"Every choice we make takes us on a different journey…": Helen Cooper in Conversation

By Astrid Recker, University of Cologne, and Christina Wald, University of Augsburg, Germany

Helen Cooper was born in Holland of Welsh/Dutch parentage. After studying History of Art at Leiden University and at the Victoria and Albert Museum she went to the **Webber Douglas Academy of Dramatic Arts**.

Film

Helen wrote the highly acclaimed screenplay for **Mike Figgis**' film ***Miss Julie***, which was based on her original translation of August Strindberg's play. Helen wrote and produced the short film, ***Station***, directed by **Jackie Oudney**, which won the **Cinerail de Bronze** in Paris, the **Best British Short Film Award** at the Kino Festival in Manchester, the **Best Short Film Award** at the Croydon Film Festival and was **nominated** as **Best Short Film** for **BAFTA** Scotland's New Talent Award 2000.

Theatre

Her most recent highly acclaimed play ***Three Women and a Piano Tuner*** premiered in June 2004 at the Chichester Festival Theatre, directed by Sam West, and was runner-up for the **Susan Smith Blackburn Award**. It transferred to the Hampstead Theatre in June 2005.

Helen's other plays include, ***Mrs Gaugin***, produced at the Almeida Theatre and later in Amsterdam, Hamburg and Ghent, ***Mrs Vershinin***, produced at the Riverside Studios, London, The Tramway Theatre in Glasgow and the Theatre der Welt, Hamburg. Both plays were directed by **Mike Bradwell** and were **nominated for the Susan Smith Blackburn Award**. ***The House of Ruby Moon*** was developed by the Royal National Theatre Studio and was premiered at the London New Play Festival.

Helen translated Strindberg's ***Miss Julie*** for Tom Cairns' production at Greenwich Theatre, Ibsen's ***Hedder Gabler*** for Chichester Festival, the libretto of ***Don Giovanni*** for Scottish Opera and was the dramaturge for Tom Cairns' production of ***La Boheme*** at Stuttgart Opera House.

Radio

Helen's play, ***Mrs Vershinin***, was broadcast on **BBC Radio 3**; her translation of ***Hedder Gabler*** on **BBC Radio 4**. Her original radio play ***Mothers at at the Gate*** was highly acclaimed and is now being developed for theatre.

Helen's work in progress includes **1934** commissioned by **Skreba Films**, a new commission from the Royal Shakespeare Company, and her play ***Mothers at the Gate***, which is being developed by the **Royal National Theatre Studio**.

Interview taken in London in July, 2005.

Christina Wald and Astrid Recker: We understand that you worked as an actress before you started writing plays. Could you tell us how your interest in the theatre began and how it developed over the years?

Helen Cooper: None of my family are in the theatre. I was at school in The Hague in Holland. Although my mother is Welsh, English was my worst subject at school. So I was sent to England before going to Leiden University for a year to do my proficiency in English. Then I came back to Leiden to study History of Art, but I had lost my heart, so I didn't want to stay and I went back to England as I convinced my parents that studying History of Art was

far better in London than in Leiden. I went there and secretly auditioned for drama school. And I was rejected and accepted, accepted and rejected, and then I went to the Webber Douglas Academy of Dramatic Art. The best thing of all was that I got a scholarship. I trained for three years, and after that I did a lot of acting work. I played parts like Hermione in Winter's Tale opposite Jim Broadbent, who played Leontes, I played Celia opposite Fiona Shaw in *As You Like It* at the Old Vic, I played Viola in Regent's Park. I did a lot of classical work as well as contemporary work, but my biggest change was working with Ken Campbell, a wild, anarchic theatre maker in England. We did a 24h show which started on Saturday morning at 10 and finished the next morning at 10. We had a group of forty actors, literally grabbed off the street almost. That was a hugely important experience for me. It was there that I met Mike Bradwell with whom I've worked since a lot. I met Jim Broadbent, Tim Albery, Pierre Audi, who is running the Stopera in Amsterdam, the actor Bill Nighy, Terry Johnson, the writer - a fantastic group of kindred spirits, who were a huge inspiration. It was then that I began to think that it was not only acting, but theatre as a whole that I wanted to be involved in.

You know the work of Mike Leigh, how he works, which is extraordinary, and this is the same way Mike Bradwell works. You create a character from the womb up to however old you are. So rehearsals mean sitting in a room on your own for weeks, and the director comes in and asks, "So how old are you now? Five? What was your favourite present for your fifth birthday?" You begin to create this whole world from birth to the end, you create the whole picture of the character. He does that with, say, five characters for a play. When you are ready, you can go out. You walk the streets in character, and you start to see the world from this character's point of view: what magazines she would buy, what newspapers she would buy, what food she would eat. And then, when they feel you're fully-fledged, they let you meet the other characters, and out of those meetings the play is created.

In the first play that I did, I was a Dutch art student. At some point we were ready, we had done our twelve weeks of research, and our characters were ready, but when we started to do the play, I realized that it was only the tip of the iceberg that was shown, and I was left with this huge iceberg - so I started to write some short stories about this character. I was working as an actress at the Almeida theatre at that time, and I showed the stories to Pierre Audi, and he commissioned me to write my first play. That was an extremely lucky moment for me, to get that first commission. So that's how I became a writer.

CW and AR: Have you also written for the TV?

HC: I have written for film. Mike Figgis's film *Miss Julie* - I wrote the screenplay for that,

and my short film *Station*, which did very well at festivals all over the world and got two Scottish BAFTA nominations. I have written some more films, but they are all work in progress. I do love the world of theatre, but I do love the world of film as well. It is the collaboration, the working together, I love.

CW and AR: Would you also be interested in directing?

HC: I was offered to direct my own version of *Miss Julie*, and I will do that. I would never do the first production of one of my plays, because you need another person to wrangle with to get it right.

CW and AR: Why did you decide to do *Miss Julie*? Did you have a special affinity to Strindberg?

HC: No, not at all! I was asked by Tom Cairns, who was asked to direct *Miss Julie* and didn't like the available translations. At first I thought why should I, a twenty-first century woman, try to translate a nineteenth century misogynist? Then I thought it is a challenge, and I read this fantastic biography by Michael Meyer and I grew to love Strindberg. He is full of paradoxes, he is extraordinary, and he was a real modernist. And actually, although everyone calls him a misogynist, I think he had the guts to pull women off pedestals and to actually make them as flawed and faulty as men. *Miss Julie* is a horrendously complex and paradoxical woman. But I think that Strindberg has done women a lot of good by making them more real and more powerful rather than putting them on pedestals. So, actually, Strindberg should be on the list of playwrights who influenced me.

CW and AR: Speaking of influence - are there other playwrights that you particularly like and who influenced your own work?

HC: One of my first plays was *Mrs Vershinin* and I think Chekhov is magnificent. Chekhov, Albee, and Pinter, I suppose, are my real inspirations.

CW and AR: What are your experiences with seeing your plays performed? Did you sometimes discover new aspects of your work when you saw them? Or did you sometimes feel that crucial elements were lost in the production?

HC: It is a very strange process. The weirdest experience I had was when I saw my first play, *Mrs Gauguin*, translated into my own language, Dutch. There is something about the rhythm of a language; the music of a language makes such a difference. English is much lighter and wittier than Dutch. A Dutch sentence is three times the length of an English sentence, so the play became much more serious, which I sometimes liked but sometimes did not want. Translation is an extraordinary thing. Fay Weldon had a play on at the same time in Paris and in Denmark, and it was a farce in Paris and a tragedy in Denmark - the very same play!

But even seeing my plays performed in English is a very strange and painful process; you have to let the play go. I remember Mike Bradwell throwing me out of the rehearsal once, telling me: "It's not yours anymore!"

CW and AR: As you have seen your play performed in the Netherlands, what do you think about Dutch theatre and the more radical way that the play scripts are used for and transformed in production there?

HC: I am told they do some fabulous work but unfortunately I haven't seen a great deal lately. What was amazing when I saw my own play, *Mrs Gauguin*, produced in the Netherlands was the difference to the original production at the Almeida. We did it with a tiny budget: there was water showering down onto the stage and it was a beautiful, fantastic set - but we had four men behind the stage who had to open and close taps. But the Toneelgroep Centrum in Amsterdam had an unlimited budget, and they had a wall of water, a proper waterfall where you could walk behind. It was extraordinary. But then again, I saw an amateur production in Ghent, and it was the most moving thing I have seen. They had solved the water problem with a hose with four holes in it: The director was a young guy of twenty-one and he wrote in the programme what he thought the play was about. That had nothing to do with me anymore, it was completely his creation. A play is like a child that grows up - it's yours, but it has its own life.

CW and AR: You are obviously very interested in recent theatre developments in Britain. Are you also interested in theatre developments in other countries? Do you regularly see performances?

HC: I would like to see more. One of my greatest inspirations in theatre is still Pina Bausch. She has inspired me more than other theatre makers. The Bush Theatre do productions of contemporary plays from all over the world, and I see everything they do. But apart from the Bush and occasional trips abroad, I would like to see more.

CW and AR: In which way did Pina Bausch inspire your work - has dance found its way into your literary work?

HC: Sometimes you see theatre that makes you think "Oh, that's possible as well" - she opened a whole new dimension. She gives you courage, I think.

CW and AR: When you start writing a new play, what do you normally begin with? Is it a specific topic that you are interested in or a particular constellation of characters?

HC: Well, *Three Women and a Piano Tuner* for example was commissioned by the RSC by Steven Pimlott, who then took it to the Chichester Festival. When I pitched the idea, my idea

came from a short film, *Station*, that I had made with two other women; often I looked at them and thought "God, we are so different," but at the same time I thought, I could have become like them if I had made their choices. So, that was the basic idea. I wanted to write about the choices women make. When I started to write, I thought what was the crucial choice that separates them, and then the whole Elektra Complex came out, and that was certainly not planned. I think my writing process has come out of how I came to writing, namely, through acting. I very much start from the characters, not from a symbolic idea.

CW and AR: Your plays focus on female characters. Do you consider yourself a feminist playwright? Do you think that questions of gender play a crucial role in your work?

HC: I see the world from a female point-of-view. I am a feminist in so far as I am absolutely and forever grateful that people fought for women's rights and broke barriers - and there is still fighting to be done, and I am aware of that. But I am not a separatist. Especially as I brought up a daughter, I have seen how boys are often badly treated by female teachers. I think this is very serious, and I do think it's important to redress that balance. That's why I loved Strindberg pulling the women down from their pedestals, revealing that we are all human and therefore inherently flawed - men and women.

I'm sure you know *Women Are from Venus, Men Are from Mars*. I recently saw a card with this printed on it: "Men are from the planet earth, so are women - deal with it!" That's my kind of feminism. We should fight together and there are still many things that need to be done - men have got privileges, especially in English theatre. But I think separatism is not the answer. By the way, at the moment I am writing a play about the Dutch humanist Erasmus, again for the RSC, and there are no female parts in it at all.

CW and AR: Do you think that theatre can be, or always already is, political? Do you think that plays can trigger social change?

HC: I would like to think so. Every human action, such as bringing up a child, can make a tiny little shift. In that sense, everything is political, every choice you make. But if we talk about Political with a great "P", there is a lot to fight against or fight for at the moment. W.H. Auden said that there are two kinds of art: escapist art, which we all need as much as good food and deep sleep, and parable art, which shall teach man to unlearn hatred. I like that.

Three Women and a Piano Tuner

CW and AR: In how far does the revived production of *Three Women and a Piano Tuner* at Hampstead Theatre differ from the original production at the Chichester Festival last year?

HC: Well, it is the same director, but the production is set in different performance spaces

and one actor is different, and that makes a huge difference. Beth was played by Suzanne Burden, but she went to the RSC. Phoebe Nicholls's Beth has a very different chemistry. It was fascinating how she then influenced the others to change. I think she's fabulous; she's very subtle, and she's been a good influence in that way.

They also changed the text and the orchestra at the end. And, as I've said, the performance spaces differ: The theatre in Chichester is almost in the round, so that's a very different feeling. Hampstead is slightly warmer - the atmosphere in Chichester is much cooler and sharper. Sometimes I prefer that, and sometimes I prefer this.

CW and AR: We understand that the music was composed especially for the play?

HC: Yes, it was composed by Jason Carr. Samuel West, the director, I, and Jason had a long talk about it, and I think he absolutely got it. Music is extremely important in my work. It plays a huge part in productions. The music in *Three Women and a Piano Tuner* is evocative; it does set the scene strongly.

I was chilled when I first heard it - I think it is brilliant. I talked to lots of musicians beforehand, and one of them said "Music is never a narrative. Never would a composer talk about a stork." Another did say it can come out of a story or a narrative. So we talked a lot about it beforehand.

CW and AR: We thought it was very interesting how the music is interpreted in the play by the different characters, how Ella conceives of it differently than Liz and thinks that Liz should be playing it differently. The same seems to be the case with memory - Ella, Liz, and Beth all interpret their memories differently.

HC: Absolutely. But you see, I don't think Liz or anyone could play it perfectly for Ella, and even she can't because she hasn't got the tools. This is a very strange thing. I wonder if a musician ever hears what he or she meant to hear.

CW and AR: When discussing your play in class, we were wondering whether Ella can be considered a more "real" character than the "might-have-beens" Beth and Liz, or, in the terminology of psychology, whether she is the "host personality" for the "alters" Beth and Liz. Did you have any hierarchy of the characters in mind? Or do you see the three figures as equally "real" figures which stand for three different ways of coping with the experience of incest?

HC: I think Ella is the one who brings on the others, she is more real. In Chichester, where the original version was played, some people I heard in the interval had already realised that they are one person, others did not get it at all, which is fine. It's like life, there is a mystery. When we read the reviews, we realised that even some reviewers had not understood it. When

we wanted to transfer the play to London, an outside producer, Peter Woolfe, put money into it. He saw it in Chichester and absolutely loved it. But then, when he considered putting money into it, he read all the reviews and it turned out that he had not realised that they are the same person. He wanted me to rewrite it, and when I said that I would never rewrite it, we had exactly the situation of the play, where Ella refuses to cut the stork-passage in her composition. But finally, I changed tiny things because I did want people to get as much out of it as possible. And then the reviews came out, saying, well, it was subtle in Chichester but now they're hammering it over our heads - it's weird.

CW and AR: Was your idea of multiplying the central character related to psychological studies on trauma, sexual child abuse, and dissociation? Did you read such studies when working on *Three Women*?

HC: I didn't set out to write about trauma, so I did talk to a lot of people only after I had written the play. Most of the people found it hard to accept Ella's unconditional love for her father. I am interested in this Elektra Complex, because I think the Oedipus Complex is so often talked about but you rarely hear about the Elektra Complex. I also think that the power system that I wrote about is different from sexual child abuse because Ella was already an adult when their incestuous affair began. However, as Liz says, "after ten years of foreplay, what do you expect?" I think it is also important that memories constantly change, and a new experience can shift everything that was in the past. So for those three women, having made their choices - aborting the baby, having it adopted, and raising it - changes their whole relationships with their past, which is the same past.

CW and AR: You just mentioned that Trauma Studies didn't play a particular role when you wrote the play, and that you only realized later on that there are parallels. Did you have other plays in mind which feature multiple protagonists such as Sarah Daniels's Beside Herself?

HC: I know of it, but I haven't read it. I would like to read that, actually. It has been done before - everything has been done before, but I don't think that there was a particular model. It really came of thinking how different our ways of looking at the world are; our choices are so different, and yet, I felt, essentially we are all absolutely connected.

CW and AR: The three main characters all have to cope with a trauma and do this in very different ways: Liz is very emotional about everything, very furious and unimpressed by social conventions (obvious also in her "striptease"). Beth absolutely avoids any memory and therefore any feeling that could arise, besides she is rational and in control of herself at all times. Ella, we would argue, is somewhere in the middle between the two, influenced by both Liz and Beth. When you developed their characters, were you also thinking about the

Freudian concept of "ICH", "ÜBER-ICH," and "ES," or did the separation of different coping mechanisms automatically lead to characters that would kind of match the Freudian concepts?
HC: I didn't consciously think of these concepts, but I'm glad that the characters have this echo. But, you see, I would like to think that there are many more of them. I would love a German production with an orchestra of women coming on at the end saying, "We have concentrated only on three women, three different choices, but there are so many more possibilities." In the Chichester production we had Harold say at the end: "Mom, look, there they are. Nuns with violins, prostitutes with double-bass, and so on," and that was lovely. But then Sam suggested we should have shadows instead of the speech. This has gone on and off, and on and off, and I lost. I think it's a huge shame. I want to say that we have so many more possibilities, not just these three. Every choice we make takes us on a different journey leaving behind many parallel might-have-beens...