

The Rehearsal Process of Playwright/Director Anthony Neilson

A Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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July 2017

Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to thank my supervisors, Professor Graham Saunders and Professor Lib Taylor, for the vital intellectual guidance they provided, the many incredibly useful suggestions they made and their general support throughout the years spent writing this thesis. I am also grateful to all members of staff at the Department of Film, Theatre & Television at the University of Reading, particularly Professor John Gibbs and Professor Anna McMullan, for their time and help in the early stages of my study. In addition, a massive thank you to chief technician Chris Bacon for his patience with my somewhat basic grasp of technology and all the technical assistance he afforded me over the years.

I would also like to thank Dr. Alison Thorne, who has recently retired from teaching Shakespeare at the University of Strathclyde, for her encouragement and guidance. The time Alison took to show me what I was doing well in my academic writing was a real turning point for me during my undergraduate degree and without it, I doubt I would have academically developed to the level required for postgraduate study. Professor Elaine Aston took the time to help me develop my initial thesis proposal, and for that I am very grateful.

I also owe the AHRC my gratitude, because without the funding they awarded me I would have been unable to undertake this PhD research.

I am would also like to thank my stepfather William Morton for his support during my undergraduate degree. I am deeply grateful to my parents, Maria Morton and Alex Harkins, for all the things they have done to help me during my studies. I would like to give a huge thank you to my partner Simone for 'everything', particularly the good grace, understanding and tolerance with which she endured my numerous difficult moments. Finally, thank you to my little cat Fonzie for his comforting and calming nocturnal companionship during my many very late or sleepless nights.

Abstract

This thesis seeks to make a contribution to the emerging field of Rehearsal Studies. It is an analytical account of the rehearsal process of playwright and director Anthony Neilson, whose ‘noted process’ has been attracting critical attention. He begins his rehearsals with no script, and the actors are involved in a complex devising process. The thesis pays particular attention to the perspective of the actor within this collaborative environment. The thesis will focus on the rehearsals of one specific production at the Royal Court Theatre in London, Neilson’s 2013 play *Narrative*. This thesis utilises an unusual methodological approach, in that its findings have been reached via close analysis of filmed footage of the *Narrative* rehearsals, as well as interviews with the practitioners involved in the production, in addition to other actors who have collaborated with Neilson in the past.

This thesis follows a tripartite structure which aims to uncover the particular properties of Neilson’s rehearsal methodology and the manner in which his approach critically engages with the issue of authorship, improvisation and the director-actor relationship. It also seeks to address issues such as how the investigation of rehearsals can contribute to our understanding of theatre practice. The thesis also demonstrates how research based on the analysis of filmed footage can facilitate a more in-depth enquiry of the subtextual components that are often of fundamental importance to rehearsals. In addition, the thesis will show how the often marginalised perspective of the actor has a productive and illuminating contribution to make to the understanding of Neilson’s process specifically, and the field of Rehearsal Studies more broadly.

Declaration of Original Authorship

I confirm that this is my own work and the use of all material from other sources has been properly and fully acknowledged. A substantial portion of the material in Chapter 1 on Neilson's authorial process was published in July 2017 under the title 'In Good Company: The Authorial Process of Anthony Neilson' in Trish Reid's, *The Theatre of Anthony Neilson* (London: Bloomsbury Methuen, 2017).

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Thesis Introduction

In the introduction to their edited collection *Making Contemporary Theatre: International Rehearsal Processes* (2010), Jen Harvie and Andy Lavender point out that ‘there is relatively little published about contemporary *processes of making theatre*’ mainly because it is extremely rare ‘to learn first-hand in detail about other maker’s methods’ (2010: 1-2; emphasis in original). One of the reasons for the lack of documented accounts of what happens in the preparation for performance is ‘insider access to contemporary rehearsal practices’ denied, ‘because many practitioners carefully guard admission to their rehearsals, generally to help their companies feel safe to experiment rather than to protect particular trade secrets’ (Harvie and Lavender, 2010: 1). Sarah Caroline Segal echoes this sentiment concerning the difficulty in gaining access to rehearsals in her doctoral thesis *The Role of the Writer and Authorship in New Collaborative Performance-Making in the United Kingdom 2001-10*, where she writes:

One of the central methodological issues in researching this thesis was the lack of access to live observation of rehearsals and development workshops [...]. At the beginning of this investigation, it seemed ideal to rely on observations of the workshops, research and development processes and rehearsals of each company, but many collaborative companies are wary of (or sometimes loath to) allow outsiders to observe their working process, some being concerned with the secrecy of the process itself while others are concerned with the disruption of the intimacy and privacy that a closed rehearsal or workshop can afford. (2013: 37-8)

Other scholars have made similar comments, including Helen Manful, who writes that ‘none of the directors [discussed in her book] like to have visitors in their rehearsal rooms. They consider it to be a very private time but also a time when actors are vulnerable and emotionally fragile.’ (1999: 61) Sigal, Harvie and Lavender, and Manful’s words highlight how unusual it is to be afforded access to rehearsals, as well as recognise the paucity of research published on the rehearsal processes of contemporary theatre companies and

dramatists. Not only are accounts of rehearsal processes rare, theatre director Deborah Warner has stated that ‘rehearsals are complex and organic processes which defy definition as much as they resist formal or intellectual structure’ (in Giannachi and Luckhurst, 1999: 137). Roger Dean and Helen Smith also draw attention to the fact that any ‘analysis of the creative *process* has tended to be undervalued in criticism and theory. [...] [T]he process-product interchanges have been neglected by critics.’ (1997: 29) As Alison Oddey argues, what this ‘lack of analysis on how work is realised both artistically and aesthetically reveals is the necessity to examine the process and aesthetic concerns of making theatre.’ (1996: 163)

Daniel Johnston states that “[r]ehearsal studies” is an emerging discipline still in its infancy’, and for him the word rehearsal itself is an umbrella term which encompasses different approaches to the use of the preparation period preceding a theatrical performance (2011: 213). These approaches include perhaps the most dominant rehearsal system based on the use of an existing play text (text-centred theatre), and one that uses devising as the principal methodology in order to generate the text, or adapt and/or create materials to make up the performance (devised theatre). Out of these different approaches to rehearsals, much more critical attention has been paid to devising, particularly in edited collections such as Harvie and Lavender’s *Making Contemporary Theatre: International Rehearsal Processes* (2010) and Alex Mermikides and Jackie Smart’s *Devising in Process* (2010). Both collections are analytically detailed anthologies of case studies on the process employed by respective devising companies to create their work, such as Theatre de Complicite (hereafter Complicite), Elevator Repair Service, People Show and Shunt. There are also books by practitioners, including Tim Etchells’ *Certain Fragments: Contemporary Performance and Forced Entertainment* (1999), as well as texts authored by scholars, such as Alison Oddey’s *Devising Theatre: A Practical and Theoretical Guide* (1994) and Deirdre Heddon and Jane Milling’s *Devising Performance* (2006). The latter two discuss devising as an approach to

crafting a performance and examine many of the same devising companies, including Open Theatre, Forced Entertainment and Goat Island. *Devising Theatre* also presents a guide for practitioners to employ when devising; while *Devising Performance* charts the history of devised theatre and encourages the reader to consider various approaches to devising and reflect on the effects of the use of these practices in the new millennium.

Heddon and Milling define devising as ‘a mode of work in which no script – neither written play-text nor performance-score – exists prior to the work’s creation by the company’ (2006: 3). In existing accounts of rehearsals devising has been described as ‘a challenge to the authority of the playwright and the director’ and as ‘a process that empowers performers to give creative input’ (Mermikides and Smart, 2010: 12 and 16). However, there are also devising companies who do not privilege the actor and their creativity, such as New York based The Builders Association, whose 2005 show *Super Vision* Harvie and Lavender note, ‘inverted conventional theatrical production processes, prioritising the creation of a media-saturated scenography over the creation of character.’ (2010: 6) One of the contributors to Harvie and Lavender’s collection, Sarah Jane Bailes has noted that devised theatre can be ‘driven and shaped by many things besides written text, such as music, objects sound or movement’ (2010: 85). It can also explore ‘the theatricality inherent in a range of other media – television and film especially, but also pictures, texts [...] and everyday behaviours’ (Bailes, 2010: 88).

In relation to non-devising contexts the critical material available on rehearsals is much more scarce, with most accounts being autobiographical in nature and often, as Gay McAuley notes, written by directors themselves:

such as Peter Brook, Max Stafford-Clark and John Dexter [who] have either published casebooks or diary accounts of their work on a particular production or have authorised other writers to do so. In these accounts it is, understandably, the

director that is foregrounded, and this is also the case in the studies by academics that are beginning to appear. (1998: 75)

In *Taking Stock: The Theatre of Max Stafford-Clark* (2007), editor Philip Roberts and Stafford-Clark,

collated a series of the director's journal entries and interviews about [Stafford-Clark's] career and the evolution of the *Joint Stock* and *Out of Joint* theatre companies. Stafford-Clark's memoirs and careful notes on workshops, rehearsals, performances and critical receptions are organized into case studies on different productions. Although the detailed rehearsal accounts, the reactions, the relationships, the exercises and the source material used are particularly useful (as it is unusual to find such detailed accounts of this nature), *Taking Stock* is ultimately a kind of memoir, so company members' perspectives are subjected to the director's. (Sigal, 2013: 33-4)

There are other accounts of the rehearsal processes of text-based theatre productions in circulation. These include, Susan Letzler Cole's *Directors in Rehearsal: A Hidden World* (1992), which is one of the earliest written accounts of rehearsal processes.¹ *Directors in Rehearsal* documents the work of American directors such as Elinor Renfield, Emily Mann and Robert Wilson. Cole documents the approaches of the directors she witnesses and gives details of when the relationship between process and end result becomes problematic, as well as the manner in which the particular directorial processes vary. However, it is Gay McAuley's *Not Magic but Work: An Ethnographic Account of a Rehearsal Process* (2012), which is widely considered to be the seminal text in Rehearsal Studies to date.

The reason for McAuley's position in the field concerns issues of methodology: the scholars in Harvie and Lavender's and Mermikides and Smart's collections, Oddey, Heddon and Milling, as well as Letzler Cole were all present for at least some of the rehearsals which they examine, took notes as well as conducted interviews with members of the company in question and (in the case of Mermikides and Smart) undertook archival research. As a result,

¹ Not every production in *Directors in Rehearsal* is text-centred, at times the work of the directors is more avant-garde, such as the Wooster Group's Elizabeth LeCompte's *Frank Dell's The Temptation of Saint Anthony* (1989).

their analyses produce valid and useful arguments concerning rehearsal processes. Moreover, Etchells and Stafford-Clark's publications provide valuable insights into and via the director's perspective. However, what sets McAuley's work apart is the attention she pays to the minutiae of the rehearsals she examines, which she analyses by drawing on ethnographic and anthropological theory, which I will explore in more detail in my forthcoming discussion of my own methodological approach. McAuley observed and documented the six-week rehearsal period and six-week run of Company B's production of Michael Gow's play *Toy Symphony*, directed by Neil Armfield, at the Belvoir Street Theatre in Sydney in 2007.

Drawing especially on Clifford Geertz's concept of 'thick description' (1973: 3-30), *Not Magic but Work* is not, as D. Ohlandt points out,

a primer on rehearsal ethnography [...]. It is also not a big-picture survey of rehearsal or even a case study used to support broad assertions of how rehearsal works or how theatre is made; it is, rather, a study of rehearsal as a culturally embedded and frequently ritualized set of social interactions by which meaning is negotiated and significance is assigned. (2015: 182)

While Ohlandt is right in her assertion that *Not Magic but Work* is not intended to support assertions about rehearsals, McAuley's work does nevertheless provide broad insights into processes of making theatre that are of interest and relevance beyond her immediate object of study, the *Toy Symphony* rehearsals. Most significant perhaps, is her focus on detail, influenced by semiotics, and her insistence that 'nothing that happens during the rehearsals can be bracketed out as not relevant to the production process that is occurring' (McAuley, 2012: 213). She draws attention to the significance of subtext that inevitably accompanies rehearsals and the social culture within which rehearsals take place, which profoundly shape them, noting that:

There are many features of the *Toy Symphony* rehearsals that might be considered somewhat peripheral to the task of producing the show, but seen in the light of interaction ritual theory, are utterly germane to the social process of which the

production is part (2012: 10).

This in turn allows McAuley to identify a number of pertinent critical issues, such as her contention that the ‘[p]laywright and director are not the only authorial forces in the theatre’ (2012: 172). Representing the most comprehensive published academic analysis to date of the rehearsals of a text-based theatre production, *Not Magic but Work* and McAuley’s work more broadly are the single most significant point of scholarly reference on which my PhD draws and seeks to build.

Anthony Neilson: An Overview

Anthony Neilson is a Scottish dramatist who has written ‘for radio, television and film, as well as theatre’ (Sierz, 2001: 86),² with a canon of work that now spans close to three decades. Neilson’s work has been categorised by theatre scholar Ian Brown as being most ‘often associated with a new internationalist movement in contemporary theatre, the so-called “in-yer-face school”’ (Brown, 2007: 322) and Trish Reid who notes that ‘Neilson is regularly cited as the progenitor of this movement’ (2007: 490). Neilson is also a dramatist of growing international significance whose ‘plays are performed all over the world, though usually to small houses that cater to adventurous theatregoers.’ (Ng, 2009). For example, the first production of *Realism* (2006) was performed by the National Theatre of Scotland; *The Wonderful World of Dissocia* (2004) was put on by the Sydney Theatre Company in 2009; Jean-Luc Moreau’s *Les Menteurs* (2013) was the French adaptation of Neilson’s play *The Lying Kind* (2002); and a production of *Stitching* (2002) opened in March 2009 at the Lillian Theater in Hollywood.³

² See Appendix 1 for full details of Neilson’s theatrical work.

³ Only a month earlier Unifaun Theatre Company’s production of *Stitching* was banned by the Maltese government, who cited ‘blasphemy, sexual content and “obscene contempt for the victims of Auschwitz”’ as the reasons for this’ (Ng, 2009).

Neilson's work has the reputation for being an 'extreme kind of theatre' (Sierz, 2001: 67) which is 'haunted by recurring images of sex and violence.' (Sierz, 2001: 86) This controversial content has meant that his plays have often received widely different reactions by reviewers, as typified by the following responses to Neilson's second published play *Penetrator* when it was performed at The Royal Court in 1994. *The Observer's* theatre critic Michael Coveney described the play as a 'truly extraordinary piece of relentless realism' (1994: 39) and for *the Mail on Sunday's* Louise Doughty, 'the explosion of violence towards the end is one of the most nail-biting scenes I have ever watched in theatre.' (1994: 39) However, for *Theatre Record's* editor Ian Herbert the subject matter of the play 'is so extreme, its horrors so relentlessly described that I actually found myself wondering whether it should have been put on at all.' (cited in Sierz, 2001: 76) Nonetheless, Reid states:

it may seem something of a stretch to attempt to impose a meaningful pattern on Neilson's work, for the preoccupations that have driven him in his more recent work, particularly *Edward Gant's Amazing Feats of Loneliness* (2002), *The Wonderful World of Dissocia* and *Realism*, seem more overtly comic, populist and expressionistic in nature than those that underpin his more naturalistic relationship plays like *Penetrator* (1993), *The Censor* (1997) or *Stitching* (2002), which are largely understood by critics as issue based examples of the new brutalism. (2007: 489)

However, it is not just the explicit nature of his early plays that Neilson is recognised for, he is also well-known for his particular rehearsal methodology.

Neilson's directorial/authorial approach is highly unorthodox: he begins rehearsals with no script and writes his plays in collaboration with his actors throughout rehearsals, often right up until the opening night and sometimes beyond. (The introduction to Parts 2 and 3 will discuss the extent to which Neilson's process can be understood within the context of devising.) Neilson's *modus operandi*, or 'process' as it has come to be known, has long been noted by journalists such as Karen Fricker who writes that *Relocated* (2008) 'was created

through Neilson's signature seat-of-your-pants writing process: The company started without a script and built the play through research and workshopping during a four week long rehearsal process' (2008); as well as scholars such as Sierz (2001:67), Reid (2007: 498), and Anthony Frost who comments how 'the plays of Anthony Neilson [...] are sometimes deliberately "unfinished" as they go into rehearsal, because material will be generated in the rehearsal process to complete them' (2007: 212). Whilst Neilson's rehearsal methodology has been previously noted and discussed, what is so far absent in any case study of his work is an in-depth engagement with the working processes that take place in the rehearsal room for productions commonly understood as written and directed by Anthony Neilson. This absence is, of course, not restricted to Neilson's work. As Giannachi and Luckhurst remind us, '[i]t is extremely difficult for anyone to theorize the creative processes pertaining to a particular performance [...] (1999: xv-xvi) More explicitly, Gay McAuley has drawn attention to how

[t]he well-documented difficulties involved in talking about performance in bygone periods are greatly compounded when the question turns to rehearsal for, if public performance is ephemeral and leaves little trace, the private work processes that precede it are even more deeply buried in the past. (2012: 3)

McAuley, Giannachi and Luckhurst are making a case for scholarship that pays more attention to process, not just end result. I would take this argument further and propose that there is a need for more scholarly work that is focused on specific practices and specific areas of practice. In the case of Neilson, to date, no one has been in a position to document his process from an insider perspective or analyse the directorial, performance and authorial techniques that Neilson and his actors employ to move from the rehearsal room to the stage. In doing so, this thesis will engage with the following research questions:

- 1) How can the comprehensive study of rehearsal processes develop critical understanding of contemporary theatre practice?

- 2) What are the specific properties of Anthony Neilson's 'process', and how does his approach to rehearsals critically engage with issues of authorship, improvisation and the director-actor relationship?
- 3) How may paying attention to the actor's perspective productively inform studies of rehearsal in general, and, Neilson's 'process' in particular?

Introducing the *Narrative* Rehearsals

Between March and April 2013 I was granted insider access to Neilson's then new play *Narrative* at the Royal Court Theatre in London. This access enabled me to film much of the *Narrative* rehearsals, and conduct on camera interviews with Neilson, his assistant director Ned Bennett and the actors involved in the production: Zawe Ashton, Imogen Doel, Brian Doherty, Christine Entwisle, Barney Power, Olly Rix and Sophie Ross.⁴ With the exception of Ashton, all the actors had worked with Neilson on at least one previous occasion.⁵ During the course of my research I also conducted follow-up interviews with Power and Entwisle and interviewed five other actors who have collaborated with Neilson over the years; these actors are Selina Boyack, Tam Dean Burn, Alastair Galbraith, Phil McKee and Matthew Pidgeon.⁶ I was granted such insider access because of my past working relationships with Neilson and the other interviewed actors. I am a trained actor (Equity name Cas Harkins), with many years of experience in the profession, encompassing television, film, theatre, radio, and adverts. My theatre work includes leading roles in the original production of Sarah Kane's *Phaedra's Love* (1996), which was directed by Kane herself, as well as Neilson's unpublished play *Hooverbag* (1996),⁷ which was rehearsed in much the

⁴ I will discuss in detail the DVD accompanying this thesis below. For now, see Sequence 1 (0.00-end) for an introduction to the *Narrative* company.

⁵ A Neilsonian company could not be termed an ensemble, in the sense of Brecht's Berliner Ensemble or Forced Entertainment, both of which feature a recurring set of company members. Neilson's productions are 'ensemble-based' in the sense that Neilson has a pool of actors that he prefers to work with. Not every actor works on every show, but in every production some (if not most) of the actors have worked with Neilson on multiple occasions.

⁶ Full details of the Neilson productions the respective interviewees have collaborated on can be seen in Appendix 3.

⁷ *Hooverbag* is a play which is set in dystopian future world, after a global outbreak of Mad Cow Disease (BSE) has spread to humans. The character I played David, a serial killer who thinks he is the reincarnation of an

same manner as *Narrative* was. I will combine this professional training and expertise with scholarly approaches to performance analysis to critique Neilson's work and assess his collaborative approach to rehearsal.

Narrative is Neilson and company's attempt to develop dramatically and structurally a contemporary theatrical form that represents how our employment of the internet and technology is altering our neurological makeup and our perception of narrative. The title, *Narrative*, is Neilson's signpost that this play will offer no finished or orthodox theatrical narratives. Its thematic content addresses issues of how conventional theatre represents dramatic narrative, questioning what a written play text is considered to be. It plays with the idea of a story about stories in a fragmented format that aims to mirror the experience of surfing the internet. These boundaries between stories often break down and at points the narratives overlap. A good example of this occurs near the opening of the show when singularly, or in pairs, the actors enter the performance space and deliver semi-improvised exchanges and monologues that run concurrently. Scenes also flow to and from the inner mindscape of the characters, often with dialogue and exchanges intersecting and interweaving. The play is an intricate maze and deliberately (or perhaps accidentally) foregrounds its own process of creation; a process which is littered with difficulties, paradoxes and inconsistencies.

Interestingly, for Neilson's next show at the Royal Court, *Unreachable* (2016), a series of specifically produced recordings, ostensibly about the play, were released by the theatre. The first, titled *It's Just Going*, is a montage of seemingly random pictures and video clips of objects such as trees, a skull, animals, a crucifix and algebraic diagrams. The video is accompanied by of voiceover of Neilson and, at several points, lead actor Matt Smith reciting

Amerindian shaman, believes the disease is the revenge of his ancestral spirits for the white man's almost complete extermination of the buffalo in the previous century.

a monologue about ‘light’ from the play.⁸ The second, titled *The Light Disappears*, is a ironic music clip featuring actor Jonjo O’Neil singing to camera with the rest of the company members behaving increasingly bizarrely behind him.⁹ However, it is the third video, titled *The Pursuit*, that is most noteworthy.¹⁰ This roughly five minute sequence was shot in the Jerwood Theatre and features Neilson, with three hours to go before the show opens that evening for the first preview, directing several of the actors in a scene from *Unreachable*, which according to captions on screen, has been re-written by Neilson only an hour earlier.

The Pursuit is similar to my material in that it is rehearsal footage of a Neilson play at The Royal Court. However, in many respects, it is significantly different from my own rehearsal footage. *The Pursuit* is located only in the theatre auditorium, unlike my own footage which is also located in a somewhat dilapidated rehearsal space near the stage door of the Royal Court. All the shots in *The Pursuit* seem to have been adroitly framed, carefully edited and the sound quality is excellent, particularly when an onstage Neilson is shot from the auditorium facing upstage and very softly giving actor Matt Smith the character note that ‘the defining thing is that he [his character Maxim] has a lot of pain.’ These high quality production values are not as apparent in my footage of the *Narrative* rehearsals, particularly the sound, which is at times very faint due to my static camera positioning and the lack of extra microphones around the rehearsal space.¹¹ In *The Pursuit*, Neilson is depicted directing in a way that one would typically expect from a director: he gives specific notes to the actors from the auditorium; he discusses characterisation and works on specific moments in the play, all in a manner that is calm, relaxed and supportive. There is a distinct sense of energy and focus, with everyone appearing quite upbeat and seemingly enjoying themselves. This

⁸ *It’s Just Going* can be viewed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xS9OBlrr8rg&t=126s>

⁹ *The Light Disappear* can be viewed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d-JSWeGV-I0>

¹⁰ *The Pursuit* can be viewed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NHxWVwgJE7A>

¹¹ When listening to the *Narrative* footage I would advise that the listener uses earphones in order to compensate for the poor sound quality at points.

somewhat idealised approach to directing, energy and focus is often not as visible in many of the sequences of my rehearsal footage; nor is there a positive and cheerful atmosphere noticeable in the final hours before the Press Night of *Narrative* when the actors are given a new scene to perform that evening, as my analysis in Chapter 6 will show. *The Pursuit* also does not fully contextualise its contents. Instead, it presents stand-alone moments that are carefully selected and edited in order to provide a brief, enjoyable ‘behind-the-scenes’ insight into the *Unreachable* rehearsals. What is distinctly absent are the inertia and grind that are often the hallmarks of Neilson’s rehearsals, as well as the difficulties the actors encounter.

Of course, *The Pursuit* is located within a promotional framework. This is most explicit in the captions (reminiscent of a cinema trailer) near the end of the footage which are reviews of *Unreachable*, including *WhatsOnStage*’s assessment that the play is ‘a meta-critique of the process of creation itself’. Most of the other captions in *The Pursuit* reiterate what is already in the public domain about Neilson’s process. They do not probe his rehearsal methodology, and several of them are Neilson’s own words, such as ‘the actors have a huge impact but more by way of who they are – as performers and people – than in terms of what they create’. What the existence and focus of *The Pursuit* does do is reflect the interest in Neilson’s rehearsal process, as well as the need for rigorous scholarly engagement with it.

Methodology

My time with Neilson and company working on *Narrative* commenced on 13 March 2013, during the third week of rehearsals, and finished on Press Night (10 April). I joined rehearsals at this point because Neilson had understandable concerns that my presence filming proceedings would be inhibitive for the actors during the first two weeks of rehearsal, which began on Monday 25 February 2013. Most of the actors had not worked with each other before this point, although all but one had worked with Neilson, so Neilson wanted to use the

first two weeks to bind the company together by a process of discussion and improvisation. Much of this work would be very private, and it was not appropriate that these debates and improvisations should be filmed.¹² I filmed two or three days per week and three days of the four-day technical week, right up to the one-hour call before the first preview on Friday 5 April 2013, in addition to the aforementioned afternoon rehearsals before Press Night. It is Royal Court policy that cameras are not allowed into the auditorium during shows, so I was unable to capture any of the actual performance on film. In fact, the first preview was the first time that the play was run in its entirety. What I was able to capture was extensive coverage of Neilson's directorial/authorial process and the collaborative and creative work of all those involved in the crafting of the play, a process that will be very different from the rehearsals of any subsequent revival of the show.

By filming these rehearsals my objective was to use the footage and interview material acquired to archive, analyse and assess the collaborative rehearsal methodology that Neilson employs to compose his performance texts, paying particular attention to the actors in order to analyse their 'role' and level of impact on proceedings. My critique is not concerned with analysing and commenting on the filmed footage as a work of art in its own right. Instead, sections of the footage have been edited into sequences and transferred on to a DVD that accompanies this thesis. The DVD is what I will term an 'audio-visual script' which facilitates the representation of moments of rehearsal for interpretative analysis. This establishes the footage as the tangible primary source of analysis because, as suggested by Angela Piccini and Caroline Rye, 'not only do camera-based images appear to capture events, they also offer the promise of allowing a return to events to repeat them without difference'

¹² Actor Barney Power discusses two of these preliminary conversations and improvisations in his first interview with me, and gives reasons why he thought that the timing of me entering and filming rehearsals was correct. Full transcripts of Power's and all the other interviewees testimony can be found in Appendix 2.

(2009: 35). Thus, I will attain ‘a research outcome that can be both textually *summarized* and visually represented’ (Piccini and Rye, 2009: 39; emphasis in original).

Stephen Di Benedetto highlights how ‘we suffer from an inability to document performance in a comprehensive way’ and points out that the very ‘act of preservation is an impure process [which] by its nature is incomplete’ (2010: 202). Of course, my documentation of Neilson’s process could never be complete, even if I filmed every day of rehearsals. Even though I was not present every day, I still have close to 100 hours of rehearsal footage and interview material. However, my analysis is not based on ‘the mediation of a third party that is removed from the creation process and from primary experience’ (Benedetto, 2010: 202). Although, for the most part, I was not part of the actual creative process, I was nevertheless extensively present, so not divorced from the primary experience. Thus, my findings are not relegated to third party mediation; they are perhaps more aptly termed a first-hand interpretative analysis of Neilson’s particular authorial, directing and devising methodologies. With reference to Matthew Reason it is also worth emphasising that it ‘is not within the scope or ambition of this investigation to reopen long-running debates as to the relationship between the stage and the screen, or between the live and the non-live’ (2006: 74).

In his article in *New Theatre Quarterly* Marco Marinis discusses the use of audio visual recordings in theatre, relating how:

It is important to document not only the *finished product* but also and above all the theatrical *process*. [...] One of the most widespread and serious limitations of existing theatrical recordings [...] concerns precisely the fact that these, on the whole, cover only the performance – the finished article – and hardly ever provide information about what *went before* and *led towards* that product, the whole creative-productive process which has led up to it, including not only rehearsals, but [...] the work of the actors in training and improvisation. (1985: 384; emphasis in original)

Marinis' comments echo a similar sentiment made by Denis Bablet in the second instalment of Annabelle Melzer's article on the documentation of performance in video and film in *New Theatre Quarterly*. Bablet states that:

the life of the theatre takes place elsewhere than just on the stage, [it occurs] in the exchanges between all those who participate in the creation of the performance, it is in the daily life of the director, the actor, the designer etc. [...] There rests which one should know and make known if one wants to penetrate and present the theatre of a given society, during a given period, in a given place. This is the work least done. Showing the building of the performance, so as to make it comprehensible. (1995: 263)

The contents of the audio-visual script that I will present are exactly what Marinis refers to in the above citation, namely the 'theatrical *process* [that] *went before and led towards*' the performance on Neilson's *Narrative*. Baz Kershaw poses an important question concerning the documentation of live events: 'How might valid knowledge claims emerge through the ephemerality of performance events?' (2008: 26) I would contend that one way in which 'valid knowledge claims' can be made is by using audio-visual material of the event in question as the object of analysis. In this, my approach differs from the approach of many other academic accounts of a major contemporary playwright or theatre company's rehearsal process. My findings provide an extra layer of evidence and texture since they are not based solely on eyewitness testimony of rehearsals and notes composed during and after the event, or affected by a deterioration of memory which impacts on the scope and quality of retained knowledge. These difficulties are ones that I actually encountered when trying to decipher notes I made during the filming of *Narrative*'s rehearsals. At times, not only was it difficult to recall what I was referring to when reading the notes back, but the actual form of the notes was somewhat haphazard due to the fact that I was trying to do four things at once: operate the camera, formulate my ideas and physically perform the act of writing, whilst watching events in the rehearsal room.

Instead of eyewitness testimony and rehearsal notes, I have audio-visual substantiation that allows me to partially compensate for the loss of the memory of the event and use as the foundation for my analysis. I have found that this type of evidence is particularly effective in facilitating a greater level of scrutiny of subtextual proceedings, meaning that there is often much more going on in the rehearsals than appears on the surface, and studying the footage allows for a deeper probing of this. In addition, the footage will allow the viewers to engage in their own critical observations. Of course, there are limitations in using what has been captured by the camera as the object of analysis, among them that the camera represents a single point of view, as well as the fact that it cannot switch between locations as quickly as the eye can, and it cannot capture everything that is transpiring in the rehearsal room in one comprehensive shot. I would argue that these limitations are to an extent compensated for, because the camera has the advantage of providing a record of events which can be revisited in order to glean as much detail as is possible for analysis. In effect, the footage acts, to borrow from Piccini, ‘as a bridge, allowing trouble-free travel between one world and the next.’ (2009: 36)

Nonetheless, there are significant impediments to offering a critical methodology for Neilson’s rehearsal process. As Paul Allain comments:

Good documentation or even accounts of rehearsals are rare, in part because they are a time for private exploration. Observers or outsiders might unsettle the atmosphere, making actors self-conscious. But the lack of documentation also indicates the difficulty about an often serendipitous process where methods and systems may be inappropriate [...]. Rehearsal methods are as varied as the possibilities of performance they precede. (2006: 200)

Allain’s statement relates specifically to the lack of written accounts of theatrical rehearsal processes and the difficulties of applying pre-existing academic models to an analysis of any creative event. In the case of my filmic encounter with Neilson’s rehearsals, this problem is

further exacerbated by the dearth, as opposed to the rarity, of comparable accounts which use filmed footage as the principal method of their analysis. The material that I present on the accompanying DVD is what I shall term as ‘quasi-documentary’; it is raw footage that has been roughly edited into a series of sequences for the purposes of analysis, and is the evidence from which my arguments are developed. Stella Bruzzi points out that, ‘raw material is incapable of drawing out or articulating the truths, motives or underlying causes it both contains and implies, so it falls to the writer to extract this general framework’ (2006: 13). Bruzzi’s point is pertinent to my argument because this is one of the main difficulties encountered in constructing an argument via raw footage; namely, that the material contains a pool of information that is not necessarily discernible from a casual, or otherwise, viewing. In order to identify relevant moments from the material, analyse these, and articulate the analysis in written form, it is important to have an understanding of academic approaches to the analysis of the creative event, as well as it being helpful to have relevant professional experience of and insight into what transpires during the rehearsals of a play. I will explore the significance of my practitioner status shortly.

As I have already noted the footage that I have assembled draws on documentary discourses, therefore, existing scholarship on documentary is appropriate as a critical framework from which to explore the rehearsal material. In documentary theory there are a multitude of categorised modes of engagement through which the filmmaker reacts with the filmed event.¹³ However, as Bill Nichols has observed, increasingly modes ‘tend to be combined and altered within individual films’ (Nichols, 1991: 33). In order to function synergistically, a combination of modes is observable in the *Narrative* rehearsal sequences:

¹³ For a detailed discussion of these modes, see Nichols (1994: 95).

observational, interactive, and to a lesser extent, participatory.¹⁴ As John Corner makes us aware, the observational mode:

is the mode of minimal directorial intervention in respect of pro-filmic events. It is the mode of 'fly on the wall' [...] It is an indirect mode, placing the viewer in the position of vicarious witness to ongoing events and often requiring of them a high level of interpretive work in converting the particularity of what is seen and heard into 'significance'. (1996: 28)¹⁵

Keith Beattie outlines how 'the interactive mode stresses dialogue and the verbal testimony of subjects' (2004: 84), and furthermore this mode emphasises the use of 'images that demonstrate the validity, or possibly, the doubtfulness of what witnesses say' (Nichols, 1991: 44). The defining characteristics of both these modes are readily recognisable in the subsequent sections of my footage that will be offered for commentary, in particular: how I am witness to events in the rehearsal room; how I adopt a stance of 'minimal directorial intervention'; how the interview testimony complements and comments on the filmed footage; as well as how my interpretation was necessary in converting the footage into the research object on which my analysis is based.

As my examination of Neilson's rehearsal methodology and the role of the actor within it is firmly grounded in interview testimony, it is both appropriate and judicious to critically deliberate on this specific research methodology. In regards to interviewing practitioners, Christine Cornea has argued that the disinclination of many scholars to approach practitioners means that they are 'ignoring a rich field of enquiry [which could help] create a constructive bridge between the industry and academia' (2008: 120). Brett Mills warns that 'in side-lining practitioners, we might often be doing our topic a disservice [and by failing to engage] we are neglecting to put on the record a significant aspect of

¹⁴ The participatory mode will be defined and discussed in Chapter 2.

¹⁵ The pro-filmic event is 'what happened when the camera was there' (Corner, 1996: 20).

cultural history that will be useful research material for the future (2008: 151-2). To date, practitioners are a comparatively untapped resource which could – and arguably should – productively inform scholarly discourse. Without interviewing performers and contextually analysing the testimony of those who researched, developed and performed their characters, particularly in a collaborative environment like Neilson’s, it is significantly more difficult to understand and explicate why specific choices concerning performance and characterisation were made while others were rejected. Furthermore, without hearing the specific details of how decisions were implemented, it is much more challenging to gauge their impact on the formulation of the play or performance text, which is ultimately the material many scholars use as the basis for their enquiry. My principal objective, in adopting the methodological approach of conducting interviews with Neilson and twelve of the actors who have worked with him over the years, was to ‘uncover *constructive* material that is able to take research and knowledge forward in a productive manner’ (Sutherland, 2009: 11; emphasis in original). This objective will be accomplished by allowing the ‘participants to shape results,’ (Mills, 2008: 151) rather than the interviewees ‘lending experiential support to an emerging, general version of the truth which they have been precisely chosen to underwrite’ (Corner, 1996: 88).

Of course, interview material is not an entirely unproblematic form of interchange. Heather Sutherland makes us aware that there are ‘a number of views and arguments about the relative use of interviewing and the data and evidence it yields’ (2009: 1), among them ‘doubts surrounding memory and oral history’ (Sutherland, 2010: 160). This issue is also recognised by Roman Ingarden, whose opinion is that ‘we must bear in mind that some or all of the knowledge [obtained through interviews] will be based on acts of memory, and we must take into account the role of memory in supplying information’ (1973: xxiii). This argument is of course valid, although *exactly* how to make these kind of judgements is elusive, particularly when interviewees are recalling events from the more distant past.

However, the interviews with the *Narrative* company were conducted on the spot, at lunch or dinner breaks during the final stages of rehearsal; there were even times when this testimony was acquired mere minutes after an event discussed in a sequence of analysis. These factors go some way to allaying any concerns regarding discourse being contaminated by the passage of time. That said, five of my interviews were obtained from actors who had worked with Neilson on previous productions going back as far as 1994, making them more exposed to concerns regarding the deterioration of memory. However, the range of testimony makes for a more comprehensive overview of the actor's view of Neilson's rehearsal methodology, as well as giving a long-term perspective which is solidified into a stronger sense of memory stretching back through a number of previous productions. In addition to actors who worked on other Neilson productions, I conducted follow-up interviews with two of the *Narrative* cast, Barney Power and Christine Entwisle, which I would argue allowed for a more reflective quality to emerge during our conversation. Thus, I have interview testimony which is immediate as well as reflective in nature.

Another latent issue concerning interviews is that 'personal agendas and subjective perspectives need to be considered in interpreting material' (Cornea, 2008: 119). This concern is echoed by Mills, who cautions that 'it is important to acknowledge the subjectivity within any interview material, and not use this data as evidence of certain kinds of working practices' (Mills, 2008: 152). These concerns are both relevant and irrelevant to my interview material. They are relevant because my main objective was to gain insights into the interviewees' subjective experience, individual assessments and opinions. I would argue that the interviewees' personal subjective perspectives are crucial in this regard, because the actor's perspective has not been given the attention it deserves in scholarly discourse, as well as the fact that the very diversity of responses acquired facilitated a more comprehensive analysis of Neilson's rehearsal methodology and the role of the actor within it. In addition, I

do not uncritically accept the testimony of the interviewees; I test their statements in relation to my filmed rehearsal footage in order gauge their contextual accuracy. It is also worth noting that the similarity in some responses to questions is also a positive property, in that this demonstrates elements of agreement and commonality in the assessments of the interviewees. Thus, their subjectivity provides another level of corroboration to the evidence, as will be seen in my analysis throughout this thesis.

However, Mills and Cornea's arguments are also not of relevance to my project because there is no real evidence of personal agendas manifest in the interview footage. Also, as mentioned above, Mills cautions that one should not use interview testimony as evidence of certain kinds of working practices due to its subjectivity. However, my intention is precisely to use this interview testimony as evidence of Neilson's working practices, because ultimately, in the words of Donald Ritchie, oral history has the capacity to 'open up new areas of enquiry' (Ritchie, 2003: 3), and it is 'as reliable or unreliable as other sources' (Ritchie, 2003: 16); therefore, 'it should not be tarnished as a lesser source' (Sutherland, 2010: 160).

One of the principal debates within documentary scholarship is that there is 'a problematic fusing of the putative event (what things *would* have been like without the camera there) with the pro-filmic event (what happened when the camera was there)' (Corner, 1996: 20). This means 'that the intervention of the camera necessarily distorts and alters human behaviour[, so] the resulting piece of film cannot be objective or truthful' (Bruzzi, 2006: 10). In fact, Eric Barnouw goes as far as to say that 'the minute an individual becomes involved in the representation of reality, the integrity of that reality is irretrievably lost' (in Bruzzi, 2006: 6). This argument is no doubt appropriate in many cases, but, for the most part, as far as my

footage is concerned it is not applicable.¹⁶ I would argue that in what I present there is a minimal tension between the putative and the pro-filmic event in the vast majority of the coverage. The veracity of this conclusion is bolstered, if not conclusively confirmed, by the interviewees in the following sequence when I ask them whether they thought myself or the camera filming them while rehearsing has had any effect on them (see Sequence 2: 00-4.38).

In this sequence, for the first and only time, I adopted an expository mode of engagement with events and share the premonition which had just come to my mind that ‘as soon as I ask the actors whether my presence here affects their performance they’ll all say it doesn’t.’¹⁷ My intention was to capture this thought on camera in order to subsequently connect it to and record the level of corroboration the interviewees gave. It would be remiss of me to say that there was not also a suspicion that the interviewees may ‘be predisposed to providing responses to questions that they think the interviewer wants to hear’ (Sutherland, 2009: 6). What I thought was true was that my presence made them slightly uncomfortable in the first few days of filming, but once they had become used to me they were more relaxed in my presence. In fact, Neilson did not inform the actors that I would be joining rehearsals to film them for my thesis, so it was something of a surprise for them when I appeared with the camera at the beginning of week three. In hearing what each actor said and assessing how they said it in response to the question, I came to accept that, while the interviewees were being honest to an extent, their responses were not entirely accurate or considered, as subsequent analysis will show.

With the exceptions of Ashton and Bennett, all the other interviewees (Power, Rix and Doherty) gave an immediate and emphatic negative response to the question, with Doherty

¹⁶ There were two instances when this was not the case, one of which will be discussed below and the other in Chapter 2.

¹⁷ The expository mode is one in which the filmmaker intrudes on the action and passes comment on proceedings. See Nichols (1994: 95).

adding ‘it’s surprising [...] you don’t think of the camera being there [...] anything I’ve said, I’ve said because I was going to say it’. Ross and Rix connect my presence to other *personae* who have frequented the rehearsal room who are not members of the company: Ross purports that she feels ‘like there could be a hundred people in the room and it wouldn’t make any difference to’ her and Rix notes the relative invisibility of a journalist. It is also worth highlighting that Ashton and Power take pains to reinforce how surprised they were that, rather than a detrimental effect, my presence has actually been positive on proceedings. Ashton contends that ‘it feels quite nice and supportive’ and that ‘it is weirdly comforting that there is an outside eye’; while Power emphasises how I’m ‘a very positive presence’ and that ‘surprisingly’ he’s ‘found it to be quite a good thing’.

It is entirely possible that these responses were intended to deflect a question which made the interviewees uncomfortable. This conclusion has been reached by observing the juxtaposition between the words spoken and the body language and verbal expression of the interviewees in response to the question: Ashton screws up her face and tells me that I’m ‘so nice’ and then jokes that my only vice is that sometimes I ‘get in the way of the heater’; Ross chuckles and squirms around on her chair, and Rix brings his leg up and holds his knee, erecting a kind of barrier between me and him and then subsequently folds his arms to reinforce the point, all the while giving alternative scenarios where being filmed may have affected him. Considered in this light, it may seem that I am implying a certain level of disingenuousness on the part of the interviewees. On the contrary, what I am proposing is that they were, to an extent, trying to spare my feelings by not providing any negative comments concerning my presence. My suspicion is that assistant director Ned Bennett’s answer is closest to the truth and what the actors actually felt, but were too polite to say. Bennett’s response was:

I don't think so hugely. I mean I'm sure it does on a tiny level [...] the fact that you're an actor and the fact that you know Anthony [means] that I don't think it's had a huge impact; maybe a tiny bit and perhaps people cover it up. But no.

In Bennett's testimony, I would argue that the disparity between what is articulated by the interviewee and his body language is not manifest. From the beginning, he has his hand on his chin in a thoughtful pose and then as his consideration bears fruit, he removes his hand and provides a deliberated reply, while, for the most part, retaining eye contact with myself off camera. This physical subtext denotes a more candid answer. Also, Bennett, as assistant director, is arguably the person in the room who most closely observes what transpires. He is not concerned with his performance onstage, the selection of creative material, the quality of the written material, or the technical requirements. Thus, as he is not as personally invested as Neilson and the actors, it seems reasonable to assume that his observations are credible.

Bennett's contention that my presence only impacted proceedings 'on a tiny level' can be discerned in the remainder of Sequence 2. However, I would argue that it was not quite what Bennett was referring to, even if his actual words are applicable. It also brings into focus my previous view that responses were honest if not entirely accurate or considered; particularly in regards to Rix's testimony. This gives credence to Linda Ruth Williams' view that 'interviews generate material that is both true and false, skewed by memory, or wish fulfilment, interpretative and richly interpretable' (Williams, 2008: 134; see Sequence 2: 4.38-end). In this excerpt, Ashton and Rix are rehearsing a promotional interview concerning Rix's soon to be released film *Elastic Man*. In the scene, on four separate occasions, Rix incorporates me filming him into the unfolding action. The first instance is when asked to repeat the 'famous catchphrase'; to which he retorts 'can't we just save it for the film...I'm asking you...I'm right here', all the while glaring in my direction. He also flicks his gaze towards me after his line 'yeah sure'. Next, when Ashton enters the shot and expresses her

hope to see him in ‘Elastic Man four, five’, Rix again glances over towards me and says ‘hopefully’. The final time is after his chair-kicking tantrum, when he looks over and gives me a somewhat forced ‘thumbs up’, as if to physically express a sarcastic ‘thank you’ to his off-camera producer. Throughout this scene Rix used me as the offstage character of his producer and spontaneously incorporates my presence into the actual *mise-en-scène* in order to add another level of detail to his performance. Thus, on this occasion my presence, filming the action, actually had a performative impact on the pro-filmic event, contrary to Rix’s interview remarks. This also substantiates a previous statement from Power earlier on in the sequence when he acknowledges to me that ‘you’re not just observing us [...] it’s like having that extra lens to be watched through’. Inevitably, there is a level of disparity between what the interviewees say and do and, arguably, what they actually think, and this might undermine my argument that the interview testimony is untainted discourse. However, I show there is a level of disparity in order to demonstrate that my intention to allow the ‘participants to shape results’ (Mills, 2008: 151) instead of ‘lending experiential support to an emerging general version of the truth which they have been precisely chosen to underwrite’, is not just empty rhetoric (Corner, 1996: 88). In the following sequence the two discourses (oral testament and rehearsal footage) deal with moments in which both sources are not at odds; instead they support and complement each other.

Nichols makes us aware that ‘when interviews contribute to an interactive mode of representation, they generally serve as evidence for an argument presented as the product of the interaction of filmmaker and subject’ (1991: 48). This citation is particularly pertinent to Sequence 3, where there is a definite interaction of filmmaker and subject which serves as evidence to reinforce the testimony of actor Christine Entwisle (see Sequence 3: 0.00-end). In her interview Entwisle comments that: ‘When we started the tech and I was doing my poem without the script for the first time, I could feel the camera on me then I just couldn’t

remember any of my lines because I was being looked at so intently.’ Here, Entwisle is touching on one of Allain’s reasons for a scarcity of documented accounts of rehearsals; namely that ‘observers or outsiders might unsettle the atmosphere, making actors self-conscious’ (2006: 200). In the rehearsal footage of Entwisle reciting her poem, it is clear that the act of being observed is having this effect on her: there is a distinct hesitancy in her delivery and on two separate occasions she forgets her words; the first time calling for her ‘line’ and shortly thereafter saying ‘oh sorry’. Here Entwisle’s proximity to the camera, and how this positioning affects her performance, demonstrates how the oral testimony is corroborated by the rehearsal footage as well as showing how on this occasion there is a tension between the putative and pro-filmic event.

It is also worth noting that Entwisle confirms my suspicion that ‘there’s going to be some kind of effect’ on proceedings from my presence, stating that ‘we were worried at first, I’ll be honest, about somebody filming, and the first couple of days were a bit odd’. Note Entwisle’s use of the word ‘we’; this usage implies that some or all members of the company had discussed my presence filming amongst themselves. Thus, Entwisle’s testimony is at odds with what her colleagues had expressed in Sequence 2, proving that ‘no one witness holds the definitive version of events’ (Beattie, 2004: 136). However, Entwisle’s comments are thematically consistent with Power and Ashton’s aforementioned remarks concerning how my presence positively impacted proceedings. Entwisle comments that:

I think it’s had a really positive effect [...] when we got used to you, you’re a very kind of focusing presence. The camera focusing on us all the time contains and focuses us [...] it’s almost like a super-ego kind of presence or eye at any rate that’s watching things and is sensible. It’s like a parent, sensible, not emotionally engaged.

Here, in addition to providing a level of testimonial corroboration, Entwisle infers that the very act of shooting keeps the company attentive and concentrated. Thus, for Entwisle, ‘the

camera becomes a kind of physical embodiment of the director's attention to the acting' (Svensden, 2010: 235).

Several of the company also refer to my personality, practitioner status and prior experience of Neilson's rehearsals, clarifying that this made a difference to them. As noted already, Bennett mentioned how me being an actor and knowing Neilson reduced any negative effect on the company; Ashton remarked how I'm 'a nice person and obviously completely understanding and supportive of it [what is going on in rehearsals]'; and Power stated 'you're a very positive presence, you know what we're going through'. It is not appropriate for me to give subjective details of how my personality positively affected, or minimized any detrimental impact on, the actors. However, I would argue that my practitioner expertise and prior experience of Neilson's *modus operandi* was useful to me in filming the *Narrative* rehearsals and supported the interviews with Neilson, Bennett and the actors.

My professional experience of being an actor was of benefit to me in regards to the interviews. Not only had I trained and worked with three of the other actors interviewed, I also managed to secure two interviews via other industry contacts that I have. As a professionally trained actor, I am, to an extent, an 'insider' as discussed by McAuley in her reflections on ethnographic research. As McAuley points out:

Rehearsals are traditionally private, a time when artists work intensively together, when actors go further and deeper into their own and their characters' emotions and need to feel safe to experiment with what they are finding. The demarcation between insider and outsider is very strong in the theatre, and never more so than when it is a matter of rehearsals, for many directors fear the disruptive impact an outsider can have on the chemistry that is occurring in the room. (2012: 6-7)

Neilson granted me access to the *Narrative* rehearsals because he expected that my presence would have a minimal disruptive impact. Because of my familiarity with rehearsal protocol in

general, and more specifically Neilson's methods I was able to integrate myself into the fabric of the rehearsals with minimal disruption to the work of the company. For example, I placed myself and the camera in such a way that both would be as unnoticeable as possible for the actors, in addition to being as far removed from Neilson himself within the space. This was because I knew that if the actors felt my presence with the camera to be intrusive, they would – consciously or otherwise – not only potentially be much more self-conscious, but also be somewhat resentful and therefore disinclined to be as open with me during any interviews they agreed to do with me. It would also have been disrespectful to position myself or the camera in such a way that I was prioritising my work before theirs; perhaps this is what Entwisle is referring to in her interview when she said to me, 'I think if you were a knob it would be very different.' I purposefully kept a spatial distance from Neilson so as to not make the actors feel like I was participating or taking on the function of an assistant director. Being an actor also meant that I am comfortable around other actors and the *Narrative* cast quickly grew to be comfortable around me. I switched the camera off during breaks and joined the company, where I made a point of joking with them, joining in with whatever they happened to be discussing and giving honest answers to any questions that they asked me. They were exposing themselves to me by being filmed, so it was only fair that I expose myself by being honest with them. I have no doubt that it would have been a major breach of rehearsal etiquette to film the company during their breaks, even though I know that what happens during rehearsal interludes can be quite important to how a play develops (particularly a Neilson production, as will be discussed in Chapter 1). Not only would it have alienated me from the company, it would also have made the actors distrustful of my motives and guarded around me.

However, as McAuley rightly points out, ‘the ethnographer must first ‘grasp’ and then ‘render’ what has been grasped’ (McAuley, 2008: 286),¹⁸ and my ‘insider’ status enabled me to do both. With access to the *Narrative* rehearsals secured, as I am familiar with the language that actors use and how they think and what is important to them, I was able to formulate appropriate questions, as well as frame them in such a way that their tone was not off-putting and their content was readily understandable for the interviewees. Being an actor also helped me to decode the information from the interviews, which in turn allowed me to present it in a manner that supports my analysis and is academically appropriate.

In dealing with the amount of footage I have acquired my methodological approach has inevitably meant making certain decisions on what to include and to exclude in both my writing and recorded evidence. In order to give a cogent critical account of Neilson’s rehearsal process and the role of the actor within it, my analysis has endeavoured to remain focused on what is significant and relevant, but, obviously, the choice as to what these are, can frequently be a contentious one. However, when dealing with Neilson’s work, this becomes particularly significant because, as my analysis will show, his process is marked by an arbitrariness, uncertainty and, on occasion, a degree of incoherence, unfinishedness and fragmentation. I am not implying that Neilson’s process is unique in this respect, but it is important to acknowledge the somewhat chaotic structure of Neilson’s rehearsals. Neilson’s *modus operandi* actually problematises conventional assumptions about significance, relevance and meaning, because it is informed by, draws upon and, to a certain extent, is dependent on the random, tangential and erratic. Therefore, my analysis will demonstrate that what might appear (or in fact *be*) incidental may unfold, via a complex web of developments,

¹⁸ Here McAuley explicitly draws on Geertz’s argument that the ethnographer must deal with ‘a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular and inexplicit, and which he [sic] must contrive somehow first to grasp and then to render’ (1973: 10).

into something crucial to the creation of meaning and performance. As Patrice Pavis reminds us, ‘meaning is produced in the theatre performance from a great many unknown factors’ (1982: 133).

Engaging analytically with Neilson’s process is a challenge because, as much of my analysis will demonstrate, to the observer the process is unpredictable, disjointed, repetitive and prone to setbacks, overlaps and digressions. I have constantly found myself in the position of having to avoid unduly condensing and thereby misrepresenting the actual, messy and unwieldy texture of this process. As I have been interested in charting a recognisable methodology, I would argue that this strategy is especially important given the noted absence of existing documentation of this kind of creative work. In my attempt to map the creation of particular relevant moments and issues, my editing, inevitably, has shaped the footage in particular ways. At times, this has meant placing more emphasis on similarities, links and causal connections between some moments that I have organised together than others. This has been done partly to facilitate the mapping of overall patterns and broader development as well as allowing detailed attention to be paid to individual moments and instances. I have been very aware that I could have ordered the footage differently, and examined alternative patterns and moments. Of course, this applies to any research, especially research that works with a large amount of data; and, inevitably, this remains an issue that cannot be resolved. With my selection and editing of the material guided by the thematic strands I identified (which I will discuss further shortly), all I can do is be aware of the fact that my analysis, inevitably to an extent, ‘produces’ the *Narrative* rehearsals and Neilson’s process.

I am fully aware of the fact that I could have given a different account of proceedings, and given the wealth of footage at my disposal has inevitably meant that it is beyond the scope of this thesis to consider all the patterns and moments within the *Narrative* rehearsals

that are of interest to scholarship on contemporary performance. However, at the same time, my objective is to make the practitioner discourse overt in order to generate new knowledge and shape the research results. In order to accomplish this goal, I will construct links between specific moments of rehearsal and the manner in which scenes were ultimately performed. I will also chronicle exactly what the labour of performers is and what they do in rehearsals, namely bring bodily, cerebral and emotional facilities and skills to the work. Finally, I will analyse the ways in which Neilson as the writer/director engages with these procedures. In order to achieve this end, it is extremely important to acknowledge that in the work I will present, a degree of ‘description [...] is crucial both to the perception of what sort of things need to be observed and noted and to the subsequent analysis and explanation of this material’ (McAuley, 2008: 286).

Thesis Structure

In reviewing the footage of the *Narrative* rehearsals certain thematic strands emerged. Therefore, unlike McAuley who organises her research linearly, I have adopted a thematic structure for this tripartite thesis. Each Part has an introduction which frames and contextualises the argument, and is comprised of two chapters which investigate a particular thematic strand. Part 1 discusses the complexities and peculiarities of Neilson’s authorial process, Part 2 considers Neilson’s approaches to improvisation, and Part 3 examines the relationship between Neilson as director and the actor’s process.

Part 1 (Chapters 1 and 2) will discuss Neilson’s authorial process in terms of how materials for the published play text and actual performance are produced, paying particular attention to the creative contributions of the actors. Chapter 1 will focus on particularising the various forms of input the actors have in the authoring of the play. Its discussion will hinge around testing out Neilson’s own perception of his authorship, which is that the contributions

of his actors are somewhat limited and oblique, by examining three case studies. The first case study will discuss one of Neilson's authorial tropes, the deployment of sound effects to communicate a character's interior thoughts, and how this recurring device here in the *Narrative* rehearsals is inspired by the work of Alfred Hitchcock. The case study will then investigate the various forms of indirect input that Neilson proposes the actors have into his authorial process. The second case study identifies and assesses the indirect actor input I witnessed over three weeks of rehearsal, and how this input contributed to a particular character speaking in malapropisms during a scene in the play. The final case study will then explore how the actors do in fact make the kind of direct authorial contributions that Neilson refutes, by showing how actor Olly Rix constructs lines that add nuance and detail to their characterisation.

Chapter 1 demonstrates how the actors have both direct and indirect input into Neilson's authorial process. By analysing the rehearsal of a specific scene, Chapter 2 will investigate how this input manifests in both the performance and the published play, in order to comprehend some of the core structures that inform and inflect meaning in Neilson's work. The chapter will explore the manner in which the input from the actors intersects with two other Neilsonian authorial tropes that recur throughout his canon, namely his tendency to use non-malicious theatrical humiliation and his naming of characters. The chapter will then analyse how the actor's input tends to be employed in a seemingly arbitrary manner by Neilson, in that he incorporates it into the performance of *Narrative*, but excludes much of it from the published play. One analytical thread running through this chapter will be that Neilson's authorial approach is somewhat spontaneous, haphazard and erratic. These particular properties will emerge in the analysis towards the end of the chapter, where I consider that Neilson's impulsive attitude to authorship extends to asking myself, an observer, to have a role in the authoring of the play.

Part 2 (Chapters 3 and 4) will consider Neilson's complex and unusual employment of improvisation by analysing one particular case study per chapter. In keeping with this thesis's overall concern with exploring Neilson's process from the actor's perspective, Chapter 3 will focus on how the employment of improvisation during the *Narrative* rehearsals impacted on characterisation. My analysis will open by discussing the roots of the chapter's case study, the 'Box Therapy' improvisation, and the rationale underpinning its usage. The chapter will consider the direct and indirect effect of 'Box Therapy' on the characterisation of the actors involved in the improvisation; examine how the improvisation and the employment of Stanislavskian acting techniques interact; and argue that the particular properties of 'Box Therapy' constitute unconventional mask work. The chapter will then discuss the improvisation during the technical rehearsal of the production in order to explore the tension that arises between the objectives of the director and the goals of the actors.

Chapter 4 will explore Neilson's use of improvisation in terms of the critical issue of failure via an examination of one particular case study, the 'Human Soundscape' improvisation. In this chapter, the focus of my argument will be on how a lack of objectives, guidelines and responsibilities when improvising can result in problems. The chapter will discuss how humour informs the working relationship between the company and Neilson, as well as the actors 'corpsing' that occurred as a result of Neilson's somewhat unconventional directorial behaviour during the improvisation. Finally, the chapter will examine how, although the improvisation might constitute a failed event, Neilson's employment of improvisation at this juncture of rehearsals fulfils a more unorthodox and cathartic purpose.

Part 3 (Chapters 5 and 6) will examine the ways in which Neilson's directorial approach informs and affects the actors who work with him. Building on Vicky Angelaki's (2014) notion of 'unsafe spectatorship', Chapter 5 will propose that Neilson can be usefully

understood as an ‘unsafe director’. The major case study here concerns a discussion between Neilson and the company regarding whether to have audience participation in the show. The chapter demonstrates how this debate is concerned with issues of power. The chapter will introduce this critical issue and then go on to consider the way in which power operates during the ‘Ask the Audience’ debate. It will discuss the positives and negatives of the creative labour hierarchies that result from Neilson’s approach to directing, and then focus on the manner in which communication functions between Neilson and his actors. The chapter will conclude by analysing what occurs when Neilson directs the ending of the show during the technical rehearsal.

The thrust of Chapter 6 will be providing an account of proceeding from the perspective of the actor. The chapter will develop strands of analysis touched upon in previous chapters, map the level of notice given to the actors in existing discourse as well as by Neilson himself, and give a detailed account of what the actor process is within a Stanislavskian context. The final section of the chapter will discuss two case studies: a ‘motivational’ speech given by Neilson at the end of the rehearsal period and a new scene given to two of the actors on Press Night. These case studies will facilitate a detailed consideration of how Neilson’s process affects the actor’s process. The analysis of these case studies will also expand upon the critical issue of power considered in Chapter 5, by discussing the actor’s process in the context of their current working conditions.

Finally, the thesis conclusion will examine the research questions and consider the manner in which the respective Parts of the thesis have approached answering them. It will then go on to consider how future research could be produced from points raised and critical issues tackled within the thesis and then proceed to give a final reconsideration of Neilson’s process.

Part 1: Neilson's Authorial Process

As the introduction to this thesis has discussed, there has been interest in the working process of Anthony Neilson within scholarly, journalistic and industry discourses, but thus far no in-depth analysis has been undertaken of this. The critical issue of authorship is no exception in this: noted for his unconventional approach to authorship, Neilson's authorial *modus operandi* has long been a topic of some curiosity for many theatre scholars, including David Lane (2010b), Anthony Frost (2007), Trish Reid (2007) and Aleks Sierz (2001). For example, Sierz notes how

Neilson gradually developed his own approach to writing and rehearsal. 'I would have less and less of the script finished by the time we went into rehearsal,' he [Neilson] says. 'And it got to the point when I was making it up as we went along.' He [Neilson] would 'take bits in and try them with the actors and see whether they worked.' (2001: 67)

Lane remarked in 2010 that '[o]ver the past decade Neilson has collaborated frequently with actors from scratch to write his plays, utilising a free theatrical imagination to create work that is highly expressive and playful but still tackles subjects of serious emotional and political depth' (2010b: 89).

Meanwhile, within industry literature, the *Official London Theatre's* Matthew Amer has asserted that Neilson's way of working 'has led to comparisons with Mike Leigh, though where Leigh's plays grow out of improvisation, Neilson's do not. For him the actor's influence "isn't direct: they suggest things that suggest things" [...]' (2007). Neilson's actual working practices are described in little more detail by *the Guardian's* Brian Logan, who observes how 'Neilson writes his plays collaboratively, together with his actors, throughout rehearsals. And continues to do so until the hours before opening night. It's a working practice that has caused him problems in the past, but he's sticking with it.' (2006) Critic Dan

Hutton who attended the *Narrative* rehearsals for one day, has commented in relation to Neilson's 2013 Royal Court play *Narrative* that this was:

created through workshops with the cast, in Neilson's trademark style (which, appallingly, I've only just learnt about). He rehearses by day and (re)writes by night, meaning that the shape of the piece is always shifting, resulting in a freedom and fluidity which would otherwise be dormant in a conventional 'written' play. (2013)

As these different accounts attest, Neilson's process insistently raises authorship as a critical issue, as his working methods are not only unstructured, but also, crucially, ensemble-based and highly collaborative in nature. However, in none of these accounts are the specifics of Neilson's authorial approach discussed in any great detail. This process is an unusual rehearsal methodology for a contemporary theatre practitioner with an established profile as a writer and raises the question how, to borrow from Sarah Jane Bailes 'within a collaborative environment [...] is authorship and ownership of material renegotiated by the conditions of ensemble process?' (2011: 169)

Authorship has long been a subject of interest and concern for theatre, both informed by and responding to broader arguments, including those proposed within post-structuralism, such as in the work by Roland Barthes (2001 [1967]), who argued for the significance of the reader/audience in the process of signification, and Michel Foucault (1995 [1969]), who examined the author as a function of discourse, identifying the significance of evaluative hierarchies, the exertion of control, as well as the 'containment' of meaning within acts of interpretation. In theatre, such debates have considered the roles of and relationship between the playwright, the director and also – influenced especially by Barthes' work (2001 [1967]) – the audience. As Avra Sidiropoulou has summed up in her book *Authoring Performance: The Director in Contemporary Theatre*: 'the prevailing thrust in theatre research is the interrogation of the concept of "meaning" and, in particular, of whether it is predetermined by the playwright, served or reimagined by the director and the performer, or ultimately

constructed anew by the individual spectator.’ (2011: 136) However, the weight of existing debates has been placed on the playwright and the director (and Sidiropoulou’s work is no exception in this). For example, Gerald Rabkin (1985) has considered the tensions that may arise between the two positions with reference to Arthur Miller’s and Samuel Beckett’s legal challenges against, respectively, the Wooster Group’s *L.S.D. (...Just the High Points)* (1984) and the American Repertory Theatre’s production of *Endgame* (1984). The issue Miller and Beckett raised with the productions, directed by Elizabeth LeCompte and JoAnne Akalaitis respectively, is that these were unauthorized and/or supposedly distorted productions of their work, because the former included lengthy excerpts of *The Crucible*, and the latter disregarded stage directions and used music in the production. As Rabkin’s analysis (1985) points out, the critical issues at stake here are that of fidelity and interpretation, as well as the closely related points of what actually constitutes ‘the text’ in theatre (the play text as written or the performance as staged) and who ‘the author of the theatre text’ (1985: 149) is.

As far as a potential answer to this question is concerned, British theatre has been, to use Dan Rebellato’s words, ‘famously – or, if you prefer, notoriously – writer-centred’ (2016: 11). For example, the traditional (and continuing) ascription of authorial status to the playwright is exemplified by Doug Wright *et al.*’s insistence that there is a:

misguided notion that everyone involved in a play’s long journey to the stage becomes, in some way, its author [...] only the writer can cite his or her influences with authority, and only a writer can choose to credit them accordingly. (1998: 6-7)

Wright’s view directly contrasts continental European theatre cultures, ‘in which the director, as opposed to the writer, tends to sit at the top of the theatre-making hierarchy’ (Love 2015: 320).¹ Of course, such a binary distinction does not account for the multitude of practices

¹ As Sidiropoulou has pointed out, the centrality of the director is especially prominent within avant-garde theatre practice:

within British or continental European theatre (and the cross-influences between them), nor for the post-war rise of director's theatre (as exemplified by Peter Brook's career). Indeed, the status of the director within the context of British theatre has been pithily expressed by Gabriella Giannachi and Mary Luckhurst, when they observe that 'the British still tend to perceive the director as a creative god, and the work of individual directors has been the subject of mystification, deemed to be beyond our understanding.' (1999: xv)

Certainly, such a binary distinction and the views cited above do not sufficiently recognise the essentially collaborative nature of theatre practice. Indeed, even within challenges to the traditional notion of the single author, as can be found in Luule Epner's argument which draws on the opinions of Estonian theatre director Mati Unt, residues of more traditional views may be found. Epner commented that:

authorship in contemporary theatre has actually been reduced to only one function: the director is not the sole author but rather organises a kind of cluster or tangled web consisting of his [sic] own as well as the writer's, scenographer's, actors' and others' intentions. (2007: 214)

Even though Epner is challenging the notion of the director as the single author, she simultaneously does, to an extent, uphold it by positioning him/her at the top of a hierarchy, coordinating and ultimately controlling the other creative individuals' efforts. In this way, Epner as well as Wright *et al.* risk marginalizing the significance of the creative involvement by other company members. Acknowledgment of collaboration is usually more readily found within discussions of devising companies, when of course all theatre practice involves a number of different personnel giving input and working together.

Since the latter part of the twentieth century, the role of the director as maker, creator, ultimately "author" of the theatre event has been firmly rooted in the practices of the avant-garde stage. In fact, among the most common titles that come to be identified with innovative theatre makers, such as "conceptualist," "formalist," "experimental artist," and "scenic writer," and that of "director-auteur" has been most apt. (2011: 1)

However, as scholarship on contemporary British theatre attests, ‘Britain’s playwriting culture’ (Love 2015: 320) is continuing and attention has been paid to the work of playwrights such as Sarah Kane, Martin Crimp, David Greig and Simon Stephens. Like Anthony Neilson, many of these have (had) close working relationships with the Royal Court, ‘the self-identifying “writers” theatre’ (Love 2015: 319). With a long history of encouraging first-time plays and playwrights, the Royal Court has since the 1990s, when the New Labour government instigated changes in arts funding,² become strongly associated with and been part of a shift within British theatre towards facilitating and emphasizing ‘new writing’, which Jacqueline Bolton has defined as ‘the first production of an individually authored unpublished play’ (Bolton 2012: 209). This new British writing culture has helped to support the work of playwrights in the form of, for example, theatres hosting workshops for first-time playwrights (in which Neilson has been involved at the Royal Court) and commissioning new work (including and especially new work that involves some form of creative risk-taking) by more established playwrights (including Neilson, who in the last decade alone has had four out of seven plays premiere at the Royal Court). As the term reflects, ‘new writing’ is in Aleks Sierz’s words, ‘literary, not performance based’ (Sierz 2011: 44) and places the ‘individual playwright [...] at the centre of the theatre-making process’ (Sierz 2011: 50).

Both Jacqueline Bolton (2012) and Catherine Love (2015) have been interested in the ‘cultural narrative [that] has formed around the idea of the “new writing play”’ (Love 2012; 319), a development that may be understood as privileging the importance of the writer. Bolton has considered how the culture informing ‘new writing’ has arguably fallen back on long-standing notions concerning the unique vision of the single author, noting that ‘a

² See Bolton (2012: 10-12).

pervasive rhetoric of individuality and originality serves to downplay, or even erase, the contributions of collaborating practitioners such as directors, actors and designers' (Bolton 2012: 221). Love has explored how Simon Stephens' *Pornography*, which was first staged at the Traverse Theatre in 2007 under the direction of Sean Holmes, provokes 'a reconsideration of the ways in which texts are treated in British new writing theatres' (Love 2015: 326). Love's argument is that Stephens' encounter with continental European productions of his plays led him to re-examine his professional practice, especially his approach to collaboration. This re-examination displays itself in plays such as *Pornography*, which, featuring textual openness towards interpretation that implicitly inscribed an attitude towards authorship, has moved beyond '[enshrining] the authorial intent of the playwright at the expense of interpretation; which is open to various different forms of collaboration' (Love 2015: 326).

Love's analysis draws on Dan Rebellato's (2016) discussion of authorship within contemporary British theatre, in which he identifies 'a wider pattern of playwrights variously absenting themselves from their plays.' (2016: 11) With reference to a number of 'new writing' playwrights, such as Kane, Greig, Crimp and Churchill (and briefly Neilson), Rebellato notices 'several perceptible dramaturgical shifts beginning in the mid-1990s characterized by writers abdicating from aspects of their plays that they formerly may have been expected to control.' (2016: 15) These include shifts towards textual openness, such as little in the way of textual specifications pertaining to time, place or character (such as Crimp's *Attempts on Her Life* (1997));³ an absence of clear authorial commentary on the action of the play (including a lack of irony to guide the audience's perception, as can be

³ Such elements of textual openness can be found in Neilson's *Stitching* and *Narrative*.

found in Kane's *Blasted* (1995);⁴ through to the staging of the deaths of the play's author within the play (as in David Greig's *San Diego* (2003)).⁵

Rebellato's analysis of these stagings of authorial absence – notably different in their non-prescriptiveness from the stances taken by Miller and Beckett mentioned earlier – takes issue with the anti-intentionality arguments that took inspiration from the post-structuralist debates of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. He insists that, despite the apparent resonance of the murder of 'David Greig' in *San Diego* with Roland Barthes' writing on the 'death of the author' (2001 [1967]), these stagings are not best understood as an articulation of 'the principles of poststructuralism' (2016: 12). This is not least because, as Rebellato's discussion emphasises, Barthes' work has been subject to some misunderstanding. Instead, these stagings signal that 'authorship itself has become a key area of theatrical experimentation' (2016: 11) for playwrights, indicative of and reaffirming the capacity for writing (and 'new writing') to 'profoundly [investigate] theatrical meaning' (Rebellato, 2016: 12) and the playwrights' creative agency.

What my brief outline of these existing debates concerning authorship, especially for contemporary British theatre, has shown is an interest in practice and process (especially by Love, whose work I refer to in Chapters 5 & 6); but overall the focus in such existing debates has remained on authorship in terms of its visibility and detectability on the page and/or the stage (albeit in Rebellato's case, via its absence). As the introduction has noted, extensive ethnographic accounts of theatrical rehearsal processes are rare, and in one of the few that do exist, Gay McAuley concludes that 'the authorial process involved in contemporary theatre is

⁴ This absence of authorial commentary is not evident in Neilson's plays to date.

⁵ This has thus far not featured in Neilson's plays. *Unreachable* (2016), which focuses on a film director, included a death, but this was by the character who is the camera operator. Interestingly, reviews of *Unreachable* (e.g. Billington, 2016) drew links between the play and the death of Michael Cimino (who directed *The Deer Hunter* and *Heaven's Gate*) shortly before the run of the production.

[...] complex and creative output comes from many sources.’ (2012: 230) Building on McAuley’s insistence on the complex and contestable nature of authorship within theatre, what my analysis in Chapter 1 and 2 will have to offer to existing debates is a consideration of authorship in terms of the specific practice of Neilson’s rehearsal process, and how this may inform the end result on page and/or stage. My discussion across the two chapters will demonstrate that Neilson’s work represents an unusual, highly collaborative type of ‘new writing’ and a very particular experiment in authorship in a way that addresses and problematizes conventional ascriptions of authority within theatre to the writer and/or director. My discussion will also consider issues of intentionality through Neilson’s ad-hoc use of company members’ input.

The discussion in both chapters will be concerned with providing an in-depth exploration of the specifics of Neilson’s authorial approach. As the introduction has already highlighted, there is a need for more theatre scholarship which engages with the specifics of theatre practice, particularly work which focuses on the perspective of the actor, and as the beginning of the introduction to this chapter reflects, this applies to Neilson’s work. One noteworthy exception is the view of aforementioned critic and scholar Catherine Love, who, having attended some of Neilson’s ‘Collaboration’ workshop programme for the Royal Court’s Open Court festival in 2013, makes the following insightful argument:

What the use of improvisation does reveal, however, is how close the roles of writer and actor actually are. As Neilson repeatedly insists, actors are essentially writing when they improvise. They are involved in a similar act of creation, only theirs is rough and immediate rather than meticulously constructed over time. The extraordinary ability of the actors in the room becomes more and more evident over the two weeks, as they reveal an instinctive sense for the direction of a piece as they move within it. They can push at a text and occasionally explode it, in the process revealing new facets. It’s a skill that sits close to writing, but works within a completely different time frame and demands a very different way of thinking. Actors feel their way through the action, moment by moment; writers sit structuring it at one remove. (2013)

However, while Love witnessed some rehearsals from this collaborative programme, I, as detailed in the introduction to this thesis, was present for and filmed much of the *Narrative* rehearsals, and conducted interviews with Neilson, the *Narrative* cast, assistant director Ned Bennett as well as other actors who have extensive experience of working with Neilson. I also use my experience as a practitioner to analyse and assess the collaborative methodology that take place in the rehearsal room for productions commonly understood as written and directed by Anthony Neilson.

My discussion in Chapters 1 and 2 will be focused on authorship in relation to the generation of written material for the published play text as well as material for the performance text. (Neilson edits the written text that was used for the performance when working on the published play text.) My emphasis on writing when discussing authorship risks following the traditional privileging of the playwright within discourses on theatre authorship. However, this is nevertheless an appropriate approach. While Neilson during rehearsals arguably collapses the distinction between the role of writer and director,⁶ his primary concern during rehearsals lies with writing and not directing. Moreover, this approach suits my intention to highlight the creative input by company members during the generation of material. My analysis of the creative input feeding or being fed into the generation of material will be informed by and seek to demonstrate the applicability of Bakhtin's notion of the dialogue, which he defined as 'a very complexly organized chain of [...] utterances' (Bakhtin 1986: 69) in which 'any utterance, in addition to its own theme, always responds (in the broad sense of the word) in one form or another to others' utterances that precede it' (Bakhtin, 1986: 94). However, I will argue that this dialogue is not as orderly as Bakhtin's concept may suggest. Moreover, Neilson's authorial practice is also not as

⁶ Neilson is known for directing the first production of the shows that he writes, although he does, on occasion direct shows written by others, such as Peter Weiss' *Marat Sade* (2011) and Alastair Beaton's *Caledonia* (2010) Neilson employs his unusually collaborative approach to plays he directs but has not written himself.

democratic as Bakhtin's concept may imply, for, as my analysis will reveal, Neilson is more often than not the final arbiter in the decision-making process.

Chapter 1, of Part 1 of the thesis, will be concerned with establishing and detailing the different kinds of input that the actors have in the writing of Neilson's *Narrative*. My discussion here will be testing out Neilson's self-conception of authorship for his work, which contends that the actors' input is somewhat limited and indirect. It will focus first on the ways in which Neilson's approach to rehearsals fits more conventional notions of authorship, challenging the oblique input by the company members that Neilson implies. It will then go on to demonstrate that the actors do, in fact, have more direct input than Neilson concedes. With Chapter 1 having established that the actors working with Neilson do have a range of different kinds of input in the writing process, Chapter 2 will explore, via an analysis of rehearsals of *Narrative*, both the impact that this input has on the performance and on the published play text. As for the former, the chapter will analyse how the actors' input informs, if not creates, distinguishable Neilsonian authorial tropes that surface in the rehearsals and recur throughout his body of work. Chapter 2 will discuss how the actors' input is subject to being used in an ad-hoc, random fashion, and performance material not appearing in the play text published by Neilson since he is ultimately the final arbiter in the decision-making process.

Chapter 1: Neilson's Authorial Process and the Actors' Input

In my interview with Anthony Neilson during the *Narrative* rehearsals, when asked the question 'How does the actor shape the text?', he gave a firm response that (Sequence 4; 0.00-1.18):

there's a difference between input and influence and I think the actors massively influence the text. But it's not a direct thing [...] A lot of it for me is about trying to create an environment where accidents happen or things that you couldn't orchestrate, or things you couldn't predict happen. [So] they have a huge influence more so than a direct input. There will be a few ideas that people have that go into it, but I don't think they are terribly conscious of it, they don't know, in a sense, what it is they're going to say or do, because it has to be something that chimes with me.

This chapter will be concerned with testing Neilson's own understanding of the relationship between his writing and the actors' input. My discussion will focus on three case-studies.

First I will consider the ways in which Neilson can be understood to fulfil conventional expectations of authorship through his driving of the discussion, informed by his knowledge of existing artistic practice. My case study here is Neilson's inspiration by Alfred Hitchcock's film *Blackmail* (1929), which needs to be understood as belonging to Neilson's authorial trope concerning the use of sound to signify a character's state of psychological liminality. I will then explore the different types of the indirect input that Neilson refers to above. My second case study concerns the indirect input that I observed during the third, fourth and fifth weeks of the *Narrative* rehearsals, and which informs the use of spluttered malapropisms by Imogen Doel's character that evoke the auto-correct function of mobile phone technology (e.g. 'he'd cumberbatch on my façade!').¹ Following this, the chapter will then consider the fact that the actors do actually have the type of direct input that Neilson denies, with my third

¹ 'He didn't want anyone to know he was my boy-band [instead of boyfriend]' and 'He licked [rather than liked] me in my school uniform' (Neilson in Reid, 2014: 287).

case study of Olly Rix demonstrating that the actors actually may feed lines into the play text that add detail to characterisation.

Case Study 1: Neilson as Author, *Blackmail* and Murder, and the Authorial Trope of Sound to Portray Psychological Liminality

To briefly contextualise, my first and second case study concern the rehearsals of the aftermath of Imogen Doel's character's murder of her friend Sophie Ross' character (see *Narrative*, pp. 250-5). On 13 March 2013, the beginning of the third week of rehearsals, a read-through was held of material that Neilson had drafted so far, which included this aftermath. This read-through was noticeably flat, with the actors' performances lacking energy and commitment, and the entire company experiencing a degree of frustration. The read-through was followed by a discussion (Sequence 4; 1.18-5.19), during which the mood in the room was fairly lethargic, with the actors seeming withdrawn. My focus lies with the half-hour discussion of a particular section concerned with a dislocated vocal effect to be used for characters' interaction with Doel's character following her murder of Ross' character. In this discussion, the actors are relatively unresponsive to Neilson's somewhat meandering observations:

about 8% of that worked. Most of it's bad writing, I'm just trying to figure out what the bad writing is. [...] There are moments when you say something and it works, where I've got the 'voice' [But] it's not for you to try and say indigestible lines, the whole point is that I'm trying to give you lines that you can happily say. That don't turn to shit in your mouth. [...] There's something not quite working about these voices at the moment. [...] It's about finding that sense of dislocation.

Neilson's comments reflect his ability and willingness to deliver an honest appraisal of the quality of his writing, that he is not overly attached to material he has produced, and that he both trusts and expects his actors to help him develop the material. Here, with Neilson evidently having a rather vague idea of some form of sound effect, this help was especially

needed. In the ensuing discussion, the company agree that a sense of dislocation post-murder for Doel's character is necessary for the scene to work dramatically, and that this dislocation should be rendered using a range of the audio-visual channels of communication that theatre offers.

As my analysis will bear out, Neilson is the one who drives the discussion, thus supporting and reflecting conventional notions of authorship that place the playwright or director at the top of the creative labour hierarchy. At one point during the discussion, he notes the importance of 'correctly analys[ing] what that feeling is', and asks whether 'anybody ever had a feeling like that, anybody had something that felt very dislocated?' Taking up this invitation to reflect, Christine Entwisle references her experience of amnesia fits during which 'it's confusing and nothing really makes sense, so you see everything differently.' Brian Doherty then interjects with the observation: 'You're at a remove from things. Everything's being filtered.' Genuinely receptive to this discussion, Neilson redirects the debate towards a range of other subjects, including the rather oblique comparison of the life changing effect that encountering a ghost or a UFO would have. Without being able to recall the film's title, he then refers to Hitchcock's *Blackmail*, which produces a character's sense of dislocation through its expressionist sound design, as the kind of 'aural scenography' he is aiming for (Brown, 2005: 110; see Sequence 4; 5.19-6.05).

The scene from *Blackmail* that Neilson is referring to is the famous 'Knife' sequence,² during which the character Alice is at the breakfast table the morning after killing the character Crewe who had attempted to rape her. John Belton has discussed how, in this scene, the 'expressionistic tendency in the sound track occurs [during] the speech of a gossip neighbour [which] is initially clear then deliberately garbled' (1999: 240). After the gossip

² This scene can be viewed at the following web address: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UvlyQaJbJgs>.

delivers her line, ‘Now mind you, a knife is a difficult thing to handle’, Alice gradually begins to subconsciously stop paying attention and tune out the remainder of the gossip’s lines. The gossip’s words then become distorted enunciations, except for the word ‘knife’, which is the only clear word emerging (and in fact, is delivered in a quite clipped and aggressive tone by the actor). ‘Knife’ is repeated ten times throughout, cutting into the monologue as a form of subliminal sonic punctuation, which reveals ‘Hitchcock’s penchant for expressionistic devices [that] serve as non-realistic rhetoric to dramatize the character’s state of mind’, as well as serving to increase the aural density of the *mise-en-scène* (Yacowar, 2009: 29). On the eleventh, and final, repetition, the word ‘knife’ is screeched, breaking Alice’s reverie and snapping her back into reality.

As this brief outline demonstrates, Neilson is drawing quite strongly on Hitchcock’s work for developing the first proper introduction of Imogen Doel’s character within the play: like Hitchcock, Neilson is faced with a dramatic situation in which a female character is struggling with guilt after committing murder. Like Hitchcock, Neilson is interested in, as Elizabeth Weis has noted in relation to *Blackmail*, the ‘challenge [...] to find techniques for externalising the heroine’s guilt.’ (1982: 43) And like Hitchcock, Neilson (as I will explore in more detail shortly) decides to resolve this challenge through the use of sound, and particularly stylised and distorted sound, in a way that Weis considers ‘the aural equivalent of visual expressionism.’ (1982: 42) Furthermore, like Hitchcock, Neilson is interested here in notions of liminality: Hitchcock’s soundscape in the ‘Knife’ sequence could certainly be argued to construct a limin (or liminal zone), which Victor Turner describes as ‘a no-man’s land betwixt and between’ (1990: 11). In the scene, Hitchcock’s ‘no-man’s land betwixt and between’ manifests as a hybrid auditory location; on one side of the limin we have the interior (Alice’s guilt-ridden mind) and on the other side, the exterior (the gossip’s speech). Both these worlds exist in conjunction with each other, and the word ‘knife’ erupts from the

limin created from the collision when Alice's 'mindscape' encounters the external stimuli of the gossip's monologue. Or put another way, when Hitchcock's physical locale interacts with his character's psychological landscape, the result is an aural score defined by an audio impingement from reality lingering in the liminal zone.

Neilson's work has generally demonstrated a long-standing interest in sound as an important theatrical device, and more specifically explored another mindscape 'defined by an audio impingement from reality lingering in [a] liminal zone' for one of his female protagonists previously, namely Lisa in *The Wonderful World of Dissocia*. Regarding this play, I have argued elsewhere how Neilson employs various forms of liminality in the play, including through the properties of sound. I have proposed that at certain points in the play the connection between the physical and imaginary worlds is marked by audio intrusion (Cassidy, 2013), with reference to the following example from the play:

*Helplessly, Lisa watches the offstage action: there is the sound of animal grunting, Jane screaming, the sound of blows... the awful sounds build and build.
(Note: in the original production, the live offstage sounds were Eventually swamped by a treated recording of a violent domestic argument) (Act 1, Scene 1: 45).*

As my prior analysis has brought out, it seems that sound from the real world impinges on the fantastical world of Dissocia because disturbing events trigger its intrusions. In these moments, Lisa loses control of her liminal mindscape (the world of Dissocia), as her concentration has to be given to blocking out what is happening in reality (in which she is witnessing a violent domestic encounter). As a result, Lisa does not have the mental resources to sustain her imaginary world, which is signified by a barrage of sound from the physical world (Cassidy, 2013).

In *Narrative*, the use of malapropisms and lip-syncing – which are also informed by the indirect input concerning synaesthesia that the second case study will explore – Neilson clearly shares *Blackmail*'s interest in creating a soundscape that evokes the interiority for a character's 'mindscape' within a liminal zone post-murder. Here, the liminal terrain is situated in the space between what Doel's character is thinking and what is, or strangely appears, to be coming out of her mouth (For example: 'he said he was my boy band' instead of 'he said he was my boyfriend'). During this part of the rehearsals, Neilson makes use of a specific intertextual point of reference (Hitchcock's film) in order to develop an ongoing authorial pre-occupation of his, namely the use of sound to represent ideas theatrically, and especially to portray the interior 'mindscape' of a character in a state of heightened awareness, via sonic intrusions from the 'real world'. The latter, I want to argue, constitutes a Neilsonian trope that is crucial in understanding his authorship and the work it produces. In pursuing a soundscape that is an acoustic expression of a thematic concern, Neilson shares a similar sonic preoccupation of playwright Howard Barker who also, as Adrian Curtin has noted, 'creates an aural palette for his productions that can promote receptive meanings particular to the thematic elements of his plays.' (2012: 279-80: see Sequence 4; 6.05-End)

It is worth reflecting on the fact that this Neilsonian trope is marked by an intertextual quality: taking inspiration from *Blackmail* brings in an intertextual reference to a cinematic *auteur* who, incidentally, had an approach to authorship noticeably different to Neilson's: Hitchcock storyboarded his films very extensively in order to keep full control over the material during production and post-production.³ Interestingly, the next intertextual reference Neilson alludes to during the rehearsals is to the Saturday Night game show *The Generation Game* (BBC 1971-2007), in which winning contestants must remember as many items as they

³ The term *auteur* stems from French film criticism in the 1950s, which sought to critically celebrate the work of directors whose work was judged to be distinctive. This focus on authorship has helped to claim cultural legitimation for cinema and for film studies.

can from an eclectic array of household objects passing through their field of vision on a conveyor belt, a format that Neilson is interested in drawing upon for the forthcoming 'Random Objects' improvisation (see Chapter 3). His broad authorial approach and wide body of work further demonstrate an interest in intertextual borrowing from a diverse range of cultural sources: for example, as I have argued elsewhere (Cassidy, 2013), that *Dissocia* draws on the musical *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939) and classic children's literature such as *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (Lewis Carroll, 1865) and *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (C. S. Lewis, 1950). Moreover, the ending of *Penetrator* (1993) contains a reference to a commercial for the popular sweet Rolo, and *Narrative* further contains allusions to the crime thriller *Reservoir Dogs* (Quentin Tarantino, 1992) and the ITV amateur detective drama *Rosemary and Thyme* (2003-6; see Chapter 2). Neilson is clearly comfortable with taking inspiration from very different types of source materials with disparate cultural status; and in this way, his authorial approach challenges existing paradigms both in terms of (as the second and third case studies will attest) creative labour hierarchies and culturally evaluative hierarchies.

To conclude my discussion of the first case study, Anthony Neilson's authorial approach contains a degree of 'conventional' authorship, in that he is the one driving the discussion through his ideas and inspirations, and developing what is to be recognised as one of his authorial tropes (the use of sound to portray the liminality of a character's state of mind). Neilson, as the playwright, is at the centre of the creative process here, which fits into the playwriting culture fostered within British theatre in general and at the Royal Court in particular. The second and third case studies in this chapter will explore how Neilson's authorial approach further contains degrees of more explicit collaboration, which involves both indirect and direct input from the actors. What the second case study will now go on to consider is the way in which the input by both Neilson himself (here, his evocation of

Blackmail) and his actors are located within a convoluted jigsaw marked by a delayed response by Neilson to such input.

Case Study 2: The Actor's Indirect Input into Neilson's Convoluted Jigsaw

My second case study, which concerns the indirect input by actors (which also informs the use of malapropisms), also took place on 13 March 2013. To briefly outline the pertinent moments of what I have already noted is a convoluted jigsaw. After explicitly invoking *Blackmail*, Neilson condenses the thoughts and ideas that have emerged so far with the comment: 'It's that thing of seeing things in a totally different context. [...] It's perceptual change that we're talking about. It's almost like a drug-induced perceptual change.'

Following Doel's suggestion to use a projection of Ross as a possible effect in the scene,⁴ Neilson returns to what the company had been discussing, namely disjunctive states of awareness as well as synaesthesia, a type of hyper-sensitivity in which a misalignment of synaptic receptors and triggers can cause one sense to activate another sense. Neilson explicitly pulls out synaesthesia as a relevant idea, via the memory of a dream he once had, which was triggered by the preceding discussion:

This [the intention to explore the psychological aftermath of a murder via theatrical means] kind of came out of a dream that I had where I'd murdered somebody. [...] Supposedly serial killers have this thing called the aura phase. It's a profiling term where things become a bit synaesthesiac. Colours become more vivid, [...] it's a heightened state of awareness; [...] an adrenalised feeling, a druggy adrenalized feeling.

Neilson then asks Olly Rix, an experienced boxer, for any input he may have, to which Rix, in part, replied:

a coach of mine gave me something called an ECA stack which you use to cut weight. [...] The feeling that it gives you is that you have a massive rush of adrenalin all the

⁴ Although Doel mentions using projection, she does acknowledge that it will be impossible to gauge the effectiveness of this device until the company have moved into the theatre for the Technical Rehearsal.

time. ALL the time! [...] I just remember really weird things, I remember feeling really, really tall and just walking down the street and it just felt like I was so much bigger. [...] What I'm saying is that something kind of rang true about a heightened awareness. [...] The other thing I thought about [was] everything is out of sync for her [Doel's character]. [...] You're a beat behind, or something, [...] and augmenting that sort of feeling through a very simple process [with] everything just being skew-whiff.

Neilson moves the discussion once again to more tangential topics and starts the first of two quite similar rounds of improvisation,⁵ much of which did not produce anything that would be discernible in the play. Five days later, on 18 March 2013, the company are about to embark upon their second round of rehearsal/improvisation exploring the synaesthetic soundscape of Doel's character (Sequence 5; 0.00-end). Just before the improvisation begins, Neilson instructs the actors to not 'worry about the words, just say weird things to her [Doel]', a comment which demonstrates his relative lack of concern about verbal specificity and his interest in pursuing more abstract objectives. Here it seems that, as indicated in his interview testimony above, Neilson is 'trying to create an environment where accidents happen or things that you couldn't orchestrate, or things you couldn't predict, happen.' This round of improvisation, which hinges around the use of objects on stage, also includes some experimentation with sound effects to produce dislocation, and has the actors crossing the space with various items and verbally interacting with Doel: for example, Ashton pronounces that 'the thing about Man U. is that they will always be the team to beat' while carrying a palette of arbitrary items.

During the ensuing discussion, Neilson realises that the use of objects and arbitrary comments are theatrically insufficient for the scene, and that they need 'to support it with something; recorded dialogue or something'. This remark elicits no response from the other company members and the unfocused discussion continues until sound and music designer

⁵ The first round of improvisation is the 'Random Objects' improvisation mentioned above, which Chapter 3 will explore in depth.

Nick Powell remarks, ‘I do really like that idea of us recording Imogen speaking and then getting her to lip-sync to it’, a suggestion met neutrally by Neilson with the words: ‘Yeah, but we can try out a few things.’ In the next four days, Neilson produces a draft script for a scene in which Doel’s character is placed within a meta-fictional moment and her lines have been pre-recorded and are played when her character is supposed to be speaking. The influence of *Blackmail*, discussed in the first case study in this chapter, is already evident, in the way in which various sound effects are being spliced into Doel’s dialogue in order to find the best manner in which to theatrically represent her character’s mindscape. This scene is then run five times, each time with a different approach to her lip-syncing, during which the following discussion occurs (Sequence 6; 0.00-2:42):

Powell: I think we should try and make it unnoticeable as an effect. The more Imogen tries to sync up with it and the more located the voice is, the more interesting it will be. Because it will obviously not perfectly sync up. [...] You will never ever, ever think it is Imogen speaking, but the closer we get to that, the more weird it will be as an effect. If we just disembodify the voice it will not be nearly as interesting an effect.

[The scene is run again.]

Neilson: No, that doesn’t quite work.

Doel: It’s also REALLY hard.

Powell: Can you try being slightly out, but it doesn’t matter if you’re ahead or behind. [...] The effect that we’re trying to get, and it may be too difficult, is that you’re very close to being in sync, but you are obviously out of sync. [...]

Neilson: It’s very difficult for her, because she can either be in sync, or we take the cue from her, or she can take the cue from it.

Powell: No, because it’s to do with the rhythm within the line.

Neilson: Ok, change the rhythm of inflection of the line. That might do it for you.

[The scene is run again, although this version has not been included due to time considerations and it is, for the most part, covering similar ground to before (Sequence 6; 2.42-7:37).]

Neilson: It sort of worked in places. When it’s really out of sync, it doesn’t seem to be that effective. [...] There’s something in it when your actions don’t quite go with the

exact intonation of how you said it. Choose a couple of lines to say in the same time span.

Doel: I think it would be easier. [...]

[*The scene is run again without Doel lip-syncing and, as above, has not been included. After further discussion, the scene is run with Doel lip-syncing the words 'rhubarb, rhubarb' to her lines. The company members laugh throughout this version*]

Entwisle: [...] There's something quite dreamlike about that, where you feel that you haven't got control over what's coming out of your mouth, that I really liked. [...]

Neilson: There's a point whereby it's so mismatched that it becomes something else. [...] It's the same things as though your ears were blocked. [...] I think all you can do is try to sync it up but try to find a couple of lines where you find a different intonation for it, or add a word in the middle of it to put you just slightly out of sync [...].

Readers of the published play text and audience members of the Royal Court performance will note that the scene being rehearsed does not feature in the final performance or play text. However, I would argue that it is nevertheless important, because it formed a crucial bridging link within the trajectory of the development of how synaesthesia is theatrically rendered within *Narrative*. It is through the exploration of the incongruity between the words and lip movement within the lip-syncing, that the final use of words, that are in themselves incongruous, was arrived at. Importantly, this bridging link already reflects the collaborative quality of the *Narrative* rehearsals. The indirect input by the actors and Powell are located in a Bakhtinian dialogue in which any given utterance by Neilson, Entwisle, Doel and Powell, 'in addition to its own theme, always responds (in the broad sense of the word) in one form or another to others' utterances that precede it.' (Bakhtin, 1986: 94)

There was one further step concerning indirect input within this development. This involved a random conversation during a break from rehearsals between Neilson and one of the cast (Sequence 7; 0.00-0.22). As assistant director Ned Bennett recalled during the production week:

The other day Imogen [Doel] brought in autocorrect screenshots, when the iPhone gets things wrong when you're texting, and showed it to Anthony. And that became the spine of how her dialogue now works when she becomes disoriented and dislocated.

Here Bennett is discussing how an informal lunchtime conversation between Neilson and Doel about the autocorrect function of mobile phone technology informed the malapropisms that contribute to the desired dislocation for her character. Doel also discusses her conversation with Neilson in her interview (Sequence 7; 0.22-2.31), and of particular note is her mention of

autocorrect mistakes [where] technology tries to guess what you're thinking or interpret what you're saying, and it becomes completely misunderstood. [...] And he [Neilson] has integrated this idea that she's in this sort of autocorrect kind of place. So she's saying things, and she's trying to find a meaning, find a way of communicating but she can't.

Just as the autocorrect function on a mobile phone may change words in a text message, so Doel's character's dialogue features malapropisms such as 'I'm sordid! I'm so funky sordid' instead of 'I'm sorry! I'm so fucking sorry' and 'he'd cumberbatch on my façade' instead of 'he'd come on my face' (Neilson in Reid, 2014: 285-7). (To view how the synaesthetic soundscape idea is ultimately theatrically rendered for performance, return to Sequence 6; 7.37-End, which occurred on 4 April 2013, the evening before the first preview.)

This type of incident that involves indirect input by the company and 'goes beyond the floor', blurring the boundaries between work mode and break time mode, is typical of Neilson's *modus operandi* (Sequence 7; 2.31-3.13). This can be discerned from Neilson's comment concerning his authorial sources, where he describes how: 'It's a strange thing; it's just as likely to come out of a stupid conversation out of hours as anything else. [...] From the moment you're in there to the moment you come out during a day, everything can possibly feed in'. Neilson also in passing, jokingly referred to his penchant for this type of

authorial activity during rehearsals on 18 March 2013, almost three weeks before Bennett's production week comment about the autocorrect screenshots, with his remark: 'this is what happens, people say something at the table and I go "no, no, no", but it's in my fucking head and I end up putting it into the thing [the play].' This fact is further attested to by actors Sophie Ross and long-time Neilson collaborators Christine Entwisle and Barney Power (Sequence 7; 3.13-5.13): Power observes that 'everything feeds in, it all feeds in. Often [...] an off-the-cuff discussion finds its way into the script. I've learnt to understand that everything that happens in the rehearsal room is potential material.' Ross recalls how '[i]t's just as likely for the material to come from a random lunchtime conversation as it is from a structured improvisation. So, in the end, anything you say in the room is part of the creative process.' Entwisle remarks that, 'you potentially have a lot of input into the writing of it. And by writing of it I don't just really mean the words, I mean kind of the authorship of it, the whole beast really. [...] you will have conversations [and] you'll see subject matter pop up'. Given this cumulative commentary concerning indirect input, Neilson's process would seem to vividly articulate Charles Marowitz's argument that:

The rehearsal process never ends. It goes on even during coffee breaks and dinner intervals. Every moment of communication between the actor and the director is an opportunity for artistic interchange, even when the conversation appears to be trivial or irrelevant to the work in hand. (1986: 65)

However, Marowitz's argument is concerned with how such artistic interchange facilitates the context within which a performance develops (for example by building trust and a collegiate atmosphere). Neilson, I argue, takes this one step further, as he systematically utilises such randomly occurring interchange as an authorial source that impacts the final play text.

As my discussion above for my second case study bears out, Neilson's process is somewhat akin to a jigsaw puzzle, whose picture, in this example, only begins to emerge through a convoluted development that here stretched across roughly three weeks. The jigsaw is assembled through a series of discussions and improvisations during which Neilson repeatedly and insistently asks for the input from his actors. Neilson responds to this input in ways that do not signal explicit interest or approval; in fact, there is little immediate feedback from him as to what he thinks of others' ideas and suggestions, and whether they may influence the development of the work. This behaviour is most likely because at that point he is not himself entirely sure where the work is heading, at least on a conscious level. Actors and creative technical staff working with Neilson find themselves operating within a loose, unstructured approach to rehearsing, whereby there is little delineation between different strands of ideas, between working and not working, or indeed between the role of writer and director. Actors, in particular, frequently do not know either Neilson's assessment of or opinion on how successfully events are developing, both in terms of their individual involvement and the play/performance overall. Neilson is aware that this internalised approach within a collaborative context can cause difficulties because, as he puts it (Sequence 9; 2.05 - end), 'it [the process] probably makes them [the actors] quite nervous [because] what happens is sort of quite invisible'. Neilson's more immediate responses to input can be frustrating to his cast (and crew) and lead to some confusion and insecurity, although, of course, this partly depends on the level of experience and confidence of the actor in question.

Through a series of theatrical blind alleys, cul-de-sacs, tangents and trial and error, what Neilson does with the indirect input he receives is mentally store, condense and distil the ideas and suggestions offered to him. It is very rare for him to make actual physical notes in response to what he witnesses; instead, he prefers to feed the material straight into his imagination where he lets ideas germinate and only returns to selected ideas at a later date.

For example, the influence of Olly Rix's thought, that 'everything is out of sync for her' and 'everything just being skew-whiff'; Imogen Doel's suggestion to use projection; his own comment 'there's something in it when your actions don't quite go with what you're saying'; and Christine Entwisle's fundamentally important (though seemingly innocuous at the time) remark about things being 'dreamlike [...], where you feel that you haven't got control over what's coming out of your mouth', all combine with Neilson's interest in the use of sound in *Blackmail* to inform the final use of malapropisms to help create character synaesthesia in *Narrative* (see *Narrative* scene 5). At the time of their inception, this input did not necessarily elicit any noticeable response from Neilson; it is only after his process of internal filtration that they re-emerged, in this instance weeks later. It is mostly in Neilson's mid-term response to input where his company members see that he does take on board their thoughts and suggestions. What is often necessary for Neilson is to receive one particular piece of input, in this case a random conversation, occurring during a rehearsal break, about a mobile telephone technology quirk, to complete the jigsaw. This piece of input is pivotal, for it fuses the diverse strands of associative development, and ideas that may have appeared irrelevant and discarded are revealed to have been vital.

The way in which this indirect input by company members works is via a disjointed, delayed chain reaction, one whereby the onus is not on directly transplanting the offered material, but one that operates instead on a more oblique, conceptual level. This is confirmed by assistant director Ned Bennett (Sequence 7; 5.13-5.32), who, when discussing the use of the autocorrect screenshots, further reflected that, 'it feels like it's less writing down what's actually been said, and it's more about using the ideas behind it and how that can work for the story.' What is particularly important to highlight with Neilson's approach is that he needs 'time between phases of the creative process to allow ideas to incubate' (Mermikides, 2010: 21). Generally speaking, Neilson's incubation period often involves menial tasks

during which his ‘conscious process of selecting and accessing ideas weaves in and out of their generation, as if it were a separate part of the mind [...] monitoring and commenting on the creative process as it goes along’ (Claxton, 2006: 65). This type of brain activity is what cognitive neuroscientist Michael Corballis (2015) has described as the default-mode network, which uses a widespread mesh of connections in the brain to solve problems and generate ideas. Neilson, however, uses the rehearsal period itself as this incubation period, he seems to access the default-mode network by letting his thinking drift across tangents, producing both his internalised, somewhat muted responsiveness and his creative lateral associative developments. Thus, to refer to McAuley, Neilson’s authorial process ‘is not confined to a particular place and time but can be bubbling along in a subliminal way even when the artist is doing something else’ (2012: 11).

Case Study 3: Olly Rix, Shakespeare and Superheroes: The Actor’s Direct Input

This chapter has so far established the indirect, oblique input actors have into Neilson’s rehearsal process, which chimes with Neilson’s own views on how his rehearsals operate. The final case study will now investigate how there is furthermore a more direct input by the actors, despite Neilson’s insistence to the contrary. To reiterate, Neilson has commented that ‘there’s a difference between input and influence and I think the actors massively influence the text. But it’s not a direct thing [...]. [So] they have a huge influence more so than a direct input.’ It is interesting to compare Neilson’s thoughts with that of the actors he has worked with. In a follow up interview in December 2014, actress Christine Entwisle had something quite different to say on the subject:

He [Neilson] talks about it as a colour palette [and how] it’s not a Mike Leigh process, they [the actors] don’t give him lines. I would argue that slightly, I would say that a lot of the lines do come from the actors. [...] [But] does that make them authors, does that give them shared authorship? Because ultimately he’s the one to put it on the canvas. I don’t know, I’d like to think so. [...]. What they [the actors] do is,

they engage with his ideas. They create characters, they create worlds for the characters, and they come up with text as well. They contribute to the material being generated in all sorts of ways. Frustratingly, few of which could be documented or pinned down. (Entwisle, 2014)

During our interview in November 2014, Alastair Galbraith, in regards to Neilson's authorship, stated:

He [Neilson] may bounce a few ideas off you and see what you would go with. But I never got the feeling that part of the process was the actors coming up with the material at all. [...] What he doesn't do is, he doesn't claim authorship of something that's not his. Everything is his, even if you think you've come up with the whole thing, you've only come up with it because he's let you come up with it and given you parameters to express something [...] he edits by watching people doing his stuff. (Galbraith, 2014)

Galbraith's thoughts are more in line with Neilson's position, so there is a significant divergence of views, which my discussion for my final case study in this chapter will proceed to analyse, demonstrating that the actors both do and do not have a direct input into the material. I will develop this discussion further in Chapter 2.

I will focus my attention on one particular example, namely the direct input by actor Olly Rix into his character's 'Hamlet/Macbeth' speech in Scene 4. This speech was first given to Rix on 28 April 2013 during the final week of the *Narrative* rehearsals. In the scene containing the speech, Rix's character is being interviewed by Zawe Ashton's character about his first major film role where he plays the fictional super-hero 'Elastic Man' (Sequence 8; 0.00-1.37). The original draft of the speech reads as follows:

You approach a character like Elastic-Man in the same way as you approach a character like Hamlet or Macbeth. In some ways, it's actually harder than those parts because it's more outside your experience. I mean – here's a man who suddenly has the power to stretch like elastic – he can stretch himself to the size of a football field; he can stretch his neck and look in a window ten-stores up – so what does that do to your body? What does that do to your mind? How does that kind of power change you? What responsibility do you have with a power like that? Those are really interesting questions and it's really meaty stuff for an actor to play. (*Narrative* draft 28 April 2013: 47-8)

However, during the first rehearsal of the scene Rix significantly digressed from Neilson's written text, which the following transcript from the *Narrative* footage shows:

You approach the character of Elastic Man in much the same way as you'd approach Hamlet or Macbeth. In some ways it's harder than either of those great roles because it's a little outside your field of reference. To some extent we all know what it's like to be a moody teenager, or a bit ambitious. But to stretch yourself, literally, physically the size of a football field. Or to stretch your neck ten stories high and look in a window. Can you imagine what that's like? I mean, what does that do to you, not just physically – you'd probably age really badly – but emotionally. How does that affect you? How you see yourself? How does that affect how you relate to others? These are big questions. You know, at this stage of my career it's quite a gift to get a role like this. To be able to work with Ridley Scott the producer, Scorsese's directing, George Clooney's starring in it. It's amazing, it's a gift, it really is.⁶

What is noteworthy is that, apart from a quick glance at the beginning of the speech, Rix does not read from the script at all during the first rehearsal, and this is undoubtedly a contributory factor to his version exhibiting a number of the smaller changes, additions and paraphrases. These minor alterations by Rix are typical examples of Neilson's laissez-faire approach to his dialogue, and how his writing can function as a framework for the actors to develop further. By imposing their own speech patterns and idioms, the actors have more ownership over the material. This potential for making the written text more one's own was noted by Rix when interviewed near the end of the technical rehearsal (Sequence 9; 0.00-1.19):

[...] you kind of get to do whatever you want, and if you bring some crazy idea with material he's given you, or if you change it, then he'll [Neilson'll] go along with it. There are certain little moments, songs, lines that I've changed. Nothing too major, but certainly [...] also I think that Anthony appreciates quite an informal, naturalistic style. But also sometimes he tries to write that...sometimes it works and sometimes it's very much in his voice and he's an older Scottish guy and I'm a young not-Scottish guy. So sometimes you just kind of have to change certain things: turns of phrase that I'd never say and would sound weird coming from me. [...] you can veto

⁶ The next section of Neilson's draft text deals with George Clooney, so undoubtedly this is where Rix plucks this particular name. Therefore, this incorporation is not of particular note.

certain ideas, change certain lines, and improvise. [...] If you offer up other little bits, they often stay if they make him laugh.⁷

Something similar was also articulated by Imogen Doel, who observed this flexible, actor-friendly quality of Neilson's authorial process (one which is far from common within contemporary theatre practice) as follows (Sequence 9; 1.46-2.05):

He's not precious about his words, if you feel that something would come out in a different way, you can change the lines and put one in front of the other. Anything to give it that 'real' feeling or to get your instinct working, he's totally open to.

However, Rix's additions and paraphrases are not entirely accounted for by the fact that he cannot remain absolutely true to the written word due to not reading it while speaking it for the first time. Neilson's approach contains further scope for more significant input by his actors, as the first rehearsal transcript cited above demonstrates. Rix brings in his own ideas as his character speculates that 'you'd probably age really badly' and poses new questions such as 'How [do] you see yourself?' and 'How does that affect how you relate to others?' Rix paraphrases very similar versions of this speech throughout the rest of rehearsals; but particularly noteworthy contributions by Rix are his reference to 'what it's like to be a moody teenager, or a bit ambitious', as well as his mention of the film being directed by Martin Scorsese and produced by Ridley Scott. What makes these contributions so noteworthy is that both of them feature in a discussion on 4 April 2013, the last day of the technical rehearsal. In the technical rehearsal, the speech is constantly interrupted due to technical issues concerning how the stage direction of the '*anus sounds*' (Neilson in Reid,

⁷ Rix's view about Neilson sometimes failing to capture a particular actor's 'voice' in his writing is at odds with the testimony of Brian Doherty (Sequence 9; 1.19-1.46) whose conviction is that 'he's writing for you and he writes in your idiom. He writes the way we speak and he's quite strangely gifted at that. And at times it does feel that he reads minds. And he captures the cadence and rhythms of people's speech particularly well.' The disparity in these assessments not only echoes the contradictory nature of the testimony of Neilson, Entwisle and Galbraith, highlighted towards the beginning of the chapter, it also suggests that Neilson can be inconsistent in tailoring his writing to the specific actor, and/or he is better at capturing the 'voice' of a particular actor, based on accent, familiarity with the person, or time invested in attempting to do so.

2014: 277), playing as an onomatopoeic internal monologue in Rix's head, can be plotted as specific sound cues by music and sound designer Nick Powell. The transcript of the relevant moment from the footage is as follows (Sequence 8; 1.37-end):

Rix: 'You approach a character like Elastic Man in much the same way as you'd approach Hamlet or Macbeth. [*Powell cues in the anus sounds.*] In some ways it's actually harder than either of those great roles because it's further outside your field of reference. We all know what it's like to be a moody teenager, or a bit ambitious. [*Neilson laughs off-camera at this point and continues throughout the rest of the speech.*] But to stretch yourself, literally, physically, the size of a football field.' [...] Shall I keep going?

Neilson: [*Still laughing*] If he's going to say 'a bit ambitious', that needs at least one [anus sound]. It deserves at least one. It's like a Richter Scale of arseholeness. A Geiger Counter of arseholery.

Powell: 'A bit ambitious' is not in my script.

Neilson: It's not in the script, no. [*To Rix*] Are you going to say 'a bit ambitions'? I like it, I like it.

Rix: [*Off-camera.*] Yeah.

Neilson: Ok then. [...] By the way Olly, I never really believed that bit about Scorsese directing.

Rix: Yeah, I was just fucking around.

Neilson: It wouldn't be Scorsese.

Rix: No, I know. It could be Ridley Scott?

Neilson: That's unlikely as well.

What emerges from this footage is that neither the 'moody teenager' line nor the reference to film directors Scorsese and Scott were in the then-current working draft of the script, and Rix was ad-libbing material that he had previously been working with.⁸ The 'moody teenager' line was even causing technical difficulties for Powell, who was trying to plot in sound effects for which he required exact cues from Rix. Very amused by this line,

⁸ It should be acknowledged that Rix's additions are directly associated with Neilson's initial words, so for example Rix's 'moody teenager' links to Neilson's 'Hamlet'.

Neilson conceded that his draft does not contain Rix's improvised material, and then what transpires is the writer/director asking the actor if he is going to keep the line in; a situation unusual enough to deserve attention.⁹ Following Rix's sanction, the line was added to the script and appears in the published play text, even though this was already the evening before the first preview, the eleventh hour, so to speak, if not beyond.¹⁰ Neilson vetoed the reference to Scorsese and Scott, but this seemed mostly based on his film industry, and genre-specific, knowledge (neither Scorsese nor Scott would be likely to direct and produce a film featuring 'Elastic Man'), and not so much on the fact that the actor was bringing in new material at this late stage. So, while, undoubtedly, Neilson produced the bulk of the text, Rix inflected the work and especially the characterisation, adding another level of comedic shading. Due to Neilson's somewhat loose, yet generous approach to his own authorial status – which allows for direct input, even when this causes problems for the efficient running of the last day of the technical rehearsal – it seems that Neilson and Rix share authorship of this particular speech.

In her discussion of the rehearsals of theatre company Forced Entertainment, one of the observations that Alex Mermikides makes is that 'while the material-generation phase of the process may involve the performers as authors, the fixing phase represents the reassertion of the director's authorship as he sculpts the material into shape.' (2010: 106) Neilson's and Forced Entertainment's Tim Etchells' fixing phase have remarkably similar properties, as Neilson also reasserts his authorial function and 'sculpts the material into shape'. But

⁹ This demonstrates the validity of Rix's earlier comment that 'certain little moments [...] often stay if they make him [Neilson] laugh.' This comment also chimes with a remark by Neilson in a previous interview we conducted concerning *Dissocia*, during which he stated that 'I would be lying if I'd said there weren't a couple of gags in there that didn't really need to be there, that were kind of there just because I sort of thought they were funny.' (Neilson, 2012) So, ultimately, it seems that Neilson is prone to including material authored by the actors if it makes him laugh, whether it drives the plot or not.

¹⁰ In Neilson's published play text of *Narrative*, Rix's 'Hamlet/Macbeth' speech is identical to Neilson's first draft. The only difference is that Rix's contribution is included virtually verbatim and reads as follows: '[...] it's actually harder than those parts because it's more outside our experience. I mean...we all know what it's like to be a stropky teenager or a bit ambitious: but here's a man [...].' (Neilson in Reid, 2014: 277).

Neilson's process also differs from Etchells' because the former still uses the performers as authors and his actors have an unusual amount of creative agency, with space for a notable amount of individuality and specificity in the fixing phase. That this creative agency is present in this way also shows the accuracy of an astute reflection made by *Narrative's* assistant director Ned Bennett (Sequence 7; 5.32-end), who observed that 'compared to other, more conventional processes, the script changes much, much more easily and is responsive to what's actually happening in the room and who the actors are.' This creative agency is interestingly connected to temporality here, in that its presence so late in the rehearsal period causes problems for the running of the play, and is arguably also facilitated by the fact that, as director Declan Donnellan has noted, 'the real problem with devised work is that you don't reach the realisation of a piece until a very late stage' (in Giannachi and Luckhurst, 1999: 20).

Conclusion

To conclude, the analysis across the three case studies has demonstrated that the actors do have a range of different kinds of input into Neilson's authorial process, despite Neilson's placing discursive limitations on this. Much of the rehearsals function as a complex, convoluted form of Bakhtinian dialogue, in which, as the first and second case study have shown, Neilson's utterances do usually drive the discussion but do not necessarily get privileged. Neilson is still ultimately the one who collects and distils the input, putting together the individual pieces of the complex jigsaw, so his rehearsal process revolves around the playwright, thus locating himself within the writer-centred tradition of British theatre as noted by Rebellato (2016). Nevertheless, in its collaborative nature, Neilson's process can also be usefully understood as a type of 'new writing' that is experimental, loose and takes creative risks in its approach to authorship. With intentionality present, but enmeshed, diffuse

and located within a convoluted jigsaw, the playwright as individual is in his work ‘at the centre of the theatre-making process’ (Sierz 2011: 50) but this position is intertwined with the creative input of his company. This both complements and represents a notable development to the Royal Court’s ‘new writing’ culture. Chapter 2 will explore in more detail both how the actors’ input may inform the performance and/or play text, and what may happen to the actors’ input (especially the possibility that, unlike Olly Rix’s input from the third case study, it may get cut) within Neilson’s ad-hoc approach to authorship.

Chapter 2: ‘The Footmouse Dance’: The Actors’ Input into Authorial Tropes and Neilson’s Ad-Hoc Approach to Authorship

Having proposed that the actors working with Neilson have both indirect and direct input in the writing process in Chapter 1, Chapter 2 will explore both the impact that this input has on the performance and/or the published play text. The chapter will analyse how the actors’ input informs several distinguishable Neilsonian authorial tropes that surface in the rehearsals and recur throughout his body of work. The identification of Neilsonian authorial tropes (here, the naming of characters and the use of non-malicious theatrical humiliation) is of critical interest because they foster an understanding of the deep underlying structures that shape, determine and inflect meaning. They are of particular significance for Neilson’s work because his process is so arbitrary and convoluted that patterns are considerably harder to spot and identify. The chapter will then consider how the actors’ input is subject to being used in an ad-hoc, random fashion, for example, being included in the performance but being cut from the published play text. One recurring idea running through the analysis in this chapter will be that Neilson’s approach to authorship is ad-hoc, random and inconsistent, and this will emerge particularly vividly in the final part of the discussion in this chapter, which demonstrates that this ad-hoc approach even extends to Neilson asking myself to make a contribution to the *Narrative* rehearsals.

What’s In a Name?: The Naming of Characters as an Authorial Trope in Neilson’s Work

On 26 March 2013, the *Narrative* rehearsals focused on completely new material that Neilson had written the previous evening, and included one scene lasting approximately five minutes, which I will term the ‘Footmouse Dance’ sequence. In the first segment of the sequence, Barney Power’s character (Noel Bingham) is giving an embarrassing account of himself at an

advert audition for a new computer product, a ‘footmouse’, where he is being ‘put through his paces’ by Zawe Ashton’s maliciously bored and unimpressed character (Sequence 10; 0.00-3.19). The actors are hesitantly feeling their way through the scene for the first time, so the action is somewhat stilted; the only point where it begins to come alive is near the end where Power improvises the ‘Footmouse Dance’. A small moment from this segment, namely Ashton’s line ‘Ok, Noel, I’ll tell you when he jumps out’, serves as a springboard to critically examine the use of character names.

As Warren R. Maurer points out, ‘names are an aspect of form and can provide valuable insights into authors and their work’ (1979: 457). They are also an important theatrical device that can ‘provide significant clues to the characters’ (Burelbach, 1985: 138), thus making them ‘an integral part of characterisation’ (Maurer, 1979: 467). This is reflected in the fact that they have received much critical attention from scholars in their discussions of dramatists from the Renaissance to the present day: including Mark Anderson’s work on Ben Jonson (1981),¹ Lina Perkins Wilder’s examination of Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (2008),² Vicky Angelaki’s analysis of Martin Crimp (2012) and Frederick Busi who argues that, for Samuel Beckett, character names ‘serve linguistically, profound dramatic functions [...] [and] are ultimately central to his dramatic concerns’ (1980: 2-3).³

At this point in the rehearsals, the names of all the characters have not yet been decided, although it does seem that Power’s character has provisionally already been named

¹ Anderson makes the point that Jonson’s ‘character names are carefully chosen and related to the action’ of the play (1981: 182).

² One of the arguments that Wilder makes is that when one Shakespearean character names another Shakespearean character, they are attempting to gain ‘control over the thing named’ (2008: 47). Wilder cites the example of Petriccio continually calling Katherine ‘Kate’ in *Taming of the Shrew*: ‘naming and taming’, as she puts it.

³ Angelaki suggests that ‘by giving characters surnames, Crimp flags them up as important or special, next to the array of first-name only or anonymous characters/personae in the rest of his plays.’ (2012: 19). Angelaki also proposes that in Crimp’s play *The City* (2008), the protagonist the Girl’s lack of a specific name is ‘uncharacteristic in a Crimp play of this kind, [which] suggests that she is in a project of flux, still being written while her author [...] is exploring different possibilities.’ (2012: 113-4)

‘Noel.’⁴ To briefly map out the ensuing exchange, Neilson and Doherty are engaging in some light-hearted banter concerning a scene just about to be rehearsed which is a fictional detective television pilot authored by Doherty’s character that was not picked up for broadcast by ITV, mainly because Power’s character ‘Noel Bingham’ featured in it.⁵ Prompted by the repartee, Neilson realises, ‘we’ve got to sort this [the character names] out’ – the use of the first person plural pronoun is critically significant here, as it is in the following quotation – and calls for the attention of the actors, telling them: ‘Right, listen, we’ve got to sort out whether you want to use your names, or whether you don’t’. The use of the 2nd person plural pronoun here is also quite revealing, signalling that Neilson ascribes the authorial control here to the actors. Power, Doherty and Ashton prefer a fictitious name for their characters, while Rix wants to use his own name. Ross’s question to Neilson as to whether he wants the names of the characters being the same as the actors – ‘to be all or nothing, don’t you?’ – is met with a non-committal shrug.

The variation in the naming of characters between matching the names of the actors to the characters they are playing, characters having no personal names at all, and actors choosing their characters’ names, is an authorial trope that recurs throughout Neilson’s body of work. For example, actor Selina Boyack remarked during our interview that her character in *Stitching* (2002) ‘may not have been called Abby’ if she had not ‘chose[n] her name.’⁶ In *Realism* (2006) the main protagonist Stuart McQuarrey was played by the actor Stuart

⁴ Discussion of what to name the characters must have occurred previously on one of the days that I was absent from rehearsals, as a brief exchange two days later, on 28 March 2013 (Sequence 10 B; 0.00-2.32), attests.

⁵ Shortly thereafter, it emerges that Neilson had considered naming the two detectives from Doherty’s pilot ‘Hammer and Nail’ or ‘Dandelion and Burdock’, expressing a preference for the latter. This is an intertextual allusion to the ITV amateur detective drama *Rosemary and Thyme* (2003-6).

⁶ Similarly to Boyack, actor Matthew Pidgeon also chose the name for his character in *Edward Gant*, but Pidgeon and his fellow actors also took the naming a lot further, as Pidgeon’s following interview testimony attests: ‘We went off and wrote character studies and we devised our own characters, the four actors, the cast of four. [...] We came up with the name, a bit of backstory and the kind of stuff they’d been doing.’

McQuarrey, while in *Dissocia* many of the characters are given generic titles as names such as Nurse 1, Inhibitions, Laughter and Oath-taker. This type of non-specific onomastic activity which erases the individualism of a character is also present in Sarah Kane's *Crave* (1998) where she distils her character names to letters, namely A, B, C and M (Kane, 2001: 154). In *Crave*, Kane's alphabetised names actually bear similar properties to Neilson's Dissocian names because, as Sierz has pointed out, it is very likely that 'A stands for abuser, B for boy, C for child and M for mother' (Sierz, 2000: 118).

In *The Censor* there is a different inflection to this onomastic approach, as there is a degree of intertextual word-play in the naming of the characters. This is revealed in the final few pages of the play where it becomes apparent that The Censor's Christian name is 'Frank' (Scene 13: 283). In this play the character name of, 'Frank the Censor' is an allusion to television character Frank Spencer. This intertextual naming activity was discussed in my interview with Alastair Galbraith:

Galbraith: [...] I mean The Censor didn't even have a name.

Cassidy: No he does have a name, he's called Frank I think.

Galbraith: Oh that's right, Frank, like Frank Censor/Frank Spencer (*both laugh*).

Yeah, and I think there was a line in it when Alison [Newman, the actress who played The Wife character] used to say 'Oh come on Frank!'⁷ But we just couldn't get through it [meaning they corpsed] so he cut it.

Word-play on character names is also discernible in *Dissocia*. Here Neilson's principle protagonist Lisa Montgomery-Jones, who is suffering from a dissociative/depressive mental condition, is known as 'Divine Queen Sarah of House Tonin' (Act 1: 25) in her self-created fantasy world. As I have pointed out previously, 'Sarah...Tonin' is Neilson's reference to the drug serotonin, which is utilised for the management of various mental disorders (Cassidy, 2013). Again, this intertextual approach to character names has an onomastic equivalent in

⁷ This line was often used by Frank Spencer's long-suffering wife Betty in the television show *Some Mothers Do 'Ave 'Em* (BBC1 1973-8).

the work of Neilson's contemporary Sarah Kane, as both playwrights demonstrate an 'awareness of the dramatic potential in didactic character names' (Anderson, 1981: 182). In regards to *Cleansed* (1998), Hilary Chute has noted that: 'The character of Tinker, reportedly and believably, earned his name from the journalist Jack Tinker [...] who first catapulted *Blasted* into a news story with his review titled "This Disgusting Feast of Filth"' (2011: 163).⁸ It seems that both dramatists, at times, adopt an allusive approach to character names, although I would argue that their motivation for doing so is radically different. Kane, I would venture, seems to be indulging in what could be termed 'theatrical vengeance' in her allusive naming; while Neilson creates an intertextual in-joke for his audience to work out.

In our 2012 interview, when discussing what he considers theatrically important in his work, Neilson commented that 'I'm not that fascinated by the well-turned line [or] that Lewis Carroll play-on-words'. This comment connects to the idea presented earlier in this chapter that often Neilson's 'scripted text forms the architecture or scaffolding of the piece' which functions more as a framework than as an exact blueprint for the actors to follow (Moss, 2010: 79). However, Neilson's claim that he is not particularly interested in word-play for his scripts cannot entirely be sustained when considering the names of his characters, the presence of word play in *Narrative* in the form of malapropisms as discussed in Chapter 1, and his evident broader interest in intertextuality.

Of course, there are many occasions when Neilson has more conventional names for his characters and chooses the names himself, so there is a certain level of inconsistency apparent in this authorial trope, when the very idea of a trope suggests a detectable, stable (enough) pattern. However, my analysis does reveal a pattern throughout Neilson's work. In

⁸ Tinker is 'a sadistic guard or doctor at the institution' who is ultimately responsible for most of the cruelties inflicted on the other characters in the play; atrocities such as an eye being injected with heroin, amputations, a broomstick inserted into a rectum and a penis transplant (Sierz, 2001: 112).

his discussion of Max Stafford-Clark's Out of Joint theatre company, John Ginman has remarked that 'the work in rehearsal is a shared, essentially discursive activity' (2003: 19). This comment can be applied to events in this particular segment of Neilson's rehearsal footage, because what emerges here is a shared discourse between Neilson and five of the cast that results in what Jack Stillinger has described as a 'dispersal of authorship' (1991: 175). However, this dispersed form of authorship is marked by and gives rise to an absence of a logical and consistent theatrical patterning: Power, Doherty and Ashton choose fictitious names, and only Rix expressed a preference for using his own name. Ultimately in the performance of the show and the published play-text, one character has a fabricated name, namely Power's character 'Noel Bingham'.⁹ Furthermore, Neilson's aforementioned non-committal shrug to Ross concerning the desirability of consistency in the character names is very revealing, because it shows that Neilson is content for there to be elements of irregularity, discernible in his work.

What is noteworthy from an authorial perspective is that, when the ceding of authorial control to the actors is coupled with the inconsistency of having one fictitious character name, it becomes apparent that Neilson does *not always* consider the authoring of appropriate names for his dramatis personae to be important or interesting, which is arguably why he relinquishes authorial autonomy to the actors. Consequently, the naming of characters is implemented with very little regard for the repercussions that deviations from the dramatic convention of consistent and appropriate character names could potentially have. A response to this from a broadly realist tradition that takes a conventional - conventional here meaning representation that is stable and intelligible - approach to theatrical representation would find this problematic. To name one example, Warren Maurer has noted in relation to

⁹ To view the cast list for *Narrative*, see Neilson (in Reid, 2014: 219).

Shakespearean character names that, to ‘ignore them [runs] the risk of neglecting an important interpretative tool’ (1979: 466). From this particular perspective, Neilson’s onomastic approach in *Narrative* is impeding the possibility of a multi-levelled engagement with, and perspective on, the play for the audience and readers. It is also entirely at odds with the capacity that character names have for assisting actors with their characterisation because, as Wilder has observed, they ‘can be among the many other factors that feed into the construction of character’ (2008: 53).¹⁰

However, given the form, characters and subject matter of *Narrative*, a different response seems just as, if not more, appropriate. Neilson’s already mentioned non-committal shrug can also be understood as a refusal of accepting that consistency is a useful value in theatre. In her 2007 article on Neilson’s oeuvre, Reid pointed out that ‘a useful terrain onto map [sic] his [Neilson’s] work might be offered by Hans-Thies Lehmann in his influential study *Postdramatic Theatre*’ (2007: 493). Postdramatic theatre challenges many of the traditional conventions of theatre (see Lehmann, 2006: 2-14), because, amongst other things, ‘[t]he orientation provided by recognisable character or plotlines dissolves’ (Barnett: n/a). Postdramatic theatre can also ‘offer a public reflection on particular themes instead of dramatic action’, such as the decentring of identity driven by techno-socio-cultural changes (Lehmann, 2006: 112). With *Narrative*’s absence of a finished or orthodox theatrical narrative and its thematic content concerned with how conventional theatre represents dramatic narrative, Reid’s argument that Neilson’s postdramatic strategies problematize representation (2007: 493) is clearly pertinent; indeed, the conflation of character and actor

¹⁰ As an actor I personally would find it more problematic to play a character that had the same name as myself, especially if the character was an actor who had the same accent and vocal idiosyncrasies. (This is the situation with the male actors in *Narrative*; Doherty, Power and Rix are all playing actors in their own voice.) It would be difficult to subconsciously separate myself from the role under these circumstances. So, I suspect that it would feel as if I was playing myself on stage and I would have to counter the urge to behave as I think I would in the situations my character finds themselves in.

names in Neilson's work very much ties in with the concern to "distance" the audience emotionally from the characters and their story' (Eddershaw, 1982: 136) that has been fundamental to both postdramatic theatre and Brecht's much noted *Verfremdungseffekt* (Brecht, 1964 [1957]). Therefore, it seems that Neilson's work often chooses, 'to discourage the audience from directly relating to the dramatic characters' (Anderson, 1981: 182) by presenting them in a 'mode of theatrical expression that offer[s] unstable or multiple perspectives' (Reid, 2007: 493). This post-dramatic aspect of Neilson's body of work is, as my discussion has demonstrated, clearly informed by the fact that the actors have considerable input into the naming of the characters they play, which makes a level of inconsistency more likely. So, this trope is both partly formed by and becomes somewhat unstable through the actors' input; and Neilson's loose approach to authorship resonates with the post-dramatic.

Zawe Ashton and the Cancelled Magazine Subscription: The Actor's Direct Input Reconsidered

The post-scene discussion of 'The Footmouse Dance' sequence (Sequence 10; 3.19-4.37) begins with Neilson informing Ashton that, 'Originally I didn't think it was her, so it's still written in that mode';¹¹ and suggesting to her that 'maybe you could say something about her own life [something like] you haven't found your soulmate.' Ashton is favourably inclined to this suggestion and adds to the mix a line of her own invention which, as Neilson necessitated, encapsulated 'something about her own life': 'your magazine subscription's

¹¹ Neilson's remark here shows the validity of Doherty's aforementioned assessment concerning Neilson's penchant for actor-specific authoring: (Sequence 9; 1.19-1.46) 'he's writing for you and he writes in your idiom. He writes the way we speak [...] [a]nd he captures the cadence and rhythms of people's speech particularly well.'

When asked in his interview 'To what extent do you write material specifically centred in what you see in the actor that you're working with?' part of Neilson's response was 'Yeah that can happen [...] [but] it's a variety of different things.'

late'. Here Ashton's line is referring to women's magazines such as *Vogue*, *Marie Claire* and *Elle*, and as feminist scholars such as Marjorie Ferguson (1985) and Ellen McCracken (1993) have discussed, in these types of publications female identity is conventionally determined by notions of lack, fear, insecurity and dissatisfaction. McCracken has argued that in these magazines:

The attractive presentation frequently disguises the negativity close at hand: within this discursive structure, to be beautiful one must fear being non-beautiful; to be in fashion, one must fear being out of fashion; to be self-confident, one must first feel insecure (1993: 136).

Here McCracken's argument is that while women's magazines reinforce a negative female self-image, they also promise transformation; transformation that is enabled by consumption, labour, time, energy and discipline. Ultimately, this metamorphosis is what Ashton's character pursues throughout the play.¹²

In this brief exchange between Neilson and Ashton, from an authorship perspective, there are two salient points. First, because the writing had not been tailored for Ashton, the dialogue is somewhat underdeveloped and lacking in idiosyncratic content: a fact that Neilson fully and readily acknowledges. Second, and more importantly, in order to remedy this lack, Neilson and Ashton both invent lines that would be more subtextually indicative of Ashton's character's attitude to Power's antics, while revealing, more generally, her personal preoccupations. Neilson's 'You haven't found your soulmate' is entirely in keeping with Ashton's character's fixations and shows that Neilson understands the fundamentals of Ashton's character's psyche on a macro level, as the main arc of her character's development in the play is her desperate, and ultimately fruitless, search for a meaningful and lasting romantic relationship. However, I would argue that Ashton's line 'Your magazine

¹² This is particularly evident in the analysis/discussion of the 'Box Therapy' improvisation in Chapter 3.

subscription's late' is, similar to Olly Rix's input discussed in Chapter 1, a more nuanced indication of character that operates beyond the macro on a micro level. Neilson's line, while not out of place, is somewhat predictable, due to the narrative development of Ashton's character, and its obvious connection to the other examples of disgruntlement in Ashton's mini-monologue featured in the first segment of Sequence 10: 'You're not where you want to be with your career. You don't like the way you look, the place you live in. You're not happy in your relationship, you don't like your body'. These areas of dissatisfaction are very general and could be applied to most individuals. It is also not too difficult to discern the link between 'You haven't found your soul mate' and 'You're not happy in your relationship'.

Ashton's line, however, operates on a deeper, subtler level because it reveals, in one succinct phrase, the manner in which Ashton's character typifies how women have been pressured to internalise various detrimental aspects of consumer capitalism, especially the insecurity which drives them towards continual consumption and how the emotional fallout of this pursuit can result in a fractured and/or damaged female psyche. Ashton is, in effect, verbalising to Power her character's internal monologue of issues in her life that cause her distress in order to give him the impetus to imaginatively engage with the hypothetical scenario (similar to a somewhat heavy-handed Stanislavskian 'affective memory' exercise.)¹³ Therefore, the inclusion and placement of this minor inconvenience amongst the larger, albeit generalised, issues is a hint at or encapsulation of the serious psychological and ideological issues affecting Ashton's character. In one well-chosen line what is subtextually being communicated is that Ashton's characters' unhappiness about her copy of *Vogue* being late is a key concern in her life. This is a concern which is so important to her that she positions it

¹³ Lee Strasberg has defined affective memory as 'the basic material for reliving on the stage, and therefore the creation of real experience on the stage. What the actor repeats in performance is not just the words and movements he practiced [sic] in rehearsal, but the memory of emotion through the journey of thought and sensation.' (1987: 113)

among much larger issues such as her lack of success in her career and relationships. Ashton's authorial input exhibits similar properties to Rix's 'moody teenager' addition discussed in Chapter 1, and as such there is little point reiterating the core of the argument offered there. However, Ashton's input is also a good example of the actor's ability speedily to craft dramatically appropriate character-specific material, and therefore demonstrates how an actor can, at times, have more insight into their character and what motivates them, than the director/playwright does.¹⁴ This level of character awareness by the actor is something which Neilson repeatedly taps into throughout rehearsals in order to inflect certain points in the play with an element of detail that would in all probability be absent without the contributions of his cast. That being said, I feel that it is important to emphasise once more that this type of authorial involvement by the actor is one step in the process; a step which provides the final layer of polish to the artefact that has primarily been created by Neilson himself.

The scene is re-run and then some post-run discussion ensues (Sequence 10; 4.37-9.29). This run of the scene is very similar to the first, with the only differences being that there are some minor variances in the order of the lines delivered by Ashton and Power, and the phrases 'you haven't found your soulmate' and 'your magazine subscription's late' have been included. However, once Power begins the Footmouse Dance, Neilson calls a halt to proceedings and gives both actors notes about changes he wants to make to the structure of the dialogue and how these minor changes affect the timing of Power's 'dance'. Neilson then gives Ashton a very specific note regarding the vocal delivery of one particular line, 'What's wrong with you', even going as far as demonstrating the desired cadence of the line to

¹⁴ Of course, this is not necessarily always the case. For example, in the Footmouse Dance sequence, which this chapter will proceed to discuss, Neilson has a firmer grasp on Power's character's psychology and what would be appropriate for him to say than Power does, when Neilson advises that Power not refer to 'wanking' during the audition scene.

Ashton.¹⁵ Neilson's mid-flow directorial/authorial intervention to address specific textual, choreographic, vocal and character details is an extremely unusual occurrence for his rehearsals.¹⁶ When he does provide *any* directorial/authorial input during rehearsals, it is typically at a scene's conclusion, so this moment is unusually collaborative in that both the actors *and* Neilson are giving direct input.

This unusually collaborative authorial moment continues with Ashton asking Neilson 'Can I say something about the Tiny Him,¹⁷ [...] maybe like "Stroke his head"?' This query is met with a burst of laughter from Neilson, Ashton and several other company members, after which Neilson responds with: 'Yeah. I don't mind. There are some places where you can let it play out a bit longer. [...] Wait til you're convinced [...], get him to do what you like, as long as it's vaguely humiliating it's fine.' Neilson's laughter effectively gives Ashton carte-blanche to embroider his original script with lines of her own invention. Neilson's comment 'There are some places where you can let it play out a bit longer' also reveals that he is aware of the fact that his text in its current form is too short and lacking all of the specific detail that would make it 'vaguely humiliating' for Power to enact. There is a degree of humiliating material present in the draft of the scene, but for Neilson the lines do not quite provide enough support for Ashton to fully achieve Neilson's or her character's objective of humiliating Power's character. Thus, in light of Ashton's clear demonstration that she can author lines that are not only funny, subtextually appropriate and entirely in keeping with her characterisation, I would argue that this is one of the reasons why Neilson is prepared to concede a degree of authorial control to Ashton at this juncture. This exchange is an example

¹⁵ Power is not exempt from this atypical flurry of activity, as Neilson draws his attention to an exact point in his characters' thought process that needed to be evident in the enactment of the scene with his remark 'there's a moment for you [Power] that you feel quite proud of, where you get it [i.e. finally understand the potential function of the product]', and then adding 'that's your little bit of invention'.

¹⁶ By rehearsals, I hear mean the 'regular' rehearsal period, excluding technical rehearsals.

¹⁷ The miniature version of Power that he has to imagine being present and interact with during the scene.

of how, to borrow a phrase from Susan Behrndt, ‘once a basic outline has been agreed, the devisers start a layering process, adding details and other actions’ (2010: 40). It is also a good example of Neilson placing trust in the capabilities of his actors to author their own character-specific material which ‘fleshes out’ the exoskeleton of his written text and helps to achieve his desired aim in a scene. As mentioned above, it is unusual for Neilson to intervene and become so directly involved in the minutiae of a scene. I would argue that he does so at this point to ensure that another of his authorial tropes is included in the play, the humiliation of his actors/characters for dramatic effect, which I will explore shortly.

In the next section of Sequence 10, the scene is re-run and, apart from some minor paraphrasing, music from Powell underscoring Power’s Footmouse Dance and the additions and revisions discussed above being incorporated, the content is very similar to the previous two attempts (Sequence 10; 9.29-14.52). However, in this run of the scene, the acting has markedly improved, with Power portraying the humiliation being inflicted upon his character particularly well via the sheer range of his vocal delivery and grotesque prancing. The only real textual differences in this version are that Neilson continues with his authorial intervention to suggest additional lines to Ashton (‘Too tall’ and ‘Too short’), and that Ashton and Power both improvise part of their final exchange; which reads as follows:

Power: How was that? How was it? Was that all right?

Ashton: [*Pause*] We’ll give you a call. Are you still with Marion? [Ashton is referring to Power’s agent]

Power: Yeah. I really like the product by the way, you’ve got your hands free for a wank. [*Laughter from the cast and an awkward pause as Ashton doesn’t respond*] Ok, thanks. Bye. [*Power exits*]

This spur of the moment coda to the scene demonstrates that Ashton and Power know they have the artistic licence to treat Neilson’s scripts as, what Brendht has described as, ‘scores

for [...] improvisation with room for the performers' own ideas, contributions and interpretations'; as well as that they have the ability and confidence to do so (2010: 36).

Ashton's 'Are you still with Marion?' line is noteworthy. Neilson gives his explicit approval of the line when he tells Ashton that 'the "Marion" thing's good; let's go with it'. Here, Neilson's endorsement of Ashton's impromptu contribution again demonstrates his awareness of when an actor authors character-appropriate material and his willingness to include it. But Ashton's line is not only appropriate on a character level, it is also appropriate on a situational level because it adds another small, but realistic, element of detail to the unfolding audition scenario. By adding this line, Ashton is providing some meta-commentary on auditions by drawing upon her own professional experience and splicing this familiarity into her dialogue. Therefore, because the scene is bordering on, if not fully crossing over into, the realms of the bizarre and surreal, a line such as Ashton's, which springs from the actuality of an audition situation,¹⁸ I would argue, helps to anchor the scene somewhere just within the bounds of realism and verisimilitude. The analysis presented of the post-run debates concerning the editing and layering of the scene/script are concisely expressed in Entwisle's follow-up interview testimony by her summation that 'authorship can be about censoring ideas and cutting things as well as coming up with the words' (Entwisle, 2014). This is very much the case at this juncture in rehearsals.

However, while much of the discussion of Ashton's input here resonates with my analysis of Olly Rix's direct input in Chapter 1, there is a crucial difference worth reflecting on in detail. When the notation of the final run of the scene is compared to the published play-text, something authorially significant is discovered. In the final run of the scene, Ashton's mini-monologue and Neilson's interjections are transcribed as follows:

¹⁸ It is not in any way unusual for an actor to be asked about their agent during an audition.

Ashton: Ok good, but more. You're so dissatisfied with your life. You're not where you want to be in your career and you don't like the place you live in, you haven't found your soulmate, your magazine subscription's late, you're not happy in your relationship, you don't like your body. You don't like the way you look. That's good, great.

Neilson: [*Intervening*]. You're too tall.

Ashton: You don't like the way you look. You feel too tall.

Neilson: [*Again intervenes*]. You're too short.

In the published version, the text has been condensed and Neilson has re-written the beginning and end of Ashton's speech, but otherwise the thematic structure is the same as before, reading as:

Ok, good, but more. You're anxious, depressed, disappointed. You're not where you should be in your life: your career's going nowhere; you don't like where you live; you haven't found your soulmate, you don't like your body; you hate your thighs (Neilson in Reid, 2014: 245)

When these versions are compared, it becomes evident that Neilson has excluded both his mid-scene interventions ('too tall' and 'too short'), but retained his rather one-dimensional line 'you haven't found your soulmate' and, despite his earlier and explicit approval of Ashton's authorial detailing, he has cut her deeper, more subtextually appropriate 'your magazine subscription's late'. He also edits out her later contribution, another one that he originally sanctioned, 'Stroke his head', but keeps her 'Are you still with Marion?' line (Neilson in Reid, 2014: 248). In her article 'Editing in the Rehearsal Room', McAuley observed that 'during the *Toy Symphony* rehearsals, the playwright himself was [...] ready to cut words he had thought necessary on the page but discovered to be redundant in performance' (2015: 37). However, when this observation is applied to this strand of analysis of the *Narrative* rehearsals, it seems that Neilson has done the exact opposite; he has cut what

he considered to be necessary from the performance and authored something quite different for the page.

This authorial turn-of-events is puzzling because, although Neilson welcomes and expects the actors' direct input, acknowledges the appropriateness and quality of their offerings, and allows these additional textual nuances and improvements to be rehearsed and then to be present in the performance of the play onstage, he actually omits most of them (and some of his own) from the published play-text.¹⁹ The motives for Neilson's editorial decisions can only be speculated upon. It is conceivable that he had forgotten the majority of the contributions that Ashton made when it came to writing the play for publication or who made the actual contributions he did include. Maybe it is something to do with the pacing of the scene or a negative reaction from the audience. It is possible that he professes to like Ashton's lines more than he actually did in rehearsals. Perhaps he is happy for the actors to author for performance, but when it comes to publication he wants to limit their contributions. It is also possible that he just changes his mind or is he operating on a subconscious level, thus not fully aware that he is actually making authorial choices of this kind.

The list of possibilities is vast, and Neilson's reasoning cannot be conclusively stated. What can be said for sure regarding this decision making is that Neilson is not concerned with the exclusivity of the authorship of the play because he retains Ashton's 'Marion' line and kept Olly Rix's direct input (see Chapter 1), and he did not consider the Ashton mini-monologue to be too long, due to his earlier comment that Ashton should 'let it [the speech] play out a bit'. It seems that the results of the less hierarchical approach to authoring material that Neilson adopts in rehearsals are abandoned when it comes to the published play-text, as

¹⁹ This is not the only occasion where Neilson excludes material from the published play-text that was present in rehearsals and the performance. The 'Box Therapy' scene that will be discussed in Chapter 3 is also absent.

during this final editorial process Neilson's re-establishes full authorial control over the material, and the actors' direct input may ultimately get cut. This re-assertion of authorial control is not dissimilar to how, even within the more egalitarian devising context of the work of *Complicite*, Simon McBurney still asserts final control, as noted by Sidiropoulou (2011: 164). It also demonstrates that Alastair Galbraith has a point when he notes (see Chapter 1) that 'everything is his [Neilson's], even if you think you've come up with the whole thing, you've only come up with it because he's let you come up with it and given you parameters to express something' (Galbraith, 2014). Moreover, it underscores how resistant Neilson's authorial process is to ordered, logical and comprehensive systemisation and documentation.

“Footmouse! Brilliant!”: Humiliation as an Authorial Trope in Neilson's Work

My analysis of the Footmouse Dance sequence thus far has already noted an interest by Neilson in ideas of humiliation, which I now wish to consider in more detail. This type of non-malicious theatrical humiliation of particular (and exclusively male) actors is another Neilsonian authorial trope that surfaces at times in his work. This trope is acknowledged by Neilson in our 2012 interview when, discussing the qualities that actor Matthew Pidgeon brings to a role, he light-heartedly remarked that 'he's always vaguely humiliated by what I get him to do, [...] he feels it's beneath him. [...] Like when he played Mullet in *Realism* [...] I just thought it would be funny to see Matt with a mullet, with a ridiculous mullet' (Neilson, 2012). Neilson's predilection for adopting this authorial position was jokingly referred to during Pidgeon's interview:

He [Neilson] does like to humiliate you, particularly the blokes (laughs). I think he feels they can handle it. [...] But the reason is good, it's not something gratuitous, it's not just to say look at this stupid fucker and hang you out to dry. [...] It's because [...] it's part of the piece. [...] So that stuff with me poncing around in a basque [in *The Lying Kind*], the mullet [in *Realism*], and all the rest of it, that was brilliant, it was funny. [...] So I think if it was just you hanging out there looking stupid, he wouldn't

be interested in that at all. But there definitely is a sadistic part of him that enjoys that (2014).

Galbraith also touched upon this authorial trope in his joint interview with Pidgeon:

in every play there's been some sort of sex act that I've had to do, either to one of the actresses or to myself. (Pidgeon laughs) And often both. But it's never done to make you look an idiot. *The Censor's* a good example. [...] He [Neilson] kind of wrote it out and then he'd go 'Oh no, I've wrote it out now and that's why you're impotent.'²⁰ It's all this hard core pornography that's made you impotent. So it has to be something really, really not nice mate that it takes to turn you on. Sorry, I've just realised that that's what has to happen.' [...] So that's what he does to you. It's almost like the play's another person. We rehearsed it and he'd kind of giggle but it worked. [...] [And] it says so much about the character (2014).

This type of humiliating, often sexually themed, material that male actors have to perform is evident in many of Neilson's plays. For example, actor Phil McKee's character Stuart sucked on a dildo in *Stitching* (Scene 6: 33); Galbraith's character Sid from *Year of the Family* rubbed Tabasco sauce on his fingers then inserted them into the vagina of the character Claire (Act 1, Scene 7: 144-5); and Neilson himself is not exempt for when playing the role of Max in *Penetrator* he, post-ejaculation, mistakenly licked semen from his fingers, thinking it was amphetamines (Scene 2: 63). What can be gleaned from Neilson, Pidgeon and Galbraith's testimony is that, although there is a part of Neilson that takes enjoyment from the discomfort, this use of humiliation is not intended by Neilson to shame the actors for his or the audience's amusement. Moreover, the material concerning humiliation also, as Galbraith highlights, 'says so much about the character'. For example; the very fact that Power's character Noel is prepared to endure and actively participate in his ritualistic humiliation in the Footmouse audition shows how desperate for employment he is. The fact that he does it so badly displays how damaged and traumatised he is by the difficult

²⁰ Galbraith's comment 'he kind of wrote it out and then he'd go...' is referring to *The Censor* (Scenes 9 and 10: 271-7), where it is revealed that the only way the Censor can be sexually aroused is by watching a woman defecate.

experience of being a middle-aged, unemployed actor who struggles to survive within the challenging working conditions of professional actors within contemporary Britain. Chapter 6 considers this further. So, from one relatively small moment of humiliation, a subtext is revealed, through movement and physicality (Power's enactment of the Footmouse Dance), which encapsulates a significant facet of Power's character. Here in *Narrative*, Neilson's authorial trope functions on a meta level, because not only is Power's character humiliated, the scene is reflective of the humiliation actors often have to endure during auditions, but also of the fact that Neilson's work often involves embarrassing moments for the (male) cast.

This trope is again apparent in Neilson's aforementioned response to Ashton's query about whether she could make Power mime stroking the head of his miniature doppelganger, when Neilson informed the cast of another layer of humiliation that he had considered visiting on Power's character in this scene:

"Now your trousers fall down" (*chuckles*). Originally, I was going to put that in "Now your trousers fall down". So, you'd [referring to Power] have to drop your trousers, then she [Ashton] would go "Ok, thank you" [meaning Power was abruptly dismissed from the audition]. (*This information is delivered in a sing-song voice. The cast laugh. Neilson then comically mimes pulling his trousers up from his ankles, grinning throughout*)

Neilson's relish for inflicting humiliation on Power is evident in his interview testimony where he stated that (see Sequence 10 B: 2.32-end) 'there's a certain essence of Barney that I know quite well because I know him and that I play on. And those things are, in a way, just things that I think that I would find amusing to see Barney do'. What is of note here is that, rather than compounding Power's character's humiliation by having him drop his trousers during the Footmouse Dance, Neilson censored his inclination to author something he would 'find amusing to see Barney do' pre-rehearsal; then in rehearsal he allows Ashton to shoulder the responsibility for authoring material that will accomplish this objective.

This predilection for shifting responsibility from himself, when the authoring of potentially humiliating episodes surfaces in rehearsals, is apparent in Galbraith's above account of Neilson's reasoning for the defecation scene in *The Censor*. Neilson (according to Galbraith) stated, "Sorry, I've just realised that *that's what has to happen*," (emphasis added), and that Galbraith himself felt compelled to add that: 'It's almost like the play's another person.' These comments imply that Neilson transfers the responsibility for the authoring of humiliating material from himself to the conventions of genre, plot and character construction that the play itself requires. However, this line of argument is somewhat problematised by the fact that Neilson is frequently engaging in postdramatic challenging of established approaches and conventions concerning narrative, character and representation (embodied in his non-committal shrug concerning the naming of characters as discussed earlier).²¹ Furthermore, that Neilson does not see himself as the (sole) instigator of the humiliating material also makes sense given how diffuse and enmeshed with others' input and agency his *modus operandi* is, even if, as my analysis of Zawe Ashton's input has demonstrated, there are firm limitations to that input and agency.

However, I would like to emphasise that what Neilson claims 'has to happen' does happen repeatedly across his body of work, in a way that is not inevitably necessitated by conventions of genre, plot or character construction. Surely, the depiction of the darker side of relationships and character psychology could have been achieved within the plays in question without necessarily resorting to dildo sucking, fingering with Tabasco sauce and accidental semen licking. My point here is not to critique the presence of these transgressive acts within Neilson's work, but to emphasise the fact that they have been actively instigated by Neilson (here in *Narrative*, in one of the rare moments of direct interference by him, as

²¹ That said, Neilson's displacing of responsibility also touches on the objective found within post-structuralist discourses to understand authorship less in terms of the author as a flesh-and-blood individual with agency and (conscious) intentions, and more as a function of discourse (Foucault, 1995 [1969]).

discussed above). As Foucault reflected: ‘it would be false to consider the function of the author as a pure and simple reconstruction after the fact of a text given a passive material, since a text always bears a number of signs that refer to the author.’ (1995 [1969]: 238-9) Whether Neilson is consciously intending it or not, humiliation is a recurring theme in much of his work.

Chance and the Arbitrary: Neilson’s ‘Magpie’ Approach to Authorship

My analysis in this and the preceding chapter has already born out the fact that Neilson’s authorial approach is marked by an indiscriminate, inconsistent and random quality. I will now discuss the next section of the Footmouse Dance sequence (Sequence 10; 14.52-16.52) to consider in more detail how devised work can depend on and utilise the ideas and chance discoveries that occur in the rehearsal room (Baldwin and Bicat, 2002: 17) as well as how ‘chance and randomness open the possibility of serendipitous and surprising conjunctions’ (Mermikides, 2010: 154); surprising conjunctions that address the underlying principles of ethnographic scholarly research.

The post-scene discussion continues with Neilson, from off-camera, seemingly spontaneously, coming up with the idea to film Power performing the Footmouse Dance and perhaps using the footage as projection entitled ‘Wanker at Audition’ during the performance to further pursue his authorial trope of inflicting humiliation on Power’s character. When Neilson introduces this idea, his off-camera position in the rehearsal space and what he is physically doing are extremely important details that must be understood for this strand of analysis to be securely anchored. As Neilson proposes his suggestion, my camera is focused on actor Sophie Ross, *ergo* his exact position in the space, and what he is physically doing, is impossible for the viewer of the footage to determine at this point. However, as the camera pans right, via Power, and then upwards to locate Neilson, when it finally captures him as he

is saying ‘he doesn’t know that actually he’s [Power’s] become massively famous as “Wanker in Audition”’, it becomes apparent that Neilson is only around a foot from myself and the camera. The fact that this is the original position from which Neilson first introduced the suggestion to film Power can be determined by combining two things. Firstly, the fact that (for a mere second between 15.44 and 15.45) Neilson’s hand enters the frame in the top right hand corner and when shortly thereafter the camera locates him it is clear that Neilson’s position in the space is congruent with the brief intrusion of his hand into frame. Secondly, although the volume of Neilson’s words increases as the camera attempts to locate him, phonetically they exhibit a level and undisrupted quality which indicates that the words have been originating from one static position throughout; in this case, off-camera and around a foot right and forward of my position. Thus, the close proximity of Neilson to the camera as he suggests ‘we should film him [Power] doing that [the Footmouse Dance]’ is established. The next thing that needs to be established is what Neilson was physically doing as he enunciated this idea. Quite simply, Neilson was gesticulating with his left hand at the camera a foot away from his position, a fact I was fully aware of due to Neilson’s close proximity to me and the camera at the time.

As the post-scene events continue, several of the actors join in and much comedic banter ensues; with comments such as Doel’s ‘Oh, my god, you’re [Power] the Wanker Guy. Can I Instagram you?’ and Power’s line, delivered in a bad/mock American accent, ‘Guess who’s here. Guess who’s here everybody, it’s Wanker at Audition!’ being typical examples of the content and tone of the chatter. In this section of post-scene ‘discussion’ Neilson is particularly animated and is clearly enjoying himself as he giggles and chuckles along to the repartee, which culminates when Neilson gives his own brief and poorly executed rendition of Power’s dance. After this mock jig, it seems that the premise to film Power’s cavorting has been fixed as Neilson formalises in his own mind how to proceed by glancing around the

rehearsal space while saying ‘we should film him [Power] in here, it’s actually the kind of room they [casting directors] would do it in’. He then points at and looks down the lens, muttering ‘we could film it with the camera’. The briskness and spontaneity of Neilson’s authorial process at this juncture is notably unusual,²² and reveals another aspect of his authorial procedure; an aspect which has ‘a reliance on intuition, chance, [...] accident and impulse’ (Etchells, 1999: 19).

During this section of the sequence there is a four-stage chronological authorial process unfolding, with each stage, except the first, being informed by the one that precedes it. First, Neilson’s original idea to film Power’s Footmouse Dance is sparked by his proximity to the camera.²³ When discussing the properties of Forced Entertainment’s authorial process Tim Etchells writes, ‘it’s not out of the question that a good idea for the show should come from the “unofficial” or “unsanctioned” fooling around that takes place during or in parallel to discussions’ (2012: 34). In this regard, Forced Entertainment’s process of authoring material displays similar properties to the second-of-the-four-stage authorial process that Neilson’s embarks on. Here Neilson seems to use the collective tomfoolery as the means to gauge the value of his ‘good idea’ and then take the enthusiastic engagement by the cast with the horsing around as a signal of their implicit approval of his epiphany, both of which cement Neilson’s notion of filming Power’s gambolling and using it as projection at some point during the performance of the show. Having decided to run with the idea, in part via the cast’s participation in the fun, Neilson then begins to consider the technological logistics that would be involved in rendering his idea into theatrical form. Finally, Neilson disregards our

²² Here, it takes two minutes for the idea to be discussed and decided upon; in other situations, it can take Neilson weeks to fully develop an idea, as evidenced by the close to three-week period it took to render Doel’s synaesthetic mindscape acoustically discussed above.

²³ This is why it was so important to establish Neilson’s exact position and what he was physically doing in the preceding paragraph.

established rehearsal convention of me being a neutral documenter of events when he asks me, from off-camera, ‘Could we film it with your [camera], Cas?’

For the purposes of analysis here, it is the final stage of this authorial moment that is of particular significance because here the stance of ‘observational “purity”, which maintains that the filmmaker should be an unobtrusive observer’, that I have adopted throughout the rehearsal period is broken for the first and only time, albeit not by a deliberate intervention on my part (Beattie, 2004: 22). In her article on the ethnographic analysis of rehearsals, McAuley flags up an important point for consideration namely ‘does the presence of an observer during the rehearsal process necessarily, by his or her very presence, transform the event?’ (1998: 79). McAuley’s point touches upon one of the key debates in documentary theory. This particular debate hinges around the fact that in the filming of a documentary, as discussed in the Introduction to this thesis, there can often be ‘a problematic fusing of putative event (what things *would* have been like without the camera there) with the pro-filmic event (what happened when the camera was there)’, meaning that the very presence of the filmmaker affects the events represented on screen (Corner, 1996: 20). In this particular moment of the *Narrative* rehearsals there is indeed a tension between the putative event and the pro-filmic event, because here ‘the filmmaking process disrupts and intrudes upon the reality of the world it is documenting’ (Bruzzi, 2006: 17). This being the case, a rhetorical question posed by Bill Nichols that if ‘events came about because of the watchful eye of the camera and the presence of the filmmaker, were these events encouraged, even inadvertently?’ needs to be addressed (2001: 6). I would contend that Neilson’s idea to film *Power* and use the footage as projection was inadvertently provoked by my presence, as the above strand of analysis bears out, and quickly leads to a complete breakdown of the

observational mode of address²⁴ I undertook during the course of rehearsals when Neilson enquires ‘can we film it with your thing Cas?’ and I respond with ‘Of course, I’ll change position then, so we can get the best out of it’, then alter the positioning of the camera to accommodate Neilson’s request.²⁵

In the final segment of the sequence, from a new camera position, I film Power performing the Footmouse Dance in order to best capture its grotesque and humiliating properties (Sequence 10; 16.52-end). This segment of footage was edited and sent to the production team at the Royal Court and, with the exclusion of the few seconds at the beginning and end where Power is not dancing, was used as projection in the show for the first few previews. During the show the footage was slowed down to half speed and there was no sound. For best effect, I would advise re-watching this segment of the sequence in a darkened room with the volume on mute. For Press Night, and the subsequent run of the play, Power’s dance was re-filmed by the production team in a room at the theatre because the natural lighting in my footage was found to be a touch too bright for the theatrical event. But otherwise the new footage was remarkably similar to my own. The essence of the footage also made its way, in the form of stage directions, into the published play-text, which read as follows:

On the screen, we see footage of his audition as if on YouTube: dancing like an idiot, grinning, shouting the name of the product, played out in agonising slow motion. The title of the clip is ‘Footmouse Wanker’ and it has been viewed nearly a million times (Neilson in Reid, 2014: 248).

²⁴ Bruzzi describes the observational mode as having ‘as its premise the desire to follow action rather than dictate it, to see and record what happened in front of the camera’ (2006: 74): while for Beattie the ‘observational mode is summarized in the assessment that the camera becomes a “fly on the wall”, an unobtrusive and all-seeing eye on the world’ (2004: 21-2).

²⁵ I should explain that I responded in this way in order to be supportive, show good will and nurture my working relationship with Neilson and the company. The latter had of course afforded me access to the *Narrative* rehearsals in the first place.

In light of these facts it seems that my presence filming with the camera acted as a catalyst which was instrumental in audio-visually authoring one specific moment of the performance and an excerpt in the published play. This supports an argument made by Jack Stillinger that there are often ‘situations where someone other than the nominal author is essentially and inextricably a part of authorship’ (1991: 20). Here, my contribution could perhaps best be described as a peripheral and unintentional quasi-authorial role which ultimately influences the *mise-en-scène* of the performance. Therefore, to borrow some phrasing from Mermikides, who has observed some of theatre company Shunt’s productions, ‘despite my efforts to be “invisible” as an observer, my presence has indeed left its mark’ on the show (2010: 107). At this juncture in the rehearsal process, it seems that Neilson has been successful in his aforementioned objective mentioned in his interview of ‘trying to create an environment where accidents happen, or things you couldn’t orchestrate, or things you couldn’t predict happen’. In drawing the observing researcher into the rehearsal, Neilson displays a locational and resourceful approach to authorship stemming from a specific presence in, but not part of, the rehearsal process. As this and the preceding chapter have demonstrated, Neilson’s approach to authorship has a random and ad-hoc quality, where nothing is ‘out of bounds’, including break time discussions about the autocorrect function of mobile phone technology and the presence of an academic researcher. To evoke more metaphorical terms, Neilson is a ‘theatrical magpie’ who opportunistically filches from his surrounding environment to feather his authorial nest.

Conclusion

Part 1 of this thesis has aimed to demonstrate how Anthony Neilson’s authorial process problematises and raises questions around the very notion of authorship, especially that of the single author. Drawing upon the labour, presence and personal qualities of actors, creative

staff and even myself as a neutral observer at all stages of (and at times beyond) the rehearsals, the *Narrative* rehearsals and Neilson's process revolve around the processing of this input and how 'the authorial role necessarily fractures and becomes shared' (Thomassau, 2008: 236). Stillinger has argued a related and relevant point, namely that it is 'when the circumstances of composition are investigated in detail, the identifiable authorship turns out to be a plurality of authors.' (1991: 22). As my analysis in Chapters 1 and 2 have demonstrated, Neilson's authorial 'process is made up of multi-layered activities', with his actors very often being absolutely central to the event (McAuley, 2008: 287). With Neilson, it is useful to think in terms of his authorship being a 'non-linear system which follows [its] own logic' (Moss, 2010: 84). It is associative, non-structured, opportunistic, lateral, on the spot and somewhat inconsistent authorship, presenting an experiment with intentionality (Rebellato, 2016) in both its particular use of collaboration and inconsistency, within the framework of the Royal Court's 'new writing' culture. This authorship is an intertwined, erratic, messy, tangential and tangled texture that is partly engendered by Neilson's penchant for an ensemble-based generation of materials. As Jonathan Shandell reminds us, '[a] collaborative form is messier than working with one author' (2005: 23), and one which my discussion has sought to evoke via the summaries, footage and transcribed excerpts of moments during the *Narrative* rehearsals. McAuley is certainly not wrong when she proposes that '[i]n rehearsal analysis, as in ethnographic description, the larger picture comes into view through the accumulation of minutiae.' (2012: 10)

The differing accounts by Neilson, Entwisle and Galbraith referenced earlier in Chapter 1 and 2 each have validity and something relevant to add to discussions concerning Neilson's working methods, while also being interestingly contestable. Predominantly responsive to Neilson's framework and requests, and using the springboard and 'parameters to express something' (Galbraith 2014) facilitated by Neilson, the actors do generate material

of their own, via oblique input (which Neilson readily acknowledges) and also direct input (which Neilson denies). The actors, creative technical staff, Neilson and even myself on one occasion operate within a type of Bakhtinian dialogue, in which ‘any utterance, in addition to its own theme, always [eventually] responds (in the broad sense of the word) in one form or another to others’ utterances that precede it’ (Bakhtin 1986: 94). However, the dialogue ultimately comes to a stop with Neilson’s final decision-making. As Chapter 5 and 6 will explore in further detail, the complex, ephemeral and circuitous chain of utterances found within Neilson’s process, is both at times accepting of and at other times at odds with the actor’s craft. It is also, as Entwisle remarked, a challenge to document, and it is this challenge that the chapter has most sought to tackle, in order to be able to highlight the multi-faceted engagement of Neilson’s company with his process.

Of course, Anthony Neilson’s authorship does not merely involve what he does (or his collaborators do), but also forms part of discourses that repeatedly ascribe such authorship to him, which is significant to the reputation and status of both him and also those institutional frameworks that support him, such as the Royal Court. Certainly, the unusual, if not ‘edgy’ quality of his working methods works well to support and confirm the notions of artistic unconventionality and commitment to creative risk-taking with which both Neilson and the Royal Court (Bolton 2012) are associated. This is particularly noteworthy, given that Neilson used to be more associated with edginess through the *content* of his plays during the In-Yer-Face period of the 1990s. However, the significance of this discursive function and dimension of authorship notwithstanding, what has been my concern in this part of the thesis has been the specific contributions to Neilson’s process by his collaborators in order to re-position and raise their status within the debates and discourses about Neilson, authorship, rehearsal processes and contemporary theatre practice more broadly, in which they have been traditionally marginalised.

With Neilson's process, the input by the actors and creative technical staff is of a creative, conceptual and analytical nature, and the latter is far too rarely associated with the work of actors. Here, I take issue with Catherine Love's aforementioned argument that:

They [actors] can push at a text and occasionally explode it, in the process revealing new facets. It's a skill that sits close to writing, but works within a completely different time frame and demands a very different way of thinking. Actors *feel* their way through the action, moment by moment; writers sit structuring it at one remove. (2013; emphasis added)

If we go back to Roland Barthes' seminal work on authorship, we see that he argued that:

We know that a text is not a line of words releasing a single "theological" meaning (the "message" of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture. (2001 [1967]: 211)

It is not difficult to apply this thinking to Neilson's authorial process, in which the text is indeed a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture, in ways that cross borders of medium, genre, time periods and cultural hierarchies, where inspiration is as likely to be drawn from one of the most highly acclaimed film directors as it is from a Saturday night game show. Most importantly, however, Neilson's text is a tissue woven collaboratively by several different, highly skilled weavers, who deserve recognition for their crucial creative and analytical input and agency.²⁶

To conclude, Harvie and Lavender have highlighted the fact that 'because many of us do not [...] have access [to rehearsals] we experience theatre predominately as a created product – a show – but have little opportunity to learn how it is created' (2010: 1). In light of this fact, I would argue that the authorial archaeology undertaken in Part 1, which uncovers

²⁶ Despite Neilson's insistence that 'actors are essentially writing when they improvise' (Love 2013), I deliberately use a metaphor that is not writing based, in order to challenge the dominance conventionally ascribed to writing in discussions of the generation of creative material.

how the rehearsal process informs the published play-text, already demonstrates the value of the methodological approach to this thesis. This is because Chapters 1 and 2 have revealed dimensions and nuances of Neilson's authorial process (including and especially concerning the actors' input) that would otherwise be lost to scholarship, and that are not evident in the existing literature on theatre authorship, such as, for example, Rebellato's (2016) otherwise illuminating discussion, which have tended to be more concerned with product rather than specific details of process. This methodology will next proceed to illuminate another significant critical issue concerning both rehearsal studies more broadly and the work of Anthony Neilson more specifically, namely improvisation.

Part 2: Neilson's Process and Improvisation

As Part 1 has already indicated, one particular feature of Neilson's process and of rehearsals is the use of improvisation, which will be the focus of investigation for this Part. As Rob Wallace has pointed out, improvisation is 'a notoriously difficult word to define' (2015: 187), mainly due to the fact that 'no single definition of improvisation can be satisfactory because there are many different kinds of improvisation' (Dean and Smith, 1997: 26). More recently, Vera Dusya and Mary Crossan have echoed Dean and Smith's suggestion in their insistence that there has been 'no agreement [...] about common conceptualisations of improvisation [so] there is a need for research that clearly identifies what improvisation is and how it relates to performance' (Dusya and Crossan, 2004: 728). Given the diversity and complexity of practices and the use of improvisation across a range of contexts, it is not surprising that Roger Dean and Helen Smith have suggested that 'there is no ready and generalizable solution to the conundrum of analysing improvisation' (Dean and Smith, 1997: 46); and Bruno Nettl's argument that, 'while we feel we know intuitively what improvisation is, we find that there is confusion regarding its essence', seems particularly accurate and still relevant. (1974: 4) Furthermore, Dusya and Crossan have noted that one of the obstacles of pursuing a critical investigation of improvisation is that 'a lot of the literature [available] is about improvisation as performance, rather than as a tool in assisting the development of a script' (2004: 735). By this, they mean that more attention has been paid to the use of improvisation as it features in on-stage performances (for example, *Lost Without Words*, National Theatre, March 2017) than to the use of improvisation that involves the exploration of an existing script, characters and/or the creation of new dramatic material during rehearsals. There is also 'a further problem improvisation poses which critics are reluctant to face, [namely] that there is no script or score, no object which can lend itself to critical analysis' (Dean and Smith, 1997: 6).

These conceptual and methodological challenges notwithstanding, increasing attention has been paid to improvisation within theatre scholarship in recent decades. For example, Nadine Holdsworth (2006) has explored the use of improvisation by Theatre Workshop's Joan Littlewood. Littlewood deployed improvisation to help the actors rehearsing *The Quare Fellow* (Theatre Royal Stratford East, 1956) that helped 'capture the human minutiae of everyday interaction, the shifting moods, silences, physical detail, rhythms, textures, antagonisms and complex spatial relations so that the actors could *live* rather than *act* on stage by complementing and counter-pointing each other's actions.' (Holdsworth 2006: 64) Holdsworth cites the actors' recollection of being taken

up on the roof of the Theatre Royal. All the grimy slate and stone made it easy to believe we were in a prison yard. We formed up in a circle, and imagined we were prisoners out on exercise. Round and round we trudged for what seemed like hours – breaking now and then for a quick smoke and furtive conversation. Although it was just a kind of game, the boredom and meanness of it all was brought home. Next, the 'game' was extended – the whole dreary routine of washing out your cell, standing to attention, sucking up to the screws, trading tobacco, was improvised and developed. It began to seem less and less like a game, and more like real. (Holdsworth 2006: 65-6, citing Milne and Goodwin 1967: 116-17)

This is a fairly well-known account within practitioner discourses on acting, and conveys Littlewood's interest in extensive improvisations in the early stages of rehearsal. Holdsworth gives a number of further examples that demonstrate Littlewood's preference for 'discard[ing] scripts in rehearsal as she thought it was only necessary to roughly know what the scene was about in order to play with the physical 'truth' of the unit.' (Holdsworth 2006: 64). Holdsworth's analysis also pays attention to Littlewood's use of improvisation to generate text, such as was the case for *You Won't Always Be On Top* (Theatre Royal Stratford East, 1957). This

arrived as several pages of carefully observed and authentic dialogue drawn from [Henry Chapman's] experience as a building worker but by no stretch of the imagination did it constitute a fully formed play. Rather than rejecting the material out

of hand, Littlewood [...] invited Chapman to work with the Company to develop the script. The actors read the text, improvised, went out to local building sites to learn the physical rhythms of the work and explored ways of transposing what they learnt on to the stage. It was not a case of the actors simply replicating what they had seen but of playing out everyday incidents in the moment of performance. (Holdsworth 2006: 70)

Holdsworth's analysis provides a number of nuanced insights, taking some account of not only Littlewood's but also the actor's perspective on these uses of improvisation. However, Holdsworth's discussion of improvisation in Littlewood's work is somewhat telescopic and summarised. Of course, Holdsworth's work has to contend with the historical gap between her research and the object of her analysis, which only increases the methodological challenges that improvisation present for scholarly study, due to the spontaneous and thus ephemeral nature of this activity. Even so, Holdsworth's analysis almost raises more questions than it answers, with specific and, I would argue, significant details noticeable for their absence: including information regarding how the actors in the improvisation for *The Quare Fellow* worked out the noted prisoner activities (for example, cleaning cells, standing to attention, trading tobacco); the specifics of the systems and structures developed, such as prisoner hierarchy; material discussing how the information engendered the feeling of realism within the actors, and how this impacted the characterisation and performance; facts regarding what exactly the actors working on *You Won't Always Be On Top* did in their improvisation before they went out to the building sites; data of what the actors actually experienced on those building sites, and how those experiences linked to the improvisation; and details of what 'exploring ways of transposing what they learnt on to the stage' specifically involved.

Littlewood's use of improvisation, encompassing a variety of approaches, largely related to working with an existing script of some kind, but it is worth briefly considering the

field of scholarly engagement with improvisation as it is used within practice more fully located within the context of devising. Jen Harvie and Andy Lavender ‘understand devising to be a method of performance development that [...] uses improvisation [...] as a key part of the process’ (2010: 2), in the devising of a script or performance, thereby, increasing scholarly attention has been paid to improvisation as a tool for devised work. For example, Christopher Innes and Maria Shevtsova (2013) discuss the use of improvisation by a number of theatre practitioners, including The Wooster Group, noting that ‘[i]mprovisation of various kinds has been key to The Wooster Group since Elizabeth LeCompte founded the company and directed *Sakonnet Point*, her directorial debut, in 1975.’ (2013: 225) Innes and Shevtsova stress that ‘The Wooster Group relies on three types of improvisation: the sensation that the work is in-the-making and about itself [...]; the processes of improvisation set into train during a work’s preparatory period; the improvisation that actually occurs during public performance.’ (2013: 226)

Given this thesis’ overall concern with rehearsal processes, I will here focus my attention on Innes and Shevtsova’s analysis of The Wooster Group’s second type of improvisation. They argue that:

The material with which the performers play is gathered, improvised upon and chosen collectively during the preparatory periods; and all material is considered, whether it involves costumes, props and records or video tapes from earlier productions that are subsequently recycled and transformed, or whether it is found for the first time, prompted by the new production. Material can be visual, sonic, gestural, kinetic or verbal, and if established classical texts are points of departure – for instance, Chekhov’s *The Three Sisters* for *Brace Up!* (1991) or Racine’s *Phèdre* for *To You, the Birdie! (Phèdre)* (2001) – they are spliced and reconfigured in relation to the performance material amassed from all the contributing components during the course of improvisation. [...] Improvisation, as practised by The Wooster Group, relies above all on the combinatory ingenuity of all its participants. Furthermore, since it is tightly connected to the use of technology and, more still, to an intermesh of media, its technicians are also improvisers of both the work in process in rehearsal and the work still in process shown to spectators. (Innes and Shevtsova 2013: 227)

This quotation captures both the achievements and the limitations of the discussion of improvisation at stake: Innes and Shevtsova give due recognition to the complexity of practice and the input by all the members of the company, including the technicians. However, as with Holdsworth, a number of details are absent: including what actually happened when the gathered material was ‘improvised upon’; information which discusses how and by whom the specific acts of splicing and reconfiguration were instigated and executed; and an explanation of the systems and protocols the different participants developed for working together.

It is important to stress here that Holdsworth’s and Innes and Shevtsova’s discussions of improvisation are among the most insightful and detailed that I have encountered in my research. I intend, however, to highlight that existing scholarship on improvisation, even that which evidences the most interest in process, continues to telescope the process, and there is need for research that undertakes more detailed analysis of specific instances, which this part of the thesis will endeavour to provide. In this, the thesis responds to Roger Dean and Helen Smith’s argument that any discourse of improvisation must include ‘detailed technical analysis of particular works and the processes that produced them. [This] discussion of the process rather than the product is essential for understanding improvisation’ (1997: 40); which is as relevant now as it was at the time of writing. By paying detailed attention to the uses of improvisation during the *Narrative* rehearsals and how these do (or do not) affect the performance text, this Part of the thesis will address the need for the type of research identified by Dusya and Crossan (2004) above. I would furthermore suggest that the ‘object’ that Dean and Smith (1997) note as not available for critical analysis is, to a degree, addressed by my rehearsal footage of *Narrative* with its abundance of improvisational material. This data allows me to critically confront the difficulties highlighted above and to contribute research material and analysis that make an original contribution to scholarly

debates on Neilson's work, and to research into processes of improvisation and rehearsal studies.

As the commentary above highlights, this Part of the thesis explores challenging terrain, which is further complicated by the fact that Neilson's process and his particular use of improvisation is complex: he does not make use of improvisation in order to have his actors explore a pre-given, fully formed script. Instead, as the analysis in this Part of the thesis will demonstrate, Neilson's process needs to be understood as partly located within the context of devising. Neilson's use of improvisation for *Narrative* is comparable to the work of a devising company such as Forced Entertainment. *Narrative* rehearsals began without any pre-existing script. Neilson had an idea of what he was interested in but had not produced any written dialogue, and so the company was trying out and creating material from the very beginning of the *Narrative* rehearsals. This is similar to the start of a Forced Entertainment rehearsal phase, as can be seen in Tim Etchells' brief description of their rehearsal process:

no one would bring anything too complete to the process – a few scraps or fragments of text, an idea or two for action, a costume, an idea about space, a sketched-out piece of music – everything was unfinished, distinctly incomplete (1999: 51).

Both Neilson and Forced Entertainment's work is partially 'made through a process of improvisation and discussion' throughout rehearsal,¹ and as this Part of the thesis will demonstrate, some of the work produced in improvisations during the *Narrative* rehearsals features in the play on stage (albeit not in the published play text), which is comparable to Forced Entertainment (Mermikides, 2010: 101). However, what distinguishes Neilson from

¹ From the information garnered from my interviewees, it can be ascertained that Neilson's *Hooverbag* and *Stitching* are the only productions with a lack of improvisation in rehearsals: this is attested by my own memory of the former, and for the latter, the testimonies of Phil McKee (who emphatically stated that there was 'absolutely no improvisation [...] no improvisation. At all!') and Selina Boyack (who remembered that 'we [Boyack and McKee] didn't improvise').

common approaches to devising is that it is Neilson who creates and controls the script, and the relationship between the improvisation and the script, as it develops, is noticeably loose. In Neilson's process, the purpose of improvisation is focused on the development of the script (not the acting). However, at the same time, improvisation outcomes tend to get discarded or significantly reworked by Neilson, who throughout his rehearsal process produces excerpts of text that take precedence over any improvisational material and redirect the focus of the rehearsals. Therefore, while it is valid and useful to consider Neilson in terms of the context of devising, this is only to a limited extent; it would be erroneous to refer to him as a devising practitioner, the significance that improvisation holds for his work notwithstanding.

This Part of the thesis will consider Neilson's complex and unconventional use of improvisation through one case study per chapter. The first chapter of this Part, Chapter 3, will focus on the use of improvisation for the purposes of characterisation in *Narrative*. While improvisation can fulfil a number of functions, such as the development of form and style, the focus on characterisation is appropriate given the thesis's overall concern with exploring the work, input and perspective of actors within Neilson's process. Here, in keeping with the analysis and critical framework of the overall thesis, ideas concerning characterisation will be located within a Stanislavskian framework. There is a tension within *Narrative* worth highlighting, namely that it is not an entirely naturalistic play, but the approaches to acting during rehearsals and the actual performance on stage are largely grounded in and, as I will argue, often fall back onto naturalism, frequently linked to Stanislavskian ideas concerning character interiority, emotional truth and instinct.

The case study for this chapter is the 'Box Therapy' improvisation, which occurred in the final week of rehearsals, on 28 March 2013, and involved Zawe Ashton and Chris

Entwisle in a scene in which Ashton's character is attending a therapy session with Entwisle's therapist. Ashton is struggling with her characterisation until the improvised placing of a box over her head enables her to use an affective memory technique. My discussion will begin by paying detailed attention to the origins of the 'Box Therapy' improvisation and the reasoning behind its deployment. I will: discuss the direct and indirect effect of the improvisation on the characterisation of the roles by Ashton and Entwisle; examine the interaction between the improvisation and the application of Stanislavskian acting techniques, paying due attention to the significance of actorly instinct; and argue that the use of the box represents unconventional mask work. I will then discuss the improvisation in the context of the technical rehearsal of the production in order to examine the tension between the goals of the director and the objectives of the actors, and how the final performance outcomes are ultimately reached.

The second chapter of this Part, Chapter 4, will focus on Neilson's use of improvisation as it relates to the critical issue of failure, which can result when an improvisation process is without agreed rules and objectives. The case study here will be the 'Human Soundscape' improvisation, which took place on 28 March 2013, shortly after the 'Box Therapy' improvisation that Chapter 3 explores. This was a somewhat unconventional improvisation involving the whole company where the input of the performers has much less impact. Here the main thrust of my argument will show how the absence of a clear aim, rules and roles for improvising, instigated by Neilson's unorthodox directorial behaviour, can lead to a number of difficulties. My analysis will pay particular attention to the presence of humour, corpsing and failure as failure, before finally making a case for why, the presence of failure notwithstanding, the improvisation is to be understood as partially successful. An underlying theme to my discussion concerns creative hierarchies and the implicit contract

between directors and actors, and this will prefigure the focus of my discussion in Part 3 of the thesis.

Chapter 3: ‘Box Therapy’: Improvisation and Characterisation

As the introduction to Part 2 has already noted, improvisation is used in a number of different ways and to achieve a range of aims, both within and beyond rehearsal contexts. This chapter will be focused on the potential the use of improvisation holds for the purposes of characterisation, which has been summed up by Lorraine Hull as follows:

[improvisation can be] utilised for an actor or director to deal with a psychological problem, to develop behaviour to make a character more believable, to develop a better sense of a character’s physical life, to develop some aspect of the character not evident in the actor’s work on the role, to understand a character better, to execute an intention set by the actor or director, or simply to note what instincts actors follow in staging a particular scene. (1985: 133)

Before the chapter’s analysis of Neilson’s specific use of improvisation can proceed, it is important to consider that terms such as ‘believable’ and the closely linked ‘truthful’ are complex and contentious. Stanislavski states that ‘the actor’s belief in his own action places him on the path of truth’ (1979: 156); therefore, as David Magarshack observes when discussing Stanislavski, ‘the actor had to believe in what he did on stage and that truth on the stage was merely what the actor believed in’ (2010: 305). Terms like believability and truth are very much part of the vocabulary for actor/practitioners, particularly in regards to Stanislavskian acting techniques and how actors judge their own, and others’, performances. They are the stated goals that actors strive for in the creation and performance of a role.

However, Trevor Rawlins flags up the problem with the employment of these, and other, actor/practitioner terms in Stanislavski’s writings. He describes these writings as an ‘uncertain, unstable and disputed area [that] does not behave like a theory in the accepted academic sense, as it is (often) based on anecdotal, oral tradition.’ (2012: 20) As a result it is ‘extremely slippery when an attempt is made to deal with them in a written context.’

(Rawlins, 2012: 30) Rawlins goes on to address the issue of truth and being truthful, Rawlins

writes that ‘these concepts are tangible, although there is no consensus about their definition. They are concepts that exist in practice and in the specifics of a performance, rehearsal or exercise. They cannot be explained in any stable or long-lasting way.’ (2012: 44) Therefore, the ‘challenge is to move towards ways of accurately expressing what the actor/practitioner really means, but in ways that can satisfy the critic/scholar: to maintain the practical point of view, but express it with clarity and accuracy.’ (Rawlins, 2012: 47)

I would concur with Rawlins’ assessment; there is a distinct difficulty in reconciling actor/practitioner vocabulary and academic discourse, and it is beyond the scope of this thesis to attempt to resolve this issue (if it can indeed be resolved). Nonetheless, it is still important to attempt to define what ‘believable’ and ‘truthful’ will be taken to mean within the context of my analysis. Located within a Western context of performance and acting, both my definition of finding a believable and truthful characterisation in the rehearsal room and the work of the actors for *Narrative* are informed by Stanislavskian approaches to acting. As Bella Merlin (2007: 115; emphases in original) explains:

Stanislavsky was hot on TRUTH. He believed that a sense of TRUTH marked the difference between a craftsman and an artist. And he pinpointed three kinds of TRUTH which he saw in acting practice:

1. ‘Make-believe truth’ (which draws on clichés and short cuts);
2. ‘Actual fact’ (which is life as we know it);
3. ‘Scenic truth’ (which is ‘actual fact’ distilled into a creative form).

My discussion and understanding of truth in this chapter and the thesis overall is focused on Merlin’s third point, scenic truth. Stanislavskian approaches entail the actor mapping out, testing, storing and above all synthesising the results of a coherent system of cerebral, emotional, physical and/or instinctive stimulation when exploring the text in whatever form that exploration takes, be that improvising, running the scene, or a personal and/or private

intellectual, psychological, emotional and/or physical engagement, all within the parameters of scenic truth. Here, my analysis and the work of the actors that forms part of my object of analysis share the Stanislavskian emphasis on the actor in terms of who makes the judgement on believability and truth. As the analysis in this and the next chapter will demonstrate, if a rehearsal process is such that if the actor does not think and feel that they are being ‘truthful’ and ‘believable’, then their performance is undermined. This is due to the fact that, if the actor’s internal gauge concerning truthful/believable characterisation is not telling them they have reached this point, then they are unable to make an unreserved, unselfconscious and wholehearted commitment to the performance of the role. This trepidation is often discernible to the audience, who can become aware when an actor is not completely ‘inhabiting’ and/or at ease with their part.

With this understanding of ‘believability’ and ‘truth’ informing my analysis and in response to the significance of detailed discussions of the process of improvisation identified by Dean and Smith (1997: 40), this chapter will begin by sketching out the origins of the chapter’s major case study, the ‘Box Therapy’ improvisation. It will then proceed to consider the use of Stanislavskian principles, especially how these link to the notion of instinct and characterisation; as well as how the particular features of the ‘Box Therapy’ improvisation mean that this improvisation can be usefully understood as a form of mask work. As its last major point of analysis, the chapter will discuss the significance of the working relationship between director and actor for improvisation, and the ways in which the ‘Box Therapy’ improvisation simultaneously represents a successful and not successful instance of this working relationship.

Uncertain Beginnings with Random Objects

My analysis begins with Sequence 11, which contains a section of the initial scripted scene (in which Zawe Ashton's character is attending a therapy session conducted by Christine Entwisle's character), part of the scripted version with some new elements, the improvised version, and then a portion of the post-improvisation debate. These components have been selected because they contain an extensive amount of dramaturgical material that allow me to map the complete trajectory of the scene to the final performance of the show. In my discussion, I will trace how the rehearsals had become stagnant, and how the use of improvisation made a productive contribution, until in a key moment the improvisation had a considerable positive impact upon proceedings. I will then explore in more detail the critical issues arising from this development (see Sequence 11; 0.00 - 2:41).

In this initial section, which occurred during the final week of rehearsals on 28 March 2013, there is a discernible lack of engagement with and commitment to Neilson's script from Entwisle and Ashton. Both actors are static and seem constrained by the text, rarely looking up from the page, so there is little sense of flow and communication between the performers; no real energy is apparent, either vocally or physically, and there is minimal characterisation evident. These absences suggest either a lack of trust in Neilson's material at this point, or the actors' struggles to bring the material 'to life'. As the scene draws to a close Neilson calls a halt to proceedings, groaning 'No, no, no, no, no, no, no', then lets out a long, exaggerated dramatic sigh. This reaction releases some of the tension in the room, as we hear the other actors laugh off camera, Ashton forces a smile and Neilson and Entwisle have the following exchange:

Neilson: There's a combination of bad things going on here.

Entwisle: It had reached tipping point, hadn't it? Too much bad.

Neilson: Is it time for box therapy? Or is that too comic a beat?

From the thoughts articulated through speech and the physical actions of the performers during and post-rehearsal, it can be discerned that the scene, as currently scripted, is recognised by the entire company to be underdeveloped, and Neilson decides to take the rehearsal in a different direction through an improvisational device which involves Ashton's head being masked by a cardboard box.

The genesis of the idea behind 'Box Therapy' seems to have come from what I will term the 'Random Objects improvisation' which occurred at the end of my first day of filming rehearsals on 13 March 2013. This improvisation exhibits similar properties to theatre company Gecko's use of improvisation which Alex Mermikides describes as 'often [being] inspired by things that they happened to find lying around in their various rehearsal spaces' (2010: 24). The improvisation also 'provides an excellent example of how discoveries occur in the rehearsal process and how often chance can function alongside more consciously directed experiments' (McAuley, 2008: 279; see Sequence 12: 0.00 - end). In the Random Objects improvisation sequence, Neilson informs the actors that, 'I just want to see what might be the start of something [...] you'll feel like dicks but I just want to see what it looks like'. Expressing his awareness that the actors may feel self-conscious, Neilson signals that he has nothing concrete in mind regarding the outcome of the improvisation. Instead he is hoping that there may be something which prompts his imagination into generating an idea from which he can produce material to explore in rehearsals. He seems to be, as Viola Spolin states, 'setting out to solve a problem with no preconception as to how [he] will do it; permitting everything in the environment (animate or inanimate) to work for [him] in solving' it (1999: 361).

The Random Objects improvisation actually lasted for around nine and a half minutes, which I have edited into a three and a quarter minutes long sequence. The general gist of the improvisation is evident in the footage: actors cross the space with random objects from the room while at times interacting with Doel. The type of this improvisation connects with an observation made by Daniel Johnston, who states that ‘objects within the environment are apprehended in many different ways [and the objects’ status] changes according to the activity of the involved human subject within the context’ (2011: 77). In the improvisation footage, we see Johnston’s observation in operation when Entwisle uses two separate everyday objects for a purpose different from what they were designed for: she uses toilet paper as a headscarf for Doel and a roll of blue electric tape as an engagement ring. The actors cross the space a total of 33 times during the course of the improvisation, utilising objects like an umbrella, a pair of boots, a ringing alarm clock, a fire extinguisher, a metal urn and a walking stick. But from the 33 vignettes he has at his disposal, Neilson focuses on Ashton’s ‘chance’ application of a cardboard box as a helmet. It seems that he has achieved the objective he stated pre-improvisation, namely that he ‘want[s] to see what might be the start of something’, in this instance Ashton wearing a box over her head, although whether he actually had ‘box therapy’ in mind at this point cannot be determined.

This improvisation happened on 13 March 2013 and the ‘box improvisation’ occurred 15 days later on 28 March. So, it seems that Neilson has (mentally) archived this ‘chance’ discovery, and perhaps this is what he is doing at the end of the sequence on 13 March when we see him scribbling in his notebook. When Ashton crosses with the box on her head, the camera coincidentally pans across to Neilson who, at this point, is watching and looking thoughtful. Then sometime during the following two weeks, the idea of ‘box therapy’ has germinated in his imagination. Thus, a tiny moment from one improvisation has spawned another, more in depth, improvisation at a later and very different point in the rehearsal

process. This shows the structural complexity and contingency of Neilson's process, and how he embraces the latter, as well as being another example of Neilson accessing his default mode network, as discussed in Chapter 1.

In the next section of footage which takes place a few minutes later, things have progressed. Both actors are still reading from their scripts, but Entwisle has adopted an American-Jewish drawl and Ashton has donned a non-descript box and is speaking her lines into a microphone (see Sequence 11; 2:41 – 6:31). The scene, like the initial scripted version, remains static, and the performers are still constrained by the words on the page, but there are signs emerging of positive development in the acting. Ashton is more vocally energised, a fact partly, though not entirely, due to the increased volume facilitated by the microphone, and there is more variation of tone, pitch and pace in her delivery. However, because the actors are still reading from the script and the fact that she has no visual connection with Entwisle is particularly inhibiting for Ashton. Not only is she reduced in her ability to mobilise her face as part of her own performance, she also cannot use what Entwisle is physically and expressively providing to inform the development of her own performance. In addition, because the box absorbs much of the energy behind her words, Ashton is encouraged to compensate vocally for these impediments, although her lack of visual connection with Entwisle does not result in any change in her character's physicality at this point.

However, while Ashton's performance shows signs of vocal development when supported by the use of the improvisational tool of the box, Entwisle still seems to be struggling with her characterisation; her new accent is hampering her performance and causing her to lose focus. This is evident when she does not pick up one of her cues from Ashton and apologises for this slip-up; she then has to repeat a line as her accent slips from

her control. The scene continues to break down for her, as her level of concentration fluctuates, and she rushes through the script, until ultimately she says that she has ‘lost it’. Entwisle’s anxiety concerning the script, her struggle with her accent and the direction this exercise is taking, is having a detrimental effect on her contribution to developing the scene. Neilson’s reaction that ‘I don’t think the little Jewish lady is going to fly’ indicates that he is not convinced this version is the effective direction for the scene to progress.

Thus far, in these two attempts at the scene, there is a clear articulation of what Clive Barker discusses, when he insists that ‘the principal use of improvisation [...] is to overcome the actor’s failure to penetrate the text to the actions that underlie it.’ (1977: 167) Entwisle is failing to penetrate the text. She is not emotionally or psychologically committing to or connecting with Neilson’s words; thus, a real tension and lack of confidence is coming through in her performance, especially vocally. What is revealed, in this moment of rehearsal, is that while Neilson’s script does make linguistic sense, there is no emotional depth in Neilson’s text for Entwisle or real dramatic meaning emerging, as the acting provoked by the text, does not form a cohesive or dramatically stimulating enough performance unit.

Clearly aware of the present problems, Entwisle then takes up a suggestion from actor Olly Rix, with which Neilson concurs, namely that she could perhaps revisit one of the characters she had previously tried out, ‘Sibilant Susan from Essex who runs a jewellery stall’. Seizing the initiative, Entwisle spontaneously (and with no prompting from Neilson) launches into a completely new phase of the improvisation (see Sequence 11; 6:31 - 8:44). At the beginning of this phase, Entwisle is still holding the script, but she is not reading from it. She adopts an Essex/Estuary accent and begins to verbalise entirely new material with the opening lines: ‘We’ve come up with a new plan [...]. What it does is, it frees you up, because no-one can see your face. It frees you up to talk about what’s troubling you’. Ironically, these

lines are thematically appropriate to the improvisation because the objective is to implement a new plan in order to liberate both actors from the constraints of Neilson's text, as well as translate the underlying theme of the scene – an individual's pursuit of happiness by desperate and inappropriate means – into something more theatrically stimulating. Entwisle continues to search for new lines, but there is no real momentum behind what she formulates, so she returns to the words on the page in order to overcome this obstruction.

However, once she has returned to the text, things do not markedly improve. In fact, events resemble the pre-improvisation version discussed above, as both performers are still static and constrained by the script with little sense of flow or communication between them. Neilson then begins to guide the improvisation directing Entwisle to 'get her [Ashton] to walk'. While she implements this suggestion, Entwisle seems preoccupied and distracted from the immediate moment. She is vocally grasping for a sense of characterisation, evidenced by the reticence of her delivery. She then has an epiphany about her character, exclaiming (increasingly energetically): 'I'm a bit like that guy from Fat Club in *Little Britain!* [...] That's exactly who I am. Oh no!' It seems that the improvisation is beginning to bear fruit for Entwisle, as she finds a televisual frame of reference from which she begins to assemble her character. Entwisle's burgeoning characterisation has several similarities to actor Matt Lucas' portrayal of the character of Marjorie Dawes who convenes the Fat Club in the BBC sketch comedy programme *Little Britain* (BBC3/BBC1 2003-2006). These include Entwisle's new accent, pitch and tone of voice, as well as the completely inappropriate manner of engaging with her client; she blurts out the first thing that pops into her head, completely bypassing any internal mechanism of censorship.

While things are beginning to improve for Entwisle's performance, Ashton, despite the development of her vocal performance, displays a tension stemming from her attempts to

incorporate the written text into events as they unfold. Her difficulties connect to what John Hodgson and Ernest Richards' (1974) observe as:

tension seems to build particularly rapidly when people find themselves with a script of the play in their hands. Free open thought seems to be blocked, and when leaders [of the improvisation] find this happening it is vital to encourage actors to put down their scripts and improvise on the ideas which lie behind the words. (1974: 57)

Hodgson and Richards' thoughts are particularly appropriate to Ashton, as thus far her thought seems to be blocked: while Ashton's facial expression is masked by the box, there is a definite tension in her physicality as she traverses the space when prompted by Entwisle. Both arms are held stiffly by her sides and there is a stilted or jerky quality to her walk and, unlike Entwisle, she has not come up with any new lines or responses, indicating a creative blockage, or what Clive Barker defines as 'deficiency in emotional expression.' (1977: 167) Neilson recognises that Ashton is 'stuck in a text which [she is] unable to physicalise', so in order to 'penetrate to the feeling that should find articulation through the words' (Barker, 2002: 13), he suggests that Entwisle should 'get her to actually walk like she would imagine a tree would walk'. In character, Entwisle then dispenses with her own script and removes Ashton's script and the microphone from her hands. This act is the *perepeteiac* moment, or turning point, of the improvisation which leads to a completely new scene being created.

Improvisation and Characterisation via Stanislavskian Principles

In this new scene, Ashton is undergoing therapy where Entwisle as the therapist prompts her into performing increasingly bizarre physical actions in order to manufacture a synthesised feeling of happiness (see Sequence 11; 8:44 - 14:14). This scene displays, in very concrete terms, some of the productive outcomes that improvisation can achieve. To draw on Lorraine Hull's work again, these outcomes pertain specifically to helping 'an actor or director to deal with a psychological problem' (1985: 133). This is revealed on two levels: first, the actual

content and action of the scene is concerned with Ashton's character attempting to deal with her psychological and emotional issues. Second, as mentioned above, both actors are creatively impeded which is preventing them from fully engaging with the words on the page. But once freed from the 'tyranny of the text', the performances are transformed. By this, I simply mean that the sheer presence of the text at this juncture is somewhat inhibiting for the actors, partly because at this point the text is underdeveloped. Neilson's process is such that his texts are marked by an inherent non-fixity, compounded by the fact that he directs all his own plays. Ironically, it is precisely the unfixed evolving nature of his process that, while inviting so much input from the actors, makes his text a barrier to creativity for the performers.

Now the performers are no longer rooted to the spot as in previous runs of the scene. Ashton traverses the space in a manner reminiscent of a comedic fusion of human and tree. Entwistle rocks back and forth and approaches Ashton with the microphone to capture her response, then retreats to her previous position. She even smiles and, as the improvisation concludes, she makes physical contact with Ashton for the first time as she removes the box from Ashton's head, revealing her face. Now there is much more communication between the two actors, and clear evidence of a symbiotic performance is emerging, as each respond to the verbal and kinetic stimuli provided by the other performer. The vocal and physical energy levels have also markedly increased; now there is a real drive and structure to the scene. So, the improvisation has become about overcoming a psychological hurdle in order to portray a psychological problem.

It is not only the psychological dimension of improvisation that merits critical attention; Hull's suggestion that improvisation can be used to help 'develop behaviour to make a character more believable, [...] to understand a character better' (1985: 133) is also

worth exploring. This particular strand of analysis is more complicated and depends, to an extent, on how the term ‘believable’ is defined. As I have discussed in the introduction to this chapter, within a Stanislavskian context, terms such as ‘believable’ and ‘truthful’ are notoriously slippery and unstable, but as far as the ‘Box Therapy’ improvisation is concerned, what my analysis so far has demonstrated is that Ashton and Entwisle have been struggling with the material because, in their judgment, the scene and their characters lack a level of truth and credibility due to a lack of coherence. For an actor to find an effective means to a psychologically coherent performance (or in other words ‘inhabit’ their part believably and truthfully), Stanislavski states that ‘sometimes it is possible to arrive at the inner characteristics of a part by way of its outer characteristics’ (in Magarshack, 2010: 46). I would argue that in this improvisation, the renewed commitment, or belief in the action, from both actors results in an unintended, but useful, truthful discovery being made. A discovery, which puts Ashton in touch with one of the inner characteristics vital to her characterisation via the outer characteristics explored in the improvisation.

There is an issue here concerning whether Stanislavskian modes of characterisation are appropriate in analysing Ashton’s performance, given that, as already noted, *Narrative* is not a naturalistic play. Cynthia Bishop Dillon states that a more ‘external’ mode of characterisation may be a more appropriate and effective means to apply. She argues that the ‘absence of character, plot, and narrative make traditional interpretative acting based on actorly representation of [...] self problematic.’ (1993: 35). Bishop Dillon is pointing out ‘the inappropriateness of a Stanislavskian approach’ to acting when the actor is performing in a non-naturalistic environment or style (Bishop Dillon, 1993: 35). However, Stanislavski’s ‘System’ has become a significant paradigm in actor training in the United Kingdom since its emergence in the 1960s, and as such is the principal methodology many actors have at their disposal in order to create a character or performance and measure whether the work is

successful. Ashton trained at the Manchester Metropolitan School of Theatre, where she would have been exposed to Stanislavski's 'System' and encouraged to apply its doctrines to her performances. William Worthen has stated that 'Stanislavsky [meaning the employment of his techniques] prohibits the actor from entirely *absenting himself* [sic] from the stage' (1984: 208; original emphasis). This inability, highlighted by Worthen, to separate the self from the character,¹ when applying Stanislavskian principles to acting is exactly what Ashton is struggling with at this juncture and her reticence seems to stem from using Stanislavskian techniques to engage with Neilson's material, and the failure of these techniques to penetrate the text and, from her perspective, improve her characterisation. In effect, one of the principal benchmarks for her to construct and gauge the quality of her performance is unavailable to her. Therefore, I would argue that Stanislavskian terminology and ideas are relevant to the discussion of events at this juncture, because Ashton is (unsuccessfully) attempting to apply these principles to a non-naturalistic scene.

The scene is concerned with representing theatrically Ashton's character's increasingly bizarre quest to fill a void within her, in this instance capturing ephemeral fragments of non-existent happiness. Throughout the improvisation, the outer characteristics on display are visually and audibly cosmetic in nature: they are external physicalisations and vocalisations with no real connection to inner emotional or psychological impulses, evidenced by the comedic physicality Ashton adopts in pursuit of her goal and Entwisle's peculiar vocal instructions. However, at the end of the improvisation when Entwisle unmasks Ashton and asks whether she is 'Happy', Ashton's somewhat hesitant vocal response, 'Totally', is completely at odds with her physical reaction. In the 30 second uncomfortable silence which ensues, Ashton does not move from the spot where the improvisation

¹ In Stanislavskian terms, 'the performer's off-stage personality becomes the basis for the development of performative material.' (Bailes, 2011: 190)

concluded; she looks fearful, isolated, exposed, slightly traumatised, and lost. Her gaze shifts from one spot to another, but she makes no eye contact with anyone, until she turns and throws a glance behind her to Entwisle who forces a slight smile and then averts her eyes.

George Tabori comments that ‘nothing actors experience should be censored or repressed, and everything they experience can be used in performance’ (in Deidrich, 2002: 279) and Nicholas Ridout asserts that ‘paralysis and fear are both prerequisites and direct fuel for the truthful presentation of human emotion in the theatre.’ (2006: 39). Ridout and Tabori’s arguments are relevant to Ashton’s reaction to the improvisation, because in this uncomfortable silence Ashton now understands her character better, and because through the improvisation she has discovered something which is emotionally truthful and ultimately useful for her in performance. In the process of the improvisation, the discomfort she is experiencing is a feeling akin to the emotional state her character often finds herself in throughout the course of the play, a state that comes from being scared, alone, isolated, emotionally vulnerable and not really knowing what to do to resolve these issues. As can be seen, Ashton is extremely uncomfortable with the turn the improvisation has taken and she finds the comedic developments embarrassing and painful to enact; so, the Stanislavskian outer characteristics which involve comedic aspects (the box on the head and walking like a tree) result in inner characteristics concerned with emotional vulnerability and believing in a character being accessed. I am not suggesting that Ashton as a performer or person has never experienced these or similar emotions, rather she now has an emotional/psychological map she can employ in order to arrive at this emotional state in performance: albeit this point has been reached in an unintended and unconventional way and at some emotional cost to Ashton. Through this improvisation, Ashton has inadvertently created the basis for a future use of the affective memory technique, which is a ‘*technique* that allows actors to find the emotional triggers that set off appropriate feelings’ (Krasner, 2010: 151; emphasis in

original), to help her access the feelings she has just experienced for her performance of the role. It seems that Ashton has been experiencing difficulty because of her Stanislavskian approach and instinct to the material; and yet it is her Stanislavskian approach and instinct that helps her to arrive at a productive outcome.

Instinct

When Ashton says ‘Totally’, the improvisation stops and the 30-second-long silence shows that everybody is uncomfortable by her looking visibly upset; the jokey tone of the rehearsal process has temporarily ceased. Anthony Frost and Ralph Yarrow note that improvisation often ‘awakens responses in the performer which are primal, and personal, [which] can be adapted and assimilated into the actor’s conception of the role’ (2007: 175). In a similar vein Shomit Mitter’s articulation that ‘the memory of a deeply felt emotion can sometimes coax that feeling back into existence’ supports my argument (1999: 20). This process of emotional stimulation and subsequent retrieval aptly encapsulates what Ashton undergoes during and post improvisation: the unintentional consequence, in which Ashton ends up upset and forlorn, is something which she subsequently draws on during rehearsals and performance in order to make aspects of her character more psychologically believable for herself and the audience.² The positive outcomes that Hull (1985) discusses regarding improvisation as character development strongly connect to Hodgson’s point that during and after an improvisation, ‘it is usual to encounter self-consciousness and embarrassment’ (1974: 21).

This notion is present, not only in the improvisational moment I have just discussed, but also in the testimony of the performers during my interviews with them. (see Sequence 13; 0.00-end). During her interview Entwisle expresses concerns about feeling ‘like a total

² This point can be seen in the subsequent performance, at the point just before Power recites his ‘Lawrence of Arabia’ speech, and will be touched upon in a little more detail shortly.

twat' during and after the scene discussed; she then goes on to elaborate that 'it was the one time throughout the whole process that I needed to call somebody' for emotional support.

Ashton, whom I interviewed roughly an hour and a half after this scene, tells how she felt:

very vulnerable. And to go with the notion of something, not knowing whether it's going to be used or not is really hard. [...] If there's anything that I'm exercising it's an instinctive response to something and making it work [...] you've got to dive right in.

In our follow-up interview, Entwisle discussed this particular improvisation further:

If I'd been 25 or even an actor who hadn't worked with Anthony before, I might have been utterly destroyed by that. [...] I did have a crisis because I texted Barney and I wanted to talk about it afterwards. I asked him 'Did I make a total fool of myself today?' [...] I came home a fucking seasoned Neilson deviser, traumatised. Fuck knows what Zawe was feeling, so I rang her up. [...] And I kept her on the fucking project. I rang her up and talked her round. (2014)

Both actors display similar concerns regarding the emotional effects they felt and the psychological and creative hurdle that had to be overcome when running this improvisation.

However, at the same time, Ashton expresses something about improvisation that has been articulated by Dusya and Crossan, namely that improvisation 'is about embracing the uncertain, trusting intuition [and] acting before thinking' (2004: 731). Ashton forced herself to confront her instinctive response and commit to the improvisation blindly (both metaphorically and literally, given that she was wearing a box over her head), because she could sense that the scene was not developing satisfactorily. Also, as an experienced performer, Ashton is all too aware that, if she does not fully commit to her character, however unsupported and extreme it may feel, it would be likely to be evident in the final performance. Following the earlier lack of commitment by both performers to the text and the improvisation, commitment is now very palpable in this scene as Ashton forces herself to

fabricate spontaneously a completely new characterisation via a process which is interestingly intertwined with pain and discomfort.

The instinctive dimension to improvisation, mentioned by Hull (1985), and already referenced earlier in this chapter is worth analysing in the same context explored above. The fact that both actors have dispensed with their scripts forces them to deal with their intuitive aversion to running the scene, in all likelihood based on the performers' hunch that the script is underdeveloped, even when taking into account Neilson's developmental approach. They rely on their personal performance instincts and experience. In going against this instinctive response, Entwisle discovers the broad outline of her character, which results in her intuitively adopting a caricatured and comedic performance style. So, by overcoming one instinctive reaction, Entwisle discovers a new instinctive position, a position which encourages her to increase the comedic aspects of her characterisation when this is reaffirmed and supported by the laughter she can hear from the actors watching the scene and the smile on Neilson's face. While intuition is the fundamental base from which many actors build their performance, and many actors often perceive a tension between intuition and technique (evident in Entwisle's struggle with her accent), this moment of improvisation is notable for the tension within the intuitive realm and the productive outcomes this yields.

Similarly, Ashton mentions feeling 'very vulnerable' and 'exercising [an] instinctive response' which, as already discussed, results in a new and external physicality being appropriated and an internal characteristic being inadvertently discovered. However, unlike Entwisle, I would argue that Ashton does not overcome her initial instinctive reaction, a reluctance to fully engage with or commit to the material, which is informed by and located within a Stanislavskian context developed both during her training and professional experience. Instead she grapples with it throughout the improvisation. Mitter insists that 'it is

a necessary condition of the unfettered operation of the subconscious that conscious awareness be actively suppressed during the creative act' (1999: 16). Or, to put it another way, that for instinct to be used to full effect for creative purposes, it is obligatory to tap into an unconscious and intuitive stratum of response by subduing the more structured thoughts which supersede the unconscious. This suppression of conscious thought is something which Ashton is unable to completely accomplish. I would argue that the essence of what Ashton is thinking and feeling is that, as discussed above, what she had just improvised was extremely uncomfortable for her. One can easily imagine Ashton thinking, as she is prompted to imagine how a tree would walk by Neilson via Entwisle, how embarrassing this development of the scene is for her to enact, and worrying whether her new characterisation is coming across as ridiculous. The physical manifestation of this worry is evident in her facial expressions post-unmasking and heightened by the uncomfortable silence which follows. I would contend that what we see at this point is the same or a small variation of Ashton's expression beneath the box when running the improvisation. This situation is another example of Neilson's habit of having the actors perform humiliating material, as discussed in Chapter 2, and very much ties in with a conversation between Neilson and theatre critic Catherine Love, who writes that: 'Neilson talks of a shame barrier that has to be broken through in order to progress; actors must be unafraid to make fools of themselves in the improvisations' (2013).

It seems that the physical and unintended internal characteristic discovery that Ashton makes as a consequence of the improvisation is not a product of overcoming one instinctive obstruction and going with another to construct her character, like Entwisle's journey. Instead, the end result for Ashton is a product of the battle between conscious thought and instinctive response. Stephanie Hill has stated that 'when improvisational moments do not work as expected or planned, a space is created for that which is not anticipated' (2013). This

is precisely what happens with Ashton: she produces a positive improvisational result, not because she manages to suppress her conscious awareness in the way that Mitter emphasises, but precisely because she fails to do so. Thus, it seems that Ashton has inadvertently, and somewhat fortuitously, used ‘failure [as] *a route to critical discovery*’ (Bailes, 2011: xix; original emphasis). This type of productive failure I would argue has not been considered enough in the existing scholarship on improvisation, and I will explore the notion of failure in further detail in the context of the ‘Human Soundscape’ improvisation in Chapter 4.

Mask Work

The ‘Box Therapy’ improvisation is also instrumental in developing the physical life of Ashton’s character. As already discussed, during the improvisation, Ashton discovers a comedic human/tree hybrid physicality. This burgeoning physicality is linked to wearing the cardboard box over her head, and I would argue that the box is Neilson’s unintentional version of Jacques Lecoq’s and Jacques Copeau’s mask work. The actual mechanics of the box improvisation and the reasoning behind it are reminiscent of an account of inadvertent mask work by John Rudlin who witnessed a similar occurrence at Jacques Copeau’s school at the Vieux Colombier. Rudlin recounts that:

Whilst rehearsing a scene he [Copeau] despaired of an actress who found herself repeatedly blocked [...] Copeau took his handkerchief and covered her face, noting that the body was immediately released as an expressive instrument. [...] This experiment was immediately put to work in the School, using stockings as well as pieces of cloth. Jean Daste [an actor involved in the scene] later noted: ‘when the face is masked or hidden, one is less timid [and] more daring [...] The mask demands [...] an extension of gestures; something forces you to go to the limit of the feeling expressed’. (2003; 57)

Note the similarities between Rudlin’s account and the box improvisation; in both accounts an object at hand from the rehearsal room is used as a device that masks the face of the respective actors who are experiencing creative blockage in a scene they are rehearsing.

Copeau utilises a handkerchief and subsequently stockings and pieces of cloth; Neilson employs a cardboard box. In both cases, the result of this development for the performers is that their bodies become a more 'expressive instrument'. Ashton, like her counterpart, also increases her commitment to the scene by temporarily overcoming her instinctive reservations to her characterisation; her physicality is transformed and her gestures now exhibit an elongated quality.

Most obviously, the cardboard box and the handkerchief display the similar physical property of non-expression associated with Lecoq's neutral mask through which an actor can 'achieve the state from which new creative structure can arise.' (Frost and Yarrow, 2007: 155) The neutral mask is most often 'a teaching tool and not designed for performance'. (Murray, 2003: 73) It is also 'a tool towards characterisation' (Murray, 2003: 73) which can put 'the actor in a state of perfect balance and economy of movement.' (Lecoq, 2000: 38) Because of its lack of expression, the neutral mask can free up performers as they are not encouraged, guided or provoked to adopt a pre-given physicality stemming from the appearance of the mask. It can assist the actor in finding an 'inner zone' from which innovation can emerge, especially the physical mannerisms of a character. (Vocality is often not part of this type of mask work.) Anthony Shrubbsall believes the mask-wearing actor is 'encouraged to move from the individual and feeling of the real person to the immediate, instinctive physical world of the mask'. (2002: 100) This process is precisely what Ashton goes through when wearing the box; as she lumbers across the space, swaying from side to side and bobbing up and down, her arms have effectively become branches of a tree and her fingers twigs. The kinetic quality of her physicality mirrors Entwisle's vocal modulations: as Entwisle speeds up her delivery, Ashton speeds up her hulking gait; as Entwisle slows down, Ashton does the same; and as Entwisle's pitch increases, Ashton's 'grabbing' actions become more frenetic. The precision, despair and grotesqueness evident in the movements connect to

her character's state of mind: a woman so unhappy, lonely and at odds with her physical appearance that she seeks out and takes advice from Entwisle's unconvincing therapist.

At the same time, in this improvisation, the box obscures Ashton's facial expression. With naturalistic approaches to performance,³ the face has long been considered as one of the principal sites of performance and crucial in conveying emotions and characterisation when acting. This issue is touched upon in the following comment by Keith Johnstone when discussing film actor Greta Garbo: he states that 'information transmitted by the body [is] perceived as emanating from the face'. (1981: 185) However, this particular avenue to performative expression is denied to Ashton who is compelled to communicate primarily through her body. As Jane Baldwin states, 'the full-face neutral mask [...] deprives actors of their normal modes of expressiveness, the face and voice, forcing them to communicate using only the body', which describes exactly what is occurring with Ashton at this juncture. (2003: 90) The mask also has a somewhat dehumanising effect on Ashton; we now see her as something devoid of expression, something not quite fully human (this is fitting as she is drawing on tree-like qualities here). One of the primary functions of neutral mask work is, what Simon Murray terms, 'a tool of transformation towards a dramatic character.' (2003: 105) Work undertaken while wearing it has the potential for 'theatrical transformation', and it can provide 'the key to the actor's approach to the role'. (Felner: 1985: 42) This metamorphic capability of mask work is evident in Ashton's performance and is instrumental in her new characterisation methodology. She undergoes what I will term as a 'dendropomorphic transformation',⁴ which until now had been 'stored in the psychophysical being of the performer' (Elderedge, 1996: 17). This transformation has been precipitated by a combination of the verbal stimuli provided by Entwisle and the expressive liberation of the

³ As already discussed, most of the performances within *Narrative* fall within these approaches, even though the play itself is not entirely naturalistic.

⁴ 'Dendro' is the Latin word for tree.

box/mask. The box/mask has emancipated the performer from the need to concentrate on the face as the principal means of performance engagement, thus enabling a different route to be taken to performance; a route which involves her relinquishing Stanislavskian performance techniques in favour of a reluctant commitment to a more external performance. What is ironic and of note is that this commitment accidentally results in Ashton subsequently drawing upon the 'affective memory' generated by the fallout of this improvisation, as discussed earlier (see Sequence 11 B: 0.00-end). Through obstruction and removal, the box/mask allows and facilitates a shift towards the unconventional, turning what is usually a pedagogical device into theatrical strategy.

The Relationship Between Actor and Director: Unproductive Aspects

As McAuley points out: 'improvisations [...] are an excellent example of the interdependence of director and actor in a good creative process' (2008: 281). Whilst this is undoubtedly true, I would argue that more attention needs to be paid to the moments when this interdependence encounters the difficulties and frustrations that are always part of the creative process. In the remainder of Sequence 11, events have moved on and there is an excerpt of the post improvisation debate between Neilson, Entwisle and Ashton (see Sequence 11; 14:14 - end). In the opening section Entwisle does not say much, but Neilson and Ashton express their concerns about the improvised scene. Neilson questions the quality of his writing and is still unsure that the underlying thrust of the scene is coming through. He explains that: 'it's not that I don't think the information is interesting in that scene. It is, but I think it can be written better [...] there's something about her searching for something [...] the pursuit of happiness really.' Ashton is also still unsure about the material generated, and her response that 'at the moment it's lacking something bizarre, but I don't think it's as bizarre as jumping around in a box', is entirely in keeping with her instinctive aversion to the material discussed above. I would argue that this comment is how Ashton truly feels about the improvisation. However,

for the purpose of my subsequent analysis, the most relevant aspect comes at the end of the sequence when Neilson and Entwisle have a debate on the merits of the improvisational material.

In this exchange Entwisle cautions against her part becoming a fragmented depiction whose characteristics shift for theatrical convenience and she questions if it would be preferable to cut the scene entirely. Neilson, on the other hand, is still concerned with the quality of his writing and is adamant that the scene has to be different; that Entwisle's characterisation has to radically change, and she has to be completely real (though the term 'real' is not explained).⁵ This is a clear example of a moment of improvisation where the director and the actor have different and opposing goals and concerns and the creative process is marked by frustration, especially for the actors. In the next sequence, events have shifted from the rehearsal room to the penultimate day of the technical rehearsal in the theatre, 4 April 2013, just over a week since the box improvisation (see Sequence 14; 0:00 - 1:01). In this opening section, we see that there has been no development in this scene from the initial work on it. The action and dialogue of the scene, as well as both characters, are virtually identical to what occurred in the box improvisation from the previous week (see Sequence 14; 1:01 - 3:30). However, the scene has not yet been cemented into the form it will ultimately take in performance. Both actors are uncertain as to what exactly should transpire once Entwisle removes the box from Ashton's head, so they debate several options. Eli Rozik's assertion that 'interpretation by directors and actors reflect different mental processes' seems particularly appropriate in assessing events at this moment (2009: 147). Neilson does not become involved in this part of the discussion; for the most part, he swivels

⁵ Note also how Neilson uses the words 'completely' on three occasions, 'different' on two occasions, 'real' thrice, and both 'realistic' and 'realistically' once. These semantic choices evident in his use of language clearly demonstrate Neilson's concerns at this juncture.

in his chair, completely disengaged from the conversation. It seems that his mind is focused on the transition into the next scene. His interpretation of what needs prioritising at this juncture is entirely at odds with Ashton and Entwisle's, who are concerned with developing their dialogue and characterisation. It is them who have to perform the following evening, virtually unrehearsed and with a very loose script; there is a real tension between the objective of the director and the objective of the performers.

In order to instigate development, Ashton takes the initiative and we see how a scene can 'develop incrementally, as each actor adds something to the scene through statements', as she concocts the following ad hoc dialogue, which the actors then run (Dusya and Crossan, 2004: 741):

Entwisle: How old are you?

Ashton: I'm eight.

Entwisle: Where are you?

Ashton: I'm home.

Entwisle: How do you feel?

Ashton: Happy! Happy!

This development is somewhat unusual as Entwisle and Neilson are ordinarily the two who constructed the details of this scene (evidenced by the debate between the two at the end of Sequence 11); but at this point they go with something which Ashton spontaneously suggests (see Sequence 14; 3:30 - 5:37). We then see Ashton's frustration escalate when out of character she exclaims, 'I mean what the fuck. I don't know. Whatever, you know', as she washes her hands of responsibility for how things are progressing. The first preview was the following night, 5 April and the scene has still not been finalised. Everyone has been in the theatre since 9.30am and at around 9pm there is only one hour left of this day of the technical rehearsal, which compounds Ashton's increasing frustration with how things are proceeding.

Recognising Ashton's worsening mood, Neilson intervenes and gives the essence of what he wants to be communicated in the scene, stating that: 'All we need to say here is she's searching for something. We also need to say there's something wrong. There's something not quite right about the story she's told herself. That's what we need to know.' It can be ascertained that Neilson considers the actual dialogue and action of the scene to be relatively inconsequential. For him, what is most important is that the subtext is clear; the text and action are merely a loose framework that should facilitate this end, something very much at odds with a performer's perspective. An actor's preferred approach to live performance is definitely not being under rehearsed. An actor's perspective entails knowing the material well enough so that the lines are firmly lodged in the memory and that the process of characterisation is deemed to be fully developed and consistent, in order to deliver a believable performance in front of the audience. The actors then run Ashton's ad-hoc dialogue; Neilson listens and begins to work through the issues in order to ensure his previous concern, a smooth transition into the next scene, can be facilitated by these developments and to determine whether the subtext is coming across through these lines. Ashton, however, has still not come to terms with wearing the box; it seems that her aversion to this device has still not been overcome. Neilson reassures her that he thinks 'with it on is pretty good because we don't know what your expression is; it's a mystery to us. [...] It'll be alright, it'll be fine'; as does Entwisle who tells Ashton, 'it's really poignant'. For Ashton, her morale and trust in the material that she and Entwisle have formulated has not increased much, despite the creative and psychological hurdles that have been confronted and overcome.⁶ What the events of Sequence 14 show is that 'the interdependence of director and

⁶ Ashton's protracted sense of unease concerning 'Box Therapy' is a very human response to a situation she thinks and feels is entirely inappropriate for her character to be involved in. But ultimately the actor is lower in the hierarchical structure than the director (see also Chapter 5), so is obliged to carry out the director's wishes, regardless of their reservations. It is this type of creative 'clash' that can lead to a degree of resentment on the part of the actor towards the director and the show in general.

actor in a good creative process' (McAuley, 2008: 281) is here impeded because Neilson is more concerned with his responsibilities as a writer than as a director (a point which will be further discussed in Chapter 6 and the Conclusion to this thesis); and this constrains the productive outcomes here.

The Relationship Between Actor and Director: Productive Aspects

Having emphasised the ways in which improvisation can be marked by difficulties and frustration, I will now explore how improvisations *can* indeed fulfil McAuley's notion of 'an excellent example of the interdependence of director and actor in a good creative process', (2008: 281). In the remainder of the sequence we see that the final destination of the scene is achieved, via a collaborative process which involves both actors improvising and Neilson, as the director, lightly guiding proceedings (see Sequence 14; 5:37 - end). He deals with the exact beats and pauses, and determines what will fill gaps, thus cementing the ending of the scene and allowing a smooth transition into the next. Of particular note, as my discussion will show, is the fact that Neilson, as a writer, has not had much impact on proceedings. His script has chiefly been used as the framework, from which the scene has evolved. The actual substance of the scene has been formulated by Entwisle and Ashton (albeit with some minor direction from Neilson); the characters, physicality and the dialogue created are, for the most part, the work of both performers.

Due to the fact that the lighting designer Chahine Yavroyan was plotting the lighting change into the next scene, the scene begins in the dark, but Entwisle can be heard delivering her lines as both performers slowly begin to come into focus, and we see that Ashton is wearing very high heeled shoes which, when combined with the box, adds another layer of kinetic detail to her 'dendropomorphic' gait. In the final version of the scene it seems that Neilson, by determining the specific chronological layering, reassuring the performers and

resolving the technical issues for a scenic changeover, has achieved his objective of communicating to the audience that ‘something is wrong [and] not quite right about the story she’s [Ashton’s] told herself’. This is due to the fact that Ashton’s character has willingly put herself in this outlandish situation, which invites the audience to wonder what exactly is so wrong with a character who would take such extreme, and ridiculous, measures. In this moment, the director-actor tension abates and, following the earlier disconnect, this light touch collaboration of Neilson, yields fruitful outcomes.

What is crucial to observe is that the action and the dialogue of the scene in the technical rehearsal of 4 April are virtually identical in form and content to the combination of the original Box Therapy improvisation of 28 March and Ashton’s impromptu revision of the denouement of the scene of 4 April. However, that the final version of the scene is something which Neilson has taken from the improvisational labour of the performers and inserted into the performance text problematises comments made by actor Brian Doherty and Neilson in their interviews. As previously discussed, ‘qualitative interviewing allows researchers to gain insights into thought processes, opinions and reactions’ (Ritchie, 2003: 160). We see Ritchie’s assessment in action when Doherty and Neilson provide personal insights, opinions and reactions regarding improvisations and their effect on how text is formulated in the rehearsal room (see Sequence 15; 0.00 – 0.51). Both interviewees articulate the same sentiment: Doherty states how Neilson is ‘influenced by improv, but you never feel that your work’s been lifted wholesale and put in the script. [...] Anthony’s scripts are very definitely Anthony’s scripts’; Neilson states that ‘very rarely do they [the actors] do an improvisation that I take lines from’.

However, as Keith Beattie advises and the analysis in Part 1 of this thesis has already demonstrated, ‘attention to the word [should not] result in an uncritical acceptance of the

opinions of interviewees' (2004: 136). When Doherty and Neilson's comments are scrutinised through the lens of Beattie's advice, particularly in the previous context of Sequence 11 and Sequence 14 (the 'Box Therapy' improvisation and the 'Box Therapy' improvisation in the technical rehearsal), the validity of Beattie's warning is patent, as both interviewees' remarks prove to be not entirely consistent with regards to the finished product formed from the improvisation material. This is one of those occasions of improvisation that Neilson does take lines from; in fact, it is not just a few lines, the whole exchange is transposed. Contrary to Doherty's assessment of improvisations, this part of the performance-text has not been manufactured by Neilson. No resolution for Neilson's self-proclaimed 'need to write it better [...] or find a way to make her [Entwisle's character] real' has materialised; nor has Entwisle's suggestion to 'ditch that scene' been acted upon. Instead, the work of the actors has indeed 'been lifted wholesale and put in the script', despite Doherty's belief to the contrary.

The reason for this occurrence is impossible to ascertain with any certainty. However, I would argue that it is a combination of expediency, and the fact that Neilson had the acumen to allow the performers to take the initiative with the Box Therapy improvisation and the opportunity to take from their labour the components that most furthered his own objective that the subtextual theme of the scene was evident. Thus, by implication, it can be ascertained that Neilson respects and trusts the creative abilities of his actors. Moreover, the fact that Neilson makes use of his actors' input and labour in this way again touches upon issues of authorship discussed in Chapters 1 and 2 and similarly, Neilson again excludes all the material that both actors generated for this scene from the published play-text despite it being included in the performance at the Royal Court. There is a tiny echo of the improvised scene in the published text (Neilson in Reid: 271-2), and then two pages later there is another glimmer of the improvised scene in the stage directions for Ashton's entrance, which read as

follows: 'Zawe enters. She looks glamorous but too thin, and despite wearing ludicrously high heels that accentuate her height, she bends down to compensate.' (Neilson in Reid: 274). As discussed in Chapter 2, it is impossible to qualify exactly why Neilson chooses to do this. What can be said is that the improvised scene's 'absence from the print version [...] serves to mark the difference between the decidedly transitory, ephemeral context of performance and the more solid or fixed arena of publication.' (Etchells, 2006: 113)

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that improvisation's productive potential for characterisation, identified by Hull (1985), was realised during the *Narrative* rehearsals, especially as far as the creation of Christine Entwisle's character Sibilant Susan and the development of the physicality of Zawe Ashton's character during the 'Box Therapy' improvisations are concerned. There was virtually complete blockage on the part of the actors, who were struggling with Neilson's script, and the use of improvisation eventually led to a whole new scene being created; a scene that was judged by Neilson to be significant enough to be included in the performance at the Royal Court, even if cut from the published play text.

Here, the use of improvisation by the actors was essential to overcoming the impasses that were marking the development of these characters and the overall rehearsal process, both of which were due, at least in part, to the under-developed script. The 'Box Therapy' improvisation offers an important inflection to Hull's point that improvisation can be used 'to develop some aspect of the character not evident in the *actor's* work on the role' (1985: 133, emphasis added): improvisation must also be understood as a tool to develop an aspect of the script not evident in the playwright's work. This was certainly the case with the 'Box Therapy' improvisation, during which the actors' instincts (which Hull notes as important) were actually somewhat at odds with the material (due to the under-development of the

script); and this is also a worthwhile addition to make to Hull's summary, namely that actors' instincts, can be problematic and detrimental to the development of an improvisation. The chapter has explored Neilson's complex, but still conventional, use of improvisation in the *Narrative* rehearsals in terms of productive outcomes for characterisation. Chapter 4 will consider a further moment during the *Narrative* rehearsals that occurred very shortly after 'Box Therapy', which represents a much more unconventional use of improvisation, and will allow the chapter to explore the complex relationship improvisation may have with the issue of failure.

Chapter 4: The ‘Human Soundscape’: Improvisation, Rules and Failure

As the introduction to Part Two of the thesis has already pointed out, while improvisation is used in a number of different contexts and concerns spontaneous creative acts, the conventional use of improvisation in rehearsals depends on clearly defined sets of parameters. This has been stressed again and again in the existing scholarly and practitioner discourses. For example, Hull is unequivocal in her conviction that improvisation ‘in all phases of rehearsal must have a specific aim. The theme or purpose should be properly defined’ by the director (1985: 133). Michael Chekhov has stated that:

the beginning and end of this exercise [improvisation], whatever they may prove to be, must be clearly defined at the outset. [...] With no definite beginning to impel your actions and no definite end to complete them, you only wander pointlessly. (in Caines and Heble, 2015: 171)

In a similar vein, Charles Marowitz has noted that:

Unless a director has shared a general conception with his actors, and each member on board is aware of the purpose of the voyage, a lot of time can be spent meandering. Often, setting out with no clear view in mind, the cast hopes blindly that [they will arrive at] the proper port. That is of course, deadly, because an improvisation without a purpose is the exact equivalent of a ship without a rudder. (1986: 62)

This commentary highlights how essential it is that before any improvisations are undertaken in rehearsals, the director must clearly communicate the specific rules and objectives to the actors, who in turn, must accept and adhere to them. Throughout this kind of process there is a tacit contract between the director and the actors that all parties follow the rules, which in turn requires them to fulfil the particular function they have been allocated (i.e. the actors will engage in the improvisation, and the director will communicate the beginning and end, as well as any changes of the parameters). In this way, improvisation bears a resemblance to a game; just as improvisation needs a delineated framework, so games require consistent rules

as well as a beginning and end point, in order to succeed. Just like improvisation, games require clearly defined roles in terms of who gets to play and who fulfils a different function.

If this preparatory stage does not occur, then in all likelihood all the improvisation will do is waste time drifting aimlessly and it will be virtually impossible for the improvisation to yield any useful creative outcomes. Or, to put it another way, the improvisation will fail. This view is supported by Bishop Dillon, who points out that operating ‘within a highly defined, and sometimes confined, performance structure is important for actors’ (1993: 38). Failure is a notion that has received increasing attention within scholarship on theatre and performance. This scholarship has paid attention to different kinds of failure, or the presence of failure within a range of contexts. Nicholas Ridout contends that theatrical problems such as stage fright and corpsing represent types of failure and Eric Weitz notes that:

Clowns fail hopelessly, imaginatively, unluckily, triumphantly and barely – and if, perchance, they succeed, it happens by accident or misdirection. The clown, or clown-like performer’s success at causing laughter bases itself upon a special competence for failure. (2012: 80)

Sarah Jane Bailes is the scholar who has written most extensively about failure, and she asserts that ‘failure is intrinsically bound up with artistic production and, by extension, the figure of the artist’ (2011: 1), giving examples such as slapstick comedy, Punk and amateurism to exemplify her argument (see Bailes, 2011: 40-93). Bailes also makes the case for why failure is significant for performance, stating

There’s a pedagogy in failure – we learn by mistakes, by accident, and by getting things wrong. In a sense then, the development of a theory of failure in performance is a constructive and revisionary optic through which one can begin to consider the political value to be found in strategies of coping and recovery, the continuation after the disaster, adaption and accommodation, and the use of what is revealed through narrative breakdown and compromised circumstance. (2011: xx)

Existing debates have shown a tendency to discuss failure in terms of its productivity and how it ultimately has a positive, if oblique, impact on the final desired outcome. For example, Roisin O’Gorman and Margaret Werry promote the view that failure is productive partly because in ‘failure we are forced to think critically, to reimagine, to make something new’; going on to add that failure can also be ‘a strategy to prompt creativity, a tool to discover new forms, ideas, worlds.’ (2012: 105). Likewise, Hill is a proponent of the positivity of failure, writing that:

Participants in improvisational art-making can learn to see failure as a process by adopting an attitude of accepting and working with a failed event. When improvisers embrace such a methodology of acceptance the process and products of failure can be generative [because it] provides new experiences for critical reflection that can also become incorporated in the planning and process of future performances[.] (2013)

Hill mentions Forced Entertainment in this context, highlighting that for the company ‘failed events [have] proved generative of new artistic products’ (2013), as does Bailes who stresses that in a Forced Entertainment production, ‘the success of each performance is usually contingent upon the countless failures and botched attempts that unravel through the process of apparently trying to perform “well” whilst deliberately sabotaging the event.’ (2011: 58)

This chapter will explore in detail Neilson’s use of improvisation in terms of defined and communicated parameters for improvisation, and the threat of failure that is understood as likely to arise from an absence of such rules. Through in-depth examination of a case study, this chapter will consider whether for Neilson failure is a ‘stoppage, a caesura: a moment in which the linear drive of progress, betterment, accomplishment grinds to a halt’ (O’Gorman and Werry, 2012: 106) or not. The chapter will do so by first outlining the context and content of the case study, and the presence or absence of rules, objectives and roles. It will then consider how the presence of humour informs the tacit contract and working relationship between the actors and Neilson, whose leadership is both challenging

and (albeit implicitly) challenged. The chapter will pay due attention to the corpsing that occurred during the case study, which represents a form of ‘rule breaking’ and as the analysis will demonstrate, was actively instigated by Neilson himself. The chapter will move towards its conclusion by first considering the presence of failure as failure, before finally suggesting that Neilson’s use of improvisation here can be understood to have a more unconventional function that links to catharsis.

Uncertain Beginnings with an Absence of Rules

This chapter’s case study is what I will term the ‘Human Soundscape’ improvisation, which occurred on 28 March 2013, only a few minutes after the conclusion of the post ‘Box Therapy’ improvisation discussion analysed in Chapter 3. The ‘Human Soundscape’ involved the whole company, and concerns a ‘polyphonic improvisation’, in which several layers of sound cohabit, produced by the individual members of the company (Nettl, 2015: 73). It seemed to be a rather haphazard attempt to explore what Lucy Fife Donaldson has referred to as ‘the power of [sound’s] abstract qualities to enhance affect’, as discussed in Chapter 1 (2014: 117). The first section of the sequence deals with Neilson’s conception of the improvisation and the short preamble leading up to the first attempt at running the ‘Human Soundscape’ (see Sequence 16; 0.00 – 2.32).

It is worth sketching out the pre-improvisation preamble in some detail, as there is a marked difference in the mood of the company. Due to the prospect of the forthcoming improvisation, the somewhat fraught atmosphere the recent ‘Box Therapy’ discussion engendered quite rapidly dissipates and shifts to a register which is more upbeat and light-hearted, with much giggling and smiling, including by Neilson who is clearly relishing the moment. Somewhat surprisingly, this positive, and abrupt, rejuvenation of the atmosphere in the rehearsal room seems to be solely initiated by Neilson’s impulsive and rather unexpected

question to sound designer Nick Powell: ‘Do you want to do a human soundscape? Where everyone has to find a strange noise?’ Neilson alerts the rest of the company and singles out Doel, whom he asks what particular noise she intends to articulate. Doel instantaneously offers two noises for consideration, the first is her exhaling like a cat hissing and the second is reminiscent of the call of a cockatoo. Powell reminds Doel that it is in fact a ‘human soundscape’ they plan to pursue, so Doel changes her noises to exhaling on the same breath four times in short succession. Shortly thereafter, a grinning Neilson asks ‘Does this work?’ and proceeds to croak out a noise that he is certain will be highly amusing to the company, a noise which is reminiscent of a cartoon character who is grunting from the pain of being kicked in the crotch. Neilson’s comedic croak is met with a burst of laughter from around the room and Entwisle hides her head against the wall in mock shame. The cast then commence with the enunciations of their own spontaneous and increasingly odd noises. The verbalisations finish when Power ironically and pointedly pronounces that ‘it’s a good job we’re not rehearsing in a dance studio [because of the] mirrors’, and then in mock shock glares down my camera lens and exclaims ‘Hey, you’re not filming this!’ Power then makes a clipped and nasal ‘NNNyipp’ sound as he crosses the space to form a line with the rest of the company; a line which includes Neilson, assistant director Bennett and latterly, at Neilson’s insistence, Jules the assistant stage manager. Once the whole company have lined up, Powell gives a rather vague note concerning the premise for the forthcoming improvisation, namely that ‘what we’re doing is collectively, really accurately, creating a sound world of something completely abstract.’ There is then a degree of confusion as Powell endeavours to clarify his brief with reference to ‘animals’, but Neilson shuts down Powell’s attempt at clarification with his remark ‘Don’t complicate matters’, then Doherty chimes in with ‘Shall we just do it’ in an attempt to get the improvisation started.

During this pre-improvisation phase, the comments and actions of the company highlighted here are significant because they reveal clues about the attitude of the respective actor to Neilson's improvisatory strategies.¹ Doherty's 'Shall we just do it', and his attitude to Neilson's practice of improvisation is clarified in his interview testimony (see Sequence 15: 0.51 - end) when he states that 'at times when you're working with him you feel like "please cut it, kill it now."' These statements strongly suggest that he not only wants the work to begin in earnest, he also wants what he fears will be a lengthy improvisation to be finished. This is not necessarily because it is an onerous task that he wants concluded, but that he is interested in getting to whatever potentially useful creative by-product may result from the improvisation. This conclusion is based on the remainder of Doherty's interview testimony where he states that:

Oftentimes with an improvisation he's [Neilson's] just seeing how an idea works. Or trying to clarify his own thinking on something a lot of the time. [...] [T]hen quite often after that stage [meaning the "cut it, kill it now" phase mentioned above], it develops into something else, something interesting.

Therefore, it seems that Doherty is not only aware that the forthcoming human soundscape improvisation may not be used as a direct compositional tool, he is also mindful that it may develop into something more interesting.

Power's satirical comment that 'it's a good job we're not rehearsing in a dance studio [because of the] mirrors', implies that he does not want to be visually aware of what he and the rest of the company will be doing during the improvisation. This is perhaps due to his first-hand experience of Neilson's penchant for introducing a degree of humiliation to proceedings, as discussed in Chapter 2. But it is not only the company seeing the improvisation that Power is self-conscious about. His aside to me, 'Hey, you're not filming

¹ They also reveal clues about Neilson, who I will discuss below.

this!' hints that he is, consciously or unconsciously, reluctant for someone outside of the rehearsal environment to have any access to a record of what might be another somewhat compromising situation.

Similarly, based on her past experience of Neilson's improvisations in rehearsals as well as him demonstrating to the room that his aural contribution will be the comedic croak, long-time collaborator Entwisle's reaction of hiding her head in mock shame against the wall suggests that she suspects that imminent events will bear all the hallmarks of a 'typical' Neilson improvisation. During our follow-up interview, Entwisle made the following candid comments:

The improvisations are endless. They're bad improvisations to be involved in as an actor because there's never any rules, they never have an end, and you have no purpose [...] I feel like what he's [Neilson] doing is kind of sucking stuff up which may or may not be useful to him later that night when he goes home and tries to think of something to write. And I'm not even sure about that. My suspicion about Anthony's lengthy improvisations, which he confided in me a long time ago, is that 'actors need to feel like you know what you're doing and they need to feel busy, so this is a good thing to keep them busy.' [...] For actors, he gives them something to do for two fucking hours in a rehearsal room when there's no more script, and that is where I put the full stop. (Entwisle, 2014)

Entwisle's testimony touches upon a number of significant points regarding Neilson's use of improvisation. Firstly, Neilson's improvisations often serve no discernible purpose for Entwisle other than to fill up time by giving the actors 'something to do' in order to diminish and/or temporarily forget any misgivings they may be experiencing about how the work is developing. In this way, Neilson's use of improvisation fulfils a 'medicinal' function intended to help allay or soothe any concerns the actors may have concerning Neilson's ability as a director, by providing what to the actors is a familiar and appropriate activity for a rehearsal process. Secondly, and similarly to the Random Objects improvisation discussed earlier, Neilson is on the lookout for an unspecific occurrence in the improvisation that will

be of assistance to him in developing the script. This somewhat scattergun attitude is similar to how Forced Entertainment can use improvisation in their rehearsals, as seen in the following short excerpt from *Certain Fragments* (1999):

The process used [when improvising] was chaotic, exploratory, blundering. A question of going into the rehearsal room and waiting for something to happen. Waiting for something that amused, scared, hurt, provoked or reduced one to hilarity. (Etchells, 1999: 51)²

Entwisle's final point is that Neilson's improvisations can be very difficult for his actors to be involved in due to the fact that a rule-and purpose-free approach is Neilson's preferred improvisational methodology. This is confirmed by Matthew Pidgeon who, in his interview, stated that Neilson 'does tend to do a lot of these open-ended improvisations. He doesn't give you a set objective, somewhere to go. So they just go on and on and on.' (2014) This particular and rather peculiar approach to improvisation is apparent in his response to Powell's attempt at clarifying his brief with reference to animals, when Neilson cuts off any further explanation with the instruction: 'Don't complicate matters.' These three words capture the essence of Neilson's improvisational attitude and clearly indicate that he does not want what he considers to be unnecessary instructions, rules or elucidations to interfere with his vision (if indeed he has one) for the forthcoming improvisation.

A rule of improvisation is that it conventionally involves the identification of who is leading proceedings, and takes responsibility for the running of the imminent improvisation. This is absent from this pre-improvisational stage, evidenced by Neilson temporarily relinquishing his directorial role and becoming an active participant in the forthcoming improvisation without acknowledging this or conferring with the rest of the company. Cynthia Bishop Dillon proposes that "absence" can be defined as [the] lack of a definable

² It should be highlighted that this 'wait and see' attitude that Forced Entertainment adopt is different to Neilson because the process described by Etchells' leaves more time to develop the script afterwards.

constructive subject to be made present' (1993: 31); and this definition of absence is present in the guidance by Powell who takes responsibility for running the improvisation; guidance which consists of 'creating a sound world of something completely abstract' and 'the most important thing is that it doesn't sound like anything.' Powell's guidelines are scant and unspecific (although more detailed than Neilson's), and there is certainly a lack of a definable constructive subject discernible in them.

Neilson's idiosyncratic approach runs contrary to the dominant understanding of the deployment of improvisation in rehearsals, which revolves around specific aims, a defined purpose and allocated roles and responsibilities. From the perspective of more conventional theatre practice, it is extremely unusual, and in all likelihood detrimental to the chances of attaining any positive results, to have such an obscure brief. It is here Powell, the sound designer, and not Neilson, the director, who seems to recognise that a properly defined framework for performance enables actors (and directors) to focus their energies and resources specifically, which in turn allows them to ascertain whether what they are attempting, in the specific context, is working and worth pursuing in the most effective manner. Without a set of defined parameters, there is a possibility that time and resources will be wasted that could have been better spent developing and defining existing areas of interest. If unsuccessful a wasteful activity can damage the morale of the performer particularly as actors move closer to the show opening, especially if the scripting of the play has not been completed, as is the case here in the *Narrative* rehearsals.

Further, concerning this absence of rules, aims and roles, it is now useful to consider Drew Leder's notion that 'absence is not equivalent to a simple void, a mere lack of being' (1990: 22), as well as Heiner Goebbels' closely related suggestion that 'absence can be understood as space(s) in which emotion, imagination and reflection can actually take place.'

(2015: 4) However, in this improvisation preamble, there is little space for Goebbels' conception of absence as an opportunity to think, imagine and reflect. Instead, this segment of footage confirms Rob Wallace's argument that improvisation may connote a lack of sophistication or planning (2015: 134). It also, to an extent, supports the (somewhat contentious) point made by Bishop Dillon that 'actors work as a channel through which impulses flow without literal understanding' (1993: 36). The latter is discernible in the acoustic offerings made by the company, in particular Doel. When asked what her noises will be, Doel immediately responds with her renditions of a cat hissing and a cockatoo squawking; she also responds in the same expeditious manner when she is informed that her animal noises should be one human noise. The sheer rapidity with which Doel provides her sounds demonstrates the absence of thought or planning. Doel does not consider her options (or indeed appears to be not listening properly), as her response to the instruction to produce a human sound is to produce the first sound she thinks of (an animal noise), completely bypassing any process of reflection. The same absence of thought or planning is also evident in the cacophony of noises from the actors which follow Neilson's comedic croak. Here, the actors follow Doel's lead and improvise sounds that are not only immediate and spontaneous, they also demonstrate the lack of sophistication highlighted by Wallace, as there is no thought or planning as to how their aural contributions could phonetically integrate and complement each other in order to create a choral effect. This absence of consideration regarding the formulation and blending of the aural properties by the actors mirrors and is symptomatic of – indeed responsive to – the lack of forward thought and planning behind the improvisation itself.

The most obvious evidence of these absences is the fact that the improvisation, from its conception to its commencement, takes only two and a half minutes to coalesce into its provisional and nebulous form. This period of time consists of what is, for the most part,

relatively unfocused chat, which all the actors know is part of Neilson's rehearsal process. If the company had taken more time to discuss the parameters of the forthcoming exercise, it is highly likely that some of the absences of rules, thought and planning would not be present. Instead, what might have been present is a much more solid structure to support the improvisation, which in turn would have increased the probability of the improvisation yielding manifestly positive results. Absence, of course, holds the potential to highlight and link to presence; a point acknowledged and elaborated on by Marie-José Mondzain, who writes that, 'absence [...] by the trace that it leaves and the lack that it incarnates, produces the very essence of the visible.' (2005: 94)

The principle of absence revealing what is in fact present, stressed by Mondzain, is pertinent to my argument here, because what is present in this rehearsal moment is a very loose framework in which the allocation of responsibility and the driving of the creative decision-making process are suspended. The supposed leader (Neilson) has abdicated from his position of authority and gladly joined the actors, with one of the technical support staff (Powell) deciding to shoulder the responsibility for running the improvisation. Neilson wanting to join in with the 'fun', chimes with something Entwisle said during her follow-up interview, in which she commented that 'he works with his mates and he enjoys having a laugh with them' (2014). In light of this comment, it seems reasonable to argue that perhaps the forthcoming Human Soundscape improvisation is Neilson's (un)conscious attempt to satisfy this particular preference. It is also possible that, as discussed in Chapter 1, Neilson needs to indulge in this type of activity in order to access his default mode network to come up with solutions to problems and/or generate ideas. This directorial abdication, in combination with an almost complete absence of any rules present within which the company may operate and the fact that there is no real mention of any clear objectives to be worked through or attained, suggests that 'unstable' would be an appropriate word to describe the

structure of the soundscape. I will consider the consequences of this absence of rules, purpose and the roles in my discussion of failure later in this chapter.

Humour, Rules and Challenging Leadership

In the next segment of footage (see Sequence 16; 2.32-3.05),³ the company embark on a rather brief stab at running the improvisation and ultimately end up with an under-developed and dramatically unengaging result that bears remarkably similar properties to the description of an improvisation explored by Joseph Chiakin's Open Theatre where 'the actors improvised [...] using all kinds of vocal sounds, including hisses, clicks, phenomes and some words' (Dean and Smith, 1997: 215-6).⁴ The soundscape begins with each company member simultaneously vocalising their respective aural contribution (that include various 'hisses' and 'clicks') before Powell intervenes after a mere 20 seconds, as he asks 'Can we do it [the human soundscape] so that it gradually builds up?' I would argue that Powell's prompt intervention is due to the fact that, as a very experienced theatrical sound designer and composer, he is all too aware that the process of producing viable 'sound effects involves attention to the internal dynamics of each, so that the relationship between them (whether it is parallel or contrapuntal) creates something that isn't just noise' (Fife Donaldson, 2014: 124-5). Powell realises that this premise has not been yet been applied to the emerging soundscape.

It is this lack of attention to the internal dynamics of the respective company member's aural contribution, before the contribution is actually made, that is one of the key

³ When the company are actually articulating their respective noises during the improvisation, I suggest that the viewer of the DVD footage close their eyes and just listen to the soundscape at least once. I have found that this approach provides an aural 'counterpoint or subtext to what is objectively [visually] occurring within the frame' (Borger, 2012: 1).

⁴ Dean and Smith's (1997) description of Chiakin's improvisation is another example of the sparse way in which improvisation can be discussed in scholarly discourse.

determinants in the first attempt at the soundscape rapidly descending into a cacophony of overlapping ‘noise’. Fife Donaldson describes ‘the work of sound designers/editors [as being] precisely geared to creating and transmitting aural texture’ (2014: 119), and this texture is achieved often via ‘a process of layering and weaving and balancing various strands and the interaction of these elements (2014: 124). The creating and transmitting of aural texture via a process of layering and weaving is certainly the direction that Powell wishes to take the soundscape improvisation, and this fact is evident after Neilson asks him whether he wants the company to be mobile during the next round of improvisation, in Powell’s response: ‘Not at the moment because it will get difficult to layer it’. This comment reveals Powell’s interest in adopting a more textured polyphonic approach. The results of this new approach can be seen in the next improvised soundscape which exhibits quite different aural properties to the previous aborted attempt (see Sequence 16: 3.05-5.00).

In this next round, due to the fact that someone with the appropriate expertise (Powell) is running an improvisation based around their particular skill set, the phonetic particulars and ordering of the improvisation are more focused. That being said, the company are still uncertain regarding the objective of the improvisation. The improvisation commences with Powell cuing in Ashton, who gives a slurping sound, and then on Powell’s signal, the company one by one join in with their own particular aural contribution: Entwisle produces a creaking croaking noise, Doel delivers breathy exhalations, Doherty makes a sound by inhaling through his mouth, Power makes a high pitched keening noise by exhaling through his nose, Ross joins in with an asthmatic snoring noise, Neilson makes his former comedic croak and then, amused by Neilson’s input, Rix can only manage a half-hearted and barely audible rasping sound. Bennett and Jules contribute nothing acoustically, all they can do is attempt to suppress the mirth provoked by Neilson’s deliberate attempts to make them laugh

and the unfamiliar situation they find themselves in, as assistant director and assistant stage manager.

The noises are articulated at periodic intervals, sometimes they are the only noise audible and at others the noises occur simultaneously, the noises also fade in and out in a continually shifting relationship to each other, at points the sounds seem fairly equal in volume, then at others one sound predominates. The upshot of this aural composition is a medley of sounds that collide and interact with each other, and ultimately what is produced is a dense polyphonic effect with multiple layers and rhythms. Here the mixing of the various noises does not result in the same level of acoustic ‘mess’ that the previous attempt did, instead the soundscape exhibits signs of phonic development. However, they are still just an assortment of randomly selected noises mixed together, and then, ‘as if by magic’⁵ it is hoped by Powell that something of use will emerge. This does not happen and the soundscape breaks down into fits of giggling after Neilson vociferously delivers one too many intentionally comedic croaks.

Although the actors have seemingly enjoyed themselves during this attempt at the soundscape, evidenced by their somewhat nervous laughter and smiles at its conclusion. There is a noticeable trace of defensive anxiety and self-consciousness creeping into the body language of Ross and Ashton post-soundscape. Both actors almost mirror each other at times in this regard with an arm folded across their chests and the other hand touching either their face, head or neck, suggesting their apprehension or an unconscious need to guard themselves within or hide themselves from this situation. There is also a degree of ironic concern and implicit criticism discernible in the comments on the improvisation. For example, Power’s sardonic line, ‘One week to go...and the cast are hard at work’, which he delivers as a mock

⁵ Here I deliberately recall the title of McAuley’s book *Not Magic but Work* (2012).

television voice-over, is his particular way of commenting on the fact the actors are *not* hard at work when they ought (and want) to be, signalling his frustration at this turn of events.

Power does seem to be more conscious of me and the camera than the other company members.

As part of his discussion on the function of humour, Robert Westwood writes that:

Direct and sober criticism of the noble person would have been illegitimate and an effrontery, but the jester avoids this through assuming a specific role and by disguising the critique in humour. [...] Jesting is a questioning and corrective of authority, but not, however, a subversion of it. (2004: 786)

Neilson of course is not a member of the aristocracy, and Power is not his court jester,⁶ but in terms of hierarchy, the relationship between Neilson and Power as director and actor is similar in structure to the master/servant relationship. Therefore, the essence of Westwood's argument, that a person in a subaltern position can use comedy to critique his superior without directly challenging their authority, is pertinent here because this seems to be exactly what Power is doing at this point. This links to issues of power which will be discussed in detail in Chapter 5. While Neilson is suspending the rules for the use of improvisation, the (often unspoken) rules for actors' behaviour within rehearsals are still very much in effect here. Even though Neilson partly intends to upend the rules for the comportment of the company members, as he participates in the Human Soundscape, power here works unilaterally and the rules for the actors cannot be (fully) upended.

Of interest here, is the fact that Power's frustration is ultimately caused by Neilson's refusal to take on the responsibilities that accompany the dominant role. This type of ironic

⁶ However, the dynamic between Neilson and Power does seem to be oddly similar at times to the noble/jester relationship in this regard; see Chapter 2's discussion of humiliation and the Footmouse Dance, where Power capers in a manner reminiscent of a jester and Neilson considers having him perform increasingly embarrassing actions for his own amusement.

commentary is a safe tactic to adopt because it allows Power to voice criticisms without overly exposing himself or absolutely ‘owning’ what the criticism implies; after all he can always say he was only joking if asked to explain the remark. The jokey veneer covering the serious undercurrent, as well as the fact that Power does not articulate his criticism in his own voice, in effect, allows him to doubly distance himself from the subtextual criticism he is in fact expressing. As a long-time collaborator of Neilson’s, Power is also aware that his use of irony is very likely to be acceptable to Neilson, given that Neilson has a penchant for the use of humour, as discussed in Part 1. This is one of the key strategies that he and many of the other actors employ in order to communicate their concerns during rehearsals. However, this tactic has a flipside, because it also allows Neilson (or whoever it is levelled at) to ignore the serious implication underpinning the statement and take things in the jokey manner they are seemingly intended to be when it is convenient for them to do so.

In this brief post-soundscape phase the fact that the improvisation has had no properly defined aims or purpose is emerging more explicitly as a critical issue, all couched within the context of humour. Thus far the attempts at the soundscape and the discussion before and after it exhibit all the properties that Marowitz (1986) and Chekhov (in Caines and Heble, 2015) have warned against: with no directorial clarification from Neilson and minimal direction from Powell as to the purpose and methodology of the improvisation, the resulting soundscape has produced ‘meandering’ (Marowitz 1986: 62) work, which the actors are finding it embarrassing and difficult to be involved in. The fact that the improvisation is causing a significant amount of confusion to the actors and that Neilson has no apparent rationale for pursuing the soundscape becomes explicitly obvious in the final brief exchange at the end of this segment of footage. Doherty, who like Power articulates his concerns in a comedic fashion, stutteringly asks Neilson ‘Wha...what’s...wh...What’s it for?’ meaning, what creative function is the soundscape geared towards; to which Neilson barely audibly

responds from off-camera with ‘I don’t know.’ Doel then also uses humour to couch her point and, quips ‘Brian, never ask why or “what’s it for”. Never, never.’

Neilson’s admission as to having no idea as to the potential function of the soundscape is very revealing. The remark corroborates several of the comments made earlier by the actors concerning Neilson’s use of improvisation, particularly the lack of rules, and how Neilson is perhaps ‘sucking stuff up which may or may not be useful to him later’ (Entwisle, 2014), as well as how Neilson may be ‘just seeing how an idea works’ (Doherty). It is also not difficult to understand how Entwisle reached her conclusion that Neilson’s improvisations are ‘bad improvisations to be involved in as an actor’, given that she has previously experienced Neilson’s attitude. However, what is arguably more revealing is what Neilson’s confession of ‘I don’t know’ says about him as a director and how at odds this is with the actor’s craft. The instantaneous and matter-of-fact manner in which Neilson makes his admission indicates that he is not anxious about having no idea and, just as important, that the actors *know* he has no idea about why the soundscape is being run or where it is potentially leading. To return to and extend Marowitz’s comment that ‘an improvisation without a purpose is the exact equivalent of a ship without a rudder’ (1986: 62), Neilson’s active enjoyment and his conscious lack of clarification lead to everyone being on a rudderless ship.

I would venture that Neilson’s matter of fact ‘I don’t know’ remark, is quite disturbing for the actors to hear because not only does it lay bare Neilson’s lack of leadership, it also implies either a disregard for, or a lack of awareness of, what an actor needs from their director and what is considered to be good theatre practice; namely the fact that ‘the practice of theatre is predicated on the execution of specifics, and direction that is not couched in specifics is of no use to the actor’ (Marowitz, 1986: 66). Neilson’s admission of having no

idea about what is going on with the soundscape is completely at odds with the testimony of Entwisle discussed earlier where she recalls how Neilson believes that ‘actors need to feel like you [the director] know what you’re doing’ and suggests that Neilson sometimes uses improvisation for ‘medicinal’ purposes. This is certainly not the case with the soundscape improvisation, as not only do the actors not know what they are doing, Neilson has also revealed that he does not either, and that he does so freely and without resorting to humour would certainly have an impact on the ‘medicinal’ value of the improvisation exercise.

It is, however, not only Entwisle’s interview testimony that Neilson’s ‘I don’t know’ comment runs contrary to, it is also at odds with an assessment made by Power concerning how Neilson’s proficiency with rehearsal exercises has developed over the years. According to Power, ‘as a director he [Neilson] knows much more what he’s doing with certain exercises now. Whereas, when I first worked with him he would try things out even if he wasn’t sure about certain stuff’ (2014). In the soundscape improvisation, it seems that Neilson has reverted to his former position of implementing exercises of which he has little (or no) definitive understanding. This fact calls into question Power’s assessment that Neilson’s directorial expertise has increased during the projects he has been involved in. So, given Neilson’s lack of any idea underpinning the soundscape, it does not seem unreasonable to argue that this lack could have a detrimental impact on the confidence that members of the company have in Neilson’s abilities as a director. Therefore, as my analysis has shown, whilst Neilson’s leadership is being challenged by his actors, albeit obliquely through the use of humour, it is challenging because it is mostly absent, which breaks one of the rules of improvisation.

Corpsing

Returning to the footage, in the next short segment events have moved on around five minutes and the company have another two attempts at the soundscape (see Sequence 16: 5.00-7.04). Powell is now making an audio recording of the soundscape and the company are standing in a semi-circle.⁷ There has still been no discussion of rules or purpose, and the first soundscape begins and unfolds as before with the company's aural contributions being cued in one at a time by Powell. As before, the company breaks down into fits of laughter a few seconds after Neilson voices his first deliberately humorous grunt, and the first improvisation ends, like its predecessors, in failure. Doherty, although outwardly as amused as the rest of the company by his involvement in the soundscape, becomes increasingly exasperated with the lack of focus and Neilson's tomfoolery and urges everyone to 'Come on now', demonstrating that he, unlike Neilson, has a reflexive awareness of how improvisation can 'become a rut instead of a path', especially if there is no focus and concentration underpinning proceedings (Foster, 2015: 401). The second attempt picks up where the last attempt left off, and like previous efforts Neilson's first comedic grunt elicits peals of laughter from several company members. However, at this particular juncture the company collectively manages to suppress the majority of their merriment, so that it does not unduly interfere with this run of the soundscape.

The next round of improvisation begins with Powell telling the company to 'Hold on to your noise and now imagine that whatever this landscape is that we've built, an edge of danger has crept into it.' (see Sequence 16: 7.04-8.08) I would argue that this comment is the first clear and potentially useful instruction to the company regarding the soundscape, as now

⁷ Here and in the remainder of the soundscape footage, the camera position is not ideal for capturing all the responses of the participants because of being blocked by Rix, Doherty and Jules (the assistant stage manager). Not only did I not have time to change positions due to the rapidity of the semi-circle being formed, I also did not want to contribute to the company being even more self-conscious by being directly in their eye line.

the actors know with what emotional quality they should inflect their respective noise and what overall phonetic effect they should aim for. However, despite the aural effects now potentially having an emotional component and a direction to follow, there has still been no mention by Powell or anyone else of how the noises could and/or should ‘communicate qualities of character and shape [...] narrative development’, which Fife Donaldson argues are two of the principal functions sound effects should fulfil (2014: 120). The new and danger-inflected soundscape then begins with an eruption of simultaneous noises that have an increasingly frantic edge to them. Despite Powell’s previous insistence that there should be no animalistic quality infusing the work, this soundscape is reminiscent of the noises one may hear in a jungle canopy at night. Neilson’s agitated comedic croak is the first noise to loudly emerge and within five seconds of this event, one by one the company begin to quietly corpse.

As part of his discourse regarding theatrical problems that have received scant critical attention from scholars, Ridout identifies corpsing as one of the unexplored issues, stating that, ‘the experience of being [...] overcome with the giggles [has] so far fallen outside the scope of theatre studies’ (2006: 15). It is beyond the scope of this thesis to provide any extensive contribution to this academically underdeveloped area. Rather, it is my intention to add to existing scholarship on this subject by discussing ‘corpsing’ in the context of this specific improvisational trajectory. Ridout defines corpsing as being ‘where one actor deliberately “corpses” another, making them laugh’ (2006: 131), and Ridout’s idea of corpsing taking place because someone intentionally tries to induce laughter in others is certainly apparent throughout the arc of the soundscape. It is worthwhile pointing out that Ridout’s discussion is focused on corpsing in the context of on stage performance, while my interest lies with corpsing during rehearsals, and especially improvisation. However, one of the key rules for improvisation both during rehearsals and in the on-stage performance, is that

the actors must fully commit to the activity. Neilson effectively breaks this rule as he begins his attempts to corpse the actors even before the improvisation commences with his jocular groan which affects the company from the outset. The actors are not enabled to fully commit. There is no attempt to purge the company of this infection before embarking on the soundscape and this is ultimately a significant causative factor in much of the corpsing that ensues.

Throughout the various version of the soundscape discussed thus far, Neilson's deliberate attempts to corpse the company do have a distracting and undermining effect that contributes to the improvisation's failure to be productive. This is due to the fact that the company members seem to be anticipating Neilson's comedic croak rather than focusing on the task at hand of blending their respective aural contributions into one phonetic whole. Once they hear Neilson's noise they rapidly fall into spasms of giggling. Neilson is without a doubt satirising and ridiculing the soundscape, he is clearly enjoying his clowning, while seemingly unaware of the frustration felt by members of the company. He is also conscious of the effect his aural mischief is having on proceedings and seems unconcerned that his contribution is often the cause of the soundscape breaking down, particularly in the most recent danger-inflected soundscape, with the volume, timing, tone and frequency of his twelve pained grunts. Neilson's behaviour during the various soundscapes is not the usual type of activity that an actor would expect from their director while they are improvising. It is customary for the director to observe events unfolding, make notes, give instructions and provide feedback. Neilson does none of these things, and this links back to the significance of 'the interdependence of director and actor in a good creative process', (2008: 281), discussed in Chapter 3. That being said, Neilson corpsing the company is not the only significant factor in the soundscape not producing anything of artistic merit or of use to the production, given the absence of any, rules, parameters and objectives.

Corpsing is not just deliberately making someone laugh. According to Ridout it is also ‘notoriously infectious’ (2006: 131). The infectious quality of corpsing can be seen time and again throughout this sequence of footage, particularly in the ‘dangerscape’ mentioned above, and in the second round of improvisation where Powell cues the company in one at a time (see Sequence 16: 3.25-4.13). In this segment of footage, after Neilson gives his first croak, first Bennett and then Rix corpse, but they manage to force their tittering back in. Shortly thereafter Neilson actually corpses himself, which makes Rix chuckle, then after Neilson’s next noise Rix, then Jules, then Bennett make small stifled sniggers. Ridout explains that corpsing is ‘the laughter [of] suppression and containment’ (2006: 130), and this is certainly the case here, as throughout this segment the company members on camera begin to corpse but then manage to temporarily repress it. The corpsing erupts after Neilson gives his final loud croak, as nobody can hold in the laughter that has been building beneath the surface, and in rapid succession everyone starts laughing hard, particularly Ashton.

Corpsing frequently ‘occurs in situations where the self is operating with particular self-consciousness’ (Ridout, 2006: 142), and this is certainly the case for several company members in this sequence of footage. This is evidenced by the discussion above of Ross and Ashton’s guarded body language, Entwisle’s reaction of hiding her head in mock shame against the wall, as well as Power’s relief that there are no mirrors present for the company to see themselves in and his desire for there to be no record of events. So, it seems that at least four of the cast are predisposed to corpsing from the soundscape’s very inception. I have already argued that Neilson’s noise as well as how and when he delivers it causes the company to corpse, but I would venture that it is not just Neilson’s sound that provokes all the laughter. Ridout also points out that corpsing is ‘a symptom of the specific conditions in which the actor finds himself’ (2006: 141). The validity of this assessment is again evident throughout the various attempts at the soundscape and the brief interludes before and between

them and, as Ridout's maintains, other key determinants elicits the corpsing. The corpsing here is a 'laughter of shame and embarrassment' in response to the surreal and bizarre circumstances of the soundscape (Ridout, 2006: 130). Therefore, due to Neilson's particular, rule-free approach and practices, it seems reasonable to conclude that the actors are more likely to corpse, particularly given that the company have already been through the moment several times already.

This type of incredulity concerning one's involvement in a Neilson improvisation, the corpsing that ensues as a result of this participation, Neilson's enjoyment of making actors undertake such outlandish tasks, and the lack of improvisational purpose, are all evident in the interview testimony of actor Tam Dean Burn, in which he discusses an improvisation run by Neilson for the cast of the National Theatre of Scotland's 2010 production of Alastair Beaton's *Caledonia*. Burn describes an improvisation during which, as the cast walked around the rehearsal space in character, Neilson would periodically say something to the actor who then had to 'extend the grotesqueness of the character' (Burn, 2014). Burn describes this as 'like some kind of *Wacky Races* on acid',⁸ and further adds:

But you just have to go with it. On the inside you're thinking 'What the fuck must this be looking like? What the fuck is this feeding into?' [...] We were just trying not to piss ourselves laughing, and not entirely successfully if I were being totally honest. He [Neilson] was pissing himself as well and there was definitely a sort of malicious glee on his [Neilson's] part in manipulating you in that way in the rehearsal room, and getting you to make a complete arse of yourself (Laughs). (2014)

Burn's account of the *Wacky Races* improvisation is particularly noteworthy because not only does it display the similarities to the soundscape highlighted above, it also occurred in a very different type of rehearsal situation since Neilson is directing and devising his own show in *Narrative* and directing a completed script authored by another playwright in *Caledonia*. The

⁸ *Wacky Races* (CBS, 1968-9) is a Hanna Barbara cartoon featuring characters who are racing drivers.

fact that both improvisations occur in completely different rehearsal situations, while displaying such similarities, suggests four things. First, that Neilson has a tendency to embark on improvisations that the actors do not know the purpose of but have to commit to despite their reservations. Second, that the actors are self-conscious about and feel foolish during the improvisations, Third, that the improvisations provoke a significant amount of corpsing and finally, that Neilson enjoys implementing, watching and participating in the improvisations. It seems that Neilson is consistent in his employment of improvisations that have little chance of being a positive influence on the development of the performance. A definitive reasoning for Neilson's employment of improvisation cannot be provided; Neilson himself may not even be consciously aware of the reason. I would argue, similar to Entwisle above, that there is definitely an element of improvisation being a strategy to fill up time in rehearsals when Neilson has no other ideas in mind as to how to proceed.

Failure as Failure

I will now discuss the remainder of the sequence which contains two more brief stabs at the soundscape and the aftermath of all the improvisation (see Sequence 16; 8.08 - end). What is most noteworthy in this segment of footage is the aftermath to all the improvising. Under conventional rehearsal circumstances, after running five 'successful' and two aborted attempts at an improvisation in around 15 minutes, there would either be a coffee break and/or a discussion of what had just occurred. Therefore, in following this convention, the company seems to presume that there will be a post-mortem conversation and most of them remain in the positions they were in when the final soundscape ended. Johnston's point that 'the improviser is looking for something to respond to' (2006: 110) namely: an assessment of the respective actor's contribution; the beginning of a discussion or analysis of the improvisation; and an explanation, from either Neilson or Powell, as to what the improvising

accomplished or failed to accomplish. However, this fails to materialise; neither Neilson nor Powell instigate any debate, instead Powell fiddles with his recording equipment and Neilson wanders around before starting to have a conversation with Jules (the stage manager) about an external issue. The actors seem to be quite phased by this, and many of them outwardly display somewhat pensive body language, fidgeting around with their arms crossed, and voice their concerns in the same humorously veiled manner that Power did earlier. Then during the next four minutes the company disperse to various positions around the room, have mundane conversations and then they begin to rehearse a scene between Power and Doherty that does not make it into the final performance.

According to Bailes, ‘failure often becomes evident not in the final presentation of a work but through an analysis of the compositional techniques invented to generate materials’ (2011: 118.). This is certainly the case with the soundscape improvisation, where the notion of failure has emerged as a critical issue. As I have already noted earlier in this chapter, existing scholarly debates of failure have worked towards understanding the positive, productive contribution that failure can make to creative projects. However, when the arc of this improvisation in *Narrative* is examined, it becomes apparent Bailes’ argument that failure ‘can be understood as generative, prolific even: failure *produces*’ (2011: 3; original emphasis) does not apply here. The ‘Human Soundscape’ fails to be a stepping stone of the creative process, it is not propagative or productive, there is no attempt to accept the failed event and use it as a point of departure from which fresh ideas are generated, nor does it trigger any critical thinking. Thus, the soundscape fails to be a positive failure and cannot be ‘reframed as a learning experience that leads to victory’, as failure often is (Bennett, 2014: 126).

Although Hill argues that failure can be a positive occurrence, she also poses the question: ‘When is failure “just failure”?’ (2013) Based on the evidence presented thus far, I argue that this applies to the ‘Human Soundscape’ due to the catalogue of failures contained therein. The improvisation fails to follow established improvisational protocol, specifically in terms of rules; therefore, there is a failure to have a solid foundation which would maximise the chances of the soundscape achieving positive results. When there are rules, they are often so vague that the improvisers fail to understand them, and when they do understand them, they fail to adhere to them: for example, the failure to prevent animalistic phonetic properties infecting the supposedly human soundscape. O’Gorman and Werry assert that ‘failure and nonconformity are intimates’ (2012: 105), and this is certainly the case with Neilson during the soundscapes, because he fails to conform to his directorial function and forces his assistant stage manager and assistant director to also relinquish their positions.

Bailes argues that ‘If failure can be located in the production of an event or text’, as it is here, ‘it can easily be perceived [...] through states of disengagement’ (2011: 23). This aspect of failure is present during the soundscapes: Neilson encourages the company into a state of disengagement that manifests as all the corpsing that ensues throughout the various rounds of improvisation. Failure also ‘rebels against expertise, virtuosity [and] competence’ (Werry and O’Gorman, 2012: 106). In the soundscape improvisations, this feature of failure is also evident because, contrary to his maxim that it is very important that actors should feel that the director at least outwardly displays competence, Neilson in fact wilfully fails to convince the actors that he knows what he is doing with the improvisations. There is also a failure to discuss and analyse the improvisations during and after the various attempts at the soundscape, which denies the actors of the chance to debrief and finally understand the intentions of the work. These are not the only areas in which the needs of the actors fail to be met during the improvising, their need for structure and specific direction also fails to be met.

Hence, they in turn fail to commit, concentrate or intellectually engage. Despite the blurring of the conventional rehearsal hierarchy during the improvisations, the actors *are* actually in the subaltern position and are obliged to take part in the soundscapes despite their reservations.

However, it is not just Neilson and the actors who are marked by failure during the soundscape exercise. Powell is also implicated, albeit that Powell's failure is linked to the fact that he has to take over from Neilson without having the time to consider the particularities of the imminent improvisation. Ross Brown explains that 'sound effects are important to the production in that they create, reinforce, or counterpoint the atmosphere or mood, reveal character, or contribute to the advancement of the plot' (2005: 107).⁹ This premise of sound effects being principally focused on character, atmosphere and narrative advancement is something Powell fails to acknowledge and implement during any of the various soundscapes, nor does he pay that much attention to the dynamics of the various sounds articulated. Therefore, all the soundscape improvisation ultimately produces is animalistically inflected dissonance that has no bearing on the creative development of the performance. Therefore, the soundscape also fails on a phonic level.

Dean and Smith stress that 'improvisation is used as a way of generating ideas for the playwright' (1997: 225) and Michael Mangan emphasises how improvisation 'can also be used as a way of exploring experientially and theatrically the ideas which are being developed towards performance' (2013: 63). But the soundscape also fails to engage with these two ideas that underpin conventional improvisation: there was no identified concept or text that the soundscape was intended to investigate, so no recognisable new ideas spring from the improvisations. Many of the benefits that an improvisation can yield, as discussed

⁹ This sentiment is echoed by Fife Donaldson, who writes that 'sound – music, dialogue and other varied noises – plays a large role on the creation of atmosphere, of mood and world' (2014: 113).

for the 'Box Therapy' improvisation in Chapter 3, also fail to emerge from the various soundscapes. The improvisations do not function as a compositional tool (directly or indirectly); they are of no assistance in unblocking the creativity of the actors and they have no impact on characterisation either psychologically, emotionally or physically. In light of the weight of this cumulative evidence from the 'Human Soundscape', it seems reasonable to suggest that Neilson's use of improvisation here is very different to that by, for example, Forced Entertainment, who 'actively court failure and are inspired by what such courtship can produce' (Hill, 2013). The valid arguments for failure's positive productivity notwithstanding, I suggest that it is important to also understand failure as failure where appropriate, as is the case with the 'Human Soundscape'.

Play and Catharsis: Therapy for the 'Box Therapy'

The presence of failure as failure notwithstanding, if the human factor, particularly the timing of the 'Human Soundscape', which took place only a few minutes after 'Box Therapy', is taken into account and events are examined from the perspective of the soundscapes in terms of play, the process might be analysed differently and McAuley's insistence that 'nothing that happens during rehearsals can be bracketed out as not relevant to the production process that is occurring' is valid (2012: 213). Theatre director Jonathan Miller is on record as stating: 'I see the rehearsal room as a playroom; it's rather like a nursery where I am the supervisor.' (in Giannachi and Luckhurst, 1999: 91). Miller's idea can certainly be applied to what happens in Neilson's own rehearsal space where there is often a significant amount of playful and juvenile behaviour, often initiated by Neilson himself, such as formulating the idea to film Power performing the Footmouse Dance (see Chapter 2), although he does not want to be the supervisor. Moreover, while games have rules, play carries less structured, more free-wheeling connotations, which certainly applies to the 'Human Soundscape'

I want to suggest that what underpins Neilson's reasoning for initiating the soundscape and his behaviour during it, particularly his attempts to corse the company at every available opportunity, links to the point made by Phil Jones about the function of play in his treatise on drama as therapy. He says '*playfulness* and the general process of playing can be the vehicle of therapeutic change' (2007: 161; emphasis in original) and states that 'dramatherapy work might use play activities and processes as a mode of therapeutic intervention' (2007: 164). It is beyond the scope of this thesis to fully engage with the field of drama therapy, and it is not my intention to argue that Neilson has any knowledge of it, or is consciously employing its theories. Any engagement by Neilson with drama-therapeutic principles happens intuitively and by chance. My argument here concerns that while Neilson's motivation to use improvisation for 'medicinal' purposes, as identified by Entwisle, fails in the context of the 'Human Soundscape', this improvisation is also intended by Neilson to succeed on the level of the players therapeutically benefiting from it.

I would propose that Neilson's attempts to inject as much humour as he can into proceedings is his way of attempting to use catharsis to purge the company of the unease resulting from the Box Therapy improvisation. Catharsis, 'the process of emotional discharge which brings relief to emotional tension' (Scheff, 1979: 47), is originally an Aristotelian concept. It is commonly associated with tragedy, understood as the 'purification of strong emotions' after the encounter with the tragic event (Ley, 2006: 147). However, catharsis has also been linked to comedy by scholars such as William Owens, who writes that:

tragedy and comedy appear to offer two different kinds of catharsis: the former purges the spectator of bad feelings; the latter induces a surfeit of good feelings which bubble over into laughter. [So, although] tragedy and comedy use different means, their ends are the same, the purgation of negative emotions. (1977, 323-4)

Cali Armstrong describes how 'when anxiety is experienced in a situation [...] the anxious individual may not have a way of releasing the anxiety and finding relief from these

symptoms' (2007: 10). This is exactly the type of situation that the company, particularly Entwisle and Ashton, found themselves in the aftermath of the Box Therapy improvisation. As discussed in Chapter 3, both actors had to cope with a significant level of anxiety during and after the improvisation, and this distress had not been expunged during the post-improvisation phase. In fact, it was still the predominant emotion that both performers were feeling in the few minutes between the conclusion of the 'Box Therapy' discussion and the run up to the 'Human Soundscape'.

Having known Neilson professionally and personally for two decades, I would argue that he was certainly aware of the mood of the company at this juncture, but as he struggles with communication (which will be discussed in detail in Chapter 5), he does not outwardly acknowledge his awareness to the actors. Thus, rather than continue with the somewhat troubled discussion concerning the 'Box Therapy' improvisation, or begin what would, in all likelihood, be an emotionally charged conversation concerning how Entwisle and Ashton are feeling, Neilson avoids these directorial responsibilities. Instead, aware that 'anxiety is one of the key emotions that can be discharged and released by catharsis' (Armstrong, 2007: 50) and that 'comedy can have cathartic effects' (Westwood, 2004: 792), he decides that playful clowning is the appropriate therapeutic activity for the company to engage in.

This would explain why, and the manner in which, Neilson initiates the soundscape, as well as his directorially unorthodox behaviour throughout the various improvisations: his lack of interest in following conventional improvisation protocol to generate material of theatrical value; his acting out and his conscious attempts to make everyone laugh. It could also perhaps explain his somewhat inappropriate response to Doherty of 'I don't know' to the question regarding the purpose of the improvising. On one level, this comment could be

absolutely truthful, but there could also be a subtext of 'I don't want you to know' what the purpose is, because, as Clive Barker articulates:

if an actor is told in advance what the purpose of an exercise is, this knowledge might push him towards doing the exercise 'properly' or 'well' or 'efficiently' as an end in itself, and this would interfere with the experience and sensations that are encountered in simply 'trying' it.' (1977: 8)

Therefore, Neilson's use of the 'Human Soundscape' is a good example of how, 'what might appear on the surface to be a diversion or distraction may in fact be fulfilling a directly functional role in the work' or indeed the role of the director (McAuley, 1998: 76). Bruce Avolio, Jane Howell and John Sosik (2004: 221-5) are proponents of the view that humour is linked with effective leadership, and I would argue that this applies to Neilson in the context of this improvisation. He is here both destructive towards his actors' working practices, through his deliberate use of corpsing, and intends to have a productive impact by providing a cathartic moment for his actors.

However, it is impossible to say for sure whether Neilson's cathartic endeavours have been successful, because:

catharsis has little to directly do with observable behaviour. While observable behaviour or affect can be indicators of catharsis, catharsis can also occur without any visible indicators. Therefore, it is not always possible to determine from simple observation whether or not someone has experienced catharsis. (Armstrong, 2007: 16)

The premise that there are times when the indicators of catharsis are present and therefore discernible to the observer, and other moments when, although catharsis may still be occurring, its signs are absent, therefore not discernible for the observer, seems applicable to the company in the context of the various soundscapes and the post-improvisation phase. The observable behaviour of the company during the various soundscapes does exhibit cathartic properties, because as discussed earlier, the mood in the rehearsal room improves and the

company are laughing and seem to be enjoying themselves. However, when the company are not actually running a soundscape and in the aftermath of the improvisations there are points when the observable indicators of catharsis stop and the company adopt a more neutral, muted emotional response. I would argue that this particular type of reaction implies that for at least some of the company members the cathartic process they have been undergoing is superficial and temporary, which in turn is probably linked to the frustration they are feeling. This is further suggested by Entwisle's recollection of needing both emotional support for herself and providing this to Ashton after the rehearsal that day (see Chapter 3). Therefore, it seems reasonable to conclude that if catharsis is 'a discharge of feelings which succeeds in changing the nature of an existing feeling-state', Neilson's attempt at using improvisation as a purgative and mood-changer is only partially or temporarily successful (Duggan and Grainger, 1997: 73). With the pre-existing atmosphere of anxiety and tension discernibly carrying over into most of the discussion between the various soundscapes, the post improvisation phase and the rest of the scenes rehearsed on 28 March 2013, Neilson's therapy for the 'Box Therapy' fails to fully escape failure.

Conclusion

Chapter 3 has argued that the 'Box Therapy' improvisation had a complex relationship with Hull's argument that improvisation can be:

utilised for an actor or director to deal with a psychological problem, to develop behaviour to make a character more believable, to develop a better sense of a character's physical life, to develop some aspect of the character not evident in the actor's work on the role, to understand a character better, to execute an intention set by the actor or director, or simply to note what instincts actors follow in staging a particular scene. (1985: 133)

However, as the analysis in this chapter has shown, the 'Human Soundscape' yielded none of the positive outcomes that improvisation can achieve, and this is closely linked to the fact that

this second improvisation exhibited even less of an intention set by the director. With an absence of clear rules and objectives, the 'Human Soundscape' did not follow any conventional improvisational protocol. It is because of this that much of the Human Soundscape improvisation needs to be recognised and regarded as failure. Here, failure needs to be understood as not a temporary stopping point within the creative process, as neither directly nor tangentially productive, and as not engendering or utilised for the purposes of critical reflection. However, as this chapter has also suggested, Neilson's use of improvisation in itself is unconventional, and when it is not measured against identifiable criteria for a successful improvisation, such as those offered by Hull (1985), then another facet is revealed: as the 'Human Soundscape' improvisation demonstrates, Neilson uses improvisation as a therapeutic device for his company though this is not entirely free from failure either.

While it is important that scholarship recognises, acknowledges and considers the positive dimensions of failure, in the ways that, for example, Stephanie Hill (2013) and Sarah Jane Bailes (2011) do, it is equally important that scholarship recognises, acknowledges and considers failure *as failure*, where appropriate. Improvisation by its nature always means taking risks (including the risk to fail), and with Neilson's loose and unstructured approach, that risk is arguably enhanced and becomes more failure-prone. Neilson's loose and unstructured approach could be much less failure-prone if his process as director and the process of his actors were more synchronised and located within an informing dialogue with each other. If that were the case, then there would be no need to use improvisation as a therapeutic device, and Neilson could actually use improvisation for its conventional purposes and reap the associated benefits. That there is somewhat of a lack of fit between Neilson's process and the process of his actors has already been suggested a number of times both within this Part and Part 1 of the thesis, and this will be explored in full detail in Part 3.

Part 3: Directing Actors

In his article for *Official London Theatre* concerning Neilson's rehearsal process, journalist and theatre critic Matthew Amer describes how Neilson's 'way of working is different to almost all other theatre practitioners, [...] he starts with a blank page, and uses his experiences with the cast to drive the work forward' (2007). In a similar vein, *The Financial Times* columnist Matt Trueman writes:

Commission Neilson to write a play and you never know what you're going to get. He starts rehearsal with a cast but no script. No plot. No characters. 'Nothing much,' as he puts it. 'A couple of ideas.' [...] But it's his singular process in the theatre that imposes uncertainty. [...] 'Very few people let me work like this,' Neilson explains – and it's not hard to see why. (2013)

Furthermore, in her blog post titled '*Narrative, Royal Court*', theatre critic and scholar Catherine Love explains that: 'While he [Neilson] remains very much a writer, his writing happens alongside rehearsals; [...] building on a process of daily workshopping and improvisation with the cast [in a] process of generating, gathering and discarding' (2013).

What these excerpts demonstrate is how much of the interest in Neilson's work and process is focused on Neilson as a writer and his penchant for beginning rehearsals with virtually no script written or preliminary work undertaken. There is an important detail implied, but not explicitly investigated in these accounts, namely Neilson's other function within his process: being the director. As writers themselves, it is understandable that Amer, Trueman and Love seem more concerned with analysing Neilson's authorial process in relation to writing; and this concern reflects the dominance of the playwright in British theatre culture. Nevertheless, it strikes me as somewhat incongruous to draw attention to Neilson's authorship, and neglect to explore the dual roles he undertakes within his rehearsal process, particularly if one takes into account Chris Johnstone's observation that 'the

playwright is one person and the director another, even when they share the same skull’ (2006: 110).

This Part of the thesis will shed light on Neilson’s understanding and practice of directing, providing the rigorous academic analysis of his work as a director that is absent thus far from the existing literature. Therefore, this Part introduction seeks to contextualise and locate Neilson’s work as a director within existing theatre directing practices and the scholarly discourses thereon. Of course, any discussion of directing needs to deal with the challenge of there being certain patterns or groupings in the work of directors that have been identified (e.g. Innes and Shevtsova, 2013), which are useful to understanding the wealth of past and present practice, and the fact that such groupings are inevitably contestable.

This is because firstly, the very role and function of the director has remained subject to debate. As Giannachi and Luckhurst point out, ‘there has not, and never has been, a universal way in which to understand the role of the director’ (1999: xv). Part of the reason for this lack of codification is, as Simon Shepherd explains, because ‘there are many different ideas about what directors do [...] it is very difficult to arrive at one precise overall description [or] to fix on a definition of it’ (2012: 20). In fact, even though there are some broadly shared thoughts on the role and function of a director within a Western theatre context,¹ as theatre director Michael Grandage articulates, ‘there are as many ways to direct a play as there are directors to do it’ (in Shepherd, 2012: 187). This idea is confirmed by Peter Brook’s statement that ‘[u]nlike many other practitioners I don’t have a strong [directorial]

¹ For example, while some theatre *auteurs* (Innes and Shevtsova, 2013: 147-184) bring together a number of other creative functions, the role of director does not predominately encompass that of the costume designer, make-up artist, etc.

methodology because one show is often quite different from another' (in Giannachi and Luckhurst, 1999: 74).²

And secondly, as Brook's above comment already indicates, the work of directors often resists easy categorisation. To give a couple of illuminating examples, one broad distinction in discussions of directing is that between text-centred directors and devising directors. Katie Mitchell is widely considered to be an example of the former: predominately working with existing scripts, she has written and spoken in interviews about her 'forensic' attention to detail' (in Innes and Shevtsova, 2013: 211). This sees her investing strongly into the pre-rehearsal analysis of the play she is working with, where she 'analyse[s] the events and intentions and the idea structure of the play' (in Shevtsova and Innes, 2009: 184) and undertakes extensive research of relevant contextual information (Giannachi and Luckhurst, 1999: 96). Furthermore, her actual rehearsals begin with a reading of the play, followed by a collecting of 'the information in the text which is non-negotiable' (Shevtsova and Innes, 2009: 185) and that which is more ambiguous, which then leads to very concrete tasks being given to the actors. However, Mitchell's precise approach to the text is, as Shevtsova and Innes argue, an extrapolatory one that does precisely not seek to make texts 'sacrosanct' (2009: 178). Mitchell also used devising methods for *A Dream Play* (2005) and *Waves* (2006). Evidently, her engagement with texts is far from straightforward.

In contrast to Mitchell, Complicite's Simon McBurney is generally understood as a devising director. Having trained with Jacques Lecoq and with his artistic influences

² Given this heterogeneity of approaches to directing, it is vital to stress that this chapter will be mindful of Shepherd's argument that:

it seems important not to limit the potential of that variety [of practice]. Such limitation might occur when we assume, or impose, certain sorts of evaluative hierarchies. It's worth challenging such assumptions. [...] And in the face of generally accepted norms of rehearsal-room practice we might insist, rather pedantically, that these are, after all, merely that, generally accepted norm: They are not necessarily better or more productive than minority, albeit abnormal, practices. (Shepherd, 2012: 4-5)

including commedia dell'arte and the work of Pina Bausch, McBurney's work emphasises physicality, movement and musicality. His 'working approach always starts with an image, or an object, while rehearsals help to define a single moment that the action of a show revolves around' (Innes and Shevtsova, 2013: 221) and are used to produce the different materials that McBurney joins together. However, he has also, for example, worked with author John Berger for *The Three Lives of Lucie Cabrol* (1994) or *The Vertical Line* (1999), which involved McBurney writing a scenario that Berger used 'as a basis for creating possible words to speak, out of which dialogue emerges.' (Innes and Shevtsova, 2013: 222) This, in turn, resulted in a series of one-line sentences that McBurney used in the rehearsals with the actors. Innes and Shevtsova (2013) further note that McBurney derived the central image for *Mnemonic* (1999) from an archaeological book. Thus, while David Williams advises that 'all of McBurney's work should be viewed through the lens of devising, including work on existing texts' (2005: 248), 'text' clearly has a complex role to play in McBurney's and Complicite's devising process.³

Not dissimilar to his two British contemporary peers, Anthony Neilson's work, has a complicated relationship to the distinction between text-centred and devised directors. As I have already discussed in the introduction to Part 2 on improvisation, Neilson can usefully be understood as *partly* located within the context of devising (as Alex Mermikides has commented, he 'use[s] devising as a tool within [his] process' (2010: 20)): not dissimilar to Simon McBurney, he tends to start new projects with an idea of what he is interested in

³ McBurney himself has commented that:

The beginning, the origin of a piece of theatre is never clear, even if it is an established play, because the play consists of words on a page and this in itself does not qualify those words as theatre. The words may appear to be something substantial in themselves, but they are not. [...] There is a curious and very different sensation when you apparently have something in your hands – a play – and when you have nothing but fragments, scraps and imaginings when you are devising; yet strangely I feel I start from the same place: until I start to feel and experience something, there is nothing. (in Giannachi and Luckhurst, 1999: 67)

instead of an existing script and uses rehearsals to try out and create materials. However, the relationship between the use of improvisation and performance outcomes is loose in Neilson's process; and with Neilson's work not being located within the context of physical theatre, his use of improvisation is focused on the development of dialogue, characterisation, scenes and narrative structure. In this sense, his work is text-centred, preoccupied for a large part of the rehearsals with the writing of the script. However, Neilson does not make space in his rehearsals for the established methods of working with texts, with none of the actioning or uniting of the text or textual analysis with the actors that is commonly found in the work of a director like Katie Mitchell.

Moreover, like many theatre practitioners, Neilson's work has also shifted and developed during the course of his career. Trish Reid points this out, noting that:

it may be something of a stretch to attempt to impose a meaningful pattern on Neilson's work, for the preoccupations that have driven him in his more recent work, particularly *Edward Gant's Amazing Feats of Loneliness* (2002), *The Wonderful World of Dissocia* and *Realism* seem more overtly comic, populist and expressionistic in nature than those that underpin his more naturalistic relationship plays like *Penetrator* (1993), *The Censor* (1997) or *Stitching* (2002), which were largely understood by critics as issue based examples of the new brutalism. (2007: 489)

At the same time, she notes that Neilson has maintained a number of motifs and preoccupations in his work, such as his interest in storytelling, humour and his commitment to both an experiential theatre and to 'exploring the materiality of the live event.' (Reid, 2007: 489)

Across Neilson's body of work, his approach to directing displays shifting, complicated links to the paradigms of directing identified by Innes and Shevtsova (2013), who distinguish between and devote attention to directors of theatricality, epic theatre directors, the director as *auteur*, directors of ensemble theatre and directors whose work

emphasises collaboration and improvisation.⁴ For example, whilst Neilson combines the role of playwright and director, he is not an *auteur* director who ‘embrace[s] the whole creative process’ (Innes and Shevtsova, 2013: 147), in the way that Robert Lepage, who takes on creative responsibility for all aspects of his performances, does. Moreover, Reid understands Neilson’s work in terms of the political, ‘insofar as Neilson’s postdramatic strategies can be read as deliberately drawing attention to, and problematising the politics of representation itself.’ (2007: 493) Reid rightly suggests a certain political intention in Neilson’s work; and highlights how the work has the potential to bring the audience ‘into consciousness of themselves as interpreting subjects’ (Reid, 2007: 489-490) as well as an interest in non-naturalistic forms. Nevertheless, Neilson’s work is not marked by a strong engagement with socio-political issues, and does not show much commonality with, for example, Bertolt Brecht’s epic principles, such as ‘the revolt against realist presentation’ (Innes and Shevtsova, 2013: 144) and an emphasis on argument instead of emotion. Thus, Neilson is not usefully understood as either a political or epic theatre director.

Furthermore, Neilson’s work is interested in experimentation with form, such as in *Realism*, which includes a jarring musical number featuring minstrels, and *Narrative*’s use of pre-recorded sound during the rehearsals (see Chapter 1); and Reid (2007) rightly argues that paying more attention to his use of form produces a more nuanced understanding of Neilson’s work. However, there is no strong fit between his work and the paradigm of director of theatricality, into which Innes and Shevtsova (2013) place Vsevolod Meyerhold’s radical experimentation, use of stylised, figurative expression and rejection of verisimilitude. Similarly, while several actors have worked with Neilson on a number of projects, Neilson’s deployment pattern of performers is too irregular (see thesis introduction) and his working

⁴ Innes and Shevtsova duly note that the ‘patterns [they] have traced show knots of interconnections, which means that a director whom we have grouped in one way belongs just as readily in another grouping: [...] discerning the coherent patterns of directors and directing is difficult’ (2013: 3).

methods do not sufficiently take note of the actor's process (see Chapter 6), to ensure a good fit between Neilson and the category of directors of ensemble theatre.

The above remarks should already convey that Neilson's work sits in a loose trajectory with a number of different directorial principles and interests, fully fitting into none of the above groupings. Chapters 5 will build on the discussion in this Part introduction to further demonstrate how Neilson's directing has a complex relationship to the category delineated by Innes and Shevtsova with which Neilson's work has perhaps the strongest resonance, namely directors who use group devising methods.⁵ What I would like to argue here is that, while Reid is right to want to draw attention to Neilson's use of form as opposed to the content of his work, what her analysis does not fully or explicitly reflect on is that Neilson's use of and experiments with form are always linked to and inform his characters' interiorities, as well as relationships, within a framework of psychological realism usually associated with representational theatre.

Reid's analysis (2007) actually supplies a useful example to support my argument, drawn from *Realism*, which she considers one of Neilson's less plot-driven and more postdramatic plays. Drawing on Maake Bleeker's work (2004: 35), Reid writes that the living room of the central character Stuart:

is recognisable as such but in Miriam Buether's design is no longer the realist living room of Ibsen or Osborne, which was designed to allow 'audiences to pry into the private interior of the psychoanalytical subject'. The living room in *Realism* instead consists of isolated domestic objects set on a severely raked stage, at different angles and half buried in sand. This living room is home to a character that appears to be in a similar state of confusion and deterioration. (2007: 497)

Here Reid implies that the use of non-realist form links to and informs realist character psychology, and she furthermore quotes Neilson's comment from the foreword of *Dissocia*

⁵ Neilson's approach to improvisation has been extensively discussed in Part 2.

that he is interested in developing strategies that ‘theatrically represent the internal landscape’ (Neilson, 2007) of his characters. However, this connection between non-realist form and realist content remains marginal to her argument; and she sees Neilson’s engagement with realist theatre practice appearing ‘to be in the process of receding.’ (Reid, 2007: 496)

However, my understanding of Neilson’s work is that, even though it has shifted towards more experimentation with (non-realist) form, which has found its peak to date in *Narrative*’s fragmented storytelling and foregrounded use of media technology, I find a persistent authorial trope of Neilson’s in his ongoing interest in realist character psychology. This interest is one of the drivers of his approach to rehearsals, as much of my close analysis throughout this thesis shows, and informs his finished play texts and performances. For example, in Chapter 1’s discussion of Neilson’s authorial approach, I examined the use of pre-recorded sound to cause an ‘out of synch’ lip-synch effect for Imogen’s character that draws inspiration from *Blackmail*’s expressionistic sound design. This effect was eventually discarded, and the finished play text and performance instead feature Imogen Doel’s character speaking to the ‘ghost’ of Sophie Ross’s character on a screen (via a live feed) using malapropisms that derived from the prior experiments with the sound effect. In both rehearsal and finished play text and performance, Neilson here shows a keen interest in the relationship between technology, mediation, embodiment and live performance. However, this interest in experimenting with non-realist form is closely linked to and indeed driven by realist characterisation, with Doel’s character struggling to cope with her guilt over and to deal with the repercussions of murdering Ross’s character. The use of pre-recorded sound and screens still very much seeks to ‘theatrically represent the internal landscape’ (Neilson, 2012) of the character here.

In addition to arguing that Neilson's work is marked by an interest in realist character psychology underpinning non-realist experimentations with form, I furthermore want to propose that this interest both informs and is furthered by his particular approach to collaboration with actors. Partly, it is that Neilson himself continually shows an interest in realist characterisation and story-telling when rehearsing, and the actors take their cue from him. But it is also partly because Neilson, as already discussed, follows established rehearsal protocols for neither devised nor text-centred work, that the actors he works with, who are located within Stanislavskian acting contexts, draw on their training and professional experience during improvisations and the development of material more broadly (see e.g. Chapter 3's discussion of the 'Box Therapy' improvisation). As a result of this, *Narrative* is a play marked by realist characterisation and acting within a framework of non-realist form; and the presence of Stanislavskian approaches to acting forms part of my analysis in Chapter 6.

Having mapped out both the broader context in which Neilson's directorial approach is located and one of his major directorial interests, I will now proceed to provide an oversight of the specific concerns of the chapters in this Part on directing. Noting the lineage between the contemporary theatre director and the actor-manager of the nineteenth century, Innes and Shevtsova suggest that:

No matter how many and varied their tasks may be, and how they may multi-task and come to dominate productions with their energy, directors' activities identify who directors are and what they do, specifically, when they work together with others. *Directors cannot work alone*. A solo director can only be, in fact, a solo performer. (2013: 2; emphasis added)

Of course, in the work of directors of ensemble theatre and directors who use group devising methods as discussed (Innes and Shevtsova, 2013), the significance of collaboration – which raises issues of power, hierarchy and communication – and the work of and creative input

from actors, become only more pronounced. Chapters 5 and 6 will focus on Neilson's work as a director in terms of how he works with actors. This has been a strand of investigation running through the previous Parts of this thesis, but Chapters 5 and 6 will now proceed to devote more explicit, in-depth attention to this, paying due recognition to one of the most significant creative functions of a director.

My argument in Chapter 5 will build on Vicky Angelaki's (2014) discussion of Neilson's work in terms of the concept of 'unsafe spectatorship', to propose that Neilson is also usefully understood as an 'unsafe director' in terms of his approach to collaborating with actors. The chapter will explore one major case study, which concerns Neilson's suggestion on 28 March 2013 to potentially use audience participation, triggered by his wish to find an ending for the show. The discussion of the 'Ask the Audience' sequence will consider the ways in which power and traditional creative labour hierarchies are both diffuse and re-asserted during the *Narrative* rehearsals, paying particular attention to the significance of communication. With the thesis overall driven by the intention to examine Neilson's process as well as the work for and perspective on this process by the actors, Chapter 6 will illuminate the actor's process (placed within a Stanislavskian frame). I will investigate the complex relationship between Neilson's process and that of his actors via two main case studies: firstly, the 'Motivational Speech' that Neilson gave towards the end of the *Narrative* rehearsals (30 March 2013) which he intended to provide support to the actors; and secondly, the new scene Neilson gave to actors Zawe Ashton and Imogen Doel on Press Night (10 April 2013), which shows the effect Neilson's engagement with the actor's process can have on actual onstage performance.

Chapter 5: Neilson the ‘Unsafe’ Director

As my introduction to Part 3 has already suggested, vis-à-vis Christopher Innes and Maria Shevtsova’s (2013) useful mapping of dominant directorial approaches, it would appear that Neilson’s directorial practice would find perhaps its most ready fit with the category of directors who emphasise group devising, given his pronounced collaboration with actors. That this fit is far from straightforward or uncontentious is equally suggested by my discussion in the Part introduction of how Neilson does not follow established devising protocol. Presented with this tension, this chapter will follow the pertinent line of enquiry outlined by Innes and Shevtsova:

where it is the performers as a group who evolve the material, develop their own styles of presentation and/or structure the production, the role of the director changes. In such a context, to what extent does a director control or guide the process? What is the director’s function? (2013: 218)

In an attempt to provide answers to Innes and Shevtsova’s above questions, this chapter’s main argument will draw on Vicky Angelaki’s (2014) analysis of *Relocated*, Neilson’s 2008 play about child abuse and abduction. Interested in the relationship between contemporary audiences and issues of complacency, witnessing and social responsibility, Angelaki pinpoints the Royal Court production’s use of gauze, which accentuated ‘the act of seeing, at times facilitated while at others impeded’ (2014: 137-8) as the most affecting creative decision. She understands *Relocated* as probing, through form and content, its audience’s spectatorial responsibilities, ‘testing, through sensory means, the point at which pleading ignorance by claiming not to see or hear becomes invalid.’ (Angelaki, 2014: 138) My argument intends to build on Angelaki’s discussion of Neilson’s ‘unsafe spectatorship’ in order to propose that Neilson is also usefully understood as an ‘unsafe director’ in terms of his approach to collaborating with actors.

The main case study for my argument concerns events that occurred on Friday 28 March 2013.¹ The company are at what Alex Mermikides defines as the ‘fixing phase of [their] creative process in which decisions are made as to what will be incorporated into the performance score’ (2010: 118). At this juncture, Neilson does not have an ending for the show in place, so he suggests options involving audience participation, which he and the company then proceed to discuss at length. This chapter’s analysis will explore the ways in which this ‘Ask the Audience’ sequence is concerned with issues of power. After introducing some of the key theoretical debates on this critical issue, the chapter will examine the power dynamics at stake and how power functions in ‘Ask the Audience’: it will consider the positives outcomes of the upturning of traditional creative labour hierarchies achieved by Neilson’s directorial method (that is, the alleged egalitarian and democratic approach and open atmosphere), as well as the negatives (for example, the impeded productivity and confusion for the actors).

The chapter will then uncover the ways in which Neilson’s directorial method is not fully egalitarian and democratic, paying particular attention to the ways in which communication functions. This will include communication both between Neilson and his actors, who express criticism in both coded and more overt ways (the latter being linked to ethical considerations concerning audience participation). At first I will argue that power works bilaterally in Neilson’s directorial approach focusing on Neilson searching for the ending to the show. The chapter will then move towards its conclusion by exploring what happens in the last few minutes of the technical rehearsal on 5 April 2013, when Neilson directs the ending of the show.

¹ The ‘Human Soundscape’ and ‘Box Therapy’ (see Chapters 5 and 3) also happened on this day, approximately two hours earlier.

Directing and Power: Neilson's Egalitarian Approach

My discussion and analysis of the 'Ask the Audience' sequence will, due to the lengthy nature of this section of the footage, not examine every moment of the debate and the critical issues that are raised, as was, for example, the focus of Chapter 4, the 'Human Soundscape'. Instead, what will unfold is an analysis of key points, attitudes and contributions, that will shed light on how Neilson's directorial methodology enables him and the actors to engage with the notion of power (see Sequence 18: 0.00-14.30).² In the initial section of the sequence (0.00-1.09), the lengthy discussion begins with Neilson proposing that an option for the ending of the show could entail the company wearing T-shirts with their character's cause of death displayed on it. He then somewhat hesitatingly asks: 'We shouldn't do something that involves the audience? Should we do something where we ask the audience for their stories?' The company then responds to this suggestion by groaning their disapproval. At first glance this might appear to be an inconsequential moment in the rehearsal process, but, in fact, it encapsulates a significant aspect of Neilson's directorial *modus operandi*, namely the ways in which his approach to directing engages with issues of power.

Power as a theoretical concept has been the subject of much academic scrutiny, most famously by Michel Foucault whose seminal work *The Subject and Power* has argued that 'the exercise of power is not simply a relationship between "partners," individual or collective; it is a way in which some act on others' (1994a: 340). Power is also, as Foucault puts it, 'an effect that is manifested and sometimes extended by the position of those who are dominated' (1977: 26-7). However, for Foucault, it was important to stress:

What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces

² I recommend that the reader view the whole of this section of footage because it is important to be familiar with the complexities of the discussion. However, in the analysis that follows, I will provide details of the specific times in the sequence I am focussing on, so the reader can revisit events if they wish to.

things. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression. (1994b: 129)

In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* Foucault goes on to expand on this point, adding: ‘we must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it “excludes”, it “represses”, it “censors”, it “abstracts”, it “masks”, it “conceals”. In fact, power produces: it produces reality: it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth.’ (1977: 19) Foucault’s perception of power is that power exists and operates in relationships between individuals or groups, particularly where an individual (or group) occupies a subaltern position. Nonetheless, power is not just a force which subjugates, it also functions in a multidirectional and pluralistic manner, yielding productive outcomes. Therefore, because ‘some rehearsals function as power rituals’ (McAuley, 2012: 230) and the fact that even a ‘director best known for collaborative work may eventually assume a position of central power in rehearsals’ (Cole, 1992: 8), as will be seen below, a Foucauldian understanding of power will inform my analysis of this particular sequence.

Before moving on to the analysis of Neilson’s directorial approach in this sequence, it is important to mention that existing theatre scholarship has thus far not provided much detailed work that explicitly deals with the minutiae of how power actually works within the devising process, or how it emerges and specifically functions in accounts of directing (or acting). Of course, there is specific and implicit mention of power within these contexts, but the discourse is not expansive or comprehensive, as the following examples typify.

Mermikides reports how ‘group hierarchy is centred on a charismatic director [Tim Etchells]’ in relation to the work of Forced Entertainment (2010: 106). With particular reference to actors, Giannachi and Luckhurst note that ‘for Stanislavski, the actor is an equal partner in the creative process; for Meyerhold he is more of an instrument of a premeditated design’

(1999: 102). Even renowned actor William H. Macy articulates that for him ‘the toughest thing about being an actor is feeling powerlessness. When it comes to the food chain, we are down there with the plankton’ (in Luckhurst and Veltman, 2001: 70). Finally, in relation to theatre company Forced Entertainment, Paul Allain and Jen Harvie highlight that they ‘challenged conventional theatre’s usual prioritisation of text, director and performance product by using collaborative and/or collective methods to explore the possibilities and challenges of a less hierarchical theatre practice’ (2006: 145). Here, Allain and Harvie touch upon the assumption that in devised work, such as Forced Entertainment’s, power is shared amongst those involved, and it is this argument that my analysis will now proceed to test out.

Returning to the sequence, what is noteworthy in the brief exchange of views, is Neilson’s use of the word ‘we’ in his question ‘Should we do something where we ask the audience for their stories?’ as well as the fact that it is a question in the first place. The use of ‘we’ and the phrasing of a question here implies that he is in favour of a collective decision-making process and that he invites and welcomes the actors’ contributions to the debate. This stance is somewhat at odds with Helen Manful’s ‘concept of [the] director as [the] authority figure’ (1999: 80). Neilson seems to be, as Adam Alston puts it, in favour of ‘agency [being] afforded to “embodied” spectators of theatre events’, as well as his actors (2012: 353). Here, Neilson’s inclusivity mirrors that of Katie Mitchell’s approach to directing, because as Mitchell emphasises, for her ‘the working environment has to be egalitarian: everybody has to have equal input into the work.’ (in Giannachi and Luckhurst, 1999: 97). This egalitarian style of directing is very much the approach favoured by Neilson throughout the *Narrative* rehearsals, and is remarked upon by Neilson himself during his interview (see Sequence 17: 2.32-3.15):

I’m not very good at censoring myself, that’s why I have a lot of people around to say ‘no you’re slightly stepping over the mark.’ The whole notion of taste, and all that, is

slightly odd to me because I don't really have those boundaries. And in a way that's quite good.

Doherty and McKee also mention this aspect of Neilson's directorial approach in their interview testimony: McKee has 'always felt that working with Anthony is incredibly democratic, which I really like' (McKee, 2014). Doherty commented (see Sequence 17: 1.31-2.00):

I think this [Neilson's rehearsal process] is a lot more democratic than most. Or not most, but some rehearsal rooms can be. The thing with Anthony is that ultimately as a director he's a benign dictator, because one person has to make those final decisions, because nothing is good when directed by committee. But your voice is heard.

Both actors respect Neilson's democratic approach, which holds several productive possibilities: showing a level of trust in the creative abilities of the company and making the actors feel included and valued. This approach is likely to instil confidence in the actors, which is bound to benefit their work and the success of the performance overall. By facilitating the discussion and testing of ideas and by bringing different perspectives into dialogue, this approach is also likely to help develop and refine the dramatic material. To give a specific example, as I have discussed in detail in Chapter 1, Neilson's democratic approach to the Hamlet/Macbeth speech makes the inclusion of the lines authored by Rix dependent on Rix's preference, and this adds valuable nuance to the scene (which is, in turn, acknowledged by Neilson).

What is of further note here is the negative side of directorial inclusivity touched upon by Doherty, namely that there has to be one person in rehearsals who has, as Eugenio Barba puts it, 'the ability to make decisions, to implement them and take responsibility for them' (2009: 152), otherwise, the results produced tend not to be good. Thus, when considered in this light, a democratic director, such as Neilson, must find a way of processing and incorporating the results of the artistic license enjoyed by the actors, while still retaining

overall creative control; in effect, they must disperse, but at the same time, retain and exercise power. This need for balancing power is something that theatre director Di Trevis articulates in her comment, 'I think directing is a very interesting mixture of the passive and the active and they have to be balanced in a personality' (in Manful, 1999: 104), and is alluded to in the following account from Peter Brook:

An open non-restrictive form has to be found to encourage the free play of the actor's creative energy, a form at the same time not so loose as to collapse into inarticulate and anarchic diffusion. [I have learned] that, paradoxically, too much freedom is a lack of freedom. (in Bradby and Williams, 1988: 162).

As will be seen below, finding the balance of active and passive, discussed by Trevis, and locating Brook's directorial 'sweet spot' is something that turns out to be somewhat problematic for Neilson, because at points proceedings do collapse into inarticulate and anarchic diffusion that Brook cautions against, despite their clearly being an open non-restrictive form in operation.

But it is not only the fact that Neilson brings up the point of audience participation, and the manner in which he does so, that is worthy of mention. The response from the company to his suggestion also merits attention, because the response is a direct result of the open non-restricted atmosphere that Neilson is keen to foster in his rehearsals. The immediate reaction from the company to what I will term 'Ask the Audience' is, as mentioned, one of disapproval, and then Doel comically complaining that it is very likely that there will be 'some dick [in the audience] that will go on for about 20 minutes' if the company pursue this particular idea. Christian Billing believes that '[e]ffective rehearsal invariably involves humour (in the senses of both "good humour" and "comic humour"), as well as the development of a sense of trust and openness between all those involved in the process' (2012: 391). Doel's comedic quip is an excellent example of Billing's point in operation,

because it occurs due to Neilson's cultivation of an open and relaxed atmosphere, wherein the company members trust him enough to be able to share their critical responses in an extremely direct and uncensored way.³

While the atmosphere is of course not always positive (for example, see Chapter 3: 'Box Therapy'), Neilson manages to cultivate an open atmosphere via two principal ways: firstly, being open and appropriately self-deprecating about his writing (as mentioned in Chapter 3 where Neilson remarked: 'about 8% of that worked. Most of it's bad writing'); and more importantly, by encouraging and participating in the significant amount of horseplay that occurs during rehearsal (see Chapter 4, where he actively sought to change the negative atmosphere engendered by the 'Box Therapy' improvisation with the 'Human Soundscape'). As a result of Neilson's playful, relaxed and calm approach, the actors' behaviour is usually reflective of a positive and safe working environment: everyone uses profanities throughout rehearsals; the actors reveal very personal information about themselves. For example, Entwisle reveals that she suffers from mental health problems, and Rix discusses how he took performance enhancing drugs (see Chapter 1's 'Blackmail and Murder' section). The actors also perform embarrassing actions in good humour (see Pidgeon and Galbraith's interview testimony concerning *Realism* and *The Censor*, discussed in Chapter 2).

I would argue that this type of open rehearsal room atmosphere is extremely unusual, and from an actor's perspective, very refreshing, and potentially extremely rewarding, to work in. Usually, an actor must edit, or curb entirely, any overtly negative thoughts and

³ As will be seen shortly, it is not only Doel who is comfortable voicing their objections in this relaxed manner. Time and again during this sequence various company members do the same. Particularly Doherty, who questions how likely it is that audience participation will produce useful material, with comments such as: 'What story is coming out of the audience [...] We've got an imaginary story in our head. This brilliant story that the Really Willing Woman is telling us'. These comments often corpse the other actors, and at the same time raise insightful and important ethical issues. I will discuss the ethical dimension of 'Ask the Audience' further below.

reactions they may have to a directorial suggestion, especially if they want to be considered for employment on another project. This liberated atmosphere that Neilson encourages is, for me, one of his key strengths as a director and the importance of this ability in a director is stressed by French actor/director Louis Jouvet, who argues that in order to direct successfully, the director must ‘gather together all the people and things that make up a performance and to create, through them, a certain atmosphere, arousing and serving their capabilities and their personalities’ (1973: 227-8). What Jouvet describes is exactly what Neilson often does very well, and is certainly the case here. Therefore, given that Neilson’s directorial approach depends so much upon input from his actors, it is vital that the actors are relaxed, uninhibited and trusting. To have the actors who are fearful, wary and self-conscious would arguably be extremely damaging to the production; as Shepherd argues, a ‘particular kind of character, a kind of acting, will inevitably emerge out of particular kinds of rehearsal atmosphere’ (2012: 60).

However, when considered in a different light, Neilson’s use of ‘we’ in this context also hints that he is transferring directorial/authorial responsibility to the actors. In effect, Neilson is temporarily abdicating leadership of the company and, most importantly, at the eleventh hour, since at this point there are only around two days remaining of the five-week long rehearsal process, and as yet there is no ending for the show. By this action Neilson seems to relinquish his directorial power, which, in effect, positions himself in opposition to Shepherd’s conception that ‘the director is a leader’ (2012: 29) and director Michael Grandage’s view ‘that one of the most important things to provide as a director is leadership and a vision of some kind’ (in Shepherd, 2012: 187). This realigning of conventional rehearsal room hierarchy, when it suits Neilson’s purposes, is something actor Matthew Pidgeon finds unsatisfying, as can be gleaned from his interview comment that ‘it can appear

that there's no hierarchy, which can get very frustrating. [...] It can be very frustrating, this apparent inertia and leaderlessness' (Pidgeon, 2014).⁴

What Pidgeon finds difficult relates to a point made by director David Glass who states that, '[p]erformers like structure, [as it is] a means of giving security' (in Giannachi and Luckhurst, 1999: 42). Therefore, to alter the traditional rehearsal structure where, 'the director is at the top of the hierarchy' (Shevtsova, 2007: 105), as Neilson does at the eleventh hour here, means that the actors are in an unfamiliar and less secure position than they may be used to, or indeed want or need to be in. The premise of the director being in a position of authority and power, and hence, the 'organisational tool for delivering hierarchical labour' (Shepherd, 2012: 206), is embedded in theatre culture for a reason, namely to maximise productivity by ensuring that creative decisions are made when needed. The frequent absence of a hierarchy in Neilson's process negatively affects creative productivity in a number of ways: it slows proceedings down, sometimes (as noted above by Pidgeon) to a point of inertia; which stands in contrast to the approach to devising of, for example, The Wooster Group's Elizabeth LeCompte who when interviewed has noted that she will intervene after ten seconds if she feels that an unproductive path is being pursued by the actors (see Shevtsova and Innes, 2009: 100). The absence of hierarchy wastes creative labour, such as when the use of singing improvisation, which took up a portion of the first day of the *Narrative* rehearsals (during which the actors sang their life stories), was followed by repeated considerations of how to incorporate song, and none of this made it into the performance or had any other observable productive effect. It leads to the actors feeling

⁴ Pidgeon further notes:

I'm afraid I do find the pace of it quite tiresome sometimes. [...] I find them [the endless discussions] incredibly, incredibly frustrating. [...] I also think that rehearsal should be alive and kept alive. Being prepared doesn't have to mean being over prepared, or dead and not in the moment. I'd like to see Anthony trust that a bit more. (Pidgeon, 2014)

frustrated and/or anxious (for example, the already noted quips by Doherty throughout this sequence). It causes confusion for newcomers to Neilson's process, as Neilson does not explain his *modus operandi*, and thus those unfamiliar with his rehearsal protocol feel unsure of the process, which affects confidence (for example, Ashton's difficult 'Box Therapy' experience discussed in Chapter 3). Thus, whilst the dispersal and sharing of power within devising rehearsals has been celebrated for its liberating and creative possibilities (e.g. Mangan 2013, Britton 2013), the latter are not an inevitable outcome of the former. Odin Theatre's Eugenio Barba rightly insists that '[p]ower, or authoritativeness, is necessary for the director to incite, not subdue' (2009: 152), and the executive function of directorial power within devising contexts has a positive role to play that has so far not received as much detailed attention as it should.

Directing and Power: Neilson's Not Quite So Egalitarian Approach

Neilson's suspension of his role as leader during rehearsals is something that he has in common with Belgian director Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui who also, as Lou Cope observes, 'divests responsibility. He [Cherkaoui] lets, indeed forces, the performers to be individuals, teachers, sharers, devisers, directors, creators' (2010: 46). This underlying coercive element to directorial abdication observed by Cope is something Doherty touches upon and Power explicitly mentions in relation to their experience of Neilson's rehearsals. As Doherty comments (see Sequence 17: 2.01-2.32):

I think there's an expectation when you come to the rehearsal room that you become involved in the process, and that you become involved with the whole work. And that is both a responsibility and a compliment; you're expected to do that, and there's also a respect for other people's opinions in the room.

Power observes:

[H]e [Neilson] will sometimes ask you to contribute even if you don't want to. [We] spend a lot of time discussing the ideas and sometimes you think, 'I don't want to do that', or 'That's not my job.' I mean, [jokingly] you can sit there and not contribute. [More soberly] But I think you are expected to contribute. (Power, 2014)

Both Doherty and Power here pick up on the implicit expectation that they recognise is being placed upon them by Neilson, with Power's joke indicating that resistance is inappropriate, if not futile. This coercive element is also present at this juncture of the *Narrative* rehearsals, because although Neilson seems to surrender directorial responsibility, he is still the director, he is still the one who raises the idea of 'Ask the Audience', and ultimately it will be him who will make the final decision as to whether to implement it. This situation is what Derek Layder conceptualises as 'a power relationship [...] in which A has power over B not only if he or she can determine the final outcome of decision-making on a key issue, but also if he or she can determine what is to count as an issue' (1985: 135).

Of course, the fact that the actors have to explore ideas, including those that they may not be comfortable with (such as audience participation), is in no way an unusual occurrence in any rehearsal process. What is unusual is that Neilson in effect forces the actors to take the lead in and responsibility for this particular, and very important, decision, at a critical point in the rehearsal process. I here use the verb force deliberately because, even though Neilson offers the idea of audience participation in the form of a question, which has a tentative quality to it, Neilson is nevertheless gently exerting his directorial power, which can, according to Viv Aitken's Foucault-informed argument, 'operate in subtle, ubiquitous and invisible ways' (2009: 506). This is due to the facts that it is Neilson who instigates the debate, the discussion happens when he wants it to, and he couches things as a question despite there being no realistic option for non-compliance.⁵ This, in effect, compels the actors

⁵ The point touched upon here concerning the tactical necessity of actors having to be somewhat compliant is an issue I will explore further in the next chapter.

to contribute despite their reservations about the idea, because, to draw on Layder's work on power concerning the relationship between structure and agency, 'structural constraints limit the agent's ability to act otherwise' (Layder, 1985: 138).⁶

It is also worth pointing out that, despite his inclusion of himself – 'Should *we* do something where *we* ask the audience for their stories?' – it is the actors, not Neilson, who will be responsible for the realisation of this notion. Here, the use of inclusive and tentative language masks the power that is present and being exerted by this apparently egalitarian question. Of course, that the use of inclusive and tentative language works on the level of rhetoric is understood by everyone present in the rehearsal room. This point is touched upon by Mermikides who writes that, 'performers seem accepting of their subjugation to the director's creative agency and it seems unlikely that experienced performers do not recognise that they are being "guided".' (2013: 162). This is further demonstrated by the fact that Neilson moves quite quickly from the inclusive 'we' to the instructive 'you': Following Ross's remark concerning 'Ask the Audience' potentially being 'the best bit of the show' (see Sequence 18: 3.00-4.01), Neilson replies: 'No, you'd interview them [...], you'd put it in some kind of context. You could underscore it as well, you could have three or four bits of music with something you've used to underscore things.'

Having been somewhat vague at the beginning of this discussion, Neilson here becomes more specific at the same time as he, in effect, removes himself from proceedings and the difficulties that implementing this idea would entail. Consequently, should 'Ask the Audience' actually transpire, 'the effectiveness of the script's dramaturgy [would be] now dependent on the present and active contributions of the audience' (Crouch in Lane, 2010a: 133). Therefore, in a way, if Neilson's directorial suggestion were to be realised, the actors

⁶ I will consider the structure/agency relationship further in the next chapter when I explore the working conditions of actors.

and the audience (as well as music and sound designer Powell) would do the work of Neilson the writer and Neilson the director. Inclusive language ceases and traditional power relationships become somewhat more explicit, at the same time as the responsibilities associated with the power to make decisions are transferred and traditional labour hierarchies are upended.

Power and Communication

What my discussion in this chapter has highlighted is the number of times that Neilson does not explicitly explain to his actors how his non-hierarchical *modus operandi* works in practice. This deserves a little more scrutiny via attention to the following excerpt of Entwisle's interview testimony:

[Neilson] always comes on the first day [and says] that anybody, including stage management, is welcome to give feedback. There comes a point however, later in the process, closer to opening night where that [free rein to comment] gets shut down, and that moment is always very shocking for a person. [...] Any negativity is met with defence and annoyance, and stamped down upon, and you're made to feel bad for being a spanner in the works. So you think that you're a part of a process which is all about you having equality, and having a voice, and then at a certain point that stops. [...] I can understand that as a process and the need for it. But I think that he [Neilson] has to be honest about the point at which he needs to stop hearing other people's voices. (Entwisle, 2014)

From Entwisle's testimony, it is clear that Neilson does discuss aspects of his process at the beginning of rehearsals; certainly those pertaining to the non-hierarchical mode. However, while anybody in the rehearsal room is free, actively encouraged and indeed (Doherty and Power's earlier comments notwithstanding) *explicitly* expected to contribute thoughts and critique what is going on, there comes a point towards the end of rehearsals where this phase ends, and from then onwards, Neilson assumes a more traditional version of director – as Entwisle puts it, although 'he [Neilson] presents it as there being no hierarchy, ultimately there absolutely is a hierarchy' (Entwisle, 2014). Entwisle understands and fully accepts that

this change is necessary for Neilson, but it can be disconcerting for the actors, as, unbeknownst to them, their status can quickly shift from being equal voice to ‘spanner in the works’. The issue that Entwisle identifies is that Neilson does not communicate to the actors that change has occurred; and this can have an unsettling effect on the actors and make them feel somewhat unsafe. Neilson’s lack of communication with his actors concerning the unstable nature of his directorial approach is something that Pidgeon, like Entwisle, discussed in his interview; Pidgeon remarked that, ‘Anthony doesn’t explain it [his directorial approach] to you, you’ve got to find your own way. He doesn’t really communicate his way of doing things’ (Pidgeon, 2014). American director Sue Sutton Mayo advises, ‘communication is what it’s all about, [so let] people know what’s going on, so you don’t get problems’ (in Manful, 1999: 102). Certainly, the need for communication here becomes pronounced as it concerns a fundamental shift in Neilson’s working mode and the actors’ role within it.

Following some discussion concerning how technology or written audience comments could perhaps assist with Neilson’s idea, as well as some comedic ‘criticism’ from Doherty, it is now time to discuss Ross’s remarks that, ‘it [audience participation] might be shit. There might be a really shit story but that’s also interesting because [...] it might be that [...] this is the best bit of the show.’ This comment is revealing, because it demonstrates the ways in which actors may express their views and potential criticism of the material. By suggesting that something completely arbitrary spontaneously authored by a random member of the audience could turn out to be ‘the best bit of the show’, Ross is possibly implying that at this stage she has doubts concerning the quality of the work produced thus far. Something similar emerges shortly afterwards from Ashton (see Sequence 18: 4.12-4.42): following more details from Neilson and Ross’s continued attempts for arguing a case for ‘Ask the Audience’, Ashton retorts, ‘I’m with you Soph [Ross] [...] I feel that audience participation is

like in TV shows, when you go “what are you watching?” And they’re like “*The Godfather*.” And you’re like, “Why am I not watching *The Godfather* because this programme is shit”.’

Again, I would argue that this seemingly innocuous (and incongruous) input, is quite revealing, if one bears in mind that subtext can be conveyed ‘through the disparity between what a person actually says and what he or she means’ (Merlin, 2007: 96). As discussed in Chapter 3, Ashton is having a lot of difficulties with Neilson’s process, she is concerned with her own performance and character, she is sceptical regarding how the play is developing, and this is a particularly challenging day for her as she has very recently been directly involved with ‘Box Therapy’ and ‘The Human Soundscape’. In light of these facts, I would propose that Ashton is (consciously or unconsciously) substituting the ‘shit’ programme she is hypothetically watching for *Narrative*, and *The Godfather* signifies the alternative and, from her perspective, better play she would rather be working on. Effectively she is expressing: ‘why am I not in a better play because this play is bad’. This expression of doubt about the quality of the work echoes Ross’ earlier subtextual articulation of doubt via her ‘the best bit of the show’ remark and this assessment, is arguably supported by Ashton’s opening words which clearly ally her with Ross, ‘I’m with you Soph’.

It is noteworthy, that, in as open and safe an atmosphere as Neilson undoubtedly manages to create, in which many actors frequently express strong views concerning the validity of Neilson’s ideas, there is nevertheless evidence of criticism being voiced by actors in a coded and oblique manner. This codification of criticism clearly illustrates that ‘[t]he dynamics of power [...] are ones of internalisation, [...] and discretion’ for the actors at this juncture (Dowling, 2008: 84). Two points are worth mentioning here: firstly, that ‘power must be conceived of as a truly structural phenomenon’ (Layder 1985: 131), meaning that (pre-)existing power structures constrain individuals’ exercise of agency within those

structures. Therefore, as Ben Spatz points out, we should ‘not think of the actor’s reactions as arising from pure agency or free will’ (2014: 90). Not all of the actors in question will feel able, comfortable or safe enough to challenge the widespread behavioural protocol that dictates that actors are expected to remain positive and not to voice challenging criticism (despite what many directors and indeed some scholars may assert). Secondly, those actors who do feel able or comfortable enough to do so are long-time collaborators such as Power and Doherty who have a history of experience and trust with Neilson, and those who do not are newcomers such as Ashton and Ross. Therefore, analysis of Neilson’s directorial engagement with his actors needs to be mindful of the differentiation to be made between the actors in terms of their age, level of experience and gender.

‘Ask the Audience’: The Suggestion of Audience Participation and its Rejection

After Neilson’s ‘delicate’ extrication, the company focus on their reservations about the use of audience participation, and Power and Doherty raise the issue of the audience’s perspective. Power brings up the point that audiences might not be interested in story-telling generated by audience participation, commenting that: ‘If I’m in the audience, I’m not that interested in the person sitting next to me.’ (see Sequence 18: 4.01-4.23) In response to Power, Doherty raises another important point, namely that enforced audience participation can also cause anxiety in the audience through his comment ‘if anyone comes near me off that fucking stage, I’d be “Get the FUCK away from me”.’ Power and Doherty here voice concerns that are also echoed in scholarship. For example, Gareth White comments that ‘some kinds of audience participation seem trivial and embarrassing’ (2013: 2), and Helen Freshwater argues that audience participation can lead to spectators being ‘coerced rather than liberated; manipulated instead of emancipated; instead of agency they receive entrapment’ (2009: 71). Of course, despite the valid points raised by Power and Doherty (and

White and Freshwater), audience participation can be a very positive undertaking that yields productive outcomes. This is highlighted by Kurt Lancaster who associates audience participation with empowerment, stating ‘these performances [in which there is audience participation] give people the opportunity to inject their own values and beliefs into the event. As a result, participants are able to break out of restrictive social roles’ (1997: 77). Similarly, Lyn Gardner is of the opinion that ‘audience participation allows us ownership of our own lives and own imaginative processes’ (2009).

A crucial point to stress here is the importance of the proper planning and careful thinking through of the use of any audience participation, as noted by White who writes that ‘audience participation usually involves a lot of preparation’ (2013: 29), and Freshwater who believes that it also requires ‘commitment, great sensitivity, and an acceptance that genuine participation has risks’ (2009: 76). This sentiment is echoed by Entwisle when she cautions that while audience participation is ‘possible, [...] you’d have to set it up really carefully’ upon hearing Neilson express his thoughts:

But if somebody talks to them [the audience], it can be kind of interesting. I’m just asking the question would it be interesting on some level. I’m not suggesting that it’s new or innovative or anything, just would it be interesting on some level in some context to hear a genuinely unscripted story coming from somebody despite all the inbuilt feeling we have that it’s bullshit. I’m just wondering if there’s something we can do. (see Sequence 18: 5.10-6.34)

Entwisle probably detects that Neilson’s idea to directly involve the audience here is rather vague (which links back to the lack of creative vision noted earlier and furthermore reflects Neilson’s lack of relevant prior experience),⁷ is not carefully thought through, and is unlikely to be properly set up as there is now no time left in which to do so. As the discussion across

⁷ While Neilson’s work has shown a long-standing interest in spectatorship, it has to date not involved audience participation.

this thesis has demonstrated, it is often not that Neilson's process does not generate interesting ideas, but that these ideas often emerge simply too late.

Not immediately responding to Entwisle's advice, Neilson notes that 'some nights it [audience participation] might work really well, some nights it might not.' In its vague and underdeveloped quality, which reflects his engagement with this discussion point, Neilson's comment indicates that he has given little thought to the risks and dangers for the audience or the actors that could arise from audience participation, yet is prepared to entertain the idea. But Doherty tries to force Neilson to acknowledge the cost to the actors and the audience in the event of a challenging moment as he voices the concern:

what if the story is "my daughter died like Chris' daughter" [...] I've no idea what to fucking do with that. You're constructing this incredibly delicate and intricate intertwined fucking thing [the play]. And then you go, "Well fuck it, we'll just ask the [audience]" (see Sequence 18: 7.20-7.48).⁸

Doherty's comment raises a significant point concerning the ethical dimension and responsibility pertaining to audience participation, namely that such 'participation can be profoundly disturbing [and] may involve making ourselves vulnerable as we open ourselves to unexpected experiences and outcomes' (Freshwater, 2009: 76), as well as touches upon the fact that 'such direct contact is an evasion of its [the audience's] guaranteed privacy' (Bennett, 1990: 267).

As already discussed at the beginning of this chapter, Neilson does have a tendency to incorporate 'unsafe spectatorship' (Angelaki, 2014) into his shows, which can expose the audience (and actors) to risks that may make them consider whether theirs is a passive or active role, and may instil in them the urge to intercede in the events unfolding on stage. This

⁸ Doherty mentions Entwisle's character's dead child being a daughter, but in fact, her character's bereavement is due to the death of a son, as can be seen in the poem she delivers to the audience: 'David died a year ago. Such pain I hope you'll never know...' (Neilson in Reid, 2014: 230-1).

is also something which Aleks Sierz and Neilson himself have noted in relation to Neilson's play *Penetrator*:

Its ninety minutes with no break were relentlessly frightening because of the acute sense of imminent danger and the real possibility of actors injuring themselves or one of the spectators. During Tadge's attack on Alan, with the vicious knife flashing through the air, the audience seemed to be collectively willing that nothing would go wrong. [...] After the show I staggered into the night like a survivor, glad to be alive. (Sierz, 2001: 74)

and

By going to the theatre people are putting themselves into a situation which is halfway between watching and participation. [...] [E]ven we [the cast] didn't know how violent it [*Penetrator*] would be on any particular night. [...] Some people even said they wanted to get up out of their seats and stop it. (Neilson in Sierz, 2001: 79)⁹

Exposing actors and the audience to a form of physical, psychological, emotional and even moral 'jeopardy' is something for which Neilson's work is well-known. But at this juncture of the *Narrative* rehearsals, Neilson is proposing that the actors face an entirely different sort of risk. He seems to be intent on exploring Dror Harari's premise that, 'if risk is "taken", it can also be manipulated strategically to one's benefit, and serve as a performative device to generate a desired effect.' (2009: 176) This risk that Neilson is proposing, arguably, places the actors in a much more difficult position, than, for example, the actors in *Penetrator* were, because Neilson is, in effect, dictating that the 'invisible' fourth wall of the theatre is removed, which means that the customary separation of actors and audience, and the conventional rules governing their actions, would be removed and broken down. This would mean that the roles and functions of the actors and the audiences would become disturbed and indistinct, leaving the actors with potentially very little control over what will happen next. These risks are made more acute by the fact that they link to a rather ill-defined last-minute

⁹ This blurring of the boundaries regarding audience and performance is also something that Neilson does, albeit in a completely different form, in his play *Normal* (1991), when the character of Wehner pursues Frau Kurten into the audience and 'catches her and drags her kicking and screaming back to the stage' (Scene xxvi: 52). This event and the critical response to its occurrence are discussed by Sierz (2001: 69-73).

suggestion, and it is not surprising that it is one of the actors, and not Neilson, who expresses this anxiety, for it is a risk that the actors will be directly involved in. It is worth noting that, while Alston not unreasonably points out that ‘the experience of risk in the live theatre event will usually be much stronger for the spectator than the artist’ (2012: 349), the experience of risk for the actors is not to be underestimated, and that potentially highly challenging encounters such as the one imagined by Doherty could be traumatic for both parties involved and seriously affect a performer’s confidence and ability to give an unself-conscious performance. Representing perhaps his single most unsafe directorial idea in his approach to rehearsing for *Narrative*, Neilson’s suggestion to ‘ask the audience’ sees his long-established interest in unsafe spectatorship and his at times unsafe directorial approach converge.

‘Ask the Audience’: Not Neilson’s Way or the High Way

Following Doherty articulating his ethical reservations to ‘Ask the Audience’, the discussion moves into the type of anarchic diffusion mentioned by Brook (see Bradby and Williams, 1988: 162) that is the hallmark of the open atmosphere Neilson facilitates, with deliberately ridiculous suggestions like the characters becoming large lottery balls and Power finding out his character Noel Bingham is actually TV presenter Noel Edmunds. Neilson, then begins to wind down the discussion, stating that:

It just occurred to me and I thought [in a deliberately bad Cockney accent] ‘I’d put it out there man’, in case someone had a convincingly good argument about it. [So] don’t worry my feeling is likely not to do it, I was just seeing if there was an interesting point of view that might change that [meaning his mind]. (see Sequence 18: 10.20-11.00)

From these comments, it seems that from the outset Neilson was actually broadly leaning towards not having the audience participate in the authoring of the show, until and unless he received a convincing argument for and any creative suggestions as to how to implement ‘Ask the Audience’ from the actors. I would suggest that Neilson is, in effect, partially

backtracking from his original position and appeasing the actors, due to the almost universally negative response 'Ask the Audience' provoked.

In her discussion of how power functions, Lisa Dowling proposes that it can be utilised 'assertively or reactively, to compel or to resist' (2008: 90), as well as points out that 'power is mobile, [and] operates from the bottom up rather than from the top down' (2008: 93). I would argue that Dowling's Foucauldian delineations of power and its properties are valid assessments of what transpires during the 'Ask the Audience' debate. As already mentioned, Neilson softly and semi-covertly exerts his directorial power by raising the issue of potentially having the audience participate in the ending of the show, and forcing the actors into engaging with this idea. From this perspective, what we have is power operating from the top down (albeit in a vague and unfocused manner) in an attempt to achieve consensus. However, at the same time, the power operating from this direction 'finds resistance in proportion to its exertion' from the bottom-up reactive application of collective power by the actors against the idea of audience participation (Dowling, 2008: 93).

Ultimately the power exerted from the bottom up wins out, so it is clearly not, as actor Alastair Galbraith observes, 'his [Neilson's] way or the high way' (Galbraith, 2014). In many ways, Neilson's directorial approach is too vague for this to be the case, as it is often so underdeveloped that its enforcement would most likely be a mistake, and Neilson knows this. Instead what emerges here is a good example of Viv Aitken's argument that 'the subjected individual (he or she who is a lower-status participant in a power relationship) does not by definition become oppressed but rather always maintains some possibility for creative action, interplay and agency' in operation; and crucially, Neilson's directorial approach allows for and creates space for this, enabling the bottom up application of collective power (2009: 506).

However, despite my above argument that the actors persuade or influence Neilson and ultimately get their way here, it is important to stress that, as actor Tam Dean Burn articulates, ‘when it comes down to it he’s [Neilson] going to be deciding and he’s going to come back with what he wants done’ (2014). This sentiment of the ‘final authority remain[ing] that of the director’ (Cole, 1992: 72) is certainly the case in relation to ‘Ask the Audience’, because, as seen in the footage, it is Neilson who makes the final call to not have any audience participation. This is not a criticism of Neilson; after all, a final decision must be made eventually, and it is customarily the function of the director to do so, and indeed many of his actors do want Neilson to do so. At the same time, of course, for most of the rehearsal, Neilson does not fulfil the customary role of the director and avoids making decisions. In this way, his working practice is somewhat liminal, fully committing to neither the directorial-authoritative approach nor the egalitarian-democratic approach (and it is the latter with which he is mostly linked to date). It is this inconsistency that, I would argue, presents unsafety and raises issues for the working processes of his company. I will explore this in more detail in Chapter 6.

‘What Did You Expect’: Neilson Directs the Ending

Returning to the footage, after Neilson’s explanatory mini-monologue, Ross revisits her earlier point regarding audience participation potentially being ‘really interesting’ or even ‘incredible’. However, Rix and Power are still not convinced by Ross’s argument, and shortly thereafter (see Sequence 18: 12.33-14.31), Ashton tries to articulate an alternative idea about what she terms as the ‘what do you expect thing’, referring to is the discordant pre-recorded voiceover of Ross that the company intend to use at the top of the show (see Sequence 18 B: 0.00-end). Ashton uses aural effect hesitatingly as the starting point for her somewhat inarticulate idea and expands on it as follows:

The ‘what did you expect thing’, [...] there was something about it that I did like. That telling the audience something, putting something on to them, like this will happen to you or this is how you think. [...] Maybe the person who doesn’t disappear from the play can then address the audience, and that will bleed out because they are one of them or something. [...] I’m looking out to all of you and saying, ‘why are you here, why did you watch the play?’ [...] putting something into their mind. [...] Do you know what I mean?

What Ashton is trying to express seems to be the possibility that the company could have a linkage between the start and the end of the play that has similar audial, textual and thematic properties. Neilson then exercises his directorial prerogative to decide what is ‘a valid experiment and a pointless waste of time’ (Marowitz, 1986: 62), shutting off any further input from Ashton with: ‘Look there are other ways of doing it [audience participation]’ (this exchange is noteworthy, and will be explored in more detail later in this chapter). Entwisle jokingly then accuses Neilson of ‘[t]rying to wind us up’, with the ‘Ask the Audience’ suggestion, to which Neilson retorts with a knowing smile: ‘No, I’m not trying to wind you up, we might need another fifteen minutes’.¹⁰ Neilson’s response is obviously meant to be funny, revealing that the rationale behind the ‘Ask the Audience’ suggestion is that Neilson is looking for a way to avoid having to write the ending for the show. This well-delivered joke elicits peals of laughter from the rest of the company, effectively diffusing any residual tension the ‘Ask the Audience’ discussion produced, in a similar manner to how Neilson dispersed the tension during the ‘Human Soundscape’ discussed in Chapter 4.¹¹ But I would argue that there is a more serious undercurrent to Neilson’s jape, namely that Neilson is

¹⁰ In his interview testimony Phil McKee noted Neilson’s penchant for humour in rehearsals, commenting that Neilson is ‘constantly on the alert for a gag, or a piece of business. You know how he is. (Laughing) He’s got a very, very funny, childlike, sense of humour. He loves it!’ (2014)

¹¹ Ironically and pointedly Ashton chooses to refer to the ‘Human Soundscape’ in her parting shot, ‘we could do another Human Soundscape’, as she exits the rehearsal room. I would argue that this is Ashton’s way of voicing her opinion that ‘Ask the Audience’ is just as, if not more, nonsensical than the recent ‘Human Soundscape’.

concerned that at this very late stage of the rehearsal process he still does not have an ending for the show and he has no firm idea what to do about it.

Renowned playwright and theatre director George Bernard Shaw advised that when a director encounters a problem in rehearsals that they are unsure how to resolve, they should not try to concoct an instantaneous solution, instead they should be patient and wait until an answer to the problem presents itself (in Cole and Chinoy, 1973: 195). Whether or not Neilson is aware of Shaw's directorial advice, it does seem that this is exactly what Neilson does in the week following the suggestion to 'Ask the Audience'. This can be discerned from the following instructions Neilson gives the actors regarding the ending of the show at the end of the technical rehearsal on 5 April 2013 (see Sequence 18: 14.30-19.12):¹²

Let me tell you what the ending is. No learning involved, nice and easy. [...] Brian's still on here [*Neilson indicates Doherty's position*]. [...] The audience are staring at the empty stage. [...] Leave it slightly too long and then [*A loud blast from a foghorn is heard with some music underscoring it*]. So, those people who are still alive, that would be you [*Doel*], Zawe, Chris and Olly, will now start coming back on to the stage. [...] And then, [*Another blast of the foghorn and underscored music is heard*] Brian wakes up, sits up. Then the people who are dead come in from the side there, and wander on to the stage. [...] And then, [*A third blast of the foghorn and underscored music*] you start looking up to the sky.¹³ [...] So, you're all wandering around. [...] Then we do a slow fade on the lights, [...] Blackout. [*Voiceover and music end*] Lights come up. [...] It's an ending. Let's see how it plays. It might be wrong. It might be exactly right. It seems like we can't have a big scene. There's no big scene to be had there.

Here, it is apparent that Neilson's former position of not really having a clear creative vision, making somewhat vague directorial contributions and relying on the actors' input regarding the ending of the show, is one he no longer occupies. What emerges instead is a demonstration of directorial skill from Neilson that is very different to much of his previous

¹² In this section of the sequence events have moved on to April 5 2013, the evening of the first preview. It is around two hours before the show will go before an audience and the company have not managed to find the time for a dress rehearsal, so tonight's show will be the first time the play is run with all its technical elements.

¹³ From this point onwards, Ross' 'what did you expect' voiceover plays underneath Neilson's instructions. I will discuss Ross' voiceover in more detail shortly.

direction discussed in this thesis; one that I would assert is more traditionally directorial in form and in step with what an actor needs and expects from their director.

First, Neilson's behaviour here shows that he possesses a clear creative vision for the dramatic realisation of the scene, with a confident and precise use of the theatrical channels of communication of light and sound, as evidenced by the well-timed, considered and integrated sound and lighting cues he gives throughout. Second, Neilson here further demonstrates that he possesses and can employ the directorial attributes highlighted by theatre director Michael Grandage, who has expressed several thoughts regarding what actors require from a director and what a director ought to be able to do. Commenting that '[a]ll directors should be able to communicate easily with an actor as to what they like to do, how they would like to do it and what they want to achieve' (in Shepherd, 2012: 189). Grandage sees the 'primary function, and maybe even the craft, of the director [as having] to do with organisation of others.' (in Shepherd, 2012: 200) Actors, according to him, 'want to know [...] that somebody is in charge of the environment and decisions can be made. [They also] need to know that somebody is leading the process on a purely practical level. (in Shepherd, 2012: 192) Thus, for Grandage, it is important that a director should take charge and make decisions, they should be adept at organising people, as well as possess the ability to articulate what their creative vision is and the method through which it can be realised.

Neilson's actions here resonate with Grandage's thoughts in several ways: he opens by gathering the company together and then saying to them, 'Let me tell you what the ending is.' This phrase shows that Neilson has made an executive decision concerning the ending of the show and is now taking full charge of the situation. The directorial vagueness and nebulous hierarchy evident in 'Ask the Audience' is now gone. Neilson then articulates the blocking he envisions and how this blocking interacts with lighting and sound, giving specific

instructions to Doel, Ashton, Entwisle, Rix, Doherty, Power and Ross about their sound-cued movement throughout this scene. The direction that Neilson gives here has obviously been carefully thought through and it is concise, coherent, orderly, logical and precise. This demonstrates that he possesses and can effectively utilise the important directorial skills mentioned above by Grandage, namely an aptitude for organising the actors on stage, as well as an ability to articulate his creative vision and how it can be achieved. Furthermore, having provided a series of vague responses throughout the rehearsals, he demonstrates his ability to give precise answers to questions by his company: for example, Doherty's query concerning his sound cues is met by:

No the first one [foghorn] sounds and the people who are alive, that is Zawe, that is Chris, that is Olly and that is Imogen, start to come in and populate the stage. [...] Second one, that's where the dead rise. You [Doherty] open your eyes and they [Ross and Power] file in there [stage left entrance].

But Neilson displays here not only the directorial attributes articulated by Grandage, he also shows that he is sensitive to the needs of his actors by reassuring them that there is '[n]o learning involved, nice and easy. [...] There's no big scene to be had here.' Up until this point all the actors are concerned, to varying degrees that they may have to try to learn the lines of a new scene only two hours before they open. To find out that this will not be the case is a huge relief to them. That being said, Neilson's decision is in all likelihood not entirely altruistic, there is undoubtedly an element of expediency underpinning it. Therefore, the actors' fears being allayed seems in part to be a by-product of a pragmatic decision made concerning the production. Katie Mitchell advises that as a director you should 'try to hold your nerve; it will be better for everyone involved in the production if you do.' (2009: 123). I would maintain that Neilson is doing exactly as Mitchell advises, as he certainly seems to be calm under the pressure of the show's imminent start. This has a positive effect on the actors and is another way of reassuring them that all will be well with the show.

Returning to the rehearsal footage (see Sequence 18: 19.12-22.41), as the actors run the new ending, Neilson can be heard giving direction from the auditorium as to the precise points where the actors should follow his earlier instructions: telling Doel to come further into the space after the first foghorn and saying ‘don’t look up yet Barney’ to Power after the second blast. Shortly thereafter the run of the ending concludes, and Neilson gives the actors some easily comprehensible and specific notes in order to shape the scene into a form closer to his vision, as can be seen in his following comments:

I can see you all wandering around [looking at different points on the ceiling]. I think there should be one point that you look at. [When] the second one goes off [...] use that time to populate the space. [...] I’m not going to give you any lines, but if you wanted to [make eye contact] that’s ok, you can do that if you want. Then when that third one goes ‘boom’, [...] you can all stare up at that [*Points at a mirror ball on the ceiling*]. [...] As if an eclipse was going on, or some weird thing was happening in the sky. [...] So you can still occasionally look at the other people that are around and look back up at [the mirror ball]. [...] I’m just saying that you don’t have to wander around looking up. [...] Try to make an interesting picture in the space. It’s a *Close Encounter* thing.

Tim Etchells asserts that for him, the ‘task of a director, is to fix meanings, to nail things down and make them much more precise, but [...] without solidifying them too much.’ (in Giannachi and Luckhurst, 1999: 25) What Etchells does when he directs, is exactly what Neilson does at this juncture of the *Narrative* rehearsals. When Neilson says ‘there should be one point that you look at’ he giving the actors a single focal point to visually engage with, or put another way, he is fixing the action. When he tells the actors, ‘when the third one goes “boom”, [...] you can all stare up at’ the mirror ball, Neilson is finalising the timing of the sound effect which cues the actors to look at the ‘weird thing in the sky’, or in more colloquial terms, he is nailing things down. Then, when Neilson gives the note, ‘you can occasionally look at the other people that are around and look back up at [the mirror ball] [...] you don’t have to wander around looking up’, he is telling the actors what he wants them to do, but giving them the freedom to decide how best their character can accomplish this

end; so, in effect Neilson is being precise without solidifying things so much that they would be prescriptive.

In the final section of this sequence the company, having heard and digested Neilson's notes, rehearse the ending of the show for the final time (see Sequence 18: 22.41-end). Here, as can be seen, the company have incorporated all of Neilson's earlier notes: on the first foghorn blast the characters who are still alive enter looking moderately confused and populate the space by lining up at the back of the stage; then on the second blast the dead characters rise (Doherty), join the other characters (Power and Ross) at the back and all the actors make eye contact with other actors; on the third foghorn blast the actors choose their individual response and stare at the mirror ball/*Close Encounter* object, and as per Neilson's direction, form a tableau. Apart from the fact that Neilson has so quickly and skilfully crafted the ending of the show, what is noteworthy here is the extent to which the final tableau resembles Ashton's 'what do you expect' suggestion touched upon earlier.

Ashton previously presented the idea that for the ending of the show the company could revisit the beginning of the show, where a discordant pre-recorded voiceover of Ross – 'What did you expect of life? Why did you expect it? Who told you what to expect? [...]' (see Sequence 18 B: 0.00-end) – underscored the action; a suggestion that Neilson seemingly brushed aside at the time. In his discussion of the products of his own directorial methodology, Peter Brook writes that, 'nothing is ever lost completely – a trace [can] remain and return unexpectedly weeks later in a different scene' (1993: 110). Brook's idea of vestiges of one rehearsal moment emerging at a later point in rehearsals is precisely what happens at this juncture of the *Narrative* rehearsals. First, in suggesting the 'what do you expect' thing, Ashton was referring to how there could be an audio, textual and thematic connection between Ross' voiceover at the beginning of the show and whatever the ending of

the show turns out to be. But Neilson, goes one step further, and instead of taking the essence of Ashton's idea and adapting it, Neilson takes the voiceover Ashton was referring to and integrates it here in exactly the same form as it takes at the top of the show. Second, Ashton mentioned that the characters could look out into the audience and try to implant questions into their minds; a remnant of this idea can be discerned in the way the characters stare out over the audience and convey different attitudes to the imaginary stimulus in the sky while the audience are asked the questions in Ross' voiceover. Thus, it does seem that some of what Ashton suggested as a possible ending to the show has actually transpired. Therefore, Neilson's apparently negative response to it in the first-place warrants further attention.

From one perspective, Neilson's reaction to Ashton's suggestion seems to be somewhat 'ungenerous'; it is either a rebuttal, a refusal to acknowledge or a failure to fully understanding the idea's merits, or he is not paying much attention to what Ashton is trying to articulate. However, I would argue that this is not, in fact, the case. In his account of witnessing the rehearsals of the Red Room's production *Unstated* (2009), White observes that what seems to be:

wasted time or unproductive meanderings [...] are evolutionary moments where osmosis can take place, the unconscious absorption of the ideas and knowledge related to the performance, allowing the company to make sense of the chaos of the process and letting the performance ideas adapt to new circumstances. (2010: 91).

White's observation that what may seem wasteful and sterile discussions can have the beneficial side effect of creating a space where ideas can incubate and evolve is similar to what is occurring with Neilson throughout the 'Ask the Audience' debate. I think he responds to Ashton's suggestion in the way that he does, because he subconsciously recognises there is value in what she is saying and at the same time, on a more conscious level, he is aware that his decision-making process needs time for data to be processed. This facet of Neilson's

directorial process is something which Alastair Galbraith has understood, as can be seen in his following interview commentary:

He [Neilson] listens to everyone [...] and things germinate for him during those huge, big discussions. You're never going to change his mind on anything, but you might temper it in a slightly different way. [...] That's Anthony's process and you have to join in with that process. (Galbraith, 2014).

Conclusion

This chapter has worked to engage with Christopher Innes and Maria Shevtsova's (2013: 218) central question concerning, the extent to which, in the context of group devising, a director may control and guide rehearsals. The answers can, of course, only be partial and specific, and it needs and ought to take account of the particular approaches employed by individual directors. Thus, for example, Anthony Neilson's working method, although it shares the emphasis on collaboration with that of Forced Entertainment and Simon McBurney, is marked by several distinguishing features: unlike Forced Entertainment, he works with changing sets of actors across productions and his rehearsal periods usually cover weeks, not months, and unlike McBurney, Neilson's directorial approach is not driven by 'the viewpoint of an actor' but rather a writer (in Giannachi and Luckhurst, 1999: 74). Providing a reflective account of how Neilson's directorial approach functions in specific detail, this chapter has argued that Neilson's directorial approach links to issues concerning power and safety in notable and complex ways.

I have argued that power is not as dispersed and shared in Neilson's process as industry discourses may assume: all the main suggestions and decisions made during the devising stem from Neilson; he is the 'ringmaster' or MC, and at no times does he actually fully relinquish his control. This is no criticism; indeed, it is not seen as negative by his actors, as Doherty's noted comment that 'one person has to make those final decisions,

because nothing is good when directed by committee' reflects (see Sequence 17: 1.31-2.00). Instead, it is more a reflection of the dominant creative labour hierarchies and power structures that exist in contemporary British theatre practice, and that Neilson and his actors are used to.

However, even within these set parameters, within which the dispersal of power unfolds, Neilson's process is nevertheless noteworthy for the fact that it provides his actors with the opportunity to express their creative ideas and opinions, and to do so within a safe environment where they know that offense is unlikely to be taken and that their creative input will be integrated if affective and relevant. Moreover, the fact that much of the actors' input does eventually feature in the play text and performance reflects the level of trust and respect Neilson holds for them. The productive outcomes of Neilson's power dynamics include that Neilson receives topics, characters and perspectives that he would be less likely to generate on his own, and that he gets the chance to test out his ideas and materials.¹⁴ The actors, in turn, experience a creatively and personally close connection to the material they have helped to generate.

What would aid the productivity of Neilson's power dynamics would be more communication, which would provide a less 'unsafe' working environment for the actors: as he shifts between more and less conventional approaches to directing without communicating that he is changing his directorial mode, is an unproductive and unsafe exertion of power;

¹⁴ Entwisle mentions this aspect of Neilson's directorial approach in her original interview testimony (see Sequence 17: 3.16-end): 'sometimes he [Neilson] comes up to me quietly and says, "Do you think we can get away with this or is this really bad taste?" [So], sometimes maybe I help him a little bit as a litmus test.' She then gives a specific example of this type of activity in her follow up interview when she recalled:

'I'm glad that sometimes he listens. [...] There was going to be a massive section [in the play] where Brian talks about this rape and taking someone into the woods. And I said [to Neilson], 'You do realise at the moment there's this woman who has been gang raped by all these American guys?' And that didn't go in in the end. (Entwisle, 2014)

Entwisle is referring to an international news story concerning a US college girl who was given a date rape drug and then taken to various fraternity parties, where she was sexually assaulted by numerous individuals.

whether this is done intentionally or not. It would be undoubtedly beneficial for his actors to receive explicit signals when such shifts are taking place, so that they know when to shift between more and less conventional roles as actors, and avoid the jolt of moving from feeling a valued and trusted collaborator to ‘being a spanner in the works.’ (Entwisle, 2014) This unsafe exertion of power underscores the fact that Neilson’s process overall, as this chapter has already noted, despite inviting so much input from his actors, is not taking sufficient account of the actor’s process. Contributing to his status as an ‘unsafe director’, it is this central tension in Neilson’s work that the following chapter will explore in further detail from the actors’ perspective.

Chapter 6: Neilson and The Actor's Process

Thus far, this thesis has been concerned with providing a detailed analysis of Neilson's authorial and directorial processes and of the unconventional ways in which he uses improvisation, during the *Narrative* rehearsals. Throughout each chapter there has been continued reference to actors and acting in terms of how both interrelate to the thematic strands of investigation contained therein. However, what has been absent thus far is an investigation that is more focused on the actor's process and the acting. In order to address this gap, the emphasis of this chapter will be on providing an account of events from the perspective of the actor. The chapter will expand upon threads of discussion touched on in previous chapters, such as: the importance of working conditions for actors and how this reality impacts on their agency; how the actor's process may or may not be complemented and supported by Neilson's process; the ways in which Neilson's direction is actor-centric, and how Neilson's approach does not take sufficient account of the actor's process.

The analysis in this chapter will consider these issues firstly by outlining the degree of attention paid to the actors and their process evident within existing discussions of Neilson's work and by Neilson himself. It will then provide an in-depth consideration of the actor's process within a Stanislavskian framework. Finally, it will, examine two particular case studies: Neilson's 'Motivational Speech' which took place at the end of rehearsals (30 March 2013) and a new scene given to the actors on Press Night (10 April 2013). These two case studies will allow the chapter to consider in detail the ways in which Neilson's process intersects with that of the actor, both during *and* after rehearsals; with the second case study providing an insight into how Neilson's process may impact the actors' onstage performance. Furthermore, the analysis of these case studies will pick up on the critical issues discussed in

Chapter 5 concerning power and ‘unsafety’, by examining the actor’s process within the context of the contemporary working conditions of actors in Britain.

As already noted in previous chapters, there has been considerable interest, expressed within industry/journalistic discourse, in Neilson’s rehearsal process and how it actually operates. Attention to this issue is now growing within scholarship as well. Understandably, existing discussions have often been quite generalising, lacking concrete detail as to how Neilson’s unusual methodology works in practice. Where more information about the specificity of his process has been sought, this has usually involved interviews with Neilson himself, and thus existing written accounts are based on and privilege Neilson’s own perception of his process, neglecting the perspective of his collaborators. This type of generalising and Neilson-centric account is typified by Matthew Amer who writes that for Neilson, ‘the actors’ influence “isn’t direct; they suggest things that suggest things.” [...] This is, we decide, a type of people-specific theatre’ (2007).¹ It is also evident in scholar and journalist Catherine Love’s comments that:

it is a process for which Neilson is a persuasive advocate. At first glance his writing method would seem to shift focus away from the writer, creating a collaborative making process more akin to that of devising companies, but Neilson’s understanding of his way of working is deeply rooted in the centrality of the playwright. [...] Neilson explains [that] ‘the playwright has a direct connection with actors and designers, forging a tighter unity between the vision of the work and its individual parts.’ (Love, 2013)

Amer and Love, are writing short pieces, and as such do not have access to the resources I have to analyse Neilson’s approach. My intention is to stress the fact that, to date, there has been scant mention in published material of the actors that Neilson has worked with. Despite the fact that, as the previous chapters in this thesis have demonstrated,

¹ It is interesting to note that over four years after making this point to Amer, Neilson made a similar remark to me during our *Narrative* interview (see Sequence 4; 1.35-2.53), and which I show to be not always be strictly the case, as discussed in detail in Chapter 1.

Neilson's working methodology foregrounds (and depends on) contributions by the actors, in existing accounts of Neilson's process, the actors' creative process does not really feature. A notable exception to this tendency is journalist Maddy Costa's article in *The Guardian*, 'The more pressure, the better'. Here, Costa discussed Neilson's directed/devised RSC/Soho Theatre production *God in Ruins* (2007: 23), providing short extracts of interviews conducted with Neilson and several of the actors involved, Costa wrote that:

[w]hat the actors think means a lot to Neilson. He constantly asks their opinions on new scenes [and] invites discussions on the form of the play. [...] [T]he relentless questioning [that a particular idea] received from the cast contributed to him abandoning the idea. [...] This too became frustrating. As [actor Brian] Doherty said in October: 'I don't want to hear myself talk about anything anymore. And it takes a lot to get a bunch of actors to not want to speak.' (2007: 23)

Doherty, who subsequently worked on *Narrative*, also commented on the lack of text Neilson gives actors to explore in rehearsals; his feeling was that it 'can be very unsatisfying because you finish work and you've got no idea what's been achieved' (in Costa, 2007: 23).

Similarly, actor Ryan Gage reported that '[s]ome days Anthony would turn up and say, "I haven't got anything I want to show you, there's nothing new to explore." As a creative person who needs material to be able to do something, that was really frustrating.' (in Costa, 2007: 23) And actor Sean Kearns recalls how:

We [the cast] would improvise stuff, and at the end you would discover that Anthony's not interested in any of the dialogue we'd come up with, or any of the scenarios, but in the dynamics within the group. We'd try to get underneath him, but you would second-guess what he wanted, and in actual fact that was the furthest thing. It was quite frustrating. You'd wonder, 'What's our deal in this creative process?' (in Costa, 2007: 23)

What can be gleaned from these comments from Costa and the actors is that the *God in Ruins* rehearsals bear three of the same hallmarks of the *Narrative* rehearsals: that Neilson requires input from the actors and this input can affect decisions that are made; that Neilson employs

improvisation unconventionally; and that Neilson does not communicate his *modus operandi* to his actors, which links to his 'unsafe' approach to directing as discussed in Chapter 5.

The relative disregard for the actor's creative process within journalistic and (where it exists) scholarly discourses echoes the limited attention Neilson himself has paid to this, as suggested in previous chapters of this thesis, and reflects in the frustration expressed by Doherty, Gage and Kearns over their creative approach being, in effect, side-lined in favour of Neilson's. Neilson openly acknowledges that he does not give that much thought or space to what the creative act of performance involves and requires. When asked to define the risk to the actor in his productions during our interview, Neilson's response was (see Sequence 19: 0.00 – 1.18):

Well, the risk to the actor is that, along with me, they've been put into a bad play I suppose. The other risk for them is that they're not allowed to process things, they're not allowed to do a lot of the things they do in order to make themselves feel comfortable. Which may or may not be relevant things, sometimes they may not actually be terribly useful things. But they're the rituals...everybody has rituals for what they do. And I suppose to some extent this is my ritual – it happens to be a strange ritual – So I'm getting to do my thing, but they're not necessarily getting to do theirs. But I make that very explicit and plain to them. I think all the actors that do this all have to have some kind of love of that adrenalin in a sense. So the risk of embarrassment I suppose, which for an actor I guess is everything. I mean they're going out there on stage and doing it. I suppose that's the risk. But the actors will maybe be better able to tell you that. I can't think too much about that.

This response shows the extent of Neilson's level of regard for the actor's process. He articulates some understanding of how actors think and what is important to them,² but at the same time, he seems to trivialise their process, relegating it to the level of 'ritual' instead of recognising it as a foundational element of theatre making. Ultimately, to him, the actor's process is subaltern to his, and, as he acknowledges, this can have a detrimental impact on the actor that he 'can't think too much about.' Interestingly, there has been a specific encounter

² This understanding is not only informed by his professional experience to date, but likely also his own initial background as an actor, and the fact that both his parents were actors.

between Neilson and an actor working with him that sheds further light on this attitude towards the actor's process: during the 2008 rehearsals for *Relocated*, Neilson gave Phil McKee a lengthy speech to learn, which had to be performed in a German accent, on the penultimate day of the technical rehearsal. McKee challenged Neilson's decision to give him difficult new material at such a late stage. When asked during my interview with Matthew Pidgeon whether Neilson accommodates the actor's process, Pidgeon's reply describes Neilson's reaction to this challenge:

Not particularly. I don't think he's [Neilson] interested in that. I've had discussions with him and I've heard other actors saying: 'What about my process?' Phil famously said that to him. And Anthony scoffed to me: 'Phil's process? What the fuck is Phil's process?' (laughs) That's very Anthony. You can talk about it [your process as an actor] with him, but what he will do is that he'll try to assure you if you're really worried, that 'Fuck it [your process]! You don't need that process.' What you're giving him is what he wants. [...] He's really not that interested in working with your process. (Pidgeon, 2014)³

It seems that, across his career, Neilson has never had much interest in accommodating the actor's process, and the tension between the actor's and his process is a recurring theme of Neilson's rehearsals. As Pidgeon's testimony illuminates, Neilson has even shown himself to be quite dismissive of the actor's process, trying to persuade actors to abandon it, ignore their reservations and trust his judgement. This is certainly quite removed from the interest to place 'actors at the heart of the theatre' (Innes and Shevtsova, 2013: 186) that informs, for example, the approach of ensemble theatre directors such as Stanislavski or Giorgio Strehler.

Before I consider what the actor's process entails and explore in detail the relationship between Neilson's and the actor's working methods, it is worthwhile noting that this (conscious or unconscious) disregard for the actor's process is not exclusive to Neilson. Existing commentary by scholars and theatre practitioners alike, contain both positive and

³ Pidgeon's comments as transcribed could be read as negative, but Pidgeon tells this anecdote in a very comedic fashion, with no malice involved on his part.

negative references to actors and their process, in ways that resonate with Neilson's interview. For example, American avant-garde theatre director Robert Wilson's opinion is that a director does not need to facilitate an actor's process, nor do they have to have any esteem for the craft of acting in order to do their own job (in Shyer, 1989: 12). There are clear links here to Neilson, who would be more likely to agree with Wilson than with Kenneth Rae's view that '[l]earning to work with actors and understanding the actor's processes should be the primary focus of any course on directing' (1989: 165)⁴ and the centrality placed on the actor within the theatrical process by Bella Merlin (2007: 60) and Gay McAuley (2015).⁵ For Wilson's contemporary peer, Alan Schneider, what is important is the result the actors produce rather than the process by which they produce it; he believes that 'any way of achieving the semblance of reality is legitimate, [...] the reality of the actor is much less important than the reality of the audience' (in Schechner, 2002: 75). This resonates with Neilson's approach to directing, which, by not allowing the actors to 'do their thing', contrasts sharply with Irish theatre director Lynne Parker's insistence on the significance of the actors' reality: 'It's always got to be about the finished product. There are many ways of getting there, and you've got to be able to satisfy the actors, or you won't get to the product' (in Manful, 1999: 78; see also Shepherd, 2012: 62).

However, while Neilson's process is overall more closely aligned with the more negative than the more positive views on actors and their process, it must be noted that his approach is certainly very different to Norman Marshall's somewhat archaic view that '[s]ome [actors] need to be coaxed or cajoled, some need to be flattered, some need to be

⁴ Theatre director and acting teacher Rae worked on a project that investigated the training of directors, which was set up by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation and produced the report 'A Better Direction: an enquiry into the training of directors for theatre, film and television'.

⁵ As McAuley puts it, 'it is the actors who are always central, their questions, their perceptions, their technical skills, their bodies, and the deepest levels of their emotional lives are what transform and sublimate the written words' (2015: 38).

deflated, [...] and a few are better off for the occasional bullying' (1962: 268) for a director to get to their desired outcome. Supporting Trevor Rawlins' argument that 'actors are often infantilised by the industry and by critic/scholars' (2012: 229),⁶ Marshall's approach to directing brings to mind strategies an adult may employ to make a child behave. While Neilson's approach is not focused on 'nourishing, sustaining and revitalising the actors, encouraging and satisfying them and finding their theatrical diet' (Jouvet 1973: 228), he certainly does not share the stance outlined by someone like Marshall above. Neilson has a concern for the mood of his company and does not participate in cajoling, deflating or bullying. He does have some understanding of the actor's process, even though he side-lines this in different ways.

The Stanislavskian Actor's Process

Before this chapter can provide an analysis of a specific example of the ways in which Neilson's and the actor's process may or may not work together, it is imperative to interrogate critically the term 'actor's process' first. The creative processes for the actors who have been involved in Neilson's work have been predominantly located within a contemporary (post-1990) British context and most have attended drama school. As Christian Billing notes, actor training in Britain and the USA has 'been dominated primarily by quasi-psychological approaches to the preparation of character and to rehearsal methodologies that stress an actor's personal identification with a role' (2012: 401). Increasingly since the 1960s, actors in Britain are primarily trained in and professionally experienced in using Stanislavskian techniques to act. While other approaches to creative processes for

⁶ Given the prevalence of this view, it is unsurprising that Uta Hagen felt compelled to call her 1972 book *Respect for Acting*.

performance exist, this chapter's discussion of 'the actor's process' will be located within a Stanislavskian-informed, Western context, in line with the thesis's analysis overall.

Briefly, Stanislavski's understanding of and approach to acting focuses on an inside out approach, is concerned with realism/naturalism, and emphasises the psychological motivation of characters, as well as an organic impulse to action and notions of truth; a problematic and contested term. Stanislavski states: 'the most important thing is not the actions themselves but the emergence of natural impulses towards them' (2010: 55). As already discussed in Chapter 3, Bella Merlin (2007: 115) notes that Stanislavski identified 'scenic truth', 'which is 'actual fact' distilled into a creative form' as significant; and Trevor Rawlins (2012: 40) has explained that 'scenic truth' is the key aim for the Stanislavskian approach to acting, because here actors experience something as if it were for real. As Rose Whyman noted: 'What Stanislavsky wants, whether it is by exploring the method of physical actions or emotional memory is for the actor to *experience*. To be in a state of *I am*' (2008: 254; emphases in original). For Stanislavski, the necessary pre-requisites for an actor to be able to achieve an organic, truthful performance, where they experience 'being in the moment', include an absence of physical tension, which aids mental and physical concentration so that actors can reach a state of *public solitude*. In it, actors tune out anything external to the world of the play.' (Carnicke, 2010: 9) What facilitates such relaxed states is careful preparation: actors located within a Stanislavskian tradition will typically 'search for a uniting thread that links together all the characters' actions to produce an overall sense of what the play conveys to the audience' (Carnicke, 2010: 16), located within a 'logic of action' (Gordon 2006: 86). This, in turn, will help determine their super-objective, objectives, actions and units, within the context of the given circumstances of the play that have been identified.

However, these imperatives do not mean that actors working within a Stanislavskian approach necessarily require a script that is entirely fixed and finalised. Indeed, Stanislavskian principles and techniques can be productively employed for devising; for example, the use of objectives, emotional/affective memory and/or given circumstances may be used for producing material with this methodology. Also, Stanislavski uses improvisation in *An Actor Prepares* (1977).⁷ However, what is important for the actor's creative process, working within a non-devising context, is that the script (ultimately) provides sufficient information for actors about their characters, so that they can choose relevant and appropriate strategies to attempt to identify and achieve their character's objectives. For a 'truthful' performance, there is a need for 'a context for what we're seeing, some rules which determine our expectations, some kind of LOGIC AND COHERENCE' (Merlin 2007: 114; emphasis in original), especially for scripts that are (at least partly) generated during rehearsals and significantly evolve during work in progress, as is the case with Neilson's process. The actor's process requires enough time to rehearse. Actors need to be enabled to become familiar with lines, movements and cues, and how these interconnect, as this helps them reach the desired state of unselfconsciously 'being in the moment.'

Actors' Heterogeneity

The accumulative effect of the analysis in the preceding chapters have already flagged up that Neilson's ways of working does not readily facilitate the Stanislavskian trained actor's

⁷ The Stanislavskian approach to improvisation is text based, whereby actors improvise around the text in order to better understand their character psychologically and emotionally. For example: during the rehearsals of the original production of Sarah Kane's *Phaedra's Love* (1996), we ran an improvisation in which my character Hippolytus' girlfriend broke up with him. This scenario does not happen in the play, but it is mentioned in the text and is the event which is largely responsible for the crippling depression Hippolytus is currently experiencing (see Kane, 1996: 83). Therefore, Kane and I thought it necessary to run this improvisation to explore this strand of backstory so that I could use affective memory techniques to draw on the intense emotions I felt during the improvisation to provide the motivation my character needs to inflict what Kane has described as 'emotional decimation' on the character of Phaedra (Langridge and Stephenson, 1997: 132). (For a discussion of emotional/affective memory, see Strasberg and Schechner (1964: 132).)

process which govern the actors he has worked with. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that the work of actors is marked by heterogeneity, and that some of the actors who have worked with Neilson have found his approach and its challenge to the actor's process creatively stimulating. Imogen Doel has summarised her experience of this during the *Narrative* rehearsals as follows (see Sequence 19: 1.18 – 2.02):

I've totally freaked out, I've had two days where I've been like: 'I don't know what I'm doing, I don't even know if this [her acting/character] makes sense.' You'll be really frustrated [...] and then he'll [Neilson] say something like: 'Well, would it be any better, would the performance be any better, if you knew what you're doing?' Then you go off and you think about that and you go: 'Well that is some sort of bullshit response.' Then four days later you go: 'Well, actually just because you know what you're doing doesn't make it any better.' It just means something else is happening, something more interesting.

Here Doel articulates how after a period of confusion and frustration, she found herself agreeing with Neilson's approach, which she found rewarding. During the *Narrative* rehearsals Doel seemed to be genuinely enjoying herself and was by far the most energetic, upbeat and enthusiastic member of the company. Doel is not the only proponent of the actor's process being disrupted by Neilson's process: in his interview, Alastair Galbraith also seems just as, if not more, positively inclined, stating that: 'I think it's a really good way of working, I don't have any problems with it at all. [...] I love working with [Neilson] because he takes your process away from you, which in a way is quite good. [...] With Anthony I only did his process.' (2014) Tam Dean Burn has commented:

I love the way he breaks with the conventions of a normal type of theatre setup, where you've got blocking, or you feel like the director's puppet. It's not a foregone conclusion where you're going to be going with this thing, it's a process of discovery that you're involved with together. (2014)

And his challenge to Neilson discussed earlier notwithstanding, Phil McKee has also mentioned the benefits of having one process disrupt the other:

With Anthony's plays you're very often genuinely in the moment because genuinely you haven't had time to over-analyse [the text] or use your wee tricky bits. So whatever it is, the wee things that make you feel comfortable, your safe places, your own process, the actor's process, you can't really use. (2014)

McKee and Dean Burn's thoughts resonate with actor Michael Sheen's view that '[n]eeding lots of time and apparatus to act can be a dangerous crutch' (in Luckhurst and Veltman, 2001: 123); and there is certainly little risk of that danger in Neilson's process. What emerges from the interview testimony by Doel, Galbraith, Dean Burn and McKee is an appreciation of Neilson's process for its unconventionality, its fluidity and the way in which it challenges their acting process by forcing them out of their 'comfort zones.' There seems to be a degree of congruence between Neilson's process and the actor's process, as the former can encourage a state of 'being in the moment' but interestingly, approached via the opposite route to the conventional Stanislavskian one based on preparation and rehearsal.

An important point to consider here is that of training and prior professional experience. Robert Gordon has pointed out that:

Problems occur when, during the course of their professional careers, actors are asked to create performances utilizing techniques and stage conventions other than the ones in which they are schooled. These problems arise not merely because actors are unfamiliar with the alien conventions and techniques, but also because their performing identity has already been formed by the aesthetic they have unself-consciously absorbed in training. (2006: 3)

Gordon's argument concerning how the embedded nature of actor training might conflict with subsequent professional experience is demonstrated in the difficulties Zawe Ashton experienced when applying Stanislavskian acting principles in the 'Box Therapy' improvisation (see Chapter 3). It also strongly resonates with the disruptive experience of encountering Neilson's process as noted by Tam Dean Burn, who commented that Neilson's process 'just goes against the grain of everything you've trained for or what you're used to in the profession.' (2014) Matthew Pidgeon noted that:

nothing in my training prepared me for working with Anthony (laughs). I thought it [Neilson's process] was one thing and it turned out it wasn't. That's what I found with Anthony. When I came into it [Neilson's process] I thought: 'Oh, this requires this sort of thing [a Stanislavskian approach to characterisation].' Maybe that's my shortcomings as an actor, I don't know. I thought I could pin it [how to adapt] down and I couldn't. (2014)⁸

However, all of the actors interviewed for this research (with one exception), including both the more positively and the more negatively inclined towards Neilson's process (such as Doel and Ashton, who both feature in the second case study in this chapter), share the experience of British drama school training and have Stanislavskian-informed prior professional experience. Entwisle is the exception as she has not attended drama school and comes from a devising background. She has suggested that such a background is useful for Neilson's process:

I think it's really helpful if you've come from a background of devising work. [...] You're not a 'pure actor', you're much more from a devising background of making your own work kind of world. I think that actually [Neilson] suits those actors best... I think that if you are just an actor you're going to really struggle. And I don't mean it pejoratively, being 'just an actor,' because it is a skill and a craft. (Entwisle, 2014)

However, Entwisle herself has experienced problems with Neilson's process (for example, in her interview, she spoke of challenging situations during *Edward Gant*). While a grounding in Stanislavskian approaches makes it likely that an actor will struggle to employ an unfamiliar methodology, and a background in devising may be helpful, actors' responses to Neilson's process cannot be reduced to and 'explained away' by reference to their training and prior experience.

⁸ Galbraith commented that 'you work with other directors who let you bring something. They want you to [...] use your technique and find your inner whatever. [...] Whereas with Anthony it's the other way.' (2014) McKee felt that, 'because it's [Neilson's way of doing things] such a different process, it requires something different from the actor. It's such a different world to inhabit as an actor. It's unlike any other experience with any other director. So you have to adapt.' (2014)

What the diversity of responses to Neilson's rehearsals vividly demonstrates is the heterogeneity of the actor's process. This reflects that Stanislavski's 'system', despite its connotations of scientific order and fixity, allows for creative scope.⁹ As Carnicke points out:

The System's techniques suggest various pathways for actors to follow as they strive towards successful performances. In choosing a path, each actor reinvents and personalises the System. This reinterpretation and adaption is exactly what Stanislavsky hoped to inspire in actors. He hated the dogmatic teacher who insists upon a single correct way. (2010: 23)

Evidently, some actors who have worked with Neilson find it easier to have their process disrupted by Neilson's and perhaps this experience is something easier to appreciate on reflection than at the point in time when it happens. Bearing this heterogeneity in mind, I will now move to my first case study, to discuss the ways in which Neilson's process fails to accommodate the actor's process during rehearsal.

Case Study 1: Neilson's Motivational Speech

The first case study pertains to what I will term 'Neilson's Motivational Speech', which occurred during the last 15 minutes of the final day of the five-week long rehearsal period, 30 March 2013, and represents the first segment of the footage. At this juncture, the company has just finished their first staggered run of the material they have rehearsed thus far, and the next time they meet as a group will be for the beginning of the lengthy technical rehearsal on 2 April 2013. Neilson and the actors are at what is very often a difficult stage of any rehearsal process, namely one in which they are about to make the transition between the rehearsal room and the theatre for the technical rehearsal, where there is always 'a lot of pressure on everyone, [particularly] the actors [who] have to absorb several new ingredients – lights,

⁹ As Gordon has rightly pointed out, Stanislavski's system itself is an unstable term, not least because he 'continually tested and revised his ideas, so that, while a number of key elements remained present throughout his career, they were reconceived in a dialectical process' (2006: 39).

sounds, scenery, costumes so on – in a very short period of time.’ (Mitchell, 2009: 137)

Regarding the shift from rehearsal room to the theatre, director Katie Mitchell writes further that:

The way in which the director negotiates the transition from the rehearsal room to the theatre needs careful thought. Manage it smoothly and it will strengthen the actors’ work and your ability to help them with that work. [...] [So] give the actors the impression that you are calm and in control of the transition, no matter what is happening behind the scenes. Manage it inefficiently and it will weaken what the actors are doing as well as your hold on the work. (2009: 200-1)

I will now examine in depth how Neilson handles this transitory stage of rehearsals and to what extent his particular engagement with the actor’s process supports the actors in the difficult work they will soon undertake during the technical rehearsal and ultimately the final performance.

As it is one of this chapter’s two main case studies, it is worth reproducing ‘Neilson’s Motivational Speech’ in full (see Sequence 20: 0.00-8.09):

So, fun and games on [...] Tuesday... Well look, the main thing now...all that’s going to happen is it’s going to get better (laughter around the room). [...] Depending on where you feel we are at the moment...wherever you feel we are at the moment; it’s all just going to get better...And lots of stuff will happen on set. It will really come alive on set. It’ll happen and that’s always a good time. When we get to the end of next week I think we’ll know. But like I said I really don’t have any compunction about cancelling that first preview if that’s where we feel we need to be. I’ve had to do it once or twice, but to be honest it’s always usually more a technical issue than actors. But genuinely, if anybody’s feeling that we’re not ready on Friday night; or if we obviously can’t busk it in some way then we just won’t do it. And I’m just saying that to you, not to raise a defeatist thing, but to take that pressure off of you. I don’t know how you all actually feel about it inside, or whatever, how freaked out you are. But I think if we remove that pressure from you it’s just a little bit less tense. And if that is the case...the fucking *Low Road* missed the first two, and they had a script for ages...

There will be a few little tweaks or things going on, but I will be realistic about them. Stuff will come up or whatever. Unless something is really vital or whatever; certainly as the week goes on, I’ll start saying to people ‘well look, introduce these changes when you feel you’re ready to’, do you know what I mean? So I won’t say ‘well you have to do this tonight’, or whatever. It will be a case of it doesn’t matter. So I’ll try very much to tailor it to what pace you feel you’re ready for in terms of change. But I

don't want to make too much of it because I really think that actually we'll be fine. You'll actually have quite a lot of time...Even on set there'll be a lot of rigging going on, there'll be a lot of stuff going on where we'll be just talking about the acting.

And also just, the other thing to say to you is that, as ever, I won't really look for trouble where I'm not seeing any. So if I don't see that there's a problem...I can still see problems in things and I will start saying this or that to you, or whatever. But other than that if I don't see a problem I won't raise it. So if you have a problem, if you have something, then no matter what is going on you are all entitled to my time. You're entitled to come up to me and say 'well this, I really don't like doing this', or 'I'm not happy with that', or 'how do I do this' or whatever. What I don't really have the time to do...I can tell you if what you're doing is wrong, but sometimes some people want to know why what they're doing is right. And I probably won't offer that freely. So if you need to know then ask. Otherwise...

I can see lots of things wrong with it, but my feeling is that all those things are really fixable. And at the very least there'll be...it'll be pretty interesting to see how it goes down. I'll be pretty interested to see what an audience makes of it actually. You're the ones that have to go out there; you're the ones who have to do it in front of them, or whatever. And I will almost certainly go out on the first night and... just on the first couple of previews. I really don't mind doing it...going out to the audience and going 'oh, you know bastards coming on a preview (Shakes his fist in mock indignation) (laughs from the cast). And just create an informal atmosphere.

So literally, if you do fuck up, you can sort of acknowledge that you've fucked up, and we can move on. And certainly Upstairs they're a fairly young audience...they quite like all that stuff as long as you create the right atmosphere. So I'll do everything I can to make it feel as safe as possible. And then hopefully we can, whatever the fuck ups, just try and enjoy it. It's going to be really, really interesting to see where they laugh, when they don't; what they get, what they don't. I think we will be surprised certainly. It might be very surprising what they laugh at and what they don't. But it's a very funny show, it's interesting and it's unusual, and (jokingly) it's not that long. What more do they fucking want? And it's going to look great, and it's going to sound great, and all that stuff is going to be there behind you. And it's not going to be amateur hour; it feels like it now but it won't. [...] Unfortunately it is probably full on the first preview. I would be very, very surprised if we make the first dress rehearsal. I'll be fairly surprised if we make the second. I would not be at all surprised if the first dress rehearsal is the first preview. It's possible; it's definitely happened a few times before. We'll see how it goes.

Neilson here arguably manages the transitional moment smoothly in a number of ways. He is very likely picking up on a certain air of tension in the rehearsal room, caused by the somewhat chaotic nature of the first staggered run of the play the actors had just been involved in. While most of the actors do attempt to stay as upbeat as possible about the probability of the play improving, Neilson nevertheless recognises that there is a need for

positive directorial intervention at this point, and is willing to provide support to ease the tension, which he – whether he is familiar with Stanislavskian discourse on acting or not – understands as detrimental to the actor’s process. He achieves a level of success in this because he certainly does not seem to be anxious and clearly intends for his words to have a calming influence on the actors, knowing that ‘the closer you get to moving into the theatre the tenser the actors can be’, and that this tension ‘is just a sign of growing fear about the opening of the show.’ (Mitchell, 2009: 186)

As far as the main responsibilities of directing actors is concerned, actor William H. Macey believes that ‘it is a director’s job to lead the troops [and] make sure that team spirit is good’ (in Luckhurst and Veltman, 2001: 71). They should also, according to theatre director Declan Donnellan, ‘look after the health of the acting of the ensemble’ (in Shevtsova and Innes, 2009: 70), in part by displaying, to borrow from scholar Gay McAuley, ‘sensitivity to the different needs of the actors’ (2012: 196). Neilson intends to meet these crucial directorial responsibilities especially through communicating his decision to shoulder the responsibility for letting the audience of the first few previews know that the show is still at the work-in-progress stage. (He also ‘leads the troops’ in that he takes on the task of telling the actors something they probably do not want to hear, but should certainly know, namely that in all probability the first preview will also be the first run of the completed play and the first dress rehearsal.) Neilson follows the emphasis on maintaining good spirits as advised by Katie Mitchell as follows: ‘no matter what your [the director’s] larger concerns are, give the actors the impression that you are happy with the direction that the work is heading’ (2009: 185). Neilson tackles the low morale of the actors that he has become aware of by assuring them that the show can only improve, jokingly referencing *The Low Road*, the contemporaneous show by the then-artistic director of the Royal Court, Dominic Cook, which had to cancel its first two previews despite having a script from the outset. With this, he attempts to reassure

the actors that the *Narrative* production is not too out of step with more high-profile and conventional Royal Court theatre practice: also, he is likely to be aware of the fact that his actors would be taking comparative note of other productions. He also tries to reassure them that the current issues with the show can be easily rectified and that *Narrative* will be produced to a professionally high standard.

Neilson further demonstrates his awareness of the fact that his actors need support, by trying to allay fears that he has identified. He reassures them that they will have the opportunity to incorporate the changes required to get the show to performance level, by emphasising that he will work with and at the pace the actors need (underscored by his insistence that the actors are entitled to his time), so that any changes can become securely embedded in their performance. Neilson also shows that he is aware that the actors need to feel secure in order to perform in front of the audience, and the protective framing (the pre-show announcement to the preview audiences) will, he believes, help the actors cope with and move on from any issues with or mistakes in performance ('fuck-ups', as he calls them). This signals that mistakes to him are not going to be of artistic primacy and that no judgment is going to be forthcoming from him; instead he suggests that what is important is that the actors enjoy performing in the show. This reference to enjoyment, I argue, crucially reflects that Neilson possesses a developed understanding of what constitutes achievement in acting, namely that any small mistake, such as fluffing a line, does not outweigh achievements in terms of strong characterisation, being in the moment, constructing a 'truthful' performance, and/or creating an emotional response in the audience. He is sincere in his wish to help his actors experience the already noted Stanislavskian imperatives of relaxed concentration and public solitude. From this perspective, Neilson successfully fulfils the directorial responsibilities highlighted by Donnellan, Macey, McAuley and Mitchell and demonstrates some understanding of and sympathy for the actor's process.

However, when ‘Neilson’s Motivational Speech’ is considered from the perspective of the actor, he manages the transitional moment much less smoothly, and a contrasting picture very much at odds with the actor’s process begins to emerge. I would argue that the actors take something very different from Neilson’s well-intentioned remarks than what he expects, partly, though not exclusively, because these remarks emerge at this crucial, liminal stage, late in the rehearsal process. First of all, Neilson’s assertion that the first previews could be cancelled, though not as ‘a defeatist thing’, and his references to problems which are ‘really fixable,’ would be likely to be received with varying levels of anxiety by his company. Neilson’s comments contain some negativity (albeit positively meant), which could easily heighten any apprehension, doubt and worry that the actors may already be feeling. These types of concerns are not conducive to fostering the confidence and un-self-consciousness needed to produce a strong performance. Furthermore, to have apprehension, doubt and worry that one might privately be harbouring voiced by the director, confirms the reality and validity of such concerns to the actors. Here, Neilson’s attempt at reassurance that the show is ‘not going to look like amateur hour’ suggests to the actors that Neilson is aware that a number of them may have found a certain level of conventional professionalism absent from proceedings thus far and/or are not confident with their performances. By articulating these concerns, Neilson may be inadvertently underscoring them, thus furthering any tension.

Moreover, the actors are also likely not to read Neilson’s declaration that he will not be freely offering positive feedback in the supportive way that he undoubtedly intends. Neilson means to express that an absence of positive reinforcement is not to be read as an implicit criticism. However, what his directorial perspective fails to consider is that for the actor’s process, it is important to not only know and be told what one is doing wrong, but also what one is doing right, so that they can build on the latter, without having to second-guess levels of success. Stanislavski placed emphasis on positive directorial feedback and support

as follows: ‘The most important function of the director, as I understand the definition, is to open up all the potentialities of the actor and to arouse his individual initiative.’ (in Gorchakov, 1973: 192) This type of actor focused direction is also stressed by Merlin, who writes that it is the director’s ‘job to help every actor sound the true notes and ditch the false, and not just let them [the actors] wallow about in a chaotic quagmire of artistic anarchy.’ (2007: 183). Despite Neilson’s intentions and declaration, it is likely that an absence of positive reinforcement will ‘breed insecurity in actors who might read an absence of positive feedback as a sign of disapproval or bad work.’ (Mitchell 2009: 128)

Neilson’s comment also points to another, closely related way in which his approach to directing intersects with the actor’s process. This has been identified by Sophie Ross as follows (see Sequence 19: 2.02 – end):

I’ve been really positive about this ‘process’ so far, and I do absolutely love it. But there’s one thing that I’ve noticed that can happen, which is because Anthony has to be a writer at the same time as direct I think that actors can sometimes *feel a bit at sea*. There’s a *sense of isolation* with this process once you get to the point where you have to think about yourself and your character. So sometimes I think the trap for the actor in this ‘process’ is that they will need Anthony to be the sort of director they get if the only job the director has to do is blocking or you know. [...] So it becomes much more about the script than the actors. [...] [I]t just takes a bit of getting used to because you’re used to a director giving you all this *sensitive energy* where they treat you like a kid in a way. That doesn’t happen in this ‘process’ and it can’t because there’s not enough time, there’s too many other things to do. (emphases added)

What Ross here recognises is that Neilson’s process, despite being known for its collaborative quality, does not actually fully approach acting as a collaborative endeavour. As Charles Marowitz observes, the ‘director is the litmus paper on which the actor tests his ideas. Unless the actor receives some kind of affirmation of his [sic] legitimate results, they will dissipate in endless experimentation.’ (1986: 57) From the actor’s perspective, it is important that the director functions as a sounding board and gauge that provides both positive reinforcement and productive criticism; this helps them avoid performance choices

that are motivated as coming only from an actor's comfort zone. Ross furthermore also notes a 'sensitive energy' that is often exerted by other directors, but not Neilson. This absence does not help to facilitate an actor feeling valued, supported and 'safe', and is probably most acutely experienced in any moment when an actor exposes themselves emotionally during a scene. For example, during the 'Box Therapy' improvisation discussed in detail in Chapter 3, in which Zawe Ashton was visibly upset, her emotional commitment and risk-taking, as well as their residual after-effects, were, via the absence of 'sensitive energy' being exerted by Neilson, not accommodated and supported.

Moreover, Neilson's well-intentioned attempts to downplay the significance of any potential issues or mistakes in performance are likely to be met with some scepticism, as from the perspective of the actor's, mistakes are significant and do have an impact. Even minor mistakes such as fluffing a line cannot be as easily separated from the overall performance as Neilson envisages or assumes. Acting needs to be understood as a holistic process that produces and follows a flow, and thus, a disruption such as a minor mistake has the distinct possibility of (at least temporarily) having a detrimental impact, potentially affecting not only the concentration, confidence and state of 'public solitude' of the actor in question, but also their fellow performers. Furthermore, the mistakes that could occur are not limited to such minor issues as fluffing a line, but, with the structure and running order of the play, at this point, still in flux, could also pertain to entrances, exits and cues, technical and otherwise. These are certainly more significant mistakes, for they could disrupt (if not unravel) the narrative trajectory of the play, as well as interfere with an actor's sense of orientation on stage as well as pacing, relaxation and concentration.

It is conceivable that a number of the actors in the company could feel varying levels of resentment for being put in the position where they are more likely to make minor and/or

major mistakes. This is reinforced by the fact that the performance is going to remain under-rehearsed, since Neilson comments that it is very probable that ‘the first dress rehearsal [will be] the first preview’. What this spells out in practical terms is that the company is going to miss out not only on the first run of the play, but also on any number of subsequent runs prior to the dress rehearsal they would hope for and be accustomed to. Having, at this point, done a staggered run through of roughly three quarters of *Narrative*, the actors will effectively have to go without a dress rehearsal and have their first full run in front of an audience. With preparation a crucial facilitator in the actor’s process, this means insufficient time for the acting to become embedded, to become ‘synced’ up with the technical elements such as sound and lighting, and for the actors to get used to the set, and diverges noticeably from Katie Mitchell’s instruction to ‘[d]o the first run-through at a point when you have at least two days to make corrections in response to your discoveries.’ (2009: 187)

Any feelings of resentment are reinforced by the fact that, having invested in training and professional experience, the work of actors is usually accompanied by a strong sense of professional pride, which is frequently coupled with an equally strong sense of professional fear. When they perform, actors always potentially showcase themselves to audiences, critics and casting directors, thus being enabled to perform to the best of their abilities is understandably a great concern for them, as their professional future is at stake. In the case of *Narrative*, that the actors know at this point in the rehearsals that this under-rehearsed show is already sold out at the prestigious and high-profile Royal Court, could easily strengthen any feelings of professional pride, fear, resentment and ‘unsafety’. Neilson’s suggestion that the actors ‘move on’ from any mistakes and ‘try and enjoy’ performing the play is much easier to say than it is to do from an actor’s perspective. Grappling with issues pertaining to professional pride and fear, as well as any feelings of resentment and ‘unsafety’ they may have been experiencing, would make it difficult for the actors to access feeling the relaxed

concentration which is at the core of the actor's process and the enjoyment that Neilson sincerely wishes for them. Just as much as an actor's enjoyment can be discernible on stage, so the absence or impairment thereof can also be noticed (the second case study will consider this point).

The Actor's Process, Emotional Labour and the Reality of Working Conditions

Perhaps the most revealing aspect of 'Neilson's Motivational Speech' can be found towards its beginning, when he offers to cancel the first couple of previews if, in his words, 'that's where we feel we need to be. [So,] if anybody's feeling that we're not ready on Friday night, or obviously we can't busk it in some way, then we just won't do it.' This is another well-meant remark intended to provide reassurance and demonstrate his awareness of the actor's feelings. However, this suggestion is remarkably out of step with the industrial realities of the working conditions of the actors. Derek Layder has identified the 'pre-existing and enduring asymmetries of control and access' as structural constraints that place boundaries on the autonomy and agency of individuals (1985: 146). The financial implications of any of the actors requesting the cancellation of previews would be considerable, not least because a proportion of the preview audience have already paid for their tickets, with no hope to switching to another evening as the rest of the show was already sold out. The Royal Court would not only lose money but also risk complaints from disgruntled patrons. Whilst theatre shows do get cancelled from time to time, the reasons for this usually involve cast illness that cannot be accommodated or specific technical difficulties that cannot be resolved; it is unheard of for a high-profile show to cancel a performance because the cast does not feel ready to go on.

Furthermore, Neilson's request relies upon at least one of the actors coming forward to take him up on this offer, which is highly unlikely, given the highly precarious and unsafe

nature of working in the creative industries in general and acting specifically. Rosalind Gill and Andy Pratt point out that creative workers experience ‘short-term, insecure, poorly paid, precarious work in conditions of structural uncertainty’ (2008: 2), and this applies perhaps more strongly to actors than to any other type of cultural worker. In 2015 the actor’s union Equity estimated that ‘around 90% of trained and qualified actors are out of work at any one time’ (The Stage Castings 2015). Furthermore, even when in employment, the results of an Equity survey found that in 2012-13, the time of the *Narrative* rehearsals, ‘56% of Equity members earned less than £10, 000 from being professional performers’ (Wilson 2014). An even starker picture of the earnings of actors is to be found on Equity’s official website, where it states that ‘almost half of respondents in our most recent survey earn less than £5,000 per year from their professional work’ (Equity 2013). In light of these statistics and growing concerns about low and no pay, which saw Equity launch its Professionally Made Professionally Paid campaign in 2013, it is not surprising that David O’Brien, Sam Friedman and Daniel Laurison have likened being an actor (especially those not from a privileged background) to ‘skydiving without a parachute’ (2016: 10). These statistics provide an important context for and perspective on the labour of actors.

In the light of these unsafe professional realities, no matter how strong their concerns about the state of rehearsals, the *Narrative* actors would be highly unlikely to take up Neilson’s offer. They would be understandably loath to not only risk acquiring a reputation for being implicated in the cancellation, but also to cause problems for the audience, the crew and their fellow cast members. The former would be likely to occur given the strong presence of gossip that circulates within the professional theatre company, and would mean that the actor in question could be seen as a ‘difficult actor’ and a liability, thus damaging their future employment prospects. And in regards to the latter, no individual actor would want to be the first one to say ‘cancel the show’, as it likely that a degree of strife would arise between the

actor(s) and the other members of the cast, which is the last thing an actor would want at this point.

Therefore, I would argue that the *Narrative* actors are not only likely to be already experiencing negative emotions arising from professional pride and fear, but that Neilson's speech is actually likely to cause further negative emotions in at least some of the actors. This is because the actors listening to him will undoubtedly be acutely aware of the highly unsafe nature of the working life of the professional actor and thus likely to feel that Neilson's offer is not a feasible option. Thus, they would be likely to not see that they have a 'Sophie's choice' between getting the previews cancelled or going ahead under-prepared, but realise that there is actually no real choice. In addition, the actors are likely to be seeing that their participation in a high-profile show at the Royal Court is a big opportunity for their career advancement that can showcase their talent to potential employers, and if they suspect that this opportunity is being squandered, then they are bound to harbour feelings of disappointment, upset and resentment towards the predicament they are finding themselves in.

Thus, I propose that the actors here are likely to be dealing with difficult emotions on several levels, and this warrants further attention. As Elly Konjin points out, '[e]motions on the level of the actor-craftsman are rarely considered in traditional accounts of acting, except incidentally in relation to stage fright.' (1995: 133) While actors are frequently linked to emotions in terms of the characters/roles they play, the emotional labour they undertake in terms of managing their own feelings during the processes of rehearsing and acting is a significant part of the professional working life of an actor. As David Hesmondhalgh and Sarah Baker insist in relation to creative work in the television industry, such emotions 'cannot be detached from an understanding of the specificity of cultural production' (2008:

103). Furthermore, Eric Hetzler found in his study of actors and emotions in performance that actors' negative emotions can have a detrimental impact on their performances, because these emotions hinder them from connecting 'better to the task and thereby be "in the moment".' (2007: 75)

At this juncture of the *Narrative* rehearsals, Neilson's well-intentioned offer notwithstanding, the actors know they will have to manage their feelings (in fact they know they are forced into the position of having to manage their feelings) in a way that minimises any impact on their performance and which does not involve having the previews cancelled.¹⁰ By offering something that is (to the actors) patently unfeasible, Neilson demonstrates a lack of understanding of the implications of the unsafe working conditions of actors and thereby manages this transitional moment ineffectively, which negatively impacts on the actor's process. With the first case study having examined the way in which Neilson engages with the actor's process during rehearsals, the second case study will now proceed to consider how Neilson's directorial approach to the actor's process impacts the on-stage performance during the actual performance of *Narrative*.

Case Study 2: Press Night

The second case study concerns a scene involving Zawe Ashton (who as Chapter 3 has discussed, experienced some difficulties with Neilson's process) and Imogen Doel (one of the main advocates for Neilson's process within the *Narrative* company). In the scene, which is included in the published play text, their characters end their romantic relationship (Neilson

¹⁰ Additionally, the actors need to manage their feelings in such a way that minimises those feelings' impact on their future career prospects. As Hesmondhalgh and Baker further note, emotional labour is 'involved in developing working relations with team members that lead to those very important enduring contacts – contacts that lead to further contracts.' (2008: 114). Any perceived mismanagement of emotional labour could lead to the acquisition of the label 'difficult actor', which could very easily seriously impede an actor's future employment opportunities.

in Reid, 2014: 290-4). What makes this scene significant to the argument in this chapter is that, as Sequence 21 shows, it was first given to Ashton and Doel approximately only two hours before the start of the Press Night performance (10 April 2013; see Sequence 21: 0.00 - end). Vicky Angelaki comments on Neilson's process in relation to his 2008 play *Relocated*, stating that it gives 'dramatic leeway for making insertions into the piece [...] much later in the process than is considered standard' (2014: 136), and this proves very much to still be the case in relation to *Narrative*.

My analysis will consider the ways in which this dramatic leeway may have a negative impact on the on-stage performance of *Narrative*, both during and beyond Press Night. The first segment of the sequence opens with Neilson breaking the news to the company that there will be a new scene, immediately followed by him assuring the actors that he is 'not giving out a huge number of little individual notes because by and large the performances are very strong' and that the show is 'getting better every night.' The new scene is then run for the first and only time before the performance that evening, after which Neilson gives both actors a short note session. Watching the Press Night performance, I was struck by a degree of self-consciousness and tension in the two company members during this part of the play, observable as occasional vocal tremors, physical tightness and rushed pacing – arguably, signs of what might be called 'bad acting'. Of course, any judgment or view on achievements, or lack thereof, pertaining to performance are inevitably somewhat subjective. However, Matthew Pidgeon also noticed discomfort in the actors during *Narrative* in the second half of the run, as can be seen in his following comments:

Narrative was a particular thing. [...] I found that [the show] really unsatisfying and the whole cast hadn't bought into the project, I thought that was really clear. [...] The regulars, Chris [Entwistle] and Barney [Power] were in it and they seemed very comfortable as they always do. But there were one or two of the women who seemed uncomfortable.

As there were four female actors in *Narrative*, Pidgeon is referring to either Doel, Ashton or Ross. As Ross's role was relatively minor and I did not observe any unusual performance anxiety in her during the performances I attended (the first preview on 5 April; Press Night on 10 April; another performance on 20 April), it seems not unreasonable to assume that he refers to Ashton and Doel, echoing my impression of problems with their performance. Both of us independently noticed these issues, which link to commonly agreed upon (although far from fixed or uncontentious) broader notions concerning 'good' and 'bad' acting within a Stanislavskian context. As Jean Benedetti points out, 'what is recognised as good or bad acting change[s] from period to period, as society and taste change.' (2005: 3) Nevertheless, within contemporary actor and acting training discourses, the qualities observable within Doel and Ashton's acting, namely self-consciousness and tension, have long been identified as hindrances to good acting, if not signifiers of bad acting. Stanislavski's notion of the actor's 'sense of self' refers to the state of body and mind necessary for the actor to create a successful performance. As Sharon Marie Carnicke has pointed out, this sense of self:

combines two conscious perspectives: being on stage and being within the role. In other words, the 'Sense of Self' is Stanislavsky's term for the actor's dual consciousness made familiar by the French philosopher Denis Diderot. He does not mean that the actor feels self-conscious. Rather, the sense of self is 'proper to the stage' (*stsenicheskoe*), 'inner' (*vnutrennoe*) in its concentration, 'outer' (*vneshnoe*) in the actor's physical presence, and 'creative' (*tvorcheskoe*). (2009: 224)

In the new Press Night scene, Pidgeon and myself observed that Doel and Ashton were not 'proper to their stage', 'inner' in their concentration, nor 'outer' in their physical presence (although they used their creativity to engage with the material).

From a Stanislavskian perspective, Doel and Ashton here displayed elements of 'bad' acting. This is not intended as a criticism of these two actors' performance skills; nor do I wish to single out these two actors' difficulties with Neilson's exertion of dramatic leeway.

The scene in question not only constitutes new material with an unusual theatrical delivery system (i.e. it is performed by actors who are reading their lines from a script into a microphone), but moreover also introduces entirely new information about Doel's and Ashton's characters (namely, that they have been in a romantic relationship, which is now coming to an end). Such significant challenges introduced at this late stage would have the potential to unsettle most, if not all actors and detrimentally impact on their performances, with a real risk of destabilising previous acting choices. My intention is to demonstrate the impact of Neilson's process on the actor's process and on-stage acting, and that it is not necessarily 'a method of ensuring performability' (Angelaki, 2014: 136). By bringing in interview testimony from other actors, I will seek to show that Ashton and Doel are far from the only actors working with Neilson who have struggled.

The Importance of Timing for the Actor's Process

Perhaps the most obvious point to be raised in relation to the sequence concerns the significance of timing. Katie Mitchell advises that a director should '[k]eep cuts to a minimum and time the moment you give them carefully. Badly timed cuts can destabilise the actors and make their work thinner. Try to wait until the work is secure under the actor's feet' (2009: 132). Whilst she is referring to cuts, her point is applicable to the insertion of new material, as having new material to deal with arguably has more potential to unsettle actors than cuts have. Despite the fact that this new material is introduced as late as Press Night, it cannot be said that the 'work is secure under the actors' feet', as the first preview occurred only five days previously and this performance was the first time the whole play had been run in its entirety. This means that Press Night would be only the fourth run of the whole show, where ordinarily one would expect that the fourth run of a play would happen sometime in the last week of rehearsals. Thus, not only is *Narrative* an under-rehearsed show at this point

in time, with actors who have not fully settled into their performances, it will now also contain an even more under-rehearsed scene within its performance score, thereby making two of its actors feel even less secure in their roles. The issue of Neilson's timing is made even more acute by the fact that, after Neilson informs the actors about the new scene, he then spends the next 50 minutes rehearsing an established scene with Rix and Power (Power's 'exit' scene; see Neilson in Reid, 2014: 295-302). After this, Neilson, Power, Entwisle, Doel and Ashton spend around 25 minutes working through the transition needed to facilitate the insertion of Doel and Ashton's new scene.¹¹ Overall, Neilson spends an hour and a quarter on this activity and only around seven minutes running the new scene and then three minutes giving notes to Doel and Ashton.

From an actor's perspective, Press Night is arguably the worst possible timing for the introduction of new material as in this particular performance actors are already likely to be experiencing their highest levels of performance anxiety. Katie Mitchell states:

Getting through this performance is first and foremost about fear management. Fear [...] tightens the muscles in the throat making actors vocally less distinct and audible. These things, in turn, make actors self-conscious [which] makes them behave in a stilted and lifeless manner. Very few actors perform on a press night without a trace of one or more of these symptoms. (2009: 218)

The reason why Press Night tends to cause anxiety is that it is an important industry evening regularly attended by casting directors and journalistic critics, so actors are understandably keen to perform to the very best of their ability. In light of these facts, the question arises as to why Neilson chooses Press Night as the time to include a new scene. The new scene could easily have been incorporated into the show the next evening. Given that he has shown himself perceptible to others' tension and has many years of professional experience

¹¹ The viewing of this audio-visual material is not required, as it pertains to events that are superfluous to my line of argument.

(including of Press Nights), I would suggest that Neilson is more concerned with the reception his part in the work will receive than he is with what response the actors will get from the critics.

Neilson does show some consideration for the situation and the predicament into which he is placing the two actors: he is also aware of the fact that there is no time left to learn any new lines, and so he integrates the script into the scene and has Doel and Ashton read from this in front of a microphone. The scene also mirrors and contains material that has been recycled from an earlier scene from *Narrative* (Neilson in Reid, 2014: 233-8), when Rix's character ends his relationship with Ashton's. For example, at the end of the scene between Ashton and Doel, Ashton tells Doel 'I want those shoes back' to which Doel replies 'But I don't have the receipt'. This echoes the earlier exchange at the end of a scene between Rix and Ashton during which Ashton tells Rix 'I want my jumper back [...] And the receipt' (Neilson in Reid, 2014; 237-8). Therefore, Ashton, in particular, is familiar with the emotional trajectory her character goes through at the end of the new scene. However, while Neilson displays a level of sensitivity, and intends to help his actors by having them read from a script, he demonstrates a lack of concern for acting and the actor's process by giving them a script to read from. As the discussion of the 'Box Therapy' in Chapter 3 has shown, with his years of professional experience, Neilson is aware that 'tension seems to build particularly rapidly when people find themselves with a script of the play in their hands. Free open thought seems to be blocked' (Hodgson and Richards, 1974: 57); or put another way, that scripts can pose a hindrance to performance. By presenting the actors with a script during performance, Neilson is solving one problem and creating another for the actor's process – another example of his 'unsafe' directing.

Actors' Coping Strategies

Doel and Ashton at this point must be very aware of the fact that their acting in the new scene is bound to be compromised, and likely to exhibit what actor Selina Boyack describes as the 'hollowness and fakeness that can happen if you're not connecting to what you're saying and you're not clear about why you're saying it' (2014). To compensate for this, Doel and Ashton employ two main strategies: they instantly commit to the material and use their vocal skills to inflect the dialogue with high levels of energy, spontaneity and nuance, despite the fact they both appear not entirely at ease. Secondly, they deliberately overact at certain points in the scene; for example, when Ashton retreats upstage, she delivers her line 'What! What do you mean?' in an exaggeratedly dramatic manner while banging her hand on the set. This adds a certain performative self-consciousness that signals to the audience that more conventional forms of acting are not appropriate in the reading of the scene.

There are strong links here between the experience and compensatory decisions taken by Doel and Ashton and other actors who have worked with Neilson. Christine Entwisle has commented:

[My] big thing about Anthony as an actor is that, either the text supports you or you support the text. And in a lot of Anthony's work, if he hasn't done it properly and put the right amount of work into it, that's what happens. The third act of *Edward Gant* is a perfect example. I had to go crazy, bat shit crazy to make it work. We all did, you know. I had to cluck, be a chicken, do all sorts of crazy shit. [...] There was nothing supporting us. So, you have to hold up the text. And there is a very different experience as an actor where the text holds up you. There are certain well-written scenes of Neilson where you will be. You will be in a show where certain scenes are well written and you feel supported by the text. Others are full of holes and, my God, if you don't give it fucking mental shit you're fucked. You've almost got to disguise the holes with your energy and commitment. (Entwisle, 2014)

In a similar vein, Selina Boyack describes how: 'you do have to make some bridges. You do have to flesh it out and invest in it. [Because,] if you're not being given that by the writer

then you have to do it yourself. [...] He can leave you exposed and unfairly so. (Boyack, 2014)¹²

However, their attempts at dealing with the new material notwithstanding, Doel and Ashton very likely know that they are very unlikely to be acting to the best of their ability given the very limited amount of time they have to tackle the new scene. This is only reinforced by both struggling with their professional fear that it is Press Night, and all that that entails, and with their professional pride, which is likely to be piqued by the fact that they will be acting with a script on stage. Ashton and Doel are in the challenging position of having to appear in front of the most important audience they will face during the run of the show, while having their acting compromised. Displaying physical tension, which Stanislavski described as ‘creativity’s greatest enemy’ (in Carnicke, 2010: 8), during the Press Night performance means it is very likely that they are experiencing the ‘hollowness and fakeness’ described by Boyack, because ‘if there’s no sense of TRUTH for the actor, the moves will be empty, [and] formal’ (Merlin, 2007: 120; emphasis in original).

This difficult experience is one they share with a number of other actors who have worked with Neilson. For example, long-time collaborator Barney Power spoke of the effects Neilson’s process can have on the quality of his acting:

You have to buy into it [Neilson’s process]. If you don’t, you’re going to be in for a bad experience and probably give a bad performance. [...] Sometimes you can be in a rehearsal with him [Neilson] and you think: ‘What am I doing? I’m not acting, what am I doing? I’m just doing stuff.’ Then sometimes you think: ‘This is bad, this is bad acting.’ [Sometimes] when you go on [the stage] you think it [the acting] could have been better, [which] goes back to the fact that if you’d rehearsed it a bit more you could have got more out of it. [...] That can be quite frustrating because you go: ‘Oh I knew that was wrong!’ But it’s too late, you’re in front of an audience. [...] You can

¹² I am conscious that, because this part of my discussion references the problems four female actors have experienced with Neilson’s process, gender could look like a valid point for discussion. However, the chapter refers to struggles experienced by male actors, and in my own professional experience with Neilson on his unpublished play *Hooverbag* (1996), he showed considerable support and attention to veteran actor Stella Tanner. Thus, I do not believe that gender warrants a discussion.

go on, first night, everybody's happy because of the adrenalin. It's probably the third or fourth night when the cracks begin to show, and that's where you have to do a lot of work because you have to go: 'Ok, there's a lot of gaps here and I've got to fill them in.' (2014)

Christine Entwisle expressed similar sentiments when recalling her first few performances of the 'Box Therapy' scene discussed in Chapter 3:

I was on mashing my way through three different accents at one point with no fucking idea what I was doing. [...] I was on my fucking arse for the first three performances. Just basically trying to get tricks out of my own bag. And people talk about that a lot. Imogen [Doel] says: 'Other actors in Anthony's process are worried about the first night, but for me the first night is never a problem because you are coasting on your adrenalin. The problem is the third night, the fourth night and the fifth night. That's where the holes come up' (2014)¹³

Power and Entwisle touch upon an issue concerning the actor's process raised by Roy Connolly and Richard Ralley, namely that, 'consciousness gets in the way of action to disrupt efficient functioning' (2007: 253); and Gordon, who reports that an 'intervention by the conscious mind in the psychophysical processes of acting is bound to result in self-conscious performance that is either uncoordinated or appears as a mechanical contrivance for theatrical effect.' (2006: 204) What I find significant in the comments from these two 'veterans' of Neilson's process is that they both note that even once the rehearsal period is finished and the actual production has begun, when an actor would conventionally expect things to be settled and stable (indeed, 'safe'), doubts and self-consciousness do not abate. In fact, both refer to the fact that the doubts and self-consciousness re-emerge more strongly after the adrenaline-

¹³ When Entwisle refers to 'tricks out of [her] own bag', she means by this that there are certain actions, methods and short-cuts that many (if not all) actors establish over their career that they know will work for them and be likely to be responded to positively by audiences, and which many (if not all) actors are reluctant to employ because they consider them to be 'cheap,' manipulative and lacking in (Stanislavskian) truth. Interestingly, these are the same type of 'tricks' that McKee, as noted earlier, finds unavailable by Neilson's process, because to him it effectively forces the actor to be genuinely in the moment. This discrepancy of views once more demonstrates the heterogeneity of acting and the actor's process, and that 'we do not have stable conventions of acting to which we all may easily refer to' (Risum, 1996: 344). Also, Entwisle and McKee are referring to different kinds of (genre) materials: McKee has appeared in *Relocated* and *Stitching*, two of Neilson's darker pieces, and in this kind of material using 'tricks' is generally more difficult for an actor.

filled intensity of the first night, when any ‘cracks’ and ‘holes’ in the material become more pronounced to them.¹⁴ Doel and Ashton would perhaps not be likely to agree with Entwisle that ‘the first night is never a problem because you are coasting on your adrenalin’, as the adrenalin they were feeling regarding their new scene on Press Night did not resolve their problem. However, what emerges from these different experiences is that Neilson’s process has an impact on the actors, their process and acting, across different moments in the post-rehearsal period.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the ways in which two creative processes, namely Neilson’s and the actor’s, intersect both during and after rehearsal. Its analysis has demonstrated how the latter needs to be understood as fundamentally interlinked with the work of the director. Within a Stanislavskian context actors are facilitated in their efforts to achieve the desired state of relaxed concentration and public solitude that helps to produce a truthful performance by a positive, ‘safe enough’ working relationship with and productive input from the director. The director in turn can help the actors with their work by ensuring sufficient time for preparation and, acting as ‘litmus paper’, providing clearly communicated constructive feedback (identifying both strengths and areas for improvement) that will help the actors work on their objectives and actions.

Neilson’s process is such that it does not readily facilitate the actor’s process as it has come to be defined by the dominant approaches to actor training and acting in Western theatre culture. The intersection of the two creative processes in question sees one (Neilson’s) disrupt as much as support the other (the actor’s), Neilson’s well-meant intentions towards

¹⁴ To be precise, Entwisle refers to a comment made by Doel, who is, as discussed above, a champion of Neilson’s process. Even she, who finds the rehearsal process so rewarding, experiences difficulties during the actual performance.

his actors notwithstanding. Recalling how during the final stages of the *Relocated* rehearsals a considerable amount of uncertainty was felt among the cast because of Neilson's *laissez faire* attitude to changes to the script, Phil McKee commented that: 'That's [Neilson's] process, that's just how he works, and it's where he's at his best. It doesn't always fall that it's where everyone else is going to be at their best.' (2014). This is evident in Doel and Ashton's struggles with their performance in the new *Narrative* scene, which form the second case study for this chapter and are not the signs of actors experiencing enjoyment (which Neilson acknowledges as important) during an important opportunity for their professional career development. These struggles vividly demonstrate the importance of director-enabled preparation to the actor's process, or as Stanislavski saw it: '*If our preparatory work is right, the results will take care of themselves.*' (1989: 212; emphasis added) McKee's comment encapsulates the disjuncture in the intersection between the two processes: the success of Neilson's process is dependent on the actor's, but – partly through his 'unsafe' approach to directing – he does not properly facilitate this and thus does not enable the actors to do their best work.

Indeed, Neilson even encourages the actors to let go of their process, but without offering tools to help fill the potential vacuum he is encouraging. He does not seem to have considered or understood that it is not possible for an actor to let go of a process that has become ingrained through years of training and professional experience. Neither does he seem to be aware that the actors he works with frequently do draw upon their process whilst attempting to fulfil Neilson's instructions during rehearsals, despite the fact that the techniques and tools stemming from their training and prior experience are not necessarily always appropriate for Neilson's instructions. As this and the preceding chapters in this thesis have demonstrated, this is a somewhat unsatisfactory state of affairs from the actors' perspective. Given Neilson's lack of understanding and insight, it is here worth considering

Neilson's own training and professional experience: he was expelled from the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama during his first year of study there, and then won a BBC writing competition. Following this, he began his career in theatre with *Normal* and *Penetrator*, the original productions of which were small-scale, involving a small number of performers who were his classmates and friends (as well as Neilson himself in *Penetrator*). Thus, Neilson's formative experience was located within a less formal context,¹⁵ and he is not professionally trained as a writer or director. This must be a determining factor in Neilson's incomplete understanding of the actor's process and the conventional ways in which directors work with and facilitate their actors, and thus Neilson's 'unsafe' directing.

Neilson's approach to directing would be somewhat less 'unsafe' if the working conditions of actors in contemporary Britain were 'safer'. Given the power structures as considered in Chapter 5 and the industrial realities as discussed earlier in this chapter, Neilson's process is likely to retain the privilege to disrupt that of the actor. However, it remains to be wondered in what ways his process might miss out on other privileges or benefits by not accommodating the actor's process more consistently. Neilson's insistence in his interview testimony that he 'can't think too much about' the actor's perspective signals both some awareness that his process could be improved and a reluctance to do so. However, if he were to think more about the actor's process, and offer more support to it instead of encouraging his actors to let go of it, the actor's process would be highly likely to bring more valuable productivity to Neilson's.

¹⁵ Neilson's experience of less formal formative contexts is likely to have affected his approach to communication and to working hierarchies.

Thesis Conclusion

This Conclusion aims to revisit the research questions and reflect on how the different Parts of the thesis have approached them. It will also suggest how further research could develop a number of the ideas and critical issues addressed within the thesis, and then offer concluding reflections on Anthony Neilson's process. To recall, this thesis has set out to explore the following research questions:

- 1) How can the comprehensive study of rehearsal processes develop critical understanding of contemporary theatre practice?
- 2) What are the specific properties of Anthony Neilson's 'process', and how does his approach to rehearsals critically engage with issues of authorship, improvisation and the director-actor relationship?
- 3) How may paying attention to the actor's perspective productively inform studies of rehearsal in general, and, Neilson's 'process' in particular?

Part 1 has contributed to addressing Question 2 by showing how Neilson's authorial process is convoluted and diachronically complex. It has demonstrated that Neilson germinates his ideas often from ostensibly minor or marginal actions or utterances during the rehearsals (such as a discussion of mind altered states which led to the theatrical representation of synaesthesia). The Part proposes that it is useful to understand Neilson as developing these ideas via the 'default mode network', which is a process of thinking that needs time for the subconscious to process materials (Corballis, 2015). Consequently, his authorial approach is one marked by an unpredictable and pronouncedly lateral working practice, which weaves together both temporally and thematically separate moments and threads of the rehearsals, as well as challenges conventional boundaries of rehearsal time.

Furthermore, the Part has identified and illuminated a number of Neilson's authorial tropes. It has demonstrated that analysing the patterns that emerge within Neilson's rehearsals can help to uncover a number of his recurring devices and tendencies, such as the naming of

characters, non-malicious theatrical humiliation and sound to represent character interiority. This then can enrich the analysis and reading of the play text and performance. The chapter's analysis has provided insights into the decision-making process that produces Neilson's authorial tropes, giving an account of both the layers and stages of his authorial editing, as well as the motivations that drive him (for example, Neilson's interest in humour informs his use of non-malicious theatrical humiliation).

The Part has also contributed to a better understanding of the specific properties of Neilson's process by demonstrating in detail the extent to which Neilson's authorial approach ruptures the notion of the single author. His rehearsals contain a plurality of authorship, with actors having both direct and indirect input into the creation of materials. The Part has shown that Neilson's writing often functions as a framework that places trust in and affords creative agency to the actors. The productive outcomes of this authorial approach include more nuanced characterisation. However, my analysis has also established that Neilson ultimately places boundaries on this rupture by retaining control over the published play text.

With the creative input of actors having been noted in existing accounts of Neilson's process and devised work more broadly, the Part has contributed to answering Questions 3 and 1 by showing in detail the specific ways in which actors have an integral impact on the authoring of material during rehearsals. It proposes the importance of considering the creative input by actors not only in terms of feeling (or indeed physicality)¹ but also their intellectual contribution to the work. The Part suggests that it will be beneficial for scholarship to pay more in-depth attention to actors' creative input into contemporary theatre practice,

¹ One noticeable tendency in existing discussions of devised work is the emphasis given to the physicality of actors. An example of this can be found in Innes and Shevtsova's thought that 'actors too are co-authors of productions with their bodies when they invent material *with* directors, some of which can also be dialogue.' (2013: 2; emphasis in original)

especially in terms of their strengths in authoring character-specific material, as the Part has demonstrated.

Moreover, the Part has provided an answer to Question 1 by illuminating the complex relationship between creative process and end product (performance and/or published play text). The study of rehearsals offers the opportunity to test out practitioner commentary and self-discourse, and the Part has demonstrated the validity and importance of doing so, as the analysis of Neilson's rehearsals challenges his view that the actor's input is of a more oblique nature. The comprehensive study of rehearsals also enhances critical understanding of contemporary theatre practice by uncovering creative material and labour that formed part of the process and one of the end results (here, the *Narrative* performance), but was excised from the published play text. Therefore, as a type of archaeological work, the study of rehearsals offers an enriched understanding of the ephemerality and non-fixity of theatre practice, and of how end results are arrived at and what shapes and informs their form and content.

Part 2 has made a contribution to answering Question 2 by exploring in detail the complex function and role played by improvisation for Neilson's rehearsals. It has considered how Neilson's process features the use of improvisation both (somewhat) conventionally and unconventionally. The more conventional approach to improvisation here involves the use of improvisation driven by a clear purpose, namely the development of script and characterisation, which in the *Narrative* rehearsals produced the desired outcome, albeit within a less conventional frame. Not only was it instigated by the actors in question, but the productive outcome (namely, the accessing of emotional truth) derived from the emotional consequences of the improvisation, rather than the contents. The Part has further examined how Neilson's rehearsals make unconventional use of improvisation in that the latter can be

marked by an absence of rules, purpose, leadership and boundaries. My analysis proposes that the improvisation yielded no useable outcomes in terms of the development of form or content, and that this links to the critical issue of failure in two significant ways. First, it highlights the potential productivity of failure, in that the cheerful chaos of the improvisation under investigation generated an atmosphere that contributed to the lifting of the tension engendered by the preceding more conventional improvisation. This cathartic effect notwithstanding, improvisation in Neilson's rehearsals also needs to be recognised where appropriate in terms of failure as failure, in that it can represent a wasteful unproductivity. This also makes a valuable contribution towards my response to Question 1, in that to not recognise failure as simply failure where appropriate, risks misunderstanding contemporary theatre practice.

Moreover, this Part has worked towards addressing Question 3 by giving an insight into the varied ways in which actors engage with and respond to improvisation. It demonstrates the specifics of their vocal and physical skills, as well as the emotional labour involved in and required by their improvising; both of which represent a noteworthy aspect of contemporary theatre practice and thus warrant further detailed investigation. This Part has also provided a response to Question 1 by articulating in vivid detail the actual uses of specific improvisations in rehearsals. Following the impetus towards 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973: 3-30) that drives the analysis of the thesis throughout, Part 2 has provided a space for engaging with nuance and intricate detail, which has facilitated a consideration of unintentional mask work, catharsis as well as the importance of recognising instances of failure (simply) as failure; all of which offer avenues for potential fruitful further study.

Picking up on strands of discussion that already emerged in Parts 1 and 2, the final Part of this thesis has provided an answer to Questions 1, 2 and 3 by being devoted to the

work and perspective of the actors and acting. The Part has examined the presence and absence of traditional labour hierarchies in Neilson's rehearsals, in which actors are awarded creative input, value, trust and agency (although this is accompanied by an underlying coercive element), which enables them to produce creatively nuanced materials and to help test out Neilson's ideas. At the same time, they have to contend with a lack of leadership, inertia and accommodation of their process and needs. The Part proposes that, most significantly, they have to contend with Neilson as an 'unsafe director', who, occupying a liminal position, both possesses and lacks understanding and consideration of the actor's perspective, both offering and withholding support (at times even simultaneously). He moreover deploys his evident proficiency at more conventional approaches to directing (including strong creative vision and precise instructions), but only inconsistently and in unpredictable moments. As a consequence, the actors repeatedly find themselves in an 'unsafe' position, in which shifts in Neilson's directorial mode are not sufficiently communicated and there is a potential for exposure to ethically risky encounters.

Articulating the discrepancies that exist between Neilson's process and that of the actors he works with, who are predominantly located within a Stanislavskian framework through their training and professional experience, the Part has made a particular contribution towards addressing Questions 3 and 1 by paying attention to the working contexts of professional actors in contemporary Britain. In particular, it has considered the heterogeneity of actors, their emotional labour and 'unsafe' working conditions, and how these may affect and be present in their work during rehearsals and performance. Overall, one of the major ways in which this thesis provides an answer for Question 1 stems from its methodological use of filmed footage. This has enabled my analysis to uncover small moments that would otherwise not have been noticed as significant or remembered by me, and which proved to be highly illuminating: these include Neilson's shrug during the discussion of character names

(see Part 1), his comment that he does not know what the purpose of the ‘Human Soundscape’ improvisation is (see Part 2), or Zawe Ashton’s suggestion to connect the beginning and ending of *Narrative* (see Part 3). What these moments reveal or reaffirm, individually and collectively, is the validity of McAuley’s thought that ‘[i]n rehearsal analysis [...] the larger picture comes into view through the accumulation of minutiae’ (2012: 10); and that not only are rehearsals indeed ‘not magic but work’ (McAuley, 2012), but that this work and so much of contemporary theatre practice are strongly informed by subtext.

As this thesis has employed a new, particular methodology (filming rehearsals) to examine the work of one specific practitioner (Anthony Neilson) and in relation to a set of critical issues (authorship, improvisation and directing actors), there are of course a number of ways in which the work could be developed further. With this study having necessarily and appropriately invested much of its focus on and attention to contextualising Neilson within the relevant wider practice contexts and approaches to writing and directing, further research on rehearsals could study the work of actors in rehearsals across a number of practitioners and working practices. My plans for my future research include the application of my methodology to practitioners, such as Headlong Theatre’s Jeremy Herrin, who work in more firmly delineated non-devising contexts. This would offer the opportunity to undertake detailed analysis of how specifically actors draw on their training and engage with improvisation and what kinds of authorial input they may have in text-centred rehearsals. (For example, my own professional experience has included the very text-centred and meticulous Sarah Kane instigating a discussion with me about my views on textual detail for *Phaedra’s Love* (1996).) It would also allow for a more explicitly comparative analysis of Neilson and practitioners such as Herrin, and the actors who work with them.

Moreover, it could also prove very useful to widen my current focus on actors to pay more attention to other creative roles and individuals. It would be illuminating to consider the work and perspective of, for example, sound, lighting or set designers, and the specific ways in which they contribute to rehearsals (be it in devised or non-devised contexts), and how precisely their working processes engages with, respond to and inform that of directors such as Neilson, or actors such as Christine Entwisle, Barney Power or Zawe Ashton. For example, as Chapter 1 in Part 1 has indicated, sound designer Nick Powell worked very productively with the actors during the *Narrative* rehearsals, helping Imogen Doel to achieve a slightly out-of-sync quality in her vocal performance when rehearsing the aftermath of Doel's character having murdered another character. Significantly, it is Powell, and not assistant director Ned Bennett, who was asked by Neilson to run the *Narrative* rehearsals when Neilson was spending time away to write. This had happened before, and represents another unconventional, liminal aspect of Neilson's working practice.

Throughout the Parts of this thesis and as already indicated above, Anthony Neilson is not only interested in exploring liminality within his work (see Cassidy, 2013), but has emerged as a profoundly liminal practitioner: he possesses and lacks understanding of the actor's process; he hands over and reasserts control and power; he both seeks a close relationship with his company (e.g. through taking part in improvisations) and does not communicate with them sufficiently; his working mode shifts at unpredictable points in time; he places great emphasis on devising but also remains a text-centred practitioner in his approach; and he collapses the distinction between writer and director. This makes him a fascinating and challenging, 'betwixt and between' (Turner, 1990: 11) collaborator, as well as object of study. With close to three decades of professional experience behind him, Neilson's career seems to be shifting into a different stage, with the recent high-profile casting of Matt Smith for *Unreachable* (2016), a forthcoming adaptation of Edgar Allen Poe's *The Tell Tale*

Heart for the National Theatre, a commission to write and direct a feature film for Film4, and plans to work with US film and television director and producer David Fincher. It will be interesting to see how his process may be evolving as it intersects more pronouncedly with more mainstream working practices, star power and different media. However, regardless of the direction Neilson's future work takes, this thesis makes a rigorous contribution to studies of rehearsal and theatre scholarship more broadly. It is especially through its methodological approach that this thesis will support the emerging field of Rehearsal Studies to grow, develop and become established as an important branch of theatre scholarship.

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Appendix 1: The Plays of Anthony Neilson

- *Unreachable* (2016) at The Royal Court Theatre
- *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* November (2016) at the Royal Lyceum Theatre
- *The Haunting of Hill House* (2015) at the Everyman and Playhouse
- *Narrative* (2013) at the Royal Court Theatre
- *Sixty Six* (2011) at the Bush Theatre
- *Get Santa!* (2010) at the Royal Court Theatre
- *The Seance* (2009) at the National Theatre
- *Relocated* (2008) at the Royal Court Theatre
- *God in Ruins* (2007) at the Soho Theatre
- *Realism* (2006) at the Royal Lyceum Theatre
- *The Wonderful World of Dissocia* (2004) at the Royal Lyceum Theatre
- *Twisted* (2003) at the Theatre Workshop
- *The Lying Kind* (2002) at the Royal Court Theatre
- *Edward Gant's Amazing Feats of Loneliness* (2002) at the Drum Theatre
- *Stitching* (2002) at the Traverse Theatre
- *The Censor* (1997) at the Finborough Theatre
- *Hoover Bag* (1996) at the Young Vic Theatre
- *Hereditary* (1995) at the Royal Court Theatre
- *The Night Before Christmas* (1995) at the Red Room
- *The Year of the Family* (1994) at the Finborough Theatre
- *Penetrator* (1993) at the Traverse Theatre
- *Normal* (1991) at the Pleasance Theatre
- *Welfare My Lovely* (1990) at the Traverse Theatre

Appendix 2: Interview Transcripts

Anthony Neilson *Narrative Interview*

GC: Thanks for doing this Anthony, it's been a pleasure.

AN: That's alright, it's fine.

GC: And I'll send you a transcript when it's finished, so if there's anything you that you don't want in or changed we can do that. It's just so that you're comfortable with it. Anyway, first of all, could you talk to me about your authorial/directorial way of doing things?

AN: Ok. We start the rehearsal process; sometimes there's an idea, sometimes there's not, sometimes there's a few pages. You'd know better than me. I think I came in with a couple of pages, but it started with a formal idea. So there's a lot of discussion of what that will be and bouncing ideas around the room and talking to all them. And at some point I'll start writing, I'll do a few pages, I'll bring them in and we'll discuss them. I'll hear them played, we'll talk around the options. And then from there the whole thing becomes...you could separate it in a sense...the actual meat and veg? (Laughs) The actual meat of the directing doesn't happen til late on in the day. But if part of directing is talking to actors about their character or character motivation and the themes of the piece or whatever, then that kind of happens from the beginning. So in fact, there's a sort of implicit direction happening during it. And of course, as I'm writing because I know that I'm going to be directing it, I'm taking into account what we're going to do with sound, and what it is that we can do with set, lighting, all that sort of thing. So actually by the time you come to do it, I think possible for the actors it feels...before I actually say 'go there or do this, walk there, do that' it probably feels like a long extended thing. It probably makes them feel quite nervous in a sense, but actually it happens quite quickly when it happens; and that's more towards the end. I think that's because what happens is quite invisible, they know quite a lot about it. I mean, I've had to give very few, very specific acting notes to people. So it's different from a normal process in that sense.

GC: It seems to me that there's a lot of things going on at once, five or six. Whereas in other rehearsals; there's one or two things going on. That definitely seems to be the case. Ok, has this 'process' evolved or been refined from you earlier works such as *Normal* or *The Censor*? Is it any different now from it was then?

AN: (Pause) I guess it must be. Yeah, I suppose I've gotten used to doing it, there's probably more...there's more sort of lateral improvisation at the beginning of it maybe. I think when I first started it, I did kind of start it very much on the basis that I was a writer trying to get something done, and talking a bit to the actors. But the emphasis for me was write as much as you could as quickly as possible, you know. But I think I've relaxed about that now, so I take quite a while before making decisions now...So I think it has changed, but it's difficult for me to say how exactly, because it's such an intense thing for me to do. I'm not terribly objective about it in a way; do you know what I mean?

GC: Ok. How in your shows does the actor shape the text?

AN: We were talking about this the other night. I think there's a difference between input and influence and I think the actors massively influence the text. But it's not a direct thing; very rarely do they do an improvisation that I take lines from. It's a strange thing; it's just as likely to come out of a stupid conversation out of hours, than anything else. A lot of it for me is trying to create an environment where accidents happen, or things that you couldn't orchestrate, or things that you couldn't predict happen. Because that seems then to me to be where a play comes alive, where something really unexpected happens. That sometimes happens in your own imagination, but quite often it just comes up. But again, from the moment you're in there to the moment you come out; during the day everything can possibly feed in whether you're improvising or not, whether you're in a lunch break...things people say, or things people tell you, things that you find out about a person will feed into it. They have a huge influence more so than a direct input. There will be a few ideas that people have that will go into it, but otherwise I don't think they are terribly conscious...they don't know in a sense what it is they say or do that's going to hook me. Because it also has to be something, that chimes with me.

GC: Next one. To what extent do you write material specifically centred in what you see in the actor that you're working with?

AN: (Pause) Yeah that can happen. But it would be a mixture of things. Sometimes you'll have a lynchpin actor that you know does something very well. Like Barney's comic timing is very good, and there's a certain essence of Barney that I know quite well because I know him and that I play on. And those things are, in a way, just things that I think that I would find amusing to see Barney do. (Both laugh) But then there is something if you need a character that's got an emotional force and looks a certain way then I would choose someone like Christine who I know can really deliver that emotional force and can be quite versatile. But for the newer ones like Zawe and Olly, to a certain extent, I will. Sometimes it's about who they are, sometimes it's about how they look, sometimes it's about what they can do, sometimes it's something I know they can't do, that will be a stretch for them because I think that will be interesting. So it's a variety of different things.

GC: You seem to discard a lot of material that you spend a lot of time on

(Nik Powell the music director enters and informs Anthony that they are setting up and he's needed on set shortly)

GC: We can just cut this...

AN: Let's do a couple more of these questions.

GC: Forget that question then mate.

AN: No ask me it.

GC: I'd rather move on to other ones.

AN: We can always pick it up later on.

GC: How would you describe the risks inherent in your way of doing things?

AN: (Pause) Well you don't have a lot of time for reflection, you have to be quite instinctive. The risk is with all these things that you fail. But failure is a very subjective thing really. I

mean you always run the risk that...the risks are personal , if you do a not very good show the critics can hammer you. Well the critics can hammer you if you do a good show. But it's more that you're asking a whole lot of actors to put their faith in you, a whole bunch of people to put their faith in you. So it's that that keeps me awake at night, put it that way. It's not so much about doing a piece of work that...my own personal aims for a piece of work would be more important. So failure? I always feel that we'll do something interesting, though it might not work in a sense. So if you're aiming for something quite pedestrian or conventional and you fail at that then that would be worse to me. But we were aiming at something quite ambitious, so at least if you fail, or whatever that might mean...

GC: That's the point really, defining what failure is.

AN: I mean, I may have failed in some ways, and I think that maybe all artists do in a sense. You have sort of amorphous vision when you start of what the thing may be, but it will rarely match. In this we were going for very abstract, quite a delicate thing. And it has more and more become ruined. But maybe that had to happen, maybe it's found its level. I think you're always to some extent failing and maybe that's what keeps you going I suppose. I mean total success, what would that be. Nowadays we measure it by reviews, box-office and it tours all around and that becomes an unquestioned success, but it's not. It's not necessarily a success. Maybe it's just caught that thing at the time. So it's one of those terms that I know what you mean, but it falls apart when you start thinking about it.

GC: Fair enough. On the online publicity for the show, they say on the website that 'risk is everything to you'. Could you talk to me a little bit about that?

AN: Well I suppose it's the idea of live art. I don't see the point in a...I mean would you go to a...would you be content to turn up to an air-show and be content to see a video of planes flying? No, you go to watch it because there's folk in those planes and they're doing that thing, and they could crash. And it's the not crashing which is thrilling. So I guess that relates more to the 'process' in some way. But I think that the risks we take in doing it, risks in all kinds of ways: taste, and form and to a certain extent people coming in primed knowing how it's been made or whatever. I think it gives a sort of buzz to it...The idea to try to automate theatre – is that the right word? – of getting it to where it should be on opening night and then hoping that people will do the same thing every night seems to me (Shrugs). I mean go and see a movie, or watch TV or something. I just think that theatre should be plucked from the idea of literature, it's still seen as literature in a sense.

GC: And when you're critiquing it, there are these little rules that you should follow. But it's not about that, it's entertainment first and foremost.

AN: You're right it gets treated as literature. For me a play – certainly a text version – is a blueprint, sort of a guide. And increasingly now I put less and less stage directions into things and more and more random elements in. In this we have video; so what am I going to do, am I going to go 'right we now have to have a video of a woman with horns growing out of her head'. So in that form they'll fill their own content in. So, yeah.

GC: Ok. How would you define the risk to the actor in your productions?

AN: Well the risk to the actor is that, along with me, they've been put into a bad play I suppose. The other risk for them is that they're not allowed to process things, they're not

allowed to do a lot of the things they do in order to make themselves feel comfortable. Which may or may not be relevant things, sometimes they may not actually be terribly useful things. But they're the rituals...everybody has rituals for what they do. And I suppose to some extent this is my ritual – it happens to be a strange ritual – so I'm getting to do my thing, but they're not necessarily getting to do theirs. But I make that very explicit and plain to them. I think all the actors that do this all have to have some kind of love of that adrenalin in a sense. So the risk of embarrassment I suppose, which for an actor I guess is everything. I mean you're going out there on stage and doing it. I suppose that's the risk. But the actors will maybe be better able to tell you that. I can't think too much about that.

GC: I'm just interested to hear your take on it. Just a couple more really quick ones Anthony. What effect does risk have on you as a writer? (Pause) Do you have sleepless nights?

AN: Oh I have sleepless nights but it's not anxiety that keeps me awake, it's writing...What is not being employed is that part of your brain that thinks 'what is a good move for my career', you know. It's not a terribly good idea for my career to have a fucking anus showing on that screen, much as people think you're doing that to cause shock or to get audiences in. But in fact the way to get audiences in is to take all that stuff out. So that little part of you that censors...I mean I'm not very good at censoring myself, that's why I have a lot of people around to say 'no, you're slightly stepping over the mark.' The whole notion of taste, and all that, is slightly odd to me because I don't really have those same boundaries. And that in a way's quite good. So the risks again, are rather mundane ones like if I do too many bad shows I won't get to work again. Working this way has probably not put me on the commercial circuit; it doesn't do much for the bank-balance and all that. So they're all superficial things. They're important in some way...but I believe that you have to think you're on some sort of artistic journey because I think that nothing is going to sustain you otherwise.

GC: I think you are absolutely right because doing all that career politician move...

AN: Won't sustain you. What sustains you through all the bad times, all the hard times is the notion that you're investigating humanity on some level.

GC: You've got to be able to live with yourself and wake up liking yourself.

AN: Yeah. It's not that I've never done some shit. I will do other jobs. But in theatre when I've got this chance I don't tend to...I mean I'll do TV and other jobs that I'm disengaged with to a certain extent I'll try not to do anything I don't care about on a certain level.

GC: Just very quickly Anthony; does my presence her filming have any effect on you or that you noticed on the actors?

AN: No I didn't feel it and I didn't notice it in the actors. As I said to you before because you've been in shows of mine, it didn't feel odd to have you in the room. I certainly didn't censor myself. Honestly, if I thought I was going to be like that I wouldn't have let you do it. If I thought it was really going to restrict the actors I wouldn't let you do it. As you've seen we've got a fair bit of traffic coming in and out of the rehearsal room. For me, every angle and opinion is useful on some level. So it didn't affect me.

GC: Very quickly; is there anything that you would like to say, or add to what we've discussed, anything else you would like to mention?

AN: (Pause) No I don't think so...I often think that the word 'process' is overstating it. It's kind of chaotic and may work in ways that even I'm not entirely conscious of. Something happens; I know that. I'm not entirely sure of how or why. I'm not that conscious of it, I'm not that calculating about it. This has sort of come to be the way that I do things. It's probably not healthy. But something happens. I know the shows, when I see them, are not better or worse than any other shows, but I know that they have a unique feel to them. And I kind of know that that is not the feel they would have to them if it was just down to me. I don't think it would be. So that's interesting to me.

GC: I'm really looking forward to seeing it tonight actually and seeing how it's progressed in the last couple of days.

AN: It's tightened up.

GC: Thanks a lot Anthony.

AN: No bother.

Anthony Neilson 2012 Interview

GC: Interview with Anthony Neilson in London on the twenty ninth of May 2012. Ok Anthony thanks for doing this interview it's much appreciated.

AN: Why are you saying that bit is somebody like going to hear it?

GC: Well I have to record it and then transcribe it. You know what I mean and do it that way.

AN: Oh I see right.

GC: Don't worry I won't let anybody else hear it.

AN: It's just when you said that bit, I was like Oh it's Radio Four.

GC: When I've been interviewed before that's what they've always done.

AN: Is it?

GC: Aye. Right. Anyway. I've done my best to make the questions not sound like something from an exam but I expect some of them still do a wee bit. So please accept my apologies in advance if they do. So first question. In what ways does the harmony between form and content in the play relate to its sense of location or place?

AN: Well, harmony is kind of an interesting word, and I suppose it's a good word because the idea was to juxtapose two really different theatrical styles. The starting point of the piece was quite a simple question: which is, why is it that certain people who suffer from mental illness find it very difficult, or have a resistance to taking the medicine or medication that controls it. Because for anybody who is sort of involved with somebody who is on that sort of medication, that it is often an issue that comes up and it affects the lives of the people around them as well. So the best thing I could think of was in some way trying to present those two sides of what happens and trying to get as far as possible the audience to understand that experientially rather than intellectually because it seemed to me that most of the theatrical attempts to tackle mental illness that I'd seen - and I certainly hadn't seen all of them. I come from a slightly more objective viewpoint in focussing on the social issue and focussing on the outside rather than trying to get that within the piece. Understandably because it's very difficult thing to do. So the use of the word harmony is quite interesting because in the second half when we use very classic, naturalistic techniques and sort of bent over backwards to be as naturalistic as possible. Then you would have playing underneath that I suppose all the time the contrast of the beginning, that's something one wouldn't have got, in a sense they did overlay like harmonies, rather than had it been too close in a sense it would have just seemed like a continuation. So the sheer incongruity of it I suppose as you're watching the second half was playing as a sort of subtext as a track as a very vivid series of mental images that we were not doing anything to try and displace, apart from the first striking image - Perspex box or whatever - so remind me what the crux of the question was. In what ways the harmony between form and content relate to its sense of location or place. Ok, so I mean what was interesting was that the second Act had a very definite sense of place and a very solid form, you know, box with Perspex that was meant to be a hospital room. Whereas the first Act obviously had no particular location but was the landscape of somebody's mind.

You know, so I guess that that juxtaposition was completely vital really. In the first one as well we were always not absolutely obsessed with this but we wanted to have a sort of a real world analogue for what was going on with her. So a lot that was kind of word association that she imagined that in real life she'd maybe been there was there and then this had happened, or she'd seen this which had set this train off in her mind. But you know she might not have moved very far at all in the first Act.

GC: Yeah that's one of my questions later on, it's quite an interesting point.

AN: And again there were no, there were no scenes delineated in that sense, there were no lights up, there were no lights down, it was a fluid associative or dissociative. But actually the first half was associated, it was joined up, it was linked, it was not fractured in a sense.

GC: Yeah you could definitely see it.

AN: It was a flow of stuff leading from one to the other. And interestingly I was talking about this recently to somebody, because somebody was writing a book – Lisa Goldman in fact, it's up there - called the *Rules of Writing*, so she was phoning up and talking to me about that and I was saying well, I didn't really know what to say about all that, whether there were rules, well you know The thing that struck me was that the rules you break, the ones where you really notice that you're breaking rules, or where you slightly do things, and for some reason I find myself constantly doing this, and again every time I think about it I go oh this is not a very good idea, cause I know how this is going to be perceived. The one criticism that people came up with of the first Act is that it was a little bit too long, just overstayed its welcome a little bit. Well what was interesting was that before we went up that what was clear in a sense and whilst you wanted to sort of tighten it up, there was you know some sections that could have gone from it and I decided not to take them out, not for the usual reason which would be you loved them so much – well there was an element of that in it – but you know because you had to get just slightly irritated, just slightly tired of the first Act. If we'd finished it at the exact right moment, you know that moment of exquisite taste that some people end things on, that characterises a great work. In a sense you wouldn't have got a little bit irritated by it and what was necessary was that you be a little bit irritated by it and I'm glad that's over, I'm glad that first half's over, you know, and you go out. I mean some people were really glad the first half was over, some people never came back for the second half because they were expecting another fucking hour of it. So they came back in and they see this next thing, so the trick was in a sense making them want back something that was all slightly irritating not so long ago, you know what I mean? Just to try and create... I've often thought about, how do I directly translate this feeling into a form, you know. And one that isn't always successful with it, but to have worked with *Dissocia* wasn't by any means always the subtlest form in the world, but you know that sledgehammer contrast, sudden earthbound location, sudden clunking, again lights up lights down, no real sound effects, no colour, it was all monochromatic, miked voices, very naturalistic performances.

GC: Yeah you talk a lot about that in your notes and your stage directions are very explicit. You really get a real sense of all that even just reading it, even if you haven't seen the performance you can get a really good sense of that.

AN: A lot of the lines were, well you would choose lines to write down that were improvised on the night. Maybe we could have gone a lot further with all that you know. The audience

had to lean in. But of course I don't think the play wouldn't necessarily work if it only worked on that basis and would only be relevant to people who have mental illness or whatever, you know it had to work on some other level.

GC: Of course.

AN: And, you know, that contrast between the inner world of ourselves, of imagination, you know even if it only works on that basic level, you know we can live in that world but when we have to return to the normal world to do something you want, your taxes or take the bins out or whatever, you do what you have to do. All of us experience that all the time and have this wish to be... to live in the dissociative world in a sense which is a kind of freedom. Does that answer the question?

GC: It certainly does, more than answers it. It answers several questions.

AN: Ah right, ok.

GC: Ok, next one then. What do event in the play say about the place they are occurring in? Obviously you've touched upon it a bit.

AN: Where they are occurring in? Well the first Act...well I remember for instance we...obviously we...again it's a kind of associative thing...What became clear, though maybe this is not about location, was that I couldn't make the story too specific. Because you know, I mean the first Act is not in any sense a realistic representation of what happens to somebody when they are mentally ill. You could do just as bizarre and surreal things which are much more specific to a person but that would sort of involve you giving a bit of back-story to that person, you know all that sort of thing. So it was decided quite early on that instead we'd go for a slightly more generic idea...kind of where we would drawing on popular influences to create the paranoia's or to create those things where everybody sort of understood them to begin with, we didn't have to go well here is Lisa and she is this age and she lives here and she's fallen out with her mother, and she's got this thing...there was none of that, going into all of that would have made it fucking three acts. So we were drawing on those things, so the first kind of influences were like *Alice in Wonderland* which actually has a very linear open sort of world that she just wanders in and *Alice in Wonderland* works very well, I mean there's no real plot in *Alice in Wonderland* but it's very enduring, it's very dreamlike. So we were thinking well how do we, how do we...for instance in the set design what the fuck are we going to do for a set, you know, for this. And eventually we settled on the idea of miles and miles and miles of carpet. And it might have begun with the idea that she didn't move out of her house, but what was kind of great about it was that it mimicked – especially if you were low down and near the front row – it sort of mimicked that child's-eye view you know where if you put your head down on the carpet and you look along the carpet. So we were immediately trying to engender a kind of childlike place in the audiences that were watching it. It literally starts with the carpet, immaculate and by the end of it it's covered with shit, toys and crap, you know. But, you know that was mainly the set, the rest was all really...Again we had some rationale that she goes out to an airport or station of some sort.

GC: I know what you mean, because that was going to be one of my later questions, but you are actually touching on it now. In the play you seem to use a hybrid of internal and external landscape so I was wondering is Lisa physically travelling and hallucinating while she is

doing so? Or is her excursion into *Dissocia* occurring in a fixed physical place with no external movement?

AN: We figured that it was all...she was on the move. The basic story of it was of somebody who had stopped taking their medication who was out on a bender, you know, and just wandering around. So when she has the meeting with the Goat we were bringing up sounds. I mean sound was massively important actually, you know, and it's the limitations of the print in play. The sounds were massively important in giving a sense of place of wherever that was. So we brought in like motorway sounds whilst that was happening over the back of it. And meanwhile her boyfriend is kind of looking for her, and he becomes to some extent The Black Dog King. You know when he arrives at the end, that's the boyfriend, he's the one that's hunting her down, that's seeking to end... her...you know her dream in a sense. Again all the characters within it only exist because of her and this is a frequent trope that comes up in fairy tales. There was another subtext about fairy tales that even the Wizard of Oz.

GC: Even Never Never Land, there is even an element of that.

AN: Yeah, I mean there are interesting psychological elements. A lot of things that appeal to children, or were written for children have sort of analogous, psychological subtext which is quite interesting you know. But I also believe that children are psychological animals, maybe they are the most purely psychological animals on some level because they haven't mediated all of that with sounds. Again everything in the first, or almost everything in the first act was related in some way, they were either...again we had lots of, we improvised a lot of stuff, we had a lot of stuff, material to choose from. So the criteria we used that should be at least laterally connected to the subject of the psychology, to the mental illness. So some of them are, some of the embody symptoms, some of them embody terms, and it all sort of relates out from that.

GC: It's like The Black Dog King. I take it that that's a reference to Churchill's depression for instance?

AN: Well yes.

GC: The Polar Bear, is bi-polar.

AN: The idea of the Black Dog yes, the polar bear yes. And when successful working on a couple of levels you know that...toy companion, that soft toy you know.

GC: It's a key to *Dissocia* isn't it? We have that at the end of the play where the lights flicker over her, where it's implying it's not over. It will never be over.

AN: Or the character that can't speak properly or again the idea that there is one personality that takes all the pain that is ascribed to one. You know then there were moments where you felt it was only a flight of imagination from her because you want to be as creative as possible in terms of where she could go in her head. Again the long winded answer to your question is that everything in a sense was about the place in the mind. And in the second Act it is quite obvious. I guess it was a very solid clunking. And again there were many occasions where we were like do we bring in one of the characters now and we just didn't do anything til the end with a bit of colour eventually, and I'm glad we resisted that as there were various plans to do bigger things, but the denial of that seemed to be important.

GC: Yeah... Absolutely...Excellent. Yeah, we've kind of covered that. So...In what ways does your use of humour and satire contribute to the world of the play? Because it's very funny.

AN: Well some people didn't think so.

GC: I thought it was very funny.

AN: Well, you know, it's funny and that but you know it's full of puns and the type of humour of it which is very much Edmund Lear, is in very much children's fairy tales, all of which seem to be very much kind of associative things and they sort of move the way the mind moves. I mean there might be one or two places where...there is another dialogue going on, you know, where for me which is about theatre should be and what that is. And you know, you will probably go on to talk about Scottish theatre and it's context I don't know.

GC: We'll slightly touch on it later but not so much because I don't think you're a typical Scottish dramatist really. You don't really fall into that bracket.

AN: Well.

GC: Overtly political for instance. I'm not saying there are no politics in your plays.

AN: Yeah, no no well.

GC: But you're not commenting on the state of Scotland or devolution.

AN: Not overtly political but I must have been osmotically kind of...because growing up I was exposed to a lot of 7:84, Wildcat and all that sort of thing which definitely owed a debt to music hall. You know, all of which involved songs and humour and were tackling very serious issues. So, you know in a sense this is -one might - a political issue but it is a serious issue and there is this feeling of, at the same time. Again that first half could have been darker or less funny or whatever. I wanted people to have a good time that was important part of the plan you know. If we had been too disturbing or too awful with it then it kind of would have blown it a little bit because if you'd done anything really that was... In the second Act you were looking back and sort of going but I wouldn't then that would be too horrible.

GC: I think you struck a really good balance actually, for me anyway.

AN: Then it wouldn't quite have worked for us to understand that. Maybe in that sense it's not entirely about the experience of, which can be more terrifying in a sense, but not always, not always. People feel that they've sort of come alive on that level and it's a very creative level and it's very funny. I mean you know, again there is a sort of a thing of people doing stuff. I mean the big problem with mental illness is that it's socially fucking unacceptable, you know. I mean I've been involved with various people who have mental illnesses over time, you know, and they can just kick off in the middle of a shop, it's an embarrassment, people hate embarrassment, but they kind of love to watch it to be presented with it or whatever you know. So humour is...humour always had to be part of that but I would be lying if I said there weren't a couple of gags in there that....

GC: (laughs) You certainly would be.

AN: that didn't really need to be there that were kind of there just because we sort of thought they were funny you know or audiences generally speaking thought they were funny. I mean I have to say on balance audiences found it funnier in Scotland than they found it here.

GC: Really?

AN: Well there were less people just out-right fucking irritated in Scotland than here. I mean here there were people who were just like...I remember coming out the Royal Court...I don't know if...you know what I can't remember if it was me that heard this or somebody told me they'd heard it. No it was Matt.

GC: Was it Matt?

AN: It was Matt that told me. This woman had said something to him like 'I don't do zany.' (Mock R.P. accent).

GC: (sniggers).

AN: You know, so there is a certain audience. And there is stuff, and I particularly remember Alan going 'I'm aff for a shit'. And I could justify that, I could say well she overheard somebody saying it, oh well you can't say it shouldn't be in there. It just make me laugh hearing Alan saying 'I'm going for a shit'. I think that for exuberance one gets there, but of course the contrast is about making people feel things you know whatever even if it was irritation you know even if it was that then it's a feeling of some sort, the whole point was to be making them feel things constantly wherever they were, to be laughing to be sad, to be elated to be irritated or angry or whatever. You know, but in the second Act really not to have any of that, you know it's interesting that especially here a lot of this was from critics and things... they thought the second Act was a really good piece of theatre.

GC: They were just missing the point then really it seems to me.

AN: Well no to be fair they understood the point but they were sort of... the first Act looks like it's being made by somebody who doesn't really know what they're doing and is not really judging audience response properly or tastes or anything. But you know in a sense the second Act is undeniably sort of accomplished technically.

GC: Yeah, absolutely.

AN: You know, the use of sound and the way the set...there was lots to admire there strangely in the second thing, you know there were no points going I think that was excessive or I think that's taking things...so there was a slight feeling of, well they can obviously all do it, they can obviously all act, and they can obviously all be concise. So why were they like that in the first Act.

GC: It's that kind of demand for realist theatre isn't it that seems to predominate British theatre.

AN: That discomfort that people seem to get.

GC: They understand what's going on, they know what they're getting. It does exactly what it says on the tin.

AN: I know, I know. And it's actually a horrible structure the second Act, you know because it's that lights up, lights down television scenes, and a lot of new plays are written like that and I just think it's a horrible, horrible structure for something. You can do it but it's horrible. But the gaps in between it became...you know, interesting spaces for people.

GC: Were the scenes in the performance, were they really slick, like one after the other, or were there gaps between.

AN: Well the lights would go down and there was a system... that I forget now actually what it was, but whenever she was getting medication I think the lights would go down and you'd sort of wait for a beat or two and you'd sort of hear

“**Knock...Knock...Knock...Knock...Knock...Knock...Knock...Knock**” as the actors were all miked up behind the thing and Lisa would be sitting there and they would come in. It was lights up, lights down, and again the second Act was...the first Act had been long it was like ninety minutes and the second Act was like forty or something. It had a gradual reintroduction of speech until by the end you have actually a quite classical theatre scene.

GC: Yeah between her and Vince, the penultimate scene?

AN: Yeah and that's the most classically theatrical.

GC: Excellent. Ok. Do you think it would be fair to say that place is represented ritually in the play and if so how?

AN: Well I refer you to the previous answer to some extent. I don't think, I don't know that it is to be honest. You know I've never been personally or professionally terribly hung up on place and I've never been very external. I've always been much more interested in the internal, I've always been much more introvert than extrovert. I'm no...I've never really cared where I was particularly. I mean obviously there are some places you don't like and there are some places you're kind of fond of. I've never been nationalistic or...I could live in a shit-hole or I could live in a nice place, it doesn't really bother me. I'm not a very external person in any sense. So that's a drawback in some way, cause some people are really, really detailed, but I never really have been and I tend to find actually that detail about place is quite appreciated and some people – not everybody – but again especially in the industry like to look outwards you know.

GC: They like to kind of connect the dots don't they, they like to kind of put the puzzle together and go right this means that, oh they're getting that from research. And go bang. They like to understand it in that way.

AN: Yeah and looking out at the world. A lot of those plays are quite successful where people look out at the world. But I've always felt that still the uncharted territory was largely inside and interior and certainly untapped in terms of narrative structure and sort of how we could move, you know. Largely untapped, not completely untapped by any means, I'm not suggesting that but there is for me more fruitful avenues or newer avenues. So I don't know that the sense of place is massively important there and you know in the second Act which again...what was really, really difficult was the fact that what I didn't want to make it, and what some people still insisted on kind of portraying it as was a sort of an argument for, an argument for not medicating people.

GC: We talked about that.

AN: Well yes. You know if you were really trying to depict a modern sort of mental health unit then you know now it's all like you can paint your own room. All this sort of thing, and it's an entirely different kind of thing. And we did think about all of that, but again it went against the idea of what we were doing, it would have lost its metaphorical weight in a sense and opened out into these other areas. I tried really hard to make it not look like it was an argument for that because my feeling was that in a case like hers medication was kind of necessary to make life liveable. But there was some people who still saw it as some kind of weird sixties argument of like let the people be free man. You know, which was not the point... You've got to remember that really the first half is a monologue, it really is just her imagination in a sense. So it was quite subjective. And people think that the first half is subjective and the second half is objective, but I don't know if that is entirely true, I felt that the second half was also from her point of view to some extent. So that even if your environment is not like that it was still somehow how you feel. She would still feel that she was in a kind of...in the belly of some kind of rather anonymous machine, and that still is the way that it is. So it's not about crushing people it's about making it possible so that people can live and coexist socially or whatever. But the fact is that that's the process we all go through and I feel that we all feel that we sacrifice something in order to do it.

GC: Our own individuality would that be suppressed.

AN: Yeah, yeah we do. So in a sense it's like not to infer the viewpoint that that's an evil terrible thing to do is that sort of the way it is, and do you think that's a price worth paying. I'm never really making any position or statement as to whether it is or not.

GC: Ok, brilliant. This is not something I necessarily agree with but a lot of the academic criticism suggests that.

AN: Can you wait a second.

GC: Sure.

AN: I'm just going down, cause I gave up smoking last year and I'm on these electronic cigarettes.

GC: Yeah I remember from Christmas. Are they working for you?

AN: Yeah...I'm going to have a diet coke or something, do you want a beer?

GC: Yeah ok thanks. It's quite interesting Anthony because you've answered quite a lot of my questions already.

AN: Yeah well asking me to talk about myself will do it.

GC: (laughs) Yeah that's my favourite topic as well...A lot of the academic criticism of the play suggests that your message is that imaginary worlds are better than the real world. To what extent do you think this is an accurate description of the play?

AN: I don't. You see whatever I would think personally of that I won't really seek to impose it on the play. I fundamentally disagree with the idea that you...

GC: I disagree with this as well but any criticism I've read they do imply this.

AN: Yeah, I know, I remember. I just fundamentally disagree with that central idea that a writer presents a kind of thesis. Well I suppose you can.

GC: That's the nature of academia.

AN: I know. Well it makes it much easier to argue for or against, or to dissect it or whatever, but it's a bit of an imposition really. I mean I don't...the whole point which you kind of know personally is that if you're a writer or whatever, that if anything what happens is that your life devolves into one pasty sort of grey sludge in a sense because...and morally you do as well because it's not...you can sort of see both sides of the argument. I could sit here and argue to you that the imagination is a bit...and I could sit here and argue, but in fact as everybody knows really the truth of the matter is the two are interdependent and the two coexist. In fact...

GC: Why does it have to be one or the other, you know, it doesn't have to be does it?

AN: You know, well it never will be, I mean it never will be because people will always have an imaginative life. In fact it's not really about, there's nothing there which says she can't have an imaginative life, and that's why the first Act isn't about her just sitting in her room, you know. She's out there on the street putting herself into positions of danger, you know, and she nearly gets raped. We felt that actually happens, you know, and she generally just gets carried away, and sort of makes a mess, you know. And worries people, and goes running off and God knows what. So, you know, it's not really about imagination. Imagination is a ridic...it's not the right, it's just not the right, it's not about imagination, you know. To some extent it's about...you could say that it's about stimulation or expression.

GC: Sure.

AN: It's really about the ways we stifle expression to some extent you know, and if you see it from that viewpoint more. You know and it strangely gets echoed in the academic sort of analysis of it. Cause even theatrically you have what is the more enticing element of it. There's a strange sort of thing in that the first Act was sort of more crowd pleasing. I would imagine that a lot of critics are sitting there thinking this is kind of childish and sort of nonsensical, you know. And yet everybody around me is laughing and looking like they're really enjoying it. Now here comes the second Act, which I actually think is much more rigorous in its technique. And yet that seems to be looked upon in some sort of way as being less exciting or whatever. People are bringing their own, they're bringing their own shit to these sort of things really, you know. People who feel vaguely guilty about living incredibly dull and unproductive lives tend to rationalise that on some level, you know what I mean? And the fact of the matter is that the critical and academic establishment largely to some extent are people who are commenting on what other people do.

GC: Absolutely.

AN: They're not actually having the experience. They're commenting on the second hand experience, which is fine that's still doing something. In a funny sense they kind of...have had to actually subsume an awful lot. And that's part of the thing because in the second Act it's like she does it she doesn't resist it to the end she starts to do it and when she does it she apologises and she repents and she does all those things. You know, and she sees the sense of it in a way, she sees that this is something that needs to be controlled and I think we all have

that to some extent, we all see that in some way our expression, our true expression, what we believe to be our true characters, and that's a common thing and people suffer from those things in a sense that that's as true a part of themselves as anything, and they have to kill it. People who don't have a mental illness understand that as sharply as they do. The idea that we have to kill things...

GC: That are socially unacceptable?

AN: That we love about ourselves, you know. It happens to us gradually, but it's the way we are brought up. I mean there is a machine and a system that does exist to kind of, you know, crush and dampen. *Dissociatis* not *1984*, it's not about people being cruelly crushed, it's about people taking the medication. It's not about the medication being forced on you it's about you gradually taking it and realising I cannot dance on tables I cannot...

GC: It's a kind of metaphor for society on some level isn't it?

AN: Well yeah I mean, we're not supposed to dance on tables.

GC: We have to take our medicine.

AN: So we pay money to see other people dance on tables .

GC: (laughs) Let's say no more about that. The less said about that the better... Excellent... Don't need to ask that, we've done that...How accurate an assessment is it to say that in *The Wonderful World of Dissocia* that you reject the laws of cause and effect that structures realist theatre in favour of a theatre of a surrealist atmosphere?

AN: Oohehr. The laws of cause and effect?

GC: You know, in a play this happens, that happens, there's a kind of payback for that and then this happens.

AN: I mean maybe, I don't know, the play...You know it's not a Surrealist play I don't think. It is pretty much cause and effect in fact. You could look on the first Act as cause and the second Act as effect. And also because it moves in a kind of an associative way...You see the other play that I wrote just after this felt like a bit of a companion piece was a play called *Realism*. Actually what we were trying to say to people... I was trying to get my head around this because people were talking about this because I felt for a while that ostensibly what is called Absurdism or Surrealism is probably the natural... a return to that is probably the natural evolution of theatre.

GC: Yeah I've read your comments on that.

AN: But you know I couldn't come up with a fancy name for it, because I don't think it's the same, it's not the same as it was before.

GC: I've been exploring Absurdism and Surrealism, you know the theory of it for this dissertation as well. And I don't think it really applies to your plays, but a lot of the comments say that it does and I'm not so sure about that myself.

AN: Well I think it's about people understanding – I don't even know what one could call it – but it's about understanding that we don't live our lives on a realist plane, I mean I certainly don't. The whole point of *Realism* was to go here is a guy who does ostensibly nothing

during the day and it was to really say to people ok so you think you've done nothing, but actually look at where your mind has gone, look at where you've travelled internally, look at what this amazing...so I don't know a kind of a neurological Absurdism or something or some kind of neurosome...it's about understanding that life is...if you're really going to...I mean realism it seems to me just scrapes the absolute surface of the world, just scrapes the surface of life.

GC: A lot of the time we don't talk about our own internal worlds, you know. Not that we'd know them, but we don't talk about them to anybody else. It's not that we're ashamed, it's just not a topic of conversation. It's like what did you imagine today, rather than what did you do today. We don't say that to each other.

AN: Exactly. They're private worlds, and a lot of people are uncomfortable with that and they don't like where it takes them. A lot of people are not introspective by nature you know, do not want to be forced to be introspective, and do not want to see anything introspective, they're not interested in self-analysis. Sometimes that's because there are horrendous things that we can't criticise people for not wanting to look at every day because they have to do what it takes to survive. But even on a basic level there is not just that, there is the fact that pretty much all of us dream, so just on that basis, we live a conscious realist day and then we go to sleep which is a strange enough thing to do in itself, and within that we have a dream. Part of art is to say to people wait a minute look again at this, look again. You carry around with you this strange memory for part of a day quite often of something which didn't occur. But has had an effect on you in some way. Now then you add into that the general tracts on which your mind's working on, but now you also have to factor in things like the internet which strangely moves...and again my feeling is that this is going to feed into a different form of narrative in a sense because with the internet that linearity where you would go well I want to find out about this. How often do you go there and just find out about that, I mean you set out to find out about that but then something else comes up and you click on a link. In a funny way this is quite neurological, this is quite analogous to how we think and where we go mentally.

GC: I mean even keeping your train of thought sometimes because you go off on little tangents all the time and it's hard to get back to the point. I do that all the time.

AN: Yeah. I mean art and classical narrative storytelling which can be absolutely brilliant but is increasingly becoming more and more unreal in a sense and more and more like a little gift, a little present. It's consumed like food in a sense, it's a narrative story and really doesn't really bear any relation to life and it's given to us. And as a result the less and less truthful it feels, the more and more people don't want it to be a vessel for telling them anything truthful and so it becomes just a bit of escapism, it becomes like a burger in a sense so they'll go I want to go there and I want to laugh. In fact there's nothing wrong with that as long as there's other stuff that exists as well, but I think in a way you know, we're beginning to lose the faith of people in a sense if we don't start to...there is a sense that people are feeling that there's something wrong here; this stuff is meant to be telling me something about my life but isn't.

GC: We need to acknowledge that face. People generally don't acknowledge that fact.

AN: We live in a world, we live in a world...there was a day when something like *Cathy Come Home* could come on or a social drama or whatever and it would alert you to something that you didn't know about. Or something that would describe a place you'd never been but we've seen everything and we know everything. But we don't need to tell those social stories anymore, now we have a point whereby people feel like they know about it and it's not fascinating. In fact anything ugly and they just don't want to look at it anymore because they go I know there's children starving, I don't want to see a fucking drama about it and I don't particularly blame them because they know there are children starving. You know, what can you do about that, what do you feel about that, what is a drama necessarily going to tell you about that. It just increases your feeling of impotence in a sense. So it will gradually become you know...I'm way off the question aren't I?

GC: No that's fine because you're answering five questions at once. It's hard for me to keep up. No, no that's fine because this leads me on to the next question, what you just finished with there. I'm going to suggest that social realism is the dominant feature of a lot of drama but this continued attraction to fantasy suggests we need other ways of exploring human behaviour in existence. Do you think that in order to accomplish this goal we have to find other "worlds" and discover new ways of seeing the obvious? And if you do how did *Dissocia* fit into this concept? It's a bit long-winded, I'll rephrase it if you want.

AN: I wonder whether, yeah but I wonder whether we...as I was just saying I wonder whether the movement towards fantasy is about finding other ways of...I think it might be to some extent...I think we have to be very careful, you know as I said, the art does not just become completely about escapism. We seem to be becoming strangely less introverse, less willing to self-analyse, less willing to look at those places, and despite the fact that when we go on the internet where we're going into something and we're accumulating information it also feels like you're drifting further away from the cockpit of yourself to some extent you know? And so I think people are quite uncomfortable with themselves now in a way; they're uncomfortable with silence, you know, they're uncomfortable with...you know when you think about the days of sort of Jane Austen and all that when it was all just people sitting in a room by candlelight you know fucking reading or you know. But when you think about the enormous amount of space there was there and silence to contemplate life.

GC: They didn't have television, a lot of people couldn't read for instance.

AN: Yeah. And don't get me wrong I'm not talking about...I completely understand that I can barely get to sleep without the TV on or the radio or whatever because last thing at night I don't like to listen to my own thoughts, in a sense you know what I mean? But as a writer you're kind of forced to go there in as sense, and I've always felt you could go there and still be entertaining, but at the same time this is a massive split off. So fantasy is good and it's all of course related to the human condition but then actually in a funny way that then becomes not the thing that analyses the human condition; art does not become the thing that reflects the human condition. In fact the relationship of the audience to the artefact they're consuming mentally becomes then the story in a sense and in fact insight about the human condition then begins to reside solely in the hands of the rationalists, scientists, the behaviourists. Rather than finding an analogue for that you know they'll throw in little bits and peices of...

GC: Freud and Jung or whatever.

AN: Well no, even the fancy sort of things I mean. Those things are fruitful to some extent, but it depends on who's making them. I just think there is an increasingly escapist sort of culture, but again there has been this sort of polarising notion that you either watch something fucking depressing or you watch something escapist. Ironically realism of itself depressing, and again the strange thing is the growth of reality television.

GC: Oh don't get me started on that.

AN: Well, you know it's a misnomer in a sense because it's always a manufactured level of reality as well.

GC: Of course it is.

AN: Although for all of people's complaining about sort of...there were truly some Beckettian moments in reality television, do you know what I mean? Where you just...the absurdity of what you see. When it first started there were moments. But again they've just tried to breed all of that out of it so it's like we're watching realism but we're not watching realism so it's quite strange you know?

GC: It's like that kind of thing where you know, you put a camera on somebody they'll be acting realistically. But how does the camera affect what's going on because obviously it does on some level.

AN: Of course, yeah, yeah. But you know as an actor what's strange now...but you've noticed this kind of...you might say fair enough cause it's what's been being done to women for ages. But now every actor, there are even photos of Benedict Cumberbatch with his fucking abs out, do you know what I mean? In fact it's strange with all this superhero stuff and all that as well, and I like some of that, you know the Avengers was great, it was fun and all that. But we're moving to a kind of Olympian idea of actors and you know they must all be like really honed, they're like thoroughbreds now, they've all got to have abs and be streamlined. Even if you have to pump iron and steroids like fuck to get into that place for that movie and then let it go to fuck. But then you've got to keep presenting yourself, so there's a strange kind of Greek superhero sort of notion that we're giving to artists at the moment. And these fantasies are not about normal people, they're about people with great power who are...I don't know where the identification is with that; it's a strange sort of thing.

GC: Maybe it's the fantasy element of it, you know kind of fantasising about these people.

AN: Yeah, but nobody really sits there and thinks oh I could be that guy, do you know what I mean? In something like *Diehard* you know...the premise that it had, the only thin premise was that he's a policeman, he's a reasonably ordinary bloke faced with...getting beat up quite a bit but manages to get or Indiana Jones to some extent are guys who get kicked to shit. And they're still heroes and again I think it's odd because you're creating sort of...it's about telling the truth to people to some extent because if you open up too much of a gulf between the truth about humanity and this idealised image of humanity all you create is shame.

GC: I think that's a good point.

AN: You know art in a way, has some responsibility, sometimes, at least, to tell people the truth about themselves. If all we see is heroes, and everybody really knows that when it

comes to it...many of us are much more cowardly than what we'd like to believe. I don't know if you remember *Carla's Song*, have you seen *Carla's Song*?

GC: Yeah, yeah.

AN: There's a brilliant moment in that when Robert Carlyle falls in love with a Nicaraguan or something and he goes over there.

GC: He's a bus driver or something isn't he?

AN: Yeah, yeah. But he sees something horrendous and where as the normal you know sort of escapist ideal would be him staying there. He comes to her and he goes, he goes he...I'm just too freaked out I've got to go home. And this is what many of us do.

GC: I know, I know. We are ambiguous; we're not black and white.

AN: Yeah, and we're not heroes. We are capable of doing things here and there that are heroic. But we don't see many stories of cowardice. So this gulf is opening up. You know art is getting to the point where it's just beginning to lie too much to people. And ironically I think it doesn't really matter what happens in documentaries and things like that; if art starts to continuously lie about the human condition then we are slightly in trouble because art is meant to be a mirror to our real selves and if all we're seeing is Olympians it will breed quite an unhealthy...

GC: I agree, we've crossed a line.

AN: Population. We're certainly far down that line, yes certainly.

GC: I don't know exactly when it happened, but it's certainly, certainly in the last ten or fifteen years there has definitely been a digression, progression, whatever you want to call it in that direction.

AN: Yeah. In *Realism* the guy that's spending the Saturday by himself. There are a couple of sequences...where you couldn't not do it; he has a wank.

GC: Yeah and at certain times the Black and White Minstrels...

AN: Well precisely, I fucking calmed it down to be honest, you know, or he would have returned to the well a few times on that day probably. But as it is he has a wank a couple of times.

GC: I've done that on stage myself as you know.

AN: Yeah. But the prurience of some of the response to that was unbelievable, sorry the prudishness of the response to that, of critics. You don't plan this filth scene, sort of fantasy, and I've certainly never...It's like those people who go like 'I saw some pornography and it just bored me, frankly I...it just bored me'.

GC: Really, really?

AN: And that's the response of someone who has saw an awful lot of it, do you know what I mean?

GC: Yeah, yeah (laughs)

AN: (laughs) You're only bored of something you've seen an awful lot of.

GC: Yeah absolutely.

AN: Otherwise it's like two people fucking, why would you not be interested to some extent, you know, if it's a seldom viewed thing? But it was strange, cause this was a guy over the day, he's just a normal guy, not an evil guy. You see there's another element to that as well about empathy and the general death of empathy in our society; and that doesn't lead to good art either. This idea that, this vilification that people are put under this talk of sort of you know...

GC: No I know what you mean I hated that and when I was acting I always tried to make my characters ambiguous as much as possible; I didn't like to play them completely straight, or completely good or completely bad. You know especially like in *River City*, I tried to make my character unlikeable in a way. I deliberately tried to make him, obviously that backfired because they went sorry your character's so unlikeable that you have to be punished, you know.

AN: Of course.

GC: That's what I tried to do, you know I want to make him unlikeable to show to show that he has three dimensions and this is what he is. And why shouldn't you be able to do that?

AN: I know. I mean I fight against it all the time in trying to get stuff off the ground, especially in TV or theatre or whatever. Not theatre sorry, I don't mean theatre, in theatre I kind of get to do what I want. But in TV or film this paranoia they have whether a character is likeable or not.

GC: Yeah tell me about it.

AN: And actually it doesn't matter if he is likeable as long as he is understandable or he is sympathetic in some way or whatever. Certainly the executives are not convinced that people have any understanding of that anymore. And again it's all interdependent you know, and all this tabloid stuff about paedophiles and all this sort of thing, all the kind of stuff that happens all this leads to...Even the smoking ban. It's not so much that they...what concerns me is that the response that is not so much that people are obsessed with people who do it but they say that I do not do that and therefore if I do not do this I am a good person, you know? In the absence of religion we're finding a whole new bunch of ways to sort of stigmatise people about their true character. And in a sense it's only people who feel shame who need to scapegoat, because you make a scapegoat to divert attention from yourself. Because if people aren't coming after you, if they're going after somebody else they're not coming after you.

GC: You talk about that in *Realism* as well, don't you? That little bit from that poem.

AN: Yeah yeah. So that...so again we're miles off the question.

GC: That's all right, no it's all good stuff.

AN: Read again the question because it was quite a good one

GC: It was something like, I'm going to suggest that social realism is the dominant feature of a lot of drama but the continued attraction to fantasy suggests we need other ways of exploring human behaviour in existence. Do you think that in order to accomplish this goal we need other worlds to explore and to discover new ways of seeing the obvious?

AN: Well again, my personal feeling is the world we maybe need to discover is our own, our own internal world. But then again I can't see in twenty years the West End is going to be full of plays about people's internal machinations. Although who knows. It feels to me...even with the movement that was slightly manufactured around me and Sarah, the sort of in-yer-face thing.

GC: The subject of my PhD.

AN: Right well. Whether that existed or not it's still strange that that was the nearest thing to any kind of movement, and really...

GC: It's been described as a moment now, they've kind of rephrased it into a moment. It's not a movement now, it's a moment.

AN: So we've lost the v e?

GC: Yeah, yeah. It's a moment now.

AN: Ok, well fine. Ok, yeah. I wonder why they've...it's a downgrade in that it didn't have any traction?

GC: No it's just saying it was a specific period of time and it wasn't a movement because everybody wasn't doing it, and everybody's not the same. You know academics have this urge to classify, to put things in boxes. And that's what it was, that's what seems to have happened, you know AleksSierz was the man who did it, blah, blah, blah. I've read stuff you've said and you've went look 'I'm not the granddaddy of in-yer-face etcetc'. Nobody likes to be classified, I certainly don't.

AN: You know I can appreciate the marketing element of anything. It's better to be known for something I suppose even if it's not entirely true. I mean just on the basis of continuing to work, it's quite nice that people...But I think what it was is that it was a generation as well that had come out of the whole punk thing, so there was an element of that. I think the only real lasting legacy of it was...I can at least now talk with a bit more sexual frankness about things, and I think that was important because again it was funny because you're constantly accused of putting sex or salacious elements into things in order to drum up an audience.

GC: But it isn't about that.

AN: No, but in fact the irony of that is that's exactly what you don't do. What all mainstream art does to attract audiences is take all of that out. Because again people are uncomfortable with that, they don't really want to go there, and there is a very pernicious movement to roll back on that.

GC: Funding for instance, you know. People in control of the funding.

AN: Well I think it's an aesthetic thing. Again this pernicious idea of taste. You know people did get a bit carried away with it and there was anal sex and everything and all that. Some did

get a bit carried away with it, and young people who have that a lot more on their minds...and the old guard who are still fucking there are kind of trying to humiliate that a little bit to make fun of it.

GC: More in-your-lap than in-yer-face I believe was one of the quotes for *Phaedra's Love*. Do you remember that?

AN: Yeah. I mean that sort of thing. But it's just an attempt to control the agenda in a sense. It's the fear of ridicule, it's all very sort of court of Louis XIV sort of thing. It's a bit sort of by humiliation. Well first off we'll reverse, we'll get back to the sort of theatre that we're comfortable with anyway and comfortable about talking about and discussing and dealing with. That theatre of ideas, cerebral sort of arguments and theses and all that sort of thing, that's theses, faeces not theses.

GC: (laughs) That's something completely different.

AN: (laughs) Let's start that movement. The faeces movement, faeces not theses... So there's an attempt to roll back on that a little bit. There are still these areas that are still very painful for people and they're very difficult, and that's where the real truth about us lies. And the thing that was important to me about sexuality was you can't really lie. I mean you can to some extent, but again there's an honesty in and around sex. A lot of people have dishonest sexual relationships but they become sharply aware that they're being dishonest.

GC: So there's nowhere to hide is there?

AN: Not really anywhere to hide. There's no way to convince yourself however much you might like to, you know, to be attracted to your wife or whatever. There's no way to hide it from yourself the fact that you're stimulated by the boys in Compton Street, you know what I mean? There's nothing you can do about that, and there you come up against the really hard edge of humanity, and the things we don't have control over and the things that are ourselves. We're always trying to control things, and art to some extent has got to talk about things we can't control; the moment in *Realism* where the Black and White minstrels was a theatricalisation of the idea that... Your memories are not you, you know they're not the thing that creates our thing.

GC: It's what you do about it.

AN: Again, there's terrible dishonesty about a lot of art. Trying to present an image of yourself. It's the most deplorable thing in art to use it to present a false image of yourself to the world is I think vile.

GC: You're entering really dangerous territory with that, because look at the way art's been used for really bad purposes in the past historically, like, don't know off the top of my head. Nazis for instance, symbols etc, etc. It's very dangerous because art's so powerful.

AN: Yeah...At least on some level...well they weren't being honest, but their agenda was quite transparent.

GC: In-yer-face.

AN: It's you just can't lie to people, if you say to people...what you're doing is creating this quasi-religious situation where you're sort of saying somethings are thought crime and if art is to allow that to be then you're giving in to that idea of thought crime.

GC: We're all guilty of that, aren't we? Of course we are.

AN: Yeah. You know people want to write plays saying racism is bad. We don't need to know racism is bad, what t we need to look at is that you can have a racist thought without being a racist.

GC: Misogynistic, sexist, whatever. Of course we do. We'd be a liar if you said you didn't have these thoughts.

AN: I mean the character in *Realism* is just a...I mean the funny thing is that people come out thinking he is such a disreputable sort of guy. You know, he has a wank, he has a fantasy about two of his girlfriends.

GC: We've all been there.

AN: Delusional dream, delusional fantasy about his own death, and about aggrandisement, you know and he's full of vanity. He's a coward, he's a fucking, you know he's worried who he is.

GC: He's just like us.

AN: He's deeply anxious about his own character and all of that. He's banal but at the same time he's being quite profound. And it doesn't massively interest me to sort of depict the Jonathan Miller's of the world being profound. What interesting to me is a normal fucking guy trying to deal with questions of the infinite cause we all feel it, we all have to deal with it; we all do have quite profound thoughts and think quite profoundly about things. It's not preserves of some class or other you know. And that to me is really interesting, but maybe people can't articulate it, and actually the inarticulation of that is much more moving and interesting to me.

GC: I think you've hit the nail on the head. It's about articulation, isn't it.

AN: Yeah. Yeah. You can articulate all of that thing, but really there's no great difference there. Nobody quite wants to...certainly don't want to acknowledge that in a sense. They don't want to acknowledge that actually their articulation is meaningless, it doesn't tame those feelings in real life it doesn't make them any different. Their lives make no more sense, they're no less cowards, you know, they're no less frightened than the rest of us. Anyway.

GC: That's cool. There's a lot there for that one. Ok...Most theatre is affected by the primacy of the text above all other elements of the stage in what critic David Lane describes as the 'dominance of the word'. So would I be correct in thinking *Dissocia* rejects this notion? And if so in what ways does your rejection of this notion affect place in the play? Does that make sense?

AN: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I don't know that *Dissocia* rejects it particularly because it's actually a very...

GC: Of course the text is important. I just got the notion in reading it of all the other visual elements. There were quite a lot of sound elements and text was not necessarily the most important thing in the play, though it is important.

AN: Yeah. No it's not the most important thing in *Dissocia*; the most important thing is the structure. The meaning of the play is in the structure, you can even argue that the meaning of the play is in the interval. Although it isn't really because you haven't really completed the second part of it. You know, but it's in the gap between the two bits. So it's not the primary thing, but I've done plays like *Relocated* which is much less about that and I'm moving much more in that direction of trying to move away from the idea that playwriting is about words. You know, there's those people who go (mock RP accent) 'It's called an auditorium because it's about listening'. My fucking father says that actually and it like really irritates me.

GC: That's what you get taught at drama school as well.

AN: Balls...Affect the place, rejection of this notion affect the place. But I mean certainly the frequency of words is important in a sense, even if it was just an impression of sound. Hitchcock said dialogue should just be a sound effect, but it's not something he absolutely stuck to if you look at his films. There's a lot of talking in the first half, there's a lot of association there's a lot of all that. The primacy of words in theatre is a practical thing because you can't do what a film can do and change round all those sort of things. Although the one thing that I'm trying to work on at the moment is seeing if I can just tell the story of a relationship by just using the silences, of the relationship.

GC: Semiotics. Other ways of communicating.

AN: Yeah. So that's important, but it's kind of related to...actually never mind the place of the play, but the place you're in to some extent. I mean there are certain things that are going to work better in smaller spaces. The important thing is that there is a lot of talk there's a lot of noise. And that has a flow to it. It's written, the first half is very written in that there is largely speaking a rhythm to a lot of things and often people are rhythmic. You know again I was trying to get some of that stuff where you just repeat a phrase over and over to yourself to give it some of that...So limerick, rhyme, lyric, all that sort of thing, different techniques of writing, flow, free flow of things, quick fire and stuff. And then you go to the second Act...to begin with nothing...gradually it becomes just grunts, words, words like that and then it moves into a quite naturalistic style which again when you write naturalistically...when you really write how people speak it's not pretty, it's not pretty on the page particularly...So we'd go through that phase and then we eventually arrive at a moment towards the end where it's crafted much like a traditional two-hander play. So the birth and evolution of dialogue in the second act is again, not so much important for place but important for process, which is again embodied by that place; that is a place of process. So the sound of it and the rhythms of it are more important. What it doesn't do...and the reason why the last bit of it is quite classical is because it's the part of the dialogue which carries meaning. I'll tell you, none of the other dialogue carries any particular meaning, that's the thing, it doesn't really carry any great meaning. Every now and then at low moments of it...dialogue tells you not really much, you know. So in that sense it sort of different, but I would say that what you're saying is true, but there are plays where I've probably been more...well I'm going more in that direction now and that will probably be more true.

GC: Well you can say so much more, or just as much, with a look, or a look and a silence in that pause where nothing is being said.

AN: Well yeah.

GC: It's the old cliché, silence speaks volumes.

AN: Yip, Well, that's true in a sense as well in the first half there's not really any down time; it is again that manic energy so there is always...there is a couple of moments when she speaks almost in a soliloquy but has to keep talking about her thoughts, has to keep trying to have them because those things have to come out to some extent. So you know that's true. Trish Reid went on a bit about that; that's not something I think about really. All the stuff I'm saying now is a bit after the fact I don't really think about it too much. Again it's what's appropriate to the story or what's appropriate to the mood or to the effect you're trying to create. It's definitely resource, I've never been...there is a few times when I've let myself go down this road, but I'm generally speaking I'm not really that fascinated by the well turned line of the...

GC: The clever play on words or blah, blah, blah...even though you do do that in this it's puns.

AN: You know that Lewis Carrol play on words, it kind of amuses me I think it's funny. I'm not really into poetics.

GC: The content's more important than the style?

AN: Yeah you know but there's lots of Lewis Carroly type Edmund Leary stuff in it, stuff that I think is quite funny.

GC: You can definitely see that. I don't know much about Edmund Lear but I know *Alice in Wonderland* and obviously I've seen *The Wizard of Oz*.

AN: You know, just those plays on the illogicality of language.

GC: I've lost my sense of humour, I'm losing the argument. That kind of stuff?

AN: Yeah. Yeah, yeah. But the bit that makes me laugh still is the – and largely to do with the actors' performance of it – was that thing about the wild goose chase. The guy who did it, Barney Powers, is very funny, he makes me sort of laugh. He goes, 'I used to be a wild goose chase saboteur'; 'a wild goose chase, how do you sabotage that?' He goes 'nyetnyet you let loose some geese' (laughs).

GC: (laughs) And between it as well he's thinking of the answer.

AN: But then Jo James was sitting there wearing this...just suddenly shouts...well he was getting really pissed off doing it, but we had to keep it in because it really makes me laugh 'YOU...ARE...TALKING...FUCKING...SHIIIIIT!!',...'Yes, yes I am'. But all the things that make me laugh are in performance. But I am interested in the idea...I do become increasingly convinced that the whole idea of theatrical acting is a bit of a lot of bollocks, and that it's much much more connected to tunnels in acting. I mean I know people need to be heard and I know voices need to be projected but there's an awful lot of girning and kind of that goes on, and I don't necessarily feel is needed. You know, personally my feeling is like if that requires

miking actors I think it's a fair enough trade off. You wouldn't want to breed a lot of actors who couldn't project the three nouns or whatever. But at the same time it's not the b-all and end-all and there's a kind of a sort of an old fashioned kind of chest puffing thing about 'I can speak to the...'. Brian Blessed is the ultimate...and he is the end of that argument.

GC: (laughs) He is the end of that argument.

AN: I sort of think that the more fantastical one wants to be or the more absurd or the more surreal – it's not even the right word – the more you want to shift on planes of reality. I don't know why we can't tell, what would have before been quite, standard stories and tell them on a number of planes so that there are scenes which you could classify as realism but you are also allowed to go into dreams and you're also allowed to go into other representations. But as we do that I actually think you have to keep the acting very connected to truth in a sense, you know, it needs to be quite...

GC: Stylistically different? And it's still got to be truthful.

AN: Yeah, because if you look at something like...

GC: Nobody likes seeing ham acting, do they?

AN: No, but you can look at something like Jimmy Cagney or whatever who would like go really quite out there and yet you sort of believed it. It's a strange tenuous thing connected to the truth in a way. But I quite like that juxtaposition of quite naturalistic acting against non-naturalistic...but I've also pushed actors into other places, cause obviously you can't play the Insecurity Guards to keep up the level...And I quite like when you get an actor like Matt who, you know...I think Matt is another one of those guys who comes out sort of expecting to be a male lead and then finds himself not there and gets a bit sort of disillusioned by that. He can do it in quirky in sort of quirky sort of things or whatever but I think I utilised him quite well, and he's always vaguely humiliated by what I get him to do.

GC: (laughs) We can ask him later.

AN: Then he feels it's beneath him. He slightly does because I remember him going 'how come you don't cast me in something like *Stitching*?' And I'm like you know...Phil McKee was in *Stitching* and if you look at Phil McKee and Matt...Matt brings something that nobody else brings, again a really strange sort of energy. He does that face.

GC: He's got a great face: it's the eyes isn't it?

AN: The eyes are like fucking lamps. But audiences fucking love him man , they love him. I mean they genuinely...He was in a thing called *The Edward Amazing Lone*...no *The Extraordinary* what the fuck was it called.

GC: (laughs) You can't remember what it's called.

AN: *Edward Gant's Amazing Feats of Loneliness* and he played this character; and there was a moment when the character was being a real tit and Stuart McQuarrie was playing Edward Gant and he had to say something to the audience that was meant to get an audience response out of them and they never would go for it they just liked him too much no matter how much of a dick he cares to be. (laughs).

GC: Well that's Matt in real life isn't it?

AN: Yeah, yeah, that's right people like him.

GC: No matter how much of a dick he is.

AN: He's just got a something which nobody else has got really in a way, and it's good to find actors that have something that nobody else has got.

GC: He can do the romantic lead and he can do this other stuff as well, he can do both.

AN: There's something I find odd about Matt that if I was trying to something about an everyman I wouldn't necessarily put him in there. Other people might feel differently because it's largely about who you identify with. Stuart McQuarrie I can put in a sort of lead because then I feel quite...I guess you put in people who are slightly avatars of yourself to some extent. And Stuart, though totally different from me, I feel is like you know?

GC: I know what you're saying, I know what you're saying; Matt is difficult to pin down, he's difficult to kind of categorise.

AN: I think he's quite weird, I think he's quite a strange presence.

GC: He's certainly got different personalities for different occasions, shall we say.

AN: He doesn't seem that way when you're sitting there talking at the table. But put him on stage and he's quite weird. Like when he played Mullet in *Realism*...and again I just thought it would be funny to see Matt with a mullet, with a ridiculous mullet. (laughs)

GC: (laughs) With a mullet? Did he have a mullet in the show?

AN: Oh yeah, yeah. He had a ridiculous mullet wig.

GC: I hope it was still bald.

AN: No, no he didn't it was all a bit *Shangalang*, it was a bit sort of seventies. He also kinds of reminds me of Jason Donovan for some reason.

GC: Of course he does, I've said that to him, he totally hates it.

AN: Slightly Jason Statham as well.

GC: More Donovan than Statham.

AN: More Donovan than Statham, but somewhere on the line between the two. Anyway...I don't know if that has place in it.

GC: Ok, we're nearly finished. The play seem so transform ordinary places into significant indicators of meaning. To what extent do you think this is a valid assessment of the play?

AN: Does it? Explain.

GC: Well I was thinking the Tube for instance and the elevator. Those kind of things. Ordinary places.

AN: How many ordinary places are in it? There's her flat.

GC: And there's what you were talking about earlier, when she's walking about in the real world, when she meets somebody and he attempts to rape her and it manifests as the Scapegoat. So these places perhaps...or maybe they're not, which is fair enough.

AN: Well again you don't quite know...often this is not...again what you're doing here is a sort of analytical process which is not really what happens at the time. What you try and do is create and open up and a sort of channel where you're doing things and you don't quite...if you reach a point of proper immersion then you start to do things and trust really that they are connected to something. So I don't know if it's a rationalisation when you look back on things and say well that connects to that or whatever when academics look at things and quite often that sort of working...but at the time you're thinking what can you do on a stage. And an elevator seems...these are all very specific circumstances. I mean that was what are the ways that people enter fantasy worlds; wardrobes blah, blah, blah and this idea of your flat descending came from an idea of...I think I might have had dreams about that when I was a kid when the flat descended.

GC: It's almost that idea of *Jamie and the Magic Torch* thing where he shines the torch from under he's bed and creates a portal in his room.

AN: Yeah, yeah, yeah. To find their own way into this thing and the other thing was something which felt right at the time.

GC: Well it's that thing as well that a play is written for performative reasons or maybe slight educational reasons, it's not written primarily to be analysed by academics.

AN: Yeah well I wouldn't want to go too far on the idea of descent necessarily. It was something that seemed...and that lift goes sideways and all of that which of course actually is *The Great Glass Elevator*. Beyond that she finds herself round an airport but that again was dictated by the ideas of guards, security guards that was the first idea.

GC: The Lost Property Office as well.

AN: Lost property that's right yeah. Again I think that I am not – it's difficult because you're writing about place – but I'm not very place orientated.

GC: But that's good, you don't have to be, that's interesting. It makes a good argument. You're no David Greig in that department where place is vital to his plays.

AN: Yeah yeah. But some people have that or quite often that project comes up Like Vicky and *Home* and all that. Well a lot of people do things about home and what that means. It's never carried an awful lot of meaning for me, my life is lived in my head largely and so whatever takes place is...In a film it would be more important because that's a visual sort of thing, but for me actually one of the attraction of theatre is it exists in this...liminal zone...this other sort of space. Like the play *Stitching* was interesting because it takes place on a couple of different timeframes and I don't know if you know it. Do you know it?

GC: Yeah. Phil and Selina were in it weren't they?

AN: Yeah. The trick in *Stitching* was that it played on the idea that we think the first scene we see is present then if we change into another time zone we are automatically going backwards. In fact this wasn't the case the first scene we were seeing actually took place in the past, the next scene we were seeing took place in the future or ahead of that. But that only

worked because you were in this weird space of theatre where you don't have to account for yourself in that sense, you know. This is the thing about theatre, the interesting thing about it – people talk about cinema – but the theatre is a very dreamlike space. I think when you dream – and again who knows how people dream – but certainly when I dream things are not very detailed. I don't remember detailed environments, and I think if you were to directly translate environment you would end up with something quite theatrical.

GC: It's more impressions you get from dreams, isn't it?

AN: You'd know you were in this room, but wouldn't in a dream I don't think you'd ever focus on those little gaps in the radiator.

GC: Or whether there was a vase there unless it was important to the dream.

AN: Yeah. So in a sense *Stitching* kind of had that. It happens quite a lot whenever people are building sets or whatever and going into really extreme kind of detail because people go 'oh what a marvellous set'. I find that a little bit odd and a little bit deadening now. I quite liked it when I first started but I find it a bit odd and deadening now to not be abstract. But again it depends on what you're doing.

GC: That makes sense I get it...Could *Dissocia* be construed as a character in itself?

AN: Yes, oh it is, it is. Well actually it is a character and a condition of sorts. The main inspiration for *Dissocia* was also someone who had some sort of dissociative identity disorder I.E. multiple personalities to some extent. So all the narrative and the story is, to some extent...you know that idea of betrayal and all that they're all there saying...first of all again which is a trope of fairy tale the kid arrives and finds out that they're actually the queen or the princess. I mean that's an interesting sort of idea because that's related to the idea that you're the organising personality, you are the umbrella personality of in fact this fantasy world. So the reel that they've all known about it, that they all knew she was coming and that they're under threat or whatever, that only she can save them, the defensive characters and the betrayals that go on. They're all created by her, they do exist, and that whole long speech at the end that *Dissocia* will die and we want to keep you in this world, we want to keep you in this state otherwise we die. Like I say the first Act is kind of a monologue and the place is her...

GC: That's what I was going to say. The setting of the play is, in effect, Lisa.

AN: Yeah. It's in her brain it's happening.

GC: Cool. Ok just a couple more Anthony. To what extent does the play explore the idea that the nature of a place can be changed due to events?

AN: Well it certainly explores the idea that the nature of a person can be changed.

GC: It's just one of the things there's been a lot of research on is how place is used in literature. A lot of critics say it's dependant on events, it's dependant on character. You know, it doesn't have any meaning in itself, it's what is imposed on it. Which I'm not necessarily saying I agree with.

AN: What does, a play?

GC: A place. It's about what happens in a place and how characters relate to place. It doesn't have any intrinsic meaning.

AN: Well I mean that's probably true if you're talking about a place. If we're talking about the place as a mental landscape then I would probably say it carries all intrinsic meaning. It is the fount of meaning to some extent. It's easier to talk about the second Act because it does have a very defined idea of place even if it's not an absolutely naturalistic representation of one. When you analyse that maybe it's not one of those points that's not really worth making in a sense. Well, would a hospitable a hospital without any patients?

GC: Yeah, yeah. I get your point.

AN: Well I don't feel I'm making a very profound point I just don't quite understand a place doesn't have any meaning. And again it's this idea of meaning, what even is that concept? So Bannockburn wouldn't have much meaning if something hadn't happened there.

GC: I think that's the point they're making. That's the thing.

AN: I really am not, I'm not, I'm not one of those people who gets a big kick out of going there and going 'Oh there used to be a...' I'm quite subjective in my experience in a sense, and like going into Charles Dickens' house... Yeah I sort of intellectually perceive the idea that Charles Dickens sat here but I don't really give a shit. I don't really feel it, it doesn't really move me. For some people it really does, some people have a sense of connection to all that of that sort of thing. I could live in a house where a bunch of people were murdered you know what I mean?

GC: I must admit when I did go to Auschwitz it was the middle of February with drama school; there was two feet of snow on the ground. That's the only place that I can think of that really affected me. There was something about that place. But like you say that Charles Dickens sat here has no meaning for me either.

AN: Yeah but there's something about that place. But you can never really say that, because you can't be free of all the knowledge of what that was.

GC: Yeah. You walk in and you get a big film, the you walk into the room full of shoes, room full of hair and this and that.

AN: In order for you to really prove that point it would have to be a case of which you have no prior knowledge. We're beginning to get into the realms of sort of spiritualism. We start getting into that sort of thing where we go 'Oop I can feel a bit of a fracade here' you know. I don't really believe in any of that shit but I do believe that if you fill the brain with knowledge it creates a sense of the uncanny, it creates emotional effect. I've been to the Vatican, the fucking church or whatever, I mean I'm not religious at all but I was quite moved by it. Because you knew a whole bunch of people had made this and they believed it and it sort of made you feel ...on some level there are certain types of feelings, we're still superstitious animals so feelings that we have that we ascribe to something out with ourselves. Freud talked about the uncanny, the idea of the uncanny and similarly the spiritual, there is an element we feel that. But again the scientific community will tell you that's the production of a certain kind of endocrine.

GC: Specific impulses and electromagnetic things in your brain.

AN: Well would you have felt that about Auschwitz? But it's impossible not to. I mean I looked at the photos of people from the 9/11 thing...and there's a 9/11 memorial sort of thing down the road from the site. And I was sort of having to keep myself from crying. Yeah looking at all the photos of all the people...you went fucking hell all those people. But that's just a human emotion, that's an imaginative response, and that's an empathic response to the suffering of the people that have been there. And to be there in that place where all these people died I'm sure I would be moved by it I don't think it's intrinsic to the place. There we seem to get into a different area of discourse.

GC: You hit the nail on the head when you said would Bannockburn be Bannockburn without evens that happened there? So that answers that. Anyway moving on to the last question Mr....Are there any insights that can be yielded in thinking of the play from the perspective of place?

AN: ...

GC: That we haven't talked about because we've talked about it pretty extensively.

AN: Only as far as the first half. The first half is – although I think to some extent they're both subjective – ostensibly you're looking at a fantasy place in the first Act and you're looking at a real place in the second Act. So the most that can be said is that we live, I live and presume that a lot of people live in a strange place with no real boundaries or borders. You know, if I can now focus on reading something...I can listen to the radio and if I decide to read something I'll read that thing and then come back to the radio. So our senses in a way are dictating place all the time and the notion of place is never...it comes in and out of focus. And we have to force it into focus, but increasingly the times when we have to force it into focus are certainly as you get older they're less and less attractive those ways in which you have to focus, you know. You are often having to focus for no good reason for something that is not...I suppose this is going back there is no doubt the fact of the matter is if you get on the bus you're in a very practical space, you get on it and you pay, and then you go and you sit upstairs and you go into this other space and then you go onto ...So I think it's about a tension, I think the play is probably about a tension between the landscape of the soul and the tension between the real physical world that we have to live in. There's definitely that element going on and where we want that focus to be and where society tells us that focus should be are slightly different things and that some sacrifice of our. We cannot live fully in either one of those places.

GC: Brilliant. Well thanks very much Anthony that was excellent and we'll conclude it there unless there is anything you would like to add?

AN: No there isn't.

Barney Power *Narrative Interview*

GC: Thanks Barney, for doing this interview.

BP: You're welcome.

GC: Ok , first of all, could you talk to me a bit about how Anthony's rehearsal 'process' compares to other shows that you've been in where you have a script from the beginning?

BP: Yes. Well it's much more free-fall. When you have a script you know absolutely from day one; you have a meet-and-greet, then you have a read-through. With this there's a lot more...a lot more getting to know each other as a company. And not in a horrible touchy-feely way, you know. It's about figuring out the different individuals and the group that is there. So there's a lot of discussion about ideas, and the central idea of the show that Anthony has. He usually brings something, be it an idea, be it an article, be it a book that he's read which he's been very interested in. And there's a lot of open discussion for two weeks and a lot of improvisation as well. Do you want me to go over the whole 'process'?

GC: Well I was wondering about the script, how that makes you feel, but we'll get on to these more specific questions in a minute. I know you've done quite a lot of Anthony's stuff in the past, but are these particular rehearsals any different to ones you have done previously and if so how? Or are they the same?

BP: I think – I might be wrong -, but in the previous two productions that I did; which were *Edward Gant's Amazing Feats of Loneliness* and *The Wonderful World of Dissocia*, I think that Anthony had a script in his head. With this show I think that he's been doing it much more as he's gone along.

GC: More ad hoc.

BP: Yes. I think with the previous productions it was more a case of him just trying to figure out what not to include.

GC: That's interesting.

BP: And then finding a point and going 'ok, I think I've got enough and I've got to write it.' Yes, the feeling for me is that it's more ad hoc; I might be wrong.

GC: No, no, it's all about your personal take on things, that's what's interesting. Everybody's saying different stuff and that's what's interesting.

BP: And I think there's been slightly less improvisation this time. Slightly less: but not too much.

GC: Is there any improvisations that you've done that have had any effect on the text to date, and if so what are they?

BP: In this production?

GC: Yeah, in this production.

BP: Yes. In fact we did about three or four improvisations and I think that they've all had an effect. There was one really early on...the first thing we had to do was to tell the story of our lives to the cast.

GC: Your personal lives?

BP: Your personal lives in a monologue. But we had to do it in the third person and at any point Anthony would bang the desk and would ask us to sing. So we had to continue the story but sing it. So we had to continue the story, but sing it. Going with the concept of narrative, you know, the narrative of your life. And I think that was the third day...he sort of sprung it on us. We'd had these nice chats about narrative and things and then he just said 'right I want you to tell the narrative of your life.' And it was difficult and it was very moving as well. Because if you do it in the third person you don't realise until you're bang in it, that actually...it makes you look at things a bit differently.

GC: I'd really have liked to have caught that, it's a pity.

BP: It was very – I hate to use the word powerful -, but you know what I mean, you know. And at the end of that week I think we did something were interested in three sets of playing area. So you would have a central scene which was being commented upon by two people as they watched the scene; and then you had another two people who were commenting on the first commentators. Sort of like what you get when people respond to things on YouTube , the comments underneath. And there were a couple of other things. Everything feeds in...it all feeds in and what I've always found with Anthony is that sometimes the way that someone speaks is incorporated into the dialogue, the way a character will speak often suits that particular actor. And often something that somebody has said...you just think that it's an off-the-cuff discussion, which has nothing to do with the 'process', often finds its way into the script. I've learnt to understand that everything that happens in the rehearsal room is potential material.

GC: It's just as well he's not had a look at this as most of it would probably have been in (*Both laugh*). Discussions off camera.

BP: Yes, yes, exactly.

GC: Is there anything that you has particularly played to your strengths in the show?

BP: In this?

GC: Yes.

BP: That's an interesting question. (Pause)

GC: I think there's a lot of stuff that plays to your strengths.

BP: I don't know...I suppose so...it's difficult when you think about what your strengths are, you know what I mean though? Because you kind of think 'oh I'm doing the same thing again.' But I suppose yes there are...the comedy elements I think hit it and the poignancy as well...I suppose so but I think that's what Anthony is very good at he will zero in on somebody...

GC: He writes for the actor, specifically for the specific actor. That's what I've noticed and from my experience.

BP: Yes he does.

GC: You've got a lot to do in this show, a shit-load of stuff to do.

BP: Yeah...yeah. I mean it's funny; when I first worked with him he wrote this thing and I thought 'bloody hell! This is great for me...my God this is fantastic! It's exactly what I want to be doing.' But another part of me kind of thought 'blimey! Is that what he sees?' (Gary laughs) And now that I'm a bit older, a bit wiser, I would hope...this is the fourth time that I've worked with him or something...I'm slightly more accepting of that.

GC: I suppose that can be a bit of a double-edged sword?

BP: It is a bit, and I think 'oh I do that do I? Ok.'

GC: That's really interesting, because when he wrote for me it was like 'fuck, does he think that I'm that weird?'

BP: (Laughs). Yeah...yeah.

GC: Ok, cool mate. To what extent do you think that you are creating your character? How much input are you getting in to what you do?

BP: That, again, is kind of tied up with the last question. It's a more difficult one to answer for this show. At the moment not...at the moment I'm just kind of going with the flow. I think that in the next few days a lot of things are going to fall into place. It's difficult because I think that with this show it's about the experience of doing it; because it's so self-contained. At the moment I don't feel like I'm contributing enough. I think that I've still got a lot of thinking to do. I may have a think and try a few things out and go 'actually I don't need to over think this.'

GC: I've noticed you doing a lot of things and trying them once and then you just don't do them anymore. I've noticed you doing a lot of that kind of thing.

BP: Yeah...yeah. Because I kind of think that once it's on the page I can't change those words. (Pause) It's a weird one this one because with *Dissocia* and *Edward Gant's* there were very defined characters. With this it's much more fluid...

GC: It's very fragmented as well; it's like putting together a puzzle where the joins are really important.

BP: Yes that's right, it's the nature of it. I think only when we do it will we go 'ok that doesn't need to be a through line there', or maybe it does? I really don't know.

GC: Yeah, you've still got a long way to go with this tech.

BP: Yeah. Things are coming clear now. I hope that answers your question?

GC: Absolutely, it's all good. Do you have any doubts or concerns with this particular production above and beyond those that you would normally have?

BP: Do you mean in a play with a script for example.

GC: Yeah. Or: another production with Anthony. Anything at all...Anything that makes you worried or concerned, anything like that? There doesn't necessarily have to be.

BP: I'm not really concerned – maybe I should be -, I'm very...we were talking about this in rehearsals, I think you were there, it's very interesting how it's going to be received. Although a lot of these things have been tackled before, I think this is a very interesting way of doing it. And as you've seen, the layering of things on stage together, the cacophony of things...how are people going to react? I'm not overly concerned; I think we'll be able to put it on in time. Because, with this, it's a lot of couples just talking. So a lot of it comes from the conversation. That's what my concern is at the moment that we can get...that we can convey the nuances that the text requires; and convey it in a theatre. Even just going out for the tech today, it's a dead space vocally.

GC: I've noticed that as well; the vocal levels, you need to bring it up.

BP: And it's whether the text can take that.

GC: Totally mate. That's a very interesting technical point. It remains to be seen, doesn't it? That's great Barney, that's a very interesting technical thing that you've said there. Do you think that you're taking any risks in rehearsals that you would not normally take? I'm going to talk a bit about risk now, because I think that Anthony's stuff can be quite high risk.

BP: I think it is, in that every actor has to give a lot of themselves; whether they know it or not. Because that's the nature of what Anthony does, I think; he analyses things and people, he'll analyse a sentence, he'll analyse a conversation. So the risk is that you have to trust that he's going to be able to do it. And also, we've been through the stage...we hit a stage about two weeks ago where everybody was like 'we don't know whether we're going to get a script'; because the script we had wasn't good enough, you know. He said that, and then there was a point, which I'm sure you're aware of, when he came in and he came in with some really good stuff...

GC: And morale went up. I noticed that.

BP: That's a risk. And it might be that...I suppose it's the thing that will people engage with it? Because it's not like presenting a script where, you can pretty much tell whether people will. It's the thing where we're doing it and going 'what do you think?'

GC: There seems to me that there's a risk whether it will be ready in time.

BP: Yeah...I think it will be. That's the great thing about the previews – I think we've got four previews which is great -. But you're right actually after today (Laughs)

GC: I know, in a scary way, it's been going really slow today. You've got only about ten minutes into the script and you're nearly at the end of the first day. The pace seems to have really dropped.

BP: Oh yeah.

GC: Ok mate. What do you do to deal with the risks in this kind of show? How do you deal with them?

BP: (Pause) I don't think about anything that I don't need to think about. I just worry about the thing that I'm doing. Because I think with this kind of 'process' it's very easy to kind of forget that you're just here as an actor. It's like 'I'm not the writer'...with some productions you feel an ownership to the total thing and you feel a responsibility for the total thing. With this, what I've found working with Anthony is that you feel an ownership, you feel very protective of it...

GC: Well, a lot of it is you.

BP: Yes, that's right...but you don't feel responsible. Which is a very nice position to be in, I think. So it gets to a point...and it's a little bit more difficult with this one because of the fluidity of how we've been doing it, certain things haven't been set. But there gets to a point where I go 'right ok, that's it. Now I need to just approach it as I would any other script. And I think that has just happened on Friday.

GC: Ok, excellent. What's your personal take on the saying that acting and performance is all about risk? To what extent do you agree or disagree with that statement? A lot of things can happen on stage. A lot of actors say that they really enjoy taking risks, it's all about risk in performance, we don't want it to be stayed etc etc.

BP: I think it depends on the type of job you're doing. Because I think that there's some jobs where everything just needs to be (makes very precise hand –gestures) as is there. (Pause) But I think in a thing like this...it's not for me about taking risks, it's about trying things...just trying to find new things to keep yourself interested. Even if it's just a different way of saying a line or if it's doing something completely different. And to push yourself I suppose...Yeah.

GC: Ok mate. To what extent do you enjoy taking risks; is it your kind of thing? I notice you doing a lot of different kind of things all the time.

BP: Well I suppose that I don't want to just do something that I've decided is right. I've tried that in the past. I've gone 'oh I think it would be really good if I came across as this. Or if I did that as this.' What I like to do is that when I hit something that feels good, then I think that 'if that feels good, if it feels right, then hopefully it's getting somewhere near what is correct for that moment; or for that part.' I find it quite difficult sometimes talking...is it instinct, I don't know. You know what it's like Cas when you rehearse a scene and it goes really well the first time that you do it, then you do it again, again and again and you decide to do it the first way because that was the best way. (Pause) And there's no point taking risks if you're the only one taking risks. (Both laugh) But sometimes you do though...

GC: Running across no-man's-land and the a sniper goes 'ding.'

BP: Yes.

GC: That's good. I think this is high risk, but It's also high reward, this show. That's what I see as a spectator/audience member.

BP: Oh that's good.

GC: I was wondering is there are any potential rewards for risk that you see in this show?

BP: Well going back to this thing, that if people really engage with it...I think if people engage with it, they really will engage with it. I think that it could be a really, really enjoyable thing to sit and watch. We've talked in rehearsal about this thing, from quite early on, that hopefully it will be something that will bleed into people's life as they leave. And if that kind of thing can happen then that's great, isn't it...That for me would be the reward if people go 'yeah, parts of that really stayed with me', or the whole thing stays with them.

GC: I think when it comes together, there's a lot there that people will like. I'm not just saying that to blow smoke up anybody's arse.

BP: Good, good.

GC: it's genuinely what I think. Once the technical things, the music, sound all of that, and the confidence in you guys, you're going to have a really interesting show on your hands.

BP: Actually, just going back to this thing about risk...now we're there you're kind of...normally in an orthodox production you would be finding your feet...

GC: Oh yeah, you'd have done five runs by now, you'd have learned all your lines and you'd know exactly what's going on.

BP: It would all be coming together. In this it goes the other way. You come out of the rehearsal room and everything goes 'pphheeww!' (makes an explosion sound) And that actually is the risk that I'm feeling at the moment. It's like I have no idea what anybody else it's doing, I don't actually still know what I'm doing. And it's like what you were saying, that hopefully things will come together.

GC: I'm sure they will, I'm positive they will actually. I'm not saying they'll be there on Friday, I'd love them to be...I know it'll come together...Just a couple more wee quickies. Could you tell me how 'Elastic man' came about, because I find that quite interesting?

BP: It was a conversation in week two...we were interested in the idea of somebody playing a superhero. And then we had to think of ideas of superheroes that didn't actually exist, but could exist. So we had an hour and a half just talking. It was going to be the Fox, we had this character called the Fox...you know, cunning etc., but he wore a fox's head...so actually he is a bit of an idiot. (Gary laughs) I think there was a very, very early scene with the Fox and then it quickly became 'Elastic Man'. Zawe had a very funny one of the Wall, I can't remember what his special power was...make walls. And you were like 'he's a brick-layer, what?' (Gary laughs)

GC: He wears dungarees and a hard-hat.

BP: But it's funny because a lot of the material that Anthony uses...a lot of it's stand-up...We had this discussion in development work in *Get Santa*, and we were talking about *Saxophone Man*...there were superheroes connected with music that I can't remember. But what I think is interesting is how far he takes things. Because: there's a big difference between a funny conversation that you have with him; to comedy material; to dramatic comic material. And he's got that ability just to stretch thing out and then to twist it. It's great, it's great...And that is a reward for me...also I trust him to write very interesting, funny scenes. And sad, there's some very, very sad scenes.

GC: Your character especially has got some nice little poignant moments actually.

BP: I think everybody has. Anthony has this bitter-sweet...

GC: Tragicomedy is the correct genre name.

BP: That's right. But it's more sinister than that.

GC: I agree with you, a dark tragicomedy...a couple more very quickly. Do you think this show and Anthony's stuff requires a particular style of acting?

BP: Yes this show does. But I'm not sure I know what it is yet. (Gary laughs) That goes back to the vocal thing. It's a live show, it feels like it's very intimate...it's almost designed for a film or something.

GC: It's like what is required is a heightened naturalism tinged with surrealism...for me that seems to be the ingredients required.

BP: Yeah, yeah. Certainly in *Edward Gant* and *Dissocia* I knew...I had an instinctive feel for the style. But in this one: no idea yet.

GC: Does my presence here with this camera have any effect on you as a performer?

BP: No not at all. I was thinking though it's really nice...it's really good to have someone in watching it. And also you're a very positive presence.

GC: (Laughs) Well thank you very much kind sir.

BP: But, you know...you know what we're going through. You're not just observing us. Surprisingly, I've actually found it to be quite a good thing, I don't know why. It's having that extra lens to be watched through.

GC: Thank you very much. Last question Barney. Is there anything about this that you would like to talk about; anything to add, or not?

BP: No I don't think so...Except to add that I think the same thing as you. I was thinking that it would have been great if you'd seen a couple of those early improvisations. However, I think at that point maybe that would have been too early for the camera to come in. It definitely, definitely would have been.

GC: Yeah, I think that people would have been too self-conscious for that.

BP: So you definitely came in at the right time...yeah, maybe that's another thing as well, the improvisations that I've always done with Anthony, have always been the most embarrassing...not embarrassing, but open. But also, completely safe: because they've always been completely safe. Anthony's the only person really who usually...not all the time...you know when an improvisation's goes on way too long (Both laugh)

GC: Oh yeah! Stop the Nazi concentration camp improvisation. NOW!

BP: And you're in it going 'for God's sake stop...it's not working, we know what was working.' With Anthony I've never felt that...It's because he kind of switches off sometimes, you'll be doing an improvisation and he switches off. He's not the kind of person that's like that all the time. We did one for *Dissocia* that went on for two hours. Two hours!

GC: That's a long time.

BP: And it was just...it was great. It may have created a little bit of material, but what it did was it got us all...it got a load of crap out the way that would have taken weeks or a couple of weeks of lots of little improvisations.

GC: That's great Barney, thanks very much. You're a star mate.

BP: Thanks a lot.

GC: No thank you.

Barney Power 2014 Interview

GC: First of all; you've worked with Anthony quite a lot, so could you briefly talk me through some of your experiences of working on the various plays?

BP: Yes. The first one I did was *Edward Gant's Amazing Feats of Loneliness*... That was where we all went down to Plymouth, the cast. I think there were five or six of us and Anthony really had nothing, he had nothing, he had no script at all. But I think he had an idea... We worked very intensely for five weeks and he was writing very slowly. That was the slowest that he'd written because I think he had some kind of block or something and he was quite open about that. And it was a great show, a really good show, but it was a bit unfinished. Then he called me back in to do *The Wonderful World of Dissocia* a few years later.

GC: That's just been declared a world classic.

BP: What has?

GC: *Dissocia*. By Methuen. It's now a world classic.

BP: No!?! Wow, I've been in a world classic! (both laugh)

GC: Yeah, you've been in a world classic.

BP: That one was more intense because there was a lot more pressure. But the flipside of that was he had his ideas a lot more formulated. And any kind of improvisation things that we did were much more focused.

GC: I'd like to talk to you about improvisations in a little bit.

BP: And then I did a little thing for him at the Royal Shakespeare Company, which we did at Latitude Festival and was a site specific thing with zombies and *EastEnders* and an extended script. Then we did *Dissocia* again... Oh, I can't remember... we did *Narrative* last year which you saw and I really enjoyed actually. Because *Narrative*, for me, well for everyone actually, was about stripping down, right back down to the basics. It was very, very flawed, but by its nature, it had to be really. It really was like a bit of a test. And then I've just worked with him on this film trying to use some of the same methods of working as we do in the theatre.

GC: That's interesting, how that process would translate for the screen.

BP: As far as that goes from an actor's point of view, at this stage, the early stage, it's exactly the same. Because he says, 'Right this is an improvisation...' You kind of know why you're doing it and you know with Anthony that the improvisation will probably go on for a long time. It's difficult, but you stay in character, as much as there are characters, you know what I mean. (Gary laughs)

GC: Yeah, yeah. Ok, in your opinion, how collaborative is Anthony's process? Barney's laughing.

BP: No, it is (Pause) It's difficult...It's extremely collaborative, but I can understand why people get very frustrated about it, and people do get frustrated with it.

GC: Me being one of them.

BP: And I can completely understand that. But for me, it just suits. I guess it suits my character or something...For me, the roles are never blurred.

GC: The role between actor and director?

BP: Yeah, yeah. How can I put it? You have to trust Anthony to...His final decisions, you have to trust are for the good of the play. And it's his play, it's not my play. So I know what I can give to it and he knows what. But I don't think you can go into one of his projects and go, 'I want to do this.' Because if you do that you're in for a fall. I think you have to go in completely open-minded. I don't know if that answers your question. Put it this way, you're not just expected to go onstage and say the lines that he's written. And so I think that there's so much work that you have to do. It might be mental work, or stress, you know. So yes, there's a lot of collaboration. He's not after people who want to just go onstage and say his lines.

GC: No, that's not going to work, they're going to have a miserable, miserable time. They really are.

BP: Yeah. Yeah. But he listens to people, he lets everyone speak. And actually he will sometimes ask you to contribute even if they don't want to.

GC: I've seen him do this, I've seen him do this in *Narrative*. Ok then, let's go on to the improvisation then. I remember you mentioning to me before this two hour long improvisation that you did in *Dissocia* and you said that it 'cleared the decks of unnecessary clutter.'

BP: Did I say that?

GC: You did say that Mr. Power. (both laugh) Could you just talk to me about that improvisation?

BP: We had done similar ones in *Edward Gant* but this one, as I said, was much more focused. This one in particular was quite early on in the second week, or maybe the first week. Anthony wanted to look at the possibility of creating this world that eventually ends up being the first act. But of course, he'd already worked on it at LAMDA I think it was.

GC: Yeah, he did some work with students there didn't he?

BP: Yeah. What he wanted to do was explore the possibility of coming up with these different characters. So I think he basically put Chris or Amanda...I can't remember...The roles were not specified at this point. So we had to people this world in any way we wanted and I remember me and Alan Francis...(both laugh) I still think this is great...we were the singing butcher's and we had a meat shop that had no meat in it. I thought it was a great idea but nobody else picked up on it...So it was things like that...And you would move from one character to another. Jim was quite full-on I remember, which was very funny. I think we made him a king. You see, you can influence other people as well...I think Jim was made the king, or became the king. And it was interesting, in that...we didn't know it was going to be

two hours... When somebody says 'Improvisation.' I think, 'Christ, I hope this is over quickly.' You know.

GC: Yeah, me too.

BP: It just went on and on and on. And the thing was we could influence other people. And what Anthony's very good at is that he allows things to happen. You know what he's like as well, when you're discussing things, he'll just let things go on and on. Which is longer than normal people would actually do it. I think he does it in his writing as well. So in an improvisation similar things where after about the first half hour the pressure was off to try to make it interesting if you see what I mean. Because it was all about just trying to create interesting characters. And I suppose that feeds back into what you were saying about collaboration, because if you want to you can go, 'Well I'm going to do this and see what happens.' That way ideas do come up... Since I've worked with him, since *Dissocia*, there are more people in the rehearsal room, he brings more people in, which I think is good. But at that point, at that particular improvisation, it was only us, it was only us and him. That was it. And there's something to be said about that because you know that nothing will go outside, it's private, and you can really mess up and make an arse of yourself.

GC: Most improvisations tend to be used as a compositional device in rehearsals, to come up with a script with dialogue, characters, etc. Is this the function Anthony uses it for?

BP: No, I don't think so. And I think this is a slight misconception, but maybe it's not a misconception. Hearing other actors often talk about this, or ask about this... I think this is key to this idea of authorship because at no stage ever, when I've been working with him, have I ever felt that this is devised. I've done devised work, I did a lot of it when I was younger and I don't want to do it anymore.

GC: No, it's horrible.

BP: Yeah, it's a horrible process... That's what I mean, for me the roles are clear. (pause) I think that Anthony keeps a lot of stuff back. I think he knows the characters that he wants because he is a writer, he is a writer.

GC: Well, he's been doing it a long time, he's been doing it for twenty years.

BP: Working with him as a director he knows much more what he's doing with certain exercises now. Whereas, when I first worked with him he would try things out even if he wasn't sure about certain stuff... I think he is such a good writer, he can sit down and write a play. I know he finds it difficult. One reason he finds it difficult is because it's not so much fun.

GC: It's not, writing is difficult, very difficult.

BP: So I think there are certain characters that he's very clear about and certain themes. But what he wants to get is maybe the tone, or the way that somebody is able to speak, or the way it would be best for that person to speak. Or he wants to be able to see how this world can be created. I've worked with other directors who have a different approach, they might bring a play into rehearsals and then they say, 'Now we want to create a world... for want of a better word, a market.' So, you know, they'll prescribe things to you, for instance they'll say, 'Can you people be over there selling coats or something.' And you think, 'Ok, right, yeah, that's

fucking dull, there's better ways.' And coming at it his way is much more interesting. But he knows what he wants.

GC: But he doesn't state the objectives to you beforehand.

BP: No, no, but I think his mind's as open as anybody's. And also, he's quite willing to while away his time on something. And I think that's much more interesting... You can see it in productions, you've seen it in productions, where all the company comes on and they present a market scene. And it's awful! Whereas, if you've done it the other way round, his way, the world actually feels a bit better. I don't know what it looks like, it don't know if it's any different, but from an actor's point of view it feels more truthful. Although it probably looks ridiculous.

GC: That's the thing. These ephemeral things about acting, this shorthand that actors/practitioners have is really hard to define. Really, really difficult to pin down in concrete language. We talk about 'truth', 'feeling it', inhabiting the part', but what does this actually mean?

BP: Yeah, yeah, I know, I agree. It's an experience you know. He wants you, as an actor and as an audience, to have an experience.

GC: He's very big on the experiential. He doesn't want you to sit back and go, 'Oh that was a very intellectual message there.' He doesn't want that dry, cerebral thing, he wants an experience.

BP: Yeah. Yeah.

GC: Do these improvisations have any effect on the written text?

BP: That I don't know. I think they must do, I think they do... He doesn't take things verbatim I don't think.

GC: Well not very often.

BP: For example: in *Edward Gant's Amazing Feats of Loneliness* we had to research the characters. He didn't know about the characters; he knew about the story. And I came up with this character who'd fought in the Crimean War. So I read up about the Crimean war and I created a backstory for him. And I thought, 'Well maybe this'll work and maybe not.' And we did improvisations, it came out in improvisations... I can't actually remember if he was steering me that way or whether I steered him that way. But his backstory ended up in the final script, and it was referred to obliquely in the script. It's the relationship between the character I played and Edward Gant. I think I'd rescued Edward Gant or he'd rescued me from the Battle of...

GC: *Two Little Boys*. The Battle of Balaclava?

BP: Yes. (Pause) Whether it made it into the writing or not, it definitely made it into the production. Because we do these improvisations and then we go out and do the show. This is a key thing, because we're not doing these improvisations to produce a play, to produce a script. We're there to produce a show, you know. In *Dissocia*, for example, the Oathtaker song. He wouldn't have written that without Alan, in fact all of us, being a bit crap... Rehearsing it was absolutely infuriating, but hilarious as well. And I had this bloody

drum and he'd go, 'BANG IT!!! Bang it now, GO!!!' And what happens with that is, if you have actors who enjoy that kind of thing, who enjoy the energy, or fear, in a sense. I can only speak for myself, but what I liked about that scene was that we'd worked on this for five weeks and we were going to get it right. Do you know what I mean? We hardly ever did because we were awful. (Gary laughs)...And Anthony would say, 'You're all awful. You're going to be laughed off the stage.' And you kind of think, 'Well, we've got to turn that experience into making it.' And for me, that was one of the best parts of the show, I really enjoyed doing that bit because, for me, it was absolutely fitting in the world.

GC: It's kind of like the form mirroring the process almost, isn't it?

BP: Yeah. Yeah. And there were elements of that in *Narrative* where you didn't want to over-rehearse. You could have, you could have really made bits of it very slick. You have to have this slippage between slick moments where you go, 'You see we can. We can. But we're not going to.'

GC: You've got to show that you can do it so that at the other bits where it's not so polished people don't think, 'What's going on?'

BP: Yeah. Yeah.

GC: Ok, brilliant. Do you think that if you had a different group of actors in rehearsals you would end up with a very different play?

BP: Oh definitely, yeah. You would definitely end up with a different script. I have no idea, you should ask Anthony.

GC: It's a difficult one to answer.

BP: Yeah, that's one for Anthony. For example: the character of Biffa in *Dissocia* could only have developed because of Jim. That's not to say that another actor can't play it because it's written and it's there. But I saw when that happened, and when it started working...He's extremely sensitive about criticism and he's very unsure about some of his ideas. He's very sure about what he wants to do but he's not sure if it will work. And I think that's a case in point, he wasn't sure what to do about Biffa. He knew that he wanted this character...We were just doing this scene, this improvisation and it started working and it was really funny.

GC: So that whole section came from an improvisation, is that right?

BP: Again, I don't know. I don't know what happened at LAMDA. But I'm pretty sure it did. And another really long improvisation was about the lost property scene. Now that was very collaborative and we had to come up with ideas about what we'd lost. We had lost voice, lost virginity I think etc. And a lot of it made it into the thing. And I ended up playing the guy who's losing the argument. I'm quite argumentative, but I back down a lot, you know. And to have Jim as this other worldly character was hilarious because he hated it. He hated it!! You could speak to him...

GC: I've tried to get Jim but he's not around shall we say.

BP: I think he would grudgingly say I knew it was good. But I think he felt a bit put upon or not valued. That's a thing, it's a big thing in the rehearsal room with Anthony that a lot of people sit there feeling extremely undervalued. And actually that's not the case.

GC: But it's really difficult because... Well from my experience of it, I didn't know what I was getting myself into and Anthony didn't explain it. So you're sitting in rehearsals wondering what's going on because you're not rehearsing although you're there all day. I wasn't sure that you could pitch in with ideas and all that because he was working on the early scenes. So you sit there thinking, 'I don't know what the fuck I'm here for. I don't know what's going on.' I'd never experienced that before, I was only two years out of drama school and I didn't know this was how things were. I'd just come from working with Sarah Kane to working with Anthony, and they couldn't be more different in their rehearsal methodology. Sarah's very structured, there's a script there from day one etc., etc. It was all about honing your performance, but with Anthony it's not like that at all... I think he could communicate things to his new cast members what is expected of them a bit better.

BP: Yeah, oh definitely.

GC: Because they just don't know what's going on or what's required of them. They think they're here to do a play.

BP: Completely, completely.

GC: You want to be directed and to have a character.

BP: Oh definitely, definitely. He likes winding people up and if he sees an opportunity to wind people up he will.

GC: Yeah, there was a lot of winding up in *Narrative* wasn't there?

BP: Yeah! One day I got infuriated on this little film thing, you know. He just makes the odd comment and you think, 'Well, you know...'

GC: Fuck off?

BP: Yeah you do think that. But I think, 'Well I'm going to use this.'... The third or fourth day of working with him on *Edward Gant's Amazing Feats of Loneliness* he brought in a script. I've probably told you about this, he brought in this scene for me and it was just brilliant. I thought, 'I can say this, it's so easy to say.' And also you go, 'I just want to put this in front of an audience because it's good stuff.' If it was shit you wouldn't put up with it...

GC: It's almost like panning for gold isn't it? You've got to go through all that silt and mess to get to the nuggets.

BP: exactly, exactly... You can also go up to him and say, 'Well see that line there, I can't say it. It's not a good line.'

GC: Yeah, I've noticed that he's not precious about his words. If anything they're a framework.

BP: Exactly, yeah.

GC: In your opinion, what are the pros and cons of Anthony's unusual rehearsal methodology?

BP: (Pause) You have to buy into it.

GC: Is that a pro or a con.

BP: Con... Well no, it's both. If you do it it's a massive pro. If you don't you're going to be in for a bad experience and probably give a bad performance... I think you need to rehearse certain things more than he possibly does... More than anybody, when you say the first night is only the beginning, with Anthony's work that is true. I mean, we were still perfecting *Dissocia* when we'd been on tour for six months. But I do think that sometimes there are times when energy or adrenalin will get you so far and then you get to a point where you really have to start acting. Because I can't produce this emotion night after night just on a whim. That's when you have to act... I've never seen one of his except *the Lying Kind*... I saw *Stitching* as well but that was a very different thing, it was just a two-hander... In his desire to give everybody a fair crack of the whip he may end up over writing certain scenes. That's a criticism that could be levelled of him I would say. I'm not sure if he would agree with it, but there are certain scenes that go on too long... It's not indulgent but he does enjoy the process. Sometimes I think he's guilty of putting the process on stage maybe a little bit too much... But I think the pro is, one big pro is that you do get a lot of energy in all of his productions. And you do feel there are certain points when you think, 'I don't know what's going to happen.'

GC: Especially early on.

BP: Yeah. 'And I'm going to be surprised here.' And you're very aware that you're watching live theatre.

GC: Yeah, there's a definite sense of liveness or spontaneity for want of better words.

BP: Exactly.

GC: They are very difficult to pin down but you know it when you see it. You know it when you feel it, it's a feeling isn't it?

BP: Yeah. Yeah.

GC: Brilliant. Let's move on to actors now. What do actors actually do in Anthony's rehearsals? How do they contribute to the material being generated, if at all?

BP: It's been slightly different on every production.

GC: Of course.

BP: There's a lot of talking about ideas. But, again, we're very firmly there as actors not as devisors. I think you have to be responsive to whatever he throws at you, that is part of your job. And you've got to realise that some things he sets up are merely there just to see if they work. We did quite a lot of improvisation early on in *Narrative* and some of it just didn't work. And that was good enough to know that we were not going to end up doing that. I think a lot of it's just to get a language for the piece so that you all know what it requires. Like doing *Dissocia* was a lot different to doing *Narrative*.

GC: Well you've all got to be in the same play.

BP: Exactly. You've got a huge amount of personal responsibility for how you're going to do it. He will very rarely say directly, 'This is what I want you to do.' So you have to take ownership of it...

GC: That must be quite difficult because I noticed, filming *Narrative*, he would often say when things weren't working but not what you will actually do.

BP: Yes, he'll never say, 'I want you to do that.' Because if he doesn't say anything it means he's happy.

GC: Yeah, but you don't know that. Well I didn't know that.

BP: You just have to be on it. That final week of rehearsal you just got to go, 'Right! We're going to do this come hell or high water.' And learn stuff really quickly.

GC: Yeah. YEAH!

BP: It's funny, but it's never been a problem for me, he's always given me stuff quite early on which I feel very lucky about. (Laughs)

GC: It's quite terrifying. I got my stuff beyond the eleventh hour, two minutes to midnight was when I got my stuff. And it was really difficult to learn it that quickly.

BP: Again, it's a misconception, because what Anthony does do, is that as you go along he writes. Let's not say a play, because at times you think, 'I can't understand this as a play', in the way that you might understand *All My Sons*. What he gives you is a selection of well written scenes that you may or may not be in. So what you have to do is go, 'I've got to do this scene justice to the best of my ability' and treat it as an entity... In a way you're just the messenger, it's not yours. That's when any kind of authorship or ownership you may have of any of the material needs to just disappear... My view is that you treat it very reverently as a text. So *Narrative* for example, there's a couple of scenes in *Narrative* where you have to apply emotional memory and all of these things. And it doesn't matter if you've done all these improvisations... And that's what I mean about the roles being defined because that's where you become a pure actor in a sense, you know.

GC: That's very interesting and it's something I want to explore later on. In fact it's now we're going to come on to it. To what extent do any actor training techniques like Stanislavski's emotional memory, affective memory, or whatever have any bearing on working with Anthony? Do you use these techniques?

BP: Yeah, definitely. But you would never talk about them I don't think... Victor Hesse, for example, in *Dissocia*. It's one scene, a bloody long scene, and there's so much stuff in there for that character. You have to look at subtext, emotional memory, things like that. I approached it in quite a Stanislavskian way... with Chekov as well, there's always a bit of a wink to the audience. So I think you can do that. And also I think, he wants you to be in the moment and say the lines like they're absolutely the most important things you've ever said. There's a couple of lines at the end of act one of *Dissocia* where the two Mungarees pull off their jackets. It's ridiculous and it's all a spoof, but you can't play it like that. If you play it like that it's just dead, I imagine. I don't know, I suppose there is another way of doing it because it can't be panto. It has to have an element of that and you have to give the audience the idea it's panto and then go, 'Hang on, it's not.'

GC: Oh no it isn't.

BP: (Both laugh) Oh yes it is. Because you have to go, 'Oh well, look at how they're playing it.' And there's a show I saw here that Anthony did with Jo James, no Jack James. And Anthony got him to do this whole scene with a dildo strapped to his head and he just did it so spot on because he was so in it. And I don't think you could do that in any other play with any other director because there would be a decision somewhere along the line where someone would go, 'Ok, let's make a gag about a dildo.' The dildo was the gag...

GC: The dildo speaks for itself.

BP: (laughs) The dildo speaks for itself. It was so tragic to see this guy.

GC: I'm quite interested in exploring this particular avenue. In watching the *Narrative* rehearsals I see these techniques that I'm very familiar with as an actor. But I also see them trying to be applied but not working due to the particular qualities of a certain scene...It's just something that struck me in watching it back for the hundredth time. So I just wondered what your take is on that.

BP: That's interesting, yeah. I think that's part of it. There is the layer that a lot of his work is a satire on theatre. And it's difficult as an actor when you realise that because you can't let that affect you.

GC: I remember Zawe in particular seemed to have problems with this.

BP: Yeah.

GC: I could definitely see her using her actor training. Her instinct was telling her it wasn't working. Because of the subject matter these principles, for her, weren't gelling properly and it caused her a lot of problems.

BP: Yeah, yeah. But you've got to enjoy that it doesn't work.

GC: Well that's about trust and jumping in without knowing, isn't it?

BP: Yeah. (Pause) I've never really thought about it like that actually, it's interesting.

GC: No that's all right, it doesn't have to affect you. That's absolutely fine. Were you ever aware of Anthony specifically using, or adapting, any type of actor training exercise in rehearsals? Apart from improvisation.

BP: He does, yeah.

GC: What does he do? Which ones?

BP: Every time I work with him he's always got something and I think, 'Oh, that's a new one.' He did one that was a visualisation thing...I've never heard of it before but it was very useful and funny. You visualise certain things in the line and it's mainly about remembering the lines. And it worked on the first night and then it didn't on the second because I completely forgot my line. (Laughs) No, he doesn't adhere to these technical things.

GC: That's what I thought.

BP: Technical things like voice and things. But he would expect actors to be able to do it naturally. So he doesn't really force anything. But he will attempt to do things if he sees an actor going a bit wrong, or is blocked and he will try to talk to them (Laughs) - Sorry, it's very funny – to various degrees of success. (Laughs) And then if that doesn't work he'll go, 'Look, I don't want to show you but I will.' (Both laugh) And then he'll show you how he wants you to do it... When I was at the RSC we had to do all sorts of ridiculous things which were basically about walking on to the stage. And I thought, 'Well, I can walk on to a stage. I've done it a lot.' I won't have any truck with that.

GC: It's interesting for me because I know you would never notice this, but do you remember that box improvisation that you did in *Narrative*, that Zawe and Chris did, the box therapy that went on for fucking ages?

BP: Yes.

GC: I've been writing about that and I just went 'That's mask work. That's inadvertent mask work. That box is a mask.'

BP: Yeah. Yeah. He'll do stuff like that but he doesn't couch it in the same language.

GC: That's exactly what I mean, inadvertent.

BP: Oh yes, yes, I see what you mean.

GC: Do you see where I'm going with this?

BP: I do. I do, yes.

GC: It's very, very interesting because it's never talked about. But when you actually do the research, you get these things and you go, 'Ah right! This is his version of that...'

BP: Yes, Yes... He will do stuff that is almost Method but he would never say it like that. He kind of trusts you to know that you don't need that kind of language. And also I think what is interesting is that if you look at the casts that he always uses... they're very eclectic. People come from very different backgrounds. And he's more interested in the quality of the person, rather than the technical skill of an actor. But he is aware, he can see technical skills. What he'll probably do is highlight where you're lacking... Inability to sing, for example, would be something he'd end up making you do.

GC: Something I suffer from, the ability to sing badly.

BP: But a lot of it is to push you. He would never ever want anybody in their comfort zones. And he achieves that quite spectacularly.

GC: (Laughs) Yes, yes he does... Do you ever find it overly difficult to implement any of the material that Anthony writes for you?

BP: Yeah, I think it's all difficult. I think if it's easy there's a bit of a problem there.

GC: I was thinking overly difficult, more difficult than it would normally be.

BP: I see what you mean, yeah. So, no I don't think so.

GC: That's fine, you don't need to elaborate on it.

BP: I think he's very good at spotting very early on what isn't going to work and it'll disappear from the script.

GC: It connects to that thing that you just said about pushing you in directions that you're not comfortable with because it's not your thing. About your weaknesses.

BP: Yeah but he does it in such a way that you kind of know that you'll get there in the end. I think if something deserves to be in the play then it's worth doing. So, no.

GC: That's absolutely fine. So, how much of your self has been in the parts that you've played? How much of Barney?

BP: In *Narrative*?

GC: Any, it doesn't matter.

BP: In *Narrative* there was a lot because that was part of the process really... You kind of go into a role with Anthony knowing quite early on, that you're not interchangeable I think. He wants to get the best out of people so he wants to use people's strengths. Definitely. But he also wants people to push themselves and he wants to push people. So a lot of yourself, either as an actor or as a person.

GC: It seems to me that he fuses them both together.

BP: Yeah.

GC: The actors as themselves is very important as well as their ability to act.

BP: I think that some people may have a problem with that. Like you were saying, sometimes you can be in a rehearsal with him and you think, 'What am I doing/ I'm not acting, what am I doing? I'm just doing stuff.'... Then sometimes you think, 'This is bad, this is bad acting.' But you have to turn that around. I mean, I've been in plays where there's bad acting. It's generally not Anthony's plays... I've just remembered actually that I did see *Realism* and it was brilliant.

GC: Was this the original production?

BP: Yeah, and I thought it was brilliant. But it was rough and ropey, people weren't secure. But that's acting, you know. It's not Oscar Wild, it's not *the Importance of Being Earnest*.

GC: Ok. Do you think you have to more than just an actor in Anthony's rehearsals? (pause) I'm moving into the authorship area now.

BP: I think he expects you to think a bit more around the ideas, but it depends on the production because it's been different for each one. *Narrative* was different. I think *Narrative* was difficult because you were aware that it was about ideas... It was more about ideas and provoking people to think than the other shows which were a bit more of an experience.

GC: It was less experiential *Narrative*, wasn't it?

BP: And in that sense I think... We had to spend a lot of time discussing the ideas and sometimes you think, 'I don't want to do that.' or 'That's not my job.' I mean, you can sit there and not contribute. But I think you are expected to contribute.

GC: I remember Olly. When Olly did say things they were sometimes quite interesting but he didn't really say much at all.

BP: But I think that can be a good thing, you see. Because, again, it goes back to how he collects different groups of actors. So there's someone like me who's quite vocal about stuff and then you have someone...I agree with what you said about Olly and I think you need that because you can't all be vocal. I'm sure that everybody holds back stuff and you go, 'Well, I'm not going to say that, what's the point of saying that? That's not my job. That's your job. You think about it.' And I think he's quite happy with that.

GC: Ok. Do you think that Anthony accommodates the process that you, as an actor, need to go through to give a confident and credible performance?

BP: No. Definitely not. Definitely not. But if you're willing to come out of the other side. If you come out of the other side thinking, 'Well, this is a good scene, or a good performance, or a good play, or a good show.' I think it's worth it in the end. But no, not at all. It goes back to what I was saying before, you can go on, first night, everybody's happy because of the adrenalin. It's probably the third or fourth night when the cracks begin to show and that's where you have to do a lot of work because you have to go, 'Ok, there's a lot of gaps here and I've got to fill them in.'

GC: Yeah, you've got to make sense of things, you got to get your character journey, you've got to get these things.

BP: Yes. Or realise that there is no journey and that you go, 'Ok, well I said that this way last night and I think that works, so I need to repeat it.' No, definitely not. I mean there was one time in *Narrative* where I did something...this was the seventh or eighth performance and Anthony came back stage and went, 'What did you do that for?' So I went, 'Well hang on a minute, on one level you're giving me a free rein and on another level you're not.' That's difficult to deal with, that's very difficult.

GC: What did you do?

BP: I can't remember.

GC: Did you cut it? Did you do what he said?

BP: No, no, no. I think he was right. It was on one line where I shouted the line and I hadn't done it before. And it was wrong. But it was like, 'Well don't make me feel bad for doing that.' And he didn't mean to, but he was like, 'Well don't do it again.' But then he would argue, he would argue that because of his process he's still directing all the way through the run.

GC: How difficult is it when he's still directing when it should be hands off and let you get on with things?

BP: I think you got to be secure in yourself and just take it on the chin and then do it however you want to do it...You could actually just say, 'No, this is how I'm going to do it, this is how I want to do it.' I do think it's infuriating sometimes. The night before we did *Dissocia* at the Lyceum...or was it press night...he was telling me loads of stuff to stop doing, to stop doing loads of stuff. And I eventually just walked out...He said, 'I'm just trying to stop you looking like a cunt.' So I just walked out because I thought 'This is just what I don't need.'

GC: Especially just before you were going to go on, on press night.

BP: He did it, I listened to him and then went, ‘Well, my job is to listen to it because he’s not only the director, he’s the bloody writer.’ So, there’s that as well. Just like you when you were working with Sarah Kane. So I sat down and I thought, ‘Ok, what am I going to do?’ because I actually liked what I was doing... So I took it all out and he was right. That is the infuriating thing... There’s some actors, in any production, who wilfully react against people sometimes... And you think, ‘This is not for the good of the play, this is for your insecurities, selfishness, or whatever. It’s for your mental well-being that you’re doing this. So that you can go well I did what I wanted to do.’ But maybe what they wanted to do was wrong. But the flipside of that is that sometimes you think, ‘Well you should have directed it a bit more.’

GC: Of course you would.

BP: And I’ll tell you what I’ve noticed. What I think is wrong to do is to say that this happens because this is the way we do it. This is the way we work. I think there’s a bit of a danger with that... with this process. Because I’ve worked with him four or five times now, so I don’t think you should ever say that. I don’t think you should ever be in a position where you go, ‘This is just what happens because this is the way we work.’, because I think this is really dangerous. I think what he should do with actors who are familiar with the way he works is go, ‘Is it right, is it right that we work like this for this play?’ Sometimes I think there’s a slight danger that you could go, ‘well that scene’s a bit under-rehearsed and that’s the way we do it.’ Because if you always have fifty percent of the people who’ve worked together before and fifty percent who haven’t, there’s always a bit where you might go, ‘You’ll be getting a script, you’ll be changing your lines just before you go on stage, you’ll be playing a different character tomorrow.’ And then you go, ‘Well hang on a minute, maybe this job will be different.’... I think that’s where complacency might come in... I would hope that would never be the case. I would hope that you always strive to get things the way they should be before the show opens. And don’t ever rely on the process, because the process is just the process... If people get fixated on the process... I mean you don’t want to see the process on stage, do you?

GC: No, no, you want to see a show.

BP: Exactly, exactly. It’s very interesting, but ultimately, what you are presenting on stage should be as good as you can get it.

GC: As an actor, when you walk out on to that stage you want to do your best, you want to be good, you want to feel as if you’re good. That’s what I wanted, I wanted to feel that I was good, it didn’t really matter to me what the audience thought. Selfishly, it was about how I felt, I was my own internal judge.

BP: Yeah, yeah, and that I did the best that I could.

GC: So when you’ve been working with Anthony have you ever felt that you were failing in your job as an actor?

BP: Yes, yes.

GC: What happened?

BP: well just when you go on and you think it could have been better...*Dissocia* and *Narrative*, for me, were just a collection of scenes as I said earlier. So you kind of think, 'Well, I'll make the next scene good.' So you can't really approach it as one character that goes all the way through. Again, it goes back to the fact that maybe if you'd rehearsed things more you could have got a bit more out of it. But then again, you might have lost something else as well.

GC: So you think it's a fair trade-off, you gain more than you lose?

BP: I think so.

GC: Ok. So what is it like to witness, or be involved in, these lengthy discussions in rehearsals that end up going nowhere, or the ideas generated being rehearsed and ultimately cut? What's that like?

BP: In *Dissocia* there was a whole other section for the three Mungarees and Victor Hesse was going to come back. We started doing it in an improvisation then we ran out of time because we were at the end of the day. And Anthony said, 'It's good that you're doing that because I'm thinking about writing another scene for Victor Hesse to come back.'...But it never happened. It's ok because they're not really cut...I think there should actually be more cutting going on. You could go through *Narrative* and go, 'Cut that, cut that, cut that.'

GC: To be honest with you, the actual play text that came out a month or two ago bears little resemblance to some parts of the show.

BP: Has he cut it?

GC: Yeah.

BP: Really? Really? Wow!

GC: Yeah, that whole 'Box therapy' bit is not in the play anymore, but it happened in the performances.

BP: That's interesting...It's not really cut though.

GC: It changes and evolves into something else. A remnant of it. An echo.

BP: I think there's stuff in *Dissocia* that could really be cut; about two thirds of the way through, before you get to *Lost Property*.

GC: The field of flowers and such like doesn't really need to be there....So it doesn't really have any effect on you as a performer?

BP: No, not really.

GC: Do you think these cuts fulfil a constructive criteria? And the lengthy discussions that go nowhere?

BP: Yes. Probably for him because part of it is the writing process. What is frustrating is that you are aware that you are in the process of writing as well as the process of rehearsing, and that is frustrating. But, you see, I've never worked with him...he did *Marat Sade* and *Caladonia*, did you see that?

GC: I didn't see it, but I've heard about it. I heard it was a cock-up. I've heard really bad things about it.

BP: It's slightly different when you realise that he's got to write something, you know.

GC: I know it's something you can't really talk about, but I'm really interested in how his process translates when he's not doing his own stuff.

BP: Yeah, that would be interesting.

GC: How would you define truth in acting? This is a bit of a crap question to spring on you mate... Truth, reality, keeping it real, whatever; these slippery terms that we all know what they are.

BP: It's about the ability to say a line and absolutely have a connection to that line as you say it.

GC: An emotional connection?

BP: Yeah. People talk about 'believe it.' I'm not really sure about believing it because it's all theatre. You have to take each line absolutely on the moment. I think I possibly think about things too much before I say them. It's that thing about thinking on the line, though that's probably because I'm trying to remember the bloody line.

GC: (laughs) That's because you've probably never rehearsed them.

BP: Exactly, yeah. It's one of these wanky things that actors talk about. So, in *Narrative* for example, I could tell you about three or four times where I was being truthful. In that I was really connecting with every line and there was a (snaps fingers) a flow going on.

GC: What bits were they?

BP: The scene where Olly reveals that he's got that part, which is a really difficult scene to do... The follow up scene is a bit different, it's more comic. Some of those lines go (snaps fingers on each word) bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang! And they're written in a very naturalistic way, a naturalistic way where conversations aren't compact in a nice little package.

GC: They're not dramatically, grammatically, syntactically perfect.

BP: Exactly, exactly. So you have to invest every line with the feeling. There's a line like, 'Maybe I should just give all this up.'

GC: 'Maybe I should give up the flat and move out of London? Maybe it's for the best.'

BP: That's right. It's a big jump. The thought process isn't there like in a well-written play. (laughs)

GC: Well that's a technical term.

BP: Yeah, that's right. So you have to make those links. The truth is where you are able to make the link between scenes. I was watching a film the other day, I can't remember what it was, and it was a really ropey script, a really badly written script. Oh I know what it was, *Edge of Darkness*. Have you seen *Edge of Darkness*?

GC: The original *Edge of Darkness*? Yeah, I've seen it.

BP: It's bonkers! Absolutely bonkers!

GC: I watched it recently.

BP: Some of it is brilliant but some of it is awful...It's like a sledge hammer coming in, but they do it. Most of those actors say those lines and they're just fantastic. You're just there going, 'What! What are they saying?! That's just great, that's fantastic!'

GC: it's like if you're in that truth zone, for want of a better term, the lines take care of themselves a lot of the time.

BP: Exactly!

GC: It's that liminal thing between thought and feeling. And you know when it is, but more importantly you know when it's not.

BP: Yeah, exactly. And if you push stuff too much...Sometimes you have a line and you can't push it, you've just got to say it...That thing again, about not rehearsing things, that can be quite frustrating because you go, 'Oh, I knew that was wrong!' But it's too late, you're in front of an audience so you go, 'tomorrow Night.' Then tomorrow night it works. But then it's very frustrating because you think, 'Well, yeah tonight is good, but what about last night?' Then there's the type of actor that just wants to do exactly the same performance every night.

GC: The robot.

BP: And you can understand why they want to do that. It's because they don't want to have that feeling. They don't want to have that feeling of frustration going on. 'Fuck! Fuck! I knew that wasn't right, but I've just said it in the wrong way.'

GC: You do come across actors who do that. But if you're give them something different that night it really fucks up the performance because they don't look as if they're reacting to you and you don't look as if you're reacting to them.

BP: Either that, or they don't care.

GC: It's shit, I hate that.

BP: It, is. It is.

GC: Ok, not many more to go. Anthony usually works as director and writer; does this raise any issues? Do any tensions or problems emerge because of the merging of these two roles in one person?

BP: Yes. (pause) I suppose the ability to step back...I'm not sure this is right, but for me, it can be about a question of pace in direction. Do you know Tony Cowney?

GC: I know Tony Cowney, yeah.

BP: I would like Tony Cowney to direct an Anthony Neilson play because Tony's brilliant with pace. He's brilliant with rhythm, he just knows. Whereas I think Anthony sometimes will reflect of the way he was feeling when he wrote a scene. Sometimes you think (snaps

fingers quickly) ‘Come on we need to do it quicker, we need to get through this.’ But then again you wonder what you would lose in doing that. In *Narrative* there were lots of scenes that went on too long...It’s difficult because there’s always a line in the scene after you think it’s too long, there’s always a line where you think, ‘Oh, no, that was worth it.’ Like ‘Cumberbatch on my façade.’

GC: That’s my favourite line in the whole play.

BP: I mean, that’s a very long bit, it’s a very, very long bit. But it’s a good pay off. It’s the same with *Stitching*...

GC: I know exactly what you’re saying. Anthony’s writing is often very loose, does he encourage you to adapt, to in effect, make his words your own?

BP: Yes and no. Like you said, he’s not too precious. He’ll say ‘That sentence doesn’t have to be said exactly the way I wrote it if you’re finding it difficult.’ But then again, I think you’re aware, as an actor, which lines are very important. So a bit of both really.

GC: Ok. Conventional notions of authorship, especially that of the single author, seem problematic when applied to Anthony’s particular writing methodology. Do you think this is the case?

BP: I think it is problematic...

GC: Care to elaborate?

BP: I don’t know really. I mean it is and it isn’t, the deal is the deal. I think it’s more problematic with a more devised show. Anthony goes away and writes stuff and he’s the writer. He’s certainly never used...I mean this is what you’re talking about, material? I can’t think of anything specific that he’s used of mine that has come out of improvisation. I suppose where it becomes problematic is when he involves actors all the way through the process, and in that sense you give a lot. But that’s the deal.

GC: Authorship is quite a complicated thing.

BP: Put it this way, financial things aside, but when I heard that *Edward Gant’s Amazing Feats of Loneliness* was being staged again I felt (pause) extremely possessive of it. To the point where, initially, I went, ‘They can’t do that!!! Without me!!!’ That sort of thing. It’s like, ‘Well no, get a grip of yourself. It’s a published play that anybody can do. Why not. It’s out there.’ And I’m bloody glad that plays like that are out there. I think *Edward Gant* is really good and I think *Dissocia*’s a fantastic play.

GC: World classic.

BP: World classic. I’m extremely proud to have been involved in them.

GC: Of course somebody picks up that play and they read Barney Power that’s forever mate, that’s there forever.

BP: Yeah, exactly, you can’t take that away.

GC: I know, I’ve got that with Sarah Kane. A little piece of history.

BP: Exactly.

GC: Ok, about authorship. I remember in *Narrative* when you did the footmouse bit and then Anthony comes up with the idea, ‘Oh let’s film this bit. We can put it up on the screen. We could use you Cas!’ Obviously I’ve got nothing to do with the writing, but the authorship comes about from the stimulus of me being in the room at that point. Because without me being there with the camera he might not have come up with that idea.

BP: That’s right, that’s right.’

GC: I’m not claiming that this is my little moment. But this is things about authorship about authorship; random conversations outside of the rehearsal room, it’s really complicated.

BP: It’s interesting and it becomes more complicated the more successful these plays become and the more interest there is towards it. Because, naturally, there’s a part of you that goes ‘Oooohhh!! I was involved in that!’ I feel it more strongly with *Edward Gant* because we were stuck in Plymouth for six or seven weeks.

GC: Yeah, there was the whole backstory that you had invented. I’ve talked to Matt and Chris about this. He asked you to go away and come up with your characters, didn’t he?

BP: Yeah. And there’s all that stuff about the Crimea. And it’s like, ‘Well bugger.’

GC: It’s like signing up for an advert and not getting your repeat fee for it. Just getting your little wage, your little fee.

BP: It’s a little bit like that, but I’ve worked with him five times and I’ve really enjoyed it. But it is weird. But from his point of view he’d be like, ‘Look, there’s nothing to own. I bloody wrote the stuff.’ And, in fact, he has said that, he’s said that. I’ll give you an example, the flipside of that. In *Edward Gant* there’s a line...Edward Gant says, ‘What have we learned from this little story?’...the line in the text is ‘What do we learn by this?’ and my character says, ‘Never trust an Indian sir.’ So he’s inappropriately racist. Anyway, one night I changed it to ‘Never trust a snake charmer.’ or something...I felt I was totally justified in doing that because a part of me thought that this was our play, So Anthony came up to me and went, ‘Are you censoring it? Are you censoring my writing?’ Sort of in a jokey way, but he was right...I’m not a writer, I can’t write this stuff. I can’t write one scene of that stuff. I just know I couldn’t. So I can’t really claim any ownership at all. It would be like helping somebody to paint a wall and then going, ‘That’s my wall.’

GC: I get what you’re saying. I just remember there were bits in *Narrative*, Olly’s stuff about Hamlet and Macbeth and the moody teenager, because that’s all in the play-text.

BP: Yeah, that’s interesting. I’d forgotten about that.

GC: There’s loads of that in *Narrative*. I’ve got the footage of you coming up with the lines and they’re all in the play text.

BP: That is very true. It does seem to happen to other people rather than me. (Both laugh) Maybe I’m just not saying the right things, you know. That example you’re saying I think is pushing it. Amanda swears that there was a line that she used which ended up in *Dissocia*. But if you feel that strongly about it, go up to him and say, ‘You can’t write that without accrediting it to me.’

GC: For me, I'm trying to gather in all the strands that go into authorship. I'm not trying to make a valiative judgement that you should get paid for this. It's very interesting the process of authorship and what goes into it.

BP: Do you know Vanishing Point.

GC: I've heard of them.

BP: All their stuff is devised but it's devised in a way that I can't cope with. In that, the artistic director, Matthew Lentin has a similar approach. In that, he goes, 'I am the eventual author. I am the final author.' But he doesn't write plays because they don't produce plays. I did a show where our voices weren't heard at all. We were speaking but we were inside a box. And it all came from us, it all came from improvisation, all of it, the entire thing. It was a really good show, it won awards up in Scotland. They're still doing it with a new cast. And I'm very happy for them, I'm really happy for them. There's no play. But that infuriates me a little bit more than with Anthony. Because Anthony goes away and goes through the fucking difficult time of actually writing the play. And I know it's not easy.

GC: No, it's not easy to write.

BP: And also the quality of what he writes, when it works, is really, really good. We wouldn't be talking about this if it wasn't quality.

GC: Or unusual, or noteworthy.

BP: Yes exactly, exactly. Though it does go back to that thing that it's never happened to me. If what happened to Olly happened to me I think I would probably go up to him and say, 'I want a credit for that.'

GC: The stuff that you did with Olly, Elastic Man, where you go, 'Mr. Rix to the set.' and all that. That's in the play text and you just came up with that off-the-cuff.

BP: Yeah, but that's not the same. Anybody could have come up with that...I did a radio show with Alan Francis and we used some stuff from some sketches that we'd done together. And Anthony had written a couple of the sketches with Alan...and there was some material of mine in there. And I was in the radio show and I saw the sketches. And I went a bit ballistic and I said to Alan I wanted a credit. I said, 'I know it's too late for money', because it was the fucking BBC, but I said, 'I do want a credit.' I was insistent. And that was enough for me. But I haven't seen any of the scripts, I don't think I've even read *Dissocia*. I've got the script at home. I'd be quite interested to see *Narrative*. You came in after we had done all that stuff.

GC: Yeah, you talked to me about this on camera.

BP: That's difficult...I don't know how Carol Churchill...This is not specific to just Anthony, I think Carol Churchill worked like this.

GC: But she credited her actors in her earlier stuff...In *Cloud 9* there's a big list, acknowledgements and all that.

BP: What about Mike Leigh?

GC: I don't know how he credits it. I don't have a problem with it personally when you know what you're letting yourself in for.

BP: No, I don't.

GC: I'm just interested in his authorial process.

BP: But I know that people do. It's quite interesting as well, because actors who haven't worked with him have a problem with it. It's surprised me a little bit, it has surprised me...I don't think he intentionally takes people for mugs. But that is interesting about *Narrative*, I'd forgotten about that. For that scene with Olly. And Olly was really good in it, really funny...But I'm pretty sure...Have you spoke to Olly about it...I'm pretty sure that him and Anthony had a conversation about it. I think Anthony might have asked him about it, but I might be wrong.

GC: What happened in the technical rehearsal, because I've filmed it, Olly's doing it and he comes up with this Martin Scorsese stuff as well. And Anthony says to him 'No, cut the Martin Scorsese. I really like the Hamlet and Macbeth, are you going to keep that in?'

BP: Olly says that?

GC: No, Anthony asks him if he's going to keep it in...That's what I'm saying about his authorship, it's really convoluted and interesting. I've got to plot it, but that's my job.

BP: Well here's a question. Do you know there's a film coming out this Christmas called *Get Santa*? And you know he wrote a play called that.

GC: I know he did.

BP: Well Nick was talking about this the other day because Nick did the music for *Get Santa*. And you wonder how they get away with it because it's a published play, *Get Santa's* a published play.

GC: Is it a film of the play or just the title?

BP: It's just the title.

GC: Well maybe some little deal was made through agents. Or maybe they're just letting it go and then they can sue them for huge sums of money.

BP: Exactly. But I like to think it's happening to Anthony as well.

GC: (laughs)

BP: I don't mean that...

GC: Yes you do. I'm going to erase you backtracking.

BP: I think it's an interesting question. But I do think it gets more interesting the more successful these plays get.

GC: Of course. It's what we said off camera about Anthony making a lot of money from his plays being put on overseas.

BP: I make no money at all.

GC: I know. Ok, almost finished Barney. Anthony's authorial methodology strikes me as both that of a theatrical magpie and as an editor who invests a noticeable amount of time condensing material that's developed during rehearsals. Do you think that's accurate?

BP: Yeah, pretty much...I definitely think it's true about the magpie thing, it's quite interesting. For me part of the fun of working on it is that you can be in one scene and go 'this is realism', you can be in another scene and go 'this is fantasy', this is absurdist theatre, this is...

GC: A cop show, this is *Reservoir Dogs*.

BP: This is a love scene etc. The second part is true up to a point, but I think it's more that he will mold what you do in rehearsal to what he wants...He's guiding stuff and shaping things to fit his end. And I think he knows his end before he starts the project, even with *Narrative*. With *Narrative* he knew from the beginning he wanted to do a show where there was no narrative. He knew that. And there was a point where we pushed a little bit and said 'Look, you've got to have some narrative.' But there was no way that was going to happen.

GC: He's very resistant sometimes. His ideas are his ideas.

BP: Brian came in on day four or something, a later stage. And we'd kind of had these conversations. So the ideas about *Narrative* were presented to him and his initial reaction was, 'I think that's crazy. I think as an audience member you would sit there going "I want a narrative."' And I remember this. And you would go, 'Fuck! We can't have another day of this. Or two days of this.'

GC: It would kill you wouldn't it?

BP: And there was no argument because Anthony knew what he wanted. And there's a thing, when you're working with him, when you're doing an improvisation or you're doing a scene when you know this is never going to make it into the final script, this is not right and everybody knows it.

GC: Yeah, I remember where you did that video game stuff, the superheroes, 'I am Queen Zelda's daughter, dou, dou, dou.' And they did it four times exactly the same. Imogen and Brian it was.

BP: That's right. There was another thing about moving in straight lines before the set got redesigned. Do you remember that?

GC: Oh yes! , Yes, yes, yes.

BP: And you just knew this was not working and we're not going to do this. But you do it.

GC: It's like a purgative.

BP: Yeah. Whereas if you were working on a normal play, in a normal process you would know that you were going to do it. It's not working but we're going to do it.

GC: Ok, final question. Why do you think Anthony has this pool of actors that he repeatedly employs?

BP: Because we're cheap and available. (both laugh) I don't know, I really don't know... You'd like to think that he sees something in us, but I don't know.

GC: Course he does, don't be so modest...

BP: Obviously you've got to be able to act and you've got to be able to do what he wants you to do. But more than that he likes to work with people he feels he can get the most out of.

GC: That his process will work with?

BP: Yeah. That might be people who will challenge him. For example Chris will, there's always a time where she will challenge him at least once.

GC: And rightly so actually. Rightly so.

BP: Completely, completely. But probably what is happening now I think is that he now has a group of actors – and I think that's always been his intention – a group of actors he can call upon – to go back to this shorthand thing – that he can say something to and he knows they will understand him. And I think that is really, really important.

GC: I think if he had eight actors who had never worked with him before you wouldn't actually get a show by the end of the four or five week rehearsal process.

BP: Well certainly not a good one. I think it would be quite interesting if he did a show with a cast entirely of people who he'd worked with before. Though maybe that wouldn't work, maybe you need a blend. But I know from the first time working with him on *Edward Gant* it's always been his intention. I think what he would like was to get his own company. I think that would be great.

GC: That's what we'd all like, isn't it?

BP: Exactly. Matthew Lenton of *Vanishing Point* does the same thing. But I would like to think that's not the only reason, I would like to think it's the quality of the acting as well. But let's see what he does when he gets a mega, mega budget.

GC: Yeah, that will be the real test. I'm joking, I know Anthony's very loyal.

BP: I don't think that he quite trusts fame. Celebrity, he doesn't really trust it.

GC: He doesn't really want to be involved in the sort of thing.

BP: I don't know. I think he probably would... I think he likes to be challenged but from people who are doing it for the right reasons... he can see through people quite easily... you can't challenge somebody just for the sake of challenging them.

GC: It's not about hierarchy, or I'm the young bull who's going to challenge the leader of the herd.

BP: Exactly, exactly. You've seen that in company's... he doesn't play the hierarchical game... in the film development we've just done he made a point of the assistant producer who would set herself up in the corner of the room. He said, 'Get in to the circle, you're part of this process.' It was great. And actually what was interesting was that she was kind of challenging us quite soon into the process. That's partly her, but it's also the fact that he

doesn't hold with hierarchy. Christ, I've spoken to the director at the RSC and it's like you've just offered them a turd.

GC: It's like you're a difficult actor so now we won't work with you again.

BP: It's like 'Don't ask me a question, I'm the fucking director.'

GC: Fuck all that shit! I know mate. Unless there's anything else you would like to add mate we can leave it there.

BP: No that's great. I hope that's all right.

GC: Yeah great Barney thank you very much. We will leave that there. End of interview.

Brian Doherty *Narrative Interview*

GC: I was wondering if you could talk to me a bit about how this rehearsal ‘process’ compares to other rehearsals where you have had a script to begin with?

BD: Well it’s a ‘leap in the dark’. I joined this rehearsal process two weeks after everybody else as well, so you feel you’re going in even more blindfolded to a certain degree. What is brilliant about it is that you have no preconceptions. Well no grounded preconceptions; we all have preconceptions, we all invent futures for ourselves. But in a way it’s quite refreshing to begin a rehearsal process and not know what’s going to happen, or not know what’s going to be expected; and not to have any hang-ups or pre-set neurosis about ‘that scene’ or ‘this is going to be difficult’ or ‘this person is going to be ok’. It’s so broad that there are no specifics to get hung up on apart for hoping that it’s going to be good. But that’s the case with everything you ever do anywhere really; you hope it’s going to be good.

GC: Where there any improvisations that you did that you felt had any impact on the text and if so what effect? The only improvisation that I saw you guys doing, was ‘the weird object’ one with Imogen.

BD: Yeah again, I think in the two weeks before I started there was a lot more improv in there. I’ve done quite a bit of it in the past having worked with Anthony before. And he’s interesting because... I think he’s influenced with improv, but you never feel that your work’s been lifted wholesale and been put in the script and somebody’s taking credit for it. Anthony’s scripts are always very definitely Anthony’s scripts. And often with an improvisation he’s seeing whether an idea works or trying to clarify his own thinking about something a lot of the time. Improv’s all about trust anyway and you have to trust that he knows what he’s doing. But there are times when you work with him when you fell like ‘oh please kill it now’.

GC: Yes I remember that feeling very well.

BD: Yeah. But you push through that, and then quite often after that stage it develops into something else, something quite interesting. And that’s the thing with Antony it’s always about the interesting thing; which is a good thing.

GC: Ok. Are there any ideas that you personally presented in rehearsal that are in the script; and if so what are they?

BD: Where there ‘specific’ ideas? I don’t think there were ‘specific ideas necessarily. But I think Anthony is...he does listen to what people say, so ideas about character come in...There have been moments when I’ve said ‘that doesn’t make sense to me’ and next time when you see the script you find, that quite subtly at times, those bits are gone. Of course then you immediately question whether that was a good thing to do and wonder ‘was he right in the first place’. But I don’t think he removes things without being confident that it’s a good move. So I don’t think there are any specific lines that I’ve come up with but I think the characters have ‘moved’ in particular ways for all the people involved. And that’s been influenced by conversation and improvisation.

GC: Yeah I've seen this sort of thing myself. I've seen things being cut and things developing and obviously I've got little bits of footage where you guys discuss things and obviously that's very interesting from my point of view. That's absolutely what I'm after. Now: something quite similar. To what extent do you think you are actually creating your character?

BD: Particularly with this, particularly with Anthony that's quite hard to catch hold of because in the script he's writing for you and he writes in your idiom. He writes the way we speak and he's quite strangely gifted at that. And at times it does feel that he reads minds. And he captures the cadence and rhythms of people's speech particularly well. So the creation of character is usually you but at a remove...it's a version of you but with things stripped away or with something blown up larger. But that's the way with any character you're going to play; if there's going to be any truth it has to be some part of you. But with this, it's quite a subtle shift at times and that can be...when you feel that your character is not very likeable...I think that can be quite hard for people...it's hard for me as well when you think 'it's so close to me I don't want this, I don't want my representative on earth to be this version' you know?

GC: I do know. I had my own experience with Anthony before and I had similar thoughts actually. So that's quite interesting. So do you have any doubts or concerns about the production? About how it's going?

BD: No... well yeah there are always moments and then before (Laughs)...a week from tomorrow, when we first preview there will be other doubts. But they pass and then suddenly you see a scene spring to life and you go 'right ok, we've got it now'...you have to be doubtful now and then and then you get through that and you move on to the next bit. I think you'd be quite odd if you think that everything's going to be dreamy.

GC: I should have probably rephrased that to 'out with normal doubts'. But that's cool. Ok. Do you think this production is catering to your particular strengths as an actor and if so how is this facilitated?

BD: I don't know about that. I don't particularly think so but then I don't think we're the best judge of our own particular strengths. And also I think as an actor, if you want to develop, I think you should be hoping to work on your weaknesses rather than your strengths; rather than doing stuff that you've done before. What it is is that it's both different and very similar to work that I've done with Anthony before. But at times you play to your strengths and I don't think that's a good thing. You know?

GC: Yeah. That was going to be my next question actually. Do you think this is stretching you, and making you think 'I want to, or I don't want to explore this aspect'?

BD: I think there's stuff to come which will be difficult and the work will come by not taking the easy option on it, and not taking the obvious path on it. Keeping it natural, that's where the challenge will be. Again, with Anthony's work, because he writes it for us and you're speaking it so naturally, you can think 'well that's that done then'. But no it needs to be...you need to get into it more but it lures you in, it tempts you into the idea that one more rehearsal and we're done. Which is, of course, not the case. So that's where the challenge lies I think.

GC: Do you think you are taking any risks in rehearsal that you would not normally take and if so what are they?

BD: I don't know that I can answer that to be honest. With this 'process' you take a risk anyway, so nothing really feels that it's a real leap. Si I don't know that I can answer that question.

GC: Ok then. So how do you as an actor feel that you are shaping this text?

BD: Well I think there are elements of my life in there. And the character I play is an actor who's dissatisfied by where he is in life. I don't think there's an actor my age – I'm forty six – that isn't. Unless you're wonderfully successful; and even those ones are dissatisfied because you're reaching a point...Actually here's a thing that's really surprised me when it's come up is that I really don't like being the older man (laughs) and it's my first time really doing that. Particularly in improvs where people are going on and on about him being old enough to be her father. And these are girls who are thirty, and I'm going 'well that's not right'...it surprised me that that affected me but it has done. At one stage in the script it referred to me as being fifty two and I'm going 'I'm not! And I don't want to be; that six years older than I fucking am'...'I'm not accepting that' (Both laugh). But thankfully Sophie's changed that now.

GC: Yeah I know, it's quite interesting because the guys like yourself and Barney are in their forties and the girls are in their twenties mostly, apart from Christine.

BD: Yeah. And you go well ok...that's quite hard to accept that and go 'right this is how life's going to be now' (Both laugh)

GC: Yeah, it's all downhill. Basically, how would you assess your role as an actor in this production?

BD: How would I describe my role as an actor? I don't know that I understand that question.

GC: Well it's quite similar to a few that I already asked...

BD: Oh right! Well I think this is a lot more democratic than most. Or not most, but some rehearsal rooms can be...the thing with Anthony is that ultimately as a director he's a benign dictator because one person has to make those final decisions because nothing is good when directed by committee. But your voice is heard. So I think there is an expectation when you come into the rehearsal room that you become involved in the 'process' and that you become involved with the whole work. And that is both a responsibility and a compliment; you're expected to do that and there's also a respect for people's opinions in the room.

GC: Ok, brilliant. So, do you think Anthony's way of doing things is any riskier than what you are used to?

BD: Oh yeah! Of course it is! Course it is. I think he always knows more than he lets on, but at the same time you don't know if this is going to work because nobody's sat you down and gone through his script with him and gone 'well that's good and that's not'. So of course, there's a risk involved. Other people, most people would not be able to take that on; they would not be able to sleep at night with that sort of responsibility. Most writers would run a million miles from doing it this way. But this is the way it works; it works well for him. And he feeds off that; that energy. I think if he doesn't have a deadline he's completely useless.

GC: Yeah, totally. He does seem to thrive on it. This is why I'm here, because it's such an unusual 'process'. And the effect that the actor's have on the finished product is really what I'm interested in. So this is tailor made for me and also I've worked with him myself so I kind of know what it's like.

BD: Yeah, yeah.

GC: Anyway, so what do you do to deal with the risks in this kind of production? How do you deal with them?

BD: For me...I think because I've been through it before I trust him so I think it's going to be alright. Of course there's a selfish part of me that wants a nice part and that's probably bigger in me than some of the others, they seem to be pretty generous souls. But I want to have something interesting to do, I want something I can look forward to doing each evening and that challenges and that is entertaining. So these are the main worries; that that's not going to be the case. And you have to overcome that and trust that will be all right; you know.

GC: Ok. What is your personal take on this saying that goes around that acting is all about risk? What do you think of that? Because Anthony says in interviews; that 'acting is all about risk. So let's explore the risk.'

BD: Again I'm not sure what that means in a way. I think by walking on a stage you take a risk; you take a risk that the lines are not going to be there; a risk that the person there with you will relate to you in a meaningful way. It's very different from most other jobs because so many things can go wrong. And when you begin a process it's very rare that you walk into a rehearsal and you know what you're going to do by the end of it. So you take a risk that it's going to be all right and that you're not going to be shit. And that most actors' big fear that they're going to be shit. So there is risk involved and I think most good actors will not want to do work that is considered safe; any good actor will want to do something that has that element of risk in it, where there is the unknown element there. How people are going to relate to it, how it's going to work out. That has to be there.

GC: So I take it that you enjoy taking risks as an actor?

BD: I do yeah. I've had opportunities in the past where I could have gone into soap operas, things like that. I've walked away from it, and kind of surprisingly, particularly when you're being paid nice money and you go 'ok, I am going to leave this.'

GC: Yeah, I took the devil's dollar much to my regret. So basically what's your take on the risks of this production? Because I think it's quite high stakes, particularly because his last play at the Royal Court didn't do so well etc. etc. So obviously it's quite high stakes to make this one really good.

BD: I think because it's on upstairs, it's a studio space; that reduces that. But then anything with Anthony's name on it is going to attract a lot of attention. But that's always going to be there. You know what, it his last show was a disaster – and it wasn't – you might actually be in a better position than with the next one, because comparatively, you know, you're all right. But if your last show was a stunning success, you're probably taking a bigger risk.

GC: That's interesting; the inverse of risk that you're talking about.

BD: So comparatively you're going 'Oh well that's not as good as that.' So what is risk in that case? How do you view these things?

GC: Excellent... Ok. I know that you've worked with Anthony before, but are these rehearsals any different from what you've done before?

BD: No it's like having flashbacks (Both laugh) in the middle of the afternoon with Anthony moving around going 'What...what's...?' Slightly mumbly, talking to himself more or less and people are chipping in with different ideas...and I find myself no longer being able to keep track of what's being talked about. And yeah, I recognise this feeling. And then you move on and do other things. So for me it's familiar but in a slightly flashbacky kind of way.

GC: Cool. Right, does my presence here filming have any effect on you as a performer?

BD: None whatsoever.

GC: Ok...good answer. Does the same go for the camera?

BD: No it's just been part of the room. To be honest apart from talking to you directly you don't think of the camera being there.

GC: Good. Good.

BD: At all: which is surprising.

GC: Really? Good, I'm glad. I don't know if everybody will feel that way because I just don't want to get in the way of what you guys are doing, you know.

BD: Because anything I've said was because I was going to say it anyway.

GC: Ok, we've covered that. Right we're always finished. Do think that the style of this show encourages a certain type or style of acting? Is there something that's required specifically?

BD: It's very natural...it's very natural but doing some quite surreal things, and doing them in a way that reads as true. So there's an interesting ambiguity there with that. I think overall, he writes and directs in a very natural way, but manages to keep the interesting element. And when it comes down to it I think he's a brilliant self-editor, he take stuff out that gets in the way. He's very good at doing that with his own work.

GC: Yeah, he's quite brutal, I've seen him go cut, cut, cut.

BD: That's fascinating to see...and suddenly then stuff sits up that didn't because a line or two is gone.

GC: Absolutely. And final question; what is your personal take on Anthony's 'process'; as the media call it?

BD: To be honest...again, what does that word mean? It's the way he works and I don't know many other people who do it that way. I think, and this sounds completely wanky; I think you get an insight into why Shakespeare wrote his plays so fast. Because he churned them out. He wrote for specific people, in specific parts, he knew how they all spoke and he wrote directly for them. That sounds very lovely and wanky, but I think there is a direct correlation between the two worlds. I think when there were companies of actors and there were writers who

worked with them. Stuff happened much faster because people knew in their heads who they were working with.

GC: Brilliant Brian, Thanks mate. If there is anything else you would like to add then please feel free to do so. But other than that that's brilliant, there was some great stuff there for me.

BD: No problem.

GC: Cheers Brian, thanks a lot mate.

Christine Entwisle *Narrative Interview*

GC: Ok Chris thanks very much for doing this. I was just wondering could you talk to me a little bit about how Anthony's rehearsals compare to other rehearsals that you've been in where you have a script to begin with?

CE: Well I suppose I'm more used to devised work than scripted work anyway. So I'm happier in an Anthony rehearsal, than I would be in say the RSC.

GC: You're not the only one.

CE: (laughs) Yeah. But I suppose the main difference is that you potentially have a lot of input into the writing of it. And by writing of it I don't just really mean the words I mean kind of the authorship of it, the whole beast really. You can subtly influence that and I think that Anthony would say himself that he's not like a Mike Leigh; he doesn't take actors words. But what he does do is that you will have conversations, and I don't know whether it's conscious or unconscious but you'll see subject matter pop up that you may have touched on very briefly four weeks ago and it will be in the script, there'll be some reference to it. I'm just trying to think of an example for this one; I'll think of one later. That happens quite a lot, and then sometimes you do get to actually write some words. I wanted to change one of the lines in this one to...when the executive talks to the two killers, the two assassins, and he'd written 'they kill people with unusual objects like a glue-gun or a set of golf clubs' and I changed it to 'a staple-gun and a duvet'. We've kept glue-gun because we've got a glue-gun but we've also kept duvet because it's easier to get a duvet and the word duvet made Barney Power laugh. There's a fair amount of randomness in his choices.

GC: I was wondering, because you've worked with Anthony quite a lot; are these rehearsals any different to any others that you've done?

CE: I would say that there's a certain amount of dishonesty in Anthony saying how much he has or hasn't prepared for something. (both titter) I mean with this one he knew he wanted a superhero or he wouldn't have cast Olly – Olly's fantastic -; he's got things in mind. But this one is more genuinely, he's more genuinely open-minded I think and that's reflected directly in how it is now the day of the first preview and he hasn't written the final scene. I think that is because he has genuinely gone into it in a properly experimental way and let things arise; and I'm really proud of him for that because his tendency is – and I think that any writer would – to resolve. So it is different from the other stuff because it's even more chaotic and a lot of the scenes haven't even been rehearsed, especially in the second act and one of them hasn't been written. It's not normally quite that bad.

GC: Are there any ideas that you have presented in rehearsals that are in the script; or a version or an evolution of them that you can think of? You were saying about the blanket is there anything else?

CE: (Pause) There's lots of stuff...lots of stuff that I've suggested tweaks to and changes of direction in. It's often to do with theme and tone.

GC: I've noticed you do a lot of that actually.

CE: (Smiles) Have you? Good, good.

GC: You're one of the ones that has a quite an input from what I've seen. Obviously I've not been in every day, but you've had a lot of suggestions to make.

CE: Yeah...I've been working with him for quite a long time and I think Anthony tries to work with people who can be useful in the creative process. Because I come from a devising background I'm not just looking at my part. The whole thing's got to make sense or it's not very satisfying. And I think that when Anthony's little team is working at its best, it's full of people that want the show to be good and that aren't neurotically obsessed with what they're going to wear. (Smiles while shaking her head) Because there's no place for any of that, there's just no room for it. But in terms of actual things; yes there's lines here and there and the character of...I call her Sibilant Susan.

GC: The therapist?

CE: Yeah, the therapist. You know, there's what Anthony would call a sweet spot between he and I where we both dig the sort of same material and sort of get each other. And then outside of that our tastes differ quite widely but there is enough crossover for us to influence each other.

GC: It's quite interesting I've noticed that you, Anthony, Barney and even Nik as almost a kind of core. I've noticed a collaborative core.

CE: And Chahine the lighting director has worked with him on loads of stuff. I think Anthony needs to have people around he trusts because if you're going to work down to the wire, or whatever the expression is, you don't need to be worried about people getting nervous. It's that thing that if you find somebody you work with who gets you, who you don't have to worry about, it's fantastic and you're free to do whatever you want. But I don't think that most theatre works like that at all and that's why it's so deathly, really.

GC: Olly was telling me that you did a really kind thing for him and Zawe, you phoned them up and gave a bit of reassurance to them as they were struggling because this was their first time.

CE: (Smiles) Well I've kind of secretly got Anthony's back a little bit, even when he really fucking annoys me at times.

GC: (Both laugh) Excellent...So how do you think the show is coming together at the eleventh hour?

CE: I'm quite excited about it. I really like the multi-layeredness of it. I really keep dropping in to Anthony's ear about not trying to make it scene, scene, scene and making it sure that, as much as possible, there aren't beginnings and endings to scenes. So I'm trying to get him to let us stay on more and stop exiting and coming on.

GC: A fluidity rather than fragmentation; I've noticed that.

CE: Exactly. And I think the piece can really benefit from that...and the set is really, really difficult because it's a strong statement set. And I think that ideally if we could have worked on it the show would have a very different choreography to it. I think that might come though over the next few days.

GC: So do I.

CE: It's just such an obvious place for people to pop up and, you know, hide and seek type thing...like open tabs on a computer screen. Yeah, we need to work with it; it's not particularly actor friendly. So it'll take a little while to get used to...but I can't remember what I was saying at the start of that sentence. Sorry.

GC: It was just about how you personally think the show's coming together.

CE: You know what...in terms of the content, I'm not a hundred per cent on the video content, I think that some of it will probably change. I think it's really exciting to have it there as a texture. I think that at the moment some of the choices are not the best choices or as helpful as they could be. I realise that a really important theme – maybe the main one – is looking at mundanity next to greatness...or godliness almost. So for instance I said to Anthony the other day there's too many tits on this video footage. I know he wants to be mundane with it but there's also something about ...one time in rehearsal I was telling him about this rape case when there was still a story in the show about rape. And I said you are aware that there's a rape case at the moment that's gone viral, which is about a young woman of about sixteen and these football guys in America had taken her from party to party – she's unconscious – and they raped her in all these different places. And it was such a hot topic that when you put stuff like that in the show it can have such a knee-jerk reaction. And I was watching all this sort of *Nuts* magazine woman on a rollercoaster 'oh isn't that funny she's got a bikini top on and her tits are jiggling about.' And I'd just read about a woman who'd received death threats because – an Arabic woman -...there's a lot of Arabic women protesting and they're keeping the veil on but they're going topless and they're writing stuff across their breasts about their rights to drive actually was what it was for, to be allowed to drive. I didn't tell him about that but I did say I feel that this is not quite the right tone. And sometimes he comes up to me quietly and says 'do you think we can get away with this? Is this in really bad taste?' And I do have a very, very dark sense of humour...sometimes I help him a little bit as a litmus test.

GC: That's really, really interesting Chris I didn't know that. (Chris laughs) That's really good. I saw you talking, but obviously I don't know what you're talking about. So that's really interesting actually. You're like his conscience then.

CE: Well you know, in terms of politics, feminism and stuff like that...cos he is a bloke and he's a joker as well. I know what that's like, you'd do anything to make someone laugh and it doesn't matter what. I think sometimes he shoots himself in the foot a little bit because his content. (Smiles throughout)

GC: Yeah guys do cross that line thinking they're funny. I do it all the time and it's really not good thinking you're funnier than you actually are. (Both laugh)

CE: Oh no.

GC: Seriously. So basically how would you describe the role of the actor or actress in Anthony's process. It seems to be a very integral part of it to me.

CE: You know it's really weird, it is and it isn't. I think what we do is not a collaboration as far as I'm concerned. I think that what we do is we're a sounding-board. We inspire him to write particular characters; this is going to sound really wanky...with more of the texture of ourselves, words that we would say. He takes personalities on. He is quick to find people's

Achilles heels and will often exploit them. Often you will find yourself playing a character in an Anthony Neilson show that is actually a heightened version of yourself and realise that everybody else is taking the piss out of. So this is why some actors get a little bit offended. (Both laugh)

GC: Absolutely. Matthew Pidgeon is a really good friend of mine and he just takes the piss out of Matthew in every single one (Both keep laughing throughout, Chris is shaking her head) of his shows.

CE: I know.

GC: In *Realism* making him wear that mullet wig...Matt hates it.

CE: Anthony really likes Matt, but if he takes a dislike to you he will put you in something fucking ridiculous, he really will. I've seen him do it at the RSC with a couple of people who have given him a really hard time and he ended up going 'right...

GC: Theatrical vengeance.

CE: (laughs) I'm going to write you some stuff sunshine. So I would say we help a lot; I also know that Anthony finds it very difficult to be motivated to finish his scripts especially a theatre script, there's not much money in it, he's written quite a few of them. So actually for him to get people in a room and have a time limit of five or six weeks is a way for him to produce something. He also enjoys company, he works with his mates and he enjoys having a laugh with them and I think that's great. In terms of collaborating, really genuine shared authorship; it's not that type of collaboration at all. But you have to accept that, I didn't accept that at first and we got into fights. And then I understood what he was about. He'll go away and he'll write whatever the fuck he wants; however many scenes you've improvised, however much research you've done or come up with, you might come in the next day and your character doesn't even exist. As long as you accept that, that's fine.

GC: It's interesting how much time you've spent on many scenes over the weeks that I've witnessed and now there's not even a semblance of them there any more. But it's not dead rehearsal, it's not wasted time, which is fucking interesting actually.

CE: No it's not. Do you know what they are? They're steps on the way to somewhere else. And I think that if each one of those steps didn't happen he wouldn't end up in the place that he gets to.

GC: Exactly.

CE: But you have to accept that those steps may not be visible at all in the end, and the trace of the path that you've taken.

GC: That's absolutely what I've noticed where I've gone 'yeah I see what's going on here.' I'd just like to talk to you a bit about risk if that's all right? Do you feel that you are taking any risks in rehearsals that you would not normally take in another show?

CE: You know the main risk that I take is to agree to work with him again, that's the main risk I take (Gary laughs). Because I never know, how much of a twat I'm going to end up looking. But in terms of this rehearsal what's hard is to stay honest throughout because you can give reactions sometimes...Anthony is not the most encouraging person and he can

undermine people. He's a human being, he will undermine you, he will take the piss out of you. And sometimes it is very difficult in that atmosphere to continue to really honestly try and be an artist; to respond truthfully and keep giving. Sometimes you can't actually. I reached a point where I could do no more two days ago, and I'm glad that I reached it then because now I'm fine. But in terms of acting risks the therapist, the whole therapy thing was an acting risk for me because it goes from one thing to another to another so many times. We didn't rehearse it at all.

GC: Yeah I know I've got that on film actually.

CE: And now I'm doing a different accent for her...that feels like a risk, those things are only acting risks...

GC: A technical risk, a technique risk, under-rehearsed risk.

CE: Yeah, exactly. But they're not things that would hurt my heart. Whereas when I talk about things in rehearsal that I genuinely think , that's much more of a risk for me because it's me being me and talking about things and genuinely responding. Yeah, you might look like a twat but it's just acting isn't it.

GC: That's interesting the differentiation between emotional risks and professional risks and what's more important to you.

CE: Well maybe you should ask me again tonight after we've done the show, I'll have a different answer for you.

GC: (Laughs) I'll ask you after press night, that's probably a better time (Chris laughs). Do you enjoy taking risks as an actress?

CE: I do yeah, because I don't often feel that I get pushed far enough and I do do the same old stuff. And actually, if I'm really honest I am doing some of the stuff that I normally do in this, vulnerable kind of grief-stricken. But then also that's probably why he's cast me.

GC: Though you're very different from what you were in *Dissocia* that's the only other thing I've ever seen you in.

CE: Oh good, I'm glad you think so.

GC: There's similar textures on some level in this show and *Dissocia*. But you're completely different. I know there's that wandering around in a kind of fugue-like state which is slightly similar. But this is real that was unreal and it's completely different. So don't be so hard on yourself about that, it doesn't come across like that.

CE: Oh good, good thank you. This is kind of like therapy Cas, it's really nice.

GC: (Laughs) Thank you very much. So what do you think of the potential rewards and failings or risk in relation to this show. There may be positive risks that can be achieved or negative risks. If it fails it could be problematic.

CE: Well it won't be problematic to me if it fails because I'm not one of those actors who...I'm not exactly in the limelight. I don't feel that it's a professional risk for me to do this at all. And actually I don't think even if it fails. Some of Anthony's shows do fail, some stuff fails.

GC: I'm more talking about the technical failures or what can go wrong technically. I'm not really bothered about critical failure because that's just critic bullshit to me. I'm interested in the acting and the production. We can talk about that if you want.

CE: Sorry, so your question was...

GC: It was probably a bit long-winded...the positive risks and the negative risks. Do you get my drift? No not really?

CE: (Pause) In terms of...?

GC: For instance I think once this show is slick, it's going to be great. But that's a risk to get it to that stage.

CE: (Pause) I don't think I quite comprehend...sorry.

GC: That's alright. We can move on that's no problem. Just a few more quick questions Chris if that's alright. I'm just wondering does my presence here filming you guys rehearse have any effect?

CE: I was going to talk to you about that actually. I think it's had a really positive effect in terms of...well the effect it's had on Anthony. And when you're not here now, we miss you. And we were worried at first about somebody filming, and the first couple of days were a bit odd. And then when we got used to you, you're a very kind of focusing presence. The camera focusing on us all the time, contains us and focuses us and Anthony is one of the least contains and focused people. He can go from being the least to the most, but on the whole he's the least in rehearsals. He wanders around aimlessly, I'm sure there's a lot going on in his head. So to have that there it felt like...it's almost like a super-ego kind of presence or an eye at any rate that's watching things and is sensible. It's like a parent, sensible, not emotionally engaged; fair you know. The good parent basically, that's what you've become to use psychoanalytic babble.

GC: Well thanks very much that's really interesting. For me I think there's going to be some kind of effect, most people go 'oh no, no, no we don't bother.' So that's really interesting what you've said, not because it's positive. I put myself in your positions because I'm an actor as well and I wonder how I would react to that. I wonder how that would affect me.

CE: I think if you were a knob it would be very different. On a couple of occasions, I was really aware of it... no on one occasion it's when we started the tech and I was doing my poem without the script for the first time I could feel the camera on me then and I just couldn't remember any of my lines because I was being looked at so intently. So that was weird and the other time it was kind of good where I was Sibilant Susan the therapist and I did all that work. Sometimes when you improvise like that you're summoning stuff up and you'll never be able to remember how you did it. And I thought 'oh Cas has got that if I do need to look at it.'

GC: I do remember that because Anthony did not even prompt you and Zawe and go let's start improvising and let's see where it goes. You just started doing it and everything just went silent. And it lasted for absolutely ages. It was fucking excellent. I can definitely send you footage of that if you want.

CE: And then he gave me a microphone.

GC: And the box came in and all that.

CE: Yeah the box came out. And there's remnants of that left in the show, it's a slightly different character. But it's the same energy I suppose, or positivity. That was good because Anthony didn't come up to me afterwards and go 'this, this and this was interesting about that' he just wandered off.

GC: And absorbed it.

CE: And I looked at the camera and I thought that 'at least if I look like a total twat later on I can ask Cas to have a look at that.' It was the one time throughout this whole process that I needed to call somebody. And I texted Barney when I got home and asked him whether I'd made a complete twat of myself.

GC: I wish I'd have given you my number, I could have talked to you about that.

CE: And he said 'no not at all.' And then since then...

GC: Ok Chris just two more questions. Do you think this show encourages a particular style of acting or form of acting?

CE: Oh that's an interesting question. I think...I think Anthony can't stand stuff that looks pretend unless it's supposed to look pretend. So there is a certain amount of very naturalistic acting going on. But it's not about naturalism, it's about truth. So you don't have to be natural, you just need to be keyed in to a truth somewhere I think. So the stuff that I tend to do, especially in the first act, is really naturalistic, Olly is, Barney maybe slightly less so. But Anthony once said to me 'anything that doesn't make my toes curl or bore me is a fair indication that it's alright.' But it's actually quite difficult to tell sometimes if you're doing good acting or not. I think if you can't really tell if they're acting, or you think about the acting then the acting's fine.

GC: Yeah, I think that absolutely the point if you don't think about it. For me there seems to be a fusion, or a hybrid of the different styles that we've talked about. An ultra-naturalism, but then you're sort of flipping in to surrealism. Some kind of heightened realism, slightly Vaudvillian in parts.

CE: Absolutely.

GC: It's really interesting watching what everybody's doing, how it's stretching them, no pun intended with 'Elastic Man.'

CE: I think that's right. I think that if there was a basic thrum that went through it, it would be naturalistic conversation. And it always sort of lands back on that, and at the most tragic or poignant moments – even though you're wearing a purple wig or you got a teddy bear's head on – you're actually talking about real stuff, you know. Quite mundane stuff.

GC: There's lots of – obviously when you run it – semiotics and signs. You're going to be doing this stuff wearing horns which the audience will see how that pans out, how that works.

CE: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I'm looking forward to that.

GC: When the visuals combine with the audails and technical things.

CE: I'm interested in moments when the audience can't tell whether you're talking to them or not. I like direct address a lot. When theatre doesn't acknowledge that the audience is there I have a real problem with it.

GC: The fourth wall.

CE: Exactly. And I don't know if it's a result of him knowing that about me, but he's given me a lot of stuff which is out to the audience. And at one point I nearly go in to the audience accidentally. And I'm really interested in that line and crossing it and coming back...putting one foot out and coming back in. Or kind of hoodwinking the audience into thinking it's just me and actually it's me doing a character. But I think we both have an interest in that.

GC: Do you know what I'm actually studying this at the moment and it's called experiential phenomenology. It's very dense fucking philosophical stuff about acting, embodiment, etc., etc.. I'm doing a big theory chapter in my thesis, so it's really interesting what you've just said because I'm going to talk about this relationship between actors and audience and what that means. Is it the character talking...I think I can definitely use this in a different section.

CE: Fantastic. Well come and talk to me any time. My thesis was on something similar but it was from a psychoanalytic point of view and it was about the relationship between the actor and the audience. How the actor is contained by the audience because of their reverie...the audience are looking at them and towards them and what that relationship was really.

GC: That's fascinating. We're in similar sort of fields actually. I hope you could send me that at some point.

CE: I will do. It's funny I probably wouldn't understand it now I wrote it ten years ago.

GC: I don't understand mine's now (Both laugh loudly). What's going on? It's too complicated! But anyway Chris just finally Is there anything you would like to add, or talk about, or mention at all that we haven't covered. If not that's absolutely fine.

CE: Not really, except that I suppose this 'process' gives you an opportunity to make theatre that is a live event and acknowledges all of that. Because it has enough experimentation in it, and an elasticity in it, for it to be a different show every night. It will be a different show every night. And some of the sections are improvised, so it will be quantitatively as well as qualitatively different every night. And I just think that's the way it has to be because that's the only thing that stops something from dying if you've done it more than once.

GC: It's calculated risk, I know when I act I like taking risks. I don't mean I come on dressed as a fucking Smurf or something, but I want to take risks within the structure of what we're doing. I hate when you're acting with somebody and they speak to you with the same intonation every time. I'm doing something completely different and you're giving me this formulaic, robotic fucking nonsense.

CE: It's because they see themselves at the top importance-wise and they're not, they're not. The show or the story is. Yeah I know what you mean.

GC: Ok then, brilliant. Thank you so much Chris there's some great stuff for me. No seriously. And good luck for tonight. (Chris shakes her head and smiles).

Christine Entwisle 2014 interview

GC: Could you just talk to me a bit about working on the various productions with Anthony that you have been involved in. I don't need great detail, just briefly.

CE: Originally I worked with him on a film where I was an actor and there was a pre-written script for channel Four. And that didn't involve collaboration. Then I asked him to direct a solo piece that I'd written. I think the next time was on *Edward Gant's Amazing Feats of Loneliness* at Plymouth. After that, I think *Dissocia* and then *Narrative*. But I may have missed some things out. We did various bits and bobs in between which involved me writing something and presenting it at the same evening that he was presenting things. And also, most recently, I wrote a piece for a thing called *The Getout* at the Royal Court, which was a sort of comedy night and I do cabaret a little bit. So I wrote something for that and it was an open thing where anyone could submit their stuff. Mine was selected, and unfortunately it was the only one selected so I couldn't be credited as a writer. Because when the other writer's came Anthony was worried that he had only actually accepted one. It was the one opportunity I had where I was actually credited as a writer in Anthony Neilson's work was robbed.

GC: (Both laugh) Tut, tut, tut Anthony. I'd like to talk about this issue of authorship later on. I was wondering, are there any differences or similarities in the rehearsals of the various shows?

CE: Yes, there are some things which are the same, the first of which is that on the first day of rehearsal, whatever he says, Anthony will always have some ideas about what it is that he wants to do. The other thing that's common to all of the processes is that you will usually rehearse the first scenes a lot because those are the first ones that he writes. So they will be rehearsed incredibly well. The opposite of this is *Dissocia* where he'd actually written the second act. But then when we had to rehearse the whole of the first act it was still the same process. The Security Guard scene with Barney got rehearsed an awful lot. And the scenes towards the end, like the flying car, was re-written the day that we went to open. The other thing that connects them all, for me, is that he uses a mix of actors that he's worked with before and usually one or two newbies.

GC: Yeah, I've noticed that pattern.

CE: And for very good reasons. I'd do the same if I was him and probably be less brave and just use people that I'd worked with before if I was doing his sort of process. The other thing that's similar to all of them is that there'll be lots of table discussions about the ideas. So there will be a lot of sitting around the table and talking about not just the characters and the isolated scenes and dramatic moments, but as the concept as a whole. And the other, I need to take a deep breath to say it, there will always be a lot of very long improvisations.

GC: Excellent! I want to hear all about these improvisations later. So, is Anthony's process fixed or stable?

CE: I wouldn't call it fixed I would call it a kind of a chaos, whereby, really, the only path you could follow is to talk about an idea, to write something, to get people to do what you've written and go from there really. The chaos is fixed, the chaos is fixed.

GC: Yes, I've noticed this. It's random, tangential, erratic, it goes back on itself, it returns to certain points, it's non-linear.

CE: Yes, the process might be non-linear but the work is linear I would say. And in terms of a writer, he's not from the farm of association. With *Narrative* if you tried to be from the farm of association, an area of performance that he's poo-pood for forty odd years... It was interesting with *Narrative* because he'd go 'Let's just go and see what happens here.' How much he genuinely did that and how much he manufactured that chaos is a moot point.

GC: What do you mean?

CE: I think that Anthony generally knows what he wants and that sometimes he thinks, or wants to put across, that he is presenting something new. And this is partly naivety on his part because he doesn't, for instance, know the work of a theatre group like *Forced Entertainment* and yet, uses microphone's at the beginning, completely ad hoc, and at the very last minute in *Narrative*. *Forced Entertainment* have been working on what does it mean to use a microphone on the stage in a theatre for 20 years. He's never heard of them.

GC: He's never heard of *Forced Entertainment*?

CE: No. We had a question and answer session and somebody in the audience said 'Was that moment inspired by *Forced Entertainment*? And he looked around, so I put my hand up and went 'No, it wasn't.' And he said to me, 'Who's *Forced Entertainment*'?

GC: That was a good Scottish accent.

CE: Thanks man. (both laugh) I can only do Anthony.

GC: No, that's really interesting because one of my supervisors specifically picked up on the microphone and *Forced Entertainment* and asked me what I was going to do with that.

CE: For me that was the most offensive part of that process. Partly because it's resonant of mainstream theatre kind of grabbing bits of experimental work that they feel will suddenly have a kind of a wow factor in their own work. So there was that going on, and also that is the background that I'm from where people earn very little, nobody knows their names, and they properly investigate all these sort of performance scenarios. And I think that's a worthwhile pursuit to an extent. To be honest with you, I'd rather watch a Neilson show than a *Forced Entertainment* one. Do you know what I mean?

GC: Yeah, of course, me too. I saw *the Coming Storm* a couple of years ago at Battersea Arts Centre, and it was all about narrative actually, what is narrative, what is a story etc. It left me quite cold, it wasn't the best thing I'd ever seen or they'd done.

CE: I saw one, and I can't remember the title of it, that was really wonderful and it had some great writing in it. And what I like about them is that they acknowledge that they're in a performance space. And I think that Anthony's use of me in his work is about the line in which you say 'Is this a performance, or is it not?' And I think that is of interest to Anthony. Whether or not he would articulate it in the same terms as me I don't know. But I suspect that's why he's interested in me as an actor. Because if I can't do anything else, I can do that... tread that line of am I actually acting or is this really happening, sort of thing.

GC: How collaborative is Anthony's process?

CE: It is collaborative in the sense that he would not end up with the result he has, or the script he has, if he did not have that room of actors. He talks about it as a colour palette... It's not a Mike Leigh process, they don't give him the lines. I would argue that slightly, I would say that a lot of the lines do come from the actors.

GC: I think so, from what I've seen.

CE: Yes, definitely, I would agree with that... So you end up with a product that is essentially the sum of its parts plus Anthony. And Anthony is a very big plus, the guy can fucking write.

GC: He's fucking great when he's on form isn't he.

CE: Absolutely. If you just put me, Barney and Amanda in a room together, we're not going to come up with the same stuff that he comes up with. We're not even going to come up with the words that he comes up with. He's going to take something from what we do, go home, write it and often it comes back and it is unrecognisable. Sometimes it comes back and you see your own words. So I would say that it's essentially collaborative in terms of the end product could not have been made without that group of people. However, it is not essentially collaborative in any egalitarian terms whereby you have a co-authorship of the final product.

GC: So, you think that if he had a different bunch of actors in the rehearsals you would get a very different play?

CE: Yes, absolutely, absolutely.

GC: Ok, let's get on to these improvisations that you're obviously very traumatised about. (both laugh) Ok, tell me about... for the record Chris is sitting here not looking very well at this point, it's as if she's going to cry – Sorry Chris. Could you just talk to me about any improvisations that you did in rehearsals.

CE: Ok, ok. I know you need specifics and my memory is really bad. But I recall a very long improvisation for *Dissocia*.

GC: Barney's mentioned this but he didn't go into detail about it.

CE: We helpfully had a costume and wigs bin and it did go on for some time. And I do believe actually that Alan Francis, when he donned the blonde wig and became the Oatcake Eater was a very seminal moment I played a lot of different characters in that, that were not in the final thing. I don't think he's really looking for characters. The improvisations are endless. They're bad improvisations to be involved in as an actor because there's never any rules, they never have an end, you have no purpose... and actually it's exhausting as well. And I feel like what he's doing is kind of sucking stuff up which may or may not be useful to him later that night when he goes home and tries to think of something to write. And I'm not even sure about that. My suspicion about Anthony's lengthy improvisations, which he confided in me a long time ago is that actors need to feel like you know what you're doing and they need to feel busy, so this is a good thing to keep them busy. But I actually think that it's more about management than art.

GC: That's very interesting... I remember watching some of the *Narrative* improvisations. Do you remember the Weird Object's one where Imogen sat down and Nik started playing the radio and you all walked about the room picking up objects. Do you not remember that one?

CE: No, I've blanked it out.

GC: Good. (laughs) Because that went on for ages. I don't know what the purpose was of it, but at one point Zawe walked across the room with a box over her head and coincidentally I panned across to Anthony at that point and he was writing in his notebook. Totally coincidentally. And you know where I'm going with this so we don't need to go there. That's exactly what happened. You had a roll of electric tape pretending it's a wedding ring.

CE: (Laughs) That was very creative of me, why wasn't he fucking writing that down...

GC: Do you think he uses improvisation to clear the decks of unnecessary clutter?

CE: All improvisation does, for me, is clutter things up. I don't know what the clutter is that you refer to. If it's the clutter of his psyche, then that is a question for Neilson. For actors, he gives them something to do for two fucking hours in a rehearsal room when there's no more script, and that is where I put the full stop.

GC: No, fair enough. I just remember when I interviewed Barney during *Narrative* he mentioned this big, long improvisation that you did and he said that it cleared the decks, so I'll talk to Barney about this.

CE: I don't know what he was referring to.

GC: So, they're not really used as a compositional device in rehearsals? Is that right.

GC: I wouldn't say so.

GC: So, basically, they're just to fill up time? And if you're lucky they might spark an idea out of him?

CE: Cas, if I was being completely honest, yes.

GC: Ok, so what do you think the pros and cons of Anthony's unusual rehearsal methodology are?

CE: First of all he hasn't got a methodology, I would say, I would posit. I think the pros are, that from a place of chaos...Peter Brook talked about how the best theatre comes from 'comfort when sitting in the dark'. I would say that the best pro from Anthony's rehearsal process is that you can, from a place of chaos, if you remain open-hearted, you can create something incredibly beautiful. I think that is when Anthony is at his best. And you could say that 'Who cares what the means are, who cares what the actors are having to go through if it creates something beautiful. I'd probably go along with that. My difficulty comes when we create something that isn't actually beautiful. And I think that as a writer he imposes a narrative, and he imposes a journey line that he wants, or has in his head. And sometimes in rehearsal things emerge which feel very resonant and truthful and potent. And I think that his weakness is to ignore those in favor of other ideas that he already has in place in his head. The cons are too many to mention (laughs)...The cons are, that if you're in any way insecure, and most actors are actors because they are people that are emotional sponges, and will therefore, probably be quite sensitive. And the cons are, that you feel that you're being used and exposed to a malevolent dictatorship.

GC: Ok, right. I probably mentioned that I didn't have a great time...But this is not about me, I'll write about my own stuff later. Ok, thanks Chris for that, it's a very honest answer. So, what do actors actually do in Anthony's rehearsals? How do they contribute to the material being generated?

CE: He says, 'Anyone is welcome to say anything, and comment on anything. And that all feedback is good.' I believe that he has good intentions. But that is actually not the case...Ok, sorry, this was about hierarchy actually.

GC: No, that's alright, let's talk about hierarchy then.

CE: Anthony's rehearsals. And how does Anthony actual manage the rehearsal process. And what does he do. This is about equality...He always comes on the first day with that on the table, that anybody, including stage management, is welcome to give feedback, and all of that stuff, there comes a point however, later in the process, closer to opening night, where that gets shut down. And the moment is always very shocking for a person in the process, because you will have had, up until that point, free rein to comment. And then any negativity is met with defence and annoyance, and stamped down upon. And you're made to feel bad for being a spanner in the works. So you think that you're a part of this thing, part of a process which is about all of you having equality, and having a voice. And at a certain point that stops. And my main argument in the last show with Anthony was you (he) have (has) to be honest about that. I can understand that as a process, and the need for that. But I think that he has to honest about the point at which he needs to stop hearing other people's voices. So he presents it as there being no hierarchy, but ultimately there absolutely is a hierarchy. And Anthony will always also have people that will completely bum-lick him, like Alan Francis, who would just say that (another bad Scottish accent) 'Everything you do is fucking hilarious!!!'

GC: Ooogh!! I really hate that. (both laugh)

CE: And then you will have people like me. And he did say to me recently, we were looking at the script he was writing, he said, 'I feel very alone with this.' And I said, 'Look, you do have mates, you could get me and Alan round.' And he just went, 'Alan will just tell me it's fucking great, and what use is that.'

GC: (laughs) He should have got me round.

CE: (laughs) Yeah, get me and you round. So I suddenly thought, 'Well yeah, ok, you give me a really hard time about being negative.' You were there for that whole *Narrative* process, and I don't believe that I was negative, I just brought up some issues.

GC: No, no, you brought up things that needed to be done, that needed to be said. You had a lot of really interesting things to say and do, and your contribution to that show was very important actually, and my writing will reflect that.

CE: I think you would be really hard-pushed to say that I was a negative presence throughout that process.

GC: Definitely not. No, No fucking way.

CE: So my difficulty with the whole notion of hierarchy is that Anthony, perhaps deliberately, gets people in that room who will like what he writes, and he gets people in that room who will actually criticise. He does trust me, we've worked together for a long time

now and he does trust me. He does trust what I say, and it fucking annoys him at times, but he does still listen to it. But then the coin will suddenly flip, and I've gone from being a constructive influence to being a destructive influence. But nothing for me has changed I've continued doing exactly what I've done for five weeks. But there's come a point in his process whereby, and I can understand this, he has to be the lone voice. But he hasn't translated that to anybody else.

GC: His communication sometimes leaves a lot to be desired from what I've noticed. I think what you've said is true, I really do.

CE: What was the question you wanted to ask?

GC: It's basically about what do actors actually do in rehearsals, how do they contribute...?

CE: In many ways. I've spoke before about the paint palette... This will be interesting for your translator to write up.

GC: No, I'm afraid I have to do it myself. (laughs) It's a nightmare!

CE: You should give someone 50 quid.

GC: I did, but they did a really bad job. Basically it's about 150 quid an hour for professional transcripts. That's how much it costs... So, I'm as well doing it myself.

CE: Right, just re-read me that question.

GC: Right. What do actors actually do in rehearsals and how do they contribute to the material being generated?

CE: What they do is, they engage with his ideas. They create characters, they create worlds for the characters, and they come up with text as well. They contribute to the material being generated in all sorts of ways. Frustratingly, few of which could be documented or pinned down, where we go back to the colour palette. And go back to the notion that he would not end up with the same result if he had been in the room with four other actors than the ones that he was in with. And the product, though it's hard to prove, is the sum of its parts. But with Anthony not as a facilitator Mike Leigh type character, but as a very talented writer, going away and coming up with a script. That does separate him from those other people who do this script devising process. But I have had words of mine... Ok, last night, because I'm writing something at the moment, I went back and looked at some old material. One of which was created in an Anthony Neilson project. He wanted us to come in with something written, that our characters would have done. And mine was a funeral speech, and it was a broken woman giving a sort of comedy poem. And he didn't ask me to do that, I just did it. I read that comedy poem last night after ten years and I thought, 'Fuck me. I've just done that in *Narrative*.' Which was the main part of what I did actually.

GC: 'David died a year ago...'

CE: 'David died a year ago.' Now I could actually say to you, and Anthony would agree with his hands up, that he wrote a poem and I re-wrote certain sections of it. So I can actually tick that I actually wrote that. But also there is a process whereby, having worked with him many years ago, I created that poem which was a broken woman giving a tragicomic poem about someone who had died, or was in terrible straits... you know it's hard, you can never prove

these things, and it's actually not about proof, because of the zeitgeist, shit happens and people do write terrible poems about people that they love. And I could imagine that he could totally come up with that himself. But given his process and what he sticks his flag in, I would also like to say that maybe some of that came from that early poem that I wrote as well. That really might be overstating the case, but I just want to flag it up.

GC: I think he does do this. It's one of the things later on that we might get to. He's like a theatrical magpie he takes things from random conversations. Anything goes. Not necessarily in the rehearsal room, it could be years before, like your poem, but things just come in.

CE: Yeah. Yeah. And I think that the best way to defend yourself is to continue to be in his work, because at least then you have some degree of ownership. Because at least you're the person saying it, you know.

GC: It's not somebody else telling your story.

CE: Exactly. Also, actually, if he hadn't had me in that piece, maybe he wouldn't have had that poem. He assimilated me with that poem. And who knows where that came from, maybe it was me doing the poem originally. Maybe it's because he associates me with some broken tragicomic figure who could have led on to a poem like that...

GC: Do you think he writes for, or caters to the particular actor?

CE: Absolutely! One hundred percent!!!

GC: That's basically what he does?

CE: Absolutely! A lot of the time actors don't know that he's doing it. For instance, Olly in the last show, sings a song about being an arsehole. Now Olly is a lovely guy, he has his shit and he is a bit of an arsehole (both laugh), And Anthony – and I don't know if it's out of guilt – now talks of Olly very fondly in terms of Olly having a difficult relationship with his dad and stuff... That's probably why he used him actually. He likes using actors who have something fractured in their persona... Olly's an arsehole and he made him sing a song about being an arsehole.

GC: Yeah, he had to deal with all these onomatopoeic, interior monologue sounds from Nick that said he's an arsehole.

CE: Yeah! Yeah! And I'm looking at the guy thinking... And he's a young good looking guy who in order to live, has to be in eighty percent denial because talking to him in the bar afterwards he really is a bit of an arsehole. He tries to fuck people by saying, 'I'm a sex addict.'

GC: What!!!

CE: Yeah, the guy's a bit of an arsehole. I could tell you other stories, but not for your dissertation. (both laugh)

GC: We can talk about that later on, once I switch the tape off. I'd be very interested to hear about this. (both continue laughing)

CE: And, of course, you've spoke to Matt Pidgeon.

GC: Yeah, poor Matt, poor Matt.

CE: So the thing about me that might link to your question that you wanted to ask in a bit. Me; I've suffered from mental health problems all of my life, but I also do comedy. So what Anthony always gives me is a kind of tragic role...I think that is true actually. *Dissocia* is someone who is mentally ill, *Narrative*, someone who is deeply upset dealing with the death of their son. And with *Edward Gant* – there were some comedic elements – someone with a lot of longing and unfulfilled, to a certain extent. So I think that he sees me as that. What's really difficult...recently I did a film, I don't know if this falls within your remit...I did two weeks development on a film script for him...He didn't prescribe the characters to us, but I was playing this woman who led the group. And I ended up coming up with this character who was basically very comedic. And he didn't know what to do with it because he said to me, 'Maybe I've got you wrong, maybe I should cast you as one of the general group of students because what you're doing is funny. And I don't see that for the main part.' My question to him, at that point, which he took very defensively, was, 'Politically what are you doing by always making...It's great that you're making the main part a woman and that you want me to do it...But politically what are you saying if – and this comes from his back catalogue – your main character is always an *Alice* character who has very little voice of her own, or personality of her own, but always responsive to – like *Dissocia*, and *Narrative* and *Edward Gant* to an extent where you're...Not so much *Edward Gant* actually, to be fair, - the things around you. You're the protagonist, you're kind of the protagonist, and yet in out notional terms of what the protagonist is; a person who makes the decisions and drives the action, you're not doing it. You're a woman who's responding to the things that are happening around you. So my question, in this instance is, 'Why does he shy away from using the comedy for woman?' He will mainly give the gags to the men...He works with a lot of funny woman, but he does hold back from giving them the funny lines. I kind of understand that because he is a guy, I can understand why he might think in those terms. But at the same time, if you are presented with someone who is funny, or doing some funny stuff. I'm not saying that I am intrinsically funny.

GC: You are funny.

CE: (Laughs) Thank you. But if you are presented with some funny stuff, that immediately puts you on a tangent from being the main character as a woman. So that was my question, 'Politically, what are you doing with that?' And he became incredibly defensive about that, which was interesting to me because I think that is actually a bit of a sticking point for him. I think he genuinely does like woman, but he prefers them to be broken if they're a lead.

GC: Wwhheeww! I'm not going to even try to delve into Anthony's psyche in that department.

CE: (Laughs) We can talk about that afterwards as well.

GC: (both laugh) For the purposes of the tape, I was going to say something about that, but I won't...So, did you ever find it overly difficult to implement any of the material that Anthony wrote for you?

CE: In *Narrative*, yes there's a section that he wrote for me when I have to become a therapist.

GC: Yes, I've been writing about that for the last few months Chris.

CE: Ok. So that was a strange journey because it was a bit of a leap, but I found a way through it in the end. Which was simpler actually, than the roundabout way that we came to it. But he was unable to help me get there I feel. Hence, on the first two or three nights I was exposed, using old tricks, and would have rather not have done that...But it was ok in the end, it was ok in the end.

GC: Have you actually read the script of *Narrative* that's come out recently? That stuff's not in it, the therapy stuff.

CE: Oh really?

GC: Yeah, I can't believe it because I've written extensively on it and now I have to rewrite it because it's not in the script!!! But it was in the performances.

CE: It doesn't matter Cas because we can all remember it.

GC: So just for the record Chris, it did happen didn't it? It happened on stage.

CE: Yeah, it HAPPENED, it HAPPENED! It did absolutely happen. He boiled it down. So is that not there at all now?

GC: There's a tiny little bit of it in a stage direction.

CE: (Whispers) Wwhheeww! What a cunt.

GC: Exactly, what a cunt.

CE: You know, this is an example of there being stuff and he doesn't know how to use it because he's already thinking about the next thing. And I think in *Narrative* there were a lot of threads that came up that if he'd been a bit more open minded he could have explored and pulled together, But he was actually, ironically, too busy making a narrative.

GC: He seemed more interested in the structure and the fucking internet thing than the nuts and bolts and theatricality of that one. I think he was focusing on a broad idea.

CE: Yeah. And my point about the mother with the petition in *Narrative*, was that I thought, as an artist, she could come in and should have been allowed...If he'd genuinely been interested in exploring narrative, he should have given me carte blanche to walk into any fucking scene that I wanted and ask them to sign my petition. That is essentially, totally in parallel with what he initially set out to do. And this goes back to what I was saying earlier when he says this is what he wants to do. It's not! He wants to do something else. Whether he believes that or not is a whole different matter.

GC: Well only he will know.

CE: Yeah. And I think that he works with really interesting artists...And we were all underused in that show and fitted into the glove box, ultimately of narrative. Which was what the whole thing was struggling against.

GC: It's like having an overall objective but not having the strategy or tactics to do it...It was just this big idea.

CE: And I think that is to do with the fact that he has to feel like he has an overarching concept of you and a show. Whereas, if he was truly collaborative and egalitarian, he would have something really fucking interesting on his hands. You know?

GC: I do think so. Yeah, I think so... Ok Chris, in my experience of observing and being in an Anthony show, often the role of the actor is less to do with acting. In fact it can move into a different sphere. Do you think this is an accurate assessment? Do you have to be more than an actor in Anthony's rehearsals?

CE: Yes I think you do. I think it's really helpful if you've come from a background of devising work. It was me that suggested that he work with Barney on another project. There are certain actors, like Amanda Haddingue who is another one, you're not a pure actor, you're much more from a devising background of making your own work kind of world. I think that actually he suits those actors best... I think that if you are just an actor you're going to really struggle. And I don't mean it pejoratively being just an actor because it is a skill and a craft. Anthony's work is about artistic collaboration even if the end product doesn't feel like that. It is. As I said earlier, it is the sum of its parts. I think that on top of that, as a human being, you have to be someone who has patience.

GC: (Laughs) Of a saint!

CE: And also have a sense of security. Not even about your abilities actually but intellectually. I think that you have to be able to lock horns with Anthony intellectually in order to feel bona fide in his process. Because he will say that your comments are welcome, but very quickly, if you can't lock horns with him, you will start to feel as though you're falling off the side. And all you've got left is your acting talent. Which is fine because you'll use that ultimately in the show, but there will come a point where you will stop being part of the process. So if you are not used to devising work and creating your own material you may – and some actors may find that wonderful to discover new things and discover that they can actually do all that shit, which is great. But other actors I've seen will just go 'Fuck. Right, I don't know what you're talking about now.

GC: That's really interesting actually, because I remember having a conversation with Anthony in the pub during the *Narrative* rehearsals and I said that I thought that one of the most important tools for an actor is intelligence. And he said, 'No! No, no!! They need to have other kinds of qualities. Intelligence usually just gets in the way.' And I was like, 'No, Anthony you need to be intelligent to be a good actor.' It's interesting that he said that. I know it's not on the record, but he did say this. We had a long conversation about this. And actually I found that really offensive. I was fucking annoyed at him actually

CE: It's because he what he wants is play dough, he wants play dough. But he fucking knows that his show won't be as good as it could be, especially with something like *Narrative* when start out with nothing. So if he had a room full of play dough he'd have nowt because he'd just be relying on himself. He does need people in there who are actually clever.

GC: I know. That's why he works with the same people again and again. I don't mean that's just why. He knows that you, Barney and Matt are very clever... We had a half hour discussion about this.

CE: Yeah, but he doesn't really see me as an actor that's the thing.

GC: What!?

CE: I don't think so...*Edward Gant* was a very difficult time for me and Anthony and I walked out and said that I wasn't coming back at one point. (laughs) The stage manager had to ring me as I was eating a fucking huge ice cream on the front...And apparently completely unbeknownst to me, because the boys had all been there in the process, and I was going, 'What the fuck are you doing? Yeah, what are you doing? What is this? Why are we still rehearsing the same scene? I've written all this stuff. Last night you asked me to go home and I've come in with four fucking pages of stuff. Why are we not talking about any of this?' And he'd said in the pub to Matt Pidgeon, it was Matt Pidgeon that told me this, what Matt said in to him in the pub was, 'Well Chris went off today. Chris has had an epi and you've both had that massive argument.' And he said, 'Yeah, well Chris is an artist. That's what you have to understand about Chris.' As far as I'm concerned all actors are artists, we're all artists.

GC: (incredulously) What does that even mean? Is it that you're temperamental? What does that even mean? Was it a compliment?

CE: I think it was Anthony's actual version of a compliment...You know, she has things going on in her head as well as her WHAT? Because actors only just use their WHAT? (both laugh)...I suspect that Anthony thinks that most actors are a little bit thick.

GC: I think he does as well.

CE: Which is ironic as he needs intelligent actors. Amanda Haddingue is a perfect example, Amanda is a fucking genius.

GC: I don't know Amanda, I've never met her.

CE: She was in *Dissocia*. And you know what, you should interview Amanda.

GC: Yeah, I'd like to but I don't know if I could get her.

CE: Well I'll get her for you. Amanda's great, she comes from the same background for me. And I said to Anthony, 'Work with Amanda in *Dissocia*. She's brilliant and she's really funny.' I'm always trying to push funny and clever women at him because he fucking needs them. He gets them and he writes stuff for them but they're never the lead. So where am I going with this...please Cas help me here.

GC: Well, we were just talking about intelligence in actors and do the actors do more in Anthony's rehearsals than just act...

CE: It was really about intelligence and devisors...Ok, so, she was also in the Christmas show at the Court, the one that Imogen was in.

GC: *Get Santa*.

CE: Yeah, Amanda was in that as well. He needs and he fucking knows he needs people in the rehearsal room who are really smart and actually nice. Who can look at his scripts...Amanda's nicer than me actually and I have to say that I've really been on my best behaviour on the last two projects with Anthony. If I said what's actually going on he wouldn't believe it, he's actually really easily hurt. It's an answer to a question that you wrote later which actually so maybe we'll come to that.

GC: Ok. This is of particular interest to me. Is Anthony's process ever at odds with the creative or technical staff that he works with?

CE: Yes, he thinks that stage management are spies, literally! So he has a great distrust of them. I would say that Anthony has learned in the last seven or eight years that a good designer and a good musician will fucking save his arse.

GC: That's why he got Nick on board isn't it?

CE: Nick, Chahine, and Myriam Bleuthner was the best thing that ever happened to him. And he needs that really rigorous German design to offset the chaos of his work. And I think that's when it works best. He has worked with other designers since, like during *Narrative* and she didn't get it. You have to be fucking German and go like (bad German accent) 'No, we have to do it like ziz. No, what do you mean? I don't understand you.' You can't go in there and try and please him. The moment that anyone goes in and tries to please him it's like blood in the water with a shark, it really is. And that goes for actors as well. If you do you're fucked.

GC: I think so as well. You have to be strong with him. I think that Anthony needs a really strong assistant director or collaborator who goes, 'Why are we wasting all this time? Why are we persisting with this, it isn't working, and we're going off in a tangent.' I don't know if he would ever have somebody like that in the room but I think that's what he needs.

CE: Do you know the guy who is at Soho now, Steve McMarmion who is a fucking terrible director but a very nice guy, was the assistant director on *Edward Gant*. And Steve told me this actually... The whole fucking thing was falling apart and I had done one, and Steve could understand why I'd done one. And I'm not an unreasonable person, I'm really not. So Steve said that he'd had a meeting with Anthony where he'd said, 'Look...' Because one of the roles of an assistant director is to talk to the cast when the director can't talk to them, in order to gauge the temperature. He did it and he did it really well and he said to Anthony, 'Look, they're all really unhappy. They need a bit more from you in terms of encouragement basically.' And Anthony absolutely bollocked him and said, 'The moment you start listening to them and thinking what they say has any weight is the moment that you're fucked.' No it wasn't 'having any weight', it was 'Don't be taken in', that was it. 'Don't be taken in by their insecurities.'

GC: (Long silence) I don't know what to say to that really to be honest.

CE: So you're at war and I've always been quietly at war with Anthony. And I learnt at *Edward Gant*... I'm an actor and I need to work and Anthony is very loyal. So even however difficult he thinks I've been he gets me back. And I'd like to think that's because of the quality of the stuff I can do for him.

GC: Of course it is, course it is.

CE: And not just going, 'Oh well we'll throw Chris a few hundred quid.'

GC: Course it is. Course it is Chris. Saying that though, he's never worked with me again (Chris laughs).

CE: So we've been quietly at war. Sometimes I'm not actually quietly at war. He can come up with an idea, like he did recently for this film, and I was moved to tears. It was about the

dissolution of a relationship and the metaphor was a haunted house. And I just found the two things so beautiful and said it was absolutely wonderful. And I thought, 'You'd never fucking do that for me would you. You'd never enter into my creative world so wholeheartedly. Or chase an idea that I'd had and then go "Yeah, do that".' It isn't within him, it's just not within him. Anyway, that's probably a private conversation.

GC: (Pause) For me this is the most interesting stuff actually: Anthony as director/writer versus actor/artist. Does Anthony accommodate the process that you as an actor have to go through to give a confident and credible performance?

CE: (Chris laughs very loudly for quite a long time)

GC: This is what I want to know. (Gary laughs too)

CE: (Continues laughing) Why have you even written that question?

GC: Because I want to hear no.

CE: NO!!! ON NO ACCOUNT, ON ABSOLUTELY NO ACCOUNT. EVER OR ANYWHERE...he has undermined, I remember his notes to Barney and Barney was always very pro Anthony through all the time when he was giving me a fucking hard time.

GC: Was this in *Narrative*?

CE: No this was in *Dissocia*. Barney was doing a certain thing and was taking quite a long time with some stuff with a stick. It was a little comedy moment. We'd got down on the floor together right at the start of *Dissocia* and Barney was doing the Sigmund Freud stuff. We'd done it a couple of times at the Lyceum and in the note session one night he went (Best Anthony voice), 'Barney I think you should cut the thing with the stick.' And Barney said, 'Oh well I've been doing it... (Stutteringly) the audience seem to really like it.' And they argued for a while and ultimately Anthony said, (Anthony voice) 'No, no, go ahead and do it if you want to look like a cunt.' (Both laugh) Barney wouldn't talk to him for days after that.

GC: Did he just go silent and walk away? I can imagine Barney doing that.

CE: Yeah, he just went quiet and absolutely couldn't hack it. And I remember talking to Barney about it afterwards and Barney was so hurt. And I was like, 'Well do you understand what I was going through now, all that time?'

GC: Yeah, you had a moment like that in *Narrative* when you had that discussion after the 'Box Therapy' improvisation. And he was saying, 'Yeah, well, I quite like what you're doing but it has to be more real. It needs to be this, it needs to be that...' And you said, 'I thought that's what you wanted.'

CE: Is that on video?

GC: Yeah. I'll send it to you when I've finished... There's loads on the dynamics of you and Anthony's relationship on a subtextual level.

CE: Oh Cas, my God!

GC: There are actually times when he's been quite kind to you as well. But there are a lot of subtextual things going on there. I'll send it to you.

CE: It's really tricky and I've become a bit sort of titanium. I expect him to say things like that, I totally expect it. I can still come back at him and say things like 'I thought that's what you wanted.' Because...

GC: He has no idea what he wants.

CE: He has no idea what he wants. What he does is he'll create a thing, see you do some stuff and go, 'No! That's not it. No.' And then give you a hard time as an actor for having, basically, cut yourself in two. Exposed and having done things against your instinct. Done accents and voices and put a box on your head. Sibilant Susan and all sorts of shit. All of it. And then it's very difficult... If I'd been twenty-five or even an actor who hadn't worked with Anthony before I might have been utterly destroyed by that.

GC: Zawe was.

CE: Zawe was?

GC: Zawe was. There was a minute pause after that where everybody was laughing. When you took the box off her head and you see her face, the body language etc. And you don't say anything and you walk up to the back Zawe's looking around and the atmosphere is silent and uncomfortable. It lasts for about a minute then Anthony goes, 'Good stuff. There's some good stuff there.' And you see that Zawe is nearly crying and everybody else is not laughing any more. There are some very interesting things in that one moment of that improvisation which I've written about ten thousand words on.

CE: Good, good, good! Thank you. Please send it to me.

GC: The stuff can't be sent by computer, it needs to get on a disc so that I can send it to you.

CE: But also, actually remembering that, I did have a crisis because I texted Barney and I wanted to talk about it afterwards. I asked him, 'Did I make a total fool of myself today?' And it was you actually who told me that I didn't. I came home as a fucking seasoned Neilson devivor, traumatised. Fuck knows what Zawe was feeling, so I rang her up.

GC: You could see that she was devastated after that.

CE: And I kept her on that fucking project. I rang her up and talked her round. I was also feeling raw from it.

GC: It was really exposing what you guys did that day, it was really brave actually, really brave.

CE: And a benign dictator, or a good dad would have said, 'Wow! You know let's have a break, let's have a tea break.' And then we could have had a nice discussion about it. But he can't go the extra mile.

GC: Yeah, that's his bad communication skills. Watching all the footage that I have you do notice that his communication skills leave a lot to be desired. That's what I'm talking about when I say the actors' process, what you need from a director that Anthony maybe doesn't give.

CE: I think it can be very damaging and hurtful and not in a precious way at all. But in terms of the process, a really beautiful honest process, with Anthony. I want to make this work with

Anthony, but if he could just take his fucking foot off the gas of being the leader or the person who knows and just be one of us, the work would be better, I'm sure of it. *Narrative* could have been much better.

GC: Yeah, for me it could have been much better...I was going to say something ridiculous like, if you had an extra two weeks rehearsals. But actually not, because another two weeks would have been the deadline for him and time would have been used the same. It's almost like the last two weeks of rehearsals is the first week of you run. I think if you had another two weeks of rehearsal there would just have been more arseing around.

CE: Exactly. Don't give that man more than five weeks because he will just hurt people more and more and there's a limit to how much you can take. Because he has a really strong crew in me and Imogen and Barney. And within that process we've all worked with him again...I have had to really block a part of myself which is hurt and wants to tell him shit.

GC: Yeah, you do just have to protect yourself.

CE: Sorry Cas.

GC: No, no, there comes a point when you just have to look after yourself because at the end of the day it's you that has to go on stage again, again, again and again.

CE: Yes, you're right...So all the time, at the back of your head, as an actor within his process, you have another voice which is going, 'So, I sort of think I know what I'm doing here. And there's this bit that I don't know about, but I can do that voice if it comes down to it; I can probably mash my way through that. So I was mashing my way through three different accents at one point with no fucking idea what I was doing. I was doing an American therapist, Sibilant Susan, a fucking Jewish lady. And I'm glad it got cut, well it didn't get cut, it got reduced to something which makes some kind of sense within the whole of the narrative. But I was on my fucking arse for the first three performances. Just basically, trying to get tricks out of my own bag. And people talk about that a lot. Imogen says, 'Other actors in Anthony's process are worried about the first night, but for me the first night is never a problem because you are coasting on your adrenalin. The problem is the third night, the fourth nighty and the fifth night.' And that's where the holes come up. Ok, my big thing about Anthony as an actor is that, either the text supports you or you support the text. And in a lot of Anthony's work, if he hasn't done it properly and put the right amount of work into it that's what happens. The third act of *Edward Gant* is a perfect example. I had to go crazy, bat shit crazy to make it work. We all did, you know. I had to cluck, be a chicken, do all sorts of crazy shit. So it became an experiential, weird third act for the audience...There was nothing supporting us. So, you have to hold up the text. And there is a very different experience as an actor where the text holds up you...There are certain well-written scenes of Neilson where you will be. You will be in a show where certain scenes are well written and you feel supported by the text. Others are full of holes and, my God, if you don't give it fucking mental shit you're fucked. You've almost got to disguise the holes with your energy and commitment.

GC: That's what I felt when I was on stage with Anthony's work. That's exactly what I had to do.

CE: Yes.

GC: And it's fucking terrifying actually.

CE: Yes, it is terrifying...

GC: The first couple of times that you do it.

CE: Yes, exactly. But the first couple of times, in a way, are a bit easier because you've got the adrenalin. If you've been covering holes for three weeks it's just exhausting and you're angry with him and you're thinking, 'Why didn't you just write this better man?' What I won't do is go back and edit the work.

GC: I think you're absolutely right there. Ok, moving on. What is it like to be involved in or witness the discussions that end up going nowhere, or the ideas generated or being rehearsed ultimately being cut? Does that have any effect on you as a performer?

CE: I don't mind the two hour debates... The stuff that gets cut has an effect on you especially if it was good. Which takes us back to the notion of collaborative work whereby, you all fucking know in the room if something occurs which is good and worthwhile and true to some extent. And if that is sacrificed for an overall concept, or whatever Anthony's got in his head, then you think, 'Why did we just spend those hours, all that time doing that stuff?' And ultimately, I think that's very de-motivating. Not particularly as an actor, because as an actor you're still going to play your part and say your words. As an artist, as a collaborator, it's incredibly de-motivating to have work discarded if it's good. Do you know what, it would be so much better if Anthony had come in on the first day and said, 'We're going to do loads of stuff, it's not going to get used, I'm just going to cut the shit out of it. I'm going to spend hours doing stuff in this room and none of it is going to get used.' I only know that happens because I've worked with him for so long but a new person wouldn't know about that. So, as an artist, as a collaborator, I think that is incredibly problematic.

GC: Ok, great. Anthony usually works as both a writer and a director does this raise any issues? Do any tensions or problems emerge because of this duality?

CE: Yes Cas, they do. I think Anthony Neilson, on a whole, should not be allowed to direct his own work. I think he has great talent as a writer. I think he's a very interesting person. I think the chaos of his rehearsal rooms are like... At their best they're like the beginning of a schmorgousbourg of anything can happen. And that's a wonderful, wonderful place to be. But when you then create a two and a half hour long schmorgousbourg you need someone to say, 'That's completely irrelevant, this doesn't work. Let's cut that.' Anthony is not good at cutting his own work, he's not good at editing it. And he's very reluctant, ultimately, once a thing has gone on, once it's opened, to cut the stuff. On a plus side of that, I think a lot of that has to do with his feeling of loyalty to his actors. Whereby he does want people to feel like they have something to do within his work.

GC: I know he does. He's quite even handed. Nobody gets a three line role for instance. Nobody's the Butler walking in and saying, 'Here's your gin and tonic mam.'

CE: No, absolutely not. But I can't think of any show that I've done with him that wouldn't have really benefitted... He's not a good director, I've said that for years.

GC: That's kind of what I've been getting at with this accommodating actors' processes and getting the best out of them. I don't think he does that. I don't think he does that.

CE: No, I don't think he does that either. If you think about *Narrative* and all that the actors had to give in that process. It was so much of ourselves, so much of ourselves.

GC: (Sadly) There was so much waste of yourselves.

CE: So much waste Cas. So much of it got thrown in the bin. And a lot of it wasn't even utilised because he doesn't know how to. And I think that a really good director, who has actually spent their life in theatre – Anthony would be the first person to admit this, but he doesn't go to see theatre shows, he doesn't really like theatre, he doesn't know who Forced Entertainment are. He's not a theatre guy. If someone had come in there, the assistant director Ned who I've worked with before, someone like that.

GC: Ned's a really clever guy, he had very insightful things to say on the interview that I did with him on camera. Ned said some really interesting things.

CE: Yes, I bet he did. I bet he did.

GC: He did.

CE: Ned's a really clever guy and Anthony underused him. Out of all the people in that room, in that process, Anthony underused Ned the most because that guy could have made that show a whole lot better. Not only did he understand actors and the actors' process but he also has a really good sense of theatricality, and I'm not sure that Anthony does. Him and I have differences about theatricality and what that is. But he knows that I'm from a visual theatre background. So it killed me, it fucking killed me when we were working in multi-media and he hadn't thought through what the pieces actually meant. And the weight of that compared to what we were doing; and what that meant as well. What does it mean to be a live performer alongside recorded media, or ostensibly live media. What the fuck does that mean? He never engaged with that, he never engaged with that even briefly. We had stuffed kittens all that shit tacked on. A couple of bisons, this and that tacked on. I found it so offensive the whole of the Lawrence of Arabia bit.

GC: Yeah, why was that there.

CE: Because there was a pond there and Anthony Neilson thinks it's fun to piss into a pond. And Barney used to go on every night and come off dressed in the full fucking Lawrence of Arabia (laughs) stuff, and go like, 'What the fuck am I doing?' And I said to Anthony when we opened, 'You have to cut that Lawrence of Arabia stuff.' He went, (Neilson voice) 'What do you mean?' So a man, up until a certain point, has listened to my ideas, then suddenly feels that he has to negate everything that I say. And that's very difficult to work with (Gary sighs), as an artist, as an actor, as a fucking human being. As a human being and suddenly go, 'No you're wrong and I'm right.'

GC: Yeah, he can be quite defensive and pull the shutters down suddenly.

CE: Yes he does. And I've said to him, 'Do you know what, if this is your process then just fucking say it. Really, really just say it.'

GC: Aye, own it.

CE: Yeah, own it. 'There will be a certain point guys and girls where the shutters will come down and I will just have to do it.' And we'd all go, 'Ok, we know this is the point where the

shutters are down.' My point is, the difficulty is that he, I believe, wants to present being a good dad. And actually he needs to be a bad dad, and he can't square that with himself. He can't square that in his psyche because of the relationship he has with his dad.

GC: That's something we can talk about off the record. His woman, mum thing and the damage that's done to him being around that.

CE: Cas, all night I could talk about this shit. (Both laugh) All night.

GC: Ok, let's move on then. Conventional notions of authorship, especially that of the single author, seem problematic when applied to Anthony's process. Do you think this is the case?

CE: Yes, absolutely. I have struggled with notions of authorship all my life. And I think that as an actor, especially if you're involved in any devised process, you will struggle with notions of authorship. I think in Anthony's case it is particularly difficult because often you will be in a process whereby you create, but the ultimate script will not necessarily exactly translate as your words. So you cannot legitimately claim authorship and yet none of the pieces of work that I have made with Anthony could have been made, the exact way they were made, without the people involved. So what does that mean? Is there another definition of authorship, does it have to mean words on a page?

GC: No, authorship is a very amorphous term... You have the single author and you have authorship from various different strands. One sentence can be written by one person, but what influenced that person to write it. It's very murky when it's applied to Anthony. I don't mean that he grabs lines that you've said. I think that you're co-authors in a way. He writes most of the words but without you guys doing what you do in rehearsals there wouldn't be any words. It's a bit like the chicken and the egg.

CE: Yeah, there wouldn't be any plays, and Anthony would be the first person to tell this to you. He needs actors in a room and a deadline, without which there would be no play.

GC: He doesn't like sitting down and writing in front of the computer, he doesn't like that.

CE: No he doesn't. I think authorship is such a slippery term... It's difficult because, always, as an actor, in new writing you always feel that you have some authorship to a degree. And yet, if I were the first actor in a Mark Ravenhill play, the words would already have been written. The whole concept, the whole thing would already have been made. That's not the case with Neilson. I think that many artists need that brush and that paint and this collection of things in order to make something on a canvas. Anthony needs that person, and that person, and that person, and that person. Does that make them authors, does that give them shared authorship, because he's ultimately the one to put it on the canvas. I don't know. I'd like to think so. Going back to something I said earlier on, it is the sum of its parts. You can't make a painting without paint and a paintbrush.

GC: Yeah, your paint palette is a good metaphor for what's going on.

CE: It's tricky though because it lets him slip under the lines in terms of legality.

GC: This is an angle that my supervisors are interested in. But I don't know, should actors get paid more for what they do in the rehearsal room?

CE: No... I don't know... as an actor, ultimately, you're just glad that you have a job.

GC: That's what I said to them, it's fucking economics.

CE: It is. And I have been used much worse than Anthony uses me. At least he appreciates my opinion. At least, at the end of the day, he gives you a part I can do... There are worse things, but then we're into a world of relativity aren't you.

GC: It's not the economic side of authorship. As we touched upon earlier, when I worked with him, I wrote my part. I don't mean I wrote the dialogue for my part, but it sounds the same as you in *Edward Gant*... The last Friday came, and we were up on the Tuesday, I hadn't been used, it was a three week rehearsal period. So he told me to go home and write...

CE: Your play.

GC: Who your character is

CE: Your play, *Hooverbag*, right? The piece that I wrote that he directed me in was about a guy downstairs who had a water bailer. I thought it was a water bailer in my mind, but it was actually a hoover. So the whole of the piece was about a guy who had a hoover.

GC: He's a theatrical magpie.

CE: The next thing is that some guys I don't know are rehearsing in my flat.

GC: That was a one off, it was weird that Saturday afternoon.

CE: Doing a play that's about my piece.

GC: So you didn't know? What the fuck? Because Jo, your flatmate was the stage manager.

CE: She told me she was the lighting designer. And she said to me, 'You know this play about a hoover is a bit like your play.'

GC: I had no idea.

CE: Ok, so there's another one (laughs)... So authorship goes very much beyond the piece you're actually working on with Anthony. If you've worked with him for a while it goes way back. Our biggest fight ever has been from me coming from a performance art background of it's not about narrative, it's about connecting images, it's about the feeling and about the experience. And him going, 'No, no, we need a story.' You know why I wrote *Feeder*, it's because Anthony said to me twelve years ago, 'Just write a play, just write a fucking play with three acts. And I said to him...

GC: Why don't you just write a fucking play asshole?

CE: (Laughs) No, what I said to him was, 'Why don't you just fucking chill out man? And let what happens happen, forget the narrative.' I end up being in his fucking show, and so contro posto I say to him, 'I've just written a play called *Feeder* and you're in it, you're playing Al.' So he's agreed to play Al, but since then I've decided that he's not good enough for it. (Both laugh) And, you know what, if it was a success they'd say it was because Anthony had influenced me. And if it was a failure it was because I'd chosen the wrong gang of actors. I can't win.

GC: No, you can't win either way. There is a part of me that would like to see the fucker on stage and see how he feels, how he copes, to be honest.

CE: I know mate, that's part of the reason why I did it.

GC: Seriously, he's a callous fuck with actors, and I'd like to see him go on stage underprepared and not really knowing what he was doing.

CE: Jesus fuck yeah that's why I'd want him to be in it. But, you know what Cas, he wouldn't be underprepared if I was directing it, it really wouldn't. I'd be fucking lovely to him. I've been in his stuff for twenty years, now come and be in mine.

GC: Sorry, I got a bit carried away there imagining Anthony in our shoes. I know you wouldn't be underprepared; it would be very fucking hard to be as underprepared as Neilson. (both laugh)

CE: Sorry, we're going off track here.

GC: No we're not, we're not. Well we are, but it's funny. (both laugh) Ok then, why do you think Anthony has this pool of actors that he repeatedly employs?

CE: (Chris laughs) Because, A, we're all desperate for work, so he can basically have whatever pool of actors he wants...So the people that are continually working with him, like me, I would say that whatever my problems with Anthony were, and they are manifold, he does still truthfully attempt to pursue the unknowable, and I'm interested in that. And I also know now, after working with him for many years, how to protect myself. So I know I can survive within his process.

GC: What was it like the first couple of times when you didn't have that armour at your disposal?

CE: Awful, fucking terrible! Arguments, walked of, completely walked off the project.

GC: He must get this reaction a lot.

CE: Yes. He has. I know that working at the RSC (laughs) has been a trial for him and I'm not surprised. And part of me punches my arm in glee, that other actors have felt the way that I did. And another part of me thinks he's just dismissing these actors as 'precious'.

GC: He does, he thinks they're just being 'typical actors', I've heard him say it. He's said it to me: 'You're just being an actor, you're just being an actor.'

CE: Well why don't you be a director then!

GC: I wish I'd have thought of that at the time.

CE: What it fucking entails is to be able to manage and look after people, and to have a respect for the processes that other people have to go through; actually what they have to drag up for you in rehearsals. As an actor you come with a fucking open heart.

GC: Yeah, you bring yourself, and your secrets, your innermost thoughts. You fucking do man.

CE: All of that stuff comes out in his work, in his rehearsals. And I did hold back in *Narrative* because we all had to do our life stories. I don't know if you were that that day.

GC: I wasn't, but Barney briefly talked about it.

CE: So we all had to do our life stories and people before me were getting very upset and crying. And I just thought ‘No. I know what you want and I’m not going to give you this.’ I was honest and I did talk about certain stuff. And at the end, he knows me very well, he said (Neilson voice) ‘I’m surprised you didn’t talk about this. And this and that.’ I went, ‘Well it didn’t seem important. It didn’t seem interesting.’ But there was a real feeling that he wanted everybody to be in tears, and I simply can’t understand that from a director, that you feel you need to reduce people to that place. So of course there is a resistance, a resilience in me now. I will never go there with Anthony. But I’ll do it on stage, I’ll do it on stage.

GC: Of course, that’s a different thing entirely.

CE: It is. And talking to you about my dissertation about containment and when I’m on stage I’m safe, because the reverie between them and me holds me in a way that I can’t be held with him in rehearsals. You’re never held by Anthony.

GC: No, you’re not supported and looked after.

CE: There’s no containing space and a benevolent director would give you a containing space, and they’ll give you a parent figure, and enable you to play. Now what Anthony wants from actors is for them to be play dough and to play. And in order for them to play he has to be a benevolent father and he isn’t.

GC: No, he’s an absent father.

CE: Very observant, very pertinent Cas.

GC: That’s what he is. He’s left his single mother wife up in the house while he’s out doing whatever it is he does, as a father. Sorry, I’m away there in my own stuff...But it is interesting that thing in *Narrative* when you gave your life stories; did Anthony give his life story? Or did he just sit and listen? I don’t think he would have gave his, did he?

CE: No.

GC: I didn’t think so.

CE: That’s why I wouldn’t give mine.

GC: I’d probably have been stupid enough to give mine, because I can be a naive little soul at times.

CE: I still spoke about things that are very important to me, but I wasn’t willing to go into the dark place that Olly and Barney went because I knew I wasn’t in an environment that could contain it.

GC: But also, why is it pertinent, why should you have to reveal this to a group of strangers for no reason. Just in case it sparks something in his imagination that he might use?

CE: Absolutely. Exactly. It’s a very dilettante approach to making work. And one that I really cannot see the point of. We certainly all knew each other better afterwards, there was a lot of empathy between the actors. But we didn’t need to.

GC: It must have been quite weird coming in the next day with say Zawe, having never met you before now knowing x, y and z about you?

CE: Sure! Actually, as an exercise, it was kind of interesting. The difficulty about it was, that he said, ‘Whenever I bang this drum you have to start singing.’ So he would...I could see him doing it...he was like a kid in a toy shop. He could just bang the table whenever he wanted. You could be in the middle of a story about attempted suicide and he would just bang the table and make you sing it. I can’t translate that as anything other than abuse.

GC: That’s harsh.

CE: Fucking right it is. I don’t care.

GC: Wwhheeww! That is fucking extreme man.

CE: We’re all involved in art. We’re all artists together and that does involve a certain amount of introspection. But to be the conductor of that is a different thing all together. What was he trying to do to us?

GC: Yeah! What was the objective of that? Was it to generate material or try to engender trust and familiarity in the actors? What is that about?

CE: He was interested in, which was an interesting notion, us suddenly bursting into song throughout the production.

GC: That’s what I thought. I’ve edited clips about this.

CE: He chickened out in my view...You know what, you can only have one or two threads of enquiry in a process. If that’s his thread of enquiry then follow it, use it in the show. And there were moments of it in the show.

GC: There was. That scene with Brian dying and Zawe beside the bed and you’re being the narrator. That seemed to be the essence, or a progression, or evolution of that idea. You tried out lots of musical things that didn’t make it into the final cut.

CE: I think he should have gone for that. I think if that was his interest, which is the only reason why I did that exercise...

GC: It’s the only justifiable excuse for asking for that.

CE: If that had ended up in the process, which it did at the start, there were more moments of singing, then that original exercise had validity and a purpose. And I can understand the line of going, ‘Oh this doesn’t work.’ But I don’t believe that, I really don’t believe it. I believe that at some point for Neilson there kicks in, ‘We’ve got to get a show on. And it better be good and it better be funny.’

GC: There’s definitely a degree of expediency that comes in towards the end...Which is why, maybe, that idea of ‘Box therapy’ came in, but didn’t make it into the final published script. Just thinking about this Chris, you did this the week before the technical rehearsal, the penultimate day you had in the rehearsal room. There was this big debate between you and Anthony afterwards about whether you were going to use it. And you said, ‘Why don’t we just cut this? If this isn’t working then why don’t we cut this?’ And he said, ‘No, no it’s interesting, but I need to do some work on it. I need to do this and this and this and that.’ Then the next time you came to do it was the second last day of the technical rehearsal and no other work had been done on it up to that point.

CE: Oh yeah!

GC: So you had to go with what you had and there was no script. And I remember Zawe coming up with these ideas and Anthony was just being a cunt to her. It was like he thought she was just stupid. And then he ended up going with the fucking ideas! I've got footage that shows this is what's going on.

CE: Oh Cas, Cas!

GC: And then the fucker doesn't have it in the play text that he writes.

CE: Yeah, but it saved him didn't it. It got him out of a tricky situation.

GC: Yeah. And do you remember the ending when he said, 'We're not going to have an ending. You're all just going to come in and look at this fictitious thing in the sky. We don't need an ending.'

CE: Can I tell you about the ending. What happened was, we were all in the theatre and we didn't have an ending. And I said to him, 'Anthony don't you think we should all maybe be in that thing', and begging for it?

GC: Yeah, yeah, I remember, I was there.

CE: I can't believe you've got that on tape.

GC: I think this might go into my authorship section, this kind of stuff.

CE: Good.

GC: Because there's a lot of different types of authorship.

CE: Yes, oh god yeah. And visually that's absolutely where I'm going when I say, 'Let's look at the whole thing because this doesn't make sense.' And if I'd had the chance to see the fucking video shit that he was putting on...And I did say to him...

GC: Yeah you did, something about the girl from *Nuts* magazine on a rollercoaster with her tits jiggling about. It didn't make it into the show, but you did have a conversation about that.

CE: And I'm glad that sometimes he listens. I'd forgotten about that. Do you remember the rape conversation? There was going to be a massive section where Brian talks about this rape and taking someone into the woods. And I said, 'You do realise at the moment there's this woman who has been gang raped by all these American guys.' And that didn't go in in the end, and that's authorship isn't it?

GC: Course it is.

CE: So, authorship can be about censoring ideas and cutting things as well as writing coming up with the words, right?

GC: Absolutely. It can involve so many different things. Don't worry, I'm not going to ask you to go back and give a different answer, but there's so many things involved in authorship than just writing. And I think authorship is a huge question mark with Anthony's stuff. How authorship comes about, the actual process of authorship, and what tangents that draws upon....Right we're nearly finished...I think there can be productive and unproductive risk,

waste and failure. Do you think this is the case with Anthony's process? Unproductive versus productive.

CE: Risk and failure, oh gosh.

GC: That's maybe a hard one.

CE: There's an awful lot of waste, there's an awful lot of risk and there's an awful lot of failure...It's a reiteration of stuff I've said before really, which is about the amount of material that's generated which is ignored or sidelined to the sacrifice of an overarching notion or idea that he has in his head anyway. So the whole notion of genuine collaboration is undermined...I think that risk can be...I love risk. I do Anthony's work because of risk. I think that it is both productive and unproductive. I think that if you take things too personally then they can have an absolutely crushing effect on you as an artist. And I think that certainly can be the case with Anthony's work. I think productive risk is difficult because you often take unproductive risks in Anthony's work because you're unsupported by the final thing. So you go on taking productive risks for three weeks once you're actually doing the thing, doing the show. Every show is a risk because if you're unsupported by text you are taking a risk every night.

GC: Even if it's just on the level of, 'Will I say the right lines.' If you don't have a script that's cemented, you find yourself thinking, 'Will I remember these improvised lines that I've come up with within this framework tonight?'

CE: Yeah. Yeah...I remember very, very laterally, after three nights at the Royal Court in *Narrative*, he came up with a scripted version of the therapist scene and I had to tape one of the words, I can't remember which word it was, but I had to tape it to the underside of the shelf, because I'd never learnt those lines, you know. It'll take even a good actor quite a while to learn a script...And suddenly you're not improvising lines anymore. It was all fine before and now you're having to say new words. I had one word! One fucking word out of all the words that I had to learn at the last minute taped! And all I can remember is Anthony coming up to me afterwards and saying, 'It looked like you were looking for something, what were you looking for when you were at the back with your horns on? And I went, 'That word.' And he was sort of amused and condescending and couldn't believe that I hadn't learnt it. He made me felt like a bit of a shit actor because I couldn't remember what that word was. And, you know, I could've thrown the whole shebang, I could throw the whole shebang at Anthony at any point. But it would have been pointless because he would say, 'You narcissistic, egocentric fucking actors. You slightly think, not knowing the whole thing actually. Don't you understand what it is, don't you understand my pain?'

GC: You could easily say to him, 'Don't you understand my pain, my job?' I think you could very easily say that to Anthony.

CE: I think you could. And you could also say, 'Ok, let's get into a boxing match about pain.' Who the fuck cares. 'Your pain gets you a script which is written down and done by a gazillion people all over the world.' ...I've worked with Anthony a lot over the last twenty years...What do I have? Where's my sweetie box? I haven't got one. I'm still trying to get one show on at the Royal Court upstairs.

GC: Yeah, you're the same as me, forty five years old blah blah blah. Anthony's got his big house, royalties from all over the world coming in, etc., etc., etc.. You and the likes of Barney are poor.

CE: Yeah, I know. I've got this beautiful flat, but I'm here by the grace of god, as you know.

GC: I know.

CE: So, just all that.

GC: Ok let's finish it there. One last question, is there anything we haven't covered, anything to add? You don't have to.

CE: Yeah. Anthony Neilson is a cunt, but he's our cunt, as you once said to me. (both laugh)
I think that I hold people dear because there are certain personality traits that are incredibly important to me. And the most important of those is loyalty, the second is kindness.

Imogen Doel *Narrative Interview*

GC: I'm wondering, just to start off, could you talk to me a bit about Anthony's rehearsal 'process', and how it compares to other rehearsals that you've been involved with that have a script to begin with?

ID: Yeah. Obviously it sounds very different in the fact that you don't have a script; and that's very, very true. It's a completely different process from anything that I've ever been a part of. The only thing I had similar experience of was at drama school where the training that I went through...there was a part of the course that was quite heavily about devising. And it was actually a part of the course that I was really interested in when I was doing research for the course and also when I went to do the course. In practice it feels like the thing that I enjoyed the most and felt like I found the most truth or the more interesting of choices in the playing of it. So when I first met Anthony I had no idea he worked this way. I got a breakdown for an idea for a story, he'd written a monologue, and I got a phone call asking me to prepare the monologue and prepare a song. And the part was for a ten year old kid, which I just jumped at the chance for. I actually really wanted to do something like this, and then when I heard he was doing it I actually enquired about it. So I went to meet and that's when he told me that 'what you've received in terms of the monologue is all that's actually been written, it's more like an idea really'. And from really meeting him I was really interested about the character and the idea that the story sort of had. But actually I had no idea. Once I met him, hearing him speak about the 'process' just made me more interested in the whole thing. And I think really having been through it – this is my third time working with him –; I'm always surprised how much he trusts his actors, and when he says it's a 'collaborative process', he really believes that, he practices that. Whereas, with people they can go 'well there, you know, let's get everyone in the room...' Yeah, he makes the decisions and he makes the final cuts and puts all the story together. But actually there are discussions that you're having in the corner of the room with someone about a thought that you had in relation to maybe someone's scene, or anything like that, and then suddenly the next draft comes in and that's in there; but in such an integrated way. And I think for me it's a much better way of working and also you think...we still don't have the final script and this is our last day of rehearsals, but actually we know our characters so well. Something else happens, it stops being about the lines, about the script and what the character says. It starts becoming more about who they are and how they behave; and just really who they are as people. And actually what they say can change. It's a hard thing to get your head around especially if you're someone who likes to know exactly what you're doing. But I think you actually find out more about the character and more about yourself as an actor through this process.

GC: You've touched upon a few questions I was going to ask. So that's really excellent. So are there any ideas that you personally presented in rehearsals that are in the script and if so what are they?

ID: Yeah. The most recent one was on my Facebook I was sent this link the thirty biggest autocorrect mistakes...when you're texting someone and it corrects you. So I found it and they were absolutely hilarious and I brought them in and I showed Anthony and we were having a laugh about them. I thought it was very interesting especially in terms of 'narrative' and how you're trying to express yourself and communicate with people and how through

technology it tries to guess what you're thinking or interpret what you're saying, and it becomes completely misunderstood. I thought that idea was really interesting. Not that in any way I thought he'd use it; I thought he'd use it in quite a separate way because we're working with projections and maybe also because they were mini narratives in themselves and we were looking for things to punctuate the scenes. So I sort of thought that maybe that could be a good idea. But actually now, in our latest draft, the character that I'm playing is actually struggling with being a part of the narrative. She does something and she doesn't really have a motive or clear intention for why she did it. As a result she's lost her narrative, and she's lost her way within a story. And he has integrated this idea that she's in this sort of autocorrect kind of place. So she's saying things, and she's trying to find a meaning, find a way of communicating but she can't. I just thought that parallel was so clever, it's extremely funny. But it's also very poignant. I really drives home the point that he's trying to make in such an interesting way and hopefully other people will find it funny as well. I personally find it hilarious.

GC: I do. I've been watching a lot of stuff and there's a lot of funny stuff in the show there really is.

ID: I know, and I think that's another thing, like you find really genuine things that you all believe are funny. Rather than someone coming in with all these ideas that they think is very funny. You know, because you all have a say in that, I think there's much more room for the dramatic to come out of that and in quite an unexpected way. When I go to see a piece of theatre or a film, I really relish those moments.

GC: Brilliant. Ok, to what extent do you feel that you are creating your character?

ID: I feel that, particularly at the beginning, anything is possible. When you have a script and you audition it's very much about fitting in to a scenario or into a particular character, it's ready-made and it's up to you to pull those things close to you. Whereas, I feel that when you work with Anthony nothing is impossible and nothing is sort of...you can do anything and you don't even know what that's going to be, and he doesn't know what it's going to be. That sounds utterly crazy but what's really great about that is that everything in the rehearsal room is totally open and free and you really feel that you're given that time to be heard and to have those conversations that will never show up in the final product. But having been through those conversations and down those avenues that you don't want to go in the end; those are maybe the most important days. Well for me anyway. I just feel like being given the time and being given the space to make those, well not wrong choices, because they're not wrong. It's just...you don't know straightaway all the time I don't think, and it's good to actually actively do those things rather than just talk about them. You get a chance to really try it on and see what that does to you. Often that can lead to something that you never even thought of or that Anthony never even thought of.

GC: Absolutely; that's brilliant. So I take it that this kind of production caters to your strengths as an actress? And what you are into doing and the way you like to do things? Is this your preferred *modus operandi*, if you like?

ID: Definitely, definitely! I just think that it's more of an authentic thing because the job we do is about looking at human beings; we're looking at their behaviour, we're looking at how they change how they interact with other people. And as basic as it sounds actors are people

and they come with their own experiences, and they come with weaknesses and insecurities. I think that what Anthony really cleverly does is acknowledges that and he opens the room out to that, where everyone can behave very much like themselves from the outset. And there's no pretence about that, and you're looking at a group of people that you've maybe never met before...you don't know these people and you're looking to go through very vulnerable things or you are discovering things together or you're trying to forge new relationships so that people will believe that you've had them for a lifetime. So that if you're playing a family, or a boyfriend. I just feel like it's the best chance to really find that authentic nature of those relationships.

GC: I think it's a kind of double edged sword in a way. It's really actor-friendly because you have a lot of personal input and you get to be creative as well.

ID: Absolutely! Because you do work with people who are very into blocking and the presentation of something and how something looks. And those are all extremely important things but Anthony's 'process' is very much about the actors and it's very much about the story that you're telling. There is something about working with someone who's brave enough to admit that their own thing is shit or what they've brought in is shit. Or that maybe they don't have the answer, or that they don't have the best idea. And I think that you're going to get the best out of people if you put yourself out there, which he very much does. He practices what he preaches; you know.

GC: It's very much a case of trusting in him...trusting that it's all going to come together in the end, isn't it?

ID: Yeah I mean, there's a dialogue there, that he's picking people...he is picking actors, but he's picking the people that he wants to work with. You are in a room with each other solidly. You need to be able to work together, and you need to be able to trust each other and I feel he realises that and really capitalises on it.

GC: Do you have any doubts or concerns about this production, above and beyond what you would normally have in another type of production?

ID: Yeah, for sure. I think I'd be lying if I said I didn't have anxieties or I didn't worry about the line learning thing which is a massive thing for people. But I know that in contrast to the first time I worked with him and this time I've been able to let a lot of that go. And I feel like I've never enjoyed a rehearsal process as much as this one. It's actually been quite liberating and I also think that what we're looking at with the subject-matter of narrative really lends itself to the 'process'.

GC: That's a very good point.

ID: I really think it does. And I feel that what we're saying is really relevant. Every night I go home and I'm thinking about things that are always coming back to my own experiences, or conversations that I'm having with people that I meet up with at the weekends. Things are constantly coming back to conversations we have had in the rehearsal room; scenes that have been written, improvisations that people have done, opinions that other people have had. It's really relevant, I really believe in the work that we're doing and I think that what's also been great is that I've learned to let go of what an end product is. Because actually you're doing a play with the same structure but completely different things happen every night. Someone

feeds you a line a different way, something doesn't work, but all those things happen; that's life. I feel that this 'process' really allows you to embrace that and especially I think in this case.

GC: This is great, thank you very much. I was wondering, do you feel that you are taking any risks in this rehearsal that you would not normally take and if so what are they?

ID: Yeah. There isn't a lot of time to worry or to mull things over. I think, for me, the more I think about things the more I can block myself. So for example, you can have a scene that you think is going to happen, and then Anthony will come in with a new draft, with a new idea as you're rehearsing it, and there is no chance to go 'I can't do that'. You literally have to throw yourself in and I find there is less judgement there from yourself and from other people because everyone is really just responding from instinct. And I think he tries to pick actors that really work from their instinct. Things I've seen where conversations come up in the room and you go 'where does that even come from, how is that even going to fit in; and how is that going to be realised in the end product?' And then you get up and do something that you haven't even considered. I know I've done things where I didn't even know what it was going to be. You're tapping in to another thing, maybe your subconscious; but you're tapping in to the really creative side of yourself.

GC: Yeah. I've been really impressed with how brave you all are with what you're doing. It's like you just said, you get the stuff and you go 'what the hell' and you just get up and fucking do it. I've went 'wow this is very interesting from the point of view of what I'm doing'

ID: Totally!

GC: 'That's very brave.'

ID: And even with some of the scenes that Anthony's written two actors will just get up and do it. It will be the first time they're reading it and they're reading it out loud Anthony will say things like that's not how I pictured it, or that's not how I intended that to be read, but it really worked and it's bringing up different questions. And I think the thing with Anthony is that he always wants to ask those questions. He always likes to throw things out there, even if they're dead-ends it's asking the questions and does this feel right. It's about the group, it's about the group of people.

GC: So do you think that Anthony's way of doing things is any riskier than any other types of rehearsals that you've been in?

ID: Yeah it's riskier. You have to have a lot of belief in someone to allow them to have a bunch of actors in a room with no script and trust that there's going to be something at the end of it. But that's what the 'process' is. The 'process' is six weeks...it's all-encompassing, that's what you're signing up for. It's a different way of working. I don't think it's that way that six o'clock comes around so I can switch off or I'll go home and I'll do my lines for an hour and I'll watch a film that I believe is linked to researching and then I can just switch off. It's more than that, it's more embedded and there's a lot of things just happening, there's a lot more things just seeping in, so maybe in week four you have this massive epiphany. But then I've totally freaked out, I've had two days where I've been like 'I don't know what I'm doing, I don't even know if this make sense'. You'll be really frustrated and you'll be like

‘Jesus, I don’t even know what I’m doing’, and then he’ll say something like ‘well would it be any better would the performance be any better if you know what you’re doing?’ then you go off and you think about that and you go ‘well that’s some sort of bullshit response’ and then four days later you go ‘well actually just because you know what you’re doing doesn’t make it any better’. It just means something else is happening, something more interesting.

GC: Anthony’s very big on the authenticity of performance; as if you’re doing it for the first time. I’ve worked with him before myself and I’ve read things he’s said. That’s one of his things, he doesn’t want things to get stale or stayed or over-rehearsed. He’s very much into the fresh vibrant and energetic.

ID: Absolutely. And I think it really shows. I think there is something very immediate when you’re sitting there watching it and when you’re a part of it as well actually. There’s something about having it right there; it’s a real thing for him. You know when you hear something and it doesn’t sound authentic or it sounds like a line has just come out just because you know that’s the next line. That is something that just doesn’t work for him, he’s not shy about admitting that. Or even about his own writing he will say ‘look that just sounds shit, it doesn’t sound like anything someone would say’. He’s not precious about his words, if you feel that something would come out in a different way or you can change the lines and put one in front of the other. Anything to give you that real feeling or to get your instinct is working he’s totally open to. And I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone who’s like ‘just do what you want...it’s sort of like a guideline, it’s there to...’

GC: Yeah. He very much writes it for you guys and you get to adapt it to suit your strengths and what your instinct is telling you to do.

ID: Absolutely!

GC: It’s very much like a framework and you fill it in. That’s how it comes across to me anyway.

ID: Absolutely! Absolutely! That’s exactly it; it is like a framework. It is something you are working on together and he wants to know what you feel about it, that’s what interests him. It’s not like he’s written a scene and you come in to fulfil the scene to its potential. It’s like writing the scene is just one of the steps. It’s like he gives you the scene to try it on and bash it about a bit and then something else happens that’s really exciting.

GC: What’s your take on this saying that acting is all about risk?

ID: I suppose I don’t really know what I feel about that. You often find actors talking about things that they do in a particular job where they took a massive risk, it opened stuff up for them and it was really terrifying. But I think there is probably something in every part you do. If I think about it in all the parts I’ve done so far – and I haven’t done that many – there’s always been the one bit of the character or one scene where I’ve gone ‘how am I going to do that, how am I going to get to that, how am I going to be able to access that?’ but again, something else happens; the nerves or the anxiety about that comes with adrenalin and that’s what he’s tapping into with this ‘process’. And I think it’s good to shake things out of your comfort zone because otherwise...and also I think it depends on the type of person you are because I know for me if I’m entirely comfortable something else kind of happens. It’s like a

little but less interesting or it's a little bit more predictable or a little bit more pedestrian. I think that if you have that thing that makes you go 'Fuck!!!' then the whole game is raised.

GC: So do you enjoy taking risks does it help your performance?

ID: Yeah. I think you have to. Before I would have gone 'God no I can't do that', I would have been much more nervous about it. But I think everyone feels like that when they take on a part there's always a bit of it, so you go 'well ok this is the situation that I'm in and I just have to rise to it'. It's a challenge and you find those things on the way.

GC: When I act I enjoy taking risks; I don't mean crazy risks the jumping out of a plane without a parachute kind of risks...it's part of the thing, the fun which keeps it alive.

ID: Absolutely. Yeah exactly, you find out in that moment what's going to happen. And I think that's also what this 'process' has taught me, in contrast to those things, is that sometimes you have to let it all go and blow it out of the water and you don't know what's going to happen and that's a really good thing that's come out from under the surface.

GC: Brilliant. Thank you very much Imogen there's some great stuff there thanks a lot.

ID: No worries.

GC: I'm basically, I'm thinking that whenever I ask the other actors whether my presence here affects their performance, they'll all say it doesn't. Just to have this on tape.

Matthew Pidgeon and Alastair Galbraith Interviews 2014

GC: Thanks a lot for doing this interview Matt. First of all: Matt, you've worked with Anthony on some of his later plays, could you briefly talk me through your experiences of that?

MP: I worked with Anthony, first of all, on *Edward Gant's Amazing Feats of Loneliness*. My memory of that is that it was called *Number Nine* when we agreed to do it on the posters at Plymouth, the Drum theatre Plymouth. It said *Neilson Number Nine*, or *Number Nine*. Because I think it was literally his ninth project...Do you want me to go through the list of all his shows?

GC: Just briefly, yeah.

MP: Ok, so that was that one *Edward Gant's Amazing Feats of Loneliness*. And then after that I did *The Lying Kind* with Anthony at the Royal Court, quite shortly after that in the same year. And then I think after that it was *The Wonderful World of Dissocia* which was done with the Tron Theatre and Plymouth Theatre Royal and about a year later it came back with the National Theatre of Scotland. And then after that I did *Realism* with the National Theatre of Scotland. After that I did *Caledonia* with the National Theatre of Scotland. In between times I did a project with him for the Royal Shakespeare Company for the Latitude Festival called *The Big Lie* which was a wacky festival thing, not a proper play really.

GC: In any of these shows...what was the status when you arrived on the first day? Did Anthony have a script and how did it start? Because sometimes he starts with a lot of stuff, and sometimes with very little.

MP: The first project *Edward Gant*, which was *Number Nine*, there was nothing, nothing at all. And I'd never worked with Anthony, in fact I got the call to work with him, I think on the Friday, or the Saturday, to start in Plymouth on the Monday. Now whether someone else dropped out or he just thought he needed another actor, I don't know. So I knew him a bit socially, both from Edinburgh, and our parents had known each other. There were one or two connections. So there was nothing, we sat around, we talked, there was some improvisation. We went off and we...Eventually, quite late on in the process, I think it was a three or four week rehearsal process, eventually he had this idea which he presented to us in the pub: a lot of stuff with Anthony is presented in the pub. (Both laugh) That we should do a Victorian freak show, but rather than physical freakery it was emotional pain and angst. People's stories of lost love etc. And he told us he already had one or two child's fairy tales that he wanted to incorporate. So in a sense I never saw any material. He told us a story about a woman, a girl, with acne, terrible acne; the spots, they increase and increase until eventually one day one of the spots burst and produced a pearl. So that formed the basis of one of the stories. The he had another idea about a teddy bear that came back to see his master after his master had grown up and abandoned him. Teddy bears feature quite a lot in Anthony's stuff. So that was the teddy bear story and I think those were kind of floating around in his head. We went off and wrote character studies and we devised our own characters, the four actors, the cast of four.

GC: I did the same when I worked with him on *Hooverbag*.

MP: So Stuart McQuarrey, Barney Power and Christine Entwistle and me all came up with these Victorian performers. So, for example, we came up with the name and a bit of background, the kind of stuff they'd been doing. And crucially, how these performers me the guy who ran the travelling show, Edward Gant. And Edward Gant, I think was a character who existed in previous stuff by Anthony as well. I think maybe he had a radio play about this guy; he was certainly a character that Anthony had used or thought about in the past. So, Stuart McQuarrey was this central figure, Edward Gant, who presented the show and we were his performers. Now did any of that come out of improvisation? I think maybe a bit, but largely what would happen is that we'd sit around and talk, and Anthony would come in with screeds and screeds of material right up to the wire. We were learning new passages of this the night before. So, in a sense I think he needed us there to come up with these characters with a bit of back-story. It was a starting point for him. So for my character I had this idea that he had been a child performer and had played girls. Because, you know, historically we were all over the place, it was just a vague historical notion that once upon a time there were no women on stage. Not in the Victorian era, I think we were playing fast and loose with history. So I had this idea that this boy played girls and he was Scottish and he had grown older, got in with the wrong crowd, and become a revolutionary (Gary laughs), a bit of an alcoholic I think.

GC: That sounds a bit like you Matt.

MP: (Laughs) Exactly. And he was still trying to ply his trade as this girl, this grotesque. I was a bit grotesque and he got jeered and stuff.

(Matthew had to take a call from his agent, so the interview was suspended for a few minutes at this point)

GC: Interview with Matthew continued.

MP: So we created these characters with quite a rich back-story. Chris had a character who used to lay eggs as her party piece (Gary laughs). And Anthony incorporated all these things in the show. They were a really good kicking off point, but combined with his fairy tale stories that he had. So that was the first experience. The second play that I did with him at the Royal Court, he'd already written.

GC: Was that the *Lying Kind*? I want to talk to you about that specifically.

MP: So it was a different process. I think because it was a big establishment, or what we thought was a big establishment, it was already there. I went and met him and Amy, who was the casting director, and auditioned because I think I had to. And he just offered me the part. So, that was a very different process. So that was that. The next one was *Dissocia*, which he... We did a lot of improvisation to come up with the first half. I think, similarly, he had some ideas, but a lot of that came out of improvisation.

GC: I'll talk to you about improvisation in more depth a bit later if that's ok?

MP: Yeah. So we did that, but he had the second half written. He didn't show us the second half, he only gave it to us right at the eleventh hour even though he had it written. I mean Anthony's such a perverse character... I think it's because he loves putting actors under pressure, he thinks that's the most creative way to do it. So even though he had that script he didn't give it to us right at the end.

GC: That's very interesting.

MP: *Realism*...He wanted that to be a counterpoint to *Dissocia*. So in a sense, he had some ideas, but a lot of that came from improvisation. I think he was increasingly borrowing from his own life with *Dissocia* and *Realism*, big aspects of it anyway. I mean he'd done that before with *Penetrator* and in between times, he'd done that with *Stitching* I suppose. And then lastly *Caledonia* which was someone else's play.

GC: That's an interesting thing which I'd like to talk to you about.

MP: So I felt that rehearsal process was stymied right from the word go because Anthony and Alastair Beyton basically fell out. Their relationship became unworkable very early on. Anthony's way of working...he does tend to do a lot of these open-ended improvisations. So he doesn't give you set objective, somewhere to go. So they just go on and on and on. We were doing that with *Caledonia* which was an actual script. But he didn't trust the script and neither did we feel that we could work on it effectively.

(Pause as actor Alastair Galbraith enters. Shortly hereafter both actors will be interviewed simultaneously)

MP: So I think that was a weird rehearsal period because no one really knew what the hell we were supposed to be doing. We felt we'd come to *Caledonia*, and Anthony felt it as well, the idea was we would do improvisation, we would come up with our own creative suggestions and Alastair Beyton the writer would be flexible. We didn't have a finished script and it became very apparent quite early on that he didn't want to budge, initially very much; And after about two weeks not anything. So you had a director who has a very strange process of organically creating things using the actors; writing around them using their speech patterns, the way they look, all those kind of things. And this rather dry, historical, apparently witty script. So we just had this impasse, and that was very peculiar. We still had that panic stations of doing an Anthony show where you don't rehearse until the Tech. But we actually had a script but no one trusted it, we didn't trust it either. So I suppose that's a few different versions.

GC: No, that's great. How collaborative is Anthony's process?

MP: (Pause) I think in a sense, one can feel that it's not collaborative at all, you can feel that you're just being manipulated. You can get that feeling because there's a lot of the rehearsal period where there's just this inertia and you can't do anything. And an actor's instinct is to try and push it along. And Anthony is utterly resistant to that. So, you feel, in a sense, that it's not collaborative, and yet, what he writes when he goes away and comes back with a script is, in a sense, it couldn't be anyone else but you. He beautifully tailors things to you and often, increasingly, based on improvisation. So I think that in the end it's very collaborative, it just doesn't necessarily feel that way (Both laugh). You feel quite manipulated, it's quite cruel Anthony's method of working. These vast improvisations that can get quite tedious and harrowing, and it can feel a bit torturous at times. But I think Anthony likes that, I think he likes to push through all the kind of neat stuff to get to the messy shit. And he kind of feels that's where you are, and that's the bit he's interested in.

GC: Ok, brilliant Matt. I'll ask you one more quick question and then I'll move over to Mr. Galbraith. So, do you think that the actors have a lot of direct input on the script or do they influence it more indirectly?

MP: Generally it's indirectly, but occasionally it is direct. Anthony will put a piece in verbatim sometimes. Because I think he thinks that's just so you and it fits with what he's written as well. But, it's not like you sit down and discuss it with him and you say 'Well Anthony I think I should say that and that and that'. He's up for it, he's not resistant to it, he's not precious. He comes up with the words but many of them are based on things you've said, or the way you would say things.

GC: Ok, brilliant Matt. Alastair hello, thank you for coming. I'll just throw you right in then if that's all right? Alastair, you have worked on some of Anthony's earlier plays; could you just briefly talk me through your experience of these rehearsals?

AG: Yeah. The first one was *Year of the Family*. I did *Year of the Family*, *Dirty Laundry* and *the Censor* that's it I think. They were all pretty much, similar experiences. They were his smaller plays unlike the one's Matt got involved with. *Year of the Family* had a little bit of script but not a huge amount. *Dirty laundry* had a little bit of script, but not a huge amount. *The Censor* had nothing on the first day. So, you just had to give yourself over to the process, in as much as you would to any other process. So you know that when you pitch up...no, in fact you don't know when you pitch up what's going on. But you get a sense from him of how he finds you. He kind of recruits actors a bit like MI5. (Laughs). He came to see me at the Royal Court upstairs, he came a couple of times to see the play, and he just sort of sidled up to me in the pub and sort of went 'Hiya, you were shite in that weren't you'. (All laugh)

GC: He pretty much did the same to me after *Phaedra's love*.

AB: So he does that to sound you out to see whether you're going to be a like-minded person; are you going to give me any bother in rehearsals. And then...certainly when I met him, in the plays that I did with him...A bit like Woody Allen places himself with John Cusack or whoever, I kind of played the Anthony part which he actually takes great delight in making me do stuff that he wouldn't dream of doing. Much as Phil McKee had to do, which we all enjoyed, (All laugh). I'm not sure he's put a dildo in his mouth in anything else apart from (All laugh) whatever it's called. He sort of primed me on what it's going to be like, he said 'We'll all meet in the rehearsal room'. We did another thing at the National studio, me, him and Jim. And in that we did three weeks of piano playing, we went in at eleven, left at two, and played the piano, and he wrote four pages of very good script at the end of it. But, obviously he wasn't supposed to. So, obviously with Anthony, the only thing that keeps...the only thing that gets the play finished is that someone saying 'You've got a first night in three weeks'.

GC: He needs a deadline doesn't he?

AG: Yeah. But it was great every time. I think it's a really good way of working, I don't have any problems with it at all.

GC: Ok. How collaborative do you think Anthony's process is?

AG: I think it's very collaborative to the extent that he'll only use actors that will work his way. It sounds as though that makes him dictatorial; it's only his way or the high way. But I

think the thing is that you all have to work that way, and he's the same. It's not like...he's not as involved in it as much as everyone else is. It's not as if he wants to do that; I think if he could write a play and finish it he'd love to do that. But he can't do it, he can't do it unless he sees what the page looks like after the day's rehearsal, then he writes the second page. So, in terms of being collaborative...it's collaborative if you all join in, if you decide you're going to do a play where there's a bit where you kind of improvise, but not really. Unlike Mike Leigh who seems to improvise with actors, takes what they've done and writes a script from it. Anthony tends to...he'll write very specifically. *The Censor* was the most distilled version of working with Anthony Neilson because there was only three of us and you literally get a page a day, and the page might have ten lines in it. And you will spend the day doing that page and changing it ever so slightly and altering the odd line. Then he'd refine it and give you another page and so on and so forth. And you never felt that you had to improvise, or you never felt that...I absolutely felt that it was his job to write the script. We would improvise but I never noticed if he put any of our lines in or not; apart from one line in *Year of the Family*, no not *Year of the Family*, *Dirty Laundry*. 'Ho Ho Ho' is the line, and I wrote that line when Fahter Christmas is about to shag the Fairy up the arse, takes his belt off and says 'Ho Ho Ho' (All laugh)

GC: As you do.

AG: And that's the only line I've seen in a script from improvisation that I've worked with **him** on.

GC: All right. Did you do any improvisations for, say *the Censor*?

AG: We would improvise, but it more like character work. You would sort of play a scene a couple of times and maybe change it. We wouldn't go off to look for new things that he wasn't already bringing. So you wouldn't improvise your way to something that wasn't already there. You would slightly change the odd line. In *the Censor* the action cut between the censor's office and breakfast. Those scenes were very sparse so we'd improvise those to a certain extent. But very minimal improvising. He's still quite formal and structured so the scripts still have a certain...they're not Mamet or Ian Heggie with that sort of everyday speak about them. So we'd improvise stuff...When we were doing *Dirty laundry*, a short play about sex, he was going out with Selina at the time, and he refused to direct the part where I fuck her up the arse (All laugh loudly, especially Matt) Because he got embarrassed about it and he would just giggle and not be able to do it. So he would leave the room and say 'Can you just sort this out and at the end of it can you just be fucking. So you sort out how it's all going to work.' So we kind of improvised that only because he was too chicken-shit to direct it.

GC: See, joking aside, that's very interesting.

MP: That is interesting because I thought he'd be getting his hands dirty from all that sort of stuff. He has a sense of propriety doesn't he?

AG: He's embarrassed on your behalf. You see it whenever you work with Anthony, there's parts where he's sitting giggling. He's giggling on two fronts: that poor fucker having to say this filth and also I cannot quite believe that I'm getting away with this. I can't believe these guys are doing this.

MP: Yeah. I think he's not afraid of that juxtaposition as well, of how something can seem serious and heavy and moving. Like in *Stitching* with the dildo or whatever. But it can be both can't it? It can be both, it can be shocking and make you giggle and all the rest of it. It can be both of those things. And I don't think that Anthony's afraid of that at all.

AG: No. What he's very clever at is that he writes these things as though it's beyond his control. (Authorship) And he laughs at it in a way that he wishes it wasn't funny. (Matt laughs). Because he writes it in a way that's serious and then he thinks 'Well actually that's quite funny'. I bet there's a bit of him that's thinking, 'Well I can just run with this and let this be funny'...In *the Censor* some of the talk in it is filth and he would giggle his way through rehearsals because he almost thought 'I'm too embarrassed about this'. And it's as funny as it is serious. But then again, contrary to popular belief, he is not in any way vulgar, I don't think. He doesn't try and shock. I remember we did *The Censor* at the same time as *Shopping and Fucking* was on everywhere. And, *Shopping and Fucking* I thought was a pretty good play. But I do think that if he didn't rim him would I miss it? (All laugh) And I don't think I would. But in *the Censor* if she didn't shit on stage would I miss it? I think I would. And he does that; it's only there if it absolutely has to be. I don't think he's ever done nudity, I've never been a production where there's any nudity.

MP: Actually Jo James got his cock out...

AG: In rehearsals?

MP: No, it was in *Dissocia*, it was a gag. I think Anthony would, but it would be a bloke and it would be for a gag. And it's entirely up to the actor, he would never push an actor into anything like that. He's very sensitive about all that.

AG: He's very sensitive about that.

GC: Ok, brilliant. In my experience, there seems to be an absence of a noticeable hierarchy in Anthony's rehearsals. So how does Anthony actually manage the rehearsal process? What does he actually do? Matthew.

MP: Well it can appear that there's no hierarchy, which can get very frustrating. I'm speaking about the big productions. I think it must be different when there's three of you in a room. But when I've been with him there's been a minimum of five or six. No, so, it can feel a bit chaotic...He seems to have absolute authority, just by virtue of the respect everyone there has for him. I've never worked with him where someone is awkward or difficult, and not wanted to be there. And that is because of the way he chooses his actors and the kind of people he uses. I know he's worked with the RSC where he's inherited a cast and I think his experience was very different; from what I've heard. But he just has that quiet authority. We're there for him and I think quite quickly you glean when he does produce a little bit of material, a page or two. That's his talent, he goes away and comes up with something fantastic. And you think 'Well, we want more of that.' If Anthony takes it up it's because it's good, or if he doesn't then obviously it doesn't fit in with his vision...It can be very frustrating, this apparent inertia and leaderlessness. But actually, in the end, he always comes up with something and everyone follows him.

GC: Ok. Alastair same question to you.

AG: I think that what he does really well is that he is very much on your side. He won't make you look like an idiot. (Matt and Gary laugh). He won't.

MP: Can I tell a quick story? Can I tell a quick story. Sorry.

AG: Go on then.

MP: I probably shouldn't actually.

GC: No go on let's hear it.

MP: (laughs) You know the one about Barney Power doing *Dissocia*. He got Barney to do all this quite extreme physical stuff. He was playing this little Swiss watchmaker.

GC: The Sigmund Freud guy.

MP: Yes the Sigmund Freud-like character. So he had to do this extreme movement in the previews. And then at Press Night...Just following on from what you said, Anthony said to him just before the half, round about the half, 'Look Barney I know I got you to do this rather extreme movement, but it was because I was afraid you wouldn't get the heightened quality. But you have got there, so I'd like you to just cut that out now.' And Barney's like 'It's the half. It's Press Night. (All laugh) Well thank you for trusting me so much'. All this kind of stuff, his ego came out. And Anthony said 'Look, Barney it's up to you. You can if you want to look like a cunt.' (Alastair and Matt laugh loudly). But there is something in that because Anthony didn't want Barney to look like a cunt, he didn't want to mock him. It was merely about trying to get rid of some crap, heightened theatricality. In the end everything was fine, Barney was fantastic in the show, and it all went well. But there are some very jagged edges (Matthew laughs) and noses can be put out of joint. Sorry don't put that in.

AG: What he does very well is that he absolutely has the measure of everyone in the rehearsal room. And he will speak to them in an appropriate way and not treat people the same. In rehearsals for *the Censor* with Raquel Cassidy; he can say to her 'Well that scene's very good, I really like what you're doing. But you need to think about x, y and z.' Then he'll turn to me about the same scene and say 'Why are you doing it like William Shatner? WHY...ARE...YOU...TALKING...LIKE...THIS (Alastair's delivers this in a very stilted, disjointed manner). You're turning into fucking William Shatner!!! That's pish! Don't do it like William Shatner.' And I think, 'well you wouldn't give her that note.' But he'll give me that note because he thinks 'well you can...' I'll respond to that note insomuch as I won't do it like William Shatner. So he knows how to speak to individual actors. He also is very good at rallying the troops, slightly against the production. Depending on the place where you do the play I think. When he was doing his little things upstairs at the Finborough everything was up to him. When you are involved at the Royal Court and him, like when you're in one that's transferred or in the West End he's very good at protecting you and saying 'no look we're going to do another rehearsal. Don't you worry about this.' And you can tell they're all at him saying 'it's not finished'. He never passes that on, his anxiety about the production, he doesn't really pass that on to you. He does it to a certain extent and he'll say to you...like in *the Censor* on the first night, or the last dress rehearsal, he said 'the in between scenes run them all together at the end, you've never done that before'. And he's done that with every play, he gives you the last page on the last day (Matthew agrees 'Yeah, yeah throughout). And so, he kind of...for all he messes around in rehearsals, and he really does, he never lets it

get out of hand, and he'll always bring it back to the script. You always know that every night when you go home, he's sitting up working and writing. And he comes in the next day with it. As long as you respect him...and he's quite an imposing figure. He's a big guy who wears terrible clothes.

MP: He's impressive when he speaks isn't he. He's thoughtful, he's articulate. He's big in that sense as well. And also, as you say, you know he's got your back.

GC: He's very clever as well, he's a very intelligent writer.

AG: And he really likes everyone he works with he really does. Because people keep going back.

GC: Great. Matt what do you think the pros and cons of Anthony's unusual rehearsal methodology are?

MP: The pros are that appears to be the way that he can work. Al was talking about the time you sit around and you play the piano or whatever. In our case arse around in a wheelchair (laughs), roll around rehearsal in a wheelchair or whatever. That time is being used I think, because he is watching and soaking things up. That's what I think is the most impressive thing about him, if there's a problem he can write his way around and out of a problem using you. If there's some part of what he's written that you're not getting he can change it and tailor it to you. So in that sense that's a real pro. Where it falls down is if you have someone who's a bit resistant. I did *the Lying Kind* with him which was a pre-written script and we had two older actors. One of whom is now dead, the other is still working, but he's pretty old. And they were pretty old at the time which was about ten years or so ago. And they **couldn't** change because they had to learn these large speeches, big speeches and stuff. And they were really resistant. If they'd just gone with it and been able to do it, Anthony could have made it perfect, it would have fitted them like a glove. But they were resistant. So when I've encountered that, that's a real con in his method. Because he doesn't know...he doesn't have the directorial language to work around it, the Plan B. So I think that is a problem.

GC: I just want to talk to you very briefly about *the Lying Kind* Matt. It's very interesting that you said that Anthony actually came to rehearsals with a full script because a lot of the reviews said that it appeared completely unfinished.

MP: (laughs) Is that right?

GC: Yeah. They said it appeared unfinished and not ready to go on. So what happened there then?

MP: Well Anthony can take a finished script and make it appear unready. (They all laugh) He likes chaos, he likes a bit of chaos in rehearsal. He doesn't respond well to resistance, he doesn't back away from it, it kind of slows things up. And I think that's what happened in that process. He didn't quite have everyone's buy in. I think ideally, he would have been re-writing that thing constantly as we went along. Because then he could have had us all on our toes, he likes that brinkmanship, he thinks he gets more interesting performances from actors if they're not too comfortable. He could have had that and people wouldn't have been inherently uncomfortable because it would have been closer to them. When that goes wrong I think it can appear a bit chaotic and not quite finished because he doesn't have that need for

neat polished stuff like a more established director. He can't just do a number on things with his method.

GC: Yeah, because every time it changes I would imagine.

MP: I think it has to be...no that's sounding too earnest, it has to be real for him, it has to have some truth about it. I think if it was just making pretty pictures it wouldn't work at all. But I think some of those critics might have wanted that. People coming in and out of doors at the right time and all that.

GC: Ok thanks Matt. Alastair pros and cons?

AG: It's like Matt said, the pros are that it very much removes egos from actor's performances. You can never play the ending because you don't know what it's going to be. So everything you do is...your performance is always very light I think and unfussy. You're basically not bumping into the furniture and trying to remember your lines all the time.

GC: Yeah, I know. I know.

AG: You don't see people in Anthony Neilson plays doing a turn. You don't see big character acting. Everyone's quite small. So it's brilliant for that. *Year of the Family* was the biggest of all the plays that I've been in of his and I think that suffered. I think that seeing those bigger one's that Matt's been in looked like they were ready to go into the rehearsal room by the time they get on the stage, because there's so much in it. His ideas about theatre I think are brilliant. Anthony Neilson writing or directing, I think is most successful in his chamber pieces, when he doesn't have to worry so much about production, and he can spend all his time on the actors and the script. So I think he slightly makes a rod for his own back, but then again he can't really work any other way. And in terms of cons, well you always think 'are there moments that have been settled because it has to open tonight'. But he does come to almost every show and note it. Not that he would change anything particularly but he would certainly tighten the focus on it. And I think also he creates an atmosphere, and there's a degree of one-offmanship about it. I'd like to see other productions of his stuff, I'd like to see one again.

MP: They have been done, I saw...*Edward Gant* was done more successfully than our production.

GC: *Realism* was done again.

MP: *Dissocia* was done in Australia when I was down there they were all talking about that. I did see *Penetrator* and it was really good. But I imagine, like you say, you've missed an essential part of that experience...You know we did *Dissocia* and then we came back and we did it again a year later for the National Theatre of Scotland. But the first time we did it the response from people in the audience...the tears from people at the end is unrepeatable. Because in that show the point was to replicate the condition. But when we did it again it's not like another production, but it almost is. With that considered thing it doesn't quite work as well. There's something about what's coming, we don't know what to expect, or what's going to happen. And that's a huge part of the impact of his pieces for me. But he's too good a writer for it not to work when other people do it. But there is something live about it isn't there, a one off.

GC: Ok, brilliant guys. How do the actors contribute to the material being generated?

AG: A couple of things. Little bits of improvisation, but I don't think you would consider Anthony an improvising director really. I think what they contribute to is that he can test material. So he can write a page and then just put it in the bin because he sees that it's not really working. That it's not coming across what he think is on the page. So it's all about being the best you can for him with what he gives you that day and seeing if it works or not. And he casts very well and then obviously he writes for his cast. So you get a character written absolutely bespoke for you. So if you couldn't pronounce your r's he wouldn't give you lots.

MP: No, he probably would, but he'd make a feature of it.

AG: Yeah, and then change it all on the last day, because he doesn't want to make you look like a cunt. (All laugh)

MP: Exactly. (Matt continues laughing)

AG: So he absolutely tailors things to your strengths and weaknesses. So I guess what you bring to him is that his characters are formed in front of his own eyes; he sees them coming alive. So then he can write for the next day thinking what's this guy is going to do next, or what's this woman's going to do tomorrow. So he really feeds off his actors even if it's just them standing in the middle of the rehearsal room and saying a couple of lines it really resonates with him. Much more than getting them to improvise. Because that all just becomes about your ego really.

MP: We do have these open-ended improvisations which went on for hours and hours.

GC: Barney mentioned this actually.

MP: In the bigger, longer wackier pieces. And actually he was using us because he likes to employ funny people. Some of those people have done a lot of comedy. Alan Francis has done stand up. They come up with stich and Anthony liked some of that and did use some of that.

GC: Was this in *Dissocia*?

MP: Yeah, and in *Realism* we did a bit as well.

AG: We had most of that in *Year of the Family* as it was a bigger piece than anything else.

MP: I totally agree with you about the bigger plays and the little plays. I think he does less obviously flawed work in those smaller chamber pieces because he doesn't have to worry about sightlines or some big theatrical number. But having said that, I do think the success *Dissocia* had had something spectacular about it.

AG: What's the one with the second half in the psychiatric ward?

MP: That's *Dissocia*.

AG: Because that second half is like his chamber pieces. Switching to that all of a sudden is an incredibly brave thing to do because nobody's expecting it. And it works. Were you in that Cas?

GC: No, no.

MP: It was pre-written that bit Al. He did that last page last day thing. We were given that in the last week of rehearsal. So even if it's pre-written he still wants to have you on your toes somehow.

AG: But also what he's very good at is distillation, essentialising things. And oddly enough, if you gave him twice the time in rehearsals and twice the budget it would be the same thing, he'd just stretch it out. It's a bit like travelling across London, it's an hour to anywhere no matter what you do, it just is. So if you give him six months rehearsal, you might as well give him six weeks because he'll just stretch it out. I think when he's most successful is when everything is absolutely distilled and it's the perfect line, directing, set, lighting, pieces of music. Because his music stuff quite extraordinary. A couple of the one's we've done...in *Dirty Laundry*, that short play, there's a whole song that we have to sit through at the end. And *the Censor's* got a whole song at the end.

MP: So does *Stitching*, it's not one of his. It's a Blue Nile song.

AG: It's not one of his, but it's as much part of the play as anything else to sit and listen to this piece of work during the production. And all that stuff is very brave, it's very distilled. And things like the song at the end of *the Censor* is as important as anything anybody says in it in a way. You have to sit and listen to every single word of it at the end, Ethel Mermer or whoever it was.

GC: Ok great. So Alastair to what extent did your training in Stanislavskian, or other techniques, that you received at drama school have any bearing on your work with Anthony? It may not have any bearing, but was there anything from drama school you found particularly useful or problematic?

AG: Gosh. I wouldn't think there was anything in terms of training that resonated while working with Anthony. Apart from discipline. In terms of Stanislavsky, I don't really know...He's into his back story an awful lot...Philip Proust from the Citz famously said to one actor about who's got one line 'well you know this is foretelling the French Revolution.' And Anthony's a bit like that, he can talk a lot about one particular section and what it all means. And he doesn't let you away with dead space. So you always have to be, is actioning the right word? You always have to do something because his pauses are monumental sometimes. And he spots if you're not working on them. So I guess that you do rely on training and experience just to be able to recognise that his pauses. Everything in an Anthony Neilson play is important. It's a bit like that old adage about don't mumble any line. Because if you mumble any line, one line, even if it's 'Oh here comes the Butler', the audience think you said 'The butler's the killer'. They think it's the most important line in the show and they missed it. With Anthony every single thing that he does in his plays I think is as important as anything else. Especially his big plays because they look extraordinary; (But this isn't down to him and he talks about the excellent music earlier) props, costumes, lines, pauses, music; everything is important...He doesn't send you to the woods in your underpants to find out what a character's about. (all laugh)

MP: He did that to me.

AG: Did he?

MP: (Laughs) Well no, but something like that. It's weird, it's becoming apparent that Al and I had very different experiences.

GC: Yeah, his late stuff versus his early stuff is very interesting.

MP: I think there's a very much old fashioned theatre man about him. His mum and dad were actors, so he grew up around it. Those kind of virtues like physicality or timing, which are old school and actually quite Scottish I think. Certainly in his big, funny, wacky plays. I shouldn't call them wacky should I... I think he requires a bit of that which does need a theatrical background, or training. And yet, what's different about him, is like Al says, he does still require that kind of low key truth running through it. So in terms of training... nothing in my training prepared me for working with Anthony (Laughs) I thought it was one thing and it turned out it wasn't. That's what I found with Anthony. When I came into it I thought 'Oh, this requires this sort of thing'. Maybe that's my shortcomings as an actor, I don't know. I thought I could pin it down and I couldn't. He certainly does require commitment and truth. And as Al says, discipline as well. Which is odd considering the rehearsal period feels like there is no discipline a lot of the time. But when you're actually doing it he does require that.

GC: When I filmed the rehearsals of his last play *Narrative* at the Royal Court. What I witnessed was some of the newer actors seemed to be trying to apply Stanislavskian techniques to gauge the quality of their performances in rehearsal and to generate material. And it didn't work, so they were freaking out... A hybrid style was required which they didn't quite get, or quite manage. And it made them very upset.

MP: I understand that and I completely agree with that. That's where it's come from since the days of *the Censor* and maybe *Stitching* was one of the last like that. Now it has come in to this neither one thing or the other, or perhaps both things.

AG: But what's interesting about Anthony, is that he forgets he's in theatre. He's not Ken Loach, he's not making gritty dramas with non-actors. I mean, he loves theatre, he loves actors. I can't imagine him using a bunch of non-actors. I mean look at *Penetrator*, look at Jim Cunningham if you want to get close to a non-actor. Jim's got a certain quality to him. Even Anthony himself when he does perform. But he still very much in the game of theatre. And he never really loses sight of that.

MP: He loved working with Stuart McQuarrey, someone who has that very low-key style and yet there's a whole lot of learning behind it, a lot of stich. Comedy chops and all that sort of stuff, do you know what I mean?

AG: Yeah, but he requires a performance out of people. Not that he doesn't care about how they get there, but what I think he won't do is... I don't think an actor would ever get away with saying 'my character wouldn't do that.' I think he would disagree with you on that on principal.

MP: (Laughs) I've never heard anybody say it to him.

AG: Well no. But you work with other directors who let you bring something. They want you to bring something, they want you to use your technique and find your inner whatever. Do all that and then work with what you're giving them. Whereas with Anthony it's the other way.

MP: It's tricky. You were talking about *Narrative*. I saw *Narrative* and it didn't look like the most comfortable experience.

AG: What was *Narrative*?

MP: It's a thing he did at the Court last year. What Anthony was doing was that he was getting into the idea of chopping up narrative and saying why do we need a linear narrative.

GC: He wanted the form of the play to echo the experience of browsing on the internet, going from one page to the other and jumping around etc., etc..

MP: Actually I was working with an actor recently who said he could have watched it all night, he was absolutely rapt by it. Whereas I found, maybe I'm a traditionalist or something, that I needed something to hang on to, and I lost it. But it was very Anthony, it was very perverse.

GC: So Matt, did you ever find it especially difficult, or embarrassing, to implement any of the material that Anthony wrote for you?

MP: (Pause) Some stuff...I don't know about embarrassing...No he does, he does put you into odd places.

GC: The mullet wig for instance.

MP: Yeah, yeah, that's right, he dressed me up in weird seventies gear and a mullet and a sleeveless vest. (Laughs) I've been dressed up in a basque and a thong and all that. So he does like to embarrass you. Funnily enough, Al was saying that he'll save the actor's blushes. He doesn't want to put you in anything that's horrible, or awful. But I kind of disagree with that. There's an element of a sadistic side to him. He does like to humiliate you, particularly the blokes (laughs). I think he feels they can handle it. Freud would have a field day on that one (all laugh). I don't know where that comes from...I don't know whether it's him working something out (laughs). But the reason is good, it's not something gratuitous, it's not just to say look at this stupid fucker and hang you out to dry, it's not actually. It's because you're doing something and it's working, it's part of the piece, of his play or a gag or something. And it really genuinely does work. So that stuff with me poncing around in a basque, the mullet and all the rest of it, that was brilliant, it was funny, it got a great reaction. And he was right, it worked, the mullet and all the rest of it...Yeah, there's something funny about seeing an actor doing that and going 'look at this poor bastard'. But actually, it was really lovely, it was really theatrical and it created a really nice effect. So I think if it was just you hanging out there looking stupid, he wouldn't be interested in that at all. But there definitely is a sadistic part of him that enjoys that. (laughs) Actually, this is an interesting question in regards to *Realism* because I hit a real block with that. I found it very difficult to do because I was playing a sort of impish scamp. Maybe Stuart as a little boy...he's a figment of the main character's imagination...and just being fucking stupid. And that's what he was going for and I found it difficult. The night before we opened he went 'Look, you're a third of the way there, you're about 30 percent of where you need to be, but I know you can do it.' And actually it was good because I'd felt a bit confused, and then it became really clear to me what he wanted; just go for it and it worked. I think we pulled it off and that's what he wanted, us to be brave, to be silly, and he knew that I could do it. And it's not just because he

wanted to have a laugh at our expense, it was a really important part of the piece. So yes, the short answer is that he has made me very uncomfortable, but there's been a reason behind it.

GC: What about you Al, any experiences like that?

AG: Well no actually...But saying that, in every play there's been some sort of sex act that I've had to do, either to one of the actresses or to myself. (Matt laughs) And often both. But it's never done to make you look an idiot. *The Censor*'s a good example of it because he started with page one on day one. I may be mis-remembering this but he said that 'it's going to be a love story about a film censor and a pornographer.' The way I always think of *the Censor* is that if you're going to do a love story about two people, why not make one of them an impotent film censor and one of them a hard core pornographer because you're going to get a lot of good material that way. He kind of wrote it out and then he'd go 'Oh no, I've wrote it out now and that's why you're impotent. It's all this hard core pornography that's made you impotent. So it has to be something really, really not nice mate that it takes to turn you on. Sorry, I've just realised that that's what has to happen.' He almost couldn't believe that's what he had to write. So that's what he does to you. It's almost like the play's another person. We rehearsed it and he'd kind of giggle but it worked. And you'd kind of go 'well I trust him that this is going to work. I know he's tried to not make it happen'. And I think that's the thing about him, you kind of trust him. Certainly with those plays he wants things to be extreme...

GC: In-Yer-Face.

AG: In-Yer-Face to worth coming out to watch. Like there's a little sex scene in *Year of the Family* that's a whole lot better when you put a bottle of tabasco on your fingers and shove it up someone's you know. And that can be quite strange stuff. And he didn't have to do that, but it says so much about the character. (all laugh)

MP: There's a bit in *Penetrator* when I saw it where one of the characters is having a wank and then something happens, he gets disturbed or whatever, and he has this great speed which he tries to take a dab of. And he does a double take as he realises that he's just got a mouthful of spunk instead off his fingers. (all laugh)

GC: We've all done that.

MP: But it's a good gag and it has to be there, it's important. It's better than if it wasn't.

GC: Ok...How much of yourself was in the parts you played with Anthony Alastair?

AG: I think quite a lot in so much as there's always some of yourself in any part. Because you're not playing what would I do in that situation, you're behaving as you would as that person in that situation. So there's quite a lot of me in it in so much as I always played my own age, I always played my own type, I always looked like the character. In a way, I was always playing Anthony. So there was always a lot of me in everything. I was never ever playing anything not like me. I mean the Censor didn't even have a name.

GC: No he does have a name, he's called Frank I think.

AG: Oh that's right, Frank, like Frank Censor/Frank Spencer (all laugh). Yeah, and I think there was a line in it when Alison used to say 'Oh come on Frank!' But we just couldn't get

through it, so he cut it. (Matt laughs) So I think I was very much employed to be me. Or because he couldn't get the real William Shatner. So a lot of me in every character.

GC: Ok. What about you Matt?

MP: This is another point where we diverge again. You see I was always a bit embittered about this because I always wanted to be the Anthony part, I always wanted to be the main guy, I wanted to be the stage alter-ego, I wanted to be that central figure. He never thought that for whatever reason, maybe he thought that I was too much of a fud. He never felt I was up to that, or right for it. In the shows that I did, in the end what actually happened was I ended up having a lot more fun. He tended to employ me for all these very different and strange characters. He always found it very amusing when I lost my temper...he would probably say that there was quite a bit of me...a bug-eyed intensity he found amusing. So I tended to do those kind of things for him. I'm just trying to think...the last thing I did for him I had a slightly different kind of role, but he didn't write that. And I haven't worked with him for a while, so it would be interesting to see if those kind of parts changed.

GC: Ok great. Alastair, in my experience of observing and participating in Anthony's shows, the role of the actor has less to do with acting and moves into a different sphere. Do you think this is an accurate assessment? Do you have to more than just an actor in Anthony's rehearsals?

AG: Oh yeah you have to much more than an actor. You have to be a member, you have to have signed up for the process. I'm sure there are hundreds of actors that would hate it and go home and have miserable evenings, and not want to go to work the next day. So the acting bit of it is part of it, but it's being in an Anthony Neilson production. I'm sure if you speak to production, a lot of them would say the same thing. He's changing lighting, sound cues...I remember that he'd run his own boards a lot of the time in the tech and stuff to see what he wanted. So I think your job is to do the acting, but it's also to put up with him, to put up with the process and not moan. And just be prepared to...because if you have a need, when you're working, to know where your character is going then it aint going to happen for you...So you have to be much more than an actor. In a way you really have to leave your ego at the door, you can't get away with any of that. And your needs as an actor are not really met.

GC: I want to talk to you both about that. It's one of my big topics.

AG: But then again, it makes you think, 'well what are your needs as an actor?' Do you feel dissatisfied that your character doesn't have an arc, or whatever. I don't really go in for that anyway, I kind of trust the writing no matter what you're doing. And there are certain things where I think it's inappropriate. In Anthony's shows your job is to serve the writing not to bring a performance to that character in a way. So as long as you know that then you'll get on fine. But if you don't think that's what it's going to be about then you'll find it frustrating. (opposite to Chris about the text supporting you)

GC: My experience was that I didn't know what I was letting myself in for. I didn't even know I was going to be involved in a collaborative piece. So it takes a long time to realise what's going on and it's quite scary I found...What about you Matt, same question? Do you have to be more than an actor in Anthony's rehearsals?

MP: Yeah, yeah. I agree with Al, I think being an actor is the least of it. You need to be there and you need to be open. You need to give of yourself without sounding too wanky. Because that's the bit that he's going to use. If you're too po-faced and take yourself too seriously and require this process that Al was talking about you're going to be disappointed. He will provide material for you but if you're going to spend a lot of time in torment the material will be about spending time in torment because that's what he's getting from you, and that's what will be used. I've seen that happen and I've probably been a victim of that myself... You've just got to be open and prepared. And you can contribute as well and it helps if you're funny and all those things. Because that's the bits of you that will make it in. The contributions that will make it in.

GC: Ok. Does Anthony accommodate the process that you, as an actor, need to go through to give a confident and credible performance?

MP: Not particularly. I don't think he's that interested in that. I've had discussions with him and I've heard other actors saying 'What about my process?' Phil, famously said that to him. And Anthony scoffed to me 'Phil's process? What the fuck is Phil's process?' (laughs) That's very Anthony... You can talk about it with him, but what he will do is that he'll try to assure you if you're really worried, that 'Fuck it. You don't need that process.' What you're giving him is what he wants, and if you're not giving him it then he'll say 'You're 30 percent of where you need to be.' He's really not that interested in working with your process. Or rather, that's been part of the initial weeding out process. It's as Al says, he's scoped you out and if he finds that you're the kind of person that could work like that then he's going to go for it. If suddenly you want to do some crazy Method thing I don't think he's as interested in that. Although, having said that, when he did *Marat Sade* he did send half his cast of loonies out in character and they all got arrested. (all laugh) So he might like a bit of that now, I don't know.

GC: Ok, what about you Al, did he accommodate your process as an actor?

AG: Well he did inasmuch that my process as an actor is very much like his process as an director. I kind of rely on being told what people are seeing. And that's what he's very good at, saying, 'I'm seeing this or that or the other thing and I need to see x, y, or z, not what you're showing me.' And what you do to achieve that is up to you. I love working with him because he takes your process away from you. Which in a way is quite good. I remember working here on David Hare's play and reading it knowing that someone else's done it and having to come up with something in the scene. With Anthony you never have to come up with anything in the scene because it's written as much as it needs to be. There's loads of subtext in Anthony's work, there's loads of backstory. What there isn't though, is that it's not dependant on that. It's much more in the moment I think. Whereas other plays are reliant on allegory and references and subtext. So you have to have a process to make scenes work that's a much more, maybe method approach, or much more of an acting process. In the same way that you go and see different performances of different plays and it's different actor's processes that make it work. I mean, look at Mark Rylance, everything's light as a feather no matter what he's doing; and his process is completely different to someone else's. Whereas with Anthony, I only did his process... In a way I then use his process in everything else that I do rather than the other way around.

GC: That's interesting.

MP: But it probably fits you and me and a lot of people that come from where we come from because there's that truth and belieffy way of doing it. Basically applying it to what you do yourself, but there's a wee bit of the showbiz comedy tart about showbizzy Scottish actors I always think. And I'm sure that's part of it too; there's something about timing. I know you have a bit of that about you as a person, and Anthony does; a lot of the actors that Anthony uses has that.

AG: Yeah, but it comes down to him finding people to be in his plays and the way he scopes them out and sees what they're like. And he does bring that out of you... It's an interesting thing because when you think about actors' processes... actors talk about approaching a role but it's already done, it's already written and people have played it. You know what happens at the end so they have to get their journey right to make it work for them within their own physicality, within their own voice, there's all sorts of things going on. Whereas with Anthony, he takes care of all that... he won't write something that you can't do.

MP: And if you can't he'll write you out of it, he'll write you out of the problem.

AG: Yeah, he will.

MP: Which is where I had problems with him in the past in things that were written by someone else; or pre-written with actors who expected not to have script changes. And he was unable to change it, to write you out of a problem. And he can write you out of a problem better than anyone else I've ever worked with.

GC: Ok. Matt, what is it like to witness or be involved in these lengthy discussions that happen in rehearsals that end up going nowhere, or the ideas generated being rehearsed then ultimately cut? Does this have any effect on you as a performer?

MP: (Pause) I'm afraid I do find the pace of it quite tiresome sometimes.

GC: There can be a lot of what appears to be wasted time.

MP: It does appear that way and it can be frustrating. But I think Anthony's suspicious about rehearsal. I can understand why in a way, the nature of what you get sometimes. But I also think that rehearsal should be alive and kept live. Being prepared doesn't have to mean being over prepared, or dead and not in the moment. I'd like to see Anthony trust that a bit more. Sorry, I'm not answering your question... It's what Al said about the wacky pieces – sorry I shouldn't say wacky – the zany pieces. Anthony quotes that in the forward to his book, someone said to me that 'they don't do zany' after *Dissocia*. But it feels like they're not ready to go into the rehearsal room, that you're not ready to start. And you do feel that if only Anthony had more of a structured process and then took it on and see where that would get you. Sorry I've forgotten about what we were talking about.

GC: It was about the lengthy discussions.

MP: Oh yeah. I find them incredibly, incredibly frustrating. But then again, I've not been in the two-handers or three-hander things. Those bigger shows like *Dissocia* and *Realism*, fuck me they really got me down. My tendency is to try to push and Anthony just won't have that, he won't be pushed. But, you know, he's right, it's his thing... I suppose that what's frustrating is that you might try to go there, or take different routes, or try and speed the process up, but in the end the process is Anthony. Anthony is the process, it's him, and you'll

go as fast or as slow as he wants to go when he wants to do that. So all those plodding, fucking endless discussions, if they're useful for him then they're good for the process. So it doesn't really matter if it's frustrating or not for me.

GC: So, do you think these debates can fulfil any constructive criteria?

MP: (pause) I'm not sure, I've seen them hold things up. We got into a whole thing about sexism...

GC: Yeah, I've seen them last for hours, and it's two hours of rehearsals just gone.

MP: Yeah, that's not very helpful. But then again, in the end, maybe it was... Al how would you answer that question?

AG: All those lengthy discussions in rehearsals you have with Anthony are all helpful. There are times when you panic about how much work you've got left to do before you open, and you might get frustrated with him. But I think what he does really well, is that he kind of slightly...it's like open-book accounting in his process by talking things through all the time and debating everything. I think it informs you as an actor about what he's doing and what he's trying to do with his play. Again, I've said it before, I always think that his plays are another character in the room and he's sort of wrestling it out of himself. He needs to do that process.

MP: But it does make you feel powerless in that equation doesn't it? Because, actually, as you say, he's opening it up, he's opening up his mind to you. But there's nothing you can do, you can spend two hours having a massive debate about whether you should go this way or that way, that happens a lot. But in the end you've just spent two hours.

AG: Yeah, but he listens to everyone in those two hours and things germinate for him during those huge, big discussions. You're never going to change his mind on anything but you might temper something in a slightly different way. I think as an actor you...that's Anthony's process and you just have to join in with that process. It might frustrate you. Any director might make you wait two minutes before the actor can summon up the energy to say 'To be, or not to be'. I didn't mind any of that it was all helpful. Sometimes you get trite and ridiculous and funny and you think 'we'll we're slightly avoiding work here'.

MP: (laughs) Yeah, that does happen a lot.

AG: And he does avoid work. And Anthony himself slightly plays at being Anthony Neilson. You'll go out for dinner with him and on the menu there's steak and chicken. And he'll go 'Oh, can I have the kidneys?', and only Anthony wants to order the kidneys or the octopus. He kind of does that he plays at being him. Steve Unwin used to do that, he used to dress as Brecht in the rehearsal room thinking it made him a better director. So Anthony's whole stich is all those endless discussions and not rehearsing and then his lonely nights of battering away at the typewriter.

MP: But that is psychologically quite interesting isn't it, that he doesn't want to rehearse. He really doesn't though does he? He only wants to rehearse under that pressure because he thinks that's when you can do the best work. There is still a strange resistance to rehearsing something, and I've never quite got to the bottom of it.

AG: I can't remember a huge amount of re-writing being done. It's an awful long time before what you get arrives... There's not draft, after draft, after draft. There's only one draft.

GC: He's not got time do draft after draft.

AG: I think he's slightly... I think there's a part of him that thinks the first version is the best version, except when things aren't working, or he's rushed it, or it's not what he wants it to be. I think there's a part of his process which is about it being as good as it can be on the first night.

MP: I think sometimes a piece will start strong and get a bit weaker just because of that process.

GC: It runs out of steam doesn't it?

MP: He doesn't redraft, or he's taken four or five weeks to get the first couple of scenes and by the end he's had to do it the night before. And I think that could be looked at. Just because you done something forever doesn't mean you can't modify it a little bit

AG: No.

GC: It like he spends a lot of resources on the earlier stuff that he writes and like you say Matt the rest of it goes relatively unfinished or rushed. That's what happened with *Narrative*.

MP: That might be the way with a lot of writers. I've worked with David Greig and he was talking about how he needs a way in. They spend a lot of time finding what this way in is, and then it gets a bit rushed as the deadline approaches. That's probably the same for most writers I suppose, or many writers.

AG: Yeah I think it is. And it's also you can have an idea and in getting to that idea the first bit is the most interesting bit and it's about making the idea resolve itself. And with Anthony, he does it in a certain amount of time. Whereas I think that other writers would either discipline themselves to get to the end of the play and be quite happy with it, or they'd put it in a drawer, you know.

MP: You must've read things that have been re-written, then they've come back and eventually you think 'well hang on a minute, where's the good bit?' (laughs) You think you've made this better, but in fact it's much more boring. The initial thing that you had is completely lost.

GC: Ok, just as a quick aside, Matt how would you define truth in acting?

MP: (Pause) I think simplicity and I think you've got to try to hook it to yourself somehow, come what may. You've got to relate it to some personal experience. I know that's a bit boring and I don't mean weeping over you cat, or whatever it is. But somehow you've got to strip away all the extraneous, clever stuff and just keep it simple. That's what I think.

GC: What about you Al?

AG: I think I'd agree with that. The thing about truth in acting, is that you have to put yourself in that situation. And then your character comes about with the truth of yourself in those contrasting and contradictory situations; that's what becomes a character. Hamlet's a prince who... everything that happens to him... he just has to be a person who every time you

walk into a room everybody looks at. And then think ‘well how does that make you feel?’ You just have to bring everything back to you. As an actor I wouldn’t do anything that I didn’t think I could do and make believable. And that’s a lot to do with physicality and voice. I’m not interested in doing it in an accent because I don’t get it. I’ve never known a character that’s about an accent. I’d rather use an actor that uses the accent. The least amount of extra stuff that I have to do as an actor, the better. I think that makes it easier to get to the truth about a character. And to be in the moment for each moment, and not to be playing it.

MP: I think you can about the accent and physicality. You can immerse yourself in all that sort of stuff and get to a point where it is like second nature and you finally get it. So I would say that you can do that stuff, and it’s a big challenge, it’s quite thrilling for an actor to try and go there. But in the end you can’t play the big nose and the hook and the parrot and the eye patch, you’ve got to forget them in the end. You need time for all that, you need to throw yourself into it and immerse yourself and be prepared to be stupid. But in the end you’ve got to bring it back to yourself. The same rules still apply. So I would go a bit further than what Al was saying, or I disagree slightly. I think you can, but if it’s half-arsed or you haven’t had enough time and it’s a bit half-cocked it can be dreadful. You’ve got to immerse yourself completely in it.

AG: I do agree with you, but I remember doing *the Crucible* and the whole company was involved in that. And all that’s great if it helps you find the truth because it’s something you can rely on and give you a little spin on the dialogue. But it’s about you being in that moment as yourself as that character.

MP: It’s interesting what you say there about Hamlet. It honestly never occurred to me that you’re the prince so everyone’s looking at you all the time. That’s why you’re such a good actor, that would never have occurred to me. I’d be thinking, ‘oh, what am I feeling? I’ve got this relationship with my mother and my uncle doesn’t like it.’ But those are practical things that you’ve got to think about. So when Al goes into his house his kids will be looking at him and expecting something from him. It didn’t occur to me so there you go.

AG: It’s that very old adage that’s absolutely true when you play the king you don’t have to be kingly, it’s everyone else who has to bow their heads, you don’t have to do anything...As an actor I feel uncomfortable doing anything I don’t physically believe myself as being. Even though that’s a slightly ridiculous thing to say.

GC: Ok, Matthew, Anthony usually works as both director and writer do you think this raises any issues. Do you think any problems or tensions emerge in the merging of these two roles?

MP: No, I actually think, if Anthony has to be a director that’s the only way he can do it actually. (laughs) It feels a bit mean, he’s a friend of mine. It’s not the only way he can do it, but I think he is perfect for his stuff and his stuff is perfect for him. He’s the perfect director for his writing and his writing is perfect for him. I’ve certainly been in a production of someone else’s play that he directed and it just didn’t work. That’s a bit unfair on Anthony because it was not a good play and the writer was very resistant, very difficult. So Anthony had a really, really tough time. And actually, funnily enough, as the director in that he did all things he should do. He was so protective of us, so good in dealing with the National Theatre of Scotland, there were lots of different pressures on him, and he was terrific. In regards to his own pieces, I don’t think there is, I think that’s the best way. I think you’ll get

reproductions of his original shows that will maybe get another star on the review and be more polished or a bit flashier. But I think, as we said earlier, they'll be missing that essential heart. There's something kind of indefinable about what he does that only he can seem to get to. It comes out though, it does come out.

GC: It's difficult to pin down.

AG: Well I think, from my experience, he's a great director working with actors on his own scripts. I think he's the closest to Pinter in some of his plays. I think he's a great director, I really liked working with him. I would hate for him to be the writer with another director in the room. I just can't imagine that at all.

GC: No, I can't imagine another person directing his stuff.

AG: No. I can imagine someone directing once it's all done. One thing, having seen his other plays, I sometimes wonder what... I think he's a good director but I think there's several things he misses as a director that other people don't... when you go and see a *Complicite* show that Catherine Hunter directed, or any of those type of companies, you see what they can do with just a cup of water that becomes something else. Those tiny little things that you see in theatre, stuff that they do. I sometimes think that Anthony wants to do some little tricks and they're never quite those refined, beautiful moments of theatricality, that they should be.

MP: But those things just don't come out of thin air, they don't just think of them, they've got years and years of practicing. There's a real rigid discipline behind *McBurney*, *Complicite* and all that stuff, there's an education, there's a training, there's decades. I mean, that little cup turning into whatever it is didn't come out of nowhere. Not to say that Anthony hasn't spent years working he has, but on those specific things... he's not schooled in that way of working.

AG: I think there's something about him as a director... I can see his imagination theatrically, but he doesn't direct it with that finesse that *Complicite*, or a physical theatre company would, who can conjure something out of nothing and you kind of gasp at what you're seeing. And that's absolutely about directing and design. He's good at it, but he isn't one of them when it comes to those particular moments. Maybe he's not trying to do those moments, but I get a feeling he is.

MP: I think you're right, I think he is and that requires something else. Some other skill set. My feeling with him is that his genius lies in his writing, but having said that I think the best person to direct his stuff is him.

AG: I think a lot of that comes down to production. The stuff that he's coming up with... he doesn't have enough time. You come here and see *Machinar* and you see the roof coming down, it's all been welded and it's mental, it's nuts. But you know that it took six months to build, that piece of machinery, because Stephen Daldry knew it was going to happen. Anthony would love for it to be able to snow.

MP: He needs to be helped through that somehow, he needs to be persuaded that actually those six weeks could be better spent. But maybe he does have the six weeks where he sits around, bats the ball, play the keyboards and writes to a deadline and comes up with something. And then you do have another six weeks down the line where you do have something. 'Well you wanted the machine Anthony, you wanted the big machine, we've built

it, here it is. And if that doesn't work, we'll build another machine.' My feeling is that somehow he needs to be persuaded to use time better. But maybe he does need that period of inertia, because when you have something that you have to do, you just don't do it to the last minute, it's very difficult. And it's not about laziness, it's painful and difficult writing stuff.

AG: With him as a director, the stuff that really works in terms of directing a production is the second half of *Dissocia*. Because it's a theatrically arresting moment when you open in that hospital and the little box, and you can't quite believe that you're going to be here and you are.

MP: I've seen it copied, I've seen it done since.

AG: But you come here and a whole bunch of people are working before the actors turn up. It's designed and everything, so you get those moments. And I think with Anthony they're slightly stapled on in the production week... What's the one with the sand?

MP: *Realism*.

AG: With the singing and dancing. If that was going to be in it, it would have been choreographed since day one as it's a big number.

MP: It should be. I know he quite likes to profess that he likes this half-arsed way of doing things, but I'm not convinced of that, I'm not convinced he does like it. Or if he does like it, I'm not convinced that he wouldn't like it better if it was really, really good.

AG: He probably wouldn't mind having a go at that number, for there to be an absolute west end number in the middle of it. Then if it turns out a bit shit he could do something with that. But he doesn't give himself the chance to do that.

GC: Yeah, his time management lets him down a bit sometimes.

MP: (Laughs) It's terrible, terrible!

GC: Yeah... Matt, Anthony's authorial methodology strikes me as what I will term as a theatrical magpie who invests a lot of time condensing material during rehearsals. Do you think this is accurate?

MP: Theatrical magpie? I don't think he's a magpie about theatre, he's a magpie from films. He's on record talking about David Lynch and Kubrik. So I think a lot of his stuff comes from that. What was the rest of the question? I'm, sorry Cas.

GC: Basically, he plucks ideas from here and there, from all over the place and then he edits them down. He spends a lot of time condensing this material into something. Do you think that's accurate? This is what I noticed in *Narrative*.

MP: I think *Narrative*'s a bit different because he's trying to break up narrative. No, I'm not sure I did find that... When I've worked with him there's never been this massive quantity of too much material that he has to edit down. You're always desperate for more material. But that might be different in that way of working. In *Dissocia*, yes there was different styles. He talked about Jonathan Miller's *Alice in Wonderland* and about various other fantastical things like that. So he did borrow from those things, he borrowed the structure a little bit from that idea. So yeah, he was a bit of a magpie in that piece. With *Realism* he was a bit of a magpie

from his original piece, because *Realism* was a response to *Dissocia*. *Edward Gant*? Yeah actually, there was the Victorian freak show and fairy tales and Shock-Headed Peter and all that stuff. Although, I'm not sure that Anthony ever saw that. So I'm sure there's all that going on, but I've never been overly aware of it.

GC: Do you think that Anthony's process flirts with risk and failure and if so why do you think he does this?

MP: I think it does massively flirt with risk and failure. I think he doesn't appear to see it on those terms. I think he's happy for a piece not be ready when it's supposed to be ready for a theatre company and the press and all the rest of it. He wants it to develop and he has said 'Look, even if we only get there on the last night, I'm happy with that.' So yeah, he's happy to flirt with it and he doesn't care about those kind of risks.

GC: I think there can be productive and unproductive risk and failure. Do you think this is the case with Anthony's process?

MP: Yeah in a sense. *Edward Gant*, *Dissocia* and *Realism* were productive. Everything that we went through, all the stuff that wasn't used, all the pain of the inertia did lead to pieces that I think really stand up. And there's proof of that because they've been done successfully again and again. I think the brinkmanship involved in *Caladonia*, which wasn't his work, so couldn't write his way out of the problem. So it was a disastrous flop, it didn't work on any terms I didn't think. And there were some interesting theatrical flourishes, that were his, and he had some good collaborators on it; musically, lighting and design and all that sort of stuff...Anthony doesn't really seem to give a shit about all that, which I love, and that's why he can create some really unforgettable pieces...A good piece by him is almost better than anything else and you're not going to be bored. So I think it is worth it and sometimes things aren't going to come off. I think we probably need a bit more of that, a lot of what we do is quite safe and samey. I've been doing a lot of theatre over the last few years, good stuff, but I think sometimes we try to get it right for the sake of inverted commas 'getting it right for press night'. When actually we should maybe dig around a bit and be prepared for things to fall flat to get somewhere ultimately. And Anthony's prepared to do that and that's why his stuff is more exciting. I see where you're going with waste. *Narrative* was a particular thing, he's deliberately being perverse and playing around with narrative. We need narrative structure, so what is it? So of course he's going to magpie all these different pieces and then he's going to throw them up and see where they're going to fall. I found that really unsatisfying and the whole cast hadn't bought into the project, I thought that was really clear. And yet John Ram, who I've been working with, loved it he said he could have watched it all night. The regulars Chris and Barney were in it and they seemed very comfortable as they always do. But there were one or two of the women who seemed uncomfortable. And I don't blame them because Anthony doesn't explain it to you, you've got to find your own way. He doesn't really communicate his way of doing things.

(Matthew has to leave, so interview continues with Alastair)

GC: Anthony's writing is often very loose. Did he encourage you to adapt what he wrote and, in effect, make it your own material?

AG: Yes, though I wouldn't say it was particularly loose. He gives you pages, he absolutely gives you pages with words written on them. And he would mess around with it, he would

write stuff for you and he could tell if it was quite clumsy. So he would tweak it to make it easy for you to do. But again, that's easy for anyone to do. It's how he edits, he edits by watching people doing his stuff, and he will edit it that way. He writes for you, which is a great thing.

GC: Did Anthony ever ask you to come up with ideas and relate them to him?

AG: I'm sure he did but I can't remember. But I think that anything he would have done would be asking you about ideas about your character in something he's already came up with. I don't recall him ever saying 'What do you think he's going to do next?' 'He will more talk to you about how you're going to do a scene, what your character might do in that scene. It's very much to do with something that he's already decided, or that he's looking to do that's maybe not quite set in stone. He may bounce a few ideas off you and see what you would go with. But I never got the feeling that part of the process was the actors coming up with the material at all, even though it kind of feels like that when you're in there and you've only got a page or two to rehearse. So then you would improvise, you would talk about 'what if I'm here, what if I'm over there'. So it's odd, you think it's a different process than it actually is.

GC: Did he ever pick up ideas from random conversations, or conversations outside of rehearsals, and then later present them or a reworking of them?

AG: Again, I've never really noticed it, but I'm very aware that when you spend time with Anthony – and you do, you rehearse, you go to the pub, you do everything together – you sense that you're always on duty, and that he's always working... What he doesn't do is, he doesn't claim authorship of something that's not his. Everything is his, even if you think you've come up with the whole thing, you've only come up with it because he's let you come up with it and given you parameters to express something. So it's a bit like a movie. In a movie even if you come up with every word of the script, it's still the director's movie. Whereas you could always say that the movie is authored by the screenwriter. So with Anthony, no matter what you come up with, unlike I imagine Mike Leigh where he records your improvisation, Anthony doesn't ask you for anything. You could say nothing and you would still get the same script. Or you might get the same script and feel less involved.

GC: Conventional notions of authorship, especially that of the single author, seems problematic when applied to Anthony's methodology. Do you think this is the case?

AG: No I wouldn't say so. It seems like that, but you're only there to serve the author. It doesn't matter that there's nothing on day one, it doesn't matter that what you come up with in rehearsals he goes on to write because he's not relying on you to do it. He's picked you, you haven't picked him. He never gets a cast foisted upon him for his own plays. And I never think of it that way, even though it's a very collaborative process. I said to you earlier, there's one line that I know that I wrote and he kept in and he would probably admit that... It appears that you're in a very collaborative, improvisational, process where you come up with the play with him. But you're never in the same room when he's typing, he goes home and writes it. Especially given what he comes back in with. He doesn't write in an improvisational tone, there's not much in the way of idiom and dialect, you don't get a lot of that. So one of the magical things about that process is that it appears to be one thing and actually it is something else.

GC: Why do you think that Anthony has this pool of actors that he repeatedly employs?

AG: (Laughs) Because of his way of working. I think so that he doesn't have to deal with actor's anxieties. Because it's scary as an actor when you don't know what's happening. There are certain actors that learn the script before day one. I've never had a problem learning lines so it's never really bothered me. I really like working that way, there's something kind of nice about having a head full of notes in a dress rehearsal or a preview, or a press night. So in a way, all you're really doing is playing the notes, trying to remember what's cut, what's not cut, becomes part of the process. In the same way as those Aleki Blythe plays where the words are fed into your ear as it's coming out, it's a process. And part of the process in an Anthony play is that you don't drop the notes. And I'm sure that you'll go back to an Anthony play if you can do things like that. But I'm sure there's actors who he's given 12 notes to before a press night and they've done none of them because they just can't keep it in their heads. Whereas that's all part of his process and he keeps a bunch of actors because they come up with stuff in the rehearsal room. He knows what to write for them...I don't think he would take a bunch of people just because they were mates or he'd worked with them before unless there was something he knew they could do. I think he would err on the side of getting as many as he could, but he wouldn't pick somebody he'd worked with over somebody who was right.

GC: Do you think that this structure facilitates the emergence of something which is recognisably a Neilson show?

AG: Absolutely! Fundamentally! You see it with his big ones in terms of their theatricality and their non-sequiterness, their slightly thrown together look because it had to be thrown together. Similarly, there are techniques within his writing which are circular references. *Year of the Family* starts with a tableau at the beginning and at the end. I think the whole play may have started with the end scene and then he worked his way up to it. So there are ways of the process being reflected in the show. In *the Censor* it cuts to the little domestic scenes and that was a thing he did on the last day. And I can't imagine that it would have been that way had he sat down and wrote it, it would have been a completely different play...It's interesting that in his big plays a lot of people turn up in a lot of different scenes because he had them around in the rehearsal room. So he's working with what he's got in the rehearsal room, from actors to sound to words.

GC: It even goes as far as objects in the rehearsal room. They can end up in the play by a random and circuitous route. He just plucks ideas from everywhere doesn't he?

AG: Yeah. They often say the best run of any play is the last run in the rehearsal room.

GC: (Laughs) You very often don't get one of those with Anthony.

AG: That's true, but it would be really nice to see an Anthony show that doesn't leave the rehearsal room.

GC: I could show you that I've got the last run in the rehearsal room on film.

AG: And how was it?

GC: Ramshackle, chaotic, all over the place. Fear in the eyes of the actors.

AG: (laughs) Carrying the notes is a big deal, just trying to remember what cut and what scene is next.

GC: Well that's it when he changes the structure right at the end you wonder 'what order do these scenes actually come in now, what's my cue, what scene am I in?'

AG: Yeah, yeah. And it's not easy, but it's also not hard and it's very much part of it. In the same way as if you were in a very physical production and you couldn't lift your leg above your knee you wouldn't do very well in it. So Anthony needs people who can do that kind of thing, who can change something quickly. And also throughout the run, because he does come to see it a lot. It's like Matt was saying, even if it's on the last night. You get notes every single night, every single night and things change. They don't change hugely, but he really tightens it up. You can tell that there's probably things that he's getting into your performance. It's like Matt was saying, he's bringing your performance back to the script, or he's making the script better by directing you in a certain way. It may be that lines that are weaker gain more poignancy.

GC: I noticed this with *Narrative*. I saw the show three times and then I read the text a couple of weeks ago when it first came out and there is so much of it that's different from the performance than there is in the text.

AG: Do you know what the text was based on? Was it based on rehearsal?

GC: It was based on the production but scenes were actually in during the run that are not in the play.

AG: Really? Wow!

GC: Which made part of a chapter for my PhD an absolute arse because I'd written this and now I've got to change it all. Twat!!!

AG: (Laughs)

GC: Could I ask you the question about risk and failure that I asked Matt? Do you think Anthony's process flirts with risk and failure?

AG: Hugely, hugely. It hugely flirts with risk and failure. I think there are times when he's more confident that he's going to pull it off and there are times when he thinks that he's bitten off more than he can chew. I think even he gets to the point where he goes 'enough's enough now we need to open this up now.' So he'll kind of rein it in a bit. I just think that's part of the process. It's his labour, and he couldn't give birth to these things any other way. So he holds the balance as he's done before. When he did his film, when he did *the Debt Collector*, you can't not write a film, you've got to write every single word of it. And it's a good piece, there's some really nice things in it, but you sense that it's missing a bit of Neilson magic. It's when he's up against it that he comes up with it. And I think it's about the choices he makes, as much as a director than as a writer when he's up against it. So if something's not working he'll cut it, or he'll change a few lines to make it work... I think he's not afraid to fail and he's not afraid not to be asked back because he's on the outside looking in at all of us and everyone else can go and fuck themselves as far as he's concerned. If it's not ready, it's not ready, it is what it is. In a way you could say that about any show, any rehearsal period. Just because the script's finished, just because the set's built, it doesn't

mean the performances are there. It doesn't mean to say that the leading lady hasn't fallen out with the leading man, or there's no chemistry between them... Although, at the end of the day, if you're producing theatre...

GC: Yeah, that's what I was going to go on to next actually. So, given this high risk approach, why do you think institutions like the Royal Court continue their patronage of Anthony? Because, as you know, after *the Lying Kind* he had a two or three year exile from London because of that show.

AG: Well I think it's because there's not much else. Because he's proven that he can do it you've got to give him the chance to do it again. I absolutely don't think that everything that Anthony's done is brilliant, I certainly think that some are better than others. Of the one's that I was in, *the Censor's* head and shoulders above the rest of them. I think *Stitching* is a hugely under rated play. One of his first one's, *Penetrator*, *Dissocia* was great. What was the one upstairs with the serial killers?

GC: *Normal*?

AG: No, not *Normal*, that was the Dusseldorf one wasn't it? What was the one with Phil and Stuart in it?

GC: *Relocated*. That was the one about Fritzl.

AG: Yeah, *Relocated*. I thought that was really interesting. And in a way, what I think Anthony would benefit from would be to be constrained a little bit... I mean if I was running the Royal Court now, I'd say to Anthony, 'Well you can do a play, but you're only allowed three actors. And you're only allowed one set.' So that he doesn't have to worry about anything else apart from that. And he can do what he likes with that. I think for a successful Anthony Neilson production, you shouldn't let him do absolutely anything. I think he needs a little bit of constraint. And for me, his weaker plays are the bigger ones, because they crash into the process.

GC: I totally agree with you. I personally think that Anthony needs a really strong assistant director, who he respects, and who is going to keep things on track in rehearsals so that he can maximise the time.

AG: I think he does, or a really strong producer, or artistic director. Not to answer to, but to say, 'Look, you're only allowed three actors...' or whatever, because you know that he'll come up with something. And he won't be worrying about the sand or the dancing girls, sheep, or whatever it is that he's going to come up with. But he doesn't get asked back that often. I mean, the Royal Court's probably where he's been most... And he'll always garner interest, people will turn up, no matter how good or bad it is. And the only risk you run is that you don't get to read the play before you start. Whereas, there's lots of plays on at the Royal Court, that if you read say, *Happiness*, that Martin Crimp play, you'd think 'Oh, this could go all the way.' So there you go.

GC: Fair play. So, talking about the productive and unproductive side of risk, waste and failure?

AG: Well productive, because it's the only way he works. So it's ultimately productive. Unproductive... well I would always talk about production. Say you want your character to

stand on top of a mountain, for it to snow and for a plane to hit him on the head, you kind of need to tell an awful lot of people that, a few months before you start. You can't come up with that three weeks in rehearsals I don't think. So I think, in terms of him as a director, and as a theatre maker... Again, it's like something like *Complicite*; what they're very good at, is that they will have the man at the top of the mountain getting hit with an aeroplane, but they'll do it with an umbrella, and they'll just make that work. Whereas with Anthony, that's the weakest part of his game, and he's got a great game, his strengths are huge. But he can't come up with the man on the mountain getting hit by an umbrella. So if he could really nail that he wouldn't get bogged down in unproductive production stuff. Like the dancing girls in *Realism* and all that stuff. There are certain effects that aren't working quite as well as they should because of lack of time and money and telling people. So that's where it becomes unproductive. Whereas, it's a very productive process when he's got two or three actors and a black box. Then it really works I think.

GC: For me, his best play that I've seen, is *the Censor*. It's one of my favourite shows ever, it's just the two main actors and Alison.

AG: It's the same with *Stitching*, I absolutely love *Stitching*. It was him back on form, and everything you like about him. And there's not that many plays that you remember. You know, I still notice the clock when it's 22.22pm all the time. And my kids always shout 'It's 13.13pm', and they don't know about the play when she's doing that.

GC: Ok, a couple more quick ones and then we're finished. Are there any particular risks for individual actors, to do with things perhaps like, gender, age, nationality etc.?

AG: From my experience, not really. It's interesting what Matt was talking about the older actors. What was the play upstairs about the old man in the hospital bed?... There was a play upstairs and there was a guy in a hospital bed, he was an old guy, and Jan Pearson was in it. I only went to see it because she was in it. I thought it was one of Anthony's and he's deaf, and she keeps saying things like 'Are you coming home today?', and he says 'Cod and chips.' So that thing about the older actors, it's interesting seeing Jan come in and replace Raquel in *the Censor*, and she was very, very good in it. But I got a sense of it being a character written for another actress (this is an interesting avenue to explore) even though she was great in it. I think if Jan had been in it from the outset the play would have been slightly different, not hugely different, but there would have been a few things different in it... So, in terms of his gender politics... every play that I've been in there's almost as many woman as men. Two women, one man, in *the Censor*. *Year of the Family* had Rachel Weisz and Sophie... Me and Selina did *Dirty Laundry*. I've never had an issue with his gender politics. He's certainly tip toed; he does have a Frankie Boyle sense of humour in the rehearsal room. He loves all that, he absolutely loves it, he plays to it. But it doesn't appear in his work, I think he gets it out in the rehearsal room. He purges himself of it because he can be hugely racist and sexist because it's funny, only because it's funny, and only in front of people who he thinks he can get away with it.

GC: Ok. So finally, is there anything you would like to add that we haven't covered, or elaborate on anything that we have discussed?

AG: I think he's kind of under rated. I really noticed that with *the Censor* and *Shopping and Fucking*, because we were both on at the same time in the West End, there, or thereabouts.

But then *Shopping and Fucking* went to New York and Mark Ravenhill became the go to guy. He became a sort of celebrity playwright. And Anthony's never really become that and I think his work is better than almost any other contemporary playwright.

GC: I think it's much better than Ravenhill's.

AG: Without a doubt, it's head and shoulders above. I don't know whether that's about Anthony or...I think it's about the people who run the buildings, like the one we're in now. He's very much an outsider in terms of that theatrical establishment. He belongs, inasmuch as he's on a level with them. But I don't know whether he'd pushed himself a bit more, could he become that? I think also the way that he protects his cast and is quite insular about his work...He could be a much bigger name than he is...He should be on Robert Lapage's sort of level. You almost wish that he'd be given a huge amount of money to do a show out with another producing partner, which he's never really done. Not necessarily direct, I think his chief strength is as a writer. Now that I remember it, the very first time that I came into contact with him was when he wrote *Welfare My Lovely*. Do you know that?

GC: is it that radio play?

AG: No, it was on at the Traverse and it's a little three-hander, very funny, and it's about a debt collector. I remember thinking it would make great telly. And that was a well made play. I think he's a lot more traditional than people than people give him credit for because he doesn't shock. You obviously know the Sarah Kane stuff better than I do. I've not really seen Sarah Kane's stuff, I've seen *Phaedra's Love*. I didn't see *Blasted*. And at the time of all that in-yer-face stuff, *Blasted* and *Shopping and Fucking* and all that. I'd never put him with them.

GC: Yeah, I know. Aleks Sierz puts Anthony in with Mark Ravenhill and Sarah Kane as the big three In-Yer-Face writers...which I don't necessarily agree with, I don't think Anthony fits well into that actually.

AG: No, no. because his plays aren't about that. His plays are...He pushes stuff because it's more interesting, they're visceral, and they're about things that are absolutely in everyone. They're only about desires and stuff we don't talk about. Whereas a lot of those other plays are about stuff we don't do.

GC: That's a good point.

AG: His are about stuff we don't talk about and he talks about it. And I'd like to do another one.

Ned Bennett *Narrative Interview*

GC: Hi Ned, thanks for doing this. I was wondering what your personal take is on Anthony's rehearsal 'process' in comparison to other rehearsals where you actually have a script to begin with?

NB: From day one it's been a completely different atmosphere in the room. And not least because he's put together a group of people that on the whole, he's worked with before. It's meant that from very early on, particularly in the workshop week, the work became very personal. So improvisations very quickly became about the actors themselves and it felt like there was nobody uncomfortable with doing that. So I think inevitably it's meant that we've got to a place much quicker where everyone's a lot freer and more comfortable with each other. Though saying that is not necessarily about not having a script. But I think that's part of the ethos of if we're not going to have a script the actor's input is what the 'process' is and that wouldn't happen if we did not have that vibe in the room; if that makes sense.

GC: It absolutely makes sense. Are there any improvisations that you did that are in the text; or echoes, or remnants in the text to date?

NB: It's interesting to what extent there is actual dialogue that has come from the improvs. So far it feels like there are snippets here and there, but where I think it's got really interesting is on a conceptual level. The other day Imogen brought in autocorrect screenshots, when the I-phone gets things wrong when you're texting, and showed it to Anthony. And that became the spine of how her dialogue now works when she becomes disoriented and dislocated. I think that's a really *interesting* example of where it feels like – and I might be wrong – but it feels like it's less writing down what's actually been said and it's more using the ideas behind it and how that can work for the story.

GC: Ok, that's great, thanks a lot. I was wondering do you have any doubts or concerns about the production (Nods) that you would not normally have in other productions?

NB: Not really, if anything it's, as cheesy as it sounds, it's refreshingly liberating being in a room where the driving momentum is an artistic curiosity. So it moves away from that production line thing. I think Anthony's engendered a - what's the word – like a relaxation or something. I'm not quite sure how to describe it, but a relaxation where it's not results based. We will have a show, and a show that we're really pleased with. And it feels like it's not that preview press-night mentality of that's it, right what are we doing next. So I don't think I've got any doubts.

GC: That's good, that's great. To what extent do you think that the actor and the people that are involved – yourself and the music director – have an impact and shape this text overall?

NB: I think that they have a huge impact. I'm just thinking this through, I'm thinking about the workshop week where we did some impro, but it was predominantly discussion-based about the kind of areas that Anthony was interested looking in. And Anthony day-by-day responds to material that comes into the room. That's an interesting question, how different would the show be if it had been a different group of actors? I don't know, I don't know. I'm not sure.

GC: That's fine. Do you feel that there are any inherent risks in this way of doing things that are different to other theatrical risks? Script-wise, improvisation-wise? These can be positive risks, negative risks, whatever you think.

NB: Yeah...yeah. This may not be answering the question but it feels like this can only work if the person leading it has a certain amount of objectivity. So it feels like compared to possibly other processes – conventional processes in terms of script, script workshops and script development – the script changes much, much more easily and is responsive to what's actually happening in the room and who the actors are.

GC: It's really fluid isn't it?

NB: Really fluid. Whereas, sometimes I think the more conventional way of working with text can become...it almost feels like the wrong battles are being fought or discussed. So there's an attention paid to a piece of dialogue and a twenty-minute discussion ensues about the phrasing of something. Whereas, possibly the energy could have been more efficiently used at a distance. Does that make sense at all?

GC: Yeah. In a more creative way. Perhaps others can get a bit bogged-down in details.

NB: Yeah, yeah. Exactly.

GC: Do you think that's a strength?

NB: I think that's a strength because this only happens through Anthony's objectivity to what's going on. I guess what I'm trying to say is that this way of working can't just work in principle, it's down to the character of the people involved. Otherwise it could just go tits-up and we wouldn't have anything on. (Both laugh)

GC: Yeah, absolutely that can happen. To what extent do you think that theatre is inherently risky in itself?

NB: I think to a large extent it is and that's why it will keep theatre as something that's going to survive forever. It seems like it comes in and out of fashion; as to 'theatre's dead or theatre's dying.' I don't think it ever will actually because it's that...

GC: It's live.

NB: Yeah, yeah, it's the liveness of it is what will...if anything I think it will become more popular once actors eventually become CG things, no matter how realistic it is, I think we will always want to watch the real deal. And I think it could be perceived or articulated as a risk in terms of that not quite knowing what's going to happen and the changeability of it from night to night. And particularly with this kind of work where Anthony's encouraging that; where it's encouraged that we don't have to be particular to the text. The acting will change and there isn't a sense of getting it right for the director.

GC: Do you think that...I'm not a big fan of what critics write about shows, but I suppose that's one of the main risks about this kind of thing of how the critics are generally going to receive it.

NB: Yeah, yeah.

GC: That's going to be a big thing, but it doesn't really say anything about the quality of the show to me. What do you think of that?

NB: I think that what's interesting is a show like this upstairs at the Court when the tickets are pretty much sold out the criticism of it, I'd like to think, as a group, we are aware of how the piece could be received, like the positives and the negatives. And without denigrating the critics too much, I feel that they're voices will just be part of the other voices when we speak to people afterwards.

GC: (Jokingly) Part of the narrative.

NB: (Laughs) Exactly, yeah. Whereas, were it a bigger house or a longer run yeah it would have a practical implication. It feels like when we have the rest of the theatre in the previews and the feedback they give us, the feedback we get from our mates watching it will all be part of the same thing.

GC: Yeah, absolutely. Because what's interesting is that this show has been sold out from day one. With no cast list, no name, no nothing; Anthony Neilson's new show, dates, bang. That says a lot.

NB: It does and it says that people have an appetite for this type of work.

GC: Which is great. Ok mate just a few more quick questions.

NB: Cool.

GC: Does my presence here filming you guys have any impact that you've noticed on the performers?

NB: I don't think so hugely. I mean I'm sure it does on a tiny level, but I think the atmosphere is so relaxed from day one and the fact that you're an actor and you know Anthony. So I don't think it's had a huge impact; maybe a tiny bit and perhaps people cover it up. But no.

GC: Ok mate. And last of all, is there anything you would like to add, or talk about, or mention about this whole experience?

NB: I guess something that I've noticed and will take away is the way this way of working impacts on the other practitioners in a really positive sense. I get the impression that no one in the team feels like their work is ever just going to be tacked on or a small part of the overall impression of the piece. So that means that everyone works in a different way in terms of being in the room more and influencing actually the way the play will go in, in terms of light, and sound, and set and costumes.

GC: Yeah, there doesn't seem to be a hierarchical system that you get in many other rehearsals. There's nothing that I've picked up on or noticed.

NB: I think you're absolutely right, there's none of the constrictions that come with ego-based, ego-led stuff.

GC: Yeah, he doesn't do that 'I'm the director, I'm the boss, you do what I tell you.'

NB: Absolutely, not at all.

GC: Brilliant Ned thank you very much. There's some great stuff.

NB: No worries. I hope so.

GC: It's really interesting to hear your take on it as not one of the actors. It's been really, really good so thank you.

NB: It's funny because a lot of my housemates work in theatre and I've gone home and said 'whatever the show ends up being, it's a really positive, nourishing, stimulating room to be in'.

GC: Thanks a lot Ned.

Olly Rix *Narrative Interview*

GC: I was wondering if you could talk to me a little bit about how Anthony's rehearsal 'process' compares to other rehearsals where you have a script to begin with?

OR: It's a very chaotic, unstructured 'process'...It's hard to say, I guess the 'process' and the style are two different things; but it feels like you start with nothing, completely with nothing. And the 'process' feels like, for a long time, that you don't really have anything either. And then after a while, I guess, things start to tie up, and then you become aware that what you say being potentially used against you (Both laugh). So a 'process' starts to form, I guess...well depending on how self-aware you are without you realising it...before you know it you're in a different 'process'.

GC: Are there any ideas that you have come up with that are in the script at the moment, or vestiges of these kind of things?

OR: I don't know...I guess indirectly yeah, and directly a lot of it performance-wise he might say 'I'd like you to sing a little song there' or something. But he's not a really hands-on director in some respects, so you kind of get to do whatever you want and if you bring some crazy idea with material that he's given you or if you change it, then he'll just go along with that. There are certain little moments, songs, lines that I've changed. Nothing too major, but certainly.

GC: I've noticed that you all have been constantly improvising bits, adding wee bits here and there to make it feel more comfortable. Or maybe it just feels natural to do it.

OR: Yeah, I think so. I tend to do that with anything I do, but if it was anything else you strip that away. Whereas, with Anthony, residual bits of improvisations find their way in. And also I think that Anthony appreciates quite an informal, naturalistic style. And also sometimes he tries to write that...sometimes it works and sometimes it's very much in his voice and he's an older Scottish guy and I'm a young not Scottish guy (Both laugh). So sometimes you just kind of have to change certain things: turns of phrase that I'd never say and would sound weird coming from me.

GC: Oh ya wee bugger pass me the Irn Bru. (Both laugh)

OR: Exactly, yeah.

GC: Ok. To what extent do you feel that you're having creative input into your character?

OR: We've never sort of sat down and discussed it, but you do have a strong input I think. You can veto certain ideas, change certain lines, and improvise. So I think through the process of rehearsal which has been kind of brief I guess, because a lot of it has been discussion. So if you offer up other little bits, they often stay, if they make him laugh or if they achieve something. So I think you do indirectly, it's never been a formal thing of sitting down and discussing the character, deciding which bits to cut, which bits to turn up. Well not for me, it might be different for the other actors...that's how I've kind of dealt with it.

GC: Ok. Do you have any doubts or concerns about the production that you would not normally have in another type of production?

OR: (pause) I don't know...I guess with new writing you have no idea how it's going to be received. I guess to some extent you always have a Hamletometer, you know the play so well, you know where it's kind of going to fall; is it going to be one of the great productions or is it going to be pretty shit. And you just don't have that gauge with Anthony, and I've certainly had moments when I've wondered what the core audience is going to be like, what the demographic is. Because I don't know it, or feel that I know it that well.

GC: I will say this from someone who's watched you all over the last few weeks; things are really coming together. And I think once things do come together you're going to have a very good show. Sounds, and the technical things, and you get a bit of confidence, a bit of flow, I think it's going to be good. And I seriously mean that. It's very funny, it's very poignant.

OR: That's good. I have a feeling it can be. I think what it is lacking is familiarity and flow, which obviously gets harder the more pressure, is on.

GC: It's gone very slowly today, for instance.

OR: Exactly, yeah.

GC: So do you think the production is catering to your strengths as an actor?

OR: I do actually. I guess I just said I didn't have a massive influence on the character but the character kind of is me. We discussed about my experience as an actor last year. It was something we discussed before we got into the play. Nobody's ever handed me a picture of an arsehole, but...I'm sorry I completely forgot the question. (Both laugh)

GC: It's alright. It was just about your strengths as an actor.

OR: Sorry mate.

GC: Don't worry we'll keep this short.

OR: No, no. So yeah, I think it does. I think that obviously having text that you are free to adapt and to literally your own speech patterns or whatever, is pretty special. I certainly hope it plays to my strengths.

GC: I think it does, I think it plays to everybody's strengths. I don't think Anthony is playing to anybody's weaknesses, because we've all got weaknesses. I'm not going to list mine and I've got plenty as an actor. Anthony caters to your strengths I think, he spots them, and people look good.

OR: Yeah, I think so. I've seen him take things away to facilitate other people's scenes. He goes 'ok, they're kind of struggling with that beat, or that line, so I'll rewrite, I'll change it, I'll get there another way.' It's definitely something I've noticed, and he's probably done it to me as well.

GC: How do you feel that a lot of things that you spend a lot of time on gets discarded? (Both laugh). How do you feel about that; how do you deal with it? The singing stuff for instance, you spent a lot of time on that and there's very little in anymore.

OR: I guess you've got to try and relax. It's actually quite rare that something gets totally discarded. What normally happens is that it gets morphed into something. It seems totally different but actually it has kind of led to that in a really random, circuitous kind of way.

Yeah, I think you've got to just try and relax. And I'm quite lucky I suppose, within an unusual play, I think I've got the most linear and traditional narrative. The story's unusual, but I think my task as an actor is one of the easier ones of the play. I think some of the other roles ask a bit more. I'm not sure what they ask, but somehow I think they're asking more.

GC: That might be that thing that it's written to your strengths in a way.

OR: Possibly, yeah, yeah, quite possibly.

GC: So that you're comfortable with it.

OR: That's absolutely true. They are. I feel exactly the same, though it might be because I'm thinking I wouldn't be able to do that.

GC: That's an interesting little connection. Do you think you are taking any risks in rehearsal, that you wouldn't take in another show?

OR: Yeah, I do find I'm quite open with Anthony. He's disarmingly honest about himself...It was only in the second week and we were all sort of – not in a wanky actor kind of way – telling each other out life stories and everyone was getting a bit emotional. That sounds fucking awful.

GC: it sounds like the first day of drama school mate.

OR: (Laughs) Yeah. But it wasn't though. And that's an unusual thing to do straight away with a cast of people that you don't know. Normally it takes a long time to build up to that. I think that's what you get with Anthony very quickly, in the room, as a company. Because I think he's so crazy. I mean he kind of leads from the front in that respect as well.

GC: There doesn't seem to be that distance that you might get with other directors. The hierarchical thing of; 'I'm the director, and you're the actor.' There's none of that.

OR: Yeah, I don't think there's an inequality. Because of Anthony's 'process' being quite unusual, you're very much with him during his creative process as well. And that's something that you're not always privy to with another director where you feel that you are the one that does the creative work, and they sit there and judge you. You're right there with him, you know.

GC: Think about this; other writers will take months and months, maybe a year or whatever. Anthony's writing this in four weeks. That's a fucking huge risk.

OR: Yeah, it's quite crazy. It's mental, and it's not in some pokey little fringe venue it's at the Royal Court. It's a brave thing. (Laughs)

GC: It's high risk, but I think that the rewards, potentially, are very, very large. That's what I think anyway. What do you do to deal with the risks involved in this type of show? If anything, or do you just come in and do your thing?

OR: (Pause) Part of me sort of hates the industry and hates being an actor. I don't hate acting, but I kind of hate everything about it.

GC: That's why I've taken a back seat with it to be honest with you mate. I've reached my bullshit level with it and I'm not prepared to take any more of it.

OR: Yeah. I find that hard. I have a lot of protective mechanisms in place anyway. But I feel that with Anthony...I feel that I've let my guard down a lot with him. They might come back up once we have an audience in and that's something I have to try and resist, taking too many precautionary measures. Because I will kind of undo the work that we've done. But I think thus far, there's not really been much of an issue.

GC: So you don't think there's much chance of that happening?

OR: I hope not. It's more likely to happen if the tech goes disastrously and I feel unprepared and terrified. Certainly by the time we've opened I hope that's gone.

GC: Yeah, I remember the first night of the one I did with Anthony was pretty scary. We didn't get to finish our tech and have a dress.

OR: We did that on *the Marat de Sade* as well. It is a bit nerve-racking isn't it.

GC: It certainly is. Do you enjoy taking risks as an actor?

OR: Yeah, I do, but I have to feel supported. I enjoy it very much in the room, I don't necessarily enjoy it on stage if it's for an audience that isn't on our side. I really hope they will be. I don't think that's saying anything revelatory, most shows are lifted with audience support.

GC: The audience add a whole new dynamic to a theatre production.

OR: Exactly.

GC: Because without an audience what you have is a rehearsal.

OR: Exactly, I do agree.

GC: Do you have a take on this saying that acting's all about risk? Does that mean anything to you?

OR: (Pause) I think maybe good stuff comes from not being that comfortable.

GC: That's an interesting point.

OR: That might signify that you're further from yourself. That you're going to a place that you wouldn't if you were faking it...Maybe it's about moderation as well.

GC: Calculated risk.

OR: Calculated risk, yeah. It can't just be crazy risk. (Both laugh)

GC: Running across no-man's-land naked into machine-gun fire.

OR: Some people would be up for it, but maybe not me. I mean it's brave and I admire it in a way. But I don't necessarily equate it with great acting; it's an experiment.

GC: I agree with you actually.

OR: But yeah', a certain amount of risk is a good thing.

GC: Just a few more quick ones. Does my presence here filming with the camera have any effect on you as a performer?

OR: No not at all actually. I've been really, really relaxed. It might well have done in a more formal setting, or if we were doing a traditional Shakespeare with some famous guy in the lead and everything was very serious and earnest; then I probably would have felt more off balance. But it just doesn't really feel like that in that room, you don't really feel judged. We even had a journalist in for a few days and I barely even noticed that he was in most of the time.

GC: Because what I'm here for is the 'process', not to make an evaluative judgement on how good people's acting is. It's to see how things are created, formed, made. That's what I'm here for.

OR: Yeah, yeah. It might have done when I was younger. I frankly couldn't care less what anybody thinks of me in a rehearsal room because it's the place for looking like an idiot. So no: not really.

GC: And finally just generally, do you have anything to add about Anthony's 'process' that we haven't covered, or anything that you want to add in general? I'm interested in what your own thoughts are.

OR: Anthony has a tendency towards...You know we were talking the other day and he was talking to me about what De Niro said about acting being about subtraction and not addition...Say that you want to play a psychopath you don't add some crazy look, or limp or whatever, you remove compassion, you remove bits of yourself that stop you from being that day to day. I find that sort of interesting because I feel with Anthony that he's trying to strip things away a lot. And he actively encourages you to throw away lines. He doesn't like vocal tricks, things like that. And it's a style of acting that I really like and I wish there was more of. I'm not saying that I do it amazingly well, but it's certainly the kind of acting that I really admire. So it's quite nice to do it. I always feel like I get a bit better when I work with Anthony.

GC: That's good. I found as well pretty similar things. I feel that after you leave drama school you spend a lot of time unlearning bad habits that you picked up there. That was my experience of it and I thought 'what am I doing?'

OR: Yeah, yeah. It's just not human is it? I finished drama school a couple of years ago and I went straight to the RSC. I was really lucky; I got a lead role in a big play. So they just went (Grimaces and makes grabbing action), you know. Massively! And I totally understand why. I guess I was a real liability, I was quite a risk, I had no proven track record or anything. It was quite an amazing thing to get. But I think it did a lot of damage actually, and it was a really formative job because it was my first one. And I'm actively trying to undo things and I'm grateful to get this chance to do it because he's got a good eye for that. He'll say 'you don't have to do it like that.'

GC: Yeah, because you're in a small space not the Cottesloe – no that's the National - ...you're in a small studio space.

OR: Yeah. So it's nice.

GC: That's great, thank you very much Olly.

OR: Not at all. I'm sorry I'm monged out.

GC: Don't be sorry, it was great.

Phil McKee Interview 2014

GC: Interview with Phil McKee about Anthony Nielson's work. Hello.

PM: Hello Cas.

GC: Ok mate, can we start? Could you talk me briefly through your experience of Anthony's rehearsal process?

PM: Ok. Briefly, I have done two plays with Anthony, *Stitching* and *Relocated*. One's a two hander, *Stitching*, and the other one was a cast of seven or eight...I think. Both pretty different, obviously one's a larger cast and the other, very much a very intimate little piece. But yes, *Stitching*, I mean at the start of everything, first meeting on *Stitching* was day one, Anthony came in, I'll never forget, with one page of dialogue. (Ends 0.58).

GC: (Laughs) Yeah? You're lucky you had one page?

PM: One page. I think he had a title...did he have a title? I think he might of had a title, an idea that I don't think he shared completely that time, but he has a lot of things going on in his mind though. What it could be? Where it could go? But generally, all the work I think, most of his plays he generally doesn't know where he's going to go. I think he gives a general idea, somewhere, a hazard, sort of you know, just stays for a long period of time. But he came in with one page of dialogue, which surprised both myself and Selena, who's done the play. And we start with one page of dialogue and I think...

GC: (Laughs) I am laughing for the record here.

PM: (Laughs) I think that initial page was the beginning of the couple talking but it was a long time ago now, so forgive me if I can't remember.

GC: No no no...

PM: Of them discussing about being pregnant and what to do about it. So, we worked on that. And I'm not sure how well formed it that was at that time actually. But, yeah, so we read that, read it over and over, read it over and over, tried it. Kind of discussed, you know, what we thought, what we thought, you know, initial reactions to that. First piece of dialogue and where we might see this play going and what we thought about the characters based upon that first page. So very much, for the first, actually for the first week we, he took that page home, he came back the next day I think with two pages. And then again Anthony came in and I think he came in with one page again, so one page of improvements, so it's constantly being edited as it's going along in terms of writing. And in a way, it's collaborative in the sense that he'll seem to suggest things that you have an idea, you have a response to what he's written, and he'll listen to your response and about how you're playing it. And obviously cast Selena and I specifically, which I think he does quite often cast actors specifically for who they are. The kind of person they are, the kind of qualities they will bring to the, you know the vague idea he has in his head. And I guess some plays are more, well-formed in his head than others I think. But, *Stitching*, I don't think he knew, I think he was wanting the two characters...to see in us what we were going to bring to it. And then from that, he would take our suggestions and ideas and then that would, you know, our suggestions would evolve in that way. And that went

on for a long period of time until day-by-day, pages, more pages. It's a very, very slow process, absolutely no improvisation...

GC: No improvisation for this one?

PM: No improvisation. At all.

GC: Wow! That's whole ideas of mine missing, but that's good.

PM: Apart from one section, which we, that Selena and I improvised, which was the...

GC: Is that when she calls you a kind of Scottish ginger guy, doo doo doo doo...

PM: I didn't think that was particularly...I think that was more of an ad lib than any set improvisation. But the idea that the physical segments, the physical sort of manifestations, sexual issues and emotional life. We worked with sequence, which physicalized that.

GC: We can talk about that a wee bit later on actually. I have some questions that pick up on that. If that's alright with you?

PM: Sure. Yeah.

GC: Ok. We can move on briefly. We can move on. That's good. Are there any specific qualities that Anthony's process exhibits? Such as you know, a non-linearity, a certain chaos element to it? I found watching it...you know...

PM: *Stitching* in particular? Or just generally?

GC: Just generally. Obviously how you work with them. Whatever you think.

PM: Chaos? (Laughs) Chaos. Well I think with Anthony's work, well certainly most actors who work with Anthony would say this, I mean, I think you've got to be careful not to get too attached to anything.

GC: Yes yes yes.

PM: At all really. Yeah, it's a mistake to get attached. And I think in a really good way, as well, that's why I respect his work so much. You basically, I mean, in *Relocated* we...I think I played a named character for the first one, thinking 'this is my character and this is what's going to happen'. Of course it changes every day, evolves and changed, was taken away, and became something else within the framework of what I thought was that character. I was no longer playing that character, and if I doubt he would exist any more, then it became something else, and morphed into often something else.

GC: Yes.

PM: And one of the actors who was playing the sequence, which actually there was an improvisation within that.

GC: Are we talking about *Relocated* now?

PM: Yes. There was some improvisation within that, and actually quite a lot of improvisation around the thickness of the sequence with the couple, and it didn't make the cut in the end, it morphed into something else. And then I was given that character to play for a week with one of the other girls. So there's a real crossover, and in a way it's something I haven't experienced with Anthony before, because obviously with *Stitching* there was just two of us.

GC: Yeah yeah. [...]

PM: I was always going to be playing Stuart. [...] I never thought I was going to be playing somebody else. In *Relocated*, that happened quite a lot, all the way through, which I think was great, because, as I say, don't get attached to something. You're instinct is to get attached to something...

GC: You're invested in it. You're invested in what you're doing.

PM: You think, 'I've got that character who I've got a handle on. I've got something to work with, something tangible, something to get my teeth into, I can really work with this. It can grow, it can develop.' GONE! And in a way that's brilliant, because it'll end up somewhere else. [...] I think he sees it as this jigsaw puzzle. You might be the centre piece of the jigsaw day one, then on day six you're the corner piece of the jigsaw, and then sometimes you turn it over and you realise it's actually a double sided jigsaw and you get another image on the other side. And now you're a part of something you didn't even know you were a part of. He cleverly weaves it together in this way. With *Relocated*, we all had our own ideas of what it was about, there were ten different variations of what people thought that it might be about. I had my strong idea of what it was and where I was going with it, but that shifted and changed several times. I was looking at the play from a different perspective, looking at what was going on.

GC: There seems to be an inherent a non-fixity to things?

PM: Yes, and of course I think that's deliberate. I think, there's an openness to Anthony's work...I think I speak for him when I say that there's a desire to approach theatre in a very open-ended way. [...] The actors don't know what they're going to do. They don't know what this is. It's spontaneous and non-structured, non-linear. So let's question all of that. Let's question the nature of structure, plays... And in every play I think he goes further, or he'll try something else.

GC: There's certainly a theme there, certainly in his later work anyway he does play about with the structure.

PM: *Narrative*, yes of course. Absolutely. Absolutely. With the whole thing, of course.

GC: Brilliant, thanks Phil. Ok...How much emphasis do you think Anthony puts on the subtext being discernible during rehearsals? Does that make sense?

PM: Yeah, I think so. Erm...

GC: For me, I've noticed that that's one of his things. The text sometimes takes a back seat to the subtext.

PM: Yeah, I think with *Stitching* in particular I think, we had reams. What Anthony does is, he writes a lot, overwrites a lot of stuff, in a good way. So you come in and you read a little monologue or whatever and then it'll be rehearsed all day. Then the next day, it'll be paired away, paired away, paired away. And obviously this is influenced by us times as well. [...] I remember having a particular response to this and thinking 'Oh my God, this is too much. This feels wrong.' That's what it felt on an emotional level to me. But, for Anthony, that monologue wasn't a finished product by any stretch of the imagination. Although it could have been, it was well-written enough, it could easily have been the end product. But it wasn't. And I kind of knew that, but my instinct was to say 'Oh my God, this feels like it should be less, that there's a lot of stuff that doesn't need to be said here. And Anthony obviously agreed. That's what he does, he churns out a lot of stuff, breaks it right down, pares it right down until it becomes nothing, that it doesn't exist or it's in one line. So, that whole speech disappears but it doesn't disappear if you know what I mean.

GC: Do you remember that happening in *Stitching*, and if so where? Where it pared right down to that (clicks finger)?

PM: Quite a lot of it I think. Quite a lot of it. But there was some stuff that had been written. It was more speeches.

GC: There's very few speeches in it. It's mostly dialogue.

PM: Yeah yeah yeah, but there was more of it, and it was pared down. As he watched, he would tell us what he realised and what was needed. And brilliantly he would come in with the absolute essence of it. Which was great, because as an actor, you come in and think it's genius. [...] As an actor you go through your own process when you read things and become attached to what he's written and then it's gone, or it becomes a line. But it's not gone, it's not gone, it's there. And that's the beauty of his writing. It's at its best when it's completely gone but it's not gone, it's in some other form.

GC: Yeah yeah. I've noticed this myself. In the *Narrative* rehearsals I've noticed this.

PM: He really writes in the direction the play is going. He knows what to get rid of and what to put in. So as the process goes on it becomes, I think it becomes clearer for him.

GC: (laughs)

PM: (laughs) It's clarity for the actors as much as it is for him.

GC: (laughs) Is it? I don't think that's true.

PM: It certainly was for us.

GC: So, it's one actor's dream versus another actor's nightmare?

PM: Yeah, well, it can be a bit of a nightmare. But I tell you what, genuinely I've never felt

as alive as I have felt in a rehearsal with Anthony...especially with *Stitching*, which was an incredibly intense experience.

GC: So, does failure have any part to play in Anthony's process?

PM: Failure?

GC: You've talked about this kind of paring things down, so, there's an element of failure there isn't there? This kind of 'it's not what I want. That's not what I want.'

PM: Yeah. You mean failure from his perspective?

GC: Well it's interesting that a lot of work that's rehearsed doesn't make it in, like you say. So there's this invisible step in order to get to that.

PM: I wouldn't use the word failure, to me that would be part of the shedding process. [...] I mean, he might see it as he's not getting through the way he would like, or reaching the place he wants to reach. [...] It is interesting when you use the word failure, because to me it's just shedding off what he thought might work and doesn't. So, if something doesn't work, it has to change. I don't think that's a failure.

GC: Ok. Ok. There does seem to be a fairly large amount of what can be perceived as waste in Anthony's process. What do you think of that statement? Do you think that's true?

PM: Waste? As in...

GC: As in material that doesn't get used.

PM: As I said when I last answered that last question, that's not waste. To me, that's process. Necessary process to get to where it needs to be, in order to get to the essence of something. So that, that's not waste. [...] You might look at that stuff that he's written and think 'God that's brilliant!' But actually, within the context of the finished article it's unnecessary, and has to be chucked.

GC: But do you think he always makes the right choices with his material? You might think it's really good stuff, but he gets rid of it. Do you think he always gets it right?

PM: Probably not. You know, probably not. His plays end up the way they end up. I think with Anthony, they could end up in many different ways. There's many ways all of his plays could go. Sometimes you have to sacrifice to get to the essence. But what in the end did you actually sacrifice? They're not perfect pieces of theatre, there's no perfection in there. It's a flawed, there's going to be flaws in there. He's not looking for a perfect finish. I don't think. "The perfect play", I don't think he's interested in that.

GC: I think that the actual words are secondary in some respects.

PM: In some respect, you're right, absolutely. He wants to get rid of as many words as he possibly can to make it the kind of theatre he wants to see.

GC: How does that affect you as a performer? Going through that whole process of being committed to stuff, then it going away, cuts coming, and then it eventually gets pared down. What effect does that have on you?

PM: I think because I started with *Stitching* as my first, my first performance, it didn't really have any effect, though it certainly was different to anything I've previously been involved in. And I found it intense and difficult and times. And I went through lots of doubt, my own self-doubt, and questioning what I was doing. Was I acting? Was I able to match the material?

GC: An incredibly small cast, adds to the intensity of that play.

PM: It was intense. Things were discussed, one word was discussed, the minutiae of several sequences. It was a very emotional experience for me and I think for Selina as well, because of the nature of the material. It was harrowing material. [...] I was using a lot of myself in there, a lot of my own experiences to base the material on. While the process is happening, it's evolving. I'm sure Anthony is picking from us and what we're bringing in. Looking into it, delving into it. But that is not necessarily where the plays going to end or what's going to ultimately happen, but it influences choices that you make, how the characters relate to each other. I think he is influenced by that. Especially in *Stitching* because it can't not be with only three of us. With *Relocated*, slightly less so, but he will go with things, you'll have plenty of freedom which is what I really like. Plenty of freedom to play, which I absolutely adore. I never feel like I better 'shake a leg' here, or 'get a move on' because, I feel I have the time, as much time as it'll take to do whatever is going to come up. You never know what is going to come up. A bit like Anthony, he doesn't know what's going to come up either.

GC: Good. Good. Ok. How would you assess your role in the development of the script?

PM: Ooh, my role in developing the script... (Laughs) It's a tricky one.

GC: Yes, we're getting into the tricky kind of stuff.

PM: It's tricky. All I can say is how I felt. Anthony obviously has his ideas of what he thinks the actors should change during the process. But I definitely felt I had influence on both plays. [...] He's not big on sitting down and having big long discussions about what the scenes about necessarily. He's more about letting the scene run and seeing how it evolves. Then the next time seeing where that goes, and then changing it up a bit. He might stick something another actor in, or he'll change your character. But he's not big on sitting, analysing with you. So anything, so any influence I would have had was in making suggestions, which he would or wouldn't take on board. I always felt heard. [...] I definitely feel the platform is there to play and change and add.

GC: Is it very democratic?

PM: I've always felt that, yeah, I've always felt that working with Anthony is incredibly democratic, which I love. Yeah, but it's his writing, it's always his writing. Anthony's the writer.

GC: I was going to ask you. How would define authorship in Anthony's process? Authorship can be many things.

PM: Again it's a tough one. [...] Because it is collaborative in so many ways, but a lot of unspoken ways I think. You're sitting in a room and there's intelligent folk sitting around discussing what has been written - where the play's going, where it's not, where we all think it's going - and it's all taken on board. Whether it influences his writing or not? I think, undoubtedly, suggestions are made, we'll suggest things to him and it'll follow in that way. Feelings about the subject matter come up and we'll discuss that. He's open to discussing the whys and wherefores of what it is he's written or why he's taken that particular direction. But there's also stuff that he doesn't want to discuss. There's stuff he keeps to himself. For instance, in *Relocated*, we didn't know what the ending was going to be, and I certainly didn't know what the ending was going to be. So I had no hand in guiding that. Well I say that, the character, morphed into something completely different, which I tried to make sense of in terms of the characters journey. I had a hand in getting him to that point. But I think Anthony already had in mind an ending or a couple of endings. He hadn't written them but he had an idea this character was going to morph into something else. I didn't quite know what that was until near the end. (Laughs) Till very near the end! That's how Anthony works. [...] You can't be faint hearted about these things. You've got to be up for it.

GC: You commit to it don't you? Got to absolutely blindly commit actually at times.

PM: Totally. Blindly committed at times or not.

GC: Or not commit?

PM: Or not. I mean he's up for the challenge. He's up for the discussion as well. But yeah, you've got to trust. And I guess I always remember beforehand: I do trust him. I trust him. I trust it's going to end up in a good place. I always find Anthony's plays incredibly interesting, and actually incredibly moving.

GC: They can be...

PM: I've always felt the emotional content in Anthony's plays and that's not talked about often.

GC: Yeah, no, cool, brilliant. You've touched upon this earlier, but, do you think that Anthony caters to the strengths of the performers as he sees it? And if so, how does he do this? How does he cater to actors strengths?

PM: I think he caters to the actor's strengths. I think he does actually. He does cater to the actor's strengths and he does this by his casting...but within the ever-changing world of his plays you're going to be one thing then suddenly two days later you're something else. And a week later, you thought you were that and you're not, you're something else. So he's changing because he's watching. He also watches pairings. When I was there and actors were bouncing off of each other, he saw the chemistry between particular actors, and that's something he is interested in. He's interested in the dynamic, and he'll go with that, he'll write a scene about that.

GC: About that?

PM: Yeah yeah yeah. Within the context of what he's writing.

GC: Of course within the context of the story.

PM: Not always of course, (laughs) because you never know!

GC: True!

PM: So he will play to the strengths of the actors. He also likes to challenge actors, he likes to challenge actors' safe places.

GC: He does.

PM: As an actor it's very easy to fall back on what you think you're good at, and avoid the things that you think you'll struggle with, that you think aren't your strengths. I think Anthony's interests are in pushing your boundaries a little bit, putting you in a less comfortable zone. You might try to get back to that comfortable zone, but he'll push you for the good of the piece. So he's not really interested in casting someone who gives a particular thing, because this is what they do. He's interested in messing with it a bit. And in messing with structure, he messes the structure for the actor. What that actor thinks they're good at or not good at. And obviously what you think and what he thinks is up for debate as well.

GC: And is he right?

PM: Well that's up for discussion. Discussions have been had in that area.

GC: (Laughs) I bet there has!

PM: Of course. But he's up for those discussions. Anthony's a great believer in an actors' first instinct, which I think is a big thing for Anthony. And, consciously or unconsciously, that's why in his plays - when he's rehearsing them, when he's writing them - it all happens quite late. Things are constantly changing and evolving. And that's partly to do with how he works in his process. That's how he needs to work to get the best out of himself. He trusts an actors' first instinct more than anything and I don't think he likes the idea of anything becoming stale, over rehearsed, or lacking of spontaneity or, in fact, an actor falling into that safe zone.

GC: (Agrees) No no, absolutely. Were there any specific ideas that you remember that you presented in rehearsals and ended up in the script?

PM: Oh, there's a question. Because it was so long ago. Any ideas?

GC: Any ideas? Anything like that?

PM: Yeah, I'm sure there were many in *Stitching* but just in the playing of things. I'm sure Selina and I both warmed into the characters to the point that we became incredibly as one with them. I wouldn't say we changed dialogue, we were just playful with some of it. We could change a mood and he was very open to all that...In *Relocated*, yes, the actors was doing things that were incredibly creative most of the time...And there was one particular sequence I had, with an actor where I think we were a couple. I get up in the middle of the night and I think she's at the refrigerator and I say, "What are you doing? What are you doing

at this time of night up at the fridge?” And she says, “Oh, I’m just getting a lunch”, so I then say “Oh, you’re looking a bit suspicious there.” A very simple little scene. But I think that I left a dangerously uncomfortable pause and then crept towards her in a very slow, deliberate way for a very, very long time. This was not scripted at all. But Anthony liked it and he kept it, he didn’t say anything, he just let it go.

GC: He just let it go.

PM: So it was up to me to have that ever appear again. In a way, I love that. It did appear, it appeared every night again. But variations of the theme. Within the context of the character and the piece it felt right.

GC: But did you actually nail down the dialogue with Anthony coming in going ‘this is your dialogue for this bit?’ Or did you just improvise it every night?

PM: No, there was no improvisation involved in that sequence either. That was more of a physical, was more of a physical unspoken moment that lasted a very long time. So the dialogue was there initially, but it was all in the pause and silence and the creepiness of it. The creeping towards, the physical intimidation and oddness of that moment.

GC: It’s something you just don’t get in stage directions is it?

PM: It wasn’t. I think that came to me because of what had been written. But I gave myself a freedom to be that way in that particular scene because I knew there was something odd about that particular moment. It could have just been a slightly odd moment, but we stretched out the awkwardness of it.

GC: You were adding spice to the moment?

PM: Well I was kind of, getting equally as much from it. So a little story was told just from him just letting us be free at that moment. And that kind of thing happened in *Relocated* a lot I think.

GC: Are you happy with the stage directions in that play?

PM: Actually yeah yeah. It might even say he creeps towards her like a mole. I mean maybe he did script it. I don’t know.

GC: Do you think that Anthony’s style of work encourages a certain type of acting? Is a certain style of acting required to do Anthony’s work?

PM: No.

GC: No? An emphatic no? (Pause) Anything else or can we move on?

PM: I don’t think it requires a particular style of acting. Because his plays are so (laughs) different. *Stitching* was the most sort of real/naturalistic play you could probably come across. Filmic almost. *Relocated* was slightly odd.

GC: No, cool, that’s good.

PM: You just need to be open to whatever his plays throw up really.

GC: Did you learn something about your acting from that?

PM: Yeah oh God I'm sure...I'm sure I went through a list of crises of confidence in *Stitching*, mainly because it's the first time I'd been rehearsing a play that I didn't know.

GC: You didn't know anything. You didn't know who your character was.

PM: I didn't know what I was doing. So I had to trust fully in Anthony and Selina that we were going to arrive at that together. So I didn't even know if what I was doing was pitched correctly. And I felt slightly insecure about that... scared even when I think, about those moments. And not knowing anything about the characters, if they're a particular way at certain points. Whether you're to play it differently. Especially when you're in a two-hander...I guess that maybe at the time I felt it could have gone a particular way but it didn't. So no, I was open to the process. As the process developed I was getting more and more open to Anthony, and trusted Anthony and the process more and more.

GC: And the fact that there's only two people in it...how tense that must be?

PM: It was incredibly tense. And actually at the end of the day of rehearsals, there was very little we could say to each other afterwards. It was an intense process, and so was the material. When you've only got a certain amount of material, and you're missing vital chunks, some things, when you take them out of context, become slightly more disturbing. When there's no obvious reasoning for what you're doing you have to really hang in there, and trust. Otherwise it messes with the map that you make for your character.

GC: Yeah. When stuff is taken away, it just totally fucks up your way of thinking. That's when you really need to just commit to it.

PM: Absolutely and when you don't know what's going to happen, that's when you're really trying to be in the present of something. Because you're not thinking, because you don't know what the next page will be, you don't know what you're going to say next, or say in the next scene. So you don't know if the scene that you're playing is actually bearing any resemblance to the next scene. So in a way you're more in the moment than you would be in any other play that's not Anthony's stuff. Because, as an actor you've not got your head at the ending, at all! Because you haven't even got your head in what's going to happen to you in the next scene.

GC: You've not even got the journey.

PM: You don't know who you're going to be speaking to, you don't have any of it. So in a way, you're right in the moment more than you would be in any other play, because your actor's head isn't going 'Oh yeah yeah, I know that because then he does that.'

GC: It's almost like a mini play isn't it? In itself? A unit.

PM: Yeah. Absolutely.

GC: Ok, cool cool. Do actors have to do more than just act when they work with Anthony?

PM: It's not conventional in the sense that you would walk into a room with the director and you would all sit down and do a read through of the play. And you would all say 'Oh marvellous, what an amazing play. Ooh look at the set! Isn't it so beautiful?' There's none of that. There's no first day nonsense of going through blocking in a very conventional way - it doesn't exist. Certainly on day one, it was dead slow, we just sat and we talked about that one page, for three days.

GC: I suppose this is the kind of thing I was talking about when I mentioned the 'waste' thing, earlier on, you know. All sitting about talking...all that arseing about that gets done.

PM: You could say 'There's too much arseing about go and write the play, Anthony.' (Laughs). You could say that. [...] At certain points when the heat is on and the stress is on you kind of think, 'WRITE THE PLAY! GIVE ME A CHARACTER!' But actually, in those three days of hanging out, even just rehearsing a scene once is enough. Talking about it, doing another wee bit, giving him time to go off and play. Yes, because it's such a different process, it requires something different from an actor, not just acting. It's such a different world to inhabit as an actor. It's unlike any other experience with any other director. So you have to adapt, and think 'Oh right. Oh so, I'm not on all day, every day, having to be on with my character and discuss what's going on and analyse this sequence or whatever'...you know what I mean, motivations and actions, there's none of that. So there's stuff going on within all that. And yes, there's stuff there's that's probably waste. But actually, when you put it all together, there's all those things. There is something within those things which Anthony will find of interest to him and he'll take it away and make a mental note. So it does require a slightly different approach and is a slightly less conventional way of rehearsing.

GC: Do you think the actors have a lot of direct input on the script or do they have more of an influence indirectly?

PM: I think the actors influence...indirectly...Not directly at all.

GC: Can you explain that a wee bit?

PM: It's indirect in the sense he's just going to pick from bits and ideas from what you're doing. He won't enter any conventional dialogue of what you think you should say or what you think. There's no, 'Oh no, I think this play should do this', there's none of that. There will be dialogue, there will be discussion, we will discuss the content of the play, the material, but indirectly, I would say. Anthony will put it together using whatever influences have been around him that day or that moment. I don't think it's a direct influence like an actor saying, 'Oh no I don't think the play should be this. I think we should do this with it. This feels wrong.' I don't think he deals in that kind of language, at all.

GC: Ok cool. How would you define truth in acting?

PM: Truth in acting? (long pause) I feel much more exposed in Anthony's plays than I felt in any other play. And therefore in a way, it's back to that thing: being in the moment. And kind of working off the seat of your pants in that moment and not quite, not quite being in control of the material, even when you know it. Because in some of the plays, you'll know the material better than others, it doesn't change as much. I suppose it's that sense of being in the

moment, that's where the truth is. In terms of from an acting perspective it's just playing the scene, playing the moment, between two people, three people.

GC: So it's a feeling, an instinct? Or is it an intellectual thing do you think?

PM: No no, it's not an intellectual thing. As soon as you're in there, as soon as you're in your head, you're out of it I think. I'm not saying we don't engage with our heads of course we engage with all of those things all of the time. I think that, as an actor you're going to be in that moment or not. I mean if you're not in the moment that's usually your head and you're thinking other things and you're not quite in the zone of being in the scene, or believing what you're talking about. If you don't believe it yourself, don't expect anyone else to believe it... With Anthony's plays you're very often genuinely in the moment because genuinely you haven't had time to over-analyse it or use your wee tricky bits. So whatever it is, the wee things that make you feel comfortable, your safe places... your own process, the actors process, you can't really use. It's a safe place to be, we all do it as actors, find that safe place where you feel comfortable. For whatever reason, whatever insecurity that's making you need to have these safe places... But if you're truly in the moment, in a truthful moment in any play you've got to be present with your every sinew of your being. And Anthony's writing is that on many levels .

GC: Ok, brill... you said earlier you didn't do any improvisations in this one but, were there any improvisations that you did in *Relocated* that you feel had an effect on the text? Or even *Stitching*, if there was something improvisational that came up? Not necessarily a structured improvisation.

PM: Well there was a coming together, a sort of sexual coming together which happened spontaneously between myself and Selina We just went for it and got a bit bloodied at the time. It was just a manifestation of their pain really and their grief all rolled into this particular sequence. And there was all sorts of ugly stuff going on, which was messy and exposing. Exposing not just as the characters but exposing as an actor, within that. This is a particular sequence where I think Selina had a dildo and I sucked a dildo for quite a long time. I think I could have been in the moment there. If you've got a dido in your mouth, then you've got to go with it or you're going to go 'Nah, I can't do this.' But I actually think, to be fair, it became a running joke because I, I think I said for the first couple of days 'Yeah, I know there's a dildo in my mouth , but we'll do that bit later.' But actually, in the moment, and in the sequence when they came to do it I didn't even think about it. I think our friends probably thought it was probably quite amusing that I had the dildo in my mouth and I was going at it with great gusto. In that moment, that felt right very real, real and very honest and very damaged and all sorts of things. So that sequence was suddenly improvised and the idea of the sequence itself got a bit funny there. I think it might have said that they come together in a something embrace, I can't remember. So it was, it was not wholly improvised by Selina and I; the choreography of it was improvised by Selina and I and we went for it first couple of times and got a bit messed up. And then we thought well we've got to work through this scene and work it out technically, so we don't get hurt. The emotional damage had been done by that point, any physical damage was yet to come every night...

GC: For the next three months.

PM: Yeah, exactly! Yeah.

GC: Ok mate, cool. Do you think improvisations can be used to clear away material? To purge material? Have you encountered aspects of that?

PM: I don't recall any of it in *Stitching*. We might have touched on it in *Stitching*, particularly troublesome sequences that we were all struggling with, to make sense of. I think we might have. Certainly it's not a, not a thing that Anthony's particularly interested in. Although I believe he has in other plays. In *Relocated*, there's one particular sequence... (laughs) I think it was about the spelling of the word, a sequence where a character was talking about goat's cheese.

GC: Goats cheese?

PM: I said goat's cheese. Goats apostrophe 's' cheese. Goatssss apostrophe cheese. A very very funny, funny sequence. I remember being on the floor. I wasn't involved in this, it was another actor. It was brilliantly improvised (laughs). The goat's cheese, the goat's cheese was in there I think. But I think the actors ran with it but Anthony didn't say, pointedly, 'Let's improvise this and see where it goes with the goat's cheese.' And it was incredibly, incredibly funny. The goat's cheese sequence, I thought was just the funniest, one of the funniest things... It was Monty Python. But it went! Didn't make the cut!

GC: It didn't make the cut? I was going to say that I don't remember that bit.

PM: It didn't make the cut.

GC: Right.

PM: It was probably the only scene in any of Anthony's plays that I've been involved in, that I think I should have gone up to him and said, 'Anthony mate, you've got to keep the goat's cheese.' (laughs). And that's what the beauty of his process. Yeah it was lovely, but taken out of context it was unnecessary. It was superfluous. It was not part of what that fight was going to be. And that's brilliant. That's brilliant. I hope he uses it somewhere else! (laughs).

GC: Ok brilliant. Let's talk about spontaneity. How was the dialogue in *Stitching* created? Did Anthony just go away and write it and come up with it day after day?

PM: Yes pretty much.

GC: Pretty much? That's the way he wrote it. He just came in with it?

PM: I think occasionally, he would go off over lunch time and come back with something. There was a difficult sequence we were trying, that we were all struggling with. We didn't know why it wasn't working, we didn't know why it wasn't scanning quite the way it should have. And he'd go away, flesh it out and come back with some other variations of it. But generally speaking he would go away and spend probably all night writing, until five in the morning, six, or later actually. Which is why we don't start rehearsals till maybe midday; this is quite common.

GC: Aye aye, that's quite normal. That's quite normal.

PM: Quite normal for Anthony because he'd been up all night just writing writing writing. Writing writing writing. So yeah, so that's how he worked on *Stitching*. So it was a slow process for *Stitching* because there was just two of us. So it wasn't as if we could come in and actors can go off and work on different sequences. It was just Selina and I. So it was slow and laborious, going through it.

GC: It was a grind?

PM: It was a grind, it was intense experience, *Stitching*. Because it's his baby as well, you know.

GC: Yeah, intense.

PM: I don't think Selina and I quite come out of that world of the play until about three weeks into the run it was that intense. People were, appalled by it, and absolutely, in floods of tears because they were so moved by it. It was interesting times. And engaging for members of the audience. People were saying 'why, why?' One guy said to me once 'Why, why did you... why did you make me feel like that? Why did you make me feel like this?' I said, I remember saying, 'well how are you feeling?' They said, 'I'm just feeling angry, I'm angry at that play, I'm angry at you, I'm angry... And I said, 'Well I'm not making you feel like that.' He said 'What should I feel? I'm angry, you're making me feel angry. But what should I feel? What am I meant to feel?' So it bought a lot of interest. Difficult.

GC: Cool. Ok cool. Not much more Phil. How did random conversations feature in the formulation of an Anthony script?

PM: (laughs) Actually, I don't know. During the process?

GC: During the rehearsal process. I've noticed that anything goes. Whether it be on a lunch break, whether it be at the pub afterwards.

PM: That's true, that's true, that's true.

GC: You can be talking to him about something that happened to you on the way to rehearsals.

PM: That's true. That's true. He's constantly on alert for a gag, or a piece of business. You know how he is. (laughs) He's got a very, very funny, childlike, sense of humour. He loves it. I think there was (laughs) one particular sequence in *Stitching* where we were talking about a very harrowing sequence about a bush, this woman's bush and Anthony cracked up laughing in the rehearsal and he said in a very funny (laughs) funny voice, 'But we're at the Bush. We're at the Bush'. And we laughed a lot, it was a ridiculous little moment.

GC: Ok, ok. Nearly finished. Ok, we've talked a wee bit about these cuts that you were talking about. Was there a lot of material that you created and rehearsed that ended up cut from the final script?

PM: Yes. Yes. In *Stitching* not so much because, daily, in *Stitching* it really was fine tooth combed all the way through. At most it was a day or two and then it would go. There were variations, but the essence of it was pretty much sorted out within a couple of rehearsals, a

day or two. He realised, we realised, what wasn't quite scanning or working or whatever. He felt the aim was to get the right direction for the characters to go in, or to relate it in a different direction. In *Relocated* there was probably quite a few sequences like the 'Goat's Cheese' sequence...

It still existed within the play, but at the very end the sequence got removed. A whole sequence was added very close to the end in *Relocated*.

GC: So what function did these cuts fulfil do you think? What function did the cuts fulfil?

PM: I think the nature of Anthony's process is as he's going along, he will cut things..., like the 'Goat's Cheese' for instance... That was out of nowhere it seemed, he probably watched that improvisation and thought 'Yeah this is good, this is good. But, maybe we shouldn't get caught up in this... is it dominating too much?' I don't think he's afraid of sticking in stupid gags like 'Goat's Cheese' type... But for some reason he thought that this particular sequence just didn't fit the way he thought it was going to go. I think possibly it stayed in for as long as it did because he was working on other bits, and thought 'Do you know what? I now see this going elsewhere. I need to take that and put something else in that best fits with how I now this play going, where I now see these characters going.' But that very much showed in *Relocated*, because he didn't really cut chunks of dialogue, it was the characters who were changing. Characters were being removed.

GC: So, what effect does that have on you as a performer? That kind of thing.

PM: That's tricky, that's kind of anxiety provoking. I remember... I think it was about a week and a bit in, maybe two weeks in and I thought I was playing a particular character, until another actor came in to take over... And then suddenly I find myself watching him playing the guy I've been playing for the last week and a half, and of course I thought 'Maybe I'm not quite getting that character right.'

GC: Yeah yeah, that's inevitable.

PM: I've got to admit, it didn't take long, within a couple of seconds I think, to realise that's not how Anthony functions. He's obviously now linking that guy with the other guy he's been playing. So there is a method in the madness.

GC: A knock on event.

PM: I quite liked that wee scene.' Now, you know, you're becoming attached, you're becoming attached, I liked that scene, I enjoyed that. So you have to remove yourself from that. **(Ends 1.00.48)** Get out of that and just go with the flow. And leave yourself open to whatever is going to come, because there's going to be a lot of it to come.

GC: (agrees) Well that's what I was thinking. How does it feel at the end if you do get something added on at the eleventh hour? Because that's happened to me you know.

PM: Yeah and to me in *Relocated*. I mean that was difficult because it was close to the wire. But it was something that Anthony talked about from the beginning actually; the nature of this character that was going to come in and the big, the big finale. It was about four days before. In the end it was fine, but it was difficult initially because there's a lot going on near the end of the process when you're just about to go up So yeah, it's very difficult adding that

on. But actually in the end it was brilliant. I was a brilliantly written couple of pages.

GC: Are you talking about the Joseph Fritzl character?

PM: Yeah yeah, exactly. I played the Joseph Fritzl character who'd kind of morphed from a mild-mannered janitor character from early on. There were a few oddities which are the oddities I mentioned earlier on. It's going to be a little bit funny because it's all in someone's head anyway... So yeah, it was difficult initially but absolutely right in the end. So I'm very grateful for that.

GC: Marvellous. Marvellous, only a couple more left. Do you think that there are ever any issues between the technical requirements of the show and Anthony's process? Because sometimes the script sometimes can be so loose. They need specific cues and all this kind of stuff.

PM: Yeah yeah, that's true.

GC: Scene changes and all these kind of things.

PM: The two plays I did with Anthony was the same lighting guy.

GC: Saheine?

PM: Yeah, Saheine, in both productions. And he's worked in with him countless times. So there was no tension there whatsoever, other than the usual, people are tired, maybe working for twenty-four hours and stuff. The stage manager has to be on their toes because there's constant changes...

GC: That's what I'm talking about.

PM: They were great, having to deal with such a lot, because things were changing on a daily basis and minute-by-minute basis. Things were constantly shifting and evolving. So yeah, that's the difficult bit, of course it is. So, you're looking for a team to be as flexible and open as the actors are. And yes of course, there are times in there where it's going to get fraught, and it's going to get difficult, and there's going to be unhappy campers. But that's the same in any process. Anthony's process is no different to any other process in that regard. If you're an actor who's never worked in this process before, you might get a shock. You can go, 'Oh my God. What's going on?' And even if you're an actor like me who has worked with him before, there's still a shock when you get something close to the wire, and so on. So, no I wouldn't say there's an inordinate amount of tension.

GC: Ok. To what extent do you agree that the ends justify the means of producing a show?

PM: Depends what the means are doesn't it. I can only speak from my experience of Anthony's plays, and I would say in both those plays the ends justified the means. In *Relocated* there were times in there where we didn't know who we were playing, where we were going, whether we were going to be playing that sequence, or if Anthony was going to come in tomorrow with something written? There's always that. The occasional day off will happen because he needs to recharge or he needs to just bash something out. That's his process, that's just how he works, and it's when he's at his best. It doesn't always fall that it's

where everyone else is going to be at their best. So there's going to be tension for everyone. And it's back to that idea all about wasted time. Although, ultimately I think the ends justify the means.

GC: Ok, yep, cool. Ok, and just finally Phil, or semi-finally, just generally, what is your personal take on Anthony's process of rehearsal?

PM: Well Anthony's process is collaborative in the sense that he's open to actors suggestions, ideas, and everything they bring as an actor and. That influences his writing, it influences his plays, and requires an openness from the actors and from Anthony. Anthony's a great believer. So I think his process, reflects that. I think Anthony believes there's something positive in the process and yeah I think there is too. There are times in there when you think 'What? What's going on? What are we doing? What? Who? What? Why is this back...?'

GC: Yeah, there's nothing fixed in it.

PM: There's nothing fixed. Nothing tangible. And in a way that's the beauty of it. And that's the difficulty of it at the same time. So, like most things in life, it's a contradiction.

GC: A paradox?

PM: Yeah, exactly. And there's a conflict there. These things exist at the same time.

GC: Good good. I think that as well. And just finally, is there anything you would like to add or say that we haven't covered or anything at all. Not necessarily...

PM: Well, just one thing. I think Anthony believes in, as I do, that if you don't walk out of a theatre feeling something there's something wrong.

GC: Experiential? He's big on the experiential.

PM: Yeah yeah yeah. Absolutely. That's a very emotional sort of word there, you're right. He wants to move people, he wants to create an experience with people not just coming out after watching a thing and being cerebrally stimulated. It's out of the head and in the heart ultimately.

GC: Ok, brilliant. Thank you very much Phil. We'll leave it there at 1.09, a new record.

Selina Boyack Interview 2014

GC: Hi Selina thanks for doing this. Just very quickly, could you talk me through Anthony's process from your perspective; what you remember of it?

SB: I suppose it's quite a difficult one to answer because in some ways it felt that there wasn't a process with Anthony. It felt very casual. And I suppose I can only really talk about *Stitching* because that's the only one I did with him. The one I did with him at the National Theatre was a scratch project, it wasn't quite the same, although there were similarities. I think his process is quite private, he sort of operates under this guise of being collaborative.

GC: Interesting.

SB: Which he sort of is. It might have been very different on *Stitching* because I know that his style changed very much after *Stitching*. But when we were working on *Stitching* he was very much in the more linear narrative style. He hadn't seen gone into his weird fantasy mode. His kind of surreal stuff.

GC: Yeah, his *Dissocia* and *Realism*.

SB: Do you want the nuts and bolts of what we did every day?

GC: (Laughs) No, not every day.

SB: (Laughs) I'll give you one day and sum it all up. It was very casual, we would go in and you would talk a lot about the play he wanted to finish up with and what his interests were in exploring. In *Stitching* he was particularly interested in exploring a backwards narrative. So that was his thing at that time: betrayal and similar to *Don't Look Now* and the information you get at the end makes you replay the whole.

GC: Yeah.

SB: So more than theme or anything, that was what he was interested in, the structure and the storytelling trick is what he was interested in. And the process was him trying to make that work. So we talked a lot, we didn't improvise; there was little or no improvisation.

GC: That's really interesting actually.

SB: So me and Phil would arrive at about 11 o'clock in the morning and Anthony would roll up about 12. We'd talk and he would... We'd all talk about ideas, thoughts about our characters, who they might be, where they might have come from, background narrative. And then he'd go away and write some scenes and he'd come back and we would rehearse. But we worked a very short day. We'd do a lot of, you know, nothing; we did a lot of nothing.

GC: I want to talk to you about that; the waste factor.

SB: Yeah. But that's part of his process, and that suited us fine. (Both laugh)

GC: Ok. Cool, cool, cool. It sounds like the message, or the idea that he's trying to explore, perhaps even the subtext is something that seems very important to Anthony. How much of an emphasis do you think he puts on the subtext being discernible during rehearsals rather than the actual dialogue or action of the play?

SB: I suppose again, with *Stitching*, it was... because he was playing with this narrative trick. So what I know is that we lots of conversations towards the end of the process about what the audience knew and what they didn't know. What was revealed to them and what wasn't, and when. An, so in terms of him playing with subtext it was more difficult to discern because of the trickery of the structure. And through the slippage of information how you would get subtext. But how much he was aware of that, or in control of it I'm not sure. But I suppose what was undeniable at the end was how powerful it was. And I only say that because of what it did to the audience and how affected they were by it.

GC: You must have felt yourself though, that it was a powerful thing.

SB: Actually, not so much. I remember just before we started performing it there were real questions about whether it was even going to work. And it was only after the audience started having such a strong reaction to it that we were aware that it had worked, that it had power. *It's an interesting question about Anthony about how much he is aware about it, about how much he is in control of it. How much it is somewhat accidental.*

GC: Yeah things just seem to happen or not happen. They just seem to happen towards the end, they either come together or they don't. That's what I've noticed.

SB: Yeah. There's a theory that says that's to do with panic and that through fear and the panic of not being prepared or ready you get from your company, or get from yourself, an adrenalin, an energy that feeds the audience. I suppose you'd have to research future productions of his plays to see whether they have a similar power due to that heated rehearsal process.

GC: That's good. Excellent. We'll talk about that waste now. There does seem to be a large amount of what I would describe as waste in Anthony's process. What do you think about that? Do you think this is true?

SB: Yeah I do. But again, I think it's important, I think it's part of his process if he has one. And therefore, you can't really call it waste. He moves things along at his own pace, just the same way all directors and writers do. Some work incredibly fast so you can't keep up, and in others, like Anthony, there seems to be all this space.

GC: I just remember sitting there with the clock going tic toc, tic toc.

SB: It's because he's writing it as he goes along, as you're all going along. And as you know the writing process is long and torturous and most writers do that privately in their own time. Whereas with Anthony we are all invited to be involved in this process. (Both laugh)

GC: Yeah, because you're in rehearsals every day, all day. You don't get calls or anything, whether they're rehearsing your scene or not. Sometimes you just sit there all day and you don't really do anything.

SB: Yeah, I know. Although the one at the Royal National Theatre was more like that. It was a much larger company and I did have calls. But again, that was less structured because it wasn't going towards a performance. I'd just bugger off for a couple of hours to the shops. So I didn't mind so much because we were on the South Bank.

GC: Ideal. It's quite a nice place to hang out.

SB: Yeah. So it didn't bother me. And maybe because I knew this was part of the deal.

GC: Yeah. It must be very strange for first-timers who don't really know what they're getting in to.

SB: Well yeah. If you're expecting a rather normal rehearsal process and you walk into organised chaos.

GC: (Laughs) Or just chaos.

SB: Or just chaos (Laughs). Yeah, you're right, forget the organised.

GC: (Laughs) I think organised is overstating it a bit. Ok, how did that waste element of it... I know you're saying it's not necessarily waste, but let's call it that for the moment. How did that affect you as a performer? Did it have any effect on you?

SB: I don't think so. No. I don't remember feeling, anxious, or worried, or annoyed by it.

GC: Ok then, frim answer. How would you define authorship in Anthony's process?

SB: (Pause) He's a thief. He steals from people. But, again, as an actor you learn the hard way that that's part of the deal. You will give parts of yourself and ideas that you have, information that you have. And you realise that often you give it up for nothing. But that's part of being an actor, being a piece of meat that is replaceable. I suppose you have to take responsibility. If you want authorship you have to be the one that stands up and put your name on something and doing the hard work of putting it on paper and getting it on. So it's fair enough.

GC: Were there any ideas that you presented in rehearsals that ended up in the script?

SB: Yeah, I guess there were lots. Not big structural things, but there were discussions that went on. Again, as I say, towards the end there were quite heated debates about what the audience knew and what they didn't and how that was affecting the performance. But he wouldn't budge.

GC: He wouldn't budge?

SB: No he wouldn't budge. So I felt there were a lot of people who came out of *Stitching* who didn't get it at all. And therefore, I felt that, as a performer, I was putting myself through such a rigorous process for nothing. And in that way I felt slightly cheated. Anthony, with a little tweak of information, could still have this effect of this surprise but you could make it clearer so that almost everyone got it. And I wouldn't feel that I'm knocking my pan out for this interesting experiment. But that was me being slightly younger and I suppose more egotistical about my work. Maybe now I'd approach it slightly differently, with a slightly more hands off, heart off way.

GC: I have to say though that it's a two-hander and it's such an intense thing. And you Anthony and Phil are all friends. And to be locked together in this little thing for all that time. That must have been difficult.

SB: Yeah it was. And considering how it could have gone badly wrong it went very well I thought. None of us really fell out that much; me and Phil did towards the end of the performance. Originally Anthony wanted a real couple.

GC: (Laughs) They wouldn't have been a real couple by the end of that play.

SB: No they wouldn't because me and Phil were not friends by the end of it. We couldn't see each other for about six months after it.

GC: I can understand that actually.

SB: It just sort of degrades you in some way. And knocks some chunks off you. So it takes a bit of time to repair that.

GC: So do you think that Anthony's process of doing things is sometimes at odds with the actor's process of getting their performance?

SB: I would say that of most directors, or a lot of directors. Particularly author/directors. I've worked with Suspect Culture and it's a similar thing that, again, you think it's collaborative, and it is collaborative to a certain point. Ultimately you will be overruled. And, again, probably at the time you're not aware of it until you get hurt, or you get angry because you think that your way is probably better and they're not listening to you. And then you go 'Of course they're not listening to you, they're the director, it's their theatre company, it's their name on the play.' You're not in that pecking order.

GC: No, you're not part of the equation are you?

SB: No.

GC: You're there to provide little things that they'll go away with. It's tiny little details that they're after.

SB: Yeah, and if it chimes with them great, they'll take it. I used to fight for things because I thought it was a more collaborative process than it actually is. And I suppose if I've learned anything, I've learnt that nobody will ever thank you for that. They will only ever remember you as being difficult.

GC: I've suffered from that as well actually. I get that as well.

SB: They go 'Oh well, she's good, but she's actually a bit difficult in rehearsals' because you keep fighting for something you believe in. But no one's fucking interested, 'Just do your job, learn your lines and don't bump into the furniture', to a certain extent.

GC: I agree. I agree. So how would you assess your role in the development of the script?

SB: I find that quite difficult to answer because it was such an opaque process. Well it felt opaque at the time; casual. I really wouldn't have a clue. You would have to ask Anthony, because I have no idea how much. I feel very little. Any other actor or any actress and it would have ended up the same play.

GC: Do you think so?

SB: Pretty much. She may not have been called Abby because I chose her name. (Both laugh) And of course I know that there are details in there on a very specific personal level.

GC: Of course there are.

SB: But they're very small details. And how much that actually informs or changes the piece I wouldn't have a clue about.

GC: Ok, cool. To what extent do you feel that you created the character? Was she your invention?

SB: I don't know. I certainly don't feel any affinity or attachment to her any more so than any other part that I've played. But then I haven't ever seen it again. I re-read it once and I actually found it too difficult to re-read it. So maybe that means that I'm more in it than I have any knowledge of.

GC: Reading it I can see you in it.

SB: I can't. I just see lines that could be spoken by anybody. But I do know that Anthony is manipulative and he will almost draw a veil over you to get something. (laughs) He's a twisted magician who will take a tiny part of your soul but then make you forget that he's done that. (Both laugh)

GC: That's a good way of putting it. So do think that Anthony in his writing caters to what he sees as the strengths of his actors?

SB: He does, yeah. Very much yeah. He's very particular about his casting. So yes, he must have very specific tones or qualities clearly in mind.

GC: Did you feel he was writing specifically for you when you were doing *Stitching*?

SB: I didn't, as I say, because I thought he was so much more interested in his structural game than that was his main objective. That was what he was really focussing on. It was not so much a character exploration. He was much more interested in exploring the narrative gameplay.

GC: He did a similar with his play that I filmed *Narrative*. He wants to explore this topic and the actors as the vehicle that explores it. It's not even about dialogue. You could say what you want pretty much. Was it like that in *Stitching* in any way?

SB: Yeah, I suppose it was exactly that. The nuances of the structure of the sentence was not of any interest to him at all.

GC: Yeah. He's not really interested in that.

SB: Yeah, the language. I know that a lot of other writers focus on each choice of words, commas, and that's very important. You're right, Anthony couldn't be less interested.

GC: He's not interested in what you say unless it jars with him. Unless it's wrong.

SB: Yeah, yeah. Unless it's very wrong. It's more about the story arc and the structure and the narrative.

GC: Excellent. How much of yourself did you put into that role?

SB: I guess a lot I probably shouldn't have. (Laughs) I don't know...I don't know how to answer that.

GC: Ok. So do you think actors have to do more than just act when they work with Anthony?

SB: (Pause) I've got to think about this.

GC: By all means, thinking is good.

SB: I don't know. I don't know whether he in some way wants you to think that you are more than just an actor. When in fact, actually, that's really all you are. Maybe more so than other director's rehearsal room. And again, whether he does that intentionally or whether that's just a casual thing I don't know.

GC: Other actors have said that they're a sounding-board for his ideas. Some have even said about being a co-author at certain parts. I just wondered if you feel anything like that? Not necessarily those ones, but something else? (Pause) No, well that's interesting if you felt that when push came to shove that's what it was.

SB: I don't think so...I mean these things are difficult to know because when I worked with him it was a long time ago before he worked with bigger companies. And it was just me and Phil, me and Phil and Anthony. It wasn't at the Royal Court, it wasn't at the National Theatre of Scotland. It just felt like a more friendly process. So I suppose at the time I felt very much part of the creative process, the collaborative process because there were so few of us and it felt like we were informing it, shaping it in ways that we may not have been even aware of. But I hesitate to put too much on that because I also know that he was interested in and he can explore that with whoever.

GC: Yeah, ultimately he's going to go away and write whatever the fuck he wants to write anyway.

SB: Yeah. Yeah of course.

GC: There doesn't have to be any universal consensus at all. Because my experience of working with him is completely different. I did *Hooverbag* with him, one of his unpublished plays and to be honest, I'll put it on tape, 'I didn't have a good time with you Anthony'. (Selina laughs). Well, I didn't. I found it really, really difficult actually, and really, really exposing and vulnerable and frustrating. It was great how things ended up, we got a good show at the end of it. But I was very upset all the time actually.

SB: If I was upset at all, it was later when I wasn't enjoying it. And I wouldn't say that I was upset. But if I felt something uneasy it was much later.

GC: Did you feel prepared when you walked out on to the stage for the first time? Were you ready to go on?

SB: No. No, it was total madness. And worse at the National Theatre one the scratch performance. Because we weren't even supposed to be off the book, it was a **scratch performance** and they fully expected us to have scripts in hand.

GC: He didn't let you go on with a script?

SB: No, because he wanted us off the book. So he made us all learn a massive script really late. I mean, I didn't have so much to do, but Jo who was the main guy in it, he was going off his nut with stress about the amount he had to learn in three days.

GC: I was the same Selina. I sat for three weeks in rehearsal and did nothing. He hadn't written my part yet and we got to the Friday night and we were up on the Tuesday and we were teching all weekend and I hadn't said a word, I hadn't done anything yet. We had a big chat in the pub, it was a heated chat shall we say. And he said just go 'up the road' and give me a breakdown of your character and we'll work something out. I came in and I'd just wrote a lot of nonsense and that's what I ended up playing. (Selina laughs long and hard) Seriously! And I had to invent all this tai chi stuff by myself and do it because he'd written it in. And we were about to start teching on the Saturday. We hadn't run the show, I hadn't done my part. He came in on the Sunday and he'd written all this stuff and, you know, we were on on the fucking Tuesday.

GC: Yeah, well that's Anthony going 'Well you asked for something, there you go'.

GC: Yeah, thanks for that man. Thanks Anthony. I found it difficult, I found it very difficult.

SB: He has such different effects on different people. It's extreme and I suppose that's part of his charm.

GC: (Laughs) Part of his charm. Ok, how would you define truth in acting? (Pause) For the record Selina's screwing up her face and going 'OOH EEOOUUGH'. This is one of these terms which is undefinable, but I'd really like to hear what you think it is.

SB: Well I know what it's not because I watch other actors and it sounds fake and hollow. I don't know what their process is and I'm sure I sound like that myself sometimes. There's a hollowness and fakeness that can happen if you're not connecting to what you're saying and you're not clear about why you're saying it.

GC: You can't commit to it if you don't know what you're committing to.

SB: Yeah. But there are tricks, you can find tricks to find the truth in something even though you haven't been given one, either by the director or the writer. (Pause) I don't know, for me it's always being as real as you can, as naturalistically real as you can.

GC: Do you mean by that, feeling the emotions you think you're supposed to be feeling and being in that moment and things will take care of themselves. That's what I always did.

SB: Yeah. I don't know of any other way. Though, maybe that's not necessarily the only way. There are lots of actors that lead you somewhere to your own truth as an audience without them as themselves. So, it's difficult.

GC: Ok. Did Anthony come in with some stuff for you to work on at the beginning, some words?

SB: At the beginning there was nothing...

GC: Just chats? And then Anthony created the world.

SB: (Laughs) And Anthony created the world. There was literally nothing, just his idea, couple lost their child, play it backwards, or mess about with the timescale. And that was all we had to start with. So the first day or two was literally just chatting and then he started to write, bring in scenes and just build it gradually.

GC: Were there any random conversations that you had that ended up in the script, or an evolution of this idea? This seems to be a current theme that I've noticed, anything goes. It's not just what you talk about in rehearsals, it's in the pub, or during the week or whatever.

SB: Yeah, yeah, yeah. It's all in there. There are no delineations, there are no markers.

GC: Nothing off limits.

SB: No, there is no 'this is the end of the rehearsal day'. But I think that's true of any theatre rehearsal. I think some people try to define it, or make delineations. But I think that whatever goes on in the pub still...Of course there are some directors who never go to the pub, they only ever operate in a rehearsal room atmosphere, and a structured one. But, yeah, there was no off the record on the record. There's no boundaries, no privacy.

GC: (Laughs) Right, how was it actually being friends with Anthony and Phil? How was it to perform such an intense play?

SB: As I say, at the beginning it was fine. It didn't feel difficult at all; no. As we got into the performance of it there started to be tensions. (Laughs) I don't know if that's the right word. We were all drinking too much and staying up too late and doing that play too many times. And that's a heady cocktail.

GC: A dangerous brew.

SB: Yeah. So that's all it was.

GC: I remember doing the Sarah Kane play and it messing with my head. I don't mean majorly, I didn't have to go to therapy for six months, or a year. That would be ridiculous. But the intensity of it did have an effect on me. I took it home with me a lot and lived it. I wasn't easy to be around, shall we say. It had an effect on other people around me.

SB: I think you're right. I think there's probably effects that you're not aware of. And I'm sure that if you ask somebody else, who was around me at that time, they might say 'God, she was an absolutely bloody nightmare. She was up to high doh, she was stressed, she misbehaved'. But as far as I was concerned it was all going fine, it was pretty civilised.

GC: Ah, this is one of the interesting things I think. Was there a lot of material that was explored, rehearsed, that ended up cut from the final script?

SB: Not much.

GC: Really!!!

SB: I thought *Stitching* was pretty sleek in terms of that process. Obviously scenes got binned, but there didn't seem that a massive amount of material got chucked out. Again, I think it's the nature of the piece, a two-hander, with a very clear story, there's no going off into surreal world. So, it's probably less wasteful...

GC: Do you think there were any invisible steps you had to go through to get to the performance?

SB: I think there always are many. Whether they actually are necessary is a question to do with the whole acting process. Yes, many. Some people said that they thought the character

that I played was underwritten, and that I made her credible, or something. So obviously when I heard that from some people I was like ‘Oh yes, I’ve done an awful lot of work to make it work.’ But, again, I’m not sure if that’s really true. (Pause) So, I did feel that there were invisible steps, but I always feel like that. And I’m not sure that that’s fair or true, or necessary; in that it’s just the process I have. (Pause) Maybe, just honestly, it’s Anthony’s failing, he is flawed, and it’s messy, and you do have to make some bridges. You do have to flesh it out and invest in it. It’s like a framework or exoskeleton. You have to really flesh it out or bring it to life beyond what you would do with a Shakespeare or something that’s been written. There’s something very non-fixed about Anthony. That’s what I think. He’s more interested in the structure, or narrative, those kind of trickeries; and not the detail of the words. The details of the words, or choice of language, or tone of those words is exactly what gives you the character. And if you’re not being given that by the writer then you have to do it yourself.

GC: He very much lets you speak in your own voice most of the time. You can say ‘That’s not colloquially what I would say where I come from, using the voice I’m using’. He’s quite reasonable, he lets you say it how you would say it.

SB: Yes, so I suppose that’s why you feel there’s a lot of his actors in the play.

GC: There’s such an investment of self into it.

SB: Because he hasn’t taken your natural language and shaped it in another way.

GC: Were there any technical issues between the technical requirements of the show and Anthony’s process, when you actually started teching it? (Pause) For instance, the looseness of the language and lighting cues etc. etc.? Was that ever a problem?

SB: No. Because again ours was very simple. We had a gauze back and that was the set; a stool, incredibly minimal. So the technical issues were about...there were annoying technical issues like what are you going to wear, or what’s the future you or the past you, how are you going to manage that with one costume? And how are you going to make the future slightly different to the past? And then there was a little dream sequence in it as well. And because he was playing with timescale there were technical questions around that.

GC: (Pause) That was it, just that? I think it’s probably different when it’s a two-hander and it’s quite simple. There were massive problems with *Narrative* because the script was not cemented. There was a lot of problems, he had digital, and projections and other things going on. And nobody knew what they were doing, and stuff came in at the end etc. etc. And there were seven of them, so there were a lot of technical issues.

SB: That must have been a nightmare, Anthony in a room with projections. No, no, I imagine that is a recipe for disaster.

GC: It was all right a lot of the time. But the technical staff need what they need, the actors need what they need, and Anthony as the director/writer needs what he needs. So sometimes there’s a lot of tension between them. I don’t mean tension as in arguments, I mean not jelling properly...Ok, nearly finished Selina, just a few more random ones.

SB: Yeah, Throw them at me.

GC: Is Anthony's way of doing things any riskier than what you were used to? And if so how?

SB: Riskier, in what sense?

GC: Well, when you go onstage in an Anthony show is it riskier than in a normal show. I found it was riskier when you don't have a proper script. This is a big risk.

SB: Yeah, obviously on a technical level or will he give you the script by the technical rehearsal. Yeah, it's utter nonsense compared to other rehearsals. It is much riskier, of course. You risk exposing yourself. The scratch performance – I can't remember what the bloody thing was called - was very frightening, very exposing, because it was on the National Theatre stage.

GC: I bet it was.

SB: Anthony wants to look good. Look good, slightly at your expense, because you spend a lot of time getting into these complicated period costumes and the script wasn't set, and he wanted us off-book. Now, none of these things were necessary as it was a scratch performance. And one might argue that in fact that the audience was a little bit disappointed because what they saw was quite a polished piece of theatre. And there was a part of me that thought that 'they're coming to see us stumble a bit, and have scripts in our hand and work it a bit.' And he'd presented this very accomplished piece; we're all costumed up to the hilt, we're all off script. But we were all uncomfortable because we couldn't walk properly, we weren't comfortable in our costumes, we hadn't rehearsed properly.

GC: Yeah, all these technical requirements.

SB: With *Stitching* it was completely different because it was a much less complicated show. So I agree, he can leave you very exposed and unfairly so.

GC: I agree actually. I felt very upset actually. It worked out fine in the end, but actually taking that step on to that stage and we'd never run it really, and I didn't know my lines and having to improvise all this stuff, I found very hard. It demanded something of me more than just acting.

SB: It's very difficult when you look at it retrospectively. With all of Anthony's stuff it's a whole mixture of emotions. Total fear that you've stitched me up like a kipper and I'm going to fail. You'll be fine, you'll go on to the next job but I'll never work at the National Theatre again because I've looked uncomfortable and awkward as an actor. And, of course, that probably isn't true, there's lots of reasons why you never work at the National. There's a little bit of that, that you have in your head.

GC: Yeah I know. For me I found that I didn't really get to do my process to make me feel ready to perform.

SB: Yeah, yeah, I can see where you're coming from.

GC: I found that really, really difficult actually, because I was only two or three years out of drama school. So I found that really difficult. It's the most horrible feeling in the world walking on that stage knowing that you're shit.

SB: Knowing that you're not in the moment.

GC: Yeah. I felt not ready, I'm not ready to perform. That's how it felt when I worked with Anthony.

SB: I remember it now from that one at the National, I remember that feeling and having a conversation with Anthony 24 hours before and saying 'Don't make us be off the book it's not fair, it's not fair.'

GC: Even in *Narrative* he did the same thing on the last day before they were going up, in fact it was the night before. They were up on the Friday, and this was on the Thursday night he gave Brian, one of the guys a huge monologue to learn for tomorrow. You know, this is nine o'clock at night and they're back in at 10 in the morning the next day for a full day of it. I mean, when's he going to learn it? Anyway, that's fine...Just very briefly Selina, is there anything else you would like to add or talk about or mention that I haven't touched upon. I'm sure I haven't thought of everything. Is there anything else? And if not that's fine too. (Pause) This is totally overstating it, but is it an actor's dream or an actor's nightmare to work with Anthony?

SB: I think it's both and that's the interest. That's why some of the actors return again and again and again to work with him. Because it must be a bit of both, because otherwise if it was just a nightmare ...It's like a lot of those things in the theatre, the adrenalin rush and the buzz. I guess it's like childbirth, you forget the pain.

GC: It washes away.

SB: You forget the pain of this baby, or this play, or this production that you're proud of. And once you've had a chance to rehearse it; i.e. run it in for three, four or five performances it's then good, it works and it's very successful. Therefore, you forget that when you walked out on to that stage you were tempted to kill yourself.

GC: Or kill him.

SB: And that's what keeps his work interesting and gives it an energy that more polished productions don't have.

GC: He's very big on the spontaneity, and the liveness of the moment, as if the words are being spoken for the first time if possible.

SB: Yeah. And what that gives his stuff is...In some ways, I don't think he'll ever have a play that runs in the West End and sells out to however many people because his work isn't rigorous enough, rigorous in terms of neatness, that neat playwriting.

GC: Yeah. All the 't's' being crossed and the 'i's' dotted.

SB: And you can't put your finger on what it is but there's just something. His plays will never be that. That's what keeps them so exciting and different...I remember we had conversations about the need to go back and rewrite. And ultimately he was saying 'I can't do that. I can't write like that. It's not my process, it's not for me. So my plays will always be flawed and rough around the edges. And they'll never be on in Chichester I guess.' Although, who knows these days?

GC: (Laughs) They're not polished pieces of dramaturgy.

SB: No, they never will be.

GC: And why should they have to be actually?

SB: No. You get something else, the payoff is you get something else that is probably more relevant because it's about live performance and that's what it should be in the theatre. Not about churning out a well-polished play however many times over the centuries.

GC: Did you find that your performance was different every night? I know the ideal is that it's different every night. But was it the same template of performance, did it change, did it evolve?

SB: It must have changed and evolved because we did it for a very long time. It probably got worse. (Both laugh long and loudly)

GC: As you try to act your little heart out...I suppose we're not the best judge of that as performers are we? I remember Anthony saying that Phil's performances were always really good at the beginning then he overthinks things or whatever. He's not as good in the performance as he was in the read-through. Phil starts covering himself and doing all these things to protect himself. I've noticed that with Phil's acting.

SB: Yeah, yeah. Oh yeah, he was very protected.

GC: Ok, that's brilliant Selina. Shall we leave it there.

SB: Thanks very much Cas.

GC: No thank you very much Miss Boyak. (laughs)

Sophie Ross *Narrative Interview*

GC: Thank you for doing this, I just want to assure you that this is for academic purposes only. I'm really interested what your thoughts are on this 'process', When I've transcribed it, I'll send you a copy of it and if there are any bits you want cut, changed I'll change it. Or anything you're not happy with or uncomfortable with; because I don't want anything that you're uncomfortable with. Is that ok?

SR: Yes, that's great.

GC: Ok, brilliant. Thanks Sophie. Could you talk to me a bit about how Anthony's rehearsal 'process' compares to other rehearsals you been involved in that don't have a script to begin with?

SR: Well I think there's a lot less time on the floor with this 'process' and a lot more time talking about what it is that we're trying to say. So the obvious difference is that you start with a script in another 'process' so you immediately have the text and you talk about what that might mean from a character perspective. I think in this 'process' the actors are being asked to be a lot more than actors in a sense. I think that everyone in the room is a sort of dramaturge and a writer and an editor and a director. So I think that if you get a Shakespeare and you're playing Juliet or whatever you come to it and you're looking at the play from the perspective of your character, that's kind of what's asked of you. So you're sitting in a place where you're trying to make sense of the emotional journey of your character; you don't ever have to think of it as a whole; that's the director's job. But I think with this 'process', because we're creating it as we go, - that's all of us, not just Anthony - you have to have one eye on your journey, your character journey, and another eye on the whole, which is a very directorial way of thinking. I love that because I do think that the journey of an actor in a rehearsal process can be quite inward looking; and what this 'process' seems to stop is that 'I'm only going to think about myself, my own journey.' And you start to really think about all the characters equally and you think of yourself as a strand of the whole. So it's much less of an egotistical 'process'.

GC: That's interesting. So it's like one grand narrative almost, and it's called *Narrative*.

SR: I think so. It's a strange experience on this particular show because I started as assistant director. Did you know this?

GC: You mentioned it yesterday, but we've not really talked about it.

SR: Yeah, for the first two weeks of this rehearsal process I was assistant director. And then as often happens with these shows you realise that he needed another actor. So I got fired as an assistant director (Both laugh) and hired as an actor. So actually I came at this from a slightly different perspective. So even when, but even when I worked with him before I felt that way. I care far less about myself in this than I care about the whole and making sure that what it is that we've been talking about the audience goes away with.

GC: That's great. Could you talk to me a bit about what you did before with Anthony.

SR: Before, he came for four weeks and worked with an ensemble that I'd been a part of. I've been a part of a resident ensemble in Sydney Australia and we've been together for three years. And part of the aim of this ensemble was to be able to create work. We'd worked with a few different people that devised. And the artistic directors of the Sydney Theatre Company were already programming some of Anthony's work. They were already big fans of his and they thought that it would be great for him to come and work with an already established ensemble. I think for him it was a bit of a weird one because I think he usually he does this 'process' with actors that he knows. So this was interesting because he'd come to a completely new country to work with six of us who all knew each other really well; but he didn't know any of us from a bar of soap. I think that was interesting. So the aim of that 'process' was that we would come up with a sort of short form version of what a show might be if he continued writing it. So it was just four weeks...to develop it and one performance at the end of it that we did to a theatre full of people, but it wasn't a paying audience it was mainly the people who worked for Sydney Theatre Company to see what they thought of it. That one was interesting because we spent a lot of time with him running sort of random improvisations just to get a sense of us as actors and where we were coming from; and also really general discussions. And then he started to get more specific with it...that play was called *Discontent* and it was about the discontent that we're experiencing now in the world because of choice and advertising and all those things. And we played with narrative in a similar way to what we're doing in this show. This play feels like an extension of that process that was started, but with a different group of people. I think Anthony's preoccupation has been with narrative form in our world now...ours was very similar in form to this piece.

GC: That's very interesting because the characters you play, however weird they are, they do have a linear form. Well all the one's I've seen. There are stories, ok some of them are quite surreal, but there are stories.

SR: *Narrative* is going slightly away, slightly further from the idea of linearity and discontent. *Discontent* started with very random moments...mostly they were to represent the way in which a computer actually functions in a much more literal way to what we're doing here. *Narrative's* more about that feeling that you get when you've been online for a long time or the feeling that you get in our world of things starting but not necessarily finishing and you've constantly got some kind of input. *Discontent* was more obviously about the internet, whereas this one is not about the internet.

GC: That's a really interesting comparison.

SR: Oh good.

GC: I was wondering do you have any doubts or concerns above and beyond what you would normally have in another show?

SR: I've got less than I'd normally have. I just love this 'process', because I think it's really great when actors feel that nothing's set in stone. I think there's something quite dangerous about it.

GC: Good because I'd like to talk to you about risk. I'd like to talk to you about that.

SR: I've done quite a few shows, like Shakespeare's or Greek tragedy's...classic shows where people want to have everything worked out two or three weeks before opening night.

You know everything that's going to happen in every moment. And I've often found that as a result the actors stop communicating well with each other and there's something quite dead about that. The thing that I really love about this is that genuinely anything could happen at any moment. So it's always really alive. It's the kind of show that I would want to see.

GC: So in that respect do you think that the risks that you're running are actually really positive risks?

SR: Oh yeah. No matter what happens we've had really interesting discussions and Anthony is clearly a really interesting writer. So really from this point no matter what happens it will be interesting. It's not like when you take a Shakespeare and you can really fuck it up. Everyone knows what that is. With this, as long as it comes from the discussion and the play that's been going on in this room there will be something interesting about it because if people in a space, alive, and having to be really, really open all the time. I just think that's an inherently interesting thing and anything else that comes out of it; a really wonderful story or engaging characters are kind of a bonus.

GC: So do you enjoy taking risks as an actress? Do you enjoy that?

SR: Yes, yes I do. But something that I've realised in this 'process', is that because I'm playing a role that's...so in a way it's important for me not to take risks. I'm playing a character in this that's not very cooky or a slightly off-centred character. She's actually more straight down the line, she has to be, because of the structure of the show, a less interesting person. And actually as a result I've realised that 'yes it's great to take risks and to constantly put yourself out there'; but sometimes it's just not the right thing to do. Sometimes the right thing to do is to sit back and let other performers take those risks. That's what's needed for the balance of the show. So yes of course it would be terrible if nobody ever took risks in life or in art or in everything; it would be terribly boring and nothing would ever change. But I think that taking a risk just to be cooky or to be interesting is not a healthy one either. It's about balance, about reading the other actors and knowing your place.

GC: So you don't think that acting is all about risk, it's about a balance of risk?

SR: I think so. I do think that as long as the actors can go (Puts hand to forehead in a melodramatic fashion) 'as long as I'm putting myself out there and trying anything, that's a risk and amazing.' But sometimes that can be slightly egotistical and indulgent in a way. So yes, risk is vital but definitely has to be balanced for my money. It's about taking them in the right moments.

GC: It's not just risk for risk's sake?

SR: Yeah. I don't know if I'm being very clear.

GC: No you are being clear. It's interesting because I think the stakes are very high, it's a high-risk method of doing things but I think the rewards could be really worth it. It's all about safety and trust, you know?

SR: There's another way of looking at it. If you take a classic text that everybody knows the risks can be much higher because there's a weight of expectation that doesn't exist with a

show like this. In this people go knowing that anything can happen. And therefore, what does happen is going to be interesting in some way.

GC: I think that's a really interesting counter-point to the risks you take in other sorts of shows. It really is an interesting point to bring up because I never thought of it.

SR: Good. (Laughs)

GC: So how do you think as an actress that you shape this text? If at all?

SR: I don't know that I've as an actress has actually shaped it. But I do think that me as a person in the room has. As I say, I've had a weird journey on this because I started as the assistant director. I wasn't an actor for the first two weeks so I wasn't involved in the improvisations. The first two weeks was where we did most of them...and I actually wasn't involved in that. So actually from a get on the floor and be creative point of view I've probably shaped it less than other people. But I think that everybody in the end shapes it equally. What's really interesting with Anthony's 'process' is that yes you spend all this time doing improvis, but half of the time what actually ends up in the show is from a little discussion that you had in the morning about who you were sitting next to on the Tube. It's just as likely that the material will come from a random lunchtime conversation as it is from a structured improvisation. That's what's really interesting about this 'process.' In the end anything you say in the room is part of the 'process' That's why I've shaped it as much as anyone else. Because I came at it from the point of view of assistant director from the outset, I was thinking a lot more about it from a script analysis perspective.

GC: Ok, brilliant. Do you have any thoughts on the fact that a lot of the stuff you have done in rehearsals, you are not doing any more? A lot of things have been cut and things are changing almost on a daily basis.

SR: (Laughs) Sorry what's the question?

GC: Do you have any thoughts on the cuts and changes? Because I've saw little snippets and things that have been totally cut.

SR: I feel that it's about knowing what's going to work for the whole. I definitely think that part of this 'process' will be that sometimes even though the scene itself is a fucking great scene it doesn't actually mean anything or add to the sense that we want to leave the audience with then I think that it should be cut. And I think that it's really, really great that Anthony's objective enough about his own writing that he can see these things need to be cut.

GC: I think it's excellent as well. It's the risks that you take by doing that is a really good risk that pays off. The bravery it takes to take that risk and go 'you know what; that's good but we can do better.'

SR: Totally!

GC: I see a lot of that going on.

SR: Of course you do. Everyone needs to be secure enough in themselves and the choices they make to know that it's not about whether it in itself was interesting. Actually everything

we've tried has been funny or moving or something interesting. But it's not always about the thing that we've been talking about, it's not quite the idea that we want to leave the audience with. I think his objectivity is quite extraordinary in that way.

GC: Do you think that devising and discovering things encourages a certain style of acting from the actors and actresses?

SR: It's funny actually because I think it depends on the conversation; it depends on how you feel like the show is going to sit with an audience. Although I definitely feel like Anthony doesn't like that old-school...

GC: Arch-acting?...AAACTIIIIINNNGG (Best Brian Blessed impersonation)

SR: Yeah that kind of acting. Though I can't imagine that type of acting happening in the room because the improvs are all very...he just runs them very gently; there's a gentleness about it. He doesn't really care whether he can hear everything you say, he doesn't care if your back is facing the audience. So there's never any of that turn out and project kind of going on, which is old-school theatre. But having said that it's not less dynamic, he goes for a hyper-realism, but equally he can go into this surreal, abstract kind of world.

GC: It's a hybrid of naturalism and surrealism.

SR: Exactly. That's exactly what it is. It can be surreal and absurd but the thing that Anthony always talks about is that it has to be truthful.

GC: I knew you were going to say that. That's really important. I totally agree with you actually. Watching it you can really see that going on. Ok, we're nearly finished; just a couple of more questions. Does my presence here filming have any effect on you as an actress and as a performer?

SR: No.

GC: No?

SR: I don't think so. Sometimes I notice the camera and I get embarrassed. Not actually when I'm doing the work depending if I'm sitting in the corner looking bored or something (laughs). No, this is a really open room, actually. And because you're always improving and putting yourself out there I feel like there could be a hundred people in the room and it wouldn't influence me. It's nice.

GC: Cool. And just finally and generally, what's your personal take on Anthony's 'process', how would you describe and assess it? What do you like, what don't you like? Anything like that.

SR: How would I describe it? Do you want me to describe how it actually works?

GC: No, your personal take on it.

SR: What do I think about it? Ok, well I really love it, that's why I wanted to come and work with him again. I find that there is an honesty in the room with Anthony's rehearsals that you

don't often feel. It also creates a sense of collaboration between everyone. I definitely feel that in this room actors are much more open to helping each other. It's this thing...I don't know if it exists here but in Australia the taboo of giving other actors notes as an actor...it's the director's job. But maybe because I've been in an ensemble for so many years I often think that probably another actor could do that better than me. I'm really open to other actors giving me notes (Sophie is called to rehearse). I'll finish it after. Is that enough?

INTERVIEW CONTINUED

GC: Ok, thanks again Sophie for finishing this off. I was just wondering what's your personal take on Anthony's 'process'?

SR: I was in the middle of saying something and now I can't remember what it was now. What have I already said? Sorry now I'm trying not to repeat myself.

GC: It doesn't matter.

SR: My personal take? I sort of don't know what you mean by that. How do I feel about it personally? How does it affect me?

GC: All of them, none of them. Whatever you think.

SR: Ok, ok, ok, ok. Well, it's definitely a 'process' that I find much more stimulating in terms of...I take it home with me and I don't think I always do. I feel that somehow I get home and this 'process' has infected my life somehow. And that sort of is the case for actors anyway if you're playing an intense role; you can take it home with you. It's not your character that you take home, it's not the emotions the feel that you take home with you. I feel that my brain is just in overdrive being part of this 'process'. So it feels that I'm being paid to philosophize. I know that sounds a bit wanky, but that's actually how I feel. I go 'this is insane we're sort of just sitting around talking about things; talking about the way the world is, our perspective on it, but we're being paid for it.'...I just constantly question the way that I do things and how I'm processing information while I'm working with Anthony. That might be because of the particular type of work that we're doing here at the moment. *Discontent* and *Narrative* have been about how do we place narrative in our own lives, our personal stories we give narrative to. The fact that we like to make a story out of everything around us even though it might not necessarily have one or make any sense. So I think this 'process' particularly has made me think of how I process information. But I do find that incredible because as I said before I've gone home before and I'm thinking about where my character came from, the emotional place that they're in. It might turn me into a sort of crazy bitch – it often does. But this is not so emotional it's much more of an intellectual place it's taking you to...It's something about the whole 'process'. We're in the room for five weeks and we go through the whole 'process', whereas usually as an actor only part of the last bit of the 'process'.

GC: Yeah you get calls. You're not usually in for the whole day.

SR: Yeah, mostly you turn up and you work on your part of the narrative and that's the part that infects you. Usually the process of writing a play...people can take ten years writing a play and the actors get the last three months of it. This happens so quickly and there's so

many things to talk about and digest I feel like my brain is really on overdrive. I haven't been sleeping very well.

GC: Yeah I remember that very well.

SR: Yeah, usually if I've not been sleeping well it's because I've got heaps to do in the show; I'm learning lots of lines or I'm really stressed about my performance. This is not like that at all, I'm not in any way panicked; this isn't about me at all. I can't sleep because I'm just thinking faster and more deeply than I do regularly in life. That's what this 'process' does. I'm not being very clear am I?

GC: No that's brilliant. And just quickly, is there anything you would like to add about anything? Any thoughts?

SR: Maybe there is one thing I want to say. I've been really positive about this 'process' so far, and I do absolutely love it. But there's one thing that I've noticed that can happen, which is because Anthony has to be a writer at the same time as direct I think that actors can sometimes feel a bit at sea. There's a sense of isolation with this 'process' once you get to the point where you have to think about yourself and your character. So sometimes I think the trap for the actor in this 'process' is that they will need Anthony to be the sort of director they get if the only job the director has to do is blocking or you know. So if there is anything that is particularly difficult about this 'process' I'd say it's that. This sense of isolation that certain actors get in this 'process'...there are stretches where you can see Anthony go back into himself to see whether the writing is working, is this exactly what we've been talking about. So it becomes much more about the script than the actors. I actually don't really mind that, although it was a bit strange when I first worked with him. Not that it was bad it just takes a bit of getting used to because you're used to a director giving you all this sensitive energy where they treat you like a kid in a way. That doesn't happen in this 'process' and it can't because there's not enough time, there's too many other things to do. You've got to look after yourself a bit more in this 'process' than you might otherwise have to.

GC: I absolutely agree with you. I remember talking to Anthony at Christmas about the show that I did with him. And he went 'well yeah, I was probably a bit callous, I am a bit callous with actors, maybe I should go back on stage.'

SR: Oh yeah. But actually I do think that he's very sensitive about the way actors feel. I think he has an instinct about knowing when an actor's feeling a bit lost.

GC: Yeah that speech he did just there showed you exactly what he's been thinking.

SR: That's probably why I'm thinking about it now. I actually think there are some actors who could not work in this way because they actually need more from a director than he gives. No, not more, something different; more focused, individual time. And if you really need that you're not going to enjoy working this way.

GC: Brilliant Sophie, you're a star. Thank you very, very much for that.

SR: No problem, no problem.

Tam Dean Burn Interview

GC: Hello Tam, thank you for doing this interview.

TDB: Pleasure Cas.

GC: Could you just briefly talk me through the *Caledonia* Rehearsals with Anthony?

TDB: It was a very strange experience really because there was a lot of pressure, it was a huge show for the National Theatre of Scotland. And it was clear from the start that the writer and the director hadn't really met much beforehand. Alastair Beaton and Anthony. It wasn't finished and it was clear there was divergence going on, and it turned into quite a fraught, mental process. But I think that's usually the case with Anthony. (laughs)

GC: It certainly was in my experience of Anthony. Sounds about right.

TDB: But this was under such a glare of spotlight because of the International festival and all that as well. It was a pretty wild time. And it was the only time I'd worked with Anthony...No, I did the very beginning thing for NTS *Home* but it was just meeting one day and then performing it the next, so that was much more straightforward.

GC: Ok. How do Anthony's rehearsals compare to other rehearsals you've been involved in?

TDB: I've not really been in other rehearsals like that, really. To that same extent. I've worked quite a lot when people have been improvising in rehearsals and so on. And I've been in situations, like *Communicado* with Gerry Mulgrew, where things take a long time to work through...It's the sort of thing where energy just seems to dissipate, things sort of grind to a halt, you're having to pick yourself up a lot. A lot of fascinating stuff would go on as well. But this was a very particular process that went on where we weren't getting down to the text in that was at all...He's got this desire to work off the ball, completely! That I'd never experienced quite as much. It's very difficult to pin down what he's after, I think it's because he's not sure. But he wants to go right out there and play around and then...It would have been completely different if he'd written it and then getting stuff at the end from him. I think that's what he intended but then he was suddenly put over a barrel when Alastair Beyton was saying that 'You can't change a word.', and it was a legally binding script. I'd never been a circumstance like that before where you weren't allowed to cut things without the writer's approval. But in this case the writer ended up not in rehearsals, but we had to do his script as written with very, very little rehearsal on that script at all. He used a framing device, I think he often does that, that we were a theatre company telling the story of Scotland's disastrous attempt at a colony. It sort of reflected the story itself, it was full of high hopes, they set off there with the best of intentions (both laugh), everybody being behind it, and then very quickly it became apparent it was a disaster. That's what it was like in rehearsals.

GC: Rehearsals mirroring the theme.

TDB: Hysteria. I was a little bit more grounded because I was one of the very few actors in it that were based in Scotland. It was a Scottish cast but they were all based in London. That made such a difference, I was coming home each night (laughs), the rest of the cast weren't. So there was a sort of air of hysteria around the whole thing which was a laugh and all that as well. But it was an incredible process and I wouldn't have missed it for the world in that way.

I also had Emma, my partner, being pregnant at the time, and as it turned out, she gave birth on the day of the Tech at the Kings.

GC: (laughs) Oh my god, at the dreaded Anthony Neilson Tech!

TDB: In a way it wasn't the Tech, because we'd teched in in Inverness. This was like the final rehearsal with a lot of stuff still being put into place in Edinburgh. I was quite glad in a way to just miss it.

GC: I bet you were.

TDB: Because it wasn't essential and everybody said, 'You didn't miss anything.' (Laughs) So it was real seat of the pants stuff. So quite an incredible process really.

GC: Ok, brilliant Tam. Anthony usually writes and directs his own shows in collaboration with his actors during rehearsals, as you know, did this methodology mesh well with a script that had been written by another dramatist?

TDB: No, that was the crux of the problem. He treated it as if that was what he was doing. He was completely disparaging about the script as was...He was quite juvenile when the writer was out the room and all of that sort of thing. (laughs) He shared far too much with us how he felt about it and that. He revelled in all that with his pals, but treated it as if it was his sort of process we were going through. And didn't reckon with Alastair Beyton's obstinacy and also the fact that he's married to a lawyer, so he was in a position, legally, of knowing where he stood. It was a strange process as well in that the pair of them were potentially, actually, of more like mind than actually then played out in the end. As London Scots, Alastair Beyton was definitely like a Gordon Brownite,...that's how he would have seen himself politically in the referendum. So against an Independent Scotland. He was quite removed from what was going on and the level of debate that was going on in Scotland. That sort of became apparent in a way. They didn't properly ever share that...There's a lot of footage of them, I don't know if you've caught up on that...We were on the Late Show and all that sort of thing. There's quite a lot of stuff to look at there with the pair of them jostling with each other in the heady early days.

GC: I must try and find that actually.

TDB: It should be available, it should still be around. I got to speak fairly extensively as well. We were all very enthusiastic and positive and we made it sound great. (Both laugh) James Knoughtie was of the same mind as Alastair Beyton. And I think in a way, Anthony was as well, but it's always hard to pin down what he felt about Scotland in that way. I know, having lived in London a long time, I knew I was quite adrift from the debates that were going on up here. But that potential way they could have allied didn't come to pass. And there was loads of problems with the script, but it never fully got a chance in that way as well. But Anthony was completely disparaging about it and was out to take another road...It wasn't just about not really rehearsing, he hadn't fully cast it as well.

GC: So you started rehearsals without a full cast?

TDB: We started rehearsals without knowing which parts we would be playing, that sort of thing. There was another couple more brought in, but it did still have to be fully cast. But he would audition us. There's one part of the main religious figure in it that he hadn't cast, and it

was possibly going to be me, or Paul Blair. He basically auditioned us in front of everybody (Laughs).

GC: That's pretty fucking weird.

TDB: And it's like, 'You bastard!' I didn't realise that's what was going on, I thought it was just trying out. But it's apparent to everybody. That was quite hard to bear, especially because I didn't get the part. (Both laugh)

GC: And you lost it to Paul Blair.

TDB: (Laughs) Yeah, yeah, yeah. But there's also the thing that you're not sure, because you're going for laughs all the time, what's actually funny or whether it's public schoolboy humour in the rehearsal room. As it played out, there was an awful lot of people who absolutely hated it. That can be the case with his stuff, but this was much more so because it was all so close to home, and close to the bone for Scotland. People expected a lot of it. But there was a lot of people that did go with it in that way and did have a laugh because it was a very strange piece of theatre.

GC: I've only read it and it does seem a strange piece of theatre.

TDB: Aye it is and it was played even stranger. Paul Higgins was incredible in it because he went with Anthony in everything he did, he never rebelled against him in that way. He tried to drive on, and jump around and play everything, all the contradictions. But the idea that he was leading this crazy band of fools on this journey did really reflect the whole Darien scheme situation itself. I thought he was, potentially, close to a nervous breakdown, he really went out there and went for it. And that's what carried all the rest of us. There wasn't mass rebellion within the ranks in that way. There was all sorts of things, potentially, getting talked about. We didn't really know what was happening, whether Alastair was going, or Anthony was going to be bumped, what was going to happen. And you start to tremble a bit, as actors that you better start speaking to the agent and seeing what's going to go on here. But it all worked out in the end. It was big audiences, the most successful show they'd had on that scale, packing the Kings out and all that as well. It was definitely a heroic failure.

GC: Typically Scottish.

TDB: Just like the actual journey itself.

GC: Ok, brilliant. How collaborative do you think Anthony's process is?

TDB: In some ways very much so because he's asking that of you continually. He's throwing the whole thing open. He's very game, on that score, of allowing everybody to go for it...But he calls the shots in the end, it's him deciding in that way. It's imagining what he's like, having seen other shows, and having then been in the process, you can start to see what he aims for and what he gets when it's working well. You can see how collaborative it is and how much people can thrive on it. That's why good actors keep coming back for more. Aye, they're pals with him, but they get such a buzz of working with him, clearly. They get opportunities that they would never get anywhere else. So I think he really thrives on collaboration in that way. But it's just a very particular type of collaboration.

GC: A very chaotic collaboration?

TDB: Aye. Aye.

GC: Ok. Could you talk to me about any improvisations that you did in rehearsals?

TDB: I remember going round in circles a lot. He would walk round in circles setting something up and then us going round. It was a bit like *They Shoot Horses Don't They*, something like that. He would call things out as you were going round and then you would in character extend the grotesqueness of this character. Taking it to further and further and further extremes. It's like some kind of *Wacky Races* on acid. (Both laugh) But you just have to go with it. On the inside you're thinking 'What the fuck must this be looking like? What the fuck is this feeding in to?' But I think a lot of it had to do with trying to open you up to extremes and for you to be willing to go there. He did want to take us to extremes and I think it was because there was people there that he hadn't worked with. Certainly he didn't want naturalism in that sense. (Laughs) We were just trying not to piss ourselves laughing, and not entirely successfully if I were being totally honest. He [Neilson] was pissing himself as well and there was definitely a sort of malicious glee on his [Neilson's] part in manipulating you in that way in the rehearsal room, and getting you to make a complete arse of yourself.

GC: So it wasn't as a compositional device, it wasn't to work on characters? Was it for him to watch you going through this, perhaps to bond you, something like that? Because I've heard other people talk about these amorphous improvisations that they don't really know what the function is. And he doesn't tell you, and he doesn't know.

TDB: Oh, no, no. That's why he throws it all up the air to see what will happen. Because, you see, when he's walking around, sometimes he seems to know what he's on about, sometimes he obviously doesn't...he was rewriting stuff, and all that turned out to be a waste of the time, because it was all getting chucked anyway. But you would see him trying to think things through and then we would start to get some kind of momentum. But it was sometimes lurchy, it was not BAM right. You get other directors who will work with beanbags or whatever to get the energy up. Whereas with him it was sort of slow, plodding, turgid and then it's agony. So it's like going through this treacle trying to find something. It was a bonding type of thing and trying things out. But I think it was, above all, about trying to find some sort of style that we would be doing it in which was to be quite grotesque and extreme. Because it was trying to conjure up another age and all of that as well. So he would encourage that and that's why...Paul, with that character, was able to take it to Paisley sort of extremes with the character of the Minister. But he also had, and I was quite surprised, a sort of sentimental streak that would come out through the songs. Alastair Beyton had written the words to these songs and then he came up with tunes for them, rather than leaving it to the musicians who were involved. He would do it himself at times. And seeing how much he was being moved by this...They were lovely, but they were more sentimental than I expected from him. He did have that sort of side to him as well.

GC: That's interesting. He does these improvisations, talking to other people and from what I've witnessed, that don't really go anywhere. And it's really, really odd. He gets you to do strange, strange things and I think there is an element of malicious glee in it. (Both laugh) It's also to fill up time, people have said, because he doesn't know what he wants to do.

TDB: Yeah, yeah. (Laughs) He doesn't come with some big game-plan at all. It's a different way of making theatre from what people are used to, and very interesting from that point of view.

GC: Ok, how did Anthony manage the rehearsal process, what did he actually do?

TDB: Like I said, slowly. It's not energised. He would play around with the script and try stuff out. But, like I say, he was pretty disparaging about it really.

GC: So he was not fully committed to it?

TDB: In no way was he committed to the script. He was committed to the idea behind it, of the Darien Scheme, he was interested in it from that point of view. As we all were. But it wasn't like a great deal of research had been done on that score...It was about a belief that it was all going to come together in the end...It would make for very tricky production meetings, all these sort of things that have to go on...It's good fun, in a way, it is, especially when the pressure's not on yet...Playing around, trying things out.

GC: Did he do that thing where he calls you all every day, all day?

TDB: Yeah, he did, all that hanging about.

GC: That's fucking annoying.

TDB: There's no sort of plan in that way and there's a lot of breaks. And just because of the lay out of the rehearsal room...it would have been different in the old days when he could've smoked in the room, but now it was all in this fire escape. So there was a lot of hanging around. The smokers were on the fire escape while the rest of us were getting to know each other. It made me want to fucking start again, if I was going to start again, it would have been on that. (Laughs)

GC: That would drive you to it wouldn't it.

TDB: And also everybody bonding at night in that way as well. He would always take part.

GC: Yeah, when he should be up the road working.

TDB: There was a period towards the end when he did start to write stuff. But it was a complete waste of time because we were not going to get away with that.

GC: Yeah, yeah, there's a lot of wasted time in Anthony's rehearsals isn't there? There really is, and when you get to the end you're like, (pained voice) 'Why didn't we just work harder and do stuff. We're not ready!' Anyway, that's just my thoughts...Ok, Tam. What did the actors do in rehearsals, how did they contribute to the show being made?

TDB: It was a good bunch, it was a really good bunch of actors. But they were all being asked to work outside their comfort zones, and be quite ham-ey and all that type of thing as well. But you're being tested in lots of ways. It was, in many ways, stereotypes. I was with Alan, we were a double act. What's Alan's second name again, his mate from school?

GC: Alan Francis.

TDB: Alan and I were a sort of old, drunken double act, which was good fun, I enjoyed that...You'd see people coming up with good stuff, being stretched and trying things out, and

making things work. And everybody being supportive because we all know that we're in this together in that way. He picks enough of people that he knows already, who know what he's like. I've been in situations elsewhere...working with Declan Donnellan of Cheek by Jowl...several of the cast that I was working with had worked with him before. It was different for me because you could see that they got on with him better and you felt sort of left out, that type of thing. Whereas with this, they were disparaging of him. They were perfectly open, they knew what you were going through and shared that with you. So, by and large, there was an equality on that score...you felt that you were in it together. You were all being tested in ways that you weren't used to so it was completely natural to worry 'Are we going to get away with this? Is this going to work?' So you would try and help each other's confidence towards these types of things in that way as well. And particularly, trying to be supportive of Paul, because he had to lead this thing. So that what was going on. He was a really strong actor who was going to have to go out there and not bottle it. So we were doing it for him in loads of ways. He was our leader more than Anthony was because we were all on stage having to do it together.

GC: So what does Anthony actually do if he directs, when he directs? From what I see, he has a very softly, softly approach to directing most of the time...Sometimes you want a bit more direction from him actually.

TDB: He's got a trust that you're going to do it and leaves you to it in that way. He doesn't expect that he's going to have to feed you. He expects that you're going to come up with it and trusts you. But he doesn't fill you with confidence either...I've been with other directors, where at times it's been like that as well, where they don't give you a lot. It depends on what stage you're at, what the production's like, how much you need it. Because...once you're on it's fine. I was desperate to be reassured but now I can fly with this because...Ian Brown comes to mind in that sense, he's not very hands on in that way, he's sort of leaves you to it. Anthony trusts you in that sort of way as well. He understands actors to a good extent and loves being around them clearly in that way as well. I remember there was this period where we thought I was going to be off because of the bairn being born. So it was set up that he was going to go on for me. So that was going to be quite intriguing.

GC: (laughs) Oh, I would have liked to have seen that. See how he likes it.

TDB: (Tam laughs) Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. But he's also got a sort of dissembling sort of thing where you're never quite sure if that's what he looking for, or if that's what he says, or that's what he wants...Because it's slightly shambolic, sort of off the cuff...It's indirect so much...

GC: Indirect directing?

TDB: (Laughs) Yeah, yeah. Very indirect directing. (Both laugh)

GC: I wish you would have said that first...Ok. In my experience of acting and observing an Anthony show often the role of an actor is less to do with acting. Do you think this is an accurate assessment?

TDB: In what sense? Being also...

GC: Director, co-author, agony aunt...it's not necessarily about just going in and acting.

TDB: Yeah, yeah... In that way, he's very open about the process and what his dealings are with the writer, Alastair Beyton, and also the National Theatre of Scotland. So you are party to a lot of information, and in a way it would be easier for us if we didn't know this. But because of that you are sort of half-expected to play a bigger role.

GC: Yeah, you find yourself with a lot more responsibility than just looking after your own performance.

TDB: Yeah, yeah. Some people get that a bit more than others, or want to take that on.... We'd be throwing in suggestions continually.

GC: Suggestions of how to do a scene?

TDB: On every level really. And that was difficult because you're then writing by committee. That's a very difficult process because you know you're not really doing that. Again, it's what fills time in rehearsals going through that type of process. But you know that when it comes to it he's going to be deciding and he's going to come back with what he wants to be done. But the difference on this one was that he couldn't do that because he was forced into a particular situation.

GC: it's interesting that tension between his methodology and having a script. Having somebody else's script to do I find quite interesting. It's interesting to hear that he tries to implement his own process to other people's work, the lateral improvisation and endless discussions, this is common. It's interesting that he's still doing it even when he's got a script.

TDB: Yeah, I know. I don't know what he's done, and whether you've spoke to people who've done the Brecht or that, or the opera, and how much he was beholden to the script then. It would be interesting from that point of view, how much he was able to fuck about with the script. I don't know if he would have been able to change Brecht.

GC: I wouldn't imagine that you would be able to change Brecht, would you?

TDB: I don't know. I don't know whether he was improvising around the script that way as well. But it was the belief that we were going to be able to do that and then the discovery, very late in the day, that we weren't able to do that at all. And then the discovery that the writer had then gone as well, but we still weren't going to be able to do that. (Laughs)

GC: What the fuck were you going to be able to do then?

TDB: But it was easier when the writer was out of the rehearsal room in that way. At least we didn't have that tension to deal with.

GC: Of course, that must have been very strange... Does he accommodate the process that you as an actor have to go through to give a confident and credible performance?...

TDB: We were on a ship, the whole big metaphor of that, everything you were used to was overboard... I have my warm ups that I gear towards, but even in that it all went out the window. That didn't bother me that much... There were some actors that had never really worked at all on it.

GC: Yeah, they probably never wanted to work again after it.

TDB: (Laughs) So it was an amazing experience for them in that way. They don't know any better, they don't know any different. We were trying to find the strengths from within it itself for each other...It would have made it worse to then be isolated and go, 'This is what I do and this is how I gear towards my performance.' It was impossible to be able to do that and I didn't really desire to do that because I knew it wasn't going in that direction at all.

GC: Did it have any effect on you, not being able to do the stuff that you would normally do to perform?

TDB: At the beginning we were hanging about in the auditorium before the audience came in. So I wasn't scared of it but you were worried that you were taking the piss out of the audience...what you were getting away with.

GC: Mmmhh. That's a good way of putting it, 'Getting away with it.'

TDB: At the same time you think, 'Well why can't it be sort of off the cuff?' you don't know fully what an audience is getting from it. You know that you're not feeling that secure in it, that deep in it. It feels cheesy, superficial and half-baked. But at the same time there's something going on where you think, 'This could well be interesting to be observing.' From an audience's point of view.

GC: Or it could look like a semi-pantomime.

TDB: Yeah, yeah. You think, 'Well that might be alright, it's part of the Scottish tradition, pantomime.'...But it's punk-y as well...John Lydon's lyrics, 'Ever felt you've been cheated?' (Gary laughs) It's sticking two fingers up in that way as well. I quite enjoy the punkiness...It's sort of rough theatre...I know he would say that 'At least it's not fucking boring.' But I don't know, you don't know whether it is or not, or whether it's just antagonising an audience...What may be sort of personified to some extent was him playing *We're On the March with Ally's Army* as we went out at the end. (Gary laughs)

GC: Yeah, that's sticking the final finger up.

TDB: Yeah. Yeah. An element like that is just like, 'Up yours Scotland. Fucking look at you. You fucked it then and you're going to fuck it up now. You fucked it up with the Darien Scheme. You'll fuck it up again.' It's a sort of celebration of that 'fuckedness' in that way as well. In some ways it was the right type of show for him to be doing for the National Theatre of Scotland. And it was potentially a great idea. And as what happens a lot of the time in Scotland it was a glorious failure.

GC: The Scottish way.

TDB: But it's the Anthony way as well in the sense that he's willing to take that risk.

GC: I'd like to talk to you about risk later on, because he does take huge risks. You just talked a wee bit about failure there. So working on this show, did you ever feel that you were failing in your role as an actor?

TDB: Well harking back to that point where I failed to impress him (laughs) in the 'audition'. I can see why that was because something I'll tend to do is try too hard and get a bit tight on it, rather than staying light and loose...You're never really challenged in that way...It's hard to judge yourself...There was a tendency to think this was just old, ham-y, drunk acting, and

you think, 'I shouldn't be getting away with this.' But then you find a way through it and then hope that it's contributing something. And I knew that there was a sort of pushiness in it...I can't remember properly what I had to do in it...

GC: Your memory has blanked it out.

TDB: It was a challenge in that way...By and large I didn't feel that isolation as an actor and his role. You were sort of...you were part of this team and you were all in it together and you all understood each other and were trying to help each other. So it never came back on you on that, and neither did you feel that you were trying to impress people out there. Any of that, you're relationship with the audience was entirely different.

GC: Ok. Talking of these lengthy discussions, what was it like to be involved in, or witness these debates that end up going nowhere? Or the ideas being generated being rehearsed and then ultimately cut? What was that like, what effect did that have on you?

TDB: As ever, it's a mixture of it being funny, a bit hysterical, it's a bit mad and you're trying to figure it out but you're not completely sure. And as it went on you became less and less sure rather than more and more sure. There was the potential that the whole thing would fall apart and we thought, 'surely it can't get to that extent.' Because of the nature of the scale of it, because it was the international festival...But it was a little bit in a tradition of what had been happening with large scale Scottish work. In the international festival there was one that grid iron did, *Variety*, that was a disaster. Similarly, it was devised, and it was very exposed on the Kings' stage, it almost seemed that it was sort of cursed, these sorts of productions...I can't remember what the question was.

GC: That's all right, it was just about the lengthy discussions and what happens with them. Anyway, do you think these lengthy debates fulfil any constructive criteria?

TDB: (Lengthy pause) I don't know, because it's about looking at things in hindsight. It can seem at the time that everybody's trying their best, everybody's pitching in. You think you're making progress and then you find it's been a waste of time.

GC: This is what I'm talking about. I've witnessed this, I've experienced it myself actually, the lengthy debates that don't go anywhere. It had a very negative effect on me to be honest.

TDB: The more and more I look at it I think, 'Why are you studying this?' (Both laugh)

GC: Because it was only supposed to be one chapter. Then the amount of time I invested in filming, documenting and editing it means that it's got to be about this fucker now. (Both laugh) This is what it's come to. And because I have filmed footage of these rehearsals, it's academic gold. Well that might be over-stating it a bit, but it hasn't really been done before, nobody's really done it. But it's incredibly difficult to write about, really difficult to decipher what's going on and get it into an academic form. Really fucking hard...So, what are the pros and cons of Anthon's rehearsal methodology?

TDB: I love the way he breaks with the conventions of a normal type of theatre set up, where you've got blocking, or you feel like the director's puppet. It's not a fore-gone-conclusion where you're going to be going with this thing, it's a process of discovery that you're involved in together. I like that type of stuff, I like improvising. I didn't think I used to, but I can appreciate that...and taking it right out to left field and you're challenged as an actor and

an audience. I really like all that stuff. And he tries to make theatre that's funny, looking for a type of humour that's more known in, say, *The Comic Strip*, things like that. It's quite pushy, adult, or even juvenile. (both laugh) the type of humour that could appeal to young folk maybe. But it's not youth theatre, but probably the sort of audience that's going to get it more is a younger audience to an extent. The cons of it are that it can be facile. It's difficult because it's only through this one process, because now I'm more imagining what it's like watching it for the audience's point of view... There is a lot of time wasted. You could be exploring a lot more stuff... a difficulty with this type of thing is that so often there'll be complaints about what a director/writer/creator's not doing. But I realised quite early on, and it was to do with working with Berkoff early on, that rather than complaining about what they're not doing it's about what they are doing. Every director's got their limitations, so it's what is being created within those limitations. How valid, how unique, how challenging that is because, ideally, I do like to be challenged as an actor. And it is an almighty challenge working with him. I appreciate all that... There's frustrations in loads of ways, you feel you should be doing much more, you feel you could be exploring more, less could be getting left to the last minute...

GC: Less pressure.

TDB: But it's theatre in that was as well... He wants to entertain, he wants to challenge an audience, he wants to put you in a position where you're being challenged. Even if the challenge to the audience is in facile, juvenile ways, because so much theatre takes itself so fucking seriously, and is dull and boring.

GC: And cerebral.

TDB: Yeah, it's mediocre. There's so much mediocrity going on.

GC: It's the Emperor's New Clothes, isn't it?

TDB: Yeah. He wants to transcend and wipe away all of that. So you feel that you are doing something pushy in that way... I mean, I'd work with him again, I would.

GC: Be careful what you wish for.

TDB: Yeah. (Laughs) I might not have after this.

GC: Don't worry he won't see this. Ok, why do you think Anthony has this pool of actors that he employs? Or repeatedly employs?

TDB: I think it's part of his psychology, these are his mates, some of them go way, way back. So he's got his friends, he works in quite a tight circle in that way, and it's always been like that. It makes it possible for him to do it, he needs that support. He needs you to feel that you are part of the team, that he can rely on you, that you know what he's like and you'll go along with him. And it's like a love-hate relationship, he loves them, these people. He finds them really funny, but he is sort of contemptuous of them in that way as well (laughs). He laughs both at them and with them. But that's what they do with him, they see his faults, but they love him as well... They're an interesting bunch... he gets strong women and that's a very important part of it... who gets women and they don't take on any sort of lowly position. They are strong, they speak their minds and demand their space and don't take any shit. So he relies on people from that point of view.

GC: To me it seems that it's like a football team, he has certain positions that he has to fill. Whatever show he's doing, he thinks, 'Oh I need the person for this and that person for that. I need Barney Power because he's funny, I need Matt because he can do this type of stuff.' It's almost like he's targeting qualities that they have... 'I'm going to need a striker, I'm going to need a strong defence.' He's casting it in that way.

TDB: Yeah. Yeah. I don't know if you could use a football analogy in that way, because he does seem... being a public schoolboy himself he does seem more of a Rugger Bugger possibly. (Laughs) I don't know how much he's fucking ever been involved in sports or that, he doesn't seem sporty.

GC: No, he's not sporty at all, he's never done any exercise in his life.

TDB: He puts you into brackets and has you as a stereotype, but at the same time he knows what he's tapping in to, the strengths that he's tapping in to... And these people have been built up over the years, they're partly self-serving in that way. He's got to discover, each time, who's up for working with him again... But he gets himself into strong positions because the shows that's he's doing people find hard to refuse. They're getting the opportunity to play big games. It's interesting that when he's casting he's not got characters as such. It's like trying to create a team but you don't know who's going to be playing where. (Both laugh) So he needs all-rounder's.

GC: Ok, do you think that Anthony's process flirts with risk and failure and if so what do you think that's all about?

TDB: Well, that's what it's all about really, he thrives on that, taking risks and flirting with failure. I think he feels that it can't fail as such because as long as it goes on, with this team that he's assembled, it's a success to some extent... But his refusal to play by the rules as they're generally written is what he finds absolutely necessary. Actors are challenged by this as well. It's what makes the show, it's what creates that nothing's ever going to be set in its way. You're never going to have a set, stock production that's then going to go on where everyone knows exactly what they're doing. Sometimes that can work, but sometimes it's like, 'Well make a fucking movie then!' Theatre should always be about risk and live and letting the audience know that's what's going on as well. Somehow that has to come across to them. But the actors have to be able to feel like that as well. And if that means putting them right fucking through it to the bitter end the so be it. But there's other ways of looking at it as well... The David Bowie exhibition that was going on at the V & A...

GC: That was going on during *Narrative* actually.

TDB: Picking up a lot of the ways in which Bowie works there's similarities. He's got his team that he works with again, again and again, and they're not necessarily sure what he's after. Whether he knows exactly what he's after. But they go in and they work fast. They don't have endless fucking periods where fuck all happens (laughs), not in that kind of sense. But it's done on the hoof... Maybe that's what he needs, don't worry about these long rehearsal periods, just get together for four days and do it then! But he'd never be allowed to get away with that. If he was allowed to say, 'Right we're not going to fucking rehearse. I want you to pay the actors. And we'll meet up each night in the pub.' If he could get away with not having to go through the whole fucking rehearsal period... Because it's designers and that as well, I don't know how much you've had a chance to talk to them.

GC: I know. I don't think his process meshes well with the technical requirements of a show. For instance, the looseness of the script and a complicated lighting cue. It's becomes virtually impossible to do that, so it takes up a huge amount of time in the technical rehearsal.

TDB: Yeah. Yeah. When it comes to it in the end, so much time gets spent on that. He does want that...and relies on it to an extent that it's going to look interesting. And again, he gets the same people, Sahine and Nick Powell, they know what he's like and they know what it's going to be like. So obviously they get a buzz off of it, and get to contribute, big style. And he relies on that being part of it...So that's where he is more like Bowie, in that way, with them. But he probably does think why should he fucking have to go through this whole, big rehearsal period. (Both laugh)

GC: Or a writing period. So given this high risk approach, why do you think institutions like the Royal Court, or the National Theatre of Scotland, continue their patronage of Anthony?

TDB: Because he's done the biz, he can produce amazing shows. And he is one of the unique figures in British theatre and beyond. There's not many practitioners like him. And he has profound effects on an audience a lot of the time. And I think he's worth the trouble. Some people are willing to risk that. Not all the people, they'll have done it once and then not again...I could set you up with Lisa, she ran the Red Room, she commissioned him. Emma ran the day to day, dealing with a lot of the practicalities, and saw all that side of things, and has a very good memory. But Lisa was the one that was going out on a limb herself, being a writer and director. But loved his stuff and was one of the very few in that early period that was giving him a chance. The Red Room was doing it because they recognised that. And, in the end, it was down to the writing what actually came out. These plays exist and are being performed...

GC: I can't think of anybody else that would get away with it. You know, you've got an unnamed play, with no script, and he still gets a job...You know better than anybody, the whole process of getting a play on, the vetoing process...Anthony goes, 'I'm doing it in April, let's see what we come up with.'

TDB: Somehow, they're willing to take that risk. Him taking the risk encourages others to take the risk with him. It re-establishes theatre as the risky business that it should be...It's not out-there stuff that actors love doing but audience's don't...Howard Barker, I've got a lot of respect for him, but a lot of people go, 'What the fuck.'...He attempts to do something popular in that way as well, and he's got an instinct for things...he's willing to stick with his instincts of what is good and what's shite...It's that same type of punk-y instinct that you know what you like, but even more so, you know what you don't like. He works off that intuition and risk. And it has to be all the way with that because it can appear...there's plenty of others that make it look as if that's what going on but there's nothing that risky about it at all. And that's what most actors would like as well...he must have made mistakes sometimes. I don't know whether there has been people that have left productions that just couldn't handle the rehearsal process. Or whether he's had to spend a lot of time winning them round.

GC: I think he has had to spend a lot of time winning round actors that are having a hard time. I don't just mean normal complaining, I mean folk who are really having a hard time, and really, really struggling. He has to spend a lot of time with them instead of helping them a bit earlier on by engaging with them. This is what I've noticed.

TDB: Yeah, that's like being his own worst enemy.

GC: Yeah, he does create problems for himself. He really does.

TDB: That's the nature of him that he gets himself into these positions. That's what he sort of thrives on...because what does he do with the rest of his time, when he should be writing the play. He's obviously not writing plays the rest of the time, so what is he doing on his own? *Realism* showed that in loads of ways...Depressive states and life being fucking difficult in normal times...And then having these little periods of combustion.

GC: Yeah, the amount of time he spends at the computer actually writing the play must be fairly limited. Because he usually hasn't got anything when he starts rehearsals and he comes in with a page or two of dialogue now and again.

TDB: But that's the thing, you do wonder whether he's got anything up his sleeve. He always is a bit inscrutable, you're never quite sure. But then is he actually being completely honest here.

GC: (Laughs) He doesn't have anything, he's not bluffing...Nearly finished Tam, are there any particular risks for actors in an Anthony show?

TDB: Aye, they're huge really because it just goes against the grain of everything you're trained for or what you're used to in the profession...I'd been working for a few years and then I became aware of East Fifteen and the way that they operated and saw that complete reliance on improvisation and working off the ball. And then the idea that when you rehearse and then step on the stage, that's the freedom, because you've done all the work. Then it can all just happen, but that's all based on working really, really hard.

GC: Exactly.

TDB: His type of thing has got these elements to it but it's a lot less to hang on to...But it's posing the risk of your relationship with the audience and what the actors need to do to convince them. And why should it be? An analogy would be, if you were a musician you would feel utterly exposed that you might not be able to play the bare minimum.

GC: Yeah, you better be very good at Jazz.

TDB: I've just done a whole stint, last week, with Glasgow Improvising Orchestra and there's elements of that where you go, 'This is crazy.' What you're watching people doing. But they're all really experienced musicians doing this. And you think, 'Well if you're really experienced musicians, why are you doing this?' It's just a different language and it's happening in that moment...that's the hypocrisy of theatre in that way as well. It's there, it's only ever happening that once, that performance. But no! It's a script that you're trotting out, so it's the same fucking thing happening all the time...It's kid on in that way. Usually you'll go along and see it and it's pretty much the same each time...But does he cling to more facile forms of security? Or, and this is the thing you'll know more than me, do things develop much more during the run?

GC: I think things develop during the run.

TDB: And that's as valid, as important a rehearsal period as the period that you've just come out of. That you make the discoveries, each night, going on and doing it then. Which is the most important thing really.

GC: But you can still do that with an organised structure depending on what type of actor you are.

TDB: Yeah, yeah, you're right. I do believe that. You try and get as deep as you can. Obviously, it's always within timeframes. I know that all the way through this, fundamentally, I'm giving him the benefit of the doubt. But I'd rather do that because I know so much of the other way I just can't be bothered with, I've been like that from the start. Because there's a whole fucking swage of theatre that might well be good plays, with good actors, but I just can't be fucking arsed with it. I've no desire to go and see it, or to be involved in it.

GC: It's just fucking dull!

TDB: But I love theatre, you know... Some people say, 'Fuck theatre, it's movies.'... To me it's still like that, as it's like with Anthony... I mean he's writing television now, and he's obviously got the discipline to be able to do these types of things. And he knows that sort of craft and structure. But maybe's he's got that same sort of love-hate relationship with theatre, being disparaging about it, but fucking loves the idea of making something really special because of the way he's trying to do it. He's got his limitations and he lays them on the line as well. He's not scared to show them. Usually directors will try to cover all that up much more... *Caledonia* was a very particular circumstance... For me, it is similar, in a lot of ways, to what I've got for Berkoff, and the way he'll operate, and what he'll create, how he'll infuriate and all that as well. But I see him as an absolute giant of theatre outside the norms. And Anthony's in that sort of vein and thank god these sort of mavericks are still going.

GC: They're a dying breed.

TDB: Otherwise, it all becomes homogenised, safe.

GC: And finally, is there anything you would like to say, or add that we haven't covered? Or elaborate on anything we have discussed?

TDB: I don't think so, particularly. We've covered a lot of ground

Zawe Ashton *Narrative Interview*

GC: So first question. Could you talk to me a wee bit about how Anthony's rehearsal 'process' compares to other processes or rehearsals that actually have a script when you begin?

ZA: From the word go really, from the moment I went to meet him about the project it was completely about connecting with you as a person and thinking about how you might fit into...well in my case with the other four or five actors that had already been cast. So it was just a coffee and 'a meeting of minds?' (said in a self-deprecating manner...they both laugh)

GC: I don't know if that's a good thing.

ZA: I don't know if it was a meeting of minds; I don't want to put that on to him. So from the beginning it was about creating a group of people that would eventually end up serving potentially an idea or a notion, and serving the piece. So instantly it was different from other processes because a lot of the time you go in and you read the script and you're supposed to fit in to something else, supposed to fit a character I guess. So from the beginning it was about...the premise was about whatever this piece might be. And as we've gone along it's been interesting really because it's made me question what a collaborative process actually is when you go in to a play with the script in place, the writer in place, the characters and the actors. Everyone's got these roles carved out. And sometimes that can feel collaborative in a good way because everyone knows their role. But sometimes it can feel non-collaborative because sometimes as an actor you feel like 'oh I've just got to move about from place to place and do what the director tells me.' But I feel that all of our voices, what we've said, or things we've done in the room influences the piece in some way. However, he's got to take it on now, because none of us can direct it. So it's made me reassess what a collaborative process actually is. (Barney Power enters and passes through)

GC: Come on Barney, get a grip.

BP: Sorry man, I'm taking a shit.

GC: Excellent. That kind of leads me on to some of my follow up questions. Are there any specific ideas that you have presented in the rehearsal room that are in the script and if so what are they?

ZA: Not ideas that I would recognise in the writing straight off, but there is a moment where I think that my character is sort of becoming really irritating to another character or potentially where I'm being irritated by someone else. Chatting to Anthony on a break he said 'Oh that actually came from you saying that you'd been irritated by a bumbag that an ex-boyfriend of yours used to wear.' So to the untrained eye maybe nothing that I've said does make it in but there are potentially moments like that which have potentially been served by something I've done or said. I hope my character isn't based on anything I've done or said; that would be depressing.

GC: (Laughs) Excellent. I was wondering to what extent do you personally feel that you're getting to create your character?

ZA: Again, I don't know the idea of what the collaboration actually is; I really don't think it will become clear until the lights go off and it is all of us out there doing the parts. I still don't really know who's creating it; whether he's leading it, whether I'm leading it. It's very up in the air.

GC: That's really interesting actually. So do you think that the production is catering to your strengths as an actress?

ZA: God I have no idea what they are. And again because the 'process' has been so different; right now I feel that my strength as an actress is to...I love working out ideas, I feel more like a writer or director than an actor at the moment. Does that make sense?

GC: It does make sense because of the collaborative process because you're doing that kind of thing. You are in a way always writing it because of your ideas. Is that what you mean?

ZA: Yeah I think so. I want the writing of the character to be strong and I want her to make sense within the piece. So I'm probably calling on my strengths as a shorthand to make it work. Sometimes we're only rehearsing scenes once or twice before they get thrown out or kept in so if there's anything that I'm exercising it's an instinctive response to something and making it work.

GC: It's what I said to you earlier; you're coming across really strong – well for me anyway - and you bring a real commitment to it. So I was wondering if that's the kind of strength that you think you're bringing to it. I can see that.

ZA: You've got to dive right in.

GC: Yeah, it's take no prisoners with this one, isn't it? (Both laugh) Ok, do you have any doubts or concerns about the production?

ZA: Many! Yeah I think everyone has; and they're all different. One of my doubts is that we've made something that is poignant in some way...that we haven't tried to get away from form so much...that we haven't made a piece that will penetrate people. I can't see that yet because we're still in this room pretending chairs are the set. I think this is going to be such a multi-media layered piece. Again, all the concerns for the first time relate to the whole piece, not necessarily just to my part within it and that isn't how it usually goes. You can easily employ the blah, blah, blah by-line if you're not getting on with an actor or director in a scripted piece. But in this I really want to fit into it and push the story along and make it meaningful somehow.

GC: Yeah, it's very much a collaborative piece and you all have equal parts, there is no hierarchy of roles, if you like, that I've noticed. You're all in it together.

ZA: And if anyone did star-turn moment it would...it just wouldn't be right. Do you know what I mean? It would have to relate to the character and that person's journey within the piece. We've all been in plays where the light is specifically put on one person as they roll around in their emotional bullia-base (Both laugh). And I think if that were to happen in this that would be because that character at that moment does that and it says something.

GC: Ok. Do you feel that you are taking any particular risks in this rehearsal process that you would not normally take?

ZA: (Pause) I don't know. I do not know. I don't know if I'm being massively safe or massively risky. I think in terms of...I'm taking a risk on a fundamental level in hoping that I have my lines learned in a week before doing a show.

GC: That's a massive risk.

ZA: (Smiles) That's a huge risk (laughs).

GC: I've been there. That's a massive risk

ZA: So I feel that I am putting myself at risk. Yeah. In that way.

GC: Excellent, ok. It's probably an obvious question, but for you, is Anthony's way of doing things any riskier than in other theatre jobs?

ZA: (Pause) Yeah. It's a big thing to trust that you'll get story from the people that you're working with in a room. It's a massive risk to chore a completely open-ended subject like narrative or people or how we've changed since the internet. And tailor that in four weeks and let everyone see you doing that. And come in having had two hours sleep. Because I'm a writer and I know exposing that process has been. I've been on similar processes where you come in, the next day you've had two hours sleep and you've written five new monologues. You put that in front of people and the sound after it's first been read through as everyone is processing it in their brains is like...for me anyway it's like pork crackling or something. So it's uncomfortable. So in terms of that he's exposing himself and putting himself at risk in the room. So in those terms I think it is very different.

GC: Ok. What's your own take on this saying...I mean Anthony is always saying that acting and theatre is all about risk. What do you think of that?

ZA: (Pause and smiles)

GC: Because Anthony wants you all to be very natural, as if it's happening for the first time.

ZA: Yeah...Yeah.

GC: That's what he sees as this kind of risk. Which I think is very high-stakes risk. What about you, what do you think?

ZA: O God yeah. I think that when it moves me it's always someone risking some kind of exposure. You know, as I grow up in the theatre and loving the theatre and watching it and being in it I see things like adopting a hunchback or having a limp as less risky things than stripping it all back and potentially putting some of yourself in. I did a play here about six years ago and I didn't understand that. And the director said to me please be yourself, but I was obsessed with creating a character that would be far away from me as the run went on – it was about a three month run – the riskiest thing I did was to do that, was to do it just how I would do it. And go 'Oh for God's sake it's not Mary Poppins or whatever'.

GC: Yeah. I've done that myself where you do invest a lot of yourself in a character. It's close to you in a way. It's not you because you're acting but having a lot of your own stuff in there can be very a very vulnerable exposing, risky thing I found.

ZA: Yeah! Yeah, it is. I mean what was interesting in meeting Anthony for the first time was him telling me that 'I don't want anybody to do nudity.' And I've done a lot of things like that on stage and been very proud of myself afterwards because they have been huge risks in that way. And weirdly when I saw one of his plays here a couple of years ago *Relocated*, it started with a man with a penis on his face.

GC: Yeah, my friend was in that, two of my friends were in that; my best friend was the guy in it.

ZA: That's weirdly riskier in a way. I've just done an improvisation with a box over my head and that feels extremely...you feel very vulnerable. And to go with the notion of something, not knowing whether it's good, or whether it's going to be used or not is really hard.

GC: It's very good, it's very funny. You did it really well. Both of you. It's one of the favourite things I've seen so far, not just for the comedy effect, but the way it just came from improv. It was brilliant; you just sort of launched into it and you just totally went for it. That's what I was talking about when I said about your commitment. It's really good, so I don't think you need to worry about this kind of thing.

ZA: Yeah. It is a risk. Chris said earlier, and I hope you won't mind me saying, that the thing about Anthony – and I know she's worked a lot with him before – is that it's "emotionally expensive". You have to be in the room and you have to get ready to commit to something, and expose yourself that just might lead to nothing. Or inspire him to improve another bit that isn't necessarily yours. It does feel exposing but you just get on with it.

GC: Ok, brilliant. I was wondering, does my presence here filming have any effect on you as a performer?

ZA: (Smiles) You're so nice You're a nice person and you're obviously completely supportive and understanding of it. So no it doesn't feel intrusive at all, it feels quite nice and supportive.

GC: Cool. And you're ok with the camera, because obviously me and the camera are separate entities. But the camera, does that have any effect on you? Does it bother you in any way?

ZA: No. It is weirdly comforting sometimes that there is an outside eye. But no. Sometimes you get in the way of the heater, but other than that no. (Both laugh)

GC: Ok, excellent. Just a couple more questions. Do you think this style of theatre, this kind of process, encourages a certain style of acting or not?

ZA: Interesting. In a way. In places it's a lot harder to be truthful because sometimes you're playing the idea of something or like I was saying, a piece in...just playing a small part in the notion of something or the representation of something. And again, because you get the scripts so quickly and you instinctively take on a role. Like mine; my character has changed

virtually every time we have a draft. So yeah, sometimes it's harder to be completely truthful, but in some cases there's so much weird stuff going on that the truth is not so easy to find. So again, I think it's encouraging the instinct, the first instinct. Like we were doing this scene just then and the all of a sudden, half way through I was taken by the need to make it slightly more surreal. So there is obviously something that he pumps in to the atmosphere.

GC: It seems to me like a hybrid of styles; naturalism is absolutely needed and necessary, but it's also heightened as well . It can't just be naturalism like in a soap opera, it's a hybrid of styles that I find very interesting to watch. So I'm going to ask all the actors about that.

ZA: It does bring out the first instinct in you because sometimes you are representing a moment or a scene...especially in this because each scene has to be quite strong and a mixture of so many different moments it kind of frees you up to make it ridiculous if it has to be. Again, it's all to do with where it's coming in the piece.

GC: I think you are all doing a lot of really brave stuff; you are all taking a lot of risks in rehearsals. You are not in this mode, not in a rut. You are taking risks all the time to see where the line is, and what you're going to use.

ZA: Yeah totally.

GC: It's very interesting to watch it. Sorry I'm putting words into your mouth.

ZA: No, it's exactly it. You know I said to Anthony early on in rehearsals that 'you have a way of writing that the more serious it is, the more comedic it becomes.' He's got a kind of reverse comedy writing style. I don't really know how to describe it more than that. Again finding yourself in the middle of that kind of tone is informing; how far you think you can push it or hold it back.

GC: Brilliant. And the last question. What is your take, personally, on Anthony's 'process' of rehearsal? The media, the press, the academics all call it 'process', because it has to be called something. So what's your take on that, your evaluation?

ZA: I mean it's really interesting because I was a fan from the outside of his work. So I watched his stuff before I was in it. I think I actually made an assumption about his 'process' which has been changed since I've been in one of the pieces. Again, it's just bringing up lots of truths about my 'process'. I feel like I'm one of those people who is like 'Hey come on whatever...the script...let's just throw it around.' But working the way that we are it gets to a point when you go as an actor (brings hand over her face and focuses her expression) when you go 'right I need to do this now'. And I think that because I'm also a writer I've been easily lulled into the making of it. And yesterday I suddenly went 'I'm going to have to do this...this isn't a think-tank; I'm going to have to actually get on stage do this.' And that is a massively risky exposing thing no matter what you're in. So I wouldn't say I love the 'process' in any way and I would say that to him. It's been exhilarating and it will continue to be exhilarating throughout the run. But it does expose the best and the worst parts simultaneously about putting on a play.

GC: I mean I found it personally very scary the closer we got to opening. I found it scary, very scary and I felt very very vulnerable. But then onstage it worked out perfectly, well not perfectly, it worked out well. But (makes a horse noise...Zawe nods in agreement through)...

ZA: I can see myself looking back on this and going ‘That was a fantastic “process”’. Going along everything is stripped bare...it is like being back stage or seeing the strings of a puppet. He’s exposed because he might not know what the F... he’s doing, or he might know what he’s doing, and that’s going to change the atmosphere in the room. We might not know how to interpret something but you have to in a short period of time. We might be so bang-on and then it’s not working. So every single mechanism, every single vulnerability of every aspect of this ‘process’ is flying round in the air. And I wouldn’t call that fun, but it’s definitely worth it.

GC: Brilliant. Thank you very, very much Zawe that’s some great stuff. I hope it wasn’t too awful for you.

ZA: No, no it’s fine. No I’m fine Cas.

Appendix 3

Interviewed Actors' Neilsonian Productions

	<i>Year Family</i>	<i>Censor</i>	<i>Stitching</i>	<i>Edward Gant</i>	<i>Lying Kind</i>	<i>Dissocia</i>	<i>Realism</i>	<i>God in Ruins</i>	<i>Relocated</i>	<i>Caledonia¹</i>	<i>Get Santa</i>	<i>Marrat Sade²</i>	<i>Discontent³</i>	<i>Narrative</i>
<i>Ashton</i>														x
<i>Boyack</i>			x											
<i>Burn</i>									x					
<i>Doel</i>										x	x			x
<i>Doherty</i>								x						x

¹ *Caledonia* (2010) was written by Alastair Beaton and directed by Neilson.

² *The Marrat de Sade* (1964) was the RSC's 2011 production directed by Neilson.

³ *Discontent* was the name of a workshopped play that Ross collaborated on with Neilson for the Sydney Theatre Company in 2012.

