

'It's not about fucking it up'

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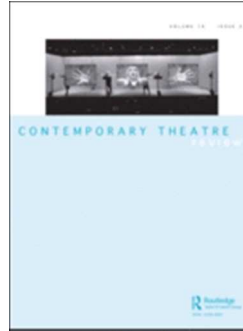
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'It's not about fucking it up': The Trial of Ubu, the text and the director

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3 **'It's not about fucking it up': *The Trial of Ubu*, the text and the director**
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7 Simon Stephens's *The Trial of Ubu* ran at London's Hampstead Theatre in January and February 2012, directed
8 by Katie Mitchell, in the face of lukewarm press reviews and, as Stephens himself has pointed out, disappointing
9 audiences.¹ Stephens's conceit in *The Trial of Ubu* is to take King Ubu, the central character of Alfred Jarry's
10 1896 play *Ubu Roi*, and place him on trial for crimes against humanity in a setting reminiscent of the International
11 Criminal Court. Although Stephens has stated that he had no interest in creating a documentary drama to explore
12 the aftermath of genocide, war crimes or other atrocities² – and had written the play earlier as a commission for
13 an existing collaboration between theatres in continental Europe - he was criticised by *The Guardian*'s Michael
14 Billington for not following the strategies of verbatim theatre so successfully employed at the nearby Tricycle
15 theatre.³ *The Telegraph*'s Charles Spencer insisted too that the idea 'cries out for the detailed, sober documentary
16 drama'⁴ of the Tricycle's work. These critics miss the point that Ubu is a fictional character; Stephens can but
17 invent Ubu's testimony, drawing on *Ubu Roi*, though extends the account of Ubu's crimes to include more recent
18 events.
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30 By placing Ubu in a contemporary period, Stephens is able to examine the protracted legal wrangling of
31 international tribunals (processes with a contested legal status still). As well as a legal team, court personnel and
32 Ubu himself, characters are called as witnesses: Achras, Norbert Nurdle, McClub, the Major General-in-Chief
33 and, a star witness, Ma Ubu herself. Each of these figures reports Ubu's gruesome behaviour, in a play that
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41 ¹Simon Stephens, 'Recession has made British audiences more conservative, says playwright', 9
42 February 2012, *The Guardian* <[http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2012/feb/09/recession-british-
43 audiences-conservative-playwright#comments](http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2012/feb/09/recession-british-audiences-conservative-playwright#comments)> [accessed 27 June 2014]. The article comments are
44 drawn from an earlier interview with Simon Stephens on the Theatrevoice website
45 [http://www.theatrevoice.com/7706/award-winning-playwright-simon-stephens-rewrites-king-
46 ubu/#.U60RcHlwaZU](http://www.theatrevoice.com/7706/award-winning-playwright-simon-stephens-rewrites-king-ubu/#.U60RcHlwaZU) [accessed 27 June 2014].

47 ² Stephens, in Duška Radosavljević, *Theatre Making: Interplay Between Text and Performance in the 21st*
48 *Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 205.

49 ³ Michael Billington, '*The Trial of Ubu* – Review', 25 January 2012, *The Guardian*
50 <<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2012/jan/25/the-trial-of-ubu-review>> [accessed 24 June 2014]. The
51 Tricycle Theatre has a reputation for staging verbatim work, including several recent plays 'edited', rather
52 than 'written' by Richard Norton-Taylor that have staged inquiries and tribunals, such as *Nuremberg*
53 (1996), *Called to Account* (2007), concerning the legality of the invasion of Iraq, and *Tactical Questioning*
54 (2011), based on the inquiry into the death of a prisoner in British custody in Iraq.

55 ⁴ Charles Spencer, '*The Trial of Ubu*, Hampstead Theatre, review', 25 January 2012, *The Telegraph*
56 <[http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/theatre-reviews/9038474/The-Trial-of-Ubu-Hampstead-
57 Theatre-review.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/theatre-reviews/9038474/The-Trial-of-Ubu-Hampstead-Theatre-review.html)> [accessed 24 June 2014].
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3 clearly should be taken to mirror recent events in The Hague, not least the trial of Slobodan Milošević.⁵ Like that
4 figure, Ubu ends the play alone in his cell, remembering ‘one time I dreamt that the sky was full of stars but all of
5 the stars started to bleed and burst [...] I dreamt that all the metal in this place started crying. Ubu - watch the
6 skies! [...] Ubu – this is what you did! This is what you have to do’.⁶
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11 Prior to Mitchell’s production, *The Trial of Ubu* had been staged earlier in 2010 as a German-Dutch co-
12 production between Toneelgroep Amsterdam and the Schauspielhaus Essen, directed by Stephens’s regular
13 collaborator, Sebastian Nübling. In some contrast to the London reaction in the press, reviewers enjoyed the ‘physical
14 clowning and verbal horseplay’ of Nübling’s production. Even if, as I discuss, Stephens’s text was not followed closely,
15 Nübling’s inventive production was relished for its ‘grandiose clowning-about and excited action painting’, in which actors
16 covered each other in paint and indulged in casual violence, like, as one critic suggested, amidst ‘a children’s party that
17 descends into a bacchanal’.⁷ As well as Nübling’s bold directorial hand, it was as if Jarry himself had been let loose on
18 the production.
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27 Unlike their Continental counterparts, some reviewers of the Hampstead production resorted to their familiar
28 criticism of Mitchell, disliking how the play had apparently been warped by the interventions of a self-interested director;
29 key to Mitchell’s production was the radical decision that the procession of characters in the trial scenes would not be
30 seen by the audience. Instead the bulk of Stephens’s playtext was delivered by two courtroom interpreters (the presence
31 of these figures is only alluded to in stage directions), who translated the speech of ‘invisible’ witnesses, as well as Ubu
32 himself, into English. Elsewhere, a wheezing Ubu with smudged clown make-up, his gaoler and two lawyers were shown
33 in scenes set in other locations; in the court characters ‘appeared’ only through the eyes of the actors playing the
34 interpreters, who had worked in rehearsal to create this ‘reality’ for themselves very precisely, as if watching live action
35 or film. But Spencer found Mitchell’s choice led to a ‘smart-alec production’ and opined that her ‘absurd focus on the
36 translators, rather than the witnesses and the accused, is to create an arty, tiresomely self-regarding production out of
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48 ⁵ Milošević was President of Serbia (1989-97) and President of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia
49 (1997–2000). His five year trial for genocide and crimes against humanity, during which Milošević
50 conducted his own defence as he refused to accept the legitimacy of the court (which had not been
51 convened according to UN agreement), ended without a verdict upon Milošević’s death in his prison cell
52 in 2006.

53 ⁶ Simon Stephens, *The Trial of Ubu*, (London: Methuen, 2012), p. 45

54 ⁷ These review quotes are, respectively, from the website ‘Come-on.de’ and the newspapers
55 *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (Germany) and *Trouw* (Netherlands), but are taken from
56 <http://www.tga.nl/en/productions/ubu/pers> [accessed 25 June 2014]. I am grateful to Simone Schroth for
57 these and subsequent translations from non-English press sources.
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subject matter that ought to offer a serious, sober insight into the darkness of mankind at its worst'.⁸ Certain critics could not accept a performance where a formal approach was at odds with the kind of realism they had seen elsewhere and, in contrast to Continental practice, wanted instead a director who would not interfere (as they saw it) with the writer's text.

Despite differences in performance style and reception, Stephens had an active involvement in both productions of *The Trial of Ubu*; he is a writer who wishes to work amidst a creative process where the realisation of a new play is never complete until director, actors, production personnel, the rehearsal process and, ultimately, audiences comprise part of the collaboration. Stephens has particularly embraced the directorial daring of German contemporary theatre, describing Nübling's work as 'remarkably bold, visually confident, theatrically physical, intellectually daring [...] there is terrific kinetic energy to his productions'.⁹ Stephens's collaboration with Mitchell continued too with his version of *The Cherry Orchard* at London's Young Vic (2014); indeed, Stephens dedicated the published version of the text to Mitchell, praising her 'rigour and cheekiness and clarity'.¹⁰

Mise en scène

This discussion offers an account of the two contrasting productions in which the directors created radical reworkings of the playwright's *schema*, yet where choices still aligned with and promoted the intention of the work. Cutting through the often circular contestation of the 'problem of text and performance', Duška Radosavljević usefully considers staging is an act of meaningful translation, suggesting 'translation' should be understood as 'an epistemological rather than a mechanical endeavour',¹¹ where idiom and context are important. Beyond entrenched positions around text and its (too) straightforward relationship to a production, the 'experimental' directors of the London and German-Dutch productions both exemplify how such a shift in thinking and practice produced something *new* within the idiom of their respective formal experimentation and in the context of particular performative circumstances. In looking at aspects of both productions of *The Trial of Ubu*, I intend to consider place (here specifically a courtroom),

⁸ Spencer, 'The Trial of Ubu, Hampstead Theatre, review'.

⁹ Theatrevoice, <http://www.theatrevoice.com/7706/award-winning-playwright-simon-stephens-rewrites-king-ubu/#.U60RcHlwaZU> [accessed 27 June 2014].

¹⁰ Anton Chekhov, *The Cherry Orchard*, English language version by Simon Stephens (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), n.p.

¹¹ Radosavljević, *Theatre Making*, p. 27.

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3 approaches to acting and characterisation, and some of the implications of the respective director's
4 choices. I adopt Patrice Pavis's dual notions of *mise en jeu* and *performise* as discussed in his
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7 *Contemporary Mise en Scène: Staging Theatre Today* (2012) to examine some of the choices evident in
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9 the two distinctive productions.

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11 Pavis suggests that the more familiar term *mise en scène* is confusing: it may be 'the passage of
12 the text to the stage' or 'an autonomous art'.¹² Pavis suggests that *mise en scène* is, more clearly, 'the
13 tuning of theatre for the needs of stage and audience', in which 'organisation and meaning'¹³ is -
14
15 significantly for this discussion - that of the director. Pavis further proposes the term *mise en jeu*, a
16
17 'putting into play' of the playtext within the *mise en scène*. As exemplified in both of the directors' work
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19 discussed here, a performance, as an event in itself, may sometimes radically depart from what the writer
20
21 has placed on the page.¹⁴

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25 A more sophisticated understanding of the interrelationship between playtext, director, acting and
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27 production leads Pavis to suggest a 'connection [...] which is so marked we might be tempted to invent
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29 the new terms, *mise en perf*, or *performise*',¹⁵ a hybrid neologism bringing together 'the previously
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31 incompatible notions of performance and *mise en scène*'.¹⁶ To relish what is in effect the presentation of
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33 the outcome of 'translation' (as Radosavljević puts it) appears in some contrast to the apparent British
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35 tradition of vanilla renderings of the playwright's text, exacerbated in the case of the Hampstead Theatre's
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37 production of *The Trial of Ubu* by expectations in the press of mimetic re-enactment of courtroom
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39 proceedings through verbatim drama. Stephens has also suggested that the conditions of production are
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45 ¹² Patrice Pavis, *Contemporary Mise en Scène: Staging Theatre Today* (London: Routledge, 2012), p. 11.

46 ¹³ Pavis, *Contemporary Mise en Scène*, p. 4.

47 ¹⁴ Of course, rather than offering a closed, fictional world and defined location, some contemporary
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49 writers' texts increasingly have a call to create a directorial *mise en scène* written into them: Martin
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51 Crimp's work without attributed characters is a clear example, and Stephens's *Pornography* has implicit a
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53 challenge to *find a mise en jeu* through its openness and fluidity of place and time, despite its 'seven ages
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55 of man' structure; Stephens has mentioned using Jacques's speech from Shakespeare's *As You Like It*
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57 as a framework several times in interview, e.g. '*Pornography* – Simon Stephens interview'
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59 <<https://www.list.co.uk/article/10159-pornography-simon-stephens-interview/>> [accessed 15 February
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2015].

¹⁵ Pavis, *Contemporary Mise en Scène*, p. 47.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

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3 key determining factors in outcomes,¹⁷ whereby economic or other factors, not merely 'smart alec'
4 tendencies, necessitate certain decisions. Far from thwarting *The Trial of Ubu*, as I discuss, directorial
5 choices in both productions were undertaken with Stephens's approval, both undermining the UK critics'
6 assumptions and reinforcing a playful *performise*.
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13 | *The court*
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17 Stephens asks that *The Trial of Ubu* is performed 'immediately after a performance of *Ubu Roi* by Alfred
18 Jarry or combinations of his *Ubu* plays'.¹⁸ Stephens in fact provides his own, shortened version of Jarry's
19 *Ubu Roi* (some nine and a half pages in the published English version), which Stephens explicitly says
20 'should be performed by puppets'.¹⁹ In Mitchell's production, the puppet play recalled something of the
21 violence of Punch and Judy - using puppets certainly makes stage directions such as 'the stake is driven
22 up his arse'²⁰ a little easier to realise - and established Ubu's violence that, in turn, served to emphasise
23 Stephens's contemporary response. Dispensing with the puppets, though using some of Stephens's
24 prelude text similarly to revel in the totalitarianism and toilet humour of *Ubu Roi*, Nübling's production took
25 place in an unidentified action-space in which actors worked as an inventive, ensemble-based company,
26 each playing several characters (bar the male actor Nicola Mastroberardino as Ubu); Frieda Pittoors, for
27 example, first played Ma Ubu (an 'unseen' character in Mitchell's production other than in puppet form)
28 and later the presiding judge when Stephens's play proper began.
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40 One of the greatest challenges presented by Stephens's script is how to stage a courtroom,
41 which, if following the example of the International Criminal Court, would comprise some forty people. The
42 playtext lists twelve named characters, but the script calls for additional court personnel. To understand
43 the sheer noise levels created by all these people and envisaged amidst a Babel of languages - an
44 acoustic aspect never really achieved in either production - Stephens's instructions are worth quoting in
45 full as they reveal a particularly aural dimension to his imagination:
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53 ¹⁷ Simon Stephens, 'Two Kingdoms: England vs Germany', discussion at 'Turning the Page: Creating
54 New Writing 1945-2013', University of Reading, 13 September 2013.

55 ¹⁸ Stephens, *The Trial of Ubu*, n.p.

56 ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, n.p.

57 ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 57.
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5 In the courtroom multiple translations are used. Words are translated into German, Dutch, English
6
7 and French where appropriate.
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9 Where appropriate we can hear the translation.

10 Where appropriate the multiple translation becomes cacophonous.

11 Sometimes there may be discrepancies between the spoken statements and their translations.

12 Sometimes the translation is on a soundtrack that slows down or speeds up unnaturally.

13 Sometimes the sound drops out altogether.²¹
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21 These stage directions clearly offer directorial choice and also suggest a more abstracted soundtrack that
22 at once echoes the action of the court, whilst also suggesting its irreality, again demonstrating Stephens's
23 desire to resist a classic courtroom drama. As if in response to the writer's attempt to make the sound of
24 language sometimes dominate action, the Hampstead version staged the court as, crucially, *voiced*
25 through the interpreters, cocooned in their accurately recreated booth, locked in the translation and
26 verbalisation of dialogue between parties carefully visualised by the two actors Kate Duchêne and Nikki
27 Amuka-Bird. The presentation of the courtroom action was thus a sometimes frenetic speaking of other
28 characters' dialogue taken in turn by the two interpreters; this new version became, so to speak, the play
29 of the play by Simon Stephens.
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38 There is a pre-existing economic, as well as an aesthetic issue at stake in Stephens's original that
39 offers some justification for Mitchell's choice. She explains:
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45 It's a courtroom drama; telly does it so much better and also we didn't have enough money to do
46 a full court, we didn't have all the characters that were going to be in the court, a courtroom like
47 the ICC, that's like forty to fifty people, so to do it credibly... And I thought it would end up being
48 derivative of other theatrical practices like at the Tricycle or of television.²²
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55 ²¹ Simon Stephens, *The Trial of Ubu and King Ubu* (London: Methuen, 2012), p. 6.

56 ²² Katie Mitchell, unpublished interview with the author, 30 October 2012. Subsequent quotations appear
57 as 'Mitchell, interview'.
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3 Mitchell's comments suggest her interest in detail and realistic portrayal of environment, which cuts
4 across her work regardless of genre. Not least due to the production budget, Mitchell's opposition to a
5 half-baked version of somewhere like the ICC or TV courtroom drama backs Stephens's resistance to
6 documentary, but it is this contained, verbally driven performance that, paradoxically, became the
7 directorial strategy to invoke the play's thematic concerns. As Mitchell goes on to explain, any other
8 choice would result in

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17 An impoverished version of a courtroom [...] that would diminish the intellectual ideas. The scale
18 of it was somehow better. I couldn't animate the ideas underpinning the material and the scale,
19 the burden of the process of a two-year trial through normal means and that would conjure it, the
20 scale and the burden, much more efficiently, I thought.²³

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27 Thus the weight and flow of words of Stephens's original remained, yet with in-built hesitations and micro-
28 pauses. This emphasised the dispassionate delivery of the spoken material, not as quotation but an act of
29 precise translation. Such an approach captured the actuality of the dramatic world and the ideas of the
30 play through an evident *performise* of its action, which housed a *mise en jeu* of the text, not a bald
31 narration of the dialogue. However, as we shall see, Mitchell and her actors introduced a carefully
32 constructed physical aspect to the performance: the sheer verbiage was sometimes delivered, especially
33 at first, with the characters in a state of energised, nervous tension; as Mitchell continued to place the
34 actors in concrete situations, whilst not in Stephens's original, this led them at times to being seriously
35 affected by the horror they heard.

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45 In contrast to the swiftly rehearsed London production (achieved in some three weeks only), the
46 German-Dutch production rehearsed for two months, had a cast of ten and played at two European
47 theatre centres.²⁴ Instead of a realistic portrayal of what Stephens determines as 'Trial Room 2 of The
48 Hague and surrounding rooms',²⁵ Nübling's production took place on an almost open stage. Figures were
49 seen slowly setting up the space, moving cardboard and paper, sometimes attached to wooden frames,

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55 ²³ Ibid.

56 ²⁴ The production also had a re-rehearsal week in Amsterdam to adapt to the bigger performance space.

57 ²⁵ Stephens, *The Trial of Ubu*, p. 4.

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3 whilst some also painted signs in careful calligraphy. The set was completed by a wooden backdrop and
4
5 a floor covered by polythene on which the actors slipped when the surface became increasingly
6
7 splattered in paint. Yet this open-plan setting housed a clear interpretative decision; Nübling explains:
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11 Normally I have a clear idea or main line before rehearsal. For *Ubu* [this was to show] three
12
13 steps: from some kind of order (the writing out of sections of the Declaration of Human Rights), to
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15 chaos, to a system again in the trial – or at least a mixture of these aspects. Sometimes this is
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17 lost in the rehearsal process and working with the freedom of the actors, but if the frame on the
18
19 theoretical and aesthetic levels is good enough, then you can have the freedom to juggle around
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21 on the intellectual, theatrical or playful levels.²⁶
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25 In Nübling's production, following what he considered the representation of 'a lost high cultural system'²⁷
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27 to begin with, a semi-improvised version of Jarry's *King Ubu* took place instead of Stephens's puppet
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29 prologue, in which Ubu careered around inflicting the symptoms of his despotism before escaping with his
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31 cronies through a window clearly held in mid-air by the ensemble. As in Mitchell's production, this created
32
33 a 'kingdom' for Ubu, drawing on the reality of surrounding objects and exploiting the cartoonish spirit of
34
35 both Jarry's original²⁸ and the playfulness of the production, before recourse to the writer's main text
36
37 began, if only after around an hour of stage time. However, given the co-production, multiple languages
38
39 emerged, since actors regularly swapped between English, German, Dutch and French, which came
40
41 closer to Stephens's stage directions.
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43 For Nübling, the purpose of rehearsal is evidently not the realisation of a text as a blueprint for
44
45 pre-established dramatic action; neither is reworking material mere directorial wilfulness. Text is vital for
46
47 Nübling, who states 'it's the piece of art where everybody is connected, it's not just one track, it's the main
48
49 source'.²⁹ Given that other 'tracks' were created, Nübling moved scripted sections around as required: the
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52 ²⁶ Sebastian Nübling, unpublished interview with the author, 8 March 2015. Subsequent quotations
53 appear as 'Nübling, interview'.

54 ²⁷ Nübling, interview.

55 ²⁸ In discussion (Nübling, interview) Nübling states that 'Jarry wrote the *Ubu* story as a young man [...] so
56 I think there's some kind of teenage wildness that comes from Jarry; he carried that spirit'.

57 ²⁹ Nübling, interview.
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3 indictment speech, for example, was accurate, although occurring in a different place than stated in the
4 published text, but the end of McClub's testimony was improvised and segued into the scene between the
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7 Defence and Prosecutor, here not kept separate, as in Mitchell's version. These alterations were, the
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9 director explains, 'a continuous process [...] in contact with Simon [...]. It's not about fucking it up;
10 rehearsal drives somewhere, it goes in some corners, but still in the same direction as Simon wants,
11
12 though by taking different moves'.³⁰ Given that he was present in rehearsal, Stephens was part of a
13
14 production process that, rather than a mimetic *mise en scène*, staged the broad action of the trial through
15
16 an ensemble *mise en perf*, underpinned by the grotesque, physical characterisation of the actors'
17
18 performances.
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20

21 22 23 *Acting*

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27 If Mitchell's intent was that spectators should vicariously witness the activity of the (for her, unstageable)
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29 court as seen by the interpreters, Nübling's directorial focus was that of collective creativity. He explains,
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31 'I understand myself as some kind of co-actor [...] I'm very busy, very involved, not really sitting there and
32
33 waiting to see what comes'.³¹ Certain motifs thus appeared: having established the role of paint in the
34
35 production's aesthetics, Nübling's actor's sawed off (obviously fake) legs that spurted red paint, and killed
36
37 Good King Wenceslas, splattering him with yet more red paint, before the actor later got up to play his
38
39 other part. Elsewhere, an actor was wrapped in brown paper and 'drilled' by an absurdly long paint mixer
40
41 attachment, connected to a (real) electric drill. This inventive grotesquery extended too to how some of
42
43 the characters were established: in the court proceedings for example, Achras hobbles on with walking
44
45 sticks and Norbert Nurdle's face is distorted by rubber bands (items earlier repeatedly used as the
46
47 weapons of choice by Ubu). But before listing others' atrocities that have slipped from collective memory,
48
49 Ubu halts and questions:

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52
53 is the building this big to keep me inside or is it this big to show everybody how hard you're *trying*
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56 ³⁰ Nübling, interview.

57 ³¹ Nübling, interview.

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3 to keep me inside [...] I stand here listening to you talking about talking and about honour and
4
5 about law and about justice [...]³²
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9 Ubu may drop his trousers, but Nübling describes his directorial approach as 'interested in the cases
10 when the body tells a story different from that of the text, also with regard to its relationship with other
11 bodies. [...] I want to preserve the ambivalence of these relationships. To be able to cope [...] with
12 tensions instead of releasing them'.³³ In the trial, many of the figures thus wear clown shoes, as if to
13 underline the *performise* of its (questionable) legal status (something Ubu constantly draws attention to in
14 the text) and the casual violence of the characters surrounding Ubu. But Nübling's work is no simplistic
15 cartoon; it relishes the ambivalence of ideas through the violence of the clownesque.
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19 Stephens has said of Nübling's work that he is especially good at finding times when actors can
20 face out front, using direct address.³⁴ Overall, Nübling's directorial tactic lends an urgency to the
21 performances he creates as characters are put on the spot and actors must appeal to a collective. In
22 Nübling's production of *The Trial of Ubu*, there was little recourse to a 'fourth wall': Mastroberardino as
23 Ubu spent much of the initial part of the performance addressing the audience and the indictment was
24 delivered through a microphone, with the actor facing front. Particularly during the parade of witnesses,
25 this front-on orientation served to include spectators in the world of the courtroom. Although very much in
26 contrast to Mitchell's contained performance mode, both choices in the respective productions activate
27 the involvement of spectators, as if they might pass judgement, albeit if in one version through actors
28 eyeballing the assembled audience and in the other by a staging choice that draws an audience into the
29 imagined courtroom.
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32
33 In contrast to Nübling's emphasis, the two central actors in Mitchell's production created definite -
34 if imagined - activity, closely following Stephens's script and seeing this like an internal film; this is much
35 like Stanislavski's 'Film of Images', an acting technique where the actor mentally 'runs' a set of imagined
36 pictures or eidetic images. Exactly what the actors 'saw' was, as mentioned earlier, carefully worked out:
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53 ³² Stephens, *The Trial of Ubu*, p.42.

54 ³³ *Badische Zeitung*, 'Theater ist nicht ökonomisch', 8 March 2013, <<http://www.badische-zeitung.de/theater-2/theater-ist-nicht-oekonomisch--69859169.html>> [accessed 29 December 2014].

55 ³⁴ See Theatrevoice, <<http://www.theatrevoice.com/7706/award-winning-playwright-simon-stephens-rewrites-king-ubu/#.U60RcHlwaZU>> [accessed 27 June 2014].
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3 at one point, the interpreters 'see' Ma Ubu take the stand, their speech halted as they trace her progress
4
5 across the floor. Stephens has spoken of this
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9 amazing moment [...] there's a silence for 34 seconds and [...] the two actors playing it just watch
10
11 an imaginary person leave the room, wait, and then [watch] another imaginary person come back
12
13 and take their place. Now, some people were really cross about that: you know, that's not drama,
14
15 that's not acting. I thought it was completely intoxicating because it places the court completely in
16
17 your imagination'.³⁵
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21 It is worth noting the writer's enthusiasm for a moment that was simultaneously absent and present,
22
23 manifested in precisely rendered yet completely imagined action. It *is* acting, of course, but the objection
24
25 in the press appeared to be that it could not be acting if it was not *acting out* observable action.
26

27 Mitchell's production became, increasingly, the story of the two women. Undermining blithe
28
29 accusations of creating a 'self-regarding production', and echoing the German-Dutch production, Mitchell
30
31 reveals that Stephens had an input into the version at the Hampstead Theatre, explaining,
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35 we decided with Simon what would happen between the two women in each of the scenes [...]
36
37 the climax of the relationship of the two women in the booth [...] something that happens to
38
39 interpreters, very, very rarely, is that they can't talk - this is something that happens - so that
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41 would be the climax of it and therefore we'd have to build one character who was more
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43 functioning than the other character, so we constructed biographies.³⁶
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47 Importantly, Stephens co-authored the events outside of his own text; whilst it was for the director and the
48
49 rigour of her process to find the means to manifest the action, he was complicit in the version,
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51 underpinned by Mitchell's faith in action as a consequence of previous life events. For the characters,
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53 these included, for example, how they had achieved fluency in Ubu's language and that for one of them,
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56 ³⁵ Stephens, in Radosavljević, *Theatre-Making*, p. 205.

57 ³⁶ Mitchell, interview.
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3 Amuka-Bird's character, her first appearance was also her first day of work in the booth. Thus invention
4 was carefully justified retrospectively through new ideas outside of Stephens's text in order to make
5 decisions secure and repeatable.
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9 Aside from this carefully constructed fictional hinterland, the interpreters periodically went through
10 high speed, time lapse sequences, with extremely accurate movement. To return to Pavis's notion of
11 *performise*, this is an example of how 'an acting technique is thus staged' evidencing 'an impeccable
12 physical training, but without the refusal of *mise en scène*',³⁷ through which Mitchell employed the
13 physical skill of the actors, guided by Joseph Alford's movement coaching, to fast forward the action. In
14 Pavis's terms, performance became the dominant choice, where slick physicality told a different story,
15 one of the trial's duration, rather than the immediacy of the court room and scrutiny of Ubu's crimes.
16 Whilst this is theatricality of panache and rigour, the themes and detail of the play were not at this point
17 foregrounded (Pavis's initial definition of *mise en scène* above) because the sophistication of the acting
18 took prominence.
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29 The centre of *The Trial of Ubu* in the London production was, then, not a play-within-a-play, but
30 perhaps, to coin a phrase, a carefully constructed play-outside-a-play. Mitchell's fixing of time, place and
31 temperature as a measure of the familiar Stanislavskian 'given circumstances', was palpable:³⁸ each
32 scene between the interpreters took place in the same booth of course, but the passing of seasons and
33 the temperature (inside and outside) were made clear through costume changes and carefully determined
34 physical behaviour in response to a hot or cold environment. In turn, these decisions served as playable
35 circumstances to punctuate and articulate the extreme duration of the trial. At other points, one interpreter
36 is poorly and medicines are mixed; one is late; they find things funny or deadly serious; and, increasingly,
37 are caught up in the content of the trial, until Kate Duchêne's character has a kind of seizure.
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48 *Faithfulness*

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52 If, for Mitchell, the court is a place of verbal and psychological gymnastics, for Nübling, it is a macabre
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55 ³⁷ Pavis, *Contemporary Mise en Scène*, p. 48.

56 ³⁸ For an elaboration of Mitchell's process, see Katie Mitchell, *The Director's Craft: a Handbook for the*
57 *Theatre* (London: Routledge, 2008).

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2
3 game. Where does this put Stephens and his text? Towards the end of his book, Pavis questions
4
5 'faithfulness', usefully distinguishing between the dramatic text and the stage event, something I have
6
7 also drawn attention to here. If 'faithfulness' implies performing the text in the order the lines were written
8
9 with the characters presented as they appear on the page and in a setting prescribed by the author,
10
11 neither production discussed here is faithful. For Nübling, Stephens's text is a stimulus for a performance
12
13 space and action, out of which figures emerge and who engage, more or less, in the action of Stephens's
14
15 play. These choices attest to what Stephens himself relishes as Nübling's 'balletic imagination and [...]'
16
17 instinct for formal explosion'.³⁹ They confirm his role as a writer providing materials for a director and
18
19 actors to take on and shape. At first glance, Mitchell seems faithfully and accurately to place the text at
20
21 the centre of her production, since this was mostly spoken by the interpreters and became, for them as
22
23 well as an audience, the principal point of focus. Yet this was not consistent and a mix of genres emerged
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25 in the production: the puppet play; the precise, verbal rendition of question and answer through the
26
27 interpreters, which obliged an audience's imagining of the court; the realism of the lawyers; and the
28
29 *bouffon*-like Ubu in the scenes set outside the courtroom. Perhaps hinted at, too, by Nübling's use of
30
31 clown shoes, these latter aspects point to a marionette-like leitmotif which runs through the production:
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33 puppets, two actors who ventriloquise the action of the court; two lawyers (whose dialogue is a bit too
34
35 expositional); and the grotesque Ubu, played by an actor. It is perhaps this thread to (here, Pavis's
36
37 second definition of) the *mise en scène* that brings together potentially disparate aesthetics in political
38
39 terms; in the world of the international tribunal, all are caught up in a performance of legality where others
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41 seem to be pulling the strings.

42
43 For these two directors, the kind of narrow 'faithfulness' I suggest above is not the point. They
44
45 have instead taken the key content of the play as they have understood it and proposed decisive
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47 directorial choices. This is not unusual: in his nuanced discussion of 'Werktreue' ('faithfulness to the
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49 play'), for instance, David Barnett explores how even wildly radical stagings of texts may qualify as
50
51 'faithful', concluding that 'the relationship between text and performance is defined by a central aporia –
52
53 the difficulty of comparing two fundamentally different types of artistic product, the theatrical text and its
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57 ³⁹ Theatrevoice.

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2
3 production.⁴⁰ Thus Pavis suggests that 'faithfulness' is an 'illusion [...] as if there existed a correct
4 reading [...] that reveals a verifiable truth in the play'.⁴¹ Mitchell's work appears a verbal, intellectual
5 rendition of the 'truth' - the more visceral material is the separate and invented story of the interpreters -
6 and Mitchell holds the themes of the play up for scrutiny through the drive of language. Nübling's
7 production relishes a knockabout, ensemble playing style, yet, in its dispensing with chunks of text, was
8 not, as Stephens says earlier, to rip the heart out of the play, but to expose its heart, placing it as a
9 circumstance squarely on stage. For Mitchell, the *mise en jeu* of the playtext play sits alongside created
10 action; for Nübling, the script is a scenario offering a pretext to an inventive theatricality, which, here, is
11 rendered part of a total *performise*.
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55 ⁴⁰ David Barnett, 'Offending the Playwright: Directors' Theatre and the 'Werktreue' Debate', *German*
56 *Monitor*, 77 (2013), 75-97, p. 91.

57 ⁴¹ Pavis, *Contemporary Mise en Scène*, p. 295.

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3 This article examines two different productions of Simon Stephens' *The Trial of Ubu* (2010)
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5 in order to argue for the radical theatrical interventions of their respective directors.
6
7 Stephens' play takes Alfred Jarry's King Ubu and places him on trial for crimes against
8
9 humanity. At London's Hampstead Theatre, much of the performance (2012), directed by
10
11 Katie Mitchell, became a sophisticated ventriloquy delivered by two courtroom interpreters,
12
13 minor characters in the actual text. The earlier German-Dutch co-production (2010,
14
15 Toneelgroep Amsterdam and Schauspielhaus Essen) was directed by Stephens' regular
16
17 collaborator, Sebastian Nübling. Actors played multiple characters in a production of
18
19 ensemble inventiveness, as if Jarry himself had intervened in the proceedings of the
20
21 International Criminal Court. If neither production apparently followed what Stephens had
22
23 written on the page, what had, instead, been produced? The discussion explores Patrice
24
25 Pavis' notions of *mise en jeu* and *performise* (*Contemporary Mise en Scène*, 2012) to
26
27 suggest that the productions are examples of a 'putting into play' or 'performances' of
28
29 Stephens' text, yet where both remained faithful to his intent. The article draws on reviews in
30
31 English, German and Dutch, and interviews with Katie Mitchell and Sebastian Nübling, in
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33 order to highlight vital artistic choice in the context of current discussions around text,
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35 performance, authorship and directing.
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The Trial of Ubu, directed by Sebastian Nübling (Toneelgroep Amsterdam/Schauspielhaus Essen, 2010).

Photo: Jan Versweyveld
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The Trial of Ubu, directed by Sebastian Nübling (Toneelgroep Amsterdam/Schauspielhaus Essen, 2010).
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