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Citation

CLARK, Timothy Adrian Robert and MANGHAM, Iain. Stripping to the undercoat: A review and reflections on a piece of organization theatre. (2004). *Organization Studies*. 25, (5), 841-851.
Available at: https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/lkcsb_research/6282

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Stripping to the undercoat: A review and reflections on a piece of organization theatre

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Published in ORGANIZATION STUDIES, 2004 June, Volume: 25 Issue: 5 Pages: 841-851

DOI: 10.1177/0170840604042417

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Accepted version

Abstract

In this article, we review one 'tailor-made play', one piece of organization theatre called Varnishing the Truth. We then reflect on the questions we asked of ourselves while watching this performance and reviewing the video of it: how does this activity relate to its claimed theoretical foundations (Boal's forum theatre)? Is forum theatre an appropriate model for organization theatre? Can 'things be made to move' by an activity such as the one to which we were an audience? In the process of answering these questions, we emphasize the reductive adoption of radical techniques (that is, Boal's forum theatre); the depoliticization of corporate theatre; and, the limitations of the theory of negotiated order as a model for learning, given the discursive construction of organizational roles.

Keywords

organization theatre; forum theatre; Augusto Boal

Introduction

Attending the theatre is generally considered to be a leisure activity, conducted outside of organization time. However, a number of writers have highlighted the emergence of a new form of theatre: organizational theatre (Clark and Mangham 2004; Meisiek 2002; Schreyögg 2001; Smith 1997; Pineault 1989). This treats theatre not primarily as a resource, an ontology or a metaphor, but as a technology. It literally refers to the use of theatre in organizations. It involves the deployment by an organization of dramatists, actors, directors, set designers, lighting specialists, and musicians to put on performances in front of an audience. Companies offering organizational theatre services draw on a range of theatrical traditions, including Boal, Brecht, masque, commedia dell’arte, as well as other forms of improvised theatre.

In this article, we review one ‘tailor-made play’, one piece of organization theatre. We then reflect on the questions we asked of ourselves while watching this performance and reviewing the video of it: how does this activity relate to its claimed theoretical foundations (Boal’s forum theatre)? Is forum theatre an appropriate model for organization theatre? Can ‘things be made to move’ by an activity such as the one to which we were an audience? In the process of answering these questions we emphasize the reductive adoption of radical techniques (that is, Boal’s forum theatre); the depoliticization of corporate theatre; and the limitations of the theory of negotiated order as a model for learning, given the discursive construction of organizational roles.

The Performance: *Varnishing the Truth*

To receive an invitation to attend a play called *Varnishing the Truth* with the instructions 'dress casually performance starts at 10am' is perhaps unusual. But to discover that the venue is not a theatre, but the shop floor of a knitting factory on an anonymous industrial estate in the East Midlands of the United Kingdom is unexpected and intriguing. On arrival, audience members were directed onto the shop floor and walked between rows of industrial machinery to an area screened by a black cloth. The performance arena was entered by pulling the loosely draped cloth to one side. Chairs were arranged in rows in front of the *aesthetic space* for an audience of about 30. On the opposite side of the room dining tables were stacked against the wall. We were entering the factory canteen. The stage was bare except for a table and three chairs. Behind the table was a large mobile whiteboard that appeared to act as the division between the front of stage and backstage areas. This stripped-down, minimalist approach pervaded all aspects of the performance. There was no specialist lighting or elaborate scenery and the audio equipment was limited to a battered, portable radio-cassette recorder. The actors wore minimal costumes to signify the role of their character. Thus, the actor playing the managing director wore a suit, whereas the person playing the foreman wore a yellow safety hat and thick wool builder's jacket.

The play concerned an industrial paint company, Fab Finish, and comprised five scenes and three main characters: a managing director, an administrator, and a foreman. A fourth actor played a number of different roles during the performance, but primarily acted as a narrator and master of ceremonies. From the outset he informed the audience that their participation was crucial. Indeed, it was central to their purpose and the success of the event. They were about to witness a play that would contrast a possible future state of a company, Fab Finish, with its current situation. They could not remain a passive audience, since after the performance their views, ideas, and active participation would be sought. The performance opened with a musical number in which the four actors presented a parody of a 1950s advertisement for the fictitious industrial painting company's products to the accompaniment of the theme tune from the 1960s Hanna-Barbera children's cartoon *Top Cat*. The second scene was set four years into the future at a regional business awards ceremony at which the managing director collected an award for Business of the Year. After the presentation of the award she made an impassioned speech about the factors that contributed to her organization's success. These were largely to do with delegation, communication, and teamwork. The third scene shifted back to the present time and focused on a series of crises facing the company. The company was depicted as suffering from cash-flow difficulties and several of its key contracts were presented as experiencing critical problems. The source of these problems appeared to be a lack of delegation, poor communication, and the absence of a team spirit between the three main characters, in particular the failure of the managing director to either consult or listen to the suggestions of others within the company. The next two scenes focused on Tom and then Heather's stories and how their combined experiences of the managing director's leadership style left them feeling undervalued, frustrated, and ignored. These were told through a mixture of monologue, a musical number, and a game-show parody.

After the performance was completed, the audience was asked by the master of ceremonies to identify the key problems experienced by the company and was then invited to watch the opening scene being replayed. Identifying the problems consisted of the audience offering their views and the master of ceremonies writing up somewhat edited versions of what was said upon the whiteboard. Before the replay occurred he divided the audience into three groups and instructed each group to identify with one of the characters. Each group had a few minutes with their character to explore further his or her characterization. Once the scene was replayed, the audience were asked for their opinions on the sources of the manifestly dysfunctional relationships between the three main protagonists. During the replaying of the scene, it was stopped every so often to allow the audience to intervene and make suggestions as to how each character could modify what they were saying and the manner of its delivery to improve communication. On occasion, audience members were invited to join the actors on stage

and play a particular character the way they thought it should be played. None did. Suggestions were shouted out by the audience and the person or actor modified his or her performance accordingly.

Varnishing the Truth as a Piece of Forum Theatre

In our discussions with the actors following the performance, they repeatedly characterized what they had just enacted as a piece of forum theatre according to the principles developed by Augusto Boal, a Brazilian playwright, theatre practitioner, and agitator. The theatre company were keen advocates of Boal's ideas. They were active participants in a range of national and international fora devoted to discussing and disseminating his ideas. They had also directly corresponded with Boal. We therefore immediately asked ourselves to what extent the play we witnessed took the form of forum theatre, as claimed by the actors. Some explanation of Boal's general ideas on theatre is necessary before we discuss this issue in more detail. As the title of his first book, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, suggests, Boal (1979: vi) regards all theatre as necessarily political:

> 'theatre is a weapon. A very efficient weapon. For this reason one must fight for it. For this reason the ruling classes strive to take permanent hold of the theatre and utilise it as a tool for domination. In so doing, they change the very concept of what "theatre" is. But the theatre can also be a weapon for liberation. For that, it is necessary to create appropriate theatrical forms ... Change is imperative. All must act, all must be protagonists in the necessary transformations of society.'

For Boal, the conventional form of theatre is one of the many means of ideological oppression. He offers an account of early theatre that highlights the moment when those he sees as ruling classes took over (few scholars would support this account of the origins and development of theatre, but Boal shows little interest in theatre research or scholarship):

> 'In the beginning the theatre was dithyrambic song: free people singing in the open air. The carnival. The feast. Later, the ruling classes took possession of the theatre and built their dividing walls. First they divided the people; separating actors from spectators; people who act and people who watch — the party is over! Secondly, among the actors, they separated the protagonists from the mass. The coercive indoctrination began.' (Boal 1979: 119)

According to Boal and his followers, conventional forms of theatre have largely prevailed from that moment a couple of thousand years ago. In conventional forms of theatre, the audience, the spectators, passively observe the actions of the characters on the stage. By and large in the conventional theatre there is a code of non-interference by the audience. Not so in Boalinspired theatre. Using a variety of unconventional forms of theatre and a battery of disruptive techniques Boal's life work has been to enable spectators to transgress, to break the conventions, to enter what he calls the 'mirror of a theatrical fiction', rehearse forms of struggle and then return to reality with 'images of their desires' ready to take action (Boal 1998).

In Boal's form of theatre, which he terms 'forum theatre', the audience is not simply there to see and hear what occurs. They are invited to be active *participants*, not only emotionally and intellectually since they are to be given the opportunity to interfere and intervene physically. Boal claims that the conventional theatre presents images for contemplation, whereas in his kind of theatre these images are presented to be challenged by the audience, to be destroyed by them and to be replaced by others. He argues that in the conventional theatre the

action is ‘fictitious’ action, which substitutes for ‘real’ action, whereas in his form of theatre the ‘action shown on stage is a possibility, an alternative, and the intervener-spectators (active observers) are called upon to create new actions, new alternatives which are not substitutes for real action, but rehearsals, pre-actions which precede — rather than stand in for — the actual action, the action we want to transform, a reality we are trying to change’ (Boal 2001: 72). The goal of the forms of theatre that derive from Boal’s ideas is not to create calm and equilibrium, but rather to foment disequilibrium that prepares the way for change.

As a supposed piece of forum theatre, *Varnishing the Truth* is Boal lite. It is an approximation to the form of his theatre shorn of much of its structure. Boal outlines the procedure for *forum theatre* in the following manner: first, the participants are asked to tell a story containing a political or social problem that has no immediately obvious resolution. The story our participants apparently offered was (on the surface at least) a pretty routine one of poor communication, which, as it turned out, was to be resolved by skills such as listening, not interrupting others, and so on. We were not party to the discussions that preceded the performance, but the play that was developed from them appeared not to be specific to the commissioning organization. Neither the characters nor the actual events they depicted appeared to be based upon the employees or situations within the host organization. Happy with this problem, the actors developed and rehearsed a script or an improvisation based upon it. Boal’s procedure for forum theatre requires that the participants and the actors propose and enact a solution. This was not done in the case of *Varnishing the Truth*. The actors developed a script, rehearsed it, and then presented the play to the participants, who at this stage were treated and behaved as though they were a conventional audience, that is, passively to contemplate what was presented. In forum theatre, they would be asked if they agreed with the solution that had been proposed, but since no solution was presented our actors went straight on to performing aspects of the play again. Again, in pure Boal terms at this point in the performance any participant has the right to replace any actor and lead the action in the direction that he or she thinks more appropriate. The displaced actor steps aside temporarily, but the other actors have to improvise responses to the newly created situation (Boal 1979: 130–132). The participants who step up onto the stage must behave as actors, they are not allowed simply to address everyone as though they were at a symposium or a political meeting. In forum theatre, no idea is imposed: ‘the audience, the people have the opportunity to try out all their ideas, to rehearse all the possibilities, and to verify them in practice, that is, in theatrical practice ... It is not the place of the theatre to show the correct path, but only the means by which all possible paths may be examined’ (Boal 1979: 139). In *Varnishing the Truth*, it was clear that the definition of the problem was imposed upon the audience and that the actors carefully corralled the solutions. Members of the audience indicated few additional paths and only a couple of such paths were somewhat tentatively explored. The actors performed a couple of scenes again; the master of ceremonies called a halt and asked for suggestions as to how it might be performed differently. From their seats some of the participants offered suggestions, one or two of which were acted out by the actors. The performance concluded with the participants being broken up into discussion groups to come up with ideas for the resolution of the problems identified by the actors.

More generally, therefore, *Varnishing the Truth* displays a decorum and a distancing from Boal’s original ideas and conception of a piece of forum theatre. Although it follows the very broad outline of his format for forum theatre, in a number of key aspects it departs substantially from his theory and his practice. The process that we witnessed was more akin to a mixture of conventional theatre or role-play and standard training-room practices than it was to Boal’s forum theatre.

Forum Theatre as a Model for Organization Theatre

As we noted above, a key aspect of Boal's theatre is the involvement of the audience as active *participants*: 'Anyone may propose a solution, but it must be done on the stage, working, acting, doing things, and not from the comfort of his seat' (Boal 1979: 141). Working, doing, and acting on stage have a clear purpose:

> 'Maybe the theatre in itself is not revolutionary, but these theatrical forms are without doubt a *rehearsal of revolution*. The truth of the matter is that the spectator-actor practices a real act even though he does it in a fictional manner. While he *rehearses* throwing a bomb on stage, he is concretely rehearsing the way a bomb is thrown; acting out his attempt to organise a strike, he is concretely organising a strike. Within its fictitious limits, the experience is a concrete one.' (Boal 1979: 141)

The stress on this aspect of the power of forum theatre derives from Boal's ideas about human nature. He claims that theatre resides in the human being observing itself. 'Observing itself the human being perceives what it is, discovers what it is not and imagines what it could become. It perceives where it is and where it is not, and imagines where it could go ... Theatre — or theatricality — is this capacity, this human property which allows man to observe himself in action, in activity' (Boal 1995: 13). The self-knowledge thus acquired allows him to be the 'subject (the one who observes) of another subject (the one who acts)' (Boal 1995: 13). It allows him to imagine variations of his actions, to study alternatives. This spectator ('spect-actor') is not only an object, he is a subject because he can also act on the actor: 'the spect-actor is the actor, he can guide him, change him. A spect-actor acting on the actor who acts' (Boal 1995: 13). As we indicated earlier, Boal (1995: 14) holds that in the beginning (long ago and far away) 'actor and spectator coexisted in the same person; the point at which they were separated when some specialized as actors and others as spectators' marks the birth of the professional actor and the conventional theatre. However, he argues, 'the theatrical vocation belongs to us all. Theatre is a vocation for all human beings: it is the nature of humanity.' The role of forum theatre is 'to safeguard, develop and reshape this human vocation' (Boal 1995: 14–15). This is achieved by creating an open, pluri-vocal space, in which all contributions are valued, to facilitate the emergence of new understandings on which the spect-actor can then act.

Boal appears to be claiming that conventional forms of theatre depend upon professional actors *standing in*, as it were, for us as members of the audience. From this viewpoint, new understanding and learning, if it is to come about at all, results from an identification with another party up there on the stage (Mangham and Overington 1987; Schechner 1988). In this form of theatre, the actors and audience are segregated, with the latter observing the former in 'a space which demands uninterrupted scrutiny' (Counsell 1996). For Boal, and a number of critical commentators on organizational learning (Burgoyne and Jackson 1997; Coopey 1998; Coopey and Burgoyne 2000; Fulop and Rifkin 1997; Örtenblad 2002; Oswick et al. 2000), such an approach fails to create a space within which people can take risks in improvising aspects of their self and social relations within organizations by exchanging views freely and without concerns about future consequences. By creating a distance between the actors and audience conventional forms of theatre elevate the position of those on stage, with the consequence that there is an imbalance of power between actors and audience. There is no opportunity for the free exchange of ideas, since the views and understandings of the former are privileged at the expense of the latter. The audience are not sanctioned to speak and so are treated as the passive recipients of messages controlled by those in power. By democratizing the learning space, forum theatre seeks to create new insights out of the participants' contributions through episodes of mutual self-disclosure which serve as a vehicle for learning and building up trust, so that pluri-vocal rather than univocal understanding emerges. As Coopey (1998: 375) notes of participants, 'Once they have found their voice, rather than being given permission to speak in a language controlled by those who govern, people are able to articulate their reclaimed knowledge, breaking [the] silence in which privileged others have enclosed them.'

Forum theatre and its associated exercises and activities appear to be designed to achieve this by providing an opportunity and space for participants to open up, step back, consider the past history of their thoughts and actions, and to deliberate and rehearse their future thoughts and actions. The actors who offered *Varnishing the Truth* may well cleave to such a model. If so, their practice fell far short of their ambitions. No individual was given the opportunity to step back from their specific role, consider the implications of the way they played it, and rehearse alternatives. There was no sense of danger in the activity; no sense that anyone was expected to step back from the given, finished, and done in order to pursue radical change in the way that they went about things. One did not feel part of a potentially revolutionary and subversive act. It is this very absence that led us to speculate further about the appropriateness of Boal's theatre as a model for organization theatre more generally, over and above this specific performance.

Boal's theatre (at least in its original form) was overtly political and revolutionary. It posits a world of workers and bosses, oppressors and the oppressed. It creates circumstances in which it invites participants to rehearse revolutionary action and structural change. Underpinning its design and practice is a conception of action as an ongoing series of interactions in which there are no stable and fixed positions. This approach views social actors in organizations *as elements* in relationship with each other in which each actor participates in defining and sustaining the role of the other. The dialectical character of organization is realized through the management of discourse — a theory called 'negotiated order' developed by Strauss (1978) and elaborated by Maines (1982). The negotiations by which order is created, sustained, and changed, and through which conflict is resolved, are conducted by the management of discourses. The aim of many of the exercises, improvisations, and discussions is to have the participants represent their positions to each other through symbolic means, largely, but certainly not exclusively, through spoken discourse.

What practitioners and supporters of organization theatre who claim an adherence to Boal's philosophy appear to ignore is the fact that although it may seek to create an aesthetic and emancipatory space, the discourses that obtain in a given organization at a particular time are constrained by the elements of organizational roles and role relationships that have previously been constituted discursively. As Perinbanayagam (1991: 90) argues, 'When one eschews a linear logic, it becomes clear that at a given moment in time participants create discourse that reproduces the organization in and through the talk itself and that the discourse that emerges is influenced by the roles of the participants in the organization.' One feature of membership of an organization is the status that is accorded to the ranks of its members. These ranks have to be acknowledged and given discursive presence in emerging interactions by those party to it, unless, of course, a member intends to insult, challenge, or provoke other members by repudiating his or her rank or role. What someone can say and how much that person can claim to know are functions of his or her place in an organization, in the role complex in which he or she is situated. Perinbanayagam (1991) argues that it is the case in all forms of organization that who talks and how they talk is decided by the disposition of power and status. Before one talks one has a membership that defines one's place in a hierarchy of power and privilege, and the right to speak, the right to interrupt others, and the obligation to keep silent significantly define such power and privilege. As Perinbanayagam (1991: 93) puts it: 'There is no doubt that the oppression of the larger society is manifest in small conversations.'

Discussions with members of organization theatre companies in the UK, Europe, and North America, as well as our observations of a number of plays of the type reviewed earlier, lead us to conclude that the actors who claim to use this method perhaps unwittingly cling to a theory of negotiated order that lacks an understanding of power and status. They appear to believe that, given the right circumstances, social actors can step out and back from their roles and renegotiate them. But at no time are the audience members of these performances given the opportunity to play another role or question the nature and impacts of hierarchy. Rather, the performance space, the play, and discussions precipitated by the actors generally work against this by reinforcing power and status. Fundamentally, these are not plays helping the oppressed break free from oppression. The plots, as indicated by

that of *Varnishing the Truth*, are not focused on first-order structural change, but rather, second-order issues such as communication. The prescriptions for future success contained within these plays are not about the subversion or redesign of the hierarchy, but rather, its maintenance and lubrication through improved communication practices (something that is an essential part of the actor's skill). Boal (1995: 55) argues that disruption can be facilitated through the presence of a joker. The theory is that the performance of such a role enables communication to proceed without the hierarchical roles solidifying into oppressive and monological structures. In certain circumstances, the traditional jester or trickster represents disorder. Radin (1956: 185) captures something of what we are groping towards: 'the spirit of this disorder is the trickster. His function ... is to add disorder to order and so make a whole, to render possible within the fixed bounds of what is permitted an experience of what is not permitted.' In a court, the jester is the one who does not have to wait for or be given his turn; his privilege is to be allowed to speak even when not spoken to, to interrupt ongoing discourses, to speak to anyone without permission. Violating the orderly processes of interaction and communication, he disrupts the discourse and changes its direction (Otto 2001; Southworth 1998). But such a free-ranging role requires a liminal space, a space which captures the carnivalesque, which subverts convention and 'celebrates temporary liberation from prevailing truths and the established order; mark[ing] the suspension of hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions' (Bakhtin 1984: 10). However, the abandonment or temporary suspension of the hierarchy and the formal restraints it supports is difficult given that these plays are always commissioned and approved by senior management within client organizations. Indeed, we have not encountered a play in which the senior management did not attend and exert considerable influence over the discussion which followed and the interpretation of the nature of the performance. In such circumstances, the subversive and political intentions of Boal are difficult (if not impossible) to achieve. Indeed, Boal confines his activities to those groups he views as the oppressed. Thus, when he was asked to meet with a European organization theatre company he responded in an e-mail:

> 'Please understand me. Theatre of the oppressed is theatre of the oppressed, for the oppressed and by the oppressed. I know that social and labour conditions in Brazil and in Europe are very very different, so it is difficult for me to imagine what words like managers, executives, business etc. really mean to you. I know what they mean to me.'

He declined the invitation because he viewed this use of his ideas as involving the oppressors and maintaining the status quo.

If new understanding is to be brought about by allowing audience members to step back and take a look at what they are doing, more attention needs to be given to the complexity, irony, politics, and power struggles that characterize organizations. It may also require quite a different order of skill to that which we have seen being deployed. 'It is not the place of the theatre to show the correct path, but only to offer the means by which all paths may be examined' (Boal 1979: 141). This 'offering of the means' relies heavily upon the ability of the joker or convener to promote a process of dialectic among the participants; something which is generally absent from these plays and *Varnishing the Truth* in particular. Beck holds that dialectic is

> 'mutual criticism of free and equal beings willing both to support and to change their reasons, actions, projects, plans, desires and aspirations. In dialogue, I respect you as a free agent by using no argument and appealing to no reason to which I do not bind myself ... for my emancipation from the limitations of my role I need the criticism and backing of free men; only from them can I learn.' (1975: 136–137).

To achieve this requires a very different dramatistic approach than that adopted in this genre of organization theatre.

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