Directors give instructions

On the publication of her book *The Director's Craft: A Handbook for the Theatre*, Katie Mitchell discusses the inheritance of Stanislavski, working with multi-media, and why painstaking preparation is absolutely essential

This event took place at Central School of Speech & Drama, University of London, on 14 October 2008[1]

Guest speaker:
Katie Mitchell (KM), director

Chair:
Prof Andy Lavender (AL), Dean of Research, Central School of Speech & Drama

[1] *This transcript of the conversation was edited by Joel Anderson, Andy Lavender [and Katie Mitchell].* The conversation was between Andy Lavender and Katie Mitchell, with audience questions at the end.

About Katie Mitchell:

Katie in rehearsal for Euripides' *Women of Troy* © Stephen Cummiskey, 2007

Controversial amongst critics, polarising amongst audiences, and highly respected amongst her peers, director Katie Mitchell produces work of extraordinary clarity and decidedness that has won her international acclaim.

She began her career at London's King's Head before joining new-writing theatre Paines Plough, then moving to the RSC as assistant director. A devotee of the methods of Russian pedagog Konstantin Stanislavski, she travelled to Eastern Europe in 1989 to meet and study with proponents Lev Dodin of the St Petersburg Maly Teatr and Tadeusz Kantor, to explore his ingrained theatrical inheritance.

In the 1990s she set up theatre company Classics on a Shoe String, before rejoining the RSC in 1998 to run their black box project The Other Place, encouraging new initiatives in this now-retired experimental space. She has directed for the Welsh National Opera and been an associate of the Royal Court; she is currently Associate Director of the National Theatre.

Her work courts controversy, scrupulous and highly detailed productions of canonical plays by Chekhov (most famously her much criticised 2006 reworking of *The Seagull* at the National), Ibsen, Beckett, and the classical Greek dramatists. Recently her work has taken an exciting turn into a multi-media. *Waves* (National Theatre 2006) was adapted from a Virginia Woolf novel and used live video to express inner monologues, setting a template for subsequent work such as Martin Crimp's *Attempts on her Life* and *Some Trace of Her* (adapted from Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*).

Her book *The Director's Craft: a Handbook for the Theatre* (Routledge 2008) is a detailed, systematic, highly pragmatic account of Mitchell's directing practice, from preparation through to considerations in conduction of rehearsals and the business of getting the production into the theatre and in front of the public.

Katie is so respected amongst her peers for work of extraordinary clarity and decidedness.

Andy Lavender: I'd like to begin by discussing *The Director's Craft* and to ask, Why write the book? Was there a gap in the market that you spotted? Or did you feel, at a certain point in your career, that you wanted to map out a process developed over quite a considerable number of productions?

Katie Mitchell: I did a lot of teaching and as I taught I thought it would be useful to write things down, and then I wouldn't have to do so much teaching! But also I'd

reached a point with my own work where I needed to refine more and I thought the discipline of trying to communicate something very complex to someone just starting out might help to refine my own process and my own thinking - which it did. I was encouraged by publishers to study gaps in the market, but it certainly wasn't an economic thing – it was an intellectual challenge. Also I'm not a writer at all, so the idea of having to communicate with sentences on pages was quite challenging. I had a tremendous amount of help: I had been given so many tools from other practitioners. Most of what's in the book is from other people; I didn't make it. And I thought it would be great if one could find a way of levelling the playing field so that everyone could have a good tool kit, and that [acquiring one] wouldn't be a problem for people starting out. I think that's often what can happen in this country: it glorifies the amateur, gung-ho feeling that anyone can direct. I wanted to chip away at that problem in culture and show that directing is actually a craft that anyone with a lot of application can pick up and get good at.

AL: Would you describe what you mapped out here as a system?

KM: I don't think it is a system at all.

AL: But it is very systematic.

KM: It is very systematic, but I am very systematic, so it suits me. I think it is because I'm actually very chaotic: things have to be clear otherwise my chaos overwhelms everything. It is not a system though, it is just a collection of different tools which you might choose to use at any stage in the process: from reading a play through to the last night. I wouldn't say that anyone has to take the whole thing lock, stock, and barrel. If you don't know what to do in technical rehearsals, then you can just flip to the bit on technicals and find something that might be useful. But of course, if you wanted to be assiduous and anal, and you had a lot of time on your hands, you could read the whole thing.

AL: Give us an introduction to the core principles of it and the process that you describe in the book.

KM: The main principle, which is very unpopular as a way of thinking, is that the director needs to prepare a lot before entering rehearsals. The culture can suggest that rehearsal is the place where everything happens, and that the director and the actors sort of explore everything. But mostly directors in this country work with between two and four weeks of rehearsals, and you need to come up with a way of working that uses very little time more efficiently. And a vague sense of exploring together without any proper preparation is very dangerous, because it means that you might stumble over accurate choices just by chance, not by design or intent.

The thing I learned is that everything in the craft of directing lies in the preparation. And it's not just that you walk into the rehearsal room knowing exactly how people stand or do things, but that you have a solution to every inch of the evening's performance which can be drawn up if there isn't another solution there in the rehearsal room by way of a more organic discussion with the actors. I used to think that you weren't allowed to tell actors to do things. So I would direct by asking them questions: "What do you think?…Should we…?" But this is incredibly inefficient for everyone. It can be better with a limited time period for the director to say, "Let's assume for the sake of argument that it *is* …1897… and let's say it *is* August and let's say it *is* very very hot and there are a lot of insects and let's say you are playing to get this and you are playing to get that. Let's try it and apply it to the scene." I think that the joy of directing is the preparation: the very careful study of the play, frame-by-frame, and then the description of very simple concrete tasks for the actors. And then you go into the rehearsal prepared, and then you have to be very cunning to draw the actors alongside you without the feeling that you know everything and that there is nothing for them to discover. So the other basic idea would be: directors give instructions, and actors do.

Directors must give instructions that are specific, local and concrete, because actors really can't translate vague, abstract ideas into anything that an audience can watch. When I was starting out, I didn't know the language to use to talk to actors to get the outcomes that I wanted. I would sit and watch my work in performance - it wasn't what I wanted and I couldn't control it. So I tried to find out whether there was a way of getting an outcome closer to what I wanted the audience to see, and a way of noting that outcome and making miniscule and subtle corrections that would sharpen the outcome, performance-by-performance. It sounds very dogmatic but it isn't in practice. It can make the actors feel very confident that someone really has imagined the play from their character's point of view, so has thought through absolutely every tiny detail of what their characters will have to do. But it's not a very popular way of making theatre and I work with a very small group of actors.

AL: I was very struck by the fact that a good quarter or third of the book is about work that happens before the actors even come into the room. How long does it take you to prepare for a production?

KM: A couple of months. I'd be doing it around other things. I have to survive, so I have to work. So that means I can't spend as much time just preparing as I would like to. If I'm doing a revival of an opera, during the day I'm doing rehearsals for that and in the evening I'm prepping my next show. So it isn't neat. It isn't Katie does two months in the London Library and then Katie directs something. It is lots of tiny snatches of time taken from other jobs and around other jobs. But it is possible to do some of it in just a weekend. My argument to young directors is just to get a bit ahead. Just do a number of tasks. Think through what one scene might look like.

AL: As you do it and develop that method you become more adept and swift.

KM: Yes, you get very swift.

AL: It seems to me this could be called *A Director Prepares*.

KM: But there's another fantastic book called that.

AL: Indeed, but it sort of comes back to and closes a loop with what we understand of the Stanislavski system. And you've written about that, and I have to ask how you locate yourself within that tradition, since this work deals so scrupulously with intentions. It looks at the concrete world of the drama and how actors navigate their way through this in a very grounded way, so its root in what we might think of as the realist inheritance from the writings of Stanislavski seems very clear. Are you developing that in any sense?

KM: Developing his inheritance? No – I'm communicating fragments of the inheritance that I've been taught. When I started directing I was incredibly drawn to books about Russian and Polish theatre. I just loved the images, the photographs. I wasn't very good at reading the books to be honest! I just looked at the images and thought, "That is so beautiful!" I tried to get through all those tomes but I could never get through all of Stan cover to cover. Jean Benedetti's book – you know the eighty-page one –[2] is really a good read. So when I was starting out, I was drawn to the aesthetic coming out of those countries, and I didn't understand that they had such a scientific attitude to their theatre making.

So finally I went there in 1989 just after the Berlin Wall had come down. I saw them working and the first thing that struck me was that they train actors for four years and directors for five years. And at that time you couldn't get a job as a director without a five-year diploma! That was a real shock. And then I watched Lev Dodin train young directors in St Petersburg. They were doing animals and they had little black tights and pumps. Directors aren't made as physically beautiful as actors quite often, so they were quite a motley crew! And

[2] *Stanislavski, An Introduction*

they were spending a lot of time trying to do things like flamingos. But Lev Dodin, who is an incredible realist, was saying things like, "What is the fourth feather on the left wing doing? What's your flamingo doing? What's the time of day? Is your flamingo hot or cold? What's the brain activity of your flamingo?" That sort of thing! And the more I watched the work of Dodin and then Vasilyev, the more I realised that they took it very seriously. They took every inch of what an actor might do on stage incredibly seriously, not in a heavy way but in a very workmanlike way.

So after being inspired by them I did a lot of reading and then I started, in the early stages of my career, to use what I understood of their teaching. In my head I was trying to take forward some of the tools. I failed mostly. A lot of Russians would come over and go, "Oooooh!" I remember one woman came over and watched *Ghosts* (1994), for which I was nominated for an Olivier award, and I was suffering from a lot of hubris. She said, "It's very interesting: it looks reputable, the sound is very beautiful, but there is absolutely nothing going on between any of the actors and you are only directing one of them. So what do you say to the actors?" And I said, "Well, I ask them questions," and she said, "What? Actors aren't directors; they are actors, and you have to give them instructions!"

So bit by bit, first in Russia, Georgia and Lithuania, people watched what I had tried to do and told me where I had failed. Finally, in 2000, although my career was going well, I knew that I wasn't directing very well, so I went back to be taught again. Everything that finally got deposited in the book is really just the best things that people in Eastern Europe told me as I struggled to make theatre. Now, of course, I could be rather grand and say, "Well, I see myself as positioned here in the narrative of Stanislavski through 'til now!" But I don't experience myself like that. I just feel enormously lucky to have met certain people who pointed out certain flaws in what I was doing and suggested very concrete changes to my practice that led to clearer work. Everything comes directly from late Stanislavski. But not early Stan: not the 'emotional memory' section, more the 'physical actions' section, which he discovered later on, so not the Method.

AL: There is a very interesting calibration in the book, where you talk about events as a consequence of discussion with Tatiana Olear, whom you recruited as a teacher in some respects.

KM: Yes, she worked with Lev Dodin. She'd done the four-year actor training and then worked with him for four years. Then I cast her when I was working in Milan. I was doing a version of Martin Crimp's *Attempts on Her Life* in Italian (1999). She was terribly polite throughout the whole of the rehearsal process and then I asked her at the end, "What do you think of my Stanislavski work?" And she said, "There is no Stanislavski work in this room at all!" It was very humiliating. She very kindly offered to teach me, and came over to work at the National Theatre Studio with actors. And she started to reveal different ways of looking at the structure of a play.

The thing that she showed me, which radically changed my whole structure of thinking about plays, is that a play is a series of changes that we watch. You can call them events. Every change must affect every single character in the scene in a small or a big way. For example, a change would be 'armed gunman rushes in here' so every single person in the room would change what they were doing, whether it was watching Katie talk to hiding or confronting whatever it was. So that would be an event. That was the tool that she gave me. It sounds very simple but what it does is create better architecture in your directing. Because you are aware of where the big changes are, and where the little changes are. It helps stop that awful levelling-out feeling that you get when you are directing, especially when you are starting out: you know the rhythm and the structure is flat and dull, or, as an actor on the inside of it, you just feel everything is just flat and dull. Events stop that from happening. A simple thing, but an enormous discovery, directorially.

AL: The book focuses on the preparation, rehearsal and delivery of a production of *The Seagull* (2006). You talk in the book about the methods here perhaps

being applicable to other sorts of theatre. I saw that less clearly. You describe improvising parts of back story, parts of the context: the premise of the book is that this work is transferable into devising new material.

KM: Absolutely. Even if you are playing a banana in a surrealist play! What tree were you on? When did you fall off the tree? How were you transported? How long were you growing? Who is going to eat you? When? Etcetera. I was trying to describe what you could do in a room with actors. What I was aiming to do was literally that, not to position myself in a tradition. But because it's written down, it gets looked at as something else: a theory or an idea. That's an interesting by-product of trying to write things down: that it becomes an idea of something as opposed to a boring old tool kit that you can take out if you fancy. I wasn't aspiring to anything more than that.

AL: But in the tool kit, presumably, you use different tools for different jobs, which I think does produce different results. When I was looking at the book, I was thinking about how someone might apply this to a situation where the actors have to, in effect, create live cinema, as is the case in your recent multimedia productions at the National. So when the audience watches this they watch a video screen and they see effects and relationships that are meaningful only in as far as they are cinematic. So the work on intentions and on back story, on locational grounding, in some ways seems peripheral to that kind of a process.

KM: It happens at a different place in the process. But I'm just starting something - I don't know where the multimedia work is heading, or what it is yet. I couldn't describe exactly how we make it so accurately. But at the performance level, all the people who are constructing the work have characters. So just imagine that the output on the screen isn't there: everyone who moves a camera or focuses a light is playing a character with a back history that is completely constructed and they are also playing immediate circumstances. The immediate circumstances are that this is a one-off performance with a live radio relay. It is

being performed on Radio 3 and the video output is going to the White Cube Gallery. And all the people at the ground level, who are moving the cameras and lights etcetera, are a combination of visual artists and performance artists, based on existing people…. So we used all of that work to create the reality for the skills that are used to construct the video output. And then in the video output they have for their nineteenth-century characters, they have the characters' back histories, they have intentions, they have it all! There are actually two documents: originally, when we made *Waves*, we actually put in some fake mistakes in order to make events at the performance level, not the video output level. So all of these things are used in the making of that work but they are legible in a different way. You might just catch a tiny trace of a relationship if you look between a camera operator and a lighting person. But they're all there in the work.

AL: But the critical task is to make these things readable on the screen?

KM: No, it's not. That is what is so interesting. No, it all came from feeling that there is something about the well-made play: as time passes and you live a bit more, you don't experience yourself neatly like a protagonist in a well-made play. I don't experience relationships like that and I don't experience the community I live in like that; it all feels more chaotic, more fragmented and stranger. So why, I ask myself, if it feels like that, am I constantly doing these well-made plays which seem to be very fake?

So I found something that captures more my experience of myself, the relationships I have, and the world. And good old Virginia! That book, *The Waves*, is very good because it's just internal monologues. You know, world wars happen and they don't even get on the radar of the mental structures of any of the characters. It is an incredible novel because of that. And so I then thought about how we communicate, and thought we should try some video and some sound: then we evolved this thing.

Waves © Stephen Cummiskey, 2006

It was a way of liberating ourselves from the linear narrative as a way of communicating how we perceive and experience things. And the aim of it also is to allow the viewer to make their own narrative: they can take their narrative entirely from the video output, watching it as though it was a film, although it really isn't good enough to watch as if it were a film – some of the shots simply have to be held longer than they should be because we can't move to the next shot. Or they could just watch the live performance, or move between the two. You construct whatever meaning you want. And I rather like the fact that it is a pick-and-mix evening. You can get into the lighting it sets up, or the video, or you could go up there and look at the output… Anyway that sounds very vague… I'm trying to be clear! It came from trying to get theatre a bit closer in on the experience of perception.

AL: And did you work differently, in order to achieve that in the rehearsal room, in the planning or in the relationships with collaborators?

KM: Yes, I walked into the adventure with actors who I had worked with for about ten years, with sound designers it was a 13-year relationship, and with set designers it was a 20-year relationship. So we all had reached a ceiling in our own work and we were also reeling a bit from being constantly attacked for what we were doing. It was getting very intense around *The Seagull*, very intense. So we wanted to do something for ourselves. The working process wasn't very formal; we didn't know what we were doing for a lot of the time. And we only half worked out what we could do with *Waves*, and then on the last day of rehearsal we tried to run it and we couldn't. We stopped over 25 times and we had awful accidents – fish bowls and electricity… We killed some fish! And I think all of us thought, "Fucking hell, we can't throw this together! What's Nick [Hytner] going to say? This is just so awfully embarrassing." And, miraculously, we put it together. So it was a bit of an unsteady experience. Not as well prepared as the book suggests you should be. I would say, "Do what the book says for a few years and then do something like *Waves*." Then at least you've got something to fall back on.

AL: You talked about the challenges for the actors. What do you look for in actors who are working in your room, with its hanging equipment and very precise set-ups, and where you generate and presumably finesse these different set-ups for each shot?

KM: It's difficult because I work with such a small group. I got so badly burnt casting people who were driven by therapeutic needs or vanity. It was permanent negotiation and I did at times think I should be working at the UN! So I finally said, "I've had enough. I'm nearly 40. I'm not doing that anymore. I'm going to work with a small group of people." I think of actors not as actors but as adults who I collaborate with, and so they are fellow travellers and fellow

thinkers, and I sort of look for a lot of curiosity, very low vanity, very low therapeutic needs; I want them to have sorted out why they wanted to be an actor so there aren't unconscious things disturbing them, because sometimes private things can actually get in the way of good acting. So I think I look for people who are very stable and steady, clear headed, self-knowing, calm, curious, and prepared to take enormous risks for the sake of something bigger than themselves. I'm just describing a group of about fifteen people whom I love very much and I work with a huge amount. The thing that makes me laugh is that I'm always described as an 'auteur'. And yet, I travel in a bus! I couldn't possibly travel on my own. I only make all of this work because I have such amazing relationships with actors. On *Some Trace of Her*, at the first preview, we couldn't get through a run-through. It was literally the actors' courage and insistence that made the show happen at all. So that is an amazing thing. I work with people who go, "Oh, a microphone is really interesting. I wonder if…" They are sort of fascinated by everything like, "Oh, that cup is very interesting!" And just not so worried about their character and why they are standing downstage-centre.

Some Trace of Her © Stephen Cummiskey, 2008

AL: You are currently an Associate at the National. What does that mean? What do you do?

KM: Well I don't get paid anything, which is very tense-making! And there's no formal contract, just a verbal, very insecure, agreement that I will sort of do about two shows a year for I suppose as long as I can get the reviews or the audience or the box office. There are a lot of Associates. There are nearly 30. We never all meet.

AL: So it's not a planning position?

KM: No, no planning. If, for example, they are doing something like the final set of interviews for the head of casting or the head of the studio, they will roll me in to ask all the difficult questions. I'm seen as difficult, so I give the difficult questions. That's their reason, I suppose. I don't know. So it is very difficult to say what being an Associate is. When I was an Associate at the [Royal] Court, and then at the RSC before that, it was a financial agreement, which sort of made it easier if you like. So I'm really blessed because Nick lets me make very difficult and expensive work - the man takes enormous risks. He receives a lot of hate mail about offering me work, and he bothers to answer it. I think he is rather remarkable, and very, very generous.

AL: So do you observe a shift from one thing to another thing?

KM: At the National?

AL: Yes.

KM: No, it's very hard-nosed consolidation. They are a flagship. I think they are trying the change the whole structure of theatre practice in the UK. They've just done Sunday openings, a very complex and delicate thing. The people who run the National are enormously tough and intellectually rigorous and powerful, and very courageous, particularly now that the economic climate is changing.

AL: I remember quite fondly when the National received work by Giorgio Strehler. We don't see that sort of international work come to the National now.

KM: Well there is some of it. Steppenwolf is coming isn't it? I think that's just about to start. And who is the dancer they just brought in with Juliette Binoche [Akram Khan]? So they are heading there.

AL: But it is tentative.

KM: Yes, they are putting their energy into trying to create more relationships with the avant garde young audience, with young groups. They are just putting it in a different place.

AL: At the point where you were looking to challenge or develop your own practice, you went to Lev Dodin or Kantor. Where would you go now? And what people would you want to meet with? Are they coming over here?

KM: What, people to push me further creatively?

AL: Yes, you and, grandiosely, the whole of theatre practice in this country?

KM: Who are those people now? I'm not as open as I should be to what's going on in Europe. I'm more in touch with the people who inspired me when I was in my twenties. So I'd still go to look at Pina Bausch's work. I'd still go to look at Gardzienice's work, sort of a near-Grotowski group who are still doing night-running in the fields, which is an experience that everyone should have. And even Lev Dodin whose work has, I think, got slightly frayed, but is still absolutely beautiful. And then the younger practitioners I suppose: Thomas Ostermeier is very interesting in Berlin, and – I can't ever remember his name – his contemporary working in Warsaw at the moment.

AL: Do you let critics in your room? Because one of my beefs with theatre criticism is that often one senses that the critics don't understand the production process.

KM: I don't know – it's very difficult. The thing that really gets my goat is their inability to study acting well, and to write about acting. You know, acting is an enormously difficult thing to do: it is enormously hard to slip into the skin of another character in a specific time and a specific place and do it accurately without using conventional theatrical gestures, or without the fear of doing it intercepting what you are aiming for. It is such a hard craft. And for me their writing about acting is the thing that just drives me mad: they mix up a director's idea with the acting – they are not able to separate the two. So, whatever people might say about how I conceive something like *The Seagull*, I tell you the acting was top notch: absolutely precisely acted. The ideas I asked them to enact may have been flawed, but the level of quality in the acting was so high. And that's the thing that I find most frustrating. Critics just cream off the conceptual ideas and write about that and they don't go, "My God, Michael Gould's playing was so precise, did you notice that I really believed he was an estate manager in 1892, and that it was hot, and that there were horses outside the door?" That's when I get angry. But the thing is, there's no point in my feeling of anger: it is wasted energy against critics. They have a whole other thing that they have to do. I'm just sad sometimes that the things that are very accurate aren't celebrated or described, and they over-destroy or overdescribe tiny, tiny things in the work.

Questions from the audience:

Audience Member 1: Could you say a little bit about working in opera: is it different or the same as what you would do in your multimedia work or in your other theatre work?

KM: Yeah, we do do back-histories, for example: immediate circumstances. But there isn't very much time to do the same amount of work. And they have to practice other things: one simply has to acknowledge that singing requires a huge amount of practice, and it is very hard to do that and also do other things, especially for that production, at that tempo, which is quite fast – singing in this tempo is really hard. So I do quite a lot of the work, but I tend to give it to them in very small, bite-sized, easily-digestible-and-usable chunks, because they've got so much else on their plate. And my job is to really edit out anything which is like a theatrical convention, anything that isn't realistic, or anything that's there just because they have to produce the sound in what they're doing. They do these very weird movements with their upper body, simply to support the sound, and one tries to modify or disguise those moves or put a distraction across the stage elsewhere so the audience doesn't pick up those distortions. It is a slightly different field, so I do this work for them.

Audience Member 2: With your multimedia work you use a camera to focus the audience on one place to watch, whereas in *The Seagull* and *Women of Troy* (2008), I saw [the staging] as a panoramic view: there is so much going on everywhere, and the audience chooses where they want to watch. How much has the multimedia work inspired the work which is not multimedia-based?

KM: You are definitely a directing student! I think that's a really interesting observation, because in *The Seagull* I was consciously stopping there being focus, always making sure that all of the canvas was totally egalitarian. So there wasn't that whole thing where the important character is downstage-centre; wherever you looked there was life and you could select how you were going to look at it.

Audience Member 2: And there were servants running through constantly.

KM: Exactly. That was also because there were some really long, boring speeches that Martin wouldn't cut! But I think Chekhov just got overly excited about talking, about writing, and had forgotten where Trigorin was standing when he was talking. But, yes, I wanted the multimedia to continue to have an egalitarian canvas. I suppose it came from studying the history of painting: when the impressionists came along what they did was to make the canvas egalitarian. So every bit of the canvas was as important as every other bit. And I thought, "Christ! This is a fantastic idea for directing!" And also they worked in thirds not in halves. It was so ugly to put someone in a canvas downstage-centre, plunk in the middle: it's just really hard on the eye. So in the multimedia work I'm still trying to do that, but I think it's very difficult: we are still working on the lighting of the ground level, where they are moving the cameras, so that it is equally lit. Come to Cologne – I think we've found a solution. But it's a flaw in the multimedia work that the eye goes too much to the video output. It's my flaw You are right to observe it.

Audience Member 3: Could elaborate on the relationship between the director and the costume designer?

KM: Yeah, you see, I'm not really good at that because I've only worked with three different designers in my life, and I was at university with the designer I've worked with, so if you watched us you wouldn't be sure who was who! But I'm working with a new, young designer at the moment. Is there a particular area of it that is interesting you that you want me to talk about?

Audience Member 3: When you are in pre-production. How do you work? It is sort of a collaboration?

KM: I used to suffer a lot in design meetings because I used to feel like me and the designer were like two terriers, with the play like a bit of material, going, "I think it's this! No it's that!" I thought "this is so horribly subjective," and also

secretly I wanted to be the director, which means I wanted it my way, but I didn't know how to enforce that. So I realized that there was a dysfunction in the process: the outcome would be a lot of subjective conversations. The designer would say "I feel that…." And then I would say, "I feel that…" And then someone would say, "It's supposed to be organic," and I thought, "Well, that's what we are supposed to do, so we're doing this weird-feeling dance!" And then I would not be getting the outcome I wanted in the end. So I thought it would be much better to take the pressure to solve things off the designer, and to take a step back and say, "Ok, let's together look at what the actual facts are of this play, and where the interpretational possibilities are." So the first thing that I would do is go through all the facts about place with the designer. Not just the place that the audience see either, but the places that are talked about. Because often things go really wrong if a designer is so fixated on the room in which the action happens and yet all the doors going in and out of it don't make sense. So the actor has to come into a kitchen through the stairs or something ridiculous! I try to encourage the designer not to conceive and not to solve, but to imagine being the actor trying to play a character in a real place. So that would be the first thing that I do: to go a little more simply through the action, and then move on to the "I feel" more subjective, aesthetic territory; but even in that territory I'd be a little more hard-lined than I was to begin with. I'd be going, "So if these are the events of the play, and they are the events because I'm directing it, and these are where the changes are going to happen, how are you – the designer – going to help focus that? What decisions can we make about place or about the colours that people are wearing that will draw the eye to the events?" So, for me, that is to really be the director. There is a very beautiful, subtle other thing which is going on, which is that a really good designer has a really subtle, beautiful sense of atmosphere, tone, colour, and texture. It is not my field, so the designer must be free as an artist to be functioning in that territory. But that can't overwhelm all the other things that have to be in place for the actor to play the character, and for the event and the changes of the actual play to occur.

Audience Member 4: What draws you to a particular text or script? What issue do you want to make a piece of theatre about?

KM: Of course there are always very private things that I would never disclose about me and why I want certain plays. I'm probably drawn to plays… if I analyze this… because they've got really good, big ideas behind them. So it's the idea structure of a play that appeals to me. If it's Chekhov, there are always these really simple solid ideas, like: it's about family, it's about death and illness, it's about despair. It's about these lovely big ideas that I know will feed me and will feed the actors. So I'm sort of x-raying the surface detail to make sure there are some really big muscular ideas behind it that I can feed off. I am very alert that I will be drawn, because of my own psychology, to certain ideas more than others, so after that first exciting flutter: "Gasp! What are the ideas? X-ray. There they are. There they are." There'll be two out of four that I most like. And then I've got to remember to direct the other ones as well, otherwise the play will be lopsided.

Audience Member 5: What are the flaws that you are working to improve on for your upcoming pieces?

KM: I would say that I like 'fast' a lot. That is my tempo. So I think I need to look at allowing sections of the overall architecture of the piece to go a little slower. I think with the multimedia work we have the flaw that this gentleman pointed out, which is that the screen becomes the main place where the eye rests. We need to work out a way of avoiding that from happening. I think I have lots of ticks as a director, and I need to check that all those aren't just ticks and are actually servicing the material. I think I need new scripts. All I want to do at the moment is just direct plays I've directed before; but I haven't had time. I've been a bit busy recently so I haven't done what it says to do in the book. So I haven't really rigorously itemized the weak areas, but I imagine they are to do with

tempo, and they are to do with overplaying certain aesthetic ideas. Probably there is a dysfunction with my relationship with the actors. There is something about not trusting them entirely, which leads to certain behavioural patterns as a director, even with my closest collaborators.

Audience Member 6: When people are horrible about your plays how much does that impact on your next production?

KM: Oh, you've got to process it so it doesn't. As Marguerite Yourcenar, the French philosopher, would say: "Where is the advantage?" As an artist all you want to do is to move forwards, you don't want to sit in pain. So how can you turn this awful situation of being annihilated to your advantage? When it first happened, which was really painful, like walking on glass, was I studied to check that there wasn't something that I was doing that was actually creating this feeling. And I did discover that there were certain things that I was doing that I didn't need to do that were leading to people misunderstanding my aims and intentions. And indeed with *The Seagull*, which was quite annihilated, I did study it and realized I made one simple mistake: it was about costumes. I just said, "Let's not have corsets." And of course this was a very simple error; I bet you, if they'd been in nineteenth-century corsets the reviews wouldn't have been so extreme. So I think as they hurt you you've got to live with them and you've got to study them and you've got to go, "Well, I'm someone who makes things, so how can I change what I've made to stop this intense feeling?" Or, "No, I don't think what they said is useful, I think I'll stand by what I've made." So that's what I tend to do. It's not a nice day when you do it, but you do it, and then you feel creative again at the end of it; you feel creative again and you move forwards.

ENDS