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Who Owns a Gesture? Negotiating Creation and Collaboration in Theatre Arts Practice

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Abstract: This article includes excerpts from interviews from nine theatre artists. Individually and collectively their perspectives help us to understand a range of ways theatre artists navigate issues of group creativity and ownership, from very casual exchanges to more formal practices for feedback and response. By examining these theatre artists' practices, we explore the interactions between collaboration and originality that are increasingly prevalent in the ways we work and create.

Keywords: theatre, collaboration, gestures, originality

Theatre requires collaboration in order to produce a performance for an audience. Such collaboration appears intrinsic to theatrical production, but as performance scholars Noyale Colin and Stefanie Sachsenmaier note, "[a]lthough performative art forms can be seen to have an inherent collaborative aspect, it is only recently that an emphasis has been placed on problematizing processes of co-labouring in the disciplines of the performing arts" (1). Indeed, questions regarding collaboration, or co-laboring, are especially pertinent today due to advances in digital technologies, which bring with them new possibilities for online and dispersed cooperation and developments in collaborative research, design, and education. To name just two examples: Peter N. Miller, in an article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* titled "Is 'Design Thinking' the New Liberal Arts?" posited "radical collaboration" as one of the founding principles of design thinking, and Henry Jenkins and his coauthors of a study for the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation of media education in the twenty-first century identified "collaborative problem solving" as one of the key forms of the emerging "participatory culture." In light of the increasing influence of digital humanities scholarship and other widespread emphases on cooperative working methods, theatre, a necessarily collaborative art form with ancient roots, appears cutting-edge again.

Given many new possibilities for collaboration, through digital media and across time and great distances, the issue of ownership of creative work can be particularly vexing to those engaged in work in many contexts: arts, education, design, scholarship, and others. In this article, we open up theatre artists' collaborative practices in order to investigate how theatre artists navigate issues of originality in collaborative creativity. The ways that ownership and originality and credit and contribution are negotiated within the work of creative artists pose the question: How might the very old theatrical technologies of collaboration inform the emerging forms of collaboration and sharing facilitated by new technologies?

Especially in digital and other collaborative spaces where originality is shared and contested, theatre arts offers models for negotiating creative contributions and credit. Many people participate on any given piece of theatre—from the playwright to the director to designers to stage hands to performers—making theatre arts practices important sites for examining the many and various forms of negotiation within creative, collaborative processes. While there are many ways of making theatre—from more conventional interpretations of an existing play script to devised theatre practices, in which the script is collaboratively developed by all participants—all theatre relies on creative participants working together through shared processes to produce a production.

We have begun to examine the issues of ownership and originality in shared content and creative practices by interviewing nearly twenty theatre artists about their working methods. The interviews of theatre artists were conducted as part of a larger study of writers and theatre artists that investigated the interplay of originality and collaboration within processes of artistic creation. Most of the interviews were conducted in the theatres, studios, or workspaces of the theatre artist. Interviews were typically an hour to two hours in length and focused on questions

of creative process and collaboration. In particular, the interviews probed whom the artists collaborated with; roles for collaboration/creation; methods for managing collaboration; and conceptions of ownership of the products of collaboration.

This article includes excerpts from interviews from nine of the twenty theatre artists interviewed. Individually and collectively their perspectives help us to understand a range of ways theatre artists navigate issues of group creativity and ownership, from very casual exchanges to more formal practices for feedback and response. By examining these theatre artists' practices, we explore the interactions between collaboration and originality that are increasingly prevalent in the ways we work and create.

Our study builds on work in collective creativity, especially R. Keith Sawyer's study of jazz musicians and improv theatre groups. Sawyer's work contributes three major insights into improvisational creativity and collaborative group work: 1) creativity "cannot always be defined as a property of individuals; creativity can also be a property of groups"; 2) "even individual creativity is influenced by the immediate social and cultural context"; and 3) "creativity is not limited to artists and musicians. Group creativity is also found in everyday life" (25-26). In relation to Sawyer's final tenet, we hope that this article might open further research and insight into theatre-making and its collaborative processes from those who might not regularly work within the theatre.

Our interviews support Sawyer's findings, and deepen our understanding of how creativity might be owned or credited among a group of collaborators and the ways that such credit is negotiated, especially among different roles within collaborative processes. At the heart of our argument is the notation that negotiation of ownership is dynamic and integrated within the process of creation itself, as well as in its products.

Our interviews identified two intertwining sets of issues related to collaboration 1) originality and ownership, and 2) contributions and credit. How theatre artists have responded to these issues offers guidance for practitioners in other domains, especially in new media and digital humanities, in which the ownership of shared or collaboratively developed content is necessarily negotiated as it is developed and disseminated. Confronting these questions is also useful for theatre artists (and here we are especially thinking of emerging artists and current and recent graduates of theatre arts programs) to recognize theatre-making as a way of working that has and can be extended beyond the rehearsal room.

In short, as a way of enriching the discussions of originality and ownership occurring in and across media we turn for insights to arguably the most collaborative art form: theatre. Theatre takes for granted methods of collaboration that frequently must be taught and/or made more explicit in other subject areas. If theatre, as a discipline and as an art, has something to offer new forms of creation, be these "design thinking" or the increasingly dispersed participatory affiliations of media culture and digital humanities, it is inherently connected to collaborative ways of working. One of the enduring questions of collaboration—and one theatre has provided a laboratory for centuries—is that of ownership of the product of collaboration.

Originality and Ownership

In theatre, it is not possible for any one person to own the final product as it is presented on the stage. This is due in part, of course, to the fact that many people work to create a production. In addition, that creation occurs anew in real time throughout the process of developing the piece and in its presentation to an audience. The production might be recorded and someone might own that recording, but it is not the play itself—it should be noted that Actors' Equity, the union that represents stage performers, strictly limits the recording of performances for this very reason. In many ways, various artists "own" pieces of the whole, even if many of these pieces are intangible or inseparable from the whole. For instance, without a recording, no one can own an actor's performance except the actor, who literally embodies the performance.

That said, there is one aspect of theatre that is very clearly owned and copyrighted: the play script. One of our interviewees, Meron Langsner, a playwright and stage combat coordinator offers a unique perspective on the ways that ownership and originality can be negotiated in the theatrical process. As a playwright, Langsner is very clear: "[if] you wrote it you own it." Indeed, copyright law supports this reading and has led to a number of high profile cases in the past where authors and their representatives have challenged the interpretation of their scripts—to name two: Joanne Akalitis' 1984 *Endgame* at the American Repertory Theatre was challenged by Samuel Beckett, and the Wooster Group has frequently pushed the limits of the nature of the text and legal understandings of ownership. While the law is relatively clear on this matter, issues persist beyond the rule of contracts and copyright. Langsner acknowledges plays are necessarily "influenced by the people you work with. There are rewrites I made because my director suggested them." But as a playwright, the script—the words on the page—are his even if influenced by many, many others. Despite the tradition (and legal standing) that claims the playwright owns the play, the performance requires the original contributions of a large collection of collaborators, all of whom contribute their own original ideas.

Langsner explains how such originality comes to bear on the performance of a play (that he wrote and thus owns) with an example of working with actors: "[t]he thing about theatre as a communal form is that everyone creates—I don't have ownership of an actor's gesture." He explains that in one of his plays, he wrote a recurring interaction between two characters that calls for one of them to perform a gesture for the other "that's an inside joke between the two of them"; however, he does not suggest in the script what exactly the gesture might be. The creation and performance of the gesture is left up to the performer and director to develop something that works for each production. Langsner says: "Each person had to come up with their version of that gesture. They were completely different. I have no ownership of . . . what that gesture would be." Thus, the performer, through their creativity and originality, owns that gesture. But not wholly or permanently: the actor's original movement might be associated with that character even into future productions whether the original actor performs the role or not.

Shane Breaux, a playwright, dramaturg, and performer, describes navigating the tension of ownership and originality that is fundamental to theatre. As a playwright, he maintains: "I would love to [say], 'Do whatever you want with my play'" implying that the creative team that performs

it should be as original as possible in their interpretation. However, he quickly adds: “But . . . please take care of it and don’t change anything!’” Here, Breaux describes the other side of originality and ownership for a playwright, acknowledging the ways that despite his ownership of the script, the original contributions of the production team can have significant impact in shaping or reshaping the final product. This too is part of the dynamic negotiation of ownership.

From the perspective of a performer, Breaux takes a different tack as he describes owning a piece of the production: “with performing, I feel ownership in the sense of I’m proud of my work. Not always, but I recognize my work.” In the work of acting, Breaux thus connects originality and ownership as a sort of artistic ownership. He is invested in the project with his time and energy and is able to see where he is having an effect on the end result, even if he won’t walk away from the experience with something as tangible as a script.

Kate Sidley is a comedy writer based in New York City. She was previously one of the principal owners of Sea Tea Improv, which is a for-profit theatre company based in Hartford, Connecticut. While she was a member, the group focused primarily on improvisational comedy. That is, it did not produce scripts or other tangible products, only performances. In our interview with Sidley, she expressed a sense of financial or corporate ownership “as well as an artistic ownership . . . a sense of ownership of quality.” Despite the commercial nature of the company, like Breaux, Sidley’s sense of ownership was not solely financial even if, as Sidley notes, such investments do have a financial impact. During her time with the company, Sea Tea members were tied to the organization financially while their performance, both onstage and in public, reflected directly on the company. Sidley explains that these arrangements drove many of the members to take on an ethos of encouragement and cooperation. Describing situations that might strain that sense of ownership, Sidley suggests the dual investment in the company pushed members to “just support, support, support” others. She adds “that‘s what we look[ed] for in people, to sort of take ownership of representing something that‘s of the caliber that they want to be a part of, both artistically and also just with a professional air.” This commitment to the group, to the project and product, is a key aspect of collaboration in other realms. It points to a more holistic approach to team building that considers more than just team member skills when beginning a project and then finding ways to sustain that interest throughout. The strength of ownership is affiliated with the strength of connection to a corporate (and collaborative) entity, i.e., a company.

Director Lear deBessonet heads the Public Works initiative of the Public Theater in New York City. As described by the Public Theater’s website, the project "seeks to engage the people of New York by making them creators and not just spectators. Working deeply with partner organizations in all five boroughs, Public Works invites members of diverse communities to participate in workshops, take classes, attend performances at The Public, and, most importantly, to join in the creation of ambitious works of participatory theater" (Public Works).

deBessonet spoke with us about the importance of making room for originality in the collaborative activities, allowing participants to take ownership in the process, especially when that ownership is not tangible or financial. deBessonet looks for these collaborative possibilities

outside of “the climate of professional theater making.” In seeking alternative ways of collaborating, deBessonet suggests that projects that are community based or otherwise self-organized allow participants to experience “the joy of being part of something bigger than themselves or telling a story that is bigger than with them. And with those projects, it’s just very literally, you are part of something bigger than yourself . . . It puts people into this posture of generosity that is so fabulous.” Individuals and groups don’t lose their own identity in this process, rather they are integrated into a larger identity and co-ownership.

Contributions and Credit

Theatre, like many other collaborative endeavors, raises the issue of owning something that cannot be owned. For artists like Langsner, the crux of the issue between ownership and originality can be parsed by the fact that “there’s ownership and there‘s credit, which I think are very different things.” Whereas ownership is often tied to somehow claiming one’s own original contributions, credit is a means to recognize such work.

Especially in the performing arts and in many other ventures with numerous contributors and collaborators (and often little money), the question of ownership is sometimes less important than ensuring that everyone involved receives proper credit for their contributions. While various members of a group or organization might feel ownership over a particular aspect of the production, it is vitally important that they are also credited for their work. Director Richard Maxwell, whose often experimental theatre pieces have been produced around the world, explained in an interview “there is a division of labor . . . That’s one way of working, and that would satisfy the more traditional, theatrical definition of collaboration, but I don‘t know that—if an actor is contributing physically to something, I don’t see how that’s any less important.” Here, even if an actor feels ownership over the physical contribution they are making, is a question of how they might receive credit for such contributions, which can help develop the working process itself.

In speaking with us, Ben Williams, an actor and musician, suggested that the working process can be somewhat competitive, with collaborators trying to get their ideas heard: “It‘s almost like a constant pitch meeting that you might imagine, like, a product . . . people are just constantly giving ideas. And, I think the freedom to do that is a huge part of it . . . because you can‘t use everything at the end of the day.” This certainly points to the sort of investment in the process that some theatre artists discussed in terms of ownership, but it also indicates that something is at stake and something (credit, recognition) can be won. People do want to receive credit for their good ideas and participation. In theatre arts and elsewhere, credit is thus a contested commodity within a group, something that is seemingly at stake in the spaces of creativity and shared work. Even outside the context of theatre-making, explicitly acknowledging these dynamics, as Williams describes, might mitigate and make playful some of the otherwise competitive aspects of collaboration so that participants feel able and are encouraged to contribute. Here one might invoke theatre director and teacher Anne Bogart, who encourages her collaborators to “hold on tightly, let go lightly” (49).

Performer and writer Michelle Farbman suggested in an interview that co-creators should always have opportunities to completely redirect the process of the project: “And I think the best moments are—you’ve proposed something. Here’s your concept and you’ve gotten the people you want to work with and you’ve started working and two weeks later you lose the vision and someone else says: ‘Hey, wait a minute. Don’t you think this would be better?’” In addition to the outward signs of credit—programs, posters, words of thanks—then credit for contributions can also be internal to the group. The credit for the idea might come through simply taking the idea up, embracing it, naming it, using it for the production.

A role that really embodies this idea is that of the dramaturg. Responsible for varying aspects of the production, a dramaturg will work with actors, the director, playwright, and designers in conducting historical and thematic research as well as taking on important roles in audience outreach and community building. Tanya Dean, a dramaturg based in Dublin, Ireland, emphasized to us the pleasure in seeing one’s work in the end product, even if very subtly:

> at the end of the day . . . I don‘t sign my name to anything. The playwright is the one who is putting their ideas up on stage, the director is the one who said, “This my interpretation, and I will take all the accolades or all the blame, depending on if that interpretation works.” The actors are on stage with nowhere to hide, literally . . . I take great pride in doing the work. I like to think I’m an extremely valuable part of that collaboration, but at the end of the day, I can‘t point to one thing and say, “That’s mine. Give me credit for it” . . . I take pleasure in seeing myself on the genetic level.

Especially in collaborative, creative arrangements, many participants will affect the production in an understated way or at the “genetic level.” In working together, different ideas will necessarily compete and blend and splinter as they connect with each other. As many theatre artists know and as many working in other creative and collaborative areas know as well, a major aspect of ensuring participants receive credit for their contributions is simply making sure that participants *feel* that they are receiving credit.

For some of the artists we interviewed, credit may even be extended to those who come to see the work. New York-based performer Maximilian Balduzzi explains how he views the audience as a contributor to the production: “It’s a little bit like a cliché but I believe that once I’ve done the work and you come to see the work that something of the work is yours. Or . . . let’s say that the work is not just mine anymore.” It is noteworthy that what feels clichéd to theatre artists is actually the basis for much of the digital sharing economy as well as the functioning of social media—things must be shared in order to continue to exist. Balduzzi illustrates this concept with his own experience as an audience member where he enjoyed the work, but more importantly felt invited into the performance. The performance gave him things to think about, but in its inclusion of him as an audience member, allowed for his input or contribution: “But I also gave them something and they, maybe unconsciously, will carry that with them. In the next performance or in the next hour.” Something in this performance event was effective at fostering an atmosphere of creation, where Balduzzi, as a member of the audience, felt as if his presence was contributing to it in some meaningful way. So, while contributions can certainly be very

explicit for some roles, they might also be quite subtle. Credit is given when the contributions of individuals are highlighted and elevated. And in a truly collaborative process, this will happen throughout the creation process, as well as in the presentation of the final product—and even, as a number of our interview subject stated, include the final collaborator: i.e., the audience. Indeed, theatre has sustained itself for an incredibly long time rewarding originality with some form of credit for their original contributions.

Conclusion

As a centuries-old form that is intrinsically collaborative, theatre should offer other areas of research and study a useful example of how many ideas and efforts are not only assembled and distributed, but shared and co-owned. If theatre artists like Meron Langsner ask the question (one of many) "who owns a gesture?"—then creators and scholars in other domains (education, design, civic engagement, and others) might ask themselves similar questions. The data from our interviews with theatre artists suggest that the practices of theatre artists encourage us to avoid thinking of these categories as fixed and instead to continually search for ways that originality, ownership, contributions, and credit are negotiated and integrated within the creative processes themselves, as well as within their products.

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