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What is devised theatre? Why have theatre-makers chosen to devise performances since the 1950s? How has devised performance changed over the last fifty years? Why, where, when, how, and for whom does devising take place today?

Devising Performance explores these fundamental questions and charts the development of collaboratively created performances from the 1950s to the present day in British, Australian and American culture. Deirdre Heddon and Jane Milling discuss companies including The Living Theatre, Open Theatre, Australian Performing Group, People Show, Teatro Campesino, Theatre de Complicite, Legs on the Wall, Forced Entertainment, Goat Island and Graeae. In so doing, they encourage us to look more carefully at different modes of devising and to consider the implications of our use of these practices in the twenty-first century.

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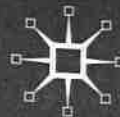
THEATRE &
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devising performance

deirdre heddon and jane milling

devising performance
a critical history

deirdre heddon and jane milling





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As we shall argue in Chapter 7, the slickness of visual performance did not necessarily make it easily consumable; some performances still aimed to have a tangible impact on the spectators, drawing attention, as Blood Group did in 1984, to the activity of spectatorship. Impact Theatre Cooperative's *The Carrier Frequency* appeared to bridge earlier performance forms with the visual finesse expected in the 1980s. Steve Rogers' description of the show as 'total theatre', where 'what you see is real, actually happening, and not a representation', seems curiously reminiscent of 1960s aims (Rogers, 1985, p. 28). In 1986 Claire MacDonald, co-founder of Impact, asked, 'How do you have an art which is humane, which is rooted in social and political issues, but which is not about them? An art which is not "for" something but which "is" something?' (Rogers, 1986b, p. 18). Though the forms might seem to have travelled a fair distance from the 1960s to the mid-1980s, they carried with them early concerns and explorations; and MacDonald's question is not really so far removed from the earlier impassioned rhetoric of Jean-Jacques Lebel.

4 Devising and Political Theatre

The focus of this chapter is the use of devising in the creation of political theatre. We understand the politics of theatre here to embrace not only the explicit political content of devised works, but also the structures and processes employed. As John McGrath, co-founder of the socialist theatre company 7:84, wrote,

It is important ... to see theatre not just as plays, but as a means of production, with bosses, workers, and unemployed, with structural relationships. ... It is through its structures as much as through its product that theatre expresses the dominant bourgeois ideology. (McGrath, 1984, p. 44)

The work explored in this chapter arose out of and was informed by the specific historical and political context of the 1960s and the New Left politics of the 1970s, which necessitated organisational structures and working processes that matched certain ideological beliefs. The increasing politicisation of society could be seen in the rising trade union membership in the UK, from '9½ million at the end of the 1950s to over 11 million by 1970' (Davies, 1987, p. 163). The election of a Conservative government in 1970 motivated further political activity, particularly in light of new anti-workers legislation such as Edward Heath's Industrial Relations Act. As David Edgar reflected, 'millions of workers became involved in industrial and political struggle who had never been involved before' (Edgar, 1979, p. 27).

Against this political background, many theatre workers throughout the 1970s actively sought to create organisations that did not promote or support bourgeois ideology, in particular the hierarchical structure of boss and workers. This desire to implement models that ideally enabled the practice of 'participatory democracy' initially led, in most cases at least, to the use of devising as a means of production.

In a culture in which models of devising are now commonplace, it is important to remember that in the 1960s and 1970s there were no models available to be appropriated. Reflections by practitioners throughout this period reveal an ongoing search, often characterised as a painful struggle, for *new* working practices appropriate to the political and ideological needs and aims of the time. When the ideological needs and aims shifted, so too did the practices.

Forms and Processes

Arising directly from the political ferment of the time, the catalyst for the founding of many of the best known political theatre companies was often to be located in political protest. Prior even to attempts to develop appropriate working practices, theatrical forms and working processes were often arrived at accidentally or through pragmatic decision-making in light of immediate pressures and concerns, including the intentions of the work and the performance conditions of the proposed playing environment.

The 'genesis' of the Chicano company El Teatro Campesino is instructive here. Its founder Luis Valdez wanted to use theatre to support the striking farm workers of Delano, California (his own father was a grape picker).¹ In 1965, broaching the idea to the strikers, he realised that in order to convince them of theatre's potential he would need to connect it to the workers' own experiences. He hung some signs – Scab, Striker, Grower, and Contractor – around workers' necks, and invited them to 'enact the characteristics of their signs. The results far exceeded his expectations' (Harrop and Huerta, 1975, p. 31).

The scab didn't want to at first; because it was a dirty word at that time, but he did so in good spirits. Then the two strikers started shouting at him, and everybody started cracking up. All of a sudden people started coming ... they filled up the whole kitchen. We started changing signs around, and people started volunteering ... imitating all kinds of things. We ran for two hours just doing that. Thus was El Teatro Campesino born. (Harrop and Huerta, 1975)

Valdez did not approach the workers with a ready-made script, supportive of the strike. Instead, the 'form' realised here was developed from within a context of necessity – how to convince the workers of theatre's radical potential, when theatre was considered an alien,

bourgeois activity. Connecting theatre to the real lives and real struggles of the workers necessitated drawing on the workers' own experiences, and using these experiences in the devising of the performances. The workers themselves both suggested the content and enacted the pieces, extending the sense of ownership and therefore relevance.

The circumstances surrounding the form developed by CAST (Cartoon Archetypical Slogan Theatre) proved equally productive. Ejected from the 'legitimate' left-wing Unity Theatre for attempting to introduce non-traditional political matters, such as anti-nuclear and anti-apartheid sentiments, the founding members of CAST

found ourselves sitting in a hired pub room in Camden Town, dreaming of changing the world and theatre along with it. None of us had previously considered ourselves actors, we had in fact been theatre technicians. (Muldoon, 1976, p. 40)

As they undertook 'exploratory exercises' in the hired room it dawned on them that 'on other nights [this is] where our potential audience sat' (ibid.). In devising their work, CAST members realised that, given the context of its presentation – a pub or club – they needed an approach that was dynamic, and that would grab attention. They quickly learned that 'we had to work fast, cut fast, to get at least a laugh a minute, if we were to stop the bastards going for a beer in the middle of it' (ibid., p. 41). Recognising the mass appeal of other cultural forms, including rock music, cinema and television, co-founder Roland Muldoon understood that

if I was going to be in theatre with the idea that it must be popular culture and have the attraction of rock 'n' roll, then I had to invent a style for that theatre. Twenty, twenty five minutes long, totally compressed, totally dynamic, cut, cut, cut, speed. So much so, that we could move faster than you could think ... (Rees, 1992, p. 70)

The aims of this 'fast cut' approach appeared to have been realised, as one critic reported that their work was, even as early as 1973, 'readily appreciated by younger audiences brought up on television and commercials' (Hammond, 1973, p. 46). CAST, describing its approach as 'agit pop' rather than 'agit-prop', considered itself a 'group with a gang ideology', more a rock 'n' roll theatre group than a collective. Notably, then, the politics of production did not, at first, influence the working process of the first socialist theatre company. As Muldoon admitted, 'All that collectivism came later' (Itzin, 1980, p. 41).

The Agitprop Street Players, founded in 1968 and re-named Red Ladder in 1971, similarly devised a form in response to a particular context, in this instance a request for help from a Tenants' Action Committee who were striking against imposed rent increases. Company member Chris Rawlence recollected that about half a dozen people got together 'and made the simplest of little sketches, a seven-minute thing saying basically: shall we pay the rents, no we won't' (ibid.). Richard Seyd, meanwhile, recalled that they made 'a 15-minute play. The result was a primitive – and not very well acted – “cloak and dagger” account of the rent fight up to that date. It used the traditions of melodrama and the music-hall.' In spite of any shortcomings, the sketch 'worked – and was booked for a dozen meetings' (Seyd, 1975, p. 36).

The important facts here are that the group were responding to an initial request, and that their 'play' was made for a specific group (a Tenants' Association), a specific place (Tenants' group meetings) and with a specific purpose (to support striking tenants). The form and content were dictated by political and physical context, and the criterion was simply, as Kathleen McCreery stated, 'did it help the struggle or not?' (Irzin, 1980, p. 41). This synergetic relationship between 'product' and context is further evidenced by the fact that the sketch developed as the real events altered. Seven plays, responding to the strike, were devised in total.

The 'model' proposed by the Agitprop Street Players, which connected performance to real workers' struggles, was one practised by a number of socialist theatre companies. The issue of rent increases, for example, was also at the root of North West Spanner's genesis. Originally it was a children's company; parents asked the group if they could support their rent strike in 1972, resulting in their first play for adults, *The Rents Play*. Similarly, The General Will's play *Rent, or Caught in the Act* (1972) was also 'devised for and played to tenants' groups, giving them information ... in an entertaining way' (ibid., p. 141). Unlike the other companies, The General Will actually had a company playwright, David Edgar, who was involved from the outset in the devising of the pieces.

Agit-Prop Form

The Agitprop Street Players' play *The Industrial Relations Act*, also known as *The Cake Play* is illustrative of the agit-prop form

developed during the early 1970s. It was performed at a Trade Union demonstration in Hyde Park in February 1971, the context again necessitating a short, attention-grabbing performance. Cognisant of this, the company composed a series of memorable symbolic or metaphoric images accompanied by simple, sloganeering text, intended to represent clearly the political message. The central images used, for example, were the 'national cake' and a set of ladders.

The workers are bakers who bake the national cake, the strike is seen as a knife which cuts into the cake; the myth of the national cake is exploded visually because it is the capitalist who sits on top of the cake, the workers purchase the cake to eat, the cake itself is a visualisation of the class structure in society, etc. (Seyd, 1975, p. 39)

Judith Condon provided a detailed account of the performances at the Hyde Park demo:

There were massive columns of men and women lined up behind the banners, rank after rank, and the players set up their props at the end of each line, giving performance after performance. There are three bakers' workers, men and women, in overalls, and the boss stands on a ladder looking rich and greedy. The workers produce a big section of pink cake, and stand it up against the boss's ladder. The boss looks pleased. He gives them their wage and they give it back to him in return for their slice of the cake: it isn't very much. (Lambert, 1977, p. 26)²

Using imagistic techniques to show the effect of the Industrial Relations Act, the play ended with the workers combining their strength to pick up the cake knife and 'strike off the heads of Heath and the Boss'. As member Richard Seyd explained, the aim of the play was to make tangible and comprehensible the invisible forces that create and impact on our lived experiences 'so that they can be grasped and, hopefully, acted upon' (Seyd, 1975, p. 39). Indicative of the rousing intention of agit-prop work, the final slogan shouted by the workers was 'We don't want a slice of the cake. We want the bloody bakery.' Capturing the atmosphere at Hyde Park, and the enthusiasm with which the play was met, Condon reported that 'Everyone had been joining in the workers' shouts, and at [the last line] we gave a great shout' (Lambert, 1977, p. 26). Such a response substantiates Seyd's claim that 'agit-prop is an effective, perhaps the best, theatrical method of mobilising support' (Seyd, 1975, p. 40). However, as Condon also noted, the play would only have had an

impact on those already convinced of its arguments; the simplistic content demanded by agit-prop might mobilise already existing support then, but it would be unlikely to persuade the not-yet-converted.

Luis Valdez of El Teatro Campesino, developing the fortuitously 'found' method whereby worker-actors simply wore archetypal characters' names around their necks, devised a similar form to agit-prop, called *actos*. The *actos*, like the agit-prop plays of the Agitprop Street Players, were intended to

inspire the audience to social action. Illuminate specific points about social problems. Satirize the opposition. Show or hint at solutions. Express what people are feeling. (Kanellos, 1987, p. 20)

Actos, similarly determined by the context of their performance, were short, humorous scenes that presented clearly the facts relating to political situations. Scenarios were developed from improvisations enacted by the farm worker-actors, drawing on their real experiences (ibid., p. 18). *The Two Faces of the Boss*, a typical *acto* presented in 1965, aimed to erase the intimidation workers felt, by revealing the boss to be simply a man, like them. In the *acto* the boss initially wore a pig facemask, carried a whip and smoked a cigar. Attempting to persuade the worker that he would not want the trials that attended his life, the boss swapped his mask, whip and cigar for the worker's shears and hat and sign. The worker, confronted by the unmasked boss, laughed in response, saying, 'Patron, you look like me' (Kourilsky, 1972, p. 48). In addition to the appropriateness of the form in relation to its political intentions (simple and clear messages), agit-prop and *actos* were 'practicable' – cheap to produce and able to be performed anywhere (DiCenzo, 1996, p. 44). They were also capable of being adapted quickly in response to real events. This is one advantage of the devised script; having been devised and performed by the group, it could quickly be revised and kept up to date.

The agit-prop form used in the 1960s and early 1970s was felt to be one that could be mastered by anyone, and was not considered the preserve of the professional theatre maker. In fact, this model of practice aligned itself with the perceived primary function of *political* performance – its political intentions – rather than with any aesthetic concerns. Theatre was considered a tool. Thus, as a Red Ladder programme from 1972 stressed, 'Theatre is not our end; it is our means. A way of putting across ideas. ... A means of stimulating thought, discussion and even action, on issues of critical importance

to the working class' (Shank, 1978, p. 52). Luis Valdez, in very similar tones, declared in 1967 that his company 'shouldn't be judged as a theater. We're really part of a cause' (Elam, 1997, p. 19).³ This focus on politics rather than aesthetics rendered possible the ideological stance of anti-professionalisation, itself tied to a general desire to democratise the arts, making them accessible to all. 'Devising', the creation of a 'product' from scratch, enabled by everyone's contribution, was considered a potential model of democratic arts practice.

The Mode of Production

Aligning political ideologies with working practices led many companies to develop collective structures. Rather than one person assuming a position of ultimate control over the theatrical product (the director), and over those who created it (the performers), political companies most often attempted to operate collectively. Initially, collective practice was equated with everyone having an equal say, decision-making operating via discussion and consensus, all jobs being undertaken by everyone (either randomly or on a rotating basis), and all jobs considered as equally important. The collective model insisted on shared and equal responsibility for all aspects of the production. As we will soon see, different companies evolved their own different collective models, partly responding to the actual experiences of working collectively.

What was also apparent in many companies operating at this time was their own ongoing consciousness-raising and political education. Red Ladder, for example,

would read Lenin and Marx and other theorists every week and have a discussion about it. The political discussion was also about how to organise the group. For many years they were an absolute model of democracy. ... They had weekly meetings, a whole afternoon to discuss the group, to ensure that everybody had an equal role, that all work was rotated, including the Chairman of the Day. (Itzin, 1980, p. 47)

The reflective writings of theatre practitioners at this time are evidence of their theoretical training, illustrated and substantiated with statements from the 'canon' of radical politics, from Chairman Mao to Lenin to Brecht.⁴

The lesbian collective Siren Theatre Company, founded in 1979 in Brighton, also bore testimony to this process of group education and

the focus on political clarity over aesthetic sophistication. Member Jane Boston 'recalled that the discussion and the clarification of political positions seemed to be more important than its theatrical expression' (Freeman, 1997, p. 49). Like Blood Group, Siren's discussions were prompted by Mary Daly's *Gyn/ecology*. Interestingly, Sandra Freeman noted that because of members' different experiences of class and background, there was no emergence of a 'collective mind, rather a reconciliation of individual differences' (ibid.).

The Bradford Art College Theatre Group, founded by Albert Hunt and his students, which developed from the 'Happening' performances discussed in Chapter 3, also provides an interesting example of the relationship between political ideas and collective organisations. Hunt's description of their devising process is certainly similar to that of other political companies, but there is also some resonance with other less explicitly political groups, such as the People Show. The Theatre Group

works as a collective, putting together ideas in discussion and improvisation: but it's made up of individuals, each of whom might have his own descriptions and definitions of what we are trying to do. We work together because we respond to each other's ideas and attitudes and inventions – and not because we've sat down and hammered out a manifesto and an ideological line. (Hunt, 1971, p. 47)

That said, it is clear that the company did practise consciousness-raising, or what Hunt calls 'political discovery', during the creation of their plays (Hunt, 1975, p. 6). The group did not begin by already knowing the answers to political questions. Instead, like Red Ladder, they 'discovered the content as we worked. ... As we put our plays together, we were trying, not to parrot simple slogans, but to examine, scrutinise, question our own received ideas – and to invite our audiences to do the same' (ibid.).

In an article written in 1975, Hunt posed a question to all those engaged in political theatre at that time: 'why theatre? At this moment? Why not other forms of political agitation or activity? Why not social action?' Hunt's own answer insisted on the politics of production: 'In the first place, the theatre, at its simplest level, that of small groups of people coming together to work, offers a concrete form for creating new, collective working relationships' (ibid.). The process of devising, without any pre-existing script, potentially enabled greater collective practices.

The desire and aim for shared and equal creative responsibility needs also to be read within the particular context of dominant theatre practice – a practice marked by hierarchical structures. By the 1950s the director occupied the apex of the theatrical hierarchy, and – as Dan Rebellato has argued – the role of the playwright had by this time also received professional recognition. Both of these shifts were indicative of 'the lure of professionalism', which 'was extremely strong in the forties and fifties' (Rebellato, 1999, p. 83). As Rebellato summarised, such professionalisation 'sharply delimited the creative freedom of all but a select few theatre workers' (ibid., p. 85). The political theatre 'movement' of the 1960s could be read as a deliberate refusal of this 'lure of professionalism'.

As the ideology of 'participatory democracy' took international root, it was evident that for theatre to play its role in the formation of any new society, the praxis of participatory democracy should also be implemented. Set beside the model of hierarchy, specialisation and increased professionalisation, devising as a collaborative process offered a politically acceptable alternative. According to Theodore Shank, alternative methods of theatre creation developed in part

as a reaction against the psychic fragmentation the artists experienced in the technocratic society which believed that human needs could be satisfied by technical means requiring a huge degree of specialization. Instead of the individual specialists of the established theatre, the typical member of an alternative theatre has broad creative responsibilities. (Shank, 1982, p. 2)

Devising a Play

Strike While the Iron is Hot, or *A Woman's Work is Never Done* (1974) was one of Red Ladder's best known plays. Responding to certain political shifts of the time, not least the impact of the burgeoning feminist movement, this play moved Red Ladder, for the first time, from its singular focus on socialism. Complementing this widening of focus, the form of the play attempted a more socialist-realist style in place of the crude agit-prop form of earlier work (albeit interrupted in places with more expressionist language). Though the usefully illustrative visual metaphors used in their agit-prop plays were retained, they were placed within a framework of realism. For example, in one scene the principles of Equal Pay were

explained to the main character, Helen, using quantities of beer in pint glasses. This explanation was given while the characters were in a pub, therefore making the use of beer as a visual prop probable within the overall structure of the play.

The word 'play' is significant here; where the agit-prop performances were more like 'sketches' in their form, *Strike* developed into a full-length piece, and deliberately attempted to construct realistic characters, situations and exchanges. Though the words and images used in agit-prop had always to be precise in order to be clear in their ideological message, the devising of a full-length play, aiming for a socialist-realist form, complete with plot and dialogue in place of sound bites or slogans accompanied by images, might arguably demand a different process of play construction. Where the agit-prop sketch lent itself easily to a fragmented script, the socialist-realist form required a greater narrative unity (even if presented episodically). In this example, we can see the interrelation between form and process; as the one shifted, so too did the other.

Richard Seyd's article 'The Theatre of Red Ladder' provided a full account of the 'play-making process'. Though this relates to *Strike While the Iron is Hot*, it nevertheless proposes one model of devising a play, a complicated and ostensibly 'careful' model that Red Ladder arrived at through six years of previous experience collectively devising agit-prop performances. According to Seyd, the total process, from the beginning to the opening of the play, took about nine months (Seyd, 1975, pp. 38–9). This model also reveals the company's organisational structure. The collaboration of all members, alongside the delegation of different responsibilities, matches and reflects the company's ideological beliefs.

The group's decision to make a play focusing on feminist concerns arose out of post-show audience discussions following previous performances, and members' own concerns. Once the subject matter had been agreed upon, one person undertook primary research, which included interviewing a variety of people, while the whole group continued to discuss the subject for a further three months. As the group worked its way towards its own understanding of the issues, an element of consciousness-raising was inevitable, during which members of the group confronted their own actions and behaviour. The group worked out a series of components that four people then used in order to plan the play's structure, which took two months work. This dramaturgical skeleton was presented to the whole group for discussion, changes, or even total rejection. Improvisations based

on the material that had been agreed were used to find ways in which the content could be made as clear as possible, and the different characters were also devised during these improvisations. Following the improvisation work, the play was again distributed amongst different people in order that a rough script could be prepared from the material that had been generated. The whole group again discussed the results, and further changes were made. Two people were finally given the responsibility of providing a stylistic unity to the entire script. The play was cast according to the principle that all members should have the opportunity to play different types of parts in each of the company's productions. The script was further developed during rehearsals, and would continue to evolve whilst touring, in response to audience feedback (*ibid.*).

Other companies shared many of the features evident in the process used by Red Ladder. For example, the Women's Theatre Group's first performance, *My Mother Says I Never Should* (1975), similarly involved group discussion in order to determine the focus of the piece. The subject matter – sex and contraception – was then collectively researched. As the intended audience was young women, the company members talked to girls, parents and teachers. This information was then pooled, and through group improvisation characters and plot were created. Finally, company members formed small sub-groups in order to write and rewrite the script (Wandor, 1980, p. 115).

Organisational Structures

Many reflections by practitioners on their modes of production focused on the struggles experienced in attempting both to determine and then to practise a collective model. This would obviously have repercussions on the methods of devising that were adopted; different models resulted in different methods. For Seyd, developing an appropriate working structure 'has been perhaps the most problematical part of the work, relating, as it does, to the creation of an organisational structure that is at the same time democratic, productive, and non-oppressive to the individuals working within the collective' (Seyd, 1975, p. 42). Seyd's next comment is revealing:

The major problem was that we made an idealistic analysis of the nature and practice of democracy. We worked in what we would now call an ultra-egalitarian structure. (Seyd, 1975, p. 42)

One effect of this collective structure was, ironically, that it created an 'anarchic tyranny of structurelessness' (ibid.).

John McGrath similarly used the word 'anarchy' to describe certain collective models. Referring to the differences in aims between himself and his former 7:84 colleague Gavin Richards, McGrath claimed to have distrusted the actuality, if not the concept, of the 'liberation of the performer'. For McGrath, such 'liberation' was 'a kind of anarchism', whereas he was 'interested in a Socialist theatre, not an anarchist theatre' (McGrath, 1975a, p. 50). Richards in fact broke away from 7:84 in order to found another socialist company, Belt and Braces. McGrath's experiences of mounting a joint production with Belt and Braces, *The Great Money Trick* (1976), substantiated his suspicions, at least in McGrath's opinion,

there was a total decentralization, a total exchange of roles. Everybody was a writer, everybody was a bureaucrat, everybody could do anything on the show. It was total chaos. The gigs got all fucked up because somebody didn't tell somebody that they'd made an arrangement to ring somebody back, because one day they were organising the gigs and the next day they were rushing around finding props. (McGrath, 1975a)

Collective decision-making also, in practice, often fell short of the ideal. Red Ladder initially employed a model of unanimous agreement. However, Seyd revealed that such 'unanimity' might in fact be the result of the most dominant members of the group – typically the men – getting their way, rather than there being actual agreement with all proposals. As nothing could progress until a unanimous agreement had been reached, 'those in a minority would eventually put up their hands and make the decision unanimous ... just so the work could continue' (Seyd, 1975, p. 42). It was only when the company began to work on *Strike While the Iron is Hot* that members of the group confronted their own oppressive behaviour. As one member, Glen Park, recalled, the preparatory discussions for the play involved examining personal histories of being men and women, 'and for the first time making conscious the ways in which male oppression took place within the group. Everyone was very shaken up by that' (Wandor, 1986, p. 96).

Another potential danger of the collective model was that, as Lizbeth Goodman recognised, the very structure of collective organisation often ironically prompted a non-agreed hierarchy to be imposed. In order for a play to progress, it was often necessary for

someone to step in and take control; in the 1970s, that someone (a necessarily confident figure) would typically be a man (Goodman, 1993, p. 55). Gillian Hanna, founding member of the feminist company Monstrous Regiment, similarly referred to the 'hidden hierarchy that can lie beneath the surface of a group' (Hanna, 1991, p. xx).⁵

Equally damaging to companies was an unquestioned faith in the democratic model. When Red Ladder deployed the collective structure but then experienced resentment and tension, explanations for such failure were sought in 'individual personalities and psychologies', rather than in the process. As Seyd stressed, one effect of this collective method was, paradoxically, the individualisation of everything (Seyd, 1975, p. 42). Responding to such experiences, by 1975 the model favoured by Red Ladder had shifted to one of 'majority' rather than unanimity.

The organisational history of the San Francisco Mime Troupe is an instructive example of the struggle to find a mode of production that is both ideologically acceptable and practicably workable. Though the Troupe was founded and directed by Ronnie Davis, the context of the group's work (San Francisco in the 1960s), and its increasingly political focus, created a tension with the hierarchical structure, the 'one-or-two-person-lead [*sic*] group' (Davis, 1975a, p. 114). As the company grew, 'others wanted a chance to direct, perform and do the creating' (ibid.). One alternative model that was implemented was a Gerontocracy, 'whereby the oldest members became a committee of decision-makers' (ibid., pp. 98–9). This structure did not work, however, since these members did not want the responsibility of running a company and were not involved in the day-to-day organisation of it. Two members of the company then proposed an alternative structure: five members of the group would be elected by the company to form an 'Inner core', which would 'decide on the direction and policy of the company' (ibid, p. 99). The practice of this group, in relation to decision-making, was as ineffectual as the Gerontocracy, resulting in the group being voted out. This then led to the creation of what Davis termed a 'loosely ordered collective', a development that prompted Davis to leave the company. Davis considered that 'requiring people to be all things at all times (actors are writers, directors are actors, technicians are theoreticians, and so on) hampers the wholesale improvement of the work' (Davis, 1975b, p. 26). Further, in Davis's opinion, participatory democracy 'is not likely to lead to revolutionary work nor sustained revolutionary activity. In the theatre, it is likely to lead in the opposite

direction – congratulatory participation, amateurism and bourgeois choice' (Davis, 1975a, p. 124).

Evident here is a tension between 'politics' and 'aesthetics', and process and product, and Davis suggested that such tension was also tangible between performers who were professionals and those who were amateurs, when both had an equal voice in meetings. In presenting his critique of collective theatre processes, Davis included the informed reflections of Sandy Archer, his former colleague (who also left the Troupe a few months after Davis). Archer proposed that, as divisions of labour were erased, so too was 'the trust and respect that was associated' with them. In Archer's opinion,

while this can bring out innovative ideas or techniques, it primarily focuses on breaking down identities built upon what we would call experienced or professional wisdom. In this way, anyone's opinions become as valid as anyone else's. The extreme result of this would be *individualism*, i.e., total expression of each in all areas. (Davis, 1975a, pp. 125–6)

In place of this model, Archer instead envisioned a cooperative, where each would use their specific skills and experience for the benefit of the total production (ibid.). Archer's cooperative ideal would in fact be a model pursued and practised by various companies seeking a mode of production that would overcome the problems identified above, including the 'hidden hierarchies'. Such a model of cooperative practice was not, however, the one favoured by the San Francisco Mime Troupe at this time.

Though some of the San Francisco Mime Troupe's productions, such as *A Minstrel Show*, or *Civil Rights in a Cracker Barrel* (1965), developed under Davis's leadership, were considered by the company to be 'collective' productions, the collective process became more conscious following Davis's and Archer's departure. Company member Joan Holden referred to the collective model as 'group production', first explicitly experienced in the making of *Seize the Time* (1970) (Holden, 1975, p. 28). Holden's account of the process revealed that there was still a division of labour – there were writers, directors, and actors, for example; however, the aim of the company was to 'allow more people to play those roles'. It is evident from Holden's account that the writers used work generated by performers, and in this sense, the production might be considered a collectively devised piece. In *Seize the Time* there were two writers, and two directors who 'assembled the show from the fragments of style and

staging produced by the workshops' (ibid., p. 30). The ideas for the play also came from the whole group. The collective process was signified in the programmes by the lack of company members' names; no one person was credited with any specific task.

In spite of the new model of collectivism instituted at the San Francisco Mime Troupe, an article by Theodore Shank, written two years after Joan Holden's 'positive' appraisal of collective playmaking, revealed that the company was still working through what might be a 'hidden hierarchy'. The fact that Holden had published an article about the company does suggest that she held a certain amount of power. Shank's account of the making of *False Promises* (1976) rendered explicit the difficulties of collectively arriving at a subject matter, and then of writing a script for this. Joan Holden eventually wrote the play. Given that she was the most prolific writer in the group to date, having written *Independent Female* (1970) and *Frijoles* (1975), as well as being a writer for *The Dragon Lady's Revenge* (1971), the company policy of rotating creative tasks did not appear to be holding. As Shank reported, tensions within the group were evident:

About seven weeks after the play had opened, a meeting was held to discuss the process by which it had come about. There was still dissatisfaction about how the play had been written because the company had begun with the idea that it would be developed at all stages by the entire group. These dissatisfactions needed to be talked about openly. (Shank, 1977, p. 48)

The meeting also acknowledged that every play so far presented had been created differently – no 'perfect' model had yet offered itself. One note from this meeting captured well the potential tension that arises from a collective process and a model of equal and shared responsibility: 'The group's commitment to collective process is unanimous. ... However, those participating must maintain concentration and energy during the discussion to realize fully the benefits of collective playmaking' (ibid.).

The Role of the Writer

Although the focus of this chapter is primarily political devised theatre, in most cases the form of this theatre was 'text-based', and as

such, the problematic relationship of writing to devising cannot be ignored. In distinction to those performances that might be 'scored' or 'composed' from visual images or physical actions enacted by the group, the plays explored here are usually textually scripted, although the means of producing that script is, as we have already seen, varied. In this context, Lizbeth Goodman's supposition that 'one of the primary difficulties of devising is a definitional one: that of distinguishing between "writing" and "devising"' (Goodman, 1993, p. 101), is one that the reader would do well to bear in mind, although it is a conundrum not easily resolved.

In the production of agit-prop plays, with their emphasis on unambiguous political messages, the accompanying text was necessarily sparse. This was particularly so given the performance environment – often outside, often programmed as part of another event, and often with limited time available for performing. There was no attempt at characterisation, story line, or any sequential unfolding of plot in time and place (Seyd, 1975, p. 39). The form of agit-prop would more readily lend itself to a group devising process provided the group was in agreement about politics. As we have seen, group discussion involving much personal consciousness-raising around the issues to be addressed was a large part of the devising process.

However, as the agit-prop sketch gave way to socialist-realist plays, complete with narrative structure or plot and a degree of character psychology, the process of devising the material also shifted. We have already seen one example of this in Red Ladder's *Strike While the Iron is Hot*, where specific members were given the responsibility of writing the text. The process of producing *Mother Country*, a play by Mutable Theatre (1975) that explored the interconnections between class oppression and racism, is also instructive. The group adopted the by-now familiar model, beginning with a research period which involved reading various materials and holding discussions with appropriate different individuals and organisations, and then sharing this information with all members of the group. The company then met to discuss what they had learned – a process of consciousness-raising. This was followed by a period of improvisatory workshops, after which one company member took responsibility for writing up a script, using the devised material as the basis. The written script was then further discussed and revised by the whole group (Shank, 1978, p. 57).

It is notable from this example that it was finally one person who took responsibility for writing the play-text. Responding to the

various strains produced by a collective model, in the mid-1970s many companies in the UK developed a cooperative structure, matching Sandy Archer's ideal form of collaboration. Aiming to retain the ideological foundations of the collective, companies would typically insist that all skills were equally valuable. Important to our survey of the devising process is the fact that one specific skill recognised by the mid-1970s was that of writing. John McGrath had always been passionate in his defence of the professional writers' skills, and although 7:84 was considered a socialist theatre company, McGrath maintained a powerful position during his time in the Scottish company as its writer and director. For McGrath, though the process of writing was open to discussion by all members of the company, nevertheless 'writing a play can never be a totally democratic process. They are skills which need aptitude, long experience, self-discipline and a certain mental disposition in one individual' (McGrath, 1975b, p. 9).⁶ In a neat sound bite, McGrath's aim was 'to de-mystify the role, without castrating the talent' (ibid.). The purpose of opening up to discussion the process of writing was intended to give all company members a sense of shared ownership over the play, even if the act of writing remained an individual task. Members should feel 'part of the creation of the show, not alienated from it or the mere instruments of it' (ibid.). The making of *Boom* (1974) began with the company involved in discussion, followed by ideas 'of all kinds, from all directions. ... The whole company was throwing in their ideas which were taken up, knocked down, analysed by everyone else and fed into the growing pool of unrealised material that was to be the basis of the show itself' (ibid., p. 10).

The published introduction to 7:84 (Scotland's *The Cheviot, the Stag, and the Black, Black Oil* (1973) provided further insight to the company's working process and McGrath's position within that. McGrath stated bluntly, 'Obviously I, as a writer, had a very clear idea of exactly how I wanted the show to be. I knew who it was for, and I knew what I wanted to say and how I wanted to say it' (McGrath, 1981, p. ix). Aligning the production process with his ideological beliefs, McGrath tempered this blow of individualism by insisting that even though 'this wasn't to be a free-for-all, utopian fantasy: I wouldn't expect to play Allan Ross's fiddle, or to sing in Gaelic, or act', the hierarchies of theatre could be smashed by giving equal respect to each individual's skills, whilst still keeping the processes of each open to 'collective discussion and advice' (ibid., p. x).

McGrath's unequivocal designation as 'playwright' makes it difficult to claim that 7:84 was a devising company at that time. Yet in practice their process during the 1970s does not appear to be that dissimilar to other companies which might be thought to employ a devising model. Michael Patterson's conclusion that 'it is not the writing that is a collaborative process but the research that precedes it' seems, however, too easy a separation when placed against the evidence of the actual creative methods used (Patterson, 2003, p. 129).

The impetus for many political companies throughout the 1970s and 1980s was the observable lack of plays that addressed the concerns of many people. In order that the experiences of gay men, lesbians, disabled people and women, for example, were represented on stage, companies such as Siren Theatre Company, Gay Sweatshop, the Women's Theatre Group, Gracae Theatre Company and Monstrous Regiment realised that they would need to generate their own texts.

Monstrous Regiment, a feminist collective founded in 1975, were from the outset clear about their need for a writer. Recognising the assumption that a collective company should employ a collective method of devising scripts, and therefore aware of the potential tension that having a designated writing role might cause in such an organisation, co-founder Gillian Hanna asked:

Wouldn't it be more democratic to write scripts collectively? If you were working in a collective, how could one voice represent the ideas of the whole? We acknowledged some truth in this, but there were some areas where we recognised it as bunk. Enough of us (and I was one of them) had been through the painful experience of writing shows collectively in other groups to know that the skill of playwriting was one we wanted to acknowledge. (Hanna, 1991, p. xxxiii)

However, aiming to maintain the ideal of a collective organisation, Monstrous Regiment hoped to develop a 'collective relationship with the writer'. Like the Mime Troupe, in the absence of any already existing model for this, each of their ventures was to employ a different model, and not all of these could be considered successful. The company's first play, *SCUM: Death, Destruction and Dirty Washing* (1976), was written by Chris Bond and Claire Luckham. The original intention of holding discussions from which Bond and Luckham would then write the play, or of the play being written first and then opened to discussion, was never realised. The writing was mostly done from a distance and when Monstrous Regiment received

the script, they decided to collectively revise those elements they considered to be 'still in an unresolved state' (ibid., p. xxxiv).

Under Susan's direction, we improvised, we discussed, we argued, we went away and wrote scenes and bits of scenes. We also added more songs. It's impossible now to say who did what. ... Everybody wrote something. (Hanna, 1991)

In this example, then, an originally commissioned script was adapted through a collective devising process. In a later project, Monstrous Regiment attempted to devise their own script, adapting *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. Hanna described this new venture as 'a disastrous foray into the grave labelled devised writing' (ibid., p. xlviii). Though *Scum* had been a great success, 'Claire and Chris had created a substantial basis of structure and narrative, a vision from which we worked' (ibid.). In Hanna's opinion, the totally devised work, by contrast, was 'incoherent. Too many people had a hand in writing it' (ibid.).

Claire Grove, a member of the Women's Theatre Group, addressing the collective devising process, similarly found problems with collective writing. She reflected that:

Quite often it completely cut against what you wanted to say, because having set up a structure like that there's a feeling that everyone can contribute ... and you ended up with a sort of gap in the middle of a group of people that was the play. All your intentions were right and the play was dreadful. (Goodman, 1993, p. 54).⁷

It was perhaps an awareness of such a gap in the middle of *Care and Control* that prompted Gay Sweatshop to invite Michelene Wandor to assist with the production of the final script. Gay Sweatshop's first play, *Mister X* (1975), was scripted by Roger Baker and Drew Griffiths, with the text being reworked in rehearsals through discussions and improvisations (Osment, 1989, p. xix). *Care and Control* was the first play to arise from the women's section of Gay Sweatshop, founded in 1977. Following an established model, the women of the company first undertook group research and used interviews with women as primary material that was then drawn upon during workshops. A scenario, and then a more detailed synopsis, was developed out of improvisations, which were in turn transcribed by some members of the cast (Wandor, 1980, p. 63). However, having undertaken this process, the group 'arrived at a point where we had a lot of material, but felt we could not produce an adequate script

ourselves' (ibid). As a result, the group invited Michéle Wandor to 'come in and script it'. Wandor's revisions consisted of 'editing and tightening and reorganising' what was already there, and also adding new material where needed, all of which involved discussion with the company. Nancy Diuguid's description of *Care and Control* as being 'a collaborative effort, a collaborative piece' that 'Gay Sweatshop collectively wrote' is unequivocal (Goodman, 1993, p. 95). Wandor, similarly, did not claim the status of 'author' of the play. As she explained, 'The company researched and devised the play and I scripted it (which is not the same as writing)' (ibid., p. 96). This distinction between scripting and writing is an important one that recognises collaborative creation. The difficulty of defining the status or practice of 'writing' in relation to collaborative models of devising remains in contemporary examples. Companies that employ a writer, but which also want to acknowledge the collaborative contribution of others, such as the Scottish company Suspect Culture, or the New York company The Civilians, replace the term 'playwright' with that of 'dramaturg', or 'text by ...'.⁸ Both of these work against the assumed individualism or autonomy of the writer, whilst still recognising that writing demands its own particular skills and/or experience.

The model used by Gay Sweatshop could be contrasted with that employed by The General Will in its early years. David Edgar was, from the start, the company's playwright, collaborating on *The State of Emergency*, *Rent*, or *Caught in the Act* (1972) and *The Dunkirk Spirit* (1974). Where Wandor was brought into the process late in its development, Edgar was involved in the discussions from the outset. Edgar would write scenes that arose from 'day-to-day discussion and/or improvisation', which he would then bring back to the group to try out, and for further discussion. In this process, Edgar was 'writing a scene a day' (Itzin, 1980, p. 140).

Graeae Theatre Company, founded in 1980, employed a similar devising process. Speaking of the genesis of the company, co-founder and actor Nabil Shaban recollected that in 1980 there were no opportunities in theatre for disabled actors: 'even local amateur dramatic societies at that time looked askance at having disabled people on stage'.⁹ Further, there was little representation of people with disabilities, and what did exist was written by observers of disability rather than those who directly experienced it. The co-founder and director of Graeae, Richard Tomlinson, set out to redress this invisibility.¹⁰ Like other companies discussed here, Graeae

adopted a devising process in which the actors would improvise in workshops and Tomlinson would then take this material and translate it into a dramatic script. For Shaban:

Devising is an attractive process because it offers the opportunity to make a piece that is as 'authentic' as possible. Robert couldn't hope to be able to create what disabled people felt and experienced. However, he used his professional theatre craftsmanship to turn what was developed during workshops into a credible piece of theatre.¹¹

Importantly, the early shows of Graeae, including *Sideshow* (1980) and *3D* (1981), were very much determined by and dependent upon the people who performed in them. As cast members changed, so too did the script. In this sense, the 'product' was always in 'process' and the play was always 'owned' by those contributing to it. By 1983, both Shaban and Tomlinson had left Graeae; that year the company presented *The Endless Variety Show*, a performance written by Geoff Armstrong which indicated a shift in the working process of the company.

The early work of Joint Stock Theatre Company also raises the difficulty in determining the relationship of the 'writer' to our concept of 'devising'. The impetus for the foundation of Joint Stock is to be found in some of the companies covered in Chapter 2. Inspired by a visit of Café La Mama to Jim Haynes's new project, the Traverse Theatre, Max Stafford Clark had set up a workshop there (1968–72) and in 1974, with writer David Hare and David Aukin (from Freehold), he established the touring company, Joint Stock. Actors once again undertook research and generated improvisational material, but a writer worked with them on a project from the beginning and generated a script that was then rehearsed as a traditional production. The pace and activity of the workshop discoveries fed into the scripts and performances that the company produced. The material that the group worked on was often factual, and actors were involved in gathering research in order to generate the performances, as in *Speakers* (1974), *Fanshen* (1975) and *Yesterday's News* (1976). The script for Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine* (1979) was conditioned by the interests of the actors, and their desires for equality of parts.¹² Nabil Shaban, Gillian Hanna and others have identified this desire for equality of parts as a potential problem shared by many collective companies. Reflecting on the experiences of Graeae, and its shift towards the employment of a writer and commissioned scripts, Shaban suggested that 'The danger with a devised piece [by a collective

company] was the attempt or desire to please everyone, and the attempt to give everyone equal parts, resulting in a homogenous piece'.¹³ Shaban's insights suggest an attention to product over process.

Politics vs Aesthetics

It is apparent, from the examples so far offered, that by the mid-1970s there was a move away from a singular focus on the political function of theatre, and the primary importance of that, and a move towards prioritising theatre as an aesthetic form. This focus on the production, over process, implies an equal or greater degree of concern with the cultural value of the work than with its political impact, or at the least, it suggests a different way of relating 'politics' to 'product' by suggesting that practitioners were becoming more critical of the forms through which politics were being presented. In its early years, members of Red Ladder had insisted on the primacy of its politics over any aesthetic concerns, but by 1975 Seyd was writing that the 'disrespect and mechanical relegation of the forms used do a disservice to the ideas being communicated. No craftsman would disregard the tools of their trade to the extent that socialist theatre workers often disregard theirs' (Seyd, 1975, p. 39). This sentiment was supported by a quotation from Mao Tse Tung: 'Works of art which lack artistic quality have no force, however progressive they are politically' (ibid., p. 41). By this time, members of Red Ladder were taking 'on their own shoulders areas of the group's work – in other words we have a division of labour' (ibid., p. 42). Like the San Francisco Mime Troupe model, rotation of the different tasks was intended, so that 'no one job is the preserve of any one individual'. However, Seyd admitted that some jobs had to be occupied for at least a year, 'otherwise swapping around does become counter-productive' (ibid.).

El Teatro Campesino represents an early instance of the shift from explicit politics toward aesthetic concerns. In September 1967, Valdez relocated the company to Del Rey, thereby breaking the previously exclusive bond that it had with the Delano strikers. Valdez commented:

We found we had to back away from Delano to be a theatre. Do you serve the moment by being just kind of half-assed, getting together whenever there's a chance, or do you really hone your theatre down into an effective weapon? (Harrop and Huerta, 1975, p. 31)

Valdez suggested here that the 'professionalisation' of his theatre would enable it to be an even greater political tool; more sustained focus on the production values of the performance did not then, in his opinion, render its political import any less significant. However, the geographical move was matched by a move in political sensibilities, with politics being read from a broader cultural perspective rather than a socialist one. Valdez now identified more with a Chicano identity than with worker identity, and the purpose of the work was to strengthen Chicanos' sense of, and pride in, their own culture, history and traditions. As Harrop and Huerta documented, in order to approach these 'broader and abstract issues his theatre would require a greater technical sophistication on the part of the actors' (ibid., p. 32). A new training programme was developed, bearing resemblance to other ensemble training of the time, in particular that of Joseph Chaikin (discussed in Chapter 2). Such a training programme was far removed from the devised *actos* of the unskilled farm workers. Perhaps unsurprisingly, from 1971 Valdez replaced the *actos* with *mitos*, 'the playing and singing of a narrative drama' (ibid., p. 34). *Mitos* were written and directed by Valdez himself. Again, we witness in this example the symbiotic relationship between form and process. As the form shifted, so too did the means of attaining it. Indicating the dramatic shifts in both practice and content, in 1974 Valdez commented, 'Now our acts are the acts of human beings living and working on this earth. ... We are still very much the political theatre, but our politics are the politics of the spirit – not of the flesh but of the heart' (ibid., p. 34).¹⁴

As suggested in the example of El Teatro Campesino, the move away from politics to aesthetics, and from collective models towards cooperative ones, correlates with a re-professionalisation of practice. Though undoubtedly some companies encouraged radical forms of writing, there was nevertheless some notion of 'good' theatre being applied (even if that were 'good popular entertainment'). In the 1980s, plays written for those collaborative companies that still survived certainly approached the conditions of more conventional – or bourgeois – theatre. It was perhaps not unsurprising that such plays were written using more conventional methods, for a different approach to producing written texts would arguably be likely to result in a different form of text (such as those that are discussed in Chapter 3 and Chapter 7). Any 'gap' perceived in the play, then, might well have resulted not from the process of collectively devising the play, but because the type of play being aimed for – social-realist

with naturalist dialogue, narrative-driven with a linear plot, and structural unity and coherence, for example – could not easily be made using a collective devising process.

By the 1980s any explicit political signifiers that remained were to be found not in radical modes of production but instead in the content of plays, although by now these politics were far removed from the socialist politics of work produced in the 1970s. Though many companies did attempt to retain their difference from mainstream theatre by at least insisting on a collective, rather than a hierarchical model, even this practice was to be challenged by the new economic pressures of the 1980s.

Shifting Economics

So far we have explained the move away from processes of collectively devising political productions by recognising the growing concern of companies with 'aesthetics'. However, another major (and related) factor in the shift away from collective and collaborative models is that of subsidy for the arts. If the economic climate does not support, in general, collective modes of production, then a collectively devised process becomes difficult to sustain.

The issue of state subsidy in relation to political theatre has always been somewhat contentious: can a theatre company which attempts to challenge the status quo be simultaneously supported by an institution seen to be a cog in, and an emblem of, that dominant culture? Seeking to secure funding from the Arts Council, and then retain it, companies would inevitably 'become more interested in professional survival than in revolutionary action' (Birchall, 1978).¹⁵ The focus shifts to financial matters rather than political objectives (Davis, 1975a, p. 16). This argument coincides with the debate between politics and aesthetics; as companies became professionalised, working in political theatre might have been considered a career option rather than a political passion (Birchall, 1978, p. 39). Though funding provided some stability, in Ronnie Davis's opinion this resulted in a dangerous cycle of events: professional status brought with it increased overheads and larger production costs, necessitating the securing of further funding in order to survive, and so on (Davis, 1975a, p. 16).

Any changes in arts policy would most affect those companies who depended on arts subsidy. After taking office in 1979, Margaret Thatcher revoked the Labour government's arts budget by cutting

£1.1 million from the previously agreed Arts Council funding. In 1981 the Arts Council instituted its first-ever series of cuts. By 1983/4 there was a 1 per cent fall in the Arts Council budget (DiGenzo, 1996, p. 69; Kershaw, 1992, p. 170). The 1986 Cork Inquiry into Professional Theatre in England noted that while, between 1975 and 1980, eleven new companies were granted Arts Council annual revenue funding, between 1981 and 1986, only two additional companies were funded, whilst thirteen lost their funding (Brown, Brannen, and Brown, 2000, p. 380).¹⁶ Though the Arts Council is meant to operate at arms length from the government, as Baz Kershaw noted, by 1985 it 'increasingly looked like a central government: clone', adopting the same language as its 'paymaster'. There is no mistaking the ventriloquism of the then Chairman of the Arts Council, William Rees-Mogg:

The qualities required for survival in this age are the qualities of the age itself. They include self-reliance, imagination, a sense of opportunity, range of choice, and the entrepreneurial action of small professional groups. The state should continue to help the arts, but the arts should first look to themselves, and to their audiences for their future and their growth. (Kershaw, 1992, p. 170)

The concept of 'cost-effectiveness' inevitably had an impact on year-round employment of collective company members. Cost-effectiveness referred also to programming choices in relation to maximum box office returns. As funding schemes began to insist that applicants secure match-funding, the majority of companies were also forced to seek private sponsorship. In such a climate, the survival of those companies seemingly pushing marginal or radical political agendas, or employing non-traditional modes of production, was threatened. Elaine Aston, in relation to feminist theatre, summarised the situation:

For many professional feminist practitioners the economic squeeze on political theatre in the 1980s was in part responsible for the displacement of issue-based, political theatre and the rise of a theatre which prioritised style over (political) content. (Aston, 1999, p. 14)

Ian Milton (of Pirate Jenny and 7:84 England) further noted that the conservative Arts Council's preferred organisational structure was that of a limited company with an artistic director, a structure which emulated private business but which was diametrically opposed to the

practices and ideals of many non-hierarchical collectives that were still in existence (Goodman, 1993, p. 56).

Experiences of many companies operating throughout the 1980s indicated clearly the difficulty of attempting to operate a collective model that would employ a devising process. For example, in 1975 Monstrous Regiment were organised as a collective, with eleven members. By 1989 they had a management structure composed of five people (Hanna, 1991, p. lix). The number of collective members had reduced partly because some wanted or financially needed to work with other companies, or could not accommodate the arduous touring schedules that were required to prove the company's 'value for money'. This inevitably led to a weakening of the collective structure and the need for some alternative.

In relation to 'product', though the company had 'continued to commission and champion women's work of all kinds ... economic conditions force us into a conservative position' (*ibid.*, p. lxxii). The output of this conservative position was the staging of 'safe plays', since programmers were not prepared to take risks in a competitive market. According to Hanna, the reliance on already existing scripts was a response to 'the changing political climate, theatres were beginning to want to read the script of a show before they would book it' (*ibid.*, p. lxxvi). Such a situation obviously worked against the devised play script. Notably, the devised 'visual theatre' performance was, at the same time, becoming increasingly supported, a situation not lost on Hanna, who designated the 1980s as 'the decade of style' and 'de-politicised' work (*ibid.*, p. 65). The portfolio of companies such as Monstrous Regiment would not have been considered 'experimental' enough for the performance venue circuit, even if the company had continued to utilise a devising mode of production. Monstrous Regiment lost its funding in 1994, in spite of its new management structure.

The Women's Theatre Group (WTG) provide another example. Like Monstrous Regiment, they began to commission scripts extensively, rather than devise their own. Also like Monstrous Regiment, they began as a collective but by 1989 they too had reorganised into a management team, with a board of directors. More radically, in 1991 they 're-branded' themselves as Sphinx Theatre Company. The company had tried and failed, on numerous occasions, to attract sponsorship. As their administrator in 1990 stated, the WTG 'is not what the sponsors want to fund' (Goodman, 1993, p. 67). Sue Parrish, artistic director of Sphinx, justified this new name:

[a] survey had revealed the company name to be no longer an essential call sign to the radical faithful, but a fossilised slogan turning away audiences, potential and stalwart. Feminism had moved on, and the company needed to forge a new 'take' on the world, and its place in it.¹⁷

Though the company's focus on supporting women writers remains central to their policy, an element of 'safe' programming is evident in their output. Replicating a trend evidenced across the UK, in the past few years Sphinx have produced, in addition to new plays, a number of adaptations, including Jouho and Juha Turkkas's *Cherished Disappointments in Love* (2001), adapted by Bryony Lavery. Less radical in terms of writing, if not in terms of staging, was a production of Shakespeare's *As You Like It* (2003). Sphinx's recent show is an adaptation by Pam Gems of Hans Christian Andersen's *Little Mermaid* (2004), aimed at audiences of 7 years old and above. It is also to be noted that recently the company has produced only one play a year.

Re-branding and repositioning is not unusual in a competitive art's market. The Black Theatre Co-operative, founded in 1978/79 by Mustapha Matura, was primarily a producer of conventionally scripted plays, such as those by Matura, Farrukh Dhondy and Edgar White. It too has recently changed its name to Nitro, and now markets itself as a producer of black musicals, although its conception of these at least suggests a willingness to experiment with the form: 'Encouraging Black artists working in film, video, music, live art, visual art, fashion, digital media, poetry and rap to join us in expanding the boundaries of Musical Theatre' (Nitro).¹⁸ This move into contemporary musical form might, in fact, in opposition to the trend we have identified, offer further opportunities for a devising process. A recent production, *Catwalk* (2002), was described as 'A story told in a series of monologues with recorded music and sounds mixed live by a DJ; projected video and digital imagery and set in the world of fashion, fabulous costumes and "beautiful people"'.¹⁹ There would appear to be certain similarities here with some of the work covered in Chapter 7. Notably, no playwright is credited; instead, we are told that the 'Text [is] by Malika Booker'. As the work moves away from the production of a conventional 'play script', the process appears to open itself up again to devising practices.

Red Ladder, whilst not changing its name, has nevertheless undergone dramatic shifts in direction. In the 1980s, the company changed from a cooperative to a hierarchically organised structure,

complete with an artistic director and board of management. It also changed its focus, making work for young people, and it now describes itself as 'one of Britain's leading new writing companies for youth audiences'.²⁰ The company no longer devises work, instead commissioning plays from both new and experienced writers, and – along with Sphinx and many other companies – spreads its production costs by entering into collaborations or mounting co-productions with other organisations, such as Manchester's Contact Theatre and the Half Moon Young People's Theatre. A unique development of Red Ladder is its establishment of an Asian Theatre School.

Red Ladder, it would seem, has managed to survive by redirecting its attention towards a specific market. As Chapter 5 will argue, the targeted focus and agendas of the political companies that all but disappeared throughout the 1980s have, to some extent, been redirected into community theatre, where they are more likely to receive some form of subsidy. Given that, initially, political companies were closely tied to what might be thought of as 'political communities', such as striking tenants, this shift is perhaps not so large as we might initially think. The work is less visible because political activity is, generally, less visible. The case of 7:84 Theatre Company (Scotland) is instructive in that, though it now most typically commissions new writing, it also has a 'community' arm, which works with specifically targeted 'communities' for particular projects. It is through this that the process of devising is maintained, with participants frequently contributing to the scripting of a play, as well as performing in it. The Chicago-based About Face Theatre, a gay and lesbian company founded in 1995, is similarly illustrative. Though their programme consists of the presentation of scripted work, their About Face Youth Theatre very specifically devises plays with young people, explaining this with the same rhetoric of empowerment as that employed by companies discussed in the next chapter.

We believe that engaging youth in the rigorous process of creating and performing an ensemble-based play in a dynamic collaboration with a community of accomplished adult artists encourages youth development and supports youth to become agents for change in their communities.²¹

Shifting Politics

The demise of companies using a collective, devising model in order to make political theatre is also, of course, connected to a general demise

of visible, collective political activity. Though trade union figures in the UK continued to rise throughout the 1970s, peaking in 1979 with a total of 55 per cent of all employees belonging to a union (Abercrombie and Warde, 2000, pp. 86–7), it is certainly the case that throughout the later 1970s, socialism became less a primary or even an equal concern in the work of devising groups. The increase in companies representing 'new ideological formations' (Kershaw, 1992, p. 134) was as dramatic as the increase in socialist companies during the first half of the 1970s, rising from about 5 in 1975 to approximately 20 in 1980: 'fifteen women's, two gay and three black' (ibid., p. 139).²² For Kershaw, this shift in focus from socialist to multiple causes 'led to the ideological fragmentation of the *movement*' (ibid., p. 252). Kershaw perceived that from 1968 to 1975, there was a political (socialist) theatre *movement* in Britain, and that this movement, like any political movement, aimed towards widespread social change. Any 'collective determination' fractured in the face of a more pluralist politics; and a fragmented movement was, arguably, no movement at all.²³

Another factor impacting on concerted political activity in the UK was the consistent attack on organised union activity. Between 1980 and 1993 the Conservative government introduced eight major acts which 'outlawed the closed shop, curbed picketing ... made all secondary industrial action illegal, imposed the use of secret and postal ballots ... and rendered unions liable to be sued for a wide range of unlawful activities' (Abercrombie and Warde, 2000, p. 85). Thatcher's monetarist policies, which prioritised the free-market economy and led to the privatisation of nationalised industries, inevitably also affected the labour movement, as did the closure of previously heavily unionised industries, including coal mining. By the end of the 1970s, unemployment in the UK had doubled to over 2 million. The failure of the year-long, bitter and difficult miners' strike of 1984 did nothing to instil confidence in the unions (ibid.).

The impact of such a combination of factors can be seen in the falling union membership throughout the last decades of the twentieth century. A Workplace Survey, conducted in 1990, gathered evidence from over 2000 British workplaces and found that 36 per cent of these had not one single union member. Further, 'the proportion of employees who were union members in all the workplaces fell from 58% to 48% between 1984 and 1990' (ibid., p. 90). While 55 per cent of the working population were union members in 1979, by 2000, this had fallen to 30 per cent (ibid., p. 95). Arguably, then, the

socialist theatre movement all but disappeared during the 1980s because the socialist movement disappeared.

At the end of the twentieth century and in the early years of the twenty-first century, there is undoubtedly a widespread apathy towards party politics, as reflected in the decreasing election turnouts across western Europe. Though the 2004 elections in the USA recorded the highest election turnout since 1968 (more than 60% of the population), the fact that 78 million people did not vote remains significant. Within the context of diminishing traditional industry and increasing service industry, alignments between class and political party have weakened dramatically. Further, as credible concepts of a radical left have diminished, it is difficult for any political theatre to find a position with which it might align itself, and it is equally difficult to find a supportive base from which it might issue political challenges. As Peter Dahlgren has written, any 'atmosphere of anti-politics must be understood as the consequence of the inability of the political system to meet social expectations and an absence of an alternative and compelling political vision' (Dahlgren, 2001, p. 67).

However, we must not confuse party political apathy with a lack of politics. The 1990s and beyond have witnessed an upsurge in eco-politics, and massive international demonstrations directed against global capitalism and the continuing oppression and exploitation of 'Third World' countries. Thousands of demonstrators, worldwide, recently took to the streets to protest against the second invasion of Iraq, a war initiated by the USA and the UK in 2003. Not all political activity can be deemed to belong to the typical 'left' either. Recent massive protests in the UK have been against the ban on fox-hunting, causing unexpected alliances between various groups, for example, the rural working class and landowners. Sociologist Anthony Giddens has referred to these political activities as signalling a 'life politics', political engagements outside of the parliamentary system (ibid., p. 68). As Dahlgren suggested,

[people] are in the process of redefining just what constitutes the political, often within the context of social movements. The boundaries between politics, cultural values, identity processes and local self-reliance measures become fluid; civil and political society become less differentiated from each other. ... This new politics is characterized by personalized rather than collective engagements and a stronger emphasis on single issues than on overarching platforms or ideologies. (Dahlgren, 2001)

Though the political theatre seeded in the 1970s seems, as Irzin feared, to have 'simply become a chapter in a book' (Irzin, 1980, p. 339), if we take 'life politics' as our identifier then arguably political theatre persists. The docudramas so successfully produced by London's Tricycle Theatre, for example, such as those of the Stephen Lawrence inquiry, *The Colour of Justice* (1999), and the most recent, *Guantanamo: Honor Bound to Defend Freedom* (2004), were indisputably 'political', as was the Chicago-based Tectonic Theatre Project's *The Laramie Project* (2000), a play based on the homophobic, brutal murder of Matthew Shepard in 1998, scripted from interviews conducted by Moisés Kaufman and company members. David Hare's play *The Permanent Way* (2003), produced by Out of Joint (a reincarnation of Joint Stock), took as its foundation transcript materials relating to the state of British transport in light of recent rail accidents, while David Edgar's double-bill, *Continental Divide*, which premiered in Oregon in 2003, was the most broadly political, exploring the attitudes of America's political left and right.

Admittedly, none of this detracts from the plain fact that the practice of devising in the production of a political theatre, however that is designated, remains almost non-existent. One exception is the Theatre Workshop in Edinburgh, which became, in 2000, a fully inclusive producing theatre. Robert Rae, director since 1995, has continued to use a devising model to create ostensibly political, contemporary performance. *The Jasmine Road* (2003), for example, a play that addressed both the Palestinian and Israeli conflict and the experiences of refugees in Scotland, was written through the collaboration of the director Rae, the two performers, Nabil Shaban and Marnie Baxter, and the writer Ghazzi Hussein. Credits for an earlier Theatre Workshop production, *D.A.R.E.* (1997), similarly attributed the play-text to Rae and all of the performers. Nabil Shaban, again one of the performers, recalled creating nearly everything his character said in *D.A.R.E.*²⁴ Theatre Workshop have published a statement that indicates a commitment to this devising process: 'The work we perform is produced at the theatre through a process of devising with our main company. This allows actors, musicians and designers a fuller role in the creative process'.²⁵ Notably, however, the most recent Theatre Workshop production, *The Threepenny Opera* (2004), has started with an already written text, perhaps signalling a shift in both direction and process similar to that experienced by Graeae over twenty years earlier.

In the early twenty-first century, the theatre market continues to be a market. Even if, as Brown, Brannen and Brown have suggested, subsidy from 1986 to 1998 increased in real terms, such subsidy is nevertheless continually threatened, and the field remains competitive. During this time, an additional 19 companies were awarded revenue funding. The nature of the recipients suggested that there appeared to be an emphasis 'on new work of various kinds, primarily on black and children's theatre' (Brown, Brannen and Brown, 2000, p. 384). Three of the companies who lost their funding during this period, Joint Stock, Monstrous Regiment and Foco Novo (and soon after, Gay Sweatshop), 'may be seen as traditionally political'. However, for Brown et al., given that Graeae, Tara Arts, and Gloria were awarded funding, it would be 'vain to argue that such companies ... are not political', though they may be defined as 'personal/political'. That this may be the case does not, however, explain why Monstrous Regiment, a feminist company, or Gay Sweatshop, a gay company, had their funding withdrawn, since they were also arguably 'personal/political'. If one were to be more cynical, an alternative analysis of the awards might suggest that the awarding or withdrawal of funding was dependent both on 'quotas', and on what issues or sectors were considered 'hot', 'worthy' or 'needy' at any particular time. According to Barnaby King, by 2000 there were still only four 'black' (African-Caribbean and Asian) professional companies working in the UK (Tara Arts, Tamasha, Temba and Nitro) (King, 2000, p. 28). Arts Council England's own survey for 2001/02 also reported that from a sample of 503 organisations in receipt of regular or fixed-term funding, only four companies from the drama section (from a total of 50) described their work as 'African, Caribbean, Chinese or Asian led'.²⁶ It is also to be noted that funding in drama for this period decreased by 1 per cent (£2.5 million).

In an environment where funding is dependent on continual appraisal, and can be withdrawn at any time, or where project-funding applications can be refused, there is little encouragement towards experimentation or risk taking, either in production methods or in form and content. An already written script, by an already recognised or 'sponsored' writer (for example, a 'young writer from the Royal Court'), is an altogether more bankable option than an, as yet, literally immaterial script. Further, though funding does exist for devised productions, it tends to be channelled into community-devised projects or 'cross-art-form', 'experimental' performances. In all cases, where a company has to rely on project funding – and this

is the most typical source – collective organisation remains extremely difficult, as companies cannot be guaranteed an income from one project to another, having to continually reapply for funding for each project. As this chapter has shown, devising processes are arrived at through experience, and the garnering of experience takes time. Project funding does not permit companies to consolidate their experience or their practices.

Post-script

Though the organisation of this book suggests clearly defined categories, the practices themselves do not obey the imposed rules of such neat divisions. In spite of any such divisions implied by critics' methodologies, including this one, there are in fact many crossovers between oft-separated practices, and a substantial sharing of people, space, and form. The work undertaken by Albert Hunt and his students at Bradford College of Art is instructive in its clear merging of the aesthetic avant-garde and the explicitly political. Alongside the Festival of Chance, explored in the previous chapter, students could participate in 'The Strike Game', itself a follow-on from the 'Vietnam War Game'.

We shall pretend that we are involved in an industrial enterprise which has labour troubles. A crisis will be invented, which will lead to an unofficial strike. There will be teams representing the strikers, the official Trades Unions, the management and the Government. We shall also need people to run a daily newsheet, and a broadcasting service. (Hunt, 1978, p. 182)²⁷

Hunt, John Fox and their students also created an environment to accompany CAST's performance of *Harold Muggins is a Martyr* (1968), itself a collaboration with playwrights John Arden and Margaretta d'Arcy.²⁸ The San Francisco Mime Troupe's early performance explorations included a foray into Happenings, and one 'helper' at these was Ken Dewey, who would later stage the notorious Happening in Edinburgh (Davis, 1975a, p. 20).²⁹

Perhaps more problematically, the focus of this chapter – the use of devising in the creation of political theatre – suggests that work discussed in other chapters is not, therefore, political. It is, of course, impossible to ignore the political intent of The Living Theatre's work

of the 1960s, or indeed the work of Stalker or DV8. A liberal position would also suggest that all theatre is political: 'even the silliest farce or most innocuous musical will reflect some ideology, usually that of the Establishment. In this sense, all theatre is political' (Patterson, 2003, p. 3). Typically, theatre may be divided into alternative theatre – understood as a cultural movement rather than a sector of the theatre industry (Kershaw, 1992) – which is explicit in its political agenda, and theatre that ideologically (even if inadvertently) supports the status quo. This division assumes that political theatre must be explicit in its aims. Though such a certainty might have been possible in a cultural context in which there was a shared understanding of what constituted oppositional political activity, or even some sense of the existence of a shared oppositional culture, contemporary times – multinational capitalism, globalisation, postmodernity – make concepts of the 'political', 'political activity' and 'political opposition' contested. The pluralist 'politics of postmodernism', for example, would resist promoting the idea of a 'single' political solution, such as Socialism.

Much existing devised 'visual performance', defined by Baz Kershaw as 'neo-expressionist', does not appear to be explicitly political when held beside the 'political devised theatre' arising throughout the 1960s and 1970s, or the feminist, gay or black theatre of the 1980s. However, many contemporary practitioners would in fact insist upon the politically intentioned nature of their work, in spite of (or indeed because of) the fact that its 'ideological orientations were opaque or even invisible' (Kershaw, 1992, p. 178). Is a visible ideological orientation of a work necessary for it to be perceived as 'political'? The context and potential politics of other contemporary devised performances will be further discussed in Chapter 7.

Conclusion

As this chapter has argued, the political devising companies that proliferated during the late 1960s and early 1970s were very much of that time; their means of production were aligned to their political ideologies and aspirations, and in most cases this led initially to a collective devising process. As the political and economic context changed, alongside the aims of the companies, so too did the organisational structure, and therefore the creative processes. As the devised plays moved further towards more traditional play scripts,

the collective devising process diminished. Similarly, when the organisational structures shifted towards more conventional models of production, the opportunities for collective devising processes also lessened. Finally, as explicit and visible political activity decreased, along with any sense of a political socialist movement and a related political theatre movement, the explicitly political content of devised plays also became negligible. From this, one might argue that political theatre companies who forged devising processes were only ever politically reactive, arising from the given, politically favourable, conditions of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Though feminist, gay or black political theatre endured throughout the mid-1980s, by the 1990s this too had become threatened by economic pressures, and also by challenges to ideas of fixed and knowable 'communities' and 'identity' politics. Where the companies of the 1980s might, for example, argue for 'gay rights', in the 1990s the term 'gay', and our assumptions of what that meant, would itself be taken as the ground to be challenged.

In 2004, there appears to be a dearth of politically devised theatre that is distinct from 'community theatre'. There remain, however, some hopeful examples, such as a recently formed Scottish company, Reader. Committed to a model of 'shared authorship through processes of collaboration', Reader's recent work-in-progress, *Songs from the Burning Bed: Selected Songs* (2004), shied clear of constructing a 'play', and instead used a cabaret structure, presenting humorous 'sketches' that involved a great deal of audience collaboration, a device that served to provide a unifying non-textual frame. We would argue that this structure lent itself more readily to 'shared authorship' than the construction of a more 'traditional' play script. Throughout the performance, the group mined a contemporary political vein, raising into public view a number of troubling contemporary social events, including the imprisonment of terrorist suspects without trial or formal charges. Reader's form was almost a hybrid-blending the implicitly hybrid practice of 'live art' or 'performance theatre' with an unusually blatant nod towards political injustices and oppressions. Perhaps Reader is the CAST of the twenty-first century; and perhaps, in spite of the forty-year gap, it is not that far removed from its predecessors.