



Approaches to the Concept of Devised Theatre

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Abstract: *A theatre play's validity is determined by the contemporary approach with which the producer (director or actor) can think about a theme, the way they are susceptible to enhance an issue up to our recent, modern existence. Based on past tendencies, an attempt of distancing from the text-based theatre is perceptible these days, but in practice, the stage story, the situations and the character's world are given by the text. The information read in it constitutes the principle of the play. In a theatre performance based on an author's written material and a director's creation, the word has its power. In devised theatre - although it is not the text-based theatre's counter pole - the director's vision is placed in a dominant role, as well as the acting initiation and the elimination of the text dominancy. The text which emerges from improvisation and story-building, can carry significant risk in comparison with a text-based production, as the director's and the company's professional preparedness is needed for reaching a higher artistic level. In our theatrical practice (Hungarian), devised theatre (improvisational) is, in fact, an unknown concept. Hungarian and Romanian theatre companies have just developed it in very few theatrical productions. Devised theatre, devised process, methods, product, play may overlap the concept that is being used in our theatrical and cultural belief system. This study presents how foreign theatre companies and Hungarian-speaking local companies (Transylvanian) adopt and apply the entire concept or just some parts of it.*

Key words: *theatre, devised, text, improvisation, collective work*

If we try to define devised theatre and to describe with meticulous care the improvisational methods, we should take into consideration various ways in which artists do like to show an artistic movement, their long-time experience, their vision about certain cultural, political beliefs and their desire to create a new artistic product (which is considered to be made by a collective group), in which the spectator has his/her own decisional and interventional part. This circle, which theatre scientists call devised theatre, can be extended, modified, improved, changed, challenged and as sometimes happens, unfinished. This kind of unfinished performances does not intend to bridge the gap between traditional text-based or literature-based theatre. They want to be an alternative to other kinds of theatre we are used to, or become dominant in our theatre tradition. "Devised theatre is an alternative to the dominant literary theatre tradition, which is the conventionally-accepted form of theatre dominated by the often patriarchal, hierarchical relationship of playwright and director" (Oddey 1994, 4).

K.M. Syssoyeva and S. Proudfit (2016) define collective creation, the terminological predecessor to devising, as a group-generated theatrical performance. In these terms, all



theatre is a collective creation. The authors of *Women, Collective Creation, and Devised Performance* conceive an analytic simplification of this term, speaking of a group whose purpose is to use a procedure which centers deliberately on the group's attendance, on certain teamwork methods, and which is perceived in a certain manner as more collaborative than any other experienced before.

This term, "collective creation", was introduced by Meyerhold into Russian Theatre in 1906. It describes experiments completed with actors, designers and composers. "The practices he explored there today look a good deal like much of contemporary, director-led devising: leveraging the generative creativity of the theatrical group, facilitated by an aesthetic leader with a strong vision and ultimate decision-making control, motivated principally by aesthetic considerations" (Sysseyeva and Proudfit 2016, 8).

An improvisational show makes the informality, the offline barriers, unrestrictedness, the freedom possible, in other words, it makes possible a way of experiencing improvisation both for actor and spectator. Speaking about Hungarian and Romanian theatres from Transylvania, devised theatre is absent from our repertoire, not only as a notion, but also as a phenomenon. Starting with the 1960s, England has had devised theatre companies. Since we do not really have such theatre companies, it is difficult to describe this theatre form. In our theatrical belief, traditional theatre parameters and terms include a text, an interpreter, who is a director, and a production process, which is accomplished by a group of artists acting in a theatre building. According to theatre critics, writers, analysts, in Allison Oddey's view, a devised work is considered to be a response, a reaction to the playwright-director relationship, to text-centered theatre. It challenges one person's world view, visualization, conception, notion, under another person's direction. A devised show is seen as being generated, composed, not in a traditional way where playwright, director, actor, show have the accustomed sequence. What devised theatre offered, permitted, granted, was to open a new prospect of interaction, communication with an audience, and to test new inspiration, the artist's ideas, being a channel which is not text-centered. In a performance, an actor's work is to play a specific part which is based on a playwright's text and directed by another person. In devised theatre, the actor's task includes administrative, exploratory and experimental work with a specific spectator group. An artist's contribution does not end with his verbal or non-verbal communication of his role, but with his entire cooperation, endorsement to the whole set.

If we imagine conventional theatre as a closed space, in which performances take place following a recipe, devised theatre could be a back stair, a wicket gate where artists, performers, can express their personal thoughts, convictions about some particular theme, topic, during the entire performance. This opportunity, offered from the beginning of the play's working process, places the performer in a totally different "seat, corner" from where he/she becomes conscious of his/her recognition and of his/her interest in the whole preparation process of the play.



In devised performances, the company, the group, decide the standing of the performance, and this interval depends on the financial and administrative background. In the case of performances created in traditional, repertoire-based theatres, the time dedicated to rehearsals is settled from the beginning. In this case, the plays are performed in a theatre building. Devised performances can also use theatre stages, but they often take place outside theatre institutions. “The visual concept is often a starting point for a devised performance, which is different from conventional theatre. A company may work out of and inside a defined, structured space in order to discover the form or structure of the piece. As the performer negotiates the space, experimenting and trying out ideas, the product evolves and progresses from the developing process of discovering” (Oddey 1994, 17-18). It consists of a very important relationship between performers and fictional space. Oddey mentions that *Forced Entertainment Theatre Cooperative* always create in a set, or a provisional model. Traditional text-based theatre creates the visual world during the rehearsal period, so the actors` work and setting will interlock shortly before the performance.

“The show is not a text, the show is a kind of world which is based on text.”- says Radu Afrim, the Romanian awarded director in one of his interviews (Fám 2015). His way of making theatre is director-centered, and the actor is regarded in his performances as a creative partner. His way of thinking about the audience approaches the expectations “required” by devised performances` admirers.

“The spectator can set aside any preparation. His presence and open spirit are required exclusively. Here I am referring to the spectator of the shows directed by me. The most parlous are infected by preconception and are tenet-minded people. Past them not only the show is off, but life too.” (Afrim 2016, Székely Hilda, tr.)

Devised performances “capture” the audience from the very beginning, they interact with them and they make the spectator feel as a living part of the performance. Sometimes it is hard to make decisions related to the receiver, the play, the artists or the unconventional reception area.

“The devised performance may be a procession involving local participants, which is viewed both as spectacle, celebration and event. Devised theatre has the potential to address specific issues within a community, or to create performances for a non-theatre-going audience.” (Oddey 1994, 20)

Many theatre companies which were formed in England in the 1980s applied devised methods functioning as devised theatres: The People Show Company, Forced



Entertainment, or Graeae Theatre are just a few of them. By presenting them, my intention is to create an approach to the concept that theatre specialists call “devised”.

The People Show Company works without a director. According to Mark Long, founding member of the group, they would talk for weeks and discuss hundreds of things and just one thing would be included in the performance. He describes this general pattern of working and he also believes that artists are the best critics. He considers repressed, unvoiced criticism an unhealthy option. In one of his shows, “Burning Horizon”, a designer, a sculptor, a visual artist and two musicians were involved. In this show, everyone was responsible for something, all the members of the group had their own contribution to the process. *The People Show Company* is recognized as being the first experimental theatre in London, the most long-lived company that is still functioning. In the beginning, - its founders worked after a scenario. Today, it has seven members who perform both together, and individually. *The People Show Company* call themselves *People* and, according to their self-definition, they create a living multidisciplinary and multimedia theatre, which offers continuous public information about the individual’s personality and abilities.

Another prominent English theatre company, *Forced Entertainment* has two directors who are responsible for rehearsals, process and the final product. A re-working, re-writing process used by them takes around ten days. Since they have worked as a group in this company for a long time, Forced Entertainment have created an environment “where risks can be taken, mutual support and responsible criticism are needed”(Oddey 1994, 44).

Forced Entertainment is a theatre company founded in 1984 by Tim Etchells and several drama graduates of Exeter University. Tim is now both a professor of performance and writing at Lancaster University, and a fiction writer. The company has recently (2016) received the International Ibsen Award, the webpage of which describes them as renewed for “its groundbreaking, genre-defying theatrical approach” (official webpage of International Ibsen Award, 2016). The committee honors this continually surprising and not less entertaining theatre group, because Forced Entertainment revive and challenge the theatre, recognize and utilize the power inherent in the art form. Forced Entertainment takes the theatre’s role within society, “deeply seriously.”.

Etchells said about devised theatre that it is “an image of theatre or performance in which different visions, different sensibilities, different intensions could collide.” (Etchells 1999, 192) During their long working period, which began in 1984, they have created a lot of projects. “We’ve worked on texts, we’ve danced and moved, we’ve fixed things meticulously, we’ve improvised”(official webpage Forced Entertainment 2017) is what appears on their webpage, as a self-definition. The question “What do they do?” can be answered in the following way: they are a rare example of people building, maintaining and continuing to develop a vocabulary. Their project, *First Night*, starts in an unusual way. At the beginning, one of the performers addresses someone in the audience: “You will die of kidney cancer...” and another person “You will die in a



car crash”. Some people react nervously, some of them want to leave. As Lyn Gardner (2009) says in his article, they act like a child breaking the toys he/she loves. The company picks up theatre and smashes it against the walls, their intention being to discover what you can do with something broken that you could not do before.

The six performers work together starting from the company’s foundation. They have not changed, they form a partnership, they are a “true ensemble with a shared history. As Etchells mentions, -they love the theatre’s codes and conventions and are, at the same time, frustrated by them and wage war on them. Every time they are set out to break theatre up, they try to find a way to put it together again, and that really allows it to fly. He thinks experimental theatre is seen as a young person’s game that is supposed to be done for a few years and then to be left behind. In case the game is fully continued, it must be the same one. Etchells says: “We gave ourselves permission to stay together and do different things” (Gardner, 2009).

Texts are written within the devising process and members offer, through rehearsals, the “vital place, support, criticism” says Alison Oddey (Oddey,1994,53). In devised performances, the person who writes the texts can be named “the process writer”, rather than the writer of a show.

In the third group I would like to present, *Lumiere and Son*, the initiator, creator and director of the devised product is Hilary Westlake. Allison Oddey describes her as the artist who does not use the term devising. Instead, she uses “creating” to describe her method of working with the company. She suggests “creating” implies a single vision, but one in which the creative imagination of others is given the opportunity of being involved” (unpublished interview Hilary Westlake in Apr. 1990, in Oddey, 1994, 54).

Another outstanding theatre group, *Graeae Theatre Company* was founded in 1980 by Nabil Shaban. At the time, there were no opportunities for disabled actors. According to him, “devising is an attractive process because it offers the opportunity to make a piece that is as “authentic” as possible” (Heddon and Milling 2006, 115).

According to the authors of *Devising Performance* Heddon and Milling, *Graeae Theatre Company* “adopted, with the contribution of director and co-founder Richard Tomlinson, a devising process in which the actors would improvise in workshops. Afterwards, Tomlinson would take the material and translate it into a dramatic script. As cast members changed, the script changed too. In this sense, ‘the product’ was always in process and the play was always ‘owned’ by those contributing to it” (Heddon and Milling 2006, 115). In an interview given to Heddon, founder Shaban speaks about “the danger with a devised piece (by a collective company) was the attempt or desire to please everyone and the attempt to give everyone equal parts resulting in a homogenous piece (Heddon and Milling 2006,116). Brian Astbury in his article, in *The Guardian* (Astbury, 2006) presented Shaban’s thoughts related to the name of company

”[...] the idea of using something from mythology to dispel and shatter the misconceptions and myths about disability was very important, and we



wanted to contain that notion within the name of this embryonic theatre company. We were in the business of myth-breaking.” (Astbury, 2006)

Perhaps one of the best-known English theatre companies which employ “devising” methods, *Theatre de Complicite* was founded in 1982. In one of his interviews, Mcburney speaks about his methods of creating a show, which is a simple concept: he wants to tell a story as clear as possible. Simon Mcburney as a co-founder characterizes their work as “a series of extraordinary and intricate collisions” (Mcburney, 2010) in the generation of devised work or with scripts, stories or music. *Complicite* does not work as a stable ensemble. In *The Street of Crocodiles*, Simon’s comment was “people talked of the choreography, but it wasn’t choreographed, instead, through innumerable improvisations, the actors physically learned to shift together like a flock of starlings. They learned to dip and wheel and found a fantastic pleasure in it. This required enormous physical discipline and they worked extremely hard every day. It is the discipline of body and voice that is fundamental in my work” (Murray and Keefe 2007, 83). Maddy Costa claims that Mcburney’s productions’ variety is shocking, as it is related to dance, music, literature and technology. As a student at Jaques Lecoq school in Paris, he learnt valuable movement techniques, and he started to use them during rehearsals. He says music tells you what to do, it is a liberating experience, and that “the texts of the different parts of theatre must be as articulate as the spoken world. There is nothing original. There’s only the question of whether something is alive and speaking to you” (Costa 2010).

His production, *A Disappearing Number*, was incomplete when it first went on stage at the Theatre Royal in Plymouth, 2007. He admitted that he had to tell the audience about this issue with a single honest comment: “I’m sorry, we didn’t finish it” (The Guardian 2010 okt.7, Youtube interview). In his work, the collaboration with audience, actors, designers, technicians, is essential. In the creation of his early shows, Mcburney was always “inside” the exercise of improvisation with objects and urged his fellow performers to create an image. He says “Sometimes I leave the actors to prepare something which we then look at; it can be tremendously liberating for actors to work without the director” (Heddon and Milling 2006, 181). Other shows, like *Mnemonic*, are based on human interactions. In the introductions of his plays, he creates an existing and intruding relationship between actors and the audience.

In our theatrical practice, devised theatre is actually still an unknown “concept”. Transylvanian theatres, including Hungarian and Romanian theatre companies develop, utilize as a purpose the mentioned form just in a few projects or performances. In our region, a devised performance, even without great professionalism - due to the genre’s contemporary presence, freshness -, is in vogue among audience members. At the National Theatre in Tg. Mures, *Championship of Improvisation* show has been kept on the repertoire for seven years because of the interest shown by the audience. The actor



trainers Vlad Massaci and Mihaela Sârbu recommend the show to the public on the theatre`s website:

“If the spectator comes to the show, he/she feels that wearing a suit, elegant clothes, jewelry is required. The lounge will change into a social status place. But to a performance which employs improvisation, you may come in jeans and a T-shirt, even your telephone can be on, (but yet we`ll ask you not to leave it on). Our wish is to make the audience feel as if they are attending a well-managed party. A good party depends on interactions you may have with other people. We are waiting for you to attend our party.”
(TNTM s.a., Székely Hilda tr.)

One of the performances presented in Târgu-Mures by “Tompa Miklós” Theatre Company, *The Devil`s Casting* (2014) was directed by Radu Afrim, a remarkably effective text specialist. His method of working and interacting with actors and, actually, with the whole Hungarian theatre company during rehearsals could be “branded” with a devised flow line, and the result could be considered a close-knit pinpointed hit. The show directed by Afrim was promoted as a surprise performance. This director coalesced a veritable team during rehearsals - this statement is not valid solely for the artistic team. This way, the actors, the stage manager, the prompter, the light designer ... could help the rehearsal process with unflagging ideas. It is not compulsory for an individual to create only in his domain, observing the theatrical hierarchy and status-scaling. However, the validity of ideas in the show was determined and reposed by the director. *The Devil`s Casting* show started from improvisations, but it is a fully functional theatre play.

Radu Afrim implemented that kind of working process with Tompa Miklós Theatre Company, a process in which text, stage situation, and, last but not least, the play`s substance, could evolve during the working process, its base being provided solely by the actors` improvisation.

The term devised in our (Transylvanian) theatrical notion does not appear as a functional institution, like those foreign theatre companies presented at the beginning of this work with actors, people, who perform together to create a theatre play. Various methods, concepts, working processes based on discussions, improvisations adopted by the directors, designed, conceived together with all protagonists in a collective, collaborative work denote the concept.

Improvisation is an unvarying instrument in the creation of a theatre play. The play might be built upon written text or on the absence of it, “from paper to the stage” (Pavis 2000, 93) realization appears exclusively through improvisation.



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