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Firing, Kristian; Thorkelsdottir, Rannveig; Chemi, Tatiana

*Published in:*
Culture and Organization

*DOI (link to publication from Publisher):*
10.1080/14759551.2022.2028146



*Publication date:*
2022

*Document Version*
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Culture and Organization

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/gsco20

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**To cite this article:** Kristian Firing, Rannveig Björk Thorkelsdóttir & Tatiana Chemi (2022) The Theatre of War: leader development between personal identity and person-in-role, Culture and Organization, 28:3-4, 330-344, DOI: 10.1080/14759551.2022.2028146

**To link to this article:** https://doi.org/10.1080/14759551.2022.2028146



Published online: 18 Jan 2022.

CULTURE AND ORGANIZATION
2022, VOL. 28, NOS. 3–4, 330–344
https://doi.org/10.1080/14759551.2022.2028146



# The Theatre of War: leader development between personal identity and person-in-role

Kristian Firing[a], Rannveig Björk Thorkelsdóttir [b] and Tatiana Chemi [c]

[a]Institute of Teacher Education, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim, Norway; [b]School of Education, University of Iceland, Reykjavik, Iceland; [c]Department of Learning and Philosophy, Aalborg University, Aalborg, Denmark

**ABSTRACT**

The aim of this study was to develop new knowledge about theatre as a form of and platform for learning in leadership development. We asked: How is theatre perceived as learning in leadership development? The context of our study was leadership training at the Royal Norwegian Air Force Academy, where a group of 14 leaders was given the assignment The Theatre of War: Planning and performing a five-act show for an audience of 50 people at the city theatre. Eight in-depth interviews were conducted and participatory observations were documented in the educator's logbook. Our data analysis developed five categories of findings. Our research points out at the ways in which theatre is perceived as learning in leadership development, broadening from the feeling of uncertainty and anxiety to the experience of community, holistic identity, empathy towards the other and oneself, and transformative learning.

**ARTICLE HISTORY**
Received 27 December 2020
Accepted 5 January 2022

**KEYWORDS**
Leader development; education; arts-Based; theatre; performance

## Introduction

This article focuses on leadership development through embodied dialogues between military students and imagined roles on stage. In the military, leadership is an interaction between leaders and followers propelled by the aim 'to accomplish the mission and take care of your people' (Luftforsvarsstaben 1995). Using the person-in-role concept, originated by Miller and Rice (1967), we investigate how leaders can be reflexively responsive to their own actions, thoughts, emotions and bodies in dialogue with their role, other role-holders and an organisation (Case and Gosling 2011). The educational-artistic context here is a full-scale theatre where the spectators respond as followers. We explore how learning can unfold through the use of theatre in a unique embodied rethinking of leadership training.

The leadership course analysed here aims to prepare military leaders for the complexity and volatility of their duties. The course was designed as a stage production, concluding with a public performance at the city theatre. Through the facilitation of character-building and text production, the participants reported transformative learning outcomes, identity building and transfer to work-related areas. This case emphasises the potential of theatre as a bridge-builder in management education (Chemi et al. 2020). We show that using theatre in leadership training is not only an approach to problem solving and coping with not knowing (Darsø 2004), but also an entirely different way of

**CONTACT** Kristian Firing kristian.firing@ntnu.no Institute of Teacher Education, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim, Norway

This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

knowing, which is embodied, sensory and relational. Participants learn in a different way about themselves, their colleagues, their profession and leadership.

Students at the Royal Norwegian Air Force Academy (RNoAFA) have practised their rhetorical skills using theatre each year since 2015. In 2020, the teaching staff at the Academy orchestrated the entire leadership training programme as a full performance: a group of 14 leaders was given the assignment *The Theatre of War* (ToW), which included nine weeks of preparation that culminated in a 60-minute five-act performance for an audience of 50 people. The entire ensemble was on stage, with leaders performing solo sketches. Here is an example from the first author's observation logbook that was part of the data collection[1]:

> The actress quotes from Norwegian lyrics, holding a rope symbolising her lifeline in her hand. She continues her monologue – using gestures, artefacts, voice and verbal utterances. I felt her loneliness, despair, pain and sorrow. She concludes by asking "who will come to my funeral?" standing two metres in front of me looking straight into my eyes for an answer. She saw right into my doubt, and held me responsible for my selfishness and her loneliness – for four seconds. I loved those seconds as much as I hated them. She taught me a lesson about loneliness.[2]

How could this happen? We, as participants, had visited the space between play and reality, structure and flow – both students in roles and spectators, had trespassed through the liminal zone (Turner 1982) and into transformational experiences. According to Dewey (1980), the arts are what make visible the learners' needs that trigger the passionate desire to investigate new and appropriate knowledge. In our case, the cadets' compulsion to learn about (self)leadership encountered overwhelming challenges in the theatrical task. This created an appropriate disharmony between the known and unknown that the (safe) theatre frames were able to foster by offering aesthetic 'favoring agencies' (Dewey 1980, 65). The cadets had to approach a knowledge-problem using enquiry strategies that differed from the ones they were used to.

When our non-theatre-professional students entered onto a professional stage, it resonated with the concept of 'teaching what is not there'. Authenticity was derived from the students transforming their life-stories into performed dramaturgies on a stage where reality and performance were intertwined. Actors partake in reciprocal relationships as responsive humans, but they also have close ties with their characters that is consistent with the dramaturgy. On stage, the actors simulate an alternative reality that the spectators, willingly suspending their disbelief, agree to accept as *true*.

## Leadership development: the Armed forces

The Norwegian armed forces' leadership philosophy states that effective leadership behaviour should be expressed through: role models (having good values); mission orientation (efficiency and performance); social interaction (activation of human resources and relations); and development orientation (focus on learning and development) (Sunde 2012, 12–13). We will focus on the latter as it fits with experience-based learning (Dewey 1961; Kolb 1984) and artistic metaphors (Tzu 2003). Military education is based on what is known, often learned through experience (Dewey 1980), and what is unknown, what learners have not yet experienced. The latter is a space for creativity and experimentation that is difficult to be prepared for. Creative pedagogies (Cremin and Chappell 2021) explore how to develop learners' dispositions with respect to the management of the emergent, the unforeseen, the unknown. Artistic methodologies are applied to education and leadership in order to train learners' abilities to think differently and to cope with what is unpredicted.

## Arts-based methods

Taylor and Ladkin (2009) argue that arts-based methods can provide means of accessing and developing an approach to the world, which in turn could contribute to a more holistic way of engaging with managerial contexts. Arts-based methods, including several practices and paradigms,

encompass a variety of practical activities and scientific approaches potentially useful in education and organisations (Adler 2011; Chemi and Du 2018; Strauß 2017). They also have the potential to surprise positively by expanding knowledge or negatively by shocking and disturbing. In arts-based education, learners find themselves in the midst of the wrangling that Turner (1999) describes as a tension between structure (what is planned) and anti-structure (what is emergent and chaotic). Even though this is not exclusive to the arts, the practice of having original and appropriate reactions to emerging situations is what characterises theatre.

## *Theatre in education*

The sharing of life-stories is associated with leadership development (Shamir and Eilam 2005), however, when life-stories are performed on stage, they are part of a complex construction of intimate personal dynamics and the person-in-role process encompassing relationships to other role-holders and leaders of an organisation (Case and Gosling 2011, 227). The potential of using role-play to learn within the military system resonates with key concepts from the theatre.

Theatre in education, where students take on roles as actors, is a specific tradition within arts-based methods that makes use of all the elements of theatrical performances (Cooper 2013). Szatkowski (1985) proposes that acting should be seen as the transformation of actors into characters, and that the areas of real life (actors) and staged life (characters) should be understood as dialectically related to each other. Szatkowski defines this as *redoubling*: a person plays a role, while a spectator observes both the role being played and the person playing the role. In this way, theatre provides experiences of ordinary life in the awareness that this is not life, but make-believe. Stanislavski (2013) talks about dual affect in theatre and drama through the 'magic if', that is the capacity of human beings to engage in imaginative tasks. Similarly, Bolton (1986) saw dual affect as the tension between concrete and imaginary words. Actors enter the artistic space as individuals bringing their own bodies, emotions and knowledge to the collective process, but also their own assumptions about their role in relationships and about others' behaviours.

A rich research tradition has explored how theatre is used for educational purposes (Biehl-Missal 2010; Gagnon, Vough, and Nickerson 2012; Katz-Buonincontro 2011; Vera and Crossan 2004) and how leaders can be compared to actors (Clark and Mangham 2004; Ibbotson 2020). Theatre addresses leadership as art through leadership performance, leader-follower interaction and greater aesthetic awareness from the viewpoint of followers (Biehl-Missal 2010). These studies do not, however, report on students bringing their authentic life-stories to the stage and performing triggering events before a real audience in a full-blown theatre production. We intend to address this gap in our study.

## *Authenticity in leadership and theatre*

The real/unreal dialectic that constructs theatre practices can be unrelatable for non-theatre professionals. This is because theatre requires one to reflect closely on the concept of authenticity, which – from the Greek *authentikos*, meaning original, genuine – does not mean choosing fact over fiction, but rather balancing the two in a specific context. Literature on authentic leadership argues that leaders lead best when in contact with their 'true' self, however, authentic leadership 'extends beyond the authenticity of the leader as a person to encompass authentic relations with followers and associates' (Gardner et al. 2005, 345). Authentic relationships must be rethought in theatre: to be believable, actors need to establish a redoubled dimension between what is 'true' and what is 'invented'. Meaning emerges through the gliding of sense back and forth from ordinary life (reality) to stage life (make-believe).

Diderot (1883) discussed the paradox between what is experienced in real life and what the actor interprets on stage. He wanted to do away with the prejudice that actors should feel 'real' emotions on stage and that what they feel is what they express on stage (Konijn 1991). From this perspective,

the actors' mastery is not in the conveyance of feelings, but in the representation of the physicality of emotions, to the extent of deception. Actors are not their characters, but only an interpretation of them. Their talent lies not in being true, but in building a credible fiction *as if* it were true (dramaturgy according to Clark and Mangham 2004). According to Diderot, no spectator is interested in the naked truth: acting is not about *being* authentic, but about *appearing* so. What are the consequences of this in our case where non-theatre professionals were staging their life-stories? The room of playing out authenticity on stage in the range between the truth and appearing to be true resonates with Stanislavski's 'magic if' (2013). The person-in-role process gave the cadets a room to display emotions (or a lack of emotions), not as a requirement for being a leader in the armed forces but as an artistic exploration of emotions so they could learn more about themselves as part of their leader development process. To our cadets, the person-in-role process, acting as characters, does not reflect back on the real life of being an actor but on the real life of being a leader.

## *Theatre as learning zone*

Theatrical educational interventions tap into the liminal zone, described in theatre anthropology as a dangerous and threatening area (Turner 1982), and in military leadership as the front-line or border-area of military conflict (Brunstad 2005). Limen means threshold, an architectural feature linking one space to another – a passageway between places rather than a place in itself. In performance theory (Schechner 2002), 'liminal' refers to 'in-between' actions or behaviours, such as initiation rituals. This can encompass both a real space and a psychological experience. Learning, as a transformational process, shapes affective spaces where learners trespass from the known to the unknown. Before the enquiry process brings new acknowledgements and changes, learners find themselves in what we define as the liminal zone. Here learners negotiate meaning between 'personal needs, desire, and interest (that) internally motivate the exploration', shaping a 'poetic space' (Garrison 2010, 117) for learning possibilities.

Within theatre laboratories (Chemi 2018), education can be seen as a hybrid space of possibilities where opposites co-exist in the frames of informal and formal elements within the same learning environment: critical third spaces where knowledge emerges through collaborative and original investigations. When students are invited into a playful dramatisation, educators argue that the communication established between the participants is built on multiple levels. Dialogues occur not only between the participants in the conversation, but amongst a multiplicity of performed roles. When students observe one another's work and change from actors to spectators, they become percipients of their own work, while sharing trust and understanding through the theatrical space (Thorkelsdóttir 2016). This makes theatre a unique space for experiential and holistic learning, merging affects and cognition. Through the person-in-role concept (Case and Gosling 2011) leaders behave, think and feel in dialogue with their role, where the spectators respond as followers. Bringing authentic life-experiences to the stage establishes an aesthetic conversation between actors and spectators, which transforms the zone of potentiality (liminal) into a learning zone (Brunstad 2005). Here past experiences are reflected upon in embodied ways, and new opportunities for learning are explored.

## *Leader development beyond personality*

When reviewing the literature on authentic leader development it becomes evident that the individual self is the primary focus (Gardner et al. 2005). However, as military forces always operate in teams, the significant tradition of team development in the Norwegian military (Luftforsvarsstaben 1995) tends to view leader development as a social process enhancing – and enhanced by – team development. In theatre, team development can be seen in ensemble-building from which actors find the confidence, inspiration and knowledge to perform (Chemi 2018, 83). Bearing in mind that in theatre any action or choice is team-based, we expected that the use of a full-scale theatre production could propel the learning processes beyond personal identity into group processes, and that that would

occur in different ways than in traditional military exercises. In other words, it was our belief that having to perform in front of an audience could move leadership development beyond individual personality and into a team process of shared creativity (Sawyer 2014).

## The current study

War operations, called 'the theatre of war', are a backdrop for military education (Warden 1989). Theatre is used as a metaphor for war (conflict area) and a concept for capturing the drama at the front line (Dietz and Schroeder 2012; Warden 1989). A large body of research bridges the use of theatre in education to the military context (Chemi and Firing 2020; Firing, Fauskevåg, and Skarsvåg 2018; Firing, Skarsvåg, and Chemi 2018). Nevertheless, none of these studies have explored the mechanisms involved in a full-scale production with all its arts-based elements: director, script, dramaturgy, actors, stage and audience. There is a lack of research exploring the learning processes that arise when students contribute their authentic life-stories and triggering events to a complete performance. The use of a full theatre production is new to leader development in the Norwegian military, and our study is the first to address students staging their life-experiences in a 'real' performance for the purpose of their leadership development.

This study is important because it explores the process of staging the ToW and its consequences for leadership development: the creation of aesthetic, collaborative, performative and embodied learning experiences between actors and spectators, giving resonance to leaders and followers. The aim of this study has been to develop new knowledge about theatre as a form of and platform for learning in leadership development. We asked: how was theatre perceived as learning in leadership development? The following research questions guided the study:

(1) What happened to the students when challenged to perform in a full-scale theatre?
(2) How did the students experience performance when using the person-in-role approach as a learning process?

### *Methodology*

The Norwegian Armed Forces, the military organisation responsible for the defence of Norway, has four branches: the Norwegian Army, the Royal Norwegian Navy, the Royal Norwegian Air Force and the Home Guard. The RNoAFA founds its educational philosophy on three pillars: theory, practical training and reflection. Along with experience-based learning, reflection processes stand out as the core of the learning process (Dewey 1961; Kolb 1984). All practical training is rooted in theoretical knowledge and followed up through reflection processes in the form of group guidance (Rogers 1961) and diary writing (Firing 2004).

The RNoAFA provides officer training as a three-year Bachelor of Military Studies in Leadership programme for officers with command authority, in addition to management training for specialists representing expert skills and practical experience. Our study focused on a nine-week course for specialists, where the participants engaged in a variety of topics from the curriculum: 'Inscape', 'Profession' and 'Education'. The short 'Inscape' seminar aims to guide the participants in how to create a positive and safe learning environment, warm relations and personal trust. The content includes warm-up cases, sharing life-stories and triggering events and speeches about the will to learn. Based on both professional and educational study areas, the students were given the ToW assignment on the second day of their leadership programme. This assignment encompassed planning and performing a full-scale theatre performance for learning in leadership development, and was the case we used to explore the two research questions outlined above.

### *The Theatre of War*

The assignment aimed to provide learning on the individual, relational and group levels. The students were invited to plan, develop and perform the play for the ToW. They were given the freedom to develop their content from the professional study area. Through dialogical processes between the students and educator supervision (Rogers 1961), the content developed into the following five scenes (we present this rather briefly as the paper is focused more on the process of learning than on the content):

(1) Opening – A ceremony focusing on the division into officers and specialists.
(2) Person – Bringing life-stories and triggering events to the stage, addressing topics such as burn out, sexual abuse and loneliness.
(3) Relationships – The cocktail party, addressing exclusion and inclusion of new employees.
(4) Intergroup – The relationship between the groups, in our case between officers and specialists.
(5) Conclusion – Addressing death, and bridging officers and specialists with each other.

The students were given the freedom to create their dramaturgy, however, as they had limited experience from such processes they were offered highly appreciated supervision by their educators and by a skilled actor/director from Trøndelag Theatre during the process. One of the students was a skilled musician, something that added quality to the dramaturgy. An audience of 40 student officers and 10 officers/specialists witnessed their final performance.

### *Data collection*

Our case (Stake 1995) draws from performative methodologies (iterative embodied dialogue), educational topics (staging of identity, relationships and groups) and the context of higher education. Ethical considerations were taken throughout the process by obtaining informed consent according to NSD requirements. To guarantee their anonymity, the eight informants and 14 participants (Academy students) will not be described in any further detail.

The first author was an educator at the course and responsible for the study areas 'Inscape' and 'Education'. Based on mutual trust, the teacher-student relationships were important for how and why the students accepted the surprising mission and chose to make it a learning process instead of turning their backs on it. The role of being both an educator and a researcher was a process of mutual reinforcement. Two other researchers and one Master's degree student participated in the research lab, asking questions about the assumptions and asking important critical questions.

This teacher had the main responsibility for the ToW as an educator, something that also made it possible to observe the entire planning and performance process through participatory observation (Jorgensen 1989). Data that emerged as field notes in the educator's logbook were analysed through coding and categorisation (Charmaz 2006). All data were discussed in a shared research lab consisting of the researchers and a Master's degree student. This served as the background for the interviews which explored the students' most important moments from the theatre process and performance according to three levels:

(1) Yourself. What did you learn about yourself and how did you learn?
(2) Relational and social knowledge. What have you learned about yourself in interaction with others, and how did you learn this?
(3) Leadership in the Air Force. In what way can the theatre as a learning arena be important for leadership in the Air Force?

Eight in-depth interviews were conducted, audiotaped and transcribed to obtain an accurate basis for analysis (Creswell 2007). Sampling was guided by principles of accessibility (time and

availability for the interview), variety (age, gender, in-service experience) and participatory field observation (responses during the assignment). The interviews were conducted and stored by the Master's degree student.

### *Data analysis*

The data material was analysed through coding and categorisation (Charmaz 2006). Coding is seen to be the pivotal link between collecting data and developing an emergent theory to explain the data material (Charmaz 2006). This process started by bringing order to the material by attaching one or more code words to the relevant text paragraphs. Through this process we developed a table with utterances in one column and code words in another. The further analysis used the constant-comparative method, an iterative process between empirical data and theoretical concepts (Charmaz 2006). In this process, some data were excluded[3] while other parts were subject to deeper examination along with theoretical perspectives. Through the final categorisation process the following themes were developed:

(1) On the Edge
(2) Authenticity
(3) Emotions
(4) Nakedness
(5) Group Affection

Reflecting on the data analysis, it appears that the categories emerged through an iterative process based on the experience of the students as well as established theoretical concepts within theatre and leader development. The analysis in the research lab had a similar and overlapping focus in the student's Master's degree thesis and in the researchers' current study, with only small differences according to practical leadership experience and theoretical knowledge. Shared dialogical processes in the research lab enhanced reflexivity and were mutually enriching for knowledge construction.

## Findings

### *On the edge*

The theatre assignment was an emotional bomb-shell for the cadets. Facing the stage through the person-in-role process became a real meeting (through an imaginary role) between their own personality and the audience. This reflects experiences in liminal zones, which are emotionally charged and marked by resistance and precariousness (Brunstad 2005; Turner 1982).

> So, I have a "print screen" inside my head then, of that room when it dawns on us that it's actually a theatrical performance. […] I experience that many of us are on our way to the trenches because this is scary and uncomfortable. That moment has been burned on my mind, when it dawns on us that this is the mission.

When non-theatre professionals are asked to work with dramaturgical processes, having to act in liminal dimensions can be a frustrating experience, triggering feelings of uselessness and generating the desire to go back to what is known and culturally accepted. The participants might struggle to find a sense of purpose in the extraordinary learning setting and end up wishing for more ordinary frames, as expressed here:

> We struggled to see the purpose in this, what we were to achieve, for somehow, we didn't see the end result, we didn't understand where we were going to end up … we wasted a lot of time, why can't we just get this in a classroom setting, why can't we just get this on a blackboard so we can see what the point is?

> While this utterance may be interpreted as being mainly cognitive, the students' emotional reactions cannot be ignored:
>
> Because I thought the world would collapse for a moment, and I really hated life for a while. When it dawns on me that we're actually going to be doing theatre, then all my barriers come up. I don't want this, I really, really don't want to do this, and then I felt that I actually got angry.
>
> You hear "Trøndelag theatre and audience", and that you have to both write and act in this play, then you'll have to push yourself far outside your comfort zone, to perform for someone. Then you're afraid of being stupid.

The feeling of being far outside one's comfort zone is here triggered by the presence of an audience, which is the core of theatre: actor-audience encounters. This may be the reason behind the participants' impulse to run for the trenches in search of refuge from challenges that are too demanding. However, after this dramatic start, the students embraced the mission as a learning opportunity and ended up achieving self-efficacy on a personal and collective level.

### *Authenticity*

What our participants seemed to repeatedly come back to was the perception of reality versus authenticity on stage. One of them experienced a new recognition about what is genuine when performing authentic life-stories as staged narratives, and therefore having the possibility to both express and conceal traumatic or intimate events:

> I got an eye-opener: it's only me and the other actors who know if [the story] is real, but the audience doesn't know if it's real. It gave me an epiphany, that I have not considered before. Only I know that.

As non-theatre professionals on a professional stage, the cadets responded with a paradox addressing the concept 'teaching what is not there': authentic relational acknowledgements derived from transforming life-stories into performed dramaturgies. The participants author their own stage-role by tapping into personal experiences, which can be defined as authentic: they act according to their own authority and authorship. The fact that these life-stories are performed on stage makes a difference in their expressive-aesthetic quality and educational impact. The stage provides a safe disguise that the participants feel more comfortable with, and outwardly they can reach out to others with whom the performance might resonate.

> I was sure that everyone thought it was real. I was not present, but I have been told by others that people sitting in the hall thought I was really dead. AND that what I said was 100% true, but then I didn't think that we were in a performance, at the theatre in Trondheim with *The Theatre of War*. I was taken off guard.

Performances redouble (Szatkowski 1985) the reality of the performer and the spectator into relationships and influences (Chemi and Firing 2020). Looking at theatre as redoubled means that reality and performance are intertwined. Actors partake in reciprocal relationships as responsive humans and sentient bodies, but they also have close ties with their characters, and characters dwell in reciprocal interactions consistent with a given dramaturgy. What is authentic for the actors, as bodies situated in specific historical and cultural conditions, might not be true for the characters, situated in different contexts. Claims of truth in artistic experiences must be bracketed, suspended or even reframed (Ibbotson 2020). On stage, the actors simulate an alternative reality that the spectators agree on believing to be *true* according to cultural conventions. Spectators and actors engage in a mutual, tacit and materially mediated contract about their suspension of disbelief. These informants notice the paradox of playing a part that is based on one's own life-story:

> … [the audience] realises that it's real that it's not something you just play. As a non-professional actor, it's difficult to play an emotion, and then it must come from the heart to understand that it's real. Then you get feedback, that it was very intense to see that you're standing there with your real feelings.

Even though these non-professional actors confuse the boundaries of reality and make-believe, what they describe is the paradox implicit in personal development and leadership. Through acting

on stage, our participants experienced the strong impact they had on their audience. This on-stage experience shed light on leader development and the power of authentic leadership behaviour and enhanced relations between leaders and followers (Gardner et al. 2005). The impact of authenticity, even when showing vulnerability, inspired the students to tap into their emotional self to create relationships with their followers.

## Emotions

Theatre is three-dimensional, sensual, sensory, bodily and often cruel. Its brutality is due to the presence of the actor's flesh and bones, its embarrassing materiality being in space and time, and here and now. This 'meaty' presence cannot be hidden, not even by costumes, masks, scenography or props, but it can be enhanced through performative processes. This involves the affects of actors, characters and spectators. One of the dramaturgical purposes of theatre is to give shape to emotions. It is a matter of daring to be on stage, exposed to the Other and vulnerable. One of the informants said that 'it's about daring to show who I am then, and showing, the feelings around it, as you say, dare to be yourself'. Emotions are part of the feeling of the authenticity of the performance, both for the actors and audience, and of the awareness of personal leadership through affect. When we asked Informant 2 whether her performance was acting or if it was real, she replied: 'It was real'.

This is a clear indication of authentic effects that emerge from the participant's involvement in the performative process. Clark and Mangham (2004) would define this approach as 'dramatism' (37), which can be explained as the understanding of social and organisational life *as* theatre. What happens on stage, for Informant 2, *is* real, her acting draws from real life. However, the categories of 'dramaturgy' (organisation *as if* it were theatre) and theatre as technology (Clark and Mangham 2004) can also apply here in a productive way. Theatre practices show that the credibility of performances is only achieved by means of a believable simulation. But, if these are the premises of professional theatre, what kind of performance was the ToW?

> The audience was important. Because it created the pressure that many were afraid of facing. So, without that stressful moment, there would only have been empty seats there, then there would not have been that seriousness and the pressure in the situation. It was a stressful moment, and for many it was an experience very much outside [their] comfort zone.

According to this informant, the experience was challenging because the performance context was authentically theatrical, just as in professional theatre. Specifically, the presence of a real audience seems to contribute to the perception of this task as serious and somewhat anxiety-provoking. A similar response is found where the actor–actor connection is emphasised as the emotional bond that releases empathic reactions: 'You're in a way part of their story then, you manage to get into it, you feel her pain then'.

Emotions emerge from responses to stories that are dramatised on stage and delivered in dramaturgical form. Even though these stories tap into real life-stories, they become something else on stage, something capable of strongly connecting to and with others, something that can be related to and safely exposed. In leadership development, these processes are fundamental pedagogical tools that verge on the provision of therapeutic help or healing, without necessarily slipping into therapy. The cadets acquired experiences of how emotions can influence followers in relational contexts. Their acting involved emotional awareness and regulation (Goleman 2006) by means of relational processes with their co-actors and the audience. They extended their experience of authentic leadership to one in which emotions are normalised and highly valued (Gardner et al. 2005).

## Nakedness

Stanislavski (2013) conceptualises the autonomy of theatrical practices that comply with criteria that are aesthetic and justified by dramaturgical coherence. The actors' work on themselves and on the

characters is based on being believable according to realistic standards: their way into the character taps into their personal lives. Even though these participants were not professionals, they took the preparations for an authentic performance seriously, displaying semi-professional attitudes. The participants behaved and performed *as if* they were professional actors. They *became* actors in all their authenticity *as actors*. Actors are '*βιος* unfolded before our spectators' eyes' (Chemi 2018, 39). This is what Informant 2's perception is:

> If it was just acting, then she's good in that case, because she's managed to touch an entire audience with her acting, because people reacted to it, I did myself, my hair stood on end and [I had] tears in my eyes. Then I think maybe I would consider a new career.

This comment reveals the informant's admiration for her colleague's performance and the overall opinion seems to be that the spectators' high level of emotional involvement can only be achieved through the actor's presence. Presence can also be felt *in absentia*, as in the case where one of the participants was away and had recorded a soundtrack for the performance:

> … [name of participant] makes it very personal. He speaks to his loved ones. You get a name, it's almost like you think he's lost his life and is gone. You're in the zone where you'll deliver, it's something I'm used to, but the mindset is different. It will be very real. It becomes very real. The fact that you hear the voice of [other participant], but he's not there, then it's very strong.

The absent actor-participant is felt as present. This gives a truthful impression and motivates the other co-performers to deliver their best. Grotowski (2002) claims that this is a different way of doing theatre, where the actors are stripped of Western theatre conventions and are asked to be authentic. This is not a denial of Diderot's paradox (1883) or of the redoubled dimension of performance, but a different trajectory. The actor finds in his/her body authentic impulses that are material-biological through authentic nakedness: 'We feel that an actor reaches the essence of his vocation whenever he commits an act of sincerity, when he unveils himself' (Grotowski 2002, 124). One of the participants reflects on this feeling:

> When I suddenly went up on stage, and started reading that letter, […] it became so real. I was moved, my voice trembled, I was myself, it was real and it was not acting. When I presented my thoughts by saying goodbye it was so strong, it became so real, it was not acting then. It was a way of expressing my feelings in a play. Very strange to play oneself with those feelings by saying goodbye.

According to Grotowski, acting must be cultivated through relentless practice that is at once physical, professional, spiritual and ethical. Being an actor is no different than or separated from being a human. Both are individuals who are an active part of a relational community and who spend time and energy in being and becoming a person. The actor-participants who expose their subjectivity undergo a transformational process that is felt as authentic, in spite of its being dramaturgically constructed. This paradox is voiced by Informant 8:

> I played myself, I exposed myself completely, I was myself […] I didn't feel like I was playing anything. I was just me. […] I was myself, because the roles I had were in a way … you could not play it off somehow, because it hit us like that and the profession we have. I think it was important for the audience as well, that [the actors] dared to be themselves.

Theatre's foundation lays in the actor's body, materiality and organicity. For Grotowski, truth in action is what is enacted to stimulate and facilitate personal change. The participants in the ToW are concerned about truth as a creative tool because it shapes human potentiality and is the ultimate purpose of creation. Through journal writing (Firing 2004) and group-based coaching (Rogers 1961), the students link their experiences from the stage to the process of sharing their life-story and triggering events as the start of their leader development course (Shamir and Eilam 2005). Repeatedly, the students discover the impact of being straightforward, something that resonates with the potential of authentic leadership where showing 'the real me' is seen as an opportunity for having impact (Gardner et al. 2005).

### *Group affection*

Having to perform in front of the audience propelled the learning process beyond individual personality, opening up to group processes:

> We were against the plan and yet we did it, we were good soldiers, I don't agree with this, but we are in, and then in the end we go over the edge and then we are into it, because then we understand the thing.

> It will be very much that team feeling: now we're all in the same boat and going in the same direction. There are a lot of emotions in people, either because they dread until they go out on stage, or others who enjoy themselves … We're together on all these feelings no matter what they are.

This utterance discloses the intergroup processes between the students as a group and the staff. They identify themselves as 'good soldiers' before they 'go over the edge', which mirrors their liminal experience that brought them to a new identity as pupils and actors trespassing past unknown boundaries to reach new understanding. Their transformative process from a person to a new social identity is echoed in their use of pronouns, changing from 'I' to 'We'. They become a group in relation to the other group, 'we are together'. They no longer act as individuals, but act as group members with a social identity as actors.

Military-team research explains how groups develop through different phases (FIRO-model) (Schutz 1998). Each team starts in the inclusion phase, moves on to the control phase and might enter the affection phase. A group in the cohesion phase will be able to show genuine affection for each other, which enhances the capability to perform in demanding situations. The participants belong together and perform as a group. How did our participants experience this?

> Her tears rolled, and began to roll, and she said it'll be all right, and both stood and hugged each other and supported each other, and it actually builds up the belief that you'll make it then. When I come from my monologue out into the hallway, as they have been watching, and how much care there is. To feel that the unity of affection that I might not have felt in the whole course as a group, […] it's in a way the first time I have felt that the class was one group.

We see here how the team has developed into cohesion. From Informant 2, we see deep and genuine support, an empathetic skill that reinforces her belief that she can cope. Having to perform in front of an audience became a transition from individuals into a group of actors with solidarity, cohesion, shared belonging and genuine affection.

## Discussion

This text has addressed the 'teaching what is not there' approach by bringing non-theatre-professional students onto a professional stage where the stage performances redoubled and brought the reality of the performer and the spectator into dialogues where reality and performance were intertwined. Our research shows that theatre is perceived as learning in leadership development in multiple ways, broadening from the feeling of anxiety to transformative learning. The ToW created a productive disharmony that the theatre frames were able to foster (Dewey 1980, 65). Learning through the body, affects, senses and dramaturgy opened up for a quality of thinking/feeling that brought new insights into the learning processes and leader development.

Our first research question, 'what happened to the students when challenged to perform in a full-scale theatre?', has mainly been answered through the five categories presented above. Moreover, we would like to add that our findings point to the painful processes where learners are required to accept the complexity of unfamiliar educational situations. The process starts with refusal or explicit opposition because theatre and acting skills are felt to be alien to the military profession. One of the challenging processes during the ToW was dealing with emotional reactions. The Norwegian Air Force practices a debriefing procedure in which emotions are addressed for learning (Folland 2009); they are addressed during field exercises and during cases such as a staged mass demonstration or a shooting simulator (Firing, Fauskevåg, and Skarsvåg 2018)). However, the ToW-

processes did not offer any standard way of coping with emotions through debriefing or learning from one particular case. On the contrary, the emotions were associated with the stage and the togetherness with the spectators: students being anxious about their performance and teachers being anxious about the students' motivation and learning process. The main challenge was to acknowledge the emotional reactions as part of the learning process and maintain support through coaching to bring the emotions into leader development and manage to transform anxiety into self-efficacy.

Our second research question, 'how did the students experience performance through the person-in-role approach as a learning process?' has been answered in part through the findings, but needs further elaboration. A transformative experience from the theatre was how military leaders managed themselves in their role when bringing life-stories to the stage. It is well known how sharing life-stories provides the authentic leader with a meaning system from which to feel, think and act (Shamir and Eilam 2005). However, when life-stories are performed through a person-in-role approach, this becomes a complex construction of intimate personal dynamics, of relationships to other role-holders and of managing a system/organisation (Case and Gosling 2011, 227). This is acknowledged in a very tangible way by the fact that their leaders (system holders) are spectators. The transformative potential of role-playing resonates with leadership development in the military because it holistically addresses the possible developments of the role in relation to other roles and to the primary task of the system. Taking on the role and entering onto the stage was done within social relations and the institutional perspective was present during the ToW performance. Setting roles and relationships on stage makes what is hidden visible in a poetic or metaphorical fashion. Thoughts, behaviours, emotions and embodied values can be made visible in the theatre space. When individuals engage in performative dialogues, their reflection, sharing and learning become an act of agency that is collaborative.

The Norwegian Air Force has a long tradition of team development. Surprisingly, the person-in-role process in the full-scale theatre experience mediates team development beyond the way it is scripted (Luftforsvarsstaben 1995). Looking to the literature on leaders managing their role, we see that acting as a person-in-role, is also a contextual matter. When considering knowledge and practices in context, we are moved to think of interrelationships in a given domain at any given moment in time (Case and Gosling 2011, 28). In our case, the context was mediated by the students creating their role as actors in relationships to the spectators. Our participants faced challenges, worked through problem-solving processes, found appropriate solutions to expressive problems, related to each other and experienced flow and frustrations over an extended period of time. We understand the students in our context as an *ensemble*, which means 'together', 'at the same time', 'of the same kind' (Etymonline 2020). The process the students went through transformed them into performing actors and actresses, and finally left them with a felt togetherness associated with a theatre ensemble (Chemi 2018).

## *Implications and future research*

Our research reduces the gap in our understanding of how theatre can, at the educational level, bring learners from fixed assumptions (about themselves, their profession and their professional relationships) to novel speculations by navigating through a zone of not-knowing. The programme's focus on leadership skills, relational exchanges and dialogues is unfolded within theatrical frames and facilitated so that resistance dissolves and learning takes place. The participants report learning outcomes that are processual (production process), content-related (leadership) and transformative (identity). They report clarity about applying the learned *βιος* skills to military-professional duties, and about accepting an *affective turn* in their reciprocal relationships.

These new perspectives seem to emerge from bodily and dramaturgical processes in the theatre production, and to be of a creative and critical nature (Chemi, Borup, and Hersted 2015). This study has contributed to our knowing about why and how to use full-scale theatre for leader development,

and has the potential of being extended to non-artistic areas of higher education. This can resonate with the needs of educators who envision a more creative, relational and transformational education. Theatre, drama and performance have the potential to transform leadership and leadership training into a more holistic experience with meaningful learning. To conclude, we would encourage educators in leadership training to investigate *on the floor* the many opportunities that theatre has to offer.

## Notes

1. The first author served as educator and researcher throughout the entire process, while the other authors served as researchers and theatre professionals.
2. The extract (field notes from participatory observation) and the following unreferenced extracts (utterances from interviews) are part of the original empirical material collected for the present study. The extracts have been translated from Norwegian by the authors.
3. Part of the excluded empirical data is in the process of being analysed for further research with focus on the multidisciplinary alliance between artists/educators.

## Acknowledgements

This research has been funded by the Erasmus+ Strategic Partnerships Programme. We are grateful to the students who participated in this study and wish to acknowledge their openness and their enthusiasm during the investigation and the educational experience.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## ORCID

*Rannveig Björk Thorkelsdóttir* http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1623-8297
*Tatiana Chemi* http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4695-585X

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