

The Role of Improvisation in Devising and Rehearsal (My Creative Process and Evaluation)

4165 words

Meet four mothers, don't worry about learning their real names, these days they all just go by 'Mum'. Each has a story to tell. Their stories are open, honest, raw and funny. Discover these mothers' most precious moments and their darkest hours. Delight in their ridiculousness, share in their sorrow and maybe even gain an insight into the workings of a mother's mind! Using live music, breast feeding and original song, your hostess for evening, Mama Cabaret, will take you on a journey through childbirth, motherhood, divorce and more. Welcome to the mothers' cabaret! (non parents welcome!)

Programme notes, *Mama's Cabaret* (2019)

Introduction

As humans, we are improvisers. Children in playgrounds, storytellers, teachers planning a lesson but then gauging a class and acting in the moment, are all improvising without thinking about it. In everyday social situations we have no scripts: we are using our own experiences to create social interactions. When we improvise we react in the moment, creating something that is a unique, emotional response to what is happening in the here and now. We accept what is happening and build on it – the 'Yes And' technique that improvisers talk about. 'Improvisers have an open, positive mind-set. They are in a willing, supportive and co-operative mood. They think "Yes". Listen first. Then respond' (Fox 2019).

Practitioners have used improv in rehearsal in many different ways, under many different terms – including devising, ensemble, creating, Greek chorus, response, theatre making and free writing. Improvising is at the heart of devising, as Farmer (2019) explains:

Devising a piece of theatre can be a stimulating and exciting journey towards the development of a performance which is a fusion of the unique talents and creativity of the group. It is not a direct journey, but one in which you will encounter well-trodden paths, blind alleys and sudden surprises. In order to prepare, the group needs to have a good grasp of improvisatory skills.

Improvising can bring unexpected discoveries and moments, as well as plenty of mistakes that don't need to be kept. It is a fresh and active devising tool, generating a space where work can be created without censorship or judgement.

Improvising is universal, allowing connections to be made with people, and it opens up a generous and brave way of living. It is heading into the unknown, which can bring unexpected results. Paul Hunter says: 'Things don't always arrive by lots of consideration. We think about things, but sometimes they happen by mistake' (quoted in Farmer 2019).

Improvising allows these mistakes – and therefore discoveries – to happen. Hunter's company, *Told By An Idiot*, are known for their improvisational and ensemble style, and their performances have a sense of freedom and play that comes from having created the work together as a company.

Improvising allows us to think away from the page, off the cuff, to make mistakes but also discoveries. It gives us the freedom to fail, and to create without censorship or judgements (these can come later). During the Newcastle Improv Festival, Stella Duffy ran a five-hour 'improvising for writers' workshop which I attended, where she told us to remember to 'say yes, and learn how to do it later' (Duffy 2019). So, using improvisation to create work means that not everything will make it into the script; judgements will be made and much of the work may not be kept, but within the process discoveries may have been made that otherwise would not have come about.

Improvising gives us the 'Creative expression, free-thinking and sharp wit [that] can only be found when we stop pre-judging ourselves. The ideas are there, but they can be hidden away because we filter our thoughts to appear "normal", and overthink them. They need to come out of the closet, and be heard' (Fox 2019). When we

learn to improvise, we learn to return to our innocent and childlike states where we feel free to play and where we are not scared of making mistakes.

Relinquishing control is one of the keys to creating theatre. When we are feeling brave enough to make mistakes and take risks, we make big discoveries.

Devising the songs

I knew what my theme was, as this project draws on the work of the previous two terms: creating a solo show and a research project. My solo show ended up being *Mama Cabaret*, a solo cabaret about my own experiences of motherhood. I included one song at the piano, 'Cabaret' from the film *Cabaret* by Kander and Ebb, plus I included lip synching to 'That's Entertainment' by Irving Berlin. I already knew that for my final piece I wanted to include only original songs, written by me, so that the whole piece was devised. I had used my own experiences and anecdotes as the material, and had explored the work of different practitioners, including Anne Bogart, to influence my form and style. For the research project, I had chosen to explore the role of a musician in improvised comedy. In order to combine these two projects I decided to start with the use of music and improvising.

I began by interviewing Steve Byron and asking him about his own creative process. I went to see two plays that Byron wrote, *Bacon Knees and Sausage Fingers* and *Floorboards*, and so was asking him about these two works in particular. He explained that he maps out the play, and as the writer has a plot of the play scene by scene, and then will guide the actors in improvising before writing down the final script. He said that he believes 'this gives actors a real understanding of the dialogue and the ability to deliver it truthfully, and to inhabit it, as they may have had the thoughts before they come out with the words' (Byron, interview, 2019).

He talked to me about *Bacon Knees* ..., saying that it had all been improvised in rehearsal, and that the dialogue with Gary Kitching had been done in just one session. His main advice to me was what was becoming the mantra of everything I read about improvising: 'don't block yourself, don't say no to anything, do say yes to everything, and try everything!' (Byron, interview, 2019).

At this point (July 2019) I was involved with the Newcastle Improv Festival as a musician (not an actor), and I signed up for an 'improv fix' workshop to gain more ideas about improvising. During the this workshop we studied some Meisner techniques which I then tried to apply to my piece.

I described everything I could about the character, repeatedly, without comment, to get into the moment. This was a technique we had used in the class. I spent time in the studio in room O26 at Northumbria University, looking in the mirror, saying the first thing that I saw about the character and repeating it. I found this useful as a means of getting into the role and beginning to build my character, but it didn't generate any material for the piece. I then used more of an emotion exercise (which was similar in approach, but instead of describing my appearance I gave myself a feeling which I then accepted) and this was useful. I added to the script 'Are you a mum, Katie?', 'No', and then the repetition of 'You're not a mum' and 'I'm not a mum' with no comment or judgement. This then changes to 'Yazmin is a mum' on repeat, until this is broken with 'Yazmin never wanted to be a mum'. This takes my character into the monologue about Yazmin, who is a mum but doesn't want to be. This would have been more effective if I had had a director, but I did have another actor, Katie Roberts, so we were able to do the exercise together. A director could have been an outside eye and could have really guided us through the exercise.

The exercise is what Meisner calls 'mechanical repetition', and is designed to stop the actor from emoting, or really 'acting', and to encourage them to find the truth in what they are saying (Meisner 2015).

I spent some time with Katie looking at how she could add dance moves to the laundry song. She added some beautiful moves at the beginning, but then during the song her moves were too generalised for my liking. I did provide her with a copy of the lyrics, but of course she also had to spend time on her own piece, and so she decided to improvise during the performance. In the end we agreed she should just try to fold the laundry and that that would be enough. Her dance gives added choreography and physical comedy to the number, and in the tradition of cabaret it works to have a dancer on stage. I didn't want the audience to miss the lyrics, though, so we needed more rehearsals. Luckily the feedback from the show-backs

was the same: that she was doing too much, and should just fold the laundry. So we accepted that less is more, and planned to run it like that at the theatre.

Because I wanted to write my own songs but do not see myself as a 'writer' (although I do see myself as an improviser), I put myself in a room with a piano, a video camera and just one rule, which was that I wasn't allowed to say no to anything. I could only follow what Keith Johnstone calls the 'Yes And' rule. According to Johnstone, 'Those who say yes are rewarded by the adventures they have' (Johnstone 1979, p.82).

I shouted out one subject (for example childbirth, miscarriage, housework) and a style for the music (for example country and western, disco, musical theatre, blues). I made sure that I wasn't censoring the styles and subjects and was just saying whatever came into my head; I took the same approach with the styles. I then immediately made up a song in that style about that subject, and videoed it. My process was then to watch these back, writing down the lyrics and the chords, and then sitting and editing. Thus, although the process led to more traditional-looking writing in the end, the improv was the starting point. Stella Duffy (2019) calls this 'Playing and using our bodies to create, to make, to write. Playing and asking ourselves questions and trying out brave or silly or absurd or thrilling answers. Not trying to get it "right" because there is no right. All there is, is trying.'

If I use this approach again, I would like to have someone else calling out the subjects and styles: this would really take me outside my comfort zone and could potentially lead to much more exciting discoveries. However, in the true spirit of the piece, these rehearsal were grabbed moments whenever I realised the children were at school, the housework was done and there was a spare hour or so before I needed to be at work. But I am aware that all the suggestions were coming from within my own limitations – styles and subjects that were familiar to me.

This process led to the writing of my first two songs: 'Two Blue Lines', in the style of contemporary musical theatre, and 'The Laundry', which was originally country and western but gradually morphed into a slower song based around the chords of 'Crazy' by Patsy Cline. We can only draw on what we know, and this has taught me to listen to a much wider range of music than I currently do, to give me more to draw on. Bev Fox of the Suggestibles has observed of my playing that 'when we play with

Alex, all his songs have a country and western feel, no matter what the genre, and yours have a musical theatre quality, because that is mainly what each of you listens to. It's not explicit but you can see patterns in your choices of tempo and chord progression.' Alex (Ross) and I play with the group the Suggestibles as their pianists (Alex is the regular pianist and I stand in for him when he is unavailable). If I develop the piece further I would like to work with a director who will force me outside of my usual song choices. I can also expand my repertoire by listening to different types of music.

At this point we showed our pieces to each other at university. My feedback was that I needed to really show the trauma of childbirth, not to feel that everything has to be funny, that the laundry song was not as engaging as 'Two Blue Lines', and that perhaps the piece needed a dance break.

In response to this I asked on a Facebook post for issues that people have with laundry. This resulted in a brilliant response, almost all from mothers, but also from one dad, who said there were no issues because his wife had it all under control, and from a few non-parents wondering why their socks never matched (see Appendix 1).

This really helped me to edit the laundry song and add some humour to it. I intensified the sense of trauma in the childbirth section and took out most of the swearing. During the Newcastle Impro Festival I worked with a company called DragProv, who said that they felt swearing should be avoided if possible 'unless you can really justify it. Otherwise you're just going for a cheap laugh or an easy shock' (interview with Ed Scrivens of DragProv 2019). While I don't necessarily agree that this is always true, it made me consider the swearing I had used in my piece, and I took out everything that didn't feel necessary.

We then performed our pieces at the Live Theatre Scratch afternoon and I received some very encouraging feedback (see Appendix 2). Some of the comments were from audience members who said they would have liked to see more character development and talking between songs, and this was what I focused on next.

I took a trip to Edinburgh intending to see Sarah Louise Young's *An Evening without Kate Bush* and Bryony Kimmings' *I'm A Phoenix, Bitch*, which I thought would be

excellent research, but – again rather in keeping with the theme of the piece – by the time I went to get tickets the one show that Bryony Kimmings had sold out was on the day I was there, and I was too far back in the queue to get into Sarah Louise Young's show. Both shows are continuing to London, so as I develop my show they are the priority pieces I need to see. Instead I took part in an improv show and focused on saying yes to everything, in preparation for writing my final two songs.

I then had a feedback session with Kay Hepplewhite, my course tutor, who advised me not to shy away from the dark places in motherhood. I decided that my final two songs would be about rape and miscarriage. I sat at the piano and improvised these to a blues scale.

Because I didn't have a director, the most useful moments for me were the show-backs and performances, as opportunities to get some feedback. I would have liked to see more relevant shows, although I did manage to see Bonnie and the Bonnettes' *And She*, about motherhood, and I was inspired by cast member Cameron's monologue at the end of the show, about how during the making of it he wasn't speaking to his mother. This inspired me to write my final monologue about how I couldn't write a final song.

I had wanted to include a song about women's experience of rape, but nothing was happening. I tried for days to find the words, genre or melody and nothing would come. In the end I decided to use this frustration to present the piece as an unfinished song, one that wouldn't work or come out right, but even this I found hard to access. I tried using Anne Bogart's composition techniques but this was becoming a perfect example of why an actor cannot create on their own, and I needed a director. I tried repeating the techniques I had used earlier of just picking a random style of music, and then tried focusing on what I thought would be appropriate styles of music, but I couldn't write anything I was happy with.

In the end I wrote a monologue about how I couldn't write the song. I also wanted to make this part of the piece more abstract and movement-based. Again without a director or outside eye, when I tried to work on it I felt awkward and I shied away from it.

We had show-backs on 23 September, and the performance lacked energy. As Victoria Wood says:

If you're telling a joke, you have to tell it. You can't act telling it, you can't just say it, you have to actually tell it, which means that you have to engage that audience that night. It has to be spontaneous and you have to react to the audience as they are that evening. You can't think 'oh it was nice last Tuesday, I'll just do the same thing'; it's always just slightly different. (Wood, in Oddey 1999, p.188)

I was trying to recreate a feeling from a previous performance, and it was not working. This was useful for me to experience, and a good reminder that for the performance I would need to fully connect with that specific audience and not try to force something.

The feedback at this point was that 'Cabaret' was not the right song to end on, and that I should sing away from the piano, at the front of the stage, and be more exposed. It was also suggested that I needed to give the gags time to breathe, and to make sure that Jazmin's story made sense. People said that Yazmin's song, 'He Came Too Soon' worked well, caught people off guard but didn't alienate (which was my worry). At this point in the piece I want the audience to be on my side because, as Freshwater writes, 'the relationship with the audience provides the theatre event with its rationale' (2009, p.2) and at this point in the play my character needs to be sympathetic. Other feedback was that I needed to make it clear if I was becoming the character at the piano or just telling their stories, because I was being inconsistent. It was also suggested that Katie was doing too much during the dance, and that I as her director needed to address this and give her more guidance.

This was all useful feedback, and I chose to rewrite the script so that I never 'played' any of the characters – I was always the cabaret host telling other people's stories. In the future, as I develop this piece, I would like to explore actually playing the other characters, using costume, movement and lighting, as this would make more of a spectacle and give it more of a real cabaret feel.

I also took on board the advice about ending with a song at the front of the stage, away from the piano. I tried to use improvisation to come up with a new song, which I knew I wanted to be similar to 'Nowadays' from Chicago. All the songs up until this point in the piece had been written by me, and it seemed wrong to sum up with the words of someone else. But during the previous scene I had talked about not being able to find the words or the tune any more, and because the song was presented differently – not as a show tune but as my real thoughts and feelings – it represented my inability to come up with Yazmin's song. It also reversed the norm: the show tunes at the piano were my own compositions, and the *a capella*, freer song was someone else's work. It also gave a nod to other cabaret shows, as Kander and Ebb are popular cabaret composers.

Devising the text

I found this harder because I don't see myself as a writer. I knew I wanted to keep some of the text from my first piece, specifically the opening and the first monologue, but I wanted to add more to the body of the piece and I wanted to change the ending. Again, using improvisation as my main rehearsal tool, I tried to just make it up on the spot – not block myself, not have an agenda, not try to be funny or clever – and to just tell the story. Again, a director would have been valuable here, but I was mainly recording myself and watching it back, as I had done in semester one with our 10-minute pieces. Writing about Joan Littlewood, Callaghan (in Laughlin and Schuler 1995, p.267) observes that 'Even the play texts themselves were object for collaboration and improvisation' and quotes Littlewood as saying 'I do not believe in the supremacy of the director, designer, actor, or even the writer'. What she is describing is a team: a team who will improvise together to create something new, including a new version of a script, and who will collaborate as equals. While my director wouldn't necessarily have to be in charge, or have a fixed vision for the piece, I needed someone to collaborate and share ideas with.

I tried to use the Jo Ha Kyu that Bogart (in Bogart and Landau 2005) writes about and that we had been learning about last semester, but I found that in the end my style was more a series of sketches, which maybe made it feel more like a cabaret. Each sketch had its Jo Ha Kyu. The ending is definitely a new beginning, so in this

way it is like the start of a new Jo Ha Kyu section. The whole piece felt like a series of sketches – almost like cabaret acts. In developing the piece further in the future I would like to develop a much clearer narrative, and work with a director to move seamlessly between sections.

Ethics

In my final monologue I say that I have ‘filled in countless ethics forms and gained the consent of these women to put their most intimate and dark secrets into comedy songs for your entertainment’, but in reality I have drawn almost completely on my own experiences. While I wanted to put my own experiences on stage, I also wanted to avoid a sort of self-indulgence or therapy, so I chose to act. Ridout (2009, p.5) asks ‘how shall I act?’ when discussing theatre and ethics, which asks us to consider not only the ethics not only of our research, but of our own behaviour. He suggests that ‘ethics displaces politics’. My piece presented the politics of motherhood, but I also considered the ethics of how I was presenting subjects on stage. For example, I did not use the word ‘rape’ or explicitly describe what had taken place: I gave the audience information about how Yazmin lives her life now, and the audience needed to work out for themselves what had taken place. Julie Waters (in Oddey 1999, p.257) writes that ‘acting is part of what I am and who I am’. This whole piece is who and what I am, but as an actor I don’t need – or really want – the audience to know how autobiographical it is

Evaluation

On the day of the performance I found our open dress rehearsal more nerve-racking than I had expected. The audience were quiet, and up until this point I had had a lot of laughter whenever I had shown my work. This took me outside of the performance and made me try to reflect as I was performing. The verbal feedback afterwards was supportive, and was mainly about needing to slow down, allow the jokes to breathe and give the audience time to get them, and trust that the audience are loving it, even if they are quiet.

After the evening performance, the verbal feedback was similar but much more enthusiastic. The performance had gone much better, the laughter was louder and I could feel that the audience were with me. I did everything I had planned to do, but I would have liked to have planned it better. Moving forward, I would like more moments of movement in abstract, rather than story-telling throughout. I would like more of a flow between each moment, and a chance to develop each character.

As feedback suggested, (and I already knew this to be the case) my piece needed a director, and although it was a cabaret it needed more of a through-line.

However, audience feedback also suggested that the whole evening needed a director so that even the scene changes were choreographed, as the audience said that at times these felt awkward (the scene changes were under-rehearsed and the music often came in too late).

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And She. 2019. Bonnie and the Bonnettes. Northern Stage.

Bacon Knees and Sausage Fingers. 2019. S. Byron and G. Kitching. Alphabetti Theatre.

Floorboards. 2019. S. Byron. Alphabetti Theatre.

The Mothers' Cabaret. 2019. Performed by Jenni Winter. Live Theatre.