Didaskalos in Exile:

the role of the playwright in actor-training

(a case study of the student response to the author writing

a piece exclusively for them to perform under his direction)

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1. Introduction

The playwright's lot is not a happy one. Such is the parlous state of the profession in the United States that a 2009 report commissioned by New York's Theatre Development Fund[1] lamented:

> This study describes a collaboration in crisis ... The eco-system in which the new play is produced is not healthy. Playwrights can not make a living from their plays. Artistic Directors are deeply troubled as they work to navigate the marketing and funding pressures facing their theatres … In the United States today, it's hard to find examples of theatres defined by the voice and vision of a particular playwright or group of playwrights … As professional theatres have expanded and created sustainable institutions, the playwriting life (and living) has remained unsustainable. [2]

The influential theatre critic Alex Sierz, however, provides reason for cheer on this side of the Atlantic. In his 2011 survey of 'British Theatre Today', he describes the current trend for new writing as "a very British idea": [3]

> … [I]n the United States of America, very few people have heard of new writing; in Europe, it's only sporadically glimpsed. In those countries, there are old plays and new plays, but new writing has little status, a poor profile and no history. By contrast, British new writing is special. [4]

[1] "Theatre Development Fund, a not-for-profit organization, was created with the conviction that the live theatrical arts afford a unique expression of the human condition that must be sustained and nurtured … Created in 1968 to help strengthen Broadway and Off Broadway, in particular serious dramatic plays, TDF has subsidized more than 900 plays and musicals … and has developed a wide-ranging variety of programs to serve audiences and theatres." Mission Statement, TDF Webpage [accessed 5th October 2013] available at http://www.tdf.org/TDF_Landingpage.aspx?id=109

[2] London, Todd et al. "Dialogue in the Dark: Playwrights & Theatres" in *Outrageous Fortune, The Life and Times of the New American Play*. New York: Theatre Development Fund, 2009, p. 1

[3] Sierz, Aleks. "Cult of the New?" in *Rewriting the Nation, British Theatre Today*. London: Methuen Drama, 2011, p. 16

[4] Sierz, Aleks (2011), ibid, p.16

Sierz, in sharp contrast to his despairing American counterparts, suggests there may even be a danger of new plays flooding the market, "new writing is everywhere … There is a deluge of the new." [5] One is struck by the statistical data he provides [6] to support the claim,

> "Britain today has many more living writers than Periclean Athens, Shakespeare's England or the first post-war new wave." [7]

And yet the title of *Rewriting the Nation*'s first chapter - *Cult of the New?* - carries an implicit health warning: that the production of new work may be driven more by an unquestioning adherence to funding initiatives than a nuanced response to what might be in the interests of the individual playwright or playwriting in general. Sierz concludes provocatively that while new writing has become a virtual industry in this country in the last decade, the system has yet to discover an artist to match the power and vision of Sarah Kane. Is it the case that in America playwrights starve through neglect, while in the UK they feel at the mercy of a process that prioritises new writing over writers with something new to say? Has the creation and production of new work become the sole province of a powerful, and yet only recently constituted, 'troika' – director, literary manager and arts administrator?

Naturally as a playwright myself, I am concerned both that the British 'eco-system' avoids the meltdown experienced by our cousins in the States, and also that 'interesting' new work is not ultimately defined by the sensibilities of the latest generation of Oxbridge graduates to run our theatres. However, in this research project my aim is to explore whether we are training

[5] Sierz, Aleks (2011), ibid, p.15

[6] For example, "It is calculated that between 500 and 700 writers make a living out of stage plays, radio plays and TV drama in Britain." Sierz, Aleks (2011), ibid, p.16

[7] Sierz, Aleks (2011), ibid, p.16

actors who share these concerns. Does the playwright have a part to play in the training of actors? Should new writing be an integral part of actor training? Are we securing channels to meaningful dialogue between student actors and playwrights? Perhaps if we wish to ameliorate the alienation felt by playwrights in the States and safeguard the quality and innovation of new work here, we would be wise to ensure that (student) actors are fully invested in the creative and technical process; to afford them, in Sidney Webb's much maligned phrase, a sense of "the common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange." [8]

It might appear that the main impediment to an unfettered collaboration between actors and playwrights is that while theatres search for young writers (and young writers for actors that will vitalise their work), drama schools continue to adhere to the teachings of superannuated pedagogues such as Sanford Meisner, whose 'technique' (in its published form) declares: "The text is your greatest enemy" and "an ounce of behaviour is worth a pound of words."[9]

A playwright keen to fraternise with performers might ask what can this technique achieve, but to instil in the young actor a fear of approaching any script more sophisticated than your average soap opera? Little wonder perhaps that while Meisner and his disciples ruminate on the human soul, the playwright-director David Mamet retorts with the bluntest of advice to the novice, "Nobody cares how you feel."[10]

[8] British Labour Party constitution, Clause IV, 1918.

[9] Meisner, Sanford, Dennis Longwell. *Sanford Meisner on Acting.* New York: Vintage, 1987, p.4

[10] Mamet, David. "Emotion" in *Theatre*, London: Faber & Faber, 2010, p. 38

The author of *True and False* compounds the 'heresy' of that work in his follow-up book, *Theatre*, by offering this 'common sense' evaluation of the director-teacher's predilection for psycho-analysis:

> The actor spends the nonperforming part of his day in rest, as he must … [I]n order to act freely and unreservedly on stage, [he] must leave his mind clear and his body rested for the remainder. Not so the director. So the mill of his mind, turning, turning, turning, may and usually does turn to theory and, so, to instruction. But there is, truly, little for him to instruct. What is the play about, what is the scene about, stand there, move downstage of the couch on such a word, don't walk on the other fellow's laugh, the blue drapes rather than the red – that's about the limit of the director's job. For the rest he is deluding himself …[11]

To counteract this delusion, the performer must rise from the therapist's couch.

> The actor's true talent and job is to inhabit – whatever that may mean to him – the part. To stand still and say the words – in order to accomplish something like that purpose indicated by the author. That's it. [12]

And so the battle lines in American training are drawn, and the trenches are similarly occupied here. But were the divisions between disciplines always so rigidly demarcated? For a response to this question see Appendix One. [13]

[11] Mamet, David (2010), ibid, pp 32-33 ('The Problem with Training').

[12] Ibid, p. 33 ('The Problem with Training').

[13] Appendix One comprises a brief history of the *Didaskalos (the playwight-teacher-dircetor)*.

2. The Project: *My Approach*

While at Rose Bruford College, I have been keen to continue the collaborative practice I first developed during my three years as Playwright-in-Residence on the MA Performance programme at Goldsmiths in the mid '90s. Commissioned to produce material for the programme's annual public production in a London venue[14], I spent a lot of time in close observation of the MA ensemble as it engaged in classes, workshops and rehearsals. Drawing on techniques pioneered by the likes of Joint Stock, I became fascinated by the playwright's role in the defining of a company and the writer's contribution to the creative and technical process of the actor. The experience and skills I gained from this period at Goldsmiths I then applied to the American Theatre Arts (BA) programme at Rose Bruford – and to the college's MA Acting programme, where again I was given the freedom to write plays for specific ensembles.

Over the last decade Rose Bruford has proven fertile ground for the development of new work (the Directing, Acting and Actor-Musician programmes have collaborated with playwrights such as Simon Stephens and Richard Holman and new writing companies such as Paines Plough and the Soho Theatre). I have produced a new play (or adaptation) every year since taking up the reins as ATA Programme Director. These have constituted the centre-pieces of the ATA final year public seasons.[15]

[14] These included *Visitation* (1994) and *The Happiness Compartment* (1995) at the Oval House Theatre, *Kolonists* (1996) at the Man in the Moon, Chelsea and *amnesia (and other means of escape)* (1997) in the Young Vic's Studio Theatre.

[15] These have included the full length original plays *Coming To Our Senses* (2003), *Figures* (2004) *Homestead* (2004), *The Means At Our Disposal* (2006), *There's A City in My Mind* (2011), *Glockenspiel* (2012), *This Divided Earth* (2013)

So for my Action Research Project, I wanted to explore some of the key aspects of this direct connection between actor and writer. To do this I engaged a cohort of students (on the BA Hons American Theatre Arts programme, of which I am Programme Director) in a process whereby I would be their teacher/director, but would also write a piece specifically for them. How might this process impact on their training? What benefits – and what problems – might arise if we emulated a traditional company of actors in collaboration with a 'didaskalos' (playwright-teacher-director)? [16]

3. The Company: *a community of practice*

How might one define the ATA Level 6 cohort - the group who provided the majority of my data for this exercise? A company of nineteen students who comprised the cast of the play *This Divided Earth*, the production of which (in collaboration with the School of Design, Management and Technical Arts) constitutes the final assignment they all worked on practically together as the culmination of three years of vocational performance training. In addition to being an acting ensemble, for the purposes of this research project it is also important to define the cohort in terms of its educational identity. The playwright-teacher plays a dual role in balancing the company's attainment of professional competence with its right to experiment and learn-through-doing. This duality is most obviously manifest in the

[16] What I should make clear is that this project is not about the playwright teaching playwriting. The TDF identifies 'The Teacher's Path' (in the chapter *The Lives and Livelihoods of Playwrights* in *Outrageous Fortune*), acknowledging the positive impact established playwrights can have on university departments when teaching their craft to undergraduate writers, while bemoaning the fact that this is often one of the few financially secure options open to the playwright in mid-career. I find the proliferation of such playwriting courses (where neophyte authors spend most of their time reading their scripts – woodenly - to each other) problematic, yes, but I want to move beyond what might be considered the legitimate remit of the playwright within education; beyond the playwright as mentor for other playwrights. More problematic are the dozens of 'performer' training programmes that now exist in the UK, which provide next to no resources for properly 'realised' collaborations (least of all with playwrights). In too many training facilities, there holds sway a policy of segregation that regards the playwright and actor as members of different (rival) tribes. [*pace* Harvey Granville Barker, see Appendix One]

fact that although an internally examined piece, the students' work on the play is tested in front of a paying public audience. There is a pressure placed on the playwright-teacher to provide appropriately 'educational', yet dramatic and 'original' material; and in turn on the student-actors to impress and 'entertain' their audience / examiners. A pressure that highlights issues of trust and communal cohesion, unique in HE circles perhaps? It also raises ethical questions which with I engage with Appendix Three.

Etienne and Beverly Wenger-Trayner, specialists in social learning theory, neatly define in their web-site description of their field of work, an ethos shared by the ATA. Staff and students comprise a 'community of practice'.

> Communities of practice are formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavor: a tribe learning to survive, a band of artists seeking new forms of expression … a clique of pupils defining their identity in the school … In a nutshell: 'Communities of practice' are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.[17]

As documented in Appendix Two, I interviewed two highly experienced professionals as part of my research. One of them, Colin Ellwood, a director, neatly applies the Wenger-Trayner model to theatre practice:

> CE[18]: Everything we do is about human relationships in every conceivable sense and managing and negotiating those relationships in a way that's sensitive and

[17] Wenger-Trayner, Etienne and Beverly. 'What are Communities of Practice?' available at http://wenger-trayner.com/theory/ (accessed 20th September 2013)

[18] Ellwood, Colin. Interviewed by the author, Rose Bruford College, Tuesday 1st October 2013.

> productive. And you don't get a better challenge or test for the director than managing and working with the creativity of a writer, and the actors, and how that fits together; how one manages that in a way that respects everyone's creative space is a fantastic challenge.

The ATA's version of a community of practice also has at its core a regard for *constructive alignment.*[19] Dr. Warren Houghton, in his report for the Higher Education Acdemy, (*Constructive Alignment - and why it is important to the learning process*) emphasises the need for a perpetual fine-tuning of programme design and delivery (in which tutor and student take joint responsibility as 'reflective practitioners' for the evolution of key elements of the curriculum). For the ATA, this is most explicitly manifest in the public production modules where staff director and student-actor are encouraged to interact as collaborators first and foremost, coming together to define the 'learning outcomes' of the rehearsal process based on their mutual interpretation of the material in performance. There should always be a sense that not all outcomes can be anticipated (no matter how experienced the parties involved) when presenting work to a live audience. [20]

4. The Data: *Student Feedback*

(i) Pre-rehearsal observations

Let us begin with an extract from the discussion forum[21] I convened with the ATA6 students (the cast of *This Divided Earth*[22]) prior to rehearsals. Here the students consider the various roles undertaken in a production:

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[19] Dr. Houghton, Warren. http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/subjects/engineering/constructive-alignment (accessed 5th October 2013)

[20] The material (text) in this instance was written by me (*This Divided Earth*), the Programme Director, but we have plenty of other opportunities for students to independently explore material/text of their own choosing/devising. We aim to encourage students to recognise, evaluate and relish the 'surprise' discovery (or dismal failure!) in their own creative process, wherever possible.

[21] ATA6 students. Interviewed by the author, Rose Bruford College, Monday 15 April, 2013.

Steven Dykes: What do you think your primary role is as the actor?

GW: To convey what is on the page, convert the text into a performance. It's as simple as that.

HW: A storyteller someone who tells a story.

SD: So the storyteller who serves the text, okay? Anything else?

SH: As a medium, does that make sense? Like a vessel?

LK: I think on top of conveying the text, you also bring yourself to it and you infuse in the text what you are as a person and artist and you bring that to the audience.

CB: I suppose it's about converting text into action and conveying that, because the play exists as a written thing, but then it becomes a different entity in performance where the given action is then transmitted.

SD: That's quite an intellectual process, though. Do you sometimes feel as actors that you're either not encouraged or more importantly it's your job instead to connect primarily on an imaginative level? That the intellectual process is to a certain extent that of the director or even the playwright or the producers, the designers? That they will take care of the parameters, the structure of the piece and it's for you to then fill it with an imaginative or even emotional engagement?

RB: I think there is room for an actor to be intellectual with it, because if an actor wasn't intellectually engaged with the text and the character, then it wouldn't be completely lifted off the page. You do need to go and do a little bit of homework, do your own dramaturgy as much as you get given it.

CB: I think this is a personal thing, but for me I think sometimes it's easy for us to over-intellectualise what we do and to over-think the emotional content, and actually sometimes it would be really nice to be encouraged to engage with the physical, visceral level of the material, rather than intellectualising it in terms of context and emotions (you know breaking it down into actions). Less of the 'What am I doing here?' and just kind of going there and pushing it gut forward.

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[22] *This Divided Earth* is a full length musical play specifically conceived for the 19 actor-musicians (15 women, 4 men) of the ATA who studied module AT605 of the programme. It is set in the last days of the American Civil War (1865) and the cast take on roles requiring a physical engagement with a muddy 'exterior' setting, period costume, alien accents and obscure 19th Century colloquialisms. All company members are required to sing and/or play a musical instrument. The inclusion of video sequences, projected digitally throughout the show, meant that the cast were also involved in filming outdoors as part of their rehearsals, adapting to an 'on-camera technique' in often foul weather conditions. The rehearsal-performance period was 5 week in total, the show was performed a total of 4 times in 3 days in May 2013. [See Appendix Four]

GW: But to contrast that, for me it depends on who is the director or playwright you're working with, because sometimes as an actor they don't want you to be intellectual and to do your own [dramaturgy], they literally want you to do what they say.

SD: *Perhaps I need to define my terms a little better, that I don't mean to say that the actor is in any way stupid or childish and needs to be led by the nose. I'm talking about what you prioritise, I guess. That the actor's primary function in turning this text into action is to care on a sort of microscopic level about this individual character and this individual's inner world and emotional engagement and imaginative engagement and that a concern for the wider context of structures and interpretation and everything is less important.*

LH: I think the intellectual side of being an actor *is* the imaginative engagement, is taking a line and understanding what it means without having to know any history. Without having to know what the playwright thought when they were writing it. I think that is the intellectual side of an actor is just to look and then decide and imaginatively engage with just what's there. I think that's what makes an actor intellectual.

LK: I think you do have to have some basic understanding of the world of the play, because just as much as we are defined by our outside circumstances in real lives, so is the character. When you're engaged long term with a text - not just like a cold read or even a monologue - when you're engaging long term with the text you need to understand where the character fits in and the action of the play and also this world, so that you can understand how most appropriately to define who you are as this character.

SJ: Also discipline - not in terms of any sort of army stuff - but just the sort of discipline that you can walk into a room on your own and know that you are there to do a job. As much as you are friendly and very co-operative with everyone around you, just to know that if you go into the acting world you're going to be on your own most of the time, and walk away with probably your handful of numbers [of people] that you've got to know, but basically taking on whatever's on board.

SD: Do you think that actors are the most exposed people in the process, the most vulnerable people in the process?

NE: The most powerful people.

SD: The most powerful people in the process?

NE: If you don't have text you can still perform, you can still make something out of movement. If you do not have lighting and you are in the dark, the

audience member listens to you. If you do not have costume, well then you dress up in black or you perform it naked. If you do not have a director, then it's an ensemble piece.

SD: *Everything exists if the actor exists, nothing exists if the actor doesn't exist.*

CB: Yeah, in essence.

SH: I think the playwright is probably the most vulnerable, because an actor performs the text, but that doesn't necessarily say anything about them as a person. But the playwright has written it and it's come from them, so for me I would say the playwright's more vulnerable.

CB: I think from personal experience the director is vulnerable in the process as well because he doesn't have any hold over anything. He doesn't physically own anything, because the playwright's text is theirs - it came from them - and the actors work, their physical work and their process is theirs and their interpretation is theirs. If you really break it down, the director kind of sits in this middle ground and sort of has to navigate between the two … Unless they're incredibly prescriptive in their process - if you're looking at someone like Robert Wilson who has a really specific aesthetic and works within the concept of his own design and reworks it personally - if the director's there purely to navigate, for example a naturalistic play (a piece of Chekhov), to navigate between Chekhov's words and the classically trained actors in the cast, then that's a really vulnerable position.

It is interesting to note that the students are readily articulate when it comes to an understanding of the risks all parties take when sharing their creative process.[23]

(ii) Post-show reflections

The following are extracts from the students reflective journals, submitted shortly after the run was complete. Several of the students comment on the mixture of anxiety and

[23] We could (and should), of course include the vital contribution of the design team in this process; they too brave the scorn, indifference and confusion of their collaborators and audience in making public their ideas. To compare and contrast the students' perception of the nature of collaborative roles and hierarchical structures, please refer to Appendix Two where I consider the views of two professionals, well placed to critically examine the pros and cons of the didaskalos' role in contemporary theatre practice.

excitement they felt having no prior knowledge of the text or what to expect at the outset of rehearsals.

LB: I'd rather spend my money at the Royal Court or National Theatre, because I want to see a new untold story, now that's what excites me in theatre, the unknown. So when we were told that Steven Dykes would be a new play for us, I couldn't help but feel a shiver of excitement.

CB: I think what's most exciting about working on a new piece is that you don't have the history of an established play looming over you. That was what was terrifying about performing *Angels in America*: there was this Tony Kushner shaped weight, a shadow looming over me, "You must do this well!" There's a safety in a [un performed] piece, because at this stage of a new work there is no 'wrong way'; there is only interaction between actor and playwright and text and finding what works and what doesn't.

NE: The opportunity to perform in an untested play was just as empowering as it was terrifying.

LK: Often with an established play it has truth in it because obviously it has touched a lot of people and become a standard canon piece because of that. And when you're working on a new piece you often feel, 'Is this any good?' You can't really say objectively that it is. That's was my worry, you know, 'Is this any good?'

HW: It was very strange to start rehearsals having no idea what the play was. When everyone was going around introducing themselves in the initial production meeting it felt so weird not actually knowing the character that I would be playing or even the title of the play.

LH: As we were working with the playwright and a play that was brand new, we were very aware of the delicate nature of the opportunity we were faced with. I was very nervous to begin with and was afraid that [the playwright] had a specific vision and I did not want to step over that. I think there were many people who felt because Steve was the writer he would be precious about who these characters were and what he wanted from them. Asking us to make bold decisions was very daunting and I'm not sure he understood how scary it was to be given such a rare gift and as we saw it the expectation that came with that.

Some expressed more personal reservations:

KS: Although I was very excited that Steve was writing the play for us as a company, it also made me slightly uncomfortable and confused. I think that to be a playwright, like Steve says, it is possibly one of the most exposing things. Letting someone else read your work and putting yourself on display makes us incredibly vulnerable. I have experienced that many times with my own writing and it is unbelievably hard and nerve-wracking to have your work read by someone else, not to mention performed! However, in this case, I feel that it is equally nerve wracking to know that someone has written a character based on what they know about you and how you work. Initially, when I came to Rose Bruford and decided that I wanted to act, it was to get away from my own personality and to be able to project and be someone else for a little bit. So to find out that for my final show, the playwright is writing a character based on myself, does make me feel a little bit uncomfortable as that is completely not the reason why I want to be doing this at all.

It is worth looking at this in the context of 'Ethical Questions' (see Appendix Three), but the majority in recognising how specifically the play had been tailored to their own personae, were comfortable with that process, for example:

LH: [who is Scottish and played Morna] I had once said to Steve that I didn't think I'd ever have the chance of acting as a Scot and I guess this was a gift to me.

GR: The fact that Steve'd written it for us and knew us meant he must have glimpsed something and known that we could do it. Then even if it took a while for us to get to that place, because he knew us and knew our capabilities, he knew we could get there.

Some felt that the relationship with the playwright was of less importance than that with the director:

SJ: Why should I need the playwright around? Once the playwright is removed, we have a director that gets their job done. As far as we are all concerned, the playwright has already done his job.

While others perhaps expected more insight from the playwright than was forthcoming:

AW: One of the surprises of the rehearsal period was working with a director who had written the play; finally, I'd thought, we could ask the playwright all the infuriating questions about our characters that are unexplained in the text. For the most part however, we were to be disappointed - Steve didn't know the answers either. And had written many of the characters precisely because he wanted to answer the questions, leaving them for actors to answer either explicitly or simply informing their portrayals. This was a great insight into the mind of a writer, and brought into question all the hours we had spent in the first year fretting whether Arthur Miller had intended for Eddie Carbone to be actually infatuated with his niece, gay, or simply unable to express his feelings - maybe Miller didn't know either!

Gradually a desire for 'macro' explanations was replaced by an appreciation of the 'micro':

LH: I am learning all the time about the developments of characters and plot through working with the writer in the room and feel it will give us a huge insight to what the process of writing a play is, which is vital for an actor to understand … I had never realized how small and detailed his thoughts could be for one line and again it opened my eyes with what comes with being the writer and director.

Some shrewdly observed those moments when the separate impulses of playwright and director could be discerned:

LH: I would catch Steve's head down listening rather than watching, and this is where I noted the writer within the room. I don't think he played any role stronger although he was determined that the text had to be the most important aspect of his or any play.

Several noted a strict accordance to the play as written - "I feel people are much more inclined to really adhere to the text" - which is further stressed by the Professionals in Appendix Two. On the other hand, however, others felt the playwright was too willing to jettison the text at points.

KS: One thing that I was a little bit upset about was the fact that a lot of the lines, especially the Northern Delegation's lines, were being changed in order to make sure that the audience understood what was going on. That is maybe one element of the playwright-director ideology that I did not think necessarily worked. The audience need to understand what is going on, I get that, but Steve had written some really beautiful lines, and some of them were just completely cut [due to a fear of] … the audience not understanding. If you are going to write such a beautiful play that is, admittedly, very contextually heavy, with certain intensions for the characters, then don't change the lines because you feel it isn't obvious for the audience. Make the audience work for it!

What was most pleasing is that the company without exception gained a heightened appreciation of the playwright's creative and technical process, even when struggling with their own:

LR: When Steve talked of the vulnerability of the playwright when exposing his work, it immediately justified his prior approach to the work in earlier weeks. He was desperate for the read through to be at a 'performance' level so he could begin to picture the play as a director, but also understand and actually listen to the play he had written as the playwright. I found I was unable to deliver such a performance so early on as the play was, of course, so new … I found myself taking time to absorb its scale and easing into the character written for me rather than throwing myself 'head first' into the performance of it [as Steve wanted].

One of the cast had had more experience as a writer herself than as a performer and offers particularly intriguing (and salutary) observations. This passage chimes very closely with Colin Ellwood's remarks in Appendix Two:

NE: Speaking of the playwright/director: I have never had a good experience with that combination. As a playwright I can fully understand the want to direct one's own work, but in my experience, directing your own work can blind you to it. Instead of working with someone who says "this is what I saw when I read it," you work with someone who says "this is what I saw when I

wrote it," which is a completely different thing. Watching my play performed by eight different theatre groups, I loved how they had all read it differently, and how they all had chosen different approaches.

For this student, it's a question of when to let go. She continues:

NE: The director-playwright might have the final say in the rehearsal room, but the playwright-director loses that control at the exact same time the director does: Opening Night. And for the playwright-director, I believe it must be even more intimidating to let go than for the playwright or the director alone.

Furthermore, she highlights the deadly sin of any director – overly demonstrating your instructions / ideas – although she acknowledges those ideas were ones the cast were encouraged to discuss:

NE: Not only did we have a director who wrote the play himself and had clearly envisioned the entire blocking before he had even finished writing the script[24], but we also had a director who likes to be on stage … We may have felt like Steve's personal mannequins from time to time, but we were always encouraged to connect intellectually to the play and the period in which it was set. He may not have cared about what our characters had for breakfast, but the process was just as much theoretical as it was practical.

Finally, she draws attention to one of the major drawbacks when writing for a student cohort:

NE: I find that the greatest issue with having a play written specifically for a cohort of actors: everyone needs their equal "time in the lights". Because the playwright is also the director AND the tutor, he needs to be fair, to give everyone an equal opportunity to showcase themselves. And with so many characters, each can only have so many lines.

[24] Not true, incidentally. I come to each rehearsal with no specific plan, certainly not a conscious 'blocking' in mind.

I would contend – like David Bown (Appendix Two) that one can make a virtue out of a necessity and that the challenge of providing rewarding roles for a cohort of this size can inspire the playwright to create something truly theatrical in scale and of significant dramatic impact.

5. Conclusion

As you'll note from the abundance of appendices attached, I have amassed a great deal of material from the students and professionals I talked to. Perhaps the most interesting document is the CD recording of the students, which I have yet to transcribe, but which I include in my submission. Such is the quality of the student-actors' responses to the issues arising from having a play written for them and directed by the playwright-teacher, that I feel confident a second larger project will emerge from it. In the meantime, my appendices contain much more of the context, history and primary research than I was able to include within the word count of the main body of the assignment.

What comes across clearly in the student feedback data (see Appendix Six and CD) is the enthusiasm with which these students participated in collaborating on a new play and engaged with the controversial subject matter. To offer one example,

> LH: This is the second show I have been in now that Steve has both written and directed and I find the process inspiring. I have never felt he has been overly precious and has let our decisions be part of his process. I have always asked questions about … the characters I played] and feel that that he has always given me chances to explore, but is there to support me when they may be wrong. I have never felt shy or scared to try something out and feel that he thoroughly explains his choices for moves and tensions in the text. The scenes that were sexually explicit were all justified and I never had any doubt that they stood as an important link within the play.

Others are keen to stress that the political-historical context of the play also stimulated them: the dramaturgical aspect of their process in keeping with their training on the ATA up to that point.

I raised the issue that perhaps they were disappointed not to be performing in a well-known and popular play for their final public show. Universally, they acknowledged that not only did they regard the opportunity to premiere a new play as a positive endorsement of their talent, but also the urgent creation and immediate realization of a new work in a close tight ensemble were exactly the conditions under which they wished to work in the profession; that collaboration was the motivating force behind their future ambitions in the performing arts.[25]

The ethical issues raised by the play (issues of ownership, personal integrity, gender, race and sex) appeared to be exactly those which should be openly discussed and resolved within an educational environment – and the nature of the process actively encouraged debate and the airing of contentions: a rehearsal of the debates that students will encounter in the profession and for which they should be prepared. I believe the emphasis on the collective – the 'community of practice' – enabled the students to channel many of their personal explorations, interests and doubts though the medium of a dramatic text specifically engineered to facilitate such a process. Could this be more effectively facilitated than through the conduit of the playwright-director-teacher?

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[25] While I believe the scale of *This Divided Earth* made the project unique in a drama school setting, I wish to investigate further the provision for playwright-actor collaboration in the Drama Sector of England's Higher Education in general. [The issues concerned with this provision are expanded upon by the professionals in Appendix Two].