

DEVISING THEATRE

A practical and theoretical
handbook

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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-

cally related to the nature of the devised piece, the purpose and intention of the work. A company is concerned with the length and duration of a performance, work in progress, and touring arrangements: a participatory theatre-in-education programme can last a day, or an outdoor site-specific celebration may not commence until late evening. Some companies place a limited time structure on the devising process, whilst others work within a much longer period despite financial restrictions. What is essentially different for devised theatre is the company's need to plan and schedule its own timescale according to the development of the work, and in relation to a flexible structure of potential change, shift of focus, and spontaneous decision-making.

Time is needed for the trying out of ideas, the experimentation of work, the development of a process, and subsequently to create deadlines out of that work. There are not the time constraints normally allocated to specific roles or responsibilities in text-based theatre, where, for example, the musician employed to play music in a theatre production usually comes in at the end of the rehearsal period, or a lighting designer might expect to have about twelve hours to light a musical or complex play in a five-hundred-seat theatre. In a devising company, such as IOU or Lumiere & Son, a musician can suggest the time needed to make a contribution to the developing piece at the start. However, a difficulty arises for some companies devising innovative, experimental work when a good idea can develop over a number of years, such as Station House Opera's series of works using breeze blocks in performance over a period of four to five years. This raises the question of different levels of funding needed to accommodate planning or preparation time, a devising period of workshops and discussion, as well as rehearsal or touring timescales. The notion of producing more than one show out of a time-related budget is not relevant to a system of funding based on established conventions of touring the traditional play in Britain. Within the broad spectrum of contemporary British devised theatre practice, the overall length of time used to devise a theatrical product or performance varies greatly with every company's internal planning and organisation. This is illustrated by the examples of Trestle Theatre's 'Top Storey' (1990), which took ten weeks to devise (including one month's

research and development), and 'Crime of Love' (1991), which was completed within six weeks.

Devising theatre demands decisions about the organisation and structuring of time, whether it be a three-week residency, a ten-day site-specific piece, or a three-month tour. Apart from the making of the artistic product, there are time decisions related to the administration of the product, publicity, company business, and evaluating the work. In devised theatre there is always a sense of never having enough time to work. This is particularly true of those roles from traditional text-based theatre, which have different functions within the devising company; for instance, the set designer cannot design the set at the start and know that the task is complete. A designer in a theatre-in-education company may have little time to create a visually satisfying space if the process is fraught with difficulties and subject to constant change.

Resources

Finance and budget for a devised show are inextricably linked to decisions about time. The 1970s saw increases in Arts Council subsidies, which helped the expansion of alternative theatre. Thus, Joint Stock had funding for four-week workshops, five to six weeks of rehearsal, and three months of touring. The communal way of working was respected in terms of both temporal and financial requirements. However, the 1980s saw a preoccupation with fund-raising and sponsorship to the extent that many companies felt their creativity stifled, the artistic side of the work devalued, and experienced a need to become multi-faceted. For some companies this meant developing workshops, residencies, or touring projects, in order to survive. Gillian Hanna, a founder member of Monstrous Regiment, compares the company's situation in 1978 to 1989 in an article, 'Waiting for Spring to Come Again: Feminist Theatre 1978 and 1989',¹² which states that its original revenue funding grant paid for eleven people to work full-time over a year, whilst its current grant covers an administrator only.

In the early 1990s, devised theatre receives less Arts Council funding generally than traditional play production that is based in a theatre building.¹³ Theatre buildings need income to survive and be maintained. The building provides a potential

artistic continuity in a specific community or region, whether by maintaining the particular operation or transforming it. Thus, the Arts Council will withdraw funding from a building-based company whose artistic quality is not adequate. Indeed, I found when I was a member of South East Arts Drama Panel (1988-92), decisions about financial applications for non-theatre building-based companies were heavily restricted by the fact that there were three repertory theatres in the region requiring a significant part of the budget in order to be maintained.

Those devising companies linked to particular theatre buildings are partly resourced for this reason, such as Belgrade Theatre-in-Education Company in Coventry, which receives some Arts Council funding under the auspices of Belgrade Theatre Trust, in addition to central funding from Coventry City Council.¹⁴ For devising companies based in buildings which are not part of an existing theatre structure or designed specifically to accommodate an audience, there are still additional costs of rehearsal space, administrative work, storage, and the needs of a particular project.

This alternative form of theatre is often specifically 'Project' funded, although there are some companies devising theatre who are 'Annual Clients' or 'Three year franchise clients (touring)'.¹⁵ Unless a company is franchise funded over three years, it must make applications for individual projects to the Arts Council. Subsequently, many devising companies have to prove the value and significance of their particular products with every application, rather than developing the work in a financially secure situation over several years. One of the real problems for newer companies devising live art, performance theatre, or experimental work is working within a category of theatrical form that is still relatively unacknowledged. Despite the Arts Council's attempt to maintain up-to-date information on such companies, one cannot ignore the fact that ultimately all individual views or opinions of officers, advisers, or panel members are subjective responses to the work. Consequently, devised theatre is often dependent upon a variety of financial resources linked to a proposed project, which has no guaranteed future funding. For some companies, this becomes a debate about basic living standards versus how much budget to afford to the making of the devised product. Therefore,