

THEATRICALS OF SEAM

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guest edited by Henri Savall

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to explore the similarities and differences in the SEAM method and postmodern approaches to theatre. Neither metaphorical nor managerialist, SEAM's perspective allows that the organization *is* theatre. Our contribution is to introduce the terms 'metascript' and 'metatheatre' to describe how SEAM's approach accommodates the multiple perspectives and simultaneous multiple stages populated by the "spect-actors" (Boal, 1979) of the *Tamara*-esque postmodern organization.¹

"Organization is theatre," says Henri Savall, the founder and director of the Socio-Economic Approach to Management (SEAM), during a personal interview conducted in July 2001 in Lyon. One year later, the present authors (Boje and Rosile) are again in Lyon, at the ISEOR campus. We are in an ISEOR seminar room on a Saturday morning with 18 SEAM doctoral students and five of Savall's key faculty at the Institute. We have just spent 90 minutes offering our interpretation of the relationship of SEAM and theatrics. We explain that we theorize organizations narratively; and for us, theatrics provides a contextual frame for our narrative approach to organizational change that we call *restorying* (Rosile, 1998a, b, c; White & Epston, 1990). The storied organization is *Tamara*-esque theatre, with simultaneous multiple stages (Boje, 1995). SEAM does not ignore, gloss over, or totalize this variety. Instead, SEAM incorporates what we call "metascript" and "metatheatre."

Since the purpose of this article is to explore the theatrical aspects of the SEAM methodology, we begin by offering a bit of the theatrics of our own research of this topic, by taking you, the reader, back to that seminar room that sunny Saturday morning in Lyon. The present authors had concluded their talks, frequently drawing on Savall's English-speaking faculty for translations. As we conclude our comments on theatrics, we are surprised to discover that Savall has unobtrusively begun a flip-chart drawing to address the issues being discussed. Ever the showman, in his quiet style Savall dramatically reveals that he is still *Comedien Français* as in his youth, but for a different audience in academia these days. As he paints a drawing to deconstruct our presentation with his theatrical intervention, he evokes a bit of silent theatre. In his trademark bowtie,

¹ Tamara-esque means the network of simultaneous theatre stages that comprise any organization. People performing their theatre scripts in one room, are not present in another corporate room. The spectators and actors split and go to various rooms, in the networking that occurs each day. They rely on storytellers to tell them what went on in theatres that did not attend.

he resembles Charlie Chaplin for a moment. His performance is ironic and humorous. The silent theatre is a pregnant pause in the dialog and rhythm of the event.

Then Savall begins: "There are people who are the stars of organizational theatre. There is an off stage and an on stage, and those who work to perfect what takes place on the stage. There is a director, and there are people who think they can be better directors. There are people on the sidelines who want to replace the stars, who think they can do a better job. With so many directors and also spectators seeking to displace actors and become the new stars, the metascript becomes increasingly chaotic." We are theatre therapists to organizations. SEAM methodology scribes the fragments of the metascript and presents a deconstruction of the script variations and incongruities in the "Mirror Effect" intervention (see intro article by Boje & Rosile in this issue). Then after the variations (of the metascript) are presented to organizational members, the rescripting intervention is jointly produced.

How do we view SEAM in the context of organizational theatrics? In organization studies, theatre is either a metaphor or an actuality. In a previous issue of the *Journal of Organizational Change Management (JOCM)*, Oswick, Keenoy, and Grant (2001) and Kärreman (2001) conclude that followers of Goffman (1974) take a metaphoric approach (e.g., Harvey, 2001; Overington and Mangham, 1987; Rosen, 1985; Clark & Mangham, 2001; Meisiek, 2002) while followers of Burke (1937, 1945, 1972) take a more literal approach, theatre is not a metaphor (Gusfield, 1989: 36; Kärreman, 2001: 106; See studies by Czarniawska, 1997; Mangham & Overington, 1987; Pine & Gilmour, 1999; Somerset, Weiss, Fahey, & Mears, 2001).

We believe that Savall's quote, with which we began this paper, reflects the more Burkean perspective inherent in SEAM. Before proceeding with this analysis, however, we will address another use of theatre in organizations. This third perspective is helpful because it demonstrates something which SEAM is not.

To the above metaphoric/actual dualism, we add a third alternative trend: theatre as an organizational change tool. In our symposium for the 2001 Academy of Management (Boje, 2001c), panelist Georg Schreyogg (2001) presented theatre as a change technology (See also Schreyogg & Noss, 2000). In Germany, France, and even in the U.S., firms hire consultants who employ professional actors and playwrights to enact theatre as a technology of change. In this approach, the professional actors recreate conflict situations and craft object lessons to address problems identified by senior executives. The consultants may interview organizational members for dialogue, and may incorporate ongoing organizational issues in the plots. These theatrical productions may be employed to suggest alternative perspectives on problems, or to model problem resolutions or specific behavioral responses desired by management. Performances typically would be discussed and processed by managers and employees, sometimes using focus groups, following these theatric events. We view this as a managerial use (Alvesson and Willmott, 1996) of theatric technology, employing theatre professionals to aid the expert consultant and top management in their strategies to control organizations.

Of the three approaches described above (metaphoric, actual, and managerialist), we suggest that Henri Savall's Burkean perspective offers a less metaphorical, less managerialist, and, we contend, a more postmodern approach to diagnosing and intervening in the organization which is theatre. Saner (1999, 2000) pursues theatre as a postmodern intervention which is off-Broadway or even off-off-Broadway when

compared to more traditional relationships between consultants and clients. By off-Broadway, Saner means consulting is a form of postmodern theatrical intervention. We turn now to a more detailed exploration of the ‘postmodern theatrics’ (Rosile, Best & Boje, 2001) of SEAM.

SEAM IS THEATRIC METHOD

SEAM assumes organization is theatre. It does not approach theatre as a metaphor. Rather, the purpose of the diagnosis stage of this intervention is to research the “*metascript*”¹ of the organization, and to use qualitative narrative research methods (Boje, 2001a) to reproduce samples of the organistic metascript in the “Mirror Effect” (The Mirror Effect is discussed by us in intro article to this issue). In theatrical terms, SEAM’s Mirror Effect explores the many different scripts which populate an organization simultaneously, that collectively constitute its metascript.

What is Metascript? SEAM juxtaposes the senior executive’s script against many alternatives, more marginalized scripts, so that the metascript is a multiplicity of contending and fragmented scripts. Executives are directors who line up characters (human and non-human alike), in an *antenarrative* (Boje, 2001a). An antenarrative is a pre-narrative bet that a story can be told that will enroll stakeholders in ways that transform the world of action. Corporate directors, managers and other script-creators mobilize plot-scenarios in the course of which theatre emerges on multiple, real corporate stages (as in Tamara, Boje, 1995). Indeed many directors offer characters roles, themes, dialog, and ways of playing (paraphrase of Latour, 1996: 172).

SEAM consultants meticulously record comments of executives and non-executives in individual and group interviews that we (the authors) believe constitute fragments of the metascript. Scribing and translating the metascript is the starting point for SEAM. And a co-reading of the collected fragments of metascript is the point of the Mirror Effect event. These comments comprise what we view as a script. For example, in a SEAM diagnosis in an alarm company (Cristallini, 2001, p. 171), 7 consultants collected quotes from 480 people. We consider that this data comprises a “metascript.” Data (or “script lines”) were also collected using field observations of company meetings and work process behaviors. To coordinate the multi-consultant interviewing and observations, field interviews were entered into a computer database over a period of six months. This yielded 2,500 pages of what we would consider to be mostly metascript.

SEAM assumes that over time the organization’s script becomes overlaid and fragmented with the many scriptwriters and script editors in organizations. Further, as in TAMARA (Boje, 1995, TAMARA Journal, 2001) the organization is assumed to be a multiplicity of stages on which different plays are acted out by organizational members

¹ During our 2001 interview with Henri Savall at the EGOS conference in Lyon France was the first mention of the term “metascript.” We continued our interview with Savall about metascript at the June 22 2002 session at ISEOR institute in France. Metascript, is a concept he uses, but has not written about.

(actors) simultaneously. Since organizational theatre is multiple and simultaneous, actors in one part of the organization do not see the performance of other groups of players first-hand. Rather, they hear stories of performances at meetings, and experience various other presentations and stagings of events they did not attend. The actors of the organization therefore pursue stories of theatric performances from room to room, office to office, branch to headquarters, in a TAMARA-esque networking.

As in TAMARA, SEAM's postmodern perspective of organizations recognizes the modernist false dualism in the distinction between actor and audience (see also Boal's 1979 concept of "spect-actor").² Actors may choose not to behave (to become part of the audience of spectators), or to behave differently (to improvise), to slant their interpretation and even resist the script. SEAM's extensive interview process collects the lines of dialog, which reveals the hidden conflicts, taboo topics, and dysfunctional dynamics in mostly unwritten (and often conflicting) scripts. In these ways SEAM acknowledges that the organization is not only metatheatre, the organization is also metascript.

As the firm enacts and networks a TAMARA-esque simultaneous and fragmented multiplicity of theatre, the metascript becomes less and less coherent (perhaps it never was so). Piecemeal revisions may result in a metascript that "de-energizes" organization stakeholders (Cristallini, 2002). In postmodern terms (see M. & M. Peron in this issue of JOCM) the metascript may contain a dialectic of scripts that are in opposition, yet do not totalize. As Treppo and De Geuser (in this issue) point out, we manage and work in under-organized worlds of contradiction and heterogeneity.

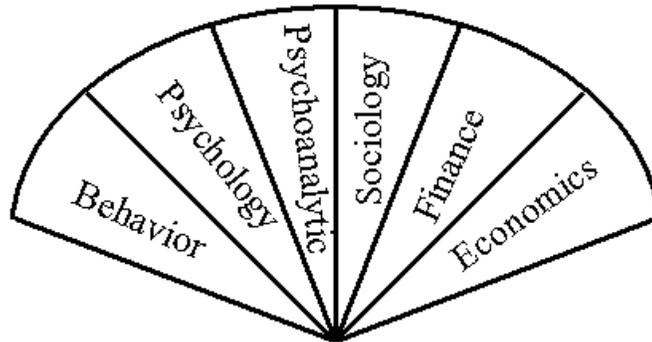
In our terms, the metascript never ceases to emerge, adapt, and dissolve; it does this without the interference of a cadre of directors and script revisionists. By definition, metascript cannot stand still. We can hypothesize that it is more homogeneous in more bureaucratic organizations, with fewer authorized directors and editors and more structured and formalized rehearsals. However, even in bureaucracy there is TAMARA-esque simultaneous performance, within the divisions of labor and divisions of hierarchy. Further, as in less bureaucratic organizations, even bureaucratic metatheatre has a "drift effect." Any originary script (and we doubt there was) drifts in its editions, revisions, and fragments, to become a monstrous collage that while continually con-scripting in a panoptic embrace, does not necessarily meet needs of actors or spect-actors.

If we return to Savall's theatric performance at ISEOR, his intervention was to write the word "aesthetics" onto a chart he sketched on a flip chart (See Figure 1); he also sketched his "SEAM Field of Theatre."

² In modern theatre, the perencial arch is a sacred boundary between actors authorized to be on the stage, and the spectators who, are imprisoned in their theatre seats. In postmodern theaters, such as the Tamara play (Boje, 1995), actors invade the space of spectators, and vice versa. The spectators become spect-actors (Boal's spectators and actors), and since there are a multiplicity of simultaneous plays going on simultaneously in up to a dozen rooms, the audience literally fragments, chasing actors and the many stories, from room to room. This is Boje's image of what organizations are, quite theatrical, with a networking of many simultaneous stages of theatrical action.

Figure 1: SEAM Field of Theatre

Seam Field



Aesthetics

SEAM Theater

ONE VISIBLE PERFORMANCE OF THE PLAY	A VARIETY OF HIDDEN PERFORMANCES AND META-SCRIPTS
AUTHOR	The written text doesn't necessarily translate what the author really wants to carry over (underlying and hidden sense)
CHARACTERS	
- Leading roles	- The actors would like to modify the script according to their own characters.
- Supporting roles	
- Walk-on parts	- Supporting roles and walk-on parts would like to play the lead.
DIRECTOR AND TECHNICIANS	- Director and technicians seek to influence the play through stage setting.
SPECTATORS	- As in Elizabethan theater, spectators would like to interfere and participate in the

play.

According to Savall (2002), SEAM incorporates a range of considerations, from emotional to financial. SEAM avoids the traditional separations of categories like aesthetic, physiological, psychological, sociological, and economic. Action in the organizational theatre incorporates all these in its inquiry and analysis.

Next, we propose seven elements of metatheatre, which we refer to as the “Septet” (Septet means seven items).

SEAM’s Relations to Septet, the Poetic Elements of Metatheatre

In our Septet, we propose a postmodern reinvention of Aristotle’s (350 BCE) dramatic elements (of *Poetics*). Aristotle’s Poetic elements are also the root of the Boal (1979) theatric method, *Theatre of the Oppressed*. Boal builds upon Freire’s (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1969), and reinterprets Aristotle’s *Poetics* to fashion a postmodern Poetics of theatre. Boal’s methodology is widely used around the world. This approach, and its application to organizations, was the focus of an Organization Development and Change division of the Academy of Management’s conference symposium (Boje, Rosile, and Malbogot, Toronto, 2000). In that event, Malbogot, director of Toronto’s Theatre for Social Change, put on masks and portrayed characters that consultants and academics would likely encounter (for example, the sloth, the aggressor, the sniveler, the conniver, and the crazy-maker). The purpose was to demonstrate how the various masked characters typically engaged in oppressing others.

How does SEAM relate to Boal’s methodology? During the diagnosis phase, SEAM consultants spend 2-6 months scribing the metascript in extensive organizational interviews. As do most researchers, they aggregate data and show trends. However, they also highlight diverging comments explicitly, thereby revealing potential oppressions, and metascript incongruities. They do this with SEAM’s mirror effect (see Boje and Rosile’s Introduction in this issue of JOCM), which explicitly presents diverging and converging clusters of actual utterances of organizational actors. This focus on divergences in comments (script fragments) prevents the glossing over of differences, and the forcing of a falsely uniform theatrical-picture of the organization. We view the SEAM mirror event as a metascript process which allows SEAM to do what Boal does-- to reveal oppression, conflict, and power.

Although the metascript is not a written text, yet it has, we hypothesize, a “Septet” of theatric elements, which are character, plot, theme, dialog, rhythm, and spectacle – and these affect individual and organizational performance (Boje, 2003). A brief explanation of these elements follows.

CHARACTER: Characters are recruited, seduced, coerced into new roles and relationships. There are starring roles, understudies, and supporting roles.

SEAM involves both horizontal and vertical actors in the organization (the “horivert” concept) as well as customers.

PLOTS: There is never one script, always a multiplicity of scripts. There is never one plot, there is a network of plots (and emplotments). Emplotment is Ricoeur’s (1984) term for “grasping together” characters, themes, events, dialog, etc. into a hermeneutic spiral of three mimetic moments (see Boje, 2001a chapter on plots). Plots are discarded, invented, and disseminated for a new inter-plot-ment in unwritten intertextualities. The collective *metascript* itself is a system of inter-scripts (i.e. script lines in one script reference lines in another; scripts do not have to be written). Plots, for example, are organizational plans seeking realizability and realization, but they can also de-realize when characters stop engaging in them. Plots have champions (starring characters) supporting characters, antagonistic characters, and non-included characters yet to be seduced or conscripted. The metascript is a system of communication, coordination, and control (SEAM’s 3C’s) among the various characters.

In SEAM, plots may be viewed as part of narrative organizational strategies (Barry & Elmes, 1997). To plot a revision to a metascript is to attempt to realize a transformation in all the 7 Septetic elements of theatre. SEAM carefully constructs its changes as experiments. With thorough documentation of the subtleties of hidden costs and the loss of potential performance, SEAM clients gain a more accurate sense of how a strategic change (plot change) is affecting organizational performance. SEAM experts have demonstrated that their comprehensive form of cost analysis could have revealed the hidden costs of many reengineering efforts which ultimately failed (Savall and Bonnet, NEED DATE AND REFERENCE).

THEMES: Never singular as in Aristotle’s view, but “mega” as in Freire’s (1970) radical variation of action research. Freire’s “theme analysis” is jointly co-enacted by the researchers and the Brazilian peasants in his project narrative. Themes emerge in discussions by the peasants with researchers. In some cases, themes are presented theatrically, as with Boal’s approach to theatre.

SEAM assumes a multiplicity of themes. In SEAM’s mirror phase, intervener-researchers reveal the actual utterances of organizational actors, so they can negotiate with organization members to co-produce the diverging and converging categories of comments. This highlights the multiplicity of perspectives and themes simultaneously present in the organization theatre.

DIALOGS: Not one dialog, but contending dialogs exist, which do not conquer each other and do not present a totalization. Themes and plots are expressed in dialog, and dialog can be more or less scripted. For, example a McDonald’s restaurant has highly scripted dialog for not only its employees, but also for managers and customers (Boje, 2002).

SEAM intervener-researchers are trained to record verbatim comments of organizational members. These comments are not forced into totalizing categories, but rather, are mirrored in their complex and contradictory natures, as described above under THEMES.

RHYTHMS: There is not one rhythm as with Aristotle’s *Poetics* (350 BCE), but a pan-opoly of rhythms. What are organizational rhythms, planning rhythms, and controlling rhythms? Rhythms are recurring patterns in fields of action and discourse.

Rhythms in organizations are part of the self-organizing system of complexity and chaos effects; scripting attempts to channel rhythm.

SEAM follows a « chrono-biological » rhythm, which is, according to Saval, « the change music, the harmony of change for the actors, and the...biological rhythm » (Saval interview, 2001).

SPECTACLES: For Aristotle (350 BCE), spectacle was the least important of the six poetic elements of theatre. For us, spectacle is the most important. Spectacles multiply, in that they accumulate as theatric expressions of corporate image and consumer advertising. We prefer Debord's (1967) conceptualization of spectacle to Aristotle's (although Aristotle is not totally abandoned by us--we retain the cathartic effect). Corporate spectacle is designed to instruct the mass of consumers in scripts of happiness through consumption (Boje, 2002; 2001b, d) in what Firat and Dholakia (1998) term "theatres of consumption." For Nietzsche (1974/1887), spectacle is the theatre of addiction; spectators are unaware they have become actors in spectacles scripted by a collective of power brokers. Foucault (1979) in his chapter on the *carceral*, notes something Nietzsche has missed, that the powerful are as conscripted by spectacle as the minions.³ It is important to remember that while the metascript is a carceral, it is not a dialectic. We do not transform corporate spectacles into some theatrical space we could call non-spectacle. Rather, the spectacles are rescripted into just another spectacle to be incorporated into the *metascript*. There is not vacation from corporate spectacle, just substitution of one more consumer spectacle for another.

SEAM recognizes that the essential component of spectacle is power. SEAM's Saval is neither a Marxist nor is he a "critical postmodernist." The SEAM approach is spectacle, is more Goffmanesque, with its front stage official corporate spectacle and the backstage intrigue of scripts that want to be realized, but are not yet. « Managers will have the formal power intact; but what SEAM demonstrates, is that they don't have actual power. But all the actors in the organization have hidden power. So it is important to acknowledge the existence of conflicts within the organization ... To overcome and transcend this conflict...it is necessary to (establish) a leadership/management which negotiates with each, each and all the persons who are the actors within the organization...It is impossible to get lasting financial performance...without management based on negotiation... » (Saval interview, 2001).

FRAMES: Burke's (1972: 23) unfinished project was to extend his "Pentad" (his interpretations of Aristotle's 6 poetic elements) by adding one more, called "frames." Burke's pentad corresponds to Aristotle's poetic elements as follows (Burke, 1945: 231): plot = act; character = agent; spectacle = scene; theme = purpose; dialog = agency; and also rhythm = agency. What are frames? They are competing points of view, and contradictory ideologies (Burke, 1937). In organizations, the official ideological frame conflicts with unofficial aspirants (new frames). For example, the marginalized ideologies of workers, unions, or environmentalists juxtapose the official ideology of the firm and its corporate executives (Boje, 1995). To transform the organization's metascript is to intervene in the network of frames and make one frame more pronounced, and/or introduce some new frame.

³ We are indebted to Rickey Moore of ISEOR for making us aware of the con-scripting aspects of metascripts in organizations. Executives are as trapped as workers in a carceral sense.

SEAM embraces frames, which other perspectives may view as contradictory or irrelevant (see again Figure 1). Further, these frames are interpreted with economic cost data. However, the organizational members, not by the SEAM experts, supply this data. "...we bring them these new tools, and they calculate hidden costs, not us, we don't do it by ourselves" (Saval interview, 2001).

All seven theatric elements (the Septet, above) are constituents of the metascripting dynamics of managing organizational change, in what we have been developing as the metatheatre of organizations. We have suggested how each of these septetic theatre elements relates to SEAM methodology. We conclude by summarizing 5 ways that the metatheatre elements of SEAM shape SEAM'S organizational change approach. First, SEAM is metatheatre: it assumes a multiplicity of each Septet-element (e.g. not one but many plots), and not one but many theatres of organization. Second, in assuming organization *is* theatre instead of organization *as* theatre, the SEAM approach is more compatible with the Burke and Boal approaches and our Septet interpretations of Aristotle, rather than the Goffman metaphoric sociology. This leads to the third point, that SEAM is not only theatrical but also postmodern. Oppressions (expressed as loss of potential) and conflicts are not glossed or finessed, they are uncovered, highlighted and negotiated. Fourth, SEAM has made a conscious choice to challenge Fayol's management approach as incomplete. While organic, Fayol's approach is, for Saval, more sociological than economic. Saval's "theatre de SEAM" extends the socio-economic by supplementary inclusion of the psychoanalytic and of the aesthetic (see Figure 1). SEAM's expanded frame includes human, technical, social, and economic costs, including also the hidden and potential costs. Finally, SEAM accommodates a view of organizations as theatric spectacle. Aristotle thought spectacle was only something bad poets did when they wrote bad theatre. In contemporary postmodern theatres of capitalism (Boje 2002) the septet elements have become fused into one element, the spectacle. Corporations produce and distribute spectacles (not products) for mass consumption.

In sum, SEAM intervenes into what we call the "theatres of capitalism" (Boje, 2002). SEAM is neither metaphoric theatre, nor a performance staged by professional actors reciting lines scribed by consultant's visions of senior managers' frames of managerialist ideologies. SEAM is not application of theatric terminology to corporate behavior. Rather, SEAM fights fire with fire. SEAM meticulously collects (what we assume to be) *metascript* from alternative viewpoints (i.e. executive, workers, technicians, and customers) in order to confront the organization with the "Mirror Effect." This can be a day-long event, and is devoted to reading to the corporation its own metascript and deconstructing dysfunctions in metatheatre. Changes to the metascript are proposed as SEAM « experiments, » suggesting an off-Broadway (Saner, 2000) phase of the organization theatre. Add to this the surprise of daring to calculate the hidden costs of the metatheatre dysfunctions, and we see in SEAM a way to cast the spotlight backstage, and ultimately, to relate theatre to economic performance..

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