

second edition

# the frantic assembly

book of devising theatre



scott graham and steven hoggett



# The Frantic Assembly

## Book of Devising Theatre

'This is a close companion to Frantic Assembly's practice and one that is written with an open and engaging, even disarming, tone ... A rich, rewarding and compelling text.'

Stuart Andrews, *University of Surrey*

As Frantic Assembly move into their twentieth year of producing innovative and adventurous theatre, this new edition of their well-loved book demystifies the process of devising theatre in an unusually candid way. Scott Graham and Steven Hoggett offer an intimate and invaluable insight into their evolution and success, in the hope that sharing their experiences of devising theatre will encourage and inspire students and fellow practitioners.

*The Frantic Assembly Book of Devising Theatre* is a uniquely personal account of the history and practice of this remarkable company, and includes:

- practical exercises;
- essays on devising, writing and choreography;
- suggestions for scene development;
- a 16-page colour section, and illustrations throughout; and
- a companion website featuring clips of rehearsals and performances at [www.routledge.com/cw/graham](http://www.routledge.com/cw/graham).

This is an accessible, educational and indispensable introduction to the working processes of Frantic Assembly, whose playful, intelligent and dynamic productions continue to be acclaimed by audiences and critics alike.

**Scott Graham and Steven Hoggett** are the co-founders of Frantic Assembly.

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## Book of Devising Theatre

SECOND EDITION

SCOTT GRAHAM AND STEVEN HOGGETT

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This book is dedicated to the following:

Liz Heywood for seeing something at the very start – thank you

Sally Harris for *teaching us everything you knew!*

Sian, Marcia and Carys Graham

In memory of Nigel Charnock and Marcia Pook

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All of the above allowed and encouraged us to be what we are and for that we truly love and thank you.

And thanks to Talia Rodgers ... for the suggestion, the encouragement, and the patience.

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# An introduction

## **The book – an introduction by Scott Graham**

Knowledge is surprising. It sneaks up on you. You can wait for it, look out for it and even, if you are confident enough, expect it. When it arrives it does so unannounced. This book represents what we know after 18 years of making work together.

It also marks a significant change in the relationship at the heart of Frantic Assembly as Steven Hoggett leaves to pursue a freelance career. Within these pages we shall talk about the discoveries we have made together, the work we struggled to make, the revelations that rewarded many hours of hard sweat. And the many hours we made it up as we went along.

Throughout this book you will read how 'we' worked or what 'we' tried. Despite being sole artistic director of Frantic Assembly I don't think I will quickly get out of the habit of using 'we'. This is not an aspiration to royalty. It is just that 'we' feels right for a company built on collaboration, a company that has prided itself on its openness and accessibility. As I take Frantic Assembly forward I look forward to the new collaborators and the new discoveries 'we' will find. Over time I will not rule out the rise of 'I' but for now I do take pleasure, solace and pride in 'we'.

Writing this book remains a fascinating exercise. Like I said, it is the process of writing that reveals the knowledge. It bubbles up. You start with a vague

notion you have something you want to say, something that might be relevant to someone, somewhere struggling to make work. You want to tell them that it is going to be ok. You want to tell them that there is a way through the maze. You want to tell them that things can be much simpler than they initially seem. This is what drives this book. So much of theatre seems to perpetuate the myth that the process is torturous. This does not have to be the case. Yes, it can be very hard work. Yes, there can be days where the task seems insurmountable but if you can look at the situation in another way then opportunities can present themselves. If this book provides the reader with anything, I hope it is at least the ability to look at the problem differently.

What you will find here is a determined effort to demystify the devising process. To this end, the book falls into two parts. The first includes a selection of scenes that cover the creative output of the company from early shows such as *Klub* (1995) through to *Little Dogs* (2012). Each of these scenes are taken and examined in terms of the initial idea followed by the methods used in transferring that idea from a scrap of conversation or grotty notebook into the production and onto the stage. We then look at possible ways in which this existing scene might be developed or how the creative process could be harnessed to create something different. The last section expresses our belief that the reader should not think about the ideas here being an end point. When running workshops, we are always at pains to point out to participants that the most important part to take away from the workshop is not the creative end point we might have reached but the means by which we got there. It is the understanding of the process that is valuable. We are certainly not unique in being a company who continue to work on the production throughout its tour. The development of ideas is essential once the production begins to seek validity in front of an audience.

Part One also includes a number of essays that cover some of the elements and ideas that have become central to the Frantic method of thinking about and creating theatre. As well as revealing the places where we find ideas and inspiration, it is hoped that this section might encourage the practitioner to reconsider their own inspirational locations and, in doing so, free up the frequently self-imposed restrictions on where to be looking for creative motivation.

Part Two is a comprehensive guide through the creation of our work and how it might help your work, starting with warm-up advice and games through to advanced choreographic exercises before looking at specific uses of music and text in our theatre practise. Each exercise has been tried and tested by the company over a number of years working with a wide variety of practitioners ranging in age and ability.

We hope that the reader of this book will find enough points of interest to instigate their own search for good practice. In our own experience, it has

been important to establish both starting points and departure points for us. This book should work in the same way – a healthy balance of agreeable and disagreeable pointers, thoughts, exercises and suggestions. It is an attempt to provoke the reader into looking for new means of creating theatre performance. Our own non-theatre background meant that we had no choice but to forge our own understanding of how to create work. This in itself might have been a blessing, as we have never felt beholden to any particular school of thought or theatrical tradition. It led to a freedom in picking and choosing what appeared interesting or relevant no matter where that inspiration lay. We were open enough to take advice, ignorant enough to look for inspiration anywhere and brave enough to ask for help. Over time we found what we liked mostly through finding out what we didn't like. But this never led to definitions and rules. We always retained the right to change our minds as we became aware that inspiration could come from the most unexpected places and take the most unexpected forms. A rigid sense of what theatre *should* be will always be the enemy of devised theatre. The 'what might be' is essential.

An introduction will usually go to great lengths to define the terms central to the book. Having spent years wrestling with the term 'physical theatre', we have found ourselves less and less sure of its definition and even its relevance. It is a phrase we never utter in the rehearsal room. It exists outside and as such it proves that other people are much better placed to comment on definitions. It can be argued that all theatre is physical and that all theatre is, to some extent, devised. That argument is not one we care about enough to dedicate space to here. It is a waste of precious time. Let's just get on with it! We also encourage practitioners to get into the rehearsal room, make the work and let others be the ones to speculate on the definition of what it is they just experienced.

Ok, ok, we will talk about physical theatre. Later.

Actually, before we get on with it, a quick word on the book itself.

Having written this book remains a great source of pride for us. To hear that it has a value within rehearsal rooms or in the 'manbags' of aspiring theatre makers is a tremendous thrill. Returning to update it is a brutal reminder of our initial fear when asked to write it. What if we change our minds about these thoughts? Committing them to print seemed reckless and rash. Surely they will come back to bite us as we develop and they date?

It is true that passing time does make the voice a little unfamiliar but it has mostly been a pleasant and fairly informative return to the book. Yes there may be things that we might have done differently and things we might never do again (we are not going to point them out!) but on the whole, who cares? Things we believed then that we might not be so sure about now still retain a certain validity. We have come to realise that this book is less about capturing



pronouncements that define the universe and more about sharing processes that might lead to something significant for your work. Not that we ever tried to define the universe! The revelation just means that it is easier to write knowing that one day we might not hold these 'truths' so dear. That is ok, for in the meantime they hopefully mean something to the reader and help open up theatrical possibilities for them.

It fills us with immense pride when people remark how the book has helped them make work. It is almost surreal. There was a moment at a book signing a few years back (now that WAS surreal) when a young woman apologised for the tattered and bent state of the book she was asking us to sign. She did not realise that this was the moment that possibly thrilled us the most, when the significance of having written a book actually hit home. It was not the signing itself. It was the fact that the book was being used. It had suffered from being stood on in a sweaty rehearsal room. How wonderful is that? It was never meant to gather dust on a shelf. The ambition was always for it to be a partner to your creativity and how fitting for it to wear the bruises and scars of the rehearsal room with pride!

Right, now we *can* get on with it.

## **A brief history of Frantic Assembly**

This book is not about the history of our company but a little background information might explain a lot about our company ethos.

The nature of how we came to be has been a massive influence on our drive to make our work accessible. It has informed all our efforts in education and training.

We were both English Literature students at Swansea University. We met as an unused understudy and a bored prompt on a student drama society production of *Educating Rita*.

Swansea University does not have a drama department but it does have a fantastic theatre that hosts the drama society three or four times a year presenting the usual talcum headed Chekhov and vanity projects. That is what we thought theatre was.

As students we individually took part in and watched a student production directed by Volcano Theatre Company (*Savages* by Christopher Hampton). This was the life-changing moment. We did not know that theatre could be like this. We had experienced this production from both sides of the fourth wall and it had blown our preconceptions apart. It was also clear that this was what we both wanted to do with our lives.

Volcano were a massive inspiration to us. They were alternative and sexy, intelligent and fierce. They were the perfect role models for us, being Politics and Psychology graduates from Swansea who had been inspired by another

director to set their company up and create their own work. They recognised the inspiration and expertise they could give us and actively encouraged, advised and nurtured us during the early days. This is why our education and training programmes are so important to us.

With Volcano's encouragement we presented *Savages* at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. For 'we' you should read 'Swansea University Drama Society'. Before signing up for the festival we were to be found around a thesaurus trying to agree on a company name. For some reason we felt that Swansea University Drama Society was not going to bring the punters in. We all agreed on Chaos then found out there was a Kaos Theatre Company. Then someone proposed Frantic and Frantic it was.

The next year we directed *As Is* by William M. Hoffman and took it to Edinburgh, again as Frantic Theatre Company. We managed to sell out both runs and garner good national reviews. It was felt that if we could fool the public so far maybe we should give it a go full time. That is when Vicki Middleton (née Coles), Scott Graham and Steven Hoggett decided to hatch a plan and turn a hobby into a job.

We got other (proper) jobs for the year while we waited for each other to finish our studies before returning to Swansea to start the company properly. The reason for starting out in Swansea had everything to do with Volcano, the goodwill and encouragement of those at the Taliesin Theatre, the lower cost of living, and the prospect of immediately being a small fish in a small pond. We felt that in being anywhere else, even Cardiff, we would get swamped in the clamour for new companies to get noticed.

We formed the company proper under the name Frantic Theatre Company Limited in 1994 on a government scheme called Enterprise Allowance. In real terms this meant being unemployed for at least six weeks and taking a £10 pay cut from your Job Seekers' Allowance and attending seminars and meetings on finance and business. Being on the scheme meant that we did not have to sign on for the year as we built the business up. Enterprise Allowance contributed £30 a week to each of our wages and the company added another £10.

We had decided that our approach to building the company would be all or nothing. We would not get part-time jobs so that we could concentrate fully on Frantic. This mostly meant tapping out letters to artistic directors on an old typewriter, stuffing envelopes and waiting for the phone to ring.

Our first tour saw us take a radical reworking of *Look Back In Anger* to mystified audiences in arts centres throughout Wales and a few dates in England.

With each production came an intense learning curve gained from working with a talented freelance choreographer. Their input was our training. We had little more to offer than boundless energy and enthusiasm (which of course

should never be underestimated). We were also brave and driven both in our desire to try new things and make an impact on the theatrical world. *Look Back In Anger* was our way in. From then on we felt that we could do what we wanted.

That has meant the odd distraction and the odd blind alley but we have always been lucky enough to make our own mistakes and honest enough to learn from them.

Throughout this book we will refer to past productions and specific scenes from past shows. An anthology of our work can be found on this book's companion website: [www.routledge.com/cw/graham](http://www.routledge.com/cw/graham). Further information for all productions can be found on the Frantic Assembly website: [www.franticassembly.co.uk](http://www.franticassembly.co.uk).

## **Artistic aims of the company**

Frantic Assembly is one of the UK's leading contemporary theatre companies, producing thrilling, energetic and uncompromising theatre, constantly attracting new audiences. In collaboration with a wide variety of artists, Frantic Assembly continues to create new work that places equal emphasis on movement, design, music and text. Since its formation in 1994 Frantic Assembly has toured extensively throughout the UK and abroad, establishing a reputation for excellence with work which combines striking physicality and the best new writing. In addition to its productions Frantic Assembly is deeply committed to its extensive Learn and Train programme which has run since the company's inception and now serves over 6,000 participants each year reaching every county of England and throughout the UK and across the world. In addition, Frantic Assembly also run the highly successful Ignition programme aimed at bringing raw male talent into the sector, much in the same way its founding artistic directors were drawn into and encouraged to develop within theatre. This is a nationwide initiative focusing on unearthing untapped talent in sports, youth groups and those not in education or employment.

## **How can this book help you?**

Sometimes we have had suggestions to structure the exercises in this book into a kind of beginners/intermediate/advanced format. There is a little resistance to this on our part as we don't believe that it is necessarily the exercise that is 'advanced' but how you apply it and who you apply it to. Some of the more apparently simple exercises can be used by professionals of great experience to access new movement and see things in new ways. Similarly we believe that each exercise aims for a simplicity of building blocks that should offer something to the more inexperienced practitioner/student/teacher. We

urge you not to see any of the exercises as off limits because you might define yourself as beginner/intermediate/advanced. The process for Scribble (see Chapter 2) remains the same when used by young students as it does when used by experienced dancers. That the results will be different (possibly in style and quality) does not matter. The process is not about replicating our version that appeared in *Beautiful Burnout*. The process is there to open up different possibilities for you and those involved. The scene was *our* result from the process. What will *yours* be?

That said, it would be churlish not to offer some guidance to using this book. Not that there is a secret blueprint to getting the best out of this book. Any guidance we offer is merely us guessing what might work for you! And what about you? Are you a teacher, a curious student, an actor, a dancer, a director? Experienced? Are you looking to get sweaty? Do you want to get your group lifting? Are you working with a large group? Are you trying to work with text? Are you making work from scratch?

OK, let's try this. From this point you might want to jump past Chapter 1, 'Frantic essays' (we need to think of a better word than essays!) and get stuck in. Fine. If that works for you. We are not suggesting you do, just trying to guess where you are coming from.

Can we recommend you have a look at 'Why warm up?' (page 91) before you get started? Setting the initial tone can be so important. As they say, you never get a second chance to make a first impression.

Even if you are gagging to get stuck in, don't overlook the rest of the 'Suggestions for constructive warm-ups' section (page 100). Those simple, calm exercises go a long way in influencing the quality of the more dynamic and 'advanced' exercises.

You can see there are a few warm-up games to pick from. Clear The Space is your bog standard but is so important for breaking down any inhibitions about touching and physical contact. Even experienced performers appreciate the opportunity to play a silly game and get a lot of hugs coming their way first thing in the morning.

If you have a boisterous group that are a little afraid or prejudiced against what they think drama or theatre might be then go for the recognisable simplicity of Relays. Like Clear The Space it subtly works its magic on the group.

Quad can be used with all levels of ability and can be returned to every day as it is a useful tool to show how a group are progressing. It introduces participants to the task of moving and counting within music too.

To be fair (and contradicting ourselves slightly) you might get the best results from Marcia Take Down with a slightly more experienced group. That does not mean it is not worth trying though!

Chapter 4, 'Choreography' should be accessible and relevant to all levels. Passives (in 'New physical vocabulary/restrictions and freedom') is fairly

simple exercise that might actually be more relevant to the experienced performer who has got stuck in their movement palette. That said it should still take the body to new positions. When looking at these exercises, do not think about the end product as defined by our productions. Look for the building blocks that support the process. These are the most important parts and what make the processes accessible.

‘Advanced exercise – pushing the potential’ suggests just that. Ok, you have got us there. Maybe these are more advanced but maybe they are also a way of returning to a simple process and rethinking its end point. Ideally, this is how you look at any of the processes. Ask yourself, ‘How can I take the building blocks and create something new and relevant to my theatrical aspirations?’

If you are working on a production, then Chapter 5, ‘Devising and words’, could be a rich source but, again, please do not presume that any aspect of this book is irrelevant just because it refers to an existing or dead show. Everything in this book is here to suggest a way of moving forward. Chapter 2, ‘Scenes and their Creation’, is not a history lesson. It is about offering up the processes to the work you want to make today.

Which brings us back to Chapter 1, ‘Frantic essays’ (still working on a better title). They are not musings from a comfy leather armchair. They are here because they are discoveries that have opened up our understanding of how we can make work. They are often Eureka moments. We offer them here as a response to the comments we hear from students/teachers/practitioners as they struggle to make their own work. They might offer a new way of looking at the problem, or a new way of getting over it. So have a look and see if they answer the question even if you haven’t asked it yet.

## **A glossary of terms**

It struck us that, at times, you might not know what we are talking about. We hope this helps.

<i>A String of material</i>	Through our devising processes, participants are usually set tasks to come up with several moves to be retained and performed in a specific order. This is often referred to as a string of material.
<i>Contact work</i>	The more lifty side of choreography. When actors bump up against each other.
<i>Beats per minute</i>	The, er, beats per minute contained within a music track. Has a profound effect on the listener.
<i>Gestural</i>	Gestural can be considered movement based on gesture. Or more simply, movement based on arm

	and hand movements. It can be incredibly detailed choreography.
<i>Unison</i>	Identical movement. An absolute minefield!
<i>Canon</i>	More complex group work. Or what happens when unison goes wrong.
<i>Core strength</i>	Referring to the internal muscles that offer control and stability
<i>Building Block</i>	At the heart of how we disseminate our creative devising processes (see Building blocks).
<i>Transitions</i>	Often when performing newly created choreography you can see where sections and moves have been joined and learned. You have to work on these transitions to create a smooth, flowing piece of movement.
<i>Calippo</i>	An iced lolly. Also, the perfect inspiration for a group lift that appears and feels fairly effortless.

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part one  
documentation



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