Interval Drinks podcast, Series 3

Eleanor Rhode and John Bulleid – transcript

Announcer: Welcome to the Royal Shakespeare Company.

Host: You're listening to interval drinks. Meeting in the bar this week is director Eleanor Rhode, talking to Magic Circle member and illusion designer John Bulleid about all the stage tricks up their sleeves.

Eleanor: I think there's a sort of a vibe in theatre at the moment, which is sort of a change in how creative teams want to make things. I think we're moving away from this notion of a writer writes a play and someone produces the play and someone directs the play.

John: The theatre is the most, in my mind, the most magical place in the world. So when an audience walks in there, you ask them to completely suspend their disbelief and accept the world that you're putting in front of them.

Eleanor: Welcome to interval Drinks. My name is Eleanor Rhode, and I'm currently working on a production of Midsummer Night's Dream for the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, which will be going into rehearsals on the 4th of December. And I'm delighted to be joined by my friend and colleague John Bulleid, who's an incredible illusionist and collaborator of mine. And this is actually going to be the first time that we work on a project from start to finish. So it's lovely to have you here, John to have a chat. Let's start just by getting into the interval space. What's your interval drink of choice, John?

John: Yeah good point. So I don't drink. So I tend to go for things like for softies or coffee, I drink quite a lot of coffee. So it depends how the show is going. Um, if I'm not backstage in the interval trying to fix something, I'll probably be front of house with like a Diet Coke or something. Trying to...

Eleanor: Trying to stay awake.

John: Trying to stay awake, but also helping my director. So my director is getting panicked by something that might be going on, making sure they're not too panicked.

Eleanor: I don't know what you mean. I don't know what you mean at all.

John: How about you? What's your what do you go for?

Eleanor: Do you know what? If it's a show of mine, I. I won't really have anything, and I probably will steer clear of front of house as much as I can. I think I've had a sort of a bad experience in the past of ending up in the ladies loos at the intervals and hearing what people are saying in the cubicle next door. Yeah, it's never good. Even if they're really enjoying it. It's never going to be something that makes you feel good at that moment about the work.

John: No.

Eleanor: So I tend to steer clear and just hang in some sort of limbo, usually near the stage manager's office, because I don't want to go near the actors, they don't want to be near me.

John: I also get ice cream. My granddad always taught me that that's what you do at the theatre, so I always, I always get ice cream and if I can't get ice cream, I get quite upset.

Eleanor: What about when you're at the theatre not seeing a show of your own? Does that even really happen anymore for you?

John: Not really. But when I do, if I'm with friends, then yeah, then I'll get a round drinks and hang out with them in the bar and try and talk about what we've just seen. What about you?

Eleanor: I tend to sort of gravitate towards shows that are sort of like one act and out the door, if I'm honest. And I got used to, I think particularly before the pandemic, I was going to the theatre so regularly and mainly it was on my own actually. Um. And it still felt sort of like an extension of, of work. And so it's very much go there, watch the show,

come out, process it on my own, and probably process it quite slowly. If you're going to the theatre with your mates, it's a totally different.

John: Yeah. Yeah, definitely. Yeah. If I go and see a show that's got other illusions in from one of my friends or whatever, I will spend a lot of time thinking about what I've just seen and trying to work out a way that I could do the thing they've done.

Eleanor: But better.

John: Different. Not better.

John: It's not a competition. But yeah, so so so there's that side to it as well where like so for example, it depends if I'm going to see like a magic show, like a Derren Brown show or something, I spend the interval entirely dissecting what I've just seen. So when I watch it I can enjoy it. And then when it's the interval, I try and then work it out as a magician, and then go back and enjoy the second half and do the same afterwards.

Eleanor: Never really switching off.

John: I can turn off the magician side of my brain and enjoy it as like a muggle if you like, but then think about it later.

Eleanor: Well, let's talk about that because, I mean, you started off I've always known you as an illusionist, and I think the first time we met, I found you through a mutual colleague or an agent. I think because I was looking for some illusions for a show that I was potentially going to direct, which I never did direct. But it was very nice to meet up with you and chat about how it could be possible, particularly on like, small scale. But I also seem to remember you working as an actor at that point.

John: Yeah. So to go to the beginning I started learning magic when I was seven and I'm 41, so I've been into magic for all that time. And Mum and Dad tell me that when I was a kid, I used to do puppet shows or tell stories or make up scripts and be like, now you're going to say this, and then you say this, and then He-Man will say that, or whatever it was. So they gave me a magic set to shut me up and give me something to tell stories with. And that's really that was their worst mistake, because then I had

something I could just consistently bother them with. To be fair to mum, dad. They had the absolute patience to let me do that and to really practice awful tricks and for like hours and hours and hours. And I always wanted to do something to do with performance or storytelling. And so the idea of being an actor seemed to make sense to me, because that felt like what it was. And so I went to drama school, trained for three years at Webber, and then left and started working as an actor. And when I left Webber, I wrote to a lot of the big theatre companies, including the RSC and the National, to say, I'm an actor that does magic. There's something in this. There's something about using magic as a storytelling device that can elevate the story to somewhere completely different that I'm not seeing on stage anywhere. Maybe we should talk about it. So my background is in performance and magic. So it means that when I come to designing stuff for the stage, I know what I'm asking the performers to deliver and it's achievable.

Eleanor: Well, let's talk about that a little bit. Because you and I first met, we've been trying to figure this out. Was it 2008, 2009, something like that?

John: Yes.

Eleanor: And I think we were both really quite early on in terms of figuring out what kind of work we wanted to make, what interested us, how we were going to do it. And we met very much on those terms of I had a play that needed to have certain...

John: I think it was a coin vanish. I think it was a retired magician who used to do cards and coin. What was the character.

Eleanor: Is it was a Stuart Parker play, and if I'm honest, I can't even remember the title of it at this point. But it was you're quite right. It was a character who performed card and coin magic as a hobby, and it was probably going to be produced in a very small space where the audience are right up in your face and there's nowhere to hide. And I suppose the notion of magic and illusion was always really interesting to me, but it always seemed that it was, on a technical level, just something way over there in terms of as a skill set. And actually I remember you turned up in a pub with a fake thumb, a fake thumb, and a bunch of other sort of little knickknacks, and then did a bunch of card tricks in front of me, and I was like, well, that's pretty cool. Yeah. And then that whole sort of side of the conversation disappeared quite quickly and we both just started

talking about story. Yeah. And we ended up doing a workshop at the National Studio a few years after that.

John: It was 2012, because I remember I got my first illusion consultancy job in 2011 at The Brewhouse in Taunton, where I auditioned to play the White Rabbit because they wanted an actor magician to play the White Rabbit. So I auditioned to play that, and I was told that I was too tall for what they were looking for, but the magic was better than anything they'd seen. So would I be prepared to teach that magic to another performer who is considerably shorter than me, but also design some other effects for the show?

Eleanor: We should probably say at this point that you've moved on from, like the Paul Daniels magic trick, and you've become a member of.

John: The Magic Circle.

Eleanor: Is it the Inner Sanctum Magic Circle? I can't quite remember.

John: So my official title, I am an associate of the Inner Magic Circle with Silver Star. And that means Silver Star is donated for if you get performance. So they assess me performing magic and and. Yeah. And there's only 268 of us at the moment who are associates of the inner circle. So it's basically the highest level hat you can get in the magic circle through examination. And the final step is to be invited into the inner circle, which is only by invitation of the president. So I'm waiting.

Eleanor: Does that like involve a blood oath or something really sinister?

John: I don't think so. I'll tell you when it happens.

Eleanor: Do you have good snacks at the Magic Circle? That's something I've always wanted to know?

John: We do. Yeah. It's a really sociable club. So we were set up in 1903, and it's the oldest magic society in the world, set up by the best magicians at the time. And it's really like a safe space to go and talk about magic and share secrets. And the view is that once you're a member, you're safe to share secrets with because we want to keep

magic secret as part of our job. And so. Yeah, so and then we have a very sociable club where we have lectures every Monday where you can go and visit a lecturer will come in and teach a coin trick or some card what they've been doing. Or here's a crazy idea for like a vanish that's never been done before. And and we'll watch them lecture on it. And then after that there's normally like people go and get some food or like order food in. They do like a really good fish and chip night, which is pretty fun. And you just sit around chatting about magic. And you have to understand that magicians are mainly massive geeks like we. And when we get together, we just geek out about magic and get obsessed about like the third phalanx of your middle finger moving a card in a particular way that no one's ever done before. And most people won't know what that means. But it's really exciting that that's our secret code that we have.

Eleanor: I mean that's the sort of crazy thing is you have this sort of mechanical, practical, practiced knowledge that takes years to develop. But most of the time when you're working, you're not talking to other magicians, you're talking to people like me, you're talking to directors, you're talking to designers, you're talking to actors and to stage management and production managers. And so you have to have a sort of universal language that carries you through all of those conversations.

John: Yes.

Eleanor: Are you generally talking about practical things at that point, or are you focusing a story, or is it is it something sort of more ephemeral?

John: Yeah. So I think so. My starting point is always to get the visuals from the head of the director. So like we've been doing with Dream, like to get inside your head and understand what you want the picture to be of that moment, and then I can go away and work out the thing that needs to happen to make that moment appear as you're expecting it to on stage. And so one of the shows I did a few years ago for the RSC was The Magician's Elephant, and we had to make an elephant vanish. Not a real elephant. I'd say it was a three puppeteered elephant, but we had to make it vanish at the end of the show as part of the story, and it was a really important narrative moment. And when I asked my director, Sarah, about how she wanted the vanish to look, she sort of said she wanted it to feel like you watched it disappear into nothing was kind of her view of it. So you want to feel like you blinked your eyes and it had gone, so that meant it had to

be a really quick vanish. But she also wanted nothing on stage, apart from the elephant and the other characters.

John: So from an illusion point of view, I had to design a method that used no cover to make the vanish happen. And the vanish happened two point I think it was in 2.5 seconds was how quick the vanish happened. And and interestingly, we, we workshopped it and the vanish was taken 9.75 seconds. Yeah. And then we changed the method and got it down to 2.5 seconds. And we found by changing the lighting cue, because you can do this with lighting cues. Change the lighting cue by 0.25 of a second. So it'd be 2.75 seconds, you saw the elephant's trunk. So? So we kept it at 2.5 and you didn't see the trunk. It completely vanished. And so it starts off being very like, how do you want it to look? How do you want it to feel? And then quite quickly, I can then take that and process it into a technical aspect to go and speak to production and designers and everyone else I have to speak to, to orchestrate that moment to happen.

Eleanor: Do you think that was in terms of sort of something that you've achieved with a theatre production? Do you think that's one of the big ones?

John: Yeah, I mean, it's the biggest illusion I've designed. One of the biggest, most prestigious stages in the country.

Eleanor: I mean, you're working all the time on, you know, new cast for Harry Potter and Ocean at the end of the Lane and all of these massive sort of. I mean, they're like sort of armies that you have to train up.

John: Yeah. We've just finished the biggest cast change for Harry Potter. I think something like an 87% cast change. Yeah, it's a mad process. So I know that all the effects work brilliantly in Potter, and it's my job to get those people to that standard, to that show standard within the cast change period. And that's what I have to do every year, which is brilliant, and I really enjoy doing it. And then the flip side to that is on my own work, where like Dream is a great example. You know, you and I've been talking about it since the beginning, about since the summer really, plotting these ideas and these concepts that we'd love to see happen on the RST. And I've then got complete free rein to make those things happen for us without having to worry about... Oh I'm not allowed to change that, because if I change that thing, the implications on a running

show is massive, whereas on a new show it is the thing, and that's just the way it's going to be done. So if we took the Dream and then and then it came back next year, the Bible we create for our version of it would then be the one we use again.

Eleanor: I mean, we should probably talk about A Midsummer night's Dream, shouldn't we?

John: Yeah. So you want to talk to me about what have you got planned for it? I mean, I kind of know.

Eleanor: I mean, it's one of those lovely things to be asked. And yet the circumstances of making this so far have been quite different to anything I've done before and I think quite different for the RSC as well, not least in terms of timescale for making something like this. It's the kind of thing where if we had two years, I can imagine you and I getting very carried away in terms of connecting up with the digital department and making this, you know, something accessible outside the theatre. In terms of what we have, though, it's a really wonderful opportunity to come and do. I think probably one of my favourite of his plays, actually, in an incredible space. And to try and tackle it from a perspective that is, it just relies on incredible collaboration between everyone on the creative team. So in terms of what we've been making so far with our design team, pretty much everyone has been involved at every step of the way in terms of trying to problem solve and to build the world that's still under construction. So there's still quite a lot that's sort of open, yeah, at this stage.

John: But I think those things we have to solve in the room.

Eleanor: Yeah. And that's sort of the thing that's, I think terrifying and exciting in equal measure. There are things that we can only solve when we're having conversations with the actors, when it's a group of us altogether in a same space together. Because actually, I mean, I think that's something just on a practical level, it's really, really difficult if your creative team is entirely made up of freelancers, which it nearly always is. Everyone's off doing other shows, everyone's sometimes off in other countries and just having to focus on other things. And so to have all of us together in a space together, actually working on something is very difficult and very rare and is only really going to come about through the rehearsal process. But in terms of what we're thinking of for the

show, I wanted to come back to theatre, as it were. It's only my second show since the pandemic, and my feelings about theatre and live performance have changed a lot since 2019, which was when I was making King John up in The Swan. So I'm coming back to this with a notion of what is actually really important to me as someone sitting in an audience receiving this story.

Eleanor: And I wanted to engage with something that felt incredibly epic and full of spectacle and wonder, but also has a sense of intimacy that I think you can only really get in a thrust stage production or a production in the round, but is often missing when you go and see a Shakespeare production. I think there's a lot of baggage that's carried with Shakespeare, particularly with a really well known Shakespeare. This is the first time I've directed a Shakespeare, or any play where most of the audience probably know the story or have seen it before. I usually direct new writing or quite obscure plays that no one's seen, and so it doesn't feel like.

John: It makes you feel safe.

Eleanor: I mean, the wonderful thing about it is it's done a lot because it's a really, really good play and it works. And so from a dramaturgical standpoint, things are just a lot easier for me. But I've never wanted to feel like I'm going through other directors' underwear drawers, as it were, in terms of finding what they did. That was their version. That's the Peter Brooke version. That's the Peter Hall version. You know, that's never particularly interested me in terms of being, you know, contributing to that legacy. The thing that really does excite me about this play is that, and particularly at the RSC, is that I know we're going to have a lot of schoolchildren in the audience.

John: Yeah, yeah.

Eleanor: And that feels amazing. That feels like an incredible opportunity, because I can still remember the first shows I saw when I was like six or seven or eight and going to see Shakespeare for the first time or the first time that I really connected with those plays. And it did feel like an intimate moment. It did feel like it was someone talking directly to me. And yeah, that's that's a really magical thing, particularly when you're a kid. Yeah. And you don't assume that those places are for you.

John: No, I agree.

Eleanor: The second thing is, I say, is making something that's truly collaborative. And I suppose what's the phrase transmedia?

John: Cross-departmental.

Eleanor: There we go. In terms of connecting a relatively sort of contemporary technology through projection and through 360 sound design and incredible lighting and all of these things. But combining that with really old school stage magic and stagecraft.

John: Yeah, I agree. Well, I've come to realise that I'm like a conductor.

Eleanor: Yeah.

John: So to get the one thing that you and I want to see happen on stage, I have to orchestrate every department to do that one thing. And that includes the performers as part of that, as part of that conversation. So I really love the fact that especially in particular directing.

Eleanor: Yeah. It is directing. It's the same thing, I think the old school notion of directing, where it's just about your relationship with the actor, everything that you're describing is exactly what a director would do. It's just with a slightly different skill set, a slightly different toolkit.

John: And the nice thing about illusions is that there's there's lots of different ways to achieve the same effect. So if you think of an illusion, having three elements, having a method effect and performance as an audience member, for example, seeing an elephant vanish, your concern is that the elephant's vanished. That's what you remember. You won't necessarily be worried about how it happens. And I think with us for this, for Dream, there's lots of stuff we've got planned, but at the moment we're talking about how we're going to make it happen, but that might change along the way.

Eleanor: Magic seems to be having a bit of a heyday at the moment.

John: It's great. It's really busy.

Eleanor: It's great. But I mean, I know that, I know that because I know, obviously, you know, you have performers like Derren Brown and, you know, Penn and Teller and everything who are doing these massive tours and that sort of a more traditional relationship between magician and the audience in terms of what you're you're paying to go and see. But in terms of actually magic, stage magic creeping its way into theatrical performance, that seems to have suddenly exploded.

John: Yeah, I agree.

Eleanor: And I think most exciting for me, I see it sometimes being used in ways where it's not about literal magic. It's about problem solving. It's about a mindset in order to to make a show work. What do you think it is about magic and illusion that keeps bringing audiences back?

John: You mentioned a few times the idea of wonder, and that to me is what magic and illusion is all about, is we create that sense of wonder whether it be making a vanish happen, or someone suddenly appearing in a chair, which isn't really a magic trick, but all of a sudden they weren't in that chair and now they are, to start the scene or whatever it is. The theatre is, in my mind, the most magical place in the world. So when an audience walks in there, you're asking them to completely suspend their disbelief and accept the world that you're putting in front of them. So if I can then add elements to that to make them really question what they're actually seeing on stage, to really, really believe and completely lose their disbelief. I think that's why it's so important. And I also think there's a real wave of collaborators coming through at the moment on every department who are understanding the strength of working in numbers and pulling in multi-discipline teams together to really work on moments when I think of things like Ocean in the Flame, for example, you know, the stuff on there really blurs the line between illusion and movement and direction and all those other things, because that's how we made it. We were all taken. We were all working together to make these things happen.

Eleanor: Do you think the industry knows that?

John: My instinct is that the creative teams are starting to, the creatives within the industry are starting to realise that and starting to do it more. And ultimately, for the public, it means they're getting to see this level of work, which is so exciting to walk into theatre and see where mad things are happening on stage you wouldn't think were possible. And as you said, it can be a literal magic trick, like someone appears on stage out of nothing or disappears or whatever it might be. But I also love the fact we do a lot of facilitation work where we're helping directors solve problems that maybe they won't start a scene with the entire cast on stage, but it doesn't need to feel like a magic trick. They just need to be there. So we can then offer illusion principles that could allow that to happen, but disguise it in a way that doesn't have like a Ta-Da magic feel to it. It's like a kind of oh yeah, they're there and then we carry on. It's not like a big thing.

Eleanor: I remember you coming in and working on, like, helping me out. Exactly ten years ago, I was directing a farce.

John: Oh Thark?

Eleanor: Yeah. So Thark is a play by Ben Travers from the 1920s, who was the writer of a lot of the Whitehall farces, and it's called Thark. That's actually T-H-A-R-K, I should say. Thark is the name of a house in the play.

John: Which is haunted.

Eleanor: It's haunted, ridiculously, the title actually came about because I think it was of a bet, or someone goading Ben Travers into the next play that he was supposed to write, and so they gave him a name, just a word that meant nothing and was almost unpronounceable. And so he had to suddenly write a play about 'Thark'. And so he made it this haunted house. But they used to do like the Whitehall Theatre, they used to do things like they took cannonballs from the Tower of London and ran them over, because I think one of the producers had a connection with one of the Beefeaters at the Tower of London. Just a bizarre bit of producing going on there, but they had tracks that ran above the audience's head, and they just roll the balls above them to make the sound of thunder. So that's proper like 1920s, 360 immersive theatre making.

John: Love that.

Eleanor: Before they had like, you know, a fully fledged speaker system or anything like that in a theatre. I didn't quite know... There was a series of moments at the end of the show where, you know, a door blows open and a gust of wind comes in and someone accidentally lets off a shotgun and the fire flames come up, and then a ghost appears and there was no magic trick involved. But it was more about I don't know how to make this sequence work, and you literally just sat me down and said, right, you want them to look over there? So you need this thing to happen over here. All it really was, was essentially teaching me a bit of stagecraft, actually, which was just to to distract the audience just long enough for this thing to happen over here without them noticing. It's sort of that last minute tinkering and problem solving.

John: Yeah. So when we talked about the interval at the beginning there, there's never a show that goes by where I'm not backstage, normally in the half, with gaffer tape and fishing line or whatever it is I'm doing, to fix something.

Eleanor: Stage managers love you. They never let me back there at the half.

John: Well, even I just get everywhere. It's like, so, so did Robin Hood this year at Regent's Park, and we had a flaming arrow that we wanted to make appear as part of the show. And in tech it failed, every preview it failed. But in the test during the day it was working, but then in show conditions it was failing. And so we got to the night before press and my director said to me, what have you got left? What can we do? And I said, well, I've got one other idea we could try, but we'd have to test it tomorrow. So we tried it and we tested it in the day and it worked in the tests. And I said, right, we need to make sure it's going to work tonight. So let's set up show conditions. We'll set the flame paste on the arrow and leave it for half an hour and see if it ignites, because that's how long it's on stage for ignites. And it did. And the final test completed at 7:30 that evening and press night curtain up was at 7:45. So at 7:30 when I went and took my seat next to my director for press night and gave her a nudge and just said, just to let you know, the flaming arrow's going to happen. And then it did happen, and it happened for the rest of the run. I was so delighted. I loved the fact that, like we are trained as illusionists to just not stop thinking about what we do, we get obsessed over the tiniest of things. So the things you talked about with Thark, about the misdirection and allowing a relatively

simple solution only worked because you gave us that trust to deliver that for you. Do you know what I mean? You trust the fact that if I said they look, they're this will work.

Eleanor: It is a leap of faith. If you're not, if you can't sort of see the mechanism of it.

John: No. I spend a lot of time explaining to performers that sometimes it feels like they're not part of the trick, but they're the trick in the entirety. And if they don't do their job, if you like, the thing will fail. You know, especially for things like drawing the eye across the stage, movement is really useful. So having someone literally run across the stage can take the tension away from someone stepping out from the wings, which I think is similar to what we did in Thark.

Eleanor: Yeah, but I mean, again, that's something that as a director you're doing all the time.

John: Yeah. As illusionists, we have process and concepts that we know how to deliver every time. So we've distilled, if you like, that idea of misdirection on stage and really worked out the exact places and the sweet spots that people should get to, for particular shows, to make that misdirection really work. And we know that it can be as simple as like a step further downstage is all we need to cover the angle for this to happen. There's a few things like that where you really needed people to be in exactly the right place, just to block between two bits of scenery, someone crossing so the audience don't see them, and they can come in through a door or whatever it is. And weirdly, I've been speaking to the RFU, to England Rugby about this and how you can use misdirection on the Rugby pitch, and using running lines of the players to misdirect the opposition, which is nothing to do with theatre but fascinating that you can use illusions in that way.

Eleanor: I always think that there should be something, there should be like a segment about illusion or magic, on every drama school course or every kind of training for actors and directors. Certainly, I think it's actually a big part of the theatrical canon and theatrical history that most people don't necessarily connect with when they're training in classical.

John: The Greeks had a word for someone who is a bringer of wonder. That's what we do into into any space we're in, ideally, but especially in the theatre. And and it is so prevalent in a moment and people are realising you don't have to do a magic trick to use an illusionist to make something happen.

Eleanor: What is the dream for you?

John: Interesting.

Eleanor: For the next decade?

John: So I found lockdown fascinating because obviously, like most people in this industry, everything stopped. And especially with magic because you're live, that's magic is live. That's what we do. But very quickly magicians learned to use Zoom. And the challenge there was to break the fourth wall because you're literally a screen between you and someone else, and you could not. How could I convince someone opposite me in their front room that what they're doing has an impact on what I'm doing the other side of the screen, that connection you have from being live was lost. So I was really curious to start exploring how you break that barrier. And how do you give the audience, agency and control over what you're doing as a performer? I believe there's going to be a big shift to using things like AR and VR and putting the audience in control of the live events so that they feel that what they are doing has an impact on the live event that they're watching. I certainly plan on doing a lot of exploring into how we create shows the audience can interact with digitally, that has a direct effect on the live. So, for example, if there's a ghost on stage, I can make a chair move or a door close on stage using illusion techniques for the live audience. But what if the digital audience is the ghost and they've chosen to move the chair? And so me pressing a button on my phone to move the chair moves the chair, which then the live audience react to. That to me, I think, is where we need to get to, because then that's that means they're in control of the live performance. And as a live audience, you're experiencing incredible stuff in the theatre. As a digital audience, you feel that you're in control of what's happening in the theatre. So imagine if you said to your friends, I'm going to see this ghost story tonight. I'm going to go live. Why don't you guys be the ghosts? And then they they sign up and then they are having a direct impact on your experience.

Eleanor: If there are any producers listening to this, we are available... No. I imagine that's sort of in keeping with the rise of sort of quote unquote immersive experiences and the notion of audience agency.

John: Yeah. Or perceived control. Yeah. Because as theatre makers, you can't give the audience control. You can't do that. So so I'm also interested in the use of illusion techniques to perceive, to give the audience perception of control. But actually we're in complete control.

Eleanor: I sometimes worry that you're doing that when we're having a conversation about work, that there's some sort of weird manipulation going on.

John: We've talked about before. I love the idea of like, how do we give an audience that feeling that when they walk into an immersive space, for example, they're not feeling railroaded through a narrative. They feel they've got free choice to go through any of the five doors, but actually they can only go through door number three because the other four doors don't really exist.

Eleanor: So I know you're sort of sworn to secrecy and the Magic Circle know where you live. But I mean, when you're making illusions on stage, are you generally using things that are already sort of present in theatrical vocabulary, as it were? Or are you bringing devices of your own making in, or can you not tell me anything about this?

John: Yes to all three. So it's always a combination of set design and lighting and sound and direction and performance. So all of those things combine to deliver any given moment. Stage managers are also very helpful, obviously, to maybe sneak secret things in and off or whatever it might be. So certainly we use the existing technology within the theatre to create a lot of the effects that you're seeing on stage. And, and you've hinted at stagecraft that's so important to us, the idea. So, for example, making a coin disappear from your fingers is the same way that David Copperfield made the Statue of Liberty disappear. You're shifting the audience's perspective. And the best thing about magic is you can take a small concept and blow it up exponentially. I mean, it's about trying to make the moon disappear. Have you seen this?

Eleanor: Yeah.

John: Yeah. So there's that. And then also, yes, we have secret gizmos and gadgets that we get made. So we have a team of like independent makers that we can go to that have worked with us on illusions that we can go to and say, like we need this thing to do something. So a good example was not really an illusion, but I had to make a chest full of 100 severed fingers that could move. So when they dropped, the severed fingers ran across the floor, which was great fun. And so I found these things called Nano Bugs, which are these kids toys that when you turn them on, they buzz and like dance across the floor. And if I put one of them inside a fake finger, the fake finger moves across the floor. So. So then I got my props teams to to make that for me and make 100 Nano Bug fake fingers that were turned on in the interval. There's an interval ritual for you - turn on the fake severed fingers and then. Yeah, then when he tipped the chest out, these things, landed on the floor and started buzzing and running across the stage.

Eleanor: How much does having three young children influence your perspective? So much how you make these things?

John: I have such a weird job I have to look at like, yeah, kids toys are really useful because they they're full of surprise. They're full of like really cool little like gadgets and stuff that you'd be like, oh, that's a really there's like, actually I did a show for the RSC a few years ago called We Are Arrested. And in the show this guy was in solitary confinement and talked about a moment where he used coloured paper to create paint and paint his tables with. And the set was designed to be totally white, but we wanted to bring colour in. And I remembered my kids have this book they use in the bath, which is white, and then when you get it wet, the paint goes translucent and you can see the colours through it. You can buy that paint. So we bought a pot of that paint. They painted the tables bright colours and then covered it in this white paint. And so then in the show, all I do is flick water over it. And this paint became translucent, revealing the colors underneath. And so that is literally inspired by a toy. So we've talked a bit about what you've got planned for Midsummer Night's Dream, but I'm curious to know why an illusionist, why do you think it's important to have that as part of the conversation?

Eleanor: We'd been working together a little bit on developing a project, together that was unrelated to Dream, but was using lots of ideas and techniques that were really clicking with me as a theatre maker. And then, as soon as the idea of Dream was

floated with me, I realized quite quickly how much I wanted to lean into the dream aspect of the world. For me, the forest isn't really important as a literal thing. It's purely a dream space, and I wanted to create an environment where the edges of the world that the audience are sort of peeking into are constantly changing and evolving. And so you're sort of kind of discombobulated most of the time. And so that felt very natural, as a collaboration between between you and me. I think, most of the time when people think about Midsummer Night's Dream and they hear there's, you know, an illusionist or a magician on board, the ideas of what that's going to be become very, very small. Quite quickly it becomes about Puck, you know, doing sort of card and coin or close up magic, which is great and it's fun and it's interactive.

Eleanor: And, you know, we are going to have elements of that within the show. What I'm more interested in, not to sound too pretentious, is world building. And in order to build something that feels malleable and fantastical on this scale, I know it's something that I need to collaborate with people I've never sort of fully worked with before. So we're working with Nina Dunn, who's our video designer, Matt Daw, who lights a huge number of sort of gigs and sort of beyond theatre spaces. We're working with Pete Malkin, who is just incredibly knowledgeable as a sound designer in terms of new tech and creating something that feels visceral and 360, but probably the most important collaboration is actually the conversation that you and I have been having for like 10 or 12 years, which is how do we bend the audience's perspective of what is real and what is not.

John: Yeah, yeah.

Eleanor: I think that's something that's going to bring a closer contact between the audience and the play. Actually, hopefully what we're doing is bringing the audience into the story, into that world and making it a much more sort of intimate and visceral experience for them.

John: Yeah. Yeah, I agree.

Eleanor: That's that's why I immediately thought, yeah, I need to work with Jon on this.

John: In terms of, you mentioned world building and those sort of things. There are some amazing film directors, theatre directors out there who specialise in that sort of stuff. Is there anyone in particular that you think has really sort of inspired you as a director to think about the scale of it, about how you want to make this world as epic as you're planning?

Eleanor: Do you know what? It's particularly since the pandemic and working in other media for like the last couple of years, I've been doing a lot of writing. I've been having to think about storytelling from a slightly different perspective, from a filmic perspective. I've been working a lot in audio and also screenwriting, and it's trying to see really the conversations are about the limits on what we can put on a story or how far we can stretch those limits. During the pandemic, I also got a DYCP grant, which is to develop your creative practice grant from the Arts Council, and I was able to go and do some work looking at how digital media, particularly things like VR and AR, can impact live performance and impact my process. And I think it's been talking to a wide variety of people who are just coming at storytelling from a slightly different angle in that regard, has been has been really inspiring for me. I would say there's not necessarily one particular director. I think there's a sort of a vibe in theatre at the moment, which is sort of a change in how creative teams want to make things. I think we're moving away from this notion of a writer writes a play and someone produces the play and someone directs the play. One of the people who's sort of brilliant at realizing that is Sarah Ellis, who runs the digital department at the Royal Shakespeare Company, who I'd say more than anyone else I talk to, is sort of really focused on the idea of audience. What's the audience experience?

John: Yeah, yeah, yeah, I agree.

Eleanor: When you're starting out as a director, you really want to earn your stripes. You want to sort of declare yourself in a way, or in my case, you declare yourself by hiding behind a playwright. Yeah. And talking about the thing that you want to say to people. And then I think now my emphasis is much more about what do I want the audience to feel?

John: I argue a lot with my musician friends, they don't really understand what I do in the theatre, because they don't understand when I tell them how, like how we get away

with some of the stuff they can't comprehend that's possible, because they don't understand the tools you have in the theatre at your disposal. And so I love the fact that like, yeah, it is just it's about the audience. It's all about the audience. And all we're trying to do is use, in this instance, magic and illusion to push them over to that point of where they really do believe everything they're seeing on stage, because it's harder not to believe. You mentioned about Dream, but it's my favourite Shakespeare because it does all the things that he does, so this is the best version of all the things he does. So the magic in Dream for me is the best magic he has, I think, in his shows, and it's really exciting to see how we can use illusion principles to elevate them all. So not just the magic, but how do we bring the Mechanicals in, in an interesting way? Or like, you know, how do we do the Pyramus and Thisbe? What's our version of that using the techniques that we've talked about? It's going to be a really fun couple of months, I think.

Eleanor: I mean, you've done a lot. Um, and I'm sort of envious in terms of the number of productions you've been able to to work on. You're jumping in and out, and so you have all of these sort of avenues to try new things and to, you know, learn from different people and to sort of perfect your process in all these particular ways. What haven't you done?

John: Well, it's a really good question. I have like a cupboard full of stuff, magic stuff. And I think it was being answers to questions that have been asked yet. So I've got all these things which I've seen. I think that's a really cool thing. It'd be great if I could do that somewhere. So I've got all that stuff waiting and there's, there's everything from like little sleight of hand things to like, really neat ways to like, tear and restore a newspaper. But it's the story that needs to be right behind it. Rather than just being here's a torn newspaper, it needs to be a reason why. And my favourite trick is a guy is a guy called Harry Blackstone Junior who is an American magician. And it's my favourite magic trick because it encapsulates everything I love about magic. He has a light bulb that he's holding on stage, and he makes a light bulb light up and turn off by itself. That's beautiful. That's a really exciting thing to happen. He then makes it float in front of him and then catches it, and he walks down to the stalls to a lady right in front of him and shows the lady that it turns on and off while she's there, and then he makes it float in front of her, which is ridiculous.

John: And then he takes it back up on stage and again makes it light and float. And then he says, 'oh my friends at the back, you haven't seen this yet.' And the lightbulb flies over the back of the stalls and then flies back to him, and he catches it and puts it back in his pocket. And it's such an elegant, beautiful piece of magic. I want to do something like that. I want a moment like that where I can be like, there must be a reason why the object has to travel to the back of the stalls to come back firstly. Otherwise it's just a magic trick, which is fine. But in the theatre world there needs to be a reason behind the narrative. So I'd love to find a reason for something, Tinker Bell, or whatever it might be for something to fly around the auditorium and to come back to the performer on stage, and for them to disconnect it from however it's flying or whatever and put it away. And so that's one thing I would love to do a version of on stage.

Eleanor: Well, that's the bell. We're going to have to go back in and and watch our show now. But before we go, um, John, who real or fictional would you like to share an interval drink with and why?

John: So I knew I was coming here to talk about today, and I spent a lot of time thinking about this, because there's lots of people that I would love to have a drink with - your good self, lots of friends that I've met in industry, but the one person that kept coming back to me was my grandad. And so my grandad died in 2006 and he was the stage manager at Theatre Royal in Newcastle. And back in the day he told me stories about Gielgud and all these wonderful people and he's the reason I got into theatre. So in his house he used to have Pollock Theatre boxes and we'd play with them together, and I called him grandad with the toys, because he kept all my mum's old toys, and he had a cupboard full of all her old toys, and a bit like in Slumdog Millionaire, when, when he gets flashbacks to his childhood and sees things. I feel like that with stuff I do now from my grandad, because there's things that my grandad showed me in terms of like how magnets worked or how to tie a knot, or theatrical traditions that are so prevalent still. So I would love to have him and a drink in an interval in one of my shows. It would have blown his mind to see the stuff that I get up to, based on the stuff he taught me when I was younger. And he. Yeah, he died just as I left drama school. So he saw me in a show with Kate O'Mara and Tony Britton, those sort of people. So he recognised the level that I was working at, but never, never got to see any of the illusion stuff. So same to you, Ellie. If you had to choose someone to have a drink with real life fictional, who would you pick?

Eleanor: Do you know what? It's so rare that I get to do these. Um. It's so rare that I get to go to the theatre at the moment. I think it would probably just be. Either my husband or close friends. Actually, I think there's something just really wonderful and special about being in a live space, sharing something together and having that chance to have a quick chat about it. And then dashing back in for the second half. There's a sort of romance about the whole thing, isn't there, of sort of being in a in a beautiful old theatre.

John: Yeah. Definitely.

Eleanor: And sharing that with with people you love. I think it would probably be real people who I'm already sort of quite close to. I think that's a nice way to spend an evening.

John: Yeah I agree.

Eleanor: John, thanks so much for the chat.

John: Thank you.

Eleanor: We should probably go back to work and start making the show. It's been lovely to catch up with you.

John: Thanks, man.

Host: Come back next week to listen to a special playwrighting episode with actor, writer and director Isobel McArthur talking to fellow playwright Gary McNair.