

On Collaboration in the creative process

Andrea Wiarda corresponds with Lou Cope

I met Lou Cope at a garden party in the Belgian countryside last August. In a very animated conversation she told me about her PhD research into collaborative theatre – a term which I took for granted at the time. With this issue of *A Prior Magazine*, however, an emerging discourse on the variety of approaches to and visions of collaboration and participation in the creative field occurred, and I began to wonder how the collaborative in theatre is understood and whether it can teach us anything about collaborative processes—artistic, productive, economic and political.

Cope is a creative practitioner in the field of theatre, performance and communication. She has worked in various roles within several theatre companies in the United Kingdom and Belgium. Her current research focuses on the collaborative process, in which her own position as an observer, maker, deviser, author, contributor and analyser keeps shifting continuously and consciously so. The following Q&A is the cut 'n paste result of an email exchange that took place between November 2007 and January 2008.

AW: I'm curious to understand what has led you to researching collaboration or collaborative practice in theatre. Could you tell me about your background, previous work and activities leading up to your PhD research?

LC: I'm going to tell you about my 'three steps back'.

First Step Back – from performer to director

'When I was in my second year of university studies in theatre, I spent a lot of time in the dark. My friends and I spent hours and hours improvising in darkness. And I don't mean that metaphorically. I mean that literally. We would turn the lights off and surrender ourselves to the moment. We would improvise our little hearts out, delving deeper and deeper into ourselves, into one another, into the darkness. But one day something happened. After a few hours of terribly earnest devising, we emerged from the darkness, and as my eyes struggled blearily to adjust to the light, I realised that what we were involved in was the most masturbatory indulgent nonsense; the adolescence of a would-be deviser. We looked to each other with 'how was that for you?' eyes, asking 'what can we take from that?', 'what worked and what didn't?', and I realised that we did not have the slightest clue to the answers. How could we? We had been busy, very busy, but there was no distance between ourselves and what we created. And it occurred to me that the notion of creating work for an audience – which is definitely what I thought I was doing – without having anyone to assume the role of that audience in the creative space was just nuts. If this was to be anything other than our indulgence, there should be someone watching – someone being what I would later hear described as 'the first spectator'.¹ And I now see that it was at that moment that I turned the lights on, as bright as they could be, and took my first step back – into the role of the director in devising processes.

I hadn't changed. I didn't suddenly have a desperate desire to organise, to lead, to dictate or even to author. I hadn't changed, but I became more and more interested in peeping around the edges of what we were creating to see what it actually was. I didn't suddenly want to be separate to my fellow devisers. Quite the opposite, I love

¹ **Four Spectators**, Eugenio Barba, Richard Fowler, *TDR (1988-)*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (Spring, 1990), pp. 96-101

being surrounded by people who are buzzing with ideas, and pushing to get them explored. I wanted to be *with* them, not in front of them, and certainly not above them. And I wanted to put some distance in between me and the work so that I could see it. Both in the thick and on the edge, I wanted to shake my head, rub my bleary eyes, and 'dream in blazing clarity'.

And so it was that for the next ten or so years I directed devising processes. I worked together with performers, writers, composers, film-makers, choreographers and designers. One moment 'in the thick' of things, the next at the front with notebook and pencil. Sometimes above. Sometimes ahead. Often behind.

I initiated, I followed, I fed, I ate, I selected, I composed, I listened, I spoke, I moved, I stayed still, I struggled to empower, I struggled to inspire, I struggled to decide. I enjoyed the struggle.

I tried not to 'reach the point where one no longer says I, but the point where it is no longer of any importance whether one says I'²

She initiated, I followed, They fed, I ate, You selected, I composed, He listened, I spoke, We moved, We stayed still, We struggled to empower, We struggled to inspire, We struggled to decide. We enjoyed the struggle. Mostly.'

Second Step Back – from director to researcher/ lecturer

I also lectured throughout these years. And I grew to find this more and more interesting, more and more rewarding, and, selfishly, more and more helpful to my practice. A practice which I continually tried to develop. As I stumbled through the many projects I was involved in, I had a sense that there must be some information, some pedagogy out there that could help me do what it was I was doing – better. I did a Masters in Directing, which was almost completely fruitless. It involved me listening to the anecdotes of other directors, (a little like those I knowingly write here!), But what I needed was some detailed, constructive and deconstructed teaching that would delve into the messy, wonderful and sometimes painfully complex dialogue that was directing collaborative process. So I took another step back and started to explore that role from the outside, observing people as they devised collaborative processes, and developing workshops and classes to try to help people do it – better.

Third Step Back – from researcher/lecturer to dramaturg

As I did this, I got more and more opportunities to observe people collaborating. I found myself wobbling on a tightrope – simultaneously struggling to maintain some objectivity whilst desperately wanting to contribute to the process, feeling that my 'seat at the side' afforded me the privilege of being able to see things more clearly – and by this I mean both the intricacies of personal dynamics as well as the content and progression of the work itself. And my focus shifted, from the role of the director to the role of everyone involved in the process. My (partial) understanding of the different disciplines and their inherent languages,

² Deleuze & Guattari – A Thousand Plateaux, The University of Minnesota 1987, p. 3.

vocabularies and needs, as well as (I hope) a sensitivity to the personal and human fragilities of the collaborators themselves, has led me to seek situations where I 'dramaturg' collaborative processes.

This has also led me to explore the role of writing in collaborative processes. Writing done by me - in different modes and with different objectives, and writing done by those involved - that is then collated, edited, potentially distributed - by me.

So in one sense I have taken three huge steps back, but in another sense nothing has changed. I still thrive on being in a room with a bunch of creative people facing questions that either we don't know the answer to or to which there are no answers. The fun lies in trying to find out.

AW: What are some of the key questions you ask yourself in your research?

LC: What is the difference between 'collaborating' and 'working with' someone? Why collaborate?

How is power played out and exchanged in (specific) collaborative processes? Specific indicates that, in the initial stages of my research at least, I did not wish to generalise about collaborative process - I wanted to explore actual collaborative processes between actual practitioners.

Is directed collaboration actually possible?

How can we fruitfully explore the languages and vocabularies of different disciplines, and, separately, different people and personalities?

What roles do similarity and difference, harmony and conflict play in exploring the spaces between people and disciplines?

What of the notions of authorship, ownership, signature, the cultural currency of the single author? (There is some really interesting recent writing around this in a theatre and dance context - look at Susan Melrose's work - particularly 'Rosemary Butcher: Choreography, Collisions, Collaborations')³

How do we ensure that the 'third way' is not dilution or compromise, but a new and stronger concept born of two or more 'parents'?

What is the role of director/choreographer/lead artist in a collaborative process? What is the implication for the role of performer in this context?

How can the role of dramaturg/ observer/ writer/ even facilitator be approached as an artistic and creative act? (Interesting writing on this can be found in the very recent 'Physical Theatres - A Critical Introduction' by Simon Murray & John Keefe⁴) What role can writing play in the development of collaborative processes? (writing of the observer/ dramaturg; multiply authored writing about multiply authored process; audience reflection...)

AW: What / who are your research objects?

LC:

- From October 2006 to June 2007 I observed Belgian choreographer Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui collaborate on a piece with eight dancers, five actors, five musicians, one assistant, one dramaturg, and different members of the production team. The principle collaborators came from Belgium, the USA, Australia, Sweden, Slovakia,

³ R. Butcher and S. Melrose (eds), *Rosemary Butcher: Choreography, Collisions and Collaborations*, Middlesex: Middlesex University Press, 2005; also S. Melrose 'Constitutive Ambiguities', in J. Kelleher and N. Ridout (eds), *Contemporary Theatres in Europe* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006)

⁴ S. Murray and J. Keefe *Physical Theatres: A Critical Introduction* (Routledge 2007)

France, Italy, Japan and the Netherlands. The languages used were French, Flemish and, predominantly, English. My observations will form a major part of my PhD, and also form a chapter in the forthcoming 'Making Contemporary Theatre' – published by Manchester University Press, edited by Jen Harvie & Andy Lavender.

- M&DE – Music and Dance Exchange – a forum for collaborative exchange between dancers, choreographers, musicians, composers and visual artists – hosted by Professor Emilyn Claid and Dr. Chris Best at Dartington College of Arts in the UK (where I regularly teach classes on collaborating and directing). My role in M&DE is to act as observer, feeding into the collaborative process by making my observational writing available to those that wish to read it. I define my role in multiple terms:
 1. to provide a record of what happens, lest we forget, as the speeding by of now blurs and tricks our memories
 2. to see what cannot be seen by those who are necessarily blinded by their own busy-ness
 3. to grapple with the difficulties of collaboration, but from a distance. From the vantage point of otherness, with the benefit of exclusion and stillness, to understand and try to sense the complexities, possibilities and opportunities of collaboration
 4. to explore and welcome the notion of self in documentation and observation
 5. to read what I see – to be an immediate 'first spectator' seeing both the process and the product long before it sees itself, with the possibility of dramaturgical response as a collaborative element
 6. to explore how process can survive, as words, after the event
 7. to work at the themes of the day, exploring their embodiment in the real and raw action within the space
 8. and to make all of the above available to anyone who wants to see it – to aid reflection, to offer another (potentially 'wrong') perspective on what is happening and what has happened, to encourage reflective dialogue (spoken, written or simply 'thought') that can be shared and built as the process goes on
- 'BEAR MEETS...' Director: Sri Louise. Dramaturg: Lou Cope.
'Performed improvisation that forces process, kicking and screaming (though secretly re-applying its lipstick), to become product. The performer and their character are present on stage of course, but also, unusually - the director and the dramaturg.

Collaboration is performed and the performative space is extended to include those normally sacred and hidden 'edges' - the territory of the director and dramaturg. We watch the director negotiate the events, the players and the feedback she receives from performers, the dramaturg, and indeed the audience, as she works to help make moments work. And the live responsive writing of the dramaturg, which we see projected at intervals throughout, serves to document and archive the entire process *as it happens*. We see the structures, rules, directions, intentions, desires, conflicts and multi-directional communication that are normally absent in performance, either because they are all done in rehearsal and left at the stage door, or because they are unspoken in performed improvisation. Here, such elements are not only spoken, they are shouted, contested, sung, negotiated, and relished.

AW: Self- or rather perhaps auto-reflection is the core of your practice ever since you switched on the light! How does this inform theatre, and more specifically the performance part of it? What is the position of an audience in this?

LC: Mmmm, the notion of 'self' is something that has troubled me in the past, though in fact my struggle led me very positively to the kind of work I do today. What I mean by that is that I tried to eliminate my 'self' in my observational writings and in my research – but I wasn't very good at it. My voice(s) kept coming through loud and clear, or so I was told, and this troubled me. Interestingly – and here it ties in with your next question about the role of the audience –

as soon as I accepted that all I am is a member of an audience (albeit a privileged one who sees work as *it is being made*, and sees the processes that make it), then OF COURSE it became okay for my self to be present; it is delusory to think it could be otherwise. And so that is what I do now, I put myself – a keen, excitable and positive audience member who is also honest and experienced in the workings of performance and communication – in front, or on the edge, of processes, and then I respond to what I see. Of course this includes the dynamic of a group that is in the process of collaborating, the interplay of disciplines, vocabularies, aesthetics and desires, *and* the creation and presentation of ‘product’ that is ultimately offered to an audience, of which I happen to be the first in the queue. So then the notion of the audience, and my perception of what I think they might want or need is paramount. If I were to be so outrageously bold as to make a sweeping statement about much of the contemporary performance I see, I would say that its main problem is that the audience has not been considered enough... The blindness that is absolutely necessary while making work (with its lack of inhibition, self-censorship and its willingness to commit to the present) later becomes a stumbling block. And, especially in collaborative process, the final edit may go under-interrogated and the audience is not best-served. I like to think that this is where I come in.

AW: You position yourself as the translator between the creative process and the public performance; After switching on the light you’re also opening the door? It seems nevertheless that you are also producing a project in itself, with your research – what shape will that take on? A text? A play? A new process?

LC: Yes, it may take on the form of a text – anything from a theatre programme text to a book. However, I would also like to explore the possibility of having an installation that includes writing, film, visual- and movement-based expressions of how the process worked, created by the key collaborators with my help, in the same building where the performance/presentation takes place, so that audiences can visit this before or after they view the piece. There is also the potential for a web application that invites wider input and therefore comment and collaboration.

I think often about the preposterousness of presenting a product as ‘the representation of the process from whence it came’. This process cannot possibly be represented. But I am interested in ways of preserving process – not only highlighting its importance and making it available to those (not) involved (and so far many of those involved say they have found value and significance in reading my perspective of what they have been doing), but also recognising that though they may bear the same title – creative process and product can be radically different, and that process is also a creative act, worthy of consideration and reflection, and more importantly, perhaps affecting our understanding and our response to the end-result or product in itself.

AW: How would you describe collaboration as opposed to working with someone?

LC:

*Each of the people in the room will shape the piece.
If one is missing, then the piece will miss them.
If one has a toothache, the piece will feel it.
If one is in love, the piece will know it.
And if one is bored, so then all will be.*

For me, the difference between collaborating with and working with someone firstly comes down to intention. If I want to collaborate with someone it is because I want to spend time deliberately and consciously having my mind, my being and therefore my work influenced, infected and altered by the desires, various types of knowledge and experiences of the people with whom I am collaborating. Secondly, I want our exchange to result in its own ‘third thing’ – new to and unseen by both/all of us, – greater than any of us.

It comes from my belief that “a group is always smarter than its smartest individual” as Cools summarises in *On Dance Dramaturgy*.⁵ And yes my research tries to explore whether collaboration is truly possible, whether it is desirable, and how we might collaborate successfully. By that I mean collaborating while avoiding dilution, unproductive compromise, and indulgence; as well as negotiating similarity, difference and conflict, in the personal as well as the ‘professional’ – attempting to find the positive/productive in all. And my work is about doing it, aiding it, facilitating it, writing about it, and importantly, teaching it. I teach in universities and run workshops elsewhere that aim to help people explore the why’s and how’s of collaboration, starting with the acceptance that collaboration is far too slippery and beguiling to be grasped and taught in an easy ‘how to’ method. Instead, I explore its purpose and potential, and aim to develop strategies that just might be useful, somehow one day. Perhaps it is simply about heightening (auto) reflexivity to acknowledge what is happening in collaborative processes in order to get the most out of the collaborative exchange.

AW: And Theatre acts as an example?

LC: If you mean do I see collaborative process as a political act – the answer is yes.

AW: Do the implications of collaboration change with the intentions, ie: collaborating with other professionals or with the audience, which may come less prepared?

LC: My immediate response is that the implications don’t change at all.

AW: Could you elaborate on the notion of ‘(directing) collaborative process’ as far as it is directable? I mean, is a director always supposed to stimulate collaboration between the actors on stage? or is a collaborative process a different ‘thing’ to direct?

LC: When I talk about directing collaboratively, I mean paying attention to the following ideas: a director needn’t/mustn’t be too many steps ahead of the group, but must serve their defined intentions (wherever they may come from); a director needs to be able to initiate activity and then respond to what has been created, creatively; it is part of the director’s role to work with who people are *as people*, what they consider themselves to be ‘for’ as performers, and what the performers want to do in a particular piece. That’s all about working with performers. Then of course there is working with visual artists, composers, writers, choreographers, designers, technicians etc, which involves practically and theoretically exploring shared and unshared languages and vocabularies. This is a massive area, that requires attention not only to practical strategies but also the power play and hierarchy of the process ... however to be short I’ll say that I do not believe it is necessary to have democracy in every stage of a process in order for collaboration to be successful. For me that’s the whole point – that a director can and should take decision, taking responsibility when it is required. Everybody will have knowingly signed up for this, and I believe nobody (collaborators and audience alike) is served by a desperate clinging to a democratic model that both dilutes product and wastes time. Part of what I now do is about trying to help people come to terms with these power plays.

AW: What about the *role of writing* in the development of collaborative processes, especially when there is also already a plurality of other disciplines involved? Can you elaborate on this?

LC: The use of writing is a fairly new development for me, both within my own practice and in the facilitation or documentation of the practice of others, and I am just beginning to explore its potential.

⁵ Cools, Guy: ‘On Dance Dramaturgy: A Dramaturgy of the body. *Cahiers de Theatre Jeu, Montreal March 2005*

I am interested in exploring and encouraging modes of private and shared writing (I might describe the various modes as, for example, figurative, descriptive, narrative, diary, character-based, analytical, discipline-led; theoretical, pedagogical, anecdotal and so on – I could go on), and I am interested in writing's potential: to develop and enrich one's dialogue with oneself, encouraging reflection not of but as creative activity; to open up dialogue between collaborators in ways that need not be spoken, (or even read!); to create documentation / archives useful not only to those involved in a given project as and after it happens, but also to those not involved who, a posteriori, can benefit or learn from the public and (initially) private negotiations, perceptions, interpretations and readings of what is happening and what is being created. (I paste an extract from some observational writing I have done below) It is of course possible that what is written becomes used either in the process or even in the product, but this isn't necessary. Writing is about taking time to slow down the making process by reflecting on personal dynamics or the development of 'material on paper', as this slowing down allows a distancing, an analysis and perhaps even an honesty, that might struggle to find its way through in a busy creative-environment.

To be clear, it isn't about 'writing well', it is not meant to increase (time or creative) pressure on those collaborating. And of course there will be occasions when it is the last thing in the world collaborators want to do.

I am currently talking to a number of theatre performance companies about using writing to create 'a multiply authored text, or even installation, about the multiply authored process' – and I think that audiences, not just artists, would be really interested in taking a small step into the hidden arena of process that is normally out of bounds, thereby not only increasing their understanding of how the work was made, but also and perhaps more importantly, colouring their appreciation and perception of the product.

The following notes are extracted from observational documentation written whilst observing an improvisation session at M&DE at Dartington 2007. The collaborator/improvisers (a composer of electronic music and 3 dancer/choreographers from Denmark, Germany, the US and the UK) are setting up rules: they will improvise for 5 minutes, then stop, then again for another 5 minutes following something new, and so on. After having done this several times they will then improvise for 30 mins, and finally they will reflect on what they have made, and present something to the other M&DE participants at the end of the day. I simply write and observe, flitting from narrative to analysis to interpretation and 'reading' what they create, my writing is available immediately or later, but there is no pressure on anyone to read it at all.

There is a brilliant negotiation moment. Negotiation between roles, desires, and proposed structures. Everybody is speaking very clearly and directly. 'What I would like is...' Two clear camps seem to be developing – the compromise is picked up again.

They agree: 6 sections of 5 minutes with clear shifts, then 30 minutes of gradual flow.

Julianna says something about roles – I think something about how everybody has the power to initiate

Katja asks Julianna if it is ok that they all make music. Julianna replies – well yes *be aware – music isn't like dance where things can always happen simultaneously – lets all be aware of the music picture*

She adds '**of course I can feel like an accompanist or I can feel like an instigator**' – a nice way of putting it. The same goes for us all. Always.

Right now Julianna would quite like the opportunity to be in her corner and do what she does.

So there has been:

Desire difference of opinion skill and lack of it rule definition
boundary definition

different approaches to communication technological opportunities/ limitations

– and it seems the stage is set.

Clear structures, key elements (*instruments including the grand piano, Julianna's music kit, a pile of random costumes, a board with wheels on, some music stands (which Katja places at the centre)*) – and a massive sense (for me) of anticipation. Julianna says it's 12.17 and we will start at 12.20. Wow. So specific.

What are the thoughts that fill these 3 minutes....

What am I going to do

What am I feeling

What am I going to give

What is in here

Who is in here

And as I edge my way to another writing mode, Julianna counts them down to the start, and they edge their own ways to other modes:

10, 9, 8 - we are not performing now, 3, 2, 1 – now we are performing

I read, I see, I feel:

a song is sung, but the stand on which the score is laid keeps being moved

*a forest of music-stands serves as a trap
Lucinda Childs, Robert Ashley and Lindsay Anderson pop round
'I've looked at love'
I've tried to escape upwards but it hasn't worked*

Change 3, 2, 1

*A guitar tries to communicate with a piano. It is movingly imbalanced. Like a medieval
peasant boy trying to talk the talk with the queen
But then the relationship develops
Sounds of a super market
And I am not the only observer*

Change 3,2,1

*There is a down time, that is not really down time. We see the workman like, yet random,
preparation
Katja writes. I want to read what she writes.
A singer prepares, and prepares
Smoky jazz tugs at my weekend glands
Construction and destruction
Not much communication*

Change 3,2,1

*'A minor' 'B flat'
New York
The 60's
'G'
'A minor, A minor, A minor. G'
A forced-ents like seriousness in the delivery
Slithering that's gotta hurt*

*Can I have some of your water
No. I'd prefer not to*

Bird sound belies that rejection, and speaks of other things

Change 3,2,1

*A voice
2 voices, narrating a letter
a letter about now
letters about now
lets all write letters about now, the real now*

2 people speak at once and see:

*I want you to like me so much that I am prepared to say everything you say and even say it
when you say it I can be you and love you and see what you see and think it before you and
make it all good*

Change 3,2,1

The half-hour session begins. Or does it? Confusion about whether it has started, which confuses. There is no difference, at first, between what they do when they are performing and what they do when they are not performing. And yet, they discuss again when the 30 minutes will start, or has it started, or.... Discussion about whether they talk now or go again. They go again. Another countdown.

I tire of my own mode. I decide to switch to another tack, to another part of me. I don my lecturer hat – and I switch to Times New Roman in honour of that

What skills are being demonstrated here? (I watch and I write)

Vocal skill; vocal dexterity; vocal range; different languages (national and physical and sound); conscious, careful and creative use of different disciplinary languages; technical knowledges; use of mic; understanding and sensitivity to rhythm and pace – in terms of physical and aural composition; composition within time and space; development and application of process-enabling structures; inbuilding of opportunities for both group and individual reflection; manipulation and generative exploration of objects; embodied communication/ responsiveness/ listening and offering; application of strategies for developing and delivering text; use of different dance, movement, and sound techniques and vocabularies; awareness of different disciplinary needs; willingness to take personal and physical risk; willingness and ability to engage in the moment while remaining 'knowing' of other's moments and offerings;

This is what you get paid for.

Time is up. Many things have happened – what do they think has happened? How will they present this? They decide to present the structure they have developed, rather than its content.