DIGITAL THEATRE⁺

MAKING POSTDRAMATIC THEATRE: A HANDBOOK OF DEVISING EXERCISES

Edited by Tracy Crossley and Niki Woods

This exclusive Digital Theatre+ workshop handbook compiles exercises from contemporary British and trans-European theatre companies and practitioners for tutors teaching postdramatic practice and for students and theatre-makers devising their own performance work.

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PREFACE

Making Postdramatic Theatre is a workshop handbook for tutors teaching postdramatic practice and for students and makers devising their own performance work. It aims to extend the range of workshop manuals on devised theatre that are currently on the market by focusing specifically on exercises that can be used for making theatre that is postdramatic. Uniquely, this handbook is compiled of workshop exercises contributed by a range of established British and trans-European theatre companies and practitioners who tour their work internationally.

The practitioners who have contributed to this resource have their legacy in the postdramatic innovations of pioneers such as Impact Theatre, Forced Entertainment and Station House Opera from the UK; **The Wooster Group**, **Goat Island** and **Robert Wilson** from the US; and **Pina Bausch**, Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker and Jan Fabre from Europe, to name a few. The work of these pioneers has been documented and analysed in many publications on contemporary theatre and postdramatic practice. Likewise, several of the practitioners featured in this handbook have published books and manuals on their own specific practice, which are included in the **Further Reading and Resources** section towards the end.

However, our aim as authors and editors has been to compile workshop material from a range of practitioners that can be applied beyond specific productions and beyond the unique approach and style of individual companies. This does not mean we wish to present postdramatic theatre as a prescriptive style or methodology. Just as there are different forms of dramatic theatre, postdramatic theatre is a diverse field, across which practitioners might develop very different practices and draw from a range of performance methodologies. We also acknowledge that the term 'postdramatic' is not embraced by all scholars and theatre-makers and some prefer the more generic term 'contemporary performance'. However, whilst postdramatic theatre is part of the contemporary performance landscape, that landscape stretches beyond theatre into realms such as live and performance art and dance; whereas this handbook is concerned specifically with theatre practice (even though this practice also overlaps with other disciplines). Likewise, some view the postdramatic as simply another term for the postmodern. Again, whilst there is an overlap between the two terms and they share many characteristics (although a detailed

analysis of this is beyond the scope of this book), postmodernism is a broader cultural category, which also encompasses dramatic forms, whereas the term postdramatic refers to a set of approaches that attempt to move beyond or push back the limits of dramatic elements such as character, story and fiction. Some of the ways in which postdramatic theatre does this are outlined in the introduction to this handbook.

ABOUT THIS HANDBOOK

Following an introductory chapter, this handbook is divided into four chapters:

- **Action:** *Body / Task*
- **Text:** *New Text / Found Text*
- **Space:** *Space / Place*
- **Time:** *Composition / Structure*

The duality in these titles indicates the diversity of sources, materials and strategies that play across the field of postdramatic theatre, while grouping the exercises loosely around the four basic dimensions of theatre: Text, Action, Space and Time. We acknowledge that these dimensions are overlapping and integrated in any live performance – for example, composition involves the placing and structuring of all elements in space and time. As such, these groupings are provisional rather than definitive and organised simply to indicate a key area of focus.

The exercises are of varying lengths: while some are short exercises, others take the form of full workshops, which can last for several hours and/or form the basis of a more extended performance project. Although this handbook is not a step-by-step guide for the devising process, to facilitate further elaboration and development of the exercises, suggestions are provided in the 'Variations/Development' sections, from both the contributing artists and in the form of text boxes from the editors. We also refer the reader to the devising guidebooks in the **Further Reading and Resources** section – such as Oddey (1996), Bogart and Landau (2005). The exercises are also of varying complexity and difficulty: some may be considered more relevant and applicable to specific age/skill levels than others in both further and higher education contexts. We have not indicated specific levels as we feel this would be too prescriptive and therefore defer this judgement to those using this resource in the classroom.

To provide contextual understanding, we have preceded each exercise with a section profiling the work and approach of the contributing practitioners, with links to websites and videos of relevant productions. In addition, the specific context or production in which the exercise was first

used is described in the section entitled 'Origins'. It is important to highlight that the origins of these exercises are not always clear: as many of the practitioners note, they are often adapted from exercises they have been introduced to by other practitioners who in turn have adapted them from others. These practitioners, where known, are acknowledged by the contributors in these sections. This is a lineage to which we hope to contribute to by compiling this material for current and future theatre-makers, in order for it to be used, adapted and developed by those who use this resource in their own work.

Finally, we conclude this handbook with an annotated **Further Reading and Resources** section, which can be selectively used to further critical understanding, to gain deeper insights into the processes and work of individual theatre companies and to access further exercises and tools for postdramatic workshop practice. This is by no means an exhaustive list and, as with the exercises, some are more challenging than others and will therefore suit different educational levels. It is compiled of more than thirty publications/resources that have a direct or contextual relevance to postdramatic theatre, many of which we have found useful in our own research, teaching and practice.

INTRODUCTION
Tracy Crossley

What is Postdramatic Theatre?

In order to answer this question, it is helpful to first note the key elements that make up 'dramatic theatre.' 'Drama' fundamentally involves the unfolding of situations and events in a fictional narrative (or story) and the psychological and emotional conflicts experienced by the characters. Typical, linear narratives are ordered through a chronological series of actions, incidents and effects that lead to a crisis in one form or another. The narrative ends when the crisis is resolved in some way. Whilst not all narratives unfold in chronological order, they are often linear in the sense that the events of the plot can be ordered chronologically when the narrative has reached the point of resolution or closure. In theatre, all the elements of the production (such as dialogue, movement, lighting, costume and props) are organised within the framework of the fictional narrative and therefore service the written text of the play, which is the guiding principle.

While the term 'drama' dates back to Classical Greek theatre and the theory of Aristotle, the postdramatic theatre tradition emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, in the work of companies such as the **Wooster Group** in the USA and Forced Entertainment in the UK. However, the term 'postdramatic' was not used until after 1999, when German theorist Hans-Thies Lehmann (1944-) introduced it in his book *Postdramatic Theatre* (first published in the UK in 2006). Lehmann used this term to describe an approach within Western theatre and performance practice that is marked by a shift away from **mimesis** (the fictional imitation of the real world) and from the written play as the dominant element of a theatrical production. One key element that Lehmann described as postdramatic is either an explicit acknowledgement of the live *presence* of spectators as part of the content of the work, or a direct exploration of this relationship through forms that invite their participation. In other words, the postdramatic is concerned with theatre as a live *event* rather than represented fiction, which Lehmann (2006) refers to as an encounter of "*shared energies* instead of transmitted signs" (p.150).

The word 'post' in 'postdramatic theatre' suggests that this is a tradition that comes *after* dramatic theatre. This does not mean that it has replaced

dramatic theatre, which continues to exist in many diverse and evolving forms; nor does it necessarily mean a total break with the dramatic conventions described. Rather, it represents a point of departure that moves away from and, at times, returns to and revisits the conventions and structures of drama:

> *"The adjective 'Postdramatic' denotes a theatre that feels bound to operate beyond drama, at a time 'after' the dramatic paradigm in theatre. What it does not mean is an abstract negation and mere looking away from the tradition of drama. 'After' drama means that it lives on as a structure – however weakened and exhausted – of the 'normal' theatre: as an expectation of large parts of its audience, [...] or perhaps only a deviation and playful exploration of what is possible beyond that horizon" (Lehmann, 2016, p.27).*

Limitations of Dramatic Theatre

So what is wrong with drama? Well, nothing. Drama is exciting and thrilling, sometimes tragic, often cathartic. This is why drama is one of our most popular forms of entertainment, most commonly in our TV and film viewing. Even Reality TV now often mixes scripted mini-dramas within its 'slices of life'. But in the medium of theatre, drama has certain limitations because theatre cannot achieve to the same degree the illusion of real life as screen-based media. Yet similarly, dramatic theatre separates performers and **audience** as if they inhabit different times and spaces (like TV and cinema) in order to maintain the illusion of the fictional world created on the stage. It is therefore limiting for practitioners who want to engage more directly with theatre as a live event and with the explicit co-presence of both spectators and performers.

Theatrical **naturalism**, with its imaginary 'fourth wall' between actor and audience, is the most obvious example of the limitations described here. Does this mean that a form such as Bertolt Brecht's **Epic Theatre** is postdramatic? After all, Brecht formed his model of Epic Theatre in opposition to dramatic theatre and wrote plays in which the actors broke the fourth wall to address the audience directly. Well, not exactly. Brecht used the term 'dramatic' in reference to naturalism specifically, whereas

Lehmann describes all forms that rely on fictional narrative, character representation and the dominance of the written play as 'dramatic' – a definition that includes Epic Theatre and the **Theatre of the Absurd**. Therefore, although some of the theatre techniques Brecht pioneered have been influential on some postdramatic theatre work, there are a number of fundamental differences; the most significant being that Brecht, as Lehmann puts it, "clings to the presentation of a fictive and simulated text-cosmos as a dominant, whilst postdramatic theatre no longer does so" (ibid., p.55).

By using the term 'cosmos,' Lehmann is referring to the notion of a world with a fixed and rational order and pattern, whereas reality is multifaceted and can often be disordered and chaotic. In other words, our experience of the world does not always follow rational structures and rules, and shared values and perspectives. As many individuals have different backgrounds, experiences and cultural environments, we experience different realities. This awareness of difference has expanded through the late 20th and 21st centuries with increasingly diverse racial, cultural and social groups, and greater geographical mobility and cultural exchange fuelled by developments in information technology and social media. Our 21st-century reality is one in which we are aware more than ever that conflicts do not have singular origins, cannot be solved by simple resolutions and often transform into new conflicts. This is not the stable cosmos that we usually find in dramatic fiction with its ordered, chronological structure.

Therefore, postdramatic theatre attempts to acknowledge or explore the complexity and diversity of the contemporary world by abandoning the attempt to *represent* reality from a single perspective within a fixed dramatic cosmos: it favours the *presentation* of performance and production components within a **dramaturgical** composition that offers or encourages multiple perspectives on the ideas or themes explored, rather than aiming to fix meaning in a pre-written text. Where written or spoken text is used in postdramatic theatre, it often functions as one component or 'score' amongst others (such as movement, image and **scenography**) in the performance fabric as a whole, rather than as the organising framework of the entire production. An example of this approach is Stan's Cafe's 2003 production of *Be Proud of Me*. The company used slide-projected images, and text in a mix of languages taken from tourist phrasebooks, in a show

that mimicked the narrative form of a psychological thriller. Yet rather than constructing a clear narrative conclusion, the show hinted at several possible narrative threads, leaving the audience with fragments from which to construct their own final story:

> "Dramatic theatre is subordinated to the primacy of the text. In the theatre of modern times, the staging largely consisted of the declamation and illustration of written drama. Even where music and dance were added or where they predominated, the 'text', in the sense of at least the imagination of a comprehensible narrative/or mental totality, was determining. [...] Wholeness, illusion and world representation are inherent in the model 'drama'; conversely, through its very form, dramatic theatre proclaims wholeness as the model of the real. Dramatic theatre ends when these elements are no longer the regulating principle but merely one possible variant of theatrical art" (Lehmann, 2016, pp.21-22).

Form and Meaning

Postdramatic theatre, then, can be described as having a *multi-textual* landscape which can be structured in different ways and take many different forms. Therefore, processes of composition in postdramatic performance are very different than they are in traditional forms of drama. In both cases, the theatre-maker must effectively arrange and balance speech, image and action within time and space in order to create a performance that is engaging and meaningful for an audience. In dramatic theatre, these elements are organised within the framework of the story, its 'given circumstances' and stage directions dictated in the script. In postdramatic theatre, the different performance components are typically blended so that they function as associated threads or layers that are woven together in a montage – "a way of constructing new meanings from numerous disparate sources or bits" (Schechner, 2013, p.255) – or a collage that explores an idea or theme from multiple, sometimes contradictory, perspectives. For example, the **Wooster Group** often make performance collages that draw on diverse audio-visual sources in combination with classical plays. As Andrew Quick describes, their work is structured through "a shifting array of frameworks," which include "the

various technologies of communication – sound, video, televisual, as well as pictorial, cinematic and choreographic modes of expressions" (2007, p.9). Their most famous piece, *L.S.D. (...Just the High Points...),* (1984), explored American culture in the 1960s through the lens of the 1980s by using real (or 'found') materials from that period alongside new material created specifically for the show. This included: documentary television footage; taped interviews; readings from novels written in the 1960s; sections from Arthur Miller's play *The Crucible* (1953); and choreographed dance sequences, which the performers present as a cartoonish Mexican dance troupe. The result was a piece that, rather than attempting to present a totalising historical viewpoint on the 1960s, demonstrated different experiences, perspectives and values in relation to the cultural and counter-cultural themes of that period.

As this example indicates, the growth of the media and its saturation through everyday life is a strong influence in postdramatic theatre. In the 21st century, investigations into the ways in which our lives and our identities are shaped through mass media forms (including film and television, the internet and social media) are common in postdramatic theatre productions, which often use texts and images directly from other media, as well as its technologies. This means that postdramatic theatre productions are often *interdisciplinary*; that is, they may draw on different art forms such as dance, music, the visual arts and media, and use their forms of expression and composition in place of linear narrative.

"Postdramatic theatre focuses on theatre [rather than drama] emphasising the visual (for our media age) and sacrificing a sense of coherent narrative synthesis [...] cognisant of how movement, rhythm, architectonics, aural elements and so on all contribute to the fabric of the event. [...] A significant, repeating feature of postdramatic theatre is that it encourages (or even necessitates) synesthesia, the audience's gradual recognition and pulling together of correspondences across the work. [...] Dispersed and multiple processes of creation become constitutive of the work in more ways than one – they are its process of making, and they remain in its product" (Harvie, in Harvie and Lavender, 2010, pp.12-14).

However, not all postdramatic theatre pieces take such a diverse approach in their use of materials as the Wooster Group. In his book, Lehmann refers to a "panorama"**,** a wide view of postdramatic work (2006, p.68), thereby acknowledging the many different forms that a theatre 'beyond' drama can take. For instance, Quarantine's *Wallflower* (2015) unfolds through two simple activities: dancing and storytelling. In this piece, the performers are challenged to remember every dance they have ever danced over a five-hour duration. The performers do not adopt fictional characters (though they imitate other figures at times) and the spoken text is drawn from their own memories, which is interwoven to create a tapestry of text and movement. Improvisation is incorporated as an element of the performance: there is no fixed order in which the performers take to the 'stage' and no set 'script' that prescribes which dances and memories they will present. Therefore, although its form and content are very different to the Wooster Group example, as with *LSD*, there is no central textual authority that orders the potential meanings into a stable 'world representation'. Instead, meaning is more open and is partly dependent on how the work is experienced and understood by the spectators and what personal connections they make with it.

So does this mean that a postdramatic theatre piece is essentially meaning*less*, in and of itself, that what it means is wholly decided by the spectator? No. The work's meaning is neither entirely absent nor entirely open. Some postdramatic works create multiple layers of *potential* meaning so that spectators are forced to actively connect strands or *signs* together (as in the examples above), or create a multitude of partial – unfinished – narratives. Others construct events in which spectators are invited to physically participate such that the work is incomplete without that participation. Therefore, a more personal reflection is encouraged as the spectators will not necessarily all experience or respond to a performance piece in the same way. In fact, what it *means* might be the wrong question to ask in relation to postdramatic theatre generally (at least in the immediate experience of it) as it tends to privilege the audience's sensorial experience over meaning. In other words, the spectator is invited to consider how it makes him or her feel and what it makes him or her think in relation to the emerging themes and through the specific nature of their engagement with – or active participation in – the performance event.

Performing Postdramatic Theatre

If spectatorship is transformed in postdramatic theatre, then it follows that its modes of performance also shift. So, if the traditional function of the actor in Western theatre is the *representation* of a fictional character or historical figure, how is this function altered through the shift to direct *presentation* of performance material?

In his analysis of the emerging Performance Art scene in the 1960s, Michael Kirby (1931-1997) proposed a spectrum from 'complex acting' (in dramatic theatre) to 'not-acting' (in performance art) that is helpful in considering the shift. He suggests that performance artists operate in a manner similar to stagehands or **circus** performers, *doing* 'real-time' actions and carrying out actual tasks rather than *acting* a role. He describes this as 'non-matrixed' because it does not operate within "matrices of pretended or represented character, situation, place and time" (Kirby in Zarrilli, 2002, pp.40-41). This task-based approach is a significant feature of postdramatic performance. In some cases, performers engage in actions that generate physical endurance or risk. For instance, Reckless Sleepers' *Negative Space* (2016) is performed in a constructed white box set, which is systematically destroyed by the performers. As they alternate between entering and exiting the set (from the sides, top and underneath) and attacking it with their fists, feet, a hammer and a sweeping brush, they risk the danger of falling through it, being hit by it, or by other performers. Similarly, in durational works, such as *Wallflower*, performers experience a state of exhaustion and disorientation that is not acted but felt. Postdramatic theatre does not depict three-dimensional characters in narrative conflict or emotional crisis, but it may involve performed actions that cause the performer to feel certain emotional states, or create experiences in which different 'mood states' are generated. Audiences can also feel that they have endured or 'lived' an experience with the performers as they shift through a range of potential moods, such as tension, boredom, frustration and hilarity as well as empathy and self-reflection.

As with action, speech in postdramatic theatre is 'non-matrixed,' which means it is not delivered through character dialogue but through direct audience address or conversations between 'performer-selves' onstage, which might mix fiction with reality to create 'mini-dramas' within the overall

postdramatic framework of the piece. An increasing tendency is for performers to engage in actual conversations with spectators. Gob Squad's 2003 piece, *Room Service (Help Me Make it Through the Night)*, is a good example. This piece plays interestingly on the conventional separation of audience and performance by replacing the traditional 'fourth wall' with video screens. The performance takes place overnight in a hotel and situates the audience in the hotel lobby while the performers are in different hotel rooms, each of which is relayed to the audience through a camera and viewed on a bank of screens. This boundary is periodically breached when performers make calls to the audience through a telephone stationed in the lobby and speak directly with them and, in one instance, an audience member is invited to one of the rooms to become a momentary performer themselves. This strategy creates a space of encounter with audiences within the structure of the performance that cannot be (fully) rehearsed in advance or entirely controlled by the performers, as each time the audience's intervention affects and alters the content of the piece.

What Kirby refers to as "simple acting" is also a key feature of postdramatic performance (ibid., p.46). Simple acting can involve an emotional or psychic element – a state of feeling or simulation of an activity (such as pretending to faint), but it does not involve the depth of characterisation and emotional complexity involved in dramatic acting. This might involve the incorporation of dramatic elements, such as fictional scenarios (the simulation of a motorcycle stunt show in Actions Hero's *Watch Me Fall*, 2009), character 'types', or personae (the 'Interrogators' in Stan's Cafe's *Good and True,* 2000). A persona can also involve the exaggeration of an element of the performer's personality. For example, in Forced Entertainment's *Bloody Mess* (2004), the performers introduce themselves to the audience by their real names before comically describing how they would like the audience to 'see' them that night. The use of personae blurs distinctions between everyday 'being' and acting – particularly in works that use autobiographical material or real experience. As performance artist Rachel Rosenthal (1926-2015) suggests, "It is you and yet not you – a part of you but not the whole. It is not a lie but neither the full truth" (cited in Lampe, in Zarrilli, 2002, p.295).

When dramatic elements are used in a postdramatic context they are used *reflexively,* that is they are presented *as* fictional constructs or performed

behaviour. This may occur through a Brechtian-influenced acting as demonstration (or 'citation') – as if placing a performed role in quotation marks. As Carl Lavery writes in his introduction to Action Hero's *Action Plans*, citation is "work in which speech, images, gesture, and situations are shifted from one context to another" (2015, p.xvii). Alternatively, performers may adopt what Sara Jane Bailes calls a "poetics of failure", where characters or actions are performed deliberately badly or awkwardly or where the normal conventions of 'good' stage acting are broken (2011, p.22). Failure *performed* through a deliberate rejection of acting technique produces a self-conscious, often ironic, style of performance, which is intended to playfully 'deconstruct' character types or fictional scenarios that may be commonly seen in other media (such as film or television) or which have now become clichéd representations**:**

> *"If the performed self is recognised as a constructed representation or strategic illusion [...] then it offers audiences the opportunity to reflect on their own representations of selfhood in the world beyond the theatre. [...] If character, as understood in a modernist sense, is metaphorically dead by the end of the 1980s, then theatre at the turn of the century [...] is haunted by free-floating, mischief-making apparitions that are concomitant with the contemporary understanding of identity as made up of multiple and provisional selves who create the world they inhabit"* (Tomlin, 2013, pp.80-81).

However, it is important to acknowledge that postdramatic theatre is not without its critics and that techniques such as 'performed failure' or citation can produce 'carbon-copy' imitations of existing work. For instance, Liz Tomlin warns that by now failure is often used as an established postdramatic *style* "with its own rules and prescriptions" rather than an experimental strategy (2013, p.48). Similarly, in their influential study on devised theatre, Heddon and Milling highlight a tendency within the higher educational context to approach the devising of postdramatic performance using predictable formulae. They link this tendency to the use of formal codes and techniques "based on the repetition of taught/appropriated models" (2015, p.228), which are based on the work of a few influential companies without a contextual understanding of that work or critical application of the techniques used (ibid., pp.215-17).

Of course, any performance technique has the potential to become stale and clichéd if used to simply repeat what has been done before. Yet, as Lavery suggests,

> *"To quote something is to have the potential to change it, to give it a new life by subjecting it to analysis, [...] to rupture conventions that are as much social as they are theatrical"* (2015, p.xvii).

Repetition is also an important part of learning for those exploring particular forms and approaches for the first time. Techniques of 'failure' and citation can be used fruitfully to explore different performance registers across the spectrum from acting to not-acting and can, therefore, help budding theatre-makers to expand their performance repertoire.

Nevertheless, to help facilitate a critical engagement with postdramatic theatre, we encourage the users of this handbook to explore the critical and contextual material listed in the **Further Reading and Resources** section; the video links to productions (where available); the wealth of material on the contributors' websites; and to go see and *experience* postdramatic theatre work. Finally, we urge our readers to use these exercises, which have been generously contributed by those practitioners making postdramatic theatre today, as stimuli and starting points; to freely experiment with and adapt these exercises to your own specific contexts and obsessions, and to make theatre that is fresh and relevant to your contemporary world.