

Devising music for theatre

By Zara Nunn



There are several characteristics commonly attributed to mainstream musical theatre which make it so universally identifiable as a genre, such as dazzling dance routines, through-singing, complex set pieces, casts of thousands, special effects and a large amplified sound. Within the contemporary field, the term 'music theatre' is increasingly becoming the definition most frequently applied to the newer, 'trendier' works that for the most part shy away from employing many of these standard devices, and as a result there is now a clear distinction between them and the more traditional interpretations of the form.

By virtue of the fact that they are simply unable to compete on the same level as populist musical theatre, which is a commercially driven machine that sustains itself through mass-market appeal and rather crucially ties up the majority of main house venues, the makers of contemporary music theatre have acquired the freedom to experiment. This has enabled them to explore inventive and alternative approaches to form, structure, composition and performance as well as develop more artistically challenging collaborative relationships between other theatrical disciplines and crossover art forms.

Devising music theatre, that is to say, creating and developing music and/or songs for a show in simultaneous, parallel and direct response to the process of creating the drama, is a method that sits very comfortably within this contemporary music theatre framework. It lends itself incredibly well to these alternative approaches, particularly those that involve transmuting the standard chronology of the production and design process, or working with performers or participants from diverse backgrounds and with varying abilities.

Within devising structures such as these however, whilst the process is as essential as the product; in some cases more so; that process is not really something that you can sell, or market

as part of the whole package in any tangible way. So whilst moving away from the commercial constraints of the mainstream certainly provides a rich source for experimentation, there is consequently often an unavoidable shift away from the likelihood of there being much in the way of commercial reward, which obviously then presents a whole other set of limitations in terms of the actual theatre making.

It is not surprising then, that a large proportion of devised music theatre is made within an applied, community or educational setting, where not only is there usually greater flexibility in terms of time, space, production and budget, but where it is likely that fewer pecuniary pressures are going to be placed on the outcome.

The majority of large-scale devised music theatre shows I have worked on have taken place within this applied, educational setting, and they have presented such a vast array of challenges not only in terms of creative and production prerequisites, but also with regards to cast size/ability/background, venue/site, time-frame, musical requirements and so forth. Therefore whilst considering the frequently asked question of how to devise music for theatre, I find myself reflecting on these productions in particular, since for me, they provide such a rich source for analysis.

The final term of the first year on the Drama and Applied Theatre in Education degree (DATE) at Central School of Speech and Drama consists solely of the directed production unit. This entails devising a show with music/songs to be performed by the entire year group for a week's run during 'schools' fortnight' at the Minack theatre in Cornwall; a startlingly proportioned 700 seat amphitheatre, built into the edge of a cliff, three miles from Land's End.

I have musically directed and facilitated the music devising process for this Central show

for the last eight years and although, because of increasing student numbers, the unit model has more recently evolved to include two additional and separately run smaller productions, seventy percent of the first year students are still assigned to the Minack project. This means that over the last eight years we have had between 35 and 65 cast members to devise these shows with and for.

The DATE students are obviously training to be applied theatre practitioners and/or educational facilitators. The greatest challenge we face as a creative team, is always how to make a show that consistently meets the expectations of both the theatre and its paying public, therefore enabling us to secure this much sought after slot in the programming schedule year after year. The pressures are further compounded by the fact that we have to achieve this with a large group of participants who are neither actors or singers, and often have a collective reticence towards performing in general. In 2007, the proposed show was *The Grimms's Tales* and interestingly, particularly in terms of the effect it had on the creative choices we were forced to make, out of the entire cast of 46, 43 of them were female.

In 2009 I was also asked to work on a devised unit for the BA Musical Theatre degree at Trinity College of Music. These students were in their third year and throughout their training had undergone intensive tuition in singing, dancing and acting as well as being exposed to many styles of musical theatre as performers through the requisite number of fully realised public productions per year. However, they had little or no experience in devising or making any type of theatre that didn't involve a script and a set of directorial instructions, and this was the first time this particular unit had ever been run. It was anticipated that this too would end up being a site-specific show and include the entire year group which meant that we had a cast of 22, all female as well.

There are some really interesting contrasts and parallels to be drawn between the processes of creating both *The Grimms's Tales* and the Trinity show (eventually entitled *Various Cures for Loneliness*), and these span from inception, and production right through to performance. The most obvious similarities between the two were that they were both site-specific in nature with a massive imbalance in the female to male ratio. The gender break down was something which presented challenges enough, not only in the overall sense of how we were going to construct and tell the story, but more specifically for me, there was the worry that the limits to the type of full ensemble vocal sound we were going to be able to achieve could potentially restrict what we were going to be able to do musically. Perhaps the most crucial observation however, is that whilst they were ultimately going to reach the necessary outcome by embarking on almost exactly the same type of process, the pedagogical

needs of these two groups were essentially at polar opposites from one another.

The Minack show is normally a new adaptation of a book or a play that has to be decided upon quite early on in the year in order for there to be an adequate amount of time to form the creative team, make some early design decisions and meet the marketing and publicity deadlines for the theatre. Groups of second year DATE students are assigned to facilitate the collaborative outreach work with the local schools as part of their path of study and we also have to incorporate various placements assigned to us from the BA Theatre Practice course. They not only provide us with the stage management team, but also often place students from other strands with us, such as puppetry, sound, costume and props which means we have also have to provide learning opportunities and/or performance outcomes for them.

The other thing that happens is that before the six or seven week rehearsal period begins we go into an intensive 'craft fortnight'. This means that all the students elect a speciality and are assigned to groups such as music, craft, costume, front of house, dramaturgy, etc. and for two weeks these groups work fairly independently from one another. This has historically been because of the fact that all the courses are only permitted to have exclusive access to the workshop for a limited period of time so the build has to be largely completed within that two weeks. It makes sense then to put that time to equally good use in terms of distributing all the other departmental tasks whilst the build is happening, but rather oddly means that almost everything gets made for the show before the actual devising even starts which often throws light on some interesting creative and dramaturgical issues. In the music group, I would be assigned roughly between eight and twelve students with a fairly even split between those who listed music as their first choice and those who didn't. Often those with instrumental skills will also be included in my group, but this is not necessarily a given, as those students might prefer to do something else as their craft speciality. In the music group for *Grimms's Tales*, I had around eight students, including two pianists and a guitar player.

It is worth noting that there isn't really a straightforward facility to accommodate a 'band' at the Minack. By virtue of the fact that these students are not training to be musicians, the likelihood is that the technical playing ability amongst the year group will not be of a suitably competent standard to adequately support the sound of a cast of that size. From a practical point of view, it would also take performers out of action for us and I would need to musically direct it from the stage, which isn't really the right formula for this particular show. Therefore I will normally produce a backing track to accompany the songs which not only provides a robust foundation for the singing, but which can then be enhanced to varying degrees by live instrumental and percussion playing, dependent on who we have available and what the musical palette ends up being. At the end of the craft period, I take everything we have made away in order to edit, rewrite or compose additional material, vocally arrange and orchestrate and I then move into my role as MD 'proper'.

At Trinity, the only fait accompli was that the production would be site-specific and the entire rehearsal, production and performance schedule had to take place within a five-week period. There was no stimulus, source material, or pre-arranged starting point. The venue was a café space at a southeast London fringe venue, which was possibly one of the most uncompromising, and least geometrically shaped rooms I have ever seen. Aside from this, there were other constraints that were imposed on the creative team, which rather unexpectedly came from the faculty itself. Whilst they were anxious for this devised unit to run and were open to suggestions made from our combined experience as a team in terms of how this sort of process typically unfolds, they couldn't understand that this meant the traditional rules in terms of scheduling the various stages of a standard and linear rehearsal process, simply couldn't apply. Consequently there were band calls scheduled for the middle of the second week, when we knew from the outset that there most definitely wouldn't be anything for me to give the musicians to play and they were demanding decisions to be made in terms of lighting, staging and instrumentation that we were wholly unable to make. This eventually meant that I was rather forced into making the decision that we wouldn't have a band, which meant that the musical support was to come from two keyboards played by me along with any additional instrumental playing from the actors. As far as rehearsals and devising were concerned, however, with no initial specifically dedicated music writing period, the director and I were able to be in the rehearsal room, together with our full cast, every day from the very start of the process and this paved the way for us to introduce some interestingly entwined methods of working.

Some decisions had been made for the Minack show prior to the start of craft fortnight such as which specific tales we would use, the fact that the director wanted a full ensemble opening number and what the overall framing device would be, so the initial brainstorming and discussion sessions focussed on looking at the content of the individual tales in more detail and compiling a list of key themes and possible song points.

At Trinity, we gave our cast two starting points. One was to do as much background reading and historical research about the area and community in which our performance venue was situated, and the other was to go to a café and observe one person for as long as possible in order to construct a thoroughly realised physical representation of them and some sort of back story. Since the group, as I mentioned, had never worked in this way before, they needed so much teaching from us in terms of the basic principles of devising and improvisation, that discussing and practically exploring the outcomes from these initial exercises took us well into the middle of the second week and until this source material had been clearly established, identifying the key themes and song points couldn't and didn't happen until much later on.

What did happen, however, was that during this time they had ample opportunity to play characters other than the one they had created in different combinations and scenarios. This not only meant that they got to see and consider

many alternative and abstract interpretations of their own character, but more importantly when we started writing the songs everyone had the same thoroughly exercised working knowledge of all the others. Additionally, since this character work had been combined with elements of the background research in order to produce a series of monologues, we finally had the textual material from which to create the lyrics.

Conversely, the deeply ensconced working knowledge the Minack group had in terms of the actual fairy tales themselves, and the vast amount of existing textual material they had at their disposal from the outset had rather a detrimental effect at the start of the writing process, because they were initially unable to distance themselves from 'what it said in the book' and consider some more playful and less obvious angles from which to tell the stories.

In both of these cases, as soon as we had material to work with, I introduced the concept of writing theatrical songs 'from the inside out'. During the Grimms' craft process, since we had to deal with rather a lot of animal characters, this came to be known as 'Being the Dog'. What that means is that as far as I'm concerned a character or narrative song has to be and do what the song is. This is basically a musical extension of the dramaturgical concept 'Show, not tell' and it comes from something that Stephen Sondheim often talks about relating to how essential it is to give a character a lyrical syntax that is firmly derived from their particular consciousness rather than objectively forcing on them what you as the writer perceive their internal experiences to be, as these are based purely upon external observations. Once the groups had grasped the basics of this concept, it produced some excellent results for both shows.

Rumpelstiltskin, as a fairy tale, is rather thin, content-wise but it had been chosen for *Grimms'* because there was an opportunity to build a puppet for it so the original directorial decision was that there would only be quite a fleeting reference to it, and this would mainly be for visual purposes. However, as quite often happens during the craft process, whilst we were 'looking for angles' the group stumbled upon this idea that we could tell the story from the point of view of some fictional guards and their subordinates who, we decided, had been charged by the Queen to go out into the town and ask the residents to help them discover Rumpelstiltskin's name. The original start of this lyric read:

*Come one and all, I need a name
To take back to her highness
Old and young, large or small
Rack your brains I need them all.*

I fairly immediately threw this away and encouraged a shift in thinking towards 'being the guards', structuring the song in a way that enabled the narrative to be what the song *was* and *showing* us the story rather than *telling* us. The song eventually came to be structured in three distinct parts (the story itself takes place over three days) separated by short cut away scenes at the palace, where the Queen tries out the results. Each recurring section follows almost an identical structure, but with slight musical variations and a shift in tone that raises the emotional stakes as the

guards get more and more hysterical, exhausted and desperate to solve the problem and the villagers get more and more annoyed at the fact that they're being disturbed. The song, which finally ran at over four and a half minutes, became a full ensemble set piece and with the guards listed on the left and the subordinates' asides on the right in brackets, the opening lyrics for each consecutive section subsequently became:

- 1: *I've been sent by the Queen to gather some names (sent, sent, sent, sent, sent)
There's a short, smelly fella been playing some games (scent, scent, scent, scent, scent)
He's a right piece of work, short little thing
Planning on getting his hands on the king!*
- 2: *I'll be seized by the Queen if there's nothing to tell (seize, seize, seize, seize, seize)
To top it my allergy's flared up as well (sneeze, sneeze, sneeze, sneeze, sneeze)
Cos of that child-sized dwarf, below average height
Who's desperate to snaggle the Queen's little mite!*
3. *Now I've aged twenty years from the stress and despair (Bless him fee-ling old)
I'm tired, emotional, losing my hair (Look, he's go-ing bald)
(If you missed it) He's vertically challenged; we need to get rid,
Before he can kidnap the palace's kid!*

Back at Trinity, once the characters we wanted to focus on had been identified, I divided the students into four smaller groups, gave them each one of the monologues, and asked them to write between four and sixteen lines consisting of the words and phrases that most stood out to them from the text. They were also allowed to incorporate any other words or phrases that had become connected to that character through the practical work. Once they had done this I swapped the results between the groups and got them to edit again. This is a technique I often employ that allows everyone to be more ruthless about editing since it's not their own work, and also encourages them to delete all the extraneous words, even down to the smallest article. After the third rotation, each group then came to me and we set about the process of setting the music and melodies, with the editing button still firmly engaged. One of these monologues concerned a character called Mandy who suffered from Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, and we were following her stream of consciousness as someone near her sat tapping a pen on a table. The monologue was virtually edited down to nothing and the lyric that remained was:

*Two, not three, stop, five times left
**Look, one minute(s) late, tap, tap, tap tap
I'm hot, I'm sweaty, got a temperature.
Tumour! Dying!
Must check again, check again, check***

We decided to use this as a map for what became the verse, since there was a clear and naturally identifiable rhythmic pattern that had emerged and this could be delivered as one run on sentence. As the lyric developed, we rather arbitrarily decided that the words that are highlighted above in bold would never be



changed, but the rest of them could be. 'Tap, tap, tap', became 'drip, drip, drip, drip' became 'ring, ring, ring, ring' on so on. The song that came to be entitled *Check*, absolutely ended up *being* what the song was about. In order to develop the complexity and the sense of the internal turmoil further we gave the whole number an incredibly slow and steady build up in speed, which by the end was utterly frantic, and this coupled with a similarly dramatic arc in the choreography made for a very effective result.

Having worked so closely together for nearly three years, this group were more than familiar with their collective sound as an ensemble and needed very little help in that area. Stylistically, however, they were firmly locked into the classic 'musical theatre' sound, which as a direct response to the style of the action we had begun to devise, I decided to completely strip away. This clean, crisp, 'non-flowery' style of delivery was totally alien to them, and it meant they had to work much, much harder in terms of pitching; I also really limited the use of harmony to very specific moments. But the very worst thing I could do in their opinion was stop them from singing at all – and that's virtually what I did for this song, not merely for the sake of it, but because it totally suited the style. However, they did remain open to this and quite immediately saw how effective it was as a device. We decided that certain words 'stop', 'late', 'tumour' and 'dying' were the only ones that would be sung and the entire remainder of the song would be spoken. At the very beginning we removed the spoken elements completely so these sung words were all the audience heard during the first cycle of the song with randomly spaced gaps in between them and from that point forward with each cycle we merely 'filled in the blanks'.

Taking all these elements and contributing factors into account, the process of composing and making music for theatre in this way is, for me, one of the most engaging, challenging, unpredictable and exciting ways to work. It provides one of the best environments for enabling a wholly immersive experience that remains implicitly focussed on maximising the potential of a unique dynamic. This dynamic can

only be generated by the combination of a certain group of people with a certain set of skills who are brought together at a certain time, within a certain set of parameters and more importantly, by virtue of the fact that those conditions can never truly be identically replicated, it ensures a level of originality for the outcome that is artistically and creatively invaluable.

LOOKING BACK AT PREVIOUS EDEN FESTIVALS

In 2011 Daniel Sarstedt ADd our MS Festival at Eden where the starting point was *The story of chocolate*. Daniel began the first full group by teaching this to the entire Festival ensemble. Every time I read the words I still actually sing them in my head; this is how a good song works right?

"Co-Co-Cocoa-Co

Have a lovely bit of chocolate
You deserve a treat
Give a lovely bit of chocolate
To everyone you meet"

In 2012 our starting point was *Footsteps* where we 'followed' the travels of the plant hunters, who journeyed to lands afar to collect plants. Storyteller and ISTA artist Chris Salisbury introduced us to Wassailing and to the wonderful lyrics:

"Here's to thee, old apple tree,
That blooms well, bears well.
Hats full, caps full,
Three bushel bags full,
An' all under one tree.
Hurrah! Hurrah!"

This, too, became a refrain in our final performance.