

## Why Devise? Why Now? In Search of Eco-theatre

*James Slowiak*

About devising theatre and the New World Performance Laboratory . . .

I have always been reluctant to use the term “devising.” It speaks more to the thought process than to the somatic process. And for me, creating performance has always been much more about stimulating the total being into action, not just the mind. In our group, the New World Performance Laboratory, we have devised performances in a number of ways—beginning from classic or traditional texts, reacting to material from a variety of sources, from songs, from themes, from current events or historical happenings. But the one aspect of our work that remains constant is the translation of all material into physical action. Action is the primary language of theatre and, before any text or *mise-en-scène*, the actor must first embody the material organically. So, for us, devising performance becomes about finding a way to engage the actor totally in the process of creation and then transform one’s self into a transparent embodiment of knowledge.

We break creativity into two different types, based on cultural historian Morris Berman’s formulations: modern creativity and traditional creativity. Modern creativity, according to Berman, has given society much great art, but it is art which accentuates the mind-body split, privileges self-expression, and radiates erotic tension. Traditional creativity, on the other hand, displays an absence of Eros and can be characterized by a smooth descent into the unconscious (or the Void), where a forgotten unity organically expresses itself. Traditional creativity is not separated from life itself. It is part of a craft tradition in which the artwork often remains anonymous. The ideal then becomes an egoless theatre whose purpose is not to demonstrate one’s virtuosity or identity, but to penetrate one’s own humanity. As Simone Weil said, you decreate yourself in order to create the work.

Recently, NWPL culminated a three-year project with young actors in Poland. The piece we devised with them was based on Mexican author Juan Rulfo’s novel *Pedro Paramo* (a forerunner of magic realism), the ancient *Exegesis of the Soul*, and a cycle of traditional Polish songs. The performance was an effort to create a theatre of no-ego—eco-theatre, not ego-theatre. The result was a performance that left those audiences used to seeing actors shamelessly display their wares somewhat perplexed. However, there were also those spectators who remarked upon seeing their “friends,” people they knew or didn’t know, but who were revealing to them things they had not seen before about themselves as human beings in an intimate and effortless way. For us, this was a marvellous accomplishment and it took us further down the path toward the kind of theatre we would like to create—an ecological theatre where one goes

to remember what it is to be a human being and live in harmony, in wholeness; where a spectator-friend meets an actor-friend and the boundaries between individual and surroundings soften. Inauthentic behavior dissolves. Self is accepted because self is forgotten.

Berman gives Japanese haiku, Greek and Egyptian vases, Hopi or Celtic designs, seventeenth-century Chinese landscape painting, and some medieval art as examples of traditional creativity. I would add the ancient mysteries of Greece and Egypt. Are there techniques for this work? Certainly the material is important. And then one must find ways to allow actors to embody the knowledge as an authentic demonstration of a way of life. This *via negativa* process, this process of elimination, takes years and is not easy. There are many mistakes and many detours. Worth and meaning are discovered only in doing the work, in the process of creation, in the action itself. Morris Berman calls this “the monastic option,” and points out that this kind of embodied knowledge can function as a counterweight to “a life based on kitsch, consumerism, and profit, or on power, fame, and self-promotion” (157).

In today’s political and social climate, it is more important than ever to get theatre out of our heads and egos and into our total beings as a demonstration of human possibility and a stimulus for cultural transformation. In NWPL, we are not out to devise something new, to break old forms or discover original techniques. In fact, to paraphrase our teacher Jerzy Grotowski: We are not trying to discover something new; we are trying to remember something forgotten—craftsmanship, compassion, and integrity. Our motto has become a haiku from the seventeenth-century Japanese poet Bashō:

Journeying through the world  
To and fro, to and fro  
Cultivating a small field.

And that’s how we devise theatre . . .

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#### Work Cited

Berman, Morris. *The Twilight of American Culture*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2000.