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# APPENDIX

## Mark Ravenhill and Polly Stenham

in conversation with
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Keir Elam, Isabella Imperiali, Andrea Peghinelli

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DIANE BORGER: Mark Ravenhill and Polly Stenham both came out of the Royal Court play development tradition, even though in very different ways. So Mark, how did you develop your first play for the Royal Court, *Shopping and Fucking* directed by Max Stafford Clark, and how was your experience of working in this theatre?

MARK RAVENHILL: I've been involved with theatre since I left university, mostly as a literary manager, script reader and as a director. So I think I became active writing a play from the experience of working in theatre. I believe that for playwrights from the Royal Court the first contact with theatre they have is when they write a play, while I was quite immersed in the culture of theatre before I wrote a play.

I was directing plays and I didn't quite find one that articulated what I wanted a play to articulate, and I found myself starting to try to give other authors notes to write a play, which in the end was my play rather than their play. I think this is really bad: as a director you shouldn't be trying to make other people write a play to articulate something for you. So I thought it would be better to sit down and write a play myself. And I was trying to articulate something of a feeling, in the sense of the world that was particular to my generation, and it wasn't found in the plays that had been written at that time. I liked to watch other plays, but they didn't quite articulate something that I felt it needed to be articulated. I thought I'd found a kind of voice in the American fiction of the time: people like Bret Easton Ellis and Douglas Coupland, who is actually Canadian. In North American fiction of the time, there was a 'Generation X.' This fiction is called 'blank fiction,' a kind of a generation without any political, religious, and sometimes even family structures, which was trying to pick its way through life without any maps at all. So I sat down and wrote *Shopping and Fucking*. As soon as I had a draft of the play, I talked to Max Stafford Clark about it. Max is maybe thirty years older than me and brings with him a very particular, great experience and tradition. I was writing about that generation which was a puzzle to him in many ways, even a mystery. One of the things that would attract Max to a play was that it would introduce him, and potentially an audience, to a world that they didn't know.

Initially the idea was for me to direct the play – I didn't want to involve anybody who didn't know anything about that world – and to put it on in a pub theatre like the Finborough theatre, where I had been working, so that the people of that same generation would be in the play and come to see it, really being a generation talking to itself. But working with Max, and the play being a co-production with the Royal Court, would introduce the play to a wider audience, maybe in terms of age and in terms of reference points. We did spend quite a lot of time talking about the play, and then we spent a couple of weeks in a space called the National Theatre Studio with a group of actors, investigating the play and interviewing quite a lot of people whose experiences would be relevant to the characters in the play. I think with that method there is always going to be a pull towards locating your play within a particular tradition of social realism. In some ways my play was something like an urban fairy story or an urban shaggy dog story. So, to some extent, there was some very useful stuff that came from the workshop. The policy is to make sure that every play that comes out from that kind of process is in the same model of social realism; there were some very useful things that came from that workshop. As an author you have sometimes to struggle slightly not to let your work to be placed in the same model of a play coming from that process.

I learned an awful lot from that process and particularly I learned to focus on the text, a very close analysis of it that Max guided a writer through; to have your text exposed in that way is very frightening, very humbling, but it also makes you value what you have written a lot more because they spend an hour on what you maybe spent a minute to write.

Through that process I was in connection with a tradition that went back a long way in British theatre, to close analysis of the text. So the play that came through and was produced was maybe a fourth draft. So there are a couple of moments where I really feel like I own them because there was a sense that you got to explain the world of this play to a group of people that didn't know it, but there is some overwriting, over-explanation of the play. They also benefited from the engagement of the actors researching the world of the play. I think that close analysis of text is still something that is very strong at the Royal Court, and something that writers benefit from hugely.

BORGER: Did you develop your next two plays with Max Stafford Clark?

RAVENHILL: I actually developed a couple of plays with a small touring company called *Actors Touring Company*, and I think this is the danger of the emphasis on play development: the writers can't finish the play themselves, and the play can only be finished with a director and actors in the room.

Next time I came to write with Max I found it very hard to write a play, because initially I wrote *Shopping and Fucking* just for myself. But I think that when you know that every word that you are writing is somehow provisional, it's actually quite, how can I put it, infantilizing, so we started with the workshop process, and I think in the end I was able to pull from that process a play that I still felt was my play. But apart from that process, which was quite painful, I came to the conclusion that there was a lot to learn from workshops, working closely with directors and actors, but ultimately that the duty of a writer is to learn how to write a play by himself, on his own.

BORGER: You wrote an important play for the National Theatre, and then also a pretty big play for the Donmar Theatre, and you worked with a very eminent British director, Nicholas Hytner, besides Max Stafford Clark; I wonder if they did any play development working with you when you wrote *Mother Clap's Molly House* and *The Cut*.

RAVENHILL: They were very different experiences. Nicholas Hytner, who directed *Mother Clap's Molly House* at the National Theatre, was very keen to unpick a play and to rebuild it again with actors. That was not an altogether happy experience, because I think that Max unpicks a play and there is a kind of moral, ethical, a kind of political question: «Why are we unpicking the play?» What I felt with *Mother Clap's Molly House* was that we were unpicking the play and putting it together again to make the most spectacular show that we could.

And then, at the other extreme, there was my play *The Cut*, which was produced in London at the Donmar Warehouse (I think it had a much better production later on at the Schaubüne directed by Thomas Ostermeier). The director and the lead actor of the London cast, Michael

Grandage and Ian McKellen, didn't come from that kind of new writer tradition at the Royal Court, so I didn't get any access to change my own play in the rehearsal. There wasn't the opportunity to say «that needs to go there in the drama,» you didn't have access to the play at all as a writer, to make any changes in the rehearsal. And it's just when you get the play on its feet that you discover things about it. So there is a kind of 'happy medium.' But some English directors and actors are terrified of the idea of a play changing in rehearsal. So what I want as a writer is some kind of 'happy medium,' which maybe you never reach. But there is an idea of 'happy medium,' where the play is open for testing development work that it might need during rehearsal, but it is not necessarily or obligatorily part of the process.

BORGER: Polly Stenham came to the Royal Court about ten years after Mark's time and two artistic directors later, but in a very different programme. Polly, could you talk about the development process of your play *That Face*?

POLLY STENHAM: I think that in the play development I had quite a different experience from Mark. After my play was selected I had one workshop and I made the play change quite a lot, because initially it was conceived in a room. Then in that workshop I realized that it was kind of rubbish and I should change it. I completely agree with Mark when he talks about a 'happy medium' between the two. You should be able to change your play a bit, definitely. But you also don't want to completely rewrite a part you are quite pleased with. So that is naturally really important.

BORGER: Can you talk about the reason why you did the course?

STENHAM: I did this brilliant ten-week course and I wouldn't have written the play at all if I hadn't done it. The Royal Court does the *Young Writers' Programme*: it's a ten-week course and you don't need to read anything before, it's not even expensive. Once a week you go, you sit down and read some plays and you talk about them; then, you have to write maybe two or four pages of a dialogue. But what is so important about the course, I think, wasn't so much the talking, it was just the act of

writing these two pages once a week, the weirdness of writing dialogues, because it's a really a weird thing to do, when you think about it. You know, writing what people say is just odd. But if you practice a little bit, soon it becomes ok. A really important thing about the course is to gain a sort of confidence, among many other young writers, because what you are doing is completely odd, but you start to believe in it more.

ISABELLA IMPERIALI: Since the writer at the Royal Court often has an active role during rehearsals, what kind of collaboration does he establish with the director? How much does his point of view on a character or on the whole setting of the performance affect the final choices?

RAVENHILL: People quite often think that when you write a play you have the whole production of the play in your head. But I think, maybe because I came from a directing background, that the play is a kind of container into which lots of different people's feelings, thoughts, ideas can be poured. So the play is quite open. As a playwright, during the first production of the play, where everything happens in the language in which you wrote it, you would like it to be pretty true to your intentions. But I don't have a mental picture of every character. There is a funny story of one writer of the Royal Court watching one of his plays screaming 'No! It was a yellow bag!'.

Well, I think a play is quite an open form and beyond the first production it is actually fun to see different productions that can transform the play in an exciting way you haven't considered at all; sometimes, on the contrary, the production completely misconstrues the play. So the playwright has to create a kind of framework, which hopefully exists by itself as a good text. The play is also a very open thing and it is the skill of the actor, the director and the designer, and then the imagination and the emotion of the audience that creates the whole meaning of the play, and sometimes it's better to enjoy this act of collaboration.

The unusual thing about theatre in the UK is that it is still based in London. The fact that every city has a theatre, as in Germany, which would be able to stage its own production is not conceivable in the UK, we don't have the same situation. The first production in the UK is often the only one; for this reason playwrights place a great emphasis on that production, and often it's the only chance for your play to be seen. While

if you write a play in German and it is a successful play, quite often you have the play opening in four or five productions in the same week. It is exciting and interesting to see just how different each director and actor make the play. And quite often critics, reviewing the play, will see maybe three different versions of it opening in the same week. So the idea that in the UK there is one essential, central, definitive production is one of the problems, because after the first production probably it will never be seen again in English in the UK; this is one of the reasons why we produce so many plays; the risk is that the audience and the critics never get to see that the play could be interpreted in five different ways, maybe within the same year by quite different directors.

BORGER: Also not in all the theatres in the UK, but certainly at the Royal Court, it's written in the writer's contract that they attend the auditions for the actors. So they are part of the people who make the choice. I've certainly known instances where the writer and the director disagreed, and the writer made the final choice, I think perhaps foolishly. They also have the right to attend all rehearsals. So maybe sometimes they are unhappy about what's going on, but they are at least always part of the process. The arguments happen, but that's good and constructive.

KEIR ELAM: Mark has written, performed and published a large number of very successful plays. He is unquestionably one of the most acclaimed playwrights working in Britain today. He uses a very wide range of theatre styles and is an extremely experimental dramatist, in the good sense of the word. Every time he writes a play he tries to go beyond what he has done before, setting himself new challenges. Just to give you an idea of the many roads that Mark has travelled along Britain, where he is a very visible public person and an excellent playwright, I want to underline that, among other things, he has also been a literary director – in 1996 he was literary director for Paines Plough, a New Writing Company; he is an actor; and he regularly writes cultural columns for the *Guardian.* I think it would be interesting to ask to Mark about his recent experience, his continuing search for new forms, new ways of approaching what are, in effect, recurrent themes, for example political themes, the conflicts taking place in the world and indeed in Britain itself.

Mark's recent experiences include the extraordinary cycle of sixteen twenty-minute plays, which he wrote in 2007 for the Edinburgh Fringe Festival under the title of *Ravenhill for Breakfast* and which was then recreated in London the following year in different venues with different directors, including some of the leading directors of British theatre today. This highly ambitious epic cycle in some ways recalls the medieval cycles of plays performed in the streets and squares, and in other ways it recalls classical epic, because some of the titles look back to works such as the *Odyssey*. So Mark, could you tell us something about this experience?

RAVENHILL: This cycle of plays did literally just start with the challenge to myself to write a new play for every day of the Edinburgh Festival which lasts for three weeks. I have read about an American playwright who wrote a play every day for a year and I thought 365 plays would have been a little too much, but I thought that the span at the Edinburgh Festival would be good. I couldn't write a full length play for everyday, but something like a twenty-minute play is a reasonable time; so we asked people to come at breakfast and we presented the reading of the new play every day; and I wrote the plays over a few months.

I think we've got a very curious kind of contradictory hunger, which is for big epic stories and also a need for quite short, quick and immediate forms. So there is an almost implicit contradiction between these two needs.

I don't think we quite trust one big epic story that ties everything up – this is something from the playwrights of my generation – and makes all the connections, so I thought that through a series of fragments we could get to something that was like the epic and again this is reflected in the speech of *Shopping and Fucking* about big stories and small stories. I wanted something that was quite a big story and quite a small story. Each of the short plays is actually ironically named after some of the biggest stories mostly in western civilization.

Through this combination of plays I did want to look at what we experience, in my opinion, as epic events of the time: the dominance of the Neo-cons, a new world view, a new sense of proactive war, in particular in America, but also in the UK and in European countries.

So I was trying to tell a big, big story through a series of fragments. Initially we just presented these twenty-minute play readings in Edinburgh

and we started in these little studio theatres. Then we took them to London and this was an idea of the artistic director of the Royal Court, Dominic Cooke. The year before the artist Anthony Gormley had a series of statues that just popped out around in London and Cooke wanted to do something similar with my plays. There was one person who went to every single performance, so it was possible to collect the whole cycle, but it was also possible just to see one, or two or three. And I wanted that sense: that you could come into this world, come into this view of world pictures, and also put the plays into a different order, and you could see the whole thing because this seems to me to reflect, and hopefully not just to reflect, but to underline the way we just draw rolling news and the way we just draw shuffling tracks on our iPods. There is something about that element of the fragment and a hunger for the bigger picture that I was trying to capture in this form of the plays.

So there was a kind of spreading out across London; and different companies in different parts of the world are choosing to present the plays in different ways, and it would be interesting to see which plays are chosen in each country and how they choose to present them.

MICHAEL BILLINGTON: Don't you also hunger to see the complete version of these plays when they are not put together? Because, as a critic, it is very frustrating. I was rather frustrated by this. Would you not like to put them all together?

RAVENHILL: Yes. But financially it could be a problem.

ANDREA PEGHINELLI: In 1996 in *Shopping and Fucking* you dealt with a crucial theme, 'the death of grand narratives'. Is that argument now dated? Because at present, as Billington also suggested, we are probably living through one of the grand narratives of all time, that is the crisis in capitalism. Do you think it could act as a stimulus to you and to other playwrights of your generation?

RAVENHILL: Absolutely. Everybody I guess, right at this moment in time, you in Italy as we in the UK, are starting to want to map out what the connections are between our personal lives in the economy and politics in a new big question: why didn't we ask this question sooner? So I

think there's going to be a big shift in what a play is, and what plays are about. It's a sad time for lots of families and individuals economically, but actually in terms of a hunger for plays and what a play is going to do, I think the next few years could be very exciting. And I think that it was one of the things that motivated the wave of plays, of which *Shopping and Fucking* was one, of the generation from 1993 to 1996–97. What is interesting about these plays is how diverse they are. But I think they convey the sense that something was shifting in British society very profoundly. I don't think people were so wildly optimistic that they wanted to change the world, but there was something that was ending, something that was shifting, and a release of a kind of energy from the playwrights, writing about politics or social situation. The sense of change and the language that we needed to express the world that was changing, was part of why there was the biggest explosion of playwrights, not only financially – the plays were made possible by the Royal Court – but also pragmatically, because of this sense of mood changing. There was a gap in meaning which playwrights often rushed to fill.

BILLINGTON: Our global economy has changed and, secondly, we as individuals are facing a change in our way of life. We are all talking about unemployment, the increasing shortage of money in our own pocket. What effect is *this* going to have on writers and on institutions? With Polly we had an interesting conversation about who goes to the theatre, why young people do not go to the theatre, and we said it could be for economic reasons. Now, with this economic crisis, is it going to be less likely that young people can afford to go to the theatre?

STENHAM: A lot of friends couldn't afford to see my play when it was transferred to the West End. It was something like forty-five pounds, which is just insane, too much money for students or young people. But the Royal Court is not totally expensive, even if it's still more expensive than a cinema ticket. It is an expensive hobby, definitely.

BILLINGTON: Would you suggest it's mainly money that keeps your friends out of the theatre?

STENHAM: I think it's partly money, but I also think it's partly that the theatre has a bad reputation and it isn't fair. It has this kind of reputation among my friends which upsets me. It's a sort of a 'dull medium', like a rubbish play you see at school. And I have just memories of theatre things like three hours watching bad Shakespeare productions. I think that the responsibility of younger writers is encouraging people to go. It has the same quality and it gives the same excitement as going to see a rock concert, because it's live, that's the brilliant thing about it, it's all in front of you, you can't download it.

ELAM: The Royal Court is very successful regarding young writers, but is it equally successfully for young audiences? Do you find there is a change of generations among audiences? Do you think that the same audiences who came maybe to see *Shopping and Fucking* also came to see *That Face*? Is the Court's policy working in attracting younger people to the theatre?

BORGER: The Royal Court attracts slightly different audiences for two reasons. One is, I think, that we are still pretty good at attracting young people, and you can go cheap to the Royal Court. And then people tend to go to the Royal Court until they are about thirty. And so it's full of drama students, young people, people who maybe think we have a cool bar. And then people seem to disappear for about fifteen years, and come back when they are in their forties and then go there for ever. While in their thirties they tend not to go to the Royal Court, maybe because they have young children and they have mortgages. But if you are going to the theatre, even in London, which is a very big theatre-going town, you're going for a light night out, you're probably not going to the Royal Court: if there is somebody celebrating their anniversary for example, I promise you *That Face* is not the right play. I think it's something to do with our subject matter, and I'm not saying that they park their brains for those ten years, but I think that it's a curious thing.

Dominic Cooke, our artistic director, is particularly interested in who the audience is: he's not trying to exclude anyone, he's not trying to exclude older, white, middle class people. But he wants more people to come, and he's very conscious that the experience that you have as a theatregoer is very related to who was in the audience and what there was

on the stage. So in the past three years we've done quite a lot of work by black playwrights, we have spent a lot of money for us on gaining black audiences in. And I know it could sound like a sort of truism, but that is a population that really doesn't go as much to the theatre, and certainly not in Sloane Square. The plays that we've put on, that directly affect their lives, have had a tremendous response and I'm so proud because they were successful. For example *Random* by Debbie Tucker Green, it was about knife crime in London, which is a really huge problem right now because one teenager a week is stabbed, and it's shocking but they are almost *always* black. And it has become so common and they are eighty percent black, certainly under twenty-five. *Random* was fantastic for the response, for the people who were there.

We've done a lot of experiments this year, with taking work outside Sloane Square and we did the play in a shopping centre, an old shopping mall, and that attracted completely different people.

BILLINGTON: The Court has been relatively successful in attracting new audiences like other theatres, the Young Vic has a similar policy in attracting people. Some thirty years ago I went to a lecture given by Peter Brook in London, the question was never to be asked, but «What is the future of the theatre? » was brought to the attention of Peter hoping he could give the solution. He paused for a very long time, he put the end of his fingers together in a very contemplative way, and thought and thought and finally said: «The future of the theatre is cheap seats. » That was true and it is still true.

If we can find a way of making theatre affordable, I think we will be able to satisfy the hunger of this generation. But that hunger is somewhat stopped by or not satisfied by the price of the ticket. If we could only find a way of making theatre more affordable, would we crack a lot of problems?

BORGER: We would, but in all ways there is a credit crunch. The Royal Court has always charged no more than ten pounds for the cheapest price ticket, without subsidies, and it has to do with where you put your money, while those big theatres spend hundreds and hundreds of thousands of pounds on sets. So why don't they have small sets and cheaper tickets? And if you want to take your children to see *War Horse*

at the National Theatre, it costs you forty pounds per head. They get twenty million pounds in public subsidy! And that makes me crazy because England is very, very blessed with subsidies in the arts, and I just think how can a family with two kids afford the National Theatre cost if they have to pay a hundred and sixty pounds if they want the kids seated in good seats? That's wrong.

ELAM: Unfortunately in Italy we don't have the same kind of promotion of young playwrights or young theatre in general; there is a phenomenon of a return of interest in theatre among young people but at the moment in Italy it is very unlikely that somebody as young as Polly could be so successful. It is not easy, especially for young people, to break into any sphere, or simply to find a job. The vey idea of a young person, a university student, being able to become known and to have access –the word 'access' is a key term here – to what in Italy or in many countries is a much more closed world, you only break through, if you are lucky, when you are about forty!

So Polly, what has been your experience in these terms, in leaving one world: the world of study, the world of the university, and breaking into this other more 'exotic' sphere?

STENHAM: I believe it's really important to clarify that what has happened to me was a kind of an accident, because I had no idea, no plan, no dream that any of this happened. I mean, I wrote a play really not very encouraged. I remember the exact moment I sat down thinking 'Can I be bothered? Should I do it?' And then I wrote the first name of the character down and I did this sort of thing without thinking and this changed my life completely and so much for the better.

I was looking for a course in fiction writing, because I was a bit bored at the university; I wanted to write novels and it never occurred to me at all to write plays. I was looking for a writing course everywhere and there was nothing and I found this Royal Court course. I think it's funny if you chase a big change in your life back to this tiny decision that you take one Monday afternoon, in a library, with a coffee. And that tiny decision makes this thing happen.

I don't know what the opportunities are to do things like that in Italy, I mean I wouldn't be able to do that without the Royal Court, so it was ob-

viously much more than a random decision, I had an enormous amount of support and encouragement.

BILLINGTON: What do you think could have happened if you had attended a fiction course? Would you now be writing novels?

STENHAM: Maybe yes. When I think of a novel I think 'how long is a novel' and I imagine I can't write more than twenty thousand words. Maybe short novels.

RAVENHILL: The great thing about theatre is that anybody could make it anywhere with any resources. I mean, I started making plays with my brother in our bedroom – we were about four. It is actually not that complex, it's very simple to make, so you don't need to wait for the Royal Court Theatre to set up a writers' school. I mean when I decided that I wanted to write, I just wrote a number of short scenes, and just got together with friends in a living room, just to learn the craft.

So anyone who wants to write a play can grab a couple of people in the room, write a ten-minute play, stage it and invite twenty people to watch it. With film, with television, you've got to wait for lots of other people to give you permission or resources. But you really can create a play in a day with no money at all. That's really what I love about the medium of theatre, for me it is the most exciting medium of all.

One of the reasons why I decided to perform monologues was that all I needed was just to stand up and start speaking for an audience and you had a play, so I wrote a monologue just to remind myself that, of course, I didn't need to wait for directors, literary managers, critics, and also people but, at any moment, I could make a play and start doing it.

BILLINGTON: For both of you your imagination was shaped by an explosion of drama at quite an early age actually. Polly, what effect the plays you saw had on you as a writer? Have they inspired you in writing and conversely for Mark as well?

STENHAM: My dad used to take me to tiny theatres, like the Fringe theatres. He took me also to the Royal Court where, if I'm not wrong, I saw *Ladybird*, by Vassily Sigarev. It's a heroin and gay play. And I only

realise now how desperately inappropriate some of the things he took me to were. Did anyone see *Caravan* (Helen Blakeman's play)? Where two people were doing stuff, copulating? I was eleven and it was in a tiny space. They were there and I was sitting here singing and pretending I couldn't hear them. So I think those kind of awful experiences were helpful, because I was acquainted with the quite boring stuff I was taken to at school, and they were sort of new things that did this kind of literature-like productions. But you also had places where people did things in front of you in tiny rooms. So if I had not seen some of those dirty and exciting places quite young, I don't think I would have taken perhaps some of the risks that I took in that play.

BILLINGTON: Mark, what shaped your imagination?

RAVENHILL: We weren't very metropolitan, we were much more suburban and we didn't have very much money either. We went to amateur theatres. In Britain there are a lot of very good youth theatres. And I think often people in professional theatres maybe have no contact with that, maybe they are a bit dismissive or snobby about that; having little or no money to travel and go and see theatres, I didn't really see any professional theatre. But there was a good amateur company putting on plays, like *The Caretaker*. But also I loved amateur productions of pantomime, which is a very English form of theatre. I wrote one of those pieces for the Barbican Theatre. I wrote a pantomime that went into *The Cut*. But I think maybe the first play that really excited me, and that I didn't have the chance to see, was *Waiting for Godot*. And I could remember that, I was sitting in the backyard and for some reasons I had a copy of *Waiting for Godot*. It was as exciting as my first sexual experience reading *Waiting for Godot*. I never knew a play could do anything like this. And actually that night I learned Lucky's speech, and I decided I had to learn about that play. And then the first professional production I saw, was by the Royal Shakespeare Company doing *Henry IV* in a sports centre, and again I found it was hugely exciting. I think when you are a teenage boy, the relationship between father and son growing up, put in a play, is something that speaks to you very directly. But I still think strongly that there are many more links that can be built between amateur theatres, new theatres, community theatres, and professional theatres. One of the projects I

have been involved with at the Royal Court was created by the National Theatre. It consisted in a scheme commissioning plays and creating a repertoire of brand new plays for young people to perform. So I've written three plays for that scheme, and the great thing is that you write your play and you get about thirty different productions of it, all over the country. Then you go in schools and centres and you have to spend a few months to see all of them. Some of them are terrible but others are absolutely wonderful, also because your play is performed by a group of fifteen or sixteen-year old teens. I guess, because of my experience, I know that those plays are genuine, and people will remember them for the rest of their lives. There's a kind of change of the sense of the world. So writing those plays is something I find particularly exciting, because they're going to speak immediately to people in a different way. When you are an adult you just go and see that play and probably you never have the impact with plays like a teenager does.

BILLINGTON: Diane, what was your experience with professional theatres?

BORGER: I'm from a small town in the Midwest of the United States and I didn't see any professional theatre until I was quite old. The first play I ever read and had a strong impact on me was *Mother Courage*. I was sixteen and I thought: 'How can I be sixteen and never heard about it?' It was massive for me.

BILLINGTON: I was taken to see *Troilus and Cressida* when I was ten, but maybe what I liked most was Pantomime. Pantomime in England has a different meaning from the Italian one. In Italy it is still a sort of *commedia*. In England it is incredibly tacky, crass and vulgar entertainment, and it is always based on a fairy story. It's all always based on crossing the casting, a man who plays a woman caricatured, travestied, parodied. The hero, the principal boy, is traditionally played by a girl. Everyone swaps gender. It's an amalgam of fairy story, pop songs and audience participation, which is an important feature. There is a song sheet and all the audience has to join in. It's also a way of keeping the ancient comedy tradition together, and also it's amazingly coarse, vulgar, de-

lightful. A peculiarly English entertainment and it does affect most of us from quite an early age.

RAVENHILL: I think it's harder and harder with schools in the UK because of the pressure on teachers' time. But it's still the case that a lot of people have been in a play when they were at school. By visiting other countries you realize there are actually lots of countries where people haven't been in a play when they were at school. So most people in the UK still would have had the experience – at least once and maybe with a small part – of being on a stage and acting in a play when they were at school. And most people would have gone quite a few Christmases to a theatre to see a pantomime. So theatre, to that extent, is part of many people's experiences, and a very high percentage of British people has got that kind of connection with theatre. As you travel you realize that not every country has that connection between children and theatre.

ELAM: Just think about the drama clubs or the performance of the annual school play.

RAVENHILL: And the other thing that we have to take into account is the publishing. I think this started with the Royal Court but actually it expanded when publishers discovered there was enough market for plays. If you publish a play at the same time as it is produced, you sell enough copies to break even. Maybe one out of a hundred plays that you produce becomes a classic and you can make money on it. Every single play that is produced practically in the UK is published at the same time. That means that if you are studying anywhere in the UK you can walk into a bookshop in your town and buy copies of the latest plays that are being produced. That's really quite extraordinary. That means that Polly can open a play, and two months later it can be on a shelf somewhere. That's a really extraordinary access to the latest plays. And I remember when I was a graduate and I was doing a horrible job in my hometown, paying off my university fees, it was possible to buy and read the paper (it was Michael's reviews actually) every morning – I couldn't go to the theatre because it was too far but I could buy the paper and read the reviews of what was happening in London. And then I could buy the play or, if not, steal it! By the time I came to London I actually was aware of all the new

plays that were being staged of which I'd already read the reviews and the playtext. And that level of access to text is unusual as well.

ELAM: Also, the fact that people get used to reading a play, which is not something that comes naturally, as it were. You acquire a sort of knowledge, a competence in reading plays, which in other countries is not common. You see people on the tube reading a play when they might be expected to be reading a novel or a newspaper: elsewhere, this would be a rather strange thing to do. Reading a play competently is partly about knowing how theatre works, allowing you to create an imaginary stage in your mind. I think this is a very important part of the interest in drama in Britain, as Mark was saying: if you come to read a play you can find different ways of gaining access to what is happening now in real time in drama and the theatre. This competent audience, knowledgeable about how to respond to plays is, I think, vitally important for a playwright. I would ask Polly, what is like having been on the syllabus, having been studied by your former university colleagues? Have you ever minded becoming a subject of studies? You might ended up studying your own plays, had you stayed on at a University College in London?

STENHAM: It's a little bit of a weird thing.

ELAM: I can imagine. Do you like to discuss your plays with students or with young people?

STENHAM: I like to talk to people after they've seen it, I like them not to know that I wrote it. When they don't know you are the author, you can know their thoughts because they are honest, and it's fun, I feel like a detective. My play was studied briefly in the English course, which I left to write more plays. And something that made me feel a bit weird was that my play was studied by everyone, but few of them knew me from the class which I left the year before. They started to talk about the play and decided that the play belonged to Mia, the girl character, because I clearly named her Mia and Mia means 'mine' in Italian, which is just the biggest load of rubbish. So I think I prefer people to see it, not to study it.

PEGHINELLI: I would like to know what do you think about the scandals that have typified the Royal Court's 50-year history. It seems scandals are endless at the Royal Court: scandals of rows between the playwright and the public, director versus critic, and so on. Are they part of a strategy to keep it up-to-date?

BILLINGTON: Nowadays there is much more tolerance in people's comments on the plays. Dominic Cooke did say something that caused a lot of comment which is that the Royal Court had dealt historically with kitchen-sink dramas, the problems determined by the urban dispossessed and Dominic said that actually the middle class problem is now an unbelievable dilemma and this is part of the inevitable subject matter at the Royal Court. Diane, what is the agenda now at the Royal Court? Has the agenda changed in some ways? Has it been expanded?

BORGER: I think it has been expanded because what Dominic said at the beginning of the sentence, when he talked about how examining the middle class is never quoted. And what he said is: 'Shakespeare wrote about kings, queens, people and power, and the reason why we are still interested in Shakespeare after four-hundred years is because we are still interested in people who have power.' So he wanted to turn the mirror towards people who have power, and inevitably in our society it means turning the mirror to them as well as to the marginalized and dispossessed, but a lot of people who make decisions and affect our lives are middle class – one of the better terms. Because we don't have kings and queens anymore, but we have political leaders, we have businessmen with huge amounts of money who pull the strings behind the scenes. What Dominic Cooke wanted to look at was who has the power, who makes the decisions that affect our lives, our lifestyles and all that. I don't think he made any claims to throwing out the *kitchen sinks*, so that's why I think it was expansion rather than contraction. But I also think maybe he wants to make the middle class squirm when you talk about that, because he thinks people can't get off the hook that easily. In Springtime 2009 we are about to stage three American plays by a playwright whose name is Wallace Shawn, who has struggled with the issue of 'how are you a liberal humanist in this world that we're living in?' I don't know if you guys talk about this so much, but how do you remain tolerant and accepting of the

values of cultures which are not your own, or are not western values? I'm sure women here in Italy wouldn't be in a burka, but if you want to be understanding of other cultures you have to wear it. Dominic wants to go into that world, so we are just cosy sitting there and thinking: 'Wow! We are so liberal, we are so laid back.' Because he thinks that power and responsibility are in that world.

BILLINGTON: Let's go back to Polly's play that we see as some kind of declaration of intent. It was an extremely middle class family play, in the Theatre Upstairs.

BORGER: Yes, but it was defined by your lot, by the critics. I don't think Dominic said: «Oh, I have got a middle class play!»

ELAM: I would like to ask Diane what the *International Programme* is and what the *Young Writers' Programme* is? How do you encourage young people to learn a craft such as a specific genre of writing, which is quite a difficult craft to master, as Mark said earlier? Can you tell us some of the things that come out of this experience? Obviously, Polly's play is one of the best things to have come out of it.

BORGER: I think the aim of the Royal Court is to put on 16 to 18 plays a year, but the rest of the work is really play development. And in a sense, putting on productions is just the most successful mode to test the play's development. And it's really hard to find 16 to 18 good new plays a year. And so we're selfish. It's self-interest to find ways to get people to write plays and tell the stories they have to tell. There are many ways. Some are historical: you know somebody who is a good young playwright, so you offer him a commission to encourage him to write a play; you accept scripts that are unsolicited; that means that someone just can send it in and someone would read it; you have relationships with existing playwrights like Mark, with whom you take a cup of coffee and you hope he'll send a play to you; you go and see plays at other theatres and you talk to people. Those are the historical ways for getting plays, apart from that and the belief that a writer sits in a room, or in a library, writes a play and sends it to you; or they talk to you and you may have a reading or a workshop. But beyond that, how do you get people like Polly who had

never thought she may be a playwright? Or people who maybe don't have the privilege of education, but would still have extraordinary stories to tell? For that reason we do a lot of workshops, sometimes under the title of 'Unheard Voices'. The project we did with the young Muslim writers took two years and was difficult to start up at first because it was really hard to get those communities to trust us and to figure out that we had a boy group and a girl group, things that are really obvious for us. At that time we were well-intentioned liberals. We recently had a workshop for people who had lived in London for less than three years. As a result we now have really promising Polish writers. We're constantly thinking of ways to find writers. And so we do it by looking for young people, going into schools. For several years we had a scheme called 'Playwrights at work.'

What we do in the United Kingdom is what we do overseas. This is mostly funded by the British Council, so it relates partially to where they want the work and money to go. We've done it in a lot of different countries over the past ten years in particular, and I think that, when we go, we always work with a partner theatre there because there is a danger. Once there was an article that said that the Royal Court was the Starbucks of playwriting because everywhere you were, the Court plays were all the same. It was a little bit hard. We can't help it if all these theatres want to put our plays on. They work on our productions but they are performed in an original way. We always send out working practitioners, playwrights and directors, we don't send someone who is a teacher and says: «These are the ten rules of playwriting.» As Polly was describing it, you work with a playwright, you read plays, you might be told to write scenes, you learn about dialogues, characters and structures. For some of the playwrights it's more pedantic, I guess. For example Simon Stephens and Steven Jeffreys, two playwrights, are really organized in their approach. But I think they're just sharing what works for them, some are more laid-back and just wanted to have a conversation and be encouraging. So I think we go about it in a lot of different ways and it's interesting.

BILLINGTON: You talked about the unsolicited manuscript. When was the last time the Royal Court staged a play that came from a letter box unsolicited? I suspect, the bulk of the work comes through writers you know or young writers' schemes or whatever?

BORGER: It's been a while since the last time. Maybe 2000, 2002 or 2003. It doesn't happen very often. What happens is that the unsolicited script allows us to find good writers, so sometimes the first goes unsolicited but then you meet them to have a cup of coffee and you get to know them and talk about their work so the second one isn't. I don't want you to think it's manna from heaven.

ELAM: It might be interesting to ask our two playwrights, Mark and Polly, about their current projects, without necessarily asking them to reveal secrets about the plays they're working on now. Could you please tell us something about the process of conceiving and writing a play: how the idea arrives, and the next steps after that?

RAVENHILL: We've both got plays on in March and April 2009 at the Royal Court. My play is a good example of a very long-term product of relationships created by the International Department of the Royal Court. In 1997 we made the first contact between the Royal Court Theatre and the Schaubühne Theatre in Berlin, before they had the artistic teamwork studio theatre. Sarah Kane and myself went there just for a week of readings with a team. As a result of that week of readings they produced my plays at the Schaubühne. Three are in the repertoire at the moment: *Shopping and Fucking*, *Product* and *The Cut*. But we also produced other plays, in particular Marius Von Mayenburg's plays at the Royal Court. So there's been a genuine kind of exchange of plays and ideas, and I think to some extent our plays became a little more German, and their plays' production became a little more British. It's been a kind of sharing a way of working. This play I'm going to do at the Royal Court this year is a co-commission between the Royal Court and the Schaubühne in Berlin, initially suggested by the Schaubühne, even if the Royal Court carries all the financial and production costs. It's a play which is part of the season at the Shaubühne, marking the sixty years from the division between East and West Germany and twenty years since the collapse of the Berlin wall. So that production will play at the Royal Court, then for a few performances in Berlin at the Schaubühne. That's not the end: it's part of a relationship that began eleven or twelve years ago, with the week of play-readings. We gave it a very good title

'Collapsing Ideologies' by the Schaubühne. So I found the bigger the subject, the bigger the theme; I also gave something personal to it. So in the end it's a two-handed play. A kind of drawing of my relationship with my brother, which I'd never really written about. But it's about East and West Germany, before the fall of the wall. The experimental form of the playtext wouldn't have happened if I had not gone twelve years ago with a little play exchange for few days in Berlin, with the International Department of Playwriting of the Royal Court.

ELAM: Polly, your play *Tusk! Tusk!* is coming on this spring, but you are also working on the film version of *That Face.* What is the difference between working on a play and transforming a play script into a film script?

STENHAM: It's really hard. I don't recommend adapting your own work at all, because, I don't know if I get pressure, but I've changed that quite a lot and I don't want to talk too much about it because it is so embryonic. The play is very much about the boy and his mother and his story, and the film is about the girl and her mother, so I shifted the focus.

ELAM: What about *Tusk! Tusk!*?

STENHAM: That has been really hard as well. I didn't really think that it would be easy, but I wasn't prepared for how hard writing would be now. I think it's the second album feeling. I messed up between getting the commission and doing the new play. When I got the commission, I was so cheerful about how it was going, so I went and sat in my room for about two months smoking and making big collages. I convinced myself that this was work, but I didn't write down a word. I had this idea: it's going to be huge, and it's going to be a lake and a forest and a country house and it's going to be massive.

And then I went out for a drink with someone from the course, a friend, rather than someone official and she really knew that I was bad when I said that I wanted wine instead of coffee and she said 'You are mad! It's not possible! You can't do that as a play! You look awful.' So I had this horrible journey back on the tube, I was really upset because I had to start all over again. But from the ashes of that came the new idea

for the play. They are not the same characters, they are different, it's a different world, a different situation, but there is a connecting image in the very last scene of *That Face*: a boy and a girl, brother and sister, lay on the stage in a very desperate situation, completely alone in a building. And the new play begins with a brother and sister, quite a similar age difference, but the new characters are a bit younger. And that's how I started with those two on stage. Yes, it's really hard to write.

BILLINGTON: Can I ask a silly question about how a play starts? Because I've been working about Harold Pinter on stage and Pinter says, in the development of his plays, nearly always he starts from an image or a word. When the final image comes to his mind he has to explore and unlock the medium of that image. Maybe it's just a phrase and he has to find out who spoke that phrase, where does it come from. Is this the way that plays are frequently born? I mean you, Polly, have just mentioned the image at the end of *That Face*. Is that a common experience for you, Mark and Polly?

RAVENHILL: In my own experience nothing is ever quite as thorough and schematic as non-playwrights think it is, each of my plays has a different starting point. *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat* has a kind of personal form. I've written twenty-minute plays for three weeks, and each of the plays would normally begin with a line, an image or a moment. But I've been trying to find an image that for me in some way solidified or made concrete a political situation. Normally something that is very simple. So one of the plays I wanted to write was about Guantanamo Bay. I just wrote about a woman who wants to get a good night's sleep (*Paradise Lost)* so she decides to explore the screams coming from a neighbour's flat. She discovers a woman has been tortured, and what she wants to do is stop the tortures. But in the end she ignores what she should do, and she just leaves it and carries on, just to be quieter. Sometimes for me there is a big theme, and I just try to find something concrete, and last time I thought about East and West Germany and I read about it. Then I thought how can I make East and West Germany, two big countries, be in a concrete relationship? And I just thought I don't really speak to my brother anymore, and I've got lots of presage dreams about him; so I decided to see what the links are between my dreams about my brother and

this situation that I've got to understand between East and West Germany. So there's normally a point where you find a kind of concrete moment where you can start. I can't begin a play from a big subject, I have to find a little line, or an image, or a moment as a way in. Lots of writers think for months about a big subject, and I think probably Polly's collage making was all feeling her way into the play. I mean, as you write for a long time, you give yourself permission that actually what you are doing is part of the process, and then one day you say: «That's it!» and you can write the play. So that the play tends to be a kind of six months' window-shopping, collage making, baking cakes, cleaning, going to the gym, and a few weeks of writing. I'm always amazed when in the introduction of known playwrights they say: «And the play was written in two, three weeks!» Like every play in the world, because plays are always written extremely quickly, but they are thought about, felt about and experienced often over years.

STENHAM: Mine took eleven months. A very long time, but I completely agree with all Mark said about finding a little inlay, like a little mouse. I remember when I spent eleven months writing stuff and never put it into the play. I was trying lots of different avenues just to get into the right writing material. I listened to lots of music and some of the lyrics that I find confined in a tiny bed were in *In Rainbows* by Radiohead. And the weird experience of this play was that the lyrics were all I needed. I planned the whole sub-story of the play. So I think listening to music, collage making, and baking cakes are really important things.

PEGHINELLI: Do you think there was a sort of a zeitgeist, or any kind of defining mood, that you embraced maybe together with other playwrights who emerged in the Nineties? I'm thinking of Sarah Kane, Antony Neilson or Joe Penhall, for instance.

RAVENHILL: In retrospective we projected kinds of narratives, and people sometimes asked me when the meeting was, where the café was where we all sat down and wrote the manifesto called *In-Yer-Face Theatre*. I'd have loved to be part of one of those, I'd have loved to be kind of a Dada or something, it was the most exciting thing in the world. And that never happened, there was a very disparate group of playwrights at

the time I was writing. I believe there was a general sense – which I can only realize looking back on it – of excitement in the air in the UK in 1995–1996 due to a change of government, a change of generation. You could see it in visual art, in pop music, and also in theatre writing. But even at the time when it was happening, you didn't have the time to say: «Oh, '95 feels more exciting then '92 or '93.» But actually in 1995 you are writing a play that in 1992 you never thought of writing. So looking back I suppose there was something in the air that was exciting for all of us. Often I write in very different and disparate ways. I don't believe there was anything acting as a movement, and I think you'd have to work quite hard to find many links. Maybe there are some links in the images between my plays and Sarah Kane's plays, but I'd say it's more interesting to see how different Sarah Kane's plays are to my plays. Look how different Conor McPherson's plays are from Joe Penhall's plays and Martin McDonagh's plays, or how different Rebecca Prichard's plays are to mine. The differences are more interesting, there is an age of playwrights in which everyone felt excited about writing for the theatre at the same time. But they didn't get together and plan anything. I wasn't part of any Royal Court writers group, the only person I really had any contact with was the playwright Anthony Neilson. We were both directing plays at the Finborough Theatre in London, which was a completely unsubsidized room in a pub. Antony and I had some conversations about what a play was in 1994–1995, and what could be exciting subjects for plays. He is the only person I had any kind of a dialogue with. I remember, in 1996 I was supervising some students' essays, and I wanted to write about violence in theatre, in particular about *Blasted* which was a great play, while all the critics said it was awful. But I read it and I thought: «This is an extraordinary play just for the plot and the quality of the writing.» Sarah Kane wrote that and I'd already written *Shopping and Fucking*, but there wasn't any dialogue between us. I didn't feel I was part of a movement.

STENHAM: I think I've noticed something, a sniff of something. My generation, our generation, is concerned a lot about legacy because of the environmental stuff. Everyone is thinking a lot about living in that sort of terrible situation environmentally. And you also can see the link between that and the family plays. A lot of people are writing about parents and children, brothers and sisters, because they are thinking about the residue

of a generation, what we leave behind us, what we inherit and this has something to do with the state of our planet. And I also believe there is a small tendency that arose in your generation, which has a sort of lack of belief, a sort of tentative movement toward writing about belief and about what it means to really believe in something fundamentally, because I think you are were growing up with something like a Bush administration around you. I feel my play is in a way about believing in something that we know wasn't true, that is never going to happen.

IMPERIALI: Polly, This is a sort of follow-up to Michael's question about how the idea of the play begins in your head: how do you know whether it is a good idea or not?

STENHAM: I guess it's like thinking about it absolutely obsessively and for a while. I think that has happened to me sometimes.

RAVENHILL: There is something obsessing about playwriting, you just keep on picking it up because you can't leave it alone. There is a question about gay plays. It is a question about reading *Shopping and Fucking* as a gay play in 1996. In fact I think it was the opposite. We had so many plays on the West End stage about gay characters, that I was a little tired of them. And actually I just wanted to write about a group of characters whose sexuality was very fluid, and who I didn't identify with being gay in particular. And its issues had nothing to do with most of those plays. I had the issue of coming out, or Aids, or the two things together. So I just wanted to write plays that reflected the kind of people I knew, whose issue maybe would be predominantly gay, but I wouldn't necessarily identify them as such. They weren't the kind of people who spend their life-making coming out speeches, or speeches about Aids. Sometimes I've written gay plays because they are central to a lot of gay people's experience. But at this time it is important to move on from that kind of play, which was actually pretty fashionable in 1994 and 1995, and I just wrote about sexuality in a different way.

STENHAM: I find it annoying that people enjoy that sort of middle class play or gay play. I think that it's a terribly annoying bracket and surely we're a little past bracketing things in those terms. We should be

looking a little more closely: it's about relationships essentially. I think a lot of the plays are built like gay plays or labelled in general. I just don't like it and it's annoying.

RAVENHILL: Yes, there was an important phase in the British struggle and a big gay experience has been represented on stage. There was a great sense in 1994 and 1995, that lots of main theatres, especially the Court, did that and maybe the Royal Court is re-examining that situation. But I think there are coming waves. Certainly, when I was writing my plays there was this sense of gay with capital 'G' play, that this was a fashionable subject to write about.

PEGHINELLI: In *That Face* Mia tries to get the attention she doesn't get by behaving very badly, defying the authorities. Does she want to uncover what's going on in her family and then, in the very end when she says «We are ok,» she realizes she has probably gone too far and is afraid of the consequences?

STENHAM: In my head Mia's action at the beginning of the play was actually very clever. She did it deliberately to bring attention to the fact that her family was falling apart and doing that was the only way to make her father come back. By behaving badly she could ensure her father would come back. She almost crucified herself for it to bring light on the situation,. But I think it's much more of a heroic action than it first seems, and only when you get to the end of the play do you maybe realise that the action was a really brave thing, if that makes sense.

ELAM: A question about the end of the play, which is of course quite tragic of course especially the breaking up of the family, when Mia, probably Polly's cleverest and most interesting character, who in a way is the heroine (even though Henry is the 'official' protagonist) - says: «It's ok. I promise. It's ok. We are ok.» As Andrea remarked, to some extent this is what you want to believe. Could the ending be read sardonically, the fostering of another illusion or is it right to think that everything is going to be ok?

STENHAM: That's a really good question. I think that the play is littered with broken promises. It seemed right for me beginning with a promise and symmetrically ending with a promise. The story actually is real, not ironic but desperately sad because it's really obvious that everything is not going to be ok. It has been inspired by Virginia Woolf after her craziness and carnage. I think it's very beautiful bringing something down and then having these very soft last lines, even if everyone knows they are lies.

IMPERIALI: Polly, you talked about being concerned about the environment. Do you believe that through theatre you can help to create a sort of consciousness on that issue or is it naïve to think that?

STENHAM: Personally, but this is probably down my taste, I think the most effects that have been created by art have been in the theatre. The most I have cried or laughed or shaken was due to theatre. It's about life quality so that for me it is a little revolution. But I'm aware that for other people perhaps it isn't. With regard to what you say about the environmental stuff, I just firmly believe in any avenue this could be reached, any avenue whatsoever; such a point of crisis is absolutely terrifying because we don't talk about it much and it is even scary. So through theatre, radio, everything that can be done is absolutely a good thing.

PEGHINELLI: You mentioned you listened a lot to a very popular rock band, *Radiohead*, and to one of their albums; to what extent have they influenced your writing?

STENHAM: For some reason I named 'In Rainbows,' the last *Radiohead* album, I listened to it repeatedly while I was writing the new play. I was massively tied to it but now it is annoying for me.

PEGHINELLI: And what about you Mark, are there any bands or any kind of music you like to listen to while writing to get a sort of inspiration from?

RAVENHILL: No. I'm surprised when I hear that lots of playwrights write with music on. I really need total silence when I write. I really have

got to focus on a play. I mean, people are diverse like Howard Brenton and Sarah Kane. People who do this, they can share part of their brain for music and the other part for writing the play, but my brain isn't big enough to listen to music and write a play. I'm very keen on music in theatre and I think it's a shame that music has been side-lined into quite bad musicals. There is a much more exciting use that can be made of songs, and music so I'm keen to pursue this in theatre. Actually we've got twins in the play *Over There*, because they are real twins, they can play and sing, so I think we'll have a song in the next play at the Royal Court.

IMPERIALI: Do you think the highest ambition of a writer is to give a key to understanding ourselves?

RAVENHILL: Yes. I think so. I mean, I think the idea of recognising yourself in a play is an important one, but maybe also not recognising yourself is important as well. Sometime a play allows us to test feelings, ideas, thoughts that we haven't had for ourselves. I think a play can do both. Sometimes you can say: «That's it! Nobody had ever put it like that. I feel exactly like that. I think exactly like that. And I've never been helped in expressing it in that place, in that perfect form which captures exactly how I feel.» That is incredible. But also sometimes a play is really exciting in presenting you with a particular feeling or thought that you didn't know was possible, maybe you have never had that thought or feeling, so that play brings something to your intellectual and emotional vocabulary. I think plays can do both things: a kind of recognition shock, but also that shock of not knowing what a human being has ever thought and broaden your mind. I think now we tend to put the emphasis on always recognising ourselves in plays, and that is one of the reasons why there has been a lot of emphasis on new writers in the UK and less on the classical tradition that often plays from other countries and other periods offer: like a different way of life and a different kind of behaviour. And I believe it's important that plays give this experience of moving in a world which is very different from our world.