



WE TEACH DRAMA
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Plan and Teach Devised Theatre

Rethinking stimulus, process and practice
A practical PDF guide for drama teachers

About We Teach Drama

“Utterly professional, completely brilliant!”

Kathryn Torbet, Drama specialist- Principal Teachers

We Teach Drama supports teachers to plan boldly, teach confidently and bring professional theatre practice into the classroom.

What began in 2021 as a series of practical webinars has grown into an international platform working with schools, theatres and arts organisations. Our focus is simple: clear curriculum thinking, creative process, and beautifully designed resources that genuinely support classroom practice.

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Our work

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Charlotte Watkins, Teacher of Drama- Hampton High

“Informative, inspiring and insightful!”

Michelle Serrechia, Head of Drama - William Howard School

“Amazing! So useful and translatable to the classroom.”

Justine Arif, Drama Teacher - Sandringham School

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How this resource is structured

The resource is organised around three recurring challenges:

1. Selecting a stimulus that sustains the work
2. Getting students doing, not just discussing
3. Ownership, autonomy and the teacher role

Each section includes:

- teacher and practitioner voice (shared verbatim)
- three practical classroom approaches

An appendix includes additional resources and student-facing handouts.

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About this resource

This resource has been created for drama teachers working with devised theatre in secondary and post-16 settings.

It brings together:

- classroom strategies
- teacher and practitioner experience
- ideas shared during the webinar '*Plan & Teach Devised Theatre: Rethinking Stimulus and Theme*'

In **January 2026**, we ran this webinar with **nearly 200 drama teachers** from the UK and international contexts. During the session - and in follow-up reflections - teachers shared their questions, challenges and successes when teaching devised theatre.

At the end of the webinar, teachers were invited to contribute their **most effective devising stimuli**. Their responses, alongside practitioner insights, are shared throughout this resource as quotes, examples and practical starting points.

This is not a linear guide. It is designed to be **picked up, dipped into and returned to** at different stages of the devising process, reflecting the non-linear nature of devised theatre itself.



Devised Theatre: the context

“They want to fix the story early because it feels safer.”

Teacher feedback

Devised theatre places process at the centre of theatre-making. Rather than beginning with a finished script, work emerges through collaboration, experimentation and rehearsal.

In classrooms, students are often asked to:

- generate original material
- work collaboratively and physically
- tolerate uncertainty
- make decisions before ideas feel secure

This resource focuses on how devising actually works in practice: through play, repetition, return and refinement.

For a fuller overview of the roots of devised theatre and its relevance to classroom practice, see the handout ***Devised Theatre: Origins, Evolution and the Classroom*** in the Appendix (p. 37).



Section 1 - Theme

When teaching devised theatre, it can be more productive to begin with a broad theme rather than a single stimulus.

A theme acts as a conceptual container. It provides focus and direction while still allowing students freedom to explore multiple interpretations and ideas.

Common themes in drama classrooms include:



These themes are intentionally open. They do not dictate narrative, but they create a shared frame that can sustain exploration over time.

Why Theme Helps

Starting with a theme allows teachers and students to work with:

- multiple stimuli rather than relying on one
- contrasting viewpoints
- a range of theatrical forms

Within a single theme, students might explore:

- images and articles
- music and sound
- objects and installations
- movement scores
- practitioner techniques

This prevents any one stimulus from being exhausted too quickly and encourages deeper, more layered devising

“The theme gives them something to return to, even when the original stimulus has changed.”

Teacher feedback



Theme as a Flexible Frame

A theme should remain open and negotiable. Students do not need to agree on its meaning at the outset. Instead, meaning can emerge through:

- making
- revisiting
- refining
- reworking material

One theme can generate multiple responses across a group, supporting originality rather than uniformity.

From Theme to Stimulus

Once a theme is established, a range of stimuli can be introduced within it.

For example, within the theme of Protest, students might explore:

- photographs of demonstrations
- protest songs or chants
- personal testimonies
- symbolic objects
- physical actions such as blocking or resisting

Layering stimuli in this way allows the work to be revisited and refreshed throughout the process, rather than relying on a single starting point.

The following section explores how to select and work with stimulus within a theme so that it continues to sustain the devising process.

“The theme holds the work, but it doesn’t tell them what to say.”

Practitioner reflection



Devising

Section 2: Challenge 1

“Students often want to create a complete story and fix the narrative early on.”

Webinar participant

Selecting a stimulus that sustains the work

Devised projects rarely stall because students lack ideas. More often, momentum is lost when a stimulus is settled too quickly, leaving little room for return, reinterpretation or development.

During the January 2026 webinar, many teachers identified this as a recurring challenge:

Working with a **shared theme** and multiple stimuli helps prevent this. Rather than relying on a single starting point, teachers can introduce and revisit different provocations that sit within the same thematic frame.

The three approaches below explore how teachers successfully select and work with stimulus so that it continues to generate material throughout the devising process.



“I think an installation is brilliant as different students will naturally be drawn towards different elements of it.”

Carly Smith

Teaching approach 1: Theme as environment and provocation

One effective way of introducing stimulus is to create an environment that students physically enter and explore, rather than presenting a single image or text to interpret.

This approach encourages experience before explanation and allows students to generate individual responses within a shared theme.

Carly Smith describes using installation-based stimulus as a starting point:

“I think an installation is brilliant as different students will naturally be drawn towards different elements of it.”

By working in silence and responding physically, students are less likely to fix meaning too early and more likely to discover material through exploration.

This approach works particularly well when introducing broad themes such as Protest, The Outsider or Power and Status, where multiple perspectives can coexist within the same space.

→ Read the full case study of Carly Smith [here](#) (Appendix A p.27)

→ Our Blog on [Five Engaging Ways to use Impact Sessions](#) explores this further.



“...immediately accessible, open to multiple interpretations, and [inviting] physical, emotional and imaginative responses without privileging language.”

Henrietta Stathopoulos

Teaching approach 2: Theme explored through ambiguous, open texts

Many teachers identify images as one of the most effective sustaining stimuli, particularly when they are ambiguous and emotionally open.

Henrietta Stathopoulos describes images as

“immediately accessible, open to multiple interpretations, and [inviting] physical, emotional and imaginative responses without privileging language.”

She goes on to note that:

“As ambiguous texts, they generate strong questions rather than fixed narratives, making them ideal for sustained devising work in the classroom.”

Within a shared theme, images can be revisited multiple times and explored through different theatrical elements - movement, composition, spatial relationships - allowing students' understanding of the theme to deepen through practice rather than discussion alone.

→ Read the full case study of Henrietta Stathopoulos [here](#) (Appendix p.29)

“I realised quite a few years ago that I probably wasn’t giving students enough time for individual exploration and response.”

Lucy Bellingham

Teaching approach 3: Allow time for individual exploration before group devising

One of the most consistent reflections shared during the webinar was the importance of giving students **time to respond individually** to a stimulus or theme before working in groups.

This stage is often rushed or skipped altogether, yet it plays a crucial role in helping students develop confidence, originality and ownership.

Lucy Bellingham reflected on a shift in her own practice:

“I realised quite a few years ago that I probably wasn’t giving students enough time for individual exploration and response.”

When students move too quickly into group discussion, ideas can become diluted or dominated by more confident voices. Individual exploration allows each student to form a **personal relationship** with the stimulus or theme before negotiating meaning collectively.

As Lucy also noted during the webinar:

“We want to give them that individual thinking and creating time before they bring ideas into the rehearsal room.”

This approach supports deeper engagement with both **theme and stimulus** and often results in richer material once students begin devising together.

“We want to give them that individual thinking and creating time before they bring ideas into the rehearsal room.”

Lucy Bellingham

What individual exploration can look like

Individual exploration does not need to be lengthy or complex.

It works best when it is:

- low stakes
- varied in form
- quiet (or with atmospheric music playing)
- clearly framed as exploratory rather than evaluative

Below are examples of solo activities teachers use to help students respond to a theme or stimulus before group work begins.

1	Visual sketch response	<p>Students create a quick visual response to the stimulus or theme. This is not about artistic skill, but about capturing mood, energy, shape or contrast.</p> <p>Prompt: What does this stimulus feel like rather than what is it about?</p>
2	Mind map with constraints	<p>Students create a mind map, but with a specific rule, such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • no full sentences • only verbs • only sensory words <p>This encourages instinctive responses rather than over-thinking.</p>
3	Written questioning	<p>Students respond by writing questions rather than statements.</p> <p>Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who is missing here? • What isn't being shown? • Where might this take place? <p>This keeps interpretation open and avoids fixing narrative too early.</p>
4	Silent physical response	<p>Students respond physically on their own in the space - walking, gesturing or holding still - without being watched or discussed.</p> <p>This is particularly effective for students who struggle to articulate ideas verbally at an early stage.</p>
5	Collage or image curation	<p>Students select or create a small collection of images that respond to the theme or stimulus. These might be printed images, screenshots or drawn symbols.</p> <p>The focus is on selection, not explanation.</p>
6	First-thought writing (timed)	<p>Students write continuously for one or two minutes in response to the stimulus or theme.</p>

Rules:

- do not stop
- do not edit
- spelling and structure do not matter

This often reveals instinctive ideas students would not share aloud.

Once individual exploration is complete, students bring one idea, image or response into group work, rather than starting from nothing.

Why this matters

When stimulus is treated as an ongoing provocation within a shared theme, students are more likely to:

- resist fixing narrative too early
- take creative risks
- tolerate uncertainty
- sustain momentum across a project



Section 3: Challenge 2

“Students often want to create a complete story and fix the narrative early on.”

Lucy Bellingham

Getting students doing, not just discussing

Once a theme and stimulus are in place, many devised projects stall at the same point: students talk about ideas rather than trying them.

Teachers frequently describe rehearsals where:

- time is spent negotiating meaning
- ideas are dismissed before being tested
- practical exploration is delayed

As Lucy Bellingham noted during the webinar:

“Students often want to create a complete story and fix the narrative early on.”

The following approaches focus on **shifting the culture of rehearsals** so that action comes before explanation and confidence is built through making.

“What I’m trying to do is give them less time to think about what they’re doing - which sounds strange.”

Rob Otton

Teaching approach 1: Action before discussion

One of the most effective ways to reduce over-discussion is to begin with **practical tasks**, rather than questions or planning.

Once students start working in groups, Rob Otton described deliberately limiting thinking time at the start of devising and working more physically:

“What I’m trying to do is give them less time to think about what they’re doing - which sounds strange.”

By asking students to respond physically first, teachers:

- lower the stakes
- prevent ideas being dismissed too early
- encourage instinctive responses

Discussion still happens - but after something has been made.



“Five still images, then one line of dialogue - and keep it open”

Rob Otton

Teaching approach 2: Short, repeatable structures

Students often struggle when tasks feel too open. Short, repeatable structures give students clarity while keeping outcomes flexible.

Rob Otton shared a structure he uses regularly:

“Five still images, then one line of dialogue - and keep it open.”

Working with frameworks like this helps students:

- generate material quickly
- build confidence through repetition
- focus on making rather than planning

Head of Drama Carly Smith reinforces the value of tight structure:

“Give them really tight blocks of time for practical work.”



“Limitation lessons have worked really, really well for me.”

Rob Otton

Teaching approach 3: Constraint as a creative driver

Rather than offering unlimited choice, many teachers deliberately introduce constraints to push students into action.

Rob Otton reflected on the impact of this approach:

“Limitation lessons have worked really, really well for me.”

Constraints might include:

- no words
- repetition
- limited space
- strict time limits

Why this matters

When rehearsal culture prioritises doing over discussing, students are more likely to:

- take creative risks
- build momentum
- stay physically engaged
- generate material they can later refine

As Rob Otton succinctly put it:

“Short time limits stop overthinking.”



Section 4: Challenge 3

Ownership, autonomy and the teacher role

Devised theatre asks students to take responsibility for creative decisions - often before they feel ready to do so.

At the same time, teachers are balancing:

- guidance
- assessment
- time pressure

This can easily lead to the teacher stepping into a directing role, particularly when work feels unfocused or uncertain.

The approaches below explore how ownership can be supported and structured, rather than removed or enforced.

“What can we build in earlier, before devising, so that those foundations are already there?”

Lucy Bellingham

Teaching approach 1: Building autonomy through structure

Autonomy does not mean absence of structure. In fact, many teachers find that clear frameworks help students take ownership more confidently.

Lucy Bellingham reflected on the importance of foundations:

“What can we build in earlier, before devising, so that those foundations are already there?”

Structures might include:

- agreed rehearsal routines
- clear roles within groups
- shared expectations about experimentation

These help students understand how to work independently, not just that they should.

“Devising is messy - and it’s from that messiness that we get some really interesting work.”

Lucy Bellingham

Teaching approach 2: The teacher as facilitator, not director

Many teachers describe a shift from directing outcomes to facilitating process, particularly once students have begun to generate material independently.

Rather than shaping the work for students, this approach focuses on:

- holding the structure
- protecting time for exploration
- guiding attention without fixing decisions

Lucy Bellingham emphasised during the webinar that devising requires teachers to tolerate uncertainty alongside students:

“Devising is messy - and it’s from that messiness that we get some really interesting work.”

In practice, this often looks like:

- side coaching during action
- asking reflective questions rather than giving solutions
- allowing work to remain unfinished for longer

By resisting the urge to step in too quickly, teachers support students in developing confidence, resilience and genuine ownership of the work.

This is exemplified in Simon Burney from Complicite’s quote:

“I allow people to create, but I’m also marshalling everybody, which is difficult for my creativity, as I’m like a referee. Everybody else is kicking a ball. It is very messy. From the mess, though, you refine what is there.”



“I always ask students to come up with a plan for their following lesson.”

Carly Smith

Teaching approach 3: Sharing responsibility within the group

Ownership grows when responsibility is distributed across the ensemble, rather than held by one individual or the teacher.

Teachers support this by:

- rotating leadership roles
- using ‘outside eye’ structures
- making reflection a shared responsibility

Carly Smith highlights the importance of preparation and accountability:

“I always ask students to come up with a plan for their following lesson.”

This approach encourages students to see devising as collective work that requires commitment from everyone involved.

→ Read the full case study of Carly Smith **here** (Appendix p.27)

Why this matters

When ownership is supported rather than assumed, students are more likely to:

- take responsibility for creative decisions
- engage more consistently
- develop confidence as collaborators

For teachers, this shift allows space to observe, question and guide, rather than carry the work.

Appendix A

Devising Commedia dell'Arte

by Cheryl Stapleton, Learning Through Theatre

Commedia dell'Arte gives us the clearest early model for what we now call devised theatre and the methodology underpins our performance work at Learning Through Theatre. Working without directors or playwrights, the Commedia ensemble of actor-creators devised productions collaboratively working with familiar stock characters, an outline structure, improvising action and dialogue, rehearsing key sequences and collectively authoring original works. A capocomico would lead the ensemble, but more as a producer than as a director.

Starting Points

When Learning Through Theatre works as a performance ensemble, our starting point is a simple seed of an idea – often a physical, comic gag (a 'lazzo'). Our first show, 'Trouble Inn Paradise', began from a desire to master a 'sleight of hand' gag: three waiters toss (what appears to be) one tray of food from one to another across the stage. From this, we decided the setting would be a restaurant: the 'Inn Paradise'. Our second show, *The Breath of Love*, came from a desire to explore how we could bottle love for the Doctor to sell. The "Lazzo Of Trying To Bottle Love" came from that.

Playing in the Space

Taking these simple ideas, we start to play with them in a rehearsal space exploring

how to make the lazzo work, and with which characters. The drive here is to use childish play with improvisation games to generate adrenalin, creativity and more ideas. All the character masks are laid out, and we freely play with different masks to decide –

1. which masks we enjoy playing
2. which masks feel right for the gags
3. which masks are funniest for the gag.

From this free play session, we decide the main characters for the play and often have more lazzi (comic gags) and ideas of which direction the plot will take us in.

Narrative Arc: Creating a Canovaccio

We then spend a day working out a possible frame for the action – what is known in Commedia as a 'canovaccio'. Literally meaning 'canvas', this was the traditional starting point



Credit: Cheryl Stapleton, Learning Through Theatre.

for a Commedia troupe to devise from, being an outline frame of the scenes, character entrances and exits, together with key action points. The actors knew the order of action and roughly what happens, leaving space for devising how to get there. We consider which characters to put together to create conflict, and, with a whiteboard, we draw a narrative arc, onto which we jot action points, connecting those to characters and lazzi. We work with a small troupe of three – four performers (traditional troupes would have been 10-12 actors) – so we also consider who would be playing each character based on time for costume changes.



Credit: Cheryl Stapleton, Learning Through Theatre.

Walking the Arc

We enter the rehearsal room with this narrative arc that gives us a framework. We then walk the narrative to map it out on stage. We play the characters at very low energy to work out logistics of who's where when, how and why. This also highlights any potential problems in the narrative.

Improvising Scenes

Once we have a clear framework and characters defined, we begin improvising

stage action. Physical storytelling comes first, using the given movement repertoires and energies of the characters. The characters are the engine for the narrative and scenes begin to easily take shape when performers play to type. Their given hierarchy and typical behaviours define how a scene evolves, and their needs, desires, motivations and pre-determined relationships, rapidly develop the plot. We try to keep each scene to no longer than two minutes and no more than two characters on stage at the same time, for most of the play. Any actors not performing a scene will sit out front as an audience.

Thinking Cap

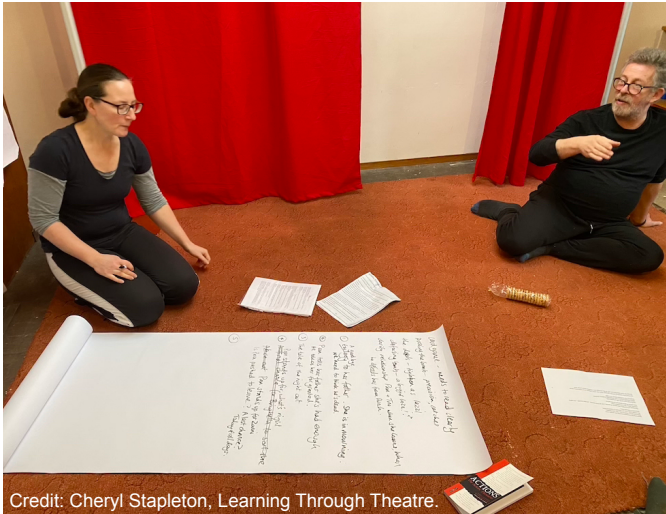
In order to keep the action flowing and to prevent us getting stuck on the detail of one scene, we have a Thinking Cap and a pile of post-it note size paper. The observer(s) of the scene jot down any thoughts, ideas, changes, edits they think of as they are watching. At the end of the day we take an hour or so to discuss the scenes covered that day and go through the comments in the Thinking Cap.

Choreography

We continue working on scenes in this way, and when we get to parts that are very physical or are lazzi, we choreograph sequences so that they are repeatable, safe and slick. There are often some dances, music and songs that we devise too and these get rehearsed each session. We also tend to video rehearsals to watch back and as a memory aid. The videos we either watch together and discuss or we share them in a cloud drive, make our own notes and share those over email so that rehearsal times are not eaten into with lengthy discussions.

Feeling the Rhythms

Once we have the scenes largely mapped out, some of the dialogue starts to stick as



Credit: Cheryl Stapleton, Learning Through Theatre.

these are cues for subsequent actions, but other dialogue continues to be improvised. We have found in the past that one of the risks of improvising dialogue is that we can lose the rhythms of the scene and the length can become elastic. Commedia uses a gestural language, conveying meaning through the body, the breath and spatial relationships, so dialogue needs to be minimal, and we keep reminding ourselves to strip it back and say less. To help with this, we do run-throughs using grammelot (gibberish language) instead of the actual words. The focus is on finding the energy, the beats, the proxemics of each scene so that they flow and the energy never drops. This applies to character monologues too. We then bring back in only the lines that we feel are absolutely necessary for the plot to make sense.

Stock speeches

Where there are monologues needed, performers develop these through rehearsal and then write them, adding these to the canovaccio. Monologue moments are useful devices to build into scenes as they allow the other performers to change costume as well as letting the audience into the character's mind. It is common for Pantalone to have a tirate to rant about his grievances, for Capitano to share a bravura about his prowess in battles,

for the Lovers to recite concetti in rehearsal for delivering the emotive speech to the one they love or for the Doctor to spout sproloquio to regale the audience on his academic excellence.

Audience

We regularly invite friends to join us in the rehearsal room to offer an outside eye and to be an audience to play off. It's impossible to know if the lazzi are funny or if more narrative context is needed if we don't have an audience.

Final Script

As the rhythm of the scenes is so important, rehearsed dialogues gradually become more set, particularly where fast repartee is needed between characters. By the time we come to perform, we have a script that is largely locked in and each actor will have a copy of their parts.

Take a look at Learning Through Theatre's resources here:

<https://learningthroughtheatre.co.uk/resources>

Appendix A

From Stimulus to Devising: A Classroom Case Study (UK)

Carly Smith - Head of Drama, UK

1. Most effective stimulus for devising

Installation-based stimulus has proven to be particularly effective, as different students are naturally drawn to different elements within the space. This encourages a range of responses from the outset and supports individual engagement. One example of a particularly successful stimulus is outlined below.

2. Outline of a devising project and early-stage set-up

Working with a GCSE Drama group, one of the drama spaces was transformed into an installation. Lighting was dimmed and artificial candles were used. White sheets were hung to create walls, with a fan gently moving the fabric. Atmospheric music was played throughout the space.

The installation included:

- an overturned bed
- an article about reported hauntings at an old pub
- photographs of Victorian asylum “inmates” suspended from the ceiling
- a white doctor’s coat with a fake knife in the pocket, hung on a coat stand
- a briefcase containing letters written from the perspective of asylum inmates, describing their living conditions

Students moved through the space individually and in silence. They were given a prompt sheet containing the questions: *Who? What? Where? Why? When? How? Any other thoughts?* Students were encouraged to interact with the objects and record their responses.

Following this, students worked independently to note any further ideas prompted by the installation before moving into small groups to share initial responses.

Each group then selected five words, phrases or ideas drawn from their collective responses and created a series of still images, with one image per idea. All group members were required to be included in the images. These were shared with the rest of the class, who were asked to identify suggested ideas, themes and settings.

Transitions were then introduced between the still images, including narration, mime, role-play, thought-tracking and slow motion. These sequences were shared again, with further reflection on emerging themes and possibilities.

For homework, students researched three additional sources that could help to develop their ideas, themes or settings. These could include a photograph, a person, a quotation, a song, a news article or a video. Students returned to the next lesson and presented their research to the group.

Later in the process, a technique developed by The Paper Birds, *Multi-Role Improvisation*, was introduced. Students listed all potential characters connected to their emerging narrative. Using three chairs - two for performers and one for a director - the director selected two characters and asked

the performers to improvise a short scene. Improvisations typically lasted around 30 seconds, or longer if the director felt there was potential to explore further. Roles were rotated to ensure all students experienced both directing and performing.

This exercise encouraged students to explore alternative storylines and characters, while also generating improvised dialogue organically through action rather than discussion.

3. Strategies for avoiding common pitfalls in devised work

Limited risk-taking and experimentation

Targeted research into content, structure and theme can significantly support students in taking creative risks. In one project, techniques developed by The Paper Birds were used, including interviewing parents about the chosen topic. These interviews generated verbatim material that students were able to incorporate into their work, adding authenticity and depth.

Discussion dominating rehearsal time

Clear time constraints are essential. Students were given a short recap period at the start of each lesson and were expected to arrive with at least one concrete idea for developing their work. This could be an extension of existing material or a new idea, but students were required to explain how it would contribute to the development of the piece.

Practical work was structured into tightly timed blocks to maintain momentum and focus.

Sustaining connections between stimulus, movement and text

Regular reflection at the end of lessons helped students make clear links between their stimulus and the material they were creating. Students were asked to articulate where ideas originated and how they connected to the original stimulus. While some divergence from the initial stimulus was acceptable, students were expected to justify the development of their ideas.

Difficulty selecting stimuli that sustain a devising project

Providing a range of stimuli within a shared theme proved effective. Practitioner-led approaches were also used to provide students with established tools and techniques, particularly where students required additional structure.

In one project, a series of fairy tales (including *Little Red Riding Hood* and *The Three Little Pigs*) was explored. Students used the five Ws (*who, what, where, why, when*) alongside visual analysis of illustrations. This was followed by targeted research into aspects of the stories to support character development and dialogue creation. Students were required to return with at least three research sources to develop their ideas further.

In the same academic year, students attended a performance by Splendid Theatre and participated in a workshop, which familiarised them with professional tools and techniques that could then be applied to their own devised work.

Appendix A

From Image to Ensemble: A Devising Case Study (Australia)

- **Henrietta Stathopoulos - Education Officer (Arts), Australia**

1. Most effective stimulus for devising

Images are identified as the most effective stimulus for devising, particularly within diverse classroom contexts.

“Images are my most effective stimulus for devising because they are immediately accessible, open to multiple interpretations, and invite physical, emotional and imaginative responses without privileging language.”

“Images allow students with diverse strengths to contribute equally and encourage meaning-making through movement, space and composition.”

“As ambiguous texts, they generate strong questions rather than fixed narratives, making them ideal for sustained devising work in the classroom.”

To support students who may find open-ended images challenging, additional tools such as story dice can be introduced to provide further entry points.

2. Outline of a devising project and early-stage set-up

One devising project that produced strong outcomes began with a curated collection of photographic images depicting moments of tension, isolation and connection. These included images of protests, landscapes,

derelict buildings and popular culture (such as a rock band). Both black-and-white and colour images were used. Students were also invited to contribute images, which were then curated by the teacher.

In the early stages, students worked in small groups and responded to the images through:

- physical tableaux
- movement improvisations
- spatial tasks

This work took place without discussion. Each image functioned as a repeated provocation, explored through different performance elements including gesture, rhythm, proxemics and vocal texture.

Only after sustained physical exploration were students introduced to text.

“Only after substantial physical exploration will the students introduce text, generated from the images themselves (internal monologue, overheard dialogue, fragmented poetry).”

The project was shaped through ongoing cycles of showing, reflection and refinement.

“The project is shaped through cycles of showing, reflection and refining, with images continually revisited to ensure coherence and depth across the performance.”

3. Strategies for avoiding common pitfalls in devised work

Limited risk-taking and experimentation

“Use images with ambiguity or emotional charge and set non-negotiable physical tasks (e.g. sustained movement, repetition, constraint-based improvisation) to push beyond safe choices.”

Discussion dominating rehearsal time

“Delay discussion by starting each rehearsal with an image-led task. Reflection occurs briefly after making and is linked directly to action-based next steps.”

Sustaining connections between stimulus, movement and text

“Require all text and movement to be traceable back to a specific image. If material cannot be justified through the stimulus, it is removed or reworked.”

Difficulty selecting sustaining stimuli

“Choose images that offer scale, depth and contradiction. Strong images support multiple perspectives, evolve through repeated exploration, and can be reinterpreted physically, vocally and spatially across the project.”

4. Additional approaches used within the process

The following strategies were also embedded to support ensemble ownership and sustained engagement:

- rotating leadership so that each student directs at some point
- side coaching, with the teacher asking questions while students work
- introducing specific performance

requirements, such as:

- * ten seconds of silence
- * a moment of laughter
- * using an object in a non-literal way
- * a moment of chorus

5. Reflection and process focus

Reflection was framed as part of the making process rather than a separate evaluative task.

Reflection prompt used with students:

What is one risk I took this week, and how did it develop the work?

6. Devising checklist (student-facing)

Henrietta also uses a checklist to support students (and teachers) in monitoring progress during rehearsals, focusing on:

- risk-taking and experimentation
- productive use of rehearsal time
- sustained connections between stimulus, movement and text
- effective use of open-ended stimuli
- ensemble commitment
- refining without rushing

This checklist is revisited throughout the process and can also be used as a grid for summative assessment check-ins.

Appendix B

The Best tried and tested Devising Stimuli from Teachers

Collected from the January 2026 Plan & Teach Devised Theatre Webinar.

At the end of the January 2026 webinar, teachers were invited to share one stimulus that had led to rich, sustained devising in their classroom. The responses below are presented in full and grouped by stimulus type.

Together, they demonstrate that effective devising can begin from image, text, sound, space or objects. What matters is not the format of the stimulus, but its capacity to generate questions, sustain exploration and support layered responses.

IMAGE-BASED STIMULI

Banksy & Social Commentary

“Pupils were presented with 12 framed images taken from a Banksy calendar. Class were given set amount of time to respond to each one.

Various instrumental music played, which was also responded to.

Meaningful pieces created with a message for societal change - Verbatim/Brecht/Frantic worked well.”

<https://www.banksy.co.uk/>

- Nicola Gornall-White, Drama Teacher (UK)

Frida Kahlo & Identity

“Two Frida’s by Frida Kahlo - this was one stimulus out of three and the most popular with students. The others were a song by Public Service Broadcast and a projected saying by Jenny Holzer. The students found the song and saying too abstract, and yet really engaged with the portrait with a range of themes - identity, self, modern vs traditional, repression of women, 1930s Mexico... It suited are all female cohort.”

- Irena Pearce, Drama Teacher (UK)

Visual Art & Sculpture as Entry Points

“We do the explorative journey, where students explore the space and find the stimuli which captures the students’ imagination.”

David Robertson, Drama Teacher, Bexhill Academy (UK)

Art & Sculpture Stimuli Used:

The Lovers - Oil Painting - Rene Magritte:

<https://www.etsy.com/uk/listing/1752452591/rene-magritte-lovers-master-piece>

Bang- Sculpture - Ai WeiWei:

<https://www.ignant.com/2013/06/07/bang-by-ai-weiwei/>

TEXT-BASED STIMULI

Spoken Word & Contemporary Poetry

“Kae Tempest – People’s Faces spoken word poem.”

Here is the live clip:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9y0V0ro2Nf0>

- Claire Hopkins, Teacher of Drama, Stratford-Upon-Avon (UK)

Song Lyrics & Satirical Commentary

“A particularly effective stimulus was the lyrics from ‘American Dream’ from Miss Saigon. Students devised a powerful, satirical, episodic piece that mocked the illusion of the ‘American Dream’. Their scenes featured characters such as an Epstein-like figure, a homeless veteran, a mother who lost her child due to a lack of medical insurance, and someone seduced by the bright lights of Las Vegas who developed a gambling addiction.”

Here is the YouTube version of the song:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ntXK3yALmXI>

- Kerry Scott, Subject Lead: Drama & Performing Arts (Bahrain)

Contemporary Media & Social Identity

“Another effective stimulus was a clip from Black Mirror showing a character obsessively chasing the ‘Like’ button. Students devised a thought-provoking piece titled ‘The Social Media Freak Show’. Using a circus motif, the ringmaster became an online predator, the juggler symbolised juggling a fake online persona, the clown represented a victim of online bullying who developed an eating disorder, and the trapeze artist portrayed a teenager whose private images were leaked. A student costume designer enhanced the concept by creating imaginative outfits that blended circus characters with elements of school uniform, revealing the vulnerable teenage identities hidden behind their online personas.”

Black Mirror clip about social media:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EcspUD0kF7g>

- Kerry Scott, Subject Lead: Drama & Performing Arts (UK)

Personal Testimony & Historical Narrative

“My best stimulus was for a Year 8 class where we focus on Conflict. We offer various stimuli for conflict but the one that has been really lovely to explore is a holocaust survivors letter, retelling her journey from the train to the concentration camp.”

- M Breadmore, Drama Teacher (UK)

A Single Quote as a Starting Point

“A quote from Lewis Carroll: ‘I can’t go back to yesterday because I was a different person then.’”

- Gillian Thompson, Drama Teacher (UK)

Real Stories & Ethical Questions

“Sutton Hoo, Suffolk Dig (Themes of ethics, past stories, a rural quiet town getting invaded by press attention)”

Use this as a starting point:

<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/suffolk/sutton-hoo/digging-the-dirt-at-sutton-hoo-the-true-story-behind-the-dig>

“Joyce Vincent, death in flat Wood Green went undiscovered for almost 3 years (themes around who cares about us, are we selfish/selfless, who do we point the finger at for letting her down, the unanswered why/hows)”

Here is the BBC news report:

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/london/4906992.stm>

- Matthew Lawrence, Drama Teacher (UK)

AUDIO-VISUAL STIMULI

Music Video & Contemporary Culture

“We do the explorative journey, where students explore the space and find the stimuli which captures the students’ imagination.”

- David Robertson, Drama Teacher, Bexhill Academy (UK)

Touch by Daft Punk:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wP1w5M0F57U>

Everything Else Has Gone Wrong by Bombay Bicycle Club:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZF0LF1gQZKs>

Everyone’s Free to Wear Sunscreen by Baz Luhrmann:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sTJ7AzBIJoI>

IMMERSIVE & ENVIRONMENTAL STIMULI

Exam Room as Devised Environment

“The best stimulus I have used was an immersive one. I took a group of first year IGCSE Drama students into the school hall (and the school’s performance space) which had been transformed into an exam room, with long straight rows of desks and chairs. The students sat at the desks and imagined the voices coming from that room. The themes discussed and researched touched on individuality versus conformity, the value of exams, the function of school, freedom and responsibility, fear of the future.”

- Graham Mackey, Drama Teacher (Luxembourg)

OBJECT-BASED STIMULI

Props & Imaginative Transformation

*“A table of random props/costume items on a table. Students come up in groups to look at the items and memorise them before they are covered with a tablecloth. In groups they discuss how these items are linked. **THE ITEMS CAN BE USED AS IMAGINATIVELY AS THEY WISH**, e.g. a wooden spoon could be a sceptre, or a key. They devise a story to be shared with an audience of their peers where every item is woven into the story. They can use a range of theatre styles, stage configurations.”*

- Dr Julie Salisbury, Head of Performing Arts (UK)

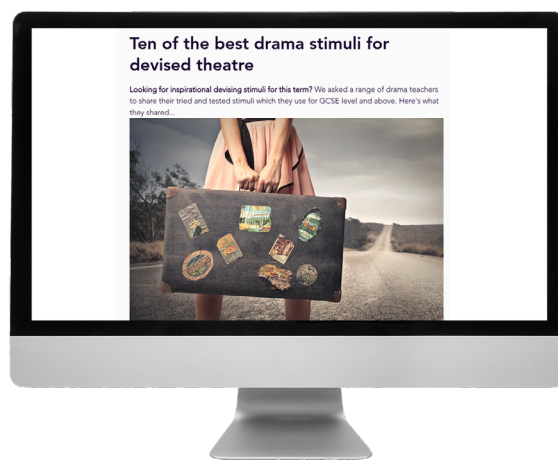
Thank you to all the teachers who contributed to this section.

Appendix C - Further reading and inspiration

For an extended collection of tried-and-tested stimuli shared by teachers, see:

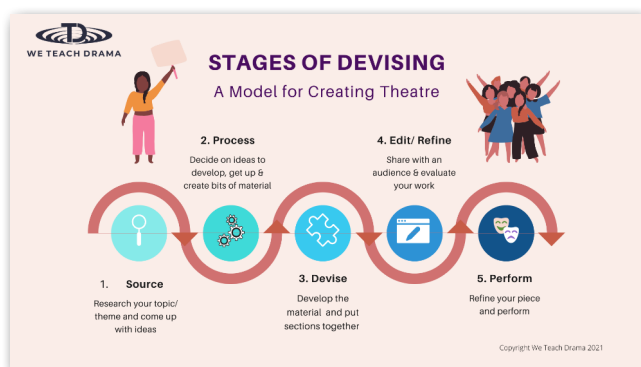
Ten of the Best Drama Stimuli for Devised Theatre

<https://www.weteachdrama.com/post/ten-of-the-best-drama-stimuli-for-devised-theatre>



The Devising Process

This infographic is available to download from our free Drama Resource Library.



Sign up to access our *free* library and download your copy [HERE](#)

Devising Research Project

Also in the resource library, download this ready-to-use template for a Devised Theatre Research Project. This is more suited to post-16 students and challenges them to create a presentation about the origins and roots of devised theatre, focusing on Commedia dell'arte, post-war theatre and the influence of US dance and theatre companies.

Appendix D - Teacher & Student Handouts

Devised Theatre: Origins, Evolution and the Classroom: An overview for drama teachers

Where devised theatre comes from

Devised theatre emerged in the mid–late 20th century as a deliberate move away from traditional, text-led theatre-making. In conventional Western theatre, creative authority usually sat with the playwright and director, with performers interpreting a pre-written script.

Devised theatre challenged this hierarchy.

Rather than beginning with a finished text, devised work starts with **shared exploration**. Performers collaborate to generate material through improvisation, physical action, visual composition and discussion. Meaning is discovered through making, not decided in advance.

As **Devising Theatre** explains, devised theatre is defined less by a single method and more by a set of principles:

- collective authorship
- process-led creation
- experimentation and revision
- ensemble responsibility

This makes devising inherently flexible - but also difficult to pin down.

Key influences and developments

Devised theatre did not emerge from one movement or practitioner. Instead, it evolved through several overlapping influences.

Physical theatre and post-war experimentation

After the Second World War, many theatre-makers began questioning realism, naturalism and fixed narrative structures. Physical theatre, mime and movement-based practices placed the body at the centre of performance-making.

Ensemble-led companies

Companies such as Complicité, Forced Entertainment and later Frantic Assembly developed collaborative processes where performers generated material together. Scripts, if they existed at

all, were often created after rehearsal exploration.

Dance and postmodern performance

The Judson Church movement in 1960s New York influenced both dance and theatre by rejecting hierarchy, valuing everyday movement, and prioritising process over polish. These ideas fed directly into devising practices.

Across these developments, a shared philosophy emerged:

- theatre could be made without a script
- performers could be creators, not just interpreters
- uncertainty and experimentation were productive

Devised theatre as a way of working

Importantly, devised theatre is not a genre or style. It is a way of working.

As Alison Oddey and others note, different devised processes may look very different in practice. What connects them is the emphasis on:

- collaboration
- iteration
- testing and refining ideas
- allowing meaning to emerge over time

This explains why devising is often described as messy - and why it resists tidy lesson structures.

How devising entered education

As drama education expanded at secondary and post-16 level, devising became central to many curricula. It aligned well with educational aims around:

- creativity
- collaboration
- independent thinking

However, this also created tension.

Education often values:

- clear objectives
- measurable outcomes
- fixed assessment criteria

Devised theatre, by contrast, values:

- exploration
- uncertainty
- ideas that change over time

This mismatch can lead to familiar classroom challenges: students fixing ideas too early, talking instead of making, or waiting for teacher approval.

Process, not product

Professional devised theatre is iterative. Ideas are:

- generated
- tested
- discarded
- returned to
- reshaped

Meaning often becomes clearer after physical exploration, not before it.

When students are supported to work in this way - through physical tasks, individual exploration and ensemble collaboration - they are more likely to:

- take creative risks
- tolerate uncertainty
- generate original material
- stay engaged across a project

Teaching devising as a **process** rather than a task helps students understand how theatre is made, not just what the final piece looks like.

The role of the teacher

In devised theatre, the teacher's role shifts.

Rather than directing outcomes, the teacher:

- creates conditions for exploration
- holds the structure
- protects time for experimentation

- supports reflection without fixing meaning

This role can feel uncomfortable, particularly in assessed contexts, but it mirrors professional devising practice more closely and supports genuine student ownership.

Why this matters

Devised theatre in schools is not about producing professional-level work. It is about developing students who can:

- collaborate effectively
- think physically and imaginatively
- respond creatively to uncertainty
- understand theatre as a process of investigation

Seen in this way, devising is not an alternative approach - it is a **core theatrical and educational practice**.

Further reading for teachers

- **Devising Theatre** - Alison Oddey
- **A Beginner's Guide to Devising Theatre** — Jess Thorpe & Tashi Gore
- **The Viewpoints Book** - Anne Bogart & Tina Landau
- **The Frantic Assembly Book of Devising Theatre** - Scott Graham & Steven Hoggett

Teacher Guide

Tips to avoid common pitfalls in devised work

Limited risk-taking and experimentation

Use images with ambiguity or emotional charge and set non-negotiable physical tasks (e.g. sustained movement, repetition, constraint-based improvisation) to push beyond safe choices.

Discussion dominating rehearsal time

Delay discussion by starting each rehearsal with an image-led task. Reflection occurs briefly after making and is linked directly to action-based next steps.

Weak connections between text, stimulus and movement

Require all text and movement to be traceable back to a specific image. If material cannot be justified through the stimulus, it is removed or reworked.

Difficulty selecting sustaining stimuli

Choose images that offer scale, depth and contradiction. Strong images support multiple perspectives, evolve through repeated exploration, and can be reinterpreted physically, vocally and spatially across the project.

Additional ideas:

1. Make each student the director at some point of the piece.
2. Side coaching: The teacher can side coach asking students questions as they work on their piece.
3. Ask the students to add the following into their performance:
 - ✓ 10 seconds of silence
 - ✓ A moment of laughter
 - ✓ Using an object (like a chair or phone) but not in its intended use (ie. Do not just sit in the chair eg. it could become a dinosaur etc.
 - ✓ A moment of chorus

Created by Henrietta Stathopoulos - MA BA Dip Ed

Student Handout

Devised Company Research task:

1. Select one company you don't know.
2. Find out their mission, style of theatre and approach to devising.
3. Find three images and a video link which depicts their work.
4. Create a handout or slide deck to share your findings.

The Paperbirds Theatre Company: <https://thepaperbirds.com>

Frantic Assembly: <https://www.franticassembly.co.uk>

Gecko Theatre: <https://www.geckotheatre.com>

Graeae Theatre Company: <https://graeae.org/who-we-are>

Complicite: <https://www.complicite.org>

Told by an Idiot: <https://www.toldbyanidiot.org>

Anne Bogart & SITI Company (Viewpoints): <https://siti.org/about>

Kneehigh Theatre Company: <https://thisiskneehigh.co.uk>

Punchdrunk: <https://www.punchdrunk.com>

1927: <https://www.19-27.co.uk>

Devising Checklist: Avoiding Common Pitfalls

To avoid common problems in devised work, it's important to take creative risks and treat early ideas as experiments rather than finished scenes. Rehearsal time should focus on doing, not talking, by using physical tasks and showing changes instead of explaining them.

All movement and text should clearly link back to the original stimulus, with text growing out of movement rather than being added at the end. Choosing open-ended stimuli, like images that raise questions, helps keep the project going and supports deeper exploration.

Rotating leadership roles, keeping records of ideas, and setting small goals for each rehearsal also help the ensemble stay engaged, organised and motivated throughout the process.

Reflection Prompt

What is one risk I took this week, and how did it develop the work?



Devising- A Checklist for Students

Teachers can also use this as a grid for summative assessment check-ins.

Risk Taking & Experimentation

- I try multiple ideas before settling on one.
- I push beyond my first or safest response.
- I experiment with constraints (no words, slow motion, repetition, limited space).
- I contribute ideas even when they feel unfinished or risky.

Productive Use of Rehearsal Time

- I prioritise doing over talking in rehearsals.
- I respond to feedback by showing changes rather than explaining them.
- I keep discussions short and focused on next actions.
- I stay physically engaged when others are working.

Strong Links Between Stimulus, Text & Movement

- I can clearly explain how my choices connect back to the stimulus.
- My movement comes from the stimulus, not just from habit or style.
- Any text I use is generated through movement, image or improvisation.
- I remove or revise material that doesn't clearly connect to the stimulus.

Choosing and Using Effective Stimuli

- Our stimulus is open-ended, not just telling a story.
- We can explore the stimulus in multiple ways (movement, voice, space, sound).
- We continue returning to the stimulus throughout the project.
- The stimulus raises questions rather than giving answers.

Ensemble & Process Commitment

- I respect and build on other ensemble members' ideas.
- I stay focused and contribute consistently across rehearsals.
- I am willing to adapt or let go of ideas for the strength of the group work.

Refining Without Rushing

- I allow time for exploration before finalising scenes.
- I revisit and rework material instead of settling too quickly.
- I respond to feedback with practical changes in performance.

Created by Henrietta Stathopoulos - MA BA Dip Ed

Contributors

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Lucy Bellingham is the Founder and Director of We Teach Drama. A former secondary Drama teacher, she holds a Master's degree in Physical Theatre and Performance and specialises in devising, design-led practice and curriculum development.

Through We Teach Drama, Lucy works with schools and arts organisations in the UK and internationally to design resources and deliver training rooted in clear process and ambitious classroom practice.

Rob Otton

Rob Otton has been a Drama teacher for 16 years and a Head of Department for 11. He holds a Master's degree in Drama and Education and is passionate about the impact Drama can have on young people.

He now leads teaching and learning in his school and delivers PGCE teacher training in the North West of England, with a particular focus on rehearsal process and ensemble practice.

Henrietta Stathopoulos

Henrietta Stathopoulos is an experienced K-12 Drama educator based in Australia. Holding an MA, BA and Dip Ed, she specialises in many areas including image-led devising and ensemble-based rehearsal processes. Her work focuses on mentoring beginning teachers, well being, accessibility, sustained exploration and ensuring strong connections between stimulus, movement and text.

Cheryl Stapleton

Cheryl Stapleton is the founder of Learning Through Theatre, specialising in Commedia dell'Arte and physical theatre approaches. She provides workshops, revision sessions and practical classroom resources to support character-led devising.

Cheryl offers tailored in-school workshops and online sessions for students and teachers.

For more information visit:

<https://learningthroughtheatre.co.uk/online-workshops>

Or email Cheryl: cheryl@learningthroughtheatre.co.uk

Carly Smith

Carly Smith is an experienced Head of Drama with a strong background in acting, performing arts and theatre education. She holds a PGCE in Secondary Drama from Manchester Metropolitan University and a BA (Combined Honours) in Drama with French from the University of Northampton.



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