



From Your Needs to Our Performance. PAPALANGKI Theatre Company: A Devised Theatre Company for Teenagers

ANGELOPOULOS Tasos, PhD

School of Drama, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece
tasosangel@hotmail.com

Abstract: *The article presents PAPALANGKI Theatre Company's methodology, which is based in a perception of democratic function of the group: the questions result from every time needs and all members of the group are gradually encouraged to ask them during the whole process (even during performances). The answers given each time are based on the members' experiences, previous research and structured improvisation, and they have defined the recognizable group's aesthetics. The result is not only an open form performance, collectively created and integrating the audience's participation, but also a new "meeting" with theatre itself for audiences with little interest or access to traditional theatrical shows. Since 2011, PAPALANGKI Theatre Company has presented outdoor and into classroom performances mainly for teenagers, on issues such as bullying, racism, homosexuality and intersexual relations.*

Key words: *PAPALANGKI; theatre; teenagers; devising; research.*

Instead of Introduction

PAPALANGKI Theatre Company's beginning of activities coincided with the outbreak of the economic crisis in Greece (2011) and someone would believe that there was no need for another theatrical group, especially under those circumstances. But, it was actually these new conditions that lead the group on to expand its activities and to change its own identity. Since then, the Greek theatrical 'market' was vibrant and wide: it seemed that there was a place for everyone (considering that there were approximately 200 theatre stages only in Athens – more than London!). After the crisis (and the reduction of the state's grant for cultural activities), the socio-economic situation forced some theatre practitioners to follow new roads and to re-think more severely on their 'product'. Of course, a failure might happen, to act as motivation.

PAPALANGKI's moment of failure was its weakness to secure a permanent theatre venue (the rentals for theatres became unapproachable) and to attract paying audience at



its first two performances (*Dear Dad*, by Milena Bogavac and *The Golden City*, by Danai Tanidou and Tasos Angelopoulos). Although there was not a real lack of audience (something also proven by the attendance of the free performances for advertising reasons), this same audience seemed unwilling to... buy a ticket: When *The Golden City* (a 2012 performance on the history of the Jewish community of the Thessaloniki, in collaboration with *Experimental Stage of "Art"* – the most historical private theatrical group in Thessaloniki) was presented freely during *Dimitria* Festival, as a site specific performance (at the Old Railway Station of Thessaloniki, from where the Jewish community started its death journey for Auschwitz in 1943), the audience literally flooded the place and the reviews talked for a unique experience - the same performance at *Amalia* theatre was a tremendous failure, with only 1000 spectators in 12 shows...

It was clearly time to put new priorities, to reconsider what and how, to ask new questions and to give original answers. PAPALANGKI's next performance was about to change everything. It was time for the director to think on the structure and the targeting of the group.

From Director To Facilitator

A central problematic in devised theatre theory is the role of director and the contradictions emerged between his/her historical role in theatre's center (even above the writer) and the collective creation imposed by devised theatre's 'rules'. As Heddon and Milling recognize, the director's function within devising practices "complicated the notion of non-hierarchical work of democratic participation" (2006, 55). By his part, Chris Baldwin (2002, 13) seems to believe at the director's fundamental role, since, listing his/her responsibilities, he includes: building a production and performance team, timetabling, compiling documentation of the rehearsal process and, mainly, fulfilling the role of spectator of the devised show. His understanding on director's disciplinarian, rather than authoritarian role, as an "outside eye" and a facilitator of the process, is similar with Calery's perception for a director representing the "eyes and ears of the potential audience" (Calery 2001, 178) and Parsons's idea on "the devised director as facilitator and outside eye, [which] suggests a power arrangement that [...] requires a re-consideration of wider socio-cultural influences on the organization and operation of collectivity" (2009, 12). For Baldwin, as he puts it (2002, 25): "The key question for a director or a writer might be a surprising one: it is not what happens next but what the audience wants or expects to happen next", and this idea is included into the tradition of re-arrangement of the director's role into postmodern theatrical creation. The distance from Jon Whitmore's (1994, 1-30) description of the director as [the audience's] navigator through the complex sign-systems, which formulate modern performance, and Baldwin's director as 'representative' of the audience is closer than we might think.



But, if Baldwin's idea of a director-interpreter between the group's theatrical expression and the audience is right - integrated into a broad definition of devised theatre, such as given by Heddon and Milling (2006, 3): "a process for creating performance from scratch, by the group, without a pre-existing script" - the actual question still exists and it should be re-formulated to: 'Who this audience is?'. In other words, the response to this question pre-supposes a deep understanding on to whom a performance is meant to address. This is the fact that Baldwin seems to actually imply: that the audience is not a stable subject, but a group of people defined every time by wider socio-economic and cultural conditions.

So, who the audience was in a country hit not only by economic, but also by social and cultural crisis? After *The Golden City*, the director's role in PAPALANGKI Theatre Company was obliged to change. Since then, the director was the leader of the group's activity, even though some elements of devising had already emerged, such as the collective creation of the *Golden City's* script through improvisations (a collective creation, nevertheless, edited afterwards by the director and his collaborator). Now, the director was expected to become also the analyst of the socio-economic situation and its reflection on theatre. Through several meetings with the group, we - and now, we may start to refer to our group using the first plural - decided that the problem of the audience's lack was not temporary and it was not only ours. On the contrary, it was a structural problem of contemporary Greek theatre, used to survive through state's grants and supported by the so-called 'white-headed' audience: people of a certain age, having the money (the pensions) and time to follow theatre activities. It was (and still is) a dangerous situation: not only because of the conservative preferences, imposed by that kind of audience, which strangled every innovative idea, but also because it was literally a survival dead-end, a situation demonstrating its expiry date. Hence, we decided at these meetings that our main focus hereinafter will be "teenagers", as an unknown, but not elusive community, a part of the audience which seemed inevitably lost for traditional performance.

This transition from "open theatre" to a more targeting one was not easy. The questions arose like a waterfall. The dialogues which might happen could be described like these (and intentionally we put no marks of the person talking - either the director or the actors may be the one putting questions or the person giving answers): -'Ok, we want to address teenagers, because, otherwise, theatre is determined to die. But they come not at theatre.' - 'So, theatre has to find them.' - 'But, where could we find them?' - 'In their natural environment, the schools' - 'But, schools don't buy performances at their place, because they will destroy their daily program' - 'Hmmm, let's say that this won't happen. Let's say that they will host a performance lasting approximately 45 minutes (as long as the school hour), which will be presented from classroom to classroom and it won't affect



the schedule’ – ‘And why schools and teenagers would be interested in this performance?’ – ‘Because it will present their lives and it will give voice to their anxieties and problems’.

It was time for the director to acquire the features that Baldwin implies: not only those of a process facilitator, but also those of an asker of questions with social and cultural interest. But, it was also time for the whole group to answer those questions, to collectively take responsibility of tis actions. PAPALANGKI’s first into-classroom performance in Thessaloniki, *The Story of Victor and Mary* (2012-2013), was collectively decided and it followed exactly a logic which emerged by these questions: it was a 45’ minute show, with a created by us script, for two actors playing multiple roles (changing from one role to another using simple means, such as a hat) and representing a story of bullying - a phenomenon with worrying raise into Greek schools. The performance was presented into secondary education classrooms, since classroom is also its “scenic” and the real revolution was also its ticket price: with the symbolic price of 2 euro, teenagers could afford to watch, laugh and problematize with the show’s heroes. The performance was accompanied by a small talk with the teenagers (normally during the breaks), where everyone could say his/her opinion on the characters or the story. The acceptance was so big that approximately 10.000 teenagers in Thessaloniki imaginarily “travelled” outside their classes with Victor and Mary, and the performance was repeated in Athens during school year 2013-2014 and 2014-2016 in collaboration with Porta Theatre, the theatre which actually created theatre for children in Greece,. It has also a value to mention that the script of the performance was presented by different theatre groups at the city of Ioannina and now (2017/2018) it travels across Cyprus’s schools, becoming the first “international” success of PAPALANGKI.

The same logic was followed for our next performance. But now the bet was more difficult and, perhaps, dangerous. The possible dialogue between the group’s members might be like this: -‘Where else can we find teenagers?’ – ‘At the parks and the squares, where they hang out’. Our next show was *Dombre Den* (this is how “good morning” in Russian and other Slavic languages sounds in Greece) and it faced the problem of racism in Greek schools and society: a group of children decide to search throughout their neighborhood for their bicycle, which they suppose is stolen by the new, immigrant kid. But, they know nothing for him except a word-phrase they have heard: “dombre den” and, through several ‘adventures’, they realize that the foreign kid “is ok and we may hang out with him”. The performance was presented as theatre for teenagers in public and open spaces across Thessaloniki during spring 2013 and it was repeated as classroom theatre during 2013-2014, and in Athens during 2015-2016. And it was the first time teenagers with foreign origins could follow a show reflecting their selves and the attitude they had faced in schools or society, or even hear their parents’ language alive in front of them (some dialogues were actually in Russian).



At our third performance (2014/2015), *I Am (not) the Cool Guy*, we decided that we don't want to leave teenagers outside the action: after all, one of our aims was to motivate them to change attitudes, to make them think and, why not, participate and act. For this, Theatre in Education techniques proved to be valuable: our script (and the performance) was created in such a way that it demanded the spectators' integration. Now, the story was based on inter-sex relations and our improvisational ways helped teenagers to perform their selves on "stage" and to be added in the cast. There was no return anymore: the same logic was followed in *Case B* (2015/2017: a performance based on real events: the suicide of a young boy because of bullying), which was presented both in school classrooms and a 'normal' theatre (Black Box Theatre), and in *Goodnight Mr. Bear* (2014/2015: a story of parents' divorcing – there, we also used puppet for the first time). And it was the same idea that pushed us to choose – for the first time – written plays by others: *Erste Stunde* by Jörg Menke-Peitzmeyer and *Hunting Scenes from Bavaria*, by Martin Sperr were edited by the whole group in such a way that they could fit our new style and presuppose our audience's participation. The first one, a play on homosexuality, was presented as theatre in public spaces in 2014 and the second one as theatre into classroom in 2016-2017 (and it is repeated this school year: 2017-2018). They both were performed for the first time in Greece.

Practice and Research

PAPALANGKI's original style of work seems to go beyond Baz Kershaw's distinction between "practice as research" and "practice based research" (2002, 135): while with the first one, he means "a research *through* live performance practice, to determine how and what it may be contributing in the way of new knowledge or insights in fields other than performance", the second one is referred to "research *into* performance practice, to determine how that practice may be developing new insights into or knowledge about the forms, genres, uses etc. of performance itself" (Ibidem). But, what if we have both?

Maybe it is time to determine a third branch of practice accompanied with research: the practice that it is concerned both on its social impact and the development of its artistic means – an applied performative practice, which interrogates for theatre both as tool (for social change) and as an aim. We could determine this as a "practice *and* research" branch, with conclusions and results both in the essence and the process of theatrical action, a branch including more questions than solutions. After all, as Oddey (1994, 2) says for devised theatre: "there is a uniqueness of process and product for every group concerned".

The selection of our performance's theme by the whole group is succeeded by a research onto this theme's parameters and it is not rare that our "other" lives provide us with elements: i.e. the director's and other members' second professions as substitute



(drama) teachers, tutors and professors allow us to have a better understanding on the conditions of teenagers' lives, their anxieties and their problems. It is not rare as well that our action aims to change reality: *Dombre Den* was born when we realize (through an extensive use of questionnaires in our schools) that Greek inhabitants don't know even a single word in immigrants' languages (the Russian language been the most characteristic case, since a high percentage of "immigrants" – actually, repatriated people because of their Greek origins, who came during the '90s from the Russian territories of the Black Sea: these people spoke mostly Russian and their children still do). Similarly, the bullying as constant mention in our performance came from a two years research, conducted by the director during his classes at the School of Drama (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki): there, approximately 140 post-teenager students (20 or 21 years old) answered an anonymous questionnaire on the existence of bullying issues even into this artistic environment and the results were both revealing and disappointing: 43% of them had faced some sort of bullying or oppression by their classmates (relevant or not with their artistic creations)! After that, it was sure that we could only imagine the analogous percentage in high schools and gymnasiums (the 2nd grade schools in Greece)...

Nevertheless, these preliminary researches would be nothing without the inner research into our deepest selves. When we decided to present a performance on bullying (we didn't know yet the title), certain rehearsals were dedicated to the protected revealing of our own experiences on bullying. But, is it possible to persuade someone to uncover his/her deepest secrets, to share things he/she is still embarrassed for? The answer for us is "yes". First of all, with most of the group members, we work together since School's years and – as Oddey mentions for *Forced Entertainment* group– we "have developed a full awareness of [our] strengths and weaknesses, and how [we] can contribute to each other" (Oddey 1994, 44). But the rehearsal itself, our exercises and techniques, help the development of a 'circle of trust', inaccessible from outsiders and where personal experience could be combined with our audience's speculated needs. Exercises of trust (such as "Jump and Catch" or "Fall From a High Level") and cooperation, which motivate mostly the actors' bodies, combined with free and democratic conversation and decision for every subject, which pushes the actors' to feel like creators and not simply as the executors of the director's will, helped the bonding among us and the building of our 'circle of trust'.

Bicât and Baldwin (2002, 9) rightly argue for "the discoveries that are made in rehearsal, [which] can lead to unexpected outcomes". One of our favorite exercise during rehearsals is the dramatization of a well-known fairy tale (such as *The Red Riding Hood*) which, eventually, is transformed to another contemporary 'tale', full with personal elements: here, the narration's distanciation conflicts with the personal and more expressionist style of playing, and the actors are free to freeze the action, share their beliefs, turn over the classic narration to investigate other situations and, finally, to take



over the narration itself. Many times, the actors randomly identify their ‘roles’ into the process with a simple proverb or word: one of them is chosen to be the “yes[man]” (the person saying always “yes” to narration itself or the execution of the action), another one the “no[man]”, the negative one, and the third one the “maybe[man]”. Each one of them has his/ her opinion on the narrated events, and the ways they (have to) find to serve both the action-narration and their ‘role’ reveal new perspectives to the story and help the gradual building of a multilevel final script. Actually, the relations developed between these ‘roles’ and their ‘fight’ for the dominance of their own perspective on the story forms another ‘script into the script’ – this battle between different opinions and styles has only one rule: the story must, by any means, go on.

I believe that we have already positively answered whether devising theatre is purely spontaneous or may exist within structures, as Fryer (2013, 39) wonders. PAPA-LANGKI’s method could be described as the outlining, mainly by the director, of a simple frame (a “box”, as we like to say) into which the actors are, then, free to create. Another structural exercise we use is the status game, which was introduced by Johnstone’s writings (2011, 37-85). With exercises and improvisations, the actors take over to present not only the story (and their point of view on it), but also their status as ‘roles’ into the story itself and an imaginary hierarchy of the group’s itself. They actually have to defend two different statuses, which may conflict with each other: one symbolizes their place into their surrounding context (i.e. the society): their external status, but the second one represents their inner self, their estimation on whether they deserve their social place or not: their internal status. Both statuses are schematically described with a number from 20 [the highest] to 1 [the lowest] (one number for every status: external and internal) and the most interesting stories occur when a character has to manage with two very different numbers: i.e. a 5 external status and a 6 internal means that this character stays at the ‘lowest’ social class, but he/she is ok with that. But, what happens when a character has a 3 external and a 20 internal status? Does he rise up against the others? Does he/she believe his/her standpoint is better, righter or more interesting than the others’ one? And what liberties can he/she take, how he/she may manage to impose his/her perception on the events? And what happens if a character has to deal with the opposite (i.e. 20 external but 2 internal)?

Our actor-centered methods are also revealed by the use of another technique: the Laban movement analysis (LMA), a description of which may be found in Newlove’s writings (1993, 78-86). According to LMA, every body’s (and, consequently, character’s) dynamics could be described according to four different pairs of effort qualities: direct-indirect/ strong-light/ sudden-sustained/ bound-free. A character can be schematized and, finally, performed with four different qualities (each from every pair). Our normal rehearsal consists of the character’s building through LMA, and, afterwards,



the gradual development of the story (based on a decided subject) through these characters. With LMA, the same actor has also the ability to perform multiple roles (necessary for our low budget and into small places, such as classrooms, performances): if each character can be analyzed in four elements, all the actor/actress has to do is to change some of them, and he/she has already changed the person he/she presents. If then, she/he also adds the different character's status and his/her motivation word (i.e. "yes" or "no"), she/he performs on stage a complete new person.

Maybe all these sounds like a riddle, a brainteaser compared with the impression we have for devised theatre as a theatre category born for and based on actors' freedom and their releasing from the director's power. But, we have to ask ourselves: can we actually be free outside structures and norms? And if yes, is this enough interesting for a performance addressed to a specific audience? Our experience with more than 60.000 teenagers showed us that we follow the right pathway of creation, based on a cohesive method that allows the group to feel free, but not lost during rehearsals. Someone may also find peculiar the building of the characters before the creation and editing of the script/story, but we may reassure everyone: this method may be revealing for the hidden depths of each story, since every differentiated character acts differently facing the same situations. *The Story of Victor and Mary* is based exactly on this logic: the same story of bullying is narrated by different characters – the victim and the third person, the observer – and it is this contradiction that provides the problem's final solution. Similarly, in *I Am (Not) the Cool Guy*, the boy and the girl describe and perform their own perspective on their love story. And our teenagers audience appreciated both performances: *I Am (Not) the Cool Guy* still (2017/2018) is presented in Athens and schools still ask for a performance of *The Story of Victor and Mary*, approximately six years after its 'opening'.

Experiences From the Audience

There is a story I like to say when I am asked about the acceptance of our performances by the audience. When *Dombre Den* was presented at the central square of a very non-privileged neighborhood of Thessaloniki (Evosmos), the population of which includes a high percentage of Russian immigrants, we thought that our performance might be considered as offensive for these people. One of them, a boy around 18 years old, sat next to me, watching the show and asked me for a cigarette. We started talking during the performance (been in a public space gives certain 'advantages', such as eating, smoking or little chatting during the performance) and the boy predicted the 'thief' of the bicycle (and the end of the play): when, surprised, I asked him how he found out, he told me that his main interest was to read crime books. And when I asked him what he was doing, after the end of the school, he just told me "nothing": the school system was not able to give this immigrant boy the opportunity to



expand his talents (the reading or writing literature) or find him a place into Greek universities (which accept students through a very competitive contest).

We like to imagine that this boy – and several boys and girls - found, understood, felt something new showing our performance, something that will give him (and the others) a new perspective and vision in his life. Of course, the general assessment issue of the social concerned arts has its corresponding to our actions: we are sure that our performances encourage participants to “create dialogue through imagining and enacting possibilities”, as Prendergast and Saxton (2009, 198) say, but we cannot, quantitatively evaluate if and how they have finally turn society over one or the other direction. To overpass this problematic, Prendergast and Saxton, based on McKenzie’s theory (2001, 29-54), propose an understanding of performance as social efficacy, which allow us to limit assessment language in applied theatre to the realm of the efficacy of its process, not the efficiency or/and the effectiveness of its intervention (2001, 24). Into this spirit, a lot of times, one crying teenager stopped the actors before their leaving from the school and thanked them, because he/she had seen his/her life story. Similarly, several mothers and professors called us after the show to thank us because we had helped the cultivation of a climate of acceptance into their classroom. And, several times the after-the-show conversation (which we established after *The Story of Victor and Mary*) revealed hidden tendencies and gave all participants the opportunity to express their thoughts and feelings.

But, what we consider as our greatest achievement is when someone ‘from the other side’ - a bully, a teenager with racist opinions, a homophobic - takes the speech to defend his/her actions and behavior, or to present his/her ‘values’. We don’t expect that our performances had already affected him/her and, surely, we don’t expect that she/he had changed his/her opinions only by watching our show. But, the will to participate to a dialogue process may be the first step to a path of questions and doubt, which will lead him/her on to change. And it is these questions and this doubt we would always like to keep for ourselves, express through our performances and give as a gift to our audience.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BICÂT, Tina and BALDWIN, Chris, (eds.). 2002. *Devised and Collaborative Theatre: A Practical Guide*. Wiltshire: The Crowood Press.
- BALDWIN, Chris, 2002. The Director. In Tina Bicât and Chris Badlwin (eds.). *Devised and Collaborative Theatre: A Practical Guide*. Wiltshire: The Crowood Press, p. 12-29.
- CALARY, Dymphna, 2001. *Through the Body: A Practical Guide to Physical Theatre*. London: Nick Hern.



- FRYER, Nick, 2013. *Towards a Pedagogy of Devised Theatre Praxis*. PhD Thesis submitted at the School of Theatre, Performance and Cultural Policy Studies of the University of Warwick.
- HEDDON, Deirde and MILLING, Jane, 2006. *Devising Performance: A Critical History*. London: Palgrave.
- JOHNSTONE, Keith, 2011. *Impro. Improvisation and the Theatre*. Greek Translation Anna Garefalaki, Athens: Okto.
- KERSAW, Baz, 2002. Performance, Memory, Heritage, History, Spectacle – The Iron Ship. *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, vol. 21, no 3, p. 132-149.
- MCKENZIE, Jon, 2001. *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance*, London: Routledge.
- NEWLOVE, Jean, 1993. *Laban for Actors and Dancers: Putting Laban's Movement Theory into Practice*. London: Routledge.
- ODDEY, Alison, 1994. *Devising Theatre: A Practical and Theoretical Handbook*. London/ New York: Routledge.
- PARSONS, Rosemary, 2009. Between the Director and the Spectator: Decision Making and Devising Theatre. *Humanity*, vol. 2, p. 12-17.
- PRENDERGAST, Monica and SAXTON, Juliana (eds.), 2009. *Applied Theatre: International Case Studies and Challenges for practice*. Bristol: Intellect.
- WHITMORE, Jon, 1994. *Directing Postmodern Theatre: Shaping Signification in Performance*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press.



ILLUSTRATIONS



© y.o.p.j. cre8ive studios

Dombre Den 2013. Photo by Cre8tive studios.



The Story of Victor and Mary, 2015. Photo by PAPALANGKI.