Collaborative ‘Spaces’

(E. Jamieson 2012)

A presentation at

Middlesex University’s Performing Arts Symposium,

On Collaboration: with a specific focus on the notions of ‘memory’, ‘place’ and ‘time’ in performance-making.

I was fortunate to attend and present at a symposium just over a week ago, which centred upon the notion of “Devised Dramaturgy: a Shared Space, a symposium for the makers” at the Archa Theatre, Prague. The symposium raised various issues concerning the practice of devised theatre and, in some cases dance, in Europe today; issues not far away from some that we are addressing in this symposium. The examples presented in Prague were situated within a specific cultural context, framed by histories and conventions of theatre practice across the European theatre community itself a shared space in support of devised theatre practice, that is, collaborative creation.

Collaborative creation focuses on people, their enactment of ideas, past experiences and commitment to an ideology through a particular way of doing. And, in this doing, what is important is what is discovered together, finding a collective and collaborative ‘space’ in an embodied process through the time of working together within various context(s) of the group involved. But of course, these are themselves cultural processes and we may wish to consider that culture itself is determined by time and place, altered and
transformed by collaborative discourse across fields and domains of practice. Patrice Pavis (1991), in his 'Theatre at The Cross Roads of Culture', identifies through his Hourglass of Cultures model, how a source culture can be completely remodeled by the time it reaches the bottom of the hourglass, what he describes as a new target culture. There has been a process of filtering, mixing and reforming by the end of the glass. If we look at collaborative practice, there is a constant interplay across, between and within the various discourses, informed by time, place and memory of past experiences. Concurring with Pavis, in any specific collaborative practice engagement, there is always a ‘cross road’ in some way or another allowing us to take one path or another.

To turn to the practitioner devisor-performer, we are faced by the notion of ‘time’ in a variety of ways. The most tangible is that we seek time and space to make our work. The nature of devising needs space and time within the contexts of our cultural environments, to create this kind of shared creative work that can allow for experimentation, uncertainty and unexpectedness. ‘Time’ in a shared creative process has to allow for play and accident (Jessica Kaplow 2012). The sharing of ideas, trying out, exploring, improvising and discovering something valuable by chance, something worthwhile and exciting in the process. By trying out different ‘things’ we discover possibilities by chance, an accident, an enactment. The devisor performers enact various tasks, which hopefully lead to a state of true embodiment in the material.
What is being outlined is a constant to-ing and fro-ing between these two states (of enactment and embodiment). If you like, a creative fake it to make it principle. Therefore, it is an expectation that to enact and embody happens as a fluid process in different collaborative times and places.

In dance, a contact improvisation the two states drift in and out and at times become synonymous. The body takes over, the physicality can merge into a fully embodied visceral experience.

I would like to suggest that a collaborative process is determined by time and place. Essentially, collaboration whether it be two dancers improvising in a studio or devisor-performers creating a theatre piece, musicians with visual artists or any form of interdisciplinary work is a unique dialogical discourse. Each shared creative endeavour is unique, having its own collaborative ‘blueprint’. It can never be exactly the same as another process as it is located in its own time and place. There maybe similarities to another process but arguably there could never be a complete replication.

Tim Etchells (2012) at the Prague symposium talked about his current devising process with Forced Entertainment. He is recalling his memories of the previous few weeks in rehearsal - being in the rehearsal room - the room being important - the room that captures the ‘shifting constellations of time’ - the room that gives inspiration - the performers and their ideas, actions, reactions, improvs… Perhaps Etchells alludes to as Peter Harrop states as ‘Memories of rehearsal are stronger than memory of performance?’ where we
have been engaged in work as an evocative, collaborative process in certain, places ‘rooms’, memories and time. The rehearsal process for Forced Entertainment’s new show was half way through when he spoke. Etchells’ feeling of being in what he calls, ‘middles’, are:

‘Middles are more nebulous spaces. The longer the time a performance is, the longer it takes to connect with “middles”. The potential depths of the “middle” space is never far from the agents of our own lives…. in the rehearsal room we are imagining unfoldings of time’. (Etchells 2012. pq-symposium)

Where we have been engaged in work as an evocative, collaborative process the devisor-performers enter the ‘space’ together. Etchells sees many possible shows, potential uses, but no ‘endings’. He says ‘we come to these decisions in process…we allow the material in performance to make decisions. It is a dance of what is and what might be’ (Etchells 2012). There are many actions and reactions, each enactment leads to another enactment and another, and so on, until they are in a ‘space’ and place to fully embody their experiences.

Ultimately, Etchells describes a creative process specific to time and place; the ‘doing’ in a particular place, the room, and the interaction between the people in that room, on a particular day and time. There is a constant gathering of ideas, testing and exploring material from past (memories) and present experiences. A process by all involved, working together in a particular place and time, finding their own unique collaborative ‘space’.

The artists working together with Etchells cross discipline boundaries. They come from drama, dance and music, each devisor-performer bringing to the
rehearsal process their own individual skills and ideas. But, the discrete discipline boundaries as such are not maintained, they fall away when the devisor-performers enter the collaborative ‘space’ together. The discreetness of a discipline becomes irrelevant.

In 2011, my paper ‘Collaborative Practice: Some thoughts…’ I referred to Catriona Scotts’s paper 2004, “Assessing the invisible” where she outlines that ‘often by having people come together in creative work can cause some kind of reaction as each art form crosses a boundary, moving not into another one but finding a new place or common space together’. (Scott 2004: 2) This new ‘space’ is formed by the collaborators enacting, exploring ‘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). In the case of an established devising company, the ‘spaces between’ fields of practice become blurred, the boundaries disappear to a large extent and a new collaborative ‘space’ emerges where a ‘community’ of intent is as much a community of practice (Etienne Wenger, 1998) holds sway.

Points to consider:

1. By collaborating on a project, as a community of practice over a period of time, not only do you get better at doing something, you are more likely to embody the experience than merely enacting it.
2. Boundaries become lessened and a shared identity emerges.
3. There is more potential for a shared collective ‘voice’ therefore the outcome should be stronger.
4. A heightened sense of ownership by all involved in the process leads to an embodied experience.

To summarise, I have presented thoughts regarding how the notion of time and place offer people within a given collaborative creative process the opportunity to enter a new ‘space’. This process allows for a constant and continuous interplay between enactment and embodiment.

Wenger purports that a group’s shared identity comes about when people work together as a community of practice. Furthermore, the group that works as a community of practice within a collaborative creative engagement can achieve a shared identity and heightened sense of ownership in the doing, the process. I hope that this paper has attempted to present a case that by entering, interacting, creating and owning a collaborative ‘space’ this can lead to a truly fulfilling, embodied experience.

References


Jamieson, E. 2012. ‘Devising as a way of performing: enacted or embodied?’ Prague Quadrennial Symposium 2012


