Diffuse, Divide, Devise: An Analytical Study of Devised Theatre

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In the year 2014, devised theatre is not a marginal or experimental methodology. The massive artistic and commercial success of the National Theatre in London's production of *War Horse* showed the world that devising is not a toy for young actors and free spirits, but simply a way of producing beautiful, meaningful art. Devising stands beside mainstream theatre, like a cousin or younger sibling. But this too is an inadequate picture since devising draws from roots just as ancient as any other form of performance. Devising is merely different. Its backbone is an ensemble of ideas rather than a script. It reveres the human body or spirit the way dramatists revere Shakespeare. The performers hold a stronger artistic voice than the script writer. Although the traditional theatre art form has always respected creative ways to express simple truths, devising perhaps brings a multifaceted perspective that would otherwise not be reached.

There continues to be ambiguity when discussing devised theatre. All assert that it is an alternative method of creating a theatrical work, but there are many veins and styles that may or may or may not be lumped together when trying to define it. Allison Oddey, in her work *Devising Theatre*, has this to say: "A devised theatre product is work that has emerged from and been generated by a group of people working in collaboration" (1). The key feature of a devised piece is its methodology, or how the project comes into being. Rather than beginning with a script, devisers begin with a team of artists who tackle the project in a collaborative way. This process has also been called collective collaboration, although there is some discussion currently that the two are, or should be, distinct from one another, with collective collaboration being considered more about the structure of the company as opposed to that company's means of

performance. Devising has also been compared to physical theatre, performance art, and improvisational sketch comedy; each of these, however, is a theatrical genre, which may or may not make use of devised methodologies. Another way of talking about the definition of devised theatre is to say that traditional theatre centers on the playwright, while devised theatre centers on the performers.

Devised Theatre: A Blueprint

Because the process for devising is so vague, it makes "devised theatre" hard to define. In fact it is the eclectic nature and methodology that defines devised theatre as a genre. Unlike other theatre forms it is not the style (musical theatre) or the writer (Shakespeare) that gives the genre distinction, but rather the process. The idea that devised theatre can start from anything is what gives it its appeal. Because it is not text based, devised theatre cultivates freedom and spontaneity. Although the process for devising is nebulous, and there is variety from company to company, there does seem to be a very general way to approach the devising process.

Typically the company works together to outline a general framework for the piece. Generally this is divided into two main sections. The first is the process (how the piece is created), and the second in the product (the piece itself). During the process stage the company is seeking new ideas and exploring motivations. Often stimuli (such as a painting, song, news clip, or photograph) will be presented and the company will explore and react to that stimulus. From there individual reactions are generated and symbiotic relationship between the individual reactions begins to produce a collaborated response. As each individual reacts to the stimuli they bring their own unique experiences, biases, and viewpoints based on their individual lives. Then as they explore together they shape each other's ideas and sharpen one another's visions. A devised piece is essentially fragments of individualized perception of images that combine

together to produce a defined product. The product however undergoes extensive adaptation as the company always relies on imagination.

The time allocated to the product is spent on rehearsing, crafting, and deciding on the division of labor. Devised theatre companies tend to follow two main forms when establishing labeled roles. One form is that everyone in the company works as designers, writers, directors, and actors. This approach is very holistic in its mindset. It seeks to level the playing field and keep every entity of the piece collaborative. The other way to construct labeled roles is to appoint someone during the process phase as a designer, writer, or director. These individuals still lend their reactions to the overall experience of the creative process just like the actors, but they also help to lead and explore within their specific departments.

To think of this section as a finalized blueprint of devised theatre is really misleading. The whole process of devising seeks to invent something from the raw individual reactions to stimuli. Because of the individual nature of devising, there is no specific route from process to product. Each company chooses how to approach devising. Often each company will find a form that cultivates the greatest potential for exploration for their specific need and the end product is generated through the company's distinctive process. Rather than the product dictating the process, the process births the product.

Theatre History: Impact on the Actor

It is no wonder that devised theatre has become such a palpable entity of modern theatre; instead, the question is why it is seen as separate from theatre as a whole. Acting, or rather, the role of the actor, seems to be one key factor. Devised methods require that the actor be not just a player on a stage, but a whole artist in and of his or herself. This focus on the actor-artist is one reason devising has always thrived in university and other actor-training environments. There is

a breadth that the actor can explore while devising that cannot always be present when rehearsing a scripted play. For devised theatre to exist to the extent that it does, then, the actor must be encouraged to find this breadth, to become an artist. We must take the time to look at how perceptions of the actor have changed over the twentieth century and find the origins of the devised theatre movement therein.

One critical impact on the twentieth century actor were the suppositions that were set up by the pre-twentieth century theatre world. Since the reappearance of professional actors in 1430, the expectations placed on actors as well as the ideologies of acting theorists have changed significantly. The fifteenth century saw the introduction of *Commedia dell'arte*, the induction of drama into English universities, and the birth of William Shakespeare. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries women were invited to perform female roles, and David Garrick proposed a natural acting style. Then the nineteenth century burst forth with improved realism and the revolutionary minds of Stanislavski, Chekhov, Brecht, and Artaud. All of these men, along with their predecessors helped shaped the general course of the twentieth century actor.

Modern Theorists: How to Play the Part

Constantin Sergeyevich Stanislavski is now known more for his methods than anything else. He began his acting career at fourteen when he joined his family's theatre group. As he grew in acting, Stanislavski also began to produce and direct plays, working often with the Moscow Art Theatre. Using both his acting history knowledge and his directing experience, Stanislavski slowly began to develop what is known as the Stanislavski Method (also known as the Stanislavski System). This system revolves around the idea that the main goal of an actor is to be believed. As this system developed, Stanislavski began to share his findings with the Moscow Art Theatre. First, Stanislavski used "emotional memory" to prepare the actor for a role

so they could come across in a more realistic fashion. Previously everyone had been told to abandon their own emotions and completely become the character. Actors often had a hard time bringing the character to life in a realistic fashion because of this lack personal attachment to the character. Stanislavski even tried to recreate physical situations to stimulate memory. Through its development, his system adapted exercises to help create the link between memory and stage performance.

During his time at the Moscow Art Theatre, Stanislavski worked alongside playwright Anton Chekhov. As Chekhov wrote, not only did his works adapt to what Stanislavski learned, but Stanislavski's method adjusted according to what Chekhov wrote. Through their relationship, Chekhov learned to put more emotional depth into what he wrote, and Stanislavski was able to increase the emotional value for the actor. Due to the nature of the newly developed material, Stanislavski could rise to the challenge and begin to push his students and his own mind further into the world of acting. Because of all of Stanislavski's research and innovative practices, actors were able to think about their methods differently and became open to new ideas from other theorists.

Another well-known acting theorist is Sanford Meisner. Meisner was born in 1905 in New York City. Originally a musician, Meisner was never a stranger to the arts. He was even originally in school to become a concert pianist. Once he graduated, Meisner began to pursue acting, much to his parent's chagrin. Through the Lower East Side's Chrystie Street Settlement House, Meisner met Lee Strasberg who helped with his artistic growth. Strasberg was, at this time, developing his own acting technique based off of Stanislavski's "Method Acting." Method acting is used to help actors create, in themselves, the feelings or opinions of their characters. Strasberg's version was the American adopted version of Stanislavski's original creation.

Strasberg was focused on "Affective memory," which uses previous memories or details from similar situations to help recreate past emotion. New emotions invent weaker characters than recreated emotions construct.

Meisner, on the other hand, had moved on to study according to Stanislavski's newest and developing beliefs. He continued to follow Stanislavski's idea of using past memories, much like affective memory, but added the component of creating a logical and new response from the character. The goal was to remain new and fresh within the moment according to the emotions the actor was actually feeling. This became the basis of his acting technique that is often defined as "To live truthfully under given imaginary circumstances." This technique is known as the Meisner Technique, which he created while working with Lee Strasberg at the Group Theatre and working as the head of New York City's Neighborhood Playhouse acting program. The Meisner technique begins with improvisation. As the students begin to improvise, they create their characters, their characters' emotions and general reactions to what may occur, according to what they read in the script or what they are given. As they continue, the students bring this improvisation and creation of character to the actual text of the script. This follows Stanislavski's method for developing a character and new ideas continued to open doors for actors everywhere.

A modern theorist, Bertolt Brecht, born in 1898, responded to Stanislavski's naturalist method. He thought audience members should always be aware they were watching a play. Actors used gesture to detach themselves from the story. Brecht called this "Verfremdungseffekt," or the distancing effect:

> Playing in such a way that the audience was hindered from simply identifying itself with the characters in the play. Acceptance or rejection of their actions and utterances was meant to take place on a conscious plane, instead of, as hitherto, in

the audience's subconscious. (John Willett, ed. and trans., *Brecht on Theatre*

(New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 91)

Breaking the fourth wall was a frequently used technique to distance the actor from the story. Actors had to create believable characters but not so believable that the audience bought into the fictional story. Brecht created a technique called the "Not/But" element. In this technique, the actor was to make the choice of a decision very clear. Both possibilities are shown and one is purposefully picked over the other. This is demonstrated through speech as well as movement. The audience should never feel involved with the characters or the plot. The actor's purpose was to distance the audience from the story so they would not forget reality. This was to assist in the overall goal of Epic Theatre which was to promote social and political change in the audience. The fourth wall is broken frequently in devised theatre and often with the purpose of affecting the audience in a similar way that Brecht does. Often, devised pieces have a political or social goal which the actors work to accomplish. This seems to stem out of Brecht's Epic Theatre model.

Antonin Artaud, born in 1896, was the creator of the Theatre of Cruelty. His idea was that the audience should be disoriented by what is happening onstage. Artaud believed the theatre should not be a place to come and forget the difficulties of the world but the place where all the audience's nightmares came true onstage. Plays devoid of plot would cause pain and confusion for the audience. This presents an interesting challenge for the actor. He must perform in a story where there is no plot and resist the temptation to convey any sort of meaning. Actors were engaged in the effort to cause the audience discomfort and heighten their emotions. Because of the lack of dialogue, grunts, screams, and other noises were used by the actor to help them tap into their primal instincts. Actors were meant to act out of a subconscious, emotional

place. In the Theatre of Cruelty, the playwright/director is the one who informs the actor's methods. Artaud's written word and direction were what dictated how the actor performed. This method of acting out of an emotional state will play a part in devised theatre when actors' emotions and primal instincts are called on.

Improvisation – A Building Block for Devised Theatre

Modern improvisation has its roots in 15ᵗʰ century *Commedia Dell'Arte*. Commedia was very situational. Although the characters were predetermined, the set, dialogue, and plot were all improvised. Unfortunately shortly after the Commedia movement, the idea of performing improvised theatre went to the wayside until Viola Spolin reintroduced it in the 1950's. Spolin used improvisational games to motivate the children in her community theatre. Although Spolin's form of improv was used mostly to engage kids, she did demonstrations of her games for broader audiences in which she based her performance on suggestion. Spolin's incorporation of improv and performance was in sharp contrast to Stanislaviski, who said improv should only be used in the rehearsal phase and should be approached void of performative intentions. Although Spolin's style of using audience suggestion was fresh at the time, it has become so overdone that it is almost a sub-genre of improvisation as a whole. Although improvisational theatre most certainly falls into the category of devised theatre, it definitely relies more on instantaneous reactions to the immediate situation or conflict. These natural reactions are used in devised theatre to keep everything in the performance fresh and as accurate to the character's personality as possible. Improvisation is also used in all of the actor's dialogue during a devised piece. The actors must follow a certain plot line, but all of the lines are created on the spot during the performance because no written script exists.

The Origins of Devised Theatre

The exact origin of devised theatre is rather unknown, simply because it has always been occurring. Actors devise each time they create a character: how they walk, how they talk, and how they react to different things that occur. Some people look to Etienne Decroux, who was a mime and educator, as the originator of the modern devised performance. Decroux was an active performer from 1932 – 1968 and he was the first to truly encourage his acting students to create their own work, thus instigating devised theatre as we know it today. One of the earliest companies to be credited with using devising methods was Theatre Workshop, begun in 1953 and located in London. Under the direction of Joan Littlewood, the company lived in and renovated the Theatre Royal where they also rehearsed and performed. The idea was to create a professional company that focused on actor training as much as on performance. Training included a variety of acting techniques and exercises – including an emphasis on Stanislavski and Improvisation – as well as the more mundane tasks of running a theatre and living together.

The company did not begin by devising works, although they were interested in creating original pieces from the start. Littlewood would bring in new scripts and start the actors with improvisational activities before revealing the text to them. In Littlewood's mind, the playwright should not have a voice that overpowers that of the actor. She commented in an interview once, "I believe very much in a theatre of actor-artists… the playwrights have got to be in the theatre… then perhaps out of our type of play, which has got a lot of improvisation in them, we shall get better plays" (Heddon 31). As time went on, Littlewood developed a working relationship with one playwright in particular, Brendan Behan, who began to workshop with the actors in generating the characters he placed into his scripts. Eventually, a decade after the company came together they created their most historic work, *Oh! What a Lovely War!* – a musical which

examines World War I. The Actors conducted the research, generated script material, and eventually played the characters they gave birth to. This was their first endeavor into what is now known as devised theatre.

According to Heddon and Milling, teachers of devising and contemporary performance, there are specific groups that are recognized to be involved in avant-garde theatre(experimental or innovative theatre) such as "the San Fransisco Dancers Workshop, the San Francisco Mime Troupe, Open Theatre, The Living Theatre and The performance Group, as well as groups within the European tradition under the leadership of directors such as Joan Littlewood, Jerzy Grotowski and Ariane Mnouchkine." Often, these groups begin with games and improvisation. The idea behind this is to create a brainstorming atmosphere that the actors can create in. This allows the actors to be released from textual constraints, so they can create their own character, free of any other opinions. Littlewood pushed this idea and used the improvisation games in the formation of Brendan Behan's play *The Quare Fellow.* By using improvisation games, the actors were able to more closely relate to their characters, like the Meisner technique previously mentioned. These games forced the actors to think and act like their characters without relying on lines. By doing this, it was even easier for the actors to create real emotions and reactions when they did use the lines created for them.

Later The Living Theatre and The Open Theatre expanded the use of devising methodologies. These companies, according to Heddon and Milling, are "two of the most significant American theatre companies who used games, exercises and improvisation as part of their devising". They did not use a "pre-formulated method" and allowed their performers to rely on each other to develop the arc and main ideas behind the plays created. The Open Theatre began to move away from the performer- writer attachment with *The Mutation Show* which

required the writer to show up to rehearsals and make notes about where the show should go. After this, both companies began devising routinely, utilizing playwrights less.

Devised theatre was not widely used and devising companies did not experience a great success for a number of years after *The Mutation Show*. It was not until 2007 that a devised piece found its way into the public eye. Winner of the numerous Tony Awards, several Drama Desk Awards, and Critic Circle Awards in 2011, *War Horse* is perhaps the most well-known of all devised theatre pieces, although many people do not know that it was first a devised piece. The idea all began with a physical movement workshop where actors learned how to move the puppets in a horse-like fashion (Heddon 29).

Devised Narratives

A key feature of Devised Theatre is the lack of a script at the beginning of the process. A question arises: how does one begin without a script? There are a few narrative options when beginning a devised piece. A company could begin with a general topic, an existenting story, or autobiographical information.

Autobiographical performances have become both popular and controversial. *Making a Performance* states that, "Questions of authenticity are raised when fact is blended with fiction" (Govan et. al. 60). In autobiographical pieces, performers take occurrences from their lives and include them in the narrative of the piece. Often, true stories and fake ones become mixed, leading the audience to question what is real and what is not. Autobiographical performance has been classified as 'non-acting,' "as it appears to work against a masking role and to communicate with the audience in a direct manner" (59). A fine line forms between real life and story when the actor seems to be portraying herself. Memory becomes more important in this style of narrative because the way events are remembered can affect the factual accuracy of the story. For

example, *Making a Performance* points out that, "the human memory acts as a filter and, as a consequence, what is remembered may not be the truth but an embroidered version of the real" (63). Memory filters ideas and occurrences which can change the development of a production. The realistic aspect of autobiographical shows, "lends a vibrancy to the relationship between the storyteller and the audience; where actors address audiences directly, audiences become very aware that they are sharing space and a present moment" (Govan et. al. 66). This seems similar to Brecht's theory of Epic Theatre. In Brecht's theatre, the actors created space between themselves and their characters so the audience remains in the real world. In this narrative style of devised theatre, actors are themselves so the audience does not have to leave the real world at all.

Adapting a pre-existing fictional story is another way to begin the devising process. Actors begin with a story they already know and reorder the plot or change the preconceptions of characters as they devise. What is created is a piece that the audience is familiar with, but will still be surprised by the outcome. There are two paths that this kind of performance can take:

> does [an actor] stick closely to the original novel and risk over-literary, reverential and possibly protected play, or does he adapt it more liberally and risk changing its emphasis, rewriting some of the text and attracting the critical ire of the audience that knows and loves the book. (94)

Adapting is a tricky enterprise, but rewarding. There is a connection to the audience, a shared experience, that is unmatched when a fictional story is adapted. It also helps in the devising process to begin with a story everyone knows. Variations and adaptations can begin right away.

A company could begin with a general topic or moral when beginning the devising process. Once the group decides what it wants to convey, everyone can work together to achieve

this goal. For the audience, a fresh piece is experienced. A moral, emotional, or social problem can be conveyed in an engaging and expressive way to the audience using devised performance. The audience community can be challenged and built up by the questions and claims of the actors

Bodies and Spaces

No discussion of devised theatre is complete without at least mentioning physical theatre. This is odd because the two are actually completely separate concepts, but they happen to overlap quite a bit. Physical theatre is a close to self-explanatory title. Those who create physical theatre focus on the physicality and athleticism of the human body; they see the body as the most basic and essential medium of the actor. Their work tends to draw from dance, mime, and other non-verbal art forms and trends toward visually stimulating pieces. Because these pieces focus on the actor as an artist and as a result minimize playwright and text, physical theatre's aims and those of devised theatre mesh nicely and a great many physical pieces make use of devised methodologies.

Much of devised theatre, similarly, becomes very physical. Actors do not spend rehearsal time on memorizing and interpreting text, rather they think about how best to express the ideas within the story they are creating. This more explorative process lends itself toward the physicalization of emotion and story. For example, the Joe Goode Performance Group, a San Francisco based dance-theatre company established in 1986, focuses on eliciting what is vulnerable and personal in humans through choreography. Goode and his troupe use simplicity as a guiding force as they evoke personal emotions out of static situations – like a jealous housewife or an emotionally distant couple (Govan et. al. 164-5). This method of expression

requires the actor to develop a very personal connection to their character – a connection that the exploration in devising makes room for.

Likewise, the focus on exploration in the rehearsal process lends itself to creative use of theatre spaces. Here, we are not discussing places – the static location of a theatre work – but the fluid and malleable spaces that are the containers for experience. Spaces are environments that can be shaped both physically and emotionally by the actors performing in them. One way to distinguish place from space is to consider a mime who takes a bare stage – a place – and creates a room within it by meticulously detailing its invisible features; as the audience begins to "see" the room, the space – but not the place – is transformed.

Conventional theatre not only utilizes a limited set of places, but has structured guidelines about use of spaces as well. The quintessential example is the fourth wall, an imaginary division between actor and audience which is only broken if there is a reason for dissolving that barrier. These guidelines create a safe space through artifice. Devised theatre allows for more creativity in use of spaces. One trend is to become personally involved in the performance space and to expose the audience to its quirks, history or design. Another is to invest the audience in the space itself – usually by motivating them toward some task, like changing seats or eating a meal, that physically involves them in the space being created. These are attempts to engage the audience more personally than a pre-scripted play can allow, breaking the safe, artificial environment of conventional theatre and forcing the audience into a more personal engagement.

Conclusion

Devised theatre has been around for much of theatre's history but has just recently come to the forefront of mainstream theatre, acknowledged as its own subgenre, and studied by theatre scholars. Major theorists of the twentieth century paved the way for the role of the actor to

expand into a more holistic artist within the rehearsal process. The actor considers space, narrative, body, and the audience when creating a piece. A production begins with the actors' consideration of these things and ends with the creation of a script and final performance piece. Unlike other genres of theatre, devising begins organically with the rehearsal process and originates with the actor. Theatre hierarchy has remained a part of devised theatre but is divided between the company as a group of collaborative artists. Through this collaboration, multiple perspectives and diverse backgrounds are combined to create a single work of art. Devised theatre's recent rise has only just begun. The holistic creation and collaboration of multiple artists is the theatre of the future.

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