

## Introduction: Katie Mitchell's Theatre

Tom Cornford and Caridad Svich

Katie Mitchell is, by any measure, a prolific director. In the decade 2009-2018, she opened 59 productions, of which 21 were operas; 31 were originated outside her native United Kingdom. This achievement is yet more significant because, in many respects, Mitchell's rise to prominence as one of the UK's and Europe's most highly regarded auteur directors has been achieved against the odds. There was, for most of the twentieth century, little opportunity within the mainstream theatre for female directors to achieve what Mitchell has done since, in 1989, she went more or less directly from obscurity, via a period as an assistant director with Paines Plough, to the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC), where she made her full professional directorial debut with Thomas Heywood's *A Woman Killed with Kindness* (The Other Place, 1991).<sup>1</sup>

When, in 1993, Richard Eyre, then Artistic Director of the National Theatre of Great Britain (NT), met the 'gifted, bright, young and idealistic' Mitchell, she reportedly wanted 'to run a company like Ariane Mnouchkine', whose Théâtre du Soleil had taken up residence in the grounds of a former munitions factory near Paris known as the Cartoucherie in 1964, the year that Mitchell was born.<sup>2</sup> Eyre responded with the possibly helpful but certainly somewhat dismissive observation that 'Ariane took years to establish herself and still works herself to the bone: she directs the plays, runs the theatre, oversees the catering and tears the tickets'. He records that Mitchell's response was to

<sup>1</sup> Mitchell had previously directed for her own company, Classics on a Shoestring (see List of Productions in this issue, X-X) and a single performance of Alexander Galin's *Stars in the Morning Sky* (RSC at the Almeida Theatre, 1989).

<sup>2</sup> Richard Eyre, *National Service: Diary of a Decade* (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), 231.

appear ‘slightly dashed’ and generalises that her ‘generation seem less willing to go out into the wilderness and start their own companies’, without reflecting that severe reductions in the economic value of, and access to, state unemployment benefit during the 1980s, for example, were likely to be a more significant cause than generational malaise.<sup>3</sup> Eyre went on, however, to note more perceptively that ‘we voraciously draw them [directors like Mitchell] into the big companies’.<sup>4</sup> In spite of its analytical shortcomings, Eyre’s observation would be borne out by Mitchell’s subsequent career, in which she has kept one foot firmly planted in the mainstream, and the frequently lodged outside it. She first directed at the NT in 1994, creating a production of Githa Sowerby’s *Rutherford and Son* which Eyre described as ‘fastidiously directed’, noting her ‘admirable (or enviable) refusal [...] to appease the audience’.<sup>5</sup> When Nicholas Hytner took over the NT in 2003, he programmed Mitchell’s first show in the Lyttelton Theatre – Chekhov’s *Three Sisters* – that same year, echoing Eyre’s arms’-length praise by describing her as ‘a director whose work I admired partly because it was so unlike my own’.<sup>6</sup> Mitchell went on to become an Associate Director and to develop what Hytner called ‘a loyal repertory company of actors’ at the NT.<sup>7</sup> Mitchell was, then, indeed ‘drawn in’ to ‘the big companies’, but only as far as to become part of a group of advisors whose membership ‘revolved often’,<sup>8</sup> and she did also form ‘a company’, of sorts, albeit certainly not in ‘the wilderness’.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 254-5.

<sup>6</sup> Hytner, N. *Balancing Acts: Behind the Scenes at the National Theatre* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2017), 45.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 296.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 291.

The ‘big companies’ to which Eyre referred (where Mitchell would go on to make the majority of her work in England) were, at that time, about thirty years old, having established themselves in the early 1960s as overwhelmingly the principal theatrical beneficiaries of public arts funding. Their directors were Laurence Olivier (1907-1989) at the NT, Peter Hall (1930-2017) at the RSC, and George Devine (1910-1966) and Tony Richardson (1928-1991) at the Royal Court. The fact that the Edwardian-born Olivier and Devine were actors (though Devine shifted mainly to directing after the war), whereas Hall and Richardson began their careers as directors, encapsulates the shift of power between these roles in the mid-twentieth century. Directors quickly rose to a commanding position within the new subsidised theatre, primarily thanks to the mechanism of the emergent role of Artistic Director, a job that combined executive and artistic functions, and which Mitchell (very unusually among senior British directors) has never sought, though she has spent much of her career adjacent to it. She was put in charge of programming *The Other Place* at the RSC in 1997, and was an Associate Director at the Royal Court during the 1990s, and at the NT from 2004 until 2010, a job that usually entails a commitment to direct a certain number of productions, and to advise the building’s Artistic Director. In the year that Mitchell began working at the RSC, it was run by Terry Hands (1941-), the NT was led by Richard Eyre (1943-), and the Court by Max Stafford-Clark (1941-). All three theatres were, as they always had been, dominated both by male directors, and by plays by men, whether canonical or contemporary. Eyre was the first Artistic Director of the National Theatre, for example, to stage a play by a woman, though he only did so upon returning to the theatre thirteen years after his tenure was over.<sup>9</sup> In most respects, these men had come into their positions via the same paths taken by their predecessors: private education, a degree in an elite university (Hall, Devine, Richardson and Eyre were all Oxbridge graduates), and

<sup>9</sup> This was Moira Buffini’s *Welcome to Thebes* (NT, 2010).

directorial careers built upon productions of canonical plays (predominantly Shakespeare), and close working relationships with living (male) playwrights.

Although she has certainly not followed it, Mitchell cannot be said to represent an absolute break from this pattern. She has worked within the theatrical canon, but has conspicuously avoided Shakespeare, directing only *Henry VI: The Battle for the Throne* (RSC, 1994). When she returned to Shakespeare twenty-one years later, it was to Alice Birch's adaptation of Hamlet, *Ophelias Zimmer* (Schaubühne Berlin and Royal Court, 2015), in which the Danish prince is an abusive narcissist who sends Ophelia a looped tape recording of the words 'fick dich fick dich fick dich' (fuck you fuck you fuck you), and drags her father's corpse into her bedroom. She has also worked only sporadically on contemporary plays, though she has developed notable collaborations with Martin Crimp and Simon Stephens, and – latterly – with Alice Birch. She has, however, increasingly eschewed pragmatic acceptance of the British tradition of deferring to the creative primacy of the playwright, choosing instead systematically to develop a particular aesthetic for her productions and showing an increasing willingness to adapt prose texts and take an interventionist approach to plays in order to explore certain central ideas to which she repeatedly returns in her work. Mitchell was also not the only female director of her age to break into the male directors' club. Her contemporaries Marianne Elliott (1966-) and Vicky Featherstone (1967-) also did, Elliott as an Associate Director at the NT from 2002 until 2017 (the only woman apart from Mitchell mentioned by Hytner as having fulfilled this role during his tenure), and Featherstone as Artistic Director of the National Theatre of Scotland (2004-2013) and then of the Royal Court (2013-present). All three of these women shared, however, a position adjacent to the dominant, male culture that they successfully entered. All White, privately educated, middle-class university graduates, as young directors their gender was the only thing that differentiated them from the directors for whom they worked.

Mitchell's artistic formation was not, however, all undertaken within the British establishment where it began with a degree in English Literature at Oxford University where she was also President of OUDS, the University's Drama Society. Moving to London after her graduation in the mid-1980s exposed Mitchell to a very different range of influences: she recalls the experience of watching groups from mainland Europe and the States coming to the London International Festival of Theatre (LIFT), seeing the video experiments of companies like New York's Wooster Group and the non-verbal theatre of abstract images made by London-based Hesitate and Demonstrate (1975-1986). Then, in 1989, Mitchell secured a Churchill Fellowship to develop her practice, for which she planned a trip to eastern Europe and Russia to observe directors including Lev Dodin and Anatoly Vassiliev, both in rehearsals and classes, and later the work of Tadeusz Kantor in Poland, where she also observed and briefly participated with the work of the company Gardzienice, whose performances, woven together with choral song and intense and demanding sequences of movement, have brought international acclaim to the small village in south-east Poland whose name the company adopted and where most of them live. Later, Mitchell would twice bring Gardzienice to the UK for brief residencies at the RSC – on one of these occasions to train the company's actors. A matter of weeks before Mitchell was due to begin her trip, the Berlin Wall fell, meaning that she encountered these artists in a moment of thrilling political change. She also saw their work just at the time when the international festival circuit became fully open to theatre-makers from behind the former iron curtain, making the Russian-inflected Stanislavskian technique that Mitchell observed and went on to study an increasingly desirable commodity in the west. Once again, therefore, Mitchell moved between centre and periphery: the lessons she learned from the international avant-garde shaped a directing practice she developed within the British mainstream. To complicate this paradox further, of the influences gathered by Mitchell, none was more

formative than a figure who was himself both a radical reformer and a pillar of the establishment: Konstantin Stanislavsky.

Mitchell now regularly says that Stanislavsky is the source of everything that she does in the theatre, and it is true that – regardless of its genre or conceptual form – her work is always marked by the closely observed behaviour of Stanislavskian naturalism. Her book *The Director's Craft* (2009) is also firmly rooted in the Stanislavskian tradition. Mitchell's thorough adaptation of Stanislavsky's core theories of performance is virtually unique within the British theatre (only Mike Alfreds and Declan Donnellan could claim to have done this to a similar extent). For almost all productions, Mitchell asks actors to create an 'extensive backstory [...], constructing detailed psychological profiles for each character, and rehearsing the play with a focus on the biology of emotions'.<sup>10</sup> She has met with psychologists during rehearsal periods for her productions to help develop the psychological profiles of the characters in the plays, whether she is staging a new version of a Chekhov play or an ancient Greek tragedy. One of the reasons Mitchell's productions are commonly described as affectively 'clinical' can perhaps be traced back to the intensity and thoroughness of her application and amplification of Stanislavsky's teachings and theories. Moreover, her emphasis on both the emotional life of characters and its scientific, physiological appearance pushes what is expected of actors trained in various forms of the Method as the goal is not merely to ground character work in deep psychological investigation but also to work to achieve forensic accuracy of representation.

In spite of all this, Mitchell's implicit insistence in almost all interviews with her on the ways in which her Stanislavskian practice differentiates her from the British school of directing has not

<sup>10</sup> Emma Cole, 'The Method behind the madness: Katie Mitchell, Stanislavski, and the classics', *Classical Reception Journal* 7, no. 3 (December 2015): 400-21 (403).

gone uncontested. Peter Boenisch, viewing her work from the perspective of the German tradition of directing known as ‘Regie’, sees Mitchell’s approach within ‘the prevalent, Stanislavskian diet of established British directing practice’.<sup>11</sup> Boenisch is certainly justified in his observation that Mitchell’s adherence to the precepts and methods of Stanislavskian naturalism is not, in itself, inimical to the British tradition of directing. Nonetheless, it is also not simply a form of adherence to that tradition. Indeed, as Eyre acknowledged when he employed her at the NT, the distinctiveness of Mitchell’s willingness to commit to her vision of Stanislavskianism singled her out among emerging British directors during the 1990s. Dan Rebellato describes Mitchell’s ‘slightly tongue-in-cheek’ characterisation of this as her ‘anthropological phase’, and notes that it was marked by ‘detailed research’, a focus on ‘the relations between place and behaviour’, and ‘a “poor theatre” aesthetic of bare floorboards and natural materials’.<sup>12</sup> It reached its peak in 1995 with *The Phoenician Women* (RSC), which strongly hinted at a Balkan location for the play’s struggle between Eteocles and Polynices, and asked its audience to engage with the performance as a ritual of bearing witness – implicitly to the recently-concluded conflict in the former Yugoslavia. Spectators sat for nearly two and a half hours without a break on backless benches, and held – instead of a programme – a sprig of thyme, while more thyme burned in a brazier on stage. This production’s 1996 run in the Barbican’s Pit Theatre won Mitchell the Evening Standard Award for Best Director, a success that

<sup>11</sup> Peter Boenisch, ‘Towards a Theatre of Encounter and Experience: Reflexive Dramaturgies and Classic Texts’, *Contemporary Theatre Review* 20, no. 2 (2010): 162-72 (166).

<sup>12</sup> Dan Rebellato, ‘Katie Mitchell: Learning from Europe’, in *Contemporary European Theatre Directors*, ed. Maria Delgado and Dan Rebellato (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), 317-38 (323-4).

established her career on a more secure footing: ‘suddenly everything crystallized’, she said, ‘the political agenda, the artistic agenda, and the culture’s reception of the idea’.<sup>13</sup>

At this time, Mitchell’s career can, indeed, be seen to have taken on a distinct shape. She worked mainly in small but prominent theatres (The Other Place, the Cottesloe, the Young Vic) and with a clear focus on modern European classics such as Chekhov, Toller, Beckett, Genet and Pinter alongside an exploration of the social roots of theatre through productions of *The Mysteries* (RSC, 1997) and Ted Hughes’ translation of *The Oresteia* (NT,1999). Mitchell’s career moved on again thanks to the support of two Artistic Directors: Ian Rickson at the Royal Court, and Nicholas Hytner at the NT, who gave her the opportunity to direct regularly in the large, proscenium arch Lyttleton Theatre between 2003 and 2007. Mitchell’s productions at this time thus grew in scale and prominence as well as in their proximity to the core remit of their theatres. She was no longer the only notable director at the RSC whose repertoire did not centre on Shakespeare, and her work was no longer confined to studio spaces. Instead, thanks to her interpretations of the turn-of-the-century naturalism of Chekhov and Strindberg, the anti-heroic tragedies of Euripides, contemporary plays (particularly those of Martin Crimp), and the realist stagings of opera that followed her 1998 *Jenufa* (WNO), Mitchell became one of the country’s leading directors. At this time, she also began to be able to demand unusually long rehearsal periods, of at least eight weeks at the NT (rather than the more usual six) and sometimes longer – *Dream Play* (2005) was rehearsed over twelve weeks, for example. The wider political context of these shifts in Mitchell’s career was, of course, New Labour’s policy of increasing funding for the creative industries, which included a real-terms increase

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Rebellato, ‘Katie Mitchell: Learning from Europe’, 326.

of about 35% in funding for Arts Council England.<sup>14</sup> It was an auspicious time for a director who wanted to spend long periods of time rehearsing shows that were never going to light up the box office.

2008 marked a further shift in Mitchell's work. That year, she completed her widely-read book *The Director's Craft* (2009) which has been – with the possible exception of Anne Bogart's writing – arguably the most significant influence on young, Anglophone directors this century. At the same time, however, Mitchell argued in an interview that she did not feel that her works had a clear personal 'signature'.<sup>15</sup> She was also reportedly told privately by Hytner that the multimedia productions she had developed primarily at the NT following the success of *Waves* (2006) were 'a one-trick pony' with no future.<sup>16</sup> They were also extremely expensive, and the global financial crisis of 2007-2008 was threatening Artistic Directors with substantial cuts to their funding. A notable European exception to the tightening of budgets was Germany, where public subsidy for the arts (which operates predominantly at local and federal levels) continued to be high, and it was in

<sup>14</sup> David Hesmondhalgh, Melissa Nisbett, Kate Oakley & David Lee, 'Were New Labour's cultural policies neo-liberal?', *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 21, no. 1 (2015): 97-114 (100).

<sup>15</sup> Alice Jones, 'Katie Mitchell: I'd hate to hang around making theatre when they're tired of it', *The Independent*, April 17, 2008, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/features/katie-mitchell-id-hate-to-hang-around-making-theatre-when-theyre-tired-of-it-810224.html> (accessed on February 7, 2020).

<sup>16</sup> Royal Holloway Drama, 'Katie Mitchell on Theatre Directing', Interview with Bryce Lease at Royal Holloway University of London, April 28, 2017, YouTube-Video, May 3 2017 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U6KYWNh62Xo&t=229s> (accessed on November 14, 2019), 00:17:57.

Germany – at the Schauspielhaus Köln – that Mitchell directed her 2008 live-cinema adaptation of Frank Xaver Kroetz’s *Wunschkonzert* (*Request Programme*). This led to a steady flow of further productions in this format in mainland European theatres in cities including Köln, Salzburg, Berlin, Avignon and Hamburg, providing Mitchell with a clearly identifiable directorial signature that launched a new phase for her career. Since 2008, Mitchell’s work has been by no means uniform, but her signature has been increasingly bold. She has directed more opera (and more new operas), undertaken numerous prose adaptations alongside writers such as Duncan Macmillan and Alice Birch, and her commitment to the canonical texts of European drama has notably waned. When she has staged canonical play-texts and operas, she has done so mostly to deconstruct them and call into question their underpinning commitment to patriarchy, commonly employing a tactic that Cornford has termed ‘willful distraction’ from their political agenda.<sup>17</sup> Mitchell’s productions in the last decade have been marked, then, by the more frank centrality of her artistic and political perspective, and by an unmistakable emphasis on the articulation of feminist concerns.

Mitchell’s intense focus on the treatment and representation of women has been a clear feature of her work since that start of her career, but it was not until recently her over-riding theme. In a conversation with Robert Icke on stage at the Almeida during the run of his *Uncle Vanya* (2016), Mitchell admitted that it took her a while to be open about her position as a feminist in theatre, and that it wasn’t until she was established that she felt able to assert it.<sup>18</sup> Elsewhere she has described

<sup>17</sup> Tom Cornford, ‘Willful Distraction: Katie Mitchell, Auteurism and the Canon’, in *The Theatre of Katie Mitchell* ed. Benjamin Fowler (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), 72-92.

<sup>18</sup> Almeida Theatre, ‘On Chekhov: Katie Mitchell and Robert Icke in Conversation, 17 March 2016’, YouTube-Video, June 9 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FaeAgWMYu8w&t=2736s> (accessed February 3, 2020), 00:15:14.

her 'feminist agenda' of rebalancing representation, some thing of which she has only latterly become 'really conscious'.<sup>19</sup> This speaks to the difficulty of having risen through the ranks of a male-dominated system, and the layers of protective armour she built up in the process. In her earlier career, it is possible to see Mitchell's feminism occupying a similar position to many women in the canonical texts she often staged: visibly present but confined to the periphery and frequently overlooked or neglected. The practices that Mitchell has learned and adapted for her use were likewise structured by patriarchy: the Stanislavskian directors she intensely admired as a young woman were all men, and were positioned as the inheritors of the great man's work by a system in which they were unchallenged. Asked by Bryce Lease if Dodin was good at taking feedback on his productions from students, Mitchell said: 'No! No feedback. It was a one-way street. [...] he was so masterful – I mean, what could you note? When I was out there, he was in his forties, he was at the top of his skill. [...] I don't think there'd be very much criticism'.<sup>20</sup> Significantly, however, Mitchell's principal teachers have been women: Professor Soliviova, whom she met in Russia, the actress Tatiana Olear and director Elen Bowman. Perhaps as a result of her work with these women, Lisa Peck has argued that Mitchell's pedagogical practice as a director represents a feminine rewriting or over-writing of Stanislavsky's practice.<sup>21</sup>

Rewriting and over-writing have indeed become increasingly important strategies for Mitchell's directing in recent years. Her ultra-behavioural, laboratory form of theatre has frequently

<sup>19</sup> Matt Trueman, 'Katie Mitchell: 'I was uncomfortable coming back to work in the UK'', *The Stage*, February 26, 2016.

<sup>20</sup> 'Katie Mitchell on Theatre Directing', 00:32:26.

<sup>21</sup> Lisa Peck, 'Katie Mitchell: Feminist Director as Pedagogue', *Stanislavski Studies: Practice, Legacy and Contemporary Theater* 5, no. 2 (2017): 233-46.

been combined with complex technological and aesthetic mediation, re-framing and sometimes deconstructing the naturalistic action that has remained her stock-in-trade. This mediation has taken a range of forms: slowing down, speeding up and/or rewinding the action at crucial points; using stage-hand figures – sometimes faceless – to set and re-set furniture and objects; incorporating live foley artists to produce sound effects and/or using visible sound booths to produce voiceover or off-stage speech live, and – most famously – the use of complex digital technology to create multimedia productions in which an audience watches the live creation, on stage, of a video output that is projected onto a screen above it. The last of these has been deployed both to rewrite and over-write. The capacity of this form to project huge images of small details of behaviour has allowed Mitchell to make unmistakable her focus on women's commonly overlooked experiences. From the communist activists of Luigi Nono's *Al gran sole carico d'amore* to the conventionally religious maid, Kristin, in Strindberg's *Miss Julie*, to Frau Rasch, the suicidal heroine of Frank Xaver Kroetz's *Wunschkonzert*, Mitchell's camera has repeatedly zoomed in on oppressed and disregarded women and offered audiences close-ups of their facial muscles twitching with emotion, their tears wiped away, their shoulders raised and fingers clasped in tension. Thus, Mitchell has rewritten histories and narratives, placing female experiences in the centre of the frame.

In this period, Mitchell has also demonstrated an increased willingness to engage in directing as a form of over-writing in other ways; for example, by creating scenographic constructions and conceptual frameworks that enable her to intervene openly and assertively in the text or narrative she is presenting. Her 2019 production of Anne Carson's *Norma Jeane Baker of Troy* (The Shed, Hudson Yards, NYC) offers a case in point, as audiences were presented with Ben Whishaw's screenwriter narrating to Renée Fleming's stenographer a version of Euripides' *Helen* in which Helen's story is hybridized with the already hybrid life of Marilyn Monroe/Norma Jeane Baker, whose costume from *The Seven Year Itch* (1955) Whishaw gradually assumed. Thus, the production

both laminated and delaminated the various actor/character combinations it created. Helen/Marilyn, Marilyn/Norma Jeane, Norma Jeane/Whishaw were all brought together and peeled apart, in what seemed a deliberate response to Elin Diamond's famous feminist critique of the ways in which realism laminates 'body to character'.<sup>22</sup> Arguably, of course, Carson's text did this without Mitchell's intervention, but if it did, it followed in the footsteps of much earlier productions by Mitchell, such as ....*some trace of her* (2008), where, as Peter Boenisch described, 'on many occasions what appeared as a coherent set of images – face, hands, and a top shot which, watching the three screens, suggested the perception of one single body – was actually produced in front of the cameras by different performers'.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, while Mitchell has, on the one hand, used technology to extend the reach of naturalism, she has also used it to denaturalize representation, particularly that of women.

Mitchell has not committed herself entirely to complex multimedia adaptation, however. She has also created conceptually over-written versions of frequently-performed works such as her productions of Sarah Kane's *Cleansed* (NT, 2016) and *4.48 Psychosis* (Deutsches Schauspielhaus, Hamburg, 2017), both of which reframed the plays as landscapes traversed by a lone female protagonist: the dreaming Grace in *Cleansed* and Julia Wieninger's solitary night-walker in *4.48*. Mitchell's exploration of female isolation and sorrow, and of the operation of misogyny in a hostile world, was, to some extent, written over Kane's texts, just as it was in Mitchell's 2015 German-language staging of Beckett's *Happy Days* (Deutsches Schauspielhaus, Hamburg). Here, Julia Wieninger's Winnie was relocated to a flooded kitchen, in which she stood, finally, in water that reached her neck, indicating further interlocking concerns of Mitchell's recent work: the crises of

<sup>22</sup> Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and Theatre* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1997), 51.

<sup>23</sup> Boenisch, 'Towards a Theatre of Encounter', 166.

climate and population explored most explicitly in *Ten Billion* (Royal Court, 2012) and *2071* (Royal Court, 2014).

Although it is true that this increasingly explicit willingness to articulate her directorial vision is a relatively recent feature of Mitchell's work, it is important to situate it within a longer history. In 2009 *Guardian* theatre critic Michael Billington published a blog on the newspaper's website warning of the dangers of allowing '[c]ertain creative figures' to acquire 'auteur status', so that 'their individual style and idiosyncratic signature becomes more important than the work itself'.<sup>24</sup> This tendency was exemplified, he wrote, by Mitchell and her near-contemporaries Simon McBurney (1957–) and Emma Rice (1967–). Billington's distinction between 'the work itself' and its director's 'signature' is, of course, extremely tendentious, not least because he displayed no such concern about the signature of the playwright. Billington's project, as he went on to reveal, was to reassert the traditional British hierarchy of text over performance and to deprecate theatre in which 'the interpreter becomes bigger than the thing interpreted. Or, to put it more bluntly, that the director takes precedence over the writer'.<sup>25</sup>

Billington's explicit identification of this directors' theatre with post-war Germany echoed the way that, as Dan Rebellato has argued, 'European influence' was driven out of the British theatre in the late 1950s as part of a nativist assertion of the continuing cultural significance of a newly post-imperial Britain. Unlike Billington's Anglo-German binary, however, Rebellato shows that '[i]n the

<sup>24</sup> Michael Billington, 'Don't let auteurs take over in the theatre', *The Guardian* Theatre Blog, April 14, 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2009/apr/14/auteur-theatre> (accessed on November 3, 2019).

<sup>25</sup> For a fuller consideration of the charge of auteurism as it has been levelled against Mitchell, see Rebellato, 'Katie Mitchell: Learning from Europe', 317-20, and Cornford, 'Willful distraction', 75-8.

British theatre [of the nineteen-fifties] [the] other culture was French, and asserting Britain's cultural *strength* meant a transformation of cultural relations to situate French culture as weak'.<sup>26</sup> This reclaiming of the centre ground by a 'new wave' of British writers, counterbalancing the 'nouvelle vague' of French directors, had the consequence of marginalising the creative work of directors in the UK. Peter Brook, an Associate Director at the RSC under Peter Hall, dedicated himself, in the 1960s mainly to the fringes of the company and its repertoire, staging a 'Theatre of Cruelty' season in 1964 with an 'Experimental Group' at the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art's Theatre Club. This led, famously, to Brook's production of Peter Weiss' *Marat/Sade*, which opened at the Aldwych Theatre in the same year, to his anti-Vietnam war play *US* (1966), which was significantly influenced by the Polish director Jerzy Grotowski's nine-day visit to the RSC, which Brook organised (an event echoed by Mitchell's hosting of Gardzienice at the RSC a quarter of a century later). Finally, in 1970, Brook chose to leave the UK to establish the Centre International de Recherche Théâtrale with Micheline Rozan, which became the Centre International de Creations Théâtrales when it took up residence at the Théâtre des Bouffes du Nord in Paris in 1974.

Mitchell was ten years old when this happened, and the other 'auteur' directors identified by Billington – McBurney and Rice – were seventeen and seven respectively. It is therefore no surprise that – as they developed into aspirant theatre-makers – all three identified more with Paris and with Poland than with London. McBurney returned to London from Paris in 1983 to found Theatre de Complicité with Annabel Arden and Marcello Magni, both fellow graduates of the École Internationale de Théâtre Jacques Lecoq. Rice trained with Gardzienice rather than Lecoq, but she has recently said that her company Wise Children will form an alternative theatre school in Bristol

<sup>26</sup> Dan Rebellato, *1956 And All That: The Making of Modern British Drama* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1999), 143.

‘[b]ecause where do you go in the UK to study that? You go to Paris’.<sup>27</sup> Mitchell visited Paris in 1987, seeing both Peter Brook’s work and Pina Bausch’s *Nelken* (1982), which she describes as a life-changing experience. Rice and Mitchell also drew – as Brook had done – on Polish systems of training and theatre-making in the tradition established by Jerzy Grotowski, since both had observed the work of Gardzienice, with whom Rice also trained and performed for a period. By the time Billington chose to critique the auteurism of these directors as a new and somehow un-British phenomenon, then, he was attacking a loosely-connected movement in the British theatre going back at least twenty years to Annabel Arden and Simon McBurney’s production of Friedrich Dürrenmatt’s *The Visit* (1989), Mitchell’s *Arden of Faversham* (1990) with Emma Rice as the maid Susan, and *A Woman Killed With Kindness* (1991) with Rice as movement director, as well as McBurney’s *The Street of Crocodiles* (1992), inspired by the work of the Polish director Tadeusz Kantor, and based on stories by the Polish writer Bruno Schulz. If Mitchell is, as Rebellato suggests, ‘too European for some British tastes’, she has also spent her entire career working alongside significant British theatre-makers who have shared her European tastes.<sup>28</sup>

In place of Billington’s aesthetic analysis of the theatrical phenomenon exemplified by Mitchell, Rice and McBurney, Alex Mermikides has developed an economic critique of the work they can be seen to represent. She analyses the ‘collective activity’ through which both Mitchell and McBurney develop productions and its role in ‘reinforcing the director’s priority in response to a “market orientation” that ultimately subjugates the performers’ creative agency to the director’s

<sup>27</sup> Kate Kellaway, ‘Emma Rice: “I don’t know how I got to be so controversial”’, *The Observer*, July 1, 2018.

<sup>28</sup> Rebellato, ‘Katie Mitchell: Learning from Europe’, 319.

“brand”.<sup>29</sup> In this context, Mermikides argues, the aim is to develop ‘innovative theatrical product’, a commodity that is then marketed as an individual director’s vision.<sup>30</sup> Mitchell is, indeed, somewhat open about this practice in relation to the designers with whom she regularly collaborates – a ‘group of about twenty people without whom my work would be awful’, she calls them – saying that she even has ‘a special folder marked “creative teams”’, to keep track of who is working on which of her productions.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, although Mitchell’s artistic signature has grown ever more pronounced and confident, she has also, in the process, become increasingly dependent upon large teams of people, even commonly travelling with her own stage manager, Pippa Meyer. Standing, to a certain extent, outside of the theatre’s organizational and institutional systems, Mitchell has thus created a system of her own, which is partly integrated into and partly independent from them. This provides an important context for Mitchell’s increasing capacity to produce work that is openly critical of systems of power within and beyond the theatre. To what extent should we conclude that she is afforded the ability to occupy this stance because she is working within systems of affluence, that are hegemonic in – for example – their bourgeois, White Eurocentricity? If so, have the critical positions Mitchell has adopted been always already absorbed by hegemony? Or has she begun successfully to instigate meaningful political change from within the systems of power that she has infiltrated?

Mitchell’s output in 2019 featured two cases in point. First came her stage adaptation of Schumann’s song cycle ‘Dichterliebe’, which was developed with composer Bernard Foccroulle,

<sup>29</sup> Alex Mermikides, ‘Brilliant theatre-making at the National: Devising, collective creation and the director’s brand’, *Studies in Theatre and Performance* 33, no. 2 (2013): 153-67 (164).

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>31</sup> ‘Katie Mitchell on Theatre Directing’, 00:19:57.

writer Martin Crimp and designer Chloe Lamford as *Zauberland* (Théâtre des Bouffes du Nord, Paris, 2019). This new music-theatre piece uses the Syrian civil war and the post-2015 European refugee crisis as a backdrop. Its central figure is a Syrian refugee (played by American soprano Julia Bullock), who is caught between the country she has left behind and the country – Germany – in which she now finds herself. In a programme note for the premiere, Mitchell deprecates the ways in which ‘our Western European society tries to insulate itself from the bigger world events, like mass migration, and fails to’.<sup>32</sup> Inevitably, however, such a statement draws attention to its context in the expensively produced print material for a co-production between the Royal Opera, London; La Monnaie/De Munt, Bruxelles; Opéra de Lille; Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, New York; Le cercle des partenaires des Bouffes du Nord; Opéra de Rouen Normandie, and the University Musical Society of the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. The elite audience to whom Mitchell is speaking here is, paradoxically, somewhat insulated by her statement both from ‘society’ (it’s ‘our’ society, but it tries to insulate ‘itself’) and from ‘mass migration’: the addressees are clearly assumed not to be migrants or to identify as part of a diaspora. The ways in which Mitchell’s statement thus partially, tacitly enacts the insulation it explicitly decries indicates the absence of a structural correlative in this work to the political intent of its aesthetic statement. Without mechanisms to collaborate with refugee artists, to engage refugee audiences, and to divert income to refugee organisations, what is the role played by *Zauberland* within ‘our Western European society’?

A similar question may be posed of Mitchell and Alice Birch’s adaptation of Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* (Schaubühne, Berlin, 2019). Mitchell notes that she had long been searching for ‘a strong text about gender fluidity’ to stage, and describes Woolf’s novel as ‘a defining classic on the

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Zahr, O, ‘*Zauberland*’, *The New Yorker*, October 18 2019, [www.newyorker.com/goings-on-about-town/classical-music/zauberland](http://www.newyorker.com/goings-on-about-town/classical-music/zauberland) (accessed January 28, 2020).

subject'.<sup>33</sup> 'Gender fluidity' is currently commonly used in the theatre to indicate a range of representational practices including, for example, simply altering a character's gender. In the context of recent debates in the UK media about the status of transgender people, however, the depiction of a character who begins Woolf's novel as a man and then becomes a woman with the famous remark 'Different sex. Same person' would inevitably be read as an exploration of a prominent question for contemporary feminists: 'to whom does your feminism apply?' On the one hand, Mitchell's production's enthusiasm for its hero/ine's fundamental refusal to be categorised seemed intended to reject the ominous scare-mongering of contemporary transphobic discourse and to undermine the system of power it represents. On the other hand, the casting of a cisgendered female performer as Orlando alongside a creative team which was comprised entirely of cisgender people, raised questions about the basis of the production's claim to represent experiences of gender non-conformity. What cultural purchase does the critical position of trans\* people in relation to gender have when it is represented for them by cis people?<sup>34</sup> Thus, the extent to which Mitchell's *Orlando* served to trouble fixed, binary conceptions of gender or to reassert the right of cis people to define gender as a system of power is a complex matter. As in the case of *Zauberland*, questions about the political work being done by this production are difficult to resolve.

Mitchell's significance for the contemporary theatre, like so much about her, is rooted in paradox. She is a British director with a distinctly 'European' vision; she has an unmistakable directorial signature, yet, like a number of other contemporary directors, she works repeatedly with large teams of artists and craftspeople without whom that signature could not be achieved. She has worked in both the English text-focused tradition of directing and learned a more actor-centred,

<sup>33</sup> See Mitchell's Interview with Bryce Lease in this issue, X.

<sup>34</sup> See J. Halberstam, *Trans\** (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018).

Russian approach, and – having achieved high status within the industry – has chosen substantially to abandon the tradition of classical, text-based theatre that brought her that success. She is also a director who has rarely committed to direct engagement with the theatre’s power structures, and has increasingly sought to critique them, but has also worked consistently and almost exclusively in the most privileged centres of the establishment. Likewise, she is an avowed feminist who has forged a career within what she openly acknowledges are deeply patriarchal systems. This special issue of *Contemporary Theatre Review* does not seek to resolve any of these tensions or paradoxes, but to explore them through research articles that engage them in detail in relation to various aspects of Mitchell’s work; to open them up to future scholarship through the resources gathered together under Documents; and to discuss them through a series of shorter interventions grouped together in the Backpages section.

The research essays begin with Benjamin Fowler’s careful ‘rewind’ through three of Mitchell’s scenographies – *Anatomy of a Suicide* (Royal Court, 2017), *Alles Weitere kennen Sie aus dem Kino* (Deutsches Schauspielhaus, 2013) and *...some trace of her* (NT, 2008) – exploring what he terms, following Sarah Dillon, their ‘palimpsestuous’ play with temporality. Fowler argues that Mitchell’s work frequently produces ‘a hauntology which, in its reproach of late capitalist “timelessness”, defiantly contests some of its losses and amnesias, particularly those produced by problematic forms of neoliberal feminism’, and asks us ‘to confront the ongoing histories that seep through’ ‘the glossy surfaces of late capitalist culture’ and consider ‘multiplicity in ways that challenge dominant formations of culture, history and patriarchy under the social and political consensus of neoliberalism’. Fowler’s essay is followed by Tom Cornford’s exploration of Mitchell’s directing as the management of the technologies of the realist theatre, by focusing specifically on three repeated strategies: the placing of two box sets side-by-side in *A Woman Killed with Kindness* (NT, 2011) and *Lucia di Lammermoor* (ROH, 2016), the dramaturgical restructuring of a play through the aperture of a

single subject's viewpoint in *Dream Play* (NT, 2005) and *4.48 Psychose* (Deutsches Schauspielhaus, 2017), and the development, with video designer Leo Warner, of the technological configuration of 'live cinema'. Cornford explores the politics of these processes by considering Mitchell's productions as a series of attempts to manipulate the realist theatre's technological apparatus in order to represent political alternatives to hegemony. He concludes that the contemporary realist theatre is systemically resistant to critical politics and radical action, and Mitchell's political project therefore always and inevitably exists in tension with her technological resources, which 'are – in themselves – conduits of hegemonic power'. Hegemony is also central to Anna Harpin's analysis of Mitchell's sustained exploration of relations between patriarchal oppression, madness and suicide. Mitchell has refused to represent madness in lurid, spectacular manners, choosing instead a 'forensic' approach, and Harpin questions the politics of the scientism that characterizes both this decision and its reception by others. She argues – through an analysis of *Anatomy of a Suicide* (Royal Court, 2017) and *Ophelias Zimmer* (Schaubühne, 2015) – that, by 'leaving the coordinates and orthodoxies of normative gazing upon mad folk intact', Mitchell's productions have tended to 'reiterate the ideological project of treating madness as an exceptional catastrophe and an absence of meaning'. This pattern, Harpin proposes, has serious consequences at a time of soaring diagnosis and invasive treatment of mental illness without any improvement in outcomes for patients. Mario Frendo turns to opera in his essay, resisting Slavoj Žižek and Mladen Dolar's announcement – in *Opera's Second Death* – of that art form's imminent demise. By contrast, Frendo argues that Mitchell's mobilizing of techniques drawn from theatre-making as 'radical opera-making strategies' offers what may be appropriate performative conditions for 'a second life for opera', that can be seen in the 'performance dramaturgies' developed by Mitchell for operas such as *Written On Skin* (ROH, 2013). Frendo uses Eugenio Barba's notion of 'scenic bios' to analyse Mitchell's development of performance dramaturgies in opera, which – he argues – 'expand and dilate the borders of operatic potential'.

Finally, Catherine Love explores an emergent strand of Mitchell's work dealing with the climate crisis, which she terms ecodramaturgy (following Wendy Arons and Theresa J. May), through an analysis of *Ten Billion* (Royal Court, 2012), *2071* (Royal Court, 2014), *Atmen* (Schaubühne, 2013) and *Glückliche Tage* (Deutsches Schauspielhaus, 2015) – Mitchell's German-language productions of Duncan Macmillan's *Lungs* and Samuel Beckett's *Happy Days*. Love finds that 'Mitchell's theatrical strategies for tackling this subject matter have [...] been in flux', very much in line with the fact that '[o]ur collective awareness of the challenges of the Anthropocene and the potential solutions that might enable us to avoid or mitigate climate catastrophe remain uncertain and ever-developing'. Nonetheless, Love argues that Mitchell's developing work in this area has drawn attention to the urgent need for 'cultural representations that can fundamentally unsettle and reorder our feelings about the more-than-human world we are embedded within'.

The Documents section begins with three interviews. The first is a conversation between Duška Radosavljević and Mitchell's former collaborator, the movement director Struan Leslie. Termed an 'archive-embedded interview', it was structured by the viewing of extracts from Mitchell's *The Oresteia: The Home Guard* (NT, 1999), *The Oresteia: The Daughters of Darkness* (NT, 1999), *Iphigenia at Aulis* (NT, 2004), *Women of Troy* (NT, 2007) and *The Seagull* (NT, 2006) and is 'concerned with surfacing and documenting an otherwise invisible aspect of Katie Mitchell's oeuvre as a director' – her engagement with choreography and movement in rehearsal, and the role of a movement director in facilitating it. This is followed by a reflective interview with Mitchell's regular sound designer, Donato Wharton, conducted by Tom Cornford. Mitchell has long been an advocate of sound as a core element in scenography, and was somewhat ahead of the curve of its exponentially increased significance for theatre-making in the early part of this century. This is the first published interview with one of Mitchell's sound designers, and offers insights into her approach to working with sound, as well as consideration of the wider aesthetic and technical

challenges of sound design in the contemporary theatre from one of its most skilled practitioners. The conversation with Wharton is followed by a new interview (commissioned for this special issue) with Mitchell herself, conducted by Bryce Lease. Mitchell reflects here on her experiences of working in continental Europe, her collaborations with contemporary British playwrights, the development of the genre of 'live cinema', the differences between directing theatre and opera, her commitments to feminism and environmentalism, and on training the directors of the future. These interviews are followed by reflections on Mitchell in rehearsal from her erstwhile collaborator Paul Allain, and from Adam Ledger. Allain recalls in some detail his collaborations with Mitchell, which emerged from their mutual engagement with Gardzienice in the late 1980s and early 1990s. As he observes, this is a phase of Mitchell's work that has received almost no scholarly attention, and it is our hope that his recollections will ignite interest in it. Ledger has spent a considerable amount of time observing Mitchell's work in rehearsal and offers some observations here of her technique of managing what he describes as the 'ecology' of the rehearsal room in relation to her 2018 production of *Schlafende Männer (Men Asleep)* by Martin Crimp. Lastly, Backpages visits Mitchell's stage works through multiple lenses: a roundtable held by Maddy Costa principally focusing on the production of Birch's *Anatomy of a Suicide* (Royal Court, 2017), David Jays' ingenious look at Mitchell's preoccupation with objects on stage, Peter Campbell's appreciation for one of Mitchell's rare forays into making work for children, and a consideration of Mitchell's long-standing collaboration with Martin Crimp by Vicky Angelaki.

Inevitably, given Mitchell's prodigious output, this issue can make no claim to a comprehensive account of her work over the last three decades. Despite our best attempts, for example, we have been unable to commission a research article on Mitchell's productions before her rise to prominence in the mid-2000s. There is also notably more to be said about her collaborations with living writers. Our editorial choices have, of course, been shaped by the interests and

availability of contributors, but we have also sought to be responsive to the body of excellent work that already exists about Mitchell's practice, including numerous essays upon which our contributors have drawn, and interviews and discussions of her work, notably those collected by Benjamin Fowler in *The Theatre of Katie Mitchell*.<sup>35</sup> This issue aims to contribute to an ongoing dialogue with these perspectives, with a particular focus on the work of the last decade. The Katie Mitchell encountered in these pages is therefore more actively and avowedly political, more widely European, and more multifarious a director than the subject of earlier research – working in both theatre and opera, in multi-media and more conventionally realist forms, and with the dramatic canon, new plays and adaptations. Our approach has sought to reflect these characteristics of its subject. Partly supported by Cornford's 2017 David Bradby Award for Early Career Research in European Theatre (given by the Standing Conference of University Drama Departments in the UK), and following shortly after a special issue of *CTR* on 'Feminisms Now', this issue aims to meet Mitchell's committed internationalism and feminism with a critical approach that echoes these values.<sup>36</sup> This does not mean that our contributors always agree with Mitchell, but this issue's consideration of her work and its wider significance is committedly in solidarity with these projects.

<sup>35</sup> Benjamin Fowler (ed.), *The Theatre of Katie Mitchell* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019).

<sup>36</sup> Sarah Gorman, Gerry Harris, and Jen Harvie (eds.), 'Special Issue on Feminisms', *Contemporary Theatre Review* 28, no. 3 (2018).