

**Interview with British Playwright Mark Ravenhill for the
RADAC's *Coup de Théâtre* Journal**

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Kösterbergstraße, 62
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Time: 10:10 p.m.

Length: Approximately ten minutes

(Almost verbatim) transcript

(): I could not hear the exact word so I replaced it by a different word taking into account the context as much as possible

...: Incomplete sentence (as recorded)

Italics: Oral markers that can be edited out for clarity without a significant loss of meaning

CYRIELLE GARSON: We are currently interested in having a reassessment of what has been known as *In-Yer-Face* theatre and as a major figure of the “nasty nineties” as well as a very prolific playwright in the 2000s, what do you think remains of this strand of theatre today?

MARK RAVENHILL: *Well*, I think definitely what happened with the explosion of that sort of energy of playwriting in the 90s was that it did really convince British theatres that new writing was an exciting thing to do. So obviously there have been all sorts of fantastic new plays before that, but there was still a sort of sense that new plays may be something you ought to put on, and that you had to (moderate) the number of new plays you put on because they might not find the audiences and stuff. But, *you know*, I think that excitement around those plays in the mid-to-late nineties really convinced, *you know*, big theatres like the National Theatre now just puts on a lot *lot* more new plays. So I think even though all of the plays, *you would say*, have anything that much in common with the plays of the 90s I just think, it did give a big..., lots of people have been pushing for twenty, thirty years to push new plays more into the centre of the repertoire but *I think* that final maybe the final kick *sort of* came from those plays in the 90s that convinced other theatres that putting on new plays wasn't the sort of slightly worthy but money-losing option.

CYRIELLE GARSON: I think this has been very beneficial indeed to the new writing scene in Britain. The first decade of the new millennium was fantastic in that respect and it seems to me that new concerns have recently arisen due to the financial cuts.¹ But in terms of the strand itself that Aleks Sierz called *In-Yer-Face* theatre, do you think there's anything left of that sort of aesthetics or themes that are still present?

MARK RAVENHILL: *Well*, I think actually what's more interesting about those groups of plays that emerged from sort of 94-95 through to about 99. I guess it's a period of about five years. I think what's much more interesting is how different those plays are from each other. So a Martin McDonagh play *I think* is almost entirely different from a Martin Crimp play, a Sarah Kane play and a Mark Ravenhill play. I think the danger sometimes with *In-Yer-Face* is that you start to find the things that are similar with those plays and not the things that are different. And I think that actually the difference

is more important. I think up until that point, there's been more of a consensual agreement with play(wrights), there's been more of a sort of shared political dialogue, there's been more of a sort of shared agreement about left-wing values and more of a shared agreement about what that meant in terms of making a play. But that sort of left-wing language broke down and then I think it threw open the possibilities of what a play could be. There was less of a sense that a play in some way should sort of toe the party line. So the *Weir* and *Blasted* have, *I would say*, have nothing in common as plays and I would say *Closer* and *The Cripple of Inishmann* have nothing in common as plays almost. So I think it would be more interesting to look at the ... *you know* I mean if we want to look at that period to actually say it's a moment where a sort of shared agreement about what plays do, what they're for and politics breaks down in this sort of plurality of voices and I think actually because there was such an excitement about new writing that theatres sort of wanted to continue that excitement so they became much more progr..., they set up much more schemes and much more trainings for writers and much more writers' developments. So where that initial excitement hadn't come out of sort of lots of schemes, the playwrights had just *sort of* written the plays because they felt that they needed to write these plays. I think as you got into the 2000s, theatres got more wised up about writer training and because there's been more of a programme I think plays are a little bit more similar again. They don't necessarily share the same ..., well writers do and they all share sort of the same sorts of politics but only because it was quite such the same clear political interest as the 70s. But I think, *I mean* lots and lots of writers came through the Royal Court and writers' programmes. So I think, there's more in common again with plays that have been produced in the sort of five, seven years. So I think what's particularly, if anything is to be particularly celebrated about that five years sort of 95-2000, 1994-1999, is the differences of all the plays and the differences of the voices.

CYRIELLE GARSON: It's a very interesting point and I now wonder how you consider, with the benefit of hindsight, your own

work from this period and perhaps also those of other playwrights that have been grouped as *In-Yer-Face* dramatists.

MARK RAVENHILL: I think, *you know*, what that moment in time created was a sense that, actually, young people wanted to make plays and that, actually, writing a play was an exciting thing to do and not something that wasn't the sort of worthy thing to do or a thing you ought to do but actually there was an assumption, an exciting thing to do and very easily the theatre can become sort of an institution and people write plays and they are programmed because they are sort of the right thing to do or the worthy thing to do but, actually, I think just that sense that *actually* theatre was sort of the most exciting place that you could be, more exciting than the film studio or TV studio or even in a band or writing a novel that actually the place to be was, that something was happening in theatre that was alive and that was where you wanted to be. And there is something really exciting about that, that actually, *you know*, I think people not even anticipated that would happen, and sort of accepted that theatre was always going to be ..., might have had a moment before but was now actually sort of institutionalised, could be interesting but actually theatre could suddenly have that sort of almost sort of rock and roll..., about somebody who just wrote a play in their room a few weeks ago and now it's on at the theatre and people are seeing it, actually that sense of excitement was ..., I think that's what was special about that period.

CYRIELLE GARSON: These plays had such an impact on spectators and as you know all these plays have been revived and have been staged in Europe and America. Have you seen any of these performances or do you know the sort of reaction to these plays now that they have been revived and restaged.

MARK RAVENHILL: *Yeah* no, I haven't really. I'm not really sure how much my own plays of that time have been revived recently. *You know*, I think, if you were staging *Shopping and F***ing* now then, *you know*, you certainly have to make a decision about how much is

this a period play of this time, where exactly is it located, is it a moment in history which was very far apart from now, is it still a play for..., *you know*, I don't know, I'm too close to tell but whether a younger director and a young company of actors putting on some of those plays that I wrote in the 90s whether they would be a sense of sort of history plays (in keeping with) the theme of the Conference² or they would decide to locate it in some ways as history plays, I don't know.

CYRIELLE GARSON: It is a very fascinating question in terms of how you would direct these plays now. Would you rather do them differently or elsewhere? Should we consider them as history plays? Or do they resist such a categorisation?

MARK RAVENHILL: Yeah, I mean I think those plays I wrote in the 90s have ..., *yeah I mean* they do have a sort of social context and social issue and factualism like a lot of British theatre. But they're not ... they are different animals to Sarah Kane's plays so. They are not over-cluttered with references to contemporary events. But they are clearly happening in Britain in the 90s, plays such as *Shopping and F***ing* and *Some Explicit Polaroids* and *Handbag*. *So yeah*. I think any production now would have to decide how do you relate to the fact that clearly those characters do exist in ..., almost certainly in Britain in a particular moment in time so what do you do with that now?

CYRIELLE GARSON: As you know, these plays have been translated, have been all over the world. Have you seen any of these productions?

MARK RAVENHILL: Yeah, I have seen quite a lot. But it tends to be two or three years after the first English production so... The last time I saw any sort of production of *Shopping and F***ing* in another language would have been a long time ago. I haven't seen a play that I wrote in a long time in a production.

CYRIELLE GARSON: Now your work seems to have taken a different direction, obviously you are concerned about different things now, in terms of aesthetics you've been involved with the Secret Theatre series³ and you also did, I believe, some verbatim plays, you might disagree with that, but you also worked with the Surprise Theatre at the Royal Court last summer⁴ and you wrote *A Life in Three Acts* about Bette Bourne.

MARK RAVENHILL: Yes, that was sort of verbatim and then we made that into a film as well actually.

CYRIELLE GARSON: If you compare to that period, what are you interested in now as regards to playwriting?

MARK RAVENHILL: I think the main thing for me is..., I try to keep somewhere, moving somewhere between the mainstream and the edge, the fringe, so I think there are certain things that you can achieve if you move quite close to the mainstream so spending two years at the Royal Shakespeare Company, which in many ways is perceived as being as sort of ..., it's not quite as sort of establishment as the Comédie Française because nothing can be quite as sort of official as the Comédie Française. The Royal Shakespeare Company is positively sort of high arty(cal) compared to the Comédie Française but, *you know*, I suppose in England the Royal Shakespeare Company is as close as you get to Comédie Française so to spend some time there and see what you can make in that context but then it turns out that I moved to the Secret Theatre, which is a sort of young company of actors and working with limited resources and with quite a sort of oppositional stance in some ways compared to the way theatre is made. I like to keep on moving between those things and then a little bit in the institution and then a little bit out, I think it keeps you stimulated as an artist. I think those different contexts bring different things out of you and your writing, so that's really, I sort of discovered, it wasn't a massive plan that I sort of discovered that seems to be my tactic as I go along, to never quite try to get right into the middle of the

mainstream so you say “ok, I write a play it’s got to open at the National Theatre” or something in the way that somebody like David Hare is sort of right there in the middle but to sort of get close to that and then pull away and move into a proper fringe theatre and then move back again and that seems to be the thing that works for me to sort of keep me ... question the work.

CYRIELLE GARSON: What do you think of the new decade if we compare to the 1990s which was such a golden age of new writing. Do you see some work from the young generation?

MARK RAVENHILL: Well, I think we’ve got some really *really* good new plays that are just coming up now so just about to open tomorrow I think in Stratford, Alice Birch’s play which is called *Revolt. She said. Revolt again* which has just won the George Devine [Award] and that’s the opening night tomorrow at Stratford, and I think that’s a really exciting play and a young writer also called Birch, but no relationship to Alice Birch, called Brad Birch is writing really exciting plays and a writer called Dawn King. So actually, I think people are just starting to come out now. I think there is a sort of boldness, a sort of individuality of their voices that was slightly missing. I think there are very well-made exquisite plays in the last ten years, but not quite that sort of individuality of voice and just sort of challenging forms and stuff. I get a really strong sense that playwrights that are just starting to come out now are bolder.

CYRIELLE GARSON: So to take a term that you used earlier “optimism”,⁵ are you optimistic about the new generation of playwrights?

MARK RAVENHILL: Yeah, the theatre does seem to be a particularly resilient form that sometimes it seems like newspapers might completely disappear and the British film industry sort of dies very regularly sometimes they do, but the theatre just does seem to... I guess because it’s cheaper and it’s more flexible somehow but

it does seem just when you think the theatre is getting a bit dull that there is a new generation or interesting individuals who suddenly seem to make it worthwhile, so *you know*, I do get through different periods of becoming sort of disenchanted with the theatre but actually all it takes is one really brilliant new play I mean a writer “oh God this is all worthwhile”, theatre can do something that no other medium can do, so yeah I think, *yeah I mean*, I have periods when I get really pissed off with theatre but then something comes along “oh, this is really exciting”, there are things that you could do with theatre that nobody else would allow you to do or you wouldn’t allow yourself to do. So yeah I do feel pretty optimistic about theatre actually.

CYRIELLE GARSON: So I leave the interview on this positive note. Thank you very much again Mark.

¹ This issue has been raised in recent studies such as Fin Kennedy in collaboration with Helen Campbell Pickford, “In Battalions: A Snapshot of New Play Development in England at the Start of 2013”, <<http://fr.scribd.com/doc/126273288/In-Battalions2013>>.

² In reference to the 23rd annual CDE Conference entitled “Theatre & History: Cultural Transformations”.

³ The Secret Theatre series was created in 2013 at the Lyric Hammersmith, the performances are the result of a 20-strong ensemble of actors, directors, writers and designers brought together to explore new ways of making theatre.

⁴ Mark Ravenhill penned for the Royal Court a “surprise theatre” lecture *Cakes and Finances* drawn from *verbatim* interviews with other writers. The audience, as part of the theatre’s Open Court Festival, were invited to buy a ticket without knowing what the show would be.

⁵ The term was used by Mark Ravenhill in the context of his conversation “The Permanent Present? Locating History on the Contemporary Stage” with Jörg Bochow which opened the 23rd annual CDE Conference in Hamburg on Thursday 19th June 2014 at 8.00pm.