

of body awareness as appropriate. Test awareness further by stroking the left leg from thigh to foot. Concentrate all attention and love on to that leg until ready to move around the room. How does the leg compare with the right leg? Is it heavier, warmer, or stronger? Now, standing still with eyes closed, imagine the process of stroking the right leg. Remember how it felt, focussing on the earlier process and sensations. Walk around the room and become aware if the right leg feels any different.

Now find a place to stand in the room, marking the position or stance adopted in relation to others. Establish who is where, and how they are standing. On an agreed command, all move to someone else's position, trying to remember where everyone in the group started. Continue this process, correcting each other until everybody knows all the positions. Then without further commands, spontaneously move to new positions as a group, arriving at the same time. Each time, help anyone who is wrong or without a position. Continue the exercise until everyone can confidently change all positions within the group. This exercise warms up the participants in terms of concentration, memory, and group dynamics.

### **Group dynamics**

It must be said, however, that it is the South American theatre practitioner Augusto Boal who has inspired, challenged, and influenced me most in relation to working with groups when devising theatre. My first impressions of Boal in 1985<sup>8</sup> were of a radical, political, charismatic man working with his Paris-based company on the techniques of the 'theatre of the oppressed'.<sup>9</sup> Working with him in 1988, 1989, and 1992<sup>10</sup> has developed my awareness and ability to address the potential, problems, and difficulties that can arise in a group devising theatre. Boal has developed these techniques, games, and exercises from the 'theatre of the oppressed'<sup>11</sup> as a way of challenging preconceptions, and illustrating quite radical ideas about power hierarchies and dynamics.

Boal's methods of working are useful for any group devising theatre. They enable an exploration of individual and group dynamics, relationships between people, sensitivity, trust, giving and taking, and listening skills. They can help establish

those people in a group with a need to assert themselves, to be recognised, quick to intervene or criticise the work. Some techniques engage with the world of fantasy or imagination, whilst others encourage members of a group to become more open to new ideas, humble in opinions, observations or comments, to be able to distance themselves or stand back at times, to directly say what is felt, and to be more flexible or adaptable as appropriate.

The 'theatre of the oppressed' is both a method of working, and a language to analyse the interaction of group dynamics. Boal's techniques can be used in many ways, which is what attracts me to his work. I have used these techniques to dynamise or stimulate members of a group to show or see themselves in light of others. This is a learning process that cannot be forced, but comes from and with desire, choice, and recognition. Boal's techniques challenge a group to share and discover ideas practically with each other. In the same way, Boal's exercises and games for introductory group sessions stimulate members to build, develop, and communicate a group confidence and enjoyment of working cooperatively.

Boal divides preliminary exercises into four categories (to feel what we touch, to listen to what we hear, several senses, to see what we look at), proposing a range of activities that embrace the basics of initial group work. Here are some selected examples from each category:

## *1st category (to feel what we touch)*

### Hypnosis:

- 1 In pairs: One person holds the palm of their hand upright. The partner must focus and follow the palm of the hand with their nose and face as near to the palm as possible. Swop in turn as leader or follower.
- 2 In threes: The leader holds both palms upright for both others to follow. Swop in turn as leader or follower.
- 3 As a group: One person starts with palm of hand as leader of the exercise. All go in, one by one, locating a particular point of contact to follow on the next person. Try keeping as near to them as possible, or as far away as possible, and finally place the nose on the original point of contact.

Mimosas:

- 1 In pairs: One touches the other's body, so that the partner must immediately start shaking that part of the body in response to the contact. This is continued so that the partner is using the whole body in the end to spontaneously respond to different points of contact. Swop in turn.
- 2 Continue the exercise so that a sound is also made with each physical contact. Try and make the sounds as melodic as possible.

*2nd category (to listen to what we hear)*

Machine of rhythms:

- 1 As a group: Everyone stands in a circle with one volunteer in the middle. The person begins making a rhythmic movement and sound of a machine. One by one, everybody joins in, relating their movement and sound to a specific person or part of the machine. The group now operates as a rhythmic movement and sound machine.
- 2 Repeat the exercise as a 'Hate Machine'. The individual's focus is on a rhythmic movement and sound of hate that relates to another one observed in the group.
- 3 Repeat the exercise as a 'Love Machine'.
- 4 Repeat the exercise as an 'England Today Machine'.

Note: Once the group is working as a machine, speed up the rhythm very fast; slow down until the group finds a way to stop on its own.

(This exercise is about spontaneity, impulse and instinct. It is not about thinking of the various possibilities or interpretations of the theme.)

West Side Story:

- 1 As a group: Divide into two groups at either end of the space with a leader at the front. The leader makes a sound and movement, which is copied by other members of group one, as they advance towards group two. The leader of group two responds to group one's movement/sound, which is copied by group two. They advance on group one, who retreat

## DEVISING THEATRE

backwards. This pattern is then repeated in continuum, with a new leader stepping forward each time.

Note: The actions and sounds should become more complicated as the exercise progresses and both groups gain in confidence.

### *3rd category (several senses)*

Noise:

- 1 In pairs: One is 'blind' and must move towards an agreed noise made by the partner. The partner explores making the lowest sound so that it is almost inaudible. Swop in turn.

Note: Boal suggests that at some point somebody else makes the sound to test if the 'blind' person is aware that it is not their partner.

### *4th category (to see what we look at)*

Complete the image:

- 1 Using two people, start by demonstrating them shaking hands together. Encourage the group to comment on the image, saying the first things that come into their heads. Immediately respond to the image and as Boal says, 'Do not censor what you speak'.<sup>12</sup>
- 2 In pairs: Start by shaking hands. One drops out and looks at the image of their partner. That person returns and makes a new joint image in relation to their partner. The partner drops out, looks at the person, returns and makes a new joint image again.

Note: This exercise is about fostering the objective and subjective at the same time. The aim is to work spontaneously and instinctively, rather than thinking and interpreting the ideas of the image.

I have selected only a few examples to indicate the kind of exercises and warm-up activities available to a group, and suggest looking at *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*<sup>13</sup> for a more detailed description of these exercises, and further information about Boal's work. Other books that I have found helpful in terms of selecting and adapting warm-up exercises for a group

are Moshe Feldenkrais' *Awareness Through Movement*,<sup>14</sup> Iyengar's *Light on Yoga*,<sup>15</sup> and Litz Pisk's *The Actor and His Body*.<sup>16</sup> What I must reiterate is the significant point that every group must decide on its own needs in terms of choosing exercises, games, or warm-up activities that will benefit those particular individuals, the project, and the initial objectives of the group. Explore what is relevant and appropriate in context of the specific circumstances.

This section ends with a selection of exercises that I have used with new groups to encourage a spirit of communication and cooperation, in order to develop skills of concentration, trust, and sensitivity to each other. They are drawn from a wide range of eclectic experiences and sources, proving of value in a number of diverse working situations. They can be incorporated together as an initial preliminary group session, or used independently as required.<sup>17</sup>

## Introductory group exercises

### *1 Name game*

Standing in a circle, each person introduces him/her self in any way they choose, moving and speaking within the centre of the circle. Everybody then goes in and imitates the presentation as accurately as possible. Repeat so that the movement/speech is more individually adventurous and inventive.

### *2 Getting to know each other*

- 1 Within a time limit of two minutes, individuals introduce themselves through their name and one piece of chosen information to every member of the group.
- 2 Greet every member of the group with a particular physical gesture that is special to each new pairing or partnership. There is no discussion in this exercise, with every pair finding a gesture collaboratively without words. Each member of the group now has a repertoire of physical greetings.
- 3 Divide the group into two lines and number them individually. The left side line is numbered 1-6 left to right, and the

right side line is numbered 1-6, right to left, so that the 'ones' are diagonally opposite each other. One person calls out two numbers, for instance, 'left one' and 'right five', and those two people must physically greet each other in the central space. There is no discussion, and if greetings cannot be remembered, the pair must improvise.

### 3 *Games*

#### 'Yes, let's!'

One person is elected to start, and makes a suggestion to the group, prefaced by 'Let's all. . .', to which everyone replies with huge enthusiasm, 'Yes, let's. . .'. The suggestion is then carried out by all the group, and continues until somebody says 'Let's all. . .', and so the activity continues.

Note: This is a fun game, but each suggestion should be carried out with serious intent.

#### 'Zing, zing, zing and 1,2,3'

Standing in a circle, each person is numbered individually. The game opens with everyone chanting 'Zing, zing, zing and 1,2,3', followed by the person elected to begin, such as, 'number one', saying a number, for example, 'number six'. The person who is number six replies, 'Who me?', and number one says, 'Yes you!'; number six answers, 'Not me!', with number one questioning 'Then who?'. Number six suggests 'Number three', and so the pattern is repeated. Once the sequence is established, it is useful to play with the vocal presentation of the exercise in terms of pace, tone, and diction. If the game breaks down at any point, the group chant is spoken and the exercise starts afresh.

Note: Other useful group games are 'Killer', 'Grandmother's Footsteps' and 'Court of the Holy Dido'.

### 4 *Cannoning*

Standing in a circle holding hands, think of this exercise as creating a current of group electricity. One person starts by raising their left arm upwards, which immediately triggers off

the raising of the next person's right arm, so that we witness a series of arms being raised around the circle. Back to the opening person again, and the arms are brought down in sequence. This is then followed by each person bending their knees in turn, and is finally completed with a straightening of knees sequence.

Note: This exercise demands high levels of group concentration, and should be neatly carried out with quick, crisp, concise movements that flow around the circle.

### *5 Group huddle*

Divide into two groups or remain as one group. One person stays outside the group as members make a 'rugby tackle huddle', bodies interlocked with heads down towards the ground. The outsider has to climb over the 'huddle', experimenting with ways of travelling across the group. Each person has a turn at finding a way to cross the 'huddle'.

### *6 Movement game*

- 1 Standing in a circle, the first person, for example, A, creates a movement inside the circle and takes it to B. B must 'pick up' the movement on the spot before moving off into the circle with the movement. Once inside the space, B must change the movement instinctively without stopping the flow or direction so that a new movement is created, and then given to C. This pattern is then continued by members of the group. (Note: The fluidity of movement is important, and each person must be encouraged to really explore and experiment when changing the movement before it is finally passed on to someone else. The exercise is about being inventive, creative, and accurate in imitation.)
- 2 Repeat the exercise using sounds as well as movement. Again, it is vital that there is a fluid continuity of sound development with each new experimentation and change of person.

Note: Let the movement and sound evolve naturally out of

exploration rather than intellectually planning and preparing in the head.

*7 Concentration exercises*

- 1 In a group: Standing in a circle, the person elected to start, A, looks at B and walks slowly across the circle to them. Meanwhile B looks at C, who must say B's name aloud before A reaches B. B is then free to look at D and move to them. D must look at E, who says D's name before B arrives and D is free to move. (Note: This is an excellent exercise for any group, and can be included as part of an introductory warm-up routine. Once established, the participants should be able to run across the space so that it becomes a fast-moving alertness exercise.)
- 2 '1,2,3' – for pairs: A and B stand about three feet apart, facing each other. Using a spoken number sequence of '1,2,3', A says '1', B says '2', A says '3', B says '1', and so on. Once the sequence is clearly established, then the person who says '1' stamps their left foot at the same time. This is continued until the pair is satisfied with the sequence. Finally, the person who says '3' hits their head with their right hand so that a rhythmic flow is completed.
- 3 'Hi-yee' – for pairs: A and B stand about three feet apart, with knees bent and one finger of each hand pointing up towards the ceiling. This is the opening ceremonial gesture for the exercise. Make sure that both people can touch each other's noses comfortably. When ready, the pair jump together into opening position whilst shouting out 'Hi-yee' as the start to concentration. The aim is to touch the partner's nose without being told to stop. 'Stop!' is spoken when one of the pair is aware of the finger coming towards the nose.
- 4 'Mirrors' – for pairs: A and B stand about three feet apart, facing each other. The exercise should start slowly as they aim to imitate every movement made, as if watching a mirrored reflection of themselves. Gestures should be slow and simple until a confidence/trust is developed between the partners. At a later stage, the pair can move together around the space, find another pair, and make a mirror reflection of four people. (Note: If movements are to be accurately imitated, a strong sense of concentration is required between



the two people, which can only be developed slowly over a period of time.)

*8 Trust exercises*

- 1 Everyone stands at one end of the room except for the teacher/leader/facilitator/director, who stands at the other end. In turn, each person walks the length of the room with their eyes closed, until the leader says 'Stop'. The rest of the group observe individuals to see if they slow down in anticipation of the command to stop and open their eyes.
- 2 Repeat (1) at a jogging pace.
- 3 Repeat (1) at a running pace. (Note: The leader must pay particular attention to safety provision in terms of physically stopping the individual, and allowing plenty of surrounding space at this end of the room.)
- 4 In pairs: In turn, A and B practise falling backwards into each other's arms. It is best to start with one person standing closely behind the other until confidence and trust is established. Ideally, B should be some distance away from A, so that A falls backwards, and B steps forward to catch A. (Note: B should bend knees when taking the weight of A.)
- 5 In group(s): Divide into small groups with each person in turn standing with their eyes closed in the centre of the circle. The group should be sufficiently close to catch the falling person and gently pass them to and fro within the circle. There should always be two people working together to receive the falling person and pass them across the circle. (Note: This is a real test of group trust, and is also a relaxing experience for the person in the middle of the group.)
- 6 Group diving exercise: Six to eight people are needed to form two lines opposite each other, about three feet apart. Everyone stands with the palms of their hands facing upwards, ready to catch the person who will dive into the receiving group of people. The 'diver' runs up to the group, jumps and springs into a horizontal diving position, and is then caught by the group. (Note: With more confident individuals, be aware of the distance they may travel through the air.) Sometimes, it requires more or less people to stand together because of an individual's size, height, weight, or degree of confidence. Once everyone is happy with this exercise, there

are variations that can be developed; for instance, the group members face away from each other at the start, and turn together to receive the 'diver', or the 'diver' stands on a table or rostrum and dives from a height into the group's arms.

Note: Always be aware of safety precautions for any or all of these trust exercises.

*9 Introductory improvisation*

- 1 Standing in a circle, one person (A) volunteers to be in the middle. A further six volunteers are selected to participate in the exercise. In turn, each person must create a new situation for A to spontaneously respond to and improvise from as one volunteer enters and the other exits. With each new person there should be an immediate change of situation, which challenges A to relate to a new set of circumstances.
- 2 Standing in a circle, one person (B) volunteers to be in the middle. The first volunteer (C) enters the group and places B in a situation to improvise with C. At an appropriate point, another volunteer (D) enters the circle, creating an alternative context for B, C, and D to improvise. No one leaves the circle, so that the last volunteer will create a situation that involves all members of the group improvising together.
- 3 Standing in two circles (inner and outer), pairs are formed by the inner circle turning to face the outer circle. A series of different circumstances and contexts is given by the leader, so that each new pair can spontaneously improvise the situation. Examples are: one of the pair has failed to keep an important appointment with the other; one has borrowed something from the other and failed to give it back; one is interviewing the other for a specific job that the interviewee is trying to discover at the same time. (Note: It is important that the inner circle moves round each time, so that partners change with every new improvisation.)

Note: These introductory exercises can produce a tendency towards rather shallow improvisation at first, with unreal characters, conversations, and situations. It is important to address this as a group, using observations of the exercises as a basis for discussion about the process of improvising with

others. Do not be afraid to repeat exercises in order to develop particular skills further.

*10 Pairs work*

- 1 Sitting opposite each other, look specifically at every feature of the partner's face. Examine every feature in detail. (Note: The leader may wish to question individuals after this exercise about the colour of eyes, shape of nose, and so on.)
- 2 In turn, try and move as many as possible features of the face separately and in isolation. Explore what you can do with the mouth or eyebrows. Try and avoid using the eyes to express feelings. (Note: The partner can alert the other to over-use of the eyes.)
- 3 In turn, say to your partner, 'I love you very much' with one part of the face only, for instance, with the eyebrows. Say, 'I dislike you intensely' with the nose. Communicate boredom with the mouth to a partner. Indicate excitement with the eyes. The observing partner comments afterwards as to whether the message was conveyed, using only one part of the face.
- 4 Facing a wall, one person creates a face mask of horror or joy so that every part of the face is expressing that particular feeling. Keeping the rest of the body as neutral as possible, walk in the space without indicating the action of the mask. The partner should observe if a neutral body stance is adopted, if the face mask remains consistent when encountering others, and the level of concentration achieved. Swop roles.
- 5 Standing opposite each other and using the person's first name as the only word to be used, convey an individual mood through vocal exploration of the name. When the partner's mood is understood, convey *their* mood through body movement whilst still expressing one's own mood vocally. (Note: This is a difficult exercise, which can be examined further through discussion.)
- 6 Lying down opposite each other, place feet together so that both are able to cycle in unison. Experiment with cycling very slowly or fast. Whilst cycling, establish a nursery rhyme to say together. Then cycle very slowly and say the rhyme fast.

Do the reverse, cycling quickly and speaking the rhyme slowly.

- 7 One person bends forward; the other lies backwards across their partner's back and says the nursery rhyme. Swop roles.
- 8 One person bends forward, relaxing the knees and making sure that the neck and head are free. The partner checks that there is no tension in the neck, gently massaging the neck in the direction of the head. Cupping the hands, the partner firmly massages the spine in a rhythmic up and down movement. The person hanging should feel no tension in the body and be able to make a relaxed 'ha' sound from this position. The sound should vibrate through the back easily, and any tightness in projection indicates tension or strain. Swop roles.

### *11 Relaxation*

Lying down in a space, check that the back is as close to the ground or floor as possible. Become comfortable with eyes closed. Think of the left foot in isolation and flex it just above the floor. Feel the tension and relax. Think of the left kneecap, calf, and foot. Pull up the kneecap, stretch the calf muscles and raise the foot off the floor in one movement. Tense and release. Focus on the whole left leg; tighten and tense as much as possible; hold and relax. Repeat everything with the right leg. Check that the feet are now relaxed outwards and not still in a tense position. Think of the left arm; make a clenched fist with the left hand and lift the whole arm just above the ground in as tense and tight a position as possible. Hold and release. Repeat with the right arm. Check that the hands are not still clenched, but relaxed open with the palms facing upwards. Hunch the shoulders to the ears as tightly as possible, keeping the back and head on the ground. Hold and relax. Repeat this several times. Keeping the shoulders on the ground, arch the back in an upward direction, clenching the buttocks together and tensing the whole back region. Tense and relax. With shoulders on the floor, raise the head off the ground and hold in a tense position. Relax. Repeat several times. Gently move the head from side to side. Think of the left side as a whole; stretch through from the foot, calf, kneecap, thigh, hip, waist, arm, hand, and shoulder to the head with the aim of tensing the left side of the body

completely. Hold and relax. Repeat with the right side of the body. Repeat with the whole body, stretching, tensing, and relaxing several times. The body should now be in a relaxed state. Alter the position as needed. Breathing should be natural and relaxed. Imagine lying on a bed of feathers, gently drifting through the air, staring into space. Clear the mind of all worries and concerns, focussing on breathing and relaxing. Allow several minutes of pure relaxation. Slowly stretch right through the body, wriggling the toes and fingers gently. Taking as much time as is needed, turn on one side and carefully come up to a sitting position, with the eyes still closed. Rub the hands together and cover the face. Open the eyes behind the hands and slowly become aware of the environment.

(Note: Wherever possible, make sure that the room is warm and comfortable, and that the lights can be turned off for the main part of the exercise. A blackout facility is useful with members of a group lying on blankets or rugs. Individuals should not fall asleep during the exercise, but should reach a deep level of relaxation. It is at the discretion of the leader how often different parts of the exercise should be repeated until the point of pure relaxation. A gentle, soothing voice should be adopted when leading and talking through the exercise.)

## WAYS OF STARTING TO DEVISE THEATRE

It is quite clear that devised theatre can start from almost anything, and this book reveals selected examples of the diversity of professional theatre practice to support this fact. It is also my own experience that the same starting stimuli can be taken by any new group interested in devising theatre, and the work produced will always be unique for those particular people involved in the work. I will always remember an especially difficult fifth-year secondary drama group I taught in 1980, who created an extraordinary devised piece based on a surrealist painting of a pair of shoes,<sup>18</sup> which not only fully occupied and absorbed their attention, but became a crafted, polished, and memorable performance.

Resources are infinite when beginning to devise theatre together, and this is often one of the first problems encountered by a group. Where exactly to start from? Ideas and

suggestions must come from the group concerned in the context of the nature of the intended project. When I was teaching 'A' level Theatre Studies to a group of lower sixth formers in 1981, we examined the ideas and theories of Antonin Artaud by devising a piece of theatre that started with an exploration of objects. We looked at ideas of dismemberment, experimenting with a wide use of materials to create object-characters, such as the upside-down man, who originated from a varied collection of cardboard boxes, or the chrysalis creature, which writhed within the folds of thick industrial plastic sheeting in a pool of pink light against a background of distorted sound effects. The audience sat in the middle of the drama studio space on swivel chairs turning their attention to whichever action or activity interested them most. Musical instruments became people, lighting and sound played significant new roles, whilst actors were employed as props, set, or facilitators of the next sequence.

## Initial ideas

This experimental, non-narrative piece of work developed from a desire to place greater emphasis on the visual and sensory nature of the theatrical experience. Therefore, it is important to ascertain whether the choice of stimuli or starting points are for a specific purpose, for example, to fulfil a major objective, or are randomly chosen in order to point a way forward in one direction or another. Having experimented with various ways of devising from a range of starting points, I suggest a skeleton checklist that offers potential beginnings for any group devising theatre. Personal choice determines the details of each category within this list, which simply lays open a structure for particular individual or group decisions about where to start:

- 1 Poems: 'Telephone Conversation' by Wole Soyinka; 'The Castaways or Vote for Caliban' by Adrian Mitchell; 'Little Johnny's Final Letter' by Brian Patten.
- 2 Pictures: *The Red Model*, 1934, or *The Reckless Sleeper*, 1927, by René Magritte; *The Robing of the Bride*, 1939, by Max Ernst; *Extase*, 1967, by Pyke Koch.
- 3 Music: Songs written by Tom Waits, for instance 'Frank's Wild Years' from the LP 'Swordfishtrombones'; the music

of the Windham Hill record label, and the composer Philip Glass, including 'Songs from the Trilogy – Einstein on the Beach, Satyagraha, Akhnaten'.

- 4 Prose: Cooking recipes.
- 5 Stories: 'How the Camel got his Hump' from *Aesop's Fables*.
- 6 Play texts, extracts of: 'Storm from Paradise' by Claire MacDonald.<sup>19</sup>
- 7 Objects: Kettle; old boots.
- 8 Issues: Crime; abortion; equal opportunities.
- 9 Theme: From a play; general, such as 'Body images' or 'Goddesses'.
- 10 People: Their stories and personal experiences.
- 11 Documents: Historical; letters.
- 12 Design: Space; set; physical materials.
- 13 Movement: Sequence of movements observed in life situation.
- 14 Concept, question, statement: Newspaper headline.
- 15 Photographs.
- 16 Films.

### Exemplification

In order to examine different ways of starting to devise theatre, I want to take two examples from my experience as a performer/deviser and teacher/deviser, illustrating how processes can begin and subsequently develop. In the first example – 'Women Imprisoned', devised by Workshop Theatre Women in Leeds during 1985 – the driving force came from the director (Carola Luther) with her passionate interest in the treatment of women in prison. Luther was keen for the seven-strong company of women to devote a significant preliminary period of time to research and interviewing ex-offenders.<sup>20</sup> As performer/deviser, my brief was to get to know two ex-offenders, researching their backgrounds and stories of crime. Additionally, we were all given separate research tasks that addressed the wider issues of women in prison, including strip searching, use of drugs, and medical facilities, as well as other known cases at the time.<sup>21</sup> This research involved me in two prison visits to Askcombe Grange, an 'open' prison near York, and Styal Prison in Manchester, where we talked to women prisoners, officers, and the Governor.

The company made up a long list of case-studies, biographies, and other reading materials, which we reported on weekly in early meetings together. Throughout this initial period of research, we compiled a huge file of resource material, which was shared out so that every company member read all the articles, pamphlets, and written reports. Individuals conveyed information through their contacts with the 'Women in Prison Campaign',<sup>22</sup> meetings with the probation service, and attendance at a conference on 'Crimes against Women' in Leeds.<sup>23</sup>

With a deadline in view, one of our first objectives was to make a tape recording of each ex-offender's life story. A second objective was to ensure that all those participants were invited to become actively involved in the devised project. The company wished to 'give a voice' to the ex-offenders, desiring as close a collaboration as possible with the women. Informal meetings and discussions took place to encourage relationships, which developed slowly over a number of weeks. An initial aim was to create a pool of researched source material as a starting point for the work, with the clear intention of producing seven life stories of ex-offenders.

In tandem to the research work, the company held preliminary workshops that explored crime, being a criminal, getting caught, and the issue of stealing, in some depth. Apart from an examination of content material, these workshops revealed a great deal about individual members and their various attitudes to the subject. There were differences of opinions, beliefs, and perceptions of crime, which had to be faced directly by the group if they were to work collaboratively with the ex-offenders. These were difficult, fiery sessions on occasion, demanding honesty and clarity from seven strong personalities, who also had to keep in perspective the fact that none of them had been in prison.

The work that followed the initial research period, discussions, informal meetings, and workshop sessions developed out of the seven original stories, which were transcribed, edited, and shortened into six performers' monologues. Scenes were written out of 'workshopping' and improvisation around source materials. It was at this stage of devising that several of the ex-offenders attended sessions, contributing ideas, advice, and views on the content being devised. I vividly remember us trying to construct a scene in the police station where I was



meant to feel intimidated by the police, which was heavily criticised by two of the women watching the session. Frustrated by the timidity of the playing, one woman intervened and gave a rendition of how the police officers would have acted towards my character. It was rough, violent, and real! I never felt satisfied with this scene, but their contribution pushed it forward, and changed it in a way that we could never have achieved ourselves.

The early devising process for this show became a mixture of improvising ideas or content material for potential prison scenes whilst transcribing, writing, and editing the seven stories of the women. Parallel to this had been an initial decision for one member of the company to write music for songs linked to the characters and their stories, or issues that seemed relevant to all women in prison. What generally followed was that each company member wrote lyrics for their character's song, and group songs were written by the individual with special responsibility for music and singing. Structuring the show into a cohesive whole was essentially the director's responsibility within a working context of group agreement. A first draft of the intended script became a new starting point for revision, editing, more writing, and the beginning of rehearsals. At this point the work moved into another phase, which is an appropriate place to leave this example of one way to start devising theatre.

### **Another approach**

'Women Imprisoned' was devised from original, contemporary, researched source material, and based on the true stories of seven women in prison. The second example of a way to start devising comes from my experience of working with B.Ed. drama students training to be primary teachers, whilst I was lecturing at Portsmouth Polytechnic in 1987. These were first-year students focussing on the 'Creative Arts', and the overall aim of the term's project was to devise together a theatre-in-education programme for nine- to ten-year-olds in a middle school. What follows is a description of the early work, which was centrally concerned with learning and the process of devising, rather than the final product. Apart from my role as teacher/facilitator/deviser, I attempted to highlight the various

choices or decisions available to the group, as well as indicating the different stages of the devising process.

The major difference in this second example is that we started from ourselves as a theatre-in-education company, working within the known context of devising a theatre-in-education programme for nine- to ten-year-olds in a Portsmouth middle school. After a preliminary 'getting to know each other' drama workshop, I initiated a 'brainstorming' session to establish more about ourselves, our thinking, and beliefs, as well as issues important to us as a company. Members of the group were asked to respond to three questions:

- 1 What do children want to learn?
- 2 What do children need to learn?
- 3 What do I want to teach them?

The discussion that followed from the 'breakdown of the sheets' revealed clear differences of opinions, which were further explored through the question: Is there any commonality or shared ground within the group?

Another early discussion that took place centred on what the programme was to be about. A popular theme was 'the family', which produced the questions:

- 1 What do we want to look at about the family for nine-year-olds?
- 2 What is the notion of 'the family', and how important is it to a nine-year-old?
- 3 What does the family mean to *us*?
- 4 Are we multi-racial conscious?

This particular session helped to identify individuals' personal perceptions and experiences of the family, which in turn focussed on power relationships, status, and roles within families, as well as the various images of the family to be explored in different countries and cultures.

Questions to the group provided structure and focus for sessions, challenging everyone to respond to the work. Two key questions which were placed in permanent view throughout the term were:

- 1 What are we going to do, and why?

## 2 How are we going to do it?

It was agreed early on that we would explore the family in as many practical ways as possible. I find the construction of images a useful means of clarifying ideas, and asked the students to make three physical group images of support, security, and duty, which were their agreed answers to the question 'What does the family mean to *us*?'. This exercise illuminated the security image as being a central reference point for the development of the theme. Smaller group images of the family were explored, which led to a series of images about the 'perfect family' as projected in advertising, media, and television culture. The brief at the end of the day was to write a song about 'The Perfect Family'.

My interest in Boal's 'Image Theatre' was explored through a number of exercises and techniques with the students in relation to the family. I asked each member of the group to think of a personal experience of oppression within the family, presenting it first as a still image, and second as a sound. I also requested that they show an image of their oppressor. Students then swapped images so that they took on another physical form, analysing how they felt in an image, and becoming aware of the range of oppressions. In discussion, I asked them which image they identified with most, which led to a sharing of experiences and further personal investment in the company. There then followed some improvised work in pairs that illustrated the roles of oppressor and oppressed within a family relationship. Contradictions and feelings of duality were also considered, for example, the daughter who loves her mother but also feels oppressed by her.

Improvisation was an important aspect of practical work. One exercise that enabled a fuller examination of the family was for every individual to choose to play a member of a family talking about another member, such as a nine-year-old child talking about her father, or a daughter-in-law speaking about her father-in-law. This particular exercise produced many ideas for further exploration, one of which was for everyone to script a monologue for their character and read them aloud. An interesting group improvisation (again influenced by Boal's 'Forum Theatre' work) was to take a family situation and show how one member of the family is being oppressed by the

others. It is important to clearly establish the oppression, the oppressor, and the protagonist of the scene. This work revealed the domination of a grandmother over her family with particular consequences for her daughter-in-law, the mother in the group. This scene took place around a table whilst eating a meal, and demonstrated beautifully the issues of power, status, and roles within the family.

During this same period of practical theme exploration, the group visited a local Portsmouth Middle School to observe me teaching drama to a class of nine-year-olds, as well as talking to the children about their interests, hobbies, and work activities. As a company, we listed the areas of learning for nine-year-olds and attempted to articulate what it meant to be a nine-year-old child. The next stage of the devising process began with the two questions:

- 1 What *questions* has the work on the family raised for us?
- 2 What are we going to do, and why?

Following a discussion of the responses, I asked the students to take their characters from the earlier sessions (scripting of individual monologues), and work in pairs on an improvisation that explored one question from the list of interest through the two characters. Examples of key questions selected were:

- 1 How important are the relationships between parents and children?
- 2 Is the extended family important?
- 3 What do the children think about the family?
- 4 Do the tensions of family life affect your relationships with other people?

From the improvisations created, we then looked at what was relevant to the areas of learning for nine-year-olds, devising collectively a list of agreed questions that we would want to raise for nine-year-olds. We then considered specific aims for the programme that would be presented to one class, which addressed what we wanted to do as educators, and how we wanted to use theatre. In terms of the programme's content, there were three aims:

- 1 To bring awareness to the fact that every member of a family has their own set of problems.

## PRACTICAL IDEAS AND SUGGESTIONS

- 2 To bring awareness to the children that every type of family has problems that are individual and unique to them.
- 3 To promote better communication between family members and an ability to express their feelings.

It was at this point that we also started to discuss the possibilities of form for the programme, based on a content decision to work through selected family members and related characters.

This devising project developed through the use of questions, discussion, 'brainstorming' techniques, practically related exercises, and improvisation. It was my intention that we should constantly challenge ourselves in every session to look at the different possibilities and avenues to be explored, rather than make early decisions about the proposed product. We were always learning, whether it was about the content theme of the family, or about how nine-year-old children think, feel, and operate within the classroom situation. The progress of the work was fully dependent on the cooperation, collaboration, communication, and contribution of every individual member of the group.

## EXPERIMENTING WITH FORM, CONTENT, OR AUDIENCE

In chapter seven, I outlined a theoretical model of process to be investigated in terms of initial decisions related to form, content, or audience. What I want to suggest now is a series of mini-projects that offer structures for experimentation with form, content, or audience. These mini-projects were originally created for drama degree students in a learning situation, and are offered to the reader as potential frameworks to be adapted for group exploration. The aims of these mini-projects are:

- 1 To free the imagination.
- 2 To consider the possibilities of content or subject for devised theatre.
- 3 To encourage and find a 'voice' for a piece.
- 4 To look at a style of presentation or performance.
- 5 To identify a form for a piece.
- 6 To know who it is *for*, and why.

## Mini-projects

### *1 Form – Structure*

- 1 Physicalisation of ideas or physical beginnings.
- 2 Multi-images: use of sound, lighting, music, film, video, projections, montage techniques, multi-media.

Project (i): Devise ten minutes of physical, visual theatre. Suggested title – ‘Strangers’. Use music, slides, dance/movement, masks, colour/spectacle, costumes, and any other resources.

Project (ii): Explore a theme widely over a prescribed period of time, for instance, ‘Summer’, and then discover the potential of different kinds of devised shows on this theme. Consider the theme in relation to a piece of outdoor, site-specific theatre, and/or to the presentation of a physical performance that includes text, projections, soundtrack, Super 8 film, or video.

### *2 Content – Group/Company – Audience*

Devising theatre from a range of varied content beginnings, for example, the group or company, the intended audience, an issue, concept or theme.

Project (iii): Devise a ten-minute piece of theatre that focusses on the exploration of personal material and interests within the group. (Boal’s work from the ‘theatre of the oppressed’, such as, Image or Forum Theatre, could be considered in light of this project.)

Project (iv): Devise a fifteen-minute piece of street theatre that takes into consideration its potential non-theatre-going audience, intended environment, and site-specific circumstances.

Project (v): Devise a ten-minute piece of theatre based on the theme of food.

Project (vi): Devise a ten-minute piece of theatre based on the issue of gender and sexual politics.

## PRACTICAL IDEAS AND SUGGESTIONS

### 3 *Research – Improvisation – Workshop*

Various kinds of research to form the basis of devised theatre, for example, naturalistic improvised scenes, issue-based work. Research through reading, interviews, tape recordings, visits to museums, schools, and other places.

Project (vii): Devise ten to fifteen minutes of improvised scenes based on characters created from research, improvisation, and developing work. (Consider the approach taken by Mike Leigh in relation to this project.)<sup>24</sup>

Project (viii): Devise fifteen minutes of a theatre-in-education programme for secondary pupils, aged fourteen years. Research a specific topic that is historically or biographically based, and examine a variety of possible theatre-in-education programme packages to be devised. Plan and present ideas for a workshop, offering examples as part of the overall presentation. Edit material prior to demonstration of project. Plan and prepare a teachers' pack alongside the intended programme.

Project (ix): Research contemporary material related to group interest that is based on meeting people, interviews, tape recordings, oral reminiscences, and so on. Consider the potential forms to be explored in light of the researched material, examining different ways that the same material might be presented, for instance, look at a documentary form and style of presentation.

### 4 *Style – Adaptation*

The adaptation of existing written materials, including play text, novel, short story, song lyrics, myth or legend, poem.

Project (x): Devise fifteen minutes of 'Storytelling Theatre', working from an adaptation of a source text, and using the resources of the actors only to create a particular style of presentation.<sup>25</sup>

Other practical suggestions for groups wanting to make or create a devised performance:

- 1 Devise a piece of theatre for a specific audience with particular aims and objectives, for example, a touring show

for young people to be performed at 'Youth Club' venues, or work in collaboration with a local Women's Refuge to devise a piece of theatre that examines the oppression of battered women.

- 2 Consider a variety of approaches to writing in relation to the process of devising, including:
  - (a) Workshopping ideas as a company that are observed by a writer, who then goes away and writes a script;
  - (b) Improvising scenes as a group that are then tape recorded, transcribed, and edited by one member of the group;
  - (c) Writing from ideas collectively, for instance, individual scenes are written by different members of the group;
  - (d) Every company member produces a written contribution as a stimulus for leading a devising session;
  - (e) Every company member writes a song about one aspect of the proposed theme or subject matter.

### **PROBLEMS, DIFFICULTIES, OR BLOCKS ALONG THE WAY**

During any devising or rehearsal process, there are always difficulties or problems at some point in the proceedings. Probably the most frustrating period is when a group feels 'blocked' in terms of finding the most appropriate way forward to develop the content or form of the intended piece. Unfortunately, there are no magic solutions available. I can only suggest certain preparations in advance which may or may not make the group ready for this baffling experience, and which often leave individuals feeling thwarted, disappointed, or unsatisfied.

First, when organising and planning the work schedule, try incorporating deadlines for specific activities to be completed. Knowing that there is only a prescribed amount of time available for a particular section of the project may finally reduce the group to a state of inertia, or it may just push some members into a state of action. Either way, it is worth the risk!

Second, a planned 'work-in-progress' is often useful, in order to consolidate the work so far, as well as identifying specific problems with the product. A small invited audience is essential to test out ideas, and post-performance discussions can provide



positive outside feedback to the proposed material or form. Again, it is a case of knowing that you have agreed to show something to an audience in two days' time, regardless of feeling frustrated, helpless, depressed, and without direction.

### **Scheduling**

Try to allow adequate time for rehearsal, rather than devising up to the bitter end and learning lines the night before the first performance. (It happens to the best professional companies too!) Create planned opportunities within the schedule structure for re-writing, editing, and revision. It may take several days to incorporate individual and small group activities related to the show, such as one member re-writing a section of text, or two performers rehearsing a scene, whilst the remaining members participate in painting the set, completing costumes, or looking for additional props. This will all become entirely theoretical once the group is so far behind that these suggestions are totally inappropriate, or have no relevance to the group's particular way of working or operation.

Sometimes when a group is 'blocked' in the devising process, it just requires someone external to the company to look at the work as an 'outside eye'. Fresh ideas, advice, criticism or comments can trigger off a new momentum for the group concerned. It may simply be a case of needing to identify and focus on one question, concept, section, or area of decision in relation to the intended form, content, or audience. Perhaps the group has lost sight of the needs and interests of the audience, or the material is so generalised that it lacks any power, presence, or direct appeal to either the performers or observers. One practical suggestion when 'blocked' with decisions about the structure of the piece, is to lay papers on the floor (indicating different sections, scenes, or images) and move them around to appreciate the possibilities of all the material. It is also helpful to include blank pieces of paper so that 'links' can be written or notated as they are discovered through experimentation with the form. Somehow connections are made easier by seeing the pieces laid out in front of the group, which can be physically and visually juggled until the right decisions are taken.

Inevitably, being 'blocked' means dealing with a number of

theatrical hurdles, going off at tangents, and almost abandoning an idea that will not come right, until suddenly the group sees a way through. What is most important is to find something that prompts action in order to maintain the group's momentum, however slow! Select a way forward even if it leads the group to a cul-de-sac; someone can always turn round and try another direction. In my experience, it is never the planned attempt to motivate ideas that produces results, but rather some spontaneous discovery that turns everything upside-down, and reveals a glimmer of light on the devising horizon.

Devising theatre is a new experience in the making with every new group of people who come together at the start of an intended show or project. It can cause heartache, joy, frustration, and satisfaction. It can make an individual wonder why she or he ever had this notion of wanting to create work that is unique to a particular group and interests. How much easier to pick up an already written play text, and interpret how the play should be produced in performance. What is this constant appeal of wanting to begin from the germ of an idea, and develop it into a full-scale piece of theatre? It is the need to say something, to express oneself, to give a voice to ideas, thoughts, and feelings about the world; to capture the essence of a particular group of people making and creating theatre. It is extremely hard work, but the reward comes from partaking and participating with others in an attempt to define, articulate, and contextualise contemporary cultural and societal experiences. The reward is being involved in a group of individuals wanting to assert their particular view of the world. Despite the difficulties, there is the stimulation, excitation, and sheer pleasure of working with other people in the act of sharing and pooling ideas together. Its attraction is in the multifarious aspects of both process and product.

However much the group evaluates and assesses the final product, there is simply no guarantee that its members will be able to apply that wisdom to new circumstances, or to the next devised project. It is vital to be open and accessible to changing one's mind, moderating one's views, and compromising when necessary. Against this is the desire to push for specific ideas with a determined passion that reveals a total commitment and dedication to the work. The ultimate goal is to feel completely

satisfied and excited by the final product. Learning to devise theatre opens up the possibilities and potential of such an experience, which is always an unhabituated territory at the start.

Writing this book has enabled me to explore and examine a number of questions related to the subject of devised theatre. As I come to the end of my exploration, I find I have come full circle and am faced with even more questions about the process and practice of devising theatre. Hopefully, this book will lay some foundations for further building, enquiry, and critical examination. I want to encourage others to offer their experiences, responses, and answers to such questions. As the next academic year approaches with a different group of full-time fourth-year 'devising' students, I experience familiar feelings of both excitement and fear as I anticipate first beginnings, further learning, understanding and enlightenment, an unknown set of problems or difficulties, and the potential enjoyment of working with another group of people on what will certainly be a wholly different and original experience to the last. This is where the work commences with a series of questions and some initial ideas for starting . . .

Where and how shall I begin?