

Meeting of minds



TRISTRAM KENTON

Tristan Sturrock and Naomi Frederick in *Brief Encounter* by Kneehigh Theatre

Examining the recent successes of devised theatre, Jo Caird talks to some of the leading lights of the genre about why audiences are increasingly receptive to it and how this way of working can produce such impressive results

Devised theatre has been a strong creative force in the UK since the sixties. It has tended to attract niche audiences looking for a more flexible and challenging theatre experience, but it is only relatively recently that it has begun to come in from the margins and find success with mainstream audiences. Larger numbers are going to see it, both in buildings known for their independent way of thinking – like the BAC and Riverside Studios – and in flagship establishments such as the National Theatre and the RSC.

In November, Kneehigh's Brief Encounter ended a long and successful run in the West End. Although by no means the company's first foray into the mainstream, the longevity, scale and reception of the show appears to mark a new moment in Kneehigh's history and in devised theatre in general. Another turning point production was Punchdrunk's enormously popular *The Masque of the Red Death*, which ran for seven months at the BAC in 2007. Clearly UK audiences are enjoying this type of theatre, but what is it about the format that fosters such creativity?

"The basic theory of devising is that two minds and bodies are better than one," says Professor David Williams, director of theatre at Dartington College of Arts in Devon, the only institution in the UK that offers an MA in devised theatre.

The traditional model of a director choosing a script, taking it to a cast and

asking them to interpret it according to a particular vision, is a time-tested one, but devisers claim that their way of working offers more. Alan Lane, artistic director of Slung Low, seen most recently at the Barbican this autumn with *Helium*, explains: "It's a bit like having the A-Team. Each of them are very clever on their own, but when you can bring that group of people together, you just get a much more interesting product. We can stretch ourselves by knowing that that person's going to be able to bring that skill or that agenda to the table."

Tim Etchells of Forced Entertainment finds devising attractive, "because it gets you to stuff that you probably wouldn't get to otherwise". Unlike Slung Low, whose focus is primarily storytelling, Forced Entertainment has always made work that is more about the theatrical process itself and is deliberately non-narrative as a result. Etchells' working model is to explore all contributions, "going down every road and seeing what's at the end of it before deciding we're not going to do that". He finds this method fundamentally more open and creative than what he calls the "autocratic or regal system" of traditional theatre.

Dr Simon Murray, senior lecturer in the department of theatre, film and television studies at Glasgow University, points out that, although devising is a flexible process and by its very nature empowers actors by putting them "at the centre of the making

process", it "isn't theatre by committee".

"While the whole process is structured for people to have their creative space, editing is a big part of devising, because you create an awful lot of stuff and someone has the task of going, 'That is brilliant, but it's not right'," says Emma Rice, artistic director of Kneehigh. "I'm the author of the work, even if someone else has ownership of the poetry or the language, because I am authoring the world of the production."

Punchdrunk, led by Felix Barrett and Maxine Doyle, creates promenade productions that put the onus on the audience to make its own theatre experience. That said, as strong a directorial presence is employed here as in Kneehigh's shows, but with a difference. "My role is less to direct the action as direct the audience through the action," says Barrett. This new focus on audience experience and response is a major factor in the increase in interest in devised work over the past few years. Doyle recognises that a large part of the impact of devised work is to do with "being part of a really collective experience of an audience in a place". It is a question of engagement and relevance. In an age of short attention spans and reality TV, this model is exactly what theatre needs.

What is fundamental to the processes that allow the creation of such engaging work is time, observes Joseph Alford, co-artistic director of Theatre O: "You really get to investigate, so you know where this piece comes from, you know its depths," he says.

Many of the companies questioned spoke about the challenges of finding sufficient funding to cover both the cost of the extended development process, integral to devised work, and the interim, non-project specific costs of running a company.

The entire subsidised theatre industry is struggling in the current economic climate, but it is arguably more difficult for devising companies to embark upon such necessarily long-term projects when the situation is so unstable. "The result is that you're constantly having to assess, how are we going to exist come January 2009?" says Alford.

Professor Williams finds an upside to this 'dark moment' of funding – the companies coming out of the colleges now have a much greater agency when it comes to accessing alternative funding structures. For Analogue, the newest of the companies I talked to, as for many of the others, this agency comes via collaborations with venues. Analogue received project funding from Arts Council England for its first production, but Liam Jarvis, the company's co-artistic director, is aware that there's no guarantee of funding.

"You don't want to be too reliant on the arts council alone for that reason," says Jarvis. "It's important to find other partners to work with." For Beachy Head, the show the company is currently developing, Analogue is working closely with four venues, as well as receiving ongoing support from Royal Holloway University.

However these companies succeed in surmounting the challenges of the current funding crisis and whichever processes they employ to get their work to the stage (or whatever other platform they choose as a context for that work), one thing is clear – audiences are flocking to see these shows and take part in the wider discussion that is going on around devised theatre, and that can only be a good thing.

The traditional theatre community, both practitioners and audience, are acknowledging the power of devising and the only way is up.