

Rehearsal: The bridge between text and context

By *Marijke Broekhuijsen and Piers Ibbotson*

ABSTRACT

The ideas in this paper were initially explored at the Organisational Theatre summit, co-ordinated by learning Lab., Denmark at Lisegaarden near Copenhagen in March 2005. Working in collaboration with a group of actors and theatre practitioners; approaches to the phenomenon of rehearsal were discussed and a short play was devised and performed to communicate our findings to the rest of the conference. This paper arose from further reflection on those discussions and includes a transcript of the short play devised: The paper offers some reflections on the phenomenon of 'rehearsing' as practiced in theatre. It also represents our view on the usefulness of rehearsal as a model for the development of new products especially services and the possible value of this concept in the context of organizations, especially the management of professional service firms.

Introduction

Like some other participants at the conference 'Organization and Theatre' the participants in our sub-group (Susanne Kandrup, Camilla Albrecht Jensen, and Göran von Euler) shared a background in theatre performance and working within industry. The subgroup we formed part of, focused within this large field on the phenomenon of 'preparing to perform'. In order to show rather than tell, our colleagues something about the differences in ways organizations prepare to perform, or develop their product/service, the subgroup made up a small play called 'Rehearsal for Hamlet'. For an *impression* of this play: the text only, (the impact of a play does not lie only in the text,) see box 1:
Box 1

A Rehearsal for "Hamlet"

Five people in a room, sitting round a table, discussing a project with a flipchart and papers etc.

Director:

All right, everybody, sit down, we have just one more scene to rehearse, the theatre is booked, we have sold a good number of tickets for Monday.

Hamlet:

If we can finish off planning for this scene today, we will be ready to launch the performance on Monday.

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Gertrude's Maid:

We've sold 200 tickets already, we've nearly sold out.

-

Director:

Fine - good: I knew there was a market here for this product.

We are all set then. So - Hamlet. Act 3 scene 4. Hamlet comes in: where were you standing in the last scene and how will you come in?

Hamlet:

(Pointing at diagram of the stage on a flip-chart)

Here. In this scene I have decided to come in from the left, I will walk for 5 or 6 meters to this point here and stop and say the words.

Director:

Can you be a bit more precise with those figures? How far exactly?

Hamlet:

I think it is probably nearer 5.5 meters. *(He measures the distance on the chart)* Yes, it's 5.5.

Gertrude's Maid:

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Umm... Can I come in here? I need time to get to fluff the pillow on the bed and leave the scene...I need something like 30 seconds. But Hamlet is in the way.

Hamlet:

So what is my time schedule?

Gertrude's Maid:

Three and half seconds for the move across to the bed, should give me enough time.

Director:

OK, so you need to begin moving 26.5 seconds after the maid begins to fluff and cover the 5.5 meters. That should be fine. Can we agree that? - Good.

Hamlet:

I don't know but I wonder if we could change that to 3 seconds? That would raise my average speed and make more impact?

Director:

No, I think we need to stick with these figures. OK. In the specifications here, Gertrude then screams when she sees Hamlet. Are you coming in with a loud or soft scream?

Gertrude:

I was thinking a loud scream.

Hamlet:

But not too loud. Not more than 25 decibels.

Gertrude:

25 decibels? Is that in the right kind of range?

Hamlet:

I think so, for the dimensions of that theatre.

Director:

You go to the acoustic-lab and have your sound measured. It should be in between 25 and 30 decibels.

Gertrude:

I will do that and report back.

Director:

OK. That's good: We've settled the loudness issue: Now emotions. How do you react? Troubled or Angry?

Gertrude:

Troubled, I decided, based on the research.

Director:

Okay. Troubled then, and then you say all the words. Good. Right; that wraps it up I think. You have all the necessary data.

Gertrude's Maid:

Have you all got your ground-plans and time-schedules ready?

Hamlet:

Yes, we have, I'll finish mine today

Gertrude:

This is good, it's going to work. I have a gut-feeling it's going to work.

Director:

I think we have covered all the detail; we can go straight to implementation. We are ready and prepared!!

We don't know what you think of this rehearsal ...maybe it depends partly on what you know about theatre! At the conference some people in the audience reacted to the play as to what we intended it to be: a parody. But to the consternation of the makers others made clear by their reactions they saw nothing weird or ridiculous in the scene. Maybe the behaviour shown in the little scene is so dominant in our society and organizations, that it did not strike some onlookers as a strange method related to the purpose. They did not see the complete in-effectiveness of this 'rehearsal' for a theatre performance of Hamlet... We figured it was worthwhile to get into the

concept of 'rehearsal' a bit more.

Theatre and organizations

In the last couple of decades theatre seems to have been discovered as a meaningful metaphor for various aspects of organization and management. But theatre offers more than this metaphorical perspective. Theatre-texts (plays) offer great possibilities to reflect on the social reality of organizations and management.

The profession/craftsmanship of acting and directing include competencies, methods that enlarge the behavioural repertoire of managers. And although the transfer from theatrical competences to managerial ones is not always evident or easy, we want this paper to add another link in the chain of theatre-methodology for management *i). We think an essential element of the theatre-practice: 'the rehearsal', can offer a useful contribution to some aspects of management of especially professional service-firms.

Probably because of the importance of 'performing' in professional service organizations, theatre professionals are often asked by these firms to bring in their expertise some way or another. So were we. We observed many situations and regularly found that the quality of performance could be higher, in spite of good quality and zeal of the individual professionals involved.

Before we go further we will describe what we think of as the special characteristics of 'services'.

- Services are intangible
- The consumer of a service is also its co-producer
- The 'production' and 'consumption' of a service coincide
- The delivery of a service is transitory
- A service is connected to a person(s), it is personal
- Services are processes.

A large part of business-activities in

Western Europe has moved from the manufacturing of objects to the manufacturing of moments; from the manufacturing of things (ships, fridges, computers) to the making of events (adverts, deals, contracts, behaviors), moving from products to services. Because of some essential differences between products and services this change has an impact on many aspects of organization and management.

With regard to 'preparing to performance' we have found in some service-firms a kind of 'embarrassment' concerning the introduction of new services or the changing of existing services. Managers seem to be still looking for appropriate ways to get from the idea of a new (renewed) service, event or moment to the successful realization of that idea. It seems to us that either:

- People tend to fall back on traditional and familiar product-development-models
- Or
- People rely on the individual know-how and the skills of professionals, counting on them to be able to transform ideas to realization. They depend on the tacit knowledge and experience of professionals to enable them to translate ideas into to new behavior.

Because of the nature of services/moments that we outlined above, it seems to us that these two ways might not quite do. We believe the concept of 'rehearsal' as practiced in the theatre, may be useful here as an alternative and complementary method of development .

The product development models used in professional service firms are borrowed from engineering.

In the engineering model there is a cycle of testing, evaluation, modification and re-testing and there are places to do this work; laboratories, where prototypes and models can be rigorously examined and modified prior to letting them loose on the real world.

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An important reason for companies to test their materials or products is, of course, the reduction of risks, that have to do with investments or effects.

This engineering model has been transferred to the more intangible process of developing ideas for actions in service industries. Customer feed-back and focus groups are used extensively in a rough model of testing. But these techniques are not as rigorous as what is possible in engineering. Engineers do not sample public opinion to find out what is an acceptable thickness of cable to support an overhead power line. Engineers test their ideas against the known and immutable laws of physics. Against what laws are you testing services/ events? An understanding of the nature of the rehearsal process in theatre may offer part of the answer to this question.

Relying on the skills of the professionals when new services/events are introduced, is a good thing because most professionals are used to improvising - because a service, by its very nature, is never quite the same from performance to performance.

In theatre however, no one thinks that well trained actors can 'do' a performance only on the base of their individual skill, they are expected to be able to rehearse...before they have a try-out with live audience. What is the specific character of a rehearsal then, compared to the practise of professionals in other fields?

Theatre as a professional service organisation

In order to consider the rehearsal-process as a possible development-model first a bit more on the nature of theatre and the function of rehearsal in theatre.

In organizational language 'making theatre' is 'delivering services/moments':

-The core of theatre is the **performance**: a process of co-creation

between all the makers and the audience at a specific time and place

-Acting is always inter-acting

-The performance is intangible

-The 'customers' are co-producing (if the audience doesn't play along in the illusion, there is no theatre; without spectators one cannot even speak of theatre)

-It is connected to a person, persons (a part can never be done the same way by a different actor)

-The performance (the service) can not be produced before consumption; so the professionals cannot design and make the product to deliver it at the desired moment. They must prepare themselves to be ready to perform adequately at the desired moment.

As in other professional organizations, it is essential that the professionals involved are well trained (have the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to do the job) and keep on being trained. They have to go on practicing throughout their professional life. But training, practicing and rehearsing are three different things, all needed though in the theatre-profession. As we have said: no-one in theatre thinks that well-trained actors can 'do' the performance only on the base of their individual professional skills, how experienced they may be. Neither does any actor or director think that a play, or a text, however well written, however filled by the author with instructions for director or actors, will bring about a performance by itself. The script of a play written down is not a performance. The gap between the text (or the ideas about the text in the heads of the director and actors) and the actual performance at a specific time and place is bridged by the rehearsal. Rehearsal is the bridge between text and context.

Rehearsal in theatre

A rehearsal is a process of co-creation in which all the participants in the story that is to be played out work together to find the best possible interpretation of the text under the guidance of a director.

Creating art means giving a concrete form to an idea; an idea is not a work of art yet.

In the rehearsal process one is looking for forms, which are beautiful and meaningful; meaningful in the eyes of the makers and the audience, and meaningful regarding the chosen interpretation of the play or the characters. Rehearsing is the process of looking for these forms and meanings by trying them out, by enacting them.

During rehearsal the critical question at any new suggestion is: 'will it work?' - Does this style of playing, this way of appearing on stage, this design, this change of rhythm or lighting - work? An idea might be new, spectacular, a creative find, if it doesn't work, if it is not functional in the whole of the performance, it will not be used.

In order to answer that question 'does it work?' during rehearsal, the following conditions are essential:

-One has to *try new forms by doing, by enacting them. Theatre is more the result of doing than of good thinking.* - Only by doing do you get the information you need about whether it works or not and about what the next step is.

-*Acting is action* - making a gesture into the space. Until an action is taken, the creative process has not really begun.

The descriptions of the possible actions in the actors head are only fantasies until a gesture is begun. In rehearsal, actors and directors read, discuss and think about the role of course: but until the first *action* is embodied the process of creation has not really started. It is not until the first attempt is made, the first words spoken into the space, the first gestures made, that the necessary understanding is there for the creative process to begin. The first attempt, - the first contact with the raw material from which the performance will be shaped-

alters the understanding of the task, and of the potential of the creative conditions that have been set up. Rehearsal proceeds by iterative failure. What actors and directors understand is that until the first attempt is made there is only an idea about the performance and the idea about the performance will never manifest itself. The reality will always be different.

Of course a director has their ideas about style, rhythm, scenes, characters etc. based on his general interpretation of the play. But the concrete form of the play will originate during rehearsal. The play develops during rehearsal by exploring many possibilities that preferably, *are as much in contrast with one another as possible.*

One explores not only variations on a theme, but also variations in themes - especially in the beginning. It is more useful to look for contrasts than to look for what is better. Improving a mise-en-scene is less interesting than trying to find a contrasting way to do the same scene. *'Don't improve on your first few ideas; try something else, try something different'*. The director encourages actors to enact different versions of a scene and helps them by imposing different constraints. A constraint is, contrary to what people often think, an enormous catalyst of change and of creativity. The director can both encourage divergence and shape the direction of the actor's exploration by offering constraints; by framing 'what if?' questions, by challenging assumptions, and by placing resistance in the way of the performers. For example: -

'What if in this scene it is pouring with rain?'

'What if you try to kiss her before you finish what you are saying?'

Theatre and rehearsing are first and foremost interactive processes: the performance is the result of different contributions of many professionals and

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of the personal chemistry between them. This art form is not about the individual expression of an individual feeling or idea. This means everybody has to give way to the 'whole', each individual has to be dedicated to the 'whole'. An actor or designer should be able to put away private feelings, put aside his ego and concentrate on the matter at hand. Keywords are 'letting go', 'trusting' and 'humility'.

The director plays an important role during the rehearsal. He or she is the one who chooses the initial conditions from which the explorations will proceed. He or she will move the process along by looking carefully at what actors and other makers are presenting and choosing among them. Good directors maintain complexity and openness as long as possible. They postpone the moment at which decisions about a form are taken, they delay as long as possible the moment when things become 'fixed'.

They hold open the creative space. The director is present, he watches, listens and evaluates. He puts into words what he sees the actors do, expresses what is happening on stage. He is the eye and ear of the group. His contribution is to see clearly what patterns are emerging from the collective creative process and select the ones that will 'work'; those that are beautiful, true and meaningful for what the director wants the final event to achieve.

During rehearsals not only the director is present and watches the various trials, but the other actors often do too. The actors are witnessing the full story of the activity under development. Everyone involved in the play has a chance to witness and to reflect, which helps everyone to grasp the idea of the full script. The sensitivity and cohesion you gain by rehearsing together makes a group of people into a team, which is essential for a good performance.

We, Marijke and Piers, have been working with the rehearsal-model in various types of organizations and with various objectives. Each company context asks for its own development model (of services or products), the rehearsal-method is one of them. In our opinion the 'rehearsal-model' is an interesting alternative to the product-development-model and complimentary to the practice of relying on the existing professional skills of individual members of a team or organization.

The rehearsal-method respects the aspects of 'team', 'process' and 'context' in a service organization. *True to the very nature of theatre the concrete form and precise application of the method can only be found by doing, by enacting it each time anew...*

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Box2 Afterthought

The result of rehearsing: the creation of meaning in a specific context brings us to two other reasons why we think the rehearsal-method useful for organizations today. These are:

- Changes in today's view on social reality and organizations (such as the notion of the growing complexity and dynamics of organizations and society; the necessity to deal with responsibility without control: 'to be in charge but not in control')

- Changes in today's notion of knowledge (e.g. the idea that besides academic knowledge that is true and valid irrespective of the context another kind of knowledge is needed: 'acting knowledge'. We think theatre has a lot to offer to the development of this 'acting knowledge'.

We hope to write more about our experiences with and reflections on this theme somewhere in the near future.

Lotte Darso Ph.D

Piers Ibbotson trained originally as a scientist and worked in the oil industry for a number of years before entering the theatre in 1980. He had a successful career as a performer, working at the Royal National Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Company as well as making appearances in TV and film. In 1990 he became an Assistant Director with the Royal Shakespeare Company working alongside some of the best directing talent in the British theatre.

He has worked with a range of companies including: WPP group, McKinsey and Co., OMD UK, Marks and Spencer, Tarmac, BP, 3M, The Body Shop, Origin UK, Hays plc, Arthur Andersen, The Defence Leadership Academy, The Department of Trade and Industry, National Health Service, Lever Faberge, and others. He is a Fellow of The Royal Society of Arts and is a Visiting Fellow at the University of Kingston.

Marijke Broekhuijsen trained originally as an actress and has been acting on stage and for television in the Netherlands for many years.

Besides she studied Cultural pedagogy and Art & Media Management and she has been active in adult education and management development for many years. From 1980 she has worked as an independent trainer/consultant with a range of companies as Shell, Corus, IBM, Ernst & Young, RABO-bank, various governmental organizations and many others. Since 1991 she is faculty member of Nyenrode

Business University, working as program director in Executive Education and Development; first for the executive MBA, later for senior managers in open and in-company programs. A recent large management development project she designed and executes is for the Public Libraries in the Netherlands. In her programs she makes use of various aspects of art, specially theatre.

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