

Training Corporate Bodies

Sarah Saddler

“Are you prepared to perform?” Mohan smiles. “Well relax, because none of that is going to happen.” I watch as the audience, a group of 50 employees, all break into chuckles and murmurs of relief as Mohan adjusts his microphone and takes a sip of water. A company poster stretched across the makeshift stage he stands on casts a shadow of his silhouette on the poster. “Unlock Awesome,” it reads; smartly dressed men and women look out over the room from the photo, giving us thumbs-ups alongside inspirational quotes like “Take Action to Grow.” “As I was saying, today this training will do something completely different,” Mohan continues. “We’re going to use drama in this learning room.”¹

Mohan Madgulkar is an actor and a business consultant, and this is a theatre-based management training for a human resource management (HRM) collective based in Mumbai, India. Theatre-based corporate training (what I call “corporate theatre”) is an international management trend that gained traction in India after processes of economic restructuring triggered the rise of a massive private sector whose values and priorities have come to symbolize the nation’s new economic outlook and national identity. Increasing demands over the past 10 years for more experiential approaches to workplace learning, coupled with the now-ubiquitous emphasis on creative skills (like innovation, risk-taking, and problem-solving), triggered the rise of a consultancy industry that uses arts-based learning to teach social norms, promote company values, and orient employees to the behavioral expectations of a global workplace context. One of the early pioneers of the field, Madgulkar’s company specializes in theatre training for Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) purposes, an agenda that entered India Inc.—a term used by the Indian media to refer to the private corporate sector—in response to a global push for diversity that began in Western headquarter locations and spread to subsidiary offices in the global South (Donnelly 2015).

Madgulkar’s workshop, which I attended as a PhD researcher and intern for his consultancy in 2016, will feature a demo session of Unconscious Bias, a training product described on the company’s website as designed for “high-performing 21st-century organizations” looking to target workplace social inclusion for “bottom line” profit (Steps n.d.). The two-hour workshop features interactive drama scenarios depicting common instances of workplace bias for employees to observe and discuss. Like other arts-based learning consultancies, Madgulkar’s

1. All quotes attributed to Mohan are from Steps Drama India workshops I attended from June to August 2016 in Pune, Bengaluru, and Mumbai, India.

Sarah Saddler is a Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow in the Center for Arts and Humanities at the American University of Beirut. Her book project, “Performing Corporate Bodies: Multinational Theatre in Global India,” provides a critical ethnography of corporate theatre training in postglobalization India, demonstrating how corporations use art in the service of human capital formation, and examining the broader impacts corporate theatre is having on arts identity and labor in contemporary global capitalism. ss255@aub.edu.lb

company refers to its skits as “forum” scenes because they are adapted from the Theatre of the Oppressed (TO), a methodology published by Brazilian theatre practitioner Augusto Boal in 1974. Boal created forum theatre as a tool for social change, where community members are invited to propose and practice solutions to social problems through the repetition and discussion of dramatic scenarios (Boal [1974] 1985:117–20). I first encountered the use of Boal’s techniques in the corporate setting while interning for a small theatre company in Gurugram, India, in 2012. The artistic director had recently turned to corporate work as a way of subsidizing her other artistic pursuits, and she drew heavily on Boal’s *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* (1992) while leading team-building trainings. It took years before I discovered others in India were also capitalizing on Boal’s techniques in corporate training, either because they found the methodology particularly helpful or, like the artistic director I worked with, because they simply did not know what else to do.

I studied the landscape of corporate theatre in India from 2012 to 2019, where I met an assortment of artists who had turned to business training as an emergent vocational livelihood in a newly corporatized arts landscape. Generally speaking, my interlocutors were well aware of the ironies of using theatre for social change techniques as a form of corporate in-house training. Indeed, Boal himself positioned his approach as diametrically against the institutional authority and punitive logics of corporate capitalism. As Boal’s frequent translator Adrian Jackson attests:

[The] misappropriation which [Boal] positively hated was the colonization of Forum Theatre by business. For him this was like handing tools to the enemy—and this sense of the world of business being the enemy, however theoretically, [...was] ingrained in the early years, and [he] refuse[d] to be shifted or deceived by short-term apparent changes in attitude. (2009:307)

Boal’s fear that Theatre of the Oppressed would be sapped of its revolutionary potential by the same capitalist institutions the methodology sought to dismantle is an anxiety that continues to permeate disciplinary investments in socially committed theatre. As Diana Taylor wrote after Boal’s death in 2009, “looking back now, TO hasn’t failed as a methodology, but the hope for radical change has faded. No one now would ask how theatre brings about revolution” (2009:10–11). That same year, Jane Plastow warned that “it is important to recognize the dangers of this supposedly revolutionary tool being domesticated, and used by authority to achieve control through neo-liberal means” (2009:295). Taylor’s and Plastow’s statements are indicative of a wider fear that theatrical tools created for proletarian empowerment are being shaped into vehicles for exploitation by neoliberals who depoliticize art in the service of profit.

But as theatre scholars mourn the loss of radical arts practice to the eviscerating force of free market capitalism, business schools and management scholars have been celebrating something remarkable they have gained: the vibrant, dynamic, and transformative power of the arts. Increasingly since the 1990s, scholars in organizational learning fields have positioned



Figure 1. Unconscious Bias training hosted by Steps Drama India in Mumbai, India, 2016. (Photo by Ashish Gakrey)



Figure 2. Employees partake in dramatic simulation during a *Train the Trainer* program run by Platform for Action in Creative Theatre Company, Gurugram, India, 2012. (Photo courtesy of Neeraj Mehta and Gouri Nilkantan)

theatre and other artistic outlets as the saving grace of a global business world under extreme duress—a development that has received little attention in theatre and performance studies. The paradox of art in late capitalism has been examined as symptomatic of the cooptation of art’s democratizing aims—a policy-driven undermining of community through illusory discourses of empowerment and care (Joseph 2002; Bishop 2012). It has also been examined as a distinctly modern paradigm of institutional power, notably in Jon McKenzie’s analysis of how performance paradigms are intimately interwoven into the discourses and practices of big

business, exemplified in systems of performance management that quantify human productivity in professional cultures around the world (2001). What events like Madgulkar’s Unconscious Bias workshop reveal, however, is an increasing reliance on theatrical forms of performance in workplace training regimens that evidence a shift from performance as a standard of organizational value to drama itself functioning as a vehicle for 21st-century management ideology.

Theatre in the Global Work Economy

Role-playing has been used as an office tool since the creation of company human resources departments in the United States in the 1920s; today, it is not uncommon for team members to rehearse various business situations through interoffice dramatic enactment and repetition. Since the 1980s, however, a specialized niche of the global management consultancy industry has been on the rise. These consultants claim expertise in various forms of arts-based learning ranging from psychodrama to traditional art forms to storytelling. Claiming to advance a “radical new approach to management and leadership in the 21st century,” consultants are hired by HR to design and implement custom-made training programs that deploy theatre for purposes ranging from executive coaching to team-building to therapy (Maynard Leigh 2019). Stella Minahan attributes the rise in arts-based learning to an “aesthetic turn in management” that began in the 1980s, when training shifted from using a scientific-rationalist approach to “softer” techniques that viewed the “thoughts and feelings” of employees central to organizational performance ([2007] 2018:1, 3–4; see also Chong 2018).

In a 2004 *Journal of Management Studies* essay on the evolution of theatre in business consultancy, organizational learning scholars Timothy Clark and Iain Mangham argue that theatre in organizational contexts first emerged as a “metaphor for organizational life” through the writings of Kenneth Burke and Erving Goffman (Clark and Mangham 2004:39). Burke’s and Goffman’s work on the use of performance as a way of understanding everyday life inspired organization scholars to reflect upon businesses as theatres, where employees can be understood as actors and workplace interactions as scripted social performances. As Clark and Mangham attest, Goffman’s “situated activity” was used to help managers navigate the “fleeting and episodic face-to-face interactions that constitute a large part of social and organizational life,” and job tasks were likened to dramatic processes like directing (leadership), scripting

(project management), and artistic collaboration (team-building) (2004:40; see also Goffman 1974). The Goffman-based approach also paved the way for scholars to examine corporations as sites of capitalist oppression. Goffman's perspective that social actors can become disenchanted and change their existing social realities inspired scholars in critical management studies (CMS) to examine drama as either a potentially emancipatory workplace device or a ruse administered to bond employees to systems of surveillance and control (see Nissley et al. 2004).

An emphasis on theatre as a platform for personal and professional self-making has been growing since the 2000s. The arts are marketed as an untapped source of potential for optimizing the human capital demands of modern corporate culture (Clark and Mangham 2004:41). The rise of arts-based learning in this framework is often attributed to the intensification of a turbulent 21st-century business age, exemplified in the trendy managerial acronym VUCA (Bennett and Lemoine 2014). Adapted from a preparedness strategy developed by the United States military following the Cold War, VUCA refers

to a climate of Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity (Mack et al. 2016:81). Similar to how the United States had to rapidly develop its military intelligence in order to navigate a newly multilateral geopolitical landscape, global firms are navigating heightened conditions of unpredictability and new demands on leadership due to conditions ranging from currency volatility, cybersecurity, and corruption to economic depression and financial insecurity. Human resource management departments are under more pressure than ever to implement training solutions that prepare employees to navigate a business age marked by growing automation technologies, increasing shareholder expectations, and large-scale acquisitions.

Analyses of theatre in the VUCA economy stress the ability of the arts to ingrain those intangible work competencies now deemed essential to occupational advancement in the global knowledge economy. An April 2018 special edition of the *Journal of Business Research*, for instance, is themed "The Power of the Arts in Business" and provides a dizzying look at how the arts are harnessed for organizational growth:



Figures 3 & 4. Employees engage in theatre games for *Play in a Day* training run by Platform for Action in Creative Theatre Company, Gurugram, India, 2012. (Photo courtesy of Neeraj Mehta and Gouri Nilkantan)

Through arts it is possible to manage those organizational aesthetic dimensions, such as passion, emotions, hope, morale, imagination, aspirations, and creativity, both at individual and organization levels, that in today's complex business landscape can build new differentiating competitive factors. Nowadays organizations benefit from being agile, intuitive, imaginative, flexible to change, and innovative to meet the complexity and turbulence of the new business age. Employees need to be engaged, energized and inspired so that they can exercise their feelings in everyday working activities and operate as innovation and transformational agents [...] The arts can be exploited to increase the intangible value embedded in organizational products and processes and, therefore, to better satisfy the experiential-based wants and needs of stakeholders. (Carlucci and Schiuma 2018:337)

The excerpt above shows how “the arts” are re-coded into a skills-building enterprise that strengthens the VUCA economy's reflexive branding and helps consolidate the representational power of 21st-century organizations. The organization is anthropomorphized into a living, breathing entity that possesses its own moral compass, producing new ethical claims on employees that tie labor productivity to feelings of individual happiness, agility, and aspiration. Within what Anna Tsing has so aptly termed the “economy of appearances” (2000) the representational qualities of theatre and other artistic tools allow companies to visualize productivity in spectacle, while those human beings who presumably harbor the intangible worth so central to company survival must feel creative, happy, and inspired insofar as those feelings can be outwardly translated to stakeholder satisfaction and material profit accumulation.

It is within this strand of literature on the ability of the arts to spark workplace empowerment and increase organizational productivity that we see the emergence of forum theatre in business. Since the late 1990s, studies on the benefits of forum theatre and other Boalian techniques in workplace training have appeared in journals including *Harvard Business Review* (Ferris 2002), *Advances in Developing Human Resources* (Boje et al. 2015), and the *Journal of Workplace Learning* (Edwards and Blackwood 2017). This body of work characterizes forum theatre as a tool that can recover a sense of interoffice trust and communication weakened by workplace disciplinary mechanisms, increase employee motivation by providing outlets for witnessing and discussing individual problems and struggles, and provoke forms of dialogue that foster individual self-awareness and empowerment. In an early scholarly assessment of forum theatre written from an organizational perspective, John Coopey suggests forum theatre (what he also refers to as “radical theatre” or “liberation theatre”) can construct a “utopic vision of democratic potential” that liberates employees from oppressive work conditions that cause a lack of trust between managers and, by extension, impede organizational productivity. As Coopey writes, “theatre, especially Forum Theatre, creates an ‘aesthetic space’ in which participants can become visible and find their voice,” thus eliciting dialogue on the “need for and shape of organizational change” (Coopey 1998:374). Invoking Boal's language that “the spectator is freed of his chains, finally acts, and becomes a protagonist,” Coopey concludes by stating that forum theatre in the workplace gives birth to a “revolution in [the] political processes” of organizations” (376, 380).

Coopey illustrates how managerial rationales for corporate theatre often rely on an understanding of Augusto Boal as synonymous with oppression, liberation, and consciousness-raising. Such invocations of Boalian terminology hinge on the seemingly dogmatic point that what the employee desires is what the organization desires. “Liberation” in this context is synonymous with company productivity; “protagonists” are those who feel capable, motivated, and incentivized to work in the service of institutional change; and “freedom” is equated with working in the service of that which keeps the organization in existence.

The conflation of Boalian techniques and consciousness-raising also leaves aside the extent to which managerial analyses of forum theatre address the texture of Boal's writing and journey as a theatre activist and practitioner. Scholars in theatre and performance have written

extensively about Boal's experience adapting his methodology for communities located in industrial nations of Europe and the United States starting in the 1980s, where he confronted workshop participants who felt more oppressed psychologically than materially, as a result of, for example, alienation at work, depression, and loneliness. As biographer Francis Babbage writes, "techniques that had been designed to combat oppression in a Third-World context were now being applied to a First-World reality," and forms such as Cop in the Head and Rainbow of Desire were created to address different modes of oppression and exploitation that arose since TO was first created (Babbage 2004:23).² Managerial analyses of Boal's techniques as interchangeable with radicalism and consciousness-raising thus point to the ways corporations have rationalized appropriating forum theatre for improved brand performance and increased profits. The corporate version of TO's ethos hinges not on destabilizing and questioning systems of power, but on retooling and instrumentalizing Boal's techniques and arts traditions to "liberate" workers who feel "oppressed," thus "empowering" them to be more productive—all to benefit the company's bottom line.

Management scholars have also promoted forum theatre as a useful form of ethics training that can enhance employees' moral decision-making conduct. Ethics in this framework refers to the establishment of normative workplace conduct correlative to "company values": the guiding beliefs organizations present as intrinsic to their internal behaviors and external societal and customer relationships. For example, a 2002 *Business and Professional Ethics Journal* article by UK business scholar Jolanta Jagiello describes forum theatre as a tool that teaches employees and managers to "respond more creatively to their organisational problems both moral and non-moral" (Jagiello 2002:93). Jagiello begins her analysis with stating that there is an increased need for new approaches to ethics training that allow employees to create and experiment with their own ethical conundrums at work. She cites an earlier example of the "game-based" approach to ethics training pioneered by the Martin Marietta Corporation in the 1990s, where HR personnel created an interactive board game called Gray Matters that provided employees with playing cards detailing ethical workplace quandaries and a list of potential solutions. In 1993, however, a business panel critiqued the game for its simplistic solutions to complex job dilemmas, and researchers began searching for an approach to ethics training that would avoid establishing a "pre-determined ethical climate" (Jagiello 2002:94).

In response to this criticism, Jagiello's essay introduced a new model of experiential ethics training called The Organisational Theatre of Professional Practice, based on the application of Boal's forum theatre to organizational ethics training. Jagiello describes forum theatre as a useful alternative to the game-based approach, which "eliminates the fear" associated with ethics training by inviting employees to create and discuss their own ethical situations and solutions (91). While the game-based approach was helpful in inviting employees to choose from multiple solutions to ethical problems, forum theatre is more ideally suited to ethics training because it invites employees to "rehearse the reality" of workplace ethics through bodily communication and oral exchange (94–95). Although Jagiello concedes the terms "oppressed" and "oppressor" "may seem a bit strong" for the workplace, the application of forum theatre, she contends, will make it easier for employees to deal with thorny office situations like bribes, unfair pay, theft, sexual harassment, and racism (95).

According to Jagiello, however, several changes must be made to the forum theatre model in order for it to be successful in an organizational context:

2. There is also an expansive body of theatre for social change scholarship that has reimagined the politics and possibilities of Boalian praxis within the neoliberal present. Notable in this literature is the work of Mady Schutzman, who has advocated for terms such as "rehearsals for healing" rather than "rehearsals for revolution" in contemporary workshop spaces (Schutzman and Cohen-Cruz 1994:14–47).

Forum Theatre Technique Steps

- Step 1: Choose a problem
- Step 2: Organise a team of actors to write a script
- Step 3: Identify problem-owner's "criteria of acceptance"
- Step 4: Perform the current scenario
- Step 5: Audience intervenes with suggested solution

Organisational Theatre of Professional Practice Steps

- Step 1: Identify an organisational problem
- Step 2: Produce a script with predicted interventions
- Step 3: Act out the script in the Forum Theatre Style
- Step 4: Record the actual interventions made
- Step 5: Reflect on the similarities/differences between predicted and actual interventions made (Jagiello 2002:96–97)

The model provides a tidy visual of how the forum theatre model must be undone and strategically reassembled to fit a context of corporate power. First, the "spectators," those audience members who replace actors onstage and lead the action in the direction they feel helps achieve the best solution to the problem, are replaced by employees who passively witness the action while aware that the workshop is circumscribed by a stakeholder gaze responsible for successful results. Second, the protagonist's "criteria of acceptance" (the conditions that correspond to their given reality) is eliminated and replaced by participants who categorize scenes into "eight decision points and three to five predicted intervention points" that forecast how the dramatic action will unfold (99). This circumscribes the workshop with a managerial consciousness that establishes HRM-sanctioned "best practices" for ethical conduct. Third, the role of the Joker—the moderator in forum theatre—is replaced by an HR employee trained in the five professional ethics codes governing HRM conduct: integrity, legality, proficiency, professional loyalty, and confidentiality (99, 92). Critical consciousness is further stymied through additional stipulations regarding documentation and surveillance, including the establishment of a pre-approved script that impedes opportunities for serendipitous expression and reflection, which are essential to Boal's forum theatre.

The evolution of the use of theatrical tools in business discourse illustrates how management ideology recodes grammars associated with Augusto Boal into the creative, affective, and seemingly compassionate practices and philosophies of 21st-century capitalism. For organizational scholars, the efficacy of drama lies not in its ability to provoke critical consciousness or open lines of flight within or outside the corporate factory. Its efficacy lies in its ability to incentivize employees to create their best corporate character and perform that character according to the constantly shifting axes of skills, feelings, and motivations the organization desires them to project. Augusto Boal is (metaphorically) recast as a New Age management guru whose creative expertise helps sanctify regimes of corporate self-making that interpret work as a site where individuals can reconstruct and confirm their humanity—again, ultimately to confirm the corporation's legitimacy and increase the worker's effectiveness.

Anu Kantola elaborates on the ways revolutionary discourses have become a prime currency of soft capitalist control in consultancy industries around the world:

Revolutionary calls move the boundaries of identification and empathy; they channel and intensify feelings, selling a morality that creates an emotional bond [...] This produces communal loyalties, demarcating fantasies of "we" and "they" [...] Such binary oppositions are powerful tools for organising action and imposing order. (2014:269)

The appearance of (mostly leftist) theatre in corporate development schemes is not a one-off, then—an idiosyncratic happenstance in a grander corporate theatre of the absurd. Rather, organizational discourse on theatre and the broader economy of arts-based learning powerfully

reveals how the cultural circuit of capitalism sustains itself through self-critique—“expert” assessments of the status quo and of capitalism itself that legitimize and fuel billion-dollar consultancy industries that equip employees to creatively adapt and survive in the VUCA world (Thrift 2005:675).

Especially striking is the lack of empirical data in organizational accounts of theatre and other artistic tools used in workplace training. Essays on arts-based learning written from an organizational perspective focus on training in Western nations and neglect to note how cultural idioms like gender and class get theatrically played out, negotiated, and transformed in these spaces. They also neglect to consider the ways internal training practices reflect nationwide behavioral trends and global dynamics.

“Interviews as an opportunity to build employer brand”

Unconscious Bias

In India, systems of diversity management promote the recognition of difference as essential to a more harmonious working culture and, by extension, elevated organizational productivity—often encapsulated in organization studies literature in the phrase “diverse teams outperform.” While most diversity training is aimed at gender sensitization (as in corporate America), diversity management also addresses a range of issues specific to the Indian workplace, in particular an emphasis on cross-cultural communication, generational difference, and regional bias. Corporate giants compete yearly for NASSCOM’s (National Association of Software and Services Companies) Corporate Diversity Awards, which bestow honors in recognition of, for example, Excellence in Gender Inclusivity, Excellence in Inclusivity for Persons with Disabilities, and Most Innovative program for Diversity and Inclusion (NASSCOM 2019). The rise of the corporate diversity agenda in India and worldwide thus points to tensions in regimes of neoliberal governmentality that harness culture (ethnicity, race, gender, etc.) as a resource that can be managed for private capital consolidation.

Madgulkar began the workshop by introducing the consultancy’s story and mission. “When we first started, we had a bit of an identity crisis because we were referred to as a ‘theatre group.’” Madgulkar pronounces “theatre group” with air quotes and an exaggerated comedic emphasis that generates chuckles from around the room. He continues:

We are a learning and development company that happens to use the skills of actors. This is very important to understand, because the moment I talk to a potential client and I say “we are a drama-based training company” the client goes, “oh yeah yeah! We’ve had those come in, doing some drama with our people.” And I get scared, because that’s not what we do. I’ve had all kinds of crazy requests, like requests for cocktail theatre. I always say “No that’s not what we do.”

Madgulkar’s speech contains a critical subtext whereby a “theatre group” must establish a professional legitimacy that elevates drama from mere play (what he calls “cocktail theatre,” or dinner theatre) to a serious tool for workplace learning. The act of distancing theatre from its purportedly frivolous moorings becomes more complex when considering the historical efficacy of theatre in India, where the arts have played a critical role in the nation’s freedom movements and ongoing anti-Hindu nationalism resistance movements. While the myriad histories of Indian performance are too wide-ranging to chart here, theatre in postindependence India has always provided moments for opposing and assessing hegemonic ideologies through multiple methods of aesthetic, religious, linguistic, and political engagement (Dharwadker 2005). Madgulkar’s opening thus vindicates theatre by elevating it from paltry entertainment to valuable organizational tool, disentangles theatre from its politically fraught moorings, and helps the consultancy retain an air of businesslike expertise compulsory for continued work in the private sector.

The opening scene for Unconscious Bias centered on bias during the hiring process. Corporate India prides itself on operating on the ideology of “merit”; according to industry officials like Infosys CEO Narayana Murthy and Wipro Chairman Azim Premji, the most qualified applicants get the job, regardless of their social and economic background (Upadhy 2016:51). Discourses of meritocracy reinforce depictions of the private sector as a benefactor of equal opportunity that exemplifies a postglobalization middle-class population that is “casteless” insofar as its citizens embrace modern ideals of choice and liberal social values (see Deshpande 2013). Indeed, the corporate sector has no “reservation” (quota) system in place to ensure equitable hiring practice, as there is in the public sector. Despite testaments to merit-based hiring, sociological data has shown that the majority of the workforce is composed of educated, upper-caste Hindus from urban families (Thorat and Attewell 2007). Muslim, Dalit, Adivasi, and other minority communities comprise a miniscule percentage of corporate India, and studies have shown that social exclusion occurs at the stage of application sorting.³ Carol Upadhy, for example, shows how the hiring process is skewed to favor candidates from privileged backgrounds through an assortment of filtering processes that include only interviewing candidates who originate from urban municipalities, earned top test scores from tier 1 schools, possess exemplary soft skills, and English-language abilities (Upadhy 2007, 2016:93).

It is within this framework that Unconscious Bias emerged as a popular tool for teaching managers to be more inclusive during the application and interview process. The session’s appeal, of course, is also attributed to higher returns on company investment. As a marketing blurb for the program attests:

People are an organisation’s greatest asset, and many high performing 21st-century businesses now understand the benefits that both a diverse workforce and a truly inclusive culture can bring. This includes the ability to better reflect and respond to client/customer needs, greater scope for innovation and fresh ideas and, as is increasingly reported, direct benefits to the bottom line. (Steps n.d.)

An elevated stage in a conference room of a large business training center is set with a table and two chairs. Sonal Mahajan, a program manager in the consultancy who spends her weekends directing a small amateur theatre company in Pune, is playing the role of company Vice President (VP) Vinita. Soham Dadarkar, a marketing manager in the consultancy with no theatre experience outside acting in the company’s workshops, is playing Ashwin Deshpande, an interviewee applying for the Assistant Vice President (AVP) job. According to the script authored by Madgulkar in collaboration with various HR departments from previous workshop sessions, the scene begins as follows:

We see Ashwin Deshpande sitting in the reception/waiting area. He is a bit uneasy. We can clearly tell that he has been waiting for quite some time. Looks at his watch a couple of times. Asks “Can I have another glass of water please” to the front office executive (Not seen). Another candidate comes out of a Vinita’s cabin, and as she walks past Ashwin, he asks her “how was it?” She simply says “great,” and leaves. We now see Vinita sitting in her office, waiting for the next candidate. She is busy checking emails on her phone...gets a call.

VINITA: Where are you guys?...Cafeteria?...ya...ya...I’ll join you soon... ..Last candidate ... Na re! I am looking at the CV right now...not too impressive. No no...some 3 tier institute! I don’t think this will take too long. I will get there. Ya ya...see you soon...

Ashwin enters stage right and takes a seat. He is visibly nervous, wiping imaginary sweat from his brow and tapping his foot energetically. The audience, a group of mid- to senior-level

3. “Dalit” refers to the lowest caste or “untouchables” in the Indian caste system. “Adivasi” is a collective term used to refer to indigenous peoples of the Indian subcontinent.

employees from various companies including HSBC, Infosys, Accenture, American Express, and Wipro, sit quietly. Vinita calls Ashwin into her office and asks him to take a seat. We watch as she slowly looks Ashwin up and down, then glances at his application materials. After a beat, Vinita pastes a smile on her face and asks Ashwin where he is from. “Atpadi,” Ashwin quickly replies, followed by a short burst of surprised laughter from the audience. Atpadi is a village several hours from Mumbai.

Ashwin continues enthusiastically, explaining that Atpadi is in the Sangli district of Maharashtra, and that he recently earned an MBA in Business from Jogalekar’s College of Finance. Brow furrowed at the reference to what we have already learned is a tier 3 institute, Vinita’s eyes widen in dismay as Ashwin continues to declare proudly that his current company, “Advantage Solutions,” is a “small, family-owned company started by three brothers from Kolhapur.” Sighing, Vinita asks Ashwin why he is applying to work at “SFS,” a pseudonym for the company:

ASHWIN: Ah...well (*hesitates a little*), I am an honest, hardworking person. (*Thinks what to say...*) That was a learning experience for me at Jogalekar’s as I was able to participate in various projects successfully, which later helped me while I was with Advantage Solutions. I always loved finance as I come from a business family. My family owns a confectionery shop back home; baked goods, handicrafts, dried fruits... I considered joining the family business but I wanted to work for the Global Economy, and that is why I chose to apply at SFS. I believe that SFS is a leader in its field...so I am here only. I want to work for SFS only.

The room breaks into laughter as Ashwin beams and Vinita tries to mask her horror. Eager to change the subject, Vinita asks Ashwin if he has any hobbies. Ashwin scrunches up his face, deep in thought. “Knitting,” he says finally. “I knit.” Once more the audience breaks into laughter, louder and more enthusiastic than before. Vinita shouts to be heard over the noise; “you what?” “I knit!” Spurred by the audience’s delight, Dadarkar starts improvising his lines. “Sweaters, scarves, mufflers, I knit all things. Actually, I have a handkerchief in my bag right now, do you want to see?” “NO!” replies an embarrassed Vinita. She thanks Ashwin for his time and ushers him out the door before collapsing in her chair and picking up her phone. The scene ends as follows:

VINITA: (*Into the phone*) Hmm... just finished. You reached?... Give me two minutes, and I’ll be there. (*Laughs*) Same old story yaar... Told you na! I mean...they just don’t fit the bill...no...no...five minutes, and I was done...as usual... Why waste time on someone who is not going to set the world alight anyway!!... Yeah... I am just going to scribble some notes on the resume and be there in no time... Get me a sandwich yaar. See you soon...

The scene quickly establishes Vinita as the manager whose bias impedes her hiring choices and Ashwin as the applicant typically rejected during the interview process. The terms signifying Ashwin’s background (Atpadi, Jogalekar’s College, confectionery shop, etc.) exemplify the kind of social background typically excluded from Indian corporate culture. Interestingly, the script denotes Ashwin’s last name as “Deshpande,” a high-caste surname native to Maharashtra and Karnataka regions. Ashwin’s problem is not caste, then (although his last name may have played a factor if he had been invited to the interview), but a nonmodern habitus that is not only linguistically implied but coded in the language of the body. Ashwin’s vulnerability, displayed through performances of excess (sweating, fidgeting, an overly emotional demeanor), conveys a lack of professional charisma and confidence necessary for belonging in corporate India. Performances of vocal stammering accentuate a lack of mastery of the English language accent skills required for upper-level management roles. An ambiguous sense of effeminacy (knitting) further contradicts what is widely perceived to be a patriarchal work culture wherein, as Suma Uppalury and Kumar Bhaskar argue, male employees are pressured to embody notions

of “heroic masculinity” that expect them to understate their emotions in order to appear in control, rational, and strong (2014:391).

Ashwin, however, has all the right skills for the job. Alongside (presumably) coming from an upper-caste family, he is forward-looking, enthusiastic, and knowledgeable about the company—all markers of the enterprising work ethic of the global knowledge economy. But Ashwin’s passion to work for the “Global Economy” is perceived as desperation, rather than businesslike enthusiasm. Corporate belonging is positioned as not only conditional upon class and education status, but upon one’s ability to perform oneself *as* corporate—a strategic bodily exhibition of one’s belonging in an organizational system where exhibitions of gendered leadership and a cosmopolitan lifestyle are emphasized as not equally important to occupational expertise, but demonstrative of it. Humor played a central role in this interaction; Ashwin’s enactment of the anticorporate body transpired through a comedic exaggeration that invited the audience to participate in the marking of Ashwin as the nonmodern. Laughter sidestepped thorny questions of social inequality and neatly paved over opportunities for critical discussion on the politics of caste, class, gender, and regional identity that circumscribe India’s corporate work environments.

Madgulkar told the audience that it was time for “hot-seating,” a debrief period where participants can ask the actors (still in character) questions and offer comments. The first comments were directed at Vinita. “Why were you so disrespectful to him?” a man in the front row asked. Vinita smiled; “come on,” she replied, “we all know his background is not right for the job. You would have done the same.” A woman in the back raised her hand. “But this guy could be a star performer,” she said, “he could be a better performer than you even.” The group broke into laughter as Madgulkar stepped in, asking participants to pinpoint the moment they think Vinita decided she was not going to hire Ashwin. After a 30-second jumble of conversation, participants described the moment Ashwin says he is from Atpadi as the moment Vinita decides she is done with the interview. “What should Vinita do in the future?” Madgulkar asked. Two participants informed Vinita that she should be “more meritocratic” in the future by treating every interviewee with equal consideration. Out of time to argue, Vinita agreed to change her behavior and Madgulkar announced it was time to move on.

To me, this didactic message of meritocracy seemed obsolete in the wider context of the training—a requisite top-off to what was an implicit endorsement of the structures of privilege that demarcate the corporate sector and broader politics of middle-class belonging in urban India. While Unconscious Bias was perceived as successful by its participants and trainers, what it succeeded at was not what it purported to offer. Instead of teaching managers how to recognize and overcome implicit bias, Ashwin performed an embellished version of the “wrong” employee that was inadvertently validated through a laughter of recognition that enforced gendered, social, and cultural tropes of difference. The scene had no semblance to forum theatre as envisioned by Boal, raising the question of why consultants would prefer to call their scenes “forum” scenes, except perhaps because of their misguided association with organizational grammars of liberation, interaction, dialogue-building, and reflection so palatable to HR personnel doing the hiring. Finally, and perhaps reiteratively, we see no move to put theatre in the hands of the people or transform the conditions of subjectivation that demarcate the workshop. Theatre adheres to a regime of value that allows for the profound puppetry of organizational meritocracy to remain unchallenged and unexplored.

Off Script

And yet, performance, whether on the streets or in the boardroom, is a valuable resource not only due to its ability to enforce systems of power, but also because of its inherent ambiguity—its ability to be, in Margaret Werry’s words, “both a resource of the dominant culture and of the powerless, who use it to navigate, to inhabit, and even to trick systems not of their making” (2011:xx). As we went to set the stage for the next scene, an older work-

shop participant approached Madgulkar and asked him if he could take the microphone to make a comment. I watched as Madgulkar begrudgingly agreed, perhaps noting that the man's name tag distinguished him as regional manager in a well-known company.

The man walked onstage and glanced slowly around the room. He raised the microphone: "I am ashamed at you all," he stated. Several participants looked up mid-conversation, surprised at the change of tone. "The moment you all heard Atpadi, you all laughed," the participant continued. "You all laughed at him." In what followed, the man critiqued the audience for playing into Ashwin's performance, informing the room that their laughter revealed their "hypocrisy" and refuted the purpose of the training event. "You are all guilty of not hiring this fellow from Atpadi," he repeated several times, concentrating on a group of several younger participants in the front row who seemed to find his outburst amusing. Others in the room, I noticed, simply stared, while still others paid attention for the first several minutes of the speech before returning to their cell phones. The man's speech began veering into other points of contention, like how "closed-minded" the labor force in India is and how "cultural sensitivity trainings are a joke." At the later comment, Madgulkar commandeered the microphone and thanked the man for his comments. When the man expressed that he was not done, Madgulkar told him we could return to his points if there was time left at the end of the session (there wasn't).

While not part of the "official" training, the man's disruption demonstrates a persistent capacity for theatre training to go "off script" and deviate from HR-approved objectives. The man's reprimand of the audience for laughing made visible the contradiction wherein diversity training is intended to make the workplace a more inclusive place, while its underlying mechanisms often serve opposite ends. Arguably, the man "Boalified" the profoundly un-Boalian scenario by reading it critically, standing up, and challenging the entire organizational contract the event was built upon. At the same time, his emphatic assertion that the audience recognize their own complicity in the perpetuation of damaging stereotypes circled back to an "authentic" merit-based hiring as the perceived solution, reproducing the same logics underpinning the training enterprise.

While the man's disruption can never be called "radical" or "revolutionary" in a Boalian sense, it demonstrates the inadvertent side effects of theatre in institutional settings and the promises and problems of theatricality as a quality consistently open to improvisation, risk, and threat. Even as corporations legitimize and instrumentalize theatre to nourish capitalism's incessant thirst for creativity, there is something insistently inadmissible about theatricality that makes it impossible to quantify these practices as always and only ever occurrences of capitalist appropriation. As Nicholas Ridout so aptly surmised, "the theatre is a good place to go looking for communist potential not, crucially, because it offers any space beyond or outside capitalism, but precisely because it usually nestles so deeply inside it" (2013:9). Herein lies the potential for scholars of performance to consider anew how performance works at once with and against networks of economic precarity that govern life and labor under contemporary capitalism.



Figure 5. Employees engage in a debrief session with consultancy actors during Unconscious Bias training hosted by Steps Drama India in Mumbai, India, 2016. (Photo by Ashish Gakrey)

References

- Babbage, Francis. 2004. *Augusto Boal*. London: Routledge.
- Bishop, Claire. 2012. *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. London: Verso.
- Bennett, Nathan, and G. James Lemoine. 2014. "What VUCA Really Means for You." *Harvard Business Review*, January–February. Accessed 1 September 2019. hbr.org/2014/01/what-vuca-really-means-for-you.
- Boal, Augusto. (1974) 1985. *Theatre of the Oppressed*. Trans. Charles A. and Maria-Odilia Leal McBride. New York: Theatre Communications Group.
- Boal, Augusto. 1992. *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*. Trans. Adrian Jackson. London: Routledge.
- Boje, David M., Grace Ann Rosile, Jillian Saylor, and Rohny Saylor. 2015. "Using Storytelling Theatrics for Leadership Training." *Advances in Developing Human Resources* 17, 3:348–62.
- Carlucci, Daniela, and Giovanni Schiuma. 2018. "The Power of the Arts in Business." *Journal of Business Research* 85:342–47.
- Chong, Kimberly. 2018. *Best Practice: Management Consulting and the Ethics of Financialization in China*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Clark, Timothy, and Iain Mangham. 2004. "From Dramaturgy to Theatre as Technology: The Case of Corporate Theatre." *Journal of Management Studies* 41, 1:37–59. Accessed 1 September 2019. <http://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6486.2004.00420.x>.
- Coopey, John. 1998. "Learning to Trust and Trusting to Learn: A Role for Radical Theatre." *Management Learning* 29, 3:365–82.
- Deshpande, Satish. 2013. "Caste and Castelessness: Towards a Biography of the 'General Category.'" *Economic & Political Weekly* 48, 15:1–10. Accessed 1 September 2019. www.epw.in/journal/2013/15/perspectives/caste-and-castelessness.html.
- Dharwadker, Aparna Bhargava. 2005. *Theatres of Independence: Drama, Theory, and Urban Performance in India since 1947*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.
- Donnelly, Rory. 2015. "Tensions and Challenges in the Management of Diversity and Inclusion in IT Services Multinationals in India." *Human Resource Management* 54, 2:199–215.
- Edwards, Margot, and Kate Marie Blackwood. 2017. "Artful Interventions for Workplace Bullying: Exploring Forum Theatre." *Journal of Workplace Learning* 29, 1:37–48.
- Ferris, William P. 2002. "Theater Tools for Team Building." *Harvard Business Review*, December. Accessed 1 September 2019. hbr.org/2002/12/theater-tools-for-team-building.
- Goffman, Erving. 1974. *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Jackson, Adrian. 2009. "Augusto Boal—a Theatre in Life." *New Theatre Quarterly* 25, 4:306–09.
- Jagiello, Jolanta. 2002. "Organisational Theatre of Professional Practice: The Application of the Forum Theatre Technique to Business Ethics." *Business and Professional Ethics Journal* 21, 2:91–107.
- Joseph, Miranda. 2002. *Against the Romance of Community*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Kantola, Anu. 2014. "Branded Revolutionaries: Circulated Gurus as Management Tools in Soft Capitalism." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 17, 3:258–74.
- Mack, Oliver, Anshuman Khare, Andreas Krämer, and Thomas Burgartz. 2016. *Managing in a VUCA World*. New York: Springer International.
- Maynard Leigh. 2019. "Leadership." Maynardleigh.com. Accessed 1 September 2019. www.maynardleigh.com/core-courses/leadership.
- McKenzie, Jon. 2001. *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance*. London: Routledge.
- Minahan, Stella, and Julie Wolfram Cox. (2007) 2018. *The Aesthetic Turn in Management*. London: Routledge.
- NASSCOM. 2019. "Diversity & Inclusion." NASSCOM. Accessed 6 February 2019. www.nasscom.in/about-us/what-we-do/diversity-and-inclusion.

- Nissley, Nick, Steven S. Taylor, and Linda Houden. 2004. "The Politics of Performance in Organizational Theatre-Based Training and Interventions." *Organization Studies* 25, 5:817–39.
- Plastow, Jane. 2009. "Practising for the Revolution? The Influence of Augusto Boal in Brazil and Africa." *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* 7, 3:294–303.
- Ridout, Nicholas. 2013. *Passionate Amateurs: Theatre, Communism, and Love*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Schutzman, Mady, and Jan Cohen-Cruz, eds. 1994. *Playing Boal: Theatre, Therapy, Activism*. London: Routledge.
- Steps. n.d. "Diversity & Inclusion and Unconscious Bias." Steps Drama. Accessed 6 February 2019. www.stepsdrama.com/diversity-inclusion-and-unconscious-bias/.
- Suma Uppalury, and R. Kumar Bhaskar. 2014. "Gender Bias: Heroic Masculinity in Corporate India." *Human Rights International Research Journal* 2, 1:391–401.
- Taylor, Diana. 2009. "Augusto Boal, 1931–2009 (In Memoriam)." *TDR* 53, 4 (T204):10–11.
- Thorat, Sukhadeo, and Paul Attewell. 2007. "The Legacy of Social Exclusion: A Correspondence Study of Job Discrimination in India." *Economic and Political Weekly* 42, 41:4141–45.
- Thrift, Nigel. 2005. *Knowing Capitalism*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Tsing, Anna. 2000. "Inside the Economy of Appearances." *Public Culture* 12, 1:115–44.
- Upadhy, Carol. 2007. "Employment, Exclusion and 'Merit' in the Indian IT Industry." *Economic and Political Weekly* 42, 20:1863–68.
- Upadhy, Carol. 2016. *Reengineering India: Work, Capital, and Class in an Offshore Economy*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Werry, Margaret. 2011. *The Tourist State: Performing Leisure, Liberalism, and Race in New Zealand*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

TDRReading

- Colborn-Roxworthy, Emily. 2004. "Role-Play Training at a 'Violent Disneyland': The FBI Academy's Performance Paradigms." *TDR* 48, 4 (T184):81–108. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4488597>.
- Paterson, Douglas L. 1994. "A Role to Play for the Theatre of the Oppressed." *TDR* 38, 3 (T143):37–49. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1146378>.