



## East Meets West

Declan Donnellan talks to Jane Edwards about rehearsal trends in Moscow and London

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This week Declan Donnellan's production of 'Three Sisters', performed by Russian actors and designed by Nick Ormerod, is playing at the Barbican Theatre. Donnellan and Ormerod have toured in Russia with their company Cheek by Jowl since the '80s and have worked with Russian actors since the early '90s. They were invited by the Russian Theatre Federation to create a company to present 'Boris Godunov' in 2001. That production was so widely admired that others followed and a theatre is currently being built for the company in Moscow. After 'Three Sisters' comes 'Cymbeline', performed by British actors and presented by Cheek by Jowl. Both productions have been touring the world. Here Donnellan talks about the differences between theatre life in Moscow and London.

### TO: What would you say is the main difference between working in Russian theatre and here?

**Declan Donnellan:** 'In England you're like a small fish in a big pool. The big pools are film and TV. That's not true in Russia. There the actors have enough power to arrange their TV and film schedules around their theatre work. They are able to take two or three weeks off from filming to appear on stage.'

### How do budgets compare?

'I've no idea. I keep as far away from Russian finances as I possibly can! I get the impression it's more or less the same.'

### How does the first day of rehearsal differ?

'Nick and I never show a model of the set because there never is a set. The English are freaked out by that, but in Russia it's much more normal. In England we say that we've only got costumes to show and everyone says "How wonderful!", but they look slightly pale at the same time.'

### And after that?

'In Britain it's all very contractual. There's a very neat day with a neat beginning and end. In Russia it isn't like that at all. I've had a tearful conversation with an actress saying "Please can I not go to the dress rehearsal this afternoon? If I do, I will be flung out of my theatre." You say "I'm sorry, but you have to come to the dress rehearsal." The whole thing often takes place at this incredible pitch of emotional blackmail. "If you loved me," she says, "you'd let me go." And you find yourself saying "If you loved me, you'd stay!" I can't imagine having that conversation with an English actor. It would be extraordinary.'

### Then you have lots of rehearsal time in Russia?

'That's one thing I will debunk. If you say that there are 17 or 18 shows in repertoire and each show will get a couple of performances a month, then the theatre company is constantly taken up with reviving things. Also everybody's always ill in Moscow. You lose more rehearsal days from illness than anywhere else. So you could quite easily rehearse a play for two/three years and get the same number of rehearsal hours as at the National Theatre in London. I now have this ruse that we do two months of rehearsal in the woods to get them away and get them healthier. It's very sweet taking actors out of Moscow – they're completely terrified once you go past the ring road.'

### Do they wear the same sort of casual clothes as British actors?

'No. The young ones, who are terrifically successful and very rich, wear very fashionable clothes to rehearsal. They come in wearing rags, and Nick says that it's the latest torn T-shirt and costs \$5000 in some boutique place in Moscow.'

### Does the training differ in Moscow?

'Intriguingly, although there are sixty theatres the size of the National in Moscow, there are only five or six drama schools. In Moscow, they have this fantastic thing that every few years directors will go to a drama school, give classes from time to time and then do a final show. Students will wait to work with their chosen director, because they are heading towards a serious theatre career. They still have a tremendous respect for the theatre. That's very reassuring. I think it's still true in Britain but I sometimes have doubts. It's important that young actors think of themselves as artists – and if that sounds pompous, well sorry, that's what I think.'

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