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## ***Frantic Assembly – A Guide to Devising***

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## For Teachers

### Introduction

As students of Drama & Theatre studies at some point we will all have to embark on devising a unique and original piece of theatre. How hard can that be? Where do you start? What influences your decisions?

Here we learn and experience the collaborative processes behind 'Frantic Assembly' a company born out of the frustrations of watching 'talcum powder headed Chekhov and vanity projects.' The programme looks at the numerous influences behind the 'Frantic approach' as well as giving us practical exercises that we can take into our own studios with our students as they begin their own 'devising journey'.

### Timeline

0.37 – 5.19	A History to Frantic Assembly
5.19 – 10.43	The Devising Process
10.43 – 15.16	Practical Exercises 1
15.16 – 18.29	Practical Exercises 2
18.29 – 20.38	Frantic...assembled
20.38 – 22.30	Cultural Considerations
22.30 – 23.30	Credits

### Related Titles

*Theatre Practitioners – Berkoff*  
*Theatre in the Modern World*  
*The History of Theatre*  
*Practical Approaches to Artaud and the Theatre of Cruelty*

### Recommended Resources

<http://www.franticassembly.co.uk/>  
<http://www.franticassembly.co.uk/learn/devising-and-physicality/>  
<http://www.edexcel.com/quals/gce/gce08/drama/Pages/default.aspx>  
<http://www.dv8.co.uk/>  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Physical\\_theatre](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Physical_theatre)  
<http://www.franticassembly.co.uk/resources/>  
<http://www.volcanotheatre.co.uk/>

## Active Viewing Guide

1. Who are the two founders of Frantic Assembly?

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2. What roles did they have in their drama society at Swansea University?

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3. Which theatre company that arrived at Swansea University did they quote as being a 'Life changing experience'?

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4. Does Frantic Assembly class itself as a 'Physical Theatre Company'?

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5. What piece of theatre are Frantic working on in the film?

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6. Who is involved in the collaboration process?

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7. What do Frantic say about rehearsing with your set?

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8. What importance does Frantic Assembly place on warm-up activities?

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9. What two areas do they focus on during rehearsal?

## Frantic Assembly – A Guide to Devising

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10. Name at least five original Frantic Assembly pieces of theatre:

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## Frantic Assembly – A Guide to Devising

Below are a series of sessions designed as a way into **devising** which is an appropriate way to attack this unit and can lead to some excellent student work. The key is to structure the early sessions and support the development of ideas in the initial stages.

### The Use of Stereotypes and Spontaneous Improvisation

Learning Objectives:

- To understand how characters can be developed
- Experiment with stereotypical characters as a way into a physical exploration of character construction.

Introductory Exercise:

Split the group into pairs. Using the technique of **spontaneous improvisation** ask the group to perform the following scenes:

1. two patients waiting to see the dentist;
2. parent and child in the supermarket;
3. two friends arguing over where to go on holiday;
4. two students opening their exam results; and
5. two boxers 'psyching' each other out before a fight.

Have the class explain how they acted the improvisations; what aspects of performance did they have to consider? (Voice, dialogue, physicality, staging, narrative) – When creating any drama these aspects of performance need to be remembered.

These early sessions look at the idea of **building a character** and using this as a starting point for devising. The focus for them is on:

1. the **physical** aspects of a character;
2. the **internal/emotional** aspects of a character;
3. the **environment** characters can act in; and
4. the **situations** character might enact.

ACTIVITY: Creating a physical character through stereotypes

One way of building a character is from the outside in. Establishing the physical aspects of a way a character moves first can lead an actor to creating a more three dimensional internal psyche.

Ask the students to find a space – this is a **non-verbal** exercise. Students move around the space safely using eye contact to avoid physical contact. Using some stereotypical characters from the list below call them out one at a time asking the students to reflect the character in their body language – experiment with how they move around the space:

1. Nosy neighbour
2. Stressed parent
3. Old-aged pensioner
4. Bully
5. Dizzy-headed blonde
6. The 'City' executive

#### Further Development

Develop this exercise by staging the movement: 1<sup>st</sup> stage: no interaction between students; 2<sup>nd</sup> stage: eye contact only held for a moment then move on; 3<sup>rd</sup> stage: a greeting between characters (keep this brief)

STEREOTYPE MASTERCLASS:

Ask the class to form small groups and ask them to choose one of the stereotypes looked at. Their task is to not only evaluate the **physical characteristics** of the stereotype but to develop an exercise in order to teach the rest of the group. An example is the stressed parent: movement may well be erratic, facial expression would be taught and concerned, they may burst into a room and seem that they have the world on their shoulders.

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EXTENSION TASK: Set up a series of improvisations that put the physical characters through their paces enabling students to experiment with the stereotype:

1. Getting ready for work
2. Making a cup of tea
3. Wrapping a present.
4. Playing a sport

Stereotypes can enable an actor to physicalise a role before adding in the psychological aspects of the character (such as emotion, intention, given circumstances etc). These are essentially distinct and enable an audience to recognise the 'type' of character quickly leaving an audience left with working out the actions and motives of the characters.

## The Theatre Practitioner

Learning Objectives:

- To introduce a new theatrical practitioner
- To experiment with Grotowski's 'The Wave' in rehearsal

NOTE: By now students will have experimented with a theatrical practitioner for Unit 1 and may well have looked at another for their Unit 2 performance. For Unit 3 to be successful it is encouraged that students **explicitly use practitioners**. An opportunity here is presented I feel to further broaden the students experience on the course by looking at a different practitioner from the one they studied in Unit 1 and/or 2. There are a wide range of theatrical styles covered by numerous practitioners – my advice is experiment!

### A List of Possible Practitioners

Stanislavski  
Brecht  
Berkoff  
Grotowski  
Artaud  
Peter Brook  
Boal  
Frantic Assembly  
Le Coq  
Kneehigh Theatre  
Craig  
Complicite  
Trestle – excellent for mask work  
Shared Experience  
Laban

*These are just a few – there are many more!*

### ACTIVITY USING GROTOWSKI'S "THE WAVE":

Grotowski encouraged his actors to become very physical in their performances largely experimenting with physicalising on stage.

The Wave is an exercise that is designed to maximize the number of ways that an actor can move around the stage. Grotowski designed the Wave in order to isolate areas of the body, from which the actor will 'lead' all of their movements: for example isolating key areas such as head, shoulders, waist, knees and feet.

Ask the students to find a space in the room. They begin to walk around the room, again safely using eye-contact to avoid any collision. Encourage students to move randomly and not in circles.

Instruct the group to lead from their heads. (Their head should be the furthest thing forward with the rest of their bodies behind). Once students get over the initial amusement challenge them to remain focused and experiment with the movement – not just walking but running, sitting down, getting up and so on – remember the head must remain the leading body part at all times!

DISCUSSION: What kind of character might move in this way?

Continue with the class experimenting with the key body areas such as chest, waist, knees and feet each time discussing the types of characters that might well be communicated by this style of movement.

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### EXTENSION TASK: Improvisation

Divide the class into small groups and have each person assign themselves a part of the body that they are going to lead from – just like in the initial exercise they will lead from this part at all times in the improvisation. Each group should take one of the following scenarios:

1. A dance teacher is attempting to prepare their class for an end-of-year show;
2. A removal firm has been asked to move some delicate works of art to the local gallery;
3. A football coach is training some new additions to the football team; and
4. A Sergeant Major is having difficulty with some new recruits.

The aim for the group is to emphasise the various ways that each character moves, giving time in the presentation for each actor to present their role effectively.

Give appropriate time for rehearsal and performance with opportunities for feedback and evaluation of how each group used 'the wave' to effectively communicate the character.

### IN PREPARATION FOR LESSON 3:

*Investigating the physical character through interacting with their environment is an alternative process for actors. The easiest way to do this is to have a character interact with small personal props. In preparation for the next session have the students bring in one or two 'props' – these should be small everyday items such as a book, newspaper, soft toy, scarf etc.*

## Personal Props

### Learning Objectives:

- To further experiment with Grotowski's 'Wave' in rehearsal.
- To understand how we use personal props in a direct and in-direct way.

### ACTIVITY:

Following on from the Grotowski workshop ask the group to make individual choices as to which part of the body they wish to lead from in order to create a character. Ask them to place their personal prop somewhere in the room. From this point instruct the group to take their character for a casual stroll however being careful not to go near their own prop at this time.

Instruct the class that whilst on their casual stroll they will interact with other props – remembering to keep in mind their leading body part and allow it to influence even the smallest body movement.

Eventually students move to finding their personal prop. It is the most important item to them and this must be communicated when discovering the prop.

### DEVELOPMENT:

After discussion about the exercise break the students into small groups and assign each group a small number of props. (Try to make sure that each group has props that are not theirs). Ask the groups to create a short scene again using the leading exercise for each character but where this time the focus is on the use of the prop either directly or indirectly.

#### Direct use of a prop:

The scene is focused on the prop.

#### In-direct use:

The prop is not referred to at all

The scenes do not have to be naturalistic – experimentation in this early stage can lead initial ideas for a Unit 3 piece at a later stage.

Allow time for scenes to be devised and then view them.

What are the advantages for an actor when using personal props?

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How is the use of personal props key for an audience?

These early sessions have concentrated on the physicality of the character leading everything else. This could be further explored through more development through mime, dance-drama, melodrama and clowning or even Commedia dell'Arte.

A strong performance will always have a strong notion of its style of movement, rather than leaving it to chance or assuming that 'naturalism' will take care of everything.

## The Environment

Learning Objectives:

- To experiment with musical environments to help stimulate dramatic ideas.
- Understand that drama can be created through a variety of means.

Note: For this session you will need a variety of musical extracts that can be accessed instantly. I change these every time I do the exercise but essentially they should range in style. I usually have ten different pieces.

ACTIVITY:

Split the class up into smaller groups. The students must create a scene to accompany the music that they are going to hear. Play the music once to allow groups to gather and organise their ideas, and then repeat so their ideas can be performed.

*Tip; This can be a great starter to a devising session – a warm-up or in this case am more sustained exercise.*

### Music I last Used:

People are Strange – The Doors  
Protection – Massive Attack  
The Long Day is Over – Norah Jones  
Hoppipolla – Sigur Ros  
A Message to Rudi – The Specials  
Blackbird – Sharon Shannon  
Smoothie Song – Nickelcreek  
Elephant Man theme – National Philharmonic Orchestra  
Adagio for Strings – The London Symphony Orchestra  
Pink Panther Theme – Henry Mancini

What was the dramatic point of the exercise?

It focused the actors to use music as the starting point for their ideas, leading to the creation of the setting, situation and characters.

So far students have looked at both creating physical and psychological characters. These are ideal ways in which to devise a piece of theatre. Often starting with the character helps to then find focus on the narrative. Yet it is just as valid to start with an environment first and then find the characters to inhabit it.

Further develop this exercise by enabling groups to select just one piece of music as a starting point. Music can be used in numerous ways in drama – as they main thrust in a scene, to underscore (much like in the movies), to tag a character so when we hear the music we recognise the character or as simply as starting point or catalyst.

Allow groups time to explore the music and the resultant ideas eventually sharing the work with the group.

## ***Suggested Student Responses***

### **Active Viewing Guide**

Who are the two founders of Frantic Assembly?

**Scott Graham & Stephen Hoggett**

What roles did they have in their drama society at Swansea University?

**A prompt and a stage manager**

Which theatre company that arrived at Swansea University did they quote as being a 'Life changing experience'?

**Volcano**

Does Frantic Assembly class itself as a 'Physical Theatre Company'?

**No. They call their style theatre and they reserve the right to draw on any experience. They feel that 'Physical theatre' terminology inhibits their company and they feel their 'lack of training' enables them to be what they want to be rather than label itself a particular type.**

What piece of theatre are Frantic working on in the film?

**Lovesong**

Who is involved in the collaboration process?

**Artistic Directors, Actors, the writer**

What do Frantic say about rehearsing with your set?

**This is an essential part of the process and as much time with it as possible as it is important to explore the environment. It becomes the actors 'home' or 'playground'.**

What importance does Frantic Assembly place on warm-up activities?

**Short sharp shocks that get the company moving, they are not creating anything, small task-based exercises that are very rapid fire.**

What two areas do they focus on during rehearsal?

**The text and the physicality**

Name at least five original Frantic Assembly pieces of theatre:

**Beautiful Burnout**

**Lovesong**

**Stockholm**

**Sell Out**

**Tiny Dynamite**

**Klub**

### Possible rehearsal techniques for a devised piece of theatre:

- Off-text improvisation around characters or themes
- Distil-to-the-essence – what is the super-objective of the piece?
- Retell the piece in a series of still images
- In-role writing
- Work on stub-text – re-enact the piece saying only the sub-text
- Speed run through
- Marking-the-moment through either still image, key line, sound collage etc
- Status exploration through status cards – change the status of a character
- Use mime and narration
- Retell the story to children
- Forum theatre
- Play in reverse
- Sing the dialogue
- Reduced version of the play – no more than 20 lines of dialogue
- Physicalise the piece
- Change the location
- Exploration of dramatic pause
- What might occur between scenes?
- Hot seating
- Further exploration of practitioner
- Change practitioner style
- Alternative endings
- The characters 20 years from now.
- Use of music – explicit and implicit
- Spotighting

**ADVICE: Make sure the students key a diary or notebook from the early sessions – rehearsal ideas, themes and notes could help to form a credible piece and may also be of benefit when looking at preparation for any written examination.**

**Possible stimulus material for a devised piece of theatre:**

Play texts	Themes/issues
(These are numerous and are ones that we have used over the years that are possibilities)	
<i>Teechers</i> by Jon Godber	Topical News items
<i>Two</i> by Jim Cartwright	Paddington Rail disaster
<i>Road</i> by Jim Cartwright	Zeebrugge
<i>The Trial</i> by Steven Berkoff	9/11
<i>The Threepenny Opera</i> by Bertolt Brecht	A shopping list
<i>Lysistrata</i> by Aristophanes	Death of Diana
<i>Blue Remembered Hills</i> by Dennis Potter	Seven Deadly Sins
<i>Oh! What a Lovely War</i> by Joan Littlewood	Execution
<i>Under Milk Wood</i> by Dylan Thomas	Homeless
<i>One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest</i> , by Dale Wasserman	War
<i>Machinal</i> by Sophie Treadwell	Postcards
<i>Hamlet</i> by William Shakespeare	Local History
<i>Our Country's Good</i> by Timberlake Wertenbaker	Dreams
<i>Peace In Our Time</i> by Noël Coward	Music – e.g. Sigur Ros
<i>Black Comedy</i> by Peter Schaffer	Art – Monet as an example
<i>The Insect Play</i> by The Brothers Capek	Masks – Trestle Theatre Co
<i>4.48 Psychosis</i> by Sarah Kane	Children's stories
<i>Stags &amp; Hens</i> by Willy Russell	Nursery Rhythm's
<i>Not About Nightingales</i> by Tennessee Williams	Film
<i>Popcorn</i> by Ben Elton	Novels
<i>Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead</i> by Tom Stoppard	The unknown
<i>Top Girls</i> by Caryl Churchill	The Afterlife
<i>Find Me</i> by Olwen Wymark	History – key moments
<i>Tissue</i> by Louise Paige	Sinking of the Titanic
<i>The Crucible</i> by Arthur Miller	Deporting of criminals to Australia
<i>Accidental Death of an Anarchist</i> by Dario Fo	The end of the 2 <sup>nd</sup> World War
<i>Chips With Everything</i> by Arnold Wesker	The first flight
<i>Vinegar Tom</i> by Caryl Churchill	First landing on the moon
<i>Female Transport</i> by Steve Gooch	Women getting the vote
<i>Can't Pay, Won't Pay</i> by Dario Fo	Witch hunts in the US in the 1600's
<i>Closer</i> by Patrick Marber	
<i>Entertaining Strangers</i> by David Edgar	
<i>Attempts on Her Life</i> by Martin Crimp	
<i>Loot</i> by Joe Orton	
<i>Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf</i> by Edward Albee	
<i>Crave</i> by Sarah Kane	
<i>A Dream Play</i> by August Strindberg	
<i>Scenes from an Execution</i> by Howard Barker	