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A Postmodernist Look at Devised Theatre and its Pedagogical Applications

Dramatic Theory Research Paper

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An understanding of current cultural theory can help us to better understand how we connect with the world. As a teacher it is especially beneficial as it will help to engage students by understanding what the current cultural values may be. Culturally we have entered into a postmodern era. When it comes to the world of theatre education, traditional scripted work is no longer fully satisfactory for experiencing contemporary theatre. Instead, teachers are exploring new methods for introducing theatre into the lives of today's youth. This paper will explore the postmodern form of ensemble devising and its potential pedagogical applications.

Devised theatre is a form of ensemble and physical theatre combined with elements of improvisation. “[Devising] is the process of inventing material for performance together, including scene and script work, choreography, narrative structures, and design elements” (Robinson, 9). It is a unique process and each devising company has their own way of going about the creation of a show. An example process could be starting with a small prompt, like a location, and creating physical pictures from that prompt or improvising scenes that will then be worked on and expanded into a larger work. “Devised performances rarely rely solely on dramatic realism...They are as likely to use dance phrases, abstract gesture, song, puppetry, video, and design elements as narratives rather than scripts” (Robinson, 13). The variety and open endedness of this form is what makes it potentially beneficial for educational use, especially in a postmodern society.

To begin, let's consider how devised theatre exemplifies the postmodern cultural perspective that we are a part of today. Postmodernism begins with an understanding of the modern, “...the condition, the characteristic patterns, of the modern world” (Fortier, 144). The rise of such fields as science and technology as well as the vast urbanization and increased

population led to major changes in the human experience, shifting to a focus on individualism and nationalism at the core of a person's values. Modernism is the study of how society responded to life in the modern. Postmodernism addresses how our society has changed since. While the areas of advancement may not have changed from the modern era, the speed of the advancements have. The internet has simultaneously made everyone and everything available to us at once which has concurrently made us more connected and more isolated. The percentage of people dealing with depression or anxiety has greatly increased, and there is a growing concern for not belonging. While the individual is still the core concern, now there is a more universal need for diversity and inclusion. With this background devised theatre has the opportunity to thrive.

Devising theatre is not a new concept. The players in the woods of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* were taking part in some devising under the direction of Bottom. However, the cultural outlook of postmodernism truly allows devised works to shine. This is shown first through French theorist Jean-François Lyotard's views on postmodernism: "In place of master narratives, Lyotard posits micro-narratives and language games, performability over truth, plurality over unity, exchange over legitimation" (Fortier 146). The inclusion of multiple viewpoints and a variety of narratives is one of the key aspects of ensemble devising. "The notion of group is the singularly most important element of devised theatre" (Murray, 45). Working as a group, collaborating and meshing ideas will naturally result in the destruction of the "master narrative" as Lyotard puts it. "Working with an ensemble is a way of being in touch with the infinite. Watching a great ensemble perform, or being part of a group that spends time training together to become a fine-tuned organism, creating worlds triggered by memory, family,

geography, nature, and images from the fantastic to the mundane, is a way of defining who we are as people and what we can do as artists” (Robinson, 11).

The Italian theorist Gianni Vattimo insists on the absence of truth in the postmodern: a sense of thinking with no deeper regard to any universal sense of truth. As with Lyotard’s exclusion of master narrative, working as an ensemble naturally makes a singular truth impossible. Every person in the group comes from a different background and will therefore have their own truth to tell. “In devised theatre the group should be an environment where individual difference is celebrated” (Murray, 45).

The Canadian theorist Linda Hutcheon focuses on the self-reflection, self awareness, and irony present in postmodern thought. There are multiple ways these ideas are present in devising. “When an ensemble decides to create an original show or radically restage a script, it enters into the world of ‘devising’” (Robinson, 9). When ensembles restage other work in new ways, they are being referential to the original work. When creating new work it is essential to use personal experience for reference. Additionally, the idea of “a show that lives and dies with the people who created it” (Robinson, 18) is self aware in a poignantly postmodern way.

The combination of pluralism with self reflection accurately articulates the postmodern condition of individualism and a need for belonging. This paradox of identity leads to reflection and references to the past and to times where personal and societal identity seemed simpler. The American theorist and Marxist Fredric Jameson blames this postmodern predicament on the repercussions of capitalism and commodification. A form such as devising where the focus is on the process rather than the end product systematically defies what capitalism represents. The process itself also takes time, potentially without pay, a commercial risk capitalists would not

make. “Devising usually requires a period of time to develop an idea, a period of time to develop the expressive techniques, and a period of time to workshop, test-run, design, build, and polish the show for the public” (Robinson, 17). “It is a much more disorienting and intuitive way of working than starting from a script...Patience, comfort with chaos, willingness to think outside the box, physical risk, creative joy, and non-literal/non-linear thinking are some of the skills [necessary]” (Robinson, 12-13). Partaking in experimental work such as this where there is a great possibility that the show will not turn a profit requires a truly postmodern spirit of disregarding the expectations of capitalism. It requires a value in the opportunities for expression it offers over the conventional idea of success through monetary gain. “A laboratory atmosphere of experimentation is a core value of ensemble work...It helps you learn as an artist what you have to say and how best to say it” (Robinson, 11).

Finally, the postmodern condition is summarized best with the following predicament: “...tradition and the longing for certainty are bound up with a deep cultural and formal scepticism” (Fortier, 151). Devising provides the opportunity to explore this dichotomy. Whether through realism and standard narrative structures or through creating something never seen before, the process of creation allows the ensemble of artists to explore different perspectives on topics that are typically difficult to approach. “The group will benefit...as much from producing an absurd piece of non-narrative theatre as they will from producing a piece which is inspired by their own common issue” (Murray, 46).

Postmodern ideas are fundamentally at the core of what ensemble devising is. Educationally, it would then make sense to use this postmodern form in curriculum, since it will culturally connect with what students experience. Only furthering the argument of devised

theatre's benefits in a postmodern world, its pedagogical applications are themselves results of postmodern ideas.

The first major contribution devising has to offer to an educational program is its uses in capacity building. "Capacity building' means increasing an individual's capacity to explore healthy feelings, possibilities, strengths, knowledge, actions, and choices within themselves" (Murray, 46). Recall the postmodern paradigm has a substantial focus on the individual within the society and with self awareness and reference. Therefore there is a great need for developments in self improvement, specifically in communication. "The Devised theatre process can be used as a means of refocusing and developing one's capacities." (Robinson, 20). Devising, due to it being a collaborative form, builds on an individuals ability to communicate ideas, healthily share emotions, empathize with others, and realize the impact of their own actions. Increasing a students sense of self will help them to effectively communicate and help others and themselves more successfully. "Drama, dealing as it does with immediate situations in daily life, enlarges concepts of character and so deepens perceptions of oneself and others" (Heikkinen, 32). In our postmodern culture, capacity building and especially the self independence that comes with the skills of self expression and articulation become essential. "We must educate children and youth to become competent members of a critical culture. This cannot be done by discipline, love, or information alone - children and youths must be helped to find ways to express their voice" (Heikkinen, 32).

This transitions into the next pedagogical application of ensemble devising: the opportunity for unrestricted creativity. There is a need for unlimited creativity in today's postmodern world because of its outcry against absolute truths and capitalism. The future for art

is to be uniquely original in approaches and thinking. Jobs in all fields look for applicants that can think outside the box, and opportunities for exploring pure creativity will be beneficial for developing these creative skills. Devising allows students to say and do whatever their imagination can come up with. There are no limitations or imposed structures on the group. This especially has potential for children with hyperactive tendencies who are made to sit still and remain quiet in traditional educational settings. Devising allows a physical and mental outlet for children to do and say whatever they want while still being a part of a semi-structured setting.

To clarify what is meant by semi-structured: all ensembles have leaders, otherwise it would be unlikely that anything would ever really get done. However, the leaders are not dictators or decision makers. Rather they are facilitators of ideas. “The devising process is essentially a negotiation process between all members of the group” (Murray, 44). The leader’s function is to ensure all voices get heard and they mediate if any conflicts arise. “The teaching and leading should come in how time is managed, how prompts are parcelled out, how the work gets organized, and in keeping everyone motivated to make their best work possible” (Robinson, 16). The leaders are not there to impose any limits on the students other than ensuring that communication between each other is respectful. “Theatre is essentially about freedom, not constraint; exploration, not confinement; and honesty not pretension” (Murray, 45). The opportunity for a student to share their creativity unfettered with their peers is incredibly valuable, but the opportunity to fully explore their creativity with an adult role model can be even more beneficial developmentally. Relationships are key, and by creating an atmosphere of equality regardless of age or experience will allow students, especially those who struggle with

authority, to flourish. “At its core ensemble work exists as a dynamic collaborative process that gives everyone a chance to contribute to a living, organic work of art” (Robinson, 14).

An understanding of each other is another crucial learning opportunity that devising provides. With a postmodern world that rejects singular master narratives, the ability to understand others and exposure to differing viewpoints is crucial. “At its core ensemble work exists as a dynamic collaborative process that gives everyone a chance to contribute to a living, organic work of art” (Robinson, 14). In devising, “[Actors] are the building blocks that form the material for any ensemble piece...personal failure and vulnerability are a necessary part of the process” (Robinson, 19). With everyone contributing their own personal experiences, there will be many opportunities for learning about one another. “No one is perfect; flaws are often the root of some of the best material. But a generosity of spirit and ability to take and give feedback objectively is mandatory for all” (Robinson, 20). This unifying aspect of devising is unique in its prospects for teaching students empathy for one another. This atmosphere provides the opportunity to learn to communicate and collaborate with differing world views in healthy and respectful ways. The devising group engages “...through the depicted imaginary world...in which [they] can meet and confront one another as [they] examine an issue or phenomenon from a range of perspectives, modify views and perhaps expand individual standpoints to incorporate those of others” (Heikkinen, 34). Though devising is not meant as a conflict mediation tool, in a pedagogical atmosphere it could be used to teach about different cultural beliefs in a more engaging and non-threatening way.

Adding on to these benefits of devised theatre, there are also some well known benefits for teaching theatre in general. “Drama is a teaching method of enhancing gains in cognitive



competences, affective properties, and psychomotor skills” (Pekdemir and Akyol, 143). Much like with devised theatre, “The main purpose of drama, which allows children to travel between the real and imaginary worlds, is to raise individuals who are creative in all fields, self-sufficient, self-aware, able to establish and develop communication with one’s environment, and with enhanced ability and forms of self-expression” (Pekdemir and Akyol, 144). Devised theatre enhances these goals of drama education in how it fundamentally connects with postmodern ideals, whereas a traditional golden age musical for example may not. “Ensemble theatre may never take the place of the ‘classic’ plays that have been performed for decades. Yet, the school boards and principles, teachers and students, parents and communities who have seen first hand the fruits that this type of experience can bear for everyone involved will no longer need to be convinced of its validity or place in the theatre cannon” (Feffer, 51).

From a cultural perspective of postmodernism, devised theatre has great potential pedagogically. It connects to postmodern ideals in ways that traditional scripted work cannot in its capacity for pluralism, self-awareness, and unlimited creativity and experimentation. The life skills and capacities devising theatre build is indispensable and valuable to any postmodern educational programming. Though it may never reach the same commercial success of traditional work in our current capitalist society, it stands to only greten the benefits already presented by teaching drama to youth.

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