

## 'The thrill of doing it live'

Ledger, Adam

*Document Version*  
Peer reviewed version

*Citation for published version (Harvard):*  
Ledger, A 2017, 'The thrill of doing it live': devising and performing Katie Mitchell's international multimedia productions. in K Reilly (ed.), *Contemporary Approaches to Adaptation in Theatre*. Adaptation in Theatre and Performance, Palgrave Macmillan.

[Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal](#)

**Publisher Rights Statement:**  
Checked for eligibility: 27/04/2017

### **General rights**

Unless a licence is specified above, all rights (including copyright and moral rights) in this document are retained by the authors and/or the copyright holders. The express permission of the copyright holder must be obtained for any use of this material other than for purposes permitted by law.

- Users may freely distribute the URL that is used to identify this publication.
- Users may download and/or print one copy of the publication from the University of Birmingham research portal for the purpose of private study or non-commercial research.
- User may use extracts from the document in line with the concept of 'fair dealing' under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (?)
- Users may not further distribute the material nor use it for the purposes of commercial gain.

Where a licence is displayed above, please note the terms and conditions of the licence govern your use of this document.

When citing, please reference the published version.

### **Take down policy**

While the University of Birmingham exercises care and attention in making items available there are rare occasions when an item has been uploaded in error or has been deemed to be commercially or otherwise sensitive.

If you believe that this is the case for this document, please contact [UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk](mailto:UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk) providing details and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate.

## **‘The thrill of doing it live’: devising and performing Katie Mitchell’s international ‘live cinema’ productions**

Adam J. Ledger, University of Birmingham

As one of Europe’s most prolific directors, Katie Mitchell has a deserved reputation for aesthetic experimentation combined with rigorous textual analysis, and an interest in how the psychology of behaviour informs acting process (Mitchell 2008).<sup>1</sup> Whilst Mitchell has at times been myopically labelled an ‘auteur’ in the UK because of her obvious vision and textual interventions (Billington; Spencer), her innovations have met with acclaim elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> Alongside her other theatre work, *Waves* (National Theatre, London, 2006), an adaptation from Virginia Woolf’s novel, began a body of work now termed ‘live cinema’, whereby action on stage is coupled with visible, roving film cameras, sometimes using Foley or, often, extensive recorded sound, in order to realise the action as a ‘live’ film projected above the stage level.<sup>3</sup> Since then, Mitchell has built up a significant *oeuvre* of live cinema productions in the German-speaking theatre, where she continues to innovate the form she introduced with her collaborators. For Mitchell, the use of cameras within live action enables close-up observation of minute shifts in behaviour; her aim is ‘to get the audience close enough to the face of the character so that we believe the thoughts’ (2013), which are not, Mitchell claims, detectable at the long-range of traditional theatre spaces (Siéfert).

Whilst only part of Mitchell’s prolific multimedia practice (and ignoring her live cinema work in opera), the German language productions offer a new area for discussion since, as I suggest, they demonstrate identifiable shifts in process and performance choices, not only in relation to Mitchell’s earlier work but also between each other.<sup>4</sup> Here, I draw too on my

observation of rehearsal, as well as discussions with Mitchell in order to offer the director's insight into the making of live cinema.

Given Mitchell's body of work as an original practitioner and the complex live cinema making approach, which implicates text, actors and film crew, I suggest live cinema can be described as a devised genre. At the beginning of rehearsal, no shot plan exists, nor knowledge of how to move cameras in the live performance (there are typically three cameras), nor how voice-overs match other elements; as Mitchell puts it, 'day one of rehearsals looks like a full tech' (2013), and I have heard her use the term 'devising' in rehearsal of the work herself. In the context of discourses of adaptation, to discuss live cinema as a devised process, as well one that concerns how actors shift performance modes, expands preoccupations with the relationship between text and performance, authorship, fidelity and change, since the intermedial adaptation is produced only through rehearsal if, perhaps unusually for devising, some form of script exists at the outset of the process.

With the exception of Birringer and briefly in Mitchell and Rebellato, commentators have primarily focussed on Mitchell's early, UK live cinema work (Clements; Friedman; Hadjioannou and Rodosthenous; Jefferies; Rebellato; Sierz) particularly *Waves* and the later ...*some trace of her* (National Theatre, 2008).<sup>5</sup> I concentrate on Mitchell's more recent German work, including an adaptation of Peter Handke's novella *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams: A Life Story* [*Wunshloses Unglück*] (Burgtheater, Vienna, 2014) and *Traveling on One Leg* [*Reisende auf einem Bein*], an adaptation of Herta Müller's novel (Deutsches Schauspielhaus, Hamburg, 2015). I also discuss Mitchell's version of Charlotte Perkins Gillman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* [*Die Gelbe Tapete*] for the Schaubühne Berlin (2013) and, given the limits of space, make only some reference to the version of Friedericke Mayröcker's *Night Train* [*Reise durch die Nacht*] (2012) for the

Schauspiel Cologne.<sup>6</sup> As well as its primary purpose to change perceptual proxemics, live cinema - a term which prioritises the overt making of the adaptive screen image, rather than cinematic experience – clearly continues to be an especially successful means to adapt novels for Mitchell, where she has continued to refine and develop her approach by incorporating the latest technology.<sup>7</sup>

As Katya Krebs points out, discourses of adaptation have shifted from the notion of an established and definitive text versus ‘version’ arrived at through varying degrees of (un)faithfulness. For Krebs, the proliferation of adaptation in contemporary theatre practice concerns the ‘(re)writing, (re)construction and reception of cultural positions and ideologies’ (2013, 9; see also Krebs and Hand, 2007); in Mitchell’s case, she seeks cultural (re)expression of the source content through its resolute focus on the finesse of the projected film. On the other hand, Mitchell’s live cinema is still ‘faithful’ to the novel in its use of original passages as voice-overs, spoken live in performance. For Mitchell, *recorded* cinema thus remains limited because ‘it is not really happening’ (Mitchell & Rebellato 220); as Mitchell puts it, ‘the thrill of doing it live is a big thrill for everyone’ (2013). As I discuss here, devising live cinema thus concerns two interrelated processes: creating the form and content of the film, and producing what Mitchell and her team call the ‘choreography’ of *how* to perform it live. In its clearly constructed nature, live cinema is, as Linda Hutcheon proposes, a ‘double definition ... as process and product’ (Hutcheon 9), but where the process remains part of each performance in which the film is re-made and projected.

*Cinema and narrative*

In his recent *Contemporary Mise en Scène: Staging Theatre Today*, Patrice Pavis suggests the dominance of audiovisual technologies in theatre, which are seen across a number of contemporary directors' work, notably Frank Castorf, amongst several others (Pavis 139). Whilst Mitchell is not the first to use video, her work concerns the cinematic portrayal of psychology, rather than the use of media as a videographic backdrop, as in Ivo van Hove's *Antigone* (2015), or to reach an offstage location subsequently seen projected on stage (as in Declan Donnellan's *Ubu Roi* (2013), van Hove's *Roman Tragedies* (2007), and several of René Pollesch's works). Instead, Mitchell emphasises the actuality of sometimes frenetic on stage film-making, which subsequently renders the highly crafted, often consciously aestheticised realism of the film.

In early work, an ensemble of actors both performed and operated cameras; now there are separate operators and Foley artists, though actors are also involved in shooting the film.<sup>8</sup> A further key shift in Mitchell's later multimedia work is the focus on the psychology of a single character in order to 'represent consciousness and modes of perception on stage' (Mitchell and Rebellato 216), a significant shift from a focus on the group of friends in the early *Waves*. Technical considerations support these contemporary concerns; Mitchell explains:

It's difficult to film highly-complicated scenes with more than three characters ... as well as changing between temporalities. This is why we prefer to concentrate on the thoughts of a single character ... . Secondly, I'm also intrigued by the way in which our thoughts drive us to isolation. (Siéfert)

Live cinema is, at its heart, concerned with single characters in crisis and the account of their self-reflexivity. And despite Mitchell's concern with complexity, *Night Train*, *The Forbidden*

*Zone* (Schaubühne Berlin, 2014) (which, like *Night Train*, also has a set incorporating a constructed train carriage), and the later *Traveling on One Leg*, are notable for their sheer scale and technical ambition.

In an early discussion, Mitchell emphasises how her burgeoning multimedia practice also questioned linear narrative (National Theatre Discover) and links the development of her experimental multimedia work in the German speaking theatre with a rejection of ‘traditional components because they were connected to the way in which Nazism had unfolded itself’ (Mitchell and Rebellato 217). Mitchell has enjoyed in those theatre contexts the proliferation of opportunities to explore instead individuals’ fragmented, looping psychologies. Discussing her dramaturgical motivation to continue the live cinema form in combination with an approach to adaptation, Mitchell explains

... it gives me greater freedom; I can choose the scenes I want to use. I love selecting and arranging, putting together texts and visual elements. Being close to texts that are as beautiful and complex as those written by Woolf, Mayröcker, and Handke is a privilege. Also, at times novels manage to get closer to what is going on in the characters’ heads, to, say, the metaphysical element in our existence, than dramas do. (Mayer)

Mitchell clearly suggests her authorship of the adaptation here, which re-makes and remediates the novel by allowing an audience to perceive the implications of a character’s inner life on film. Helen Freshwater similarly links adaptation with a montage or collage-like practice of cutting up and rearranging text in devised work in her discussion of *Delirium* by theatre O (2008). theatre O’s treatment of Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* ‘owes something to such approaches in

terms both of the grand themes of the original and the liberties the company feels entitled to take with it' (Freshwater 9-10), recalling not only Mitchell's treatment of Dostoevsky's novel *The Idiot* in ...*some trace of her*, but also her team's ongoing aesthetic of filmmaking as a process that creates something other than a straightforward rendition of the novel.

If the live cinema aesthetic is stylistically one of realism, using passages from the novels that offer a dramaturgy of the individual, in practical terms close-ups abound as a cinematic vocabulary of psychological scrutiny. Accompanying voice-overs of principal characters' thoughts are delivered by another actor and cued shot by shot. As Mitchell's practice has developed, multi-roomed sets have enabled swift movement between multiple scenic locations. Although much appeal of Mitchell's live cinema still lies in its relationship between the machinations of this stage-level work and the often eloquent screen images, for Pavis there remains a 'competition' between live and projected action, where, for Pavis at least, 'the change of scale of an image, which is a familiar procedure in photography and cinema can lead - when that image is onstage - to a spatial and corporeal disorientation for the spectator' (134). But live cinema exploits our contemporary ease with the filmic since the actors' performances are only truly experienced on screen, even if, as I discuss, Dan Rebellato's fine description of how the early work celebrated the 'ocular movement between screen and stage. ... [t]he beautifully realised images above but also the elaborately chaotic choreography of the actor-technicians work below' (334-5) no longer always holds due to Mitchell's later interventions.

*Devising and process*

As Alison Oddey foregrounds in her early (and, for many years, virtually the only) study of devising, choosing to devise quickly raises questions of ‘how and where to start’ (Oddey, chapter 2). In the case of live cinema, where to start is often a novel: either Mitchell chooses this or she will take advice or recommendations from a dramaturg. For *Traveling on One Leg*, the dramaturg Rita Thiele had recommended Müller and a decision was made to use *Reisende auf einem Bein*, although the production also incorporates passages from her *The Land of Green Plums* [*Herztier*]. Typically, Mitchell rehearses for five weeks (her German-language productions are initially rehearsed in London) before a further three week period moving the work into the theatre. Mitchell reports this final stage can involve twelve-hour working days, six days a week (2013). Since neither Mitchell nor her regular Directors of Photography are German speakers, the working language swaps (though, given the ability of the German crew, English predominates) and the German-speaking actors initially perform in English.

Although different emphases appear in different productions, it is possible to identify clear processual phases in devising live cinema. Mitchell first stages scenes in a ‘stepping through’ period. As I discuss, this is quite different from Mitchell’s rigorous process when rehearsing a play (Mitchell, 2008), and concerns placing the action into the relevant locations. The Director of Photography will respond with a basic pattern of shots and a rough edit. Especially when rehearsing *Traveling on One Leg*, this process is called ‘making the film’ (a term redolent of the contemporary ‘theatre making’; Radosavljević 12-13), and is run once, before some finer tuning. Since all of the scene and shot sequences are independent, a complex process of ‘threading’ next takes place, whereby how cameras (as well as props or costume items) can be moved from scene to scene and location to location is established. Another logistical element to be tackled when threading *Traveling on One Leg* was a boom operator to



pick up the live speech. Given Mitchell's volume of live cinema work, it is surprising to note that this production was the first to incorporate dialogue (although dialogue appeared in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, this was muffled and often underneath action, sound or the relentlessness of voiceover). Another basic element to be considered in threading is the movement of camera cabling (to avoid tangled wiring, which camera must be moved first is determined by which camera cable lies on top of which); this was made a little easier when the boom operator in *Traveling on One Leg* was fitted with a wireless connection. The sound track is also added in rehearsal rather than in a production phase. Sequences are run, the German script is introduced and rehearsal refines the action. When activity stops, there are busy discussions on set, even without Mitchell, who may run over something with an actor elsewhere. There are thus several linear yet simultaneous devising processes involved.

Attempts to define devising often invoke the absence of script before rehearsal, or at least trouble the relationship with text as a basis of performance (Heddon and Milling 6-7; Govan et al. 6). In the early work on *Waves*, a text document of some forty pages existed before rehearsal, from which the company selected sections and isolated voice-overs. Mitchell explains an initial devising process concerned asking 'what is the image we can have for the person who's thinking that?' (Mitchell, 2013) and that actors worked in groups to produce performance proposals. Mitchell confirms 'I proposed very little - I set tasks' (2013). This process has developed significantly: in Mitchell's recent work, the writer Duncan Macmillan has become a particular collaborator, having created the preliminary script adaptation of both *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* and *Night Train*, the latter in collaboration with Lyndsey Turner, who worked alone on *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Whilst the Director of Photography - Mitchell's principal collaborator - would have read the draft, there is, crucially, no preliminary shooting script. As shots are slowly

accumulated, they are captured by powerful servers and specialist computer software and a shot list made up of several hundred computer screen grabs is created and distributed.

Simultaneously, the actors and operators create their own notation of their ‘choreography’ around the stage space. It is thus the realisation of a progression of *shots*, not the script, which determines the journey of all involved through the action.

The ability of devising to question, or at least complicate, the authority of the pre-existing, dramatically self-contained world of traditional playtexts, has fuelled a postmodern, contemporary performance mode, exemplified in the UK for example by the fragmented, self-conscious, challenging and intertextual work of companies like Forced Entertainment, and in the US by companies like Goat Island or (especially in terms of textual deconstruction) The Wooster Group. Yet Heddon and Milling warn against a too-easy elision of the critical complexities of postmodernism with stylistics and suggest that ‘the identification of a shared ‘style’ arising from the properties thought specific to devising also implies a shared *process*’ (222, my emphasis). In Mitchell’s work, the live cinema script and originary novel remain simply starting points for devising with a regular team of collaborators who understand both a process and the form and aesthetic of the film to be made. To take just *The Yellow Wallpaper* and *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*, the Director of Photography (Grant Gee), Lighting Designer (Jack Knowles), Sound Designers (Melanie Wilson and Gareth Fry) and Camera Operators (Andreas Hartmann and Stefan Kessissoglou) worked across both productions. Beyond this, designers (especially Alex Eales), Foley artists, stage managers (often Pippa Meyer) and Mitchell’s long-standing associate director, Lily McLeish, have been involved in several productions. Mitchell has thus over recent years built an Anglo-German/Austrian ensemble of what tend now to be called ‘creatives’, as well as the actors she has long worked with (Julia Wieninger has appeared in *Night Train* and

*Traveling on One Leg*) and which comprises some twenty to thirty people in the rehearsal room.<sup>9</sup> The great advantage is one of shared skill: it would also be near-impossible for a new team to learn the complex process for each new project; moreover, as Heddon and Milling suggest, shared training and skills, interests or experiences are fundamentals that will inevitably resonate in the aesthetics of the work itself.

When attending rehearsal for Handke's *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*, my overwhelming first impression was how slow procedures are. The basic script was some thirty-nine pages long and by around two thirds of this, the company had amassed significantly over six hundred shots. At one rehearsal, to run over some five shots that were already more or less established took around an hour. The first day of threading *Traveling on One Leg* achieved less than six already short pages and assembled around nine minutes of the film. At 4pm on another day I was present, nineteen shots were run, which comprised less than four minutes of screen time. In some productions, threading is interchanged with making the film: a clear difference I observed between *Traveling on One Leg* and *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* is that the former broke down the process into blocks of making and threading, whereas the latter seemed also to be finalising shots during threading, a phase which also appeared especially difficult. I also saw Mitchell direct precise action during threading of *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*, a period apparently with a different emphasis, and Gee change shots during threading of *Traveling on One Leg*.

Such slippage is common in devising processes and phases overlap and loop, and sometimes go awry; Mitchell recalls too that her early company were not able to get through a run through of *Waves* (Mitchell, 2013) and initial attempts at short sequences in the later work still regularly break down. Sometimes the production is not finalised nor achieves a successful run through until the last few days of the process. And even though Mitchell notes that 'once

you've got the machinery of this work running, it's a day's work to change anything... it's such hell' (2013) changes do happen. After threading the opening sequence of *Traveling on One Leg* for example, it was decided that the opening section concerning the Romanian part of the story should be restructured. These changes meant that the cast and camera operators had to 'unlearn' their carefully notated choreography; those that can follow script or cues (the Deputy Stage Manager, the online editor, lighting and sound) also had to reorder substantial paperwork. A key to the process is of course time, but also a shared understanding and acceptance of devising conditions.

Discourse around devising has sometimes troubled notions of authority and the role of the director. That Simon McBurney, *Complicite*'s director, 'rips and trashes' (Alexander 72) through devised material might seem far from the 'leaderlessness' (Proudfit and Syssoyeva 4) so desired by the idealism of some collaborative groups of the 1960s. In other contemporary work, Harvie and Lavender usefully suggest how 'negotiated leadership can facilitate group agency' (4). As I perceive it, one of Mitchell's key skills as a director is the ability to manage a rehearsal room and discern the needs not only of the work at hand, but also those involved. Mitchell is also a great delegator. Threading is typically led by McLeish or, for *Traveling on One Leg*, the floor manager.<sup>10</sup> This is at once a delegation of a task that Mitchell undertook in the early days of the work, but also a sharing of work processes and significant responsibility across the ensemble. In contrast to her early, hands-on work when creating multimedia productions, a key process for Mitchell now is to watch the screen - not the stage action - and give notes as well as reworking where necessary. Overall, watching rehearsal does indeed appear as a complex and slow technical rehearsal, as in traditional theatre, punctuated by moments of director and actor

collaboration, in a long and complex process that devolves and cascades responsibilities as effective devising.

### *Adaptation*

Handke's novella *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* (1972) offers a first person account of the writer's attempt to understand his mother's suicide. In Mitchell's version, the sister appears too, offering a further familial presence in the parental home at the time of the mother's funeral. Mitchell also re-enacts scenes from the mother's past: in contrast to her earlier view, the medium and language of film is, in this case, made to suit temporal shifts, as scenes involving the mother's life are shot in black and white. Lack of colour also suggests Irene's muted experience of the world around her in *Traveling on One Leg* and, aesthetically, creates perhaps the vintage, cold greyness of the former Eastern bloc. Similarly coded flashbacks also happen in *Night Train*, when the central figure's memories of her father appear in monochrome. Whilst offering a cinematic vocabulary of storytelling, these strategies also usefully place characters in *relation* to events in performance more actively than novelistic reportage. But Mitchell takes her central interest in self-reflexivity to extremes in *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* as characters do not speak, and their thoughts are almost incessantly spoken by another male and female voice.

Although, as with all of the live cinema scripts, Macmillan's adaptation of *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* is written envisaging the filmed outcome, it is clearly provisional and a proposition at the inception of the devising process.<sup>11</sup> Macmillan offered some of the script in a different font colour, either to indicate the difference between stage directions - which are a very full narrative of action - and voiceover, or to signify possibilities or potential cuts. Typically, all

scripts have cinema-style markings such as 'Int' and 'Ext' to designate interior or exterior locations; in *Traveling on One Leg*, for example, one scene is precisely set up as 'Interior. Irene's apartment, Berlin. Evening. 6.30pm' (Mitchell, 2015a), accurately placing the action. In contrast to this detail, Macmillan's rehearsal script for *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* offers potential alternatives to the opening sequences; later footnotes offer possibilities too: p. 26, for example, suggests 'perhaps this paragraph is written on the notepad but not narrated?' (Macmillan). Although an apparently simple question, this changes the form from the force of voiceover to placing the spectator in the character's point of view. To return to Hutcheon, this is adaptation as 'showing' not 'telling' (38-46), enabled not only by Macmillan's familiarity with the medium and its devising, but also temporal and formal shifts.<sup>12</sup> The live cinema scripts should clearly be considered work-in-progress screenplays.

Whilst live cinema is a medium of adaptation and a discrete practice, changes to original material have been criticised. *The Yellow Wallpaper*, arguably the most well-known of recent novels, particularly invited comparison with the re-rendered form. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's six-thousand word story of the same name was first published in 1892, but the Schaubühne called for an updated version (Mitchell & Rebellato 224). Mitchell's production thus takes place in contemporary Berlin, the husband has a car and - rather at odds with her imposed isolation in the original - the woman has a mobile phone and laptop. Later, the figure imagined behind the wallpaper is freed - achieved through video special effects to overlay images created in two locations at stage level - and, in a significant change to Perkins Gilman's work, aids the central woman to commit suicide. One review criticises, 'for Mitchell, the woman behind the wallpaper, that alter ego, is nothing but a beautiful personification of fate, the Angel of death. After 120 years of being read, this is a curious conclusion for this classic text of feminist literature'

(Spreng). Such a criticism exposes an understanding of adaptation as necessarily preserving original content or worrying about fidelity, despite translation of form, rather than, as Margherita Laera has boldly defined, adaptation as ‘a synonym of appropriation, because it is too problematic to draw the line between a ‘faithful adaptation’ and an ‘unfaithful appropriation’ (faithful or unfaithful to what, anyway?)’ (Laera, 5).

Returning to her role with *Waves*, Mitchell wrote the basic script for *Traveling on One Leg* herself.<sup>13</sup> Herta Müller’s novel centres on Irene, who emigrates from the German speaking community in her native Romania to Germany, where the action shifts across three locations, West Berlin, Marburg and Frankfurt. The novel explores Irene’s fraught relationships with three men, Franz, Stefan and Thomas, and her sense of not belonging to either her home or adopted countries. The novel renders this sense of removal stylistically, as dialogue tends to be reported and is never in speech marks; for example:

Did you ever have anything to do with the secret service there before you emigrated.

I didn’t, but they did. That makes a difference, said Irene. (Müller 18)

Müller’s slippage between reported and direct speech reinforces Irene’s daily experience, as in the live cinema version, where, like her previous choices, Mitchell is again drawn to individual isolation. The production used a multi-roomed set, though one projection screen was incorporated into the set as a section of the Berlin Wall, not, as so often, suspended above the stage. These design features were, though, also subject to the changes caused by ongoing devising: when I first attended rehearsal, a photo-booth had been removed and abandoned stage

left, but was later re-included, and in contrast to the fixity of the main set, ‘pop up’ locations were added, often achieved through an actor moving in place temporary screens or flats.

As with the changes Mitchell made to the ending of *The Yellow Wallpaper*, there is, here, an evolving adaptation process of moving from novel to script to film, nuanced through Mitchell’s response to the work as initial author. In the case of *Traveling on One Leg*, the scripted re-rendering is one of selection and emphasis rather than radical change; some sections of the script remain narrative of action, very close to the novel and look like long stage directions. But, like Macmillan’s work, the early script was not definitive - nor even complete for around the first third of rehearsal - and so offered somewhere reasonably definite to start; the ‘how’ of its progression would be to collaborate. The embryonic script was emailed back and forth between Mitchell and Thiele, who both translated and added elements based on her knowledge of the original German novels. Mitchell also involved Wieninger in decisions around the narrative of Irene, recalling at least something of the ensemble or actor-centric ethos of some devising (Heddon and Milling, chapter 2). These strategies make collaborative some of what appears as Mitchell’s authorship and, like more permanent devising ensembles, benefit from the relative familiarity of an experienced company.

### *Acting*

Even with an eight week rehearsal period, little, if any, of Mitchell’s approach to play rehearsal takes place in live cinema. Deriving in large part from Stanislavski and outlined in her own book (Mitchell, 2008), Mitchell typically considers how characters are conditioned by their past when working on a play. A precisely detailed biography of characters is created, in which past events



are sometimes invented in order to justify behaviour in the present of the play. Improvisation often explores this history. Defining ‘immediate circumstances’ reinforces the events of the twenty-four hours prior to a character’s first appearance. In terms of textual analysis, Mitchell is especially interested in intention and events (how changes in action shape characters’ shifting purposes and goals) and to establish the time, place and temperature of the specific situation and location. However, it is rare for these strategies to be employed in live cinema, although the screenplay for *Night Train* incorporated events in a production where ‘the Stanislavskian theatre work came together with the multimedia work; it was so precisely played’ (Mitchell, 2013). But usually there is simply not time for Mitchell’s processual rigour amidst the devising of the means to produce a film.

If the extremely detailed work I have seen undertaken in other rehearsal situations leads to psychologically dense, logical and, crucially, repeatable performances, this would appear to be missing in live cinema.<sup>14</sup> Given the preponderance of live cinema in her work, some reconsideration of what constitutes Mitchell’s ‘normative’ practice seems warranted too. In Mitchell’s early multimedia work, when only actors operated cameras, sub-characters were created in order to motivate their work as camera crew who also acted: in Mitchell’s multimedia version of Martin Crimp’s *Attempts on Her Life* for example (National Theatre, 2007), characters were created who might wish to create a televisual version of the text and could speak the various languages within it. Mitchell asserts that this has not been necessary when working with German casts, since she has found them particularly adept at taking on theatrical form without the need for its psychological justification (2012). In *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* especially, with little interaction between characters, it is instead an intensity of focus that characterises live cinema acting; as Mitchell puts it, actors must ‘practice the text as a thought, not spoken, not like

a monologue' (2015a), where a fixity of a key moment is often explained by the accompanying voice over.<sup>15</sup>

If acting in live cinema is part of a total theatrical montage, an issue is that it is rarely logical since actors have to switch between filming tasks, near instantaneous acting in short scenes, and shifting location both within the set and jumping time and place in the chronology of events. In rehearsal for *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*, Liliame Amuat, as the daughter, operated a camera, then was in shot as the daughter trying to make a telephone call, and next moved a tripod, all in the space of a handful of shots. In rehearsal of one sequence of *Traveling on One Leg*, Achim Buch moved a camera ready for a shot yet to happen, and then just about reached the voice over booth in time to deliver the disembodied voice of the photographer, which another actor played having moved there in preparation. In this overall sequence, Wieninger, as Irene, is in a hotel room, where she remembers the earlier event of having her passport photo being taken, yet also has to move from the interrogation room location back to the hotel. Nevertheless, Mitchell warned against 'not doing it automatically, but really joining things up in your thinking - there are hard jumps' (2015a). In contrast to her play rehearsal technique, Mitchell suggests here the nature of the problem, not the precision of a solution towards the necessary 'internal' logic actors should find. Some central actor-characters are, then, able to develop something of a throughline to performance, especially in the case of the woman in *The Yellow Wallpaper* as her situation unfolds; and in *Night Train*, the holding framework of the train journey provides a (meta)chronological consistency. For Weininger too, logic can be found in the above example as the interrogation and passport photo events are memories borne out of her location in the hotel room, creating some degree of psychological weave to what, at stage level, is urgent activity.

Even if it is the shots, both in aesthetic and practical terms, which establish the actors' journey through the performance, great attention to detail in acting is still preserved. In rehearsal for *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*, Mitchell researched carefully in order to determine exactly how many pills and of what type should be swallowed in which order by the mother (Dorothee Hartinger) in order to commit suicide. In the suicide sequence, Handke's description of how his mother had put on incontinence pads and several pairs of underwear is heard. As in Mitchell's wider practice, such on-stage items are not referred to as 'props', but 'objects', endowing them with a reality or instrumentality, which can be related to credibly by the actor. Mitchell thus advised Hartinger, 'if there's any uncertainty with objects, I don't believe you've planned it beforehand', and 'we mustn't see any adjustment in order to sit on the bed, since she would know her room very well' (2014). Here, acting is made more secure when linked to a set of environmental or situational touchstones. I have also heard Mitchell take time at least to speak through a situation and past events. In both cases, Mitchell must find precise acting points amidst the labour and slowness of shot making and the absence of long rehearsal focused on character.

What the actors develop in rehearsal is more like a score, which has to be learnt and practiced as an oscillation between diegesis and technical rendition of the performance. Even if actors are missing (and, in the case of *Traveling on One Leg*, the need emerged to replace an actor who became unavailable), stand-in actors are hired so that the mechanics of the action needed to produce the shots might still be established and rehearsed. Mitchell's long-standing collaborator, Kate Dûchene, stood in for Hartinger during rehearsal of *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*, and a drama school student was hired for a period of *Traveling on One Leg* to play roles in initial rehearsal. Given Mitchell's prolific work, coupled with a desire to work with a set of principal collaborators who may be engaged elsewhere, the devising and rehearsal processes must of

necessity sometimes focus on the development of the means to achieve the film, not the finer points of individuals' performances.

### *'Live cinema'*

As Heddon and Milling note, the growth in devising has usefully shifted the relative balance between process and product (175), where process concerns attention to a performance outcome, not an ideological position. Like much of Mitchell's work, live cinema is fundamentally psychological realism; the choices of which stories or novels to adapt are predicated on central characters with strong inner monologues, around which to grow the technical complexities of the filmic form. Relying on actors to fill out their thought process in performance goes some way toward actor-centric devising approaches, as does, in the case of *Traveling on One Leg*, having the actors move their own props and costume around the set as part of their scores. In my wider discussion, a taxonomy of devising process in live cinema suggests threading is a key step, since it is at this stage that performative action is created. As I have often observed, the ensemble works in a patient and professional manner during the sometimes arduous task. An interim outcome of threading is that an assessment of how the material plays out on screen can be made; that there will be narrative changes is mutually understood since the ultimate arbiter of choice is how the film functions. Like all devising, there is in live cinema a process of testing, assembly and cutting, yet - with whatever degree of collaboration and devolution of skill - it is ultimately for Mitchell and the Director of the Photography to determine what appears on screen.

If devising is a practice which simultaneously makes and rehearses a performance, live cinema is the devising of a film adaptation and the learning of the means to shoot and show it in

real time. In its growth in personnel, scale, complexity and aesthetic aims, the live cinema technique has clearly developed, attesting to Mitchell's reputation for formal innovation. Yet even with technological advances, Mitchell has suggested that the quality of the live film is sometimes limited and relies on its alignment with the stage action (*Dramaten*). In discussion, Mitchell described too that a sequence where the bed in *The Yellow Wallpaper* is physically shifted at speed from one room to the other is thrilling as 'a big theatrical event supporting a big change in the film' (2013), thus the affect of live cinema still sometimes relies on the simultaneous screen images and the evident production of the cinematic image through the moment of live action.

Despite her interest in the affect of stage level action, a significant development in Mitchell's contemporary live cinema work is the use of design choices whereby action is periodically visible only on screen. Preventing a direct view of some of the actor and camera operators' action is embedded in the scenography for *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* and *Traveling on One Leg* as some of the labyrinth of rooms cannot be seen by spectators without the roving cameras. And in some productions, a wooden flat, like a shutter, is dropped in, creating what is in effect a real 'fourth wall' to the rooms, a strategy that masks the setting up of a later shot. Devoid of any real opportunity to witness the live machinations of the means to produce shots (when shutters first fell in *The Yellow Wallpaper* my immediate response was to wonder if actors and operators were *really* continuing behind the walls; they are), the illusionistic aspect to the older work has depleted. Part of the pleasure as a spectator of *Waves* or *...some trace of her* was the complicity in the clear construction of shots by actors, often using rough and ready items, and the beautifully crafted images on screen. Even if Mitchell's later scenographic developments

paradoxically draw attention to the liveness of performance through its invisibility, in the competition (to return to Pavis) between stage and film, here film prevails.

As an *oeuvre*, Mitchell's work has shifted from multimedia theatre, as in the case of the early productions at the National Theatre, to a more accurate designation as live cinema in the contemporary productions; I have suggested too that the filmic vocabulary has increased, emphasising a spectatorial engagement via the screen only. Since at least three cameras are used (rather than typically one as in traditional cinema), I would further suggest that both the acting and filming task is closer to multi-camera television, a technique that enables the playing of relatively long sequences without stopping; in television, this makes for quicker recording and, in live cinema, for what has been devised to be continually projected.

Whilst Mitchell's multimedia practices do not neatly fit regular definitions of devising or *création collective*, one way of appreciating the work is as collective *labour*, in which matters of authorship and production are devolved through pockets of expertise as a simultaneous or temporally-defined process (the creation of the script at the outset, for example, in contrast to the interweaving work of 'threading'). In a recent collection on performance and labour, Klein and Kunst identify 'new modes of working [and] the potentiality of performance practice ... to challenge the established orders of the production and dissemination of artistic products ... labour has become visible in performance work' (Klein and Kunst, 1). As a set of clearly *made* cinematic adaptations, *The Yellow Wallpaper* exemplifies Laera's definition of 'intertemporal' adaptation, whereas *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* is 'intratemporal' in that its presentation maintains the time setting of the original (Laera, 7). But, given the broader processes and personnel in Mitchell's *oeuvre*, matters are more complex, since both are intermedial adaptations; the adapted product in the case of *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* also employs a

complex stage technology clearly not around in the 1970s: it is an intratemporal content realised through an intertemporal treatment.

As an aspect of devising and as the basis of performance, live cinema can be seen as a technology of movement. The labour of each performance aside, I have also seen camera operators ‘mark through’ their moves in rehearsal breaks in order to learn their particular choreography. This labour, required to render the work primarily as an ultimately cinematic encounter, remains an obvious part of the performative nature of the experience for spectators. The adaptation is laboured upon in real time before our eyes (and ears), yet ultimately must be appreciated as a film.

## Works Cited

59 Productions. "The making of a Live Cinema Show - Forbidden Zone - directed by Katie Mitchell." <https://vimeo.com/101517150>. n.d. Web. 27 Jan 2017.

Alexander, Catherine. "Complicite – *The Elephant Vanishes*." *Making Contemporary Theatre: International Rehearsal Processes*. Ed. Jen Harvie and Andy Lavender. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010. 59-80.

Dramaten. "Bergmanfestivalen: Katie Mitchell - Om Teatern om tekniken." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DoVpSvKcHq4>. 28 May 2012. Web. 29 Oct. 2015.

Billington, Michael. "Don't let auteurs take over in theatre." *theguardian.com/uk*. 14 April 2009. Web. 22 Oct. 2015.

Birringer, Johannes H. "The Theatre and Its Screen Double." *Theatre Journal* 66: 2 (2014): 207-225. Clements, Rachel. "Deconstructive Techniques and Spectral Technologies in Katie Mitchell's Attempts on Her Life." *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 24: 3 (2014): 331-341. Freshwater, Helen. "Delirium: in rehearsal with theatre O." *Devising in Process*. Ed. Alex Mermikides and Jackie Smart. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. 128-146.

Friedman, Sharon. "Sounds Indistinguishable from Sights': Staging Subjectivity in Katie Mitchell's *Waves*." *Text and Presentation*, (2009): 154-166. Govan, Emma, Helen Nicholson and Katie Normington. *Making a Performance: Devising Histories and Contemporary Practice*. London and New York: Routledge, 2007.



Hadjioannou, Markos and George Rodosthenous. "In between Stage and Screen: the Intermedial in Katie Mitchell's ...*Some Trace of Her*." *International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media*, 7: 1 (2011): 43-59. Harvie, Jen and Andy Lavender, eds. *Making Contemporary Theatre: International Rehearsal Processes*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010.

Heddon, Deirdre and Jane Milling. *Devising Performance: a Critical History*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

Hutcheon, Linda. *A Theory of Adaptation*. London and New York: Routledge, 2006.

Jefferies, Janis. "...some trace of her': Katie Mitchell's *Waves* in Multimedia Performance." *Women: A Cultural Review*, 22: 4 (2011): 400-410.

Klein Gabriele and Bojana Kunst. "Introduction: Labour and performance." *Performance Research* 17.6 (2012): 1-3.

Krebs, Katya. *Translation and Adaptation in Theatre and Film*. London and New York: Routledge, 2013.

Krebs, Katya and Richard Hand. "Editorial." *Journal of Adaptation in Film and Performance* 1: 1 (2007): 3-4.

Laera, Margherita, ed. *Theatre and Adaptation: Return, Rewrite, Repeat*. London: Bloomsbury, 2014.

McLeish, Lily. Email correspondence with author. 26 Oct. 2015.

Macmillan, Duncan. "Screenplay for *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*." Unpublished. 2014.

- Email correspondence with author. 29 Jan. 2017.

Mayer, Norbert. ““Wunschloses Unglück”, fast so schön wie Kino.” *Die Presse.com*. 31 Jul. 2014. Web. 29 Oct. 2015.

Müller, Herta. *Traveling on One Leg*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998.

Mitchell, Katie. “Screenplay for *Traveling on One Leg*.” Unpublished. 2015a.

- Comments in rehearsal of *Traveling on One Leg*. Three Mills Studios, London. 17 Jul. 2015b.
- Comments in rehearsal of *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*. Three Mills Studios, London. 10 Jan. 2014.
- Unpublished interview with author. Three Mills Studios, London. 13 Nov. 2013.
- Unpublished interview with author. Three Mills Studios, London. 30 Oct. 2012.
- *The Director's Craft: a Handbook for the Theatre*. London and New York: Routledge, 2008.

Mitchell, Katie and Dan Rebellato. “Doing the Impossible: Katie Mitchell in Conversation with Dan Rebellato.” *Theatre and Adaptation: Return, Rewrite, Repeat*. Ed. Margherita Laera. London: Bloomsbury, 2014. 213-26.

National Theatre Discover (2011) “Katie Mitchell on directing multimedia productions.” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rAij9r9RvF0>. 6 May 2011. Web. 29 Oct. 2015.

Oddey, Alison. *Devising Theatre: a Practical and Theoretical Handbook*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 1994.

Pavis, Patrice. *Contemporary Mise en Scène: Staging Theatre Today*. London and New York: Routledge, 2013.

Proudfit, Scott and Kathryn Mederos Syssoyeva. Eds. *Collective Creation in Contemporary Performance*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

Radosavljević, Duška. *The Contemporary Ensemble*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2013.

Rebellato, Dan. "Katie Mitchell: Learning from Europe." *Contemporary European Theatre Directors*. Eds. Maria M. Delgado and Dan Rebellato. London and New York: Routledge, 2010. 317-38.

Siéfert, Marion. Trans. Chris Campbell. "Entretien avec Katie Mitchell." *Theatre-Contemporain.net*. n.d. Web. 22 Oct 2015. Unpublished English translation by Tom Boddy.

Sierz, Aleks. "Some Traces of Katie Mitchell." *Theatre Forum*, 34 (2009): 51-59.

Spencer, Charles. "Women of Troy: Euripides all roughed up." *Telegraph.co.uk*. 30 Nov 2007. Web. 29 Oct. 2015.

Spreng, Eberhard. "Postnatale depression als Bühnen film." *Deutschlandfunk.de*. 17 Feb. 2013. Web. 6 Aug. 2013.

---

<sup>1</sup> Mitchell's work averages some six to eight new productions a year in both theatre and opera; she also oversees transfers.

<sup>2</sup> I also find the Spencer review misogynistic.

<sup>3</sup> Mitchell has also incorporated live music; for *Wunschkonzert* (2008, Schauspiel Köln, Cologne) for example, a string quartet played in a visible glass booth.

<sup>4</sup> *After Dido* (Young Vic, London, 2009), is one example of Mitchell's live cinema opera work.

<sup>5</sup> Mitchell's Schaubühne Berlin production, *Fräulein Julie*, discussed by Birringer, Fowler (this volume) and in Mitchell and Rebellato, toured to the Barbican, London, in 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Throughout, I use the English translations of the titles, although, of course, the productions are known in the original German. Following discussion with Mitchell, I have not included her production of W. G. Sebald's *Rings of Saturn* [*Die Ringe des Saturn*] (Schauspiel Köln, Cologne, 2012) as this is a somewhat different piece of work, focussing on the creation of a sound world, as if a staged radio play, nor *The Forbidden Zone* (Schaubühne Berlin, 2014) since it is not an adaptation as such, but incorporates texts from several sources in a screenplay by Duncan Macmillan.

<sup>7</sup> Mitchell and her collaborators continue to explore the use of the latest high definition and 3D cameras. See 59 Productions.

<sup>8</sup> For example, in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, Tilman Strauß, playing the husband, films; in *Night Train*, the actors playing the father, the sleeping-car attendant and the husband operate cameras.

<sup>9</sup> Wieninger has worked with Mitchell at the Deutsches Schauspielhaus, Hamburg, on Beckett's *Happy Days* [*Glückliche Tage*] (2015) and Martin Crimp's *Alles Weitere kennen Sie aus dem Kino* [*The Rest Will Be Familiar to You from Cinema*] (2013).

<sup>10</sup> McLeish is a bilingual German-English speaker.

<sup>11</sup> Mitchell (2013) reports that for *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the order of scenes and voice-overs were ready before rehearsal; for *Night Train*, the order of scenes, most of the dialogue and most voice-overs were in place.

<sup>12</sup> Macmillan confirms that the text was a constantly changing part of the devising and was never finished as such, and that the process for each live cinema production he has worked on has been different (Macmillan, 2017).

<sup>13</sup> See Mitchell & Rebellato, where Mitchell also reports how she produced the basic rehearsal document for *Rings of Saturn*. A production of *Waves* [*Die Wellen*] was also staged at the Schauspiel Köln (2011).

<sup>14</sup> As well as other productions, I observed some rehearsal of Mitchell's production of *The Cherry Orchard* for the Young Vic, London (2014), where her approach was most in evidence.

<sup>15</sup> Lily McLeish confirms that, whilst actors are not necessarily instructed to think the thoughts expressed in the accompanying voice overs, this is implicit, and recounts that, unusually, in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the voice over performer learnt the voice over text so as to align her delivery closely with her fellow actor's thought process. (McLeish).