

The Aesthetics of Applied Theatre: An Interview

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Theatre applied for business: Actors of the Berlin based organisational theatre agency Inszenio perform a play about the importance of intercultural competence in front of managers. Photo: Fabian Lempa

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Interview with Fabian Lempa, Research Associate in the ERC project "The Aesthetics of Applied Theatre" at Freie Universität Berlin (Germany), about applied theatre interventions in and for companies. Conducted by Kamila Lewandowska, Assistant Professor at Aleksander Zelwerowicz National Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw (Poland)

Kamila Lewandowska: *What is the aim of the Aesthetics of Applied Theatre project and what was the rationale of launching it?*

Fabian Lempa: The project is funded by the *European Research Council* and addresses a wide range of forms of theatre which are summarized under the umbrella term "applied theatre". That means types of theatre that don't usually occur in traditional theatre institutions, but rather find their way into social contexts in order to set in motion various and specific constructive processes of change. Thus, applied theatre means a theatre with clear social, political, or economic aims and you can currently find it in numerous areas. In our subproject *Theatre in Education*, for example, one field study deals with educational theatre programs in South Africa and Zimbabwe and another with theatre projects conducted in Mexican youth prisons. In our second subproject, *Theatre in Conflict Zones*, there is a study focusing on theatre projects against the background of the Greek financial crisis and one about art and theatre work in Israel and Palestine. The subproject *Theatre as Therapy* includes two field studies on psychodrama and drama therapy, which examine theatre-based therapy practices in Germany and the USA. Within our last subproject *Corporate Theatre*, my colleague Florian Evers analyses assessment centres as theatrical devices and I deal with theatre forms which are used to support and fulfill specific objectives of postmodern companies, like change management processes, conveying information, conflict resolution, corporate culture or human resources development.

The reason for launching *The Aesthetics of Applied Theatre* was the observation that previous studies on applied theatre interventions have almost exclusively focused on issues of institutional conditions, intended effects and the measurability of results, and hardly considered other important dimensions, primarily the *aesthetical*. We aim to explicitly determine what these applied theatre interventions look like in detail, which aesthetic conceptions underlie the performances and what the theatre makers expect of these aesthetic approaches.

Furthermore the project brings light to the widely neglected ethical issues of applied theatre. As recent studies on the aesthetics of performance have emphasized, the contingency and the emergent nature of performances, characterized by the interplay between actors and spectators, are neither controllable nor predictable. No one can control how a performance is perceived and neither actors nor spectators can claim to control the unfolding or the effect of a performance. These consequences of emergence and contingency of applied theatre, which entail risks for all participants, imply great responsibility for the facilitators of the interventions. The project therefore explores how those and other ethical risks are considered within applied theatre. And lastly, the project deals with numerous political questions which are raised regarding applied theatre interventions. For example, aesthetic forms already determine what becomes perceptible and what remains concealed, who may or may not take part in artistic processes. These are political decisions. One must also bear in mind that the chosen theatrical forms are often positioned within contexts that are charged with conflict or are institutionally determined.

Kamila Lewandowska: *Why did you decide to investigate the interrelation of business and theatre? What is the nature of this interrelation?*

Fabian Lempa: For some years, social and cultural sciences have been stating the rising theatricality of all spheres of society. Put in highly simplified terms, this means an ascertainable increase in the importance of concepts, qualities and procedures from the world of theatre for other social areas. And the symptoms of this tendency are ubiquitous. For example, we – most evident in our media discourses – use theatre metaphors to describe the behaviours and appearances of politicians, the processes of soccer games or religious processions, staging these social events as spectacles. But it is not only a metaphorical phenomenon. We are, at the same time, participants of these social realities which we describe with theatre vocabulary. So we have to play certain roles, to present ourselves in specific ways and to be social actors in these “cultural performances”.

In my opinion, a clear difference between theatre and economy, which is still popularly assumed, can't be perpetuated against the background of this diagnosis. Rather it has to be considered that both spheres, theatre and economy, are strongly interrelated. As Boltanski and Chiapello have shown in their research about the *New Spirit of Capitalism*, the economy has adapted artistic claims and critiques, generating structures based on them. This internalization of art (and artist) values has also led to an openness for the use of art in general. Art forms of all kinds, not only theatre, are fixed and established components within internal company development programs. In the recent past, there has been a lot research activity about artistic intervention in organizations. Moreover, especially within the economic discourse, working models and ideas associated to the theatre sphere are currently often used as new models for work in enterprises. For example, managers are compared to directors, leadership is interpreted as an art.

On the other hand, even traditional theatre institutions, like state and municipal theatres, have to be seen as companies that have to make profit in order to exist. Today a lot of theatre productions are results of teamwork processes which are planned in strict timetables. And beyond these few indications, there are many more similarities between companies and theatres than we might think. In the case of applied theatre for business, the companies provide stages for many actors who may not have found their way into traditional art theatre contexts. Companies are therefore new, postmodern options for theatre people living their passion without giving up on possibilities for acting work.

Kamila Lewandowska: *Can theatre be applied in companies to achieve business goals? How? What goals?*

Fabian Lempa: From an historical point of view, the first part of the question, whether it can be “applied”, clearly has to be answered with “yes”. Since almost three decades a huge variety of different forms of applied theatre in and for companies has been appearing, which address a lot of diverse objectives.

For example, many enterprises are ordering so called tailor-made plays, which mean plays exclusively written for and suited to a certain company. Those are often used to put the spotlight on actual problems and relevant issues. For example, as a theatre provider told me in an interview, a big car company had problems with increasing medical leaves of its employees. So he was commissioned to write a theatre play which was performed in front of the whole staff and intended to create awareness for the high level of costs the raising absence rate implied. Another company I observed in March 2015 had a bigger restructuring process of its IT sector, which entailed a lot of new challenges for the employees (e.g. new ways of communicating, new areas of responsibility, new hierarchy structures). Six of these challenges were transformed in specific theatre scenes and performed during a staff meeting by professional actors. In this case, the tailor-made theatre intervention was meant to convey

to employees that the company management was aware of their needs and the visualization was the starting point for intensive discussions about thinkable solutions for the represented issues.

Besides those very specific plays there are also plays about more general business topics such as burn-out-prevention, time management or work safety, which mainly aim to inform and make the employees sensitive to these topics. Furthermore there are theatre groups that go into the companies and develop performances with the employees themselves that are finally presented in front of colleagues and bosses. The objective behind that is often to support teambuilding dynamics or to raise the self-confidence of the acting employees or their self-presentation skills. Moreover, there are theatre-based workshops within the staff development or diverse improvisational theatre forms which were especially played during parties and festivities – often with the aim to entertain.

To sum up, you can say that in many current cases theatre is used to inform, to entertain, to raise awareness for problems, to develop or to give an initial impulse for changing a specific company situation. The companies' specific situation, which has to be jointly analyzed by both the theatre maker and the company clients in preparation of the theatre intervention, determines what kind of theatre is used.

Kamila Lewandowska: *What is the role of the Aesthetics of Applied Theatre project in incorporating theatre methods into business? (e.g. organize theatre workshops or study the initiatives that are already happening).*

Fabian Lempa: The project does not intend to directly incorporate theatre methods into business contexts as a kind of research outcome. Rather it aims to entirely explore the wide field of theatrical activities in economy, which currently exists, and to make it accessible for a theatre studies approach, our education and, of course, for the social discourse. This intention makes it necessary to bridge gaps between theory and practice, to get in contact and start a conversation with theatre makers and actors, but also with business clients, managers and employees, basically with everyone involved in this theatre.

To do this, we are first and foremost carrying out extensive field work within all the contexts of applied theatre, and in my case in companies. Besides that, we are also conducting workshops in the framework of our university research periodically – always in cooperation with experienced applied theatre practitioners. In 2014 we had such an event, in which we brought together experts from business theatre and those who apply theatre in therapeutic contexts to discuss commonalities and differences between their ways of working. It was very impressive to see that theatre in therapy settings has an extremely high level of economical aspects on the one side, while theatre in companies also has a strong therapeutic dimension regarding the used techniques and circulating ideas.

As another example, within our teaching work, we make excursions with our students to organizational theatre makers which give us concrete insights in their concepts, ideas and performances. And, as a last example, in the past winter semester I gave a seminar with the title "Staging Business – Theatre in Companies", in which we invited people who usually participate in theatre interventions in enterprises in different roles. So we talked with two providers of business theatre about their working concepts. Furthermore we discussed the use of theatre and art for cultural changes with the leader of the culture office of a German logistics enterprise, and with another guest, a former top-manager from the pharmacy branch, we spoke about applying theatre in change management processes. Moreover we entered into dialog with two actors and one actress experienced in many different organizational theatre formats who spoke about the specific challenges of working artistically in economical contexts.

We also simulated a manager seminar with an external trainer who gave us insights into the broad spectrum of improvisational theatre techniques he used in companies.

Kamila Lewandowska: *What is your role as a researcher and what methodology do you use (e.g. participant observation)?*

Fabian Lempa: In my research I consciously refer to a wide range of different methods and techniques of sociology, ethnography and, in particular, theatre studies. I conducted many qualitative interviews with the theatre makers and with the corporate members before, during and after the interventions. I also joined several company events as participant observer, made notes and preserved them via audio or – if allowed – video recorder. Furthermore I used short surveys with open-ended questions and collected source documents such as playbooks, program flyers, performance videos, reference books of the theatre providers, marketing brochures, numerous printed articles on theatre interventions from the last 20 years, and much more.

The main methods used, however, originate from theatre studies. On the one hand, I produced so called “memory protocols” of the observed performances as soon as possible following the event, which contain detailed descriptions of the happenings during the performance in combination with my own feelings, thoughts and subjective impressions. This approach is very flexible as it doesn’t degrade the introspective perceptions of the analyzing subject. So my memory protocols were always composed of a balanced fluctuation between the description of the actions, the general framework, the spaces, people’s movements, the emerging sentiments and my own reflections, emotions, perceptions as a researcher and part of a social reality, which my presence – this has always to be considered – co-produced. And the second method I used from theatre studies is the well-established instrument of performance analysis which enables to explore the different layers and dimensions of theatre performances.

Kamila Lewandowska: *Could you give a/some concrete example(s) of the use of theatre methods in business organisations? Could you share your impressions as a participant/observer?*

Fabian Lempa: Besides the already mentioned example of the company that used theatre to support an IT restructuring process by addressing its challenging side effects, I have participated in and observed a lot of other exciting theatre interventions in business over the last three years.

For example, I took part in an evening reception of a financial service provider who invited important business customers, for the most part bank directors, from all over Germany. Four actors were hired to conduct a so-called “Walk Act” during the event, meaning a particularly interactive theatre form, in which the performers don’t play on a stage, but instead act directly amongst the guests in certain roles seeking to create playful moments with them through improvisation. In this particular case, the actors formed two couples. One presented themselves as tourism commissaries of Berlin and did an entertaining knowledge quiz about the city and regional dialect with the guests. The other two actors slipped into the roles of a married couple, afraid of losing their savings and wanting advice from the bankers as to how they could invest their money well, thereby initiating funny conversations and short, cheerful competitive games like arm wrestling. The Walk Act took almost three hours and pursued two aims: the first was to entertain and ensure a casual atmosphere. The second, which was the internal objective of the event organizers, was to convey a dynamic, innovative and “human” image of their company through the use of a lively theatre format.

A further example, which I will only describe briefly, is the use of theatre for personal development that I researched through participant observation and interviews at a leading chemical company over a period of ten months. There, in different seminars, young managers learnt to give feedback and to improve their communication skills when handling stressful and challenging conversations with employees. For that, they did role-plays with professional actors, so-called "seminar actors", who assumed the roles of real existing employees trying to represent them as authentically and realistically as possible. These actors functioned as learning partners or theatrical "crash test dummies", as a trainer called it once, and the theatre intervention served as a kind of "experimental lab" in which the seminar participants could try alternative behavior patterns and different communicative techniques. The commonality of both theatre forms lies, in contrast to more staged and less interactive variations, in turning employees into playing subjects, even if the manner in which they do this diverges. For me as an observer it was very interesting to see how the employees dealt with these situations in which they had much less control than they were accustomed to in their daily work life and entered a largely "unfamiliar territory".



Staging blunders: The Inszenio performers show what it might look like, if the intercultural skills of commercial travellers aren't sufficiently honed. **Photo: Fabian Lempa**

Kamila Lewandowska: *Do you think that effects of applying theatre methods in business can be measured? What kind of effects (and how) can be captured?*

Fabian Lempa: Before I answer this question, I have to clarify the central focus of my study. Even if the issue regarding the effects of applied theatre in business is essential and probably

the most obvious and asked question at all, it is of minor importance for the theatre studies approach I chose. Rather, two dimensions are addressed which have hardly been taken into consideration so far by the previous scientific discourses. First, I am more interested in the particular manifestation of theatre used in economy as an aesthetical process which – if you look on it from that perspective – reveals very specific kinds of aesthetic conditions and links to the theatre history. For example, elements and techniques of avant-garde theatre forms like Jakob Levy Moreno's *Psychodrama*, Bertolt Brecht's *Epic Theatre* or Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* can be identified. All these forms originally implying strong therapeutic or political ideas are currently suitably adapted for the economic context and modified. My second focus lies on the ethical dimension of theatre in business. Till today, there exist only few reflections and no larger studies about issues of responsibility, protection, self-determination, limits, power relations, moments of failure and other important aspects which mustn't be ignored when talking about theatre in general and much less when referring to applied theatre for companies in particular. So the aesthetical and the ethical dimensions are the both targeted.

But of course, and now I come back to your actual question, the effects, which theatre can indisputably have, shouldn't be ignored and a lot of scientific disciplines like the business studies and the social sciences endeavoured to study them in the recent past. From my point of view, which is especially a result of many talks with theatre practitioners and company managers about their measuring methods, there are hardly any possibilities of capturing the success of the applied theatre forms comprehensively. The most favoured indicators for a successful intervention are atmospherical and emotional snapshots, subjective evaluations and individual opinions from people involved, which were collected immediately or some weeks after the event by questionnaire surveys or personal interviews. This procedure generally captures mainly positive statements and doesn't seem very reliable because several elemental aspects remain unconsidered.

First, it is often ignored that several people stand to gain from the theatre event being perceived as "successful" afterwards. Many HR or project managers, who take responsibility for the use of theatre, have to justify the costs for it to their supervisors, so there exists a "pressure to succeed". Also it can't be ruled out that the questioned employees are not always able to answer honestly because they are afraid of consequences. So their replies could imply social desirability. Secondly, many participants of such theatre interventions are often very emotional directly after the theatre performances, but such reactions are no promises for long-term effects or changes. And thirdly, the power of theatre shouldn't be overestimated insofar as a single intervention is assumed as already sufficient to change the organization or its structures.

Kamila Lewandowska: *You write that "since the early 1990s, a particular convergence between business and theatre has occurred in Germany". How common is this trend in Germany and other countries? Do you think it is a growing trend?*

Fabian Lempa: The convergence between the spheres of economy and theatre is not a German phenomenon, but a global one. When organizational theatre hesitantly began developing in Germany in the early nineties, there was already a well-established organizational theatre branch in France, which began in the 1970s. Today you can find organizational theatre makers in almost every country in the world. Only recently I got an email from a scientist in Iran who told me about the use of special theater formats in local companies. Whether this can be read as a symptom of a growing global trend, I can not say. In Germany organizational theatre got its utmost media attention around the turn of the millennium when there only existed about two dozens of theatre providers and this possibility was largely unknown to most companies. Today, it attracts significantly less attention from

magazines and newspapers, but it is still used because many enterprises know about its qualities and already made experiences with it. Even the number of providers is considerably higher.

Kamila Lewandowska: *Do you collaborate with intermediary organisations (TILLT, Conexiones improbables etc.) or other universities within this project?*

Fabian Lempa: Yes, we work with scientific local experts and collaborate with several partner universities of every country in which we conduct our field studies. These research cooperations are of essential importance for a project such as ours which compares the forms of applied theatre with an international focus. Moreover, we are in contact with diverse theatre initiatives and applied theatre activists who we regularly invite to our project meetings so they can present their work to us. There is no direct contact with the named intermediaries *TILLT* or *Conexiones improbables*. However, I am member of AACORN, which is an international network of researchers focusing – as the title implies – on arts, aesthetics, creativity and their interrelation with organizations. In this way I am finally in touch with some people who work in or with these intermediary institutions.

Additional question from the OA editors: *You are one of the few theatre studies researchers taking a serious approach to explore theatre in organisations and you are well connected in the OA field. What feedback did you receive from your peers in the theatre community and how did this differ from organisational researchers' comments? How do you evaluate your efforts in bringing together those different disciplines?*

When I talked to colleagues from theatre studies, especially at the early stage of our project, many were surprised in the first instance because most of them weren't aware of the existence and use of theatre in business contexts. After this surprise subsided, two reactions became apparent. On the one hand, there was scepticism toward the idea of theatre being a tool for economic needs. Many had concerns about manipulation and other risks. On the other hand, however, many were also very enthusiastic about German theatre studies starting to focus on those forms of theatre in social contexts. They saw this as a necessary decision against the background of an already established and intense applied theatre research practice within the anglo-american theatre studies.

In contrast, when I had conversations with organisational researchers about theatre-based interventions in companies, they were – in most cases – considerably less surprised. A main reason for that is certainly the fact that there is a longer research tradition in organisational studies than in German theatre studies. And it's very interesting that it wasn't the general topic which led to irritation in these talks, but rather my perspective on it. In the past my interlocutors had often been confused when I explained that I am addressing which aesthetic and ethical conditions these theatre interventions entail and how all persons involved deal with them, rather than the question of which effects theatre could have for companies. But mostly they became very interested in my approach and agree that these widely neglected aspects are worthy of being analysed.

For me, the connection to many colleagues of the OA field is very enriching because in the last years there has been a lot of inspiring work which brings me to new thoughts and insights. I am motivated and driven by the idea of finding ways to join our theatre studies methods and theories together with these approaches formulated in the organizational studies. For that reason, I wouldn't describe my work as too laborious or effortful, as I believe these disciplines to be compatible. It is a chance to get new perspectives. In my opinion, a study which aims at the interrelations between theatre and economy must inevitably have a

mode of focusing that oscillates between both discourses in order to avoid one-sidedness or neglect important aspects.

For further information about the ERC project *The Aesthetics of Applied Theatre*, please visit <http://www.applied-theatre.org/>

About the Authors

Fabian Lempa holds an M.A. in Theatre and Media Studies and German Philology. Since December 2012, he has been working as Research Associate in the ERC project "The Aesthetics of Applied Theatre" at Department for Theatre Studies at Freie Universität Berlin (Germany) on the ethical, political, and aesthetic aspects of applied theatre in and for business organizations. His study carries the working title "[Theatre as a Tool for Communication Management](#)". Other research interests include: performance analysis, theatre and society, theatre historiography, and the relations between theatrical atmospheres and aesthetic experience. In addition to his academic work, Fabian Lempa has been active as a freelance writer since 2009 for various print and TV media (including *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *BILD-Zeitung*, *Nürnberger Nachrichten*, *Bayerischer Rundfunk*, etc.).



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