

Creating Plays Through Play:
The Role of the Devising Director
and the
Application of Improvisation
within
Devised Theatre Practice

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Declaration: No portion of the work referred to in the thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.

Abstract:

This thesis examines five new plays in which Mark Smith took a principal role in devising as the deviser director. All the plays were performed on stage throughout the UK between 2010 and 2014. This thesis will examine the role and processes of the devising director, and the context within which ‘devising’ emerged as a particular directorial mode in modern British theatre practice. Drawing upon Smith’s practice, experiences and conceptual roots in the first instance, this thesis will add to this under-theorised area of devised theatre practice.

1. Lines of Enquiry

My thesis will examine five new plays which I took a principal role in devising as deviser director. All the plays were performed on stage throughout the UK between 2010 and 2014.

These plays are:

- *Top of the World* (2010) – national tour supported by Arts Council England (ACE);
- *The Games* (2010-12) – national tour supported by ACE;¹
- *Sink or Swim* (2013) – regional tour supported by ACE;
- *A Christmas Carol* (2013) – Lantern Theatre, Liverpool.²

¹ *The Games* was the winner of Best Comedy and Production (*Liverpool Daily Post* Reader Awards, 2010) and nominated for Best Comedy, Production and Director, *The Dark Chat Awards* in 2011. It was also nominated for Best Show by *Broadway Baby* and *Three Weeks* in the same year.

² The scripts for *Top of the World*, *The Games*, *Sink or Swim* and *A Christmas Carol* are available in text format; *Hoof!* is available as a DVD or online.

- *Hoof!* (2010-14) – national tour supported by ACE;

Top of the World, *The Games* and *Sink or Swim* form a triptych of works utilising true stories or facts to create a new dramatic fiction for the stage. *A Christmas Carol* is a new adaptation of the novella by Charles Dickens, while *Hoof!* is a series of short plays created and improvised live in front of an audience.

This thesis will examine the role and processes of the devising director, and the context within which ‘devising’ emerged as a particular directorial mode in modern British theatre practice. It will also consider several related ideas:

- Devising: Background and Theory
- Devising: (My) Practice – Methodology
- Authorship

Drawing upon my own practice, experiences and conceptual roots (appendix three) in the first instance, my thesis will add to this under-theorised area of devised theatre practice. My analysis will be informed by research in the field of devised theatre practice by scholars such as Deirdre Heddon, Emma Govan, Anthony Frost, Jane Milling, Alex Mermikides, Helen Nicholson, Katie Normington, Alison Oddey, Duška Radosavljević, Alison Smart and Ralph Yarrow.

Although none of these figures directly address how improvisation is used to generate textual / visual material, they do acknowledge the importance of it within devised theatre practice. For example, Mike Bradwell’s book, *Inventing the Truth* (2012), frames both his process as a director and the subsequent plays created; whilst acknowledging his own use of

improvisation as a method for creation, he provides no systematic analysis of its role within his own practice.

The plays submitted may be broadly defined as text-based physical comedies. They were created and toured nationally between 2010 and 2014 and were specifically envisaged and designed to be accessible, engaging and visually exciting. The emphasis in each case is on developing a bold style of storytelling, utilising physical and visual theatre practices such as acrobatics, ensemble performance, animation, puppetry, mime, clown and strong characterisation. A play text is the result, but the devising director (myself) and performer are at the centre of its creative process. The method of creation is bespoke for each project, although there are commonalities that run throughout. I have led each process, and the question arises: what is my role within that? As Radosavljević asks in her book, *The Contemporary Ensemble: Interviews with Theatre Makers*: what type of creation is taking place? Drawing upon the work of Mermikides, she breaks this question down into two areas:

- 1) Ensemble-led creation derived from a specific methodology,
and/or
- 2) Director-led creation derived from a specific methodology.

I place myself in the second category. There is some attempt by all the aforementioned authors to examine the myriad of variables that exist in devised theatre practice, such as; the creative team's cultural experience (training, previous work, influence, etc.); their response to the proposed material; and the composition of the company structure. When the

director's own cultural influences³ are added to the mix, it makes for a huge set of variables. Of course, these also exist or have influence when working on a pre-existing script; but this renders the devised play a markedly different proposition to the traditional written play: 'Devised theatre demands decisions about how and where to begin. This is different from text-based theatre, where the play script defines and determines the parameters of the performance' (Oddey, 1994: 8). A traditional play can thus be broadly defined as a series of instructions, which the director and his/her creative team will interpret. Part of my task in the proposed thesis is to understand and describe the difference between these two modes of theatrical creation.

2. Devising: Background and Theory

Devising emerged as a popular method for the creation of new plays in the early 1980s. It is important to acknowledge that 'devising' of a kind was utilised prior to this date – in the *Commedia* companies of the sixteenth/seventeenth centuries, for example, and more recently in the mid-twentieth century by Joan Littlewood in the UK and *The Compass Players* in the USA. This mode of creation was relatively uncommon at the time; however, it is not claiming too much to say that the history of modern theatre up until the end of the twentieth century was organised in the main in relation to the text and the author. My focus is on the more systematic and self-conscious method of devising which began to emerge during the 1980s and which has evolved into a major element of contemporary British theatre-making practice. 'Devising is an increasingly common and acceptable means of play creation ... and

³ with discussion on p. 76 of appendix 3, where my conceptual roots are illustrated.

clearly overlaps with improvisation, using many of its techniques to generate and develop a performance text' (Frost and Yarrow, 2007: 212).

Devising has developed from a marginal, experimental technique to a mainstream practice found in every echelon of theatre-making in the UK – from the village hall to the West End. It has deeply shaped (and shifted) British theatre in the past forty years. My work under the auspices of *Spike Theatre* has toured and performed regionally, nationally and internationally, and has been supported financially by the Arts Council England (ACE). The work is akin to that undertaken by other companies such as *Improbable Theatre*, *Told by an Idiot*, *Spymonkey*, *Peepolykus*, *Rejects Revenge*, *Ophaboom* and *The Mime Theatre Project*.

The definition of 'devising' is extremely loose and has evolved since Alison Oddey first wrote *Devising Theatre: A Practical and Theoretical Handbook* in 1994. 'Devised theatre', she states,

can start from anything. It is determined and defined by a group of people who set up an initial framework or structure to explore and experiments with ideas, images, concepts, themes, or specific stimuli that might include music, text, objects, paintings, or movement ... A devised theatre product is work that has emerged from and been generated by a group of people working in collaboration (1994: 1).

In their book *Improvisation in Theatre*, Anthony Frost and Ralph Yarrow suggest that, as an approach to theatre-making, devising should:

- 1 free up inhibition through interactive debate, dialogue, sharing;
- 2 suspend mainly 'right hemisphere' logocentric process in favour of more spontaneous, imagistic, metaphoric or metonymic activity;
- 3 supplement a singular ego-driven dynamic with a more communal, perhaps 'collective consciousness'. (2007: 215)

Both statements summarise the 'act' or 'process' of devising. What is missing in both, and in the work of others, is the nuance of how improvisation is employed. This is the major issue in how devised work is engaged with, as Mike Bradwell explains: 'There are as many ways of devising plays as there are directors, actors and companies who devise them' (Bradwell 2012: 1). The processes employed in devising are fluid and as such are difficult to define. Critical engagement with devising exists, as I have suggested, in limited form; from the perspective of my experience as a professional devisor-director, however, this work is flawed in a number of key respects. In their book *Devising in Process*, Alex Mermikides and Jackie Smart observe eight separate theatre companies and the various ways in which they attempt to operationalise a devising aesthetic. It is interesting to note that the authors did not attend rehearsal on a consistent basis, and there have been other methodological inconsistencies compromising the validity of their work and placing a question mark over the summaries they offer and the conclusions they draw. This is not to say that the work of Mermikides and Smart is entirely invalid, nor that I have not found some aspects of their approach relevant to my own practice over the course of an extended career. There is some attempt at defining a methodology for the companies observed, but as mentioned previously the mercurial nature of devising avoids definitive categorisation.

As I have identified, there is an absence of documented practitioner-led insights regarding devised theatre practice. This is to say where a company or practitioner have reflected and documented their process in a systematic fashion alongside their working methodology. The best example is that of the work of Mike Bradwell but even this only alludes to ideas that took place in specific devised works. To address this gap in knowledge I have included two case

studies as appendices, with the intention of linking the methodology described later in this thesis with specific examples. Issues covered include:

- audience relationship;
- challenges;
- the generation of material through improvisation;
- developing the narrative and structure;
- research and planning;
- provoking and facilitating the creative process;

The approach I have taken is to develop each area above in addition to identifying key moments of 'creativity' that emerged during both rehearsal processes with an emphasis on how 'improvisation' was employed to achieve this. This offers the reader a unique insight into how the plays that support this thesis were constructed but also how my methodology is applied in practice. In undertaking this I hope to encourage those who write about the field of devised theatre to reappraise how devised practice is written about and suggest that perhaps an ethnographical approach may be required to address the gaps of knowledge that I have identified.

3. Devising: (My) Practice

The plays submitted are all comedies; comedy as a form is the most immediate feedback I can receive on my work, because someone will either laugh or not. In my opinion, comedy-drama in theatre is undervalued; it is often regarded as an inferior form of

drama, as John Wright points out in his preface to his book, *Why Is That So Funny? A Practical Exploration of Physical Comedy*:

Comedy has always been the poor relation in theatre. Oh, it might put bums on seats occasionally, but alongside tragedy (whatever we mean by that today), comedy is regarded as the lesser of the two genres (2006: xi).

To elicit laughter from an audience of strangers, all of whom have a different shared experience prior to watching your work, is a challenge, and one of the most difficult things to achieve in theatre. I have explored numerous ways of provoking/creating laughter through my plays: insistence gags⁴, absurdism (visual and physical), repetition, satire, puns, wordplay, clown⁵⁶, slapstick – all have worked in some form or degree.

A recurring theme of my work is the story of characters who succeed against the odds. This makes for good drama and is part of our shared story heritage, such as we find, for example, in *David and Goliath*, or *the Hare and the Tortoise*. It is a staple of popular culture. But why am I drawn to the same story again and again? Perhaps this resonates with my own subconscious and is symptomatic of my cultural experience and makeup. My cultural identity is lower-middle-class, and my experience of the theatre until my late teens was non-existent. I was not academically inclined. What did stir in me, however, was the desire to create, to express myself through the design of imaginary worlds and characters. Put simply: I write what I know.

I acknowledge that my plays are a synthesis of many different practices drawn from theatre and non-theatre sources, and that this has evolved over time. The exposure early in my career to practitioners such as Viola Spolin, Keith Johnstone and directly with Jos

⁴ See p. 79 of appendix 2, where the 'insistence gag' is discussed.

⁵ See p. 56 of appendix 1, where an example of 'clown' is discussed.

⁶ See p. 69 of appendix 2, where the development of clown is discussed.

Houben, Andrew Dawson, John Wright, Peta Lily and Mick Barnfather (all alumni of the Jacques Lecoq School), helped shape my ideas on theatre-making. Working with each of them gave me an insight into the work of Lecoq, and in particular how each 'follower' must also become a 'teacher'. This principle of continued enquiry is best encapsulated when Lecoq, upon the thirtieth anniversary of the foundation of his school, displayed a banner reading: 'Don't do what I do. Do what you do.' My ideas on devising have evolved and continue to evolve. This learning is developed through trial and error and after every project, I will evaluate what worked and what didn't. What remains consistent is my desire and my curiosity to discover what theatre can be. Devising is something that is learned, it is experiential; the ideas and learning within the following description are a summary of twenty-five years of devising as a performer and director.

Audience

In 2009 the Artistic Directors of Frantic Assembly, Scott Graham and Steven Hoggett, released their book *The Frantic Assembly Book of Devising* (2009). I was familiar with the company's work having watched their first show, *Look Back in Anger* at Liverpool's Unity Theatre in 1994. I had been struck by their physicality and commitment to conveying meaning and character through movement. The point in the book that struck a chord was the idea of, 'claiming the space' – as the authors explain:

In creating a pre-show we felt we achieved two vital factors. One was claiming of the space. From the moment each audience member entered the auditorium, they were instantly made aware that the space was ours ... that in some way tonight might be different from what they might usually expect (2009: 21).

This idea resonated with me: what if I were to explore this? How might this develop and enhance the work? How would it serve the storytelling and alter our relationship with the

audience?⁷ Up until this point the company had not really questioned or explored what our relationship with an audience was, other than the traditional model of performer/consumer. *Top of the World* was the first play in which I explored this relationship. I drew upon the ideas of *Frantic* and a piece of work I had viewed in 1998, called *Animal Crackers*, produced and reprised by the *Manchester Royal Exchange*. This was performed in a tent as the theatre at the time was being rebuilt due to the IRA bombing two years earlier. The pre-show interactive elements established a contract with its audience, prior to the main offering. In that ten-minute period they managed to convey that the work was going to be funny, silly and that the audience was encouraged to participate. This was a conscious decision made by the directors Gregory Hersov and Emil Wolk, and as we entered the space the audience was energised and relaxed, the perfect combination, in fact, with which to generate laughter. Although this was a pre-existing text, both directors' backgrounds are rooted in devised theatre practice, and it is not unreasonable to assume that they applied many techniques drawn from this practice during the rehearsal period. This work enabled spontaneity to occur within the performance. For example, at one point a member of the audience was laughing so loud that the cast stopped and 'played' the moment; this subsequently elicited further laughter from the audience. This was something I was keen to utilise and became a challenge and subsequently, this has been introduced as a recurring technique in all the work on which I am focusing in this study.

If audiences are temporary 'communities' brought together in one place, for a fixed amount of time for the purpose of watching a specific piece of work of their choosing, is it

⁷ See p. 52 of appendix 1, where audience is discussed.

possible to create a 'communal' experience for that disparate group of people? There has been a lot of research on the theatrical audience and how it (or they?) experiences a performance. Helen Freshwater writes:

it is important to remember that each audience is made up of individuals who bring their own cultural reference points, political beliefs, sexual preferences, personal histories and immediate preoccupations to their interpretation of a production (2009: 6).

The traditional notion of 'the audience' singularly sharing the same value and experience of the work has thankfully been debunked. Most commentators would agree that it makes more sense to regard an 'audience' not as a singular 'mass', but as a group of individuals each of whom is experiencing the performance in a different way.

Matt Trueman wrote a passionate article in *The Guardian* about his fears for theatre and offered this rallying call:

I'm not saying that liveness is dying, but that it desperately needs a re-examination. We need a theatre in which liveness is interrogated, integrated and integral; a theatre that truly values its own liveness and couldn't exist without it. A Liveness 2.0, if you will (2009: n.p.).

Trueman is advocating here for a theatre in which the notion of 'audience' and its experience is considered.⁸ Devised theatre has challenged and altered the relationship between the audience and work presented on stage, as Alexander Kelly⁹ asks, 'who are the audience, and why are they here?' (Govan, Nicholson, *et al* 2007: 69). Kelly's work primarily resides in the biographical; however, the question he asks in relation to the 'audience' is important. In many ways it summarises my own enquiry, except for and in addition to: what and how are the stories told in the 'place' we gather to experience/hear them? This raises the further

⁸ See p. 73 of appendix 2, where 'audience' is discussed.

⁹ Artistic Director – *Third Angel*

question of what and how stories are selected. The second idea raised is the question of 'space', or as I prefer to view it, 'place', and the issue of how work presented relates to those who are experiencing it. This is not to say that similar conversations are not had when working with pre-existing texts or within new writing, but I would suggest that the status of the 'audience' is always an active process central to the creative practice of devised theatre, and central also to the troubled category of 'liveness'.

Another fundamental difference between the 'devised play' and the 'pre-existing text' is that the former is performed by those who create it. The intrinsic nature of the performance is altered as a result; it means that an audience will potentially engage with such creations differently as outlined here:

The presentation of a shared story not only offers the potential for the establishment of a bond between the audience and performers, but also the opportunity for the spectators to partake of a creative aesthetic that challenges the patterns established by traditional plays (Govan, Nicholson et al, 2007: 58).

Although my work does not directly mirror 'the shared story' cited here, it does deal with universal themes, which are 'shared' by the audience. The proposal above also suggests that something else is also occurring in the space between the audience and work, which is 'devised'. This I would assert was the shift in focus towards challenging/altering/considering the role of the audience in the creative process of devising and is one of the principal legacies of devised theatre practice. My work in many ways stems from this constant enquiry, which is to say: how does a devised performance engage audiences? And how do audiences engage with it?

Addressing these questions leads to a shift in the core relationship between performers and audience, and the latter's appreciation that this work is different to the traditional modes of creation for theatre – which is to say: an actor speaking someone else's words through the

interpretation of the director. Then the subsequent audience contract needs careful consideration. I place a significant 'value' in the relationship between the audience and the work that I present on stage, especially when the audience have made an active choice to attend. This is central to my thinking when approaching any piece of 'new work', from conception (Idea: Research and its development)¹⁰¹¹, construction (Devising: story, and tone / style) and forward into performance and beyond (Test and reflect).

I have derived three key points or categories which frame my practice in relation to the 'audience', and in doing so I attempt to unify the 'audience' as a temporary community. These categories are in fact interdependent and work towards engaging audiences and their collective experience of 'liveness':

- Listening and responding
- Disruption
- Working towards a 'communal experience'

How does the 'play' and those performing it relate to and respond to an audience? The dynamic I pursue differs from the traditional view of the 'Sender' (performer) and the 'Receiver' (the audience) and is far more nuanced and fluid. The framework in which my work is operating is one in which there is a continual exchange of 'listening' and 'responding' in which both parties (audience and performer) are both 'Sender' and 'Receiver'. This idea is derived from the improvisatory principle of, 'Yes and ...' but is being applied as an additional layer on top of the 'play'. This allows for a very different prospect and enables the potential

¹⁰ See p. 46 of appendix 1, where ideas and research are discussed.

¹¹ See p. 65 of appendix 2, where ideas and research are discussed.

for the performance company to operate outside of the 'play' should the opportunity arise. It is this dynamic/potential which reminds the audience that this work is 'live' and responding to them.

The traditional theatre-goer is an individual with their own set of preconceived ideas about what they are going to watch, where they are watching it and how they might relate, interpret or participate with the work, directly or indirectly, knowingly or unknowingly. Besides 'Yes, and ...' another way in which I disrupt this established role is to 'make the familiar unfamiliar'. An example of both these techniques in action occurred in *Top of the World*, in which four audience members play the role of the 'press' reading aloud questions to the performers. These moments of the 'press' were active 'disruptions' and led to moments of spontaneity from the audience in regard to their interpretation of how to read aloud the pre-prepared questions. The audience often selected to 'characterise' the 'press' through the vocal tone (formal) and or the accents employed. This active choice taken by the audience was unforeseen but nonetheless added to the work. To extend the example, when a nervous audience member stumbled over the delivery of one of the questions, the performers had a choice to ignore it or to respond to the perceived mistake. This 'disruption' (perhaps 'happy accident' is better) led to an unexpected and spontaneous interaction between the audience member and the performers. The skilful manner in which this opportunity was incorporated into the work added to the experience for this particular audience; it was a reminder of the show's 'liveness' but also that everything and anything might be incorporated as part of the performance.

The playing in the moment of 'disruption' or 'listening and 'responding' to the offer is akin to how a 'clown' might play.¹² Although they are employed in a slightly different manner, the 'playing' of these 'shared moments' stems from the openness and spontaneity which helped conceive and create the work. The 'ownership' of the work by the creator/performer is integral in enabling this to occur. This does not mean that every 'moment' is or must be seized upon, as this would unbalance the work overall and be potentially damaging to the experience of the audience. But part of the devising director's role is to encourage a selection process by a company who have been trained accordingly.

These ideas thread their way into the set design, which attempts to link the audience and the work on stage. It both acts as a 'disruption' and attempts to encourage a 'communal experience'. The 'plays' primarily took place in venues with a 'black box' studio configuration, a neutral space in which any visiting company can perform. Although there is a sound rationale for this configuration (end on), its characteristic neutrality creates a particular dynamic, and thus, experience, for the audience. The question arises: how then do I frame this kind of space for an audience? This is especially important when you have the dominant factors, such as viewing from a similar vantage point, the architecture of the building is disguised (drapes) and the acoustic is neutralised. The lack of variation across theatre spaces unless altered does not enable surprise to occur for an audience. Very often audiences are already conversant with their local venue/space and or spaces of similar design/layout. To address the limitations of the black box studio, I have undertaken numerous initiatives in which the audience are asked to visually reappraise the space. An example of this is within *The Games* in which the white screens are configured to link the audience to the stage. This

¹² See p. 72 of appendix 2, where 'disruption' is discussed.

concave arrangement broke the square lines of the 'end on' space, creating an active dynamic between the audience and the work on stage.

Another way in which I have attempted to unify an audience is to incorporate a form of 'welcome' in each of the plays submitted. The use of direct address¹³ is not a conscious device I utilise in advance but is something that has emerged organically with the devising company. As Chris Goode explains:

We begin with some sort of acknowledgement of the space we share ... we restate the fundamental importance of liveness as a premise of our gathering: the liveness of being specifically here and precisely now, and actually together (2015: 70).

In acknowledging the audience, a bond is forged; true, this represents a minor 'disruption', but it importantly establishes the contract or the 'spirit' in which the evening will proceed. There is an understanding that this might form part of the work in performance, whether this be deliberately employed as noted above or via the 'happy accident'.

Another way (perhaps the most successful) I have discovered to unify an audience, is through song¹⁴, a technique I have employed in four of the plays submitted. Of course, I cannot categorically state that the audiences in each case were united; but from my observations watching and listening to an audience singing in unison, I suspect they were, however temporarily.

The success of this is dependent on establishing a contract with the audience. The type of invitation, if undertaken correctly, facilitates an environment in which the audience are encouraged to 'Play'¹⁵ – which is to say, to engage with the work on their terms.

The Roles of the Devising Director

¹³ See p. 74 of appendix 2, where 'direct address' is discussed.

¹⁴ See p. 82 of appendix 2, where 'communal singing' is discussed.

¹⁵ See p. 56 of appendix 1, where audience is discussed in relation to 'play'

I have identified several key skills for the devising director. To clarify: this means a director who does not receive additional support such as a dramaturge, an assistant director or a writer. Devising might appear organic, a process of trial and error, but in my own case I am attempting to create a structured environment that also has the space for spontaneity. As Turner recognises: 'Paradoxically, this seemingly free and open-ended process might require an even stronger sense of structural organization and overview than a production of a conventional play would demand' (Turner and Behrndt 2008: 171).

The following list is personal to myself; however, having worked with numerous directors in a devising process I have also drawn from the observations and experiences of individuals such as Paul Hunter, Glenn Noble and David Ottone.¹⁶

Skill Sets

- Understands genre and structure of plays (Dramaturge / Writer / Director)
- Understands story and its elements (Dramaturge / Writer)
- Can research an idea and recognise the starting points from which to create a play (Dramaturge / Writer)
- Can share a vision of the idea and proposed work and can facilitate this (Director / Dramaturge)
- Understands how to generate material through improvisation with a group of deviser actors (Side Coach¹⁷ / Director)

¹⁶ The artistic directors of, respectively, *Told By An Idiot*, Spike Theatre (1997-2009) and *Yllana*.

¹⁷ Side Coach is the term derived from the work of Viola Spolin, the role is to provoke, 'actions' from outside an improvisation.

- Can create exercises to address problems or open potential ideas (Side Coach / Director)
- Can capture, edit and write text, based on the improvisations of others (Writer / Dramaturge)
- Can document an ongoing process, capturing text, image and ideas (Dramaturge)
- Can recognise moments / discoveries made in a rehearsal room (Director / Dramaturge / Writer)
- Is fearless when structural problems arise (Dramaturge / Writer / Director)
- Has a lack of ego in terms of who did what and when in a process (Dramaturge / Writer / Director)
- Has an energy and passion to drive a project even when they are exhausted
- Can manage multiple elements with focus and clarity (Director)
- Can encourage and calm people's nerves as devising is scary for all concerned, especially the deviser / actors (Director)
- Can recognise and incorporate other ideas and theatrical forms and can create new ideas from them (Director / Dramaturge)
- Can be honest with themselves and the work they are creating (Writer / Director)
- Can take responsibility for decisions made (Director / Writer)
- Understand people and recognise their strengths and weaknesses (Director)
- Is not scared to make mistakes or take risks (Director / Writer)
- Cares

This list is not exhaustive, and I address and expand upon a number of these points later in this methodology, specifically within my own seven-step guide. The roles of the devisor-director are numerous (Side-Coach / Dramaturge / Writer / Director), interchangeable, fluid, and ultimately dependent on the situation and the timeframe. They are, moreover, constantly switching; I have therefore provided below a rudimentary overview of how the roles might change, and when these changes might occur during a four-week rehearsal period, I have also indicated broadly the level of importance of each.

- Week 1 – Side Coach / Dramaturge / Writer
- Week 2 – Side Coach / Dramaturge / Writer
- Week 3 – Writer / Dramaturge
- Week 4 – Director / Writer / Dramaturge

I have utilised traditional theatre-making terms here to indicate the different roles with which the devisor-director engages. This is because at present there is no useful definition of that particular role, and the categorisation of the devisor-director is as a result obliged to refer to established roles that are not fully adequate to the processes involved.

As devising-director one serves many masters; your own mood and manner can shape (and in fact alter) the mood of the room. I have found over the years that lowering my perceived status in the room is vital; the reason for this (as I expand on later) is that the onus is on the collective, not the supposed figure of authority, to solve and create. My role is to facilitate, identify connections, provoke ideas and ultimately to act as the eyes and ears of the audience.

I have developed a seven-step practical guideline for my own practice:

1. Playgrounds / Playmates;
2. Create Challenges to Overcome;
3. I Don't Have the Answers – We Have the Answers;
4. 'Own' the Work;
5. Show, Not Tell;
6. Defend your Choices;
7. If It Doesn't Work, Bin It;

These guidelines have been distilled from over twenty-five years of professional practice and twenty-five devised pieces of work. They provide for a creative, flexible context within which to develop work. It is important to emphasise that this is a broad set of guidelines in which fluidity is inbuilt; the individual elements are designed to be interchangeable throughout the creative process.

These guidelines enable – in fact, provoke – improvisation to occur; this is often the primary means whereby text development (and related elements, such as visual imagery) occurs within devised theatre, and as such, these have been an invaluable resource from which to draw. This does suggest that I have developed a *system* of devising, and this to a certain extent is true (although as mentioned previously each process is bespoke). Because I insist on leaving room for spontaneity, however, I will reject the above guidelines if they do not serve the purpose for which they were initially created.

The relationship between the creator (devisor) and the text generated (verbal and physical)¹⁸ is, I would argue, a subtle blend of the devisor's own personality (individual) and the subsequent performance persona (character) created within the process (framework). The work (text) is bespoke to those who generate it, and builds on the relative personality, training and strengths (and perhaps weaknesses) of the individual. This also includes the distinct physical and vocal mannerisms of the individual, and thus the material reflects the collective creators. The devisor actor is often operating in a similar framework as described by Louis Peacock:

For the clown performer, working in *Clown Theatre*, or as a *Clown Actor*, there are three levels in creating a performance (unlike the more common duality of the actor and the role). For the *Clown Performer*, the three elements can be identified as follows: the performer, the persona (the clown found within the performer) and the personage (the part played by the performer whilst within the clown state) (Peacock 2009: 31).

Research: Theory and Practice

I do not consider myself a traditional playwright, but I have spent considerable time attempting to understand dramatic structure and the mechanisms which make up a play, especially in relation to comedy theatre.

What becomes clear through an analysis of my own plays is that the work often stems from an emotional reaction. This might be a positive or a negative response; frequently it can be the result of a government or social change. These reactions become the catalyst to which I respond. The resulting plays are an artistic expression of those primary emotional reactions. My ideas or jumping-off points for devising are often drawn from the past, but the themes are often still resonant in the present. A re-examination of the past will often

¹⁸ See p. 50 of appendix 1, where generation of text is discussed.

reveal that, as a species, we repeat the same mistake; so, in many ways my work is a continued enquiry of what it means to be human.

An idea needs nurturing: this in turn requires research and identifying the potential structures, starting points, story, characters, provocations and so forth. It is here that my role as dramaturge emerges. Before entering the rehearsal room, a period of preparation (including a programme of research)¹⁹ is necessary, as it is vitally important that I understand the world that is about to be created. The research of each play within the proposed thesis is broadly similar and in many ways mirrors the questions a writer commencing a traditional 'authored' play might ask: does the world interest me? Who are the potential characters? Where and when is the potential story set and do these present interesting problems or add to its appeal? What is the action the potential characters try to overcome? And is the story relevant for today? In thinking about these questions I establish a working 'framework' for myself, using it to identify potential locations, characters, period and language. This is solely for myself, and I use it to produce a summary for the creative team, I undertake the responsibility of filtering the information in advance of the creative process – what is vital, what is relevant, what might be slightly offbeat but nonetheless provocative.

This is an editing process; however, I try to avoid making plotting or structural decisions in advance of the rehearsal/creative period. The reason for this is twofold: the whole company must have an agreed understanding of the structured environment (world of the play) and thus a vision of the possibilities for the work within this setting. This encourages ownership and shared responsibility for the work created; and secondly, I will deliberately create a series of challenges or restrictions, which the company and I must overcome, based

¹⁹ See p. 46 of appendix 1, where research and preparation is discussed.

on the proposed play structure. This idea of challenges is explored in more depth later during the methodology.

The devisors are working within a structured framework (the world of the play) from which they will improvise and generate verbal text. I recognise that this structured framework is a restriction of sorts, but it is employed very much as Spolin did in her work 'theme-scene'. Spolin would create a short scenario in which, the who, what, and the where, is given in advance of the improvisation. This idea very much mirrors my own framework; however, it is much more detailed and designed to create a full-length play as opposed to Spolin's primary concern which is 'focusing the individual performer – child, student or professional – very tightly onto the work at all moments during training in order not only to liberate, but also to *channel* that spontaneity' (Yarrow and Frost: 172).

Improvisation and Application

Ideas that are generated through improvisation are a catalyst for other ideas to be built. I work on the basis that the company owns the ideas which are generated; the sole reason for this is although you may be the initiator, it does not mean you dictate the idea and where it might proceed. This is everyone's responsibility.

Improvisation as a live performance and as an actor-training tool is now well established both in the UK and the USA. The impact of works such as Keith Johnstone's *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre*, and Viola Spolin's *Improvisation for Theater* cannot be underestimated regarding devised theatre practice. I have been influenced by each of these works, and I utilised both texts (adapting various exercises from each, for example) within my own practice. As I gained confidence and trust in my own theatre-making, I started to create exercises that were bespoke for individual processes. These exercises were designed to create

a provocation within the rehearsal room in order to explore or unblock a particular creative problem. What I continue to draw from is Johnstone's ideas of *free association* – sometimes represented as 'Yes, and ...' – and Spolin's 'who, what and where' technique. These principles complement each other, but there is also a degree of tension between them; in any event, they represent the dual bases from which I work with a company to develop an original work.

The principle of 'Yes, and ...' encourages ideas to be developed, and works to overcome or think past apparent blockages. This does not mean that anything goes – far from it – but it does enable ideas to have momentum. The first week or so is spent engendering the principle of 'Yes, and ...' and the related premise that any ideas are collectively owned. The environment within which improvised collaboration is taking place is extremely important to establish. I am looking to create a relaxed room but with a sense of concentration or 'predator mind' amongst the devisors. This is a phrase I encountered when working with actor, director and improviser Todd Stashwick. What he meant is that he devisor is hungry to consume, the senses are awakened very much like a cat stalking its prey, everything is on alert and responding to and in the context of the world created. This creative state is something that Frost and Yarrow also explore in *Improvisation for Drama* in which the work of Grotowski, Le Coq and Stanislavski are compared. They integrate the term *disponibilité* used by Le Coq and draw this conclusion:

Disponibilité sums up in a single term the condition improvisers aspire to. It offers a way of describing an almost intangible and nearly undefinable state of being: having at (or in) one's fingertips, and any other part of the body, the capacity to do and say what is appropriate, and to have the confidence to make the choice. It's a kind of total awareness, a sense of being at one with the context: script, if there be, actors, audience, theatre space, oneself and one's body (Frost and Yarrow 2007:196).

This creative state is something that I have experienced as a performer and witnessed as a devisor-director. The devisor director primarily manages this playful state; how you create it

is based on the devisors with whom you are working, but you can certainly disrupt this state if you push too hard or don't push hard enough. The consequence of either can be counterproductive, such as overloading the mind of the devisors, or conversely, the room switches off due to lack of stimulation. This is a difficult balancing act and judging the temperature of the room is a skill that needs to be developed over time. I have observed over the years that mornings are the best time to generate and explore new ideas, and that afternoon is the time to consolidate previous material. This means returning to material that has had time to be reflected on; reflection is an integral part of the filtering process and vital to make the best work possible. It is a chance to think, to improve, to extend the initial work and in many cases to reject it.

I will discuss the idea of rejection later within the methodology as often work is created and yet does not serve the story we are telling. This does not negate the work, it just means it is not right for now. Many ideas, scenes and characters that have been treated in this way have gone on to be incorporated in some way, shape or form at a later date as a result of what might be called a 'cross-pollination of processes'.²⁰

In advance, I will have developed a framework and identified the potential for what Spolin has described as the key to successful improvised scene work – that is: 'the who', 'the what' and 'the where'. This establishes for the performer:

- the 'who' (character and secondly relationship / status);
- the 'what' (action);
- the 'where' (location).

²⁰ See p. 58 of appendix 1, where an example of cross pollination is discussed.

The devisors and I will expand upon my basic framework, developing a scenic structure as we discover more through testing via improvisation. Within the plays, *Top of the World* and *A Christmas Carol*, 'the who' (characters) are known in advance, in the case of *The Games* and *Sink or Swim* they were discovered through a period of research and development; within *Hoof!* they are discovered in the moment of performance.

'The what' (action) is created in combination with the company led by myself and is predominantly based on the known factors from the research as well as the possible stories explored in advance (research and development period) and / or within the creation process.

'The where' (location) is usually selected by myself. The period selected will also often delineate language, its use and vocal patterns. This is especially apparent in *Top of the World* and *A Christmas Carol*. The rootedness of the time period through language, however, does not relate to the rest of the plays submitted. The use of language was less of a factor due to either its construction and or its improvisatory nature. This is the only element that is fixed in advance of creation, and I acknowledge that it is non-collaborative. This is a result of the process / time-frame that is required to enable work to be booked into venues.

This principle creates a supportive framework and is designed to release spontaneous creativity. As Frost and Yarrow note,

[the] 'who/where/what' discipline helps to remove actors' anxieties and blocks. It gives the performer a reassuring and familiar structure with which to operate and insists that the creativity keep within the bounds of the initial idea. It's another way of taking the pressure off, without losing genuine spontaneity (Frost & Yarrow, 2007: 168).

I use the concept of 'Theme Scene' as a tool to create text. Although I create an initial framework from which we work, this is revised and refined and within the first few days bears little relation to where it started. This process is repeated multiple times, refining and developing primarily 'the who' and 'the what'. I have latterly come to realise the limitations

of the above principle, specifically in relation to ‘the who’, and have subsequently expanded this by clearly defining what this means for the improviser, this has become C.R.A.P (Character, relationship, action and place).

My Devising Guide

Playgrounds

I describe the environment of the devising rehearsal room as a playground. This atmosphere does not happen by accident, however; the environment must be fostered. To facilitate this a series of mental and physical processes must be put in place. It has been said, for example, that the room defines the mood; therefore the work undertaken in a room *without* natural light is significantly different to that *with* natural light. The impact of the rehearsal space upon the individual can vary, but the conclusion I have drawn regarding my own devising practice is that the outside world must be allowed into the process. The stimulus from observing passers-by or a bird flying past momentarily breaks the concentration of the individual and these short interventions create space to think, to daydream. The writer Neil Gaiman touches on this when he writes that

[you] get ideas from daydreaming. You get ideas from being bored. You get ideas all the time. The only difference between writers and other people is we notice when we're doing it (Neil Gaiman, 2017: np).

Gaiman’s quote suggests he is making active choices about ‘ideas’ and their development. This is the process I am seeking in my own devising; I am both listening and responding to the ‘idea/s’, the needs of the source material and the response / input of the creative team. In doing so I am building one idea upon another, consciously refining and revising work. What is not present in Gaiman’s quote is the element of ‘intuition’, and how this figures:

Within the improvisational process used by theatre companies across the various types of devising practice, there is a remarkable repetition of the idea of intuition as a structuring element of that process (Heddon & Milling, 2004: 10).

The rehearsal room will have an area in which the research is available to all, and the reason for this is that it allows participants to dip in and out of the research and provoke new thought at any given moment. More importantly it acts as a kind of well from which to draw faith. I mention this because devising is about supporting and managing uncertainty; there is no play, there is no script, there are ideas and in four weeks' time, the actors will be performing in front of a paying audience. Although recognising and managing this anxiety is important, it should not define the process; otherwise the work will reflect this.

Playmates

The recruitment of the creative team is vital in order to ensure that a variety of skill sets is present in the room. As mentioned earlier the anxiety of creating a brand-new play can be something that hinders a process, and therefore I have always employed people who have some experience of devising or improvisation. The reason for this is that they have at least experienced this feeling of working towards something which is yet unknown.

The skills brought into a room by the creative team are important, but those who contribute from outside of the room can be just as impactful. Touring can be tough and monotonous, and this must be taken into consideration. In addition, I have also looked at performers who, because of circumstances, may be more open to change and challenging themselves. Over many years, the key characteristics I look for in devisors and creative team are:

1. Generosity – happy to share themselves;
2. A willingness to challenge the ideas of others and to defend their own;

3. Other interests – for example, painting, a martial art, Buddhism;
4. Happiness to show off and have fun;
5. Care and consideration – for the work, the process and the team.

It will be noticed on this list that performance skills do not (yet) feature. Of course, an performer's skill set is important, but only secondary at this stage in comparison with their personality. The essential skills of a deviser that I have noted over the years are:

1. Make others look good
2. Can generate material individually and in partnership
3. Can generate ideas – structure, character, story, visual and physical
4. Relaxed
5. Curious
6. Playful

Create Challenges to Overcome

The starting point for the devised shows on which I've worked are the ideas that emerge during the initial research period. This leads to asking the question: how best to serve those ideas? This will often be through exploring new combinations of theatrical forms or practices and as such I will deliberately create a series of challenges which I and the company must overcome. This intervention is a deliberate contribution to develop the work in the rehearsal room as advocated by Turner and Behrndt in their book, *Dramaturgy and Performance*: 'the devising process is open-ended, a major contribution could be the identification of tangible and practical strategies for developing the work, particularly at the beginning of a process' (Turner and Behrndt 2008: 173).

Jacques Lecoq developed a similar process with his students, employing what he termed the *via negativa* (the negative way). My application differs in the sense that it is not primarily employed as a learning tool; however, the outcomes are similar in that it provokes creativity, as noted by John Wright;

Lecoq uses the *via negativa* to manipulate creative energy. Sometimes he knows exactly what he wants his students to find and sometimes he uses it as strategy to generate urgency; an atmosphere of white-hot discussion and experiment... (Wright in Chamberlain and Yarrow, 2002: 73).

The 'challenges' allow for interpretation, reinterpretation, exploration, rejection and risk-taking. This is a form of artistic agenda to which the company including myself will respond. What it encourages is being open to the 'moment/s' that emerge spontaneously and then the decisions thereafter to incorporate them or not. This state also runs parallel to the more traditional theatre-making practice of structure, story, characters and performance style. The two styles collide, mix and generate an active environment from which work will emerge. It is, in the term I introduced above, a 'playground'.

The challenges I set are often overt and shared with the company in any given process. Such challenges offer a secondary benefit, moreover, as they contribute to the development of my own theatre-making and enquiry, thus ensuring the evolution of my own theatrical practice, I am aware of my own skill set and at various points, I have sought expertise in terms of recruitment or mentoring to support and develop this.

I Don't Have the Answers, We Have the Answers

The first day of any devising process is scary for all concerned. People don't know each other, there is no show, and the clock is ticking. My role is to lay out a broad set of guidelines for the four weeks, and part of that is acknowledging that I am as much in the

dark as they are. I have ideas, but the answers we will find together. I place myself on the same level as the devisors, because we are at the same point in the process and we must move together as one. This means that the devisors are not expecting me to solve everything, and this is vital as the process already demands of them engagement, imagination and more importantly ownership. This is key in terms of fostering a sense of collective responsibility amongst the creative team; this is also a statement of fact. This statement sets out the contract between myself and the creative team and that together we will discover the answers between us.

Clearly, I understand the world and the story we are about to tell, and I have taken some decisions in advance – relating to the set, for example, or to the creative team. As mentioned previously, I will not make decisions about structure in advance; I will however have ideas about the possibilities available to us collectively. I am aware that this could cloud the room through bias, and thus I try to present the research and stories to the group in as factual way a way as possible. I provide no agenda for where the work might lead. The first few days are important to establish the research in the minds of the creative team as quickly as possible; this means the team can start to make connections to the proposed material. What are their immediate reactions to the information? What are people’s thoughts? Does the world interest them? If not, why not? What *does* interest them?²¹ Listening to this shared thought processes and noting people’s honest reactions to this information is important. These initial thoughts are noted and are displayed around the room. These notes act as a constant reminder and a source of inspiration to which we can return; they are added to and evolve as the process progresses. These are the facts, the potential characters and the

²¹ See p. 49 of appendix 1, where a diagnostic exercise is discussed to establish interest from the devising company.

possible stories of the world we are looking to create, and thus by displaying them I am looking to encourage and stimulate ideas amongst the creative team.

Along with the creative team, I will have many questions to which, hopefully, solutions will be found as the process evolves. The first idea might be fantastic, but it is important to keep questioning the material created; does it really serve the story? Does it represent us as a collective? Does it work? Can it work? Will it work? This constant intellectual enquiry is important to ensure that we are making the best possible decisions with the knowledge that we have in the short time available to us. The excitement of unlocking the puzzle together with a group of artists in a room is where the joy and fun comes from.

'Own' the Work

Ownership of the work is firstly about empowering the devisors in the room. As mentioned above, this is a collective endeavour and I have found that people react positively to this responsibility. I am asking people to invest their time, energy and creative skills in a play and thus, if you are responsible, you will take pride in what you contribute to the process. The first part of this collective ownership is the creation of fifteen-story points; this acts as a potential structure from which to start creating. This becomes the spine from which we will work; this is fashioned initially as a linear narrative structure, which incorporates the principles of classic story structure. This can subsequently alter as we discover more about the relationships and actions that take place within the story, but the principle of ownership is established. This is one of the things that distinguishes devising from traditional theatre; one is structural responsibility, and one is an interpretative responsibility. They are both creative but they are different and this feeling is both personal and collective and I believe that this translates on to the stage.

Sometimes accidents may happen in rehearsal, and indeed on stage – something breaks, someone falls over, and the collective team might share in a moment of spontaneous laughter. I have always encouraged the devisors in rehearsal and on stage to recognise, acknowledge and, if possible, incorporate such moments. In this shared moment, the veil of pretence is dropped, revealing the actor and the audience sharing in a moment of suspension, a world outside the play. The happy accident, or spontaneous discovery, is not something that emerges by chance; however, it cannot be forced either, it happens in a moment of flux. I have very carefully not used the word ‘mistake’ here, the reason being that there are no mistakes, merely opportunities that are yet to be discovered. This principle is derived from improvised theatre practice, in which anything can be incorporated; this is based on the notion that there is no right or wrong, just acceptance and incorporation. This mindset is very liberating and encourages everyone in the room not to be cowed by risk or failure. The recognition of this, as Turner explains, is key; ‘On a devising process, anything and everything can be significant and it takes a creative eye to be able to pick up on the potential and the poetry of what is going on in the space’ (Turner and Behrndt, 2008: 176). When operating in this atmosphere it allows for ‘play’ to occur without fear.

Show, Not Tell

The principle of ‘show, not tell’ developed whilst working with Paul Hunter, currently Artistic Director of *Told by an Idiot*. In 1998, he was charged with creating a new piece of work for *Hope St. Ltd.*’s physical theatre programme in which I was a participant. This was an ensemble piece, influenced by the writing of Flannery O’Connor. The company had created a structure and a hierarchy of relationships within which to create. However, the devising of the first draft was written non-verbally. This was new to me and something which generated many ideas as

both a performer and subsequently as a devisor director. The purpose of working in such a manner was to free the devisor of improvising text as this can be a barrier to creation. Improvising text is a different mindset, one in which the devisor might be led to ignore their body and their environment. It can also foster self-censorship and self-doubt: Are my ideas clever enough? Does this make sense? I don't want to make a mistake. The context for the work is all-important and as young theatre makers, Paul removed this pressure from us. It allowed him to efficiently sketch out the movement of the play without the distraction of text. I have not directly applied this principle in the same way, but the notion of 'show not tell' has developed in my practice. This practice was honed during my time working with deaf artist, Ramesh Meyyappan²² whose work is primarily for non-hearing audiences. I have developed the list below as a result of these experiences:

1. Don't say what you are doing – just do it
2. Create the picture first – composition / semiotics / proxemics
3. Character development starts with the body
4. Actors need actions, not concepts
5. Actors react in an environment

As with any 'rules' these are amenable to bending, with the results often being incongruous. I have often seen number one used a lot; sometimes a telephone might ring on stage, for example, at which point Actor One states 'I'll get that' when a far more natural response would be just to pick it up and answer.

²² This Side up – 2005 and Gin and Tonic and Passing Trains - 2007

Number two is slightly more complicated; there are numerous books written about the audience's response to the action on stage. My internal rule is that the entire theatre, including the auditorium, has meaning; where you place things onstage has meaning and everything interconnects or relates in some way.

These pictures are ever-changing and how they change in transition dictates the tone of the work in development; in many ways, they are the most important part of my practice. Transitions can create the momentum or set the mood of the play or indeed break it. Too often I still see work in which transitions are not considered a vital part of theatre-making. The scene work can be impressive, but inattention to transition can drain all the momentum, energy and tension that has been generated. The actors have to pick up a new scene and create new energy, thus testing an audience's patience and attention.

Number three suggests that the body is the starting place for character creation. This does not exclude intellectual reflection; but how someone moves can never be replicated by sitting down and discovering it in a notebook. The physical exploration and development of a character is key. I will often side-coach the actors from the outside and ask them to make instant decisions based on the questions I pose, for example, where is the weight held in the body? Does this alter how they walk? Where does this character lead from? Are they noseey? How do they stand? Where and what do they do with their hands? Are they gestural? This process realigns the body for the actor, creating an imbalance which they must learn to manage. This breaks the actor's normal movement – their internal rhythms – and encourages them to observe things anew; it also releases potential from which to build upon. This runs counter to the psychological processes often employed in traditional actor training, for example, in the methods associated with Stanislavski, Meisner, Adler, and so forth. The

emphasis is very often on the voice, gesture and facial expression, and this training complements the dominance of naturalistic drama.

Number four is a note primarily for myself. Directors will often try to explain a point or clarify an idea by talking about it. This is often not very helpful as each member of the company will have a varying understanding of what is meant. The potential consequence of this is that we have a rehearsal room which is unevenly informed, which in turn can lead to confusion. Confusion can be useful at the right moment, but often it can cause communication breakdown, undermining the ethos of the collective, rapidly leading to frustration and wasted time. In some cases it can fracture the entire process, and this can be difficult to recover from. I will often limit what I say to no more than a minute; I will take time to rehearse what I wish to communicate in order to ensure that I am clear about what I mean. If I cannot do this clearly, I will often create a game/exercise to create actions for the devisors. Through this discovery process, I hope to clarify meaning for all. Often a consequence of this intervention will lead to new discoveries, and this again may be added to the mix.

Number five relates to the environment created and the playing with the set in the rehearsal room. I have already explained earlier in the methodology the role and function of the rehearsal room, but this point relates to when the work extends to the intended performance space. Once the work moves into a theatre, the actors will be potentially unfamiliar with the new space in which they find themselves. Even if they have been to a specific theatre before, things will be slightly different as venues continually develop. This takes time to orientate; the playing space is often bigger than that used for rehearsals; the sound and lights are often not configured in the same way. This means that changes must be made – minor, perhaps, but changes nonetheless. It is my job to make the transition as seamless as possible, to which end I will often arrive in a theatre in advance of the touring

team. This gives me the opportunity to assess the space from the audience's viewpoint, and to find ways to optimise the experience for both the performers and the audience. The quirks of individual theatres produce their own challenges, choices and compromises.

These decisions will impact on the work, but what I am searching for is the set of compromises which will best serve the audience and performance team. A simple, walking of the space will reveal areas which might be problematic or offer potential. The sightlines, entrance from a raised stage area, to the flat on a studio floor, entrances to the stage, where the seating is placed in relation to the stage, the acoustic for the voice and music all reveal something.

What must be accepted by all who tour is that the play will change daily. Too often there is a reluctance to acknowledge this, because individual actors, or sometimes entire companies, are desperate to recreate the rehearsal room. I view this as a lost opportunity to react to the uniqueness of a space: if you accept the challenge, the work will continually stay fresh and evolve. Too often with long-running touring shows, this is something that is forgotten: how you respond to the above factors communicates to an audience, it reveals thought, feeling and a connection to the audience and the play.

Defend your Choices

There will be points within any process where a problem or disagreement occurs, but this is not something to fear. In fact, I actively encourage debate, as it is healthy and ensures that all sides are considered. These moments of flux are useful to explore or explode an idea or a problem that needs solving. This can be undertaken in many ways depending on the circumstances; for example, if it is a staging issue this can be resolved through flipping the idea in order to come at it with a fresh perspective. If the issue is a structural one, I have often

asked the company to work individually in the first instance, partly so the individual thinks through all the ramifications of a change or solution and to avoid undue influence from others in the room. We will then reconvene to share our individual thoughts and possible solutions; we listen without comment until everyone has engaged with each offer. What often occurs is that the space to think is the catalyst for the solution; we will then try out each offer and make decisions on these as a group. This can be time-consuming, but the investment is worth it because every member has had the opportunity to contribute, and this relates directly to the ethos of the playground and the idea of playmates. Defending your choices does not mean ignorantly defending something for the sake of it; clearly, not all decisions work, but the principle engenders unity.

If It Doesn't Work, Bin It

The brutal truth is that a lot of text and visual material will not be used as it simply does not serve the story or the way the play is progressing. This does not mean that this is wasted time or effort as often an idea can be built upon or extended to take the process somewhere else; it is important, nonetheless, to know when to let something go.

4. Authorship

Authorship is a particularly vexed question in what might be called the 'collaborative' arts (theatre, television, film, certain forms of music, etc.). None of the five plays forming the basis of this submission would not have existed without collaboration, but the initial idea and subsequent research undertaken to develop the structure, the funds raised to make the work, the tour booking, dramaturge, provocation, directing, marketing materials and numerous areas of endeavour – all these shaped the work beyond what took place in a rehearsal room

for four weeks. The DNA of my theatre-making runs through each play and as such I will argue that I remain the primary author of the work, or, to borrow an analogous term from film theory, the *auteur*.

The relationship between collective theatre-making and the necessary yet problematic role of a director figure is indicative of a tension involved in devised theatre practices. As Deirdre Heddon and Jane Milling identify in their book *Devising Performance: A Critical History*, 'the director's function within devising practices 'complicate[s] the notion of non-hierarchical work of democratic participation' (2006: 16). Consequently, I have a keen interest in the interchangeable roles of the theatre-maker, the director, the producer and the author within a collaborative environment.

An example of this took place during my undergraduate degree at LJMU. A group was tasked with adapting the short novel, *Fontamara* by Ignazio Silone. Present in the room was a playwright who took the ideas and text generated through improvisation and shaped it into a script. The work was subsequently restaged a number of years after and the tutor who led the process received an indignant email from the playwright claiming the work as theirs. This playwright disregarded the collective effort from which the play text was generated, thus downplaying their effort, skill and creativity in the creation of this particular theatrical event.

5. Conclusion

In the opening of my thesis, I provide a context for the exploration of the deviser-director role within a devised theatre practice with reference to the play texts that were produced as part of that practice I examine the scholarly works which have documented the post-war historical evolution of devised theatre, raising a number of issues in regard to the validity of these works due to methodological flaws in how companies / artists have been observed. I also identify

the importance placed on 'improvisation' within devised practice – but throughout this exploration have not discovered a clear explanation or clear examples of its use in practice. This situation has offered me the opportunity to address the potential gaps in knowledge via this thesis.

I identify the specific skills a deviser-director must have; these are drawn from my own practice and that of those I have observed over an extended period. In doing so I identify four core areas of practice utilising traditional theatre terms to aid in the reader's understanding and offer a clear sense of how these roles switch across a four-week rehearsal period. By employing traditional theatre terms of employing the traditional theatrical terms of dramaturg, director, side coach, writer I am enabled to explain to the reader the numerous roles that a deviser-director must adopt in the creation of a new play. There are differences between the interpretative act of directing a pre-existing play text and that of the deviser-director; however, it is important to acknowledge that each have a shared history, and while they are not hugely distinct from each other, there are notable differences in how these skills are applied within creative processes.

I adapt the notion of the 'auteur' from film theory but acknowledge the contribution made by the other creatives in the generation of a new play text. All of the work has been instigated by myself and as such there is a consistent through line in regards to the starting points, research, recruitment, aesthetic, themes, documentation and the visual and verbal languages employed. This then suggests that the deviser-director can be viewed as the 'author' of the resultant work having assembled the performance text (verbal and visual) through the improvisations of others. The term 'author' is tricky in a both a legal and a moral

sense as it does ask difficult questions of ownership when at its heart devising is a wholly collaborative process.

I raise the ideas of 'liveness' and how the 'audience' are responded to by those who create devised theatre. The idea of 'space' and the 'relationship' between the stage and audience is, I suggest, a suggest a wholly different one to that of traditional theatre. This is not to suggest that this is wholly unique, but the question asked by by devisors is - a unique performance contract established with an audience. This is created by the contract that is established with an audience. I explain how moments of spontaneity are incorporated into the work, asserting that this stems from the type of creation, acknowledging and allowing 'happy accidents' to emerge and embracing this with an audience. Again, this reinforces the notion of 'liveness' and what potentially sets devised theatre apart from traditional theatre.

What has become clear in undertaking this thesis is that each process also reflects my development as a devising director and the learning therein. As John Wright writes in the preface to his book, *Why is That So Funny? A Practical Exploration of Physical Comedy*:

I rarely approach two different projects in the same way. I use games to make things happen in the rehearsal room. If I don't like what is happening, I change the game so I'm continually inventing or devising new ways to make things happen as the work develops. For me the work is never fixed, it's continually evolving (2006: xvii).

This declaration by Wright echoes my own continued exploration of what theatre can be, how it can be viewed and produced collectively. Wright acknowledges that he does have 'precepts' which frame his practice, but how he operates within them is the area of interest, for as he writes: 'There isn't a "right way" or a "wrong way"; there are only differences. Differences are interesting. Differences are creative' (2006: xvii).

Duška Radosavljević observes in her book, *Theatre-Making Interplay Between Text and Performance in the 21st Century* that devising should be from her viewpoint considered as an historical case study. She suggests that because there are various forms of devising which existed prior to the twentieth century and then latterly from the mid-20th century that this makes a case. Framing devising in this manner suggests that it is fixed, that it no longer exists, and it is limited to a specific cultural period. The argument she makes, although valid does not consider the fact that devised theatre practice continues to evolve. I would argue that the skills, forms and application of devising continues to evolve, and therefore the practice could perhaps it could be categorised with slightly more finesse and nuancing.

I believe that I have identified several areas in several areas in relation to the practice of devising which, from the either the practitioner's or the audience's perspective, could be usefully considered further. As suggested earlier in the thesis, perhaps ethnography represents the most promising academic approach. Undertaking this thesis and reflecting at length about the practical processes relating to devising, has been truly illuminating, and has enabled me to reconsider my own theatre-making profile. This is exciting and thinking further about the practicalities of theatrical creativity represents the next stage of research for myself, and hopefully others.

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7. Appendices:

Appendix one

This case study focuses on the final play *Top of The World* in relation to the key processes of devising/writing, directing, rehearsing, and performing. I draw upon my own experience to examine the role of the devisor-director – in particular, his (my) use of research to develop the more traditional dramaturgical categories of character, structure, text, and *mise en scène*. I go on to describe a particular methodology in which challenges are identified and addressed using improvisation in a devised setting. Focus is given to the development of a relationship with the audience as a crucial element of this theatrical experience. Finally, I shall identify the key learning processes utilised in this instance and take them forward for deployment in future productions.

Top of the World

Top of the World (TOTW) is the culmination of research during, a four-week devising process. At the time of writing, there were no other theatrical works about the ascent and conquest of Everest, although there were numerous plays charting the tragic attempt by Mallory and Irvine.

In 1953 beekeeper Edmund Hillary, porter Tenzing Norgay and expedition leader John Hunt (along with a team of 378 men and women) began a gruelling and treacherous ascent to conquer the summit of the world's highest mountain: Everest.

Top of the World is a comic play based on the true-life events of the conquest of Everest and would be defined as a hybrid of biographical theatre with clown theatre elements. This emerged organically as the situations we discovered both real and imagined lent themselves to this style of performance and can be viewed in a similar vein to Nola

Rae's non-verbal clown plays based on figures from history²³. As a result, I wrote a re-telling of the story behind one of the twentieth century's greatest achievements.

From the mid-90s onwards there was a proliferation of plays in which the central protagonist was real and placed in either a representation/reflection of the real world or one which is imagined. Biographical theatre emerged as a specific genre, however, the incorporation of real-life stories (individual or collective) on stage has been around for much longer. The emergence or defining of this genre of theatre came about as the examination or biographical representation of the celebrity on stage or screen gained popularity and has become far more prevalent as audiences became familiar with the form and with the biographical stories of others. I had become increasingly interested in 'personal story' and felt this was an ideal opportunity to extend this research into this theatrical practice.

The stimulus for the work came about via several sources, the first of which was the 1953 Oscar-nominated documentary entitled *The Conquest of Everest*. This film documented the story of the bravery and technological advances being tested for the first time in the field (windproof nylon, shrink-wrapped food, and lightweight aluminium



ladders). And the second was a *Radio 4* documentary about the issues faced by the filmmakers before filming. The then owned French *Sony* organisation refused to release the pre-ordered film stock at the behest of *The Rank organisation*. The British documentary makers,

²³ Elizabeth based on Queen Elizabeth the 1st, Mozart based on the composer of the same name and Exit Napoleon pursued by rabbits is based on the histories of Napoleon and Hitler

Countryman Films were a small film company and *Rank* understood the significance of what they were attempting to do and thus looked to nefariously steal the project from them. This led to a diplomatic incident in which the British government persuaded their French counterparts to exert pressure on *Sony* and release the film stock.

From these sources, two things piqued my interest. First, what type of personality risks their life to become the first? The odds of making the ascent were slim, in fact, the odds of dying were much greater. I subsequently read extensively around the conquest and specifically researched the stories via the autobiographies of the main real-life persons – Edmund Hillary, Tenzing Norgay and expedition leader, Colonel John Hunt.



Although the Everest expedition was a triumph, the things I drew from this were that teamwork and meticulous planning were the real heroes. Despite this, I discovered there were some key oversights and inconsistencies within these books, and this enabled the opportunity to examine and explore these further. The second thing I discovered was that the year 1953 was culturally significant for many reasons: the FA cup was broadcast in colour for the first time and the coronation of Elizabeth II coincided with the summit of Everest. These events built on the impact of the Festival of Britain held two years prior and marked the re-emergence of Britain after the Second World War, signalling

the beginning of Britannia finding her feet again. The drama of the personal and the additional layer of the stories in documenting the event led me to become convinced a play could be made from this enquiry.

The story of Everest also mirrored the risk-taking and challenge I was proposing for the company and myself. The company's work up until this point had been based on original stories and might be best defined as 'gentle comedies' which were predominantly 'action based'. Spike had become known for a kind of 'popular physical comedy' theatre. This was successful with audiences and venues alike, but as a company, I felt we were starting to become repetitious or at worst stagnant. Part of this change of direction was also to collaborate with devisors and creatives who were new to the company; they were all familiar with the company's work and had previous experience of working in a devised context. There are many examples of companies who have radically changed direction and subsequently suffered as a result, losing the faith of venues and audiences alike. I was aware of the potential impact of this decision but felt it was a calculated risk worth taking. It is clear in hindsight that this notion of 'risk' was primarily my own, challenging myself and working in a fashion which forced me to stay active and learn something new.

Research and planning

What I realised throughout the research period via the available documentation was that the tone of each artefact was very dry and a product of its times. The autobiographies of the key characters within the play offered multiple viewpoints on the same event and this led to some interesting contradictions which is something I utilise within the play. The sterile personalities portrayed in print and on film lacked humanity, a sense of fun and if

solely drawn upon the tone of the play would reflect this. This led me to question the material, its representation of Hillary, Hunt and Norgay, and ask: what was missing?



There is a moment in the documentary film when the climbing team floats down a small river on inflatable beds. I realised that the creation and the climbing team mirrored each other in age; this was a group of young men on the greatest adventure of their lives. This led us to explore what personal detail was missing, and this subsequently became the imagined sections of the work, such as Norgay's reflection on the passing of his son and Hillary's musings on his girlfriend.

Before the rehearsal process commenced, I sent each deviser the timeline of key events prior to and after the ascent. I also sent them the individual autobiographies of the person/character they would be playing/representing, in this instance, Edmund Hillary, Tenzing Norgay and expedition leader John Hunt. Each deviser was asked to prepare a short story from the information they had received. I encouraged them to focus on something small, rather than summarising the life of the individual. The reason to start in this manner was to ascertain what piqued their interest, how they presented the information, and how they might approach representing this real person. The devisors illustrated both the physical and mental traits of each; this created a snapshot of the person from which the deviser actor could draw on or react to. This diagnostic allowed me to work out how best to serve the creative team/devisors and the story in terms of

the provocations or exercises I generated. This is not something I had utilised before, but it certainly proved fruitful in generating starting points in advance of the creation period and addressing the issue of how certain challenges could be overcome. The overarching and most obvious challenge I faced was how do you create a play when an audience already knows that they had succeeded in conquering Everest.

Provoking and facilitating the creative process

The central question raised above formed the basis in how I approached the creative process. All the challenges below were a response to this, as mentioned in the section, 'Devising: My Practice', I will create a series of challenges prior to a period of Research and Development (R and D) and interrogate them during this period. Dependent on this outcome, these challenges are either reimagined or taken directly forward into the creation/rehearsal period. This is the only piece of work that did not undertake an R and D period and as such the challenges were developed in advance. These were to become:

- Representations of real persons
- Relationship to audience (interactive / participatory)
- Perspectives (personal)
- Risk – artistically, personally, and physically
- Technology

The representation or perspectives of these real people were important. I was keen that we did not create impressions of them, instead, I wanted to capture and express the spirit of these people. The discovery and development of character was something that I concentrated on early in the rehearsal process and was drawn from the diagnostic exercise as previously mentioned. I had decided quite early on that the structure could

reflect the journey and this subsequently became the case. Each scene in the main narrative is based on the final eight stages of the ascent from the base camp to the summit. These scenes were then explored physically and verbally through a series of tasks identified via the research, such as setting up the base camp, cooking, working at altitude, etc. These were improvised and would last a considerable amount of time (an hour +). I had not worked like this before, the stimulus to do so came from participating in a



workshop in 1998 with *Ridiculusus*.

Participants were introduced to the creative processes of the company, this included improvising over an extensive period of time (4 hours +). The experience led to a number of

observations, notably that the process allowed for exploration without boundaries, enabled boredom, risk-taking and as a result developed character and worlds which could then be subsequently explored. I could understand the benefits of allowing discoveries to be made over a much longer period. This said, my application of this practice differed in that I limited the time and would sometimes intervene, acting as, a 'side coach'. Sitting out of the work allowed me to see potentials that the devisors had not. This was not always the case as side coaching can break the mood or inhibit the improvisation, so I was very careful about intruding. However, the ability to guide them within the improvisation led to several breakthroughs which were later developed. The exploration of the physical aspects of the climb, the hierarchy, the relationships between the climbing team enabled a palette of ideas and physical language to develop. There was no specific written outcome during the early improvisations, but we did note the beginnings of emergent characters and potential structures. Each

prospective character's story and scenes were given specific titles and acted as a form of shorthand for the team, for example, 'the team see the mountain'. These early discoveries became the seedbed upon which everything was built. Most importantly, it developed a bond of trust and established a working methodology between the company.

Developing the narrative and structure

The text within the play was developed through the working practices described above. Extended improvisations were discussed, and the devisors would note things that each other had done, this was particularly useful in drawing out where the process needed to proceed or where the potential story lay. Each potential scene was explored further, this became an ongoing process of filtering, and dependent on the outcome these scenes were either kept or not. Once I had decided what scenes were to be retained, we returned and reinvestigated them again in greater depth. In my role as side coach, I would externally provoke the work. At this point of refining the text, I would often stop improvisations, the purpose of which was to remind the team of information or previous moments they had discovered. I still allowed for new moments to be discovered but the focus was on creating, capturing, and transcribing into a draft script.

This draft would be further refined/rewritten, and this was undertaken by myself, any edits would be worked on in consultation with the devising team. The revision of all the material (structure, text, and image) was an ongoing process and was completed at the end of week three. It was at this point that the current structure and narrative was finalised, my role subsequently moved from dramaturge, facilitator, writer to that of the director. For the purpose of clarity, I have broken the play into three parts and explored this below:

- Main narrative – (Timeframes) Interactive, non-interactive and participatory;
- Preshow – Improvised;
- Framework – (Beginning and end) interactive.

The main narrative is episodic, interspersed with the use of interactive, non-interactive and participatory elements. Running through the main narrative I also employ the use of multiple timeframes. The use of timeframes emerged from the process, stemming from the question of how do we humanise or capture the ‘spirit’ of the real people we were



portraying. This device enabled me to reflect both the deeply personal and public thoughts of the men and in doing so create a much more rounded picture of the world and the characters portrayed on stage. This was the means to address the question I pose much earlier, as in how I/we create a play when the

audience knows the outcome of the story.

A specific example of how the text directly addresses this is within the opening scene.

Hillary: Does anybody actually know anything about the expedition of fifty-three?

Nothing? Well, they got to the summit.

The writing both illustrates the type of interaction between the actors and audience (direct address) but also establishes the form and tone of the play. It was constructed in such a manner as to offer a series of shortcuts to enable the audience to gain a vast amount of knowledge and foretelling of what they were about to see.

The opening scene (appendix one) also acts as a framing device as indicated by the Actors' use of their real names and the change of playing style. The use of direct address by the three actors or 'performance - personas' establishes and builds upon the work undertaken during the preshow element. This enabled several things to happen for the audience:

1. The type of interaction between the audience and the actors – they are safe and won't be made to look foolish;
2. The play is accessible to all;
3. The space will be disrupted;
4. The space will be fully utilised;
5. They introduce who they will be playing;
6. Representing the characters of Hillary, Hunt and Norgay;
7. The presentation style and time frames.

By establishing these key ideas with the audience, I was able to work towards and continue to develop trust, establish a style, and create an environment in which the audience is encouraged to play and ultimately sing with the performance company at the end of the play. Without these steps taken, this would have appeared forced and the success of everyone singing would have been unlikely.

The text was generated during an improvisation in which each prop was attributed to a member of the climbing team. Through our research, we drew out information for each key member of the extended climbing team. Each prop selected represented the role of the person it was assigned to. For example, the oxygen tanks were assigned to Thomas Bordillion the man responsible for their development. The props acted as a

visual aid for the devisors during the improvisation. The initial improvisation lasted over an hour and was packed with detail. This scene was explored further following the



process previously described. The method employed for this scene was accomplished by placing a clock on the material, a technique often used in games-based improvisation. The clock is reduced slowly down, and the devisors subsequently select the essential information they decide is important to

complete the task. The application of this operates in a fashion similar to Charles Marowitz's work on 'actions', however, in this instance it was used as a tool for the drafting of the text.

The opening scene builds from the work undertaken during the pre-show element. The interactive/audience participatory elements I was proposing differed from my previous work and are fraught with risk. As Gareth White writes:

There are few things in the theatre that are more despised than audience participation. The prospect of audience participation makes people fearful; the use of audience participation makes people embarrassed, not only for themselves, but for the theatre makers who choose to inflict it (2013: 1).

The challenge that emerged during this creative period was to learn how we could genuinely incorporate these interactive/participatory elements without it appearing or feeling like it was 'forced'. I drew upon my experience of watching *Animal Crackers* - specifically their use and version of a pre-show performance. I also utilised ideas developed by *Frantic*, in regard to 'claiming the space'. This was achieved through the development of the actors'

'performance - persona' a heightened version of themselves, akin to that of the street performer. I was also keenly aware of the type of 'invitation' we are making to the participant. As explained by White:

Like most performances, those that include audience participation usually involve a lot of preparation. Like most performances they cannot be considered to be fully realised until there is an audience present to watch, listen and appreciate, and to interact. But the quantity and quality of the interaction that is needed to realise audience participation is different to that which is needed to complete a more conventional performance (2013: 29).

The play started in the public areas of the venue (foyer, bar). The form of engagement was simply, 'hello and welcome'. The response to this formed the basis of either continuing and developing the conversation or wishing them a good evening. We also ensured that we spoke to people who were in groups of two or more, the theory being that we were outnumbered and would thus be viewed as less intimidating. The identification of people who were willing to engage and 'play' continued to develop throughout the tour. This was in part because the actors became much more aware and developed in: 'Rapport, listening, reading micro gestures and effective questioning' (Hogarth *et al* 2019: 1). The authors assert in their article 'Immersive Worlds: An Exploration into how Performers Facilitate the Three Worlds in Immersive Performance', that the facilitation techniques developed in applied theatre practice are transferable for the actor in an immersive theatre context. Although this was not an immersive performance, the skills noted above are equally applicable in the context in which they were being applied. It is interesting to note that Jamie Woods, one of the actors, is also a trained clown doctor and workshop facilitator. His developed skillset was initially far more successful than the other two actors and supports the proposition by Hogarth *et al*.

The actors continued this form of engagement inside the theatre space, ensuring that those who had agreed to participate were still happy to do so. This subtly leads us into the opening scene, the pre-show interaction was key in creating a connection and the development of an ongoing relationship with the audience. In practice each audience reacted differently to this preshow disturbance; this was a mix of trial and error, some encounters with audiences were less successful than others. We did however create one simple rule, which was to make an invitation to play or simply observe and play from afar. We were conscious of constructing this simple set of internal rules; we wanted the audience to choose how they participated and at what time. Zerihan's description echoes our understanding of what could take place and what is required to make this happen: 'Participation in the performance event often triggers spontaneity, improvisation and risk – in both parties – and requires trust, commitment and a willingness to partake in the encounter' (2009: 3).

The focus thus far has been on the verbal elements, an example of a nonverbal scene emerged from the oversight on the part of John Hunt the expedition leader. He assumed that Norgay could operate a camera, which in fact he could not. The iconic picture of the climber holding aloft the various flags was not Edmund Hillary as reported but was in



fact Tenzing Norgay. It was important for us to represent this image, but also the moment leading up to it; two climbers on the highest point of the planet and one of whom can't use a camera. We concluded that this scenario is inherently funny and thus this was developed into a

nonverbal scene. The performers communicate with gesture, playing out one of the most iconic moments of the twentieth century as a clown scene. The camera – or, in the terms of

the clown, 'the object' – becomes the focus and problem and in trying to resolve the issue the result is 'play'. Peacock expands the potential impact upon an audience; 'The clown demonstrates ways of playing and the audience member observes and shares in the clowns' pleasure of play. Individual audience members are, therefore, encouraged to acknowledge the value of play' (2009. Pg. 158).

This was supported verbally in the respective biographies by Hillary and Norgay's. Neither had a consistent account of what took place at the summit and thus the script below explores this inconsistency. The scene takes place after the ascent, but also advances the pair's relationship and reveals character traits of both men - Hillary the down to earth farmer come mountaineer, and Norgay the childlike dreamer who believed he was predestined to ascend the summit. (Please refer to Appendix 2).

The development for myself during this process was immense. The key outcomes are listed below. It also formed the seedbed from which I developed and drew upon through all the works submitted.

- Artistic risk – encourages director to develop and reevaluate their previous practice;
- Influence – External, drawing on previous experience of work I had seen and reincorporating this in a new way for a specific purpose;
- Influence – Internal, drawing from the creative team and the difference in their experience and practice and how both can inform my practice and the work;
- Exploration of relationship with audiences – how a 'playful' relationship can be developed and the benefits to the type of work created – this is especially important in regard to comedy theatre;

- Style – I started to investigate ‘clown theatre’ and the means to generate work of this nature;
- Research – what is relevant to the creative team? What I select and how I present it are key;
- Challenges – what are they? Are they relevant for the work? What does it provoke? And if I didn’t use this method how could this be achieved?

Although the work investigated above continues into the next piece of work, *The Games*, it does not directly transfer as in I utilise directly the same methods. There is some variance in the application, although the key ideas continue to be explored or rejected, dependent on the needs of the process.

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Appendix 1.

Hillary: So you're all warmed up. Have you been to the Himalaya's? Has anyone been to the Himalaya's?

Interaction with audience the cast reclaim the props issued in the pre-show

Hunt: Michael Westmacott. Tent.

Hillary: Now he was a statistician.

Norgay: He was the first to reach the Khumbu Ice fall.

Hillary: Michael Ward.

Hunt: He was a medical officer.

Norgay: Thomas Stobart.

Hillary: Film maker.

Hunt: Thomas Bourdillon. Oxygen tank.

Hillary: He actually invented the closed-circuit oxygen apparatus that the men used to get to the summit

Norgay: He also refused to go on the expedition if Hillary and Long were not part of the team.

Hunt: He was part of the first summit attempt that failed.

Hillary: Charles Evans. Oxygen mask two.

Hunt: Deputy leader.

Norgay: Doctor.

Hillary: He joined Bourdillon on the first summit attempt... that failed.

Hunt: Wilfred Noyce. Rope number two.

Norgay: He was first to the South Col.

Hillary: George Bann. Rope number one.

Hunt: He was the youngest member of the expedition.

Norgay: Solid climber. Dr Lewis Griffith (*others join*) Cresswell, Evans and Pugh.

All three men spit on the ground at the mention of the name Pugh.

Hillary: He wasn't much liked by the men. He was a physiologist who studied anatomy, bodies at high altitude.

Hunt: He would make the men carry out rigorous exercises in experiments.

Hillary: George Lowe.

Hunt: He was a fellow New-Zealander

Norgay: Best friend of Hillary.

Hillary: He's still alive.

Norgay: Colonel Wylie.

Hillary: Spoke fluent Nepalese.

Hunt: He was responsible for all the Sherpas.

Hillary: Alfred Gregory.

Hunt: Stills photographer.

Norgay: He was also part of the support team for Hillary and Tenzing.

Hillary: He was a Blackpool supporter.

Hunt: James Morris.

Hillary: Times correspondent.

Hunt: Later became known as Jan Morris.

To audience

Hillary: Now who had action men? Yes. Now these are not actually action men. They may look like action men but in fact they are stop motion puppets of Edmond Hillary. I'm playing Edmond Hillary.

Norgay: I am playing Tenzing Norgay. Now some of you will be disappointed to learn that I am not going to be using a Nepalese dialect or a Nepalese accent.

Hillary: While we're on the subject of accents has anybody been to New Zealand? Can you do a New Zealand accent for everybody please...
(picks out member of the audience)

Hunt: I'm going to be playing John Hunt...

Hillary: As well as...

Hunt: A few of the other members of the expedition.

Hillary: Because the expedition was not made up of three people. You knew that didn't you? And that's why we need your help. And that's why we've given you new identities for tonight.

Hunt: There were approximately three-hundred and seventy-eight people involved in the entire expedition.

Hillary: Does anybody actually know anything about the expedition of fifty-three? Nothing? Well, they got to the summit.

Hunt: And back, safe. Just another thing, there should be four people, press number one, press number two, press number three, press number four. At certain points in our show, we're going to look to you to interject our questions that we've given to you. There will be a sound effect and a lighting change so it'll be really clear when we're looking...

Hillary: We'll just be going about another scene, then this will happen. Then press one. You're ready aren't you?..

PRESS1 "Mr Hillary, how did the success of the expedition of fifty-three effect your life?"

Hillary: Hmm, well, aye, that's a good question. Hmmm, well, one thing is I went up that mountain a very quiet insular young man of thirty-three years old. And when I came down that mountain and I saw my face on the magazines, heard my name on the radio, I realised I suddenly had

got a power. So I started to give back, I mean no more than any other average man would have done but I –

Appendix 2:

Press 4: *“You may have been asked this often, but did you celebrate on reaching the summit?”*

Hillary: No.

Norgay: Yes, we did.

Hillary: No, no we didn't.

Norgay: Yes, we did.

Hillary: It is a common misconception-

Norgay: - No, it's not

Hillary: We were more concerned about getting back down again-

Norgay: I distinctly remember jumping up and down, hoopla, hoopla, we sang the song.

Hillary: - There was no jumping up and down, I went out to shake the man's hand, he got a little bit over emotional and hugged me, but there was no celebra-

Norgay: - what are you embarrassed for?

Hillary: I'm not embarrassed, it was a feeling of satisfaction but there was no jubilati-

Norgay: No, no, that's why we ran out of oxygen because we were singing the song –

Hillary: We didn't run out of oxygen, we couldn't have ran out of oxygen because we needed to get back down again

Norgay: Yes, and I had to carry you

Hillary: He didn't carry me –

Appendix 2

This case study focuses on the play *The Games* in relation to the key processes of devising/writing, directing, rehearsing, and performing. This took place over an extended period and I draw upon the developments made as summarised in the previous case study – *Top of the World*. I continue to express my own experience to examine the role of the devisor-director – in particular, his (my) use of research to develop the more traditional dramaturgical categories of character, structure, text, and *mise en scène*. I go on to describe a particular methodology in which challenges are identified and addressed using improvisation in a devised setting. Finally, I shall identify the key learning processes utilised in this instance and then how I took forward for deployment in future productions.

The Games

The inspiration for the work stems from a lecture given in 2009 by Professor Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones, who at the time was head of Classics at Edinburgh University. I was struck by his description of the ancient games held in Olympia, a world in which sport, magic, corruption, and culture were intertwined. I had visited the site of Olympia and Delphi in 1987 as a teenager and I looked back at the photographs I had taken. These memories triggered many responses, the enduring memory of the stadia was the

environment, hot, dusty, and lined with pine trees and secondly the images of naked athletes portrayed on pottery. The second moment of inspiration came from watching the award-winning rockumentary called, *The Story of Anvil*. The relationships presented and the band's doggedness to strive for the dream of success was tragic, yet the situations they found themselves in were very funny. The facts of the ancient games and the relationships from the documentary provided the perfect combination from which to start to think about how a play - *The Games* could be constructed. London 2012 was on the horizon, and I was keen that we reflect this theatrically. There was of course the opening to London 2012 and other commissions which reflected Britain and the Olympics. During 2012 *The Games* was the only theatrical work that was directly inspired by the ancient Olympics.

The Games is a modern Farce with clown theatre elements. I had not previously explored this area of comedy, and the play is the culmination of two years' work (2010-



2012). This is the most complete play in the sense of having returned and reshaped the work on multiple occasions - something which is unusual in devised theatre practice. This is the longest period I have had to develop, test, reflect and evaluate a written play on multiple

occasions (three tours). It is interesting to note that in previous eras of economic depression (2008 financial crash), farce makes a return to the stages of London and the

UK. This was certainly true in London's West End, as three farces sat cheek by jowl in 2012²⁴.

Research and Planning

My research led me to conclude there was a play, which could reflect the present through the prism of the past. I was keen to pursue and build upon the clown work developed in *Top of the World*. However, I was not confident enough to take this on single handily and looked for an individual who was willing to collaborate on such an endeavour. *Spymonkey Theatre Company* at the time were touring their first mid-scale clown show based on Herman Melville's, novel *Moby Dick*. I had known and admired the company since 2000 but had lost contact when they became the resident clowns in *Cirque De Soleil's* adult show, *Le Freak*, in Las Vegas. I took this opportunity to meet Toby Park with whom I discussed my ideas and the type of collaborator I was looking to work with. These discussions led to me approaching him. Toby had not directed before; however, he was keen to push himself in a new direction and I was excited by the idea of working with a second devising director and the opportunities this partnership may generate for the work.

²⁴ *One Man, Two Guvnors* an adaptation by Richard Bean, Michael Frayns, *Noises off* and Joe Orton's, *What the Butler Saw*

I had created several challenges in advance of the research and development week. I was keenly aware of overloading the devisors with research and facts as per my experience with *Top of the World* and thus I entered this period with only three areas to explore. One challenge I was determined to incorporate was how we represent women's role in the ancient games. This was a male-dominated environment and to cast a female in this world would, I hope, create an obstacle to overcome. The second challenge I



wanted to explore was the structure of a Greek comedy. This is not something I would ordinarily undertake in advance but the opportunity to test it without the pressure of having a creative outcome was something I felt worth exploring. The third challenge and the most

difficult was the playing of 'nakedness' on stage.

Provoking and Facilitating the Creative Process:

The team undertook a week of research and development, this was a new experience for me and something I found very fruitful. This is something that I have subsequently incorporated into my practice if financially possible. This period became the seedbed from which much of the final play was derived. It was an opportunity to experiment with the research I had undertaken without the pressure of having to have a clear performative outcome. What it did identify were areas to explore further and possible scenarios from which the clown personas could play within. This was a highly creative period and resulted in many discoveries being made. I have highlighted key moments from this research week and indicated where and how they were developed during the main creation period.

I was clear that I wanted to develop a play with clown theatre as the creative emphasis. Thus, the most important element of the week was the time spent developing and exploring the individual performer's clowns. This was key as I knew the driver for the story and narrative creation would extend from this. In spending this time, it enabled the deviser actors to identify their clown 'status' e.g., Low or High, and for Toby and myself to understand the potential relationships between the deviser actors/clowns.

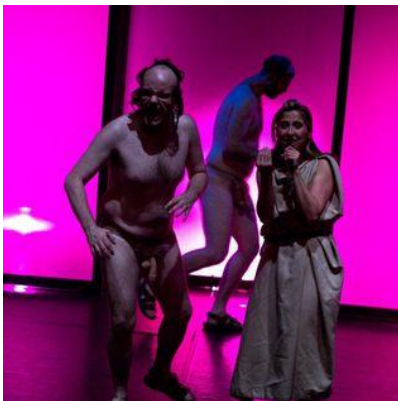
This emerged organically through a variety of improvisations such as 'Eurovision'. This exercise is developed to encourage the performers to create spontaneously a song and dance routine. The focus is on singing improvised lyrics together as one. This is a hugely complicated task for the performers as they are both listening, accepting, and rejecting ideas in the moment. These improvisations were discussed and noted as per my previous exploration and development of character. From these discussions, new exercises were created to broaden, provoke, and develop each individual clown personas. What slowly emerged was a hierarchy between the three clowns/devisors, as the week progressed this became fixed. This enabled me to identify further challenges and develop potential clown scenarios in advance of the main creation period.

One area I wanted to explore was nakedness. This is something that *Spymonkey* have regularly incorporated within their theatre and cabaret work. This is something I have also experienced as an actor in *Yllana theatre company* clown show *666*. I had some understanding of how exposing being unclothed was for the deviser actors. This had been discussed with the company before undertaking this period of exploration. We were all clear that this required investigation as all the athletes in the ancient games competed were naked. It was clearly creating anxiety in the rehearsal room. One of the deviser

actors, Jamie Woods, who has worked unclothed before addressed this by removing his clothes during an improvisation located within the gymnasium. This was a location in which men would bathe and oil themselves and according to the research, this was an everyday occurrence where possible. This spontaneous act was not planned and at the time was both hilarious and shocking in equal measure. The subsequent laughter that emerged came from the removal of his clothing and not because his naked body was funny. What followed was very interesting and revealed several things, as the improvisation continued it became clear that his nakedness was a distraction. The other deviser actors struggled to interact in the way they had previously. There was a huge shift in how the company played together, Jamie responded to this by deliberately engaging with them. This created an even bigger shift as it created a power dynamic that was limiting for the other deviser actors in the space. This ultimately did not serve the process or the potential scene and thus the improvisation was concluded. However, a huge amount was learnt during this, especially in relation to the power status held by a person unclothed. As Chris Goode explains to Catherine Love in interview:

This is something that I think most actors would attest to: there's a very interesting double dynamic going on in getting naked, in that it always reads from the outside as a movement towards vulnerability, but from the inside an actor's experience very often is of becoming more powerful. The naked actor is often the most powerful person in the room, partly because they've got nothing left to hide (Love, 2015: 33).

I was keenly aware that if the deviser actors reacted in this manner, then an audience might react similarly. If the result of 'nakedness' created such a reaction and shift in 'power' then this is something I would have to think very carefully about if I was to take this idea forward. Goode goes on to say in relation to audiences: 'people still read nakedness with alarm or with erotic fascination' (2015: 33). This led me to have to think carefully about a creative solution that allowed the actors to perform (semi-naked)



without the consequence of losing our audience. The impact of nakedness on an audience could be detrimental to the play; potentially destabilising the balance between the stage and audience; ultimately leading to the audience averting their gaze from the stage.

This period of time was vital as it enabled both Toby and I to establish a working methodology as well as the devising company. The relationships developed in this time were very informative, especially in the case of Toby and myself. I would best describe what took place during this period as akin to a wrestling tag team. We would both pick up and step in on different moments or develop potential opportunities facilitated by the other. This relationship was fluid, however, more formally my focus drove the elements of structure, story, verbal narrative and Toby would focus on the 'clown' relationships, the deviser's individual comic quirks, and supporting music.

What emerged from this period of research and development were the following key points:

- Nakedness;
- Clown – status/relationships;

- Integration of facts into a fiction;
- Gods, Structure;
- Shadow play;
- Human-nets.

Prior to the main creation period, each member of the company was asked to bring ideas to share in the first week of the formal creation process. Having worked six weeks in advance of this period enabled me and each of the devising creative team space and time to develop ideas. During this time, I created the conceit from which we would work, this being the rediscovery and staging of an Aristophanes comedy by a group of classics scholars. I also created a series of challenges to take into the main creative period. These were to become:

- Structure of Greek Comedy
- Shadow play and puppetry
- Research – Worlds/locations within the play – Clown scenario
- Nakedness

Developing the Narrative and Structure:

What emerged very quickly was that the structure utilised in Greek comedy allowed us to create and play within three distinct worlds (the academics, the gods, and the mortals). The hierarchy (status) of each deviser/clown was exchanged between these worlds e.g., the high-status clown created by Liam (academic) also played the lowest status character (Darius) within the world of the mortals. This came about through the reversing of 'status' and in doing so it also facilitated the clowns with lower status to get their own back. This

enabled the actor (Liam) to become the butt of the verbal and physical jokes within these sections.

The conceit of having academics present the play enabled several things to happen. It facilitated the opportunity for things to go 'wrong' as in the lecturers are presented as amateur performers. This could be deliberate (constructed) or not (happy accident), in doing so it allowed the world from outside of the play to emerge within it. The device of staging a play within a play and clown worked well in combination with the historical facts from ancient Olympia. Much of what was discovered came about through improvisation, however, this was also informed and influenced in the reading of Michael Frayn's play *Noises off* and Alan Ayckbourn's, *A Chorus of Disapproval*. Many of the dramatic devices previously mentioned are utilised within these plays and as such, I knew there was an established understanding amongst audiences for them.

I employed the Greek comedy structure; however, I did not stick rigidly to it. It became the backbone from which I structured the play, incorporating what best served the play. I have indicated below how and where it was used:

1. **Prologue:** A monologue or dialogue preceding the entry of the chorus, which presents the play's topic. *The Academics*
2. **Parode (Entrance Ode):** The chorus takes up a position either for or against the hero. *The Gods*
3. **Agôn (Contest):** Two speakers debate the issue (typically with eight feet per line), and the first speaker loses. Choral songs may occur towards the end. *The Mortals*

4. **Parabasis (Coming Forward):** After the other characters have left the stage, the chorus members remove their masks and step out of character to address the audience. *The Gods*

First the chorus leader chants in anapaests (eight per line) about some important, topical issue, typically ending with a breathless tongue twister.

Next the chorus sings, and there are typically four parts of the choral performance:

1. *Ode*: Sung by one half of the chorus and addressed to a god.
 2. *Epirrhema (Afterword)*: A satyric or advisory chant (eight trochees [long-short] per line) on contemporary issues by the leader of that half-chorus.
 3. *Antode (Answering Ode)*: An answering song by the other half of the chorus in the same meter as the ode.
 4. *Antepirrhema (Answering Afterword)* An answering chant by the leader of the second half-chorus, which leads back to the comedy.
5. **Episode**: As in tragedies, but primarily elaborating on the outcome of the agon. *The mortals, The Gods*
6. **Exode (Exit Song)**: With a mood of celebration and possibly with a riotous revel (*cômos*), joyous marriage, or both. *The Academics*

The set-up for a farce is vital in establishing with the audience the form and their license to laugh. This contract is vital to establish, otherwise, the audience is left wondering what and how to respond. I was keen that the play did not become a pastiche of a Greek comedy. There is historical truth within the play, this is best illustrated in the prologue/opening of *The Games* in which the hierarchy and relationships of the

academics are revealed. This establishes for the audience the tone and how the farce will unfold. As per *Top of the World*, there are elements of information for the audience to absorb such as the etymology of sayings and gestures.

The academics are seen at the beginning and not again until the end of the play. This was deliberate as the audience witness the status exchanges within the play. The gods, Zeus, Hera, and Hercules are also similarly high status, but they speak in rhyming



couplets. This was a conscious decision and distinguished the speech of the gods from both the mortals and the academics. The relationship of the mortals is wholly drawn from those within the documentary, three unlucky losers with a never-ending desire to succeed.

Scale was something I had previously explored in *TOTW* with the utilisation of action figures to highlight the size of Everest and the task ahead. I reincorporated this idea again to emphasise the height difference between the gods and mortals. This also created the opportunity of the inanimate object fighting against the clown, in one sequence Zeus throws the action figure of Hercules, who, being a demi-god and not of the same height, was played using a humanette²⁵. The actor catching the figure is doing so with puppet arms. This would often go wrong in performance, leading to the actor puppeteering having to improvise within the moment. This is known in clown terms as playing the *flop* as explained by John Wright: 'In order to debunk the play, the clown needs to be able to distance himself from the play and comment on it to the audience from a distance' (Wright, 2007: 201). This is a brief separation from the play, a suspension

²⁵ A puppet worn around the neck

in time in which the audience and performer recognise and delight in the mistake and the attempt to rectify it.



I was fascinated by the architecture of Olympia; this major pagan site had been raised to the ground under the order of the Christian Roman Caesar Theodosius II destroying a major symbol and statue (Zeus carved in ivory). Interestingly the site was only fully excavated during the 1930s by archaeologists under the behest of Adolf Hitler.

As Alexander Kelly describes during an interview: ‘So the making of the environment, how the performers interact with the environment, the tasks they have to do, the visual job of the show has always been a part of what we think of our job as makers’ (2013: 66). This is something I echo in my practice, as previously described I consider the set as the extra character within the play. The set is the playground from which the deviser-actors will interact and play with, and as such, the design is an integral part of the process. The image of the columns was something that I wanted to reflect within the design. Eight screens were commissioned to create a series of entrances and exits. The screens, through exploration (play), also enabled scenes and locations to

transform quickly and thus maintain the impetus of the play. One key element of farce is the momentum that is generated within it, and I was keenly aware that the design should aid not hinder this. The screens served to create the effect of depth and scale, but it also allowed the work to flex up and down dependent on the size of the performance space. This was created by staggering the screens from upstage to downstage in a semi-circle. This aided in connecting the audience to the work and reflected both the shape I had experienced many years ago in Epidaurus. The focal point upstage created a form of a vanishing point, the plain white backdrop also served to highlight the actors and emphasise their respective heights in relation to the screens.



The screens could be lit from front and behind, the shadow play allowed me to represent the images I had seen on the pottery. This became a visual device to

incorporate several characters without seeing them directly. The opening image of the play is a montage of creatures from Greek mythology: Medusa, The Minotaur and the Cyclops, followed by a series of representations of athletes. The effect of shadow play also created another world outside of the one on stage, the light upon the human form created images that were distorted, absurd and humorous another trait of farce.



The main design element was the construction and testing of the fake penises, in which we needed to create something which gave the audience permission to look. I had previously worked for *Yllana*²⁶ and in the finale of their show *666*; was the creation of four devil-Esq creatures with 2ft long appendages that entered the auditorium and squirted water over the audience. I struck upon the idea of creating something similar but without the length or the ability to spray water. Colin Ecclestone (designer) created a set of penises of varying dimensions, they were realistic enough, but not so much to

²⁶ Yllana are based in Madrid and tour new wordless clown shows across the world. I worked with them from 2000-2003 performing across Europe in a show entitled, *666*.

fool an audience. They were weighted and bounced whenever the devisor moved. This simple solution allowed the actor to feel secure, but at the same time gave the audience permission to look and laugh in the knowledge they were not real.



The play in hindsight was constructed by looking for the game on stage. The gymnasium scene, for example, is wholly physical and comes from the starting premise of using too much oil and it is becoming increasingly slippery, based on extending the truth of the situation. The improvisation idea of 'Yes and'. Yes, this happens and what happens next - this is taken to the extreme in which both male performers are standing and falling and unable to keep their footing.

Another example of this principle was the development of Jamie's poet (Stanza's) who can't rhyme. I was keen to reflect on Pindar and his odes within the work. Jamie

accepts that he has a pretentiousness about him and subsequently his clown reflects this. He was set the challenge to improvise a series of poems in which the final word in the couplet did not scan. The poems created were not deliberately humorous, but the seriousness of his delivery made them very funny. The subsequent use of the poems became what is known as an insistence gag, this is a clown device in which you consistently insist or repeat that something is funny until it becomes so.

The poems were structurally placed throughout the play building towards the sacrifice scene in which the character Darius offers to sacrifice his penis so Hermaphrodite can compete. The game within this scene was the delaying of the action, by this point the audience knew the set-up of the poem. The building of tension through delaying the action married with the miss-scanning poems brought the insistence gag to the fore; this scene subsequently became one of the funniest scenes within the play. The



work to get there, however, was created and established from the time we heard the first poem. The scene below is towards the end of the play and by this point, I was looking to increase the momentum of the text. It is also interesting to note that Darius completes the poem of Stanzas in the final line between them, this was deliberate to close the insistence gag for the audience. (Please see appendix 1).

Lauren's clown was the most difficult to establish and this was in part because clowning was a new form to her. This took time, but what emerged was a highly strung musical theatre diva, who was easily insulted. This was a gift to expand and play with and in

many ways led to discussing the songs and music within the show which were driven and created by her and Toby.

As previously stated in *TOTW* music which is known to an audience takes them out of the world which has been created. This is something we used for deliberate comic effect within *The Games*. There are numerous examples of popular music incorporated within the original compositions. The pieces, (theme from *Mission Impossible*, 'Eye of the Tiger' by Paul Anka and 'Barbara Streisand' by Duck Sauce) were reimagined and altered for the purposes of the play. The final two pieces above served as the music from which mime/movement sequences were choreographed to. These were created to offer alternative staging's of sporting events, a series of linked montages created to the music.

The reason for this approach was that watching realistic versions of sporting events became incredibly dull. As such all the sporting events were presented in an alternative but reflective manner of the sports or more precisely, they echoed *clown logic* (chariot racing,



boxing, and pentathlon). The music set the tone and mirrored the clown leading the sequence, one being suave, cool and the other manic and out of control. The selection of each of these pieces of music took time to find and, in many ways, was more challenging than the creation of original compositions.

The original songs within *The Games* stem from Laurens's clown; these are a mixture of ballad and choral singing, all of which are heightened. We borrowed heavily from musical theatre and used songs in such a way to move the story forward and or to enhance character development. The nature of musical theatre and its heightened performance style was something we exploited for comic effect, not to

denigrate the form but to recognise at times that its seriousness is very funny. The clashing of instrumentation was an interesting counterpoint to the lyrics, we utilised soft rock/heavy metal and this created the music to step out of the world. This was something I subsequently went on to explore in the play *Sink or Swim*.

The epilogue to the play is the final song, this bookends the play by the return of the Academics. It allowed the company opportunity to celebrate with the audience and collectively sing together as previously explored in *TOTW*. The difference in application this time was the play finishes on the beat of a gag, it was constructed in such a way to allow academic three (Jamie) to have the final word as within the triumvirate he was perceived as the lowest status clown/character. This causes the status of academic one (Liam) to fall in front of the audience and mirrors the play overall. (Please see appendix two).

I explored a vast range of work most notably 'clown'. The key outcomes are listed below. It also formed the seedbed from which I developed and drew upon in the development of *Sink or Swim*.

- Exploration of relationship with audiences utilising clown theatre elements;
- The development of clown scenarios both wordless and spoken;
- Incorporating pre-existing music;
- Refining work over an extended period of time;
- Developing challenges through a period of research and development.

Although the work investigated above continues into the next piece of work, *Sink Or Swim*, I do not directly utilise the same methods. There is some variance in the application, although the key ideas continue to be explored or rejected, dependent on the needs of the process.

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Appendix one

Stanzas: Are you sure brother?

Darius: Yes, brother, Hermaphrodite's need is greater than mine; if our love is true, I must be prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice.

They shake the manliest of handshakes. They then appear on stage, Stanzas bearing a sword. It really is going to be the ultimate of sacrifices! Darius stands ready. Stanzas goes to take the 'sacrifice' but his hands are too cold. Darius protests so he warms them. But first a prayer seems like a good idea.

Stanzas: Mighty Zeus make this painless and quick,
As I slice off my brother's dearest friend.

Darius: Thank you brother, now strike fast and strike true.

Stanzas: 3, 2, 1.

Stanzas strikes and nicks the end of Darius' member, causing immense pain.

Stanzas: Sorry, sorry!

Darius: You just nicked it, you just nicked it, it's only a little cut but it really
stings! It's too blunt brother, the blade is too blunt, we need to find
something sharp.

Bringing on a stone.

Stanzas: On your knees, brother. **Darius protests and he insists.**

Darius: What's that for? You can't use that brother, it needs to be intact, it's
no use to Hermaphrodite as a bloody pulp of bone and sinew!

Stanzas: I was thinking more of it as a chopping block.

Relieved Darius obliges and tries to manoeuvre into position, this takes some

time! Eventually...

Darius: Hurry brother before my resolve weakens.

But Stanzas feels the need to pray again much to Darius' frustration.

Stanzas: Oh Mighty Zeus, grant me the courage for this job
 As I cut off my brothers, nearest and dearest.

Darius: Tarry not a second longer brother.

Stanzas closes his eyes

Stanzas: 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3.

Suddenly panicking when he sees where the blade is pointing.

Darius: You're not looking brother! You need to be looking! Look at where the
 blade is brother please. Strike cleanly at the base. Hurry.

Stanzas: 10, 9, 8, 7, 6. **Then, feeling the urge one more time...**
 Bless this knife, bless this cleaver.

Darius: As I turn these balls into a beaver, give it here I'll do it myself!

Darius snatches the sword and screams raising it to strike, but thankfully for him, and us, Hermaphrodite enters, her back to the audience.

Hermaphrodite: I've done it, I can compete, I've solved the problem!

Stanzas falls into hysterics, but a relieved Darius is only too keen to agree.

Hermaphrodite: What do you think?

Hermaphrodite turns to the audience and strapped between her legs is a very poor imitation of a penis made from fruit.

Darius: Its brilliant isn't it Stanzas...

Hermaphrodite: What are you doing?

Darius: Oh just messing about with a co...rock.

Hermaphrodite: Do you think it will work?

Darius: Oh yes little sister, now go forward and seize your destiny.

Appendix two

The music strikes up and our three Champions return to the stage skipping, dancing and all singing to this celebratory number. This is 'Hooray for the Games!'

Hooray for the games for the fortune and the fames,
Of the athletes who came from afar,
To strive for the best to compete and contest
To beat all the rest 'gainst the odds.

To the surprise of the others Academic 1 breaks out into a soft rock solo!

But in triumph and glory, therein lies our story,
Jack, Jack, Jackanory, the folly of man.
Zeus the almighty, knows wrong from righty,
Toys with the flighty souls of the vain.
He grants their desires, **Joined by Academic 2**, relights their fires!

He toys with the liars who swear to him!

Academic 3 leaves and returns with a song sheet whilst the others do a small River dance style' hop & skip. They encourage the audience to sing along to the chorus.

Hooray for the games for the fortune and the fames,
Of the athletes who came from afar,
To strive for the best to compete and contest

To beat all the rest 'gainst the odds.

Another breakout moment.

In this devil's bargain, within a narrow margin,

If any should disparage him,

Damn- Ned they shall be!

Should your egos inflate? Think 'gainst Gods rate?

Then you are screwed mate!

Let the games! Let the games! Let the games!!! Begin!

River dance moment again, then the Audience sing along one more as the performers run and shake hands with the audience.

Chorus: Hooray for the games for the fortune and the fames,

Of the athletes who came from afar,

To strive for the best to compete and contest

To beat all the rest 'gainst the odds.

One more time!

Hooray for the games for the fortune and the fames,

Of the athletes who came from afar,

To strive for the best to compete and contest.

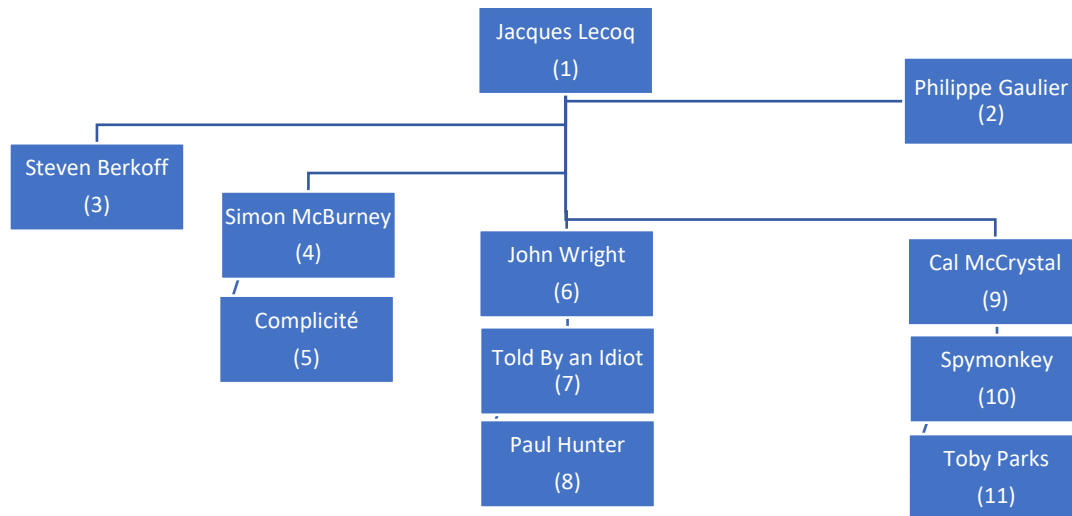
Final breakout. Academic 1 tries to go for a big finish but Academic 3 steals his thunder and they compete to see who can hit the highest final note.

Academic one: To beat all the rest! 'gainst the...

Academic three: Against the odds!

Appendix three: Conceptual roots

European theatre



- 1) Jacques Lecoq (1921-1999) Teacher and founder of the École internationale de théâtre Jacques Lecoq²⁷ in 1956. Lecoq was introduced to theatre via Jacques Coppeau daughter – it was this encounter that started a journey and led to exploration and rediscovery of Commedia dell'arte along with actor/director Dario Fo. Lecoq specialised in the teaching of visual and physical theatre practices (mime, mask, clown) and he taught up until his death.

Notable alumni: Steven Berkoff, Philippe Gaulier, Simon McBurney, Jeffrey Rush²⁸ and Julie Taymor²⁹ amongst numerous others.

Publications: *The Moving Body (Le Corps Poétique)* (2001).

²⁷ <http://www.ecole-jacqueslecoq.com/>

²⁸ Best actor award (Oscar) for *Shine* (1996)

²⁹ Award winning director – notably for *The Lion King*

2) Philippe Gaulier (1943-present) Teacher and former student at the École internationale de théâtre. Gaulier teaches clown and is a leading authority in Bouffon. In the early 1990's he was invited by ACE to set up École Gaulier³⁰ in London. He returned back to his native France in 2002 establishing a new school from which he continues to teach to the present.

Notable alumni: Sacha Baron Cohen³¹, Cal McCrystal, Toby Parks and Emma Thompson³² amongst numerous others.

Publications: *The Tormentor (Le Gégèneur)* (2007)

3) Steven Berkoff (1937-present) Berkoff is a multi-award-winning Actor, Director and Writer. Berkoff studied with Jacques Lecoq before returning to Britain in the mid 1960's. Upon his return he married both a British literary language (predominantly via adaptation) and the European physical language of mime. In doing so he was an early innovator in what is now more commonly known as 'physical theatre'.

Notable publications: *Metamorphosis*³³ (1969), *The Trial* (1971), *East*³⁴ (1975), *Greek* (1980).

4) Simon McBurney is an award-winning actor, director. McBurney studied with Jacques Lecoq before returning to Britain to co-found what was formerly known as

³⁰ <https://www.ecolephilippegaulier.com/>

³¹ Award winning actor and writer best known for his portrayal of Borat in the film of the same name (2006)

³² Best actress award (Oscar) for *Howards End* (1992)

³³ <https://www.stevenberkoff.com/plays>

³⁴ <https://www.stevenberkoff.com/plays>

Théâtre de Complicité with peers, Annabel Arden and Marcello Magni in 1983.

Complicité³⁵ as they are now known are currently an NPO³⁶ with ACE and currently celebrating their 40th anniversary. McBurney is currently sole artistic director for Complicité and has to date directed the majority of the companies work.

- 5) Complicité was founded in 1983 by Annabel Arden, Marcello Magni and Simon McBurney. They are currently an NPO with ACE and have produced 48 productions for venues and festivals. The majority have toured to either small or mid-scale theatre venues nationally and internationally. All the companies' work be it original or via adaptation and or pre-existing texts is rooted in European theatre and is widely recognised for its physical and visual theatre presentation.

Notable Publications: *A minute too late*³⁷ (1984 and reprised in 2005), *The Visit*³⁸ (1989), *The Streets of Crocodiles*³⁹ (1992), *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*⁴⁰ (1997), *Endgame*⁴¹ (2007), *The Master and Margarita*⁴² (2012) and currently *Drive Your Plow over the Bones of the Dead*⁴³ (2022).

- 6) John Wright is an award-winning director and teacher. Wright studied with Jacques Lecoq before returning to Britain to take up a teaching position at Middlesex University. During this time, he built on his experience at Lecoq and developed with

³⁵ <http://www.complicite.org/index.php>

³⁶ National Portfolio organisation supported financially by Arts Council England

³⁷ <http://www.complicite.org/productions/AMinuteTooLate>

³⁸ <http://www.complicite.org/productions/TheVisit>

³⁹ <http://www.complicite.org/productions/TheStreetofCrocodiles>

⁴⁰ <http://www.complicite.org/productions/TheCaucasianChalkCircle>

⁴¹ <http://www.complicite.org/productions/Endgame>

⁴² <http://www.complicite.org/productions/TheMasterandMargarita>

⁴³ <http://www.complicite.org/productions/DriveYourPlowOverTheBonesOfTheDead>

his students' multiple productions in what is now more commonly known as 'physical theatre'. In 1980 he co-founded the mask theatre company called *Trestle Theatre*⁴⁴ with former students; he directed all of their work up until 1991 when he parted company. In 1993 he set up *Told by an Idiot*⁴⁵ with students Hayley Carmichael and Paul Hunter. Wright continues to direct for the company and teaches across the world via *The Wright School*⁴⁶.

Publications: *Why is That So Funny? A Practical Exploration of Physical Comedy*: (2006) and *Playing the Mask: Acting Without Bullshit* (2017).

7) *Told By an Idiot* was founded in 1993 by John Wright and former students Paul Hunter and Hayley Carmichael. They are currently an NPO with ACE and have produced 40 productions for venues and festivals. The majority have either toured to small or mid-scale theatre venues nationally and internationally. All the companies' work be it original or via adaptation and or pre-existing texts is rooted in European theatre – predominantly clown and is widely recognised for its playful physical and visual theatre presentation.

Notable Publications: *On the Verge of Exploding*⁴⁷ (1993), *I Weep at my Piano*⁴⁸ (1999), *I'm a Fool to want you*⁴⁹ (2005), *My Perfect Mind*⁵⁰ (2013-2015), *Charlie and Stan*⁵¹ (2021-2023).

⁴⁴ <https://www.trestle.org.uk/>

⁴⁵ <https://www.toldbyanidiot.org/what-we-do>

⁴⁶ <https://thewrightschool.wordpress.com/>

⁴⁷ <https://www.toldbyanidiot.org/on-the-verge-of-exploding>

⁴⁸ <https://www.toldbyanidiot.org/i-weep-at-my-piano>

⁴⁹ <https://www.toldbyanidiot.org/im-a-fool-to-want-you>

⁵⁰ <https://www.toldbyanidiot.org/my-perfect-mind>

⁵¹ <https://www.toldbyanidiot.org/charlieandstan>

- 8) Paul Hunter is an award-winning actor and director. Hunter studied with John Wright and Philippe Gaulier before co-founding *Told by an Idiot* with Wright and Hayley Carmichael in 1993. Hunter is currently the sole Artistic director of the company and has directed much of the companies work.
- 9) Cal McCrystal is an award-winning director. McCrystal studied with Philippe Gaulier, it was during this time that he met clown company *Peepolykus*⁵². He directed all their work up until the late 1990's when they parted company. Alongside this he worked with *The Mighty Boosh*⁵³ directing all their work until their move into screen in the early millennium. He is best known for his work with *Spymonkey theatre company*⁵⁴ directing their early touring work prior to their Las Vegas residency as the inhouse clowns for the *Cirque de Soleil* show *Zumanity*⁵⁵. Since then, he has worked as comedy director for *The National Theatre* notably on their award-winning production, *One Man, Two Governors*⁵⁶. McCrystal is currently resident director for *Giffords Circus*⁵⁷ and *Cirque de Soleil*.
- 10) *Spymonkey Theatre company* was founded in 1998 by Aitor Basuari, Stephan Kriess, Petra Massey and Toby Parks. They currently receive funding from ACE to support the development of new work and touring. They have produced 10 productions for

⁵² <https://peepolykus.com/>

⁵³ Julian Barratt and Noel Fielding performed under the name *The Mighty Boosh*

⁵⁴ <https://www.spymonkey.co.uk/news.html>

⁵⁵ <https://www.calmccrystal.com/show/zumanity-another-side-of-cirque-du-soleil>

⁵⁶ <https://www.calmccrystal.com/show/one-man-two-guvnors-broadway>

⁵⁷ <https://www.calmccrystal.com/show/carpa>

venues and festivals. The majority have either toured to small or mid-scale theatre venues nationally and internationally. All the companies' work be it original or via adaptation is rooted in European theatre – predominantly clown and is widely recognised for its playful physical and visual theatre presentation. Following the untimely death of Stephan Kriess in 2021 the company have changed direction and now direct for others or they train the future artists of tomorrow via their well-established training wing led by Basuari and Parks.

Notable Publications: *Stiff*⁵⁸ (1993), *Cooped*⁵⁹ (2001-2005), *Zumanity*⁶⁰ (2003-2005), *Moby Dick*⁶¹ (2009), *The Complete Deaths*⁶² (2016), *A Christmas Carol*⁶³ (2018).

11) Toby Parks is an award-winning actor and director. Parks studied with Philippe Gaulier before co-founding *Spymonkey Theatre company* in 1998. Parks is currently the co-artistic director of the company and often directs in collaboration with other companies or venues. Parks manages the company's strategy most recently publishing a comedy manifesto outlining the recent change of direction for the company.

American and UK improvisation

American and UK improvisation

⁵⁸ <https://www.spymonkey.co.uk/stiff.html>

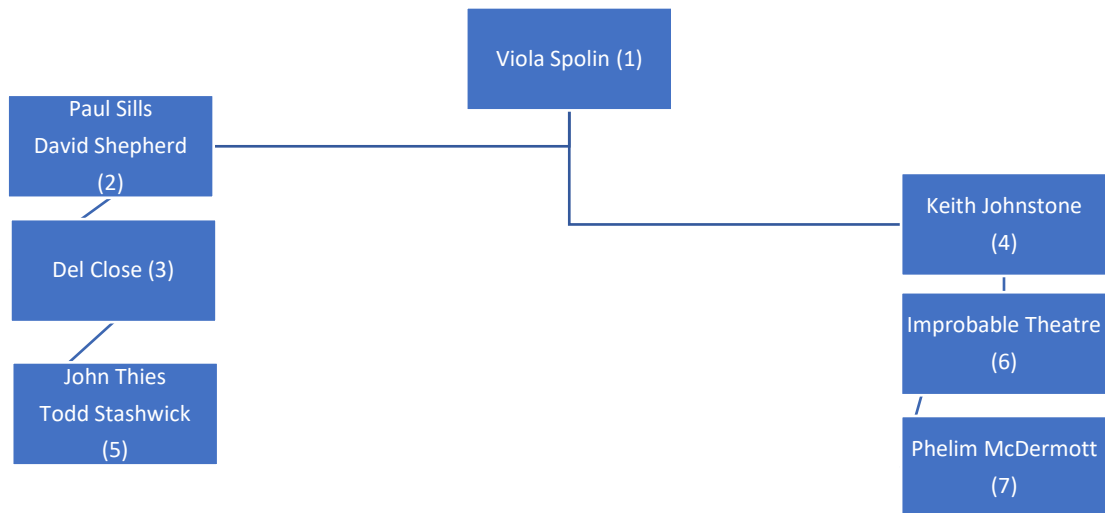
⁵⁹ <https://www.spymonkey.co.uk/cooped.html>

⁶⁰ <https://www.spymonkey.co.uk/zumanity.html>

⁶¹ <https://www.spymonkey.co.uk/moby-dick.html>

⁶² <https://www.spymonkey.co.uk/the-complete-deaths.html>

⁶³ <https://www.spymonkey.co.uk/a-christmas-carol.html>



- 1) Viola Spolin⁶⁴ (1906-1994) was an educator and pioneer in the development of modern improvisation. Her work was developed as part of the settlement programme in Chicago under the guidance of Neva Boyd in the 1930's. Many of the young participants were illiterate and so Spolin and Boyd observed the playing of children and used this as the vehicle from which to develop the games-based exercises. In many ways an applied theatre approach was taken to address the needs of the participant and in doing so created an inclusive environment.

Publications: *Improvisation for Theater* (1963), *Theater Games for the Classroom: A Teacher's Handbook* (1986) and

- 2) Paul Sills (Spolin's son) and David Shepherd took his mother's ideas and applied them in the creation and development of satirical sketches. Spolin worked with the company training the actors (Chicago university students) and from this emerged the company called *The Compass Players*. The company ran from 1955-1958 and it was from this early experimentation that modern improvised comedy was established. In

⁶⁴ <https://www.violaspolin.org/bio>

1959, Sills established a new company called *Second City*⁶⁵ and the launch of this development led to a boom in comedy in the USA. The subsequent development of improvisation happened due to the restrictions and blueprint created by *Second City*. Original members of the *Compass players* who had become teachers at *Second City* were frustrated that improvisation was still being used primarily as a tool for writing and not as its own artform. The end of main house shows were improvised, however this format had not moved on in over a decade. *Second City* continues to run and operates venues in Chicago and Toronto.

Notable alumni: Alan Arkin⁶⁶, John Belushi⁶⁷, Del Close, Byrne Piven⁶⁸, Joyce Hiller Piven, Joan Rivers⁶⁹, plus many notable others.

- 3) Del Close was an actor, director and teacher. Close was an original member of *The Compass Players* and worked in all of the above roles at various points for *Second City*⁷⁰. Close like David Shepherd felt that improvisation could and should be presented as its own artform. In the late 1960's Close debuted 'the Harold' with his then ensemble called *The Committee*. This was a new structure which merged the games-based system and the development of multiple scenes reminiscent of a play. This form did not gain popularity until the mid-1980's but brought about a huge

⁶⁵ <https://www.secondcity.com/>

⁶⁶ <https://www.secondcity.com/people/other/alan-arkin/>

⁶⁷ <https://www.secondcity.com/people/other/john-belushi/>

⁶⁸ Set up the *Piven theatre workshop* for children with his wife Joyce Hiller Piven. This theatre workshop developed actors such as Aidan Quinn, Joan Cusack, Adam McKay and son Jeremy Piven.

⁶⁹ <https://www.secondcity.com/people/other/joan-rivers/>

⁷⁰ <https://www.secondcity.com/people/other/del-close/>

change and the start of what is now more commonly referred to as ‘Long form’ improvisation.

Publications: *Truth in Comedy: The Manual of Improvisation* (1994)

- 4) Keith Johnstone was an actor, director, and teacher. Johnstone started his exploration in to improvised practice as part of the newly established *Royal Court Theatre*⁷¹ led by George Devine⁷². This research emerged from the new writing development workshops which Johnstone was leading, he would interrogate the work using improvisation to inform the playing of the text⁷³. What he observed was that the improvisations were often more interesting than the new play texts. The subsequent exploration led him to establishing in 1968 the company called *The Theatre Machine*⁷⁴. This coincided with the dissolving of the UK censor for plays⁷⁵ this allowed *Theatre Machine* to perform publicly for the first time, up until this point Johnstones work was often billed as a workshop in which the public could observe. Johnstone in 1972 took up a teaching position at the University of Calgary in Canada in which he taught writing and directing. Whilst teaching he continued to develop his work on improvisation, he subsequently established a new company called in 1979 called *Loose Moose*⁷⁶. During his time at *Loose Moose* he developed numerous improvised formats most notably ‘Theatre Sports’⁷⁷ and ‘Life Game’⁷⁸.

⁷¹ <https://royalcourttheatre.com/about/>

⁷² <https://royalcourttheatre.com/about/history/>

⁷³ Reminiscent of the work undertaken by Konstantin Stanislavski

⁷⁴ The UK’s first improvisation company.

⁷⁵ Better known as the Theatre act 1968.

⁷⁶ <https://www.loosemoose.com/#page-top>

⁷⁷ <https://www.keithjohnstone.com/formats>

⁷⁸ <https://www.keithjohnstone.com/formats>

Following his departure from *Loose Moose*, Johnstone continued to teach internationally, and it was during a visit to the UK that *Improbable Theatre* led by Phelim McDermott and Lee Simpson first encountered an early version of *Life Game*. At this point the company were operating on the small-scale touring theatre circuit but were gaining notoriety and acclaim for their work. McDermott had always promised that when they moved up a scale that they would develop *Life Game* for UK audiences. This subsequently happened and toured across the UK and the US from 2004 to great acclaim.

Publications: *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre* (1987), *Impro For Storytellers* (1989)

- 5) John Thies and Todd Stashwick both worked for *Second City* in the early 1990's and this is where they first encountered Del Close as the in house director. His influence was instrumental when both moved to New York in the mid 1990's and developed a new structure called 'the beast' a form in which there was no audience suggestions from which to base the work on. The company known as *Burn Manhattan* performed weekly off Broadway for five years. The company was made up of director Shira Piven⁷⁹, Matt Higgins, Mark Levinson, Kevin Scott in addition to Thies and Stashwick. This form was ensemble led and rooted in 'physical theatre' inspired by their experience of British devised physical theatre companies⁸⁰. This led to an invitation to come to the UK and teach in 2004. This experience led to the development of *HOOF!*.

⁷⁹ Daughter of Byrne Piven⁷⁹, Joyce Hiller Piven.

⁸⁰ Thies and Stashwick watched *Peasouper* Created by *Reject Revenge Theatre company* at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 1995.

12) *Improbable Theatre*⁸¹ was founded in 1996 by Julian Crouch, Phelim McDermott, Lee Simpson and Nick Sweeting. They are currently an NPO with ACE and have produced 37 productions for venues and festivals. The majority have toured to either small or mid-scale theatre venues nationally and internationally. All the companies' work be it original or via adaptation and or pre-existing texts are rooted in improvised practice (rehearsal methodology) and the company are widely recognised for its playful physical and visual theatre presentation.

Notable Publications: *70 Hill Lane*⁸² (1996), *Life Game*⁸³ (2004), *Theatre of Blood*⁸⁴ (2005), *Panic*⁸⁵ (2009), *The Perfect American* (2013)⁸⁶, *An Improbable Musical*⁸⁷ (2022), *My Neighbour Totoro*⁸⁸ (2022-2023).

6) Phelim McDermott is an award-winning actor, director and improviser. He co-founded *Improbable Theatre* in 1996. McDermott is co-artistic director of the company and has directed most of the companies work. He also directs opera for *English National Opera* and *The Metropolitan Opera House*, New York. He continues to regularly practice as a guest improviser performing with *The Comedy Store Players*.

⁸¹ <https://www.improbable.co.uk/>

⁸² <https://www.improbable.co.uk/past-projects/70-hill-lane>

⁸³ <https://www.improbable.co.uk/past-projects/lifegame>

⁸⁴ <https://www.improbable.co.uk/past-projects/theatre-of-blood>

⁸⁵ <https://www.improbable.co.uk/past-projects/panic>

⁸⁶ <https://www.improbable.co.uk/past-projects/the-perfect-american>

⁸⁷ <https://www.improbable.co.uk/current-projects/an-improbable-musical>

⁸⁸ <https://www.improbable.co.uk/current-projects/my-neighbour-totoro>

