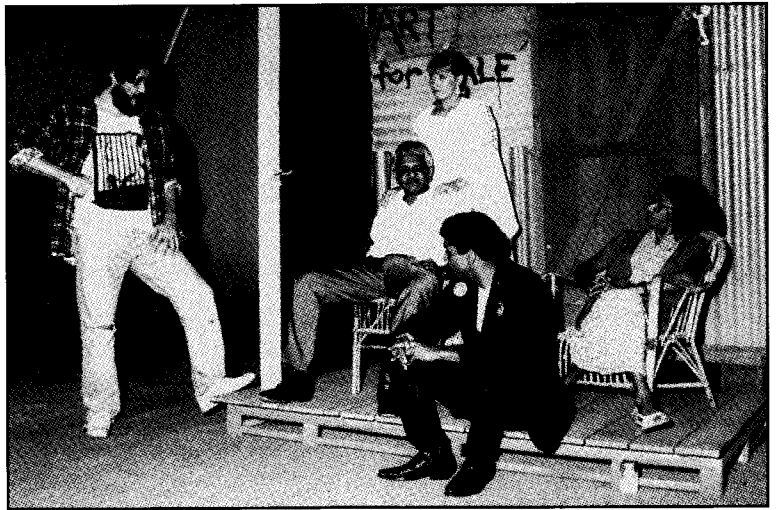


The Natural State of Things

A Philosophy for Improvising and Group Devising (Part 1)

My training in improvisation began seriously in 1974 under the guidance of David Lander at Melbourne State College as a component of a degree in Education. The philosophy and practice of improvisation has not only informed me as a teacher, performer and director, but has in fact influenced personal life choices. Improvisational skills allow one to develop frameworks for solving problems, viewing accidents or mistakes as creative possibilities and treating the unknown or strangers as positive events.



Scene from 'Funerals and Circuses'.

As educators in the 1970's, a significant influence on our approach to the method of teaching, and which complemented our improvisational training was the following principal - If a teacher caters for individual differences in the classroom, behavioural problems will be minimised and quality learning has a greater chance of taking place. In other words, individuals have different ways of learning, they learn at different rates and come from different family, socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. So, in preparing lesson plans or a school syllabus, teachers should take account of these factors. When I began working as a director I applied these principals equally to working with actors. My improvisational training gave me the courage to run with spontaneous suggestions in the classroom or the rehearsal room, to pick up on events

or actions in the moment and make them relevant to our current studies or theatre project. I planned within flexible frameworks which allowed for individual exploration in a manner which supported the individuals' way and rate of learning and took account of their different backgrounds. Whilst training as teachers, we were also exposed to several theatre-workers from the Australian Performing Group, who were hired as tutors. These Pram Factory artists influenced us significantly with their desire for the development of an Australian Theatrical voice through original performances created by ensembles. They left their mark on us, especially artists such as Robin Laurie, Claire Dobbin, Max Gilles, Paul Hampton, and Lindy Davies. They initiated Performance on Theme projects and introduced us to the new writings of Jack Hibberd, David

PHOTO: Lisa Tomasetti



Scene from 'Chutney'.

Williamson and John Romeril. They were determined to challenge the dominance of the English and American classical and contemporary repertoire in Australian theatres and replace it with something more relevant to Australian audiences. As far as I can see, the fight continues into the 1990's but the influences of groups, such as the A.P.G. and their devising techniques, cannot be underestimated.

Most people are aware of improvisation through Theatresports, a minor but well known area of the work of Keith Johnstone ('Impro - Improvisation and the Theatre', Methuen) in Canada and clearly documented in Lyn Pierce's text, 'Theatresports Down Under'. We know then that improvisation has a performance application although Theatresports is not the only medium for improvisational performance, and I recommend reading works by Viola Spolin ('Improvisation for the Theatre', N.U.P.), Hodgson and Richards ('Improvisation', Methuen) and Augusto Boal ('Games for Actors and Non-Actors', Routledge). Improvisation is also a valuable training tool for students and actors for the very reason that it celebrates individual choices and provides frameworks in which to play creatively. When I left teaching and worked as a director/actor/theatreworker with the Woolly Jumpers Theatre for Schools Co. Geelong, I was exposed to the working methods of Hames McCaughey and Nannette Hassle at

the Mill Community Theatre Co.. It was there that I learnt to combine my improvisation techniques with the Mills' approaches to group-devising original performances.

My work in theatre, therefore, attempts to celebrate the individuality of actors and recognise their role as co-creators in the process of making performances. As a director I am keen to use improvisational structures towards group-devising performances which are gender, language, culture and skills inclusive; performances which speak of the uniqueness of the artists involved and have relevance to the place, time and people for whom the performance is being created. For example, during my time as Artistic Director of Corrugated Iron Youth Theatre, Darwin 1989-90, the work was often produced outdoors with highly physical/visual components, taking account of the athleticism of young Darwin performers in addition to the tropical climate and strong Asian and Aboriginal cultural influences in the region. Sydney and Melbourne text had little relevance to our artists or audiences except for a few homesick expatriates. Plays from Britain and America were even less appropriate, therefore we utilised improvisational and group-devising techniques or developed new writings on appropriate themes. Our devised performances of young Territorian Playwrights based on the theme 'New Ways, Old Ways' was invited to represent the Northern Territory at the first National Festival of Australian

Theatre, Canberra 1991 along with professional companies from other states. The sum of all the above-mentioned experiences and influences drove my work as Artistic Director of Magpie Theatre from 1991-93 and the international success of devised works by Magpie such as 'Funeral and Circuses' and 'Chutney', testifies to the strengths of the devising process.

The group devising process is not a new one. Somehow the myth that the writer is the centre of the theatrical process has been taken as truth (not that there is no role for the author in the making of performances, just that their role is as a co-creator not the creator). Rarely does a play arrive on a director's desk complete, refined and immediately producible. Most scripts are dramaturged, interpreted and adapted to some extent, by the director, actors, designers etc involved in realising the script as a performance (Shakespeare's company were great group-devisors). For example, Shakespeare was commissioned to perform (not write!) a wedding play for rich nobles, with a very short time to do so. He and his fellow artists headed to the pub and brainstormed. They layered in two established story/myths, that of 'Theseus and Hippolyta, the King and Queen of the Fairies', 'Oberon' and 'Titania'. Also layered into the plot were a love story with some hot-headed couples and some foolish crafts people of the type who perform (badly) the Nativity plays each year. This eclectic piece allowed for entertainment, reflection, superstition and legend as only a devised piece could do. Shakespeare gave the actors in the troupe the first and last lines of their major speeches in accordance with the scene list they had developed. The actor was responsible for filling in the gaps before the performance and to improvise on the day according to the audience response. William monitored their progress in rehearsal and functioned as editor-dramaturg. The raw energy of the first performances has been substituted since by editors who notated several performance and made their own choices about the "definitive" script which was never performed in its entirety by Shakespeare's company. The "greatest playwright" in the English speaking word was a master of

group-devising processes and celebrated the art of performance improvisation, which also allowed for an early exit in case of flying food from the groundlings.

I don't know why funding bodies are nervous about contemporary companies and artists who have proven their skills in the group-devising process. These processes are age-old and highly successful.

Even in current times, well-known playwright Louis Nowra visits each new production of his plays and refines, adapts and adjust the text, taking on board the discoveries and interpretations he likes from different productions. By the time his texts are published or made into feature films they have gone through highly creative interpretation, devising and distilling processes provided by all the artists working on various productions of his plays. As long ago as 1973 Louis was involved in the group-devising process in a production at Melbourne State College and understands the benefits (and perhaps pain) of the devising process. In the end plays are meant to be performed not just read. Our work at the Mill and Woolly Jumpers in Geelong in the 1980's revealed that plays which were literary in their nature and therefore easy to read were often boring in performance. Plays which were difficult to read and demanded physical, as well as verbal, interpretation often provided the most challenge to the creative team and were much more engaging for audiences.

So what is group-devising? Essentially it begins with a good idea which might be based on:

- 1) A need to perform a ritual or conduct a celebration
- 2) A story-line: real, fictional, mythical etc.
- 3) An interesting or significant event: historical, contemporary, mythical etc.
- 4) An interesting person/character: real, fictional, mythical etc.
- 5) A strong theatrical form
- 6) A News/Magazine article
- 7) An interesting site/venue
- 8) An inspiring piece of visual art or music
- 9) A strong theme/issue eg. women, power, family, East Timor
- 10) A group of artists with diverse/interesting skills
- 11) A group of people with strong

cultural, language or political energies

- 12) Major natural events eg. bushfire, cyclone etc.

- 13) The perceived beauty/brutality of human, animal, physical activities.

- 14) The playing with, and personification of, inanimate objects

Errol Bray's text 'Playbuilding' is a good introduction to group-devising, although it limits itself somewhat to the idea of creating plays. Some performances are plays but not all of them, therefore, I refer to plays as a particular type of performance. However, if plays are revered as the only means of achieving "excellence" in drama, then that notion excludes the story-tellers of Africa, dance-dramas of Bali, shadow plays of South-East Asia, Dreaming performances of Australia's indigenous people and several-hundred years of Commedia dell'Arte movement and its influence of this day on all aspects of performance. The Dictionary of Theatre defines the well-made play in the following way: "The central drama depends on the complexity of the plot rather than upon characterisation." ('Dictionary of Theatre', by David Pickering, published by Sphere). But as Barrie Kosky pointed out to critic Leonard Radic in reference to his 1996 Adelaide Festival, "The well-made play is dead". And audiences seemed to side with Barrie on that one, by celebrating the diverse and rich nature of the substantially devised performances by ensembles at the 1996 Festival.

The group-devising process is one of constant reassessment, negotiating and monitoring of where the project is going. When final decisions are made in relation to design, story-line, costume, character etc. they are more often than not, the right decisions because of the rigorous process devising demands. Group-devising is often, therefore, an economical way to create performances.

Whilst most people associate group-devising with the collective process where all decisions are made by consensus, this is not the only, nor necessarily the best, structure for group-devising. The most effective structure is one of defined artistic roles such as Director, Designer, Dramaturg, Actor etc, are assigned to the artists involved. Depending on the numbers and expertise within the

group an actor may take on the role of Actor and Director. Certainly my time with the Woolly Jumpers collective proved very fruitful when the company of four performers were assigned functions such as Director, Designer, Choreographer or Dramaturg. In this situation, final decisions were made according to the roles assigned. Eventually the Actor/Director may, with consultation, use only 100 ideas from the group of 1000 suggestions they have made. That is not to say that the other 900 ideas are no good, its just that the work eventually needs focus and refinement and the other ideas can be stored for future projects where they might be more appropriately taken up. On other projects the Woollies employed guest directors or an actor would step out of the acting role to direct. The process of reassessment, negotiating etc is much clearer when the responsibilities are defined by assigning tasks such as director, without necessarily creating a hierarchical structure.

Steven Gratton c. 1996

(read Part 2 in the August issue of Lowdown)

THE MURRAY RIVER PERFORMING GROUP

in association with
the Flying Fruit Fly Circus
presents
their spectacular seafaring odyssey

The Incredible Adventures of Jackpot Jessie

Touring regional Queensland
May-June 1996.

Look out Mt Isa, Lismore,
Brisbane, Rockhampton,
Townsville and Ayr.
We're sailing your way.



THE NATURAL STATE OF THINGS

A Philosophy for Improvising and Group Devising (Part two)

PHOTO: Reina Irmer



Scene from 'Love Puke' (Melinda Leonard and Martin Odger)

As a director of a project based on one or combinations of the ideas listed below:

- 1) A need to perform a ritual or conduct a celebration
- 2) A story-line: real, fictional, mythical etc.
- 3) An interesting or significant event: historical, contemporary, mythical etc.
- 4) An interesting person/character: real, fictional, mythical etc.
- 5) A strong theatrical form
- 6) A News/Magazine article
- 7) An interesting site/venue
- 8) An inspiring piece of visual art or music
- 9) A strong theme/issue eg. women, power, family, East Timor
- 10) A group of artists with

diverse/interesting skills

- 11) A group of people with strong cultural, language or political energies
- 12) Major natural events eg. bushfire, cyclone etc.
- 13) The perceived beauty/brutality of human, animal, physical activities
- 14) The playing with and personification of inanimate objects,

I usually proceed with a listing of skills and information about all the participants involved with the project before or on the first day of the project. This listing might be under the following categories: Name, Gender, Age, Singing/Musical Instruments,

Martial Arts/Circus/Gymnastics, Technical (Sound, Lighting, Construction, Costume), Dance/Movement, Languages, Miscellaneous (Roller-blading, Mountaineering etc.), and Cultural Background.

We then embark upon a series of improvisational games and activities which encourage spontaneity, utilising physical potential, taking risks and getting in touch with the "child" part of the psyche (leaving the Adult, Parent functions to me as workshop/rehearsal director). A typical series of exercises in the early part of the devising process might be:

- 1) Physical stretching/warm-up -

handstands, forward rolls

2) Vocal warm-up, articulator exercises, group singing (rounds and improvised)

3) A game of chase eg. Stuck in the Mud, Collector Tag

4) 50-up (a team game with a ball, lighter than a volleyball)

5) One word stories

6) Human Machines

7) Status exercises and scenes (6)

I invite designers, choreographers, writer-dramaturg to involve themselves in the above activities. We are building a common theatrical language of improvisational concepts such as focus, risk, offer, accept, yield, protect, advance and extend which will be the core to our successful devising of material. We are also building an atmosphere of ensemble trust. The "child" in the artists' psyches is given a license to play creatively with situations, characters and objects in anticipation of creating a performance.

The artists involved are invited to share their skills and training from previous experiences or their cultural background. I often run a brief history of theatre through practical exercises to refresh artists so they become more aware of theatrical forms and conventions which already exist.

We then embark upon individual and group research related to the theme, event or characters our performance might be based on. This involves the keeping of personal research files, brainstorming charts on butchers paper on the wall, collecting photos from magazines/newspapers, library visits, songs, historical information, interviews with experts or local people or eye witnesses, and documentation of personal experiences.

While this general introduction to improvisation and group-devising techniques kick-starts each new project, there are unique processes and activities which are invented for or developed out of the particular needs of specific projects. The following examples reveal some of the improvisation techniques I have utilised as a director/dramaturge/producer/actor on specific theatre projects:

1984 'Underfire' - The Woolly Jumpers Theatre For Schools (Geelong)

Under the direction of Neil Greenaway, this performance was devised through actor research about the 1983 Ash Wednesday Bushfires in the region. It was based on facts, events, accounts of people who experienced the fires and mythology. Taped interviews with people formed the basis for improvising scenes and dialogues out of which emerged a number of characters for the performance. Movement improvisations were based on still photos of people fighting, fleeing or watching bushfires. Actors were asked to find transitions between the different physical positions in the photos. At the same time as an actor might be in a tense frozen position fighting the fire, a statement from a fire-fighter might be layered over the physical image and contradict the image itself thus providing dramatic tension in that moment. The performance was 60 scenes long in a 50 minute time-frame. The form of the scene structure swept along at breakneck speed, like a bushfire, yet had selected moments of stillness. The calm before the storm. The actors improvised with different transformable design objects and settled on three 8ft ladders which were used as images of the fire front, fire trucks, car dashboards and house frames as well as ladders themselves. 'Underfire' became a Folk Play in the same way that folk-songs develop from within communities. Essentially, it was theatre-in-education performance for post-primary students and yet its lyrical-minimal text and strong movement base saw it being invited to Margaret Lasica's Image '85, a Dance Festival in Melbourne.

1987 'Slow Train' - La Trobe University (Melbourne)

As Student Theatre Director I decided to counter the Drama Division's obsession with English language, text based performances by advertising throughout the whole campus for performers interested in a group-devised project. I advertised a free Theatre workshop for anyone who spoke a language other than English, or could tap-

dance, play a musical instrument, roller skate, do martial arts etc. At the workshop a diverse range of students from Science, Language Arts and other faculties turned up. After a general introduction to improvisational games we invented a context in which people from diverse backgrounds might meet. After discarding the obvious one of the airport, we settled on a non-specific European train station. I set up improvisations to do with "arriving" and the actors decided what luggage they or the character they were developing might bring with them. We continued improvising scenes in frameworks such as "territorial behaviour", out of which the status of the characters began to emerge. The theme of "waiting" was explored and this inevitably threw us into the theatrical form known as Absurdism. Much of the performance was purely physical, gestural and choreographic and when languages other than English were used (we had Spanish, German, French, Italian, Dutch and Hebrew to draw from) the situations contained a universality that English speakers could relate to (even if it was several seconds after the laughter of the native people in the audience). This episodic performance developed from documentations of improvisations by dramaturge Rosemary Fitzgerald who refined and enhanced the actors inventions and discoveries during their improvisations. Rosemary was often writing and refining as the improvisation took place. We even incorporated martial-arts, commedia dell'arte and tap-dancing as a natural part of the performance. This was a language, culture and skills inclusive performance based entirely on the actors' improvisations.

1992 'Funerals and Circuses' - Magpie Theatre, Adelaide

When I approached Aboriginal playwright Roger Bennet to be involved in Magpie's Adelaide Festival project, all I could offer at that time was actors' names and the skeleton of an idea: "What if a non-aboriginal woman married an aboriginal man in a small, isolated South Australian town?" Roger

accepted the challenge and we set the actors improvisational tasks such as, "select a character that you would like to play in a small country town." We improvised scenes in the local pub, on the main street etc., out of which grew some of the fictional town's history and mythology. We used a Theatresports game where two characters, a young aboriginal and a young non-aboriginal man were constantly on the edge of physical conflict and gave them the instruction to improvise "15 years earlier in the school playground." This impro gave the characters great insight into their current conflict and a practical method-acting approach to character development. Improvisations based around current news articles on racial violence in South Australia were set up and the personal stories and experiences of the Nunga (South Australian Aboriginal) Artists were incorporated into improvised scenes. Roger audio-taped many of the improvisations, transcribed them and re-drafted them. Roger was also involved as an actor in the production and thus entrusted me as director with the dramaturgical role in many scenes. Paul Kelly who was both composer/musical director and actor also contributed to the storyline and made many useful suggestions which led us to dropping some characters from the story but enriching and developing others. Paul set himself the tasks of writing a song for each of the characters in the play for that is what it became (but very much a character driven play). In the microcosm of the small town we had set up in the rehearsal room, he wrote prolifically, creating 14 songs in 6 weeks. Paul seemed to revel in the improvisational frameworks of the group-devising process. A fuller documentation of the process of creating 'Funerals and Circuses' may be found in the Director's Notes of the published text. (Funerals and Circuses, Currency Press) One of the ensemble members, Nicholas Hope, went on to make the film 'Bad Boy Bubby'. Whilst shooting the film he commented to me that the improvisational techniques he had learnt at Magpie were

extremely valuable in performing many of the scenes in the film where the Director gave him freedom to let the character find his own way.

1992 'Chutney' - Magpie Theatre (Adelaide)

Although always intended as a cross art-form performance, I decided first to write Chutney as a children's short story, based on my observations of a close friend, an Australian living as a single parent in Indonesia. It was also inspired by my contact in Darwin with the East Timorese refugee community.

Actors were asked to improvise scenes based on the short-story and to drop dialogue or actions which to them were irrelevant in the performing of the scene. The 5 actors were invited to develop simple solutions (with the assistance of the designer, Kathryn Sproul) to scenes such as a busy market place with quick transitions from rainforest, to market, to embassy, to bedroom locations knowing that the performance had to tour primary school classrooms. Many of the structural and staging problems of 'Chutney' were solved by the actors and co-artists involved due to their lack of fear of the unknown, supported by improvisational training. Improvisors are willing to take risks! Composer, Simon Eddy, complemented the performance by creating music for the actors to perform simultaneously with the section. The music varied between being strictly measured and scored to being improvised within frameworks while the actors interacted improvisationally with the audience and each other in some scenes.

1995 'Lovepuke' - Queensland Theatre Company (Brisbane)

Working on this established text by Duncan Sarkies (Young Playwrights - Eleven New Plays, Currency Press) did not deter me as a director, from utilising improvisational techniques with the actors. We used movement improvisations similar to those described in the 'Underfire' and 'Slow Train' projects, where characters established major sitting, standing and leaning

positions in relation to the chairs prescribed in the text. This informed the actors about character status and in turn I set up status transaction exercises as described by Lyn Pierse and Keith Johnstone in their publications. We utilised the old Theatre-in-Education practice of hot-seating a character where they had to spontaneously and "truthfully" answer unsolicited questions about anything the other actors demanded within or outside the context of the play. This exercise gave the actors a history and information specific to their interpretation of the role based on impulse in addition to their intellectual research. Many of their improvisational decisions contradicted their intellectual decisions and were taken up in preference to their intellectual responses. Some of the major themes of the play were Sex, Love and Seduction. The actors were asked to perform the History of Seduction in pairs with only a chair, one other object and 5 minutes preparation. This revealed the core preoccupations of both the text and the actors. The actors, in the end, owned the text and celebrated it. We returned to rehearsals 8 weeks after the 4 day "creative development" and found that it took us a mere two and a half weeks to get the show in condition for opening night. The earlier improvisational techniques and exploration allowed the rehearsal period to be efficient, productive and fun.

Theatre-practitioners need to ask why thousands of spectators, each weekend, attend sporting and live music events, and stay away from theatre in their droves. My suggestions is this: sporting events have set rules but within the rules the players have the freedom to make spontaneous, impulsive decisions, take physical risks and celebrate the unpredictability of the game. Spectators have their say, take sides and cheer with excitement or groan with disappointment. Similarly, when good original music is performed at a live concert, the musicians seem to go beyond their playing abilities, find new notes or interpretations in the moment, take emotional risks

with their lyrics and willingly acknowledge and connect with their audience who respond openly. So often in theatre the audience's existence is denied by the players, the performance is tediously predictable, the players take no physical or emotional risks and often can't, because the text won't allow it. Improvisational and group-devised performances (especially by those ensembles which have developed that other layer of enjoyment for audiences, teamwork) are bringing young and old audiences back into theatres. They are affirming and challenging the Australian cultural and social context by being inclusive in their form and content. They are offering risk, excitement and celebration.

Directors who do not practice improvisational techniques as a natural part of the rehearsal process but rather "block" (in improvisational terms this means to obstruct or ignore) their actors in the first week and do "runs", tend to create predictable theatre which lacks the *jour de vivre* which the improvising process by its nature brings to any performance. Improvisation develops and refines the skills of actors, enhancing their understanding of the way dramatic elements and conventions work in the theatre. Improvisation opens up the actors' psyches to the notion of creative play and gives them approaches to surviving bad directors. In addition, improvisational processes and techniques create positive ensemble atmospheres whether the project be group-devised or an established text, because actors know they can take risks and yet be protected by their fellow players. Improvisation empowers actors and re-establishes their role in the theatrical process as individuals and co-creators.

Quantum Physics has shown us that from the chaos of the Universe, rules and systems can be found, yet nature will respond spontaneously, ignoring those very rules and systems. Improvisation is based in rules and frameworks and yet, by its very nature, breaks the rules when it can. Improvisation, therefore, is the natural state of things. It is the sum of all we know and have experienced.

Steven Gratton c.1996

UNIVERSITY OF TASMANIA



Traditions of Excellence

Bachelor of Performing Arts (Theatre or Music)
(3 years)

Associate Diploma of Performing Arts (Music or Theatre Production)
(2 years)

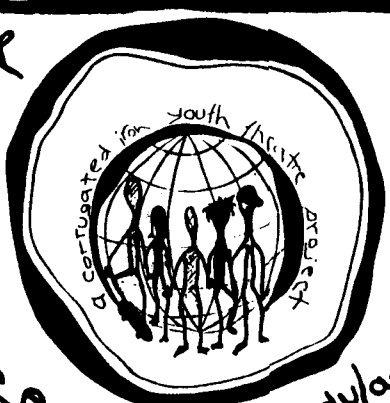
Professional training in Theatre Production or Music

Professional training in Theatre Performance or Music

Enquiries:
 Assoc. Professor John Lohrey
 Centre for Performing Arts
 University of Tasmania
 P.O. Box 1214
 Launceston, 7250
 Ph: (003) 24 3599

CHILDREN OF 2 WORLDS

theatre



music

dance

dula-tula

direction	Betchay M
design	Chrissa Arndt
dance	Julia Quinn
	Joanna Noonan
music	Becky Brown

DMDC
 Hobbiechain Tom's
 darwin

1 - 4 August 1996
 7 pm
 tickets at door \$6