

## **Funding, product placement and drunkenness in Punchdrunk's *The Black***

### ***Diamond***

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### **Abstract**

*This article responds to Stella Artois Black's recent hiring of Punchdrunk members for their 'immersive' theatre marketing venture The Black Diamond (Scene 1). What happens to immersive theatre when product placement enters its world? And what happens to the product having entered the world of immersive theatre? These questions are addressed in relation to Arts Council England funding policy and Punchdrunk's award of a significant rise in ACE funding. Balancing ACE's framework for 'sustainable' art against the threat of 'selling out' to commercial interests, a critical approach is proposed that addresses how audiences might assume partial responsibility for recognising and responding to the control of art production at the institutional level. With tongue only half in cheek, drunkenness is explored in relation to product placement as a means to this end.*

Responding to current cuts in public spending in the United Kingdom, Arts Council England are encouraging art makers and companies to source mixed economic finance from both public and private sources (ACE 2010: 7). ACE's chief executive, Alan Davey, even describes this encouragement as 'vital' for the continuation of a 'golden age' of artistic 'excellence' (ACE 2010: 7). Corporate sponsorship and private philanthropy have been tied into theatre funding for quite some time, but the privatisation of theatre finance and innovative theatre business models seem likely to become increasingly prevalent in the wake of recent ACE policy and the tightening of public purse strings by Her Majesty's Treasury. This article responds to privatisation and business innovation in theatre finance by addressing the relationship of a theatre company to its financial sources and asking what implications such shifts in theatre finance might have on producing and, significantly, receiving theatre today.

The British theatre company Punchdrunk were formed in 2000 and have since come to enjoy international acclaim as pioneers of so-called 'immersive theatre'; this is a

promenade theatre form which allows audiences the benefit of free-roaming within hands-on and multi-sensory performance environments (the term is still only loosely defined in theatre studies and will be explored more fully in the next section). Punchdrunk have become famous for appropriating (mostly) non-theatre spaces and transforming them into sumptuously detailed aesthetic environments which encourage tactility and exploration: *The Firebird Ball* (2005) was housed within Offley Works in London's Oval, a defunct factory originally home to Sharwoods pickle; a disused warehouse in London's Wapping Lane Tobacco Dock played host to *Faust* (2006-2007); and the former Battersea Town Hall, now more commonly known as Battersea Arts Centre, had many of its sixty five rooms metamorphose into the disorienting world of Edgar Allan Poe's short stories in *The Masque of the Red Death* (2007-2008). Putting aside the productive parallels which might be drawn with comparable reclamations of industrial spaces in the visual arts, I am interested in how Punchdrunk generate the necessary capital to fund performances like these in the context of an increasingly compromised funding market.<sup>1</sup> For Punchdrunk to accommodate these vast, temporarily occupied performance spaces with sets of cinematic detail takes time and money; there are myriad rooms to be filled which offer treasure troves of bric-a-brac, portraits, upholstery, rugs, etc., each hand-picked, captivatingly authentic and entirely applicable to the atmospheric landscapes of each performance. This prompts the question: where is the money to come from? This article responds to product placement in Scene 1 of Punchdrunk's corporately funded performance, *The Black Diamond* (2011): specifically, the integration of Stella Artois Black as a constituting part of the performance's aesthetic and the implications of consuming the product as a participating spectator. This performance was free for those who managed to secure a ticket and will be approached here not just as a means of boosting Punchdrunk's income to help fund their other projects, but as an autonomously functioning performance. Whilst Punchdrunk champion an aptitude for appropriating industrial off-casts, perhaps corporate business is biting back with an aptitude for appropriating Punchdrunk. However, there are more productive critical avenues to pursue than a meagre lambasting of the relationship between theatre and private finance; it seems more pertinent to account for and respond to a structural situation which might, at least partially, promote these appropriative relationships, paying specific attention to audiences stuck in the middle.

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<sup>1</sup> Comparable appropriations of a more permanent ilk are famously present in visual art galleries. Two prominent examples include Tate Modern's taking over of London's Bankside Power Station and the turning of an old flour mill into the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art in Newcastle.

*The Black Diamond* (Scene 1) began in Blackall Street, near London's fashionable Old Street. I arrived early and, with half an hour to kill, headed to a nearby pub for a quick pint with my companion. On our return we were handed two beer tokens each before heading down some steps into the living room of a stylish house, convincingly decked with 1960s furnishings. Juliette Greco LPs set the tone. Some individuals could be picked out as 'performers', distinguished as such by early 1960s clothing and an enthusiasm not so prominent in other members of this party of strangers. Most attendees had a pint of lager in-hand, the Stella Artois Black logo conspicuously printed in uniform on each of their glasses. I waved my hand in front of my lips in a tipping motion to my companion, met with a nod, and headed upstairs in search of the bar; it was not hard to find, I just needed to look for a queue. This seemed to be a party celebrating Cecile's engagement to a character called Jacques. Some danced, others searched through the ranks of beer-drinking strangers. We sank into the festive atmosphere and dipped into another pint, second guessing how the story would unfold in the scenes to follow two months later (the latter scenes of this performance took place on a different day, depending on ticketing). After forty minutes, we were ushered into the street leaving empty or half-drunk beer glasses behind. Jacques and Cecile stood on two crates. Jacques, with a flourish, pulled a box from his jacket pocket and revealed a black box – home to the 'black diamond'. He gestured to a gold chain housing the key to the diamond box around Cecile's neck. From what seemed like nowhere, a thief exploded from the crowd and stole the diamond, sprinting off into the distance. Cecile seemed to recognise the thief, or at least Jacques had the impression that she did. He took her inside and we heard their screaming at one another. This episode lasted no more than two minutes – compared with the forty spent drinking inside. We were left on the street to reach the conclusion that Scene 1 was over.

With reduced funding in the Arts Council pot, theatre companies are perhaps forced to innovate in sourcing alternative financial means. In the case of *The Black Diamond*, innovation took the form of Stella being omnipresent both visibly, as printed emblems on glasses, and viscerally, as a narcotic effect; in both instances, the product functions as a constitutive element of the performance. We might question such innovation in the light of Punchdrunk receiving a 141% rise in real terms of Arts Council funding as a National Portfolio Organisation, as from April 2012 (ACE 2010/11: n.p.). A complex network of responsibilities begins to emerge when the financial demands of creating spectacular performances rub up against the expectations and assumptions of a public increasingly

interested in funding distribution. Punchdrunk would seem to have ticked the right ACE boxes to receive such a funding increase. Perhaps their ability to tap into alternative revenue streams for theatre production reflects on their being seen by ACE as a 'model' theatre company both prior to April 2012 and in what was being, or already planned after the announcement of NPOs on 30 March 2011. Punchdrunk's corporate endeavours might tell us something about the kinds of innovation the Arts Council has in mind for theatre companies in the foreseeable future.

It is worth balancing innovation in relation to the 'excellence' of the artwork produced, to use terminology from ACE's flagship publication, *Achieving Great Art for Everyone* (2010), asking what implications corporate innovation might have on the autonomy of creative endeavour. Creating theatre where a brand is aesthetically constitutive might well be seen as 'selling out', somehow sacrificing a degree of creative autonomy for financial reward. But to what extent would Punchdrunk be compromising their interpretation of artistic 'excellence' if they neglected alternative funding strategies to produce a better return on ACE's funding?

It is important to clarify early on the intentions behind Punchdrunk's decision to work with corporate companies. These intentions were outlined by Colin Nightingale, Punchdrunk's producer, in a recent interview with me (2011). In contrast to previous years, Punchdrunk can be picky with taking on corporate work. They can promote free ticketing for audiences; they can ally the interests of the corporate collaborator with their own artistic interests given the number of corporate invitations received; they can capitalise on the income generated to support the full potential of expensive production costs for their other performances; and, significantly, they now have the collateral to demand greater exercise over creative autonomy compared with previous years. I will expand on these points in what follows. For now, I wish to underline that the notion of 'selling out' is itself a compromised accusation in the eyes of the company; for Punchdrunk, working with corporate businesses can be justified given the leverage afforded by recent success.

*The Black Diamond* (Scene 1) exemplifies some of the key issues raised by product placement; even as an excerpt from a performance it provides scope to illustrate some concerns whilst offering one or two provocations. The first section of this article proposes a definition of 'immersive theatre' before assessing what impact a political ideology like neoliberalism might have on how it functions. The second section maps out the dual issue of

*The Black Diamond* either ‘selling out’ or productively innovating in the context of *Achieving Great Art for Everyone*, looking in particular at what happens to the commodity when it enters the world of immersive theatre. The final section responds with a provocation by applying dramaturgical theory to the audience’s consumption of alcohol in *The Black Diamond*. Perhaps a little drunkenness might restore some of the creative autonomy reputedly lost in the eyes of those who see Punchdrunk as ‘sell outs’ – if this autonomy is lost at all. But drunkenness, or at least disorientation, is not the important factor, but how disorientation might provide a vehicle for audiences to recognise limitations on theatre production in a highly competitive and stumbling economic climate. It is not always helpful to point the finger of blame at those producing theatre in apparently compromised ways; it might be just as important for those receiving theatre to acknowledge the conditions which encourage particular funding choices and to take on board a responsibility for appropriate response both in the moment of performance and outside of it.

### **Immersive theatre and product placement**

Immersive theatre has been discursively framed as springing from the hands-on ‘experiences’ offered by museums with increasing frequency since at least the 1980s (Nield 2008: 531) and Punchdrunk are self-proclaimed pioneers of the genre. Though avoiding the term, Josephine Machon’s description of receiving comparable theatre practices is revealing: it is characterised by ‘the recreation of visceral experience (...) [which places] emphasis on the human body as a primary force of signification’ (2009: 1). This positions the visceral at the heart of experiencing immersive theatre which, in itself, is not enough to distinguish it from other theatre forms. Rachel Fensham has argued as much in *To Watch Theatre* (2009), phenomenologically positioning the act of *watching* theatre from an auditorium – distinct from reading or looking (the terrain of spectatorship) – as an embodied activity (2009: 11). The visceral nature of engaging with immersive theatre, however, might still be distinguished by at least some of the following sensory *acts*, in addition to the sights and sounds (including their affective qualities) attributed to theatre more generally: touching, tasting, smelling and, most importantly, perhaps, walking – this latter often being characterised by ‘free-roaming’ within an aesthetic space mapped by the creative team. Immersive theatre can also produce nausea, giddiness, physical exhaustion, a sense of claustrophobia or agoraphobia and, along with many other forms of theatre, elation, feelings of empowerment, a sense of community

amongst actors and audience, embarrassment, shame, awkwardness, a sense of risk (at least perceived risk), and weariness (of a bodily kind). The negativity of many of these traits might be re-defined as positive values within the aesthetic space of the performance, nurtured as such through a feeling that one has been 'challenged'. It goes without saying that this list is not exhaustive. Immersive theatre also has clear antecedents in minimal art, fluxus happenings, promenade theatre, and site-specific/generic/sympathetic performance. Radical novelty is not an attribute of immersive theatre.

What might help in distinguishing immersive theatre from its correlates and precursors is this: participating audiences are often constructed as something other than audiences within the theatre event, not just by the offer from actors to join them on whatever 'journey' the performance offers, but also through the gaze of other spectators. Machon has insightfully commented on the act of spectating in Punchdrunk performances, marvelling at those moments when 'fellow audience members have, unwittingly, choreographed themselves into beautiful carnivalesque sculptures. These masked, still bodies looking on, literally become part of the architecture' (2007: n.p.). This figures audiences in a compellingly ambiguous role; the distinctions between the world of the immersive theatre event and the world outside of it are collapsed through the simultaneously observing and observed spectator. Nonetheless, there remains an element of escape, play and fantasy key to defining the practice and reception of immersive theatre. Audience members are not just audience members, but are uniquely defined by the 'world' of the performance on the parts of both actors and other spectators. Sophie Nield has acutely observed the ambiguities of this supposedly 'unique' audience identity – as something, I suggest, at once akin to participant, individual, individual-as-spectator, individual-as-(part of) audience, and Machon's 'architecture' – by drawing attention to the act of 'facing' theatre, 'as a theatrical character, the character named *Spectator*, coherently in and of the theatrical world. But we do not necessarily appear so to ourselves. (...) [W]e risk staring into the black hole of the theatre itself, mute, stage-affrighted, awaking to the actor's nightmare of being on the stage, and not knowing the play' (2008: 535).

This collapse between an 'inside' and 'outside' of the theatre event also relates to the theatre environment, where the immersive theatre 'world' can sometimes be marked by a reality outside of the performance, just as the immersive theatre event might mark that reality. This is perhaps most interestingly illustrated in relation to product placement. What happens to immersive theatre when branded products enter its world? And from what ideological base,

if any, might this entrance be seen to stem? It seems pertinent to address how the logic of a corporate business like Stella Artois Black, as both a business and a potential financial source for creative practice, might work with or against the pursuit of creative autonomy in art.

Neoliberalism is a political ideology that gained prominence in the 1980s through Margaret Thatcher's conservative party in the United Kingdom and the republican's Ronald Reagan in the United States. It is characterised by dismantling restrictions on free market trade and 'liberating individual freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights' at odds with the welfare state and unionism (Harvey 2005: 2). In this climate, as Baz Kershaw claims, theatre audiences became less defined by patronage, or even as clients, but customers who submit, 'maybe even happily, to the dehumanizing dominance of the market' (2007: 190). Kershaw goes on to note how in the 1980s and 90s, 'the pleasures of the theatre-going "experience" gained as much – or more – emphasis as enjoyment of the production and performance itself' (2007: 194). This conception of the theatre 'experience' extends enjoyment from the performance towards its framing in pre-theatre dinners, interval drinks and merchandising, among other initiatives. Kershaw's observation is characteristically astute, but perhaps we might also consider how the mechanisms controlling the correlation of theatre to neoliberalism have started to morph with reference to immersive theatre.

Firstly, immersive theatre production over the past few years seems to have pushed and exploited the tendency for audiences to favour the 'experience' of theatre going, where the boundaries between the 'performance itself', in Kershaw's words, are often difficult to define as something distinct from the theatre bar or foyer, where drinks or food might be purchased in addition to the price of a ticket *within the aesthetic space of the performance*. The Battersea Arts Centre is here a case in point, not just with Punchdrunk taking over the entire venue with their *Masque of the Red Death*, but as a general rule of thumb for many theatre 'events' which take place there. This is part and parcel of how a participating audience is positioned in the role of customer; but here this positioning is extended to configure acts of exchange in aesthetic as well as economic terms.

Secondly, promoting the individual freedom of the spectator to 'free-roam' in immersive theatre might be seen to characterise a shift in performance production and reception towards the individualism promoted by neoliberal ideology; that is, an investment

in the belief that individuals should be left to their own devices and that they should reap the benefit of exploiting this opportunity – often at the expense of those less inclined to do so.

Finally, responding to what happens to immersive theatre when product placement enters its world, the consumption of branded food and/or drink suggests that there is not so much a mimicry concerning the relationship between producer and consumer in theatre, but a wholesale imposition, or ‘co-optation’ of a neoliberal logic within the spheres of artistic production and reception.<sup>2</sup> Even if a performance is free, audiences can be seen to ‘buy into’ a particular ethos, the business ethos of Stella Artois Black, for instance, through the accumulation of cultural capital co-opted by a corporate company using theatre as a means to the end of viral and word-of-mouth marketing.

Immersive theatre becomes a social and political subject if we play points like these off ACE funding distribution. Performances created in the months and years leading up to the announcement of this funding are particularly interesting, as they ought to play a role in effecting funding decisions; there ought to be something in *The Black Diamond* which we can approach as being representative of the kinds of value ACE supports. In the next section, I will use the general contextual framework mapped so far to unpack this in relation to ACE policy. Perhaps we might turn one of the above questions on its head: instead of asking ‘what happens to immersive theatre when branded products enter its world’, we might ask instead, ‘what happens to products when placed in the world of immersive theatre’?

### ***The Black Diamond: innovation or sell out?***

Corporate sponsorship and advertising are no strangers to theatre. The beverage conglomerate Allied Domecq pumped more than seven million pounds into the Royal Shakespeare Company between 1993 and the turn of the twenty-first century in return for ‘promotional credits on print materials, venue branding, joint media relations activity, exclusivity across group businesses, access to cast and tickets and hospitality opportunities’ (Charity Village 1995: n.p.). All UK employees of Allied Domecq also enjoyed one year’s RSC membership. This is typical of a number of other lucrative corporate theatre sponsorship programmes, perhaps most prominently evident in Travelex’s sponsorship of The National Theatre £10 and later £12 ticket schemes over the past decade. What is less (but increasingly) common is the

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<sup>2</sup> Jen Harvie has recently argued along similar lines, but in response to socially engaged art (2011: 114).



overt imposition of consumer products into the world of the performance, as something to be simultaneously received and consumed (quite literally, *ingested*) by an audience.<sup>3</sup> This is different to the selling of ice creams during the interval, or the purchase of advertising space in West End theatre programmes, as the performance ‘world’, operating within an aesthetic space designed by theatre artists (as opposed to managers), arguably remains separate from both these elements of theatre enterprise; the two come adjacent to a given performance, but are not fully integrated. With product placement, it seems important to ask whether the brand is incorporated within theatre, or theatre incorporated under the rubric of the brand as a means to the end of stimulating consumer interest.

*The Black Diamond* was the second free Punchdrunk performance funded by Stella Artois Black following *The Night Chauffeur* (2010). Colin Marsh, executive director for this latter, stressed that *The Night Chauffeur* was not a Punchdrunk show but ‘a piece of work the company has created in collaboration with Stella and the advertising agency, Mother. This is Stella’s event, not Punchdrunk’s (...) even though the same creative team is involved’ (qtd. in Caird 2010: n.p.). This is an ambiguous and elusive response. Marsh attempts to dissociate *The Night Chauffeur* from the theatre ‘brand’, Punchdrunk. Jo Caird responds by claiming that ‘Companies who choose to do corporate work are often criticised for selling out’, perhaps accounting for Marsh’s wariness, ‘but in a period when tough funding cuts are soon to desecrate the arts, is making an honest buck for one’s work – even from a major commercial brand – really such a crime?’ (2010: n.p.). I will return to this question, but first it seems appropriate to look at Punchdrunk’s previous commercial ventures.

Punchdrunk have, in the past, made recourse to what was then their more commercially oriented sister-company, Gideon Reeling. In sourcing funds for Punchdrunk’s *Faust*, Gideon Reeling worked with Southern Comfort to create for them immersive theatre parties at the brand’s Fat Tuesday club nights (Gardner 2006). Felix Barrett has since stood down as co-director of Gideon Reeling, with Kate Hargreaves taking the reins. Hargreaves was a performer-collaborator with Punchdrunk and one of the founding members of Gideon Reeling alongside Punchdrunk producer Colin Nightingale. With Gideon Reeling there was and still is, to an even greater extent now Barrett has stepped down, a distinction from Punchdrunk. Gideon Reeling has now blossomed into its own, autonomous company (though

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<sup>3</sup> Audiences enjoyed Hendrick’s Gin in Hilary Westlake’s *Dining with Alice* at Elsing Hall in Norfolk (2011) and Courvoisier Cognac has contributed to numerous oilings of the receptive faculties, including Kindle Theatre’s *Eat Your Heart Out* at Debut’s Coming Up Festival (2011) and Ursula Martinez and Christopher Green’s *Office Party* at The Pleasance in Islington (2011).

it does still collaborate with certain members of Punchdrunk's creative team, as well as Nightingale). But with the emergence of both *The Night Chauffeur* and *The Black Diamond*, it is no longer quite so easy to distinguish between Punchdrunk's commercial and non-commercial (or less commercially oriented) interests. Barrett did not direct *The Black Diamond*, but Hector Harkness and Raquel Meseguer – both of whom are Punchdrunk performers; that is, part of the Punchdrunk team and therefore representatives of the company. Nightingale has stressed that turning down lucrative corporate deals would be grossly unfair to their actors (Nightingale 2011). Gideon Reeling meant that Punchdrunk could keep their actors employed when no other work was available whilst exercising protection over the Punchdrunk brand, keeping the corporate activity at arm's length. But following the success of Punchdrunk, the company can now exercise leverage over the growing number of corporate companies that want to work with them. As Nightingale suggests, they have a bargaining chip leading to fewer demands on creative decisions from their corporate collaborators. They are now in a position to make demands themselves (Nightingale 2011). Even with Gideon Reeling now operating with greater independence, Punchdrunk can keep their actors employed, reap the benefit of increased income, and look to preserve the Punchdrunk brand without sacrificing the same level of creative control as in previous years.

However, it is important not to ignore the agendas that come with corporate work. In a similar observational vein to Kershaw, Nicholas Ridout has noted how 'The second half of the twentieth century saw the inauguration of a shift from an industrial/theatrical model of artistic production to one in which the performance of services predominated. This shift is perhaps most evident in those theatrical innovations that sought or seek to reconfigure the relation between stage and auditorium (or, as we might now say, between production and consumption)' (2008: 129). It is perhaps testament to the shift Ridout describes that a brand like Stella recognises the 'service' that immersive theatre might be able to offer in marketing its brand. As with *The Night Chauffeur*, the advertising agency Mother were behind *The Black Diamond*, hiring Punchdrunk as one would hire a director and performers to create a television advert (in the eyes of Mother, at least, though not necessarily in the eyes of Punchdrunk). Creativity was outsourced to a theatre company that dominates the culture pages of national newspapers and theatre blogs. So it is not only creativity which is outsourced, but a kind of viral marketing premised on the first-hand experience of a few, and the word-of-mouth hype and cyber activity in the blogosphere which spreads like wild-fire

whenever Punchdrunk are behind a creative project. The Punchdrunk ‘brand’ is co-opted here to the end of a commercially viable marketing venture, but in a way which potentially benefits both funder and funded; it is the degree of benefit open to each party, and at what price, which is at stake.

Accompanying success and its recognition might bring with it greater production costs as suppliers and performers recognise opportunities for raising prices or wages. However, it strikes me as odd to refer to funding cuts in order to justify product placement in performances created with members of Punchdrunk after the announcement of a significant funding rise (this would not have been Caird’s intention, writing before the funding rise was published), particularly when Punchdrunk performances have little issue with sell-out runs. These sell-out runs, often quite short in the UK, especially for the free corporate funded performances, might work against the second goal of the Arts Council’s *Achieving Great Art for Everyone*: namely, that ‘more people experience and are inspired by the arts’ (2010: 12). ACE is clear to specify that ‘Everyone should have the right to benefit from public funding of the arts. To achieve this goal, we want to ensure that the arts have an even stronger focus on building audiences for excellent work and that the needs of audiences and communities are at the heart of what we fund’ (2010: 31). In his forward to a 2011 review of *Achieving Great Art for Everyone*, Alan Davey (ACE’s chief executive) reiterated that ‘Beyond everything else, in whatever we do, we must place the public at the centre of our mission’ (Morris 2011: iii). Punchdrunk can hardly be blamed for producing sell-out runs. *Sleep No More* extended its run in New York towards the end of 2011 because the commercial market, in that instance, allowed for such an extension. It must also be conceded that some productions played to tens of thousands over the course of a UK run, such as *Faust* and *Masque of the Red Death* – but these are exceptions to the rule. At the level of the theatre institution, the choice to extend runs can be limited by a whole range of factors often outside of a theatre company’s sphere of influence. One example would be the barrier of a Temporary Event Notice and gargantuan orchestra expenses, in excess of full capacity revenues, in *The Duchess of Malfi* (2010). It is not wholly justifiable to accuse Punchdrunk of failing to extend runs due to popular demand; there are often institutional constraints which limit this. It is the institutional structure which needs to be developed to encourage and support the riskiness of extending runs in a volatile market; one wonders whether corporate funders would be the first to take hold of this need for beneficence, for beneficence comes at a cost perhaps in excess of the financial returns and public visibility nurtured through advertising. This begs consideration of whether shifts

towards private theatre finance in ACE policy are entirely compatible with building audiences.

High demand coupled with limited availability calls to light exclusiveness in Punchdrunk's work, despite Nightingale's claim to the contrary (Nightingale 2011). This observation is supported by their 'Key Holder Scheme'. This scheme allows fans with deeper pockets to buy access to priority booking, with prices ranging from a £30 'Valet Key' to a 'Skeleton Key' costing £25,000 biennially; the latter offers the investor 'a bespoke opportunity of the most exclusive and exhilarating nature, a once in a lifetime trip with Punchdrunk Travel Company' (Punchdrunk 2011b). A 'Master Key', costing in excess of the 'Skeleton Key', offers access to all areas of Punchdrunk. The Key Holder Scheme is an innovation on the philanthropic tradition, and an alternative means of framing loyalty and 'friend' schemes which have become common practice in theatre; in such schemes, it is assumed that the philanthropic impulse must somehow be married to and rewarded by cultural privilege. 'Philanthropy', in this instance, is less like a gesture of giving as it is a purchase of reward. It is positive that Punchdrunk feel the need to give something back to those offering money, but they end up offering in return much more than a gesture of thanks; they provide unique opportunities reserved for those with money to give. Again, this is not necessarily the fault of Punchdrunk, but the fault of an incentive-based philanthropic culture with strings attached. Exclusivity becomes a priced privilege. Priority booking schemes of the 'Valet Key' kind can be seen to price out, or at least limit the chances of securing a ticket for those with less financial means. The free corporate performances are in many ways a blessing in this regard: but even these, with their very limited audience capacities and short runs, maintain exclusivity based on limiting audience numbers which is beneficial to the stimulation of 'hype' exploited by the business funding the project.

Innovative funding strategies perhaps contributes to Punchdrunk's being a 'model' company for ACE in line with their third strategic goal for the arts: 'Collaborative and networked, the arts are known for resilience, innovation and their contribution to the nation's reputation and prosperity' (ACE 2010: 12). Key to this goal is an onus on 'sustainability' appropriate to the mixed economic finance championed by Davey at the beginning of this article. Davey, in a forward to another ACE publication titled *Supporting Growth in the Arts Economy*, expresses renewed interest 'in how the [arts] sector can operate more effectively in a commercial environment, by learning from creative businesses and making better use of finance' (Fleming and Erskine 2011: 1). This seems true of Punchdrunk, but it might also be

noted how this opens up space for the corporate environment to ‘make better use’ of theatre; the relationship is reciprocal, even if Punchdrunk now have a ‘bargaining chip’ on the back of their success. At an institutional level, ACE is championing and structurally embedding through cultural policy instrumentalism of the arts by business. This move is becoming increasingly one of the few remaining options for many theatre companies facing a reduced public funding resource, but it might also be seen as an institutionally validated opportunity by theatre companies with high production costs. However, ACE’s definition of ‘sustainability’ is very much contingent on an economic climate forged by the current ruling political coalition in the UK – a climate in which public funding choices were, and still are being negotiated. If goal three of ACE’s funding strategy for the arts is pushed to its limit, then a culture of exclusivity is likely to emerge. For those that can afford it, there will no doubt be ‘Valet’ and ‘Skeleton’ key equivalents to accessing art, but for many others those doors might well remain locked. It would be a sad thing indeed if theatre were increasingly utilised as a marketing campaign for private funding bodies, with private interests potentially at odds with public exposure in allowing for artistic ‘excellence’ to reach the broadest possible audience.

Creativity and responsibility are things to be negotiated between two parties in the process of outsourcing theatrical enterprise: between a brand with a vested interest in receiving a return on their investment in Punchdrunk through advertising and the ‘buzz’ surrounding the event (one and the same thing) and a theatre company-come-brand willing to sacrifice at least a part of their creative control in rendering Stella so prominent in the theatre event. Despite their success, Punchdrunk must still bargain. It seems important to question how this might push theatre towards integration within a logic – a neoliberal logic – which might be at odds with the capacity for aesthetic space to function as a site of social recoding, political intervention, or a terrain more readily applied to immersive theatre: aesthetic and sensory stimulation, play and exploration relatively free from the control of third parties with vested interests in profit making.

So what happens to a product when placed in the ‘world’ of immersive theatre? Firstly, the brand bleeds into the aesthetic space of the theatrical house party. As a consequence, it is not just audiences which become part of Machon’s ‘architecture’, but the printed glasses in the hands of participating spectators which catch the eye and construct the space of the theatre event through their prevalent uniformity. Secondly, the beer celebrated within that aesthetic arena remains potentially glorified once the party spills out into the

street. The beers are left inside, but the association of Stella Artois Black with ‘great immersive experience’ might well remain synonymous. What is more, Stella Artois Black might well be regarded as ‘hip’ for recruiting Punchdrunk in the first place. The latter is moulded towards the end of the brand’s celebration which might linger as strongly as the affective potential of theatre. Stella might resonate as something ‘artistic’ or ‘cutting edge’ in the minds of those who experienced the performance – if only as a subliminal memory. In *The Black Diamond*, a commodity which has successfully entered aesthetic space through the conscious intention of artists has been consumed and identified as part of an artistic experience. This experience is transposed by extension into the possibility of paying for that drink, or encouraging others to pay for that drink once word-of-mouth and publicity spreads, at a later point in time. The theatre event contributes to the promotion of the commodity. It is much less a question of art mimicking the reproductive logic of neoliberal capitalism, as it is of being rendered its servant – but in such a way that allows for certain benefits to be bestowed on artists which might be passed on to audiences in the form of free tickets. Approaching product placement in performances like *The Black Diamond* does not present a black and white set of issues, but does invite recognition of how limitations come to be imposed on those working within the theatre industry: limitations imposed not just by corporate paymasters, but also from the much broader and more powerful institutional levels of government, ACE and theatre programmers.

### **Intoxicated engagement**

This final section addresses the extent to which a so-called ‘sustainable’ example of immersive theatre might leave space for autonomous audience reception in the artistic sphere. The controlling impulse behind businesses funding (read ‘co-opting’) theatre through product placement might be subverted if the product entering aesthetic space either morphs in transition, or carries within it (or is made to carry) a destructive capacity. I will be arguing that, whilst important, it is not enough to critique companies like Punchdrunk for working in the way that they do, even though this does shed valuable light on the relationship of a contemporary theatre company to its funding sources. At present, the fault is not *necessarily* at the level of how certain artists choose to fund work, but first and foremost at the level of government, followed by the institutional level of cultural policy partially determining the framework which supports and rewards particular kinds of artistic endeavour. It is

increasingly important for audiences to recognise how best to act and react to the current cultural and economic environment. Drunkenness, or more specifically, the disorientation that comes with drunkenness that is already a characteristic of immersive theatre, might shed some light on how audiences are potentially manipulated by funding strategies, the relations of which stretch deep into cultural policy.

In my description of *The Black Diamond* (Scene 1), I noted how a sea of hands clasping Stella glasses greeted the audience when entering the performance space and how this was constituted as a kind of performance architecture through my own gaze as a spectator. As explained, this scene focused on enjoying beer in a trendy and exclusive space – two ideals which Stella, no doubt, were happy to promote in association with their drink. After a couple of pints, however, certainly *my* willingness to take note, or even care about this particular part of the theatrical architecture began to break down. This did not correlate to apathy. What happened was in itself a political gesture of refusal: an intermittent engagement and disengagement with branding. My companion seemed content to explore at times; at others, we both became distracted in conversation about topics wholly unrelated to the performance. The experience induced by a drink within aesthetic space, *as a contributing part of the theatre event*, was of paramount significance, but the brand itself became less so as the consumption of alcohol increased. A kind of experiential free-play was stimulated. The capacity for reception to be guided begins to breakdown when the mind is not so willing to submit to an orderly practise of spectatorship – a practise co-opted by Stella.

It is significant that the product consumed was alcoholic. In a provocation for *Contemporary Theatre Review*, Fintan Walsh addressed the relationship between critical intimacy and disorientation in receiving theatre:

[T]here remains a debilitating steeliness to dominant participatory and critical approaches to performance, which can be understood, in part, by the drive to qualify disciplinary integrity. Considered in this context, sobriety functions to affirm the seriousness of our selves and the object of our critique. Perhaps we need to loosen things up a bit, if not by bringing drugs (legal or otherwise) back into the site of performance, then by engaging a bit more drunkenly, in a way that allows our contact to be more wanton, provisional, and ludic, in the true spirit of good play (2010: 242).

Walsh is positioning spectatorship as a practice which asserts its own modes of control over the spectator, perhaps best exemplified by applause. Kershaw describes applause as ‘the moment in which the collective aims to assert itself over the individual (...) [indicating] consensual abandon, a giving up of individual judgment. We lose something of ourselves in putting our hands together in public’ (2007: 182). Something of ourselves is similarly lost whilst under the influence of alcohol, but it is perhaps more akin to a kind of inhibition which, in its stimulation of egotistical confidence, is likely to be at odds with communal and/or consensual abandon. Consensual abandon is still at play in agreeing to give into the effects of drunkenness, however mild, but this is more ludic, to borrow from Walsh, than the example of applause. Inebriation is likely to render the spectator as something more like a loose cannon; it brings into play the unpredictable and the frustrating.

Like most drugs, alcohol is divisive. Thomas de Quincey writes that ‘a man who is inebriated, or tending to inebriation, is, and feels that he is, in a condition which calls up into supremacy the merely human, too often the brutal, part of his nature’ (2009: 63); this is in distinct and negative contrast to what de Quincey describes as the clear-minded and ‘diviner’ state simultaneously loved and loathed by the opium-eater. On the other hand you have Charles Baudelaire, who provocatively defends the positive states induced by drunkenness: ‘If wine were to disappear from human production, I believe that in the health and intellect of the planet there would be left a void, an absence, a defect much more dreadful than all the excesses and deviant behaviour for which wine is held responsible’ (2002: 9). In distinction from hashish, Baudelaire celebrates how ‘wine celebrates the will’ and might even act as ‘a physical aid’, making one ‘good and outgoing’ (2002: 27). For Baudelaire, then, alcohol inspires wilfulness as a positive value.

The tendency towards wilfulness described by Baudelaire might be usefully applied to performances like *The Black Diamond*. The wilful deviancy inspired by alcohol might inspire intellectual and critical free-play. This is something different to neoliberal individualism and more like anarchy. Alcohol has the capacity to elude the self’s control over self, and the Other’s control over self (short of physically manhandling the drunk). This is particularly interesting when the ‘Other’ is a more abstract, branded ‘Other’: that ‘Other’ which those on the political left have for a long time positioned as antithetical to artistic practice. This is the ‘Other’ of business and of the commodity. The reason and reasoning of business, which has



made its way into ACE policy, particularly in their rhetoric of ‘sustainability’, does not tally with the inebriated who work’s on his or her own intoxicated anti-logic. Alcohol inspires an attitude of deconstruction, or even destruction towards the logical and a tendency towards deviant practice.

These authors, particularly Walsh, are useful in constructing a model of what I am here calling ‘intoxicated engagement’. This is a mode of spectatorship which makes recourse to intoxication, either literally or metaphorically, as a means of deconstructing a logic which might dramaturgically script audience behaviour. Paul Dwyer and Marco de Marinis have described the audience ‘as a dramaturgical object’ (1987: 101). Whilst they decline to position an audience’s receptive strategies as being ‘strictly predetermined’, they do underline that independence is *relative* to the material conditions of a given performance (1987: 101). Writing more recently, Peter Boenisch marks out space to consider what he calls ‘reflexive dramaturgy’, which more assertively focuses on the notion of a spectator’s experience being scripted. ‘Reflexive dramaturgy’, writes Boenisch, ‘seeks to describe dramaturgic textures which avoid a closing synthesis’ (2010: 164) and instead stage a discrepancy between the logics of receptive stimuli such as the spoken word and the more encompassing sensory world of the theatre event – from *mise en scène*, to sound, lighting and even taste in the context of *The Black Diamond*. To an extent, intoxication fosters a comparable kind of reflexivity, rubbing up against the logic of dramaturgic scripting in dampening critical steeliness whilst encouraging deviant behaviour and inducing a boldness which offers a form of autonomous strength, at least in relation to the standardization of ‘good’ audience behaviour – that is, good mannered, supportive, attentive and, depending on the performance, quiet, conscious of disrupting the event to the displeasure of others and, all too often, *subservient* to the demands of the artwork.<sup>4</sup> To this extent, one might suggest that alcohol, in partly stripping the individual of autonomy in relation to self-control and self-awareness, induces another kind of agency in aesthetic space in relation to spectatorship as a practice. This is what is meant by ‘intoxicated engagement’ producing an ‘induced agency’.

What emerges from the critical space mapped in this last section is ground for reacting to the power dynamics at play in *The Black Diamond* between artist, audience and brand. A neoliberal logic embedded at the institutional level of ACE funding policy might well be responded to at the level of reception. If the spectator is vested with induced agency,

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<sup>4</sup> For an amusing exposé of audience ‘norms’, see the comments beneath a *Guardian Theatre Blog* entry by Caroline Bishop titled ‘Ban Big Hair at the Theatre! What are your Top Theatrical Bugbears?’ (2011).

then perhaps reception can be seen as a deviant *creative* hub which eludes a secondary controlling logic: the co-opted dramaturgic scripting of the spectator. This dramaturgic scripting is part of what is outsourced by Punchdrunk, via Mother, to Stella. It might be said that a mild tipsiness was intended by both Punchdrunk and Stella and that this intention fully constitutes its own mode of dramaturgically scripting audience behaviour. I would argue that this is a self-destructive logic. If the end, for Stella at least, is for a theatre audience to engage with their product, as something to be semiotically decoded and affiliated with a particular kind of trendiness, then this end was side-lined for a mental playfulness apathetic towards that product and those associations. The logic of dramaturgical scripting, under appropriative control from a company otherwise operating outside of theatre circles, fails to coalesce into something which uniformly determines reception, thought and action.

A residue of this kind of disorientation is implicit in immersive theatre generally, and particularly so in Punchdrunk's work: work which ought not to be underestimated in terms of its power to excite, challenge and celebrate everything that is good about live theatre. Intoxicated engagement provides only the impetus for an adequate response to current ACE policy and product placement in the theatre. One does not need to get drunk, but can perhaps regard such receptive free-play as something to be celebrated in receiving theatre (in much the same vein as Walsh's suggestion), especially where the threat of co-opted dramaturgic scripting looms. Maybe audiences should not be put in this position in the first place. Or, perhaps, audiences might adopt receptive tactics opposing co-opted creativity, if only to arrive at a more balanced understanding of the production, reception and consumption of theatre and commodities within a funded aesthetic arena. Devolving creativity by rendering reception ludic on a frequent enough basis might well increase pressure on an institutional structure embedding questionable funding practices.

### **Acknowledgments**

Thank you to Colin Nightingale for his time and help with researching *The Black Diamond*. Thank you also to Sophie Nield for her critical support.

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