

Designing Shakespeare: Interview with Cheek by Jowl Artistic Director and Designer Nick Ormerod 16/12/2002

Designing Shakespeare was developed to help students and scholars gain a greater understanding of the work of theatre designers working in Britain during the last forty years of the previous century. This interview with Nick Ormerod has been published on the Cheek by Jowl Sophie Hamilton Archive with the kind permission of the interviewer Dr Christie Carson.

The entire Designing Shakespeare collection can be accessed here:

<http://www.ahds.rhul.ac.uk/ahdscollections/>

The Cheek by Jowl Sophie Hamilton Archive can be accessed here:

<http://archive.cheekbyjowl.com/>

RECORDING BEGINS:

CC: *First I'd like to start with some general questions about your work and essentially how you got into this profession in the first place, since there isn't really a direct path for many people. If possible could you give me... what interested you in theatre in the first place and the key stages to how your career developed.*

NO: I first came into contact with theatre at school as an actor and then again at college and I think everyone who goes into the theatre needs to be stage struck in some way. And that's how I became stage struck through acting. This seemed to gel with an also love of drawing and painting which started quite late on I suppose, I was fourteen or fifteen. And the two came together, in fact I trained as a lawyer first but by the time I was finishing that degree I'd already decided to do design. So a year later I applied to design school and was lucky enough rather than to go through the process of what was then a foundation course, they offered me a place on the diploma course which I think then became a BA course at Wimbledon a year after I finished doing Law. So I did another degree in Stage Design at Wimbledon so I'm very well qualified.

CC: *And in terms of working, where did you begin practising design?*

NO: My first job was up in Edinburgh at the Lyceum with a designer called Mark Negin who was a great teacher and I spent a year there as an assistant and doing what assistants normally do and I mean he taught me an awful lot. I think one comes out of school thinking you know things but in fact just doing them is the major teaching tool if you like. And then came down to London and started working with Declan who was going through a similar, no a slightly different process, discovering that he wanted to direct. And we started working together in a small way on the fringe in London, which grew into Cheek by Jowl.

CC: *When you start working on a new design project, what is your starting point? Is it the text or do you work from a variety of different angles?*

NO: The text, I mean the fortunate thing about how we have been able to work in Cheek by Jowl is that we've been able to take no decisions in advance. And any decisions that I've always taken in advance, that I've had in my head as it were, any ideas have always been jettisoned once we've started work on a text in rehearsal. And that has been a great privilege because I know working for bigger theatres with more resources but they always demand bigger decisions up front in certain major ways. With Cheek by Jowl that's never been necessary, we've always allowed ourselves two weeks as it were of a six week rehearsal period to play around and experiment. And it would always be over that second weekend when the decision had to be made, as it were, and in fact all the costumes designed, and the set designed pretty well I mean. So it's kind of exciting in that way but it does allow a more organic approach. But, essentially yes you have the text and you have the actors and the space is clearly a bit more flexible in terms of a touring piece, because you are envisaging a whole variety of different spaces and you choose essentially a format. And basically touring is a proscenium, end-on experience. And so that is essentially what I have in mind.

CC: *So does the space have an impact on your work when you are designing?*

NO: A huge amount, a huge amount, I mean that is what theatre is essentially about, is the space and the collision between the space and the actor and the piece. And, though there are also other influences like for example the director, but it's that, as it were, collision, that process of the different elements that come together, that creates the design.

CC: *Do you think that design has a different role depending on the type of production you are working with, whether it be opera or say ballet? Or say musical versus Shakespeare or another type of theatre? Does the role of design change?*

NO: No I think it's important that all theatre has a visual element and arguably it's less important in Shakespeare than a musical or ballet. But the design process is one which, it's difficult to describe, as it were, enables really, enables the piece to be realised and that applies to a musical, a ballet or to Shakespeare. Clearly there are very different considerations, whether heavy text piece like Shakespeare, I mean it's, I don't need to say it, it's kind of a cliché, that the poetry in Shakespeare does a lot of the visual work for you. And that's why spaces like the Globe are fascinating because there is no possibility really of building a set, and yet it's a very exciting experience. I'm not sure I've answered the question.

CC: *No that's fine. I guess this in a way is a particularly interesting question for you, the next one, in the sense that one of the things I've been asking a number of different people is whether the scale of the production has a large impact, I mean you've worked in a number of very small spaces and a number of well, not quite so large spaces. Are financial considerations a huge part of what you are doing?*

NO: Well in a way that's another consideration when it's another part of the process an actually I think lack of money is quite a creative part of the process in that if you have no money it actually encourages creativity. One shouldn't let the secret out, but that is one state secret, and an excess of money and the ability to do exactly what you want is arguably a bit corrupting, but having said that, there are all sorts of other considerations to. I mean you may be able to do exactly what you want, but in creating a piece that works dramatically there are certain considerations like fluidity, the ability to move easily from scene to scene is crucial for the realisation of a piece. And to pretend that you can produce a beautiful set for one scene and not consider how it moves into the next scene is potentially disastrous, you may get wonderful photographs, but arguably, dramatically it's a complete disaster because an audience shouldn't be put through that process, if you like, of waiting for one scene to move into another. I think it's absolutely fundamental for the designer's job to solve that, those moments, as it were, of how one thing moves into another, and in Shakespeare, that's absolutely key, because you're presenting the audience with a very heavy text piece. You can't allow moments like that, they just shouldn't exist. The audience should be able to move completely seamlessly from one scene to the next. And that's a hard thing to do but that's fundamental to the designer's job.

CC: *What would you say then was an effective design? One that is seamless?*

NO: It depends on the piece, entirely depends on the piece. The design should support and realise what the piece is and should sort of reveal the piece as it were. But at the same time I feel that you shouldn't go into any theatre piece and say 'Oh my God that was a wonderful design. I really didn't like the acting or the directing, but I thought the design was fantastic' I think you've failed as a designer. I think an audience should experience the piece as a unity and just come out and say 'That was fantastic' and not be able to explain necessarily why but just that overall they had a fantastic experience. And to let any one element hang out, like even if you go in a see a star performance, you think 'He was brilliant' you know, but I didn't much like him or the direction or I didn't like that costume, I think you've failed.

CC: *So that leads rather nicely to my next question, which is about your relationship with the director. You have been in the position of working with the same director for many of the productions you have done. How does that creative partnership begin? How do you...Where do you begin?*

NO: [Interrupts] Spasmodically...I think it works. Without formal meetings, it works in sort of small conversations had, you know, in odd places. On trains or to an extent we don't really need to have

meetings or meet even, you know. It might just happen almost without talking about it. And it is based on trust over working over, you know, having worked together for now, what, more than twenty years.

CC: *Do you have a language for discussing things or, as you say, does it not need language? I mean do you ever use sketches or do you refer to books or sculpture or are there things that you draw in to say 'I think this might be useful' How do you have those discussions?*

NO: That's a good question. I think it varies all the time. I don't think I can pin anything down. I mean Declan's absolute prime interest in the theatre is in the acting, what the actor does and the actor's art. And that's something that fascinates me too. And because I'm able to be in on the process from the beginning, from the absolute beginning, choosing the piece, choosing the actors that we work with, the thing sort of [?] but, as I say, it happens really in the first two weeks of rehearsal with the actors. So that decisions are taken probably with the actor in those two weeks. Recently, we worked with the RSC, we had a bit longer we had ten weeks and we were working with young actors on King Lear and we had a group of the most talented students we could find – or ex students. But the thing had to be moulded around their particular talents so that was quite specific. So in King Lear, we played Kent for example in a particular way, in an unusual way, because of the talents that we had at our disposal. But I think that just brings into relief what, kind of both Declan and I do, which I suppose brings it down to a much more collaborative process than one might think. And I think what people don't realise about the theatre is how pragmatic it is. It really comes down to what you can do and what an actor can do and not any idea that I or Declan might come in with. As I said earlier, it is almost certainly the case that any idea you might have, any intellectual idea, is jettisoned because it simply doesn't work. It just simply does not work in a kind of practical way on the stage with those actors. So in some ways, it's not a very creative process, in some ways, because it's very pragmatic.

CC: *The position you hold as being involved from the beginning is unusual for a designer, do you think you could function in any other way? Is that the only way you like to operate?*

NO: It's the only way I'd like to operate. But under other circumstances, clearly I would have to operate in another way. I haven't recently worked with any other directors, possibly because they now regard me as completely intolerable. I don't know.

CC: *What about other designers? Do you ever work with other designers?*

NO: On a piece? No. I never have.

CC: *And you'd rather not?*

NO: No. I don't...I think you get used to the idea of theatre being collaborative, and you actually get quite good at collaborating. I mean I'm not someone who comes in with a vision and says 'This must be, this is my vision, this is what it must be' That is simply not my process.

CC: *Do you think that designers get sort of typecast in the way that actors do?*

NO: I think they do, I think, completely understandably, directors don't necessarily like to get, to be seen to be, over-attached to one particular designer. I completely understand that, but it does make the designer's role a bit difficult in some ways because many designers I know feel like they are kind of, one on a list and directors deliberately choose another designer. For possibly what they think are very good reasons, that designer will be better for that piece, they think. In fact what they are doing is maintaining control of choice, and I'm very lucky in that Declan doesn't have that control. He doesn't always, there was one occasion recently when he didn't work with me, it was a French production, but on every other production he has to at least kind of consult me, put it this way.

CC: Do you think that perhaps that is, that you are seen as a working collaborative partnership, that that is the reason that other people don't ask you to work with them?

NO: I like to think that's true, maybe they hate my work but that's what I like to think.

CC: *Are there other designer's work that you admire or that has influenced your work?*

NO: Yes a lot. I have huge admiration for other designers and I think there are absolutely wonderful designers all over Britain. I think there are very many truly great talents. Maria Bjornson for one actually, who recently died. But I think there are wonderful designers.

CC: *Have any of them influenced your work in any direct way?*

NO: I couldn't pick out one in particular, but everything you see sort of influences you and you see wonderful design around all the time.

CC: *Next I want to move on to looking at you specific work with Shakespeare and look at some particular productions. In your own mind is there a particular production of Shakespeare that sticks out for any particular reason? Good or bad.*

NO: Well one of my favourite was The Tempest, Cheek by Jowl's Tempest, which was generally disliked by the critics. But I still think it was quite a remarkable piece of work and it is one of my favourites, in terms of design.

CC: *It was rather unusual wasn't it?*

NO: Yes, we took a very strong line on the play, which was in a sense, was a story of a theatre director's mental crisis as it were. It was, as it were, Prospero was a theatre director quite specifically. And so the whole thing was realised in terms of theatre. Whenever you read critics you think they're writing about the last production of any particular piece, but I think any play should be subject to strong interpretation, I mean, you know, it still exists afterwards doesn't it, I mean lets face it, as a text.

CC: *In general, do you think that Shakespeare should seek for that kind of metaphor to reach a contemporary audience? Do you think it needs that kind of translation?*

NO: Not necessarily no, I think Shakespeare needs to be recreated and made alive like any other text. Like a modern text, it needs to still be given life. And after all you are only talking about printed words on a page. And if whatever costume it's in, if it's alive that will communicate itself. I think it's true that heavy production or heavy costumes tend to combat life if you like, which is why I would, I tend to start from a principle of Shakespeare that there needs to be a good reason not do it, to be presented in modern dress. Because that, I think does communicate more directly with modern people. I mean after all when Shakespeare was played, it was played in modern dress. Why should we pin it down in seventeenth century?

CC: *And you do tend to, I mean, the majority of your productions have been in modern dress. What would be a reason to do it in another way?*

NO: Well, for example, *Much Ado About Nothing*, played in, kind of, 1900. And the reason for that was that, the reason for that was that period seemed to release the language. We were working with Joan Washington, on dialect, and we had one session when the sense of the military in that play was totally realised by giving it a military, as it were, pre First World War, voice if you like. It just completely made the language comprehensible and then it seemed to me we had no choice, it wasn't any way of making the language work within a completely modern context. So we put it, as it were, in the most recent context that we could find that was before 1914.

CC: *And do you think audiences have a good sense of period? Do you think they recognise the social structure of a very good variety of periods?*

NO: I don't think they have a very specific knowledge, why should they? Of costume, but, and so I think it's kind of part of the designer's job to, to not necessarily recreate how it exactly was, and obviously as a designer you are doing something through another lens if you like. You are trying to make something understandable to you and therefore to an audience, to a modern audience. So that I think, I mean it's not, it's certainly not my interest to say OK, we are going to do it in 1900, therefore it has to be absolutely right – it has to be specifically 1900 – we have to get that right in every detail. I don't think that's particularly useful. I think again it needs to be...As doing it now, I think naturally you are looking at it from a modern lens. You are doing for yourself what an audience will do, hopefully.

CC: *In terms of the effect you are looking for, I am particularly interested in the *As You Like It*. Why an all male cast? Was that about the original Shakespeare – boys playing women? Was there something else entirely going on?*

NO: Well in a sense it was not about boys playing women just because Shakespeare did it. But it is absolutely intrinsic in the play that, that's what, because he was writing plays for that company. He naturally made the play about issues which, as it were, having to do that. I mean if he could have had women, I'm sure he would have had women. But having only men on stage, then he wrote plays for that company, and the plays are shot through, not all of them, but are shot through with issues that raises, that that fact raises. So consequently, and some plays like *As You Like It* are absolutely about those sort of gender issues. And *As You Like It* is, and by doing it all male, you kind of throw that into relief.

CC: *Did you consider it a successful production from that point of view? Did it illuminate the text in the way you hoped it would?*

NO: I think so, yes. I hope so. And I think what we achieved was by carefully drawing the audience into the idea by not presenting them full frontal with boys dressed up as girls, but by drawing them in in a gradual way, by initially presenting them with an all male company in a basic costume. In trousers and shirt or something, and then gradually introducing them to the idea of boys dressed as girls. But in a non-specific way, and then as the evening progressed it became more specific. And, well one of my favourite costumes was Audrey. Putting her in trousers, as it were, a boy dressed as a girl, but in trousers and just a blonde wig. It kind of, it gave it another, yet another level of irony if you like, fun.

CC: *Well aren't you also dealing with the fact that the audiences expectations of a man dressed as a women are very different now than they would be in Shakespeare's day? I mean as you say, he had no other choice but to put...I think it's more difficult to take a man seriously dressed as a woman given you know...drag artists and pantomime dames...*

NO: That's why we tried to be very careful and avoid that route, by kind of using costume in an emblematic way, not going the whole hog of full wigs and make up and full costume. But giving them a costume and maybe not a wig, and certainly not using make up in a particularly overtly feminine way. So that I think we achieved a sort of emblematic sort of costume which I think is, I think is how I approach costume generally, is in terms of almost like, of function of going for a function and allowing for the actor to, to as it were, fill in the outline of the drawing.

CC: *That is something that is certainly mentioned about you, is that, well I don't know if emblematic or minimalist is another word that has been used I think, in terms of your work. Is that what you are trying to do, are you trying to boil things down to an essence?*

NO: Well that's partly again, pragmatic as I say because we've always approached theatre from a touring point of view so essentially things have to be lightweight, but I think there is a more pressing artistic requirement and I think that is essential to all. I've been thinking a lot about this recently and I think good design is rooted in need. And that's true of a building, I mean it's true of architecture. You don't build a building with too many columns, you build it with the right number of columns. So that when you look at it you feel as if it stands, and the columns aren't too big or too fat, they're just right according to need. And that's true of the set of a play. I mean, you find an element and it fulfils a need. It may be a need in you as it were, or it may be a need in the piece as realised on stage, with the actors normally. But it is rooted in need and part of the process is discovering what the need is and refining things down to that simple element – probably simple. It's probably simple because I find the most exciting image on stage is actually an actor walking onto a bare stage. I find just that image immensely exciting. But that is just my taste.

CC: *Do you ever have, well I imagine that there are inevitably times when you disagree with the director about a particular moment or particular interpretation of things. How do you resolve that? If there is a conflict in terms of approach or decision?*

NO: We have arguments sometimes, we talk about it.

CC: *Is it a creative force in your working relationship?*

NO: Oh I think so yeah. I would never talk to an actor, I would always talk to Declan first and let him talk to the actor if he agrees with me. In terms of design, he sometimes says he gets frustrated because I just give him, I just give him it and say that's it. The way I find my mind works is kind of, is, it tends to be by sort of a leap. That it may be a bit of a fog, but when the fog clears, it becomes quite clear to me and then I try and realise it in terms of what I've seen. And he sometimes I think, finds it a bit frustrating because I think I can sometimes see things quite clearly and he maybe doesn't have the same image. Well obviously doesn't have the same image in his head. But at the same time it's not, as long as I don't get in the way of what the actors are doing, it's not something that greatly interests him actually. He doesn't like looking at models. This is answering the question I failed to answer earlier I think. He doesn't like looking at models. He doesn't particularly like looking at drawings, though I do do costume drawings, mainly for the actors than for him. So that if as I say, what I produce doesn't get in the way of what he wants to do with the actors, then normally he's reasonably happy.

CC: *I think with a lot of designers, if they have only, you know they only work with a director a couple of times, that there's a, well there's an obvious hierarchy there. Do you have essentially, a more egalitarian relationship and have you sort of mapped out territory as to who's, where these responsibilities lie? Are there areas where he trusts you and the same in reverse?*

NO: Yes. I normally deal, for example, with the lighting. So I work quite closely with the lighting designer and normally I understand that the director tends to work with the lighting designer but that tends to be my function. So that if it, yeah, during the technical rehearsal process, that will be what I do. Along with making sure the set happens in the way I want.

CC: *Do you think lighting is very important?*

NO: Yes – crucial.

CC: *Particularly when you're touring, I mean do you use it to sculpt the space and create mood?*

NO: Yes and we work extensively with a lighting designer called Judith Greenwood, who's been with us for years, and hopefully she's able to go with our productions on tour. So she can actually recreate her image, rather than just leave it to somebody else. No, lighting is very important, lighting is crucial.

CC: *So you work together to create. I mean you design alongside with the lighting designer, in terms of creating a look?*

NO: No I wouldn't. I wouldn't encroach on her expertise as a lighting designer. But I'd make suggestions in terms of feel of what we are trying to achieve, I mean just in terms of ideas.

CC: *What about a space? Have you ever come across a space that you would consider the ideal performance space for Shakespeare?*

NO: Well I think the Globe comes very near it. I think that the Globe is a fantastic space for the actor and it has major major drawbacks unfortunately for the modern audience and for modern theatre people. One is that it's open air, and two is that it's lumbered with what the academics think of as the original structure. They may well be right, but I don't think that is ideal for audiences or theatre people now. I mean those pillars and the way they're painted, and the backdrop as it were. But in terms of the audience actor relationship, I think it's very hard to beat. We've just worked in the Swan, which has a similar relationship obviously, since it's kind of based on the Jacobean, Shakespearean space. But it doesn't have the epic feel of the Globe, the Globe has the epic sense of space and possibility, in that it's bigger. And talking to actors who play at the Globe, they have a terrific sense of power, in that they've got the groundlings at their feet, giving them fantastic energy. And yet they've got the epic height above to give them that epic dimension. I suppose there are three spaces; The Cottesloe, The Swan and the Globe. I would love to see someone build, and I was trying to persuade the RSC, because they have to build a temporary space for their redevelopment, I'm hoping, I was trying to persuade them to build a temporary Globe-like space up in Stratford. I think they should have a proper Shakespearean space there and this is an opportunity, while they are redeveloping their main space to do that. But I mean each of the Cottesloe, Swan, Globe, each have their specific limitations. But I would love to see a space built, very similar to the Globe, but without those limitations – and with a roof.

CC: *Would you like to design for the Globe?*

NO: It's not really a theatre for a designer I don't think. It's a theatre for the actor. Arguably, depending on what the actor, what the director's interested in, less for the director as well, I mean if the director is interested in working with actors. I think Declan would work jump at working with the...at the Globe. Given the fact that it's open air, it does impose a sort of ethos which is more to do with the rough and tumble of comedy really. I've not seen a tragedy at the Globe, I can imagine it could work but I think it would need, that open-airness, as it were, takes away the sense of concentration that audiences are used to and need I think.

CC: *Have you sat in a variety of different places at the Globe?*

NO: Yeah I think they're all wonderful and from where ever you are it's fantastic.

CC: *In terms of Cheek by Jowl as a company, what were it's original intentions when you started it and are they the same now? Has it evolved?*

NO: I don't think it has evolved in a way, it's intentions really were to work in the way we wanted to work. Or it's first intention was to create work for ourselves which it succeeded in doing. But then I think accidentally it happened to be the sort of work that we wanted to do in a way, if you follow. It was a way of making a job for ourselves. But then we discovered that actually the job we had accidentally created was one we wanted to do. Which was to take theatre around to different spaces and it enabled us to work on these texts, which you can do with the minimum of scenery and just a few props and costumes. So the two, it was an accidental collision. But I think it still does that, it provides us with a job and also working on texts that we want to do. And now it's developed in such a way that we can take it abroad a lot, which gives it another exciting dimension.

CC: *Are you in danger at all of suffering from your own success? Suddenly having to work in bigger spaces with more money or do you think it still works if you expand your vision to a larger you know, production endeavour, as it were?*

NO: Well recent experiments make us a bit wary of moving into a bigger scale because I think theatre, and I think people are beginning to realise that the key to a successful theatre is the space. And to impose these huge auditoria on an actor is actually a disaster. And actors were never meant to be able to do that. To say, to talk back to some golden age, when there were big actors who could fill these

spaces, I simply don't believe it. And if they did, they weren't acting very well, they were just standing and talking loudly to the back row. The great theatres have always been actor sized, if you like, the Globe was actor sized. It may have seated, may have crammed in three thousand, but that's the size it was, which was great for an actor. So and no, actually experiments with bigger theatres have not really proved very rewarding. So that actually we are coming back now to our roots and we're reviving Cheek by Jowl with a production of Othello, which will go into rehearsal at Christmas, next year, Christmas 2003.

CC: *I mean you are unusual as a company in that you're, apart from the National Theatre, the only one company that has been invited onto the RSC stage to stage Shakespeare. Is that not true?*

NO: That is true, and as soon as they learned that we'd been booked for a winter season, for the visitor's season at the RSC, I think they tried to cancel it because, that is true. Twelfth Night, that was the first Shakespeare they had played on the Swan stage. But I don't think they realised they were doing that at the time. And I don't think they've played much Shakespeare there since. Lear is another case in point actually on the Swan stage.

CC: *And do you think it works well? Shakespeare on that stage?*

NO: Yes. Yes, it's wonderful

CC: *What about the other spaces, I mean, predominantly you've worked in the Donmar and the Lyric Hammersmith, is that correct?*

NO: Yes, I mean, the Donmar is again a lovely space, but working at the Lyric Hammersmith and working at the Donmar and Riverside Studios, I'm afraid shows, throws into relief, what is a dearth of venues that touring or outside or foreign theatre companies can come to. And that's something that London badly needs, is a space, a proper space that visiting companies can use. And the Lyric Hammersmith is fine but it's in Hammersmith. And Riverside is in Hammersmith as well which is terrible for audiences to get to. The Donmar's too small economically. No London desperately needs, and someone should open it, a proper touring space – and it would be hugely rewarding because we would see many of the world class companies who, at the moment, will for example come to the Barbican. But as we know the Barbican is death as a space.

CC: *Yes, yeah. The last thing I wanted to shift on to was asking you about how you think that, well theatre design has changed over the period that you've been designing? Whether or not that has a bearing on your own work? Do you think that theatre design has changed? I mean we are looking over a whole forty year period. But in the period that you've been designing or just before?*

NO: I think, it's not so much design has changed, because obviously it's very very hard to say without perspective how or if that has happened. But I think designing has come into, designing has come into recognition if you like, as an element. And designers are recognised as important, as an important factor within the process. And in a sense, actually that's true of directors as almost during the same period. Because there was a time when there wasn't such a thing as a theatre director and there wasn't such a thing as a theatre designer. Both have, really in the period you are talking about, both those people have been realised as, as it were, important parts of the process. But how that, how it's changed, it's difficult to say. I think it's possible to sort of notice trends, but the actual, how it, but I think one could say no more than that.

CC: *Do you think that audiences have changes? Do you think that there's been a greater understanding of, or even a greater visual literacy in audiences? Are they more sophisticated than they have been in the past?*

NO: I think that's really hard to say too. I think, I think probably they're more visually turned on, if you like by, because we have so much visual images coming at us all the time, from all sorts of other sources, that the visual has become more important. And that may be why designers have become more recognised as sort of, individuals. So I think probably yes, the visual has become more important in theatre than it was.

CC: *What about your own approach? Has it changed over the period that you've been working? Do you react differently to plays than you did when you started?*

NO: I really don't know. I can't answer that. [laughs] I can't answer that.

CC: *Do you feel that audiences react differently to Shakespeare? Has there been a shift in the attitudes of audiences in the period that you've been working?*

NO: I don't think I can answer that question either I'm afraid. [laughs]

CC: *I guess what I'm thinking about is, you know in terms of, I think that, particularly in Britain there's been a great deal of reverence. Certainly at the beginning of the period I'm talking about, that there a certain types of audience that went to Shakespeare, and certain types of audiences that didn't go to Shakespeare. One of the things I've been remarking is the National Sound Archive, they often have a clip of, at the beginning before the performance starts, they have live performances recorded, you can hear the audience and you can tell that the demographic has changed quite dramatically. What sort of audiences come to your performances? Who does Cheek by Jowl attract?*

NO: I think, I don't know, but I think, what we have is a sort of core audience who are, hopefully passionate about theatre, and passionate about Cheek by Jowl and will come and see our work wherever. I suspect that's not huge, I think we are talking about three or four thousand people. I think we are talking about, if Cheek by Jowl come to the West End, with a successful production, I think we can safely fill a West End theatre for four weeks. I think, I think anything more than that is risky. They say that there is an audience in London of, to fill the Olivier theatre for about forty performances. That's what they say, you haven't heard this? Which is about forty thousand people. Now that's not many, and I suspect in terms of demographic changes, I suspect, I'm afraid that there hasn't been much, it's just that people talk slightly differently than they did. Their accent is slightly different than it was forty years ago. I'm afraid to say that theatre is still, I hesitate to say elitist, but I'm afraid that's true. It is an elitist activity. There was a survey recently, done I think by the Labour party, which said that theatre was institutionally racist. I don't think that's true at all. I think because there's no money in theatre, that the people who work in theatre have become stage struck probably at a young age at school like myself, and are prepared to work because they love it for not a great deal of money. And so that on the whole, they tend to be white, middle class people and the people who go to the theatre are also the people who are stage struck and they tend to be I'm afraid, white middle class people. Hopefully that can change, whether it's changed in forty years I don't know.

CC: *Is that the audience you want to speak to?*

NO: No we'd like to speak to the broadest possible audience. We'd like to speak to, and I think we do speak to, young people. And I'm sure the same number of young people are becoming stage struck in their turn. At school or whatever, they are discovering, because access, because there is access to drama at school. Probably the same, I mean I think, kind of, you are either going to become stage struck or know like that or you're not. And if you're not you are don't really much want to go to the theatre. But if you are, you just want to spend all your time in the theatre. You want to be either going to the theatre or you want to be contributing to it, be acting or doing something. And I don't know if it's genetic or what but probably the same proportion of people in the country are becoming stage struck as ever happened. And whether that will change or not I don't know.

CC: *And I mean when you tour do you go to, to you feel that you're getting to a variety of different communities? Well, demographically, as well as physically?*

NO: Yes, I think so and because when we tour, also we go for a short period of time, so it's quite, you know, the audience that wants to come and see us will have to come it that week. And again, a lot of work has been done in taking theatre to funny places by the Arts Council over the last forty or fifty years in funding theatres in small towns and whatever. And in our early days when we were very small we used to go a lot of small places for one night stands. And really did get access to places where, what's that Heineken advert? I can't remember the jingle. We did really get access to other places. But that was, I think that was probably because we were producing a good product, if you like. But also because the funding process allowed us to go to these places. There was a two pronged attack, if you like.

CC: *Do you think that Shakespeare is a sort of positive productive element in the theatre in Britain or is it actually a sort of unfortunate legacy, something that you have to deal with every time you stage it? Your own production of Shakespeare or any other play. What is the role of Shakespeare in the British Theatre do you think?*

NO: Can you rephrase that? I'm not quite sure. Do you mean that Shakespeare might be a burden?

CC: *If Britain didn't have a Shakespeare would theatre in Britain have developed differently? Is it something that has directed theatre in this country in a particular way? I mean why do you stage Shakespeare?*

NO: That's a different question.

CC: *It is a different question, but I thought it might lead from one to the next.*

NO: We do Shakespeare because he is, because they are fantastic plays, they are really great plays and they reward continual examination and work and because they are sort of, deeply human, which is why they are great plays. They are realisable all the time in a human and a live way. And that's what we try and do. To answer the question whether Shakespeare has somehow changed the way theatre is in this country. I think, I think one thing that Shakespeare has done is make the actor central. Unfortunately it has become a bit corrupt now because the actor is only really central in this country if he's a celebrity and a success and a financial, and be pointed at to be very rich, if you like. But theatre

in this country is actor-centric. it's not director-centric and it's not designer-centric. The centre is the actor – people go and see the actor in a Shakespeare. Now whether that comes out of having Shakespeare as our, sort of national playwright, I don't know. It is, that is also true I have to say of , in other theatre cultures like Russia. The actors are the centre of the art, having said that the directors are also worshiped. So there is a sort of dual thing in Russia I think. Directors and actors. In Germany it is simply the directors. Now maybe that's because Germany has no playwright of equivalent stature of Shakespeare, I don't know. I can't answer that question. But there may be something in it.

CC: *Well I guess the other part of it is, is it text centred as well? I mean the words...*

NO: Yes, it must be, that must be true. It is text-centric, yes.

CC: *And I guess the other part of the question is about whether you run into particular expectations by choosing to do Shakespeare, from the critics, from audiences?*

NO: That depends on the critic, that depends on the audience, that depends on the critic. I mean, we played once in Peshawa and we were playing Midsummer Night's Dream, and some tribesmen had come to see the performance, from hundreds of miles. They had travelled hundreds of miles to come and see our Midsummer Night's Dream in 1984. And we asked them why they adored Shakespeare, because they loved Shakespeare. They had a huge Shakespeare production every year, with hundreds of costumes and hundreds of characters. And they said for two reasons – one, the eternal truths and two the pretty costumes.

CC: *Well, that in a way leads on to my sort of last question which is do you think that there is any, do you think it is possible to do justice to your work through the type of archive that we are trying to produce? Can you recreate even in, you know, a very light way the effect of what happens on stage?*

NO: The answer is no, I don't think you can. I applaud you for trying and I think it's useful, a very useful thing to have. But I don't think you can, there is no substitute for the experience of the live performance. And that's why people have to go to the theatre to experience it. And it's difficult to get people to the theatre, but they have to experience it.

CC: *Is there anything else that I haven't mentioned that you would like to raise? About theatre design? training? Shakespeare?*

NO: I don't think so.

CC: *In that case, thank you very much.*

NO: Thank you.

RECORDING ENDS