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Teaching Writing For Performance Online: Dynamic Approaches to the Online Workshop

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This paper builds on my on-going research into the playwright's role within the collaborative devising process, which includes questioning traditional pedagogical approaches to writing for the stage. In addition, it references the practical experience of developing and teaching modules focused on the craft of playmaking for the online Theatre Studies BA at Rose Bruford College of Theatre and Performance. Although there may appear to be a disconnection between encouraging playwrights to engage with collaborative theatre making and the mainly asynchronous nature of an online degree, where students often work in isolation, the core tenet of this 'Perspectives' piece is that all teaching of playwriting, regardless of whether it is online or not, needs to move beyond the traditional classroom/workshop approach.

Whilst the pedagogical framework that sees students engage in text-based studies of scripts and books about writing cannot be entirely abandoned, students benefit from a more embodied approach, which reminds them that they are writing for a medium which communicates in a multi-faceted way and is negotiated in the moment, so that they gain a more holistic understanding of how a script might be interpreted in live performance. Drawing on both my practice as a playwright and dramaturg, and my work in online teaching, I argue that there is potential to treat the 'Zoom room' as workshop, where students can work together, improvise, and treat their screens as spaces for experimentation and performance. In addition, this more dynamic approach helps to prepare students for a rapidly evolving theatre ecology, which had embraced digital technology long before Covid-19 entered our lives.

Introduction

As part of my PhD research (2018), a practice-as-research project that focused on the effects of playwrights engaging with the devising process, I investigated traditional pedagogical practices for playwriting, looking primarily at university courses and literature designed for training writers (the 'how-to' write books). It seems natural that books, given the fact that readers tend to engage with them in isolation, tend to focus on writing done outside of a collaborative structure. However, it was surprising that many playwriting courses, taught in shared spaces with the opportunity for collective creation, also overwhelmingly emphasise the playwright-as-solo-artist model. There is the oft-touted saying that all theatre is collaborative, and indeed it is at the point of rehearsal and performance, but, as Michelene Wandor argues, dramatic writing, at least in the model which has predominantly existed within English-language theatre, is 'not intrinsically a collaborative art form' (2008: 21). Increasingly however, the model of theatre-making where a playwright constructs a script, hands it over to a theatre/director, who then interprets it with a group of actors — often with little input from the playwright — is being challenged (as is the nature of theatre itself). Arguably, and at any rate, this model has only ever been dominant within English-speaking cultures, and historically many of our greatest playwrights, including Shakespeare, have emerged from a collaborative background. As will be explored below, my key argument is that training in the methodologies of collaborative devising, along with a general approach that discourages working primarily in isolation, benefits writers and better prepares them for an evolving performance ecology that is moving away from a writer-centric theatre landscape, whilst allowing for individual creative spark.

At first glance, however, there appears to be a contradiction between my theory and my pedagogical practice. I teach on Rose Bruford College of Theatre and Performance's BA Theatre Studies, a course taught entirely online.[1] As part of that, working with Online Curriculum Manager of Learning and Teaching Jayne Richards, I have written/adapted elements of modules, including one on the craft of playmaking and a practice-based module on playwriting. My students come from all over the world, and mainly complete their studies at home (or in a non-campus-based space), without physical contact with other students or me. Although we have webinars, learning is mainly asynchronous, which would suggest that their work — both academic and creative — is completed in a non-collaborative way. How does this sit within a pedagogical philosophy that insists playwrights can only achieve a holistic understanding of stagecraft, and the potential within a script to explore that craft, if they have direct experience of collaborative processes?

The answer is 'somewhat uneasily', but, like all theatre artists, we do our best to creatively exploit the tools we have available to us. The Covid-19 pandemic forced many in Higher Education to reconsider the digital tools available to them and work out how to reconfigure teaching away from models that do not work well online (such as the lecture format), but those of us who teach creative subjects online have been doing this for many years. This article is a reflection on some of the limitations of traditional pedagogical approaches to teaching writing for the stage, and a battle cry for embracing the digital opportunities presented to us.

The Pedagogical Landscape of Writing for Performance

As David Edgar writes in the preface to the second edition of his popular text '*How Plays Work*', in the last decade the 'ideological challenge to the individually written play spread from the academy to the theatre industry' (2021: xi). This is a particularly notable observation, given that Edgar himself, like many of his contemporaries writing 'how-to' texts, ignores issues of collaborative creation. Though Edgar recognises the increasing importance of devised work, he feels unable to address it within the confines of his book, justifying the omission because 'so few of its texts are published or otherwise accessible' (xviii). This points to a central tenet in the teaching of writing for the stage – students predominantly learn by examining the finished scripted products of other writers rather than an examination of the process a writer undergoes whilst crafting a script and what happens to a script when it becomes embodied by a performer. Indeed, as research undertaken for my PhD revealed, only six per cent of those surveyed indicated that their training had included aspects of collaborative work with non-writer-artists (2018: 84).

In the United Kingdom, many short courses, undergraduate courses and MA courses teach the craft of writing for performance using approaches which predominantly focus on the writer as solo artist. As Chris Foxon and George Turvey state in '*Being a Playwright: A Career Guide for Writers*', the provision of specialist courses in playwriting 'has exploded' and it is now common for playwrights to 'undertake some form of training' (2018: 3). My own research confirms this; in 2014 sixty percent of playwrights surveyed had undertaken formal training, including one-off writing classes, non-degree courses and degree courses (2018: 80). The majority of this teaching takes place within classrooms or similar spaces which are not designated for performance, and uses the 'playwright's workshop' structure where students learn various aspects of dramaturgy, again with close reference to finished, canonical scripts, then write work outside of the room, bringing it in to share with others. Where the learning takes place

within the confines of a degree it will need to be assessed, which may mean that, as Foxon and Turvey suggest, certain elements of the craft 'will be more suited to being taught and assessed than others' (4). A student's understanding and application of a particular dramaturgical aspect such as structure is much easier to assess than more nebulous aspects of the craft such as collaboration, simply because we can see evidence of the former on paper whilst deciding whether someone is a good collaborator is a rather intricate and subjective affair. However, as noted below, it is not impossible to assess. On short and graduate courses, playwrights tend to only be exposed to other writers, and, again, generally work with printed material rather than living bodies. Even if the workshop model allows for a 'reading', this is often done seated, with the characters being read by other writers, who may not be performers themselves.[2]

There is a disconnection in this with the realities of performance; there is only finality in a printed version of a script (and even that can change in subsequent reprints). Enacted, embodied script not only changes from production to production but from performance to performance as an actor breathes in an alternative place or makes a choice to emphasise a word or gesture slightly differently than the night before. When we remove the idea of liveness from a script we place it within the category of literature and, as John Ginman argues, 'privilege the journey through time rather than through space' (2013: 134). Indeed, what is frequently in short supply in many of the pedagogical texts, and has been since the time of Aristotle, are the words 'actor' and 'performer'.[3] Putting aside the problem that this approach places speech as the prime location of meaning on stage, (a notion that is increasingly being challenged), what it fails to recognise is that a word on the page is not the same thing as a word spoken; one is not necessarily superior to the other, but when a printed word has been taken into the imagination and body of a performer it gains the 'extratextual context' described by Walter Ong (1982: 101). If a trainee-playwright only experiences the word-as-print (for even when reading a script out loud we are still rooted in the printed word) then they may not understand the performative potential of that word. Given the move towards the types of performance that may be classified as postdramatic and a general de-centring of dialogue as the key arbiter of meaning, one can question the efficacy of an approach that separates the idea of writing for performance from performance itself.

Bodies in Digital Spaces: Online Pedagogy

In 2019, students and staff in Higher Education institutions in many countries around the world retreated to domestic spaces due to the threat of Covid-19. For some, this

retreat caused only minor changes to teaching and learning; certain subjects do not require students to be breathing the same air, as long as they can communicate online. Others, such as those involved with training performers, struggled to find ways of recreating online the physical circumstances of the workshop, where bodies were regularly in contact with other bodies. Difficult decisions had to be made about how to teach safely whilst maintaining the same learning outcomes. As a result, educators who had previously eschewed the integration of digital technology into curricula had to reconsider what teaching online could offer.

Whilst this undoubtedly caused stress for many who had to rapidly rework teaching and learning materials, in some ways it has been a blessing in disguise; as Gilly Salmon points out (2019: 100) many HE institutions had been slow to recognise the technical innovations in learning that were happening elsewhere and Covid-19 forced them to confront some of the unconscious (or even conscious) biases against the integration of digital technology into teaching. In addition, what became immediately apparent, particularly in the performing arts, was that moving material online made it much more accessible to those who struggle to travel to or otherwise access 'buildings' where learning and performance are traditionally housed. Disabled individuals, those with low incomes, single parents and carers, and other people who struggle to be present in shared spaces were given unprecedented access to a wide range of learning and entertainment activities that had previously been out of their reach.

Those of us involved with the online BA Theatre Studies already knew this long before Covid-19 struck. Our students are diverse, come from across the globe, and include many who struggle with campus-based learning. We teach an arts-based subject online, and know that our pedagogical approach has to marry creativity and technology. In developing modules about the craft of writing for performance, and coming from the perspective of one who challenges the writer-as-isolated-artist model, I had already been wrestling with questions about how to make modules collaborative, creative spaces, where students are able to learn from each other and make note of the links between digital technology and performance methodologies.

A key component of this is getting students to view their computer screen, and indeed the room they are working in, as performative. Consider the similarities between a 'Zoom room' and a traditional performance space: there is an area which is designated as a 'stage'; the rectangular shape of the screen (which is not dissimilar in shape to proscenium-arch stages), which is lit, corresponds to designated performance space of a theatre or similar venue, which is generally also lit or has another way of differentiating it from non-performance-space. On this stage, we are all performers

and are observed by an audience of our peers. We can go 'off stage' by turning off our cameras or stepping out of vision, and utilise diagetic and non-diagetic sound through microphones or the playing of music or effects through our computer. We can create a 'set' by arranging the room we are in or utilising a digital background, and costume ourselves according to the role we are playing (including the role of 'teacher' or 'student'). By helping students to make these connections, not only do they start to view digital technology as an opportunity for creativity, but it also helps to develop their skills as reflective practitioners and learners.

It is often easy to forget how limitations function as opportunities in live performance. Although digital technology is now a key feature of live performance, opening up spaces beyond the designated stage, stagework cannot generally include the kind of fast-moving action that film can or have the sprawling scope of a novel. This does not however mean that live performance is a lesser form; rather, its limitations lead to meaning being created in a flexible, layered and imaginative way. Spectators are able to take more ownership of meaning in live performance and are often closely intellectually engaged; those who have watched recordings/live streams of stage performances often note that it requires a much higher level of concentration than watching a television programme. Similarly, aspects of online delivery which might be seen by some as limitations — for example, sound lag, which can create difficulties when attempting ensemble singing or line delivery — can, with the right framing, be incorporated into performance in creative ways. Many of us now spend a good deal of our lives online and have become keen observers of what happens in the enforced overlaps and silences that happen when the sound doesn't quite sync. Playwrights such as Caryl Churchill and Harold Pinter were experimenting with these peculiarities of human communication long before the internet took hold; why should we not now play with ways that technological glitches are actually laden with potential meaning-making? If performance reflects or even refracts life back at us, should makers not take into consideration the evolving ways we communicate with each other? Many of our most innovative performance practitioners, such as Katie Mitchell, the Wooster Group and Toneelgroep Amsterdam have been using digital technology for years to do just that. Playwrights need to ensure they are not left behind.

It would be dishonest for me to imply that my playwriting modules do not involve many aspects that mirror the more traditional text-based pedagogical structures discussed above; there is a great deal of reading involved! In addition, the majority of work is completed in students' own time and space, rather than collaboratively. This is partly because there is value to be found in reading, analysing and discussing plays

and engaging in solo writing; my argument is not that we should discard these things, but that we must also be creative in how we incorporate issues of collaboration and technology into our teaching. However, in developing these modules I have considered ways of exploiting the digital tools that we use to create a learning environment where students regularly engage with collaborative strategies for creating work and are able to benefit from the insight, experience and encouragement of their fellow students.

One of the key components of this is developing a sense of trust and comradeship; from the outset students are reminded that the act of sharing work is one of vulnerability. Early tasks have a focus on helping students to understand their own artistic identity and in sharing this work it helps the group to get to know each other and establish a sense of trust. I also establish principles of responding to work that focus on asking questions rather than making demands for change and encourage students to consider the personal and cultural context the writer is working in. As tutor, I keep a close eye on how students respond to each other's creative offerings, both in asynchronous forums and synchronous webinars, and point out good practice. We regularly share creative work; I have found that, by posting work in a shared space (we use Microsoft Teams) students are more thoughtful in their responses, as they are able to take time to consider and shape their reflections on each other's work. On the other hand, webinars offer the opportunity for improvisation and spontaneous response; they have the best of both worlds.

Some students are already highly experienced writers and others have never written anything for performance; some are accomplished performers and others skilled directors. As previously mentioned, we have an international cohort of students with a rich diversity in terms of engagement with performative art forms. It is therefore important that a large component of assessment is process-based; meaning we focus on aspects such as engagement and reflection rather than students being rewarded for pre-existing skills. This mosaic of backgrounds replicates the conditions of the collaborative devising workshop, and many tasks require students to work in partnerships or small groups, performing, directing or dramaturging each other's work. They benefit greatly from each other's expertise, and are exposed to performative approaches that come from outside their own cultural boundaries. This work is undertaken using the digital tools available; as established above, these tools can encourage students to be reflective about what performance is. If they are communicating with each other using video conferencing, they are already performing on a digital stage; if they are responding to each other in a forum they are creating a kind of script; apps used for creating presentations can be adapted as innovative story-telling tools. When they become aware

of aspects of intermediality in learning and performance it expands their definitions of these two categories and prepares them for a rapidly evolving arts landscape, where the very notion of writing itself is being reconfigured.

Conclusion

In writing this, I suspect I am already preaching to the converted; the importance of digital technology in both performance and pedagogical practice is not going to be a radical proposal for most readers. What is key here though is that moving to online teaching in the arts does not mean that we have to reinvent the wheel. Rather, it forces us to reflect on how learning and performance are evolving, adapting that which is still relevant and letting go of practices that no longer work; we cannot continue to do things a certain way because they have always been done so. In utilising digital technology in creative pedagogical practice, we can retain — and teach — that which is still useful, such as the integration of collaborative theatre making into the training of playwrights, and exploit the technology available to us to help our students understand those practices. My students may complete much of their work sitting in their own homes, but they do not do it in complete isolation and their modes of learning retain a strong connection to the methodologies of live performance. Their bodies are as active as their minds, and the work they develop is the result of a collaborative pedagogical process, which emphasises that, as writers, they are not ‘solo’ creatives, but members of an artistic team. We can model the kind of technological curiosity that will allow our students to become courageous and creative innovators: the same kind of curiosity that is at the heart of artistic practice.

Notes

[1] https://www.bruford.ac.uk/learn/undergraduate-courses/theatre-studies-online/.

[2] It is important to note that there is a different model in many American institutions. The Yale School of Drama, the New School and Brown University have run programmes which situate the playwright within a theatre company, training directly alongside actors and directors.

[3] In Anthony Kenny's translation of *Poetics* (2013) the word 'actor' (or derivations, including 'performer') only appears twice, and both occurrences are within a few paragraphs of each other.

Competing Interests

Karen Morash is a paid employee of Rose Bruford College, which she references in the article.

Author Information

Karen Morash is a writer, academic and theatre practitioner whose 2018 PhD (Goldsmiths) focused on the role of the playwright within the collaborative devising process. She is the Lead Academic Tutor on the BA Theatre Studies at Rose Bruford. Her writing has received prizes and been published in *Live Canon Anthology 2019* and *2018*; *Room*; *The Conversation*; *Understorey*; *Literary Mama*; *Sentinel Literary Quarterly*; *Bare Fiction*, amongst others. Karen is Dramaturg with Head for Heights, the theatre company she co-founded with director Sue Dunderdale and translator Catherine Boyle, dedicated to producing work in translation.

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