

Devising Utopia, or Asking for the Moon

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My intention is to make images into theater events, beginning simply with those which have meaning for myself and my collaborators; and at the same time renouncing the theater of critics, box office, real estate, and the conditioned public.

—Joseph Chaikin, *The Presence of the Actor*

The Legacy of Devising

The increasingly widespread usage in American theatre departments of the enigmatic catch-word “devising” points to the gradual legitimization within the academy of alternative artistic approaches first developed in the 1960s. Given the intentionally transgressive nature of these approaches, pioneered by groups such as The Open Theatre, The Living Theatre, and the Bread and Puppet Theatre, their integration into the curriculum raises the question of whether they will eventually disrupt canonical conceptions of theatre and thereby affect the future of the discipline.

Of course, the transgressive stance of avant-garde theatre, as defined by Philip Auslander in *From Acting to Performance*, has, to a certain extent, been assimilated by the canon, so that it no longer poses an actual threat to institutions. However, Auslander argues that the transformative nature of performance is still at work in today’s devised theatre, albeit in different ways. Indeed, he posits that while the object of the collaborative experiments of the ’60s was confrontation with authority through the creation of a “counter-culture,” a critical shift from modernist transgression to postmodernist resistance has since taken place. Citing the Wooster Group’s incorporation of scenes from Arthur Miller’s play *The Crucible* into the textual montage the group created for the production of *LSD*, Auslander remarks that the ensuing conflict with Miller over the rights was “a *result*, not the *object*, of the Wooster Group’s process” (71–2). Auslander suggests that this process entailed “simultaneously occupying and resisting the given structure of textual authority [. . .] in traditional theatre” (66), thereby contending that what distinguishes this type of appropriation from “a confrontational, avant-gardist gesture” is precisely its “unintentional character” (71). Agreeing with artistic director Elizabeth LeCompte that Miller’s legal action against the theatre company, which eventually resulted in the closing of the production, was “an inevitable outcome of the Wooster Group’s working process” (71), Auslander foregrounds the potentially utopian dimension of this process by pointing out that its effect “is not so much to question Miller’s rights over his text as to show what would be possible in the realm of cultural production if those rights were not in force, thus emphasizing the connection between

the cultural and the social/political” (72). Unlike the transgressive devised theatre of the '60s, postmodern devised theatre does not claim to position itself outside dominant cultural formations, but seeks to offer “strategies of counterhegemonic resistance by exposing processes of cultural control and emphasizing the traces of nonhegemonic discourses within the dominant” (61). From such a perspective, the aim of devising is no longer to storm the imposing edifice of the theatrical canon, but to open a window in the wall of the fortress so as “to provide a glimpse of what lies beyond it” (72).

In light of this analysis, I would submit that the concept of devising challenges the very principles that define institutionalized theatre practices, from actor training to production strategies. The “danger” inherent in devising resides not so much in failing to produce a successful theatre piece—a risk that also pertains to more conventional approaches—but in the expectations that devising generates in those who engage in it. Indeed, the participatory, process-oriented, and nonhierarchical nature of devising calls into question both the pedagogy of theatre education and the criteria by which one evaluates what constitutes “good” theatre. However, isn’t this precisely what makes the notion of devising so irresistibly promising? For devising compels us, in spite of Western culture’s obsession with productivity, to pay closer attention to process. Moreover, it defies yet another culturally specific trait—our privileging of discursive reason over embodied knowledge—by inviting Euro-American theatre scholars, practitioners, and spectators to engage in an experiential process through which they may reap and savor the rewards of devised theatre.

Devising Utopia

Over the course of two decades of training with members of the Grotowski, Barba, Brook, Lecoq, and Mnouchkine European diasporas, I have encountered very different perspectives on what devised theatre might entail. Based on this experience, I would suggest that the embodied creativity fostered by devising opens up a space of possibilities leading to the emergence of what Jill Dolan has defined as “utopian performatives.” Locating the power of presence in “the transformations it makes possible,” Dolan states that “Utopia, in performance, can only happen through the performative, through an action that makes it appear” (“Performance” 469–70). The utopian dimension of devised theatre is anchored in the materiality of a body transformed by the power of its own actions. The vulnerability and transience of our embodied condition inevitably transpire through the physical labor of that perspiring, breathing, vibrantly present “body-in-life.” This phrase, coined by Barba, refers to an embodied form of cognition, a “thinking-in-motion [that] proceeds by leaps, by means of sudden disorientation which obliges it to reorganize itself in new ways” (88).

Devising might thus be defined as the art of losing one’s moorings to the familiar, a fruitful loss yielding a kinesthetic and associative form of awareness. This heightened experience of reality is defined by Grotowski as “the consciousness which is not linked to language (the machine for thinking), but to Presence” (125). Barba and Grotowski hence distinguish such embodied consciousness from discursive reason articulated by language (identified by Barba as “thinking-in-concepts”), thereby associating consciousness with organicity, or the principle according to which form must always be preceded by a process leading to the form. It is precisely this type of embodied logic that enables

spectators to sensuously make sense of devised theatre. Dolan evokes this experience as one of “feelings of pleasure and hope that often come before the security of articulation, the sense of possibility for something never before seen but only longed for, that glimpse of the ‘no-place’ we can reach only through *feeling*, together. [. . .] Something inexpressible fleets before my eyes, resonates in my soul, a feeling of pleasure, a strong but inarticulate feeling of literally ‘imagined community’” (“Finding” 497). Dolan’s description of her response as a spectator clearly attests to this embodied sense of connection to others: “Those moments make me want to take my partner’s hand, or catch the eye of the stranger sitting next to me, to acknowledge that we’re here, together, that we need and deserve that physical, as well as emotional, connection” (497). Consequently, if endorsing devising in the academy does not necessarily constitute a “revolutionary” gesture, if it does not mean storming the ivory tower or uprooting the tree of knowledge from its academic turf, I would argue that it does imply privileging the transformative process pertaining to “utopian performatives,” thereby summoning new possibilities for the future of theatre education.

The Far Side of Devising

In *Through the Body: A Practical Guide to Physical Theatre*, Dymphna Callery states that “chaos is a necessary process of devising” (164). In his *Theatre Topics* review of her book, Richard Stockton Rand comments that the “oft-feared journey of ensemble-created work” and “the uncharted terrain of devised work” both depend upon an “often nebulous and uniquely challenging process” (498–9). Given institutional pressures to “deliver” when teaching/producing theatre within the academy, it may therefore seem counterproductive to encourage students to engage in such hazardous processes, especially since these often tend to challenge authoritative knowledge and established structures of hierarchically ordered social relations. Yet, it is possible to argue that any creative process is by nature a structured exploration of the unknown; as such, devising does not necessarily preclude rigor and efficacy. Rather than contrasting the seemingly chaotic dimension of devising with the supposedly more reliable processes of “conventional” approaches, it might be more productive to envision devised theatre as offering a “third way” beyond the constraints of such binary oppositions. This promising conception of devising was evoked by Canadian director Robert Lepage on May 11, 2001, during his address to the faculty and student body of the University of California, Davis, prior to performing *The Far Side of the Moon*, his acclaimed devised solo piece.

Lepage, who graduated from the Conservatoire d’Art Dramatique of the city of Québec, specified at the beginning of his talk that one of his acting teachers had studied with Jacques Lecoq in Paris; it was this instructor who first introduced him to physical theatre. Lepage explained that the popularity of collective approaches in Québec in the mid-’70s, when he was pursuing his theatre training, was linked to the need to reach out to the nonfrancophone world. Producing French-speaking work was not an option, he stated, especially since text-based theatre was associated with bourgeois psychological realism by the new generation of theatre practitioners, whose idealism led to the development of *créations collectives* in search of a more democratic approach to artistic practice. Lepage acknowledged, however, that he had quickly discovered that art was not democratic, for whenever collective work was modeled after the

democratic process too many compromises had to be made for it to become truly compelling. Addressing the question of the role of the director in collaborative work, Lepage stressed the importance of finding a balance between the figure of the authoritarian director that prevailed in Europe and the type of politically committed collective work that took a reactionary stance against this patriarchal model. Moreover, he made clear that collaborative undertakings were not immune from authoritarianism. Underlining the contradictions and tensions that often remained unacknowledged between discourse on collaborative approaches and collaborative practices themselves, Lepage rather mischievously portrayed Ariane Mnouchkine as a “Fascist” and a “Cadillac Socialist” (Address), thereby calling into question the mythologizing of *Théâtre du Soleil* by enthused theatre scholars and critics. In Simone Balazard’s *Le Guide du Théâtre Français Contemporain*, for instance, Mnouchkine’s company, historicized as a “*théâtre révolutionnaire*” because it was modeled after a socialist workers cooperative, is emphatically upheld as “not only genuine, but hearty and fraternal” (128).

Lepage, who experienced the challenges inherent in collaborative theatre-making early in his career, chose to work toward an alternative approach to collective creation that relied upon the power of intuition rather than the abuse or dilution of power. He noted that even when working collectively, someone inevitably had to be in charge, and that it became necessary for that person to earn the trust of the group by developing an intuitive way of relating to the material. Directing collective work therefore also hinged upon faith in the group’s ability to sense whether something worked or didn’t, a process that made lengthy debate unnecessary. Lepage insisted that it was not a matter of imposing one’s vision, as did Robert Wilson (a director with whom he is often compared), but of letting things unfold. It was about paying attention to details, being open to the randomness of life, and to that which occurred by chance. It was important not to start with an idea, Lepage stated, specifying that intuitive approaches served as a springboard for creation; although his work was not initially linked to anything intellectual or political, it eventually became political as it developed. Lepage also explained that, at the outset of a project, he liked to “play” with raw materials and often used recycled objects, such as the rounded window of a washing machine that magically turns into the porthole of a spaceship in *The Far Side of the Moon*. His associative, process-oriented way of shaping a theatre piece involved discovering how various elements might connect with one another without trying to force anything. He stressed that this also applied to performing; as an actor, he felt that it was important to have the courage not to know where things were going. Hence, the productions he directed continued to evolve well beyond opening night, which he considered to be the very first stage of a long honing process. Lepage’s touring productions thus underwent many transformations, although he admitted that actors often expressed some frustration with this lack of stability. He nevertheless continued to encourage them to perform without a safety net and somehow managed to help them remain confident in the work they were doing, even when that work was constantly in flux.

The type of theatre Lepage found most compelling was the exact opposite of sanitized commercial entertainment, which he derogatorily dubbed “safe theatre.” Acknowledging that his love of heightened theatricality was partly due to his long-standing interest in Asian performance traditions, he noted that he was especially struck by the fact that, in these traditions, emotions did not belong to

the actor, but were to be experienced primarily by the spectator. Asian spectators, he stated, did not go to the theatre to watch someone emoting on stage. In addition to his interest in traditional forms, Lepage said that he also felt very attracted by the possibility of combining different styles, and remarked that this kind of stylistic hybridity was particularly prevalent in contemporary Japanese culture, by which he was also influenced. Perhaps as a result of these intercultural connections, he favored formalism over psychological realism, and felt that for theatre to be connected to life, it had to include disharmony, clashes, and tensions. Art, Lepage declared, was about asking why and exploring; he suggested that, even though it wasn't a "religion," artistic practice could create inner unconscious poetic connections with the impalpable. These connections might become perceptible in the trance-like state that actors experienced, in the coincidences that were often the product of free associations, as well as in one's relationship to other artworks. He concluded that his company's approach was not limited to producing new work, but that, to a certain extent, it was linked to a spiritual quest, a collective search for a connection with the ritual of theatre making.

Lepage thus expressed his conviction that the collective nature of theatre revealed the ancient ritual roots of performance processes. Well aware of the challenges pertaining to devising, however, Lepage refrained from romanticizing the long-term commitment that this type of intensive collaboration required. The members of his company seemed nonetheless fulfilled by what they did, as conveyed by the relaxed and convivial atmosphere of their postperformance "cooldown" rituals, to which I was privy during their stay at Davis. This suggests that Lepage and his collaborators have managed to sustain a healthy professional relationship over the years regardless of the many pressures and expectations accompanying the international success garnered by their work. As if to demystify his own prominence in the eyes of the professors and students of the U.C. Davis theatre department, Lepage passionately remonstrated: "We think we need leaders, heroes, gods, writers, illuminated directors!" (Address)—and proceeded to explain that, in his view, what practitioners truly needed was neither more authority nor more democracy, but the freedom not to compromise, the courage not to run for safety, and the wisdom not to shortchange process for the sake of product.

From the Power of Devising to the Devising of Power

Artistic freedom does not come easily. In a recent *Theatre Journal* article, Peggy Phelan makes a statement particularly pertinent to the challenges inherent to devised theatre. She writes: "Great art accumulates relevance and meaning as it moves beyond the control of its creators; weak art decides in advance what the piece is about" (571). When confronted with devising for the first time, one may be deterred by the potential for chaos often associated with this approach; consequently, it may seem safer to delegate one's creative freedom to "illuminated" directors and writers, the "heroes" and "gods" of Euro-American theatre. Indeed, as noted by Lepage, while devising promises to alter traditional relations of power between director, playwright, actors, and spectators, the indeterminacy of outcome that characterizes such a collaborative approach leaves the question of who should ultimately be in charge precariously open-ended. By eschewing the conventional master plans and sanctioned master narratives of traditional theatre making, devising opens the door to unforeseen possibili-

ties—including a complete takeover of the means of production by the advocates of devising themselves. Auslander, in his analysis of resistant forms of postmodern theatre, acknowledges the danger of reproducing dominant cultural formations “rather than mounting a genuine critique” of them (61). When this remark is extended to the critique of dominant artistic practices that devising makes possible, it points to the paradoxical return of the repressed that can occur whenever alternative approaches, under the guise of novelty, enable those who are traditionally in positions of authority to devise new ways of exerting power. In such cases, the collaborative dimension of devising becomes complicit in a corporate worldview that celebrates productivity and survival of the fittest at the cost of the freedom, courage, and wisdom which Lepage envisions as the *raison d’être* of devised theatre.

To provide a concrete example of the difficulties that may arise when devising a theatre piece within the academy, I will now turn to the creation of *Interruptions*, a U.C. Davis Mainstage production, which, incidentally, closed only a few days prior to Lepage’s own performance of *The Far Side of the Moon* on the very same stage. *Interruptions* was created over a three-month rehearsal period by Annabel Arden, a British Lecoq-trained actor/director and founding member of Théâtre de Complicité, along with British playwright Stephen Jeffreys and a group of twelve U.C. Davis actors comprising six women (including myself) and six men selected by Arden and Jeffreys during preliminary auditions. Some of the latter were MFA acting students, others were undergraduates, while I was then a second-year doctoral candidate. The British artists were invited by the U.C. Davis Theatre Department to develop an original theatre piece modeled after the type of ensemble work generated by groups such as the internationally renowned Théâtre de Complicité.

This was, however, Arden’s first directorial project within an academic setting, a very different experience from what she was accustomed to when working with the core group of Complicité, whose Lecoq-trained members have been devising theatre together for the last twenty years under the direction of Simon McBurney. As for Jeffreys, he is best known for his richly-crafted and incisively witty language, characteristic of plays such as *The Clink* and *The Libertine*. He is therefore as deeply committed to the written word as Arden is to nonverbal, highly visual, physically-based theatre, which, by their own admission, made the development of *Interruptions* a particularly challenging endeavor.

The goal of Jeffreys and Arden’s project was the creation of a political theatre piece focusing on what happens to the democratic process, leadership, and community in times of extreme political upheaval. *Interruptions* portrayed the life of a working-class community in an imaginary country whose communist regime was replaced by an attempt at a moderate socialist government, which failed when the elected president was murdered in a fascist military coup. The regime that emerged out of the coup thrived on corporate power, the free flow of transnational capital, an unregulated economy, outsourcing, cheap labor, and violent police and military control. The performance was fragmented into seemingly disjointed events by the means of an achronological narrative reflecting the characters’ life-stories after, during, and before the coup. By deconstructing the ideologies of left- and right-wing totalitarian discourse and exploring the notions of nation-state and civil liberties, this production located the democratic process at the level of what Jeffreys named “basic human activities” such as “discussing, playing, dying, cooking, having sex, working, creating

art.” The playwright specified in the program notes that he was interested in working on “interrupted rituals,” and that his play raised the following questions: “Do we need to be led? How do we decide who leads? What happens when there are no leaders?” (n.p.).

Of course, these questions equally apply to devising theatre, since both the rehearsal process and the public performances can be considered to constitute ritualistic human activities in their own right, activities within which important relationships and human connections are made. Issues of leadership and community are crucial to devising theatre from the very first day of rehearsal, when the group’s objectives and working conditions are first defined as the basis for the creative process that will critically inform the final product. Given that *Interruptions* addressed issues of community, solidarity, and resistance by probing democratic processes hinging upon the Euro-American notion of leadership, the rehearsal process itself provided a testing ground for exploring these very issues. Moreover, the questions posed by Jeffreys in the program notes were particularly relevant within the context of the creation of *Interruptions* since the playwright’s role was central to the conception of this piece. Although the script was still unwritten when Jeffreys arrived in Davis, he had already envisioned its structure scene by scene prior to his first meeting with the cast. The form and content of the piece were therefore created by him, from the overall composition to the characters and dialogues. Jeffreys wrote the text of *Interruptions* while the physical score of the piece was being worked out by Arden and the actors during rehearsals, most of which he attended. The playwright’s control over the script became increasingly evident in the course of the lengthy group reading sessions, during which he systematically assigned several “action verbs” to each line: an actor would, for instance, be instructed to “buttonhole,” “dampen,” and “reassure” another actor through his delivery.

While Jeffreys handed out the various scenes to the ensemble as he completed them, the characters featured in these scenes were not cast immediately. Arden and Jeffreys had specified at the outset that almost everyone would be on stage throughout the seven scenes of the production, and that most of the actors would embody a different character each time, a strategy which seemed to indicate an open-ended approach to casting often characteristic of devising environments. However, there soon was a sense among the ensemble members that the improvisatory work led by Arden constituted a probationary phase during which actors were expected to compete for key roles, a “tried and true” method more reminiscent of commercial theatre than of collaborative experiments.

Beyond scriptwriting and casting issues, the directorial approach itself hinged upon a conception of ensemble that promoted “hard work” and resilience rather than a sense of trust in the group’s ability to shape the piece in unforeseeable and provocative ways. The *Interruptions* ensemble had agreed to an intensive three-month-long rehearsal process that involved working every evening throughout the week and all day long on weekends. Participation in this project therefore depended upon an unusual time commitment from all the U.C. Davis students involved, a commitment made particularly difficult when Arden began gradually to increase the workload beyond the initial production schedule. Not only did this overextension of the group’s energy undermine the overall progress of rehearsals, but it became particularly counterproductive as Arden, who frequently extolled efficient and productive “ensemble work” in her pep-talks to the cast, continued to spend a substantial portion of rehearsal time

on basic exercises such as tossing balls around in a circle and playing tag. Along with the Lecoq-based physical training led by Arden, these group activities had initially fostered a positive sense of play, dynamism, and confidence among participants; however, such ensemble-building exercises became redundant as time went on since they lacked direct applicability to the scene work, which consequently progressed at an alarmingly slow pace.

By the end of the three months leading to the creation of *Interruptions*, the authority exerted by Jeffreys upon his own text and the competitiveness sustained by Arden during rehearsals, while having remained tacit aspects of the creative process, had generated palpable tensions within the ensemble, so that the general feeling among the cast was unfortunately one of frustrated exhaustion. The last few weeks felt like a mad rush to the finish line, underscored by the ensemble's anxieties about whether or not it was ready to deliver a compelling enough theatre piece. Given the unusually long rehearsal process for a student production, and the international reputation of the two British artists, there was an unspoken sense that any of the difficulties encountered during rehearsal must somehow be due to the actors' own inadequacies. If the show wasn't "successful," the spectators would surely place the onus for its failure on the ensemble, since all the right ingredients had been selected for the making of *Interruptions*, from the political dimension of the project to the Lecoq-based direction, not to mention the presence of an established contemporary playwright sitting in on rehearsals.

Reviewing the *Interruptions* program notes did little to alleviate the insecurities of the actors prior to opening night. Although the project had initially been presented as largely ensemble-driven, as is the case with Théâtre de Complicité productions, Arden qualified her work with the U.C. Davis students by writing: "You cannot create an ensemble in three months. You can only give a glimpse of what such a process might entail. In particular, it involves endless repetition of sequences, with attention to minute detail" (n.p.). Arden explained that the creative process underlying this piece, although inspired by the approach developed by Théâtre de Complicité, differed from it in significant ways: "My work as an actor and director with *Théâtre de Complicité* was centered on the idea of an ensemble. [. . .] Most of *Complicité's* shows are adapted from existing texts and come into being through a painstaking process of improvisation and revision. *Interruptions* is unusual in that it is a play specifically written for an ensemble group. Consequently, much of the work a company like *Complicité* might do in rehearsal has already been done by the playwright" (n.p.). Indeed, since the text used in *Interruptions* was a work-in-progress rather than a montage of pre-existing texts, the writing process itself took, to some extent, precedence over the ensemble's process.

While these remarks emphasized the pivotal role of the playwright and director over that of the ensemble (the latter reduced to one of attentive and patient repetition), they simultaneously cautioned the spectator that, given time constraints beyond the director's control, he might catch only a few of the creative sparks usually generated by the process of devising theatre. A salient contradiction thus emerged from these program notes: while the risks pertaining to devising had been kept to a minimum by Arden through her choice to anchor the project in Jeffreys's writing, and while the responsibility of the composition of the piece itself clearly lay with the playwright and director, Arden nevertheless accounted for any foreseeable shortcomings in the production by present-

ing them in advance as necessarily due to the difficulties linked to the collaborative ensemble work specific to devising. In other words, in spite of the artistic precautions taken by Arden and Jeffreys, the director seemed to be suggesting that, in the end, devising was just too unreliable within the context of a university production. Such concern with the final product indicates that a discrepancy existed between Arden's expectations about devising, rooted in her experience with Théâtre de Complicité, and the theatre piece obtained over a three-month rehearsal period. This is unfortunate, as it would certainly have been extremely unfair to both Arden and the actors to have expected anything more from such an endeavor than an inspiringly provocative experiment. However, if comparing *Interruptions* with the work produced by Théâtre de Complicité certainly isn't warranted, I would submit that it is legitimate to critically assess the approach taken by Arden and Jeffreys when working at U.C. Davis. Much more than the quality of the public performances themselves, it is the making of *Interruptions* that, from my perspective as a member of the ensemble, raises fundamental questions about the very function and purpose of devising within the academy.

Hearing Lepage's address a few days after the closing of *Interruptions* convinced me that the Canadian director's conception of devising would most likely be more beneficial to a university setting than the model created, however unwittingly, by Arden and Jeffreys. Indeed, Lepage envisions collaborative work as necessarily challenging theatre practitioners to resist the temptation of premeditation. He stresses that the writer's and director's visions must not take precedence over the delicate process of collective creation, a process which, when appropriately guided by the director, enables both the form and the content of the piece to gradually unfold. Lepage hence considers devising as an artistic exploration, in the course of which everyone involved—whether director, actor, or spectator—might learn to cherish the plurality of perspectives, experiences, and interpretations that distinguishes provocative collaborative work from more conventional modes of production.

In contrast to this conception, Arden and Jeffreys's pre-planning of *Interruptions* prior to any involvement of the actors disengaged the cast from the creative process. Consequently, the ensemble was much less invested in the project's development and outcome than were the director and playwright. Moreover, the guarded approach to writing adopted by Jeffreys, as well as the regimented and competitive aspect of the rehearsals under Arden's direction, left much less room for input by the participants than one might have expected from a project initially presented as collaborative. Perhaps most significantly, however, the making of *Interruptions*, whose overall objective was to foreground the importance of social justice, community values, and solidarity, failed to foster during rehearsals an atmosphere of unconditional trust and creative generosity among those called upon to fulfill this objective on stage. One was therefore left to ponder what this production could have been, had it emerged from a more truly collaborative artistic endeavor.

I learned from this experience that claims to devised theatre do not necessarily guarantee productive collective work and shared authorship, and that such claims, when made within the academy, inevitably raise questions about supervision, guidance, and evaluation. The collaborative nature of the process-oriented ensemble work specific to devised theatre requires enthusiasm, discipline, and endurance, as well as faith in the group's ability to face the many

challenges of bringing an artistic project to maturity. Although good intentions do not necessarily make for good devising, it is nevertheless crucial to collectively define the overall philosophy of devising as well as the working conditions and production objectives that will shape the collaborative process. A theatre group is a microcosm of society; as with any community, relationships between the individual members deeply influence the working atmosphere, the organizational and artistic decisions that must be made throughout the rehearsal process, and the overall tenor of the project being developed. Therefore, when introducing students to devising, it is not only necessary to address carefully the expectations, anxieties, and desires that surface when engaging in this type of work, but it is also essential to consistently encourage participants to allow the contingencies of collaboration to inform and enrich their experience of the creative process.

Asking for the Moon

The dilemma with which the advocates of devising are faced when working from within the academy lies in having to convince students and colleagues that the delights of devising far outweigh the obstacles, pitfalls, and challenges of a practice hinging upon indeterminacy of outcome. When trying to make a case for devised theatre, it is therefore critical to foreground the utopian dimension of collectively created work, inasmuch as devising reflects the desire to engage in a mutual endeavor whose goal is the active involvement of each participant in the overall process. From this perspective, the teaching of devising exposes students to the broader existential question of how human beings can learn to live and work together—a question that has perhaps never before been endowed with so much urgency. The provocatively utopian view that theatre education can achieve much more than preparing students to join an increasingly precarious professional world was powerfully expressed by Zbigniew Cynkutis, a former member of Grotowski's Laboratory Theatre, when he called for a reform of American theatre programs in the mid-'80s.

In a controversial article entitled "To Be or To Have" in the Fall 1994 issue of *TDR*, Cynkutis offers a blueprint for the reconfiguration of theatre programs into "Departments of Active Culture." Written by the Polish actor in 1983 while a visiting professor at Hamilton College in Clinton, New York,¹ this impassioned manifesto envisions theatre as a powerful educational tool, yet deplores the fact that "too often professional training programs in colleges and universities teach performance skills—voice, movement, speech, tai chi, acrobatics, etc.—without teaching students how to develop a creative process, how to find inspiration from a variety of sources beyond the technical requirements of the acting profession" (54). Cynkutis contends that preparing students for the entertainment industry should be the task of special vocational schools, not universities. He insists that academic theatre programs must not become "trade schools" that train students "as sales people with marketing strategies for selling their particular bag of tricks" (54), but must focus instead on helping students search for "values that are independent of what is critically fashionable or commercially viable" (54). The Polish actor stresses the particular responsibility of theatre educators, whom he states should teach students to "develop self-discipline, distinguish between performance product and creative process, between productive and destructive compromise, and encourage them to find their own

creative fulfillment irrespective of the market place” (54). He proposes a reorganization of the ways in which theatre departments function by substituting “special performance projects unrestricted by arbitrary time constraints” for the usual season of departmental productions, which he finds “of dubious quality” and considers to be “engineered as attempts at pseudo-professionalism or public relations” (55). Cynkutis suggests that in a hypermaterialistic society driven by consumerism, competition, and greed, artistic practice constitutes a “human resource” (54) that is invaluable. He declares:

Personally, I feel that we have entered a historical period of extreme danger not only to life but to culture and society as well. [. . .] Lack of wisdom, in such times, leads to social catastrophes on a global scale. Today, we are facing not only social catastrophes, but also the threat of ecological cataclysm. [. . .] The legacy of a people is not measured in military or economic power but rather in moral strength and wisdom. And when I speak of moral strength, I do not mean sets of values or ethics imposed on others; I mean, one’s sense of self-respect. Self-knowledge, self-discipline, and self-respect lift the quality of human relations to a high level and promotes tolerance of other peoples’ values. [. . .] By investigating and creating educational programs [based on] the source-values from which life-carrying processes draw their energy [. . .] we may activate a development of consciousness, discipline, responsibility, courage, and independence on the part of our students. (51, 54, 56)

These words resonate poignantly as I reread this article a full decade after its publication. The reasons why devised theatre matters today seem to me to be precisely the same as those invoked by Cynkutis in 1983. In fact, we are now in the process of experiencing the very catastrophes and cataclysms Cynkutis predicted with uncanny foresight. Today, his call for a reappraisal of how we make and teach theatre, unheeded twenty years ago, echoes as an even lonelier cry in the wilderness of academia.

At the time, Cynkutis’s proposal was acknowledged as “far-seeing and demanding” (50) but deemed impractical by the administration of Hamilton College, even though he cogently argued that investigating “the creative process of performance [. . .] for its educational value [was] certainly no more suspect than, say, preparing students for the acting profession in which they [had] little hope of being employed” (55). With American theatre departments currently battling budget cuts in arts education, this type of sweeping reform still appears untenable. Whereas the integration of devising into the curriculum might seem similarly unfeasible, I would contend that it is precisely the utopian dimension of alternative approaches such as those of Lepage and Cynkutis that can make theatre in higher education a privileged site for the development of consciousness, responsibility, courage, and independence.

What is perhaps most striking about the perspective offered by Lepage during his 2001 U.C. Davis talk is that it powerfully resonates with that of Cynkutis, even though their artistic work is rooted in very different life experiences and cultural legacies. Indeed, both envision the investigation of performance processes as a way of cognition or a form of wisdom that reaches far beyond conventional conceptions of theatre making, and both emphasize the necessity of searching for values other than those manufactured by commercial

theatre. Cynkutis contends that theatre practice should foster a sense of self-respect, which he sees as the necessary condition for respecting others, while Lepage stresses the necessity to trust the intuitive and associative processes that connect people engaged in mutual creative endeavor.

Joseph Chaikin, who may be considered one of the pioneers of devising in America, similarly declares in *The Presence of the Actor*: “We are joined to each other by forces. These forces are of two kinds. The first are observable political-social forces which move irrevocably through all of us who are alive at the same time in history. We are further joined by other forces: unanswerable questions to do with being alive at all. [. . .] In effect we are joined to each other (and all living creatures) by what we don’t understand” (12). As with Cynkutis and Lepage, Chaikin suggests that performance may enable actors and spectators to gain access to the unknown, or to what Lepage names the impalpable. Kirsten Hastrup, an anthropologist who collaborated with Eugenio Barba’s Odin Teatret on *Talabot*, likewise envisions “the lived body as a path of access,” and suggests that performance hinges upon a form of “embodied creativity” which “takes the spectator into the unknown lands *of his own* experience” (84). This embodied creativity is pivotal to the process-oriented approaches endorsed by Chaikin, Cynkutis, and Lepage. It is through the performer’s labor of embodiment, a life-long learning process once identified by Zeami as the art of cultivating the mind-body connection, that she renders this visceral and spiritual path accessible to others.

I therefore submit that utopian performatives can be fostered by models of devised theatre that challenge practitioners and educators to test the value of creative work as a human resource. From this perspective, devising becomes not an end in itself but a powerful tool for the activation of the life-carrying processes identified by Cynkutis as pivotal to artistic practice. The danger and promise inherent in devising thus lie in its transformative properties. As noted by Dolan, “a successful, transformative performance is always a ‘doing’ that catapults an audience into a no-place of possibility, where we might gladly expect the unexpected” (“Finding” 515). When we choose to familiarize theatre students with devising, we empower them to discover for themselves what the potentialities of such an alternative approach may be. As they cultivate their embodied creativity, experience the infinite resources of collaborative work, and learn to expect the unexpected, students might indeed be transformed in the process. They might not only come to question canonical definitions of theatre and form new expectations about the function of artistic practice, but perhaps even go so far as to transform our own conception of the role of theatre education.

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Note

1. Cynkutis's proposal, translated and edited by William H. Shepard, was addressed in 1983 to Edwin B. Barret, chair of the Hamilton College Department of Theatre and Dance. It was rejected by the administration, and Cynkutis returned to Poland in June 1984, where he assumed leadership of the Laboratory Theatre (renamed The Second Studio of Wrocław) in the wake of the official breakup of the company, which had taken place in January 1984. Cynkutis was killed in a car accident in January 1987. In the editorial note to the *TDR* publication of Cynkutis's text in 1994, Shepard specifies that it was Richard Schechner's 1992 ATHE conference keynote address, "A New Paradigm for Theatre in the Academy," that inspired him to submit "To Be or To Have" for publication. He writes: "I have retrieved Cynkutis's remarks and re-edited them for the purpose of adding another voice to Schechner's revolutionary call for a reevaluation of our educational systems for theatre in higher education. At a time when world cultural, social, and political systems are experiencing unprecedented change, can we afford to do otherwise?" (50).

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