

The Peasant Kings of British Theater

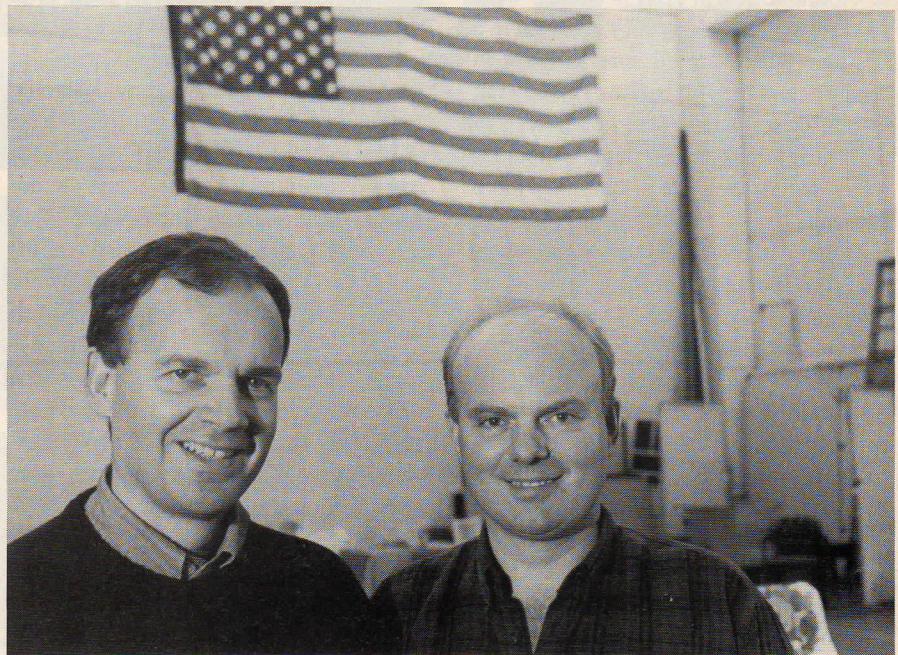
Director Declan Donnellan and designer Nick Omerod apply classical techniques to contemporary hits.

BY GERARD RAYMOND

Declan Donnellan is riding a crest at the moment. Two of the 40-year-old director's critically acclaimed productions, *Angels in America* and *Sweeney Todd*, are playing to full capacity houses at Britain's Royal National Theater, and his new production of *Measure for Measure* is beginning an international tour. His first job at the National, where he has been an Associate Director since 1989, was a riveting production of Lope de Vega's *Fuente Ovejuna*. But the Irish-born director first established his reputation eight years earlier with his touring company, Cheek by Jowl.

Distinguished by a non-reverential (but textually motivated) approach to Shakespeare and the classics, Cheek by Jowl has a global following that includes most of Europe and countries as far flung as Australia, Brazil, and Sri Lanka. Ironically, the company's production of a revelatory all-male version of *As You Like It* at Stonybrook, New York, three years ago, went practically unnoticed. Donnellan was invited to direct the Broadway production of *Angels in America*, but couldn't fit it in with his other commitments, so audiences in New York may get their first glimpse of Donnellan's work in his least characteristic venture, the forthcoming Cameron Mackintosh production of Boubil and Schonberg's *Martin Guerre*, slated for 1995.

Although Donnellan gets most of the attention, his work would not be complete without his lover and collaborator, Nick Omerod, the designer. The two men met while studying at Cambridge in the '70s and formed Cheek by Jowl in 1981. They have lived and worked with each other ever since. Omerod's contribution to Don-



Designer Nick Omerod with director Declan Donnellan on the set of *Angels in America* at the National. John Haynes

nellan's work goes much further than that of a designer. He is co-artistic director with Donnellan of Cheek by Jowl and is integral to the evolution of what we regard as a Declan Donnellan production. The dynamic between Donnellan and Omerod was aptly illustrated when I met with them for lunch at the National Theater. Omerod remained silent while his partner did the talking. But he spoke up just once, to set the record straight.

TheaterWeek: Let's begin with *Sweeney Todd*. I understand Stephen Sondheim asked you to do it.

Declan Donnellan: Yes, we have known Sondheim for a long, long time. He has come and seen Cheek by Jowl for years. He wanted it done as a chamber piece and he asked us if we would like to do it at the Cottesloe and he wanted Julia

[McKenzie] to play Mrs. Lovett, which was a wonderful choice.

What attracted you to the musical?

Stephen has struck on something that is very interesting about the British—their love of punishment, which is a very real and sinister thing. Not just to say masochism, but also a whole sense of judgment lying very heavily on you. In this country there was [a series of arrests] by the police called Operation Spanner, which was about the judiciary punishing sado-masochists who punished themselves! I think Americans have their hang-ups too, our puritanism was exported to you in the 17th century, but people in the continent find [British attitudes] very bizarre. Stephen keys into this and it is very much borne in the music. It is also a wonderful, full-blooded emotional piece. We

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are doing this as if it were Racine or Corneille or any of the other world's classics. The score is very, very specific and you have to be very obedient to the score. It is written quite accurately psychologically so it repays that investigation.

This is your first musical. What was it like to be guided by a score, rather than a text?

When I'm doing a play I am very conscious, like when you are doing a movie, that rhythms, the amount of time that is allotted to [each] part of the story, or each moment, are things that are very much in my control. In a musical they are largely taken out of your control. The composer and the music takes over time. So that's a discipline to learn. And of course what happens with a prop is very different in a musical. There are all sorts of ways in which actors can improvise their way out by putting something down [in plays]. In a musical things have to happen methodically, so the discipline is that much more difficult.

When casting for *Sweeney* what was more important, getting actors or singers?

We looked for people who could do both and we were very lucky. I think the important thing is to be able give it the same theatrical value as if it were a masterpiece of a play. We were fantastically lucky in fielding this amazingly grand cast. We gave the respect to the chorus as if they were individuals. Everybody in the chorus had basically played either *Sweeney* or Mrs. Lovett or the Judge or Johanna somewhere in the country.

Could you comment on your use of the chorus? They participate in every scene, looking on. . . .

That came up through investigation. Like a lot of major works of art, *Sweeney* is unclassifiable. Sometimes it is like Victorian British melodrama—penny dreadful, nineteenth-century Grand Guignol. At other times it is Greek in terms of the chorus. Then also you have this fantastically circumstantial set which needs two levels and needs to be able to articulate four spaces at once, which means you can't do it on a bare stage, which I wanted. Nick devised the bridge so that you could have the levels when you wanted them and then at other times you had the big bare stage for people to run around.

I loved the moment where the chorus transformed into asylum inmates after singing "City on Fire" just by turning

around.

(*He laughs*) Yes we did lots of mad improvisations for that, which is not in the Broadway tradition at all. I terrified Stephen with these stories of the things we were doing in rehearsal. It's very funny, I phoned him up one day in New York and he said, Declan, you are not going have them turn into the trees, but he enjoyed it.

How much time did you spend on exploration and research?

In *Cheek by Jowl* we work rather more purely to our ideals, which is that you go in knowing the play back to front but not having any idea of how it is going to be designed. At the National we can't do any of that because of schedules. It is more like working on Broadway than with *Cheek by Jowl*, so Nick has got to make a lot of design decisions before we go in. But we still wouldn't dream of designing costumes for the actors until they have started to rehearse. Nick will design the costumes around what the actors are doing on stage. Also in *Cheek by Jowl* we can spend a much longer proportion of the rehearsal time investigating. I think for *Sweeney* we had about 6 weeks. So it was maybe the first week for an investigative period. The cast was so nervous of the music we had to start on the music to keep everybody calm. But we did enough exploratory work to alarm some of the more traditional members of the cast! (*He laughs*)

Was directing the singing something out of your control?

Oh, yes, except not because it is Paddy [Cunneen, Music Director]. Paddy and I have always worked hand in glove and he and I have had such a long relationship with Stephen. I felt sort of out of control of the actors' nervousness, because your primary task as a director is to build up the confidence of the actors. A lot of what you have to do is calm their fears down. [The singing] was a whole area of acting which was not in my domain. That was very frightening because normally I am very good at dealing with anxiety. But I did not feel as out of control as I felt when the text of *Perestroika* was being changed.

How did you cope with the revisions of *Perestroika* during rehearsals?

I must say I found it quite hard when the text varied a lot. It was harder because Tony is a brilliant writer, so whenever he faxed me a scene it was always better and frequently longer. And then you are in the awful position of saying, well, fuck that,

I am not going to take any more, but we'd find a way of doing it. There were so very many basic things changing, it made me very nervous, but I am terribly glad I did it because it was absolutely wonderful.

So you didn't freeze it at a point before all the rewrites came in, then? I didn't notice much difference between the London and New York texts apart from the extra scenes in your production [See *TheaterWeek* 1/17/94].

No. Poor Nancy [Crane], who played the angel, was getting new scenes on the afternoon of the [last preview] and that was very hard on her. When you are flying above the audience's heads, you can't turn upstage when you forget your lines. There was one wobbly day, but I think we froze the text on the last preview. But the actors never complained. It was an enormous thing to do—that amount of theater—and they had a lot to be frightened by because the ground was changing underneath their feet, but they loved the play.

***Angels in America* and *Sweeney Todd* mark the first occasions you have directed the work of contemporary playwrights. Did you approach these plays differently from the classics?**

No. I fundamentally think there is no difference between a new play and a classic, [except that] with a classic the writer is dead. When that is put into effect, it becomes a very controversial point of view. Whatever you do, you are trying to deliver to the audience the spirit of the play [and that] might be different from the author's intentions or the letter of the play, you know, just as the spirit of the law is nearly always different from the letter of the law.

But isn't there a contemporary voice in these modern plays, even when they are set in a different period which is very different from, say Shakespeare?

Not really, because I think it is important to remember that all theater is stylized and there is no such thing as naturalism or realism in acting. Every now and then people get fooled into thinking that there is a new cinematic star, be it Dustin Hoffman or anybody else, who has discovered the way to be real. They actually haven't because when you look back 20 years later, [you see that] it has all been completely stylized.

What I am elliptically trying to say is that whenever you put on a play or make a film, you are creating a world that is completely artificial; there is absolutely

no point in pretending it is real. For example, we investigated what it would be like to be East Enders in London in the early 19th century for *Sweeney Todd*, but we were not doing it to get something right. God save us from anybody who ever gets anything right! I always say at the beginning of every rehearsal period that it is very important for the actors to do as much research as they can into their parts and the historical background because the research might trigger off something in their imaginations. As soon as they feel a weight, a historical imperative upon their backs, they must stop.

When we were doing *Angels in America*, we did an enormous amount of work [in relation] to the difference between Americans and British people and how New Yorkers behave. [This] sounds offensive and generalized and you would say it doesn't mean anything. Of course it doesn't. But you have to start with a generalization. What happens [then] is that out of the generalization something specific gets born within the actors' imagination, and the company's imagination, and you create a specific new world.

But up until *Angels* you had been dealing with worlds that nobody could relate to.

But nor can you in *Angels*. The world of 1985 is dead and gone. Even if it were now, it would be gone because anything you put on the stage is always to do with the past. I was quite strict with the actors, that they shouldn't think that they were doing some sort of naturalistic modern dress play about people today. They are doing plays about people who are different. If I were to do a play about me and Nick, they will still be people who are different. The second-rate portrait painter does a photographic reproduction of the sitter. A great portrait painter, a Titian or Rembrandt, reinterprets and does something new that is alive, which expresses the spirit. If you take a Rembrandt portrait apart, you'd think that it is incredibly sloppy brushwork and that there are a lot of second-rate portrait painters who would pay much greater attention to detail. What I am trying to say is, although you start by doing masses of research into the world of 1985 and 1986, into what people were wearing, what they were thinking, what the politics were like then, and remember how AIDS, for example, was a different disease than it is now, in the end you invent a theatrical world which has various possibilities.

What would you say is the most important thing for you when directing?

I think the single most important factor of my work is about acting. My work is 90% getting the actors to believe what they are doing and committing to their characters. I am a very rigorous disciplinarian about acting and about lack of specificity of intention. [I give] note upon note upon note, exercise after exercise, [to get] people to act better with greater depth and belief and greater freedom of imagination. I don't think of myself as somebody who's a stager.

But one the characteristics of your productions is how smoothly they flow, how the transitions occur.

Getting people on and off the stage is the least of my problems. Getting people really to believe in what they are doing is a very long process and demands the utmost concentration.

Nick Omerod: But I don't think you should undervalue your talent for staging. It is staged.

Declan Donnellan: Yes, but it is not what I am proud of. I am proud of my work with actors. What you do is you set up a situation where they know what they are doing and their intentions and they normally block themselves brilliantly. The final scene of a Shakespearean play is incredibly difficult because you have so many completely developed characters all coming to some sort of resolution. That's a nightmare.

Your work is much applauded for its clarity. We never lose our place, however intricately the story is being told.

Yes, you do something that will enable its clarity to come out, but the point I am trying to make is that if you stage things to make them look clear, it [still] won't be clear unless the actors know exactly what they are doing. They have got to be really specifically on the ball, then yes, as a director your duty is to come in and phrase it like a conductor does. But they have got to play their instruments really well.

From *Cheek by Jowl* and work in the Fringe, you have moved to the stages of the National Theater. Where do you go from here?

Our loyalty to *Cheek by Jowl* remains undimmed. It is a touring company and it may have artistic values that are sometimes an alternative to those of other theater companies, but we have never really seen it as Fringe company. *Cheek by Jowl*

is the natural expression of our work, and we begin a tour of *Measure for Measure* in February. I haven't done Shakespeare now for two-and-a-half years and that is very long for me. We are also interested in film at the moment and we would like to do some more before we get too long in the tooth.

Isn't there also the musical *Martin Guerre* for Cameron Mackintosh?

Yes, Cameron asked us to do that after we did *Fuente Ovejuna* at the National [1989]. It is quite an interesting marriage, really. Nick and I are the sort of peasant kings of British theater. We have done more peasants here—Irish peasants, French peasants, Norwegian peasants, Spanish peasants—[than anyone else]. These are more French peasants, so it is totally our stamping ground. I am writing the lyrics at the moment with Alain Boublil and I am just adoring it. Stephen sent me a rhyming dictionary and he gives me advice on how to write lyrics. It will be done sometime in 1995, here first and then hopefully on Broadway.

This will be the largest scale venture you have undertaken to date.

Yes. I have never done anything like that before. There are lots of things I would like to direct—a circus, a ballet, and a big West End musical. I can't wait to do it once.

Do you have any qualms about the pressures of working in an arena where the commercial stakes will be very high?

It doesn't feel that different to us. The pressure is always as great as one wants it to be. I think you should never patronize an audience. I treat them like I treat myself—bright and ignorant. I mean ignorant in a positive sense. That they don't come in with preconceptions, like a tabula rasa. That they are intelligent, but you should never assume prior expert knowledge. There are no experts. We must keep remembering this in life and beware of them always.

Sweeney Todd and both parts of *Angels in America* are currently in repertory respectively at the National's Lyttleton Theater and Cottesloe Theater. *Cheek by Jowl*'s production of *Measure for Measure* is on a tour which includes Perth, Tokyo, Sao Paulo, Buenos Aires, Rio de Janeiro, and St. Petersburg and several British cities. It will play in London in June and July. TW