ABSTRACT: Chris Baldwin, a devised theatre practitioner and co-editor of a practical guide to devising theatre, lists the devising director’s responsibilities as building a production and performance team, timetabling, compiling documentation of the rehearsal process and, crucially, fulfilling the role of spectator as the devised show is developed and rehearsed. Described by Baldwin as ‘at the centre of the rehearsal fulcrum’ (2002, 13), the director’s role is clearly assigned with an operation of power despite insistences that it is one of ‘enabling’ rather than ‘authority’, as in the case of text-based theatre. When compared to the tactics of discipline outlined by Michel Foucault (1977) – including spatial and temporal organization, partitioning, rank and analysis – the responsibilities of the devising director in Chris Baldwin’s account may be reconfigured as ‘enabling’ through discipline, with the persistent rhetoric of devising’s potential to democratize theatre practice masking complex operations of power that retain striking similarities to the practices of text-based theatre production that devising was initially intended to subvert. The primary holder of information concerning the devising group and the creative process (including preliminary research and rehearsal notes), the director thus fulfills an analytic role that is given added weight by its temporary function as ‘potential spectator’. In this paper I will examine devising theatre as a process of decision making, and the role of the director in presenting and ‘enabling’ the decisions that are made in the rehearsal room, and the implications for the final devised production.

Devising theatre is a collaborative process of creating an original theatrical production. While some devised productions may originate with some form of pre-written text, in my research I concentrate on theatre that is not developed from any written text but instead produced by the interactions and creative explorations of a group of theatre practitioners. In this paper I will examine the role of one of these practitioners, the director, and how this role has been constructed in practical guides to contemporary devised theatre. First, I will briefly contextualise the emergence of the director in Western theatre as an aesthetic response to 19th Century theatre styles, and the later disruption of the director’s authority as a political strategy by 1960s/70s devising collectives. Next I shall consider how the recent restoration of the director’s function in contemporary devised theatre has been couched in the terms ‘facilitator’ and ‘outside eye’ in devising literature. I argue that the use of such rhetoric suggests that the director’s function may usefully be opened to analysis as disciplinarian, in a Foucauldian sense, rather than autocratic. Using Foucault’s (1977) techniques of discipline as a starting point to such an analysis, I will closely examine Chris Baldwin’s (2002) chapter ‘The Director’ – a how-to guide for directors of devised theatre – to suggest that the rhetoric of devised theatre as a democratic theatre practice masks more complex power operations than are currently considered in the literature.
Although a relatively recent invention in the history of Western theatre, the function of the director as controlling artistic personality was one aspect of the traditional production process that devising, during its flourishing in the 1960s/70s, sought to replace with forms of collective creation to reflect the ideals of participatory democracy. As theatre theorists Deidre Heddon & Jane Milling (2006) explain, the key terms from the political rhetoric of the 1960s/70s that impacted upon the concepts and practices of devising include ‘individual and collective rights’, ‘self-determination’, ‘community’, ‘participation’, and ‘equality’ (15). In contrast, the director figure of the tradition-laden, institutional theatre reigned over a creative hierarchy that revered, and aesthetically prioritised, the written texts of its playwright Author-Gods. The role of director emerged in Western theatre in late 19th Century Europe as a type of visual and rhythmic composer in response to the requisite of aesthetically-demanding styles such as Naturalism and Symbolism. Following the influence of Richard Wagner’s concept of the Gesamtkunstwerk, or unified art work, and the so-called ‘unified’ productions of The Meiningen Players, the director was, according to theatre historians Oscar G. Brockett and Robert R. Findlay (1973, 28), beginning to ‘make his presence felt everywhere’ between 1870 and 1890. A century later, in 1975, Ariane Mnouchkine of the influential French devising collective Théâtre du Soleil claimed that ‘the director has already achieved the greatest degree of power he has ever had in history’ and declared that she and her company sought to ‘move beyond that situation by creating a form of theatre where it will be possible for everyone to collaborate without there being directors, technicians, and so on, in the old sense’ (in Williams 1999, 1). Mnouchkine’s sentiment was not unique; it had already found expression in the alternative theatre movements of the UK, USA, Australia and Europe since the early 1960s. Importantly, while the initial emergence of the director is depicted by theatre historians as a response to an aesthetic demand, with the director’s primary function to ensure the visual and conceptual coherency of a stage production, the displacement of the director by radical devising groups was politically motivated. The overturning of traditional production hierarchies, including the removal of the director, was part of a wider countercultural move to overturn a hierarchically-organised, institutionally-governed society. As theatre practitioner and theorist Richard Schechner (1967, 19) expressed it, ‘a decision to oppose a political system or to propose a different system is not an aesthetic decision’. Another theatre scholar working contemporaneous to the radicalism of early devising, Theodore Shank, observed:

The group, rather than the individual, is the typical focus of the alternative theatre, and this is reflected in the structure of the new theatre organizations, their manner of working, and their theatre pieces .... While some of the group will provide more leadership than others, the works that result are truly the expression of the group, not simply of a playwright or director. (Shank 1972, 3-4)

While couched in an enthusiasm characteristic of devising rhetoric, Shank’s point that some group members will lead more than others is a crucial one. More recent analyses of the position of the director in 1960s/70s
devising collectives acknowledge that, while generalized accounts often emphasise the pursuit of artistic democracy through non-hierarchical organisation, the actuality of practice did not accord with the ideal (Heddon and Milling, 2006; Magnat, 2005; Aronson, 2000). Many devising groups did maintain a director figure, and even a cursory reading of both contemporaneous and reflective accounts of ‘seminal’ devising collectives reveals the prominence of individual directors such as Judith Malina and Julian Beck of The Living Theatre, Joseph Chaikin of the Open Theatre, and Ariane Mnouchkine of Théâtre du Soleil. Despite the rhetoric of egalitarian participation, the director figure has been an important aspect of the development and evolution of contemporary devising. Or, more precisely, the director figure has been an important aspect of how devising as a theatrical practice has been documented, discussed, and analysed.

Frequently, the role of the director in devised theatre is articulated in terms that seek to dispel the connotations of authority that are associated with the director’s position at the top of the traditional production hierarchy. Since the fading of the 1960s/70s countercultural idealism, and the return to aesthetic specialisation and less democratic structures in many contemporary devising companies, the director figure seems to have been widely accepted as a likely aspect of most devising processes. However, devising practitioners and theorists express the function of that director figure in terms that attempt to circumvent a restoration of traditional notions of directorial authority and retain a sense of the collective spirit that remains a defining feature of devising rhetoric. The terms ‘facilitator’, ‘enabler’ and ‘outside eye’ are used to describe both the political and aesthetic function of the devising director. Although most contemporary directors of devised theatre do exert a visible amount of direct authority, ‘facilitator’ and ‘enabler’ retain a strong sense of participatory democracy in that group members are encouraged to produce ideas and make their own decisions. The director is here cast in a fairly innocuous co-ordinator role. As an ‘outside eye’, the director fulfils an aesthetic function by representing the ‘eyes and ears of the potential audience’ (Callery 2001, 178). By doing so, the director ensures the coherency and intelligibility of the devised work. In this simple rendering, it would appear that the original aesthetic function of the theatre director and the later politically motivated displacement of that function have been comfortably reconciled in the contemporary positioning of the devising director as ‘facilitating outside eye’. However, this problematically assumes that the operations of the theatre director as visual composer were politically neutral. It also suggests that the role of facilitator is primarily circumventing a conception of power that is individualised and psychologised.

The notion of power or authority is often addressed in devising literature as a sociological or psychological consideration. For example, in Sheila Kerrigan’s (2001) *The Performer’s Guide to the Collaborative Process*, power plays have a psychological basis – ‘If temper tantrums got results in family crises, they are likely to be used in a group crisis, too’ (110) – or are more widely sociological in nature – ‘Scapegoating in groups targets low-status members’ (115). Power manifested as the flow of control, aesthetic or social, amongst individuals
is presented as the primary concern of those wishing to attempt and maintain an egalitarian collective. However, Chris Baldwin’s (2002) chapter ‘The Director’, a practical how-to guide for directors of devised theatre, presents a possible alternative for understanding the function of the director as disciplinarian rather than simply authoritarian. Baldwin elaborates on the familiar rhetoric of the devising director as ‘enabler’ and ‘outside eye’ by breaking down the practical administrative tasks necessary to the efficient functioning of the rehearsal room. When read against the techniques of discipline outlined by Michel Foucault (1977) in *Discipline and Punish*, the devising director in Baldwin’s account may be reconfigured as ‘enabling’ through ‘discipline’, suggesting that the persistent rhetoric of devising’s potential to democratize theatre practices masks more complex operations of power than are currently discussed in devising literature.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1977) outlines a conception of power that is automatic and disindividualised, a power that does not depend on the authority of an individual personality but on the training, distribution, and arrangement of bodies in networks of relations. Rather than describing the effects of power in negative terms such as exclusion or repression, Foucault posits power as productive, arguing that ‘power ... produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production’ (194). The individual is fabricated by a specific technology of power Foucault terms ‘discipline’. Discipline imposes a compulsory visibility on its subjects; the Panoptic mechanism that makes ‘it possible for a single gaze to see everything constantly ... a perfect eye that nothing would escape and a centre towards which all gazes would be turned’ (173).

Proceeding from the spatial distribution of individuals, discipline employs the techniques of enclosure, partitioning and rank; it organises temporally through timetabling; and, at the level of documentation, discipline combines hierarchical surveillance and normalising judgement in the examination which, combined with various other documentary techniques, produces each individual as a ‘case’. While a very simplified overview, and one that neglects the historically-situated complexities of Foucault’s argument, it is these techniques of discipline, which I shall explain further below, that are discernible in Baldwin’s account of the director’s function in devised theatre.

In the first instance, the rehearsal room or the location of the devising process is an ‘enclosure’, what Foucault (1977, 141) calls ‘a place heterogeneous to all others and closed in upon itself’. This enclosure does not only refer to the literal location of the devising activity, but to the social space of the devising group’s interactions. This space is often delineated in theatre parlance through terms such as ‘ensemble’ or ‘complicité’, which Dymphna Callery (2001) describes as an ‘intense awareness and mutual understanding’ between performers. It is this space – unique to each devising group due to the composition of roles and relationships – that the director of devised theatre must organise in functional, material ways. The first task Baldwin allocates to such a director is ‘timetabling’ where the devising and rehearsal process is to be
arranged into distinct, manageable periods during which certain activities are expected to occur. These periods are the research and design period, the pre-rehearsal period, rehearsal, and first night, followed by performance. Timetabling is also featured in the devising handbooks of Gill Lamden (2000), Sheila Kerrigan (2001), and Alison Oddey (1994). The management of time is a key feature of any theatrical process as a show must be produced by a set date for opening night, but it is of particular interest in the process of devised theatre as how that time is managed represents the opportunity for new developments and discoveries. For example, a short research period will necessarily impact upon the amount of research material collected, while a brief devising process requires decisions regarding content to be made swiftly, leaving unexplored potential avenues for the further development of material. The next task for Baldwin’s director is the selection and formation of the ‘inner core team’ comprising the producer, playwright, designers, composer, and the movement director. Not all of these roles are necessary to each devising process and will not always be filled. However, Baldwin’s allocation of these roles echoes the principle of ‘partitioning’ which Foucault (1977) describes as each individual having their own place, and each place its individual. It is thus a spatial distribution. Baldwin’s account suggests that while there are key moments in the devising process when the writer, composer, movement director and designer(s) ought to be present in the rehearsal room and that they need to be aware at all times of what is going on, their roles do not require full group involvement – they can develop their work in isolation. The ‘inner core team’ is thus dispersed, cellular, while the performers or ‘outer core team’ are presented as working primarily as a group. This raises the question of ‘rank’, an assignation defined by individual place and the gaps that separate those places, an architectural ordering of spatial relations (Foucault 1977). The director, ‘at the centre of the rehearsal fulcrum’ (Baldwin 2002, 13), is the intersecting point for all the relations between both the inner and outer core teams. The role is ‘hydra-like – looking in many directions at the same time’ (24) as the director facilitates through supervision and centralisation. In 1974, Ariane Mnouchkine of Théâtre du Soleil described a similar situation:

creation can be collective, and absolutely collective, precisely if everyone is in his or her place,
ensures maximum creativity in each function, and if there’s someone who centralizes. This does not imply any hierarchical vision. (in Williams 1999, 57)

‘Hierarchical vision’ here refers to the imposition of a directorial, aesthetic vision that defines the overall production. However it does not take into account the power associated with an all-seeing gaze that, although not theoretically positioned at the top of a production hierarchy as with traditional theatre, is centrally located in Panoptic configuration. As a disciplinarian rather than an autocrat, the director cultivates a judgement that is seen to be based on a thorough knowledge of the independent and collaborative work of the whole devising team, and thus positions the director as best able to make suggestions or ask the necessary questions to ensure the devising process moves forward. By making timetables and organising the
inner and outer core teams, the director is further seen to be attending to practicalities that both frees and effectively manages the creative efforts of the designers, composers, performers, and so forth. While the devising director in Baldwin’s account is carefully presented as not controlling those creative efforts in conformity to a prefigured, overall directorial vision, the whole devising team is instead shown to be creating and making their aesthetic decisions within a space wholly configured by the director’s judgement. By mapping the temporal and spatial materiality of the devising process, the devising director orchestrates the context for creative potential – at a most obvious level, the selection of the inner and outer core teams themselves initiates the enclosure of the rehearsal room. When combining this already problematic ‘facilitator’ role with that of ‘outside eye’, the complexity of the director’s function as an apparent disperser of creative potential rather than commanding creative force raises questions as to how power operates in situations of collective creativity, where conventional models of a top-down hierarchy are seemingly subverted through choice of rhetoric.

The practical devising guides of Baldwin, Kerrigan, Callery, and Lamden, as well as the testimony of devising professionals in the literature, refer to the director’s role an ‘outside eye’ to carefully examine the developing devised work and make suggestions or ask questions from the point of view of the potential spectator. As Baldwin explains,

> The key question for a director and writer might be a surprising one: it is not what happens next but what the audience wants or expects to happen next. Our job, in a devising context, is to explore this concrete question using theatrical means ... The director is always asking, ‘What does the audience need to see and know next?’ (2002, 25)

In order to ask this question at the appropriate moment, and subsequently to formulate an answer, the ‘outside eye’ function requires an analytic approach that relies on the accumulation and production of various types of information. As a surrogate for the spectator, the director requires knowledge of the intended audience – a knowledge that can only ever be speculative, but is based on factors such as the possible age group at which the show is aimed, their location (whether urban or regional, for instance), and previous experiences with actual audiences. However, any knowledge of the potential spectator, both constructed and speculative, needs to be supplemented with knowledge of the conventions of theatre in order to develop the intelligible production that is presented as the aim of the outside eye. Callery states, ‘a directorial vision is what ultimately provides coherence. It is not arrived at by chance but is the organization of chance elements and collective creativity’ (2001, 194). For Callery, like Baldwin, the ‘directorial vision’ here is a surrogate for that of the audience, ostensibly deferring the ultimate decision-making to the potential spectator as the devising director advises that new scenes may need to be added for clarity, or other scenes removed as they add little to the narrative or flow of the production. Thus, in order to gauge what ‘the audience need to see and know next’ (Baldwin 2002, 25), the outside eye needs an understanding
of the conventions of narrative and how they may be employed in a linear or non-linear fashion. Both the knowledge of the potential spectator and the knowledge of theatrical convention utilised by the director as outside eye are ultimately discursive constructions that, on the one hand, posit frames of reference that seemingly transcend the individual director (that is, audiences and theatrical conventions) and point to the historical and cultural context in which the work is being devised. On the other hand, in the flesh-and-blood realm of theatrical practice, it is the case that between two different directors and their various experiences of both traditional and experimental theatrical conventions, their answers to ‘what the audience need to see and know next’ may be completely different. The director of devised theatre is apparently simultaneously privileged and effaced in the act of spectating. However, the overall process of devising theatre is presented in devising literature as occurring within the director’s ‘facilitated’ space and against the expectations of the spectator – manifested in the space by the decisions made by the outside eye – thus suggesting that the devising process, at least until opening night, takes place in a total directorial enclosure.

In this paper I have focused on the role of the director to reconsider the operations of power in the devising theatre process as disciplinarian, in a Foucauldian sense, rather than simply autocratic. By concentrating on the functions of ‘facilitator’ and ‘outside eye’, and how these relate to the director’s role as presented in devising literature, I have suggested that these terms are not as innocuous as they may seem, and require a rethink as to how the rhetoric and practice of devising theatre may mask a more subtle configuration of power than the ‘repressive’ and authoritarian formations of power that were the target of 1960s/70s collectives. I argue that a deeper analysis of the ‘outside eye’ function requires an interrogation of the power of the gaze, a consideration of Foucault’s concept of ‘power/knowledge’, as well as an investigation of the discursive construction of ‘the potential spectator’. For now, I posit that the devised director as ‘facilitator’ and ‘outside eye’ suggests a power arrangement that, while circumventing a traditional conception of directorial authority as found in text-based theatre, requires a reconsideration of wider socio-cultural influences on the organisation and operation of collective creativity. The prominence of the director in the recounted history of devising since the 1960s, and the apparent circular formation of devising space as constructed in devising handbooks by the director’s decision-making processes, suggests that the practice of devising to defy a so-called repressive formation of power in society enabled a productive formation of power to eventually become the organising principle of this experimental social and creative space. Ultimately, such an analysis requires a re-examination of how the practice of devised theatre has operated in the wider cultural context of the UK, USA, Australia and Europe since the countercultural radicalism of the 1960s.
REFERENCES


