Creating Together:
Defining Approaches to Collaboratively-Generated Devised Theatre

by

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Abstract

Popularized by the Theatre-in-Education movement in England and the work of Jerzy Grotowski in Poland, Collaboratively-Generated Devised Theatre has developed into a major movement in contemporary theatre. However, scholarship in this area has been weak due to a reliance on anecdotal analysis rather than using a comparable rubric. For this paper, the processes of three Massachusetts-based devising companies were analyzed to define three different approaches toward collaboration and devising, and present new terminology to aid the discourse surrounding companies and groups that create work in a collaborative way.

Introduction

In the fifty years since Collaboratively-Generated Devised Theatre first appeared on the stage, literally thousands of companies have sprung up each with its own particular process. During this time, scholars have attempted to classify, describe, and define the practice of these companies, often through an analysis of the process used on a particular project. However, these processes differ greatly from project to project and have resulted in classifications that vary from scholar to scholar and do little to define how companies relate to each other. In this paper, I attempt to define three approaches toward collaboration for use in the discourse surrounding Devised Theatre. By shifting the focus from an anecdotal study of a specific company's approach to a work to a study of how company members interact with each other, I am able to create new terminology that offers a way to universally describe and classify the praxis of Collaboratively-Generated Devised Theatre and allow for a more precise analysis of the field.

The approaches I propose—Collective Collaboration, Guided Collaboration, and Specialized Collaboration—are not rigid categories, but rather new terms to be applied to the vast world of Devised Theatre. These terms invite exploration and discussion regarding the processes of specific companies rather than providing a definitive analysis of their work in and of itself. They encourage the interrogation of the work of many different companies by providing a triangular plane on which the processes of any devising company can be plotted. With each approach occupying a vertex of this triangle, companies' processes appear in varying relationships to these approaches. One

company's work could be placed near one approach while another could exist in the area between approaches.[1]

      In developing these terms, I looked at three Massachusetts-based companies as case studies —The Double Edge Theatre, The Beau Jest Moving Theatre, and FortyMagnolias Productions—and found significant commonalities and distinctions in their processes. By studying each of the companies' processes individually, I discovered prevailing trends in company dynamics that could be used to describe the work of all three companies collectively. When I consolidated those trends into three single approaches, I discovered that each company was using one approach almost exclusively and at least one other in part. Therefore, by defining idealized approaches and utilizing them as a tool for comparison, I could create comparisons of the collaboration processes of these three companies and introduce a vocabulary that contributes meaningful understanding to the discourse surrounding the perceived mystery of Devised Theatre.

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[1] See Appendix

A Case for New Terminology

In two landmark texts in the critical analysis of Collaboratively-Generated Devised Theatre—Alison Oddey's *Devising Theatre* and Deirdre Heddon and Jane Milling's *Devising Performance*—a clear attempt was made to define and categorize the working processes of several collaborative devising companies. In her preface, Oddey wrote that she was "unaware of any publication that addressed a general theory and practice of contemporary British devised theatre" (Oddey 1994: xi). After citing this same quote, Heddon and Milling wrote in their introduction:

> Ten years later [...] it is apparent that very little has changed. Given the widespread use of the mode of practice that we might call 'devising', it is curious that the conversation that Oddey hoped would result from the publication of her book has never really taken place. Perhaps it is precisely because devising *is* so prevalent, so present, that critical enquiry has been so sparse. Devising may appear to be a given, something that simply 'is'.
>
> (Heddon 2006: 1)

Despite Heddon and Milling's existential contention that Devised Theatre just "is," both their work and Oddey's made an attempt at qualifying the body of work that had emerged from companies self-identifying as devising ensembles and dividing them into categories. Each author approached their analysis in different ways, but they both placed the most weight on the nature of the devising over the nature of the ensemble.

Instead of focusing on the specifics of collaborative arrangements, in their assignments, Heddon and Milling's investigation centered on the ideological foundations of various devising processes. They showed how some companies focus on the

possibilities of actor training and the relationship between the actor and the audience while others were committed to a visual sensibility. They also explored how devising companies relate to politics, communities, physical performance, and postmodernism. Despite these areas' relevance to the devising process, a clear understanding regarding what that process was for any company or how one company's dynamics related to another's was not as evident.

Further, Heddon and Milling's characterization does not specifically suggest a means by which the discourse can proceed. If we are to put all companies' processes into one or more of Heddon and Milling's categories, what do we learn about the companies or the categories? While they acknowledge cross-fertilization between their categories, claiming "the various cultural, social, political and theatrical influences inevitably work across the different devising modes we have identified" (Heddon 2006: 28), an indication of how to interpret that overlap is absent. In reading their description and categorization of two different companies, it is not possible to understand how they work, but only what kind of work they create.

Oddey's analysis takes a significantly different approach. First, she suggests that there is no definitive process for devising. She analyzes a handful of British companies' processes by looking at the make-up of their ensembles. Oddey suggests that for these companies the roles of the literary theatre are merely reconfigured for the needs of a given devised project. (Oddey 1994: 42). In this way, the different companies can be analyzed and compared by looking at the role of the director or determining the existence or absence of a playwright or musician, and then examining how these roles interact with the performers. This methodology is much more useful than that of Heddon and Milling,

but Oddey lacks the terminology to discuss the different approaches effectively. She can only anecdotally describe how companies work and does not define their methods of collaboration, nor does her analysis give the reader a rubric to define the work of additional companies.

Building on Oddey's focus on the process of collaboration and Heddon and Milling's attempt at a terminology, I propose new terms that will allow for the collaboration process of any company to be understood in a complete and meaningful way. An examination of what these terms describe and how they relate to each other will result in improved discourse when comparing and contrasting the processes of devising companies.

Presenting and Defining New Terminology

Focusing on the nature of the collaboration process means focusing on the interpersonal relationships of the devising ensemble. Are all company members considered equal? Is there one strong leader? How many of the traditional theatre roles are prevalent? Answering these and other questions can help to identify key elements of the approaches that may exist inside a specific company's process. As I looked at the Double Edge Theatre, The Beau Jest Moving Theatre, and FortyMagnolias Productions, I isolated and defined three approaches at work.

The first approach is Collective Collaboration, used heavily—but not exclusively—by the Double Edge Theatre. Collective Collaboration is collaboration in its purest form. In a company operating fully within this methodology, all of the members share equal responsibility for the creation of the work and take equal credit for the finished product. Projects do not utilize any of the conventional theatre roles—playwright, director, actor, or designer—in their development or presentation, but rather credit all participants under a blanket title such as ensemble or creators, if at all. Participants in a Collective Collaboration share in all process work from the initial brainstorming and background research, through the scriptwriting and staging, to the final performance. There is no overarching vision imposed by a playwright or director, nor any specialization suggested by an actor-designer or director-dramaturg division. Grotowski's Paratheatre represents the purest form of Collective Collaboration by including the audience as collaborator. In that case, each performance was created by equal participants. No one—neither Grotowski, nor anyone else—led the process, nor did

anyone independently design it. The performance was simply created by everyone equally.

The next approach, Guided Collaboration—exemplified in part by both The Double Edge Theatre and The Beau Jest Moving Theatre, steps away from Collective Collaboration by introducing a strong leader into the group dynamic. In its ideal form, Guided Collaboration features a director-conceiver who dictates all elements of the overall collaboration. This director will determine the source material, provide exercises and activities for research, training, and rehearsal, as well as determine how the performance will be presented to an audience. Other participants work within the parameters outlined by the director. For example, a director may decide to devise a play about the life of a famous Chinese emperor. He then will provide photographs, biographies, or other items and instruct ensemble members how to attack an analysis of that material. Next, he will outline a series of exercises—perhaps using a Chinese performance technique that he is familiar with—to encourage the actors to generate material from their research. He then edits, arranges, and consolidates the actor-generated material into a cohesive narrative which he also stages, keeping in mind the same specific goal he began with. The role of a director in Guided Collaboration is similar to that of a teacher in a classroom setting or a leader in a traditional playmaking setting where it is acknowledged that the ensemble could not create a cohesive product on their own or without an outside eye. In Guided Collaboration, all participants are equals except the director, who remains above both the ensemble and the audience, guiding both of them to his goal.

The third and final approach is Specialized Collaboration—used heavily by FortyMagnolias Productions. Specialized Collaboration establishes multiple roles or specializations, not just a director-creator, like in Guided Collaboration. These roles can be the traditional ones found in theatre—playwright, director, actor, or designer—or they can be new ones specific to a project—fight specialist, olfactory engineer, and others. There are no requirements as to what roles appear in a Specialized Collaboration, but the key is that the responsibilities of the project are agreed to be too challenging to be handled collectively and therefore divided up among participants based on needed areas of expertise. This is different from Guided Collaboration in that an ideal version of this approach will find all participants remaining equals without a hierarchy. In this way, if a director is chosen to be needed, he or she does not immediately become the leader or guide; he or she merely works as a member of the ensemble with a specific expertise of staging. In another hypothetical, a company may propose to dramatize an elephant's journey across a desert. The ensemble can, in this approach, acknowledge that they need to identify puppet specialists to create and operate the elephant, sound engineers to make the elephant's sounds, and a director to observe the work of the puppeteers from the point of view of the audience. This specialization does not limit the ability for the ensemble to work together and comment on each other's work, and no one person has a final say because all participants are equal creators in the work as a whole. However, ensemble members without skill as puppeteers can leave that duty to those that have that skill and thus not risk damaging the product in order to assure Collective Collaboration.

Through these three approaches, I have identified ways of working that suggest any possible range of collaborative processes. Describing these approaches with the

image of the Collaboration Triangle—where each approach is a vertex—I have given

myself the ability to discuss a range of processes using real, concrete terms and

illustrations.[2]

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[2] See Appendix

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Appendix

Collaboration Triangle

Visualizing Theatre Companies and their Approaches to Collaboration