

## 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.

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#### IN MEMORIAM

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