

# The **CONTEMPORARY ENSEMBLE**

Interviews with theatre-makers



Edited by  
Duška **RADOSAVLJEVIĆ**

ROUTLEDGE

# The Contemporary Ensemble

## Interviews with theatre-makers

Questions of ensemble – what it is, how it works – are both inherent to a variety of Western theatre traditions, and re-emerging and evolving in striking new ways in the twenty-first century. *The Contemporary Ensemble* draws together an unprecedented range of original interviews with world-renowned theatre-makers in order to directly address both the former and latter concerns. Reflecting on ‘the ensemble way of working’ within this major new resource are figures including:

Michael Boyd, Yuri Butusov, Lyn Gardner, Elizabeth LeCompte, Phelim McDermott, Emma Rice, Adriano Shaplin, Max Stafford-Clark, and Hermann Wünderlich;

representing companies including:

The Berliner Ensemble, Kneehigh Theatre, The Neo-Futurists, Ontroerend Goed, Out of Joint, The Riot Group, The RSC, The Satirikon Theatre, Shadow Casters, Song of the Goat, and The Wooster Group.

All twenty-two interviews were conducted especially for the collection, and draw upon the author’s rich background working as scholar, educator and dramaturg with a variety of ensembles. The resulting compendium radically re-situates the ensemble in the context of globalisation, higher education and simplistic understandings of ‘text-based’ and ‘devised’ theatre practice, and traces a compelling new line through the contemporary theatre landscape.

**Duška Radosavljević** is a Lecturer in Drama and Theatre Studies at the University of Kent, UK. She has previously worked as the Dramaturg at Northern Stage, education practitioner at the Royal Shakespeare Company and theatre critic for *The Stage* newspaper.

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Edited by  
Duška Radosavljević

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## Postscript

As this book goes into print, two of its chapters have also been made available in audio-visual form in the Routledge Performance Archive (RPA): an audio recording of the interview with Mike Alfreds and a video recording of the interview with Adriano Shaplin. Please see [www.routledgeperformancearchive.com](http://www.routledgeperformancearchive.com) for more information.

# Preface

It may seem inappropriate for a book about ensembles to open with a personal statement about the editor's singular aims and her particular circumstances that lead her into this research. However, I feel compelled to outline how this book has emerged from very real problems, ideas and challenges I have encountered in my interactions with various theatre-makers, critics, teachers and students of theatre, ever since my own student days in the UK in the mid-1990s.

Of partial significance here is my own cultural background as a person who was brought up in a collectivist atmosphere of a former socialist country – Yugoslavia – a place that was, thanks to its liberal form of socialism during the Cold War, often defined as 'the best of both worlds'. The *Cambridge Guide to World Theatre* (Cambridge University Press, 1988, p. 1093) pointed out the significance of the Belgrade International Theatre Festival (BITEF) 'which has since 1967 featured the most important avant-garde works from all over the world'. Nevertheless, the country's own theatre production carried an emphasis on the so-called 'dramatic theatre' and was heavily influenced by the German and Russian repertory theatre models which customarily included resident ensembles.

My first degree in Theatre Studies at the University of Huddersfield featured a healthy mix of Grotowski-influenced physical theatre, performance studies, drama and theatre history without an explicit acknowledgement of any tensions that might have historically existed between various paradigms of the study of theatre and performance, thus indicating that by the mid-1990s those battles might have been laid to rest, ushering in a more layered understanding of the field, whatever its name might be. As an example of this, I recall that in our first year we were taken to see *Forced Entertainment*, *Trestle Theatre*, the *Wrestling School* and the multi-award winning TV actor *Warren Mitchell* as *King Lear*, as part of one and the same course.

Changes were afoot within the theatre sector itself. By the time I joined *The Stage* newspaper's Edinburgh Reviewing team in 1998, a new

category of the annual Acting Excellence Awards was being added to the already-existing Best Actor and Best Actress – the Best Ensemble Award. Incidentally, Howard Goorney of the Theatre Workshop was one of the members of the Stage Awards judging panel in those years. Since 1998, nominees in this category have included Steven Berkoff's East Productions, Grid Iron, Trestle Theatre, Kaos, Theatre O, the Riot Group, but also more recently Traverse Theatre, National Theatre of Scotland, Song of the Goat and Ontroerend Goed – indicating an increasingly diversified understanding of the term 'ensemble'. Our award-judging discussions in this category have often revolved around two questions: 'Are all of the individual performances in the ensemble of award-winning quality?' and 'To what extent is the whole greater than the sum of its parts?'. As it happens, I have been dealing with these and a number of other questions concerning ensemble throughout most of the rest of my career.

From 2002 to 2005 I was employed as the Dramaturg at Northern Stage in Newcastle-upon-Tyne which, under the leadership of Alan Lyddiard, had been trying desperately to survive as a regional ensemble company ever since 1998. A lot of my time and energy was invested in promoting the values of the ensemble way of working, without always fully understanding the odds which were stacked against it and just how out of place – culturally and locally – this mode of working had been. It was the Equity and the Directors' Guild of Great Britain (DGGB) Conference on Ensemble Theatre at the Barbican on 24 November 2004 that opened my eyes to this. In a characteristically inspiring keynote speech, Michael Boyd, the then newly appointed Artistic Director of the Royal Shakespeare Company, outlined his vision for the company as an ensemble. This proved to be enough to lure me into the RSC, when Alan Lyddiard abruptly resigned from his position at the helm of Northern Stage in January 2005. For a year – which also saw a year-long Complete Works Festival – I had an opportunity to witness from the inside the complexities associated with imbuing a world-renowned national institution with the spirit of togetherness, experimentation and community.

Having finally returned to academia, I find myself asking these questions: What is meant by the 'ensemble way of working' in the twenty-first century? What advantages and problems are entailed therein? How does the contemporary ensemble fit with the heritage of the twentieth century, and how does it proceed forward?

Both as a practitioner and researcher, I am interested in how the ensemble way of working alters the theatre-making process by comparison to the process that exists between a number of otherwise-assembled freelance artists working on a project for five to eight weeks – including the run – and then going their separate ways. In addition, as a pedagogue,

I am confronted with an increasing trend of groups of young people graduating from drama and theatre courses together and going on to become successful ensemble companies, rather than seeking out individual careers. This requires recognition in terms of how we work as educators, but also in terms of how it has changed and continues to change the current theatre landscape.

Following the end of Michael Boyd's artistic directorship of the RSC in 2012, this book may come out in the aftermath of one significant ensemble project in the UK. However, I hope that this collection, featuring an ensemble of distinct international voices testifying to the virtues of collaborative ways of working, will continue to inspire new similar ventures. It is therefore dedicated to the ensembles of the future.

Duška Radosavljević  
*Canterbury, April 2012*

# Introduction

I also get very upset when I see a production where the only pulse beating is that of the director, whereas the other thirty people who are on the stage may also have a beating pulse, and these pulses united are not just thirty pulses, they are much, much more. It's like the notion of critical mass in physics, where this mass comes to a certain point and there is an explosion.

(Lev Dodin in Delgado and Heritage 1996: 74)

You can't push everyone to be, you know, magnesium sulphate. There will never be two of the same element – so the fusion is unique. [...] Sometimes you get explosions!

(Lloyd Newson in Tushingham 1994:51)

On face value, one may struggle to find much aesthetic common ground between the London-based dance theatre company DV8 and the Maly Theatre from St Petersburg, renowned for its meticulous renditions of famous literary classics. The way that their respective leaders, Lloyd Newson and Lev Dodin, both serendipitously resort to the scientific analogy of an increase and sudden release of considerable energy is, however, indicative of a commitment that each of those directors has to a particular way of working – namely, a group of individuals working together. Although these two companies are sadly not featured in this collection, their underlying ethos is – as well as the wide-reaching capacity of the term 'ensemble', illustrated by the synergy provided between the two quotes above.

Part of the purpose of this introduction is to engage with a definition of terms, their historical development, and the choice of vocabulary for this particular volume. It is worth briefly foregrounding here the online Oxford Dictionary's designation of the term 'ensemble' as originating from the Middle English adverb (via French and Latin) meaning 'at the

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same time'. The adverbial aspect of this usage emphasises a process rather than a fixed state, making it particularly applicable in the context of theatre-making. In addition, the primary meaning of the noun 'ensemble' as we use it today – to mean 'a group of musicians, actors or dancers who perform together' – is augmented by a more conceptual use: 'a group of items viewed as a whole, rather than individually'.<sup>1</sup> As suggested by Dodin above, advocates of the ensemble way of working very often emphasise the notion of the whole being greater than the sum of its parts.

The following discussion is therefore intended to contextualise the collection of interviews presented in the volume in four specific ways. First, it will provide some historical and theoretical frameworks within which to begin engaging with potential taxonomies, methodologies and types of ensembles. This will serve to raise particular questions and problems that the concluding analysis of the empirical research will seek to address to some extent, while also framing the enclosed interviews. Second, it will define the key terms chosen for the title of this book: 'contemporary', 'ensemble' and 'theatre-maker'. Further it will explain the criteria for selection of the subjects of these interviews, the resulting formats of the conversations, and the overarching organisational principles of their layout. Wishing to leave enough space for the reader's own conclusions, the final section will tease out some preliminary areas of insight gained through the field research, in response to the initial questions raised concerning the definition of the ensemble way of working in the twenty-first century.

### **Histories, issues and taxonomies**

Combing through histories of Western theatre, one might come across the use of the term 'ensemble' in relation to theatre only as late as the nineteenth century, and specifically the Meiningen Ensemble. Having toured Europe extensively between 1874 and 1890, the Meiningen Ensemble is often hailed as a precursor to and an influence on both André Antoine's Théâtre Libre (1887–1896) and Konstantin Stanislavsky's Moscow Art Theatre (1897 to present). Prior to the nineteenth century, groups of actors working together are often referred to as companies (e.g. King's Men) or troupes (e.g. *commedia dell'arte*). The semantic choice of denominators by various writers is probably unconscious, but this is what Michael Booth highlights as the distinguishing characteristic of the Duke Saxe-Meiningen's aesthetic approach:

Georg laid great stress on ensemble; he was opposed to the star system and required leading actors in one production to take minor roles and even walk on in another, if necessary. Lengthy rehearsal periods also

ensured perfection of the crowd scenes, which much impressed European reviewers and theatre people.

(Booth 1997: 336)

The use of the term ensemble in this context seems to imply a lack of the hierarchy that is perhaps inherent to acting companies led by actor managers in the nineteenth century and the allocation of roles on the basis of seniority. Thus the organising structure of the ensemble implies that the actor's contribution is closer to that of a musician – which is also where the term ensemble is found more frequently.

In addition to the principle of equal attention being extended to all minor parts in a play or towards individuals within crowd scenes, as illustrated by the Meiningen Ensemble, Stanislavsky's embracing of the ensemble way of working is also understood to be linked to his interest in training as an indispensable part of the actor's life in theatre. In Chapter 10 of *An Actor Prepares*, for example, Stanislavsky outlines the importance of 'communion' between actors, or 'a sincere effort to exchange living human feelings with [each] other' (Stanislavski 2006 [1937]: 205). Stanislavsky's contemporary, the director Theodore Komisarjevsky, described the achievement of this kind of quality in performance as ground-breaking, and in Magarshack's quotation below, the term 'ensemble' – which thus acquires another level of meaning – is used to denote it:

It is the method of the formulation of an inner ensemble, based on inner communication, that was Stanislavsky's greatest discovery, and in the Moscow Art Theatre we saw and felt such an ensemble for the first time.

(Komisarjevsky quoted in Magarshack 1973 [1950]: 84)

Simon Shepherd traces the first calls for ensemble in Britain back to 1904 and the early plans for the National Theatre which would 'establish a company of performers for at least three years' (Shepherd 2009: 65). Proponents of this project over the next 60 years, and those in Britain who believed in the art rather than the business model of theatre which had dominated the British stage in the nineteenth century,<sup>2</sup> repeatedly looked to Europe for inspiration and for evidence to support their arguments for greater subsidy. Of particular impact was the visit in 1935 of Michel Saint-Denis with his *Compagnie des Quinze*, which Gielgud described as one of 'the most perfect examples of teamwork ever presented in London' (in Shepherd 2009: 68). This subsequently led to Saint-Denis' ensemble-oriented pedagogical experiments in London with George

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Devine through the London Theatre Studio in the 1930s and Bristol Old Vic after World War Two.

Meanwhile in New York, in his account of the formation in 1931 of the Group Theatre collective, Harold Clurman describes a situation that may not have been dissimilar to the one that took place in Moscow in 1897, when Nemirovich-Danchenko and Konstantin Stanislavsky founded the Moscow Art Theatre. Two men, Clurman and Lee Strasberg – later joined by the producer Cheryl Crawford – with distinct but compatible sets of skills and a shared passion for raising quality standards, arrived at a decisive conclusion: continued collaboration and growth of a group of artists together, relieved of the pressures of the market economy, was a required necessity. Having produced such artists as Elia Kazan, Stella Adler, Clifford Odets, Sanford Meisner and Morris Carnovsky, the Group Theatre could be seen to have eventually contributed more to the film industry than to the reinvention of the American theatre scene. The reasons for the limited influence of its collective model of working on other theatre artists in the United States before the 1960s might be sought in the nature of US arts funding, and historical factors including World War Two and, later, Senator McCarthy's anti-communism. However, by the 1960s, this had changed radically, with the growing prominence of experimental companies such as the Living Theatre (which had started in 1947), the Open Theatre and the Performance Group.

The term 'ensemble' as a mode of theatre-making probably began to catch on in the English-speaking world as a result of another influential guest appearance in London – that of the Berliner Ensemble in 1956. According to Michael Billington, this event was one of the two in the 'pivotal year' (Billington 2007: 93) that had a long-term effect on British Theatre as a whole.<sup>3</sup> The other was the opening of the English Stage Company at the Royal Court with the premiere of *Look Back in Anger* by John Osborne. Its founder, George Devine, and the founder of the Royal Shakespeare Company, Peter Hall, did fall under the spell of Brecht's company, but they were not the only ones. Joan Littlewood, aligned with Brecht ideologically as well as aesthetically, was the first in England to actually direct and star in a professional production of Brecht's play *Mother Courage*, also in 1956.

Littlewood is another name often invoked in relation to the ensemble way of working, particularly in the British context. According to Nadine Holdsworth, throughout her career, which spanned 1945–1975, Littlewood 'maintained faith in the centrality of a permanent creative ensemble, the "composite mind" engaged in a cooperative sharing of ideas, skills and creativity' (Holdsworth 2006: 49). This was rooted in Littlewood's working class allegiances, her interest in agit-prop before World War Two, and

active engagement with popular forms of entertainment as well as the classics. Holdsworth highlights the problem of the evolving ‘cult of Joan’ (2006: 24) which ensued with her growing success in the mid-to-late 1950s. In addition, in 1955, her life partner and Theatre Workshop member Gerry Raffles got enough money to acquire their base, the Theatre Royal Stratford East, which shifted the organisational structure from a collective of equal individuals to an entity with a defined leadership – Raffles as business manager and Littlewood as an artistic director who made repertoire-related decisions.

This notion of a prominent leader being associated with an ensemble was by no means exclusive to Theatre Workshop as a company. In fact, it is a story that repeats case after case throughout the twentieth century: Jerzy Grotowski’s Teatr Laboratorium, Ariane Mnouchkine’s Théâtre du Soleil, Eugenio Barba’s Odin Teatret, Richard Schechner’s Performance Group, Max Stafford-Clark’s Joint Stock, Anne Bogart’s SITI Company.<sup>4</sup> In contrast to this, however, various directors have been eager to acknowledge their ensemble members as co-authors. In an unpublished handout in English, believed to have been distributed during the Theatre Laboratorium’s visit to New York in 1969, Jerzy Grotowski stated:

Without in any way wishing to give an impression of mock modesty, I must stress that in the end I am not **the** author of our productions, or at any rate, not the only one. I am not somebody who has devised the whole show by himself, set up all the roles in advance, planned the décor, arranged the lighting and designed the costumes. “Grotowski” is not a one-man band. [...] My name is, in fact, only there as a symbol of a group and its work in which are fused all the efforts of my associates. And these efforts are not a matter of collaboration pure and simple: they amount to **creation**.

(Grotowski n.d., original emphasis)<sup>5</sup>

In the Delgado and Rebellato’s 2010 volume on *Contemporary European Theatre Directors*, both Stephen Knapper and Lourdes Orozco seem to identify a move from collective creation to director-led decision making as a more recent development. Orozco provides the example of La Carnicería Teatro, which even got renamed to include the director’s name, and thus became ‘the more hierarchical La Carnicería-Rodrigo Garcia’ (in Delgado and Rebellato 2010: 309). Interestingly, both Knapper and Orozco cite *Complicite* as an example of a similar move from collectivity towards a singular directorial leadership,<sup>6</sup> even though Helen Freshwater has highlighted *Complicite*’s ongoing self-professed emphasis on collaboration as an essential working methodology

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(in Holdsworth and Luckhurst 2008: 177). Prompted by Grotowski's quote above, and in the context of this research project, one might also do well to ask: What is the difference between 'collaboration pure and simple' and collective creation?

As this section is intended to raise questions and frame the issues that will be addressed later on the basis of empirical research, it is also worth adding some nuance to the problem already mentioned of ensemble leadership. Despite Orozco's observation of 'a shift towards director-led theatre at the expense of collective creative structures' (Orozco 2010: 309), there is ample historical evidence that a dominant leader has often been associated with ensemble, especially if training and group development formed part of the picture.

In *Environmental Theater*, Richard Schechner (1994 [1973]) rather openly shares his experience of dealing with the power struggles within the Performance Group just at the time when the group outwardly seemed to be at its peak. He notes that *Dionysus in 69* gave an impression of group cohesion which was extremely attractive to the audience but at the same time entirely unrepresentative of the company's inner dynamics. Even though Schechner confesses that his motives in forming the group with his students were rooted in a desire to create a sense of community and a kind of 'family' (1994 [1973]: 255), he observes that the life of the group took its own course, turning him from a loved guru to a figure of hate. This was apparently a common feature of organised groups according to Philip Slater's 1966 classic on group psychology, *Microcosm*, cited by Schechner in his discussion. Eventually, Schechner observes the importance of delegating power, noting that Stanislavsky had avoided a loss of authority by forming studio theatres and appointing his students to run them (1994 [1973]: 284).

'Should groups break up every few years so that routinization does not encase them in their own discoveries?' (1994 [1973]: 283) asks the closing section of Schechner's analysis. Interestingly, psychologist Bruce Tuckman (1965) found that certain patterns in group dynamics do exist, and his more reassuring model – amended in 1977 and still used by social psychologists today – features a sequence of five stages:

- 1 Forming – a group comes together around a common goal.
- 2 Storming – conflicts and disagreements arise.
- 3 Norming – the group resolves conflicts and arrives at shared norms and standards of behaviour.
- 4 Performing – the group effectively pursues its goal.
- 5 Adjourning – following the completion of the task, group members loosen their ties to each other until the next task.<sup>7</sup>

It is clearly the stage of ‘storming’ that highlights the issues of inner politics of the group and potentially produces a leader in the ‘norming’ stage. This model applies well to theatre groups as it follows the natural rhythm of creating, performing and temporarily adjourning activity; however, it can also be applied to an overview of a company’s lifespan, potentially accounting for phases of initial success followed by a ‘storming’ period involving funding issues or pressures entailed in the individual members’ work-life balance. The sequence is cyclical, regularly returning to the ‘storming stage’.

There is another pertinent similarity to be observed between many – though not all – of the ensembles mentioned above. The initial stages of the ensembles formed by Stanislavsky, Schechner, Mnouchkine, Littlewood and Barba were all marked by a transition from ‘amateurism’ (Schechner 1994 [1973]: 257; Singleton on Mnouchkine in Delgado and Rebellato 2010: 31) to professionalism. The early dependence on the leader and the subsequent desire for emancipation would arguably be greater in such cases than in cases where ensemble members come together as more equal partners. This and other distinctions might provide us with possibilities for looking at nuances of the relationship between the leader and the ensemble, but also at the ways in which pedagogical practices in and around ensemble have changed by the twenty-first century. It may be interesting to add here that Mermikides and Smart have more recently identified a model of ensemble in the UK comprised of a core group of two people as a means of achieving collaboration, resisting directorial authority and dealing with economic pressures (Mermikides and Smart 2010: 16–17). This represents more a model of ensemble leadership than a model of ensemble company per se, but not surprisingly the model is represented in this collection too.

Although the ensemble way of working can be encountered in various cultural contexts, it will be subject to specific differences associated with distinct political histories, cultural attitudes towards the arts and mechanisms of arts funding, or even cultural propensity for collaborative ways of working. Cultural psychologist Harry Triandis has even proposed an empirical set of criteria by which to measure cultural predisposition for group behaviour, for example.<sup>8</sup> More significantly, in the second half of the twentieth century, an important differentiating factor existed between the Eastern and the Western European countries due to their respective political-economic systems of organisation. Despite its many faults, the communist East was graced with generous arts funding which made it a norm for theatres to employ permanent resident ensembles and enjoy long rehearsal periods – a luxury which many theatre artists in Eastern Europe find difficult to relinquish today. On the other hand, from

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a British perspective where a standard rehearsal period is five weeks, most of European theatre is seen as heavily subsidised, in fact. Lichtenfels and Hunter provide an interesting estimate that ‘the cities of Munich and Hamburg each give more to their civic arts programmes than the Arts Council gives to the whole of theatre in England’ (in Delgado and Svich 2002: 43). In the early twenty-first century process of globalisation, one might ask what implications does this have on any attempts at cross-cultural ensembles?

In trying to understand the nature of internal relations within an ensemble, it also is important to acknowledge the existence of a number of types of ensemble, which have emerged not simply as a result of training, but as a result of funding and employment structures (Northern Stage, Dundee Rep, RSC and many Continental European ensembles) or shared political or aesthetic values (Welfare State International, Kneehigh, The Neo-Futurists, Forced Entertainment).

Additionally, in her analysis of Forced Entertainment’s creative methodology, Alex Mermikides distinguishes between the ‘system model’ and the ‘ensemble model’ of collective theatre-making whereby the former refers to companies working together under the banner of a particular methodology as opposed to the latter model where the ensemble is assembled around a charismatic leader (in Harvie and Lavender 2010: 106). Although I admire this incisive classification, I would query the applied terminology, opting for a broader understanding of the term ‘ensemble’, as this volume will testify. Nevertheless, Mermikides’s proposition makes a very helpful contribution to the discussion of ensemble leadership by distinguishing between the post-war type of ‘director’ and the role that Tim Etchells assumed within Forced Entertainment. The key departure taken by the company is a rejection of the Romantic idea of an artist having total control over the artwork – an attitude held by the ‘post-war director’. The company therefore disassociated itself from ‘calculated intentionality, individual authorship and the display of artistic virtuosity – trappings of cultural elitism and hierarchy’ (2010: 105). However:

At the same time, recognition of the power of the individual director’s vision in creating innovative theatre, as well as the practical advantages of leadership in making both administrative and creative decisions, ensure that the *auteur*-director never really goes away.

(Harvie and Lavender 2010: 105)

In other words, it is indeed possible for a director within an ensemble to choose to be a benevolent or a non-authoritative presence, rather than

conforming to previously-held preconceptions representing a threat to the creative and political life of the group. Effectively, Mermikides's analysis points to another issue which underlies this volume – the issue of authority and the changing attitudes of contemporary theatre-makers towards it.

Finally, before proceeding with a definition of key terms deployed by this book, it is useful to conclude the historical overview by considering Simon Shepherd's taxonomy of group organisation in British theatre, arranged in a vaguely chronological order by the time of their emergence: repertory, ensemble, collective and collaboration. Shepherd associates repertory theatres with the first half of the twentieth century in Britain, seeing them as a step between the Victorian entrepreneurial model of theatre-making and an artistic ensemble, and highlights their key value as being a greater empowerment for the actors and their increased connection with the community. Ensembles are understood by reference to the continental influences described above and seen as emerging mid-twentieth century. Shepherd cites an interesting example of Joint Stock under Max Stafford-Clark starting off as an ensemble but in the course of the rehearsals of David Hare's highly political piece *Fanshen* in 1974 arriving at a crossroads between an ensemble and a collective. The distinction between the two is drawn on the basis of how the principles of political organisation and aesthetic effect are prioritised in relation to each other, with the latter prioritising political over the artistic concerns.<sup>9</sup>

In the aftermath of 1968 in Europe, the notion of political organisation of artists was clearly becoming paramount, and this is illustrated by the example of Mnouchkine's work in France (Singleton 2010), as well as the rise of fringe companies following the end of theatre censorship in Britain. Sandy Craig credits this particular year with the emergence of what he calls 'alternative theatre' in Britain, encompassing political theatre, community theatre, theatre-in-education, performance art and companies presenting plays with a different agenda from the mainstream literary theatre (Craig 1980: 20). From this temporal distance, one has to recognise that such developments, including the formation of an increasing number of collectives at the time, were clearly linked to their political context of Great Britain during the Cold War, and often motivated by a strong left wing ideology which, although it was losing popular support (paving the way for Margaret Thatcher's victory in 1979), had found fertile ground among the artists. This resulted in significant and highly influential examples of collectives defined by their socialist (Red Ladder), gender (Monstrous Regiment) or sexual (Gay Sweatshop) politics.

The 1970s are marked not only by the proliferation of fringe companies and collectives, but also by the emergence of a new theatre-making

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process. According to Jen Harvie (2005), through the abolition of the Lord Chamberlain, British theatre was no longer bound by the notion of a pre-written text.<sup>10</sup> This process which gives the ensemble members an authorship role in the making of a piece has variously been referred to as: improvisation (in the Stanislavskian tradition); authorial work ('autor-skirad RAD', 'autorsko divadlo' in East European contexts where fine art or scenography exerted greater influence than dramatic text on theatre-makers); collective creation (in the French context); workshopping (by Joan Littlewood); creative collaboration (in the US); and devising (more broadly in the UK).

The term 'devising' appears to have entered the theatre-making vocabulary in the UK via the very specific practice of theatre-in-education (TIE), which often involved groups of artists devising educational 'programmes' rather than solely 'plays'. The term emerged between the inception of the Belgrade Theatre Coventry in 1964 (as an institution which pioneered TIE work) and 1980 when the first written record of it appeared in Dave Pammenter's contribution to Tony Jackson's book on TIE *Learning Through Theatre*. Nevertheless, 'devising' has since grown to become synonymous with an entire field of non-dramatic theatre and performance in the UK, and progressively in the rest of the English-speaking world.<sup>11</sup>

It is interesting that Shepherd recognises a fourth type of a theatre-making group of artists which he denotes using the American term 'collaboration', but under which he clearly refers to a type of collective which has left its political drives behind in the interest of art, interdisciplinarity and public engagement. This type of ensemble is popularly associated with devising as a methodology; however, Shepherd's choice of term appears to be determined also by the Arts Council's emphasis on 'collaboration' as a desired quality of fundable work at the turn of the twenty-first century.<sup>12</sup> 'Collaboration', he concludes, 'slides from being an organizational issue into being a funding category' (Shepherd 2009: 79), thus polarising even further away from the notion of collective 'creation'.

However, the attempt at a departure from the term 'devising' may well be wise, not least because of the fact that its apparent inflation in the UK has led to a number of misconceptions. First, its implied binary opposition to text-based theatre tends to create confusion in Continental Europe, as work on any pre-written text in many European mainstream theatres customarily involves a collective and an improvisational approach in the process of rehearsal. Attending Eugenio Barba's 2005 International School of Theatre Anthropology in Wroclaw on the topic of Improvisation, I was repeatedly struck by the amount of devising we were involved in under the name of 'improvisation'; my Anglo-Saxon understanding of the term 'improvisation' had led me to anticipate a focus on

‘extemporaneous performance’. More importantly for this project, the overuse of the term in the British context has also led to a conflation of the terms ‘devising’ and ‘ensemble’, where it is implied that ensembles typically devise and only exceptionally work with plays and playwrights. I am keen to redress this balance as part of this project, and to recognise the increasing and undeniably healthy interplay between actors and writers in the contemporary ensemble (e.g. Frantic Assembly, Kneehigh, The Riot Group, Third Angel).

### **Definitions of key terms**

The historical overview above has highlighted potential uses of the term ‘ensemble’ as applying to an anti-hierarchical – art rather than business-oriented – model of working which emphasises inner interconnectedness between individual members and is often characterised by a commitment to training. The ‘ensemble’, as suggested by Shepherd (2009), could be specifically perceived as being the result of a mid-twentieth century Continental European influence which was outgrown in the UK by ‘devising’ collectives in the 1970s, and counterpointed in the US by groups engaged in ‘creative collaboration’. Different conceptions and manifestations of the ensemble way of working in different cultural contexts must therefore be understood in relation to their own specific genealogies, if meaningful cross-cultural collaboration is to take place in an increasingly globalised world. The twenty-first century ensemble takes into consideration different funding structures, different attitudes to tradition and innovation, changing conceptions of leadership and authority, and varying artistic vocabularies.

More specifically, the understanding of the term ‘ensemble’ in this volume is culturally broad enough to include manifestations of collective theatre-making that comply with and depart from notions of twentieth century divisions of labour (actors, directors, playwrights, designers, composers); various models of organisation (from state-funded residential ensembles to peripatetic associations of like-minded individuals, to abstracted notions of ensemble in the absence of continuous funding); and various models of artistic practice (text-based, movement-based, inter-disciplinary, conceptually-driven). The main criterion is that the subjects represented here are speaking not only on behalf of themselves as individuals, but on behalf of an artistic entity which depends upon the contribution of other – often long-term – collaborators as constituent parts of that entity.

‘The ensemble way of working’ is understood to represent a work ethos which is collective, creative and collaborative – whether by means of

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individual members making the same kind of contribution (devising) or making distinct kinds of contribution towards the same artistic outcome (writing, directing, composing, designing, performing). Both devising and playwriting are therefore understood as potentially ensemble-based activities. This book may even go as far as to suggest that the ensemble way of working is a default methodology for theatre-making as it is discernable even among practitioners who do not work under the banner of an ensemble, such as director Katie Mitchell, but may work with the same individuals repeatedly.<sup>13</sup>

This may also be true of individuals, such as the director Mike Alfreds, whose work is contingent on an ensemble methodology and on audience participation in the creation of meaning, as he will reveal in his interview. These examples may well raise the question of the economic context within which this kind of work is being made. As will be pointed out by Michael Boyd, the notion of ‘the ensemble way of working’ and the inherently collaborative nature of theatre-making is in practice more difficult to achieve in a free market economy than it is in the heavily subsidised context of a Central European country in which it is simply standard practice.

The term ‘contemporary’ is used to disassociate the notion of ‘ensemble’ from any previously held conceptions of either the political or the aesthetic nature of the ensembles represented here. In most cases, the featured ensembles are still active, and if they are not, they have been chosen for inclusion because of the ways in which they have been ahead of their time and have precipitated changes that we are witnessing today in relation to theatre authorship and its relationship with the audience. The contemporary – early twenty-first century – ensemble is often characterised by shared authority, multi-ethnicity, cultural mobility, multilingualism, inter-disciplinarity and a broad understanding of theatre and performance. The contemporary ensemble deploys collaboration as a strategy, not for purely political or pragmatic reasons, but as an indication of a system of artistic values.

And finally a word about ‘theatre-making’ – a term which is increasingly gaining currency in the twenty-first century. In 2010, in the process of writing a case study of Alan Lyddiard’s Northern Stage (1998–2005) and its debt to Lev Dodin for Jonathan Pitches’ volume *Russians in Britain*, I interviewed the Guardian critic Lyn Gardner, a one-time advocate of Lyddiard’s work. Talking more broadly about ensemble work during this interview, Gardner made a useful and inspiring distinction between actors and ‘theatre-makers’ in British theatre. The implication seemed to be that – contrary to the drama school graduates, customarily bound by the strategising of their agents – the latter type of performer

would be associated with devised work and the kind of organic ensembles that have emerged from universities. Interestingly, the term is also deployed by Harvie and Lavender in their 2010 volume on international theatre-making processes, where in the summation of the project as a whole, it is closely linked to the notion of postdramatic theatre practices.<sup>14</sup> Needless to say, the book encompasses theatre-makers who work both with playtexts and the creative methodologies that might be called ‘devising’. These theatre-makers are also not simply directors, actors, designers or writers, but often combine a number of different kinds of labour into one role. My recourse to the term ‘theatre-making’ is intended to register a certain change of climate. Even when live art is brought into this book’s frame of reference, it is with the understanding that its use is integrated within a working process that is ultimately theatre-based – and my understanding of this is that it presupposes the presence of an audience in a singular time and space (however complex this notion might have become in a mediatised society) and an act of communi(cati)on with them. This is by no means intended to discredit the efforts of live and performance artists, but on the contrary to acknowledge their achievement in bringing theatre back in touch with its heritage of live performance and visual art in those contexts where literary standards might have predominated.

There are no catchphrases – the terms used here are existing terms being imbued with new meanings through changing times. The ambition of this book is therefore not to radically break with the past, but to observe the possibility that theatre may change organically, leaving behind some of its old concerns – such as psychological realism, particular divisions of labour, notions of professionalism and amateurism, forms of authorship and authority, political and ideological drives, aesthetic preferences, established relationships with the audience. Its ability to move with and reflect the changing times is precisely its defining characteristic, and this book is an attempt to keep a finger on the pulse of the time.

### **Selection criteria**

Being a compilation of primary research, this volume provides an opportunity for many of the previously unheard voices to share information about their practice and their way of working. The questions posed to them are often open questions, driven by a genuine curiosity, and by a desire to connect with and understand my interlocutors. A reader might feel that there are potential issues emerging within some of the interviews that are not made sufficiently explicit through questioning, or that certain questions are evaded. As an interviewer, I found it important to

ensure the interviewees' trust by avoiding undue confrontation or challenging issues. Prior to publication, all of the interviews were sent to the interviewees for comments, in the process of which some were edited. Most of them have also been slightly condensed by me in order to sharpen the focus on the issues under examination. The kind of material made available here should certainly be open to the reader's interpretation and critical analysis, rather than forming any kind of gospel truth. As a means of summarising my findings, I offer a brief overview at the end of this chapter. Some of these findings will have subsequently informed an examination of the modes of authorship in contemporary theatre – and specifically the interplay between text and performance – in a separate book project entitled *Theatre-Making* (Palgrave 2013), which partly explores the thesis that the ensemble way of working has effected notable changes in this domain.

As implied above, one of the main criteria in selecting subjects for this volume has been inclusivity – although of course the limited space of this volume will inevitably raise questions about certain exclusions. I wanted to have a variety of voices ranging from performers to directors, writers and dramaturgs. (Ideally, I wanted some composers, designers and choreographers as well, but these kinds of professionals often tend to work as freelancers rather than as permanent ensemble members). I also wanted a variety of cultural backgrounds, although for reasons of my own geographical location, almost half of the selected subjects are UK-based. However, rather than aiming to have particular cultural groups and ethnicities represented in the selection (Asian and African representatives are conspicuous by their absence here), I was more interested in examples of cross-cultural ensembles which have achieved international recognition (Not Yet It's Difficult, Song of the Goat, Ontroerend Goed). In most cases, the ensembles represented are at least 10 years old; they have therefore already survived potential moments of 'storming' in their career and acquired certain wisdom worth sharing in this context. And finally, I wanted a variety of ensemble models – from big state-funded residential companies such as the Royal Shakespeare Company and the Berliner Ensemble, to those that have gone through various phases of development (Kneehigh, Pig Iron), and those that are experimental in their structure (Shadow Casters, Ontroerend Goed). Sometimes, the chosen subjects have had the experience of working with more than one kind of ensemble, such as Joanna Holden (Northern Stage, Kneehigh, Cirque du Soleil), or they may have more than one hat or cultural base, such as Gabor Tompa. In one case, the representatives of two different ensembles Alexander Kelly (Third Angel) and Chris Thorpe (Unlimited) are interviewed about their ongoing collaboration.

I was also highly motivated by a desire to include some of the voices that are not usually heard in this context (dramaturg Hanna Slättne – Tinderbox, producer Richard Jordan), and conversely, despite my own desire to hear the voices of Frantic Assembly, Simon McBurney and Forced Entertainment, I refrained from including these companies as they have recently received analysis in some of the titles cited above. Rare exceptions to this are Elizabeth LeCompte and Max Stafford-Clark, where I was motivated to draw further insights in addition to those already available in recent publications, and actually elicit their own accounts of the initial emergence of their companies and their working methods.

Each interview features a short contextual statement about the company/artists being represented in it and a brief bibliography (where available). Typically, the subject's background and formative influences are covered, as well as any characteristic working methodologies and individual examples of work. Most of the interviews were recorded live and transcribed, with the exception of Ian Morgan where the interview took place in writing. Both of these methodologies have their advantages and disadvantages – spontaneity on the one hand, as opposed to depth of insight on the other – and I opted to have both represented in this collection. Live interviews provided an opportunity to respond to the moment, and I allowed each interviewee to drive the conversation in the direction they wanted, as long as this was within the parameters of my enquiry: Shaplin, Shadow Casters and Ontroerend Goed were clearly motivated by a desire to record a certain chronology of their ensemble works as part of the interviews; Holden wanted to offer details from rehearsals; and Tompa had strong feelings on the comparative advantages and disadvantages of working in distinct cultural contexts. In terms of length, the interviews range from 2,500 to 7,500 words, becoming longer towards the end of the volume as more contemporary or innovative practices are brought into the mix, requiring more detailed contextualisation.

The material collected so far has yielded insights falling into three broad categories:

- 1 *Redefinitions of ensemble.* For example, the term 'family' as a metaphor divides the subjects: Boyd and Rice are against it, while some subjects, like Pejović and Bakal (Shadow Casters), literally do have families together.<sup>15</sup> Admittedly, the notion of 'ensemble as family' does seem to belong to an age of political idealism which has long been replaced by other realities, although other kinds of personal idealism are still in evidence. Boyd's project is motivated by a desire to overcome the pervading culture of individualism and isolation in

contemporary society. LeCompte, on the other hand, has defined her ensemble by reference to a space which has kept the company together ever since its inception. Adassinsky and Shaplin tend to use musical analogies when discussing their creative processes. Most interestingly, Ontroerend Goed define themselves as a group with 'mutual compatibilities' – which, according to some theorists of business organisation (Amabile 1998), is a highly positive model.

- 2 *Redefinitions of the roles and processes within the ensemble.* As noted above, the twentieth century notions of professionalisation in theatre are being challenged by contemporary ensemble practices, both in terms of the power relations within the ensembles (e.g. notions of leadership) and the kinds of expertise carried by individual ensemble members. This is partly a result of the new theatre-makers' training backgrounds. In the English-speaking world we are witnessing a proliferation of university drama graduates who, by the nature of the pedagogical processes they are exposed to and due to the sheer numbers of those wishing to study the subject in the 2000s, are increasingly conditioned to work in groups. Most notable additions to this trend include Little Bulb (University of Kent), Belt Up (University of York), Paper Birds (University of Leeds) and Rash Dash (University of Hull). However, they have predecessors in Unlimited Theatre (University of Leeds), Third Angel (University of Lancaster), The Riot Group (Sarah Lawrence College), Ontroerend Goed (Ghent University) and Frantic Assembly (Swansea University), none of whom have had formal theatre training, and in the case of the latter three, little or no exposure to drama/theatre/performance as a university subject. What each of these companies has encountered is a certain necessity to defend or justify their entitlement to practice theatre-making, which brings to mind the guild-like exclusivity of the theatre establishments in various cultures. However, their success is by all means good news for the contemporary ensemble, as each one of these examples has brought in a new perspective on the craft itself and the notions of authority and authorship. This is also true of some companies which did not graduate together, such as The Neo-Futurists, founded by Greg Allen to include specifically writer-performers.
- 3 *Redefinitions of the relationship with the audience.* One of the most notable of my recent theatre-going experiences has been the encounter with Ontroerend Goed in their one-to-one exploration of contemporary relationships *Internal* (2009). This piece, which turned audience members into protagonists of sorts, soon proved to be no isolated case, as a whole range of one-to-one performances got

presented by the Battersea Arts Centre for two years running in 2010 and 2011. Simultaneously, the Croatian troupe Shadow Casters has over the years developed a series of interactive performances, at times designed to empower audience members to take action in the changing political world of what was once Eastern Europe. Both Schechner (1994 [1973]) and Shepherd (2009) have pointed out that what is particularly appealing about ensembles is the opportunity for the audience to witness and hypothetically partake of a certain kind of collectivity: ‘What is performed is a possible way of working together in the world’ (Shepherd 2009: 71). Bert O. States uses the term ‘collaborative mode’ to define the default relationship between the actor and the audience in most dramatic theatre (in Zarrilli 1995: 29), while Simon Murray quotes an interesting instance of Theatre de Complicite expressing the Lecoqian principle of ‘the pleasure of play’ by defining their communication mode as a ‘collusion of celebrants’ in the programme note for *The Three Lives of Lucy Chabrol* (Murray 2003: 71). Claire Bishop has noted a paradigmatic move in the UK towards a more active engagement of the audience across the arts (Bishop 2006, 2012) while an increasing number of scholars have turned to the study of spectatorship (Grehan 2009; Kennedy 2009; Fensham 2009). Examples such as Ontroerend Goed and Shadow Casters clearly highlight the possibility of audience members becoming part of the contemporary ensemble. The fact that these three examples point to a simultaneous pursuit of similar goals, in what might have previously been seen as Eastern and Western Europe, is also a good sign in my view. One advantage of a globalised world in the twenty-first century might be the possibility that we intuitively understand each other better.

These trends of redefinition have been used to group the interviews into the three parts *Redefinitions of ensemble*, *Working processes* and *Ensemble and the audience*, although these themes – as well as a number of other resonant themes – run throughout the whole collection. Additional resonances include redefinitions of leadership, training and education, ensemble economics, and cross-cultural collaboration. Some of the artists represented will have worked together – Joanna Holden and Gabor Tompa at Northern Stage; Michael Boyd and Adriano Shaplin at the RSC; the RSC and The Wooster Group – testifying to a certain like-mindedness shared by those companies. More interestingly, however, some of the examples show striking similarities in method and outlook even if they have never met – especially the artists featured in the final part of the volume.