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ABSTRACT

Create An Opera! was a fortnightly devising workshop led by the author at Theatre Delicatessen studios in London in 2017–20. It was free to the general public and attracted participants including both experienced and inexperienced performance practitioners. It aimed to create a safe, inclusive environment for experimentation in writing, composition and collaborative performance.

This initiative arose from the author's interest in challenging the socio-political traditions and hierarchical infrastructures associated with opera production. Inspired by the ethos of devised theatre, the workshops created a space for participants to be involved in both creative and performance aspects, working individually and collaboratively.

This article presents the pedagogical and creative methodologies informing the delivery of the workshops, focusing on inclusion, collaboration and independent creativity.

KEYWORDS

Pedagogy, collaborative practice, devising, opera, music education, community music

Introduction

Create An Opera! was a series of creative performance workshops that took place at Theatre Delicatessen studios from October 2017 until March 2020. The workshop activities were designed to empower participants to engage with creative practice through developing skills in movement, voice and writing as well as collaboration and improvisation. This article explores the pedagogical methodology guiding the planning

and delivery of these workshops over the course of their first nine months as a reflection of the vast potential of collaborative, de-centralized practice in performance training and creation. Improvisation plays an essential role within this methodology, enabling experiential learning through collaboration.

Opera comprises multiple artistic disciplines including acting, storytelling, movement, composition, vocalization and visual art. Unfortunately, it is often associated with a hierarchical, centralized structure including the authority of the single composer, writer, director or conductor; the cultural specialization of the trained singer; or the economic model of the production house and its patrons. Though opera might be considered by some as an elitist art form [1], there is an increasing number of initiatives attempting to create or produce opera in a more inclusive way. Examples include Streetwise Opera, which works with people who are or have been experiencing homelessness; Opera Schmopera, working with young people to create new opera; KASKO in the Netherlands, which engages with local communities; RESEO, a European network looking into widening access to opera and dance; composer Jonathan Dove's community operas; and the community engagement and educational schemes of the large opera houses such as the Royal Opera House, the English National Opera and Opera North [2].

The *Create An Opera!* workshop series similarly aimed to challenge traditional notions of opera-making, breaking boundaries of single roles, economic status, cultural capital, aesthetic conventions and institutional frameworks. It was influenced by a range of practices, including devised theatre, community music [3], community performance

[4], participatory art, and free improvisation, without strictly belonging within the definition of any single practice.

The workshops were open to members of the general public on a bi-weekly basis. They were advertised through a range of online social and professional platforms and attracted participants from a range of backgrounds and experiences: professional actors, theatre creators, educators in the field of performance and creative writing, poets, sound artists, visual artists, vocalists from a variety of musical traditions, and composers. Some participants had very little previous experience in performance or other creative practices and were drawn to the workshops by their curiosity or love for opera. Participants were from a range of nationalities and cultural backgrounds, reflecting the multi-cultural character of London. All participants were adults, with a wide age range from early twenties to seventies. The number of participants per workshop fluctuated between 5 and 20, with an average of 10. Most workshops included a mix of regular and drop-in participants. Over time, a group of eight regular participants developed their creative work in a consistent way, resulting in a sharing of work in progress with family and friends.

Devising methodology

The workshops were informed by the collaborative creative practice known as ‘devising’. This methodology emerged in a range of theatre practices throughout the twentieth century and particularly in its second half, with links to a range of fields including political activism, community theatre and physical theatre. Companies and practitioners include SITI Company, The Wooster Group, Complicité, Robert Lepage and Frantic

Assembly. Devising companies often challenge the centralized tradition of the single creator, relying on an intensive collaborative process involving the whole ensemble and production team. Bicât and Baldwin's definition of 'devising' emphasizes the creative process in devised work taking place without the common knowledge of a pre-existing script, thereby opening up the opportunity for unexpected discoveries during rehearsal time (7). Even though usually professional opera productions are often created with a pre-existing score, some attempts have been made to include devising methods in more recent productions. One such case is Efthymiou's opera *Myisi* (see Efthymiou 2016). In this production, Efthymiou included collaboration throughout the various phases of the production, including exploration of relevant themes, creation of the score and libretto, stage design and video projections. However, in the last phase she took on the role of director of the project making overall decisions about the shape of the piece. As she points out, there is no fixed methodology within devising, and each production will discover what is relevant to its creative process.

Heddon and Milling (2006 4–5) suggest 'devising' can have a wider range of characteristics than those suggested by Bicât and Baldwin:

> Devising is variously: a social expression of non-hierarchical possibilities; a model of cooperative and non-hierarchical collaboration; an ensemble; a collective; a practical expression of political and ideological commitment; a means of taking control of work and operating autonomously; a de-commodification of art; a commitment to total community; a commitment to total art; the negating of the gap between art and life; the erasure of the gap between spectator and performer; a distrust of words; the embodiment of the death of the author; a means to reflect contemporary social reality; a means to incite social change; an escape from theatrical conventions; a challenge for theatre

> makers; a challenge for spectators; an expressive, creative language; innovative; risky; inventive; spontaneous; experimental; non-literary.

The collaborative, non-hierarchical, experimental, challenging and, occasionally, socio-political aspects of devising all informed the *Create An Opera!* workshops.

Pedagogical methodology

In line with the ethos of devised theatre, the design of the workshop activities aimed to encourage inclusion and de-centralized creative practice and learning. Several pedagogical principles became a priority: accessibility, empowerment via holistic training, collaboration, experiential and embodied learning, drawing on the whole group as a valuable resource, improvisation and adaptability.

To increase accessibility**,** the workshops were offered free of charge, and were open to all levels of experience and backgrounds. A wide variety of activities ensured everyone had a chance to step outside of their specific comfort zones and provided open-ended opportunities for exploration suitable for any level. The workshop series activities were designed as a holistic training for participants to develop a set of skills that encompassed the whole creative trajectory to empower them to develop their own work.

Furthermore, the workshops offered a practice-based experiential learning trajectory. Although experiential learning has various definitions (Beard 2010: 19–20), it is usually agreed to be a method of learning that is active rather than didactic and passive, related to doing, reflecting and applying what is learned in generating new ideas. This active engagement ideally includes a balance of the physical, sensorial, emotional,

cognitive, bodily and the inner psyche. Learners and teachers are all involved in a feedback loop that includes evaluation and reflection.

Most of the *Create An Opera!* workshops involved embodied learning experiences, including movement, physical improvisation and voice work, while accommodating all participants' abilities. Borgo (2012: 204) states that:

> [E]mbodied views of cognition share a core belief that bodily experiential knowledge is the foundation upon which all new knowledge is built. More precisely, this view holds that human motor, sensory and conceptual processes have co-evolved with each other and with their environment such that they are inextricably linked.

The importance of embodied experience is famously explored in the music pedagogy of Dalcroze (see Borgo 2012) as well as in theatre workshops and rehearsal practice (Spolin [1963] 2015: 412; Marshall 2008). At the workshops, physical exercises encouraged creative improvisation in movement and voice, which in turn stimulated creative work with text.

The group as a whole was viewed as a valuable resource within the workshop experience. According to Hahlo and Reynolds (2000: xii), 'a workshop should promote collective learning, where a group of people spend time together using certain materials and, more importantly, each other as resources to explore ideas through interaction'. Neelands (2009) discusses the value of 'ensemble building' in professional as well as educational settings, advocating the notion that within ensemble-based drama, there is an opportunity for a group to be self-organizing and connect the social and artistic aspects of its individuals' lives. In the case of the *Create An Opera!* workshop series, activities were

designed to encourage the participants to learn from others who had a different background or experience and provided an opportunity to experiment, collaborate and play, as well as develop a sense of community.

Improvisation was included in all of the workshop activities. As well as being a highly useful performance skill, improvisation also supports experiential learning through the act of creating and decision-making in the moment. It provided a useful method for participants to access the process of creation quickly in a non-judgmental way and unblock the procrastination that can sometimes be a hindrance to creativity.

Finally, adaptability was a key aspect of running the workshops. An open mind and need for flexibility are known to be crucial for workshop leaders (Hahlo and Reynolds 2000: xxiii), who need to draw on quick, intuitive choices based on their past experience (McMillan 2015: 84–86). Workshop activities were adjusted and reshaped on the spot according to the circumstances of the day or the moment including the mix of participants and their mood or state of mind, the space, the season and time of day.

Workshop structure

The workshops were split into two parts. The first part included warm-ups, movement training, vocal exploration and group improvisation. The second part focused on creative practice around a theme or narrative and included creative writing, exploration of melody, songwriting and structured improvisation. All of the sessions ended with a sharing of materials created by the participants. Many of the workshop activities were based on improvisation tasks that encompassed various disciplines: movement, sound, acting and text-writing. Improvisation played four distinct roles: establishing an ensemble

feel, developing performance skills, creating structured improvisation pieces, and generating new text and music.

Warm-up sessions are known to be an essential part of performance workshops and rehearsals (McMillan 2015: 84–85; Hahlo and Reynolds 2000: 7–9). Warm-ups started with a relatively easy task involving movement in the space. Specific instructions encouraged the participants to relax tensions in the body, connect movement with the breath and find mobility in the spine. They were then encouraged to interact with the space as well as other participants via eye contact, gestural communication or response to light touch. This helped create connection and trust within the group, enabling subsequent experimentation, playfulness and collaboration.

The session subsequently progressed into a more structured framework. With the intention of connecting embodied practice and the composition of materials, I adopted the Viewpoints system (Bogart and Landau 2014: 35–54). Starting with a simple action such as walking, elements were gradually introduced and layered: tempo, duration, kinaesthetic response, spatial relationships, topography (the group's arrangement according to a 'floor plan' such as a circle or a line), shapes (the arrangement of one's body form and its connection with the shapes created by others), gesture, and architecture (working with the attributes of the space). As the exercise progressed, participants were encouraged to continue considering and overlaying the elements introduced previously. As the workshop leader, I observed the group and encouraged them to explore all possible options within these compositional elements. In this way, participants became aware of the 'toolbox' or 'palette' of options at their disposal and how they could use it in coordination with the rest of the group.

While still engaged in movement, the participants were then encouraged to explore the sound of their voice, considering dynamics, pitch, timbre, melodic contour and texture. No words or text were used during this vocal experimentation.

Enthused by this exploration, the ensemble was sometimes tempted to overproduce movement and sound, leading to lack of overall clarity. To address this, listening exercises were introduced in the form of Pauline Oliveros's Deep Listening meditations such as *The New Sound Meditation* (Oliveros 2005: 44) and *Sound Fishes* (Oliveros 2005: 50). Both exercises focus on listening as a crucial part of performance with sound.

At this point I would introduce the theme of the day (e.g. 'community', 'animal welfare', 'political activism and resistance'). The participants were asked to choose five words relating to the theme, with a focus on the variety of sounds they contained. An open movement and sound improvisation ensued, in which the sound components of the words were explored and developed, leading up to the use of whole words. The use of phonemes and the connection between sound and semantic content were inspired by the work of Trevor Wishart (1996: 240–98)

Vocal warm-ups were led by me or by experienced vocalist and vocal coach Elise Lorraine (a member of the group who generously offered to share her skills). The aim of the warm-ups was to activate the voice through relaxation, use of the whole body, the use of breath support and opening of the vocal tract and resonating cavities. Vocal warm-ups always concluded with a group vocalization, in the form of guided improvisation or singing a round.

The second part of each workshop was focused on devising and creative activities, including the creation of lyrics and melody, dialogues or narrative. My main role was to stimulate the creation of materials, guiding and pacing the writing sessions, and then providing feedback on the materials created.

Visual stimulus proved to be highly useful for the creation of music and text, guiding the exploration of narrative context as well as musical material. Referring to works of art or archive photos, participants were asked to imagine themselves as a character within the image and, guided by a series questions paced to short time intervals, continuously wrote text from the point of view of the character. The text created was then edited and revised by the participants and used as a basis for a song or an aria. Visual stimulus was also used to consider musical elements. During the sessions focusing on melody, I encouraged participants to draw a line representing emotional intensity of a text they had written or a poem they had brought in. This then informed a process of composing a sung melody through repeated individual improvisation. Graphic scores were also created by the participants and used to inspire group 'choir' improvisations.

At several sessions, socio-political themes such as gentrification of the city or the history of the Occupy London protest movement were chosen as inspiration for creating site-sensitive narratives. Inspired by the psychophysical approach to acting developed by Stanislavski (Merlin 2007: 21–25, Stanislavski 2017 [original 1938], and Michael Chekhov 1953: 1–20 and 61–84), which emphasizes the connection between the body and psyche, I encouraged work with archive photos. Inspired by improvisation based on the physicality of the persons in the photos, the participants created character and text.

Recordings of existing songs and opera fragments were often introduced and discussed. Encompassing a range of musical genres, examples were chosen according to the thematic context of the session. Group discussion of the examples allowed for shared active reflection on writing lyrics, and the connection between musical elements and text.

Every workshop ended with a sharing of materials created: reading a text, singing the beginning of an aria or performing a small group improvisation around a narrative. This enabled the participants to receive positive encouragement from the group and sense that some tangible result had been achieved. It was also an opportunity to consider the presence of an audience as an essential part of performance practice.

Peer learning and de-centralized pedagogy

I was keen to encourage non-hierarchical learning, where my role as 'facilitator' was to provide instruction and feedback as a framework for collaborative learning and creation. The points of de-centralized learning included peer learning through (a) group improvisation, (b) peer feedback and (c) discussion. Group improvisation in movement, sound, acting and writing, allowed participants to learn from and be inspired directly by each other's actions. Peer feedback on each other's improvisational work and writing provided opportunities for encouragement as well as constructive feedback. Group discussion took place after each improvisation exercise, allowing reflection on the creative process. Further discussion during the listening sessions provided deep peer insights into the interpretation and creation of lyrics, melody and instrumentation.

Challenges and development

Approaches, methodologies and planning of activities were constantly adapted in response to the participants' needs and concerns

The duration of the workshops did not always seem sufficient to the participants. The workshops included a wide range of activities with the view of providing a full experience for one-off participants as well as ongoing training for regular participants. Participants sometimes felt that there was not enough time for the creative process. I addressed this by emphasizing the importance of the process rather than presenting a result at the end of every session.

Due to various personal reasons, lateness was a recurring problem. In an attempt to keep the inclusive nature of the workshops, I adopted a modular approach to accommodate this, in which the second part, focusing mainly on creative writing or devising, could be experienced without the preparatory aspects of the first.

The various levels of experience in performance and creative practice posed a potential challenge. Though some participants were worried about their lack of experience in comparison with others, the mixed level of the group was ultimately an advantage. Turino (2009: 110) describes the value of participatory practice in improvisation:

> Within participatory traditions, circumscribed improvisatory spaces are one key way that advanced performers can continue to challenge themselves while maintaining a musical or dance style that has easy points of entry for neophytes. Successful participatory traditions (ones that draw people back again and again) have evolved to have something

> for everyone and seem almost specially designed to create the potential for flow for a wide variety of people.

With a range of diverse activities, each participant had a chance to work both within and outside of their comfort zone, and to learn from each other's experience, skills and individual life experience.

The vulnerability of the creative act was also a challenge that needed to be addressed. In a devising workshop, one is constantly performing, experimenting and sharing unfinished fragments. This is an exposed process, which many find daunting. It is therefore essential to take the time during the warm-ups to create a relaxed, playful atmosphere, in preparation for a gradual increase in creative challenges.

Individual sensitivities within a diverse group of individuals were another challenge. Any group consists of individuals with their own sensitivities, concerns and aesthetic preferences. It is not always possible for a workshop leader to be aware of these, especially if they are not communicated in advance or at the moment they occur. Participants were asked to take responsibility for their safety by making adjustments to exercises where necessary, and to avoid participating in any activities that they found uncomfortable or express their concerns in the moment. In order to address sensitivities, multiple points of feedback and channels of communication were made available, including email, written feedback and informal discussion.

Within a workshop, however inclusive and de-centralized, there is the potential sense of hierarchy, with the 'tyranny' of the workshop leader and particular members of the group possibly dominating the process**.** While designing the workshop activities I adopted a particular aesthetic and approach, favouring devising methods rather than

scripts, improvisation rather than fixed composition, collaboration rather than individual creation and experimentation rather than convention. However, one size cannot fit all. As well as being clear in advance regarding the overall approach of a workshop, it is also important to consider the individual voices as part of the communal creative process itself, as Kuppers (2007: 10) states in relation to the field of community performance:

> The 'warmly persuasive' nature of the concept [of community] can stand in the way of rigorous and effective exchange and exploration. Who is included, who excludes, through which explicit and implicit means? It is easy to be caught up in the warmth of communal celebration, and to uncritically stop exploration and development too early.

It was essential to be aware of the individual voices within the creative process and include them in the collaborative framework to maintain a sense of plurality, interest and inclusion.

The participants' response

While running the workshop series, it was important to be aware of the participants' experience and feelings, to include their voice in the way it proceeded. I therefore asked for feedback, both as open comments as well as a structured questionnaire.

Several trends emerged from the participants' feedback (see Table 1). Many participants very quickly felt at ease with the group, and found that the workshop provided a safe, non-judgmental and supportive environment for playful exploration and creation. They pointed to the importance of the warm-up activities in achieving this. Many participants appreciated the group's diversity of experience and backgrounds and

the possibility of collaborating and learning from each other. Participants found the exercises positively challenging both physically and mentally and were happy to 'leap into the unknown'. Some commented on the importance of listening within improvisation, leading to Pauline Oliveros's listening exercises becoming an important part of the sessions. Many participants felt a sense of achievement by the end of the session and were amazed that they had managed to create something in such a short time. Some of the more experienced creative practitioners mentioned that they found what they had learned useful for their own practice and the creation of future performances.

Further insights and observations were collected from a questionnaire taken by the regular participants. Many of them found the structured improvisations exploring pitch, tempo, timbre and dynamics a useful method for exploring their full range of vocal possibilities, enabling access to music practice without needing to develop specific music theory or instrument-playing skills. Participants generally appreciated the role of improvisation to access creativity and write lyrics and melody. Several participants, including some with limiting physical conditions or disabilities, found the physical exercises helpful in freeing the body and boosting confidence, sometimes in a therapeutic way.

A major trend in the feedback was the participants' enjoyment of the group improvisations, which one participant described as the emergence of a 'hive mind' or 'mass body'. This relates closely to Sawyer's concept of 'group flow' (2015: 94) [5]:

> [G]roup flow is a property of the entire group as a collective unity. […] In this state, each of the group members can even feel as if they are able to anticipate what their fellow performers will do before they do it. […] Group flow can inspire musicians to play things

> that they would not have been able to play alone, or that they would not have thought of without the inspiration of the group. […] Group flow helps the individual performers to attain their own flow state. […] There is an open communicative channel among the performers; each performer is open and listening to the others and each performer fully attends to what the others are doing, even as they are contributing to the performance themselves.

According to Borgo (2006: 184), a state of group flow requires trust and, according to some, 'involves reaching a state of egoless state in which the actions of individuals and the group perfectly harmonise.' The gradual build-up of trust in the warm-up stage and structured progression with defined common goals encouraged this state of flow at the workshops.

Table 1: Participants' reflection on *Create An Opera!* workshops.

There was both mental and physical relaxation within the body, allowing us to be in the moment, making the work feel like 'child's play' […] oftentimes leading to emotionally deep and moving scenarios arising, which in turn gave us empathy, a sensitivity towards each other, and a desire to respect and take care of each other within the work and inevitably outside the work too.
I think the more open I was and the more time I gave over to listening and sensing the energy others gave and how I felt going into the task, and then receiving emotional responses and emotional cues, the more involved, focused and committed I was to the work and the greater the sense of enjoyment and fulfilment I experienced by the end.

It was a free space to use my voice to make sound, rhythm, harmonics, counter-sound; to feed off an emerging dynamic and then add to it […] to test the possibilities safely without judgment; learn from others and appreciate the uniqueness of each other's sounds
Improvisation sped up the process of lyric writing. It is a great short-cut: once I am physically doing it, I am in 'creation/creating mode', building and structuring forms and making the material appear before my very eyes…
Improvisation set the scene or a general responsive framework, allowed interaction, exploration of inner sound, melody, cadence […] dialogue. Building small scaffolds to strengthen lyrics and an emerging sound.
A journey of discovery of self and others. Unexpected interaction. Story lines emerged into the space. Meandering curves, musical crescendos and lots of learning.
There was a sense of play amongst participants, giving us permission to 'have fun' and trusting each other to accept the offerings given and build on them in return.
We did not have a fixed group, and with different people each improvisation was different. New people brought new things and offered me new things to learn. There was synchronicity with strangers and the emergence of a common mind.

Working towards a performance

Six months after starting the workshop series, a core group of regular participants worked towards a sharing of work-in-progress with family and friends. Setting a performance date placed positive pressure on the group to shape some of the materials created during the sessions into a more defined and structured form.

Composer/pianist Tsivi Sharett who has vast experience in a variety of musical styles, both improvised and composed, worked with each member of the group on an individual aria or song that they had started writing. Due to the limited time, these

individual sessions resulted in solo pieces that were not fully composed, but rather a combination of vocal improvisation and more structured melodies. Due to the short tutorial time with Tsivi and some participants' lack of experience with composition or music notation skills, this was a process that some participants found quite difficult. Solo performance is also a particularly exposed and vulnerable experience, and one that participants dreaded. Tsivi encouraged the performers to trust the power of their writing as well as their improvisation skills.

The sharing performance consisted of three scenes incorporating some of the most successful group improvisations from the workshops as well as the solo pieces created with Tsivi. Despite concerns that some group members had regarding the lack of a more specific script or thoroughly rehearsed staging, the work shared was a testament to the group's power of collaboration, the richness of individual experiences and narratives, and the fresh, spontaneous energy of improvisation.

Conclusion: Multiplicity and cohesion

Opera, devising and improvisation were the three main inspirations for *Create An Opera!* They provided a richness of methodologies and practices informing the workshop structure. They have in common the negotiation of multiplicity and cohesion. Opera negotiates a multiplicity of disciplines such as text, storytelling, vocal and instrumental music, acting, movement and set-design as well as a range of voices and characters, all of which must be combined into a cohesive experience for the audience. Devising favours a plurality of voices in the creative process to the single voice of the 'author', yet aims to produce a piece of work that has a consistent 'logic'. Improvisation practice, be it in

music, movement or theatre, is the process in which this 'logic' is constantly negotiated and discovered in the moment.

Incorporating these three strands in the workshops has led to the creation of a dynamic, constantly changing community of individuals, exploring the multiplicity of individual voices and the possibility of finding refreshing emergent cohesions – a powerful socio-political act in its own right.

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Notes

1. See, for example, this article from *The Independent* 4 December 2017: https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/classical/news/opera-attendance-public-deterred-posh-long-expensive-etiquette-elitist-classic-fm-survey-a8090356.html//. Accessed 25 August 2018.

2. For further information, see, respectively, http://www.streetwiseopera.org, http://operaschmopera.co.uk, https://kasko.nl/producties/ct/verbindt (in Dutch), https://www.reseo.org, https://www.jonathandove.com/the-palace-in-the-sky.html, http://www.roh.org.uk/learning, https://www.eno.org/discover-opera/eno-baylis/, https://www.operanorth.co.uk/about-us/education/.

3. For a useful survey of Community Music definitions and practices, see Veblen (2008).

4. For an overview of the field of Community Performance, see Kuppers (2007).

5. Sawyer adapts Csikszentmihalyi's notion of individual 'flow' (1996: 110–13) to a group context here.