

Devised theatre: ten tips for a truly creative collaboration

Do your research, don't obsess over plot and set aside time early on to explore everyone's personal objectives for making the piece

Britain may lay claim to some of the world's greatest dramatists, but solitary scribbling isn't the only way to create theatre. "Devising" is a process in which the whole creative team develops a show collaboratively. From actors to technicians, everyone is involved in the creative process. Since the pioneering *Oh What a Lovely War*, some of theatre's most exciting productions have been made this way.

It's both an exhilarating and terrifying way to work. I love the challenge of creating a show from scratch, but with this freedom comes a significant catch: there's no script; no safety net. I've spent most of the past decade walking this tightrope. From shows that have ended up touring nationally to flops I'd rather forget, here are some of the things I've learned along the way.

Be passionate about your source material

It might be a story you love, an injustice that enrages you or a question you can't stop asking – just make sure you've chosen a starting point that fascinates you. This curiosity will keep you alive to new possibilities, make you fearless when things get tough, and ensure you're always digging deeper. If you don't care, why should an audience?

Do your research

The more you know about your starting material, the freer your imagination will be within it. Research nourishes rehearsals, provides a huge wealth of material from which to devise, and gives authenticity to your final production. The latter is important; if an audience questions the world you create, it's almost impossible for them to relax into the fantasies you're weaving. Of course, if you're creating a clown show, ignore all the above; ignorance will be bliss.

Get your material out there as soon as possible

Nothing gets me off my backside like the prospect of public humiliation. Without the pressure of a reading or work-in-progress night, I wouldn't create anything. Early previews will stop you overthinking, get you creating, allow you to test material and (hopefully) build a buzz for the show. If

The Guardian

<https://www.theguardian.com/culture-professionals-network/2014/dec/16/devised-theatre-tips-collaboration>

premature exposure sounds too terrifying, you can always invite supportive friends into your rehearsals.

Unite the whole company around a common purpose

Set aside some time early on to explore everyone's personal objectives for making the piece. Then, as an ensemble, write a unified mission statement for the show. This might range from explicitly political aims to simply wanting to create a joyous evening of fun – it might even change as the project moves forward. It will provide an essential framework against which you can judge every decision you make and ensures that everyone is travelling in the same direction.

Keep an open mind

Few things will choke creativity more than your brainy ideas about what you think will work. Admit that you know nothing, keep an open mind and listen attentively to the people with whom you're working. The smallest comments can spark Eureka moments, and there really is no such thing as a bad idea. Some of my favourite scenes were inspired by tiny glimmers in otherwise awful improvisations. It's often the most disastrous rehearsals that tell me where I'm going wrong. As long as you're venturing into the unknown, there's no such thing as failure.

The importance of story is relative

Some people swear that story is everything, but it really depends on the show. If I'm adapting a pre-existing narrative, story will undoubtedly be high on my priorities. But sometimes it will only emerge once we start connecting the material we've made. In comedy, it's often just a framework from which to hang the gags. What's certainly true is that an early obsession with plot will close you off from many discoveries.

Always look for counterpoints

If your subject matter is serious, look for the moments of humour. If you're doing comedy, remember that it's probably not funny for the characters involved. Similarly, don't get stuck in endless dialogue; the way you tell a story through action, movement, music, design, sound and lighting is just as important as the words.

Everyone works differently

Devising doesn't have to mean endless improvisations. Let people create material in whichever way works best for them. Some of the best scenes will come when people are just given time to go home and write.

The Guardian

<https://www.theguardian.com/culture-professionals-network/2014/dec/16/devised-theatre-ten-tips-collaboration>

Don't be precious

Throw away your rehearsal plans if they're not helping, give your best jokes to another actor, consider moving your final scene to the start, simplify the plot-line, and mercilessly edit your show to the shortest length possible. I've never regretted any cuts or changes I've made to a show; getting the rhythm right trumps everything.

Stay optimistic and enjoy yourselves

Things will inevitably go wrong, but remember to keep looking for the joy and inspiration to create. Stuck in a hole? Play a silly game or get outside and do something fun. You'd be surprised how many good ideas come when you're not trying.

Task:

Complete your own devising top tips sheet

Research one of the following companies:

Knee high

DV8

Complicite

Paperbirds

Frantic assembly