

# Theatre and Adaptation: Return, Rewrite, Repeat

Edited by Margherita Laera

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*For David Kohn  
With all my love, always*

Jen Harvie and Andy Lavander (eds), *Making Contemporary Theatre: International Rehearsal Processes*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp. 81–100.

Coco, Fusco, Steve Bodow, John Collins and Rinne Groff. (1999). 'Elevator Repair Service', *BOMB*, 67, pp. 50–5.

## Notes

- 1 *Gatz* was first performed in 2005. *The Sound and The Fury (April Seventh, 1928)* (2007) was a performance of the first section of Faulkner's novel, in which the role of Benjy was shared between the cast and the novel was passed from actor to actor. *The Select (The Sun Also Rises)* (2009), was an edited version of Hemingway's novel in which the object of the novel itself did not appear onstage.
- 2 States, *Great Reckonings In Little Rooms: On The Phenomenology of Theatre*. Berkeley, CA, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1985, p. 34.
- 3 Ridout, *Stage Fright, Animals and Other Theatrical Problems*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 96–128.
- 4 Bodow is a founding member and past co-director of ERS. He is also co-executive producer of *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart.
- 5 The Performing Garage is the home of the Wooster Group, where Collins worked as a sound designer until 2003 and where Shepherd continues to work as a performer.
- 6 ERS are currently developing two new projects: *Fondly, Collette Richland*, the company's first collaboration with a playwright, Sibyl Kempson; and *Arguendo*, based on a transcript of 1991 court case, *Barnes v. Glen Theater*.

## Doing the Impossible: Katie Mitchell in Conversation with Dan Rebellato

### Introduction

Katie Mitchell is one of the most important directors to emerge in Britain – indeed in Europe – in the last 25 years. Her work is marked by a rich and profound realism; even in productions which are not in any conventional sense naturalistic, her work with actors and designers insists on a fidelity to the truth about human behaviour that grounds even the most experimental work. In her early career, Mitchell focused her attention on reviving plays from the European canon, with a particular emphasis on Northern and Eastern Europe. Increasingly over the last decade she has collaborated with actors to create devised adaptations of literary works and other sources. Often this source material might seem rather intractable to other directors – dealing as it does with inchoate and nebulous experiences like memory and consciousness – but Mitchell has developed a robust and rigorous methodology working with actors and increasingly with live video and Foley sound. In this interview, recorded at the Royal Court Theatre, London, in July 2013, and subsequently edited by Mitchell, we discuss the relationship between productions of plays and adaptations and the various techniques she has used to find theatrical form for experiences and perspectives not often shown on our stages.

## Interview

**Dan Rebellato:** Can I talk about your production of *A Dream Play* in 2005? Let me confess something: I had a very complicated reaction to the production. I loved the evocation of dream imagery on stage, the precision, the atmosphere – but I was disappointed, because I was looking forward to finally getting to see Strindberg's *A Dream Play* and I felt I hadn't actually *seen* it.

**Katie Mitchell:** Even you!

**DR:** I know! And then, of course, it made me think in what sense do we ever 'see' the 'play'? We only see a *version* of the play and decisions have always been made that, in a sense, adapt the play to the purposes of the production. In other words, I felt your production of *A Dream Play* complicated, perhaps to the point of crisis, the borderline between production and adaptation.

**KM:** The thing that most fascinated me in the text was Strindberg's idea of bringing a dream to life on stage. In rehearsals we worked with one simple aim, that is, to make the audience believe they were watching a dream. To make this idea clearer we added the framing device of a dreamer going to sleep at the beginning and waking up at the end. All the scenes were angled around this central idea of the dreamer. He was based on one of the main characters in the play and we built his biography by combining facts about him in the play with details from Strindberg's own biography. In the early stages of rehearsals we analysed the composition of dreams. The actors tried to recall their dreams and re-enact them. We soon discovered that dreams are often a jumble of very concrete details from people's lives, mixed up with other surreal data.

When I was preparing the production I didn't know that we would depart from the original material as much as we did. In the end we only kept 40 per cent of the original text; 60 per cent was added material based on improvisations around the biography of the character from the play that we'd selected as the dreamer.

Caryl Churchill did the version of the Strindberg text for the production and she watched the process of cutting and pasting evolve through the rehearsal process. She was very torn between her loyalty to the original text and her interest in the new material we were generating. She is a very generous collaborator and she agreed to all the changes after careful and precise discussion. Looking back on it, I can see that in our enthusiasm to put a dream on stage we did depart from the original written material in a way that was understandably frustrating for those audience members who had come to see the original play. Really we should have called the production *After A Dream Play* rather than *A Dream Play*. After this we started to re-title shows that we were working on in this way so as not to confuse the audience, like the title ... *some trace of her* [2008] for our adaptation of Dostoevsky's *The idiot*.

**DR:** Did you come out of that experience any clearer about the difference between a production of a play and an adaptation of a play?

**KM:** Yes, absolutely, but with later productions it was harder to be so clear-cut about the difference. In many instances, like with *The Seagull* [2008] and *Women of Troy* [2007], I thought that I was directing the play but many folks viewed these productions as radical adaptations, and I got a lot more flak for these later shows compared to *A Dream Play*. With *A Dream Play* we did major surgery to the text and with *Women of Troy* and *The Seagull* there were only tiny textual changes made. There were clearly factors other than the text that were being responded to negatively.

**DR:** Maybe because the Chekhov is better known?

**KM:** Yes, and maybe because the production history of Chekhov is more deeply embedded in British culture. I did sometimes wonder if people were comparing the production I directed with productions in the past and not with the original text by Chekhov. You know the way that a rock at the seaside has all sorts of barnacles and seaweed on it; it's difficult to imagine the clean

rock before it got any of those things grown into it and that is what can happen to old texts: the way the text is performed grows into the original text and creates a strange hybrid third piece of material and it is this third thing that people are actually coming to see. I think a lot of the time when people say, 'You're not doing the play', what they mean is, 'You're not doing the play like the productions I grew up with in the 1970s or early 1960s.'

I am working a lot in Europe now and it is clear that each country has interpreted these classics inside its own tradition, and each country's cultural approach to a classic like *The Seagull* has grown into how people understand the original text and what they expect to see from the productions they go to. If the German tradition of directing Chekhov were to butt up against the British tradition I could imagine a ripe old argument between the two sides each fighting for their cultural interpretation as the absolute truth of what the text is or what a production should be.

**DR:** Something else about *A Dream Play* that foreshadows later work is that it's absolutely about trying to capture a state of consciousness, a wholly subjective experience, and put it on stage in a public forum. And it seems to me that a lot of the later productions do something similar: *Waves* [2006], *Reise Durch Die Nacht* [*Night Train*, 2012] ...

**KM:** Yes, you're right. All the multi-media shows in Germany – the ones you mention, plus *Wunschkonzert* [*Request Programme*, 2008], *Die Gelbe Tapete* [*The Yellow Wallpaper*, 2013] – are trying to represent consciousness and modes of perception on stage. The shows focus less on narrative and action, and more on behaviour and how a character looks out at the world. It's like the difference between being a documentary film-maker where you're an external eye putting together objective information about what human beings do and a film-maker who tries to get inside the head of the subject and show that person's uniquely subjective viewpoint.

**DR:** You are often drawn to material that some might superficially think is simply impossible to put on stage. *Waves*, for example,

has these shifting internal voices, this play of memory, which is alien to a theatre of concrete, material representation, narrative three-act structure, and so on.

**KM:** Yes, I am very much drawn to texts like *Waves* which are more complex and layered. I am often struck by the way in which theatre practice has not completely embraced modernist texts from the twentieth century, and how mainstream theatre operates mainly inside nineteenth-century narrative structures. I often compare the way in which mainstream theatre has evolved in Britain with the way in which the visual arts or non-dramatic literature has developed over the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. *The Waves* was written in the 1930s and the idea that theatre attempted (and partly managed to 'do') *The Waves* 70 years later only shows how behind we are, formally. Questions like 'What is character?', 'What is narrative?' have been challenged and chewed over in other art forms for years now and yet linear narrative and traditional characters are the unchallenged staple diet of mainstream theatre practice. Germany re-imagined itself culturally after the Second World War and rejected many of these traditional components because they were connected to the way in which Nazism had unfolded itself. In theatre in the United Kingdom, we still insist on these old-fashioned rules that determine what theatre can or cannot be: it *must* have a story; it *must* be linear; there *must* be characters; there *must* be conflict; you *can't* do behaviour; you *can't* do states; you *can't* do anything deconstructed or broken down that gets closer to how you actually experience yourself in the world, not as a great hero in a linear narrative, with clarity and a fixed personality, but as an ordinary person living a much more fragmented, shifting sense of reality. Any attempt to represent that in theatre is frowned upon in Britain. Not so in literature; not so in the visual arts. And, interesting enough, not so in Europe: and for me that's a real problem.

**DR:** Do you think there's something here about gender? I wonder if some of the things that our culture seems to think are necessary

on stage – linearity, clarity, action, conflict – are also what Western culture tends to think of as masculine virtues. I say that also because *The Waves* is both a modernist novel and a kind of feminist novel in its determination to use a different attitude to consciousness to structure its text. Do you think there's anything in that?

**KM:** Yes, there is something here about gender. It's very hard to talk along strictly gender lines because of course there are many women who do exceptionally beautiful work inside mainstream practice, with linear narratives, characters, and so on, and they would rightly dispute your point. But if, like me, you end up, after 30 years of work, coming to the conclusion that female perception and experience is maybe different from male perception and experience, then it follows that the theatrical forms you select as a woman may well need to be different to those chosen by men, and as the forms that dominate are male, then you may want to experiment with generating possible alternative forms for women's experience. And when some of those experiments are received in a rather ... intense way,<sup>1</sup> one might end up believing what you just suggested. The narrative about my gender is interesting isn't it? Am I understood as a woman directing shows or just another person in the theatre? I've felt this question more and more intensely over the years; the more radical I've become, the more I've suspected that the forceful rejection of this radicalism, in Britain at least, is connected in part to patriarchal structures and systems, which lie invisible, somewhere deep in British society.

**DR:** Let me ask about *Waves*. Where do you start with adapting a novel like that?

**KM:** I had loved the novel from the moment I read the first page at University and over the years I had made several attempts to bring it to life, first during a period of research supported by a NESTA Fellowship and later in workshops at the National Theatre Studio. It was always tricky to find a performance mode that was

true to its inchoate form. When we started rehearsals in London I didn't have a clue about how we were going to do the show. I had some starting points: a brilliant ensemble of actors, microphones, Foley sound effects, and live video. And I knew that the language could not be presented like a spoken Shakespearean monologue. The delivery of the text needed to have the speed and lightness of a thought as you experience it in your head. Before rehearsals I'd boiled the text down to a 40 page document to make the material more manageable. The main aim in rehearsals was to get our theatre production as close to the novel's stream of consciousness as we could. We soon realized that the only way to do this was to get close inside each character's head. This is where the video came in as it allowed us to get very close to each character's face, so close that the audience could see a thought flicker behind an eye or a tiny movement of one of the 200 muscles on the face. We used the cameras to get close to these tiny details and then we added the text as whispered quicksilver into the microphones to simulate thoughts.

**DR:** How did you boil *The Waves* down to that 40 page document?

**KM:** The book's about a group of seven people who go to the same school when they are very little and become friends for life. It charts the way that the friendships and lives of each character evolve until their deaths. Each chapter covers a different time in their lives so it is very easy to cut without dismantling the simple narrative drive. The 40 page document incorporated material from most of the chapters, favouring some like the early primary school experiences and middle age, more than others. This was because the workshops revealed the chapters which organically generated the most theatrical ideas. I also knew that the two dinners would be the main events of the production. Each section of the 40 page document had a simple title and an approximate date reflecting the book narrative. In each section I favoured more concrete text that was better for speaking than for reading. There are sections that are very slow, contemplative, with very long sentences, that would not really work theatrically and these

were cut. The passages with shorter, punchier sentences, crammed with colour and metaphor, were selected.

**DR:** You've said that the use of video gives you the opportunity to offer extreme close-ups on the actors. Someone less sympathetic might ask, why not just make a movie?

**KM:** Film is a beautiful medium but it's totally *safe*, in that the images are pre-recorded and pre-edited. There is nothing live going on and although it can generate very strong emotions, like fear or sadness, it is not really happening. I love live performance and its edginess, how it teeters on the edge of possible collapse from moment to moment. I also love its collective nature with the strange contract between the actors and the audience. The work using video in *Waves* was done live, with live acting and live camera operating. The breathing of the live operator was present in all the shots of the actors, affecting the framing and the way the camera moved. The delicate dance between live operator and live actor is entirely theatrical and not filmic. In fact when a film-maker friend of mine, Grant Gee, first looked at one of the live video shows he said he felt physically sick. From his point of view the live operating put the film in jeopardy, frame to frame, and that was something he could not cope with being a consummate maker of pre-recorded film. The video also gives everyone in the audience access to the tiny details in the acting that normally are the privilege of the people watching in the first few front rows.

**DR:** When you first started using video, did you think this was a device with legs, that it would be very versatile?

**KM:** I hoped it would be versatile but I did not know. And it is a surprise to see how much work has evolved since *Waves* using the live video technique.

**DR:** It's going to be a bit of a leap from Woolf to Dr Seuss, but can I ask you about the children's shows? They're all adaptations in a sense.

**KM:** *The Cat in the Hat* [2009] was very much an adaptation but the focus of our work was on creating the cartoon-like pictures and not changing the text. The book was a classic picture book written for very young children who cannot read. Their experience of the book would be a visual one with parents reading as the sound track. We had to make the action on stage *look* exactly like the book, so that a child could turn the pages of the book whilst watching the show and the two would be an exact visual match. The main pressure was on the design: creating things like the outfit the cat wears or the tidying up machine at the end, and the choreography, or getting things like kites and flying objects to move through the air like they did across the white pages of the book. The children's shows that followed – *Beauty and the Beast* [2011] and *Hansel and Gretel* [2012] – were versions of existing well-known fairy tales and not adaptations of existing play texts. Here we did workshops with the actors and the playwright Lucy Kirkwood prior to the text being written. The workshops allowed us to test material in front of the age group selected for each show and to work out how to make the final production. We would work on things like how to make the beast really frightening or what sweets children thought should be on the gingerbread house. Afterwards, Lucy would write scenes to work on once rehearsals began and these would then be test-run in front of groups of children. The feedback from the children would determine how both text and production ideas evolved.

**DR:** *Hansel and Gretel* was also a piece of music theatre. How did the creation of original music figure in the adaptation process?

**KM:** In the workshop prior to the rehearsals we discovered how dark the material really is and how frightening it was for the children, not in a good way, so we were keen to present the frightening aspects of the story in brief moments and then use music to reassure the children that it was just a story told in a theatre. The text for the songs was written by Lucy before rehearsals began and Paul Clark then started composing. The songs, like the text, were tested out on children and modified and developed in response to their feedback.

**DR:** *The Rings of Saturn* [2012] was an adaptation of the book by W. G. Sebald. It's another example of choosing material about an individual consciousness. In a way someone might think of it as, if anything, *more* intractable than *The Waves*!

**KM:** When I first read *Rings of Saturn* it reminded me of Woolf's *The Waves* and I was delighted to discover later on that Sebald had been influenced by *The Waves*. The book combines a description of a man walking along the Suffolk coast with discursive passages about history, time and place. I decided before rehearsals that the material we would use would be the sections that described the man walking and the landscape through which he walked. Like *The Waves* this meant that I boiled the book down to a shorter document before we began rehearsing. The boiled-down document was divided up into sections with place names as their headings – Somerleyton to Norwich, the Victoria Hotel, Benacre Broad, and so on. I had done the walks he describes in the books so I had a clear picture of the places. The simple idea for the show was to transport the audience inside the head of the man walking and thinking. I wanted to use mainly sound to conjure up the actual sensation you get when you walk, like the way the sound of the landscape changes as the path changes from inland to coastal, or the way the blood pounds in the head if you suddenly see an unexpected sheer drop in front of you. The film-maker, Grant Gee, had also offered us his shots from his film *Patience – After Sebald* which we were planning to project alongside the sound world. The starting point for rehearsals was this filmed footage, the boiled-down script, a fantastic ensemble, a pianist, and one Foley artist, Ruth Sullivan, who was going to perform too. The show was going to be performed in German at the Cologne Schauspielhaus so I was also keen to look at the way in which the collaboration between German performers and British artists would reveal and shape the material. The first stage of the work started in Suffolk with the German and British team walking the walks described in the book. Of course the way in which a German experiences looking across the North Sea

towards Germany is so utterly different from the way in which a British person does, and immediately the thoughts of our German colleagues revealed the book in an entirely different way. These experiences were to determine the emphasis of the adaptation that we later shaped when we started our rehearsals in Cologne.

**DR:** *The Yellow Wallpaper* is another fascinating, very 'subjective' novella. I'm usually struck that your taste in sets and designers seems to favour the solid and realistic; I felt like you could live in the designs for *A Woman Killed With Kindness* [2011] or *Three Sisters* [2003] or *The Seagull* [2008]. But in *The Yellow Wallpaper* we see the room around the protagonist through her eyes. We don't know what the objective truth of the room is. How did you get round that in your adaptation?

**KM:** In the novel the woman hallucinates and 'sees' a woman trapped behind the wallpaper. Finally she tries to 'free' the woman and strips off all the wallpaper. I wanted to understand more fully the hallucinatory aspect of the novel and how to present it, so the first thing I did was to ask a psychiatrist, Dr Neil Brenner, to read the book and tell me whether the post-partum depression the book describes was literary fancy or psychologically accurate. He told me that these were textbook post-partum hallucinations and the novella must surely have been written by someone who had directly experienced them or been very close to someone who had. This made me realize that I had to create a world where we would represent the objective reality and also – more and more gradually – her subjective reading and interpretation of that reality. I should say at this point that this was a live camera show so we were already planning to use film special effects for conjuring the woman behind the wallpaper. The set consisted of two identical rooms, one with wallpaper and the other without wallpaper. The second room was used to shoot the action after the wallpaper had been removed and also as a location for the woman behind the wallpaper. We used gauzes, mirrors, and water containers to represent the woman's subjective view point and descent into madness. The script evolved alongside the set design

process and the way in which the practical ideas for the special effects developed. The show was being made at the Schaubühne in Berlin and they had also requested that Lyndsey Turner (who was doing the adaptation) update the original Victorian setting to modern-day Berlin. This added a further layer of complexity to our adaptation.

**DR:** Your production of *Fräulein Julie* [2011] at the Schaubühne takes us full circle in this conversation: back to Strindberg, and another adaptation of a play. Is *Miss Julie* something you've always wanted to work on or confront?

**KM:** I've always wanted to direct this play 'normally' as a naturalistic proscenium show so it wasn't a natural choice for the live camera work but the Schaubühne wanted us to do it as a live camera show, so I thought I would give it a go. If we were going to do a big well-known title like that, I thought it could be a really interesting exercise in subjectivity. What does it mean to look at three characters in a play? Can we pick just one of them and look at the action through the lens of that character? How will our understanding of the play shift as a result of one subjective lens? Will the action still make sense or not? Will the audience fill in the gaps because it's a title that is so well-known or not? I chose the cook to be the person whose subjective point of view we presented because she is the character who has the least to do in the action of the play and is regularly absent. In the first draft of the adaptation I simply went through and cut all the scenes where the cook was absent. These cuts amounted to over 60 per cent of the play and it was with this cut text that we started rehearsing. It was enormously difficult to work out how to shoot all the action strictly from one character's subjective point of view and it was always difficult to resist the temptation to shoot the action of the scenes in a more objective fashion.

**DR:** All of that technical apparatus and the almost literally oblique angle on the play does something very specific to *Miss Julie*, which is one of the most openly misogynistic plays by one of the

most openly misogynistic writers in theatrical history. In *Fräulein Julie*, you seem to me to have done something unthinkable, which is to create a feminist version of *Miss Julie* ...

**KM:** I was working in Denmark when I was preparing the adaptation and I had become very interested in Scandinavian feminism, particularly the poems of Inger Christensen. I thought it would be really interesting to crunch together her feminist text with Strindberg's nineteenth-century patriarchal viewpoint. So I used some of the poems from her book *Alphabet* to be the thoughts inside the head of the cook as she fried kidneys or sat waiting for Jean to return from the dance.

**DR:** And it worked very well. Many thanks, Katie.

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### Note

- 1 Mitchell's work is popular with audiences and some critics, though she has received some ferociously hostile responses. In an interview at Queen Mary, University of London, in May 2012, she revealed that when her production of *The Seagull* was running at the National Theatre, she

received a copy of the programme in the post with the word 'RUBBISH' scrawled on every page. See also Martin Kettle, 'Hostages in the Hands of Overindulged Meddlers', *Guardian*, 1 July 2006, p. 33. I discuss some of her critical reactions in my essay in Delgado and Rebellato (2010).

## There Are No Formulas: Emma Rice of Kneehigh in Conversation with Martin Welton<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

Kneehigh were founded in Cornwall in 1980 by Mike Shepherd. Finding themselves perhaps 'deliberately' distant from the capital, London, and even from other regional centres for theatre in the South West, such as Plymouth or Bristol, they built a reputation, and a methodology, out of being a Cornish company first. As both geographical and artistic outsiders, the company found a freedom to make works which were rooted in their Cornish locality and its historical and metaphoric landscape, as well as its continued location as one of the wild edges of an otherwise urbanizing nation. This wild, mythic outside informs the aesthetic of Kneehigh's productions, bringing a sense of passion and imagination to even their largest and more seemingly commercial productions.<sup>2</sup> However the same passionate force and free-ranging imagination also finds itself expressed in the visual eloquence of the onstage worlds audiences are invited into, and in the mercurial physical and vocal reach of the actors themselves.

Since their inception, the company have produced their work for and within their local community. Even as their national and international reputation has grown, this commitment to a shared sense of place outside the metropolitan mainstream, and of the vitality of a sense of 'being in common' between performers and audience has continued to inform their work. Paradoxically perhaps, given its passionately local roots, this work has grown to spread across the

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### Note

- 1 This interview was part of the Leverhulme Olympic Talks on Theatre and Adaptation. It took place on 19 June 2012 at Queen Mary, University of London.

## Theatre as an Intellectual Concertina: Simon Stephens in Conversation with Duška Radosavljević

### Introduction

Since 2001, Simon Stephens has had at least one highly acclaimed UK premiere of a new play each year. Following his residence at the Royal Court in 2000, he also served as the Writers’ Tutor on the Royal Court Young Writers Programme between 2001 and 2005. In 2006 he won his first Olivier Best New Play Award for *On the Shore of the Wide World*. In addition, Stephens has eclipsed any other contemporary British playwrights in his popularity in mainland Europe, specifically in Germany where he maintains an on-going working relationship with director Sebastian Nübling since their first collaboration in 2003. In 2010 he wrote *The Trial of Ubu* which was directed by Nübling and premiered at the Toneelgroep Amsterdam. Although this was a new play inspired by a classic, it appears to have set a new trend for Stephens which led to a translation of Jon Fosse’s *I am the Wind* in 2011, directed by Patrice Chéreau at the Young Vic in London, and to a translation of *A Doll’s House* directed by Carrie Cracknell at the same venue in 2012. In 2012 Stephens had no less than five major productions in London,<sup>1</sup> a feat crowned with another Olivier Best New Play Award, this time for his adaptation of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, directed by his long-term British collaborator Marianne Elliott for the National Theatre.

Despite – or because of – this, Stephens defies the British notion of ‘new writing’ as defined by critics such as Aleks Sierz.<sup>2</sup> In his 2011

lecture 'Skydiving Blindfolded', he championed the virtues of the continental ways of theatre-making, namely the emphasis on physicality, collaboration, theatre as art, and the musicality of language, while also criticizing the arrogance of the English and the Royal Court's 'imperialism'.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, in 2013 he provoked some controversy by downplaying the significance of winning the South Bank Sky Arts award for his adaptation of Mark Heddon's novel,<sup>4</sup> in order to emphasize the importance of collaboration and the fact that 'the creation of the work was of far greater significance than any physical accolade'.<sup>5</sup> That this was not a matter of empty posturing or false modesty is confirmed by his frequent relinquishing of authority.<sup>6</sup> In the interview that follows Stephens likens himself to a language designer and his relationship to the director as being analogous to that of an actor who 'want[s] to do what the director wants you to do as well as bringing yourself to it'. Admittedly this refers to his translation work rather than original creations. Nevertheless, Stephens once again highlights a different slant on the quintessentially British practice of versions commissioned from renowned playwrights rather than translators. At the core of it – whether he is discussing his translation and adaptation work or his own work in translation – is always an inherently dramaturgical rather than a solely literary concern with playwrighting and theatre-making. This interview took place in November 2012 in London.

### Interview

**Duška Radosavljević:** You adapted *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* for the stage at the invitation from the novel's author Mark Haddon. What was your approach to the task?

**Simon Stephens:** The conditions of doing the work allowed me to feel rather free. I read the book before I met Mark. It was interesting that it was a book that had played a very big part in my own writing in that it really did help me crystallize the character of Lee in *Motortown* [2006], so even before I met him,

that novel in some way had an osmotic relationship with my work. Mark and I worked at the National Theatre at the same time, both of us on attachments. He'd been to see a few of my plays and was always very generous about them. He rang me to ask me to do the adaptation and I was immensely flattered because, until *Fifty Shades of Grey* was published, it was the best-selling adult book in the UK by a living author (so not including J. K. Rowling and children's books). I told him I'd do it on the understanding that I didn't take a commission and that I just did it as an experiment in process. I thought: I'm not going to be able to do this if I have the pressure of a commissioning theatre on my neck. He was very happy with that and that's what I did.

One of the challenges of the book is that Christopher's interior voice is so remarkable and compelling and original you can be seduced away from the action of the narrative into looking at his worldview, and the worldview lends itself beautifully to the novel, but it's fundamentally not dramatic. What felt important was to separate his perspective from the stuff that happens – the work of the playwright, I think, is the consideration of the stuff that happens and the things that people do. I made two lists, one was the events that happen in the present tense of the book, and one was the events that happened before the book started, and I made one chronology and put them together. So I had a sense of the book as being a sequence of actions rather than just a worldview from this remarkable mind.

The second thing I did, which was very pragmatic and didn't take long at all but became absolutely fundamental, was to transcribe the direct speech – and unlike a lot of novelists, Mark's direct speech is actually innately dramatic. A lot of novelists' direct speech is often exploratory or tonal or expositional or intellectually searching, but Mark crystallizes his intellectual search and the tone and the exposition and the backstory in action like a dramatist. He's written for screen before and he's written for stage, so he's a dramatist. I had this document which was just a series of conversations and I took that to the National

Theatre Studio and just spent a morning with some actors who were working in the repertory reading the conversations.

The dialogue in itself had dramatic charge but it needed to be shaped and given a dramatic structure. In the end I decided that I wasn't going to change the chronology that Mark presented but was going to have this fractured chronology – so when the audience watch the play it does leap backwards and forwards in time. The biggest problem was the question of what to do with the letters, which was a really key moment in the novel – the moment when Christopher realizes that his dad has been lying to him and that his mum is alive. Finding a dramatic language for the letters was really important. Another fundamental challenge was that while the dialogue worked well, you palpably missed Christopher's voice – so do you dramatize Christopher's interior voice, which is the one thing that readers of the book remember?

In my memory a real epiphany was to realize the book is a book about writing a book, and the way Mark presents the book is from Christopher's point of view absolutely, as though it is a book that Christopher's written for his teacher.

Then I thought: there are three people who read the book. Christopher's relationship to his writing and to reading his own writing isn't dramatic because he doesn't really understand the gap between what he's presenting and the truth of the world. The other two people were much more interesting: one was Ed, his dad, whose relationship with the book is immensely dramatic because when he reads it, he realizes that his son has rumbled him; and the other is Siobhan, the teacher. I experimented with Ed doing some narration and with Christopher doing some narration, but I think the biggest breakthrough was to give the narration to Siobhan, because she's the one who is most like us. I think most people reading the book kind of fall in love with Christopher but, unlike Ed or Judy, don't have to live with him. Siobhan can love him without having to live with him. But also she understands stuff about Judy and about Ed that Christopher doesn't understand. She was very useful when it came to the letters because in his book Christopher transcribes the letters from his mum.

Two other decisions worth talking about: one was I really loved reading the book and then you get to the end and there's the Appendix where he describes how he did the maths A-Level. You read it and you just can't follow it, and I thought I'm definitely going to keep that because that's really joyful – to go through this whole story and then be presented with a little bit of his genius. One of the things that Mark said to me when we first met was that he was really interested in Simon McBurney's *A Disappearing Number*; the video and projection work in it he thought was amazing, and that maybe we could think about that. And my line to him was actually: you know what, we should write this play so that people can do it in their school hall – so you don't need to be fucking Complicite to do a version of this play! I just wanted a dead simple script and that's what we wrote – although Finn Ross, the projection artist who worked on *A Disappearing Number*, did end up working on *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*. But the one thought I had was: the one time when we pull all the stops out and we use all the bells and whistles should be for the Appendix.

The final element in this story was the idea of staging it as a play – the play within a play, which came quite late on. Sean Holmes read a draft of it and he said, "That was really good, you should make that much bigger."<sup>7</sup>

**DR:** Yes, because if the novel was a meta-novel you made the play a meta-play.

**SS:** Exactly! What I liked about it was: although it's a real invention and an addition to the novel, it feels completely in the spirit of the novel.

**DR:** What happened in the rehearsal process? Were you involved at all?

**SS:** I was in the rehearsal for *A Doll's House* and for *Morning* [2012] at the same time, so I wasn't there as much as I'd have liked to be. I was there at the beginning, with Mark, for the first read-through, which was just joyful, and he was just really

gorgeous, so happy with it. And then I kind of dipped in and out very briefly. So much of the rehearsal was technical, and a lot of it was physical, dominated by Steven [Hoggett] and Scott [Graham] getting the actors into a physical position where they could do all the work, especially Luke [Treadaway], whose physical work is astonishing. I've talked about the way Marianne arranges the rehearsal room. At one end of the rehearsal room there will be the various designers. She'd have the set designer and the lighting designer and the sound designer and the composer and the video designer, and I'd sit with them. We'd all get our little laptops out and we'd be sitting there watching and making notes, and I kind of thought: 'Yeah, I'm just the language designer here! That's what I am', which I quite liked; it was quite enjoyable.

**DR:** That's really interesting. Would you say that applies only to your adaptation work, or do you feel like a language designer even when you write plays?

**SS:** Well, it's a really interesting question. The difference would be: when you write a play, normally you have to invent characters and actions and situations and story, so it's actually harder to be a language designer because it's so inextricably connected with the invention of character and action and situation, and when it's an adaptation, that burden has been taken from you so you can just look at the dramatic structure and the dramaturgy.

In a sense the two different adaptations were fascinating, rehearsing in the same day – *A Doll's House* was in the Jerwood Space and *The Curious Incident* was in the National. I'd just cycle up the length of The Cut, and I'd be in one rehearsal room in the morning and the other rehearsal room in the afternoon. They're completely different rehearsal processes and completely different processes of adaptation. Both with *A Doll's House* and *The Curious Incident*, what was important to me was the certain fidelity and loyalty to the original writer's vision – I didn't do anything bombastic with Ibsen or with Mark Haddon. But with *A Doll's House* the dramatic structure, the characters, the action, the situation, the number of scenes and the order of events in the

scenes are all there. So my work on *A Doll's House* was entirely linguistic, all I was thinking about was the language which is a real luxurious exercise for a playwright whose work normally incorporates the invention of characters, situation, action, narrative, structure and language. It was great to take five of those six things away and just look at the language. *The Curious Incident*, on the other hand, most of the language in it is Mark's. I don't know statistically but I would speculate that something like 80 to 85 per cent of the actual language used in the play is Mark's. So my work on that was entirely to do with structure and with the design of the language rather than the invention of the language.

**DR:** How did you work on the translations?

**SS:** I worked from literal translations – Øystein Ulsberg Brager's for *I Am the Wind* and Charlotte Barslund's for *A Doll's House*. I subsequently went to meet Øystein. I met Jon [Fosse] as well – that was the really big difference, I never met Henrik!

I went over to Bergen with Patrice Chéreau, and had a great time with the two towers of European theatre! I really, really like Jon. We got on very well together. We stayed up quite late drinking and talking about depression, and there was an invaluable breakthrough with him just to get to the heart of his linguistic concerns.

The main thing that was useful about that night was understanding what Jon Fosse meant by the word 'yes'. His plays are mainly translated by May-Brit Akerholt, a Norwegian woman who lives in Australia. And what strikes me about her versions is she always translates the word 'yes' as 'yes' – 'y-e-s'. Now, in English, if you say the word 'yes' there's something very definite, something finite and something certain and completed about it. It's actually very rare in conversational English to complete the word 'yes' with an 's' at the end. Normally you would say, 'Yep', sometimes you'd say, 'Right', or 'OK', and sometimes you'd say, 'No' actually! Which is true if you're agreeing with somebody in the negative: if somebody is saying, 'I don't want to go to the doctor's', you would say, 'No', as in, 'No, of course not!' But in Norwegian

it would be translated as 'yes', and it's used all the time in his plays. So you get this very strange energy where the characters are saying, 'Yes, yes, yes, yes.' 'I don't want to go to the doctor's – yes'. What does that mean!? And Jon said, 'What's important is that you get the rhythm and a lightness to it, a sense of poetry, and English is a much more fluid language than Norwegian, if you've got other words, you have to use those.' With that play the subject is so dark that I thought the language needed a tone that juxtaposed with the content, rather than underlined the content. What needed to happen was to create a language that was lighter and more human and did have the poetic quality that Jon's talking about.

**DR:** Were rehearsals part of your process on *I Am the Wind*?

**SS:** I was rehearsing two plays at the same time then as well. In that one, both *Wastwater* [2011] and *I Am the Wind* were rehearsing in the same building, the Jerwood rehearsal rooms, so I didn't need to get on my bike, I just went up and down stairs. I was working with Katie Mitchell in the morning and Patrice Chéreau in the afternoon. Chéreau was very interesting because, I think, especially with male collaborators, he's quite avuncular, and especially with those two boys [the actors], he was very protective – a little bit like a kind uncle. He brought me into this circle of people and created this atmosphere that was very tender. He'd be doing line readings with Tom [Brooke] and Jack [Laskey], and in the rehearsal he had the German, the French, the Norwegian, my version, and the literal – five versions.

**DR:** So the text was really important to him?

**SS:** Yeah really, really important. And on the whole he was very complimentary. But then when he hit a corner, he'd go from being very avuncular to just being like, 'That's not right, we've got to get it right!' There were only three or four lines that I needed to rework and rework and rework – and I'd be emailing Jon from the rehearsal room, 'What do you think about this bit?' – because, for Chéreau, what was key was the psychological

precision of the language. Every phrase and every syllable had to have a psychological truth to it that he understood and that made sense to the characters. When I'm doing a version, quite often it's initiated by a director wanting to do a play. So just like an actor in a rehearsal room – if you're a good actor – you're working with the director, and you want to do what the director wants you to do as well as bringing yourself to it. I think, certainly in my translation work, it's been the same.

**DR:** How did *A Doll's House* come about?

**SS:** I think it actually came about from a conversation between Jon Fosse and David Lan, Artistic Director of the Young Vic, about *A Doll's House*. Jon made the observation to David that there's a dramatic history in the United Kingdom of receiving that play as being an iconic celebration of the liberation of women. That tradition was initiated around the time when George Bernard Shaw started bringing Ibsen over to the United Kingdom. This filtered Ibsen through Shaw's concerns, which are more overtly about female emancipation, but in Norway the play's not received as being about female emancipation, and actually Ibsen never wrote it as such. If you read his journals, his diaries and his letters about the play he never talks about wanting to celebrate female emancipation. He writes again and again about the autonomy of individuals, and it's about individuality rather than gender liberation. You get the sense that Nora was a representation of him as much as anything.

I thought it was a really fascinating time to be considering a play which the writer perceived to be about celebration of the autonomy and a call for the emancipation of individuals and individual free will because, it strikes me, so many of the political and socio-economic catastrophes facing us as a species now are, if anything, born out of an over-indulgence in individual emancipation and autonomy and a refusal to take a collective responsibility. We have all in the last 100 years been defined by our pursuit of what we want that the two big burdens facing my children's generation now are economic and

ecological catastrophe, both of which, you could argue, are a direct consequence of the post-Milton Friedman neo-liberalism of economics introduced by Reagan and Thatcher in the 1980s and then taken up by their descendants. It struck me that there's a remarkable and chilling line that runs from Nora to Thatcher! And it all crystallized around this moment that Nora has this speech where she says, 'There's no such thing as society, I don't believe in society anymore.' And I remember a woman saying, 'There's no such thing as society'...

The work with Carrie, rather than the kind of linguistic precision of Patrice Chéreau, was in cleanness and direction of action, and getting the language as simple and uncomplicated and as uncluttered by specific references to period as possible. Taking out references to currency, just keeping it as clean as possible, so it's all built around very clean moments of psychological action.

**DR:** To what extent is language or any aspect of it important to Sebastian Nübling, who has directed your plays in German translation?

**SS:** It's a very interesting question because I think on one hand language is completely fundamental to his thinking about the world. Although he's German, he lives on the border of Switzerland. The city he built his career in is Basel. I always think there's something kind of Swiss about him in that he speaks five languages fairly fluently. His English is good enough to direct in; he speaks conversational Italian, fluent French, fluent German, Swiss Deutsch. He has a real fascination with language. If he was talking to you he would be really interested in where you were from and what language you speak too. If an actor brought a linguistic faculty into the rehearsal room, if they were half-Serbian or half-Italian or half-Turkish, they would definitely have a bit of their performance in their original language. He did a co-production of *Hérons* [2001] with the Junges Theater in Basel and with the Stuttgart Schauspielhaus. The children in it spoke in Swiss Deutsch and the adults spoke in German, and when we played it in Stuttgart there were subtitles for the children. *The*

*Trial of Ubu* – there must have been eight different languages spoken during that evening. In *Pornography*, there were at least three. And in *Three Kingdoms*, five or six languages ...

But unlike, say, Chéreau, what he doesn't do is concern himself with the minutiae of psychological action brought about by linguistic nuance. So working with Chéreau, or with Katie Mitchell, or with a lot of the directors in the post-Royal Court Lindsey Anderson/George Devine/Bill Gaskill school of direction, there will be a lot of time spent looking at play scripts going, 'Oh why has the writer chosen this word as opposed to this word; why is the character saying yeah and not yes?' That would be the kernel of the director's work. Nübling doesn't do that. He's not interested in that. He's got much more interest in the sound of a sentence and the sound of a phrase, and that is really central to my writing.

**DR:** The musicality that we talked about before.<sup>8</sup>

**SS:** The musicality exactly, it's really key to me. So sometimes working with him can be really frustrating because he will get actors to improvise text in the scene. And normally I'd let them do it, but then in performance it's still jarring. With *Three Kingdoms*, when it came to the previews in the United Kingdom, I think there were three lines where I said to him, 'I've just got to change these lines, because I just hate the way it sounds, do you mind if I do that?' and he looked at me as though it were just the stupidest question ever!

**DR:** So what does he take from the text?

**SS:** The idea. The idea and the possibility for manifesting that idea, image, and action. He is using the language and the text as a starting point for image and action.

**DR:** What's been your relationship with your German translators?

**SS:** I've only got one German translator, which is really essential and really key. It's a woman called Barbara Christ who has now done 17 plays of mine. She has a doctorate in dramaturgy or

translation. We're very different people in a lot of ways but I think we're quite close. She's very cerebral; she's very sober – which are very good qualities – and our working relationship tends to be based on the fact that she's done so many of my plays now. She really knows the metabolism of my thinking and how my thinking is manifested in my word choice. She knows that instinctively now. So she will write me emails at the end of the first draft with all of her questions. And I really love her questions actually; they're fascinating. A lot of them will be about what I mean grammatically by certain decisions that I have made intuitively and that's always a healthy process to go through ...

In *Three Kingdoms* there was a real problem with translation for detective Steffen Dresner because the way Dresner speaks to Charlie and Ignatius is very unorthodox. Some of the original speeches are just untranslatable because he swears so much and he's so aggressive and dirty to them, but he's a cop. Barbara said, 'There's no way German police would ever talk like this, you can't translate that so I don't know what to do.'

**DR:** That's a very interesting problem. What did you do?

**SS:** She did quite a clean translation and then Sebastian and Steven Scharf, the actor playing Dresner, really reworked it and brought it together and invented words.

What's really, really central is that all theatre is adaptation. Every time one makes a process of theatre – you're adapting something, and every time you write a play – you're translating something. My 14-year-old son had a brilliant image: he said that theatre for him was kind of like an intellectual concertina so a writer takes a thought and compresses it into an image that's then compressed further by the director and then further by the actors and designer, and then that expands out into the audience again. Which I thought was an amazing thing for a 14-year-old to come up with, but it's kind of true – it's no different from me adapting *The Curious Incident*, or *A Doll's House*, or *I Am the Wind* than writing *Wastwater* or *Three Kingdoms*. It's not true that when you write a play as a playwright there's a purity of experience, because

I adapt my own thoughts into scenes and image and action. And then the director will adapt the script through the bodies of the actors and the image of the designer, and the audience will interpret that adaptation through their own experience. This is why writing for theatre is different from writing a novel because it's dependent on translation and adaptation and interpretation. There's no purity of text which is received by a reader.

## Link

Simon Stephens on Twitter: [www.twitter.com/StephensSimon](http://www.twitter.com/StephensSimon) (accessed 19 January 2014).

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