



## Poets of the Digital Age: An Interview with Dead Centre

### [00:00:19] INTRO

**Duška Radosavljević:** Hello and welcome to the Gallery.

Dead Centre theatre company resists categorisation in every way. It was founded by two British friends – Bush Moukarzel and Ben Kidd – in Ireland, and was immediately propelled to international fame. Their first piece *Souvenir*, inspired by Marcel Proust but written, as the programme informs us, ‘with Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, T. S. Eliot, William Shakespeare, Don DeLillo, Charlie Kaufman and Orson Welles’, was shown to great acclaim in New York, Brisbane and Seoul soon after its Dublin debut in 2012.

The following year, they premiered *Lippy*, a piece inspired by a real-life event of a suicide pact involving four Irish women in 2000. Dead Centre’s rendition of this story was delivered in a highly lyrical and distinctly Beckettian stage language. Their interest in authorship, adaptation and the unique potentials of the medium of theatre were crystallised further in *Chekhov’s First Play* in 2015. This was an adaptation of Chekhov’s *Platonov*, commissioned by Battersea Arts Centre in London, and using headphones.

In addition to these multi-award-winning works, Dead Centre have also made *Shakespeare’s Last Play* (2018) at the Schaubühne in Berlin and *The Interpretation of Dreams* (2020) at the Burgtheater in Vienna, as well as *Hamnet* (2017) and *Beckett’s Room* (2019) in Dublin. Like *Chekhov’s First Play*, many of these works include audience participation, while *Beckett’s Room* requires full imaginative investment as the entire piece takes place on an animated set with audible but invisible characters. Amid the Covid-19 pandemic, the company made *To Be a Machine (Version 1.0)* (2020), co-produced and premiered as part of the Dublin Theatre Festival as a ‘live-stream with a digitally configured audience’.

In this conversation we explore the formative influences, the developmental journey and the central concerns of Dead Centre as a company, getting closer to their behind the scenes process, interest in technology and working methodology.

This conversation took place on Zoom between London and Dublin on 27<sup>th</sup> May 2020.

### [00:02:42] FORMING A WORKING MODEL

**Duška Radosavljević:** Just at the beginning of the conversation while we were waiting for you, Ben, I was asking Bush how come you’re both from London but the company ended up in Ireland. So maybe we can start with that. We often start these conversations by retracing people’s footsteps: so how you met, how you started working together, how you found this shared interest in speech and sound as the main component of your work. And maybe also what formative influences determined this choice as well.

**Ben Kidd:** We met as friends, I suppose, at university in the UK, at quite a sort of naive theatre society doing plays, acting, performing, all that sort of stuff. We then both graduated and left university. I trained as an actor in the UK, in Bristol, and then I tried to work as an actor not for too long actually – a couple of years I tried to give it a go for, with very little, which is to say effectively no success of any kind really. And then started to try and move into directing through a fairly tried and tested method that I’d picked up in the UK’s still very – perhaps not so much anymore, but at that time, sort of mid-2000s – still a very ad hoc, in the best possible use of the word, ‘amateurish’ kind of directing ecology. Traditionally speaking, posh white men came down from Oxford or Cambridge and had some drinks with some friends of theirs and all of a sudden had a show at the National. It’s much less the case now, but there wasn’t anything like a formal – you know, to compare it with what little I know about cultures like German theatre culture – there isn’t that same kind of directing training that’s in place. Like I say it’s changed a little bit. So I was kind of floating around doing that, and testing out my abilities and ideas I suppose,



and trying to get work as best I could, and assisted here or there, and got a few pieces off the ground and entered competitions. At the same time Bush had, very surprisingly to everyone who knew him as mutual friends, gone to Ireland. And I'll let him take over about why and what happened there. We kept in touch just socially really, and with a shared interest in discussing what theatre was about and what was interesting and what was going on and what was piquing our interest and what wasn't. And then an opportunity came, as these things often do, an opportunity came that was quite ad hoc and quite contingent. Bush decided to start making a show and needed someone to help him. He was going to be in it and he was going to be the only person in it. So he needed help to make sure lights were pointing in the right direction basically. And so he got in touch with me about going over to Dublin to help to direct that show basically, which was a piece that he'd written. That was a piece called *Souvenir*, which was our first piece and which was produced in the Dublin Fringe Festival – a first of two pieces that we made in the Dublin Fringe Festival. And this is where, I guess, I'll hand over to Bush for the rest of the story because this is where Dublin as a place and as an ecology of making work and of generating work on a small scale and as a community of theatre-makers steps in. I still live in the UK, I've never lived in Dublin, so I still perhaps see it from an outsider's perspective and perhaps see it slightly more favourably, I don't know, maybe not. But I certainly would count it as a very significant element in our development and how we managed to develop.

**DR:** Can I just rewind a little bit? I am actually interested in what you studied at university and what that university was, even though it feels like it wasn't that significant, I'm just interested in hearing a bit more about that.

**BK:** We were at Nottingham, the University of Nottingham, and I studied English with Philosophy. Bush did Philosophy and Film, or Philosophy and American Studies?

**Bush Moukarzel:** That's it. Film, film.

**DR:** Okay. And then how did you end up in Dublin, Bush, I think that's the question?

**BM:** Also firstly, when Ben said we met at Nottingham he said: 'We were friends, I suppose', and I've got to pick up on that!

[Laughter.]

**BK:** As opposed to colleagues, as opposed to—

**BM:** Well, no. I think the reason why he has to frame it like that is, actually, we met in the drama society and he was playing Hamlet and I was playing Rosencrantz. So you see, this is the rivalry that was there and stuff. I was looking up to him going: 'One day, one day I'll be able to play the protagonist!'

**BK:** This is really embarrassing to say, but we've had this conversation before [laughter] and it was actually Guildenstern.

**BM:** It was Guildenstern!?

**BK:** I don't know why I remember that and Bush doesn't, but it was definitely a small part!

**BM:** Well, you see you had your eye on the little people, that's why I guess we were able to have common ground. And there were some things that we were interested in then, writers and... On the one hand that theatre society was quite traditional, on the other hand it had Mike Longhurst (running the Donmar now), Carrie Cracknell, Ruth Wilson. There was kind of a large amount – Joe Arkley, an established actor – a group of people who actually now have made their careers in theatre. There was an energy there, even if there wasn't a great experimental energy, there was a sort of passion for it, which is why we were screwing up our degrees while pursuing theatre on the side.

**BK:** It's fair to say, Bush, that you were exercising some of the experimental tastes in some direction back then when you were making. All I was doing was acting in plays when someone told me that I could have lots of lines to say.

**BM:** No, I just mean the conversations – we didn't know about a sort of international avant-garde. That was not involved in the conversations we were having. We didn't really know about experimental theatre. It was more just the literary works. Hopefully, the more interesting reaches of that in British theatre: Sarah Kane and Mark Ravenhill and Beckett and Irish theatre. So we were looking at hopefully, curious writers, people testing the limits of writing – and Caryl Churchill – but we weren't looking at the



international performance avant-garde or thinking of theatre in a wider context that kids tend to do these days, it seems, when you see what the student theatre companies are up to! Anyway, I moved to Ireland to study psychoanalysis. I was doing a Master's here because Trinity College in Dublin offered a taught Master's in Lacanian Psychoanalysis, which I wanted to pursue having found myself, like everybody, reading Slavoj Žižek and wanting to unpack why this seemed to be a fruitful tool for cultural and political analysis, the Lacanian system. That led me to Lacanian psychoanalysis, which led me to Dublin, with a flourishing interest in Beckett as well, and trying to understand what had been the ground for his work. Where had he come from? What was in the water in Dublin that led somebody to be so despairing as Beckett? How did he see the end? And he just wrote through it all and just finished it. I still think he's got a checkmated narrative. I still think nobody has quite – somebody will come and propose a better paradigm but it's sort of: he's checkmated narrative. I still think we're stuck in a 'Beckettian' – in the way we might still be in Einstein's models – we're still in the Beckettian model. And we need to overcome it somehow, which will probably happen in the digital age, increasingly there'll be the poet of the digital age that will articulate better the world we live in now. But anyway, that took me to Dublin and I started working as an actor with a company called Pan Pan, who were quite established in Ireland and on the international scene. They were known as: the whole of the Irish avant-garde in theatre was Pan Pan. It's not true, there were a few companies but there's a small enough scene here and Pan Pan certainly were the only ones who had that international reach and were on the international festival circuit. So I got a great education under the director Gavin Quinn, acting in about four of their pieces. Sometimes I stepped into a role, and other pieces I made with the company as a form of creator. But also then going on tour you would see Richard Maxwell or Daisuke Miura – so we opened our eyes to all the possibilities and a widening sense of what theatre is and what it could be, and that was what I was cutting my teeth in as an actor over about a three/four-year period in Dublin. All the while going, like everybody should do: 'I can do this better.' Obviously I knew I couldn't: mine would just be another damn show which someone else will look at and go: 'I can do better', and theirs will just be another damn show! And that's fine and that's the catalyst, that's how it works. So as long as you can leaven it with a little bit of irony or a little bit of scepticism so you don't become an arrogant prick, you kind of go: 'I can do this!' With that sort of burgeoning aspiration and ambition to take what I had learned and try to form something of my own, I thought of a solo show, obviously within the means of there being no budget, based on Proust. And the ambition – which is sort of still what we carry forward into our work – is to try to adapt something which on the face of it seems unadaptable. Do something which shouldn't fit, and then you meditate on the discrepancies or whatever. So trying to adapt the longest book ever written to a one-hour fringe show but while questioning performance and using different strategies to tell it in an unusual way. So that was where I found myself, and then got the advice to get a director because if I was going to perform this, as Ben called it, 'pointing the lights in the right direction', that was what I –

**BK:** I'm not sure necessarily that that ever came to pass in fact! [*Laughter.*]

**BM:** What, the light?

**BK:** The lighting in that show, yeah, definitely...

**BM:** Yeah, we lit the space beside me.

[*Laughter.*]

**DR:** What was that piece called?

**BM:** *Souvenir.*

**DR:** *Souvenir.* And that's the piece you mention in *Lippy* as well.

**BM:** Exactly. And as Ben said, yes, in truth the idea was: 'Okay, yes, get my mate Ben from London what has been doing a bit of directing, so I hear, to come and point the lights in the right direction.' But then we actually found we had more to explore than that. We worked closely on the text together that I had prepared for rehearsals, but through rehearsals we scrutinised it and co-adapted it together. And we were co-directing even though I was performing in that. We were sort of forming a working model. We were certainly trying to conceive it around a total theatre where all the elements were totally relevant to us: how sound was going to operate in it, how the audience becomes activated in it and not just



passive viewers, and how the style of character as a character I might be playing could be broken and interspersed with my biography and things like that. We were trying then to break the mould a little bit in what could be otherwise seen as a traditional one-man narrative show.

#### [00:14:22] BECKETTIAN INFLUENCE

**DR:** You mentioned Beckett and your interest in Beckett that predated the existence of the company. Could we look into that a little bit more in terms of: what were your respective encounters with Beckett? Because Beckett it seems to me features in some unspoken way in *Lippy* but also obviously explicitly in *Beckett's Room*, which is one of your more recent pieces. I don't know whether I'm right in thinking that that interest in the Beckettian worldview, if you like, is in some way foundational for your company as well?

**BM:** Maybe by doing *Beckett's Room*, it was probably a mistake to touch the kryptonite, you know? So maybe actually that's the least successful or the least Beckettian of all the pieces, but for me certainly it came out of – I mean speaking of us both doing Philosophy degrees – it became a way in which a playwright was moving the conversation forward within philosophy and the way performance, and the way the body can answer questions or make philosophical propositions. It just suddenly brought theatre into the argument, directly. So when I first saw – I was actually probably around 16 or 15 when I saw *Endgame*, and the kind of scenario and the language seemed to just be so extraordinary and so different, this blueprint of all plays. It just seemed to be a general problem that you had to engage with and overcome, this worldview, this vision, if you could. And then moving to Dublin, again it goes to the source of the kryptonite. He's shot through everything here, Beckett's language – and also then the economy of language and minimalism in theatre and a certain discipline of writing – the influence is vast. And then on the other side of it, the innovation between it. So you have the philosophical gesture of his writing and thinking and then his work as a practitioner. He was just an innovator, his writing is at once set design, sound design and whatever it might be. It's a sort of total integrating all the elements in the one gesture. So you can't separate the stage from his writing, all the elements speak to each other, and that integrative style was very formative as well. Every element – it has to be a Jenga block. You can't remove one bit, and if you do, it should all fall down because they have to all sit together. So that was another way in which he was an influence.

**BK:** That last point was very potent. There was not a writer before, although I'm sure that there's been lots and lots since who quite thought through... In almost every stage piece that I know that he wrote, there is that complete – I'm not sure 'integrative' is the word but it's a good one... It's not just that he's concerned with all those different elements, which in itself is a very impressive thing, but that they are all being used to make meaning, and they all seem completely fundamental. I think that's another thing as well that I've always felt about Samuel Beckett, and my relationship with him has not been as – I don't know what the word is, apostolic or whatever – as Bush's has over the years, and also my knowledge of his work is not as deep. But the other thing that strikes one alongside this remarkable concern for form and this remarkable experimentation in trying to get to the bare bones (which is probably a Beckett phrase, I don't know) of what is meant by a theatre act, you know, in a very overt sense in Beckett's work. If you look at the way his theatre experimentation went in his later works, there's a very overt concern with almost a philosophically reductive idea of: 'What can we reduce this down to and still call it a theatre act? What does it mean that we can make such a reduction? What does that mean about what we are all gathered here to do?' But the other thing [is] you can't just reduce him to that, because the other thing is that the line-by-line writing and the way in which text is used and the very specific way in which characterisation is used seems to me to be still unassailable.

**BM:** To pick up on your point there about the reduction process. And to connect – and to get out of Beckett, because this is what I mean: we can go on, you know, it kind of becomes an obsession and making *Beckett's Room* was an attempt to put a full stop on it, but let's see!... But the reduction leads itself to where we're at now with everybody making work in this new environment, and trying to see, can theatre survive this restructuring? Is there necessarily a live event without bodies? Can it be transposed into a digital format without losing its essence? And all these questions will abound basically leading him to going: 'Can you just have a mouth onstage? Yes, I think you can.' It's a similar drive



now, which is what I suppose will be the new environment of people searching to see what will be a theatre act.

**[00:19:27] MAKING *LIPPY* (2013)**

**DR:** How did *Lippy* come about then? What was your process of conceiving that piece and then working on it? I'm asking about *Lippy* specifically because I read Beckett into it and I don't know whether or not I'm correct to do that.

**BM:** Yeah. Well the giant mouth is an homage to *Not I*, of course. But the practicalities of how that came about, the background to how we developed it: I mentioned that we'd been given some space by the Fringe to develop a show, so we used that in collaboration with Adam Welsh, who was our sound designer over those two shows, *Souvenir* and *Lippy* – he actually performs in *Lippy* as the technician as well. I'd had a picture of a post-show talk, so really that was a way into a show, and was unrelated to this real-life event – that was a separate thing that I had been looking into. So it was a formal set up. Could you start a show as a post-show talk and as a way into a discussion? I had this idea about a lip reader being interviewed, and he was actually going to be lip-reading the extras in the background of movie scenes, and it was all about the incidental narrative that you don't quite see. It didn't quite work out, but that was the formal invitation to a show. And then I had again in mind that while he was speaking at the end you would do the mic drop-out, the kind of classic trick but it works every time! It's always seductive and a joyful gag, but it has this emotional resonance of a dislocation and a disembodiment of the voice. So that was the idea, and when that happened, you would move into a new place. I had the shape of that and then on the side, living in Dublin, I'd come across this tragic story of the Leixlip family, the Mulrooneys, and the inexplicability of a tragic private act like that. It became clear that you couldn't really speak directly to their story, but you could meditate on the telling of a story that isn't yours to tell. And that suddenly spoke to a voice – putting a voice in a mouth or a voice leaving a mouth – and all the structure and all of the imagery surrounding that. And also using playwriting, or scrutinising playwriting, as always the putting of words in somebody's mouth and the ethics around that.

**[00:21:57 to 00:25:05] Excerpt from *Lippy* (2013)**

**DR:** To what extent is it an intervention in the ways in which verbatim theatre had been made up until then? That was very illuminating, what you just said, and I read in the programme note that that you explicitly framed it as a piece about authorship, but to what extent were you also engaging with these methodologies of making verbatim theatre that were quite dominant in the early 2000s, maybe some years before you made this piece?

**BK:** Asking that question is interesting because I don't think we were thinking about that work, really, certainly not in any attempt to engage in a critical discussion or anything like that. I think people's responses to the piece sometimes did situate it in a lineage of work that engaged with the real, I suppose, engaged with re-staging the real. And whilst of course that's what the piece is kind of about, it was strangely in the lineage of how a playwright would approach this, you know, how a creative writer would approach it.

**BM:** To pick up on what Ben's saying there, it wasn't a conscious decision to play against things we'd seen or certain strategies of storytelling but, of course, in line with that: yes, you're dealing with reality, you have a real event, and you want to find ways to approach that. And I suppose maybe different from verbatim theatre, which is attempting to capture and honour the event almost as transparently as possible by having the language being only recordings of people from the real event. I suppose Ben used the word 'real', and more to use my Lacanian background here, we were approaching the event that had happened of this starvation pact as the Real, rather than as reality that we had to somehow tell the story of. But as the Real that couldn't be told, that was a kernel of unrepresentability that refused to be shown, and refused to be appropriated into narrative and meaning. And this is where we get back to Beckett a little bit, about how theatre can meditate on meaninglessness. So it doesn't have to be a meaning machine. Most of culture operates as a meaning machine, and it takes the raw material of our lives and fashions it into various coherent, straight shapes that we can digest and engage with. And theatre can always engage with meaninglessness and go back to a point before that appropriation



happens and you're sort of staring at, again in Lacanian terms, what is called the Real. That was our sort of way, different from verbatim perhaps, sort of an anti-verbatim meditation, but with great sympathy to the strategies involved with that. It's not scoffing at narrative. I don't think there's really a way out of it but you can sort of frame it and talk about it. So in a way playwriting was used, we billed it as: '*Lippy* by Dead Centre with cameo-playwright Mark O'Halloran'. Mark's name is quite established here in Ireland, and increasingly internationally as well. He's an established screen and theatre writer and performer. So by framing him as a cameo-playwright – he wrote the monologue at the end of the play – it was trying to frame the project of playwriting as one of imposing a meaning, a necessary imposition of meaning to give it a structure and a shape.

#### **[00:27:29 to 00:28:09] Excerpt from final monologue of *Lippy* (2013)**

**BK:** What I found interesting about the process of making that show was that for all that – as Bush has explained, there is a kind of coherent and quite rigorous philosophical investigation being pursued – at the same time I remember one of the things that we fought about quite a lot. One of the things that I found difficult and compromising in terms of my instincts I guess when making that show, was that Bush pushed for and we gradually figured out a language of work whereby an event in a piece, an object on a stage, can have its own resonance and can be found in the mind through, you know, as David Lynch talks about the big fish – if you meditate more deeply you will find the bigger fish in the deeper oceans – and it can just have only a tangential and quite ephemeral relationship with what your thesis or your, in traditional terms, your narrative, your story is doing. And yet it can still be allowed to live in a piece and then it can be allowed to make its own waves throughout the piece. I think a really obvious example in that piece is a sequence with a leaf blower that blows paper on the stage and that was just a sort of idea I think that Bush had, kind of a 'sui generis' as it were. And then the task became: 'How on earth do we fit that in?' And there was a lot of that kind of thinking I found quite hard to assimilate in a sense: it's quite a nerve-wracking way to make work, and it's not a way to make work that I had been hugely versed in. I'm not trying to make value judgements about any particular different type or style of work, because the simple fact is that different approaches lead to different types of work and there's lots of wonderful work in the world and it's all different, you know. But nevertheless there is a way that directors in my culture have traditionally been trained, and I think that training in some sort of semi-formal sense is going through buildings like the Royal Court, whereby everything serves a kind of pre-existent narrative drive let's say, or indeed just a dramaturgical drive, it doesn't have to be a narrative drive. But one really has to really hold one's nerve when one goes: 'You know what? There's just going to be a leaf blower in it', and then you have to hold your nerve and see where the waves take you and then re-assess and re-build your house afterwards, once you've allowed for this thing.

**BM:** Traditionally a leaf blower – and using that image inside the show doesn't have a natural, organic place in narrating the story of these women's death and it could jar in a way and seem to be inappropriate or a bit of unanchored surrealism. [We're] working those images into it and seeing how they can have a home because they have intrinsic theatrical potency, and that's enough.

#### **[00:31:04] THE DEAD CENTRE PROCESS**

**DR:** Talking of authorship then very quickly: how does it work out in between the two of you in terms of making work? Because you are co-directing, Bush you're writing scripts as well, you're also performing. What's the division of labour there actually? What's the model of compatibility that you've found in how you actually make work together?

**BM:** It's this [*referring to Zoom*]: one question comes through and then we misunderstand, and we only half hear it and then we have to find our way back. So actually, misreading and misunderstandings, and Skype, because Skype is our medium, you know, of talking between Dublin and London. So actually frustrations with technology are – sometimes when the play comes out in a fragmented way we weren't trying to be experimental [*laughter*], we just didn't have a good enough wifi connection for the sentences and paragraphs to be coherent. So yeah, there's going to be so much accidental avant-garde after this. Just because the glitches were not intended but we read them as being intended, that's okay!

**BK:** Yeah. I do wonder about those kinds of questions, about the things that affect what one's work is



like, but one isn't really always in control of it. It struck me when you were saying, Duška, earlier about your observation about corporality being very central in theatre work for a certain while and then maybe something about sound and voice and slippage coming. I've never thought about that, but with a brief bit of thinking about it, I probably, maybe agree. But I certainly remember early noughties, mid-noughties, when I came out of drama school, people of my generation were all very interested in getting into a room and using each other's bodies and building stories out of bodies. I think we have a big problem and concern with text in British theatre work and I would extend that to Irish a little bit for the purpose of this conversation as well. The text and how we use it, and what purpose it serves and how it works. I remember Bush saying, when we started making the piece after *Lippy*, *Chekhov's First Play*, in one of our complicated Skype calls that kept cutting off and the frustration kept building and the voice kept becoming dislocated from the body or whatever, a concern that Bush used to raise (and I hope you won't mind me repeating this, Bush), was: 'I just can't understand why any of them would start talking.' Because it was basically an adaptation of a play we were doing there, and this kind of anxiety around how for some reason we located – or you located, Bush – this anxiety around: it's sort of, maybe, acceptable to have a person on stage, maybe, but for them to just start opening their mouth and blathering away, what an earth would they say? Do you know what I mean? And that became, again, that was probably another example of something that I initially found obscure to the point of perverse maybe, in terms of: 'What an earth are you talking about?' But in an attempt to try and answer that question – I'm not saying that it was answered successfully in that piece or any of our pieces – but in an attempt to try and answer that question and see... I guess, to be lofty about it, it is to do with authority I suppose, and also: on what authority is someone speaking to a room of 200 people? It also connected with fiction and inventing: how an earth would someone say something that wasn't true? Why would you say something that isn't true in front of an audience? What kind of weird bargain are you getting into when you're doing that?

**BM:** Well, what we tend to do, and it kind of finds a different groove each project – we co-author and co-direct together. *Lippy* was an exception, and *Souvenir*, I suppose, where I had done the primary authorship, but from *Chekhov's First Play* onwards we kind of get going together and build from the ground up. The process tends to be, you know, we have a formative idea for what the show could be, or usually it's a gesture or an image and then you start unpacking from there. And we do that usually remotely over Skype, and a few sessions here or there in person. We go back and forth over the course of a year, usually, developing a script. Starting by sharing research and writing and notes and meditating on the ideas and then building a script together, Google Doc-ing it back and forth, usually a live document so we can see how it's being changed. A tendency might be that I am the author and Ben's the dramaturg. I might put something out that he then pushes back and I put something out and then he pushes something back in that way, but really what he's pushing back is authorship as well. It's not just suggestions or notes, it's also re-writing a section. So that's why it's co-authored. But it follows that path until we get a script together and then in the room the division of labour again is: I'm a bit louder and do a lot more talking, and then when people don't understand something then they go to Ben (and they usually come away and go: 'Oh, that's okay, now I get it!'). He explains it a little less bombastic – when I'm trying to shout to a whole room, and you get charged up and a bit overexcited and you're not very clear. We run the rehearsal room together, so the division of labour is sort of down the middle – our characters obviously [*glitch...*] who we might [...] pick up on a bit of conversation, who leads one meeting, or works with which designer or something.

#### **[00:36:41] MAKING CHEKHOV'S FIRST PLAY (2015)**

**DR:** You say you start with a 'gesture' was the word you used – what was that initial gesture or impulse for *Chekhov's First Play*?

**BM:** Another word we use a lot is 'equation'. So: 'What's the equation for the show?' Again, it's a sort of arbitrary obsession but it's a catalyst for writing. I find that 'what is the first sentence?', basically, is the equation into the evening. When Ben spoke earlier about me getting a lot of anxiety over people speaking on stage, I didn't understand why would they start talking? It just feels like you're presuming so many things, that you know what the deal is between the audience and the event. So I feel the equation has to be set up clearer, in a way, so then you can go anywhere, then you can do whatever



you like, really. But it's just interesting that you just set up that first – it's like first impressions, you know, they go a long way. And Tim Crouch is probably a very useful reference for this kind of thing. You can problematise it and you can be lying in that equation, the equation doesn't have to be honest. In fact the worst type of equations are the ones that are seemingly transparent, where a performer comes on and says: 'Hi, good to meet you, thanks for coming this evening', and they really mean it, and they're just saying 'hi' and then they make their show. That's like a false equation, it's not real, you know? Whereas if you say: 'Hello' and already the game is being played – a bit like, I watched it two days ago again, *The Encounter* by Simon McBurney, where those first five minutes where he's seemingly off the cuff talking to the audience as he's waiting for the last audience to come in from the bar and set up, every line is setting up a theme of the show and is delivering the kind of way in which he's going to tell this story. He puts all the elements on the table. By 'gesture' or 'equation', these are words we use a little bit to find a way in. And the one with *Lippy* had been so clear, this post-show talk. So the sentence: 'Hello, everyone, thanks for staying behind.' There you go, you've now cast the audience, so the audience now know who they are: 'Oh, we're the people that now stayed behind for a show that never happened.' So they have a role to play within this event, suddenly. And now you can play again, you can problematise that dynamic, move away from it, come back to it, whatever, but you've set up – you've made the audience feel seen in the modern sense, you know, as the modern parlance goes, they feel 'seen'.

**DR:** Yes. I was thinking about that also last night when I was watching it, I was thinking how it's really about starting from the 'here and now' of theatrical performance, even though it's a kind of fictional here and now, but it recognises that basic convention of us being–

**BM:** I think you want to do that, and then problematise it. So you go: 'It's great we're all here', and then you go through questioning how, are we really all here, and in what way are we substantially all here? So *Hamnet*, we set everybody up: 'Oh, we're all here together, and I don't know why', and by the end we cast all the audience as dead, they're all ghosts really. To quickly answer this and then we can go back – Ben, I know you want to say something – but you asked: 'What is that gesture in *Chekhov's First Play*? And what is that–?' and I was putting it as: 'What is that equation?' Ben was saying we sort of struggled to find it – it actually started with going, again this idea that I had mentioned with *Souvenir*, staging the unstageable or adapting the unadaptable. So we'd sort of come to this play – Ben had been interested in the text of what's known as *Platonov* for a long time, the untitled first play of Chekhov, as being this seven-hour, eight-hour document with scenes missing and a rough quality to it. And bringing that in in a way that maintained its fractious nature was our interest, because we had known about adaptations by, in the English editions, Michael Frayn and Trevor Griffiths and other people who had adapted that play and smoothed the edges out and made coherent plays out of that. Trying to sneak it into the canon in the backdoor, you know: 'This was actually just a proto-*Ivanov* and there it is. You know, it's a bit long, but actually we can make it a pretty two-hour play that then we can perform at the National.' Whereas actually: 'No, this is an unwieldy event and we should preserve this problem!' I've just been reading some – to talk pretentiously about philosophy for a while – I've been reading some Adorno and he's doing lectures on Kant, and he says that the most important bit in a philosophy is the bit that doesn't add up. The contradictions are the bit to preserve. So when you look at Kant and you go: 'Oh, there's an inconsistency here', the academics will get rid of that to teach Kant's system: 'Okay, this bit is wrong, obviously, it doesn't fit in, but here's–', and you tidy up the edges and you teach that to people. Whereas Adorno says the insight is the bit where the philosopher's system doesn't work. That's where they've hit reality, you're finding there the fertile – what is 'negative dialectics' I guess for Adorno – but this is the fertile problem between thinking and action, and actually there's an active relationship there. But anyway, so talking about that with the *Platonov* script, we wanted to bring that to stage with its problematic status. So that was the first inspiration, and then the equation was this director's commentary, really. But we found that through a little bit of wrong turns and workshoping it and trying it out, but that was when we went: 'Okay, that's our "in" and that frames the event in a new way.' And then of course, that leads us into what we're talking about here, about what you can then do if you're taking sound seriously.

**DR:** Yes! Yes, indeed. We haven't actually talked about sound much yet. But Ben do you want to corroborate on any of this?



**BK:** Theatre seems to be quite unique in my mind as a form in that it can contain a mistake. It doesn't quite make sense to me as to how a film could contain a mistake. It doesn't really seem so philosophically impossible [in theatre] because people know that it is possible for an actor to forget their lines and that is a possible thing that could happen, and why don't we... I don't think it's necessarily been fundamental to us but technology in theatre often introduces another level – and technology can be anything from a curtain moving, to a microphone, to a projector, or whatever – but introduces another level of a type of mistake, and there's something quite joyous about the mistake, and something quite profound about it. I think about what that could be because there's something that's I think always been quite exciting about – and I think the mistake is linked to the idea of, I think you said it actually, Duška, of the fictional here and now. And I think I agree that that idea of that line 'Hi everyone, thanks for staying behind' just was instinctively a good idea for a beginning of a show. I think the thing when Dan [Reardon] as the lip-reader character takes his microphone down and carries on speaking, that's a kind of mistake in a way. I know it's not a mistake, but it is a kind of questioning of 'Oh, hang on, is that working right?' I remember we did that show in Edinburgh and about 30 seconds after that happened the computer died and the QLab files stopped playing and we had to stop the show and Bush had to come on stage and apologise. And of course everybody who saw the show thought it was part of the show because that's the kind of game that we were playing. So anyway, that's just something, that idea of the mistake – I don't know where I got that from really, but it just came from what you were describing. I suppose connected thematically with the Chekhov play and the idea of not wanting to get rid of the mistake but wanting to investigate it.

**BM:** The anecdote he was giving there briefly at the end was our own fault, you know, we deserved it. I couldn't get out of this kind of prison we'd set up. Again I was thinking about *The Encounter*. It was so brilliant but it's state of the art, I wonder why, because I imagine he was very interested – they didn't really play with mistakes. I was watching that going: 'What was the creative team's anxiety every night?' Is it just so rigorous that they go: 'No, no this can't fail.' Or were they like: 'What if that Sennheiser head just fails tonight?', you know? Or: 'What if one wire gets kicked out whilst he's running along? What's their back-up system?' This was all the stuff that I was thinking about when I was doing *Souvenir*, which is like nothing, but I was just going: 'What do I do if that doesn't open tonight, and if that thing doesn't actually work when I pull it, what shall I say? I just want to be ready for plan B and plan C.'

**BK:** I think also one of the things that our work tries to attain is a degree of precision as well. I don't think we're interested too much in kind of – there is chance in the work definitely, but if you try and attain that degree of precision you can't escape its horrifying opposite, which is that things might go horribly wrong.

#### **[00:45:28] SOUND OPERATOR AS A CONCERT PIANIST**

**DR:** That really cues up *Beckett's Room* and the scope for anxiety there in terms of things potentially going wrong. Which seems – to someone like me who is just watching it – enormous, you know? I mean, how do you deal with mistakes in that?

**BM:** We didn't really get that far, because we did that show and then it was set to tour this year. So we didn't have many chances to go through the 'what if?' That was what our rehearsal period was for with that show, the technical and puppetry team really understanding their system, and they designed it obviously bespoke and created a system which they understood. So they were making it reliable. We had imagined that the person firing Ableton, the sound program, would have to be like a concert pianist because she was there and having to watch the stage and be really reactive to, you know – there was a sort of through-score of some things, but then there was her reacting to small movements that then she was triggering the sound design for. So that was a very anxiety-inducing experience. I think that it was to the detriment because I think – but again, we didn't really do it enough. I would have learnt more about that show this year and I will learn more if we do get to bring it alive again. But in its short run, I think that the anxiety that the audience felt for that was not supposed to be so excessive. It didn't complement it in the way that we had anxiety in our *Traumdeutung* show in the Burgtheater where we bring an audience member on stage, a complete stranger each night, she lies on Freud's couch and she tells a dream and then we interpret that dream live in the show. It goes off into a very strange place



and it's a very complicated technical show – it's our most complicated show because obviously the Burgtheater has the resources to really take it somewhere. But in that case the anxiety of 'will this work?' complements the dramatic event, and the audience are sort of reading their experiences through the audience member who's seeing her dream re-created live in this way. So I think it's a complementary experience whereas in *Beckett's Room* the anxiety, I think, pulls you away rather than brings you to it.

**DR:** That's very interesting. Presumably it is performed in German, the Freud play?

**BM:** *Traumdeutung*, yes. That just opened this year and they were running the show successfully and they were having good responses and they've invited us back now. So they were very happy. So our next premiere will be in the Burgtheater in April next year in theory.

**DR:** To do what?

**BM:** To do what's called *The World Is Everything That Is the Case*, which is a Wittgenstein project based on *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, so it's a staging of the *Tractatus*.

[Laughter.]

**DR:** Okay, another big challenge!

#### [00:48:28] MULTILINGUAL TEXTURE

**DR:** So that's now triggering another set of questions for me, which is to do with the other languages in your work. Obviously there's the question around how these international collaborations have come about, but also there's something in your work, in *Chekhov* there are sections in Russian in it, actors are speaking Russian, and then similarly in *Beckett's Room* other languages are in the mix. How does that come about, and what's the interest in language?

**BM:** It depends. In *Beckett's Room* that was, I suppose, trying to capture a realism, a naturalistic rendering of the story. And we just weren't satisfied with the sort of BBC – 'We do it all in English, but with French accents', or something like that. We just weren't satisfied with that as an option. But then on a deeper level it becomes a European prayer – this multilingual texture is our cultural ambition, you know? It should be the case that we celebrate and hear the world in that way, and when you're not doing that it's really giving up on something, which is such a joyful part. You could do it all in English, but if you bring in all these other languages you create a much richer world, or 'the world' – also known as 'the world.' You bring the world in, you know?

**DR:** And it potentially reads also as a way of resisting Brexit.

**BM:** Again, in the case of *Beckett's Room*, that's what they were trying to fight for in that narrative, to fight for Europe literally, and we were playing it at a time when there was a different type of fight for Europe. The collaborations that we do there, those were international artists that we met: two of the actors were from the Schaubühne that I'd met. Viviane De Muynck did a lot of work with Needcompany, I'd met her through Pan Pan as a mentor on one of the projects I was working on.

**DR:** And Valentijn as well.

**BM:** And Valentijn Dhaenens, you know, an extraordinary actor. We met because he was in the dressing room before us in Edinburgh when we were doing *Lippy*, he was doing *Bigmouth*, *SmallWaR*. We met him and felt great sympathy for him as a person, a beautiful human being, but also a great artist so we'd always hoped to work together. And then he recommended Laurence Roothoof who he'd worked with before, so that's why we cast her, met her and cast her. It was really also a legacy of the international collaborations that we've done is that you meet so many interesting people along the way and want to bring them into the texture of the work and how it sounds and then feels. We have a working knowledge of French, probably a bit better, and now increasingly a working familiarity with German. And we spend a lot of time when the texts are translated with the translator or with the dramaturg going line by line and really scrutinise what's going on in the German and try and unpack what we think the tone of what we're trying to achieve in the English line is.

#### [00:51:31 to 00:55:26] Excerpt from *Beckett's Room* (2019)



### [00:53:39] TECHNOLOGY AND DRAMATURGY

**DR:** Actually I want to ask several things, but one thing is the audience is wearing headphones, which is not quite yet binaural sound [in *Chekhov's First Play*], is it? It becomes binaural in *Beckett*–

**BM:** We used elements of it, it wasn't totally binaural. *Beckett's Room* had been recorded exclusively binaurally, but in *Chekhov's First Play* we had used the binaural recording for moments, and for getting textures. It is just that sound is just not – it's one of the reasons why it's not so good in theatre, because the sound isn't good enough. If you're in a big auditorium and you're at the back you're sort of uninvolved, in a way. And when you go to the cinema and it's the state-of-the-art Dolby surround and it's such an awesome experience that you can be enveloped in, there's no reason why theatre shouldn't have that same sonic ambition. Of course practically it's not always achievable and that's understandable, but it can aspire to that. So the biggest problem with the headphone show was how to go back. After we made a headphone show we were just so disappointed to not make every show on headphones. It's a relief because it's very complicated and it brings a load of technical concerns and costs with it but you can afford such an intimate communication that it's a shame. So it's hard. So actually, since we've made that headphone show all our other shows we've been trying to: 'Can you achieve the same effects but without the headphones?', using sound in such an involved way.

**DR:** But what you're describing sounds like you're still prioritising the theatre experience, which is just then served by this extra aural dimension that is possible through the headphones, rather than being driven by that interest in what that technology can do.

**BM:** Maybe, but I think together: it's all just in tandem actually. Like I was saying at the beginning, you want to create a scenario where you can't remove one element, like it wouldn't work. So actually, I don't want to go to a show and it just be a sound experiment, and I don't want to go to a show and it just be a design experiment, visual design. You want to go and know why every element is there and they speak to each other and harmonise. You want to have a complete, a total experience in that way. Of course that doesn't mean there can't be a show where you sit in darkness and have an aural experience, but actually the darkness is the set design there. So there's been a very considered set design it just so happens to be complete pitch black, which is very hard to achieve.

**BK:** One thing I would say is that when we make our shows, and having been in rehearsal rooms – having directed pieces and been an assistant director in rehearsal rooms that aren't *Dead Centre* shows – I think the *Dead Centre* rehearsal room is much harder to be in and involves much, much, much more technical working out of problems. It seems to me, and I think that this is massively true, it's definitely true of the *Beckett's Room* show, but it's perhaps even more true of the *Freud* show we just made in Vienna, that you start on day one with absolutely no idea how on earth you're going to achieve it and a strong nagging suspicion that you're not going to achieve it. I think all of the pieces we've made probably do sort of fit into that category. There's something quite honest about it, I think. Okay, with the *Freud* show you're introducing an audience member and we use the audience member's live testimony to create content in the show. But it's often to do with technological ambition as well and trying to test the limits of what technology can do for an audience. And it does keep one honest as a practitioner, I think, because it means you really don't waste time. You can't afford to waste time.

**BM:** They are usually premised around that – we try and form an idea, Ben and I, we investigate it a little bit based on a rough understanding of how it might be achieved. Then we take it to somebody who knows about it and it's only when they say: 'Yes, you can do that', then we pursue it. Only once – and it really broke my heart and really, really shook me, in a way, creatively it was quite damaging – did we have something that just didn't work, and that was in *Shakespeare's Last Play* at the Schaubühne. We had a whole element of technology of live GPS tracking on all the characters that was going to monitor them and we had been told – absolutely this is on us, it's not on this coder – but we had been told that it's possible but he did, this coder, did qualify that it's very unreliable and it's very hard to achieve. He said: 'We might get it to a position where this works but it might actually fail and then what?' And we had too many eggs in that basket going: 'No, no, it works', and that was one time where a planned technological element just absolutely had to be cut at the eleventh hour from a show,



and the show quickly re-conceived to work without it. And we got to a performance, there were other things going on so we kind of got it over the line but it was a big – it gave me a fright! You know, it gave me a fright to pursue something so far and then it doesn't work, you know? It made me nervous for a while afterwards but hopefully we've got our ambition back.

#### [00:59:08] AUDIENCE

**DR:** I do want to ask you a few more questions to do with this work with the audience and how that journey has changed through the different shows. You've just mentioned casting the audience at the beginning of *Lippy*, we've talked about the audience becoming ghosts in *Hamnet*. You mentioned the audience – is it the audience that comes on stage as part of the Freud play, a member of audience comes on stage?

**BM:** Yes, yes.

**DR:** And that also happens in *Chekhov's First Play*, that you have an audience member playing the protagonist. And I guess linked to that might be this element of sound in *Chekhov's First Play* and the decision to use headphones.

**BM:** Well that came from the director's commentary, and how that would function. That was the base, and then we were unpacking what possibilities does that offer. And that works on a simple level: the resonance of a voice in your head being the voice of your consciousness, and how that would be operating. And then it's just a disembodied voice in that way, in which you've seen me and then I go away and then it takes on a life of its own and has a different quality as it turns against itself and distorts. Then you realise you have an opportunity for giving an audience member direction through this special set, that one seat has this special set of headphones. Then the second half where all the characters lose their voices in this way and they become fractured and disembodied, you have different textures and different ways in which you can tell the story.

**DR:** I'm just really interested in that audience perspective, specifically in relation to *Chekhov's First Play* regarding that audience member who gets selected. I'm not going to ask you to give away all your secrets, but I'm just interested in the way in which that moment in the play works. Do they know from the start that they will be doing this part?

**BM:** Yeah, we can give some of it away because it's okay, it's part of the process of it. We ask somebody in the bar beforehand, or the queue. We frame it in such a way – all we do is we've worked it out what the language is. Again because it's really part of the performance: how you approach somebody, and you have to use the right language so that you get the right person. And the right person really just means that you have not forced somebody to do it. That's all it means. It's no 'right person' in terms of how the result is – it can be however they are is correct, that's alright. But you don't want to find yourself in a situation where somebody wishes they weren't there, because it's not interesting to watch suffering, you know. So we find a language in which you make clear the coordinates of what will be involved, but also you don't want to say anything of the deeper content because you do want it to be a pure experience. For them and for the audience to see this organic event unfold. We find the right language, and if they agree – a lot of people say no – and then we find somebody, and if they agree we take them to the seat. They sit in that particular seat, we swap their ticket, and then we put the jacket on them, I put their headphones on them. Ben does a quick '1-2' because Ben does the instructions for them and we just make sure they know, and we just say: 'That's how it will work. Other than that you don't need to know anything, good luck, have a wonderful show and see you at the end', and that's it. So we have very minimal contact and then it's left. The Freud show is even more extremely unprepared. We just invite everybody in the audience to stand up at one point. There's the actress dressed as Freud, she dresses as Freud and says she's going to analyse somebody's dream, she invites everybody to stand up, she then explains that psychoanalysis begins with Freud listening to women's dreams: 'So tonight, to honour that, we want to let a woman speak, so can all the men sit down', and says: 'Right ladies, I would like to hear your dreams, so I would like one of you to come on stage and lie on this couch. Thank you.' And then Freud sits in the chair and waits, and obviously the room is confused and unsure and eventually, organically, someone – and that was our bet, our bet was just: in the auditorium of the Akademie Theater of 500 somebody will come up. Of



course, as in the Chekhov play, a lot of the time a lot of the audience think it's a plant. Of course there's no really escaping that, but you actually try and fashion something whereby it works anyway, you know. It's still curious even if – I think it's always better if you know it's really the beauty of an unprepared audience member, but it's still a coherent evening if you think it's a plant, albeit a slightly less theatrically thrilling one.

#### **[01:04:04 to 01:07:01] Excerpt from *Chekhov's First Play* (2015)**

**BK:** We talked a lot about this while making the Chekhov show: were there strategies we could employ to make it 100% clear to the audience what was going on? With the Chekhov piece: a) it didn't seem to be within the metaphysics of the show we'd made that we could tell the audience in any way because there is no absolute authority in that show, because Bush's character is talking with authority to the audience but that's being undermined and so on, and also b) I think when it really works, an audience are hopefully wondering to themselves all the time: 'Is that–', you know: 'Is that a real person? No, it can't be! But look at the way they're doing that dancing! But no, it can't be! But no–' and that's–

**BM:** Yeah and then that chimes, the psychology is: 'Do I know what I'm doing, or do I not know what I'm doing?' And that sort of existential psychology is at the heart of the Chekhovian character in that sense, and then that's fine that the audience... Using that strategy, that question: 'Is that a plant or is that not?' is the same [as]: 'Is this rehearsed or do they not know what they're doing?', which becomes the same existential question, you know?

**BK:** Yeah. Because that idea in that show did come... I can't remember how it originated – but it definitely wasn't unconnected to the text of Chekhov's piece. And to a sort of simple reading of this idea of the central character who'd literally just say to people: 'I'm not who you think I am', you know. It does seem to represent this blank space.

#### **[01:08:34] A POLYPHONY OF READINGS**

**DR:** We are ostensibly talking about sound in your work, but actually I am really interested in this question of what the authorship model there is: how we make theatre, how we think about making theatre, how we go in step with the time and so on and so forth. What we've been talking about is this idea that you're very conscious of how authority in theatre might function and you're concerned with undermining it, or questioning the ethics of it. And then I've just realised just talking to you that we are talking about these shows that we are referring to as 'the Proust show' and 'the Chekhov show' and 'the Beckett show' and 'the Wittgenstein show' is coming up as well. I mean, how does that notion of authority of Western, you know, white, male–

**BM:** Canon.

**DR:** Yes, the canon. How do you work with–

**BM:** Well, I hope like a lot of people, the way we prefer men is dead, you know? My favourite kind of man is a dead man. It's a question for us a little bit, and we wonder if it's a failing, so it's something we keep in mind for our future work. We try to pick these canon writers because that's the opportunity – you're taking on a figure of the establishment in a way and trying to create a democratic relationship with it, with the thinking involved and with the writing involved, by telling the stories anew and afresh and in a different way. So I think it's just trying to democratise authority, in a way. [Laughter.] So that's it. At the same time though, it's not safeguarded from the criticism of: 'Yeah well there's another way that you could do that, just turn your back on it in its entirety!', and I agree with that as well.

**BK:** Because also – I think I'd maybe even go a bit further maybe – and I'm just thinking this through as I say it, because that argument of democratising access to, say, Chekhov is also the argument that is made for doing a big old boring Chekhov play at the National Theatre. I'm not saying that that happens I'm just using that as a stand-in, whereas–

**BM:** You've been covering your arse a lot, Ben! In this conversation you keep saying: 'I'm not against that, I'm not saying that.'

**BK:** But that idea about democratizing, just as you were saying that, that reminds me of what is often said behind some the most deadly and kind of horrific dead-ends in theatre, you know: 'I just want to



open up access to this to a new generation because—’ And I know that’s not what you meant, but I wonder if sometimes we’ve been able to – certainly I’m thinking with the Chekhov piece this is true, with *Hamnet* in regards to Shakespeare is true, I think with the Freud piece it’s true as well, (Freud is a good example because Freud for the Viennese is Shakespeare, you know) – if you do take on something that has such large cultural capital then you can undermine it. I don’t think we make fun of Chekhov in the piece but we definitely do make fun of the kind of way of interpreting Chekhov, and we definitely give someone an excuse to go: ‘Yeah, Chekhov’s shit!’

**BM:** I think what I meant as a distinguishing point – so let’s say the traditional production of a Chekhov play says: ‘Okay, we’re doing this with somebody famous from the telly so that the young kids come and see it, and we’re actually going to make this more accessible.’ But what you’re doing in that process, while you’re doing that, you’re preserving the traditional view and reception of the work. You’re just trying to make more people come to that traditional mode of reception: ‘There is a way you should understand Chekhov and we’re just going to try and get more people to see that work that way.’ Whereas I hope what we’re trying to do is celebrate misreading and misunderstanding in that way.

**BK:** Okay, right.

**BM:** To say that misreading and misunderstanding is really as important as whatever understanding a thing might be. So it’s a sort of polyphony of readings, and a polyphony of interpretation, you know? So it becomes much more unruly than bringing everybody to the same church, you know.

**BK:** Yeah.

**DR:** It’s very stimulating anyway to think about it in relation to your work and I think in any case what you do with the classics is not something that many other companies in the English-speaking world are doing. There could be a whole other conversation about interpretation, but I should probably stop at this point. Thank you so much. I mean, it’s just been really interesting talking to both of you.

Transcription by Tom Colley

## Clips Summary

[00:21:57 to 00:25:05] *Lippy* (2013)

[00:27:29 to 00:28:09] *Lippy* (2013)

[00:51:31 to 00:55:26] *Beckett’s Room* (2019)

[01:04:04 to 01:07:01] *Chekhov’s First Play* (2015)

Audio available at <https://www.auralia.space/gallery2-deadcentre/>.

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