



The Fest Track Experience
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It's the red blond hair I see first – the warm smile – the dancer's grace – and the unmistakable laugh that is the ISTA ensemble leader I will be shadowing for the next 3 days. So I embark upon my Fest Track professional development at the High School ISTA festival hosted by Pdraig Downey at the Dubai American Academy, Dubai, in March 2014.

As a Middle School drama teacher at the International Community School of Addis Ababa, and an avid attendee of ISTA festivals since 2004, I was curious to see the devising process first hand with the 14-18 year old age group over an intensive three-day period. Would it be similar to eight to twelve regular drama-devising classes packed tightly together? Or would there be any elements of the devising process left out, or added in, that make it a uniquely ISTA devising process?

Having attended ISTA festivals with both middle and high school students for the past ten years, as well as hosting one at ICS in Ethiopia, I had also attended a lot of Teacher Workshop (TW) sessions at festivals, as well as running 2 workshops on improvisation and SCREAM (Supporting Children's Rights through Education, Arts and the Media). I have come away from each ISTA festival inspired by the sheer amount of creativity and polished work packed into 72 hours, and recharged by the chance to collaborate with international drama and performance colleagues in a constant exchange of ideas and skills. Included in the TW sessions were ones on the devising process, but in doing the Fest Track, I got to see it up close and personally in a way I couldn't do in the TW sessions. It felt like being a very privileged fly on the wall – part of the creative process as well as an observant recorder of the whole process - to better inform my own teaching and devising practices.

The Fest Track began with an email to Jo Parish about a month beforehand, as soon as my PD application had been approved at school. I knew it was a high school festival I wanted to attend, and the Dubai festival hosted by Pdraig Downey at DAA was the best fit in terms of dates and flights. I outlined my general objectives on the Fest Track online application form, and Jo quickly hooked me up with Chloe Keller, sending me her bio and contact details should I have any questions ahead of the festival. For me it was a match made in heaven – not least because one of my personal goals was to be less dependent on text and language in my devising work, and more dependent on movement and physical expression. Chloe Keller is a master of all things movement oriented, and shadowing her for three days was akin to having a 1:1 non-stop masterclass with Laban and Anne Bogart rolled into one! Chloe's easy, professional air immediately put me at ease, and at all times during the Fest Track she was open to questions and discussions.

Day one of the six ensemble sessions each ensemble leader had with their group was unusual in that it was outdoors in the huge Safa park - away from the sacred, indoor space where ensemble building

often begins. Chloe quickly established a firm foundation of trust, high expectations, and commitment to the creative process through ensemble and trust building games and activities. I picked up some new ice-breakers, and was reminded of the constant need to both demonstrate and expect excellence – even in the simplest of warm up activities. The adept delivery of instructions and expectations – always with a large dash of humor and self-deprecation – immediately helped the students become comfortable in their own skins and at ease with the group and their facilitator. A safe space was quickly established, where the ensemble leader was both demonstrating that she would not ask students to do something she herself was not prepared to do – thus building trust – and also gently pushing them to continually explore new limits and take the risks that great performance work requires.

Chloe also brought the student's attention to the site-specific nature of ISTA theatre, with Dubai being an integral part of the performance being created – and of the stimulus for this particular festival: Becket's *End Game*. I was secretly thrilled to learn that my ensemble leader mentor was also not a massive fan of Becket, as it would help me better overcome some of my own dramatic prejudices and see different ways of dealing with those texts and techniques I am not immediately drawn to.

The second and third ensemble sessions were back at Dubai American Academy, all on the first day. A great deal of time was invested in ensemble building and creating trust within the group, and the rewards were quickly and effectively reaped with open discussion and sharing of ideas quickly taking place. Ensemble games and techniques introduced in the first session in Safa Park were skillfully woven back into successive ensemble sessions, like a thread weaving each work session together. All ensemble members were contributing and participating fully, and collaboration norms had been smoothly established. Chloe was constantly encouraging students to give freely and take more risks. Having created the safe space for them to do so, students responded generously, and sincere thanks and appreciation for the authentic work they were already creating was frequently given. The text and Theatre of the Absurd were introduced and explored, and Chloe skillfully moved from discussion to inclusive decision-making without ever seeming to rush or force the process. The pace kept students engaged, and gentle reminders of attention and awareness kept the devising process moving in an organic, yet structured, way.

Chloe was constantly attuned to the ebb and flow of the group's dynamics and energy levels, as well as constantly reaffirming the feelings of the group and what courage it takes to be more daring. At one point an ensemble member suggested discarding *End Game* and Becket altogether. Chloe's suggestion of comedy and humour immediately brought them back into the fold and reengaged with the somewhat somber, starting stimulus. The idea of unrequited affection, and of being discarded, was picked up and run with, and a couple of key lines were drawn from the text and focused the ensemble for the remainder of Day one's ensemble work. Exploring the text through movement; introducing the students to the work of Anne Bogart, and building on the motif of being discarded, the devising process was in full swing!

The remaining ensemble session followed a similar pattern, with students constantly involved with the decision-making, creative process, together with continual striving for excellence and reminders of the need to serve their audience to the best ability of their actor's craft. When I asked Chloe how devising at ISTA differed from her regular classroom devising practice, the main idea that I took away was that ISTA facilitators as ensemble leaders are often trying to bring something new to each festival – something that students may not get from their regular drama teachers. What Chloe brings in her unique interpretation of Laban and Bogart's work is an incredible depth to the movement work she does with students. The focus on the importance of neutral position and negative space also allowed the students to take risks in a compressed amount of space and time that they probably wouldn't have taken otherwise.

For most part of the ensemble sessions, I sat quietly in the corner taking notes as an observant recorder and photographer of the devising process. A lot is packed into three days, and by taking notes and photographing the whole process I would be better able to unpack it on reflection in Addis Ababa. I joined in a couple of the warm up activities, but as a Fest Tracker, my main objective was to develop my own devising techniques with both middle and high school age groups, and the role of observant recorder and photographer, for me, worked best. I am currently developing our middle and high school drama / theater arts curriculum with two drama colleagues back in Ethiopia as part of our ongoing curriculum development, and adopting a devising approach for most of our middle school courses allows us to combine a drama for understanding approach, together with drama as an art form. Students begin with a basic introduction to drama skills and devising in 6th grade, then develop those skills in Drama 1- Grades 7/8; with the opportunity to specialize further in Drama 2 Grades 7/8. In high school, drama is offered as a semester long programme to grades 9-12, with a balance between pre-scripted texts and devising work being offered.

As luck would have it, the day after the Dubai HS Festival, Jen Tickle was offering a 1-day Continuing Professional Development course on Developing a Drama Curriculum in the Middle Years, at the Greenfield Community School, Dubai, so I signed up for that at the same time as the Fest Track. Although my PD allowance didn't cover the entire amount, it was a sound investment in my own drama professional development, and would immediately be put to good use on my return to Addis. Both the Fest Track and the day's Continuing Professional Development course on Middle Years Drama Curriculum Development were highly relevant to my needs as a drama teacher and after school drama coach.

In previous professional development courses, I have approached drama companies and collaborated in the design of a week-long PD course that best meets my needs. Had I requested a tailor made course on devising and curriculum development, I would have been hard pressed to find one that matched what the ISTA Fest Track and CPD offered. Having also done an ISTA Artists in Residence course with Mike Pasternak 3 summers ago, I can testify to the pertinence and immediate application any ISTA professional development course offers. With such a wealth of international drama, theatre, multimedia and performance practitioners and artists at their fingertips, they can hook you up with an unbelievable database of talent! And for a fraction of the cost of most PD courses. They are also 101% responsive to your needs – making sure they communicate promptly and effectively at all stages of the process so you feel like a well-cared for client who's every need is carefully attended to. The added advantage of the Fest Track is that you not only get to have a world class mentor 1:1 for three days, but you are also continually connecting, re-connecting and networking with both international drama practitioners and ISTA facilitators – which is a vital part of any dynamic drama teacher or practitioner's programme and practice. As Pdraig so eloquently put it in his thanks to all the ISTA participants, "This ISTA festival was the best way imaginable to support understanding of this complex work. ISTA fans the flames and is a lifeline for us on the ground, and you remind us all as to why we are doing what we are doing."

