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DEVISED THEATRE AND COLLABORATION

How do individual actors become a collaborating group during

a devising process?

Giggles and insecurity characterised the 19 high school students I sat among when we, in correspondence with my master's project, were to present a show together. The group was hesitant towards the subject and each other, and reluctant to partici-pate in a production platform they had no experience with. 5 months later, they were on stage with the heartwarming performance „Identity through the ages" - about how challenging it is to be yourself. Several students expressed that they had been involved in creating something that was „bigger than themselves".

How do individual participants become a collaborative group in a devising process?

Devising is collaboration

When you devise theatre, you make something together from the beginning. You often start with an idea or a form of stimulus, which can be anything from a text or a word to an object, phenomenon, image or whatever (Heddon & Milling, 2016). Community theatre, collective creation and 'from idea to performance' are examples of how Norwegians define devising. But in my experience, the essence of devising is about more than what these definitions manage to capture. It is about the people behind the idea and how the idea sparks a theme through collaboration. To devise is to collaborate.

The phases and conditions of devising

The collaborative devising process from an idea to a performance can be intense, confusing and complex. The work roles are more fluid than in a traditional theatre production, and tasks are rarely performed in the „correct order". Despite the un-predictable nature of devising, I would say that the process can be systematised into three phases: material development, material composition and staging of the material.

But the success of the phases is not unconditional. In a collaborative process, the ensemble is jointly responsible for the final product. All members are responsible for everything that happens between the origin of the idea and the content of the pre-miere. Therefore, it is very beneficial that each member is engaged and committed to the project, and not least that the ensemble maintains a strong collectivity. Through my master's thesis, I found that collectivity, engagement and commitment are the cornerstones of a devising project. They are necessary to keep the project steady throughout the process. If one of the pillars fails, the other two are affected, and then the project is in danger of collapsing.

Collectivity

The feeling of a common ownership of the finished product is often something a de-vising ensemble can experience. The production platform is democratic and the aim is for the entire ensemble to contribute with their individual competence in an equal environment. In other words, the creation takes place in a meeting with the rest of the ensemble. Not as a combination of predetermined elements, but rather a fusion of ideas and engagement.

Devised theatre is a contemporary reflection of culture and society (...) It is about the relationship of a group of people to their culture, the socio-political, artistic and eco-nomic climate, as well as issues or events surrounding them(...) Choice, opportunity and infinite possibility set devised theatre apart from conventional play text produc-tion (Oddey, 1994, s. 23).

That a group has solid collectivity is a fundamental element in being able to create devising theatre, because the origin of any collaborative performance is formed wit-hin the group while the material is being created (Oddey, 1994). In order to be able to create something as a group, one must therefore operate as one organism.

During the project with the students, it became clear that the collectiveness grew stronger from the first to the last day. In the material development phase, for example, it was difficult to get comments from the group and only a minority wanted to partake in the discussions. Instead of developing a material, many used the exercises I presented to impress their peers with internal humour. In other words, the collectiveness was aimed at the established class codes and not at the project, which blocked them from getting carried away in the creation. When I later alternated between individual work, group work and ensemble work, more people invested their energy into the project. Eventually, the students presented many suggestions for what story we wanted to tell, and when we went over to the composition phase, the group had collectively come up with the theme „Identity through the ages".

To further develop the concept, the students were divided into focus groups: text, design, music and movement, depending on which area of responsibility they wanted to contribute to. Elements from these groups were eventually sewn together, so that in the staging phase we had a script with a clear plan and vision for how the performance should be. The groups visited each other regularly to coordinate ideas. Everyone agreed with what we were trying to create, and several used the opportunity to make objections and alternative suggestions. The project had gained direction and the degree of active participation increased because the sense of ownership eventually arose in a collective sense.

Engagement

The students' involvement varied from phase to phase. During the composition phase, I made arrangements to maintain everyone's interest through, among other things, the focus groups. This partly ensured that the students participated based on self-interest. On the other hand, it became more difficult to monitor the involvement in the composition phase. Within the groups, I noticed that some took on the role of „free passengers" and left the work to the "drivers". Several of the free passengers were students who had skipped classes earlier and were, at this point, not very involved in the production. They may have found the task overwhelming or unattainable, and doubted their own ability to produce elements for the performance. Their lack of commitment and initiative reduced the diligent workers desire, and thus the whole group lost the motivation to create together. This was especially true for the text group, when one of the drivers, „Rita", asked to swap groups. She was among those who had the most ideas for the script, and I feared that the group would collapse without her. It turned out that the free passengers let the drivers decide, perhaps because they had no better suggestion themselves. Rita's frustration was understandable when she was practically left alone with the task without any real sparring partner, which is part of the point of the focus groups. Students should be able to toss an idea back and forth so that it can develop. As sparring did not materialise in the text group, the solution was to give a scene to each scriptwriter. This way, we got a skeleton of a script that everyone owned. It also became easier for the whole text group to get involved in stage transitions, as they now had insight into the motifs in scenes they had written themselves.

In the staging phase, the students were so self-directed that I was free to assist those who needed help instead of keeping the class focused. As the elements came into place, the students instructed each other depending on whether the focus was on

text, movement, music or design. However, we encountered several challenges, especially when it came to the school's scarce resources. As long as there was involvement in the group, an alternative solution always emerged when we together discussed the challenges. Many showed a willingness to go a little further for the project, for example by fixing things after school or bringing the necessary equipment from home. The desire to achieve this made the students far more solution-oriented than they had been during the development phase. It seemed that the participants had invested enough into the project to think that „if I am to be a part, it MUST be good". This way of thinking inspires creative solutions, and motivation to realise one's own vision of the project.

In devising projects, the ensemble must really want to create something together, something that engages and matters to them. If the starting point is engaging, the ideas can come fluently. And if the group collaborates, a theme will grow faster and stronger. The commitment ensures that the entire ensemble contributes where they can and to maintain the continuity of the project.

Commitment

There were many external obstacles for us in this identity project. For example, we often found ourselves without a decent space, and a group of 19 students need certain spacial requirements. We lost many hours at short notice, due to other events at the school, and suddenly the premiere was a week away. Something extraordinary happens when a premiere approaches, and everyone wanted the product to be ready, even though it felt like an impossible task. But the commitment was strong and the students worked hard and efficiently together in the final hours.

Of the three pillars, it was commitment that had the sharpest growth curve. Students being absent, which was frequent in the first two phases, decreased significantly when the script was staged. The students blamed illness, but my theory is that when the students understood how important they were to the project, and saw how something they themselves had created became important in the performance, they were motivated to follow the project to the end. They discovered that their presence was important to both the project and the ensemble.

One of the students who had a high rate of absence, ended up with one of the main roles, something he wanted. In this commitment, he climbed from grade 3 to 5, where 6 is top grade.

Collaboration and the individual participant

Commitment, engagement and collevitity are three pillars that must be present in order to build a successful devising project. The three pillars are equally dependent on each other. Without engagement, how can one manage to promise commitment? If you do not feel part of the ensemble, do you want to commit at all?

In a collaborative process, opportunities open up, allowing individual participants to add personal touches. The performance is shaped from the first to the last day, and it is rarely wrong or too late to make suggestions. The material is created in the moment, and the moments are diverse. The collaborative product is filled with the participants' thoughts and competence, thus each project is defined by the participants who create. Limits have not been set, giving room for everyone who wants to get involved. The devising process is kept afloat by the individual voices of the partici-

pants, and is driven forward when ideas and themes are digested in the collaborative community. The pillars make it easy for the participant to present their thoughts and ideas. The participants' voice shapes the performance. On this basis, every collaborative performance is unique.

The first time I met the 19 students, the class consisted of several small groups who were reluctant to stand alone in the crowd. As the premiere approached, the small groups ceased in favour of a large and inclusive collective who together helped each other through nerves and forgotten lines. Some of those who had high absences at the beginning of the process ended up staying after school to complete the project. For me, this was a sign that devising projects includes and motivates the community. Feeling important and part of something bigger is something most of us want when we create something with others.

References
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