

# “It Is In The Text”



Robert Workman

Cheek by Jowl's production of *The Tempest*

*At the theater company known as Cheek by Jowl, Shakespeare is the most avant-garde playwright around*

**by Gerard Raymond**

**W**e are very interested in doing contemporary plays, but nobody is writing plays as modern as *The Tempest* anymore," says director Declan Donnellan, who, together with designer Nick Omerod, founded Cheek by Jowl in 1981. One of Britain's most exciting experimental touring theater companies, Cheek by Jowl has acquired a reputation for revivifying dusty classics.

Since its first production, William Wycherly's *The Country Wife*, at the

Edinburgh Festival in 1981, Cheek by Jowl has presented the British premieres of Jean Racine's *Andromache*, Pierre Corneille's *The Cid*, and Alexander Ostrovsky's *A Family Affair*. This January, Donnellan and Omerod made their debut at the Royal National Theater of Britain with *Fuente Ovejuna*, a rarely performed 17th century Spanish classic by Lope de Vega.

Last November Cheek by Jowl took up a seven-week residence at London's Donmar Warehouse, the premier

Fringe (alternative theater) house in the city. The London engagement—which featured Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and Sophocles's *Philoctetes*—was the start of a five-month tour which took the company to Singapore, Malaysia, Australia, Norway, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Turkey. Although London is just one stop on its seasonal schedule, Cheek by Jowl has made an indelible mark on the London theater scene; Donnellan has received the Laurence Olivier Award for Best Director (1987) and Omerod has been



**Keith Bartlett and Leslie Udwin in *Macbeth* (l); Cheek by Jowl artistic directors Nick Ormerod and Declan Donnellan (r)**

nominated for an Olivier for Best Designer (1988). Their production of *The Tempest* held its own alongside the high-profile Peter Hall production at the National, Jonathan Miller's at the Old Vic, and Nicholas Hytner's at the Royal Shakespeare Company's Stratford venue.

"Nick and I first met at Cambridge. We wanted to work together, but no one else would let us, so we started a company," explains Donnellan in the spacious, barely furnished house in London he shares with Omerod. "It was all by luck, because we happened to get funding for what we wanted to do and got some wonderful actors, and it happened to work. That is what upsets me very much about arts funding in Britain today, because I don't think it could happen again."

The name Cheek by Jowl was thought up by Omerod. "It means the people are close to each other," Donnellan elaborates. "We wanted to break down the barriers that exist between modern audiences and the great scripts. Nothing puts a barrier between you and somebody else more than sentimentalizing them. The best way to lose a lover or a friend is to sentimentalize them. Loving people, which is quite different, is quite a hard thing—it's tough and dangerous."

Donnellan and Omerod's unsentimental approach to Shakespeare has resulted in productions that have been controversial, to say the least. One critic described Donnellan as "one of the most inventive young directors in England,"

although Donnellan sees himself as a purist whose primary concern is "to be truthful to the play. The plays are much more avant-garde than modern audiences are. It's very patronizing to say that Shakespeare was ahead of his time, because I think that his time is much more ahead of ours in terms of the range of emotion and the degree of experiment which that audience could experience. Our imaginations have shrunk so much to naturalism, cheap realism, and sentimentalism."

Cheek by Jowl's production of *Macbeth* in 1987 raised the hackles of many conservative theatergoers, in part because of Donnellan's staging of the Porter scene. His Porter was a bag lady from Glasgow who made topical jokes and cursed in choice profanities. According to Donnellan, "we keep forgetting that it's a very odd thing to do a text that was written 350 years ago under very different circumstance. Shakespeare continually slaps the audiences' face with a wet fish. When the Porter walks on to the stage after the dagger scene it has to alienate and violate the audiences' tragic expectations. It is the most outrageous piece of writing. In Shakespeare's times, the Porter was a comedian and it would have been a huge comic turn. Certainly what we have in the script bears no relation to what was performed on the stage. Probably Shakespeare had no control over what happened on the stage at that point." Pointing out that most of the references in the extant version of the Porter speech are now obscure to a modern audience,

Donnellan insisted that "to play the speech exactly as written violates the spirit of Shakespeare's intention. We were quite tame—we didn't nearly go as far as I think one should go.

"Shakespeare was a practical man of the theater; he was not academic," Donnellan points out. Out of practical necessity, Donnellan hit upon an intriguing concept for *The Tempest*. He offered the role of Prospero to 27-year-old Timothy Walker, who was about to leave. "We decided it was such a shame to let such a wonderful actor leave the company just because he was 20 years too young. We saw a lot of good middle-aged actors for the role, but nobody was quite right. And so we worked around the fact that we had an excellent young actor." Consequently this *Tempest* became a performance by a group of actors, led by a driven and egomaniacal actor-manager, who also plays the part of Prospero.

"We certainly don't intend to be original," Donnellan points out. "But a work of art like *The Tempest* is so enormous, if you throw yourself on it and investigate it, it brings out the differences in what we do. I think the more humble and pure you are toward it, the more different it's going to be. People say *The Tempest* is Shakespeare's most serene play, but it has the noisiest title. It is his angriest play, his most neurotic, driven, and violent play. I do actually believe that it is a play about a young man. Prospero at the end of the play isn't going to die—he is going to start his life. The more we opened to *The Tempest*, the more extraordinary it became."

A similarly open-minded approach to the text of *Twelfth Night*, which Cheek by Jowl presented in 1986, revealed “the the Orsino-Viola marriage is very problematic, because Orsino has been in love with a boy [the disguised Viola] for most of this play. It is in the text. If you pretend that Orsino and Viola have no problems at the end of this play, which is what normally happens, then you have made an outrageous imposition on the text—to see the play simply as celebrating love’s order, instead of celebrating that dissonance, complexity, and the ugliness of love. When you go back to the scripts you find that they are very avant-garde.”

**A**long with textual purity, another characteristic of Cheek by Jowl’s work is its intimacy with the audience. “All the shows are turned out so that the actors speak to the audience quite freely; there is no fourth wall. I think it is very funny to pretend that Shakespeare takes place like a 20th century play in front of this funny cinema wall that we put up. This means that the audiences change the production quite a lot. And if you play in a foreign country you find that people laugh in different places, listen in different places, and gasp in different places. So although we don’t have any particular audience in mind, we are obsessed with the audience because where the theater happens isn’t on the stage, but in the audiences’ imagination.”

Contact with audiences around the world is an essential part of Cheek by Jowl’s agenda. “We are completely nomadic. Our first nights are often in very strange places—Italy and Turkey and so on. So we live entirely on the road, and like Blanche DuBois, we depend on the kindness of strangers.” This independence also accounts for the eclectic choice of plays. “On the whole, most stable companies give a wide spectrum of theater because it serves a constituency. We don’t acknowledge any constituency. We only go where people want us, which permits us to be totally self-indulgent. That has been our strength.

“The touring is fine for me,” Donnellan adds, “but sometimes it’s difficult to get older members into the

company and the design restrictions are rather frustrating for Nick. But then, the design restrictions are often the greatest liberation.” Sparse set design is also a hallmark of the company, which operates on minuscule budgets; Donnellan points out, however, that even when Omerod has “a big budget and a fixed space, I’ve noticed that he has always stayed simple. But it’s actually not so much a case of money, because simplicity can be very expensive. If you are going to have one chair, it has to be the right chair.”

Donnellan says that his partnership with Omerod is “not the traditional designer/director relationship—it’s much more. Nick has a much bigger input into the directing than designers ever do. He and I choose all the actors between us; Nick always starts the

rehearsals by playing games with the actors and so on. We also prefer to delay the design so that it happens within the rehearsal period.”

Clearly, Donnellan and Omerod’s sensibilities are what Cheek by Jowl is all about. “What is interesting is that although the company is led by a director and a designer, we still see theater as being fundamentally the actors’ art,” Donnellan explains. Indeed, Cheek by Jowl productions are well-known for their ensemble work. “When you see one of our plays, what I like to think is that you are very conscious of the power of the actor and the actor’s art. That is much more important than the script. It is the actor’s and the audience’s imaginations which hopefully catch fire together and make theater happen between them.”



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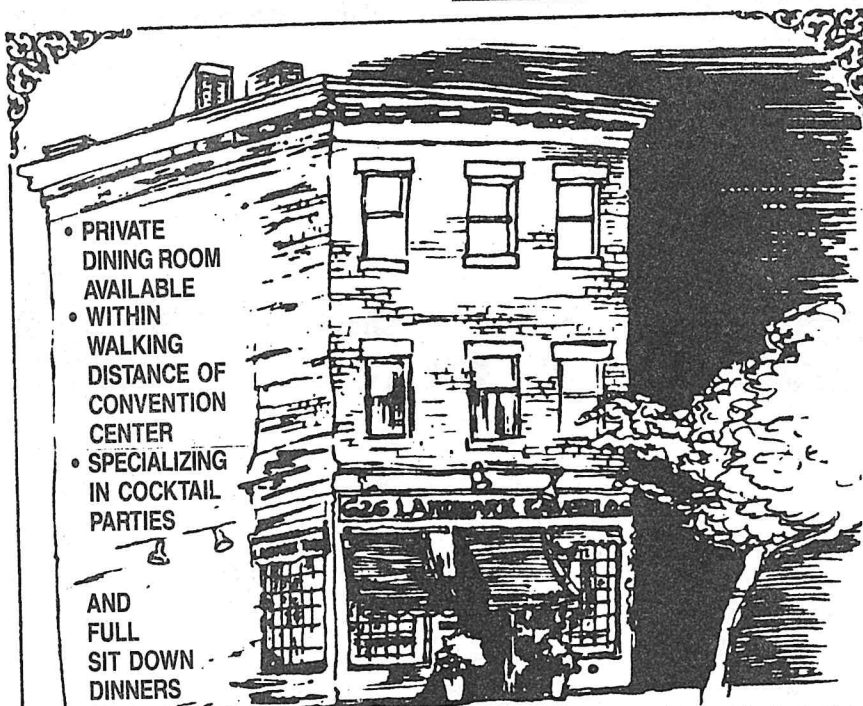
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It was this idea of company that led Donnellan and Omerod to choose *Fuente Ovejuna*, a play in which the peasants of a small town in 15th century Spain rise up in a body and liberate themselves from a feudal overlord. Their plans to do the play had fallen through when an invitation came from Richard Eyre, the new director of the National Theater. Donnellan and Omerod presented a typically Cheek by Jowl production in the intimate space of the Cottesloe Theater. Staged in a transverse format, with the audience sitting on both sides of the playing area, the production has been hailed as a triumph of the company spirit. Striking in its bold simplicity, the production reinforced the solidarity of the peasants who, when questioned about the murder of their overlord, stubbornly refuse to succumb to torture and will only answer "Fuente Ovejuna did it!"

In effect, Donnellan and Omerod had turned the National Theater company into a new Cheek by Jowl company. "Yes, if you like," agrees Donnellan. "I didn't sleep for a whole weekend before we went to the National because we were very frightened that these actors were going to be very different, that they wouldn't want to improvise or work the way we want to. Most of the rehearsal period involves me working with the actors and releasing their imaginations, which is very painful sometimes. I'm like the coach and they are like the athletes—you don't get to run a three-minute mile without a great deal of pain.

"Most English theater," Donnellan continues, "runs on the system that the actors are independent experts and that the director, the designer, and the playwright are independent experts and you produce them like a Broadway musical—you put them all together and then you get good theater. But actually, making a group happen is the first thing to do. I don't think that there is such a thing as a great actor, or a great director, or a great designer. I think there is great acting, great directing, and great designing, and we are all capable of it if we work together.

"In Britain we have a tendency to destroy our actors by sentimentalizing them and telling them that their



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presence in itself validates the evening. That is not true. Nobody's actual presence validates anything. British theater is basically amateur. The truth of British theater is always the actor-manager and it has always been extremely anti-intellectual. There is tremendous international nostalgia for the great British actor, the Olivier and the Gielgud, but when questioned closely you find these people have never seen any of these performances. It's like French perfume and French wine. It's sentimentalism for something you haven't truly seen."

Now that Donnellan and Omerod have successfully worked within a mainstream theater company, what is the future of Cheek by Jowl? "Nick and I will always keep Cheek by Jowl. There may come a time after a few years, when we are too exhausted to tour anymore, and we might want to settle in a building somewhere. But not for the foreseeable future—I can't imagine anything more awkward than running a building."

Cheek by Jowl has in eight years played in 256 towns across five continents, but never in the United States. "We haven't played in the States partly because it is very difficult to find funding and our work is very experimental. But we have nearly gone to the States; lots of festivals have nearly had us there and have failed for one or two or three thousand pounds. We are always looking for a sponsor who will pay that. I think it would be wonderful to play in New York and some of our past shows like *Twelfth Night* would have gone particularly well there."

In a book that Donnellan is currently writing, he describes the theater as being "as vulgar as a strip show and as holy as the Mass"—the two opposite poles from which Cheek by Jowl draws its energy. "You see, we are simply entertaining somebody for two and a half hours with a text," he observes. "I am a showman. I put on plays to entertain people—not to instruct. I am no better than anybody else in the audience—far from it. But we explore, hopefully with the audience, big themes, big exciting themes—sex, violence, politics—all the wonderful things that you really want to see." □

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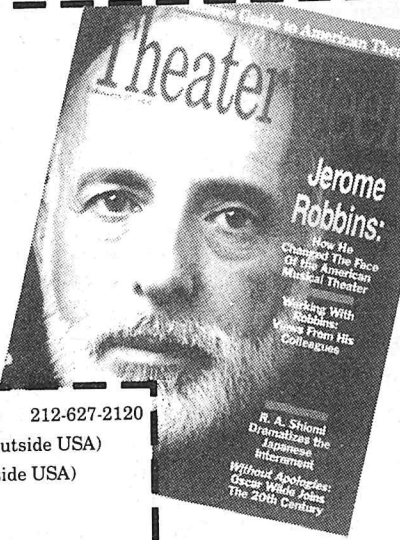
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