Rosie Goldsmith:
Simon McBurney is one of the most exciting British performers and directors alive today – he's also one of the most international. He creates thrilling productions all over the world, based on the works of Dürrenmatt, Frisch, Murakami, Shostakovitch, Bulgakov, Bruno Schulz and many more.
A lot of his most thrilling and innovative work is as artistic director of the ground-breaking theatre company Complicité, which Simon set up 30 years ago. Complicité's productions are both visually stunning and cerebral, combining high-tech wizardry and magical storytelling.
He's also a renowned actor on TV and on screen; you'll may have seen him in *Rev* or the *The Vicar of Dibley;* in *The Last King Of Scotland* and, of course, *Harry Potter*. In other words, he's one of the busiest cultural figures around in Britain today, so it's amazing that he's found time to meet me here today at the Goethe-Institut in London.
Simon, how would you describe your form of theatre, what you do…?

Simon McBurney:
I work in many different aspects of theatre. I don't see myself as somebody who is an interpreter of classic plays, although I feel deeply involved with those playwrights who I've had the fortune to be in the company of, because I say 'in the company of' because when you're working on *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* by Brecht you begin to feel close to Brecht. When you work on *The Visit* by Dürrenmatt, you begin to feel in the company of Dürrenmatt, partly because when you are performing something in the theatre you are embodying the text.
My great influences were Beckett, were the fact that in exploring and performing Shakespeare he was constantly using laughter in relation to tragedy and to the darkest possible elements of his plays. The laughter is there constantly, as well as the poetry and the beauty and the sculptural nature of the words. Tragedy is tender to man's dignity, it makes him feel that he is a more important creature than the rest of the creatures that exist upon this planet. And it preserves the illusion that he is somehow a noble creature, whereas comedy takes a scalpel to human beings and exposes the corrupt truth. And you open their belly and the corrupt intestines with all their shit pours out. And it shows you the truth behind certain things, which is why, of course, we hate being laughed at in real life, because at that moment people see who we are.

So, you asked me what I do and I would sum it up in this sense that I don't really know what I do, it's all part of a process which is very messy, very chaotic. Yes, I'm a theatre-maker. Yes, I'm an actor in movies. Yes, I'm also an actor sometimes in popular television. Yes, I am a writer. And I feel as if I have no idea what I do exactly. I make these encounters with other people. I'm fortunate enough that I have worked all over the world and come into contact with many different artists from many different disciplines and discovered people who are of a like mind. I was the *artiste associé* of the Avignon Festival last year and for the first time came into… met wonderful, multidisciplinary artists like Romeo Castellucci, Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker and many, many more. Sophie Calle…and Thomas Ostermeier of course is another one with whom I feel very close.
In answer to your question. Who am I? What do I do? I don't really know. It's up to other people to decide.

Rosie Goldsmith:
Do you see yourself as a British performer and director or as a European?

Simon McBurney:
I grew up surrounded by British literature. My mother wanted to be an actress. I read books, we had no television. And I played from a child. I was immersed in the world of English literature. But the question of being British was very much being surrounded by the words of the past, the words of Shakespeare, but within that – performing in Shakespeare. So growing up in a university town it meant sometimes small children were asked to be in Shakespeare productions, so I would be in them, I would go and see them in the Arts Theatre in Cambridge, I would perform them at school, I would read them in class. But always for me there was a sense of discomfort. I had a feeling of never being quite where I belonged. And going to Paris and living in Paris for four years I suddenly felt more at home than I ever have felt in England. Paris at that time was full of productions from all over the world. I could go and see Peter Stein's *Oresteia* and equally I might see Augusto Boal performing at the Cartoucherie. I would say at that point certainly Paris formed an intersection whereby it was absolutely normal to see Kantor in Polish, Peter Stein *Gross und Klein* with Edith Clever performed at the Odeon, something you would never ever see at the British National Theatre. It was strictly a diet of English and American plays and then, you know, a radical departure would be a translation…of course of Brecht who was, sort of, thought to be almost English, he would be appropriated by a certain part of the English left as being, sort of, politically the thing to hold on to, but not necessarily seen as German, but seen as an international part of…*C'est la lutte finale*. So we were all within the same struggle, which was wonderful, of course.

Rosie Goldsmith:
Is it more normal today for you to be involved in the European theatre?

Simon McBurney:
I don't think it is something we take for granted at all, being part of European theatre. I mean the Royal Court does extraordinary work with young writers from all over the world and they are exposed to an English public to a certain degree, but, quite naturally, it's involved in bringing up the generation of young British writers.
Nonetheless if you look around at other institutions there is not the constant stream, I wouldn't say there is a constant stream of European theatre, there are relatively few translations, I would say, of German and French and Dutch and Spanish plays. And very often they are extremely… they fall into certain traditions of a way of doing things. That's what you are dealing with in Britain. It is very insular and inward looking. There is no, sort of, interest in the fact that the rest of the world exists. And it's part of being an island culture. And it's very, very deep-rooted. There is this feeling that there is 'us' and then there is 'the rest of the world'. We still very much in this country have a thing of… we have a set and then we have a play, and we do the play within it. Of course it has developed enormously, we have some wonderful designers within this country, but not all of them have this, sort of, rather chaotic and…wrestling relationship with directors and writers that I tend to see sometimes in the work of Thomas Ostermeier, which I admire a lot, where there is constantly there is this question 'what is it doing?', 'what are we seeing?', 'what is it?', 'what's the argument of the circumstance of this?', 'what's the architecture of the space which must also reflect the architecture and the argument of the play?'.

Rosie Goldsmith:
Every single time I talk about the arts these days I end up talking about funding. Do you think that we've achieved a solution here in the UK? Has a balance been achieved? Has it gone too far?

Simon McBurney:
The official line is that art is a luxury and therefore it doesn't particularly deserve funding of any sort and we are headed in the direction where the arts should pay its way and good art makes a lot of money. So the idea… if you equate good art being things that make money, if you equate art with the money that it brings in and then, of course, necessarily, you have a particular idea that art is simply, as one American critic famously once put it, 'mental cheesecake'…it's just a luxury, whereas every single human being is an artist. What does that mean? It means that you have to choose the words that you speak, it means that you have to express what you feel. Art is the absolute root of what it means to be human. So the negativity of not funding and the stupidity of not funding art as being something that everybody has a right to, everybody should participate in – there is no question that this government would like to make everyone pay to go to a museum, they would love that! I can't help but feel…forgive me, I feel very angry about this.
In the end we have to see things in a new way. And I think partly because of history within Germany, a kind of self-reflection and a need after necessarily historically from 1945 onwards this deep trauma which a nation had to confront and live with, an enormously dark past, which we in Britain also have to live with, but don't confront in the same way – you only have to look at the history of British colonialism to see that there is enough dark past there to confront that we don't confront. But in Germany perhaps because it is within touching distance, it's people's parents and grandparents, that there is a real desire to tear away, to open the fiction. There is another kind of engagement, which I find very exciting. In France there is yet another form of engagement. There is enormous fascination with just the sensuality of language in France. And the presence of the human body in a totemic way. So that you read, can read an action or an inaction. It's no coincidence that Beckett ended up in Paris and he wrote in French. Because there is a real pleasure within the French language, of the lips and the mouth moving. And that's enough, the meaning is here.

Rosie Goldsmith:
You are sitting here in the library of the Goethe Institut in London…

Simon McBurney:
Just in front of Bertolt Brecht and some conversations between Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht.

Rosie Goldsmith:
Is it a good feeling for you to be here in a German environment?

Simon McBurney:
Yeah, I'm really delighted…

Rosie Goldsmith:
Simon McBurney, thank you very much.

Simon McBurney:
Thank you for having me.