

## Devising Formulas

**Ensemble:**3-7 in a group.

**Materials Needed:** Butcher paper or large post-its, tools to write with (pens/pencils/markers), a timekeeping device (phones/egg timers/hourglass)

**Space Needs:** A large enough space for writing and staging without too much distraction.

### I. FINDING THE STORY

1. What's the **Question?** This motivates the entire process. This should be big enough, and relevant enough for the ensemble, as well as to the community and audiences you intend to share the story with.
2. What's the **Anchor?** This is the person or event that serves as a vehicle to get to the Question.
3. What's the **Structure?** The skeleton upon which the events hangs. The way to organize time, information, text, and imagery.

### II. GROUP WRITING

#### That's Brilliant!

This is an exercise to generate material quickly for your story. Only rules are that everyone has to put some ideas forward, and everyone has to accept. And everyone has to agree by saying out loud enthusiastically, "THAT'S BRILLIANT."

- 7 Minutes to create it the piece and rehearse.
- No longer than 2 minutes
- No shorter than 2 minutes

### III. CINEMATIC STAGING

Once you have a "sketch" of the play through "That's Brilliant," use these cinematographic terms for staging. Create blackouts in between by instructing the audience to close their eyes with "Lights On" and "Lights Off."

#### Montage

Create a 5 part montage of your story using these steps. Group identifies their director who will be the "outside eye," but ultimately the ensemble is collaborating and ideas are shared freely. The director can be in the piece if necessary.

The steps:

- 10 Minutes to Storyboard. Allow the architecture of the environment inform your choices.
- 10 Minutes for the director to stage the composition.
- 10 minutes to rehearse

Use these techniques for expressive staging.

#### Movie Camera

- *Close Up*—in between blackouts, get as close as you can to the audience
- *Pan*—leaves the scene but we can still see or hear it. Focus is drawn to the scope of Place.
- *Voice Over*—A voice "from above" speaks during a blackout.
- *Track*— The audience moves past the action in promenade.
- *Dissolve*- Can be achieved by "peeling away" at the end of the scene.
- *Cross Dissolve*—a transition one scene crosses into another. Can be achieved by "peeling away" and "pushing through" at the end of one scene into the beginning of another.
- *Jump Cut*—usually achieved from two people standing back to back, one of them facing the audience. During a blackout they switch places (add a monologue or scene heard in a voice over for the "Godard Effect.")
- *Long Shot*—audience sees something from very far off.

## **Ingredients List**

(Use at least ten.)

Revelation of Space  
Revelation of an Object  
Revelation of Character  
A sustained moment where everyone is looking up  
A surprise entrance.  
Broken Expectations  
One gesture repeated fifteen times  
20 consecutive seconds of stillness  
A staged accident  
15 seconds of top-speed talking  
15 seconds of unison action  
15 seconds of sustained laughter  
Vocal music  
Sound effects  
6 lines of dialogue

## **Resources**

Bogart, Anne, and Tina Landau. 2005. *The viewpoints book: a practical guide to viewpoints and composition*. New York: Theatre Communications Group.

Boal, Augusto. 1985. *Theatre of the Oppressed*. New York: Theatre Communications Group.

Michael Rohd.1998. Theatre for community, conflict & dialogue:the Hope is Vital training manual. Portsmouth, NH. Heineman.

**Devising Theater With High School Students**  
**by Joel Sugerman**  
**(from Howlround.com)**

*Many of us can attribute our path to the theater to a dynamic teacher in school: the teacher that inspired us or showed us a new side of ourselves. This series is a snapshot of today's high school theater educators across the country sharing about what they do and how and why they do this work.*

Preventing me from punctually completing this writing, which is largely on process, was, naturally, product: Tech week of a show. Getting it up, so to speak. Being in a place of *knowing*.

But my writing is about *Not Knowing*. Donald Barthelme says, "...the not-knowing is crucial to art, is what permits art to be made. Without the scanning process engendered by not-knowing, without the possibility of having the mind move in unanticipated directions, there would be no invention."

I am a high school teacher and I also happen to be a theater artist. Or is that the other way around? Doesn't matter. The fact is that I am teaching students at an independent high school in Massachusetts who aren't intending to be professional makers of theater, with a few exceptions. Rather, they are young people who will go on to a variety of fields in which they will use the skills they acquire here to be more human in whatever they end up doing. As the STEM fields start to nudge the humanities out of their way aggressively, we begin to lose our...well, humanity. So while we hang on, how do we continue to teach and nurture that humanity?

***As the STEM fields start to nudge the humanities out of their way aggressively, we begin to lose our...well, humanity.***

Perhaps by being okay with not knowing.

Starting from a place in the work where all we have is each other, the room, the selves we bring into it and what we're interested in saying. Where whatever is going to come has to *emerge* out of what happens in the room. That, of course, is the essence of devising theater and it also seems to be the essence of the best educational practice.

- Creative problem solving.
- Students learning from each other in collaboration.
- In conspiracy (latin root: *breathing together!*).

When we devise theater with students instead of starting with a script (and roles you have to fill them into like square pegs into octagonal slots), we can work with what is actually in the room. We can look at the *abilities and affinities* of the students that can help guide us in our creation of a piece (Do we have a harp player in the group? Someone who can spin a basketball on their finger? An avid science student? Someone deeply religious?) We can pay attention to our specific context and our specific resources. And we can create instead of recreating.

A lot of high school students would rather get their script on day one and start memorizing lines so they can be told where to go and when, and perhaps figure out the why. And they want that because it is (relatively...I say relatively) safe.

But why not allow ourselves to be in a place of *Imbalance*...on the precipice. The tightrope. I think we can't be in a comfortable or easy place if we're going to make anything that is interesting.

So, I've begun to ask, "*What are we going to Try today?*" rather than "*what are we going to Do?*" It implies risk of failure and there's energy in that—action in the face of uncertainty. Lack of surety contains the power of learning and creating, contains potential. That power is magnified a hundredfold when we are creating new work...when we are looking for something together which has not yet existed...that our audience has never seen before...when we're breathing together...and asking questions and responding to those questions in lots of ways other than with "right answers."

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In the work I've done over the last several years with high school students, the most difficult and most rewarding has been ensemble-created theater which starts from the grain of an idea. We've made a piece about their dreams and nightmares called *Barefoot and Late for History*, a piece about their ancestral journey stories called *The Trip*, and last year, a piece called *Oklahoma! City.*, which was our imagining of a high school production of the musical *Oklahoma!* being rehearsed in an Oklahoma City area high school in April of 1995 in the days before and after the bombing there. All of these shows involved student created music as well as

texts. A great deal of the material came from interviews and research the students did. In the case of *OKC*, my students reached out to and did interviews with people who were teenagers in Oklahoma City at the time of the bombing.

I've been lucky enough to be an associate artist with my college friend Michael Rohd and Sojourn Theatre over the last several years and the work I've done with them in Oregon and across the country has not only been incredibly fulfilling work as a performer/creator, but has also been perfect professional development for me. It consistently informs the teaching and directing I have done with my students. Sojourn makes work that asks questions about the world, and is an ensemble that is very okay with the idea of *not knowing* as the journey starts out. That is the model I want to bring back to my teaching when I return from the work with Sojourn.

For my students, there are no right answers to the questions and problems that come up in rehearsal and class as we make something together. There are only more and less clear, or more or less articulate ways of conveying ideas about the world and ourselves. Emily Dickinson wrote, "Tell all the truth, but tell it slant." If we listen and we try everything, we are bound to find the truth and the way to tell it in ways no one has seen before.

Something emerges.