

Devising as a way of performing: enacted or embodied?

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This presentation will investigate notions of the 'space between' (Teymur, 2002) discourses in terms of heightening meaning and values in creative collaboration. Necdet Teymur (2002) in his paper 'Spaces Between Disciplines' illustrates that disciplines form their own distinct communities of practice. These discipline communities create their own boundaries: 'they form solidarities, define common-purposes and invent defense mechanisms' (Teymur, 2002: 99). Teymur states that this is to protect their knowledge or territory base. He makes the following comment regarding interdisciplinarity: 'a typical field of interdisciplinarity (as distinct from those of disciplines) is precisely a field not so much of agreements, alliances or co-operative intentions as protected boundaries, walls and barbed wires' (ibid: 101).

To turn to my own experience, the work of *Idée Fixe: Experimental Sound and Movement Theatre*, of which I am Co-artistic Director (Landy, Jamieson, 2000). In this case the dancers and musicians work together, as performers, sharing ideas and appreciating each other's art forms. 'Our approach demands generosity on behalf of its devisors: it enables artists to appreciate

the work of others and be able to evaluate in a constructive manner. With this in mind, the 'why' element within the art-making process is crucial as members of a group try to appreciate, understand and react to ideas other members suggest. Nothing in particular is taken for granted. Everything deserves, and in fact needs sharing. Thus, anyone and everyone can own that which has been constructed involving cross-fertilization of understanding and interest'. (Landy, Jamieson, 2000: 3)

My background has embraced professional dance, community dance and formal teaching and lecturing in Higher Education. It has been a road filled with an interplay between these three areas of practice and led me to pursue a dance based PhD into collaborative practice in dance. Although my experience in collaboration is most frequently foregrounded (even offered as a *raison d'être*) in the community dance discourse, I am aware and have experienced how collaboration permeates all the sectors described.

My thesis particularly questions the place of collaboration in the history and present situation of dance practice, especially with regard to the post-1960s cluster of methodologies embraced by the term 'devising'. Collaboration and devising are not synonymous and there are distinctions and differences that are inherent in these two terms. Nevertheless, If we look at the term 'devising practices' or the more current 'making practices', these have always carried a connotation of collaboration, and 'making' seems to become more *de rigueur* in the last 10 years. As Peter Harrop (2009) states:

These collaborative methods avoid what we deem as a traditional sequential handing over of roles at different stages in the realisation, in favour of a shared creative process, involving a group of people working creatively together, often moving between traditional discipline boundaries. (Harrop, 2009: 3)

It is unsurprising that the central notion of 'us' was inherent in the shared group process of creating performance work and as Hedding and Milling (2006) state: 'The upsurge in collectives and collaborative groups during this period,(1970s and early 1980s) and not just in the performance contexts was remarkable' (Heddon and Milling, 2006:17).

But staying with the performing arts, dance did move into new territories in the 1970s with the development of the British New Dance movement. From that point onwards, there was an emerging new experimental dance dimension in the UK. It grew in stature and acceptance that permeated and eventually reached the corridors of the arts establishment, the Arts Council. One only has to look at the work of the X6 Collective, formed in 1976, where we see that X6 were a driving force behind what became known as the New Dance movement. They were about finding space and a place to make and share experimental dance work. But equally important, was their firm belief in the collective, '.. the group believed in the importance of complete democracy' (Mackrell, 1992: 32).

If we are to consider that the collective construct is embedded within collaboration and community and, at the same time, we know that these two dimensions, collaboration and community are not synonymous, we can move towards seeing the possibility of a relationship between the two discursive formations from a number of standpoints.

For example, as part of my research I am compiling concepts and metaphors of collaboration from several diverse fields of practice. This study provides a growing awareness that when collaboration is associated with a shared group process such as devising; the concept of *community* frequently seems to form an essential ingredient. Perhaps this connection is inevitable for me, as the 'community' dimension has been a constant factor in my artistic and educational work. The location of community within the collaborative discourse emphasizes what one could term, a 'situatedness', within a group creative context and that by collaborating in whatever capacity, there is some kind of exchange taking place whether intentionally or not. Baz Kershaw (2007) states that:

...we can see communities in two ways: communities of location and communities of interest; the second is central here. Communities of interest are 'formed through networks of association that are predominately characterized by their commitment to a common interest'. (Kershaw, 2007: 88)

Even more interestingly, and pre-dating Kershaw by some years, Wenger (1998) speaks of 'communities of practice', which can emerge from the communities of location and interest discussed by Kershaw. Collaboration is almost certainly taking place when communities of location and/or interest become communities of practice. Etienne Wenger goes on to outline his

concept of a community of practice as a way of looking at how we engage with others ... 'more than technical knowledge or skill ... communities develop around things that matter to people' (Wenger, 1998).

In Higher Education, as tutors we engage in a collaborative practice discourse on a number of levels. Ultimately, we perceive the intrinsic value of providing the opportunity for our students' to experience and learn in groups as shared learning experience. Hopefully, we give them the skills and understanding to do this and in collaborative creation, be true to self and others in the process.

However, as Harrop (2012) illustrates:

Enactment can describe either a response to the imposition of collaboration as an external and unwished for constraint (*mere* enactment as going through the motions of collaboration) or the seeing through of a constructive creative process in which the consequences of collaboration are embodied (and enacted) in the subsequent performance. (Harrop, 2012)

Furthermore, we have to acknowledge that collaborative working processes are in themselves performative, an enactment, and that performance may be the outcome of such a collaborative process, *another* enactment. One could suggest that the performative construct is a special application of the everyday social and cultural performances whereby, to paraphrase Baumann (1997), we enact and embody 'the making or unmaking of strangers'.

Ultimately, is it the case that collaborative working processes, which as Harrop (2012) states, 'unmake strangers', result in the embodiment of an ethos and in this instance, a collaborative ethos within a subsequent performance? Have we reached a juncture of an ultimate affirmation of devising, of the collaborative process? And, before we answer that, might we

also dare to ask the question might this, by extension, also be possible in interdisciplinary work as well as in dance per se?

Catriona Scott has described the term “interdisciplinary” ‘to refer to engagements where two, or more, of these fields collide or elide’ (Scott, 2004: 2). The different disciplines cross a boundary; the artists in a project whether inter- or intra-disciplinary have to find a new space by entering it together to achieve a common goal. What is ‘shared between’ and the ‘space between’ the disciplines and the discourses, allows for interdiscursivity by entering into a purposeful dialogical space:

‘... [we] explore existing and potential relationships and partnerships between disciplines, engage with those spaces between fields of practice and discourse, and help clarify the boundaries of an individual’s own developing practice’. (Scott, 2004: 2).

To conclude as Harrop (2012) states: ‘Is the best way forward the conscious construction of not just a shared space but a ‘safe space’ in which the different performances of selves and disciplines might forge a ‘generous narcissism’ in seeking a ‘flow’ of consciousness in the making of new work?’

By considering devising, or making, and by default collaboration, as themselves performative, and by considering that performativity through the lenses of enactment and embodiment, can we ease the move from Teymur’s ‘barbed wires’ to Csikszentmihalyi’s ‘flow’?

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