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Devising In Process

Edited by Alex Mermikides and Jackie Smart
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Devising in Process is a welcomed, introductory examination of eight British theatre companies that create devising-based performance. This accessible and concise collection of essays, edited by Alex Mermikides and Jackie Smart, both Lecturers at Kingston University, London, presents a valuable insight into the vibrancy of alternative British theatre. The groups featured are all creating today, some for more than forty years, others for only a few, give the volume an immediacy and documentary aliveness. Each essay author was imbedded within a group to follow the devising of one specific performance project. Their unusual access to the unique, often long and idiosyncratic, process of devising performance brings detail, breath, and depth to a vibrant, often obscure subject.

A comprehensive introduction provides an overview of devised performance in Britain, placing it in historical and political context and positioning its relationship to performance art and visual theatre. Devising in this context “contests the authority of text and of the individual creative artist—and, by implication, any suggestion of a singular ‘truth’” (6). Historically, devised theatre was also in part, a political reaction, “emancipating the practitioner (most usually the performer) from the ‘tyranny’ inherent in ‘mainstream’ practices (10).

The themes and concerns established by the introduction establish threads that link—the common concerns and contrasts—an unwieldy array of companies, practitioners, and performance. The introduction and each essay also highlights often ignored practical and operational concerns that shape the work, namely, company structures, roles, and relationships, and the external factors such as funding, time constraints, space, schedules, and how it all effects creative process and artistic objectives.

The People Show was formed in 1966 and is often cited as the UK’s longest standing devising company. To date they have created one hundred and nineteen original performances, which they number and then subtitle. *People Show #118: The Birthday Tour* was documented by the book’s first essay and, in its way, established a template, vernacular, and frame by which to perceive all that follows. *The People Show* structures their work around a “collage of atmospheres rather than narrative or character” (34) preferring to start from a ‘visual point of view’ and a loose and malleable method of working to guarantee that there is no single, typical devising process or method for the company. They work with fragments beginning with associated images and ideas, which are then ‘embroidered’ with bodies, actions, text, and reactions. Performers are encouraged to bring their interpersonal relationships to the process, pushing the work into uncharted, highly personal, and ultimately risky terrain.

Station House Opera are known for their ‘telematic’ performances, which put performers and audiences in a shared virtual, worldwide space of performance. *The Other Is You* strives to create a “condition of telepresence that allows you to take your body ... into

some other environment” (55), in this case into three spaces—a basement in Brighton, a school in Groningen and a café in Berlin—which merge to create a fourth imaginary space. Eschewing linear narrative, each space is created independently and is linked only by visual similarities of gestural signs, task-based action, costumes, and spacial organization of objects which requires audiences to decipher and give meaning to the overlay and vectoring of the actions performed.

Faulty Optic’s performance of *Dead Wedding* calls on Darwin’s Theory of Evolution and Chaos Theory to demonstrate how chance and chaos foment instability, disrupting usual patterns as to create a new order. It’s *Dead Wedding* project, a contemporary re-telling of the Orpheus myth was organized around a ‘chaotic’ process. Starting with a ‘creative pond’ into which all associated ideas, images, and actions are put and allowed to ‘spawn’ and from which the strongest patterns and associations suggest themselves. Spontaneous, self-organizing systems are what *Faulty Optic* terms ‘creative systems’ and are central to their collaborative imperative.

Political advocacy is highlighted with the documentation of *Unstated*, a project created by *Red Room*. The performance, dealing with refugees awaiting admittance into Britain, was devised through a process of interlocking circles between writer, director, actors, references groups, and interviewees. With the writer and director taking the creative and organizational lead, the advocacy centered process aspired to a multi-vocal act of agency that “seeks to make a person visible in a valued culture sphere” (109).

Third Angel’s trust in serendipity, chance, and coincidence was crucial in the development of *9 Billion Miles from Home*, a performance inspired by the Voyager 2 spacecraft and its relationship to human experiences of time and distance. *Third Angel* created a multi-stranded, parallel, and backtracking creative methodology allowing several independent explorations to be interrogated. During a long development period, some strands were abandoned or became side projects, with others connecting to form a single, highly refined ritual performance shaped by six work-in-progress presentations.

Delirium, a project created by *theatre O*, took Dostoevsky’s epic novel, *The Brothers Karamazov* as its starting point. Working with a writer, and through a process of adaptation and improvisation, the company explored the text, style, and world of the novel to find a theatrical language that combined puppetry with Lecoq inspired, physical theatre.

The most engaging of the volume’s essays are the last two. *Shunt*, a relatively new and certainly the most unusual companies featured, is a collective of ten artists who essentially work together and separately at the same time, stretching the conventional definitions of collaboration, performance, and creativity. *Shunt Lounge*, a long running and evolving project, was conceived as a ‘bit of a holiday’ and wholeheartedly embraced the objective of entertainment, remaining unabashedly and fully focused on the experiential delights of its audience. Located in the capacious tunnels under London Bridge Station, replete with a full bar, the company members created and presented work in parallel rather than in collaboration, relying on a clash and consensus principles of creation. Inspired by the chance experiments of John Cage and Michael Kirby’s ‘compartmental’ (self-contained and hermetic) structure, each artist created and presented their own performance with no information passing from one discrete theatrical unit to another. The result was a constantly developing happening or collage—linked only by coincidental similarities, shared values and principles—that was reflected upon, adjusted and revised. The project celebrated inconsistency and lack of narrative

coherence, and in so doing required, embraced, and fostered innovation and individual creativity.

Equally innovative is *Gecko*, a physical theatre company dedicated to engaging and awakening the senses of their audiences through athleticism and emotional expressiveness. *Gecko* uses little speech in its work, which resembles a multi-layered collage of actions and images, to create a journey of emotional understanding. Influenced by the theatre and methodology of Lecoq, *Gecko* works to realize their performances emotionally and internally rather than intellectually, with understanding coming through the uncloaking of the layered and highly textured landscapes of the body. Once the emotions residing in the body are revealed an authentic vocabulary emerges, with heretofore hidden aspects of self and the world interconnecting to create a new territory, the performance. The process blurs the personal with the theatrical, the public with the private and was well suited for their performance of *The Arab and the Jew*, an exploration that started without an agenda and evolved into a politically themed show about the issues surrounding the Jewish and Arab performers.

Devising In Process offers up an entertaining, insightful, and often inspiring account of British performance collectives today, serving as an introduction, overview, and guidebook. It's writing is clear, informed, balanced, and often passionate, revealing not only its subject but also the vibrancy and resilience of theatre responding to our time of fundamental social and cultural evolution.

Thomas Riccio
University of Texas at Dallas