

The Last Dog of War

A History of the Process of Development

First Stage - Experimentation

The Improvised Show.

In April 2006, Linda Griffiths resolved to attend the reunion with her father. She also resolved to do an unrehearsed, impromptu show about the trip in front of an audience – right off the plane. It was to be a show but also an experiment in process, inspired by her improvisational roots. The fine tuning of the idea happened during a kitchen conversation with Daniel MacIvor. He volunteered to be there on the day of the show, to help in whatever way possible. MacIvor was dubbed a ‘buddy’, which in *Duchess Productions* speak is both/neither director/dramaturge. As the substance of the show would happen on the trip, there would be nothing written down and no rehearsal.

The use of improvisation in the history of Duchess Productions is strong. From years of doing collective creations with Paul Thompson, a way of working has been developed inspired by that training. The plays *Duchess* develops have been created through a combination of traditional methods of playwrighting and different versions of impromptu process. After writing *Age of Arousal* with a conventional writer’s process, the challenge was to do something immediate, raw and unwriterly. A piece that relied on the primal relationship between actor and audience.

The Night of the Impromptu

After leaving my father and the relatives in Rotherham, I had two days in Manchester before I had to leave for Toronto. I paced a small hotel room, thinking about the show and creating sections, including a basic order. I read war stories on the plane back. I’d asked Daniel MacIvor to meet me at the theatre, and between us we knocked together a more precise running order. It was amazing how MacIvor worked as a director given he knew absolutely nothing about the...whatever it was. I showed him my list of headings – he would say ‘what’s that’? I’d say, “that’s the story of how we almost didn’t go to the reunion.” Then he’d say, “how long will it take?” I’d say, “about twenty minutes, maybe more.” We went through the whole thing that way, some headings I allotted ten minutes, some five. Daniel added up the time. I had a clock on stage so I would have an idea where I was. There was a dream near the beginning. MacIvor said, ‘Well, if there’s a dream and the beginning, maybe it should be at the end too.’ Seemed to make sense, so the dream went at the end as well, even though I’d never spoken the dream and he’d never heard it. That’s how the structuring went. We even had several sound cues and a couple of lighting cues. I gave the line I thought might be the ending and went home to have a nap.

The Mainspace of Passe Muraile was full. I came on with a suitcase as if I'd just got off the plane, which I basically had. I explained what I was doing at the beginning, and started. I felt light and free, so full of the experience, dying to tell them, dying to be before an audience. It was so great when they laughed. I explained that this was uncensored, saying in a way that it was a betrayal and yet by the end I knew there was no betrayal. By the end I knew my father was the hero of the tale. I told the story of the reunion, but also of my secret feelings of war. A girl growing up on war stories, wanting her father to see that she understands. After announcing the show would take an hour and a half, I never looked at the clock once. Some things I couldn't do as well as I wanted, like the details of a bomber mission, so I just moved on. There was spontaneous applause at what should have been the end - the audience teaches us. How would I have known except for them? It was terrifying but so much fun, at the end as I bowed, I just laughed. What a ride, what a wild ride.

Irritatingly, MacIvor kept saying after the show, "Now comes the hard part."

The first stage was funded by Nightswimming through an OAC Creator's Reserve Grant.

Second Stage – Exploration:

An intense week's workshop with Daniel MacIvor,

The improvised show had been a success – but how to proceed? It was important not to betray the impulse of the process, but more work had to be done. Did it get pinned down, 'dramaturged' and turned into a script? The answer seemed to be yes and no. Inevitably something more formed would occur, but when? Linda and Daniel discussed how to maintain, and continue to learn from the impromptu spirit of the piece.

The process of the workshop was experiential, active. Linda improvising, bringing in new material and some written work. Daniel watching, video taping, shaping and advising. Some of the rehearsals were video-taped and transcribed. New material included a bomb run with Griffiths playing the Lancaster, the bombs, the crew and the populace below.

This continued to be an experiment in process. The script was never learned as a written text, but was treated as a story that might change each time it was done. At the end of this workshop, there was small presentation attended by Daniel Brooks, Jackie Buroughs, Clare Coulter, Layne Coleman, emerging playwright Michelle D'Allessandro, and three student volunteers at TPM. It went well.

The script was then re-written, incorporating the new material, using the taped presentation as a basis.

Stage Three: Presentations

ATP and TPM

Last Dog had to be tried out in front of more audiences. Terrifying as it was, it still felt right to learn the script in a general way, without strict memorization, but more with a sense of familiarity. Last Dog was still in a process that process was about impulse and immediacy. Layne Coleman came in as Buddy at this stage, rehearsing the show with Linda and helping to keep it's improvised feel.

Griffiths performed Last Dog as part of ATPs Blitz Weekend 2007. Theatre junkies packed the Big Secret Theatre and were an enthusiastic audience. Again the piece was taped and the script worked on after the performance. The second performance was in May 2007, as a benefit for Theatre Passe Muraille. Again the piece changed, with the addition of bits of new material and some on-the spot re-arranging. The audience was again enthusiastic.

This stage was funded by Factory Theatre, through an OAC Creator's Reserve Grant.

Stage four: OAC Workshop Honing and Rehearsing

Another workshop and a big transition. Daniel MacIvor making the transition from Buddy to Director. From Buddy to dramaturge. Linda making the transition from informal improviser to precise performer. The script making a transition. How written in stone should the script be? The goal was to take the show, which at this point was running slightly over an hour and half, down to seventy five minutes. Designers were brought in to develop a touring production. Kim Purtell on lights, Michael Laird on sound. This meant more precision. At some point in the this process, some of the joy was lost. The performance still worked, but the edge of performance immediacy that had been the keynote of the previous experience just wasn't there. This meant that there must be leeway within precision. Daniel and Linda's collaboration had to include a melding of their processes to make it work. By the last of four performances at Bread and Circus in Kensington Market, the joy was returning, and the script was seventy five minutes, give or take a couple of minutes of negotiated on-the-spot improv.

This stage was funded by the OAC and Fourth Line Theatre came in with an OAC Creator's Reserve Grant.

Opening the Show

After a preview performance at PAL, *The Last Dog of War* opened at Festival Antigonish in July, 2009. The show 'opened' but the critics were on vacation. Audiences were very enthusiastic and a range of ages attended. Some veterans, some children of veterans, some students, some people who just wanted to see a show..

The full opening came in November, 2009 in Winnipeg at Theatre Projects Manitoba. The Last Dog of War had a ten day run at the Costume Museum in the Exchange District. Critics were enthusiastic. The show is now on the road.

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