

Dialogic Devising  
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Dialogic Devising is a collaborative methodology based in choreographic craft for the creation of original text/movement performance. Dialogic Devising is malleable and can be adapted for various outputs: original text/movement performance, physical theatre productions of published scripts, opera, musical theatre, burlesque, and contemporary concert dance. Dialogic Devising is also effective in solo endeavors.

While it is impossible to rid oneself of the influences of one's prior and current movement training, Dialogic Devising's rubrics for movement invention provide a very effective approach to generation of original movement that does not rely upon learned classroom vocabulary. As the emphasis of the methodology is upon movement invention we have not attempted to utilize it with ballet and other forms with prescribed movement vocabulary however we feel it could be adapted for that use as well.

We have been refining and expanding this creative methodology to include trained and untrained dancers, actors, singers, visual artists, young and old, differently-abled, from and in various cultures and countries for many years and more recently, in digital space. The resulting work defies categorization - we use whatever works or whatever the work requires.

Utilizing this methodology we are able to create performance-ready large scale works in relatively short rehearsal periods. Dialogic Devising is a very effective and efficient approach to movement invention. Usually, within the first few rehearsal sessions the performers create more than enough source material for an evening-length work. While habitual movement patterns are impossible to completely avoid, the method's rubrics lead to original movement phrases not based in classroom vocabulary. As the source movement and text originate with the performers the process for bringing the work to performance level is usually an easier task than projects based in solely choreographer-based movement.

Through a dialogic process of research, brainstorming, writing, free association, creative writing assignments and exchange, text is created. The text is edited; resonant words are identified and then paired through chance operations to words connected to aspects of the elements of movement to manipulate body parts, movements, pathways, time, space, energy, and sound. By this process, performers create source movement integrating the text rather than pantomiming the text. This movement is developed through standard choreographic manipulations, taught to other collaborators, and then structured into a cohesive whole. Text is incorporated in either live spoken word or manipulated recordings within the sound score.

Acknowledging that each project has its own unique processes we will, for the purposes of this article, provide a generalized overview of the Dialogic Devising process while providing examples from specific projects. This process includes: Training the Collaborators; Development of the Theme; Identification of Significant Words; Creation of Text; Movement Invention and Manipulation; Creation of Sound; and Structuring the Source Material into a finished product.

### **Training the Collaborators**

The roots of Dialogic Devising are pedagogical, borrowing heavily from lessons we have created for Improvisation, Choreography and content-based Creative Dance course. As such the collaborators require some knowledge of the movement analyses of Rudolph Laban and Margaret H'Doubler (see appended Elements of Movement outline).

While it is preferable that collaborators have extensive experience and exposure to utilizing Laban and H'Doubler Analyses for the generation of original movement, it is possible to provide collaborators with enough of a background to effectively create interesting work in a relatively short time frame. With neophyte collaborators we have found that devoting the initial rehearsal to an improvisational movement exploration of Body, Space, Time and Energy with, perhaps, a brief improvisational warm-up for the next few rehearsals untrained movers are able to create wonderful phrases for implementation in the final work.

As the director will be available to clarify the individual terms when the collaborators begin work solving their individual choreographic assignments, a cursory introduction rather than a thorough embodied knowledge of each of the Elements will suffice when working with untrained movers. There is not the space within this article to provide a detailed exegesis on how to present the Elements of Movement through a structured improvisation. Essentially the director verbally leads the collaborators through an exploration of shape, locomotion and non-locomotive movement, aspects of time, H'Doubler's 6 Qualities of Movement and Laban's 4 Efforts (H'Doubler's Qualities are much easier to teach so , depending upon the level of one's collaborators one may opt to avoid use of Laban's Efforts and still make effective use of Dialogic Devising), and the one-, two- and three-dimensional directions from Laban's Space Harmony. Through this exploration a definition of each of the various aspects is provided.

### **Development of the Theme**

We have worked with initial themes as weighty as the concept of Capitalism as religion as identified by Harvey Cox's "The Market as God" to the seemingly insignificant exploration of the number "7". We have found that what one chooses as a theme is not nearly as important as how it is developed through brainstorming with collaborators. What follows is a sharing of ideas that spring from the initial theme amongst collaborators.

The process of developing the theme expands or contracts to meet the limitations of the production process. The former case, *In God We Trust*, was a production at Luther College that allowed for a semester-long thematic development process with collaborating faculty from the Dance, Theatre, Art, Music and Economics of weekly meetings where we would share our research and ideas. With collaborators from disparate disciplines the shared material ranged from printed materials exploring the mythic structure of shamanic and Greek Mystery religions, documentary photos of poor workers climbing with ore out of pit mines in Brazil, quotes from Alan Greenspan, archaic hand signals from Medieval trading guilds, colors and textures of fabric, sounds, specific web applications, masks, etc. We were also able to take the student performers to observe the trading pit of the Chicago Mercantile Exchange.

For other projects whose schedules do not provide the luxury of regularly scheduled meetings to physically share related materials we have created Cloud-based spaces such as private Google or Facebook Groups to share. This approach was demanded from our international, internet-facilitated collaborations, *Global Corporeality* and *Laptop Performance Laboratory* as we explored their respective themes "Communication" and "Bridges". We have since utilized the convenience of Cloud-based sharing for other projects that allow for all participants to gather in real space and time.

Projects with tighter rehearsal schedules follow a thematic process akin to the latter example, *Zaum: Etude #7*. At the beginning of the first rehearsal a brainstorming process was held with the performers. "7" was written at the top of a white board and the performer/collaborators were asked to free associate and call out any word that or short phrase that came to mind (e.g., seas, luck, dice, number, etc.).

Projects utilizing existing texts include a sharing of the text followed by a sharing of ideas. For example, *Rue for Ophelia* shared monologues for and about the character from Hamlet followed by various character analyses by Shakespearean scholars, URLs for websites in support of the Ophelia Syndrome, songs relating to Ophelia, contemporary scripts exploring the character, paintings of her, etc.

On some projects we have provided collaborators with prompts based upon the theme for writing journal entries. For *Grudge Match*, our seasonal “antidote to the Nutcracker”, our performers were provided writing prompts specific to their family Christmas celebrations in childhood.

### **Identification of Significant Words**

Significant Words are rich metaphoric words that have, for whatever reason, some sort of personal resonance for the individual collaborators. Whether from pre-existing text, journal entries, or from a list of free-associated words related to theme, collaborating performers are asked to identify a specific number of Significant Words from the source. This may range from as few as two to as many as twelve. When working from a shared source (either pre-existing text or a list of brainstormed words) we ask for collaborators to identify a small number (3-4) and then create a secondary list of words that have been selected by the collaborators. From this shared list we ask each collaborator to choose a larger number of words (usually between 6 to 12). This ensures that there is an overlap of Significant Words amongst collaborators.

Utilizing online Thesaurus lists of synonyms and antonyms of the Theme is another method for generating Significant Words. However this bypasses collaborator involvement in the selection so we oftentimes utilize synonyms and antonyms as sources in addition to collaborator generated words.

Significant Words are utilized within rubrics for creating both text and movement. The creation of text and movement may occur simultaneously or in either order based upon the project. For the purposes of this article we will discuss the use of Significant Words in the creation of movement first.

### **Movement Invention**

This is the most powerful and effective aspect of Dialogic Devising. Through chance operations each of the Significant Words are matched with 3-5 additional words from the Elements of Movement as described by Laban and H'Doubler Movement Analyses (aspects of Body, Space, Time & Energy). Each performer/collaborator will have their own set of Significant/matched words. Each matched set of words provides a rubric for the performer to solve in movement. Dependent upon how one wants to manipulate the movement, the collaborators create several different movements or join them together to create a phrase.

We utilize labeled “magic envelopes”, each filled with strips of paper. Various envelopes include words listing: body parts, locomotion (as described by H'Doubler), direction (as described by Laban), Spatial relationships (e.g., beneath, around, near, far), pathway (spoke, arc, spiral), H'Doubler's 6 Qualities of Movement, Laban's Efforts, Qualitative movement words (e.g., splat, ooze, soar, giggle), and Tempo (very slow, slow, medium, fast, very fast, stillness). Additional envelopes include simple line drawings that may be interpreted as pathway or shape, arrows indicating spatial orientation, and algebraic numbers 1-20 that collaborators are instructed to freely interpret as indicating repetition, timing, shape, path or however else they may utilize them.

For some projects we have created additional envelopes specific to each project. For example, with the series of male solos *XY* we added two Thesaurus derived envelopes, one full of synonyms of the word “masculine” and the other with synonyms for “feminine”.

We draw words out of the envelopes to create strings of words that are added to each Significant Word. We have found that the best work comes with strings of no less than 3 words up to 6. Less than 3 the combination of words is not complex enough to result in interesting movement solutions, more than 6 creates a very difficult rubric to solve that tends to slow down the creative process.

For the most efficient management of rehearsal time we conduct the chance operations with magic envelopes prior to meeting with collaborators so we may hand each of them a list of words that they may add to their Significant Words. In spite of the time that it takes however, there is some benefit to conducting the drawing of words from Magic Envelopes in front of the collaborators so they may get a fuller sense of the process.

The Significant Words connect the phrases to the theme in an abstracted, non-linear manner. By providing each of the collaborators with a set of unique and specific rubric to invent movement, each is able to create phrases that avoid habitualized classroom vocabulary. Untrained dancers are every bit as successful with this movement invention as trained dancers. In fact, the individuals we find likely to struggle most with this process are intermediate level dancers who strive to “be creative” or find ways to make the rubric fit their preferred dance moves from class. We gently remind them to “Just solve the problem”. What is important is not that their solution is deemed “creative” in their minds, nor if it seems sufficiently dancerly. What is important is that they come up with a solution to the rubric presented through the Significant/Magic Envelope Words.

As each collaborator completes their choreographing assignment they show their work individually, allowing us to refine their movement. We tend to focus much more on honing the phrases than editing them; attempting to keep as much of the collaborators’ original material as is feasible while still maintaining our artistic standards.

## **Movement Manipulation**

Of course we make use of standard manipulations from basic choreographic craft and there is no reason to describe them here but there are a few manipulations that we continually utilize as they are especially efficacious for layering text with movement.

**Sequencing of the Phrase.** We require collaborators to maintain the order of Significant Words in their movement phrase as they are found in the original or created text. The Elements of Movement-based rubric ensures that the movement phrases echo the text through abstracted movement rather than literal pantomime.

**Borrowing Movements.** At their discretion, collaborators are required to appropriate one movement from each member of the casts’ phrase to insert into their own phrases. This provides connective repetition between each of the individual solo phrases, ensuring stylistic continuity with all of the phrases.

**A/B Scales.** To create duets each individual phrase is expanded to twelve Significant/Magic Envelope movements. (For a recent project, with a cast of seven, individual phrases started with six Significant/Magic Envelope movements. Each cast member borrowed movements for the other six cast members, expanding each phrase to twelve movements). The original phrase is adapted to the twelve directions from either

Laban's A or B scale. As the scales mirror each other, partnering an A with a B scale phrase provides an excellent starting point for duets which then may be easily adapted to include sharing of weight. The scales also work well for trios and other groupings.

Single Significant Word phrases. Each of the collaborators who have the same Significant Words share their movements to create a joint phrase based upon a single Significant Word.

## **Writing the Text**

The preceding method works well to create more traditional contemporary concert dance performed to music without adding text. However the Significant Words may be used to create related text to incorporate within the performance.

When we are utilizing original text we complete this step prior to creation of movement so that the movement may follow the same sequencing of Significant Words as the text.

Journal assignments based upon the original theme provide a wonderful source for text. We have found, however, that this method tends to be more successful with older, more mature collaborators with more life experience who are willing to write with an honest voice that is willing to expose insecurities and perceived weaknesses. Nevertheless, we always retain editing control over text, striving to maintain the writer's original voice while honing it to fit the artistic vision.

Writing Verse. Collaborators are asked to write a verse incorporating one Significant Word per line, utilizing a specific form. For example: After selecting six Significant Words, write two haikus with one Significant Word per line. While in Latvia we asked collaborators to utilize the rhythmic structure of the traditional four line folk song *daina* to create their verses.

## **Creating Sound**

If spoken/sung text is desired we wait till the performers have committed their movement to their bodies before adding voice. As the sequence of both the movement and text is related through the order of Significant Words, there will be places where the movement and text align in a one-to-one relationship but we do not expect, or desire that this be the case. Ideally the text and movement phrases will provide commentary upon each other in unexpected ways. This oftentimes occurs when phrases have been expanded by borrowing movements from other members of the cast.

Collaborators record themselves speaking their individual verses. They are then asked to create an expanded version of the recording through readily available software such as GarageBand that somehow sonically reflects the words. The original and expanded recordings are used as source recordings that may be utilized within the final mix.

The Significant/Magic Envelope words may be used directly by composers or sonically adventurous collaborators to create motifs to be incorporated in the final score. With more musically literate collaborators magic envelopes that contain more music-specific terms and symbols may be put into use.

## **Structuring the Source Material**

Again, we utilize all of the common structures found in choreographic craft within our work. However, as the movement, text, and sound are connected via Significant Words, overlaying sections with common Significant Words is a highly effective structuring device to provide continuity within the work.

## Elements of Movement

### **BODY** *the instrument*

- The action of agonistic and antagonistic **muscles** on **bones** across **joints** creates **movement** and **alignment** (posture).
- **Whole body** or **isolated body parts** may be manipulated in **sequential** or **block-like** fashion.
- Movement may be initiated **viscerally** or **peripherally**.

### **MOVEMENT** *the material*

#### **Non-Locomotive Movement**

- **Gestural** Non-weight bearing movement of extremities
- **Axial**(postural) Movement of the axis of the body, the spine.

#### **Locomotor Movement**

- **Weight transfer/moving through space:**
  - **walk:** One foot to the other foot, with one foot always in contact with the floor.
  - **run:** One foot to the other foot, during transfer of weight both supports are off the floor.
  - **leap:** An extended run.
  - **jump:** Both feet to both feet
  - **hop:** One foot to the same foot.
  - **“jop”:** (hopscoth) Half jump/half hop (2 to 1 or 1 to 2)
  - **assemblé:** A jumping step from one foot to two.
  - **sissonne:** A jump from both feet on to one foot.
  - **gallop:** Step and run that undercuts leading step in uneven (long short) rhythm.
  - **slide:** Sideways gallop.
  - **skip:** Step and hop in uneven (long short) rhythm.
- **(Locomotion that doesn't require the feet):**
  - **crawl:** transfer about three or more supports with the body in a basically parallel orientation to the floor
  - **roll:** transfer by rotation of supports about a non-vertical axis

### **SPACE** *the canvas*

- **Shape** Individual or group.
- **Level** High, medium, low.
- **Relationship** to the space and other bodies in space.
- **Path**
  - Locomotive pathway
  - Trace path of isolated body parts
  - Spoke-like or Arc-like
- **Direction**
  - In relation to performance space
    - Upstage, Downstage, Stage Right, Stage Left, etc.
  - In relation to the performer (points on the Icosahedron)
    - Forward; Forward/Right; Right; Back/Right; Back; Back/Left; Left; Forward/Left  
High/Forward; High/Forward/Right; High/Right; High/Back/Right; High/Back;

High/Back/Left; High/Left; High/Forward/Left  
Forward/Deep; Forward/Right/Deep; Right/Deep; Back/Right/Deep; Back/Deep;  
Back/Left/Deep; Left/Deep; Forward/Left/Deep

- High/Medium/Deep

- **Laban's Spatial Scales**

- The Defense Scale (1 Dimensional along the Vertical, Horizontal and Sagittal Axes)
  - High-Deep-Left-Right-Forward-Back
- The A and B Scales (to the corners of the 2 Dimensional Planes)
  - A Scale
    - High Right-Back Deep-Left Forward-Deep Right-Back High-Right Forward-Deep Left-Forward High-Right Back-High Left-Forward Deep-Left Back-High Right
  - B Scale
    - High Left-Forward Deep-Right Back-Deep Left-Forward High-Left Back-Deep Right-Back High-Left Forward-High Right-Back Deep-Right Forward-High Left
  - Diagonal Scale (to directions defined by 3 Dimensions)
    - High Right Forward - Deep Left Back
    - High Left Forward - Deep Right Back
    - High Left Back - Deep Right Forward
    - High Right Back - Deep Left Forward

## ENERGY (DYNAMICS) *the expression*

### Rudolf Laban's 4 Efforts

- **Flow**
  - **free:** released movement without muscular tension
  - **bound:** controlled movement with muscular tension.
- **Force (weight or strength)**
  - **strong:** sense of power
  - **light:** delicate, "airy" quality
- **Time**
  - **sudden:** A sense of urgency
  - **sustained:** An indulging sense of time
- **Space**
  - **direct:** Having one clear spatial focus
  - **indirect:** Having more than one spatial focus

### Margaret H'Doubler's 6 Qualities of Movement

- **Percussive:** Sharp and sudden movement initiation. (staccato)
- **Sustained:** Smooth, even release of energy. (legato)
- **Vibratory:** quiver, shake, shimmy.
  
- **Suspension:** Lightness, denial of gravity
- **Collapse:** Heaviness, giving into gravity.
- **Swing/Pendular:** a cyclic combination of suspension & collapse

## TIME *the organization*



- **Duration** The length of time from a beginning to an ending.
- **Tempo/Speed** How fast or slow.
- **Rhythm** The events (sound, movement, etc.) that occur within a duration.
  - **Metric** Duration is subdivided into regular, even beats.
  - **Non-metric** Duration is subdivided into irregular “beats” (breath, biorhythms, waves, wind)
- **Accent** Emphasis

**FORM** *the structure*

- **Theme & Variation**
- **Rondo/Canon/Fugue**
- **Suite**
- **Narrative**
- **ABA**
- **Aleatoric “Chance” Composition**
- **Various forms from music (inversion, retrograde, etc.)**