Looking Back on Organizational Theater

Daved Barry
Clarkson University

Abstract

Using a retrospective, personal narrative approach, I detail my evolving understanding of when Organizational Theater (OT) works and when it doesn't. With this, I highlight the importance of working with OT professionals, speculate on what to do when there are no pros around to help, and conclude with some brief observations on how current social trends and changes in technology might affect OT's future.

Key words: Organizational theater, organizational change and development, management learning and education, management consulting, organization theory, organizational behavior, organization design

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Starts, Stops, and Hiccups

This essay is kind of a Back-to-the-Future look at Organizational Theater—sans a fast car, curvature of space, and a clever script. As I'm interested in inviting readers into the lived world of OT, I've deliberately written it in a recollective, personal narrative form. Is it research? Yes, if you count exploratory journeying, lots of trials & errors, and perhaps alchemy as methods. But I think my hard science colleagues would say no; there's no objectivity here.

Let me begin by saying that of all the arts-business mediums and interventions I've tried, OT ranks as perhaps the most powerful. It can lead to profound "ahas" and long lasting insights (cf. Antal, 2014; Chemi, 2017; Chemi & Du, 2017, Meisiek and Barry 2008; Meisiek and Barry, 2018; Sköldberg, Woodilla, & Antal, 2015). Yet it's also one of the most difficult to do well. In the hands of a master it can take people to great heights, and in the hands of a dilettante…well, Icarus comes to mind.

My work with it began in the 1990's, when I was a new, naïve assistant professor at Syracuse University's business school. The times there were heady. My senior colleagues were training in Gestalt psychology and running confrontational T-groups with conservative MBAs. I'd spent a decade studying in the opposite setting—a city-sized state university driven by nose-to-the-grindstone positivism. It was like waking up in Wonderland, replete with Mad Hatters and Cheshire Cats.

I'd landed as a Strategy professor, teaching part time MBAs. They were mid-level managers and many had families to get home to on top of working 50-60 hour weeks. Class went from 7 to 10pm, and they arrived bleary-eyed and tired. I tried enacting a stereotype I had of perky Harvard professors waltzing their students through mesmerizing HBS cases. But my students came from rust-belt surroundings and could care less about boardroom CEOs, or how Coke should answer Pepsi's challenge. Given their malcontent, I wondered if my interests in the arts could be brought into business settings. The business settings I'd worked in were mostly soul-sucking black holes, and the art settings I'd been in were mostly the opposite. So I imagined that the one could help the other. I started bringing in applied art methods, particularly those used by art therapists. I grew up with model railroads and was pretty good at papier-mâché mountains, so I asked the students to model the HBS case problems in paper, wood, and paint. Maybe it was because the task was so alien from their daily routines, or that they got to be kids again, or that it required imagination—or all three—but somehow the class turned around and the students became energized.

At the time I didn't have a clue about what was causing what, but I thought perhaps I was onto something and started diving deeper into the more esoteric art therapy literature. I read how sociodrama and its even scarier cousin, psychodrama, could save families and transform communities…and thought if they could do this, maybe they could liven up HBS cases as well. Until then, my theater experience consisted of being a tree in an elementary school play, but I carried on and asked some of the more adventurous students to pretend they were the characters in the case, imagine what they would say, and act it out. Enter OT realization stage left: OT is *complicated*. Professional actors and directors make it look so easy. But it's not. Being MBAs, my MBAs asked many pointy questions: "Should I be the character in the case or be myself in that job description?" "Clearly these people know more than is written here; do you have more information?" "The company in the case has gone bankrupt; shouldn't we be working with one that's doing better?" I could only answer "do

your best" while trying to affect a knowing professorial gaze. The OT sessions ended up going surprisingly well, but in retrospect I think different case material—cases reflecting mid-level management issues—could have been more effective.

From Role Plays to Simulations

My next dive into OT was running the Looking Glass behavioral simulation developed by the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL). Though not OT from a professional theater perspective, it has many theatrical elements. In brief, it is a structured role play for up to 24 participants, where each person is an executive working for the fictitious Looking Glass multinational corporation. Each participant gets an innocuous brown envelope filled with memos, a brief description of the company, and a two line job description. The memos are cleverly constructed around several hundred problems, and have multiple hidden dilemmas. You might find that your division desperately needs money, that someone else has money to lend, and that there's another division that equally needs money. Unbeknownst to you, the person with the money has information that your division could be axed…so, fireworks are in the making. In the five day version that CCL ran in the 90's, participants were broken into four rooms with message runners. The simulation ran all Monday and was videoed. During the remaining days, video clips of key moments were played and discussed, and Friday was used to form personal development goals for the following year.

CCL had an inexpensive university edition and based on the roleplay successes with the MBAs, I decided to give it a go—this time this time with seniors taking an Organizational Behavior course. Because of their schedules, we played it on a Saturday and debriefed it over the remaining classes. It worked remarkably well. The beauty of Looking Glass, especially for me with zero dramaturgic training, was that it ran itself. The students rapidly dove into it, and though few of them had any work experience, they nevertheless learned far more about organizational behavior than through any other medium I had tried. Years later I would meet graduates who said that their hard won Looking Glass insights had fundamentally boosted their careers. The experiment was exhausting to run, at least solo the way I did, but I resolved to try it again, this time in New Zealand at the University of Auckland where I took my next job.

Unfortunately, my version of Looking Glass got lost in the move and CCL stopped selling the university edition. So I tried making my own…or rather, had one of my classes on Organizational Change make a version that was played by another of my classes in Organizational Behavior. I was working with Master of Science students, mostly in their early 20's, and they were bright, imaginative, and adventurous. The class tasked with making the simulation opted to create a publishing company with four divisions: a business magazine group, a women's magazine group, a nature publishing group, and a travel guide group. They went beyond the CCL version by creating sets; e.g., the office of the women's magazine division was pink, frilly, and personalized, while the business publishing office was dark and severe. Scheduling became the hardest challenge and I've since found that this is a recurring issue amongst OT practitioners—how do you get busy, time-is-money people to take extended, defamiliarizing, and often uncomfortable detours into strange lands?

Looking back, I think that having students craft their own simulations has both plusses and minuses. On the one hand, the Auckland project was more fun than Looking Glass, as the students drew on their stereotypes of the different industries and playfully exaggerated their roles. And because it was their own creation, there was a lot of ownership and dedication. On the other hand, I could see that the writers of Looking Glass—some of whom were playwrights—had incorporated many more layers into their work. Like a great book,

Looking Glass invited participants at a surface level, only to lead them into deeper, more tectonic considerations.

The Pros

Around this time, I started discovering how professionally trained dramaturges work and how someone with gifts in this can make magic happen. I saw Steve Taylor running his plays at the Academy of Management. "Capitalist Pigs" (Taylor, 2000) was one of the first and I recall standing ovations for it. Hans Hansen came to New Zealand when I was at Victoria University in Wellington, bringing with him considerable training in comedy and theater from the States and we co-taught a class on creativity. I watched Hans draw out and encourage the students, challenge them with simple but powerful improvisation exercises, and skillfully move the energy of the class across many planes: intensely personal, uproariously funny, quietly contemplative, and everything in-between. Comparatively, I was the clumsy dilettante mentioned earlier.

This same revelatory pattern continued after I moved to Denmark and started formally researching OT with Stefan Meisiek—who had made OT the subject of his PhD (cf. Meisiek, 2002). We were working for Learning Lab Denmark, and one of the projects there—the Organization Theater Summit and the resulting Thin Book of Organizational Theater (Darsø, Meisiek, and Boje, 2007)—became the Woodstock of OT. The summit brought together well known OT people from Europe, North America, and Australasia to work, play, and make the material for the book, and it resembled a theater troupe full of colorful characters and wonderful performances. In one fell swoop, I got to see how the best of the best worked and thought, and started realizing that I would never be able to do what they did or have what they had…especially that theatrical savior faire that seemed such an integral part of their DNA.

As this soaked in, I considered taking a "little a" approach to OT—instead of a "Big A", Art World perspective (Barry, 2008). Maybe I could appreciate OT as a spectator and aesthete. With this in mind, I started looking at some of the stage performances used to assist organizational development. One of the highs was seeing the work of Boal-inspired Dacapo, and how they created invaluable organizational outcomes, ones that succeeded in part because they defied their corporate briefs (Meisiek and Barry, 2008). One of the lows was seeing a highly theatrical production called "Foot and Hose", presented to workers in a Norwegian mining operation, deep down in one of the mining and foundry areas…reminiscent of Tolkien's Mordor. It epitomized what Tim Clark and Ian Mangham (2004a, 2004b) term "corporate theatre", essentially propagandistic uses of theater to sway employees, investors, or both. In their wonderful tongue-in-cheek critique, they note the key differences between corporate, and what I now call inquiry theater. Inquiry theater "highlights what is and what might be." (2004a: p. 54).

> "In contrast, corporate theatre is not democratic. It owes no debt to these forms of theatre [e.g., situational, forum, inquiry]. Instead it is informed by the conventions of Broadway, the West End, television and advertising. It is about creating a piece of theatre that reflects the wishes of a particular organizational group. Consequently it is not about creating circumstances in which audience members feel empowered and liberated to develop their own new understandings of their working lives. Rather, it appears to be used to contain reflection and to promote the views of a particular group within an organization." (Clark and Mangham, 2004a: p. 55).

I couldn't agree more. I find corporate theater to be a kind of OT doppelgänger that sneaks in under the radar and often does subtle damage. In our fieldwork on arts-based interventions, Stefan Meisiek and I found numerous instances of this—where entertainment-based, song-and-dance OT productions were sold to unwitting business owners, and where the employees concluded that it was a waste of time and even coercive (Meisiek and Barry, 2018).

Try Try Again

Having noted the coercive aspects of corporate theater, there is some element of coercion in any OT work I've seen or tried, and perhaps needs to be. I have two more vignettes around this. The first is a graduate class in organizational change that I ran at Copenhagen Business School and where Mogens Holm—the director of Culture Copenhagen (Kunst og Kultur; Art and Culture)—had kindly agreed to have his organization be the "client" for the class. As background, Culture Copenhagen is tasked with bringing together and elevating art and culture in Copenhagen. Mogens had successfully run a theater on Copenhagen's outskirts and was a genuine theater person; director, producer, actor, all of it. Caught up in theatrical enchantment, I opted to have my students make and perform a play that artfully depicted Culture Copenhagen's challenges. Yes, you think I would have given up on this kind of thing given my previous OT encounters. But this was just too tempting.

The class had around 50 students, and I asked them to become a consulting OT organization. Working off of my amateur-hour understanding of what OT requires, I thought that we first and foremost needed a director. Unfortunately, when I asked "Who of you has theater experience?", only two raised their hands. The first was a Swiss Army captain. He looked like Schwarzenegger and could shake the building with his voice—and had once been Peter Pan in a school play. A Canadian woman who had once played Snow White was second. And so they became the co-directors and set to organizing the others, many of whom were economics and finance people.

Two months into the semester, disaster seemed imminent. The class had come up with many staging ideas, had run through numerous cost-benefit analyses of the options, had spread-sheeted everything, and had fallen into a classical paralysis-by-analysis trap. I had no idea of what to do, other than call for help. In this case, help arrived as Claus Springborg, a colleague who lived nearby and who was another real-deal theater person. He walked into the class, very tall, very serene and poised (among his many other talents, Claus is a tango master), and with laser-like directness asked "What are your options?" The students stuttered and harrumphed, and then started listing their many ideas. Claus said, "Okay, I want you to demo each one in 2 minutes or less …I'm keeping time." One group said, "But we can't act it out—our idea has goldfish migrating across a screen." Claus said, "You, you, and you are the goldfish and you, you, and you are the screen. Now get to it."

Acting out all the options took 30 minutes, and Claus was ever the calm and immovable director, impervious to the wishes of the various idea champions. Then he introduced a decision screen that perhaps had never been used at CBS. He asked, "Which of these has the best energy?" It was obvious that three buzzed, and the rest didn't. He then said something like, "Now you know, and good luck" and headed off with the wind—a bit like Mary Poppins. In less than an hour, he had accomplished what we couldn't in two months of work. The resulting OT plays—all three variants were performed somewhat like David Boje's description of Tamara (Boje, 1995)—were greatly applauded by the Culture Copenhagen employees and became a baseline for several change initiatives. It was almost epic in how it went against all the odds and once again illustrates the difference that an OT professional

can make. It also illustrates that artful approaches to change can be just as functional as their "strictly business" counterparts.

This brings me to my last illustration, which is about what to do if no pros are around. Takaya Kawamura, one of the editors of this special issue, invited me to run some kind of workshop with his health/social care MBA students in Osaka. The kicker was that in previous years he had invited numerous OT pros to do the same thing, so the bar was high. Takaya's course revolved around big themes and challenges. When I visited, his theme was "Decent Work", which is almost an oxymoron in Japanese culture and simultaneously a foundation of contemporary Scandinavian culture. Within Sweden, where I was working at the time, "decent work" means working hard and working for the good—both one's own good and the collective good. But as Takaya told me, the Scandinavian version of decent work is alien to Japanese thinking. In Japan, decency equates to flawless performance and work is what one does 110% of the time. Takaya's students were the crème-de-la-crème of Japanese healthcare—top neurosurgeons, CEOs of hospital groups, and directors of large nursing associations. I knew I couldn't come close to the theater-based workshops of my predecessors, so I went for something less theatric but still related: videos of decent work. When I introduced the brief—make a video of decent work within your field of work—I could see that I'd dropped yet another big bomb, something inconceivable, crazy, and clumsily Western. But this was Japan, indefatigable all the way, and Takaya's students gave it their all. The resulting videos bordered on capital A art—subtle, elegant, and profoundly moving. One video by a hardened and grizzled CEO brought forth tears. As with my Copenhagen example, I was amazed by what can happen when a big creative challenge is accepted by bright, hard-working, and resourceful people.

Looking Forward

So this has been the backwards part of my Back to the Future. Futuring on, I think there are a number of things to be mindful of. As I've indicated throughout, bringing in OT professionals is highly advisable. Theater is an extreme profession, with a very few high profile people who make great wages, and the vast majority who make peanuts…but who are often extremely talented, intrinsically motivated, and who excel at transformation. Plus, they can frequently be found right in one's neighborhood. In addition, I think it's very helpful to bring in "extras" who can assist with the social and logistical sides. For instance, with the Japan project, creative psychologist Rebecka Jensen and management consultant Natsumi Yamada provided extensive support and encouragement, especially when the participants were feeling lost, and this directly contributed to the project's success.

Onto futures proper, there are many currents that are shaping what's next. One is the availability and ubiquity of theatrical advice on the internet—how to stage, light, storyboard, sequence, direct, and produce theatrical engagements. With the concomitant need to stage one's material within vimeos and youtubes, I think we'll see many more amateurs doing OT of some sort. This could work against or for the OT profession as a whole. For instance, smart phone photography has simultaneously decimated photojournalism while improving business for professional photographers where buyers have become sensitized to the things that they can't do with their phones. Wedding and portrait photography are cases in point.

Another current to watch is the growing divide between corporate theater and inquiry theater. Corporate theater has become more sophisticated and business-based over the years, and increasingly adept at covering its profiteering roots. I think organizations like Dacapo are holding the line, but I wonder for how long. They adhere to being genuinely inquiry based, and they have a great word-of-mouth reputation, but is this enough to fend off their competitors' Madison Avenue style marketing?

Finally, I'm guessing that OT will increasingly move beyond organizational engagements and into more distant realms like engineering and science. Dorthe Bille (2020) set the stage for this back in 2004 with her Science Theatre (Videnskabs Teatret), which dramaturgically explores science problems and issues. Now, both where I work and at other technological universities, I'm seeing engineering and science students using dramaturgic methods to stage and video their inventions. The same is true of entrepreneurship students trying to pitch their business ideas. As video and audio continue to displace reading, I can imagine a time when some form of OT will be the norm rather than the exception. Curtains up!

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About the Author

Daved Barry is the Gates Professor of Innovative Business Culture at Clarkson University in New York, and is Adjunct Professor of Innovation at Jönköping University in Sweden. Previously he held the Banco BPI Chair in Creative Organization Studies (Nova University, Portugal) and the Victoria University Chair in Creative Organization Studies (New Zealand). He completed his BA in Psychology and his PhD in Strategic Management and Organizational Psychology at the University of Maryland. His teaching and research focus on how design, the arts, and studio methods can improve innovation, leadership, organizing, and problem solving.