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### From dramaturgy to theatre as technology: The case of corporate theatre

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# **From Dramaturgy to Theatre as Technology: The Case of Corporate Theatre**

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## **Abstract**

This article examines a piece of corporate theatre. Although theatre has entered organization studies through the dramaturgical writing of Kenneth Burke and the dramaturgical writings of Erving Goffman, this article is concerned with an approach variously described as organizational, radical, situation or corporate theatre that treats theatre not primarily as a resource, an ontology or a metaphor but as a technology. This approach involves the deployment by an organization of dramatists, actors, directors, set designers, lighting specialists, and musicians to put on performances in front of audiences. Using frameworks derived from studies of theatre a particular piece of corporate theatre is described and analysed. It is argued that this form of theatre appears to be used to contain reflection and to promote the views of a particular group within an organization. It does not confront an audience but subtly suggests alternative ways of evaluating, construing and understanding issues. This may be achieved by anaesthetizing audience reaction by encouraging imaginative participation in the performance so that cherished beliefs and values do not appear to be directly challenged.

## **INTRODUCTION**

In this article we are breaking new ground by examining a previously overlooked area of consultancy activity. We are not concerned with understanding consulting as a dramatic event, nor with consultants as actors, but rather with consultancies whose core activity is the employment of theatrical techniques within organizations. These are generically called corporate or industrial theatre consultancies. They emerged in America in the early part of the twentieth century as organizations such as Coca-Cola, IBM, and NCR created 'corporate shows' for their annual sales conferences (Pineault, 1989). In the UK the live events sector – which embraces conferences, annual general meetings, exhibitions, shows, and product launches – has been growing at 20 per cent annually for the past five years and is comprised of around two hundred firms that generated a little over £500 million in fees in 2000 (*AV Magazine*, 2000). Smith (1997, p. 2) has argued that despite its growing size, theatre in corporate/organizational settings is 'hidden theatre'. Although it employs the techniques of theatre, often utilizes the talents of well-known theatre professionals (actors, singers, writers, directors, etc.) and occasionally transfers and adapts successful Broadway and West End shows into the corporate/organizational setting, this is not typically viewed as a site for theatrical activity. Rather, attending the theatre is generally considered to be a leisure activity, conducted outside of organization time. To date scholarly attention of this area is limited to three PhD theses (Hansen, 2002; Pineault, 1989; Smith, 1997) and a single article in an academic journal (Bell,

1987). None of these publications has empirically examined this phenomenon. Consequently, this article represents the first systematic analysis of this type of theatre. It has three overall aims: (1) to situate theatre as technology within the broader literature on theatre within organization studies; (2) to offer a description of an instance of corporate theatre; and (3) to identify the differences between corporate theatre and other forms of theatre as technology.

In the first of this article's five parts we review the literature in organization studies that has been concerned with theatre. Building on this wide-ranging review the second part highlights the central features of corporate theatre. In the next two parts we discuss our research methods and then describe and analyse the processes of producing and performing an actual piece of corporate theatre called *Your Life. Your Bank*. We do so utilizing ideas from the studies of theatre, in particular Cole's (1975) notion of *imaginative truth* and Pavis's (1992) concept of *mise en scène*. The article closes with a discussion of the differences between corporate theatre and other forms of theatre of technology.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The idea of theatre has entered into organization studies in at least four distinct ways: through the use of theatrical texts to inform and illustrate programmes in leadership and/or through the deployment of games and activities derived from rehearsal processes in the theatre to stimulate and enliven training programmes; through *dramatism*, an analytical perspective which adopts an ontological position and holds that social and organization life *is* theatre; through *dramaturgy* which holds that social and organizational life may be treated metaphorically *as if* it were theatre; and finally, through an approach variously described as *organizational*, *radical*, *situation* or *corporate* theatre that treats theatre not primarily as a resource, an ontology or a metaphor but as a technology.

There is a burgeoning activity in the use of theatre as resource and a growing literature. That part of it concerned with lessons in leadership largely consists of selective readings of Shakespeare (Augustine and Adelman, 1999; Corrigan, 2000; Jackson, 2001; Mangham, 2001; Whitney and Packer, 2000). That part of it concerned with theatre games is relatively poorly documented although articles occasionally surface in the press attesting to the benefits of such activities (Keene, 1999; Olivier, 2001). We will not be dealing with either of these areas in the present paper. Our interest is primarily in theatre as a technology, but in order to clearly differentiate and situate this approach from more presently well-known conceptual notions/frameworks of theatre within organization studies we begin with a brief outline of dramatism and dramaturgy.

### Dramatism

In the middle years of the twentieth century the literary critic Kenneth Burke developed what he termed a '*dramatistic*' model of human behaviour (1945, 1969a, 1969b). Dramatism is a method of analysis that asserts the reality of symbolic action as the defining activity of human beings, not analogically, but as a formal model with which to explore both action and explanations for action. As a guide to such analysis, Burke offers two basic notions – the *Pentad* and the *ratios*. The former is the name that he gives to the five terms that he claims to be basic to any analysis of motivated action: the act, the scene, the agent, the agency, and the purpose. Burke suggests using these terms in pairs in order to understand the congruence that makes theatre interpretable and social action coherent. Thus, the conventions of social life and of drama expect some kind of consistency between say, the nature of agents and the acts they perform, or between the acts and the scene against which they take place. These ratios among the elements of the Pentad are an array of heuristic strategies for grasping the intelligibility of social action, or for recognizing the ways in which a violation of dramatistic coherence illuminates the principle that it offends (Mangham and Overington, 1987, pp. 70–2). Studies in organizations purporting to derive their

method from Burke – however indirectly – have been undertaken (Case, 2001; Graham-Hill and Grimes 2001; Kendall, 1993; Mangham and Overington, 1983; Pine and Gilmore, 1999; Walker and Monin, 2001).<sup>[1]</sup> As Geertz (1983 p. 27) remarked some 20 years ago, Burke's influence is 'at once enormous and – because almost no one actually uses his baroque vocabulary, with its reductions, ratios and so on – elusive'. His baroque vocabulary is in more use now than it was when Geertz made his comments, but so far its potential has not been fully realized.

## **Dramaturgy**

Burke and his major interpreter Duncan (1962, 1968) have had relatively little direct impact upon ways of looking at social and organizational behaviour, but – together with Gustav Ichheiser (1949) – they had a strong influence upon Erving Goffman, whose own work, of course, has now ensured that theatre as a metaphor for social life has to be taken seriously by philosophers and social scientists throughout the world. Shakespeare may have said it earlier and better, but Goffman gave it a form that sociologists could appreciate. Mitchell (1978) points out Goffman borrowed heavily from others in developing his framework. From Burke, Goffman took the notions that behaviour is to be treated as a process of people relating to each other as actors; that meaning is not a characteristic of the world but is the result of a process – an evolving social process – with others and consequently it is fragile and problematic; and the notion that the self is not a given but is derived and sustained through interaction. From Ichheiser he took the idea that the processes of everyday interaction were of fundamental importance to the understanding of social order, that these processes could be seen as involving 'actors' and 'spectators' giving and receiving 'impressions'. Ichheiser also emphasizes the primacy of the 'situation' and its definition in the unfolding of interaction (Ichheiser, 1949).<sup>[2]</sup>

Goffman's great contribution has been to take these ideas and to develop and elaborate upon them in his description and analysis of everyday face-to-face behaviour. He had a genius for observation and a great flair for articulating the delicate balances and imbalances that inform performances. His position is most clearly stated in his *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) and is elaborated in a number of other works (1967, 1974). His debt to the theatre lies in his use of terms derived from it. He conceives of social behaviour as 'performances' among 'actors' who adjust as best they can the 'expressions' they 'give' and 'give off' so as to convey the 'impression' that they are what they claim to be. Social actors like stage actors 'prepare' and 'rehearse' their performances 'backstage' where they take themselves to be not 'on'. When they are 'on' they 'enact their roles' and they do so on a 'stage' where they are conscious that they are in the presence of an 'audience' who expect a coherence 'among settings, appearance and manner'.

Goffman's *dramaturgy* was received with considerable acclaim. Within 20 years or so it was established as an important theoretical framework in mainstream social science (see Burns, 1992 for a review). It was several years before the framework began to be utilized in organization studies, but here too it has enjoyed some success. Many of these studies follow Goffman in describing and analysing 'situated activity', the fleeting and episodic face-to-face interactions that constitute a large part of social and organizational life (e.g., Brissett and Edgley, 1990; Clark and Salaman, 1996; Gardner, 1992; Gardner and Avolio, 1998; Gardner and Martinko, 1988; Giacalone and Rosenfeld, 1989; Grove and Fisk, 1992; Rosenfeld et al., 1995; Schlenker, 1980). Many of these writers pick up on the notion that Goffman's work is potentially emancipatory. Once it is understood that social reality is a matter of scripts and performances created and sustained by human interaction, changes become possible. Other forms of reality may take the stage given adequate political means for choosing between scripts. Goffman thus provides a perspective from which social actors can become disenchanted with their lot and seek to change it.

However, neither the popularity nor the beguiling nature of dramaturgy should blind us to the fact that it is a somewhat limited application of the theatrical metaphor to social and organizational life. Goffman's exclusive concern with role-playing and impression management and his lack of familiarity with the function of theatre, with rehearsals and directors, with stage performances or theatre audiences has resulted in theory that in its present form is inadequate and stultifying (Wilshire, 1982). It is those features concerned with the construction, delivery and reception of performances that are central to the approach of theatre as technology.

### **Theatre as Technology**

The fourth approach to the use of theatre in organizations is literally that – the use of theatre in organizations. This 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. It is an approach that largely eschews reference to either dramatism or dramaturgy. This is not to say that its practice is not grounded in a reasonably coherent set of ideas concerning the function of the theatre, although these have not often been spelled out. Some derive from ritual and some from the theatre of the ancient Greeks (Meisiek and Dabitz, 1999). Lyman and Scott (1975, p. 2) remind us that for the Greeks, the plays that were presented at their festivals were a mimesis of ordinary everyday acting. By seeking to render the everyday ‘unhidden’ to an audience that was urged to adopt a position of ‘wonder, astonishment and naïve puzzlement’, theatre was the ‘primordial social science’. The essence of this position is picked up in the work of theatrical practitioners and anthropologists, who, in turn have influenced some of those seeking to bring about change in social and organizational behaviour (Cole, 1975; Geertz, 1980; Schechner, 1988). Some, like Victor Turner (1984), an anthropologist with a deep interest in and knowledge of theatre, acknowledges his debt to the Greeks with his notion that every society needs a form of activity through which its ways of normally perceiving, valuing, feeling and behaving may be reflexively confronted by members of that society:

. . . any society that hopes to be imperishable must carve out for itself a space and a period of time in which it can look honestly at itself. This honesty is not that of the scientist, who exchanges the honesty of his ego for the objectivity of his gaze. It is, rather akin to the supreme honesty of the creative artist, who, in his presentations on the stage, in the book, on canvas, in marble, in music, or in towers and houses, reserves to himself the privilege to see straight what all cultures build crooked. (Turner, 1984, p. 40)

This space of performance, and the culturally endorsed reflexivity that distinguishes it, Turner calls a ‘liminal’ space, in which:

. . . groups strive to see their own reality in new ways and to generate a language verbal or non-verbal that enables them to talk *about* what they normally talk about. They are liminal in the sense that they are suspensions of daily reality, occupying privileged spaces where people are allowed to think about how they think about the terms in which they conduct their thinking or to feel about how they feel about daily life. (Turner, 1984, p. 23)

Theatre is clearly one such privileged space and – as we have indicated above – some working in and around organizations have sought to capitalize upon its potential to provide opportunities for members of organizations to see straight what has been built crooked. John Coopey (1998, p. 365), for example, drawing heavily upon the ideas and practice of Augusto Boal (1979),<sup>[3]</sup> puts forward the notion of *radical theatre* which he envisages being used ‘directly in furthering the process of discursive exploration, release and political action’, and quotes Kershaw (1992, p. 24) to the effect that this type of theatre is similar to that in ritual. A *liminal* role placing participants betwixt and between their more permanent social roles

and a 'ludic role' enabling the spectator 'to participate in playing around with norms, customs, regulations, laws which govern her life in society' (quoted in Coopey, 1998, p. 374). Unfortunately he provides only one rather thin illustration of the use of radical theatre in organizations and we have been unable to find any more substantial representations of the approach elsewhere in the literature.<sup>[4]</sup>

Schreyögg argues for an approach to change that he terms *organization theatre* (Schreyögg, 2001; Schreyögg and Dabitz, 1999). Working with members of organizations, theatre professionals and social scientists tailor-make plays to deal with specific issues within specific organizations. They may use a variety of theatrical approaches – burlesque, melodrama, naturalistic – to realize the resultant drama, but the aim is emancipatory, to 'expose the audience to situations of their daily life, thereby confronting it with hidden conflicts, subconscious behavioural patterns or critical routines' (Schreyögg, 2001, p. 3). The debt to Turner is clear in Schreyögg's (2001, p. 9) belief that 'things can be made to move' by rendering discussible that which is not normally discussible. It is reported that organization theatre has quite a following in France and Germany. In 1997 alone there were two thousand such performances in French organizations and two hundred in German companies (Wehner and Dabitz, 1999). In addition, there are companies of actors involved in what may be very similar activities in a number of countries including Belgium, Canada, Denmark and the United Kingdom.

Meisiek (2002) uses the term *situation theatre* for what is essentially *organization theatre*. His form of theatre is 'the staging of problem-oriented plays in an organizational context' that 'is used to promote problem-awareness and to stimulate a readiness to change' (ibid, p. 3). He claims that plays are often written specifically for particular organizations and that a writer may well spend time with the organization to study its processes, its language and its culture. Professional actors then perform the piece. Alternatively members of the organization are drawn directly into the making of the play through workshops and discussions. They may even be invited to 'intervene spontaneously' in the performance 'whenever they feel they would like to change the plot in favour of their own ideas' (Meisiek, 2002, p. 4).

Subscribers to the fourth form of theatre as technology – *corporate theatre* – appear to operate out of the same broad background of theory. They appear to believe in the value of a liminal space – a metaphorical space where the organization can come together and reflect upon its own values and performance – but for the most part corporate theatre appears to be used to contain the reflection and to promote the views of a particular group within an organization. It is not about audience members confronting and reflecting on organizational problems. Indeed, in this type of theatre there is no admission that there are any problems.

Young (1990) argues that the greater part of our so-called developed world constitutes a *dramaturgical society*. One in which 'the technologies of social science, mass communication, theatre, and the arts are used to manage attitudes, behaviours and feelings of the population' (Young, 1990, p. 71). Throughout Western industrialized societies the services of 'expert technicians, research institutes doing surveys, polls and samples, theatrical people, mass communications, are disproportionately available to large-scale organizations' (ibid, p. 71). The task of these 'function-aries' is to 'use the accoutrements of the theatre, the findings of social science, and the facilities of the mass media to generate an 'informed' public – formed in the image of the purchaser of such services' (ibid, p. 72). Large corporations with large budgets can and do attempt to influence governments, communities, regulators, competitors, customers and – not least – their own employees through the skilful projection of images. It is probable that theatrical resources are more heavily used by organizations to manage and manipulate their employees than they are used to confront 'hidden conflicts, subconscious behavioural patterns or with painful truths' (Schreyögg, 2001, p. 8). It is certain that we know very little about the practice and impact of either form of activity. This paper is designed to add to our knowledge by describing and analysing a performance that those who designed it saw as being in the tradition of *corporate theatre*.

## **THE NATURE OF CORPORATE THEATRE**

Pineault (1989, p. 2) offers a broad definition of corporate theatre by suggesting that it is a 'type of production which excites, motivates, and persuades its audience about a company's service, product, and/or slogan through the use of live theatrical performance'. According to Bell (1987), performances like this have a number of specific characteristics. First, performances are nearly always located off-site where the main theatrical infrastructure – stage, scenery, lighting, and audience seating – has to be constructed ad hoc. They are usually one off performances. Their bespoke and temporary character makes them expensive. A single performance can cost from £100,000 to several million pounds. Second, despite the presence of external actors, designers, writers and directors, the performance is created for and targeted on a specific internal audience. Attendance is not open to everyone but is restricted to a limited group of organizational insiders. It is private rather than public theatre. Organizations are very reluctant to permit anyone, other than the intended audience, into the performance. In part this may be ascribed to the sensitive nature of the content, but is more likely to be occasioned by the third characteristic of corporate theatre: the purpose of the performance is largely motivational. It shares something with another marginal form of theatre –*agit-prop*– in that theatrical elements are used as a means of ideological propagandistic-persuasion in order to foster group identification and enhance specific didactic intent (Blau, 1992; Kershaw, 1992). The presence of strangers could well detract from such a purpose. Fourth, and linked to the previous point, the content and subjects of corporate theatre are the organization's products and services, its self image, or the image its leaders want to project. Fifth, the message is communicated using sophisticated multi-media technologies. They are audio-visual extravaganzas utilizing state-of-the-art technology such as revolving stages, hydraulics, lasers, complex lighting rigs, computer programming, back-projection, plasma screens and so forth.

## **THE PERFORMANCE: *YOUR LIFE. YOUR BANK***

The empirical material on which this paper is based stems from the authors' association with a single corporate theatrical performance called *Your Life. Your Bank*. Eiger International – one of the world's most successful producers of corporate theatre of one form or another – had been commissioned by Green Group Plc – a very large bank – to devise and produce a show that would help it celebrate and consolidate the merging of what had until now been two separate banks: Green and Blue. The performance that we were party to constituted an attempt by those who commissioned it to manage the impressions received by their employees in such a way as to consolidate changes instigated by the commissioners – the institution's most senior managers. Eiger were chosen primarily because of their experience and expertise in producing large performances. As the Chairman of Eiger stated, 'Our reputation is founded on the delivery of high quality live communication. The heart of our business is about devising and delivering live communication in order to inform and educate audiences all over the world . . . corporate theatre is a key part of this. The success of these performances is a reflection of our creative expertise more generally but also our long experience of designing something that engages an audience'. In turn, we were commissioned by Eiger International to design and implement a series of questionnaires and interviews that would provide a measure of the success of the performance.<sup>[5]</sup> For us it offered the prospect of examining a branch of theatre that had not previously been the subject of description and systematic analysis. To enable us to do this we sought and were granted permission to observe the development of the performance from start to finish. Over a period of eight months, as observers, we attended many of the meetings within the consultancy concerning the development of the script, meetings between the consultancy and the client, the dress rehearsals and the performance itself. We also collected information on the creative principles underpinning the design and staging of the performance, a variety of briefing documents generated by Eiger and the bank, the final script and all information aimed at those who were to constitute the audience. Apart from our impressions and notes that we made at the various meetings we

attended, at the dress rehearsals and as members of the audience on the day of the performance, we had access to a video recording of the entire live show.

## **FRAMING THE PERFORMANCE**

### **Introduction**

Schreyögg (2001) offers a frame for the consideration of organizational theatre that can also be used to facilitate a broader understanding of theatre as technology. He conceives of a theatre group as a service organization with a chain of distinctive value creating activities. An ideal typical production process should involve a distinctive set of activities and stages: commissioning, exploring, dramatization, *mise en scène*, performance and follow up (Schreyögg, 2001, p. 6). Whilst we are broadly in agreement with what he has to say, we are unhappy with the somewhat mechanistic industrial production process vocabulary that he favours. For our analysis we felt we needed a frame that as far as possible derived from studies of the theatre. We have chosen that offered by Cole (1975) and we have complemented it by ideas taken from a range of other writers, most notably Pavis (1992). We have selected these writers primarily because Cole's overall schema and Pavis' detailed thoughts on *mise en scène* enable us to organise our description and analysis in a manner that we take to be isomorphic with the activities to which we were witness.

### **Commissioning the Play**

As Hamlet reminds us, one of the most important factors in the development and performance of a piece of theatre lies in the commissioning of it. In what is possibly the first example of a circumstance where, in the play within the play, theatre as technology is used to bring about a change of circumstance, Hamlet embodies the power of the patron. In this instance he gets to rewrite the script and plunge the court of Denmark into chaos (Shakespeare, 1996, Act 2, Scene 2). Theatre – particularly corporate theatre – is an expensive resource and whoever commissions the play has the opportunity to influence both the script and the subsequent performance. In the present case the commissioners were clear that their objective in putting on the performance was to manage the impressions of the merger received by their employees in such a way as to consolidate changes instigated by the commissioners – the institution's most senior managers. In order to produce the script Eiger had to gain an understanding of the range of activities that had contributed to the merger of the two banks. Rather than conduct a wide-ranging audit of how the different parts of the banks had been contributing to the merger, the consultancy relied solely on briefings from the members of the committee co-ordinating the merger programme entitled *Towards One Bank*, all of whom were senior managers. Eiger were paid to deploy their skill and techniques in the service of this group. No attempt was made to involve more junior levels of the organization in discussions about the content or the shape of the performance. Save for a short passage towards the end of the performance, the audience were to remain in their seats and certainly no opportunity was to be afforded for raising questions such as possible redundancies, branch closures or reduced opportunities for promotion. It was taken as read that the management's perspective was to prevail throughout. And like Hamlet, they took care to monitor the development of the script and the rehearsals to ensure that their view of social reality was to be exclusively promoted.

### **The Imaginative Truth**

In line with the comments made earlier about the nature of dramaturgical society, the development of the script for our piece of corporate theatre offers an example of how social reality was to be defined and promoted. This was to be a good news show. It was designed to *reinforce* the values that were to underpin the new bank; it was to *celebrate* the merger; it was to *laud* the merger as the biggest and most successful



piece of change management that had ever been attempted anywhere in the world; it was to involve and make *heroes* of the people who were making this happen; it was to fill with *pride* the hearts and minds of audience and performers alike; and it was to *inspire* them to pass on the good news to their colleagues back in the various branches. The image that was to be promoted was one of an organization that had taken on a major task, overcome all of the problems and obstacles and had *triumphed*. This was an organization that could feel justly pleased with itself.

Our framing of this part of the development of the performance begins with the idea of theatre as an opportunity to experience ‘imaginative life as physical presence’ (Cole, 1975, p. 5). Cole makes a distinction between what he calls *imaginative truth* and *present truth* that we find useful in the present context. Imaginative truth satisfies our longing for coherence, but more often than not it is only something that we envisage, it is not something that is physically manifest. Present truth on the other hand surrounds us – it is seeable and graspable – but it lacks the coherence of imaginative form. He quotes Sartre: ‘the real and the imaginary cannot coexist by their very nature . . . to prefer the imaginary . . . is not only to escape from the content of the real (poverty, frustrated love, failure of one's enterprises, etc.), but from the form of the real itself, its character of *presence*’ (italics in original, p. 5). Theatre of all human activities and theatre alone provides an opportunity of experiencing imaginative truth as present truth. ‘In theatre, imaginative events take on for a moment the presentness of physical events; in theatre, physical events take on for a moment the perfection of imaginative form’ (Cole, 1975, p. 5). Everything that figures in theatre can be understood in the role that it plays in the manifestation of imaginative life as physical presence. The script is its source, the actor is the one who makes it present and the audience are those to whom the imaginative truth becomes present.

Prior to the commissioning of *Your Life. Your Bank*, members of the Green and Blue banks had spent three years surrounded by the physical truths of the merger. Each day there were new setbacks and problems, further trials and tribulations, more false starts and premature declarations of success. Possibly more than one person in the organization tried to fashion an imaginative form that rendered these experiences coherent. It could be that memos, articles, videos and perhaps even stories and poems were constructed and circulated. None of these, however, had the immediacy and seeable, touchable physical reality of the performance. Eiger's contribution and singular achievement at an early stage of the development of the performance was to shape a script which gave imaginative coherence to the myriad activities that had gone into the effecting of the merger between the Green and Blue banks. As one of the most senior managers noted: ‘What Eiger did was to give us something that was memorable and that celebrated what had been happening as well as a key moment in the history of the Bank. They brought all the disparate activities within the bank together and gave them coherence.’

The script was eventually to form the basis of the rehearsal, where elements of it were to be further modified, and of the performance. It illustrated the Bank's struggle to bring about the merger and so consisted of a series of accounts of problems met and overcome punctuated by interludes that illustrated the scale of success that had been achieved. The struggles were not to be presented dramatically – the outcome was already known to everyone – but a sense of excitement, of building towards a climax, was to be engendered by a repeated emphasis upon the size of the change that was being effected and upon the date when the merger would become a legal reality. The leitmotif for the day was to be represented by the phrase ‘Just 34 days to go to the birth of a new bank. The countdown has begun.’ The climax of the day was to be a ‘surprise’ live appearance of The Corrs – at the time one of the world's most successful singing groups – reprising the songs that would have been prefigured earlier and in particular the song that had become the aspirational signature tune of the new merged Bank – ‘What can I do to make you happy?’.

## **Casting and Rehearsal**

*Your Life. Your Bank* was to be a show about the process of a merger performed almost exclusively by members of the two banks. It would appear that many pieces of corporate theatre feature professional actors and, as we have seen, they also appear to feature in radical, organization and situation theatre. The decision in this instance to go with employees of the organization rather than with professionals was determined by the nature of the script. The whole day was to be about bank employees who had overcome all kinds of obstacles to make the merger a success. It would have been rather an odd decision to have the heroes sitting in the audience watching themselves being played by someone else. However *playing* oneself on stage is not simply a matter of *being* oneself as some of those eager to put themselves forward were to find out.

To complement her cast of largely amateur performers, the director insisted on a highly professional and highly paid compere. She did so on a couple of grounds: first that she felt that she needed a professional to hold the show together, and second, the employment of such a high profile compere/interviewer would signal that this was indeed a very special performance. Elsewhere the senior management determined the personnel who were to perform. It was taken as read that the key performers were to be main board directors or individuals just below that level. On one occasion when a candidate beyond the senior group was suggested as a possible keynote speaker they were dismissed in the following way: ‘Will they [the audience] know who they are, and do we know they can deliver?’ Lesser speaking roles – those who were to comment, for example, on the new signage, the new IT systems or the new uniforms – were assigned to lower level managers who were known to be ‘reliable’. As the Chairman of Eiger explained when referring to the predominance of senior executives in the show: ‘Green is a very hierarchical organization. I am not sure that it could be any other way’.

Whilst many of the most senior directors were happy with their *casting* as key performers in the piece, most did not see any point in *rehearsing* their performances with the director. For them it was just a matter of agreeing the lines with the writer, turning up on the day and reading them off the autocue. Two of the key speakers did not even attend the dress rehearsal. This created enormous problems since without the actors on stage running through their performances it was impossible to determine the precise synchronization of the background visuals with their words. Although stand-ins were used, the pace of their delivery turned out to be different from that of the actual speakers. Furthermore, since one of the most senior performers who failed to attend the dress rehearsal had determined that he was writing his own speech, there was no guarantee that the version Eiger had was the version that would be delivered the following day. Some of those who did work with the director found it a chastening experience. One of the senior managers was to be interviewed on-stage early in the performance about the purpose of putting on the performance. During the rehearsal the Director identified several problems with his performance. He was not looking directly at the audience and his tone of voice was too much of a monotone. She therefore suggested that he reposition himself on the sofa so that he could read the autocue more easily and focus on using an appropriate tone that projected both the informative nature of the day but also the fun and excitement of what was planned. This also meant amending the script so that certain key words could be used to facilitate this tone, in particular the words ‘big’, ‘massive’ and ‘surprise’. He repeated his performance until the Director was satisfied that it would work on the day. When one of the researchers discussed his rehearsal experience with him he said ‘It’s difficult enough getting the words out let alone putting all the right emphasis on them. I hope tomorrow I can do what they want . . .’.

## **The *Mise en Scène***

To move from a script or text – albeit one that was re-written several times – to a performance is no easy matter. What the audience sees is a finished product. The text is what is heard and the performance is all

that is made visible and audible on stage. The audience are party to a performance that is more or less successful, more or less comprehensible, in which the text is only one of several components, others being the space, the setting, the performers, the music, the lighting and the tempo etc. Pavis (1992, p. 24), from whom we have taken the term *mise en scène*, defines it 'as the bringing together or confrontation, in a given space and time, of different signifying systems, for an audience'. He considers the relationship between text and performance to be something more than one of conversion or translation. He prefers to describe it as 'a way of establishing effects or meaning and balance between semiotic systems such as verbal and non-verbal, symbolic and iconic' (ibid, p. 29). The essence of Pavis' approach is the recognition that the text frames a particular imaginative idea that may be acknowledged, underlined, built upon, undermined, ridiculed or denied by the auditory and visual discourse of the *mise en scène*.

In our case, for example, the spoken text for *Your Life. Your Bank* repeatedly mentioned the enormity of the change that had been undertaken. The biggest change ever. This sentiment was a key part of the text and was uttered not once but throughout the day. Significantly (in the sense of something that signifies) it was spoken on a vast stage to an audience of five thousand in an auditorium set up by the director and the design team within the largest exhibition space in the United Kingdom. The audience were constrained to approach the auditorium by walking down an avenue formed by exhibition stands. These contained information on the activities of different divisions of the Bank, the charity and community work supported by the Bank, sports events sponsored by the Bank and information on aspects of the merger exercise. The setting put one in mind of a Roman processional route provided for a conquering general. In this case the conquerors being honoured were the bank employees who were also the audience to the show. The performance arena was located at the far end of the hall, opposite the entrance to the arena. This was hidden from view by a black cloth draped over a five metre high wall formed by the scaffolding that supported the raked seating within the auditorium. The audience entered the arena by walking up one of two staircases situated at either end of the wall. As they emerged onto the first tier of the raked seating they were treated to an unobstructed view of the whole auditorium. This first view of the performance arena was designed to have an impact on the audience. As the Chairman of Eiger stated, 'I want them to come up those stairs and say "wow". The scale of the space, the lighting and the images that we shall be projecting onto the back wall should impress them. It's important that we set the right tone from the beginning.' Putting the show on in a pokey little theatre in East Acton with a couple of spots and an overhead projector would have done little to set the right tone. It would have run the risk of ridiculing the entire enterprise.

Setting the right tone was also a matter of the pace of the performance. Speakers moved in and out of position fluently; the lighting switched attention seamlessly from one area of the stage to another; screens appeared and disappeared on cue; accompanied by vibrant music, groups of employees demonstrating the new uniforms raced across the stage from different directions exuding energy, vitality and enthusiasm. There was a sense of purpose about every sequence, a forward thrust that complemented the words and the images with which the performance began. With the auditorium in complete darkness an announcer stated 'Welcome to *Your Life. Your Bank*. We are just 34 days away from the birth of a new bank. The countdown starts now.' Onto the screens at the back of the stage a series of graphics and images in the corporate colours of the new Bank were projected. These were combined with text that highlighted the key events since 1995 when Green Bank plc announced its intention to purchase Blue Bank. This ended with the caption 'Just 34 days to go from the birth of a new bank. And now the countdown has begun.' The words faded out and were replaced by an image of a clock superimposed onto which was a calendar. The date on which the Performance took place was shown. To the accompaniment of a loud ticking noise and music by The Corrs, the dates changed and stopped on the date in a few weeks when the merged bank would be launched nationwide. Without a pause a woman emerged from down left and walked to up centre. She was wearing the colours of the Bank – a blue trouser suit with a green T-shirt. She was greeted with enthusiastic applause, as the audience became aware that it was one of the best-known presenters on UK television.

A very, very big welcome to you all. What an incredible event this is. And what an important event too. On June the 28th, just 34 days away, a brand new bank, Blue Green, the UK's newest bank, is born. And today we are going to learn all about that and understand just why it is so important. And I can promise this, it is going to be a great day. A day full of information and interest, and we have a couple of surprises.

Setting the right tone was also a matter of the performers. Contrary to what some of our performers thought, there is more to realizing an imaginative idea than simply saying one's lines. Non-verbal processes of communication can have a significant influence on the audience's experience of the performance. The posture the performer adopts, their eye contact (or lack of eye contact) with the audience, the confidence with which they move around the stage and take up their position, matching the speed of delivery, the tone and pitch of their voices to the demands of the text – all of the factors feature in the audience's reception of what they have to say. The promise and excitement, the sense of adventure with which the merger was characterized in the text could be severely undermined if not actually ridiculed were the performers to shuffle on to the stage and stumble through their set pieces in a flat monotone with their eyes firmly fixed upon their notes. A mismatch between words and non-verbal signals was evident only once during the performance when one of the senior managers, who took himself to be too important to attend rehearsals and wrote his own speech, delivered a three minute speech in an evangelical style which rang hollow with the audience.<sup>[6]</sup> Overall, encouraged by a readily responsive audience, the performers managed to say their words as if they believed in them.

The fact that most of the performers and the audience were members of the same organization probably made it easier for the former to be accepted. Other things being equal, when professional actors stand on stage and enact characters that are examples of certain types of humanity the audience identifies with these types. Often an actor has to work hard to secure this identification. Had professional actors taken part in this performance, they would have had to work hard to have themselves taken as senior businessmen and women. As it was the performers were being asked to enact themselves writ – as it were – large. No actor was standing in for them so no great imaginative effort was required of the audience. The audience may or may not have believed what they were hearing, but for the most part they would have had no difficulty in identifying, in the sense of ascribing a character to, whoever was speaking. What is more, many of them signalled that they were keen 'to get it right'. They signalled a vulnerability that was picked up and responded to by the audience who were willing them on. It was their managers and their colleagues that were up there and the audience was not about to let them down.

## **The Audience**

In dealing with theatre as technology in general and with corporate theatre in particular we have to confront the issue of what we actually mean by an audience. In most instances where the technology of theatre is deployed within organizations the audience is not present simply to be entertained. As we indicated earlier, corporate theatre has some similarities with political theatre. The stance taken by many of those involved in *agit-prop* theatre and in the present case, clearly if not explicitly adopted by Eiger and those who commissioned them, was that the performance was an opportunity to educate a large group of the masses in an ideology (a particular way of regarding performances) and in so doing to incite them to action outside the auditorium. The performance was designed to turn its audience into performers, by making them want to go back to their branches to spread the message. If Eiger were to be successful in its bringing together the variety of elements that constitute a performance, then the audience would not feel itself to be passive, merely watching, but would sense itself to be part of the action, to have so fully absorbed the impact of the performance as to have broken down the distinction between those on the stage and those sitting in the auditorium (Hilton, 1987, pp. 131–4). In line with reception theory this breaking down of the distinction between performers and audience will be greatly facilitated where the

*horizons of expectation* of those involved meet (Hilton, 1987, p. 131). That is, a circumstance exists in which the beliefs and values of performers and audience are reasonably close. In the present case the performers and the audience were bank employees and colleagues. What is more they were handpicked to attend the performance. Prior to it they each received a personally addressed invitation with a congratulatory message from the Deputy Group Chief Executive and some general information indicating the nature of their role. The role of the Pathfinders was to communicate the key messages to their colleagues within one month of the performance through a structured ‘cascade’ exercise. On leaving the auditorium each delegate was to be handed a Pathfinder Communication Pack that contained a script, visual support materials (overheads and video), advice on how to prepare for the cascade session as well as guidance on presenting their experiences to their colleagues.

The expectations of our performance may have gone a long way to preconditioning the audience for it. Thus, from the information supplied with the invitation, members of the audience knew that the show was to be about the merging of the two banks, they could also anticipate that it was to be a celebration of some kind or another, and the excitement accompanying rumours circulating within the Bank about possible surprise appearances on the day suggest that they were up for it before they got on the specially chartered transport that brought them to the venue. Intra-audience relations may also have played an important part. Conversation analytic and semiotic studies of speaker-audience interaction indicate that the communication between members of the audience usually determines the ‘homogeneity of response’, even where there are variations in the expectations that individual members initially bring to the performance (Clayman, 1992; Elam, 1980; Heritage and Greatbatch, 1986). In almost all cases laughter and applause are infectious in that they are collective displays of positive audience responses. The audience, through homogeneity of reaction, in effect, confirms a common reading of a presented experience. Eiger wanted to use the performance to create a sense of ‘one single bank’; a Green Blue community. As one of the consultants stated when referring to the design of the set pieces within the performance: ‘We want them to be episodes of positive communication. The aim is to create goodwill and we want that to leave the hall at the end. The Pathfinders have to relay a positive message in their presentations.’ They therefore designed into the performance plenty of opportunities for collective positive audience response. The introduction of each speaker and the end of each speech were greeted by rapturous applause. The unveiling of the new television commercials received enthusiastic applause. The surprise appearance on stage of two elderly actors from the television commercial received thunderous applause and a standing ovation. And when The Corrs appeared the audience stood in unison, cheered and danced in the aisles. Each positive collective response may have assisted with the generation of group solidarity and social cohesion during the performance and reinforced the feeling that the Pathfinders were a special group with a shared task. By evoking and producing affiliative responses, Eiger encouraged the public display of group consensus. In this way they may have assisted with the constitution of the members of the audience as an “in group” who are like-minded with respect to their appreciation and understanding of the messages presented during the day.

## **Action**

Finally, although this paper is primarily concerned with a close analysis of the process of producing a piece of corporate theatre, it should be noted that from the point of view of those who commissioned it and those who put it together it was a success. It met its creative objectives. The questionnaire responses and telephone interviews indicate that immediately following the performance, and one month after, those who had constituted the audience found the day motivating and inspiring. It created greater pride in the organization and gave them more confidence to communicate the key messages to colleagues via a ‘cascade’ exercise. An evaluation of the ‘cascade’ exercise conducted separately by the Bank confirms this in that the presenters were rated as enthusiastic, positive and motivated. In their presentations the audience members were therefore able to successfully embody the mood of the day.

## DISCUSSION

At the outset we stated that this paper had three aims. The first was to situate theatre as technology within the broader literature on theatre within organization studies. We achieved this by reviewing primarily the literature on ‘dramatism’ and ‘dramaturgy’ and drawing out similarities and differences with the emerging literature on ‘theatre as technology’. Our purpose was to extend the commonly accepted boundaries of the notion of theatre within organization studies to include this previous overlooked area. As we indicated this is a large and fast growing area of consultancy work that has been subject to little empirical investigation. The second was to offer a description of an instance of corporate theatre, which as far as we are aware is the only such description available to scholars. Drawing on the notions of *imaginative truth* and *mise en scène* we examined the processes by which a particular performance called *Your Life. Your Bank* was commissioned, created and performed. Our third and final aim was to consider the differences between our instance of corporate theatre and other forms of theatre as technology. Having described in detail a piece of corporate theatre we can now highlight the key differences.

First, from what we know of how these other forms operate, a key difference is the extent to which they deploy the resources of theatre (see Clark and Mangham, forthcoming). Performances appear to be staged ad hoc on company premises. Actors are used, but the scenery, lighting, music, and choreography is usually kept to a minimum; whereas corporate theatre is a visual extravaganza. Second, the emphasis of these other approaches appears to be upon the democratic development of an imaginative truth that can be readily played out in a relatively unsophisticated manner that will bring about reflection, discussion and change. For example, Schreyogg's organization theatre deliberately sets out to produce a script and a performance that highlights what is and what might be. And, apparently, it works. Those who participate in organization theatre find that it facilitates change both in their perspectives on themselves and their organization and in subsequent actions. He accounts for what happens to audiences by recourse to Luhmann's (1998) theory of second order observation. Drawing upon this theory Schreyogg (2001, p. 12) asserts that his kind of theatre is ‘likely to bring about a splitting experience’ dividing reality into two levels – the everyday and the familiar and reality as it is presented on the stage. He argues that in such circumstances the everyday taken for granted reality becomes contingent. ‘In experiencing a second reality construction the former (usually taken for granted) construction of reality becomes an unstable one, i.e. a construction that is open for change’ (ibid, p. 12). In other terms and at other times this is a theory that has been advanced in support of agit-prop, Brechtian and *forum theatre* approaches to performance (Boal, 1979; Brooker, 1994; Kershaw, 1992).<sup>[7]</sup> In contrast, corporate theatre is not democratic. It owes no debt to these forms of theatre. Instead it is informed by the conventions of Broadway, the West End, television and advertising. It is about creating a piece of theatre that reflects the wishes of a particular organizational group. Consequently it is not about creating circumstances in which audience members feel empowered and liberated to develop their own new understandings of their working lives. Rather, it appears to be used to contain reflection and to promote the views of a particular group within an organization. Whilst change is sought in the audience, the nature of that change is strictly controlled and channelled by the piece of theatre.

Leading on from the previous point, a third difference lies in the aims of these forms of theatre. The aim of organization theatre appears to be to make people *think*. The aim of our instance of corporate theatre appeared to be to cause the audience to *feel*. One of its aims of course was to induce those who participated in the performance to change their perceptions and their values, but it did this not by confronting issues but by *subtly suggesting* alternative ways of evaluating, construing and understanding the issues that the merger of the two banks had brought about. The performance suggested that the merger was not something to be concerned about, something worrying, something to be feared; rather it was a performance to be proud of, an occasion for celebration and joy. The notion of suggestion is commonplace amongst those who write about novels, plays and films (Currie, 1990, Matravers, 1998).

Novitz (1997) is one of the principal proponents of the theory and he argues that when our values and beliefs are tested in this way, the form that it takes – in our case an instance of corporate theatre – ‘frequently manages to prevent the sorts of emotional responses that normally accompany challenges to our deeply entrenched beliefs and values’ (p. 247). It does so, he claims, not only because some performances make us suggestible and susceptible to new values, new ideologies, but they also ‘anaesthetize us against the pain that often attends such upheavals’ (ibid, p. 247). In an earlier book, he notes that this phenomenon effectively converts certain forms of fiction, theatre and film into ‘instruments of policy that can succeed where other instruments of persuasion fail’ (Novitz, 1992, p. 34). They achieve this by encouraging our ‘imaginative participation’ in what is presented to us (ibid, p. 180). Such an argument resonates with the work of Cole (1975) in that it is the presentation of imaginative life as physical presence that prevents us from fixating on the consequences of abandoning our cherished beliefs and values. Corporate theatre does not challenge, rather it seduces. It is a ‘form of persuasion that entices by touching the right emotional chords, but never threatens or coerces’ (Novitz, 1992, p. 184). Many of the fears and anxieties of the employees of the Green Bank had been addressed before the performance of *Your Bank. Your Life*, but those few that remained could well have been assuaged by a performance that seduced by presenting an imaginative truth with the support of bright lights, music, singing, dancing and presentations all stressing the virtues of the brave new world.

Finally, this article indicates that the use of theatre as technology has been previously overlooked. It therefore offers a potentially fruitful and productive area of research. There is an urgent need to obtain a more detailed understanding of the extent and nature of its use. This requires obtaining information on the number of firms offering consultancy services in this area, the size of their turnovers, the nature of the services they offer, the character of the projects in which they are engaged as well as a profile of the client organizations and their motivation for using such services. In conducting this research the differences between the various forms of the ‘technology of theatre’ will become more apparent. As we have indicated above, these are presently partially understood.

## NOTES

[1] Turner’s (1969, 1974) ideas on life as social drama share Burke’s perspective in as far as it holds that social and organizational life is theatre. The perspective has given rise to a handful of empirical investigations (e.g., Rosen, 1985, 1988).

[2] This is a highly selective account of the intellectual milieu in which Goffman’s ideas grew. In a fuller account, Mead’s symbolic interactionism would need to be considered (Blumer, 1969; Perinbanayagam, 1991).

[3] Who, in turn, draws heavily upon notions deriving from both ritual and the practices of the theatre of the ancient Greeks (Boal, 1998).

[4] This should not be taken to imply that such work is not going on. Writing up such performances is often prevented by issues of confidentiality.

[5] Eiger was keen to sponsor an independent evaluation of their work on the basis that if positive it could well be beneficial for their relationship with the particular client as well as more generally helpful in projecting their effectiveness and expertise to a wider audience. If negative our results would have been unlikely to see the light of day. Eiger’s faith in its own processes was rewarded and

findings emanating from the evaluation have subsequently been issued as press releases, reported in trade journals and incorporated into corporate publicity materials.

[6] There was a three-second delay before the audience applauded and the applause was muted when compared to other speakers.[7] 'Alienating an event or a character', wrote Brecht (1978, p. 301), 'means first of all stripping the event of its self-evident, familiar, obvious quality and creating a sense of astonishment and curiosity about them'.

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