

Peter Sellars and Maria Shevtsova

Covid Conversations 1: Peter Sellars

In this profoundly dialogical exchange, Peter Sellars, theatre director, researcher, and teacher, and Maria Shevtsova open out a whole array of questions on the integral relation between politics and the theatre in its multiple manifestations. These questions not only concern the damages inflicted by the present Covid-19 pandemic but also those developed by the neoliberal economics and politics of the past forty years and more. In Sellars's view, neoliberalism has been the hotbed of social injustices, inequities, market and other forms of current enslavement, migrations, refugee and related precarities, and the havoc of the world climate in which the plight of humanity and that of the planet are indelibly interconnected. His and Shevtsova's discussion links such vital concerns with his theatre practice, which ranges from his engagement with local communities and indigenous peoples – he details some of his work with the collective, community organization of two Los Angeles Festivals of the early 1990s – to the various forms of his music theatre in which he collaborates, in institutional structures, with highly proficient musicians, singers and dancers. The focus chosen here from his music theatre is *The Indian Queen* (2013), which Sellars dramaturgically invents using pieces by Henry Purcell combined with prose fragments by Nicaraguan novelist Rosario Aguilar. Peter Sellars is an internationally renowned theatre director among whose more recent productions is Mozart's *Idomeneo*, premiered at the Salzburg Festival in 2019. Maria Shevtsova, Professor of Drama and Theatre Arts at Goldsmiths, University of London, is editor of *New Theatre Quarterly*. This conversation took place on 16 August 2020, was transcribed from the recording by Kunsang Kelden, and was edited by Maria Shevtsova.

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Maria Shevtsova *Peter, you have you been in lockdown but, at about this time last year in 2019, you were with conductor Teodor Currentzis at the Salzburg Festival, where you were staging Idomeneo. You can't go to any big festival this summer. Now that you are back in California, are you working with your local communities the way you did when you were a younger director – a very impressive director who, already in the 1980s, took the theatre world by storm, causing controversy wherever you went and gaining the reputation of being rather 'strange', 'eccentric'? Apart from productions in established theatre houses, you were doing very important work in the Los Angeles area, and you were tied up with two Los Angeles festivals (1990 and 1993), which were very much devoted to local communities. How did you see this work and which specific communities were involved?*

Peter Sellars Nothing like this has been possible during the current situation.

The Los Angeles Festival was a completely transforming experience. I arrived in California

from the East Coast with its training and cultural hierarchy in mind, and I had to learn very differently. At that time, there were maybe a hundred and thirty-five languages spoken in Los Angeles, and Cambodian Los Angeles had an incredible history and incredible futures. These were people who arrived from the Pol Pot killing fields and whose family members were missing. Sometimes parts of their bodies were missing. They arrived in a state of total shock and settled in Long Beach California, and the very first thing they did before going to a job-training programme or English language classes was to have a school of Cambodian dance because the deepest thing, the deepest part of their being, was cultural and was expressed in the dance: holding your centre, maintaining equilibrium, grace under pressure, a way of recounting horrifying stories with tenderness, grace, discretion, and restraint, and interiorizing everything to a point of extreme beauty.

Now, these dance performances done by Cambodian kids in Long Beach were not

elaborately sophisticated, but they were one of the most moving things you've ever seen in your life; and you realize that, wherever you live, the local is actually global because your connection, here, to the history of the world is refugees – people who couldn't stay where they were and ended up somewhere else. In the case of Native American and Black populations – they are people who've been kept outside of the cultural sphere deliberately and in very specific ways, but who have incredible histories to narrate and incredible futures at their fingertips; and we're actually released from the tyranny of the one-size-fits-none, which is constantly imposed on us by mainstream journalism and mainstream politics.

Whoever digs into who lives here is digging into the richness, depth, intensity and urgency of world cultures. This is all just where I am living and it's just getting to know people in the city you live in. I think that most people in most cities have been to the same three places every day, while there are entire sections of the city that they never go near and never visit. These are sections of a city that have incredible depth of cultural representation. The parallels of who is excluded in the cultural map and who is excluded in the political economic map are always the same, and I don't want to repeat what we know about the colonialist lack of regard for 'the local' – so, for instance, the French in Africa busy teaching Africans about the superiority of French culture and not noticing the depth of the culture that is right in front of them.

Our universities, our English, French, German, and American universities, are all set up along these same cultural guidelines. The English department and the French department are immense, with dozens of professors and hundreds of students, while African Studies is in the basement of some building, and the fax machine barely works. Obviously these cultures, indigenous cultures, are majoritarian cultures; they are actually the cultures of the largest number of people on the planet and, when you want to be an educated and dimensional human being, this is a motive for why you would look for them. Second, if your job is running a major cultural organization,

then you absolutely have the responsibility to put forward representative programming.

Right, and the major cultural organization here was the Los Angeles Festival.

Yes, and the Los Angeles Festival was an astonishing experiment, curated by three hundred and fifty people, not by me. The whole point was, if you really believe in democracy and diversity, then, for goodness' sakes, you have to create a structure that represents that. One of the most important things, for me, was to have three hundred and fifty people curating it; and to have an artistic steering committee of twenty-five artists from different neighbourhoods in Los Angeles – you know, a Lebanese oud master and a filmmaker running a hip-hop cafe in Leimert Park in South Los Angeles and a Native American cultural figure who repatriates the bones of his people from the basements of different museums. It was about getting all these people around one table and asking where we lived. What is this place and how are we living? What do we share and what do we not?

It was crucial to have a youth committee of twenty-five teenagers from, again, twenty-five different parts of Los Angeles, all curating together and creating a [common] space because, going from neighbourhood to neighbourhood, Los Angeles is just another world. So what are the points of entry? What are the points of understanding? What are the points where you can actually be received and you're not a tourist? What are the points of deep exchange? It's a much longer conversation. I grew up with standard East Coast and European hierarchies of cultural importance. At the age of ten, when I was working in the marionette theatre, I was surrounded by Balinese masks and puppets from India and Yucatán, and so on. My very first exposure to theatre was quite global because of the puppet theatre but, nonetheless, it was assumed that the most important theatre in the world was in Paris and Berlin – and I was very privileged to be part of that scene.

But, then, when I arrived in Los Angeles, it was stunning and the scales fell from my eyes, although not painlessly. It was a genuinely uphill learning process because I had completely

to remake everything that had been placed in my mind concerning what was 'important' in the cultural sphere and what was 'not important'. From that point, my work shifted. The difference between, shall we say, *Nixon in China* [1987, composer John Adams] and *The Death of Klinghoffer* [1991, also Adams] was that *The Death of Klinghoffer* was a story enacted by a community.

Did you consider yourself to be one of the organizers of the Los Angeles Festival or were you principally a facilitator who brought together other people to do the organizing?

I was, of course, the Director of the Festival but the point was, as always, that, whatever power or money you have in this world, you have to divest and redistribute it immediately. My first step, every time I run a festival, is to hire a wide range of people with a wide range of cultural expertise and curiosity. It was a huge effort with a large staff and really extraordinary curators. We had help from Foundations. The 1993 festival, which was during the first Gulf War, was focused on Arab, Black, and Jewish art. We had three-day conferences, each attended by one hundred people, local, national, and international. Local communities were meeting with leaders they respected from the countries of their origins.

We had dialogues that were quite far-reaching. Cultural work comes from deep dives into culture and history and people's life experiences. The questions to be asked are, here in Los Angeles: 'Are we simply going to bring back what you remember from the old country? Or are we making something new here?' Which is why the first Festival was called 'Home, Place, and Memory'. The understanding was that these are three different things and that your home is not necessarily where you are living. How are you living with memory and what does that generate in a new context?

The way in which given cultures were being recontextualized at this global moment of presence and identity was extremely rich, and none of this was done out of my own personal genius. It was really a learning process – meeting people and meeting people and meeting people and spending time in community meetings, sitting

with people through long intense sessions, frequently being fed spectacular things that you couldn't name, and learning that all of these worlds exist within the world called Los Angeles. And the world of Los Angeles exists all over the rest of the planet. That was a real turning point in my life – understanding how culture really works, and I had extraordinary collaborators. Judy Mitoma, who founded the Department of World Arts and Cultures, where I now teach, here at UCLA [University of California, Los Angeles], was the person who taught me what that meant and what it means. 'Arts' is one set of projects and 'Cultures' is another, and their interaction is in the word 'and'. What's exciting is what takes place in the tension of that *and* between 'arts and cultures'.

Did you, while you were doing this in Los Angeles, actually work directly, say, with a group of African Americans, and create a performance piece that could be shown, if not necessarily in the Festival then in another venue at another time?

No. At all times, the Los Angeles Festival was people really speaking for themselves on their own terms. There was no cultural ventriloquism, as it were. My work was represented in the first festival by *Nixon in China*. What I was creating during the 1993 Festival and the Gulf War was *The Persians* and *The Death of Klinghoffer*, but they were not in the Los Angeles Festival. The Los Angeles Opera chose to pay for *The Death of Klinghoffer* in full and then to cancel it and destroy the sets.

*Well, the cancellation of this opera is for another conversation. Let's go back to our central theme and so to the Adelaide Festival (2002), which you also intended to be a festival of local communities and indigenous peoples. It's part of your history of tremendously deep commitment to the local, to the indigenous and to the social groups that in French are called the *defavorisés* . . . as you know, it's very hard to find the accurate words, and the words are different in different socio-historical situations. Really, fundamentally, we are talking about the people who have been beaten down and suppressed, who have been forgotten or ignored – the 'disadvantaged' and 'discarded' people. Dostoevsky had his own terminology: the 'insulted'*

and the 'injured', the poor, the damned, and the despised people; and we have this awful academic language that talks about 'marginalized' and 'minority' groups.

Well, let's put it this way: it's the majority population on Earth.

Would you agree with me that, with the Covid-19 pandemic, this majority is going to increase?

Yes, and I think that it's really been a privilege because the disease has come like some kind of biblical or transcendental massacre, first of all, to have us really realize how incorrectly we are living; and the message is being put very, very directly that humans need to stop, particularly humans on the high end of the environmental exploitation scale who need to stop and turn around. The virus brought everything to a halt and just said: 'Can you people please stop? Look at what you're doing. Stop running around! Look around and look inward.' In the previous forty years everyone was running around, and we knew that many, many things were incorrect, but we didn't stop and fix them. We just kept going, and they got worse and worse and worse, like the drug war, which was hatched one afternoon with John Ehrlichman and Richard Nixon in the Oval Office [Nixon's Presidency 1969–74] when they were trying to think how to stop students and Black people from voting in the next election. They cooked up the drug war in just ten minutes.

Is this a conspiracy theory?

It's the actual reality. Mr Ehrlichman has told us directly – we now have his testimony. And so billions and billions of dollars later has created a worldwide gulag and a nightmare of surveillance and fascist and proto-fascist military intervention everywhere. That was just one afternoon in the White House and, fifty years later, we have something so out of control, so wrong, that separates parents and children and separates families, destroying entire communities. These things are under way and have not been addressed. The virus was here to say, 'OK, look at the sacrificed

communities.' Where does the virus have the greatest inundation and the greatest death toll? It is exactly in communities that have been abandoned and rendered vulnerable by systematic starvation and denial of support – schools, health – and any kind of financial flow. Those communities are so vulnerable. They have been left naked by an absolutely intentional rollback of the entire civil rights movement in the last thirty years masquerading as economic advancement.

Meanwhile, in the same period, while we impoverished, hugely impoverished, most of the world, we've created a culture of billionaires – for how many dozens of people? This is the greatest inequality in the history of the human race and we are presiding over it at this moment. Who does not notice? What do you not notice about how wrong this is? This makes the period of Tsars and serfs in Russia look humane. We are dealing with our streams right now where people around the world are selling themselves and their children into slavery, and we have more slavery now than in the lifetime of Abraham Lincoln. So what's amazing is that this virus came and forced all of us to stop what we were doing; it forced all of us to stop jetting around; it forced all of us to stop and focus.

And then three months into the virus, with the death toll mounting, three words came to the fold – Black Lives Matter – and those three words resonated around the world. It's also an environmental statement because the areas of greatest environmental degradation are where people of colour are living, and the distress of the entire planet is signalled by the situation of the living conditions of many people of colour. So I have to say right now that it is a privilege to be alive at this moment. It feels like one of the great moments in the history of human reckoning with a larger force beyond us. That's what the virus came to announce: that you human beings think you know everything, can run everything, are in charge, are in control, but you are not. The message is Paul Robeson singing the spiritual 'Let My People Go': 'Go down, Moses, Let my people go.' That is the message to Pharaoh in the book of Exodus and it's also the message right now of entire peoples in this age where

there's a resurgence of fascism worldwide. Suddenly, the planet itself is speaking.

You were thinking about this and I have been thinking about this, but what about the people who are out of work or struggling for work and worrying about money, and the people who are anxious about how they can survive in tiny flats and small houses with children? Have they got the space in their head and their hearts to be thinking about this big calamity when they are surviving from day to day, step by step? And what about our leaders? They're not thinking about this calamity, are they? I don't see our Prime Minister Boris Johnson particularly anxious, at this point in time, about the crisis of humanity and the planet; and climate change is part of the cosmos crying out for help.

Humanity is part of that cosmos, so planet Earth and humans are together, suffering. People are struggling with fear and precarity. What are the leaders doing? Are they thinking like you and me? Boris Johnson is concerned about finance, about business, in general, and probably big-bucks business, in particular – put more seriously within a comprehensive view, the word would be 'economy' – and he started worrying publicly about people getting back to offices, and then he started wavering: one day we've got to get back to the workplace, on another we are being sent home, and yesterday there was a curfew: people who had travelled to France – France was the focal point at that moment – had to be back in London by four o'clock on Sunday morning or they were to be stuck for two weeks in quarantine. Their first fear was how they were going to get back to work to earn their living. 'Economy' from their point of view meant 'livelihood'.

Maria, we have never looked to those places for solutions. Those places have not had the solutions for a very long time. It's been forty years or longer since we've had solutions coming from those places between the neoconservative and the neoliberal takeover that occurred with the Reagan and Thatcher era. It's been a long time since we've really had leadership of quality. It's like looking for another Martin Luther King. We know that what is going on is [happening] on the ground. What is going on is small groups of people, small communities of people – which is why theatre was invented; theatre was

invented so that people could really come together. You can hold integrity on a small scale, and this means beginning to replant the grassroots at the grassroots because democracy has to be replanted there and not in the halls of power, where the corruption is. Not in the world that has been entirely run by money and where you can see the money itself speaking. We have truly not to look to power for any kind of explanation.

First, [we have to work] in small groups to try and touch truth in an era of lies, deceit, and widespread delusion. How do you move through delusion? You move through it one step at a time and you just try and touch something that you can actually feel as truth. That feeling that you recognize the truth in the midst of the delusion is, of course, very powerful in the arts, and here music is very powerful. You were talking about the *St Matthew Passion* (2010) earlier, before we began this more formal part of our conversation. The *Matthew Passion* is not about how marvellous Pontius Pilate is. Let's look to hear him. He is among those people who are so totally self-absorbed with their own sense of power that they are missing the real power that is in front of them.

For me, it's the rejected community, which is obviously very powerful in the *St Matthew Passion*, and the *Matthew Passion* is about a rejected community finding its own voice. Somebody who was going to change the world, this person Jesus Christ, who transformed the lives of the people he came into contact with, was arrested like a common criminal, and publicly executed with the full opprobrium and shame of the state saying he was the problem. Obviously all of that has to be reversed by a community of people who have been rejected and whose very hopes were rejected and destroyed very publicly.

I don't even want to go to the Dostoevsky place of the exalted and humiliated because, frankly, we know enough from the statistics on drug use that the very wealthy are just as addicted to drugs. Drugs give you some kind of exit from this life that you don't want to face because this life is unbearable. We see people at the other end of the wealth spectrum who can't bear to face this world. Then, of course, there is the drug use in other communities

where daily life is absolutely unbearable. Many of those communities are places of struggle, of generosity. They are places where justice is so deeply implanted in people's hearts and consciousness – people of deep, deep ethics and deep integrity; people who care for their children while they have two or three jobs and who gave up and sacrificed everything so that their children would have something better. That human generosity and human sacrifice is, of course, a glowing area of hope in the world.

So I think that theatre is always operated from the point of view of power. Even when the theatre has been situated in zones of power and has addressed it – the case of Shakespeare, Molière, or Racine – you have always seen the worth of power for what it was: absurd and kind of humorous, or very sad, very tragic. You know Racine and Shakespeare. My God, their plays about the high end of the power spectrum are devastating. You watch the betrayals and the lies (also to oneself), and all of this stuff is depicted with such vivid intensity. Look closely at any of this stuff, it does not hold up.

The time for thinkers has come, as they say. Here we are in a situation where things are not working and this global collapse is, as always, an opening. It's a moment where people can say, 'OK, let's not just continue as we were.' That will be a struggle, but I think artists are more equipped to be vocal at this moment just because artists have nothing to lose. We have no economic future of any kind. The arts have been gutted completely by this virus. Many of the large art institutions, too, which were assumed to be armour-plated battleships, are sinking rapidly.

Like the Metropolitan Opera in New York, for example.

Yes, and the very things that planned to live forever are, in fact, on their knees right now. For me, that's not entirely a tragedy because I do think we need a new ecology for the arts. We need a new way in which the arts are not only funded but also offered and become part of the fabric of a society that's rebuilding. *That* is really going to be the task: not the arts as stand-alone institutions, but the arts as

integral to the entire process of rebuilding societies from the ground up, with integrity, with a vision, and with a sense of justice at the centre. Which is Black Lives Matter, if you actually decide that Black lives matter. That means completely rethinking the health system, and completely rethinking elections and how democracy functions. Completely rethinking real estate. *Completely* rethinking. Then, if you're rethinking all those things, you'll definitely be rethinking an opera house or a symphony orchestra. They need to be rethought in the exact same way that we need to rethink all of the other large societal structures that are not serving the actual population.

But, Peter, to rethink this and then to put it into action is far from straightforward. We are, nevertheless, in societies that have power structures and so it is a matter of how these power structures in democracies can be bent precisely so that they actually can put into effect the kind of programme that you envisage. While I might totally agree with you – you are putting it forward as the hope for us all – I cannot at this very moment see it. Think of the great revolutions. Think of the great revolutions and their demise.

Right, and my point is that you didn't see them when they started, either. And when your eye is not on the ball, the giant, the imperial, high-capitalist world, always catches your eye with its gold and its glitter and its giant statements of its own invincibility. But the virus has seriously damaged all that, so that even these giant parades of capitalist triumph are being reduced, cancelled, and so on. The bread and circuses are, right now, very fragile. The real work – and we know this – is the generational work. It's not one election cycle, it's not this week's newspaper; it's across a generation that deep change occurs.

What we do in the theatre is not have someone the next morning vote for someone different, or change their brand of toothpaste. That's marketing and propaganda, which is about convincing people of things that you want them to think: it's the opposite of theatre, the opposite of art. Art is not 'I will tell you

what to think', and that is what the whole rest of the world is doing. Theatre and art are the place where no one will tell you what to think, and where, finally, you *are* able to think. No one will tell you what to feel, but finally you're able to feel something. For me, the very agenda of freedom is to invite people to taste freedom and not prescribe what you want people to do. For me, that process takes a generation, exactly because you're not saying, 'Do this, do this, and do that.'

Long-term change is not about following the leader. Long-term change is a whole group of people across a generation saying we don't believe in torture. We actually don't believe that these children should have a ten-year shorter life expectancy than those children. We actually don't believe that older people should not be able to have a meal. At the beginning of the day, these are the things that, right now, are quite standard in the high-capitalist societies, where we live among budget cuts for food for poor children and older people. They say that we just don't have enough money for that, while we can allow billionaires to pay no taxes and enrich themselves in ways that are obscene. These are very basic things. How we turn them around is going to be by small structures that gradually find their feet and gradually grow and proliferate and become what most people want.

Can the big structures, however, the good ones, be part of the 'turning around' you refer to? I'm sure you and I would agree that the Berliner Philharmoniker, for instance, with whom you worked on the St Matthew Passion, is one of these privileged and influential big ones that is not an exploitative machine. Artistically very fine institutions like the Berliner Philharmoniker have attempted, in fact, to be democratic. It has relatively lower-priced tickets, which encourages a wider range of people to come, and Simon Rattle had a wonderful education programme there to open out the musical world to all kinds of people, particularly children and adolescents who might not have even thought to come to a concert of 'classical' music. Some of these monolithic institutions are trying to find ways of opening up, of being democratic institutions, that is, of recognizing the equality of people not only before the law but also before the work and

creations known as 'theatre', 'music', and, generally, 'art'.

What seems to be very clear from what you have said here, as from what you do and make, is that you yourself are fundamentally a very democratic director. This is the case not only because you so powerfully believe in collaboration but also because of the way you do not create boundaries between what I called at the beginning of our discussion local-community theatre, which does not necessarily involve professional artists, and theatre that does. I wonder whether the concept of 'professional' is still relevant. I think it is, although I know full well that it is debated through the argument that anyone can do art.

We'll come back to this question another time because it is also at the heart of what we have been discussing, and professional artists live by their art, while paying the rent is still part of living. Professional artists are seriously out of work right now, as you know only too well, while the theatres, like concert halls and other places of meeting and sharing, are closed. And who knows when they will re-open and under what conditions they will be able to operate and resume their social role of gathering people together in a communally experienced way. This is only part of theatre's role, of course, but it is probably its primary role, unless it starts out only or, at least, principally, to seek the big bucks and be integral to the mass commercial systems running the world that you have been talking about.

*Yes, let us assume that anyone can do art, but I'd still say there is a difference between what kind of art one can do, say, in a local village hall and art made in the Berlin Philharmonic concert hall, or, say, in a dedicated theatre space, for instance, the Teatro Real in Madrid, where you staged that magnificent *The Indian Queen* (2013), with Teodor Currentzis. You don't make a distinction really, do you? For you, it's all on the one continuum of art: the so-called high art, the classical art, the established art, European-culture art (call it what you may), which, in your worldview, survives side by side with that which is not established art, or, in Brecht's language, 'bourgeois' art, or, as used in a more contemporary language, 'institutionalized' art. You don't appear to see any difference. You have some kind of wonderful worldview that allows all of this to co-exist together and, while it all co-exists together, you appear to think – so it*

seems to me – that, whatever form it might have, it has its own power and its capacity to add to the whole world picture and that it has its own capacity, in fact, for hope – for generating hope, the ‘hope in the world’ to which you referred earlier.

Oh bless you, the question itself is incredible, the way you have asked it – and you’ve answered it so beautifully. I would just say that this whole spectrum is not [a matter of] my just saying, ‘Let’s put this next to that.’ It’s just a question of recognizing that the work of our time is coalition building, actually gathering people rather than saying, ‘Oh, these people over there, and those people [go] over there.’ What can we do to create a shared space that actually doesn’t say ‘You have to be this or you have to be that’? You know very well that there’s no substitute for deeply skilled, wonderful, extraordinary artists. All my life I have worked at the highest level with the most extraordinary artists so, in that sense, I really am working with the very best people in the world . . .

Peter, I know you are, and that is also why I am asking you about possibilities, differences, and intersections!

And I am able to work with a whole other range of people. What’s marvellous is that they’re all here on Earth and we’re all together on Earth and we share elements of our lives. Many people are able to step forward without a lot of our training. They are able to testify to questions of justice and to questions of really deep ethics. They are able to testify to the real situations that are, to say the least, under-reported and under-acknowledged, and truly misunderstood. For me, that’s very important in this era. I mean, what identity politics did bring us is that consciousness, the consciousness of who is qualified to tell what story, and who can tell what part of what story. Just to put it very simply: if, right now, on the Texas border, the parents who have their children taken away from them and the children who are being taken away from their parents and put in these nightmare detention centres – if we actually had them speaking to us instead

of the reporters from the *New York Times*, that policy would have ended two years ago.

The actual grief of the parent who’d been separated from their child, and the actual grief of the child who, in this nightmare process of thirty-five seconds with the judge, is separated from their family, maybe for ever. The testimony of these individuals is worth so much. The ventriloquism and speaking on behalf of [someone] has actually slowed us down. More direct contact with people who are in very intense experiences does not actually reinforce the trauma but it is a way of their moving through the trauma and finding their own strength. That work requires very skilful engagement, and, everywhere, we are dealing with what the word ‘art’ means, which is ‘skill’. Everything has to be skilfully handled – political work, psychological work, spiritual work, artistic work. It’s all a question of skill and how we can handle a situation skilfully.

But more than skill is involved, Peter. Sorry to put a little puddle in here. Look at yourself. You work with the greatest conductors – Rattle, Currentzis, who is a young genius, fabulous singers: we could itemize them one by one. My point, though, is that you are a director and a human being who is one and the same – you are one in the same, and that’s one of the great things about you; and, for you, the social and the political are always utterly and totally integrated in the compositional, the formal, the stylistic, and the skilful. It’s an integrated whole for you, which is why your works are always highly artistic, highly musical at the highest level of music, and, at the same time, highly politically aware, highly socially aware, and – dare I add? – highly morally and ethically aware.

They are not only aware but also committed on all of these levels, which is partly why some of the reviews, particular the British ones, find you rather difficult to deal with. Well, the best way of dealing with somebody who is as integral as you, finally – when they are music rather than theatre critics – is to find a way of saying something about your ‘aerobics’ (or was it ‘calisthenics’?), which is a silly word for describing the very stylized movement in some of your work – less, perhaps, in the St John Passion (2014) than in the St Matthew Passion, if one were to compare them. I seem to remember the ‘aerobics’ (or ‘calisthenics’) remark

regarded St John Passion, when you staged it with Rattle conducting the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment in London in 2019.

The other thing is that you are working at a very high level and working in this cross-arts, inter-artistic way with an intra-social, inclusive, I would say, as well as international outlook: with the idea that all human beings are part of one whole, without it being a synthesized kind of totalitarian whole – far from it. Nevertheless, you're working through powerful people, and also, but not always, you do both – work with the unpowerful people as well as the powerful. I can't think of any other world-renowned director who can work, like you, across the entire spectrum, but you do.

And then the question is: Is it necessary? Is it right? How do you bring the asylum people with whom you work, your refugees with whom you worked on The Children of Herakles (2002), for example – how might you bring them into the concert hall to hear St Matthew Passion? How? And do they want to? Should they also know about Bach? I remember the days when I was teaching, not at Goldsmiths but in another university in Britain, and my students, whom I liked very much, were constantly talking about elitism; and, although they enjoyed my classes [on European directors and companies], they said, 'Oh, but Maria, you work on all this elitist "art".'

They refused to go and see a wonderful piece [by a British group] that was performed in the university theatre on the grounds that it was 'elitist'. They actually refused to come (the show was free, as I remember) and I found a way of telling them on Monday morning at ten o'clock, when I met them for a class, that I thought they had acted out of prejudice and that, actually, I thought they were unbelievable snobs. They were shocked. No one had told them they were snobs before and I said, 'Well, look how you are. You presume to judge a piece of work for which people have really worked hard and put all their heart into with great openness, integrity and honesty to produce a piece for people who might include you, and you're too snobbish to turn up.'

Well, Maria, I have to say you have just asked forty-five questions, but let's take them all. Let's take them all. It's thrilling.

Just to go in reverse order for one moment, and say that one of the crucial things is that, if the people on the stage don't look like you,

then it's not your story. I think that a very important thing right now is how we really fail to see in many opera houses and theatre companies a cast that looks like the people in the world. So I'm not totally blaming those students. I really am also saying that certain lives are not represented, and we're not correctly representing certain human beings, certainly not at the level at which they're part of the population. That's a serious reform that has to be made; Shakespeare's mirror ['up to nature'] has to be intact. Does the mirror really reflect back? Is that [what we see in the mirror] who we are? For a long time it hasn't been. It's improving, but it still is a serious crisis, and so large numbers of people look and don't see themselves, and they move on. That is very understandable.

The question of what is it like for those refugees who I'm working with to come to Bach? You know, what happens over and over again in every project that I engage with in a very difficult neighbourhood or in a very difficult political situation is . . . For most people who are dealing with bureaucracy every day, every day dealing with the police, every day dealing with standing in line, every day dealing with filling out more forms – an art project is a joy and music is a pleasure. That there's another world is beautiful, and so most people – I'm including the police and the immigration officers – most people actually say, 'Well, let's do an art project.' They are extremely excited, and it's a relief from their daily work in a prison, or whatever. And so there is the sense that you're offering people the oxygen that they have been deprived of and the space in which they can express themselves because, in all of their situations, both the prisoners and the prison guards cannot express themselves. To create a space where people are fully human is a really powerful thing because their jobs will not let them be fully human. That's a way in which the arts can truly bring oxygen into dehumanized situations. When we're dealing with people who have been treated as less than fully human beings, an art project is just about the fullness of the stature of a human being.

And that's why the British press, particularly the musical press, seems so funny to me. For a while I just thought 'What is their

problem?’ but I realized that, most of them, particularly the elderly ones, came up in a state where art was pure and didn’t connect to anything in the world – kind of like abstract painting. You know, to look at Balanchine and say ‘aerobics’ would be so strange, and you get the impression that there’s a lack of culture, and a lack of a larger culture; and that they’re in a very narrow cultural bandwidth and they’re not recognizing that the world has been moving, speaking, and expressing itself in interdisciplinary and intercultural forms for a long time now.

Everything’s political because human beings create politics. Actually, politics is about humans. Therefore, the humanities are the best way to approach politics because, as soon as you approach politics just in terms of politics, it’s a nightmare, and we are seeing this nightmare in our political life. Our political life actually needs the infusion of human space because, right now, the kill or be killed extremes of polarization is going on, whichever side is demonizing the other; and everyone is treating everybody else as not fully human, which is what creates this politics of extremes. An intervention from the humanities is exactly what is required; again, politics is, I’m sorry, human. We’re creating it. The political world is just part of the assignment. If you’re working in the humanities and not noticing it, then that’s a lot not to notice.

It’s wonderful how you’ve put that, Peter – ‘part of the assignment’. It’s a fantastic metaphor for what you are saying about politics being a normal aspect of living and so inclusive, as well, to the theatre. Politics understood in this way cannot be anything but part of your music theatre, including the Bach Passions that we have been talking about.

I love the very wide range of your work, which is what I started out saying before we began recording our conversation. One of the most beautiful works, I think, is The Indian Queen, and I don’t say this just because I love [Henry] Purcell. Purcell was six when the plague hit London in 1665, and the Great Fire of London was in 1666. To be six years old is enough to have been affected by traumatic, tragic events. You get glimpses of it in Purcell’s music, but your production of The Indian Queen (2013), to come back to the question

you raised about recognizing yourself, has performers from a range of ethnicities, colours, languages, and facial and vocal structures, and the intercultural and inter-artistic or multi-artistic aspects that you were talking about are fully visible here (Figure 1).

The dance sequences of The Indian Queen are superb. Sometimes they’re part of the narrative. Sometimes the dancers dance behind those who are singing and sometimes they dance right up close to them, but they’re always an integral part of that whole dramatic process carried through the singing and the narrative constructed from the novel by Rosario Aguilar that you use as part of your libretto (Figure 2). This novel is another stream through which the inter-arts of the production or its ‘interdisciplinarity’, the term frequently used today, is very obvious and very vivid. Your whole subject matter demands not just beautiful music but that the spectators look closely and see what surely today can only be called genocide, in this case, the genocide perpetrated by the Conquista – the Spanish Conquest and colonization of South America (Figure 3).

Well, Maria, thank you again. One of the crucial things about Purcell is that, at the age of seventeen, he had to re-invent English church music and to re-invent English theatre music. There were not only the plague and the fires but, of course, Mr Cromwell and the Puritans: what it meant to re-open the theatres and the churches to music. Here you have this teenager who has come through devastation, and the whole country is climbing out of it, but this young man with no budget has to figure out how we move forward, step by step. He starts writing these anthems, which are a cappella because we can’t afford instruments yet, and we just have to start, step by step.

This is my very favourite period of English theatre because, you know, finally, hello, women are on the stage. Now, that’s stunning, you know: women are actually representing themselves. That’s astounding! What a complete transformation! And then the rest of the world is on the stage. Suddenly you’re putting Chinese people and Latin Americans on it. The range of who is in all of these Restoration plays is incredible, and they look really wild, now. Our own identity politics are a little more . . . shall we say, exacting, about how and who can



Figure 1. *The Indian Queen* (2013), Perm Opera and Ballet Theatre. Musical Director and Conductor: Teodor Currentzis. MusicAeterna Orchestra and Choir. Choir Master: Vitaly Polonsky. Stage Director: Peter Sellars; Visual Artist : Gronk. Costume Designer: Dunya Ramicova. Lighting Designer: James F. Ingalls. Choreographer: Christopher Williams. Photo: Aleksey Gushchin. Photographs courtesy of the Perm Opera and Ballet Theatre.

represent what. At the same time, what's so amazing is the theatrical curiosity, the sense of people interested in other people and trying to imagine their lives, and [trying to] imagine them in a global sense by realizing that everybody is part of a much bigger picture.

The issue of how you can represent Amazonians matches that. The same question also arises in the same years in France. You have to have a dance. There is already a strange understanding that dance will speak more powerfully than words because many cultures understood, and still understand, that words mostly lie; that words are mostly a cover for something else. That's why many cultures express themselves in dance, the highest form of expression. In the Mayan culture, where dance was the very highest art form, the kings and queens needed to dance in front of the population to assert their royal power and their spiritual presence. Dance was the way in which that was communicated. The same can be said in Indonesia, in India, in China. It's an incredible reality that dance is so powerful in most societies.

What's marvellous is that British theatre at this moment includes dance, and suddenly there's nothing called opera: it's all theatre and it has music, dance, poetry; it has machines; it is this total vision, this intercultural, interdisciplinary spectacle that captures multiple meanings, multiple signs, multiple ways of reading and multiple ways of feeling. The very fact that it lasts three, four or five hours [allows this multiplicity], and the sheer flood of experience that pours out never narrows itself into a single meaning. That, for me, is so very rich. I love this period of theatre.

What is magnificent for me about The Indian Queen, if we're going to talk politics and art, is that you have created a subject matter whose politics you can't ignore any more than you can ignore its art (Figure 3). Art is the means through which you articulate a multi-structured, multi-vocal and multi-physical work so that the political becomes an absolutely ordinary component. Let's put it this way: the political aspect is fundamental to the work because the work can't exist without it. You've made it in such a way that I've had to

rethink what it is to make a classical work or an established work today. This is not a well-known work. It's not *The Fairy Queen* [also Purcell]. What is it to make known a work that belongs to another form of theatre, which is not necessarily a known piece of music theatre, to thousands and thousands of people across the world? I think that you have made it contemporary not because you've given it a contemporary interpretation but because you've shifted the languages. You have made it contemporary by speaking the language of the contemporary world in the work.

It's seems clear to me that all your music theatre work is fundamentally perceived and made like this. I listened to a videotape on YouTube some weeks ago, when you received the Polar Music Prize in Sweden in 2014 [Chuck Berry was Sellars's counterpart in a prize Sweden usually shares between a pop and a classical musician], and I noticed that you were speaking as if you were addressing someone who had just got over a horrible drug trip, but you were not talking about a drug trip or to a drug abuser. Even so, you were talking along the lines of something like this: 'Well, you've just got over some horrible drug experience

and so what are you thinking?' You were saying this to a formally dressed audience, and, I presume, to many who were invited guests.

I suddenly realized that you were not speaking the language of your high-end audience – for the sake of this argument, the language of, say, Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, the eponymous protagonist of Mozart's opera that you, contra Mozart, had set in 1986 in a drug-taking context, with *Don Giovanni* shooting up (I think it was that) in the streets of Harlem. In the YouTube case, you were speaking your twenty-first-century language as if it really was the language of that official context, and that's how you make your work contemporary in whichever given time you are making it. You shift the language to the work as if that work was coming out now, today, and that's a very different thing, I think, from seeing it from a contemporary point of view or interpreting it from a contemporary view but speaking about it in 'standard', accepted, and formalized language – the way we speak of 'standard English' or 'metropolitan Italian' rather than of 'Italian dialects', for instance. To shift the posts in this way seems to be extremely radical.



Figure 2. *The Indian Queen* (2013), Perm Opera and Ballet Theatre (as above).



Figure 3. *The Indian Queen* (2013), Perm Opera and Ballet Theatre (as above).

Well no, no, it's also based on eighth-century Sanskrit aesthetics, which is concerned with 'the gaze of love'. Most of the way in which classical culture is treated is so distanced and it's so Othered, but this is only because people don't know how to read it. They're not comfortable with the language, the language feels foreign and it is treated the way you treat a foreigner, never quite getting to the point, always being polite, always saying, 'I hope that's OK for you,' but not actually going very deep into an engagement. Mozart goes very deep, and he also wants you to go very deep. Shakespeare does not skim the surface. Shakespeare tears up the surface, and digs and digs and tries to create some new world that has never yet existed. All of these artists, whether Sophocles, or Stravinsky or Toni Morrison – they all try to use their language to create a world that does not yet exist because the world that does exist is not acceptable. And so, to me, to stuff them back into the world that they were trying to exit is cruel and does not understand that all of them are looking forward, not backwards.

Their work is the definition of prayer: it's a way of influencing future reality, and that's what theatre is. Theatre is: How do we create a future? We have to discuss the past in order to create a future not because we're interested in

the past, but because we're interested in the future. You're coming to these works and we are the future that they were hoping for. We have to realize that we are being addressed very directly and we have a responsibility to ask whether we are the future that they were hoping for, or have we not yet measured up to that? Where are we in terms of the future that they were imagining?

That's our relation to Mozart, that's our relation to Shakespeare, and that's our relation to the people who come after us. Toni Morrison wrote those books for people who were not yet born as well as for the people, the girls and the little girl she grew up with, and for her parents, who are not alive to read these books. We're always addressing the people we feel we needed and should have spoken with, who left the world painfully, who left the world unfulfilled. We're also addressing the people who are arriving in the world and who are going to have a very difficult road, like the generation right now that has had its credit cards maxed out by the society spectacle. This week in America, we have said, 'Oh, roll back all the methane gas restrictions,' so now the world is flooded with methane gas. That's what we're offering the next generation, and it's disgusting. So we create a space where we're able to hear both the people who left

the world in duress and the people who are arriving in the world in duress. Can we bridge these levels of injustice and hunger, and searching and aspiration?

Well, yes, the theatre and, perhaps, music theatre, in particular, is the space where one can imagine what is not yet visible. Music gives us the space in which to venture not only to imagine what is invented but also to feel differently; or maybe to feel in ways that we cannot because we don't have the time as we're paying electricity bills, waiting endlessly for the plumber to come and fix the leak, and coping with kids, and all this kind of daily stuff. There is a freedom in the artistic world that we don't have in the daily world and, perhaps, it is in that freedom that lie some of the clues to what you're talking about: the capacity that art, so also the theatre, opens up in us, for us, and with us to envisage, to feel, to dare, and to hope.

There are things that you have not fulfilled in your life that are personal, but there are also laws and structures that are unjust and affect an entire generation, and it's not just my personal problem. Theatre needs to operate in both realms: address structural inequity and structural mistakes as well as where the individual is in the flow and tension of that [structural problem]. Again, if you can't imagine theatre and opera as being political, you really have to remove Shakespeare, Moliere, and Racine, and you have to remove Verdi.

It's just the silliest thing in the world. It's just plain silly because we're all working in a world where we're trying to create structures of justice in the place of structures that are clearly unjust. Large-scale structures like operas are a mirror of the unjust structures that we're trying to discuss which, in most cities, are represented across the street from the opera houses. An opera house is located in real estate that is also shared by the city councils and the large governmental buildings. Opera is a particularly useful space to speak in, for it is directly across the street from those power structures, and the audience in the expensive seats in opera houses are always these very people. So, the opera is a very important location for address and exchange.

Precisely because that's where you reach the seats of power.

What's important in Salzburg is that you really do have the European power structure attending performances. Meanwhile, you can create videos that can be shown on television and go around the world for free. That's the tension point of trying to work for multiple audiences, multiple vantage points, and multiple vectors of political engagement.

*Can I ask you artistic questions now, questions of skill, creativity, position and organization in the artistic process? Only when I started looking carefully at *The Indian Queen* did I notice that there wasn't much opera in it. Were there only three-quarters of an hour of music that Purcell had managed to write for it? I think that's what you say in the notes to the recording of this opera. You have added a considerable number of Purcell's hymns and songs, including that absolutely magnificent song that Andreas Scholl sings divinely, you know, 'Music for a While' – to die for. I first really knew the song through Scholl's voice, his countertenor, even though I'd heard it before when I was much younger, thinking it was Shakespearean music. It's very Elizabethan in a very curious kind of way.*

It's from [Purcell's] *Oedipus Rex*.

*Yes, that's right, but I don't know *Oedipus Rex*. I have no idea what it sounds like.*

It's music. He wrote songs for a production of *Oedipus Rex*, but there was no opera. Somebody had to call the spirit of Laius out of the grave to ask 'Who murdered you?', and so there needed to be this seduction that brought the spirits of the dead back into our world to speak with us. And that piece is the hypnotic seduction that calls Laius out of the grave. What's so crazy is that, when you hear Andreas Scholl sing it, you say, 'Ooh this music is hypnotic and gorgeous,' and you want to put it on continuous play.

Purcell deliberately created this endless line of melody that is sinuous and never stops, so that the piece has no ending points. Like the serpents, it just keeps coiling and uncoiling. Of course, for the Greeks, serpents were a very



Figure 4. *The Indian Queen* (2013), Perm Opera and Ballet Theatre (as above).

Antonin] Charpentier were not able to have real support for working in the opera. Teodor's obsession comes, as happens with most Russians, from [Andrei] Tarkovsky's *Mirror* (1975), whose theme is the final aria in *The Indian Queen*. Tarkovsky uses it over and over again in the film. He didn't go to a film school but to the music conservatory and studied baroque music, which is why Bach and baroque music are in every Tarkovsky film. The way that Tarkovsky uses that aria and its meaning and feeling in *Mirror* are overwhelming.

So that is at the root of our collaboration. Teodor and I worked very, very closely together. He was incredibly generous, saying that I was to find what I wanted to work with, and I was trying to find the Purcell music that I felt was under-represented. The Purcell tradition in England is nice boy choirs with little frocks and collars in Sunday morning chapel. That music, for me, is not the sound of boy choirs, but the depth of spirituality and the weight of history that a Russian choir brings to it (Figure 5). Suddenly it's not sanitized and,

for me, a lot of the British tradition of Purcell is quite sanitized and quite trivialized. For me, this music comes, as you said, out of the plague and the fires of London. It comes out of very intense human situations, to say nothing of Purcell's own personal biography, which is harrowing.

His biography is a bit like Shakespeare's; we know little, but *The Indian Queen* is at the very end and, as far as we know, it was never performed. We have no record of what happened, but it is one of three things that Purcell was working on when he died at the age of thirty four – *Don Quixote*, *Indian Queen* . . . what was the third one? Well, those two are enough, and he froze to death on his doorstep when his wife would not open the door when he came home late one night.

All of this music is about unrequited love – about regret. It is always broken, always heart-rending, always in a state of apology and sorrow, and hope against hope. All of that is Purcell, and the British tradition of making it charming and jolly is very far from the actual



Figure 5. *The Indian Queen* (2013), Perm Opera and Ballet Theatre (as above).

temperature of these songs. So, I really wanted to do something that moved against *The Fairy Queen* and against the kind of charm offensive that was usually mounted when Purcell was shown – the charm of *Dido and Aeneas*, which gets really serious at the end, but, until then, everything's kind of winking, and you're just gonna say, well actually, it's broken lives and broken people trying to deal with each other with some dignity. For me, the British Restoration stage is one of the most heart-rending moments in the history of the theatre, and I wanted Purcell's music, and particularly the theatre songs, to have the emotional power that I think they originally had.

But, do you know, I think 'Music for a While' is a tragic piece. I have never heard it as charming. I hear it as a song of grief.

Yes, well, again, most of Purcell and particularly this late material is about love that has not found its reciprocal response. It's like Mozart. You have to look in the music and not in the letters. The music tells the story, and so you look at love song after love song, which is 'We the spirits of the air / That of human things take care, / Out of pity now descend, / To foretell what woes attend'. Charming, lovely music but, actually, no, it is coming down to tell someone they have cancer. Literally the last line of 'We the Spirits of the Air', which on every recording is made charming, charming, charming, but the spirits are here to tell you the last thing, which is that you will never, never, never, never, never, you will never, never, never, never, never, never be loved again. What!?' 'We the spirits of the air'? All of Purcell is like Beckett. The word that is repeated in every Purcell song is never never never, no no no no no no, never never never never never never, not not not, never, no no no no, no, no, no, no. It's Beckett.

It's also Shakespeare. And, after all, Shakespeare survived a series of epidemics of bubonic plague during his lifetime.

It's the end of *King Lear*. 'No, no, no . . . Never, never, never, never' – that comes from being six, as you said, and seeing London as

the land of the dead, and so all of that is there. I was just trying to move against the usual operatic treatment of Purcell, which is that people then had simpler lives than we do. But what if you just wanted to say, no, in fact, that generation was charged with having to reinvent civilization from the ashes, from the dregs and corpses, from the mass death from the plague and London as a burnt-out hulk. How do we start again? And so the consciousness of the 'never never never never' and the consciousness of 'Rebuke me not, oh Lord' – everything is in this state of sadness and grief and apology and prayer.

Oh my goodness, will we be this after our plague?

So this goes next to Aguilar and what you said – genocide. It is the voice of Aguilar that comes through these Purcell songs and these anthems, which are heart-rending. I just wanted that texture to be sustained and, if Purcell had been allowed to do what Handel could do one generation later, which was to write a piece that goes on for three, four hours, what would his music be? What would it be if he had been allowed to sustain it? If the theatre was not the way it was in his time, which is like early television, where you were limited to two or three minutes at a time?

This is music, the anthems in particular, with deep spiritual dimensions and, as I look at your theatre biography, at least as I have constructed it, I see you moving more and more, over the last two decades, I would say, into the spiritual realm, which is embedded in the music that you choose to work on. This spiritual quality is in concord with Currentzis.

I didn't answer you properly about how I collaborate with Teodor. The answer is – profoundly. He is so open and genuinely a searcher, unlike many conductors who just want to lay down something they already think. Teodor is constantly open, and so one of the first things we did in the first week of rehearsals of *The Indian Queen* was to have all the singers sing all the numbers and decide who was the best to sing which number, which was really incredible. Teodor is so

radical and so open that, frequently, he will take over the staging. He'll say to me, 'Peter, that's a little bourgeois, isn't it?' or, 'Really, don't you think that's a little clichéd?' And he will frequently ask me to make it more radical. He constantly says, 'No, listen to what Peter's asking for, he's really asking for *this!*' Teodor takes over and pours all of this content in, musically as well as dramatically. He often climbs up on to the stage and demonstrates everything to the singers and creates new staging and so, meanwhile . . .

You become the conductor to his becoming the director.

Exactly, and, unlike most conductors, I can really say to Teodor, 'Maybe musically you should go this way and, maybe, let's make it like this,' and, you know, Teodor's open for it. In press conferences, Teodor enjoys saying, 'Welcome to our press conference. I'm Teodor Currentzis, the stage director, and next to me is Peter Sellars, the music director.' He really enjoys that. He enjoys how we go back and forth very freely, and the rehearsals are always an amazing experience for everyone because there's so much genuine collaborative energy and imagination in them: dramatic imagination from the musical side, and musical imagination from the dramatic side, so that, by the end, there are no fingerprints left. Everybody's fingerprints are on everything and so that's very very . . .

. . . rare. That's so rare, that kind of collaboration.

It's so rare, it's so joyous – it's incredible. Once Teodor sees what I'm trying to do, he has a more radical way of getting there, and that's always thrilling. He's so perceptive and, at the same time, his musical understanding is profound in ways that are totally rare. I staged

something in Part Two – the aria 'Not all my torment can your pity move' with Julia Bull-ock [in the role of the Indian Queen], and it's this wild outpouring of emotion, the hurt of a lover who has been treated really badly. It's like one of those Monteverdi things, just a torrent of feeling. And then Teodor came into the rehearsal and said: 'No, no, Peter, you don't understand. This is music by Bach. It's a very formal statement harmonically, not a freewheeling thing, and the conclusion is in the beginning, as it is in Bach. You actually have to recognize that the state that you're going to discover already exists, and you have to discover what is already true.'

Teodor's structural sense, his sense of music, is so profound, and he reads it in extraordinary ways. He likes to ask about Purcell: 'What period is Purcell from?' Teodor says in an interview that Purcell is from the fifth century before Jesus Christ.

The Greeks, that's what he's saying.

It's the Greeks. And he does put it that way and, of course, he's Greek and he does feel this music as part Greek tragedy, part Greek ceremony and part Greek ritual. And then there's my approach to the Greeks, which comes from how I was honoured to be engaged during much of my life with indigenous artists in indigenous communities, and, too, with Aboriginal rituals, the rituals of the indigenous peoples of Australia. When I went to Epidaurus, it was shocking to realize how close this understanding was to ceremonies in Aboriginal Australia or ceremonies in the south-west of the United States with the Pueblo Indians. Greek dramas are deep rituals. The project in these cultures has always been about healing in the context of communities and communities healing through the inspiration and self-sacrifice of generous individuals.