
Youth Theatre and Non-Text-Based Dramaturgies

New forms of playwriting

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Abstract

Although at the start of the new century a generation of playwrights renewed the Catalan text-based repertoire, twenty years later many emerging companies tend to collectively *write* their shows instead of staging already existing plays. Theirs is often a hybrid, multidisciplinary writing, established during the research and creation process. This trend has also spread among schools, which welcome the performing arts and contemporary creation in their classrooms.

The objective of this study is to look at the contexts of collective or community 'co-writing' that prevail in emerging creation and to check if the text plays a major role or whether the lack of interest in texts that has emerged since 2000 is real.

The methodology has involved conducting questionnaires among youth companies (emerging or not), professionals working in the performing arts in secondary schools, and others who promote youth/emerging creation through residencies. They have been asked about collective creation, Catalan text-based playwriting or multidisciplinary.

The results show that the need to work makes new graduates form a company and take on all the roles of creation; that the horizontality that defines these companies comes from a crisis of hierarchy but also a specific demand: the desire of the performer to be a creative subject rather than an object; that the incorporation of technology tools is due to the fact that the new creators are digital natives, and that 'co-writing' is the most efficient way to introduce secondary students to a process of creation.

Keywords: Collective creation, multidisciplinary, co-writing, emerging creation, youth companies

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New forms of playwriting

Collective creation, as a widespread phenomenon, is taking root in times when the foundations of the most institutionalised theatre need to be shaken. The renewal of artistic languages, the incorporation of technology tools into the live arts or the need to work (*to start work*) in a sector that sometimes does not seem to trust emerging talents are some of the current demands that necessarily entail changes. These changes can be considered in themselves as a crisis, which, quoting Ramon Rosselló, are related to ‘co-writing’ contexts “of textuality understood as yet another material of collective or community performing arts creation.”¹ Moreover, the horizontality that defines many of the young companies perhaps derives from a crisis of hierarchy but also from the need of many performers to be creative subjects.

The establishment and continuity of new companies, the direct consequence of the economic crisis that has severely punished the sector for over ten years, is a phenomenon to be considered. “You must find your own work as no one will find it for you,”² comments Andrea Martínez Artero, an actress and teacher who also explains that the small companies that create collectively do so because there are far more performers than playwrights or directors. This is also due to another crisis, the generational crisis: the famous blockage that, according to her, prevents young actors and actresses from accessing the big theatres that guarantee decent working conditions.

Youth Creation, Collective Creation

We believe that theatre is a collective event that must call upon the present times from different viewpoints, and building discourses among everyone enables us to compare views and stimulate debate during the creative processes.

1. ROSSELLÓ, Ramon, introduction to “Al voltant de l’anàlisi de la literatura dramàtica actual: la categoria ‘procés’” within the 2021 international symposium of the journal *Estudis Escènics* “Imagining the Future?”

2. Statement made in a telephone interview on 20 September 2021.

“We also create collectively because we don’t believe in hierarchical structures (but we do believe in sharing roles and tasks) that for years have served to support bad praxes of power abuses, and so on. We believe that creators must have many strings to their bow.³

These are the statements by The Followers, a company of young women that uses documentary theatre and digital technology to call upon the audience and make them an active subject of the performance. In their words, we already intuit one of the reasons why many graduates in dramatic art decide to start a company to begin their professional career and, once started, choose collective creation. After they have completed their official studies, they continue their training in work and creative life, contradicting the rules learnt and looking for new paths by questioning the norms and freeing up creativity, so that they feel like an important part of a project.

“For me, often and unfortunately, setting up a company and being young involves precariousness, and, as the situation is precarious but we are enthusiastic, first and foremost we want to be happy and do what we really like,” says a member of José y sus hermanas, one of the most promising recent companies. “With collective creation you enjoy more and become empowered.” “The concept of directing is being challenged; I think that people understand each other more as a group.” “We are in a period when the pyramidal and hierarchical structures are being closely questioned, and theatre can be a place to do so. Collective and multidisciplinary endeavour to not overlook anything or anyone.” These are the views of other members of the group.

Precariousness is at the origin of the current emergence of small companies that work collectively to create the theatre they want. Members of La Virgueria note that: “It is clear that, for someone who doesn’t have an established position, adding voices, energies and ideas increases creative, production and audience possibilities. Moreover, we believe that, after a time in which vertical hierarchies have prevailed in the world of culture, there is a return to the idea that horizontal and team work enriches and enables us to grow together.”

“We are companies that were born out of two economic and social crises that have made us question the traditional concepts of playwriting, directing, performing and so on,” explain The Followers. “We are creators who had to learn to do everything, aware that we couldn’t earn our living one hundred per cent from nothing, and we have learnt (we don’t know if this is good or bad) that strength lies in what we do together. We are also a shifting generation, with diverse interests and which avoids labels, which looks for the best way to convey a message, regardless of whether we are a text-based company, a movement and gesture company, and so on.” Another rising company,

3. This and the remaining statements by the companies included in this article come from the questionnaire sent on 17 September 2021 to around fifty companies that have participated in an edition of RBLS APOSTA. Fira de Teatre per a Joves. The questions were: *Do you make text-based theatre or create collectively? Why? (Explain briefly) / Are you interested in Catalan contemporary (text-based) playwriting? Why? (Explain briefly) / How relevant is text in your creations? / Why do you believe that emerging companies tend to create collectively and, often, in a multidisciplinary way?* Around ten companies responded.

Hermanas Picohueso, speak of collective creation as follows: “We create collectively because we are interested in sharing the vision that each one of us has about the same subject. We like thinking together and making projects grow together.”

And, in these projects, the artistic languages mix and flow in the most organic way. Ultimately, the borders between disciplines are fictitious conventions: in the beginning, painting, music, dance or theatre were a single whole.

Collective Creation, Multidisciplinary Creation

Youth companies do not choose to be multidisciplinary, they are, as they command many languages that they use every day to communicate with their environment. In fact, probably the strangest and most complicated decision for a youth company right now is to use only the spoken word to build a show.

Hermanas Picohueso

Adding voices, energies and ideas increases the creative, production and audience possibilities, as La Virguería noted above. These are the reasons why emerging artists create their companies and embark on collective creation theatre. The Followers, in a previous statement, answered the question *Why do you do multidisciplinary creation?* Koilara Teatre speaks of a trend, like Maria Cambil, who points out that “it seems that we young people are discovering the world.” But she also adds:

But there are also new and young pieces that are very powerful and help evolve the contemporary performing arts, which is what people working on text-based shows don't usually do. So it seems that we are following the trend towards the death of theatre innovation, because we know what works and we follow this path. Is it possible to innovate by doing text-based theatre? How? Who does it? Does innovating mean it is already a multidisciplinary [show]? If I have a text-based piece but live music plays a major role, what does it become? It is still also text.

Collective creation enhances the capabilities of each individual to enrich the project. According to Hermanas Picohueso, internet environments have turned the collective into the first norm. Everything we do today we share, and the youngest generations are getting increasingly accustomed to this:

There is a very interesting subtext in this trend because, on the one hand, everything we do and think is done collectively and shared, and, on the other, a firm individual position is advocated. Each subject is a creative subject potentially capable of generating content that interests and nourishes the other users. By experiencing this reality, it is clear that collective creation can only lead us to do more tri-dimensional, richer and interesting projects.

As for multidisciplinary, they link it to how we live, communicate and work in the digitised world:

We're jumping from screen to screen, and from app to app. We have talks with the same person through different media (WhatsApp, e-mail, telephone, Instagram...) and in these talks we don't only use words but photographs, emojis, stickers, gifs or videos. So, the fact that theatre projects are increasingly multidisciplinary is not premeditated, it is a change that the language is bringing about increasingly faster before our eyes.

This is why they insist that youth companies are multidisciplinary in a spontaneous, instinctive and unplanned way. An opinion that José y sus hermanas back:

For many years the arts have been porous and we deal with this organically. For us, it is not an effort to think that video, music, text, a tree moving and shadow theatre can coexist in a piece for one hour and a half because this is not something they have told us, it is embedded in our ram memory.

Published Text, Own Text

It doesn't mean there are no interesting contemporary texts in Catalonia, but what is published or has repercussions is not the most relevant. The mistake is to think that only certain texts (the most Aristotelian or "dramatic") are publishable. Why not publish collective creation texts or more post-dramatic texts? There is great talent in many fields of theatre creation. Why not give it more importance?

La Virguerria

For three editions, the youth theatre festival RBLS [*rebels*], which aims at linking teenagers and young people with the performing arts, as an audience and as practitioners, has included in its professional programme a theatre fair for youths called RBLS APOSTA. The process is simple: a call is launched for artists and companies with a show (or more) that can interest the teenage and youth audience; from all the proposals submitted, a jury, which is also young, chooses fifteen which are finally presented in a pitching format before an audience formed by heads of programming of theatres, fairs and festivals. The aim is for them to get to know the pieces and programme them. In 2021, 70 companies registered, of which 60 (86 %) create collectively. Out of these 60, 27 (45 %) define themselves as text-based theatre companies although the text they work on, with a single exception, is not an existing play written by a specific author. In other words, the company creates its own text during the rehearsal process.

Another 26 companies, of those that create collectively, call themselves multidisciplinary (43 %). The seven remaining companies (12 %) focus on other specialities, such as improvisation, street theatre or movement and gesture theatre.

Mambo Project, an audiovisual artistic collective which explores different disciplines from a documentary perspective, considers that “it is often believed that Catalan text-based production is pigeonholed. There are many companies which work with text that are trying to provide a new approach, but it is true that when we speak of classic text-based playwriting, we imagine an antiquated type of theatre.” The Hermanas Picohueso believe that:

It is important to find stories that represent us so as not to always resort to classics, and broaden the range of possibilities so that more people become interested in theatre. However, we try to create the theatre we would like to see: multidisciplinary shows, the search for new languages, different ways of shaking up the audience. So we would be lying if we said that we greatly enjoy seeing a Catalan, Bulgarian, Colombian or Chinese (text-based) dramatic play.

Text is an essential part of the creations. Koilara Teatre, for instance, explains that their creations are born out of improvisation and, although the words are not written, they are still texts important enough to learn and be performed correctly but also volatile enough to be changed during a performance.

The Girona-born actress and teacher Maria Cambil says that the text is the foundation of a theatre piece, but everything else makes it grow, while Mambo Project notes that the text is present in their creations but it is important to reflect on the best language to explain what emerges from within them. The Followers attach to the text the same importance as the other elements of the creation: screening, interaction with the audience, and so on. They do not understand the text as a central element but as another means of expression. For El Eje, another rising company, the text usually has a key role in their theatre; finally, the pieces of La Virguería use words.

“But the text dialogues with music, gesture, space and all the remaining theatre languages,” this company points out. “It doesn’t mean that for us the text is a minor thing but rather it is an essential piece of a large puzzle formed by many other pieces. When creating, the text can be transformed until the last minute, as can lighting, the performances... The text is in an ongoing dialogue with the remaining theatre elements,” they add. “We write most of the texts with four hands, and we also create the directing, performance, set design, musical composition... as parts that are equally as important in the creation, which enrich each other.”

The text is a major displayer of imaginaries, states a young creator, Elna Roca Tarruella, who mainly expresses herself through words. And, in spite of this, she explains that she tries to commit to a text-based theatre that mixes different text-based formats and generates frictions between the text and the stage.

New Textualities in Secondary Schools

In a secondary school you don't work with innate talents, you have to open them up, work with their tools, and you can do so collectively based on a text. But experimentation in the classroom must be of another kind. The text is not everything. It means living the experience, giving a voice to the participants, listening to them. Working with sounds, matter, objects.⁴

Pere Borrell

What happens with Catalan contemporary texts in the classrooms of secondary schools? If we focused on training in the performing arts in class hours, related to subjects such as Catalan language, we would probably find Catalan plays, contemporary or not. In this brief study, however, we want to focus on students who choose the branch of performing arts because they want to work professionally in theatre, or groups of students who, outside school, decide to meet and share a creation process. And we focus on this because it is where we can find the embryo of what, later, will be the generational replacement of today's emerging companies. The work of the trainer or the person who mentors these groups in their creations is fundamental to open new horizons for youths.

Among the many projects developed by the Arts and Education Department at the Institut de Cultura de Barcelona, there are five that directly link contemporary creation and education in classrooms. These are EN RESIDÈNCIA, Tot Dansa, Escena Pilot, Connexions entre instituts i espais escènics and + ESCENA. They all share the desire to build bridges between culture and education, bridges that are jointly and necessarily built by professional actors and actresses and participating boys and girls. A creation process that is also a transformation process.

And for this transformation to take place, once again, the students (the subjects of the action) should be creative subjects. As Pere Borrell pointed out, not everyone can memorise a text or perform it. This multifaceted artist, illustrator, musician and theatre creator understands creation from a broad point of view and jumps from one field to another according to how he feels. Maybe for this reason, the educational line he develops as a teacher focuses on stimulating the creativity of his students. He argues that an external gaze is needed in the classrooms to change the trend followed by non-specialist teachers in the performing arts, who choose published texts to work in a standardised way with the students because, quite simply, they lack the resources to do so differently. For instance, taking what is essential in a text, choosing the words that students come up with and reaching the actor or the actress in another way: thorough audios, images, and so on. Playing with the texts. "The playwright is not the text but the context, which must be adapted to the group with which you're working," he comments. "Words, sometimes, don't excite girls and boys, and frighten them. I don't want people to suffer

4. Statement made in a telephone interview on 20 September 2021.

on stage even though they are keen to be on it. They must experience theatre in another way.”⁵ Placing, in short, students in a central position, showing them that they can be creators even though they do not think so.

The aforementioned programmes, like others, work in this direction: on the empowerment of secondary students through contemporary creation. On their growth and transformation, two results achieved when they take on the creative role.

This is the main reason why, in many cases, current playwriting enters the schools through Catalan and Spanish literature, and through teachers without previous theatre experience (although they can teach the subject of performing arts). Educators with a very broad approach are not usual in secondary schools and they are very necessary. Andrea Martínez Artero, who graduated from the Institut del Teatre and is a teacher in the performing arts at the Institut Pedralbes, adds: “The reality of the secondary school is highly diverse; you find many profiles in a single classroom. This heterogeneity means that there is a marked tendency to collective creation so that everybody finds their space. You cannot give them the foundation to do a Shakespeare, but the tools to transform it.” Collective creation in secondary school students, she says, is not a comfort zone: everybody participates. But as soon as they try it, they feel motivated, they are surprised. Teenage students are very open to experimentation; they jump into it without fear. “And this should be encouraged.”⁶

Víctor Muñoz i Calafell,⁷ who is in charge of training and relations with playwrights at the Sala Beckett (which has a youth laboratory, the Malnascuts, formed by a group of youths with an idea of creation far from the text as a dramatic piece) works with secondary schools and proposes that students write the play they would like to see on stage: “It is a programme focused on writing that wants these students to create theatre from their point of view, to express their hopes through writing and, if possible, stage them,” continues Muñoz. “Because we have seen that they only validate a text if they feel it is their own.” The experience of the Sala Beckett confirms that very often students seek in theatre a place to express themselves, to have their own voice.

Promotion of and Support for Contemporary Collective Creation

Don't you think that cultural agents are putting the focus more on theatre companies than on artists? There is a trend that supports the establishment of new companies and collective creation.

It seems that the hybrid scene and all this were invented yesterday.

José y sus hermanas

5. Statement made in a telephone interview on 20 September 2021.

6. Statement made in a telephone interview on 20 September 2021.

7. Statement made in a telephone interview on 16 September 2021.

The actresses of José y sus hermanas are right in these two reflections. Because the hybrid scene is nothing new and many venues in Catalonia support contemporary, multidisciplinary and experimental creation mainly through residency programmes. Community centres, for instance, support research into new performing arts languages and the mixing of disciplines. Between fifteen and twenty centres in Barcelona open annual calls aimed at emerging companies that need premises (laboratories) to test and develop their creations: Parc Sandaru (Kinètic, Mostra't), Can Felipa (La(b) Felipa), Cotxeres Borrell (Laboratori Tísner) and the CC Sant Martí (Perpetracions, performance) are some of the venues that offer residencies for the production of artistic projects which almost always respond to performing arts experimentation criteria.

We find other models in the Fàbriques de Creació programme in eight of the ten districts of the city, which offers artistic research residencies in different fields, or in initiatives such as El Cicló del Tantarantana, a three-year season of independent companies in residency, during which they create and premiere three shows; that of L'Antic Teatre, a centre of experimentation, creation, residencies, production, presentation and promotion of professional artists in the local, national and international field, which is a lever for emerging creation; or the Beca DespertaLab, a grant bestowed by the Nau Ivanow and the Sala Àtrium, aimed, as the rules state, at professional performing arts companies and collectives or those in process of professionalisation. The committee assesses the projects depending on their originality and artistic value and considers the beneficiary companies' desire to carry out research, stressing creation and not only the final production. In this respect, it particularly values the least conventional roles in emerging companies, such as those involved in production and distribution as an active part of the collective.

Does this strengthen the idea that it is necessary to shake up the most institutionalised structures of theatre? That the Catalan contemporary dramatic corpus does not appeal to the youngest talents? Is the crisis generational or does it go further? Would writing and publishing texts by young authors that appeal to a young audience be an option for the new companies to work using existing material?

Very significantly, at the Sala Beckett, they note that there are playwrights who are aware that there is no theatre for youth and that they would like to write it. "But they don't see any way out. This is why, in contrast to other European countries, here there is no established line of youth plays,"⁸ explains Víctor Muñoz i Calafell. Time will tell if Catalan playwriting is again experiencing an era as powerful and vibrant as the early 21st century. For the time being, a new generation of creators seems to feel more comfortable with other writings, other textualities.



8. Statement made in a telephone interview on 16 September 2021.