

Auteurship and Collaboration: developments in facilitated creativity

A round table discussion of the role of the ‘director’ in collective companies, focussing on the work of Shunt, Complicite, and Robert Lepage

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Panel:

Dr Karen Fricker (KF), Lecturer in Contemporary Theatre, Royal Holloway, University of London

Catherine Alexander (CA), Senior Lecturer and Pathway Leader, Collaborative and Devised Theatre, Central School of Speech & Drama

David Rosenberg (DR), founder member, Shunt

Chair:

Helen Freshwater (HF), Fellow in Theatre Studies, Birkbeck, University of London

Prof Andy Lavender (Dean of Research, CSSD): We are talking today about the relationship between being an auteur – or a director figure who also perhaps conceives and creates work – and working with, or indeed running, a collective of people who are themselves authors and creators who have ownership of the work. I will hand you over to Helen Freshwater, who teaches at Birkbeck College, University of London, and specialises in twentieth-century British theatre and contemporary performance and has written on collaboration and auteurship in contemporary British physical theatre. She has two books forthcoming next year: *Theatre and Audience* and *Theatre Censorship in Britain – Silencing, Censure and Suppression*.

Helen Freshwater: Thanks, Andy. Karen, Catherine and David have a lot to tell us about companies and creators whose work depends upon collaboration, which is central to devising. Now, devised work has been described among other things as the embodiment of the death of the author; but it seems to me that the actual practice of devising leaves little evidence of any such death – of the author or indeed of the auteur. This easy spillage between the words ‘author’ and ‘auteur’ suggests to me what’s really at stake here. Assuming we are all happy to accept that the term ‘performance text’ can mean movement, sound and image as well as words on a page, then the questions raised about the relationship between auteurship and collaboration circle around issues of authority and the development of new directing practices within companies that are well known for their collective creative processes.

Of course, the establishment and negotiation of any new collaborative relationship necessarily involves questions of authority and ownership; and any theatre company seeking to devise a show for the first time will need to address a series of challenging questions. For example, whose creative vision

will be the most important? Who is going to take the final decisions about the form and content of a production? Who is going to be named as the author of a piece on the show's publicity, or on a script if a publication is planned? Who is going to own the copyright and the rights to future performance?

The answers are obviously hugely important to everybody involved with the production, and the commercial structures of publicity and publishing still tend to operate upon the assumption that a created work will have a single named author, which militates against recognition of performers' creative contributions to devised work. But while who owns the rights and who is going to be named as author might seem of vital importance to those involved in the production, they often only provide us with very partial information about the way in which these issues have been negotiated during the development of a show. They are only the outward signs of a set of collaborative relationships which are inevitably much more subtle and complex than these labels and phrases can imply.

So, I am very much looking forward to what Karen, Catherine and David have to tell us about the relationship between auteurship and collaboration.

Karen Fricker: First of all I should say that, unlike my two colleagues on the panel, I am not a maker of theatre myself; I am not a deviser of theatre. I am a theatre scholar and critic, and somebody who has had a long-standing relationship with Robert Lepage's work. The first Lepage show I saw was 19 years ago here in London, and that sparked what at first was a journalistic interest in his work. I was then working as a theatre critic, which led to me becoming acquainted with Lepage and his company personally, which in turn led to me observing the creation of one of their really massive spectacles, 1990's *The Seven Streams of the River Ota*, which some of you might know took them many years to create. It ended up being over seven hours long, and obviously I did not watch the whole thing. I was living in New York at the time, but I got a chance to really watch how Lepage and his company worked. I have been writing about Lepage's work in a scholarly context for about ten years now. It was the subject of my dissertation and I am working on a book.

In the book I use the idea of globalisation as a kind of theoretical and critical framework to explore Robert Lepage's practices – both his creative and, if you will, corporate practices. I'm interested in how his work reflects globalisation in its subject matter and form. What is globalised theatre about? What does it look like? I'm also interested in how the processes of globalisation have shaped Lepage's career. It is my argument that these processes have been central to his development as an artist. I guess the core questions I am asking myself at the moment as I write the book are: What does it mean to be a 50-year-old, world-famous theatre director? How does that work? How is Lepage shaping his career as somebody who is extremely well known as a director with – I think those of you who know his work would agree – a very recognisable signature. You know a Lepage show when you see it. At the same time, he is somebody who absolutely thrives on and requires collaboration. This is how he works. This is the centre of his work. Even in shows we think of as solo shows, like *The Far Side of the Moon* and *The Andersen Project*. It is kind of well known that he is never alone on stage – he has a body double. So he is never solo even in practice. And he also always makes his work in collaboration with dramaturges and writers. He's someone who absolutely thrives on collective creation. And yet, bluntly, he is the famous one; he is the rich one.

So I'm asking how somebody at this point in his career shapes and models his creativity in his work? It strikes me there is very little precedent for this. Lepage has recently revealed that the inspiration for him and for the formation of his company Ex Machina was Ariane Mnouchkine and the Théâtre du Soleil – another star director who is a collaborator. So clearly he is working from a model. But I just think that we are really in relatively uncharted territory here, because it is only in the contemporary period that a director could be so globally mobile and so globally well known, so quickly.

The idea for this panel came out of a conversation I had with Andy Lavender – a theatre scholar and artist who is very inspired by Lepage's practice. And what will be fruitful at this panel is to be able to actually talk to people who

work in devising as well as in other forms of theatre, to try out some ideas I have about how these practices actually work. I am not an artist myself, so I am delighted because I am getting what I want here. It seems to me actually that there are a lot of parallels – although Catherine might disagree – between Ex Machina, Lepage’s company, and Complicite, a company with which Catherine works, because they too have a director who is quite well known, Simon McBurney, and he works as an independent director for hire as well as a member of Complicite. And this is something that is not well known about Lepage, this is something I am going to talk about – Lepage was very connected to his company, Ex Machina, but there is another company that he runs, Robert Lepage Incorporated, and that is the company he runs as a director for hire.

So for example, when he worked with Cirque du Soleil, as he has begun to do, that is where the wealth is coming from: he is hired independently. And I noted recently that Lepage and McBurney are capable of similar new superhuman feats of creative multitasking. Lepage, in the past fortnight, as some of you might have read if you follow his work, opened a production of Berlioz’s *Faust* at the Metropolitan Opera, which is obviously a big deal – very, very high-tech, using a lot of the technology he found when he was working with Cirque du Soleil. He opened that on a Friday and the next Thursday he starred in his own production, the English-language premiere of *The Blue Dragon* at UCLA. So within five days this man was in co-productions both implicating Ex Machina: directing a massive production for the Metropolitan Opera and acting on another major stage on the other coast – which I think is pretty impressive but raises some interesting questions.

I also noted that Complicite opened their revival of *A Disappearing Number* at the Barbican, directed by McBurney, within a week of McBurney’s production of *All My Sons* starring Katie Holmes opening on Broadway. Again, the way in which that works I find very interesting. How does Complicite actually manage Simon’s career alongside the continuation of the collaborative work? That is a question I would be posing to you, Catherine. I think it’s a tribute to the innovative and flexible practices that companies like Ex Machina and

Complicite have to adopt in order to accommodate the extraordinary success of their artist directors that these feats of production are able to happen.

I guess one of the questions that I am asking is: how does this actually work? Collective authorship and directorial signature? Is that something that comes up for Shunt, I wonder? I know that there are written accounts of devising practice starting to emerge, so there are materials that those of you who devise and those of us who are interested in devising can go to. But I am just excited and curious to hear from the artists that we have with us.

A couple of related issues that I will just kick out now to start a discussion, hopefully... First of all, the issue of branding, and secondly the discourses that companies and artists generate when they work. By this I mean the way they talk and write about their practice and then how we as makers and teachers of theatre take up their practice and their writing about their practice as inspiration to make work and/or as teaching tools.

Ex Machina has worked strategically to work itself up as a brand; as a blanket name for productions made under its aegis and for related products such as books, DVDs and this year, for the first time, a Christmas calendar. This is their most recent publication. It's only in French at the moment, but I understand from reliable sources it's coming out in English soon! And you will note it does not say Robert Lepage on the cover, that is Lepage himself – some of you will recognise the image from *The Andersen Project*, his most recent solo show. But there are interesting mixed messages here. On the one hand, Lepage is the name, Lepage is the star, Lepage is the bedrock of Ex Machina. But they are very much trying to brand the name Ex Machina and not the name Robert Lepage. Now, why might that be?

It is clear that Ex Machina are trying to brand themselves as a creative, multidisciplinary company, working simultaneously on a variety of projects. What is not acknowledged in that but is absolutely clear to me is that at the centre of that is Lepage; and were he, God forbid, to drop out of the picture, Ex Machina would either cease to exist or have to radically reform what it

does. Because what Ex Machina does is create situations whereby Lepage can be creative globally. But there is clearly an investment in creating an artistic corporate identity somehow separate from, but I am saying completely dependent on, Lepage. There seems to be a value system implicit in this which prioritises the idea of group creativity and a collective artistic identity above the idea of a star-driven company. And Helena touched on these issues in a recent excellent article, which I recommend to all of you, about Complicite, where she argued quite convincingly that there is a value system and a certain politics that are associated with devising.

Devising seems to be democratic; it seems to be in some ways an oppositional practice, to be connected to a kind of socialist ethos rather than an individualist ethos. And these associations are still powerful enough, Helen suggests, and I agree with her. For example, Complicite and Ex Machina insist on a group identity and a name: Complicite, not Simon McBurney; Ex Machina, not Robert Lepage. And I know also that Catherine is going to tell us that Complicite is more than McBurney as well. Is it because the notion of branding is so strongly associated with capitalism and the global circulation of consumer products that Ex Machina and Complicite resist the notion of their companies' identities being referred to as brands?

Certainly, in the case of Ex Machina, the company worked very hard to underline that there is a process-based methodology behind the shows, and in the early part of their lives at least they were always changing. Some of you might have experienced this yourselves, particularly in the 1990s when Lepage got into a lot of trouble with the British press and audiences by opening shows in extremely high-profile contexts like the Edinburgh Festival in considerable states of disarray. And Lepage has done, I have to say, an exceptionally good job of training us how to watch his work by means of interviews and the material circulating around the work, underlining: 'We are a process-based company. We don't know what we've got until we put it in front of you. So if you come along and see something and it looks like a dog's breakfast, thank you, because you are responding to our work and you are helping us shape our work.'

Process is part of their product. That is the idea we're buying into when we see a Lepage show: the idea that it is volatile, that it is changing and that we have been invited into the process. It's a pretty nifty feat on the part of a company – to be able to sell that!

So what I want to ask Catherine is: Do you think Complicite understands itself as a brand? Does Shunt understand itself as a brand? Because Shunt is the name associated both with the company and with a place where things happen. Is creating a clear and distinct identity for these companies something you guys recognise as important?

My final set of questions: What I am interested in is the ways in which well-known theatre companies and artists talk and write about their practice, and then how we as teachers and makers of theatre respond to their work and their writing about their work. What do I mean by that? Well, thinking specifically of Lepage, he is someone who has been working for 25 years now. There is a considerable body of work there, and an approach to making work that has proved extremely interesting and enticing to a younger generation of artists. I don't think I am talking out of turn by saying that Analogue – Liam from Analogue is here [in the audience] – identifies itself as a company very much inspired by Lepage. I went to see *On Emotion* at the Soho Theatre last week and it seemed to me the imprint of Lepage was all over that show. And I'm not saying 'stealing' at all; I'm saying it seemed clear to me that Mick Gordon had seen *Far Side of The Moon* and said, 'Oh, astronaut puppets, let's have a go with that.' What I'm talking about is inspiration, the idea of a new generation of theatre-makers modelling themselves on Lepage's work, just as Lepage modelled himself on Mnouchkine. Lepage's way of making theatre is taught in drama schools and universities as a way to help students learn about and undertake devising practices. And the point I am getting at is that I am a little bit worried about the lack of official materials telling us how to do that. Those of us who teach Lepage are doing so using a cobbled-together understanding of his work

based on things that he said about it and based on observations of his work and practice.

By far the best account of Lepage working is Andy's account of the creation of *Elsinore* in his book *Hamlet in Pieces*. Lepage seems to try in this book to explain what he does, but it's unsatisfying as an exegesis of a practice. He says things like, 'Think outside the box, let the work guide you.' And I don't mean to mock him by that, these are clearly the principles by which he works. 'Let the work guide you' – and very much an insistence on working through inspiration rather than intellectualisation. Thus what I do is very different from what he does: I intellectualise his work. I'm not saying that it is the responsibility of artists to explain what they do. However, I am asking the question: on what, as teachers and as makers, are we basing our understanding of Lepage on? And is it in Lepage's interest to explicate his process more? Is that a concern an artist should – I hate that word – have? Or is this just how it happens? Would a book that was detailed and more authorised be of particular use to artists and scholars, or am I just wishing for something that is never going to happen?

Those are my initial thoughts.

Catherine Alexander: I feel significantly less well prepared than you. I started considering the notion of collaboration and thought 'I am very naïve' because my first job out of university was with Complicite. So, really, I only know one process – I worked within it for about 12 years. I went to Lecoq in the middle of that and it was all very compatible, and I think it was 12 years later that I witnessed some rehearsals with English Touring Theatre and I saw how the rest of theatre worked. And it was just a very, very scary day in my life. And a big shock. I assumed most theatre was made in this way, because it felt very natural, it felt the best way – only because it was the only way I knew. And I think I have always had tremendous curiosity about people, how other people work. As a director you are alone really, and you are working with the people that you work with frequently. But you don't know how other people work, and I think most directors don't particularly reflect or investigate how other people

work. Maybe I am just lazy, but I sunk myself into processes and did what seemed right in a very, very basic way. The more tools I've developed over the years, the easier that has become. There are a lot of myths about what a Complicite process might be, or what my process might be. The reality is a lot messier. I can't say that there are great overriding philosophies or plans of action. It feels from the inside a lot more chaotic than it seems to the people who intellectualise and write articles about it. They make it sound quite extraordinary as a process. From the inside, it doesn't feel like that at all.

In terms of Complicite, you need to recognise that the company has evolved since 1984 from being a very small collective of fewer than ten people in its first six or seven years; one which made very small-scale work that toured and, probably, felt incredibly different. I didn't see the very early shows. As the company grew and won Perrier awards and got a name for itself, three artistic directors emerged: Annabel Arden, Marcello Magni and Simon McBurney. And they all had very, very different flavours. The work they created was very different, but they worked incredibly closely together, so they all acted and they all directed and they all owned all of the work. Marcello specialised in *commedia dell'arte* and is a brilliant physical comedian. He did a lot of *commedia*-based work with Complicite. Annabel now directs opera, but she used to do quite a lot of classic texts and adaptations like *The Visit* and *The Winter's Tale* that were co-directed. I think she was the primary director of those projects, but Simon co-directed. Simon was primarily a performer; then at a certain point he became the sole artistic director of the company. The other two went away and did freelance work. And it was only at that juncture that the beast that is Complicite as it is perceived now evolved, and his ego as a director began to grow, and the nature of collaboration changed really significantly. Now he is at the top of a huge pile of people. But that is a relatively recent phenomenon and I think the people writing about the work define Simon McBurney as the Complicite brand.

On the question of authorship and demanding ownership of a piece of work – there is a lot about ego there that I find really disturbing. And that is hyped up by the media. I think *Time Out* described Simon as 'like God, only better'.

Which gives you a sense of importance in a process where that isn't necessarily the most helpful thing. But it also creates a public perception of who owns and controls the work. That isn't what you perceive from the inside; where, actually, there is a human being directing the work and he has all the frailties and doubts and confusions that you have – that *everyone* has. So, there is a public perception and then a private perception which is really clear.

But public perception is so often what drives people in modern theatre – disastrously. In the little moments where I feel I want to take control or I want to get a particular credit or I start fighting for royalties, alarm bells start going off in my head. Not that I don't *want* royalties – I do get royalties – but once that becomes the motivating force I actually feel my enjoyment diminishing really rapidly. Looking back, the most satisfying shows I ever made were the ones where there was no money involved – where people didn't really give a shit who was the owner of the work, or who was the author. It just was your piece of work and you shared it as a group. That is what I like about Shunt's work. You have no perception from the outside who has directed it or who the people involved are, and I find that a really beautiful thing. Certainly with my own company, I don't mind how many collaborators I have: when I do the contracts, I divide ownership absolutely equally. And the first time it came up as an issue was when there was a show with three of us in and we were devising it together – very, very small scale, we didn't have a sound designer or anything. One of the three of us was a writer, and it just so happened that in the process he started scripting. It was the first time we had really scripted stuff rigorously. And then he said: 'I'm a writer and I want to be credited as a writer.' And I suddenly realised that the person who happens to be sitting at the laptop tapping stuff in and transcribing improvisations often feels that they have ownership. But it's a very false feeling, a 'false writer moment', I always think. And I think you always have to ask: in a devising process, what is the origin of the words and what does writing mean anyway? The real skill in devising processes is how effectively all the elements are managed: the scenic elements, the movements, the space, the staging, objects, light, words. How is that all brought together?

Simon's genius as a director – and where he is very much an auteur – is that he defines a process, he leads a process, he conceives the project. It might originate with him and a couple of other collaborators. *A Disappearing Number*, for instance, originated with Simon, a couple of mathematicians and the musician Nitin Sawhney because they were fascinated by the same ideas. But Simon was the one who defined the process on a day to day basis. And that I think creates the author, in a funny way.

It's a really intangible thing. We all have days when we feel like authors; then whole weeks when we feel we've contributed nothing at all. But I would also say that sometimes it's really obvious that you have a collaborator who is contributing tons; that he or she is the one who is doing most of the research and the writing. And there might be another collaborator who is very quiet and seemingly *not* contributing lots of stuff. But I would posit that very often it is the quiet collaborator who is contributing something intangible to the writing process, and it wouldn't – *couldn't* – exist without them. The fairest thing is to credit everybody equally for the writing of a piece. Otherwise, you just go mad, saying 'that's my bit there'.

Lecoq always used to say that theft is essential. I think theft is unconscious – 95% of the time we don't know that we're absorbing other people's images and practices and words. I think theft in theatre is really permissible. If you recreate something that is very similar to something someone else has done that you happen to have seen, I don't think it's a deliberate act of copying. I think it has just lodged somewhere in the brain and happened to come out. That is how, within a devising process, you evolve a shared language. Sometimes workshop leaders have said, 'That is my exercise and you are using it.' But exercises you do in a rehearsal room are there for the taking.

David Rosenberg: In terms of ownership of all the shows Shunt have performed as a company – if we actually had a programme, then the line 'directed, devised, designed and performed by Shunt' is what we would have used. We've never drawn attention to individual contributions. Because the ten core members of the company do create every performance together, and

even though there is a point at which someone might get involved in the lighting design, or someone might have overall responsibility for the sound design, the processes always evolve in such a way that it doesn't mean anything to categorise what individual people's contributions have been to a show. So we agreed on this line. That does have its own difficulties, because as other collaborators come in then someone would be in charge; someone would do additional help with the design; someone else might do some costume. You would have 'designed, directed and performed by Shunt' and then there would be these other credits for the other people who came in to help out, which confuses things a bit. However, that's still something we stick with.

One of the most important things the company decided when it began was that we were really working against a hierarchical structure; that the starting point is a collection of artists. In terms of remuneration, it was always the same for everyone. That's the key thing. In terms of being a director in that process – when we begin each project, there isn't a even a sort of separation, as in the director will come up with the concept of how we are going to work on the show, or the director will necessarily lead all the rehearsals that will create the material. That's something the company does very much together, and it's only in the latter stages of a project, when some people will be performing and other people concerned with other elements of the running of the show, when I guess the role of the director becomes more of a single job. Even then it's never about fulfilling a personal vision of what the show is going to be. It's about trying to fulfil what the collective ambition was. Everyone in the company also does their own solo work or their own work with other companies, and there people explore very different things. They work in very different ways where they might have a more direct authorship of a piece of work. But when we work together as a company, we try and keep it a very democratic process, which is also a real problem as well. It's a massive fight, mostly. There are ten people, and even though we've been working together for a long time we still manage amazingly to have very different tastes. Sometimes that conflict is good, it makes for work it would be quite hard to imagine one person conceiving. At other times it's incredibly time-wasting and

frustrating. But we still believe enough in the importance of making work in this way that we are prepared to go through all of that – the pain and the incredibly long rehearsal processes – because we believe that's so important. We don't then just say 'fuck it' like Complicite and have one person running the company. I know it didn't quite happen like that, but...

CA: No, it wasn't far off.

DR: The other thing is that when, in a bad review, someone asks: 'Who is the writer on this thing? Who directed this?' we keep our heads down a bit. People still have such difficulty understanding that things are being done in a different way. In Hollywood films writers are just... well, no-one knows who the writers are half the time. In quite a lot of films they will have one writer, then that one will go; there will be another one. It's a very different attitude towards writing. And obviously with theatre the writer is king, even more so than the director. Maybe we should open this up for discussion.

HF: I was struck by your last remark David, about how the writer in British theatre is still king, and also by the way you pointed out that the moment things get fraught about ownership in the rehearsal room is when somebody gets their laptop out and starts typing, then positions themselves as having a particular ownership of the work because of that. I wanted to know if any of you would like to say something about why writing is still problematic in this way?

CA: A really simple practical reason. When I was working on *The Elephant Vanishes*, I was associate director, but I also worked as the dramaturge and I scripted – I was the person on the laptop feeling very important. And the reason I felt important I think, if I analyse it, is because everybody in the process does rely on a script to a certain point. So in fact everyone starts coming to you in the room. A simple example: Gareth the sound designer would come to me saying, 'Have you got the next bit of script, I want to look and start putting cues in,' and the stage managers and the lighting designers and the video designers, they all want this script, because it's still the way the

event is managed by the designers and the operators. Less so the actors. They don't really need scripts, frankly, in a Complicite show. I don't even think they pick up their scripts because you don't: it comes so late in the process and you already know what you are doing.

But the operators need it, so you become a hub. You have the crucial information. That's the purely practical reason why that person sitting in the middle becomes in great demand and feels very popular. With *The Elephant Vanishes* I had a literal translator sitting next to me; so things were going through translation and back again. So if we had evolved a scene in English through an improvisation, I would sort of transcribe it, tidy it up a bit and then it would go to the literary translator who would turn it into a Japanese version, and then it would be given to the actors who would go 'Ah'. You know, there was an excitement: 'That's what it's all about.' Because we spent so much time watching improvisations in Japanese which we wouldn't understand and they would watch improvisations in English that they didn't understand, so that bit of written paper did become really key. In Complicite, it's a purely practical thing.

It's interesting because I don't really consider myself a writer, but I get writer royalties for Complicite shows now. I try and think about what I do that's deserving of that, but it's actually just being one of the people that puts the work together on the floor. And in fact I realised really quickly that working on the script was the least fun part of the process. I did it once because I had a slipped disk and I couldn't do anything else, so I became a drudge for four weeks.

HF: And how did you resolve that conflict with your own company?

CA: In the end we gave him a weird credit like 'scripted by'. Which we thought was fair. We all wrote and we all got a writing credit, but he was very insistent that he wanted some kind of credit for putting words on paper. It was a bit of a compromise.

DR: Are those the words people, ie the actors, were saying?

CA: Not always, but very often. We would do an improvisation and in certain scenes he would craft them and script them. But in other scenes it might well be that a collaborator would have taken something from before and crafted and evolved it in a different way. And I believe that the one who is scripting is no less or more of a writer than anyone else in the process. It was tricky. We did have a big debate about it.

HF: And Shunt has completely resisted those compromises?

DR: Usually when you talk about a writer in theatre, you are talking about someone who is writing in dialogue most of the time. And because, with the Shunt process, the dialogue is normally the last thing to come, that's the thing that is always changing. We rarely have a script that could be understood in any way at all. In terms of who has ownership of lines that are created – for example, in *Dance Bear Dance*, which was a show about the gunpowder plotters, one exercise, because we were using phrasebooks in a sort of international conference setting, was to give a sermon as if you were a priest. You had to do it using just the words from the phrasebook. So that was the exercise I gave to the performers that were improvising and it worked really well and went into the show. But it's not his, it's not the scriptwriter's writing – even though the words that were finally used were ones that he created, it was still part of an exercise that was set.

As soon as you have a few different people involved in the creation of a particular improvisation or exercise, it becomes very difficult to appropriate ownership.

KF: I think the issues of how we document this kind of collaborative creative work are huge because the question of 'what are these play scripts for?' certainly comes up around Lepage's work. When *The Seven Streams of the River Ota* was published, one of my jobs was collecting the text for publication. It was the most hilariously hair-raising experience because they

just don't write anything down. That's part of who they are. So we had to 'capture' the script, which involved members of the company videoing what they'd performed that night and us literally transcribing it, with the complete understanding it could well be something different the next night. So there is an absurdity in publishing that at all, but I believe we should have captured it like that because that's now the record that we have. But it also raises the question of whether other theatre companies are going to do this. In the case of *River Ota*, more than half of what's in that play script is stage directions – which I happened to write because I was the person who wanted to do it. All I'm trying to do is describe in words all of those images – because that's very much where the storytelling happens.

But interestingly, publishing those scripts is now standard practice for Lepage and his company. And I think that's great because I believe in having stuff to document what happened. But I can also see that they're useful in a teaching context because, although they're in French, those who can read French can read them. Students can read them.

HF: I am assuming that Shunt had no scripts?

DR: No. As Catherine said, the only necessity to have something written down is usually for the technical operators of the shows. We sometimes document stuff, but always after the event. We don't do that much. We don't video our shows much.

HF: So they are just out there in your audience's imagination?

DR: Yes. Getting better in their imaginations, hopefully.

Audience Member 1: I wanted to talk about the use of the word 'ownership' with regard to performance, because I think in terms of artistic context we have no set way of 'doing' ownership. If we take the usual way – someone creates a product; the person who has paid money for it owns that product – it's not anything to do with the person who creates the product. If someone

photographs a painting in a gallery and another person buys it, the artist does not own it but he is still the artist. So why do we use the word 'ownership' in a performance context?

And then secondly, there's a lot of socialist language coming up when you create something directly for a capitalist system. What is it actually resisting, or doing differently? Like the idea of collective ambition that was raised at one point. I just thought: how is that actually possible? You know, wouldn't all of the world's problem be solved if we actually had some idea of collective ambition?

DR: I think you can take a decision to work with a group of artists and then allow each of them to try and have their work realised within the piece you are doing. Lizzie Clapham, who does a lot of design for us, also does a lot of work in other projects. She comes in as the designer and has no control over what the final show is going to be. That's out of her control. She can design the set for it, but it's very compartmentalised – and very frustrating for her not to have a final say on what a piece of work is.

AM1: There was that phrase again – 'final say'. Surely if she didn't do it then there would be no set at all, and that's the choice being made to begin with. To me, it's the same sort of rhetoric that goes with, say, socially engaged art: where art is going to communities and they work with people; and there's a certain discourse that goes with it. As Claire Bishop says, the way people describe this work is not in terms of the aesthetic but in terms of how equal the process was. So is it equality that you're fighting for or good work? And if it's democracy, then is that actually resisting anything when at the end of it there is still product?

DR: Of course it's not just about the social arrangement in making the work. What we produce is paramount. But it's also about how the individual feels about their contribution to that work. I don't see it so much as a kind of political thing or anti-capitalist thing.

Audience Member 1: I think wrapping that rhetoric around it is very anti-capitalist.

DR: Maybe it's just more about working; about respect for an artist and allowing their creativity to be realised in a way that they would like.

KF: Another aspect of Shunt's work – and correct me if I'm wrong – is that you are 'happy capitalists' in that you are largely unsubsidised; you support the work through selling tickets and through bar sales. You participate in the world that we all live in, but at the same time try to protect the way that you make work; to keep certain principles sacrosanct. Would that an appropriate way to talk about it?

DR: Certainly, the company also strives to operate commercially and largely does. We want the work to be making the money that pays for the company. It's not so much to protect the way that the company works; but we wouldn't want to be co-pressured into making work a different way in order to be commercially successful.

Audience Member 2: I'm sorry, wasn't there a National Theatre subsidy?

DR: There has never been any National Theatre subsidy. We get 10% of our annual turnover from the Arts Council. So that's a very small portion, as it is for most Arts Council revenue funded companies.

HF: If I can follow up this issue of a possible conflict between perceived rhetoric and necessary commercial awareness... There was a point you were making earlier, Karen. Do you think Complicite are happy to be thought of as a brand, Catherine?

CA: Again, there is a commercial side to the organisation, not least because the shows are phenomenally expensive to make. *The Elephant Vanishes* cost more than a million pounds, mainly because we were flying Japanese actors and crew back and forth to London. I think most of it went on flights. When

you set up a show, if you want it to be on a certain scale, you have to pre-sell the show to a lot of buyers. And for us that meant the only stages big enough for *Elephant Vanishes*, which had the equipment and technical wherewithal, were the Bite Season at the Barbican and big international houses and festivals. Those were the places that could guarantee paying the hideously large weekly fee for the show and put some subsidy in. It's also why Complicite works with co-producers. You have to play the game if you want to make big, expensive work.

My company is pathetically tiny because I'm rubbish at playing the game, so I just tour in a Peugeot 405 that I can fit everything in. I don't want to participate in that system and I'm terrible at writing grants applications! At a very simple level, you have to eat. But to come back a bit on what you were saying: there are theatre processes in this country where individual creativity is not being satisfied at all. There are people for whom the only opportunity for a bit of collaboration or sharing is in a scene rehearsal on stage. Apart from that there isn't even conversation half the time. I find that a very terrifying thing, and I do think collaborative processes are about the things that we are really good at as human beings. In a really stupid way it's about making a Christmas pudding together: all kinds of stirring and throwing things in, then cooking it and eating it together. It's about the pleasure of sharing a process. It is for me, anyway – I get a real buzz out of being in a room with lots of other creative minds and grappling, really grappling physically and mentally, with issues and problems. It's not a political thing, it's a playful forum. It just seems the easiest way to make work.

HF: It's great to be hearing a bit about the pleasure of it, rather than these broad questions of ownership. Any more questions?

Audience Member 3: Both of you seem to be implying that the role of a writer or a primary creator or whatever in a devised piece is absolutely unnecessary – because if it was a devised piece where everybody was involved, it would be impossible for that piece of theatre ever to be performed again in any other space that did not involve every one of those people. So producing an

historical artefact that says 'This is what happened on this particular day, at this particular time' is great. But whoever wrote that is just writing that. They are not writing down anything really to do with the process, and anything that a teacher, lecturer or student could get from that is just what they are ready to get from it at that particular time. It has nothing to do with any of the process prior to that or after. So actually, ownership of this particular type of theatre just seems like, why are we even bothering talking about it? I don't mean to be rude, it's a great conversation, thank you very much. But it just seems all of you are saying, 'Why would we be considering that as a thought?' Simon McBurney is a very fine director and it feels like he is no longer involved in that particular type of theatre, although he uses other people to do all of these things. He is a primary motivator in this particular thing. So is it still devised theatre?

CA: Oh, absolutely, yes.

Audience Member 3: It is still devised theatre?

CA: 100%. McBurney provokes and he defines a process but yes, absolutely. Everyone in the room is constantly creating and defining and making work.

Audience Member 3: So he is just better at advertising himself and putting his name forward?

CA: Well, I suppose. That's marketing, isn't it? Because he is the name. But that doesn't reflect the work in the room. I don't think the way he is or the way he works has changed at all. The way he is in the room, as it were, hasn't changed in the 15 years I've worked with him.

AM3: So Lepage and Simon McBurney managed to make on a massive scale this particular kind of theatre and have managed to make themselves and their companies specific names. And in your particular situation, you held on to an initial idea of a group name and artistic anonymity within that. Do you feel that the images that [Lepage and McBurney] have created and their

massive success... It feels like Shunt would absolutely radically change if it took on that particular thing. But do you think that if it did it would just get so much bigger, because it has a name, because it has something for society, for the media to hang on to? For somebody to blame if it goes wrong and celebrate if it goes right?

DR: I think it would then become a different thing. We're in quite a curious position at the moment because we became so identified with a space as well. And by focusing on the kind of project that involves curating other people's work, we've been putting more attention into creating a different environment for people to see work in. If we did what you say, that would be such a change for the company, I'm not sure they... It might as well just be a different company to do that. Because that isn't the way we are.

KF: I think, just to come back to you about that, it's absolutely, in the case of Lepage, not without its tensions – and this is me as a critic talking now. The attempt to create these kind of pools of creativity sometimes results in work that does not feel fully formed. That, plus the necessity of negotiating with the incredibly high powered Lepage, who is someone who feels he has to be doing a million things all the time, means that there is a kind of a simulation of a collective that I personally, as an observer, am not quite sure how that works. So it's an attempt to maintain this utopian idea of how work happens under the conditions of global capitalism in which Lepage and McBurney have become big names. And it's an absolute reality that even though I have seen them work, I have never seen Lepage give a direction in my life. You do not see him direct and Andy commented about this when he watched Lepage work as well. It is so low-key to the point where an observer might go, 'Are you going to make a decision? It's the opening tomorrow!' What it is that he does is really hard to pin down. But that's something that has made him really successful and everybody else he works with collectively is not nearly as successful financially or in terms of profile, and that does create tensions. It raises questions about who the next collective is going to be, who the next collaborator is going to be. So there are a lot of issues there, I think. I am speaking now as someone who has observed the process.

Audience Member 4: I just want to pick out what this gentleman [AM3] was saying about the topic of ownership and whether it's a topic that is worthy of discussion. I would say it absolutely is and I find the conversation quite interesting. My company Analogue is nowhere near the mammoth beasts that these companies are, but nonetheless... The question of ownership comes to you as it has to us over the last four years of our development because everyone wants to know who is financially accountable, who is taking the risks, and I empathise exactly with what Catherine was saying about the practicalities. These are questions we never really wanted to ask ourselves, but all of a sudden supporters and co-producers are asking, 'Well, if you give you this much money and it all goes wrong, who is the person responsible?'

That is why I am baffled by how Shunt works, because how can ten people be accountable for a financial investment? In our situation, we had to start asking ourselves questions about ownership that we would never really have wanted to ask. I agree also with what Catherine was saying about ownership and theft – in our case literal theft; because for our first show the set was taken out of skips and found on the streets because we couldn't afford a set! For a company at our level, survival is quite a key thing; just trying to put money on the table, form new relationships and make things happen. So we find ourselves in a situation where actually the topic of ownership all of a sudden has come to us - and it's an important question. That would be a question I have for David, in terms of how that works with Shunt. Because the issue of accountability baffles me there.

DR: Accountability is a slightly different question to ownership. For quite a long time we were also the management of the company. That now has changed. We are still pretty much involved in the management but now there are some people to point our fingers at, which is great. I mean, the thing with ownership is... If you think about fine art, it's not about owning a painting but about who painted it.

AM 1: But in terms of any other genre, the ownership rather than artistic authorship is...

DR: I think that, but what we are saying is: who is the artist? Who is the named artist? Who is responsible for the work?

AM 1: I'm just interrogating the use of the word 'ownership' in that case.

DR: Sure, yeah, yeah. I mean, I understand that: who is responsible for the work and can you name someone, and who is the one whose career is blossoming because of it. And I think actually, with devised theatre, people are traditionally very relaxed about those ideas of ownership. But maybe that's not such a good thing.

CA: Simon knows this and probably won't thank me for saying it, but I think Complicite has a lot in common with a religious cult with a charismatic leader. You have the people below being almost egoless in order for the work to survive, but then at the top this figurehead who somehow manages to inspire. And I'm not necessarily using 'religious cult' in a negative way! Sometimes it's a very positive thing. People join cults because they give them huge amounts of brilliant things as well as negative things. They wouldn't exist if they didn't give a lot to certain people. I absolutely understand that I am a devotee of this strange cult and extricating myself is sometimes very difficult, but that is the structure for me. I don't know whether that is the same with Robert, that there is a charismatic leadership that's very appealing to be part of. It isn't necessarily healthy or happy *all* the time, but I do consider that it is quite often.

HF: That is a fantastically provocative image and I know I really want to hear more about Lepage, Complicite and Shunt, but we will have to end it there. Can I ask you to join me in thanking Karen, Catherine and David.

ENDS