

Sub-theme 30: From Change Management to Change Leadership

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## **Translating, deconstructing and harmonising: Organisational theatre and organisational polyphony**

### *Abstract*

The paper seeks to further the understanding of the potential of organisational theatre as an intervention in organisational development and change programs. It employs the concept of polyphony to support an analysis of the character and impact of organisational theatre processes. The findings of this paper rest on a longitudinal single-case study, which followed an organisational theatre process from its early development until follow-up stages at an innovative health care project over eighteen months. The analysis suggests that, while organisational theatre is able to provide multivocal and diverse debates and interpretations, the outcomes and effects of organisational theatre for individual participants largely depend on their perceived power status within the organisation.

## **1.1 Artistic interventions in organisations**

Over the past few decades, it has become a veritable cliché to observe that the world has experienced numerous social and economic upheavals, leading to the need for a new orientation of the ways in which organisations address and handle change and transformation. In responding to this situation, organisational development theorists and practitioners have focused even greater attention onto the invisible and repressed beliefs, values and voices that, if neglected, stifle the capacity of organisations to respond creatively and innovatively to turbulent environments (Margulies & Raia, 1972; Marshak & Grant, 2008). It has become necessary to look for new and innovative ways of changing the routine and habitual patterns of ‘doing business’ that hinder the capacity for expressing diversity and restrict the potential for creativity and innovation. The use of artistic interventions to facilitate change in this way has increased as part of this movement (for example: Barry & Meisiek, 2010; Berthoin-Antal, 2009, 2013; Biehl-Missal, 2011; Darsø, 2004; Taylor & Ladkin, 2009).

It has been long recognised that art has the potential to change consciousness (Marcuse, 1978) and, in its deliberate use in organisations, can be used to “stimulate us to see more, hear more and experience more” (Schein, 2001: 81). The arts can encourage individuals’ reflection on and increase their awareness of organisational issues (Barry & Meisiek, 2010; Biehl-Missal, 2011; Schein, 2001; Taylor & Ladkin, 2009) and can inspire organisational members to expand their technical and behavioural repertoire as well as illuminate choices and possibilities (Schein, 2001). For these reasons, various art-based processes have been used in organisations to stimulate deeper experiences of learning (Barry & Meisiek, 2010; Biehl-Missal, 2011; Darsø, 2004; Taylor & Ladkin, 2009).

In recent years, the use of such artistic interventions in organisations has been the subject of increased research and discussion (Barry & Meisiek, 2010; Berthoin-Antal, 2009, 2013; Biehl-Missal, 2011; Darsø, 2004; Taylor & Ladkin, 2009). This paper has been written as a contribution to this body of research, with a particular focus on the use of organisational theatre as an organisational intervention technique.

## **1.2 Organisational theatre and its polyphonic interpretation**

As one form of art-based intervention, organisational theatre has attracted the interest of theorists and practitioners, stimulating an extensive debate on its theoretical underpinnings and the character and impact of its methods when applied in organisations (Barry & Meisiek,

2010; Clark & Mangham, 2004b; Meisiek & Barry, 2007; Nissley, Taylor, & Houden, 2004; Schreyögg & Hopfl, 2004; Taylor, 2008). In particular, the links drawn between managerial organisational theatre and the radical Boalian *forum theatre* techniques, which organisational theatre researchers and practitioners began to see over the past decades, have stimulated heated discussions amongst organisational scholars (for example: Boje & Larsen, 2006; Clark & Mangham, 2004b; Coopey, 1998; Ferris, 2002; Jagiello, 2007; Meisiek, 2004; Meisiek & Barry, 2007; Nissley et al., 2004). Many of the current debates in organisational theatre research circles around the nature, aims and effects of using Boalian *forum theatre* techniques in working organisations and whether or not these are able to realise Boal's original purpose of recognising diverse and repressed voices.

Augusto Boal developed *forum theatre* in a context and environment that was very far from its current use in organisational theatre in the West. He created forum theatre as one branch of his *Theatre of the Oppressed* - a 'theatre' which aimed to provide a platform for dialogue and an open space for surfacing, discussing and addressing repressed and, often silenced, fundamental social and political problems in Latin America (Boal, 1979/2000). Boal sought, through theatre, to encourage greater consciousness, critical thinking, spontaneity and confidence amongst people repressed by authoritarian regimes. The 'catharsis' that *Theatre of the Oppressed* aspires to create is one that draws on action in theatre as a basis for stimulating action in real life. Through an active participation in the theatrical process, *Theatre of the Oppressed* aspires to give voice to those who do not have one, to stimulate self-consciousness and willingness to participate in democratic change and to overcome oppression and social injustice (Boal, 1979/2000).

Supporters of organisational theatre argue that Boal's forum theatre methods can be utilised to 'unfreeze' and engage participants in the organisational context. To them the *looking glass*<sup>1</sup> like character of organisational theatre, which captures the shifting and unpredictable reflections that the method provides for the viewer during the event, can inspire polyphonic and antenarrativist conversations (Meisiek & Barry, 2007; Schreyögg & Hopfl, 2004). Opponents, on the other hand, regard such interventions as, by and large, a travesty of Boal's original ideals - at best, mere entertainment and, at worst, yet another form of managerial control that channels and oppresses employees' thoughts in a way that distracts them from 'real issues' (Clark & Mangham, 2004b; Nissley et al., 2004).

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<sup>1</sup> Meisiek and Barry (2007) have introduced the concept of the '*looking glass*' as a metaphor to describe the emerging, shifting and unpredictable character and impact of organisational theatre interventions.

Drawing on and seeking to contribute to ‘ambiguity’ and ‘fragmentation’ perspectives on organisational culture (Martin, 2001; Meyerson & Martin, 1987), this paper contends that the nature and impact of organisational theatre is ambiguous and multifaceted, influenced in its design and implementation by multivocal actions-in-context. Perspectives that view organisational theatre as controlled by either management or employees and as either managerial or liberating in its outcomes, are too simple and one-dimensional as a basis for either explanation or evaluation. Where this analysis involves an attempt to ‘read’ the nature and outcomes of organisational theatre from one-dimensional structural characteristics or normative frameworks, it is unable to capture and explore the implications of the multifaceted and fluid power dynamics within which organisational theatre takes place and which constitute its meaning.

A number of previous studies focus on the degree to which organisational theatre fosters or constrains diversity and multivocality and refer to “pluri-vocality” (Clark & Mangham, 2004b: 846, 847), “multivocality” (Nissley et al., 2004: 833) and “polyphony” (Meisiek & Barry, 2007: 5, 19). However, these studies only very briefly and schematically explore what this means as an explanatory or normative framework in the context of organisational theatre.

Within organisation studies more broadly, several theorists have, however, discussed the concept of polyphony as a metaphor or textual strategy for writing research narratives and for understanding organisational realities as sets of socially constructed verbal or textual systems (for example: Boje, 1995; Clegg, Kornberger, Carter, & Rhodes, 2006; Czarniawska, 1999; Hazen, 1993; Hazen, 2011; Kornberger, Clegg, & Carter, 2006; Letiche, 2010; Rhodes, 2001). One of the main objectives of this paper is to use this more extensive and systematic outline of polyphony to help guide the study of organisational theatre, using polyphony as a metaphor to help capture not only the multivocal character of organisations and the diverse points of views that emerge during the process of organisational becoming (Boje, 2002; Gergen & Whitney, 1996; Wertsch, 1991) but also the ways in which the orchestration of these voices may be characterised in normative terms as being more or less ‘harmonious’ and ‘expressive’ in their nature and outcomes.

While Kornberger et al. (2006) offer an in-depth exploration of how to manage polyphony, their discussion on how processes of deconstruction, translation and thus harmonisation of multiple and differing voices can be realised remains largely theoretical. As they themselves admit, more empirical research is required to enable a better understanding of such processes (Kornberger et al., 2006).

To further the discussion, this paper employs the concept of polyphony to support an analysis of the character and impact of organisational theatre processes. It presents the findings of a longitudinal single-case study, which followed an organisational theatre process from its early development until follow-up stages. Particularly, this paper looks at the phases following the organisational theatre performance to illuminate the ways in which the character of the intervention was perceived as a deconstruction or translation.

## **2. Case study and methods**

The organisational theatre intervention being studied took place as part of a leadership development program conducted at Platanus<sup>2</sup>, a not-for-profit, public and benevolent cancer care organisation. The organisational theatre event was set up to support the organisation's executive team in bringing about a planned 'normative' change initiative to establish the patient-centred cancer care facility. Within this new facility, members of the organisation are expected to be fully engaged with the patient-centred vision and mission and to support the formal commitment to diversity and inclusiveness in health care and the creation of a multivocal culture and organisation.

It has been frequently observed that current empirical studies of organisational theatre have been restricted by the absence of a longitudinal investigation of all stages of an organisational theatre intervention, from pre-commissioning to follow-up (Berthoin-Antal, 2009; Matula, 2012; Schreyögg, 2001). The case study followed the leadership development program over eighteen months, from its early establishment (one year before the theatre event) until after the organisational theatre event (six months after the theatre event). While building on findings of a broader PhD study regarding the setting and background of the organisation and involved stakeholders, this paper focuses on the character of the stakeholders' interpretations of the outcome of the organisational theatre event during the post event stages only. The case study focused on one research site to create a richer understanding and description of the stakeholders' interpretations of the outcomes of the organisational theatre intervention at this site (Dyer & Wilkins, 1991).

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<sup>2</sup> The term 'Platanus' was used to find a fictional name for the case study site – the establishment of a world-class holistic, patient-centred cancer care facility – that captured its idealistic medical nature. Platanus was the name of the tree under which Hippocrates taught his pupils the art of medicine.

To support the analysis of the ways in which stakeholders interpret and construct the character and impact of an organisational theatre intervention and in line with social constructionist perspectives on the mutual creation of meanings by researched and researchers, the data collection and analysis process used a contemporary, constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz & Bryant, 2011). Following this approach (Charmaz, 2006; Charmaz & Bryant, 2011), I engaged in data collection and analysis concurrently in an iterative process employing comparative methods throughout the research process.

The data collection during post-event stages involved non-participant observation (Dawson, 1997) of meetings between Platanus's HR Managers, the Academic Consultants and the Theatre Company, of three leadership workshops following the organisational theatre event, which were all audio-recorded and of which notes were taken. To deepen the understanding of the actors involved and their understanding of cultural norms, customs and behaviours, additional data was gathered from casual conversations with the stakeholders, which were also captured in diary type notes. Further, two sets of formal, open-ended and semi-structured interviews with the HR Managers, the Academic Consultants, two members of the Theatre Company and the Executive Team were conducted. In addition, documents and emails, which were distributed during meetings and workshops, were gathered and analysed to gain further historical and demographic information to provide a better background to the case.

### **3. Findings**

The analysis of the data showed that the stakeholders of the organisational theatre event interpreted the character and impact of the intervention in diverse ways. Some Executives, mainly men, perceived the organisational theatre event as a translation, which created a playful and safe environment in which they were able to discuss and debate their own ideas and understandings with other, sometimes contradicting, voices. They perceived the organisational theatre event as a platform to discuss, debate and exchange ideas and felt motivated by the workshop to apply those strategies they had learnt or were reminded of. For example, some Executives reported later that they developed communication maps and supporting models. While the motivation seemed high during the first set of interviews, the group's engagement in realising its ideas contracted over time. Deadlines had to be met, other issues emerged and, when I interviewed the group four months later, none of its plans had been realised.

During post-event stages it became apparent that other Executives, mainly women, interpreted more than just the event and its effectiveness in enabling dialogue and discussion but also, and to them more importantly, they focused on the reactions and behaviours of some of their colleagues during the workshop, which they perceived as a deconstruction of existing narratives within the organisation. This recognition led them to question the Leadership Team's unity of the vision and mission, as well as their own hierarchical status and voice within the group and the wider organisation. To this group, the event brought into question some realities that were taken for granted. They viewed the 'others' as "not [being] able to understand how people in Health tick" and "out of touch with reality" with the currently existing cancer clinic, whose employees "will play an integral part in Platanus's enterprise" (Post-event Interviews Set 1 with Sonja, Julia, Anne, Simone, February 2012). Julia, Communication and Marketing Manager, explained that "the most enlightening part for me [was] that people are not connected with the organisation that they are meant to be transforming" (Post-event Interviews Set 1 with Julia, February 2012).

A third group seemed to have come to a consensus in their interpretations of the impact of the event. This seemingly harmonious agreement over the general value of organisational theatre as a method and its effectiveness in enhancing the Executives' communication skills in informal conversations with potential staff became observable in conversations with those who planned the organisational theatre event, that is the HR Managers, the Academics and the Theatre Company.

They focused their interpretations on more common and technical aspects such as the general value of organisational theatre as a method and its effectiveness to address communication issues, which they considered had been harmoniously realised. The interpretations of the HR Managers, the Academic Consultants and the members of the Theatre Company focused on the reasons why they perceived the organisational theatre event to be an effective intervention. However, in doing so, they seemed to generalise the ways in which the Executives experienced the theatrical event. While the Executives also all agreed on the general value of organisational theatre as a method and its effectiveness to enhance the Executives' communication skills in informal conversations with potential staff, their interpretations of the ways in which the event enabled an 'harmonisation' of diverse voices were variable and contested. This group showed its satisfaction with the 'impact' of the theatre by highlighting the capacity of the intervention to enable diverse discussion and debates amongst participants to enliven their recognition of the 'other' and the ways in which

the theatre helped to improve Executives' communication skills. The group seemed to generalise some of its explorations by intentionally, or unintentionally, communicating that the organisational theatre had the same 'impact' on all participants.

The differences between those viewing the organisational theatre as a translation and those focusing on their colleagues' behaviour during the event became particularly apparent through references the Executives made about three incidents within the organisational theatre event. The scenes around the incidents constituted the largest part of the workshop and will be used in the final paper to illustrate the divergent interpretations of the character and the impact of the organisational theatre event.

#### **4. Conclusion**

While the theatre had a mirroring effect on its participants - therefore confirming Meisiek and Barry's (2007) descriptions of the *looking glass* - the findings showed that there remained a managerial aspect that influenced these 'reflections' through the process of translation. In this way, the paper does justice to Clark and Mangham (2004b) who consider the managerial 'reflections' of the *looking glass* that organisational theatre provides. However, some of the participants 'went through' the *looking glass*, causing a process of deconstruction and enabling these participants to see that everything was, to borrow from Lewis Carroll, "quite different on beyond" (Carroll, 2000/1872: 131). This leads to a finding that diverges from Clark and Mangham's (2004b) interpretations who view organisational theatre as 'toothless' with regard to social change. These findings also address Nissley et al.'s (2004: 828) concern regarding whether those who own the role or the script really have power over the event or whether this may be also affected by elements of "concertive control" as the 'ownership' of role and script did not influence or hinder a deconstruction for those feeling less powerful within the organisation.

Based on the findings of this paper, it appears that organisational theatre cannot wholly embody Boal's Marxist assumptions (Boal, 1979/2000), as it always also reflects managerial aspects. However, theatre's inherently powerful character enables the method to provide more than just 'entertainment' through its deconstructive character and, through this, has the potential to stimulate change (Kornberger et al., 2006).



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