Elizabeth LeCompte, Kate Valk, Ari Fliakos, and Maria Shevtsova

A Conversation on The Wooster Group's *Hamlet*

This conversation took place during the Gdansk Festival, 1–10 August 2009, where The Wooster Group performed its internationally acclaimed *Hamlet* (2006), directed by Elizabeth LeCompte. The conversation, led by Maria Shevtsova and edited by her for publication, was part of the conference organized under the auspices of the Festival by Jerzy Limon, the Festival's director. Here LeCompte and two performers from the company, Kate Valk and Ari Fliakos, discuss how they generated the work, and develop their thoughts in answers to questions from the audience. Later this year The Wooster Group will perform *Hamlet* on 10–13 August at the Edinburgh International Festival. Maria Shevtsova is the Chair Professor of Drama and Theatre at Goldsmiths, University of London, and Co-Editor of *New Theatre Quarterly*.

Key terms: Richard Burton, *Hamlet* on film, Gdansk Festival.

Maria Shevtsova *Thank you all for coming. This is a tremendous occasion. We have Elizabeth LeCompte here to my right. Kate Valk to my left, Ari Fliakos to my right and Cynthia Hedstrom, who is also from the company. We met briefly last night after* Hamlet, *which I first saw in Paris at the Centre Pompidou in 2006, and the performance I saw last night was a rather different* Hamlet. *It is difficult to speak of a definitive version of a Wooster Group production, since, for the company, it is always a matter of ongoing work, of work always in process – not in progress, but in process – and of always doing work that is being checked and balanced and re-examined, and constantly renewed.*

Everybody here knows your work, but perhaps it is important to mark out a few points. The Wooster Group began in 1975 with Sakonnet Point, *caused an enormous scandal in 1984 with* L.S.D. (. . . Just the High Points . . .), *and in 1991 created* Brace Up! *in which some of your material was from Chekhov's* Three Sisters. *In 2001 came* To You, the Birdie! (Phèdre) *inspired by Racine's play, and in 2004* Poor Theater, *where Grotowski and Forsythe were put back to back. This was followed by the 'first' version of* Hamlet *in 2006, by* La Didone *in 2007, and by* Vieux Carré *by Tennessee Williams* [*first seen in 2009*].

Instead of starting with a content question or a 'why?' question, like 'Why did you choose the Richard Burton Hamlet (*1964*) *rather than any other* Hamlet*?' – we will look at this question later – I'm going to ask you a 'how?' question.* [To LeCompte.] *I remember some years back, when we had a long conversation, we talked about the way in which you used technology to keep the actors constantly alert and alive; the way in which there is a sense of risk, and the risk of failing on the stage.*[1] *You spoke of how the technicians, to keep the actors alert and alive, quite often fast-forward or rewind a tape so that the actors are, in fact, taken off their guard and have to do something that they might not be expected to do.*

Now, last night I noticed that Scott Shepherd said 'Cut the Ophelia stuff' or 'Let's go to the book', or he would give the technicians a kind of instruction on how to fast-forward – Ari Fliakos did it once, but Scott did it several times. How much do you use this kind of 'direction' when you prepare a work? What is the balance between the spontaneous and the risky, the rehearsed and the structured?

Elizabeth LeCompte Well, it's not a stylistic move. It's pragmatic because, in making a piece, there are so many elements that have

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to come together in that moment that I have to depend on everybody being able to improvise off of one idea. So, something like saying to Scott, 'Skip to the book' – he does that now every night – originated in my wanting to check and see if that's what I needed to get rid of. So, it was pragmatic. That was the only way I knew how to do it, when we were all together, because he's not on headsets with the technician. I thought, 'Well, I'll just put that in the background when he says "Skip to the book", and see how it works.' When it works, it is left there like a vestigial direction, wouldn't you say?

Ari Fliakos Yeah. Well, also, when we were first performing this, it was so challenging performance-wise; in some ways it was like an eject button for us, so, if we messed up and forgot a line, we could have the technicians rewind so that we could do it again. And some of that stayed, too. But, again, it was very pragmatic.

LeCompte It changes all the time. Like, last night I think the technicians made a mistake and there was a skip in the digital, so Scott missed a couple of lines that he likes. So, he asked the technicians to go back and do it again. That happens all the time, but it's random. Some of it is vestigial, coming from things that we were experimenting with and that happened by accident, or from when I was working on structuring the piece; and some of it is new every night. Mistakes are made and, when the mistakes are made, we like to use them as some kind of impulse towards something unexpected.

Fliakos But it has also evolved for you a little bit, right, as a way for Scott to control – as a way of Hamlet orchestrating the making of the piece.

LeCompte Right, yes. The impulse to do the piece came originally from Scott because he wanted to play Hamlet. So, he's got to play Hamlet! [*Laughter.*]

[To Kate Valk] *And did you want to play Gertrude and Ophelia?*

Kate Valk Well, Scott had been memorizing all the various Quartos and the Folio of *Hamlet* on his own and, yeah, he asked me if I would play Gertrude in a workshop, just to learn the lines. I love that character. I especially love the actress, Eileen Herlie, who plays Gertrude in the Richard Burton production. She's fantastic. It's a fantastic role model for me. It took me to new places where I had never been before.

Can you just say something about what those new places are? Why haven't you been there before and where haven't you been before?

Valk Shakespeare. I had never performed Shakespeare outside of, you know, some monologues at acting school, and none of the Shakespeare productions I had seen in the United States drew out a desire to encounter Shakespeare. I kind of had a Shakespeare deficit disorder. I really couldn't understand the language in most of the productions. It was huge to encounter that language.

This might be the moment, Liz, to ask you why, then, was it the Burton Hamlet? *You could have taken Laurence Olivier's or Kenneth Branagh's or Mel Gibson's.*

LeCompte I guess because I saw that production and I had a memory of it, and I had a memory of the milieu of its first performance in New York. It had a certain glamour to it because it was really the first time that a movie star – because Richard Burton at that time was a movie star coming off *Cleopatra* – drew a lot of attention to Shakespeare. I think it's probably – though I can't attest to this – it was probably the first time that a big movie star did a Broadway Shakespeare. From then on, we've never had a Shakespeare that didn't have either a television or a movie star in it. It changed Broadway for us, and it changed all of acting in America for us. It was on the cusp of the change into a kind of performance that comes out of film rather than theatre. Some of the greatest English actors of Shakespeare were involved in that production. So, I guess I saw it as a sort of cultural change in America that I was interested in at the time.

It was romantic, for me, too, to see this film that had nothing to do with what I remembered of the production. Also, that it

Scott Shepherd as Hamlet with Richard Burton on screen. Photos: Paula Court.

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had been filmed in order to carry on the idea of the production was terrible for me. You know, these are two different mediums. So, I was fascinated by all those questions coming up, and the fact that I had actually seen it and was trying to remember what had happened in it; and trying to put that together with seventeen different cameras and seventeen different camera angles, and cutting it up and seeing how John Gielgud directed it – or how he might have directed it, because there are whole scenes filmed in profile. I was, like, 'Now, is he facing the audience? Is he facing Gertrude? What was he doing? Who is he talking to?'

Fliakos Seventeen different cameras.

LeCompte Yeah. So, it became kind of a puzzle where I was putting together my memory and these little shards of something that I had seen.

Fliakos Plus, he used to refer also to the idea that Elizabeth Taylor was always lurking in the audience, watching it.

Audience Member *She was there?*

LeCompte She was there when I was there, yes. She was wearing a beautiful pink hat. She came out afterwards, at the stage door, and there were – I was very young – it felt like thousands of people wanting to see the two of them come out. It was a fun moment in my life because I came within two or three feet of her. For me, her name was Elizabeth and so was mine, so I identified immediately with her. I guess I think I'm telling you too much about myself, so I'll stop here.

[*Laughter.*]

Fliakos There's also this back story, too, that we read a lot about but is probably not in the production at all – about Burton and Gielgud. The story about how Burton was always yelling too much; all this stuff about performance and about Burton, this modern film actor, coming up against the epitome of old-school British performance.

LeCompte Oh, yes, there are several books written about the production, too, which we read. Burton asked Gielgud – Burton was the only one who had the power to make this production – to direct it because he had seen Gielgud and admired Gielgud's performance. And I think Gielgud thought that he was going to imitate his performance and, of course, Burton didn't; and that made Gielgud pretty angry. So, he would give Burton notes (this is, of course, according to gossip), and Burton would go out the next night and absolutely ignore them. So, I think it was a pretty big clash of two worlds coming together, and the change that was happening then. But that Burton wanted Gielgud to be there and to direct is . . . I think his whole career was caught between those two worlds.

Just one last question, and then I'm going to open the discussion out. It's very interesting the way you play with simulation and simulacra in the production. All your performers are very busy watching monitors – four across the stage and there is one up above. Ari was constantly looking up above the audience, but really he was looking at a monitor right above my head.

Fliakos In my mind's eye I was looking at it.

You were, and Scott was constantly looking up at it, so that one had this interesting play of gazes: you know, who was looking at whom and why were they looking there? Why was he looking above our heads, and why were you [indicating Kate Valk] *looking constantly to the sides? Of course, it was the monitors: that's one of the tricks of what you do. But I am wondering how much leeway there is in this game of simulation in* Hamlet *and impersonation that you do in most of your work. How much leeway do you give to a kind of improvisatory quality? In other words, Scott wasn't necessarily always imitating Burton, was he? And you weren't necessarily always imitating Eileen Herlie?*

Valk Well, it's how we come up against the film and those performances. It is mimicry, which is the very basis of theatre, I guess, but we're in an encounter with televisions and those performances. It's a third thing that's made when we imitate those performances from the past and we're in the present, and we're dealing with each other on stage, so that makes a third thing. There is also a certain liberty in saying, 'Well, you know what, Gertrude is a brunette so Ophelia is

Kate Valk and Ari Fliakos. Photo: Mihaela Marin.

going to be a blonde.' Linda Marsh, the actress who plays Ophelia – her performance was slower than we wanted in some scenes, so we fast-forwarded her and added an effect to the voice to make the distinction between the two characters. Yes, we set ourselves the task of imitation, but then there are also things that you, the performer, want to do, or you want to do differently; or things that just seem to want to happen.

[To Valk.] *How about some examples of what* you *wanted to do?*

Valk I like to wear wigs, so I got to play both of the women. Also, I like to play drag. And because it's fun. I mean, one of my favourite theatre artists from New York, Charles Ludlam, did a piece called *Irma Vep* [*The Mystery of Irma Vep,* 1984], where they made really, really fast changes, and I think there's just too much fun in the theatre to have that kind of simple transformation happen very fast.

And you were so fast! I was watching you from the corner, I could see you changing.

[To LeCompte] *In relation to the issue of imitation, simulacra: how much freedom do you give the actors?*

LeCompte I don't think about that. That's their business.

That's their business. Oh, great!

LeCompte It's true. The idea was interesting to me, and I didn't know how it was going to work out. I didn't know how *they* were going to encounter it. So, I just watch them and I go, 'Oh, that seems to be interesting to them.' For me, it was about just watching what would happen when you set up a series of systems that you're interested in, and you see how the chemicals work together. I was learning with them, basically, and that's why it changed so much.

At first, I thought, 'We can't do English accents!' – because they would imitate. Remember? You were imitating the English accents, and it sounded copied – badly copied; an affectation rather than something deeply felt. But then, slowly, as they stripped away the English accents and stayed with

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the exact shape of the language and the metre of their particular performance, they began to invest it so deeply that, when they would go into an English accent, it was fine. But that took, like, a year, and I never knew that was going to happen. I was interested, too, in Burton as a performer because I had watched him come up. So, it was an experiment for me, actually. It's funny – experimental theatre.

Fliakos Because we don't really have a specific technique or anything, we have to find a way that unlocks the text or the particular world we are creating each time. So, the idea of copying is just one tool that comes up as a way of accessing whatever material we are working with. It's a practical way of dealing with how we solve this issue of performing Shakespeare. How do we tackle this without falling into the old traps that everyone falls into?

Valk Also, we're a company. Scott and Ari and I have worked with Liz for a number of years, so we don't approach casting like a normal theatre. Usually, in our pieces, I feel that somebody has the desire to do something, and, in this case, it was Scott. It was like the whole thing comes through him and then Ari and I can play in the same league with him. Not so much with the Shakespeare in the beginning, but with the way we work physically in the space, with the inner receivers and the televisions. [*To Fliakos.*] I don't think – correct me if I'm wrong – because we don't spend a lot of time talking about what we're going to do.

Fliakos It's only in these situations like this one, now that we find out!

Valk Yeah, but I think that Liz's idea might have been that it was Scott, it was in his head, he was Hamlet, and then Ari and I would play all the other roles. And then, other people accumulated around that: 'Oh, you know what, it would be really great if we had someone different for Laertes.' And then Casey Spooner of Fischerspooner had stopped us on the street and said, 'I want to work with you!' and Liz said, 'OK, come to rehearsal.' And then he was playing Laertes and writing songs from the text. It kind of happens like that, who gets attracted to us, and we usually form it out of somebody's desire – because you've got to have that, or you're not going to make it. Somebody has to have the desire in a really strong way.

Fliakos Or the intern, who we see moving a table really well. There was really something special about it.

Valk Yeah, furniture moving will get you into a company.

[*Laughter.*]

Fliakos [*pointing into the audience*] It was that guy, and he ends up playing Horatio!

[*Laughter.*]

Well, I think this might be the moment to open out to the audience's questions.

Audience Member *It might sound like a very ignorant question, but has there been a night when you don't cut Ophelia? If there hasn't, would there be a night? Could you cut Ophelia, given the doubling with Gertrude that the production is playing with? It has happened in film, but not in live productions.*

Shevtsova *Where he says, 'Let's skip it.'*

LeCompte Has there ever been a night when we haven't skipped it? I did everything I could as a director to try to figure out how to make that work, and I finally just gave up. But I think I worked quite a while trying to make it work, and then I said, 'Oh, skip it,' which is what Scott says: 'Skip it.' So, it's like a failure of mine. Every night, I have to look and go, 'Oh, that's my failure.'

Audience Member *One of the intriguing characters not there in Shakespeare is, of course, the Nurse, who, I assume is a sort of a stage manager, but is also someone who takes care of the characters. How did she get there?*

LeCompte She got there because there are a couple of scenes – again, it was a pragmatic thing – where there is a female presence with Ophelia when she is going mad. And, I couldn't have her turn around and do that to herself, like this – [*Demonstrates a back and*

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forth motion with her body.] I had no way of having that presence, because Eileen Herlie [*as Gertrude*] moves over to Ophelia and touches her, whereas the men are all kind of back in the way Gielgud staged it. So, I didn't like her being alone there without a female presence with her. We've worked with the woman who plays that role before. We asked her to come in to sub in physically there, but not in the character of Gertrude. So, we at least had the female there in the performance. She comes in when Kate has to do Ophelia and there is some kind of movement on the stage, or some psychological or emotional thing that I just can't do without, that she can embody. She is also a stage assistant, moving furniture.

We asked this friend of ours, an artist whom I really like, Richard Prince, to do a poster for us. He did, and his poster was a nurse with a bunch of books in front of her, and one of them was *Hamlet*. So, I just took her. Because we were using that as the poster, I thought, 'Well, people are going to say "Where is the nurse in the piece?",' so I thought I'd put her in. And then, you would ask that question! You probably didn't see the poster. If you had seen that poster, you would have known. You would have said, 'Oh, yes, it's because she's on the poster!'

Audience Member *I'd like to come back to the Burton film, not so much biographically, but in terms of the visual quality, the way we see it as spectators. I was fascinated by what you were doing to it. What was striking, of course, was the way figures suddenly just appear. In my mind's eye I was oscillating between seeing what I thought was a kind of a blue screen, on the one hand, and on the other hand almost the way a painter would work on a canvas and scrape bits off, and other bits would come back on. It was kind of an oscillation between the oldest visual medium and the newest visual medium. I was wondering if you had any comments on your own approach to using that film.*

LeCompte That came from . . . I don't remember the name of the artist I saw at a MOMA show, but it was cartoons. Everything was taken away out of the blurbs, and it was just the cartoon. The blurbs were empty. I don't know, but for some reason that made me think, 'Ah, let's just erase and bring in and out the characters in the film so that they can ghost.' You know that old Victorian ghost photography, where you kind of think you see something, but you don't really? So, we began working on that with one video person. It's very difficult. If anyone knows anything about video, you know that unless you have a million dollars a day, it's very difficult to do that. They have to do it frame by frame, pixel by pixel, removing and then replacing what's not there from other parts of the video. It took us a year to do that.

It was piecemeal work. It was exactly like weaving. We would ask people to come down from NYU, from the video school – everybody came in – and every time I gave them a scene, I would just say, 'Do what you want with this scene. Take out who you want, put in who you want, if you want to leave a leg, if you want to leave an arm, if you want to leave the whole thing and just take out the background, go ahead, whatever you want.' So, each scene is actually done by a video student. Then, the overall video man who is running the video also has a whole track of the film, complete, so he can bring it in and out, at will; and this means that he is improvising during the performance on the night, as well. Seeing all these guys moving incrementally just to make one second in the day was beautiful.

Audience Member *I heard you talking about defining a way that unlocks the text. Does that mean that, somehow, the way you're staging, the way you're working pragmatically, is supposed to lead you to an interpretation of the text that you had not foreseen? My question would be: what is the place of reading* Hamlet*, of re-reading* Hamlet? *What is the place of interpretation, if there is one?*

Fliakos I guess what I meant by 'unlocking the text' is about hearing the story. I feel that Liz is really interested, ultimately, in hearing the story of *Hamlet*, on some level. Whether that is through the more conventional way of hearing the text right, I don't know, but on some level she wanted the clarity of that story, that emotional story to be heard.

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Audience Member *But I meant stories that you could tell.*

Fliakos Interpretation is not, I think, something we ever aspire to. We want some kind of clarity or common uses. You know, 'This works' or 'That works'.

LeCompte I think that if you can apprehend how the writer heard the story and you can get that as clear as possible, then you will hear what he or she was trying to do. I'm not so interested in the psychology, although I think that it should all be there. If it's not, you know, I'll add a dance or something. [*Laughter.*] For Shakespeare, for me, *Hamlet* was structured musically, so I felt that if we could get its musical structure . . . I was interested, and so was Scott, in going back to the original iambic pentameter, which Gielgud was starting to take apart, doing it on breaths, doing it on ideas and connecting sentences in different ways, trying to modernize it. Or rather, it was just a natural thing coming from film, which was taking over the iambic from the theatrical world. Scott took the film on his computer and he edited out the long pauses. If there was a long pause, it broke the iambic, and he closed it up. He added pauses where pauses were left out, where they should have been in the iambic, so he actually restructured all those speeches. Wherever you see those glitches [in the production], that's where Scott made an elision, or added something to put the line back into the iambic.

Fliakos As a performer, you're always looking for ways not to have control over your performance. That, in turn, serves to make the story clearer, or the music clearer, or whatever. It has the added bonus of helping Liz with her work. It's a way for us, in the way we use the video and this particular film, to take the attention off of ourselves, which is a difficult thing to do as a performer. It takes it outside of us. It takes the control, or the choice, in some ways, or the manufacturing of the performance, out of our own hands. That lends itself to a different kind of freedom because we're on a track that's very specific, and you can dance around it in your own way.

Katie, I'd like you to answer the question about interpretation, too.

Valk Oh, I'm against interpretation. Yeah, I mean, you see a lot of Shakespeare productions set in Fascist Italy, or, you know, *Troilus and Cressida* as a motorcycle gang. Here, it felt like Liz was creating a living, modern metaphor of ghosts that the film is the father of. The Burton production is the ghost and the ghosting keeps reverberating. We don't spend a lot of time talking about what this means, or whether Gertrude knows that Claudius killed her husband, or whether she's drunk – I'm only thinking in terms of my own character. We don't talk a lot about how we are going to interpret it. It just happens in the alchemy of our physical, modern beings and we bring all of this stuff to the room, encountering the system that Liz sets up from the very beginning. We don't sit around the table a lot and break down the text. It happens on our feet because Liz needs to hear it in the room. So, we are against interpretation, I would say.

Audience Member *I have a question about the acting. It's a common saying that there is a big difference between, say, East Asian actors and Western actors. East Asian actors act in a given form and use it, and it's just the Western actors who take so much pride in being original. What I liked so well about your acting was that you took a given form – of course you changed it every night – but there was an enormous stage presence. What would interest me would be whether taking the form and using it has changed your way of acting. Do you think this has added something to your own experience as an actor? Would you say you can now do things differently from before?*

Fliakos Well, Scott and I work a lot with Liz. That's what we do. [*Laughter.*] But when you say 'acting', I think the intention is always to have a certain kind of honesty, right? Even Stanislavsky had you do these actions, these series of actions as a way to be actively doing something in performance as opposed to pretending to be doing something. Sometimes I feel like, 'Wow. Each piece is a way of figuring out a way of doing what those guys always wanted me to do,' which was to do something – really *do* some-

thing. Whether it's moving a piece of furniture, or really listening to what you're listening to, or whether you're really watching what you're listening to – executing a series of actions. Yeah, it's very informative because it's not abstract. It's very concrete, and I think that's helpful in all kinds of performance.

Shevtsova *Have you got something to add, Katie?*

Valk Well, it just suits me fine, her style, because I get more excited by Asian theatre forms. The costumes, the masks, the way they move, the way the whole space, formally, is vibrating, the way they perform with the intensity of one mind. All their musicians are like our technicians, and we're all in concert together. Our technicians are like performers. Somebody might be doing the voice for you while you're performing. You asked me earlier if doing *Hamlet* made me capable of doing other things outside of it. Doing *Hamlet* is very, very different. I was even thinking that last night, watching Ari and Scott and thinking, 'God, I can't believe we're doing this *Hamlet*!' because, when we first started, it seemed out of my reach. It's a great experience. So yeah, I feel different. I don't think I could be in Shakespeare in the Park – or even that I would want to – but it's changed us as a company.

Audience Member *I saw this first when you were in Berlin, and I think that now your stage presence has grown enormously compared to the performance that I saw then.*

Valk Well, that's the best thing about – I don't want to compliment her too much, because she's sitting right there – but that's the best thing about working with Liz: she wants to see us growing and changing all the time. So, she'll set up some situation that has an enormous amount of room in it just to see how we're going to fill it and what direction that's going to take us as a company.

Shevtsova *One of the things that I noticed last night after having seen your 2006 version-in-process in Paris was the way in which you talked about the actors filling the parts, which is perhaps what we've just been saying now about your filling the stage with your presence.*[2] *It seems to me that, in these years that have passed, one of the big changes in the production is this 'filling': the role is no longer just being articulated, you're actually filling it. But I would like to push you into explaining to everyone here what other changes have taken place in this growing process, where you are all growing as performers, and the production is growing with you as performers.*

LeCompte That's a lot.

Fliakos Well, I'll say something that will get you off, Liz.

LeCompte OK, take it! [*Laughter.*]

Fliakos I think that much of what you see us doing, or transforming, owes a lot to what is developed in the sound, and to the music of the piece, generally. I think that evolution is critical for Liz.

LeCompte Yeah, thanks, Ari. I think that, as we are developing these techniques, we're also experimenting with sound and video, which is very exciting, and it helps us. It's huge. Originally we didn't have the money to have a decent microphone, so things would be flatter; the microphone would make a flatter sound. Now the microphones are so much better, and all of the consumer stuff is so much cheaper, and we are really able to experiment a lot with stuff that we could never have afforded in the past. That changes how I direct them; that changes how their performances are. My dream for this, originally, was to keep the same style as the Burton production; to integrate some filmic sound but to have the actors quiet, because Burton, if you hear the film – if you ever want to see the film – screams through the whole thing. They all scream. They had to because it was a huge theatre. The Lunt-Fontanne.

I wanted to be able to keep the same energy, but to do in theatre what you have in film. We are now able to do that because the development of our sound – the equipment and the people we are working with – has developed along with us to make it happen. When we first worked on this piece, we

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didn't have single microphones. We had to work with a set, so I had to make a much less sculptural sound. I had to really compress the sound, and that made the performances a little more compressed, too.

Ari, have you got something to add here?

Fliakos We often put up a piece, performing things that are relatively unfinished. Over the course of performing it, you realize that Liz allows something to fester or bother her for a long time before she understands how to address it. She knows these issues exist, but she doesn't know how to correct them until a couple of years later. Problems reveal themselves more clearly over time.

LeCompte I come from a time when we really were experimenting. I don't think people do that so much any more. At least, I notice it with the young people who are working. What happens now is that they do a lot less ambitious pieces more quickly because they have to: they don't have the money. I came up in a time when we could buy our own theatre. It took us a long time to do it, but we did it. We are able to fail. I don't have the feeling that, 'Oh, this has to work exactly.' I have it in my mind how a piece is going to come out, but I don't have to have it there for the first performances. I know that it's not going to be stopped, that there's not going to be somebody there who says, 'This is not good.' Well, people *can* say it, but I can always go back and perform in our theatre until it's ready; and we can survive.

Valk Also, one of the best things about being in a repertory company is that we can go and work on something else for a while and then come back to it, and the muscles that we have been flexing for another show, when we come back to this show, make it easier. I don't know. Another piece that we were working on most recently was an opera [*La Didone*]. We got to work with opera singers, and just to watch them work and see how they approach material – just learn from them – had an effect on us, too. I think we're very lucky.

It was thirteen months ago that we last did *Hamlet*, and all of a sudden it was like, 'Ah! We're doing *Hamlet* next week!' And it came back. One of the great things about working with the meticulousness of filmed performances, video, and recordings is that it's a score, it's a track. All of the messy human development of ageing can meet with the film. The film is the same, but you're different, and so it's a different alchemy. Again, I think 'alchemy' is the best word.

LeCompte I was so concerned about the performances: how to copy, how to inhabit them – whether that would work, whether there would be such a strong physical performance in the space or whether we were just copying. The other thing that was so interesting for me was the editing: how would it work on the stage? Film time is so different from stage time. Now I'm really working on the two things, stage time and film time, to try to see what they're like.

We just had lunch with you [*indicating an audience member*] and we were talking about that performance where the guy sat for ten minutes, and we felt that that was his pain. You know, in America, that would be the audience's pain. In film time you get that in the close-up, but there is no close-up in theatre. The closest we have is the insert that you see, which is part of the film, and I am trying to take some spaces in the middle of that to make theatre time and to see how it comes in and out of the film time, the film structure.

Audience Member *This production could be understood as a representation of what Marvin Carlson calls 'ghosting': trying to represent what happens in the mind of a spectator when they watch this new representation of something that they have seen several times.*[3] *I found there were several interpretations – not only for Gielgud's production. I found an interpretation for another* Hamlet *that I could not identify, and I found myself thinking of Laurence Olivier. My question is, simply, did such a thing cross your mind?*

LeCompte It crossed my mind! When Scott said he wanted to do *Hamlet*, all I could think about was, 'Oh my God, this production, that production.' The Hamlet that I had seen most recently, I think, was Ralph Fiennes, on Broadway. So, all these productions melded.

Remember this? It was so long ago – in 2000, last century. We watched all of them, whatever we could get.

Fliakos Or listen to.

LeCompte Or listen to. We went to London to listen to the tapes because they have some very great, early tapes, as you probably know, in London. I kept thinking, 'Oh, maybe this is going to be a piece about all of those different pieces constantly filtering through.' I didn't come to Burton right away. I just realized that, in watching all of those, the Burton was the only one that was the full *Hamlet*, and it was an actual recording of the stage production, with the audience there. We compared, 'Well, was he as good as this?' and, sure enough, all of the reviews did, too: 'Well, it wasn't a *Hamlet* like this, it was a *Hamlet* like this.'

It's all about the memory of that role and how it's come down through history, which is beautiful. But there's never the right *Hamlet*, you know what I mean? Everyone was always going, 'Yes, but there was *this Hamlet*,' or 'Yes, there was *that Hamlet*.' There isn't a quintessential *Hamlet* because it's going to go through for ever. As long as I'm alive. It's an iconic role that everybody identifies with. Well, at least all you men do. [*Laughter.*] I have to say, I kind of identify with the nurse.

Audience Member *It struck me, listening to you, that another word has cropped up at least three times, and that's 'system'. I think Kate said, 'Ah, yes, this is a system', and I think you yourself used the term 'system', and it's an unusual word to hear used by actors because the term 'system' is not what they usually like to use to describe their work. They would say the artist is free, or inspirational, or innovative, and so forth. But, of course, 'system' has a long history, and a lot of very interesting theoretical things grew out of it, particularly in the 1960s. So, is this just a kind of shorthand, or is there something more behind your use of the term?*

LeCompte It's probably shorthand because, for me, when I use the word 'system', I just mean something that can take it out of my control so that I feel free. Oddly enough, a system that works on its own allows me to meditate on it. It takes the ego away from me.

Valk Liz usually starts with some kind of architectonic sense of what the space is going to be like. So, 'system' could mean a game of badminton, or it could mean a piece of videotape that we are following, but it is something that gives kinetics to the space so that things happen, and maybe collide, and people have a way to ambulate and to speak, and to set the text on its feet right away so that it can run around and get articulated that way.

Shevtsova *In fact, this reminds me of something you said in our interview a few years ago, Liz. You talked about how the technology helps you to co-ordinate the space, and perhaps that is part of your system, and your shorthand.*[4]

Audience Member *Going with this idea of 'system', in much of your more recent work you worked with what I would not call 'high classic works', but here, in* Hamlet, *there is a whole bourgeois culture. I just wondered if this made a serious difference? That is, did you feel that working with this material was different from, say,* Olga's House of Shame*?*[5]

Fliakos The Burton production itself is a mishmash of low celebrity culture and the high tradition that Gielgud comes from. In the source material, you have that juxtaposition of high and low. And then, also, I think us doing Shakespeare is kind of like low meeting high! [*Laughter.*]

Well, I wouldn't put it quite like that. Thank you, Liz, Kate, and Ari, for taking time from your rehearsal to be here.

Notes and References

1. Maria Shevtsova and Christopher Innes, *Directors/Directing: Conversations on Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 92–119.
2. Ibid., p. 101.
3. Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: the Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001).
4. *Directors/Directing*, p. 105–8.
5. *Olga's House of Shame* is a 1964 B-movie directed by Joseph Mawra. The Wooster Group used the film as source material for *House/Lights* (1998) together with Gertrude Stein's *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights*.

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