



## The Ideology of Collaborative Theatre: The Auteur Director and the Anticapitalist ‘Good Soul’

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***Abstract:** Today’s theatre artists working collaboratively position themselves as outsiders to a system of institutions, hierarchies, and structures. However, Alain Badiou states that theatre has historically been and presently continues to be an extension of state power, meaning that collaborative theatre may be just delivering the state’s mantra in a different guise. The propensity to avoid aesthetic definition further dilutes the potential for such theatres to truly generate change – in fact, they may be dangerously close to simply becoming agents for a neoliberal agenda, perfect examples of unwitting agents who have internalised the messages of the system to the point of invisibility. How might we examine the ideology of collaboration? This paper argues for a self-analysis of the ideology of collaborative work existing ‘outside the system’. Furthermore, the auteur model is proposed as a counter-system, one in which a certain proximity to power actually serves to (theatrically) threaten it.*

**Key words:** state; horizontality; authorship; self-sacrifice; ideology.

### Introduction

Eurocentric theatre – i.e. theatre descended from the traditions of Ancient Greece – is today stuck in a moment of *aporia* defined by twin movements occurring in opposite directions simultaneously. On one hand, attempts are being made to de-institutionalise or restructure theatres to accommodate perceived cultural and political needs, in line with both neoliberal ends (of efficiency, event-based programming, or hybridisation for example) and those driven by identity politics (such as problems of representation, embedded racisms/misogynies, and cultural pluralism). On the other hand, collaborative productions coming from outside the theatre – in public space, in site-specific locations and so on – are circumventing entirely the problem of theatre as an architectural and institutional site, a practice therefore requiring vast amounts of capital to maintain (and coming with historical baggage embedded within the walls). The position outside the state system of theatre production results in the production of genuine new possibilities, and also repeats previous cycles of supposed change. But the trend towards devised or collective creation in the theatre does not itself come with a clean slate. Rather, it has its



own set of ideological characteristics, stemming from a perception of being less restricted, less conventional, and more activating of the spectator than theatre trapped within a set of institutional or state-funded walls. This makes devising or collective creation a primary site for change in the periphery, and also a site which can easily be co-opted for the (subliminal) reinforcement of existing hegemonies. Furthermore, the conventional instrumentaliser of theatre – namely the State – may be overlooked in this new constellation of power, where precisely the slippery or undefined nature of the collaborative theatre excludes it from the mechanics of social change or anti-state actions.

### **Theatre as State Power and Badiou's Dialectics**

In his 2008 article *Rhapsody for the Theatre*, Alain Badiou makes a provocative proposal regarding theatre and state power, and an equally provocative dialectical model. The proposal – an aside for Badiou's project but nevertheless important – is that theatre is (always) an expression of state power. "Next to the spiritual suspicion that befalls theatre, there has always been the vigilant concern of the State, to the point where all theatre has been one of the affairs of the State, and remains so to this day!" (Badiou 2008, 189). Here Badiou simply connects the intertwining of the State and theatre, with theatre's own fabulism challenging the 'true' fictions of religion, the other historical player of hierarchy. Badiou later proposes a model of the functioning of dialectics in the theatre from the perspective of the spectator, where the theatre's 'elements' (or 'analytic', being place, text, director, actor, costumes, public) and the emergence of their 'challenge' (dialectic or at-play, in the form of the State, ethics of play, spectator and others) produce dialectical truth. These might be more easily divided into the physical 'given circumstances' of the theatre on the side of the analytic, and the more ephemeral on the other side, with their dialectical truth commonly manifesting through the spectator, who is "summoned to appear in the tribunal of a morality under the watchful eye of the State" (2008, 194). If Badiou's proposals are taken seriously, then significant problems immediately arise in relation to collaborative theatre, for if theatre is always an expression of State power, then does not collaborative theatre effectively mean the extension of that State power into areas outside of the structures of theatre? In which case: In a collaborative theatre model, where is the State hiding? On the second point, the production of dialectical truth being reliant on a set of elements met with their challenge, collaborative theatre may render these concepts fluid to the point where they almost disappear – or perhaps worse, take on a kind of extreme visibility through their constant negotiation. Here the promises of a collaborative theatre here can be likened to those of the neoliberal 'collaborative state': merely empty symbolic gestures designed to maintain state power through a dissemination of its structures within the individual ('internalisation'). Furthermore, we may see the tools of



state power finding expression within the artist themselves – in other words, an extension of the neoliberal individual-as-citizen. Within the dialectical model proposed by Badiou, the actor becomes an agent for the conveyance of a power structure now rendered invisible, through a masking of both its analytic (which is now so fluid as to be removed from the equation) and its challenge (also lacking definition). The truth conveyed to the witnessing audience has its basis not in the opposition of analytic and element, but in circulated assumptions and consensus over a pre-defined, ‘correct’, or acceptable articulation.

### **Claire Bishop and Aesthetics in Collaborative Art**

This process of internalisation and circulation of already-knowns is exacerbated by the difficulties of establishing any clear aesthetic commitment within a collaborative situation. The United States author Clare Bishop begins her 2006 paper *The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents* by questioning the Turkish art collective Oda Projesi, who consider aesthetics a ‘dangerous word’ to which she replies “if the aesthetic is dangerous, isn’t this more reason it should be interrogated?” (2006, 181). Bishop paints a picture of collaboration without ethics, leaving only what she calls a “generalised set of moral precepts” (2006, 182). Not coincidentally, she criticises such projects as conforming to prevailing identity politics in contradiction with aesthetics (or dialectics), the values of ‘respect for the other, recognition of difference, and inflexible attitude to political correctness’ (the value of which are assumed to be conveyed to an audience through the act of performance). Most relevant the subject of collaborative theatre, however, are Bishop’s statements about authorship: that the dominant situation in which ‘authorship’ occurs in collaboration is “self-sacrifice”, where she points out a “tacit analogy between anticapitalism and the Christian ‘good soul’” (2006, 184). She goes on to name a number of counter-examples, including a film from Lars von Trier, *Dogville* (2003), which attempt to complicate authorship precisely through an implication of the politics of authorship and their visibility, and not through its (supposed) erasure. In these situations, claims Bishop, aesthetic and ethical concerns are made visible precisely on account of their maintaining the aesthetic and the social/political *together*.

While Bishop doesn’t mention the possibility of the director as rendering this structure visible, it seems the logical next step. The visibility of the power structure is inherent in the figure of the director, who puts himself forward as a figure of power, therefore to be subverted, attacked, even destroyed. In this sense, the director becomes a symbolic stand-in for state power within the structure of theatre production, at once referring to Badiou’s proposition regarding theatre and state power, and opening it to critique. By capturing the commons and declaring themselves governor, the director



inscribes the human into a dominant order, potentially articulating an aesthetic that at once may assert and render fragile this power.

### **Collaboration as Commodity – Arendt and the Totalitarian Auteur**

Theatre's increasing globality and intersections with capitalism, represented best by cross-border collaborations (both those supported by institutions and independent), encourage us to ask in what way collaboration might hasten the process of commodification, as capitalism expands into new frontiers of primitive accumulation. In this sense, collaboration in the theatre may function similar to today's exponentially-expanding 'sharing economy' – where despite the erasure of regulatory conditions (such as insurance, liability, etc.), it is capable of generating ideology totally compatible with, and not at all challenging of or resistant to, capitalism in cahoots with state power. Within sharing economies, a previously deviant activity such as tax evasion becomes the ultimate expression of the mainstream, tacitly supported by a government needing an alibi for its lack of concern with taxing the wealthy or corporations. Likewise, collaborative theatre's potential to erase Badiou's analytic and element result not in a resistant outcome, but in one that instead stands as an expression of the dominant set of non-specific moral principles (not coincidentally, these are increasingly programmed at international state-funded festivals despite their supposedly anarchist foundations). Here we can see a particular paradox of directorial authorship emerging, one in which the specificity of an articulation of morality becomes dependent on its authorship, yet the authorship itself is no longer acceptable practice outside state theatres. It does not take much of an extension of Bishop's statements regarding authorship and self-sacrifice to claim that the sacrifice of authorship in the western theatre is itself a performance of Christianity – and therefore conclude that a truly anticapitalist position, minus the good soul, one which offers resistance against the theatre as an instrument of state power and ideology *per se*, would precisely re-inscribe authorship into its collaborative models, formal or informal<sup>1</sup>.

Here I see potential for auteur theatre to somewhat paradoxically resist this state power, not through an erasure of, or distancing, from constellations of power within

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, the possibility of multiple authors within horizontal structures complicates things further. One could nevertheless ask (and it is commonly asked) in what way such structures are different from the most hierarchical theatre, where every work is inherently multi-authored and the difference is in role definition (the theatre's version of an economic division of labour). It is not enough to suggest that these roles are fixed in their distribution of power – rather they are, and have always been, shifting according to trend, specific productions, and other factors. The shift to collaborative theatre here denotes a shift towards labour negotiations on unclear and undefined terms, situations that historically favour voices already dominant.



collaboration and their accompanying ethical conundrums, but precisely through a type of complicity or closeness to power. The section of Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) titled 'Totalitarianism' is notable for its recurring connections between selflessness and totalitarian rule. "The disturbing factor", she writes, "in the success of totalitarianism is rather the true selflessness of its adherents" (1951, 307). The factor demarcating the individuals living under totalitarian rule is their willingness to prove the idea of the regime, and their membership to it, is through their self-sacrifice. "He (sic) may even be willing to help in his own prosecution and frame his own death sentence if only his status as a member of the movement is not touched" (Arendt 1951,307). How might the same idea look in the context of authorship in the theatre? Would it not indicate that the inscription of the individual (any individual) that is the hallmark of auteur theatre finds its resistance as a mirror to the power of the State – again, not through its distance from the complications of power, but a type of complicity, or closeness to it? Returning to Badiou, isn't the positioning of a theatre as a "morally suspicious" (2008, 189) affair of the State dependent on the expression of power, one way or another, within the theatre? Does criticality therefore not depend somewhat on the very presence of hierarchies, structures, and authorships that collaborative models would seek to erase?

The visibility of morally questionable gestures lying at the heart of both the auteur theatre and the State is best found in examples such as Bishop's example of *Dogville*. Here, the auteur aligns himself with a variety of omniscient, yet entirely weak and finally corrupt, figures: committing rape, dwelling on philosophical questions whilst tragedy is unfolding, blackmailing whilst appearing polite, and so on. The heroine of the story is (undoubtedly problematically) tortured by the operation of power upon her, as the flimsiness of power and the violence emanating from that flimsiness is exposed through its symbolic expression (not coincidentally, on something of a stage, as Van Trier's set is aesthetically laid out like a black box theatre). The point is not to illustrate an unachievable goal for collaborative theatre in complicating itself with power to create an audience-as-witness (or which *Dogville* is an extreme example), but to ask in what way it can generate alternatives to this, avoiding as it does the aesthetic articulation of power and replacing this with the aforementioned poor substitutes of participation, hybridisation, and self-sacrifice. The point is that we should not avoid demanding power – together with its complications. Within such a context, the auteur director denotes a figure of wilful corruption, easily confused with their counterparts in other systems of power and yet able to render them visible through their manifestation in the (symbolic) expression of ultimate authorship.

This is not a mere discussion about periphery and centre. The absence of – and even rejection of – aesthetic proposals in collaborative theatre, outlined by Bishop, has concerns deep in the heart of theatre's expression, and reveals a blinding of theatre



artists to the consequences of their supposedly oppositional proposals. Whilst some destabilisation of structures is necessary to create the ‘new’, there must be, at some stage, an articulation of an aesthetic project. Here, rather than simply attack such work, I claim that these aesthetic projects should comprehend and articulate themselves within Badiou’s dialectical model and claim of theatre’s inexorable link to state power, inevitably tied to questions of authorship. Considering the question of theatre as an expression of state power allows us to closely examine the propositions of alternative models as themselves replete with ideology – and not free spaces of moral and ethical sanitisation, nor a kind of baptism from the problems of the world. There is no ‘clean slate’ or morally pure position – rather, theatre can only ask the revolutionary question: what kind of state power?<sup>1</sup> Returning to Arendt, the question becomes not how to erase ourselves in the face of an indomitable system of state power, but exactly how to re-inscribe ourselves, through a process of authorship, and in doing so, interfere with the expression of state power by a process of mirroring it. But first, state power must be recognised in ourselves – and in our collaborative models. In effect, the question here is not ‘what is collaboration in relation to a classical theatre?’ or even ‘what is collaboration in a political context?’ but a much more radical ‘What is collaboration, in an ideological sense?’

### **Conclusion: A Relentless Expression of Authorship**

Examining collaborative theatre within a political frame in today’s period of expressive ideology, in which previously latent movements have begun to show their plans more openly, necessarily involves questioning the perceived neutrality of collaboration itself – for example, its claims to freedom, drawn from a separation from the political burdens of state institutions. Far from being a perfect measure to address state power from the periphery, an examination of power’s functioning within theatrical collaboration – as it functions across both ‘free spaces’ and state theatres – complicates the effectiveness of such a position. Authorship, as it exists within collaborative theatre labour, and particularly its complications with respect to the role of director, are necessarily implicated in this story, as the director becomes the symbolic site of struggle for non-hierarchical alternative structures. As the figure of (perceived) supreme authorial power, the auteur director is the one at once the most compromised by their thirst for power and yet also best disposed to challenge state power precisely through this very compromised situation. This position asks serious questions about the ability

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<sup>1</sup> I see possibilities for particular forms of Anti-Theatre to challenge this assertion, however this belong to a category outside the limitations of theatre itself. There is no claim from collaborative theatre groups to be working in anti-theatre, and if there is, it is precisely to be ‘not theatre’ or more precisely ‘against theatre’ – this would create an entirely different paradigm.



of collaboration, and its twin of shared or horizontal authorship, to significantly alter the pre-existing conditions of theatre, because it arrives to the scene ironically hampered: by both its ideal image of consensus and correctness, and its ironic execution of some of the least collective tendencies of the neoliberal project.

Such analyses gain importance for theatre artists working outside state institutions of today's Europe, where populism and nationalism continue to make gains against a backdrop of working class discontent. The critique of state power becomes paramount in such circumstances, whereby theatre art might bring to attention the possibilities outside nationhood. New aesthetic proposals create new realities, which, with critical distance, may prevent the spectator being subsumed by image culture, participation, and a kind of default social consensus for whom independent theatre artists are increasingly serving merely as additional agents. Acknowledging our complicity within structures of power, and in particular our capacity to promote and create systems of power through the theatre, will aid the development of new aesthetic proposals to address present and coming crises. However, as with any systemic change, it is dependent on recognition of system within the self, first and foremost. That recognition presently seems impossible, as theatre art increasingly participates in what appears as a new Avant-Garde, but which is in fact only a new system of manufactured consent.

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