

## **Independent Theatres Network**

*One-Day Event at Warwick Arts Centre, 3 December 2005*

*Report on Sessions*

### **1. 'Meeting Needs Through Devised Work'**

*Session led by Nick Walker (Talking Birds)*

Nick posed the question: is there an opposition between text-based, and devised work?

The following report summarises some points from the discussion.

#### *Status of Devised Work*

There is a suspicion of devised work in some sectors (e.g. venues, some funding bodies). It is difficult for people to see beyond the notion of the single-authored text - which is still accorded a higher status, and more funding. Audiences, too, may see theatre in terms of the single-authored play.

There is, perhaps, a popular preference or prejudice in favour of *narrative*, and this may favour work by the single author. Devised work may be more image-based. There is a stronger tradition in Europe of companies working through images that have a visceral, 'gut' reaction.

#### *The Devising Process*

The devising process can be like a dysfunctional family. Companies may suffer from a desire to do *everything* themselves - without necessarily having the skills to do it. In the devising process, you may come to recognise a need to divide up the work, so everyone isn't trying to do a bit of everything.

#### *Structure*

The question was raised: *can* the devising process be completely collaborative, or does there have to be someone guiding the process, and structuring the final work - such as the director-auteur?

A company doing devised work may be able to shift its ground, and be more flexible, than you can be with a fixed 'text' by a single author. Devising companies have

the ability to shift creative territories, and move comfortably across art forms, thereby making them potentially more slippery and interesting.

At the same time, the writer brings skills of shaping and structuring the work, and a facility with language and dialogue. We may see structural flaws in some devised work.

## **2. 'Meeting Needs Through Text-Based Work'**

*Session led by Steve Johnstone*

Steve Johnstone began by asking: why do we want to work with writers?

### **Why?**

- Decide why you want a writer on the project.
- Will it be easier with them?
- Is it something you've done before, if not why not? If you have done it before but not for a while, what has stopped you?
- Do you really want to work with a writer, or will they get in the way?

*It was suggested that working with a writer will help to give the work a strong structure. With a short rehearsal time, a pre-existing text is a 'safe' starting point. Finally, the writer 'is an artist in their own right'*

In working with a writer, it is important to establish trust. The most important factor is defining the relationship and the responsibilities.

### **How?**

- How do you want to work with them, or in what way?
- Do you want a writer to work independently from you, producing a script and then coming back to you with a finished thing (or draft)?
- Do you want them to be part of the process you have of devising a play and then script from there?
- Have you got a story you want written, or a pile of material you've gathered through research that you want put into a form?
- Do you want a completed script or a framework on which you can develop the work through performance?
- What's the language going to be like? Verse, prose, no swearing, lots of swearing?

For different reasons you may want to be involved at different times. How do you define this, so that it isn't seen as interfering, and it isn't misunderstood?

At some point, the writer needs to know what s/he is doing: who are they writing for?

### **What?**

- What do you want them to produce? Is it a piece of TIE, or a community play? Do you have specific venues into which it must go?
- What technical support can the production expect?
- What is the context of the work when you are performing it?
- Who is the audience?

### **When?**

- What's the timetable?
- When must drafts be ready and what are they for? Rehearsal drafts, or a first draft of ideas etc.
- How are you going to feedback on their work and what is the timetable for that?
- When does it need to be ready, it will vary depending on the type of production. - if it is a community play how much time do you need for preparing the whole thing, design, recruitment etc etc.

### **Where?**

- Where do you want them to work? In their garret, in the rehearsal room, a mixture of both?
- Do you expect them to do some active research with community groups, clients or participants?
- What kind of research is useful and where should that be done, will they be expected to work alone on that?
- Who will organise any of this kind of work, if it needs to be done?

### **Who?**

- Who do you want to work with?
- Is it some one you know? If not then how do you recruit them?
- How do you know if that person is the right one for the job in question?

- Trust... - trust them to get on with it or is this just cutting them adrift?

If there isn't a shared understanding, that's when things can go wrong. Writers can write the wrong kind of play for the company, if they are not clear about you, your work and your aims.

*The question was posed: whose play is it? The writer's? The company's? Some writers, it was suggested, can be precious about their work. Does the director have to have the final say when it comes to performance?*

*It was suggested that, while there can be a scepticism in some sectors of the theatre world about devised work, companies working through a devising process may equally be suspicious about writers taking the work over and controlling it. Smaller companies, where the members are used to having a hand in everything, may be wary about working with a writer, and handing over control to them.*