

## ***Through the Reading Glasses: A Performer's Perspective***

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When Steve's email arrived inviting me to participate in the performance of *Through the Reading Glasses* at the forthcoming Art of Management and Organization Conference in Copenhagen (August 2014) I was both flattered and frightened. I am familiar with Steve's work, having mounted his play *Ties That Bind* here in Auckland, and acted in the play *Cow Going Abstract* at the Banff AoMO Conference in 2010. Although performer at heart, and always ready for an opportunity, I doubted if I had the emotional energy to put into preparing for this production.

I arrived at the morning rehearsal discombobulated (obscure directions were written at the bottom of the script's title page: "9AM in Ks71 at the ground floor in Kilen"). After travelling about 36 hours alone to a completely foreign country, and with only one recovery day, I was exhausted. My colleague and I decided to walk from our apartment to the rehearsal venue, doubling the time it took because of my disorientation (the sun is in the wrong place in the Northern Hemisphere, and I was nearly run down several times by cyclists coming unexpectedly out of nowhere at break-neck speeds). But it was the requirement to rap that became the focus of my anxieties.

Here's the thing with a staged reading of one of Steve's plays; although you have the security of the script, the performing demands are rigorous. Projecting the voice out and pacing the dialogue so that it doesn't flag are standard requirements. But singing and rapping require much more courage than I imagined. Indeed, before the rehearsal began I asked Claus Springborg, who wrote the music for the play, to teach me to move and dance like a real rapper. He graciously declined and after persistent requests he said that my clumsy inept rapping was exactly he and Steve were looking for. I swallowed my pride, but thought, "I'm will look like a prize idiot!"

During the post-play gathering, I was engaged in conversation with a fellow conference participant. He asked me, "Did Steve discuss with you the content of the play when he was writing it?" I was somewhat baffled by the question, and wanted to declare to him, "The author is dead!" Clearly that was not the case, given the "author" was a few steps away mingling with the crowd, and for this interlocutor, the author was very present to him in his thinking. He probed a little further musing, "I wonder how much the play reflects your own academic journey". I assured him "No, I'm just a performer. No, I never discussed the play with Steve".

But the question disturbed me. In spite of Steve's exhortations in the weeks prior to the conference, I had not dedicated myself to learning my part. Indeed, I arrived at the first rehearsal not fully understanding what the play was about. While I had rehearsed my

songs and had tried to capture the rhythms of the rap sections, I had given the play only a cursory reading.

Agreeing to participate in the play was an act of faith because earlier in that year I experienced a deep personal crisis. As a result, I had very low enthusiasm for my work, and just getting up in the morning and getting on with each day was all I could cope with. Throughout that period I remember being gripped by moments of anxiety that would only shift by deliberate self-talk; with me telling myself to ground myself in the moment. So the role of being the Prof on stage, a man filled with professional doubt and disillusionment was not my experience, and yet the character resonated with me at a deep visceral level. There were moments during the performance where I felt anxiety wanting to return. I felt like running from the stage, and at times even breaking down in frustration. I felt dark.

They say that the show must go on, and in my self-talk I recognized that to melt down in public would bring me disgrace, and would implicate my co-actors in a world outside the play, of which they had no knowledge. I told myself that I could not allow my personal life to invade my professional life. And perhaps that's what acting does: it forces the separation between the world of the play and life outside that immediate context. For me, the act of faith was to live the play. My "virtual" world became the actual world of the play while my "real" world virtually carried on in a parallel universe. The act of stepping onto the stage meant that I could change my glasses and experience a different reality.

Perhaps *Through the Reading Glasses* is not about a new world of virtual reality. Perhaps it is more about a nostalgic desire to revisit key moments of our lives, to rewind, replay and recreate them differently. And perhaps this is the genius of it: reconstructions of our life experiences may indeed be different if we were to change our spectacles.