

## CHINESE WHISPERS

*Gerry Stembridge and Mark O'Rowe worked together for the first time on NAYD's **Stage It!** Young Playwright's Scheme in 1995. Six years on, they've joined forces again: Gerry is directing Mark's new play **Made in China** for the Peacock Theatre. Here, they talk about writing, directing and other violent acts.*

**Gerry: Is there a reason why you write?**

Mark: I think, once you start, it's like a hobby almost. It becomes a compulsion or an obsession and you just keep wanting to do it and come out with something better. I think you know when you've done something better than you've done before.

**But you also know when you're chancing your arm?**

Definitely. A lot of that goes in the bin. An awful lot of pages get dumped.

**You have a fairly high strike rate, haven't you? Or is there stuff you've written that never saw the light of day?**

There'd be half-finished plays left, right and centre. I would never want to put anything out that I wasn't one hundred per cent behind.

**So where did *Made in China* come from?**

After *Howie the Rookie*, I think I wanted to write the antithesis of that. I wanted to write something that was really physical and much more theatrical. The whole mindset came from those notions of keeping the actors moving and keeping stuff happening.

**Given that you felt like writing something very physical, does it mean anything for you?**

It just seemed like fun, to tell you the truth, to actually see an actor say a couple of lines, walk over here, do this, and something that's quite precise in that stuff repeats and grows and one device criss-crosses with another.

**And yet you still did it all in one set? You didn't feel the need, as part of that, to move it around?**

I've always had a problem with the location thing in terms of plays. I always find some of those plays with a lot of scenes almost with their legs astride between theatre and TV.

**It's theatre at second hand...**

Exactly. Although, I know, with your stuff, say something like *The Gay Detective*... there are a lot of scenes in that. But they're all combined under an immense theatricality, where you're using theatrical methods to overlap one scene to another or to make changes. But, if you've got a 120 minute play that's all set in one location, it's almost the challenge and the fun of saying 'I can make a complicated story, a complicated characterisation, a complicated action confined within this one space that people can leave, but we can't leave.'

**The first play of yours I read, the one that you sent into the NAYD competition [*Stage It!*]: I was a judge in the competition and I was reading them without knowing even the name of the person who was writing it, let alone who that person might be. That play – *The aspidistra Code* – I love the title, for a start. And I also love the fact that you had a really, really modern play but actually, quite formally done - it all took place within the space of a few hours, it all took place in the same place. Is it the only one of the plays you've completed that**

**hasn't been done?**

Yes.

**And does that annoy you?**

Not really. I'm still really, really fond of it though. And I'd love to see it go on.

**Clearly, people who commit violence and who are the subject of violence are of interest to you. Is that because you know it's something people like and enjoy and it's something you enjoy yourself? Or is it something you actually want to say something about?**

I don't think I'd ever say I want to deal with violence or do a study of violence, but I know it's what entertains me. In the end you write for an audience, but you write to please yourself as well in terms of what interests you. I love violence in its literary form, its cinematic form. You were talking about whether it was because that's something that people like. In this country, I don't think it is. They prefer another kind of thing. I think the kind of violence that does very well and the stuff that we see like *Shopping and Fucking* or *Mojo*, I find that quite a shallow reading of violence, kind of cartoonish. Even though there's a huge cartoonish element to the violence in *Made in China*, it's still grounded in a very personal, human story.

**You said that one thing you want is that the violence is grounded in some kind of personal thing. What is this personal thing?**

I don't think it's a personal thing for me. I mean for the characters. I just think that every play should have that, it's as simple as that.

**I feel that too often writers use violence as a sort of shorthand for 'bad' or 'evil'. If they make a character a violent character, he's immediately saying 'here is the bad character'. Or a violent action in the play is intended to indicate a sort of evil element within the play...**

With those kinds of plays, again the violence is intended to get a certain idea across; it's violence signifying something else. Whereas I think, with this, I wanted to get into the very centre of it. *Made in China* isn't a play where there's one violent character, like what you're talking about. It's about three violent characters, or three characters who have a great capacity for violence. It's getting into the middle of them and seeing how the rules play across each other...

**And look at it from the inside out?**

Looking at it from the inside out. I suppose, in the early plays like *The aspidistra* *Code* or *From Both Hips*, you had violent characters seen from normal people's perspectives. It was with *Howie the Rookie* that I really had to question myself. It's not the kitchen sink element, the people in the house who are witnessing this. It's actually the people who commit. They're the people I'm interested in.

**Already, just in terms of directing the play, you've just said something there which will probably have a considerable effect on how I direct the play. And it was something that hadn't occurred to me until now in a very specific sense. You know, I knew what was there but it hadn't occurred to me to pinpoint it in the way you just talked about.**

In *Made in China*, I don't think for a moment that the author or the director should ever tell the audience to judge these people. By asking people to judge it, you take them a step outside and you're looking down at these people. When I wrote this, I wanted us to be in there with them and, despite the fact that they're horrible people, to have an empathy with them.

**How long more do you think you will put up with other people directing your**

work? I wouldn't say this about any writer, by any means, but my own personal view is that you start directing as soon as possible because I think you probably have the knack for it. But, I think the longer it goes on, the more it becomes difficult to start. One of the reasons I do it is probably because I started as a director. So that, by the time something I wrote was being staged, I was already somewhat established as a director or, at least in my own head, I was confident of myself. And I think that makes a difference. But, I think it's certainly a problem for a writer when they direct for the wrong reasons, like when they direct in order to protect their words. Secondly, it's wrong to do it only as a last resort because they haven't been able to find any other director who they can work with. I think it's really important for the writer to see that, if they're going to direct the work, that that's a valuable job they're going to do as well. That it's an almost separate job that they're going to do. But it can be uneasy, can't it, working with a director?

If you find a director that you can trust and has a certain empathy with your work, that's fantastic. It's always terrifying wondering what this person is going to think: are they going to be on an ego trip, are they going to want to completely re-mould this play so that they can put their stamp on it? I've learned, having worked with directors for quite a while, not to be so precious and to always be aware that, if somebody says there's something wrong here or if it needs work, to look within yourself and ask yourself if they're right. So, I think it's all about opening yourself up to, well, listening, I suppose. Listening and deciding who's right.

**I've noticed you said you abandon stuff. There are still a lot of writers who plough away, determined to finish something even if it's taken them three years to get through it. I've always had a problem with that because I always think that the writing itself dies for lack of oxygen.**

I think you do need to have an impetus to write, especially the first draft; to write as much as possible and to get through it as fast as possible. If your heart isn't in it from the beginning, then what's the point? You will have a mediocre piece. Whereas, if something just really takes you with it, I think that's where your best work comes out.

**Have you ever written anything in a more cynical vein? Like for the money or because somebody asked you? And, you then found out that it was really good?**

Yeah. Both the youth theatre plays – *Sulk* and *Buzzin' to Bits* – I wrote on commission. I had to work to time, deadlines. And, once again, those are even more difficult because you've got to cast fourteen kids, they have to play their own age, they have to be kids. You have to divide it out equally enough...

**You don't have to, but it clearly works better if they can do that.**

Ah, now, Gerry, I was told I had to do that.

**Oh, you mean specifically in that case? You're right. I was the one who commissioned you to do that!**

So, you're constrained even more and yet, within that constraint...

**You were happy with the result?**

Yeah. It's great. But I've never taken a commission since. And especially commissions for theatres - major theatres. I've heard stories about people - directors or artistic directors - getting personally involved and bending the play out of shape.

**I think what's interesting about writing for youth theatres is that you feel less pressure. You're not hanging your balls out to dry when you commit yourself to write a piece for a youth theatre. And, weirdly enough, because that**

**pressure is off, you can write better, you can write more freely. Whereas, I understand what you're saying that, if you set about on a commission for a theatre, there's a kind of weight of significance can come upon you. But, often, is it not also true that the completely open brief is the hardest of all?**

The open brief - I find even now - often it is just actually deciding what you're going to sit down and write that takes the longest time. Just making that decision. So, yeah, commissions - like for youth theatre - do push you in a certain direction where, once you're pushed, a certain amount of responsibility comes off you because it's almost not your decision what you decided to write.

**Does it make any difference to you, in terms of how you see yourself as a writer, now that *Made in China* will be your first play at the National Theatre?**

No, it makes no difference whatsoever.

**Whereas, many other writers who are much more into the whole business of the literary tradition would think about the whole tradition of Abbey writing. For a lot of people, to be part of that tradition, is something to aim towards. Would you still be saying 'no, that's not really something I'd aspire to'?**

It means nothing to me, that whole writers' tradition. I've never felt part of it and I've never really wanted to be part of it. What actually happens, when you have a successful play like *Howie the Rookie*, people start making you, in a way, part of it. Although, with that kind of play, they kind of feel 'when he starts writing fifty-year-old characters in the bogs and talking about what it means to be Irish and the land, maybe we'll let him in then.' Do you know what I mean? The Irish literary tradition - this is not meant to sound arrogant because I'm not talking about my own writing here, I'm talking about the kind of stuff I like - never impressed me that much. I'm much more of a fan of American literature, always have been.

**So, where would you like to plant yourself as a writer?**

What do you mean?

**In the end, you will end up somewhere as part of something. Are you a Hollywood film writer? Are you an English socialist writer? Are you European new wave? If someone was to ring you tomorrow and make you an offer, what would that perfect offer be?**

Oh, wow. It would be to write an apocalyptic, dark western for - I was going to say Martin Scorsese but I don't think westerns would suit his particular sensibilities for directing - whoever was the top man at that job. No, I could direct it as well! So, the darkest, darkest, most apocalyptic western...

**So, a big American movie?**

Yeah. In terms of literary aspirations though, in terms of the kind of stuff I'd like to get out, I tell you what I'd like to do. I'd like to push Irish theatre on to the next level. I'd like to be part of the thing that, in twenty years' time, made Irish theatre. I'd like it if I was part of that wave or whatever that turned it on its head.

**Rather than being part of the tradition, being part of what shifted the tradition, is that it?**

Exactly.

*This conversation was recorded by Julie Cronin in Dublin Corporation Arts Office, Parnell Square on Friday, February 9, 2001.*

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