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## Case Study

### SOME EXPLICIT POLAROIDS

Mark Ravenhill

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*Workshop:* from 18 March 1999

*Rehearsal:* 23 August 1999

*First Performance:* 30 September 1999

*Cast:* Russell Barr, Nick Dunning, Fritha Goodey, Sally Rogers, David Sibley, Matthew Wait

*Published:* *Some Explicit Polaroids* (Methuen, 1999)

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I first met Mark Ravenhill at an evening of short plays at the Finborough, a fringe theatre in West London.

🔊 MARK RAVENHILL: It was an evening about playing with erotic themes, called *'I'll show you mine'*, and I wrote this little play called *Fist*, which Max came to see. We exchanged a few words downstairs, and Max expressed an interest in a full-length play. I didn't have a full-length play, so I decided to write one quickly while his interest was there and before he forgot that we'd met, so I wrote *Shopping and Fucking* in the next four months. He got back to me to say he had read and liked the play, so we met up.

The meeting took place with no particular commitment from Out of Joint, and certainly with no idea that I might eventually be directing the play. Sometimes meetings with writers are laboured occasions when it is impossible to express any reservations about the play without sending the writer into a state of advanced misery. But Mark Ravenhill was open and engaged. The meeting lasted an hour and a half, and he was enthusiastic about taking on a new draft. There was one character who had no lines but who followed the others round with a camera. The point eluded me as did Mark's baffling

explanation, but anyway the character disappeared from subsequent drafts. I looked forward to the next meeting, but then Mark disappeared himself. I had become intrigued by the play and the title, so after some difficulty I eventually tracked Mark down to the Salisbury Playhouse, where he had been directing a children's play. We had several further meetings in the course of which I found myself recommending other directors to Mark with less and less enthusiasm. I had become hooked, and it became clear that I was going to direct the play myself.

The shape of *Shopping and Fucking* changed quite a bit in the course of rewrites and particularly as the result of a ten-day workshop at the National Theatre Studio. But through all this the kernel of the play remained the same. It was about two young people adrift in London, and their emotional relationship with a slightly older father-figure, who is struggling with a heroin addiction. They get caught up in a drugs deal that goes hilariously wrong and are given a lecture in market economics by a sinister crime boss. The most comic moment was a long shaggy-dog story, in which the character called Mark, who was to be played by Lloyd Hutchinson, claimed to have had sex with Princess Di and Fergie, the Duchess of York, in the Gents' toilet of a London club, both dressed as policewomen, with Di very much taking the lead. We were performing the play in Leeds on the night after Princess Di's car crash, and I got a panicked phone call from Lloyd pointing out that this material had become well-nigh combustible in the period of national hysteria that followed her death. An instant rewrite was essayed, and the chief protagonist in this subterranean toilet orgy became the Duchess of York.

The play's title was the cause of much discussion and proved a test of manhood for various broadsheet editors. The *Daily Telegraph* and *The Times* opted for the safety of asterisks while the *Independent*, the *Guardian* and, of course, intrepid *Time Out* went all the way with the title. Philip Roberts records Sonia Friedman's worries:

🔊 SONIA FRIEDMAN: I was nervous. Max not remotely. We had a lot of serious discussions about it, and I was completely wrong. I thought the problem was that we were a relatively new, young touring company, and I thought we were going to be in legal trouble with it. I recall a lot of discussions with Max, asking if we were going to be laughed out of town, and Max said, 'No, we stick with the title.' And, of course, he was completely right, and I think if it had been called anything else, it would have signalled that the times were different.

But Sonia wasn't alone with her sensitivity; when the play finally transferred to the West End the sign-writers employed to erect the name outside the theatre declined the job on moral grounds.

The journey for *Shopping and Fucking* was eventually to embrace five separate productions, and Out of Joint would tour it to nine different countries. But the play began in the tiny studio arrangement that Stephen Daldry had chiselled out of the Ambassadors Theatre during the Royal Court's exile from Sloane Square. (From 1996 to 1999 the Royal Court was being rebuilt and the theatre occupied the Ambassadors and the Duke of York's Theatre.) In this proximity the play was at its most intense, and on the first night at a crucial moment the *Times* critic galloped towards the exit in desperate need of some fresh air. In Bristol people fainted in the Old Vic's confined studio space. But with success the play moved into bigger theatres where it became much more dependent on the wit and humour of the writing, and the intensity was defused by the laughter.

More than with any other play I can think of, I started or continued a series of relationships during the course of *Shopping and Fucking* that were to be of enormous importance to Out of Joint: with Mark himself, of course, but also with the actors: Lloyd Hutchinson, Kate Ashfield, Russell Barr, Stephen Beresford, Ian Redford, Sally Rogers and Robin Soans. The quality of Out of Joint's work can be traced to this continuity. It's the nearest to an ensemble that you can create, given Out of Joint's touring commitment and economic circumstances.

🔊 MARK RAVENHILL: What I'd anticipated that Max would focus on would be the social aspect of the play, which he did, and actors were sent off to interview drug addicts, rent boys etc., though I didn't really feel it was terribly important to the play, which I'd written as a kind of urban fairy story. But what surprised me was how much Max was interested in the archetypal qualities of the characters, in particular the kind of Jungian archetypes. We did some movement exercises to explore the characters, which you don't associate with Max. We looked at archetypes, like the mother, the hero . . . And we used that quite a lot in unlocking the play. Bad and good fathers, bad and good mothers. Actually, that revealed things to me about the play itself that I wasn't aware of . . . The other thing that I appreciated when I first worked with Max, and still do, is a line which you see through Bill Gaskill, and that is just a real passion about directing the text, really looking at each line,

where the stress is, and what the rhythm of the line is . . . There's not much democracy. Max is generally absolutely prepared. When you start actioning, you see that he's actioned the whole scene the night before, so on the whole he'll suggest the actions because otherwise it would take for ever. And if somebody comes up with a much better action, then he'll pencil his out. But if you compare what he started and ended the day with, relatively few actions have been changed.

🔊 I spend the first two weeks of a five-week rehearsal period breaking the play into units and then working on actions. A unit is determined by what the character that runs the scene wants. So the opening unit of *Some Explicit Polaroids* could be called 'Nick wants to befriend Helen'. Nick has just been let out of prison after a long sentence for a politically motivated kidnapping and assault. He is desperate to get a place to stay and some dry clothes. An action is the tactic the protagonist takes to achieve that objective, and it has to be described with a transitive verb. Nick's first line in the play is 'Hello Helen'. Clearly a pretty neutral line, but in the context of the situation where Helen is shocked to find her old boyfriend on her doorstep after years in prison the action is probably 'steadies' or possibly 'befriends'. Helen then responds 'Fucking hell', which is 'resists' or 'reprimands', and Nick's second line is 'I tried to ring you', which is 'reassures'. And so on. It's a method which places analysis before instinct but is none the worse for that.