

Theater can be dangerous. The British theatrical troupe Cheek by Jowl was in Moscow to stage a show at the Red Army theater, a massive space built for spectacles glorifying the state. Director Declan Donnellan and set designer Nick Ormerod, his artistic and personal partner, were wondering what might be available to them in the free market chaos of the former Soviet Union.

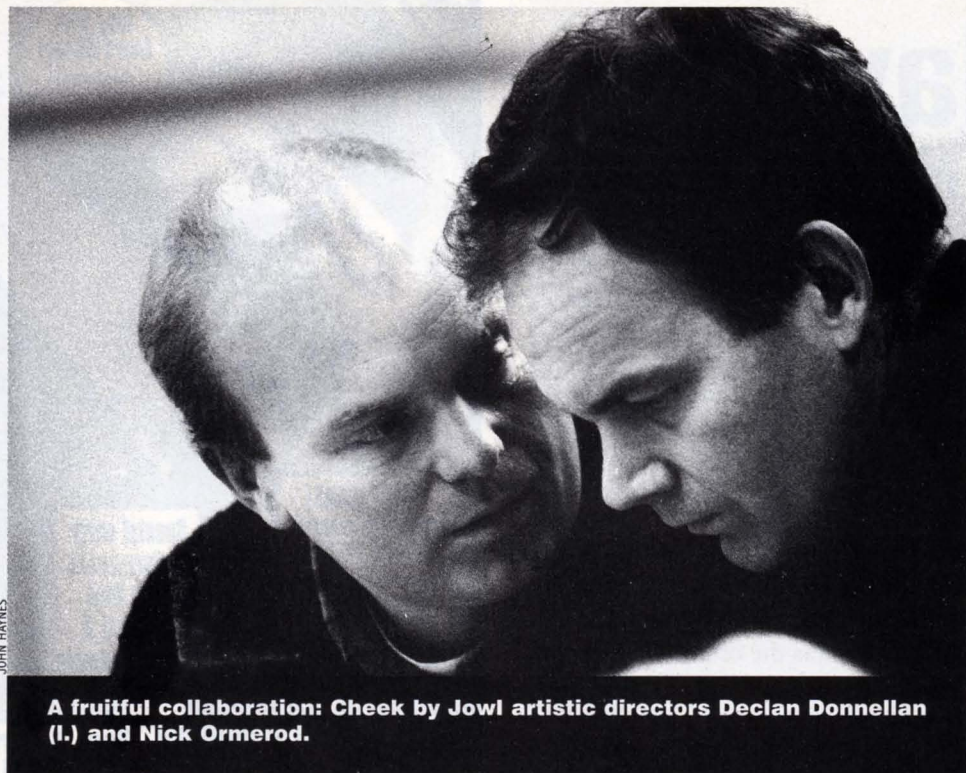
"We were speaking to some of the people working with us and I asked, 'Is the stage strong enough to bring a jeep on?' And they said yes. Then I asked, 'Well, could we bring a tank on stage?' And they said yes, but it would be very expensive. Then they smiled and said, 'We could even get you a nuclear bomb.'"

Donnellan laughs, quickly adding that the Russians were just joking — never a given in the Wild West that is Moscow today. He's relaxing with tea and a smoke at Method and Madness, a rehearsal space in London a stone's throw from the National. It's late January, and Donnellan and his cast have just finished a run-through

of the first act of Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*, which comes to the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Majestic Theater March 25-April 5.

For theater people, a rehearsal space is a safe haven, a bunker they can hunker down in without fear. But Donnellan has more reason than usual

to enjoy its solitude today. Cameron Mackintosh has just posted a closing notice for *Martin Guerre*, the less-than-mega musical that Donnellan and Ormerod staged for him in the summer of 1996. Instead of spawning countless productions around the world, *Martin Guerre* was coming to a



A fruitful collaboration: Cheek by Jowl artistic directors Declan Donnellan (l.) and Nick Ormerod.

Cheeky Theater

London's innovative Cheek by Jowl brings *Much Ado About Nothing* to BAM.

By Michael Giltz



Adrian Lester played Rosalind in Cheek by Jowl's *As You Like It*.

close after a turbulent West End run. Donnellan's publicist suggests he won't be very interested in talking about the show's fate ("That's the past," he says), and indeed all the director will say about it is a noncommittal, "It was an interesting experience."

Donnellan opens up when the subject turns to Cheek by Jowl's fresh approach to the classics. The company first won raves at BAM in 1994 for *As You Like It*, a revelatory all-male pro-

duction that launched Adrian Lester (now featured in the Mike Nichols film *Primary Colors*) to stardom. "Shakespeare doesn't have answers; he asks wonderful questions," the director says. "The lines are a mystery. You never actually get to the bottom of it. I think it's vanity [for a director] to say, 'This is what I have to say about this play; it's going to be under my control.' We try very hard not to do that."

The versatile Donnellan, 44, and Ormerod, 46, have collaborated on acclaimed productions such as *Sweeney Todd*, *Peer Gynt*, and the electrifying initial London staging of *Angels in America* that helped ensure its worldwide reception. But it's Cheek by Jowl — founded in 1981 when the men decided they'd rather make a case for the classics than work as barristers — that's remained a constant. Asked about his and

Ormerod's working relationship, Donnellan says with a laugh, "We don't have one. He does what he does [as the designer], and I do what I do, which is talk to the actors. It's not very structured, although he sits in on rehearsals as much as he can."

The pair chose to tackle the often-performed *Much Ado* because, says Donnellan, "After *The Duchess of Malfi* [another critical success, which came to BAM in '95], I wanted to do some-

thing funny — though this one is seeming more and more dark! It's sort of a comic version of *Macbeth*. I think all the Shakespeare comedies are about the complexity of marriage in its different forms; that marriages are important, but they also involve compromise. You open certain doors by

closing other ones. Lots of people are in tears at a wedding because they're [feeling] excluded."

Donnellan and Ormerod set the play in 1900 England so that the production could be as modern as possible but still bound by societal restraints. "We explored it in a very free way, like *As You Like It*, but we had to provide a very specific social context," Donnellan says. "That period is quite useful to provide a cage in which the passions can rattle. If you don't set up the conventions, you can't watch them being broken. We wanted to do it first in the Titanic period, but it was hard to avoid the feelings of the mass dead. [In every production] we put a lot of work into how people move in different periods and how accents change. Aristocratic English is very, very good for this play."

Even Beatrice and Benedick (Saskia Reeves and Matthew MacFadyen) have been rethought. That sparring couple is usually seen as Tracy and Hepburn soulmates, verbally fencing with someone they secretly admire. But Donnellan zeroes in on the seemingly harmless trap set for them by the others in the play.

"I think they play a very cruel trick on Beatrice and Benedick, telling each that the other professed their love when they hadn't. It may be one of the cruelest things one can do. It's actually probably worse than saying someone hates you. People want to control love, and they think they can turn it on very cheaply. What they forget about love is that it's out of control and you have to obey it. We can block it, bury it, but we can't control it."

At Donnellan and Ormerod's behest, Cheek by Jowl's productions are actor-driven. "Performances change from place to place," the director explains. "Audiences affect things when they see them, so it's important for me that a production is not seen as 'finished.' We want to take the pressure off actors and not make them feel that they're producing a finished article. It's always a work in progress." ■

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Matthew MacFadyen and Saskia Reeves are Benedick and Beatrice in *Much Ado*.