

Polly Teale

interviewed by Rebecca Waese

'Distilling the Essence': Working with Shared Experience

In this wide-ranging interview of 25 November 2014, Polly Teale, writer, director, and Artistic Director of UK-based Shared Experience theatre company, reflects on her stage adaptations of literary works, the lives of their authors, and the processes of adapting texts between genres. Founded in 1975 by Mike Alfreds, Shared Experience has toured internationally from Sydney to Beijing with highly physical stage adaptations of literary texts and biographies that express the inner lives of complex and fascinating characters. Teale discusses the adaptation of her play *Brontë* to a screenplay, Shared Experience's upcoming production of *Mermaid*, and rehearsal strategies she uses to encourage actors to explore the subjective truths that lie beneath the surface of their characters. Besides *Brontë*, past productions have included *Jane Eyre*, *The Mill on the Floss*, and *After Mrs Rochester*. Shared Experience was recently awarded a £105,000 grant by the Andrew Lloyd Webber Foundation and has won several theatre awards including *Time Out's* Live Award for Best Play in the West End (2004) and an Edinburgh Fringe First Award (2010). Rebecca Waese is a lecturer and researcher in Creative Arts and English at La Trobe University, Melbourne. She is co-writing a book on Polly Teale and has previously written on interdisciplinary adaptations and dramatic modes in Australian and Canadian literature.

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Rebecca Waese *What are some of the specific challenges of moving Brontë from a play to a film?*

Polly Teale Well, I'm just learning about film. The whole experience is very new. But one of the things that is interesting is that in the play *Brontë* there's a lot of flashback, and actually it seems, in film time, you have to be really sparing with flashbacks. It's something about the present-tense pressure-cooker of the narrative that seems to need to stay intact. It doesn't mean you can't have flashbacks and, of course, a very carefully chosen flashback that really informs the present tense can support and fire something up, but it feels like the spine of it needs to be in the present tense of the story – unfolding forward. So that's been an interesting discovery.

I mean the thing that's so exciting, of course, is that you can guide the eye of the viewer in a way that you can't when you're on stage; both forms have their magic, but at

the moment I'm finding it quite exciting. I've just been sitting upstairs trying to think of a scene. I'm trying to show Emily Brontë at school. Emily found it almost impossible to be away from home, from the Moors, and although she was incredibly independent, fiercely independent, in many other ways she couldn't really function away from home. She was quite socially phobic. And I'm trying, very succinctly, to tell the story of what happened when she tried to go to school, when she was sent away to school for a while. She basically stopped eating and kind of made it so that she had to return home.

And I've just come up with this little scene where I start imagining her and Charlotte. Charlotte was the complete opposite. She was head girl and wanted to be the best at everything and very keen to get approval – so I've got this little scene where you see Charlotte licking her thread, threading her needle, and going into this sampler, and then you go along this row of girls all doing these

beautifully precise little samplers with flowers and twee little Victorian poems on them, all in their uniforms, and you get to the end of the line – just imagine the camera following the line – and you see this girl in these crumpled kind of ill-fitting clothes and then you see this needle going into the sampler like she's sort of attacking it in a complete mess of stitches. Then you see her kind of *bite* the thread and then look out the window. And you cut from that, really watching her feet as she runs through the woods in bare feet in the middle of the night, something pretty crazy and unallowed, and then you cut to the headmistress's office where you see she's being grilled about why she's refusing to wear her petticoats, and it's quite exciting being able to be that precise about what you see, that you're honing in on the absolute details. It's almost like suddenly being given a whole new language, that you can decide exactly what people see in a way that's very different from theatre.

And it's all new. Who knows, you know, I don't quite know until it happens, when we start doing it, whether I'm . . . I'll find out how good I am at it, you know, it's a new medium. And far fewer words, of course, much more visual.

And with more music –

Yes, and sound . . .

And the art of cutting and splicing and juxtaposition.

Yes, all of that. They say that, don't they, that so much of the movie is made in the edit.

Your theatre work is so interesting with gaps and parallels and counterpoints already.

I mean it's the language that I really enjoy. I love that. I've always been fascinated by that aspect of the story, of how you can slice into things, and I think often with adaptations that's the difference between a good and a bad one; a bad adaptation has too much – just filling in all the gaps and taking you through all the *event* of the story.

One of the reasons we were so drawn to using novels as a source is that in Shared Experience as a company we're very inter-

ested in that possibility of making visible the inner lives of the characters and getting beneath the surface of the story, expressing their most private experiences of the world. I suppose what's great in a novel, and perhaps why we're drawn to novels, is that they give us the opportunity to live inside somebody's head and experience the world almost as though you're inside their consciousness. And so I think they've been really rich pickings for us, exploring that territory in theatre, finding ways of slicing through and making visible what's going on inside.

I've heard you describe it in a video on your website as 'distilling', and I was interested in that expression, 'distilling the essence' or 'distilling the experience' of a novel. I wondered if, in your writing process, when you're into that distillation process, is there any physicality involved? Because once the words are taken to the company it becomes so physical. Are you imagining the physicality when you write? Does that play into your writing process?

That's a good question. I think definitely that I know that it's going to go on this journey with the company and that it will have this very strong physical life but I don't quite know what it's going to be. And that's what's interesting. I think there probably are directors who, before they start on a production, have a really clear picture of how a certain moment is going to be physically onstage, and I'll have a certain instinct about what the territory is, and obviously a sense of what we want to explore, but it definitely evolves with the actors. It definitely comes out of the process rather than being something that I walk in saying, 'I imagine that this happens at this moment.' It all comes out of the exploration.

And then is it a back-and-forth process? Do you then change some of the text as a result of the rehearsal or do they just take it and open it up and excavate it?

When I'm working on my own stuff, I will quite often just start chopping things because you often realize that you've put more than you need into the language. With Helen Edmundson, who has done several adapta-

tions for us and who is very good at distilling things, actually the text doesn't change a huge amount. *Anna Karenina* was the first adaptation she did for us, and it was very cleverly honed and focused on the page. She just has a real facility for being able to find a language that has a charge and energy, because that's the key, isn't it? Lifting anything from a book to the stage, because it's all about the physical presence of actors, where you make whatever's happening palpable, as opposed to it all being expressed in words, in language.

I think I learned a huge amount from her. She's found a device for cracking it open and getting inside, if you like, finding a way to allow us access to that inner world. With *Anna Karenina*, Levin, throughout it, talks to Anna; this allows them to say things to each other that they just don't say in real life. In the actual novel I think they meet once, very briefly. In *The Mill on the Floss*, Helen had this wonderful idea that there were three versions of Maggie, and then, of course, in *Jane Eyre* I had this idea that the woman in the attic, the mad woman, could express everything that Jane had to cover up.

So I suppose it's finding a device that will allow us to see inside the characters. And I always feel I should qualify this slightly because, of course, at the same time, I'm also always very interested in the bigger story; it's not all about the subjective experience. I'm thinking about the cultural, social, political landscape and how that impacts on the characters on a deeply private, personal level, and then, in turn, how that impacts their sense of who they are, and, in turn, impacts on the way that they behave and the world that they create, if that makes sense?

It does. And I was thinking particularly of the Bertha double in Jane Eyre as representing several things: the inner child of Jane, and the wild, animalistic part of Jane.

Yes.

While she is also a character in her own right. Do you see those several lives operating simultaneously? I know there was some criticism about the

idea that if Bertha is two parts of Jane, does this take away from her own autonomy . . .

Her own reality.

Yes, her subjectivity as a character with a real life. What did you think about that?

I mean, it's an interesting question. Yes, and then it's interesting that I then went on to do *After Mrs Rochester*, which was about that story but entwining it with Jean Rhys, who knew that world of the West Indies. I suppose I was nervous: will it feel like we've somehow confused things? But, for me, I always felt that Bertha, in some way, had been born out of a part of Charlotte Brontë, if you like. As children they read these travelogues and were fascinated by these stories of foreign lands, which is particularly interesting because, of course, they lived their lives in this very remote bit of Yorkshire and although Charlotte briefly went to Brussels, to the school there, I don't think she saw much of Brussels, really. So, in a funny sort of way, they lived in one place, and found it hard to leave that place in actuality, but in their imaginations they went on these huge journeys.

I always think those sections of the West Indies are amazing in *Jane Eyre* because they're so vivid. It almost feels as though she must have been there in the way she describes it. And I think it was because she read travelogues – the Victorians were travelling the whole time and there were travelogues in the newspapers – and I suppose there's something about the idea of writing about this kind of tropical climate and this creature who is everything that Charlotte, as a Victorian woman, couldn't be in real life.

Well, because all characters are created. They are not people. It's a version created by Charlotte. It makes sense.

Yes, and I think particularly in that novel, you feel when you read it, that really everything is seen through Jane's psyche. It's almost like everything is magnified by her life experience so that it is a very particular keyhole into the world. And all the way through the novel she's looking, isn't she,

she's asking a question, 'How is it possible, as a Victorian woman, to be true to myself?' And she sees all these different possible models. There's the completely self-denying Helen Burns and then there's the frivolous artificiality of someone like Blanche Ingram, and then there's Adele, the precocious, rather spoilt child. It's like she's looking around her the whole time to see, and, I suppose, that's the question to try and work out: how is it possible to be a woman in this world? What are the role models? And Bertha is part of the picture. She's this sort of exotic; and you feel in the novel that Jane is irresistibly drawn to her. So she's both drawn to her and at the same time she has to reject her and make her a demon because Bertha's everything she's not allowed to be. And that tension's very interesting.

I'm also interested in your use of intertextuality. For example, Paula Rego's art in Brontë, and the film projections in Mine, and what you get when you mix those texts. I'm wondering how those projects came about and the affiliations with the artists and what that did for the plays?

Yes. With Paula Rego, I've always loved her work, and I wrote to her when we were making *After Mrs Rochester* because someone had told me that she was making a series of paintings about Jane Eyre. So I just wrote to her, out of the blue, not really expecting to hear anything back, thinking she might, but it was a long shot, and she came to see the play. She was just so lovely and incredibly supportive and generous.

When I did the *Brontë* play, because I always looked at her work, whenever I was working with set designers, I always found myself getting out her pictures and referring to them. Something about the way she layers her images – you often feel as though you're looking through. I mean, similar to my plays, there's layers of reality and so, yes, we came to the idea of putting these images on the wall when we did *Brontë*, which is a slightly strange thing to do, really, to have these huge paintings, but it was quite interesting, visually. The Brontës themselves drew. They lived at a time when you couldn't have a likeness of anything unless you drew it. They didn't

have photographs or film; photography was in its very early days, wasn't it? It kind of worked. I kind of liked having these huge images on the walls.

It bridges times and realities, too. Like at the beginning of Brontë, when the actors come on stage in contemporary dress and contemporary language and talk about their own characters in the third person; there's an engagement and an invitation – 'come into our play' – and there's that moment to engage the audience. And I wonder if the effect of those pictures is about bridging times or engaging people.

Yes, you're absolutely right. It does somehow, doesn't it, it pulls together. Because certainly one of the things we were wanting to do with *Brontë* was to deconstruct it so it felt a little bit like we were in a rehearsal room with a mark-up on the floor and props on the tables. As you can see from the minute the play begins, they're in modern dress, and they're sort of thinking, 'Oh, what must have it been like to wear these clothes?' – that process that an actor goes through when they start thinking their way into the character. That's rather fascinating, the way actors gradually step into the character through a lot of research.

Could you tell me a little more about the use of film in Mine?

It was a bit of an experiment, really. I enjoyed it. I mean it's a wonderful thing to be able to have because you can suddenly have a forest spring up in the house. It allows for imagery to explode in a way that's quite exciting. Again, it's another language, isn't it? It's quite an expensive thing to do but it was very interesting to explore. I'm not sure how much I'll do it again in the future because you can have two actors for the price of your film. So you have to think quite seriously about it, and, of course, now, I don't know whether it's the same for you, but arts funding has all been very squeezed, and we have to be really careful about what we spend.

I wanted to ask you how the funding – for example, the Andrew Lloyd Webber grant you got, and how the other funding cuts affected the

direction or what you could do, and what you might like to do?

It is hard, there's no question it's been really tough. We used to be what you'd call a regularly funded organization, so we used to have money and we would re-apply for it in three-year chunks, but since they did the big reconfiguration, we no longer have regular funding and we have to apply production by production. In fact, we're about to try and apply for three productions in a row to give us a bit more security.

But I think it does affect things. It means that I spend more of my time on it; we're much more skeletal because we don't have the money to cover core costs, and we're still, in a way, working out how to function. We're going into rehearsal in the beginning of February for our next production and, you know, we don't have an office with a team of people any more. It's all being done with much more skeletal staff and people working part-time, so we'll see. It's quite a big, big production and it also has these choruses we're going to make in each city.

This is Mermaid, you're talking about? Based on the Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale, The Little Mermaid? How did that idea come about? Are the choruses made of teenagers from each city? Is that a community youth initiative?

Yes. Partly, I think there's a lot of pressure, and in some ways, quite rightly, from the Arts Council to make sure that theatre is seen by more than just the middle-class people who regularly go – that we have a kind of duty to reach out to audiences who might not normally go and to try to increase the number of people coming to the theatre from less privileged backgrounds. And certainly there's a big push to try and get more young people to come to the theatre because the theatre population is aging, and so it was one of the reasons for choosing this story. You know, it's a real coming-of-age story and I had this idea that the mermaids' singing could be improvised and created by a whole chorus of teenage girls. When we managed to get this money, it was great and we thought we could properly resource it, but

actually it is turning out to be quite a complicated thing to do. Especially since some of the girls are younger than sixteen so they'll need licences and chaperones. The organizing of something in nine different venues, the logistics . . .

Of rehearsing nine different choruses . . .

Exactly. All of that. Yes, so, it's quite a big thing to undertake. And we've not done it before, not quite in this way, anyway.

Does the idea bring in specific funding?

I think it will have helped us get the funding for the project because you bring in not just the girls in the chorus but you bring in their families and friends and it opens up a sea of people who might not be there otherwise, so that's an example of the kind of thing. These are challenging times, though. I don't know what it's like in Australia because I don't think you were so hit by the recession as here.

Not at the time, but arts funding now is not easy to get.

It's very scarce, isn't it? I remember being in Sydney when *After Mrs Rochester* was there and doing workshops with a big group of actors, and there were lots of really talented, very clearly talented people there, and you could just feel how *hungry* they were and how tough it is trying to get work. They were saying, well, you know, there are basically only really three big companies.

I've been very interested in the educational mandate of Shared Experience. The educational packages are comprehensive and thorough and useful.

Did you look at *Mary Shelley*?

Absolutely! In one of my lecture workshops we took some of the wordless scenes – because in that play and in your plays there are many wordless scenes where so much is conveyed not through text but through physicality – and we had the students imagine how they might direct it.

Which scene did you take?

*Well, I gave them a choice between the first scene with *Mary Shelley's* mother jumping off the*

bridge and the scene with the father choosing not to recognize Mary Shelley on the mountain top, just turning his back to her. And the students imagined the scenes in different ways; somebody made a bridge out of books to show the literary fabric of Mary Shelley's life and then other people used pieces of material for water, or they used music or sounds or streams of light to be water. It was great!

I know occasionally at rehearsals, I've done that thing of saying, 'Everyone have a go at this image.' And that, actually, can be very interesting, can't it, when you get ten people all coming up with different versions of something.

Which exercises are really helpful in getting actors to access their subjective truths?

One thing we do is explore what the person is feeling through physicality. It's an exercise where in the middle of a scene I'll suddenly clap my hands and the actors will physicalize whatever it is that's happening underneath, so you might have a scene where, on the surface, it looks very naturalistic, you know, two people are just sitting, drinking a cup of tea, like us two, but underneath, when I clap my hands, somebody might be extremely agitated. They might just go into something very physical and somebody else might be feeling hugely angry. It could be anything. They'll just physicalize whatever it is they might be feeling. And, when I clap my hands again, they have to return to what they're doing. But because you've had the physical experience of totally expressing that emotional state, and trying to be specific and detailed, you really capture in that moment what it is that's happening. And then you have to go back to whatever it is you were doing, I don't know, putting sugar in your tea, but hopefully it's still there in the body and you can feel at an energetic level that the person is struggling to contain that feeling. Really it's a way of exploring subtext.

Sometimes we will look at incidents in the person's past; with Rochester, I remember exploring the feeling as a child of being second best and then the moment when he discovered this woman that he was in love

with was cheating on him, and then you explore the terrible moment he discovers that she's actually in a relationship with someone else and she's really just using him for his money. So he has to explore all this shame and humiliation and these feelings of terrible distress. And then you'd say, 'Okay, now, you're at a society party and everyone there knows you've been humiliated but you've got to completely cover it up'. Because I think that's the thing I'm really interested in. So once you've explored that, how does that person, depending who they are, cover it up? And Rochester – there's a wonderful moment in the novel where he is described as having had so many knocks and bruises that he's now like an 'India-rubber ball'. I love that description. The idea that he is so tightly bound but also rubber, so he repels things.

That is good, isn't it?

It's really good. So that feeling of someone who's not going to allow anything in. He describes himself as having one sentient point right in the middle of the ball as if you have to get through all these layers. And that's such a great image, isn't it? I mean the way we build up these protective layers so that people can't see our vulnerability and Rochester has this kind of amazing swagger, doesn't he? He's brilliant with language and, actually, a very interesting way to look at it is as a rather elaborate cover; so that somewhere deep inside he's very wounded. But he's created, in a way, a whole persona; he seems rather theatrical, doesn't he?

Yes, his farce and games . . .

All of that, as a sort of way of not allowing people to see what's underneath it. And I suppose what happens with Jane is that it gets stripped away because she just keeps challenging it, not allowing him to play his game; or at least she is going to play it on her own terms, not on his terms. With Jane, similarly, she has created a version of herself, it's like a protective shield; she seems to be rather controlled, contained, sort of stiff, in order to stop people being able to see that underneath it there's somebody who is a bit more like Bertha, who is angry, who has this



Scenes from *Mermaid*, Polly Teale's version of *The Little Mermaid*. Above: 'Far, far from land, where the waters are as black as the darkest night, where no anchor can reach the bottom, live the mermaids.' Below: Blue, played by Natalie Gavin, re-imagines and re-writes the story. Photos: Robert Day.



huge imagination, and has all these complex feelings that she's had to batten down.

And a sensuality.

Absolutely, yes.

So many of your characters have an incredible sensuality and that's such an important thing when you're adapting novels from a time when the sensuality is suppressed or not overt; in your plays, that sensuality is released.

Yes, that was a big part of that story, really. As a Victorian woman, any kind of sensuality had to be completely covered up. So, in a way, that's why it's interesting to have Bertha there; she can be sensual, disinhibited, because she's mad and she has no sense of what is and isn't allowed. And some of the physical stuff she did was quite strange, and that was really fascinating – just working with madness, with someone who doesn't have that protective cover, who's lost any sense of what you do and don't show to other people. It's just like this shell has been completely taken off. Because it's hard to know what on earth we would be, isn't it? We've so evolved into creatures that are all so aware of what other people see of us.

It was really lovely. I mean, I remember sessions where we probably spent a couple of hours just with the idea of everybody in the company, all eight of them, imagining they were Bertha locked in her attic, and it went through all kinds of stages of the utter boredom and the self-stimulation through all sorts of things – setting fire, masturbation, becoming completely fascinated by your own body. Losing a sense of what's you and what's not. It was very interesting. I suppose often in my work I find a way – and in *Mermaid* it's the same, really – of exploring the animal part of ourselves that's much more raw and not socially defined, so that this exists in relation to this other reality which is how we deal with the world.

*I wanted to ask you about how different it is when you create theatre from historical situations, as in *Speechless*, rather than from fiction?*

Yes, I've done a lot of that – the Jean Rhys, *Speechless*, I've done a lot of plundering. I

suppose it's really fascinating because you have the real lives as stimuli and I think the challenge is to distil it. If you look at a life story there are so many incidents and events and the danger can be that you get caught up in all those fascinating bits of detail; but you have to be really quite brutal about what this is actually about. It's funny, because I'm doing exactly this sort of thing right now with the *Brontë* film script – does this really feed into the spine of the story? Every single thing in it has to relate to the heart of the story. And that gives you a pathway, a way through all the mass of stuff. With the Brontës, you've not just got one life, you've got five lives, if you include Patrick, and it needs to be about all of them because the work came out of this sort of extraordinary kind of pressure cooker of a family. So the question in my mind was how was it possible that these three Victorian spinsters who lived in isolation on the Yorkshire moors and had such limited life experience, and as far as we know no sexual experience at all, how could they have written some of the most passionate, erotic literature of all time? That question was there the whole time. Everything had to relate to that question.

*And with a more contemporary modern play like *Speechless*? Was that different?*

Funnily enough, with *Speechless*, I think the question was how was it these two girls who had such vivid inner lives and had so much to give – imagination, an acute intelligence – how had they ended up being convicted and thrown into prison for twelve years for violent crimes? What was their story? What was it about them coming to this country, in this very strange position, actually, of their parents being in thrall to a culture which ultimately alienated and rejected them? So you have this really complicated tension between, on the one hand, them wanting to belong, and, on the other hand, never having a possibility of that. And in a way the twins were the outcome of that.

How does Mine fit in with your oeuvre, with your other plays? Because it seems so different.

Does it feel very different when you look at it?



The Prince in *Mermaid*, played by Finn Hanlon, explores weightlessness in the depths of the sea.
Photo: Robert Day.

Well, it has a little bit of *Sleeping Beauty* in it. I know *Mermaid* is largely based on a fairy tale, but *Mine* has a tiny link to a fairy tale and it's not an adaptation, it just mentions it, so I'm wondering what was the seed of that story.

With that, I suppose I was really interested in the question of who is fit to be a mother. I suppose I thought it was interesting that somebody whose life seems, on the surface, very desirable, like the Woman's, and she wants a child very much, but when she actually tries to deal with the reality of it, she falls apart.

The ending of it . . . The audience is left in that pit. To crawl out themselves. The baby's on the pavement. The two mothers: we don't know what will happen; which it will be, if either. In Jane Eyre, you resist the temptation for Rochester's sight to be miraculously restored. You don't go for a happy ending and full closure. Have you got a strategy for endings, for leaving your audience to struggle with what will be?

With every ending, you're just following that story to its conclusion. I suppose with *Jane Eyre* I always felt it was interesting, that final image of Rochester at Ferndean, deep in the woods. At the end of *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë is trying to imagine something that was very hard to conceive of at that time, which was a marriage of equals. So because the big house has burned down, Rochester's lost his sight, he's lost his hand; in a way, everything's been stripped away, and *Jane Eyre*, in fact, has inherited money. I didn't put that in the play because in a way it seemed a sort of an uninteresting way of making them equal, but there's something about the fact that now that he's lost all that, somehow they can come together as equals. The fact that he can't see, I suppose, is part of that equation. I don't know, but there's something sort of amazing about the idea

that you can only feel somebody; I mean his sight does gradually start to come back, doesn't it, at the very end of the novel?

Which is kind of a cheesy part.

Yes, exactly. (Laughs.)

You have such a ruthless focus on the parts that make your story work.

I'm working on the screenplay, and it's interesting that you're doing that thing of resisting the whole time anything that feels too easy or too sweet. You just always want to pull it away from that. It's like the more tension and complexity you can get, the better.

One last thing, about your influences. Whose plays hit you in the guts and whose plays inspire you? Which would you read if you were having trouble with something, or where have you learned techniques?

I do see quite a bit of theatre and I suppose everything goes in, doesn't it? And here, as well – much more so than when we started doing our adaptations – there's a lot of really interesting physical work. I mean, I'm casting younger actors in *Mermaid*; there are five mermaids altogether, and it's interesting because nearly everybody we're seeing is really up for doing very physical work, and I think that's changed a lot over the last twenty-five years. So a lot of rehearsal processes now are very physical. Yes, just going to the theatre, I'm constantly seeing things that make you think, 'Oh wow, that's really a bold way of doing that.'

I find it quite hard to say there's only one influence. There's a lot of people whom I admire and quite a lot of stuff out there that's really interesting. And it's good to keep going and getting shaken up, and thinking, 'Oh, yes, you could do it like that.'