Transcript

MADELEINE

Welcome to Practice Makes: the Oxford Reimagining Performance Podcast, where we put leading scholars in conversation with actors, directors and other practitioners to crack open the connections between theatre research and performance in practise. I'm Madeleine Saidenberg.

HELEN

And I'm Helen Dallas and we're PhD students at Oxford.

MADELEINE

We've worked in theatre as directors and dramaturgs.

HELEN

And now we also ask academic questions about theatre.

Before we start this episode, which features Colin Blumenau and Dr. David Taylor discussing performing 18th century drama today, David reads a speech delivered by the character of Millwood in George Lillo's 1731 play *The London Merchant* to introduce this episode. On the surface, this is an 18th century morality play, in which the protagonist, a merchant's apprentice called George Barnwell, is seduced by a sex worker called Millwood into a life of crime which culminates in him murdering his uncle. At the end of the play, the penitent George Barnwell and the determinedly unrepentant Millwood are both sent to the gallows. We know that masters took their apprentices to see *The London Merchant* to instruct them on how not to behave. But Millward as a character challenges such a straightforward moralistic understanding. Here's David Taylor reading her speech from just after she is apprehended.

DAVID

"What are your Laws, of which you make your Boast, but the Fool's Wisdom, and the Coward's Valour; the Instrument and Skreen of all your Vil|lanies, by which you punish in others what you act your selves, or wou'd have acted, had you been in their Circumstances. The Judge who condemns the poor Man for being a Thief, had been a Thief himself had he been poor. Thus you go on deceiving, and being deceiv'd, harassing and plaguing and destroying one another; but Women are your universal Prey."

HELEN

With that fantastic introduction to today's episode. Here are our speakers. Colin is the artistic director of the Production Exchange as well as a prolific writer and director. You may recognise his voice from his six-year stint as Francis Taffy Edwards in *The Bill.* From 1996 to 2012, Colin was chief executive and artistic director of the Theatre Royal Bury St. Edmunds, which is the last working Regency playhouse in England. Under Colin's leadership, the theatre was restored to its original state as it was when it was built in 1819, and Colin led the "Restoring the Repertoire" initiative which brought forgotten Georgian plays back onto the stage.

MADELEINE

And David is an associate professor at Saint Hugh's College, Oxford, specialising in the theatre of the long 18th century. He has written widely on drama and theatrical culture in this period, including *Theatres of Opposition: Empire, Revolution, and Richard Brinsley Sheridan,* and he co-edited the *Oxford Handbook of Georgian Theatre 1737 to 1832*. David is also a member of the R18 Collective, a group of international scholars who work to "reactivate Restoration and 18th-century theatre for the 21st century." He also works on Shakespeare and cartoons, and he has recently developed a prototype smartphone app with Arcade which recreates in virtual reality the stage of the 1785 pantomime *Omai, or the Trip around the World* and he is also as we can both say from personal experience, a fantastic PhD supervisor in addition to many other things that we'll talk about today. Welcome both. Thank you so much for being here with us.

HELEN

Yeah, thank you for speaking to us.

DAVID

Lovely to be here.

MADELEINE

We had the pleasure of getting to work with both of you together on a workshop recently of *Who's the Dupe*, but were wondering if you could chat with us a little bit about your relationship and how the two of you know each other and how you've worked with one another.

COLIN

Oh, goodness. Uhm, we were introduced. I can't remember how David will remember 'cause he's got a much better memory than I have.

DAVID

Well, I don't know I can remember. I mean so, I was a PhD student at Cambridge during the period after the City Hall at Bury St Edmunds reopened following its restoration. So during that amazing such incredibly exciting period in which Colin was leading this “restoring the repertoire” project. And I. in 2007, certainly saw some of the— actually I didn't see *Black Eyed Susan*, Colin, your very first production, but the I think thereafter I saw pretty much everything, because you know, Bury St. Edmunds is a not particularly long train ride from Cambridge. So I think we became introduced that way and then once I finished my PhD in 2009, 2009 to 10, I worked with Colin across that year, especially in the early—first half of 2010 more directly on the restoring the repertoire project, sitting in the rehearsal room, you know, helping with some of the rehearsed readings as well. So it that that's really how it took shape for someone who was first a PhD student and then for, you know, like an early career researcher, it was just a gift from heaven, quite frankly in ways that I appreciated at the time, but that now, more than a decade on, I really think. Wow, just how unbelievably lucky was I.

Speaker 5

It was a moment in time wasn't it. And the thing I remember about that time was that it, it was very much riding by the seat of one's pants, because there was no received wisdom about any of this stuff, and we had to create not just, kind of plays, out of written pieces of writing, but we also had to kind of create an idiom that worked, and because it was unresearched and untested in the practical field, having somebody like David along for the ride was absolutely invaluable because there was a source of knowledge and scholarship that was like manna from heaven really, because we knew nothing, and there was I grandly making all these claims for Georgian drama—and I think we even were presumptuous enough to say we were going to do for Georgian drama, what the Globe did for Elizabethan— on the basis of no knowledge whatsoever! And having David there was fantastic because he knew stuff, and he knew stuff both in terms of the work but also in terms of the context, the society, the politics, the people, which I as a theatre practitioner knew nothing about.

DAVID

But what was interesting is—and what continues to be interesting when I I'm involved in seeing these plays put on their feet—is that the knowledge is in the plays themselves. In other words that the repertoire is a kind of embodied reservoir of knowledge. And that you know, I could come along, or another academic could come along, and say, "well, this is what happened in 1786, this is how you know this should be done, or this is how that should be said." But within the plays themselves, when you try to work out how they move—and this is what was so exciting about being in the rehearsal room—within the plays is all this knowledge. You know, this sense of gesture and movement and interaction that is only in those plays, and that is only unlocked when we perform those plays. So the thing I would add to what Colin has just said is that for me it was not about kind of imparting my knowledge to Colin or his actors. Rather, it was just a huge learning experience for me as well. A wonderful learning experience of the kind that I could not possibly, and I don't think anyone could possibly, get elsewhere.

HELEN

So what we've been saying—this is such a wonderful working relationship to get to hear of insight into—is that you both came to 18th-century theatre independently. As Madeleine and I both know, it is a notoriously underresearched area and even more so an underperformed area, so how did you both come to this area before you ended up finding one another to work on this?

COLIN

Well, I ran a Regency theatre! And it seemed to me that there was a gift from heaven, and when we went to the Heritage Lottery Fund to ask the money to restore the theatre, they said why? Why do you want money to restore *that* theatre? And I said, well, because it's a national treasure and they went, yeah, but what are you going to do in it that means that we're going to give you £2 million? And that was a light bulb moment, when I thought, I knew that that the history of the theatre was kind of architecturally really, really important. But what it did? Nobody even thought about it. And so what I did know going right back to my university days was that I was taught everything from the Greeks up to, uh, Shakespeare. And then there was an enormous gap, apart from *The Rivals* and *She Stoops to Conquer,* until Victorian theatre. And I always, even as a 20-year-old, thought that was very odd. And then that came back to me and I went, “oh right, OK, there's all that other stuff.” And then you start researching and people say, “don't bother 'cause it's rubbish.” And for most people, I think, that's enough. For me, there was an imperative, which was find a reason for spending £2 million on the building, and what's going to happen in it. So that's how I came to it, and it felt like—and still feels like, I have to be honest—pushing a boulder up a hill. Because people still don't listen, even though we produced, I don't know, 10 plays and read 100 of them, and they were incredibly well received. All of them. It still feels like somebody’s got a vice like grip on 18th century and in early 19th century theatre and gone, “yeah, you can't get it this 'cause it's rubbish, so we're going to hold onto it.” I know, that's fanciful. But it does feel like there's a set of obstacles which we haven't yet surmounted that that stop there being a public recognition of the value of these plays. Now remember, there's a director called Jessica Swale, who’s now terribly famous who did productions of the *Belle’s Stratagem*, and something else, one of the one of the Centlivre plays, I think, at some Southwark Playhouse and again the whole world went “ooh, these are magnificent, let's have more,” and then it stopped. And there were no more. The National Theatre never does any, the RSC never does any, and none of the regional centres ever look at 18th century theatre with anything but kind of, oh, I don't know, distaste.

DAVID

Uh, in my case it was. I suppose it probably goes back to an amazing teacher I had at school who taught me English at A level theatre studies, a teacher called Dot Em, who in fact I dedicated my *Theatres of Opposition* to because she was just so profoundly important to, you know, my own development intellectually. And we were lucky; so I grew up in the West Midlands and we lived quite close to Stratford upon Avon, and Mrs. Em would take us regularly to see things at Stratford and Warwick Arts Centre. Everywhere. And so I just developed this deep love of the theatre. But amidst various things we saw, one of the things that we were taken to was a production, an RSC production of the *School for Scandal* with an amazing cast, actually a young David Tennant was in it. I'm worried I'm now getting confused 'cause also around the same time the RSC did *The Rivals* and definitely David Tennant was in that as Captain Jack Absolute. I'm getting confused. I saw an RSC *Rivals* with David Tennant as Jack Absolute, the kind of the male lead in that play. And I saw *the School for Scandal* with Matthew Macfadyen as Joseph Surface. And we spent some time, you know, talking about comedy. And actually interestingly, we were taught *The School for Scandal* as a Restoration play—

HELEN

Which, if we could just jump in here, maybe explain to our listeners—

DAVID

Yes, go on please.

HELEN

--why it's not a Restoration play, David?

DAVID

Just to explain that: so Restoration as a term would usually apply to the theatre from 1660 when the theatres are reopened following an 18-year period of closure, which spans the Civil Wars and then the Interregnum Cromwellian period. So from 1660 through to roughly the beginning of the 18th century. Sometimes it's extended to 1714 when Queen Anne dies and George the First comes to the throne, but never really any longer. Uh, but Restoration comedy seems to be this term which gets applied to comedies of manners as we often call them, that date from much later. And Sheridan was writing in the 1770s and in fact one of the things that I'm interested in sharing was Sheridan was the fact that he was later in his life a drinking buddy of Lord Byron's. So that you know here is this, supposedly “restoration playwright” which makes us think of late 17th century theatre. But in fact there he was at the beginning of the 19th century running a theatre as he did—Drury Lane Theatre— and drinking with Lord Byron. There's a very, there's a great anecdote in one of Byron's Diaries in which he describes the perils of trying to navigate a very drunk Sheridan—who by the end of his life was very, very big—trying to navigate a very drunk very big Sheridan down a corkscrew staircase in the middle of the night after one of their drinking sessions. Sorry, this is the—I digress. I had this amazing teacher. She took me to some amazing plays, including an 18th century play and I think that was the beginning of it, and then I was lucky enough to do one of the modules I did when I was an undergraduate at St Andrews University was in Restoration Drama and uh, basically by the time I graduated as an undergraduate, I then knew that I wanted to do graduate work on 18th Century theatre and that's really where it all started.

COLIN

I think there's a really interesting thing that's happened that makes the distinction between Restoration and Georgian theatre terribly important, because there's a real danger that Restoration is going to be obliterated from the map because of the political connotations to do with slavery and the association with the period. And I don't know if you're aware, but in lots of drama schools at the moment there is a movement to stop doing Restoration plays. And the fact that happened has a real knock on effect, I suppose, and implications for the longer period which isn't restoration, so there is there is yet another thing that's being added to the list of impediments or the list of obstacles that exist for this historic work to try and surmount in order to survive. And I do have real—not fear because God it's only theatre and what does it matter?—Bbt I have a concern that some of the brilliant plays of the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries are just gonna be unacceptable to a modern world through I think misplaced criticism. The criticism is absolutely appropriate, don't get me wrong. It's absolutely right, you know, you only have to look at the novels of Jane Austen and go, “yeah, alright. They're based on practises that we cannot accept or support nowadays and therefore they should they should have to answer for that, but they shouldn't be expunged from the record.” That’s true. But there's a real danger that the Restoration period, the Georgian period, but particularly the Restoration is going to be treated differently for no particular reason. The historical canvas looks at slavery from the year 0 until now, and you would be pushed to justify vilifying 30 years of English drama as the representative of it, and so to kind of get rid of Restoration theatre or to get rid of Georgian theatre *because* when slavery first came to public notice I think it is not appropriate.

DAVID

I think, just to build on what Colin has just said— this is something that as a collective R18 Collective is really interested and engaged with, you know, thinking about “where's that critique coming from?” and I think we can understand it because where it comes from is in part…it's in part a result of how Restoration, and indeed 18th century theatre, has been seen and has been practised (so far as it has been practised) for decades. OK, you know, it tends to elicit highly conservative approaches to staging that, understandably, a lot of people feel excluded from. But what I would say is—I'd say two things. The first is, there is no, you're not going to find many Restoration or 18th century plays that are any more problematic than Othello or the Taming of the Shrew or Merchant of Venice, OK?

COLIN

For the whole Shakespeare canon! I went through Midsummer Night's Dream the other night and thought, “what?!”

DAVID

Exactly so. So that, what needs to happen, or at least, more of which needs to happen, is a kind of critical and interrogative approach to these plays in their staging you know, and an experimental approach. And a recognition that these plays have absolutely had problematic areas, but those are theatrical opportunities for critical practise in the way that they are staged rather than reasons for pushing them aside and pretending that they don't exist and that they don't belong on the stage. And I think that again, going back to the point I made earlier about the fact that this the repertoire is this kind of reservoir of embodied knowledge, I mean, that knowledge with questions of how modern ideas of race come into being, how modern ideas of sexuality and gender come into being, howmodern ideas of capital come into being. All that knowledge is in those plays. And I think that as well as there being many brilliant plays, these brilliant plays are also telling us about who we are *now* and how we came to be who we are now. And I think on that basis that it's really important that we do stage these works and that we find ways to engage young actors and directors in in the challenges of these plays, in the merits of these plays, and certainly of course in the problems of these plays as well.

Speaker 5

It's so important, isn't it? And a practical demonstration of that—oh gosh, this sounds so arrogant— is the production that we did of *Wives as They Were and Maids as They Are*, which, you read and the first 3/4 of it, and it's setting it up beautifully for a denouement that doesn't happen when you read it. All the issues, particularly about marriage, about feminism, about the women's right to self-determination, all exist in the debate that the play throws up in front of you. And then the ending when you read it feels like a cop out, where all the all the relationships get tied up with pretty little bows and everybody gets married and everybody is happy in the end, so you've you kind of created this maelstrom of ideas, but then you haven't carried it through. And it felt to me when we did that, that the most important thing to do is to try and stay faithful to the two things which were— the ideas that were thrown up by the play itself and its contemporary resonance, where we've gone beyond that, we've gone beyond tying things up in pretty little bows, and there are real questions to ask about the way society treats women. Ten years ago it was less sophisticated than it is now, but it was still pretty sophisticated. And the more I worked on the play and the more I said to the actors, "we have to find a way of doing this so that we don't tie it with, with pretty little bows, and send people off into the night thinking about what they've seen rather than just getting all that was jolly fun." *That* was the real challenge for us. And I think what we— what we achieved with it was doing exactly that thing that David was saying, was using the crucible of knowledge and experience that the 18th century offered us and the early 19th century offered us. And then we interpreted it for our modern audience. And that felt like a perfectly harmonious thing to do, even though it was tough.

DAVID

I think I'm so pleased that Colin's brought up Wives as They Were and Maids as They Are, which is an Elizabeth Inchbald play from 1797—in my humble opinion, is possibly, possibly the greatest play of the 18th century. I just think it's an absolutely astonishingly good play and Colin's production of it in what, 2007 or 2008, I think it was? At Bury St Edmunds was a brilliant production of it and the play. The wife in the play, the "wife" of the play's title, is tyrannised and indeed tortured by her husband, but at the same time is being harassed by this rakish male admirer, who is convinced that, you know really, he can help her escape, not stopping to consider what she wants. And then the maid, on the other hand, is a fashionable young woman mired in debt, but also being constantly chided by an older man who in fact his her father in disguise and who's constantly kind of assessing her, and if he like also "mansplaining" as well, as we might now. And I'd say from these two very—through these two characters in their situations, Inchbald is telling a story about how women are trapped financially and sexually within these ideals of femininity, which were very important to the 18th century, but which certainly haven't entirely gone away. And really, what the play is doing is offering this kind of remarkable and radical and highly searching exploration of the ways in which men seek to control women or control women's bodies and Inchbald is asking well how, what strategies, realistically what strategies do women have for resisting those systems or structures of male control? And her answers, as Colin's already suggested, really are surprising and certainly not always as affirmative as we as an audience might want. I think she's—I think Inchbald plays with that, to some extent with frustrating an audience, with not giving them, certainly not giving a modern audience quite what they expect or want. It's such a stunning play and given what's been happening, for instance in the States just this past couple of weeks [as Roe v. Wade is overturned], it's a play that feels more urgent than ever, I would say, So yeah.

COLIN

And the really interesting thing about the play is it doesn't give the answers, but it raises all of the questions, yes, and that's a product of its time. Maybe she didn't have the answers, but we certainly have the answers now, and so it's up to us to go forward from the end of the play, or just before the end of the play and go "all right, we can use this, we can enjoy it for what it is, but we can use it politically, we can use it socially, to humanise our society a bit."

DAVID

I think— I'm not sure we *do* have all the answers now, I suppose I disagree with Colin there, but also I think that I mean for me Wives as They Were and Maids as They Are is as much a "problem play," to use that term as something again just to kind of turn to more familiar Shakespeare precedent, as something like *Measure for Measure.* OK, it's an 18th century problem play. And in part you can—I think you can feel the way that, what Jane Austen does brilliantly is not dispense with the marriage plot, but work within that particular inherited structure of the marriage plot novel, to do something different. So Inchbald is working within this inherited structure of comedy in which as Colin has said, you know, everything needs to be tied up with bows at the end. And you know, just as in some of those Shakespeare problem plays, we feel as an audience the strain of that structure as it tries to make everything knit together in ways that feel awkward and indeed wrong for us now, certainly.

Colin

Uh, yeah, yeah, no, I agree with that completely. I would only say that what we what we did at the end of it, rather than tie it up with bows, is just throw it back at the audience and go "what do you think?" So we didn't make any of the decisions—well, we made two out of the three decisions because the text demanded it, but the central character, Maria, was being tasked with tying the final bow with a totally unsuitable man. And the way you read the play, it feels like the very last act is that she caves in and agrees to marry him, but we didn't do that. We stopped it before that point. There's no dialogue, but we stopped it before that point, and she just looked at the audience and went – sorry, for a podcast audience, she shrugged and demanded of the audience to make their own decisions, and that felt like, going back a bit that felt like it was exactly the right way to use the material, but to interpret it for a modern day.

HELEN

Can I just jump in on that? 'cause I find this this whole discussion about time of writing and setting so interesting, and I think it's on now as we are recording this, but the National has a new version of *The Rivals* on, *Jack Absolute Flies Again*, which is set in the Second World War, I believe.

COLIN

Yeah it is. Yeah yeah it is.

HELEN

Right, thank you. Just checking I'm not talking nonsense. I know, David, this is something we've spoken about briefly before, but I, I wonder about thoughts about sort of setting these plays within their historical era or kind of untethering them from that, and what you think that does, what creative and the sort of discursive interrogative model, what it opens up for that as well.

COLIN

Yeah, I mean this was this was a central point of discussion when we were doing it. To what extent do we want to do museum theatre? Zero. and to what extent do we want to make it relevant to contemporary society? 100%. And so naturally, from the point where you make that decision, you can explore any idiom that you want in order to get the play to its audience, and we did. You know, there were a number of productions that didn't follow convention, and in fact I think there was only one that we did, which was entirely conventional. And that's because we wanted to demonstrate the way that the scenery worked more than anything else. And we wanted to show off the beautiful Restoration theatre sets, so we did a picture book production of a play which I didn't think was anything except for great fun before I did it, but then as I did it—we're talking about Black Eyed Susan— out of this fairly banal text, came a play that historically looked at returning militia to their homeland, and the way they were treated, which of course goes across every era that has ever existed.

The idea of soldiers, sailors, latterly, airmen coming back to a society who wanted them to do what they did but doesn't value them for people anymore when they come back And the examples of how people have been very badly treated are legion. And that's what happens in Black Eyed Susan. So yeah, even in a very traditional picture book production, you've got something extraordinary. At the other end of the extreme, we did a production of the hitherto unperformed play *The Massacre*, which Inchbald wrote as her contribution to the debate about the French Revolution, which is a play, amongst other things--and it's only a short play-- but it's a play about, well, genocide I suppose in its most, inclusive terms. It lent itself completely to looking at the way that different societies treated the issue of how to imprison, torture, get rid of disembarrass themselves of people who weren't part of their central identity, and that that felt like we could do everything from Northern Ireland to Rwanda. And so we did it in the modern dress production. Sorry, that's very badly expressed, but at least I know what I'm talking about.

DAVID

Yeah, I think— I think what Colin achieved at Bury was showing you that you can do so many different things in these plays; from stagings which at least superficially feel quite traditional, in period costume—indeed, in the case of the Black-Eyed Susan production in 2007 as Colin said, even working with that kind of traditional perspectival scenery scene-painting. But, as something like *The Massacre*, his production of *The Massacre* showed, you know doing that in modern dress, as was the case, worked so well was so powerful. I think, to take two other examples: in 2019 the RSC did two plays, Thomas Otway's tragedy *Venice Preserved* and John Vanbrugh's play *The Provoked Wife*. *Venice Preserved* is a tragedy, *The Provoked Wife* is a comedy, a complex troubling comedy. *The Provoked Wife* was done in period costume, but it was done in a way which really brought out the complexity and ambivalence of its comedy. So that worked very well, whilst *Venice Preserved* was done in this kind of 80s Blade Runner-style aesthetic and that also worked really well. And I think that's what I would say in that you know: play with these plays. Don't assume that they need to be done with the big wigs and the big costumes. I think the danger is sometimes that that it kind of becomes panto season automatically the moment that actors put on these big wigs and costumes they kind of strut across the stage slightly differently. And sometimes that might be very useful. I just think there's so much scope for doing things differently and that's one of the things that I would just say to any actor or director is just approach these plays experimentally. Think about what you could do with them. You know the possibilities are so vast.

COLIN

And they're robust, just like any other play from a good writer. You can take Shakespeare and do whatever you want with it, but actually think across the era. There are many plays that have been taken and reinterpreted for a different audience in a different way. There are many, many examples of that and why, why should the 18th century be any different? You know the great plays will lend themselves to it.

DAVID

Absolutely agree.

Speaker 3

I guess I find myself curious about, you know there's such a delight in collapsing the remove between this far away, this thing that feels were temporally far away from us and right now, and sort of saying, you know, “we can do this in a way that makes it feel really immediate.” But I guess, you know, Colin, part of have the delight of having the Regency Theatre at your disposal, and I know, like David with your work on spectacle and sort of restoring and reactivating not just the repertoire but the space: I wonder what the possibilities are of that, and of like reimagining the spectacle as it was in a way that doesn't make it feel more removed.

DAVID

Yeah, I think the danger there is that you're in the realms of museum theatre and I just, I'd think theatre is live in lots of ways, OK, and that you know there is—we don't have an 18th century audience, so there's no point pretending that we have. These the plays need to work for a 21st century audience and I think there are ways, for instance, I mean to take the question in terms of space—and really Colin should be talking about this, but I think I think I'm right in saying that if you stand on the fore-stage of the theatre at Bury St Edmonds, right at the front of the fore-stage, you are at the exact centre of the building. You know you’re as far from the very back of the building as you are from the front of the building, so that-- I think almost everything, I think that Colin did at Bury played with that. The idea that if you're stood there on the fore-stage and of course in the 18th century, and indeed in a Regency theatre such as Bury St

Edmunds, you know, the stage hasn't retreated behind the proscenium arch yet, as it will do in in the Victorian period. You are in a very particular and intimate relationship with spectators and that Colin would always say in the—and again I'm stealing your lines here Colin, so do interrupt me—Colin would always, Colin would always say in the rehearsal space and I thought it's absolutely right, to his actors, “you know you've got to, you know always think about the audience as another character in a scene. You're also always talking to them, always involving them in some way.” So and that is an insight which is at the one hand, historical and on the other hand, kind of ahistorical. It works now, you know it's a hugely important insight for how to make that space work and a hugely important insight for how to make plays work *now* that were written in a period before we have Chekhov, before we have Stanislavski et cetera, et cetera, in which an idea of what counts as “natural” is just very different. And then on the question of spectacle, I think that, I mean, I don't think we need to be staging a Restoration or 18th century plays using the kind of scenic approaches that were used at the time, what I think we could do if you if we have the budget, is to recognise how much these plays are visual, are thinking visually, and that can be done with lots of modern techniques, some of which might require a very large budget, some of which might require a lot of imagination and a small budget.

COLIN

Yeah, completely, completely. Let me go back to the architecture and its relationship to the repertoire. Because it's central. The architecture of the building as David said places the actor right in the middle of the audience—well, right in the middle of the building, but as part of the audience as a member, if you like, of the audience. So that that the illusion, if you like, is 360 degrees other than 180. And the audience are complicit in everything that goes on. That grows from a tradition where the Shakespearean soliloquy is delivered in the hope that the audience will at least receive the information slightly differently from the drama itself, and in the best of worlds will respond to it, and that this has moved on in time, and moved indoors, and it becomes a real feature of all of these plays that you are asking the audience to be your friend, your confidant, your critic, your ally, whatever it is, and you want them to be part of the drama. So the reason I say that thing to the actors about the audience being another member of the scene is that there is so much that you can talk to them about. And by addressing them personally, they feel involved. And there's a neat little trick which-- I've yet to discover why this happens, it's all about psychology—if you talk directly to one person, everybody feels included. If you sort of, make it general, and look out over the top of people, nobody feels included. And so that the trick is always to look directly and to hold their gaze and to start a conversation with them. The best example we have of that now is in pantomime where if you talk to a member of the audience, everybody in the audience feels involved in that they don't feel that they're dislocated from it and there is something that goes on there. And these plays absolutely rely on that relationship. So here I'll trot out the little story about. Uhm, the London merchant, which is a play by uhm. What was he called? Thank you, George Lillo, which we did later on. One of the last things we did, big heavy duty tragedy about all sorts of issues with an astonishing central female character of a courtesan called Millwood. And she seduces a young apprentice, George Barnwell. And after their first meeting, he has a conversation with the audience, which hitherto would have been called a soliloquy. I banned that word in my rehearsals simply because it means you're on your own, and I didn't want him to be on his own. I wanted him to be talking to his audience. And he was debating the pros and cons of either staying away from Millwood or going with her in some of the most tightly written and effective poetry that the play has got. And during this play we did it, actually, in the round, which was an experiment, but it put him right next to a box in the circle, we floored over the pit so he could go all the way up to the circle and talk to people in those boxes. And he settled on the first night or whichever night it was on one pair, a man and a woman sitting in this box and he said to them in this very tight beautiful poetry, effectively, “should I stay? Or should I go?” And the man responded, and he said, “yeah, go with her, go with her!” And the woman said, “don't you dare.” And I just thought that was a brilliant vindication of the idea that you can, you can involve your audience in all sorts of things that will help you as an actor, or as a character, determine your way through the play. I mean, obviously you can't divert yourself from the text, but it will give you a sense of how the audience is feeling and the way that you can flesh out your motivations, your characterizations to make it a richer experience for everybody.

HELEN

Oh, it's wonderful that that just, you have that perfect example of how that comes to life, how it engages people. We maybe should just cover how-- if people haven't come across 18th century theatre before, however technologically advanced they’re imagining it was, it was probably more so. It's very impressive. This they love water on stage performing dogs, bits of set coming down, bridges that collapse, they’re really, you know, this is Andrew Lloyd Webber in 1790.

COLIN

I mean, one of the amazing things when you kind of delve back into the history and the practical application of all of this, which goes right back to the Baroque era and all of those amazing opera houses in Europe, is that again returning to the theme of returning soldiery or the Navy, is lots and lots of sailors were employed in theatres when they came back to pull ropes and to turn pulleys and to do things that that that sailors were inevitably very good at, because that's what they did on ships.

DAVID

Isn't that where—we also, we talk of a crew. Yeah, the crew, as in this kind of stage crew.

COLIN

Yeah, absolutely.

DAVID

Well, I think one of the reasons that this period of theatre as we discussed has been forgotten or neglected, or indeed, in some ways, consciously removed from our cultural history, is because it's a period of theatre that isn't just textual, it is so visual. And the kind of denigration of special effects and spectacle I think is certainly part of why this period of theatre has been neglected and misunderstood. And yet that's it. It's so important. I mean, in lots of ways we've already talked about how in this period of theatre we see the racial and sexual and financial ideas and ideologies that shape our own moment, but this period of theatre is also the period that gives us ultimately, the kind of blockbuster movie. You know there couldn't be Jurassic Park or Avengers: Endgame without Restoration and 18th Century theatre and the kind of spectacular effects that they gave their audiences. But you know, there was a real change in the way that—in what theatre was in this period that lots of people seem to have found quite troubling, but I find tremendously exciting.

MADELEINE

I sort of wish we'd all been unmuted for that moment when David was talking about the blockbusters, 'cause we were all giggling with delight at that idea, because absolutely, that's the sort of, thrills and horror and excitement that you get when you when you go to a movie theatre, they're all present in in these plays in some ways.

HELEN

It's just such a wonderful conversation about the mechanics of theatre and its history and how those things could have informed the actual staging now. And kind of drawing through, I think something that's just been so wonderful about this conversation as a whole, I would just love to ask both of you how you see practise and research in your work as a whole theme of our of our podcast. Do you see research and practises as opposite sides of the same coin? Is one in service of the other? Can they get in one another’s way sometimes? It’s a huge question that we're so we're so fascinated by we made a podcast about it.

DAVID

That's a really gosh, that's a, that's a big question. I feel we could go on for an hour here. I would say I mean they constantly get in each other’s way. I mean, I think there's always, at least in my experience of working with Colin and with other theatre makers, I think that slight sense of tension that dissent and difference is actually often quite productive, and I wouldn't want to be without it. I mean, the fact that we're coming to similar or the same materials from different places is exactly what’s interesting, and that might mean that sometimes there is disagreement about approaches. What I would say is that certainly, if we're talking about this question of well, how can we ensure that more restoration and 18th century plays are put on by commercial professional companies in Britain, and indeed beyond in America as well? And I think the answer to that is going to have to involve both researchers and also theatre makers. Obviously it has to involve theatre makers, but I think that, you know the people who are researching and reading and teaching these plays need to find ways to get word out about them quite frankly, you know, to show those people who have the skills, the talent and the resources to put on these plays to show them that these plays exist and that they are great and they would be brilliant for actors, that they would be brilliant for contemporary audiences as well. So I think that is where I feel responsibility is researcher, and I think my colleagues in the R18 collective, Misty Anderson, Daniel O’Quinn, Tracy Davis, Kristina Straub, Lisa Freeman would all agree. I think they are in agreement that we need to find ways to get the word out. And then beyond that I, I mean really, it is about then us learning. As I've already said in that if we believe that these plays are kind of a reservoir of embodied knowledge, then the only way to unlock that is to perform them, and so we're not going to—there are certain things that we will not learn as researchers unless we work with practitioners. Did you agree with that Colin?

COLIN

Yeah completely. I, I don't think there's any tension between research and practical work. I think the tension is between purism and pragmatism. That the people who are purists, although I'm not sure quite what that means, tend to say “you can't do it like that” when there's no good reason for not doing it like that other than a kind of misplaced belief that aspic is the place for these things. And there are people like that, and they're entirely entitled to their own view. I don't believe that's the way to do it. I believe that research should inform practise, and practise should return to research a degree of discovery. And there are plenty of brilliant plays out there. But it's interesting Helen that you talked about *Jack Absolute Flies Again*, which is a reinterpretation of *She Stoops.*

DAVID

The Rivals, it’s *The Rivals*—

COLIN

I just—sorry, *The Rivals*—I just wish they'd chosen another play. Yeah, you know which would have had brought *that* play forwards a bit, without going, here's a lovely 18th century drama.

HELEN

I also think Colin, I was thinking as you were talking and I just felt we should address this at some point on the podcast. And as you say, the kind of extant canon of that time period is really a few plays by Sheridan and one from Goldsmith. But as your “restoring the repertoire” proved, there are so many plays by women in that period, it's a fantastic—we talked about Elizabeth Inchbald several times we've mentioned Susanna Centlivre. Madeleine and I have both worked with both of you on a Hannah Cowley short play. There's such good work by women in that period and it doesn't get performed and I think we should at least just note that Colin's been doing amazing work getting that onto stages, yeah?

COLIN

There's lots of it. There's lots of it.

DAVID

We could add Aphra Behn, Mary Pix. Delerivier Manley, I'm gonna be missing—Catherine Trotter.

MADELEINE

Eliza Hayward, Kitty Clive

Speaker 4

Eliza Hayward, yeah Kitty Clive. We could. We could go on absolutely-- there are—my dream is that one of the major rep theatres in London does a season of new plays by 18th century women because they are *new plays* and this is how they ought to be approached. These are new plays that they've not been seen by audiences for hundreds of years that speak to us in really powerful ways now. And I think they ought to be marketed as new plays that just

MADELEINE

Well, it sounds like we have our, you know, next couple of seasons of theatre laid out for us. I just want to say thank you so much for your, for your work and your further work that we'll get to see and read, and it's been a delight talking to both of you.

DAVID

Thank you.

COLIN

Thanks for having us.

HELEN

This has been Practise Makes: the Oxford Reimagining Performance Podcast with Helen Dallas and Madeleine Saidenberg. Thanks for listening.