

***Trial: A Study of the Devising Process in Reckless Sleepers’
“Schrödinger’s Box” by Andrew Brown, Mole Wetherell and Reckless
Sleepers***

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Over the last few years, I have been following the work of Reckless Sleepers. They are not, perhaps, as widely known as some of their contemporaries (Station House Opera, Forced Entertainment), but they deserve much greater critical attention both within and without the academic world than they have so far received. *Trial*, the book written by Andrew Brown, Mole Wetherell and Reckless Sleepers, which creatively documents some of their existing work and processes, is therefore a very welcome development.

Whilst reading the book, I thought about a particular personal experience of working with Reckless Sleepers (as an observer/ researcher) on a *Quiet Time* project in Oxford. The project was over. It was late at night and I walked back through the square in which we had performed earlier that evening. The trails of sugar we had left on the empty paving stones of the square during the performance (as personal mappings of the city), glittered in the light of the street lamps, like hieroglyphics writ large across the space. I’d been there; I’d help to create them, but as traces of something passed, they seemed to have taken on a different, mysterious meaning. What can you make of such traces? What can you re-construct or imagine of what took place, from the leftovers of performance? *Trial* is about just such a re-construction: not just a documentation of a project that is past, but a re-animation of a performance based on traces of the past.

In an exploration of the connections between theatre and archaeology, Pearson and Shanks suggest that:

The past is not somehow “discovered” in its remains, for what would it be? ... What archaeologists do is work with material traces, with evidence, in order to create something – a meaning, a narrative, an image – which stands for the past in the present. (Pearson and Shanks 11)

Trial is both a construction and a re-construction. It is also a set of traces or evidence for further imaginings by the reader. *Trial* focuses (although not exclusively) on one of Reckless Sleepers’ projects, *Schrödinger’s Box*. The company decided to re-visit the project (which it had first presented in 1998), not just to reproduce it as it was then, but to re-animate it in the present, using the same pool of material – the constructed metal box which was the “set,” the ideas and the notes, diagrams and videos, and memories of the 1998 *Schrödinger’s Box* - as evidence for re-interpretation. To help with this re-interpretation, new performers were introduced to the process.

In the re-devising of Schrödinger’s Box, the artists ... asked questions of the original work, and generated new ideas. The involvement of new people is necessary because new ideas are necessary. (Brown, Wetherell and Reckless Sleepers 13)

The approach of drawing from previous ideas or performances is one that features in the work of many contemporary companies; old projects sow the seeds of new ones or cross-fertilize with other ideas in development. However, Reckless Sleepers’ re-visiting and re-devising of a previous project, and the documenting of this process in *Trial*, seems to me to be a valuable challenge to a funding culture which prioritizes “the new.”

Trial, as a documentation and re/construction of this process, also presents a possible way forward in the tricky question of the “legacy” of devised performance. At a recent symposium on *Devising In Process* (2008), a discussion took place about what the possible legacy of devised work could be, and what any such legacy might bring to the field of performance. A playwright leaves behind a script for interpretation and re-

interpretation, so the work can continue to be explored by other people in other contexts. Devised work, on the other hand, is often seen as being closely linked to its originating company or performer, so not appropriate for others to perform. A script, or other form of notation, also carries very little of what gives life and meaning to a devised performance, particularly when the work relies on physicality, visuality, liveness or engagement with the audience. Video documentation raises problems of its own, as it cannot capture the full phenomenological experience of a performance, particularly with a company such as Reckless Sleepers who often use sensual elements (such as touch, smell, performers' proximity, audience perspective) in their work. Finding alternative ways, then, of increasing the exposure to and legacy of devised work, seems to me to an important issue.

The book, *Trial*, especially if viewed alongside the video of *Schrödinger's Box*, offers a new kind of legacy: a complex, multi-voiced re/collection of ideas, images and processes from both the original development of *Schrödinger's Box* (and other works), and the re-visiting of it in 2006. As well as being a documentation of the project, the book seems to invite new explorations by the reader of the "evidence" – both in reconstructing it in their mind as they read, and in presenting possibilities to create new work from the same pool of material and processes, as the company themselves have done.

As *Trial* informs us, Reckless Sleepers are often inspired by Surrealist ideas and imagery; their name comes from Magritte's painting, "The Reckless Sleeper." *Trial* also draws on the surrealist processes of collage and juxtaposition the text, structure and layout of the book. The text comprises four different voices: Andrew Brown

(researcher/writer), Mole Wetherell (Director of Reckless Sleepers), various company members through their records and notes on projects and processes, and a written notation of the 1998 performance of *Schrödinger's Box*. These voices are presented side by side on the page; sometimes the texts directly relate to the same idea, and sometimes they take the reader in different directions. The various voices allow different ways into understanding the work, as well as opening up space for the reader to find their own connections between the disparate ideas and experiences presented.

The book focuses on the 2006 re-animation of *Schrödinger's Box*, but rather than follow a linear path through this process, it draws in ideas and understandings from previous company projects (through the various voices and collaged texts) and diverts out to explore processes and theories that underpin the company's work in general. Detailed descriptions are given of the "box" that forms the stage set of *Schrödinger's Box*, and is described as a "performance machine" for "generating ideas and behaviours" (15). The performance of *Schrödinger's Box* evolved from a physical and *thought-full* exploration of this box construction: "The box is an experimental chamber, a cloud chamber, a crucible, an alchemical experiment, a television, a radio, a tuning device; it is so blank it calls other rooms into being" (9). Explanations are also given of the relationship between the performance piece and Schrödinger's original thought-experiment (from the field of quantum physics) from which it derives its name. But Reckless Sleepers are inspired by a diverse range of ideas and knowledges, and so the book, too, represents this eclectic approach, with chapters on such diverse subjects as physics, mathematics, Magritte, alcohol, letters, maps and journeys, alongside descriptions of the company's devising processes and descriptions of exploratory, practical exercises.

The structure and collaged approach of *Trial* makes it a book that is sometimes challenging to read, necessitating the reader to pause for thought or to digest or connect ideas. It is ideal for dipping into for inspiration, or for referring to when lecturing on postmodernist theatre, or for gleaning practical exercises for devising work. For lecturers, students, practitioners or readers engaged with contemporary performance, *Trial* offers a useful and fascinating insight into the workings of this important company.

Bibliography

Devising in Process Symposium, Shunt Vaults, January 16th 2008, University of Kingston.

Pearson, Mike and Shanks, Michael. Theatre/Archaeology. London: Routledge, 2001.