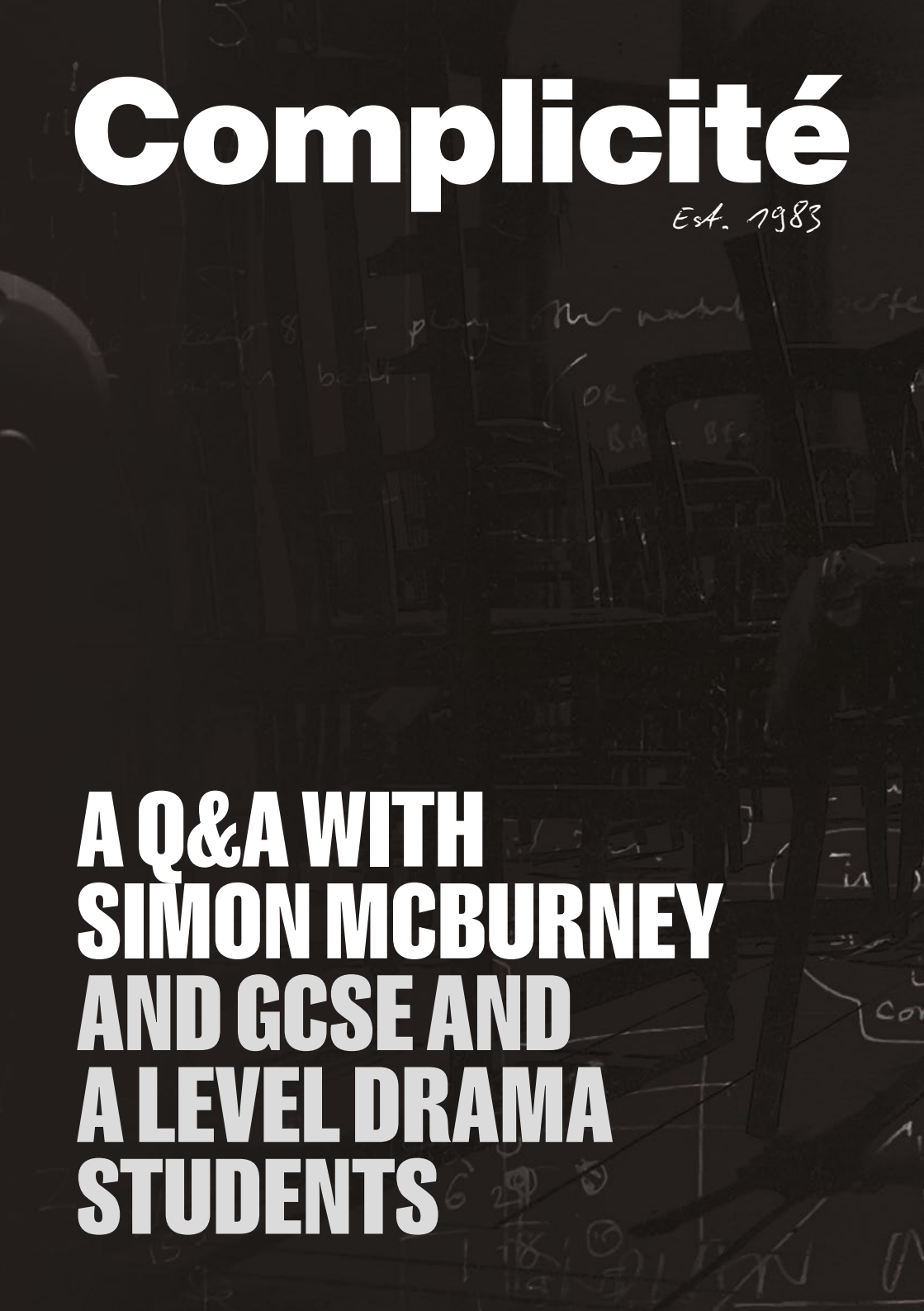
Complicité

Est. 1983



A Q&A WITH SIMON MCBURNEY AND GCSE AND A LEVEL DRAMA STUDENTS

INTRODUCTION

Students from Nower Hill High School, Queens Park Community School and Exeter School met with Complicité Artistic Director Simon McBurney online in May 2020 to ask him some questions.

The answers offer a great insight into the Company and Simon's processes, ideas and thoughts about creativity and culture. We therefore hope they might also help students to better understand how the process of making theatre is not linear; it is a web of anecdotes, memories that all begin from playing in a room with your friends. Some questions are answered directly, and others take us in different directions that explore something else entirely- much like the way Complicité tries out lots of different ideas in the rehearsal room.

THE Q&A

Jane: I was wondering, when you have director's block, what's the first thing you do to get back on track or stimulate a new idea?

Simon: That's a good question, I think I kind of cry a bit. An incredibly important thing is to look the other way so you don't know what you're going to do. Leave that problem or whatever is blocking you and do something completely different. Within the company of Complicité one of the things that we do all the time is play games. We have all sorts of games that we play. It's a bit like picking up a fidget spinner or something like that, you do something totally different. Or you attack something else. Or you play some very loud music. Anything to put the brain into another place and while the brain is in another place then sometimes the problem is solved. I have a friend who is a mathematician and he says if he looks at his problem intently he never finds a solution, but the solution comes to him when he's suddenly riding on a train or getting out of the train - bam - as he steps onto the platform suddenly the solution will come to him. So, go somewhere else.

Sorel: A lot of acting is about reacting; how hard was it in your production *The Encounter* to do this considering that you are alone on stage?

Simon: Ah well that's not quite true, the fact is that I am not alone on stage. At the beginning of the show I talk directly to the audience so I am reacting off the audience. Then I split myself, I literally have a conversation with myself so I'm reacting with myself. Then my friend Marcus Du Sautoy - mathematician and scientist - comes in and I talk to him. After him comes my daughter, and so on. When I'm performing it I feel that I am not alone but I'm constantly reacting to all these different people, and of course when I become Loren McIntyre then I'm in the village and I'm reacting to the village. I can hear all of that because I have headphones in my ears at the same time, I have several different microphones that I'm using so I can hear the mix. The mix that I get is slightly different to the mix that you get as an audience.

Laura: I read in an interview that Jacques Lecoq inspired you, is there anyone else that inspired you?

Simon: Jacques Lecoq was a teacher of mine and he was a very fascinating man. One of the aspects of why he was such an interesting teacher was that his teaching was fundamentally different to the kind of drama school that you might go to in this country. He was not focused on people coming out of school and going into what is called 'the business' or 'the industry'. He was interested in the individual imaginations of each person that he took into his school - what he was interested in was making. So in my year, for example, some people went into the theatre and some became directors, some became actors, some became clowns, some went into the circus, some became dancers. But equally, some people discovered that how they wished to express themselves was not through theatre or performance at all; some became novelists, some became visual artists - I had a friend of mine who became a landscape gardener. So Jacques Lecoq's teaching was fascinating. He said in the end: "I'm not anybody, I'm not interested in me, I'm just interested in your imagination and how it works."

So many people have influenced me in my life... I've had a very long relationship with a wonderful writer, who you should look at, called John Berger. He did an amazing series in the 1970s which you can watch on Youtube called *Ways of Seeing*. It was a BBC series and his analysis of art in that series is still being used today and in History of Art courses in universities all over the world. He was a really fascinating man, and became my closest friend for 25 years, until his passing in 2017. So yeah, he is very very important to me.

Viola: Has any particular production stood out to you in your career which you have created?

Simon: With every production that you make, the last one becomes the most important one, so of course you have very particular attachments. I don't really think of it as having a career, I just go from thing to thing. It feels a little bit like rock climbing... one of the people that I most admire in the world right now actually is a man called Alex Honnold who ascended El Capitan without ropes, which is one of the biggest pieces of sheer rock in the world. How he did that I don't know, but he went from crevice to crevice to crevice and

that's how it feels in life. I don't really have a scale of things, I just feel as if I'm continuously climbing a precipice; it doesn't get any easier the older you get, you just continue to look for the next handhold and the next place that you want to go to. Right at the beginning, a few years after I started, I made a piece about the death of my father - my dad died when I was about 18. I found that I wasn't really able to process the grief of it. I didn't know how to weep or mourn particularly, it was quite a complicated event for me. So when I made this show, which was called *A Minute Too Late*, it was about death and in a sense it was about him. It was one of the funniest pieces we ever made. t's a three-hander between myself, an Italian actor called Marcello Magni and a Belgian actor called Jozef Houben. This production is pretty important but they're all important in different ways.

Tim: Do you use music in any way during the creative process and what kind of music would you use?

Simon: Music is absolutely fundamental for me, for the whole thinking process, I can't live without it. If I'm confronting a problem or wondering how to do something, sometimes I will just play music, I will try it. It's like a direct feed into my subconscious, my unconscious; if words are the way that we communicate consciously, I think music is the way that we communicate unconsciously because it is beyond language, it is before language. Before we communicated verbally, we, as early humans, we communicated musically. But when does a sound become music? Or when does music become sound? Very difficult to say.

I'll give you an example of this, there was a show that we made about 30 years ago now called *The Street of Crocodiles*, in which we took a piece of music by a Russian composer, and I asked my sound designer at the time to put that piece of music through digital treatment. He treated the music in lots of

different ways, so that every single sound effect in the play could be made from that music, and then the music itself would sometimes emerge and we would then use that. So all the sound effects of doors slamming, people shouting and the wind - there are great bursts of wind in the piece - are this piece of music which has been transformed into sound effects.

Sasha: What do you believe are the key things you should focus on when devising a piece or creating a narrative?

Simon: I don't think I have key things to focus on; when you're creating a narrative, when you're devising something, the main thing is to make sure that you try anything. There isn't really a point of entry, you've just got to start and the moment you start and you make something then you start to build an understanding of what you like and don't like. The key thing is to be able to do something. It doesn't matter what you do and sometimes it can seem unconnected with the whole process, it can be something that you like, it's something that tickles you, making people laugh, just playing around sometimes so that you start to get fragments of different things, which you then eventually will start to arrange and make; you take that one, put it there, that one you put it there, and that one there no that doesn't work, you change it around... you have to play. I had a teacher once in Paris who said to me if an actor or theatre-maker has forgotten what it's like to play as a child they shouldn't be doing this profession. We all need play.

Blaze: I was wondering, what route did you take on your way to get to where you are now?

Simon: That's really interesting, it's a really interesting use of words because I didn't take the B4070, nor did I come off the M5 at Junction 26. In other words, I had no map and I don't have a map...things happened and I responded to them. I went to university, I don't know whether that was a good idea or not, but that's what happened. I went into university because of my dad (who was still alive at that point), I knew that that would please him, so I think I did it to please him. I'm not sure what I learned there, I really felt as if I started on my journey once I left the UK and I was living in Paris. As I learned French (I couldn't speak French before I went there), and I engaged deeply in French culture and I was working with artists, actors, performers, dancers - people from all over the world - it totally blew my world view apart and at that point any plans that I had were changed. I just started on a path where I was kind of following my nose. Quickly I decided to get together with friends and we would make our own work, we wouldn't be dependent upon other people and so that's when Complicité was started.

But Complicité has gone through all sorts of different forms. It's a constantly changing entity and it's not the only work that I do, and in fact at the beginning there were so many of us we were all pulling in different directions. The whole thing kind of exploded and everybody wanted to do their own thing and we were arguing and fighting and then at a certain moment I went off and was doing my own thing. Then people said, well why don't you become Artistic Director? I said that's a bit formal, but on we went... within the last 30 years it's taken many different turns and forms and unexpected directions. So there isn't a route, there's only

staying alive to the landscape that you're in and responding to what is there; maybe you can make a map after the event. I tend to shoot off in every single direction which is absolutely infuriating for the people who work with me, but that's just the way that I work and that's the way my mind works. Sometimes I can be coherent and logical but other times I don't really know what I'm doing, and that's part of the joy of the company. Some of my friends say it's a little bit like going into the jungle with somebody who's possessed and maybe a little insane, but who's determined to find out something new. When we started off on a journey with our production *The Encounter*, we didn't really know what the whole thing was going to look like, but then it suddenly emerged and that's the same thing with what you might call the route; the key thing is staying alive to life around you, the dead thing is having a single goal, because once you get there that is it.

Ekani: How did you and your peers come up with the idea of Complicité and did you always want to work within theatre?

Simon: Yes I did. I found school very difficult. When I was at school I was quite shy, so performing was a way to help me deal with that. I also found it quite easy, I liked being in a group of people making something, so it was kind of natural... I never said oh you know what, I'm going to be an actor, it wasn't a revelation for me, it was just a natural extension of what I was doing anyway. My dad was very worried and wondered if I had thought about being a teacher. I didn't really fancy that, I just liked playing around, and so the reason why I started Complicité with my mates was I didn't want to wait around for someone to give me a job. I started improvising on the streets, gathering a crowd, doing a little show, and people gave me some money. If nobody was going to give me a job, I was going to play nonetheless, and nobody was going to stop me. I just like making things. We're lucky enough to have a garden, so I make stuff in the garden, if I can't make stuff in the garden I make stuff in the kitchen, if I can't make stuff in the kitchen I make stuff you know, with anything. That's why I made Complicité: wanting to make stuff.

WITH THANKS

To the students and teachers at Nower Hill High School, Queens Park Community School and Exeter School.

Complicité travels the world to share how the company creates and devises theatre, with students and professionals alike, through workshops, residencies and bespoke engagement projects.

For more information about our work with schools or to start a conversation please contact creativeengagement@complicite.org

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