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THEORY AND PRACTICE

> People make work in such different ways for such different reasons, but often reading about someone, who may be working in a very different field, opens up something for me in my own work.
>
> (Annie Griffin, formerly of Gloria, now with Pirate Productions)

Researching and observing contemporary British professional devised theatre practice in recent years confirms my own experience of sixteen years: that devising is dependent on people, their life experiences and motivation, why and what they want to devise, and the pathfinder process chosen by them to explore their particular set of circumstances. In the wider context of the early 1990s, the implication is that time, money, and space determine the parameters of the devising experience, suggesting an initial structure within which to work. Perhaps this explains the more recent trend of solo artists collaborating with others on an individual project, but still working as an ensemble.[1] Time, money, and space are fundamental prerequisites of every new devising equation created.

For me, the richness of devising theatre comes in the sharing of experiences with others, from the risk factor implicit in its production, from the efforts, enthusiasm, and energy of those particular people, and from the sheer excitement of trying to express something through a collaborative process that continually opens up a multitude of possibilities, discoveries, or questions in an attempt to articulate yet another new creative way of making theatre. The observation and discussion of the work of professional companies, and reading around the subject (often indirectly), are useful

stimuli for ideas of content, form, and audience. Something has to inspire the need or desire to artistically construct a piece of theatre, whether it is from an initial idea, feeling, image, concept, story, theme, written text, picture, music, location, group of people, or a specific community interest. The choices are infinite, the potential is enormous, and the thrill comes with every group's decision.

It is in the practical experience of devising theatre that much is to be learnt. There is no single theory that can embrace this amorphous subject; no formula or prescribed methodology can be applied that guarantees a particular product every time. It is questionable whether the skills of devising can be taught as such. I am constantly learning how to devise theatre with every new group of drama students that I encounter in their eager curiosity to discover the mysteries and magic of the subject in their fourth year of study at the University of Kent.[2] I do not wish to teach them in a prescriptive way (nor do I suggest that there is an agreed body of knowledge to be digested), but rather I want to encourage them to think, try out ideas, explore group dynamics, and develop their imaginative ability; I want to engage them in analysis, criticism or evaluation, inspire their enjoyment and enthusiasm with devised theatre, and somehow to facilitate that passion to want to make a unique theatrical experience with others. It is in the doing and making of theatre that mistakes are made, that failure occurs, and that is how one learns. Nobody wants to fail, but sometimes it is necessary in order to really understand a process, group dynamics, company administration, or the basic requirements of a specific form of theatre.

GUIDELINES

Reflecting on my observations of contemporary professional practice in tandem with my own devising philosophy and experience, I suggest some general points for consideration by any group devising theatre:

1 Do not be afraid to clearly establish roles and responsibilities within a particular project. Allocate specific functions or duties if appropriate, or decide how to structure the process of democratic decision-making.

2 Is there a need to write a 'Code of Practice' document incorporating company policy, objectives, procedure, and planning of meetings, evaluation, and assessment guidelines? (See Appendix III for an example of a professional theatre-in-education company's 'Code of Practice').
3 Establish leadership of project (if applicable), and how this will operate in terms of company decision-making. Delegate or form hierarchies according to skills and interests.
4 Have something that the group passionately wants to do, and is committed to exploring theatrically. Have an initial sense of what the group would like to achieve, aim for, or create.
5 Trust to feelings, instinct, and intuition about the development of the work.
6 Allow members of the group space to work on their own for part of the time. Consider dividing into smaller groups with specific tasks to report back on.
7 Ask questions throughout the process, and do not be afraid to return to original aims or objectives in order to clarify direction.
8 Consider space, setting or location that work will be devised from; for instance, if the set, visual stimulus, or location are the initial reasons for devising (notably in the case of site-specific pieces), then it is essential (if not always possible or practical) to work in that space from the start. Try and rehearse in that space as much as possible.
9 Analyse, criticise, assess, and evaluate the work as it progresses, in one form or other. Decide on the most appropriate methods or criteria to achieve this.
10 Try to maintain a critical 'outside eye' on the process and product, both as an observer at an objective level, and at a more subjective level of involvement. Avoid introspection and always be individually truthful, and to the group.

The above ten points are a guiding reference only, as the ideas, feeling, or vision have to come from the group! It is the participants who have to find their own dynamic as a group and be responsible to themselves. This means a commitment to the group, to the time period allocated for the project, and to the end product (the show), which ultimately involves a commitment to a relationship with an audience. If the product is the

focus, then the group has to work together in a way that is practical and structured by agreed limits.

By offering a model of an open-ended structure of a devising process, groups can practically experiment with the possibilities that any one starting point may throw up. Examining the different routes that may be taken via practical discovery, in conjunction with parallel analysis and evaluation of the journey's progress, present opportunities to compare, contrast and broaden the devising experience. Therefore, in order to learn more about devising theatre, one way forward is to practically experiment with an outline model of process that allows for flexible decisions and spontaneity within the group. Never be afraid to abandon ideas or to start again, however hard that prospect appears at first! Devising is reliant on the motivation, interest and energy of a group that is willing to try out ideas that may fail, and yet may constantly surprise individuals in their further exploration or experimentation.

The construction and consideration of various models of practice are valuable in widening the devising debate of how a group works together. In this sense, a model serves as a springboard for creative exploration and discussion. Clearly, it is easier to suggest a model of practice based on the process of devising reminiscence theatre (as observed in the practice of Age Exchange Theatre Company) than to formulate a model from the work of Forced Entertainment Theatre Co-operative. However, this is not to imply that to follow the former example produces a replica of an Age Exchange product, but rather produces a specific form of reminiscence theatre. The latter example provides a model that is intuitive, largely based on aesthetics rather than on any ideological or pedagogical system, which is ultimately about what one thinks is beautiful, or what one believes is worth doing as art. Intuition, instinct, and aesthetic choice are vital elements in any devising process, which can never be directly taught or learnt.

MEANS OF ENQUIRY

I want now to consider a theoretical model of process, which addresses different stages of progression in an attempt to define and further question how a group devises theatre:

MODEL OF PROCESS

Stage one: PRE-PRODUCTION PLANNING

Questions:
- What do I want to devise and why?
- What kind of theatre do I want to create?
- Is there a starting stimulus for the show?
- Is there a combination of ideas, materials, and resources?
- Are there initial ideas for content, form, or audience?

Draw and define the preliminary boundaries at the start of the project.

Stage two: QUESTIONING/EXPLORING/DISCUSSING THE PRELIMINARY DECISION

Questions:
- What are your initial aims and objectives as a company for this project?
- Who are you devising for and why?
- Is content or subject matter the starting point for the work? What are the source materials?
- Is the form or structure an important preliminary area for exploration?
- How to proceed – organisation, roles, responsibilities, method(s) of working?

Select appropriate ways and means to examine these questions, for example, via research, practical work, or discussion.

Research:
- Audience – visits to; interviews with; discussion
- Content – range of reading materials; allocation and organisation of; visits to museums, site
- Members of the group – individual interests

Practical:
- Creation of an outline scenario or story
- Design for set, environment, masks
- 'On the floor' work – trying out of ideas via improvisation, workshops on particular theme, topic
- Exploration of images, attitudes

Discussion:
- Form – skeletal outline, rough structure for product or programme, style of show

Further questions – Is the potential of the group being utilised? Does the work feel exciting, interesting, or dangerous?

Stage three: EXAMINING THE SPECIFICS OF THE DECISION

Working in constructed visual, physical space or environment if of primary importance

Writing a detailed scenario, pilot scenes, or opening scene for practical exploration and discussion

Building and developing characters through research, improvisation, 'hot seating' techniques, role play, and workshops

Further questions and discussion of central concept or starting point in order to ask further questions

Sharing research as a group in order to make new decisions about content or form of show

Practical considerations of form, structure, and performance

Is a 'WORK-IN-PROGRESS' useful or relevant at some stage?

Stage four: SOMEWHERE IN THE PROCESS – DIFFICULTIES

Questions: What is this piece of theatre about, and why?

What is happening at this precise moment in the show?

Does this section or scene work? Why not?

How does the problem reveal itself in light of the whole structure?

Have we veered away from our original intentions, aims, or objectives? Consciously?

Is there a unity of style within the piece?

Does the material need to be re-written, reworked, or discarded?

Do we have to abandon completely and start again?

Within this model of process, it is immediately apparent that

stages can be swopped, re-ordered, or re-arranged in light of the specific circumstances of the devising situation. It is also true that areas to be discussed in stage two may have already happened in stage one, as is the case for any of the stages. The suggested structure is skeletal, flexible, and designed to encourage greater group awareness, confidence in decision-making, and clarification of intention. A process develops with every decision taken by the group in its search for a particular direction. The impetus comes from numerous sources, which include the material itself, whether it is the development of characters through improvisation, an agreed theme, or the idea for a performance structure in a park.

It is possible to define models of practice based on the work of established companies, but even then a change of personnel or project can entirely alter the way a group devises its next product. All the elements or factors are flexible, changing positions of significance or importance as needed. What is important is the place and relationship of the key component parts of form, content or audience at the start of the devising process and their subsequent development. In a learning situation, it is useful to look at the different approaches that can be taken when each part is the central focus for the work. Again it is a question of identifying and clarifying the group's intention throughout the devising process.

The need to question how we see the world underlies any devising process, consciously or not. Devising is a means of re-arranging that world for a group; assembling and structuring an experience into a concrete form for others to see, which is often complex, both intellectually and emotionally. The drive or motivation comes from a desire to make sense of something, a need to speak, a will to investigate, as well as the passion to explore this through the means of theatre. However, a group can only work at its own level and pace. No amount of reading or theorising ultimately affects that starting decision of how to proceed. Once in the making, it may or may not be appropriate to look at live or video performances, books or other resource materials, but the pivotal or key decisions remain with the process adopted by the group. What concerns us is directly experiencing that process, defining and questioning what is happening, and engaging with the material in a personal and objective relationship at one and the same time.

'OUTSIDE EYE'

Watching the different devising processes of professional companies has enabled me to clarify how a lack of communication creates confusion between people to the extent that a group can complicate subject matter into six areas instead of clearly focussing on one, which, in turn, emphasises the importance of an outside commentator on the work. This might mean a director, co-ordinator, team leader, or a member of the company with that specific responsibility during a workshop session or rehearsal. Working 'on the floor' is a direct way forward for some companies, when feeling trapped by the material itself, or blocked in the development of the piece. 'Thinking on your feet' allows the individual to respond to new ideas or thoughts spontaneously, to sense and react to others so that the interaction or combined operation often produces unknown or unseen fresh material. This is not to underestimate the value or importance of group discussion, but to point out the danger of becoming preoccupied with talking and words. Companies vary the balance of emphasis placed on practical exploration and discussion, so that the input of theory and critical analysis may be of greater or lesser interest to them. In an ideal world, I would like to integrate theory and practice wherever possible, but original objectives often define a process that relies more heavily either on one or the other.

RESOURCES

Reading about the work of professional companies and their approaches to devising theatre provides a useful comparison of working methods, not to be replicated but rather to provoke or stimulate further thinking about the ways and means of devising theatre. It is interesting to note that research clearly showed that professional companies could not name any books that were of direct use to them in terms of how to devise theatre, but that a wide range of reading materials had been indirectly influential in a general sense, or of direct use within the context of a specific project. Individual practitioners felt that the most beneficial books were either extremely theoretical or analytical texts, including Keir Elam's *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* or Martin Esslin's *Field of Drama*, offering what

is in use when a group starts devising theatre, or books that described particular ways of approaching performance and art, about particular passions or attitudes to work, which can both clarify a group's position and become a source of inspiration. (See Appendix IV for 'Further selected reading list', based on the various suggestions of individual members of professional companies.)

It seems to me that much more is needed to promote a greater dialogue and understanding between practising members of the theatre profession and those training or studying drama and theatre in higher education. In this I include degree courses, teacher training programmes, vocational studies, and the drama school curriculum. There is no substitute for seeing live performance, practically engaging in workshops with visiting theatre practitioners, or being involved in thought-provoking debate with members of a professional company. It is the accumulation of these experiences that widens students' perspectives of the real world of professional theatre.

It is also vital to relate the learning situation to the professional world, and initiatives such as Enterprise in Higher Education[3] allow for the professionalisation of staff and student projects through the development of training skills that come from working with professional theatre companies in residency or workshop situations. In 1990–91 Kent University fourth-year drama students benefitted from working with professional practitioners and others from Lumiere & Son, Pirate Productions, Forced Entertainment Theatre Co-operative, the Royal Court Theatre, the Independent Theatre Council, and Wimbledon College of Art and Design. This provided their last year of study with a real working context and experience for the future, bringing together the areas of professional theatre, business, and education. This is a positive move towards an improved dialogue between the professional practitioner, those involved in education or training of drama students, and the general public.

DOCUMENTING WORK

Apart from wanting to increase liaison between professional and educational workers, more materials must be made avail-

able and accessible to those involved in theatre education. The issue of devising and documentation raises a number of questions about the purpose, functions, and role of documentation in relation to contemporary devised theatre. Does the dominant literary theatre tradition necessitate that devised theatre is documented? Documentation brings credibility and respectability. Perhaps the significance of devised theatre is in the ephemerality of the event, and in the importance of transience. The motives for documentation include popularising the work of particular companies, and promoting the alternative form of devised theatre – for posterity or inspiration, as a report, history or memory, as a work in itself to exhibit, and as a working method to bring a group together, in order to keep track of ideas and internal dialogue.

The documentation of devised theatre serves different functions for drama teachers or students in higher education, professional theatre practitioners, and those generally interested in the subject. Different forms of documentation, including video recordings of performances, written reviews, books about a specific company's work, or photographs, enable others to re-live another version of a performance, to sell or market a product, and to gain insight into a particular process of creativity. Who documents the work – for example, the company, the video maker, the outsider, the academic, or the theatre critic – and how it is documented are significant in the representation, interpretation, value and meanings attributed to devised theatre.

The intention and context for documentation is fundamental in that the 'document' is the work itself. It has a life of its own. Whatever form the document takes – for instance, an analytical article, a critical review, or a video – it is always a shadow of the original document (the live devised performance). This is where the importance of memory and imagination cannot be overstated: that immortal moment shared between the performer and spectator never to be recaptured again. Perhaps I do not want to see everything? Memory and imagination suffice.

I feel like this when I recall watching a performance of Impact Theatre Co-operative's 'The Carrier Frequency' at The Ralph Thoresby School in Leeds in the autumn of 1984. At the end of the performance, I just sat in my seat silently for ten minutes. I had no desire to speak to the friend sitting next to me, I simply

wanted to be alone with my feelings, emotions, and the power of the theatrical experience. I had no need whatsoever to articulate verbally what I felt about this stunning performance. I shall never forget it, and words cannot describe how emotionally 'gutted' I felt. That moment of exchange between performers and spectator cannot be documented.

When I tell second-year performance students that 'The Carrier Frequency' was the most significant theatre performance I watched in the 1980s, they are confused. What they observe from the documented video extracts or written articles[4] about this performance did not contain the proximity of the spectator to the powerful set (a pool of water two feet deep, out of which rose scaffolding towers), the extraordinary soundtrack, and the desperate images that occured and re-occured throughout the piece. The video does not reveal how dangerous it was for the spectator, or the sheer physical energy emanating from the performers as they enacted a series of rituals in an attempt to continue their existence, those repeated actions of carrying each other through the water, that confusion about what was happening, and what was not. Of course, the live engagement between performer and spectator does not exist on video or in the written text.

What does the specialist and non-specialist reader want from documentation? To discover various ways of devising theatre, materials for research and teaching in education, inspiration for making original work, a system of effective networking, or new ways of 'reading' theatre? There is a difference between being documented and doing the documentation. How work is documented is never neutral; it has a language of its own. The document never signifies in isolation. The documenter and the 'reader' of the document give it new meanings and significance within the cultural context of both the time and place that it is 'read'. In this book, I have described various devised theatre performances that I watched between 1989 and 1993, in an attempt to provide the reader with a sense of what each performance conveyed at that particular moment. I am unable to capture the liveness or authenticity of the event, as this is in the physical bodies of both performer and spectator.

What then is the value of documenting the process of devising or the devised product? It depends on what the documentation is for – artistic, educational, political, or cultural

18 Steve Shill, Heather Ackroyd, and Niki Johnson in 'The Carrier Frequency'. Impact Theatre Co-operative, 1984–86. (Photo: Matthew Davison.)

reasons. When it is linked to politics, the pressures of press reviews, funding bodies and decisions, there is an uneasiness about the relationship of devising and documentation. In the 1990s, the marketing and selling of the product often mean promoting or publicising the event well before it is fully devised. The promotional video plays a significant part in determining how a group's work is presented, viewed, and critically received. There is a greater demand for high-quality publicity materials with devised products that have a strong, visual emphasis so that an audience has some indication of the intended work.

For those studying the subject of devising theatre, it can be inspiring to look at a company's working process, or useful to read about a company's problems or difficulties with the work. For some companies, the daily recording of the work's progress is an integral part and development of the process, particularly important in experimental performance. IOU has developed a method of documentation for the company, which is unique to them and would not work for anyone else. The act of notation cannot begin to reproduce the various elements that make up live performance. The notation, the text of the performance, is never made complete. Even video, which has become a prime medium of documentation, can never describe all the action. It can record the physicality of the performer, but the notations are full of gaps. Gestures, movements, whole sections of performed actions are lost. The limitations are with the 'eye' of the camera person, who chooses what to focus on for the audience. The live theatre performance moves the spectator through a process, the sense of engagement and dynamics between performer and spectator, which video can never capture. The video is a separate art form and performance product in itself.

Devised theatre demands different ways of writing about and recording performance. It needs various approaches to be taken, which mix disciplines and share a performance vocabulary. A multi-vision is required, which incorporates sketches, slides, reviews, memories, photographs, objects or props, videos, and traces of performance. Some of the more established companies do have archive collections, such as The People Show and Belgrade Theatre-in-Education Company, which are invaluable research resources, but demand time and money to be maintained efficiently.

It is my experience that the range of contemporary British devised theatre is such that it is vital to find ways to communicate this diverse wealth of material to others without losing the uniqueness of every created product. Within the context of my own research, the simplest way forward has been to compile three lists of information that relate to the professional companies devising theatre included in this book. (See Appendix V for 'Contact list', Appendix VI for 'Video availability list', and Appendix VII for 'Publications featuring the work of companies'.)

ASSESSMENT

How then to evaluate contemporary devised experimental performance? How does one notate the complex interaction of physical, visual, and verbal languages into the written word? There is certainly a strong argument for looking at alternative ways of assessing the current full range of devised theatre practice, so that a wider vocabulary of performance is developed, which is not solely reliant on the words and wisdom of London theatre critics writing their reviews in the daily national papers, or academics theorising about the mechanics or dynamics of performance! John McGrath makes this point in relation to the language of the complex social theatrical event:

> To complicate matters further, each occasion of theatre is different, evanescent and impossible to record. . . . But what it does do all too often is to reduce the language of theatre that is studied academically to the most easily obtainable – the words. . . . But words are not the 'language' of theatre, and by exclusively attending to them we reduce, impoverish the event for academic convenience.[5]

The acknowledged London group of theatre critics are responsible for analysing theatre performance across the board, which means that the same set of criteria is being applied to the work of the Royal National Theatre or the Royal Shakespeare Company (who are concerned with productions of written plays, whether classic texts, works by Shakespeare, or new writing) as to the devised work of IOU, Lumiere & Son, Forced

Entertainment, Station House Opera, or Forkbeard Fantasy. In this context, devised experimental performance is clearly inhibited by the great traditions of established theatre, which focus centrally on the written text, making any performance work without spoken words apparently elitist or irrelevant to the general public. Likewise, directors' theatre, which presents a single vision or interpretation of a play written by a playwright, sets the norm and criteria for judging work that is group-orientated, collaboratively devised, and that often incorporates various art forms or multi-media approaches in an attempt to integrate the complexity of that vision.

This reiterates a point made in the opening chapter about theatre criticism in conventional theatre being concerned with the relationship of writing and performance. Inevitably, there are problems for the critic writing about devised experimental performance in a culture of text-based theatre tradition reliant on interpretation, the primacy and the privileging of the word. Equally, there appears to be a desire to mythologise one person, that is, the director or the playwright. Theatre criticism is delivered out of a socio-political and cultural context too. The critic has to please the paper, the sub-editor, the readers (the general public), and the artists. The critic offers a subjective response to the work in a particular place and time, which is made objective within the written text of a newspaper, journal, or book. What is needed then, is a multiple subjectivity and a multiplicity of discourses.

LANGUAGE

In devised experimental theatre where the body is the primary signification of text, the gestural language (through the combination of narrative, text, and physical movement) is the performance vocabulary for the work. It is made up of visual images, movement, music, and use of objects or props in new ways. It is a different means of using a performance language, which in turn requires a critical language that relates to the work's vision and frames of reference. The body and the use of physical, visual imagery are the focus of the performance. Thus, a form of critical language or vocabulary is needed to analyse work that integrates different kinds of 'text', whether physical, visual, or verbal. Devised theatre also necessitates a

new relationship between writing and the making of performance.

The framework and critical vocabulary that exists is for a British culture that ignores looking at a piece of theatrical art in aesthetic terms. This lack of analysis of how work is created both artistically and aesthetically reveals the necessity to examine the processes and aesthetic concerns of making theatre within our drama training programmes or education system. From early schooling through to higher education, there is a constant confirmation of a two-tier division of the 'Royals' on top, and alternative theatre below. Within education, there is little critical discourse of the 'second division' that is witnessed publicly in the media and national newspapers. Devised theatre is hampered by living in a specialised society that demands a specialisation of art forms, resulting in a lack of cross-disciplinary work, as well as leading to a series of separate cultural messages being created and transmitted to particular sections of society only.

WHO BENEFITS?

The nature of the devised performance suggests a value in the process as related to the end product. The significance is in the group's creativity and the intended audience's involvement with the performance. Fundamentally, it is what the elderly south London community, the fourth-year secondary pupils, or the local general public discover from the experience. The devising process becomes important in providing the opportunity and availability for others (including the non-specialists) to make or create a theatre performance. Within these parameters, judging or assessing success or excellence can only be determined by those participating in both process and product. Hilary Westlake of Lumiere & Son argues a mutual incompatibility between art and local involvement, based on the limitations of amateurs' commitment and performance ability. However, if the dominant literary theatre tradition and the restrictions of text-based work prevent non-specialist individuals from participating in the process of making art, then surely the alternative form of devised theatre embraces the struggle for artistic democracy in this country?

I am faced with the intrinsic question of who and what is art

for? Therefore, what is the function of devised theatre in relation to traditional, text-based theatre? It is to offer accessibility and opportunity to groups of people to make, create, participate in and spectate theatre. Community-devised theatre is for a particular group of people; street theatre is for anyone passing by; performance art installations in public places are for everyone. The essential difference between the audiences of Welfare State's spectacles, or passers-by who stop to watch an IOU site-specific outside event, and those visiting a theatre production at an acknowledged venue is obvious; it involves a concrete decision of choosing to pay money to see art.

Devised theatre encourages and supports the notion of a group of people having the opportunity to be artists in their own right, to discover their own creativity in form and content. The importance of the devising process is to enable a number of individuals collaboratively to express, share, and articulate their views, beliefs, or opinions about British culture and society. The evaluation or assessment of such work is ultimately dependent on those making or participating in the theatrical event. Access can mean excellence. Devised theatre has a place alongside our literary theatre heritage. Both are necessary; they are neither in opposition nor in conflict.

DISCUSSION

Within the context of education and training, it is important for teachers to address the issues of how to bring greater accessibility of work to students, how to examine or judge art, and how to criticise or review contemporary devised theatre. Training programmes for intending artists must encourage them to discuss their work more frequently with artists from other disciplines, or to honestly share their true feelings about, or criticisms of, performance art. Similarly, in order to promote a greater dialogue between performers and audience, there must be more articles, books, and conferences to digest and discuss the subject of devised theatre within a public forum. The attendance of both professional devising theatre companies, theatre critics, academics, and graduate students at the Centre for Performance Research's conference in Cardiff on 'Devising and Documentation' in February 1993 was a great

success.[6] It reflected a strong desire for artistic, intellectual, and educational debate on the subject of devised theatre.

Such debate illustrates the strength of appeal for companies devising theatre in the early 1990s. The attraction is in the devising process, in the alternative uses of time, money, and space to create a theatrical performance. The excitation is in the role of the performer/deviser, the relationship of the company to the audience in the non-theatrical space, and the visual and physical use of the playing environment. Every time a group devises a piece of theatre, it builds on previous experiences, but the uniqueness of the occasion demands a fresh approach to working together, an open mind, and a willingness to trust to the process rather than deciding too firmly in advance how the product will be created. The appeal of devising theatre lies in balancing and blending the various components together, in order to take control of the production of theatre.

8

LEARNING TO DEVISE

Practical ideas and suggestions

> . . . And so each venture
> Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate
> With shabby equipment always deteriorating
> . . .
> For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business.
>
> ('East Coker', *Four Quartets*, T.S. Eliot)

This final chapter is for any new group devising theatre. It is intended for those people looking for signposts and directions in the form of practical ideas or suggestions. These can be taken either randomly or not on one of the many possible journeys of devising theatre. Having devised theatre with a number of groups in a variety of situations, taught and worked with students or young people in a range of educational institutions, and observed, researched and discussed contemporary British devised theatre practice with many professional practitioners, I wish to share what I have found useful from that discovery, learning and acquired knowledge. I offer a guide that is neither definitive nor presented as a recipe book for making theatre, but is just one approach to working together that is based on cumulative personal experiences over some years. Any ideas, suggestions or help that are proffered can be taken, tried out, adapted, or rejected, wherever it seems appropriate to the particular devising situation. They may be of value as learning models, for exploration and experimentation, or may simply serve to stimulate discussion about the processes and products of devised theatre.

What I have found most useful when devising theatre are a number of resources that are accessible and readily available.

The devising experience is often contradictory, unclear, and confusing. I need a structure that allows me to clarify, verify, and understand where I am going within the process. At the simplest level this might mean a pen and notebook to jot down observations and thoughts during initial sessions, or it could include detailed discussion time being purposefully planned by the group. It is important to acknowledge the contradictions in a positive way, and not attempt to solve early problems with a quick, compromising, mediocre answer.

There are books that are helpful to identify the practice of professional companies devising theatre, as well as those written by individual practitioners outlining practical ideas, games or exercises that can be used by any group working together. Selected examples of books that I would always recommend students to read in the former context are Rob Ritchie's *The Joint Stock Book*, Tony Coult and Baz Kershaw's *Engineers of the Imagination – The Welfare State Handbook*, David Savran's *Breaking the Rules: The Wooster Group*, and Elizabeth MacLennan's *The Moon Belongs to Everyone, Making Theatre with 7:84*.[1] However, it must be said that I have never picked up a book for practical working reference when 'on the floor' and immersed in the creative process of making theatre. Reading as widely as possible to increase daily awareness of the world, or to challenge new ideas or thinking, encourages further questioning, investigation, and exploration.

Going to see as much live devised theatre as possible is an obvious suggestion, but one that needs continual reiteration. Watching work that is exciting – or poor – stimulates ideas, inspiration, and material for discussion. Financing theatre visits or accessibility to performances in certain parts of the country can be problematic, but if all else fails, most companies video their productions as an ongoing record of their work. Festivals often provide a focus for a range of performances to be seen, such as the 'Showcase' season at the Brighton Festival, or the London International Festival of Theatre that brings wonderful work from abroad to Britain every two years.[2] Participation in workshops led by professional practitioners not only gives an insight into a company's approach or working method, but provides a practical learning experience of working with others.

When I started devising theatre as an undergraduate student in the 1970s, what most inspired and excited me was seeing

such a tremendous range of professional work, which included, Shared Experience's early shows, Monstrous Regiment, Ken Campbell, Belt and Braces, Foco Novo, Incubus, and Footsbarn – the list is endless.[3] Trying out ideas, however, was the most important part of wanting to devise theatre with a group of people also interested in working together. There is no substitute for exploration and experimentation of ideas, knowing that all can be abandoned, and that the possibility to start again is always there. The making and examination of work 'on the floor' is the most important aspect of devising theatre for any group, because it moves the process forward practically towards the creation of the product.

Much of my teaching work is about facilitating ideas, discussing process or product, as well as advising on the possibilities of a devising situation. I want to consider how a group begins to work together, and ways of starting to devise theatre, to suggest ideas or stimuli for experimenting with form, content or audience, and to examine some problems or difficulties that may occur within the devising or rehearsal process. The written format of what follows is intended to be selectively used in the way that is most appropriate to the group's manner of making theatre. Individual personalities and reasons for motivation are fundamental to how a group decides to devise, which is why my suggestions or ideas can only be one way to investigate, build, and develop a working practice that is right for a group.

GROUP BEGINNINGS (1)

Decide how often to meet regularly as a group; for example, agree a weekly time or session to discuss company business or administrative matters, as well as time for advance planning of work, a weekly review, or evaluation of progress so far. It is important to establish how the group is going to assess progress, and this will very much depend on the nature of the participants and the project. One suggestion is to keep a company log-book or written record of progress, which will enable the group to look back at how devising decisions were arrived at, building on and consolidating the work further. This may take the form of diary entries, and can be a shared responsibility, for instance, a rota basis of weekly recording

that includes all members of the group. Sometimes it is also appropriate for individuals to keep personal notebooks of jottings, notes, or observations during a workshop session that can be reflected on at a later stage of group discussion.

'Brainstorming'

Initial aims and objectives for the group, company, or project provide the boundaries at the start. How this is organised and determined will depend on the individuals' interests, experiences, and ideas for the project. What I have often found particularly useful at this early stage is to identify key questions for the group, and to 'brainstorm' answers over a specified period of time. This involves writing the questions on 'sheets' of wallpaper and asking members of the group to write their immediate responses to the questions (and to the answers of others) in silence over an agreed time limit. This provides a core of personal material as a basis for discussion, a stimulus for further questions and 'brainstorming', which eventually results in a shared written statement of intention, or agreement of principles, aims or objectives. If the group is devising in a permanent space, these 'sheets' can be displayed as a reminder of original decisions, or as a resource to return to as necessary.

I have also used this method of working when group discussion is blocked, negative, or dominated by the same people, as the disciplined conditions of the exercise ensure fairness to everyone to individually respond to the questions. Questioning techniques are vital in a devising process, but look out for the obvious danger of asking closed questions that direct or narrow the focus of discussion too soon. If motivation, interest, and intention are unanimous, then consider the opening parameters of the product to be devised. Never lose sight of the product or end performance. Work towards a goal of completion, which is identified through a series of deadlines or 'work-in-progress' stages. The group is devising a piece of theatre for an audience to watch at a particular time or place, which begs the question of how to devise the product, and what tools or means are available within the process.

Discussion is an early essential means of communication for the group. Explore different ways of structuring a discussion as a group, such as appointing a chairperson to lead, intervene as

necessary, and summarise points of agreement. Try a system of everyone having the opportunity to speak in turn, rather than random ideas being offered by the same members, or those people with the loudest voice or the strongest personality. Adapt the 'conch' idea from William Golding's novel *Lord of the Flies*, so that a member may only speak when holding the selected object within the circle of discussion. Consider the suggestion of each individual's idea being given to the 'group pot of ideas', so that ownership of a personal contribution is surrendered in further debate. Sometimes a discussion needs to be as free-ranging as possible, whilst other occasions demand a clear focus and a more structured form of debate.

GROUP BEGINNINGS (2)

In order to get to know the group better, it may be useful to take a preliminary idea for content as a means to discovering more about individuals' interests, attitudes, beliefs, feelings, or views about a particular subject. Imagine that a group has expressed an early interest in the theme of crime as a possible starting point for devising a show. The first stage might involve using 'sheets' to 'brainstorm' personal responses to four key questions about crime, for example:

What is crime?
What is a criminal?
Is it a crime only when you are caught?
Is stealing always a crime?

The answers to these questions are discussed and immediately establish a difference (or not) in attitudes towards the subject. This may open up further questions and 'brainstorming', or it may suggest a particular line of enquiry to be pursued through a specific practical activity rather than through discussion. Alternatively, there may be one 'issue' that produces strong disagreement or conflict of opinion to the extent that it is adopted as the next area for practical examination. Examples of relevant practical exercises might include:

1 Individually: Present a physical image that reflects a personal view of crime.

2 Look at each image in turn, and discuss together what the image says to the group.
3 Try to make an agreed physical collective image of crime. Experiment with ideas using one member of the group as an 'outside eye' to comment on the work.
4 Create a physical and verbal collage of crime as a group, using movement, sounds, music, and any other appropriate resources available. (Work on the mood or atmosphere of the presentation.)
5 Individually: Tell a personal story of crime to the group.
6 Discuss these stories, choosing one that seems most appropriate to everyone, or that holds the most exciting material for theatrical exploration, or that combines ideas from all the stories to create a new narrative.
7 Agree an outline scenario for the story (written or improvised).
8 Decide on a number of characters in the story, based on people from the original material, or invented from discussion or improvisation.
9 Improvise a central scene from the story, or allocate members of the group to work together on different sections, in order to find out more information about characters, or to look at the development of a specific scene.
10 'Hot seat' each character as a group to establish a background knowledge or base line for further development.

Exploring a theme in this way brings people together and also identifies the needs of the group with regard to ways of working, material to be researched, ideas for the form or content of a show, and group dynamics. This might be one of several preliminary exercises of working together, or it might be the beginnings of a route to be taken towards devising a piece of theatre for ex-offenders about women in prison.

GROUP BEGINNINGS (3)

A group coming together for the first time may find introductory practical work an instrumental way of getting to know each other, using games, concentration, and trust exercises to develop a sense of discipline, fun, and spontaneity at the same time. Activities that promote skills of communication,

confidence, trust and sensitivity all contribute to the training of a group in terms of establishing its identity, discovering its own dynamics, and improving basic skills of performance. Work to be covered includes movement and vocal training (with an emphasis on physical fitness, suppleness, and competence in various physical skills), games that encourage group creativity, concentration and trust, improvisation, and relaxation, as well as ways of focussing discussion, decision-making, and leadership.

It is important to point out that every group needs to select the most beneficial exercises or games that are pertinent to the growth and progression of individual members relating to, and interacting with, each other. For this reason, there is no definitive list of practical group exercises, because it is dependent on the nature of the project, the people involved, the theatre being created, and how the group chooses to incorporate initial practical activities into the overall working structure agreed at the start. In other words, out of one set of exercises come ideas for others, or alternatively, a decision to change direction completely through a written activity or discussion. Examples of books that provide valuable resources for a group in terms of reading about personal experiences, specific improvisatory techniques, or finding something that stimulates imagination and creativity are: Albert Hunt's *Hopes for Great Happenings*, in which he lists some examples of games that he has found useful in Appendix I;[4] Keith Johnstone's *IMPRO Improvisation and the Theatre*, which offers the reader a range of practical techniques, exercises, and ideas for spontaneous creativity;[5] Clive Barker's *Theatre Games*, which is a handbook about 'the work and art of the actor';[6] and *BODY SPACE IMAGE Notes Towards Improvisation and Performance* by Miranda Tufnell and Chris Crickmay, which is 'intended as a manual, an aid to action, but . . . is not in any sense a complete guide'.[7]

Whichever way you choose to start working practically as a group, it is important to establish a shared feeling of participation at the beginning of a session. This is most easily achieved through an introductory physical warm-up, which is important in terms of focussing concentration and creating a healthy working atmosphere. Appropriate loose clothing should be worn so that members are not restricted in their movements, for example of falling, being caught, or travelling in unison.

The warm-up might take the form of playing games, following a strict routine of aerobic exercises, the yogic 'Salute to the Sun', stretching and breathing exercises, or instituting 'the grid' as a way to start a session.

'The grid' involves skills of group awareness and discipline, concentration, and trust. An area is marked out for the group to move in, in as simple and neutral a way as possible (eyes front, head up, no arms swinging), walking in straight lines and turning at right angles (ninety degrees), changing direction whenever they encounter another person travelling towards them. Someone outside the group claps to indicate that everyone should stop. This is developed so that the group can stop and start without help, producing a performance style of neutrality. Once this has been achieved, the group can learn to stop and start in varying combinations, such as only a certain number of people moving at once, or all but one person moving together, building a base for more elaborate group performance work.

Influences

I have used and taught a number of warm-up exercises over the years, developing a personalised vocabulary based on the influences and ideas of others. I include Iyengar and Hatha Yoga (particularly breathing and relaxation), contemporary dance techniques, t'ai chi, and aerobics, as well as other adapted forms of warming-up suggested by theatre teachers or practitioners, such as Jerzy Grotowski and Augusto Boal, in an attempt to bring people together in an atmosphere of relaxed trust and cooperation. I will always remember a workshop run by members of Triple Action in the early 1980s for my students, where an actor asked the group to start 'warming-up'. Immediately, everyone (anxious to please) started to limber up using a series of stretching exercises that included Yoga's 'The Cat' and 'Salute to the Sun', contemporary dance back stretches, and other collectively learnt sections of aerobic workouts. After a period of observation, the actor stopped the students and asked them to define what they were doing in terms of his request. He suggested that they were warming-up for *his* benefit, that they were creating an image or picture of warming-up through these exercises or routines, rather than

physically exerting themselves so that they felt pushed to the point of exhaustion.

He then led them through a Grotowski-based exercise in which they were to imagine themselves as horses in a meadow running and playing together, moving in bursts of energetic activity, or rolling gently on the grass in preparation for the next concentrated spurt of exercise. This was a long, continuous physical warm-up, which pushed the students to breaking point, but more importantly, focussed their attention, concentration, and energy on a specific objective or intention in preparation for the work that followed. I find the 'yogic' quality of some of Grotowski's preparatory exercises beneficial in tandem with specific practise of yoga poses, for example, the shoulderstand, dog pose, and squat. There is an emphasis on breathing correctly before, during, and after each exercise, encouraging a disciplined approach to the work. Here are two illustrations of this work:

1 Play the 'follow my leader' exercise, moving in squat jumps or alternative ways; run around the space and find the energy to include a jump and a scream that do not interrupt the flow of running; jump from a squat position, releasing the energy from the stomach, whilst screaming aloud and travelling through the space.
2 Imagine the arms are paralysed; there is a fly on the right shoulder, and the desire is to shake it off. In the same situation, there is a piece of silk placed on the head, which is to be thrown off using all of the body to do this.

A warm-up that I have used (inspired by the ideas of Grotowski) looks at body awareness and group concentration, contradicting the approach of practising a routine of exercises in order to make the body more supple and strong. Lying on the floor with the eyes closed, imagine the body shape or self-image against the ground. Become aware of the parts of the body that are heavy, warm, or tingling, or any other sensations associated with them. Think of the distance between parts of the body and hold up the fingers to indicate the distance between them – for instance, be aware of the distance between the ears or the equivalent length of one foot in relation to another part of the body. Draw a spontaneous map of the body, using colours to indicate the various areas of feeling, and illustrate other aspects