

## A Eulogy, a Foil, and a Rebuke: To Whom, in Which Order, and Why?

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*The author wants to thank S. Parker and S. Meisiek for their useful comments. Had the time granted been longer, the integration of their comments would have been ever larger. If some mistakes still persist, the author asks forgiveness, because none of them has been committed intentionally.*

Meisiek and Barry's (2007) "Through the looking glass of Organization Theater" article deserves a eulogy.<sup>51</sup> Published in the *Organizational Studies* (OS), this article produced an "analogically mediated inquiry in organizations." In other words, it analyzed the impact of theater, whenever it happened inside organizations. For their work, theatrically speaking, I applaud both authors and say: "Go up and take a curtain call." Naturally, thunderous applauses also came from most Aacorners<sup>52</sup>-and-OS subscribing readers. Bluntly, I had wanted to be the first to praise.

Even so, I praise them now for their defense of theater, as a managerial tool. For my warm note, let me use the theatrical appreciation signs of contentment, common on reporting such events: most Aacorn people whistled, stamped their feet, and clapped their hands. To make this allegory even more radiant, let me state: applauses toppled the shaky Aacorn-and-OS Theater. To use the ultimate theatrical compliment, let me shout: this theatrical article brought down the Aacorn-and-OS House.

Had I alone a critique to make, however, it would be the following: this article brought down the house, but it did not raise the roof. To be sure, the paper stops short of presenting, as

a foil, the various and vicarious<sup>53</sup> theatrical experiments that some Aacorners had tried, for the best part of six years, at the annual conferences of the Academy of Management (AOM). Though a collective work, a few amateur writers and actors (Boje, Ferris, Hansen, Taylor, just to mention a few), all Management and Organization professors who met at the Fringe Café, tried to make theater accepted by the relatively "boring" Academy of Management. Among the participants, boring was a commonly heard adjective. To this little group, theater could be a catalyst or a change agent, by bringing in joy and pleasure.

Poulson, the head figure, usually applied camel case to write AcademyArts", though Bartunek's (2007) preferred "Academy Arts." Suggested in 1995, born in 2000, a few AOM professors used to present art, poetry, theater, paintings, photography, performances, in that "village square." Bartunek described several "learnings" from the experience. In what ways, could have this experience implications for others, interested in the implementation of novel ideas? To her, there were six: (1) how an initial idea evolved over time; (2) how excitement became real; (3) how participants became "too attached" to the idea; (4) how ideas needed appropriate structures to develop; (5) how the original impetus for an idea could eventually be forgotten; and (6) how an innovation might be assessed based on different criteria from the original purpose.

<sup>51</sup> **Eulogy** takes more the Greek sense of "speaking well" than the Latin sense of "epitaph"; **foil** implies "good contrast to something"; and **rebuke** means "a telling off" as expression of criticism or disapproval.

<sup>52</sup> **AACORN** stands for Arts, Aesthetics, Creativity, & Organization Research Network, which assembles a few hundred people interested in relating art and management. Initially, most of them were dissidents from the Academy of Management. From the acronym AACORN emerged the noun "aacorner."

<sup>53</sup> In medicine, **vicarious** means something occurring in an expected part of the body (for example, menstrual bleeding in the nose, breast, or sweat glands). In organizational context, what was not occurring inside the Academy of Management was expected to occur at the Fringe Café.

Differently from Bartunek' article, I am more interested to cover *terra incognita*.

Despite their good efforts, as you now know, the experiment unfortunately failed to attain that positive changing purpose at the Academy of Management. Apparently, the argument used by the AOM commissary was: "You had your start, now form a special interest group." Much painstaking and soul-searching then followed. Now, while taking a Southern Comfort sip, let me put the following question: had the same trial happened elsewhere, would the same results recur? Apparently, as the praised article documents, the same unhappy ending happened at least in their similar story: indeed, Meisiek and Barry described a related case study of Organizational Theater in a Northern European hospital. As a foil, as a contrast, however, the same experiment done at the biennial conferences of the Art of Management and Organization has been a success, since its inception. Last year, theater has thrived again during the Fourth Conference at Banff Center, AB, Canada.

The previous paragraphs, devoid of all pretense, reveal two things: (1) that I was also a participant in that same theatrical experiment; (2) that during a 15-year professional career in a big chemical corporation I also tried a couple of times to introduce theater, in its simpler form of stand-up comedy, and also faced the same kind of ambivalent adherence-resistance; and (3) after a three-year experiment, the same results also occurred at the Technical University of Lisbon. From these three different samples of life, I would risk to express the following concerns:

*First concern:* Acceptance of theater by top management as a managerial tool does not depend on the intrinsic quality of theatrical production.

*Second concern:* Only flexible organizations are willing to accept the changes induced by inner theatrical production.

Any objective evaluation would confirm that Aacorn authors wrote excellent plays for

the Academy of Management. None of the actors behaved in an overly theatrical way. None gave any avail to easiness, none overreacted, and none was a ham. On stage, among other things, Aacorn players always avoided low-comedy effects. Looking retrospectively, they shunned, by instinct, effects and instruments that, improperly used, could be concessions to lenience. Examples of these gawky effects could have been: (1) farce, (2) stooges, (3) bazookas, (4) slapsticks, (5) barnstormers, (6) Annie Oakley(ies), (7) billingsgate talks, (8) sound-effect machines, or (9) acknowledge-the-corn effects. To make these examples clear, let me explain one at a time.

1. As most of us know, the word **farce** comes from Latin *farcire*, meaning "to stuff." In the Aacorn case, authors evolved from linear to complex stories; in old Rome, however, excessive jokes heavily stuffed the feeble miracle plays. Let me recall one of the Aacorn plays: the good-intended professor paying a visit to a faraway village, located in a very underdeveloped country. He went there with a purpose: to cure the local sick cows, suffering from low-milk production. By misconception of their husbands, local women took the prescribed hormones; thus, women were the ones, not the cows, which gained breast-milk abundance. On the business and economic side, while teaching in Mozambique at bachelor's and master's levels, I came across similar fallacies. On the medicine side, this case could happen even in the most developed countries: how many times have similar malpractices occurred in U.S. or E.U. hospitals?
2. **Stooge** is another term of trade. It designates a comedian's accomplice hidden in the audience. Up to a certain moment, the actor's real identity and purpose remain unknown to the public. Similarly to a pigeon

hunter, the stooge usually ties himself to a captive seat; at critical moments, his function is to raise hell during the play, thus making the public laugh. In theater, he imitates a captive pigeon, well seated on a "stool," in front of a net. In real life, the tamed pigeon helps capture wild pigeons, for later sale or supper in the market. With invisible strings attached to the pigeons' wings, now and again the hunter makes the wings flap. Eventually, the bird's flapping wings will entice passenger pigeons into the net. Thus, by elision, stool pigeon became stooge. Another allusion also exists, this time to the metal industry: a stooge is a tool used by jewelers, to set off precious stones. Alas, the AOM theatrical experiment could have been for Meisiek and Barry their philosophical missing gemstone. Because it takes two to tango, I wonder why they have forgotten to do so. As a foil, why have they not remembered the Acorn experiment at the Academy of Management to check their article's results? Those, who were so well enabled to look "Through the Looking Glass," should perhaps have gained a better view of the other side of the organizations' mirror.

3. **Bazooka** comes from the combination of two Dutch words: *bazu*, meaning trumpet, and *kazoo*, taking its name from the same word. In the 1930s and 1940s, Bob Burns created a variant form of kazoo similar to a long-sounding horn. With this quasi-instrument, Burns sang and vibrated a little strip of paper, thus making people laugh. In contrast, Acorners never were neither comedians

nor vaudeville performers. They were well-trained professors, who wanted to make the Academy think and laugh.

4. Acorners also abhorred **slapsticks**. In the same way as the Spanish *castañolas*, two loosely fastened sticks, wielded as a club, make a loud slap. To produce laughter, some low comedians often spank each other with this device. In the Chinese theater, the orchestra uses similar devices to produce even more dramatic and surprising effects. In none of their plays, however, have Acorners lowered themselves to the point of using slapsticks, even for the sake of getting an easy sado-masochistic giggle. Still, the Academy finished their *gustoso* interplay.
5. By reason of their ranting and storming, actors have long been called **stormers**. In the early years of theater, there were not enough playhouses to hold all the troupes of players that toured England. Poor troupes, wandering far afield, often played in barns. Hence, these players got the name of **barnstormers**. For a good cause, while trying to make the Academy more exciting at their annual meetings, eventually Acorners became "hotelstormers." Even so, they have done it differently from so many politicians, who often tap dance their way out of much more difficult situations.
6. Because free passes were commonly punched, thus becoming full of holes, such a theater ticket was often called an **Annie Oakley** pass. Indeed, Annie was a famous rifle shot. As a part of her act, she used to shoot holes in a playing card, held by a courageous assistant. In contrast, Acorners never gave away free passes to

gain an audience. Moreover, likely or unlikely Annie Oakley, Aacorners never killed any assistant.

7. In their plays, Aacorners never had dialogues in coarse, abusive, **billingsgate talk**. About two centuries ago, Thomas Bowdler's (1807) **Family Shakespeare** removed, from the Bard's works, all improper words to any family's ears. Without "bowdlerizing," the Aacorn playwrights employed expressions that were of common use in any corporation. From its beginning, it was clean grassroots production. Even so, the AOM excommunicated the Aacorn authors and players "by bell, book, and candle." In the 8<sup>th</sup> century, the Catholic Church introduced this ceremony, which was no doubt a very theatrical rite, even recently suggested in Brazil. After reading the sentence, the old ritual imposed that the Holy Church cardinal rang a bell, closed a book, and extinguished a candle. With no rites, however, the Academy of Management disclaimed *urbi et orbi* all the theatrical Aacorners, as entertainers, from her divine worship ceremonies.
8. For his play **Appius and Virginia** (1709), John Dennis, an English critic and playwright, devised a thunder machine. His play was a failure, but his **sound-effect machine** became a hit. Later, when others pirated his thunder effect during a performance of **Macbeth**, Dennis used to complain that someone had stolen him "his thunder." From this incident, it emerged the old English expression "to steal one's thunder." In spite of this, most Aacorners are ready to
- swear, by heavens, that they have never stolen any sound-effect machine, not even a time machine, much less a fax machine, from any plot, from any player, from any author.
9. Finally, let me remember an old English expression, **acknowledge the corn**. As most of you know, this expression denotes "no" acknowledgement at all. In this particular case, to acknowledge the corn means no acknowledgement of the Aacorners. The AOM high ranks barred the low ranks from trying to introduce theater as a management tool. In this context, the expression "higher ranks" means the commissary responsible for the decision of closing the Fringe Café. "Lower ranks" means anybody lower than him. In a way, he upstaged the Aacorners. Apropos, here is an old American story. Once upon a time, a farmer bought two flatboats. To make his fortune at the market, he loaded one boat with corn and the other with potatoes. For the travel and amusement expenses, he also carried some little money with him. Then he sailed down the Mississippi River towards New Orleans. Upon arrival, while looking for a resting house, he stopped at a casino--the House of the Rising Sun?--where he gambled and lost not only his money but also his boatloads. Returning to the wharf, he found to his greater despair that, in the meantime, a sudden twister had sunk the flatboat full of corn. Eventually, he met with the holder of his gambling promissory notes, who demanded immediate delivery of the produce. The farmer shrewdly said: "I acknowledge

the corn, but the potatoes you can't have." His line was a wise crack, since the corn was at the bottom of the river.

Aacorners had a similar reaction to the "acknowledge-the-corn" attitude, when they moved from AOM conferences to "Art of Management" conferences. The year before Katrina, one of the Aacorn funniest plays happened in the Big Easy. A year later, after Honolulu, as if in a blow-after-blow sequence, the Academy of Management gave to AcademyArts, and its Aacorn members, the painful "no" acknowledgement-at-all attitude. As actors say in their theatrical lingo, the Academy of Management "sat on its hands." Since then, despite the good memories from complacent audiences, it has not been easy for all theatrical Aacorners to deal with the AOM rejection. How can any former participant forget this?

Before Meisiek and Barry's paper, a kind of Foucault's pendulum seemed to follow its natural from-right-to-left swing: the boring AOM, the less boring EGOS, the never-to-be-forgotten AcademyArts, the unforgettable Fringe Café, the Aacorn brethren, the ad hoc Art of Management. After Meisiek and Barry's paper, the pendulum began to follow its contrived from-left-to-right swing: Art of Management, Aacorn, the not-yet reborn Fringe Café, the not-yet resurrected AcademyArts, the semi-rigid EGOS and, finally, the rigid AOM. In a two-dimensional world, this could be the metaphor. Yet the world is a three-dimensional entity. Thus one has to wait longer, to see the results of a 360°-full circle. For the sake of the 3D-metaphor, it takes roughly 33 months. To regain the political forces within the Academy of Management, apparently nobody can shorten this long time span.

With the pendulum getting close to EGOS, Meisiek and Barry tried a new equilibrium at a midway point. Yet, inspired in Taylor's *finale* for his Paris' Art of Management play, the question that matters here is about **Ties That Bind**. If this were the criterion, then here is a fair balance: for a rebuke, an AOM tie; for a foil, an Art-of-Man tie; for a eulogy, an Aacorn tie.

So far, only a flexible organization, such as Art of Management, has been willing to

accept the changes induced by inner theatrical production. Sooner than expected, any inflexible structure, such the Academy of Management, rejects any imaginative creation, as a menace to its power structure. In this type of situation, participants are forced to become more flexible, while looking for smaller compliant organizations, similar to Fringe Café or AcademyArts. In the medium term, not all individuals have come to terms with rejection. Despite a good evening encounter, the morning-after syndrome still keeps some of them, looking for a subrogate limbo--the latent Aacorn network. Most Aacorners even try a bigger womb, namely, the Art-of-Man biennial conferences. However, biennial conferences are perhaps a too long period to wait. As a result, they are now trying the EGOS annual conferences. After all, Aacorners are active people and like to write a paper each year.

In 2004, I played a *bona fide* character called Rasheed during the AOM annual meeting in New Orleans. Since then, my philosophical touchstone for critical moments of life has been: once Rasheed, why not always Rasheed? In my mind, the revival of this character still occurs a few times over a year. Mentally, I play him either in his home village or in any other world's Big Easy. In accord with the international current issues, Rasheed was exuberant, ecumenical, and environmental. For giving me such an interesting travel companion, this article is a thank-you note to all the Aacorners who wrote and interpreted such a witty, waggish, humorous play.

As a large theatrical gesture, here is a give-back proposal. For the "animation" of us all, let us revive Rasheed. To do that, resist making him a Phoenix revival sign or a David-versus-Goliath symbol. Simply, develop its legacy or legend, as a character tolerant to any professor's ambiguity. In certain aspects, Rasheed was clumsy, but you have to understand that he was born with two left feet. Consequently, forget me as Rasheed's first amateur actor. Sometimes, actors have to play other characters, even villain characters, such as Iago. As the Foucault's pendulum keeps moving back towards the AOM initial point, Rasheed could become more than an icon or an idol—perhaps an idealized mental picture, an **imago**.

Thus, do not ask Rasheed do the impossible, like walking over waters, crossing the beach spearhead, and knocking daringly at the AOM gates. If the gates do not open wide, let him simply write on the wall his discontentment: "There is a connection, even if feeble, between Management and Organizational Theater." As an external observer might have said, perhaps there are potential political concerns of the AOM group that provide resistance to these plays. Like an Amish believer, the plainest is the strongest. Since long, the public seems to crave for a character who, with no going back, acts in favor of his reputation. As an inspirational metaphor, let him try Verdi's first libertarian line: "Va', pensiero, sull'ali dorate!"

In the meantime, one follow-up question remains: how flexible is EGOS going to be in relation to Aacorners' perspectives? After it became apparent that our two incumbents won their place among the stars, I fear some will tend to jump on the same bandwagon. Some like being in the limelight, some find the public attention flattering. If you asked my position, I would ponder two concurrent arguments. First, while the pendulum swings, I would remember the aphorism: "Never make a decision too early." Second, if the pendulum stops, I would recall the final theatrical trope: "It ain't over till the fat lady sings."

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*Why do we say it? The stories behind the words, expressions and clichés we use.* Edison, NJ: Castle, 1985, s.v. "acknowledge the corn."

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