

'A Festival Of Disassembly': Queer Devised Theatre**Jonathan Seinen**

When discussing 'Forms' when it comes to Queer Theatre in Canada, I wish to speak about my work in creating new pieces through what I have specifically named Queer Devised Theatre. Queer Devised Theatre, for me, is not only a particular approach/methodology to the creation of new works for the stage, but also speaks to a particular engagement with the material and with the artists involved that disrupts conventional theatre hierarchies, challenges the professional/non-professional performer binary, and presents an alternative for the ways in which our industry engages with topics of diversity and inclusion. It is an opportunity to create space in the theatre, a space that is usually not a space for queer bodies to speak, a space that does not necessarily invite queer forms. Queer Devised Theatre is as much about process as it is about product.

In my role as director and co-creator of Queer Devised Theatre, the technique begins with listening, and from there, determining how best I can serve the process, depending on the needs of the project. I don't pretend to have an answer or a solution. I'm in the shit with the performer. I have an aesthetic, certainly. A poetics of space. But how we get there is determined by the process. My aim is to find the best way to fit the material together and how to stage it so that an audience can encounter the work most fully. Which means, in one case, intimate storytelling and direct address in a small space. In another, it means a fully white stage in a theatre that bodies of colour transform and deconstruct. In another, new project still in development, it is about discovering how disabled performers encounter able-bodied spectators in surprising and unusual performer/audience dynamics.

Let me give you a few examples of how I have created Queer Devised Theatre.

First of all, *Charisma Furs*, co-created and performed by Katie Sly. This piece was borne out of our early collaborations at Buddies In Bad Times Theatre where I was a Co-Facilitator and Katie was one of a group of participants in PrideCab, part of Buddies' Queer Youth Arts program. PrideCab was a three-month program that included training in approaches to creating theatre performances, research into LGBTQ+ history, and conversation around topics facing these young queer people, some of whom had never performed on stage before, concluding with a cabaret performance as part of Buddies' Queer Pride events. Katie came to this process with no formal training in theatre performance, and with some experience as a new playwright.

Katie and I collaborated on a number of pieces during PrideCab, including one that featured storytelling enhanced by an overhead projector, called *Kid: A Queer Fable*, and *Yellow*, which was a poetic retelling of a transformative night Katie spent at a poorly attended poetry reading. I was struck by Katie's promise as a writer and presence as a performer. About a year later, I heard Katie tell a captivating story about a night at a BDSM party in New York City, and we soon began discussions around crafting a larger piece.

We started our work through a residency with lemonTree creations, which at the time had a studio on Spadina Avenue in Toronto (now it has moved to Steward Street). We meet for a week, and basically Katie shared writings they had already written up to that point, and also told me stories that I recorded, transcribed and edited, which then Katie dramaturged. I suggested a few things, like ‘What about karaoke?’ and ‘How about making origami boxes in the show?’, things that were inspired by our conversations or skills they had already learned and felt somehow thematically or stylistically linked. I asked simple questions, such as: ‘What have you always wanted to do on stage?’ I looked at their writing and imagined what modes of performance might connect that material best with an audience – ie. perhaps a stand up comedy routine? We were mining the materials of Katie’s life, which included the detritus of popular culture (‘90s hip hop music, television shows like *Home Improvement*, *The Spice Girls*, etc), so a haphazard approach to our creation dominated. However, we were fully following our instincts on this. While stories about their impoverished childhood in Verdun gave context, poetry about the pleasure and pain of rope bondage gave nuance to the life of this bisexual person coming into their own.

Our first presentation at lemonTree had Katie in a proscenium setting, with a table, a ladder, and a microphone at one end of the rehearsal hall, in our take on a Spalding Gray piece. Still on book with the text, it became apparent that direct audience conversation was the way to go, and that Katie’s composite pieces in *Charisma Furs*, many dealing with difficult issues of child abuse, relationship trauma, and biphobia, needed the right touch to be heard in the spirit in which Katie tells them – as one who tells it not to dwell there, but to reclaim it, excavate it, and know themselves more fully.

Through additional development at Videofag on to our production in the Factory Theatre Rehearsal Hall at SummerWorks Live Arts Series in 2014, Katie and I developed a strong rapport on crafting the text, on finding the right tone and approach to performance, on engaging with an audience in a vulnerable and accessible manner. They grew as a performer, gaining confidence and gravitas, but also charm and heart. Katie continues to perform the show, touring to upintheair theatre’s rEolver Festival in Vancouver in 2016 (in the Founder’s Lounge at the Cultch), and has performed excerpts in New York City, including Dixon Place.

My feeling about this piece is that it was really a matter of finding the ways in which Katie wanted to speak, to express themselves, to play with them in finding methods of storytelling (stand up comedy, building a miniature city out of origami boxes), so that the piece in which they ultimately performed was true to Katie’s voice, what they wanted to say and how they wanted to say it. In some ways, I suppose this is queer in that the director (me) doesn’t come in with a particular vision, other than to realise what is unique about this particular performer, and to use my skills in composition and space to bring it in contact with an audience.

The next example is *Black Boys*, a project started around the same time as *Charisma Furs*. In this case, I was working as director/co-creator with three non-heterosexual Black men. Once again, we started with conversation, starting from the basics of whatever it was they wanted to say and do on stage. In this case, I was working with three trained actors – Thomas Olajide,

Tawiah Ben M'Carthy, Stephen Jackman-Torkoff – who had spent time working in major festivals across Canada (ie. Shaw Festival, Stratford Festival, National Arts Centre), and they brought with them a desire to do on stage the things that those spaces didn't allowed them to do, to talk about their experiences in rehearsal as Black men, as non-straight men, experiences as artists on the receiving end of a contemporary movement toward 'diversity' on our stages. Our company also includes choreographer Virgilia Griffith and our goal is to actually take on the ways in which race is avoided in Canadian society generally and in theatre specifically, and approach it head on, not only in the work we create, but also in the organisational structure of our company, Saga Collectif.

We worked primarily through improvisation from the beginning, a technique I'd devised called 'The Grid', which was a combination of two modes of creation I was exposed to as a younger artist. One is the Theatre Passe Muraille/Layne Coleman technique of 'Jamming', to which Layne introduced me during the creation of *You Like It.*, a queer take on *As You Like It*, and then more extensively through working with him on *Highway 63: The Fort Mac Show*, Architect Theatre' collective creation about Fort McMurray, Alberta and the oil sands. The other is Viewpoints, which I first encountered in my training at the National Theatre School through Leslie Baker, a movement improvisational approach developed by Mary Overlie, Anne Bogart and Tina Landau. My rudimentary understanding of Viewpoints, enhanced by the book of the same name, gave me a starting point through which to devise a physical vocabulary. Developing 'The Grid' meant a method through which material could be generated that was text- or character-based, while also allowing for movement scores to be created through the same process. For *Black Boys*, these three men came with a variety of skill sets in regards to creating theatre, as playwrights or not, through movement languages all their own, developed through, in one case, martial arts training and, in another, traditional African dance.

I was present at the inception of this project, borne of conversations between friends. Sensing the potential of this piece, we pursued some seed funding, and started working. Based on this, we were invited into residency at Buddies In Bad Times Theatre, where we will be co-producing the premiere production of *Black Boys* in the fall of 2016.

I suppose the definition of Queer Devised Theatre that I would attach to this process would be that we were working with materials – the lives of these three Black men – for which there is no analogue in Canadian theatre, and so we needed to develop our own form. 'The Grid' was something that I had originally devised working with lemonTree creations on our 2010/2011 production *Still Life*, and I felt that returning to that form at this time would produce outstanding dividends.

The form of the final piece will be fluid, with movement the connective tissue between scripted scenes, monologues, poetry, music, and direct audience address. The presence of the Black male body, vilified, objectified and a site for tenderness, is central, as is the relationship with the audience. In terms of space, we have been working in a theatre with an all white set, a space that these Black bodies redefine as they tell their stories. Using sound and video as integral components, the search for heritage and history, either through imagining the

footprints of queer ancestors or through the words of a luminary like James Baldwin, is foundational. Verbatim text from company conversations about Black Lives Matter implicates the performers in the issues of our times, when the Black male body is a threat and is threatened, when the queer Black body is at home in neither the Black community or the LGBTQ+ community. In this liminal space, in this unwritten-upon space, these performers write their narratives, cobbling together their different identities and identifications in pursuit of an integrated self and, as we like to say, 'an emancipated Black imagination'.

Queer Devised Theatre is somewhat a growth out of the identity plays of the past, trying to move beyond monologue/taking-up-space storytelling theatre and moving towards a dynamic and compelling theatrical experience. The form is as new as the content, as malleable, as responsive. As we, the artists, imagine the theatrical possibilities, borne out of the imaginations of the creators, we can imagine a new world. When faced with continuing violence against queer bodies, particularly now in the wake of the mass shooting at Orlando's Pulse Nightclub, and particularly against racialized bodies and trans*/gender-non-conforming bodies, the need for these bodies to take up space and tell their stories through whatever means necessary, whatever means are truest to those bodies, is great.

However, this also calls for and provides a new approach to power and decision-making in the theatre. Freeing itself from the constraints of conventional theatre production, with playwright, director, actor, designer all determined and organised, Queer Devised Theatre, collective in nature, is a promising example of how we must move forward in Canadian theatre, to be truly diverse and inclusive. When I work with a diverse company and by having the decision-making shared in a truly collaborative manner between the artists helps avoid the potential of appropriation by a well-meaning white male saviour complex. Personally, I am on guard for this, and in these collaborations, this is always a topic that is up for discussion, and the door remains open for ongoing understandings of privilege and prejudice.

With experience working in devised theatre, primarily with artists from across the LGBTQ+ spectrum and/or of visible minority, I have crafted techniques of generating material that demonstrate alternative means of creating work for the stage. Starting from fundamental values of honesty, sensitivity, and patience, as I come to work with people with different life experiences from mine (training/education, race, class, gender identity, sexuality, etc.), I ask, 'How do I collaborate to reflect and honour their unique aesthetic and voice?' Rather than functioning from a hierarchical position of a director's 'Vision', Queer Devised Theatre demands a lateral approach with an emphasis on dialogue. It insists on creating space for new possibilities of exchange and performance.

I believe Queer Devised Theatre can serve to disrupt the conventions of the theatre industry, while suggesting alternative modes of being. I am afraid that the usual dynamics of theatre production, especially in Equity contact gigging situations, can be about protecting professional boundaries and personal egos rather than liberating the potential of our art form. By demonstrating an upheaval of the conventional hierarchical structures of theatre production, demanding a greater level of accountability, the Queer Devised Theatre work that I've been

engaged in practices the kind of diversity in decision-making that is the antidote for the tokenistic approach that is more commonly seen on our stages. Not only does this form create material that is theatrically compelling, but demonstrates an approach to theatre that is necessary at this time.

In this paper, I have draw specifically on experiences developing work with young queer-identified artists in devising *Charisma Furs* and *Black Boys*. Queer Devised Theatre can create from marginalized bodies and experiences acknowledging systemic privilege and oppression, working toward an ethics of love and accountability, in crafting new and necessary works for the stage. At the same time, Queer Devised Theatre can provide a model for a more inclusive approach to decision-making in theatre producing. In this way, this 'Form' furthers the potential of theatre to present a rare opportunity in a market-driven culture to imagine a different world.

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