Managerialism Meets Dionysos: Theatre and Civic Order

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I want to begin my talk with a rhetorical quiz. I say ‘rhetorical’ because, if you do yell out the right answer, it will spoil my punch line. You have to guess who is being referred to by X in the following quotation (which I have adapted very slightly):

   The underlying messages of X's system are efficiency, professionalism, management by experts, social order...all this is to take place in a society balanced by...leadership and market forces.

Any one of a number of our most enlightened federal leaders might come to mind, though, if you are from the state of Victoria like me, you are likely to guess that X refers to our beloved state leader. If you are in the business of applying for arts funding in Victoria, you may have even guessed that X refers to Arts Victoria, the state government’s arts funding department. And indirectly, you would indeed be absolutely right.

However, in this particular instance, the quotation from John Ralston Saul’s *The Unconscious Civilization* (1997: 27) refers to Benito Mussolini. I would like to propose that there is an underlying connection between that earlier leader with an edifice complex, contemporary corporatism, and arts funding (quagmired as it is in managerialism and a ‘performance management’ structure) on the one hand and citizenship, Greek theatre, and the absence of an arts industry, on the other. Oh, and bread. I'll come to the bread bit later.

In this paper, I am going to explore these connections, drawing upon my recent experience running a theatre company and venue for five years in Melbourne (namely, Theatreworks in the bayside suburb of St Kilda) and upon my experience (now using that word in its mostly vicarious sense) of ancient Greek theatre, both as an academic, a sometimes practitioner, and an audience member. In examining these connections, I will be exploring the balance of, and the tension and state of suspension between, a number of oppositions, such as order and disorder, concreteness and fluidity, predictability and unpredictability, industry and system. Towards the end of the paper, I will be suggesting that the situation we find ourselves in at the turn of the century does not have to be tolerated, that we do not in the end need to enter into the transactions on
the menu (to use Adorno’s phrase) and on the terms offered. At the very end, I will be offering you an opportunity to participate in a Bacchic orgy - well, one suitable to a conference on industrial relations at least.

**Performance Management Structure**

Let me start with some comments on managerialism and the performance management structure, as experienced in what is nowadays called the ‘arts industry.’ As practiced by governments all over Australia where the private sector has been extensively used as a model, managerialism invokes the perfectly sensible notion of accountability for public money. Only I doubt very much that governments ever think of the money as actually belonging to the public. Under the performance management structure, the client (whether a governmental department or agency, an arts company or business entity), has to establish ahead of time what it wants to do, how it will do it, how much it will need to fund it, and how it will measure and evaluate its performance. Financial accountability is of course, and properly, taken for granted. Should the government agree to a proposal, then it allocates the applicant enough money to do what has been applied for. Well, that’s the idea anyway, but not in the arts. Your service agreement is designed to guarantee that you will do what you say you will do and usually with penalties for failure to do so. Of course, in the dealings between government and the private sector, these service agreements and their supposed penalties are used to keep as much information as possible about the use of ‘public’ money from the public itself under the heading of ‘commercial in confidence material.’ But never mind, we don’t need to know this information because the government will smack their bottoms if they are naughty. Trust them.

Here’s how it works… The arts company seeking annual or triennial funding from, say, Arts Victoria, is increasingly required to set itself up as a business enterprise which, upon receiving funding, enters into a contract with the government. The company is called a ‘client’ and has a client manager at Arts Vic. As a business, you are required to have a ‘vision’ and a ‘mission,’ ‘goals’ and ‘objectives,’ timelines and so on. I’m sure these notions are not new to many here, but you may be unaware of the extent to which these structures dominate arts companies since the ’nineties. The goals and objectives are transferred into your contract with Arts Vic and form the basis of the ‘performance indicators’ with which you must justify your continued allocation of funds. Sounds perfectly sensible? Let’s see.

Although the titles vary slightly amongst different users, the performance management structure contains a series of levels which increase in concreteness and measurability from the broad and ill-defined to extremely specific. The broadest level of vision usually contains those adjectives which have been somewhat meaninglessly turned into nouns, such as ‘excellence,’ ‘innovation’ and ‘accessibility,’ and are so general as to be applicable to the arts, engineering, the finance sector or whatever - perhaps not benignly so. Goals, the next level, are slightly more specific but not very measurable, being those targets on the horizon of your orb of influence towards which you would like to move because you believe they will help to achieve your vision. Objectives sit within the middle strata, being the reasonably concrete ‘what’ you will do in a system where you have some measure of control over your actions and the results of those actions (at least in principle). They must be measurable and have a definite time frame to them. This is the dangerous level. The Latin origin of the word is interesting: *obicio, -ere, -ieci, obiectum* primarily refers to something put in front of you to get in your way. The next
two levels are ‘strategies’ and very specific ‘actions.’ And if you turned off during that description, think what it’s like to spend all day every day for months on end immersed in it.

The annual grant application, which must respond Arts Victoria’s policy statement called ‘Arts 21,’ must now contain the following:

(1) **Corporate Plan**, containing Executive Summary, Vision and Mission, Principles and Values, Industry Analysis, Goals and Objectives for three years, Activity Descriptions. (I used to joke that this section could contain one sentence: ‘Write this plan, fill in your questionnaires, write your reports.’ I joked, but did not laugh.) The Corporate Plan also contained Performance Indicators and Three Year Financial Plan.

(2) **The Annual Business Plan**, detailing all your Goals and Objectives, Strategies and Actions, time frames, and so on, in great detail for the year ahead, and including, of course, your detailed Activity Descriptions (see Corporate Plan above).

(3) **The Corporate Governance Plan**, containing Recruitment and Induction Processes for new Board members, Composition and Role of Sub-Committees, Board Performance and Assessment Process, Personnel, Staff Recruitment and Assessment Procedures, evidence of adherence to various legislated governance policies, etc., etc., etc., and, best of all, a detailed **Risk Management Plan** (and it’s not acceptable to say, ‘Shut the doors and get another job’). Here you are asked to rate numerically (of course) the risks for your company and how you will deal with them if they occur. (For example, ‘What if the media don’t like you’ to which I couldn’t stop myself from writing, ‘Let them eat cake!’)

(4) **The Annual Marketing Plan** (which is self-explanatory and even more tedious).

(5) **Response to Arts 21** (which is where you want to write, "I vomited, now give me the damn money!")

So there, on the table, is Theatreworks’ last grant application: seventy-odd pages of corporate speak, as required, for a staff of two and a miserable grant of $85,000.

The performance management structure as I and many others like me have experienced it, with its attendant performance contracts and indicators, apart from the very real result that it leaves no time to do what you are actually there to do, constrains arts practice into an ever-tightening paradigm of concrete and meaningless numerals. This inadequate system is really all about numbers – simple numbers, in a standard format that can be compared to other simple numbers in identical standard formats, which can then be transferred and summarised in the funding body’s annual report with the underlying message: vote for this government!

All this might be laughable if it stood alone, but of course it doesn’t. Remember Saul’s quotation regarding Mussolini from the beginning of my paper. Performance management is a clear example of corporatism at work. In *The Unconscious Civilization*, Saul describes corporatism as an ideology in which
The technocracy has developed an argument that now dominates our society according to which ‘management’ equals ‘doing’ in the sense that ‘doing’ equals ‘making’ (1997: 7)

and in which

Our actions are only related to tiny, narrow bands of specialist information, usually based on a false idea of measurement rather than upon any knowledge - that is, understanding - of the larger picture (1997: 5).

‘Truth’ in a corporatist society, he argues, ‘is not in the world, it is in the measurements made by professionals’ (1997: 9).

In order to understand in what kind of society we live, says Saul (1997: 32), we need to ask the basic question: where is the source of legitimacy? The answer nowadays in the West is clear. It lies in groups and corporations, in corporate structures and hierarchies. Corporatism is an ideology, says Saul, which claims rationality as its central quality, where the citizen is reduced to the state of a subject or serf (or a client of government) and exists as a function rather than an individual (1997: 2 & 34).

The human is thus reduced to a measurable value, like a machine or a piece of property. We know that real expressions of individualism are not only discouraged but punished. The active, outspoken citizen is unlikely to have a successful professional career (Saul, 1997: 34).

Managerialism is so focused on rational, strategic choices and goals that democratic processes are considered an annoyance, hence the prevalence of ‘commercial in confidence material.’ In an episode of Background Briefing on ABC Radio National, entitled ‘The Consultocracy,’ David Osborne (in Correy, 1999), stated that ‘[r]ational, strategic choices are almost the opposite of the political process’ with apparently no sense of irony.

**Theatre and Civic Order**

An alternative legitimacy can be found in the individual citizenry acting as a whole, a legitimacy which requires participation rather than acquiescence. This leads me naturally to the second section of my paper, in which I will examine the relation between theatre and civic order in Ancient Greece in the fifth century B.C.

There are a number of things to keep in mind when we speak about Greek theatre. Firstly, like its citizenship, the theatre was an entirely male affair. There are no women on the Greek stage, only male constructs of something other than themselves; there are certainly no women involved in making or performing Greek theatre; and almost certainly no women in the audience. Where that leaves us is another paper - or seven - but we certainly can’t forget it. Secondly, like anyone who talks about Greek theatre, I base my observations on the best scholarly and theatrical methods, which end where a leap of conjecture takes off. The fragmentary nature of the evidence demands such a leap, but I am a cautious athlete. Thirdly, the period of the big adventure in Greek, or rather Athenian, theatre is synonymous with the period of radical democracy, a fact most noteworthy in the context of this paper.

One of the most striking features of the performing arts paradigm in Greece was the
place of theatre in the public life of the *polis* and the way the Greeks balanced order and disorder, solidity and fluidity in both.

The annual seven-day City Dionysia festival was one of only two or three significant occasions each year when theatrical performances could be experienced. Over three to four days, depending on what part of the fifth century we focus on, four or five plays were staged daily: three tragedies and a spoof by a single playwright on each of the first three days followed by a single day of five comedies by five different comic playwrights. It is noteworthy that, in comparison to our own situation, in any one year during this period, there might only be thirty to forty single performances of theatre. At each performance in the City Dionysia, it is estimated that about half the male population of Athens might attend (approximately 15,000 - 17,000) - not a bad house. This figure along with plenty of other evidence suggests that, in Athens, theatre was considered a most important part of public life. Clearly, something was working well.

The production of theatre was paid for partly by the citizens’ common treasury and partly by a wealthy individual, whose aristocratic ancestry might be somewhat attenuated but put to good service for the common good by his funding of the chorus. I will return to this a little later, but it is important to note here that there was no industry or profession at this stage.

The events on the first three days of the City Dionysia festival, when there were no theatrical performances, and the events which immediately preceded the commencement of performances on the fourth day, are important to my theme here. The preceding days were filled with events which celebrated the city of Athens and paid homage to Dionysos, the god of theatre and other disorienting activities, in whose honour the festival was held and in whose theatre the performances took place. On the day that performances commenced, several events of importance set the theatrical experience in an interesting context. I shall not go into great detail here, but these events included the following:

- The ritual slaughtering of a pig, whose carcass was paraded around the orchestra before an expectant audience (a terrific practice, by the way, which I recommend we reintroduce especially into our major arts centres).

- The grand entry into the theatre of the ten annually appointed generals of Athens (equivalent perhaps to the entire Australian Defence Department), followed by the male orphans of citizens who had fallen in battle. These orphans, who came of age that year and would soon take the place of their fathers in the phalanx, were honoured guests in the whole festival.

- The parade around the orchestra, and counting of the annual tributes paid to Athens by her ‘subject allies’ in full view of the *polis* and its many foreign guests.

So, the glory and power of Athens is being displayed here. What is most striking is that the 15,000 or so men were all sitting in very neat and orderly rows in the *theatron* according to their local city units or tribes (which had foisted on them at the end of the sixth century). Every citizen belonged to one of these totally contrived ten tribes, which were subdivided into smaller *demes*. And they all sat in these units as if in primary school: Warratah over there, Wattle here, Woollahra there. This is civic order personified. Not even Mussolini could have achieved that.
But what happens when the tragedies and comedies began? What sort of experience were the citizens letting themselves in for as they sat in their ordered rows? My perception of Greek theatre is very strongly one of a play between order and disorder, civilisation and bestiality, boundaries and fluidity, both inside the theatre space as well as between the theatre and its setting in the life of the polis. Greek tragedy, I believe, gave its audience a semi-vicarious experience of the fluidity and unpredictability of life where the membrane surrounding the civilised order is seen to be thin and porous. At any unexpected moment, the pores of the known universe might suddenly open wide and our orderly world, or at least our sense of an orderly world, may be disastrously ruptured by the intrusion of destructive or bestial or divine forces from beyond or indeed from within. A Kossovo might happen any time. What opens up these pores might be unknown, just ‘the way things are,’ the result perhaps of some non-human and inexplicable force which might be referred to by a divine name, or it might seem to be set off by a human miscalculation of some kind, or even by a human trait which we continue to find most admirable even after the rupture has been brought on.

This experience of rupture is captured very nicely in the 1998 Peter Weir film, The Truman Show. In the wholly constructed and apparently safe world that Truman inhabits (which is in reality a television set though, of course, Truman has no idea of this), he enters the lift at work one morning, just as he does without change every morning of every working day. But this morning is suddenly radically different. As the back of the lift is open, through the other side lies an incomprehensible other world which he has never known to exist. It is, in fact, a crew room for the television show he doesn’t know he is in and has been in all his life. This sudden revelation of another dimension appears to me rather similar to what often happens in Greek tragedy. Actions and events, which have hitherto seemed to participate coherently in the world as it is known, are revealed at a major turning point to form part of a different pattern, which includes this other dimension. It is a newly perceived but pre-existing pattern. It is this pattern which I think Aristotle refers to in his use of the word ‘praxis,’ a word which in ancient Greek carries the meaning not simply of ‘an action’ but a series of inter-related actions which include their end result. This ‘life-like’ praxis is, in his scheme, the material of the theatrical rendering, or mimesis. ‘Imitation’ is such a poor translation I think.

In Aristophanic comedy, those leaders of the polis and their activities, most critical to the survival of the polis, are held up to ridicule, at a time when Athens was engaged in a fight for its life with Sparta, which it eventually lost, along with its democracy and its theatre’s most creative life.

So, a tension is set up between the structured and stable picture of Athenian citizens in their rows of civic order, in a setting imbued with the strength and stability of Athenian legitimacy in Greece, and the tenuous, unpredictable, unstable nature of life. Life, by some mysterious process seems, at moments of human clarity, to have self-organised. It was the theatre that played the key role in making an experience of this tension available to be included in the world view of its citizens.

Dionysos, the god of theatre, embodies this tension between opposites. To experience Dionysos is to experience the ever-changing suspension between poles, the dissolution of boundaries, neither one nor the other, neither male nor female. He is mask and illusion, radical self-disorientation and uncertainty as experienced through a fluidity of identity and drunkedness. He is duality and indefinability, something that can only be
experienced and not thought. He can certainly not be measured! He is the god of theatre because he embodies (insubstantially, of course) what is particular to theatre: not a point, a numeral or a commodity; not some thing, but a tension between things, between script and actor, present and not present, real and not real, performance and audience. Theatre is a living entity which exists only in movement, like electricity. Dionysos is everything that managerialism and performance management cannot hope to measure and cannot tolerate. Theatre is a moment of activity in the dangerous and smiling eyes of Dionysos.

Managerialism is obsessed with order, rationality, markets, money, predictability, measurements, achieving quotas, achieving goals within a set time, buying and selling, economic viability, ‘ticking it off,’ ‘getting there.’ Dionysos is the concept which shows us that there is no ‘there,’ only an ‘in-between,’ a tension, an ambivalence. The managers, with their performance management structure, seem to be entrenched at present, enjoying their simple formulas, their funding-friendly, vote-attracting reports.

But Saul (1997) offers some hope:

The reaction of sophisticated elites, when confronted by their own failure to lead society, is almost invariably the same. They set about building a wall between themselves and reality by creating an artificial sense of well-being on the inside. The French aristocracy, gentry and business leadership were never more satisfied with themselves than in the few decades before their collapse during the French Revolution.

You might notice the similarity between the shape of this phenomenon and what happens in Greek tragedy, Roman comedy, and the Chuck Jones Road Runner cartoons. Protagonists are led to the edge of a cliff, knowingly or not, and are either pushed over or leap of their own volition. In the case of Roman comedy and the Coyote in the Road Runner, it is when he (it is always a ‘he’ in this case) believes himself to be at the height of his achievement that he realises there is, in fact, no ground whatsoever beneath him, that he is suspended in mid-air over a thousand foot ravine. Like Oedipus, though, it is only when the fool knows he is hovering with no ground below him that he actually falls to the ground with a splat. It gives a new sense to the Delphic oracle’s injunction to ‘know thyself.’ So we need to keep telling adherents to this foul religion that they are fundamentally on the wrong track. Who knows what awaits them?

With the often cited quotation from Einstein in mind—

The significant problems we face cannot be solved by the same level of thinking that created them (see http://www.quotedb.com/quotes/11)

--perhaps the Greek theatre has something else to offer us here. Theatre as a profession did not exist in the fifth century when almost all the great works that have survived were written and performed. Aiskhylos, Sophokles, Euripides, Aristophanes and their actors, choruses, and associated practitioners were indeed paid a small amount for their work. The theatre profession only developed in the fourth century (as did all those magnificent stone theatres that most of us have always associated with the notion of Greek theatre). In the fifth century when the great works were actually created, there were far more modest theatres with wooden seats and an orchestra that the latest archeological research suggests was rectangular and not circular at all - which I find rather challenges our image of Greek theatre. The same phenomenon, where the huge
theatres postdate the really creative periods in history, holds true for Rome and, I am told, Japan. I wonder what this suggests for our own state arts centres?

It was only at the end of the fifth century, with the democratic experiment largely extinguished, that the acting profession takes off. And what has survived from this period? Only boring old Menander, harmless and slightly amusing entertainment for the conservative aristocracy whose time had come round again; Menander, the ancient sitcom.

Perhaps it is in the very notion of theatre as an industry and a profession that our real problems lies. What if we took a leaf out of the Greek book and said, ‘No more. No industry, no profession. No performance indicators, No manipulation and economic regulation by government or commercial industry. No funding applications, no arts bureaucrats.’ What would we be left with? Well, we have the Greek example, and others through history, and even our own history, to tell us that the creation of great art is in no way predicated on the existence of an arts industry. The latter is not a pre-requisite for the former. I certainly cannot deny the good that arts funding has been responsible for over the past few decades in Australia and that I have personally benefitted. But perhaps it is time to move on.

I am not suggesting there is a simple, concrete answer. If I did, that would probably negate most of what I have said in this paper. But we do not need to enter into the transaction with managerialism on the terms that are presently on the menu. As other speakers have pointed out, to be successful within the system is to duplicate the system. What corporatist managerialism is offering theatre is unpalatable.

The Meeting of Managerialism and Dionysos

I do have an idea about where to take this, not staggering, unlikely to be original, perhaps a small beginning, perhaps not. It is an idea that came into my head from the toes up, towards the end of my five years at Theatreworks, as my letters to Arts Victoria grew more and more strident and as I fought harder to keep my bile from spilling into their newly renovated foyer with its multimedia presentation of their achievements. It was an idea formed in the shadow of their systematic reduction of all artists and practitioners to clients who need managers, ‘produce creators,’ who need to show how deserving they are to be allowed to leap onto the production line, happily to be rolled into a potential export unit before packaging and squeezing into their latest funding-friendly, vote-catching, obscenely expensive Annual Report...

The idea is called simply the Actor’s Bread Shop, the ABS, with the added irony of being potentially mistaken for the Australian Bureau of Statistics. First, gather your collaborators together. Throw off the funding. Make bread, make really nice bread, and nice coffee, of course, in the mornings. Work on a roster system with a committed group--anyone letting down the team by not turning up at 4:00 a.m. is out. Build up the business. That’s how you make your living. Make art upstairs in the afternoons. When you’re ready, invite some people to come and look. Eventually, run a season. People pay a small amount to get in, to help with the minimal production costs. No paid advertising. No career. No profession. No industry. And a strong engagement with and participation in the life of the community. It’s only a suggestion.

I would like to finish by describing a scenario I sometimes picture in my mind when I think about the meeting of managerialism and Dionysos. What better play to draw on at
the turn of our century than one written at the turn of the fifth century as the big adventure was turning into a building. I refer, of course, to Euripides’ Bakkhai. This is the conference-appropriate orgy I promised earlier.

My scenario begins: our client manager, let’s call her Penthea (her mother is from Sparta), has heard disturbing reports of outdoor events where the established paradigm is being distorted. She reads the sign posted at the edge of the forest:

‘If you go into the woods today, you’re in for a big surprise; today’s the day the managers have their picnic.’ No signature.

Hmmm. No mention of picnics in the client contract, must investigate. Quite hungry anyway. But lo, the managers have gathered in the middle of the forest, something is afoot. Their belts have been loosened, calculators have been thrown to the ground. Slogans are pinned to trees with questions like ‘Can 2 + 2 = 5?’ Business plans ripped to shreds, corporate governance plans fueling a raging fire in the centre, the expensive covers of annual marketing plans containing instead lewd pictures, Adorno, Mandelbrot sets, and weather forecasts. Everyone is drinking - fluids, defecating dried up little indicators, copulating: new connections are appearing everywhere. Suddenly a shriek rings out. The client manager, Penthea, has climbed a tree with huge roots and is tracing all their actions back to the service contract, calling for accountability. Oh my twelve gods! The managers are pulling at the tree trunk, they want to shake her out, but the poor fool is hanging on for dear salary. ‘We’ll take away your funding!’ she shrieks. But the managers are past it. They have tasted the fire of the fluid, there is no turning back now. Unable to loosen the grasp of Penthea, the toughest of the client managers with ten years experience--she who, of course, started her career in a small theatre company--is yanking the tree from the dirt, pulling at the roots, shouting ‘Adorno! Adorno! Evohe!’ They’ve got the Client Manager now; they’re going to tear her apart, limb from limb. One puts his foot into the armpit and pulls the arm from its socket, all bloody and ragged, and hurls it into the fire. Another takes a leg and twists it round and round until it comes off. They grab at every limb, urging their collaborators to ‘participate, tear! rip! enjoy yourselves!’ Another, I think it could be me, grabs Penthea’s chin and hair and rips the bloody skull from the neck, impales it on an Arts Victoria promotional banner, and together they run in a pack out of the forest into the city streets shouting:

‘This is art! This is art! And we don’t want any funding for it!’

By the way, that scenario is copyright. Thank you.

REFERENCES

