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**SHAKESPEARE IN THE
THEATRE: CHEEK BY JOWL**

Peter Kirwan



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in the Theatre:
Cheek by Jowl

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SERIES PREFACE

Each volume in the *Shakespeare in the Theatre* series focuses on a director or theatre company who has made a significant contribution to Shakespeare production, identifying the artistic and political/social contexts of their work.

The series introduces readers to the work of significant theatre directors and companies whose Shakespeare productions have been transformative in our understanding of his plays in performance. Each volume examines a single figure or company, considering their key productions, rehearsal approaches and their work with other artists (actors, designers, composers). A particular feature of each book is its exploration of the contexts within which these theatre artists have made their Shakespeare productions work. Thus, the series not only considers the ways in which directors and companies produce Shakespeare, but also reflects upon their other theatre activities and the broader artistic, cultural and socio-political milieu within which their Shakespeare performances and productions have been created. The key to the series' originality, then, is its consideration of Shakespeare production in a range of artistic and broader contexts; in this sense, it de-centres Shakespeare from within Shakespeare studies, pointing to the range of people, artistic practices and cultural phenomena that combine to make meaning in the theatre.

Series editors:
Bridget Escolme, Peter Holland and Farah Karim-Cooper

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Introduction

Who are Cheek by Jowl? The question is perhaps the most obvious with which to begin a book about one of the most acclaimed theatre companies of the last half-century, but as Declan Donnellan sets out in his acting masterclass in book form, *The Actor and the Target*, the search for insight defies not only simple answers but also simple questions.

Trying to answer ‘*Who am I?*’ is a lifetime’s work for the individual, and indeed the more we discover ourselves, the more we realise that we don’t know ourselves at all. If, then, we cannot properly answer the question about ourselves, how can we possibly answer it about someone else? (Donnellan 2005: 76)

When the actor asks ‘Who am I?’ they risk settling for an easy description that will ultimately paralyse them, because any answer that can be so easily distilled is static. Donnellan prefers different questions:

What questions would help Irina [his hypothetical actor] more? ‘*Who would I like to be?*’ is more useful because it implies an answer that moves. ‘*Who would I like to be?*’ is even more useful when asked with a near opposite such as: ‘*Who am I afraid I might be?*’ (Donnellan 2005: 76)

For thirty-five years, Cheek by Jowl has been keeping actors moving by changing the questions. Donnellan's ethos of removing the fear that blocks actors, rather than telling actors what they should do, is married with Nick Ormerod's responsive designs in a 'symbiotic indivisibility' (Prescott 2008: 70) that grows organically around the work of the actor, rather than presenting cages to which the actor is confined. As Ormerod puts it, 'I want to make the actors as free as possible to move. Movement and flow keep the play alive' (2016). At the centre of Cheek by Jowl is an ethos of potential rather than definition.

This study of Cheek by Jowl's work on Shakespeare is the first book-length scholarly study of the company, a project that necessitates some definition of who Cheek by Jowl are. On some levels, this is straightforward. Cheek by Jowl is an acclaimed international touring company, directed by the professional and personal partnership of Donnellan and Ormerod, which presents classical (and occasionally new) plays in three languages.¹ The company began touring productions around the UK on a shoestring budget in 1981, supported by the Arts Council with a grant of £6,000; Cheek by Jowl was a beneficiary of the insight and acumen of Ruth Marks, 'responsible for promoting and championing some of the best of 1980's touring theatre from within the Arts Council' (Reade 1991: 12). Then, with support from the British Council, the company extended its tours across continental Europe and beyond, establishing a reputation for 'the reappraisal of classic texts' (Rutter 2005: 346), usually with a contemporary or timeless setting that made the productions feel like new writing. Cheek by Jowl has toured to over 300 cities across six continents, launched countless careers and begun producing its own Russian and French work.² The company has a recognizable and influential style, and in Europe is ranked alongside the great European auteurs.³ And as the company's name – a quotation from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* – may suggest, Shakespeare is core to its repertoire.

The constant motion of Cheek by Jowl frustrates easy definition, however. The company may have an administrative office at London's Barbican Centre as part of its Artistic Associate status, but the productions are always on the move, often dropping in for a mere handful of performances in any one country, including in recent years the UK. The company is clearly part of the European theatrical establishment – as recently as July 2016, Donnellan was awarded the Golden Lion of Venice for Lifetime Achievement, the latest in a long line of honours and celebrations – and yet the company still prefers mid-sized venues that allow intimacy between audience and company.⁴ Several of the company's innovations of its first decade – a commitment to colour-blind casting, productions featuring an all-male company (Chapter 3), the use of actors as musicians, the distinctive practice of overlapping scenes (Chapter 4) – are now common practice in British theatre, making it harder to pin down the elusive Cheek by Jowl style.⁵ And artistically the company has refused to settle, with recent productions introducing video projection, live filming and even pre-built sets.

The one constant of Cheek by Jowl is its prime directive: the company exists to serve the artistic work of Donnellan and Ormerod, as perhaps best articulated in a 1991 policy document.

We are a director-led company. The reputation of Cheek by Jowl is intrinsically bound up with that of Declan Donnellan and Nick Ormerod. One of the reasons for their continued success is their attention to detail. Shows are regularly visited, reworked and re-rehearsed on tour; casting is meticulous and takes months; plays are only chosen after weeks of reading and debate ... we are determined not to compromise our standards, nor to cease our exploration of increasingly challenging work. (Cheek by Jowl 1991a: 3)

As the minutes of a 1995 board retreat state, 'CbyJ IS Declan and Nick's work,' and the company's board exists to provide a

regular fixed framework for this work (Cheek by Jowl 1995a). The relationship between Cheek by Jowl and Donnellan and Ormerod, however, is more of a tight Venn diagram than an exact synonymy. Donnellan and Ormerod have always worked regularly outside of Cheek by Jowl; they have directed classics, new work, musicals, opera and films, and among their more notable extracurricular activities can be found the British premieres of Lope de Vega's *Fuente Ovejuna* (National Theatre, 1989), Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* (National Theatre, 1992 and 1993) and Lee Hall's stage adaptation of *Shakespeare in Love* (Noel Coward Theatre, 2014). For actors who have worked with Donnellan and Ormerod both within and without Cheek by Jowl, such as Joy Richardson and Orlando James, there is no difference in the process (James 2016; Richardson 2016). On the other hand, Cheek by Jowl has on two occasions produced work with other artists at the helm: Calderon's *The Doctor of Honour* (1989) was directed by Lindsay Posner, who had formerly served as assistant director on *The Man of Mode* (1985), and in 1997 long-standing cast member Timothy Walker directed the British premiere of Tennessee Williams's *Out Cry*, with Ormerod designing.

If Cheek by Jowl doesn't exactly equate to Ormerod and Donnellan, however, it is the space in which they work most freely; as the policy document states, 'It is the environment in which their best work is likely to be done and the means by which it can most easily be taken to audiences throughout the country' (Cheek by Jowl 1991a: 3). Ormerod and Donnellan begin rehearsals with a clean slate – they don't present box designs on the first day or tell actors how they will interpret the text. Rather, design and interpretation emerge through the process of rehearsal, meaning that set, costumes, lighting designs and even some roles are decided very late in the process, which can cause a clash of priorities in larger institutions; as Ormerod notes, at the National 'things are required 13 weeks in advance and Declan hates planning things. That works fine with Cheek by Jowl, because we start with a tabula rasa ... out of which the best work comes' (Curtis 1994). Actor Fausto

Cabra sees this as the risk-taking that makes the company unique:

[The] work starts from the human beings who are venturing on a journey on the stage together. Ideas, images, expedients, special effects, breathtaking scenes, the director's intelligent rendition of a play etc. must be subordinate to that starting point ... What Declan and Nick do is, in the highest sense of the term, a theatre of research, since it explores the essence of the theatrical question: how to reproduce life? (Cabra 2018)

Cheek by Jowl is the environment that enables Ormerod and Donnellan to realize their most complete creative process while being supported by a dedicated team sensitive to the requirements of the work and to deliver this to a network of receptive international theatres. In 2005, Cheek by Jowl entered into an innovative residency at the Barbican (then programmed by Louise Jeffreys) to produce three annual seasons pairing an English and a Russian production, for which the Barbican remodelled its main auditorium to allow an audience of only 400 people to sit on the stage, beginning with a double bill of *The Changeling* and *Twelfth Night* (Coveney 2006; Cheek by Jowl 2007c);⁶ Les Geméaux in Sceaux is a current favourite for opening tours, with its willingness to go dark long before opening to allow for extended rehearsals on the stage (Horsley 2016). Cheek by Jowl is devoted to the ideal of the tour, creating portable work that will speak to a multilingual audience and to the idea that a production is never 'fixed' (Donnellan 2009: 71).

This book chooses, then, to focus on Cheek by Jowl as a company rather than on Donnellan and Ormerod as individual theatre-makers, and early modern drama is where Cheek by Jowl and Donnellan/Ormerod most consistently overlap (see Appendix). Donnellan has 'an intense relationship with the work of Shakespeare' (Donnellan 2009: 77), and to date the company has presented some twenty-two productions of

sixteen early modern plays in English, Russian and French, as well as others outside the Cheek by Jowl framework. Some of these rank among the most canonical of twentieth-century Shakespeare productions, and others have received less discussion. While this book cannot be exhaustive, the case studies selected exemplify the company's approach to the radical reinterpretation of Shakespeare.

The Cheek by Jowl family

At the opening of *Measure for Measure* (2013–), the lights rose on a tightly packed body of individuals standing upstage, all dressed differently: a prisoner, nun, policeman, prostitute, men in suits. They moved downstage, their eyes fixed forward, and paused. They circumnavigated the stage, completing a full loop, then crouched together. They looked up and crossed the stage, staring at the heavens, before stopping and turning to look again at the audience. The group moved on but this time left behind a single suited man still looking at the ceiling. The group completed another circuit and stopped, staring at the lone man, who began walking again before realizing he was alone. He and the group stared at one another from across the stage and reached out their hands towards one another, the group mirroring the man. To the man's apparent discomfort, the group then got onto their knees and began crawling towards him, before moving collectively to bring out a single chair that he reluctantly, slowly sat in. All of this happened in silence.

I will return to this sequence in Chapter 6, but this opening also serves as a metaphor for Cheek by Jowl's work. The production began with a group that moved and functioned as one, but produced individuals from within itself; the group does not forbid individual identity, but the individual's actions are inextricable from their influence on the rest of the ensemble. While Ormerod and Donnellan are the only constants in the

Cheek by Jowl story, their work is characterized by close relationships and long-term collaborations with a large family of contributors.⁷ It is testament to the Cheek by Jowl ethos that every member of the UK-based touring company – from the actor playing Hamlet to the assistant stage manager – is paid the same (Cheek by Jowl 1991a: 1). It is worth noting a number of the key players in this history.

Donnellan and Ormerod met at Cambridge University in the 1970s, both studying Law, and their first experience of a European Shakespeare tour was as actors, with Donnellan playing Lennox and Ormerod the Second Murderer in *Macbeth* (Curtis 1994). Ormerod went to design school following graduation, while Donnellan was called to the Bar, and the two worked separately in theatres and odd jobs until 1979 (Reade 1991: 12). The year 1980 saw them collaborate on a fringe production of *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, but it was an Arts Council grant of £6,000 – applied for under the last-minute name ‘Cheek by Jowl’ – that allowed the newly founded company's first production, *The Country Wife*, to premiere at the Edinburgh Fringe. With the exceptions noted above, they have directed and designed every Cheek by Jowl production, and apart from a brief hiatus between *Much Ado about Nothing* (1998) and *Homebody/Kabul* (2001–2) – Donnellan and Ormerod needed a break and, as Barbara Matthews says, ‘without Nick and Declan, and their work, there was no company’ (2016) – they have kept the company in constant production of new work.

Ormerod suggests that ‘it's best to work from a permanent team, or as permanent as possible in this changing world’ (Donnellan and Ormerod 1996: 85). Cheek by Jowl's official ‘Artistic Associates’ (Cheek by Jowl 2018a) are its most regular collaborators.⁸ These include Paddy Cunneen (music), Jane Gibson (movement), Judith Greenwood (lighting), Owen Horsley (direction), Catherine Jayes (music) and Patsy Rodenburg (voice), but the company enjoys long-standing relationships with several artists, particularly for their Russian and French work. Several of the associates work regularly

with Donnellan and Ormerod outside of Cheek by Jowl, and their long-term collaborations have enabled the creative teams to develop a ‘common language’ (Donnellan and Ormerod 2016) that contributes seamlessly to the Cheek by Jowl style. Regular trusted collaborators have a great deal of creative responsibility – Horsley was asked to give notes in his fourth week as assistant director and was co-director for the recast production of *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* in 2012–13 (Horsley 2016); Angie Burns, who has costumed the company since the late 1980s, takes control of fastenings, cut and fitting based on Ormerod's drawings, noting the trust placed in her (Greenwood 1998: 22); Michelangelo Marchese, associate director for *Périclès* (2018), takes a prominent role in the rehearsal room; and Gibson, who has served as movement director on almost every English- and French-language Cheek by Jowl production since the early 1990s, ‘think[s] as a director would think’ (Boiffier 2016), her physical work integral to the actors’ embodiment. Assistant directors, including Horsley, Marcus Roche and Kirill Sbitnev, often stay with the company across several productions. The artistic influence of long-term contributors such as Cunneen and Greenwood reverberates across the company's work. While these collaborations are key to the company's success, however, freedom is also essential – all of the associates are employed on a freelance basis, meaning that the Cheek by Jowl work is a creative choice for these experienced theatre-makers rather than an obligation.

Equally important to the company's success is the administrative team. Barbara Matthews made up the third of Cheek by Jowl's leading triumvirate from the early 1980s until the end of ‘Act One’ (Matthews 2016) in 1998. The executive director is responsible for implementing Donnellan and Ormerod's vision in practice, and Matthews' success at this was such that she was able to establish Cheek by Jowl Management Services, formalizing the informal mentoring she was doing for other small businesses (Cheek by Jowl 1991a: 1). The company's archives at the V&A demonstrate the extraordinary complexities of arranging high-profile international tours

and generating funding while also preserving the company's distinctive requirements: single rooms for company members, appropriate rest days and other accommodations designed to ensure comfortable working conditions for all (Cheek by Jowl 1995b). Matthews' business acumen had an influence on programming; noting that *Philoctetes* would not support a middle-scale tour by itself, the company paired it with *The Tempest* for the 1988–9 schedule, to enormous success (Matthews 2016). Matthews established the essential framework of the Cheek by Jowl tour that the company's successive executive directors (Roy Luxford, Griselda Yorke, Beth Byrne and Eleanor Lang) have maintained. Now that the company produces work in several countries, the role of the administrative office and tour personnel in realizing large-scale international tours on several different models is ever more important. The Russian model in particular, overseen by Russian producer Anya Kolesnikova, keeps productions in repertory for years, with perhaps one or two revivals a year, meaning that productions such as *Boris Godunov* and *Twelfth Night* have a particularly complex performance history.

Perhaps most importantly, though, Cheek by Jowl is the acting ensemble, central to a company ethos that is built around the craft of the actor, as expounded in *The Actor and the Target*. The particular requirements of Cheek by Jowl's work – the long international tours and the fully integrated ensemble practice that often has most company members on stage for the majority of the play's running time – mean that the company's casting practices prioritize establishing an ensemble who can work well together over individual stars (Byrne 2016). Infamously, Cheek by Jowl never holds open auditions, relying instead on trusted casting directors such as Siobhan Bracke and on established relationships. Orlando James recalls his audition thus:

If you're a new actor for them, they won't focus on the play. They'll just want to see how you perform, and how you react to direction, and how open you are to play. So you're

just asked to learn a speech that relates to the subject matter of the play, or just the period, and you'll come and do that. Then, if you get a recall, then they'll start going into the thing, and at that point, you start to do it fully. You act opposite an actor; you prepare a scene or speech, and you have a partner to play it with and to work on it with, and Declan will be there and work with both of you as well. I was very surprised when I first started helping them with auditions that I was getting as much direction and notes as the person auditioning! Because that's just how he works – he creates that environment there. (James 2016)

In the UK, the company has often hired actors straight out of drama school, and the company is regularly spoken of as a 'training ground for British theatre' (Moreton 2016) or 'a nursery to young talent' (Rutter 2005: 346). The number of now-famous names who took major roles with *Cheek by Jowl* in one of their first jobs – Gwendoline Christie, Michelle Fairley, Amanda Harris, Tom Hiddleston, Anastasia Hille, Tom Hollander, Marianne Jean-Baptiste, Paterson Joseph, Adrian Lester, Matthew Macfadyen, Stephen Mangan, David Morrissey, Saskia Reeves, Michael Sheen, Olivia Williams – is indicative of the company's eye for promising talent and/or of the value of *Cheek by Jowl* in consolidating the young actor's craft, and this reputation led to the experiment of the RSC Academy in 2002, with Nonso Anozie playing a lauded Lear at the age of twenty-four. But the directors like to work repeatedly with valued collaborators. In the 1980s, the names of Keith Bartlett, Duncan Duff, Timothy Walker and Anne White appeared regularly; more recently, recurring collaborators in the English productions have included David Collings, Orlando James and Peter Moreton. This desire is met most successfully in the Russian and French work, where working practices and permanent ensembles have allowed Donnellan and Ormerod to work repeatedly with actors such as Alexander Feklistov and Andrei Kuzichev (Russia) and Camille Cayol, Christophe Grégoire, Xavier Boiffier and Cécile Leterme (France) for over a decade.

Personal relationships sit at the heart of Cheek by Jowl. As Donnellan writes:

The idea of a family is important to me. A piece of theatre has to be moving in some way, and for that I need an emotional docking, not just with Nick but with all the people involved, where they turn up on time not because they're professionals, but because they've made an emotional commitment to the rest of the cast. (Curtis 1994)

Ormerod and Donnellan's own personal and professional relationship has remained central to the company's identity since the two founded it in 1981 as a way of establishing their creative partnership. Whether in the regular mentions of the pair's home, anecdotes about their car crashing on the way to their first Edinburgh production or in the constant inclusion of both men in interviews that would normally focus on a single director, Cheek by Jowl maintains the consistent message that the company is founded on a conversation, an exchange, an interaction.⁹ In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the quotation that forms the company's name is preceded by Demetrius's statement (threat or promise) that 'I'll go with thee' (3.2.338); in Donnellan and Ormerod's unusual practice of following their touring productions to almost every venue over tours that can last years, they literally do.

This book

This book is not a comprehensive history of every Shakespeare production Cheek by Jowl has created, nor a study of Donnellan's acclaimed approach to acting – for which there is no better guide than *The Actor and the Target* itself, of which actor Xavier Boiffier says, 'really, it's him. It's not like intellectual theory, it's really about experience' (2016). Rather, what follows is a study of the symbiotic relationship

between Cheek by Jowl and Shakespeare: what the company's productions of early modern drama illustrate of the company's practice, and what in turn Cheek by Jowl's work reveals about the plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. Most of the best writing hitherto on the company, such as that by Paul Prescott (2008), uses only brief descriptions of moments from several productions to trace broader techniques or ideas. By contrast, this book uses detailed case studies – two productions per chapter – to pursue the implications of Cheek by Jowl's practice for particular works in depth. My choices of focus are both pragmatic and arbitrary: this is not a 'best of' Cheek by Jowl, and I apologize to those whose favourite productions are not adequately represented. I prioritize productions from the 1990s onwards, as the first decade of the company's history is so eloquently covered by Simon Reade's *Cheek by Jowl: Ten Years of Celebration* (1991). I have myself seen all of Cheek by Jowl's productions since *Othello* (2004) live in the theatre, many several times, and have supplemented my own memories with recordings, promptbooks, tour reports and the correspondence of the company's archives, as well as new interviews with the company's alumni.¹⁰

Another danger that occurs when writing about Cheek by Jowl is the risk of canonizing individual performances. Among the many distinctive aspects of Cheek by Jowl's practices is that the production is never finished. While the assistant director, assistant stage manager and tour manager keep the show on the road, Donnellan and Ormerod drop in regularly to as many venues as they can, and all of the actors I have spoken to remark on the constant notes and re-rehearsal sessions, sometimes occurring as late as the third-to-last show before the end of a two-year tour. As Peter Moreton puts it, 'to my knowledge, there's no other company that has notes every night before a show' (2016). Adrian Lester goes further:

The productions he directs are alive. He avoids 'fixing' his work. It keeps changing the more it is performed. Declan will come to see the production and the next day

during notes he will say ‘Well, it looks like your belief is embedded in knowing what you’re doing, so ... in that scene, why don’t you come in from over there?’ And that simple unrehearsed change reignites you and everyone on stage with you. It will be an unrehearsed physical moment surrounded by an emotional understanding that will play itself out fresh in front of the next night’s audience. It really blows the cobwebs off. At other moments in notes sessions Declan will happily say ‘I’ve never got that bit quite right, and I realised yesterday watching you after your seventieth performance that I know what I’ve done wrong’, and then he’ll completely redirect the scene for the better. He never stops working. (2016)

Donnellan and Ormerod’s visibility and participation is a unique part of the Cheek by Jowl brand, and speaks to the company’s unusual investment in the touring show as a constantly evolving work of art. The emphasis is on process and the lived moment, rather than on fixing a finished product; even the company’s live recording of *Measure for Measure* was re-edited before being integrated into an education package (Kirwan 2018). The Cheek by Jowl production is more than usually inconstant and changing, fresh and flexible. The reader’s own memories of seeing the productions I discuss will, I hope, both align with and vary interestingly from my own reports.

My first chapter spans the broadest range of Cheek by Jowl’s history, with a particular eye on the developmental process of a production. I begin with the company’s most recent English-language production, *The Winter’s Tale* (2016–17). The company graciously allowed me to join them in the rehearsal room for a week, and my account of the production here introduces some of the preliminary work and experimentation that goes into creating a Cheek by Jowl production, including rehearsal methods, abandoned choices and underpinning ideas. That production’s partial setting in Roscommon, where Donnellan grew up, serves as pretext to consider Cheek by