Theater Outside the Box: Devised Work

February 19ᵗʰ & 20ᵗʰ, 2010

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"What Are They Talking About?" The Devised Work Convening
by David Dower
Next weekend we'll be completing the Convening Trifecta here, with the gathering of people engaged in the development, production, presentation, and touring of devised work. Here's a [long] introduction to the conversation we'll be having over the two days.

This conversation will build on a whole range of discussions that have been taking place in a variety of settings over the past several years.

So much of the discussion in the #newplay sector focuses on the systems and resources for playwrights in the development of new work. Which is logical and necessary. And yet, there's an increasing amount of work that is created through processes that don't fall so easily into the frame of "Playwright At Work" . This work is often neither aiming for-- nor suited to-- traditional production processes either. Frequently it is built in rehearsal, often it is designed to tour, generally it can only be performed by the people who created it (at least initially-- The Laramie Project certainly transcended this limitation early in its production life). As a result, the systems and resources that are aimed at advancing new work for the American theater are generally challenged by, or irrelevant to, companies and artists that are working in the [very] loosely defined terrain of "devised work".

I've written elsewhere about the 2002 gathering in Portland organized by TCG, with the support of the Duke and Mellon Foundations, where so much of my journey in #newplays was set. This was the first time I'd ever heard presenters talk about their challenges in supporting new works. What now seems like a blizzard of conferences, intiatives, and convenings followed where people tried to wrestle with ways to improve the picture for touring works and the artists who make them. Outrageous Fortune spotlights one that I created through Z Space, in partnership with 10 West Coast presenters: The Western Presenters Commissioning Initiative. Though it's run its course, it was an early attempt to align the artists, a play lab (Z Space), a small group of producers, and 10 presenters around the commissioning, development, production, and touring of new plays.

There were many challenges for the WPCI, some of which we navigated, some of which we ran aground on. But it was exhilarating to try. And it proved the basic point, which is that alignment is both possible (among people of good will and shared purpose) and necessary in terms of designing effective processes for this work.

The needs at each stage of a work's evolution change and no single organization has the resources, expertise, or focus to deliver on every one of them.

At the outset, the needs are very basic: people creating a piece together need to get in the same room. Space, over time, is the first frontier. Many of the companies gathering next weekend in DC have that wired, but for many upstarts and one-off multi-city collaborations it remains a basic obstacle. [We heard the same from the musical theater artists we gathered in 2008, btw. They have a devil of a time finding ways to be in the room with a piano together. Got a room? Got a piano? You've got an important resource for them...] While for a playwright it is often not ideal to write from home, it is still possible. Or from a library or a coffee shop. For people devising work, a library or a living room is really not an option. (OK, I can hear Ellie

Covan of Dixon Place now: "I started Dixon Place in my own kitchen!" Or was it your living room? In any event, it was her apartment and not just the artists were in there but the audience was too!)

But not too far into the process, things begin to accumulate and space is no longer the only thing the devising artists need. There are materials. There are often other media that become part of the exploratory process. Process management becomes more elaborate and time consuming and, ideally, there's some sort of support for that part of the journey.

At many points, for many companies, an audience is required. Doesn't have to be a big one. And it shouldn't be the same one that will ultimately be the audience for the finished piece unless they are an audience engaged in process. But too often, to this day, the only available audience for these companies is the audience brought to the work through a presenter devoted to the new. These are intrepid, fierce advocates for contemporary theater artists and they knock themselves out to create opportunity for the work. They try to create context for the audience-- explaining the fact that its process they're seeing, not polish. They make Fringe Festivals to cradle the risk. They create residencies to try to ground the artists and projects in their communities. They work in consortia so that there are multiple opportunities for the artists to develop the work. Really, they are working hard.

But they often find that the work is unfinished. And how could it not be? Playwrights who move into production have a process of weeks of rehearsal and whatever production resources the theater company has to support the play's debut. And even with that it is the rare play that finds its finished self in the first or even second production. Presenters are not producers. One of the easiest-to-grasp definitions of the difference I've ever heard came from one of our hero-presenters: Mark Russell. At the time he was still at PS122. "If I'm a producer and your set needs green paint, I find the green paint and someone to paint it," he said. "If I'm a presenter and your set needs green paint, I give you directions to the closest paint store." The presumption being that the production of the piece he is presenting was the responsibility of the company who took the gig.

And the artists can't skip the part of the process where the project actually gets produced. Many artists try to supply that themselves, and stories abound of the artists who have gone into deep debt trying to complete a commissioned project in time for its premiere presentation. Debt and self-producing are not the exclusive domain of the devised work tribe. But we're talking, next weekend, with people who are past the start-up phase and still many of these companies struggle to create robust, productive productions of their new works before they are booking the tours. I'll be interested to hear from Kirk Lynn about what the Rude Mechanicals are doing around this and how it's working for them. I'll be interested to hear from SITI and Rainpan43, each of whom are experiencing the infrastructure in different ways. (OK, I'm a junkie for this stuff: I'll be jonesing to hear from all the participating companies!)

A gathering in 2004 brought leading producers and presenters together around the question of how to align the competencies, resources, and processes of each on behalf of American touring artists. It was a tense, fractious, and ultimately confusing two days. In retrospect, it was in part challenging because it had been organized by two major funders of the gathered and it seemed to pit one group against the other in a tussle over those foundations' dollars. This was not the frame in which it was called, nor was it the intention. But we clearly weren't ready to talk about alignment-- not ready to trust that it wasn't a zero-sum proposition: "if someone gets more we are going to necessarily get less".

Fast forward to late last year and a similar gathering in Boston. Five years has been good to this particular discussion. Again the room was populated with producers and presenters with

demonstrated commitment and capacity in supporting devised work. Many of them were the same organizations gathered in 2004, though not everyone from that conversation returned. This time, in contrast to the 2004 meeting, there was no tension, no jockeying for the spotlight, no kibbitzing in corners. People around the circle were there to actually talk about opportunities to partner. And there were many examples of successful partnerships that pointed the way to positive practice around this alignment. What was stunning was the final go around, in which producers and presenters shared with each other the lists of projects and artists they were most excited about working with. Consortia started to form around projects right in the room. And people who a few years earlier had held each other in the frame of "competitor" were suddenly seeing them as "partner".

When we gather this weekend, we will be trying to move the ball another ten yards downfield. Here are the questions we'll be focused on, if you want to start the party early...

Prompt 1-- Generative Artists
So much of the new play sector is organized around the needs of playwrights. What are the challenges facing you guys as you attempt to develop your work in this system? How do these structures support or hinder you in the process of making new work? What gaps in the infrastructure are you experiencing in the development path of your work?

Prompt 2 -- Producers/Presenters/Funders
You are all at work trying to support and advance this type of work. What challenges are you encountering in supporting devised work? What's working well? What's missing? What's confusing or confused?

Prompt 3-- Generative Artists/Presenters/Producers/Managers
There are a lot of questions swirling around the role of, and need for, dramaturgy in this sector. Presenters are often feeling they are presenting unfinished work, and that they lack the standing to talk about dramaturgy with the artists. Narrative structures are non-traditional, as are processes, and so dramaturgical techniques from text-based work may be challenging to apply. Can we talk about dramaturgy in the context of developing this work in the new play sector? How is it done? Who does it? When? Why?

Prompt 4-- Generative Artists/Presenters/Producers/Managers/Funders
Let's talk about the role of the audience in this sector. How, when, and why do you involve them in your process? What sort of influence does the potential audience have on what you make? What you program? Is there an audience for the finished product-- an audience for "outside the box"? Are you reaching them? Where and how? What do we know about them? What more do we need to know?