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New Plays in New Ways: Redeveloping the New Play Development Model

By Lily Janiak

Most theatre people know too well how new play development typically works: A playwright submits a draft to a theatre company. The company takes the draft through a series of table reads, workshops and staged readings, with the playwright submitting a new draft based on what he or she has learned from each stage. The process culminates in approximately three weeks of rehearsals and three weeks of performances.

I say "too well" because this model often seems like the only model, and many artists are chafing at its limitations—particularly at how few opportunities for collaboration it affords relative to other models one might imagine. For many, the classic image of the solitary playwright, toiling monastically in his or her cell until a finished product emerges, no longer feels relevant. More and more often, writers are not just creating new work; they're creating new ways of creating new work, often in the company of theatre artists from other disciplines.

In fact, even if this traditional new play development model seems predominant, Bay Area theatre artists already use a wealth of nontraditional models, far too many to cover in a single article, and evidence suggests these new ways of working are becoming only more popular. There's a burgeoning number of groups dedicated to developing plays nontraditionally, and our major regional theatres are also importing work made that way, such as Berkeley Repertory Theatre's and American Conservatory Theater's Kneehigh Theatre productions.

Many factors account for this surge. Gary Graves, codirector of Central Works, points to "an explosion of playwriting talent." Indeed, the number of playwriting MFA programs has ballooned in recent years, and with a broader population entering the discipline, presumably they'd want to create work in a broader variety of ways. Lisa Steindler, artistic director of Z Space, sees new ways of creating work as an adaptation by the community to the fact that acting companies—permanent ensembles of actors and artists who get to work together across time instead of on just one project—no longer exist. Devised theatre, she says, "is not that new; it's just a word we've come up with in the last five years. In the '80s and '90s, we had companies. Nobody can afford that any more. Development processes are bringing temporary companies together as kind of an in-between." For Rob Ready, artistic director of PianoFight and a performer in a workshop production of *Hundred Days*—a collaboratively devised piece that premiered at Z Space in March—those temporary companies of which Steindler speaks allow artists to have deeper relationships with one another and produce bolder art as a result. Of *Hundred Days*, Ready says, "Everybody's friends. There's an inherent level of love and respect and trust. It's very different if you're trying to pull in a bunch of strangers and have them work on it for six weeks." Ben Yalom of foolsFury and Christopher W. White of Mugwumpin both point to new markers of legitimacy that reflect and further promote the expansion of nontraditionally created theatre. Founded in 1996, the Network of Ensemble Theaters has grown to more than 200 companies in recent years, and there's a new grant from the National Theater Project that focuses just on collaborative work.

Within this new wave, there is a great range of different working methods. On one end of the spectrum, devised theatre groups such as Mugwumpin are so collaborative in structure that

they don't even have single, designated playwrights. In such models, roles are more fluid; it often makes sense to refer to artists involved as creators rather than actors or writers or choreographers because all perform these tasks in concert. "Once we have a sense of what the piece is or what the theme is or what the foundation is that we're building upon," says White, "everybody brings in what they're interested in and sort of lays it out." This research, which can take different forms and go deeper or broader depending on the project, the group explores, riffs on and eventually shapes into a piece; the director serves as a guide. "The trick of directing," says White, "is to have an authorial eye and steer the ship, so to speak, but also to listen really, really hard and say, 'Oh, the ship wants to head in this direction.' You need to listen to this ensemble organism and focus the energy, not let the energy of theme or story become too dissipated by the multiplicity of voices."

For many other companies, using a nontraditional new play development model needn't mean reinventing the wheel. Collaboration, after all, is a matter of degree; many artists incorporate elements of it into the writing process without radically altering that process. PlayGround, for example, which offers playwrights in its writers pool an array of opportunities to develop and produce work, isn't in the day-to-day creative trenches with those playwrights, but it's deeply involved in perhaps one of the most important parts of writing: inspiration. Recognizing that one of the greatest struggles of playwriting is simply giving yourself freedom, permission and discipline to commit glints of inspiration to paper, PlayGround assigns its writers pool short monthly prompts, sparking ideas that aren't just writing exercises but that could lead to readings and full productions. It also hosts lecturers, especially in math and science, to further pique playwrights' curiosity. "We've been now for 10 years developing a series of plays inspired by the world and the people of mathematics," says artistic director Jim Kleinmann. "We bring [the playwrights] to the MSRI [Mathematical Sciences Research Institute] headquarters. There's a one-hour presentation by a mathematician on a specific subject—It could be string theory, or the development of calculus." Many plays in the 2013 Best of PlayGround Festival were originally inspired by these lectures: *Symmetrical Smack-Down* by William Bivins, *My Better Half* by Jonathan Spector and *The Spherical Loneliness of Beverly Onion* by Katie May (which was later adapted to a full-length, *Abominable*).

For many Bay Area theatre companies, shaking up the new play development model means introducing early on in the process artists who might otherwise not have begun to collaborate until later. Just Theater, which hosts a group for playwrights called its New Play Development Lab, pairs writers with directors as the writers are writing, rather than after; these directors aren't shaping the script for production, says coartistic director Jonathan Spector, but rather serving as sounding boards for writers: "The focus is just on figuring out what the play is. The directors don't have their own agenda about what the play should be. It's too early in the process to be giving that kind of feedback." In typical development situations, he says, "There's the expectation that you take the play in whatever draft it is and make a finished product. Other people's opinions become more important. This isn't really about that."

In Factory Parts, a new foolsFury performance series for short, ensemble-created works in progress, ensembles are paired with dramaturgs as they're creating. Deborah Eliezer, foolsFury associate artistic director and Factory Parts creator, believes the most radical part of the event is that it legitimizes short works in progress as performance pieces. "There aren't a lot of places to put up half an hour of work and call it a play and have it be acknowledged and understood as part of the evolutionary process in order to get to the next stage," she says. "If we were dancers, this would be no big deal. Sometimes in foolsFury we consider ourselves more akin to

the dance world in practice than to traditional theatre work. The dance community will have entire choreographic showcases that are just five minutes each."

At Central Works, a company that's long been developing plays through its Central Works Method, the entire cast and production team (or close to it) comes on at the beginning of a process, but company codirector Gary Graves doesn't see this method as very radical. "You cannot avoid collaboration in the theatre—the interaction of actor, director, dramaturg, not to mention designers. There's no substitute for that. That is the lab in which the playwright works. You bring the play into that lab, try it out, and you make all sorts of discoveries. We move that lab to the get-go, as the script is first emerging."

For many artists, the most exciting opportunity for earlier collaboration is with designers, whom, many feel, are often brought on as afterthoughts to rather than full collaborators in a production. Ragged Wing Ensemble, an Oakland-based ensemble; 99 Stock, a two-year-old company founded by recent SF State graduates; and the playwright Chris Chen (whose development process for Crowded Fire's *The Hundred Flowers Project* Theatre Bay Area has already detailed extensively in our July/August 2013 issue) all spoke about how central it was to their process to develop scripts that have—and they all used similar language here—holes. For these artists, their scripts (and they don't always look like traditional scripts) truly weren't complete without the contributions of designers. For *Hitcher*, 99 Stock's fall show, which was developed from a draft of screenplay treatment by Jim Morrison, writer/director Alex Peri brought on composers and designers early, sat his team down, he said, "and said, ‘Here are all the holes, here are all the questions, and we have all the pieces to start filling in the holes—the music, the movement.'" Nontraditionally developed theatre, he says, is "very energizing...because you're not sitting there memorizing lines. You're creating organically. We're generating a thousand things but we can only use 10—which do we use? We have to be able to cut away a lot of the bullshit and say, 'What is the corn kernel we're searching for in this?'"

Similarly, Ragged Wing artistic director Amy Sass is most interested in what she calls "these wonderfully imperfect plays." In these pieces, she says, "the written form of the play offers a lot of opportunity to be expressive as a director or a choreographer." They're "scrappy scripts" that "in their literary form would never be considered a perfect play." Ragged Wing, which does both devised work and plays by playwrights such as Sass and Anthony Clarvoe, creates these "imperfect" scripts in different ways. "Some of the work that's created in our company is devised," Sass says. "Some originates from music or visual design or movement. Other work originates from reading. We really like to look at creating a piece of theatre that originates from different places and doesn't necessarily grow off the written form. Sometimes the written form is its ending point; sometimes it shows up midway and becomes a solidifying point; sometimes it's the seed. It's an ever-shifting experiment of where the piece becomes a *written* piece. Theatre is a life form; it reaches its real form in space and time out of a script that gets published. I think of them as very different, the actual, tangible written form versus the thing that you experience physically and chemically and kinesthetically. Some things show up beautifully in written form; others show up imperfectly. Those are pieces that tend to have a strong element of choreography or movement."

Ragged Wing's process, which members call "creative development," centers on a theme or title for an entire season. At the beginning, says Sass, "all the artists come together to do some

kind of retreat and a series of trainings and creative development. We will take this idea of the season theme; we will have some research element, and then we will start to create writing—writing prompts, creating compositions up on our feet, a lot of them not at all with dialogue. Often it's a song. A lot of times we'll use some element we don't usually see—sand, water, fire, really tactile stuff. Often they'll be site-specific—on the beach, in the woods, in a crawl space underneath a house, on the fire escape of an industrial building. We'll often be using the architecture or the elements that are present wherever we are. There might be some ritual element; there might be some audience participation element. A whole lexicon for the season starts to emerge. We develop our own vocabulary. It can be phrases that are said over and over again. It might be a particular image or movement sequence or somebody eating a watermelon that later becomes the central image of the whole play. We do creative development for the season, so out of that we do proposals for projects—proposals come out of what was seen and heard and smelled and felt and tasted. And then people take them and begin to develop full ideas for their own pieces based on that. Once the proposals come in, those people leading those particular projects do creative development just for their projects."

Some companies go to great lengths to get whole teams, designers included, assembled just as a process is beginning. For Steindler of Z Space, getting the right team for a project is so important that she's willing to have Z Space do many fewer projects than it perhaps otherwise could as a result. "Finding the right team takes a long time," she says, sometimes up to two years of meetings and coffee with potential team members. "For me as producer, that's big part of my job," she says. "When you do new work, it's like a marriage. We spend so much time together. When there isn't that rigor and fearlessness and enjoyment of being in a room together, it's a problem."

In his desire to produce Erin Bregman's *Before and After*, Paul Cello, producing artistic director of 2by4, saw an opportunity to partner with another organization: Playwrights Foundation, which was producing a staged reading of the play as part of the 2013 Bay Area Playwrights Festival. Playwrights Foundation was already dedicated to providing its BAPF playwrights with visual and design dramaturgy, and 2by4 already knew it wanted to fully produce the play in the future. Cello thought, "Can we use this as an opportunity to develop Erin's play with other members of 2by4, to get other collaborators in the room together?" Luckily, Amy Mueller, artistic director of Playwrights Foundation, was open to the collaboration. "It was a really wonderful opportunity," says Cello, "the right place, the right time, the right set of circumstances. The question for us always is how to make collaborative touch points more frequent and more cross-disciplinary along the process. So often what happens is playwrights are writing in isolation. They get workshops, but often those workshops are with different people."

For some companies, just as important as when collaborators climb aboard a project is how the process is structured once they get there. Steindler of Z Space, Cello of 2by4 and Yalom of foolsFury all emphasize that they don't have a set process, that each project needs a unique process in order to develop organically and with integrity. FoolsFury, which sometimes has a designated playwright for its pieces, learned to adopt this policy the hard way, says Yalom: "When we did our first big project, with Doug Dorst, it worked one way, and it seemed so clear. We did a lot of Viewpoints and composition, and he would just sort of sit in the corner and absorb the language and the gestural work. My assumption coming out of that is that's what it's always going to be like. Our next major project was *P.O.S.H.* with Sheila Callaghan, and it started to become clear that the same process we'd used with Doug wasn't helping Sheila. So

we changed to fit her needs. She was much less interested in watching us jam around physically and develop gesture. [Working with her] forced us to do a lot more writing, to bring in a lot more verbal material. She took that material and really honed it into the language of the play." Now, Yalom says, he realizes, "I just think for every writer it's different, which is juicy. I won't make the assumption again that there's sort of a one-size-fits-all model."

What many artists crave in nontraditional new play development models is simply space to think. *The Companion Piece*, which was conceived by Beth Wilmurt and directed by Mark Jackson for Z Space in 2011, had a two-week workshop, then a months-long break, then a full rehearsal process. "The nut of devising is constant conversation. That's why people talk so much about it," Jackson says. The break allowed the team to have those conversations under much less pressure, to experiment and "to soak up what happened organically so then you come into the rehearsal process ready to go."

White says that over time, Mugwumpin learned that it works best under similar circumstances. "We just reached a crossroads where we're realizing that it takes us a really long time to make a show," he says. "We work really well in short bursts, putting a thing down and coming back to it. It's like working on a crossword puzzle: 'I can't answer anything else.' And then later: 'I know all of these!' It's not battering your head against it incessantly. The flip side of that, which might actually be the same thing, is that in the process of creating, we really fall in love with an idea—the first time something happens, it's magical; it's like that's the kernel of the show. Without taking breaks, it's really easy to keep trying to cram that idea into something alive and evolving. It might be a great idea, but for another show. Taking breaks allows us to fall a little less in love with our ideas and be able to look at it a little more clear-eyed."

Perhaps one of the most exciting new models of new play development in the Bay Area is Berkeley Rep's Ground Floor, a residency and development program that had its first session in 2012 under the leadership of Madeleine Oldham, Mina Morita and Karena Fiorenza Ingersoll. For two summers now, artists from all over the country (including some locals, such as Lauren Gunderson), selected by a rigorous application process, have descended on Berkeley Rep's West Berkeley campus for four weeks, which those artists can use however they want. What makes the Ground Floor special isn't just that it doesn't require a performance at the end (á la Just Theater's New Play Development Lab), which might force an artist to make inorganic choices to make it suitable for an audience (though some, such as Marcus Gardley's *The House that will not Stand*, later became full Berkeley Rep productions); it's also that the Ground Floor accepts artists whose projects are in the most nascent stages—including some that are still in the proposal phase.

Ground Floor artists have all their food, housing, transportation and chores taken care of to give them the freedom to have fun and create. Fun is a big part of the Ground Floor's philosophy: At last summer's session, a skeeball machine and a giant bowl of M&M's were available at all times, and each night there was shuttle service to a nearby bar and the hotel where artists were staying. The theory is that goofing off or drinking or enjoying catered communal meals is actually a crucial part of the creative process. It gives artists time to process and discuss their own and others' work, activating the kind of creativity that comes from being playful.

The Ground Floor's artistic resources are just as staggering; artists get the kind of privileges Berkeley Rep might allocate to a full production. The Debate Society, a Brooklyn-based

company that was using the Ground Floor to work on a piece with one scene in a hot tub, was expecting Berkeley Rep to just throw a couple of couches together to simulate the tub. Instead, Berkeley Rep's carpentry shop actually built them a to-scale model of a hot tub. For the Debate Society, having a more realistic set piece influenced the direction of their show. Company member Hannah Bos says that the extremely close quarters of a realistic hot tub made them realize just how differently characters would talk and interact in contrast to typical spatial relations. The Debate Society also joked that they should laminate the pages of their script and try it out at an actual hot tub—and then Berkeley Rep made that happen, taking the company on a field trip to a functioning hot tub. For another artist, the New York-based César Alvarez, Berkeley Rep took an extremely unusual development route. Alvarez, who was creating a piece about what he has called "a techno-Utopian space colony," got hooked up with experts in fields as varied as game design, crowd dynamics and flocking behaviors, including senior directors at the Exploratorium. "If you make every work the same way," Alvarez says, "the same thing comes out. The fact that [Berkeley Rep] could wrap their brains around having a game designer in new play development is a testament to how flexible they are."

For PianoFight, which works primarily in sketch comedy, it was both natural and fundamental to who they are to take an alternate route, by developing different kinds of pieces in a similar way. Mission Ctrl, the company's resident sketch comedy group, begins each rehearsal process with what Rob Ready calls "a booze- and energy drink-infused tornado of ideas": Someone will propose an idea for a sketch; the group will riff on it for a while; and then they'll vote on whether it's good enough to be developed further. "This will repeat until they have 10 sketches," says Ready, at which point the group members will pair off and write, with each idea-holder responsible for shepherding his or her idea into a sketch. From there, says Ready, "the tornado subsides, and rehearsal acts as what traditional theatres would call a workshop process." Ready says that their 2012 *Duck Lake*, a full-length piece, used a similar process but was "a much bigger project," requiring two writers to "put stuff into the script from the series of riff sessions." In working with the playwrights William Bivins on *ShortLived* and Daniel Heath on *A Merry Forking! Christmas*, PianoFighters were also deeply involved in the shaping of the text. "When we come in with a playwright, we're just going to be overbearing," Ready jokes. "They need to have help. They should have help."

Of course, traditionally developed theatre isn't going away any time soon. As Yalom says, "The standard model is still that a playwright goes into a room and writes a play and then has workshop. I can't imagine that in the near future that is not going to continue to be the main model, because that's the way [playwrights] are taught and because of the introspective nature of writing. It's also more economically efficient." Additionally, theatres that specialize in nontraditionally developed work face major challenges—explaining their processes to audiences, giving shows lives beyond their first productions, securing funding from relatively fewer funding sources. Despite these obstacles, for Yalom and many others, nontraditional new play development models—"new" and "nontraditional" as they might be—offer the best access to the myriad ways theatre has always made meaning: "The language of the stage is much broader than just the words," he says. "Sometimes the right impulse or the next image doesn't want to be language; it wants to be something else."