

## **Wedunnit: How About Face Youth Theatre Solved the Mystery of Online Ensemble Devising and Learning**

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ABOUT FACE THEATRE

### **ABSTRACT**

*In March 2021, About Face Youth Ensemble faced the task of creating a show online with both performers and teaching artists stuck in their homes, separated from each other. At the end of the youth ensemble's three-month long devising process, the virtual production of Whodunnit? A Groovy Queer Murder Mystery at Camp Forest Woods! was released online. In this paper, members of the education staff share their reflections on how they designed for and engaged in a learning environment that facilitated a particularly connected ensemble. Key aspects of instructional design addressed in the article include the motivation behind the show, the theatre company's growing commitment to youth mental health, traditional "in-the-room" devising practices, and the utilization of online technology. Recommendations for applied theatre programs and their practitioners that work with*

*teens, as well as arts researchers, are as follows: 1) Investigate the potential of hiring a certified mental health professional 2) Commit to spending significant time together for emotional connection 3) Design devising activities that support more equitable power dynamics and access 4) Explore the promising possibilities of computer-supported collaborative learning especially when returning to in-person creation.*

The year is 1971. Ten people receive mysterious invitations to a summer camp reunion at a secluded mountain resort. Who has orchestrated this get together? Does it have anything to do with an “accidental” death from their time at camp? Old passions and rivalries reignite as the guests are forced to confront what happened at Camp Forest Woods years ago... before time runs out. (Blurb from *Whodunnit? A Groovy Queer Murder Mystery at Camp Forest Woods!*)

About Face Youth Theatre (AFYT) is an award-winning and nationally-recognized youth theatre program which calls Chicago home. A rotating ensemble of queer youth devise original plays about LGBTQIA+ lives each year and has been doing so for over two decades. With the advent of the pandemic in 2020, AFYT pivoted its work to an online platform producing a monologue-heavy show in response to the Black Lives Matter movement, protests in Chicago, police brutality, and being in quarantine. The following season, now led by a new staff of educators, AFYT once again faced the task of creating a show online with both performers and teaching artists stuck in their homes, separated from each other. At the end of the ensemble's three-month long process of development, the virtual production of *Whodunnit? A Groovy Queer Murder Mystery at Camp Forest Woods!* was released online and shown all throughout June 2021.

Some of the most significant audience feedback received about the show concerned the connectedness of the ensemble members, a seemingly impossible task to pull off in a world of unending online meetings and sustained collective trauma. Therefore, in order to investigate how the closeness of the ensemble developed in the midst of such adversity, we began reflecting upon the program design and

implementation—looking for evidence that would help us crack the case.

The aim of this paper is to share our reflections, as Associate Artistic Director and as Teaching Artist, on how we designed for and engaged in a learning environment that supported this unique kind of connection in a virtual world. We attempt to answer a question posed by Gallagher et al. (2020) at the beginning of the pandemic: "How can virtual drama still nurture community and connection for young people?" (p. 639). We present key aspects of instructional design which include the motivation behind the show and our growing commitment to youth mental health. Additionally, we explain how we made use of both traditional "in-the-room" devising practices and online technology to support ensemble learning and co-creation. We offer our learning to the wider theatre community as a narrative of practice—scholarship in which we advocate for awareness and caring to support youth agency in a tumultuous and continuously changing world.

## **REFLECTIVE PRACTICE**

In order to investigate the success not only of the show itself but also of the cohesion of the ensemble, we began by sharing stories with each other. These reflections about the work included what we designed as part of the spring session, our rationale for those decisions, observations on how students participated in the learning environment, and reflections upon those observations. We then engaged in analysis of our stories in order to create an agreed upon co-constructed narrative of practice which highlights our key learnings. This type of reflective practice (Dawson & Kelin, 2014), specifically our *reflection-on-action* (Schön, 1987), is one that many teaching artists engage in throughout the course of their careers, yet rarely get an opportunity to report out to the greater theatre community. It is our hope that our design story will serve as an example for others in similar contexts and add to the nascent body of literature regarding theatre teaching, learning, and creating in online communities during times of unimaginable, prolonged struggle and trauma.

## **TEACHING THEATRE ONLINE DURING 2020**

Teaching and learning theatre online was rare, but not a new endeavor before 2020 (Philip & Nicholls, 2007; van Vuuren & Freisleben, 2020). However, as a response to the global pandemic, teachers and teaching artists were rapidly forced to adapt their work with students to online spaces. This adaptation oftentimes occurred alongside a tremendous sense of loss (MacArthur, 2021; Prendergast, 2020). Nevertheless, theatre and drama instructors managed to engage their students in a myriad of creative experiences throughout the year following the initial lockdowns. University students in Norway and Hungary participated in process dramas that focused on exploring issues related to the pandemic (Cziboly & Bethlenfalvy, 2020) and youth in a professional theatre program in Chicago practiced scene work in Zoom breakout rooms (Siciliano, 2021). Some online theatrical learning experiences included university students devising their own work. For example, graduate students in Applied Theatre at CUNY School of Professional Studies collaboratively devised a Theatre in Education experience for master's level social work students at their university (Jemal et al., 2020). In another instance, Weltsek's (2021) students completely redesigned their devised stage play and turned it into a virtual show incorporating student feelings of pandemic-induced isolation. All of the aforementioned theatrical experiences took place within the first year of the pandemic. Our narrative of practice builds upon this scholarship by examining what it was like to plan for and facilitate a collaborative devising process one year after the initial lockdowns.

## **A MURDER MYSTERY NOW?**

The idea for the spring show to be a murder mystery came out of a desire to find something that would be fun for young artists. It was quite simply that. After the fall of 2020, the education team at About Face Theatre recognized that our youth ensemble members were having a very difficult time—students were burnt out from being online with virtual programming and remote learning, suffering the very real effects of Zoom fatigue (Peper et al, 2021). Historically, AFYT shows tend to explore significant issues of identity and social justice affecting the lives of the artists. However, given the state of the world at the end

of the fall—the fact that we had just come off of one of the most alarming and upsetting years in American political history and that we were still enduring the relentless ravages of COVID—it just felt necessary to reimagine what the space could be. People were struggling, so we thought let's not do something so serious. Let's make something that people can enjoy that's on the lighter side of things. Rather than exploring what students were thinking and feeling about their lives and then translating those thoughts and emotions of frustration, isolation, and anger into a performance, we instead, wanted to provide a virtual space that was more like an escape for youth to be creative and just be able to breathe together in the midst of everything else. It is not that we suddenly stopped believing in the power of youth advocacy or in the magic that happens when young people's thoughts about the world as they understand it are shared in their own voices. But designing an environment where students could be young and have fun without feeling like the weight of the world was also on their shoulders became paramount as we discussed our instructional goals for the spring session.

The decision to use a murder mystery as a framework for the show helped to facilitate the connectedness of the ensemble members from the very first session. This genre seems to call a particular kind of person to it. In fact, there were several new artists who came to the ensemble in the spring (from around the country thanks to online learning!) specifically excited by the concept. Because most of the students had already been in *Clue The Musical* or *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* or had seen the movie *Knives Out* multiple times (as noted on their pre-session surveys), they came to the online space possessing a common vocabulary from which to draw. We began the spring session then, by capitalizing on group members' prior knowledge about the genre including what they both loved and hated. We also asked them what they wanted to question, challenge, or complicate about the typical murder mystery. Their answers and questions helped guide the ensemble's investigation into creating a murder mystery that served as both an escape from the world as we knew it and as a vehicle to explore queer representations in art.

## **A SPACE FOR EMOTIONAL CONNECTION**

The foundation of any ensemble, of which Chicago has a long tradition (Johnston & Brownrigg, 2019), is a recognition that everyone is working together towards a common goal. With communal openness, people are encouraged to be big and loud and wrong, to experiment, explore, and make mistakes because we're all in this together. In the spring of 2021, even though we chose a subject matter that ultimately was much less emotionally charged than topics we might have previously explored, we intentionally made space for all of the complicated emotions that we knew our ensemble members would bring into the Zoom room. We knew from prior experiences in the fall with the AFYT group members, that students were wrestling with mental health challenges. Additionally, we had become more and more aware of a growing national concern for teens' mental health (Sparks, 2021). Consequently, a new position for a dedicated mental health counselor was created. The primary purpose for this role was to have a trained person in the room to ensure that, at any point, students had someone they could talk to about what was going on in their lives. Knowing how difficult and complex the world had become and its impact on young people, we wanted to make sure that the space we created was one where everyone could bring their full selves into the room at all times, especially on challenging days.

Creating this new position was important because teaching artists are not necessarily formally trained to deal with important student mental health issues. While theatre is certainly a place where emotions and mental health are explored potentially more freely than in other disciplines, it was important for us to have someone "in the room" who had been trained to counsel young people rather than expecting teaching artists to simultaneously wear two different hats. During the session, if youth artists needed to take a moment away from the work, the mental health counselor could provide any needed support which then ultimately allowed students to return back to the group and continue their participation. In addition to being present for each session, our mental health counselor scheduled before and after class sessions for participants to meet together as yet another avenue of support.

The newly-designed role of mental health counselor was one of the many ways we intentionally designed for emotional exploration and connection. In fact, a particular check-in exercise called "Rose and

Thorn" became incredibly important to the group. In this exercise, group members discussed their roses, or positive things that happened to them, and their thorns, negative experiences they wanted to share. One of the teaching artists brought the idea of offering "Flies" as well—things that were distracting a person from being fully present in the room. While this general type of check-in is well known (Harris, 2020) and not revolutionary (at least in the theatre!), the amount of time we devoted to this practice at the top of each session—at least 20 to 25 minutes out of 3 hours—was significant. When we tried to shorten the check-in with another type of exercise one Saturday, it became apparent that the youth artists missed that time spent together. Before jumping into improvising a scene in a break-out room in Zoom, one student even asked their scene partners how they were all doing, as a result of the shortened group share.

The fact that we committed to holding a sort of sacred space for meaningful sharing and connections each week led to the learning of important life lessons. For instance, some older members of the ensemble offered advice and support to younger members who were exploring issues around their own gender identity. Younger members also witnessed how older artists dealt with issues of survival like finding a job and seeking medication and mental health services. These types of conversations were particularly key due to the isolation brought about by COVID. With limited access to previously in-person structures and spaces for learning, our *Rose, Thorn, and Fly* time functioned as a way for the ensemble members to pass along essential knowledge for living. The significant amount of energy we put towards really understanding and supporting everyone's mental health during the spring- making sure people felt safe, heard, and seen in their fullest—resulted in an ensemble that cared deeply for and supported one another. Because they were so invested in the health and wellness of each other, they also were deeply invested in the art they were making together, too.

## **DEVISING TOGETHER**

AFYT members were challenged to create a show "from scratch" with only the framework of a murder mystery as a guide. We believe that the development of a connected ensemble, particularly one in which many of its members had never even met face to face, was a direct

result of the youth artists' work being grounded in the theatrical practice of devising (Oddey, 1996). Acknowledging the tensions in collaborative devising about authorship and ownership (Glarin, 2020), we tried to make sure the students exercised as much ownership and power over the story as possible, constantly asking them the question: "What do *you* want to do?" Our hope was that the students would author (through playwriting and improv) as much of the show as possible, and we would be there to facilitate their authorship process.

A first decision the group was tasked with was determining how they were going to make decisions together, an exercise borrowed from the playbook of the University of Chicago's Leslie Buxbaum Danzig. In addition to decision-making strategies such as voting and "just doing it" without discussion, we also implemented the strategy of taking elements from everyone's ideas to "make a combined super decision." The act of following through with this last strategy time and time again became one of the ensemble's key strengths. Every major decision about the play—the who, what, when, where, why, and how—were results of this "combination" decision-making process. Even smaller decisions for the show were often made with the contributions of the whole group. For instance, one actor offered to design the invitation that all of the guests to the camp reunion (the suspects) would receive at the top of the play. However, once a few sketches were complete, the actor asked if he could share his initial ideas with the group specifically because that was how decisions were made—collaboratively—and that was how things got even better—with others' input.

One of the major tensions that exists in devising original work with young artists is wanting to provide a space for students to exercise their agency and also making sure a well-executed show gets ready in time for final performance (Horn, 2016). We encountered this tension ourselves and had to navigate design tradeoffs throughout the process. We often thought about the balance between providing just enough structure in order for the ensemble to successfully create a piece but also not too much structure so that they would feel stifled, unheard, or even powerless. However, other times, not providing enough structure might cause the group to feel lost at sea because they are not sure what is being asked of them. And yet, sometimes, that struggle was exactly what the group needed in order to realize that they, indeed, were expected to take the lead on all artistic choices for

the show.

To illustrate how we balanced both structure and agency to ultimately facilitate ensemble cohesion and artistic creation, we offer an example of an exercise we ran with the group in one of the early weeks of the devising process. This storytelling activity was one that was meant to create a shared understanding of what the imaginary Camp Forest Woods was like for the characters in the past. We asked each of the actors to share a positive memory about the fictitious camp starting with a phrase such as "Remember when..." Each actor would then add on to that memory, with an improvisational "yes, and..." The last actor down the line was asked to come up with a not-so-pleasant memory in order to engage the idea that the past wasn't as rosy as the previous memories led on. The last actor was asked to start their memory with a "yes, but..." The artists ran with this structure and immediately began changing it to what worked for them. Instead of the last person providing the twist at the end of the group recollection, ensemble members closer to the beginning of the story "circle" began to present memories of unfortunate events—crocodile bites, holes in canoes, and so forth—crafting a much unluckier (and more exciting) camp experience than initially intended. Much of the plot for the entire show was developed from these initial co-created stories and showed up in future improv sessions as well as lyrics to the "Camp Song" sung by the actors in the show.

## **DEVISING *ONLINE* TOGETHER**

In addition to providing time for emotional connection and support as well as the very practice of devising work together, we theorize that creating a show from our individual Zoom boxes and utilizing technology to do so helped support the highly communal nature of the ensemble. We recognize that our proposition may be viewed as antithetical to the discipline itself by some community members. Nevertheless, using technology in order to devise deserves further exploration. In our case, the most successful tool we used as an ensemble included Google Drive with its various suite of applications. In particular, we suggest that the co-creation of artifacts as well as universal access to them functioned as mechanisms for group cohesion.

Before the beginning of our spring session, we made a few key

decisions regarding the show. We knew that the piece would be a mix of script memorization and improv because we wanted to provide a professional experience while simultaneously respecting students' limited time in between Saturday sessions. We also knew that the artists themselves would be writing the scripted portions. Therefore, when it came time to write the introductory scenes, we divided the ensemble up into two groups, split them into Zoom breakout rooms, and shared blank Google Documents. The students then got to work writing lines for their individual characters and sometimes for the characters of fellow creators. What was different about this activity from previous in-person experiences we had designed was that each student was able to view and contribute to the script in real time. Instead of having one person in a classroom in control of a pen and piece of paper or even a single laptop, all members of the group were able to access the "paper" and the "pen" simultaneously. Not only could each person write whatever they wanted, but they could also read what others wrote and respond to that writing immediately either by their own writing or through conversation. Our initial intention for this activity was a student-written script. However, through reflection, we now see that by asking the students to write the script this way (which we only did because we were meeting online), more powerful outcomes may have been achieved. Students may have experienced more balanced power dynamics with power distributed among all the group members as a result of everyone having control of the physical writing space. While there will always be various power dynamics in play in any situation, Google Docs may have supported interactions more firmly rooted in the democratic ideals of devising (Oddey, 1996).

A shared ensemble folder nested within Google Drive itself functioned as an online repository for co-created artifacts throughout the devising process and may have contributed to a sense of balanced power dynamics among ensemble members including teaching artists. Students had complete access to this online folder during and between our Saturday sessions where they could view and change anything they wanted. Items within the shared folder included brainstorming documents for the show, group agreements, goals for how to make the show a very queer murder mystery, the evolving script, and videos of improvs for future reference. Students also were invited to use individual folders within the shared folder for character development and costume planning. While it's not unique to have co-created

artifacts as part of the devising process, what proved significant here was that our work was accessible to everyone at any time. The documents, and thus the story, truly belonged to everyone throughout the entire process. The rehearsal room no longer served as a structure for gatekeeping. We encouraged people to visit the shared folder throughout the week to continue adding to the show in whichever ways they saw fit. Moving forward when we return to the physical rehearsal room, providing an online space for collaborative generation with 24/7 access by the entire ensemble is something we may explore as a tool to support a more close-knit, creative community.

## **CONCLUSION**

A year into the pandemic, the education team at About Face Theatre knew that we wanted to facilitate an online ensemble devising experience for the young artists of AFYT. A main concern which drove our program was the pressing mental health needs of the teens and young adults in the group. Therefore, we made a commitment to designing an environment which would allow the ensemble members to have fun with a quirky concept while also feeling cared for by their peers and a newly hired mental health counselor. Throughout our three months together, we observed how more traditional creative generation prompts along with a variety of technological tools supported the growth of a tight-knit ensemble. Our recommendations for applied theatre programs and practitioners that work with teens are as follows: 1) Investigate the potential of hiring a certified mental health professional 2) Commit to spending significant time together for emotional connection 3) Design devising activities that support more equitable power dynamics and access 4) Explore the promising possibilities of computer-supported collaborative learning especially when returning to in-person creation. We urge the wider arts research community to examine teaching and learning in these areas, as well.

## SUGGESTED CITATION

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