Playwright Anthony Neilson was a key member of ‘In Yer Face’ Theatre, a contentious movement named, hounded and adored by critics in the 90s that challenged traditional theatrical form and content. Plays such as Stitching (2002) and The Censor (1997) won him the Time Out Award and Best Fringe Play. Recent work such as The Wonderful World of Dissocia, produced originally for the 2004 Edinburgh International Festival and performed at the Royal Court in 2007, continues to platform his muscular writing and his often disquieting experiments with form.

Your creative process is interesting, as it steers away from convention and involves actors in the writing process. How does it differ from Mike Leigh’s, who uses improvisation strategies to create the script?

One of my requirements is that I am allowed to create something with no interference, without saying how it will end up. It’s very difficult for theatres to agree to that. It’s risky. The main difference is that I don’t improvise with actors and then use the dialogue. A writer has a certain amount of voices, so when I work with a cast, they are giving me different elements of characters and different rhythms that I utilise. It’s not all work based. I explore elements of their personal lives – it’s whatever happens. If one person is different in that group, it can fundamentally alter the direction. The group of people I work with shapes the thing it becomes. It’s like a tailor making a suit. I don’t think anything I’ve done would be particularly unusual in performance art but what makes it so is the fact that it’s within a tradition of mainstream, text-based theatre.

Your current play, God In Ruins at the Soho Theatre, used this process.

Yes, there were eleven men from the Royal Shakespeare Company. The challenge was what I could do with those ingredients. I wouldn’t have chosen to work with an all-male cast. I didn’t know these men. My writing process forces me to work in a different way. I find it more productive than sitting alone pouring over my own obsessions. When you work in this way, you find different ways of expressing them. So the actors’ influence is huge but not in a definable way. It’s not a democracy. I want to have a strong sense of authorship.

You also direct. Is that integral to the shape of the work?

It’s an overall concept. At the same time that I am working with the actors, I’m
talking with sound and set designers. There’s a big difference between writing something by yourself for some future date and a punter’s experience of being in a theatre. What might be fascinating to you in the writing might not work in the live context so this process creates an environment where you live in the moment. I will bring in some script, give it to the actors and they read it to me so they respond the way an audience would respond. I don’t want the actor to take the script away and filter it through their ego. I get to see their honest response and I can immediately respond. It’s the nearest thing to having an audience there. It’s working instinctively. If you are to keep people’s interests in a play, you are in a constant game with the audience.

*Was this way of working a conscious rejection of conventional ways of writing?*

It came out of my first self-generated plays. I saw the benefits. There’s an urgency that means you are not able to indulge certain more cerebral and egotistical elements of yourself. These elements are not a problem for everyone but they are for me. A lot of the plays I’ve written have been instinctual and emotional. I don’t like to be over-analytic and cerebral. The theatre is first and foremost an emotional form: thought is secondary to experience but a trap of the normal commissioning process is that it’s the other way round. Feeling then goes because it’s hard to sustain the emotion over a six month period. I’m not interested in going down the aisles of history as a great writer. I’m trying to embrace the immediacy and ephemera of theatre. It’s not a handicap that theatre is sudden and transient. I’m not trying to create something at the outset that will necessarily last or exist in another space. It’s also what I feel like writing at the time. I don’t like to pitch an idea and be commissioned to write it six months later.

*The Wonderful World of Dissocia* is written in a more exuberant style than the minimalism of *Stitching* and *The Censor. Why?*

After *Stitching*, I moved towards comedy and the absurd. The fairytale is the pinnacle of story-telling and simplicity is key. There’s also the tradition of pantomime although I’m not mad about its present form. I try to push these forms to bring in more of the textures. Little layers built up to *Dissocia*. I was a mentor for a scheme in Camden where 8-10 year-olds from impoverished backgrounds put on ten-minute plays. You don’t manipulate them into some form of narrative. I watched these plays and they were fantastic because they had these hairpin turns in imagination and moments of real honesty and poignancy. I thought that there’s so much for us to unlearn. A lack of attention span is quite invigorating. There’s so much time spent thinking about what other people think. Questions about what makes good drama, for example. There are a lot of people who are unwittingly observing and defining what makes good theatre – usually critics or academics – and it’s actually the most suffocating form of social censorship. Either ideas are crushed or adventurous work is segregated.

*If you become in demand though – which you have been and now are again surely there are creative constraints that come with success?*

To a certain extent. The irony is that I’m working for the RSC and The National Theatre. I don’t think I’ve compromised my work to become part of that. If anything, those companies have moved over to my way of thinking. You have to be obstinate.
Was Lisa Jones, the protagonist in *Dissocia*, drawn from people in your life? You have a distinct perspective on mental health.

Mental illness is something that’s of interest to me because some of my family members have suffered from it. When you grow up with it around you, you don’t reject people who are ill later on. Lisa’s a composite of several people – a couple of girlfriends, family members; partly me.

**Do you ever make a decision not to draw from someone because it’s unethical?**

I don’t think you even know when things *are* biographical. You can’t separate elements of yourself. I work very quickly and intensely. The pressure outweighs everything and in that way you work more honestly. *The Censor* has a scene where a woman defecates on stage. People thought that was really honest and were asking my ex-girlfriend – ‘God, is he into that?’

**Malleable divisions between reality and fantasy are seductive and can add an extra dimension for the audience.**

Yes, but the elements that are truthful and honest could not necessarily be spotted by outside people, even by yourself, because a play should talk back to you. We are not all the people that we would like to be. Some people write plays and get the person they would like to be to write them. I don’t let the person I would like to be write my plays. I stop him because my plays would be bullshit. I think we have a fidelity to writing some form of truth. Truth is not bringing a particular wisdom or philosophy to anything; it’s simply as you see it. For me, that’s highlighting things people don’t talk about. One of the reasons I create and see art is because it’s a mutual kind of reassurance. You feel that you are not alone; this goes on. People are shocked by honesty. People can be shocked and walk out; that’s a mindset I can do nothing about. Many might be shocked but there’s reassurance. It might not be the right thing to say - it might be racist, sexist, low. It’s my job though to find how and when I see it and put it out there. If anything is utterly unambiguous and people know who I am talking about, then I would be sensitive and I wouldn’t do it. It would be an act of compassion.

**Has the ‘In Yer Face’ label been a hindrance? There aren’t really stylistic or formal similarities between you and the other writers – Sarah Kane, Mark Ravenhill, for example – within that genre.**

It was a journalistic conceit to call it ‘In Yer Face’. I don’t object to it because it was great marketing for me. Every generation gets franker and there’s always going to be a bump because all the B-list critics will become A-list critics and then they will grow old with me. The critical establishment is always a step behind the artistic establishment. What I was trying to do was very different to what Sarah was trying to do, but we were united by a standard, youthful frustration with boring, navel-gazing shows. One observation that applies to Sarah and I is that we were both quite sentimental. I’ve tended to notice the extremities of life: the extreme brutality and the sweetness of it. Because of her condition she didn’t see much of the sweetness. In time, if she had seen that, her plays would have been better. Drama is the most interesting when people are at their most brutal and at their most generous.
In *Stitching*, the couple can’t leave each other. Through the relentless brutality, the final scene is touching; naïve even.

That show is flawed but I always knew that I wanted the last scene to be an extremely tender, gentle moment. It captures something about life. It is the tension between sweetness and brutality. Death underwrites everything that we do. It underwrites our moments of great joy and in that is where art lies. There would be no art if there was not an understanding of mortality. For me it’s the driving force; the way to make sense of the world.

**It’s the key message in The Censor.**

Yes. The Censor smiles at the end because he’s now watching her film and it finally has meaning for him. Something terribly extreme has become assimilated into his life. Certain critics always think that I am having an argument so that Miss Fontaine was representing my argument but I’m much closer to the Censor in that I’m repressed. It was a way of showing somebody breaking open the British reserve and ideas around censorship. Prudishness comes about from an emotional basis. I believe that we are, first and foremost, instinctive. We mediate with intellect and that’s why, when we go to the theatre, I don’t want to continue that mediation process. We mediate enough.

**That’s the reason why theatre is one of the most contemporary political forms.**

I don’t tackle overtly political subjects because of this. I distrust politics – even my own. They are tied up with the person you would like to be as opposed to the person you are.

**You keep referencing this person. Who might he be?**

Maybe it’s more the person you would like others to think you are: mature, wise, sensitive, decent, active, instead of being shallow, hedonistic, depressive. Alan Bennett says that becoming a writer is not necessarily a kind or honourable occupation. If you get truth into your writing, the cost of it is utter apathy in life. You have to see both sides of an argument.

**Which play achieved most of what you set out to do?**

*Dissocia*. I wanted to find a form that would enable people to participate and enter into the psychological space of the protagonist. I could have used a more individualistic experience in the first half of the play but I would then have had to set up what her life was so that the audience could understand where all that stuff came from. I went for more common cultural elements so there are hints of *Alice in Wonderland* and *The Wizard of Oz*. I was pleased with the marriage of form and content. Elsewhere, I like bits and pieces, such as the last scene in *Stitching*.

**How do you envisage the direction of theatre?**

We are on the verge of a far more significant change than in the beginning of the 90s. The three act play seems dusty. We process narrative now in a different way and I’m interested in the internet and how we travel through it. There are these tangential narratives with shows like *The Simpsons* and videogames. Plays will still have to satisfy some basic things, though consistency of tone, resolutions and time frames will not be so important. We have to redefine the well-made play.