

A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO

ENSEMBLE DEVISING

DAVIS ROBINSON

A Practical Guide to Ensemble Devising

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Davis Robinson



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Introduction

I was motivated to write this book after leading a weekend workshop on improvisation and devising for people who wanted to deepen their ensemble skills. Some participants had worked together in the past, some were new at it, but the point of the weekend was to spend time playing together in the studio from dawn to dusk. It was a magical weekend that left everyone feeling refreshed, revived, and ready to make new work. It struck me how easy it was to create those conditions, and yet how rare it was for people to take the time to do this kind of work together.

I think actors everywhere should have a chance to do what we did. Get up in the morning, move, and develop a common vocabulary, break for lunch, spend the afternoon problem solving and testing out ideas for material, eat dinner, go back into the studio for a night of improvisation and devising, showing and critiquing work which may get picked up the next day for further development or shelved forever. There was no effort to satisfy an audience besides us. No one was worried about whether the work will “sell” or entertain. It was just a chance to create disposable, interesting material. All of the participants have since gone on to work with other companies, and the freedom and skills they developed that weekend have paid for themselves many times over.

I find the process so satisfying, and so worth doing for the sheer pleasure of the doing itself that I am beginning to think that is the real value of ensemble theater making: the discovery of new ideas, the collective excitement of exploring the unknown. It is like meeting a group of friends outside an unexplored cavern and entering in together, moving from chamber to chamber of subterranean delights and fears. It is not, at first, a journey made for public performance. Developing a show for an audience happens later. The journey of discovery in the moment for actors is a valid end in itself. As more actors investigate this kind of work, and new ensembles are formed,

the more difficult phase of creating performance pieces becomes a natural outgrowth of this initial phase of shared collective pleasure.

Ensembles develop a piece through trial and error, risk-taking, and experimenting. Mistakes become innovations that show up in the dramaturgy of the piece; creative struggles turn into dramatic, onstage relationships. Even when a linear story or an existing script is the start point for a piece, what distinguishes the ensemble approach is the degree of personal investment and experimentation that takes place in rehearsal, pushing the material to its limits and reimagining the piece through the collective vision of its artistic collaborators.

Ensembles rely on exploring the inherent theatricality of a moment. A spirit of physical trust, probity, and selflessness is needed. A script is often arrived at last rather than first. More than anything, ensembles are made up of people who are willing to try things without knowing or caring what the payoff will be for a while. This is a hard shift for some actors to make. It can be terribly frustrating when people disagree, but it is a necessary crucible for forging the best possible piece. In devising original work, objectivity, quality, perspective, interpersonal dynamics, and aesthetics are added to the usual rehearsal concerns of a company. It can sometimes feel like being lost in the woods, a feeling captured beautifully by Shakespeare when the Rude Mechanicals devised their version of Pyramus and Thisbe in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. When Bottom takes charge of the play-making process and assigns all the best parts to himself, he drives his collaborators mad and makes an ass of himself. Their final show turns into a farce, not the high art they believed it to be. In writing this book, I hope to save you some time and agony while devising. But conflict is part of creativity, and despair inevitable. Do rest assured when you hit a low point: the problems you encounter as an ensemble have been faced by many others before you and are part of the process. There will always be strong wills and differences of opinion, and the Big Picture distance one needs to see their own work objectively is hard to find (Figure I.1).

The main focus of this book is on creating original material. For me, original material is where the real magic lies. Whether it's an in-class project cooked up in ten minutes by people who just met, or a professional company working all year on a major production, the challenges and rewards of ensemble creation are the same: it is the collective excitement and joy of theater making – exploring uncharted territories, creating a new image – the positive energy released when a group of artists create a moment of theatrical magic never seen before. When the stars are in alignment and the process works, the results are deeply satisfying for audience and performer alike. Even if an audience never sees the work, the process is



Figure I.1: 2008 Devising Workshop (Liz Pounsett and Megan Strell) at EepyBird Studios, Buckfield, Maine. Photo: Adam Montanaro

invaluable for actors to experience. It satisfies a different part of the brain than the pleasure one gets from playing a role. It improves reflexes, and helps you reconnect with why you make theater in the first place.

Many colleges have added physical theater, devising, and ensemble work to their curriculum. People who are new to the process can find it immensely frustrating, especially devising something original with a group of peers and no leader. If a teacher or director tells a group to devise something with no leader assigned, everyone's strengths and weaknesses become apparent. There is no avoiding this crucible, and to some extent experiencing these negotiating difficulties is healthy. It is how we learn to navigate differences. This book helps actors, directors, and teachers learn to work constructively with each other. It prepares actors for the devised, adaptive, and innovative work that is increasingly appearing in the theatrical mainstream. It gives teachers and directors several models for guiding devised work. Early chapters tune up individual abilities that contribute to ensemble work. Later prompts give people ways to make material and stay on task. The last chapters cover the making of full-length shows with an ensemble.

Apologies if I misappropriate anyone's favorite exercise or describe it differently than the version you know. Please make this work your own. And apologies for my use of the term "you". Often I am talking to everyone "in the room". If you are a teacher, director, actor, or

combination of all three, take the word in the way you most need it to apply. With devising, these roles are often merged. Usually I am speaking to “you” as the person leading an exercise or the person participating in it. This book is for students, teachers, and directors studying the devising process, and for existing ensembles looking for new approaches. My focus in the end is on professional companies making full-length work, but applications to the student deviser/director can be found throughout the book.

College programs will find the chapters on Fundamentals, Short Prompts, and Large Prompts useful, as these exercises can be done within typical academic time frames, in class or rehearsal. The latter half of the book focuses on professional theater companies and the complex task of creating full-length original and adaptive works. Colleges with programs focused on ensemble devising can do much of this work if enough time can be built into the academic schedule. My alma mater Hampshire College allows students to spend three years doing preparatory work for a year-long senior thesis, an academic model that works well for devising ensemble theater.

Commercially successful ensemble shows now appear regularly in mainstream theaters, and highly skilled dynamic ensemble performers are in short supply. The traditional ability of an actor to learn lines, play actions, and follow directions must expand in ensemble work to include stressful interpersonal demands, more dramaturgical questioning, and greater exploration of the boundaries of the material being worked on. The exercises and prompts in this book provide the training actors and directors need to join or start a devising ensemble, and guidelines for people interested in leading that work professionally or in an academic setting.

1 *What Is Ensemble Devising?*

Manifesto

Let's make a new world together. Let's go into a bright, empty, church-like space together, ripe for potential creation. A clean, roomy studio with good lighting, a few props and objects tucked into the corners, perhaps some fragments of history tacked to the walls or embedded in the architecture of the space revealing its origins as a mason's lodge, an Oddfellows Hall, a former factory, a church, a barn, an office, a garage. A window looking out onto a field or an ocean would be nice, but a view of 14th St. and 5th Ave. works just as well. In the back stairwell is an old poster of a group that performed here, a company that no longer exists, a press photo from some other time and place. Perhaps there's a pile of leftover office supplies from previous tenants that will end up in the piece you are making. I think many dance pieces are made using chairs because the main object found in every dance studio is a folding chair. If more rehearsal studios had chicken feathers sitting around, we'd probably see a lot more pieces involving wings, tickling, and flying. We use what we find, and what we bring to the table. And with ensemble theater, the primary ingredient is each other: our memories, our ideas, our desires, our fears.

How apt

We join together in secular communion to explore the wonder, mystery, joy, and pain of meeting each other and the world (Figure 1.1).

- What do I have to say? What can we, as a group, say?
- Who is that person?
- How does the world affect us?
- What is going on today?
- Can we create something that moves, laughs, provokes, and excites us?
- Can we dip a toe into the universal?



Figure 1.1: Adam Klein, Dawson Hill, Amanda Houtari, and Stephen Volz, EepyBird Studios, Buckfield, Maine. Photo: Adam Montanaro

The most fulfilling work often happens when you aren't under pressure to make something for public showing. In college classes and in workshops I've taught with professionals, the most inspired, wildly exciting material often happens in the studio where risks are freely taken and there is no need to edit or shape the material for an audience's expectations. You can run as fast and as far as the collective interests of the group will take you. There is no fear that you are committed to these people for life, or that your livelihood depends on having a commercial success. There is enormous value in this sheer act of shared collaborative creation for its own sake. It recharges a performer's batteries, creates new friendships, gives insight into other points of view, and yes, valuable art gets made and thrown away every day, never to be seen by anyone other than the participants. But it's worth it. The monologue that was never written down, the perfectly executed physical image that captures the eye and disappears – these are the rewards of ensemble work in the moment (Figure 1.2).

Out of this practice, solid, professional work can grow. I encourage you to carve out a weekend, a week, or a couple of months to meet and do some of this work with friends and strangers with no goals in mind. Don't worry about writing a full-length piece, giving a name to your group, or producing a finished product. Just share exercises and make stuff up. Every time I make a new show with my theater company, Beau Jest, we allow plenty of up-front time for brainstorming and creative experiments. It is my favorite part of



Figure 1.2: *King Lear*, *Devising Intensive* (Micah Williams and Steven Shema), Celebration Barn Theater, South Paris, Maine, 2013. Photo: Scott Vlaun

rehearsal, and there is always a bit of a sense of loss when we have to shift gears and start locking things down to create the finished show. The work also gets a lot harder when you have to edit choices and polish every moment. Enjoy the early stages of work-for-work's-sake as long as you can, because the nuts and bolts of making a finished product will eventually take over and crowd out more liberated creative explorations.

So let's get started!

Speaking of which, a disclaimer. This book is not trying to present a comprehensive survey of all working methods used for devising. That

would be impossible. The field is growing so quickly such a book would be out of date before it could be published. I am writing to share the methods I have encountered, and to provide guidance to students and artists interested in making the transition from mainstream theater to the world of ensemble devising. I work in Boston, Massachusetts, and Portland, Maine, so the groups and methods I am familiar with have a New England bias. I studied at Jacques Lecoq's school in Paris, France, and at the Celebration Barn Theater in South Paris, Maine, with Tony Montanaro, a mime who trained with Etienne Decroux and Marcel Marceau. Other influences include workshops with the dancer Mark Morris, Jonathan Wolken of Pilobolus, Ruth Malezcheck of Mabou Mines, Bill Irwin, Ronlin Foreman, and Keith Johnstone. I have seen some stunning shows in New York and Boston, but know that I have missed out on many exciting ensembles elsewhere. Devised work has a long history in England, and I have only caught glimpses of some of the seminal companies there. My apologies to the many fine people working in Minneapolis, Chicago, Atlanta, Austin, the West Coast, and elsewhere around the world who I haven't seen or mentioned. New groups are forming every day. It is a rapidly expanding field, and this book is in no way trying to keep track of them all or evaluate which ones are important.

This book is based on my own experiences as an actor, director, and teacher doing original ensemble work, and my desire to share the methodologies I've developed or encountered over time with others. I teach ensemble devising and physical theater at the college and professional level, and have for 30 years made work with a Boston-based theater company called Beau Jest Moving Theatre.¹ My most in-depth devising work is with Beau Jest, so I will reference that work often. I also reference other ensembles that make different styles of work to ensure the reader understands I am not endorsing any particular aesthetic here. When I teach devising, I work with open-ended exercises that allow the participants to develop their own aesthetic. What I include here are the exercises I return to most frequently as a teacher, director, and ensemble actor. I will try to notate whether an exercise I discuss is geared towards classroom work or professional companies. And I will also try to give you the lineage of an exercise when I know it.

Much has been written about internationally renowned ensembles such as Germany's Berliner Ensemble, Peter Brook's International Center for Theater Research, France's Theatre de Soleil, and seminal companies in America. Erwin Piscator's Dramatic Workshop, the Open Theater, and the Living Theater were all incubators of the ensemble spirit. Their omission here is in no way a comment on their

importance to the field. Some of the productions I reference in this book were created by individual writers and directors, and not through ensemble devising, but I include them as dramaturgical models for the kind of work ensembles can aspire to. If you are interested in further research in the field, I have included an appendix with some of the main books discussing the history of ensemble theater, its origins, and the current state of the art. When I reference a show or ensemble, I will also provide the main web link to the company so you can follow up on their work.

Some definitions

When an ensemble decides to create an original show or radically restage a script, it enters into the world of “devising”. For me, devising is the process of inventing material for performance together, including scene and script work, choreography, narrative structures, and design elements. The devising process applies equally to creating something original or adapting existing material and reframing it in a new way. The same skills are needed to develop a unified whole, whether starting from scratch or working from an existing source.

When problem-solving work is done collaboratively with everyone in the company in the same room – whether steered by a director, teacher, writer, or consensus – you are engaged in the process of *ensemble devising*. You can have an acting ensemble without entering into the devising process, and you can practice devising without having a permanent ensemble, but you can’t devise a piece collaboratively with a group of people unless you agree on working towards a shared aesthetic. Some devising groups retain their artistic identity but change personnel from show to show (usually with a continuing core of artists making decisions). Other devising ensembles use a permanent repertory acting company with the same artists involved in every production, remaining true to their founding identity as a group while continuing to find new topics to explore.

Is there such a thing as ensemble work without devising? Yes, a good cast in any show can have a real spirit of ensemble by listening and working well together without inventing the show they are performing. In fact, many of the exercises in this book can be used in the rehearsal room to help traditional casts as well as devising ensembles become a more seamless group of players. Can a director lead an ensemble with little input from the actors? Of course: it happens all the time. A brilliant leader doesn’t need input, they already know what kind of work they want to make. The company

can function as a unified ensemble, and yet have very little input in the making of a show.

Ensembles can be as small as two people – a performer working with another actor, director, writer, or friend to create a solo or duet show – to a group as large as 20 or 30 people. My own company Beau Jest has fluctuated from shows with two characters to shows with 14. Of our original five founding members, most have been in at least five productions and two have been involved in all of them. When we began as a company, the term “devising” was not even in use. We simply called it making original work, or doing “physical theater”, or movement-based, actor-generated work.

Can a person devise a show alone? Yes, but they usually have someone watch their work and help them, which I think also qualifies as devising. Can ensembles devise a great show with no one leading? I doubt it. My experience is that someone has to make decisions, great or not, so that you can move on. It is the endless arguing in early devising attempts that drives people mad. You must decide how your group will handle disagreements. This book explores how to work collaboratively on a project with the paradoxical knowledge that, at the same time, someone needs to steer the ship. Often this line is blurred. I don’t endorse any one way of leading; that is up to you and your ensemble. Chapter 5 has suggestions for how to structure that hierarchy. It is likely that hierarchy already exists and you may just need help recognizing it.

A little history

While it appears that ensemble devising is a theater movement that started in the latter half of the 20th century, it really is part of a much older tradition already well established when Shakespeare captured the joy of the Rude Mechanicals meeting in the forest to devise a play for the Duke in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Peter Quince and company found ingenious, poor-theater solutions to portraying a wall, a moon, and a lion that wouldn’t “fright the ladies”, solutions that included meta-theatrical concepts truly postmodern in nature. And they had a great time doing it. Though played for humor in *Midsummer*, Shakespeare captured the spirit of ensemble creation, a form that welcomes all takers, all methods, and all themes. That same spirit pervaded the touring troupes of the Commedia Delle’arte in the 16th and 17th centuries, who barnstormed Europe with their spontaneous and inventive playing style. Before Commedia, the local merchant guilds and townspeople who formed ensembles to stage Mystery Plays in medieval times must surely have done some devising. And I am sure there were devisers in ancient Greece whose names we