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IN GOOD COMPANY: THE AUTHORIAL PROCESS OF ANTHONY NEILSON

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The rehearsal process of Anthony Neilson has long been noted for its unconventional nature in both critical and professional discourses. Neilson's *modus operandi* has been a subject of interest for a number of theatre scholars including David Lane, Aleks Sierz (2001), Trish Reid (2007) and Anthony Frost, for instance. Frost and Yarrow note how 'the plays of Anthony Neilson . . . are sometimes deliberately "unfinished" as they go into rehearsal, because material will be generated in the rehearsal process to complete them' (Frost and Yarrow 2007: 212). Similarly, writing in 2010, Lane observes that '[o]ver the past decade Neilson has collaborated frequently with actors from scratch to write his plays, utilising a free theatrical imagination to create work that is highly expressive and playful but still tackles subjects of serious emotional and political depth' (Lane 2010: 89). Similarly, within the theatre industry itself, the *Official London Theatre*'s Matthew Amer has noticed that Neilson's

> way of working is different to almost all other theatre practitioners, in that he starts with a blank page, and uses his experiences with the cast to drive his work forward. is has led to comparisons with Mike Leigh, though where Leigh's plays grow out of improvisation, Neilson's do not. For him the actors' influence 'isn't direct; they suggest things that suggest things.'

(Amer 2007)

The theatre critic Brian Logan recognizes the risk implicit in such an approach, noting how Neilson continues to work collaboratively with his actors 'until the hours before opening night' despite this being 'a working practice that has caused him problems in the past' (Logan 2006). Finally, Dan Hutton, stresses some of the potential benefits of Neilson's approach when noting in 2013 that:

> *Narrative* has been created through workshops with the cast, in Neilson's trademark style (which, appallingly, I've only just learnt about). He rehearses by day and (re)writes by night, meaning that the shape of the piece is always shifting, resulting in a freedom and fluidity which would otherwise be dormant in a conventional 'written' play.

(Hutton 2013)

As these various accounts attest, Neilson's process worries conventional definitions of authorship because his methods are not only unstructured but also, crucially, collaborative. His is an extremely unusual rehearsal methodology for a mainstream contemporary playwright and consequently it raises the question of how, to borrow Sarah Jane Bailes' phrase, 'within a collaborative environment . . . authorship and ownership of

material [is] renegotiated by the conditions of ensemble process' (Bailes 2011: 169). What is more, the fact that in Neilson's case the generation of material involves the input of cast members problematizes the deep-rooted tendency to ascribe authorship in contemporary British theatre to the writer, and in the wider European context to the director. Neilson is typically both.

Representative examples of the traditional (and continuing) dominance of the playwright and the director are commonplace. Doug Wright decries, for example, the '. . . misguided notion that everyone involved in a play's long journey to the stage becomes, in some way, its author [however] only the writer can cite his or her influences with authority, and only a writer can choose to credit them accordingly.' (Wright 1998: 6–7). Meanwhile, drawing on the opinions of Estonian theatre director Marti Unt, Luule Epner rather paradoxically argues that '. . . authorship in contemporary theatre has actually been reduced to only one function: the director is not the sole author but rather organises a kind of cluster or tangled web consisting of his [*sic*] own as well as the writer's, scenographer's, actors' and others' intentions.' (Epner 2007: 214). I say, 'paradoxically', because in this argument, even though Epner is challenging the notion of the director as the single author, she simultaneously, upholds his or her primacy by positioning the directorial function at the top of a hierarchy, coordinating and ultimately controlling the creative efforts of others. Wright and Epner are each engaging with attempts to challenge the notion of the single author within theatre, attempts that seek to uphold the significance of the creative contribution of other company members, and which are neatly summed up by Gay McAuley – who has written one of the few extensive ethnographic accounts of a theatrical rehearsal process – when she concludes that 'the authorial process involved in contemporary theatre is . . . complex and creative output comes from many sources'(McAuley 2012: 230). My intention in this present chapter is to contribute to this discourse and, via detailed engagement with primary sources, to highlight the role played by other company members, especially actors, in the authorial process typically ascribed to Neilson.

Whilst his process has often been mentioned, what is so far absent is an in-depth engagement with Neilson's working processes as they take place in the rehearsal room. Such an absence is, of course, not restricted to Neilson's work. As Gabriella Giannachi and Mary Luckhurst remind us, when discussing the deification and mystification of the director within British theatre, it 'is extremely difficult for anyone to theorize the creative processes pertaining to a particular performance' because it is impossible to gain access to it (Giannachi and Luckhurst 1999: xv–xvi). More explicitly, McAuley, has drawn attention to how 'well-documented difficulties involved in talking about performance in bygone periods are greatly compounded when the question turns to rehearsal for, if public performance is ephemeral and leaves little trace, the private work processes that precede it are even more deeply buried in the past.' (McAuley 2012: 3). One noteworthy exception to this trend is critic and scholar Catherine Love, who, having attended some of

Neilson's 'Collaboration' workshop programme for the Royal Court's Open Court festival in 2013, makes the following insightful argument about his use of improvisation as part of the writing process:

> What the use of improvisation does reveal, however, is how close the roles of writer and actor actually are. As Neilson repeatedly insists, actors are essentially writing when they improvise. They are involved in a similar act of creation, only theirs is rough and immediate rather than meticulously constructed over time. The extraordinary ability of the actors in the room becomes more and more evident over the two weeks, as they reveal an instinctive sense for the direction of a piece as they move within it. They can push at a text and occasionally explode it, in the process revealing new facets. It's a skill that sits close to writing, but works within a completely different time frame and demands a very different way of thinking. Actors feel their way through the action, moment by moment; writers sit structuring it at one remove.

(Love 2013)

While Love witnessed a relatively small number of rehearsals from this collaborative programme, I observed and filmed most of the final four weeks of the rehearsals for Neilson's show *Narrative* in March and April 2013. In addition, I conducted interviews with the playwright, the cast, assistant director Ned Bennett, and sound and music designer Nick Powell. Because there is a need for scholarly work on authorship that is focused on specific practices, the aim of my ensuing discussion is to add a level of useful texture and detail to ongoing debates about authorship, as well as rehearsal processes.

Neilson's process is marked by arbitrariness, uncertainty and, on occasion, a degree of incoherence and fragmentation. While, I am not implying that Neilson's process is unique in this respect, it remains important to acknowledge the chaotic structure of his rehearsals. Neilson's *modus operandi* problematizes conventional assumptions about significance, relevance and meaning because it is informed by, draws upon and, is to some degree dependent on the random, tangential and erratic. I therefore consider the ways in which what might appear, or in fact *be*, incidental may unfold via a complex web of developments, into something crucial to the creation of meaning and performance. As Patrice Pavis reminds us, 'meaning is produced in the theatre performance from a great many unknown factors' (Pavis 1982: 133).

Narrative is a play with a complicated texture, the content of which engages ironically with how conventional theatre represents dramatic narrative. *Narrative* plays with the idea of a story about stories in a fragmented format which in turn mirrors the experience of surfing the internet. In its intricacy it seems to celebrate its own process of creation: a process littered with difficulties, paradoxes and inconsistencies. Whilst there may be obvious and interesting resonances between texture of process and product here, I do not wish to make a particular claim about the symbiotic relationship between the two, for in

Neilson's case this kind of process can and has produced very differently textured plays. In any case, Neilson's process has developed over time and should not be thought of as a stable methodology.

Nonetheless, the disparity of views expressed by people involved making *Narrative* is striking. Consider the following accounts. In our interview during the rehearsals, in response to being asked 'how does the actor shape the text?', Neilson responded: 'There's a big difference between input and influence and I think the actors massively influence the text. But it's not a direct thing; very rarely do they do something that I take lines from. [So] they have a huge influence more so than direct input.' (Neilson 2013). The actor Christine Entwisle does not quite agree: 'What [the actors] do is, engage with his ideas. They create characters, they create worlds for the characters, and they come up with text as well. They contribute to the material being generated in all sorts of ways . . . few of which could be documented or pinned down' (Entwisle 2014). My footage of the *Narrative* rehearsals, certainly features input from company members that is circuitous, indirect and oblique, but which nevertheless contributes to a final outcome that would have been very different had the route been more direct. It also includes examples of direct authorial input from company members, input which featured in the performance of the show and the published play-text.

As I arrived on my first day at rehearsal the company had just finished a run. Neilson is open about the show's weaknesses. 'Well, about 8 per cent of that worked' he admits but, 'most of it's bad writing, I'm just trying to figure out what the bad writing is'. Neilson is relaxed about conceding that material in its current form is not working, and as is his practice he turns to the actors for help. In particular, he is concerned about the section involving other characters interacting with Imogen in the aftermath of her murder of Sophie. It is worth going into some detail about how this quite lengthy and circuitous conversation plays out.

The company agrees that some sense of post-murder dislocation is necessary for the scene to work, and that this dislocation could be rendered using a range of audio-visual methods. Neilson stresses the importance of 'correctly analys[ing] what that feeling is' they are seeking to capture, and asks if anyone has ever experienced 'a feeling where they were dislocated?' Christine Entwisle then volunteers her experience of bouts of amnesia during which 'nothing really makes sense'. Brian Docherty agrees. 'You're at a remove from things' he adds 'Everything's being filtered'. Neilson then summarizes: It's perceptual change that we're talking about. It's almost like a drug-induced perceptual change'. The conversation wanders off on a tangent at this point but following Imogen Doel's suggestion to use projection in the scene, Neilson returns to what the earlier discussion touched on, namely altered states of awareness. He explicitly references the original trigger for the Imogen/Sophie narrative:

> it kind of came out of a dream that I had where I'd murdered somebody.
> Supposedly serial killers have this thing called the aura phase. It's a profiling term

where things become a bit synaesthesiatic. Colours become more vivid, it's a heightened state of awareness; an adrenalized feeling, an adrenalized druggy feeling.

He, then asks Oliver Rix, also an experienced boxer, for any insight he may have, to which Rix replies:

> a coach of mine gave me something called an ECA stack which you use to cut weight. . . . the feeling that it gives you is that you have a massive rush of adrenalin all the time. I remember really strange things, I remember walking down the street and feeling much, much bigger. What I'm saying is that something rang true about a heightened awareness. . . . The other thing I thought about was everything is out of sync for her [Imogen's character]. And augmenting that sort of feeling through a very simple process with everything just being a bit skew-whiff.

Neilson then moves the discussion once again to more tangential topics. Thereafter, two quite similar rounds of improvisation stretch across the following four working days, the first of which does not produce anything that is discernible in the play. The second round however, hinges around the use of objects on stage, also includes some experimentation with sound effects to produce dislocation. Neilson realizes that the use of objects alone is insufficient for the desired effect, and they need 'to support it with something; recorded dialogue or something'. At this point Nick Powell intercedes: 'I do really like that idea of us recording Imogen speaking and then getting her to lip-sync to it'. This suggestion is met quite neutrally by Neilson who suggests they 'try out a few things'. Over the next four days, Neilson produces a draft script for a scene, in which Imogen's lines have been pre-recorded and are played in the rehearsal room when her character is supposed to be speaking. is scene is then run repeatedly. Each time different types of cues and techniques are explored for Doel's lip-syncing and an evaluation ensues:

Powell I think we should try and make it unnoticeable as an effect. The more Imogen tries to sync up with it and the more located the voice is, the more interesting it will be. Because it will obviously not sync up. You will never ever think it is Imogen speaking, but the closer we get to that the more weird it will be as an effect. If we just disembody the voice it will not be nearly as interesting an effect.

[*The scene is run again.*]

Neilson No, that doesn't quite work.

Doel It's also really fucking hard.

Powell Can you try being slightly out, but it doesn't matter if you're ahead or behind. The effect that we're trying to get, and it may be too difficult, is that you're very close to being in sync, but you are out of sync.

Neilson It's very difficult for her, because she can either be in sync, or we take the cue from her, or she can take the cue from it.

Powell No, because it's to do with the rhythm within the line.

Neilson Ok, change the rhythm of inflection of the line. That might do

[*The scene is run again*.]

Neilson It sort of worked in places. When it's really out of sync, it doesn't seem to be that effective. There's something in it when your actions don't go quite with what you're saying. Choose a couple of lines to say in the same time span.

[*The scene is run again without Doel lip-syncing. After further discussion, the scene is run with Doel lip-syncing the words 'rhubarb, rhubarb' to her lines*.]

Entwisle There's something quite dreamlike about that, where you feel that you haven't got control over what's coming out of your mouth, that I really liked.

Neilson There's a point whereby it's so mismatched that it becomes something else.

The material produced does not feature in *Narrative* but the sense of out-of-timeness generated survives in the echo effect. Also, it is through this practical and collaborative exploration that the basic idea of words being 'mismatched' is generated.

One more element involving a random conversation outside the rehearsal room contributes to the finished idea. Assistant director Ned Bennett recalls: 'The other day Imogen [Doel] brought in autocorrect screenshots, when the iPhone gets things wrong when you're texting, and showed it to Anthony. And that became the spine of how her dialogue now works when she becomes disoriented and dislocated.' (Bennett 2013). A light-hearted lunchtime conversation about predictive texting, results in malapropisms that contribute to the desired dislocation for the scene. 'He licked me in my school uniform' rather than 'liked me in my school uniform' and 'he'd cumberbatch on my façade' instead of 'he'd come on my face' both make it into the show (Neilson 2014: 287).

This blurring of boundaries between work and break mode is characteristic of Neilson's process. As he observes: 'It's a strange thing; it's just as likely to come out of a stupid conversation out of hours as anything else. From the moment you're in there to the moment you come out, everything can possibly feed in' (Neilson 2013). His actors agree.

For instance, Barney Power notes that 'everything feeds in, it all feeds in. Often what you think is an off-the-cuff discussion finds its way into the script' (Power 2013). Similarly, for Sophie Ross it is 'just as likely that the material will come from a random lunchtime conversation as it is from a structured improvisation' (Ross 2013). In this sense Neilson's process evidences Charles Marowitz's argument that:

> The rehearsal process never ends. It goes on even during coffee breaks and dinner intervals. Every moment of communication between the actor and the director is an opportunity for artistic interchange, even when the conversation appears to be trivial or irrelevant to the work in hand (Marowitz 1986: 65).

Marowitz, however, is concerned to show how such exchanges build trust and a collegiate atmosphere whereas Neilson takes this further, by habitually utilizing out-of-hours interchange as sources for ideas that impact on the final text.

Neilson's process is akin to a jigsaw puzzle. The picture in the example above, only begins to emerge through a convoluted development that stretches across weeks. The jigsaw is assembled through a series of discussions, casual conversations, running of scenes and improvisations, during which Neilson repeatedly asks for input from his actors. He often responds to this input in ways that do not signal explicit interest or approval – in fact, there is little immediate feedback from him as to what he thinks of others' ideas and suggestions, and whether they may influence the development of the work – most likely because at that point he is not entirely sure where the work is headed. Actors and creative technical staff working with Neilson operate within a loose, unstructured approach, whereby there is little delineation between different strands of ideas, between working and not working, or indeed between the role of writer and director. In particular actors frequently do not know 'how things lie', in terms of both the eventual size and scope of their role and the performance overall.

Through a series of theatrical blind alleys, cul-de-sacs, tangents and trial and error, Neilson archives, condenses and distils ideas and suggestions offered to him. He does not do this consciously or systematically. He uses material to feed his imagination, lets ideas germinate and only becomes selective at a later stage. The impacts of Oliver Rix's remark, that 'everything is out of sync for her', Imogen Doel's suggestion of projection, and Christine Entwisle's notion of not having 'control over what's coming out of your mouth', are all evident in the final version of Scene Five of *Narrative* but at the time they were offered, these ideas did not necessarily elicit any noticeable response. It is only via Neilson's delayed response that his company sees the impact of its suggestions. One particular piece of input, in this case a random, out-of-hours conversation about mobile telephones, often completes the jigsaw and is therefore pivotal, because it fuses diverse strands. Ideas that may have appeared irrelevant or discarded are revealed to have been vital.

All of this rather supports Neilson's contention that he rarely uses actors as a direct

source for lines, although it also troubles the assumption that lines are the key element of any play. Ned Bennett's account of the texting incident further emphasizes this idea: 'I think that's a really interesting example of where it feels like it's less writing down what's actually been said, and it's more about using the ideas behind it and how that can work for the story.' Any process of creative thinking requires an incubation period, and generally speaking, this incubation period benefits from menial tasks whereby the brain is allowed to operate in the default-mode network that uses a widespread mesh of connections in the brain to solve problems and generate ideas (see Corballis 2015). Neilson is unusual in that he uses the rehearsal period itself as this incubation period. He accesses the default- mode network by letting his thinking drift.

The discussion has so far concentrated on the oblique influence of company members on Neilson's authorial process. The remainder of the chapter focuses on an example of the more direct input of Oliver Rix into his character's 'Hamlet/Macbeth' speech, which appears in Scene Four. The speech was first given to Rix on 28 April 2013 during the final week of *Narrative* rehearsals. In the scene Rix's character is being interviewed by Zawe about his first major film in which he plays the fictional superhero 'Elastic Man'. The original version of the speech read as follows:

> You approach a character like Elastic Man in the same way as you approach a character like Hamlet or Macbeth. In some ways, it's actually harder than those parts because it's more outside your experience. I mean – here's a man who suddenly has the power to stretch like elastic – he can stretch himself to the size of a football field; he can stretch his neck and look in a window ten storeys up – so what does that do to your body? What does that do to your mind? How does that kind of power change you? What responsibility do you have with a power like that? Those are really interesting questions and it's really meaty stuff for an actor to play.

(Narrative draft 28 April 2013: 47–48)

My recorded footage shows Rix digressing from Neilson's text:

> You approach the character of Elastic Man in much the same way as you'd approach Hamlet or Macbeth. In some ways it's harder than either of those great roles because it's a little outside your field of reference. To some extent we all know what it's like to be a moody teenager, or a bit ambitious. But to stretch yourself, literally, physically the size of a football field. Or to stretch your neck ten stories high and look in a window. Can you imagine what that's like? I mean, what does that do to you, not just physically – you'd probably age really badly – but emotionally. How does that affect you? How you see yourself? How does that affect how you relate to others? These are big questions. You know, at this stage of my career it's quite a gift to get a role like this. To be able to work with Ridley Scott the producer, Scorsese's directing, George Clooney's starring in it. It's

amazing, it's a gift, it really is.

These slight alterations evidence the agency allowed to actors within Neilson's process. His writing often functions, at least in the first instance, as a framework that actors are permitted to develop. By introducing their own speech patterns and idioms, actors can gain a stronger sense of ownership of the material, as Rix's own account demonstrates:

> You kind of get to do whatever you want, and if you bring some crazy idea with material or if you change it, then he'll just go along with it. There are certain little moments, songs, lines that I've changed. Nothing too major, but certainly . . . if you offer up other little bits, they often stay if they make him laugh.

(Rix 2013)

Imogen Doel, who also worked with Neilson on *Get Santa!* (2010) and *Marat Sade* (2011) agrees: 'He's not precious about his words, if you feel that something would come out in a different way, you can change the lines and put one in front of the other. Anything to give it that 'real' feeling or to get your instinct working, he's totally open to.' (Doel 2013). Rix continued to paraphrase his speech throughout the rehearsal period. His reference to 'what it's like to be a moody teenager, or a bit ambitious', featured in a discussion on 4 April 2013, which happened to be the final day of the technical rehearsal:

> **Rix** You approach a character like Elastic Man in much the same way as you'd approach Hamlet or Macbeth. [Anus sound.] In some ways it's actually harder than either of those great roles because it's further outside your field of reference. We all know what it's like to be a moody teenager, or a bit ambitious. [*Neilson laughs throughout the rest of the speech*.] But to stretch yourself, literally, physically, the size of a football field.' . . . Shall I keep going?
>
> **Neilson** [*laughing*] If he's going to say 'a bit ambitious', that needs at least one [anus sound]. It deserves at least one. It's like a Richter Scale of arseholeness. A Geiger Counter of arseholery.
>
> **Powell** 'A bit ambitious' is not in my script.
>
> **Neilson** It's not in the script, no. Are you going to say 'a bit ambitious'? I like it, I like it.
>
> [*Rix nods*.]

Clearly the 'moody teenager' line was not in a working draft of the script and even caused technical difficulties for Powell, who was trying to plot sound effects, for which he requires exact cues. The line was retained however, and added, virtually verbatim, to the published play text as follows: '. . . we all know what it's like to be a stroppy teenager

or a bit ambitious' (Neilson 2013: 277). While, undoubtedly, Neilson produced the bulk of the text, Rix inflected the work with a level of nuance and another level of comedic shading.

In an insightful discussion of Forced Entertainment, Alex Mermikides observes that 'while the material-generation phase of the process may involve the performers as authors, the fixing phase represents the reassertion of the director's authorship as he sculpts the material into shape' (Mermikides 2010: 106). Neilson's 'fixing phase' has remarkably similar properties, as he also reasserts his authorial function and 'sculpts the material into shape'. But Neilson's process also differs from Tim Etchells' because the former, as the Rix example shows, continues to use 'the performers as authors' and his actors have an unusual amount of creative agency. Comparing Neilson's process to his previous professional experiences, *Narrative*'s assistant director Ned Bennett observed that 'the script changes much, much more easily and is responsive to what's actually happening in the room and who the actors are' (Bennett 2013). Creative agency is also connected to temporality here, in that permitting it so late in the rehearsal period causes potential problems for the smooth integration and running of the technical features of the production. This type of activity is instrumental in preserving the element of risk and precarity that is a signature of a Neilson production. The peculiar quality of his work, which is engendered by its collaborative nature and the chaotic structure of his rehearsals, is something Neilson stresses in his final words from his interview: '. . . the shows, when I see them, are not better or worse than any other shows, but I know that they have a unique feel to them. And I kind of know that that is not the feel they would have to them if it was just down to me. I don't think it would be' (Neilson 2013).

To conclude. In this chapter I have aimed to demonstrate how Neilson's authorial process complicates notions of single authorship in the context of new writing. Drawing upon the labour, presence and personal qualities of actors and creative staff at all stages of (and at times beyond) the rehearsals, his process hinges on his handling of this input. Consequently, 'the authorial role necessarily fractures and becomes shared' (Thomassau 2008: 236). This is not as surprising as it might seem because, as Jack Stillinger has argued, 'when the circumstances of composition are investigated in detail, the identifiable authorship turns out to be a plurality of authors' (Stillinger 1991: 22). In relation to Neilson, it is perhaps useful to think in terms of associative authorship, which takes shape during proceedings that are notable for their erratic, messy, tangential and tangled texture. Neilson's penchant for ensemble-based generation of materials, as Jonathan Shandell reminds us, demonstrates that a 'collaborative form is messier than working with one author' (Shandell 2005: 23). As McAuley also observes, in 'rehearsal analysis, as in ethnographic description, the larger picture comes into view through the accumulation of minutiae' (McAuley 2012: 10). The complex, ephemeral and circuitous chain of utterances that constitutes Neilson's process, is at times sympathetic to and at other times at odds with the actor's craft. It is also, as Entwisle remarks, a challenge to document, and it is this challenge that the present chapter has most sought to tackle.

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