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**DEVISING DEMOCRACY:**

**Performance, Power, and Play**

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

In

THEATER ARTS

By

**Natalie Farrell**

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **DEVISING DEMOCRACY:**

#### **Performance, Power, and Play**

**By**

**Natalie Farrell**

Unlike traditional, text-based theater, “devised” theater can be an alternative form of theater that emphasizes democracy within groups, movement-based techniques, and sometimes encourages politically driven works of live performance. Actors can become a part of generating material for the final product instead of portraying a prewritten role. Their voices, impulses, physicality, and sometimes their life experiences influence the show in a personal and reflective way. I use *The Odyssey*, directed by Professor Kimberly Jannarone at UCSC, as a case study of what the devising process can look like. I use my experience to highlight the ways a devised production has the flexibility to change in response to current events. Our devising process allowed the utilization of each actor to the best of their potential; letting individual talents dictate roles and contributions to the play (rather than immediate casting for specific roles). Devising’s open and democratic model helped us make political art in an encouraging rehearsal atmosphere where our diverse voices felt heard, in a time where political art is important and needed in America.

## **Acknowledgements and Dedication**

Patty Gallagher, Valerie Farrell, and the student artists and professors I had the privilege to work with and learn from while attending UCSC.

## SECTION ONE: INTRODUCTION TO *THE ODYSSEY* AND DEVISING

In this thesis I hope to provide clarity on what exactly constitutes *devised* theater and how the process and techniques differ from a traditional play format. The democratic nature of devising can be liberating for actors and has the potential for an open dialogue about the content, tone, and overall intent of a show. I use *The Odyssey*<sup>1</sup>, a devised adaptation of Homer's epic tale directed by Professor Kimberly Jannarone, as a case study through which to examine the possibility of this theatrical model.

Our first rehearsal began with a rough outline of what Jannarone wanted to accomplish with the story, in lieu of a script. Jannarone provided a packet that included rough plot points and vital pieces of the story she felt needed to be told in our production. Part of her document had descriptions of the visual sculptures she imagined for certain moments, such as the recurring "pile of bodies" that were killed in war by Odysseus (Fig. 2 and Fig. 3) and with some pages empty besides a single character's name. Jannarone purposefully left blank spaces in the packet and elaborated that as cast members our roles included not only the portrayal of Greek characters, but also her expectations that we would devise material to fill those empty pages. Jannarone wanted to know which scenes and characters initially resonated with us, and encouraged us to research Greek characters that we thought would be good fits for ourselves or for others.

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<sup>1</sup> The *Odyssey* was performed on Mainstage at UCSC that ran November 11, 2017 through November 20, 2017 and was a "collaborative adaptation of the ancient Greek epic in an experiential, multi-venue presentation" (UCSC Theater Department).



This kind of open dialogue with the director and other cast members can be considered a unique characteristic of what a devising process can look like. Because we started without a solidified and finished script, the cast worked through different exercises and acting techniques led both by Jannarone and our movement coach and choreographer, Dor Atkinson, to help generate material. Atkinson and Jannarone led us through *viewpoint* sessions<sup>2</sup> during rehearsal to help generate character ideas and build a unique physicality around them. We learned how to move our bodies in an economic and specific way focusing on Meyerhold's technique of biomechanics.<sup>3</sup> Because we were making theater in an academic setting, these trainings were vital to getting the entire cast in the same range of experience.

The ability to devise can be considered as one of the basic acting skills that may be beneficial to actors after leaving schools and trainings. In order for emerging theater artists to make meaningful, personal, and potentially political art one must recognize collaboration as an opportunity to create new plays. Devised works can be just as valid and powerful as traditionally performed, directed, and scripted plays. However, devising fosters an ability to change in response to stimuli, social climates, and personal reflections unlike that of a traditional script. In rehearsals for *The Odyssey* we collectively generated material building characters and scenes that

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<sup>2</sup> Viewpoints is a directing theory with an intention of helping actors get in touch with a heightened self awareness of their bodies.

<sup>3</sup> Biomechanics was created by Vsevolod Meyerhold and was a movement based founded in the 1920's with a, "purpose to forge the connection between mind and body, to 'teach the body to think.'"(Meyerhold)

reflected some of our personal experiences as well as current events occurring in America at the time.

## SECTION TWO: WHAT IS DEVISED THEATER?

Director and theater scholar Alison Oddey authored *Devising Theater a Practical and Theoretical Handbook* and exists as one of the very few leading texts on devised theater. She begins her book by asking why individuals would want to devise:

I think the primary appeal is to be able to make a personal statement within a group context, to feel that one is part of the making of a theatrical experience, not an interpreter of something already written. This desire to create an original piece of work brings an enormous freedom that is both terrifying and liberating at the same time (Oddey 27).

Devised theater has many uses and intentions, including (but are not limited to): recreating or adapting classical works, raising awareness about social issues within certain communities, and engaging with topics that may not be political. Devised theater does not find itself limited to any specific genre of theater, an important aspect to remember while considering devised pieces. It can be for entertainment or for making a political statement (like *The Odyssey*).

Flexibility and trustworthiness are the first and foremost focus for members involved; this can help to combat the sometimes-overwhelming beginnings of a process. Jannarone helped foster an environment of encouragement while embracing changes in the script. She did this through group warm ups, trust exercises, large discussions about themes that interested us, and her open-door policy during her office hours to discuss ideas and/or issues that came up in an intimate and personal setting. Jannarone also held us accountable to show up to rehearsal focused and prepared to work hard, and we held our other collaborators to that same standard.

Once etiquette and formal expectations are known, the work can begin. Oddey provides clear statement about where exactly the process of creating a devised piece can come from:

Devising begins with the interaction between members of a group and the starting point or stimulus chosen. The group absorbs the source material, responds to it, and then generates a method of working appropriate to the initial aims of the company and project. The devising process challenges every group member to confront the work, engage with it individually...develop a sense of group cooperation, affiliation and unity Oddey 24.

A group embarking on a devised piece needs to clearly answer two questions at the beginning of their process: what do we want to say, and who do we want to impact? Jannarone provided Homer's text as the source material, but also encouraged us to do outside research on other scholarly reviews and adaptations of *The Odyssey*.

Through explorations of Odysseus' journey and the monarchical politics of his time in Ithaca, we found similar political messages in our own lives that led our production in a direction with intended political undertones. The collaborators on this show constantly worked in rehearsals with an attitude that our work held a special kind importance in our community; we believed that we had a voice to enact some kind of change or engagement with the world around us. We intended audience members to leave the show thinking about what heroism means to them, what kind of sacrifices are necessary for war, and the morality behind what one justifies to be worth fighting and possibly dying for. Especially concerning actors, Oddey's assertion about the ability to make a "personal statement" does not always present itself to be true for everyone. Although *The Odyssey* gave us more liberties and

freedoms to offer input and ideas more so than other productions I've worked on, we all had a general agreement that the end result would ultimately reflect what Kimberly's vision entailed. Finished products will not always have "personal statements" from everyone involved and if they did the product might be contradictory, unclear, and lack unity. It would be incorrect to assume that everyone in the cast felt like they had been fully utilized, although Jannarone did always welcome our input.

Professors Deirdre Heddon from the University of Glasgow and Jane Milling from the University of Exeter coauthored a book entitled *Devising Performance: a Critical History*. They focus on defining devising, discussing where it came from, and provide information about companies across the globe who are producing devised work. They define the term *devising* in a broad sense, "'devising' suggests the craft making within existing circumstances, planning, plotting, contriving and tangentially inventing;" (Heddon 2). They reiterate, as do I, that devised theater does not fit one mold; it can have political implications, be location or site specific, be specifically for theater-in-education, or can take an old story and make it into something completely new. They discuss the origins of devised theater and how improvisational techniques and unfinished public displays of theater could be seen as early forms of devised work. I cite this book throughout the paper as a reference of where some devising techniques and ideas came from and how they are still being used today.

### SECTION THREE: DEvised VS. TRADITIONAL THEATER

Much traditional theatrical performance uses a linear play structure that follows the mold of a “well-made play”<sup>4</sup>. A script begins with a clear exposition, has an inciting incident, some rising action, a climax, falling action, and resolution. There may have been specified characters, a fourth wall<sup>5</sup>, and a distance between performer and audience members, as audiences are usually in seats watching the action unfold onstage. However, much devised theater sometimes tends to fall under a more Brechtian model<sup>6</sup>. In this approach, audiences maybe distanced or alienated (estranged) from the action in order to encourage a critical evaluation of what they are watching. Instead of becoming emotionally involved the goal is sometimes to have the audience become somewhat detached and objective of the play. This kind of theater hopes to move audiences to action, which could lead to social remedies. It questions and deconstructs the space and interaction between audience members and actors and sometimes steers away from naturalistic<sup>7</sup> acting. Focus can sometimes be thrown on audiences rather than the actors onstage, inciting a potential for personal reflection about issues regarding society, humanity, and interpersonal relationships.

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<sup>4</sup> : The technical formula of the well-made play was developed around 1825 by the French playwright Eugène Scribe, this kind of theater called for complex and artificial plotting, a build-up of suspense, a climactic scene in which all problems are resolved, and a happy ending. Conventional romantic conflicts were a staple subject of such plays (Parrott-Sheffer).

<sup>5</sup> The fourth wall in theater refers to a semi-transparent barrier between audiences and performers, it’s a convention and a shared metaphor that the audience and performers allow themselves to believe in, as if the performers were acting without knowledge of being in a play (TDF).

<sup>6</sup> Bertolt Brecht was an early 20<sup>th</sup> century German poet and playwright whose epic theatre departed from the conventions of theatrical illusion and developed drama as a social and ideological platform for political implications.

<sup>7</sup> Naturalism is a movement in late 19th-century drama that aimed to replace the artificial romantic style with accurate depictions of ordinary people in plausible situations. Playwrights such as Henrik Ibsen, Anton Chekhov, August Strindberg, and Georg Büchner are considered to be a part of this movement (Law).

The relationship between audience and performer remains a powerful one. We explored deconstructing this “traditional” audience-actor relationship intimately in UCSC’s *The Odyssey* by directly addressing the audience, interacting with them while in character during part two while they roamed around different artistic installations, and by the gruesome and juxtaposed ending. The audience experienced a drastic change of tone while walking into the final room, the final act ending with a floor littered with bloody bodies as Athena lead everyone else in a song of Louis Armstrong’s “What a Wonderful World”.

A key difference between devised theater and the traditional process and performance of theater is its freedom to begin anywhere and from anything. This idea is reflected in *Frantic Assembly’s* devising theater company’s handbook, *The Frantic Assembly Book of Devising Theatre*, “In our own experience, it has been important to establish both starting points and departure points...a healthy balance of agreeable and disagreeable pointers, thoughts, exercises and suggestions. It is an attempt to provoke the reader into looking for new means of creating theater performance,” (Grahm 3). This may be: a song, a color, a political event, a statement, an interview, a location, a question, or an idea. Once established, the stimulus provides those involved somewhere to look back to if collaborators find themselves too far of point. The stimulus is a general theme or idea that everyone is held to, but can change in response to where these may have taken them.

This process of creating a performance differs from traditional dramatic-based theatrical work where the script serves as the main point of departure. In devising

actors are asked to follow their physical, vocal, and creative impulses based off of the stimulus through different experimental exercises. Instead of the actor being solely an interpreter of a role, they are now part of the creation of the entire piece and an active agent behind the intentions of the overall message. This rehearsal method ultimately can become a freeing kind of theatrical art form.



## SECTION FOUR: DEMOCRACY AND THE ROLE OF THE DIRECTOR

Eric Grode, a professor at Syracuse University's Goldring Arts Journalism Program and a freelance arts writer describes devising as, “democratizing the playmaking process” (*Grode*). The actor becomes a collaborator in a devised setting, a part of an ensemble with more responsibility than simply portraying a part. Perhaps the beauty and challenge of devised theater is the lean towards a more democratic setting while making new art. This questions the role of the director; how has their role shifted when working on a devised piece? Can they participate in the creation of content? Are they participants throughout the entire process, including the brainstorming, the research, the devising; or are they merely fulfilling the role of the editor? Do they have the final say?

The director’s role in a devised piece can vary. Actors may begin improvisations<sup>8</sup> with the director being an outside eye, or sometimes even being one of the performers. Some groups prefer to have the role of the director abolished altogether. Devised theater emphasizes group agreement within members involved, unlike the role of one person having complete and utter control over the rehearsal process.

A devising company that focuses on task and formula-based dramaturgy to create performance that resembled “games” is The Theater of Mistakes (Heddon). In their process, “Instead of acting, the performers use exercises to create the possibility

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<sup>8</sup> Improv is when actors engage in a set of actions or dialogue that is unscripted, unrehearsed, and unplanned. Actors follow impulses and work with each other in an attempt to make something based off of certain stimuli or suggestions.

of extending their own behavior into the arena of the action presented to the public- thus the only drama the performers are involved in is that of their real lives at the time of the performance,” (Howell and Templeton). In *The Odyssey* our status as undergraduates, graduates, and professional actors played a significant role in the material we generated. We focused on themes and experiences including different kinds of trauma from war, hyper-masculine personalities and actions, unwarranted sexual advances, and questioning what exactly it means to be a hero. We had our own unique process, just like devising groups outside of a university setting, and we still generated more material than we used. These issues hold very near and dear in our hearts and as sexual assault on college campuses becomes more illuminated in the media, the problem weighs heavily on us as college affiliates in today’s climate.

Devised theater emphasizes group agreement and democracy among members involved, unlike the role of one person having complete and utter control over the rehearsal process. Different devising groups have found diverse answers and resolutions through trial and error. In *The Odyssey* Jannarone had the final and ultimate say about what material made it into the final product. In a university setting we found this to be the most useful and practical mode of hierarchy and balance between the ensemble, installation artists, musical director, and choreographer. With a cast of mostly undergraduates and a mixture of graduate students and professional actors, some students learned about this kind of work for the first time. Working on a non-devised show in eight weeks is daunting in itself. Having that same time constraint for a devised show and with the need to lock down technical and design

elements before that, the decision making process needed to move quickly and Jannarone provided that as the head figure of the project. Even so, both the director and the actor's role became significantly altered and more fluid throughout this process versus the many other plays I have been a part of at UCSC.

## SECTION FIVE: ORIGINS OF DEVISED THEATER

Devising in theater can be traced back to such forms as Commedia dell'arte where, “actors were able to generate material improvisational within the parameters of a scenario, which might then become the set form of a scene,” (Heddon 11).

Commedia dell'arte<sup>9</sup> has an emphasis on stock characters, repeatable archetypes that are found in the majority of commedia plays. Some characters have unwritten bits, called *lazzi* where the actor develops a repeatable physical score that can be used as a trademark and marker of certain characters and their behavior, giving actors some freedom to generate their own material. In relation to devising, actors are sometimes asked to come up with repeatable gestures to help develop and refine a character. In devising work improvisations can give the actor freedom to follow their own impulses and perspectives.

In *Devising Performance a Critical History* Heddon and Milling discuss how many individuals considered devising to be, “a material expression of political and ideological commitment, or an ideal embodiment of desired aspects of freedom and authenticity,” (Heddon 13). Political protests became more popular during the 1950s and 1960s; a time when devising groups around the world began to emerge and while politics began to refer to aspect of personal lifestyles. A steady ‘revolt’ occurred across multiple art forms, including the work of the Beat writers and Pop Artists (Heddon).

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<sup>9</sup> Commedia dell'arte was originated in the early 16th century in Italy and was influenced by masked comedic improvisations of the Romans that were put on after full productions, as well as mime practices by the Byzantine theater, also from Rome where mime was used as entertainment and for religious purposes (Vince).

Some devised theater companies established in the late 50's and 60's include: *San Francisco Mime Troupe* (est. 1959), *L'École Internationale de Théâtre Jacques Lecoq* (est. 1956), *The Agitprop Street Players*, now known as *The Red Ladder Theatre Company* (est. 1968), and *CAST* or *The Cartoon Archetypical Slogan Theatre* (est. 1965). The 70's included emergence of: *Lumiere & Son* (est. 1973), *Major Road Theatre Company* (est. 1973), and a more recent company such as *Frantic Assembly Theater* (est. 1994). This list is short, and there are many other groups working and creating theater across the globe. Some groups serve politically and socially induced purposes and some focus on other topics, like bringing theater into education such as *Belgrade Tie* (est. 1965). Some groups focus on taking theater outside of traditional theater buildings and creating site-specific work like the Britain based company *IOU* (est. 1976). All of these groups are still thriving today and materialized from political and usually socialist ideals of wanting audiences to question authority, to ask questions and engage with one's society, politics, and personal relationships. Theater has and continues to be a voice, or a platform to reach individuals in a different way than what news sources, newspapers, TV shows can do. The collective experience of seeing live performance is unique and requests a different kind of attention given to the material.

Perhaps one of the most well known politically driven devised theater group is the Chicano company *El Teatro Campesino*, founded by Luis Valdez in central California. *El Teatro Campesino* originated with motives to connect personally to the community and to bring theater and expose its political power in an accessible and

relatable way. Valdez took the lived experiences of his community and transformed it into a theater company dedicated to raising awareness about the realities of living and working in California undocumented while specifically supporting, “the intent of supporting the striking farm workers of Deano, California in 1965,” (Oddey 96). Members of the company held agency in the generation of material, “The workers themselves both suggested the content and enacted the pieces, extending the sense of ownership and therefore relevance,” (Heddon 97). By bringing theater outside of the typical theater buildings El Teatro Campesino created and brought theater to places that would not have had access to engaged with it otherwise.

The ability and flexibility to deconstruct physical boundaries and spaces of performances can be considered a benefit of devised theater. Valdez utilized the bed of trucks as a performance spaces and SF mime troupe today still holds performances in free public spaces such as parks. UCSC has a policy that entitles every student with one free ticket to each theater performance. These practices help make theater accessible and relevant; therefore reaching communities that would not usually turn to the theater as a form of expression and entertainment. Devised theater can question the role of art, live performance, and the relationship between average citizens and art, community, and politics. Plays and scripts that are constantly evolving and improving throughout the process is crucial to devised work, and by utilizing individual and personal experiences of those who are often left unheard in media and politics, the personal becomes incredibly political.

## SECTION SIX: OUR DEVISING PROCESS FOR *THE ODYSSEY*

### **An Overview of the Experience**

In every rehearsal for *The Odyssey* we generated material while constantly embracing changes, edits, and cuts that occurred until the show opened. *The Odyssey* integrated different rooms of artist's installations and took audiences through different spaces; Jannarone had audiences move to three different venues for the three-act play. The show began in Mainstage (Fig. 1) and after act one actors led audiences through three different floors in the DANM building (Fig. 4). There audiences engaged with little scenes on their feet through multi-media interactive installation rooms depicting the journey Odysseus took and the challenges he encountered on his way home. The actors continued to lead audiences until being ushered into a small black box theater on the bottom floor for the bloody conclusion of Odysseus' journey (Fig. 5) This kind of anti-traditional theater resulted with audience members having an intimate and individual experience of the show. No two people had the same track or journey with the characters and installations. With the audience's participation being crucial to the success of our show but also a variable outside of our complete control, Jannarone and the cast found ways to eliminate the risks of them becoming lost or confused. We had a few essential preview nights and although we attempted to predict where weak areas of the show existed, we discovered just where audiences became confused or lost on the way to the other spaces. With some improvisation in response to the live audience, the structure of this play asked people to engage with the story in a unique way. However, this can be

achieved without devising. Our production just happened to do that as well as taking the audience through different spaces and with a closer and more intimate relationship with performers.

### **Techniques We Used**

Actors working on a devised project are almost always required to be familiar with some kind of acting or physical movement technique. If actors do not enter the space with some kind of training these techniques are taught and applied throughout the rehearsal process, especially in educational settings. We found this to be the case for *The Odyssey*. Acknowledging that we had a diverse variety of backgrounds and acting experience within our cast, we had dedicated rehearsal time for movement and ensemble building trainings. Atkinson led us through both biomechanics and viewpoints sessions. Biomechanics is a technique developed by Russian director, actor and producer in the 1920's, Vsevolod Meyerhold, and focuses on a, "purpose to forge the connection between mind and body, to 'teach the body to think.'"(Meyerhold).<sup>10</sup> We met in rehearsal as Atkinson led us through physical exercises that focused on moving as efficiently as possible on the stage. In one such exercise we concentrated on our breath while balancing four-foot long wood poles from the palm of our hands. This helped us focus under pressure and have an awareness of our breath and what it can do to calm down our body in tense situations. We then practiced throwing the pole to a partner maximizing as much force and

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<sup>10</sup> Meyerhold's exercises, "attempted to create a limited and precise system of exercises that contained all the fundamental expressive situations that an actor would encounter on the stage. (Gordon 74).



accuracy as we could while minimizing our physical efforts. We then incorporated and played with our character bodies and mindsets after learning the basics of the technique. Although sometimes rushed and brief because of time constraints, these sessions taught us how to move with precision, while being highly aware of our breath and the economy of our movements. Kathleen Baum, who has led workshops at The National Theater Institute at Eugene O'Neill Theater, describes Meyerhold's technique as a method to:

Provide the acting student with a comprehensive, detailed program for the development of her/ his psycho-physical instrument. Probably the most striking thing about training in Biomechanics is the degree of integration between "purely" physical training and the application of that physical work to concerns specific to acting... Biomechanics begins with physical training. But the purpose of that training is to forge the connection between mind and body, to "teach the body to think"

(Baum).

We certainly achieved thinking with our bodies. The biomechanics work we did required an incredible amount of discipline and focus. Working on the play also involved complete commitment from its performers who had the task of creating a language out of movement and physicality without relying too heavily on text. We emerged from these sessions with a better self-awareness and control of our bodies as well as tools to move most efficiently to achieve our objectives.

We also engaged with Viewpoints work, a directing theory developed by Mary Overlie and later interpreted and disseminated by Anne Bogart. This technique focused on getting actors in touch with a heightened self-awareness of their bodies as well as building a strong, trustworthy ensemble. One aim of using viewpoints in rehearsal is to create work using individual artists' bodies and their kinesthetic responses<sup>11</sup>, or honest and impulsive responses to external stimuli. Bogart further breaks down this technique, "Viewpoints is a philosophy translated into a technique for (1) training performers; (2) building ensemble; and (3) creating movement for the stage...Viewpoints is points of awareness that a performer or creator makes use of while working," (Bogart 21).

Specifically in this production we focused on building gestures and making them identifiable for our characters. Atkinson led us through each physical stage while working on the suitor characters three times over, creating three different characters. Through testing different tempos of speed, shape of our bodies, and gestures, we each developed characters that came to life by simply walking around the stage. We wrote journal entries about our three characters and from the pool of about eighteen actors we had created fifty four different possibilities for the show. Reacting truthfully through viewpoint sessions comes with a potential to generate raw and unfiltered original pieces of work through building characters on these premises as well as discovering gestures for these people we created. The cast of *The Odyssey*

built the characters of the suitors through viewpoint sessions, a process further illuminated more thoroughly in the *In Rehearsals* section.

The integration of both Meyerhold's biomechanics from the 1930's and Overlie's viewpoints in the 1970's asks the actor to do similar simplistic tasks. Both attempt to get the actor out of their head, or out of the psychology of acting, and instead experimenting with character and generation of material through bodily movement. A crucial thing for actors while working with both techniques is the ability to present themselves committed to engage with extreme states of physical and mental awareness as well as a willingness to react impulsively.

### **In Rehearsals**

Very early on in the rehearsal process Jannarone gathered the cast together and opened up a discussion about our initial impressions of Homer's classical story and what it meant to us in today's culture. We brainstormed what themes from the original text we wanted to highlight for a modern audience. Jannarone asked what resonated with us personally as we began to do research about specific Greek characters. We wanted to recreate the classical characters in ways that still told Homer's story, but in a new and relevant manner. A good amount of the cast's ideas could be seen reflected in the final product, although a lot of material we generated did not make it into the show. Not utilizing all created material while devising is one of the sacrifices we found ourselves making while devising, having to let go of the

abundance of character ideas, elaborated scene work and text in order to have a show that did have a united message.

The cast engaged with ensemble work and viewpoint sessions while building the suitor characters<sup>12</sup>. The suitors all had different methods and tactics to convince an uninterested Penelope to agree to marriage. The suitors ranged from older men in bucket hats, tap dancers, a guitar playing character with quick footwork, a fraternity member trying to share a shot, a sneaky and spy-like duo that tried to tag team a “yes” out of Penelope, to finally Menelaus (Fig. 6, 7). Portrayed by actor and fight choreographer Noah Luce, Menelaus had a deep, slow, bellowing voice that rose against the rest of the suitors. He entered through a trapdoor center stage and slowly and deliberately walked around Penelope. As he made a show of smelling her from head to toe, it became hard to watch her refusal. The suitor scenes ended in chaos with suitors chasing, circling, tap-dancing, and played instruments around in an endless pursuit of Odysseus’ wife. Some of us created these storylines while thinking about the number of sexual assaults that occur on college campuses as well as unwarranted sexual or romantic advances. We brainstormed and solidified all of these characters through collaborative decisions made by the director, the choreographer, and input and talent from the cast.

After about two weeks of ensemble work, assignments for official casting roles finally became solidified and we began to conduct research on our characters.

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<sup>12</sup> The suitors in Homer’s *The Odyssey* were men left the city of Ithaca and repetitively attempted to seduce the Queen, Penelope, into marriage while her husband Odysseus, King of Ithaca, was off at war.

We first looked from Homer's text, but also read, shared, and incorporated insight from other sources about Greek origins and characters. A recurring text that Penelope repeated throughout the play came from 20th century poet Dorothy Parker that echoed themes of Penelope's faith in Odysseus' return and her patience while waiting for him:

In the pathway of the sun,  
In the footsteps of the breeze,  
Where the world and sky are one,  
He shall ride the silver seas,  
He shall cut the glittering wave.  
I shall sit at home, and rock;  
Rise, to heed a neighbor's knock;  
Brew my tea, and snip my thread;  
Bleach the linen for my bed  
(Parks)

Rehearsals usually began with us brainstorming over pages of a loosely laid out scene that included essentially a beginning, middle, and end without dialogue or specific stage directions. While we created and devised on the spot stage managers typed in the action and dialogue we came up with. As we experimented on our feet our script became a live document; reflecting what stayed, what we cut, and where gaps occurred in transitional moments. This rehearsal style allowed room for us to take artistic liberties. The more work I do at UCSC I notice a heavier emphasis on actors to hold this kind of skill in their acting toolboxes. In auditions I have been asked to generate material or improvise, with intentions behind the casting table to utilize actors who are willing to devise. In a UCSC production of *The Congressladies* directed by Danny Scheie in the winter of 2015, the cast collaborated with the playwright, professor Mary-Kay Gamel, and generated dozens of parody songs to be

incorporated into the upbeat, partially-devised, and highly political musical. I took my experiences from Scheie's show and integrated what I knew of creating and experimenting with writing lyrics into building text for Jannarone's show.

Jannarone assigned similar homework assignments that I encountered while working on *The Congressladies* by asking us to write lyrics for Calypso to sing. Some included, "It's cold and dreary/ And I'm getting weary/ Do you miss me/ Will you kiss me/ I'm far from home/ Throw me a bone/ My strong form is wasting away/ The dreary horizon shows only grey/ Guilt from my comrades lost and gone/ Zeus grant me peace after this song," (*The Odyssey* script 9). Although these lyrics are simple and not necessarily political, the fact that we collaborated on this writing helped us all feel a lot more connected to our performance in these roles.

### **Finding Hermes**

I played the god Hermes in this production, and found her exact characterization during a devised exercise. The most influential rehearsal for me during *The Odyssey* happened without any mention of plot or script, and nothing we did that day ended up concretely in the show besides some personal discoveries. The fight choreographer, Luce, planned the rehearsal entitled "Death Workshop" and set up special circumstances in order for us to viscerally feel a high stakes, life or death moment similar to that of a battlefield. Designated cast members hid as best as they could in the theater in complete darkness while three crewmen searched for them with flashlights. Once found and "captured" by the crewmen's light they let out a sound of

dying agony, stood up and waited for my character, Hermes, to come find them. Acting as a guide to the underworld I led them to center stage where the cast built a pile of dead bodies. After the majority of the cast had hidden Luce set loose the crewmen and shut off the lights. A soundscape of chains rattling, gunshots, and unsettling white noise played in the background. I waited in anticipation for the daunting task of finding and escorting the captured cast members to the underworld. I paced around quick on my toes, and with a racing heart I used my flashlight to scan the theater in search of those killed. Although Hermes did not have any real stakes in the crewman's success or my cast-mates failure to stay hidden, in single moment I found Hermes physicality. I found her sense of urgency. I discovered her ability to empathize towards immortals, her impartialness to slaughter, and the pride and seriousness she took while holding the duty of leading souls to the underworld. Completely unable to help the dead, I came to a calm acceptance of my role. Instead of attempting to save them from their impending deaths, I made it my mission to find them as quickly as possible and ease their transition into the pile.

Once I found the dead, I extended an arm with a look of quiet, sympathetic determination, and physically lead them to the pile one by one. I wanted to calm them and to do so I impulsively began using a soft physical touch with my hand to let them know of my presence in the dark. When we reached the stage, I encountered a moment where I had to let them go. Although I had short interactions with those dead, my job became necessary to calm my panicked cast members down. I existed, if only for a brief thirty seconds, as their limbo. I dropped my hand from theirs while

leading them to the others creating a pathway to the pile with my flashlight. While acting in this space I utilized my resources the best I could, fostering a connection with others without words, instead through touch and light. As the intensity rose, I ran around the theater scanning rows of seats, backstage areas, and underneath large set pieces, in these seemingly real moments, I found where Hermes' character existed in this world (Fig. 8). She existed differently than the Hermes in Homer's *Odyssey*, but still in a perfectly acceptable way because what we created developed into a different kind of Greek world. Luce, the leader of the activity successfully created a true high-stakes scenario utilizing techniques that challenged our kinesthetic responses in this devised experiment. Although this work did not make it into the show concretely, my relationships with others onstage shifted dynamics after that rehearsal. I was a God, and they were not. I found that being able to portray that distinction through strength in small leading gestures the takeaway from this devising exercise to be what I did utilize throughout the show.

Hermes in Jannarone's production answered directly to war reporter Athena and found her own moral struggle while attempting to stay true to upholding Athena's wishes and spin of the story. Hermes' rebellion and moral compass got tested in part three where her loyalty to the all-powerful Athena lessened. Entering the blood-splattered room of the murdered suitors became a moment of trauma that Hermes experienced right along with the audience. After welcoming the audience into the final segment of the show, we all watched Odysseus lick the blood off of his fresh kill, Penelope roll around in a dreamlike state, and Argos' tragic death in the moment



of reunion with his master. While Athena desperately tried to spin the story of Odysseus' journey into that of heroism, and justice, Hermes snapped and struggled with her own moral compass, ending the play in her own kind of limbo.

### **How *The Odyssey* Suddenly Became More Political Than We Intended**

What devised companies strived to accomplish in the 20th century mirrors a similar attempt that we had while working on *The Odyssey*. We focused on making political statements throughout the show about the current presidential election. With disputes emerging and anti-feminist and racist remarks being used by people who had the possibility of holding tremendous political power in America, we echoed those in our play. In a review of *The Odyssey* by UCSC's newspaper City on a Hill Press, student author Josephine Buchanan reflected on a character that echoed one of the presidential hopefuls:

As the audience explored the DARC, they met a character, Antonius, who announced that Ithaca should be "made great again." While pulling several women aside, he made stereotypical remarks about belonging at home or in secretarial roles to be suited for his city of Ithaca. As the audience was led back to their seats, viewers were left to consider questions of politics and identity, representation and how these roles fit into the modern age (Buchanan).

As the election became harder to watch and engage with because of such remarks and actions emerging, the cast decided with strong agreement and encouragement from Jannarone to use *The Odyssey* as a platform to emphasize discriminatory and unfair rhetoric used by those in political power. These themes by themselves provide a strong stimulus for devised pieces and became surprisingly easy to integrate into our

show. This idea is echoed by Heddon, “The aim of transfiguring life into art, and art into life, was an undoubtedly political act,” (Heddon 66). We took moments from the election we felt had the potential to resonate with our audiences as we ourselves questioned the morality of Americans. We transformed these personal reflections into material that commented on the treatment of different genders and races as well as how the general human condition is flawed in Homer’s world as well as in our collective realities.

The political influence of *The Odyssey* can be seen in a monologue piece performed by Danny Scheie as Odysseus. The monologue’s content slightly shifted after the election with anti-government and anti-capitalist messages spurring out of Scheie's mouth, “To hell with big governments... They tangle their citizens in nets of regulations... Limit individual freedoms... Make it impossible to get anything done,” (*The Odyssey* Script 18). Immediately the devising experience and process drastically changed tone once we knew the results of the presidential election. *The Odyssey* suddenly became a platform, and therefore more relevant as the cusp of new political discourse and disagreements emerged. Election night occurred during our first dress rehearsal and as the results became clearer our performances became more tense, emotional, and powerful. Patty Gallagher portraying Athena spoke the final words of the play, “ Let Odysseus be made King forever. Let the men of Ithaca be friends. Let peace attend them,” (*The Odyssey* script 55) and it resonated that night with an intensity and power unlike anything I’ve experienced in the theater. Increasingly it became clear we could not perform without the feeling of helplessness and shock in

our progressive, left-leaning area of Santa Cruz. Jannarone rose after the play ended with tears streaming down her face, mirroring her emotional and somewhat flabbergasted cast and told us that although we may be shocked and grieving, our work just became more important than ever.

## SECTION FIVE- CONCLUSION

Entering this project with numerous spaces to fill, pages to write, and action to happen, we created an original and special telling of this classical piece of work. *The Odyssey* became relevant to our community; we were able to take a story about the war hero Odysseus' struggle to find his way home and present it in a brand new way. However, devised pieces of theater have different kinds of challenges and setbacks than a traditional play-rehearsal-performance mold. Challenges that can include but are not limited to: misinterpretation while collaborating, time constraints, defining clear hierarchical roles for those involved, and a risk of not reaching our audiences in a way we intended to. Even so, without risk devised theater would not have the opportunity to succeed.

Theater that is devised has potential to be simultaneously personal and political and encourages new and unique collaborations between artists, performers, technicians, and audience members. I encourage actors to familiarize themselves with this kind of theater making as well as the techniques used to build devised pieces. Being able to perform improvisations on the spot, experiment with physicality and texts critically and creatively, and help build a strong sense of unity within ensembles makes an actor more versatile in ways that I believe make them more appealing to directors and casting directors. Regardless of the political climate, performance has a voice, and we can use it in many ways. Through devising individuals can showcase material that may have come from a deeply personal origin and let it develop into work that is suddenly grandiose and universal.

## APPENDIX



Fig. 1: Mainstage Theater. Credit: *UCSC Theater Arts Website*.



Fig. 2: *The Odyssey* rehearsing the “pile of bodies”. Credit: Dor Atkinson



Fig. 3: *The Odyssey* final pose of “the pile of bodies” Photo Credit: Steve DiBartolmeo



Fig. 4: Interactions in the DANM building. Photo Credit: Steve DiBartolmeo





Fig. 5: The final act in the black box of the DANM building. Photo Credit: Steve DiBartolmeo



Fig. 6: The Suitors. Photo Credit: Steve DiBartolmeo



Fig. 7: The Suitors. Photo Credit: Steve DiBartolmeo



Fig. 8: Hermes. Photo Credit: Steve DiBartolmeo

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