

THE

WHY...WHAT...HOW... ?

OF POST-OPERATIVE PRODUCTIONS

KANDIS COOK AND NICK TILL TALK ABOUT THEIR WORK

Q. Why do you make theatre work ?

A. Theatre is an activity that enables us to investigate and understand the world. To find new ways of representing the world. Our theatre activities are really just part of the larger investigations that we're each engaged in from our individual perspectives. The point where those intersect is the point where our theatre work starts. We both work across different fields and forms. Kandis works in film and theatre, but she also paints. Nick teaches and writes about contemporary visual art, theatre and music. That makes us sound like classic English dilettantes. But our engagement in different spheres of activity is properly interdisciplinary. We move between activities because we need to work within different forms to explore different kinds of ideas and problems. Kandis works out problems of space and the ways in which we experience space in her paintings, but also needs to work in actual spaces, in time, with people and sound. Nick engages with music through writing, but there are also times when he needs to find other, more concrete modes of engagement with the issues he's exploring, and that leads back to performance-making. We approach each project with a question or a problem of some sort, or maybe just a hunch about something. Often it's as simple as asking "what happens if?" Each work throws up its own problems and issues from which the next piece may evolve. Our current work on our *Silent Movie Opera* project has forced us reconsider the problem of language - the setting of words to music. The problem that somehow in contemporary art music the language always makes the music banal - reduces it to some kind of pat meaning - and the music invariably makes the language seem pretentious. Why is this ? How can you get round it ? But the questions are also being fed by our work in other areas. The idea for our most recent piece [*At Home with Art*] started with some very trivial observations about listening to classical music at home. But those observations were probably triggered by a question somebody asked Nick in response to a paper he gave about the relationship between musical listening and bourgeois subjectivity. That question connected with his interest in the theories of "everyday life" of the Marxist sociologist Henri Lefebvre which provided a critical framework for the piece. The choice of *Tristan und Isolde* for the piece also gave us the opportunity to examine some ideas around Wagner. We've never, by the way, understood the continental concept of the theatre "dramaturg" as someone who does the background research for a director. The whole point of making a piece of theatre is to be able to explore ideas.

The outcome - the production - is only a part of that process. We see no point in making a piece of theatre unless we're engaged in all aspects of making it. The dramaturg/director division of labour just re-enforces the old division between those who think and those who do.... theory and practice. It doesn't make sense. We've both spent our lives battling with that in our teaching.

Q. What are your relationships to the professional theatre world ?

A. We've both been involved in corporate theatre, for our sins. Kandis has worked as a designer for a string of mainstream theatre, opera and ballet companies. Nick served a kind of apprenticeship working as an assistant director in a number of mainstream opera companies. It was deadly. As Wagner tells us in *Die Meistersinger*, that kind of apprenticeship system is inherently conservative. It perpetuates habitual ways of doing things. If you learn "on the job" there is never any space for thinking about alternative ways of doing things... "sorry love, we've got a show to get on." It's the problem that runs through most of the educational system in music and theatre. It fetishises craft and technique - "know-how"- on the one hand, and mystifies "talent" or "genius", which are supposedly beyond rational understanding or education. It's very observable in the way that the majority of British theatre directors still come from Cambridge and Oxford, where theatre is not taught as an academic discipline. It means that the whole terrain of critical and theoretical debate is left completely unexamined; it denies the productive relationship between knowing and doing. It's a symptom of the engrained anti-intellectualism of all anglo-saxon culture, which is based upon an essentially conservative empiricism.

Q. Do you subscribe to the theory of dumbing down ?

A. Not in the terms it's usually discussed. We've always had a dumbed-down culture. There's nothing new about it. But as long as the ruling classes could believe that their particular aesthetic tastes counted as "high art" or "high culture" they could con everyone else. Capitalism has realised how easily those tastes can be commodified - Disneyfied - and that's led to the current hysteria about dumbing down. But we shouldn't kid ourselves that things like BBC Radio 3 have ever been there to do anything more than maintain a kind of cosy reverential consensus around music and culture. It is, in Pierre Bourdieu's famous term, a marker of "distinction". It sells people a self-image as consumers of "high" art. The whole purpose of the media's involvement in art and culture is to defuse the genuinely subversive energies of art and to serve it up as another lifestyle option. The media are major players in the commodification of art, which is offered as up-market entertainment - and there's nothing worse than pretentious entertainment. We all consume entertainment, but we shouldn't pretend that it's anything else. Frankly, if we want to be entertained we'd rather spend the evening watching *Southpark* than *The Southbank Show*. Hegel says something about thinking being anathema to most people since any serious thinking

negates “what is”, and for the contented majority “what is” is pretty acceptable. That’s why modern bourgeois culture has developed an ideology of art - or the aesthetic- as an entirely autonomous activity that is divorced from the intellectual or practical spheres of life. Just listen to the endless platitudes you hear all day long on Radio 3 - music is always “lovely”, “glorious”, “universal”, “spiritual”. How can music mean anything when it’s padded in cotton wool like that? It’s art as palliative when it should be an irritant. Beauty should be uncomfortable; cruel, even: a painful glimpse of what we know we desire but fail to demand of life, not just a wet blanket of dreary loveliness. One of the things we’re interested in doing in our work is to reposition musical performance and reception within the kinds of social and discursive frameworks that do actually make music meaningful. Making it scratch again. But the one thing that you’ll not be forgiven for as an artist - certainly a music or theatre artist - is asking people to think.

Q. Just think ?

A. Well, it takes a lot to make people think you know! You have to bully them. You also have to entice them. You have to provoke them. You have to seduce them. You have to unsettle them. Perceptually, intellectually, emotionally. You have to mindfuck with them - get under their skin - anything to shake them out of their routine responses to things. I guess that’s why we keep going back to opera and music-theatre. Because it has the potential - the *potential* - to do some of those things. And because it has the potential to sidestep that awful glib articulacy of most British theatre.

Q. You’ve said that opera is dead, yet more and more people are going to the opera.

A. Well, that’s because it’s dead, of course !

Q. What do you mean when you say that opera’s dead ?

A. Well, it’s hardly news, is it ? Brecht said as much eighty years ago. Opera is not a cultural medium through which our society speaks to itself in any meaningful way. New, opera, that is. The way in which our culture speaks to itself through old opera is, of course, extremely meaningful and interesting - that’s what we mean by the idea of the “operatic” as a cultural phenomenon. Just ask yourself about what’s going on in films like *Diva* or *Fitzcarraldo*. Yet even though the form of opera is clearly moribund composers still write the damned things. But they lack any meaning - they simply regurgitate the forms and subjects of the past. If you actually look at recent operas presented at places like the ENO you’ll find that the majority of them are based on classic novels and plays. What a massive admission of bad faith! But even that’s not the point; even on the rare occasions when composers do deal with contemporary subject matter they’re not dealing with it in a contemporary way.

They're replicating the old forms - the forms of 19th century opera - in an entirely mindless way. It's such a tedious thing to be going on about - it's obvious, everyone knows it, but they continue to pay lip-service to the ideal of "new" opera because they know they ought to. It's an institutional charade. We should just let the poor thing go away and die peacefully in a corner so that it can be buried decently and stop stinking us out.

Q. So if you think it's dead, why do you continue to work in it ?

A. We don't ! We've really tried to position our work somewhere else. We work through, around and against opera. But it's true that opera remains to some extent a constant point of reference. One of the things one learns as one gets older is that you explore furthest and deepest by working from what is closest and most familiar to you. Nick's relationship to opera is extremely problematic, but the fact is that he understands it more intimately than anything else. We love working with singers; they're able to distance themselves from their craft in a way that actors seem unable to do, and that makes them willing to take astonishing risks if you know how to work with them properly. And we still basically believe that there are properties of the operatic that are nowhere near being mined or tapped. We want to find and release those energies. And we realise too that our irritability with the form gives our work some of its energy. Nick started his career believing in an innocent sort of way that opera represented high art, but came very quickly see that if it did so then one had to think very hard indeed about the concept of high art ! But the biggest disillusion was with the institutions of opera. You always have to remember that "Art is Smart", and opera is therefore "Smartest". The corporate opera business has a deadly symbiosis with the socio-cultural elite, and inevitably it's peopled by a lot of socio-cultural careerists and groupies. The institutions themselves militate against any kind of meaningful art-making. And by institutions we don't just mean the theatres and opera houses; it starts with the educational system, and includes all those people who make up the infrastructure - agents, critics, administrators, consultants and all that. They're all invested in maintaining the socio-cultural status quo. But as Brecht said, you can't make progressive work, however formally novel your artistic language may be, within reactionary institutions. You have to create new structures and frameworks.

Q. How did you come to work together ?

A. In 1994 Nick started teaching at Wimbledon School of Art. It offered an opportunity to re-appraise his whole approach to art and theatre, and provided, for the first time in his career, a context in which intellectual activity was taken seriously in relation to creative practice. Art schools are probably the last bastions of a genuinely open and enquiring approach to intellectual and creative enquiry. It's undeniable that art schools have contributed much more to music in post-war Britain than music colleges or university music departments. Philip Glass's first gig in Britain was hosted by

Wimbledon School of Art, by the way. And the fact is that certainly since the fifties the most complex and theoretically astute thinking about art-making has come from the visual arts - and of course we're including in that things like performance art, which offer a really radical challenge to accepted theatre practice. It was being able to rethink his understanding of performance and art-making in this kind of really fundamental way that led Nick back to making theatre. First there came a moment when he realised that he knew what kind of theatre he needed to be making, and that it didn't have to be bad. And second, Kandis came to Wimbledon to run the Scenography MA there and we started teaching together. We found that we were real kindred spirits; that we shared the same ideas about art, theatre, politics. And after ages of just going to see stuff - like everything - films, theatre, dance, whatever - and then talking endlessly about what we liked and disliked, and why - well eventually it just became obvious that we had to put our money where our mouths were and start making work together. So here we are !

Q. You made a point about the intellectual difference between theatre and visual art - why do think that is ?

A. Well, as always, it's essentially an economic issue. It only takes one artist to paint a painting and one patron to like it enough to buy it. That allows quite a lot of risk taking. It takes a lot more people to put on a play - and a fuck of a lot more people to put on a conventional opera - and a great many more people have to be willing to see it. That militates against innovation and risk. And visual artists have time to think about what they're doing. Mainstream theatre artists on the whole don't - there's always a show to get on by Tuesday-week love. It comes back to the issue about institutions and structures. The forms of opera are never challenged because they are held rigidly in place by those institutional structures. And perhaps there's another thing too. The "stuff" of theatre is material space and live performers - real people. It's a form that resists abstraction - and that means that it has tended to resist the kind of radical conceptual investigation that has gone on in visual art. That needs more thinking about, but there's something there.

Q. So what are the ideas from the visual arts that have influenced your theatre work ?

A. Well, debates around abstraction certainly. Then there's the whole theoretical critique of representation in things like feminist art and post-Brechtian art and film-making. We've looked at a lot of Godard, for example. And Straub and Huillet. We once sat through two whole programmes of films by Straub and Huillet at the Lux cinema in one evening ! None of these kinds of thinking seemed to have impinged in any way upon the kinds of theatre in which either of us had found ourselves working up to that point, although of course they're in the work of people like the Wooster Group, whom we only encountered for the first time in the early 90s. And then there's also obviously the theoretical writings of people like Kantor or Richard Foreman, which

have also been extremely important to our work. When you get to music and opera critical and theoretical thinking is even more exiguous - with the exception of a few people like the feminist musicologist Susan McClary. Every composer should be handed a copy of her *Feminine Endings* the first day they arrive in college. But getting back to visual art, the most influential thing for our work has probably been the kind of non-intentional, non-expressive art-making that was made possible by Cage and Minimalism. In performance it's most visible in dance - people like Trisha Brown and the Judson Group. That's been really important to us - teaches one not to feel the need to control and manipulate everything in one's work. You see that kind of manipulation being deployed all the time with such facility by Hollywood and commercial theatre that you realise how cheap and easy it is. The event of performance is so much more interesting if you leave space for real things to happen; if you leave space for the performers and audience. It's one of the problems with some of the neo-expressionist theatre work that was being done in Germany in the 70s and at the ENO in the 80s. Screamed at you. Actually, if the horrible *Rigoletto* on TV the other day is anything go by, neo-expressionism is still alive and kicking at Covent Garden today. We prefer to give audiences space to perceive, to think about what they're experiencing, to question. Our favourite bit of the new Tate is where you pass from the Expressionists with their kind of "feel my rage and anger, suffer with me" stuff to the big room with people like Andre, Morris, Judd. The works are just so cool and impassive - they allow you simply to experience and think; they force you back on yourself - they don't shout at you with all that suburban angst. We like to make work that has something of that quality.... and then comes and whacks you over the head from behind when you aren't looking !

Q. So the work isn't *just* cool ?

A. Well, how could it be. It's operatic for Christ's sake ! It's about letting passion off the leash. One of the really important things is to bypass some of the control mechanisms that people put in place to reduce things back to their own level of familiarity, and to do this you need to create the kind of perceptual complexity that keeps sensations and feelings and thoughts all spinning in the air at once without settling comfortably back down to earth. Curiously enough, boredom - or lack of event - is one of the routes to creating the kind of dissociation that lets you explore other aspects of what you're experiencing, and that's certainly an essential component of the minimalist aesthetic. You have to risk being boring sometimes. Aesthetically boring, of course; not intellectually. Straub and Huillet are the masters of boredom - of presenting things so incredibly slowly, avoiding any kind of dramatic event, that you're forced to start looking properly - you're forced to start thinking! Fredric Jameson has observed that boredom is one of the most distinctive aspects of the aesthetic of video art too.

B. Are you Robert Wilson fans, then ?

A. Actually, ' afraid not. He's now a favourite amongst the international festival crowd, but we find his work to be - well, creepy, actually. There's something autistic about it. And it's become all aesthetic surface - Society of the Spectacle stuff. Just what the Versace crowd loves ! OK, that's not fair, since of course one never saw the early stuff, which was evidently amazing and has been incredibly influential in very positive ways - which is presumably why you raised the question of Wilson in relation to boredom. Yes, he did indeed dare to be boring.

Q. What about Minimalism in music. ?

A. Well, depends what you're referring to. The early stuff is really challenging; it's much closer in its intention to someone like Cage than is often remembered. Cage isn't usually referred to as a minimalist, but actually it could be argued that all Minimalism starts with Cage. On the whole it's the Cagean strand of musical Minimalism that's more interesting. But you know, when one listens to the sixties stuff now one realises that it's also much closer to the kind of music that Young or Reich and Glass believed they were rejecting than is usually acknowledged: the post-serialist Darmstadt stuff, of course: Boulez, Stockhausen.... There's a kind of alienated objectivity in both Darmstadt and Minimalism: a refusal of expressive affect; an interest in procedures for generating non-intentional musical structures; an interest in timbre and sound for its own sake. A piece like *Stimmung* really isn't a hundred miles from La Monte Young's drone music, either in sound or in its cosmic pretensions. Steve Reich has suggested that Darmstadt serialism was a response to the kind of post-war European angst that just wasn't relevant any longer to the hedonism of sixties America - or at least the Beach Boys hedonism of sixties California. But perhaps in their common objectivity both Darmstadt serialism and Minimalism should both really be seen as typical products of capitalist reification. The art critic Hal Foster has made a similar kind of equation between Donald Judd and Andy Warhol, who would normally be seen as antipathetic to each other. In a way early Minimalism was more rigorous and austere than even Boulez - there's always that bit of gallic *elan* in Boulez, which is what makes his music so charming ! The problem with Minimalism is that its more obvious aspects became so formulaic and sloppy; Starbucks music. There's a lot of Glass and Terry Riley in Moby, who's playing in every Starbucks on the globe just now. The problem with Reich and Glass comes when they start to think that they have to say something - try to deal with subject matter. Reich has at least resisted opera, and it's interesting that Glass resisted setting English for so long - probably because he needed to avoid the issue of representation or expression. Like Stravinsky in *Oedipus*. There's something curiously fascinating about Glass's middle-period work - the music for Wilson's *Civil War*, for instance - fascinating and repellent at the same time. There's a kind of alienated expressionism in this stuff. The expressive gestures are all there, but because of those deadpan and repetitive figurations that go with them they've become sort of detached. When those kind of expressionist

gestures are given back to singers in the music-theatre works they become very weird - doubly alienated in some sort of way. Reich's very different - the gestures deliberately lack affect, but they build up a real kind of cathartic release. We've very little time for more recent Glass, or for someone like Adams. Look what happens when Adams turns to opera - straight back to the old formulas. The Adams operas sound like second-rate Sondheim half the time.

Q. You've talked about the idea of a critical practice. What do you mean by this ?

A. We've tried to explain this in our manifesto so don't want to go over all that ground again. It's fundamentally about making work that questions and examines the forms that one is using - that moves away from the kind of naïve representationalism and expressivism that is still prevalent in opera. But it's not a formalism. It's about examining the meanings that are attached to forms; about subjecting every assumption that you make about what you're doing to scrutiny: even the possibility of doing it at all. Never assuming the value of what you are doing. It's not, by the way, about making critical judgements from a vantage point outside a work; the critical process is embedded in the making, in the way one considers all of the possible aspects of the meaning of what one is doing. But the concept of a critical practice also addresses what is probably the fundamental reason for the failure of 20th century modernist art music: the failure to have developed an intelligent critical discourse around the music. That's quite unlike visual art, where the debate between both artists and critics has provided a rich context for engagement with even the most difficult work. There are a number of reasons for this. With one or two exceptions composers themselves are either very unsophisticated in the way they describe the relation between intention and meaning in their work - just look at the way most composers describe their music in programmes, it goes straight back to naïve representationalism or expressivism - or they affect a kind of tiresome inarticulacy about their work full stop. But that's of course because music itself is supposed to be extra-discursive - it's meant to be somehow beyond meaning - you know, all that George Steiner "it's ineffable" stuff. So musical criticism has therefore tended to be either purely formalist, or subjectively impressionistic. Academic criticism has tended to be formalist until recently, and most journalism is just "ooh" and "ah" and "yuk" laced by a bit of back-stage gossip to demonstrate that one's got the authority of being "in the know". Professional critics are dismal - just dismal. They're to blame for most of the crap art that's around. How can you get any intelligent debate around new work when you've got such a dismal level of critical thinking going on ? That's why Nick feels a sort of responsibility to do a certain amount of critical writing about other people's work. Our view of critics isn't based on a grudge because of experiences of negative criticism, by the way. The critics can't be bothered to come and see work like ours. So our aim is to try and build up some sort of critical discourse through and around the work - to get some sort of debate going. New ways of thinking demand new concepts. As long as new ideas are being judged by the old terms of reference there's not a hope in hell. By the way,

“wow” and “yuk” are important - we always say to students that one must absolutely acknowledge one’s gut response to works, but then you have to take a scalpel to them.

Q. Why do you think that the standard of criticism is so poor ?

A. Firstly because the majority of critics are journalists; they’re part of the entertainment industry. Newspapers don’t hire critics for their critical acuity - how on earth would they know, anyway ? They hire them because they can name-drop effectively and are able to turn a quick opinion to provide fodder for dinner party chit-chat. In relation to opera, most critics are primarily music critics. They know and understand very little about theatre. That’s equally true, by the way, of the majority of composers, and even librettists. An ubiquitous critic who has dabbled in a bit of libretto-writing was saying on a radio arts programme recently that he never goes to theatre, as if that was something to be proud of ! Press critics work from within the system, so they’re never asking the right questions - they ask “is this opera or production any good?” instead of asking “what is opera good for ?” And then, the basis for their judgement is really kindergarten stuff in terms of critical or theoretical understanding. Their critical paradigm is usually based on a kind of naïve historicist liberal humanism: the banal belief that art progresses towards a greater and greater truth about “human nature”. Take the entry on “Mozart” in the *Oxford Dictionary of Opera*, written by two prominent critics, which describes Mozart’s career as a progressive liberation from conventional forms to represent his characters with increasing lifelikeness: *Idomeneo* “has the power to transcend old forms”; *Le nozze di Figaro* is “an enormous advance on its predecessors”; *Don Giovanni* “severs almost the last connections, still present in *Figaro*, with set types”; *Die Zauberflöte* is the summation of Mozart’s “lifelong care for the truthful observation of human character.” This routine narrative is patently absurd. If Mozart does deliberately seem to blur the stereotypes of *opera seria* and *opera buffa* in *Figaro*, the characters in *Don Giovanni* clearly revert to the earlier stereotypes again. And it’s a nonsense to suggest that the obviously archetypal or generic characters of *Die Zauberflöte* represent the consummation of Mozart’s movement towards “truthful observation of human character”. How can we gauge the truth of Mozart’s portrayal of Tamino in **Die Zauberflöte** when Tamino does not exist in the real world to match his portrait against ? What the Oxford Dictionary should say is that Mozart successfully creates a *type* of character whom we can recognise as having the attributes of other fictively constructed characters. To achieve this Mozart doesn’t reject conventions; he redeploys his conventions in such a way that we are persuaded that they match up to our conventional view of certain types of characters in certain kinds of narratives. Yet the Oxford Companion ideology is clearly evident in the kinds of judgements that the critics invariably make about performances - that this production or that singer manages to “bring out” this or that “essential” psychological quality of a character, to convey some drearily predictable “universal” truth about human nature. That’s just

one example of the intellectual stupidity of most critics, although of course it's also the ideology that underpins the work of most British directors too, so it's an endlessly self-confirming circle.

Q. Could you explain what you mean when you refer to “naïve representationalism and expressivism” ?

A. The way that a lot of composers approach song and opera is incredibly literal; it's basically illustrative. They're still working with the kind of expressive paradigm that goes right back to the origins of humanist music in Monteverdi and the *seconda pratica*. But we no longer inhabit a world in which there is some simple correlation between the authentic human “I” and the authentic emotions I express. All supposedly authentic emotional expressions have already been appropriated and mediated back to us. When someone stands up and emotes on stage it's just not possible to believe it any more. Popular singers know this perfectly well. Virgil Thompson once said something very astute: that basically the vocal lines of opera never change; what changes is what accompanies them.. As Thompson implies, if you remove the accompaniment from any contemporary opera you will hear all the old vocal formulas. So the idea of authentic expression in opera is self-defeating. However much emotional feeling the singers may invest in the vocal formulas they're still basically conventional. To some extent, the more feeling the singers invest the more absurd they become. That's why Rossini is so wonderful - because he knew perfectly well that the expression of emotions was a matter of convention, and that what touched you was the context in which an emotional convention was placed rather than the supposed authenticity of the emotion itself. He knew that it was theatre and that the only truth in theatre resides in the activity of making it. I just don't think that many contemporary composers have really understood that. Actually, Virgil Thompson's own opera *Four Saints in Three Acts* is one of the most radical of twentieth-century operas in its recognition of the impossibility of really conveying character or emotion in music. And although one may have a lot of problems with the basic ideology of Harrison Birtwistle, some of his operas are persuasive because he's much more interested in working out his own larger-scale musical pre-occupations than in illustrating character, emotions or dramatic situation. If he needs to get these across he just stops the show and employs a bit of good old-fashioned recitative.

Q. You've used the term “post-operatic” when talking about the work of Post-Operative Productions. Could you elaborate on what you mean by the “post-operatic” ?

A. Well, the reference is also obviously to postmodernism - to the kind of anti-foundationalist thinking that's been one of the most valuable aspects of post-modernist thinking. In theatre terms that means questioning the idea of the integrity of the original art-work - that there is some essential “*Midsummer Night's Dream*” or “*Don Giovanni*” that's waiting to be discovered if only one can find the key to unlock

the lid. That's both logically and epistemologically entirely impossible; there is no essential "Don Giovanni", and even if there were one couldn't gain access to it. But the fact is also that works of art have a life outside themselves, as it were. *The Barber of Seville* is not just a Rossini comedy now - it's also an Italian car advertisement. *Turandot* is an international football event ... Opera is used to signify a whole range of things in contemporary culture, and one can never restore some chaste pre-lapsarian purity to the works themselves. And as far as we're concerned the post-life of opera in contemporary culture is something that's way more interesting to investigate than most of the works in the repertory. We really don't ever go the opera these days. It's so *slow*. It just plods along. And it's all so redundant - you know, the dramatic situation is obvious and probably banal in the first place, then the music churns away telling you to feel what you already knew you were meant to feel from the dramatic situation, then the singer tells you that s/he's also feeling it all over again, and then most likely s/he acts it out in some sort of dim-witted sign language for good measure. It's all so turgid and obvious. One just longs for bit of speed and quick-wittedness. Do you know that lovely essay on quickness by Calvino ? He quotes Leopardi somewhere. You have to quote the whole passage: "Speed and conciseness of style please us because they present the mind with a rush of ideas that are simultaneous, or that follow each other so quickly that they seem simultaneous, and set the mind afloat on such an abundance of thoughts or spiritual feelings that it cannot embrace them all, each one fully, or has no time to be idle or empty." Exactly. Mozart had that kind of quickness. That was why he was John Cage's favourite composer.

- Q. But then you've also talked about coolness and even boredom. How do these different aesthetic ideas work ?
- A. They're part of the same thing. They're both reaching for a kind of complexity. Real complexity isn't a formal property of the art object - or isn't exclusively a property of the art-object. Complexity arises in the relationship between things. Things in themselves are only ever just themselves in the end. It's their relations to other things that are interesting, and those relations may, literally, be endless. Truly complex works of art set up complex relationships to things outside themselves as well as within themselves. That's why a three-minute piano piece by Satie, or a song by Dylan, may be as intellectually or emotionally complex as a two-hour symphony by Mahler. It's not just a matter of how many notes there are, or how "profound" the ideas are. It's how you set up and play those relationships - how you consider all the possible contexts that one's work exists in - how you set up resonances and overtones that's interesting. That's why we have a problem with conventional dramatic narrative - the representational kind. It's based on redundancy again - everything is sucked into that wretched narrative explanation - everything has to be working to convey the story - each moment has to confirm the previous - there's no space for exploring new perceptions or sensations, different relationships between

things; there no space for layering, for reflection, for changing tack, for multiplicity. For things just to float. That's what we tried to achieve with our Monteverdi piece - to imply characters, relationships and narratives, but never to let them become literal; to fragment what the audience saw - dissociate sound and image, as in a film. There's a lot of *Last Year in Marienbad* in that piece. And there are so many things in the world - so many relationships - that can't be shown by narrative. And there are so many ideological assumptions embedded in narrative structures that need to be unpacked and challenged. And as soon as one stops thinking of telling stories as the be all and end all of art-making so many other things become possible. There are so many forms of performance that don't rely on the clunky machinery of "storytelling". I mean, the Futurists espoused Variety Theatre as an alternative to bourgeois theatre almost a century ago. Our Hoxton piece is a sort of homage - "*hommage*" - to Futurist theatre. Narrative is always there, of course - as an aspect of the structure of any time-based art-form, or as a mode which we all employ to make sense of things. But it's much more interesting to let the audience make its own narratives. There's something that Valery said about why he tried to avoid narrative: "I want to give the sensation without the boredom of its conveyance. The moment the story enters the boredom comes upon you." That's precisely what we try to do - to reach past the apparatus of conveyance for the sensation itself. And that's why we find most opera so tedious.

Q. Even Mozart ?.

A. Oh Lord, how can one say this... but yes. Even Nick really can't be arsed to go and see yet another production of *Così fan tutte* or *Figaro* these days.

Q. What about staging them? You do after all have the advantage that one of you probably understands those operas more intimately than anyone around. There are some pretty radical directorial approaches around these days - they hardly treat the classics with reverence. Surely there's room for you to do that kind of deconstructive work ?

A. Deconstruction is an entirely misused term. The whole point about deconstruction is that it's not something you *do* to something. What Derrida shows is that things deconstruct themselves - they undermine their own pretensions to coherence. Properly understood deconstruction is one of the most rigorous conclusions of the self-critical methods of Modernism. But most of what passes for deconstructive production work is really just a sort of ironising commentary. We hate work with a thesis that you're supposed to read off. "Oh yes, I get it... so that means that and that means that... it was set in such a such a time or place because ... Carmen was played as a...whatever". And the whole idea of a "Konzept" production. That should be spelt with a capital "K" by the way. It's so reductive. It's just an aspect of the globalisation of opera as commodity. It's a form of packaging. You come up with a neat concept and fax it to the opera management. The performers execute your tidy

little concept like puppets - if you're lucky. What kind of investigation can possibly occur under those circumstances ? None. The press are then told what the concept is in a handy soundbite which they pass on to the audience who swallow it and then go back to sleep. No one has to think. "Oh, we didn't like the concept but the singing was lovely". Art should have a sort of obduracy about it. It should draw you in and hold you at bay at the same. I don't know...we would think hard about doing a production of *Figaro* if it was offered. But our working terms would be pretty steep ! And really, we just think that any serious theatre artist must be making new work. There's a dreadful machismo involved in the whole thing of taking on the classics... proving yourself against the big boys. Of course, we did just take on Wagner !

Q. But somewhat on your own terms ?

A. Oh yeah, just so! [Referring to *At Home With Art*]. It was both cutting him down to size - the piece was obviously satirical in some ways, and people found it very funny - but at the same time taking Wagner really seriously at his own word. We tried very hard not to be facetious. Those kinds of productions in which directors show their contempt for a work are just puerile. We played all three acts of *Tristan* simultaneously, and the effect was overwhelming - pumped-up Wagner, if you can imagine such a thing! But of course you also get these fantastic thematic cross references across acts - the love-death theme ricocheting back and forth - in a way it sort of proved that the music works in the way that it's meant to. And it was a real challenge to listening - to constructing your own musical coherence from what you were hearing. Some of it was maddening, but a lot of it was thrilling. Great washes of sound.

Q. What about the souffle ?

A. Ah, the souffle. Well, we knew that Laurence had to be cooking since of course opera is the ultimate culinary art ! And cooking is something you often listen to music to. The idea was that he had to be cooking something that was in a sense a *Gesamtkunstwerk* - an adulterous mixture of things, and a souffle's perfect for that - you can throw in all sorts of ingredients and flavours and they blend in a sort of illicit alchemy. And then, of course, there's a great mystique about souffles, and actually there's nothing to it except hard work. We sort of showed the backstage to a souffle, in the way that Brecht demystified the theatrical illusion. It relates to Adorno's comment on the way that Wagner conceals the labour that goes into the performance of his operas by hiding the orchestra. We showed the labour. And finally, there's a sort of sexuality about souffles - I mean, they're pretty tumescent. We made sure that the oven was lit inside so that the audience could watch the souffle rising. Triumphant climax of Isolde's "Liebestod", Laurence removes the souffle from the oven. Last statement of the love-death chord the souffle slowly collapses as he lays it on the table. Perfect ! Not a dry eye in the house !!

Q. You talk about new work, but the points of reference for all of your work to date have been very specifically European and historical. Shouldn't genuinely new work be broadening its scope of reference in an era of global multi-culturalism ?

A. Firstly, nothing is ever entirely new. And unless you understand things historically they're meaningless. If you're not aware that every time you commit yourself to any artistic gesture you are entering into a dialogue with the past you'll always be unaware of the full implications of your work. As for the Euro-centrism, you can only work from within your own cultural position. Anything else is cultural dilettantism. Of course you've always got to acknowledge and deal with the fact that your own position is contingent, and is going to be heavily inflected by notions of "otherness. It's one of the paradoxes of Modernism that it's been so heavily reliant on primitivism, and you have to deal with that. But we're extremely suspicious of the kind of cultural anthropology that looks at non-western theatre as being in some way more authentic than western theatre; it's so often based on a kind of sentimental primitivism or orientalism; or the kind of Peter Brook-like "universalism" that actually overrides genuine cultural difference. And we're equally suspicious of certain forms of contemporary multi-culturalism: Benetton cultural globalism. We went to a sort of intercultural love-in organised by Peter Sellars in London last year. Sellars, Bill Viola and the composer Tan Dun. They all sat around talking about the world being one big family now. Well, maybe that's what it looks like from the imperial centre. I don't think the rest of the world sees it quite that way. As we learned on September 11. Sellars always talks as if Los Angeles were some wonderful cultural melting pot. It's not. It's the most segregated city in the world.

Q. How does your collaboration actually work?

A. Firstly, we don't play director and designer; we work together on all aspects of a project. We complement each other pretty well. Kandis was a student at the Nova Scotia art school in Canada when it was one of the main centres for Conceptualism in North America and her conceptual rigor keeps Nick in harness, makes sure that some of his naffer ideas get nipped in the bud ! Kandis is always quick to pounce on anything that she describes as "theatrical", and she tempers some of Nick's inclinations to translate ideas too literally. Nick tempers Kandis's inclination to abstraction. If she had her way we would never have to deal with the messiness of real live performers ! We respect each other's particular expertise because we both know that fundamentally we share the same values and know when to let the other get on with something. But basically, all the decisions are collective. And we try to extend that to all of our collaborators. We really do think that there is an essential ethics involved in how one makes work. We hate the kind of bullying hierarchical system of corporate theatre. The end can never justify the means. The kind of parade-ground

drilling that so many directors employ always shows. The work is slick but dead. We love a bit of messiness - as long as there's intellectual clarity behind it.

Q. What about collaborating with composers ?

A. Finding the right composers to work with is the most difficult thing of all. In our experience many composers tend to be either too flexible or too controlling. There are lots of composers who will run up music for you without wanting to be really engaged in the thinking through of a project conceptually. And there are composers who will commit 100 per cent to a project, but need to dictate all the terms. Whatever it is about having the sort of mind that can think in complex abstract forms seems to need to have control over every aspect of what they're doing. It's what we dislike about the conventional forms of opera - that controlling will that can't leave any space for anything else to happen; the audience is just sucked along in the wake. And a lot of composers are unwilling or unable to examine or question what it is that they're doing when they commit themselves to making sounds. Nick went to hear a new electronic piece the other day. Some guy doing microtonal electronic drones - earsplittingly loud. The basic material wasn't very interesting anyway - building up saturated drones from Tibetan chanting with harmonics - kind of thing that La Monte Young used to do. The sound was accompanying a video showing working people in various parts of the world. Nicely filmed. But one couldn't see what the relationship was between the two elements, either at the phenomenal level or the signifying level. At one point four guys with guitars came on and a new drone was created by them "live". There was no acoustic difference between the taped and the "live" music, so what did the intervention of those guys signify - either in relation to the video, or in relation to the pre-recorded stuff ? It just didn't seem that anyone had given any thought to it. Another example: some guy setting a group of Yeats poems for two singers and chamber ensemble. Meant to be a sort of proto-theatrical piece. But why Yeats ? What does he mean to us ? And why the accompaniment of cello, flute and marimba (or whatever it was - the marimba was certainly in there) ? What do those instruments signify in themselves, in relation to each other, or in relation to Yeats, for goodness sake ? What kind of event were we participating in ? None of these things had been thought about properly. Our undergraduate art students are way more sophisticated in their ability to position their work in relation to wider contexts and debates - to question what the hell they're doing - than most composers. The first thing we do when they arrive is beat "I want to express myself" out of them. If they're still saying that when they leave then we know they're serious ! But even then they'll be able to problematise all of those terms: "I want", "express" "myself". It's only then that art-making become interesting. Not many composers seem to be able to problematise the relationship between their subjectivity and the objecthood of their work in that way. We're putting this as provocatively as possible, of course, because we're hoping that we'll be flooded with angry composers saying "that's crap", and then the dialogue can get started. But for the moment one of the reasons that we

like working with Frances Lynch and her group is that Frances is not only an astonishing singer, but she is also the kind of intuitive musician who can grasp an idea immediately, objectify it, and then generate appropriate meaningful musical responses in an entirely non-precious way. It was Frances who brought in Karen Wimhurst to work with us on the Silent Movie Opera project, and that's proving to be hugely productive.

Q. Could you say a bit more about the politics of your work.

A. That question is the most difficult for any committed artist and needs an awful lot of unpacking. Let's see. When our generation started out we mostly thought doing political work was about dealing with political "issues" or topics. Nick once planned a Karen Silkwood opera with the company he was running at the time - about the working-class American woman who led an anti-nuclear campaign and was probably assassinated by American security - there was a film with Meryl Streep. He moved from there to community art - the politics of direct engagement and empowerment, learning to value the social processes of art-making rather than the aesthetic products. But to be absolutely honest this was also driven by a kind of naïve liberal philanthropy of bringing "high art" to the masses. He also reached a point where he really felt that he needed to explore more complex ideas, and felt that every time one did a community project one was somehow having to start all over from scratch rather than being able to develop. There are also questions about the politics of community politics too, and you have to be wary about art being employed as a palliative for social and economic injustice. But basically there are some things that just can't be done in that kind of context. There aren't that many community philosophers.... it's a while since anyone saw an advert for a community critical theorist ! The critical focus of our work now lies perhaps in examining the politics of forms of representation. That's to say, one has to recognise that artistic forms and institutions have huge political and ideological implications in themselves, way before you start worrying about what you're going to "say". You can't really *say* anything about the political issues that concern you in your art without being pretty banal. Politics deals in abstractions: "politics", "democracy" "terrorism". The tendency of political art has always been to personify these abstractions, which limits the complexity of both the issues you're dealing with and of the forms you've chosen to represent them through. You end up with illustrative narrative again, or with allegory. Neither of those forms seems very interesting to us. But you can make sure that you examine - and make your audience examine - the meanings of every action and gesture that you make, the implications of one's working processes. We were once accused by the African American composer George Lewis of "warming over old binaries to return to an outdated formalism" in our work. The group at San Diego university to whom Nick was talking about the work felt that something like our Monteverdi piece wasn't properly critical. That goes back to the point we made earlier - that there's a misunderstanding that "critical" means placing yourself and your audience outside a

work in some way. But in our mind there's a very clear politics to the piece. It's not a critical commentary on Monteverdi's madrigals, but an attempt to offer a reading of the madrigals as themselves a critique of certain kinds of operatic orthodoxy.

Monteverdi's madrigals offer a kind of pre-emptive critique of the usual history that critics and historians have attempted to impose on opera - and that most composers still follow. And it's a critique that's been suppressed in both the performance and critical reception of these madrigals. That's to say, the madrigals have a kind of erotic energy that's really very dangerous. They're polymorphously perverse - the erotic attachments are non-gender specific - there's no fixed attribution of sexual roles according to voice type, something we were able to blur further by having a counter-tenor in the mix, who might sometimes join with the "female" voices, and sometimes with the male. Furthermore, the madrigals are polymorphously "cathected", to use the Freudian term - they traverse a whole range of forms in which libidinal energy may be invested. We wanted the audience to experience the real passion and perversity of those madrigals, to blast away the whole prissy "falalala" you usually get from the early music geeks. Historically one can say that these kind of polymorphous sexual energies were subsequently contained and more acceptably sublimated culturally within the individualised and genderised narratives of formal opera. McClary makes this point very well. In Monteverdi's *Orfeo* Orpheus's love for Euridice is gendered as actively male, whilst she is conventionally passive. And this erotic relationship is also sublimated in the *Orfeo* narrative as the power of culture (music) over nature, something with huge cultural implications. We have to disagree with George and say that those binaries are most definitely still potent, and to challenge them is indeed a political act. One does have to be careful here. As politicians know, signs cost nothing. The presence of a few symbolic black faces on a poster for a corporate cultural institution - or anything else for that matter - changes nothing. But one also has to face the fact that in making art one is inevitably dealing with signs and representations, although one shouldn't forget that performance is also a form of social intervention, so it isn't *just* about signs and representations. It's also about effects. A lot of the ethics of making work lies in the kinds of demands that one makes of one's audiences. That's all a very round about way of revealing that like all committed artists who are honest we're still confused on this issue!

- Q. How does work like yours reach a wider audience ? How do you answer the challenge that more far-out work can't be justified if it doesn't speak to people ? Is there an argument for a more populist approach ?
- A. Not if it means resorting to stupidity. There's never any excuse for stupidity. There's quite enough stupidity in the world, and for intelligent people to introduce more is - well it's just cynical and opportunist. It's a complete betrayal of value. Clever people peddling entertainment masquerading as art are the real enemy. We want our work to reach a wide audience, and will do everything to try and make that happen. That's the whole purpose of trying to develop the critical debate around the work.

We hate work that is just pretentious or mystifying. Interestingly our work appeals much more to people who have no preconceptions about what opera should be - or maybe even hostile preconceptions about opera - than to the kind of people who think they know about “proper” drama or opera. We probably think much more about the relationship of each piece of the work to its audience than most conventional theatre makers. But you can’t make work to please some anonymous common denominator. Well you can, actually - but that’s why so much commercial and corporate art is so formulaic. And the real issue here is that the whole obsession with audience numbers is really incredibly short-sighted. The world is awash with ephemeral things like airport novels and TV quiz shows that are consumed by millions to provide a few hours distraction and have no value or impact other than sedating people. The impact of things that really change the way we think just can’t be measured in these terms. They have to smoulder for a long time before they take hold of people’s consciousness. They can’t be measured by the economics of throwaway consumption. Unfortunately we currently have a government that has accepted the ideology of the market and dresses it up as a kind of cultural populism, sloganising about things like “access” or “diversity” and so on. It makes it almost impossible for those of us engaged in making new work. One of the disasters of modern British culture is that, as in everything else, the public sector has entered into a Faustian pact with the commercial sector. It’s both extremely depressing and yet entirely predictable that the National Theatre has just appointed an essentially commercial director as its new boss. He claims to believe that the future of the National lies in new writing. It’s pity he didn’t dedicate a bit more of his own energies to working with new writers earlier in his career, although the kind of directors who commit to new writing are not, of course, the people who ever get to be director of the National Theatre. And why always writing ? What a narrow and provincial understanding of the ways in which new theatre can be made. And another thing, we really resent too the way in which corporate culture exploits those of us engaged in more experimental practices as a kind of free pool of research and development. Corporate culture has always cherry-picked from experimental practice in a completely shameless way, and it’s completely hypocritical of the corporate culture industry to turn round and say “oh, but no one wants to see your work, so why should it be funded... it’s us who get bums on seats.” They don’t *want* us to get audiences. If we were allowed to attract audiences people would start to realise how shoddy the corporate crap is. They want us to do the exploratory groundwork work for them, unrewarded, and then they just cream off the bits they like.

Q. What next ?

A. We just don’t know. Everything depends upon so much else. The basic problem is that we don’t receive any proper funding for our work, so we’re always reliant on the incredible generosity of our collaborators. It’s a familiar story, but neither of us are, as it were, beginners, so we don’t have the sort of space that one has when one is

younger just to mess around with like-minded messers around. And unfortunately we've both got more radical as we've got older, which goes entirely against the grain! You're meant to do your weird stuff when you're in your twenties and then settle down and be sensible. Do West-End musicals and Hollywood costume dramas and become director of the Royal National Theatre ! It seems that people won't take you seriously if you start doing more radical stuff when you're middle-aged. But we do really need to be working at the level we've reached, with people who know what they're doing. The endless search for money, the endless scrimping around for cheap solutions, the endless calling upon favours does get terribly dispiriting in the end.

Q. What are your ambitions then ?

A. We're not very comfortable with the concept of ambition. Ambition is almost always conceived in terms of external objects - "I want to work for the BBC....I want to run the RSC" deda, deda, deda. Ambitious people never question those kinds of institutions, which is what anyone who wants to change things has to do. The only legitimate form of ambition is that which is directed to ends that are not attached to material institutions or objects. One's only ambition should ever be to make the next piece of work one needs to make. If you're a careerist you're always looking ahead to see what the next piece of work will do for your career, rather than concentrating on the work itself. All we want is to be able to continue making work that we feel matters, and to have that work recognised in such a way that we can make it properly. We've got masses of ideas for things, but we do also enjoy the challenge of responding of specific kinds of commission, so nothing's set in stone. And we're always looking for interesting collaborators who might push us towards new places. But actually, there's something else too. One's got to tackle these things at the educational and institutional level too. Things will never change as long as the colleges and conservatories still just keep churning out people who slot mindlessly into the corporate art system, or as long as the level of critical understanding and debate remains so mediocre. That's a lifetime's project. Hey-ho.

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