

## DEvised WORK RESOURCE

### Part I. What is Devising?

#### **Defining (or Un-defining) Devising**

In order to respond to devised work it is important to have some kind of definition of what it is. Our problem is that it is very difficult, if not impossible to demarcate something that, by its very nature, is outside of clear boundaries. Because of its intrinsic multi/inter/transdisciplinarity, as well as its compulsion to redefine itself with every work, devising and devisers are comfortable in this realm of non-definability. Devising is a continually morphing way of working which makes it a continually growing and changing practice. Essentially, Devising should not be a practice that can be clarified or crystallized in form or content because it should re-inventing itself with every work, with expanding and growing possibilities, and with ever-changing language and unlimited ways of creating performance.

#### **Locating History**

While we cannot “define” Devising, what we can do is respond from an informed perspective by locating Devising in theatrical/artistic/creative history to understand its underpinnings. Devising is a fairly new, 21<sup>st</sup> century term for the phenomenon of multi-disciplined performative collisions that have taken an interesting journey during throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. If we were to list the labels that have been applied to performance that eludes traditional text-based, or music based (opera and musical theatre) parameters, we would find a plethora of names. The first Futurist performances were called “Evenings” or “Soirées”, followed quickly by the Dadaist movement labeling their work “Cabaret’s”. There were then, through early 20<sup>th</sup> century, “avant garde” performances and “absurdist” theatre. Innovators John Cage and Merce Cunningham used indeterminacy to create “Chance” performance, which greatly influenced the “Happenings” originated by Alan Kaprow, and popular in the 1960’s. In Europe “Dance Theatre” productions evolved as directors/choreographers went through a phase of labeling their own work. Here we find such terms as: “Choreographic Theatre”, “*danceteatre*”. In America performances based loosely on plays or stories were called “Adaptations”, while productions created from scratch from an idea were call “Original”. All of these kinds of works and ways of working are part of the Devised Performance history. The term “devised” started appearing in the late 1960’s, but has become a predominant part of performative jargon in the past 10 year. I actually find it convenient to have a label to latch onto that serves as a term for what is working for us today. So for now, as the processes and perspectives converge in practice our term is “Devised Performance” or Devised Theatre”.

#### **Considering Elements of Devising**

From these underpinnings (undefinability and rich history) we can then layout some qualities or values of Devising as a place to locate, consider and discuss a devised work with performers/students.

## 1. On Text

Devised work cannot be responded to in the same way as a typical play because devised work is not text central, it is not created to serve a script, narrative or linear story. The meaning is not located solely within the text. Rather Devised work is created to serve an idea or a concept. I find this chart helpful in understanding the thinking about relocating text and Devised work:

Traditional Text-Centered ways of working	Ways that text is relocated from center with respect to Devised performance
Theatre of story, narrative	Theatre of ideas, non-narrative
Script	Texts, contexts, words
Language	Words, sounds, abstracted, dissolving, repetition...
Meaning is in the text	Meaning is created through a balance of words, visual, sonic, and kinesthetic elements....
Process is conventionalized	Process grows from ensemble created vocabulary
Linear narrative, story	Ideas, artifacts, stories
Through-line	Multiplex system
Illustrative	Demonstrative
Character	Self, performer, figure, icon, archetype...
Subtext	Context
Psychology	Mood, tone, image, resonance
Meaning is prescribed through a linear, thematic coherence	Meaning is explored, changed, deconstructed and exploded
Spectators observe from outside	Spectators are empowered to construct
Hierarchical directorial process	Collaborative ensemble creation
Dramaturge answers questions	Dramaturge asks questions

## 2. Trading Tools –or- Considering other Qualities or Elements of Devising

In addition to relocating text away from center, Devised performance has particularly asserted its inventiveness through the interplay of conceptual and formal compositional elements from non-theatre disciplines: sound, lighting, visual design, architecture, voice, dance, kinesthesia, sound, music, ritual, etcetera. In devising performance, the tools of creating in one medium are easily used or translated to other mediums in a violent act of deconstruction and reconstruction. For example if we are working with text, that text can become fodder for movement instead of spoken word; or the text can become a sonic element. Compositional elements in architecture can become compositional elements in dance. Devising artists creatively integrate and arrange movement as if it were architectural space, or sound. The body on the stage can become a visual or imagistic element as if it were painting or sculpture. So finding the musicality in movement, finding the

movements in voice, finding the voice in the architecture... all of these disciplinary strategies are practically and oftentimes interchanged in working processes.

Devising has freely appropriated ideas and conventions from disciplines of art, music, dance, theatre, media, and even outside the arts as such scientific innovations to create. Essentially we can look at a Devised work as a multiplex system of compositional elements from multiple disciplines. What is important here, is that these compositional elements can be given space to have voice and power as long as the text is relocated from center. If the working environment has allowed for it, and the "playing field" has remained horizontal, the Devised work then becomes a rich conversation between various compositional elements.