

‘Creating something that feels alive’: Sound Design for Katie Mitchell, Donato Wharton in Conversation with Tom Cornford

Donato Wharton is a composer and sound designer for theatre and dance theatre. His music has been published on the Manchester and Berlin-based record label City Centre Offices and on the Cardiff-based Serein label, as well as on self-published limited edition cd-rs and downloads. His theatre sound design includes numerous collaborations with Katie Mitchell: *Norma Jeane Baker of Troy* (The Shed, New York, 2019), *Bluets* (Deutsches Schauspielhaus, Hamburg, Germany, 2019), *Schlafende Männer (Men Asleep)* (Deutsches Schauspielhaus, 2018), *La Maladie de la Mort (The Malady of Death)* (Théâtre des Bouffes du Nord, Paris and European tour, 2018), *4.48 Psychose (4.48 Psychosis)* (Deutsches Schauspielhaus, 2017), *De Meiden (The Maids)* (Toneelgroep Amsterdam, 2016), *Glückliche Tage (Happy Days)* and *Reisende auf einem Bein (Travelling on one Leg)* (both Deutsches Schauspielhaus, 2015), and *Alles Weitere kennen Sie aus dem Kino (The Rest Will Be Familiar To You From Cinema)* (Deutsches Schauspielhaus, 2013).

This interview was recorded at The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama on 4 October 2017 and subsequently transcribed and edited. Thank you to Laura Kressly for the transcription.

TC: Although the purpose of this interview is to discuss your work with Katie, I'd like to start by talking about you, because there's a danger in discussing collaborations with a director whose vision is both highly personal and broadly encompassing that we forget the very significant contributions made by her numerous long-term collaborators. Can you talk a bit about your background and your other work?

DW: My background is as a musician, I'm a composer of electronic and digital music. I'm not a classically trained musician so I don't write. I work from sound, and from a producing point of view. I started out with piano when I was very little, and then moved onto the guitar, electric guitar, electric bass, I played in bands, and then I made the transition to digital production and got interested in sound design a lot later, initially in order to support my composition work.

TC: Supporting it financially, or artistically?

DW: Financially, really. That's how I got into working in theatre sound departments. Later, I decided to study sound design because I wanted to be more involved in the artistic creation side of theatre rather than the technical delivery side of it. Then a lot later I took a Master's in Digital Composition and Performance at Edinburgh to expand my compositional practice.

TC: That's a wide range of influences already. What kind of music did you play in the bands?

DW: Well, I started out as a rock guitarist, in a '70s retro-rock/grunge band in the '90s. The next band that I played in was a German hip-hop soul band which became really successful so I was a studio musician and touring guitarist for this group which had a top 10 hit and a gold record, but then I moved away from just playing the one instrument and into producing all of the sounds. I was always interested in recordings that were really sonic worlds. I was a big fan of Jimi Hendrix when I was a teenager because of how imaginative his sound world was. I was interested in being able to make those worlds for each track myself. However, not being anywhere near the calibre of guitarist that Jimi Hendrix was, I felt the need to work with a range of instruments and with the possibilities the computer allowed (this was 20 years or so ago where the software and the hardware started becoming more affordable so that you could have a home studio). That got me into digital production, because I see a piece of music as a sonic world to be immersed in. So I started using the

guitar more as a sound source and, rather than writing melodies and riffs, I built tracks from the sounds themselves. Part of producing electronic and digital music is to create your own sounds and your own samples. I was really interested in sampling for a while as well so I'd go to record shops and just listen to everything and anything, and pull out stuff that I thought I might be able to sample something from. That was a good education in listening to all sorts of music, so I acquired a very wide understanding of different types of music including really obscure stuff.

TC: It sounds as though some of what you were doing is quite closely related to sonic art, which came both from fine art and from music. How do you relate to those traditions?

DW: Yes, there's two paths in sonic art. There's the one that comes out of fine art, which has taken off more recently as people have become recognised as sound artists, and then there's the Trevor Wishart school of sonic art, which comes out of the electroacoustic music compositional tradition. I'm probably closer to that school. I come from making music, rather than being a fine artist using sound as my medium, although – that said – Bill Fontana was a musician, and he's interested in the musicality of the sounding world, so maybe there is a third pathway. The people associated with the World Soundscape Project in Vancouver (that was run by R. Murray Schafer in the seventies) were also thinking about using the musicality of the environment in artistic ways (leading to the sound walking and acoustic ecology movements) so maybe there's not two, but actually three or four branches.

TC: So now you continue to work as a composer and teach Sound Design at The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, and work as a sound designer in theatre. Do you work in all kinds of theatre or do you identify yourself by particular kinds of work that you will or won't do in theatre?

DW: I've really only done drama and dance theatre; those are the two genres that I work in and have worked in as a designer. Within drama, I'm most interested in what you might call auteur theatre, something like Live Art, or where there's a strong sense of artistry in the work. I don't think I've done any work in commercial theatre, I've always worked in subsidised theatre. Maybe that's to do with coming out of Germany. I had my school education in Germany and I lived my early adult life there, so that's where I had my cultural education. In Germany, culture is valued very highly, they put public money behind it in a major way. Every town and city has a theatre funded by the municipality (the regional federal government) and that's how I got into theatre. People who work in theatre in Germany often come from art schools, so set designers don't go to a drama school, they go to an art school and see themselves as artists that work in the theatre and also the theatre is known as representational art, it is the art of representing or showing something. So the sense of artistry is built in and commercialism isn't so present in my understanding of theatre.

TC: How did you come to start working with Katie?

DW: Well, one day I had this email in my inbox from someone called Katie Mitchell... [laughs] I thought: 'From Katie Mitchell, this is just impossible! [laughs] Why would *the* Katie Mitchell send me an email? But it was Katie asking if I was available for a show. It came through a recommendation from Gareth Fry, who has been, of course, Katie's great collaborator for sound design over the years. I had got to know Gareth at Central, when I was a student. He was teaching workshops, and then he came to see a show I was working on at the invitation of Gregg Fisher, who was at the time leading the Theatre Sound course. I think he was quite impressed by the sound design and we got talking, and at the time I had also become the sound manager for one of Robert Lepage's shows, called *Le Dragon Bleu* (The Blue Dragon). I can only speculate, but I imagine the combination of those two things probably – having seen what I was able to do and knowing that I was working with

another auteur – and then just staying in contact over the years, meant that when Gareth was unable to take a show, he recommended me.

TC: You've now done a number of shows for Katie, fairly consistently over the last few years.

DW: Yeah, that first show was *Alles Weitere kennen Sie aus dem Kino* (*The Rest Will Be Familiar To You From Cinema*), a new piece of writing by Martin Crimp. It's a version of *The Phoenician Women* by Euripides. And then we did *Happy Days*, also in Hamburg. We did *Reisende auf einem Bein* (*Travelling on One Leg*), which was a multi-media show (one of the live film shows) also in Hamburg, at the Deutsches Schauspielhaus. *Travelling on One Leg* is an adaptation of the novel by Herta Müller, the German-Romanian Nobel Prize winner and author. Then we did *The Maids* (*De Meiden*), in Amsterdam last year, and earlier this year we did *4:48 Psychosis*, also in Hamburg, and I'm in pre-production now for *La Maladie de La Mort*, the Marguerite Duras text. That's going to be another live film at the Théâtre des Bouffes du Nord, and early next year there's going to be another show, a new piece of writing by Martin Crimp.:

TC: On the basis of that extensive experience, could give us a rough guide to creating a sound design for Katie Mitchell. Are there things that always happen across all of those projects? I think there must be.

DW: There are. The works fall into two categories really. One is proscenium arch, fourth-wall type theatre – the plays – the other is the live films, and they're quite different. In the plays, Katie has a method, and it is always applied in the same way. It's based on her method of text analysis, of Events and Intentions. The Events and Intentions are very important to me as the sound designer because they constitute the emotional map of the performance, and they form points in time like on a score. One of the elements of the sound design is an abstract sound score that gives a precise

emotional underscoring of the whole of the performance and that is always there. Then there's a layer that you could describe as naturalistic, so in *The Maids*, for example, we're in an apartment block somewhere so you hear the neighbour, or the person living in the flat above sometimes, and events like the taxi arriving. At dawn you hear a bit of birdsong, and you have a constant sense of the presence of the city as well and the pressure it exerts. Then there is always music, that's another layer, whether it's composed or sourced (sometimes it's both, sometimes it's one or the other). We often work with the amplified voice too. That's a very important element because – if you're working with a very present soundscape as we are – it both embeds the voice aesthetically in the electroacoustic soundscape and allows the actors to speak at a lower volume than if they had to project out over a sound score, which would break the naturalism that Katie is always aiming for.

TC: And of course it means that they're limited to facing in particular directions.

DW: Yes, it helps if the actors are playing a normal conversation like this, with one facing away from the audience. We wouldn't hear that at all if we weren't amplifying. It also has the effect of creating a more cinematic feeling to the show, because when you go to the cinema you are always hearing an electroacoustic soundscape. You see the actor and hear their voice, and you're not thinking it's coming through a microphone and a loudspeaker. It's just the actor's own voice. We're used to seeing something that feels really naturalistic with this electroacoustic soundscape, so if we do the same thing in the theatre we bring a more filmic aesthetic to the experience.

TC: What about room tones? Katie often has a ceiling on the set so it's almost a room, and obviously theatres have their own room tones, and background noise too. How do you manage that?

DW: The insertion of an abstract sound score creates layers that we can strip away without ever going back to only what the theatre's own sonic environment is. Basically, we put in an artificial noise floor and then we can control it.

TC: And of course, it's not actually environmental at all, but...

DW: ...but composed. It's really a piece of electroacoustic music that's constantly modulating throughout the performance, always moving with the actors and their actions and words, and with their emotions. It animates the world sonically, it makes the world of the play feel always alive and it serves to heighten any action. It's quite interesting when you're in rehearsals and you've been rehearsing for a while and you switch it off and you're... [*exhales audibly*] All that energy drops off and things aren't quite as dark and heavy as you've been feeling for the past hour or so [*laughs*].

TC: So you're spending rehearsals composing this score to the same structure that Katie and the actors are working to as they decide where the Events fall and what their Intentions are going to be. How much of that is already decided before you go into rehearsal and how much are you developing as you go?

DW: I decide before going into rehearsals what my sonic material is going to be. I will go and make a few hours of recordings. Actually, for the first show with Katie (*Alles weitere...*), I built myself an instrument called a steel cello, which was invented by Robert Rutman. It's essentially a steel sheet on a frame with a string running from one corner to the other, that you can bow. You can make some really wonderful sounds with it. You can close-mic it. The sound has a sort of automatic scariness and sonically the really rich harmonic spectrum that allows you to do a lot if you slow it down or start manipulating it in other ways on the computer. The reason why I chose metal, though, is because *The Phoenician Women* is all about metal. There were so many references to bronze in the

text, so I thought I'd do something with metal for the sound and that worked really well, so I've continued to use metal when it feels appropriate. For *The Maids*, though, I didn't want to use metal – or not as much anyway, I wanted to use glass, because there was so much glass in the set, and the room felt very cold, so I wanted to work with that, and to create a sense of there being almost a pane of glass between the audience and the action on stage. So I was interested in a transparent, distancing, cold, very clean and polished aesthetic for the abstract underscore.

I make these choices based on what the production is. Then I'll go into the studio and record a couple of hours of sound and then I'll catalogue the sounds, and make some basic underscoring loops, in which I try to capture the foundation of feeling that the show needs to have. Those are the elements – together with a palette of naturalistic sounds that we think might happen, and some music suggestions – that I'll take into rehearsals. Then we do the text analysis and get the event structure, and then I start populating the event structure, and as we run the show, I'll just throw sounds in, and from that I start building the score in rehearsals. I do a lot of work after rehearsals of course, because we move really quickly, so I just try things out and then spend time later polishing from memory and building little arcs and sub-arcs, and deciding on when a bigger impulse needs to happen. Katie's very involved in that process – often she'll say 'we need to mark this event with something in particular' because it's a rhythmic device to help organise the show rhythmically. It's important for me to be in rehearsals the whole time so that the atmosphere is there and so that I can respond to all the conversations and decisions that happen, and modify the sound score accordingly, so by the time we go into tech, the sound is probably ninety percent there, and just needs polishing. In tech, of course, lighting and other elements come in, and because the sound is already there it doesn't need quite as much attention, which gives Katie the freedom to work on other elements and get them up to speed.

TC: So you're in rehearsals constantly?

DW: Yeah, I tend to be there from day one until the show opens, all the time – even for the full text analysis, which is about two weeks. It's really important for me to be there and to understand what the actors are thinking, what Katie's thinking, and be able to trace the emotional currents of the play, so that the sound becomes a truly integrated and seamless thing that's part of the performance. You can't integrate a sound design as effectively if you're not there from the very beginning.

TC: I'm interested in the technicalities of that. How is it cued? I assume the cueing structure is quite flexible?

DW: Yeah, the sound cues are always taken off the actors so the sound design always really in sync with the playing. A lot of the sound cues are visual cues on movement, something like 'When the hand gets to here, that's a go'. There are probably as many of those as there are cues that go on lines.

TC: Is the DSM cueing all of them individually?

DW: Well, in Germany and Holland, the sound operators always take their own cues, so annotation of the cue list in the playback software is critical and they have to concentrate really hard, so they really are part of the performance and are interacting very closely with the actor. In *Happy Days*, for instance, a lot of the cues are like: 'When Winnie moves her eyes to the left, it's a go', and *Happy Days* is four hundred cues or so, so every couple of seconds very precisely to a movement, there's a 'go'. The DSM [Deputy Stage Manager] was a new thing to me when I came to the UK; it's not common, I think, in other theatre cultures for all cues to be called. One of the things I found so attractive about Katie's work before I worked with her was how alive it feels. There's never a static moment, even though it's not necessarily always full of big action, it never stands still and it feels like

a world that's already ongoing when the curtain opens and continues when the curtain closes, and there was something very attractive to me about being able to work towards making something that feels that alive, and it means you have a cue every five or ten seconds.

TC: How much conversation with Katie do you have about the raw material? For example, the fly that was buzzing around in *The Maids*. I really liked that, it was unsettling; it made me think there was something rotting in the walls of this pristine set. It also felt like a much stronger intervention than, say, when the taxi turns up. How much does she just ask you to make sound and how much to make it sound like she wants it to sound?

DW: That also depends. There is always the framework of Events and Intentions that Katie gives, which is, I suppose, quite rigid, and you need to work within that grid, that is the skeleton of the design. But in terms of the actual sounds that I use, as long as Katie enjoys them, I can use whatever material I want for the abstract stuff. So there's a lot of freedom really. In that specific example, Katie wanted to bring the characters back into their, into some childhood memories, and the childhood memory was linked to their landscape of childhood. And so Katie was asking what that could be. Rustling leaves in a cornfield maybe? And I have two recordings of a cornfield – one with a fly, one without the fly – and of course I have the fly separate. At first I thought I'm not going to use the one with the fly because it would be irritating... but then, as I did end up using the version with the fly, I must have just thought it would be more interesting to have the fly in there. The description of the scene was that the two sisters are in a cornfield or under a tree, away from the orphanage, enjoying a rare moment of sisterly love in the sunshine. So I wasn't thinking at all of the *vanitas* element of decay, it was really quite literal. Later, Katie asked to add running water to suggest a river nearby, and one of the sisters sings a lullaby. That's really what the scene was from my point

of view, but it's great that it creates an openness of association to allow you and everyone else in the audience to experience and interpret in their own way.

TC: It felt to me like what Barthes describes as a *punctum*: there's a beautiful image being created, they're being kind to each other, but, in the fly, neurosis and – I guess – death are still present.

DW: Yes, yes, and it could well be that the reason the fly stayed in was because Katie saw that, whereas I was just thinking about summertime [laughs]!

TC: All that suggests that you are making a lot of instinctive decisions...

DW: Yeah – instinct or intuition – where we think 'that works'. I don't necessarily question it further if it's working. Although, I remember that as one of the moments where, sitting in the show, I could feel a sort of hush descending on the auditorium with everyone really zoning in – the abstract sound score goes away a bit for once and you can breathe, and then the lights go up and you go back into the pressurized situation.

TC: To move onto the live films now: they are, as I understand it, structured in a similar way but are substantially more complex technically. What are the differences from your point of view? If you have four hundred cues in *Happy Days*, can you get many more in?

DW: [laughs] I'd have to check how many cues there are in *Travelling on One Leg*, but there are hundreds of shots – I don't know how many in the end – but hundreds and hundreds and, for the sound design, every cut is a cue and then there are more cues within each scene. Unlike the plays, *Travelling on One Leg* didn't start with a text analysis, it didn't start with the event structure. Instead it started with a script that was adapted from the novel – actually two novels that were sort of amalgamated – and a shot list. So you have the screenplay, if you will, and that turns into a shot list,

which is devised in rehearsals. For me, the defining structure is the shot list. Every time there's a shot, the sound score is going to have to change, of course, we change perspective, we go to a new location – whatever... These are always in sync because they're triggered by the media server that controls the visual output, but there's also a second workspace that has manual cues that the sound operator triggers based on visual cues. These are the two structural frames of the sound design, and their timing depends on different things, so that, in *Travelling on One Leg*, for example, we're in a train station and we cut to the interior of a photo booth. On that cut, the perspective of the train station atmosphere needs to cut to a more muffled, interior sound, but then there's the moment where Julia Wieninger [the actor in this scene] gets up and puts a coin in the slot and that's a manual 'go' for the sound operator, because there's no cut there so it can't be synced up to anything else.

TC: Is there also a multiplication of sound because you're also creating a sound design for the environment of the creation of the film?

DW: No. That's really different, and it's a really good point. In the plays, the abstract sound score is as important for the actors as for the audience, because they often really sort of lean on and rely on the Event sounds happening at the right time to help them to turn the corner, as it were, into their next intention. But in the live film, the sound just needs to work with the image because we're watching a film and the acting is to camera. So that is different: I'm not creating a sonic environment. In *The Rest Will Be Familiar to You from Cinema*, it's a kind of haunted house, and there is the family and the resurrection of these characters from the dead, so there is a haunted feeling when you're onstage, as though you're walking through this weird, unsettling world, which helps the actors be in the right emotional state, and that is different in the films certainly.

TC: OK, so you're working to the shot list and effectively your job is to make a sound design for a film. In terms of how that sound is made, presumably you use the same structure of layers? You're doing the same job?

DW: Yeah, there are the same elements. There's an abstract underscore, music, amplified voice, and there's naturalistic sounds, it's all there.

TC: And the music is always written by Paul Clark?

DW: Yeah, I think it has been for around 25 years or so. Katie and Paul have been working together for I think about 25 years.

TC: How do you two interact?

DW: Well, we get on really well and the division of labour is initially very clear: Paul is composing music and I'm doing sound. But they aren't separate elements really, they need to mesh; in performance the music kind of emerges out of the sound score, and dies away back into it, so – in order to dovetail – we'll often swap sounds and I'll integrate some of Paul's stems,ⁱⁱⁱ or some of his sound material into the abstract score, and the other way around. I can take the oboe, for instance, and transform it in the various bits of software I have, and mix it with some of my sounds so that the character of the oboe is also in the underscore, so when that piece comes in it feels like it has always kind of been there and the music doesn't feel super-imposed. Often, we will no longer know whose sound we are hearing at a certain point, so it's a really open collaboration and that's a particular quality that Paul has, to be so open, as well as having very high standards being very precise. He cares a great deal about details but he's also willing to hand material over and let me play with it.

TC: And is the music ever played live?

DW: In the shows we've done, it's never been played live. He will sometimes write music and have recordings made in the studio, and then edit that to suit. There was an attempt to have a string quartet walk in at the end of *The Rest Will Be Familiar to You From Cinema* and play the Mozart right at the end, but it didn't work. Liveness is also to do with available budgets: it's more expensive to have musicians in every night.

TC: And what about things like, in *The Maids*, the characters using an iPad to play music, or in *Ophelias Zimmer*, her tape player. How are you interacting with that material?

DW: That's a conversation with Katie, of course, about what the sound aesthetic should be: like a crackly old radio, or like a modern hi-fi system? In terms of the music itself, that depends. There are two different types of music in *The Maids*, the music that the maids use to underscore their performances, which is all music that Paul wrote and recorded, and because of the naturalism we were after, the sound was imaged to the hi-fi system that's on stage. Then there's the music that Madame plays, which is techno – maybe five tracks – and they're all sourced music, though one of them was modified – kind of re-composed – by Paul. They build up to get more aggressive through the scene.

TC: And one of them goes into slow motion...

DW: Right, yeah, so Katie asked 'can we go into slow motion now?' And we were like: 'OK, give us a minute...' [*laughs*] Paul grabbed the track and did this music-slow-motion thing, and I changed the sound score – I made it louder and stretched it out a bit – and we put it back together and there was the slow motion. Some of those things need to happen very quickly.

TC: Does Katie often choose the music? Joy Division crops up quite a bit...

DW: Yes, Katie will make some suggestions. The techno was music I suggested. Katie was interested in using Polish film music because the maids are Polish [in this production], so we were listening to Preisner's film music,^{iv} and I think Chopin was another reference – those were the influences that Paul had. The ideas that the maids themselves would use film music to underscore their performances was something that Paul and I developed in an early conversation because in Katie's briefing for the show (which preceded that), she wanted them to control their own environment and use lamps and music to stage their reenactments. So that was Katie's idea, and Paul and I came to this idea that they use film music and skip through their iPad to choose tracks. The music would have this element of pathos but could also be controlled. You've then got to have someone like Paul who has the skill to write that, you'd never be able to source the right piece of music. So Katie throws the ball into your court, you make some suggestions and throw it back, and if the suggestions work for Katie then they're in – quite literally, if you try something out in rehearsals and she likes it, it's in. So you have to be quite confident about the materials that you are using – if you're not sure something should be in or not and you try it, and it's in, then you have to work with that *fait accompli*, you have to continue with it...

TC: I'm interested in genre. *The Maids*, for example, was evidently very naturalistic, but others are obviously not, and Katie stages a lot of different kinds of naturalism – mixed with other stylistic elements. How explicitly conscious are you of decisions relating to genre or style, and how much is developed organically?

DW: It's completely deliberate. Katie states clearly at the beginning of the project what the genre is. I ask for that anyway, I want to know: what is the genre? For *The Rest Will Be Familiar...*, it was science fiction really, *The Maids* was more of a thriller...

TC: I'm also interested in how much influence you think Katie's collaborations with sound designers have had on sound design beyond her work.

DW: I certainly think that directors are becoming more aware of how much they can do with sound, and how much it can elevate the production values, how it can help the actors and how they can integrate sound and all the other design elements from the beginning. I think the kind of rehearsal process with all of the elements being there from the start – that's something that perhaps other directors have picked up on – and of course Katie's written about it in her book. Her method of working with all elements, being precise and integrating all elements, that's something that is being learned from, as well as not being intimidated by design elements, but seeing their potential. Not all directors are capable of using technical elements effectively or with true control. There's also more of a cinematic sound, or cinematic aesthetic (you know, amplifying everything and making it loud and proud), in theatre and I suppose that might be to some degree down to Katie's work, but that's maybe just something to do with theatre directors being more interested in films generally and in how to bring that aesthetic onto the stage.

TC: Yes, and of course in terms of sound, Van Hove would be an obvious influence. I remember seeing *The Roman Tragedies* in 2004 and all of the actors were clearly wearing radio mics, and, at that time, that was very rare in an English context.

DW: Yeah, they really love working with mics, the Toneelgroep actors. They're very aware of how it expands the voice. It gives them a much greater dynamic range and they can use the colour of their

voice in a completely different way. Robert Lepage says that if you have a piece of technology, then use it because it will change the work that you do, and to embrace that is really valuable. I think that's maybe happening with micing actors, though Katie would never want to see a boom – the microphone has to disappear because otherwise it would break the naturalism that she's after. At the same time, though, she is interested in actors not needing to project so there's a fine line to find the right balance between intruding into the naturalism, but still retaining the advantages of a mic and enabling us – basically – to do postproduction quality in a live setting.

TC: Does that change the way you teach your students?

DW: I certainly teach them about the possibilities of layering and working with great levels of detail and emotional precision. I think the availability of technology and thinking in terms of higher production values, and of the greater presence of sound is a development that's sort of osmotic: it's already in students a lot. They want to do more, they want to have sound all the time because you now have productions that just have sound wall-to-wall from people like Lepage or Katie or Romeo Castellucci. A lot of what I teach, then, is how to do that, because it's not easy. To have a two-hour sound score, if you're just coming into university, it's a big ask to be able to do that from the beginning. I teach them to think about what the elements are, and to think in multiple layers, and about how sound can help the dramaturgy rather than just being a couple of effects put on at the end.

TC: Lastly, I wonder if we could zoom out a bit. I don't accept the attack on Katie for being an auteur, but I can see that there are recurring subjects in her work – I have even suggested that their frequent reiteration in her work is perhaps somewhat obsessive. As someone who's seen a lot of Katie's productions, I wonder what you think characterizes them as a body of work.

DW: I think Katie is an auteur. She is an artist, and I think in another field no one would be surprised about an artist having a theme and returning to it again and again and again. If you see a sculpture by Joseph Beuys or by Rachel Whiteread, you know it's by them – that's something in the art world that we all accept. So I think why is it a problem in the theatre if someone returns to the same themes again and again and again? Katie's certainly not the only one. I've been lucky enough to work on a couple of shows by Robert Lepage and you go 'Oh, it's this thing again!' [*laughs*]. Robert has this thing with crying babies for some reason. You think, 'oh, here's the crying baby again'. The other thing with Katie's work is that it's ongoing work. It's worth looking at her shows in the context of the preceding show, and at the shows that come after a particular show, and you'll see patterns recur, and tropes that were tried out and are now coming back in a new form, and bits of music will recur. I think it's normal, really, for artists to do the same thing over and over and over again in a new way. I see that in my own music actually as well, I'm always trying to express something similar, and it just comes out a new way each time and I think for some artists that's just really what they do when they make art.

TC: Yeah, I definitely think that's true, and if you look at her schedule, she must be working on the next show while she's still in rehearsals, and maybe she's going on noting the last one, so the overlap is there in her life anyway.

DW: Yeah, and some painters work like that too. Actually, when I'm making a record I'm working on a number of pieces at the same time – I think that's a normal thing really.

TC: Yeah, definitely you can see that with painters, they leave a bit to dry –

DW: Exactly, and go to the next canvas, work on that, then go back to that one, and then you get a group of works. And Katie always has some favourite types of sounds, so hers is a language that I

revisit and think ‘I know she’s going to like that and it’s going to work here’. Actually, one of the things I wasn’t aware of until you told me was that ‘Love Will Tear Us Apart’ was also in *Ophelias Zimmer*, and it’s also in *4:48 Psychosis*, except that in *4:48* it’s the protagonist singing, so that’s a variation, as it were. After you mentioned it, we were working on *Happy Days* and Katie asked me to watch *Red Road* by Andrea Arnold, and ‘Love Will Tear Us Apart’ is the closing title music (in a different version so it’s someone else performing). Maybe it’s a piece of music Katie’s been fond of for a really long time and she encountered it there and thought ‘I’d really like to have the feeling of that in the work at some point’, and it found its way in. Who knows? And of course Ian Curtis famously committed suicide, and suicide is the big theme, and that music is very often related to a character who’s close to committing suicide – often that will be a female character – that’s pretty obvious really, isn’t it.

Katie often references Tarkovsky too and I happen to think that Tarkovsky is maybe the greatest; I think his films are literally something else, different from all other cinema. At the moment I’m working on *Uit Het Leven van Marionetten (From the Life of the Marionettes)*^v with the Toonielgroep, which is a Bergman adaptation, and Bergman says in *The Magic Lantern* that Tarkovsky managed to achieve something he’d always wished to achieve and never could, which is to “create the dream”. I think culture, works of culture, and artists, also have a role in talking about other brilliant art and saying ‘you should see this’. And I think it’s ok to quote; why not? We all do it, so why should we be secretive about quoting another artist’s work and saying you should really watch this because it will enrich your spiritual life in ways of which you have no idea before you encounter it. When I first saw Pina Bausch’s work, late at night on a TV screen – it was *Nelken* – I was completely fascinated by it, and when I finally got to seeing her work in the flesh, it was the most powerful art experience I’d ever had. It restored my sense that humans are beautiful. That’s what it gave to me. It really enriched

my life, and I was lucky enough to see her take a bow like 4 metres away from me, on my thirtieth birthday. It is one of my most cherished memories.

i This was *Schlafende Männer*.

ii See Cornford, T. 'Love Will Tear Us Apart (Again): Katie Mitchell directs *The Maids*', *European Stages*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Fall, 2017), <https://europeanstages.org/2017/10/28/love-will-tear-us-apart-again-katie-mitchell-directs-genets-the-maids/> [accessed 6 February 2020].

iii A stem is a distinct element in a piece of recorded music, for example: the voice, violin, oboe, etc.

iv Zbigniew Preisner (Polish film composer).

v Directed by Nanouk Leopold (Stadsschouwburg Amsterdam, 2017).