

Devised Theatre – a Short Introduction

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Abstract: The aim of the following article is to define the concept of devised theatre, as well as outlining a brief history, and providing a description of the main elements which constitute a collective performance. It also brings in discussion the member roles in a group that practices devised theatre, and the technique they use in creating a performance.

Keywords: Devised theatre, collective author, theatre, performance, independent theatre, actor – director relationship, contemporary theatre aesthetic, authorship.

I have always believed that any theme chosen by an artist as a starting point for a new performance will, in some degree, dictate a way of working and even its own rhythm of development, which needs to be taken into consideration. In the case of the devised theatre aesthetic, there is no clear recipe.

First of all, we cannot overlook the fact that each of the artists involved in a production have their own personality, and their own way of approaching the proposed theme. Secondly, after the improvisation and experimental level, there comes a moment when everything has to be framed in a fixed form. Thirdly, the devised theatre process allows everybody the possibility to defend their own ideas, to create within their idea framework, which creates the need for a mediator who can reconcile the imminent conflicts, to see the potential of development in some situations or to remove the dead weight from the project.

Each time, during the first stage of production, the team is involved in a brainstorming of ideas and images related to the proposed theme. These should be noted and tested, even if they most often represent firsthand solutions

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that require either development or abandonment. However, it is absolutely necessary for this stage of “pruning” to exist, because it leads the team to a more profound and creative theme analysis.

What does “devised/devising theatre” mean? In a simple form, the concept can be defined as an original production, generated by a creative collective working process. The dramaturgical support does not precede the cultural product, which can be a theatre production or an experimental performance.

Often associated with the innovative and experimental, devised theatre productions have immensely developed the possibilities and the limitations of theatre shows and their perception, both from the practitioners’ perspective and the audiences’. In most cases, the artistic groups that practice devised theatre work are groups that love to experiment, that are constantly questioning the topic/ideology they want to explore, as well as creating new ways of thinking, and building new forms and structures.

Alison Oddey defines the “devised performance” concept as an answer and a reaction to the relationship between director and playwright, and also to the classical naturalism that

... 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 version of the playwright) and it is here that the emphasis has shifted from the writer to the creative artist.²

Indeed, during the creative sessions between the members of a group that practice devised theatre, a new kind of subject understanding is born. Without excluding its intellectualism, the contact with the theme is, in the first phase, more organic; and this is due to the fact that improvisation is used as a main researching instrument. Keith Johnston evokes imagination and spontaneity as principal sources of improvisation. Both elements are based on a very instinctual level and, once passed through an intellectual analysis, they lose their freshness and creativity; more often, they are born effortlessly as a reaction to an external stimulus:

... unless we think it might be “wrong” ... Then we experience ourselves as “imagining”, as “thinking up an idea”, but what we’re really doing is faking up the sort of imagination we think we ought to have.³

2. Alison Oddey, *Devising theatre: A practical and theoretical handbook*, (London: Routledge, 1994), 4.

3. Keith Johnston, *Impro* (London: Methuen drama, 2007), 80.

We cannot provoke the imagination by taking distance to the subject. It is “a muscle”, as Ariane Mnouchkine puts it, a muscle that has to be trained in school and in the rehearsal room. In order to provoke and test their imagination, to keep it permanently active, the practitioners have to be in the theatre situation all the time, not thinking outside of it.

Therefore, the approach that a group of devised theatre practitioners ought to have is to be meta-intellectual, instinctual and also, autobiographical. Most of this type of productions could be integrated in the field of “handmade theatre” as critic Cristina Modreanu puts it in her book, *Utopii Performative*.⁴

Narrative in its classical understanding is almost always ignored, to the benefit of the experiment, work-in-progress and improvisation connected to artistic contemporary conceptions. This does not mean that “devised theatre” or “handmade theatre”, as Cristina Modreanu calls it, ignores new technologies, relying only on the performers’ physical potential. This is a very complex technique, without an instruction manual, which appeals to all staging, acting or dramaturgic possibilities. Its complexity lies in its polyphonic structure.

As an independent form, devised theatre was born at the beginning of the 2000s, but as a structure it was foreshadowed 30-40 years before, by the “happening” events and the experiments of artistic groups in New York and London. One explanation of the phenomenon could be given by the fact that these two “centers” of artistic society were in continuous development, and had effervescence that can rarely be seen today. In an interview for Theatre Talk show, Richard Foreman and Willem Dafoe remember with a kind of nostalgia that Performing Garage gathered a real community of artists from different domains like music, theatre, arts, cinematography and so on, under its roof in Soho. Performative experiments were born in this interdisciplinary environment.

Between 1967 and 1980, Richard Schechner is the director of *The Performance Group* in New York, a company in which he is also a founding member. By trying to put into practice his theories about performance, Schechner gathers young actors and directors, like Spalding Grey and Elizabeth LeCompte around the idea of his company. The big challenge was to reconsider the communication between performer and spectator, giving it a more direct spin. As an example in

4. Cristina Modreanu, *Utopii performative. Artiști radicali ai scenei americane în secolul 21* [Performative Utopias. Radical Artists of the American Stage in the 21st Century] (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2014), 166.

this respect, Schechner produced *Dionisus in 69* (1969), a performance that reinterprets Euripides' *The Bacchae*, keeping very little of the original text when all is said and done. According to the main artistic direction in the '60s, which followed the ritualistic potential of the theatrical act (as in the case of the productions by Brook, Mnouchkine, Grotowski, Şerban), Schechner succeeded to introduce elements of physical theatre and non-realistic actions in this "scheme", to the benefit of the script. Also, the appearance of nudes in the performance was an innovative and also scandalous act, through which the authors wanted to highlight the predominantly sexual message. "For many, *Dionisus in 69* produced a sense of democratic community-building and challenged taboos of self- and group-expression, especially sexual expression."⁵

Due to several tensions within the group, caused by matters of authority and vision, The Performance Group split in 1975, when Elizabeth LeCompte created *Wooster Group* along with Spalding Grey, Willem Dafoe, Kate Valk, Jim Clayburgh, Peyton Smith and Ron Vawter. Unlike the original group, *Wooster Group* gave up the ritualistic elements of the performance, and focused on the political side, more functional in their contemporary society. In addition, their shows combine classical texts and theatre elements with mass culture and taboos, by using the collage technique. Pioneer of devised theatre, *Wooster Group* continuously questions the place of theatre in society and, in trying to answer, finds different ways of expression to avoid cultural clichés.

Books read, books open, books turned inside out, texts cut apart, turned upside down; ... The trilogy, the epilogue, parts one and two, parentheses, exclamation point, a work-in-progress. Pull a quote from here, take that paragraph, take out the whole section (...) Collage is the aesthetic strategy at play.⁶

Thus, one can describe the working process of the *Wooster Group* productions. Their shows are original compilations and interpretations of famous texts, and also of contemporary issues of great interest to the whole world.

Another collage technique is the one practiced by Richard Foreman, who declares the following:

5. Paul Allain and Jen Harvie, *The Routledge Companion to Theatre and Performance*, 2nd ed. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), 112.

6. Bonnie Marranca, "The Wooster Group: A Dictionary of Ideas," in *The Wooster Group and its Traditions*, ed. Johan Callens (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2004), 110.

I write a little bit every day and I end up with a huge stack of pages. And when the time comes to do a play ... I say: "let me find an interesting page." And I find the page and I see it's pretty good and look through the huge stack again. "What page can go with that?" I find another page and it seem to relate somehow.⁷

By the association of independent texts, Foreman creates a script that is the starting point for a performance. Obviously, the original script will suffer adaptations through the creative process. I believe that a script is a living organism that must provoke the taste for interpretation in the practitioners. The written text should be as adaptable to a specific performance as an actor that is looking to interpret a character.

Returning to the history of the devised theatre concept, critic Duška Radosavljević attests that: "Devising, therefore, must be understood by reference to its own context – as a term and a practice, it should be understood as belonging to a particular historical 'moment' in the UK"⁸. Therefore, from a historical point of view, the Belgrade-based critic locates the birth of devised theatre in the second half of the twentieth century in Great Britain, as a form of counter-culture, in opposition with institutional theatre. Similar practices were depicted in the works of Jacques Lecoq, Ariane Mnouchkine (France) or *Living Theatre* and *The Performance Group* (USA). In fact, even the artistic group founded by Peter Brook at *Centre International de Recherche Théâtrale* (CIRT) used devised theatre techniques.

Also, Radosavljević separates two perspectives from which devising can be understood: aesthetic-methodologic (which refers to the creative process, and to the script which is not pre-existent to the production) and political (as a revolutionary method, born under the auspices of a practice against the traditionalist ways of thinking in theatrical processes). In effect, no matter how apolitical an independent artistic group considers itself to be, their art will never be separated from politics. Independent theatre groups will always react to some restrictive political or social factors, either consciously or unconsciously.

7. Richard Foreman, interview by Susan Haskins and Michael Riedel, *Theater Talk*, PBS, November 13, 2009, <http://www.cuny.tv/show/theatertalk/PR1011221>.

8. Duška Radosavljević, "Theatre-Making: The End of Directing as We Know It," in *Sfârșitul regiei, începutul creației colective în teatrul european / The End of Directing, The Beginning of Theatre-Making and Devising in European Theatre*, ed. Iulia Popovici (Cluj-Napoca: Tact, 2015), 189.

The devised theatre technique is a concept born inside independent theatre, as a result of social research, and of a substantial change in group dynamics. First of all, one can bring into discussion the authorship issue. Who is the real author of the artistic product? The actor is no longer a simple executor, and starts to play a very important part in the process, joining the “competition” for authorship, which was destined only for directors and playwrights in the past. His contribution is captured in the dramaturgical material he provides during the rehearsals.

Regarding dramaturgy, most devised theatre groups are using the collage technique. Through the use of this technique, the result will not be an independent script, but a dramatic and performative script that, without being transposed to the stage, might not have great fluency. But, ultimately, this is not the main reason of the written text; it just supports the entire performance.

In the essay *Theatre-Makers, Directors, and the Independent Theatre. The Founding Narrative*, critic Iulia Popovici points out the authorship matter, as follows:

Under the Romanian copyright law, directors and actors have a more limited form of copyright protection (they receive credit for their work), since they are ‘interpreters’, and the playwright is the only one having fully acknowledged copyright ownership.⁹

In Romania, due to the reminiscences of last century’s cultural policies, devised theatre is only beginning to manifest; we’re now starting to think about a “performance author”, not only about a “playwright” in a traditional sense. The first term covers a wider area, which can include the Actor, Director, Choreographer or Writer – all of whom can work together in the artistic process. Also, the performance will not be complete until it is presented in front of an audience, which will contribute their own perception to the representation. In this case, even the audience might become a co-author of the performance.

Thus, the playwright plays the part of Collective Memory, which records, adapts and rewrites – an act that is as spontaneous and unstable as the Searching. He does all of these things until the perfect form is found.

9. Iulia Popovici, “Theatre-Makers, Directors and the Independent Theatre. The Founding Narrative”, in *Sfârșitul regiei, începutul creației colective în teatrul european / The End of Directing, The Beginning of Theatre-Making and Devising in European Theatre*, ed. Iulia Popovici (Cluj-Napoca: Tact, 2015), 231.

The dramaturg might spend hours in rehearsals just watching, listening, writing, possibly drawing and recording. While this quiet documenting and organizing of information might sound like a fairly dry and uncreative act, the dramaturg's creative imagination is very much involved in this ordering process.¹⁰

The director's part in the process is determined by the group's need to have a leader to point out the key-moments of the future performance, and to consider the main ideas; this position gives him deciding power concerning the options of the whole production. No matter how democratic a group might be considered, there will always be need for someone who can assume these responsibilities. Along with the dramaturg, the director is looking to establish the "game rules" in which the performers can unleash their creativity and to propose new goals and fulfill their personal tasks.

... if we were to draw a map of typical devising process, it might reveal a labyrinthine journey of blind alleys, dead ends, associative leaps, mysterious paths and links between passages.¹¹

Radosavljević quotes Martin Puchner, who

... offers a classification of dramatic texts based on their levels of autonomy from the anticipated *mise-en-scène*, including:

- a) "dramatic text as instructions",
- b) "dramatic text as incomplete artwork",
- c) "dramatic text as a complete, finished object that can be read as any other piece of literature".¹²

First point refers to the situation in which a text is a starting point for achieving an artistic concept. The second can be interpreted as a work-in-progress. The third one concerns playwright works which were created following classical rules, and are part of any cultural heritage.

Regarding theatrical collective work, this kind of theatre is based on a matter of trust. The feeling of trust creates a total availability in the relationship between the ones involved, by giving up the conventional barriers, and working with others in a secured space, where nobody is being judged, but on the contrary, encouraged to propose new elements and situations.

10. Cathy Turner and Synne K. Berhrndt, *Dramaturgy and Performance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 176--77.

11. *Ibid.*, 171.

12. Duška Radosavljević, "Theatre-Making", 184.

In her book, *Ecologies of Theatre*¹³, Bonnie Marranca makes a very inspired analogy between Wooster Group's works and Pirandello's *Six characters in search of an author* – an analogy that can be generalized in defining the whole concept of devised theatre. In creating a performance, the authors always start from human resources and their personal biographies, from a pre-existent theme, from society, politics – or all of these combined, creating unlimited possibilities.

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13. Bonnie Marranca, *Ecologies of Theater* (New York: PAJ Publications, 2012).