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Are theatre and business links relevant? A conceptual paper and a case study

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine why theatre-business links are relevant to management. The focus is on two types of links: using theatre techniques as a training method for managers, and using corporate theatre as a change management tool. The paper seeks to share an experience and tries to explicate the processes involved in order to explain the success of these two kinds of courses, both training theatre and corporate theatre (specifically, action theatre in this case).

Design/methodology/approach – This is a case study. Theatre has been taught for ten years at the Grenoble Graduate School of Business under the author's responsibility, and also the corporate theatre method is taught to initial students and to continuing training managers. This paper is based on those teaching experiences. To explain the relevance of both of theatre as a training tool and corporate theatre as a management tool, the author relates to both theories of body memory from neuroscientists and to the catharsis phenomenon.

Findings – The goal was to make hypotheses from the above theories which explain the process that takes place inside the manager undergoing training and to open further research.

Research limitations/implications – Main limitations come from the lack of established empirical and relevant measures of the effects of such theatre processes on participants' management abilities and from the lack of tools to measure the long-term effects of theatre.

Practical implications – The most important implication is that practitioners could make more relevant use of such techniques when designing training sessions or utilizing corporate theatre interventions.

Social implications – Social implications come from how the "human" face of theatre can help the personal development of managers, improving or changing their views on the world and other people.

Originality/value – Although theatre and business links are more than 20 years old, nobody has previously tried to understand the inner processes involved.

Keywords Managers, Training, Theatre, Self development, Communication skills,
Training manager, Theatre exercises, Corporate theatre, Personal development of managers,
Self-awareness communication abilities, Creativity

Paper type Conceptual paper

1. Relationships between theatre and business

Two relationships have developed between theatre and business in recent decades – theatre techniques as training tools and corporate theatre as a change management tool. We describe both and suggest reasons for their success, and outline one case that combines both management training and corporate action-theatre approaches.

2. Theatre as a relevant manager training tool

The first way theatre can be relevant to business practice is in providing management training tools. The professional training of actors in drama schools involves specific pedagogical methods which work on the essential elements of the actor's craft: body,

voice and emotions. These include some techniques which physically exercise and train the body and the voice (their main expressive instruments), and other techniques to develop their expressiveness, imagination and creativity – these latter are often given the portmanteau label "theatre games". To transfer pedagogical tools from the acting school to the business training environment, we need to understand the goals of organisations using theatre to train managers. There are two categories of goals (Barthélémy Ruiz, 1996): first, to develop verbal communication, negotiation and public speaking abilities, and second, to develop imagination and creativity. It seems that theatre training techniques constitute an original pedagogical approach to understanding people along both intellectual and emotional dimensions. Salgado (2008) has demonstrated the relevance of theatre techniques as management training tools by collecting the reactions of managers who have experienced theatre training programmes, as well as of their managers. In total, 88 per cent of the trainee managers – and 83.3 per cent of their managers – find the programmes "relevant" or "very relevant" to training for management. We have been using theatre as a means to train young business school students (as well as adult business students) for ten years. Courses (which are 12 or 15 hours long) generally take place at the start of larger programmes which usually also include more traditional elements, such as marketing, finance and human resource courses. In addition to the two objectives outlined above as the main goals (increasing communication and creativity), another indirect side-benefit appears: developing their sensory awareness seems to increase managers' awareness, of both themselves and others, and thus improves their ability to make positive contributions to team building.

2.1 Self-awareness

One goal is to increase managers' physical awareness of themselves and of others, which involves using exercises that require and encourage them to let go of their inhibitions and their self-consciousness, and contributes to the indirect goals of increasing their self-confidence and team-building abilities. For example, people stand in a circle and are asked to "give energy" to their neighbour with a simple clap of their hands and a look into their neighbour's eyes, passing that energy on round the circle. It seems very simple until there are several claps running at the same time! To succeed, people need to disconnect their minds from their analytical functions and concentrate only on the task at hand. Other "games" aim to increase participants' awareness of others – such as the mirror exercise. Two people stand face to face, one acts as a leader and makes a movement, the other copies it at the same time to create the effect of a mirror; then they swap the leadership role; by the end, both – or neither – are leading – they are simply moving together in harmony. Activities such as these increase participants' emotional intelligence and make their perception of others more sensitive. At the beginning of a session, to introduce people, I run an exercise with groups of three people where in a "first act", each must introduce one of the others to the audience but without speaking, and then, in a "second act" with speech: between the acts, the audience try to guess what the actors mean. This exercise demonstrates the importance of the using the body to expressing themselves: both they and the audience note the systematic loss of energy when they add speech. The main goal of this game is to introduce one of the theatre course objectives: to merge Acts 1 and 2, keeping their physical energy up while speaking.

2.2 Increase public expressing abilities

After these first games, aimed at increasing self-confidence, public speaking' abilities can be developed through theatre training exercises that focus on the voice, breathing and enunciation, finishing with an "anchoring" exercise. The enunciation (or articulation) exercises involve relaxing the jaw, and physically training the speech organs – the lips, tongue, teeth, etc. – with the aim of developing participants' ability to produce better sounds – vowels and consonants – by repeating exercise sequences to embed the necessary movements into their "physical memory", in the same way as athletes warm-up, or dancers learn new sequences of steps. In the anchoring exercise, they must come into the room, stand in front of the audience, look at it, and say, "Hello, I'm here". The actor must just be present, and adopt a neutral attitude, rather than giving a social "hello". The audience looks (but without being judgemental) for coordination between the actor's voice, movement and eye contact, observing if everything is indeed "here". These practices try to develop self-confidence in people and to let them simply "be there", without seeking to imitate any model, but instead just to have "presence", and be better understood, heard, seen and felt by the audience.

2.3 Increase creativity

To increase creativity, we use a variety of games built around a core technique called "improvisation" which means to "play something unforeseen, to not prepare in advance and to create spontaneously" (Pavis, 1996). Management training sessions include exercises to prepare for improvisation. In one I ask someone to make a physical movement, and the next person in the group to amplify the gesture, and so on, so that by the time the last person amplifies the movement, it can appear as an exaggerated emotion. Such movements should be created spontaneously, without participants thinking; the first could be a tiny movement – perhaps not a movement at all but just a posture – that the next player amplifies. Later, to help actors improvise we give them a framework, for example for two actors we give them a place (church, mountain, museum, etc.) and an emotion (happy and shy, or angry and fearful), but forbid them from using words, allowing them only using "gobbledegook", a muttered language. After several other physical exercises, we repeat the two-actor improvisations introducing words (one at a time) until at the end they can speak freely. Every exercise helps people get used to accepting the "empty space", inhabiting it just with their own creativity, and to gain confidence in their ability to create instantly, simply in response to the situation in which they find themselves and the stimulus of other people's inputs. This work develops a culture of finding solutions, encouraging participants to respond quickly and intuitively when faced with any situation – one of action rather than of analysis.

2.4 The suggested relevance of theatre exercises

Why and how are the training techniques used in the theatre relevant to training managers? A simple response is that anything managers learn that broadens their skills and capability bases and widens their experience, cannot do other than add to their ability to relate to other people – one of their key tasks. But we can make some more specific suggestions to explain the efficacy of using theatre techniques in managerial training.

   2.4.1 An equal playing field. Since very few participants will have been involved before in the theatre (or dance or other performing art), they are all at the same level,

without any preconception. This is important in the case of continuing training managers; one or two exercises will erase hierarchical links. The novelty of these "strange" games means that all participants are beginners, which makes the watching eyes of others less disturbing. Together, people release their minds; discover new universes and new languages, as if they were children playing. After the first three hours, we find that groups of different types (post graduate students, lifelong learning managers), all say, "We know each other as if we were thirty old friends". This feeling of familiarity breeds in-group trust which contributes to team building, and allows them to release their inhibitions very quickly, which gives them greater self-awareness and self-confidence.

2.4.2 Body and memory. Susan Goldin-Meadow (2010) asserts that the body and memory are strongly linked. She observed how children solving math problems used gestures or signs naturally, and noted that, in all learning processes, children who used signs memorised more than those who did. Adults use spontaneous gestures when they speak without being seen (on the phone, for example). People who are blind from birth make gestures even if they have never seen them used before – moreover, when blind people speak to each other, both use gestures in their conversation. These issues confirm that people need gestures to sustain memory, and theatre exercises based on this body memory help speakers be "congruent" in body and word. Thus, the body creates the voice, which creates speech, all in the service of a unique meaning.

2.4.3 Enhancing physical, emotional and creative freedom. Given that emotional intelligence exists, its development is necessary – so we need to know what its active components are. Antonio Damasio (1999), neuroscientist, defines emotion from a scientific point of view: "emotions are complicated sets of chemical and neuronal responses […] biologically given […] depending on brain mechanisms established innately […] all the emotions use the body as their theatre". Working on your body helps it to be free and to contribute to expressing your emotion. Applied to a person, creativity is the ability to improve or add value to their activities, their work and their whole lives (Dobbins and Pettman, 1997). There are four approaches of creativity, the four Ps: process, product, person and place (Kozbelt *et al.*, 2010). We focus on personal creativity, as characterised by their levels of openness, ideation, autonomy, expertise and exploratory behaviour. We believe body exercises develop exploratory behaviour, and feelings of openness to the self and the whole environment. Just as working on emotions could develop imagination and feeling, so it can enhance intuition.

Taken together, theatre training techniques can have great value to managers – increasing their self-confidence, awareness, creativity and intuition, and thus raising their personal and public effectiveness, as individuals and as team members. Essentially, they act on the individual – while the other element considered in this paper acts more on the body politic – the group, the department or the company that chooses to use corporate theatre for change management purposes.

3. Corporate theatre

The second way in which theatre can be relevant to business is via what is called corporate theatre. This approach involves theatre professionals analysing a company, diagnosing a specific problem, then writing, rehearsing and performing in front of the "protagonists" in order to try to help them recognise and/or solve the problem, or at least to facilitate positive change in the company.

One of the main definitions of corporate theatre is given by the famous William Shakespeare (1602), in Hamlet "Good my lord, will you see the players well bestowed? Do you hear me, let them be well used, for they are the abstract and brief chronicle of the time […]" (Act II Scene 2); "[…] the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image […]" (Act II Scene 3); "[…] the players cannot keep counsel; they'll tell all […] or any show that you'll show him: be not you a shame to show, he'll not shame to tell you what it means" (Act III Scene 2).

Hamlet asks the visiting players to play a scene showing the murder of a king in front of his uncle – who has, in fact, murdered the king (his own brother and Hamlet's father), married Hamlet's mother and seized the crown. In the same way, actors in corporate theatre can tell a company what no-one inside it can – although we hope with better outcomes than in Shakespeare's tragedy. Corporate theatre can take many forms, from "catalogue scenes" to "action theatre" (as shown in Figure 1), with employees having no, partial or full involvement, according to whatever goal the company defines – to inform and develop awareness, to change attitudes or to change behaviours.

3.1 Informing and developing awareness

Many corporate theatre companies have a "catalogue" of standard pre-written scenes which are not specifically tailored to any one company's situation but which can be used to tackle routine but stressful management problems – often involving such universal issues as team communication, recruitment, stress management, etc. The performance allows people to recognise themselves in the protagonists and via a
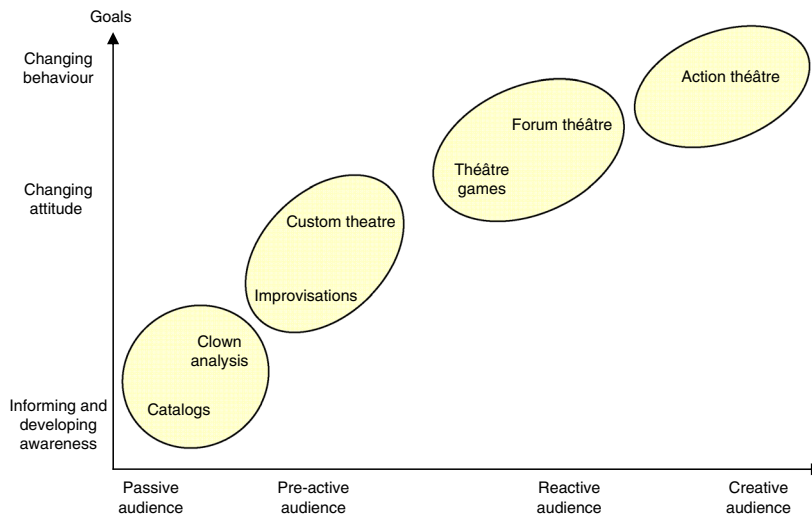
Notes: Passive audience: see the show and participate after;
Pre-active audience: in case of improvisation they participate, giving theme or in custom-made theatre, they participate upstream of the approach in the investigation phase;
Reactive audience: reactive involvement in the show;
Creative audience they write and play the scene

Figure 1.
Different corporate theatre depending on goals and audience involvement

theatrical phenomenon known as "catharsis", feel free afterwards to speak about the problem, and perhaps make progress towards solving it. Generally, the fact that it is presented in a public forum provides a distance that protects company members' emotions – but if they too strong, managers must resolve them in follow-up sessions, and coach employees in avoiding or releasing stress. When performed live, to people in a seminar setting, clown analyses and improvisations can raise managers' awareness of possible biases in their behaviours and the problems they can cause.

3.2 Changing attitudes

To change attitudes or opinions, they must be addressed as specifically and as deeply as possible, a need that led to the development of Custom theatre in Canada 25 years ago. In contrast to Catalogue theatre, Custom theatre consists of writing specific scenes which embody a company's particular problem. The method consists of three steps. First, the professional theatre company surveys managers and employees to find out as much as it can about the problem – which is why Figure 1 categorises this form as involving the audience "pre-actively" (i.e. before the event). Second, the company writes specific scene(s) to highlight the focal issue, seeking to reduce the distance between their scenes and "real life" by incorporating accurate detail (such as the company's specific language). Third, the scenes are performed in front of the people concerned, when the close alignment between the content of scenes and the audience's situation increases the power of the catharsis phenomenon. Clearly there is also a fourth step – the responsibility of management – of instituting a problem solving process.

3.3 Changing behaviours

At the extreme right of Figure 1 we note two further corporate theatre approaches that involve increasing levels of employee participation: Forum theatre and Action theatre.

Forum theatre, invented by the Brazilian director Augusto Boal (1971) as part of the "Theatre of the Oppressed" movement, again involves a theatre company writing original dramatic material for a specific problem and performing it to the relevant audience. However, the approach involves the scene(s) being play twice – on the second occasion audience members are invited to stop its progress and advise an actor as to what they think would be the actor's best response in the situation.

Action theatre involves company people in the whole process, from identifying the problem at the start, through writing and directing the scene (with help from a professional theatre director), up to performing their scenes in front of their audience of fellow employees. This total involvement gives company people both intellectual (seeing and analysing) and physical (acting in the play) understanding: we argue that both dimensions of intelligence increase the likelihood of changing behaviour.

3.4 How corporate theatre achieves its effects

3.4.1 Catharsis. This effect is described by the Greek philosopher Aristotle (1997): "Tragedy is an imitation made by characters in action and not by way of narration, and through pity and fear, accomplishes the purgation of such emotions". Catharsis is the purging of the audience's emotions by means of dramatic representation: by attending a theatrical performance, human beings can discharge their impulses, fantasies or anxieties by living through the hero or the situations depicted before their eyes. Therefore, catharsis means the transformation of emotion in thought ("to become

aware of our moral freedom" Schiller, in Pavis, 1996) and involves a distancing, or objectification – cleansed of their emotions by theatre intervention, people can achieve a new and more detached point of view of the problem. And this distance from the problem is a "sine qua non" condition for it to be solved: once the associated emotion no longer clouds an issue, it can be addressed rationally, which is the basis of the value of catharsis to solving management problems. Several thousand years after Aristotle, psychoanalyse created the concept of the "transactional object" (Winnicott, 1971). To consolidate our argument, we can build on the works of Ann and Carr (2011) linking storytelling and transitional object theory, and also on Michel Serre's (1995) "quasi-object" theory. Ann and Carr argue, first, that the play acts as a transitional object, linking the subjective and objective worlds, and second, as a quasi-object that create social links between audience members. These effects – of catharsis, and of "plays" as transitional objects and quasi-objects – seem to confirm how they can have real social impact and help people improve their situations.

3.4.2 Behaviour memory. In Forum or Action theatre, we can see how acting can generate behaviour memory. As noted above, movement can increase memory (Hosteller and Alibali, 2008). Blind people or phoning people make gestures when they speak, not for other but for themselves, helping them to remember how to say something (Goldin-Meadow, 2010). It explains a part of the success of Forum theatre. Ann and Carr show that memory would be a function of a transitional object; so there is a high likelihood than theatre increase emotional memory too. When employees act themselves (as in Action theatre), they create a potential space (Winnicott, 1971) between (in our case) the subjective world of the performance and the objective world of the firm and its problems.

To summarise we think that there are three effects explain the relevance of using theatre exercises as a manager training tool: the way their novelty removes hierarchical status; how developing physical memory yields dividends for personal expressiveness and communication abilities; and how improvisation exercises can release and develop creativity. On other hand, there are two hypotheses to explain the relevance of using corporate theatre as a management tool: the catharsis phenomenon and also the body memory by acting (in Forum and Action theatre). We integrate both approaches (training and Action theatre) in a single training course for managers, compounding their effects to build both people's self-confidence and creativity, and their detachment in managing a problem. The next section explains our dual approach in a case study setting.

4. Mixing training theatre and corporate theatre: a case study
4.1 Case description
The course – entitled "Knowing yourself and others, and staging company situations" – was developed for employees (of the National Railway Company) following an MBA executive level course in service management activities. Here, we describe the most important parts of the course and the results as reported by those who we trained, and by their managers at their companies. As its title suggests, the course has two goals. First, we focus on the personal development of managers to improve their self-knowledge and communication abilities, and increase their confidence in acquiring new abilities, and thus help build team solidarity, following the notion that repeated physical and voice exercises (as described above in Sections 2.1 and 2.2) will impact on their emotional intelligence. The first step is developing individuals'

self-confidence, the second developing their ability to trust in others and the third is freeing them to be able to create unrestrainedly in front of others.

The second part of the course involves using corporate theatre to dramatise company problems, when participants learn to distance themselves from the business and from the problem, and develop their own point of view, their imagination and their creativity. Following the above arguments about distancing and purging, we can identify two necessary steps for success. First, students must choose, analyse and diagnose a real problem they have encountered in the firm; second, they write, rehearse and perform a scene that deals with the problem so as to purge it of emotion, as a necessary step towards its solution. Participating employees perform their scene in front of an audience of company colleagues or professionals with same function, so there are two kinds of purging, of the actors and of the audience.

4.2 Results and student feedbacks

The session studied concerned National Railway Company employees and was a part of a broader programme that included courses in marketing service management, collective efficiency, management and sales techniques. The first result was the plays they created: four teams tackled four different issues – the arrival of new competitors in the market; the risk of technology evolution in a service environment; crisis communication and the need for service structure and people to adapt to e-business. Participants' evaluations of the value of the course scored on a scale from 1 (very negative) to 5 (very positive) – the average value given to the whole programme was 4.3, and this course gained 4.8, in 2009 and 4.9 in 2010:

(1) *The first goal: increasing self-awareness.* We received many comments like: "I really enjoyed this module that allowed the group to become stronger and for me to know myself and others better".

(2) *The second goal: improving public speaking abilities.* We found comments such as: "This course gave me a lot and I could already see a change during a public presentation in the company".

(3) *The third goal: increasing creativity.* We found other kinds of comments, such as: "we surpassed ourselves and we had fun learning", "we let off steam!", "Animated, pleasant and fun", with many participants using words around "pleasure of playing", "feeling very free". In the final session, railway company managers created a scene focused on the new competitor's company point of view, using a *Star War* analogy, while another group used a western environment to explain the service quality under stressed situation.

(4) *The first effect of corporate theatre: catharsis.* Many participants speak about creativity and enjoyable learning and all speak about self-discovery and increased consciousness of others. Very few speak about the real effect of the play they created. With other students, in other case, someone told: "Playing a character (physically, running his tasks), changes how I look at a person we will have under our control tomorrow".

(5) *The second effect of corporate theatre: body professional memory.* The only comment on this topic simply says "to create some plays relevant", but relevant to what is not clarified, we suppose it means relevant to their business.

Nor are there any comments that allow us to understand what happens in participants' inner selves: while they all say "It's a necessary course", none can explain precisely why. They seem unable to verbalise the processes that have occurred, although they do appear to perceive a link between the "let them be" attitude we promote in the games and the increases in their ability to manage their public relationships, and their creativity when faced with management questions when they return to work. We can make a link to the work of Salgado (2008), who evaluates the different parts of theatre courses. As we found in the qualitative evaluation of our course, improvisation seems to yield the best value (e.g. "an improvisation session could be organized to improve the ability to face stressful situations"). The part Salgado perceives as less relevant are the body exercises, and in our case the physical component is the only part of the course which received no comments, probably because the direct link with a professional context is the most difficult to make. Moreover, the end-of-course evaluations are given in writing, and words are limited in their ability to explain feelings of the body – when asked for a comment, participants try to rationalise with their analytical brain, which may not be appropriate.

5. Conclusion: further research to understand
5.1 Managers and their bodies
To understand the efficacy of using theatre techniques in management situations, further research would have to measure the links between the body and management. First, the connections between the body and self-awareness – for example, how can physical exercises bring about a better consciousness of self? Second, the connections between the body and better awareness of others – i.e. how does physical perception of others leads to a wider overall understanding of them? Third, the connections between the body and creativity – how is it that when I let my body express itself naturally, what it does is creative, and develops my intuitive ability? Finally, we need to explore the obvious link between the body, voice and emotional exercises and public speaking efficiency, seeking an inner-body rather than a technical explanation. The central role of the body cannot be studied via such traditional tools as surveys and participant evaluations – rather people could be observed via video and/or voice recordings, comparing their expressiveness at the start of the course and at the end, when they perform their play. To measure creativity we must use creativity tests (e.g. asking participants to suggest several names for a product at the start of the course in a limited time, and repeating the same test at the end of the course to see if they come up with more ideas).

5.2 The long-term issue
Established measures can be employed at the end of courses, and will often be based on participants' evaluative responses. But if theatre interventions – both training and corporate theatre – have the potential to create new kinds of relationships between managers and their environments, measuring their long-term implications, for both individual participants and for their companies, will be a challenging task.

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