



6 Thomasina Carlyle and Toby Wilsher in 'Top Storey'. Trestle Theatre Company 1987-90. (Photo: Joff Chafer.)

### Spontaneity and imagination

Improvisation is a crucial process for many companies, particularly where no writer is specifically involved in the work. Annie Griffin of Gloria relies on improvisation throughout the rehearsal period. Griffin describes the process as 'being in a room for four to six weeks, on my feet, working it out, either with myself or with a group of actors'. She defines the process of improvising as 'playing in rehearsal and letting oneself invent as part of the playing'. During the rehearsals for 'Ariadne', Griffin would set a task and the performers would go off, either singly or in groups, and invent a presentation in response to that task. In the early sessions, tasks were open-ended – for instance, improvising a 'burial at sea' – until the group progressed to more specific aspects of the piece. This process demands a continual, committed involvement from the performers, which means trying things out at every rehearsal.

One performer's role increased from her willingness to try everything in rehearsal, while another encountered problems with the style of the play, comic timing, and the direct relationship with the audience. The actor playing the character 'Dog' tried out numerous dog types in rehearsal, only to discover that he did not need to act like an animal, but just needed a precise kind of movement. Griffin states: 'He found the right note halfway through rehearsals, the right base from which to play, the strong, friendly, funny Dog.' Griffin attempted to give the performers as much as she could about how she saw their characters, what was working, and ideas for further development.

Devised theatre demands contributions of ideas from the performers in a group, causing both frustration and satisfaction much of the time. If a character is being improvised from nothing, then this can be creatively exciting or may encourage feelings of drowning in a sea of ideas and getting nowhere. Pam Schweitzer has clear expectations of performers devising reminiscence theatre for Age Exchange's elderly community. First and foremost, they must enjoy working with old people, be able to look the audience in the eye, and, as Schweitzer observes, 'be able to improvise because anything can happen'.<sup>20</sup> Actors must be versatile, good story-tellers, fast learners, and able to switch roles or leap from one mood to another very

quickly. Age Exchange's first shows were often devised through improvisation, with each actor coming up with a different idea based on a thorough perusal of the transcripts of interviews. Schweitzer comments that each actor's ideas were 'worked through until the best format was found'. These performers are also expected to have strong musical skills, which include a good singing voice and the ability to play at least one musical instrument.

### THE MUSICIAN/DEVISER

The specialist process of musical composition may be needed when devising theatre, from community documentary to theatre-in-education, and in experimental work. Musical composition is often an important contributing process to Age Exchange's devising of reminiscence shows for the elderly. Music increases the celebratory feel of the shows, functioning as a memory trigger for old people, and, as Schweitzer comments, 'a way back into a show for anyone who has lost the thread or lost concentration'. Schweitzer frequently uses music of the period when devising shows, which often comments ironically on the text.

In Gloria's 'Ariadne', the process of musical composition and the creation of Nicholas Bloomfield's musical score was an integral part of the developing devising process in rehearsals. As Griffin observes, 'music always lifts what is happening on stage, inspires, makes things move or appear to move'. In the case of Forced Entertainment's work, the music is composed out of the devising process and is used as a continuous soundtrack throughout the show. The music always accompanies what has developed from the work. The writer, Tim Etchells, states: 'Atmospherically we work off the music, but we don't start with it and ask what we could do with this.' Although not a member of the company, John Avery, the composer, works closely with the group from the early stages of Arts Council application onwards. His involvement includes attending meetings, seeing early runs of possible material, and creating musical sketches in response to what he sees and hears. At some point later in the process, the company tries to work out exactly the kinds and lengths of music needed for the

show. Final versions of the soundtrack usually reach them in the few days before the first performance.

### ENQUIRY

There are certain fundamental processes to be used to a greater or lesser extent by any group devising theatre. The process of researching material can vary from group members reading individually over a prescribed period and then sharing information together to the delegation of specific research activities for small sub-groups to investigate and report back through practical demonstration. Pam Schweitzer of Age Exchange sees the research process as changing with every project, observing that 'it can take anything from two months to two years, depending on the funds available and the dedication of the interviewers'. Transcripts of tape-recorded interviews are the basis of verbatim scripts. Schweitzer comments on the way 'in which several people's stories are woven together to create a collage'.

The actors' involvement in research is encouraged, as is actively contributing to the dramatic shaping of material. It is usually Schweitzer who scripts material with the actors' help, as her prime concern is to find a structure to hold the material together. Schweitzer elaborates further: 'This requires a very thorough knowledge of all the research material available to the project, including documentary visuals and music, on behalf of everyone involved.' Additionally, to every devised product there is a publication of edited and illustrated reminiscences as well as related documentary material collected during the research period. Schweitzer comments that Age Exchange has published over twenty books, 'which sell nationally, and have a life independent of the shows which generated them'.

### DEBATE

The use of discussion within the devising process is different for every group or company. From my own experience of working with student groups, it is clear that a balance is needed between discussion, analysis, and 'on the floor' work. These processes should be integrated when devising theatre, as the dangers of too much talking become apparent in the final

product. It becomes a question of running out of time and rushing significant stages of examination or development of work. A common weakness for inexperienced student companies is to try and say immediately what the product will be, prior to any initial practical exploration of ideas, materials, or each other. The opposite is also true, where group members do not allow a space in the devising period for evaluation and assessment of ongoing practice.

Members of Forced Entertainment are clear about the role of discussion in their approach to work. Some discussions involve the whole group, many do not. Very early on, they discovered the whole group to be an unwieldy object, and that a sub-committee moves faster and more radically. The sub-committee of two or three tends to be the two directors, plus one performer. They follow up work sessions and group discussions, making practical, pragmatic decisions, whilst always returning to the whole group for criticism and help. Every group or company utilises the basic processes of improvisation, research, or discussion in some way or other. They are an implicit part of devising theatre. Processes of writing or visual experimentation are also integral to many companies creating a theatrical performance or product.

## ADMINISTRATION

It is usual for a professional company devising theatre to have an administrator in its group, but it is rare that this role extends into the devising process itself. This is sometimes the case in theatre-in-education, where an administrator may become part of the devising team in the early stages of the work. A group must decide whether to maintain the more traditional responsibilities associated with an administrator's role, such as booking a tour, promoting the product and organising the budget, or to incorporate the administrator into creative decisions made by the company. These decisions also apply to other roles, such as educational liaison officer in a theatre-in-education company, where a balance is needed between devising with the company, communicating with local teachers, and being responsible for producing the 'teachers' pack'. Hilary Hodgson, educational liaison officer for Greenwich Young People's Theatre from 1987 to 1991, finds

it difficult to integrate all aspects of her job at times, but believes that being fully involved means sacrifices and gains have to be made throughout the devising process. It is important for her to promote feedback from the teachers to the company, and to encourage a range of follow-up work that teachers can pursue back at school.

How a group operates is dependent on how the members wish to utilise the tools of devising: whether they want to employ a variety of processes available to them in their allocated roles within the company, or if their ways and means of working are determined by hierarchical or collective structures that suggest specific methodologies of practice. What is important to acknowledge is an awareness that there are many possibilities when devising theatre and that, in the end, it is a question of making choices or decisions that are considered relevant or appropriate by the company for the product in mind. This means returning to original objectives, and questioning whether the tools or processes fit the needs of the work. This evaluation relies on an acknowledgement at the same time of the spontaneous and instinctive development of the group. In chapters four and five, I give further consideration to the similarities and differences of particular devising methodologies, examining how the process of devising relates to a particular working practice, ideology, and product.

# FROM PROCESS TO PRODUCT

## Relationship and practice

It's a situation offering the chance to produce work with a group of people whose ideas I respect so much, and with whom the working process is so good that I know the result is going to be much greater than what I could do myself.

(Terry O'Connor, Forced Entertainment)

Company structure, roles or responsibilities within the group, and the use of a variety of processes all contribute to the making of the devised product. I want to now examine two selected examples of the relationship between practice, process and product from community theatre and experimental theatre. What kinds of product did the devising process create or construct in the case of Age Exchange or Forced Entertainment in 1989 and 1990? Both products used the processes of research, discussion, improvisation, design, writing text, and musical composition to varying degrees in relation to their original aims and objectives or initial decisions about form, content, or audience. It should also be noted that each company inevitably worked out of their last product; this often determines ideas or material for preliminary discussion and planning of their next project.

### AGE EXCHANGE

This is a very stretching way of working when you have to see the material from a scattered set of fragments of memory to a shaped and coherent whole. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

(Pam Schweitzer, Artistic Director of Age Exchange)

Age Exchange claims to be the only full-time professional Reminiscence Theatre company in Great Britain.<sup>1</sup> This company aims to 'improve the quality of life of older people by emphasising the value of their reminiscences to old and young, through pioneering artistic, educational and welfare activities'.<sup>2</sup> The Reminiscence Centre opened in June 1987, and is a unique community centre providing a focus for a range of creative activities for older people. These include the production of books on community history, which put the memories in a permanent, lasting form, adding more significance to the event. Pam Schweitzer points out that those giving their memories for shows are usually thrilled to be in print as well as on stage. Schweitzer claims, 'We involve them in the editing process where possible and they have a say in what goes in to the book; many donate photos as well.'<sup>3</sup> Exhibitions of three-dimensional displays of photographs, objects, murals and memories concentrate on important reminiscence themes that are available before or after a show. The museum allows visitors to handle objects from its collection. Associated with the Centre is the Reminiscence Project, which trains residential workers and health service staff in reminiscence skills, as well as offering training opportunities to anyone wishing to broaden and augment ways of working with elderly people.

Theatre activities are equally varied, and include professional touring productions to the community that last between five and twelve weeks, theatre-in-education participatory projects for classes of primary school children in the Reminiscence Centre using professional actors as well as elderly volunteers, and Youth Theatre productions. Schweitzer believes that the Youth Theatre work brings young people and old-age pensioners together, using similar methods to the adult company, although devising more through improvisation than through transcription and verbatim theatre. Young people work on projects with professional directors and all design work, such as set and props, is supervised by professional staff from Age Exchange.

### Personnel and funding

Such diverse pursuits mean that the permanent core staff must relate widely to all activities, resulting in the employment of





7 Milly Gardner and Irene Swanton (volunteers) with visiting schoolchildren in the Reminiscence Centre, 1990. (Photo: Age Exchange.)

freelance actors, musicians, writers, designers, and researchers for every particular theatre project. Company posts specifically linked to devising community theatre are those of artistic director, press and publicity officer, administrator, and production manager. Although the company's organisation and management is hierarchically structured, there is a collaborative feel to every project in light of the majority of theatre personnel being on short-term contracts to work together over a pre-determined period. Funding for work comes from numerous sources and includes sponsors for particular projects or posts. The company relies heavily on funding from the two local boroughs of Greenwich and Lewisham, on the London Borough Grants Scheme, and on the Department of Health for its reminiscence work. Budgets for theatre projects vary tremendously and often income has to be earned from the performances.

### **Methodology**

Age Exchange has established a particular pattern of working on community theatre projects. This involves close liaison with The Reminiscence Group, which gives feedback on Schweitzer's initial outline for a show, helps and advises on themes, including attendance at rehearsals, and writes material itself. Schweitzer describes the group's involvement:

The old people enjoy it when we are devising a play because they are all creatively involved in it. They get to know the actors quite well and take an interest in the process. The actors take the work seriously because their sources are particularly close at hand.

This approach has developed out of the company's early experiences from its origins in April 1983, when shows were often devised through improvisation. The actors interviewed the elderly, incorporating the better stories around strongly devised characters and a clear plot line, Schweitzer elaborates further, 'improvising within a given shape once the actors have read the material and scripting from these improvisations'. Schweitzer has also collaborated with writers to help structure the verbatim material, such as Joyce Holliday in 1985 on 'Can We Afford the Doctor?' The writer has an editorial role and is

bound by the verbatim approach. However, Schweitzer comments that more recent projects reveal a frequent use of the actual words of old people, returning to a 'verbatim format for the greater feel of authenticity it gives'.

The research period for a show can vary considerably, but is usually longer than the devising period itself. Since 1983, at least twenty shows have been devised within a timescale of two to five weeks. Schweitzer argues that devising means planning structures to achieve objectives, thinking through the shape of a piece, discussing it with fellow artists and with people whose material is being processed. She has used the process of improvisation to discover ways through material in order to develop dialogue, character or motive. Schweitzer observes that 'sometimes it is a way of finding the meaning behind a story which is already scripted but lacks life for its interpreters – a way in to the script'. Schweitzer enjoys working in collaboration with others, devising and scripting a show out of an assemblage of edited material.

Illustrative of this method of working was 'Christmas at War' (1989), which was devised on a budget of about £1,000 over two weeks, followed by another two weeks rehearsing over thirty music cues, as well as producing a set and costumes appropriate to the Christmas-time period of 1940. The idea for this show developed out of research on the theme of evacuation for a previous project, which was the basis for a theatre-in-education programme, 'Goodnight Children Everywhere'. Andy Andrews, an actor with the company, researched the material by interviewing elderly people and recording their stories and memories of Christmas 1940. Andrews worked in collaboration with old-age pensioners at the Reminiscence Centre, as well as visiting two sheltered housing units in South London. Faced with a pile of material, which included stories, eye-witness accounts of bombings, and factual information about the war, both Andrews and Schweitzer were immediately faced with how to make the stories come alive and not simply just become a repetition of oral reminiscences.

An outline scenario was roughly shaped around the stories from the transcripts, which started with the idea of three characters and their relatives. Schweitzer suggests that 'it was about how to husband what we had, how to fashion it into something rather than nothing'. Stories were either listed and

classified as indirect, for instance, things that happened to people's relatives or children, or as direct, which involved them personally in the telling of things that they had encountered. Various stories were allocated to the three central characters. A list of spoofs was also noted, including how to keep the hair nice for the Christmas party, or how to make Christmas pudding based on a recipe using potatoes and carrots. This was followed by Andrews and Schweitzer working in unison on the process of scripting, assembling material, editing, and piecing it together, as well as writing from the resources themselves.

The research produced a great deal of information about a rest centre in the war years, which seemed a good setting for a variety of characters to come together. From the point where the scenario and overall idea were drawn up, the set designer was given a brief to create a portable, practical set for touring community venues. Andrews and Schweitzer also became aware that radio entertainment was an important part of people's lives. In view of the fact that the show would be toured and performed at several Christmas parties, combined with an objective not to make the show too gloomy or downbeat, it was decided to have lots of songs and references to specific radio comedy, reminding the audience about Tommy Hanley, Rob Wilton, and other big stars of the period. Two pensioners scripted a little sketch in the style of Gert and Daisy, which was included in the show. Serious, sad material about a bomb raid that killed two children the day before Christmas Eve was juxtaposed with humour and entertainment. One pensioner, Frank Ball, acted as musical adviser, collating songs and recording artists of the time, checking the musical material of the period. The musical director was invited to discuss the role of music in the show and to contribute to the script. This involved the creation of musical devices to overcome the difficulties of script, devising musical links within the show, as well as rehearsing all the songs and music. Schweitzer had worked in collaboration with both musical director Paula Gardiner and set designer Lisa Wilson over a period of five years prior to this production.

Andrews and Schweitzer devised the show knowing the target audience would be elderly people, many of whom would be at Christmas parties. They also knew that most of the audience would be women, which prompted the decision to

have a cast of two women and one man. The two actresses in 'Christmas at War' were auditioned on November 1st, 1989 and were reading through the first draft of script on November 13th, knowing that the show would open and begin its tour on November 28th, 1989. Certain pensioners had become very involved in the devising process, using their stories to create characters for the piece. The cast was to play the three central characters of an Air Raid Warden, a Cook, and an Auxiliary Nurse who works for the Red Cross, along with fifteen to twenty other characters, who were directly or indirectly related to their families. The style of writing was dissimilar to 'On the River' (1989), where characters were always speaking as though from memory, but was now written as though they were performing in the present. Writing from the stories meant more work on characterisation for Andrews and Schweitzer, which was requested by the actors after the first read-through. Schweitzer explains:

The actors liked it but felt we needed more establishing shots of the three characters, so we went away and scripted in some more bits which were mostly based on material we had, although some of it was slightly freer scripting than we normally do.

Pensioners sitting in on rehearsals also suggested changes to the first draft based on their memories of particular scenes or stories. Script revisions were often made in rehearsal as actors, musical director, or pensioners had ideas or good suggestions.

Connections continued to be made with characters throughout the rehearsal process and sections were re-written accordingly. The piece had a naturalistic feel, incorporating details of the period that would place things for the audience. Devising this show in the year of the fiftieth anniversary of the outbreak of the Second World War meant that it was a frequent topic of conversation for many elderly people, encouraging fresh memories and reminiscences related to the theme of the show. Many pensioners wanted the stories of the war experience to be taken very seriously in the play, and according to Schweitzer these moments tended to be shown in a documentary format, so that they became more detached. Schweitzer believes that the 'lightest touch' can trigger the material, so that there is no need for graphic descriptions, or talking directly about death.

The crucial elements of the show were to be about the separation of families, the City falling down, people trying to keep cheerful, working mad hours, and the economics of making do in the situation. Themes of women in the forces, the home guard, evacuation and civilian bombings were integrated through the three characters, who swapped stories about themselves and their families in a brief respite over the Christmas period at the height of the Blitz. The subsequent devised play is described by Schweitzer as 'a humorous evocation of a war-time Christmas through the memories of Londoners.'

### **The product**

The final devised play script evolved out of a process that starts and ends with the elderly community, integrating the reminiscences of individual pensioners together. These experiences and memories are realised for the audience through the live performance of the play, producing a particular form of reminiscence theatre. It is December 15th, 1989 and I am attending a 'Christmas at War' afternoon performance at Meeting Point, Swanley, in Kent. The atmosphere is one of anticipation and excitement as the production manager, Helen Gaynor, steps forward to introduce the show, telling the audience that all the stories are true and have been told by friends of Age Exchange. The show is to last one hour. It begins with the 'Blackout Stroll' and Andy Andrews, as Fred the Air Raid Patrol Warden, provides a background for us of Christmas 1940. Statistical information is given of thirty thousand dead and three million homes destroyed between September and Christmas 1940. Fred, Doreen, and Lil establish their characters and their relationship to the situation. A gasp goes up from the audience of pensioners at the first musical reference to listening to the radio; they remember it well!

The set is simple in design and construction, representing a room in a London Rest Centre. A variety of musical instruments, such as guitar, banjo, accordion and double bass, are placed at the side of the performance space within the rather rectangular room of this popular community venue. There is a coat-stand filled with numerous garments and hats, offering the actors a quick change from one character to another. Fred

the Air Raid Patrol Warden speedily plays Frank, a child performing Joseph in the Christmas Nativity. An extract from an unpublished copy of the 1989 script records the humour between Doreen and Frank:

Doreen: Well it's all going well till they come to the bit where the three wise men offer the gifts. I bring you gold. . . frankinsence (*sic*). . . and myrrh. . . And little Frank's started crying. Well, the whole play stopped so I went up and said to him, 'What are you crying for?' And he says:

Frank: They keep making fun of me.

Doreen: What do you mean?

Frank: They keep saying Frank's got no sense.

Doreen: I explained it to him, and gave him a cuddle, but he's still crying, so I says, 'What is it now?' And he says:

Frank: They say I've got myrrh. I might have nits, but I haven't got myrrh.

This is representative of the style of playing where a change of costume, often a coat or a hat, denotes a new character, whether it is Lil's daughter Deidre, an evacuee in Cornwall playing a butterfly in the local village pantomime, or her eldest daughter, Margaret, who attempted to escape back to London by cycling in the snow late at night, only to be caught by a policeman and returned to her village. Actors move in and out of narratives, but always return to their last positions as the three central characters to continue the underlying thread of action.

The use of music and singing songs are integral to this show. The three performers sing 'Goodnight Children Everywhere', which immediately causes much talking in the audience. The song 'Home on Leave' is a good example of performers singing in harmony together, and illustrates the versatility, energy, and attack of the cast. References to advertisements or products of the period elicit a huge response from the audience. Doreen's story about making face cream from lard and glycerine to give as Christmas presents in Shippams fish paste jars is thoroughly enjoyed, which immediately results in the audience joining the cast in the singing of 'Keep Young and Beautiful if you want to

be Loved'. More stories follow, including the one about Fred's dog called Sandy, who got drunk from licking all the alcoholic liquid pouring down the cellar walls from the upstairs shop, and the story about the unexploded bomb that turned out to be water from an overflowing pipe dripping into an old tin bath.

The storytelling works well, juxtaposing humour and pathos throughout the show. There is a strong sense of the period and the radio entertainment material seems particularly effective with the pensioners. The serious references to raids for seventy-six nights continuously, or living conditions inside an air-raid shelter, are balanced against cast and audience singing 'Roll out the Barrel' in a warm, responsive manner. The show ends and one of the actresses tells the audience that books about these reminiscences, such as *All Our Christmases*, are available at the other end of the room. The audience clap once more to a last chorus of 'Roll out the Barrel', which is followed by the Mayor of Swanley thanking the cast and recalling his memories of Christmas 1940 and 'the Blitz'. I observed an audience who laughed, cried and acknowledged their memories of this period, further substantiated in discussion with the pensioners after the show. The cast always talk to the audience after each performance. For the performers, it has been a 'physically gruelling' and stressful show, as there was so much in it and no possibility of fooling this particular audience.

### Evaluation

'Christmas at War' was devised for, with, and from a specifically targeted elderly audience. This particular community initiated and participated in various ways towards the creation of a theatrical performance, which produced a unique experience between performers and spectators. Age Exchange's working practice raises a number of interesting questions with wider theoretical implications about the value and significance of devising theatre for a particular community (including reminiscence theatre for the elderly), and the importance of evaluating the process in relationship to the product. There is no common critical language in which devised theatre can be assessed or understood, which implies a need to differentiate and articulate ways of looking at community theatre. How is





8 Clare Summerskill, Andy Andrews, and Rebecca Clow in 'Christmas at War'. Age Exchange Theatre Company, 1989. (Photo: Alex Schweitzer.)

excellence or success to be judged in light of accessibility for the audience to create the product?

I want to examine the relationship between the devising process of 'Christmas at War' and the touring theatrical performance to community centres, sheltered homes, clubs, and hospitals. The devising process of 'Christmas at War' involved the active participation of old-age pensioners in the creation of the product. The elderly local community contributed to the process through research, writing, and input into rehearsals. It is the pensioners' stories, reminiscences, and source material that formed the basis for developing work. The involvement of members of the Reminiscence Group in rehearsals constantly reminded the company of the purpose of the devised product and its intended audience. The product in performance is illustrative of where the process started and how it has been completed: from the early reminiscences of the local community with some members of the company to a wide-ranging discussion of the performance (and subsequent memories) between performers and spectators after the show.

Devising reminiscence theatre is a collaborative experience that brings pleasure to those it is intended for. The enjoyment is in the recognition of the content, the participation in the form, and being part of the whole experience. There is a sense of entertainment in the work, witnessed in the enjoyment gained by pensioners revising the script during rehearsals, or in the overall playing style and format of the performance. Age Exchange certainly fulfils the aim of wanting to entertain and inform through the company's exploration of living memory.

However, is there a therapeutic value in devising a piece of reminiscence theatre, or indeed in the spectating of the created product? What is the value of devising theatre for the elderly? The performance goes beyond that initial conversation between two pensioners recalling their memories of Christmas 1940, and provides a focus for communal sharing, communication, and interaction. (This is evident from the audience's sense of togetherness in the laughter at the comedy, or in the singing with the performers.) Indeed, this is the basis when devising theatre for any community, as are preliminary objectives or statements of intention specific to the nature of the project. Thus, the evaluation arises out of initial aims or goals in relation to the development of both process and product.

## FORCED ENTERTAINMENT

The process for this show is different to the last one and the one before. It's about creating something that has a different engagement with its audience than the last piece had, which means pushing at developments in form all the time.

(Terry O'Connor, Forced Entertainment)

With these tools we're trying to make a theatre that's both emotionally and intellectually engaging, allowing audiences to create their own meanings in the spaces between its texts, a theatre that trusts in its audience to find its own ways through.

(Tim Etchells, Forced Entertainment)

Since 1984 Forced Entertainment Theatre Co-operative has devised nine innovative theatre pieces for touring in Britain and abroad. The company is regarded as one of the most inspiring new British permanent ensembles to be creating experimental work out of the 1980s and into the 1990s, 'at the sharp end of the nation's cultural self-expression.'<sup>4</sup> In April 1987, Claire MacDonald (co-founder of Impact Theatre) described Forced Entertainment as:

the most interesting and dynamic company on offer. Their work is highly expressionistic and is in a continual process of reinventing the languages of postmodern fiction and film for the space of theatre. It is also work which makes a serious attempt to confront the political and cultural reality of contemporary Britain through the fictional representation of urban life.<sup>5</sup>

Certainly, they are eclectic in their sources and original in their ideas, devising work that combines complex use of video, choreography, set, lighting, text, and specially commissioned soundtracks by Sheffield musician John Avery. As for every devised show, the company works collectively and collaboratively, with every group member in a particular role, or responsible for specific aspects of the work.

## Personnel

'Some Confusions in the Law about Love' (1989-90) involved two new members for this piece, Claire Marshall and Fred McVittie, challenging the group to look anew at each member's contribution and relationship to the work. The company wanted to broaden their experience, communicate with new people from outside, clarify past methods of working, and benefit from a fresh input of ideas and a critical outside eye. There were five performers addressing a variety of aspects of the devising process, all of whom were in charge of other areas, such as contributing to stage management, costumes, video work, or daily administration. The two directors, Richard Lowdon and Tim Etchells, were also individually responsible for set and lighting, or text in the show.

Etchells explains the necessity of company members being committed to the development of the work: 'We don't hire in actors, the traditional theatre notion of hiring actors is an anathema to us.'<sup>6</sup> The company acknowledges that it is probably the hardest way to work with the least rules to fall back on, demanding most of an individual and costing a great deal in terms of relationships with others. Etchells concludes that if a company devises work to no fixed formula, then there is a big cost to each individual, and all group members get used to 'putting a lot on the line for the company.'

The company's work has progressed from using found atmospheres from television, film or fictional worlds as starting points to combining images from a range of sources, and then evolving a world around them. Their work presents the concerns of the time and their relationship with mass culture in a theatrical language that is constructed out of fragments from television, film, music, literature, advertisements and the company's own experiences. They are committed to a number of fundamental objectives in the development of their theatrical work. They aim to pursue non-naturalistic dramatic structures, which may contain hints of narrative, but are not obliged to tell a story. They wish to reveal a range of levels of performance within a show, so that performers may be viewed as being aware of the fictions they take on. The company wants pieces to contain contradiction and a multiplicity of meanings or interpretations, engaging its audience on a number of levels,

emotionally, viscerally, or through ideas. They juxtapose meanings that are generated from different sources, such as a variety of texts on stage, taped voice, video, and music.

### **Finance**

The company spent its first two years supported by some funding from Sheffield City Council and Yorkshire Arts (now Yorkshire and Humberside Arts), as well as small amounts of commissioning money from venues. 'Let the Water Run its Course (To the Sea that Made the Promise)' (1986) produced a significant change in the work as well as bringing their first Arts Council of Great Britain Project grant. Others have followed since then for '200% & Bloody Thirsty' (1988-89) and 'Some Confusions in the Law about Love' (1989-90), as well as sponsorship and support from Barclays Bank, as part of the New Stages Awards, for 'Marina & Lee' (1991) and 'Emanuelle Enchanted' (1992-93). The British Council has consistently supported the group in its touring abroad, and the company also receives income from workshops, residencies, lectures, and talks.

### **Approach**

Forced Entertainment is interested in devising work that has an organic life of its own. The company gathers together an almost random pile of text, images, ideas and personal experiences, out of which comes the subject matter for a piece. The process of placing texts or images against each other happens in rehearsal, and it may be weeks or months before the meanings or resonances of the material are realised. Forced Entertainment makes work that is about the way people define themselves against and through the mass culture. It is the language by which the company addresses and defines everything else in a piece. The company uses a variety of processes to create a performance world with a clear structure, and its own rules and vocabulary of speech and movement. Members are keen to create work that enriches or enhances the audience's perception of their own situation, acknowledging the power and role of spectators in the completion of a piece. A company pamphlet of 1988 describes the work:

By making art, we shape and re-shape the world in the same way as we all must live our lives: struggling to orient ourselves in the midst of our past and presents, assembling and re-assembling our contradictory experiences of the world. Memories, aspirations, stories, ideologies and desires are combined in endless attempts to find new and better structures to make sense of ourselves and our world.<sup>7</sup>

'Some Confusions in the Law about Love' exemplifies a practice and process that is continually ongoing, changing with every performance and discussion of the work. The devising of this show is not particularly typical of the nine pieces created since 1984, but reflects a turning point in the company's work with the exploration of live text on stage spoken through microphones, integrated with video performers and a musical soundtrack. The beginnings of the devising process started in summer 1989; the first work-in-progress preview was at Nottingham Polytechnic on October 31st, 1989, and the show toured throughout Britain and Europe in 1990. Within the course of a year, I monitored both process and product, observing discussion, the use of early improvisations, experimentation with texts, and rehearsals, as well as seeing four different versions of the show in Nottingham, London, and Basildon, Essex.

Forced Entertainment wanted to extend their work out of '200% & Bloody Thirsty', where they had used text on stage for the first time, having previously worked with taped text or performers using a gibberish language comprising entirely of sound or vocal rhythm as in 'Let the Water Run its Course (To the Sea that Made the Promise)'. '200% & Bloody Thirsty' is described by Etchells in the article 'Forced Entertainment, You and The City' as follows:

In the show a trio of characters awoke on the bed centre stage and then dressed up in very bad costumes and wigs to enact a series of scenes and fragments that concerned them. Chief amongst these was the Nativity story, replayed several times at drunken manic speed, before finally being acted out by the performers dressed in cardboard angels wings, very sweetly, very quietly. The

whole proceedings were watched over by two further angels on video.<sup>8</sup>

The company wanted to develop further the use of performers on video, as well as looking at the complex relationship or interaction between live performers on stage and those on video. Out of the set design and stage world of '200% & Bloody Thirsty' grew a preoccupation with skeletal theatricality. Etchells comments, 'the more we can re-use from old pieces in a slightly different way the better – that feels very comfortable.' In terms of material, the company wanted to include things that had been previously discussed, such as Elvis Presley, or develop themes from the characters in '200% & Bloody Thirsty'. The company was keen to continue an exploration of form, ideas (for instance, the concept of something beyond human experience, or developing themes of miraculous power), and style of performance where characters act out a number of different identities and roles.

### Stimuli

The process for 'Some Confusions in the Law about Love' started with a variety of initial ideas, images and source materials, including ghosts, poltergeists, mediums, stand-up comics, romantic notions of love, and a small stage with red curtains, which related to a tacky style of nightclub presentation, and was more overtly theatrical than previous work. As part of a rather shoddy nightclub feel, the company discussed strange sorts of spiritualist acts that incorporated hypnotism, seances and mind reading. They tried out and improvised various ideas to do with hypnotic regression, but these proved uninteresting for they produced a form that held few possibilities for surrealism or the unexpected. The company worked in a series of mocked-up models of the intended performance space, designed by Lowdon and constructed by the group. In the early stages of the devising process a wide range of texts was examined, including the love stories of Plato's *Symposium*, and the book *Elvis Presley Speaks* by Hans Holzer, reporting the case history of a New Jersey housewife called Dorothy Sherry, who claimed that she was visited by the spirit of Elvis Presley after his death.

The group explored the personal relationship between Dorothy and Elvis, imagined or otherwise, and were interested to look at the variety of claims that have been made about him, such as, Presley speaking beyond the grave and faking his own death. Forced Entertainment had been interested in Elvis Presley material for two years, but also wanted to pursue the notion of second-rate, supernatural acts and the way that they often focus on death. Their exploration of the differences between those who are dead, those who fake death, and people who become ghosts, prompted a number of questions for further examination. Questions about spirituality in an alienating world where the possibilities of belief have been reduced; enquiries into what it is to be human, whether it is possible to believe in anything, or what it takes to make people feel something: these have been present in every piece of work.

The idea of ghosts comes from a potent image and form that is still alive in contemporary culture, cartoons, and films. According to O'Connor, who co-directed '200% & Bloody Thirsty' and performs in 'Some Confusions in the Law about Love', it holds a meaning that has become very sophisticated and tongue-in-cheek, almost trashy. O'Connor considers it a serious theme in terms of exploring what lies outside the human existence, questioning how much of the ghost is a real person and how much is not. O'Connor states:

there is a constant flux of images and symbols that are being used, recreated, or reappropriated all the time. It's something we do without much effort, you stick a sheet over you and you're a ghost. It has that instantaneous quality.

Time was given to exposing themselves to various materials, including watching films like *Topper* with Cary Grant, or *Poltergeist*, and reading Noel Coward's play *Blithe Spirit* together. They also decided that they needed an alternative literary source of input to counter these ideas, becoming interested in the acting out of great romantic texts and exploration of romantic ideals.

The visual tone of the piece was important at the start of the devising process, as envisaged in the original image of a shoddy stage with red curtains, peopled by men in maroon velvet suits, stand-up comics, and dancing girls with jackets over their



shoulders. Linked to the design concept of a theatre within a theatre was the idea of the relationship between audience and performer. In the same way that the company experimented with texts, they considered different visual structures, building various mock-ups so that people could be seen against the set, and working within the proposed performance space. This company always devises within the designed performing area in order to feel a sense of the space, discovering more about a particular environment. For 'Some Confusions in the Law about Love' initial ideas of naturalistic locations for the action – especially a hotel bedroom and a nightclub stage – soon gave way to a design that referred to these locations without exactly depicting either of them. In a play between naturalism and abstraction, solid surfaces like walls were indicated with skeletal steel structures, the floor gained trapdoors and the night-time sky (beyond the window of the room, or perhaps backing the stage) was represented tackily with a curtain of electric stars. As with the set, there is a wide catchment area of ideas for about ten basic costumes, including exploration of made-up skeleton outfits, girls in mock Greek, white flowing robes with gold cord at the waist, and showgirls in sequinned swimming costumes, which will have been reduced to two or three by the time the show is performed.

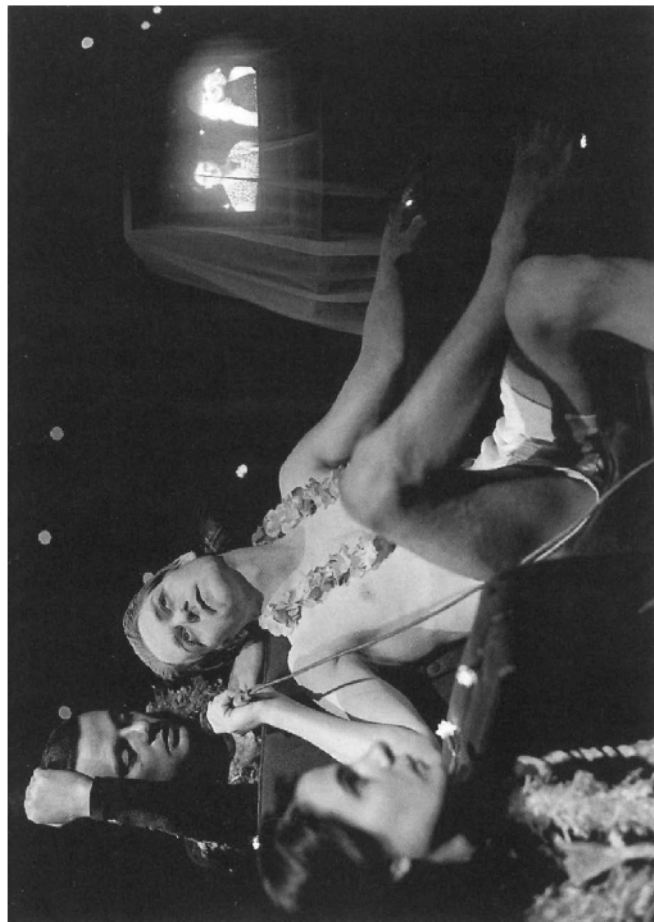
### **Ways of working**

The length of process varies with every show, and is described by O'Connor as 'serving the work, rather than the work coming out of the process that has been decided upon'. 'Some Confusions in the Law about Love' was envisaged to take five to six months' hard work, allowing for trying things out and throwing them away. Financially, the company can not afford this length of devising period (money from the Arts Council covers about twelve weeks' rehearsal), but believes that time is essential for finding its way towards an end. Etchells is clear that the final product will be nothing like that from which they are starting. Discussion is open to every company member and shared by everyone, although Etchells suggests that the danger is always not to interrogate ideas to everyone's satisfaction. Commitment to a set of specific ideas is essential in order to define what is to happen on stage, and plotting the progression

of the material enables the discovery of what it does to the characters.

Central to the devising process is the creation of performance personas who will inhabit the stage world and give rise to its action. These personas (close to the hearts of the performers themselves, but not the same as them) feature in 'Some Confusions in the Law about Love' and much of the company's work, and they are used to present a number of contradictory layered performances. Thus, the crisis Robin Arthur presents on stage lies somewhere between that of a hopeless Birmingham Elvis impersonator and the drug-induced confusion of Presley himself. The personas that exist on stage are often only glimpsed through layers of other fictions and pretences – here 'characters', if they can be called such, exist only in the gaps between other texts. Etchells observes, 'that's a kind of paradigm for what will be happening behind the piece, that you're never really sure where the put-ons and acts begin or end.' A strong preoccupation is whether to have a core character or interlocutor, who stands between the audience and the acts, independent of decisions about what the video monitors will show, and how they will interact with the performers on stage. The character of 'Hans' was developed so that he had a series of monologues in the nightclub, becoming a kind of host or compère for the show. The group tried out many ideas with videos, which provided an alternative text for the performer playing Hans to interview a tawdry sex act (Mike and Dolores), via satellite from Hawaii. Elsewhere in the show, the same performers represent skeletons emerging from trapdoors in the stage floor to enact a Japanese romantic narrative. For Etchells, a key consideration became how to combine material they had basically found, vandalised or cobbled together from other sources, with material that they had written or made up entirely.

Linked to this is the problem of how to deal with action, when the decision has been made to use microphones, which limit opportunities for performers to move on stage. The company is keen to integrate text and movement whose actions are smaller and more detailed than in previous work, and is adopting a different approach and emphasis to the large, caricatured cartoon-like gestures of earlier shows. More often than not, the company works out of the narrative or fiction,



9 Claire Marshall, Fred McVittie, and Robin Arthur in 'Some Confusions in the Law about Love'. Forced Entertainment Theatre Co-operative, 1989-90. (Photo: Hugo Glendinning.)