

Philippa Burt and Maria Shevtsova

Dialogue: The Role of the Editor

World-renowned *New Theatre Quarterly* celebrates its fifty years of publication and its 200th issue, this being the last under the editorship of Maria Shevtsova. Simon Trussler, founder of *Theatre Quarterly* in 1971 (which closed for lack of funding in 1981) always considered *New Theatre Quarterly*, established with Cambridge University Press in 1985 – and with Clive Barker as co-editor – to be simply a continuation of *TQ*. Maria Shevtsova fully agreed. Forty issues of *TQ*, combined with one hundred and sixty editions of *NTQ*, gives the magic figure 200. The logistics of things, however, means that the number 160 appears on the cover of the present issue (the ‘New’ in *New Theatre Quarterly* standing for the newly resurgent journal on the back of its predecessor). This present issue also celebrates Maria Shevtsova’s twenty years of co-editorship with Simon Trussler, together with five more years of sole editorship of the journal following his death in 2019 (commemorated in *NTQ* 142, May 2020; see also their respective editorials, ‘One Hundred Issues and After’, in *NTQ* 100, November 2009). Twenty-five years of absolute commitment and tireless work call for recognition and thanks. Assistant editor Philippa Burt here discusses with Shevtsova her vision for the journal, and how her scholarship, research, teaching, as well as her numerous academic and outreach activities in multiple media, connected with her editorial commitment. This conversation took place on 19 June 2024.

Key terms: interdisciplinarity, mentorship, legacy, archives, memory, theatre cultures.

Philippa Burt *I want to start with the idea of a ‘mission’. I’ve heard you say a number of times that you are a ‘woman with a mission’, and we smile about it.*

Maria Shevtsova I always smile about it, Philippa. I think of it very ironically. It’s one way of putting myself into order!

So what is that ‘mission’, as you see it? A nice easy question to start with!

What a difficult question! *NTQ* is part of an overall bigger vision, which is the ‘mission’, if you like, to serve a useful and enriching purpose for the discipline and our colleagues. I’m talking about Theatre Studies and the interdisciplinary way in which I have always worked and which is integral to Theatre Studies. We need to learn about the theatre from a broad and multidimensional point of view. To know something in detail is also to know what that detailed focused study is in relation to a wider field that is the theatre, and includes more than theatre.

I don’t think you can be fully specialized if you haven’t got a resounding drum behind

you, an echo, reverberations of something bigger than the specific area you are working on. The resonance from the broader context opens out what you are focusing on in all sorts of unexpected and exciting ways, making it deeper, providing greater perspectives. So that is part of the ‘mission’.

NTQ is a channel that allows people to discover things about the theatre that they might not know, hadn’t thought about, or are aware [that] something is there by the way, and this ‘by the way’ starts to become really important. It is no longer ‘by the way’: it is the way.

I have always believed in the great powers of teaching. I never saw my academic work as a ‘job’. It was a vocation. Teaching is an extremely important practice. Why? Because it opens the world to people; it gives people a richer education, but it is also about searching, and asking questions, and owning one’s life. This is the foundation of being human, of understanding why we are here and what we are doing on this planet, and why it matters that we do something for each other.

I remember when I was your student that you talked about teaching as a vocation. Do you see something similar with your role as an editor?

I think that came with time. Editing, in any case, has similarities with teaching. You are shaping something as you teach; supervision, as you saw with your PhD, was about helping you to shape it, prodding you to see, gently shaking you into a direction that you might not have wanted or that you quite openly resisted! That is some of the skill that goes into editing.

A good editor, in my view – and certainly from my experience of editing – helps an author to realize what that author can do and what depths can be found. It is a realization of potential. Sometimes authors don't fully see the significance of what they are writing: they are too close to it, or they are harried because they've got to get something published for promotion, and, unfortunately, that's a reality that every academic has had to face. It is a way of developing an article so that it is not just an article, but a really *good* article, a wonderful article, a mind-blowing article. That is what editing, in my sense of it, is about.

Of course, that sense of it came with continual work in different ways. I have always worked on submitted articles in ways that are right for that unique article. 'One size fits none,' Peter Sellars would say. There is no set-in-stone system, no 'tick the boxes'. This is what we do when we are teachers who think about who we teach and with whom we are dialoguing in the classroom or over a PhD, or whatever we are dialoguing about.

The impetus on the side of the student or the author is not your impetus, and their voice has to be heard, but they also need to learn certain skills that make the work really sing. It is the learning of those skills – the techniques of writing, the subtleties of words, the clarity of your understanding as an author as to what you want to do. Most of the time when we write, we know that we want to do something, but we don't necessarily see the path to get there. A good editor helps with that; that is part of the editing process.

Another part of the 'mission' is to look ahead to what the journal might look like, to sense, to know what might be significant

areas, to know the occasion, like the tenth anniversary of Grotowski's death [NTQ 100, November 2009], or the milestone of a festival (as happens in this issue), or the need to remember somebody who has made a huge contribution, and to give them a space to sum up their life's work. That's the case with Eugenio Barba in NTQ 157 [February 2024]. It is knowing, as an editor, when something is important, and acknowledging people's achievements, their place in the world of theatre, and their place in history – which will certainly be the case with Eugenio.

The more I talk, the more I realize that you only develop the sense of what could or should be done with the experience of being an editor. You also learn how to go *under* the work of the journal, to feel its direction, to see it as part of a series of issues and not just a one-off, so that there is some sense of continuity. In NTQ 100, I talk about clustering and threads – that's my image – for pulling things together, not just in one issue, but across several issues. It is also about threading things over time, so that there are links within the clusters and between clusters, and then between the one-offs that just appear suddenly and are delightful; you want to smile at them and publish them!

This idea of threads and resonances is clear in your work on NTQ, but it also runs through everything you do. When working with directors, for example, you don't just see one production, you see ten, twenty, thirty of them – you see as much of their work as possible. You go under the surface, but you also ask others to go deeper with you.

Well, isn't that part of teaching? It is about stretching people. It is a way of being a catalyst for them to fulfil their own vision. This is one of the reasons why I am so interested in directors, because I think that directors, too, are pedagogues. Stanislavsky, for example, loved teaching; it was his calling, in a curious way, and it is what he pursued right through his seven studios – I'm including here the Povarskaya Studio, which only lasted for several months in 1905 and was his first attempt

to create a laboratory of theatre research. It was also about bringing out the full potential of human beings. Stanislavsky's extraordinary quality was that, as a great actor who loved acting, he understood that acting wasn't just a skill; it was actually an art, which was absolutely essential for human wellbeing. Now, that's a grand statement, I know, but the more I read Stanislavsky – especially the archival material that we don't have published access to – the more I see that the pedagogue in Stanislavsky actually seeps through everything he does. I think we, as teachers, could well be like that. It's not a bad model to follow!

I started editing journals when I was an early academic. I was approached by a social ideas journal, intrigued that I was thinking in a cross-disciplinary way and was trying to develop a sociology of the theatre. That team – political scientists, sociologists, and philosophers – felt I could make a useful editorial contribution precisely because I was asking why the arts were social and how we could study art as a social phenomenon while it was intrinsically an aesthetic one. My research was about art *in* society, not art *and* society.

So I started my editorial work in the social sciences and I learned critical skills just by doing it. I then worked on *Theatre Research International* for the International Federation of Theatre Research (IFTR, or FIRT in the French acronym), connected especially with young scholars. While there, I was clearly working in the field of the theatre, although from the sociological perspective that I had pursued while studying in France; I had also done a great deal of research on social semiotics, which was by no means popular when structuralism and what I called 'systemic semiotics' were all the rage.

I edited a special issue of *TRI* in 2001 on theatre and interdisciplinarity, which meant selecting people to discuss movement across disciplines within a field like theatre. I think theatre is inherently interdisciplinary. It's not randomly interdisciplinary, and one's thinking isn't necessarily random: it can be organized and thoughtful. Sorry, Philippa, but that's another big area of conversation!

I have also been on the Boards of other journals over the years (peer reviewing, too): one in Norway, two in Italy, and I've forgotten where else; I am still on the Board of *Critical Stages* and *Stanislavsky Studies*. Then I came to *NTQ*. Simon Trussler, who had founded *Theatre Quarterly* in 1971, asked me to take on the job, and it was quite clear that I couldn't say no. For a start, I liked the journal very much, and it had played a role in my own development: *NTQ* published my extensive sociology-of-theatre articles in 1989 [*NTQ* 17, February 1989; *NTQ* 18, May 1989; *NTQ* 19, August 1989; see also Shevtsova's collected essays, *Sociology of Theatre and Performance* (Verona: QuiEdit, 2009)]. Publishing such articles in theatre journals was unheard of in those times: 'We don't do sociology of the theatre, what is that?!' I was infinitely grateful that this journal had given me a hand; that *NTQ* was impressively open to the 'What is that?' question, rather than dismissive of it.

I'm glad you brought up your three 1989 articles. These are absolutely groundbreaking in terms of setting out what the sociology of the theatre is. You mentioned the difficulties of people not understanding what you were doing. Why do you think NTQ was willing to take them?

Now that's a crucial question because, yes, it was a sign of *NTQ*'s openness. You see, *NTQ*, like its predecessor *TQ* – and, like Simon, I always saw the continuity between the two – was never a themed journal, although themes bring writers together. It was also never the journal of an institution. *TRI*, for example, is the journal of the International Federation of Theatre Research, and so it has to be responsive to its membership and institutional structure. Nor did a particular teaching institution bind us to obligations regarding content.

NTQ was really an independent journal: independent of watchdogs and those kinds of pressures, although it had, and still has, its own pressures. It was a journal that could allow 'wait and see'. This is risky for a journal because the 'wait and see' approach means that you do not have guaranteed authors, yet you have to have enough material in the wings to put into a particular issue.

Being a non-group-oriented, non-coterie, non-institutional, independent journal – Simon said, in that NTQ 100 (which is when he essentially handed the journal over to me), that we were a ‘generalist’ rather than a specialist journal – meant that there were no safety nets and that really you had to be on the ball all the time. If you weren’t themed, how were your clusters and threads going to work? How did you find authors who might pick up the ecology thread, for example? How did you inspire people to write for NTQ? I was looking for several years for somebody who could talk about the impact of NGOs on the theatre and then, lo! It fell into my lap! [NTQ 147, February 2024.]

I have been proactive, suggesting people write articles to continue threads, or commissioning them. Journals that represent institutions or university departments can ask more openly for specific articles, perhaps because it is for their given group. NTQ has a broad readership and it doesn’t have a ‘party line’. Likewise, Simon and I were always clear about not having a political agenda, although we have never balked at publishing articles expressing political views or on theatre committed to political views.

No, not at all. I’ve noticed an increase in articles that tackle political issues and theatre over the last five years since you became sole editor. These cover a wide range, including climate change, Black Lives Matter, white supremacy, a re-evaluation of Chinese traditions . . .

Yes, but I have also tried to persuade authors, often by example, to be much braver about what constitutes ‘theatre’. They write on circus and ‘site specific’ as theatre, for example, but are wary of dance and opera as theatre. I courted dancers for articles, but they preferred their own, few, specialist journals, possibly because peer acknowledgement was better for their standing. But opera is put in a separate box, as is the case across society generally. I counter this attitude. Simon printed a keynote I had given at an IFTR conference on opera in the hope of breaking borders. No luck – and that was exactly twenty years ago [NTQ 80, November 2004]. Not to mention hybrids,

which were supposed to ‘belong’ to the visual arts!

What you have just been saying comes back to the point of the interrelation between different aspects of the journal work, but also different aspects of your life and your activities across the world. You are active, alert, and connected to the many festivals and conferences that you attend internationally, where you are always listening for publishable material. Not every editor is like that.

No human being is like another, and we are all made up of multiple aspects, so I think there is a point in life where you have to say, ‘I’m OK, and I need to do this,’ and not worry about whether institutions or individuals approve. It took me a long time to learn how to bite bullets instead of just accepting them coming at me. That’s something that probably most women have to learn: don’t accept the flipping bullets at all!

I work with several festivals, including the Craiova International Shakespeare Festival (for some eighteen years). I was known as their ‘International Consultant’, which was a fancy title, but it meant that I had the freedom to suggest, ‘Bring *x*, you would find this interesting.’ The big thing was that I could see shows in festivals that I couldn’t otherwise see.

I also speak frequently at festivals, give presentations, and am asked to give interviews with directors and actors. Once, in Transylvania, at the REFLEX Festival in Sfantu Gheorghe, I had an incredibly stimulating public conversation with the actors of Oskaras Korsunovas’s company from Lithuania. They had just performed a wonderful *Hamlet* that I had recommended to the director of the Festival. There was something like three hundred people at our talk, and the actors and I just quietly chatted. They weren’t too happy about conversing after a demanding performance. But it was a marvellous experience for them, too, because the spectators were exceptional, both in the theatre and during the conversation and question time. The actors actually commented on them, and thanked me, because they had come to Sfantu Gheorghe a little sceptically: ‘Why were we going into the middle of nowhere to do *Hamlet*?!’ And afterwards they said, ‘What a phenomenal audience; it was one

of the best that we've ever had . . .' And they'd been to Avignon, and all over.

It was exciting for me, too, to discover how wonderful this audience was – due, I learned, to this small town's immersion in high-quality theatre since the Second World War. Its managing and artistic directors made strong, beautiful theatre locally. People came and learned that there was this marvel called theatre! It wasn't easy to find somebody to write an article, though, and I looked elsewhere in Romania for help afterwards. There are many things that I looked for but never got. But this is one of those examples where my interest in interacting with spectators really showed – the sociologist of theatre in me thinking about performers interacting with audiences, and what that means socially, and who the social groups are who come, why they come, and what they take away from it, and how it might affect acting and directors' thoughts.

Come to think of it, I encountered another exceptional audience, rather like the Sfantu Gheorghe one, in 2019 at a festival in Bryansk, a sizeable and historically important regional city about 380 kilometres south-west of Moscow. Bryansk is very close to Belarus and Ukraine, from whose border areas a variety of theatre groups had come to perform. I was asked to give a public lecture on European theatre directors, which the organizers knew was my central research area and that I had published books and many essays on the subject. My large and mixed audience responded eagerly because, once again like Sfantu Gheorghe people, they had a theatre heritage to draw on; and, as their questions and commentaries showed, they were asking questions about the theatre of the kind that I have evoked just now. Maybe this broader sensibility comes with border territories, with the particular conditions of life on and between borders, where many families are likely to be ethnically mixed, and where war is felt quickly and terribly painfully, when your friend yesterday is your enemy today.

These sorts of questions about the roles of theatre in society are key, particularly in today's turbulent world. I'm sick of all this talk about 'luvvies', this denigration of actors that I have seen in Britain. I hear stories

everywhere of how actors are looked down upon. Probably the only country in the world where I've never heard anyone downgrade actors is Russia, but then Russia is a deeply theatre country and there's no getting away from it. That doesn't mean that conditions haven't been horrendous for Russians to work in – they have. But the love of theatre has managed to sidestep some of those conditions, as has the conviction that theatre matters.

To come back to the question of talking at festivals, interviewing, and so on, for many years: it had occurred to me that I was doing a sociology of the theatre in practice. It wasn't on paper and theory. Theory is extremely important, but theory without the practice doesn't necessarily help. Being hands-on with spectators, and their coming to talk with me afterwards, is thrilling – thrilling to see how people's eyes sparkle. Something you've said has triggered off something, and they ask for more. What can I say? It's exciting!

I have always believed it was important to find a way of approaching people. You can't just walk in and talk; you have to sense and feel who this audience is, look at them carefully. If I had started expounding my sociology of theatre theory, where would I have been with my audience? You can't do that. So you have to find the approach, a sense of togetherness, which scholars don't necessarily have easily, because scholarly work requires solitude for writing, solitude for working on archives. You know that better than anyone.

Yes. You are talking to dead people most of the time.

Well, you are talking to them, but you are also talking to yourself. You have to talk to yourself, because you are your own interlocutor. Bakhtin calls it an 'interior dialogue'. It questions some of what you are reading, and it allows you to see beyond the words on the paper, which is what you have to do when you are in an archive.

Talking with spectators is talking with someone who is already engaged with you. It's a different kind of talking with yourself when you are talking with others.

You mentioned that the awareness of your interlocutor is the sociologist in you, and this makes me

think of the mass of research that you did on spectators when you were in Australia, and the time spent with them learning and listening . . .

And it was important because they were all working-class immigrants interacting with community-made productions. I worked especially closely with immigrant Italians. That was really important for me, and is something that I would still like to do, but haven't had time.

I've also seen you in situations where you are going to speak to a group of people. You look at them, and what you are planning to say goes out the window and you respond directly to them. It's that responsiveness and awareness that comes back to the role of an editor.

I am thinking of one time in particular, in 2009, when you took twenty-four people, including MA students, PhD students, and new scholars who had just joined Goldsmiths, to Wrocław for the Zero Festival in celebration of the Year of Grotowski.

And we all stayed in a terrific hostel where we drank vodka!

Yes, we drank vodka when it was cold, we drank vodka when we were tired . . .

A bunch of you once made me drink vodka for breakfast to get rid of my cold!

You had to give a talk; it was one of the last days of the Festival. You stood up for your presentation and said, 'I had something prepared, but I am going to change it.' And it was the most remarkable hour, seeing you piece together all of these seemingly disparate things, linking Grotowski to the work you had seen at the Festival, and then to bigger questions about society, about the social, about the cultural. No notes in front of you – no PowerPoint slides, just talking – and everybody sat on the edge of their seats with their mouths open. One of the other Goldsmiths PhD students there, who was not one of your students but who had been really struggling with the question of spirituality in Grotowski's work, could barely speak afterwards. He came up to thank you and kept saying, 'You've shown me, you've guided me.'

It was incredible to see how you were able to see what resounded – not just with the group you had brought, but with the external scholars, actors from established groups like Song of the Goat and Teatr ZAR, young performers . . .

There were huge numbers of performers and young groups who were developing their own work and I thought were part of what I call the Grotowski lineage.

It was incredible how, within what felt like thirty seconds, you were able to look at the group – everybody coming with their own interests, their own questions – and find a way to weave all of that together in a presentation that sounded really well planned and polished.

That is very kind of you, Philippa, and I am really humbled by what you have said. But, you know, I wasn't working in a vacuum: I knew this was the city of Grotowski; I knew that many of the new scholars were here because Grotowski interested them; that many of the performers were devising groups, experimental groups, laboratory theatre groups; and they had come because it was an event for the Grotowski celebration.

I wasn't looking into a void. I had a context that helped me to understand, but I was also deeply interested in the spiritual dimension of Grotowski's work, which helped me to understand the great spiritual dimension of Stanislavsky's work. That is how things are interconnected and why the larger theatre context I was talking about earlier shows you things about the specific area that you are working on, which you may not have seen without that larger context. It took me a long time to understand how to write about the spiritual dimension in Stanislavsky fully. I recognized it, but didn't know how to get a handle on it. Grotowski, in some ways, offered me that handle.

What we are talking about here is long-term work. There is no short-termism in serious work on the theatre. You can't just do it for quick results. It has to grow with you and change with you, and sometimes it outstrips you, which is also important. That is the kind of development that Stanislavsky works on. It is about developing a human being.

The long term is development. It takes years to develop, and we are still developing – I know that I am still developing.

What you are saying now reminds me of something you said on the first day of my PhD. I felt totally

clueless. But you said two things that I now repeat to all of my students. First, that a PhD is a test of stamina – it is about the long term. Now that things have got tighter . . .

And harder. And more short-termist . . .

I can see how much I benefited from your saying early on that it is about stamina and needing to take your time. It gave me the freedom to stumble and to think.

Second, you talked about a PhD as the beginning of a life's work, but not your life's work, so not to be anxious. When you are talking about your own development, I'm aware that this includes your ability to go into a room in Poland and be sensitive to everyone. That is obviously something that you have developed over years.

If one has a sense of a life's work – and that expression suggests a kind of 'mission' – then one has to follow it through, intuitively, in some ways. You asked about directors. I was always interested in directors as much as I was in dance, teaching, and so on. Directors are a specifically interesting case because they have a life's work. They may not start out thinking, 'I have a life's work.' I'm sure Peter Brook, for example, didn't start out thinking it, but when he started the Bouffes du Nord it was quite clear – I was there on the opening night to see a fabulous *Timon of Athens* – that it was part of a life's work; and he did a number of very important things during his long life.

So directors might not use the term 'mission', but it is definitely their vocation. They might say that they pursue their ideas or that they are constantly exploring – the Russian directors would always say that, and the exceptional ones, like Yury Butusov, with whom I did a conversation in NTQ 156 [November 2023], keep exploring together with an ensemble company. So my 'director' isn't just a director imposing a view, or a director telling you where to stand. This is a director who prods the actors to come up with their own action and why they are doing it. Stanislavsky potently developed this principle for actors and directors from the mid-1920s until 1938.

If Stanislavsky comes to mind in this conversation about directors, it is because he left a legacy that survived and has been developed

by others ever since. Look at the idea that you, director, can work together with actors and be 'co-authors' of productions. Lev Dodin says 'co-author' – a Stanislavskian word. But to be a co-author requires a group of people who work with you over time. It isn't just a case of come in, get a role, and then go out and work on television. It means staying together over time, learning to forge a language together over time, learning to intuit, just by sitting with your partner, that, actually, today you can't say the line in this way to get the best from that actor; it has to be said another way. This kind of directing is, of course, difficult, but it does presume the long term because it is built on preceding interactions and on arcs of actions.

Directors are a really interesting case of long-termism, even in the case of directors who no longer have a permanent company to work with, and are eclectic and itinerant. Belgian Luk Perceval, for example, worked alongside [Thomas] Ostermeier at the Schaubühne in Berlin. He then worked at the Thalia in Hamburg – including a remarkable nine-hour trilogy, *My Family: Love, Money, Hunger* (2015–17), based on Zola – then Antwerp, Warsaw, each time with another company, and, meanwhile, a good deal of work at the Berliner Ensemble – much of this during Covid. And working through Covid certainly had its hazards. I remember Perceval telling me that, as he rehearsed *3SRTS* in 2021 in Warsaw (based on Chekhov's *The Three Sisters*), and despite precautionary measures, actors fell ill with Covid, he caught Covid, rehearsals were interrupted, resumed, interrupted; but they carried on to opening night and subsequent public performances, with their precautionary measures. It was tough going.

Still, even when directors like Perceval move from company to company and language to language, they are working out something that they have been asking themselves, as directors, about actors, about human life, about why the theatre matters, and how you might approach it. It is still a long-term project; they don't just shut the door on the theatre company and [*gestures wiping hands*] 'Job done. Next!'

I realized fairly young that, if I was going to work on directors from the perspective of the sociology of the theatre, then it wasn't enough to see one or two or three of their shows. You needed to see the body of work, and I think this holds for any study of directors. You needed to do what the literary scholars do. The Shakespeare specialists, for example, don't just read ten Shakespeare plays. They read the lot. Now, it's OK with texts, because you've got them in front of you and you can come back to them and say, 'Oh, what did Othello say at that moment and why did it matter?' But you can't do that with a stage production.

So how you see the work in order to say something about a particular director with confidence is a serious problem for an academic like myself because, very often, you have to travel to see that work; you have to understand where the director might be; what that director might be doing; how you get your tickets and pay for the airfare. The logistics of this is complex. I haven't seen everything I've wanted to see – I couldn't. There is neither time nor capital to do these things easily, and then there's the question of the house, your child, your students, other people in your life – you don't just live by yourself. You have to work out how to have access to, and be with, and understand the work of a particular director, because it is only by constant seeing that you actually get a decent idea of it. I'm sure that might explain why I have come to the conclusion that following a director is a nightmare! [*Both laugh.*]

Also, at some point you need to talk to a director. From that exchange comes a much deeper understanding of what you have seen. There are some shows that I've re-seen over the years, like Dodin's, for example. I used to have to travel to Russia to see something of his, or to Italy or France. But it takes time and effort to do that; it requires keeping connected with the company. It's logistically difficult, on top of the time and the money and the daily pressures upon you, including a journal, that somehow have to be handled while you are busy chasing directors.

I was fortunate to see Robert Wilson's *Shakespeare's Sonnets* in 2009 – 2009 again! – when

it premiered at the Berliner Ensemble. I travelled to Berlin because I was following Wilson. Here is the 'You can't just see one, you have to see at least five productions before you can start talking, but preferably ten', and so you go on down the line. My first introduction to Wilson – how fortunate was I! – was when I was a student in Paris. I was able to go to Avignon, where there was a fantastic organization that arranged post-show discussions among students, which was a training ground for me. The Avignon programme featured *Einstein on the Beach*. Who was this Wilson? Did I have a clue? No. Why are these Americans at the Avignon Festival? Did I have a clue? No. I later made it my business to find out, and discovered that France had a terrific cultural policy, and that one of the reasons Wilson was in Avignon was because the French government had funded his show. So you see, there's a lot more to festivals than meets the eye!

That was my first introduction to Wilson's work, and that's where I first met him. That was 1976 and we are now in 2024, so it's been a long time! We would have a couple of words here and there, and eventually a conversation developed between us. But that is the long term. *Einstein on the Beach* was so utterly new, and we were all completely flummoxed by it. It was the beginning of my following Wilson, and I am still following him. Soon I have to give a keynote about Wilson in New York – he will participate in the conference – and the question now is how to draw on however many years to present something that is presentable.

There are a couple of things you said that I would like to come back to. You described the importance of festivals like Avignon in introducing you to theatre work, but how they have also continued to be an important way of accessing work, which is, of course, key for academics, but also key for other people. We can go back to Transylvania and the idea of building a theatre culture, building an audience.

I think the work that you do as a scholar, speaker, and editor is the same thing: it is bringing the work that somebody – me, for example, as a student and still today – does not have access to,

and how you discuss it, place it in its context, and draw on that deep, human, long-term engagement and experience, gives me a way in to understand the work, which is incredibly special.

Well, that's part of the teaching process and part of the learning process, because you don't teach without learning yourself. I am still learning, and think, 'Why didn't I think about this before?!' [Both laugh.] This experience is humbling because you realize not only how much you don't know, but also the respect that you owe the world. 'O brave new world!' It's the positive, the sense of wonder at how amazing people can be, which is part of me and part of what I can impart through my better experiences to someone else. The shameful horrors of humanity are temporarily set aside.

I have often found myself thinking, 'If you know all this, why would you want to take it away with you? Give it to somebody as a gift.' So, yes, thank you for that generous comment, because it reminds me that – to put it crudely – a 'mission' can have some accomplishments.

All this concerns the big question of what a journal can do. How do we record for other people? How do we also expand access for other people? One of the things I didn't manage to do for *NTQ* – although, God knows, I tried – was to have much more material on Black British theatre in the journal. It was something that I started pressing Simon about before 2009. But you don't always find the people you seek; and they don't always respond. You can't force people, but I think a number whom I approached didn't think it was the journal for them. So maybe, in such cases, what Simon called the 'specialist' journals are the important journals, and a broader church like *NTQ* is not really for them. This having been said, the journal serves different audiences. *NTQ* has a wide international readership, and that can be professionally very useful for writers. Writers have emailed to tell me this about them. Several have spoken of *NTQ* as a really useful 'platform'.

One of my remits was not only to make *NTQ* widely accessible internationally, but also to invite writers – this word includes practitioners – from other countries. That was another difficulty because, when a language is not your first

language, you are not necessarily able to say everything you want to say; it's a struggle. I have several languages and know how difficult it can be to write well in another language. This is where the editor's work comes in, because the editor can guide that person. I've gone through I don't know how many drafts with writers whose first language is not English to pull the best out of them for the platform they need; but, more than the platform – they need to use their voice. A voice is also a cultural voice. There are cultural barriers; there are all sorts of cultural assumptions in all journals all over the world because they are culturally bound in many respects.

So how did one open the journal to all sorts of writers and not be too culturally bound, and not be constrained by fear of transgressing cultural behaviours? That is another thing – human tact, but there is also an editorial tact. But you edit as well as you can, and you keep on doing it and try to do your best, and that's about all you can say.

What I think have been the shortcomings of my tenure of this journal are not for want of trying. They are for want of succeeding. But one can't be all things to all people. Many writers have come to us precisely because we have a broad view. I am thinking of the marvellous essay about Pirandello being sent off to Latin America to promote Mussolini's politics through theatre [NTQ 151, August 2022]. That author used to be a diplomat and had access to diplomatic files, so I prodded him on various aspects, including a plea to get a photograph of a Mussolini decree referred to in the text – and we got it!

That is part of a journal's 'mission': not to be known because you are famous, but to have the journal known because it will provide channels for material people are researching. It then provides the channels for readers who are discovering something new, and that is so important. We are back at the beginning of our conversation.

Yes, this is also back to the openness of the journal and its threads and the clusters; and then there are the quirky offbeat articles that you realize two issues later actually tie in beautifully with x. Sometimes this is planned, and sometimes it's . . .

'Well spotted!' (as Simon would say). Yes, because the 'quirky' is part of the process, and an editor needs to recognize, respect, and follow it up. Sometimes it proves to be significant. In the last five years I've certainly followed up on the quirky!

As you were talking, I was thinking about the 'Wish List' that you wrote as part of the editorial celebrating the 100th issue of New Theatre Quarterly and Theatre Quarterly combined. We are now on the 200th issue.

One of the things that you were very clear about was your wish to make the journal more international. It has become even more international in the last five years than it was before, in terms of content and author: more international writers now, speaking from theatre cultures from around the world.

Well, I've tried, but apart from language problems, there are cultural problems regarding how to write. An editor has to find a way to overcome such difficulties for something that is bigger than the difficulties; that is, the capacity of a journal to relay and communicate.

I also remember saying in that 2009 editorial that I felt we needed to expand the Eastern and Central European side of things. I had seen so much wonderful theatre in the so-called 'East' – not just in Russia but in Poland, Romania, Hungary, Lithuania, Latvia – and I kept wondering why we knew so little about the theatre of these countries. I was interested in bringing more knowledge into the journal so the knowledge could be transmitted beyond the journal. That is part of what a journal does: it transmits knowledge and sustains cultural awareness.

Again, none of this is obvious. It requires an openness of spirit, which Simon and I both had in our very different ways. As he says in that same editorial, we were totally different, and it was the difference that held us together. We respected each other's position. He was very much a 'plays' man. I am very much a 'performance' woman. Those two things had to be balanced.

Simon basically gave me freedom and left me to run with it. He was already so busy by 2009 – and extremely busy after 2009 – doing his life's work, which included working with

all the famous British playwrights. His last editing work before he died was Tom Stoppard's *Leopoldstadt*, and Stoppard thanks Simon in the preamble to the play for their conversations about right words. In my tribute to Simon after his death [NTQ 142, May 2020] I said that nobody chiselled the word like he did, and nobody did. Not even Stoppard! Some of the playwrights quoted in that issue comment on how much they owe him as their editor. His was a big, big achievement.

Going back a little to what you were saying about conversations, and the gifts that you have received and are now bestowing . . .

I'm not bestowing. I'm sharing.

Yes, sharing. I am thinking about your Directors/ Directing [Cambridge University Press, 2009], but also the 'Covid Conversations' series published in NTQ [2021–22] during a period that was so frightening on a personal and collective level – health, but also in terms of the future of the theatre and society. You said that these Conversations were gifts to the readers.

I think the words I used were 'Christmas presents'! They were presents because I felt that, in such a harsh time, theatre was a healing power. Theatre, in any case, is a healing process, which is integral to the spiritual dimension of the theatre, about which people don't generally speak, but which I think needs more attention. The unknown of human life is palpable – you can sense it in the theatre – and it adds another dimension to you, the spectator; you leave with glimpses of that other dimension, which goes so deep that we don't quite have the words for it except to speak of 'soul' and 'spirit'. It is a process of inward and outward articulation at one and the same time, so that the inward takes form and shape through the body. This is palpable – your spine shivers, tears come to your eyes.

I remember wanting to check some things for the final chapter of *Rediscovering Stanislavsky* with Lev Dodin. We were having tea together, and I asked why we don't give enough attention to the healing qualities of theatre, to the spiritual dimension of theatre and how it affects the human soul: you can talk like that with a Russian. And he said:

'Well, Maria, it seems that people are shy to talk about such intimate things as their own soul.' Of course, he's absolutely right. There's a real shyness in approaching something that is so personal, as well as overwhelmingly difficult to grasp in words.

That final chapter was tremendously important for me. Questions of legacy are dodgy at the best of times! I used to talk about the dust of history settling on people – I used this image when writing about Ariane Mnouchkine – but it is more than the dust of history settling. It is really . . . again, the words are difficult. What do we say here? Legacy is something passed on, yes, but *how* is it passed on? How is the spiritual passed on when the spiritual is ineffable by definition? And yet it is passed on through the theatre, and the legacy of Stanislavsky's spiritual dimension is crucial. Stanislavsky used the word 'communion': there is communion between actors, between spectators, and between the actors working and the people who feel the work as they watch it. That is why live theatre is so important.

In my knowledge of contemporary theatre, Stanislavsky's legacy goes well beyond the obvious stuff written about him going to North America, and the 'Method', and so on. Legacy is not only material; it is something far more elusive, but it is no good writing a chapter of a book and saying, 'Oh, it's all ineffable!'

On the topic of legacy, in his editorial in NTQ 100, Simon talks about the shift towards the digital and the loss of the physical archive, the physical journal in your hand. This prompted me to think about our many conversations about the idea of the journal as an archive that captures a moment in time. As an editor, how consciously do you think of 'archive' when you are thinking about what to select and how to put articles together?

Well, for a start I don't select on my own. You and I read and discuss texts. We have peer review for NTQ. Sometimes members of the Advisory Board read texts and discuss. The actual choice is thus from multiple perspectives. Simon was far less 'academic'. But I suppose the 'buck stops' with the editor, to use that ghastly expression. This means that

you, the editor, have to take responsibility *as* the editor. Everybody's input is great, but the editor takes the brunt and the blame. That is how it is, and you have to accept it. Being an editor doesn't necessarily mean flowers; it can also mean rotten tomatoes!

I believe that we need to have a theatre memory. An archive is a memory, and that is why I have always talked about directors and productions and performances as 'living archives'. During a paper I gave in Morocco in 2015, titled 'Living Archives and Politics', I said that theatre was an ephemeral form, even though we digitalize it today; even though we can record it in ways that were inconceivable fifteen years ago. Digitalization is, of course, not the only form of memory, or the only way to remember.

I remember talking with Dodin – again, over a cup of tea! – about how you capture evanescent theatre, and asked why he never filmed his theatre. He has working videos that act as aide-memoires – there's your memory again – but he was always wary of filming his productions because, he explained, you watch a video, but that's not how it *felt*. He said, very wisely, that that is why precise writing about the theatre was indispensable.

Well, one could say that writing is a different form of articulation. It is very different from acting, for example. Still, a good critic writing about a production captures 'how it felt', captures what the details were, what the actor was doing in that moment, the atmosphere. That, I must agree with Dodin, is far more important than a digitalized version because it's less mediated. Digital mediation is all-encompassing.

It is this idea of capturing that is so important, which is why learning to be analytical is so important. You have to learn how to detail performances. It's not good enough to come out with generalizations. The analytical process allows you to find out how it *is*, and how and why it works. To see how it works is also to capture it. Analysis is not an intellectual exercise. It is a capturing *skill*. I've trained myself to be analytical, so I know that what I am watching is already working its way through my whole being and I am remembering it

already. In remembering the details, I am remembering more about the whole.

The process of writing about productions is not easy, but it becomes part of the archive; it is part of the memory. Archives don't have to be dead archives. You talked about talking with the dead when you work on archives, but, actually, you are talking with a living soul because it is all there in the archives. You just have to fathom it – that is really important.

There I was, in the archives of the Moscow Art Theatre, working on my book on Stanislavsky, reading papers virtually ready to fall apart in my hand – and they are from the 1930s, so you can imagine the quality of paper in Soviet Russia in the 1930s, and it is yellow and you are struggling to read it. You suddenly begin to realize that it is not a dead person any more, and that this paper is actually speaking to you. Isn't that right in your experience of archives – [Edward Gordon] Craig, for example?

Yes, my comment about the dead people was glib. When reading the material, you are present with them, hearing them, and on the yellowing paper you are seeing the pencil lines, seeing errors and little traces of the person.

Traces – yes. There I was, thinking, 'Goodness, this is all being done in 1935 to 1938.' The Reign of Terror began in 1936, and Stanislavsky is writing about how an actor has to find that actor's own way of doing something. The whole thing was about the freedom of the creative actor – *this* in a time of terror on a piece of paper that I am reading decades later. And there it is: a memory. And I am relaying that memory in my book. It's incredible when you think of archives in this way, because they are living archives, too. *NTQ* is this kind of memory.

How can future generations, looking back on us, as we look back on Shakespeare and his time, perceive it? How can they capture our works, not as museum pieces, but as something that lived in its time and can still live in time future? Now that's really quite startling.

My attitude to *NTQ* has increasingly been that this is an archive. One day somebody will need to find out something about, say, theatre

of the Covid period. What was that plague that they went through all those years ago? Then they fall upon some of those 'Covid Conversations': 'What? Oh really?' It is a way of communicating wonder, actually. Good, childlike wonder.

Saying it in those terms feels incredible. It feels like the default is to focus on the disaster of the now rather than the wonder of the now, and the wonder of the past and the future. That is a really important way of thinking about the responsibility of researchers, and of a journal: to try and share it with the future.

Indeed. I think all human beings have a responsibility. It is like responsibility for the planet – now *there* is a dire situation, if ever there was one. The planet is screaming for help. We are all responsible; we are all accountable for our actions. Accountability for action is fundamental to how a human being lives a life, and so we have to be accountable to this universe. Memory is part of that accountability. Maybe that is too highfaluting a way of putting it, but I think it is vital.

If a journal is just a *plodding* journal, then we might as well not do one. I can go and grow carrots – it would be far more helpful to the universe than a *plodding* journal! I think all journals are memories. I think that any editor, conscious that it is memory, takes the time to make it a substantial memory. Why do we want somebody fifty years from now saying, 'Oh, they wrote a lot of tosh!'

I remember Pierre Bourdieu commenting on the difficulty, for a sociologist, of trying to get a sense of the time and the period, of what hasn't been documented, the idea of the bigger context. With your 'Covid Conversations' you give a sense of the time. This is part of the importance of them being dialogues.

That is sweet of you to say. The 'Conversations' directors are all North American directors, which was by design. It was the year of the elections and the question was whether Trump would win again. It was a pivotal moment for the United States. I thought that it would be to the point to hear what the Americans had to say about the specific problems that they were grappling with as artists,

so let's hear them. And, speaking of archives, when you read them together, they are all very different.

Also, I know these directors. I worked with The Wooster Group as a performer in one of their shows. I didn't have to go through complicated paths to have access to them. Plus, it was a terrible, difficult time, and I didn't have the strength to record and then translate and edit from other languages. Working in English was a matter of practicalities. So I picked up the phone, and said, 'How about it?' And they all said, 'Of course!' and we did it. I was lucky: I didn't even have to ask more than once.

I talked with Peter Sellars about his digital projects, and it struck me forcibly that they were leaving a memory. Our conversation was an archive because we were talking *now*, not yesterday, about his recent opera productions – work he could no longer do. It suddenly hit me that we were recording, archiving, during a time that was pivotal not only in terms of Covid and Trump, but also of the rest that was going on in the world. Hopefully someone will look at these Conversations one day to find out what the theatre was like during these years, what happened to the theatre, and how theatre workers responded to the situation, and what they did about it.

All of these directors kept on working as they could, as we kept on working on the journal, as I noted in that May 2020 issue commemorating Simon. People reading it then knew that I was referring to the Covid period, but people reading the journal in the future might have to ask what this period was. That is, if it *is* read in the future: right now, our world is terrifying.

But most of the time I am not thinking about archives for *NTQ*. I'm thinking about the living journal now, and what it is going to be like, and what else we can do, and that I have to get it to the press on time. This is the immediate 'here, today, now'.

I want to go back to the lines between the editor, the teacher, and the mentor. I've seen how you, as editor, work as a mentor, and I know from publishing elsewhere that that's not the case across the board. Everyone has a different editorial style.

Could you talk a little more about the very hands-on, personal approach that you have with scholars?

I think that mentorship is crucial in life. Several years ago I asked someone to be my mentor! I'm laughing because it is so funny to think that, at my age then, you could be so absolutely childlike and ask, 'Would you please be my mentor?' I was startled to hear from this very well known scholar, much older than me, saying: 'Don't be ridiculous. You are *my* mentor!' It felt like a balloon being deflated!

The idea, however, was sincere: I felt at the time that I needed some guidance. That is what a mentor is. My belief in mentorship – sustained mentorship – may well be why I take the time and the trouble to guide authors through several revisions, if necessary; such authors can be early career or established. But if you guide somebody through revision, and they are watching what you are doing and seeing why you are doing it, they actually do start going on the path and make it their own: that's really the process of mentoring. I have seen its benefits, so it is worth doing. The snag is that it is incredibly time- and energy-consuming.

Well, this connects to what you said earlier about how every article has different necessities. I saw you speaking to each one of your PhDs differently according to theirs. During my first couple of years, you knew that I needed the soft, caring approach, and then, after I had developed enough self-belief, you took to more direct comments and criticisms as a way of guiding me.

One of the things that I most admired about you was that you were so focused on learning and developing that you knew what I was doing. The approach has to be differently tailored to different people.

But that takes an immense amount of time and labour on your part.

Yes, but I always think . . . that writing at its best is seamless. You don't have to rub people's noses in what you are saying. It is enough to be clear. I always write from my sociology of theatre perspective because the theories that I explored for many years have

become my working principles and everyday language.

I don't think, for instance, that I could have written *Rediscovering Stanislavsky* as I have without studying Pierre Bourdieu closely, which is why such concepts as 'habitus' became part of my normal parlance. I would not have seen the full significance of Stanislavsky's emergence from a distinctive habitus. Industrialists who were patrons of the arts, several key ones Old Believers of Russian Orthodoxy whose values had marked him profoundly – not written about. His connection – also not written about – to some of the greatest painters of his day, the great painters of the Silver Age. His connection to composers and singers – some of the most renowned of his time.

I realized that the only word for this was 'habitus': shared social class roots; shared values; shared cultural backgrounds; shared faiths and beliefs; shared expectations and aspirations. That's habitus – the most appropriate and precise word for specifying the interlacing behaviours and practices that shaped people whose context supported them, collectively *and* individually, to create.

Bourdieu was really the only person who encouraged my research in the sociology of the theatre and, for that, I owe him a great deal. So you see, Philippa, what goes around comes around, in the end!

Do the theatre and the discipline of Theatre Studies still matter?

More than ever! Theatre work is under-respected, and yet it is crucial to societies. It

is a communal space where people are together, sharing the creative work of others and absorbing, at an unconscious as well as practical level, how to be creative themselves.

Human beings have enough to deal with in everyday life, so there is little room left for freedom, imagination, empathy, and compassion. Then there are wars. The theatre is a place where we learn subconsciously about empathy and compassion, but also about injustice, cruelty, and violence, and the imperative of social change. It is inspiring, activating a sense of beauty, a sense of striving towards something bigger than ourselves. All this fosters hope and healing. It lifts us out of our everyday, not for escapism, but for fulfilment.

From my point of view regarding *New Theatre Quarterly*, the editor's role, among other roles that we have discussed, is to create a context for the varieties of theatre that co-exist in the world and open the world to us. After all, theatre is an integral part of the multi-faceted lives that humans live, and it leads us, beside other leads, to make sense of them.

Thank you very much, Maria, for agreeing to do this interview – and for your tireless and enduringly inspiring editorship of New Theatre Quarterly over so many years.

Editor's Note

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