

The Influence of Mantle of the Expert in Southeast Asian Devising Theatre Processes amongst Young People

Mark Beau de Silva

(School of Liberal Arts Sciences, Taylor's University, Malaysia)

ABSTRACT: Devising theatre is a means to create a theatrical piece based on the collaboration of an ensemble. The ensemble works together on all aspects of the performance, including the theme, content, direction, and vision of the piece. Dorothy Heathcote's *Mantle of the Expert*, although primarily used for the classroom, has been utilized in the creative processes of the professional stage. Its drama inquiry method is particularly useful in the early stages of the devising process when data on a topic is required. This paper investigates three Southeast Asian theatre companies that have elements of *Mantle of the Expert* embedded in their creative process with young people. These youth theatre groups demonstrate the influence of Heathcote's methodology as a necessary tool in investigating, discovering, and expressing narratives of specific communities. By conducting observations of performances and workshops, as well as engaging in interviews with the creators of these productions, this study aims to contribute valuable insights into the process of devising new works. It endeavors to offer information that may prove beneficial to other creative practitioners who are considering adopting *Mantle of the Expert* in their future projects.

KEYWORDS- Devised Theatre, *Mantle of the Expert*, Dorothy Heathcote, South East Asian Theatre.

I. Introduction

This paper examines the methodologies of three theatre companies in Southeast Asia, and Dorothy Heathcote's *Mantle of the Expert* system's influence on the creative process. Ann Boggart's Viewpoints system, Meyerhold's Biomechanics, and David Glass have been pertinent reference points for contemporary theatre-makers interested in devised works. Their methodologies which are mainly developed for actor training have been adapted to innovative creatives to be used as the foundation for a devising methodology (Oddey, 2013). Similarly, Dorothy Heathcote's *Mantle of the Expert* which was originally designed to be used as a tool to be used with children in the classroom has been adapted to produce devised performances, particularly ones that require engagement with a particular society (Bolton, 1995).

II. Mantle of the Expert

Mantle of the Expert is a system created by Child Drama exponent, Dorothy Heathcote. *Mantle of the Expert* relies on drama conventions and drama inquiry to aid the teacher in inspiring students to investigate and learn a selected topic independently (Aitken, 2018). *Mantle of the Expert* has been used in the teaching and learning of almost every discipline, including Mathematics, Science, and Arts subjects (Selderslaghs, 2020). For creating theatre, and creative-led case studies, several components of *Mantle of the Expert* have been used.

In his article, Connor (2019) designed an approach to lead in the creative writing process using the Mantle of the Experts' Six Forms of Dramatic Imagination. These forms include sound/silence, movement/stillness, and darkness/light. Connor employs these six forms as a pedagogical tool to help his students in crafting richer narratives, thereby enhancing their ability to create vivid landscapes within their writing.

Apart from the Six Forms of Dramatic Imagination, the process of drama inquiry, which forms the foundation of Mantle of the Expert has been used in the study of literature.

Gray (2003) conducted a study examining the usage of the Mental of Expert approach by schoolteachers teaching Russian literature. The teachers started the process by assigning readings of selected works by Russian authors such as Pushkin, Gogol, Tolstoy, and Chekov. Using the drama inquiry method, the students were asked to assume the roles of serfs during the time, to help them understand the historical context of the 1800s. Using the drama convention of role-play, the students who have embodied the characters began their research of the assigned pieces with a deeper comprehension of the societal and cultural landscapes depicted in the literature.

Drama inquiry's various stages can also be adapted to incite its participants to perform an independent inquiry. In their 2015 article, Johnson, Liu, and Goble relay how they used the Mantle of the Expert approach to develop a method for teaching social studies that incorporates creative elements. They employed a drama inquiry technique, where students went through several stages. In the first stage, students were introduced to a social issue, specifically the environmental impact of global manufacturing. They then selected a focus point, in this case, plastic bags. This selection marked the beginning of their inquiry process, which culminated in a presentation of findings through a "garden" made of plastic bags. The creation of this plastic "garden" demonstrated the integration of artistic elements into the study of social studies. The process outlined in this case study can be summarized as follows: it commences with introducing the stimulus (the issue), then empowering students to choose their area of focus for study (in this instance, plastic bags), and finally, entrusting students with the responsibility of the mantle, which involves conducting research and presenting their findings creatively.

The next section details how three groups; Zhafir Muzani with Tenaganita (Malaysia), Orang Orang Drum (Malaysia) and Beyond Fortress Collective use devising methodologies that have been inspired by Dorothy Heathcote's Mantle of the Expert.

III. Case Study 1: The Usage of Drama Inquiry in Acquiring and Performing Refugee Narratives in Malaysia: Zhafir Muzani and Tenaganita

As a director, Muzani (2023) worked with 10 performing arts and social science students to acquire and perform narratives from refugees residing in Malaysia. Tenaganita, a non-profit organization that has been supporting and aiding migrant communities in Malaysia since 1991 selected 8 refugees under their care for this project. Muzani, who has experience devising plays since 2018 began the process with an introduction to the project with his actors. The actors, made up of 20–25-year-olds were briefed on the requirements and features of the project, particularly the sensitive topic of research and performance. The devising project would encompass 14 weeks. When asked on the rationale in using Heathcote's drama inquiry, Muzani (2023) said:

Mantle of the Expert, particularly the drama inquiry component asks for the students to immerse themselves into a world and people which may be foreign. Drama conventions used in the inquiry process like journalling based on observations, and taking on the delicate process of embodying their subjects of research is particularly crucial in a project like this. I explained to my students, that they first must play the 'mantle' of experts investigating the lives of these refugees, and then sensitively embody these characters for the stage.

In the first 3 weeks, Muzani would focus on team building and simulation exercises. Team building would aid ensemble dynamics, while simulation activities were to accustom the students to the social landscapes and challenges commonly faced refugees in Malaysia. The fourth and fifth weeks were spent at the Tenaganita office, where the actors spoke to 8 refugees. The actors were tasked to gather information on the journeys, challenges, and current state of the refugees. With this information, Muzani could then work with the students on devising the narratives. In the sixth week, he asked the students to use the information gathered as foundation to build characters and narratives for the stage. This is when the drama conventions of Mantle of the Expert came to play. Muzani utilized improvisation and role play as activities to generate a dramatic narrative. The actors were put through ‘what if’ scenarios and improvise reactions as embodied refugee characters. For example, the actors were asked to react to everyday occurrences like meeting a policeman or buying a ticket as their embodied refugee characters. By gauging the responses of these embodied characters, the actors used it to further enrich and deepen their narratives. When asked on the efficacy of the methodology, Muzani (2023) said:

The students began to embody the characters they have researched in more ways than one. The language they used changed, based on observations of the refugees’ way of speech. The students began to adopt an ‘English’ that is more for necessity; peppered with Bahasa Melayu and even Chinese. When quizzed on this, they mentioned that this was observed in the refugees’ ease in shuffling between languages to communicate with different types of people that they encounter daily. In terms of body language, the students seemed to demonstrate a confidence that they said was observed in many of the refugees. I believe this project gave the refugees an avenue to express their plight, and the students saw how resolute they were in their search for freedom.



Figure 1 Actors interviewing a representative from Tenaganita

Source: Photo provided by Taylor’s University Malaysia

In the ninth week, the actors were asked to reflect on gaps in the narratives. As their embodied characters, the actors had to fill those gaps by doing more research via further interviews or observations. Using the principles of drama inquiry, the actors by then had been introduced to the stimulus (refugees in Malaysia),

then empowering students to choose their area of focus for study (in this instance, issues faced by refugees), presenting their findings creatively (devised performance on refugees' narratives).

In week 14 a public performance was held. Titled 'Empower Me', the devised play had the performers allow the audience to participate by selecting the narratives they would like to see. This concept is an extension of drama inquiry, which now vests the power to discover the audience, who has become a 'learner' on the subject of refugees in Malaysia. The performance was powerful in its message delivered and its process left a marked impact in the students, the subjects of the research (refugees), and the audience. Zhafir Muzani's implementation of the drama inquiry process on both his students and the refugees associated with Tenaganita initiated a transformative ripple effect among its participants and observers alike. Through the deliberate integration of these disparate groups across different stages of the process, a communal understanding and heightened awareness of the refugees' predicament in Malaysia emerged. Central to this achievement was the incorporation of a component inspired by the Mantle of the Expert approach, drama inquiry. This methodological framework not only facilitated a deeper engagement with the subject matter but also fostered empathy and solidarity among the participants, thereby catalyzing a meaningful discourse and action in the audience towards addressing the challenges faced by refugees in the country. Through this collaborative and immersive approach, Muzani effectively leveraged the power of the Mantle of the Expert, ultimately fostering a more compassionate and informed community response to the refugee situation in Malaysia.

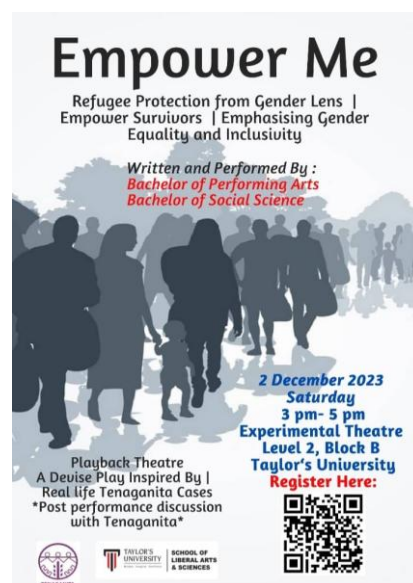


Figure 2 Poster of the performance 'Empower Me'.

Source: Photo provided by Taylor's University Malaysia

IV. Case Study 2: Expert Framing and its Influence in Orang Orang Drum 's (Malaysia) Devising Workshop

In June 2023, Orang Orang Drum conducted a devising workshop for participants of the Asian Youth Theatre Festival. Held for the first time in Kuala Lumpur, the residency saw 40 youths from theatre groups in Asia converge at the Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre to learn from Malaysian arts practitioners. Orang Orang Drum, a theatre troupe renowned for their devised works gave a one-day workshop. Focusing on using the body's natural rhythm to create narratives, observations of the workshop revealed elements of the Mantle of the Expert in the process, particularly components of expert framing.



Figure 3 Damien Leow conducting the workshop on devising.

Source: Photo provided by The Actors Studio Malaysia

Aitken (1993) explains expert framing as Heathcote's approach of placing the learner at the focus of the learning. By empowering the investigative nature of the learner, skills, and knowledge are acquired at discretion. Orang Orang Drum's devising workshop embodied this philosophy, guiding the participants of the residency to find rhythms in the body and to use it in creation.

Damien Leow, core member of Orang Orang Drum initiated the session by prompting participants to explore their walking patterns, emphasizing the acknowledgment of the asymmetrical nature of their bodies and its impact on movement. Encouraging the embrace of individuality, participants were invited to walk in their own rhythm, diverging from the usual group-oriented walking exercises. This approach fosters self-expression and inner voice exploration. Damien highlighted the importance of warming up the feet and understanding their connection to the entire body. Participants were urged to find comfort in their movement and maintain relaxed, open-eyed observation. By likening the palms to the feet anatomically, Damien directed attention to the feet's interaction with the floor, encouraging participants to "taste" the ground and manipulate their balance. Through simple instructions and international accessibility, participants were guided to understand how different walking styles engage various body parts, fostering awareness and enjoyment of bodily sensations.

Damien followed this with a breathing routine by instructing actors to take deep breaths, emphasizing conscious observation of the body's movement in sync with the breath. Prioritizing natural body movement over techniques, actors were encouraged to breathe freely, resulting in varied responses including arm swings and stillness. Specific directions were then provided, such as exhaling while lowering the back and allowing the hands to hang loose, gradually incorporating bending the knees and clutching the back of the heel. Following these movements for approximately five minutes, actors were instructed to lay on the floor face up, with eyes closed, to conclude the breathing segment. Here, Damien prompted actors to reflect on their walking, imagining themselves in motion and assessing their feet, body, and overall movement. Damien proceeded with introducing rhythm, starting with an eight-beat movement demonstrated with feet, which the actors replicated with a focus on weight shifting. Likening this to writing or painting, Leow (2023) explained:

When we write freely, there is an inherent language that we use. We may have developed that language over the years; our formal learning is influenced by conditioning of culture and surroundings. So, we call this our 'writing voice', those who write plays may understand this better. It is the same with the body. How we move and react to our surroundings has been conditioned over the years as well. This is our 'movement language'. Some people move fast, some people walk very slowly, and it is all fine. This is how we move; this is who we are. I urge you all not to worry about writing, drawing, or moving well, but to move freely.

Transitioning into a large circle formation, Damien emphasized how the task facilitated muscle relaxation and mental focus. Within the circle, the group resumed the eight-beat movement, accentuating the first step forward to elicit bodily sensations, encouraging spontaneous reactions such as vocalization. This led to a dynamic exchange of beats and movements, akin to an orchestrated cacophony. Subsequently, Boyz Chew guided the group to revisit the routine with less emphasis on the first beat, resulting in a more relaxed and natural expression. Despite subtle adjustments, the impact on the group's embodiment and atmosphere was profound, highlighting the transformative potential of rhythmic exploration in theatrical practice. Chew (2023) reiterated that his guidance must be subtle, as the participant already has all the knowledge and skills to move:

Just like what Damien has done, I am now merely reminding you of the rhythm you already possess. Remember when we were children, we would move naturally to any sound we heard. Along the way maybe we were asked to be still, to keep quiet, and we lost this rhythm. It is still there inside. Allow yourself to be free and surrender to the environment which is created now. This is an environment that we are creating together; there is the slight brush of air from the aircon, the faint lights from the ceiling, and the smell of one another. Allow yourself to imagine this.



Figure 4 Participants showcasing their creations.

Source: Photo provided by The Actors Studio Malaysia

Damien added to this environment, by introducing drums through an Orang Orang Drum performer, who initiated a slow beat that gradually intensified. Actors were prompted to synchronize their movements with the beat, with reassurance that they could always rediscover it if lost. Vocalization was integrated into the "jam" session, with Boyz encouraging actors to express themselves vocally if inclined. This phase of the process provided a liberating opportunity for actors to explore their individual performer personas without the constraints of rigid expectations or technique standards. The segment concluded with the drums slowing to a stop, as actors moved together in harmony, symbolizing an organic cohesion in a performance devoid of explicit direction.

In the final segment of the workshop, Damien and Boyz guided the group through an experiential exercise focused on recreating core elements of the company's debut production, 'Hidup Ini Senget' (loosely translated as 'This Life is Crooked'). Initially, actors were introduced to the main movement sequence, a simple choreography representing a walk in the city, characterized by 8-beat steps denoting moments in the story. Following mastery of the movements, the actors synchronized them with beats provided by the drummer. Subsequently, the group was divided into smaller teams to collectively reinterpret this production, integrating the learned steps. Encouraged to infuse their narrative twists by introducing new characters, movements, and musical instruments, each team had approximately an hour to conceptualize, rehearse, and present their piece.

This methodology facilitated a non-intimidating approach to devising based on an existing performance narrative, particularly beneficial for novice actors seeking creative exploration within established parameters. Leow (2023) elaborated:

The first staging of *Hidup Ini Senget* was created by our observation of Malaysia at the time. We looked at the plight of the everyday person, and how he struggles with the effects of governmental policies. So that was our world to investigate. Through that process, we developed a soundscape, movement, and landscape that revolved around this character of the layperson. Now, with these participants, we invite their discoveries via a reaction to our piece. This new world that they will build, will be based on the one we created in 2012. The interesting thing is this is the first time we are trying out this methodology. When we were working on this piece in 2012, sure our performers were trained in movement and narrative building, but the research and embodiment of the subject of the everyday Malaysian brought us back to square one. We only totally become the 'expert' of a subject or character at the end of the performance. Once the creative process begins again, we start from zero, I believe. That is what we are encouraging with the multinational participants of this workshop. Their reactions to a piece created in 2012, would bring forth something fresh, simply by framing themselves as experts of their experiences.

Orang Orang Drum's approach reflects Heathcote's expert framing philosophy, emphasizing participants' utilization of their innate bodily rhythms and natural responses to create. In the workshop's concluding phase, Orang Orang Drum's directive for participants to embody urban inhabitants and generate movements accordingly aligns with the fundamental principles of *Mantle of the Expert*. Orang Orang Drum's departure from traditional choreographic practices, which often involve the choreographer dictating movement concepts, marks a significant shift in methodology. Instead, their approach places participants in a central role, allowing movement narratives to organically emerge from within the group. As articulated by Chew, the inquiry process commences with an exploration of each participant's existing knowledge and vocabulary of movement. By tapping into this inherent language of movement, individuals embark on a journey of self-discovery, continuously evolving and adapting their movement vocabulary in response to stimuli provided by the facilitators. This methodology not only empowers participants to take ownership of their creative expression but also fosters a collaborative and dynamic process where movement emerges through collective exploration and dialogue. In essence, *Mantle of the Expert*'s influence in Orang Orang Drum's methodology redefines choreography as a collaborative and participatory endeavor, where movement narratives are co-created by the collective contributions of all involved, resulting in rich and diverse choreographic expressions that reflect the unique voices and experiences of the participants.

The workshop concluded with each group presenting their responses as new creations. While there were hints of the original *Hidup Ini Senget*, every piece seemed to present new perspectives, grounded in the participants' ownership of the body and its movements. There was a quiet reverence for one another as the performances progressed, as the participants celebrated the discovery of being experts, of their bodies.

V. Case Study 3: Beyond Fortress Collective's (Philippine) Utilization of Drama Conventions to Devise USA Mi's Gadamgo the Musical



Figure 5 Performance picture of USA Mi Gadamgo

Source: Photo provided by Beyond Fortress Collective

Beyond Fortress Collective is a community of art enthusiasts founded in 2020 by theatre maker, Ted Nudgent (Cultural Centre of the Philippines, 2023). The collective focuses on telling stories specific to its member's culture and situations in the Philippines. In 2023, Beyond Fortress Collective presented the musical, USA Mi's Gadamgo. Inspired by actual stories, the musical illustrates the struggles of the people in Ozamiz City via a narrative strung with original songs. In an interview with the director, Ted Nudgent (2024), he said:

In this initial phase, I engaged my collaborators (*Warner Acal, Cathriona Joy Almasor, Reyana Christian Amacna, Philip Concepcion, Franaya Jereca Cuevas, Marchmae Delvo, Karen Lingamay, Cressy Lou Jumawan, Joshua Miguel Napuli, Tricia Kae Paguican, Charis Maxene Reyes, Sean Frederick Zerna, Jed Isidto, ChreyMiekk Mutia, Jenny Largo, Aldren Alferez, Arjohn Macarate, Nuelan Ian Atienza, Abigail Seblon, Clarissa Pacatang, Gerald Bongales, Mia Shaina Dumasig, Niel Villarejo, Tresha Limbaring, Saira Apple Narit, Joean Tan, and Maria Alexandra Benitez*) in various activities to generate and shape the musical narrative. These activities included but were not limited to:

1. Free Writing: Allowing ideas to flow freely without inhibition and many prompts.
2. Eavesdropping: Listening to conversations and stories from the community for inspiration.
3. Interviews: Conducting interviews with individuals to gather personal anecdotes and experiences.
4. Heritage Hikes and Visits: Exploring local heritage sites and gathering insights into the cultural context.
5. Creative Storytelling: Sharing and building upon imaginative narratives within the group.
6. Creative Theatre Games: Playing games and exercises to stimulate creativity and collaboration.
7. Storytelling and Retelling: Iteratively refining and reshaping the narrative through oral storytelling sessions.

Ted's utilization of techniques like free writing and listening to conversations relate to Heathcote's belief in allowing the students or the participants to build from their voices. Heathcote employed various techniques like free writing, journaling, and conversing with individuals. Additionally, she utilized gentle prompts such as 'This I Think', 'This I Believe', and 'This I Know', which were non-intimidating for novice writers. By commencing with the students' existing knowledge and perceptions, they generated genuine narratives that resonated with the theme (Bolton, 1995).

In the devising of the musical's story, Ted (2024) related a process called narrative inquiry which is similar to Mantle of the Expert's drama inquiry:

Narrative Inquiry emphasizes collaborative sensemaking, where researchers and participants work together to interpret and make meaning of shared stories. Similarly, in our devising process, we collaborate with our collaborators to refine and reshape the narrative through iterative storytelling and retelling sessions. Narrative Inquiry prioritizes participants' voices, allowing them to share their stories in their own words. Similarly, our process involves giving agency to our collaborators and allowing their voices to shape the narrative and creative direction of the musical. Narrative Inquiry involves identifying recurring themes and patterns within stories to uncover deeper meanings and insights. In our process, we explore thematic arcs and integrate these themes into the script, allowing for a nuanced exploration of the human experience and cultural context depicted in the musical. Overall, by incorporating elements of Narrative Inquiry into our devising process, we are not only creating a compelling musical but also engaging in qualitative research that seeks to understand and represent the community's stories and experiences in a meaningful and authentic way.

Narrative inquiry, imbued with the principles of drama inquiry from Mantle of the Expert, necessitates participants to immerse themselves in the roles of individuals inhabiting the environment pertinent to the research topic. In the context of Beyond Fortress' inquiry into Ozamiz City, residing within the community facilitated an authentic portrayal of its inhabitants. Ted and his ensemble initiated the process by soliciting narratives from the city itself, thereby attaining a poignant and indispensable account of the community's challenges and resilience.

When Beyond Fortress Collective presented USA Mi's Gadamgo at the Asian Youth Theatre Festival in November 2023, the audience experienced a performance that characterized the culture and spirit of Ozamiz City. From the costumes and set, to the language used, every detail hinted of a performance that was backed by extensive research. In the panel discussion segment after the performance, Nudgent (2023) shared:

What you see on stage is a result of 6 months of research work based on drama conventions. The narrative inquiry we adopted informed us on the stories that need to be told, and the characters that should be given voices to. Observation on the people living in Ozamiz City helped us design the costumes and set that you see. Even the multipurpose set was inspired by the resourcefulness of the people there, who are very creative in reusing or giving multiple functions to their every objects.

Heathcote's Mantle of the Expert's influence is evident in Beyond Fortress' process and performance which in its inquiry of a city, embodied one in all aspects on stage.

VI. Conclusion

Dorothy Heathcote's Mantle of the Expert has proven to be adaptable beyond learning and teaching endeavours. While its foundational components were designed for the classroom, recent applications of Mantle of the Expert have shown its efficacy in the creation process of devised theatre. Mantle of the Expert's distinct mechanism is beneficial to practitioners who are working with communities that lack experience in a process like devising. One of its most utilized features, drama inquiry comes with clear instructions, which gives the needed structure to the organic nature of devising (Bolton, 1995). Drama inquiry's fundamental function in excavating a particular society's culture also makes it ideal for theatre makers in Southeast Asia.

Devising theatre has historically served as a vehicle for cultivating and amplifying nationalistic sentiments, particularly in post-independence contexts such as Malaysia and in response to political regimes, as observed in the Philippines during the Marcos administration. Scholars such as Rowland (2015) and Diamond (1996) have noted the pivotal role of theatre in fostering a collective voice and addressing socio-political

concerns within these nations. Practitioners rooted in educational drama, as evidenced by the three companies under scrutiny in this research, have employed the Mantle of the Expert methodology due to its recognized effectiveness in educational settings. Through the examination of these case studies, it becomes apparent that Heathcote's approach offers a versatile framework that can be applied directly or adapted to suit existing creative models. The utilization of Heathcote's conventions within these projects underscores the potential of the Mantle of the Expert methodology in facilitating meaningful and impactful theatrical endeavors, both within educational contexts and broader socio-political landscapes.

Zhafir Muzani's collaboration with Tenaganita refugees exemplified the efficacy of the Mantle of the Expert's drama inquiry method in addressing sensitive topics and themes. This methodology's fundamental principle of approaching subject matter with reverence and self-regulated discretion underscores an empathetic approach beneficial for both the researcher and the subjects. Similarly, Orang Orang Drum's devising workshop, employing the expert framing component, highlights the inclusive nature of the movement, suggesting that everyone possesses the capacity to engage in choreography, thus opening avenues for further exploration by individuals traditionally considered non-movers. Beyond Fortress' exploration of a city through inquiry showcased a comprehensive research process and a deep embodiment of the subject matter, resulting in a compelling and gratifying performance piece. Collectively, these instances underscore the value of thoughtful inquiry methodologies in creative endeavors, promoting understanding, inclusivity, and authentic expression. The varying features of the three projects demonstrate the flexibility of the Mantle of the Expert, which warrants further experimentation, particularly in the task of discovering and expressing specific communities' voices.

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