

**GROUP DEVISED THEATRE: A THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL
EXAMINATION OF DEVISING PROCESSES**

By

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This thesis represents a major part of the prescribed program of study.

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ABSTRACT

This non-traditional thesis explores the practical and theoretical processes of group-devised theatre. The research informing this thesis is derived from two interrelated components – a practical project in group devising, and a theoretical study of alternative theatre, devising methodologies, and performance theory.

Chapter One defines “devising” before tracing its origins through the development of experimental practices from the historical avant-garde to the present day. These practices include radical disruptions to discursive language and structure, increased multimedia, reconsiderations of the performer’s function and the use of improvisation. This genealogy is argued to be a “literature of practice” capable of informing contemporary devising projects, as well as helping to establish the position of devising within contemporary performance theory.

Chapter Two examines how creative collaborators begin to form and function as a devising group, a period I theoretically term “pre-devising”. By examining the experiences of my group, gaps in devising literature concerning group formation and composition are identified, complemented by an investigation into the role of theatre games in building ensemble.

Chapter Three draws upon the genealogy of devising, devising literature and performance theory to interrogate the process of devising our production, *This Is Not An Exit*. The theoretical and practical problems of our methods are explored. These methods include organising the group as an artistic democracy, developing naturalistic characters, and establishing a “postmodern aesthetic”. By analysing our experiences, this chapter attempts to illustrate the complex tangle of influences informing contemporary performance practitioners, and highlight areas ripe for future critical research.

STATEMENT

I hereby state that the following thesis is entirely my own original work and has not been submitted for any other degree at any other University or educational institution. All sources of information used in the thesis have been indicated and due acknowledgment has been given to the work of others.

Signed:



Rosemary Frances Parsons

Date: 31/01/07

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis approaches the processes of devising theatre from the point of view of a first-time devising group. The foremost reference point for such a group is arguably the devising handbooks of Oddey (1994), Kerrigan (2001), Callery (2001), Lamden (2000), and *Devised and Collaborative Theatre* (Bicât and Baldwin [eds.], 2002). However, comparing the theoretical strategies of these books with the realities of practical experience suggests there are many areas of devising in need of further research. Here, I attempt to address those areas of devising which arose as important considerations during both my practical project and my theoretical analysis of our process. Prior to commencing work with my group, I sought to establish a critical context for examining contemporary devised theatre. Unsatisfied with current genealogies for devising practice, I explore the experimental theatrical practices of the historical avant-garde, hoping to negotiate a fresh understanding of the myriad influences informing devising since the 1960s. This study forms the basis of how I analyse our production *This Is Not An Exit*, devised and performed as part of this research. Also arising from this study was the desire to organise my devising group as an artistic democracy, modelled on the collectives of the 1960s. Artistic democracies have fallen out of favour since the 1980s/90s (Oddey, 1994), and are thus not detailed extensively in the handbooks mentioned above. Lacking a methodology to follow, my group discovered its own working methods, in turn highlighting gaps in devising literature. For example, from the first rehearsals with my group, I became aware of the need for devising methodologies to address how groups form and develop, and how group composition may affect the devising work. Such areas are investigated in this thesis. Accompanying this thesis is a DVD recording of *This Is Not An Exit*, performed at the Peninsula Theatre, Woy Woy, 21-23 April 2005. A script is also provided.

Chapter One attempts to contextualise contemporary devising practice within twentieth century theatrical experimentation, arguing that devising arose from a myriad of avant-garde “conventions” that have been inherited through intentional and unintentional reproduction. After defining “devising” as it is understood in this thesis, I examine why it is important to have at least a cursory understanding of past practice, arguing that the precedents within past theatrical practice that privilege process over product may help in establishing a critical approach to contemporary devising. Section 1.1 examines the problems of linearity and why it may be problematic to try and locate a “genealogy” of devising, and argues, after examining a number of viewpoints, that the early twentieth-century avant-garde could be perceived as having a tangible influence on theatrical practice since the 1960s. Section 1.2 gives an overview of theatrical innovations, developed by the Symbolists, Expressionists, Futurists, Dadaists and Surrealists, that are very similar to the “conventions” of postmodern performances. These innovations include the disruption of linear structure, technical experimentation and an increased use of multimedia. Section 1.3 explores how between approximately the start of the twentieth-century to around 1930, the shifting boundaries of performance genres saw disruptions to the conventional process of creation. Performers in the experimental theatre were given increased opportunities to contribute to the development of performance material in situations similar to contemporary director-led devising projects. Section 1.4 draws together potential avenues of influence to complete the genealogy of devising, examining devising practice from the 1960s to the present day. This section commences with an examination of Artaud and his influence on The Living Theatre, then looks at the social and cultural forces that influenced the development of contemporary devising processes. Section 1.5 focuses on the history of Australian devising practice, detailing the traditions of physical theatre and community theatre, and how these have developed since the 1970s. Chapter One concludes by summarizing the theatrical innovations of the twentieth-century that led to the performer

becoming co-creator in the theatrical process, then turns attention to the process by which contemporary performers collaborate to construct theatrical works – by forming and maintaining a devising group.

Chapter Two argues that how groups form and operate is the logical site of initial investigation when undertaking a devising project, supporting Murray's (2000:45) assertion that the group is "the singularly most important element of Devised Theatre." This chapter combines group research literature, devising literature and an analysis of the practical experiences of my devising group to understand the implications of group composition and group development throughout the devising process. This is an area often overlooked in devising manuals such as Oddey's (1994) and Lamden's (2000). Section 2.1 uses my devising group as a case study for examining the implications of group formation, composition and discipline for the first-time devising group. I term this phase of the devising process "pre-devising" and, after examining how my group formed, argue that the composition of a group (including socio-cultural factors and levels of theatrical experience) may impact upon the final devised production. This section also investigates types of undisciplined behaviour within the rehearsal room, and the positive or negative effects this behaviour may have on the devising process. Section 2.2 explores theatre games and their potential role in devising for developing imaginative responses when improvising, enhancing performance ability and developing a sense of "complicité" or ensemble within the group. I argue that "performative games", or games played "in the sense of 'like a performance'" (Shepherd and Wallis, 2044:223), are the most useful games for devisers. In this section I examine some of the games played by my group and how they were perceived to have aided in our devising process.

Chapter Three analyses *This Is Not An Exit*, the devised work produced by my group, by identifying the major aspects of the devising process and how they remained “visible” in the final production. Section 3.1 defines and examines the concept of the “artistic democracy” and how my group attempted to emulate the artistic democracies of the 1960s/70s by making the traditional theatre roles, such as playwright, director, set designer, the equal responsibility of each group member in a model of performer-led devising. Exploring the potential problems of an artistic democracy, this section uses the example of aesthetic direction, traditionally the responsibility of the director, to argue how artistic democracies may be hijacked by one or two group members, as was the case with *This Is Not An Exit*. This section also examines how the set for *This Is Not An Exit* was collectively designed, providing a positive example of the artistic democracy in action. Section 3.2. delves into the heart of our devising process – the creation and development of Naturalistic characters. This section considers previous uses of Naturalistic techniques in devising practice (for example, the work of Mike Leigh or Trestle Theatre), then explores the process of character building. Arguing that developing a Naturalistic character is potentially the most accessible way for first-time devisers to commence devising, I use the example of my group to examine how theories of subjectivity then become an important consideration in the character-building process. Throughout devising, our characters became an extension of our own personal political views. Through the life-narratives of four characters, we performers attempted to enact our own personal resistance to the dominant discourses (capitalist, materialist, heterosexist, pro-life) that surround the issues of euthanasia, drug use, domestic violence, abortion and sexuality as examined in the production. Following Auslander’s (1997) argument that in postmodern thought it is impossible to take a position outside dominant discourses, our characters were not conceived and portrayed as transgressing these discourses but struggling very much within them. Section 3.3 continues the examination of postmodern thought and its influence on

This Is Not an Exit. After exploring the relation between postmodernism, modernism and the avant-garde, I argue that *This Is Not An Exit* exhibits a “postmodern aesthetic” which superficially reproduces the aesthetic devices of postmodern performance, adopted and adapted without an informed understanding of “postmodernism”. I examine the aspects of *This Is Not An Exit* which shared both by early avant-garde performance and postmodern performance, including a fragmented structure, non-realistic set design, and the position of performers within the *mise-en-scène*. This leads to an examination of how an audience might receive a “postmodern aesthetic”, building on audience feedback from *This Is Not An Exit*. I argue that some audiences may find “postmodern” aesthetic devices inaccessible, despite their repeated use throughout experimental theatre of the twentieth-century. This is followed by a brief exploration of two approaches an audience may use when making sense of a devised work. The first acknowledges how the mass media has permanently altered our methods of perception, while the second examines the potentiality of an embodied method of receiving a devised performance, following Magnat’s (2005:74-75) argument that spectators “sensuously make sense of devised theatre.” Section 3.4 continues to examine embodied knowledge and its role in the devising process by exploring how the structure of *This Is Not An Exit* developed through both conscious and unconscious processes of decision-making. Drawing upon Taylor’s (2003) model of “reflection-in-action”, this section argues that developing a devised work utilises not only personal experiences within and without of the rehearsal room, but is a “dialogue with other cultural processes and products” (Tufnell and Crickmay, 1993:201). This section then examines how devising is a form of embodied knowledge, drawing upon theories of embodied knowledge within performance situations (Zarrilli, 2002; Lockford and Pelias, 2004; Riley, 2004) to explore how we performers experienced the making and presentation of *This Is Not An Exit* as “embodied” rather than “embrained” process. This chapter concludes with the argument that devising as embodied knowledge is an important area for future research.

This thesis concludes by stressing that devising remains an under-researched area of theatre academia. I conclude that devising is a complexity of processes best understood through practice and that devising remains a potential site for future theatrical experimentation.