

BEGINNINGS

How and where to start

... people probably learn that the creation of a work of art is not hacking away at a block of wood and hoping that it turns out to be the image you want. It actually has to be well thought through; you have to have so many parameters and some inspiration. It's a lot of hard work and requires technical skill creating what it is you know you want.

(John Wood, Writer-in-Residence,
Greenwich Young People's Theatre)

Devising begins with the interaction between the members of a group and the starting point or stimulus chosen. The group absorbs the source material, responds to it, and then generates a method of working appropriate to the initial aims of the company and project. The devising process challenges every group member to confront the work, engage with it individually at different levels, as well as developing a sense of group cooperation, affiliation and unity at the same time. All groups are different as personalities change the group dynamics and impetus of the work. Working in unison becomes difficult when individuals conflict with each other, but is also an intrinsic part of establishing a collective group identity. Ultimately, it is about the group discovering a relationship between itself and the product it produces.

Members of a group beginning to devise theatre must be open to each other, building and developing honesty, trust, and, crucially, diplomacy! It is essential for each member to be able to reveal the personal, knowing that there is sensitivity and support within the group. Every individual must invest something of his or her person if the group is to communicate fully.

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Respect and trust in each other permits criticism, enabling individuals to give up personal interests in particular areas of investigation in favour of decisions that may benefit the group to explore new directions. Mark Long, founder member of The People Show, observes, 'You have to trust yourselves as artists, trust your art. Allow a situation where the sub-conscious of the group is enabled to emerge.'¹

In the early stages of devising, it is important for a company to explore and experiment with a range of stimuli, to understand how the group operates in different situations. Group practical work and 'getting to know each other' exercises are vital to that exploration. Exercises in communication, concentration, trust, sensitivity, movement, voice and improvisation are all required for group development. In my experience, this preliminary but necessary work can be applied to all new groups coming together at any level, be they professional, amateur, young people, drama teachers in training or undergraduate students of theatre. Knowing, using and reflecting the strengths of people in the company are vital resources for the devising process and product.

Disagreement is a healthy way to select, clarify and simplify choice of materials and methods of procedure. The danger comes in everyone compromising to the lowest common denominator, which means starting from a mediocre position. Early work can be filled with problems, so that an enormous amount of time can be spent on material or ideas that are finally rejected. Every group has the right to fail and to learn from its mistakes, working positively from them until, as Long comments, 'you do finally find yourselves in the same track on the same train'. Devising is a craft, which is inevitably learnt on the job. Certain skills are acquired empirically, and it is difficult to imagine one system of working across the board.

Every project generates its own working process, so that the actual approach to devising is different every time. I adapt my approach to the demands of the particular task or assignment, considering the project itself, the audience to be addressed, the group or company one is working with, and the playing environment for the piece. It is vital to be fluid and instinctual at the start, whether improvising from initial research or constructing related practical exercises to explore the subject itself. The best work is done when everyone in the group

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shares a common purpose, whether it is the desire to work with the homeless community of Canterbury, or to make a piece of site-specific outdoors theatre. A combination of instinct and learning is required to devise theatre. This can only be discovered through experience. In the early stages of work, it is important to be free and open, where anything that occurs to anybody in the group can be tried out in order to explore preliminary ideas further. I am keen to encourage students to 'workshop' ideas with the group, so that they gain practical experience of investigating content as well as group dynamics. At some point in the process, a director or 'outside eye' is needed to edit or discard material, make technical decisions and lead the group overall.

Choice is a key word when devising theatre. How to start working will be determined by the company; what the group wants to do is of primary importance. If the group is newly formed then it is crucial to include discussion in the early stages of work. Often the task of preliminarily researching a subject helps people to get to know each other through the process of sharing information, which in turn establishes individual ideas and opinions. For me, it has often been a fundamental need to have a strong personal association with the material or idea in order to express something about myself, as well as thinking of ways to bring ideas alive. My original starting point for devising a performance project with a group of Dutch students from the University of Utrecht in May 1992 was 'water'. I was interested in particular contradictions and ambiguities associated with the subject of water, and chose the bathroom as an initial location for preliminary investigation. The devising process needs to be searching, the work constantly sifted, re-examined, and criticised. Group analysis is required, which ultimately leads back to self-examination and self-criticism. The pertinent point must be that the strength of devised work is in its method of working, and of giving significance to the process itself. The group defines and controls its own conditions of progress, thus offering opportunities of working that no other theatre can provide.

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WHY DEVISE?

What, then, are the central concerns for a group devising theatre from scratch? Are they considerations of form, content or audience, which must be decided in order of importance or relevance to the particular project? I am preoccupied with four areas of investigation, which individually assume greater or lesser significance with each project. The first is knowing what it is I want to devise, and why. Looking back over my own experience of devising theatre since 1977, it becomes clear that there are numerous reasons why I have wanted to pursue this particular kind of theatre. I think the primary appeal is to be able to make a personal statement within a group context, to feel that one is part of the making of a theatrical experience, not an interpreter of something already written. This desire to create an original piece of work brings an enormous freedom that is both terrifying and liberating at the same time. My first steps as a director/deviser were in my final undergraduate year at Exeter University in 1976-77, when 'practical essays' were every student's preoccupation and an important part of the overall degree. 'The Open Meeting' originated from a mixture of desires to explore personal experience, to investigate specifically the subject of women alcoholics in society, and to find a form that created an environment where the audience had a clearly defined role.

The structure for the piece was an Alcoholics Anonymous 'open meeting', which was set up with the serving of tea and biscuits by several characters to the audience, as though they were members or non-members arriving at the meeting. In my unpublished 'Practical Essay Diary 1977', I noted that:

It was finally completed by being performed. It did not allow the audience to sit back as in a lecture theatre but made them unsure of what to expect. There was a general sense of uneasiness and tension from the beginning, further increased by the characters sitting next to members of the audience so that they were fully aware of being part of the structure. There seemed to be a 'heavy atmosphere' radiating from the audience and a feeling of close attentiveness.

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content in my production notebook, concluding that 'it achieved what it set out to do - inform people in an interesting and enlightening way about a problem that most people know little about.'

This devised theatre debut with a group of eight student actors was significant not because it was awarded a first-class mark, but for the sense of personal achievement I felt in making a unique piece of theatre with a group of people working towards the same goals. It was about freedom of choice of content and form, as well as sharing a creative, participatory method of working within a group situation. Other reasons for devising theatre have been: to give a voice to young people to express their interests and concerns through this medium; to explore the adaptation of text as a starting point for more creative, contemporary ideas; to research present-day situations related to women; and, more recently, to encourage students in higher education to explore and examine their ideas or opinions through this form of theatre.

DEVISE WHAT?

Second, I need to know what it is I want to say and share with others; what is the content, material or subject matter for a piece of theatre? In 1981 I took Arrabal's play, *Picnic on the Battlefield* as a starting point for devising a contemporary piece about the hunger strike of Bobby Sands in Northern Ireland - with sixth-form students from Mayflower School in Billericay, Essex. The final devised product was performed at the school, and attempted to explore the deeper issues of the Irish situation via a radical adaptation of the initial text, combining the use of humour, the style of the absurd, and present-day reality. The following year, I devised a Youth Theatre show with thirty young people, aged between fourteen and twenty-one years, which was based on the themes of communication, prejudice, and the outsider. This was an improvised piece which evolved from weekly evening sessions and was constructed over a working weekend to incorporate a range of selected ideas from the participants. The final product, performed by Mayflower Youth Theatre in 1982, included dance, mime, music, improvised scenes, and a more experimental section using movement, lighting, and sound.

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FOR WHOM?

Third, I must establish who will be my audience for the work. In 1985 I worked as a member of the company Workshop Theatre Women to research, devise and perform a piece of touring theatre about the subject of women in prison, which was based on seven original taped interviews with ex-offenders and involved several of them in the devising process itself. There was much discussion within the company about playing to an all-women audience only, and a compromise was struck by giving selected 'women only' performances during the tour. A decision was made to play a range of seven-teen venues in northern England during June and July, which included a probation centre in Lincoln, a community hall in Nottingham, and The Leadmill Theatre in Sheffield, as well as higher education colleges in Scarborough and Warrington. The show was also performed for the general public in the Mandela Theatre, at the Edinburgh Festival of August 1986.

'Women Imprisoned' played to ex-offenders, magistrates, criminology and drama students, and all those interested in theatre for, from, or by women. The nature of this devised performance changed with every venue, as the performer-spectator relationship altered in accordance with the expectations of both company and audience. A case in point was at the probation centre in Lincoln. The spectators vocalised their disdain for members of the prison service so vehemently that the performers had to adapt their playing style of performance, in order to promote a working rapport with this audience. Likewise, at those performances attended by ex-offenders or contributors to the devised product, the performers took on an extra awareness and sensitivity to the playing dynamics between actors and audience.

FORMATION

Last, I have to understand the kind of theatre I wish to create; I have to think about the form and structure of the theatrical experience. 'Not Tonight Shahriyar!' was a group devised performance project, which was performed at Portsmouth Polytechnic in 1986 with Bachelor of Education third-year

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students training to be primary 'Creative Arts' teachers. The aims of the project were: to examine how a piece of original theatre can grow from a literary text; to consider the role of director in performance; to experiment with techniques of improvising, writing, and interpreting script; and to use a range of theatre skills, and participate in the collaborative experience of making a piece of original group theatre. A range of material and ideas was considered by the group, which included *The Epic of Gilgamesh*,² *Beauty and the Beast* from the Opie fairy tale collection,³ 'Sweeney Agonistes' by T.S. Eliot,⁴ and a variety of song lyrics by Tom Waits.⁵

The final decision, however, was to use *Tales of the Arabian Nights*⁶ as a source and stimulus for storytelling theatre, focusing on the resources of the actors within the group. The performance space was defined by a large white floor area, supported by a canopy or tent-like structure of folds of white gauze, muslin and silk. The performers wore a variety of coloured silk harem pants and matching tops, which highlighted the significance of the actors in the minimalist white space. The performance started in blackout with a group 'soundscape' of the stories, which were then told through visual images, sounds, movement and mime. The techniques of Mike Alfreds⁷ and his work with Shared Experience were explored by the ensemble in their uses of narrative, group dynamics, and discovery of how an actor's resources can create or structure a theatrical experience.

These areas, in turn, become questions to the group or company, which are frequently addressed throughout the working process. This also leads to identification and examination of the company's aims and objectives, their roles for the project, the starting point for the work, and how to proceed. Methods and means are often discovered through the content or audience decisions made at the beginning, and this is where flexibility is needed within the preliminary four areas of investigation. For instance, theatre-in-education is probably going to place more emphasis at the outset on questioning the needs of the audience than experimental theatre; content may be a starting point for community theatre whilst for another company it will evolve out of experimentation with the initial decision to look at a physical, visual structure or form. Inevitably, wherever one begins or whatever kind of theatre is to be

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created, a group has to address these fundamental questions when starting to work together.

ORIGINS

What then are the starting points or stimuli for a group devising theatre? The decision of where to begin is linked to answering the key questions that focus and distinguish the initial areas of emphasis or investigation. Mark Long considers the possibilities of beginning a show:

Sometimes the starting point for a People Show is a set, a book, a picture; sometimes it's just a sentence or a line. It has once been a poster. It varies enormously. The initial parameter can be very small or fairly large, and from there as a group you start.

A devised musical score may form the basis and starting point for a show, as in the case of 'Burning Horizon - People Show No. 97' (1990), where every group member was given a fifty-minute recorded tape of music composed by George Khan. Identifying the kind of theatre to be created often suggests whether to look at content, form or audience first, or in combination.

Targeting the audience

Age Exchange is a company, founded in 1983 by artistic director Pam Schweitzer, which produces reminiscence theatre for the elderly in the south London community. The company provides a particular form of community theatre for a specific audience, which involves its members from start to finish. Schweitzer works to a clearly defined, tried and tested model of practice. From process to product, Schweitzer works from, with, and for the audience. The elderly are the starting point, source material, and content of a show. Schweitzer defines devising as 'looking for a thread through the reminiscence material we have collected.'⁸ In 'On the River' (1989), the show was virtually constructed from verbatim statements made by pensioners from the Dockland area. The musical show resulted from a series of reminiscence sessions that recorded their memories of growing up by the river Thames in the 1920s and

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1930s, and of their working lives as lightermen, dockers, and stevedores. The product evolved out of those particular experiences, and was performed by freelance actors especially chosen for the project. Having watched an evening's performance aboard a boat on the river Thames full of elderly people, there is no doubt that the experience was appreciated by all concerned. The enjoyment came from the recognition and realisation of those memories in a theatrical form.

The starting point for most shows usually involves taking suggestions for themes from the old-age pensioners, discussing the selected theme, listening to stories or memories of the client group, and recording them on audio-cassette tapes. After transcribing numerous hours of tape-recorded text, all the source materials are read through, and discussed by Schweitzer and the actors for a possible structure and outline scenario. Themes are chosen for their significance and bearing on today, and have included unemployment, race, health, migration, housing, and retirement. Schweitzer describes a strong link with the audience through the source material, 'a shared experience with the audience as the actors tell the tales to the pensioners... often the words are those given by old people in interviews during the research period.' Schweitzer comments that a theme has been explored through detailed reminiscence and personal experience rather than generalised statements.

Age Exchange's 'Christmas at War' (1989) resulted from the elderly community's suggestion of devising a show about the theme of evacuation. The source materials for the show came from individuals or groups of old people in south London, who were interviewed in-depth by actors and members of the company during an initial research period of work. These included the story of 'the wire bomb' that was phoned in as a response to a radio programme, and the text of an advertisement from a wartime issue of *Good Housekeeping* (1940) for a lipstick called 'Tangee' that changed according to the colour of the lips. Schweitzer recalls:

All the pensioners remember it - 'Lips are the potent weapon in love's delicious armory'. We liked the warrior flavour of the thing for wartime Christmas; these things give a very good sense of the period and little details like that tend to place things for people.⁹

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Songs, music and radio entertainment from the period were also used. Schweitzer received extensive written reminiscences from some pensioners, such as the memories of one evacuee from September 1939 to May 1945, which were incorporated into the final show. In effect, the audience of this community theatre company decided the content through its choice of selected theme, which in turn contributed source materials that defined the form and playing style of the piece.

Choice of audience is often the first decision to be made by any theatre-in-education company. It is crucial to decide who the piece is being devised for before any other decisions can be made. It is from this starting point that content and form constantly interrelate. Theatre-in-education must speak to its audience and challenge it, which means understanding the educational and cultural needs of young people in the context of today's society and world situation. Any group concerned with devising theatre-in-education must consider how people learn and look at the relationship between teachers, pupils and company. The starting points for Greenwich Young People's Theatre fourth-year secondary programme, 'The Edge of Reason', included decisions about form, content, and concepts.

It was decided to devise a day-long, fully participatory programme around the French Revolution of 1789 that explored the concepts of freedom and justice. The order of priority was determined by the original aims and objectives of the programme, the material, and the team. Content and form were explored within broad educational aims related to the perceived needs of fourth-year pupils (observed from a number of visits into local schools and discussions with teachers or students), condensing those aims into several questions.

The central question - 'What would you sacrifice for liberty?' - expressed a contradiction that opened out the company's thinking into the principal concepts the team aimed to cover in the programme. Experiencing concepts of loyalty and betrayal, choice and decisions, or freedom and change via drama and theatre enabled young people to discriminate and judge their own set of values. Key moments or images from the French Revolution that expressed the central question were investigated through research, improvisation, and the exploration of different theatre and participation forms, from which a story

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and scenario were created that had artistic or theatrical possibilities as well as educational challenges.

Stimuli

A story or a starting text may provide the basis of a primary decision about the content of a proposed devised product. It is often the content that initiates a project, and is the first consideration for a company. Annie Griffin believes that a concrete starting point is essential, whether it is a Tammy Wynette song, as in the case of her one-woman show 'Almost Persuaded', or the Strauss opera 'Ariadne Auf Naxos' in Gloria's devised show 'Ariadne' (1989-90). Griffin recalls, 'I was thinking about this image of somebody clinging to a rock, waiting for death, instead of just letting go.'¹⁰ Her collaboration with Laura Ford, a sculptor/painter, and Nicholas Bloomfield, a musical composer/director, comes from a belief that devising with people who think differently to herself changes the process of working together. Griffin states: 'it's very much experimental theatre. The idea of experimenting and not knowing where you're going is very important to the work process.'

Listening to music, reading and researching the Greek myth of Ariadne were stimuli for the process of creating and engaging with a starting text, before writing a scenario which was also based on knowing the performers and discussing preliminary ideas about the eight characters with them. There were two structural decisions in the early stages of devising, which were to have two acts and professional musicians (two trumpeters and a pianist) playing throughout the piece. As director/deviser of 'Ariadne', a multi-layered performance piece described by one critic as 'a cunning jigsaw of images, words, music and movement',¹¹ Griffin believes that it is very important to have something that is rich and interesting to start with.

Initial meetings and discussion between Griffin, Ford, and Bloomfield led to an outline written scenario, the beginnings of a sculptured world to work in, costume designs, and ideas for musical composition, arrangements and score. The company included an opera singer, dancers, actors, and musicians who were chosen specifically for the project and had not worked together previously as one group. Griffin describes how the

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Gloria company read the scenario, and then basically dropped the words, but kept the scene structure. As rehearsals began, Griffin, Ford and Bloomfield collaborated together, each involved in every stage of the rehearsal process. Griffin would set tasks; the performers would go away singly or in groups and invent presentations in response to those tasks using their choreographic, acting or musical skills. Styles of play were improvised with some performers experimenting or trying out ideas throughout the rehearsal period. The performers' involvement in the creation of their roles varied with each individual artist, but was inspired and focussed by Griffin's ideas of characterisation. Each actor needed a different kind of direction, and Griffin's working relationship with each of the eight performers was unique.

Multi-vision

A visual concept can be an important starting point for a devising company. Considerations of form frequently determine initial devising decisions, such as the intention to create or construct a visual space at the beginning of the process for the actors. In direct contrast to a group of people specifically chosen to work together for one project only, Forced Entertainment Theatre Co-operative is a company whose starting points for a new show arise out of the previous one. Tim Etchells, a writer and director with the Sheffield-based company, suggests that devising is about *not* starting from a single thing. As Forced Entertainment is a collective of seven members, Etchells likes the possibility of input from anywhere or anyone within the company.

Forced Entertainment Theatre Co-operative began in November 1984, and aims to produce work that is larger than any one single intention or idea. There are few cooperatives living and working together in Britain as fully as this particular company, choosing to start from a vague and intangible set of references and working towards a product over a long period of time. Company member Terry O'Connor describes their practice:

We're involved in a process built up by tradition, where we start a show with a more or less blank sheet of paper

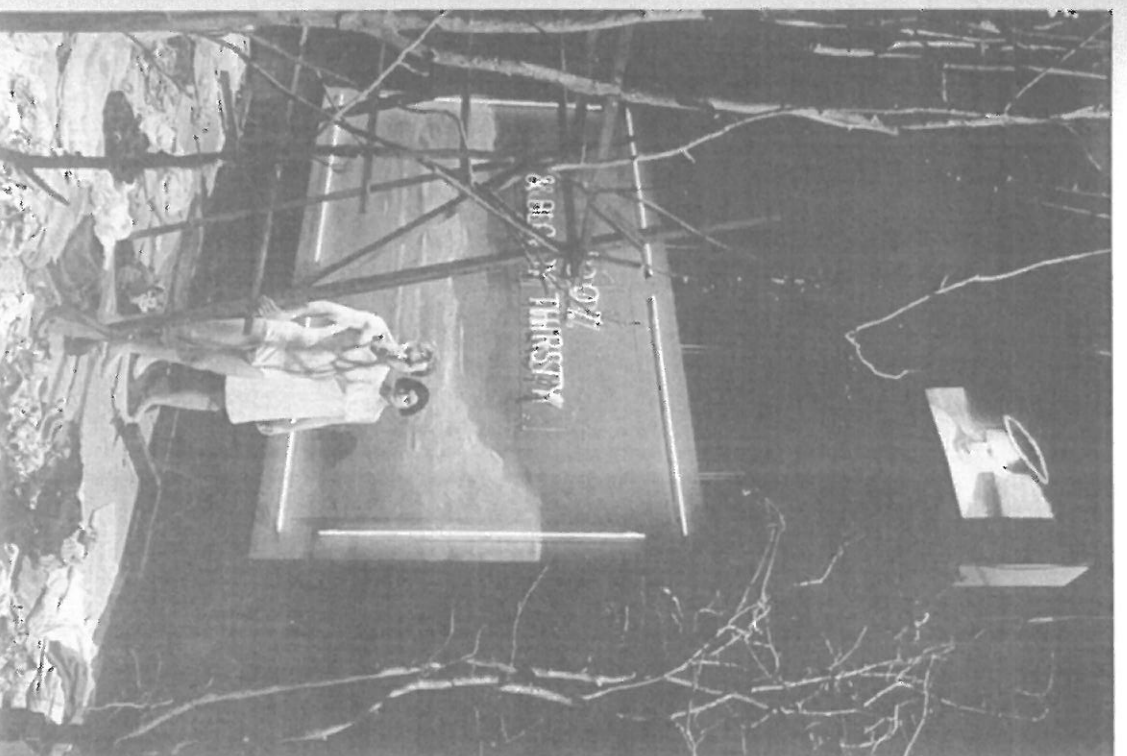
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with perhaps elements from the show before. It's exciting to be working on ideas that are at the edge, or pushing a theatre form so that you believe you're creating new things, which you're not seeing other people doing.¹²

Forced Entertainment Theatre Co-operative has worked for over nine years with more or less a permanent company, developing an awareness of personal dynamics at work within the group, and certain ground rules in dealing with people. Etchells elaborates further: 'a long set of shared work experiences inevitably builds some kind of collective shorthand. We've developed a set of terms, of reference points, and theoretical frameworks that underpin and give precision to our struggles in making work.' During a period of touring an old show, problems or high points may lead to suggestions of narrative, images, text, music, or the set design of the next piece.

'Some Confusions in the Law about Love' (1989-90) partly developed out of decisions to extend particular areas of interest from the previous show, '200% & Bloody Thirsty' (1988-89), which included the use of text and video on stage, as well as the interaction of live performers with those on video. Ideas arise, fragmentary moments are taken from television, life or other people's work, provoking discussion between different combinations of company personnel. Informal conversations lead to formal meetings of the group that attempt to clarify these ideas and thoughts. An exploratory period of devising follows, which involves working in crude mock-ups of potential spaces, improvising and working from texts and transcripts. Often fragments of text are amongst the first inputs on a project, which are sometimes intended for use but frequently serve to help define a tone or set of tones which can be used in making action or set. Etchells describes a typical pattern as one or two days of practical work, followed by four or five days' discussion, analysis, writing and model building. From four to six weeks of this, comes the basic set design, text ground rules and a performance 'feel', which are important starting points for this company's work. As a performer in 'Some Confusions in the Law about Love', O'Connor observes that it is difficult to pinpoint exactly where the move for a particular feel for a show or idea really comes from.

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1 Richard Lowdon and Cathy Naden in '200% & Bloody Thirsty'. Forced Entertainment Theatre Co-operative, 1988-89. (Photo: Hugo Glendinning.)

Form is an important initial consideration for Forced Entertainment, underlining the company's approach to structure as having to satisfy a basic meaning in addition to developing a clear, articulate structural architecture made up of many removed and complicated ideas. Form is also a central preoccupation for any company devising a site-specific piece of theatre. Implicit in the choice of a performance space is an immediate, clear starting point with the location itself. The nature of a site-specific performance demands that thought is given to a varying combination of form, content, and audience from the beginning.

Environment

The Jubilee swimming pool on the cliffs at Penzance in Cornwall was the stimulus for Lumiere & Son's site-specific residential devised theatre project 'Fifty Five Years of the Swallow and the Butterfly' (1990), which included community involvement with students from Falmouth College of Art, Dartington College in Devon, and various non-professional performers from the Penzance area. Hilary Westlake, artistic director of Lumiere & Son, describes the setting as an extraordinary location for the company. An enormous, difficult space that posed technical problems for sound and lighting, the Jubilee pool offered endless possibilities and ideas for experimental performance from a requiem for the pool to ideas of hydrophobia, ritualistic enactments of the movement of birds, and love poems to the sea set to music, with large-scale choreography being a major feature. Westlake researched the history of Penzance, swimming, and the Jubilee pool to discover points of interest such as the death of Edward Mersthem in 1934, when he dived from a cliff in order to escape an overwhelming fear of water (never to be seen again), or the origins of the pool's design in 1936, with its celebratory rituals of helping any hydrophobic overcome their fears. From this, and an 'atmosphere' in her head, Westlake constructed an outline scenario to be worked on further by her collaborative team of David Gale, Jeremy Peyton-Jones, and Simon Corder to create the structural components of text, music, lighting projections, and choreography.

The initial idea of 'fear of water' came from the location, and

Westlake envisaged the content of the text as fiction with a 'feel' of reality, asking Gale to supply dialogue and song lyrics to support the theme of the curing of people who have a morbid fear of water. Gale is praised by Westlake for his ability to tell a tale through images in his writing, and has contributed text to previous Lumiere & Son site-specific shows, including 'Deadwood' (1986), which was performed in Kew Gardens. Westlake wanted the music in 'Fifty Five Years of the Swallow and the Butterfly' to be associated with a chorus who moved and chanted throughout the piece, commenting on the progress of those suffering from hydrophobia. Westlake's unpublished notes of April 1990 state her intentions for lighting: 'The creation of strange images relating to the pool is also a possibility as indeed is the use of projected birds (projectors or gobos).' The concept of the show was initiated and developed by the director; Westlake's specifications shaped the text, music, and technical input, as well as determining the performance structure.

Westlake is aware of a need for contingency plans when devising site-specific work, and comments in the same notes of April 1990 that, 'When you're envisaging your next piece of work, you're envisaging it done perfectly'. However, her past approach of starting on day one with an idea has changed with numerous experiences of working with a wide range of participants with unknown qualities. Her 'overwhelming anxiety is the people', she told me in April 1990, prior to meeting the group of strangers in mid-May, when she would have a fifteen-day devising period with them before the first performance over the Bank Holiday weekend. When Westlake is working well, she enjoys the development of ideas with performers in rehearsal. Westlake wishes to see an idea enlarged by performer input, providing the people are charismatic or particularly interesting performers, but no planning can project this to be the case. The appeal of devising is fading for Westlake as it is too unpredictable and so much depends on the imaginations or abilities of non-professional participants. However, Westlake observes that the pleasure of devising site-specific theatre comes from 'seeing it work in location'.¹³

For any group devising theatre from scratch, it is most important to identify how and where to begin the process of working together. This may be apparent right from the start,



2 Joanna Neary, Paul Finlay, Cindy Oswin, and Trevor Stuart in 'Fifty Five Years of the Swallow and the Butterfly'. Lumiere & Son, 1990. (Photo: Hilary Westlake.)

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and indeed be the very reason why a group has congregated around a particular issue, interest, or kind of theatre. Even experienced professional companies may need to re-address their function and purpose in devising theatre at regular intervals. As a general theory, I want to conclude this chapter by highlighting the questions that can be asked by any group or company starting work together:

- 1 What is it you want to devise, and why? What kind of theatre do you want to create?
- 2 Who are you devising for, and why?
- 3 What are your initial aims and objectives as a company for this project?
- 4 Is your content or subject matter the starting point for the work? What are the source materials?
- 5 Is the form or structure an important preliminary area for exploration?