



# Organizational theatre and organizational change

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## Summary

*Organizational theatre means first of all tailor-made plays staged for a specific organization or a subgroup in an organization. The play usually dramatizes a critical problem situation faced by the organization in question. Typical problem situations dramatized in organizational theatre plays are: conflicts between two corporate cultures after a merger or communication barriers between middle and lower management. The range of realization styles that are used in organizational theatre is broad: realistic, naturalistic, melodramatic, absurd, burlesque etc. Whatever the style organizational theatre exposes the audience to situations of their daily working life, thereby confronting it with hidden conflicts, subconscious behavioral patterns or critical routines. It is the thesis of this paper that organizational theatre can be a powerful medium in organizational change processes. It can open conflicts which are deadlocked or can render undiscussibles discussible. Organizational theatre can make things move. However, it is not a substitute for change management. If the organization has no idea how to work on the theatrical irritation, how to transform the evoked energy into organizational change, the theatre performance is likely to become a single intervention without any lasting effects. Adequate follow up activities are therefore postulated as imperative.*

## **Introduction**

Theatrical interventions in organizations are not as new as it might appear. Even in the ancient world there was a tradition of using theatre to express concerns, to reveal conflicts, to reflect plans and/or to initiate discussions on topical issues. Theatre was a natural element of the political life and public discourse in the Greek Polis; it represented a forum for forming an opinion and for keeping the issues open to changes.

In a somewhat similar way, organizations in France, in Canada, in Germany and some other countries have recently started to use the medium of theatre. Theatre groups stage tailor-made plays for specific organizations which dramatize critical problems of the working life. Such performances are not merely a rare occurrence. In 1997 there were for instance (Wehner/Dabitz 1999):

- 2000 theatre performances in French organizations and
- 200 in German organizations..

Generally, there is a surprisingly high and rising interest in working with this unusual medium.

Many organizations (in particular corporations in France and Germany ) are currently considering to work with organizational theatre. As in the ancient world, in most cases, organizational theatre is used as a communicative medium in the context of conflict and change.

What however exactly is meant by organizational theatre? Why are organizations interested in making use of it? What are the likely outcomes of theatrical interventions in organizational change processes?

This paper aims at providing answers to these questions. The theoretical background is rooted in social systems theory.

## Organizational Theatre: The Concept

Nearly all organizations occasionally encounter forms of theatrical work (Petzold 1972, Rosen 1988, Schreyögg 1999). Well known are *role plays* in management development workshops, *staff cabarets* at Christmas parties, corporate *amateur dramatics* , theatrical *presentations* of new products (at fairs or department stores), spectacular *events* at annual meetings, etc. All these forms of theatrical work are very exciting and deserve serious attention, however organizational theatre in the way the notion is used here means something different.

*Organizational theatre* in the French tradition (Poissonneau 1992, Leplâtre 1996, Aragou-Dournon 1999) means first of all tailor-made plays staged for a specific organization or a subgroup of an organization. Basically the conception of organizational theatre is defined by four elements (Beckerman 1990):

1. *Theatrical presentation*: Professional performers stage a play. In other words there is a stage, there are actors and an audience, a playwright etc. It is theatre in the classical sense of the word.
2. *Organizational Specificity*: The play is tailor-made; it dramatizes a problem situation specifically faced by the organization in question. The plot and later the script is written after an exploration of the specific problem and its organizational context .
3. *Defined Audience*: The performance addresses a clearly defined audience, e.g. the service department, a plant, the sales people, the branch managers. The audience may also stem from different organizations, for instance in case of joint ventures or networks.
4. *Commissioned*: Usually organizational theatre is commissioned theatre. The client organization commissions the theatre piece and pays for the production.

Typical *problem situations* dramatized so far in organizational theatre plays are: conflicts between two corporate cultures in the context of postmerger integration, communication barriers between middle and lower management, discouragement of new ideas, "group think" in management meetings, resistance to strategic change, micropolitics in investment processes etc. ( see for more examples Schreyögg/Dabitz 1999).

## **Production Process**

In order to understand the logic of organizational theatre and its implications for organizational change, it is necessary to consider not only the performance rather the whole production process. For studying the process it may be helpful to conceive of the theatre group as a service organization and a chain of distinctive value creating activities respectively. Building upon this view an idealtypical production process should involve a distinctive set of activities and stages as shown in Figure 1.

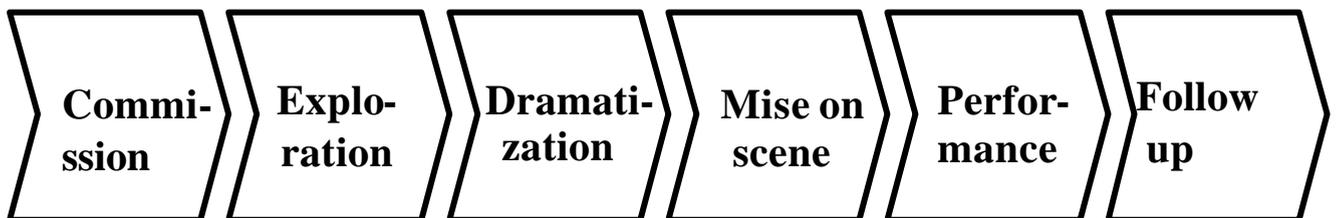


Figure 1. Activities of the production process

The several parts of the process can be characterized as follows:

- Commission

The client organization gets in touch with one or more organizational theatre groups and sketches the problem situation in question. The theatre group checks the feasibility of the project and eventually negotiates the contract.

- Exploration

The theatre group and the playwright respectively explore in detail the problem in question and the organizational context in which it is embedded. This exploration requires to go beyond the level of espoused theories and to become familiar with the predominant theories-in-use (Argyris 1976). Typical issues of the exploration therefore are not only formal aspects like the organizational structure or the economic relevance of the problem (marginal or strategic importance) but also the formal ones like: the hidden agenda, the unwritten rules, the symbols and their meaning, the jargon etc.

Methods used for exploring the issues are: Participant observation, interviews, critical incidents, analysis of documents etc.

- Dramatization

The dramatization starts with plotting. The plot is the basic means by which the playwright gets the audience into the theatrical situation and arouses the curiosity of the audience. Later on (depending on the working method) the full dramatical text is written. In many cases the completion of the dramatical text is seen as work in progress until the performance takes place. Whatever the style the play is expected to reflect the outcomes of the foregoing explorations and observations.

- Mise en Scène / Realization

At an early stage starts the process of getting up the production, involving: casting, stage design, costumes, lighting design, rehearsals etc. The (stage) director is the central person in this process. Part of the realization is also the ongoing collaboration with the client organization.

- Performance

The performance (realized by professional actors) mostly takes place at specific locations within the organization ( e.g. in the entrance hall or in a factory). Sometimes the performance is part of a conference or an annual meeting, in all those cases the performers stage the play in hotels, convention centers or even play houses.

- Follow up

As opposed to classical theatre performances organizational theatre is part of an overarching problem solving process. The whole production process therefore also has to include appropriate follow-up activities: Workshops, small group discussions on the problem in focus, reflections on alternatives etc. In many cases professional facilitators ( and not the performers) are hired to set up and steer those follow-up processes.

The way in which the production is done depends on the style of the theatre group, the problem in question and/or the approach of the playwright. The range of *realization styles* that are used in organizational theatre is broad: realistic, naturalistic, melodramatic, absurd, burlesque etc. as is the way of dramatizing the problem: concrete or abstract, comedy or drama.

Whatever the form, in all cases, organizational theatre aims at getting the audience deeply involved in the problem situation and confronting it with hidden conflicts, subconscious behavioural patterns or with painful truths. The audience is exposed to a strange experience. They observe well known problems of their working life on stage, acted by unknown people in a quite unusual setting. As a result, the atmosphere during the performances normally is tense. There is uneasy silence, laughter

and tears. The reactions on this specific experience in most cases are very strong, even in the physical sense so that frequently people are bathed in sweat.

These reactions already indicate that organizational theatre potentially is a powerful medium for bringing things on the move. It can make people aware of conflicts which have been deadlocked for a long time, it can open paralyzed situations or it can render undiscussibles discussible (Schreyögg 1998). In other words, the dynamics of organizational theatre are likely to shake things into action or to put it in Lewin's terms: to *unfreeze* blocked situations (Lewin 1943).

What are however the processes which bring about those change effects of organizational theatre and how can we explain them? The next chapter is devoted to explore those underlying dynamics in more detail.

### **Change effects of organizational theatre: Theoretical explanations**

Questions on purpose and effects of organizational theatre are mostly asked from a *causal point of view*. In this view theatrical performance is thought of as a stimulus which is supposed to bring about a foreseeable response, i.e. the response of the audience in terms of intended attitude changes or even new behavioral patterns. Consequently, the quality of organizational theatre would amount to a function of the extent to which the intended effects are reached. "Stimulus design" would become the key success factor. This is, however, too simple a perspective. The mechanistic idea of stimulus and predetermined response cannot match the complex nature of organizational theatre.

The stimulus/response-logic interprets the stimulus (in our case: the performance) as a cause which *necessarily* brings about a predefined effect. The more recent discussion in aesthetics, theory of (cognitive) leadership or performing arts (Strati 1999, Meindl 1995, Fischer-Lichte 1997), has radically challenged this logic. It has become clear that we cannot conceive of those complex interactive relationships in a simple unidirected way. Theatre produces signifiers, uses actors, environmental objects and other signs to create meaning which has to be perceived and interpreted by the audience. In order to understand the effects of theatre we therefore have to include conceptually the audience's perspective. Change if at all has first of all to be brought about in the minds of the audience, we have therefore to explain the effect of organizational theatre from their perspective. By implication the *ultimate question* is no longer how to design the stimulus but rather how the audience handles the confrontation and provocation the theatrical performance brings to them. To shed more light on these questions, it seems promising to make use of the advanced systems theory and in particular the theory of second order observation (Luhmann 1997, 1998). At the very heart of this theory is the process of perception, the way in which different observers interpret reality. It thereby provides a platform for reflecting on the basic observation process and its implications for organizational theatre performances.

### **The observation of the observation**

Let us start with the theatrical performance. The audience (department, division etc.) experiences the performance; organizational members watch a play which dramatizes sequences of their own reality, i.e. problems or relationships which are part of their working life: the conflict with the neighbor department, the controversies with foreign subsidiaries, hidden discrimination against females etc. In doing so they do not observe primarily actors performing a (good or bad) play, rather they observe the result of observations others have made in their organization, i.e. the

observations of the playwright, the director, the stage designer and/or the actors. Members of the audience watch their daily work routines, their conventions, deadlocked conflicts between their departments etc. on stage presented by performers and their view of the observed reality. These observations of the theatre group, communicated by the play on stage, confront the members of the audience (the observer of those observations) with a new view which is likely to differ remarkably from the usual perception of their reality. As a consequence, the organizational theatre is likely to bring about a *splitting experience*, it divides the reality into two levels, the usual familiar reality view and the theatrical reality, i.e. the reality as it appears on stage.

This splitting or reality "*duplication*" (Luhmann 1997) is postulated in this paper to be the core process for understanding change effects organizational theatre may bring about. Duplication of reality essentially means to set up a platform which allows for observing the familiar, taken for granted reality view from a distant angle, an angle which uses familiar elements and signs of the daily working life in a new combination and a new context of meaning. The duplication thereby puts the familiar view in perspective and that means at the same time: making it *reflexive*. It enables the audience to view simultaneously two different realities. In recognizing these as disparate the duplication initiates a process of reflexion: "*Why do we do what we do the way we do it?*". And this also means that the *constructive* character of reality views becomes apparent.

Furthermore, observing the own reality through the eyes of the performers ("second order observation") is likely to make something very special happen: the former taken for granted reality view becomes a *contingent* one. The experience of the division of the reality into two realities through the observation of the observations gives the former reality construction a contingent character, it makes it apparent that it could be different, i.e. alternative views and arrangements are

possible at least in principle. The seemingly inevitable construction and explanation of a problem situation gets rid of its inevitability. The theatrical duplication of reality brings some alienation from the former usual way of thinking; it imposes disorder. 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.

In summary: organizational theatre confronts the spectators with a different perspective of their familiar problem construction and thereby initiates a closer examination of the habituated patterns of behaviour, established perceptual constructions or possibly prejudicial views. And this is the valuable contribution it can make to change efforts. Any organizational change is in need of procedures which are likely to broaden the scope beyond the beaten tracks.

This analysis reveals the potential role and relevance organizational theatre can play in organizational change processes. The duplication effect can dissolve long standing perceptual rigidities and thereby bringing things on the move.

There are other approaches which aim at achieving similar duplicating effects by initiating a second observation. To name just a few: benchmarking, organizational surveys or process consultation. Are there any comparative advantages which favor the medium of organizational theatre?

Comparatively spoken, it is only organizational theatre that has the very potential to make a second order observation really *happen*. The theatrical form is unique in getting people interested in a duplication of their own reality and getting them emotionally involved into the whole process. It is not a dry critical reflection of the usual way of thinking or a didactic learning exercise;

organizational theatre means something different, it means to laugh, to smile, to protest, to become sad and / or happy.

The duplication process is however not as straightforward as it might appear. As already mentioned above, it does not function like a "trivial machine" (von Foerster 1984). The experience of a second order observation does not produce unequivocal predictable results. Certainly, it makes things move, but there is no way to program tightly the whole process including the tracks people chose to go in the future. Spectators have to find out their way how to come to terms with the division of their problem construction. They work through this process on the basis of their own cognitive world and their sense making mechanisms (Weick 1995), which are, as is well known, always at variance. Furthermore, world views (Weltanschauungen) are inherently complex, i.e. an impetus like an organizational theatre performance may always bring about a surprisingly new recombination of signs and meaning.

## **Practical Implications**

First of all, it should be emphasized that organizational theatre can make things move but it is not a self-contained change program. It can be an element in an organizational change approach, but it is not a substitute for change management. That would be too easy a perspective: simply to watch an organizational theatre piece and the desired change is realized. A theatrical performance can produce contingency, i.e. it can help to reflect routines and tacit patterns in defining the problem situation at stake, it can increase the awareness that problems can be defined differently and that alternative ways of problem handling are available. But, one should not ignore the fact that it is just a *single intervention*. It has no magic transformational power.

If the organization has no idea how to work on the theatrical irritation (duplication of reality) to transform the evoked energy into organizational transformation, the process is likely to fail and the theatrical performance becomes a single event without any lasting effects.. And even more, it can do damage to expose people in this emotionalizing way to critical issues without any further reflection. It is therefore necessary to discuss the experiences and to integrate the duplication experience into an *overarching change approach*. This emphasizes the significance of adequate *follow-up activities* as briefly sketched above.

More generally, referring back to the introduction and the role theatre played in the Polis organizational theatre seems to be most effective in providing a template for continuously *reflecting* organizational problems, conflicts and new challenges. Ideally organizational theatre should therefore be made part of an integrative approach to a *continuously changing* organization where change is supposed to be a common feature of daily life (Brown/Eisenhardt 1997; Schreyögg/Noss 2000).

## **Conclusion**

This paper reflects an attempt to use theatre for getting a better handle on organizational conflicts and rigidities. Organizational theatre has been defined as tailor-made plays professionally staged for a specific organization or subsystem. In this paper a conceptual framework is offered which links systematically organizational theatre and organizational change. Specifically, it is pointed out how the dynamics of organizational theatre work as drivers of change processes. The major underlying driving force is conceived as a "splitting experience"; spectators are confronted with different reality constructions which make seemingly inevitable constructions contingent ones (neither necessary nor impossible).

The analysis however also revealed that organizational theatre should not be misunderstood as a self-contained change program, audience's responses by their very nature cannot be programmed. Organizational theatre major contribution is to provide an impetus for dissolving rigidities.

There is much left to be done. Specifically empirical research is needed which examines in more detail the context which allows for a successful application of organizational theatre.

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