

UNDERNEATH a bed somewhere in Cape Town is a shoebox of serviettes with ideas for award-winning plays scribbled on them. Written in bars and restaurants, car parks and kitchens, the flimsy notes, with their torn letters and super-absorbed vowels, await their moment to be retrieved and transformed into a line or an act or a specific angle of lighting.

Tara Notcutt, who owns the shoebox and the ragged serviettes, works this way. She has normal notebooks of course. There's a red one she carries with her on the day of our interview in Grahamstown. A quick flip through it divulges excerpts of dialogue, quotes, names of bands and a page entitled "Whisky tasting — Edinburgh." (Talisker comes out tops by way of five tipsily drawn stars.)

So yes, Notcutt has ordinary notebooks, but it's the serviettes that have made her. And if an artist's work methods are a reflection of their mental mechanics, then Notcutt's serviette scheme is fitting. There is sometimes a scatteredness about the way she expresses her reasons for theatre. There are hand-tossing explanations about how she transforms her thoughts into on-stage gestures, and staccatoed riffs about some or other emotion she experienced in a bedroom eight years ago that she is still trying to fit into a play. But these flashes of intellectual volatility are the normal side-

'Night is hard ... it gets so quiet — but it does give me time to catch up on my needless worry'

effects of (reasonably healthy) obsession. There is a small silver stud in her right nostril that she sometimes fiddles with like a dial when she feels herself overtaking herself.

This scatteredness is tempered with structure and calm, in the form of a mania for Post-Its and the self-assured way in which she directs. And she's really into team work. Ask her about any of her plays, which have won or been nominated for more than 20 awards, and she loves to talk about the group effort. The brilliance of the actors. The sensitivity of the music writers. The ingenuity and patience of set builders and stagehands.

"It's really down to the great people I get to work with and the people I choose to bring into things," she says. "I am quite a perfectionist but I'm also happy to roll with whatever comes. I

don't like to impose myself on everything. That's not the way I like to make theatre."

The way Notcutt does like to make theatre has earned her very high regard. At just 27, she is already considered one of the outstanding talents on the scene today. At this year's Grahamstown Festival she was involved in six productions, either as writer, director or producer. You could spot her tearing up and down the town's haunted boulevards in her careworn maroon Mazda for the better part of two weeks.

But her acclaim reaches far beyond our shores. Some of her plays, most notably *The Three Little Pigs* (co-written and directed by Notcutt), have been performed in cities on three other continents (New York, Perth and Amsterdam). In 2011, Notcutt was invited to spend three weeks at the prestigious Lincoln Center Theater Director's Lab in New York. She is also artistic director at The Pink Couch, a production company she founded.

Oddly though, Notcutt tried admirably to avoid her destiny. Her dad was a drama teacher and her mother a dance teacher, but she had decided she wanted to be a farmer's wife, or a lawyer.

"Then in Grade 11 I wrote and directed a house play. We got best play and best director and I thought, 'Oh, I can do this instead,' because I think I only like doing things that I'm good at."

"I went back that night and told my parents I really wanted to do drama and they sighed and said, 'Well, we can't tell you not to but you know you'll live a life of poverty.' I said, 'At least I'll be happy and get to do nice things.' So far so good."

Indeed. Her first official play, ... *miskien*, which Notcutt wrote and directed, is still touring after five years and has been performed in New York and Amsterdam. In another realm she might have been milking goats and discussing butter. Nothing wrong with these bucolic pursuits of course, but SA's theatre scene would have been lacking something it didn't know it was lacking.

How did Notcutt feel the first night ... *miskien* was performed in 2009, when the serviettes first came to life?

"Utterly f***ing terrified," she says. "I like to think that everything I've made is because I like it and believe in it, but I remember sitting up in the box and the audience just kept coming in until people were sitting on the floor and I realised that there was absolutely nothing I could do. And it's the best feeling in the world; you kind of want to throw up but it's also really exciting. I think if there's ever a show when I don't feel like that, then something might be wrong."

Everywhere Notcutt goes in



Notcutt out to be a farmer's wife

Tara Notcutt is one of SA hottest playwrights and theatre directors. She also eats cereal for dinner and keeps a journal written on serviettes, writes **Oliver Roberts**

Grahamstown people stop to say hello, to ask how everything's going, to tell her they've just seen one of her plays and how great it was. Notcutt reacts somewhat coyly to all this. She mentions another interview that took place in Grahamstown, where the journalist gushed about what an honour it was to meet her, how he was such a fan of her work.

Nobody is averse to hearing this but Notcutt admits she finds it "weird", because what she does and how she does it is all so innate to her that the praise seems misplaced.

love goes from her eyes.

I watch her setting things up for the Rob van Vuuren show, *WhatWhat* and observe her instant switch into director's mode. Within minutes of her arrival, she's moving chairs about and getting stagehands to perch hazily on ladders to adjust the lighting just so. Later, the CD with Van Vuuren's music appears to be scratched and, without hesitation, Notcutt licks the CD like a soft-serve in an attempt to remedy it. When this does not work, she bolts off back to her res room to make another copy and returns looking damper, but still utterly composed.

Back in her Mazda ("Paint it Black" is playing and a heart pendant swings from her rear-view mirror) we're discussing the importance of discontent and heartache in the artist's armoury. She implores me to watch her play *Last Rounds*, in which a woman sits on stage for an hour, waiting in a bar for her lover who never comes. It's a deeply personal rendering of events in Notcutt's life and to know this while watching the play makes you cower at the vulnerability of it.

I briefly look at Notcutt in the director's box as she studies her angst unravelling on stage, while an audience laughs at lines that aren't really supposed to be funny. Is this

what's called catharsis?

"Sometimes," Notcutt says. "Last night there was a line in *Last Rounds* that really hit me for first time and I just went back to my res and ate cereal. It feels good but it's also horrible. I think I'm really good at avoiding things."

At Aardklop in 2011, Notcutt directed the SA premiere of *Thom Pain* (based on *nothing*) by avant garde American playwright Will Eno. Eno is the writer of such lines as, "I disappeared in her and she, wondering where I went, left," and "Night is hard, you know? It gets so quiet. I never know what I'm supposed to be listening to. But it does give me time to catch up on my needless worry."

She says that when she directed *Thom Pain*, she tried to bring one or two new elements into it but nothing ever worked. "It was as if the play was rejecting anything from the outside," she recalls, "and from that moment, I was in love."

That led to this moment in New York in 2011:

"I found out Eno's address in Brooklyn," Notcutt says. "One afternoon, I stood on the pavement outside his house and tried to work up the courage to ring the bell and say hello. I never did. It started to rain, and I left."

One for the serviettes. **LS**

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'Having a full house is the best feeling in the world; you kind of want to throw up'

Notcutt wears a black bow in her hair and red-framed glasses which she pushes back up her nose by placing thumb and forefinger on either side of the frame. She eats Milo cereal for dinner, and sometimes lunch too, but once she's in the theatre with a set of cue notes in her hand and the actors warming up on stage, all the