

## How to “hack” ensemble theatre

*Most of them didn't want to cause trouble. They just wanted to make a connection.*

-An excerpt from *<ph><f>reaking*

Today, we are awash with techno-babble language pervading ordinary life. From “makers” to “disrupters” and more, it seems like the grandiosity of Silicon Valley has worked its way into a larger narrative about how we think and create writ large. And one word that has successfully hopped from a technical term into more of a philosophical basis is hacking. If you ask Merriam Webster, the definition is simple:

*A person who secretly gets access to a computer system in order to get information, cause damage, etc.: A person who hacks a computer system.*

But I'll defer to the savvier, crowd-sourced Urban Dictionary, which better represents the digital democracy of our time. The first definition on the site is similarly dry, but the second goes deeper:

*Using something and change it, and make it do what you want with it.*

With hackathons and hacking contests, the coding community eagerly opens itself up to praxis and critical analysis. Instead of congratulating one another on what's working and moving on to the next task, a hacking mindset requires patience as one searches for vulnerabilities, tricks, and shortcuts. In popular culture, then, hacking has become synonymous with problem-solving — in short, with a can-do attitude that always wonders, can this thing be done faster, better, stronger? And what can happen when the raw power of human intelligence is combined, allowing one task to be viewed from thousands of angles and perspectives? Is the product strengthened, or destroyed?

Stereotypically, hackers are portrayed as loners, typing into a lonely void in an empty room. But in many ways, the process of hacking is much like the generative work done in ensembles. Opening oneself up to working in process with a group over a sustained period of time opens up vulnerabilities and allows someone else to patch up problems that one may not have even seen. But tunnel vision can still develop in long-term studio practice — and often, artists don't get to truly see a multitude of perspectives until opening night. And beyond performances themselves, the meaningful exchange and transformation of practices gets caught up into the web of possessiveness and intellectual property.

In having Heather Barfield of the VORTEX Repertory visit us at Critical Point Theatre in New York, we were determined to talk hacking in the technical sense. After all, Heather's piece *Privacy Settings: A Promethean Tale* talks digital privacy and security against the context of government surveillance and the revelations of whistle-blowers as modern prophets, much like Aeschylus's original Greek drama. Similarly, Critical Point Theatre is developing *<ph><f>reaking*, a psycho-social examination of hackers and masculinity, wondering how the rage of online communities fuel digital (and real-life) violence. We meant to talk shop over how

to replicate the aesthetics of Internet culture in performance, since both performances were meant to be individualized walk-through experiences.

Ultimately, though, we realized that we ended up trying to hack one another's theatre practices in general. Over drinks after powerful performances and on pillows in the CPT rehearsal studio, we examined what methods and modes of devising were working best for us. We shared where our vulnerabilities were — what we were running up against aesthetically and in living a sustainable lifestyle as artists. This kind of hacking, in grasping onto each other's research and downloading it to memory, is broader and more impactful.

It led me to wonder — how could ensemble practitioners embrace the spirit of hacking? How could more constructive criticism lead to more commons-based peer production, a method of freely allowing someone access to one's work in order to build to greater heights?

Big businesses are now officially opening themselves up to hackers, sponsoring contests where anyone who finds a security flaw in their technology gets a prize. In doing so, even traditional corporate structures are learning to redefine expertise — recently, one such prize went to a ten year old. Could an ensemble facing a challenge in play development sponsor such a contest? Just imagine a video going up on YouTube asking for help on a scene transition or for new exercises to generate work with a specific community. What if there were forums for playwrights like there are for coders, giving some lines and examples to generate a productive discussion where dozens of commenters could continue the work of the original? What if there were national playmaking challenges that required mass collaboration, in the same way that there are hackathons that bring together teams from all around the country to tackle problems?

The evolution of artistic traditions relies on the essential spirit of hacking, on using something and changing it to make it work for a new audience. In trying to “hack” contemporary practice, perhaps artists could beg, borrow, and steal from the techniques of those in the computing field in order to create entirely new forms of creative collaboration.

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Artists inhabit and maneuver themselves on the sometimes contentious frontlines of cultural and social issues. They are warriors, peacemakers, rabble-rousers, interrogators, innovators, and commentators. For ensemble theater artists, we access our creations through, in hacker-speak, “back door” methods. For instance, we begin most often with an ephemeral, amorphous, in the “cloud” idea or inspiration. We function as a free-flowing network depending upon nuanced collaboration, experimentation, failures, recoveries, and recap conversations. There are many methods to the elegant madness of ensemble theater-making. I have experienced a variety of techniques, but recently, my travel and subsequent observations and communications with Critical Point Theatre—operating out of a small studio space in Washington Heights, NYC—wholly informed my processing style for my upcoming show, *Privacy Settings: A Promethean Tale*.

To begin, I shared with the ensemble the basic premise and foundational aspects of my show. I had recently returned from a retreat where I reinterpreted, or “hacked” the Ancient Greek play, *Prometheus Bound*. I deconstructed the text, line by line, in such a way to align allegories according to relevant contemporary issues of our time. More specifically, I repurposed gods as governments, chorus as users, and characters as symbols.

During one week of meals, walks, and quiet contemplation, folks with Critical Point Theatre offered their uniquely derived “code” to devising new work. Specifically, I learned how CPT deploys transmedia for audience interactivity and promotional tools. They built a website that links multiple parts of a show together providing another perspective and insight into the production. The audience has the ability to make another choice to the plot’s predetermined ending, which is essentially a “hack” of Boal’s Forum Theater process.

In preparing for their creative meetings, CPT sets up a calendar with basic topics presented before the meeting but allows space for the topic to shift, transform or reshape depending upon an individual’s most current inspirations. Coming up with creative ideas, CPT would give assignments to the group. “Hacking” Michael Rohd’s techniques, they create compositions using gestures, images and word lists. They would use technology to expand the scope of a particular form, such as performing a dance via a Skype exchange. As we continued to explore and exchange ideas and techniques, my confidence grew, my sense of purpose as a theatre-maker calcified.

Upon my return to Austin, I created an extensive workshop and rehearsal schedule with the cast. In the first months of a six-month process, I educated the cast on foundational topics, imparted “instant theatre” techniques (from Rachel Rosenthal’s DBD workshops I had attended over several years), implemented a language and form for feedback and support (from my work with CPT), and gathered materials to dissect, discuss, destroy, “hack” and rebuild using body, words and intention. Using the two-thirds of the scripted text I had already written, we merged the cast’s writing and devised scenic moments into the overall performance piece. The second half of the show, a fully-interactive experience, written entirely by the cast but originally conceptualized by me, was a complicated and networked set of parameters and challenges. On the whole, we constructed a three-act show in which the audience converged with performers, gathering nodes of “input” which influenced the outcome/ “output” of the final third act. In summary, performers became agents of change alongside audience members who were offered opportunities for empowered interactions in a hacked theatrical environment.