

“I am delighted about the Leone d’Oro I will receive in Venice. Less so about Brexit.”
Director Declan Donnellan founded the celebrated company Cheek by Jowl in 1981, with Nick Ormerod. He starts our conversation by approaching the subject of politics.

“Theatre and the arts are safe places where one can explore extreme situations and other worlds without having to live them in reality. There are things that are too dangerous to experiment, and for which you need imagination and memory. Europe today seems to suffer from amnesia, and some see nationalism as the solution to our problems. Many fellow British citizens voted for Brexit because they were not happy with the status quo and wanted to find improvement through change. Einstein said that madness is repeating the same thing twice expecting different results. Our behaviour is a sign of madness”.

Donnellan maintains that we need theatre “to explore what is forbidden as well as what embarrasses us. All that places us in a predicament. Better to go to see Measure for Measure before wishing for a ‘pure’ leader, who will wash all our cares away. The play suggests ‘purity’ is of itself corrupt, because we cannot make someone pure without making someone else filthy. The problem is that to begin with Angelo is not to himself corrupt. To himself he is ‘pure’... Priests and politicians rarely dare suggest truly transgressive ideas, such as this, but in the safety of theatre this can be opened up as a suggestion. What priest could suggest that every God needs his devil? Politicians who need votes can rarely suggest that the problem lies not only with the bad press or bad politicians, but that the people can be corrupt too?”

A major function of theatre is that “it allows us to develop empathy. And we are not empathetic by birth! We are born with feral affective links, with expectations. Perhaps with a rudimentary sense of sympathy. But empathy must be developed. Just like love does”. To understand the act of theatre at least, Donnellan says, we must learn to distinguish between sympathy and empathy. “In the past I have had to write letters of condolences. I used the death of my grandparents in Ireland to make the point that I understood the pain of losing someone. I considered this a way to show compassion, and kindness. Now I always start with something like ‘I cannot begin to imagine what you must be feeling’, and then I let my heart speak for me. I no longer try to be ‘good’, but rather to establish a human connection. This is reflected in my work I think, although it is not for me to say.

When we see a show, we can empathise with a character and perhaps think ‘I do feel sorry for Macbeth, I know how painful remorse can be...’ But in reality of course we do not know. Wisdom begins with acknowledging that we do not know, with being able to endure differences between us and others, without them being necessarily in conflict with each other. While we watch Lady Macbeth slowly realising the significance of what she has done (“who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him.”) we are as horrified as she is. But we feel empathy for her, because we need her, in order to understand how far we ourselves could go. It is when we think that we are incapable of being violent that we become dangerous”

“I define theatre as a shared experience, in which a group experiences collectively the meaning of being alive. To be alive is to have to deal with a dualistic humanity, and to come to terms with it. Art which is fascinating but dead, is not that fascinating. If it is alive, it will capture our attention even if/when it may appear to be about something boring. A show

that is really ALIVE makes us feel better, no matter how painful the subject matter is. In the end we are just sad or angry, we have simply seen something which appeals to our feelings. Sentimentalism depresses me and is so hard to avoid. As soon as we give ourselves a holiday from accepting the duality of life, at that precise moment we become sentimental.”

Donnellan directed the film *Bel Ami* with his partner Nick Ormerod. Asked about the differences between cinema and theatre, Donnellan says, “many of the generalisations made when talking about the differences tend to fade away: theatre is perhaps more objective and cinema more subjective. Perhaps. But great theatre is often cinematic, and conversely there is nothing more theatrical than Fellini or Hitchcock. The luxury of theatre is that each performance is unique, regardless of how much actors and director attempt to create uniformity and consistency. Materialism is always conformist whatever the advertisers say. One Rolex is very much like another (I imagine!). All dead objects have a similarity to one another. When our dead bodies become putrid flesh, we will be just like any other inanimate object. When we are alive we are unique, even though life can be lived only in its effects. Sadly our modern fate seems to sentence us to the growing autocracy of what is visible, as we pretend that what is invisible does not exist.”

Donnellan quotes from *Antony and Cleopatra*: when the queen wants to know how great the field of Antony’s love is, Antony replies that - no matter how great it is - a love that is measurable is ipso facto not love at all. “I never realised the depth of these words – says Donnellan. I once considered them the manifestation of a dangerous infatuation, but then I realised the truth in them: if something can be measured, it is not worth so much. Apart from life, that is. But even then, can we really measure it? When my mother died and was buried in Ireland, I asked the priest if he believed in life after death. ‘Declan’ – he answered – ‘the real question is: is there life before death?’ That was a fantastic answer, and a humiliating one. But as Jung says, every humiliation of the ego is progress for the individual. We cannot trick life, but we try all the time. We prefer fake to authentic, because fake is more controllable. A few years ago, I was on top of a NY skyscraper with the company, and we were admiring the iconic Manhattan skyline. Behind us was a model of the same view, in painted cardboard – an accurate reproduction. It was interesting to see that people spent longer looking at the reproduction than at the breath-taking real thing that was behind them – the fake got more attention than the real. It was called ‘the Window of the World’, and was to be destroyed a few months later on September 11.”

Life cannot be controlled. “A few nights ago a nightingale was chirping from a birch tree in our garden, roughly 300m from the point where 200 years ago another nightingale inspired Keats. Nick wondered how sure I was that it was a nightingale, so I searched on YouTube for a recording. I pressed Play, and what shouted out was the loudest bird you ever heard! Real nightingale and recorded nightingale sang along together for a few more seconds, then the nightingale flew away: it must have been terrified at the thought of a 10Kg rival! Last night I waited for the nightingale to return, but it didn't, which makes me sad. Triumph of the fake. This is how I feel in rehearsals, when I feel that life is slipping away. Life is often painful. But when I choose the people to work with I always look for two qualities beside talent: gratitude and the ability to get joy from work. I do hope the nightingale will come back.”