



Devising Theatre

a
practical

and
theoretical
handbook



Alison Oddey



DEVISING THEATRE

Devising Theatre is a practical handbook that combines a critical analysis of contemporary devised theatre practice, with descriptions of selected companies, and suggestions for any group devising theatre from scratch. It was written because of a perceived need for information about the subject, and is the first book to propose a general theory of devised theatre.

After introducing devised theatre, and identifying the unique nature of this type of performance, the author goes on to examine how devised theatre is perceived by professional practitioners, and considers the potential processes of creating a devised performance. The author looks at the particular working practice and products of a number of professional companies, including a Reminiscence theatre for the elderly, a company at the cutting edge of the contemporary, experimental scene, a theatre-in-education group, and site-specific work that is community or visually performance based. The author also offers ideas and exercises for exploration and experimentation.

Alison Oddey is a lecturer in Drama and Theatre Studies at the University of Kent. Since 1977, she has devised theatre with young people, professional actors, teachers in training and undergraduate students. She has published articles in theatre journals and taught a series of practical workshops on devising theatre at the Universities of Amsterdam, Utrecht, and Antwerp.

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A practical and theoretical
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Alison Oddey

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In loving memory of my father,

to my mother,

for Ben,

but most of all for myself.

In my beginning is my end.

(‘East Coker’, *Four Quartets*, T.S. Eliot)

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PREFACE

I wrote this book for several reasons, the main one being that I felt there was a lack of information on the subject of devising theatre. When asked to recommend reading material to students on this particular subject, I was unaware of any publication that addressed a general theory and practice of contemporary British devised theatre or that included a diversity of devising processes and devised products from different professional companies within one book. At the same time, I wanted to enjoy researching and writing this book; my starting point was a strong, passionate interest in the subject matter, based on sixteen years' personal experience of devising theatre with young people, actors, training teachers, and students in higher education.

This handbook is written for students in higher education, professional companies, or any group wanting to devise theatre from scratch. It provides a general theory of devising theatre, supported and illustrated by selected examples from contemporary British devised theatre practice. It includes description, critical evaluation and analysis of specific work processes and theatre performances. It can be dipped into and used in various ways that will point the reader in a number of different directions. The book is intended as a practical and theoretical guide to devising theatre that will offer the reader an insight into the specific challenges and processes of devising, the sub-genre of devised theatre, as well as the infinite possibilities of working as a group or a devising theatre company.

One of the difficulties in writing this book has concerned contradictions and ambiguity. What I most enjoy about devising theatre is being with a group of people, exploring and

experimenting with the nature of performance. What originally attracted me to devising theatre still remains: first, the thrill and excitement of being part of the developing, original product to be performed; and second, the collaborative, sharing experience of making theatre with others. Its strength of appeal is in the multifarious aspects of the process (whether as a performer/deviser, director/deviser, or teacher), from the practical 'on the floor' work, which allows me to be instinctive and spontaneous, to the more theoretical aspects of research, discussion, planning, and construction. However, it is through the solitary occupation of writing that I must capture the essence of devising theatre.

This book is the beginnings of a dialogue to be shared with others. It is neither definitive nor prescriptive, but sets up a conversation about devising theatre. It is a partial map that charts some of the working methods and ideologies informing current practice. There is an urgent need for dissemination of both theoretical and practical information about contemporary practice, not only within educational institutions but also within the theatre profession generally. It is important to document the diverse work of professional companies devising theatre in order to improve the profile and status of the subject. What delighted me most about the research period was the opportunity to discuss the subject with so many professional practitioners, exchanging knowledge and opinions whilst acknowledging both educational and theatrical viewpoints at the same time. The research material formed the basis for an examination of the subject from a personal, empirical perspective within the social and cultural context of devised theatre practice in the late 1980s and into the early 1990s.

I started my personal investigation with a number of questions to be answered; I end with even more to be resolved! I am laying down the foundations of a sprawling, fragmentary, process-based subject, which demands other, more critically analytical, works to be written. I hope this book stimulates further enquiry, interest and pleasure when devising theatre, and that many more conversations follow. . . .

Alison Oddey
May 1993

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Terry O'Connor. And my thanks to all those students over the years who have allowed me to learn with them, particularly the 'Out of Order' and 'Antic Theatre' devising companies of 1989–90 and 1992–93 who contributed a great deal to my thinking about devised theatre. Finally, my love and appreciation to Ben, for all his in-house support, patience, love, wisdom, and invaluable advice.

AN INTRODUCTION TO DEVISED THEATRE

Devised theatre can start from anything. It is determined and defined by a group of people who set up an initial framework or structure to explore and experiment with ideas, images, concepts, themes, or specific stimuli that might include music, text, objects, paintings, or movement. A devised theatrical performance originates with the group while making the performance, rather than starting from a play text that someone else has written to be interpreted. A devised theatre product is work that has emerged from and been generated by a group of people working in collaboration.

Devising is a process of making theatre that enables a group of performers to be physically and practically creative in the sharing and shaping of an original product that directly emanates from assembling, editing, and re-shaping individuals' contradictory experiences of the world. There is a freedom of possibilities for all those involved to discover; an emphasis on a way of working that supports intuition, spontaneity, and an accumulation of ideas. The process of devising is about the fragmentary experience of understanding ourselves, our culture, and the world we inhabit. The process reflects a multi-vision made up of each group member's individual perception of that world as received in a series of images, then interpreted and defined as a product. Participants make sense of themselves within their own cultural and social context, investigating, integrating, and transforming their personal experiences, dreams, research, improvisation, and experimentation. Devising is about thinking, conceiving, and forming ideas, being imaginative and spontaneous, as well as planning. It is about inventing, adapting, and creating what you do as a group.

Contemporary British devised theatre practice embraces a broad diversification of professional companies. They include The People Show, Trestle Theatre, Belgrade Theatre-in-Education Company, Red Ladder, and Welfare State International, all of whose artistic, educational, or political intentions initiate, shape, and realise the making of very different kinds of theatre products. Their work includes experimental visual performances integrating various art forms, physical mask theatre, participatory theatre-in-education programmes for primary schoolchildren with severe learning difficulties, shows for young people that encourage the exploration of difficult questions facing them as young adults, and celebratory, community-based large-scale spectacles or site-specific theatrical events. Initially, I chose thirteen professional devising companies for detailed research purposes, whose work interested me for various reasons. (See Appendix I for a brief description of these companies.) There was no scientific approach to selecting them, and I could have easily made an alternative list of companies, equally impressive and worthy of attention.

Companies devising theatre constantly have to address the changes brought about by the socio-political and cultural climate of the time. The preoccupations and changes in attitudes of contemporary society are reflected in the themes, content and form of devised theatre products. A group cannot devise in a vacuum; work originates and progresses within the broadest context of culture and society, the changing world and all its events.

VIRTUE IN ECLECTISM?

What identifies and defines devised theatre as a separate form worthy of consideration is the uniqueness of process and product for every group concerned. The significance of this form of theatre is in the emphasis it places on an eclectic process requiring innovation, invention, imagination, risk, and above all, an overall group commitment to the developing work. However, it is the very nature and eclecticism of the devising experience that makes it impossible to articulate any single theory of how theatre is devised, when every professional company or group works in a unique way with different

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intentions, interests, and concerns. What makes devising so special is the potential freedom or opportunity to move in a number of different directions through a collaborative work process, developing an original theatre product to be performed. It can produce more creative solutions than other forms of theatre, although this is fundamentally determined by group dynamics and interaction.

Any definition of devised theatre must include process (finding the ways and means to share an artistic journey together), collaboration (working with others), multi-vision (integrating various views, beliefs, life experiences, and attitudes to changing world events), and the creation of an artistic product. Sometimes devised theatre is made for, with, or from a particular audience. However, there are some unclear boundaries within the subject of devised theatre, around which there are many areas of disagreement amongst theatre practitioners. Must devised theatre always be considered as a group activity, for instance, if a solo performer collaborates with another artist but is not part of a company? How do we define a devised play script in terms of authorship and ownership between a writer and company? What is the value and relationship of process to product, and the significance of the process in relation to accessibility and the creation of a performance?

Devised theatre also raises some fascinating questions for other forms of theatre, which are ultimately concerned with areas of content, form, or audience, as well as preliminary aims and objectives. I am intrigued by the differences and similarities in methodologies of devising theatre; how the process of making theatre relates to a particular working practice, ideology, and product; how a company's intentions or objectives influence and determine significant decisions of content, form, and audience; and why the process of devising, or the creation of a unique form of theatre product appeals to such a variety of companies devising theatre in Britain today.

TRADITION

It is important to record the work of devised theatre as evidence of our ever-changing culture and society. The People Show, for instance, is a company that has devised theatre for over twenty-seven years, and witnessed numerous performers

proceed into the various traditional roles of conventional theatre. Devised theatre is an alternative to the dominant literary theatre tradition, which is the conventionally accepted form of theatre dominated by the often patriarchal, hierarchical relationship of playwright and director. This dominant tradition revolves around and focuses on the interpretation of the playwright's text by a director, culminating in a performance which is realised through a production process (within a prescribed period of time and means) in a theatre building. British post-war theatre has almost always been text-led, originating with the playwright and emphasising the written word. The written play script has been the starting point and basis of British theatre production. Therefore, the dominant tradition of theatre and criticism has always been about the relationship of writing and performance. Conventional or text-based theatre is a large, diverse category of theatre. When I refer to the dominant form, I am not suggesting a homogenisation of traditional forms of theatre into one, nor am I promoting devised theatre as a form in opposition.

Devised theatre is not always in contradistinction to 'straight' theatre. Devised work is a response and a reaction to the playwright-director relationship, to text-based theatre, and to naturalism, and challenges the prevailing ideology of one person's text under another person's direction. Devised theatre is concerned with the collective creation of art (not the single vision of the playwright), and it is here that the emphasis has shifted from the writer to the creative artist. Thus, all too often, a devised performance is perceived as a sub-genre of theatre in the sense that it is not constructed in the established, accepted way of making theatre – from playwright, via director and actors, to performance. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, numerous companies were evolving with the common desire of considering different ways of creating a theatrical performance. This was the birth of new forms or styles of theatre, including the start of the theatre-in-education movement in 1965 with the founding of the first British theatre-in-education team at the Belgrade Theatre, Coventry;¹ the beginnings of community theatre, exemplified by Red Ladder Theatre Company, who started in 1968 as a political theatre group – the Agitprop Street Players;² the development of performance art, as evident in Welfare State

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International's celebratory, theatrical spectacles originating in 1968;³ and experimental multi-disciplinary visual theatre.⁴

With changes in attitudes towards sexuality, the existing political and social climate in Britain, and censorship of the stage abolished, it is hardly surprising that theatrical expression found new ways of reflecting political upheaval and discontent. Devised theatre offered the opportunity to groups of artists to try out ideas or notions that were not text-led. It provided the potential for a designer, choreographer, or performer to initiate a concept or starting point for performance. In turn, this encouraged the development of a performance language that included non-verbal forms.

An example

The company claiming to be in at the start is The People Show, a group of artists (not actors) who came together in 1966 to work collaboratively towards devising a visual theatre product in performance. A touring performing group, The People Show offered an alternative to text-based theatre, in terms of providing experimental visual performance rather than productions of new plays and writing. The company's early work experimented with various aspects of both visual and performing arts, combining written words, music, improvisation, and environmental settings. By 1971, their shows had developed a more image-based, visual emphasis, described here by founder member Mark Long as:

Now the shows are not so loose as they were, but they don't depend on word structures, or script structures, or plots. We are working around visual structures. A series of visual images is worked on beforehand and then we embroider these – with our bodies, with our words and with our reactions – to enlarge the images for the audience. In the last year, we've done six entirely different shows, all quite structured visually.⁵

David Gale, a founder member of Lumiere & Son in 1973, describes The People Show in the 1970s as 'turning out consistently impressive, surreal, poetic work that derived from the most daring devising process I have ever come across'.⁶ The People Show's method of working relied on the differences and

conflict between individual artists within the group, which changed with every new show's situation, conditions and circumstances. Every show was a unique devising experience, resulting in an original product that changed with every performance. The relationship of process to product was determined by the individual artists' interests and interpretation of ideas, rather than an agreed group vision of a show. A key characteristic of their working method was to place great emphasis on the relationship between actor and audience, which meant that the 'first night' was simply the beginning of a show. Long observes:

The presence of the audience is one of the biggest factors in the creative process itself. When an audience sees the show, your feeling and understanding for the show is inevitably altered. The audience reaction offers that feeling or understanding. It's part of the process, as is the performance as much part of the process as the rehearsal.⁷

The People Show is illustrative of a group of individual artists in collaboration with each other, taking risks, having a sense of the unknown at the start of the devising process, exploring and experimenting with ideas, form, structure, and the nature of visual performance. This company has established a particular approach to making visual theatre that uses lighting, sound, music, and technical resources to discover the possibilities of image and spectacle within the performance space. The exploration and experimentation with technical facilities in the theatre are an important part of the group's work. In a 1982 article, Long comments:

The other thing which I think is very important, which we try to do with all new members of the group, not always very successfully, but which I think is absolutely vital, is that everybody in the group has to have an understanding of lighting, an understanding of building and a definite visual comprehension of costume.⁸

Since 1966, The People Show has developed a unique visual and aural style of theatre, recruiting members from a multi-disciplinary background with interests in the visual arts, music, and technical theatre. The People Show and its early shows were significant in establishing a unique working process of

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individual artists in collaboration with each other, using the resources within the group to make, construct, and continually develop a theatre product in performance. This particular process of devising embraces the use of images, a structured environment, the contribution of individual artists' ideas, and a conscious awareness of the interaction with the audience in performance.

In order to examine in later chapters the nature of a devised performance, the actor-spectator relationship, and the desire to create theatre for a particular audience, community, or site-specific location, I intend to identify and establish the specific challenges of the subject of devising theatre by asking what differentiates devised theatre from the dominant literary theatre tradition, and why do people want to devise theatre? I want to suggest the distinguishing characteristics of devised theatre, as well as speculate about some of the reasons why companies or groups evolve to pursue this alternative form of theatre.

BEGINNINGS

What initially identifies devised theatre is that the creative process originates in ways different from traditional theatre. Questions arise about where and how to start making a performance, and what kind of product is to be created. Devised theatre can start from an infinite number of possibilities, such as an idea, image, concept, object, poem, piece of music, or painting, and the precise nature of the end product is unknown. In conventional theatre, however, everyone knows the production is, for example, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* from the outset. The script dictates the plot or narrative line, the number of characters, the setting, the scene directions, and the length of the piece. In devised theatre, at one end of the spectrum is an open book with only unmarked pages, whilst at the other end is a skeletal outline of the proposed piece to be devised. It may be a large-scale community event with local participants in Bradford, a participatory secondary theatre-in-education programme, a piece of reminiscence theatre for the elderly in south London, or a performance piece exploring the notion of reality, fiction, and contemporary culture.

Devised theatre demands decisions about how and where to begin. This is different from text-based theatre, where the play

script defines and determines the parameters of the performance, however abstract the content might be. In chapter two, I look at how and where a group begins to devise theatre, and the kind of stimuli or starting points that may initiate a devised theatrical product, arguing that form, content, or audience (in any number of combinations) determine the devising route to be taken.

Value in democracy?

The way a group or company operates, is organised structurally, identifies roles or responsibilities, and works together differs from traditional theatre. A central reason for the large number of companies devising theatre in the 1970s was the strong desire to work in an artistically democratic way. The 'collective' grew out of a socio-political climate that emphasised democracy, so that many groups were interested in breaking down the patriarchal and hierarchical divisions of the traditional theatre company. The growth of collectives in the British alternative theatre since 1970 has been written about in various books, such as Catherine Itzin's *Stages in the Revolution* or Michelene Wandor's *Carry on Understudies, Theatre and Sexual Politics*, and Rob Ritchie's *The Joint Stock Book*⁹ provides important documentation of one successful model of collective theatre. This book illustrates the various approaches taken to re-defining the relationship of writer, director, and actor, and how they differ from the hierarchy of conventional theatre.

The influence of the Women's Liberation Movement and feminism in the 1970s encouraged a change of attitudes, gave women an improved position as theatre workers, and supported the development of experimental theatre to explore the social and sexual attitudes of society. The introduction to *Monstrous Regiment, A Collective Celebration*, edited by Gillian Hanna,¹⁰ provides a useful insight into how this women's collective operated from the mid-1970s, initially as a democratic collective, and later as a more skills-specialised division of roles within the group. Companies founded in the 1970s established different ways of devising theatre, which are illustrated in the diverse examples of Forkbeard Fantasy (1974), Gay Sweatshop (1975), and IOU (who broke away from Welfare State International in 1976 to work as a collective).

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In the 1970s devising companies chose artistic democracy in favour of the hierarchical structures of power linked to text-based theatre, and yet within the last twenty years or so there has been a move from this standpoint to more hierarchical structures within many companies in response to an ever-changing economic and artistic climate. In the cultural climate of the early 1990s, the term 'devising' has less radical implications, placing greater emphasis on skill sharing, specialisation, specific roles, increasing division of responsibilities, such as the role of the director/deviser or the administrator, and more hierarchical company structures. This is evident from the changing practice of those professional companies who began devising theatre in the early or mid-1970s, and have altered the nature of their work for a number of different reasons. Variable economic conditions have prevented some companies from working as a permanent ensemble throughout the year, with the effect that they now employ a smaller core of permanent staff, using freelance artists from project to project. Companies must decide how to organise a power infrastructure, which is exemplified by the roles or responsibilities chosen by the group, and how decision-making takes place.

Politics

Group dynamics, relationships, and interaction between people are a distinguishing feature of devising theatre. The relationships between individual specialist members are different from the production hierarchy of a text-based theatre. In a conventional play producing company, people are selected for specific tasks or roles, rather than for political, pedagogical, or artistic beliefs. Implicit in devised theatre are questions about personal politics in relation to group politics, which are reflected in the making of a company statement or policy. The participants and their life experiences contribute to both process and product. A group statement or policy identifies a particular style, a unique language or vocabulary, shared beliefs, or a commitment to why a company wishes to make a specific theatrical product. A devising company offers the opportunity for flexibility between group members, in both the integration and exchange of ideas or roles within a project.

This form of theatre provides wider opportunities and

possibilities for all the members of a group. It encourages and enables new working relationships between the roles of writer, director, designer, technician, musician, and performer. Roles and responsibilities are not necessarily restricted or defined by text-based theatre, where there are clear divisions or parameters for job specification. Traditional theatre is compartmentalised into single tasks, such as acting or lighting the stage, whereas devised theatre demands a group of people who are versatile and multi-talented.

In conventional play production, an actor is only expected to play a specific part, working from the playwright's original vision through the director's interpretation to the final creation of the role. In devised theatre, a performing company member may take aspects of administrative work or developmental research work with a particular audience. In most devising companies, everyone is expected to 'muck in' or pull together, regardless of their allocated roles. This includes the company striking a set after a performance, a performer driving a van whilst on tour, or everyone helping to complete the set. I reiterate, however, that I am not suggesting that devised theatre is in diametrical opposition to traditional theatre. Indeed, many conventional, small-scale touring companies of text-based theatre will totally identify with striking the set and driving the van as being shared tasks!

Changing needs of the performer

One reason for the emergence of so many companies devising theatre from the mid-1960s onwards was as a response to changes in education, actor training, and the development of the performer. Historically, the drama schools focused on voice production, and training the actor's voice as an instrument to speak text. The influence of 'method' acting, with its emphasis on investigating the psychological nature of a character and detailed realistic portrayal, has encouraged the actor to study a role in far greater depth. It is also true that the development of film and television has meant that the actor has had to become a more thinking, feeling, truthful being, able to realise roles through both verbal and non-verbal skills. These developments in actor training, combined with increased opportunities to study drama on degree courses, have produced actors who wish

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to engage intellectually in the discussion of work, or practically in the creative process of making a performance. Although traditional literary theatre provides an actor with more opportunity for creative expression than previously, devised theatre offers a different route for the actor, which is often associated with having greater status and input within the overall creation of the theatrical product.

Devised theatre offers the performer the chance to explore and express personal politics or beliefs in the formation and shaping of the piece. This is illustrated by some women performers who feel confined by female stereotypes produced by male playwrights, and wish to experiment with creating roles that reflect their own experiences as women. Annie Griffin (formerly of Gloria, and now with Pirate Productions) devises theatre because of her interests in feminism and the politics of self-presentation, combined with her desire as a performer to engage with an audience and creatively decide how she wants to *be* in performance. A performer/deviser has a personal input and commitment to the making of the product from the start, which consequently means that the needs of the performer/deviser are recognised, and are therefore different from the actor in text-based theatre. In the traditional literary form, the actor is awarded a part or role based on external appearance and previous work so far, whereas a devising company offers the performer the opportunity and challenge of creating or developing work from an initial brief, against traditional expectations or stereotyping.

METHODOLOGY

A strong need of many new groups or companies devising theatre is to make original theatrical products through a variety of processes and methods of working. There is no one accepted way of devising a performance, whilst a conventional play production tends to follow a particular route. The process of making or creating sets devised theatre apart from traditional forms of theatre, and is its distinctive hallmark. The significance of the process is that it determines the product, and is a unique experience for every different group of people working together. The devising process is about the ways and means of

making a theatrical performance: a company chooses how the product is to be created, which involves decisions about the most appropriate process in light of the intended product. This may include methods of research, discussion, 'workshopping' material, improvisation, the use of a writer, or visual experimentation.

A devising process can mean a specific method of working, which employs the traditional roles from text-based theatre in an alternative way. For instance, Ann Jellicoe has a particular method of making a community play that uses the writer in a different way than simply being a playwright.¹¹ The commissioned playwright must respond to the precise needs of the community, writing for a town and contributing to the creation of a unique community event. The role of a writer in relation to the devising process may mean re-working or re-writing text during this developmental period, and can be approached from a number of different directions. In chapter three, I describe and examine how other conventional roles are defined by various devising companies, such as director, writer, or designer, whilst identifying some of the processes used when devising theatre.

Time

One important reason why groups devise theatre is to communicate and express particular interests or concerns – to say something about their specific situation. In order to do this, fundamental decisions about the use of time and finance have to be made for each project. Devised theatre has the potential to choose a time span for the making of the product, which is governed or determined by resources and budget. In conventional theatre, there is an accepted pattern of prescribed time for the production process of a play. This is evident in the repertory system of text-based theatre, where three weeks is an accepted timescale for rehearsing each script.

Each devising company chooses the period of time to be allocated to both process and product. This involves balancing initial planning, research, and preliminary workshops against how time is scheduled for the making of the product, for rehearsal, and in performance. Decisions about time are specifi-