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Devising Dance Theatre

THESIS

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

In Dance

By

Robyn C. O'Dell

Thesis Committee:
Professor Lisa Naugle, Chair
Professor Loretta Livingston
Professor Annie Loui

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ABSTRACT

Devising Dance Theatre

By

Robyn C. O'Dell

Master of Fine Arts in Dance

University of California, Irvine, 2019

Dr. Lisa Naugle, Chair

This research explores *devised theatre* approaches in efforts to teach and enhance the skills for contemporary modern dance students to participate in a collaborative, cross disciplinary style of performance making. *Devised theatre* is a contemporary theatre approach which derived from a desire to create collaboratively designed theatre and to challenge the hierarchal western theatre traditions. Collaborative approaches to theatre and dance can be traced throughout the twentieth century, with roots to post-modern dance and feminist collective theatre movements.

The training of many contemporary modern dance students is often focused on the traditional solo artists paradigm, with little emphasis on creative collaboration, although many professional contemporary choreographers do create work within a collaborative construct. As theatre, dance, and the visual arts continue to traverse and intersect with each other, practitioners grow increasingly more interested in working in a collaborative, cross disciplinary process.

Investigating my own choreographic interests to create dance theatre works, I used *devised theatre* methods in my process to help develop skills necessary for this style of performance. Through a four-month rehearsal process, six undergraduate dance students, one university staff member, and I embarked on a collaborative creative process to create an original *devised dance*

theatre work, based on the short story, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. This process-based research resulted in a performance at the Experimental Performance Laboratory Theater at the University of California, Irvine in April of 2019.

Introduction

In my experience as a contemporary dancer and actor, I always enjoyed performance projects developed through artistic collaboration with a strong focus on process, rather than performance results. Working on those particular projects, I had the opportunity to engage with the work on multiple levels (as artist and as creator) and felt valued for my entire skillset as a performer. Through a combination of collaboration and individual contributions, I experienced a sense of shared responsibility as the work would come together as a unified vision, authentic to the group of individuals involved. Artistic collaborations have had a significant impact on me as a human being and on the work I choose to participate in as I have come to recognize with many minds, expressive possibilities in performance are endless.

Now, as an emerging choreographer, performance artist, and dance educator, I seek to create new works in spaces where the disciplines of theatre, dance, and visual arts intersect. I am interested in exploring, and developing theatrical works utilizing the physical capabilities developed by a trained dancer, as well as investigate the psychological and performative experience of acting. I am interested in exploring and developing work through collective collaboration, learning from the essence of each performer, and welcoming their individual creativity to the process. As the future of theatre and dance continue to traverse and intersect with one another as fields of inquiry, choreographers, directors, and various performing artists find how creative collaboration values individual contributions within the creative process.

Working collaboratively with young adult dancers in colleges and universities, spanning from 2012-2018, I have observed a lack of confidence and skill for engaging in a project that requires individual contributions to the choreographic process. My research identifies some of

these skills necessary for collaborative participation and expands on methods identified by other practitioners. The seeming lack of confidence and skill I observed in young dancers may be a result of the solo artist and/or single author emphasis in training, rather than training that consciously and frequently includes opportunities for a symbiotic collaborative relationship. The history of art making in general is taught by leading, as in traditional modern dance, where choreographers are revered as the sole creator of the movement and composition of their works, while dancers serve as the facility for the choreographer to “set” work “onto”.

With these issues in mind, questions started to arise- What methods enable young adult dancers to contribute to a collaborative dance theater making process? How is a successful ensemble of diverse performers who work together collectively and instinctively created? What is necessary to establish a creative working environment conducive to group centered thinking while still honoring personal choreographic interests?

In my quest for these answers, I researched professional dance theatre works, physical theatre performances, and contemporary modern choreography, created in the 1990’s to present day, which were known to derive from collaborative efforts. *Devised theatre*, appeared to be taking the European, American, and Australian theatre communities by storm. This method of theatre making became the inspiring medium in creating an original *devised dance theatre work* (Govan et al. 3). *Devised Theatre* is by definition an umbrella term, which can encompass a large range of performance art forms. However, in contemporary theatre communities, *devised theatre* is used to define styles of performance theater that evolve out of collaborative creation, storytelling, and a non- traditional way of making theatre (Heddon, 4-5). This led me to beg the question: In what ways does *devised theatre* differ from contemporary modern dance choreography which commonly relies on improvisation and collaborative input from dancers?

The first chapter of this thesis includes a review of literature, primarily from contemporary theatre directors and choreographers whose work is developed with concepts of collaborative creation and/or *devised theatre* methods, defined in their own terms. It also draws upon literature that speaks about issues of democracy and feminism within the creation process. The second chapter, Methods, describes my experience with an ensemble in the creation and development of a *devised dance theatre* production. As a participant and as an observer, I was choreographer/ director and worked collaboratively with the ensemble to create the contents and material for the performance. The Findings chapter reveals the challenges, breakthroughs and considerations for future work I would consider in guiding a diverse cast to work collaboratively toward a cohesive dance theatre performance.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

Devised Theatre is an umbrella term for styles of theatre created through multifaceted forms of collaboration between all participants. American playwright, Rinne Groff, whom works with *devised theatre* artists, defines *devised theatre* as:

...originally made theatrical performance. Companies and individuals who devise work, embark upon rehearsal processes that are collaborative, eclectic, and inevitably experimental, often combining different methods and genres, such as dance, theater, video, live music, et cetera. Over time, such companies develop an aesthetics and performance vocabulary of their own which makes the work startlingly original and formally challenging. (Collins 16)

For the above reasons, *devised theatre* projects can result in a variety of different performance outcomes. From narrative-based storylines, to more abstract series of events, the vast difference in form, content, and aesthetics of *devised theatre* exists on a spectrum. Award-winning British *devising theatre* companies, Theatre de Complicité and Frantic Assembly, prioritize physical collaboration achieved through creative play, games, improvisation, group problem solving, and ensemble-based thinking, to enhance the complexities and aesthetics of the overall experience and performance (Alexander 1-38; Graham and Hoggett 13-16). Both companies produce works through *devised* processes with national and international touring companies and teach their methods of *devising* to professional and amateur theatre makers. Complicité and Frantic Assembly's unique works derive from a process centered focus. Graham and Hoggett describe their creative goal as:

...a determined effort to demystify the devising process...the most important part to take away from the workshop was not the creative endpoint we might have reached but the mean by which we got there. It is the understanding of the process that is valuable. (Graham and Hoggett 2)

One factor which separates *devised theatre* from traditional theatre, is the use and introduction of a formalized script, or rehearsal score (Heddon 4-5, 6-7). *Devised Theatre* generally starts with little to no formalized materials, is developed through spontaneous decision making and improvisation, and is created within the rehearsal process through collaborative efforts between all creators. If materials are selected prior to the rehearsal process, they are generally used to inspire, or to stimulate ideas for imagery, narrative, characters, and prompts. Directors Scott Graham and Steven Hoggett, of *devised theatre* company, Frantic Assembly, characterize their work in this way:

One of the most common presumptions [about devised theater] is that it excludes the presence of a writer or script. This has certainly not been the case in our work. The biggest difference from the more traditional model is that the initial idea comes from *Frantic Assembly* and then we match that with a writer. That idea might be a fragment . . . or it could be an idea much more detailed and fully formed. . . . These sparks have originated in a wide variety of ways in a number of different forms . . . They are all ultimately rich in what they provided. But more importantly, there was and is no pattern here. (Graham and Hoggett 13)

This broad methodology of theatre has led me to question: how is *devised theatre* different from contemporary modern dance choreography which commonly incorporates collaborative input from dancers? Contemporary choreographers, such as Bill T. Jones and Charlotte Vincent, commonly incorporate many of the same elements of *devised theatre* within their own dance making processes, such as improvisation, use of text, and collaborative creation, yet the term *devised or devising theatre* seems to be claimed most often by the contemporary theatre community, emphasizing the strong focus on character and narrative storytelling. In 2009, award-winning choreographer, Bill T. Jones, of the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company, performed a multi-layered dance-theatre piece, “Fondly Do We Hope, Fervently Do We Pray,” honoring the life and legacy of America’s sixteenth president, Abraham Lincoln. “Fondly Do We Hope . . . ” is a performance art piece, comprised of acting, text, dance, visual

art, and narrative story-telling, in which dancers execute physically demanding dance choreography, while simultaneously portraying characters supporting the narrative of the piece. In a *New York Times* article highlighting Bill T. Jones and the “overwhelming amount of work and creativity” required to make, “Fondly Do We Hope . . .,” journalist, Claudia La Rocco, describes how collaboration was essential to developing the foundations and contents of the work:

Walking a fine line between formalism and storytelling, Mr. Jones has incorporated video, and a score that layers folk songs and classical music from Lincoln’s day with original compositions. His movement, created by the dancers and edited by Mr. Jones and Ms. Wong, is set against these elements and a script that draws on Lincoln, Walt Whitman and the biographies of Mr. Jones and his performers. (Rocco)

Jones’ ability to build a multidiscipline style of performance merging text, character, story-telling, and movement, through a collaborative process, has been central to many of his previous masterful works, including “Still/Here” (1994) and “Last Supper at Uncle Tom’s Cabin/ Promise Land” (1990) (Zimmer and Quasha 56-57). Considering his collaborative nature for creating, I would categorize the development of Jones’ works as *devised* processes under Rinne Groff’s definition, and many others who have defined the term. However, Bill T. Jones/ Arnie Zane Dance Company are still claimed by the dance community (not considered *devised theatre*) and their latest works have been at the center of questioning what is even considered to be dance. Critics and audiences weigh this question as they contemplate characterizing Bill T. Jones’s choreography:

But the talking never seems to stop in “Fondly Do We Hope,” raising a question about what world Mr. Jones, who just won a Tony Award for “Fela!,” would rather be a part of: theater or dance? His direction doesn’t make a resounding case for dance, which is frequently relegated to a second stage extending from the main one like a jetty or veiled behind drapery. (Kourlas)

Although Jones works are created through collaborative efforts, he continues to promote himself and be seen as individual creator and dance mastermind, working as the pinnacle voice of his performance, and thus reinstating the solo artist paradigm that still holds strong within the dance community. In a *Public Broadcast Station* (PBS) American Master's documentary, "Bill T. Jones: A Good Man," filmmakers follow Bill T. Jones during the making of "Fondly Do We Hope . . .". The documentary emphasizes Jones as the clear conceptualist and artistic director of the project. However, scenes of rehearsal footage reveal how Jones worked with the dancers, through questionnaires, personal interviews, as well as having them generate choreography, in efforts to create the content and narrative of the performance. Although Jones is recognized as the face of the Bill T. Jones/ Arnie Zane Dance Company and is represented as the creative genius behind their work, "A Good Man" sheds light on how fundamental collaborative creation was to the overall shaping and building of "Fondly Do We Hope, Fervently Do We Pray" (Quinn). Considering the definition of *devised theatre*, the culmination of work created by the diverse group of artists within this production directed by Jones, in my opinion represents, a perfect example of *devised dance theatre*.

Another choreographer whose work also blurs the lines of dance and theatre, although without the global profile, British choreographer, Charlotte Vincent, of Vincent Dance Theatre (VDT). The company has been funded by the British Arts Council for over 20 years as a *devising* dance theatre company. Vincent is one of few contemporary choreographers who claim to create *devised* dance works emphasizing her productions do evolve out of a strong emphasis on collaborative creation and multidisciplinary process. Vincent Dance Theatre's notable works *Look at Me Now, Mummy!* (2015/2008), *Shut Down* (2017/2019), *Motherland* (2012) and *Virgin Territory* (2016/2017), incorporate spoken text, and characterization, provocative sets, and a

diverse group of performers. In a dialogue and discussion at Dance Umbrella, London's international dance festival, Charlotte Vincent describes her process.

Vincent Dance Theatre produces originally devised dance theatre work that has an international outlook and challenges conventional values in dance. . . . I try to challenge conventional expectations of what dance can be, jamming together bold physicality with theatricality, live and originally composed music and visually striking scenography to find a language that moves and surprises audiences with its emotional, physical and visual impact. We are a diverse company with an international cultural outlook and, working as an ensemble, we place great emphasis on the process of devising. The personal contributions and individual skills of the collaborators involved, married with my conceptual vision and choreographic structuring, make each piece what it is. Much of VDT's work springs from bringing an unusual mix of people together and nurturing their individual imaginations, skills and abilities. (Vincent, "Dialogue")

By classifying her dance company as a *devising* company, Vincent differs from her contemporaries by openly expressing how artistic collaboration is key to VDT's philosophies and processes. Charlotte Vincent is also known for having a strong feminist voice within her choreographic works, as well as within her activist efforts for women in the concert dance profession. In a round table discussion at the Dance UK National Choreographer's Conference in 2013, Vincent brought attention to inequalities within the contemporary concert dance arena by challenging the traditional concept of the solo author paradigm and giving artistic credit to deserving collaborators:

. . . And what about processes? I make work, as many people have said today, in collaboration with other people, and guess what? I credit the performers for the work that they contribute. Many of my male counterparts still suggest that they choreograph their work and have sole ownership over it. Really? Talk to the dancers. (Vincent, "Charlotte")

Vincent's concern for equality within the performing arts and her desire to create collaboratively are fundamental concepts to collective theatre making and can be traced through its lineage over of the twentieth century. Editors Kathryn Mederos Syssoyeva and Scott Proudfit

describe three waves of the evolution of collaborative theatre making in Europe and North America in their book of collected essays, *Women, Collective Creation, and Devising Performance: The Rise of Women Theatre Artists in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries*. The first wave of creative collection-based theatre is considered to start at the turn of the twentieth century through World War II (12). Group interaction and physical expression seemed to be at the forefront of performance making and was a reflection of the social change of the time.

. . . the search for total artwork, necessitating new models of collaboration with designers, composers, and writers, and an actor capable of conceiving her work within a complex *mise en scène* -possessing, in other words, a directorial/choreographic sensibility. They also include the modernist fascination with popular, and often physical, theatre traditions- especially mime, vaudeville, commedia dell'arte, forms generated by the performer/creator. . . . That the working class might benefit even more from *making* theatre than from watching it- and that the theatre they make, moreover, must be rooted in physically expressive forms that would free the laboring body from the constraints of hours, days, years of mechanistic motion.” (Syssoyeva and Scott 12)

During this time period, acting schools and training methods developed by influential teachers and practitioners, such as Meyerhold, Copeau, and Stanislavski, were emphasizing the importance of physical training through the imagination and improvisation as crucial skills of acting (Heddon and Milling 29).

In the second wave of creative collective - based theatre in the 1950s through the 1970s, creators experimented with more avant-garde forms of performance, influenced by post-modern dance, music, and visual arts (Syssoyeva and Scott 17). A few notable American companies exploring these methods of performance were the San Francisco Dancers' Workshop, Open Theatre, The Living Theatre, and The Performance Group, as well as European director Jerzy Grotowski within his acting schools. These performance companies started to explore playing

games and other collaborative improvisational approaches to actor training and rehearsal processes (Heddon and Milling 29-30). The concept of play and improvisation transversely interested dance makers, as the social zeitgeist continued to steer artists towards challenging the traditional laws of performance.

Ideas of games and improvisation were picked up by two US dance companies, working in the late 1950s, Anna Halprin's San Francisco Dancers' Workshop (founded in 1955) and the Judson Church Dance Theatre... Anna Halprin worked with dancers to improvise dance from anatomical structure, searching for a 'natural', organic movement beyond re-collaborations, where architects, musicians, painters, dancers evolved work together... The process linked task-based work, games with collaborators and games in relation to the performance environment in order to reveal new physical possibilities, and to create a sensory impact on the audience . . . (Heddon 34-35)

Contemporary *devised theatre* companies, Frantic Assembly and Theatre de Complicité agree on the value and importance of playing games within their different *devising* processes. The directors of both companies express the crucial importance of incorporating games and play into their *devising* processes. Theatre de Complicité strongly advises to always make time for play and games while in the process of making a *devised* work.

Try to get into the habit of preparing your students for collaborative work. Warm up together, stretch and most importantly play games. Find games that you all enjoy and can participate in energetically. Games that make you laugh and get competitive and sweaty... There is often a time pressure in a devising process, especially in schools, but games should never be omitted. (Alexander and McBurney 8)

Dance has always had varying levels of involvement in hybrid-forms of performance theatre. Pina Bausch of German Tanztheater, was at the forefront of the dance theatre movement in the 1970s.

One of the most significant influences on the dance theatre hybrid work was German Tanztheater, pioneered by Pina Bausch, whose disruptive, disturbing anti-ballet has developed since she took over as director of Wuppertal Dance Theatre in 1973. The aesthetics of her performance, which perhaps initially drew from her experience of expressionist choreography, American formalism, and the emergence of alternative theatre in the 1960's, are drawn from the real... Rather

than Bausch's working methods, it was her aesthetic that proved to be very influential on many of the physical theatre companies from the early 1980s onward. (Heddon 161-162)

The spontaneity and physical possibilities derived from collective play and collaboration informed the postmodern works of theatre and dance companies of the 1960s, 70s, and evolved into the third wave of collective-based theatre of the 1980s into present day *devising* (Syssoyeva and Scott 16-17).

During the third wave, the term physical theatre started to gain popularity within the UK, US, and Australian theatre communities, where a desire for edgy, physical storytelling erupted and started to incorporate different forms of physical expression to supplement, complexify, and heighten the performance content (Zarilli 175). *Devised Theatre's* use of physical collaboration and movement may resemble characteristics of physical theatre performances however, the major difference is in the ownership and authorship of the piece. Physical theatre is not always created collaboratively (Hoggett and Graham 23). It was also during the third wave of collective creation when women came to the forefront of these performance-making styles.

With the feminist movement and its tools of consciousness-raising came a wave of all women's collectives, many formed by theatre artists unhappy in the male-dominated collectives with which they had begun. (Syssoyeva and Scott 16)

UK *devised theatre* practitioner and teacher, Alison Oddey, refers to "the seemingly natural relationship between women and *devised theatre*" in the 1970s (Mermikides and Smart 253). At the time, *devised theatre* was seen as an alternative to literary script theatre, and its hierarchal structure. Now that *devising* is gaining more mainstream visibility, the once radicle style of theatre has loosened its ties to its female initiative roots (Mermikides and Smart 257).

Over time various forms of collaborative performance have consistently proven to be relevant to mainstream theatre and dance.

Devised performance occupies a distinct place in contemporary arts practice and has a history of exceeding traditional theatrical boundaries. . . .Supported by the imaginative programming of international arts festivals and a burgeoning university and college sector that is keen to encourage drama students to recognize the aesthetic, political and artistic potential of theatre-making, devised performance has achieved popularity on an unprecedented scale. . . .Devised performance . . . is becoming increasingly commercially successful and entering the mainstream. (Govan et al. 3)

Universities in the UK, US, and Australia teach *devising* methods and understand the significance of integrating collaborative creation into their student's training (Heddon 1-2). Why then, is there so little focus in dance education on training in the fundamentals, concepts, and approaches of engaging in, participating with, and heightening a collaborative process? Answering this question is part of a creative challenge on exploring teaching methods and choreographic approaches to support dance students in engaging in a *devised dance theatre* process.

As contemporary theatre continues to incorporate dance and choreography into the creative process, and contemporary modern dance continues to engage in cross-disciplinary styles of performance, why is there not more emphasis in contemporary dance education and training on advancing and developing the skills and techniques conducive to participating in multidisciplinary collaborations? Possessing these skills broaden career opportunities for all students and expands their capabilities of performance (Heddon 159).

The review of literature revealed the significance of cross-disciplinary and training in collaboration in dance education can further students understanding of historical works and support collective creation in theatre and dance in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. My own investigation picks up where I believe research has failed to investigate and contextualize, the development of a *devised dance theatre* piece, integrating elements of known *devised theatre* practices as part of choreographic practice.

The next chapter will discuss the methodologies used to explore my research questions:
How will *devised theatre* methods enable young adult dancers to contribute to the creative process of a *devised dance theater* performance? How will I facilitate a democratic system of performance-making while still exploring my own choreographic interests?

Chapter 2: Methodology

Methods of *devised theatre* are typically rooted in physical collaboration, the diverse skills of performers working cohesively together, and spontaneous decision making during the creative process itself, as opposed to emphasizing the final product. Working with the concepts of collaboration and democratic performance-making in mind, I designed a series of rehearsals for seven performers. During a four-month rehearsal process, integrating a series of commonly used *devised theatre* approaches: games, ensemble exercises, prompts for character development, images for inspiration, and adapting a text-to-script. I used the popular 1892 American short story by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper* (Gilman) as a rough outline for what would be the final production. Below, I describe the strategies designed to build this *devised* endeavor.

Games

I stayed committed to playing four games throughout the rehearsal process, Four Square, Zip Zap Doop- De-Doop, Master/ Servant, and Trust/Nod. Rather than going into detail for each game, I will describe two games: Trust/Nod and Master/ Servant.

Trust/ Nod (Loui 38) is an acting training game where making eye contact and a nod means *we are in agreement*. (I will be using the terms participants, performers, players and collaborators interchangeably throughout the methodologies chapter to represent the group of people involved in this research.) Trust/Nod was played by seven participants standing in a circle. Player A self-selected (volunteer) and began by making eye contact and nodding to another player (Player B) in the circle. Once eye contact and a nod was exchanged (agreement), Player A then takes Player B's spot in the circle. Before assuming another player's place in the

circle, Player B must make eye contact and nod to another player and then take their position. This development of agreement continues without hesitation or stopping. Timing becomes important. We began with walking and it developed into quicker paced movement. When a player broke the rhythm or disengaged from eye contact, they are out of the game. The game continued on its own momentum until it comes to an organic ending.

Another game selected for this process was Master/ Servant, a theatre improvisation game, from Jessica Swale's book, *Drama Games for Devising*, which aims to encourage the participants to be spontaneous, use imagination, role play, and work together to tell a story. (20) The instructions of the game include a selected participant as the "Master," all six other participants are the "Servants." The Master chooses a place to sit in the space and calls on a "Servant A," verbally by yelling out "Servant!" Once a servant is called, a player voluntarily comes into the space and listens to the directions given by the Master. The Master thinks of a task for the Servant to "perform," examples of tasks given were, "read a book aloud" and "dribble a ball." Every time the Master calls on a new Servant, a new participant must enter the space, become Servant 2, and performs the new given task. If the Master decides they are displeased with the Servants "performance," the Master commands that Servant to "Die." That participant leaves the space and observes the game until they are the final Servant to be called into the game. The game is over when the momentum of the game comes to an end.

Ensemble Building

I selected six dance students and one university staff member to collaborate and work as an ensemble. The dancers had varying preferred dance styles, diversity in background and training, and ranged in levels of experience. In the context of this research performance, the ensemble not only had to work as a seven-person collective, but they also had to seamlessly

switch and function as a subdivided ensemble of six and one, playing off the uneven balance. Each member was required to recognize and accept the appropriate time to follow and lead the group (Bonczek and Storck). For this reason, ensemble exercises had to vary, with the ease to work in two different paradigms. To operate in this way, the ensemble still needed to think as one collectively. A useful exercise to develop the six and one dynamic, was the human maze exercise. The members of the six-person group would create a tunnel of shapes using their bodies. The one other participant had to find her way through the formed tunnel, crawling and climbing, through the openings the six ensemble members created. As the one participant moved through the tunnel, and passed through each shape, ensemble members continued to build back into the structure, continuing the tunnel for that one ensemble member to move through.

In another exercise I directed the participants to stand in a close circle, shoulder to shoulder, and count from 1-10. The performers would count 1-10 as a group, with one participant at a time saying a number in sequential order. The participants then took turns counting upwards, without overlapping, hesitating, nor making predetermined decisions. Once the group successfully completed counting to 10, we incrementally increased the number by five. This exercise required the performers to breathe together, listen to each other, and gain the confidence to take their turn.

Character Development

Typically, in *devised theatre*, character and narrative storytelling is the driving force of performance. Throughout this research and choreographic process, the cast developed distinct personas to embody and enact within the framework of our performance. Conceiving and developing these personas or characters was a new process for many of the collaborators. In

Theatre de Complicité teacher's guide, *Developing Devising Skills*, the question on how to invent character is fundamental to *devising*:

Character work is often stimulated by text: clearly having someone else's words in your mouth will lead you directly to how someone will think and behave. But what happens when you don't have set text or characters in the text have little to say? (Alexander and McBurney 17)

To invent and apply character development to our *devised* process the performers selected portraits from about ten photos I had preselected. The people in the photos were unknown to all collaborators in the project. Each performer created a life story inspired by the portrait, speaking in first person as if they were that person. These stories included names, ages, hobbies, careers, social status, and imagined personal feelings and aspirations. Once these complex personas were developed and explained in detail, I directed the performers to walk around the room and tune into their body and own natural way of walking. As the performers walked through the space, I directed them to make physical choices to embody their individual persona. Choices included the way the foot connected with the floor during walking, the alignment of their spine and other body parts, and the way their eyes perceived the space. As the performers embodied their personas' walking style and mannerisms, I directed them to bring awareness to all the all characters in the room, asking for the performers to now see their fellow collaborators as the personas from the portraits. The performers would then interact with one another using the props and furniture in the rehearsal space. Their interactions continued until I guided the group to come to a conclusion and stop.

Developing originally conceived characters is traditional to *devised theatre*. In this project, the original text, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, had two main characters; the narrator (unnamed) and her husband, John. Since these two characters were fabricated by the author, the collaborators and I searched for evidence within the text that described how these fictional

characters may be characterized or embodied through performance. We discussed and asked questions such as, describe some characteristics of the narrator and her husband that are supported by the text? In what context do these characters exist? What may influence this person's ideas and opinions based on what we know from the text? As a group and, individually, the performers and I worked to physicalize characters described in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, as well as the original personas they invented.

Text-to-Script

At any given point, a script or performance outline may be introduced to the *devised theatre* process. Many *devised theatre* companies work with writers during rehearsals to create original scripts based on the performer's improvisations (Graham and Hogget 13). For this research, I explored ways to develop a performance script from a classical literary text. All participants were supplied a copy of *The Yellow Wallpaper* and asked to read it prior to our first rehearsal. During that meeting, we sat in a circle and discussed the short story in depth before exploring the content physically. Using poster sized paper, the cast and I outlined the story into six significant scenes (or events). We brainstormed and created a storyboard for the performance, including poignant lines, literary images, and events we considered relevant to the plot. Participants also selected sections of the text which evoked ideas for choreography and physical expression. Throughout rehearsals, collaborators improvised, and embodied qualities of movement sourced from the words and phrases in Gilman's text, such as "bulbous eyes," "shrieking heads," and the many different "horrid yellow things" mentioned in the story.

In order to develop a narrative script involving characters and elements of acting, the collaborators and I listed the dialogue located in the original text and selected the lines we considered crucial to include in our performance. We also explored places in the classic text

where notions of our originally developed personas may be represented or relevant. After a few rehearsals of discussing and collaborating on the script, I formed our *devised* script considering everyone's input. This script was referred to as a working document and was adjusted throughout the rehearsal process.

Images for inspiration

Gene Gordon, of longtime *devising* theatre company, The Living Theatre, describes how the company worked together to use outside materials to develop their loose adaptation of *Frankenstein*:

We created our production together sitting around first and talking about our materials . . . working over every detail, i.e. planning the structure of this play and other works through communal discussion; verbal, silent, physical, psychic.
(Mantegna and Rostagno 123)

Using images for inspiration is a common strategy to develop creative work and is especially useful in creating *devised theatre*. Our *devised* performance of *The Yellow Wallpaper* was set in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century, reflecting the time period in which the story was written. With this in mind, I directed the collaborators to search for source materials of popular social beliefs and practices of the turn of the century relevant to the short story. Collaborators shared images, videos, advertisements, and articles depicting 1900s health practices, fashions, and political and economic context of the time. These materials inspired group discussions, collaboration, movement, and an environment for our performance to exist.

Tasks

Steve Hoggett and Scott Graham of Frantic Assembly believe a *devising* process can be simplified down to basic tasks:

By setting tasks you allow your performers to offer much creative input into the devising of choreography without burdening them with the responsibility of creating the show . . . The shaping of theatre and choreography requires an

outside eye and it is this objective influence that can liberate the performer to be brave, take risks, and try new things. We, as director/choreographers, are liberated too as the performer is now providing a palette so much larger and richer than our own imagination could provide. (Graham and Hoggett 15)

With the concept of collaboration and democracy as a backbone to *devised theatre*, throughout the rehearsal process I designated tasks for each participant to be responsible for and develop upon; usually in pairs or in a group of three. The majority of the tasks were to create choreography and movement scores based on images, ideas, and descriptions discussed collaboratively. Groups worked on their assigned tasks for a few minutes, then, I would walk around the studio to observe their ideas. Once I felt solid material had been established by a group, I joined in on the tasks and started collaborating with them.

These six approaches of *devising* were used to influence and inform my choreographic directives, as well as educate and engage participants into a collaborative process. The results of these methodologies will be discussed in the Findings chapter.

Chapter Three: Findings

The beginning of collaboration is one of the hardest moments within the *devising* process because the participants are uncertain of what to expect from one another. In this process, some of the participants were meeting each other for the first time, or it was their first time working with me. From the onset of our *devising* process the participants and I had to establish trust to feel comfortable with each other, share information and ideas, and to be able to work well with one another. Trust was a necessary foundation for this collaboration in *devising theatre*. In most regards, the methods used to develop our *devised dance theatre* piece elicited input from every member where our contributions were successful in creating performance that reflected the diversity of the group.

The suggestion of playing games in the rehearsal process was initially strange for the dance students who are more familiar with formal rehearsal processes which rarely involve games for the sake of playing. The dance students had little to no experience working in a creative process where a portion of the rehearsals were dedicated to simply having fun, being loud and playing. At first, they seemed to be confused by the objectives and significance of taking precious rehearsal time to play, however, over time, I sensed their collective focus and energy generated through the act of playing. I selected games that would educe specific skills. Skills like communication, listening, quick decision-making, and teamwork were all heightened when players engaged in the games. The specific findings from the games described in my previous chapter evoked very different, but extremely significant skills central to the overall performance result.

In the game, Trust/Nod the players started with a high sense of excitement and anxiety, however overtime the group managed to take that high energy and channel it into a sense of grounded-ness, connectivity, and clear intention. The players instinctively widened their eyes to take in the details and the clarity of their fellow collaborators. The game required the group to be physically and mentally open to accepting and receiving eye contact from one another. This created a sense of high alert and extreme attention towards the task and each other. I noticed that the first few attempts at the game, the participants had a hard time seeking, reciprocating, and maintaining eye contact. However, playing this game repeatedly throughout the process, the group was encouraged to make deliberate and clear connections with one another; necessary for collaboration. These skills for nonverbally communication became pivotal to the success of our show when eye contact was the only way to communicate an agreement for a group lift to initiate, or for performers to connect and take in the details of each other on stage.

The second game described in the Methodology chapter is the game Master/ Servant. The nature of this game, and the not so subtle title, made it particularly interesting to incorporate into a democratic creative process. While playing this particular game, I had to be purposeful about who I selected to be the Master. I decided to select the participants who were more reserved members of the group for this leading role in the game. My intent was to give the participants who did not initially assume a leadership role within the group permission to take authority and direct the other members. My strategic selecting of the Master role gave those participants a voice and the authority to use it by commanding other participants to perform. This type of improvisational theatre game is more familiar to actors. Dancers and non-theatre students are generally unfamiliar to improvising with words, tasks, and elements of acting. This game served well for our *devising* process because of the quick thinking and responses it required from the

players. It also encouraged players to act and perform the role established in the game. The performers were able to explore the dynamics of two opposite statuses and physicalize how that would manifest through the body. The participants playing Master would often sit with a straight spine and speak with assertion as they embodied their character's control. The Servants often joined in with shrugged shouldered and smaller demeanor. The stakes in the game were high, in that participants who performed their directed task to the Master's liking would stay in the game and would not "die." This game encouraged the dancers who were particularly reserved the opportunity to be animated, flamboyant, and exuberant while playing. Choosing to select the player for Master was an important decision which effected the entire process. We only played this game a couple of times, but every time we played the dynamic of the group shifted and the perceived statuses of the collaborators were reestablished.

Through the different ensemble building exercises, the two explained stayed consistent throughout our *devising* process. The counting exercise demands complete group awareness and intuition. The first couple of rounds of this exercise the participants could not complete the task, repeatedly expressed their defeat, and thought it impossible. After directing the group to breathe together, listen to one another, intuit their turn, and speak confidently, the participants started to focus and took accountability towards finishing the task. As the participants successfully completed the exercise, the number they counted to would increase by five the following time they performed the exercise. The amount of tries it took for the group to succeed would fluctuate day by day, depending on the group's energy and focus. Generally, it took less attempts for the participants to complete the exercise towards to end of the process. By the end of the process, on opening night, the cast of seven counted to twenty without overlapping with each other or losing rhythm.

The second ensemble building exercise discussed was the human maze. This exercise was designed to serve two purposes; one, to encourage collaborators to make quick and deliberate decisions utilizing their whole body, and second, it also split the ensemble into a 6:1 paradigm, subdividing the initial ensemble to work with and off of each other. Although the dynamic shifted in this exercise, the participants had to continue to work towards a common goal. This exercise not only allowed participants to make choreographic choices while upholding and reforming the collective structure, it also helped participants develop problem solving skills, trust, and created a movement score which actually ended up as a major moment in the final performance.

There are many different methods for learning character development, however, for our *devised* process the majority of the characters were conceived by the participants themselves, giving them the chance to be creator as well as performer. In our process, six of the collaborators created their own personas to embody, and one portrayed the main character from the original text. The methods used to develop character, getting images for inspiration, and adapting a classical text into a performance script, provided some interesting and complex crossovers which contributed to deeper levels of connection and relevance to the totality of the project.

Having the collaborators create and embody their own characters helped them merge the disciplines of dance and theatre together and enabled them to gain a sense ownership in the piece. The characters developed during our process offered solid references for choreographic ideas, costuming, and improvised interactions during performance. The participant who portrayed the role from the original short story had a different process in developing her character. Through group discussions and one-on-one meetings, we analyzed and discussed the

possible intentions, motives, and inner thoughts this character may have in order to give the performer more dimensionality and authenticity. The performer's ability to apply directions and considerations during performance gave the historic character from 1892 a refreshing contemporary appeal.

Images for inspiration is probably one of the most common methods for many visual and performing artists. In this *devising* process, the images were used to bring collaborators together for discussion and collective brainstorming. Materials were used as an impetus to connect multiple perspectives to a unified idea or vision. Major moments within our performance were generated by sharing these materials with one another during rehearsals. This method also gave participants another opportunity to contribute concrete input to the creative process. Each person contributed to the abundance of ideas, aesthetics, movements, and content stimulated and generated by this collaborative research.

Adapting the text into a performance outline was pivotal to the clarity, rhythm, and overall aesthetic of the performance. I strategically chose an existing text to work with in order to eliminate the daunting responsibility of creating an entire narrative from scratch. Instead, I used *The Yellow Wallpaper* as a solid reference for the group to adapt and reimagine. The text served as an anchor, or home base, for all collaborators to refer to when it came to developing scenes and a trajectory for the performance. By allowing all participants the opportunity to contribute to the *devised dance theatre* process, the collaborators gained a sense of ownership and a shared responsibility to the work. The input of each participant helped shape and formulate the script and overall performance result. Throughout the process we continually to cut lines from our adapted script. With movement driving the story, we found little actually needed to be said.

Limitations

There were a number of limitations that made this process unexpected, and, perhaps, hindered the project from achieving fuller potential. These limitations include overcommitted undergraduate dance students who are not being able to devote enough time to an immersive and collaborative project. *Devised* processes work well when collaborators have worked with one another for a long period of time. Most *devised theatre* companies attribute the fruits of their labor to the years of working with one another and the trust and genuine creativity that emerges over time.

The age difference within the members participating in this process was a very divisive hurdle to overcome. The paradigms of teacher and student, older and younger, undergraduate and graduate, was something I tried to dismantle at the beginning of the process. With one of the participants being a staff member at the university, this divide seemed very present to the undergraduate students. The reality that this research was in partial requirement for my Master of Fine Arts (MFA) degree established an ownership to the project which created an off-balanced dynamic from the beginning. Getting the collaborators to assume responsibility for the work was challenging and took time within the process.

Another limitation which may have occurred is that I could not ensure all of the participants read *The Yellow Wallpaper*. I asked that they read the text outside of rehearsal, but I could not guarantee that happened. Whether they read the original text or not may have influenced their ability to collaborate.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

The majority of western classical and contemporary dance training and education does not support or develop skills for students to engage in or enhance creative collaborative processes. Individual creativity that actually contributes to collaboration are rarely emphasized in the overall training of dance students. While dancers certainly can be creative, the ability to explore, express, and contribute in a collaboration are skills that appeared to be lacking and required significant time to develop. Not having the experience may affect student's opportunities to work professionally in cross-disciplinary collaborations. Through my research and understanding of *devising* and the *devised* process, I have concluded that the *devising* process is a much-needed community building, democratic process for performance making, It also involves cross disciplinary forms of performance that challenges the relationship between audience, performer, and creator. In my opinion, true *devised theatre* is created through the synergy between a group of peers, or people who accept equal responsibility for the work being produced.

Collective dance-making and theatre-making is not a new concept, in fact, the lineage of collaborative performance can be traced back to about a hundred years ago. However, every new generation of performance-makers generates new perspectives on community art-making. Since *devising* brings multiple art forms together, it brings people together, perspectives and diversity. Skill in collaboration is a key element in continuing the trajectory of performance-making as practitioners are increasingly more interested in working with other artists to create shared works. In my experience, dance students are not taught with the same emphasis nor importance on individuality or creative collaboration. This lapse in training and experience is apparent in

working in the collegiate and professional fields, where often times, collaboration is at the center of the choreographer's creative process. Getting the performers to work as an ensemble was essential to their cohesiveness on stage and became a necessary means for the group to consider themselves a collective. Within an ensemble, instinct, trust, and compromise were vital for the group to function as a unit.

The solo author paradigm of performance is only one way of creating performance and is often valuable in understanding an individual voice. However, working within a collaborative team requires an artist to push her own boundaries, develop skills or acquire new ones. Most of all it increases individual awareness of how your voice and abilities can best benefit the whole.

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