



Creative Collaboration – The Working Process in Devised Theatre

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Abstract: *Devised performances permit informality and, - unrestricted, absolute freedom of experiencing the subsistence of improvisation equally for the director, actor and participant. In our (Transylvanian) theatrical world, the director usually dominates the whole creative process. His/Her working methods based on improvisation, acting techniques, situations, ideas offer vast opportunities to express something through a collaborative process or a play. In the case of a devised performance or a devised working process, the director is placed on an imaginary line in collaboration with his/her team or company. He/She can appear either as a director, text writer, stage designer, sound and lightning supervisor, or all of them at the same time. Can devised theatre and its specific working processes truly, totally weaken this kind of “leadership”, or is it a subtle camouflage, trying to express something through a “collaborative process”? This study presents how devised theatre is practicable through a non - prescribed formula.*

Key words: *theatre; devised; collective creation.*

In the traditional text-based theatre, the script has the authority to bring on the prominence of a playwright or a director. Also, the text may be considered the scheme of a production, the very principle at the basis of a creation. The text may be the result of a conceptual process. A text may belong to a single originator, with his/her name written on the pages, and may also be carried out by a group of protagonists, a team, a company. The unwritten text may also appear as the protagonist's movement, mimicry, and/or act.

In devised theatre, it is usually emphasized that there is no need for a director. People who are involved in the working process, or another person, an outside eye, will be invested to assemble, collect, collate, compile, frame the whole material. The role of the director in devised theatre is to appear as a moderator between the artists and artistic movements and to become a creative promoter. His artistic involvement is equal to that of the other participants. He will permit and advance the actors to find artistic solutions



for themselves. The devising process, as any other theatre - making procedures, needs orientation (guidelines) in which certain tactics, strategies are incorporated. Here are some generally presented methods: allow and promote unconventional, astonishing subjects, encouraging and including new ideas, direct and manipulate the actors to step over their regular, usual working course, supervise and control the artists' during their working process, maintain a continuous correlation of the piece.

Allison Oddey describes a model of a devising process - in the following way:

[...] establish roles and responsibilities within a particular project, decide how to structure the process of democratic decision - making, have something that the group passionately wants to do and is committed to exploring theatrically, trust the feelings, instincts, intuition about the development of work, allow members of the group space to work on their own for part of the time, analyze, criticize, assess and evaluate the work as it progresses, in one form or another, - try to maintain a critical outside eye on the process and product, never be afraid to abandon ideas, or to start again.

Oddey 1994, 150

Deep, combined, collective or more collaborative than ... may be the most representative, peculiarities of devised theatre. Collaboration means teamwork, where people perform their task or role. In most productions, every person, artist, artistic participant, has a precise role and there is a delimitation between those who create the theatre and those who are the theatre. It is said that devised theatre was born when this delimitation between the originator and originated was overstepped. People go to the theatre with a compulsive, deeply rooted expectation, and an anticipation based on a long established prescription- playwright-play-director-designer-actor, all staying in their well-kept corners, writing, directing, designing and acting. This regulation is weakened in devised theatre, where each participant can assist in all parts of the play. A devised production may be evaluated without any prescribed expectation, just with the willingness to step out from everybody's comfort zone and step into a group of individuals where collaboration and creative work have a more intense meaning. In devised theatre, collaborative work does not include just a team, a group of participants but also the places where formulas are reconstituted, reconsidered.

According to Rebecca Curl, discussion, decision, creation, incorporation, refining, finalization are just a few elements of the devised theatre processes. Discussions are related to the balance of power between members, to creative visions, potential subject matters. Previous debates can also be put into action, technical aspects playing a definite role (Curl 2014).

Theatremakers, theorist Allison Oddey, freelancer Rebecca Curl, and other devised theatre practitioners have argued that devised theatre's main goal is to create original,



exciting, unique theatrical productions. All theatre's purpose is to bring into existence such lasting, imperishable productions. Whether we mention traditional theatre performances or devised shows - analysis, criticism, evaluation, enthusiasm, and passion are required.

One mind can create beautiful work, but imagine filling the room with everyone's creative intensity. Devised theatre and other collaborative arts teach us that there is a place for each of us within the creative working world and that people are hungry for opportunities to create things in new ways.

Curl 2014

Devising means creating, inventing, conceiving, compiling, designing, constructing, imagining, composing. This term, "creation", may be expropriated by theatre makers writing a text with elaborated direction, guidance, which is analyzed by a group of people. In other terms, this representation consists of characters, performers, participants assembled to act, perform, play, improvise on ingenious brainstorming that they will apply or relinquish in their creation. Another possibility to complete a performance appears when a person who designs all his/her ideas makes a one-person show. These are techniques which can be applied to create a performance. This is not a presentation of a process. It is used as a term valid to all kind of processes. Using these specifications, we may consider, not in an unwarranted or exaggerated manner, that "all theatre is devised and text based. Defining these two terms is a long running theatre debate. It would help if we stopped imagining them as rivals" (Field 2009).

Transylvanian theatrical tradition, the text-based theatre, is still in vogue in our region. However, its leadership is becoming weaker due to some directors, such as Radu Afrim and Gianina Cărbunariu. They bring into existence the theatre form called "devised" into their performances. A recently-presented play with Radu Afrim's trademark, composed in a very unusual, astonishing way was *The Devil's Casting*, propagated as an eye-opening surprise performance. The play's plot, the scenario, evolved during rehearsals. Through a truly collaborative work, the actors from the National Theatre Tîrgu-Mureș, Tompa Miklós Company, were permitted to show their talent, presence and contribution to the whole performance. Nevertheless, it was unquestioned who the director was, the final decision being taken from Afrim's executive chair. We may say that it was a more collaborative working session than the actors were used to, as decisions related to the text and acting, were taken together while rehearsing. The protagonists created many standalone story segments. The characters were born from the actors' proposals, and scenes worked out through improvisations. These scenes were not built up in a predefined story structure, but as separate, potential segments of the plot. The lines presented spontaneously by the actors were supervised by the director Afrim during rehearsals. Sometimes he agreed with the improvised text without modifying it, and sometimes he remade or rejected it. Even if



the actors wrote the greater part of the text, the director had the responsibility of judging the existing text material. The validity of the ideas and the inspiration of the actors were determined and placed in the performance by the director.

Sparkling ideas, contribution, recognition characterise this method of creating an unexpected rehearsal programme and performance, similar to the devised theatre.

Collaboration-Devising is only one possible manifestation of collaborative ways of working in theatre, which emerged within a very specific cultural context at a particular moment in time. Theatre-making, in principle is collaborative, even if it results in a one-person performance.

Popovici 2015, 195

Radu Afrim claims that his shows are very diversified, they are not sad from the beginning till the end, they are discursive - a scene from a train journey, another from a book; so it is also about the personality of the text-writer, it is not just his creation. Everything related to illustration, aspect or sound suggestions are given by what he is listening to in his headsets, images, pictures he sees around him. According to the director's conception, the actors have a 50 percent contribution to the work in textual space. B. Fülöp Erzsébet, actor, university lecturer, director, protagonist in Afrim's shows, describes him

[...] as a person who has great expectations towards the actor, treating him/her as a partner from all points of views. He is an actor-centred director. Only such a director can make valuable, substantial theatre. He gives space to improvisation, proceeds from the actor's being, sees beyond the actor and considers it is his responsibility to demand, request, ask for the very opposite in the next performance.

B. Fülöp Erzsébet

I remember Gianina Cărbunariu's show, *20/20*, presented years ago (2009) in Tîrgu-Mureş. At that time, I had not heard about devised theatre. It remained an unusual, strange, provocative performance, based on a delicate story and placed in an uncommon space, in a bastion of the medieval fortress of Tîrgu-Mureş. Her method of creating a performance presents similarities to devised performances and their procedures. She starts working on a play when she considers that a particular subject becomes an obsession. That moment is considered, from her point of view, to be the starting point of a working session. Certain subjects, information related to an issue are returning elements of her conversations with friends and people she interacts with. After devising the concept of a show and establishing a common language with all participants in the process, she writes a script in half a day. The difference between her rehearsals and other performances is that she does not begin the work with reading a text, but with the sum of



several subjective meetings “with reality” (Popovici 2015, 296) when she collects material for a topic alongside some of the actors.

She declared that her shows are about the participants she works with. She does not set aside the confrontations with her group, or other participants and she does not take it as an assault, insult when somebody comes up with the statement that something is not clear. The text has an important role in her shows, “it is one of the vehicles for my ideas and questions. It is a fictional processing of different types of real-life speeches” (Popovici 2015, 297).

Speaking of the relations, she mentions that there is a continuous negotiation between director, playwright and not only. She rejects that kind of director who gives orders and those must be fulfilled by the actors. “The actor who knows everything before the director finishes the sentence, is not creative” (Popovici 2015, 297).

Her shows cannot be considered fixed, uniform. Of course, she builds upon the relationship between the performance and audience, irony and self-irony.

She works without a recipe during rehearsals. She selects a form of documentation and she introduces exercises based on improvisation. The documentation is sometimes made by herself, but in the case of the performance *20/20*, the actors were present at the interviews that constituted the material of the performance. In this case, the documentation proceeded, and it continued after the premiere which was followed by discussions with the audience. They used a frame system for discussions and the audience reacted, replied with their stories related to the events happened in March, 1990, in Tîrgu-Mureş. The script remained constant in time, but the show did change.

Cooperation and teamwork are a specific peculiarity, a personal touch of her way of creating a show. Allowing the actors to take part in the documentation, conceiving the script during rehearsals, may be considered another kind of partnership. She chooses the actors she works with. She considers the actors “co-authors” in every performance they play, not only in her productions.

According to her, in certain types of processes, in which actors, designers, choreographers participate, the author and co-author aspect is fastidious, subtle. “Although we select together the material, we often meet to discuss the concept of the piece, however, the idea of the piece is mine, so is choosing the working method and, ultimately, the fictional rewriting is also mine-the script itself. And that is why it is a piece ~by Gianina Cărbunariu” and not a collective one (Popovici 2015, 302).

By presenting Radu Afrim and Gianina Cărbunariu, two highly appreciated Romanian directors’ working sessions during their performances *The Devil’s Casting* and *20/20*, my intention, my objective was to focus on whether the leadership of the directors has become less impressive, effective, even weakened by the creative process based



on a recipe applied by the devised theatre. Using working methods specific to the devised theatre, offering possibility to the participants in their shows to take part in a more collaborative, collective creation permit us to draw the following conclusion; the theory about the term 'devised' and the practical approach in the accustomed theatre form in Transylvania, relevantly in Tîrgu-Mureş, denote, indicate that devised theatre is current, pervaded, used, applied to express something through a collaborative process, sometimes tempering the formula of a strict, severe directorial authority.

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