

Collaborative theatre project Student C (SL and HL)

CONTENTS

1. Working in collaboration: Page 1
2. The Historical Background to the Story: Page 2
3. Theoretical Thinking: Page 2
4. The Devising Process: Page 4
5. Practical applications: Page 7
6. My participation in the final performance and what to look at in the video:
Page 11

COLLABORATIVE THEATRE PROJECT

1. Working in Collaboration

Our group decided to create a piece of theatre based on the life of Franz Kafka.

The play would present the relationship of Kafka with different family members; this way we can show the private life of a family with its contradictory points of view. We focused on demonstrating the ups and downs within Kafka's life: his unconscious fear towards his father, his indifference and even repulse towards his mother, and his love for his sister.

This family that breaks the prototype of perfection inspired us to work on the oppression that begins within one's family and expands to the whole society. By analysing the repressed life Kafka had with his family it came to our minds the theme of our play: **social repression**.

We started our work by investigating a Devising Theatre Company. For this purpose we chose Angel Exit Theatre from the UK. This group has based their work on Jacques Lecoq's training, and although we were not particularly interested in this practitioner (as we had done it in class in great detail), we liked the way they integrated Lecoq's training and theories into their devising process as well as physical theatre, and also we loved the fact that they are interested, among other themes, in social issues.

"(the Group)... places a strong emphasis on storytelling, through physical ensemble theatre, using the European traditions..."¹

Our immediate thought was: if they use Lecoq for their devising process, then we could very well use any other practitioner in a similar way.

All devising needs a starting point to provide focus on the work. I was in charge of organising the team, a sort of "director's role", (apart from acting in the role of Kafka's father) even though we would all take part in shaping up the show.

"(...the) team leader's role is to focus ideas or research for the team to take on, and develop and come up with different proposals."²

Research on Franz Kafka was vital to capture the essence of his life, his personal conflicts, and therefore his emotional being.

¹ http://www.angelexit.co.uk/downloads/Angel_Exit_Education_Pack.pdf

² "Devising Theatre" by Alison Oddey. Page 1, Routledge Editorial, New York 1994

2. The Historical Background to the Story –

Franz Kafka, born July 3, 1883 in Prague, was a German-speaking Jewish writer; one of the most influential authors of the 20th century. Son of both incomprehensible and dogmatic parents, ***“who lacked the intellectual depth to understand her son’s dreams to become a writer.”***³ he went through a suffering and conflictive life, not fighting enough for what he desired.

Kafka’s symbolic text, “The Metamorphosis”, exhibits a number of aspects of life that are overturned so that makes the reader question about them in his own life. He had a pretty tough and depressing life, full of interesting aspects to analyse in a deeper way with a theatrical point of view, so we thought it would be a very interesting play if we were able to create and show the audience these issues that are so present in our real lives.

3. Theoretical Thinking –

“The statement that all theatre is political therefore conveys the idea that theatre both reflects and affects the way that society is organized.”⁴

We considered that addressing social repression in our play would be of great importance, since it is such an outstanding and powerful, though dark and unhappy aspect of life; as Augusto Boal expresses, theatre is an *“efficient weapon”*⁵. We thought that by showing and examining in detail Kafka’s repressed life, we could reach the audience in a way they realize we are focusing in transmitting the repression of society itself, in every aspect of life, not just in the one life of Kafka.

With this political/social theme present from the beginning of mankind till nowadays in every society, we thought that the best practitioner we could focus our work on was Bertold Brecht. We had seen, in connection with Boal’s theory, certain aspects of his theoretical practice during the course, and our intentions with this play matched perfectly with his theory of the importance of the practical utility of theatre:

“We need a type of theatre which not only releases the feelings, insights and impulses possible within the particular historical field of human relations in which the action takes place, but employs and encourages those thoughts and feelings which help transform the field itself.”⁶

It would be Brecht’s theories on Epic Theatre then that we would apply in our devising process.

³ <http://www.biography.com/people/franz-kafka-9359401>

⁴ “Augusto Boal”, Frances Babbage. Page 45, Routledge Editorial, New York 2004.

⁵ “Augusto Boal”, Frances Babbage. Page 40, Routledge Editorial, New York 2004.

⁶ “Brecht on Theatre – The Development of an Aesthetic”, Bertold Brecht. Page 190, Hill and Wang Editorial, New York 2001.

I wondered why Brecht desired so much to work with social/political issues and why he had such a powerful will to change those aspects of life. I thought that for a better understanding of Brecht believes, I needed to know his historical background, and I found some interesting information of his devastating years:

"Influenced by the horror of World War I's human cost, by the suffering of the middle and lower classes during the postwar recessions of the 1920's and the Great Depression of the 1930's and by the teaching of Marxism, Brecht and his fellow epic theatre artists devised a set of staging and acting techniques meant to teach their audience to criticize the injustices and inequalities of modern life."⁷

So now, being conscious of the causes of Brecht's practice, it intrigued me how to make the audience criticize the injustices and inequalities of modern life. I decided to look for the essential information on Brecht's practice -Epic Theatre- I needed to know:

- ***the actor is detached from the character,***
- ***forces the spectator to look at the issues being raised in a critical way,***
- ***Brecht said that "the essential point of the epic theatre is perhaps that it appeals less to the feelings than to the spectator's reason".***⁸

Epic Theatre seemed to me of great originality, therefore when I searched about Theatre of the Oppressed, I found out its aims are pretty similar to the ones of Epic Theatre:

- ***"To help individuals develop their own voice against oppression.***
- ***To transform traditional theatre into a social movement or message of social change.***
- ***To encourage individuals and groups to participate actively in socially engaged, critically reflective theatre process and, by extension, to recognize their dynamic and transformative potential in society."***⁹

We had worked with Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed during the course, creating images in the sequence of Montage. Our theme was 'Bullying' -which carry a social issue- so those exercises we made in the class were very helpful for me, specially those that focused on the figure of the "bully", as this focus would prove very helpful when playing the father.

⁷http://web.archive.org/web/20040207212802/http://stuorgs.lvc.edu/wigandbuckle/Epic_Theater.htm

⁸<http://web.archive.org/web/20050310225323/http://www.mcauley.acu.edu.au/staff/delyse/brecht.htm>

⁹ <http://prezi.com/ekbfipkvc3k2/theatre-ipp-workshop-boal/>

4. The Devising Process

“Devised theatre can start from anything. It is determined and defined by a group of people who set up an initial framework of structure to explore and experiment (...). A devised theatrical performance originates with the group while making the performance, rather than starting from a play text that someone else has written to be interpreted.”¹⁰

This quote from Allison Oddey matches exactly what we had read from the Angel Exit Group. In their Educational package they carry on saying:

“Obviously it is always difficult to describe a rehearsal process, and for us the devising and rehearsal process overlapped. We had done a good deal of preparation before we went into the rehearsal room so we knew quite a few scenes we would need to create to tell our story. But at the start of the rehearsals we did not have a script, just an outline of what we wanted to happen.”¹¹

This is exactly what happened with us. Through brainstorming and discussions, we had come up with an outline of the scenes we wanted to show, and what roughly what would happen in each one. But we did not have a script. That should come out from rehearsals, and specifically through the physicalisation of the characters and the relationships between them.

“Both the devising and rehearsal process involved a lot of improvisation to create scenes and characters in the story”.¹²

We began brainstorming ideas related to our theme, which should appear on stage, and actually did include in the final performance.

I wrote down some essential elements of production:

- Darkness
- Colours mainly red
- Monologues
- Placards
- Verbal/ dialogue

¹⁰ *“Devising Theatre”* by Alison Oddey. Page 1, Routledge Editorial, New York 1994.

¹¹ http://www.angelexit.co.uk/downloads/Angel_Exit_Education_Pack.pdf

¹² http://www.angelexit.co.uk/downloads/Angel_Exit_Education_Pack.pdf

- Epic elements
- Symbolic language/elements
- Projections
- Specific music to create the atmosphere desired

We used all these elements of production in a certain way to make the audience experience the feeling of social repression that Kafka is manifesting.

We spend most of our preparation paying great attention to the theoretical importance of the play. Putting the play into practice came much later, when the preparation was thought through in detail and almost finished, although

“Theory alone is not enough. The vitality, excitement and strength of Brecht’s plays can only be truly realised in the doing of them”¹³.

During the preparation we thought of every aspects of the play, including the writing of a script, who of us would perform which character, and who would take on the role of director. We had already decided that all of us would be a part of the making of the play; we would all be directors and actors at the same time, except one of the members of our group who desired not to act and to work on the technical aspect: lighting, costumes and scenery. Most of my classmates were not sure of this mechanism of work, but I was completely in favour that this way of working would be successful.

On browsing Devising Companies I came across the “People Show” and their philosophy of work called on my attention:

“(…) everyone having a definite visual comprehension of costume and set construction, as well as an understanding of building and lighting. It’s important for people to comment on other people’s areas of work in term of light, sound or acting.”¹⁴

This aspect was really interesting for me so I kept searching information and found out that in People Show n^o 97: Burning Horizon (1990), ***“(…) involved everyone in the group being responsible for something in the set, and included nearly all group members in physically building it.”¹⁵***

So as I thought that during the making of the play, as an actor and director, I would get involved also in the technical aspects of the show. That made me realize the importance of having many roles in one same play; by being an actor

¹³ “Drama and Theatre Studies” by Sally Mackey & Simon Cooper. Page 301, Stanley Thornes Publishers, United Kingdom 2000.

¹⁴ “The People Show” is a group of visual artists who work without a director. <http://peopleshow.co.uk/the-company/artistic-policy/>

¹⁵ “The People Show” <http://peopleshow.co.uk/the-company/artistic-policy/>

and thinking what I should do in certain scene (more likely in the role of director), it came to my mind where certain objects should be located for the scene I had in my mind, so that it would work the way it should work. So when I thought of a scene, I was thinking of my role as an actor, but also of what the rest of the actors should do, what the stage should look like, and me directing the other actors to show them what I had in mind; almost every element of performance that is needed to make a play comes to my mind when I take my time to think carefully of a perfect possible scene.

When Jonathan Dunstan, actor and composer from Angel Exit is asked about how is being an actor in a production of his group different to any other group production, he says:

“In an Angel Exit production the actor is involved with all the stages of the production, ie the devising, writing, directing and acting. So it’s possible to have a much greater input into the final production than in a regular rehearsal period; which is much more creatively rewarding.”¹⁶

¹⁶ http://www.angelexit.co.uk/downloads/Angel_Exit_Education_Pack.pdf

5. Practical applications

In the play we wanted to show the harsh contradictory life Kafka had; from obscurity, repression and unhappiness with his family, to kindness and comprehension from his friends.

- Working on the “Alienation Effect” and the non-naturalistic theatre: Epic Theatre

When beginning to work with Brecht’s practice, I questioned myself the cause of the so called “Alienation effect”. I found out that what he really intended with this effect was to remind the audience of the artificiality of the theatrical performance, because they may fall into a state of numbness while watching the play, limiting therefore the real socio-political influence of theatre.

“Brecht felt that in the realistic style of acting the actors put both themselves and the audience into a kind of hypnotic trance. A trance that transported both audience and actor into a world far from their own, a world where they could comfortably believe in the illusion being offered, and leave the theatre entertainment and sated, yet numb to the social problems around them.”¹⁷

Knowing this, during the preparation of our play I tried to include things that would attract the audience’s attention, shaking them off that general hypnotic state Brecht mentions. We needed always to evoke the idea that this was not the real life of these people, we were just actors representing a situation that might happen in real life. To succeed in this major goal, we added certain elements/actions that in some way would surprise the audience by reproducing to them something unexpected. Focusing our attention on some of Brecht’s plays, mainly on *“Mother Courage and Her Children”* we noticed that to accomplish this, he includes in most of his plays:

“(…) half-curtains, placards announcing scenes, slides and film projections, music, narration, all in an attempt to disrupt the audience’s tendency to fall into a dream.”¹⁸

We divided our work as directors. Two of us focused on the first three scenes and other two focused on the last two scenes of our play. I centred myself in the first scene which was a monologue by Kafka where he introduced himself and his relations with his family. I believe the most important part of this scene was the entrance of the actors on stage, which marked perfectly the power that Kafka’s father had over the whole family. Therefore, the actor playing Kafka entered first and went directly to the piano. He started playing a piece that built up while the female actors entered and dressed up their characters in full view of the audience. Finally, when the music reached its peak, the actor playing the father

¹⁷ *“The Great acting Teachers and Their Methods”* by Richard Brestoff. Page 149, Smith and Krakus Editorial, USA 1995.

¹⁸ *“The Great acting Teachers and Their Methods”* by Richard Brestoff. Page 149, Smith and Krakus Editorial, USA 1995.

(me) entered the stage. Everyone else is sitting, while I come on stage and dress up the character.

The first representation that the audience would face was Kafka playing the piano; a melody that would create an atmosphere of tension, inquiry and even apprehensiveness. This way, from the very beginning of the play, we could get the audience's attention, making them enter in the mood we desired.

We came up with the idea of adding a title to every scene, named after different books Kafka wrote throughout his lifetime. Every one of these titles would be associated with Kafka's relationship with each member of the family:

-1st scene: Kafka's introductory monologue. Title: "The Metamorphosis"

-2nd scene: Kafka-mother. Title: "The Contemplation"

-3rd scene: Kafka-father. Title: "The Trial"

-4th scene: Kafka-friend. No title (purposely done, as he is not a member of the family elite)

-5th scene: Kafka's monologue of closure. Title: "The Castle"

This structure of the play was set in a Montage narrative sequence; each one had a social issue we wanted to communicate. These titles were exposed in placards, held by one of the actors that appeared in that same scene, enhancing the idea of the actors stepping out of characters to address the audience. This ability of us, the actors, to maintain distance between our role in the play and ourselves as actors was achieved by creating a script which allowed the actor to go into the role and come out of it – analysing the character rather than being the character. I myself as an actor had to create that distance in certain moments of the play, detaching myself from my role as Kafka's father and transforming myself in the narrator of the play; questioning its morality and provoking the audience the feeling of uneasiness that would take them to try and find a solution to the problem.

By experiencing the sadness to which Kafka was chained till his death, we expected that the reaction of the audience would not just be an uncontrollable catharsis, but would increase the audience's need to do something to change that aspect in their own life.

"Rather than induce in an audience the relief of an emotional cleansing, he would create a theatre that cause them to think and then incite them to action. Action outside the walls of the theatre space. Action that would change the world itself."¹⁹

¹⁹ "The Great acting Teachers and Their Methods" by Richard Brestoff. Page 149, Smith and Krakus Editorial, USA 1995.

I represent Kafka's father and appear in both scenes: Kafka - father and Kafka - mother (apart from being present on stage throughout the play, as all the other actors). We wanted to focus our play mainly in the scene of Kafka with his father, because it is the biggest manifestation of the conflict freedom-repression. It is in this scene where our aim is mainly shown: **forces of society vs. personal independence and development.**

I was in charge of creating this scene and the first thing I wanted to focus on was in its title. I investigated and read some of Kafka's books and got to the conclusion that "The Trial" was the best option; it illustrates clearly the psychological complexity of Kafka's problems with his father.

"Throughout his lifetime, Franz Kafka could never extricate himself from the terrible friction between his parents, which was caused, for the most part, by his tyrannical father. Kafka's only strong, positive ties with his family were with his favourite sister, Ottla (...)"²⁰

In this scene my role as an actor was of great importance because the father has to demonstrate his superior power and his control over Franz. To achieve this constant tyrannical attitude, I had to raise high awareness of my physicality, gestures and tone of voice; being able to unite and connect them in a way they could express this feeling of overpowering Franz would at the same time, generate in him a manifestation of physical and psychological horror. While studying Brecht, I read that he was inspired in some ways by the physicality achieved by Charles Chaplin's performances, rather than in the realism he saw in the theatres in those days; the actors used

"(...) physical gestures to illuminate the characters they played, and maintained a distance between the part and themselves."²¹.

This made me realize why for Brecht the body is a paramount element of performance, and most importantly, *how* to use it to achieve our aim. To be able to put this into practice, I needed to review the exercises I learned during the theatre course (that pertained to the physical exploration of a character) to help myself accomplish this difficult task.

This immediately took me to look at Jacques Lecoq, who we had seen while studying Neutral Mask, Commedia and Greek Theatre. And of course, it also took me to look at what kind of exercises from Lecoq Angel Exit Theatre used. One of these exercises called my attention, and we put it into practice during one of our rehearsals. It's called "Chairs"²² and we used it to develop the physical relationship between the Kafkas: father and son. We had to carry on a conversation without the use of words, just movement. As a topic we chose a discussion in which the father insists on Franz working at their family business

²⁰ http://www.cliffsnotes.com/study_guide/literature/the-trial.html

²¹ "The Great acting Teachers and Their Methods" by Richard Brestoff. Page 148, Smith and Krakus Editorial, USA 1995.

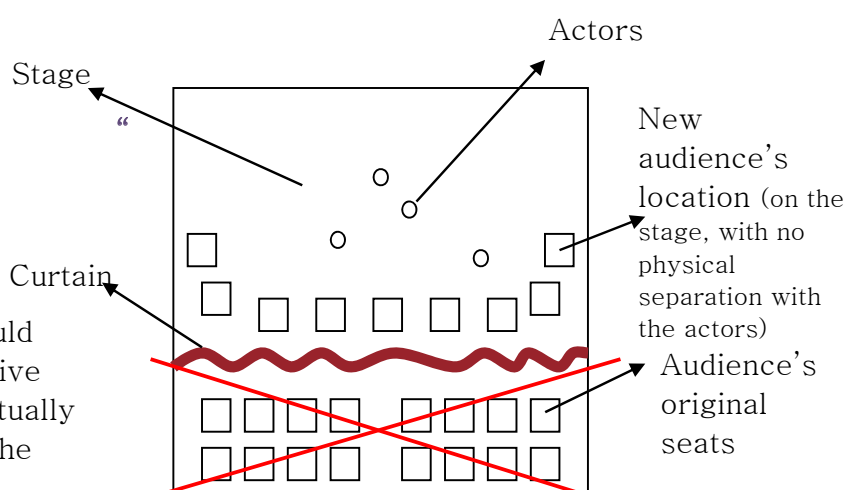
²² http://www.angelexit.co.uk/downloads/Angel_Exit_Education_Pack.pdf

and Franz tells him that he is going to study law instead. The dialogue is carried out just by placing the chairs in relation to each other during the conversation. This gave me the idea of what kind of proximity/distance I needed to use with regards to the son, and in what moments of the relationship. Once the exercise was finished, we did it again, but adding dialogue this time. The result was astonishing. The words came out naturally and it was really easy for me to understand the character and his relationship with the other one.

Having all this in mind, and the fact that transmitting feelings/ideas through the physicality is as important as transmitting them verbally, completely improved my performance in the whole play, and I truly believe I gave a positive contribution to the final product.

➤ The Fourth Wall

To further enhance the anti-naturalistic idea we decided to make the stage of the auditorium an area where the play would be performed and also an area where the audience would be located with their respective seats. The curtains which actually separate the audience from the actors were not to be used.



This way we were able to increase the feeling of the absence of the “forth wall”; the spectators and the actors would all be in the same area, feeling closer to each other, making the audience feel almost part of the play (even though this could be a feeling of uneasiness that might horrify certain spectators; after all, isn't that our aim? Feeling horrified of the life this person so close to them is conducting?). Really not just horrified but, based on Brecht's theory of the importance of theatre, making spectators conscious of certain aspects of our social life, encouraging them to think while watching the play and create in themselves the willingness to change this social issue that theatre is presenting.

²³ Drawing created by myself.

6. My participation in the final performance and what to look at in the video:

VIDEO 1: from 04:08 to the end (2'08)

VIDEO 2: from 00:11 to the end (1'44)

3'52 in total

Video 1:

- From the presentation of the character, the father shows an overpowering attitude over Franz. He orders him around, minimizes his activity as a writer and pushes towards working in the family business. I accomplish this through an imposing physical figure and a commanding voice.
- Franz performs his "gestus" of not listening, showing through his physicality how he turns away from his father
- Franz acts as if he would obey his father by walking towards the requested area, but once the father (showing a satisfied and self-assured air) sits on the chair (and in a theatrical symbolism this would mean that the "character-father" is not "on stage" any more), Franz turns, and looking directly at the audience with complicity, walks towards the piano.
- The actor playing Max Brod, Franz' friend, comes forward to address the audience and explains how Franz wrote a letter to his father where he dared to say to him everything that he wouldn't say to his face.
- I stand up, but not as the character, and this should be seen in my relaxed attitude that has nothing to do with the father's physicality, and taking the letter from my fellow actor, I read it to the audience, but not as the father would read it: I looked to devoid it of any emotion and any reaction: I am the actor, sharing the letter with the audience as an equal.
- The last line is said by Franz from the piano: again we distance the audience by using the unexpected and calling their attention towards our intention.
- The presence of Epic signs is all over the stage: my contribution to this was the use of the costumes in a rack that would be present throughout the performance. Not seen on the video, but immediately before the selection, the actors come on stage and "get into costume" in front of the audience.

Video 2:

- This particular scene was a discovery during our devising process, and one of which we are all very proud. Although the focus is on the mother, the father nevertheless occupies a relevant role in it. His domineering and overpowering figure is omnipresent and controls every member of the family, specially his wife.

- Manipulating the mother was fun, but required a lot of coordination. She had to say her lines but I had “do” her physicality. It needed lots of concentration and communication with the actor playing the wife.
- The scene produced laughter from the audience, which we expected. It was surprising for them to see the father manipulating the mother as a puppet, and certainly not naturalistic. I think the effect was perfect and we accomplished what we wanted.
- Franz repeats with the mother the same “gestus” as with the father, because he “knows” that behind the mother he can find the father.
- Ottla’s presence is very important in the scene, but it only makes the father more powerful, because she cannot neutralize him, even though she tries to stand up for her brother.