

DEVISING AND COLLECTIVE  
ORGANIZATION IN THE  
SAN FRANCISCO MIME TROUPE'S  
HISTORY

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A Thesis  
presented to  
the Faculty of the Graduate School  
at the University of Missouri-Columbia

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

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by  
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MAY 2015

The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the thesis entitled

DEVISING AND COLLECTIVE ORGANIZATION  
IN THE SAN FRANCISCO MIME TROUPE'S HISTORY

presented by Shannon Palmer,

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to first acknowledge Dr. Cat Gleason, my advisor and thesis committee chair, for all of the guidance and expertise that she contributed to this project, and her help during my time at Mizzou. I would also like to acknowledge the rest of my committee members, Dr. Cheryl Black and Dr. Rachel Harper, for their insights and comments on this thesis.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

The world of theatrical creation is a vast, diverse landscape featuring many departures from the traditional structure of text-to-performance. One of these practices, known today as “devising” in most parts of the world, involves putting the performer at the center of the creative process (rather than the written text, as in traditional theatre production), due perhaps to artistic, political, or community outreach goals. This particular kind of theatrical creation has become increasingly popular throughout the United States, from professional companies to educational theatre groups alike. Groups such as Moises Kaufman’s Tectonic Theatre Project, the Lookingglass Theatre Company (with playwright Mary Zimmerman), Fringe Benefits (with Norma Bowles), SITI Company (with Anne Bogart), and many more physical theatre companies, University theatre groups, and unnamed small theatres and schools have used devising techniques to create new theatre.<sup>1</sup> Devising as a theatrical practice has an interesting and complicated history in the United States. From early beginnings as a way to socialize immigrants and lower-class workers, and inspired by physically-based theatrical methods and collective company practices in Europe, devising has evolved into an artistic process with as many methods and purposes as there are companies that practice it. However, much of the literature on devising has been generated by British scholars who analyze the work of British companies, or British scholars who analyze the work of companies in other countries as though they all have followed the same trajectory as companies in Britain. There are subtle differences in development between devising in the United Kingdom and

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<sup>1</sup> Many of these are referenced in the 2005 *Theatre Topics* special issue – see Works Cited for details.

the United States, and those developmental differences have led to a contrast in cultural significance, creative process, and purpose in devising and collective creation in each country. Though there are companies and practitioners who have discussed their own work, the available studies conducted by researchers on devising groups in the United States, such as the San Francisco Mime Troupe, have focused on their political ideology, rather than their integration or interpretation of devising practice.<sup>2</sup> In order to trace the evolution of devising practice in a company examined primarily for its politics, I will explore the San Francisco Mime Troupe's history and creative development as a particular example within the context of American devising practice. I will examine where devising practices have fit into the artistic and organizational landscape of one company in the United States since the popularization of devising techniques in the 1960s.

In order to avoid confusion, it is necessary to define the terms that I will use within this thesis. Often in works on devising and the companies that use the practice, the terms “devising” and “collective creation” have been used interchangeably to describe actor-generated (or actor-centered) work created or developed through rehearsal. The San Francisco Mime Troupe (SFMT) calls itself a “collective,” and its work has been referred to as collective creation in the past. However, in *Devising Performance*, Deirdre Heddon and Jane Milling describe subtle differences between the two terms, which I find useful in order to make a distinction between them. These differences come from the reason that the particular group uses devising techniques – whether for artistic or ideological purposes (Heddon 4). Therefore, “collective creation” (which is a term used most often in

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<sup>2</sup> See Arthur Sainer's *The New Radical Theatre Notebook*, Mark Weinberg's *Challenging the Hierarchy*, and the *Theatre Topics* 2005 special issue on devising.

the United States to categorize the type of work described here)<sup>3</sup> can be defined as the *ideology* of an egalitarian creative process wherein all participants contribute with equal voices. This promotes the more political aspects of the practice, and because the SFMT has always had a political leaning and agenda, this term is typically applied to their group and their work. However, throughout the years, the SFMT's creative practices have evolved so that they are not necessarily as egalitarian in their decision-making from one time in their existence to the next. Therefore, the term "devising" can be applied to their work more accurately; the term has a broader definition of a creative process, typically referring to a group that works together to create performances.<sup>4</sup> It is usually understood that the performance works begin without a clear written text, and the performance is shaped by the particular members within the group, though there are as many specific definitions of devising as there are companies that use the practice. Here I will explore the practices of the Mime Troupe under the definition of "devising" listed here, noting that along the way their structure, and at times politics, have influenced how they create their performance work.

During the 1960s in the United States, radical theatre groups began to examine their hierarchical practices with a critical eye. Artistic, political, and ideological principles all came into play for these groups to choose to use actor-driven creation methods. In some cases, as with the SFMT, this decision came as part of an evolution, slowly developing from a place of both practice and politics. The San Francisco Mime Troupe began as the R.G. Davis Mime Troupe in 1959 as part of the San Francisco

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<sup>3</sup> This is especially true before the book *Devising Theatre: A Practical and Theoretical Handbook* by Alison Oddey, published in the UK in 1994, became popular in the US.

<sup>4</sup> Taken as its broadest definition, "devising" can include anything from a completely egalitarian, group-run process to a traditional, hierarchical, text-based theatre production. Typically, however, it focuses on theatre that begins without a written text.

Actors' Workshop. Under the leadership of Davis, whose training with Etienne Decroux in corporeal mime led to the creation of the silent performance troupe, they first experimented with written works, like Samuel Beckett's *Act Without Words II*. The Troupe later included *commedia dell'arte* techniques and practices, and produced plays like Moliere's *Tartuffe* (Davis 20-22). One of their most important early developments that continued throughout their history was the addition of free, *commedia*-based park performances. These began as political protest, especially since they could not always gain permits to perform and were often arrested or given citations for these performances. Eventually, they began to create their own works, writing and improvising them together as a group, until the loosely organized collective structure became too difficult to navigate for Davis and he left. After this, the Troupe experienced an artistic and organizational upheaval, and eventually settled on a more regulated collective structure, with central figures as writers and coordinators, but with a more egalitarian approach to artistic input ("History"). Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, under the artistic leadership of Joan Holden with a supporting collective, the Troupe continued to produce politically evocative theatre, building a reputation that would lead to its special Tony Award in 1987. During the early 1990s, sources of government funding became less available to groups like the SFMT, and so they reduced their performance and touring schedule to the single summer show in the park and began to look for private funding. They also inherited a youth theatre program, which they continued to run throughout the 1990s and 2000s. Throughout periods of prosperity and upheaval, the performances in the park have remained a central staple and defining feature of the work the Mime Troupe has done.



Due to the widespread and increasing popularity of devising theatrical work in the United States, it is useful to examine the evolving practices of a company that has longevity, like the San Francisco Mime Troupe. The San Francisco Mime Troupe has consistently produced work from their inception in 1959, and the Troupe still uses devising practices to create their work today (“Company”). With the Troupe’s long history, the environment in which the company was created has changed, therefore making it necessary for the Troupe to evolve. This evolution is what interests me in the history of the SFMT, and there is something other theatre groups that devise can learn from it. Throughout its life, the company had to find a way to bring in new audiences or reinvigorate the old, and work within changing political, economic, and artistic landscapes. However, this long history also poses a challenge to the focus and brevity of a thesis project. In order to focus my research, I will examine the following aspects of the company’s creative process: 1) how did the Troupe’s leadership function, and how did the Troupe’s structure influence their creative methods? 2) what has been said publicly about the Troupe’s creative practices for each production, and how can that be interpreted within the framework of devising theory to define their devising work? and 3) how was the final product received by reviewers for its artistic and political merit?

I will apply these questions to the productions of *A Minstrel Show, or Civil Rights in a Cracker Barrel* (1965), *Ripped van Winkle* (1988), and *Ripple Effect* (2014). I have chosen these shows in particular because of their significance in the Troupe’s history. *Minstrel Show* was the performance that put them on the map on a national scale; they toured with the show and it created buzz about the work that they were doing. *Ripped van Winkle* was spearheaded by Joan Holden, a prominent figure in the Troupe’s history

following the departure of Davis, and was developed during the time period they earned a special Tony Award for Excellence in Regional Theatre in 1987 (“About Us”). Finally, I have chosen *Ripple Effect* because it is the most current performance from the troupe at the time of writing, and demonstrates their current place in the evolution of the company.

In order to examine specific historical moments within the Mime Troupe’s history, I will look at the questions for each narrow timeframe as its own, very specific era through historical analysis. For this particular study, I have chosen to analyze the Mime Troupe’s evolution using primarily public documents, seeking to understand what the Troupe has presented to the public, and how that provides a window into their work and structure. During their past, the SFMT has alternatively been open and secretive with the public about the way they create their performances. Aside from R.G. Davis’ own memoir of his tenure with the Troupe, there have not been any comprehensive histories written by Troupe members to provide this glimpse. Even in private communications provided to authors of more recent works on the Troupe, such as Susan V. Mason’s *The San Francisco Mime Troupe Reader*, the emphasis has continued to be on the political work of the Troupe. Using historical analysis, I will examine the documents the Troupe has provided publicly in order to gain an understanding of what parts of their process were most important. I will then apply the history and theory of devising as provided through survey books such as Alison Oddey’s *Devising Theatre* and Heddon and Milling’s more recent *Devising Performance*, concentrating on the Troupe’s practice over their politics. This will help demonstrate the San Francisco Mime Troupe’s place in the development of devising history and practice within the United States, and illustrate how a single company can grow and adapt to a changing world.

I have organized my chapters along the timeline of the San Francisco Mime Troupe, answering my three questions for each specific moment within the history of the Troupe. Chapter One addresses the earliest days of the Troupe, when they practiced under the name R.G. Davis Mime Troupe, before they had become a collective by name. For this chapter, I will analyze historical documents surrounding the creation and performances of *Minstrel Show*. Their use of *commedia dell'arte* and traditional mime are discussed here. In Chapter Two, I examine the techniques they used after Davis left the group and they officially became a “collective.” For this chapter, I will look at the creation and performance of *Ripped van Winkle*, which became one of their most popular and enduring shows. This is where their techniques begin to more closely resemble devising practice as we know it today. Finally, Chapter Three examines *Ripple Effect*, statements and descriptions by the Troupe surrounding it, and reviews of the show in order to see the most recent step in their evolution of practice.

I will focus solely on the type of devising and performance that the San Francisco Mime Troupe utilizes, recognizing that there are many different approaches and artistic fields that use devising or devising-like practices. For example, the worlds of dance and physical theatre utilize practices that can be, and have been, defined as devising, but they are not the focus of this project. I also will not include the specific politics of the Troupe itself, even though it is a highly political company. Prominent works on the company, including the *Reader*<sup>5</sup> and Claudia Orenstein’s *Festive Revolutions: the Politics of Popular Theatre and the San Francisco Mime Troupe*, explore the political background and impact of the Troupe’s shows. By examining their devising practices independently

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<sup>5</sup> The *Reader*, written by historian Susan Vaneta Mason (who followed the Troupe’s history for thirty years), is the most comprehensive historical and analytical source available at this time. The book also contains a number of the Troupe’s scripts as well.

from their political goals,<sup>6</sup> a clearer picture of how their practices have evolved to sustain their existence becomes evident.

As for the literature on the San Francisco Mime Troupe, useful resources include R.G. Davis's book on the founding and early work of the Troupe, *The San Francisco Mime Troupe: The First Ten Years*, and Susan Mason's *The San Francisco Mime Troupe Reader*, which contains scripts and criticism on the company. The company's website, entitled *The San Francisco Mime Troupe* also has a wealth of information on their history, their philosophy, and their work, told through the words of the company itself. For the first chapter, I primarily examined R.G. Davis's book, *The San Francisco Mime Troupe: The First Ten Years*, published in 1975. In addition to Davis's book, I have examined the foundation for some of the practices used in their early period in Etienne Decroux's *Notes on Mime*, and explanations of *commedia dell'arte* practices that influenced the creative philosophy of the group. Since the Troupe's tour of *A Minstrel Show* popularized the Troupe and its style of performance, scholarship from the early 1970s also began analyzing their rehearsal and performance techniques, in addition to more contemporary scholarship like Susan Mason's *The San Francisco Mime Troupe Reader*, which contains essays on the development of the Troupe and the scripts for each time period I have explored. In addition, articles have been published by current and former troupe members, including Joan Holden, which have provided valuable insight into the inner workings of the Troupe through the years. Heddon and Milling's book *Devising Performance* contains a brief exploration of the evolution of the Troupe's structure, and Orenstein's *Festive Revolutions* focuses on the Troupe's use of popular

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<sup>6</sup> As independently as possible; for the SFMT, art and politics are sometimes intertwined in a way that makes it impossible to distinguish between them. There are times when it is necessary to discuss both.

theatre forms in relation to their political leanings. Among other sources available are reviews of SFMT shows, interviews with Troupe members, and current Facebook and Twitter accounts that provide updates on their work and insights into their process. Together, these resources show the building of a practical foundation out of which a use of devising practices was a natural progression.

In addition to work on the SFMT, the following sources are useful in creating a definition and overall impression of devising practice. Mark Weinberg's *Challenging the Hierarchy: Collective Theatre in the United States*, published in 1992, addresses the history of companies that were formed in order to create theatre without the typical hierarchy of top-down approaches to theatre-making. These groups challenged the idea that theatre must be made with a single authority in charge of the production, in order to ensure artistic unity. The 2005 *Theatre Topics* special issue on devising, including articles by Norma Bowles, Crystal Brian, and Mary Zimmerman (among others), covers a wide variety of devising practitioners and philosophies. Arthur Sainer's *The New Radical Theatre Notebook* and the two volumes *History of Collective Creation* and *Collective Creation in Contemporary Performance* edited by Kathryn Syssoyeva and Scott Proudfit chronicle the history of selected companies that called themselves "collectives" both in the United States and abroad. However, since the term "devising" was not introduced in the United States until the 1990s from the United Kingdom, some of the companies and their techniques described in these books fall under the heading of "devising" as well.

The books that concentrate on devising practice and definitions are, primarily, Alison Oddey's *Devising Theatre: A Practical and Theoretical Handbook*, published in 1994 and arguably introducing the term "devising" to a US audience, and Deirdre

Heddon and Jane Milling's *Devising Performance*, published in 2006. The length of time between the publication dates of these two books means that the initial principles laid down by Oddey in 1994 are then followed up by more research into companies that use them in the Heddon/Milling 2006 volume. Heddon and Milling also describe the subtle distinctions between devising and collective creation, which I have applied here to mean a difference between practice and ideology. Many companies make this distinction without directly applying the terms or definitions, but simply by describing how they work. For example, Mary Zimmerman devises, but does not collectively create, because while she is influenced by the work in rehearsal and starts without much of a written text, she is credited as the author of her pieces, which she primarily writes and distributes as any hierarchical playwright would (Zimmerman 25-35). In order to understand the SFMT's evolution and place within devising history, I will utilize definitions, histories, and theories put forward by the works listed here within the context of the SFMT's history and practice.

So, how can we trace the unique evolution of devising in the United States? While that is an enormous question that cannot hope to be answered here, I posit that the San Francisco Mime Troupe is an important company in the landscape of devising within the United States, and therefore, while not representative of the country's collective companies as a whole, it is useful to the discussion. The ability of a company to survive as long as the Mime Troupe has, while maintaining their collective ideals, is something that should be studied and possibly applied to companies of its kind across the nation.

## Chapter 2: *A Minstrel Show, or Civil Rights in a Cracker Barrel*

The early years of the Mime Troupe were marked by three things: Davis' leadership, an urge to develop radical theatre, and an explosion in recognition and popularity across the nation with their tours of *A Minstrel Show, or Civil Rights in a Cracker Barrel*. The Troupe during this time has been described as “structured hierarchically,” with experimentation in roles for specific pieces, and from 1959-1969<sup>7</sup> was led almost exclusively in artistic decisions by Davis (Mason 15). In fact, most of the information on the artistic and theatrical work of the company during this period comes from Davis' book *The First Ten Years*. This is the most detailed account available of the creation of the Mime Troupe's first original performance *A Minstrel Show*.

As I have mentioned, Davis was a strong central leader from 1959 to his departure in 1970. This central leadership makes sense in the Troupe's history, since Davis was the founder and visionary behind the Troupe's artistic and political mission. According to Susan V. Mason, “Although Davis left the company in 1970, members from the first ten years speak about his role with a kind of reverence, and Nancy Scott commented that Davis cast a long shadow” (23). The mythos that sprang up around Davis' leadership makes a well-rounded view of this time period difficult to decipher (since most members have only spoken positively about the initial years of the Troupe), it clearly shows the lasting impact his leadership had on the Troupe and its members.

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<sup>7</sup> Though Davis' actual date of departure was in 1970, he took an extended leave of absence beginning in 1969, and so was not actively participating in the Troupe from that time.

In 1958, Davis returned to the United States from “a six-month Fulbright studying with mime artist Etienne Decroux in Paris” (Mason 10). He did not go to the center of theatre in the United States, New York, but was attracted to the more “European” atmosphere of San Francisco. Davis said:

When I left Paris and returned to the United States I feared the big buildings, the noise and the terror of American commerce: landing in New York was like a slap in the head. I had shed some Americanisms that I wanted to keep shed so I quickly left for the only ‘French’ town in the whole territory: Frisco (*First Ten Years* 15).

This training in classical French mime at Decroux’s studio in Paris became the foundation on which Davis built his Mime Troupe. Decroux’s emphasis on the body and creation of character and emotion through physical expression led to the actors’ work developing character and improvising on an individual and group level to create performances. In fact, Decroux’s teachings promoted the actor as the center of theatrical art; actors were agents in their own artistic realm and the physical trappings of theatre (set, elaborate costumes, even written text) merely inhibited the actor from creating theatrical art (Decroux 27). The focus on the actor was important to Davis and the development of the Mime Troupe. After several performances using traditional mime techniques, the Troupe separated from the Actors Workshop to pursue its own identity as the San Francisco Mime Troupe beyond the Actors Workshop. They took with them their initial impulse of the actor to create for him- or herself, and began to also incorporate principles of *commedia dell’arte*, which they would continue to develop throughout their existence. It was around this time that they began performing their free *commedia* pieces in parks, embracing the “performer/actor” principles of *commedia*, and therefore establishing the idea of actor-driven creation as part of the spirit of the company. They



also re-wrote other scenarios and plays into *commedia*-style performances, which represents an early attempt to collectively create artistic work as a group (though Davis was still very much the “author” in these situations) (31). These performance and rehearsal styles, again, emphasize an individual actor’s ability to create, and the Troupe worked together to make performances under the guidance of Davis, but with individual contributions that would eventually lead to a more egalitarian company structure. In his book Davis said of this early period: “In rejecting the bourgeois theatre, little theatre, regional theatre and the communist old left, we lifted ourselves out of the stagnation of the fifties” (28). This movement against the so-called “stagnation” of culture and politics would carry the Troupe through the middle ‘60s and into national recognition. Their work was referred to as “guerilla theatre” by Davis in 1965, inspired by Che Guevara’s definition of guerilla warfare (“Guerilla Theatre” 130). This term continued to be used by Davis to describe the Troupe’s early work that involved performing in public, often against the express wishes and orders of local officials. This definition applied expressly to the earliest work of the Troupe, though the term would later be applied to other companies that employed other methods (Schechner 163).

In 1964, in the midst of the civil rights movement, and the same year Congress passed a Civil Rights Act, Davis wanted to do a play that would address racism, initially wanting to produce *The Blacks* by Jean Genet (*First Ten Years* 49). Until this point, the Troupe had been performing either strictly traditional mime performances that were largely improvised, or previously published scripts that they approached with a *commedia dell’arte* style. This included the use of stock characters, masks, and improvised scenes around *lazzi*, or comic gags. Actors in *commedia* were expected to know their character

types well enough to be able to create their own movement and dialogue within a scene (Rudlin 13-16). This process would become integral to the way the SFMT created its performances, and the traditional *commedia* techniques would later be incorporated into the development of original, scripted theatrical pieces by the Troupe. . The politically charged air surrounding the issue attracted the Troupe, but they rejected Genet's script and gravitated toward the idea of creating a new, original work along the lines of the work that had established the Troupe, in mime and *commedia*. According to Davis' *The First Ten Years*, "someone" came up with the idea to do a minstrel show. Davis asserted that he did not necessarily come up with the original idea, but oversaw the creation and had control of the audition process (49-50).

The Troupe set out to create a show with political and social commentary on race in the United States during the 1960s through the format of a traditional minstrel show (acknowledged by the Troupe and society as a racist depiction of African Americans) (Orenstein 92). At the time of auditions it was unclear to the writers and actors how much of the traditional format and how much new material would be incorporated, and so developed through the process of creating the show. Therefore, beginning without a script, the devised nature of the show was set through auditions. Credit for the writing has been given to Davis and Saul Landau, who worked closely on the project. Due to the lack of a script, or even an outline of a script, Davis recounts the audition process as difficult (50). In order to cast a show that did not yet exist, Davis looked for chemistry and presence among its actors, and a willingness to go to the disturbing and sometimes appalling lengths that the show would eventually reach. The script was not written before auditions, so the potential cast members would improvise scenes together, with Davis

leading. As they explored the subject matter, it became plain that there were very few actors that were willing to perform the kinds of roles and material that Davis had in mind. This was particularly true for actors of color. According to Davis, it took time to find African-American actors that were willing to be part of it. It was important that the ensemble include black and white actors, all acting in the “mask” of blackface, in order to discomfit the audience. “The combination of both blacks and whites in blackface also emphasized the fact that the stereotype was essentially a mask that anyone could wear” (Orenstein 111-112). Some of the play itself came out of the improvisation done in auditions. Much of what Davis and Landau wrote and performed depended greatly upon the actors that they cast. The script was written for the specific actors in the cast, based on their strengths and ideas. This actor-centered writing technique, writing parts specifically for the cast and developing ideas based on actor contribution, is similar to the process used by Mary Zimmerman in developing her devised projects with Lookingglass Theatre Company in Chicago during the 1990s. She calls this the “archaeology of performance,” comparing the shaping and discovery of the piece to an archaeological dig, and the discoveries contained therein (Zimmerman 25). By investing in the actors’ contributions to the piece, Davis and the Mime Troupe used devising techniques to create their performance.

In *Devising Performance*, Heddon and Milling divide companies that practice devising into six categories based on the initial reasons for their formation (with overlap). The earliest groups chronologically also tend to align ideologically (that is, they set out to create politically motivated theatre to instigate social change), and are mostly discussed in the first chapter “Devising and Acting,” where the work of these groups is described as

initially setting out to explore new acting techniques and a focus on the actor in the theatrical creation process. The SFMT is among the groups listed, due to their emphasis on actor exploration and “the performer’s relationship with the audience” (29). According to Heddon and Milling, groups that fall under the umbrella of “acting and devising” share some of the same creative attributes, including the use of improvisation and popular theatre, including *commedia dell’arte*. Other American performance groups cited in this chapter include the Open Theatre, Living Theatre, and The Performance Group (29). Many of these groups began with work similar to the Mime Troupe’s, including workshops presented to the public, and exploration of stock characters and archetypes from early improvised theatrical forms like *commedia dell’arte* and improv performance itself(43). The Mime Troupe of the 1960s fits into the category of devising and acting because that is where it began: as a way for actors to explore ways to express themselves and find ways to interact with their audiences beyond the norm. By taking traditional mime and *commedia* and using it to break the mold of traditional performance, the SFMT has been placed into this category repeatedly by devising researchers.

After auditions, the show was developed over a period of nine months. Davis, Landau, and the cast borrowed from texts of actual minstrel acts, and created new scenes that provided commentary on the social and political critique of racist attitudes the Troupe was trying to make. Much of the material was taken from old minstrel shows, repurposed or lifted straight from minstrel texts. Over the course of the weeks of the initial tour, the show always followed the same format, though there was sometimes different material brought in by new actors who replaced those who dropped out of the project along the way. While Davis and Landau oversaw the writing and eventually

decided what was included and what was excluded, the actors themselves contributed much to the process through improvisation and *commedia*-style rehearsals. According to Davis, *Minstrel Show* utilized *commedia* aspects, including: stock/stereotypical characters, masks (the use of black face), and the minstrel show format itself, which borrowed from *commedia* traditions. By using playful *commedia* techniques and applying them to a serious subject, the actors involved in the show were able to create together with a sense of humor even when addressing loaded and hurtful topics. The rehearsals were intense; the Troupe needed to develop scenes that would be effective in provoking the audience, creating a reaction to draw attention and inspire passion for the civil rights cause. Politically, the topic was necessary; personally, the actors involved were facing personal issues in a space that had to be made safe (*First Ten Years* 50). In the end, the show was coordinated and written primarily by Davis, with credit also going to Landau. Through the nine month rehearsal process, experimentation and improvisation was welcomed, but eventually the script was settled and they moved into performances.

Unlike later Mime Troupe performances, *Minstrel Show* was performed inside, in a performance hall, and in other indoor venues while *Minstrel Show* was on tour. This set up a different kind of performance than some of the *commedia* performances that the Troupe had risked arrest to create outside. According to accounts, Davis would conclude the evening's performance with, "We are doing inside what protest groups are doing outside" ("The Minstrel Show"). The show opened with a typical minstrel exchange, with the Interlocutor asking questions of three Minstrel characters in blackface to deliver punchlines to the audience. These characters also perform commentary on their own situation, demonstrating an extra layer of awareness that adds reflexivity to the piece not

necessarily present in traditional minstrel performances. The actors go on to portray scenes from different eras in history, interspersing them with more minstrel scenes and contemporary commentary. Altogether, the show is a collection of scenes that confront the audience with stereotypes from around the world, taken to extremes in an attempt to shock the audience into examining their own prejudices. The Troupe intended the show to be shocking, and went out of its way to present offensive language and images onstage. For example, the script not only uses racist images and words for African-Americans, but also does the same with Vietnamese soldiers. The most controversial scene in the play, described as the “Chick and Stud” scene, showed a sexual encounter between a black man and a white woman. Beyond the shock factor of fully clothed actors depicting a graphic sex scene, however, this also scene attempts to make commentary on the taboo, interracial relationship it depicted. The show contains scenes interspersed between the minstrel exchanges that depict issues contemporary to the performance, such as a scene in which one of the minstrels is killed by a white police officer. They then discuss whether or not the killing was justified.<sup>8</sup>

As a whole, the script is a collection of images, words, and actions meant to make the Troupe’s audience uncomfortable. As I mentioned before, the goal of the Troupe was to use this unsettling medium to force the audiences to confront their own racism, and the racism in their society. The show used a distancing effect, a Brechtian technique wherein the audience is not allowed to invest in or identify with the characters onstage, in order to make sure that their audiences did not just come to “enjoy” a show. By keeping the audience uncomfortable by not letting them settle into a scene without a

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<sup>8</sup> The script for the show is available in Mason’s *The San Francisco Mime Troupe Reader*, pp. 29-56.

jarring or offensive image or word, and by keeping them guessing as to which actors were white therefore was not able to simply relax and watch the performance.

The performances of *Minstrel Show* began as previews for invited audiences in San Francisco, and the Troupe solicited feedback. They then took the feedback given and incorporated it into rehearsals, adjusting and clarifying issues that the audience had seen in performance (*First Ten Years* 58). This cycle of performance, soliciting feedback, and continuing development is important to most devising practices even today, whether that feedback comes from fellow group members or from a public audience. Heddon and Milling address the idea of repetition and revision in their book as a commonality of devising companies; in a type of theatrical creation that does not have a set script, and is often directed by the performers themselves, repetition is necessary to create and revise the performance.

The performance set out to address political issues, and according to reviews of the time and current scholarship, it reached its goal and created waves. The show had a positive response in some locations, but was considered deeply disturbing by all of the reviews and audience reactions that are currently accessible (Mason 26). Most of the stories Davis relates in his book are of confrontations between the audience and the actors, the cancellation of subsequent performances on their tour, and having to lie about altering the text in order to be able to perform. In fact:

A performance at St. Martin's College in Olympia, Washington, was abruptly terminated with a blackout during the "Chick and Stud" scene. The story of this incident and the production's alleged obscenity was picked up by Associated Press. Fame followed. The report spread quickly and put campus and community authorities on their guard. As a result, the show was always well attended and frequently began with one of the actors announcing that spectators would be shown a "modified" version

of the production. However, no modifications were actually made, and the rest of the Northwest tour was highly successful (Mason 22).

With stories such as this, the Troupe and Davis considered the tour a complete success, and the Troupe's current website claims "arrests, protests, bans and cancellations marked the tour - a real [sign] of success as far as the Mime Troupe is concerned!" ("The Minstrel Show"). While their goal of political statement was reached, what do we know about the "artistic value" of the performances?

The creation of this performance piece followed the model that Davis advocated: a strong central leader, a single or very few writer(s), with collaboration from the actors (though he had the final word). According to Davis, this was the ideal situation to maintain a level of artistic quality in the work that they were doing. For Davis, this type of creation was what led to the most effective political and artistic work. His own artistic vision was upheld, and though he listened and respected those in the Troupe he considered to have enough experience, he was not interested in egalitarian leadership.

On an artistic level, by-and-large, the show was well received, though politically it was extremely controversial. Reviews of the show were largely positive, citing the humor and the unflinching nature with which the Troupe approached the subject matter. It can be seen that humor was important to the show's success: even when the audience was kept at arm's length from the characters, they were still able to laugh and appreciate the jokes. Newspaper reviewers found the play to be shocking and, at times, disturbing. When the Troupe took *Minstrel Show* to New York City in 1966, Richard F. Shepard of the *New York Times* wrote: "Through the entire evening there is really nothing for anyone to laugh at, no matter how funny it is." This sense of morbid humor, wherein the audience laughed in spite of the uncomfortable truths depicted onstage of how little had



changed between the heyday of minstrel acts and the 1960s, was what made the show successful for some reviewers (Shepard). Despite this, the reactions showed that the play was successful on an artistic level, drawing the audience in and presenting the political in a way that was interesting to watch. In her review for the Woodland, CA *Daily Democrat*, Dorothy Kethler declared, “All in all, the minstrel show was a fascinating and at times terrifying performance.” Overall, between the traditional minstrel scenes, with actors bantering back and forth in blackface, songs containing racist language and stereotypes, and scenes that, for 1960, pushed the envelope for sex and violence depicted onstage, the audiences that saw the SFMT’s *A Minstrel Show* saw the political point that the Troupe was trying to make.

Even at this early stage in the Troupe’s development, when they had a strong central leader who oversaw daily operations, rehearsals, and artistic decisions, and before they began to articulate their ideals that would lead to an attempt at a collective, the use of devising techniques was present. According to Heddon, “The organisational history of the San Francisco Mime Troupe is an instructive example of the struggle to find a mode of production that is both ideologically acceptable and practicably workable” (107). The type of political work the Troupe was doing at this time would lead to more exploration of what we come to know as devising techniques, and an urge toward a political collective. This move would eventually push “visionary” leader Davis out of the group, at which point the Troupe would become a loosely collaborative collective, and enter into the next phase of its experimental history.

### Chapter 3: *Ripped Van Winkle*

The next era I will examine in the Mime Troupe's history is the late 1980s and their performance of original work *Ripped Van Winkle*. By this point, Davis had been gone from the Troupe for nearly twenty years, the artistic and political goals remained similar, though their methods shifted slightly. The organizational structure of the Troupe was the most important factor affecting their devising choices. The SFMT of the 1980s experienced fame and recognition of the artistic and political merit of their work, and had ripe artistic subjects to tackle under the Reagan administration. Throughout the 1970s, they experimented with various collective structures, but during this time of their peak success, the Mime Troupe returned to the more centralized, less "collective" business practices that reflected the leadership under Davis (Mason 148). However, the various experimental structures that they attempted to implement led to a compromise in leadership and function that actually created a more stable, stronger company. Practices were put in place in the 1980s that honored their roots in *commedia* and mime, bridged the gap with other professional theatres in the country, and they tapped into financial resources that gave them room to devise in their artistic creation, even as they gave up some of their more "collective" ideals of leadership. In order to understand how the Troupe reached this point, it is first important to examine why R.G. Davis left, and the Troupe's subsequent journey.

Davis did not leave the Troupe amicably. As the 1970s approached, and other groups were defining themselves as "collectives" in reference to not only their collaborative structure, but also their artistic and creative philosophies, the Mime Troupe

could not justify its political ideals with its own internal structure. In her *Mime Troupe Reader*, Mason writes: “From their reading about collective ownership, company members began questioning their internal structure and asking for more voice in the artistic process. Most productions had been created with a high degree of collaboration, but Davis had the final word” (15). So, during the 1960s, the Troupe had considered themselves a “collective” based on the collaborative nature of their work in the rehearsal room. However, they began to see other groups who engaged in “collective ownership,” wherein more artistic and functional decisions were made democratically. They attempted to enact a more loosely constructed center of leadership, in which all members took part, and a gerontocracy, in which the more senior members made more of the decisions. They finally attempted their “Inner Core” structure, in which five long-standing Troupe members were elected to leadership. Finally, when this was not working, “long meetings were held devoted to structural reorganization,” with the Troupe leaning towards becoming a full collective (Mason 17). Davis chafed at these ideas, and left the Troupe soon after. In his book, he claimed that all theatrical companies that attempted fully collective kinds of structures created mediocre art, and would eventually collapse. At the writing of his book in 1975, Davis predicted that the Mime Troupe under that kind of leadership would not last very long. In some ways, he was correct: the fully collective functioning of the group did not last beyond the decade of the 1970s.

The 1970s were a time of transition for the Mime Troupe, whose members were shocked and saddened by Davis’ departure. After Davis’ departure, the Troupe experimented with functioning as a “collective,” with all of the organizational, artistic, and financial responsibilities shared by all members. Various former members of the

Troupe, and the current website, state that the decision to become a collective was partly about politics, and partly about the absence of Davis as a strong central leader. They considered him “impossible” to replace (Mason 17). They struggled to maintain their ideologically-based structure, while at the same time creating relevant, interesting artistic work. They eventually gravitated back toward the playwright/director as leader, as Davis had been. Gradually, through the 1970s, the playwrights that constructed most of the material the Troupe performed became leaders by default by setting the tone of the artistic and political work. It was during this time that Joan Holden, a longtime Troupe member and prolific playwright, emerged from within the Troupe and began what would be a twenty-year run as the Troupe’s leader, main writer, and public face.

Joan Holden joined the Mime Troupe in the 1960s as a writer. She was called upon to adapt the *commedia dell’arte* piece *L’amante militaire* for the Troupe in 1967. Since she did not speak Italian, she adapted the play from a literal translation, given to her by another Troupe member, for the stage (Cohn 42). The Troupe was happy with her work, and so she stayed on throughout the latter part of the 1960s, and by the 1980s had become their principal playwright. Alongside playwright, actor, and director Dan Chumley, Holden created some of the Troupe’s most memorable (and award-winning) work, including *The Independent Female* (1970), *The Dragon Lady’s Revenge* (1971), *The Factwino Trilogy* (1981, 1982, 1985), and works into the 1990s, like *Offshore* (1993) and *Inside Out* (1997). Under Holden and Chumley’s leadership, the SFMT garnered national attention for the quality of their artistic work, winning the Tony Award for outstanding regional theatre in 1987. At this point, the award was given annually, with the SFMT keeping company with other winners of the 1980s, such as the Guthrie Theatre

in Minneapolis (1982), and *Steppenwolf* in Chicago (1985), among others. This time in the Troupe's history was far more productive and successful than Davis' dire, post-departure prediction foretold.

For this particular era in the Troupe's history, I have examined one of their summer performance scripts: *Ripped Van Winkle*. Originally performed in 1988, one year after the Troupe's special Tony award, *Ripped Van Winkle* has been called one of the best-remembered plays in the SFMT's repertoire. It was adapted from the Washington Irving short story *Rip Van Winkle*, which follows the story of a colonist living in New York before the American War of Independence who wakes from a 70-year nap to find that a revolution has occurred and everything he knew about the world has changed.<sup>9</sup> Set in Reagan-era San Francisco, *Ripped* is the story of Rip, a radical hippie who takes a hit of some sort of drug (which he thinks is acid) from a mysterious woman in 1968. He then falls asleep, waking up 20 years later in the then-present day, where he finds that his revolution, too, is over, though not quite won. Throughout the play, Rip encounters stock characters from the '80s, such as a high-powered yuppie executive and a crack-dealing teenager. The characters he meets along the way inform him that he is no longer in the 1960s, and that the world has indeed changed, though not for the better. He finds his old girlfriend, Susan, who has a daughter with another man, and an old friend who has become a professional in his middle age. These and other characters tell him of the woes of the Reagan era, and Rip, still feeling the optimism and idealism of his 1968 state of mind, sets out to revolutionize the 1980s. In the end, he discovers that the woman who

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<sup>9</sup> It was very loosely adapted; it might be better to say "inspired" by the Irving tale. Where Irving's Rip was not involved in the revolution that passed him by during his sleep, the SFMT's Rip was involved in the hippie movement of the 1960s. In the end, the main character's name and his decades-long sleep are the only real similarities between the original short story and the play.

drugged him is Liberté, and that she hand-picked revolutionaries to keep their spirit and be re-awakened for the new revolution. “The ‘90s,” she says, “it looks like a promising decade” (Mason 219).<sup>10</sup>

*Ripped* was a nod to the nostalgia for the revolutionary 1960s present in the Reagan 1980s. In fact, Holden said that it was in direct reaction to movies and other plays that were addressing the ‘60s as either nostalgic or dismissive of the era (Mason 190). *Ripped* indulged the Troupe’s members who had been present from the early years in exploring what they had hoped and dreamed for the future, but also did something important: it showed the new members what those ideals were in the hopes of passing them on. Troupe members that were in the cast of *Ripped*, but had not been present during the 1960s included Ed Holmes, Mark Christopher Lawrence, Keiko Shimosato Carreiro, Audrey Smith, and Harry Rothman (everyone except Arthur Holden and Sharon Lockwood). These new members would carry on the traditions of the Troupe after the older members moved on, and so it was important for them to not only learn the structures, daily operations, and creation methods that were part of the SFMT’s history, but also their political ideals and the love that they had for what they did. This must have been successful, because several of the members of the SFMT that were in *Ripped Van Winkle* were still part of the Troupe in 2014, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

Through the Troupe’s evolution in the 1960s, they introduced the performance structures and content of *commedia dell’arte*, but never quite integrated its organizational hierarchy. Following the tumult of the 1970s, the Troupe took inspiration from its early roots and added a level of professionalism to its actor pool. Frustrated with the varying levels of talent among the actors, the title of “journeyman” was given to those who

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<sup>10</sup> The script for *Ripped van Winkle* is available in Mason’s *San Francisco Mime Troupe Reader*.

exhibited particular talent and dedication to the Troupe. These actors were marked by their ability to play multiple roles, as was common in *commedia*. Actors who did not earn this title, or did not agree with the increasing amount of regulation and control within the Troupe, would exit the group, leaving behind a group of about a dozen dedicated members. These members were better-trained, more flexible, and stronger performers overall, leading to a much more professional perception of the company. To continue this level of professionalism, members of the SFMT began seeking jobs elsewhere, in other companies across the country, and earning Actors' Equity Association membership. When these members then returned home to try to perform with the Mime Troupe, Equity would typically grant them an exception to the union rules and salaries. However, during the early 1980s Equity began to tighten its regulations on regional theatres, and the rules made it more difficult for the Mime Troupe to gain an exemption from the Equity rules. So, like many regional theatre companies at the time, SFMT had to enter into a deal with Equity in order to keep its union performers eligible to return to the troupe. In return, however, the actors brought back national recognition to the company, and created a large amount of publicity for the Troupe.

With national recognition, and a more competitive acting atmosphere, came fresh, talented members from a variety of backgrounds. Culturally, the Troupe became more diverse through the 1980s than they had in the past. Even though they had always considered themselves a “multicultural” company due to their desire to include members from many backgrounds, the SFMT had consisted primarily of white members (“About Us”). As actors of diverse backgrounds and ethnicities entered the Troupe, the storylines in the plays could diversify. The diversity of the ensemble led to the availability of a

larger range of stock characters, therefore creating a more varied possibility of subjects and characters for the playwrights. However, this also created a problem with the “journeyman” system, as some of the senior members had to adjust to the new membership, and the distribution of roles. This sometimes came into play with casting, when the ideals of the “collective” would clash with the practices of the group (Mason 155). Overall, the Troupe tried to cast actors in diverse roles throughout their tenure with the group. They did not want to “typecast” any particular actors into any particular roles. However, when the topics that the members wanted addressed (especially regarding race) required certain casting, the distribution of roles was affected. The characters in *Ripped* were based more on stock types, and therefore could be played by a variety of actors (their names indicate this as well – Rock, the crack dealer; Sunrise, the daughter of an ex-hippie who represents the next generation). Since the script is nostalgic, had a large cast, and relied on stock characters, the actors could have been entrusted with the development of their characters and contributing to the development of the play at large.

Accounts of rehearsal and creative practice during this time are difficult to find. However, the Troupe’s grounding in the teachings of Decroux on the importance of the actor in the theatrical process, and the utilization of aspects of *commedia* give insights into their devising practice. Within this new hierarchy and national attention, devising would seem to have become a method of communicating and keeping the collective spirit alive within the structure. In *Challenging the Hierarchy*, Weinberg quotes Holden on devising work as a “jazz band ‘that gives everyone something to wail on’” (16). From what Holden has said on collectivity and devising, and her presence as leader during this time, I surmise that the Troupe continued to create this way, even if they did not speak



about it. The evidence is also in the number of contributing names credited for working on the shows. For *Ripped*, for example, Holden is referred to as the main script writer by newspaper reviews of the show and more recent accounts, such as Mason's *Mime Troupe Reader*. However, the current website lists the writing credit as follows: "Joan Holden & Ellen Callas with Sharon Lockwood & Keiko Shimosato Carreiro, Nabil Al-Hadithy & Isa Nidal Totah with Harvey Varga, Arthur Holden, & Nadal Nazzal." The original program lists "Script: Joan Holden & Ellen Callas with Sharon Lockwood & Keiko Shimosato" ("Archives"). This kind of attribution is common among companies that devise where script credit is not given to a sole writer. The contributions made in rehearsal by actors and other company members involved often make it into the script, and so some devising companies have credited multiple writers or contributors. In the UK, Complicite (founded as Théâtre de Complicité in 1983) produces several shows annually wherein "The Company" is credited as the deviser, writer, or director ("Information"). With all of this in mind, the Mime Troupe's *commedia* influence, reflected in their use of the term "journeyman" to describe their acting fellows, and their continued use of collaborative techniques shows that they were most likely using similar techniques to create their shows as they had in the past. Improvisation and collegial collaboration were instrumental to creating *commedia* pieces, and the Troupe still expressed an interest in maintaining their political work even as they sought funding from avenues that seemed to contradict that (Holden interview 60). The sources that address this particular period in the Mime Troupe's existence agree that while there was a move toward commercial success and stable central leadership, the desire to maintain touch with their more egalitarian politics and *commedia*-style roots meant that artists had

considerable input in the productions that were done. While the public image the group presented was a united front, with more traditional and accepted hierarchies of leadership and artistic production, the overall impetus of the group toward political action and collective ideals kept their work collaborative. For *Ripped*, Holden was interviewed most frequently, entrusted with the responsibility of presenting the ideas and contributions of the group as a whole. In the rehearsal process, all members could contribute to the final product (as was most likely the case with *Ripped*), but by sending out a single representative to discuss the group in the public eye, the Troupe helped maintain their professional image. Many groups that devise have a hierarchical structure, often with a central figure like Holden at the helm. They have a resident company of actors who contribute directly to the development of the pieces, but a central playwright or director at the helm. This step in the SFMT's evolution moved them from a loose collaboration of a rotating list of actors to a more stable, professional company that fostered a national reputation.

Other groups have used a variation of devising techniques to create, and have a single recognizable leader in the public eye, including the Tectonic Theatre Project, especially as led by Moisés Kaufman. The TTP used Moment Work in order to create theatre, bringing in the multiple influences and perspectives of the group's members. Each member was responsible for contributing to the work, even though there was a guiding artistic and organizational hand in Kaufman (Brown 51). The pieces that have been created by TTP under Kaufman's guidance have had major contributions from the company members, but Kaufman has been credited as the main author, and has been the most recognizable name from the TTP. For this particular period in the SFMT's history,

Holden stands out like Kaufman as a recognizable name and central figure that kept the Troupe's artistic work on track.

As the *Minstrel Show* era fell into the "Devising and Actors" category provided by Heddon and Milling, the 1980s, and *Ripped van Winkle*, can fall under the "Devising and Political Theatre" heading. As the Troupe evolved further beyond its initial roots in corporal mime and traditional *commedia*, the political nature of the devising that the Troupe did became more important. As the SFMT's work became more approachable and marketable to a wider audience, the very fact that they were discussing creative decisions and implementing devising practices in creation of their works remained a political statement. Even as they accepted grant money from organizations that they had previously condemned politically, the kind of work they did with the grants was still rooted in their history as a collective. The nostalgia that is present in the script for *Ripped van Winkle* belies a longing of the Troupe to revive, or at least hang on to, the idealistic goals they had as a group in the 1960s. The devising techniques of repetition and revision would still be useful as the script was in development, in addition to such tactics as roundtable discussions to solicit Troupe input. The company wanted to hold onto its original ideals, while at the same time incorporating traditional elements to make their artistic work even better. Holden said:

We're not interested in becoming a commercially successful theater company that doesn't say what we've always been saying. We will compromise on the level of taking grants, on the level of charging higher ticket prices. If we have to charge higher ticket prices in order to survive, then we will do that. But we won't stop saying what we have to say (Holden interview 60).

The direction that Holden began to move the company toward would contain the same values, and therefore some of the same practices, but their methods became more routine over time.

With these structures, practices, and changes in mind, what was the reaction to the artistic value of the show? Overall, reactions to the performance of *Ripped van Winkle* were positive. In an article in *Mother Jones* following their tour with the show of the Midwest, Bernard Ohanian described the show as optimistic, funny, and that it brought the Troupe into modern times. Sylvie Drake, for the *LA Times*, wrote that, “The overall production is the Mime Troupe's usual ramshackle street-theater affair (we wouldn't want it otherwise), but make no mistake: The images are astute, the message incisive, the music sharp.” Diana Spinrad, for the *Chicago Reader*, said, “Their staging and costumes are elaborately simple, and rousing, raucous, and hilarious songs are part of their signature.” The Troupe took the show on tour, even performing in high school auditoriums. Holden stated that the play was “anti-drugs and that the characters were comic stereotypes” (Mason 158). Audiences and Troupe members responded to the nostalgic feeling of the play, though Arthur Holden rejected the idea that the SFMT existed as an artifact of the 1960s (Arkatov). The public perception of the Mime Troupe as a “collective” also contributed to the reception of the group – upon winning their Tony award, Bernard Weiner of the *San Francisco Chronicle* called them a “political-theater collective.” Even as they accepted a more traditional structure in their governance, the work that they pursued and the methods they used to create it remained rooted in their collective ideology. The concern that Davis brought to the group of ensuring that all of their plays were not only politically motivated, but artistically successful, carried itself

into the 1980s Troupe. In her interview with William Kleb in 1985, Holden discussed the Troupe's next moves into the future (which included *Ripped* in its purview). These moves would include musicals, of which *Ripped* was one, and is the format the Troupe' uses to this day for its park shows, and a move toward more central directors. The crowd-pleasing format and the unifying vision provided by a director contributed to the overall professional feel of the Troupe's new shows. This led not only to their awards and recognition, but also brought in fresh audiences and created a reputation that would sustain the Troupe through tough economic times that were to come. Also, by purposefully bringing in new, young actors and listening to their ideas, the Mime Troupe, like Rip, bridged the gap between the 1960s and the 1980s. This new group of Troupe members would, in turn, bridge the gap between the 1980s and the next generation.

## Chapter 4: *Ripple Effect*

For the final section of this thesis, I examine the Troupe's structures and practices surrounding its 2014 summer park production, *Ripple Effect*. As with *Ripped Van Winkle*, in order to understand the context of the production, we have to follow the Troupe's journey from one era to the next. Following the 1980s, the Mime Troupe found itself in another period of changing circumstances. The early 1990s saw a depletion of funds in the avenues that had helped the SFMT thrive; the National Endowment for the Arts restructured its process for selecting grant recipients, which made it more difficult for a group like the SFMT to qualify. Following budget cuts and an ongoing debate as to the types of art that should be funded by the government, the NEA moved from funding groups as a whole to funding only on the basis of individual projects. This required groups seeking grants to submit a detailed plan of the script and performance months in advance. For the Mime Troupe, whose work addressed the most current issues, and was created or adapted largely in rehearsal, this stipulation was a major obstacle to the Troupe for seeking grants from the NEA (Mason 227-228).

The 1990s also saw shifts in cultural attitudes, with increased apathy toward political and social issues in the younger generation, and an economic upturn that led to an increase in faith in capitalism. The Reagan era had provided a wealth of material for the Mime Troupe to spin into interesting and challenging theatre. The changing political and social landscape sent the Mime Troupe's relevance into limbo. Critics during the decade were split on whether the Troupe was still a thriving voice for left-wing ideals, or a nostalgic throwback to a bygone era. As the funding for touring ran out, the Troupe

began to reach out to the local youth community, and work with the Youth Theatre Project to give at-risk youth a venue to tell their stories (“About Us”).<sup>11</sup> The SFMT, as a group, could still identify with the sentimental main character Rip from *Ripped Van Winkle*, with one foot in the past and one in the ever-changing present, even once they had entered the decade that the character Liberté had seen as promising. While these circumstances may have been disheartening, with Joan Holden and Dan Chumley (with the support of many others) remaining at the helm, the Troupe continued to produce work of the same kind as *Ripped*: politically-minded, *commedia*-inspired, free musicals in the park. The Troupe’s work continued to win awards, with shows like *Seeing Double* (1990) winning an Obie, and a special award for “Continuing excellence in collaborative playwriting” in 1990 (“Awards”).

Toward the end of the 1990s, only Joan Holden, Bruce Barthol, and Dan Chumley remained from the earliest days of the Troupe (Mason 230). In 2000, Holden retired; in 2001 Dan Chumley took an extended leave of absence (the Troupe website shows his tenure ending with the group in 2003), and in 2006 Barthol left (though he did return to contribute to the music for the 2011 summer show *2012 - The Musical!*) (“Archive”). This left the Troupe to the younger generation, a move that Holden says was premeditated, though she questioned at the time whether or not the Troupe would survive under their leadership due to the financial strain of living and producing work in the ever-more-expensive Bay Area (Mason 230). However, fifteen years after Holden’s departure, the Troupe is still creating and producing work that adheres to the Troupe’s political and

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<sup>11</sup> The Youth Theatre Project (which the SFMT continues to run twice a year) is part of the Mime Troupe. It is an outreach program that gets local San Francisco youth involved in creating group-devised theatre based in mime and *commedia*. According to the Troupe’s website, it also works to create the multigenerational aspect of the Troupe’s work, bringing together differing experiences based on age (“About Us”).

ideological philosophies the new members inherited, in addition to their established performance practices (primarily the summer musical format). Many of the same Troupe members that were there when Holden left continue to this day, including primary playwright Michael Gene Sullivan, who joined in 1988, managing director and actor Ellen Callas, who joined in 1986 (and was credited with contributing to the script for *Ripped van Winkle*), and director Keiko Shimosato Carreiro, who joined in 1987. In 2014, Sullivan and Carreiro were the two most public faces of the SFMT, performing interviews and appearing in publicity for the Troupe as they presented their summer show *Ripple Effect*.

*Ripple Effect* examines issues that reflect Holden's own worry for the group. In the play, three women are forced together on a tour boat that may symbolize the city of San Francisco itself. Each has her own background and issues that are part of the changing landscape of the city. The play mainly addresses the issues for working-class citizens in a world of booming tech markets and skyrocketing rents. Sunny is a Vietnamese immigrant, Jeanine a tech employee new to the city, and Deborah (pronounced deh-BORE-ah) was an activist during the 1970s. They each get to tell their story in flashback, relating issues that are relevant and present in today's world, especially to San Francisco, but also generally to large cities that are gentrifying across the country. The encroachment of development companies, tech companies, and government surveillance have impacted the lives of the women in the show, and in the end, the show is more about the changing culture of the city than the other large issues at hand (Avila).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> The script for *Ripple Effect* is not yet publicly available. This description comes from reviews and commentary on the show by Troupe members.



In light of the Troupe's own struggles with finances, transitions in membership and leadership, and their own embracing of technology (they have a Facebook page and a Twitter account, in addition to their website), one can see how *Ripple Effect*'s topics would appeal to them as a collective. So, then, how did they come to create it?

During this era of the Mime Troupe's existence, there was a feeling of establishment. For one, at the time of *Ripple Effect*'s production, they had created and performed work for fifty-five years, which was not a feat that many companies of its kind could claim. The Troupe was also an institution in San Francisco, and most of the articles written on *Ripple Effect* speak to its longevity or important place in the community. In order to manage their financial problems, they resorted in the 1990s to reaching out for private funding, but they also issued calls for donations at various periods throughout the year from their subscribers and fans, mainly during the winter, when the Troupe was working on the Youth Theatre Project and putting together workshops ("News Letters"). The connections they made with the community set them up as part of the culture of the city. The group's structure also appeared more balanced than in time periods past: the Troupe was small (only a dozen members), and roles were well-established. The idea of a hierarchy of actors was not new to the Troupe, since they had all joined after the journeyman status was put into place, and the Troupe has also been part of Equity since those members joined as well. The internal structure of the Troupe stabilized, leading to routine and expected functioning among the members. Experimentation dwindled, with the same basic format and procedure followed that had been established by Troupe iterations that had gone before.

For the public face of the SFMT, Keiko Shimosato Carreiro and Michael Gene Sullivan stand out. As mentioned before, Carreiro and Sullivan most frequently gave interviews and appeared in the reviews and writings about the performance. As senior members and a director and playwright, the public appearances of Carreiro and Sullivan fit into the pattern of leadership that the SFMT has established over the years. After Holden's departure, during which she expressed desire for the new members to "take it away" from the older members, in the way that the collective seized control from Davis (Mason 230). With the professional standards and organization established in the 1980s well integrated into the structure of the company, each member of the collective has their own specific role to fulfill (though each member plays multiple roles within the company).

There were new roles, however, unique to the technological age. For example, the company's Facebook and Twitter accounts post updates on the financial needs of the company (soliciting donations), and on the creative work being done (the Youth Theatre Project and summer shows). This gives fans more access to the Troupe, and gives the Troupe another forum to pursue its political agenda. It also offers insights into how the Troupe works, with posts from Sullivan about the process of creating *Ripple Effect*. On May 20, 2014, a post to the Troupe's Facebook page said: "First reading of the summer show! Well, the script so far! Well, without songs! Or an ending! Yay!" This progression from having a reading, to acknowledging that the script was still in development, the lack of songs in a musical, and the lack of an ending, show that the productions were still heavily influenced by rehearsal work during this time. The work that was happening to

create the shows remained collaborative, even after the financial shifts forced the Troupe to solidify its practical, everyday functions into traditional roles.

With the Troupe's more business-like demeanor and stable collective membership, it seemed like a well-oiled machine. There were standards for accepting new Troupe members denoted on their website, including that the individual must demonstrate talent and devotion to putting the group first, be recommended by an existing group member, and then voted in. The new member must commit two years to the Troupe, and while the possibility for new members to join is always there, "The balance of individual politics and different personalities is a delicate one so the Collective does not add members often" ("FAQ"). The reason for balancing personalities and politics is that the whole Troupe gets to decide on what topics they pursue in their summer shows. In an interview with David Perry posted to YouTube, Carreiro briefly outlined their process for shows, stating that each show began with a round-table discussion on the topics that are important to them for the year in question. These round-table discussions harken back to the Mime Troupe of the 1960s, when there were almost three times as many members holding discussions on how to run the group. With the more organized Troupe business structure, these round-tables could focus on the artistic work, rather than debating how the Troupe should run. The smaller size of the SFMT also made the contribution of members more manageable. The Troupe also sought input from its audience via social media for the 2014 show topic. On January 27, 2014 the San Francisco Mime Troupe page posted: "It's all research now, as we try to corner the idea most people want us to tackle. Housing? Climate? Corporate government? Poverty? All those and more! What do you think?" Through another page entitled "2014 SFMT

Summer Show Topics,” the Troupe asked its fans to give them ideas to perhaps incorporate into the next summer’s shows. By reaching out to the community via social media, the Troupe created another thread that connected them to the San Francisco public. Once the idea was decided, though Sullivan was the playwright and crafted the script, the artistic process was collaborative as well. This sort of devising work fit into the description common for devising companies today. They often have defined roles, but will source ideas and give creative input collaboratively. Also through Facebook and Twitter, on May 29, 2014, Sullivan described the writing process:

A day off - which means I spent the day rewriting! People often think that our shows are either finished way ahead of time, or somehow improved during rehearsal. The fact is they are primarily written before rehearsal begins, read and worked each day, then rewritten each night to incorporate notes, new ideas, blocking, and songs. The writer or writers stay up all night putting the script together, so that each day the directors and actors can put it on its feet, and see what works. Rehearsal is just like a regular play workshop experience - only the whole thing takes 4-5 weeks! And for those of us who both write and act on the same show... we get to sleep after September! Michael S.

The incorporation of social media and reaching out to the community at large for collaboration with the collective made sense for a show as intimately connected to San Francisco as *Ripple Effect*. After decades of attempting to figure out the best way to work as a collective and yet maintain artistic integrity, the Troupe seems to have found a kind of stride.

While the SFMT reached a sort of establishment status within the San Francisco community, and found a management and organizational style that worked for them, the way in which they devised appeared to follow some of the same patterns that emerged in earlier time periods. For example, the use of the roundtable discussions that Carreiro noted in her interview were rooted in the initial discussions the Troupe used in the late

1960s in order to decide how to govern the Troupe. The process seemed to be more refined, since the meetings in the 1960s were described as sometimes stretching on for hours with nothing decided; this would be possible in 2014 because of the more defined organizational structure. The roundtable discussions were only to decide on the artistic and political direction of the summer's performance. The new addition to the discussion process was the admission of an added step: that of pre-writing a script before rehearsals begin. However, I do not necessarily agree with Sullivan's assertion that the process of repetition and revising was typical new play development. While the SFMT's devising process bears many similarities to traditional practices of revising a script through workshops, the length of time and tradition of actor involvement in the creative process shifted the focus from the playwright alone in a room with a script, and into the SFMT's group development traditions. Also, the credit for writing the script included Eugene Chan and Tanya Shaffer, which was not always usual for traditionally written scripts. The involvement of more than one writer was traditional for the Troupe, and probably necessary since Sullivan was an actor in the show in addition to his role as playwright. The multiplicity of roles in the process also made the creation of the show different from a typical new play development method.

The reception to *Ripple Effect* by local critics was primarily positive. Critics from the *San Francisco Gate*, *Marin Independent Journal*, and *San Francisco Bay Guardian* all reacted well to the local emphasis inherent in the piece, and most praised the show's entertainment and instruction value. Sam Hurwitt, in the *Marin Independent Journal*, called the shows "formulaic," but that *Ripple Effect* was "enjoyable" anyway. Likewise, Chad Jones at the *San Francisco Gate* writes that there are "lulls" in the script, but that

the director and actors manage to get through it and pick up their energy on the other side. The tendency of critics to speak generously of the SFMTspoke to the Troupe's place in the community. While some reviewing public on the Troupe's Yelp page reacted negatively to the performance, as a part of the composition of San Francisco's history as a radical, progressive town, the Mime Troupe has become part of the establishment it fought against in its infancy. However, one gets the impression that they are now trying to change the system from the inside.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

Following the San Francisco Mime Troupe's journey through history as a devising group gives a glimpse into its structural and artistic evolution throughout the decades of its existence. The structure and focus of the group has changed throughout its history: the aspect of devising they emphasize from era to era has changed, and it has moved from an experimental, fringe theatre group to a respected, accepted member of the San Francisco community. Understanding the evolution of process in a group like the SFMT, whose survival throughout the decades as an independent devising company is remarkable, is important to understand how such groups can be successfully sustained in today's world of theatre-making. The public presentation and perception of the Troupe shows the SFMT's eventual integration into the fabric of the San Francisco culture. Troupe members have given brief glimpses into their practice and brought in new ideas as the years progressed. For the 1960s and 1980s eras, it was illuminating to see the changing attitude toward the Troupe's past; it would be interesting in the future to look back and see what the more contemporary Mime Troupe members have to say about the current work the Troupe does. I also found it important to see what reviews of the shows were like, and in the three cases I chose the artistic merit of the show was either praised, or was acknowledged as secondary to the political statement and therefore not integral to the enjoyment of the show. This reflects an attitude that occurs toward groups that create their work through devising, or who emphasize political statements or education in their work: can the final product be "good" when it was created by committee, and when does it become too didactic? While that question is too broad to answer within the scope of

this project, I think that it is an important factor to consider in the longevity and popular appeal of a group like the San Francisco Mime Troupe.

Overall, there has been a unifying through-line for the creative work of the SFMT. A common thread through all of the creative evolution has been the Troupe's roots in mime and *commedia dell'arte*. Based in the principles of mime as described by Etienne Decroux, the idea that the actor was the center of a performance and emphasizing the actor's independent ability to create without a written text, the Troupe was founded on ideas that would come to be known as devising. This evolved into the incorporation of *commedia dell'arte* techniques. Initially, the Troupe practiced *commedia* techniques in rehearsal and performance, using traditional *commedia* scenarios and performing them with a political purpose in mind. When the Troupe needed to restructure and reorganize, they turned to the traditional structure of a *commedia* troupe, adding in formal acting hierarchy through "journeyman" status. This spirit of collectivity and group creation helped maintain the Troupe's devising methods and political ideas while they were swiftly joining the "mainstream" in the 1980s. Finally, by holding on to the *commedia* structure and practices that influenced their devising, the Troupe managed to find new ways of existing in a changing world, including working more with youth in their community and finding ways to engage their audiences for more help to support their shows.

The continuity of the artistic spirit was achievable because of the dedication of long-standing Troupe members. In each generation, the young members became the older leaders, bringing in a new wave of performers to take their place and train in the ideals and importance of the Troupe. From the 1960s into the 1980s and 1990s, it was Joan



Holden and her contemporaries that saw something in the dynamic and forceful leadership of R.G. Davis. Under Holden's leadership in the 1980s, Keiko Shimosato Carreiro and Michael Sullivan were handed the torch, which carries through to the Troupe today. This sort of lineage and inheritance follows their *commedia* influence, and the group dynamic encourages a loyal group of performers who can return to the Troupe even after the wider world draws them. The continued spirit of the Troupe keeps audiences returning to them today, even as the world changes.

The Troupe is currently not without its challenges, or its artistic methods without their issues. For one, the Troupe is seen by many audience members and reviewers as a bit of nostalgia, which was something the SFMT was aware of as early as the 1980s. However, for a group whose founding was rooted in "guerrilla theatre," and pushed buttons and boundaries, the entrance into the mainstream, or into nostalgia, can be seen as problematic. This goes beyond the political aspects of the Troupe and into its artistic work as well. From the time that Davis ran the Troupe, there was always a desire to produce artistically sound work; the Troupe experienced several purges of members due to this. The awards that the Troupe won over the years suggest that a devising company can create theatre that is respected artistically and considered important to a local community. However, as the Troupe becomes more professional and settles into its hierarchical business structure in order to maintain their artistic value and existence, some of the clearer devising practices fall away. For example, Carreiro stated in her interview with David Perry that they work together as a group to come up with ideas, and that these ideas are then further developed through rehearsal. The current SFMT website calls the Troupe a "collective," and describes that as follows:

The San Francisco Mime Troupe is a worker-owned company, headed by a collective. The Collective is comprised of poly-talented people who steer the artistic direction of the company and also hire office staff. A collective member might be an actor who is also a costume designer and flute player, or a technician who is also a writer and building manager (“FAQ”).

However, main playwright Sullivan states that the script development process is no different from any other new play development workshop process. This difference in categorizing the way the Troupe creates their performances demonstrates a bit of a discrepancy in the way the Troupe members talk about their process. The public image of the Troupe and the actual function in its procedures may not be exactly the same.

Another issue that I uncovered while working on this project is the way that rehearsal work is recorded in devising (and other forms of theatrical creation as well). There is a practice of someone (such as a dramaturg) recording the process of work done in rehearsals and in preparation, in order to keep track of the process. This puts emphasis on the process of creation, rather than the end product, that often separates devising from other, more traditional modes of theatre. However, devising companies have struggled with finding a more efficient, descriptive, and useful method of recording the creative process as well. Some have proposed methods to correct this issue, but have not necessarily been successful or widely used. When examining the history of the Mime Troupe, I found that while there were references readily available of Troupe members talking about the work and about the productions, there were few records kept on the details of the rehearsal process. And even rehearsal notes could be unreliable sources at best: they are only one person’s perspective of a multi-layered process. While there have been methods proposed to correct or alleviate this, aside from simply recording every rehearsal on video, what sort of processing methods might be used to show the thoughts

behind the rehearsal work?<sup>13</sup> I do not have an answer to this question, nor is it the primary focus of this project. Rather, this is an issue that we have going through the years as each new devising company feels as though it needs to re-invent the wheel: we do not always know why processes work, or in what situations, or for what purpose. Perhaps the recording process itself should be examined in order to expand the scholarship on devising practice.

In the end, I learned a great deal about the SFMT's process by examining its practices and its structure. Initially, I did not want to include the structural elements, but by reading all of the information available, it became clear that it was necessary to do so. So much of the Troupe's thought process and motivation is revealed through the structure of their company. By looking at the long life of the Troupe, and its changes (for better or worse), these ideas can help to create sustainable, working, popular devising companies within the American context, which differs so greatly from the British system that scholarship from the U.K. is not often as relevant or as applicable as the U.S. perspective.

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<sup>13</sup> This concept, as mentioned here, was explored in Dick McCaw's article "Clair Heggen Goes Fishing" in *Physical Theatre: A Critical Reader*. An attempt at a real-time feedback method was implemented for a specific rehearsal process. It is this method, among others, that should be examined for applicability across devising groups in general, in order to provide room for an analysis of devising practice as a whole.

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