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Cheek by Jowl Education Pack



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25 Years of Cheek by Jowl

by Carol Rutter
Professor of English Literature
at Warwick University



Olivia Williams in *The Changeling*, 2006 © Keith Pattison



The Changeling, 2006 © Keith Pattison



The Changeling, 2006 © Keith Pattison

They've been at it now for twenty-five years, this company built on the partnership between Declan Donnellan and Nick Ormerod that has produced some of the finest theatre seen on the contemporary world stage: Shakespeare, Middleton, Webster, Restoration comedy, European classics (from Sophocles to Racine to Lorca), new work (like Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* and *Homebody/Kabul*), re-discoveries of forgotten texts (like Ostrovsky's *A Family Affair*). Reappraising classic texts is a company trademark. When Cheek by Jowl performs them, plays by Shakespeare and the rest of the Jacobean gang feel like British premiers. When Donnellan directs them and Ormerod designs them, plays like Corneille's *Le Cid* and Pushkin's *Boris Gudonov* strike audiences in France and Russia as astonishing new work by contemporary writers.

Watching Cheek by Jowl, it's obvious why they've lasted – and why they go on making theatre that sets your pulse racing, doubles you up with laughter, and breaks your heart (sometimes all at once).

This is a company that respects actors and the creative physical intelligence they bring to the work. Donnellan believes that 'The art of the theatre is the art of the actor.' So he doesn't come to rehearsals with ideas he wants to impose. Cheek by Jowl productions grow organically out of rehearsals, out of the stuff actors discover moving in space, owning words written (sometimes) four hundred years ago, making 400-year-old arguments and actions matter – urgently – to spectators today: murder and blackmail in *The Changeling*, racism and misogyny in *Othello*, men behaving badly in *Much Ado About Nothing*. (Respecting actors is the reason Donnellan doesn't allow outsiders into rehearsals – actors need privacy for the kinds of risks they take.) For

twenty-five years this company has been a nursery to young British acting talent and a 'reform' school for some of the best of their elders: Adrian Lester, Matthew Macfadyen, Sally Dexter, Saskia Reeves, Anastasia Hille, Paterson Joseph, Amanda Harris, Nonso Anozie, Daniel Craig – the list goes on and on. Among its best achievements, Cheek by Jowl should count the way it almost single-handedly dismantled British theatre's out-moded casting practices. While other companies were dithering about colour-blind casting, wondering whether in 1980s multi-racial Britain they could do something so radical as casting a black actor to play Othello, Cheek by Jowl cut through all the nonsense. When they realised full integrated casting for Fuente Ovejuna at the National Theatre in 1989, they led British Theatre into a new political and cultural awareness. Now, integrated casting is the national norm – from King Lear and Rosalind to Emilia and Mrs. Overdone. The effect? To claim all roles on the English stage for black and Asian actors, and to claim the classics for all comers.

This is a company that relishes words. Cheek by Jowl works on classic texts that didn't know they were going to be classics. Texts written before plays were considered 'literature' and subjects for schools examinations. Texts written when English was young, and primarily a spoken tongue, not a written language, when people got off on talk. Listening to Cheek by Jowl speak Middleton you're hearing political spin, hot gossip, celebrity sleaze, stand-up comedy, the rattle of hypocrisy-in-high-places, the wheeze of sanctimonious special pleading, and plenty of dark wit, dirty jokes. Talk, that is, like we hear today – only edgier, riskier, steamier, and much, much funnier. And much more of it: a ten-course meal's worth of words, not the anorexic snacking our culture goes in for.



Twelfth Night, 2006



Twelfth Night, 2006



The Changeling, 2006

This is a company that fits design to actors and scripts, not the other way around. Ormerod is a genius of expressive minimalism, who strips everything away that comes between actor and spectator – but gives the workers precisely the right tools to do the job of releasing the playwright's words, and the watchers the right visual apparatus to make sense of the story. The Forest of Arden in *As You Like It* was seven strips of green silk hung from the flies; the madhouse in *Twelfth Night*, a garden recliner set in full sun. The deadly manoeuvrings of *The Duchess of Malfi* were conducted on a floor patterned like a chess-board. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Hermia arrived in the woods clutching her sleeping bag; in *Othello*, after the ghastly dinner party, the 'girls' sprawled together on Desdemona's bed – three boxes, shoved together – eased their high heels off aching feet, and laughed. In Ormerod's design, a visual poetry of suggestion mixes with mischief and iconoclasm.

Not least, sexual iconoclasm. Pioneers in so much, Cheek by Jowl has led the way in contemporary Britain's explorations of erotic politics: a sadie-max Bianca in *Othello*, a gang of jolily homoerotic – or were they homophobic? – Hooray-Henries in *Much Ado*; a delicious gender-bending *As You Like It*. Sex in Cheek by Jowl productions turns up in unexpected places – toying and fumbling, grinning goofily, suffering. And always challenging spectators to connect spirit to flesh, thinking to feeling, their brains to their hearts – and loins.

At twenty-five – an age when some people expect you to grow up – Cheek by Jowl shows no sign of leaving its trademark mischief, irreverence and 'childness' behind. Thank goodness. For our culture has a deep need for what they do. *Serio ludere*. That's what Erasmus called it back in 1515: 'serious play'. Play that laughs from the belly but is profoundly spiritual. The kind of play that reminds us we're all 'changelings'.

Carol Chillington Rutter

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Cheek by Jowl

Extract from an article originally published in *Fifty Key Directors*, ed Shomit Mitter and Maria Shevtsova, London: Routledge, 2005

Jodie McNeel and company in *Cymbeline*, 2007



Cymbeline 2007



Cymbeline 2007

Cheek by Jowl was founded in 1981 as a national and international touring company. Its remit, to re-invigorate the classics and make them vital to a wider public, involved demystifying the canon, not least Shakespeare. The company's critique of a certain kind of establishment, 'Englishness' was also evident in its casting of local black actors in major roles; similarly, in its promotion of foreign classics, many of them never performed in the country before.

Cheek by Jowl is neither militant nor didactic; at the time of *Measure for Measure* (1994) an expose of the cant of state authority and corruption in government, whose topical interest was evident, Donnellan was quoted as saying, 'Theatre doesn't answer political questions, though it asks them' (Guardian 14 June 1994) Asking pertinent questions, always in relation to actuality, is central to the focus on texts as repositories of thought not taken for granted as being there, immanent in the words on the page but discovered and ascribed by actors as they probe the possibilities of play.

The actor, for Donnellan, is neither an interpreter of pre-existing meaning nor a creator by sheer dint of inventive or 'creative' power. He/She is an 'intrepid explorer' and 'finds rather than creates and controls.' (Donnellan 2002: 133) In this can be detected Donnellan's implicit critique of Stanislavsky's notion of the actor-creator which reappears in his emphasis on how the actor discovers a universe from

without rather than from within his/her self. What is found, contra Stanislavsky, is not a storehouse of conscious as well as unconscious experiences and memories 'inside' the actor waiting to be drawn out, but a whole host of pragmatically ascertainable options 'outside' in the ambient world. Each one of these is a 'target' as Donnellan calls it; something concrete to guide the actor's actions – a question to be raised, a decision to be made, an object to be perceived. The actor is confronted by shifting targets, since they move at every given moment of play. Nothing is fixed, and the director's task is not only to map but to enable this journey through constantly changing goals.

To hear Tom Hiddleston and Jodie McNeel discuss these ideas with specific reference to *Cymbeline*, listen to the *Cymbeline* Podcast at: www.cheekbyjowl.com/productions/cymbeline/podcast.html

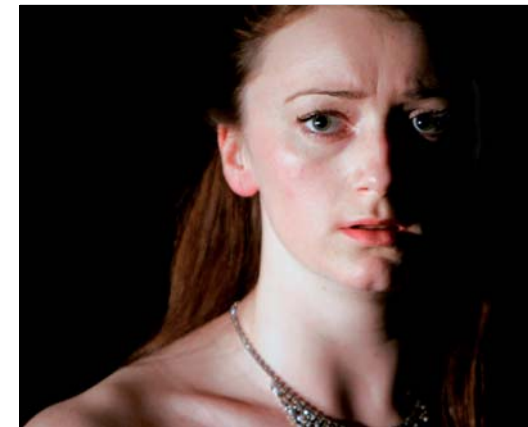
Cheek by Jowl's style is deliberate. Groupings are formal, even self consciously placed especially in the openings. Scenes overlap, actors freeze whilst others complete scenes or introduce new ones. The past collapses into the present.



Cymbeline 2007



Cymbeline 2007



Cymbeline 2007

Time is suspended or its passage is emblematically configured. Different locations appear simultaneously. Violence is stylised, the acting is incisive, precise and devoid of sentimentality.

Ormerod's design is sparse. Green banners drop from the flies in *As You Like It* to indicate the forest of Arden. A desk, a chair and a working light are the setting for *Measure for Measure*. Carpets are pulled back to reveal boards suggested a parched Kabul in *Homebody/Kabul* (2002), chairs delineate space in *The Changeling* (2006). While modern dress, especially for Shakespeare, has become a cliché of contemporary British theatre, Donnellan and Ormerod consistently integrate it into the central ideas of each production.

Maria Shevtsova
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The Doubling of Posthumus and Cloten

By Valerie Wayne, Bronwen Lawton and Melissa Chia



Jodie McNeel and Tom Hiddleston in *Cymbeline* 2007



Cymbeline 2007



Cymbeline 2007

Whenever we see an actor we know well in a new role and think about the other roles that person has played, we experience one of the effects of doubling. The theatrical practice of doubling occurs when an actor in a single performance plays more than one part. He might do it for practical reasons — because the company wants to use as few actors as possible to minimize their expenses, or because they need him to fill in for someone who is sick. Doubling was often employed for these reasons by Shakespeare's own company, which put on plays using about ten men and three or four boy actors, many of whom had to double their roles to enact the multiple parts required. *Hamlet* calls for actors in about 30 speaking roles, *Cymbeline* 33, and *Henry V* almost 50; additional characters were required for non-speaking roles. Since all of these characters were not on stage at the same time, actors could double in other roles and have the chance to play more than one part. The practice of doubling was developed by itinerant acting companies in the Middle Ages and has been in use ever since.

Yet doubling serves not only practical purposes but conceptual ones, because the experience that audiences have when they see an actor playing an additional role in the same show adds another layer of meaning to the performance. Cordelia and the Fool in *King Lear*; Mamilius and Perdita or Antigonus and Camillo in *The Winter's Tale*; King Claudius and the Ghost of Hamlet Senior in *Hamlet*;

Theseus and Oberon as well as Hippolyta and Titania in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: these are characters whose age, structural position, or function are so similar that using the same actor for both roles links them for spectators, forging a thematic connection between them. Those links also call attention to the theatricality of performance, the way in which theatre makes us aware we are watching a performance at the same time we become caught up in the fictional world being enacted. Stephen Booth says doubling reminds us that 'double identities . . . are the mainsprings of delight in all theatrical productions and most theatrical plots', blurring distinctions between actor and character, reality and disguise, truth and falsehood. Theatrical fictions always confuse these categories when an actor pretends to be someone else.

Opinions are divided about how doubling worked in practice. William Ringer, Jr., believed that 31 lines of text between an actor's exit in one role and his entrance in another would have been needed to provide time for a costume change. Stephen Booth countered that part of the audience's delight in doubling is seeing the actor's quick turn-around from one role to the next. We can read some lines of dialogue as referring to these transformations. The first time Cloten appears in *Cymbeline*, one of the lords advises him 'to shift a shirt' since he has just been fighting with Posthumus. Perhaps the actor himself has just shifted a shirt in order to present Cloten rather than Posthumus. At the end of *King Lear*, when the king is still trying to comprehend the death of his daughter Cordelia, Lear utters the haunting words, 'And my poor fool is hanged'. The doubling of Cordelia with the Fool would make these sad lines even more poignant, for the loss of much that is good and loyal in the play is compounded if the single body of an actor presents both parts.



Cymbeline 2007



Cymbeline 2007



Cymbeline 2007



Cymbeline 2007

Posthumus and Cloten are never on stage at the same time. As the play opens, Imogen refers to her husband as an 'eagle' and her stepbrother as a 'puttock', but those distinctions become quickly blurred when Posthumus is entrapped in a wager on his wife's fidelity and wants her killed because he thinks she has been unfaithful. Cloten, too, plans to kill Imogen but wants to rape her first. Are these characters really so different? As the play poses this question, it presents Imogen with the 'body' of Cloten dressed in the clothes of Posthumus, and the clothes fit perfectly. Whose body is this? Although Imogen claims to know the 'shape of's leg' and the 'marital thigh' of her husband, the audience knows she has confused one man for the other. Cynthia Lewis claims that at this moment the issues of misperception in the play reach their peak. Imogen's confusion is an ironic commentary on the similarities between Cloten and Posthumus, and we can sympathize with her predicament when we have shared in those confusions ourselves. Cloten reveals many of the boorish traits that Posthumus does not fully repress, and D.E. Landry claims he is a 'parodic

double' of Posthumus's own instincts. Posthumus eventually changes from a murderous to a repentant and more loving husband, but that happens while he is absent from the stage. He is gone for all of acts three and four, and the character we see instead during those acts is Cloten. What we witness then, according to Homer D. Swander, is Posthumus's 'symbolic life and death in the caricature named Cloten'. When Cloten dies, the part of Posthumus that was most like Cloten dies as well. Using the same actor for both roles makes the connection between the two characters more explicit, so the death of one can contribute to the reform of the other. However, we may wonder for a moment how complete that transformation is when Posthumus strikes Imogen just before they are reunited.

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Three Sisters Why Russia?



Three Sisters 2007



Three Sisters 2007



Three Sisters 2007

In 1999, at the request of the Russian Theatre Confederation, Declan Donnellan and Nick Ormerod formed a Russian counterpart to Cheek by Jowl. This ensemble, featuring some of Russia's finest actors, opened seven years ago at the Moscow Arts Theatre with *Boris Godunov* by Pushkin.

Since then, following in the footsteps of Cheek by Jowl, this new Russian company has won awards at home in Moscow and has performed across the world from Sydney to Buenos Aires. Its current repertoire includes *Boris Godunov*, *Twelfth Night* by William Shakespeare and *Three Sisters* by Anton Chekhov.

In interviews for French magazine, *La Tirsasse* and *The Guardian*, London, Declan Donnellan talks about his unique relationship with Russian theatre.

How did your infatuation with Russian drama begin?

I undertook my first experience of Chekhov in London when I was only sixteen. The play was *Uncle Vanya*. It was during that venture that my life long love of Chekhov was born. Since then, I've read as much as I could on Russian theatre, from Stanislavski through Meyerhold to Michael Chekhov, the playwright's nephew, a brilliant actor and director of actors. As soon as it was possible to tour with Cheek by Jowl to Russia we did so and suddenly Russia became a second home to us. We developed close bonds with the Maly Theatre of St Petersburg, who invited us to work on *A Winter's Tale* in 1997 and the Bolshoi Ballet, where we worked on *Romeo and Juliet* in 2004. We formed our own ensemble of actors in Moscow in 1999, who now tour the world.

I feel a great kinship with many Russian directors, who share my belief that the main task of the director is to supervise and maintain the collective interplay of the cast and that the scene takes place not only in the space between the actors, but in the space between the actors and the audience.

What drew you to particularly to *Three Sisters*?

It's so sorrowful, so funny, so frightening... Chekhov knew how to do that, to create a universe of ambivalence and contradiction, where nostalgia mixes with anger, where ritual is overwhelmed by chaos, and where tragedy imposes itself in a burst of desperate laughter.



Three Sisters 2007



Three Sisters 2007



Boris Godunov, 2008

Is theatre similar in London, Paris and Moscow?

What's different from one place to the next is much less interesting than what is the same. Audiences feed our work, the audiences we encounter naturally affect the theatre we produce. What is most intimate between human beings is often what is most common. Often seeing our work in front of different cultures gives us a deeper instinct for what is more intimate, more common. We try to examine more attentively what it is to be human and try to capture what is essential.

Theory is cheap whilst life is infinitely precious.

How have your Russian experiences shaped your attitude to the theatre?

We continuously work on a production, once the show has opened and is on tour, it is a continual process to ensure the piece stays alive and increases in life. So, it's important to work on a play as we do in Russia over a number of years. The Russian repertory system is slowly changing now towards a more Western, commercial model, however, the actors benefited hugely from the traditional Russian system where actors have a job for life with one company. They gain a confidence from working continuously, not just in terms of job security, although that helps, but from being able to inhabit a role and work on a production over a very long period of time.

To listen to Russian Assistant Director, Evgeny Pisarev discuss audience reactions across the world go to:
www.cheekbyjowl.com and listen to the Podcast.



Cheek by Jowl

An interview with
Owen Horsley, Assistant Director

Owen Horsley



Warwick University workshop

Did you start out wanting to direct?

Initially, when I had no idea what a director was or really did, I wanted to be the greatest actor that ever lived. However no amount of persistence or training could make that dream a reality, so I moved on to writing. It was when one of my scripts was performed in Edinburgh that I realised what a director did, albeit at a very basic level.

I stumbled upon the chance to direct Liz Lohead's *Dracula* in my penultimate year at school and realized first hand how amazing it was to take the words of the page and, with a group of actors, a stage and audience, create something. What that something was I wasn't quite sure.

One thing I did realise after doing this show was the most important component in the whole boiling pot of theatre was the audience; if you weren't telling the story for them then you might as well keep the curtains closed.



Warwick University workshop

Once you'd realized directing was what you wanted to do, how did you go about becoming 'A Director'?

I applied to Drama Centre London for their Directing BA and read everything I could from Tennessee Williams to Shakespeare. I remember my first year at Drama Centre as both incredible and hugely overwhelming. The timetable was intense because in the first year the directors take all of the acting classes; ballet, speech everything. Drama Centre teaches that it is important for directors to experience first hand the process of actor training so that you have a better understanding of what you are asking actors to do when you direct.

So after a long day of classes, I would sit in my London flat at night with a massive pile of plays and books and read. It was exhausting, but it was a great start to my theatre education; catapulting myself from the Greeks to Sarah Kane picking up incredible stories just begging to be told on the way.

How did you come to work with Declan and Cheek by Jowl?

As part of my course I had a work placement at the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford-upon-Avon at the time that Declan and Nick were working on their adaptation of Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*. I was lucky enough to continue my work with Declan when he asked me to return as his assistant on *The Changeling* in 2006.



John Macmillan at Warwick University workshop



Warwick University workshop



Warwick University workshop

So how does Cheek by Jowl work on bringing a play to life?

I hesitate to put labels on the way that Cheek by Jowl works as it's something much freer than that. The relationship between Declan and the actors is liberating to observe. Declan aims to free the actor and open the door to a collection of choices that can be made. To say nothing is pinned down would be a lie but Declan's aim is to plant the seed so that it is the actor's imagination that grows instead of something that is imposed or preconceived.

Before working with Cheek by Jowl, I thought that the director had decided everything about the play before the first day of rehearsal and that the designer had already made a scale model. Actually Cheek by Jowl are quite unique in that Nick designs the set during rehearsals, often not making a final decision until the last couple of weeks. From day one of rehearsals for a Cheek by Jowl show it is what happens in the rehearsal room that makes the play live.

Declan's approach to actors and freeing up their imagination and making them see the target applies very much to his directing and also to Nick's design. Rather than looking inwards, everything is taken from outside.

Storytelling is also very important and became vital with a complicated and challenging play like *Cymbeline*. Working with Declan and Nick has increased my confidence in handling the text. They are quite free with the text but it always comes from the desire to tell the story in the most lucid and concise way. Working in this way has changed the way that I read plays. When I read classical texts now, I am always looking for opportunities for clarity in storytelling.

What exactly is your role as Assistant Director on a Cheek by Jowl show?

In the rehearsal room I will be there to take Declan's notes and often when Declan works on one scene I work with other actors in a separate room on another.

As Cheek by Jowl is a touring company, most of my work happens on the road. Once the show opens it's my job to keep it running. We perform in very different spaces and so one of my main tasks is to reset things like entrances and exits for each new stage that we perform on.

Declan and Nick work on a show constantly, Cheek by Jowl's work is a continual process. This approach really makes the story live every night. So Declan will come out to see the show and give notes, giving the actors new things to think about, stories to spark their imaginations, new targets to be seen in order to keep in living outside them and keep taking risks.

One of the best things about being on tour is observing the different receptions to the show. It continually amazes me how the emotional weight of the work transcends language – Cheek by Jowl's work communicates to audiences across the world. Listening to the responses after the show is always a highlight for me while on tour.

We Can't Get Enough of Their Cheek

Dominic Cavendish



Adrian Lester in *As You Like It*, 1994



Duchess of Malfi, 1997



Othello, 1994

Declan Donnellan can remember the moment when 'Cheek by Jowl' was born. He can still, in fact, remember the exact expression on his partner Nick Ormerod's face when, seated at the kitchen table of their south London flat, after discussing what to call their new theatre company long into the small hours, 'he suddenly announced the name. He did so with an air of quite remarkable authority for his tender years. I've never forgotten that decisive look.'

A quarter of a century, 30 productions and a heap of awards later, the durability of that moniker, its farsighted aptness, its talismanic properties, couldn't be more apparent. Cheek by Jowl isn't just still going strong, it's stronger than ever – in demand at home, cemented by a residency at the Barbican Centre, and abroad, where every international festival worth its salt wants a piece of them.

The name, of course, leads to Shakespeare – and the fierce vow Demetrius makes as he accompanies Lysander in pursuit of Helena in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* ('Nay, I'll go with thee cheek by jowl'); it enshrines the company's devotion to the classics. It also takes you to the beating heart of the working method that has kept Cheek by Jowl alive, and its productions so vital where other 80s touring companies have withered away.

Togetherness is this company's calling card, a togetherness bound up in an intense yet informal rapport between actor and actor, actor and audience, and ultimately the symbiotic relationship between Donnellan the director and Ormerod the designer, British theatre's savviest couple.

It was, curiously enough, Shakespeare – and an international tour of a student *Macbeth* – that first brought the pair together while they were at Cambridge University. Ormerod, then 20, the son of a GP, played the Scottish doctor, and Donnellan, a newly arrived 19-year-old, of Irish immigrant stock, took the slightly bigger part of Lenox. 'It's strange that we should have met precisely as we were to go on, touring abroad,' the latter recalls, at 54, older, wiser and as he goodnaturedly concedes, balder. Much dithering was to take place before Cheek by Jowl's inception, however, with both men taking up, then abandoning legal careers and fussing about on the fringe, looking for openings until finally deciding to make their own luck.

'We started Cheek by Jowl,' Donnellan confesses 'because we couldn't get a job anywhere else. It's as simple as that. I was in my late twenties and I couldn't persuade anybody to take me on as an assistant, and I would have been an absolutely terrible assistant. I'd written off and said, 'I'm a barrister, I'd like to be a theatre director, are you interested?' No, people were very uninterested. So we started making a virtue of necessity.'

Nowadays the pair can be hard to track down, as they're always on the move, often abroad – not because they're particularly addicted to foreign travel but because once a production is up and running, they don't lose sight of it. Where some directors take their bow on the first night, and are rarely seen subsequently, Donnellan is punctilious in his determination for a show never to come to a full stop creatively. Together with Ormerod, he has evolved a consciously fluid approach, preventing complacency and staleness from setting in.



Much Ado About Nothing, 1998



Homebody/Kabul, 2001



Othello, 2004



As You Like It, 1994

‘Theatre is the actors’ art first and last,’ Donnellan declares. ‘The director’s role is to protect the acting and to look after the health of the ensemble playing, which is always quite fragile. Over any period of time, there’s a tendency for a company to separate and the main task is to keep them playing together.’ This strikingly modest, self-effacing assessment of a director’s contribution, together with the fact that he has never wanted to run a theatre building, may be one of the reasons why his name is far less familiar to the average ear than, say, Declan Donnelly, of TV’s *Ant and Dec*. Likewise, Ormerod’s predilection for a spare design – ‘where each object,’ as he puts it ‘has to earn its place’ – can mean the clean intelligence of his input goes under-noticed by reviewers.

To separate out the functions of design and direction like that doesn’t do full justice to the pair’s working rapport though. As Donnellan explains: ‘Nick is very central in the company in that he casts the production with me, and although only I work with the actors, design is absolutely crucial. To do very little actually involves a lot of work, because you’re constantly paring down and thinking ‘What element do we really need?’ There’s a huge amount of decision-making in that.’

If reviewers sometimes fail to spot the craft, and graft, involved, there are no shortage of actors, queuing up to sing the praises of the Nick and Dec show, and elaborate on the nature of its long-running success. Over the years, the duo have displayed a formidable aptitude for spotting and nurturing talented young things, while thriving on the freshness they’ve brought to the *Cheek by Jowl* enterprise. Daniel Craig, Sally Dexter, Adrian Lester, Matthew MacFadyen, Stephen Mangan, David Morrissey, Saskia Reeves and Michael Sheen are among the more famous alumnae.

‘He’s the closest thing I’ve had to a mentor,’ admits Spooks star MacFadyen, who got a break in their 1995 revival of *The Duchess of Malfi* while in his final year at RADA, before getting even greater exposure three years later playing Benedick in *Much Ado About Nothing* at the tender age of 25. ‘The most striking thing is that when you enter rehearsals there’s seemingly no plan about how to proceed. Both of them are hysterical when they’re in a rehearsal room and you have tremendous fun. So many directors have a preconceived idea of what they want, but we played lots of games and the process was as organic as possible.’

Sally Dexter, who took the leading role in Donnellan’s only personally scripted work-to-date, *Lady Betty* (1989), about a hangwoman famous in his parents’ hometown of Roscommon, found the lack of coercion a revelation: ‘He’s the first director I’d ever heard who encouraged people not to act. He doesn’t like crash-bang-wallop acting. The important thing, in his view, is not to dredge up emotions but to try to believe in what you are doing. That can sound wishy-washy but it’s incredibly practical, the heart follows the head.’

Adrian Lester, highly sought ever since he starred as Rosalind in their legendary 1992 all-male *As You Like It*, remembers the time that he went to audition for that production. ‘To be honest, I didn’t know who *Cheek by Jowl* were. I came from Birmingham and my first few jobs were at the Manchester Royal Exchange and the Traverse. I was told by my agent about this director who wanted to do an all-male *As You Like It*, and I thought it sounded like a gimmick. I said – ‘with all respect, I don’t want to go for a part where I’d be dressed up as a woman.’ But I went along to the audition and talked to Declan and about what he intended to do –

and I was so impressed by him that I was converted on the spot. He had such a strong instinct about the play that afterwards I called my agent and said ‘If they haven’t got a *Rosalind* yet, I’d love to put myself forward.’

He agrees with the others as to the reason for the company’s enduring appeal to actors: ‘The reason why these guys are so damned good is that they don’t tell you what to do, or what not to do. Certain directors have a process which they apply to every actor. Some are released by it, others are trapped by it. Declan adapts his process to meet the requirements of each actor. Once you’re out on stage, it’s impossible to tell where his ideas have ended and your ideas have begun.’

With *Cheek by Jowl*, you can’t see the joins. And looking back, Ormerod and Donnellan find it hard to pick out highlights or lowpoints. ‘It’s been a continuum,’ says Donnellan. ‘We didn’t set out to last 25 years, it’s just fallen out that way. We’re not great ones for planning ahead or nostalgia. I think all the work that I do as incomplete. With *As You Like It*, I still think of things I didn’t see or could have done differently. I like that feeling of unfinished business.’

Ormerod likens the experience to running a family: ‘*Cheek by Jowl* has been our child, our family. As with all families, you don’t think you’ve come close to the brink, though, in retrospect you sometimes realise you have. In a game like this, you can’t think far into the future – and you don’t have much time to dwell on the past.’ *Cheek by Jowl*’s enduring gift to the theatre, it would seem, is their uncanny ability to live in an eternal, precarious present.

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Dominic Cavendish is theatre critic for the *Daily Telegraph*. You can find podcasts featuring Declan Donnellan and his actors on the *Cheek by Jowl* website, www.cheekbyjowl.com, and also hear in-depth conversations with him on the audio archive website www.theatrevoice.com

Further Reading:

The Actor and the Target
Declan Donnellan
Nick Hern Books, London, 2002

Directing the Stage
by Polly Irvin
RotoVision, Hove, 2003

In Contact With the Gods? Directors Talk Theatre
eds. Maria M. Delgado & Paul Heritage
Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1996

National Theatre Platform Papers
No 2 on *Angels in America*
National Theatre Publications Department
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National Theatre Platform Papers
Declan Donnellan Talks About his Book *The Actor and the Target*
National Theatre Publications Department, London, 24th January 2003 www.nationaltheatre.org.uk