Who controls the looking glass?

Towards a conversational understanding of organizational theatre

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Abstract

This paper presents a longitudinal study of interactive organizational theatre. Managers of a large home care organization used 30 instances of organizational theatre over a one year period to effect organizational change. We found that neither management, who had hoped that employees would accept and internalize the messages accompanying the play, nor employees, who used the liminal spaces to express their own take on the organization's issues, achieved their aims directly. Yet a year later, organizational performance and satisfaction were significantly improved—much of this was attributed to the play. To explain this, we develop a conversational theory of change, one where 'conversation pieces' are central. We also speculate on the properties that conversation pieces and conversational systems like organizational theatre must have if they are to effect change.

Key words: organizational change, organizational theatre, liminality, conversation piece

"To punish it, she held [the cat] up to the Looking-glass, that it might see how sulky it was. 'And if you're not good directly,' she added, 'I'll put you through into Looking-glass House. How would you like THAT?'…Let's pretend there's a way of getting through into it, somehow, Kitty. Let's pretend the glass has got all soft like gauze, so that we can get through […]

In another moment Alice was through the glass, and had jumped lightly down into the Looking-glass room…Then she began looking about, and noticed that what could be seen from the old room was quite common and uninteresting, but that all the rest was as different as possible […]

(Carroll, 1872/2000: 130-131)

Of late, organizational theatre (OT) has become the new Looking-glass, making frequent appearances in corporate parlour rooms throughout the world. In the special issue of Organization Studies on organizational theory and theatre (Schreyögg and Höpfl 2004), we see how OT has moved from being a metaphor for organizations (e.g. Mangham and Overington 1987; Cornelissen 2004; Vera and Crossan, 2004) to becoming a widely used interventionist technique (e.g. Schreyögg and Dabitz 1999; Meisiek 2002, 2004; Clark and Mangham 2004a; Clark and Mangham 2004a, 2004b; Nissley et al. 2004; Woodward 2004).

It's a remarkably versatile device. Sometimes it is used in a mirror-like way, providing reflections of unattractive and attractive realities. 'Sulky' banktellers are asked to watch a skit that shows them grumpily interacting with customers, or the past work year is caricatured in the Christmas play (e.g. Rosen 1988). At other times, OT is used in a window-like way—like the talkative Snow White mirror, it attempts to show the hidden and overlooked, or fictively depict new futures (e.g. Clark and Mangham 2004a).

In this article, we focus on a third OT form used extensively by OT consultancies: active-audience theatre. Like Alice, participants in active-audience OT step *through* the Looking-glass, moving from reflection to doing. An all-important action component is introduced

which generates a sense of heightened realism and immediacy. Participants can invent and try-on new possibilities, becoming figuratively larger, smaller, taller, and shorter than they were. Roles and plots are more triggered and emergent than scripted, and the 'director' typically occupies a more facilitative role than a directive one.

Active-audience OT follows the framework laid out by Augusto Boal (1979, 1995). Boal, following Brecht (1960), attempted to reinvent theatre to serve a political agenda. He wanted audiences to become aware of existing power relationships, to understand them as changeable, and be ready to change them after leaving the theatre. Boal, like Brecht, deliberately takes theatrical performances away from amusement and ritual; amusement and rituality are seen as hindering change inasmuch as they reinforce the *status quo*. In accordance with Artaud (1964) and Grotovski (1984) he envisages a 'disturbing' theatre which provokes audiences to liberate themselves.

All this begs the question "Does OT work?" Certainly its widespread use and the fact that it is being used in more and more ways suggests that something is working for someone. But who is that someone? And what are they getting? The promotional pamphlets from various OT consultancies would suggest that there are many beneficiaries. Purported benefits for managers range from getting more compelling ways to drive points home to having a way to do deep organizational inquiry. Benefits for non-managerial audiences range from getting more motivated to getting new and useful perspectives on work issues.

Objective support for these claims is scarce indeed, but several researchers have made a start. From a Boalian perspective, Nissley et al. (2004) argue that in their experience OT can indeed help employees throw off unwanted shackles and achieve more self-direction—as long as the

script and the roles are worker-controlled instead of management-controlled. They propose that if managers cede control of the script and the roles to the workers, a collaborative work can emerge, political in nature, which contains the multiple voices of the organizational members and provides a richer point of departure for change.

'Not so', counter Clark & Mangham (2004b: 848). The examples of active-audience theatre they observed "cling to a theory of negotiated order that lacks an understanding of power and status." They witnessed a Boal-inspired play and concluded that it was "Boal Lite." Although the audience had control over the script and the roles, the content of the play failed to attend to "first-order structural change", focusing instead on "second-order issues such as communication" (Clark & Mangham 2004b: 848). They conclude that OT in its present form cannot liberate audiences, and that more attention needs to be given to the power and politics that govern organizations, as well as to developing stronger content.

Though both studies provide us with useful thoughts about OT's value, their contradictory conclusions suggest that more empirical work is needed before we can say how and for whom OT works. In particular, we need long range research. The anecdotal evidence indicates that OT is clearly a highly complex system that works at many different levels and in different ways at different times; as such, we believe that it will only be through following Alice through the mirror, back again, and afterwards, that we will gain a more helpful understanding of OT's overall effects.

In the paragraphs that follow we describe such a study, one where we followed the OT play "I Endure with a Smile" for a year. We first describe the study's background, methods, and summarize some of the key findings. Based on this we develop a micro-theory of how and

why OT works, one that deviates considerably from the content perspective (where OT is a medium for a message; e.g. Rosen 1988; Schreyögg and Dabitz 1999) and power-based views (where OT is another means for control; e.g. Clark and Mangham 2004b) articulated thus far.

Setting and Methods

Setting. In 2002, Dacapo Theatre (www.dacapoteatret.dk), one of the oldest and largest organizational theatre companies in Europe contacted us with an offer to evaluate the impact of their play "I Endure with a Smile" on a home care organization. The offer was enticing. All 3,000 odd employees of the home care organization were to watch and—if they wished—participate in a Boal-based performance. Because active-audience theatre demands rather small audiences, 30 identical performances with 100 employees each were distributed over a one year period. This permitted a kind of 'cross check' research design wherein the effects of one performance can be compared to the effects of others.

Methods. Given the many different factors at work in the case, we decided to use a multi-method approach including interviews, video recordings, a survey, and gathering of secondary data about the home care workers. The first author conducted interviews with the top managers who commissioned the play and three Dacapo employees, among them the founder of the theatre company. After all performances had finished, five of the seven district managers were interviewed.

Two performances were observed first hand and we watched nine performances on video. Audiences had the right to refuse being filmed. The active-audience parts of the videos were transcribed and broken into sections: discussions, audience-guided-performances, worker-on-stage-performances, empathy exercises (where the audience is asked to feel themselves into a

role), and interview exercises (where the audience quizzes an actor about how it feels to be that person).

A survey questionnaire was distributed to about 1400 employees one week after they had attended a performance—this was done at five points in time. We received 442 responses, resulting in a 32% response rate. Due to the overwhelming number of women in the home care sector, almost all respondents were female. We received responses from 24 managers, 55 support staff (administration, drivers, kitchen personnel), and 363 nurses. The questionnaire contained qualitative and quantitative questions on the reception of the play and on the immediate effects in the days that followed the performance. The reception of the performances was measured by asking employees if they liked the play and found it relevant, if they had talked about the play with colleagues and clients, if they had used the solutions from the play in their daily work, if they had become aware of problems, and which issues of the performance they remembered particularly well. (Note: In accordance with the terminology used in the organization, we use the term "managers" to designate the formal managers and leaders, and "workers" to refer to the support staff and nurses. In contrast, when we use the term 'employees', we mean anyone working for the organization, regardless of hierarchical level)

Finally, we collected secondary data. From Dacapo, we gathered informational material regarding their play (leaflets, brochures, booklets). From the home care organization we obtained a so-called "values box", which all employees received after attending a performance. Custom made, it included a set of 33 cards, each with a screenshot photo, a definition of the conflict depicted, the script of that scene, and on the backside, a few

suggested discussion themes. The box also included a small booklet summing up the values of the home care organization.

The fact that we collected qualitative and quantitative data may pose an epistemological problem—which one should be emphasized in the analysis? Our answer has been to view the descriptive statistics derived from the questionnaire as traces of reality rather than direct measurements of it (Byrne 2002). Such a post-positivist view on the quantitative material allows us to explore and interpret the two data sources in conjunction with one another (c.f. Yin 1994).

"I Endure With a Smile"

The Basic Play. The first part of the performance adopted a reflecting approach, presenting the relationship between home care workers, security representatives, a client and a district manager. Inga, a seasoned home care worker, gets into conflict with Pernille, a new recruit, over how to handle a difficult client. The client's failing mobility requires a mechanical device to get him from his bed into his chair. He refuses to have the device installed and insists that Inga support him, which she does with risks to her own physical health. While Inga emphasizes compassion, Pernille overrides the concerns of the client and does things by the book. The security representative and the manager appear uninterested in the conflict. The second part of the performance describes the relationship between home care workers, a middle manager, and a district manager. The middle manager Lisbeth is torn between the demands that home care workers and the district manager are putting on her. The home care workers want more resources to do their job, while top management wants more efficiency.

The Active-Audience Play. Each performance was followed by an active-audience session, where the audience was called upon to improve the situation. This could happen by directing actors to change their behavior or by stepping on the stage and taking over a specific role. A Dacapo consultant would encourage and facilitate interaction between audience and actors.

Managers' Intentions and Expectations

Background. In internal meetings, two top managers of the home care organization sold the idea of using organizational theatre to their immediate superior and the seven district managers, thus gaining support from top management. Then, the two top managers initiated contact with Dacapo and decided upon a play.

> "The idea [for the play] came because some thought that if we take concrete examples as a point of departure, there's a risk that they will hurt somebody—if not everybody, at least the ones who were involved. So we arrived at the idea of creating some examples which would promote a discussion of things, and we hoped that in this way things might be transferred into everyday life."
> (District Manager 1)

Workers and middle managers were only informed that management would prefer it if they would show up for the performances. Between 10-20% of the employees, depending on district and for various reasons, did not attend any performance.

Intentions. The top managers of the home care organization had not used OT before, but decided it was the right means for starting a fruitful discussion about a problematic situation. The implementation of a bar code system had given workers the feeling of being overly controlled. With the new system, workers had lost discretion over how to spend their work time, which angered them. District managers reported that workers and middle managers felt that putting resources into a theatrical performance concerned with this issue was a waste of time and money. To make things worse, after the performances were commissioned, funding cuts led to the restructuring of the organization and eventually to downsizing. When the

performances where about to commence, annual job satisfaction ratings were at an all time low. Considering it bad timing, the managers were worried that the theatrical performances would either falter, or become an outlet for workers' anger. Torn between canceling the event and giving it a go, they decided that active-audience theatre might give employees the feeling of being heard and help them place their experiences with the bar code system and the restructuring into the broader context of the organizational values.

Expectations. Top managers' expectations were expressed in the values boxes. These were supposed to help middle managers and workers transfer ideas and experiences from the theatrical performances into workgroup meetings and practices. The top managers saw it as their duty to define and promote the values of the company and regarded the boxes as unproblematic:

> "We are glad that our workers are able to act reasonably when they are in a specific situation. But to do that, they need to know what the important values are. […] There are few who do not agree on what is written there. They shouldn't, because what is written there is so general. In reality there is nothing especially strange in what is written there." (District Manager 1)

The cards in the box were labeled with 4 categories, supposedly representing work relationships: worker-client (14 cards); worker-worker (10 cards); worker-manager (6 cards); manager-manager (3 cards). Each card had 4 to 9 discussion themes on the back. The themes were reflected in a little booklet, which stated the vision, the background and the values of the entire home care organization: dedication, responsibility, quality, cooperation, dignity, proximity and attentiveness. While 30 cards focused on the relationships of workers, only 9 cards focused on the relationships of managers, indicating that management was trying to address the workers through the values box.

Indeed, the data suggests that top and district managers used a rhetoric of participation while attempting to control the effects of the performances. They stated that the goal of the organizational theatre was to launch a fruitful, open dialogue about the values of the organization at all organizational levels. However, they attempted to pre-define unambiguous values of the organization and wanted workers to accept and internalize these. They assumed that organizational theatre could lead to a pre-defined outcome and attributed to it a causal mechanism—from design of stimulus to audience reaction. Contrary to expectations, the values box was met with little enthusiasm. As the top managers told us, almost all middle managers and workers disregarded the values box and did not use it at all in their meetings and conversations.

Workers' Use of the Theatrical Time and Space.

A Time and Space of Possibility? In general, the Dacapo actors try to align their performances to managerial wishes. However, they also try to work it so that employees have the greatest possible freedom during the active-audience parts, including unconventional readings of the performance. They present themselves as aware of the power relationships in organizations and intend, at least at a rudimentary level, to shift the power balance in organizations during their performances.

The performance "I endure with a smile" was shaped 30 times by different audiences over the one-year period. Each time one of the top managers who had commissioned the play would introduce the theatre company and attempt to legitimize the theatrical performance, linking it to the restructuring and the need for values in work-life. District managers and middle managers regularly sat in the audiences.

While each performance triggered different audience reactions, with no two active-audience performances being identical, there were some commonalities. In the performances we observed the audiences made proposals on how to improve the situation and someone from the audience went on stage to take over a role. However, there are differences between the first part, which dealt with client issues and the second part, which dealt with leadership issues.

Client issues. Relative to client issues, the audience resolved conflicts by improving communication, respecting each other, cooperating and so on. After a few iterations of a scene and usually having an audience member step on stage, the audiences seemed to regard the situation around the old client as improved. Every performance resulted in a slightly different solution, yet all the solutions reflected the values that managers saw as crucial for the organization. In general, scenes dealing with client issues were treated with a serious aim to improve the situation.

In a few instances, the audience attempted to draw in the district manager to solve the issues surrounding the client. None of these attempts were very successful. The district manager was played as uninterested and unwilling to intervene. This might be interpreted as the actors trying to make sure that certain power relationships were not questioned. However, subsequent interviews with the district managers revealed that they indeed don't have direct contact with workers.

Leadership Issues. In the second part of the performance, which dealt with leadership issues, the pattern changed. The workers frequently ridiculed their superiors. They used humor to change the script and the roles of district managers. A reaction to the problems of managers

was the recommendation that they get a new job. Making fun of the managers seemed a form of comic relief (Rosen 1988; Woodward 2004). In the theatrical space, the employees felt temporarily unconstrained by managerial control, and the audience members amused themselves with the roles of top managers and played out their fantasies. For example, they would fictively threaten the district managers, or propose that a district manager should give in to any demand by workers and middle management. When the proposals were questioned, the audience agreed that none of this was very likely to happen in reality.

The horseplay with district managers also seemed to have a political agenda. Ridiculing and offending top managers without a response from their side made the top managers obsolete.

> "I think it was positive…because the group that I was in had completely locked out the manager. (laughter) I think that some also do that in everyday life. They thought simply that the whole thing could only be steered by security representatives and ombudsmen. (laughter) Several times in the middle one got the idea that it is exactly the way it is." (District Manager 3)

As soon as the middle manager on stage turned her attention from the ridiculed top managers to the workers' side and identified with their needs, the active-audience part turned out well and solutions were found that satisfied those present. Workers seemed to show middle managers that they had a lot to gain by attending to workers' needs rather than to top managers' demands. It might be said that the workers tried to win middle managers over. This would make sense, because middle managers were more numerous and more frequently attended the theatrical performances. Thus, a dialogue with them through the plays could potentially pay off. Top managers, however, seemed to have no direct voice during the performances. The active-audience performances created a time and space where, symbolically, workers imposed their own idea of how to handle problems.

Reception and Following Conversations

Reception. To explore further effects of the theatrical performances we turn to the survey data. Table 1 shows that all employees greatly liked the performance and found it mostly relevant for the organization. While employees shared the experience extensively with their colleagues—mostly those who had seen the play—few talked to clients about the performances. And few employees were able to transfer the solutions from the performances into work-life. Nevertheless, the employees who attended the performances reported a heightened awareness of organization's problems. Finally, most employees remembered the scenes that concerned the client. Similar numbers of employees remembered the scenes concerning leadership issues, communication issues, and the aesthetic aspect of the performances.

Insert Table 1 about here

The immediate reception of managers seems to have been different than that of support staff and nurses. A chi-square test revealed that while there was no significant difference in liking the play, managers found the performances significantly more relevant than the other groups. Members of the support staff found the performances the least relevant, which may be explained by the absence of their work role on stage. No character in the play was a driver, secretary, cook or janitor (see Table 2).

Insert Table 2 about here

A third chi-square test points to the issues that were remembered. Managers mostly remembered issues that concerned the deficits in communication, and those that concerned worker relationships. While workers also primarily remembered the issues concerning their

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relationships, they apparently paid more attention to the issues concerning manager relationships and the aesthetic aspects of the play. The deficits in communication, however, occupied a much less prominent position in workers' memory than in that of the managers (See Table 2).

The interviews help clarify these findings. The district managers told us that they liked the performances very much and found them very relevant for the home care organization. However, they also said that they were most relevant for the workers and not for themselves. The managers felt that the first part of the performances, which concerned client service, were most crucial for the purpose of the performances. In contrast, they found themselves as managers not well portrayed and said that the second part of the performance was less relevant and had not turned up interesting issues. In general, managers seemed to have been selective in their perception of the performances. In accordance with their expectations, their reception concentrates on the parts of the performances that concern workers, clients and the deficits in communication surrounding this relationship. Leadership-related issues were hardly taken into consideration because the performances didn't have the goal of changing managers' behavior. Managers apparently only heard the part of the voice of the employees they were interested in.

Conversations. The interviews with the district managers indicated that the performances led to many discussions in workgroups, in meetings, and in the corridors. At least for the duration of the year, the play was a recurring part of everyday conversations, apparently across organizational levels.

> "Dacapo made it so that people could laugh at themselves … both workers and managers. And we needed to laugh at ourselves. But suddenly, it also became okay to talk about how it was, also in connection to the manager. It became

okay for them to say to me 'You stupid idiot. You do exactly what we saw there.'" (District Manager 1)

The survey data further corroborates the interview findings. A chi-square analysis involving the variables 'liking the play', 'perceiving play as relevant', 'verbal sharing with colleagues', and 'awareness of problems', provides traces of what happened after the performances over the year (see Table 3).

Insert Table 3 about here

Liking and perceiving the play as relevant may be moderating variables. When employees liked the play and perceived it as relevant, they were more likely to verbally share the experience with other colleagues. Even so, we did not find a significant difference in sharing behavior between managers, support staff and nurses. Managers and workers seem to have talked about the theatre performances to a similar extent. Further, verbally sharing the experience from the active audience sessions apparently led to an increase in awareness of problems in the organization.

The repeated use of the theatre created a kind of in-group. When asked about who they verbally shared the experience with, most indicated that they conversed with colleagues who had seen the play already or who had seen the play with them. Few talked to colleagues who had not seen the play.

The findings indicate that the performances were soaking into the organizational discourse in a way that top managers had not anticipated. It also means that Boal-inspired organizational theatre, although falling short of an unconstrained, productive discourse between managers

and workers during the play (Clark & Mangham 2004b; Nissley et al. 2004), may nevertheless lead to changes in the views of managers and workers via other means.

Discussion

Returning to the initial question, "Does OT work?" and the subsidiary questions of "How and for whom does it work?", the answers are elusive. Here we have seen that although power relationships were temporarily suspended, the theatre certainly did not end in a 'worker revolution'. Employees obtained control of the script and the roles during the active-audience part, thus developing voice, but managers tried to force a predictable outcome (having employees accept and internalize the values) and didn't attend to that voice. Managers characterized the employees' critical voice as uninformed, bad portrayal, irrelevant to the organization, and so on. On the other hand, they praised the parts of the play that worked as they intended and produced scenes where employees, with the help of the 'right' values, solved the problems on stage. Although portrayals of power and political issues surfaced during the active-audience section and more organization-specific content was presented, these were not used for proposing structural change but to gain ground on middle management. All-in-all, 'second-order' issues dominated and Clark and Mangham's (2004b) pessimistic view on OT appears to prevail as far as power and politics are concerned—it seems unrealistic to assume that we can transpose Boal's ideas from revolutionary theatre where the 'oppressors' are absent, to an organizational context where managers are present and still expect revolution to happen.

This leaves us with a puzzle: How is it that no one got what they asked for, but everyone got what they wanted—a more effective, more satisfying workplace? Certainly the managers of the home care organization should have been disappointed. Their attempts to control the

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play's effects were undermined by employee avoidance of the performances, by their disregard of the values box, by their ridicule of top management, by their making top management superfluous, and by their binding middle management to themselves during the active-audience sessions. Further, as the survey revealed, very few employees were able to transfer the solutions from the performances to their daily work. The expectations that employees would accept and internalize the values, that the performances could function as a testing-ground for value-based behavior, and that employees could transfer these situations all went unrealized.

Nevertheless, all interviewees spoke about the performances as a success. The two top managers who commissioned the play quoted the results of an annual survey, which showed that job satisfaction had gone up tremendously since the performances started. Although their attributions are debatable, they reflect the positive views that management had about the effects of the play. The employees also shared this positive view; in general they greatly enjoyed the play and found it relevant for their work. Even support staff like secretaries, cooks, janitors, or drivers expressed this positive view, although their organizational roles were absent on stage.

It appears that the conversational patterns noted earlier may provide a possible answer to the puzzle. All the evidence suggests that the play formed a large scale *conversation piece*, one that triggered a series of informal discussions about how the organization was run and how it might be run differently. These conversations in turn led to a gradual realignment of norms, values, expectations, and eventually a new set of solutions. Thus, it wasn't the play per se that was important. Rather, it was the play *in relation* to the conversations it started that turned things around. In this way, we can think of the play as a kind of catalytic magnet existing

within a conversational system—a magnet inasmuch as it attracted attention and catalytic in that it was discarded once the conversations got rolling. The fact that the other conversation piece—the values box introduced by management—failed to be used or have any impact at all, raises the question "what properties must a conversation piece have for it to promote generative conversation?"

A key property is suggested by liminality theory, as it has been developed for organizational contexts (cf. Trice and Beyer 1984; Barry 1996; Garsten 1999; Czarniawska and Mazza 2002; Tempest and Starkey 2004). Victor Turner (1982: 44) describes liminality (derived from the Latin term "limen", meaning "threshold") as a transitional period where "the past is momentarily negated, suspended, or abrogated, and the future has not yet begun, an instant of pure potentiality when everything, as it were, trembles in the balance." He assumes that individuals, groups and societies pass through three phases when experiencing liminality: separation, transition, and incorporation. Each is needed for a passage to be complete.

The interactive performances that we witnessed in the home care organization had this liminal quality, particularly during the active-audience sessions. Although still in a room at their workplace, the employees and managers of the home care organization were no longer nurses, janitors, cooks, secretaries, or managers; rather, they became 'others'. As others, they were able to temporarily step out of their formal roles and play with aspects of their work life on stage (Nissley, Taylor and Houden 2004). After the performance, this experience turned into a conversation piece where the ambiguous character of the 30 performances led to 30 different looking-glass experiences, paving the way for a wide variety of interpretative encounters. In the language of liminality, the experience was gradually incorporated through these interpretative moves.

It is important to note that the experience wasn't incorporated as a collective narrative (which seems to have been the intention of managers). Rather, in Tamara-like fashion (Boje 1995) the managers, cooks, drivers, janitors, nurses, physiotherapists, and secretaries returned to their everyday life in the seven districts and talked within their social networks about the performances. Depending on where they worked, the shared narrative about the performance looked different. Managers had a focus on other issues than nurses. Drivers, cooks and janitors had trouble finding themselves in the performance, but nevertheless enjoyed reflecting on their organization as a whole. Employees talked about their different experiences in the theatre well until the end of the year.

In contrast, the values box possessed none of these liminal characteristics. Conceived and distributed by managers as a reminder and conversational stimulus, the boxes with their text, photos, and pre-defined message appeared closed and finished. They gave the impression of needing to be consumed rather than considered, and clearly the organizational members preferred the 'wooing' character of the play over the 'forcing' character of the box.

The case study points us to four factors that seem decisive for organizational theatre to work as a generative conversation piece: morphism, aesthetic appeal, safety, and discardablility.

'Isomorphism'—the degree to which the play had some resemblance to the home care organization—might have played some role in creating buy in. Had the play been about something unrecognizable to the employees, it would perhaps been rejected as being irrelevant. That said, there remains a question about what constitutes 'requisite isomorphism'. Is it structural isomorphism that is needed—where the 'mirror' organization in the play is in

the same industry? Or is it better to have character isomorphism—where the personalities exemplified in the play correspond to those of the client organization? One could extend this quite a few ways—plot isomorphism, value isomorphism, conflict isomorphism, etc.

A somewhat different consideration is the aesthetic character of the play. For it to pull attention away from the daily organizational routines, we can imagine that the play must be strongly attractive somehow. As Strati (1999) has described in detail, aesthetic appeal can work in many ways—a play can be variously beautiful, grotesque, sublime, comic, tragic, and so on. We would conjecture that it must appeal in any of these ways . . . but not too much. It needs to grip us but not rip us apart. If a play becomes affectively overwhelming, it is likely that viewers will simply tune it out. Conversely, if the play is experienced as underwhelming, it too will be ignored. This argues that OT must find a 'sweet spot'—that in-between zone which, in the parlance of Goldy Locks and her Three Bears, is neither too hot nor too cold. Scheff (1979) coined the term 'aesthetic distance' for the spot where the audience member is drawn to, yet remains somewhat detached from the play. Being engaged, yet aware of the fictional character of the unfolding events allows the viewer to reflect on the relevance of the performance for his or her own situation.

Another factor revolves around safety. As Barry (1996) has pointed out, full liminality is seldom safe. Full-blown liminality predictably triggers defensive closure whereby people shut down and work to protect themselves. We suggest that a good conversation piece will create a sense of *bounded liminality*, one which has enough resemblance to the familiar to create a sense of confidence and curiosity rather than fear. Organizational theatre's stage-reality seems to offer such boundedness. Audience members know they can leave the room if they want to.

A final factor centers on discardibility. While a conversation piece certainly needs to attract, it also, following the logic presented earlier, must be rejectable if the viewer is to be able to move on. Hence, we can also argue that a good conversation piece needs to be 'rough enough'—if it appears too refined, too finished, it will not be discardable.

If we compare these latter factors to the two conversation pieces—the play and the values box—we can hypothesize that these factors will work in complementary and synergistic ways. Together they become more than the sum of their parts. The play appeared to have all these factors represented in acceptable proportions. The box on the other hand represented a combination which didn't work—it was highly isomorphic, insufficiently distant (insofar as it mimetically reflected scenes from the play), aesthetically neutral (while the cards were highly finished, they weren't particularly beautiful, grotesque, sublime, etc.), overly safe (they didn't require that viewers take any risks), and highly discardable (they simply repeated what had already been physically and more sensorially experienced).

Conclusion

Collectively regarded, it seems that much more work is needed before we can establish what kinds of factor mixes are needed for an effective conversation piece to emerge. This leads us to the question of "Who controls the Looking-glass?" It appears that the answer is no one, at least not at present. Management, workers and the OT company play their roles, but do not determine the outcome. Given what we know just now, the Looking-glass is far too complex a device for anyone to control, at least not in any kind of 'A leads directly to B' way.

On a more practical note, it seems that a seemingly minor consideration—conversation—may in fact be a major agent for change. While power and content are clearly important elements

in OT, it may be the conversations that revolve around power and content that really cause change. Perhaps Marshall McLuhan (1994) was right: the medium may be the message afterall.

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Table 1.
Survey Data (% in brackets)

	Low	Middle	High		Total
Liked the play	5 (1)	59 (13)	382 (86)		442
Perceived play as relevant	53 (12)	145 (33)	244 (55)		446
	Never	Once	Several times		Total
Verbally shared experience	24 (5)	164 (37)	258 (58)		446
Used solution in everyday life	358 (84)	53 (12)	16 (4)		427
	No	Yes	Don't know		Total
Talked to client	425 (95)	21 (5)	0 (0)		446
Became aware of problems	154 (35)	182 (40)	110 (25)		446
	worker	manager	commu-nication	aesthetics	don't know	total
Issues remembered	225 (50)	54 (12)	56 (12)	39 (9)	72 (16)	446

Table 2.
Crosstabulations for "Position" (% in brackets)

		Position			
		Manager	Support Staff	Nurse	Total
Liking*	Low	0 (0)	0 (0)	5 (1.4)	5 (1.1)
	Medium	1 (4.2)	5 (9.1)	52 (14.3)	58 (13.1)
	High	23 (95.8)	50 (90.9)	306 (84.3)	379 (85.7)
Relevant**	Low	0 (0)	17 (31.5)	35 (9.7)	52 (11.9)
	Medium	6 (25)	16 (29.6)	123 (34.2)	145 (33.1)
	High	18 (75)	21 (38.9)	202 (56.1)	241 (55)
Issues***	Don't know	0 (0)	13 (23.6)	58 (16)	71 (16.1)
	Worker	10 (41.7)	24 (43.6)	188 (51.8)	222 (50.2)
	Manager	2 (8.3)	9 (16.4)	43 (11.8)	54 (12.2)
	Communication	11 (45.8)	6 (10.9)	39 (10.7)	56 (12.7)
	Aesthetics	1 (4.2)	3 (5.5)	35 (9.6)	39 (8.8)

*Pearson Chi^2 =.38 (Phi =.1; Cramer's V= .07) (n.s.)
**Pearson Chi^2 = 31.5 (Phi = .27; Cramer's V=.19) (p<.001)
***Pearson Chi^2 =26.91 (Phi =.25; Cramer's V= .18) (p<.001)

Table 3.
Crosstabulations for "Sharing" (% in brackets)

		Verbal Sharing			
		Never	Once	Several Times	Total
Liking*	Low	1 (4.2)	4 (2.4)	0 (0)	5 (1.1)
	Medium	7 (29.2)	32 (19.5)	20 (7.8)	59 (13.2)
	High	16 (66.7)	128 (78.0)	238 (92.2)	382 (85.7)
Relevant**	Low	4 (16.7)	28 (17.2)	21 (8.2)	53 (12)
	Medium	12 (50)	63 (38.7)	70 (27.5)	145 (32.8)
	High	8 (33.3)	72 (44.2)	164 (64.3)	244 (55.2)
Aware***	No	8 (33.3)	63 (38.4)	83 (32.2)	154 (34.5)
	Yes	5 (20.8)	50 (30.5)	127 (49.2)	182 (40.8)
	Don't know	11 (45.8)	51 (31.1)	48 (18.6)	110 (24.7)
Position****	Manager	1 (4.2)	7 (4.3)	16 (6.2)	24 (5.4)
	Support Staff	5 (20.8)	18 (11.2)	32 (12.5)	55 (12.4)
	Nurse	18 (75)	161 (84.5)	209 (81.3)	363 (82.1)

*Pearson Chi^2 = 26.2 (Phi = .24; Cramer's V=.17) (p<.001)
**Pearson Chi^2 = 22.7 (Phi = .23; Cramer's V=.16) (p<.001)
***Pearson Chi^2 = 23.2 (Phi = .23; Cramer's V=.16) (p<.001)
****Pearson Chi^2 = 2.6 (Phi = .08; Cramer's V=.05) (n.s.)