



Theatre Mitu's
Utopian Hotline,
MITU580, Brooklyn,
2021. Courtesy of
Theatre Mitu

Up Front

CREATIVE COMPANY

Tom Sellar

The sad news of Robert Brustein's death, at age ninety-six, came in October 2023 as we prepared this issue on ensemble-led theater. It would be hard to overstate Brustein's importance in the American theater, to the profession of dramaturgy and criticism in the United States, and, indeed, to this journal. He served several terms as dean of the Yale School of Drama, founding Yale Repertory Theatre (a copublisher of *Theater*) and creating the academic program in which we work daily, and was instrumental in the 1968 founding of *Theater*, in keeping with his vision of an American theater that might draw from the unseen wealth of dramatic literature in step with its study and criticism.

Obituaries have emphasized Brustein's passionate advocacy for a nonprofit theater resisting the commercial values and middlebrow tastes of Broadway—then a new idea, now a diminished hope. Less frequently observed, but of equal significance, Brustein advocated with fervor for resident ensembles, calling for companies who would live and work in the regional cities where a new generation of theaters were springing up. Theater-makers would create and evolve together while putting down civic roots—an alternative to jobbed-in visiting performers and designers (generally based in New York) making guest appearances. This dream of community—affirming the centrality of ensemble by employing them as staff—would nourish and advance the American theater through sustained, ever-deepening artistry.

Brustein's own resident ensemble model, which took root first at Yale Rep in the 1960s and later at the American Repertory Theatre, following his 1979 departure for Harvard, spawned many important productions, lasted until the late 2000s, and is now largely extinct. This issue of *Theater* honors his legacy by asking what's needed to preserve and expand ensemble-created theater in the United States.

Today, as the American theater confronts a crisis of relevance, sustainability, and identity, much anguished conversation has focused on the fate of regional producing houses focusing on new plays, which is what many institutional nonprofit theaters have become over the past two decades. But enormous artistic vitality—and the collectiv-

ist spirit some have called for—can be found elsewhere in us ensembles and groups who operate independently, create in cooperative structures (rather than a producer-playwright-director-actor hierarchy), and imagine productions together in a rehearsal room rather than departing from a playwright's preexisting script. Critics and theater historians have taken a cue from practitioners grouping this work under the term *devised theater* (adopted from the British theater), serving as useful professional shorthand even though arguably all theater is ultimately formed in group collaborations and ensemble-created work is hardly a tradition separated aesthetically or practically from other kinds of theater. (Witness, for example, Theatre de la Jeune Lune in Minneapolis, drawing from bountiful influences yet enmeshed in traditional dramatic organizations.)

As recently as the 2010s an abundance of groups that functioned almost like bands held vital presences in the scene, creating together in the studio and then touring their shows across a nascent national and international network for interdisciplinary performance. With names like Radiohole, Temporary Distortion, the Rude Mechs, Poor Dog Group, and Elevator Repair Service, they sounded like bands too. Semidetached from the festivals or multidisciplinary venues that presented them, they formed artistic identities around their members, becoming—and perhaps remaining, albeit in diminished numbers today—the more venturesome theater artists in the United States.

Those contemporary groups, in turn, took a cue from earlier avant-gardes. Mabou Mines, the Wooster Group, and the SITE company (among others in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s) followed from seminal 1960s groups ranging from Jerzy Grotowski's ensemble to the San Francisco Mime Troupe, the Open Theater, the Living Theatre, and the Performance Group—many of them documented and discussed by critics throughout this journal's history. This demonstrable lineage extends to European influences such as Théâtre du Soleil, Jacques Lecoq, and Peter Brook's International Centre for Theatre Research, and to South American visionaries such as Augusto Boal, rendering American ensembles, with their sustained and serious artistic focuses, as living embodiments of the rich aesthetic heritage of modernism and postmodernism.

On the one hand, this lineage has been documented and acknowledged in theater history. On the other, these groups were never fully integrated into theater scholarship or pedagogy. Perhaps because they are not organized around texts, they have never claimed a place in repertory—which, after all, consists of dramatic plays, not textless group creations. Their legacies may be studied by a select few in university courses, but audiences know little about them. There remains plenty to do to integrate these histories, techniques, and productions into theater scholarship, including the creation of curricula to teach “devising” in academic theater programs and to encourage the practice in university productions.

Perhaps this will start to happen as scholars and artists address another need: what has been categorized as “devised” in an emergent discourse has often been narrow and limited in scope, frequently overlooking artists of color and queer theater-

makers working in sustained collective collaborations but defined differently from the mostly white, European-influenced ensembles associated with the form. If the impetus for much of the 1960s and 1970s ensembles' work was directly political, later companies devoted themselves primarily to formal and aesthetic questions, their work increasingly codified as companies institutionalized, self-documenting and training students in their methods. Collectives such as El Teatro Campesino or Bread and Puppet, for example, committed to radical politics and land-based practices, so they never fit neatly into a category organized mainly around aesthetic criteria.

This issue of *Theater*, titled “Expanding Devised Theater,” contemplates a widened definition and enlarged vision for ensemble-created and physical theater with some of the artist-scholars who participated in a 2023 institute sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities with Pig Iron Theatre Company and the University of the Arts in Philadelphia. The program sought to integrate scholarship and teaching of devised work more completely into theater curricula, to ask what future documentation and preservation might be needed, and to encourage new collaborations among participants. Participating scholars and theater-makers emphasized the need to expand parameters. Their call—reflected in the essays, dialogues, commentary, and creative projects here—is for the field to build on but move beyond the sometimes Eurocentric artistic criteria of past decades, first to include work from other regions, and also to acknowledge that alternative models of collective creativity have been excluded from view and ought rightfully to be seen in this context. We hope this issue will serve as a compelling call for American theaters and universities to make more space for group creation—the beating heart of all theatrical enterprise—which deserves to be produced and studied with the same dedication as written drama.

Theater 54:2 DOI 10.1215/01610775-11127610

© 2024 by Tom Sellar

DEVisING A COLLECTIVE FUTURE

Ryan Adelsheim

In the opening moments of the 2023 NEH Institute titled “Preserving and Transmitting American Ensemble-Based Devised Theater,” Quinn Bauriedel, co-artistic director of Pig Iron Theatre, offered a guiding principle shaping the companies, artists, and ideas of American devising: “Here one day, gone the next.” Though potentially discouraging—Who remembers the companies of the past? Is our work so precarious that it could disappear at any moment?—this became a useful frame for thinking about the life cycles of devising companies, their ephemerality, and the challenges surrounding their archiving and historicizing. We began to see the fleeting nature of this work as both our challenge—How do we more successfully record, transmit, and teach this work when its own history is contested and poorly documented?—and our inspiration. Inside constant change lies a hope for transformation alongside the possibility of a good death, a healthy end to an ensemble’s life.

This mantra also became the defining quality of our time together: a brief, intense, fruitful period during which we formed a fleeting ensemble of our own, one that, like artistic companies, persists in a state of flux and collaborative possibility. During the two-week gathering, we developed a shared resistance to the seemingly entrenched dominant narratives of ensemble- and company-created theater. By identifying the cracks and gaps in the Western history, we built an archive that includes work by ensembles of color that have been overlooked, embraced performance forms not typically held under the umbrella of devising, and engaged in interdisciplinary analysis building a web that connected embodied knowledge, theater history, American studies, performance studies, and beyond. This issue of *Theater* reflects creative collaboration grown in the fertile soil of information, resistance, and relationship-building during the institute and aspires to look beyond its borders.

Of particular focus is a return to the heart of devised theater: a polyvocal expression that hopes to embrace multiple perspectives and ideas through collaborative creation. Contemporary devising emerged out of the political transformations of the 1960s and 1970s, a rising spirit of collectivity that led to a desire for different, nonhierarchical structures for art-making. American artists and activists have been returning to and remaking this kind of collectivity since the start of the pandemic: it flared under the leadership of Black Lives Matter following the murder of George Floyd in 2020, stewarded the continued growth of the labor movement that has continued through the United Auto Workers’ historic 2023 deal, and, as I write in November 2023, sees a roaring emergence of collective action opposing the United States’ complicity in the ongoing violence in Palestine and calling for a permanent ceasefire. Progressive collectivity is finding renewed urgency in a reframing of and reckoning with the past, rely-

ing on many voices (and the leadership of young people) who refuse to be ignored by global powers who would preserve the violent status quo. The work of artists interested in collective creation is visible throughout. Perhaps, through the tools and strategies of ensemble creation, we can find the political urgency that motivated the forms' emergence on our stages once again.

On the institute's final day, Theatre Mitu artistic director Rubén Polendo joined to talk about the intersections of his teaching with Mitu's work. Both his pedagogy and artistry make a practice of opening portals, inviting audiences and students to choose new directions for themselves by walking through doors to exploration. I think of this issue of *Theater*, too, as an exercise in unbarring pathways to new perspectives on devised theater. We hope you will find, as you step into examinations of Seattle-based ensembles of color, take a deep dive into contested terms like *neutral mask* and *embodied playwriting*, or discover a web of Philadelphia-based artists, unexpected portals, and inspirations for greater collectivity.

Theater 54:2 DOI 10.1215/01610775-11176007
© 2024 by Ryan Adelsheim

IN MEMORIAM

Robert Brustein, 1927–2023
Gordon Rogoff, 1931–2024