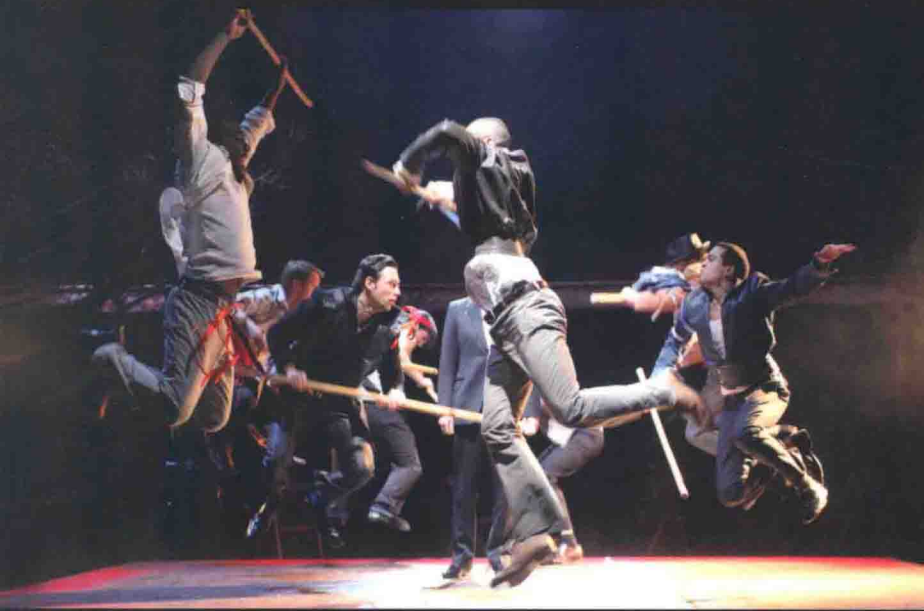


# The **CONTEMPORARY ENSEMBLE**

Interviews with theatre-makers



Edited by  
Duška **RADOSAVLJEVIĆ**

ROUTLEDGE



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First published 2013  
by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada  
by Routledge  
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

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*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data* A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data* A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN: 978-0-415-53528-1 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-0-415-53530-4 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-0-203-11270-0 (ebk)

Typeset in Goudy  
by Book Now Ltd, London



Printed and bound in Great Britain by  
TJ International Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall

# The Contemporary Ensemble

## Interviews with theatre-makers

Questions of ensemble – what it is, how it works – are both inherent to a variety of Western theatre traditions, and re-emerging and evolving in striking new ways in the twenty-first century. *The Contemporary Ensemble* draws together an unprecedented range of original interviews with world-renowned theatre-makers in order to directly address both the former and latter concerns. Reflecting on ‘the ensemble way of working’ within this major new resource are figures including:

Michael Boyd, Yuri Butusov, Lyn Gardner, Elizabeth LeCompte, Phelim McDermott, Emma Rice, Adriano Shaplin, Max Stafford-Clark, and Hermann Wündrich;

representing companies including:

The Berliner Ensemble, Kneehigh Theatre, The Neo-Futurists, Ontroerend Goed, Out of Joint, The Riot Group, The RSC, The Satirikon Theatre, Shadow Casters, Song of the Goat, and The Wooster Group.

All twenty-two interviews were conducted especially for the collection, and draw upon the author’s rich background working as scholar, educator and dramaturg with a variety of ensembles. The resulting compendium radically re-situates the ensemble in the context of globalisation, higher education and simplistic understandings of ‘text-based’ and ‘devised’ theatre practice, and traces a compelling new line through the contemporary theatre landscape.

**Duška Radosavljević** is a Lecturer in Drama and Theatre Studies at the University of Kent, UK. She has previously worked as the Dramaturg at Northern Stage, education practitioner at the Royal Shakespeare Company and theatre critic for *The Stage* newspaper.

# Acknowledgements

My thanks are due to all the individuals who agreed to be interviewed for this project and to their various collaborators and assistants who helped to set up the meetings and, in some cases, proof the transcripts. In addition to the interviewees, I'd like to thank Charlotte Bond (Kneehigh), Jane Tassell (RSC), Barney Norris and Stella Feehly (Out of Joint), Jason Gray Platt (The Wooster Group), Anastasia Razumovskaya and Polina Zhezhenova (MHAT School), the Edinburgh International Festival Press Office and the Interferences International Theatre Festival Cluj; David Barnett (University of Sussex) for facilitating contact with the Berliner Ensemble, and John Britton (Duende) for making me part of his own ensemble project; Anastasia Razumovskaya and Martin Schnabl for their help with translation, as well as to Thomas Colley for his transcription services. Special thanks to Dr George Rodosthenous for all his support in many different ways, as well as Professor Paul Allain, Dr Bryce Lease and Miloš Jakovljević for close reading and editorial suggestions on selected sections of the book. My work has also benefited from Nick Awde's eagle eye whose own project *Solo Show: The Creation of the One-Person Play in British Theatre* (London: Desert Hearts, 2013) is a cousin of this book through the Edinburgh family line.

Due to various circumstances, some of the interviews did not take place or just never made it to the final draft of the book, but I am grateful to Joseph Alford (Theatre O), Anne Bogart (SITI Theatre), Erica Daniels and Paul Miller (Steppenwolf Theatre Company), Lin Hixon (ex-Goat Island; *Every House Has a Door*), movement director Natalia Fedorova (ex-MHAT), writer and actor Tim Crouch and producer Michael Redington for their time, preliminary discussions and correspondence on the subject.

I was very lucky to have been able to gain access to various performances discussed in this volume with thanks to: Phelim McDermott for a memorable evening at the Metropolitan Opera House; Gabor Tompa for

inviting me to the Interferences Festival Cluj 2010; Patrice Pavis for letting me have his ticket to Shadow Casters' sold out performance of *Vacation from History*; Jonathan Meth and members of The Fence for introducing me to various wonders of European theatre; Paul Miller for a ticket to *The March* at Steppenwolf; Ivona Ataljević and her family for their hospitality in Chicago; Suzanne Worthington for countless discounted RSC tickets, cups of tea and inspiring conversations; David Bauwens for ensuring entry into various Ontorerend Goed performances; Rachel Chavkin (TEAM), Adriano Shaplin and Dan Rothenberg for letting me see recordings of their work; the Edinburgh International Festival Press Office and The Fringe Press Office for their help; and to *The Stage* newspaper for the privilege of bearing its press accreditation.

Special thanks to the editors of the *Journal of Adaptation in Film and Performance* Katja Krebs and Richard Hand for their support and collaboration in publishing some of this research and allowing me to reprint the interview with Emma Rice.

I owe the initial inspiration for this book to Alan Lyddiard and Michael Boyd, both of whose respective ensemble ways of working are in their own ways always coupled with extraordinary humanity and generosity of spirit. In addition, I would like to thank my colleagues at *The Stage* and the University of Kent for insightful exchanges over the years. Many thanks to Talia Rodgers for her enthusiasm and suggestions, for the editorial support of her team at Routledge and of Richard Cook at Book Now. The Routledge readers' reports from Gareth White, Jackie Smart, Sara Jane Bailes, Jane Goodall, David Roesner and Kate Craddock have been particularly helpful in the development of this project and I am grateful to them too.

Elements of this work have been supported by research funding at the University of Kent, Professor Paul Allain's Leverhulme-funded 'Tradition and Innovation: Britain/Russia Training for Performance' project, and, crucially, by an AHRC Fellowship, for which I am also indebted to various anonymous readers and panellists whose enthusiasm has made this possible.

Finally thank you to the ensemble of all my close friends and relatives, and especially to 'the Dragons', without whom, I wouldn't even be here.

## Postscript

As this book goes into print, two of its chapters have also been made available in audio-visual form in the Routledge Performance Archive (RPA): an audio recording of the interview with Mike Alfreds and a video recording of the interview with Adriano Shaplin. Please see [www.routledgeperformancearchive.com](http://www.routledgeperformancearchive.com) for more information.

# Preface

It may seem inappropriate for a book about ensembles to open with a personal statement about the editor's singular aims and her particular circumstances that lead her into this research. However, I feel compelled to outline how this book has emerged from very real problems, ideas and challenges I have encountered in my interactions with various theatre-makers, critics, teachers and students of theatre, ever since my own student days in the UK in the mid-1990s.

Of partial significance here is my own cultural background as a person who was brought up in a collectivist atmosphere of a former socialist country – Yugoslavia – a place that was, thanks to its liberal form of socialism during the Cold War, often defined as ‘the best of both worlds’. The *Cambridge Guide to World Theatre* (Cambridge University Press, 1988, p. 1093) pointed out the significance of the Belgrade International Theatre Festival (BITEF) ‘which has since 1967 featured the most important avant-garde works from all over the world’. Nevertheless, the country's own theatre production carried an emphasis on the so-called ‘dramatic theatre’ and was heavily influenced by the German and Russian repertory theatre models which customarily included resident ensembles.

My first degree in Theatre Studies at the University of Huddersfield featured a healthy mix of Grotowski-influenced physical theatre, performance studies, drama and theatre history without an explicit acknowledgement of any tensions that might have historically existed between various paradigms of the study of theatre and performance, thus indicating that by the mid-1990s those battles might have been laid to rest, ushering in a more layered understanding of the field, whatever its name might be. As an example of this, I recall that in our first year we were taken to see *Forced Entertainment*, Trestle Theatre, the Wrestling School and the multi-award winning TV actor Warren Mitchell as King Lear, as part of one and the same course.

Changes were afoot within the theatre sector itself. By the time I joined *The Stage* newspaper's Edinburgh Reviewing team in 1998, a new

category of the annual Acting Excellence Awards was being added to the already-existing Best Actor and Best Actress – the Best Ensemble Award. Incidentally, Howard Goorney of the Theatre Workshop was one of the members of the Stage Awards judging panel in those years. Since 1998, nominees in this category have included Steven Berkoff's East Productions, Grid Iron, Trestle Theatre, Kaos, Theatre O, the Riot Group, but also more recently Traverse Theatre, National Theatre of Scotland, Song of the Goat and Ontroerend Goed – indicating an increasingly diversified understanding of the term 'ensemble'. Our award-judging discussions in this category have often revolved around two questions: 'Are all of the individual performances in the ensemble of award-winning quality?' and 'To what extent is the whole greater than the sum of its parts?'. As it happens, I have been dealing with these and a number of other questions concerning ensemble throughout most of the rest of my career.

From 2002 to 2005 I was employed as the Dramaturg at Northern Stage in Newcastle-upon-Tyne which, under the leadership of Alan Lyddiard, had been trying desperately to survive as a regional ensemble company ever since 1998. A lot of my time and energy was invested in promoting the values of the ensemble way of working, without always fully understanding the odds which were stacked against it and just how out of place – culturally and locally – this mode of working had been. It was the Equity and the Directors' Guild of Great Britain (DGGB) Conference on Ensemble Theatre at the Barbican on 24 November 2004 that opened my eyes to this. In a characteristically inspiring keynote speech, Michael Boyd, the then newly appointed Artistic Director of the Royal Shakespeare Company, outlined his vision for the company as an ensemble. This proved to be enough to lure me into the RSC, when Alan Lyddiard abruptly resigned from his position at the helm of Northern Stage in January 2005. For a year – which also saw a year-long Complete Works Festival – I had an opportunity to witness from the inside the complexities associated with imbuing a world-renowned national institution with the spirit of togetherness, experimentation and community.

Having finally returned to academia, I find myself asking these questions: What is meant by the 'ensemble way of working' in the twenty-first century? What advantages and problems are entailed therein? How does the contemporary ensemble fit with the heritage of the twentieth century, and how does it proceed forward?

Both as a practitioner and researcher, I am interested in how the ensemble way of working alters the theatre-making process by comparison to the process that exists between a number of otherwise-assembled freelance artists working on a project for five to eight weeks – including the run – and then going their separate ways. In addition, as a pedagogue,



I am confronted with an increasing trend of groups of young people graduating from drama and theatre courses together and going on to become successful ensemble companies, rather than seeking out individual careers. This requires recognition in terms of how we work as educators, but also in terms of how it has changed and continues to change the current theatre landscape.

Following the end of Michael Boyd's artistic directorship of the RSC in 2012, this book may come out in the aftermath of one significant ensemble project in the UK. However, I hope that this collection, featuring an ensemble of distinct international voices testifying to the virtues of collaborative ways of working, will continue to inspire new similar ventures. It is therefore dedicated to the ensembles of the future.

Duška Radosavljević  
*Canterbury, April 2012*

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# Introduction

I also get very upset when I see a production where the only pulse beating is that of the director, whereas the other thirty people who are on the stage may also have a beating pulse, and these pulses united are not just thirty pulses, they are much, much more. It's like the notion of critical mass in physics, where this mass comes to a certain point and there is an explosion.

(Lev Dodin in Delgado and Heritage 1996: 74)

You can't push everyone to be, you know, magnesium sulphate. There will never be two of the same element – so the fusion is unique. [...] Sometimes you get explosions!

(Lloyd Newson in Tushingham 1994:51)

On face value, one may struggle to find much aesthetic common ground between the London-based dance theatre company DV8 and the Maly Theatre from St Petersburg, renowned for its meticulous renditions of famous literary classics. The way that their respective leaders, Lloyd Newson and Lev Dodin, both serendipitously resort to the scientific analogy of an increase and sudden release of considerable energy is, however, indicative of a commitment that each of those directors has to a particular way of working – namely, a group of individuals working together. Although these two companies are sadly not featured in this collection, their underlying ethos is – as well as the wide-reaching capacity of the term 'ensemble', illustrated by the synergy provided between the two quotes above.

Part of the purpose of this introduction is to engage with a definition of terms, their historical development, and the choice of vocabulary for this particular volume. It is worth briefly foregrounding here the online Oxford Dictionary's designation of the term 'ensemble' as originating from the Middle English adverb (via French and Latin) meaning 'at the

## 2 Introduction

same time'. The adverbial aspect of this usage emphasises a process rather than a fixed state, making it particularly applicable in the context of theatre-making. In addition, the primary meaning of the noun 'ensemble' as we use it today – to mean 'a group of musicians, actors or dancers who perform together' – is augmented by a more conceptual use: 'a group of items viewed as a whole, rather than individually'.<sup>1</sup> As suggested by Dodin above, advocates of the ensemble way of working very often emphasise the notion of the whole being greater than the sum of its parts.

The following discussion is therefore intended to contextualise the collection of interviews presented in the volume in four specific ways. First, it will provide some historical and theoretical frameworks within which to begin engaging with potential taxonomies, methodologies and types of ensembles. This will serve to raise particular questions and problems that the concluding analysis of the empirical research will seek to address to some extent, while also framing the enclosed interviews. Second, it will define the key terms chosen for the title of this book: 'contemporary', 'ensemble' and 'theatre-maker'. Further it will explain the criteria for selection of the subjects of these interviews, the resulting formats of the conversations, and the overarching organisational principles of their layout. Wishing to leave enough space for the reader's own conclusions, the final section will tease out some preliminary areas of insight gained through the field research, in response to the initial questions raised concerning the definition of the ensemble way of working in the twenty-first century.

### **Histories, issues and taxonomies**

Combing through histories of Western theatre, one might come across the use of the term 'ensemble' in relation to theatre only as late as the nineteenth century, and specifically the Meiningen Ensemble. Having toured Europe extensively between 1874 and 1890, the Meiningen Ensemble is often hailed as a precursor to and an influence on both André Antoine's Théâtre Libre (1887–1896) and Konstantin Stanislavsky's Moscow Art Theatre (1897 to present). Prior to the nineteenth century, groups of actors working together are often referred to as companies (e.g. King's Men) or troupes (e.g. *commedia dell'arte*). The semantic choice of denominators by various writers is probably unconscious, but this is what Michael Booth highlights as the distinguishing characteristic of the Duke Saxe-Meiningen's aesthetic approach:

Georg laid great stress on ensemble; he was opposed to the star system and required leading actors in one production to take minor roles and even walk on in another, if necessary. Lengthy rehearsal periods also

ensured perfection of the crowd scenes, which much impressed European reviewers and theatre people.

(Booth 1997: 336)

The use of the term ensemble in this context seems to imply a lack of the hierarchy that is perhaps inherent to acting companies led by actor managers in the nineteenth century and the allocation of roles on the basis of seniority. Thus the organising structure of the ensemble implies that the actor's contribution is closer to that of a musician – which is also where the term ensemble is found more frequently.

In addition to the principle of equal attention being extended to all minor parts in a play or towards individuals within crowd scenes, as illustrated by the Meiningen Ensemble, Stanislavsky's embracing of the ensemble way of working is also understood to be linked to his interest in training as an indispensable part of the actor's life in theatre. In Chapter 10 of *An Actor Prepares*, for example, Stanislavsky outlines the importance of 'communion' between actors, or 'a sincere effort to exchange living human feelings with [each] other' (Stanislavski 2006 [1937]: 205). Stanislavsky's contemporary, the director Theodore Komisarjevsky, described the achievement of this kind of quality in performance as ground-breaking, and in Magarshack's quotation below, the term 'ensemble' – which thus acquires another level of meaning – is used to denote it:

It is the method of the formulation of an inner ensemble, based on inner communication, that was Stanislavsky's greatest discovery, and in the Moscow Art Theatre we saw and felt such an ensemble for the first time.

(Komisarjevsky quoted in Magarshack 1973 [1950]: 84)

Simon Shepherd traces the first calls for ensemble in Britain back to 1904 and the early plans for the National Theatre which would 'establish a company of performers for at least three years' (Shepherd 2009: 65). Proponents of this project over the next 60 years, and those in Britain who believed in the art rather than the business model of theatre which had dominated the British stage in the nineteenth century,<sup>2</sup> repeatedly looked to Europe for inspiration and for evidence to support their arguments for greater subsidy. Of particular impact was the visit in 1935 of Michel Saint-Denis with his *Compagnie des Quinze*, which Gielgud described as one of 'the most perfect examples of teamwork ever presented in London' (in Shepherd 2009: 68). This subsequently led to Saint-Denis' ensemble-oriented pedagogical experiments in London with George

#### 4 Introduction

Devine through the London Theatre Studio in the 1930s and Bristol Old Vic after World War Two.

Meanwhile in New York, in his account of the formation in 1931 of the Group Theatre collective, Harold Clurman describes a situation that may not have been dissimilar to the one that took place in Moscow in 1897, when Nemirovich-Danchenko and Konstantin Stanislavsky founded the Moscow Art Theatre. Two men, Clurman and Lee Strasberg – later joined by the producer Cheryl Crawford – with distinct but compatible sets of skills and a shared passion for raising quality standards, arrived at a decisive conclusion: continued collaboration and growth of a group of artists together, relieved of the pressures of the market economy, was a required necessity. Having produced such artists as Elia Kazan, Stella Adler, Clifford Odets, Sanford Meisner and Morris Carnovsky, the Group Theatre could be seen to have eventually contributed more to the film industry than to the reinvention of the American theatre scene. The reasons for the limited influence of its collective model of working on other theatre artists in the United States before the 1960s might be sought in the nature of US arts funding, and historical factors including World War Two and, later, Senator McCarthy's anti-communism. However, by the 1960s, this had changed radically, with the growing prominence of experimental companies such as the Living Theatre (which had started in 1947), the Open Theatre and the Performance Group.

The term 'ensemble' as a mode of theatre-making probably began to catch on in the English-speaking world as a result of another influential guest appearance in London – that of the Berliner Ensemble in 1956. According to Michael Billington, this event was one of the two in the 'pivotal year' (Billington 2007: 93) that had a long-term effect on British Theatre as a whole.<sup>3</sup> The other was the opening of the English Stage Company at the Royal Court with the premiere of *Look Back in Anger* by John Osborne. Its founder, George Devine, and the founder of the Royal Shakespeare Company, Peter Hall, did fall under the spell of Brecht's company, but they were not the only ones. Joan Littlewood, aligned with Brecht ideologically as well as aesthetically, was the first in England to actually direct and star in a professional production of Brecht's play *Mother Courage*, also in 1956.

Littlewood is another name often invoked in relation to the ensemble way of working, particularly in the British context. According to Nadine Holdsworth, throughout her career, which spanned 1945–1975, Littlewood 'maintained faith in the centrality of a permanent creative ensemble, the "composite mind" engaged in a cooperative sharing of ideas, skills and creativity' (Holdsworth 2006: 49). This was rooted in Littlewood's working class allegiances, her interest in agit-prop before World War Two, and



active engagement with popular forms of entertainment as well as the classics. Holdsworth highlights the problem of the evolving ‘cult of Joan’ (2006: 24) which ensued with her growing success in the mid-to-late 1950s. In addition, in 1955, her life partner and Theatre Workshop member Gerry Raffles got enough money to acquire their base, the Theatre Royal Stratford East, which shifted the organisational structure from a collective of equal individuals to an entity with a defined leadership – Raffles as business manager and Littlewood as an artistic director who made repertoire-related decisions.

This notion of a prominent leader being associated with an ensemble was by no means exclusive to Theatre Workshop as a company. In fact, it is a story that repeats case after case throughout the twentieth century: Jerzy Grotowski’s Teatr Laboratorium, Ariane Mnouchkine’s Théâtre du Soleil, Eugenio Barba’s Odin Teatret, Richard Schechner’s Performance Group, Max Stafford-Clark’s Joint Stock, Anne Bogart’s SITI Company.<sup>4</sup> In contrast to this, however, various directors have been eager to acknowledge their ensemble members as co-authors. In an unpublished handout in English, believed to have been distributed during the Theatre Laboratorium’s visit to New York in 1969, Jerzy Grotowski stated:

Without in any way wishing to give an impression of mock modesty, I must stress that in the end I am not **the** author of our productions, or at any rate, not the only one. I am not somebody who has devised the whole show by himself, set up all the roles in advance, planned the décor, arranged the lighting and designed the costumes. “Grotowski” is not a one-man band. [...] My name is, in fact, only there as a symbol of a group and its work in which are fused all the efforts of my associates. And these efforts are not a matter of collaboration pure and simple: they amount to **creation**.

(Grotowski n.d., original emphasis)<sup>5</sup>

In the Delgado and Rebellato’s 2010 volume on *Contemporary European Theatre Directors*, both Stephen Knapper and Lourdes Orozco seem to identify a move from collective creation to director-led decision making as a more recent development. Orozco provides the example of La Carnicería Teatro, which even got renamed to include the director’s name, and thus became ‘the more hierarchical La Carnicería-Rodrigo Garcia’ (in Delgado and Rebellato 2010: 309). Interestingly, both Knapper and Orozco cite Complicite as an example of a similar move from collectivity towards a singular directorial leadership,<sup>6</sup> even though Helen Freshwater has highlighted Complicite’s ongoing self-professed emphasis on collaboration as an essential working methodology