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# Using Parody in Transforming a Healthcare Organisation in Australia

Richard Badham and Ella Hafermalz

## Introduction

In this chapter, we adopt a parody lens on sensuous learning to explore the use of Boalian-inspired forum theatre as an organisational learning device in planned organisational change. The chapter is based on a case study of organisational theatre and its use as part of a leadership development programme for senior leaders in a newly established not-for-profit healthcare institution in Australia. Drawing on an ethnographic and longitudinal study, this case explores the character and effects of organisational theatre as an example of the use of parody in planned organisational development and de-institutionalisation.

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The chapter seeks to stimulate further discussion on the potential role of parody in generating opportunities for reflection and development in organisational as well as management education contexts.

## Conceptual Framing

There is widespread recognition of the challenging and disruptive nature of planned change. A key component is addressing the cognitive and emotional elements in a socio-psychological transition of unlearning the habits and prejudices of the past and learning new forms of thought and behaviour, a process described by Scharmer (2009) as ‘letting go’ and ‘letting come’.

## Neo-institutional Theory and Change

Neo-institutional theory has tended to explore this phenomenon in primarily cognitive terms as a form of planned ‘de-institutionalisation’, described by Scott (2001, p. 182) as “processes by which institutions weaken and disappear” (Scott 2001, p. 182) or as Maguire and Hardy (2009, p. 150) put it, a “process whereby previously institutionalized practices are abandoned” (Maguire and Hardy 2009, p. 150). In recent years, there has been a request to deepen and broaden the understanding of purposeful de-institutionalisation (Lawrence et al. 2013; Maguire and Hardy 2009; Smets and Jarzabkowski 2013) by exploring the “work done by actors to disrupt institutions” (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006, p. 238), and to do so by undertaking more research at the ‘coalface’ where such institutional work is done (Barley 2008). A key focus of this research has been on how unreflexively habituated and sanctioned institutional myths and forms of legitimation can be questioned. Greenwood and Hinings (1996), in particular, have pointed to the general significance of rhetorical strategies making a persuasive case for change and the particular significance of legitimating the promotion of previously subordinated elements of established logics when faced with the challenge of dealing with complex and contradictory institutional logics.

## Organisational Development and Change

Traditional exponents of organisational development have tended to understand and address such processes as highly emotive ones. As Lewin (1947, p. 229) put it in outlining his approach to the ‘unfreezing’ of the existing set of beliefs, attitudes and behaviours, there is a ‘catharsis’ which seems necessary before prejudice can be removed. Elaborating further on this view, Schein (1996, p. 27) emphasised that it was essential to “recognise that change, whether at the individual or group level, is a profound psychological dynamic process” and that three key elements in this process were: disconfirmation of the validity of the status quo; the induction of guilt or survival anxiety; and creating psychological safety (Burnes 2004). Again, there have been numerous appeals for more in-depth research on the manner and appropriateness of how this is achieved in practice (Jansson 2013, 2014)

## Organisational Theatre, Change and Sensuous Learning

The use of organisational theatre as an arts-based method in addressing the challenges of ‘de-institutionalisation’ and ‘unfreezing’ is now established (Taylor 2008; Badham et al. 2016). Organisational theatre is variously regarded as acting as an ‘irritant’ (Schreyögg 2001) or ‘trigger’ (Buur and Torguet 2013). As an arts-based method for stimulating change, it involves the use of commissioned tailor-made and professionally staged plays, performed within a defined organisation, and dealing with problems that hinder aspirational forms of change and development (Matula 2013). When undertaken in its Boalian-influenced variant as ‘forum theatre’ (Nissley et al. 2004), it involves five main elements: the development of a script or ‘trigger play’ that presents in a dramatic fashion the identified ‘problem’ facing the organisation or individuals within it; the acting out of this script by professional actors; the cross-examining of the actors by the audience, to identify thoughts, motives and feelings; a re-enactment of the script, where the audience can ‘stop’ the action at any point and suggest alternatives, which the actors then integrate into the script; and an invitation to the audience

to create and then enact their own re-created script, as fully fledged ‘spect-actors’ (Badham et al. 2016).

This kind of organisational theatre embodies a form of sensual learning that surfaces situated habitual knowledge and patterns through its scripted and improvised enactments, provides an embodied representation of such knowledge and patterns through emotive, interactive and situational enactments, and explores both problems and solutions in interactive, contextual and often confrontational enactments. Meisiek (2004) explores the significance of this form of learning as a means of stimulating and channelling cathartic reactions into proactive resolution of problematic organisational situations and encounters. Taylor (2008) specifically addresses its role in establishing the conditions that Schein (1996) argues are essential for refreezing.

Organisational theatre can further play a role in bringing about what neo-institutional theory recognises as a traditional weakness in their explanatory armoury (Lok et al. 2017): processes that successfully *persuade* people to bring about the cognitive understanding and questioning of established frames and logics (Kitchener 2002). In his analysis of the cathartic effects of organisational theatre, however, Meisiek (2004, p. 814) urges that in future “researchers include *emotion and cognition* in their research efforts regarding the effects of organizational theatre” (Meisiek 2004, p. 814, emphasis added). Viewing organisational theatre as parody, we believe, provides a perspective that allows us to further explore these ambitions, activities and effects.

## Organisational Theatre as Parody

At its core, the genre of parody involves *repetition* that includes *difference* (Deleuze 1968/1994; Hutcheon 1985). It finds its comedic effect through the “exaggerated copying of that which is thought to be ‘original’ to culture” (Rhodes and Pullen 2012, p. 516). Parody thus does not stand on its ‘own feet’—it relies on a referent against which its inversions and exaggerations are recognisable in terms of continuity and difference. Because of this self-conscious and reflexive mode of engaging with another work, it is regarded as going beyond meta-fiction in

establishing “a comic discrepancy or incongruity between the original work and its ‘imitation’ and transformation” (Rose 1993, p. 37). The historical and contemporary significance of parody has recently been given attention, as parody captures the modern/post-modern experiences and anxieties regarding fragmented and conflicting perspectives, interests and identities (Hutcheon 1985; Pullen and Rhodes 2013; Rhodes and Westwood 2007; Rose 1993).

While modernist genres tended to conceal the means by which truths are produced, parody is more appropriate to post-modern sensibilities through its highlighting of the processes of production. Through artificial *imitation/repetition* it draws attention to the constructed nature of the ‘narratives’ involved, and through *difference* it draws attention to the partial, vulnerable and contestable nature of such constructions. Because of its reliance on imitation and difference, parody simultaneously reveals its dependence on an original as well as showing “the original to be nothing other than a parody of the idea of the natural and the original” (Butler 1990, p. 41). From its liminal position “between reality and fiction, between word and thing” (Agamben 2007, p. 48), parody highlights both what is taken for granted as legitimate (i.e. ‘the original’) as well as the processes of legitimisation that have sustained it.

These features of parody are clearly exemplified within organisational theatre in the initial ‘trigger’ play that acts out an identifiable problem. It is an imitation of ‘real life’, usually taking the form of a clash between a ‘formal’ world view and antagonist, often representing the ‘managerial’ view’, and a protagonist embedded in the ‘informal’ culture that is contradictory to and resistant to this view and the change it implies. The tragi-comic effect of the enacted script is created by the mutual incomprehension of the characters and associated viewpoints, the lack of respect they show towards each other, the way they fail to resolve the tensions between them, and the unintended and often disastrous consequences that result from their failure to properly understand and address the issues they are confronting. Taylor (2008) aptly points to the initial ‘unfreezing’ role of this element of organisational theatre as meeting Schein’s first criteria of providing disconfirming data, revealing that all is not well with the status quo, and doing so in a way that allows participants to experience this, without living it. When combining this

experience with humour, a comic atmosphere is created that alleviates the potentially depressive, anxiety creating and resistance-inducing tragic emotions of pity and fear that the problematic performance can arouse.

Taylor (2008) highlights the role of organisational theatre in bringing about Schein's second 'unfreezing' requirement: a sense of anxiety or guilt about the problematic situation sufficient to motivate change. Part of this process, is the collective recognition, voicing and sharing of thoughts and emotions about the enacted skit in a post-performance dialogue. In the case of forum theatre, two methods are commonly used that contribute to this collective reflection on and exploration of the initial anxieties and guilt raised by the first enacted skit. Firstly, there is an interactive questioning and answer session with the characters, as the group explores with them the reasons for their actions, their thoughts and feelings about them, and the consequences they experience. Secondly, there is an improvisational session, where the characters re-enact the scene, on the basis of prompting from the audience, where the re-enactments often reveal many of the unexpected and problematic outcomes of what are often quickly thought out and simplistic recommendations for change. The interactive questioning surfaces and allows the expression of anxieties and fears, and also encourages a group exploration of the nature, sources and consequences of the problematic behaviour. The improvised guided re-enactment by the actors reinforces the problematic nature of the situation, and the depth of its ingrained character, when recommendations go awry.

Both Meisiek (2004) and Taylor (2008) point to the role of organisational theatre in bringing about the effect of enabling 'second order observation': making it possible to be more detached from and critical of experienced reality by allowing an 'observation of an observation' of its problematic nature. Viewing organisational theatre's character as parody highlights the role within this process of portraying characters and viewpoints that are both recognisable and realistic, *and yet also stereotyped and exaggerated*. We argue that this brings to the attention of the audience both the artificial, constructed and partial nature of the perspectives that they espouse and encounter in the workplace, as well as their incongruous character and effects. Taylor (2008)

further adds that the 'naming' of phenomena, can also make such forms of critical detachment possible. Organisational members often make reference after the intervention to the stereotyped 'characters' that are represented on stage, in a reflective and humorous way, and reflect on how these characters remind themselves and others about their own partial yet embedded prejudices. In its overall effect, however, a key contribution is that parody makes it possible to expose and mock the artificiality and limitations of habituated and legitimated views and actions, thereby helping to disconfirm the validity of the status quo, and doing so *without relying on a purportedly superior viewpoint* that might generate antagonism and resistance.

Finally, Schein argues that in 'unfreezing', this provision of a degree of psychological safety, enables the participants to be prepared to consider rather than anxiously or angrily resist any proposed changes. Taylor (2008), in part following Meisiek (2004), argues that a degree of catharsis is created by the fictionalised enactment that cleanses some of the negative emotion. Meisiek (2004) also emphasises, however, the safety that forum theatre provides for participants to experiment with alternatives, what Boal (2000) intentionally promotes as a safe, conducive and empowering way of increasing both capabilities of and self-confidence to pursue change. Drawing on Moreno's 'psychodrama', Meisiek (2004) emphasises the 'action catharsis' and 'group catharsis' that is created through the involvement of the participants in acting out possible solutions in a safe environment. What Boalian catharsis adds to this is the creation within forum theatre of conditions that translate the initial 'emotional dissonance' created by the portrayal of the problematic status quo, into motivation and guidance to bring about a change of the conditions that are entrapping the participants.

Using and viewing organisational theatre as parody contributes to our understanding of these dimensions and uses of psychological safety in three ways. Firstly, the de-naturalising yet *sympathetic* exposure of existing perspectives and the problems it creates, makes participants more comfortable in creating alternatives that may involve selective repackaging or development of these. Secondly, implied in its exaggerations, reversals and mockery of the original stances lies an alternative set of assumptions, that potentially provide 'symbolic counter-cultural

resources' in the form of an 'invitation to change' (Rhodes and Pullen 2012), rather than an authoritarian imposition of 'superior' academic knowledge (Rhodes and Westwood 2007, p. 134). Participants are provided, through the comic performance and re-enactments, with suggestive ideas to guide and support their experimentation. Thirdly, parody's establishment of a creative, playful and humorous ethos for considering multiple perspectives, recognising their relative value but also their specific forms of 'blindness', releases participants from anxiety about being 'stupid', 'mistaken' or 'judged' in the creative experimentation process. In these three ways, the aesthetic distance, created by parody's playful dramatisation and stimulation of reflective self-mockery, when effectively deployed ('not too little, not too much') provides a degree of space and security to experiment with alternative ways of relating and organising.

## Context and Content

The case of parody as organisational theatre examined here was part of a 3-year leadership development programme that took place in a newly established Australian not-for-profit integrated cancer care facility (pseudonym Platanus) and was the subject of a 5-year dual ethnographic-action research study between 2010 and 2015. Platanus was established shortly prior to the study, with a budget of \$250 million dollars to build the new facility and establish a not-for-profit integrated cancer care organisation in collaboration with a major public hospital. The building was successfully opened on schedule in 2015; the staffing and organisational arrangements for day-care services were in immediate effect; and in-patient facilities were implemented 2 years later.

In the context of rapid escalation in the existing and predicted costs of health care, Australia has been developing and experimenting with 'patient-centred' care. In many cases this is primarily regarded as a cost-reduction strategy, but in the case of Platanus was part of a vision to be organised to 'focus on the person not the tumour' and to do so in a way that cut across traditional functional silos and incorporate non-traditional forms of medical treatment. In addition, in Australia

and globally, there has been a dramatic growth of interest in and experimentation with social enterprise arrangements, arrangements that seek to combine the dedicated pursuit of a social mission with a strong 'businesslike managerialism' (Noordegraaf 2007). The complexity of the Platanus project was its attempt in a five year period to establish its institutional framework, manage the construction of the building, persuade staff and specialists used to working in the local public hospital or in a private practice to renew their contracts, and to address the challenge of combining an aspirational social mission in the face of not only challenging commercial requirements but the suspicion and opposition of the local Department of Health.

Two months prior to the organisational theatre intervention on 9 February 2012, a leadership development workshop on 'Communications' had identified a key challenge facing the leadership team as one of getting the existing cohort of staff (including nurses and doctors, accustomed to operating under guiding principles of public sector health management and 'traditional professional values') on board with the integrated patient-centred philosophy and an individualised enterprise agreement. Coercion was not desirable or a long-term option, as the CEO put it, "they should be part of Platanus, and they should not be thinking 'there are these bastards called Platanus on the other side of the road who force us to do this or that'".

The desired approach was to be positive and collaborative. As the CEO also emphasised "the framing should maybe not be that this is another change management plan, people might not like the word change because it implies that people have done something wrong". The challenge for the leadership team was to craft out a message that would get the prospective employees on board, and they feared that this would be a difficult conversation. As a result, they agreed to the use of forum theatre to help them address and rehearse solutions to the problem they faced. The formal purpose of the intervention was defined as helping them answer the question: 'How, as leaders, do we respond to informal questions about Platanus' vision, values and our personal ambitions to engage them in the journey?'

The scripts for the organisational theatre were developed in a collaborative process, documented by the research team, involving the

two academic researchers (one Ph.D. ethnographer, one supervisor ethnographer and action researcher), the organisation theatre consulting company and the Platanus HR team (including the HR director, manager and an academic-practitioner). The facilitator was chosen by the research team for his ability to construct performances that were subversive, comic, yet politically and emotionally sensitive in presenting challenging and yet humorous representations of the clash between the dominant formal and public managerial rhetoric promoting change and the often not publically expressed subordinate, informal and private voices of many of those being required to change.

In this case, a particular concern of the research team was the tendency for change programmes to unreflectively 'demonise' the old way, with negative consequences for mobilising personnel, caring for existing staff and potential for the exploitation and marginalisation of weaker parties. Within Platanus, this involved potential repression of adherents at every level to traditional public, medical and professional logics and practices in the face of enthusiasm for a new care focused managerial 'integrated' and 'patient-centred' vision. HR was centrally concerned that the skits would engage the SMT through its relevance for pressing immediate issues, in this case the challenge of communicating the vision to potential staff who had previously been excluded from the conversation, and were rumoured to be negative and disillusioned.

The lead consultant, with extensive experience in theatre, education and corporate consulting, emphasised the need to clarify the exact purpose, and provide a lean and engaging 'particularised' script that was not over-burdened by any 'message'. The lead consultant had lengthy interviews and two major meetings with the research and HR teams, interviewed a small cross section of medical and managerial staff, and drafted out a script that was circulated to the others for checking and refinement. Only a few minor changes were made. No explicit consideration was given to developing organisational theatre as 'parody'. However, the format that was chosen lent itself to this artistic form: (i) creating an exaggerated, humorous and unproductive clash between 'dominant' corporate culture and 'subordinate' organisational culture views as the 'trigger' play; (ii) creating an active Q&A session on the 'trigger' play, that showed up the intellectual, emotive and political

'artifice' that underlay it, was an established forum theatre technique that was selected; and (iii) the extended use of forum theatre to involve re-scripting and active enactment by the audience, encouraging an emotive, energised and safe experimentation with alternatives; and (iv) the deliberate creation of a sensitive and safe environment in which humour, play and reflection were highlighted.

The participants in the organisational theatre event were the executive leadership team of Platanus (the Senior Management Team or SMT). The SMT was a complex blend of managerially experienced professional doctors and nurses and finance, construction, communications, HR and marketing managers from the private sector, and there were notable differences and tensions between them in how to respond to the orienting question. Within the SMT, the doctors revealed a strong sympathy for what has been termed the 'professional logic' in health care, with its prioritisation of quality and medical autonomy, while many of the private sector managers were strongly committed to an integrative 'patient centred' version of what is commonly described as a 'managerial logic' or 'business logic', with its emphasis on efficiency and systems for ensuring effective client delivery (Reay and Hinings 2009; Scott 2000; Van den Broek et al. 2014). As a not-for-profit organisation in the process of establishing a facility to deliver integrated and patient-centred cancer care, the SMT was implicated in, and confronted by, these competing institutional logics. This was overlaid with tensions between 'care' and 'cure' ideologies of health (Meyerson 1991) as a result of the organisation's 'integrated patient-centred' vision and the 'hybrid' tensions between 'commercial' and 'social mission' objectives as a result of its 'not-for-profit' status (Skelcher and Smith 2015). In this chapter, we will only examine the first scripted performance and its effects.

In this first skit, actors played out a scene where the Platanus leader confronted a 'smoking nurse', a nurse who is smoking on her break outside the front of the cancer facility. The Platanus leader tries (unsuccessfully) to persuade the nurse about the value of joining the not-for-profit Platanus organisation. It was a fumbling, yet recognisable and sympathetic portrayal of the leader's first attempts at a difficult conversation, with a realistic depiction of the sceptical reaction from the nurse and how the leader only made things worse in trying to respond to this

scepticism. Here we show an extract from this first ‘smoking nurse’ skit, where the nurse, Jo, realises she is not going to get information beyond what she already knows, and begins to disengage. The Platanus leader, Dan, ultimately fails to engage Jo in a positive conversation about the transition to the new facility, and Jo walks away to find a solution to her immediate need—a light for her cigarette.

*Jo*: I thought you came out for your daily dose of vitamin D.

*Dan*: Right. Well, okay well, my not so hidden agenda is to learn about your world. What would you do differently, what are your challenges? The whole point of Platanus is that we do get an opportunity to work on improving stuff for you and the patients. ‘Cause that’s the vision; patient focused; performance based; better communication; with enough resources into it to make it easier for you guys to do your jobs.

*Jo*: What do you mean performance based?

*Dan*: Well there will be expectations but that will provide opportunity to progress/whereas currently I know it’s very—

*Jo*: Jesus I’d kill for a smoke [*to passer by*] ‘scuse me do have a light? [*No, sorry*] No worries. Does no one smoke anymore?

*Dan*: They’re dying out...

*Jo*: Might not live to see those lovely new uniforms.

*Dan*: You’re gonna love ‘em. Green.

*Jo*: Not really my colour. Alright, I’m going to buy a new lighter...

While this scene is localised and specific in the way it represents characters from a particular context speaking about a particular change management issue, the characters and the interaction are instantly recognisable as both general stereotypes and comic portrayals. We suggest that “Jo” and “Dan” are, respectively, representations of professional and managerial logics in health care (Scott 2000). They are also comically portrayed through the parodic qualities of incongruous representation *for comic effect* (Rose 1993), where the creation of incongruities expose a politics of representation involving selective exaggeration, ‘low’ reversal, revelation of unintended consequences or absurdities, and contrasts with other realities. Jo is represented as an experienced and caring nurse, but she is also a smoker—a trait that is rendered ironic and comic *against* the ideal of a healthcare professional as someone deeply

concerned with health and well-being. Meanwhile, Dan touts managerial ideals of communication, resourcing, effectiveness and support, while, in the skit, clearly failing to communicate effectively with his subordinates and utterly overlooking the one resource Jo repeatedly requests—a light for her cigarette.

As such, the smoking nurse skit can be seen as a parodic representation of the personifications of competing institutional logics, placed in (unproductive) dialogue. Through the tropes of critical irony and inversion, the partiality and fallibility of both ideals are highlighted. The ‘disconfirmation’ of existing practices is achieved through the unproductive nature of the dialogue, and the space is created for critical distance (Hutcheon 1985) through a sympathetic yet also stereotyped, exaggerated and incompetent portrayal.

After the professional actors presented their initial scripted skit, a facilitated conversation took place with the SMT audience. In keeping with the organisational theatre format, the initial skit served as a prompt to encourage reactions from the workshop audience. Reflections were shared and discussed and formed the basis of sense-making around what kind of behaviour and activities were deemed ‘appropriate’ in the context of the emerging Platanus culture. In the discussion, the organisation’s leadership team take on the role of “critics” of the performance, and we note that according to Glynn and Lounsbury (2005, p. 1033), “critics can resist changes in logics, act as carriers of new logics, or act in accordance with dominant logics under conditions of field stability” and that therefore by “explicitly examining the relationship between logics and critical reviews, we can gain insight into how critics may provide a motor for ongoing institutional dynamics”.

In reacting to the actors, who we can think of as having shown a comic portrayal of different logics in dialogue, the participants reflect on the underlying dynamics affecting their organisation. In the following transcript, Brett the facilitator is trying to get the SMT to collectively act in the role of critic, by asking them to share their honest reflections on the skit they have just seen:

*Facilitator:* I am also hearing you saying... ‘someone we wouldn’t want to hire’. So what is the impression?

*CEO:* Oh, the impression was a) standing outside of a hospital, having a smoke and a cup of coffee, presumably in a uniform, asking passing people for a lighter. Aehm, it's not a great impression for a staff member.

*Facilitator:* So what's the word I should capture?

*CEO:* Sloppy.

[...]

*Chris:* I completely reject the notion that we don't want people like that. We want more, I think, if they are good in doing their job, which is caring for sick people. And you know whom we should blame? Was us. Aehm, with a bullshit story about, you know telling the advantages of the new facility, there was no credibility and some dangerous seeding.

*CEO:* That is what's been going on at the moment. I guess in respect to the insult of sloppy and laissez faire is the impression that it creates and it was my first instant impression. I don't mean to diss people who work in a hospital because I worked in a hospital and I have experienced what it's like. It can be shit, it's hard. Aehm, but the, it's not a good impression when you have hospital staff in hospital uniforms standing beside a no-smoking sign on hospital grounds having a cigarette, aehm, right in front of a cancer centre...

This conversation which continued between the CEO of the new facility (Platanus) and a senior radiation oncologist from the SMT, (in)directly addresses the conflict between a managerial logic and a professional logic in a healthcare context. The CEO's expression of despair at the *image* that the nurse was projecting is critiqued by those who recognise this war-weary, no-bullshit nurse as 'one of us'. She is defended by Chris the radiation oncologist as a professional who is "good in doing [her] job, which is caring for sick people". For Chris, the *impression* that the nurse makes is not relevant to her capacity to do her job and care for patients, while for the CEO, her appearance and compliance (or not) with the centre's rules and brand are of central concern, as it impacts on the brand value of the organisation.

Interestingly, although the skit was comic in tone, the conversation that followed was quite serious. The characters portrayed in the skit are nearly absurd in their contrariness, yet each finds a defender within the SMT audience. We find that the post-skit discussion ceases to be about the particular situation portrayed, as leadership members engage in a debate that incorporates the wider issue of conflicting logics at Platanus, highlighting beliefs, attitudes, practices and plans for action. Particularly productive was the discussion surrounding what 'type of person' Platanus should be hiring and celebrating as ideal. One 'type of person' displayed in the skit was shown 'battling the system' while the other 'type of person' exemplified the system—the politically correct, on brand, 'managerial self' versus the pragmatic, flexible, politically incorrect, hard-working 'professional medical'.

We note that it was because both the manager and the nurse were portrayed in a strategically exaggerated, parodic way (the former as smoking, sarcastic, dismissive of authority, and the latter as formulaic, disengaged and even naive) that enough critical distance was created to prompt such debate. If both characters had been presented in an entirely professional/effective light, the heated discussion that followed the skit would have had no fuel. While the initial parody stemmed from showing the fallibility and constructed nature of both the professional dominance and managed care ideals, the embarrassment of these ideals translated into what the facilitator of the workshop considered a productive discussion that brought to the fore certain assumptions, that could then be interrogated and provoked.

Following this post-skit discussion, the Platanus CEO volunteered to take part in a re-enactment of the scenario alongside the actor playing the nurse, Jo. The initial parody thus provides an 'invitation to act' to the SMT, who are invited to create an alternative reality. At this point it is the initial parody that becomes the referent for a new performance—which is itself not necessarily a parody, as we shall explore. In the following, Jo continues to be performed by the professional actor. She is improvising in response to the CEO, who is now acting as himself in the same scenario as before:

*Jo*: How are things?

*CEO*: Not bad. A bit frustrating.

*Jo*: Really?

*CEO*: Ah, well you know. There are just some issues that are not really helping with...

*Jo*: ...You mean with Platanus?

*CEO*: No. With you guys./

*Jo*: Wow. So. Okay [...] What do you mean?

*CEO*: Well, Platanus principles and how the hospital will run, to get your response you know... ...

*Jo*: ...if you are talking to a whole group of nurses, you will find that half the people over there are just freaking out.

*CEO*: Well, I don't, what are they freaking out about?

*Jo*: They are freaking out about all their conditions. Losing wages, not getting promotions that they might have been promised or that might be coming up. If the conditions that they are working under are going to be transferred across. You know. And so, you know, it is going to be different to be working for this private thing. We don't know what that means. Most of us have never worked outside a public situation before. So, yeah,

*CEO*: You know it is a not-for-profit organisation.

*Jo*: Yeah. That's another thing. Not-for-profit, what does that mean? That's scaring me sometimes (laughter) I am not going to work for free. You know. Not for freaking nothing. You know (laughter).

*CEO*: I got you. We are not the nuns (laughter). So we are not going to get you a robe.

*Jo*: I am happy to hear that (laughter).

In this iteration of the performance, the stereotypes are softened. The nurse is willing to speak her mind and express what is truly concerning her—working conditions—and the manager steps away from managerial 'scripts' and speaks more authentically with his staff. What emerges is a more constructive conversation that goes further towards addressing the concerns of both parties. For instance, the anxiety that Jo expresses around her and other nurses' working conditions may at first glance seem out of step with Platanus' vision of patient-centred care, however drawing on an understanding of the logic of care (Mol 2008), we can

see that resourcing, pay and staffing are centrally important to having enough *time* for the nurse to be a caring presence for her patients (Covington 2003).

Potentially what we see in this re-enactment is an illustration of a softening of the traditional view of two 'conflicting logics', where one fights for dominance against the other. In its place is a more collegial relationship between those representing different views. The zero-sum interpretation of managed care, where professionals are demoted in favour of the patient and market forces, is brought to the fore and examined. This concern is not left latent but is instead acknowledged and to an extent addressed by the CEO, who reassures Jo that the nurses will not become 'nuns'. We can further read the 'pay and conditions' issue raised by Jo in this second skit as speaking to the issue of a 'zero sum' professional dominance response to the unitarist, 'non zero sum' ideology of a patient-centred, managed care ideal (in this case, in not-for-profit form). Both sides reveal to one another the pressure that they are under, without challenging the others' interests (Dan's concern with 'principles' of Platanus, Jo's concern with wages). A kind of hybrid compromise is acknowledged through a comic 'not a nun' comment that addresses the nurse's zero-sum concerns (both her self-interest and, arguably, as part of professional dominance ideology, adequate resourcing for professional 'care').

Here the two camps find some degree of compromise, or at least a tolerance for one another's views. At this point, the re-enacted skit no longer comes across so clearly as parody. Its tone is more akin to a standard drama, where interpersonal relationships and everyday concerns are brought to the fore. The characters are more well-rounded and their fallibilities do not stand out in contrast to an ideal-type. This dissolution of polarities has the effect of moving the interaction away from a representation typical of the parody genre, just as it portrays a more hybrid understanding of institutional forces operating in a healthcare setting, including the non-profit model. The second skit is thus drawing on the first more explicitly parodic skit as its referent, acknowledging the characters and their interests (selling the managerial ideology, retaining wages and conditions), but now it is being pursued in a more collaborative fashion—seemingly more open to compromise, and revealing

the challenges that each are facing and, implicitly, the need for the help of the other to address these challenges. At one level, the re-enactment continues the professional dominance/managerial logics in their 'differences', but at another level provides a different view of how they can be handled. The alternative outcome represents another ideal, that of 'consensus' based on a mutual acknowledgement of weakness, giving the appearance of 'authenticity'.

## Process of Learning

Following the organisational theatre intervention, three rounds of semi-structured interviews were undertaken with the participants. These occurred 2, 8 and 36 weeks after the forum theatre event. Many of the responses to open questions about what participants remembered of the event, whether or not it had any effects, and if it did what they were, confirmed what other commentators have observed about organisational theatre. For our present purposes, the degree of emphasis given to six phenomena was the most significant.

Firstly, the ability to watch an enacted and embodied performance was highlighted as absolutely crucial. As one participant remarked, "presenting people with a real lived experience is much better than talking about it. It hits home better. And yet alternatively there is a little bit of distance seeing someone up there." As another elaborated, "It works because it allows us, the people watching, who are the people who this is for, it allows us to actually, if you like, step outside our normal roles and watch it like it's theatre." A precondition for this effect was the inclusion within the parody of an embodied representation and enactment of the participants' beliefs, habits and prejudices, and the kinds of problems that these created.

Also highlighted as valuable and surprising was the importance of the intertwining of the cognitive with the emotional. When asked what image leapt to mind about the performance, the most common reference was 'illuminating', and with this 'enlightening', 'innovative', 'a mirror' and 'thought provoking'. Also added were 'energetic', 'fun', 'entertaining', 'exciting' and a highly emotive 'beating heart'. As one

participant put it, what was most interesting was the combination of both 'intellectual and emotional' aspects, and others confirmed it was the 'passion in the responses' and the 'revealing of attitudes'. The intervention was rendered memorable because what was being observed was emotive, and aroused emotions in the audience. This degree of emotional engagement was also seen as surprising. As one participant put it, "I actually found myself getting quite emotionally engaged in it. More than I might have expected to be." And another remarked that the most surprising element was "The emotions. In particular the anger involved. I loved it and think it was great, but I have never experienced and seen such an aggressive element in any other intervention."

A third theme, and one that was raised even more in the second round of interviews after six weeks, were the disruptions and 'bad' behaviour that had been on display. One person's image of the whole event was a 'bowling ball and skittles', another said, laughingly, that what had an impact was 'more the bad behaviour than the good stuff', an observation others, also laughingly, followed up with specific reference to the CEO's angry denunciation of the surgeon-actor as an 'arrogant prick', and the fact that one participant "went as far as he went without stopping himself". Others also remarked on the surprising degree to which this occurred: "I didn't expect it to get so personal. I don't mean personal like they were abusing each other, but I didn't expect, you know, I was interested in that an audience member got so involved." As another commented "I was interested how willing we were to laugh at stereotypes." This exaggerated, incongruous and disruptive nature of the initial scripted and following improvised parodies was seen as both highly memorable and engaging, but also served as a warning about prejudices, even as a potential within themselves. As participants remarked, "it's a really powerful way of making myself but also everybody aware of the things that we have in our heads."

Explicit references were also made to the value of laughter and the use of 'humour', 'satire' and 'parody' to reveal underlying dynamics. As one participant put it, "you could say we were stereotyping and generalizing, but they actually have dealt with some of the real power relationships (laughs). So if we, for example, [have] perceptions about doctors being the top of the tree, nurses being, you know, the

cynical, overworked. And I think although in the forum theatre you use humour to kind of, it actually is highlighting some of the real cultural issues that you are trying to change.” As another put it, “I think it is the old saying, you know, when somebody is joking they are always half joking. So I think he said it as a bit of a joke. And the reason why it was a bit of a joke was that it’s kind of half true. It’s true and he was kind of acknowledging that it is true, but he was doing it in a lighthearted way.” Ridicule and mockery were in this way seen as a way of getting people to engage with a sensitive topic, in a way that simple ‘evangelical’ or preachy instruction was not able to do, particularly in an Australian context where there can be a distrust of such earnest approaches, as another participant highlighted.

The comments about humour and the use of parody were linked to an emphasis on the ‘realism’ of the content and in the delivery of the theatre intervention. References were made to the fact that the ‘scenarios were really well researched’ and “I liked the way the scenarios had been written and that a lot of research had gone into it prior to the session”. It was the “ability to capture the essence of the characters that they were playing”, “to get so clear, and to capture the characters the way they did” that caused the participants to be ‘delighted’ and ‘amazed’. A crucial part of this affect was the Q&A after the initial performance, “when they stayed in character for questions”. As one participant put it, it was “Interesting that [the actress] could get so much into her role. When they kept firing very technical questions at her, I never thought she would be able to get back with such good answers...She responded as a real person who is in a way an actress.” As one of the HR personnel put it, “I had it played back to me by [the senior doctors] that the research we must have done to prepare very accurately reflected the scenarios that they face. And that they were able to see themselves in a humorous way and the leaders could practice by playing through the scenarios.” The actors’ ability to identify and relay crucial elements of practice in their performances assisted participants in engaging deeply with the learning process.

Finally, participants mentioned an initial emotional anxiety and discomfort that gradually eased through the event. While one participant was astounded at the ‘debacle’ of bad behaviour, they were also

“surprised about how comfortable I felt; I thought I would feel a lot more uncomfortable than that.” Part of this, as another noted, was “how well everybody kind of warmed to it. I was pleasantly surprised by that. It seemed to me that everybody kind of, you know, tapped into and said ‘Okay, I can really see the benefit in this and get something out of it in a non-threatening way.’” As the actress noted, at the start many were “very scared and also not wanting to be there. Throughout the intervention they got more and more interested in pioneering through the issues. They gave and showed a lot of themselves in an emotional sense. It was a radical change of their emotional state.” This final theme that stood out in our follow up interviews points to the importance of skilled facilitation of such an intervention, in order to help participants become involved in such a way that they experience a sense of psychological safety and emotional openness in their interactions with the material and with each other.

## Lessons Learned

The extent to which people can significantly influence their institutional context through intentional de-institutionalisation has been the matter of ongoing debate (Greenwood et al. 2011; Pache and Santos 2013; Smets and Jarzabkowski 2013). Here we have illustrated through the example of the use of organisational theatre in a healthcare setting, how sensuous learning through enacted, embodied and interactive parody can be used in the process of planned ‘de-institutionalisation’ or ‘unfreezing’—to prompt actors to reflect on, critically consider, and respond to institutional complexity (Smets and Jarzabkowski 2013, p. 1280), and create disconfirmation and survival anxiety and yet with enough psychological security necessary for establishing the kind of ‘emotional stir-up’ required to motivate reflection on established habits and prejudices (Taylor 2008). Of crucial significance is the ability of organisational theatre, viewed through the lens of and conducted as parody, to combine (i) cognitive de-legitimising/re-legitimising elements of de-institutionalisation with (ii) a motivation-enhancing, disconfirming, survival anxiety-inducing, yet still safe psychological space.

We posit that parody, in this instance of organisational theatre and potentially in others, has the potential to foster dialogue and support multiple actors in collaborating to address the complexities of institutional transformation. It has the potential to do so by surfacing embedded and competing institutional logics, in a way that captures their cognitive and emotive nature, and providing a creative, embodied, reflective and engaging space within which to explore their ambiguities, multiple dimensions, zero-sum oppositions and potential synergies.

When asked about the effects of the intervention, the participants acknowledged that it was difficult to objectively measure its impacts, which were also affected by the nature and degree of follow up. The format of the event itself however was seen by certain participants as providing a good model for how communication *should* be done. A key takeaway was, as one remarked, not just the ‘content’ but the ‘process’: “truthfully what I found most interesting was the whole process”. For some it was the ‘concept of forum theatre’ itself that was seen as most valuable, for example one participant said “I think that’s what theatre does and I think that is what it did. It actually...created a safe environment, a very realistic environment where people could see what is really going on.” Some extended the discussion of the process into an exploration of the future, as its success added ‘credibility’ and “opened up the possibility of more activities along these lines”, but what was most important seemed to be the intervention’s initial role as a trigger for further reflection: “to be honest, I think that it was a start, not a finish... it was a start of that process and I think that was the biggest achievement.”

Here we offer a note of caution to the practitioner. As acknowledged, what we have described is only the ‘start’ of a process, and it requires systematic follow up to achieve sustainable outcomes. Different people in the room vary in not only their perceptions of the event, but also what they are able to take away. Humour and parody may even distract, or be used for ridicule and domination, as well as for furthering collective dialogue and understanding. Politics is never eliminated, and where some see the basis for a new integrative synthesis, others still see the imposition of traditional forms of domination. Moreover, the skill of the facilitator in being able to blend seriousness with humour, and strong commitments to education with a degree of playful self-irony, is

crucial and, in our experience, relatively rare, with small wonder that Boal (2000) called this a complex 'Joker' role. Finally, success depends on extensive prior research into the organisational context and a high quality of acting, the costs and challenges of which may be impractical to achieve in many corporate settings, and without which the effect is likely to be far less impactful.

As can be seen from the comments overall however, the successful outcomes of the session were attributed to the way in which the presentation, and then the encouragement to enact a range of parodies, put up a mirror to the group, raising cognitive awareness of their varied views, interests and capabilities, but doing so in a way that also reminded them of the ideals they shared. This allowed the SMT to enjoy themselves and gain confidence while they learned. This was achieved by providing them with models, tools and an ability to practise in what was seen, most importantly, to be a safe environment. The process itself modelled the self-reflective appreciation of multiple views, the surfacing and exploration of recognisable issues and problems without imposing dogmatic solutions and being ready to recognise the limitations and mock the perspectives and capabilities of oneself as well as others.

Viewing such elements and achievements through a parody lens reinforces rather than challenges the views of other reflections on the role of organisational theatre in organisational change and management education. What this adds, however, is a stronger focus on organisational theatre's potential to provide a consistently self-reflective mirror of partiality and artifice. Through such means, organisational theatre as parody has the ability to produce a form of sensuous learning that is able to blend cognitive and emotive elements in combining 'realistic' tension-laden content, presentation and particularity with a recognisably exaggerated, stereotyped and 'light' treatment of its character and effects. The parody employed at Platanus reveals how this form can support open dialogue and embodied experimentation, by portraying confrontational yet absurd situational problems and inviting experimentation and play with alternatives rather than imposing 'solutions' as if they were self-evident truths.

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