

Interview with Nadya Cohen

Orchards

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Interviewer: Vanessa Cooke

VC: Nadya, where did your interest in theatre and theatre design come from and where did you study theatre design?

ND: Well it sort of came out of having done several other things, because I was originally in Cape Town. I did a year of architecture, then I did a year of graphics, then I came to Wits. I did a year of BA sort of, very confused state what with what was going on in the country, and one's own personal kind of sense of the world and I, for some reason, decided that I was interested in theatre design so I went to London, where I did a course in basic, in design in Croydon. And then I went to the Wimbledon, the Wimbledon School of Design, where they do a three year design course. And it is solely design, I mean you're also taught to act on stage because the kind of philosophy there was that everything is generated for the point of an actor on stage and anything else is excessive. So it was sort of, we had to make figures and that was the kind of essence of the piece, was the actor in a space. So I think that from the beginning my design aesthetic was very paired and not exclusive of course in, there wasn't really a house style in Wimbledon, and so there were very many people who designed big and in fact one of them has just been up for an Oscar for ATONEMENT. She's like a serious, she does the Sherlock Holmes films. She did the ANNA KARENINA. So we were in er, good company. Everybody found their place. And then I came back to South Africa during the holidays. Um... and I had a phone call from Lucille [Gillwald] um – Hilary Blecher who is a relative of a relative- was doing something at the Market Theatre and she was working with Patti Slavin and Lucille had me with Patti Slavin and they were doing GLASS MENAGERIE and Lucille didn't find any kind of relationship with Patti and I got this phone call and I met with Lucille and, truly, I don't think I really knew anything. I had a sense of what theatre was I think it was probably in my second year or something. And we did this production. I was at the Market. It was a most incredible thing, that, in the middle of studying, that I actually had this professional production and I could sort of be very proud of when I got back and it was quite a brave thing, because we played it in the round, and there, there was a concept that I had that, it was supposed to look like a hand tinted photograph so our colours were very reduced, the actual.

VC: Stella Nova, like.

NC: Like, like a really, a 1930's photograph. There was a black and white photograph then they used to hand tint them so everything was very grey. I think Sheila's [Holliday] dress was yellow, and Lesley Nott's dress was a sort of coral colour, so there was a very deliberate palette and there was always that problem of the staircase and – how he was going to sit and muse outside on the staircase. I don't think I solved it very well. But that was my first professional introduction to theatre. My first collaboration with Lucille, which proved to be a huge learning curve for me, and a really very strong introduction to the soul of theatre.

VC: At that stage you didn't know Barney or anything.

NC: I didn't really know Barney. I obviously met Barney there and then because he was, you know, the overseer of Lucille as well. I mean he actually made comments about various work that I subsequently did, which enraged Lucille. She felt that it was my relationship with her. And Barney was not...

VC: ...to interfere.

NC:... to interfere with that. So my introduction to the Market was not through Barney. It was actually through Lucille and , you know, we did many productions together over the years. Um... and kind of, you know, even when I was at, back in London, I advised her on a production of NONGOGO which she did where the audience entered through the kitchen, so it was, you know, I think there was HEY SMILE WIT' ME.

VC: I remember that.

NC: I can't quite remember.

VC: HEY SMILE WIT' ME – I've got it here. It says consultant.

NC: Well we did it with St Barnabas and then I think it came to the Market. I can't, you know I can't remember, it's a long time (they laugh) ago. Um... so that was my sort of introduction and then you know, I went back to England and I finished my degree. I also met Barry Hough at that time, who was so friendly with Lucille.

VC: Yes.

NC: And um... you know they had an incredibly strong relationship and actually my thesis was through discussions with Barry Hough. Kind of started it was going to be about Fugard (Athol) and then it branched off into other things. Um... and, but Barry was a very supportive person in terms of my relationship with Lucille.

VC: Right.

NC: And um... you know sadly he had a terrible end.

VC: Mm.

NC: So ja, so Lucille was definitely my introduction to the Market and um... you know, gradually I got to meet other directors and sort of have a, you know, there were several that I worked with. One was Lucille, one was Clare [Stopford] whom I did several shows with, mostly tore my hair out on, on almost every occasion. But they, even now, if I think about them, they're still some of the strongest and more memorable productions that I did at the Market. When one was kind of doing, despite all the politics that was going on, there was still, like classic plays that we were doing. And that was a fantastic learning experience for everybody. It was a, you know, I think that now James [Ncgobo] is feeling that people are not getting classic training, that's why he tried to do this Shakespeare thing with Dorothy [Ann Gould] or whatever. You know when interviewing for the Brett Goldin awards he found that a lot of the actors here are not Shakespeare trained. They are trained in other arenas.

VC: We weren't either.

NC: Well we...

VC: Learned through doing the correct...

NC: Correct. So I think he is trying to do that. He felt that the Cape Town actors were so trained in Shakespeare and here they aren't. They have a different strength.

VC: Coz I think coz of the workshop theatre.

NC: Of course, of course. So it was fantastic you know. One did David Hare plays. We did Tennessee Williams, we did...

VC: DANNY AND THE DEEP BLUE SEA. I always remember your set.

NC: Yeah, that was actually lovely.

VC: Floating.

NC: It was a floating thing.

VC: Amazing.

NC: The sort of structure that was set apart from the walls and we had these ropes that were sort of half a boxing ring and half a floating thing.

VC: Extraordinary.

NC: Painted all of it ourselves. I didn't know how to paint. You kind of invented all of this. This was a very powerful again with Lesley (Nott) and Danny [Keogh].

VC: Lesley and Danny ja.

NC: Um... and I remember Barney being so – I think it was one of the first interviews I ever had and he kind of understood the aesthetic. Coz there wasn't an established aesthetic, you know, at the Market Theatre; there wasn't design.

VC: There was no set basically.

NC: Well there was hardly any money.

VC: Open space.

NC: So it was a sort of exciting, really exciting time to sort of discover one's self and discover design. Um... and I think that for the DOLL'S HOUSE a couple of years later my entire budget was R1,000.00 for the set.

VC: Including your salary.

NC: Yes because I had to pay Elizabeth Reding for painting these huge backdrops.

VC: Yes I remember those.

NC: Mid 1990 and I remember...

VC: R1,000.00 in 1990.

NC: ... going to Mannie and saying to him at the end: "Listen, I have actually painted – I've paid Elizabeth to paint these. I've been driving backwards and forwards to Pretoria. You know I – can you do anything with the budget. I'm like now earning R200.00 for this." And he said to me : "God bless."

VC: (laughs)

NC: And that was the end of the conversation.

VC: Did he touch you on your shoulder?

NC: No I didn't let him.

(They laugh)

NC: I didn't have a very easy relationship. Actually with either him or with Barney. I found Barney very difficult um... I think Barney wanted you kind of enter his world and to allow him, in his philosophy, to set the time and to set the pace and I think I had a different impatience, I had a very...

VC: I think designers had a hard time with Barney, coz he also changed his mind a lot.

NC: When we did the BLOOD KNOT; here's an anecdote. We did the BLOOD KNOT with Marcel [van Heerden] and John [Kani] and he had a model. It was on the Main Stage and we had a shack which was sort of set at an angle and he'd rehearsed like that and it was at the end of the year, difficult time always, to work. We erected the whole thing, distressed what we needed to. It was on the stage.

VC: And he worked on the stage with it?

NC: Well he eventually did and when he got onto, he looked, and Wesley [France] was lighting he said: "This needs to change. It's not a democratic angle." And I've never ever forgotten it.

VC: (laughs) Barney!

NC: It wasn't a democratic angle so we had to change the whole angle.

VC: What's that mean?

NC: Well, does it matter, you see. You were supposed to bow to that as a profundity. (laughs). But it did mean work for us, because we had to change the set around.

VC: Changing an angle challenges everything.

NC: We flattened it. And there was something about a democratic light source because the table, John obviously was darker and Marcel was lighter.

VC: Of course.

NC: So we had to put some surface on the table so that the light source would give an even – it was kind of ridiculous, you know. And then Marcel fell through the table, got stuck in the middle of the table when he stood up.

VC: He's accident prone.

NC: With the umbrella, the multi-coloured umbrella. Ja, so the democratic angle was my memory of Barney – may he rest in peace.

VC: (laughs)

NC: Ja.

VC: But you should have laughed at him actually.

NC: It was hard to laugh because there was this aura around him.

VC: He deserved it sometimes.

NC: I know. There was an aura around him that you felt that you needed to be serious and to kind of have a level of genuflection and belief. And I wasn't, I hadn't trained here and I didn't know Barney's kind of the ground he – how much he mattered to so many people. I was kind of a bit on the outside and it was just very exhausting to work with him. We did that ...

VC: DEATH AND THE MAIDEN.

NC: DEATH AND THE MAIDEN.

VC: That was also a brilliant set though.

NC: It was really hard. It was terribly hard. One night we'd finished and then I had a phone call at midnight from Wesley to say – Barney hasn't finished talking to you. I had to get out of bed and go back to the Market Theatre.

VC: He couldn't talk to you on the phone.

NC: No he needed to see me. It was nothing, it was exerting a kind of control. Um... and I supposed that, for a lot of people, you know, it was such an extraordinary exchange that um... that they would have done anything for it.

VC: But I always think that, I mean, my Dad was a set designer so I came from that side – Barney never knew what he wanted and I saw it many times. But he would never, if he was sitting here he'd say – nonsense. I have an overview. I don't think he often did.

NC: Well he didn't.

VC: He knew what he wanted from the actors, and from the story. Because the story was always the important thing, but visually he was never sure.

NC: You know I think often a director is – they don't really know, and even if they do know, and they ask – I don't specifically give them what they ask for – you find your own journey or entry point into the visual aspect of the production.

VC: I think some people have visual minds. I think Barney's mind was more ...

NC: Actor driven.

VC: Telling the story so he could have done most of his plays without a set.

NC: Sure.

VC: I think ...

NC: Sure.

VC: But luckily for all of us, he didn't choose to do that which gave maybe some soris but at least ...

NC: I think that there was also, I think there was a sort of competition between him and Lucille. There was sort of like different camps. You know, there were always camps in theatre. Who you belonged to and what is your family.

VC: In theatre.

NC: Preferred. And I think Lucille got a lot of respect from actors. I mean she was incredibly intense, incredibly passionate person.

VC: I didn't work, I never acted for her.

NC: Um... I remember on one occasion I, I had been mugged and I had broken my nose and had a cast for my nose. And even when it was better, when I saw Lucille I used to take it out of the cubbyhole and put it on just to get her to stay, just to keep her at a distance, because it was so intense. You know, sometimes she would phone at 2 o'clock in the morning, because it doesn't leave you.

VC: I remember that time, you did TRUE WEST, didn't you?

NC: I did TRUE WEST.

VC: When she took Wilson [Dunster] and who was the other guy?

NC: Sean [Taylor].

VC: Sean to a bar and Wilson didn't really drink. Wilson was paralytic and she just left him at the theatre.

NC: Mm.

VC: And we had to look after him.

NC: Mm. We also had to put soft strips on the edge of the kitchen surface so that Wilson wouldn't ...

VC: hurt himself.

NC: ... cut himself.

VC: He was also accident prone – STILL LIFE I think he cut himself.

NC: Ja.

VC: Badly on the table.

NC: Mm. But I think the thing with the Market was that there was this incredible theatre space. Upstairs Theatre with those roof trusses which were so kind of, um asking you to acknowledge them in some way or another. Um... The Lager or whatever that space was, was actually just a room but still, we did UPU VAN DER MERWE there.

VC: Ah yes.

NC: Ja and then, but the Upstairs has always been my favourite space. The Downstairs Theatre, you know, had been through so many incarnations and I think, in its present condition is perhaps one of the worst carnations that it has ever had.

VC: I was like very upset.

NC: It's really, it's transgressing in terms of hospital nature of the building in that the sides have been removed. The balcony that sticks out, it looks like a hospital. You can't see from upstairs. You can't hear and you know even with ...

VC: (inaudible)

NC: It's shocking. Even when we did um... SMALL HOLDING with Paul (Slabolepszy), there were the columns on the stage and I remember having to try and place a caravan on the stage.

VC: Paul talked about that, about how the column went through ...

NC: We had to cut a section of the caravan to go round the column coz otherwise it was just too far forward. But somehow even with those columns it was incredible. There was a different relationship to the audience. I don't know if this stage is too high. It's definitely too wide and there's something that seriously needs attention now, of having had a lot of money spent on it.

VC: They probably haven't got any more money.

NC: But they need to fix the sound. Because if they're going to be doing musicals they can't have a sound situation – and a sight line with the upstairs where you can't see. The whole of the front area of the stage you cannot see.

VC: God, you can't do anything on the floor.

NC: So I, you know, those days of SMALL HOLDING ... I can't remember. I didn't do many on the Main Stage. I've still got the model of s SMALL HOLDING there (indicates the model).

VC: Oh ja the caravan.

NC: Ja the caravan with the orange on the aerial. Also fantastic, I mean, it was incredible – Paul at his best. There were some Punch and Judy moments when Nicky [Rebello] comes in as the sort of saviour and he picks up a, a lantern and Paul's gone to fetch him Romany creams or something. He picks up the lantern and everything falls all over his feet. You don't quite know what it is. He puts it down and then Paul comes back and then he says: "I'd like to introduce you to the wife" and the wife's ashes were...

VC: (laughs)

NC: What was in the lantern.

VC: (laughs)

NC: It was the time of the kubus culture and they were making this thing in the barrel and we, when we were in Grahamstown I had to go and try and find an enema the size of a man's bladder coz Sello [ka Ngube] had to urinate into the, the barrel.

VC: Did you find a horse one?

NC: Ja, I mean, we found one. It's a wonderful thing because the audience could see Sello ostensibly urinating into this kubus culture and then Paul came and picked up the ladle wan was, sort of, about to drink from it. So it was a lovely, the sort of, the audience knowing.

VC: Mm.

NC: It was wonderful, wonderful stuff. Driving to Grahamstown with the set.

VC: Oh ja.

NC: Everything in the caravan, all the way to Grahamstown. I think we still managed to get a speeding fine. (they laugh).

VC: Nadya, um....

NC: That's very circuitous meandering discussion.

VC: Costumes. How come you never...

NC: I didn't really like to do costume. It just never was ... I managed to find people one of whom was Hazel [Maree] who I actually met her at the SABC. Then I brought her, and she absolutely clicked with Lucille. I mean she was just – so from very early on I had someone who could match the kind of concerns that I had about the quality of an object and the power of an object. She could match that with costume. She completely understood. And of course has gone on to work with Handspring [Puppet Company] you know so, so it's been a, so I've had these people, through the years, and you know more recently I've had Thando [Lobese] who has come to the table, and started to understand. But somehow costumes have always been a, a difficult thing for me. I don't really enjoy wearing clothes myself. Not exactly my forte. But I've known what is right. You know we had Sue Steele for a lot of the shows, with Clare and that was just amazing. She's quite astonishing.

VC: Ja.

NC: I've tried to get her back, but you know, she's doing adverts and things. I wanted her for COLORED MUSEUM. And she almost bit but ...

VC: Oh really. It's time she came back.

NC: But she did KAFKA DANCES. I mean it was quite extraordinary. She had a bolt of fabric that had lain in the sun, so it had, sort of patterns of burnt or bleached light and she made this dress for Camilla [Waldman] that used that, and that was so inventive. She also had a hard time on TITUS [ANDRONICUS].

VC: I think everybody did. Maybe we talk about it.

NC: We can talk about it. So Sue – For SCENES FROM AN EXECUTION astonishing, magnificent costumes. And I've been very lucky, and you know., when I don't have that person, sort of, I go into a bit of a panic.

VC: If it's people you don't know.

NC: Ja.

VC: Ja TITUS. There was so much expectation.

NC: Well I think that expectation was sort of fulfilled when it was in London because we played to full houses.

VC: It's what they wanted.

NC: It was his cachet. I mean I'd been overseas and I came back and I was interviewed for it. There were several designers who were interviewed for the job.

VC: You weren't a given.

NC: No I was not a given. There were several of us who were interviewed. And I remember one night praying “I want this; I want this”, be careful what you want.

VC: The actors also wanted it badly.

NC: No I know, I mean it came with all the cachet of, you know, Tony Sher.(Antony)

VC: We’ve finally made it with Shakespeare. Tony Sher was coming.

NC: Ja but I think what, I mean, you know, there are several things that I remember. I think it was our first preview, when the jeep had to be rolled on stage and I think that Sello’s(Maake ka Ngube) shoe got caught in the jeep and they couldn’t roll Tony Sher into his victory speech onto the, onto centre stage. He had to get off the jeep, backstage or side stage, and walk onstage and say “Hail Rome, I greet my company with my tears” (Afrikaans accent).

VC: Ja.

NC: And so he, you know that moment, his moment of return, was not celebrated in the way that he thought it would.

VC: Dress rehearsal?

NC: No, I think it was the first preview.

VC: Was it? I remember but I don’t remember that there were people there.

NC: And I think that it was, there were lots of issues – Mannie it’s the first time I’ve seen him walk off a show. And Wesley had to come and pick up the pieces – which he did.

VC: Mary Slack left.

NC: Ja I mean it was hard. There were all sorts of things about the money and the, everything. You know, we had a week in London – a workshop, it was very nice, beautiful week in London doing whatever I wanted, but the cast did have workshops with the National Theatre Studio.

VC: Fantastic.

NC: Probably, probably fantastic. And then there was a strange kind of colonial mind-set with Tony and Greg [Doran]. They, they felt that they were sort of, their largesse was allowing one to participate on a world stage. And when we were in Leeds I remember...

VC: We’d been overseas so often.

NC: I know, but they didn’t seem to...

VC: Political plays.

NC: Theirs was the moment. And when we were in Leeds, I remember. I think that they had just discovered the Haka and we all had to sort of, put arms round each other and, whoever the youngest member of the cast was...

VC: Charleton maybe.

NC: Had to take out this bag, of this “banned substance”. None of us knew what the hell it was. The story was that Tony had collected some red earth from a building site or somewhere near the

Market Theatre coz you don't get red earth anywhere else in the world. So this signifier of red earth was put into Greg's suitcase, which could have caused him to be caught by customs, coz you take soil in, I suppose it is a bit of a banned substance. And they, whoever this youngest person was, they had to sprinkle the set with this...

VC: Red dust.

NC: This dust from its source in Johannesburg and then Doris [Sehula] I think it was Doris.

VC: Doris?

NC: Had to sing one of those gorgeous songs of the ancestors to bless the production. Gys [de Villiers] I think nearly exploded out of their Laager. "I don't really want to kill them". At this point I think everyone was sort of gatvol of the kind of er... One just felt a bit used. I felt very used, you know. They had been on a huge drug binge in Michelle Lowry's father's house. Ja. So it was a difficult time in their relationship. I didn't know who I was answering to – Greg or to Tony. There were fights going on. The budget had run out. They were enforcing an aesthetic which I wasn't really er... didn't really want my name attached to. And schlepping all the props down, every single thing, and putting them in the black plastic bags. We'd done black plastic bags here – to death.

VC: Often.

NC: Dieter [Rieble] had done black plastic bags forever. So you know, they felt that there was this, sort of um..., gift that there were giving us and in fact it was a bit, a bit patronising. I have to say, it was one of the few times that I've been overseas with a production from the Market. Somehow been side-lined most of the time, except for the one trip to Stockholm and that trip to England. So you know it was fantastic in that I was able to revisit Wimbledon and invite people who had taught me at Wimbledon, and some friends who'd studied with me to come and see the production that I had at the – at the National Theatre. How amazing is that. So that was quite sort of, a completion of a circle. We were of course, well paid – union rates it was, but the work experience, you know, now it's sort of easy to laugh at it but at the time it was, it was quite a difficult, emotional ride, I have to say.

VC: Tell me um..., obviously, would you say that Lucille was your favourite director, or did you have a favourite?

NC: No, I mean, Lucille was, Lucille was where I really started um... I enjoyed doing shows with her. I mean the DIEPE GROND and NAG GENERAAL were ground-breaking works at the Market. To do Afrikaans plays that were powerfully written. Reza [de Wet] was an extraordinary person. And kind of doing the process of those designs. I think DIEPE GROND was one of the first shows where I started to sort of, feel excited about space and sort of understanding what it meant – the power of objects and the poetry of objects. So we had very isolated elements on stage and there was a pile of sand and...

VC: Was there an underneath?

NC: No there was a pile of sand.

VC: Up. Right.

NC: And they were supposed to have buried their parents, and I remember the one night there was some stones in the pile and they got, the stone got stuck in the door and the door was supposed to

be locked and I was thinking however are we going to manage this. And there were some amazing things that happened like Suzanne [Coetzer] putting, like ten spoons of sugar into Gys's tea, and Lucille actually watched Reza do that coz Reza had masses of sugar in her tea. And it was um... I remember painting this door frame with red and green, it was quite extraordinary, quite expressionist. Barney hated it and had lots to say about it and Adrienne Sichel slated me for over-cluttering the space. That was like my first review from her.

VC: Wow.

NC: And I remember seeing her at the bar at the Market Theatre and going up to her and introducing myself.

VC: You're not known for your clutter.

NC: No. so anyway she, she was at the bar and I said to her: "I've read your review; you don't know who I am" and she says: "I know who you are". I said: " OK well then let's just discuss this issue of the clutter." There was a lamp hanging from the top. There was not a single thing not relevant...

VC: Used...

NC: ...to the story. There was no excess whatsoever. She kind of back tracked, well if one can ever say that Adrienne can back track. But she kind of gave me a pause and subsequently we became very good friends. Sort of had a relationship over very many years. Um... NAG GENERAAL, that was, that followed DIEPE GROND which we took to Grahamstown. Um...

VC: Was it commissioned by Grahamstown?

NC: I think it was, ja. Coz we played at Rhodes, and again the design was influenced by that incredible truss structure at the Market. I still have the model here. And Gys again and Sandra [Prinsloo] and we had this snake, coz there was, Dawid [Minaar] was the faith healer and we had a snake which we took from here to Grahamstown and there was a power outage and the snake was in thermostatically controlled environment, and the snake died. And the snake was put into a bag at Rhodes Theatre. Nobody went anywhere near it and there was a little ad put up somewhere in a some window in Grahamstown and these kids were all arriving with their snakes, desperate for their snake to appear in the play.

VC: I remember going into the Upstairs dressing room, not knowing there was a snake in there.

NC: And Dawid had learned how to play with the snake. And um... ja it was an incredibly powerful piece. We had another anecdote – we, there were some gauzes that were given to the Market from, I think, the Burke Brickhills [Joan and Louis Burke] and we wanted, I needed a black gauze for the back, which we hung up. It appeared black but when the light came on it was the Eiffel Tower, which...

VC: (laughs)

NC: ...which had been painted out. So how on earth was the Eiffel Tower in a Free State barn huh? I remember Lucille having this incredible thing about this piano that had no keys in it and that the cutlery was stored in this, in the piano. And Lucille insisted on a dress for Sandra be in a particular colour. Hazel made up this incredible dress of different fabrics with lace and god knows what. Lucille wanted it to be white and Reza had written it to be black and when we got to Grahamstown it was

obvious that the dress should not be white. So we had to try and dye it in Grahamstown and have it dry for the performance.

VC: Before Reza actually saw it.

NC: Well Reza had seen it, and she insisted so there was a concurrence at least. And we went to Reza's house and I think we dyed it at Reza's house and then we had to go and find a place. But because Hazel had made it up out of different fabrics everything came out a different colour. Browns and greens and god knows what. But a very um... a very memorable um... powerful piece of writing. I don't know that I really realised at the time how, of what import these days and those days had you know. You were just in it, doing your absolute best to kind of find a visual poetry to...

VC: ...go with the...

NC: ...go with the text and it was, so you know they were really ground breaking plays you know. James is wanting to have Afrikaans plays at the Market, let's see if he can recapture that audience again. But you know it was in those early days, to have an Afrikaans play of incredible...

VC:... political...

NC: Yes so they were very, very powerful pieces. I didn't, you know, after that I didn't really have too much to do with Reza but of course I bumped into her here and in Grahamstown. We always had those moments, those very strong moments together. So they were very – I haven't got the model of DIEPE GROND but NAG GENERAAL I have. We adapted it for Grahamstown when we didn't have the front truss. We had the one truss, we didn't have another truss, and then we had these pieces of corrugated iron and the drip, though the...

VC: I remember...

NC:... into the basin. So it was, they were amazing. So that was Lucille um...

VC: And who else stands out for you?

NC: Clare without a doubt. Clare was always extremely challenging. I think my instinct always when Clare asked me to design a play was – no, and then I used to cry in the corner of my bedroom or something.

VC: I don't want to do it.

NC: And especially with SCENES FROM AN EXECUTION which was such an extraordinary complex play with like 26 different scenes – playing in the Laager, the new Barney's Laager and then it went to the Main Stage.

VC: Main Stage ja.

NC: We had to adapt it and I, I was so terrified of this and I just, I thought, I can't do this and I said I felt that Clare should just play this out in her kitchen with Neil, (McCarthy) or whoever it was, and I, really it was a very, very complex um... story and ultimately one of my strongest designs. I mean it was a very, very powerful er... terrifying – it had movement to it, the actors were extraordinary. The design was really dangerous.

VC: Did it have – ja a huge rake?

NC: Ja it had a massive ja. (shows model) Quite difficult to adapt...

VC: ...for the Main.

NC:... for the Main.

VC: (looks at model) Oh ja, that's right ja I remember the pattern.

NC: And I remember how excited I was because, you know, it was kind of about a woman artist in the Renaissance days, and sort of, and finding this one reference of Leonardo [Da Vinci] who had worked on perspective, and there was a sort of vanishing point.

VC: Ja.

NC: And so I, that is what the basis of the design was, that everything was sort of vanishing, and we had the target at the back blood kind of dripping down from it. So it was um... a really exciting, and a very dangerous, very steep rake, quite a danger.

VC: Ja I remember.

NC: Quite a dangerous rake but the impact, and the music was quite fantastic. Clare did an amazing job so um... I was grateful that she forced me to stick it out. Um... And we did, we did many shows together. We did SKYLIGHT which I still have. Also changing the space of the Market from an end on situation to in the round again (shows model of SKYLIGHT).

VC: Yes I remember that.

NC: With Ron.

VC: Ron ja.

NC: And Jennifer Steyn and I think Kurt Wurstman was in it.

VC: That was later.

NC: Kurt.

VC: Kurt.

NC: Kurt ja.

VC: HOW I LEARNED TO DRIVE!

NC: HOW I LEARNED TO DRIVE. I hated it.

VC: I remember.

NC: I hated it. Then we had this drama with the set. Do you remember? It was Christo ? did a terrible interpretation then we just dumped that entire thing.

VC: You went on the weekend and took it away.

NC: Yes.

VC: It just vanished.

NC: I was called into the office and asked what had actually happened. And then ultimately we used the architecture of the Market Theatre in the reset shelves and we had a tiny little house, like a Hobbit house.

VC: Tiny.

NC: Based on a Hopper thing, it was lit inside and we painted a blue sky in the background. I remember Lucas [surname ?] was still, and he had to fill in little sections.

VC: (laughs)

NC: And it was this tiny thing, filled this whole world, it placed it in time.

VC: Ja coz there were too many different locations.

NC: There were so many locations. Actually Barbara [Rubin] was another one. I met Barbara Rubin through Clare because she was assisting her on KAFKA [dances] I think it was and then we did um KINDERTRANSPORT which was also a fantastic – I've also got the model of that. But Barbara was also a lovely director to work with.

VC: She was great.

NC: Ja.

VC: Would you say that you had a, oh there was one thing I wanted to ask you. You never worked on any improvised...

NC: No.

VC: ...shows?

NC: I didn't do any of that.

VC: Coz that was...

NC: No.

VC: Biggest challenges in it...

NC: Very challenging. I worked with Bobby Heaney a lot, coz he was doing Paul's shows. MAKING LIKE AMERICA, SMALL HOLDING um... ja so. I worked with Marilyn [Van Reenen]. We did...

VC: Van Reenen, ja.

NC: Ja we did that um... Elsabe Zietsman show um... MAN TO MAN. Ja.

VC: And what would you say was your...

NC: All of them gave me a different kind of a, a different way of, of thinking, and of um... solving the problem...

VC: ...of space.

NC: ...of space, budget you know, and in those early days one kind of begged from people.

VC: Ja.

NC: And there was generosity, you know, people were prepared to loan. You know, even today, there's stuff that comes from my Mom's house.

VC: ??

NC: Finds itself on, from our house, or you know, one begs, borrows and steals for the Market because one believed in the place, the meeting place of a truth and a, a need, a terrible need.

VC: People needed to express themselves.

NC: Ja and then one of the... I've done many Fugard plays um,,, and that is always an incredible honour for me ja so I've...And then you know later on there was Mncedisi [Shabangu] we did COLD STONE JUG and..

VC: Mncedisi a real...

NC: He's an amazing guy. Amazing. I'd love to see him back. I mean John Matshikiza – did NONGOGO again. I think I've done NONGOGO four times.

VC: I loved that NONGOGO actually.

NC: John's?

VC: Ja.

NC: Many people hated it.

VC: A lot of people didn't like it. I loved it.

NC: Many people hated it.

VC: I loved the whole thing.

NC: Um... he was very difficult for the actors to work with. But one of the shows I hated doing with Clare was DEAD WAIT.

VC: It was such a weird play.

NC: I hated it, and when we took it to Grahamstown also it was an absolute, you know we had a new production manager at the market. I've kind of been through several regimes, I call them regimes at the Market Theatre, because even in an institution like that they can become a regime.

VC: And they can tell you you're not needed.

NC: And they have told one without saying so – that you're not needed. So I've had many periods of hibernation from the Market when I worked elsewhere, um... Many times when things have not been okay um – but there were very, very, very good times. You know. And as I have said to you – it has always been a home from home for me. I think that later, in my working, I came across a concept which I think that I've actually used right from the beginning – unknown. And it's a concept called Wabisabi – a Japanese concept, which celebrates the imperfections of things, and the cycle of life and death. So it is about construction and deconstruction. So it's both birthing and dying and celebrating that imperfection, and I think that as an aesthetic, I think that has been, looking back would be, if I were to describe it...

VC:... it would be what..

NC:... that would be. I mean I've said that I tried to find the meaning of objects and the poetry of an object and how that can generate a force, of a meaning, or a, an understanding with an audience.

And I like the audience to bring something of themselves when looking at my work, so that one finds a common ground of imagination.

VC: Obviously the actors also...

NC: And the actors.

VC: ...get involved in the object.

NC: Ja so I think will go back to my days in Wimbledon when we were forced to act, and also this incredible designer/director who was a mentor for me at Wimbledon, by the name of Richard Negri who was um an amazing man who taught, you can't really teach it. He gave me the sense of the power of an object. And we, shortly after I graduated did he ask me to do THE CARETAKER for the Royal Exchange in Manchester, which is a most extraordinary theatre. Have you ever been?

VC: No not to Manchester, no.

NC: This, this is a cotton exchange so it's a similar building in that it had a history, another history. The most extraordinary classic columns, huge – a cotton exchange with a domed roof. And Richard's concept of a theatre was like a lunar bubble. So it's a space from structure that sits in the middle of this thing – not touching the walls.

VC: Ja.

NC: And completely in the round and with two levels so there's a yellow staircase a red staircase, a green staircase and a blue. And your ticket says "yellow staircase, first level" or whatever, and we did THE CARETAKER, completely in the round.

VC: In the round.

NC: In the round. So this was a completely new concept for me, I woke up. Of how if you had three suitcases, what does the colour mean. I still have the model of them. I had a brown suitcase, which was the earth, then there was blue which was the water, and the white little suitcase on the top - it was a drawer, was the crest of the wave. So there was this meaning to each choice. The step ladder had three rungs because it was something to do with the Holy Trinity.

VC: Okay.

NC: So there were these kind of expanded aesthetics and profound poetry which I think has been with me, with my in my work. Not overly but subliminally, I think that I've always tried to make meaning.

VC: It's always been there with you.

NC: What one does with one's life. I think that has been my aesthetic.

VC: OK. Thank you. Thanks Nadya.

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