

DRAMA *Works*

Devising Skills

EXTRACT

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	3
PART ONE: THE BASIC TOOLS WITH WHICH TO WORK	
EXPLORING ACTOR / AUDIENCE RELATIONSHIPS	5
FURTHER TOOLS: THE ROLE OF THE DESIGN ELEMENTS	9
GOOD AND BAD THEATRE OR WHAT WORKS AND WHAT DOES NOT	12
TELLING A STORY	20
STYLE	25
CHARACTER AND RESEARCH	32
PART TWO: CONFRONTING THE FINAL PROJECT	
A WORD ABOUT CHOOSING THE GROUPS	36
THE BEGINNINGS	40
SHAPING THE PIECE	59
A LIST OF DOS AND DON'TS	66

INTRODUCTION.

In the last few years it has become imperative for every drama student from GC.S.E. upwards to be able to manage devising skills. And yet of all the drama skills, this is the hardest one of all. To be able to devise one must have highly developed 'people' skills as well as an understanding of the whole process of theatre: writing, shaping, lighting and the other design skills as well as acting. This is a daunting task for experienced groups of actors to undertake; yet we expect it of students of fifteen and sixteen years old.

Nonetheless, our students have one advantage over the professional actor: their livelihoods do not depend on it. Their piece of devised theatre does not have to sell seats; they have instead the luxury of being able to experiment and approach things in a fresh way. The outcome is important from a personal point of view - exam results may depend on it - but they do not have to worry about the commercial success of their venture. This gives them the chance of extraordinary freedom in approach and subject-matter.

What precisely is a devised play? It is a play that is conceived and brought to satisfactory theatrical fruition by the equal collaboration of a group of people. It may have a starting point that has been set by an examining board or by a teacher or the subject-matter may have been the group's free choice. It may have a time-limit of a mere fifteen minutes or may be a full-length piece of theatre - though the latter is unlikely at the levels we are dealing with. All elements of the piece - writing, direction, set, costume, lighting and any other devices deemed a necessary part of the finished piece will be the responsibility of the group.

For examination purposes, the finished devised piece will be judged by its success as a piece of theatre. It is thus a test, not only of all those skills listed above, but also of each student's understanding of what makes good theatre. It will stand or fall by whether it 'works' as a piece of theatre for an audience, even if that audience is limited to a few friends of the cast and an examiner.

An immediate problem strikes the beleaguered drama teacher. How to instil in the average student, who has opted for the subject at G.C.S.E. or at 'A' level with little or no previous experience of drama, an adequate understanding of what makes a good play. No drama student can begin to devise without some understanding of these basics.

In an ideal world, we would all begin the term by taking our students on a series of visits which covered a broad spectrum of theatre: at least one naturalistic piece on a

proscenium arch stage, a piece of epic theatre where the barriers between audience and actors are being challenged and where the fourth wall has been breached, a piece of experimental theatre, preferably along the physical or visual theatre lines, to excite them and open their eyes to further possibilities of actor/audience relationships, a piece in a tiny familiar venue such as a pub backroom or similar, etc. etc. And, of course, it is just not possible. Nonetheless, how can we expect them to bring forth a devised piece without giving them the basic understanding with which to start?

This book will not give you all the answers but will try to propose some strategies as to how to confront the problems. Ideally, the work towards devising should begin in Years 8 and 9; some of the work in this file would expect to be done at that stage if it is at all possible, but for many of you it just isn't feasible. Perhaps you don't have drama as a subject lower down the school; perhaps you are teaching at a sixth form centre and inheriting students from an enormously wide spectrum of experience. In that case, I would suggest that you dip into the early suggestions, at least to give some common shared background to all your group.

The first part of this file, therefore concentrates on giving a basic knowledge of the necessary 'tools' to every student. Having followed it, they should understand the kind of choices that are their's to make: choices of style, subject-matter and approach.

The second part of the file comes to grips with the final project and its demands, working through a variety of models and examples to point out clearly both the pitfalls and the strategies that can be used to tackle those pitfalls.

As is my usual practice throughout all the files, the emphasis of this work is on practice rather than theory. There are already in existence excellent books on the history of devising, the multitude of forms that it takes, how different established theatre groups and practitioners approach it, and so on. I do not aim to repeat any of that material but to confront head on the problems faced by a teacher and a group of probably inexperienced students with an examination looming.

Extract One

Next, start the group off brainstorming a list of things they think would not work on stage. Write everything down without comment. These are the sort of things I expect will come up:

- a football match**
- a car accident**
- a battle**
- getting lost in the woods**

There may be a lot of other what I will call 'physical' problems:

- accidents, crashes, shipwrecks,
- sporting events,
- action adventure stuff: hanging on the edge of a high windowsill, being knocked down by a landslide, and so on.

Try next to get them to think of the things that might not work because they are slow-moving or boring to watch:

- writing a letter**
- having a telephone conversation**
- thinking one's thoughts alone in one's room**
- sitting an examination**

There are also a number of things that will be somewhere in between and this should be the final list:

- a family mealtime**
- getting ready to go to school**
- packing to go on holiday**
- travelling towards a destination**

Recognising what is an unnecessary detail which ought to be excluded is one of the first problems they encounter and one of the first skills when it comes to writing a devised piece. Many of the 'in-between' final list will be this sort of detail.

Often, students have to be taught the potential of theatre as well as its limitations. Put another way, my feeling is that it has no limitations but it may need a different approach, a different way of thinking or of tackling a problem.

Let us take first of all the first group of brainstormed ideas: 'things that will not work on stage' and amend that to 'things that will not work in a photographically realistic way.' Theatre works best when it is not trying to be realistic but, like poetry, appealing rather to the imagination, by suggestion. Offer the audience a horrifying or realistic *detail* and their minds will fill in the rest. The active imagination of the audience, as opposed to the comatose imagination of the television-viewing audience, is what generates the magical energy of live theatre. A theatre audience is required to work, or should be - though of course they are rarely aware of that. Theatre takes a special kind of concentration.

Battles and sporting events have been tackled in the past by a number of means:

showing a small section - two combatants, for instance, with plenty of noise;

excited reportage, also with background sound;

slow motion sections involving, say, a mimed ball, and carefully choreographed group movement.

Accidents can be shown by their results:

by someone desperately hurt, reporting events to us;

by slow motion physicalisation.

One of the worst, in the sense of most terrifying, 'bus crashes' I have ever seen, was shown to me by a group sitting in bus formation, miming the impact and somersaulting, rolling, flying through the air in the aftershock. Sound after terrifying sound accompanied the impact, at such a level that the ear could hardly bear it, the sound cut off, the bodies came to a halt and lay still, apart from one which continued to twitch until, a few seconds later, it too went still. The audience was stunned. Probably more stunned than a filmed version of this, however realistic. The imagination had put them in the scene and they had experienced it first-hand.

For all of these 'problems' labelled above as 'impossibilities', there will be a solution, if the event is necessary to the piece. It is merely a question of approaching the problem from a different angle.

I have seen mountaineers in difficulty, clinging to a piece of board at the back of the stage; would-be suicides on the edges of cliffs or roofs, simply isolated by light, with the dark stage in front of them translated by the imagination into space; people lost in a forest fighting their way through the arms and bodies of other actors or of pieces of hung drapery.

The difference, of course, is that the weight of convincing the audience of the reality, the terror, the danger, of the event is on the actors alone. Their bodies are the catalysts which lead the audience's imaginations.

Bearing all these in mind, ask each group to come up with a viable theatrical solution to one of the brainstormed problems on the 'impossible to do' list. They are either to present their solution to the rest of the class or, if it is a solution that requires lights, sound and so on, they should talk it through to the rest of the class.

This exercise has two advantages which make it an important one to do at an early stage.

1. It causes them to reassess theatre and film and to see what is unique to live performance.
2. It forces them to think of non-realistic solutions and opens up the possibilities of physical or visual theatre.

Let us now consider the second brainstormed list - that which covers areas that might be too slow-moving or boring to watch: letter-writing, sitting in a classroom or an examination, and so on. What solutions can we find here?

Once again, if we approach each problem with 'this is something that is necessary to the plot so what different approaches might we make to the material?' solutions will usually come thick and fast.

Letters can be spoken aloud;

Both sides of a telephone conversation can be heard and the reaction of the speakers seen as both are on different parts of the playing area;

The audience can be privy to the various thoughts and concerns of several exam candidates, speaking out loud to the front. This will add interest by the variety of their moods and feelings.

There may need to be yet further solutions, to make something more interesting. For instance, the letter can be divided between the voice of the writer and the receiver; it does not have to be delivered all at once, but might be interspersed with pieces of action having some connection with the contents of the letter.

The third brainstormed list concerned things that were 'in-between'. It is this list that the groups embarking on their projects will encounter most often. Once again, the solution is usually just a question of a side-step.

For instance, a conversation might be scripted as taking place at the family meal table. Meals are always difficult: they lead to static positions and problems with sight-lines. They cannot be approached realistically, because those family members with their backs to the audience will be invisible and may be masking those sitting at the other side of the table. We are forced, therefore into ridiculous groupings with all family members seated on one side and at one end of the table.

Ask yourselves:

Is this conversation necessary?

Can not the conversation happen elsewhere? In the sitting-room, for instance?

Does an actual room have to be specified - with all that that entails of scenery and props? - could it not happen in an unspecified space with just levels indicated? or a door and chairs and a step or two indicating upstairs?

With close examination of each 'problem' as it arises, you will find that many of the things on this list will prove to be unnecessary or translatable to somewhere else.

Extract Two

MODEL B

Model B takes the epic theatre route.

For this, I am imagining that the group have decided to make a statement about women in prison. They have read a case in the newspapers about a woman giving birth in prison, handcuffed throughout the labour to a female warder. This has shocked them. They have decided to educate their audience as to conditions for women in prison and want to use a pregnant woman's plight as a particular focus. Their motivation for the devised work is both educational and an attempt to point out the need for changes within the prison system.

The first parts of their process will be the same as for Model A:

They begin with deciding on the effect they want to make on the audience. In this case, we have stated already that they want to educate the audience so that they see the need for change. Though they may want to shock the audience, to make the material too emotional might lose the intention. What the group wants is an audience that reacts rationally, from a basis of information. As with the last model, this intention must be always kept in mind, to focus the group throughout the creative procedure.

Next they make a list of potential scenes and whittle these down to the bare essentials.

They might end up with:

scene showing a number of women and the way they are treated by the system; the scene also shows what being locked up has done to their characters; one of the characters in this scene is our pregnant woman.

scene in which warders, police and other outside bodies express their opinion about women who commit crimes

scene in which our pregnant woman gives birth

Because the focus of the project is on keeping a reasoned and informed response from the audience, the way these scenes are performed will have to break emotional intensity when there is a danger of that happening. An instance might be, interrupting the woman in the middle of her labour pangs by her giving a direct address to the audience, or having other women commenting on her plight as narrators, pointing out the key factors such as the handcuffs, her lack of freedom of movement and so on. This keeps the audience angry but does not allow them to be carried away. They watch and learn and come to an opinion of their own.

Locations, because of the choice of style, become less important. They can be indicated by the simplest of props and furniture, which can be brought on by the characters themselves as they enter. This style has fewer problems of 'flow' than others: ironic, really, because one of the points of the epic style is to interrupt the flow to give pause for thought. What this style does, in fact, is give a group key scenes which they can string together with narration, fact-telling or universalising techniques, such as flashing photographs or stories from newspapers up on screens. This is to remind the audience of the reality of what they are watching. A good group might come up with clever commentary between scenes sung in a barber-shop style, or like a ballad telling the story.

Research is obviously even more important for this style of piece. The group will need to be thoroughly conversant with the facts and will need to know individual cases and attitudes, which they can weave into their characters. Wherever possible they should find real responses - the man in the street, their own parents, friends, teachers, which can be used in the piece to give different attitudes.

Characters may be many. One can mix 'key' characters with such as reporters, the man in the street, representatives of authority and so on, all of whom can give their opinion and need only appear once, perhaps as a link between two key scenes. This gives everyone plenty to do and will dictate how costume and so on should be approached.

Just as with Model A, the final manipulation of the material is important. Aim for a factual or rational beginning and ending, something like a narrator saying: 'In January 2002, Janice Streatham gave birth to a baby in Holloway prison. She was handcuffed throughout ...' The audience knows where they are then, what the focus of the play is to be and, though details may shock and surprise them on the way, they know it is their reason that is being appealed to.