Devising Dramaturgy: An Investigation Into The Art Of Dramatic Composition When Devising Theatre For Young Audiences

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DEVISING DRAMATURGY: AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE ART OF DRAMATIC COMPOSITION WHEN DEVISING THEATRE FOR YOUNG AUDIENCES

by

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B.F.A. Emporia State University, 2004

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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the dramaturgy of devised theatre for young audiences, specifically children ages 2-5. The chapters dissect current applications of dramaturgy in regards to the development of dramatic and performance texts, and present an exploration of devised theatre. My research revolved around qualitative research tactics through a review of the current literature on dramaturgy and devising, unobtrusive data collection, and interviews with the artistic directors of three Theatre for Young Audience (TYA) companies: Patch Theatre Company based in Adelaide, Australia, Theatre Mala Scena based in Zagreb, Croatia, and the Coterie Theatre located in Kansas City, Missouri. In addition, I viewed productions by each the above companies which helped to uncover how the artists move theory into practice based on their personal theories on TYA, dramaturgy, and devising. Through this research I reveal how dramaturgy proves a key element in moving improvisations into performance texts, creating theatrical experiences that capture the imaginations of the very young.
To my family for loving, inspiring, and challenging me as I follow my heart.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

This thesis strives to demystify the process and appeal of devising theatre for young audiences through a study of three international Theatre for Young Audience (TYA) companies. The study examines the devising process of Patch Theatre Company located in Adelaide, Australia, Theatre Mala Scena located in Zagreb, Croatia, and The Coterie Theatre located in Kansas City, Missouri. In addition, I present research on each artistic director’s theories on TYA for children ages 2-5, and how these theories influence the dramaturgy of devised plays.

I selected Patch Theatre Company, Theatre Mala Scena, and the Coterie Theatre as subjects for my research due to the fact that when I began this research each company had recently devised a production for young people ages 2-5. In addition, each production selected reflected a different style of theatre that I believed might provide insight into possible approaches to constructing dramaturgy when devising. Patch Theatre Company’s production of *Emily Loves to Bounce*, influenced by image theatre, was the only production of the three companies to incorporate formal verbal dialogue. While Theatre Mala Scena’s production of *The Parachutists (or on the art of falling)* revolved around movement and dance, and the Coterie’s production of *Once Upon a Treasure Trunk: Foolish but Fortunate Events* rooted itself in red nose clowning.
In order to move forward with a discussion of my research on Patch Theatre Company, Theatre Mala Scena, and the Coterie Theatre, I want to share my understanding of text, devising, and dramaturgy and to clarify how my working definition of each applies to this thesis.

- **Text**: the communication of dramatic information between performers and/or spectators including but not limited to: dramatic text (written words by a playwright) or performance text (the combination of gesture, choreography, dialogue, as well as shifts in lighting, sound, and/or scenery). A dramatic text can become a performance text when produced by a theatre, but a performance text can exist without a dramatic text through the creation process of devising.

- **Devising**: A collaborative approach to theatre making in which a “text” come to fruition out of improvisation in order to create a theatrical production.

- **Dramaturgy**: The art or technique of dramatic composition or theatrical representation.

These definitions serve as the backbone of my research, and while artists may have other connotative meanings for them, within the parameters of this thesis, text, devising, and dramaturgy will refer to the above definitions, unless otherwise specified. In addition I refer to strong or sound dramaturgy, which I am defining as a performance text where the characters, structure, dialogue, movement, and
design assist in the exploration of a theme and enhance the storytelling of the play.

The remainder of Chapter 1 outlines my research question and provides insight into my interest in devising and dramaturgy. Chapter 2 delves into the procedure and methodology of my research process, while chapter 3 contains a literature review, which explores the current state and common characteristics of dramaturgy and devising by select artists in the United States, Europe and Australia. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 provide in-depth looks at Patch Theatre Company, Theatre Mala Scena, and The Coterie Theatre respectively. Finally, in chapter 7 I highlight my conclusions and the information gained from this research as well as further research opportunities.

**Background**

I entered graduate school with the knowledge that I loved to perform for and work with young people, but searching for how I could best do so. I knew how to create quality theatre for adults, but was unsure how my previous knowledge might translate to young people. Through research, class projects, and attending conferences and workshops I became intrigued with the process of devising. My draw to devising resulted from the possibility of theatre making without a clear end in sight, as well as the high risk for failure that accompanies the process.
In addition, I was intrigued by how devising highlights imagery and physicality, and presents stories using intense theatricality. The aforementioned elements are not unique to devised theatre; however, I believe the exploration of ideas through physical improvisation moves the storytelling towards images and movement, intensifying the visual elements of the performance text, which appeals to me as an artist.

My first, hands-on encounter with devising occurred during my second year of graduate study. Michael Rohd, the Artistic Director of Sojourner Theatre in Portland Oregon, conducted a three-day workshop at the University of Central Florida based in his company’s devising techniques. The workshop focused on the creation of images, utilizing the body, working as an ensemble, and deconstructing the familiar. Through learning from Rohd, I discovered simplicity and freedom in devising. This freedom occurred because Rohd presented simple open-ended tasks. In one task, he asked us to create a pose, either literal or metaphorical based around the theme of “transitions”. Other participants respond to the image by asking questions, which no one answered verbally, that were later built upon through improvisations. I quickly realized how these activities related to the creative drama techniques I used in the classroom, and that the impetus behind devising might provide the link I had been searching for between my pedagogy and artistry.

I began experimenting further with devising techniques in my classroom work, such as techniques used by Rohd like “stories in the room” which allows
participants to tell a personal story based on a theme, which can later serve as
the impetus for improvisation. After watching my students express themselves
freely, and taking ownership of what they had created as a result of utilizing
devising, I applied similar techniques to the beginning of my rehearsal process of
a scripted play written by area students for the Orlando Repertory’s Writes of
Spring Program. Before beginning work on the dialogue sections of the play, the
cast devised images that later assisted in establishing character relationships,
and key moments of storytelling.

My introduction to devising, coupled with my class work in movement and
circus arts, has influenced every aspect of my work as a teaching artist, actor,
director, and researcher. As a result, I set out to investigate devising further for
this thesis. When embarking on my research I began searching for Theatre for
Young Audience (TYA) companies in the United States focused on devising
theatre for 2-5 year olds. My initial research uncovered that theatre in the United
States as a whole is just beginning to embrace devising, and while it is often
used in education settings, it has not yet been embraced by a majority of
professional theatres.

The TYA companies I found that used devising techniques produced a
majority of their work from the current cannon of published plays for young
audiences, or used devising in their educational programs, or as part of a second
stage series, but did not focus on devising for their main-stage productions. I
sought out possible explanations for why more companies in the United States
are not devising performance texts for their main-stages.

Joan Shirle, author of the article “Potholes in Devising” notes that artists
in England and Europe devise extensively and many countries host theatre
festivals that often present numerous devised works. Shirle notes the rapid
growth of devised theatre in recent years, but believes the reasons that
only a handful of American artists devise remains three fold:

• The difficulties of devising outstanding work
• The nonliterary nature of much devised theatre, which does not lend itself
to the marketing of play scripts or reproduction by subsequent groups.
• The timidity of producers and presenters in providing venues for devised
work. (96)

I understand the risks involved in devising in regards to time and the
unpredictability of what the final product will be making it difficult to market, but I
believe that if TYA theatres devote the time, research, and development to the
devising process they can reach out to their community of young people in
exciting new ways by involving children in the process of telling the stories of
their communities. In addition, as a TYA artist I believe that devising new work
could add more options in regards to style, form and content to the current canon
of TYA plays. In order to do so, artists would have to record the performance
text created through stage directions, videos or even lists of improvisations
around a theme, which other theatres could interpret. Through this reflection, I
discovered that while I understood the process of devising, I wondered how a devised play moved from a series of loose improvisations into a fully realized theatrical text that might have the possibility of being reproduced.

During the development stages of this study, I had a series of influential discussions about devised theatre for young people with Kim Peter Kovak, Producing Director of Theatre for Young Audiences at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, and president of TYA/USA (Formerly Assitej/USA). I expressed to Kovak my fascination with the challenges of creating story when devising. In addition, I expressed my fear that devising theatre based in movement has the danger of becoming sheer spectacle. I wondered how companies ensured that they did not forego dramatic action for a three-ring circus. Through our discussions, Kovak reminded me of the important role of dramaturgy when developing new dramatic texts or performance texts. I believed that by framing my research with an investigation into dramaturgy, I might be able to open doors to how TYA artists devise theatre based in imagery, but that also tells a story in order to engage 2-5 year olds.
For this study, I applied a constructivist philosophy as outlined by J. Amos Hatch in the book Doing Qualitative Research in Education Settings. Amos describes the constructivist research philosophy as a method of research where information is gathered through a co-construction between the research and the subjects (15). I utilized qualitative research tactics consisting of formal interviews and unobtrusive data collection from articles, reviews, and study guides from or about Patch Theatre Company, Theater Mala Scena, and the Coterie Theatre. Collection of data and formal and informal interviews spanned a 3-month period from December 5th to February 20th.

I chose to investigate Patch Theatre Company, Theatre Mala Scena, and the Coterie Theatre in order to narrow the scope of my research to plays devised for young people ages 2-5. As a result, I developed a series of questions with which to begin my research.

**Guiding Research Questions**

- What is the process of dramaturgy when devising theatre for young people ages 2-5?
- Why have the selected artists chosen to create work for young audiences, and specifically what draws them to produce movement-based work for the very young?
What are some of the challenges these artists faced when creating work for the very young?

Do certain styles of movement (commedia, puppetry, acrobatics, etc.) appeal to the very young, or is the movement style dictated by the story?

How does each artistic director/director define dramaturgy?

How does dramaturgy influence movement choices?

Do the companies utilize a single dramaturg? If so, how do the dramaturgs collaborate with the company? What does a dramaturgs’ involvement add to the process and the production?

If the theatre company does not use a single dramaturg, how does the company create collective dramaturgy?

What are the rewards and challenges of collective dramaturgy? What does this process add to the work, and how does it reflect in the final product?

After establishing the above questions to focus my research, I began viewing productions on DVD by Patch Theatre Company and Theatre Mala Scena, and attended a live production by the Coterie Theatre, in order to prepare for my initial contact with each company.

When deciding on which members of the companies to interview, I focused on the artistic directors, as well as, the director of each production. I based this decision on the necessity to narrow the scope of my research to in-
depth interviews, personal experiences, and the expertise of the director. All parties interviewed approved the use of their real names within the context of this study. The productions by Patch Theatre Company and Theatre Mala Scena utilized the artistic director as the director of the production, and the Coterie Theatre hired an outside director, who had previously been involved with the Coterie as a performer. Therefore, when addressing who I interviewed I will refer to the contacts at the theatres as artistic directors/directors.

My initial contact with each company occurred through a set of formal interview questions, or a series of prepared questions that the artistic directors/directors answered through E-mail correspondence. These formal questions were based on the previously outlined research questions, and helped me obtain a better understanding of the artists and the companies, and provided the opportunity to examine how each subject viewed dramaturgy, devising, and TYA. Following the formal interviews with the artistic directors/directors, I created a second formal interview, which I tailored to the interviewee’s specific productions. This second formal interview occurred in person when possible, via Skype Chat (an online communication tool), and over the telephone. In addition to the planned formal interviews, the artistic directors/directors and I engaged in a series of informal conversations, sent via E-mail throughout the research, development, and writing of this thesis.

My research period culminated in an analysis of the data utilizing an interpretive lens as outlined by Hatch as a process of inferring, developing
insights into the data, attaching significance, drawing conclusions, and extrapolating, which I present in chapters 4, 5, and 6 (180).

Research Constraints

My greatest difficulty in this research was time and distance. The whole of this research occurred over a four-month period in which I worked full time reviewing literature, while often at the same time conducting interviews. Scheduling was difficult as Croatia, Australia, and the United States are in vastly different time zones, and E-mail became the base of most of my communication. Utilizing E-mail was convenient for all involved as each interviewee answered questions in depth at their leisure. However, I acknowledge that more telephone and in-person interviews and observations would have benefitted this research.

I was able to attend several live performances of the Coterie Theatre’s devised production, and if time and finances had permitted, I ideally would have traveled to see the devising process and final productions by Patch Theatre Company and Theatre Mala Scena. The opportunity to travel to Croatia and Australia would have allowed me to experience the play as it was meant to be experienced, and would have provided the opportunity to view audience reactions to the plays. However, having a DVD of each theatre’s production work provided me with the chance to watch the performances multiple times. The multiple viewings assisted in the construction of interview questions, and
provided visual links for me between the theories and processes of the artistic directors/directors and the descriptions they provided of their work.
CHAPTER THREE: LITERATURE REVIEW

Chapter 3 explores the current state of dramaturgy and devising through a comparative study of articles and books by dramaturgs and devisers currently practicing theatre in North America, Europe, and Australia. I first examine dramaturgy and devising separately in order to isolate each process before exploring how artists interweave dramaturgy and devising. Reviewing the literature in this manner provides a basis for how devisers establish dramaturgy, and a reference point with which to situate the devising and dramaturgical approaches of the theatre companies analyzed in chapters 4, 5, and 6.

Dramaturgy

Defining dramaturgy proves difficult. The definition of dramaturgy varies from artist to artist and can encompass the historical research of a show in varying degrees and/or includes the collaboration with a playwright to ensure the development of the strongest dramatic action possible. In addition, it may also play a role in the direction or angle of a theatre piece, as well as have the capacity to serve as an overarching term for the creative process of designers, actors, and directors. Dramaturgy, as it pertains to this thesis, revolves around the art or technique of dramatic composition or theatrical representation.

A single dramaturg is not required for dramaturgy, and in fact, when devising, dramaturgy often occurs through a group effort, which I am referring to
as collective dramaturgy. Collective dramaturgy is the process of considering multiple perspectives that contribute to the development of the dramatic composition of the performance text.

In “Navigating Turbulence: The Dramaturg in Physical Theatre”, Bruce Barton, a dramaturg and researcher of dramaturgy and physical theatre, summarizes the duties of a dramaturg when working on a new text;

- To establish and maintain a degree of critical objectivity.
- To develop a deep commitment to the creators involved the project and the art and craft of theatre.
- To question habit, to complicate unreflective expediency, and to dig beneath the surface of unearned presumption. (Barton 103)

While much of the literature on dramaturgy points to the art of dramatic composition as the building block of dramatic texts, the above bullet points provide dramaturgical goals for devisers to utilize when developing new performance texts through collective dramaturgy.

Tori Haring-Smith, vice president for Educational Affairs at Willamette University, expounds on the role of the production dramaturg in her article, “Dramaturging Non-Realism: Creating a New Vocabulary”. She explains:

The production dramaturg’s job is to illuminate form and thereby create meaning so that the audience has some means of engaging in a production. This task requires a careful balancing of the need to simplify and clarify with the need to retain complexity and the richness of
ambiguity. As Rorschach tests demonstrate, the human animal is obsessed with making meaning. Show us a blob of ink, and we see a goose. Show us a random collection of objects, and we can impose a narrative that explains their relationships. We impose form to create meaning. (Haring-Smith 46)

Smith focuses on how a single dramaturg helps create meaning in the rehearsal process of non-realism plays. However, I posit that collective dramaturgy provides similar results for devising teams, specifically through the process of imposing form to create meaning. I believe her viewpoint that humans naturally induce meaning making proves applicable to the dramaturgical process of a devising team for TYA because devisers assign meaning to images, sounds, and movement, throughout the devising process to create story. Does this mean devisers create dramaturgy just through their devising process? When devising a new work, the development and rehearsal of the play occur nearly simultaneously as the devisers are often the performers as well. As a result, are the devisers always aware of the dramaturgical steps taken to ensure the dramatic composition of the performance text, or does the dramaturgy sometimes occur in the serendipitous moments of creation?

Julian Meyrick, an Australian based dramaturg, outlines the role of a production dramaturg in his article “Cut and Paste” and sheds light on the careful line artists must walk between creativity and objectivity when developing new texts. In addition, Meyrick highlights the trials and tribulations dramaturgs face
when working on a new text over an extended period. He points out that the longer an artist works on a project the less objectivity he/she has about the structure and quality of the work (Meyrick 278). He warns artists of the dangers of becoming too close to a project, so much so that they can no longer discern the dramaturgical needs:

We might think ‘the more we know the more we know, but in dramaturgical development knowledge is a double-edged sword, in one way taking us closer to the heart of a play text, but in another taking us further away from our memory of its first impression, the one most of those who will later come into contact with it are likely to hold. (Meyrick 278)

Meyrick’s belief that a director’s initial reading of a dramatic text is the purest way to view the dramaturgy of a text is a commonly shared belief of theatre practitioners. However, the director of a devised play will never have the experience of reading the dramatic text for the first time because as a co-constructor of the performance text the director remains intrinsically linked with the starting point and journey of the play. Thus, directors of devised performance texts must be wary of the dramaturgical double-edged sword associated with devising. Meyrick’s warning not only applies to directors but the devising team as a whole, particularly because devisers spend months at a time developing scenes, choreography, and dialogue - often on their feet, and sometimes with no original literature or dramatic text to refer. The intimate and extended development period seems to have a plethora of opportunities to skew the critical
eye needed to ensure the dramaturgy of the devised performance text. As a result, I question how devisers walk the line of creativity and objectivity in order to develop strong dramaturgy?

A majority of the above literature on dramaturgy revolves around the beliefs and practices of a single dramaturg assisting in the dramaturgical creation of a new text. I believe the focus on a single dramaturg indicates that playwrights and dramaturgs of traditional dramatic texts are documenting their process frequently and are discussing the rewards and challenges of their collaborations. However, there is far less literature on the experiences of members of collective dramaturgy. Michael X. Zelenak poses an exception in his article, “Why We Don’t Need Directors: A Dramaturgical/Historical Manifesto”:

We don’t need critic-dramaturgs in the theatre or the rehearsal hall any more than we need specialist directors. Dramatists (i.e. dramaturg-playwright or dramaturg-actor), the collaborators and ‘makers of drama’ are the only necessary profession in the theatre. (106)

Throughout this article, Zelenak promotes collective dramaturgy and makes a strong case for the importance of creating theatre with artists serving multiple roles. In my research, Zelenak was one of the only writers stressing the importance of the actor as “dramatist,” which he defines as an artist performing the duties of an actor, playwright, and dramaturg simultaneously (106). This differs from much of the literature that separates the field of theatre into a series of specialists. Zelenak’s call to action to enlist a creative team of “dramatists”
proves similar to the collaborative nature of devising, where and when actors, dancers, and directors serve multiple roles throughout the devising process.

In addition to Zelnak’s article, I found a second article documenting collective dramaturgical practices. In “Collective Dramaturgy: A Co-Consideration of the Dramaturgical Role in Collaborative Creation” Kirk Lynn and Shawn Sides discuss experiences as a playwright and a director devising theatre and co-constructing dramaturgy for the theatre company Rude Mechanicals located in Austin Texas. A key piece of their process lies in empowering the actors and creative team to contribute to the dramaturgy. Lynn prefaces the article by stating, “In the Rude Mechanicals’ version of collaboratively creating a piece of theatre, the dramaturg is a collective position that orbits most closely (thus far) around the director and playwright” (111). Lynn and Sides’ collective dramaturgy approach establishes ownership of the play by the whole company and it is the responsibility of everyone to add and to compose the dramatic arc. However, the dramaturgy, or art of dramatic composition still requires the director and playwright to act as a filter of ideas in order to ensure that the play is constructed of solid dramatic elements that add to the overall dramaturgy of the performance text (113).

Furthermore, Lynn and Sides highlight the idea that conflict lies at the heart of dramaturgy. Their conflict as director and playwright helps them exercise objectivity about the composition of the text, ensuring that the piece eventually fleshes itself out to its fullest potential. Lynn and Sides express the
difficulties and rewards of their experience of co-dramaturgy on a project they co-created entitled, Requiem for Tesla:

We fought a fair amount. I got up from the desk and left once, and it was my desk. But it was this argument, discussion, and agreement between Shawn and me that was the locus of the dramaturgy on Requiem for Tesla. There was no one there to negotiate that relationship between director and playwright. But our combined energies and conflicting ideas created a joint activity. What Shawn approaches through a door labeled directing and I enter through a door called text is a room called dramaturgy and it’s a mess in there, but it’s our room. We’re artistic roommates. (113)

Lynn and Sides continue pushing against the common notion that “dramaturgs are around to be the smart one” (113). They believe that artists have the critical thinking, research skills, and determination to research and create the dramaturgy needed to present provocative theatre. Lynn reflects that all members of Rude Mechanicals are dramaturgs in their own right:

In the collaborative structure in which Rude Mechs strives to give equal voice to actors, director, designers, and playwrights (not to mention crew, friends, and anyone else who has something to say), it is the way those voices come together to make a single piece of work that the dramaturgy takes place. (114)
Through my review of dramaturgical literature, I found that a majority of publications revolve around dramaturgy that assists in the development of traditional forms of dramatic texts, such as those based in realism. Articles foregrounded the collaboration of the playwright and dramaturg, in order to ensure the play’s structure, character, and dialogue prove dramaturgically sound. However, some artists are beginning to document and publish materials highlighting their collaboration and practical dramaturgical experiences in physical, movement based, and devised theatre highlighting a recent shift toward collective dramaturgy and collaborative theatre making. In the following section, my focus shifts to devising in order to highlight common approaches to devised theatre.

**Devising**

Most theatre is based in the notion of collaboration, most commonly occurring through the collaborative work of directors, designers, and actors working together to produce a staged dramatic text by a playwright. However, devising is a theatre making process that takes the collaborative process a step further. This occurs through a devising team comprised of a variant combination of directors, actors, choreographers, designers, playwrights and/or dramaturgs working together to create an original performance text.

Devising tactics vary from artist to artist and can consist of improvisations in dance, writing, singing, and/or the simple execution of tasks facilitated by the
director and carried out by the performers. In addition to the endless different tactics available, the final performance text can take on characteristics and incorporate multiple art forms including improvisation, physical theatre, image theatre, dance, music, circus arts, traditional kitchen sink realism, etc. In addition to the many possible tactics and theatrical styles associated with devising, the inspiration for a devised production can spring from anything including the deconstruction of an established script, a song, a picture, a newspaper article, a children’s book, abstract ideas, or personal stories, to name a few.

The above diverse elements of devising make it difficult to pinpoint and apply a theory or a single definition to the devising process. However, common characteristics can be found, and I highlight these in order to give the scope of different techniques. Barton notes that when devising a performance text the dialogue often comes second in the development process after the physical and visual elements are established (Barton 104). This does not mean that the final production contains no verbal dialogue, only that the work develops with performers or dancers on their feet, creating images and layering dialogue when needed, rather than in traditional theatre where movement stems from the dialogue in a written script. In Bruce Barton’s aforementioned article, “Navigating Turbulence: The Dramaturg in Physical Theatre,” he expounds on the collaborative process and the secondary nature of formal dialogue stating:

The term [physical theatre] identifies an approach to theatrical performance for which text is a secondary component-in the sense that
text is often secondary chronologically in the development process and in
the communicative significance. Rather the elements of visual and aural
presentation, as well as the work’s engagement with narrative, emerge out
of a set of processes that are based in movement, improvisation, physical
discipline, and the set of creative instruments understood and experienced
as instinct and intuition. (104)

While Barton notes the secondary nature of verbal dialogue in physical theatre,
he continues by highlighting that devised theatre often contains elements of
physical theatre. Therefore, in order to better understand the aesthetics of
devised theatre it proves important to examine the characteristics of physical
theatre.

Dymphna Callery in the book *Through the Body: a Practical Guide to
Physical Theatre* defines physical theatre by explaining, “at its simplest, physical
theatre is theatre where the primary means of creation occurs through the body
rather than through the mind…this is true whether the product is an original
devised piece or an interpretation of a scripted text” (4). Alison Oddey, author of
*Devising Theatre: A Practical and Theoretical Handbook*, establishes that the
language of devised theatre occurs in the combination of narrative, “text”, and
physical movement and like Callery, acknowledges the importance of physical
exploration when devising. Oddey notes, “The body and the use of physical
visual imagery are the focus of the performance “(162).
Early in her book Oddey lays out the goals of physical theatre which I posit are closely linked to the principals of devising since physical theatre and devising are often synonymous with one another:

- **Process**: finding the way and the means to share an artistic journey together.
- **Collaboration**: working with others.
- **Multi-vision**: integrating various views, beliefs, life experiences and attitudes to changing world events.
- **Creation of an artistic product**. (3)

In addition to Callery, Oddey and Barton's viewpoint on the inclusion of physical theatre when devising, each author also highlights the special relationship between the performers and the spectators in devised theatre. Callery describes the work of physical theatre as an art form in which, “the stage spectator relationship is open” (5). The open relationship forces the audiences to attach meaning to the images and movement presented in the performance text. While Callery utilizes the above phrase in regards to physical theatre, Oddey similarly addresses the special role of the spectator in devised theatre, writing; “Groups devise work for, with, or from a specific audience, and therefore the nature of the spectator-actor relationship is a very particular one” (20). As a result, I posit that devised TYA creates spectator-actors because the performers are asking the audiences to apply meaning to the images and movement.
presented on stage, and thus children in the audience become theatre makers as well.

In addition to understanding physical theatre, another important element to examine is how the starting point, or the initial inspiration for the devising process, is explored through the use of different structures. Some companies utilize improvisations, or the assignment of tasks that have the opportunity for multiple and varied interpretations, as well as research that the devising team gathers and presents to the group for further development and discussion. Callery notes that when devising theatre, “The key point is that whether your starting point is a style of performance or an idea about content, the process begins with generating visual material; characters, actions, images all from physical improvisation” (172). Callery also outlines what she believes to be important phases of devising based on her experiences:

- Preproduction research period
- A ‘making’ stage where the ‘text’ is generated
- Final phase of rehearsing that ‘text’ (165)

In order for these phases to come to fruition the devising team must establish a method to filter ideas, either democratically or through the use of a director. Today, artists have varying viewpoints on what the role of the director should be when devising. In Devised and Collaborative Theatre, Tina Bicat and Chris Baldwin emphasize the role of the director as a facilitator of tasks, as a project nurturer, and often as the key person to move between creativity and objectivity.
Bicat and Baldwin note that the director should help generate ideas, facilitate discussion and to provide shape to the material generated by the group, but emphasize that the director should not impose their ideas on the devising team (9). In addition, Bicat and Baldwin emphasize that the director is not the head or the top but instead functions as the center of the fulcrum, making everything spin (13). Baldwin goes on to say, “Above all else the director is responsible for ensuring that the production is conceptually and aesthetically coherent, that the story is clearly told, that it can be seen and heard by the audience, that it is stimulating and entertaining, and most importantly, it is not boring!” (13).

These viewpoints on the director and devising begin to uncover the steps taken by the director to ensure a devised performance text proves dramaturgically sound. Callery further explains the dramaturgical role of the director stating:

Devising is rooted in the concept of the creative actor developing ideas from tasks. It is usually the director who both translates ideas into tasks (which maybe games or improvisations) and operates as an editor, an outside eye, a shaper of the whole, in essence as the dramaturg. (165)

Based on Callery and Bicat and Baldwin’s explanation of the role of director as dramaturg, I am lead to question if the role of director/dramaturg might exist as the reason for the small amount of literature on dramaturgy for devised theatre? Perhaps the dramaturgy of devised theatre remains so tightly linked to the direction of the show that when documenting the devising process
directors/dramaturgs fail to highlight the construction of dramaturgy, but rather focus on the creative collaboration which is ultimately the basis and motivating force of devising.

**Dramaturgy and Devising Links**

Traditionally, when writing a new dramatic text, dramaturgy is established by a single playwright or through collaboration between the playwright and a dramaturg. However, rarely does a devising company hire a single playwright or dramaturg to focus on the dramaturgy of the play and Callery acknowledges that when devising, the lack of a single writer can result in dramaturgical challenges:

> Few companies employ a writer [during the devising process]. The postmodern distrust of language seems to have spread into a distrust of writers. Yet frequently the textual aspect of physical-based devised theatre--both the words and structuring that are the writer’s craft--is its Achilles heel. Performers are trained in the poetry of space but not in the poetry of language and the rhythms of structure. (179)

Callery’s warning on the dangers of losing structure and poesy when devising without an appointed writer, points to the importance of employing artists who have the ability to move between creative intuition and objectivity. I posit that the ability to swing between subjectivity and objectivity proves a key element in allowing a full exploration of dramaturgical possibilities. Achieving objectivity in the arts proves nearly impossible because all art is subjective, therefore devising
artists have a greater duty to question the choices made by the group, and to ensure that the characters, structure, and dialogue create solid dramaturgy, especially without the assistance of a dramaturg or playwright.

Callery, Oddey, and Bicat and Baldwin all practice different variations on the devising process, but they all support the idea that devisers need to challenge one another’s ideas. Due to devisers’ duty to challenge one another’s ideas and choices, it seems that a devising team develops dramaturgy through the aforementioned form of collective dramaturgy, resulting from continuous questioning, examination, and reflection. In addition, Callery, Oddey, and Bicat and Baldwin further support the notion that dramaturgy occurs intrinsically through the devising process by noting that devisers must serve as sounding boards and editors of ideas in order to ensure that a performance contains strong dramatic elements, which is similar to how a single dramaturg assists in developing dramaturgy on a traditional dramatic text. Oddey highlights the role of devisers as constructors of dramaturgy by stating, “The devising process needs to be searching, the work constantly sifted, reexamined, and criticized” (26). Oddey’s belief surrounding the constant re-examination and criticism of the devised performance text allows artists to create improvisations without overthinking, and then allows the director and devisers to step outside the work and choose which improvisations and movement sequences are needed for the dramaturgy of the performance text. In addition, Bicat and Baldwin believe that research and design of the devising process proves essential to devised work,
and that these steps of research and design are the main elements that eventually lead to the dramaturgy.

The devising process is one which the team must search out the stories that contain interesting or puzzling accounts of the way people interact with one another and then locate what we might describe as ‘playable actions’. Then we need to find entertaining ways of presenting these stories to our public. (Bicat and Baldwin18)

Callery echoes Bicat and Baldwin’s need for attention to dramaturgy, noting that dramaturgy can be developed by the devising team or through the assistance of an outside eye, but stresses that in either case the dramaturgy can not be overlooked. “Without this dramaturgical input, work lacks shape and potential dramatic moments remain unexplored” (Callery 177).

The literature I reviewed points to the creation of dramaturgy as a key element of theatre, whether dramatic or devised performance text. However, the articles and books I read lacked a description of how the tasks and improvisations, used to explore the starting point, developed from individual improvisations, movement sequences, and images, into dramaturgy. How does knowledge of the intended audience, and of theatrical conventions, help bring the devised segments into fully fleshed out dramaturgical performance texts? How does the dramaturgy help to guide the audience through the theatrical experience, especially if it proves abstract and non-linear in fashion?
In my research of Patch Theatre Company, Theatre Mala Scena, and the Coterie Theatre, the above questions prompted me to explore what theories on TYA influenced the artistic directors/directors approach to devising, and how they ensured the devised performance text proved dramaturgically sound. I questioned if the dramaturgy of their performance text developed through simple discussions, research, written feedback, and/or audience and peer review? Did it occur at the beginning, middle or end of the process? When devising what do the artistic directors/directors consider as important storytelling elements in order to serve the needs of young people, and do young people have the opportunity to contribute to the devising and dramaturgy processes? The remainder of this thesis explores these questions in relation to three devised performance texts and highlights specific examples of possible dramaturgical practices for devising theatre for the very young.
CHAPTER FOUR: PATCH THEATRE COMPANY

In this chapter, I first explore Patch Theatre Company’s (Patch) history and current repertoire of productions in order to discern the context in which *Emily Loves to Bounce* was devised. Following the background information, I provide an analysis that links Artistic Director Dave Brown’s theories on theatre for very young audiences, with the devising process and dramaturgy of *Emily Loves to Bounce*.

**Background**

Over the last thirty-five years, Patch has created ninety-nine new works and served over 1.4 million children and their families nationally and internationally. Currently Patch’s repertoire includes 8 productions: *Special Delivery, Emily Loves to Bounce; Mr. Mcgee and the Biting Flee; Sharon, Keep Ya Hair On!; Pigs, Bears and Billy Goats Gruff; Who Sank the Boat?; Aesop’s Fables; and The Fastest Boy in the World* (Patch 2007 Repertoire Brochure).

Established in 1972 by Mora Jones, Patch Theatre Company began as a puppet theatre called Little Patch Theatre operating out of an old farmhouse in Brighton, Australia. As the theatre grew, the name evolved from Little Patch Theatre to New Patch Theatre to The Patch Theatre Centre, and finally to its current name Patch Theatre Company, commonly referred to as just Patch (Patch 2006 Annual Report).
In 1986, Christine Anketell began a 7 year service as artistic director and forged a relationship with the Adelaide Festival Centre Trust. This partnership allowed Patch to produce large-scale adaptations of popular children’s literature such as *The Secret Garden*. Following Anketell, Dave Brown took over artistic leadership of Patch in 1992, moving the theatre from a community centre into the campus of Pasadena High School. Brown continued to foster the relationship with the Adelaide Festival Centre established by Ankatell, and furthered artistic reach of the company by exploring his interest in incorporating live music in theatre with new production such as *Respectable Shoes* and the Beatles inspired pop-opera *Kookookachoo*. In addition to exploring music in TYA, Brown also incorporated the celebration of culture, most notably through the production *The Boy and the Bamboo Flute* – which was performed by the company until 2006. Patch returned to its puppetry roots in 1998-2000 under the artistic direction of Ken Evans who collaborated with Johnathan Taylor to create *Visible Darkness*, a collision of Film Noir, contemporary dance, puppetry, and illusion for the Adelaide Festival Centre Trust and Come Out ’99, a festival for young people. However, in 2000 Dave Brown returned to Patch Theatre and began the current re-invention of the company, which now focuses on young people 4-8 years old and their families.

*Emily Loves to Bounce*, a performance text for young people ages 4-8 is part of their current repertoire, and serves as the basis of my exploration of how the Patch Theatre Company devising team achieves the company’s vision of,
“Taking children to amazing places” and mission “to explore new frontiers in theatre making for children” through devising and dramaturgy (Brown E-mail Interview). In addition to the vision and mission statements Patch also devises performance text influenced by their dedication to support the research of early childhood development. Brown remains inspired by the notion that two thirds of human development occurs during the first eight years of life. As a result Patch’s devised performance texts focus on the developmental needs of the child, as they believe that the culture of young people proves tightly connected to children’s process of learning and development. Brown explains:

In early childhood, when verbal language is still developing, children think with their bodies, through action and imagery. The sensory experiences of the body help children make meaning through sensation. Theatre is a heightened and living sensory experience… very symbolic where meaning is expressed in the languages of gesture, music, design, movement, spoken word etc – and because theatre hasn’t the capacity for realism, it’s imagery is representational and metaphorical. Theatre expresses “felt meaning”. Visual forms of thinking are well suited to the expression of ideas that are too subtle for speech. Children have a heightened sense of the visual world. Like a deaf person, whose sight becomes more discerning; a child has a heightened sense of the visual because the verbal is often a blur. (Brown Email Interview)
Patch’s dedication to the research of early childhood development provides the backbone for the company’s devised work.

Through my discussions with Brown, I realized that it proved nearly impossible to separate the devising of *Emily Loves to Bounce* from its dramaturgical development. The blurring of devising and dramaturgy occurred because as the performers devised segments of the performance text, Brown constructed the dramaturgy, or dramatic composition of the performance text in response to the improvisations.

As a result, in the following section I demonstrate how the devising influenced the dramaturgy and/or vice versa. Following the exploration of dramaturgy and devising, I provide insight into the specifics of the company’s dramaturgy approaches which include collective, children’s, and peer dramaturgy.

**Analysis of Emily Loves to Bounce**

The appeal of devising for Patch Theatre Company occurs through a desire to search out what Dave Brown refers to as new “performance languages” for TYA that are distinct and innovative. Brown further explains the appeal of devising as it relates to their mission of exploring new frontiers in theatre making for children:

Each new project takes the company out of its comfort zone and compels its artists to use every inch of their creative resourcefulness to get close to
the vision to which Patch aspires. It lives with the risk of failure in the hope that it may push beyond mediocrity towards a theatrical wonder that is special and enduring. (Brown E-mail Interview)

As Brown mentions above, devising proves a risky endeavor like all theatre, but the risk remains heightened when devising because there is no script to outline the overall process. Brown approaches devising with a spirit of adventure by beginning the process without a clear end in sight, explaining, “In a way I am much more interested in a loose construing process. After the event in a way. You start with images that somehow help you to compel forward” (Brown Phone Interview). The “starting point “ that compelled the devising team forward for Emily Loves to Bounce was based on a series of illustrations and story lines by children’s book author/ illustrator, Stephen Michael King.

Brown began the initial dramaturgy of Emily Loves to Bounce by devoting hundreds of hours creating what Brown refers to as a “treatment”. A treatment consists of ideas, possible scenarios, and research, based on the predetermined starting point, such as a piece of literature. Brown stresses that while many hours are devoted to the initial treatment process, the work of the initial treatment is often thrown out if the explorations and improvisations lead the devisers in a different direction. Below is a small sample of an initial treatment for the first week of devising for Emily Loves to Bounce:
Lying Without Leaving the Ground Description

- Astrid climbs into a box and after a while paper wings emerge ....
  The flying box goes through build up to flying and awkwardly flies
  .... Joy but not perfection

Symbol – transformation being in someone else’s skin.

Relationships to source material

- Henry trying on pieces of Amy
- Amy trying on pieces of Henry
- It’s not their first nature and together they learn how to fly
- Perhaps something they would do together in tree house

Dave's list (having seen above)

- Ice release of bounce
- Rubber band –something out of nothing
- Don’t steal my song
- Playing with echo/shadows
- Bouncing parts of your body to create a sequence
- Footsteps on paper
- Sharing an imaginary balloon
- Presenting imaginary flowers (Patch Development Document)
While the above initial treatment may not make much sense to the outside eye, it does provide insight into the thought process of the devisers, and begins to show how the devised improvisations became the dramaturgy of *Emily Loves to Bounce*. I noted that several of the above ideas appeared as whole scenes when viewing the DVD of a performance of *Emily Loves to Bounce*. The transition from idea to scene to performance text occurs as the devising team sifts through the initial images and improvisations and discusses what they mean to the team, as well as what the images and improvisations might convey to children. The devising team then begins to use collective dramaturgy in order to decide which pieces of the devised improvisations and images will compose the final performance text. Below is an example from the completed treatment, which manifests itself in an outline of the opening sequence of the performance:

TREATMENT

1. OPENING

(_progressive time total = 4.39 minutes_)

- Music begins
- Lids opening
- Two performers emerge and explore
- Find and reveal violinist
- Find and reveal cello-ist
- Release ball
- Two performers play in their boxes
• Male performer opens lid and hears music – plays with it
• Returns to his own box while feet appear and bubbles appear
• Female performer opens Jack in the Box
• Jack in the box routine
• All end up in big box. (Patch Final Treatment)

The movement from the scattered initial treatment to the more streamlined and focused final treatment gives a glimpse into how improvisations become dramaturgy. Dave Brown expounds on Patch’s process of discovery, noting that they must first discover what the play is not, before deciding what the play is. The process of discovering what the play is not ultimately helps the group to discover the dramaturgy. He states:

There is always a sense of something emerging under the rubble from these explosions and as the process continues, the shape becomes more and more apparent and the reasons for making the changes become evident. It’s an elegant simplicity that you hope will eventually emerge from these processes. You know you’re getting somewhere if things are becoming simpler and more economical. On the occasion that you arrive at an *elegant simplicity*, it’s often so simple that you wonder why you didn’t go there in the first place! (Brown E-mail Interview)

In order to reach Brown’s goal of elegant simplicity, the devising team focuses on framing the devising and the eventual dramaturgy around Brown’s theory that TYA should stem from a “BIG IDEA.” Brown considers “BIG IDEAS” as
overarching themes that highlight the dualities of life. He believes the theatre devised by Patch creates a vehicle for young people to understand themselves and the world in which they live. Brown describes the allure of dualities when devising TYA by explaining:

The stories that fascinate children of this age are whimsical, metaphorical and fantastical. They (children) are much less engaged by practical and pragmatic realism. This is because they are developing their inner resources in preparation for expanding their awareness of the world at large. They are making sense of the world often in terms of conflicting opposites – like goodness and badness; attachment and independence; love and hate; happiness and sadness; work and play; comfort and fear; meaning and mystery, reality and dreams – all of which are best represented in metaphorical stories that often have universal intonations…. the stuff of fables, myths and fairy stories. It is a period in their lives when we need to be supporting the evolution of a rich inner world as they deal with an alluring externalized commercial culture that beckons them to be infatuated with every new fad, fashion gadget and burger meal deal that greets them on a daily basis. (Brown E-mail Interview)

For Emily Loves to Bounce the idea to explore the duality of creativity and logic stemmed from the aforementioned starting point of the popular children’s books, Henry and Amy; Emily Loves to Bounce; and A Special Kind of Love, all by
author/illustrator Stephen Michael King. As highlighted in the previous examples of initial and final treatments, the deconstruction and synthesis of the three books creates a performance text, non-linear in fashion, teetering between reality and metaphor, which are exemplified in the opening sequence of the performance text.

The play begins slowly with string instrumentation, and a stage sprinkled with various sized white boxes. After several moments, a few of the boxes begin mysteriously glowing, and an actor pushes open the lid of a box and warily peeks out, then quickly retreats. The second actor does the same and eventually the two come out and begin exploring the landscape of boxes. Finally, they discover two larger boxes, and open the lids revealing the musicians inside who have been creating the string instrumentation. The character Henry begins singing a song about a box, and they all end up standing in the box and singing about how it is not a box, but a boat. However, Amy disagrees and sees the box as a box, the song continues with the other three performers convincing Amy that a box can be anything. The dramaturgy of this opening sequence points to Brown’s theory of exploring “BIG IDEAS” and his passion for exposing the need for both creativity and logic in the lives of young people. He notes:

As a theatre-maker, I’m fascinated by the creativity/logic duality and the battle we have as artists to convince a very rational world of the value and importance of creativity. The elixir of creativity is quite a mysterious potion and as an artist I’m very keen to unravel its ingredients…People are
generally much more comfortable with logic. It's solid and reliable. A dose is a dose and you know what you're getting…The downside is that it can dominate proceedings, which is a travesty given that the gift of creativity is the thing that distinguishes humankind from all other species. To live in a world dominated by logic may make things simpler and easier, but in no way is it better. The battle to have creativity honored and respected as an equal partner to logic is one we artists must fight on behalf of children. (Brown E-mail Interview)

The exploration of creativity and logic appears throughout Emily Loves to Bounce, and following the opening sequence, the representation of the dualities continues when a large ball named Emily appears and Henry wants to bounce the ball and run around, yet Amy wants to keep things neat and in order and would rather keep the ball under control inside a box. The devising of the latter sequence evolved through following three rules, which anchor Dave Brown’s facilitation of tasks and improvisations. The rules to the improvisations were as follows:

Rule 1. Accept all Ideas.

Rule 2. Don’t judge these ideas

Rule 3. Congratulate yourself on creative risk taking and downright silliness. (Brown E-mail Interview)

By asking the devisers to follow the three “rules”, Brown endows the performers with creative freedom to dig deep and explore beyond any initial surface ideas. In
addition, the rules empower the performers to create complex images such as a scene where magically floating paper lanterns emerge from a glowing box, symbolizing ideas floating in a character’s head.

In addition to the “three rules” when assigning tasks, Brown requests six different outcomes. He believes the multiple outcomes also push the performers beyond the easy, normal, and expected. Brown further notes, “There are lots of throw away ideas, which are fun because it’s not a game about winning or being the best. It’s just about the fun of playing with possibilities and coming up with oddball and surprising ideas” (Brown Interview). An example of the tasks that Brown presented to the devising team of Emily Loves to Bounce shed further light into Patch’s devising process,

- Six ways of using a box
- Six ways of using two balls
- Six ways of showing what bounce can mean
- Six ways of showing the difference between straight and wiggly
- Six ways of showing the meaning of difference
- Six ways of showing loneliness
- Six ways of making an image of flying
- Six ways of showing the meaning of the word connection
- Six ways of expressing joy (Brown Email Interview)

Following the initial exploration of “six ways of doing a task” which is can be done physically and/or through writing, the performers share their discoveries with the
group in order to choose which improvisations, songs, or scenes might later add to the dramaturgy of the performance text. Brown describes the vast array of discoveries that occurred as a result of asking for six outcomes:

The outcomes can be anything – demonstrations, songs, a finger performance, a drawing, a poem, a mix of sounds, an image made of stones or leaves, a hand signal, a mime, a story, music, a dance, a shadow play, an interaction between a pair of glasses and a lemon, absolutely anything…Some outcomes are then selected for further exploration and development. We ended up with lots of little image segments [for *Emily Loves to Bounce*]. The devisers edited the segments and orchestrated them into a structure. (Brown E-mail Interview)

Brown’s notation that improvisations are edited, orchestrated, and structured proves an important part of the company’s collective dramaturgical approach. These steps allow the devising team to generate an ample amount of material so that they can choose the strongest pieces for the final product. After viewing the tasks and initial treatment, I noted that the devising in fact became dramaturgy through the aforementioned editing, orchestrating, and structuring. A specific example of this occurs by observing how the task “six ways of showing what bounce can mean” moves from a simple task into an important piece of the performance text. The above task moved from devised improvisation to dramaturgy when during the performance the audience sees “Emily” (a large bouncing ball), reappear throughout the play, bouncing at different moments in
different ways symbolizing joy, anger, and loneliness. “Emily” signifies an example of how the team explored the use of a bouncing ball not only as a literal, shared toy between Henry and Amy, but also as a metaphor for the unpredictable nature of life and friendship.

Brown clarifies the importance of using symbols both metaphorically and realistically in the production:

If it is abstract to the point where the child cannot attach meaning, they will become bored with it and lose connection. The challenge then is to ensure that the segments of the piece, each have a dramatic arc – a sense of narrative – a cause and effect structure – that often speaks in universal terms about experiences that can be “felt” and comprehended by children – experiences that are relevant to their world. (Brown E-mail Interview)

When searching for ways to express ideas metaphorically, hours of devising are sometimes lost exploring an idea that the team hopes will add to the dramaturgy, only to realize that performance text must go in a different direction. However, Brown turns the negative of lost time into a positive, pointing out that the dead-ends shed light on the inner working of young people, and to the real needs of the dramaturgy. This occurs when the devising team invites young people into the devising process.

Bringing children in during the devising creates a process of dramaturgical development which I am defining as children’s dramaturgy. Children’s dramaturgy occurs when the feedback or interaction with young people changes
the dramatic composition of the performance text. Children’s dramaturgy entered into *Emily Loves to Bounce* when the devising team spent hours developing ways to entice children to step onto the stage in order to open a box. The devising team believed that children would be too shy or nervous about entering the sacred space of the stage in order to look in the box. However, to the devisers’ surprise the young people mobbed the stage, destroying the box, proving that you can never predict the reaction of a child, and adding to the later dramaturgy of the performance text. Brown notes that by doing this the team made important steps in discovering the nuances of the play and gained important insight into the psyche of their audience. In addition to the above example, Brown shares an anecdote which highlights how keen young people are at reading symbols established by the dramaturgy, which can ultimately lead to a dramaturgically sound performance text:

In *Emily Loves to Bounce*, one of the actors trod on a small ball and a child in the audience screamed at the actor, ‘You’ve killed one of Emily’s babies’. Emily was a large ball. We’d never made that link ourselves about those thousands of small balls until then. The child had read the symbols we’d created without our knowing what the symbol meant. Good dramaturgy. (Brown E-mail Interview)

In addition to considering the feedback of children when constructing dramaturgy, Patch also relies on the expertise of peers in order to assist in the development of dramaturgy and to ensure the strength of the production.
However, Brown acknowledges that while the devising team considers feedback from children and peers, the bulk of the dramaturgy develops through the collaboration of the devising team. Brown summarizes the company’s collective dramaturgy approach, stating:

Dramaturgy for us occurs on a number of levels. I mainly act as a director/auteur. I construct the architecture for creative development processes. I am not at all precious about these offerings. Early on, they will usually get chewed up and spat out. But, inevitably, they lead to exploration, tasks, playing and progress, which can be quite slow early on and very scary. What is happening here is that the performers – often instinctually and then analytically are providing the dramaturgical advice in the process of defining what the show will be. (Brown E-mail Interview)

Dramaturgy for *Emily Loves to Bounce* developed through reflection and analysis of the devised improvisations and often occurred in tandem with the devising process as the company generated and sifted through material. However, during other points in the devising process, in order to continue generating material, the team had to reflect on the dramaturgy of the performance text already established. More consciously the devising process of Patch Theatre Company’s *Emily Loves to Bounce* occurred through employing a variety of devising tactics which ultimately were finessed through the use of collective, children and peer dramaturgy, all of which were guided by Brown’s theory of creating performance text revolving around “Big Ideas” and dualities.
CHAPTER FIVE: THEATRE MALA SCENA

In this chapter, I first explore Theatre Mala Scena’s history and current repertoire of productions, in order to discern the context in which *The Parachutist (or on the Art of Falling)* was devised. Following the background information, I provide an analysis that links Artistic Director Ivica Simic’s theories on theatre for very young audiences, with the devising process and dramaturgy of *The Parachutists (or on the Art of Falling)*.

**Background**

Theatre Mala Scena located in Zagreb exists as one of Croatia’s leading theatres for young people and families, due to their high attendance and many honors awarded (Theatre Mala Scena). In 1986 actor/director, Ivica Simic and actress Vitomira Loncar opened Theatre Mala Scena in order to create theatre for adults and young people. After several years of producing TYA and theatre for adults, Simic shifted the vision of Theatre Mala Scena in order to specialize in TYA. This occurred as a result of Simic’s work with renowned TYA directors and through reflecting on the importance of TYA throughout his career as an actor and director. Today Mala Scena’s production programming consists of three different series: “For Small” (2+), “For Big” (6+) and “For Young” (focusing on middle school and teenagers) (Theatre Mala Scena).
The company operates by devising original work based on their mission, “To offer children of all ages, from 0 to 13 years, the art of theatre as an everyday part of growing up” (Theatre Mala Scena). The mission continues to expound by presenting ideas of artistic excellence through empowering young people to confront life boldly. In addition the mission highlights the importance of presenting messages that question and investigate young people’s everyday lives, with the goal to present messages of hope and encouragement. Currently Mala Scena achieves their mission through a repertoire of 13 productions. The company offers 10 productions created with young people, ages 2-6+, in mind and include, *And Who are You?*, *Story about the Cloud*, *Story about the Wheel*, *Parachutists (or on the art of falling)*, *Princess and the Pea*, *Palle Alone in the Wind*, *The Stork and the Fox*, *First Class Wagon*, *The Life of Antuntun*, and *Bum Tumica* (Theatre Mala Scena).

The company has received national and international acclaim for their new works and in 2006 presented productions at 11 festivals and won 5 awards. In addition, *The Parachutists (or on the art of falling)*, which will from here forth be referred to as *The Parachutists* received high acclaim at theatre festivals in Italy, Finland, Russia, Argentina, Austria and Czech Republic, Austria, Belgium, Luxemburg, Denmark, Ireland and Japan during 2007 (Theatre Mala Scena).

Through my discussions with Simic, I realized that the dramaturgy and directing of *The Parachutists* proves intrinsically linked. As a result, in the following section I demonstrate how Simic’s theories on theatre for the very
young influenced the devising, and then in turn how Simic directed the 
dramaturgy.

Analysis of The Parachutists (or on the Art of Falling)

As the artistic director/director for *The Parachutists* Simic approached the 
devising process in the same way he would when developing an adult theatre 
piece, but points out that in TYA he is able to satisfy his creative needs with 
bigger joy, pleasure, and satisfaction than in theatre for adults (Simic E-mail 
Interview). Simic elaborates on his heightened experience when creating TYA, 
noting that it is a joyful process that comes from the opportunities and creative 
freedom, research possibilities and imagination required when developing a TYA 
performance text. Simic's basis for creating TYA revolves around his theory that 
children believe that the performance is reality, and that through the reality artists 
present they can connect to young people on an emotional level. He states:

Children believe that the scenic reality is reality, and, besides our 
responsibility for them, in that fact lies all our joy. Children believe and 
they trust us!!! Therefore, I hope that catharsis is still possible, but only in 
theatre for children. Adults don’t believe, they are indoctrinated, they are 
afraid of emotions of any kind ...Theatre for young audiences is the field 
where we can really deal with theatre art in its pure form. (Simic E-mail 
Interview)
A major influence in the dramaturgy of *The Parachutists* revolves around reaching young people on an emotional level and as a result helping young people to develop an aesthetic sense based on their emotional reactions. Simic believes that emotions are the only connecting fabric between children and adults, and this influences the devising and dramaturgy choices he makes:

> When talking on an aesthetic level when we approach children it is our responsibility to plant in them our sense of beauty. We offer it to them, and how they accept beauty is not rationally, but emotionally. They feel ‘ahhh it’s nice’ and the next time they get the same feeling, they recognize the feeling and they say, ‘ahhh that is beautiful’, because now they have a sense of it inside, and they begin to build a language for emotions. (Simic Personal Interview)

For *The Parachutist*, Simic set out to connect with young people in the above manner by devising a performance text with a team consisting of himself as director in collaboration with two performer/dancers/choreographers, Laris and Damir. The performers devised through improvisational dance, which allowed Simic to pull out moments in order to reach the emotional centers of his audiences. Simic believes that devising theatre based in movement and gesture has the ability to communicate with young people in a special way. He reflects:

> Dance and movement is a language of children’s games, and they are experts in understanding that language and feeling are the intentions of the performers. They don’t have intellectual background, nor the
experiences that memories are made of, and they can’t contemplate upon
the descriptions. Theater time is always present, and they are living it. So,
I am always searching for the shortest way to children’s emotions and that
is why I work very often with movement and dance for very small children.

(Simic E-mail Interview)

Simic continues by highlighting why he specifically chose to devise The
Parachutists through movement and dance rather than through traditional
dramatic texts, noting that dance and gestures are the natural language with
which young people communicate. As a result, dance allows artists to create a
performance text, based around complex ideas, that does not have to explain
itself, or talk down to children.

They [children] don’t have problems in expressing feelings, and they can
understand the language of movements. The only thing that adults have in
common with children are emotions, and that is the shortest way to
approach them: emotions expressed through movements, without
explanations— the younger the better! (Simic E-mail Interview)

The dramaturgical starting point for The Parachutist, in order to reach children’s
emotions through movement, occurred through an initial exploration of gravity
and falling. Simic’s fascination with falling resulted from the fact that falling
occurs as a part of humankind’s everyday existence. Simic provides insight into
his dramaturgical thought process of exploring gravity by explaining:
Everything that we throw in the air falls down (as the apple fell on
Newton’s head) and it is normal for us. The rain is falling from the clouds,
when we jump we have to fall down etc. Gravity has the impact on our
psychical life as well. Our desire for flying is the attempt to win over the
gravity, with the predictable result - falling! How to fall down and not to
suffer serious consequences, how to stand up and continue after the fall,
that is the art of falling … that is the theme worth exploring. (Simic E-mail
Interview)

Thus, the team explored the many different ways gravity occurs in life, either
physically or emotionally. The initial devising process began with Simic and the
two dancer/performers brainstorming about how to explore gravity, and they
unfolded the through-line of the piece, which Simic explained by saying, “Our
performance will not be about the physical force, but about people, mutual
attraction … the metaphor of falling became a story of living … and learning how
to fall and how to fly” (Simic E-mail Interview).

Simic made the above leap from gravity, a scientific idea, to an exploration
of the nuances of humanity and an investigation of how people attract one
another, support each other, and learn from experiences, all through a devising
process where dancers explored ideas and scenarios presented by Simic.
Simic describes the collaborative process of devising with the dancers and how
the generating of material evolved into the beginnings of the dramatic
composition, i.e. the dramaturgy:
The dancers invented a lot of different movements and games in which they were exploring relationship between two bodies in attraction and the relationship of the body that wants to go in the air with the inevitable fall that follows. In some movement and dance sequences, the dancers needed a hard wall to lean on, in some they needed a cross bar to hang on. I, as a director, needed to find the stage metaphor and space disposition which allowed all the movements to be realized, and that is how I invented the cube 2x2 meter, with one hard wall, that turns around on wheels. (Simic E-mail Interview)

Simic used the devising process in order to begin building the dramaturgy of the performance text. The dramaturgy resulted in the team generating material which he then molded into a dramatic structure. Simic believes that while the team works collaboratively to devise the segments, he is the sole dramaturg of the performance text. He believes that the dramaturgy is intimately related to the direction of the devised performance text:

I, as the director of the performance, have a duty to build up a story and develop the dramaturgy of the show by using different movement and dance structures/sequences that are put together logically leading to the next level of understanding and the next chapter of the story…here, in dance, where language is movement, the dramaturgy is part of directing. (Simic E-mail Interview)
As the director and dramaturg Simic decided to begin *The Parachutists* with a large cube equipped with wheels and tiny holes and slits, sitting alone on stage. The lights begin shifting, slowly, so slowly it proves nearly undetectable. Mysterious music accompanies and after several moments a balloon begins to inflate, until suddenly it blows away, deflating wildly. The audiences is thrown into an uproar, but their attention proves quickly regained, by more balloons, and then eyes, fingers, noses, and several other objects poking and falling through cracks and holes in the sky painted front of the cube. Several minutes into the piece, someone flings a pair of pants over the front wall of the cube, then a suitcase, and finally one of the actors creeps around looking nervously out toward the audience. When she and the second performer finally discover one another, there is a game of cat and mouse, moving from a sense of loneliness to a sense of camaraderie for one another and the audience.

The above opening sequence was devised as a result of Simic's theory revolving around his belief that most young people are experiencing theatre for the first time when they attend *The Parachutists*. He explains that dramaturgically *The Parachutists* had to begin slowly in order to ease the audience into being in the theatre and to prepare them for the exploration of gravity. He believes it is crucial to ease young audiences into the theatrical experience and believes artists should forego speeches before performances or beginning with a blackout. This information about the needs of his audience lends itself to the dramaturgy of the play, because it helps to develop the initial
dramatic composition which lays the groundwork for the rest of the performance text. Simic elaborates on this, stating:

We knew that we had to start our show warily, with the knowledge that such a small children don’t really know what the theatre is, that everything that is presented to them is a reality and that most of the time they are afraid of the theatre and that reality. So, we started with drawing their attention with small things like sounds and balloons. After a while, when the sensation of flying balloons is consumed, the children are ready to receive more sensations and are focused on the stage. We continued with building up the images of the parts of the body (that are shown through the holes in the wall) put together in a strange way, bodies that are looking to the world with the same curiosity and fear the children are looking to them. After a while, different objects start falling down from the sky (the wall is painted like the sky with the clouds), introducing the theme and bringing the metaphor of creation, birth, beginning … until the human with the suitcase falls from the sky. Now the introduction is made, the theme is posed, the characters are born, and the performance can go on. (Simic E-mail Interview)

The Parachutists occurs through the weaving together of small segments which can stand alone. Simic believes that dramaturgically the performance text for very young people must consist of small segments due to 2-5 year olds’ limited attention span. Therefore, the company devised segments which could
essentially stand on their own, with a mini beginning, middle, and end.

Dramatically the segments of the performance text for *The Parachutists* move in and out of realism and metaphor through the devising of scenes based in the realistic presentation of friendship, hurting a friend’s feelings, and making amends along side more metaphorical moments of sheer movement that explore the body in space as well as the action of falling, which leaves the exact interpretation to the viewer. Simic presents why the fluctuation between reality and metaphor works, and reflects on the choice to not use verbal dialogue for *The Parachutists*, noting:

> Children don’t have problems with abstracts ... Everything is abstract to them, only emotions are real. They don’t know what theater is and they don’t know what theatre conventions are. They are accepting of theater reality and they believe that the message they get is real, and that fact allows us to communicate with them directly through emotions and movement. Spoken language is preventing us direct communication with them. When speaking we describe our emotions, and very rarely we succeed in being honest. Children feel and recognize that. (Simic E-mail Interview)

After the devising, Simic directed the performers in a series of improvisation that helped to connect further the more abstract dance moments with realistic scenario, thus continuing developing the dramaturgy. He describes an instance of setting an emotional tone through movement that occurs early on in
Simic muses:

Some parts are just pure movement, and nothing else. How to build up the loneliness of these people before they meet? We build up the image of the cube turning around, and we see her in one position and then another, and that’s it. The atmosphere is abstract and the movement kinetic, pure kinetic energy of the cube turning, and I hope it produced the atmosphere of loneliness. (Simic Personal Interview)

The movement between metaphor and realism keeps the very young guessing about what might happen next creating what Simic calls “a performance with a secret”. He dramaturgically accomplishes this goal by gently guiding the young people in a general direction and allowing them to fill in the specifics of the story through using their imaginations:

When creating abstract movement you still have to have some lighthouses along the way that will help children swim in the sea of abstract thinking. Children don’t have troubles with abstract thinking, but the lighthouses are there to help them understand where they are going. That is why sometimes in The Parachutists you come back from pure dance into a joke or a literal movement that we can recognize, so the audience can travel together with the actors through the sea. (Simic Personal Interview)

Simic notes that planting “lighthouses” during the devising process is what differentiates the devising of a theatrical performance text from devising a dance
performance. When devising theatre the movement and dance sequences are not just movement or movement sake. Instead, in theatre, dance helps to amplify the story, the atmosphere, and/or the emotions of the characters.

In addition to dramaturgically planting “lighthouses”, Simic hopes that the movement between metaphor and realism presents the audiences with a “Big Story,” which he describes as “A very strong story hidden behind the movement, it is not an explicit story, but it is a big story inside. And it is left to the audience to discover and build up their own story” (Simic Personal Interview). Dramaturgically he presents the “Big Story” through small everyday moments, which occur in The Parachutist when the characters fall down and express physically their pain through dance. The appeal of the story for adults and the very young prove different. The falling down and getting back up, can be interpreted by adults as a metaphor for the larger story of the trials and tribulations of life, and yet the same sequence might resonate with a three or four year old because falling down and getting up are important moments in their everyday existence that they can identify, and understand emotionally.

Simic believes that devising a “Big Story” must be done through a combination of physical exploration and research and he explains “In creative work, in arts, you have packed everything in your head, and then you have to have the freedom to go and be subjective” (Simic Personal Interview). Simic’s balances his belief that subjectivity is a key component of theatre, with the acknowledgement that a director must be able to step outside of the work and
look at the performance text as objectively as possible to create the dramaturgy. “From time to time you as the director have to step out of the performance, and you have to watch what you did as if you are a spectator watching for the first time” (Simic Personal Interview).

The mystery and challenge of discovering what each play needs artistically and dramaturgically remains the allure of devising new work for Simic. As a result he embarks on each new project as an adventure to see how far he can push the boundaries of his art form. He summarizes his approach to the devising and dramaturgy of The Parachutists, reflecting, “Every artist is doing the work intuitively and you must listen to your intuition. The worst thing would be to say ‘I know how to do the play’” (Simic Personal Interview). Entering the devising process by embracing the above theory allows Simic to develop dramaturgy that is specific to the movements devised by performers, and yet allows him to serve the needs of the audience.

The theatre produced by Simic and Theatre Mala Scena reaches out to capture what adults and young people have in common - the understanding of deep, complex emotions. The devising process proves collaborative, with Simic providing a starting point, then performers devising movement and dance which Simic responds to by directing the generated material into dramaturgy, specifically highlighting how the dramaturgical process is intertwined with the direction of the performance text at Theatre Mala Scena.
CHAPTER SIX: COTERIE THEATRE

In this chapter, I first explore the Coterie Theatre’s history, mission and 2007-2008 main-stage series, in order to discern the context in which *Once Upon a Treasure Trunk: Foolish but Fortunate Events (Treasure Trunk)* was devised. Following the background information, I provide an analysis that links Artistic Director Jeff Church and the Production’s Director Heidi Stubblefield’s theories on theatre for very young audiences, with the devising process and dramaturgy of *Treasure Trunk*.

**Background**

The Coterie Theatre serves as Kansas City’s premiere theatre for young audiences and families, and was named by *Time Magazine* as one of the top 5 theatres for young people in the United States. Established in 1979 by Judith Yeckel and Vicky Lee, the Coterie was founded on the mission statement, which still steers the vision of the theatre today, “to open lines of communication for races, sexes, and generations”. Following Yeckel and Lee, Jim Tibbs stepped into the role of artistic director, and continued to honor the mission of the Coterie, specifically through presenting young people and their families with classic and contemporary theatre that proved challenging to both the artist and the audience. Following Jim’s death in 1988, Pam Sterling served as artistic director until 1990, when Jeff Church stepped into the role (Coterie Theatre). Church came to the
Coterie from the Kennedy Center where he served as a director and playwright-in-residence. Church expanded the Coterie’s mission statement to further encompass, multi-generational and diverse audiences, which the theatre accomplishes through their main-stage season and education and outreach programming (Coterie Theatre).

Unlike Patch Theatre and Theatre Mala Scena who have continuous touring repertoires, the Coterie Theatre creates a new main-stage season each year, which does not tour. The 2007-2008 season provides an example of how the company serves their mission statement with diverse play selections including, *A Star Ain’t Nothin’ but a Hole in Heaven; Night of the Living Dead; The Happy Elf; Inspite of Thunder: The Macbeth Project; A Separate Peace; Sideways Stories from Wayside School;* and *Once on this Island.*

Over the last eighteen years, Jeff Church along with the Executive Director Joette Pelster, have worked to establish the Coterie as a leader in Theatre for Young Audiences in the United States by expanding the canon of published TYA plays. The Coterie accomplishes this by commissioning new work through a playwright in residence program, which produced the critically acclaimed play, *The Wrestling Season* by Laurie Brooks. In addition to straight plays they also nurture the development of TYA musicals through their Lab for New Family Musicals, which produced the TYA version of *Seussical!*

In addition to their main-stage series the Coterie has a touring series referred to as the Treasure Trunk Series, which tours to area preschool and
kindergartens. Past Treasure Trunk performances include dramatic texts entitled, *Once Upon a Treasure Trunk: Around the World in 80 Stories*, and simply, *Once Upon a Treasure Trunk*. The tour has developed one new work each year, and during the 2007-2008 season the Coterie devised their first performance text, *Once Upon a Treasure Trunk: Foolish but Fortunate Events*.

Jeff Church explains the Coterie’s decision to begin devising work:

> We are especially interested in this for the younger ages, as it is my opinion that we talk kids to death in performances at the preschool and Kindergarten age. We also have realized that attending theatre at our main-stage space can essentially be a sit-down-and-be-quiet type of experience, so we made the decision that for this particular age group we will tour. (Church E-mail Interview)

I posit that Church’s theory of “talking kids to death” guided the initial devising and dramaturgy of *Treasure Trunk*, because without the above theory the play might have taken a different shape, and would have likely included more dialogue and less physicality.

Much like my conversations with the artistic directors from Patch Theatre Company and Theatre Mala Scena, my discussions with Jeff Church and Heidi Stubblefield highlighted links between devising, directing and dramaturgy. Through my discussions with Stubblefield, she presented that the dramaturgy of *Treasure Trunk* was influenced by what the performers devised, and that it was their collective duty to reflect on the improvisations in order to establish the
dramaturgy. As a result, in the following section I present how the devising influenced the dramaturgy and/or vice versa of *Treasure Trunk*.

**Analysis of *Once Upon a Treasure Trunk: Foolish but Fortunate Events***

The starting point for *Treasure Trunk* began as a result of Jeff Church watching the students at the University of Kansas City Missouri performing red-nosed clowns. The red-nosed clowns appeared as a way for the Coterie to engage their very young audiences in an interactive manner, without utilizing traditional audience participation methods. In addition to observing “the clowns,” Church’s decision to embark into devising was influenced by his attendance of a performance directed by Heidi Stubblefield, a Dell’Arte trained director and performer. Church explains his choice of Stubblefield as a director for the *Treasure Trunk*:

I had seen this director's adult theatre piece and was very impressed and in fact we used a bit of that piece in our current devised show; a moment where one clown comes upon an unopened present, and, thinking its hers, opens it, only to discover it is NOT hers but her friends. Because she loves the present inside so much, she substitutes something less nice inside the box and gives this to her friend. I loved this, because I felt it to be so universal, and that really is what I was looking for to reach this younger set [....] a series of universal moments that were humorous but recognizable human behavior. (Church E-mail Interview)
The “universal moments” provided the groundwork for the dramaturgy of *Treasure Trunk*, and provided a reference point for the performers to reflect on as the developed characters and scenes. In addition to explore “universal moments” Stubblefield supported Church in the choice to devise red-nosed clowns. She believes that this style of clowning has the ability to connect with the very young. She states:

The audience actually has the power - should they choose to utilize it - to manipulate the character and help them make decisions as well as alter the course of the action. The performers in *Treasure Trunk* were red-nosed clowns and they present themselves at the audience’s disposal once they discover them. The clowns ask for permission to be there and continually checks back in with the audience for validation. (Stubblefield E-mail Interview)

In *Treasure Trunk*, the clowns first ask for the audience’s permission during the initial moments of the play. The performance text begins with no performers present on stage, only a large cloth which serves as a backdrop and swaddles the playing space. Suddenly the sound of a “honk” comes from nowhere, which appears as the clowns’ first attempt at “asking permission”. The “honk” is followed by a small tittering of laughter from the audience as the young people begin looking around for the source of the sound. The response from the audiences endows the performers with the power to move forward with three quick “honks”, which sends the young people into giggles, encouraging the
clowns to move forward again. As the granting of permission continues, the
dramaturgy of the production unfolds as the two clowns, “Rat” and “Pack” explore
friendship through playing, taunting, teasing, and challenging one another all in
an attempt to reveal “universal moments” of greed, jealousy, disappointment, and
sheer joy.

In order to further explore the Coterie’s process of moving from devising to
dramaturgy it is important to understand Stubblefield’s theory on theatre for very
young audiences. Stubblefield believes that the current generation of 2-5 year
olds may grow up with a greater disconnect from live theatre then previous
generations. She believes this is due to young people’s saturated encounter with
images on computers, TVs, and in movies which are manipulated and often
present a distortion of reality (Stubblefield E-mail Interview). As a result of the
manipulated images and skewed reality presented in the media, Stubblefield
feels that exposing the very young to theatre will prove important because it will
expose them to the “truth” in the power of human beings. She continues by
musing that the truth in theatre exists because of the human interaction that
occurs in the moment and right in front of the audience. Stubblefield not only
believes young people should be exposed to live theatre, but also feels
passionate about presenting stories based in physical theatre. She expounds
that she creates physical theatre rather than “audible narrative,” or theatre with
formal vocal dialogue, in reaction to the image based world in which today’s very
young are born.
The eye can catch some 60 images per second - it takes more than a second to utter most words. Young audiences are not less intelligent audiences, they are just younger. As I stated to Jeff, ‘Today is such a visual age, especially for children who have information available at light-speed. Physical theatre presents frame after frame of images without the use of traditional text and language, very much challenging children’s imaginations.’ (Stubblefield E-mail Interview)

Stubblefield challenges children’s imaginations in *Treasure Trunk* as a result of the team’s devising through a series of improvisations in which “Rat” and “Pack” strive to make “the illogical seem logical”. She elaborates on her dramaturgical theory of making “the illogical seem logical” stating:

Dramaturgy work insures that the reality presented maintains its boundaries and style. I do not believe that storytelling has to remain linear or pedestrian, but I do believe that poking holes in the reality presented will be detrimental to the end-result of the production. Dramaturgy work can create a template for which the ensemble can build vertically and still maintain the boundaries of style. (Stubblefield E-mail Interview)

Stubblefield and the performers devised *Treasure Trunk* through a loose devising process in which Stubblefield acted as a facilitator providing relationships, scenarios, and props for the performers to explore physically. One of the first steps in the process was the exploration of negative space. Stubblefield challenged the two actors to explore the negative space around each other by
crawling through each others legs, circling each other, and creating constant movement in response to one another. She then describes how the process moved forward by exploring positive space between actors, and applying meaning to the abstract images created. She explains:

We then analyzed the movement and discussed some "pedestrian" instances in which some of those movements would occur. One was a "pin the tail on the donkey game," one was dancing, as well as keep away, etc. We found the favorite shapes and improvised more off of those and assigned the movement to a specific activity, i.e. pin the tail on the donkey, dancing, keep away etc. In exploring the positive space, which I describe as the shapes actors make as they contact each other by either giving weight of their bodies or taking weight of other actors, the actors transition from pose to pose. These poses we used for communicating relationship, status, and reaction to audience discovery. Again, the favorite poses we found became the opening movement reaction for the two characters discovering the audience. (Stubblefield E-mail Interview)

Dramaturgically this process led to the clowns discovering the audience, and also seemed to influence a movement sequence repeated throughout the show where the clowns rolled off of each other, slid across the floor, and leaned forward to examine new items that entered the play, one of which was the actual treasure trunk, and another a mysterious wrapped box.
In addition to the exploration of negative and positive space, props also proved a key element of the devising process and included discovering multiple uses for a kazoo, a squeaky rubber chicken, hats, a birthday present, scarves, balls, and assorted toys. Devising while using props became the basis of much of the generated material, and thus much of the dramaturgy revolved around the characters’ need/want of a prop that another character had in their possession.

While devising with props, Stubblefield acknowledged that the devising team encountered a few dramaturgical roadblocks, which included devising scenes which were entertaining, but did not move the story forward and ultimately did not fit into the dramatic composition of the play. In order to move past these moments, the team reflected on the dramaturgy collectively created and chose the moments which moved the story forward and explored the starting point of “universal moments”. The frequent analyzing and reflection of previously devised segments created a performance text where each of the clowning “routines” fed into the next scene, and supported the dramaturgy of the play. For example, in the final sequence “Rat” and “Pack” pull props out of the trunk, trying to one up each other. Each prop pulled from the trunk appears more bizarre than the one before; sunglasses, then HUGE sunglasses, then a pirate eye patch and so on. This segment concludes with “Rat” and “Pack” discovering two sets of linking blocks. The two clowns initially try to out do each other by building the best tower, however, jealousy takes hold as the lust after the each others’ block tower. As a result the two clowns begin bargaining and then hesitantly share their
blocks and finally together they build a bridge, which introduces them to the joys of sharing their most coveted possessions.

In order to investigate the soundness of the dramaturgy the team employed the use of children’s dramaturgy through school previews attended by Jeff Church, and the executive and education director (adding to peer dramaturgy), which allowed for changes based on peer reflection and the reactions of the children in the audience. Children’s dramaturgy added to the overall dramaturgy of *Treasure Trunk* because red-nose clowing contains a need to surprise the audience, and as a result of the children’s’ reactions Stubblefield had the opportunity to examine the holes in the performance text. She explains the importance of children’s dramaturgy to *Treasure Trunk*:

> Ultimately, the young audience reaction, in this style of performance, is a major factor, as their attention and reaction alters the story. If they get to the “point” before we as an ensemble decide to reveal the “point” we then realize that the moment is too narrative and can thus be economized.

(Stubblefield E-mail Interview)

The devising team’s focus on economizing moments during the devising process created a performance text with the ability to surprise the audience. The element of surprise in the performance text pushed the audience to take an active role in the play leaving room for them to guess what might happen next and/or through filling in their own dialogue which supported the only two words in the show which were, “Sorry” and “No”. Throughout the devising process the team played
with several different combinations of words, but ultimately “Sorry” and “No”
helped to reveal the characters and to tell the story of jealousy and friendship.

The performance text reflected dramaturgical work that grew from
Stubblefield’s expertise in movement and her theory of making the “illogical seem
logical”. During the development stages the process of devising and dramaturgy
fluctuated back and forth between devising scenes that reflected the dramaturgy
and creating dramaturgy based off the devised scenes through group analysis.
In addition, my research of the Coterie Theatre revealed that dramaturgy
sometimes occurs by the sheer act of devising, and that the dramaturgy
developed when the devisers shifted from improvising to consciously reflecting
on the dramaturgy. Finally, the three initial starting points of “Universal
Moments,” “making the illogical seem logical,” and red nosed clowning provided
a dramaturgical basis that ultimately seemed to provide an open structure for
exploration.
CHAPTER SEVEN: DRAMATURGY AND DEVISING
CONCLUSIONS

Through my research of Patch Theatre Company, Theatre Mala Scena, and the Coterie Theatre many of my questions were answered in regards to the links between devising and dramaturgy when creating a performance text for the very young. Initially I believed I might find extremely different approaches to devising and dramaturgy based on the companies' level of experience, location, and mission statements, and while there were artistic differences, on the whole the processes and theories of these companies had many similarities which included: infusing the performance with a bit of mystery or surprise, a subtle interaction with the audience, a focus on a slow beginning, a performance text based around small contained segments, exploring "Big Ideas", a movement between reality and metaphor, and a focus on connecting with the audience on an emotional level.

I discovered that creating a performance text specifically for young people ages 2-5 years old greatly affected the dramaturgical approach. The similarities pertained to the artistic directors/directors' theories on TYA for the very young, each artist noted that when devising for this age group the performance should revolve around an exploration of an overarching complex idea. Patch referred to this as a “Big Idea”, Theatre Mala Scena cited devising around a “Big Story”, and the Coterie noted a focus around “Universal Moments”. These overarching ideas
allowed the performance texts to develop through small segments which fluctuated between realism and metaphor. This technique was used by the companies in order to keep kids engaged while exploring the overarching complex ideas. The focus on an overarching idea and/or a narrative that fluctuates between metaphor and realism leads me to the conclusion that artists devising for the very young are creating performance text that young people can relate to by allowing them the space to insert their own subject positions into the performance text. In addition, the movement between reality and metaphor demands the audience to activate their imagination which creates an interactive element. One of the most surprising similarities between the companies was that while the content of each performance text was very different, each production began with a mysterious and slow opening sequence. I believe the slow beginning proves important because it helped to lay the groundwork for the dramaturgy by establishing the rules of the performance text, as well as, allowing the young people the opportunity to ease into the theatrical experience.

While the companies’ common characteristics in regards to the processes of devising and dramaturgy surprised me, what was even more surprising was that the artists draw to devising proved similar to my own interests to devised theatre. This common connection to devising is partly rooted in the intense collaboration and the unpredictable nature of the work. Each interviewee seemed to revel in the risky, unpredictable aspects of working without a clear end in sight. Brown summarizes his feeling on this by stating, “There’s always the
risk that you never quite get there. That’s the allure of the artistic challenge!” (Brown E-mail Interview). Through my research I discovered that each of these companies seemed to rise to the artistic challenges of devising as a result of their conscious focus on dramaturgy.

I realize that my research presents a very positivist view of the devising and dramaturgy processes, and I acknowledge that there are many artists who have attempted devising and for some reason or another have felt unfulfilled or frustrated. However, when I prodded my subjects to discuss challenges during devising, all pointed out that the struggles of the process are ultimately a benefit to the dramaturgy because they provide depth and new directions for the performance text. Therefore, while there may be moments of struggle, or unpredictable occurrences, the unsteady moments help the artists to devise a stronger production, which makes the challenges satisfying. Brown supports this notion when he states:

Each new project takes the Company out of its comfort zone and compels its artists to use every inch of their creative resourcefulness to get close to the vision to which Patch aspires. It lives with the risk of failure in the hope that it may push beyond mediocrity towards a theatrical wonder that is special and enduring. (Brown E-mail Interview)

As a result of this research, I now understand that the unpredictable nature of devising is what makes a conscious focus on the dramaturgy important. I believe the conscious focus on dramaturgy is what moves the process into a
positive experience rather than devising without the support of reflection, feedback and analysis. Initially, I viewed dramaturgy and devising as two separate entities that could be pulled apart and examined, and believed that perhaps you could devise without focusing on dramaturgy. However, through my interviews I realized that the dramaturgy often occurred coupled with the process of devising, and/or in tandem with the direction of the performance text, and that the two ultimately seemed inherently connected. Whether the dramaturgy was developed by the devising team or by the director or a combination thereof, each contained the basic steps of research, improvisation, reflection, and editing. As a result, when devising a performance text I believe that the phrase “devising dramaturgy” might serve as an overarching phrase to envelop the conscious focus on the dramaturgical process when devising. To me, this phrase represents how devising and/or directing establishes the dramaturgy, whether it occurs through the director/dramaturg, or through collective, children’s, or peer dramaturgy.

While my research was fruitful, it did not discover any cut and dry answers as to the “correct” way to devise dramaturgy; rather it highlighted the fact that dramaturgy and devising are intrinsically personal experiences, and while similarities are visible between companies, it is also evident that they each facilitate devising and dramaturgy in artistically different manners based on their personal TYA theories. In addition outside motivations influence the devised dramaturgy of the performance texts. Patch Theatre Company is influenced by
their interest in childhood development, Theatre Mala Scena’s interest in emotional connection with the audience fuels Simic’s choices, and the Coterie like many other TYA theatres in the United States must connect new works, not based on literature, to the school curriculum.

While I learned a great deal from this experience, there are also several things I would have approached differently if I were to embark on this research again. When I began this research I wanted to narrow my scope to the artistic directors/directors of the performance texts. However, in hindsight I believe interviewing the whole devising team might have given me more insight into the steps of the dramaturgy process, and perhaps highlighted more challenges incurred, and/or some contrast to how the directors perceived the devising and dramaturgy. When setting up my research I did not consider that the devisers may have vastly different experiences than the directors. In addition, with the availability of more time and funds I would have preferred to observe some of the actual devising processes of these companies in order to provide more in-depth explanations of the devising and dramaturgy steps taken in order to reach the final performance text.

In addition to what I might do differently, I now have further research interests based on my conversations with Brown about the important role of children in their dramaturgical process. I would like to further invest “children’s dramaturgy” by researching artists who consult children when developing a new performance or dramatic text. While Patch Theatre Company utilized the most
formal version of children’s dramaturgy, Theatre Mala Scena and the Coterie Theatre also sighted the fact that the reaction of children influences the end product, and can influence structural changes after the previews of the performance text. I am interested in further study of how children might influence the creation of a performance text. I question if playwrights and devisers are using young audiences to their fullest potential, especially in work that proves non-linear in fashion. In addition, what educational benefits do young people gain by participating in the dramaturgical development of a new play? How would allowing young people into the process of dramaturgy help children to have a better understanding of the art of theatre-making? What negative outcomes might occur as a result of young people’s involvement, would artist begin to cater too much to children’s wants, rather than pushing artistic boundaries?

This research has helped me to develop a better understanding of dramaturgy and devising as art forms, and has opened my eyes to new techniques to try in my own teaching, directing, and performing. This research heightened for me one of my initial questions of “Why aren’t more TYA companies in the United States devising”? My hope is that as an artist and educator I can instill in my colleagues and students an interest in dramaturgy and devising and the courage to devise theatre. In addition, as a field I believe we need to look into ways to have this type of work funded. How can artists convince granting agencies and funders to back this type of work? In addition, I
think another important question to reflect upon proves what effect does devising have on our field as a whole, especially when we are still in the beginning stages of building a cannon of dramatic literature? How might a shift toward more devised mainstage productions positively or negatively affect the overall field of TYA, and could devised works be documented and reproduced? As I continue to explore devising dramaturgy, I hope to continue to explore these questions and to put into practice the methods of beginning with a “Big Idea”, devising a slow beginning, structuring the performance text through a series of small segments, and fluctuating between metaphor and reality. In the near future, Patch Theatre Company and Theatre Mala Scena are both presenting works at the Kennedy Center, which I hope to attend, in order to continue to build a better understanding of their process and product. I look forward to continuing a discussion of devising dramaturgy with Dave Brown, Ivica Simic, Jeff Church, and Heidi Stubblefield in order to continue to unravel the process of devising theatre for the very young. I believe that through a conscious effort to devise dramaturgy artists can continue to assist in the evolution of theatre for young audiences, by devising theatre that has the ability to illuminate the complexities of humanity, and has the power to reach young people aesthetically and emotionally.
APPENDIX: IRB PERMISSION LETTER
April 10, 2008

TO: Meghann Henry

Dear Ms. Henry,

RE: Theatre Master’s Thesis, "DEVISING DRAMATURGY: AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE ART OF DRAMATIC COMPOSITION WHEN DEVISING THEATRE FOR YOUNG AUDIENCES"

Thank you for submitting the information regarding your Master’s thesis, as requested by the IRB office. As you know, the IRB cannot approve your research because it was already completed prior to IRB review.

However, Dr. Tracy Dietz, IRB Chair, reviewed the material and determined that if this proposal had been submitted to the IRB prior to conducting the research, it would have met the criteria for expedited review and likely would have been approved.

If you have questions, please phone the IRB office at 407-823-2901.

Cordially,

Joanne Muratori
Institutional Review Board (IRB)

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