

Introduction

The following pages have been written to demonstrate the value of the devising approach to dance and music. We believe that devised art-making applied within a variety of contexts can facilitate many more people to discover the usefulness and joy of contemporary artistic creation and appreciation than is currently the case. Youth, community groups, organisations with a special focus and professionals may find this to be an exciting way to work, one based on the collective construction of creative endeavour.

Devising can be discussed in words and photos. However, combining audio-visual recordings with printed information forms an ideal basis for the discussion of all time-based arts. It is with this in mind that we are particularly pleased to be able to present this work to you in the form of a booklet–video publication.

The text is therefore not intended to be read in isolation. It has been conceived to provide readers with general as well as specific information concerning relevant aspects of devising dance and music through an investigation of the breadth of work with which the performing arts company, Idée Fixe¹ – Experimental Sound and Movement Theatre is involved. The first chapter focuses on the company's aims and general approach.² The second chapter is based on a specific project series. The video recordings have been made to parallel key concepts referred to throughout the booklet, particularly those concerning work in the community, including illustrations of examples most of which are provided in Chapter 2. The text and the video are supported by a single flexible framework (see Appendix 1) for clarity and potential application by others.³

For those who have little experience with the publication's subject matter, the remainder of this introduction has been included to demonstrate the value of devising as we see it. At the same time it functions as the booklet's glossary, including a variety of words which have a particular use and meaning in our context. In the two following chapters all discussions of process in arts creation have been provided as examples to indicate how we practise what we preach; they are not there to offer fixed models, but instead represent a flexible way to work in the workshop, the classroom or other arts context. In fact the general approach is easily applied without leading towards a result that looks and sounds like an Idée Fixe work. We are attempting to

share our experiences with the reader, experiences underpinned by research.⁴

The authors are artistic and choreographic directors of *Idée Fixe*. We both have significant experience in arts creation in a wide variety of contexts as well as in higher education. It is with this combination in mind that we have prepared the publication.

For whom has our publication been written then? In this booklet we speak to artists directly; however, we have attempted to create something that should be useful to anyone involved in arts education, to those working in the community or in any area of arts practice.

Devising presented in the form of a glossary

This introductory glossary includes many of our key words and expressions a few of which call for elaborate treatment. Even if the reader may disagree with our particular use of certain words, at least we can all see how they are being used within this booklet.

Any good dictionary will include a definition of *devising*⁵ which essentially means to plan or invent. Such an activity is often engaged in by a single person. Although working in isolation may have loads of uses in a number of circumstances, throughout this booklet devising will involve a number of people, that number always being greater than one. Therefore a collective approach is fundamental to the devising process. Basically we suggest that devising within our context be considered to mean the activity of a group of people involved in simultaneous artistic creation.

Devised work tends to lead towards an end point, even if it is a dynamic one (i.e., a constant work in progress, never to be fixed). Alternatively the work may confine itself to the process, that is, not looking towards a final product, a radical departure from a good deal of current arts practice. Circumstances often dictate whether a product should be the goal of collective creation.

Idée Fixe, the company of focus in this publication, strives to adhere to a devising approach in its work; however, for some other artists and companies, devising forms part (that is, not the whole) of an artistic process. Many dance companies who apply a devising methodology, led by a single choreographer, start preparing a new work calling for

material to be generated by the company's dancers. At one point, the choreographer will start to shape the piece, composing it using materials devised (generated) by those who will execute the work. Alternatively, a composer could create the skeletal structure of a piece for one or more musicians and then work with those musicians in determining exactly how the work is to sound. Please note that in both cases the work is normally made for those very people in the first instance as opposed to a choreography or score to be offered to anyone to perform later. Here the notions of *ownership* and authorship can be different as the composer or choreographer tends to take the credit.

Those who believe in devising strive towards heightening ownership. Ownership in terms of art can signify the art-maker's view that (s)he is not simply executing someone else's idea, but instead is involved with something (s)he took part in creating. All devised work theoretically should lend itself to ownership by all involved through active *participation*, that is, people's contribution to a given creative process. When a work is shared within a *community*, members ideally should own the focus (that is, the subject as well as the treatment thereof) of the work. But what is a community? A community is a group which shares a common interest(s) however large or small-scale. A community may be local or spread out nationally or even internationally. It may involve physical presence or may exist virtually (e.g., by way of the internet).⁶ Some embrace existent values; more progressive ones question, that is react against, established values. In fact, all people who have a passion for any 'high art' genre form a community.

Devising and working in a cross-arts context, similar to *Idée Fixe*'s, are both undergoing a renaissance. The context of this remark can be illustrated in the following manner. If we look at traditional Greek theatre within western cultural history or its equivalents throughout the rest of the world, especially in 'otherwise civilised' cultures, we find that music, dance and drama have very often formed a holistic trinity. The choice of a single art form as one's trade is very much a product of the mid-second millennium. Parallel to this, most art-making was, and still is in a number of cultures, created through a devising process, capitalising on known traditions whilst involving that one (or several) step(s) forward in any given artistic product. These points create quite a contrast with today's highly specialised single arts manifestations. However, in our contemporary multi-media

‘Image Culture’, being a good musician who is miserable to watch isn’t sufficient any more. Excellent choreography with less than interesting sound scores is equally awkward. This forms the basis for the above-mentioned renaissance.

Yet many professional artists shun the idea of working in collective and collaborative interdisciplinary contexts. This illustrates the supposed threat of collaboration, at least in late-twentieth century society, namely, potential loss of individuality, ego or professional identity when artists’ work is merged. The devising working practice proposed here is designed to avoid a ‘water in the wine’ experience which some may have encountered in collaborative situations. Does the musician have to compromise his or her own identity by allowing dancers to comment on a work? Our view is that devising is founded on the concept that it can facilitate both arts (or all when there are more than two involved) bringing out the best of each other. As greater understandings are reached from members specialised or trained in only one of the art forms, interpenetration can take hold as boundaries are crossed, this crossing over being a common element of devising. Ideally work from individual art forms is made more exciting, that is, heightened by merging with that of another art form. Given the collective character of devising, the tradition of the almighty composer and choreographer is thus being re-evaluated and being replaced with another model, that of *holism*.

In devised art the totality of the work is greater than the sum of its separate parts. Granted quantifying anything in art-making is easier said than done. Have you ever experienced a work of art where you were acquainted with one of its aspects separately beforehand and then saw new life added to that aspect in its new context? One might consider a new choreography with an existent composition where the impact of the known work might not have been as strong in an earlier, possibly original context as it is in the new one. (It might actually be embarrassing for the composer that the piece worked better in a situation for which it was not originally intended!) In the context of devising, one does not have to hope (or fear) that this type of coincidence takes place. Here, all involved expect their expertise to be combined to form a single work of art that does not compromise their abilities, but instead sees these abilities merge with those of others involved in the project. Thus heightening of both product and ownership is the goal of any devised work. In situations where people are involved who clearly represent separate art forms, collaboration

takes place with the full intention that the interpenetration of their expertises can and will lead to an end result that is greater than the individual aspects in isolation.

Heightening ownership and developing the devising practice represent two major aspects of our subject matter; however, returning to our statements at the beginning of the introduction, one of our key concerns is *access*. This word involves offering the opportunity to make and/or take (appreciate) art by those who normally are not involved for whatever reason. Many people have a problem crossing the threshold or are not drawn into a performance or exhibition space or into an arts workshop. Access involves lessening, or even withdrawing that threshold. Every aspect of this booklet represents means of increasing access to dance and music.

Access works hand in hand with *facilitation*. This concerns providing people with means by which they not only can become involved with an art form, but also feel at ease with it. A guideline – something that is only gained by experience – is that the way one facilitates is the way one has to facilitate. This may appear to sound rigid; however, the opposite may be true. The fact of the matter is that there exists no myriad of possibilities available to those involved in facilitation. Becoming acquainted with a community group and learning about their needs and abilities is the one and only path to follow. The *animateur* is normally an enabler/facilitator within the arts. An animateur can be defined as someone who inspires, enlivens or activates. In dance, perhaps more than elsewhere, animating has become a well-respected profession.

To enable and further access, *evaluation* plays a significant role. When is an art work perfect? Probably “never” is our answer. The practice which we preach calls for continual *evaluation* to take place amongst all involved and, when relevant, *triangulation* with feedback from outsiders. Evaluation concerns how things are evolving and what modifications and improvements can be made. This must, of course, not replace intuitive aspects of devising with self-conscious worries. Instead evaluation allows any group member involved with devising the ability to participate in the continuous improvement of a work. The notion of a ‘work in progress’ is synonymous with any activity in devising and is the quickest road leading to holism of which we are aware. The process of devising, including a good deal of group discussion, allows for an organic evolution to take place. If every part

of the organic order is made of rock, no one is able to move from his or her position, to compromise. The greater the fluidity demonstrated by all involved, the better one is able to mould a single experience from the strengths and abilities of that group.⁷ This personal *flexibility* proves to be an asset especially when working with artists from other art forms who tend to have their own preferences, particular ways of working associated with the art form. Flexible art works best with flexible artists willing to search for the ideal balance between their media.

As a bridge to the main text, two final terms will be introduced. Both of these concern participants' ability to articulate what is taking place within the devising process in terms of intention and access.

The 'something to hold on to factor' This term was created in an article by Leigh Landy in 1994.⁸ It was originally coined for use within the world of sonic art. However, the term is applicable for general use in the contemporary arts. The notion here can be introduced in the following manner. A great many people shy away from new forms of activity, including the arts, as they may have a fear for the unknown. In particular within the contemporary arts, many people we have spoken with have claimed that they never attempted to view a contemporary arts manifestation as it was assumed that it would be 'over their heads'. Obviously, this is by no means always the case, but we are dealing with a threshold problem here, one that becomes even more significant when speaking of contemporary art-making.

The 'something to hold on to factor' has been proposed as a possible remedy to this situation. It works as follows: the creators of a work offer their public something to hold on to in terms of appreciation in word and deed. This 'something' can range from a narrative, to certain types of material – sound, movement or otherwise – that are consistently used and developed to anything else one can come up with that can be understood as a concept and analogously perceived by a member of the public. The 'something' does not have to be the key element of the work in question. It is, however, an aspect of the work which helps one feel more comfortable, providing a greater understanding of the work. It is especially useful in the time-based arts (including dance and music). The element(s) is not only useful in terms of access to a work, it can also serve as an aid in terms of the devising process itself. Although the notion of organic development

has been posited above, the notion of frameworks has as well. A ‘something to hold on to’ is not only a door for the public to enter a work (along with a key to appreciation), the door itself is part of the architecture of a piece!

Anyone may decide that (s)he does not want to know about this before an event takes place. This of course poses no problem; still, it represents an aid to understanding and appreciation to those who are interested and can be seen to form part of the *dramaturgy* of a work.

A theatre dramaturg is the person who attempts to articulate the chosen path of the director, composer, scene, lighting and costume designers (and so on) as well as place the interpretation (if relevant) in an historic context to – in chronological order – the actors and others involved in the performance, those funding the production, journalists and the public at large especially through the programme booklet, but also through the communications media. Where explanation is inappropriate, the dramaturg’s role is to stimulate interest. This work completely reflects the ‘why’ (and to a lesser extent, the ‘how’) of a given production and should be applied more regularly to other artistic media than only theatre.

In a devised arts context, a good deal of the above paragraph remains as is, but the way the work takes place needs rearranging. Furthermore, the dramaturg is normally one, or ideally all, involved in the process of making the work unlike the theatre dramaturg. In dramaturgy the ‘something to hold on to factor’ should play a role. The results of this work offer all involved: participants, appreciators and even funders a grip on the process; in fact it offers a grip on what one hopes to communicate. Similarly, through evaluation and triangulation, the focus of the dramaturgy as well as of the artistic work is periodically being inspected and further developed supporting not only access, but every other element of a work a given group is attempting to address.

Note to the reader

There is no single way to view this video and text publication. You may choose to watch the video first and then read the book. Alternatively one can read the book step by step, visiting the video after chapter two, where its contents are introduced and fully discussed, whilst referring to the first appendix, our ‘flexible framework’ for devising, on occasion as a reference.

