A Devised Promenade

The purpose of this production is to engage an established Chinese ensemble to explore the different dimensions in devising an original piece. The performance will serve as a showcase of the work being involved.

The starting point of this project is simply to tell a story in a promenade, of which genre is unknown. Hence, the initial research phase is to find the story on which the script can be based.

Different techniques or exercises are employed during this phase. For example, the group is asked to use random sounds to create an atmosphere; this involves vocal and random objects that one can find around campus. With the help of the sound, stories slowly emerged and each actor is asked to share his/her story. Sometime the group can agree on certain elements of the story sometimes there are strong diversity. When time allowed, the story will be roughly rehearsed to see how movements can incorporate into the sound bath.

One of the most important elements during this phase is to lead the actors to embrace each others' ideas. This is because although this ensemble has been brought together by previous occasions, the ensemble has always worked on text-based work. When working on text, the basic ideas of the script are set whilst it is not the case when devising. Therefore, one of the common phenomenon is people tend to put forward their ideas not knowing they are in fact rejecting others' idea. One of the filters is to encourage them to provide reasons of what is good and what is bad about other people's idea.

Similar technique is used by using movement as starting point. For example, the group will create certain physical movement or image and slowly let the story emerge. We also workshop different stories to break down different elements of different stores upon which ides can be harvested and incorporated into the forthcoming script.

No matter what technique, I find documentation very important because it helps evaluation and identifying progress. Hence, most devising and rehearsing sessions are either recorded or noted on a chart sheet as spider

diagram. This also allows fast recap on previous sessions so no time is wasted on thinking about what has been done three weeks ago.

I have tried to ask the group to come up a scene in three minute and fifteen minute. What I have found in research phase is that the group often performs better with more time for experimentation. This phenomenon might be specific to this group but it is interesting to observe how ideas are sprout in the group. After few weeks of researching, the context is decided to be medieval Europe and the genre of the story will be dark fairy tale.

With the specific context, the project moves to the next phase, which is to come up with a concrete story under the contexts. Improvisation is heavily used during this phase. For example, one of the actors will go on stage and set a scene and other actors, after realizing the scene, will go on stage and interact.

Again, during improvisation, it is very common for the actors to reject each others' idea, sometimes even without themselves knowingly. Therefore, it is very important to let them understand how to embrace or understand people's idea. There are different exercises to compensate this such as the

"yes and…" game. Through practicing these exercises, actors are made aware when and how they are rejecting ideas. Usually these games will follow after physical and vocal warm up in order to warm up actors' awareness of fellow actors. Depending how the session goes, there will be series of improvisation session that will feed directly into the script. For example, one of the sessions incorporate a conversation between a soldier and village man whereby the soldier expresses strong will to protect the village. The soldier is then included as one of the characters in the final version of the script.

Slowly, through series of improvisation, there are several characters that crop up and favoured by the actors. This includes characters such as gypsy, thief, baker etc. All these characters are gathered and documented on a chart paper. In addition to the characters certain themes come up quite often such as betrayal, isolation, justice etc. These are also documented on another chart paper.

There are also brainstorming session. In some sessions, the chart sheets will be placed side by side and the actors are asked to draw links or potential story line they think fit. In comparison to improvisation that requires thinking on one's feet, brainstorming is a table work. It is noted that such table work is difficult to engage everyone's attention because sometimes one or two enthusiastic individual will express a lot of their thoughts whilst others will be more lay back since "someone else is doing the work". On the other hand, improvisation session engages everyone because all actors, at the end of the day, needs to go on stage and improvise. Nonetheless, during a successful brainstorming session, the actors will have to recap on what has been done, which makes brainstorming a good way to have a macro view of the project. This serves as a very good "break" because actors do express certain level of fatigue after series of improvisation. More so, sometimes actors will question the point of the improvisation. Hence, as an ensemble whereby actors are one of the main sources of producing creative content, it is quite important to let them understand where the production is heading in a more strategic level.

After several weeks of divergent thinking, it is decided that the ideas should be gathered and organized into a structure for the script to be based on. This is a timing decision rather than a creative decision and I think the production can benefit more if there are two or three weeks more just for experimentation. Through series of discussion, it is agreed that a nun, a thief, a soldier, a baker and a blacksmith draw the most link either during improvisation or brainstorming. As such, these characters are the characters in the script.

With the characters decided, character-centered sessions are conducted. Depending on the need to the story, actors are asked to form groups and explore relationship between characters. All these sessions are video-recorded, which has proven to be the most helpful resources in terms of scripting.

With several weeks dedicated to formulate the specific stories between characters, the actors are given a two-week break so I can have time devoted to draft the script. The scripting process comes relatively easy as all the materials are documented either as video or on chart sheets. All I need to do is to organize the material as the story goes and then find a way to tell the story. As the one writing the script, I do not find my creativity being restrained,

which I initially expected. The creative lies not on the content itself but on how I choose to tell the stories.

The first draft of the script comes relatively quick and it is distributed to all the actors who are asked to give feedback. With the help of the feedback, a second draft is drafted and after minor adjustment it becomes the final version.

The whole project then heads toward the rehearsal process. The rehearsal process is relatively fast, perhaps due to the fact that the actors one way or another, have already improvised or staged the fragments. What is the main focus is the blocking, as the performance is a promenade whilst it is the normal end-on blocking during devising.

After the performance, feedback forms are given to the audience. The feedback received are generally positive, most states that this is the first promenade piece they have ever seen and they would like to see more plays in Mandarin. The performance is a showcase of the devising piece and I am glad that the community, the production dedicated to, enjoys the show and would like to see more.

All in all, it is a very pleasurable experience to have an ensemble working together and exploring different techniques in devising an original piece. What is more worthwhile is that the audience enjoys the outcome and desires more varieties in the future.