



# Beyond Hope and Fear: The Effects of Organizational Theatre on Empowerment and Control

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## Abstract

Organizational theatre interventions have become established as a pervasive and influential arts-based method of dialogic organizational development, yet their effects are controversial and contested. While they have been praised for their potential as a tool of empowerment, they have also been criticized for their possible use as a more or less insidious form of control. This article explores and evaluates such claims and counterclaims, supported by an in-depth longitudinal quasi-experimental field study of customer service staff in a regional Australian bank. The results of the field study not only indicate that organizational theatre interventions may increase both empowerment *and* control but also suggest that the outcomes may be more lightweight than supporters have hoped and critics have feared. The article outlines the implications of these findings for future research and practice.

## Keywords

organizational theatre, arts-based, dialogic organizational development, empowerment, control

In recent years, there has been a significant growth in the use of professional theatre as an organizational development (OD) and change intervention (Clark & Mangham, 2004b; Darsø et al., 2006; Larsen, 2005; Matula, Badham, & Meisiek, 2013; Meisiek, 2002, 2004; Nissley, Taylor, & Houden, 2004; Schreyögg & Hopfl, 2004; Taylor, 2008;

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Teichmann, 2001; Wehner & Dabitz, 1999; Westwood, 2004). A key component of this growth, organizational theatre, specializes in the production of commissioned, tailor-made, and professionally staged “trigger plays” for defined organizational audiences.<sup>1</sup> The plays enact a scene or scenes addressing a critical problem being faced by the audience and dramatize the unsatisfactory nature of how it is currently being addressed (Boal, 1995; Schreyögg & Hopfl, 2004). In many cases, the plays surface a lack of understanding, communication, and dialogue between formal front stage and informal back stage rhetoric, activities, and accounts (Totterdill, personal interview, July 3, 2013).

In this sense, organizational theatre is a distinctive and significant example of a “dialogic OD” intervention (Bushe & Marshak, 2009). As Bushe and Marshak define them, these are OD interventions in which the change process emphasizes changing the conversations that normally take place in the system; the purpose of inquiry is to surface, legitimate, and/or learn from the variety of perspectives, cultures, and/or narratives in the system; the change process results in new images, narratives, texts, and socially constructed realities that affect how people think and act; and the change process is consistent with traditional OD values of collaboration, free and informed choice, and capacity building in the client system.

Despite organizational theatre’s increasing prominence in addressing such issues, it is not mentioned by Bushe and Marshak (Bushe, 2009; Bushe & Marshak, 2009) as an example of dialogic OD, and its nature, role, and impact has received relatively little serious and systematic consideration in the literature on OD and organizational change. This article aims to address this situation in three ways. First, by summarizing and introducing organizational theatre to a wider OD audience as a particular arts-based form of dialogic OD. Second, through furthering the discussion of the nature and consequences of this form of OD intervention through a critical analysis of the extant literature on organizational theatre. Third, by informing this discussion through reporting on the results of a quasi-experimental longitudinal case study conducted of organizational theatre and its impact.

The case study involved the use of organizational theatre to help frontline bank staff deal more effectively with customers in a regional Australian bank. The article draws on this case to explore a major issue of controversy and debate—the degree to which organizational theatre has the effect of increasing levels of empowerment (Coopey, 1998; Meisiek & Barry, 2007; Schreyögg & Hopfl, 2004) or introducing and intensifying forms of managerial control (Clark & Mangham, 2004a, 2004b; Nissley et al., 2004). What the case study uncovered was a more nuanced and complex pattern of effects than any simple one-dimensional interpretation would suggest, revealing elements of both increased empowerment *and* control, and an impact that was more *lightweight* than many have hoped or feared. After introducing and analyzing the case study data on which these claims are based, the article concludes with an outline of the implications of these findings for further OD research and practice.

## Literature and Hypotheses

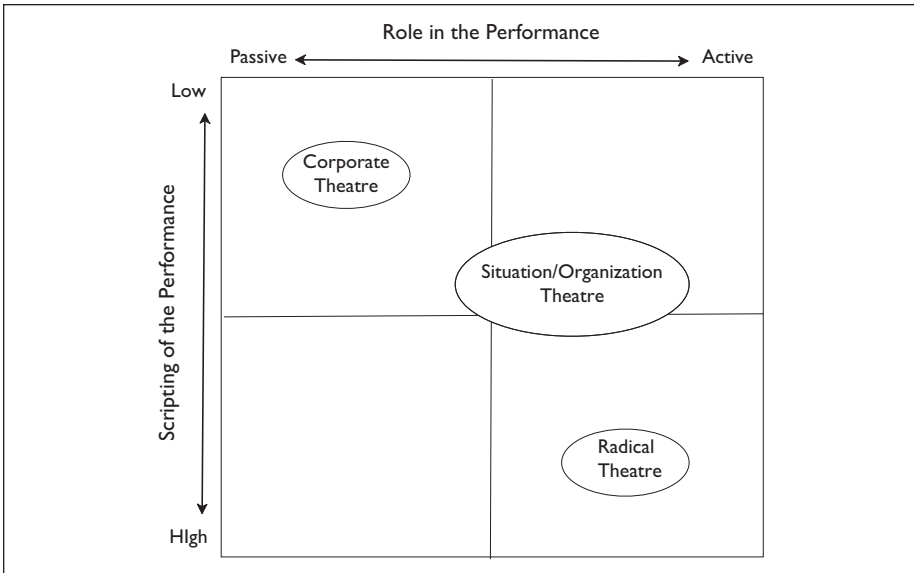
As an approach to OD and change, organizational theatre builds on the work of the radical Latin American playwright Augusto Boal (2001), in particular his work on

what he terms *forum theatre*. This type of “active-audience” theatre (Meisiek & Barry, 2007) seeks to generate a different form of “catharsis” to Aristotelean theatre, Moreno-style psychodrama, or Brechtian epic theatre (Meisiek, 2004). The aim of this form of organizational theatre is to stimulate *action* through a *rehearsal* of possible ways to more effectively address the critical problems besetting the audience. In this sense, organizational theatre is an arts-based form of serious play designed to promote or support positive change.

Unlike Aristotelean theatre, spectators within organizational theatre are not passive observers, with plays achieving their effect by the audience identifying with the “heroic” characters undertaking the action. Spectators are allowed, and encouraged, to become active “spect-actors,” questioning, rescripting, and reenacting initial attempts to address a shared problem. In contrast to some Moreno-style psychodrama, the purpose of the experimental reenactment is not to get people to come to terms with the problem within existing conditions but to actively change these conditions. Finally, unlike Brechtian epic theatre, the aim goes beyond shocking the audience into a cognitive understanding of the historical and changeable nature of the problems they confront and the strategies that they deploy. It supports intellectual, emotional, and corporeal experimentation in transforming them, encouraging embodied action that increases audience confidence and their ability to act differently.

A key component of such forms of organizational theatre is the initial definition of the problem that besets the audience. The audience must recognize that (or at least come to a recognition of) the problem is one they generally and routinely confront, that the failure to resolve it perpetuates a repressive situation, and that this situation is historical, socially created, and in principle alterable. An initial script is created, normally prior to the event and written by a professional scriptwriter/actor in consultation with or having interviewed members of the audience. The script illustrates the problem and enacts some of the established, ineffective, and frustrating ways in which it has traditionally been addressed. The audience is then invited to create a more effective response. This initial trigger play involves at a minimum an antagonist and a protagonist and can include an additional tritagonist as observer or commentator. It is most often played out by the professional actors but actively involves the audience. After the first initial enactment, and supported by a “Joker”/facilitator, the audience is given the opportunity to rescript or reenact the play in one or more subsequent iterations. This involves various forms and levels of audience questioning of the characters, providing advice on how one or more should change their behavior and have the actors proceed with the skit while taking into account this advice, and getting up and acting out the role of the antagonist themselves.

As identified by Statler, Heracleous, and Jacobs (2011, p. 237), such organizational theatre events are a significant example of the experiential dialogic techniques they characterize as “serious play,” that is, interventions that “engage deliberately in fun, intrinsically motivated activities to achieve serious, work-related objectives.” More specifically, they are a prominent case of the use of what Nissley (2002, 2008) describes as “arts-based learning” and Taylor and Ladkin (2009) characterize as “arts-based methods” involving “skills transfer,” “projective techniques,” “illustrations of essence,” and “making.” Through participation in the “theatre,” participants are assisted to develop



**Figure 1.** Typology of Theatre in Organizations. Based on Clark (2008) p.404.

the performance skills required to help them act effectively in the situations they encounter, access and reveal inner thoughts and feelings that may not be accessible through more conventional developmental modes, recognize essential features of situational action assisted by detailed elaboration and experimentation, and foster a deeper experience of personal presence and connection with the problems, prescriptions, and actions (Taylor & Ladkin, 2009). While organizational theatre is often used as part of planned change programs, these characteristics mean that it can be deployed to assist a wide variety of OD initiatives.

In practice, such active-audience organizational theatre takes many different forms, with varying impacts. Various terms such as *situation theatre* (Meisiek, 2002), *corporate theatre* (Clark & Mangham, 2004a) and *radical theatre* (Coopey & Burgoyne, 2000) have been used to help capture some of these differences. As illustrated in Figure 1, a key variation concerns how active and involved the audience is in both the scripting (and rescripting) of the theatre event and in enacting the performance. As we use the terms here, *corporate theatre* is used to refer to those forms of organizational theatre in which the audience plays very little role in either scripting/rescripting or in the performance itself, whereas *radical theatre* is used to refer to situations in which the audience is heavily involved in both activities. What Meisiek (2002) describes as “situation theatre,” is used to describe the most common and relatively amorphous forms of organizational theatre that most often sit somewhere between the extremes of corporate and radical theatre. As observed by Clark (2008), and as illustrated in Figure 1, situational theatre, when performed by professional theatre companies for organizations, frequently involves a relatively high degree of audience participation but within

a problem area and script that is largely defined for them by managers and theatre consultants.

### *Organizational Theatre as a Form of Soft Control*

For those sensitive to the potential for domination and control in managerial change initiatives, it is feared that the performance of situational theatre may be more often akin to the corporate theatre observed by Clarke and Mangham (2004b) than to the radical theatre envisaged by Coopey (1998). In his characterization of repression in the West, Boal referred to the replacement of “cops on the street” by “cops in the head” (Schutzman & Cohen-Cruz, 1994) and saw radical forum theatre as being used to combat the latter. For critics of narrow and uncritical forms of corporate theatre, however, its use may be more akin to what Alvesson and Willmott (2002) have termed *identity regulation* in organizations, that is, “discursive practices concerned with identity definition that conditions processes of identity formation and transformation” (p. 627). From such an “identity regulation” perspective, contemporary organizations are involved in strategic shifts to move from outer to inner control of employee behavior, getting into and winning over their “hearts and minds” (Barley & Kunda, 1992; Kunda, 2006; McLoughlin, Badham, & Palmer, 2005). Instead of relying solely on “hard” controls such as fear of punishment or instrumental rewards to achieve organizational objectives, the aim is to create “soft constraint” (Courpasson, 2006) by aligning employee and organization interests and encouraging employee identification with the organization, its goals, and codes of behavior (Ezzamel, Willmott, & Worthington, 2001). In effect, these initiatives operate as part of the complex new systems of “soft control” designed to engineer the type of corporate culture and employee identification required to cope with the rapidly changing environment faced by late-modern organizations. The fear is that the use of organizational theatre in such contexts will result in a loss of its critical potential, with a very real danger of it being used to increase rather than reduce oppression and control.

As an entertaining event, organizational theatre is also arguably symbolic of the type of caring, fun, and energetic environments that many contemporary corporate culture change programs seek to create but that their critics argue distract employees from the real issues confronting them (Fleming & Sturdy, 2011). While this critique has not been explicitly directed against organizational theatre, an argument could be made from a critical management perspective that rather than representing a desirable and progressive form of “serious play” (Statler et al., 2011), organizational theatre could be used as a means of “neo-normative” control, distracting, confusing, or insidiously manipulating employees’ sense of self for corporate purposes under the banner of “being yourself” in a culture of fun and friendship (Costas, 2012).

The potential of OD and change initiatives for enhancing such forms of domination and control has been observed and documented by a number of analysts of dialogic OD and discourse approaches to organizational change and development. As outlined by Bushe and Marshak (2009), all forms of inquiry, however positive and emancipatory their intent and ideals, contain seeds of domination and control (Fineman, 2006;

Johnson, 2013). In addition, as Marshak and Grant (2008) and Rhodes (2001) note, during many planned changes there are often more or less deliberate attempts by management to impose dominant and exclusive narratives designed to legitimate their programs. Finally, as Ogbonna and Wilkinson (2003) observe, the “rhetoric of empowerment” surrounding such initiatives is often accompanied by new, unacknowledged, or hidden forms of centralization, surveillance, and insecurity.

To explore such issues in relation to the use of organizational theatre interventions, we undertook a field study to examine the degree to which a case study intervention was responsible for bringing about the new forms of control most feared by critics of identity regulation and (neo-) normative control. To inform this study, it was necessary to define and operationalize elements of soft control, and four key elements were identified based on a review of what major critics regard as most significant and problematic. The first element was the introduction of new entrepreneurial disciplinary regimes that, through rhetoric, performance, and career surveillance pressures, encourage the self-disciplining of employees to become more flexible, creative, and innovative entrepreneurial selves (Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004; Sewell, 1998). The second element was the initiation of new methods of personal control that encourage employees to identify deeply with customers through “advanced engineering of emotional labor” (Hochschild, 1983, p. 187). The third element was the establishment of new forms of concertive control that, by enhancing micro surveillance and peer pressure in team-based work environments, pass control from management to groups of workers (Barker, 1993; Sewell 1998). The fourth element was the creation of new forms of “corporate branding” that seek to align employee values, work, and behavior with the organization brand (Schultz, Hatch, & Larsen, 2000).

The first empirical aim of our study was to explore whether and to what degree the personal and emotive impacts of organizational theatre acted as vehicles for these various overlapping forms of soft control. This identification of four key elements of soft control informed our first hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 1:** Organizational theatre interventions will increase employee compliance to perform in line with organizational objectives through new forms of soft control represented by self-disciplining, personal control, concertive control, and corporate branding of employees.

### *Organizational Theatre as a Means of Empowerment*

In the rhetoric of its advocates, the purpose of organizational theatre interventions is to enhance the understanding of disempowered members of organizations about their condition and provide them with the energy and confidence necessary to actively work to bring about transformational change (Coopey, 1998). Whether or not such initiatives address the barriers imposed by “cops on the streets” (external regulation, structural constraint, embedded inequalities, technical or bureaucratic controls) or “cops in the heads” (internal regulation, peer surveillance, normative disciplining and control), the general view of organizational theatre interventions is that of actual or potential empowerment initiatives (Monks, Barker, & Mhanacháin, 2001).

This interpretation of organizational theatre and its potential accords with the views and values of many advocates of dialogic and arts-based approaches to organizational change and development. Bushe and Marshak (2009) regard such initiatives as “generative dialogic practices” (Gergen, Gergen, & Barrett, 2004) involving experimental “thought experiments . . . creating containers and processes to produce generative ideas” (Bushe & Marshak, 2009, p. 357). As Oswick (2009) outlines, such experiments are deliberately “provisional and plurivocal” (pp. 372-375). Rather than experts improving processes, they create dialogues that change mind-sets about these processes, encouraging self-organizing change. For Jacques (2012), this includes essential “double loop learning of interpersonal skills” such as self-awareness, listening, observing, positive relations with peers and so on in creating what Eisen, Cherbeneau, and Worley (2005) characterize as “future-responsive awareness.” Statler et al. (2011) emphasize the key role of “serious play” in such initiatives, in enhancing strategic thinking, motivation, and teamwork effectiveness and allowing people to develop the cognitive and emotional capacities necessary for effective and productive work. Statler et al. (2011), in particular, stress the desirability of measuring the effects of such initiatives at individual and group levels.

To help measure such effects and capture and assess the claimed liberating or democratizing role of forum theatre, the present study drew on the influential overview of empowerment by Conger and Kanungo (1988). Their framework was used to help assess the degree to which the organizational theatre intervention brought about increasing levels and degrees of empowerment by “enhancing feelings of self-efficacy among organization members through the identification of conditions that foster powerlessness and through their removal by both formal organization practices and informal techniques of providing efficacy information” (Conger & Kanungo, 1988, p. 474)

In elaborating this approach to empowerment, Conger and Kanungo (1988) draw a distinction between *relational* and *motivational* approaches. Relational views are centrally concerned with the sharing and delegation of power by addressing levels of participation, the delegation and decentralization of decision making, and the degree of authority sharing. In contrast, motivational views are primarily interested in “empowering experiences,” addressing and overcoming people’s frustrations, feelings of powerlessness, and inability to cope, by enabling them to express their innate needs for power and self-determination.

As a motivational framework, empowerment is closely linked to self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). An enhanced sense of personal efficacy is seen as a key factor in generating greater initiative toward and persistence at overcoming obstacles, as well as the desire to improve task behavior and performance. Individual self-efficacy beliefs are identified as a significant motivational variable to overcome powerlessness, and motivational approaches identify a wide variety of factors that may be employed to enhance such beliefs (Bandura, 1997). While focusing on self-efficacy and motivation, this approach is compatible with initiatives to reduce individual feelings of powerlessness and/or enhance feelings of power by paying greater attention to the type of organization tasks or issues the individual feels empowered to perform and attend to.

In accordance with “relational” views of empowerment, this “motivational” approach is compatible with the view that empowerment in the narrower and more



immediate features of work has an effect on individuals' confidence and ability to influence the broader conditions and authority relations affecting their lives. For "relational" approaches to participation in the workplace, the ability to link such forms of "lower level" empowerment to increased "higher level" participation in decision making is a key issue (Gaventa, 1980; Pateman, 1974). Radical users and supporters of organizational theatre view it in relational terms as a learning space in which "hope and confidence develops which leads men to attempt to overcome the limit-situations" (Freire & Ramos, 1972, p. 99)—limit-situations that include the hierarchical institutions or closed societies they work within (Freire & Ramos, 1972).

Drawing on both motivational and relational views of empowerment, Conger and Kanungo (1988) provided a unifying framework capable of distinguishing between and measuring organizational theatre's impact on both more immediate (lower level) and more general (higher level) empowerment. The organizational theatre intervention examined in this article directly addressed issues of immediate or lower level empowerment, using an attempt to increase employee mastery of an organization task as a vehicle to reduce their feelings of powerlessness and enhance their feelings of power. The focus on a narrow, work-related task also provided the opportunity to assess any effect the intervention had on higher level empowerment, as manifested by the confidence and ability exhibited by employees to influence work overall and/or external conditions. Finally, creating an "empowering experience" to overcome employee frustrations, feelings of powerlessness, and inability to cope provided a potential basis for facilitating greater self-determination. This framework informed the two components of our second hypothesis.

**Hypothesis 2a:** Organizational theatre interventions will increase lower level employee "empowerment."

**Hypothesis 2b:** Organizational theatre interventions will increase higher level employee "empowerment."

## Research Setting

### *The Organization*

The case study financial services organization in which the organizational theatre intervention took place had its origins in a traditional state-owned, conservative bank with a strong rural community orientation. Since 1990, the bank had been taken over twice by larger commercial banks. As part of a strategic push to obtain more sales per customer, the bank had introduced a new customer relationship management (CRM) system. During the implementation of this system, staff were requested to proactively ask customers to attend a financial profiling appointment where customers' financial situation was reviewed free of charge. This question was to be posed during the course of regular over-the-counter (OTC) transactions. All branch employees (managers, supervisors, and customer service officers) were responsible for making these OTC appointments, and their performance was tracked on the CRM system. However, the



targeted number of appointments was not being met and management had attributed this to branch employees not feeling confident (having low self-efficacy beliefs) in regard to proactively inviting customers. To help address this issue, in 2007, the organization agreed to sponsor a three-stage organizational theatre intervention for 20 mid-sized branches to see if this could help the situation.

### *The Theatre Intervention*

The project was initiated by a university researcher (second author) who obtained funding from two Australian banks and the university for a collaborative academic–industry project using organizational theatre as a method for improving employee self-efficacy. While the researcher was involved in obtaining funding support for the project, the problem question focused on in the trigger play was crafted out by the bank’s human resources (HR) managers in collaboration with the theatre company, and the role of the researcher was limited to the conduct of interviews and the administration of questionnaires. The main focus of the researcher was on a self-efficacy project, collecting and analyzing data on self-efficacy and its outcomes. Organizational theatre was simply employed as a method that was assumed would create the change in self-efficacy required, and no attempt was made by the researcher to influence, nor was he actively involved in, the structuring of the organizational theatre event. Despite this distance, one theatre company participant did express the view that university participation had increased the degree of freedom they were given in the detailed scripting of the trigger play and in the rescripting that took place in a second round of theatre sessions. The focus of the problem addressed by the play was, however, determined by two of the bank’s HR managers who were actively involved in the project. The organizational theatre participant also confirmed that this relative degree of freedom had not significantly altered the content of the script or the method of delivery from the normal corporate interventions.

The intervention was specifically focused on increasing participants’ sense of their own self-efficacy with regard to conducting the required conversations with customers. The formal problem statement provided by the company, and refined in consultation with the theatre company, was “How can we increase the number of financial health check appointments initiated by our frontline employees during their regular over-the-counter transactions?” Interviews were then conducted by the university researcher and theatre company consultants with branch employees, interviews that confirmed the lack of self-efficacy with regard to posing such questions. The main professional actor/facilitator then scripted a four-scene “trigger play” illustrating the beliefs, conversations, and relationships that were holding back the proactive questioning of customers by service staff. The script was then work-shopped with the academic researcher and two company HR managers, who merely fine-tuned elements of the scripts to make them more identifiable and plausible for the bank employees.

The intervention involved three components. First, a half-day forum theatre workshop was conducted in which the four-scene trigger play was performed; participants were then invited to ask questions of the actors, suggest different responses for the

actors to reenact, and break into small groups to define the key issues and were finally followed up with a structured discussion session. Second, 1 month later, another half-day workshop was held based on the theatre company's "rehearsal for reality" method (Carter, Nesbit, & Joy, 2010). This involved participants volunteering scenarios and acting out the role of the customer service staff in an interaction with an actor-customer in front of a small group of their peers. Third, a boxed set of three DVDs were produced showing the three forum theatre characters proactively exploring customer conversation issues in different settings. The boxed set included an instruction guide for branch managers and supervisors as well as suggesting questions and issues for discussion. Each DVD segment was between 5 and 6 minutes long, and one segment was played during each branch's regular weekly team meeting over 3 consecutive weeks. After the DVD was played, a team discussion on proactive customer conversations was led by the manager or supervisor.

On the basis of these elements, the form of organizational theatre event employed can be characterized as situational theatre workshops that were initially relatively light in terms of employee involvement in the scripting of the trigger play but more heavily involved employees in the active questioning of actors and scripts, and in the reenactment of alternative chosen scenarios. In terms of the typology of organizational theatre interventions outlined in Figure 1, the event was relatively low in audience involvement in *scripting* the event but relatively active in audience involvement in commenting on, being involved in, and reenacting this script during the *performance*. The intervention also used DVDs in a manner that conformed with Bandura's (personal communication, August 2, 2007) recommendation to add a third stage of "entertainment education," a format that has been widely used in social interventions and identified as a vehicle to democratize organizations (Singhal & Rogers, 2002). The content of DVDs was, however, largely circumscribed by the script determined by the managers and professional theatre company, while the recommended questions for managers and employees to discuss in relation to the scripted performance included questions based on employees' responses to and rescripting of the initial scene(s). This is, as Meisiek and Barry (2007) have observed, quite common for situational theatre interventions, and while being far from the initial Boalian intent for radical theatre, is also more extensive in character and unpredictable and emergent in its outcomes than is captured by highly restricted views of corporate theatre.

## The Study

The branch employees from which the audience was derived were predominantly female (over 90%), ranging in age from 18 to 65 years, and with approximately 50% working as part-time customer service officers. For the study, geographic and demographic criteria were used to divide the 20 branches into matched pairs. These pairs were then randomly assigned to either a "pilot" (intervention) or "control" (no intervention) group. All employees ( $n = 120$ ) were asked to complete two online repeated measures surveys across a range of employee traits, perceptions, and attitudes. A total of 56 employees (pilot group = 30; control group = 26) completed both the pre- and

postintervention surveys and had relevant performance data available for analysis. No significant statistical difference was found between pilot and control group respondents with respect to job classification, employment conditions, or tenure.

The preintervention survey was conducted immediately before the first workshop, while the postintervention survey was undertaken 3 months after the entertainment education DVD was delivered (elapsed time = 8 months). One week before the postintervention survey commenced, a proposed “merger” (arguably an acquisition) was announced between the host organization’s parent company and a significantly larger financial services organization. The proposed merger created a degree of uncertainty for branch employees as this was the third time their bank had been acquired the previous decade and a half. Although corporate communication from both merger partner organizations made it clear that there would not be any immediate impact on jobs at the branch level, online surveys and focus groups conducted by the parent company showed significant employee dissatisfaction across all divisions with the proposed merger. Therefore, the proposed merger may have had a marginal influence on employee attitudes. Although the research design enabled statistically significant differences between the pilot and control groups to emerge, careful interpretation of the results was required due to the merger.

As a field study evaluating the effects of an OD initiative, the study used all of Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick’s (2006) levels of evaluation: reaction, learning, behavior, and results (see also Cummings & Worley, 2009). With respect to evaluating participant reaction, the learning consultants distributed and collected traditional workshop customer satisfaction surveys. As far as evaluating the other three levels was concerned, using a control group as part of the research design provided a rigorous means of evaluating learning, behavior, and results. Pre- and postintervention surveys evaluated learning by capturing changes to the knowledge and attitude of participants. Mystery shopping and supervisor interviews evaluated behavior. Finally, the results of the intervention were evaluated using actual performance—the number of appointments being made by participants in the experimental group compared to the control group. A detailed explanation of the measures used in evaluating the intervention is outlined below.

## Measures

**Performance.** The host organization employed a range of performance surveillance and monitoring measures: tracking performance against targets on the CRM system, mystery shopper feedback, and supervisor appraisals. These conditions were common to both the pilot and control groups. First, the CRM system tracked the number of OTC appointments made and provided objectively measured task performance data. Time 1 represented performance data from the quarter during which the two workshops were conducted; Time 2 represented performance data from the quarter immediately after the DVD was shown. Second, mystery shopping data was collected as a range of studies have found mystery shoppers provide reliable ratings of retail outlet performance (Finn & Kayande, 1999). Mystery shopper scores were collected from

branches on four occasions: before the first workshop, after the second workshop, before the DVD was shown, and 2 months after the DVD was played at branches. Finally, a semistructured questionnaire was conducted with the host organization's supervisory management 1 year after the postintervention survey to ascertain their view of the intervention's long-term impact.

**Soft Control.** To determine the extent to which the intervention increased soft control, the study focused on changes to employee reported levels of self-disciplining, personal control, concertive control, and employee corporate branding.

With respect to self-disciplining, an increase in absorption was taken to indicate the successful creation of a proactive and enthusiastic internal "mental cage" (Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004) to accompany an "iron cage" of external surveillance. Absorption refers to being fully concentrated and deeply engrossed in one's work, whereby time passes quickly and one has difficulties with detaching oneself from work. We used the three-item absorption subscale from the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES; Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, 2006).

To measure loss of personal control, we used three measures (deep acting, vigor, and flexible role orientation [FRO]) representing the "advanced engineering of emotional labor" (Hochschild, 2003, p. 187). We used the three-item deep acting scale developed by Grandey (2003) to measure the extent that employees attempted to modify their felt emotions so that a genuine, organizationally desired emotional display is presented to customers. We used the three-item UWES vigor subscale to measure vigor, which is demonstrated by high levels of energy and mental resilience while working, the willingness to invest effort in one's work, and persistence even in the face of difficulties (Schaufeli et al., 2006). Finally, we used the six-item customer subscale from the FRO scale to measure the experienced felt responsibility for customers (Parker, Wall, & Jackson, 1997). Any increase in deep acting, vigor, or experienced felt responsibility for customers was taken to indicate the intervention caused an increase in the level of personal control of employees as expressed through emotional labor.

Concertive control in the form of increased peer pressure on employees to perform occurs as control passes from management to worker and from bureaucratic rules and regulations to new socially prescriptive rules that value consensus (Wright & Barker, 2000). We were not able to use a direct measure of concertive control as the host organization had not formally adopted a team-based structure. Instead, we used the three-item colleague subscale from the FRO scale developed by Parker et al. (1997) to measure experienced felt responsibility for colleagues. To the extent employees reported greater felt responsibility for their colleague's behavior after the intervention, this scale was taken to provide an indication of increased concertive control.

Finally, an increase in employee corporate branding would suggest that the host organization had been successful in establishing greater employee enthusiasm, dedication, and commitment to its interests and value. We used two measures (perceived organizational support [POS] and dedication) to capture this phenomenon. POS is linked to greater affective commitment to the organization and is defined as the degree

to which employees perceive the organization supports them by caring about their well-being and satisfaction (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986). We used the four highest loading items from the Eisenberger et al (1986) POS scale. To measure dedication, we used the three-item UWES dedication subscale, which is characterized by the sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride, and challenge employees feel toward the organization they work for (Schaufeli et al., 2006).

**Empowerment.** To determine the extent to which lower level empowerment was affected by the intervention, we measured changes to reported levels of task-specific self-efficacy using Bandura's recommended 100-point grid system. In line with both motivational and relational views of empowerment, any increase would indicate low-level achievement in overcoming powerlessness as well as represent a degree of task enlargement and the confidence and ability of employees to overcome their fears to carry out these tasks.

With respect to whether higher level empowerment was influenced by the intervention, we measured employee perceptions of changes to their "core self-evaluations" (CSE) or more simply their "positive self-concept" (Judge & Bono, 2001). The CSE construct is a broad dispositional trait proposed as a potential explanatory variable for job satisfaction, work motivation, and job performance. An increase in more generalized self-confidence and increased belief in participant's ability to influence outcomes beyond the narrower tasks within the job would provide an indication of motivational empowerment increasing beyond the narrow job task into higher level empowerment.

We measured positive self-concept with three of the four CSE scales—general self-efficacy, self-esteem, and locus of control (neuroticism, the fourth CSE scale was only measured during the preintervention survey). General self-efficacy refers to individuals' perception of their ability to perform across a variety of different situations and was measured using Chen's eight-item scale (Chen, Gully, & Eden, 2001). Self-esteem has been defined as "a trait referring to an individual's degree of liking or disliking for themselves" (Brockner, 1988, p. 11) and was measured using the 4-item version of the widely used 10-item self-esteem scale (Rosenberg, 1979). Locus of control refers to the degree to which persons expect that a reinforcement or outcome of their behavior is contingent on their own behavior/personal characteristics versus the degree to which persons expect that the reinforcement/outcome of their behavior is a function of chance, luck, or fate; is under the control of powerful others; or is simply unpredictable (Rotter, 1990). Locus of control was measured using a six-item locus of control scale (Lumpkin, 1985). No measures were taken of other higher relational forms of structural empowerment.

## Results

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, and correlations for all measures for the combined pilot and control group respondents, while Table 2 shows independent sample *t* tests (listwise) for a range of measures captured at Times 1 and 2.

**Table 1.** Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations for Self-Efficacy and Performance<sup>a</sup>.

Variable	M, T1		M, T2		SD, T1		SD, T2																
	M	T1	M	T2	T1	T2	T1	T2	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	
Appointment single self-efficacy	83.7	18.9	70.9	19.7	—	.377*	.529**	.479**	.479**	.514**	.046	-.291*	.316*	.076	.362**	.428**	.305*	.456**					
Appointments made	21.7	24.3	30.1	32.7	.049	—	.434**	.334*	.455**	.423**	-.043	-.329*	.349*	.335*	.217	.447**	.072	.261					
Engagement	4.8	0.93	4.1	0.89	.482**	.069	—	.926**	.907**	.948**	.123	-.220*	.240*	.248*	.500**	.504**	.398**	.491**					
Absorption	4.6	1.04	4.1	0.98	.416**	.019	.850**	—	.736**	.829**	.127	-.128	.243*	.200	.478**	.462**	.311*	.474**					
Vigor	4.6	1.15	3.9	0.90	.449**	.116	.901**	.616**	—	.926**	.907**	.948**	.220*	.326*	.240*	.248*	.500**	.504**					
Dedication	5.0	0.97	4.3	0.99	.393**	.048	.898**	.650**	.745**	—	.736**	.829**	.128	.251*	.243*	.200	.478**	.462**					
Deep acting	2.6	1.29	2.6	1.28	.038	.215	.105	.150	.058	.035	—	.341**	-.013	.024	-.151	.065	.144	.153					
Surface acting	1.7	1.00	1.7	1.05	-.148	-.134	-.211*	-.102	-.188	-.250*	.345**	—	-.051	-.062	-.235*	-.160	-.214	-.161					
FRO colleague	4.0	0.97	4.2	1.01	.337**	.106	.297**	.302**	.235*	.217*	.025	.053	—	.613**	.123	.208	.293*	.320*					
FRO customer	4.6	0.47	4.6	0.58	.327**	.077	.508**	.407**	.442**	.483**	.028	-.097	.569**	—	.338**	.286*	.323*	.255*					
Perceived organization support	4.9	1.15	4.7	1.10	.268**	-.184	.513**	.379**	.421**	.579**	.039	-.258*	.222*	.384**	—	.292*	.303*	.388*					
General self-efficacy	5.8	0.73	5.8	0.68	.269**	.038	.534**	.385**	.480**	.542**	-.041	-.137	.248*	.428**	-.502**	—	.558**	.512**					
Self-esteem	5.6	1.00	5.8	1.02	.228*	-.105	.289*	.192*	.226*	.331**	-.101	-.171	.021	.119	-.447**	.618**	—	.492**					
Locus of control	5.0	0.75	4.9	0.77	.176*	.026	.301*	.210**	.274**	.306**	-.114	-.112	.188	.192*	-.304**	.362**	.364**	—					

Note. FRO = flexible role orientation.

<sup>a</sup>Values below the diagonal result from the Time 1 survey, those above the diagonal result from the Time 2 survey. \*\*Significant at .01 level (two-tailed). \*Significant at .05 level (two-tailed). <sup>x</sup>Significant at .10 level (two-tailed).

**Table 2.** Selection of Independent Samples t Tests.

Variable	Pilot, M, T1	Control, M, T1	Significance (two-tailed)	Pilot, M, T2	Control, M, T2	Significance (two-tailed)
Warm and friendly greeting self-efficacy	99.14	99.46	.612	97.07	99.11	.074*
Point out improvements self-efficacy	89.66	94.79	.073	88.28	90.54	.487
Make recommendations self-efficacy	88.97	95.00	.045*	87.93	89.29	.667
Ask for business self-efficacy	88.79	95.36	.019*	85.52	86.96	.715
Appointments made	22.66	20.77	.729	36.00	24.93	.129
Deep acting	2.86	2.73	.713	2.40	2.73	.367
Surface acting	1.54	1.97	.129	1.48	2.04	.053*
Flexible role orientation colleague	3.63	4.20	.045*	3.86	4.43	.043*
Flexible role orientation customer	4.57	4.69	.324	4.32	4.81	.008**
Perceived organization support	4.91	4.69	.494	4.85	4.47	.189

\*\*Significant at .01 level (two-tailed). \*Significant at .05 level (two-tailed). xSignificant at .10 level (two-tailed).



## Performance

With respect to objectively measured task performance, there was a statistically significant increase in the number of appointments made by the pilot group compared to the control group, while the observations of mystery shoppers, supervisors, and other anecdotal evidence suggest that there was also a positive shift in customer service behavior. Table 2 shows the mean number of appointments made by pilot group respondents rose from 22.7 at Time 1 to 36.0 at Time 2, an increase of 58.6% while the mean for the control group increased by 19.7%. A mixed between-within subjects' analysis of variance was conducted to assess the impact of the intervention. There was a highly significant main (Time) effect, Wilks's  $\Lambda = .81$ ,  $F(1, 79) = 19.18$ ,  $p < .0005$ , as well as a significant interaction (Group) effect, Wilks's  $\Lambda = .94$ ,  $F(1, 79) = 5.28$ ,  $p = .024$ , which shows the intervention had a clear impact on performance.

With respect to mystery shopping, the mean for the pilot group increased from 44.7% to 60.5%, whereas the control group's mean (51.5%) did not change. Similarly, the frequency with which mystery shoppers were offered the opportunity to make a profiling appointment increased from 0% to 40% of visits, whereas the frequency for the control group remained steady at 10%. With respect to supervisory management ratings, the modal response of "fair improvement" for the pilot group compared to the control group across customer service behaviors such as starting meaningful conversations and generating leads was consistent with other anecdotal feedback received informally from the host organization. Although the number of observations for the mystery shopping and management ratings means that these data must be interpreted cautiously, it provides secondary support for the intervention's impact on employee behavior and performance. Overall, the three performance surveillance and monitoring measures suggest that the organizational theatre intervention led to increased employee self-disciplining, which supports Hypothesis 1.

## Soft Control

General linear modelling (GLM) and independent sample  $t$  tests were used to measure the four forms of soft control. With respect to self-disciplining, GLM found highly significant main (Time) and interaction (Group) effects for absorption ( $p = .010$ ). Although the level of absorption reported by both the pilot and control groups fell as a result of the proposed corporate merger, the intervention clearly buffered the decrease in absorption for the pilot group compared to the control group. In effect, the pilot group's sense of personal accomplishment increased relative to the control group, while the pilot group's sense of inefficacy decreased relative to the control group's as a result of the intervention, which suggests there was a small increase in soft control in the form of self-disciplining.

GLM and  $t$  tests were also used to assess the relative impact of the intervention on personal control (emotional labor). With respect to deep acting, both GLM ( $p = .135$ ) and  $t$  tests found insignificant differences between the pilot and control groups. However, there was a weakly significant ( $p = .066$ ) decrease in the mean for deep acting (2.86 to 2.40) for the pilot group whereas the mean for the control group (2.73) did

not change. There was also no change in the level of surface acting reported by either the pilot or control groups. With respect to vigor, GLM found a highly significant ( $p = .000$ ) main (Time) and an insignificant ( $p = .119$ ) interaction (Group) effect for vigor. The  $t$  tests also showed no difference between the pilot and control groups. However, while the decrease in the mean (4.76 to 3.85) for the control group was highly significant ( $p = .000$ ), the decrease in the mean (4.46 to 4.01) for the pilot group was only significant ( $p = .040$ ). With respect to felt responsibility for customers, there was an insignificant ( $p = .41$ ) main (Time) effect for the FRO customer subscale but a significant ( $p = .022$ ) interaction (Group) effect. The  $t$  tests showed no significant difference between the pilot and control group at Time 1. However, there was a highly significant ( $p = .002$ ) difference at Time 2 as the mean for the pilot group decreased from 4.57 to 4.32, whereas the mean for the control group increased from 4.69 to 4.81. Overall, the relative changes in the pilot group's means on the deep acting, vigor, and FRO customer scales compared to the control group suggests that soft control in the form of emotional labor experienced by the pilot group fell slightly as a result of the intervention.

The relative impact of the intervention on concertive control (peer pressure) was analyzed using GLM and  $t$  tests. Both the change in the main (Time) effect ( $p = .12$ ) and the interaction (Group) effect ( $p = .99$ ) were insignificant for the FRO colleague subscale. The  $t$  tests also showed that the significant difference ( $p = .045$ ) between the pilot and control group did not change from Time 1 to Time 2. Therefore, the pilot group reported no change in the level of felt responsibility for colleagues as a result of the intervention. This result shows that there was no increase in soft control in the form of concertive control (peer pressure) from the intervention.

Finally, GLM and  $t$  tests were used to assess the relative impact of the intervention on employee corporate branding. With respect to POS, both GLM and  $t$  tests showed insignificant changes between the pilot group and the control group. With respect to dedication, there was a highly significant ( $p = .000$ ) main (Time) effect but an insignificant interaction (Group) effect. The  $t$  tests also showed there was no significant difference between the groups at either Time 1 or Time 2. Therefore there was no increase in soft control through employee corporate branding as a result of the intervention.

In summary, the organizational theatre intervention appears to have had minimal impact on soft control as the small increase in self-disciplining control demonstrated by the relatively lower decline in absorption for the pilot group was largely offset by the small decrease in personal control (deep acting, vigor, and felt responsibility for customers). Finally, the organizational theatre intervention did not lead to changes in either concertive control or employee corporate branding. Overall, the organizational theatre intervention did not create greater soft control leading to increased employee compliance and therefore there is no additional support for Hypothesis 1.

## Empowerment

GLM and  $t$  tests were used to assess the impact of the organizational theatre intervention on task self-efficacy beliefs. GLM showed two items ("ask customer for appointment"

and “smile and make eye contact”) that had highly significant ( $p = .01$ ) main (Time) and significant ( $p = .05$ ) interaction (Group) effects. Although the mean for the “ask customer for appointment” item decreased significantly for both groups, the drop in the mean (86.3 to 68.0) for the control group was greater ( $p = .000$ ) than the decrease in the mean (78.6 to 72.2) for the pilot group ( $p = .062$ ). Similarly, there was a highly significant decrease ( $p = .008$ ) in the mean (99.1 to 95.3) for the pilot group on the “smile and make eye contact” item, whereas the decrease in the mean (99.3 to 98.7) for the control group was not significant.

In addition to these main and interaction effects, there were weaker but statistically significant changes for four items (“ask customer for their business,” “make recommendations,” “point out improvements,” “provide warm and friendly greeting”) for the pilot group compared to the control group. For all four items GLM showed a significant main (Time) effect ( $p = .002-.093$ ) but an insignificant interaction (Group) effect. However,  $t$  tests showed that for the first three of these four items, there was only a small decrease in the mean for the pilot group whereas the mean for the control group dropped sharply (see Table 2). In effect, the significant difference in the means between the groups found at Time 1 disappeared at Time 2. Finally,  $t$  tests on the fourth item found no difference in the means between the groups at Time 1 but a significant difference emerged at Time 2.

In summary, self-efficacy beliefs to carry out challenging tasks such as “ask customer for appointment” or “ask customer for their business” showed a relative improvement for the pilot group compared to the control group as a result of the intervention. In addition, the pilot group’s self-efficacy beliefs to undertake superficial, prescribed customer interaction tasks such as “smile and make eye contact” and “provide warm and friendly greeting” decreased relative to the control group. Combined, these findings suggest that the pilot group’s lower level empowerment increased compared to the control group. Hypothesis 2a is therefore supported.

GLM and  $t$  tests were used to assess the impact of the intervention on higher level empowerment measured through positive self-concept. Neither analysis showed any difference between the pilot and control group before or after the intervention with regard to general self-efficacy, self-esteem, or locus of control. Therefore Hypothesis 2b was not supported.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this article was to explore the effects of organizational theatre through an in-depth longitudinal quasi-experimental field study of customer service staff in a regional Australian bank. The specific focus was on whether the organizational theatre intervention contributed to an increased employee empowerment or established new forms of soft control. Results revealed that it is possible for organizational theatre initiatives to simultaneously increase autonomy *and* control. The pilot group’s self-efficacy beliefs in their ability to ask customers for appointments, and their task performance at making more appointments, improved significantly compared to the control group. In addition, they were also more absorbed and “self-disciplining” in

their work, while outperforming the control group on key customer service behaviors.

What the outcomes of the field experiment *also* showed, however, were that these relatively “lightweight” increases in empowerment and control were not accompanied by what could be described as more “heavyweight” increases in either area. Empowerment remained restricted, as immediate lower level empowerment did not lead to more generalized feelings of self-efficacy, self-esteem, or personal control or higher levels of job enrichment or employee participation in decision making. Soft control was not accompanied by any indications of exacting and stressful emotional labor, concertive control by peers or greater identification with, or commitment to, the company. In fact, the results suggest that the level of emotional labor, a form of personal control, actually decreased. In this sense, the intervention was more lightweight in outcomes than supporters of radical theatre may have hoped and critics of corporate theatre may have feared.

## Limitations

Notwithstanding the statistically significant results generated by the quasi-experimental design of the field study, there are a number of limitations to be noted. First, the post hoc approach taken with our analysis means that a field study specifically designed to assess the controlling and empowering effects of an organizational theatre intervention may have yielded different results. To illustrate, our study employed a three-stage organizational theatre intervention implemented over 6 months that focused on addressing a specific corporate objective. A different approach to a field study explicitly designed to assess the effects of organizational theatre interventions could substantially vary the number of stages, duration of individual components, and elapsed study time. Critically, the designated purpose and process used to create scripts and involve participants in a specially created organizational theatre intervention could generate alternative findings and interpretations. Although our study provides a major step forward for organization scholars investigating the nature and effects of organizational theatre interventions, there is a clear need to vary the purpose and quasi-experimental conditions used to explore these issues more deeply.

The second limitation relates primarily to the operationalization of some of the performance measures. For example, using performance data from the same quarter as the workshops as Time 1 was not ideal as any immediate effect on participants from the workshops would likely have raised performance levels for that quarter. As a result, the pilot group’s performance at Time 1 may have been higher than it would have otherwise been and thus the reported change in performance over time lower than it would have otherwise been. A review of employee names listed for the four rounds of mystery shopping also found a number of nonparticipant names. Therefore, collecting mystery shopping scores at the branch rather than employee level may have over/understated adherence to the prescribed standards by participants.

A third limitation of our study was the choice and operationalization of some of the scales measuring control and empowerment. For example, the measures used to track

changes in emotional labor (deep acting, vigor, and felt responsibility for customers) may not have captured the true psychometric properties of emotional labor and/or would have been better captured through ethnographic means. Similarly, the concertive control scale developed by Wright and Barker (2000) may have found differences in peer pressure that the colleague subscale from the FRO scale did not capture. In addition, the POS scale and dedication subscale may not have fully represented the employee corporate branding construct. Last, there may be other measures available to identify changes to higher level empowerment than the three components of the CSE scale we used.

## Conclusion and Future Research

The results of the field study investigation suggest that organizational theatre creates both empowerment *and* control, but outcomes are relatively light in both areas. In contrast to the aspirations and claims of its supporters, empowerment largely took the form of lower level immediate confidence to perform tasks, with no indication of broader higher level empowerment being created. In contrast to the critiques of its detractors, the soft “self-disciplining” controls, often perceived as embedded within empowerment, were not accompanied by any significant increase in levels of emotional labor, concertive control, or employee branding. This finding has a number of implications for both academic research and practice.

### *Implications for Academic Research*

At least since Daniel Bell’s (1954) denigration of human relations as “cow sociology,” OD has been surrounded with controversy. While OD’s supporters proclaim liberation and empowerment, its critics charge manipulation and control by “servants of power” (Golembiewski, 2008). As a relatively new method in the OD arsenal, it is not surprising that similar issues have been raised in discussions of organizational theatre. What makes the controversy more poignant is that the origins of forum theatre lie in the radical street theatre and revolutionary drama methods of the Latin American radical Augusto Boal, while Boal himself was highly critical of the use of his techniques within corporate interventions. As he remarked when contacted by the DeCapo theatre group in Denmark,

Please understand me. Theatre of the Oppressed is theatre of the oppressed, for the oppressed and by the oppressed. I know that social and labor conditions in Brazil and Denmark are very, very different, so it is difficult for me to imagine what words like managers, executives, Bang & Olufsen, business, etc., really mean to you. I know what they mean to me. (Larsen, 2005)

Given the highly rhetorical, emotionally charged, and politically contentious nature of claims and counterclaims about empowerment and control, many commentators’ minds will probably already have been made up about the potential and use of

organizational theatre. Our findings in this study strongly suggest, however, that we should keep our minds open. Both empowerment and control rhetorics are powerful and, in many ways, convincing; however, they should be treated with caution.

From the empowerment side, the general positive claims made about dialogic and discursive approaches to OD, as well as the specific claims made about organizational theatre, are persuasive as a lens through which to view the potential of organizational theatre. Its ability to open up arenas for the expression of polyvocality, provide double-loop learning on interpersonal skills, and allow experiments in thought and action are highly desirable potential uses. Yet, once we begin to explore *levels* of empowerment, particularly moves from lower level empowerment as control over work, enhanced interpersonal skills, and so on, to assess higher level empowerment in terms of participation in decision making and shaping the organizational agenda, there are genuine grounds for skepticism. With regard to generalizing about such matters from the case study in this article, two issues are significant.

First, the way in which the initial “problem” is defined, is likely to powerfully shape the degree to which higher forms of empowerment are considered in the script and its enactment. In this case, the circumscribed focus on frontline staff making customer appointments decreased the likelihood that the event would trigger discussion and action about higher level empowerment. When discussing “lightweight” and “heavyweight” forms of organizational theatre, it would be desirable to include such problem definition in the characterization of theatre events, in addition to the focus adopted in Figure 1 on the participation of employees in the writing of the script and its enactment. While it might be argued that higher level of involvement of employees in the development of the script might lead to a broadening of the problem focus, this is far from inevitable and will be affected by local and general discursive practices and organizational regimes. One qualification is in order, however. As Meisiek and Barry (2007) have argued, and as emphasized in interviews with De Capo theatre professionals, organizational theatre events are liminal and unpredictable, with alternating multilevel front-stage and backstage conversations occurring before, during, and after the event. The outcome of the event does not simply follow from the planned script, as social interactions taking place during the event may result in discussions and outcomes that transcend even the most initially tightly managerially controlled and defined “problem.”

Second, organizational theatre events take place in a flow of organizational events, some of which are the ongoing activities occurring as planned cultural change and employee/management development activities. It is unlikely that any “one-off” event will have a significant impact in itself, and the tendency of the established literature on organizational theatre to focus on a specific theatre event and its consequences is limiting (Matula et al., 2013), particularly if attention is focused on its potential to assist in creating higher levels of empowerment. It is desirable for any future assessments of the impact of a particular event, or even an encapsulated series of events, to take this context into account.

From the control side, increases in both empowerment *and* control are not surprising. In fact, the ability to make employees more autonomous in their jobs, while



increasing their motivation, and capacity to enthusiastically and uncritically align this autonomy with corporate goals, is part of the established critique of “corporate culturism” (Willmott, 1993). In its simplest one-dimensional form, what this perspective assumes is that not only does the greater exercise of autonomy and initiative not contribute to higher level empowerment but also, through uncritical inducement into supporting the goals of the enterprise, such initiatives actually decrease employees’ “positive freedom” (in terms of their independent contribution to shaping the corporate agenda). It is simultaneously upheld that the increases in self, peer, and managerial disciplining brought about by such events also reduce employees’ “negative” freedom (i.e., independence from managerial control over thought, feeling, and action). What was revealed in the case study, however, despite a clear managerial agenda in focusing attention onto making customer appointments, was that this was *not* accompanied by greater commitment to the company, emotional labor, or peer surveillance. This confirms two standard qualifications to extreme one-dimensional critiques of such initiatives as effectively increasing managerial control. First, as argued, and reviewed at length, in overviews by Thompson and Warhurst (1998) and Thompson and Ackroyd (1999), managerial rhetoric and intent are often very different to implementation and practice, and employees’ native intelligence and ability to resist and even transform managerial initiatives should not be underestimated. Second, organizations are characterized by complex “control configurations” (Storey, 1985), so initiatives to increase “normative” or “neo-normative” control (Fleming & Sturdy, 2011) are likely to be only partially implemented and to be intertwined with traditional dialectics of technical, bureaucratic, and direct control and resistance. Given this situation, it is important to adopt a more multidimensional view of control and explore the complex ways in which organizational theatre events may enhance or reduce alternative forms or dimensions of control.

Care must, of course, be taken in generalizing too far from single field studies. The outcomes of organizational theatre in this, and any other, study may be attributed to the type of organizational theatre event that was implemented and the context in which it occurs. It is, however, quite valid to reflect on the findings of the field study as hypothetical generalizations (Yin, 2013), and the questions that the study leaves open may be taken as a stimulant for further research on the effects of different types of organizational theatre initiatives. Within this article, for example, the characterization of the organizational theatre event focused on the degree of involvement of the audience in the scripting and performance of the theatrical skits. It can be argued, however, that, among other factors, the *character* of the script and the *nature and role* of the facilitator may be of crucial significance as well as the emergent dynamics within the event itself (Matula et al., 2013), and these should be considered more closely in future studies. The influence of organizational theatre events on employees will also be affected by internal and external organizational factors, including the nature and characteristics of the audience, experiences of participation, nature of the power–trust relations between managers and employees, as well as myriad product and labor markets, as well as cultural and institutional factors, in the organization, industry sector, and societal context. More conceptual analysis and research study is, therefore, required into



not only the forms of empowerment and control being investigated but also the nature and effects of the type of organizational theatre event involved and the context in which it is implemented. In addition, while the quantitative evidence adopted within this study provided a useful supplement to previous qualitative studies, power and its dynamics is a notoriously slippery subject (Clegg & Baumeler, 2010), and the future longitudinal collection of quantitative data would be usefully accompanied by the simultaneous collection of qualitative data on the issues and interpretations being documented and analyzed.

### *Implications for Practitioners*

As revealed in this study, and other studies, organizational theatre often has a dramatic effect on the participants, who view it as a highly stimulating and insightful event. It provides an environment in which participants are able to surface difficult issues, understand and explore the detailed situated actions implied by abstracted strategies, and collaboratively experiment in changing behaviors in an environment that encourages embodiment, creativity, and play. Yet, as revealed in this study, the outcomes of even a carefully planned and seriously conducted intervention should not be exaggerated. Neither idealistic hopes nor cynical criticisms based on simple characterizations of organizational theatre events should be taken too far or allowed to dominate the discussion of whether or how to use organizational theatre. Obtaining significant outcomes from organizational theatre events depends on context as well as content. Managing the challenges this creates is a complex, highly skilled and strenuous process, requiring all the skills and methods of both diagnostic and dialogic OD.

The drama of organizational theatre events has, in the past, tended to incite exaggerated and decontextualized, claims about “its” effect. The aim of this article has been to seriously address and test the hopes of its supporters and the fears of its detractors, and the discovery of its relatively “lightweight” impact will hopefully help practitioners to focus attention on not only the form of organizational theatre being implemented but also beyond the event itself, onto how it is deployed as part of more comprehensive OD interventions.

As commonly recognized in literature on OD programs and their evaluation, preparation for OD interventions as well as follow-up can be as important, if not more important, than the event itself (Cummings & Worley, 2009). As indicated in informal interviews with the theatre company responsible for the field study intervention, without the integration of organizational theatre into a broader OD program, there is a danger that it will be labelled and restricted to “edu-tainment” rather than deployed as a major and serious intervention supporting individual and organizational transformation. In this context, the discovery of the lightweight impact of the organizational theatre event in the case study organization may be taken as an inherent challenge to explore its use as part of a comprehensive organizational development initiative rather than an inherent restriction of the technology itself.

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## Note

1. As the term is used here, *organizational theatre* excludes other or more lightweight uses of theatre as “edu-tainment.” For example, see Rosen (1988) for theatre as staff cabarets or role-playing at Christian parties, Westwood (2004) for theatre involving the deployment of corporate comedians, and Nissley et al. (2004) for theatre as serious Shakespearean readings. Moreover, it does not imply any particular position with regard to debates over organizations as being theatre or like theatre, or whether they are becoming more theatrical in character. See Oswick, Anthony, Keenoy, Mangham, and Grant (2000), Oswick, Keenoy, and Grant (2002), and Schreyögg and Hopfl (2004) for insight on these debates.

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