idea that you have for the production, that doesn't mean you've destroyed; it's still there.

I think in theatre amongst the self-styled guardians of the cultural gates there is a fear that because theatre is conceived of as a minority interest for some people this will be their only exposure to it. For some people that is undoubtedly true: coming to see *Much Ado About Nothing* will be the only time they're going to see Shakespeare; they're 16, they're taken by their school, that is the only time they'll ever do it. And for them to not get the play as per the First Quarto is some kind of terrible sort of... it's let them down.

I would come back and I would say: there's a lot of fat on *Much Ado About Nothing*, and there is a long history of productions that I think miss the point of the play, which is that it's very unsavoury. The play is actually presented as though, in Kenneth Branagh's film and so on, as though it's a sun drenched Tuscan romp; but actually you look at what's going on in the play and you've got Don Pedro sort of hinting that he might quite like to get off with Claudio's young lady, purely in order to kind of win her around, but he is conspicuously predatory. And Claudio is either too frightened or too stupid to realise what's going on. And Don John and Don Pedro are basically brothers; they have the same origins, they have the same life experience, so one of them can't be just entirely evil and one of them entirely nice. And what you get is a similar thing to the way that these days quite a lot of productions of *Measure For Measure* interpret the duke as being rather duplicitous, because basically he has mucked up running Vienna, so he decides to

bugger off and let someone else take the crap so he can come back and be a saviour. Which, of course, is a bit similar to the fact that neither the Conservative party or the Labour party in this country at the moment is convinced they really want to win the next election, because it's almost certain in five years' time whoever wasn't in government will get back to government, because whoever takes over now is going to have to manage 20% public funding cuts right across the board.

I suppose also the other thing is that it's, in so many productions of *Much Ado About Nothing*, it's quickly forgotten that there's a civil war going on and people are getting killed. I think Shakespeare knows exactly what he's saying because at the beginning almost the first thing that's talked about is that the most recent fight no men of substance have been killed, which is great; but of course loads of soldiers have; but no men of substance has. So, class is playing a role in that thing.

And I just don't get that off any of the productions I've seen. All the productions that I've seen have basically foregrounded sort of the middle aged former kind of principal actors as Benedict and Beatrice, and the main point becomes the sparring of Benedict and Beatrice. But when you look at their presence on stage in terms of quantity and the amount of time they spend talking to each other it's not that much.

So, that's that funny thing, isn't it? I can't remember what critic it was said that psycho analytical approaches to *Hamlet* have completely misled us into thinking the play is actually about *Hamlet*; when in fact it would be better to call the play *Elsinore*, because really that's what it's about. So, I sort of felt that with a production of *Much Ado About Nothing* I had to engage that. And I was looking for a situation where neighbours might have turned against each other; it might have been Rwanda, or it might have been South Africa or whatever.

But I have got a bit of a bee in my bonnet about the former Yugoslavia because my wife used to run a company called *Opera Factory*, and in the early 90s they did an Anglo-Slavic production called *Sarajevo*, and

they brought a lot of actors from Sarajevo over to be in it. It had, interestingly, terrible problems with the immigration services who were saying that there are actors in this country that could do it, and why. And that was because Equity was getting in the way of it. What happens is the government always goes to Equity and says: do we really need these people; and Equity immediately says: no, we don't; we've got actors who could do it here.

There was a theatre called the Obela Theatre in Sarajevo which had been completely destroyed, all that was left was a wall that was standing, and it became very important because it was a way of people getting to the market and back without snipers seeing them. So, the theatre kind of developed a different use.

I don't know if you remember but a chap, whose name I can't recall, a cellist in full evening dress used to play at one o'clock in the afternoon in the ruins every day to keep the flame of civilisation alive. And I thought how interesting it was that that was right on our doorstep, just a couple of hundred of miles – not even that necessarily – from Venice, and it was nearly the end of European civilisation in that part of Europe; and I thought that everybody was being a bit cavalier about it really. So, it sort of haunted me a bit.

Also the curious thing is how difficult it is in terms of racial types to be able to tell the difference between the warring factions; whereas in Gaza Palestinians tend to look different from Israeli Jews and so on and so forth. These were literally people who lived next door to each other.

We did a lot of research and found lots of visual imagery, and discovered that quite a lot of night clubs being run by gangsters were springing up in bombed out municipal buildings. And we found a picture of one, which was quite a large sports hall, where in order to be able to heat a relatively small area they put up lots of plastic in order to contain an area of it so they could use space heaters to heat it up. And

within this former sports hall, which was I think built for a winter Olympics or something, this club had sprung up. And there was a gangster called Arkam ((?)) who literally we modelled Don John on, and he was always covered in gold with sunglasses, and he had sort of pitbulls on leads; and he was a big celebrity.

So, that all just seemed to drop together. And when it came to providing a musical backdrop to it it was just logical to go towards the kind of euro pop, Eurovision song contest kind of thing; which over the years has developed so that the various alliances in Eastern Europe determine the voting and the judges. And there is a generic kind of bland out techno music, which is all they listen to really. Then occasionally – I've not been, but I'm told – these kind of more folk forms come through. Somebody told me about being in a student bar and they started doing that very nasal harmonic singing. So, it was obvious those were the places we needed to go really.

If I were to sum up the production: it was an attempt to re-orientate the audience's appreciation of what the play is and what it's about, and at the same time to put it into a cultural context that just made sense of the narrative threads that went through it, in a way that for me so much presentation of Shakespeare in the legitimate theatre just doesn't do.

I mean, I confess: I haven't been to the RSC for years. And I sort of don't miss it at all because there's a part of me that has just lost interest in all those sons and daughters of the theatrical aristocracy who come through from Sandhurst ((?)) school or Oxford or whatever, and are really chosen for those productions because their elegant and they speak well and they can give a kind of bogus lyricism to those lines. And very often you can sit and listen to them and think: oh, that's really good; and then you think: but I haven't understood a word of it.

I don't know. I'm meandering now; I'm sorry.

**SM I thought that the – going in from the idea of the war – the idea at the end of having Hero shot was a very interesting decision. And I was wondering at what point in the process that came out.**

JH We rehearsed for a few weeks, and endings of productions I think are always very difficult; they are the most difficult bit because in a way the ending has to somehow sum up the journey, and shouldn't betray it. And it felt to us that a happy ending wasn't right, a resolution wasn't right; because there hasn't been any happy ending. In the former Yugoslavia, in South Africa, in Chile the only way that those societies have been able to move forward at all is through forgiveness and through saying: we are not going to prosecute people. But that doesn't take away the pain and the hatred actually. Fundamentally forgiveness is a really difficult thing.

I suppose it just didn't feel to us like it made sense that, after all the things that had gone on, that Claudio and young Hero should somehow be blessed with security. I was watching the television last night and they've started doing a thing – I think it's Newsnight – where they're tracking a number of families of soldiers who are in Afghanistan. And these women keep a very stiff upper lip, and they talk and they tell jokes, and they are charming to the camera; and then you suddenly see a wave of grief overtake them because their partner, their child is in Afghanistan and might not make it through to tomorrow. And there was a mum on and she was saying that she gets through the day by – because she knows that they are five hours behind or whatever, she has a clock which is on his time – so when she knows that he will be going to sleep she says goodnight to him and she knows that he's in bed and he's safe; and then she knows when he gets up. So, she kind of tries to live in her mind with him and beside him in his routine. I thought how interesting that was.

I think the other choice, natural choice, would have been to see Claudio take a bullet. But it's so frequently the innocents, isn't it? Because I'm sure Claudio has murdered people and done some really

terrible, terrible things. It's that double thing: the classic thing of the concentration camp guard with a photograph of his wife and his children in his wallet. It is that ability to dehumanise the people who are your perceived enemies.

I felt that in the end, we collectively felt, that one of other of them had to go. And so in the end it seemed... also because of the arbitrary nature of those situations; whereas a stray bullet, you know, just...

**SM** **Going back to the process and the beginning of the process; could you take me through your process? Because obviously as the adaptor and the director, do the two work hand in hand? Or is there a point where you say: no more changes to the script; we're just going with this?**

JH Well, roughly speaking the script becomes fixed at the point where instinctively you feel that what you've got is good and worth keeping. Before the process I did a filtered text and set that out to everybody so they had that to work with. Part of the early process of it was them trying to defend bits of text that I might have cut out. And in some cases they were right. So, what happens in the first week of rehearsals is we essentially work on the text: what are we going to keep, what are we going to get rid of. That's not to say it becomes fixed at the end of the first week because very often you're rehearsing a scene later on and you think: you know those two lines that we cut, we could do with them back, couldn't we. What you try to do is come to a consensus that this is the thing that we're going to work with.

I co-directed with a guy called Toby Sedgwick once who had a company called the Moving Picture Mime Show, in this country, and has done a lot of work with Complicité. One of the things he always says to actors towards the end of the rehearsal period is: now it's your responsibility to defend your work. And they're kind of a bit shocked by that; but what he's basically saying is: now you have to take ownership of it and you have to defend it because you've signed up. And I think

that's something that very often rehearsal processes do not emphasise that at the point where we know what we're doing that is what we're doing. And I don't want to hear you sitting in a corner of a pub in Birmingham talking to an actor friend saying: well, I've never been really comfortable with what happens in Act Two; because you were there, you witnessed it, so that is your work now.

So, that happens in the first week. Then in the second week I tend to spend time working on the language of the piece. Now, it became evident to us that what we needed were three states of performance in the show. We needed one state which was being in character; in other words I am now Claudio. For these three states we took a kind of lead from Frank Sinatra, because Frank... there is the real Frank, there is the Frank who actually had friends in the Mafia and was notoriously a very bad person to cross, so a very determined, very tough individual; and that was Frank, real life Frank. Then on stage there were two Franks: there was the pretend Frank who would come out on stage at the beginning of the show and he would point at members of the audience and he would wink at them and he would say, and they would love him because that's Frank, that's our Frank; and then when the band starts up and he's going into a ballad he would dip his head and then he would emerge in the character that was required by the song. So, he had three personas: real Frank; nice guy Frank who talks to the audience, who we love; and then character, character in the song.

So, we decided that we needed to take a lead from that. So, we had character, Claudio, this is the actual Claudio. Then we had a sort of nice actor who wasn't in role who was actually kind of talking to the audience and doing stuff. And then we had a weird thing which was actually the actor not in character and not trying to curry favour with the audience either.

A very good example would have been the actor who was playing Claudio and Dogberry, because he was in character sometimes as Dogberry, but in order to be able to do the circus stuff that he did as

Dogberry he had to sometimes come out of character and be nice actor who the audience likes, very obviously adlibbing and amusing the other actors on stage and amusing himself. So, that is number two. But then sometimes he completely disengaged from both, and he would sit down and very carefully play the xylophone and not want to be disturbed; and he would suddenly look up and say thanks when people said they liked it. And I thought that was... we found that what became really important in rehearsals was to define it so that each of the actors knew which of those three things they were being at each point.

And I thought stylistically, in terms of what we achieved as a company, that was probably the most important thing, because it seemed to work on the audience in a very seductive way. It meant that the audience were watching almost two completely different things: they were watching a realisation of Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*; but they were also watching, over the period of an hour and 40 minutes, the career of each of the actors as they went through the production. And that provides a kind of dazzle – I don't want to overdo it – but it provides a kind of wonder, because it means that everything is being kind of conjured in front of you; and it means you end up with some really queer moments.

For example, when we had to make a transition between Claudio and Dogberry the actor kind of went into a kind of practice sort of karate thing, which would be exactly the kind of really cheesy thing that somebody who thinks of himself as a really hard kind of soldier kind of character with a skull and crossbones, sort of bandana on, exactly the sort of thing he might do. And then you saw that transition as the actor was thinking: now, somehow I've got to get into position to get that trench coat. And then the trench coat would be put on him. So, for a moment you actually saw him, Simon, the trench coat went on him, and then as the trench coat went on him he worked through into Dogberry. And I thought that worked well; I was pleased with that.

**SM** Because it's very much revealing what the actor would do backstage if they were changing backstage.

JH Yes.

**SM** It's a physical thing.

JH And it didn't seem to be necessary to hide anything, because ultimately everything could be made entertaining. It wasn't difficult to just literally make these things fun. But it required that the actors were prepared to be performers more than actors; which to some people is a fairly opaque distinction. And some of the actors adjusted to it far more easily than others.

The actor who was playing whatsisname, Hero's father...?

**SM** Leonato.

JH Leonato. He had real problems, and he got quite shirty in rehearsals because he felt his job playing Leonato was to be a man in late middle age, has a certain amount of community respect, who has a young daughter. I kept saying to him: well, yes, that's right, but you're not sort of being that thing; you're representing that thing; you're performing that. So, it doesn't matter if what you do is a bit cobbled really; you can walk around doing I'm an old man acting, like you would see in a school production of the Yeoman and the Guard if you want to. It doesn't really matter because everybody knows you're not that thing. And probably what you need to do is find a few signature gestures, which help the audience to understand. So, it might be that you've got a bad back, like people do have when they get older, or a sore neck, or you've got a bit of arthritis or something coming on. So, find a few signatures to put in there to help us to know what sort of a character this is.

He said: but that's ridiculous; people are going to think I can't act. And anyway, why did you cast me? I'm completely the wrong age.

I felt like saying: well, you knew what you were being cast for; why did you say yes.

It's quite a hard thing because I don't want to be tough on actors because I think actors are heroes, really. I mean, it's such a rare thing for somebody to be so convinced and convicted, literally, that this is what they want to do and nothing else will do, and they are prepared to effectively sacrifice their lives to it; because I don't know any wealthy actors. I mean, I do from the work I do at the BBC; but not in the theatre work I've done.

So, they are heroes. Also their creativity is brittle. And it is true that when they walk into the rehearsal room at the beginning of the process they are kind of handing it over and they're saying: here's my self esteem and my creativity, please look after it, don't damage it.

But having said that, sometimes for actors particularly who have done a lot of mainstream theatre work – and that particular actor had done a lot of musical theatre – it's very difficult for them to see how this kind of free play is going on, in the way that you're making a show, is going to make sense, and just not look a bit cheesy and ridiculous. And I never worried about cheesiness because I think the audience can spot cheesiness that comes from lack of ideas and cheesiness that's deliberate.

Does that answer your question?

**SM** Yes, process.

JH Oh, and then when we get towards the end of it, because that production and so much of the stuff that I do is so much about the integration of manipulating objects that are on stage, of passages of physical action which have got nothing to do with script, which we might kind of refer back to the Commedia dell'Arte and say they are like Zanni characters with routines.

You really do have to run and run and run. I mean, shows like that have to be rehearsed with the set in situ from the end of the first week. You need a month with the set, because the set is an integral part of everything that goes on; it's not just a locale in which the action takes place. So, all of Red Shift's shows have been and are done on the set that they will be played on. We've never done the thing of rehearsing in a rehearsal room with a mark out on the floor, and then in the last week going on to the stage.

When plays of mine are done by other people in places like the Nottingham Play House, that's exactly what happens, I always feel completely at sea in that situation because I think: oh god, whatever we've done in the rehearsal is going to get lost for two days; I just hope most of it comes back again.

**SM There are two things springing out of that. One was how did you come up with the idea of using six people, and the sort of casting and doubling process?**

JH Like so many things it's an amalgam of practical constraint and artistic aspiration. Where did Théâtre de Complicité come up with their sort of shabby 1970s sort of charity shop look that all their early shows had? Well, it was because they couldn't afford costumes; they had to buy them in a charity shop. Where did Red or Dead come up with their sort of retro high street look? It's because Wayne Hemingway and his wife literally hunted through skips. With Red Shift it is what can we afford.

There are certain peculiar things, like if you are approved management you can tour with up to six people in the cast with one stage management, but if you go over six you then have to have two stage management, and so on and so forth. So, six tends to be a sort of magic number; it tends to be the outside edge of what most people can afford.

Then you look at the play, and before you commit to doing it you think: can this thing be made better in the way that I would like it to be by

working within the physical constraints of what are available to me; or am I just disabling it by doing it. And I've found over the years that usually you know if it's going to work because you can find, when it comes to doubling, lines that go through it that link the characters that people are going to play. Sometimes they are linked by the absurdity of the way they change from one character to another; sometimes they're linked by a kind of appropriateness, a peculiar appropriateness.

Coming back again to the example of Claudio and Dogberry: they're both kind of clowns really, so it sort of fits together.

Sometimes you have to protect particular characters. I mean, with the character of Beatrice she didn't double. But it was interesting, because of the particular actor that we had doing Benedict, that he did rather a good line in Scouse tea leaves. So, it was quite nice to just throw him something that was totally different from what he was doing for most of the piece, for him to do a little cameo.

That is where I come back to the idea of variety and cabaret. All of those actors had to change parts, sometimes quite radically and sometimes they had to go and play the drums or play a keyboard or something. And really the joy of the thing becomes watching that constant changing and reinvention, and watching people take it very seriously because they're being very good at what they do and there is real dazzle in what they do; there is nothing amateurish or clumsy. But then at the same time they're not being respectful in that kind of dead hand way; there's a sense of fun. And you can kind of see in the production where the company has had fun in the rehearsal room; fun which is obviously sometimes drained out of their boots when you come up with an idea for something and it takes days to rehearse it, and you think: why did we ever...

Because there was that Eurovision dance number in the middle of it, and we were at the end of our tethers because it had to be really, really

neat and really tight, because you must never show an audience that you are within miles of failing at something; you mustn't fail.

One of the things I really do hate about productions that do kind of attempt a kind of ensemble cabaret style is that when you see that somebody playing the saxophone has been taught to play three notes. So, when you hit the chorus they go parp, parp, parp, and then they do nothing else for a while, and then it comes around again and they do parp, parp, parp. And you instantly know that they have been taught three notes. Actually the actors need to look like, and often are, very accomplished players at the same time as they're accomplished actors.

So, actually drilling the show, rehearsing and running and running and running becomes very important with a show like that.

Something that I think is difficult sometimes in the theatre for people to understand, because people I say: well, I save 20% of my performance for the show. And we don't do that; we finish the show, the show's finished, the first audience that sees it gets a terrific show. And everybody on stage knows what everybody else is doing. You can't have that kind of intricate ensemble work going on when somebody suddenly goes maverick and ends up in the wrong place at the wrong time; it just doesn't work.

**SM Moving through, just on that subject of constrictions on the show: you were touring to a lot of venues, obviously you had to take that into consideration with the design and the rehearsal of the show. How did that affect the design?**

JH Red Shift frequently plays a range of venues, which on some tours is absurd. So, you can go from small 80 seat art centre studios, right through at the other end of it to a place like the Blackpool Grand, which is nearly 2,000 seats. If you go on to a main stage like that the show has still got to fill the stage. So, what we do is we work the show to a footprint of 6 metres by 6 metres, but we've always got with our floor cloths more of our floor cloths; so in a larger theatre we can expand

and we can take up more floor space. Also, if we're hanging things, as was the case with all those plastic legs that were up ((unclear)), they were actually much longer than they normally kind of appeared as, because the bottoms were rolled up. So, that whole thing could expand to fill a main stage at somewhere like Greenwich Theatre, and expand upwards as well.

The actors get used – coming back to this idea of drilling. Choreographically the shows are very precise. There is no faffing about and going somewhere else; everybody knows where everybody is going to be at every point in the show. It's like a dance. And consequently it means they can literally physically expand the map of what they're doing by maybe two or three metres in terms of width and depth. And what they have to do is they have to keep the same physical relationships, but with literally more distance involved. And then, because they know the show very well, they know that if they've got to say a line on a particular music cue, they've got to travel faster to get from one place to another.

So, all of Red Shift's shows expand and contract. I've always had this perspective on playing small scale venues that what should happen is you should walk into the auditorium and there just should be too much stuff. So, when you sit down in the auditorium you think: bloody hell, what's going on, this is...

I'm hugely disappointed when I walk into a Black Box studio and it's a production of, I don't know, *Pride and Prejudice*, and there's a carpet and two dining chairs and a stepladder. And you think: oh god, this is going to go on at least two hours and that's all there is to look at. Do you know what I mean?

Also I light all the shows that I do because I want the lighting to tell the story, not for it to be arbitrary. So, we have our lights so that there are states that have a thematic resonance, and we come back to them at certain points. For example, whenever Don John steps forward to

speak to the audience a neon strip came on above him, which gave a cold kind of light, and rather dispelled the cosy yellowy glow of the other stuff that was going on.

Also by lighting a show in a very clear, kind of almost cinematic expressionistic way, it means that lighting it is the same in a small venue and a big venue; the only difference is instead of having three 500 watt Frenels on the front bar, you would have three 2k Frenels on the front bar. So, all you do is up the voltage literally, or take it down again. But the same lights are in the same place. Because our fit up in a small venue is two hours. And get out has to be less than an hour, otherwise we run into overtime problems.

**SM Back to money again.**

JH Yes.

**SM Talking about money, it was a very brave step to withdraw from the Arts Council's funding. Much Ado was the last show that kind of happened within that. In what ways did you feel Red Shift's work was being compromised by the arrangement with the Arts Council?**

JH Well, I felt that what was happening was the Arts Council – it's quite a complicated and boring story – but what happened was that in around about 2002, 2003 the Arts Council central office in London had a whole load of national touring clients, and they devolved those clients to the regional offices in which those companies were resident; which was really senseless because a lot of those companies, like Red Shift, were national touring companies. So, to take a company like Compass and say: well, they're based in Sheffield so they should go to Northeast Arts, was like bonkers because they only did a small proportion of their work in that area. And it made complete sense that there should be a central office that oversaw the work of national companies.

And we were devolved to Arts Council England London, and the relationship between us and the Arts Council changed overnight. We had a really good relationship with the Arts Council: I trusted them, they trusted me; I used to go in for coffee quite frequently. As soon as we were devolved to London the relationship just froze. And it became clear that there was a hidden agenda, which was Arts Council London were basically saying: hang on, why have we got all these companies who tour nationally, hardly do any work in London, and we are giving them, in the case of Red Shift, nearly 200,000 a year, and they only ever come into London for a week a year or something; this doesn't make sense. So, there was that.

There was also the fact that the old London Arts Board has never entirely gone away. In fact, the culture of the old London Arts Board is still contained within Arts Council London. And that is entirely social value driven. And they instantly started saying to people like us and other companies as well: we're not interested in your art as artists; we want to see what is the social value that comes out from funding you, so what are you doing in the way of workshops, educational projects, residencies and so on and so forth. To which we've always said we produce education packs because the shows are what we do.

I don't know about you, but I've been witness to or participated in loads of really dreadful workshops over the years done by actors who don't really want to do them, and have to do them because they're told they have to do them.

So, there was that. Then also what hove into view around about 2003, 2004 was the developing confidence of a section of very inexpensive art driven collaborative theatre – what lots of us now call Trust Fund Theatre. And I believe that the architects of a lot of that were a small coterie of people, involving Tom Morris, then at Battersea Arts Centre, a very well connected consultancy called Artichoke, LIFT, London International Festival of Theatre, and a few others. And what they were really concerned about, they were saying: right, we're giving Red

Shift 200,000 to tour all over the rest of the country doing plays; are we interested in plays anymore? Don't think we are really. What we're interested in are companies, all of whom are 24 years old, they're two years out of university, they're doing interesting kind of quasi Weimar cabaret type of work, it doesn't cost us anything, they're doing it at Battersea Arts Centre for nothing; why do we need to pay all this money to these other people when this is the art we're really more interested in, and also it's cheap.

And then you've got that mad situation that happened this time in 2007 when a whole load of companies were cut, including the London Bubble, which actually, ironically, is a company that adds a huge amount of social value. But they didn't like the art that London Bubble was making, and that's why they cut it. Subsequently, of course, Jonathan Petherbridge has run a very canny campaign to get funding from local authorities and from the mayor's office and so on.

But I could see that was coming, and I felt we were being groomed for cut, to be cut. And it had nothing to do with the work at all; it was entirely to do with strategically where we were positioned. Basically with an Arts Council that didn't want us, couldn't make sense of us, doing work that they didn't really like. So, I felt we needed to act. And initially we fought back.

In 2006 we did a production based on the original Ted Lewis novel *Get Carter*, which was fantastically successful; and actually we very nearly took it out on an entirely commercial tour. But at the end we balked because the sums of money that we were having to underwrite for it were enormous. You know that when you transfer from the context of working in small and middle scale venues to working in big places like the Yvonne Arnaud where you're capable of taking 35,000 a week, actually underpinning, you're underwriting it to... if you get someone who goes sick and you can't find an understudy then you're going to lose in a day a huge amount of money.

So, we kind of balked at that in the end. But it was a hugely successful show. And one of the things it did, oddly, was it brought in a theatre audience that doesn't really exist, which is early middle aged working class men. And we had a lot of guys everywhere we went who were kind of ex Mods, sitting in the auditorium with shaven heads and Crombie overcoats with velvet collars watching the show, and really enjoying it. And that whole world of Mod fashion. The base guitarist from Oasis came to see it in Greenwich and wanted me to write another Mod play, and stuff. And it really, really took off. And then we took it up to the Edinburgh Festival and it was in the critic's choice in all the newspapers every day, alongside Black Watch and Strawberries in January and all the kind of high profile shows of the festival. So, the reviews were great, the audiences were great, we were having our hands bitten off to do venues; there was nothing wrong with anything. Five Arts Council staff came to see the show and all produced almost identical negative reports. And that was where it became clear what was going on. I actually watched one of them sitting in the auditorium and she was obviously completely caught up in the play because she was hiding her eyes at one point; then afterwards her report said that it was dull and didn't work and so on and so forth. So, there was obviously a party line.

It's very unusual for the director of Arts Council London, a woman called Sarah Weir, to come out and see a show and write a report. And we complained. And they said: all right, we'll commission some independent reports then. So, they got Nick Kent from the Tricycle to do one, a Birmingham director whose second name I can never remember, called Tyrone something, a black director, and David Gregg. And they all went to see the show and they all loved it, and they all wrote positive reports; which were never then referenced in any of the documentation.

So, I kind of knew what was coming. And I decided that the thing to do was to pull the company out before they cut it, because I didn't want to be running a cut company.

Now, you can say that I'm a wild-eyed conspiracy theorist, and there might be some truth in it; but I think also I think the Arts Council is inherently arrogant and inefficient. And one of the things that was fascinating was they kept losing stuff. Now, you could say that they were doing it deliberately. So, we'd send them an account of our work with pictures and show reports and letters from venues, and then a week later they would say they hadn't received it. And then we'd say: but it was sent registered post and somebody has signed for it. Well, we don't know where it is. And they might have been deliberately burying stuff, or they might have been just too inefficient.

We also know that they were conference calling when we spoke to them. So, you'd be talking to your officer and there would be silence, and you could tell that there were people sitting around the table saying ((whispers)) before she replied. So, it was a very sticky kind of time. And we slapped a Freedom of Information Act notice on them, which they side-stepped by saying they couldn't find anything relevant in the files. And at that point you have to take a civil action out against them, which costs money. So, that is what any government department can do. So, I decided to withdraw.

But that's not the whole story, you see, because the other part of the story is to be quite honest I have run Red Shift for 27 years, I have directed an awful lot of shows like Much Ado About Nothing, and although actually I was very pleased with Much Ado About Nothing I was kind of getting to the point where personally, as an artist, I wanted to go in a different direction. And the kind of work I wanted to make wasn't so much about doing shows on stages and conventional theatres; I wanted to do a different kind of work. So, what we did over the last few years was we built up a fighting fund, and we squirreled away quite a substantial amount of money which would then act as a

reinvestment fund for the company; so when we came off Arts Council funding we would have the resources to be able to embark on a new series of pieces that would basically act as a calling card for a new Red Shift. And that's what we're doing at the moment.

So, in September 2007 in the last week of rehearsals for *Much Ado About Nothing* I told the Arts Council we wouldn't be re-applying. My officer – Lord love her – said: ((whispering)) that's probably a very good move. And then our funding ceased Easter 2008.

I also made a brief foray personally into academia, which was disastrous. I went to Middlesex University as Head of Performing Arts; and I knew I wasn't going to stay the second day, to be perfectly frank with you. But for the sake of sort of saving everybody's face I managed to stay till Christmas. The problem was that I went there and made it very clear to them, and they made it very clear to me, that the job I was taking on was basically a project, which was to rebuild what was at one time one of the foremost performing arts departments in the country, but which, through a series of casual and rather stupid decisions, had become much diminished, with the kind of engineering of John Wright's departure, and the engineering of the now head of East 15's departure – I can't remember his name. And actually I got there and found that the resources were not on the table to be able to do what I had been described. In reality, because of the university's financial situation – because I don't know if you know, but they bought a new campus to move to, and then they fell out with the local authority that they were going to move to, so then they had to sell the new campus site at a loss, considerable loss, many millions of pounds, and buy another new campus site, which they did in Hendon; and they are in a very energetic programme of rebuilding, which is costing hundreds of millions of pounds. And what is actually getting top sliced to pay for that from the HEFCE income is enormous, proportionally. So, there wasn't the money there for me to do it. So, I just said: I'm not going to stay. That was a shame, but you know.

I think one of the things in this game is when you know a thing's wrong you've got to walk away, because if you stay it just gets mired in recrimination and so on, and it's always better to steer clear of all of that. Hence walking away from the Arts Council as well really.

What can I say? We've got an idea for a show for next summer, which is already a big success, we've got people booking it; because A, it's artistically exactly what I'm interested in doing, and B, it provides theatres with a new income stream from facilities which they don't usually earn anything from, which is their foyers and outdoor spaces. So, that will open at Latitude next summer, then go to the Young Vic and then to Nottingham Playhouse, and then up to Edinburgh, and then the following year it's quite close to being booked and make a visit to Germany. So, thus far so good. What I'm interested in doing does fit.

But we do seem to be living – certainly in London; I don't know if it's the same everywhere else – but we certainly do seem to be living in a period of, coming back to that term, trust fund theatre. And I'm very suspicious of it. I don't think it's a healthy environment at all. So many companies that are not making a living, and don't seem to be too bothered about it, is a worry, I think.

**SM That's brilliant. Thank you very much. I think we've covered everything.**