

16 June 2010

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.

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.

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Supervisor: Professor Mick Mangan

- 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: 01 / 09 / 10

Name: STEPHEN PURCELL

(please print)

SM Could you begin by explaining a little bit about how the Pantaloon's came about and how the show fits into the aims of the Pantaloon's?

SP Sure. Well the Pantaloon's started in 2004 as part of my MA research which then turned into my PhD research and that was on Shakespeare as popular theatre or more fully; elements of the popular in contemporary Shakespearian performance. So I wanted to try out in practice some of the things that I was writing about, some of the things that I'd seen other companies do and aim at a sort of synthesis of that. So I recruited a bunch of mostly third year drama students and we did a production of *As You Like It*, which actually was very different from what now has become the Pantaloon's house style so to speak. Not to say we have a fixed style, but the sort of style that you might recognise from our productions now. So originally it was an all male production, it's very heavily commedia dell'arte influenced so we had masks, we did a bit of work on the actual masks of commedia although we adapted them to *As You Like It*, it was a bigger cast as well, a cast of nine and that was just in Kent we did that, but we felt like we were onto something, we wanted to carry on working together, many of us. So a few of us, I think around about four or five of us from that company returned the following year to do the *Winter's Tale* and Kate who had been involved in a behind the scenes capacity in the first year joined us then as an actor as did several other actors, by this point some of them were graduating, some of them were staying on for a fourth year. So it was still very much a student production, but it was moving into

something else and we did The Fringe and we did a very small tour and from that then we refined it even further, a sort of a core company began to emerge which actually is very similar to the core company as it exists today and I think it was...what did we do next? *Romeo and Juliet* and *Cymbeline* which we did both in the same summer and then really each year it's become more and more refined, we've learned lessons from previous years, generally the casts become smaller as well ((laughing)) so it's been from nine to five and so really we started to clarify what we're about, how we work as a company whilst aiming to kind of, develop ourselves as a company every year. Probably the best way you can summarise us as a company is by looking on our website and just copying and pasting our mission statement, which is up there in the 'about us' section and I don't know it by heart so I'm not going to attempt it, but it's something that we actually arrived at communally, collectively...when was that? That was...that was just after we did *Cymbeline* and *Romeo and Juliet* so that would've been 2006 or 2007, we came up with the mission statement when the company as they were then all met up, we all made a list of the priorities we had in creating theatre, what we wanted to do with theatre, with each other and it was all done very mathematically ((laughing)), we got the list, anonymised it and all voted or rather assigned a score to each word or each aim and then the ones that we'd all agreed as either fours or fives went into the mission statement; and actually, surprisingly, something that's pretty cohesive came out of it which is all about creating popular accessible theatre, which is also intelligent,

which draws from the popular entertainment of both the past and the present. So commedia dell'arte and stand up comedy and everything in between is sort of fair game. So far it applies to Shakespeare, but we decided we didn't want to confine ourselves to that and indeed next year we're doing our first non-Shakespearian performance, which is the *Canterbury Tales*, and working collectively with the audience as well in performance, but also rehearsing, devising collectively and a big thing even then, which has become a bigger thing now is the idea of...as we put it in our mission statement, keeping one foot in the world of illusion and one foot in the world of the here and now. I've written about this in my book as locus and platea and, you know, borrowing from Robert Weimann and from Brecht and all that sort of thing. So there's a sort of a theoretical basis behind it, which I won't bore you with because ((laughing)) you know, you can look it up in chapter one of *Popular Shakespeare* by Stephen Purcell, but that theory really has become the basis of what we do and why we do it and I'm sure you noticed today, we close off certain themes, they don't necessarily take place physically on the locus base, the physical stage construction, although they often do, but there are certain scenes which are sort of sacred which we don't really mess around with, which stay in that fictional world and although with *Macbeth* obviously we cut it heavily, we try to really keep as much of the poetry intact as we can and certainly in our full length shows we generally will do that. But then we'll see other moments as belonging more to the here and now of the audience and so those are the bits we see as fair game for ad-libbing, improvising,

adding modern references, anachronistic references, all that sort of thing, which actually has a useful double effect, one of which, particularly with things like Shakespeare and I imagine with Chaucer next year as well, gives the audience that frisson of rule breaking, “Oh you’re being very irreverent here, that’s very naughty and I’m quite enjoying it” you know? But on the other hand, actually we think in a way it’s respecting the dramaturgical design of the texts, perhaps not the letter, but the...I want to say spirit, but I don’t want to say spirit ((laughing)) the dramaturgical design is the best way of saying it I think in non-mythologized language ((laughing)).

SM So you’re doing two shows a year at the moment?

SP Yes. Oh yeah one thing I should mention obviously is the free aspect of what we do. We first experimented with free shows at the Edinburgh Fringe in 2005 or whenever it was that we did...it might’ve even been 2004 when we did a *Winter’s Tale* just to try it out really to see what happened because I felt, you know, one of the problems with a lot of companies who attempt to do popular theatre is they’ll absolutely nail the style then they’ll open the doors and the classic theatre audience will step in, you know, middle class, well educated and, nothing wrong with that audience, but obviously it stops really being popular theatre the minute you confine yourself to a traditional theatre audience. So we thought, well the real way of testing this will be to stick it for free in a public space and see whether people stay and watch. Obviously we advertised as well and to our pleasant surprise it actually worked quite

well and we learnt a lot of lessons, there were things that didn't work so well, there were things that we thought would work that didn't, there were things that we didn't think would work that accidentally, you know, did, that stayed in the show for whatever reason and did. We were very pleasantly surprised in that first year by the extent to which very young children will sit through a performance if the storytelling's clear and if the stage picture is constantly moving, constantly interesting, constantly colourful and the characters are clearly delineated and clearly drawn. And so we've sort of refined the company style on the basis of those discoveries and discoveries we made in subsequent years some of which were fascinating. We discovered a lot about space through doing free shows; we'd often have problems with space, we'd have audiences who were too far apart to enjoy the show. Audiences wouldn't laugh, we discovered, if they're sitting more than about a metre away from the other members of the audience. So we came up with strategies for getting the audience to pack in closely, we found ways of defining what might otherwise be ambiguous space, if you plonk benches or something like that at the back of what you want to be the audience space, it encloses the space in a nice symbolic way. We added, for some of our free shows in really busy spaces like The Scoop on the South Bank of the Thames, we found that it was so busy at the back of the space with people passing by coming and going that we put up a fence which, again, completely free to enter, but the act of going through the fence meant that you'd made a conscious choice to enter and actually then the quality of the audience's attention improved

enormously, nothing to do with the acting or the performance, simply putting a fence up. Things like that we discovered make a huge, huge difference and so we've done a lot of work on defining our spaces and manipulating the audience's perception of what that space is and what it means and what the rules are and of course we don't always get it right and sometimes that's when it's quite exciting because ((laughing)) something breaks out, a dog walks across the stage as one did today and actually it can be quite fun, quite interesting, provide opportunities for the actors to engage with the here and now. Equally it can be destructive, you know, ((laughing)) there's sort of a swings and roundabouts. So to make ends meet we do...well not just to make ends meet because we like the opportunities that a ticketed audience give us as well, it's a very different set of opportunities, but we do do a ticketed tour now where we charge more conventional ticket prices and do the more conventional open air Shakespeare sites, that's very often purely logistical reasons, because it's quite a big tour now we need to go to venues that have an infrastructure there already then you can sell tickets for the rest of the venues that have mailing lists, they can send things out to. So that does mean we go to a lot of National Trust and English Heritage sites, not that there's anything wrong with that, but it's perhaps less adventurous for an open air Shakespeare company to do that, but we do continue to do a free tour, which for the last two years has gone alongside a full length show and has been a kind of one hour and a quarter sort of length. Last year it was *Romeo and Juliet*, this year it was *Macbeth* and that works in many different ways, sometimes

we'll simply collect donations and hope the audience are generous, which we're beginning to cut down on because you just can't rely on it. Sometimes audiences are very generous, but you can't rely on it. Often we'll be paid a flat fee by an event organiser or by a local council and sometimes we'll collect donations on top of that, sometimes we won't depending on the arrangement we've come to with that particular venue and that's exciting because it keeps us on our toes as a company really, it means we have to keep earning the audience's attention, we can't take it for granted. So we have to be eye catching, we have to be constantly interesting, we have to tell the story with absolute clarity and if we don't the audience tell us by walking away or by chatting, it's that straightforward and it has been I think, for me as a director and for the actors, a training experience and you read a lot about how the commedia dell'arte companies in Italy learned their craft through doing it and they developed the commedia dell'arte style through simply having to earn a wandering audience's attention and we started to really discover what that means by having to do it ourselves and so much of the way the company perform invading the audience's space, acting in what some might describe as a very broad style actually is a direct response to that environment.

SM I was interested in that moment where Aunt Fanny checks that the children are following the story and gives away prizes. How did that come about and how does that work with the audience?

SP Now I'm trying to remember whether we've done something like that before because we've always felt that it's very important to tell the audience the story very clearly and sometimes almost to spoonfeed it, partly because we cut the text down so much. So sometimes we simply need to replace a scene with a brief bit of exposition. Sometimes it's because we fear that the story won't be clear to an audience which includes five years olds ((laughing)) and it can be useful to recap, also the cast of five sometimes doesn't aid the clear story telling in the way we'd like it to. Yeah I'm not sure we have done that specifically before, just asking the audience what's going on and you're absolutely right, that was primarily to keep the audience who might have come in halfway through, the audience who's attention might have drifted or the children in the audience for example, just keep them absolutely aware of what's going on in the story and where we are. With Aunt Fanny actually there was quite a sort of a tortuous evolution for that character because initially we had a separate Porter, Mark who played Malcolm played the Porter, and did a very dry stand-up sequence as the Porter and Aunt Fanny we wanted to be this sort of innocent character the audience would love who was on the wrong side and would slowly work out she was on the wrong side and then let the good guys into the castle at the end as you know, which survived into the manifestation of the production that you saw today, but interestingly we found that the play didn't stand up to too much comic inversion. We've previously done mostly comedies, but we've done *Romeo and Juliet* and we've done *Cymbeline* as well and we've previously found

that adding lots of irreverent bits and pieces, lots of 'here and now' stuff as we call it, or lots of platea stuff to use the more technical term, really aided the play: really helped the storytelling, the pace, the audience's relationship with the actors and helped it feel like a piece of popular theatre and a piece of popular storytelling. With Macbeth it felt self-indulgent and intrusive, so at a relatively late stage in rehearsals, it was probably about three weeks in when we were running the show in full, we realised, "No this isn't working, it's too intrusive". So we stripped back the comedy and added all those bits where Malcolm narrates, which hadn't been there in the original version. We'd devised it very differently because those little short bits of narration, often directly adapted from lines in the text, not always but often, we felt were addressing the 'here and now' in a very different way. We were asking the audience to become co-creators of the imaginative world by imagining this is now a train or this squirt of talcum powder is creating a fog and it's jokey, but it's not jokey in quite the same way that an overt piece of audience interaction or stand-up is. So we were left with a reduced number of comic sequences all of which then went to Aunt Fanny so there was more of a through line there. So she became the porter and that actually worked quite nicely. Sorry, I've wandered off your question haven't I slightly ((laughing))?

SM That's okay, in fact that leads nicely into the process. Can you take me through your process?

SP The process for *Macbeth*...it differs every year so I can't tell you exactly what we do, but I'll tell you what we did last year and what we're hoping to do again next year and, as with everything with the Pantaloon, we've lifted things that have worked from past years and jettisoned stuff that didn't. The process for *Macbeth* started in December when we held an open workshop, which about 25 people attended, most of whom were people we knew from previous auditions or had been in the Pantaloon before and had left. Obviously the current company were there with the exception of Martin who plays *Macbeth* because he was off in Canada or somewhere at the time so that was rather a strange absence, but actually useful in many ways because it meant there was no pressure of...sorry do you want us to go?

UN Hi guys, yeah sorry we're closed now. Would it be okay if you just moved onto the bench?

SM No that's fine.

SP No problem. Sorry where was I?

SM Open workshop in December, yes.

SP Yes. So we had this open workshop and the focus of that really was how do we apply...no not how do we apply...how do we bring the Pantaloon style to *Macbeth* in a way that respects the dramaturgical design of *Macbeth*, that interacts with it usefully rather than simply co-opting *Macbeth* to the Pantaloon style? So in other words, we were

looking for how locus and platea interplay works in the text of *Macbeth* or could be made to work in the text of *Macbeth*. So we worked on a lot of scenes involving unnamed characters, the old man, a scene we cut involving Lennox and the Lord eventually, but you know we didn't know we were going to cut it at the point, as well as working on the interactions between Macbeth and the servants, Lady Macbeth and the servants and then finally just working on Macbeth's if it were done soliloquy and so everyone had a stab at all kinds of different bits and pieces, there was a sense that it was perhaps an informal audition, but we didn't say that, but we did give everyone a chance at playing whatever they wanted to so we had girls playing Macbeth, we had...I don't think we had boys playing Lady Macbeth actually, but a real sense that actually this was more about the part than it was about the actor. So there was just a lot of trying stuff out really. That workshop was incredibly useful and we're definitely going to do that again. It generated a lot of discussion at the end of the day, really useful discussion which then fed into my editing down of the script and that's something that I did on my own on the basis of the discussion we'd had. So the script...and I can send you a copy actually of the script...

SM Oh yes please, that's a good idea.

SP ...includes a lot of bits in italics where I say something should go here which involves audience interaction or something could go here involving the porter character. So there are a lot of...I tried to flag up possibilities which then the company will work on and devise together.

Sometimes I'll come up with a great idea that I absolutely want to impose and will, and then often get shouted down by the actors ((laughing)) and it's quite a healthy relationship in a way because two of the actors are also producers of the company. So they can tell me "No" because they're producers. So, if I start getting a little bit authoritarian, which isn't in my nature really, but if I do get a bit, you know, 'concepty' as they put it ((laughing)) they can halt me in my tracks. But what I really try to encourage is that once we've got that company...oh and of course the audition process in January...end of January is another big moment. We don't always have auditions, the rule with the Pantaloons really is that if you were in last year's and you want to come back, you get to, and then if you say, "No" we open up auditions for the space that you've vacated. So this last year we were just auditioning for one spot, which was a female spot. We didn't know at that point whether it was going to be Lady Macbeth or the other female role in Macbeth which is, as Cait plays it, Duncan ((laughing)) and the Porter and obviously the same company do...this year did *Much Ado About Nothing*. So again we didn't know whether it was Beatrice or Hero that we were auditioning. So we really just try out a lot of bits and pieces. We're auditioning for an ensemble member rather than for someone to play a particular role and that's a useful devising process as well because obviously people bring a lot of stuff to the auditions and we try to keep the auditions...actually it's one thing we've had really nice feedback on from our sort of rejected auditionees, they tend to be really nice about the process because we hold this day

long audition where they get to improvise, they get to devise scenes, they bring along a Shakespearean monologue of their own choosing and really it's all about them showing us what they think they can bring to the ensemble rather than playing a defined role or doing a defined task. So we had some fantastic women this year, in our second round I'd have happily cast any of them, all 14 of them, it's such a difficult decision to make ((laughing)). So then the rehearsal period begins in earnest once I've cut down the text, flagged up moments that I think are opportunities for the kind of collaborative creation of something, whether it's a stand up sequence or a movement sequence or audience interaction or whatever it might be and yeah, then the cast get together on the first day, I don't do read-throughs, I think they're a bit of a waste of time because everyone's read it anyway and if they haven't, they should've done. So we'll tend to start off with ensemble building games if there's a new member of the ensemble, we do a lot of movement work, I always play a game at some point in rehearsal and it tends to be near the beginning, but I'll often bring it back when it's needed, which I call the snitch game. You know in Harry Potter the golden snitch? Well I place an imaginary snitch somewhere in the room, spread the...actually no, I start them off all in a huddle and then we play the game with them spread out and together they have to work out where the snitch is and how fast it's moving and respond to it accordingly and get interested in it, whatever it might be and that can be quite useful because it's a skill that's needed in open air theatre just to intensify focus on whatever needs to be...whatever the audience

need to be looking at. I interviewed Marcello Magni recently, and he talks about this on the Globe Stage and it's exactly the same I think for the stuff we do, it's about editing, you're like a film editor, but you're just doing it live and as an ensemble. So we do movement work, obviously we're making choices at that stage about characterisation and so we spend a lot of time talking. It's trial and error very often in the *Pantaloons*. I think if someone suggests something you're obliged to try it out before you reject it ((laughing)) if indeed you do. So yeah we'll try out things that people suggest. The idea of playing Duncan as an absolutely kind of morally bankrupt mob boss was something that one of the cast suggested and we thought, "Well why not? Let's give it a go". Sometimes the cast suggest things that I think are terrible ideas. For *Much Ado About Nothing*, Cait who played Beatrice and Don Pedro wanted to play Don Pedro as Puss in Boots from *Shrek* ((laughing)) and I just thought, "No. No way is that ending up in my production" but it sort of has in a weird way ((laughing)). So yeah whenever something comes up in discussion, often it'll be a throw away comment...I remember the first day for *Much Ado About Nothing*, Martin who's playing Don John among other roles, suggested that it was a little bit like...now I can't remember exactly what this was in relation to, but it was just a throw away comment, a little bit like a *Sun* journalist, twisting the truth, trying to find the dirty on celebrities, whatever it was, something along those lines and this idea of Don John and his buddies Conrad and Borachio being kind of tabloid hacks or paparazzi really stuck. So that found it's way into the production and similarly there

was a sort of a feeling that Macbeth was a little bit like an Alfred Hitchcock thriller, someone mentioned, so I mean as you saw today, found it's way into the show. There was talk about the Krays so that sort of, in a weird sort of roundabout way, found it's way in. A lot of the stuff like initially Macbeth has that little glass in that...you know the green glass? Initially that was going to be a gin and tonic, there was going to be a little nod to the Krays and it sort of got lost somewhere along the line, but I guess the kind of the grain of the idea is still there and it's led to something. So it's all about collaborative creation really. I see my role as sort of weaving together disparate elements rather than coming up with a concept and imposing it. Concepts tend to emerge, but actually very often they're accidents that I just...I go, "We've got to exploit this". For example, Martin just started as Macbeth to fidget in his clothes and to play around with his belt as he was losing his grip and initially I think it was just something that Martin found useful to convey or to feel or to explore Macbeth's volatile emotional state, but then I spotted that there was this sort of parallel with the line where it's referred to as, "Now he feels his... garments hang about him, like a giant's robe upon a dwarfish thief" anyway, I'm paraphrasing, but that's the bit that I remembered and so this idea that actually he was wearing stuff that didn't fit him anymore, he'd adopted a role that didn't fit him, that he had no right to, became actually something that I found really interesting, really important and so that parallel wasn't there because anyone put it there, it just emerged but then I think when you see those parallels it's worth just teasing them out and exploiting them.

SM And when you come to sections such as the porter's scene, are those devised as part of the process or do they become written at some point?

SP No, no they're very much a product of the company in the rehearsal room trying stuff out, and the company on stage in front of an audience trying stuff out if I'm honest ((laughingly)). So the Porter scene has evolved over the course of the tour and quite right, I say too, particularly at straight down the line platea moments, they need to address the here and now. If there's a big tree, you address the big tree, if there's a small number of people in the audience, you address the fact that there's a small number of people in the audience. If it's raining, you address the fact that it's raining and those are the moments to do that, to tie it in, to stitch it in with the there and then and with the here and now. For the kind of the straight stand-up moments I often put the cast on the spot in the rehearsal room and just go, "Just riff on this. Talk about this" and when they're not trying to be funny, they're funny. So you say, "Okay, talk about chairs" and they go, "What?" "No, talk about chairs now" ((laughing)) and they'll just start talking about chairs or whatever it might be and they'll come up with something funny and of course there's a load of stuff that isn't funny and is then just sort of fumbling around, but you can kind of tease that stuff out and then obviously they go away and think about it and they come up with gags like, "Is this Mick Jagger which I see before me?" ((laughing)) and all that sort of thing and so next time they do it they'll have some- they'll have a bit more material. Cait we're very fortunate

is a very experienced stand-up anyway, she's done stand-up in comedy clubs so actually she's really, really confident with all that. The rest of the company in...not so much in *Macbeth*, but in other productions do bits of stand-up as well and in many cases they're not nearly as experienced, but they learn their craft by doing it I guess. So Ross, for example, who was Banquo and Macduff plays Margaret in *Much Ado About Nothing* as a sort of drag act and does a drag act at one point, does a stand-up act and did sing a song, but we cut it unfortunately ((laughing)) because it wasn't quite working and he's never done anything like that, but, again you sort of...you just learn by doing it.

SM How does the music develop within the piece?

SP The music is mostly Mark's domain. Mark composes our music and plays the bulk of it himself as well. I tend to...we tend to leave the music until last. Mark will be playing around with ideas, but privately he and I will have a chat about various things as the process is going on and if there's a set piece of song then he'll compose that early, before the rehearsal starts and we'll bring it along and teach it to the cast or whoever's singing it. Although in some cases he'll actually scrap it, and come up with something else in response to what's gone on in the rehearsal room. The incidental music I always think is very important, and that the acting comes first and then the incidental music highlights whatever's come out, whatever we've discovered, whatever we're trying to play. So in the last the last quarter of rehearsals probably

Mark will sit there with his guitar and just pick out stuff, play around, see what happens. This year it was a bit...I don't know if I've told you about this, we originally cast a girl called Helen as our fifth Pantaloon and unfortunately she got ill so we had to recast and Lucy came into the process quite late before *Much Ado* opened, but Macbeth had already opened at that point and so Helen is a musician and she was involved with Mark in composing stuff in the rehearsal stages. Lucy's then taken on some extra stuff because Lucy's obviously a musician as well and has kind of contributed, but obviously she didn't really get a chance to shape it, which is not ideal, I'd really like to have the company on the road being the company that devised the play, but obviously you know, some things are out of your control and we've done all we can to kind of induct Lucy into the company and make her feel an equal part of things, but obviously in many ways she took on Helen's role as the way that Helen was playing them and made them her own over the course of the tour. Sorry I drifted off the point here didn't I?

SM That's okay. It's useful. We were just discussing the music.

SP Yeah music, so the incidental music will come in towards the end.

SM And how about the design? Because that's quite important with the story telling, for example I noticed you had the five actors playing different characters, but all carrying the same colour through, and then of course having the two levels with the platform.

SP Yeah well the Pantaloon colour is something we discovered last year and decided to keep. I like the idea that you...it's a Brechtian thing, sort of a Weimann thing that you never lose sight of the here and now. So I like the idea that each Pantaloon, much like each of the *Saturdays* or each of *JLS* or whatever it might be, that sort of real pop culture, each of the *Tellytubbies*, has their own Pantaloon colour. It varies from show to show so just because one of them's in green today doesn't mean they'll be in green in *Much Ado*, but each of the actors has a colour and then their characters will wear that colour in various permutations. I think that adds to the sense of the ensemble. It's kind of playful, it's kind of kitsch, but I think that's part of the charm of it really. It also kind of removes it, it heightens it just a little bit, makes it look quite cartoonish, they're sort of primary colours so we're not asking the audience to believe these people are real, that this is really Macbeth that you're seeing before you, we're asking you to see him as someone who's shown you in immense detail what Macbeth does, what Macbeth did. So you're kind of creating a fictional Macbeth, that's the idea, I don't know whether it works, collaboratively with the audience. The set...last year and the year before we had a cart because we liked the idea of nodding to travelling players and commedia dell'arte. So we had an actual cart which we painted in vibrant primary colours and that was basically as I say a cart and some trunks. So it was all about being itinerate players and that was *Romeo and Juliet* and *Twelfth Night* and the year before it was *Taming of the Shrew*, and it sort of worked, but we felt like we wanted something a

little bit more solid to act as a physical locus, again, tying in with this world of the here and now and the there and then, we wanted space that represents there and then. So for *Macbeth* we thought, "Well we're setting it..." and the design, again, it evolved over the course of the rehearsal process. The way it works, we have a three week rehearsal process, a short break and it's during that break that Nick, our designer, built the set and then we have a one week sort of top-up before the tour starts. And so this idea of 1960's kitsch came up with the Krays and all that sort of thing so it seemed appropriate to have that pillar that we have and we... *Macbeth* is anyway, it's very metatheatrical, there's lots of references to it being a play and to, life's but a walking shadow of poor play and so we like the idea of a collapsed proscenium arch and they're putting on a show aren't they? You know, the aesthetic that we'd sort of decided on for *Macbeth* was Pantaloon's gone wrong. So they've all got these sort of slightly lopsided blobs rather than perfect circles that you'd expect from clowns and the white face is grey face. I don't know whether you've noticed it's not actually white, the make-up they put on, it's grey and with *Macbeth* it smears and goes away and it then changes obviously because she throws water in his face and it varies from show to show, but that was inspired by the Joker from *The Dark Knight*, the Christopher Nolan remake...not remake, but reboot when he looks all, you know, Keith Ledger is the Joker, his make-up's all smeared and quite nightmarish, you know, he's a clown but it's nightmarish because there's the human under the clown who's sort of coming through so

that was what we were going for with Macbeth specifically, but with the whole aesthetic. We're actually using more, because we're in a tiny van and we don't have much resources, so we're using more or less the same set up for *Much Ado About Nothing*, but we don't use the collapsed proscenium arch. We have a kind of a parasol type thing that stretches out, it's a semi-parasol if that makes sense, it's a section of a parasol, spreads out over the stage and is blue and yellow so it's much more kind of carnival colours and there's bunting and a deckchair and flowers, but again this idea that this is a locus space, it's you know, when you're on it or near it you're located in a fictional world and then the further you move away from it the more you belong to the world of the audience. That's not a...it's not a religious rule that we adhere to because actually sometimes the actors will be right up close to the audience, but very much contained in the fictional world. Sometimes they'll be on the locus space as, for example, Mark when he's squirting the spray and going "It was drizzling", that's a platea moment, but it's on the locus space. So it's just a helping hand, but we did think it would be useful to have that defined space which belongs to another world and also for the free shows it's useful to have something eye catching just on a really straightforward level. People are walking past, if they go, "Oh what's that?" that's potentially another five audience members that you wouldn't have had otherwise. So that can be really handy.

SM Was there any specific reasoning behind the particular doublings chosen?

SP Yeah we talk about...I mean doublings very often are logistical. Sometimes I try and bring out an element of symbolism to the doublings. So, for example, actually I don't know if there are any this year that have totally worked out. Sometimes it's quite nice to have one character playing a lot of villains or playing a lot of victims or that kind of thing, but to be honest when you've got a cast of five it's mostly logistical about who doubles with who. I do a spreadsheet, I work out who can't possibly double with who and you end up with the only possibility left like *Much Ado About Nothing*, Leonato can virtually double with nobody I discovered without some serious cutting. So it had to be Don John that he doubled with just because I couldn't find another way of doing it without cutting the play in a way that I didn't want to do. The colours though we do think carefully about. So once the profile of roles has been worked out we'll then chat about it and it may change over the course of rehearsals because it doesn't have to be finalised until relatively late on. We can decide that a character's wearing a hat and an overcoat without deciding what colour it is. And we will talk about the symbolic value so for example Macbeth was green because we felt it's the colour of envy and he wants things he can't have. Lady Macbeth and Ross were red because we felt it's the colour of danger, we liked the idea that Ross also plays with fire a little bit and switches her allegiance, her in our production obviously, depending on which way the wind's blowing, hence her rather cold reception when she arrives at the end to see Malcolm and Macduff. Blue is sort of a powerful, peaceful colour for Banquo and for Macduff

again, peaceful's perhaps not quite right for Macduff, but you know, that sort of element that it is a relatively benevolent profile of roles and particularly we liked the idea of the grey coat with the blue splotches for Banquo's ghost. The purple is obviously a response to Duncan's royalty. Yellow, I can't remember why we chose yellow for Malcolm because he runs off probably ((laughing)). Yeah sometimes it's just Mark looks quite good in yellow ((laughing)) it could be a straightforward as that. We do like to have a selection of primary colours so we wouldn't want for symbolic reasons to have, "Oh this character seems very orange, this character seems very red, this character seems very orange red". So we'd want to have that kind of full pallet because otherwise it doesn't look quite so much like you're...we're painting with primary colours metaphorically as well as literally ((laughing)) because it's open air theatre.

SM With the movement, because there's a lot of mime within the piece, and you've already talked a little bit about the commedia side, I was wondering how much does that still influence the performance?

SP It's still a big influence and I do constantly draw attention to commedia dell'arte even if it's just as a reference point because I think what we do is quite close to commedia dell'arte, closer perhaps than anything that we've had in this country in terms of the sort of cultural, theatrical traditions, but it's not something that I insist on and it's certainly not...we don't...we won't necessarily do a workshop on commedia

characters and go, “Now what can we use from that?” That’s not to say that we wouldn’t but haven’t since...I think we might have done a little bit on *Taming of the Shrew* actually because it seems appropriate for that one, but not properly since *As You Like It* actually.

SM I noticed that when Kate is playing Duncan, the walk and movements, are not direct commedia, but they seem to be influenced by it.

SP Yeah well I think a lot of it comes from just our various influences because silent movies are quite commedia inspired, probably not directly, but the Marx Brothers, Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplain, all that stuff is very commedia even if it’s not intended to be and I think it’s a consequence of using the body in a larger than life cartoonish way to grab attention to tell a story clearly so yeah I think commedia is there as an influence somewhere in our kind of ensembles unconscious so to speak because we’ve done some work on it in the past, but also because it’s a natural response to the environment and to the challenges of doing open air performances.

SM And have you noticed any change from your audience over the five years? Have you noticed any change in the people come to the shows or their expectations?

SP Yeah we do, I don’t know I mean the free shows I think probably the majority of people in them wherever we go haven’t seen the *Pantaloon*s before, but we have started to build up a few people who come to see us every year, which is lovely and so they sort of know

what to expect. Really our audience is massively changing their sort of demographic profile from place to place and from show to show. Parks you can expect a large portion of children, places like Edinburgh or Brighton, we don't actually do Edinburgh any more because it just sucks money, but Edinburgh or Brighton you can expect probably quite a large proportion of students or of actors. Obviously we do, like with the *Much Ado*, we do the heritage circuit as we call it, so you get that sort of National Trust member sort of demographic coming along. So you can sort of predict based on the venue the kind of audience that might show up, but actually we're often surprised and I think we have quite a wide reach. We certainly get a wider proportion of younger people than you see in most mainstream theatres for obvious reasons ((laughing)) it's cheaper but also I think the style is more accessible and I think hopefully people come and see us and go, "Oh brilliant I'll bring the kids along next year" or we get quite a relatively large proportion of sort of students, teenagers and I think our shows and our style is sort of accessible to that sort of demographic as well.

SM How much does that affect your cutting and what you do in rehearsal in terms of staging? Are there times you think, "No I can't do that because that might exclude the children?"

SP Yeah we had real problems with murder of Lady Macduff and her baby ((laughing)) because we wanted to do it in a way that was shocking, but also in a way that wouldn't give the five year olds in the audience nightmares. So I think we came up with a solution to that, she's

murdered by symbolic gunshot and you can see the clapping of the board so you know it's not a real gun and the actual death happens off stage, but Macbeth is visible. So that was something that we wrote about. Violence generally is something we have to be careful with for a family audience. We also, just on a kind of practical level, we have to pitch the cultural references round about right. So in *Much Ado* there's a reference to Michael Buble because we wanted to find a contemporary musical artist who's associated with schmaltzy love songs, but one that actually all of our audience would get. So we weren't sure whether we could get away with...originally it was the Carpenters reference and we thought, "Our sort of National Trust audience members will get that, but perhaps the younger members might not know who the Carpenters are". So eventually we changed our reference to Carpenters and Michael Buble and it's always Michael Buble that gets the laugh. So we've got the one right I think, but perhaps the Carpenters one isn't quite as strong. So you do have to second guess your audience's kind of cultural reference points in a way and sometimes we'll get a little bit self-indulgent and do a little reference that we know only some of the audience are going to get, but we'll stick it in anyway because it doesn't matter if they don't.

SM Like the Aunt Fanny reference for the adults?

SP Oh yeah exactly. Actually, generally, whenever you stick Kate on stage and give her free reign to ad-lib she will do something a little bit dirty ((laughing)), but yeah I mean it's partly my fault because I always

cast her in roles that allow that; the Porter, the Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet* and yeah, but the way we see it is if you just deal with it in innuendo then the kids won't understand it if they're too young to understand it, but if they do understand it well they're old enough to. So that's not very much of a problem really.

SM You've had some problems getting funding.

SP Yeah well we just...we've never been able to get the Arts Council to fund us and I mean fair enough in a way, it's very competitive, they were very encouraging this year, they just said, "There's just so much competition" and it was difficult. I think when you're doing Shakespeare it's hard to make a really strong case even though we think we're doing something valuable that's worthy of funding. Particularly when we're doing Shakespeare in Brighton, in Stratford and places like that, it's difficult to attract funding for that reason. I mean, we'll continue to apply and...because we really do want to be able to do these free shows and pay the actors properly, but obviously it's one of those things where it would be unethical not to be paying the actors a decent wage I think for the sake of the sort of company ideology. You could have these grand ideals, but if on a microcosmic level you're exploiting a bunch of actors I think that's...it's not ethical. So yeah...so it's a balancing act between earning enough to pay the actors a decent rate, keeping the company going and remaining accessible and we're sort of managing it, but slowly we're obviously having to kind of negotiate around the free shows, find ways of doing

them and every year we have to cut a few venues that previously we'd have liked to have gone to simply because we just lose buckets of money through doing them, Edinburgh being the prime example. It costs thousands and you earn nothing ((laughing)).

SM **Something I'm looking at at the moment is the way that stage directions work because with Shakespeare obviously you've got the directions that come within the text, then there's the things that you have ideas about when you're cutting and sometimes also there's a balance to maintain where if I cut that I need to put something else in to make it make sense, so I'm looking at how that changes within the script and in terms of adaptation, because a lot of those movement pieces or ad-libbing bits tend to kind of come up in the stage direction side of the adaptation.**

SP Yeah absolutely. Yeah, no it's definitely the case with us and yeah so often it'll be dramaturgically we want a funny bit here or more often it'll be, "We need to tell this bit of the story in no less than...no more than 20 seconds ((laughing)) how are we going to do that?" Or something like that. So yeah it's usually functional, the bits that I leave to devising in the rehearsal room and yeah ultimately I think our goal as a company is always to tell the story first and foremost. So I don't believe in coming along with an overarching concept. Not to say there's not a place for concepts and often a concept will find it's way, but it will be more by accident. Yeah so it's very much what do the audience need to know? And sometimes we'll be making up bits of the

story for ourselves, what happened to Lady Macbeth's child? to give a famous example, and so we'll decide if that's a bit of the story we indeed think needs telling, sometimes it doesn't and sometimes I have to be very blunt with the actors and say, "Look that's a very interesting idea, but the story is not about that character at that point" and that's really where I'm probably most heavy handed as a director because that's where individual actors lose sight of the larger picture is in telling their own character story.

SM Which sort of comes out of the devising approach doesn't it?

SP Yeah, yeah, but it's very valuable. A guy who's...Martin who's playing Leonato in *Much Ado* really wanted to explore whether or not Hero had forgiven him in the final scene and my initial reaction was, "Look this scene is not about you ((laughing)). Just say your lines, don't bump into the furniture as Noel Coward or whatever it was said" but actually it was...it brought something to the scene, that sadness, this element of bitterness, this element of something that wasn't quite resolved even though it's very subtle and wasn't necessarily the most important thing at that point in the play, actually really helped doing bizarrely what I wanted to do with Beatrice at that point in the play, which was to bring out this idea of there being an unresolved tension between her and Benedick despite the fact they've declared their love for each other there's still something that's keeping them from kissing each other and that helped ... that tension actually helped bring that out.

SM Brilliant. Thank you.

SP Great.

End of Tape.