

**Phantom Scripts:
The Censor's Archive and the Phantom Scripts of Improvisation,**

Dr. James McLaughlin

Until 1968 The Lord Chamberlain's Office was an official instrument of state by which all performance was legally bound to a written text. If there could be no written script, there could be no performance. Like mortal enemies, improvisation and censorship were therefore defined by the absolute rejection of the other.

Steve Nicholson, in his comprehensive study of modern British theatre censorship, notes that censorship operates most effectively when invisible, arguing that 'Preventing the unacceptable from being written or even imagined is probably the ultimate goal of censorship' (Nicholson 2003: 2). I would argue that Nicholson's analysis bears some resemblance to Foucault's interrogation of Bentham's Panopticon. In this theoretical framework, the inmates of the Panopticon are trained to correct their own behaviour at all times because they could be being watched at any moment (Bentham 1995: 12) (Foucault, 1975).

It would appear that one reason the system of censorship presided over by the Lord Chamberlain unravelled so quickly is that radical and subversive theatre producers realized that the gaze of the censor was not omnipresent. Furthermore, the Comptrollers were so eager to preserve their authority by operating with the consent of those they were policing, that the producers could get away with more and more.

As the censor's authority was eroded by public disputes their correspondence with improvisation groups highlighted the inherent incompatibility of improvisation and text-based conceptions of performance. These communications, held in archive by the British Library, forge a different relationship between performance and writing, made up of letters, outlines, and descriptions. These phantom scripts, revealing the performance in negative, evidence the desire to improvise and the attempts to control that impulse. What follows is an analysis of key documents in this collection that reveal how the radical spontaneity of improvisation infected the process of text-bound censorship and played a role in its overthrow.

In 1959, Stephen Joseph approached the Lord Chamberlain with a view to producing a play that would be improvised around a premeditated synopsis. The response from the Lord Chamberlain's Office is kind and understanding, but firm in its refusal. The parental tone of the correspondence with Stephen Johnson reveals the authority, self-assurance, and confidence of an institution that is still in control:

[insert reproduction of letter here]

'Lord Scarborough has asked me to express to you his thanks for the responsible way in which you have represented to him the project ... He is ... legally bound to demand from you the full dialogue and descriptions of allied action of any play you propose to stage ... I fear that this will be a big disappointment for you, since I can, in effect, do nothing but confirm that, unless you produce your improvisation in circumstances where the Theatres Act 1843 does not apply, you will be breaking the law.' (Hill in Nicholson 2011: 215-216)

The outward calm and authority shown in the letter to Mr. Joseph is quite different to the internal communications within the office about the production.

[insert reproduction of memo here]

If he decides in this case that the requirement that 'one copy of every new stage play shall be submitted' is met by the provision of a synopsis, and that improvisation is permissible, he will not be able to confine his decision to such plays as he thinks fit. The opening he provides will be seized with both hands by the producers of all 'advanced' or 'dubious' plays who will submit a synopsis and achieve virtual elimination of the Censorship. I suggest that the only possible answer to this request is that it is legally impermissible, and I think the letter should be couched in the strongest terms possible, to ensure that the project is abandoned. If it is continued with, I think we should have to prosecute, and I foresee an unpleasant case. (Hill in Nicholson 2011: 214-215)

As early as 1959, there is a discernible note of discord between the authoritative way the office represents itself to the world, and the insecure way they consider their own position. In the letter to Mr. Joseph they regretfully inform them that if he proceeds with improvising he will be breaking the law, while in the internal memorandum it is clear that should such a thing go ahead, it would be a threat to the very infrastructure of censorship, promising to, 'achieve the virtual elimination of censorship'.

Following this polite transaction, in the first half of the 1960s, the Lord Chamberlain was faced with two American shows that pushed it to its limits in a far more aggressive fashion. The first was The Premise that was produced at The Comedy Theatre in 1962. The second was The Star Spangled Jack Show from The Second City in Chicago, staged at The Hypodrome in 1965. Both had scripts licenced for performance, but neither mentioned the fact that they would be

improvising large portions of their shows. Once letters of complaint began rolling in and the press picked up the story the Lord Chamberlain's office was forced into an impossible situation of threatening prosecutions that it had no desire to pursue.

The producer of *The Premise*, Theodore Flicker, took up the challenge of defending improvisation to the Lord Chamberlain's Office, staking its claim on as much moral authority as scripted performance. In a letter to the censors he writes:

[insert reproduction of letter here]

'In an effort to aid you in creating a principle whereby your office is not placed in a position of banning from the United Kingdom the legitimate art form of improvisational theatre, I shall define improvisational theatre for you.

'First of all you must understand that the same rules of decency and morality apply to improvisational theatre as to any other public form of expression. Improvisational theatre, though not in force in the theatre for at least four hundred years, has blossomed forth as a particularly twentieth century means of theatrical expression. Its aim is to utilise the live force of the presence of living actors and living people in such a way to make that theatre deal with the fabric of the lives of these people as it is woven each day...

'In its way improvisation and mime can be considered to be in the same relationship to the legitimate theatre. It is unique and therefore we believe it deserves a special consideration from your office...

'I sincerely hope that your office will be able to find a way to include improvisation in the ranks of permissible theatre in Great Britain and that you will not close our show.' (Flicker 1962)

The tone of Flicker's letter manages to be both respectful and condescending. He makes a show of submitting to the Lord Chamberlain's authority while intimating that they are out of touch with theatrical performance in the Twentieth Century. His articulation of the essence of improvisation in particular is very telling: 'Its aim is to utilise the live force of the presence of living actors and living people in such a way to make that theatre deal with the fabric of the lives of these people as it is woven each day.' For one thing this alludes to the performative turn in theatre that suggests there is more to a performance than the direct live reproduction of a script.

Contentiously, he also suggests that it uses the 'live force' of the audience to deal with their daily lives and concerns. One issue that was to increasingly trouble the censors was 'audience inception' (the audience contributing ideas to the performance) and the power this would have to destroy censorship (Hill 1962). The challenge to the uni-directional transmission of meaning from a sanctioned script to a passively receptive audience and a move to a more collaborative

experience in which the audience could control the public expression on the stage was the veiled issue that lurked beneath these disputes.

After a flurry of internal memos, legal opinions, and meetings, The Premise folded without any action required by the Lord Chamberlain's Office. There is a palpable sense of relief in the internal communications that they were not forced into pursuing a prosecution:

[insert reproduction of memo here]

'Very fortunately the play folded up before a final and difficult decision had to be made. What is important now is to ensure that nothing similar happens in future...

It is essential that any possibility of "improvisation" should be very carefully watched for in any script submitted for examination and killed before birth. We have just skidded round one difficult corner and we may not be so lucky should there be another one.' (Gwadkin: 1962)

The strength of feeling regarding 'any possibility of "improvisation"' and that it should be 'killed before birth' is startling. There is a sense that light-hearted comedy shows, so informal and unserious, contain within them something so dangerous that it cannot even be allowed to enter public consciousness through a prosecution. The censors must operate pre-emptively, maintaining the invisible operation of its mechanism. If debate were to allow this process to become transparent it would begin to break down. Instead, the censors must act like Herrod's soldier's, vigilantly seeking out any seemingly innocent project and killing it before it can rise against them.

The Lord Chamberlain's men were nervous for a reason, however, because three years later, The Second City (America's home of sketch and improvised comedy) staged the Star Spangled Jack Show at The Hyppodrome. Although a script was licensed by the Lord Chamberlain's office, the majority of the performance departed from that script. There were unlicensed sketches, sketches that were partially improvised, and at the conclusion of the sketch show the audience were invited to stay for their improvised performance that took audience suggestions and improvised scenarios. Once again the press picked up the story of an American show getting away with defying the Crown's powers of censorship. To inflame the situation further, the producer Michael White, gave none of the displays of deference that previous improvisors had. The Sunday Times reported that, 'Michael White, who's putting on the show, says that the company are not doing to pay any attention to any ruling of the Lord Chamberlain's.

"Improvisation," he says firmly, "is a part of the theatre. I didn't bring it up with the Lord Chamberlain in the first place because I knew he'd object. In any case what can he do about it?" (The Sunday Times: 1965)

In this case the Lord Chamberlain's office were fortunate to find a sympathetic response from the owner of the theatre who put pressure on Mr. White to curtail the improvisation. Internal memos once again show the paradoxical attitude towards improvisation, with Mr. Hill of the Office writing that, 'We are embarrassed over 'improvisations', which at present are harmless, but which are illegal and if allowed would destroy censorship' (Hill 1965).

So once more the censors had a lucky escape from having to pursue a prosecution against a seemingly innocuous comedy show, a prosecution that could have led to them being ridiculed in the press and further undermined. However, a certain fatalism can be seen creeping in to the censors' communications. Mr Hill cautions that, 'it must be remembered that Mr. White seems to be both vindictive and a man with a mission. He will learn by his mistakes this time, and will confront us again with the improvisation issue in terms that we cannot dodge.'

The final challenge that improvisation mounted against the power of the censor did not come from bolshy American comedians, but from the most innocent of sources, a children's Christmas theatre show proposed by Keith Johnstone that was partially improvised. From the writers group at The Royal Court, Johnstone had formed a group called 'Theatre Machine' that would publicly perform improvisations from audience suggestions. Theatre Machine received warm responses from audiences and critics throughout Europe (Dudeck 2013 : 77). However, in their home country these performances were illegal.

The Royal Court's involvement set alarm bells ringing in the censor's office as they had proven to be persistent challengers to the powers of censorship through the works of Samuel Beckett, Edward Bond and others. But if the censors would have looked silly pursuing a prosecution against a frivolous comedy show, they may have come off as a pantomime villain if they had attempted to ban a children's Christmas theatre show. In an internal memo, the censor's antipathy towards The Royal Court comes through strongly:

[insert reproduction of memo here]

The censor's plaintive cry that, 'these people cannot be trusted', portrays an organisation under such strain that they anticipate further attacks on their besieged position, a not unreasonable assessment of their position (Hill 1965).

Johnstone and his company Theatre Machine had been subtly avoiding the censor's attention earlier in the year by taking Clowning 'lectures' around schools and giving improvised theatre shows in the guise of lectures. His contempt for the censor was well established as it went completely against his pedagogy of liberation and creative freedom in the moment (Johnstone 1979: 118). However, by moving from lectures to what was overtly a theatre show, the censors

could not ignore it. Not only were the scenarios to be improvised, but the audience were to provide the inspiration for them. This was audience inception and the very thing that the censors could not allow, breaking apart the model of text-based censorship that their office was based upon.

However, given their position, and the damaging press that would have followed any action that they could have taken, the Lord Chamberlain's Office allowed the production to go ahead. They did not delve too deeply into the reality of the situation and there is no evidence that they followed up this tricky issue with any inspections. It appears that they were happy to let this wolf in sheep's clothing pass as quietly as possible. However, this innocuous children's show was the first time that improvisation was officially sanctioned on the British stage.

A mechanism of censorship provides the means by which a central authority controls broader society's expression and keeps it within permitted parameters, usually as a means to prevent the dissemination of ideas that threaten the status quo. This centralising urge of censorship to eliminate difference of thought stands the best chance of success within a traditional model of the theatre system where a central author or director is ultimately responsible for the meaning created by a performance. Ideally this meaning is hermeneutically contained within a play text that can be read, analysed, and licenced or banned. This text contains the ideas of the author which are considered to be the potentially dangerous and censorable material.

Improvisation on the other hand breaks open the text as a container of meaning. There is no text from which the performance is produced, but instead the performance emerges from the particular conditions of its enactment, the participants involved, the space it is staged in, and the audience who view it. Rather than being the embodiment of a premeditated script that might be assessed beforehand for censorable material, it is the spontaneous expression of the creative imagination and as such cannot be censored prior to its performance unless it is banned outright.

What is more, this liberation of the creative imagination is extended to the audience who participate through the suggestion of scenarios and interaction with those scenes as they are acted out. The Comptrollers of the Lord Chamberlain's office were very sensitive to this aspect of improvisation and they often reminded one another that the improvisation of scenarios spontaneously suggested by the audience, what they describe as, 'audience inception', must never be permitted. This makes it apparent, that the prospect that most concerned the Lord Chamberlain's office was the dispersal of creative potential to an ever wider section of society. While it is never made explicit in the Lord Chamberlain's files there is an overriding sense that

all kinds of public disorder would erupt if the audience of a performance was given a voice and allowed to suggest the ideas and situations to be performed on stage.

Such an extension of creative potential to the audience of a performance further breaks down the barriers of the author and the script that were traditionally seen as the origin and ultimate container of meaning. This process of the dispersal of meaning-making faculties from a central author to the multitude of the audience is a direct echo of Roland Barthes' advocacy of the death of the author and the birth of the reader (Barthes 1977). In the case of improvisation, this dispersal of meaning-making activity is exacerbated by the audience taking on some of the roles of a scribe of the event, suggesting scenarios and interacting with the scenes.

Three years after the Royal Court Christmas show, the Lord Chamberlain's powers of censorship were abolished and improvisation was in a single stroke made legal. There are many cases of 'serious' plays that challenged the censors, such as Edward Bond's *Saved*, and many productions by Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop. These 'serious' plays created the headlines in the battle between theatre artists and the censors. These were instances where public decency and the morality of society were seen to be at stake. The comedy and improvisation shows that were such a thorn in the side of the censor might be seen as distracting side-shows, frivolous entertainment in the name of which producers used tussles with the censors to sell tickets, and the press picked up on to tease the censors and sell papers in the process.

However, as the documents from the Lord Chamberlain's archive show, these light entertainments carried with them the very thing that had the power to overthrow censorship. By separating the performance from the script, the performances were uncensorable unless they were banned outright. Theatre no longer had to be the embodiment of a pre-written script but could fulfil all of the proposed experiential encounters between performers and audience that blossomed in the 1960s. Theatre was no longer word made flesh, but flesh generating words freely and spontaneously. This spirit of anarchic freedom was the antithesis of the regulation of expression, not because of what it was saying, but because anything might be said at any moment. And what is more, it was not only the official theatre makers who could be responsible for getting their ideas on to the stage, but anyone who bought a ticket and was brave enough to shout out a suggestion. Improvisation was poison to censorship because it attacked its structure and process. It did not matter what the content was, the very performance of this mode of theatre pushed the world beyond one in which censorship could control expression because it showed the potential freedom inherent in every moment. It showed that we are not bound by texts, and therefore cannot be controlled by the regulation of those texts. The only texts that still do carry traces of these improvisation shows are these phantom scripts of the

Lord Chamberlain's archives that portray the underlying drama of the liberation of the creative theatrical imagination from the instrument of text-bound censorship.

Reference List:

Barthes, Roland. (1977). 'The Death of the Author', from Image, Music, Text. (trans. Stephen Heath). London: Harper Colins.

Dudeck, Theresa Robbins. (2013). Keith Johnstone: A Critical Biography. London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama.

Flicker, T. (1962) Letter to Lord Chamberlain's Office. [Letter] The British Library, Lord Chamberlain's Correspondence Archive. London.

Foucault, M. (1975). Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison. (trans. Alan Sheridan). New York: Vintage Books.

Gwadkin. (1963) Improvisation. [Memo] The British Library, Lord Chamberlain's Correspondence Archive. London.

Hill. (1962) Internal Memo. [Memo] The British Library, Lord Chamberlain's Correspondence Archive. London.

Hill. (1965) Improvisation. [Memo] The British Library, Lord Chamberlain's Correspondence Archive. London.

Johnstone, Keith. (1979). Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre. London: Routledge.

Nicholson, Steve. (2011). The Censorship of British Drama, 1900-1968, Volume Three: The Fifties. Exeter: Exeter University Press.

Nicholson, Steve. (2014). The Censorship of British Drama, 1900-1968, Volume Four: The Sixties. Exeter: Exeter University Press.

(n.a.) (1965). 'Spangled' in The Sunday Times. 22 August.