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Embodied Performative Approaches

When workplace and theatre innovate together for organizational sustainability

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Embodied Performative Approaches: When workplace and theatre innovate together for organizational sustainability

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Abstract

In the present introduction the editors' team of this special issue tell the story of how this collection was conceived and shaped. The narration follows the team's initial intentions and the dramatic shift that the pandemic emergency imposed in the Spring 2020. The editors also make explicit the special issue's structure and its content, presented in dramaturgical progression: the academic articles, the commentaries and the poetic epilogue. The purpose of the special issue is to explore possible bridgings between contemporary workplace performance and theatre performance in terms of embodied learning and innovation for sustainability. The artistic practices pervade human beings' everyday life. The experience of pandemic crisis has revealed what is necessary: when life is stripped out of all basic freedom -freedom to move, to choose, to meet- and "normal" routines, what is left? What seems to be left, is the fundamental need to be together.

Keywords: workplace, theatre, organisational sustainability, innovation, organisational learning.

Embodied Performative Approaches: When workplace and theatre innovate together for organizational sustainability

The origin of the present special issue dates back to 2017, when the editors planned and formulated a proposal for a conference stream at the Art of Management and Organisation (AoMO) conference to be held in Brighton, UK in September 2018. The original title was *When workplace meets theatre: bridging workplace and theatre performance and learning for sustainable innovations*, and the intention was to explore possible bridging between workplace and theatre in terms of learning and innovation for sustainability. After the stream was accepted it ran in Brighton, a number of experimental approaches were tried out, content was added and insights emerged. This resulted in an invitation to the stream coordinators to edit a special issue at *Organizational Aesthetic*s which we readily accepted.

Initial intentions

In this special issue we initially intended to explore possible bridgings between contemporary workplace performance and theatre performance in terms of embodied learning and innovation for sustainability. We were interested in how performing bodies in theatrical performance can meet with performing bodies in contemporary workplaces. We were particularly interested in knowledge workers, using performance to facilitate embodied, participatory learning to improve the sustainability of workplaces and organizations/societies. How do such encounters develop over time to bridge multiple stakeholders in allowing them to share their ideas in their own languages? How do they liberate, empower or maintain and re enforce diverse communities of knowledge-intensive practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) in organizations, and potentially improve knowledge workers' quality-of-working-life (QOWL); we were thinking of this in terms of workplace communication, stress-coping, and work-life balance. The importance of embodied knowledge such as tacit/implicit knowing, skills, expertise, and non-verbal communication in the process of innovation has been acknowledged in the field (Varela, Rosch & Thompson, 1992; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; McGilchrist, 2009) for organizational sustainability. The argument has been that modern organizations can create new ways to re-create and sustain themselves, society and the wider ecosystems of which they are part, including nature, if they can succeed in re-creating, not only consuming these intellectual resources embodied in workplaces.

Keeping in mind such paradoxical "instrumentalization" (Habermas, 1984; 1987) of human bodies as estrangement/alienation (Brecht, 2014) in the exploration of bridging performance of theatre and workplace and innovation for organizational/societal sustainability, we welcomed contributions by authors who might want to develop -and go beyond- the metaphor of "organization as theatrical performance", which envisions theatre as space of action based learning in organizational contexts (e.g. Pässilä & Oikarinen, 2014; Pässilä, Owens & Pulkki, 2016). The metaphor especially highlights such dynamic and emergent theatrical forms as Epic Theatre (Brecht, 2014), Forum Theatre (Boal, 1985), theatre laboratory (Barba, 1995; Schino, 2009; Chemi, 2018), and improvisations (Johnstone, 1981), which all go far beyond the classic/static metaphor of "organization as role-playing/taking" leading to such forms as research-based theatre (Pässilä, Oikarinen & Harmaakorpi, 2015). We hoped that such a metaphorical inquiry (Morgan, 1997) might lead to richer understandings of workplace and organizational learning that bridge diverse research directions including: field theory (Lewin, 1997), process philosophy (Whitehead, 1978) that has been informing from the social construction of self (Mead, 1934) to recent knowledge creating "Ba" (Nonaka, Toyama & Hirata, 2008, Pässilä, Uotila & Melkas, 2013), emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995) and multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1994), phenomenologies of "intercorporeality" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962) and relational-self (Levinas, 1991), as well as poststructuralist notions of

complexity theory (e.g. Stacey, 1996), "narrative/storytelling" (e.g. Boje, 2008), "polyphony" and "Heteroglossia" (Bakhtin, 1981), and "body without organs" and "plane of immanence" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983).

Intentions Revisited

At the time of writing this introduction, people around the planet are being encouraged by their governments to step out into a post-covid world even as Corona-virus rages in some continents, countries, cities and towns. Most performance venues in the world are firmly shut and we university academics remain isolated from our contexts of practice, each of us in his or her own bubble wondering if and how we are to reconnect. The sorts of practices investigated and documented in this special edition cannot at the present moment take place save in a few countries and, when they do, social distancing rules apply. The reality of embodied presence where we humans bring in to play all of our senses through close proximity of bodies seems far away.

Does this make a difference to how we have read and thought about the articles and commentaries in this special issue? Yes, it does. The value of the arts, of the power of the embodied experience has come so strongly in to focus. We, miss the social and arts-based interactions with our colleagues those we work with in organisations including our own students, we miss each other and the *being with*. All over the world, we have seen examples of people in quarantine reacting not by missing material goods or consumption behaviours, but by trying to connect with each other. Music, dance, performance, rituals, symbols have flourished across the balconies of actual apartments and in the virtual spaces of digital media. A never-seen-before explosion of self-produced artistic artefacts that exudes humour, love for the other, passion, insightful, searing political critique. The artistic practices pervade human beings' everyday life. The experience of crisis has revealed what is necessary: when life is stripped out of all basic freedom -freedom to move, to choose, to meet- and "normal" routines, what is left? What seems to be left, is the fundamental need to be together.

As Arendt (1958/2018) puts it in the prologue to *The Human Condition*, "Men in the plural, that is, men in so far as they live and move and act in this world, can experience meaningfulness only because they can talk with and make sense to each other and to themselves." She explains the "public realm" as the most important human condition: as "… everything that appears in public can be seen and heard by everybody and has the widest possible publicity. For us, appearance - something that is being seen and heard by others as well as by ourselves – constitutes reality" (Section 7). She also argues that "Power is what keeps the public realm, the potential space of appearance between acting and speaking men, in existence", and that "the only indispensable material factor in the generation of power is the living together of people. Only where men live so close together that the potentialities of action are always present can power remain with them …" (Section 28).

Artistic performativities have been central to this desire to celebrate togetherness and in notable cases this has taken the form of movements in solidarity as invisible inequalities have been made visible and deemed to be no longer acceptable. There are, in other words, other ways of doing things. It would be foolish to underestimate the pressures in every country in the world to return to "business as usual', albeit in different disguises. It would be equally foolish to suggest that the practices and research documented and investigated by the authors in this special issue can counter such pressure, but it would be naïve not to take a position and say clearly that such practices and research do offer one means to resist the assumptions of business as usual.

The articles in this issue are based on original empirical data and presented in a classical

research-paper structure. The commentaries instead are of narrative and autoethnographic character, written by two scholars and practitioners who are pioneers in the field, David Barry and Piers Ibbotson. Their reflection on and sharing of practice allows us to the hear voices of those who were there at the start. There is a strong valuing of the autoethnographic here, and a direct link with the opening article by Chemi and Kawamura who present the narratives of the founding members of Decapo Theatre. Throughout this special issue we deliberately hold back on critique of ethical stances taken or not articulated. Whilst this might on one hand be seen to be an abdication of editorial responsibility, on the other this unfiltered presentation allows the reader to make their own judgements about the state of ethics in the field as represented by this cross section of articles and commentaries. We are delighted that the authors of this special edition are researching and practising in the very different cultural contexts of Denmark, Japan, Finland, UK, India, Turkey, Brazil, Australia and the USA.

Again, most of us are now trying to talk to each other in the internet-mediated "imagined communities" (Anderson, 1983/2016), which might be parts of "social realm" (Arendt, 1958/2018). In the social realm of modern "risk society" (Beck, 2009), the scientific fear (of the risks of) suffering and death powerfully drives peoples' behaviour, and the fear might overwhelm the public realm and reality. In the history of humankind, we have been always the source of safety and security to each other when we face the risks of non-human nature, which we are now finding in our own physical bodies. Arendt (1958/2018) suggests in the prologue that "If we would follow the advice, so frequently urged upon us, to adjust our cultural attitudes to the present status of scientific achievement, we would in all earnest adopt a way of life in which speech is no longer meaningful." To protect our own human condition of the public and reality, we might need to "speak up" a little to be "heard," both verbally and non-verbally, whilst we are now seen to be a little smaller in physical appearance.

The Contents

In the first article, "A new space of possibilities: the Origins of Dacapo Theatre" Tatiana Chemi and Takaya Kawamura tell the story of Dacapo Theatre, the Danish organisational theatre ensemble that pioneered the domain of theatre in organisations. Focusing on the early years of this journey they encourage the three founding members and one early member of Dacapo Theatre to tell their stories via the means of appreciative inquiry. The concepts of embodied cognition" (Varela, Thompson & Rosch, 2016), Theory U (Scharmer, 2016), Theatre as Research" (Chemi et al., 2015), and "Gatekeeper" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996) are set alongside the stories to accentuate the appreciation. Presented through case methodology the article documents the series of events leading to the establishment of the company and lets the reader hear these separate voices and so exercise their own criticality.

Supriya Rakesh and Ramya Ranganathan present an account of their experience as educators, in using Boal's theatre in the management classroom in "Who is Calling the Shots? Using Boal's Theatre in the MBA Classroom'. Concerned with enhancing career reflexivity in future managers they describe the process whereby their adapted Boal's "Cop in the Head" techniques provides a playful, non-threatening and experiential approach for reflection, reflexivity and dialogue. The premise, course context and development of this exercise is discussed, with reflections on the experience as facilitators together with student feedback. The reader is allowed to consider the ethical implications of introducing Boal -a theatre practitioner concerned with the relationship between theatre and revolutionary political praxis- in to the management classroom in India.

Fikret Korhan Turan and Saadet Cetinkaya consider the proposition that Aesthetics can be the core of organizational identity in "Aesthetic Reflections on Organizational Identity: A Study of Universities in Istanbul." Conceptualizing universities as organizational actors on the higher

education stage, they draw on date generated through interviews with university managers in Turkey to explore the relationship between aesthetics and representations of organizational identity. Symbols and metaphors are conceptualized as aesthetic demonstrations of organizational identity, the ways they communicate their organizational vision are elaborated on. The university is also situated using aesthetic categories from the literature and the diversity with respect to subject, genre, and style and how this is expressed by senior managers is reflected upon.

Bianca C. Araújo, Eduardo Davel and Ruth Rentschler identify aesthetic consumption as a powerful way to manage art-driven organizations for sustainability in "Aesthetics, Consumption and Cultural Organisation Sustainability." An autoethnographic approach is used to draw on the rich data in the empirical study of 19 years' experience as the lead researcher in managing identified art-driven organizations in Brazil. These are grounded in Salvador, the capital city of the state of Bahia, Brazil. The argument is made that specificities of art-driven organizations management are a critical issue for study. They conclude that aesthetics and consumption should be integrated in the managerial dynamics of art-driven organizations.

In Part 2, "Commentaries" Daved Barry in "Looking Back on Organizational Theater', uses a retrospective, personal narrative approach to detail his evolving understanding of when Organizational Theater (OT) works and when it doesn't. Through this, he highlights the importance of working with OT professionals, speculates on what to do when there are no pros around to help. Reflecting in a refreshingly honest way on his own experiences as his practice and the field develops he points to the coercive nature of Corporate Theater as "a kind of OT doppelgänger that sneaks in under the radar and often does subtle damage". He concludes with some brief observations on how current social trends and changes in technology might affect OT's future.

Finally, Piers Ibbotson turns directly to the craft of embodied practice in "Exploring the expression and interpretation of emotions through the use of full-face theatrical masks'. In a careful description of an activity making use of theatrical masks, he opens up the way in which the emotional response to the expression on a masked actor's face, is constructed by the interplay of elements. The suggestion is made that the meaning of a masked actor's performance is co-created between the protagonist, the antagonist and the audience. A case is made that a masked performance, such as that documented, may help those involved in leadership development, to understand some of the limitations to a leader's ability to control the impressions they seek to create.

In the Epilogue Anne Pässilä & Allan Owens use the arts-based performative form of Found Poetry to re-present the words of the authors of this special edition. After recapping the nature of found poetry as an arts-based research method they use it to review and re-present the articles and commentaries differently. This is used as a deliberate strategy to resist "joining-the- dots" for the reader, by instead providing an offer to listen to the echoes of the papers in the form of found poetry. The interpretative dimension of performance is stressed, and the autoethnographic approach of the authors of this edition valued.

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