Exploring The Open-Ended Play Through Devised Stage Direction

Submitted by

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Abstract

Stage directors have created endless strategies for approaching theatrical productions with both traditional and experimental narratives. However, the terms "traditional" and "experimental" do not encompass all theatrical genres. New works are always surfacing and pushing the boundaries of what has previously existed. One such work is *Chaos* by Laura Lomas. This work is "open-ended": it contains a non-linear plot and focuses more on thematic ideas rather than character and environment. How does a stage director approach a work like *Chaos*? When traditional story elements and narratives (realistic settings, three-dimensional characters, and complex relationships) are not clearly defined, the director must find new methods of making the story clear. Currently, there are no defining methods for directors approaching works of this type. This fall, I directed *Chaos* at Oakland University as a means of exploring different directorial methods. The goal of this project was to find effective rehearsal strategies for approaching open-ended works like *Chaos* in order to craft a unified and coherent production that offers a cathartic experience for the audience.

Current Research

      For a stage director, there are many methods to approaching a theatrical production. Depending on the nature of the piece, that method will inevitably have to shift to meet its demands. Over time, theatre has continued to evolve and change, and although the "conventional" story (one that follows Freytag's curve, or the three-act story structure of setup, confrontation, and resolution) has not become outdated, it has been joined by numerous additional types of stories that break these formats. It seems that some "non-conventional" pieces contain less context (information on location, environment, and character) than conventional works, which makes them more open-ended, allowing for multiple interpretations. How, then, does the director approach something that is so open-ended?

      Professional stage directors may gain inspiration for how to approach open-ended theatre from classical opera or Shakespeare, since they are limited in some aspects (such as societal context) due to age. Both of these require the director to choose a bold and unified vision to give additional context to the audience.

      For instance, a great director such as Sarah Caldwell may first approach an opera by analyzing the original libretto, listening to the score, and researching biographical information about the composer (Bendikas 119). She would then form a creative vision and environment for the show based on that analysis. Once a clear and bold vision that serves the text is established, a director may choose one or more directorial approaches that, in their mind, best serve the production. The piece remains collaborative, but the director is making decisions based on their overall creative vision.

Devised Theatre (i.e., theatre that is built from the ground up, contains no script, and is usually the result of a group collaboration) could be thought of as the ultimate "open-ended" piece, but it has many distinct methodologies for approaching it. Thomas Perucci, a professor at the University of North Carolina, offers a method of 3 axes, where performers "create with: 1) the concrete materials of performance; 2) image and spectacle; and 3) a critical engagement with a problem" (Perucci). These types of pieces shift the ownership of the creative vision to the entire company of performers and director, since it is being conceived in the rehearsal room. Some companies also come up with an "inquiry question" that prompts how and why they will construct a devised piece (Thorpe & Gore 75). Other companies, such as Tectonic Theatre, use something called "the hunch," which involves capturing the intuitive reactions people have to everyday interactions and using those reactions to create meaningful moments on stage (Kaufman & McAdams 154). While there may not be a definitive method for creating a work of devised theatre, there is plenty of research that will guide or facilitate the devising process.

An unseen challenge lies within the open-ended play; for it already contains material (the script) that must be honored (unlike a devised piece), and it does not contain lyrics and melody, which is an added layer of material that can be analyzed for contextual clues about character and environment within opera and even contemporary musical theatre. The open-ended play walks the line between scripted and unscripted, so how can a director put up a show that both honors the script, is meaningful to the audience, and upholds the proper relationship between director and performer?

This research will analyze multiple open-ended plays in search of a common method for fruitful direction. The emphasis will be on Laura Lomas's *Chaos*, a recently published work that

is made up of multiple disconnected and unrelated scenes threaded together under similar themes. Ideally, strong direction of a piece like this would gather versatility for the new stage director. The skills needed to interpret and execute a play that does contain context for environment and character would be strengthened, as the open-ended play challenges the director to go beyond what is on the page. Additionally, the open-ended play may introduce a director to methods of devised theatre, offering them additional skills and techniques for exploring other genres. Similarly, these methodologies can help strengthen the director's overall ability to create and collaborate with their team.

Aims and Objectives

Introduction

Chaos is an open-ended, non-linear theatrical work that shifts rapidly between thematic ideas and relationships that embody the feeling of chaos. How does a stage director approach a work like *Chaos*? For my project, I directed *Chaos* and used the process to experiment with different directorial techniques in hopes of sculpting a consistent method for approaching this type of work. In doing so, I used my findings to fill in gaps in current theatrical research, specifically the stage direction of open-ended plays.

Aims

1. To define the characteristics that make up an open-ended theatrical work such as *Chaos.*

2. To research other open-ended works with similar characteristics to that of *Chaos*.

3. To apply and experiment with different styles of stage direction through *Chaos.*

4. To construct a method for stage directors looking to direct open-ended theatrical works.

Objectives

1. Define the characteristics of a work like *Chaos* in order to give context for the research and reader, as well as explain how it differs from a "traditional narrative."

2. Research other open-ended works in addition to *Chaos* in order to further clarify the general characteristics of the genre that *Chaos* fits into, as well as to spotlight characteristics that are unique to *Chaos*.

3. Experiment with a wide variety of directing styles while working on *Chaos* to assess what strategies are most effective for approaching this work.

4. Construct a method for directing open-ended works in order to give new and experienced stage directors more confidence in their ability to approach works such as *Chaos.*

Methodology

The beginning of this research consisted of defining the characteristics of an open-ended play. If the characteristics are not clearly defined, then there will be no way of discerning what type of work *Chaos* actually is.

Chaos has three main characteristics that I believe categorize it as open-ended. The first of which is a lack of given circumstances. This means that the playwright vaguely outlined (but did not define) the who, what, where, and when of each scene. It is up to the director and the company to create those circumstances for themselves, which gives a lot of room for different interpretations. Hence, open-endedness.

Second, the plot of *Chaos* is non-linear, meaning it has no traditional beginning or end, and it does not flow the same way that a "traditional" narrative would. It is also worth mentioning that *Chaos* explores a multiverse of sorts within its script. Scenes are repeated throughout the show, but with small details changed. These details are changed to demonstrate the butterfly effect, one of *Chaos'* larger thematic ideas. The idea that one small choice can lead to a drastically different series of events is heavily prevalent in this work. The non-linear plot adds to this idea by taking away a clear storyline to focus on. After all, if the audience is wondering what's going to happen to the characters in the story next, they are less likely to pay attention to thematic ideas.

This brings us to the third open-ended characteristic: heightened, enigmatic dialogue. The dialogue in *Chaos* has a couple of distinct forms that are repeated throughout the piece: short,

poetic phrases and large, completely isolated monologues. These monologues feel akin to a person spouting their greatest fears out loud and often narrate a traumatic event from the character's past. What does the heightened dialogue do for our open-ended story? Similarly to the non-linear plot, it creates a focus on thematic ideas rather than character. The audience will not necessarily understand every single interaction happening throughout the show, but they will understand the repetition of the distinct forms of dialogue. The audience will view the speeches less for their content and more for their impact, which is essentially what Lomas was trying to accomplish from the beginning. Lomas wants the audience to feel what the characters are saying through the form of the dialogue rather than listen closely to the specific things being said. Repetition is also a key part of *Chaos'* dialogue. Words that are specifically tied to the themes of the piece (butterflies, bouncing balls, flowers, chaos) are mentioned by multiple characters in different scenes. Again, repetition helps the audience grasp onto something familiar in dialogue that may not be easy to understand on a first viewing.

Aristotle stated that there are six main elements of drama: plot, character, theme, dialogue, music, and spectacle (Aristotle 7). Based on the discussions above, it seems that *Chaos* focuses on theme and moves away from plot, character, and dialogue. Music and spectacle have their own place in the open-ended work and will be discussed later on. I decided to look at two other plays that I believe to be open-ended and see which elements of drama they focus on.

The first of these works is *Love and Information* by Caryl Churchill. This is a play that is divided into seven acts, each of which contains multiple, open-ended scenes. According to the playwright's instructions, the acts must be done in order, but the scenes within each act can be

ordered however the company wants. Characters in the show are not defined or repeated, and there are few stage directions. Each scene is named with a singular word or phrase that captures the topic (for example, "Decision"), the relationship ("Wife"), or the theme ("Grief") of the scene. Like the name of the play implies, each of the scenes explores different aspects of love (such as the different relationships and circumstances that love can be present in) as well as information (how humankind gathers, uses, and processes different types of information).

In summary, the structure of this work is very similar to that of *Chaos*: it is non-linear, and the given circumstances are not defined. The main way that it differs from *Chaos* is in the dialogue. Dialogue is much clearer now (full, human-sounding sentences are spoken), which helps each scene have a bit more concrete meaning. This means that out of Aristotle's six elements of drama, *Love and Information* focuses not only on theme but also dialogue. Still, the plot seems to be thrown to the side in favor of the other elements.

The other work I looked at was *The Bald Soprano* by Eugene Ionesco. This work has been categorized as absurdist (a work that showcases the struggle of humanity to find meaning in a meaningless world), but I believe there are enough similarities between this and the other works above to also categorize it as open-ended.

A difference between *The Bald Soprano* and the other works we have discussed so far is that the plot is linear. The show revolves around two couples, the Martins and the Smiths, who spend the play engaging in incoherent and meaningless conversations. At the end of the play, the couples are arguing intensely as the lights fade out, but they rise again to show the Martins

repeating the same dialogue that the Smiths started the play with. This makes the work feel almost cyclical, similar to the patterns in language and form within *Chaos*.

As mentioned before, the dialogue in this show is almost completely nonsensical, as there is a complete lack of listening between all characters. However, this actually makes the characters themselves more defined than in *Chaos* or *Love and Information,* since the type of nonsensical language used by each character is unique. So, even though the plot is linear, it is not the focus of the dramatic elements, since the dialogue prevents the plot from being (and needing to be) understood. Overall, I believe that this show focuses on theme and character and once again downplays plot and dialogue.

Within all of these plays, theme is the first and foremost element of drama at play. Therefore, an open-ended play could be described as a play that focuses on theme and intentionally makes some of the other elements (dialogue, character, and plot) open to interpretation to boast a bigger focus on theme. The other two elements of drama, music and spectacle, are, in my opinion, a bit separated from the four elements we have been discussing so far. Especially in straight plays, music and spectacle are not always written in and are a choice to be put in by the director to add to a specific moment. In the case of an open-ended play, I think it can always be helpful to add music and spectacle (that is, a visibly striking moment) to help further define and develop an abstract moment. This could be in the form of creating tension or recognition for the audience, or adding a visual aid to define the events of the scene being spoken onstage. The opening scene of *Chaos,* entitled "Train," has a singular speaker describing a personal traumatic experience of watching someone get hit by a train. As the director, I chose to

have the rest of the actors onstage, acting out the scene as various parts of the event (some

portrayed people at the station, others portrayed the train itself). This is an added layer of

spectacle that was not in the script, but I felt was needed to make the weight of the speaker's

words land on the audience.

In conclusion, an open-ended play focuses first and foremost on themes and can be

further supported by music and spectacle. The plot of an open-ended play will not necessarily

focus on what happens next (a chain reaction of actions that builds a coherent, linear storyline),

but rather showcase multiple moments that explore the themes of the play. Dialogue and

character development will be used only to support the thematic ideas of the show.

Now that the characteristics of an open-ended play have been defined, it is time to define

some directorial strategies that I brought into the rehearsal room during *Chaos*. Knowing the

demands and characteristics of the show, there were three distinct strategies I brought into the

room.

The first strategy is something I like to call soft-blocking. This strategy consists of me

knowing the ins and outs of a scene and labeling moments that I believe require movement.

Beyond that, I will work with the actors in the rehearsal room to find a blocking path that fits

their bodies and communicates the moments of the scene well. This strategy is largely a

collaboration between the director and the actors, as I know what I am looking for in the scene,

but all parties work together to make something that everyone feels good about.

As an example, *Chaos* contains a scene titled "Depression." This scene focuses around

two characters, one of whom is refusing to come out of their room. The other character's job is to

try and convince the other to come out of the room. For the two characters onstage, I placed one on the ground behind a stage cube and the other in front of the cube, simulating a door. I had three other moments in the scene that I believed needed movement from one or both characters, but I chose not to prescribe that prior to rehearsal. I wanted to see what the scene looked like in the rehearsal space and figure it out from there with the actors. Soft blocking is like giving yourself the ingredients for a meal but figuring out the recipe in the moment.

The second strategy I used was moment-to-moment work. This is a strategy used for a scene with little movement and a heavier focus on dialogue and relationships. With this strategy, I label each "moment" of the scene, in which there is a shift between the characters onstage and what they are trying to get from each other. Each of these "moments," or beats, can be used to guide the actors vocally and emotionally through a scene. This strategy can be helpful when a scene is complex, but the actors cannot rely as much on movement to guide them through it.

The thematic structures of *Chaos* come into play specifically when looking at moment-to-moment work. In the opening scene mentioned earlier, entitled "Train," the movement and music I added in were ultimately guided by the singular speaker retelling the experience of watching someone get hit by a train. The inevitable passing of time and the grief that the speaker retroactively feels about this event needed to be portrayed in their vocal and physical choices. Those themes are specific, so the actor's choices for vocality and physicality needed to be specific as well. Since the scene did not have any written beats or pauses, I prepared some on my own, turning what looked like a daunting monologue into something much more manageable.

The last strategy I used was prepared blocking. This strategy is essentially the same as choreography: I will tell the actors where and when to go onstage and often feed them a reason why they are moving in that moment. This is specifically reserved for complex, fast-moving scenes, which *Chaos* has a lot of. It is especially needed when the rehearsal process is short and there is little time for exploration in the room.

Chaos' themes needed to be explored physically, so there was a lot of "choreography" involved. The final scene of the show (also titled "Chaos") consists of many interactions from previous scenes meshed together in a confusing, fast, and chaotic manner. In order for this scene to have any relevance to the themes of the show (in this case, the human experience of dealing with chaos), it needed to feel sporadic, random, and unpredictable. So, I needed to prepare blocking in such a way that created that feeling. Making sure I knew how I wanted to translate the theme onstage prior to rehearsal is what kept the process moving forward. Each of these three strategies had its place in the *Chaos* rehearsal room, with varying results.

IRB

This project does not involve human subject research and does not require IRB approval.

Discussions

The success of directorial strategies will differ greatly from production to production due to a wide variety of factors. Some of these factors include the level of experience within the acting company, the space being used, and the vision of the production.

With that in mind, prepared blocking was the most effective directorial strategy I used during the process of *Chaos*. Since the script required me to create a very specific vision for each scene, it became easier for me to simply explain what I was looking for to the actors rather than have them find what I was looking for on their own. That's not to say that there were not moments entirely created by the actors within the show.

Soft blocking was used a few times successfully throughout the show, and I reserved this strategy for the more experienced actors in the company. They were used to making choices with movement and storytelling, and once I had explained my interpretation of the arc of a scene, they got to have fun finding movements within it. I'm glad to say that some of the less experienced actors observed what the others were doing and began to find freedom in their movement as well. Once they realized what they were capable of, it sort of unlocked a new creativity within them.

For the scene "Depression," my soft blocking preparation was successful. Placing one actor behind a cube and one on the opposite side gave the two actors some confines to work in, rather than having them navigate a blank, open space. After the general layout had been established, we worked together to find some shifts in the scene that would allow for movement from both actors, giving them motivation for their lines and also allowing them to play to different sides of the audience.

Moment-to-moment work was, at first, unsuccessful. I believe this is because I overcomplicated my direction too early on in the process. I had made the moments too short and too subtle for my actors, which confused them and led to a lesser understanding of the scene. However, once the groundwork had been laid for the show and the company had a better idea of what it was we were trying to communicate to the audience, moment-to-moment work became infinitely more productive. One big takeaway from this process was that it is always good to start bigger with notes and fixes before getting into the nitty-gritty. Using moment-to-moment work at the beginning of the process made things too complicated for the actors, until they understood the bigger picture of what was happening. Then, it provided nuance and shifts in vocality and physicality. In the case of "Train," I actually added additional movement for the speaker in the scene, to help them physicalize their changes from moment to moment (as well as keep the audience focused on them).

All of these directorial strategies were successful, and all for different reasons. However, all of the success came from the same attributes: preparation and collaboration. The clearer my preparation was, the easier it was for my actors to catch on and add on to each scene. There was one scene I initially worked through using moment-to-moment work and then decided to reblock entirely with prepared blocking. This unlocked the scene both vocally and physically for both of the actors and brought out a growth in their performance that I had not seen up to that point. It was a truly special moment in the process. I realized that my preparation using moment-to-moment work was unhelpful for where the actors were in their process, so I decided to scrap it and go back to the drawing board. Each strategy has its place in the director's toolbox; it was up to me as the director to see what strategy served the demands of the scene the best.

Conclusions

As I've learned during my artistic journey, there is no one surefire way to create a theatrical production worth watching. However, there are many strategies that I utilized during *Chaos* that I believe strengthened the cathartic response of the show.

The first, and perhaps most important, strategy is preparation. The more time that a director can sit with a script prior to auditions and rehearsals, the better. Some of the things that I did during my preparation of *Chaos* were defining the given circumstances of each moment (this was especially needed since little was given in the script), assigning meaning to each line and moment of the script (researching words I did not know, noting punctuation and motifs, etc.), and preparing movement for the critical "moments" of the piece. All of this preparation aided me in the rehearsal process, as I was able to communicate in great detail what I was looking for from the very beginning.

The second, and perhaps most inevitable, aspect of stage directing is being able to change ideas while in the room. Preparation is key, but it does not always hold the correct answer for how to stage a particular moment. Once in the rehearsal room, a line may sit differently in a particular actor than I may have envisioned it. This means that the movement I have planned for that moment no longer makes sense. However, this is not a bad thing. Often, if an actor does something I am not expecting, it may open me up to more possibilities for a scene. In the case of an open-ended play such as *Chaos,* having collaborators pitch ideas and interpretations helped me further develop the strongest choices for a scene. The group productivity went beyond what I as the director could do on my own, which creates a very satisfying feeling of unity for the company.

The last and most mysterious aspect of stage directing is factoring in the audience. Since the audience will change radically from performance to performance, how can the director possibly plan for how they will affect the performance? In short, they cannot. However, a good stage director creates a performance that is so well developed, specific, and devastating that even the most muted audience members will have a visceral cathartic reaction. That is the ultimate goal.

After the opening night of *Chaos,* a peer came up to me, and his hands were shaking, and he could barely speak. He said to me, "I have no idea what I just witnessed, but I think it was the most incredible thing I've ever seen." For me, this was the moment that I knew I had succeeded in creating a successful production of *Chaos*. My peer had not known about the open-endedness of the script or the difficulties I had getting the piece to opening night. All he had seen was the final product, which had specified *Chaos* into something that was so specific and devastating that it gave him a visceral, cathartic reaction. Open-ended or not, the play still accomplished its goal, and I was happy to have been a part of that process.

Overall, my process of directing *Chaos* was successful because I met the demands of the script. Since it was open to interpretation, I created specific environments and characters for each scene. I aided the heightened dialogue with abstract movement and music in order to make it more clear to the audience. I took the ideas of my collaborators and focused them into something that created a logical throughline for the piece. All of this was done in support of communicating the themes of the play, which I deemed earlier to be the most important dramatic element of *Chaos*. I took what the play gave me, and brought it to life. And for me, I believe that is what makes a successful production of an open-ended play.

Biographical Note

My name is Brady Jacot, and I am a B.A. Theatre Major, with minors in Music (applied, in percussion) and Communications. As an artist, branding is important to success. It is the artist's brand that sets them apart from others and makes them marketable. My personal brand is versatility. I have explored many different disciplines within the arts during my undergraduate work at OU: I have worked as an actor, stage manager, comedian, percussionist, lighting designer, and now a director. My goal is to cultivate this versatility in order to generate my own work and eventually form a theatre company. In order to do that, I continue to seek out experiences in all aspects of the theatre, both on the artistic side and the administrative side. I believe that this research has broadened my knowledge of directing and the industry. Experimenting with new directorial techniques on *Chaos* has given me the chance to practically apply theoretical work in a low-stress environment. Even when I found out that certain techniques were not a good fit for this piece, they were still added to my personal directorial toolbox. It has given me confidence to pursue other types of theatre work (such as devised work) that could populate my future company as well. Overall, directing is an art form that inherently educates the artist in multiple areas of the theatre. Exploring new directorial techniques has benefited me in every aspect of the arts I work in.

Thank You

I have truly enjoyed every moment of my time at Oakland University. The diverse number of ways to get involved, specifically in the theatre program, have been invaluable in helping me become a well-rounded artist. I would like to thank all of my professors for allowing and trusting me to work in so many different areas of the theatre, advising me when I needed help, and correcting me when I've made a mistake. I would like to give a special thanks to my faculty mentor, Professor David Gram, who is traveling overseas while I am writing this. I appreciate your willingness to guide me through this process, even during your sabbatical leave. I would also like to thank Dr. Beckwith for her support of my creative thesis project from the very beginning. Last but not least, I would like to thank my friends, family, and peers for their continued support and inspiration throughout my time at Oakland University. Without your help, I may not have had the courage to begin my journey into this industry. Now, in my last semester, I feel confident that I have the tools to succeed.

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