Performing Corporate Bodies:
Organizational Theatre in Global India

A Dissertation

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Table of Contents

Introduction

Improving Performance, Dramatically

"Are you prepared to perform?" Shruti smiles. "Well relax, because none of that is going to happen." Her audience, a group of fifty middle managers, break into chuckles and murmurs of relief as Shruti adjusts her microphone and takes a sip of water. A company poster stretched across the makeshift stage she stands on silhouettes her profile. "Unlock Awesome," it reads; images of smartly dressed men and women look out over the room, giving enthusiastic thumbs ups alongside inspirational quotes like "Take Action to Grow." "As I was saying, today our work will do something completely different," Shruti continues. "We're going to use drama in this learning room." She carries on:

> We're all used to case studies, where we read something and have a discussion? It'll be very similar, except you're going to see the case studies coming to life through actors. We have three scenarios we developed in tandem with your talent strategy team, and it's your job to give the most honest, direct feedback to these characters as possible. And remember, drama itself is a little bit of an exaggeration of reality, so please do allow us that creativity and freedom and liberty to use some humor and have some fun.

Shruti is an actor and a business consultant, and this is a drama-based management training for a Fortune 500 global investment company in Mumbai, India—what I call an example of corporate theatre. Corporate theatre is an international management trend that gained traction in India after neoliberal reform policies instituted in 1991 caused an influx of multinational corporations into the country. Almost overnight, cities like Gurgaon, Mumbai, and Bangalore transformed into visible representations of India's newfound global cosmopolitanism, and firms like Infosys, Mahindra, Accenture, and Tata have taken the lead in promoting the nation's new economic outlook and national identity (Upadhya 2016, 2-4). Corporate branding campaigns work in tandem with the state's development agendas to enhance global economic growth through the promotion of creative industries. The arts, and in particular theatre, have become a powerful way of

providing a distinctive image of India as emblematic of the alleged successes of globalization in the "developing world" (Da Costa 2016). Reputed amongst Human Resources (HR) and Learning and Development (L&D) personnel as a refreshing alternative to lecture-based training formats, corporate theatre adapts traditional and contemporary performance genres to orient Indian employees into the social norms and protocols of a new global work context.

This dissertation is an ethnographic study of corporate theatre in India which examines how multinational corporations deploy theatre in the service of profit, and demonstrates the transformative impacts corporate theatre is having on workplace culture and the landscape of Indian postcolonial arts practice. I analyze how theatre and performance techniques have become a key technology of 21st century business management ideology through detailing case studies from leading sites of India's global work ecology (the workplace, management school, consultancy office, etc.) that provide a nuanced look at how dramatic repertoires are teaching employees to embody the entrepreneurial ethos of a newly global Indian nation-state. Alongside detailing the ways corporate theatre functions as a technology of worker discipline which exacerbates the precarious labor conditions and gender, religious, caste, and class dimensions of global software work, I highlight the small-scale, intimate ways individuals use the dramatic tools these trainings provide (humor, play, improvisation, the body, etc.) to create new ways of moving, feeling, and being together in India's competitive private sector work cultures. In so doing, this dissertation demonstrates how performance functions as a prime technology of human capital formation in contemporary neoliberalism, at the same time as it opens pathways for individuals to express their struggles, identities, and aspirations in the context of corporate power.

At the same time that theatre has made inroads into corporate life, the business imperatives of corporate India have reverberated throughout India's urban arts landscape, a terrain marked by its longstanding participation in colonial and postcolonial resistance movements. The influx of global capital and rise of India's Creative Economy plans since the late 1980s has placed new demands on theatre artists to direct their talents to the tasks of national productivity, economic growth, and private sector skills development (Da

Costa 2010, 2016). Alongside neoliberal restructuring, new modes of artistic labor and training have emerged which merge histories of socially committed arts practice with mainstream management agendas that position artistic skillsets as instrumental to corporate competitiveness. This dissertation attends to these developments, and their broader implications for artistic labor, identity, and alliance work on a global scale, through providing a look at how artists in urban India are re-branding themselves and their creative labors in ways that adhere to, and collide with, the enterprising ethos of a post IT (Information Technology) Revolution India.

Academia, Performance, and the Corporate Imaginary

Since the 1980s, scholars from an assortment of academic disciplines have critiqued the impact of neoliberal economic policies by examining how rapid foreign capital investment (particularly in nations across the global South) has led to the mass displacement of dispossessed peoples, erosion of participatory democracy, and the emergence of forms of economic vulnerability that accentuate structural inequality (see, for example, Butler 2003, 2015; Harvey 2005, Puar et al. 2012). Anthropologists of work have shown how these macro-structural processes get replicated in the work routines of transnational corporations, exemplifying a contradiction wherein companies stress employee exuberance, community, and creativity, while simultaneously homogenizing diverse identities into a disciplined workforce (Ong 1999, 2005, Urciuoli 2008). This is especially true in India, where processes of Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) from industrial nations to low-cost economies since the late 1980s produced demands for employees to orient themselves to labor standards originating from a Western management context. Middle to senior level employees working in multinational corporations are expected to be highly charismatic and goal-oriented, and adhere to certain forms of demeanor and etiquette that project professionalism and "high performance potential;" at the same time, they are closely monitored and constantly developed to guarantee maximum efficiency and productivity (Upadhya 2016).[1]

[1] This is in contrast to call center workers, who navigate a different set of labor conditions, managerial expectations, and lifestyles that are viewed as "allegedly more frivolous and hedonistic" from those of India's affluent, global middle class professionals (see Upadhya 2016, 293).

Workplace training has played a lesser studied, but influential role in sociological and anthropological research on globalization in outsourced economies. In her study of the IT industry in Bangalore (the "Silicon Valley" of India), for example, anthropologist Carol Upadhya shows how psychological assessment exams teach employees to embody ideas of global professionalism that adhere to post-liberalization ideologies of middle-class belonging (2013, 96). Carla Freeman's study of female BPO workers in Barbados describes how training events install a "new, foreign work ethic" which acclimates "offshore" workers to the social norms of their "onshore" counterparts in the West (2000, 196). Daromir Rudnyckyj (2010) analyzes how state-owned corporations in Indonesia implement workshops which merge religious ethics with Euro-American management theories to create "spiritual reformers" who pursue neoliberal imperatives of productivity through and alongside their Islamic faith. These studies illustrate not only how the study of work is vital in helping understand how global currents of capital, labor, and communication shape particular ways of seeing and being in the world, but also demonstrate the importance of workplace training as a site where employee behavior and identity gets worked on and transformed.

The bulk of literature on workplace training, however, remains heavily focused on discourse—lecture content, written case studies, evaluations, etc. In so doing, this scholarship discounts the growing significance of interactive and experiential training methods whose tactile, affective elements invite employees to partake in forms of body movement and expression not normally permitted or documented in organizational enclaves. Corporate theatre has received remarkably little attention from humanities and social science fields. Research on these practices (known as "organizational theatre," "situational drama," and "arts-based learning") is found almost exclusively in business journals and management books which focus on trainings in the United States and United Kingdom and characterize the benefit of drama training solely in terms of its ability to increase company ROI (Return on Investment, Coopey 1998, Clark and Mangham 2004, Taylor 2018). This literature neglects to analyze how employees and trainers actually experience these spaces, how cultural idioms like gender, class, and religion get theatrically played out in these sites, and the implications for internal training processes

on employees' everyday work lives, national branding practices, and international management ideology. With the exception of two essays by Sheng Tao-Fan (2013) and Yongwen Peng (2016) that advocate for the use of theatre training in Taiwan and China, respectively, there has been no analysis on corporate theatre from the perspective of performance studies or on its implementation in South Asia.[2]

In theatre and performance studies, fears concerning the corporatization of performance in neoliberal capitalism have been met with a renewed attempt at understanding how performance talks back to the intangible structures and logics of corporate power, what Elin Diamond otherwise calls the "'invisible' hand of corporate capital" (2017, 3). Turning to performance as a complex response to lived experiences of deprivation, mass poverty, and exploitation that characterize the neoliberal present, scholars have examined how resistance movements, protesting bodies, and theatrical encounters serve as vital testimony to the persistence of solidarity across racial, sexual, and economic divides—what Isabel Lorey calls an "exodus from neoliberal governmentality" that "arises from the rejection of capitalizable self-government and the turn to a self-conduct that tests new modes of living in disobedience" (2015, 102). The task for performance scholars has been how to articulate and theorize moments where artistic practice creates new modes of social existence amidst international development discourses, the commodification of art for capital gain, and privatization of formerly state-supported public and educational arts programming (Schneider 2012, Wickstrom 2012, Harvie 2013). This undertaking, according to Diamond, centers on discovering "a renewed sense of the political in performance—one that hinges on, but is not contained by, the limits of neoliberal existence" (2017, 9).

An analysis of corporate theatre from this perspective of theatre and performance studies might characterize this trend an especially appalling case of capitalist appropriation—an extreme example of the neoliberalization of performance in 21st century capitalism, if you will. But, as I argue here and throughout this dissertation,

[2] While not solely focused on corporate theatre, William Sun and Faye Fei's 2013 *TDR* essay "Social Performance Discipline vs. Freedom" also touches upon performance for educational and workplace disciplining.

the story of corporate theatre should not end there. To the contrary, I believe corporate theatre presents a rich site for analysis for those in performance, not least because it forces us to reassess our own politics and academic positioning vis-à-vis neoliberalism as a field of study. With increasing urgency, performance scholars have situated neoliberalism as an eviscerating force which exacerbates the precarity of arts production on a global scale (Harvie 2013, 81). In this view, neoliberalism represents not only a set of policies and discourses emphasizing market trends, austerity, free trade, and reduction of the welfare net (Harvey 2005), but also an imagined antithesis to a critical theatre tradition generally understood as a project of the political Left.

The "invisible hand" of corporate capital, consolidated in the shadowy figure of the multinational corporation, remains a nebulous trademark of capitalist systems that performance practitioners must resist, subvert, or otherwise revise. As J.K. Gibson-Graham (a pen name for Julie Graham and Katherine Gibson) argue, "representations of capitalism are a potent constituent of the anticapitalist imagination, providing images of what is to be resisted and changed" (2006, 3). An anticapitalist imagination persistent in much performance scholarship manufactures occasions to position artistic practice as extramural or acquiescent to capitalist machinery, which may elide possibilities to examine the amorphous, free-floating forms of control that characterize the time and space of the neoliberal present. Within these contemporary "societies of control," as Gilles Deleuze calls them, "there is no need to ask which is the toughest and most tolerable regime, for it is within each of them that liberating and enslaving forces confront one another" (1990, 4).

This anti-capitalist imagination also reifies a particular ethical academic positioning whereby theatre and performance scholarship must identify artistic practice on a continuum between reinforcing or resisting neoliberalism (a point nuanced by Hughes 2017). Consider the following: "If theatre abnegates its social and political responsibility, it too is complicit with oppressive political, cultural or religious establishments that re-tool democracy to suit their own ideological agendas" (*Performance Research* 2013, 31). Or this provocation: "[I] ask whether trends in art and performance are not, in fact, complicit with the agendas of neoliberal capitalist culture

like so much else is, passed off as critical social interventions when they are actually nourishing to neoliberalism's inequalities" (Harvie 2013, 3). Unlike corporations, which are viewed as already compromised by institutional logics of productivity and competition, theatre can potentially occupy a moral high ground; thus, performance practitioners get positioned as either heroically critical or unprincipled, duplicitous, and compromised with regards to their perceived disposition towards neoliberalism (also see James Ferguson 2010).

This duality as dangerous, for it assists in the discursive construction of "appropriate" forms of artist subjectivity, agency, and modes of political belonging that obfuscate the messy, troubled, and profoundly unfixed array of subject positions artists assume in response to contemporary institutional hegemonies (Nagar 2014, Da Costa 2016). Assuming this intellectual high-ground does an injustice to the realities of those performance practitioners and other neoliberal subjects whose survival is predicated on accommodating themselves to the relentless demands of neoliberal precarity. This dichotomy is also ironic, given the discipline's own inherent compromises, like its relationship with the for-profit publishing industry or the field's institutional positioning within the so-called "neoliberal university," a term that refers to a market-driven university system which employs modes of governance according to a corporate model (Chatterjee and Maira 2014). Theatre and performance academics are all too familiar with the systemic maneuverings, institutional politics, and inner struggles that accompany the labor of educational praxis in a neoliberal setting, therefore making them primed to tackle the increasingly fluid and ambiguous array of subject-positions and modes of being (capitalist or otherwise) that characterize the present (Da Costa, Nagar, and Saddler 2020).

This critique is not new; I draw on other voices in performance studies who, especially over the past two decades, have complicated the relationship between performance and neoliberalism by insisting that we understand both artistry and scholarship not as autonomous to the "social factory" (Negri 1989, 204) but an "occupation" within it (Hughes 2017, 4). "Theatre-makers," Jenny Hughes writes, can "make nests in social structures," "provid[ing] access to and protective cover inside a

social world under siege, as well as fabricate lines of flight from the social factory" (4). For Hughes and others, acknowledging the relationality of artistic practice and neoliberal capitalism invites a more critical understanding of how performance works at once with and against networks of economic precarity that govern life and labor under contemporary capitalism (Hughes 3). Put differently by Nicholas Ridout, "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). At the same time as performance becomes the catchall for contemporary corporate strategy and global labor markets (Mckenzie 2001), its perennial excess, slipperiness, and intangibility remains a "resilient irritant for a capitalist regime" that cannot quite render these qualities irreducible to profit accumulation (Hughes 4).

The study of performance in multinational corporations, then, must not characterize the global firm as an imagined capitalist converse to an equally imagined artistic world. Analyses that overdetermine corporations as antithetical to political interests, but avoid grappling with the struggles and compromises of the individuals working inside them, profoundly abstract the corporation an absolute symbol of control, rather than attend to the mutable dynamics that inform the "capillary networks of power" that reverberate within and reshape contemporary capitalism (Foucault 2003, 28). If neoliberalism is not a monolith but a malleable force composed of discursive and affective energies orchestrated by human actors (Gibson-Graham 2006, xxiv), it is necessary to take a closer look at the ways theatre in corporate spaces constructs and deconstructs power relations, lays bare shifting processes of human capital formation, and assists in the constant interplay between subjectivation and capacities of resistance. Performance, as I discuss in a moment, is that medium which helps parse these processes.

Dissertation Overview, or, Arriving at Corporate Theatre

When I was pursuing my master's degree in 2012, I met a theatre artist in the United States named Gouri Nilakantan, who was at the time pursuing her PhD on folk dance in Jharkhand at Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi. Gouri's father was the former secretary to the President of India, her mother was a theatre artist, and her husband a software engineer (a genealogical dynamic which nicely charts India's post-

liberalization transformations). After a lengthy chat about Indian street theatre which stretched into the evening, Gouri invited me to intern for her small theatre group in Gurgaon, a dusty, frenzied city southwest of Delhi built by private companies in the 1990s. Upon my arrival, however, it became clear that Gouri had few financial resources to sustain the village theatre projects I had come to participate in. Around the same time, corporate theatre's reputation as a cutting-edge experiential learning device had started to take off, so (with assistance from Gouri's husband's contacts) we spent the next several months doing participatory theatre not in rural North India, but for managers in the heart of the country's global BPO industry.

These unexpected research trajectories and fortunate accidents served as the impetus for this dissertation, which works from the premise that deeper academic engagement with institutional cultures, frameworks, and literatures can yield a more nuanced understanding (and critique) of the shifting role of performance in global capitalism. My summer with Gouri turned into three summers traveling throughout Gurgaon, Delhi, Noida, and Bangalore, co-facilitating theatre trainings with middle to senior level managers that ranged from hour-long "icebreakers," to day-long "Play in a Day" workshops, to weeklong "Theatre in Excellence" certification programs. These trainings were in English, and aimed to enhance communication skills or enforce company guidelines like encouraging employees to spend less time on Facebook, learn new performance evaluation practices, and understand the importance of "living company values." Gouri and I generally made things up as we went along; since I had been trained in Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* methodology, Gouri had me facilitate warm-ups and exercises drawn from *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*. (It would take several years before I discovered that other consultants and actors had similarly capitalized upon Boalian methodology in corporate spaces, either because they found it particularly helpful or, like Gouri and I, they simply did not know what else to do).

Although she was well aware of the ironies of doing theatre for social change work for corporations, Gouri needed money to subsidize her theatre group and pay her son's school tuition. Her connection to her husband imbued her with the kind of social

and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1991) required to gain access into heavily secured IT parks, and as her intern I was able to accompany her. At the same time, my own presence as an American, and thus representative of Western management culture, gave us an institutional credibility and authority that became replicated in other ethnographic interactions throughout the course of my fieldwork—I point I nuance in the chapters that follow. When we ran out of work, Gouri's husband arranged demo meetings with HR teams around Gurgaon, where Gouri would carefully translate the ROI of theatre to managers interested in improving soft skills competencies, teaching behavioral norms, and documenting employee community-building. I also met with other actors, consultants, and activists doing corporate work to fund their artistic pursuits, and spent most evenings and weekends watching Gouri's theatre company (a group of corporate employees living and working in Gurgaon) rehearse Hindi and English plays in her small living room. Most of Gouri's actors had no background in theatre, but had turned to drama as a form of creative release from their exhausting work lives—a trend that has continued to grow since I commenced this project.

I begin with the story of my own arrival at corporate theatre because my relationship with Gouri, her theatre company, and with Gurgaon itself serves as the point of departure for this dissertation, which at its most basic level is an examination of the relationship between theatre and corporate capitalism. My experiences moving in and out of corporate spaces, talking with artists and activists from diverse generational backgrounds and political commitments, and doing theatre with women and men eager to escape the institutional confines their everyday lives attuned me to not only how theatre is utilized in training regimens, but the broader social and historical implications of corporate theatre for artists working in India. Throughout the course of my fieldwork, which stretched over 21 months from 2012-2018, I actively participated in the corporate theatre industry as it became more institutionalized, evolving from role-playing and ice-breaker activities to development tools for Diversity and Inclusion (D&I), cross-cultural communication, gender sensitization, ethics and values, and leadership training. The institutionalization of corporate theatre also led to increased expectations on facilitators to possess intimate expertise of the business world, to constantly develop new products

that matched HR objectives, and strategically translate the efficacy of performance in corporate contexts. I also witnessed the intensification of a vitriolic and masculinist Hindu nationalism, spurred by the election of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader Narendra Modi in 2014. Gurgaon was re-named Gurugram in 2016, part of a wider Hinduization of electoral politics and public space that has impacted the values and priorities of theatre artists and activists positioned at the crossroads of histories of arts activism and processes of neoliberal restructuring.[3]

This dissertation shows how corporations in India deploy theatre to transform employees into global professionals whose identities reflect the gendered and nationalist dimensions of India's middle class business sector and remake the nation's image from a post-independent socialist democracy to a neoliberal creative economy. This transpires through a neoliberal discourse of self-making, where dramatic exercises, skits, and simulations adapted from psychodrama, theatre for social change repertories, and *nukkad natak* (Indian street theatre) teach employees to assume different characters, behaviors, and strategies for interacting with others—not only through verbal communication, but through cultivating their bodily deportments, emotional connections, and personal aspirations to embody the ethos of a transformed Indian nation-state.

I intervene in existing academic debates on the organizational benefits of corporate theatre by using the tools and insights of performance as my primarily lens of analysis. On one hand, corporate theatre is the art of performance management—the paradigmatic framework for techniques of employee development in managerial cultures around the world (McKenzie 2001). Trainings pursue sets of objectives which aim to align employee identity with the company brand, self-fashioning workers' everyday behaviors, appearance, and personal and professional self in accordance with protocols of "peak performance potential," which hinge on representations of middle class gender, class, and caste belonging in contemporary urban India. They do so through the medium of performance itself, capitalizing upon its central characteristics (theatricality, play, affect, gesture, the body) to reinforce existing ideas and usher into being new conceptions

[3] According to government officials, Haryana (the state that Gurgaon is located in) is the historic land of the Bhagwat Gita and thus Gurugram ("center of learning") is a more appropriate title for the city.

of what is appropriate, sayable, and thinkable in the workplace. As Margaret Werry writes, "performance's power to compel belief and belonging, to enlist in action, lies in its experiential, phenomenological thickness. It has the power to materialize that which it imagines" (2011, xxxiii). The corporation's ability to incite the behavior and feelings of its workers lies in harnessing the power of performance.

But performance is a valuable resource not only due to its ability to enforce, but also because of its inherent ambiguity—its ability to be (in 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). To examine corporate theatre through a performance lens demands we also examine its fleshiness, its instability, and the ways these events go "off script" and remain constantly "open to improvisation or accident" (xxii). The dramatic scenarios featured in training unwittingly carry potential to make visible what is not seen or heard through enacting "finely nuanced meaning[s] that [are] embodied, tacit, intoned, gestured, improvised, co-experienced, covert" (Diamond 1996; Conquergood 2002).

To this end, this dissertation attends to overlaps between managerial strategies and the assertive (if circumscribed) tactics of employees and trainers who navigate these spaces. Highlighting dialectics between the desired pedagogies of training and the playful, spontaneous forms of critique and feeling expressed by individuals undergoing these practices demonstrates how corporate theatre does not simply reflect a fixed disciplinary power apparatus at work. Rather, I use corporate theatre to rupture dominant narratives of the corporation as totalizing, all-powerful, and undecipherable by working from within to tease apart its ambiguities, unpack its prerogatives, and discern how individuals negotiate and live with overwhelming structures of power and contradiction that characterize their everyday lives. In the following section, I contextualize this study through the political and economic contexts of corporate theatre in India, where global capital influx and urban development since the late 1980s ushered in a phase of theatre practice that hinges on the values and priorities of the private corporate sector.

Theatres of Resistance to Theatres of Sabotage

India emerged as an independent nation in 1947 under the leadership of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, whose legacy is characterized by a strong agenda of state-led nationalist development featuring rapid industrialization and social welfare programming as essential to economic growth and modernization. A strong civil service agenda emerged during the 1950s and 60s, with five-year economic policy plans, rural development initiatives, and a caste-based reservation system implemented to ensure industrial and social progress. The state became the administrator of job growth, and secure public sector employment became the norm for the growing middle class. Although the Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi administrations of the 1970s and 1980s took an interest in liberalizing the economy to boost the industrial sector (Oza 2006, 11), the state maintained strong restrictions on cross-border exchange. After an economic crisis in 1990, a series of reforms were enacted that permitted the rapid influx of foreign capital (Jaffrelot and van der Veer, 2010). The reforms allowed for unfettered foreign direct investment in the private sector, spurring unparalleled growth patterns that solidified the nation's status as the world's fastest growing economy and generated what Carol Upadhya describes as "profound social and cultural reverberations, from the introduction of novel forms of work and management to the creation of new aspirations and pathways of social mobility" (Upadhya 2016, 2, also see Baviskar and Ray 2011, Fernandes 2016)

The shrinking role of state-owned bureaucratic networks and rapid expansion of urban architectures rebuilt cities like Bangalore, Gurgaon, and Mumbai into visible manifestations of India's progress, illustrated by the now-ubiquitous presence of gated IT parks housing private companies whose ultramodern interiors echo the designs of Silicon Valley (Goldman 2011). These corporate offices, mostly subsidiary bases of American and European companies, are steered by a set of "global" management practices which originated in Western parent organizations yet have become the prevailing framework for the organization of work and worker subjectivity throughout the world. These corporations have taken the lead in projecting India's new economic outlook and national identity, and employees working in corporate India are viewed as belonging to a new

"transnational class" of global citizens celebrated as projecting their nationalist devotion through their private sector employment (Radhakrishnan 2011).

The rise of neoliberal India, argues Rupal Oza, is encapsulated in the convergence of three separate yet interrelated developments: the rapid incursion of global capital, the maturation of a Hindu nationalist state which touts the corporate sector exemplary of India's advancement on the world stage, and the rise of an affluent and consumerist middle class characterized by discourses and representations of entrepreneurialism (2006, 2). Contemporary urban India has become a rich site for sociological and anthropological study on trends in social mobility (Nandy 2001), postcolonial capitalist development (Sanyal 2007), urban life and new consumer cultures (Mazarella 2001, Kumar 2005), and the restructuring of caste dynamics within the context of globalization (Bairy 2010, Guru and Sundar 2012, Deshpande 2013). Nandini Gooptu refers to public culture in post-liberalization India has an "enterprise culture," where citizens are encouraged to behave as "enterprising human subjects who value autonomy, choice, and freedom, and give their lives a specific entrepreneurial form"' (2013, 7). Enterprise culture spans all facets of private and public life in India, ranging from the Bollywood film industry, to trendy women's magazines, to New Age yoga movements, to a booming skills development industry aimed at bringing the informal sector into the folds of the global economy through English language learning and entrepreneurship training.

Indian theatre practice has also shifted against the backdrop of India's neoliberal restructuring. The canonized history of colonial and postcolonial Indian theatre has demonstrated how drama consistently provided opportunities for resisting and critiquing ruling ideologies of power (Bhatia 2004, 2010, Lal 2004, Dharwadker 2005). During the colonial era, theatres opened by British officials established a long lineage of Indian and Ango-European dramatic hybrids which continue to permeate what folk theatres, indigenous dramatic forms, independent theatres, and professional arts productions (Bhatia 2004, xv). As nationalist sentiment grew throughout late 19th century and early 20th century India, anti-colonial plays in Bengal and Maharashtra fostered cultural nationalism and resisted Western imperialism (Solomon 1994). Historical plays

became messages of nationalist sentiment, while religious folk forms like *powada*, *tamasha*, and *keertans* interwove political commentary with music and dance in ways that asserted the nation's newfound independence and cultural heritage (Gāragī, 1991, Hansen 1992, Chatterjee 2016).

The decades following independence witnessed a rise in cultural development schemes touted by the postindependence nationalist state, where state control over artisanal craft production and indigenous folk performance sought to valorize cultural expression as an emblem of the state's historical and cultural dynamism (Sharma and Gupta 2006, Da Costa 2016). These decades also witnessed an amplification of political theatre embodied in the Leftist arts movements of the 1940s, when the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) emerged as the cultural wing of the CPI(M) (Community Party of India: Marxist) in Bengal. Postcolonial nationalist drama was exemplified in political street theatre *(nukkad natak),* where artists traveled to public working class spaces to perform plays on themes like industrial exploitation, the exclusion of Dalits and Other Backwards Castes (OBCs) from the public sphere, and forms of patriarchal and communal violence perpetuated by the state (Ghosh 2005, Ganjuly 2010). In 1989, street theatre worker Safdar Hashmi was killed by Congress Party officials in Delhi following a performance by his group *Jana Natya Manch*, an event which transformed Hashmi into a symbol of Leftist resistance that permeates the values of today's college activist theatre circles and anti-Hindutva cultural activism movements. While the myriad histories of Indian performance practice and their cultural, social, and linguistic diversity are too wide-ranging to chart here, theatre in India has always provided moments for opposing and assessing hegemonic ideologies through multiple methods of aesthetic, religious, multicultural, linguistic, and political engagement.[4]

The onset of post-liberalization corporate culture has given rise to a phase of Indian theatre history in which many contemporary artists are positioned at the crossroads of an enduring vision of Marxist cultural activism and a newly corporatized arts

[4] For example, Dalit theatre movements originating in Maharashtra have spread throughout North and South India, bolstering the campaign of the Bahujan Samaj Party and linking histories of caste violence in the colonial era to contemporary Hindutva (Bhatia 2009, xxx-xxxi, also see Narayan 2006, Gupta 2007).

landscape—the boundaries of which are unclear and complex but demonstrate a departure from earlier decades of arts activism. Take, for example, the story of Gurcharan Chani, a performer and activist who started doing theatre during the Leftist movements of the 1970s. On a Saturday in June, 2017, I sat around Chani's kitchen table in Chandigarh listening to him reminisce about changes in India's theatre landscape since the late 1980s. Chani moved to Chandigarh, the capital city of North India's Punjab state, in 1976 during the "Emergency," a 21-month period under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi where civil liberties were curtailed and artistic expression was censored by a militarized police state (Chandra 2003). Chani joined other IPTA activists in going "underground," performing plays that revealed the effects of state censorship and police brutality in the Punjab region. Working as a theatre artist in India today, Chani explained, carries both similarities and striking differences from doing theatre in the 1970s and 80s:

> Those were the days of the Left, when you had something to do. You were crusading against a very, very powerful enemy. Because state is enemy. State, 'til today, is enemy. State is not the person who facilitates your growth. State is an establishment which represses you completely. In Punjabi we say na appeal, na dalil, na vakil, which means there was no advocate, there is no logic, and no appeal. And some of the symptoms of this dispensation are also Emergency-like. We used to call ourselves political activists; now we are cultural workers. Our work used to be "anti-establishment," now it is "pro-dialogue." This is the theatre of sabotage.

Chani refers to the Rowlatt Acts, legislation passed by the British Imperial Legislative Council in 1919 that authorized the Raj to imprison anyone accused of terrorism for up to two years without trial. *Na appeal, na dalil, na vakil* (no lawyer, no appeal, no argument) was a battle cry against the Congress Party for resuming the colonial era law to detain political workers for presumed anti-nationalism. In the statement above, Chani charts a complex historical genealogy linking colonial law to post-independence authoritarianism to contemporary Hindutva politics, where cultural workers, journalists, and artists critical of the BJP have become similarly censored. [5] Sanitizing, or neoliberalizing, the language

[5] An ideology seeking to establish a proto-Hindu nation-state. The rise in Hindutva rhetoric, as scholars like

of his theatrical labor allows Chani to perform plays with anti-government messages while avoiding allegations of anti-nationalism.

Chani's remarks attune us to the ways contemporary artists are orienting themselves to new artistic priorities arising in the post-liberalization era. His choice to re-name his theatrical labor "cultural work," for instance, adheres to creative economy discourses that position artists as creative-cultural workers for India's new epoch of development. India's creative economy documents crafted a newfound, tenuous relationship between the private corporate world and the performing arts landscape. The 2016 *Creative Arts in India* (CAI) report, for example, promotes new partnerships between artistic industries and the corporate sector for fostering economic growth and nation-building. "The very language of theater is being rediscovered and challenged in India today," the report declares, describing how India's new role in the world order has presented new opportunities for firms to invest in the arts as an economic asset (2016, 9). Artistic industries were an ingredient of the state's 2015 launch of its "Smart Cities" development program, a ₹98,000 crore (USD $15 billion) urban renewal scheme to make 100 Indian cities more high-tech, sustainable, and cosmopolitan by 2022 (Hoelscher 2016, CAI Report 23-24). A corporate entity in each city was tasked with overseeing the creation of arts, heritage, and cultural facilities aimed at celebrating local culture, and new training programs are being created to help artists acquire entrepreneurial and professional skills.

The CAI Report emphasizes the need for the private business sector to invest in artistic industries as an untapped organizational development tool. The performing arts industry can inspire the "creative aptitudes viewed as essential for citizen skilling in the new economy;" artistic competencies like creativity, time management, flexibility, and leadership can help organizations "upskill" their employees by using theatre to develop more enterprising, self-motivated leaders (33). Performance also helps cultivate the communication and social skills necessary for job advancement in the booming business sector—the personal attributes and "soft skills" which enable Indian employees to

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Shankar Gopalakrishnan (2006) have pointed out, has worked in tandem with the onset of neoliberal restructuring.

interact more effectively and harmoniously in a new global corporate work context. As the report explains:

> Benefits of Investing in Creative Arts: Improving national productivity: The arts industry also supports productivity in the commercial creative workforce as a whole. Engagement with the arts and culture helps to cultivate creative solutions to problems and encourage effective personal communication and expression. These skills improve intellectual ability and wellbeing, enabling greater success in day-to-day endeavors. When these individual-level benefits are taken in aggregate, they represent improvements to the effectiveness and flexibility of the nation's workforce, with positive impacts on productivity (24).[6]

Documents like the CAI report demonstrate new demands on artists to orient their skills to the task of national and economic growth, localized in private sector development. They also show how theatre, an art form rooted in the nation's freedom, post-independence resistance, and ongoing anti-Hindutva opposition movements, is being detached from its social and political moorings and applied into languages and ideologies of institution-building.[7]

Corporate Theatre for a Corporate India

With the shift from Fordism to neoliberal capitalism in post-industrial economies, employee development has become a key technology for installing the behavioral attributes, social norms, and forms of bodily conduct required for company branding in the work economy. Perhaps now more than ever before, service sectors workers have been called upon to inculcate and embody company values—to enact what Ilana Gershon (2014) calls "corporate personhood" (280). Inside and outside the work context, the employee is expected to "own oneself as though a business, a collection of skills, assets, and alliances that must be continually maintained and enhanced" (288).

[6] https://www.ey.com/Publication/vwLUAssets/ey-creative-arts-in-india/$FILE/ey-creative-arts-in-india.pdf. Accessed April 1, 2019.

[7] This move echoes the entrepreneurial schemes of transnational NGOs and other international aid agencies which seek to professionalize citizens into postcolonial capitalism by using participatory theatre for skills-building (see, for example, Sharma in Bernal and Grewal 2014).

While older studies on branding focus on the ways corporations shape consumer engagements through external trademarking, contemporary trends in employee development use learning techniques that emphasize forms of emotional and physical conditioning that seek to brand bodies within the circuits of global capital.

Corporate India has assumed the lead in personifying India's new liberal outlook and commitment to social safety and national welfare. Unlike businesses engaging in American-style finance capitalism, Indian software companies are known for their commitment to customer service and morally sound company values. Industry elites and software professionals frame themselves within narratives of Indian "middle-class values," which are simultaneously neoliberal and nationalist. In what Upadhya calls India's "new corporate moral economy," professionals are imbued with a sense of nationalist devotion to India's progress while also projecting a new ethos of entrepreneurialism (2016, 269-280). Every year millions of young Indians strive to become software professionals via the private sector's identification with upward mobility, high salaries, and global cosmopolitan lifestyles. The "IT dream" is intensified by the campus recruitment process, where multinational companies filter which applicants will be the best "fit" for their organization. Successful interviewees must not only have top entrance examination scores from Tier I and II colleges, but are also selected according to the quality of their cultural capital. Impeccable soft skills, in particular fluency in "neutral" workplace English and strong social skills, are viewed as central to occupational advancement.

The corporate selection process favors candidates from high class and caste backgrounds, dispelling dominant industry and mainstream media narratives of merit-based hiring. Indeed, as corporate India prides itself on exemplifying a new, middle class population that is "casteless" insofar as its citizens embrace modern-professional ideals of choice and liberal social values (see Deshpande 2013), the corporate sector has no "reservation" (quota) system put in place to ensure equitable hiring practice, as there is in the public sector. Sociological data has shown that the majority of the workforce is composed of high caste Hindus from urban private educational backgrounds (Thorat and Sadana 2009, Thorat and Newman 2010). Muslim, Dalit, and other marginalized

communities comprise a miniscule percentage of corporate India, and studies have shown that social exclusion on the basis of caste and religion occurs at the stage of application sorting. As a 2007 study by Sukadeo Thorat and Paul Attewell reported:

> Applications that had high-caste Hindu names were more likely to result in a positive job outcome than those with Muslim or dalit names, despite their identical qualifications. The odds of a dalit being invited for an interview were about two-thirds of the odds of a high-caste Hindu applicant. The odds of a Muslim applicant being invited for an interview were about one-third of the odds of a high-caste Hindu applicant (2007, 4143).

Inside the "software factories" (Upadhya 2016, 118) of "India Inc." (a term used by the media to refer to the nation's government and business sectors), long working hours are the norm and employees are rigidly documented, evaluated, and surveilled to ensure maximum productivity. Employees must constantly adapt to new skillsets contingent upon the needs of shifting business landscape, which entails a continuous process of recertification and training. Alongside teaching corporate cultural expectations, HR and L&D foster harmony through community-making activities. Team-building games like Lego-building competitions, weekend retreats, dinners at five-star hotels, and physical fitness classes are offered to enhance a sense of workplace community, and internal awards systems like "Star of the Month" programs are used to distinguish those with the most productivity and "high performance" potential.

It is within the overlapping genealogies of theatre history, neoliberal restructuring, creative economic development, and the communicative demands of contemporary management ideology that theatre materialized in the late 1990s and early 2000s as a behavioral management tool for corporate India. Drama was first used as an internal communication tool used to help employees rehearse ways of solving problems through role-playing. The consultancy boom of the 1990s, however, witnessed the rapid growth of a specialized theatre-based learning consultancy industry in India whose methodologies promise to "Improve Performance, Dramatically," "Unlock Potential," and "Bring Working Culture to Life" through interactive dramatic scenarios that reenact

common workplace scenarios and problems for employees to observe and discuss.[8] Theatre consultancies employ a range of business professionals and theatre artists to design and deliver trainings, and their methodologies vary from consultancy to consultancy; for example, some companies utilize dramatic simulations, while others use techniques from psychodrama, while others ask employees to write and perform their own dramatic skits.

Amongst HR circles, theatre is regarded as a useful way for examining sensitive workplace themes like cultural identity and gender bias. Drama also makes for excellent company branding; organizations looking to improve metrics in the *Great Place to Work* institute, which publishes an annual list of the top companies to work for in Asia, document instances of employees undergoing corporate theatre training as proof of interoffice community, trust, risk, and individual transformation. Not coincidentally, companies awarded slots on the *Great Place to Work* list "experience as much as 65% less takeover" and "perform nearly 2x better than the general market regarding annual stock market returns."[9] This corresponds with the reasons why organizational discourse on corporate theatre is directed towards external stakeholders, lacking an understanding of how drama actually gets designed and played out in office contexts. In the next section, I detail how this dissertation attempts to address these shortcomings through ethnographic analysis.

Methodology

This dissertation primarily utilizes ethnography, a methodology that tracks human behavior, the body and its movements, and social relationships in order to understand cultural phenomena (Conquergood 1991). I conducted research in India from 2012-2018, working primarily in Gurgaon, Delhi, Noida, Pune, Mumbai, and Bangalore. IT parks are heavily secured, and it is difficult for individuals to gain access to corporate workplaces without formal institutional affiliation. To this end, the bulk of my ethnography consisted of sustained participant-observation with theatre consultancies that

[8] See, for instance, https://www.stepsdrama.com/drama/, https://www.maynardleigh.com/about-us, http://www.organizationaltheatre.com/about-us.html, and http://www.dramanontheatre.com/corporate-engagement. Accessed April 1, 2019.
[9] https://www.greatplacetowork.in/. Accessed April 1, 2019.

develop and implement trainings. In 2012 and 2014, I worked as a co-facilitator alongside Gouri with Platform for Action in Creative Theatre (PACT). In 2016, I worked as an intern and company actor with a Pune-based consultancy that implements trainings in Mumbai, Pune, Hyderabad, Bangalore, and Gurgaon. In 2017, I interned for a Delhi-based consultancy that works mostly in Gurgaon and Noida. Throughout the duration of my research, I also observed and participated in a wide array of theatre training events delivered by independent trainers and artists in Pune, Jaipur, Bangalore, and Mumbai.

The primary component to this study is an institutional ethnography that critically analyzes the role of corporate theatre inside India's fast-paced and competitive corporate cultures. Inside work sites, I sat in on marketing meetings between HR and consultancy staff, documenting rationales for theatre training including which protocols and changes HR seeks to improve and implement, and what languages are used to depict the efficacy and limitations of theatre as a learning methodology. I also participated in over a dozen "demo meetings" where a sample version of a training gets modeled to potential clients. Here, I noted why particular choices get made during scenes, which behaviors are validated and discouraged, what kinds of advice are given and action plans encouraged, and limitations placed on consultancy staff from HR teams looking to accomplish workshop objectives which often differ from the priorities and desires of theatre trainers.

During training sessions, I conducted performance ethnography—what Soyini Madison (2005) refers to as a methodology that "enters the service of freedom by showing how in concrete situations persons produce history and culture, even as history and culture produce them" (331). Performance ethnography is a mode of self-reflexive participant-observation that seeks to understand how individuals navigate systems of power through embodied action in relation to others, with the hope of articulating and contributing to understandings of progressive politics. Like critical ethnography, it places special emphasis on issues of control, power, and identity, as well as contextualizing the positionality of the academic researcher in order to highlight the ethics and responsibilities of academic knowledge production. As Madison writes:

> Doing fieldwork is a personal experience. Our intuition, senses, and emotions—or what Wallace Bacon (1979) refers to as "felt-sensing"—are powerfully woven into and inseparable from the process. We are inviting an ethics of accountability by taking the chance of being proven wrong. (2005, p. 6) resisting the trap of gratuitous self-centeredness or of presenting an interpretation as though it has no "self," as though it is not accountable for its consequences and effects (2005, 8).

For me, doing performance ethnography meant attending to workshop dynamics that become palpable when experiencing corporate theatre, but otherwise remained undocumented in organizational accounts. Rather than looking for moments of "resistance" to capitalist power, which posit a force by which individuals can extricate themselves from systems of institutional control, I paid attention to the ways individuals negotiate and maneuver within these zones—the ways participants would commit to training norms and expectations, even as they expressed awareness of the paradoxes and ironies of the training enterprise through theatrical techniques like distancing and humor. This meant attending to "on-script" choices (how desired pedagogies of corporate theatre get taught and realized), as well as moments where trainings went "off-script" and invited forms of feeling, affect, and creative expression otherwise discouraged in organizational enclaves. These included moments of contestation during audience feedback, moments when actors would enact lines and bodily movements absent from HR-approved scripts, side conversations, affects of boredom, anger, anxiety, and delight, and the wide array of spontaneous, gut-reaction expressions conveyed in training spaces. In sessions that asked participants to create their own performances, I paid special attention to the context, content, and style of their skits, examining how they represented and performed working culture along axes of class, caste, gender, and religion.

The second component to my ethnography sought to understand how trainers navigate the landscape of corporate theatre. To do this, I spent prolonged amounts of time in consultancy office spaces, documenting not only how trainings get designed, but the day-to-day lives of trainers and staff developing these events. I navigated consultancy spaces as a PhD researcher writing an ethnography of corporate theatre (conducting

formal interviews, writing fieldnotes), and an office assistant eager to put my clerical and research skills to use. Most consultancies were happy to grant me access to organizational archives (providing I did not share intimate organizational content with the wider public), where I examined contracts, facilitator expectations and rules, disclosure agreements, unpublished scripts, and company correspondence. I helped facilitators develop training programs, conducted research on theatrical methodologies for future products, transcribed trainings for archival purposes, videotaped and photographed trainings for marketing purposes, participated in workshops as an actor and audience member, and conducted pre-training employee interviews to gather company research in preparation for workshop events. I conducted over 100 formal interviews with staff ranging from company CEOs to back-office employees, in order to understand how individuals became involved in corporate theatre, the difficulties, successes, and challenges they experience, and the level of control they feel they have over training practices. I also placed emphasis on understanding how trainers who work as theatre artists and/or come from artistic backgrounds understand the politics and priorities of corporate theatre, including how they move between their artistic careers and their corporate work and how they reconcile corporate training with their artistic values and identities.

The third component of my research was having a broader sense of what constitutes corporate life in India. While inside workplaces, I took notes on the general atmosphere of workplaces and noted the everyday moods, actions, and behaviors of employees. I lingered in cafeteria and restroom spaces, chatting with employees about their jobs and everyday work responsibilities. I walked around and explored (as much as my access would allow) the overall layout of IT parks, including their restaurants, bars, cafes, and learning centers. After workshops, I went out with trainers, employees, and actors to cafes to learn about where they are from, their educational, linguistic, and familial backgrounds, and their personal aspirations and struggles. I attended non-theatre corporate trainings in order to discern the differences between theatre and non-theatre training, and went to an assortment of business school classes, HR social gatherings, and business development meetings in order to understand current management trends. I also interviewed a range of HR and experiential learning scholars at schools including the

Indian Institute of Management in Bangalore and the Indian Institutes of Technology in Delhi and Mandi. Lastly, in order to get a sense of other kinds of programs that seek to professionalize citizens through applied theatre, I attended drama training and development programs at an assortment of public and private schools, management institutions, and NGOs in Gurgaon, Delhi, Bangalore, Jaipur, and Mandi throughout the duration of this study. While these experiences are less featured in the chapters that follow, they supplied insight on the varied instrumentalizations of performance across multiple development and educational realms in India.

The final component to my research sought to understand how the corporate theatre industry impacts the values and practices of Indian theatre artists. I concentrated primarily on two artistic communities: an older generation of artists whose self-articulated priorities and values identity with the Leftist activist theatre movements of the 1970s and 1980s, and a younger, "corporatized" landscape of theatre artists pioneering new forms of artistic training that prepare practitioners to work in corporate India. The boundaries of these communities are overlapping, of course, and by no means exhaustive of an "Indian theatre landscape." I interviewed over 40 practitioners, directors, academics, and activists in Chandigarh, Hyderabad, Jaipur, Pune, Mumbai, Gurgaon, Bangalore, and Delhi to learn more about histories of performance and how processes of economic restructuring have impacted them. I conducted research with staff at the Drama School of Mumbai, the National School of Drama, and the India Foundation for the Arts in 2017 and 2018 to understand evolutions in India's performance ecology since 1991, including shifts in sponsorship, the impact of state control over artisanal production, and what kinds of dramatic practices are being valorized and discouraged in contemporary Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) plans. I examined "Creative Economy," "Smart Cities," and "Skills India" development reports, which gave me a deeper sense of the shifting role of performance in processes of urban development and private sector growth. I interviewed arts festival organizers like META (Mahindra Excellence in Theatre Awards) founders and UNESCO cultural policy makers to understand new intersections of performance, global cultural policy, and arts festival promotion in contemporary India.

Chapter Breakdown

Chapter one historically grounds this study by examining how drama came to be a business commodity in the global work economy. Stemming from the example of an Augusto Boal-inspired training I observed in Mumbai in 2016, I provide an abridged history of drama-in-management that attunes us to how and why theatrical performance has become a key strategy for managing human capital in the work economy. I draw attention to shifting descriptions of theatre emerging from critical and mainstream management theory since the 1980s to show how the insinuation of drama-in-management evolved in response to changes in workplace culture that began in the 1960s, when producers of business knowledge (the management guru, consultancy firm, and business school) became key vessels for generating strategic doctrines of the knowledge economy. Corporate theatre, I suggest, evidences a complex *re-coding* (rather than assimilation or cooption) of theatrical histories, ideologies, and practices into contemporary management agendas. I call this process "radical capitalism," which refers to a neoliberal mode of governance that harnesses tropes of revolution to humanize organizational disciplining and control. I demonstrate this with a return to Boal-inspired training in India, where I show how corporate theatre is constantly circumscribed by management in both blatant and concealed ways. I conclude by calling attention to an unexpected moment of participant expression that arose from the event which asks us to consider how corporate theatre produces its own kinds of emancipatory potentials, even as it enables forms of capitalist power that are inherently anti-radical and anti-revolutionary.

Chapters two and three offer performance ethnographies of corporate theatre trainings for Diversity and Inclusion, Campus to Corporate, gender sensitization, cross-cultural communication, and leadership training throughout Gurgaon, Delhi, Pune, Bangalore, and Mumbai from 2016-2019. In chapter three, I examine how theatrical performance has become a key technology of the 21st century "corporate soul"—a business ethos that utilizes discourses of transformation to attain moral and social legitimacy—through showing how corporate theatre teaches individuals to navigate India's contemporary "VUCA" (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous) business

world. Drawing on a series of corporate story-telling and assessment-style trainings for entry-level and senior managers, I show how organizations capitalize on the intangibility of performance to cultivate *presence* in the workplace, a metaphysical state of being-and-becoming where employees are taught that exuding vibes of magnetism, leadership, and style are crucial to becoming "peak performers" in the VUCA age. The second half of the chapter provides a close look inside the consultancy office space, where I show how trainers and staff are expected to perform as agents and models of corporate self-making. Drawing on interviews conducted with staff from varying social backgrounds, I emphasize the ways training personnel are expected to live the principles they espouse—to constantly evolve their own presence and self-journeys in ways subject to discourses of global aspirations, liberal youth culture, and appropriate forms of middle-class femininity in urban India.

Chapter three examines corporate theatre's central promise to be *fun*, examining how the role of humor and laughter in corporate theatre invites us to ascertain its redemptive promises and unsettling disappointments as a performance practice latent with creative possibility. Drawing on three training events where moments of pedagogical failure (when the purported aims of training went off course due to the spontaneity of performance) sparked unanticipated opportunities for dialogue and expression, I show how corporate theatre's use of satire, parody, and irony deliver insightful commentaries which invite participants to momentarily step outside themselves—even while cultivating modes of emotional and physical endurance that reify their own disempowerment. This concealed pedagogy of corporate theatre, I propose, points us to the fluidity of neoliberal subject-formation as a process that creates new possibilities for individuals to creatively navigate systems of power, even as it participates in processes of capitalist control that exacerbate employee isolation, discontent, and bondage.

Chapter four circles us back to the Indian theatre ecology, where I consider how corporate theatre gets lived outside the corporation—how artists working within the confines of corporate ascendency and creative industries are acclimatizing their labors, values, and practices in accordance with the instrumentalization of the arts as

economically important. I examine two programs I worked with in 2017-18, the Strategic Management in the Art of Theatre program sponsored by India Foundation for the Arts and the Drama School of Mumbai, to demonstrate new entanglements of artistic branding, theatrical labor, and neoliberal value that invites us to reimagine what constitutes possibilities for creative agency within models of art today. I first look at each program's branding materials to show how Indian theatre practice is being refashioned from a decolonizing arts praxis rooted in cultural activism to a "clean," economically valuable national asset for entrepreneurial capitalism. I then pivot to an ethnographic analysis of each program's internal training practices, where I provide a look at how the ambivalent narratives and inner negotiations encompassing each program provide a more nuanced analysis of how artists are navigating new conditions of sponsorship, labor, and infrastructure support in India today. My conclusion draws on recent debates in Indian theatre history to speculate on a new historiographic project that pays increased attention to the impact of neoliberal capitalism on conditions of theatre-making and their attendant ambivalent relations with Indian performance history.

A Note on Journeying

Due to confidentiality and disclosure reasons, I was sharply surveilled in corporate spaces. This included being barred from taking videos or photographs, not able to use a laptop (unless I was transcribing trainings) escorted by guards to and from offices, and sharply warned against exposing organizational content in my written work. For this reason, I have given all organizational and interlocutor names pseudonyms. I have also chosen to be strategic when detailing company values, procedures, protocols, and have taken the liberty to adjust titles of some internal organizational procedural systems. In addition, several of my consultancy interlocutors expressed concern that this analysis would air too much about their methodologies, thus exposing training approaches they prefer to keep private for the sake of remaining competitive. To this end, I have adjusted the content and names of some theatre training companies and products to maintain ethnographic anonymity and security.

There is also the thorny question of positionality vis-à-vis my affiliation with both Western management culture and academia (a nuance I discuss in chapter three). I

was introduced in corporate spaces as a representative of the consultancy and as a PhD student from the United States, which informed how interviewees engaged with me. For example, trainers often endorsed their methodologies while omitting the challenging or vexatious components of workshops, and employees would be keen to offer praise while clearly (and understandably) apprehensive about discussing difficulties with their workshop experience. Interviews with CEOs, L&D, and HR were difficult to acquire, because these employees are forbidden to share data with anyone not affiliated with the organization. While these limitations foreclosed opportunities for deeper understanding of how individuals experience corporate theatre, they also attuned me to the precarity of individuals dependent on finding success and survival through these practices—a dynamic I discuss in the chapters the follow.

There was also the matter of continuously attempting to sidestep corporate cultures of silence and control. For example, the subject of caste was rarely broached by interlocutors throughout my fieldwork, making it difficult to tease out the casteist dimensions of everyday corporate life and corporate theatre training. To sum it up in one trainer's words:

> Nobody in corporates talks about caste. Nobody. Never. We can't—"merit" and all these things, and because there's not a reason to. Everyone's already upper caste […] Even in corporate theatre, if we had some low caste person we wouldn't know. We don't know; we're so shielded by our caste that we don't know these lower castes even exist in corporates at all.

While in chapter one I speculate on the ways caste in corporate theatre gets coded through representations and embodiments of educational "background," the castist dimensions of corporate theatre practice remain to be fully examined. This is also where questions of positionality intersect with the politics and ethics of academic knowledge production; it is probable that my positioning rendered me unable to recognize and analyze the deeply castist dimensions of my research sites, weakening this dissertation's ability to engage with the myriad social (and gendered, religious, etc.) dynamics of corporate theatre as a cultural phenomenon and performance practice. With these

limitations in mind, this dissertation provides an ethnography of a new class fraction in India with its own customs, regimes of value, hierarchies, practices, and forms of personhood. As I show, this fraction is defined by a purposeful—but inevitably incomplete—obfuscation and instrumentalization of former Indian markers of cultural identity in favor of a supposedly deracinated mobile Indian subjectivity.

Chapter One:
Radical Capitalism

Introduction: Boal in Corporate India

Early in the morning on July 15th, 2016, I sat in the back of a taxi van traveling from Pune to Mumbai. To my right sat Saanvi, program assistant for Dynamic Drama (DD), a Pune-based theatre training consultancy. Up front was Sanjay, marketing manager, and in the back sat Dhruv, business head. Although we had made this trip several times before, this morning was especially memorable. DD was invited by the HR Senior Manager of an American multinational company to deliver a demo session for "HR Makers," an international collective of HRM (Human Resource Management) employees whose mission is to create a global HR community through sharing current trends in organizational learning and development. At each Saturday morning gathering, a consultancy debuts their training product in a sample session for HR personnel based around the city. DD agreed to participate in three HR Makers scheduled for Mumbai, Pune, and Bangalore, free of charge. The hope, according to Dhruv, was to secure multiple clients from these events so that the travel costs would be worth it.

Over the past two decades, HR departments have assumed a leading role in helping organizations face the challenges of a post-globalization work economy. Training has become a key corporate strategy for managing what David Becker (1964) coined "human capital" theory, which posits that an organization is most competitive when it leverages both its tangible products and intangible assets (a well-trained workforce). In recent years, HR departments have assumed a developmental vision where aspects of employee fulfillment, self-realization, and individual potential are promoted as integral to organizational growth (Kopp 2017, 27). Management scholars attribute this shift to the birth of the knowledge economy in the United States in the late 1980s and 1990s, when training shifted from preparing workers for service sector communication to an educational realm for teaching new skills and behaviors that orient employees to a rapidly changing business landscape (Lawler et al. 2008). This shift, comprised in the conversion of "personnel management" into "Human Resources" in the 1980s, is also marked by the

rise of the corporate diversity agenda. Changing customer demographics, intercultural working sites, and shortages of technically trained workers in subsidiary office contexts since the 1990s shifted diversity management from an emphasis on the awareness of "difference" to a now-ubiquitous promotion of "inclusion," which positions "culturally competent" leaders as a key asset to global growth plans (Anand and Winters 2008, 362). 21st century organizational branding spotlights diversity as representative of each organization's unique set of "company values," the guiding beliefs and philosophies companies present as integral to their internal behaviors and external societal and customer relationships.[10]

Multinational corporations in India began implementing Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) programming in response to the global push for diversity which originated in Western headquarters and distributed throughout subsidiary office contexts. While most diversity programming is aimed at gender sensitization (as in corporate America), diversity management in India also addresses a range of issues specific to the Indian workplace context, in particular an emphasis on intercultural communication and regional bias. Corporate giants are in fierce competition for NASSCOM's (National Association of Software and Services Companies) annual Corporate Diversity Awards, which bestow annual recognitions in focus areas like Excellence in Gender Inclusivity, Best IT Services & Product Company, Best BPM Company, Best Emerging Company, Excellence in Inclusivity for Persons with Disabilities, and Most Innovative program for Diversity and Inclusion.[11] These discourses position D&I as central to personal transformation for the sake of elevated organizational performance, often encapsulated in the phrase "diverse teams outperform." For example, Accenture (a Fortune 500 firm with over 150,000 employees in India) recently released its annual "Corporate Citizenship" report, which included a lengthy declaration of the company's continued commitment to "…finding the right people who embrace our 'culture of cultures' and provide them an environment where they experience a true sense of belonging, where they can be their

[10]Accenture's "Corporate Citizenship" program, for example, refers to its company values as CRIBOS: Client Value Creation, Respect for Individual, Integrity, Best People, One Global Network, and Stewardship.

[11] https://www.nasscom.in/about-us/what-we-do/diversity-and-inclusion. Accessed 6 Feb. 2019.

best, professionally and personally" (2018, 41).[12]

Returning to HR Makers, Dhruv decided to model the consultancy's popular *Unconscious Bias* session, a two-hour training featuring dramatic skits exhibiting common instances of workplace discrimination. According to the company's website, *Unconscious Bias* is a training product designed for "high-performing 21st century organizations" looking to target inclusion for "bottom line" profit. 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.[13]

During the taxi ride, I chatted with Dhruv about Augusto Boal. The skits performed in DD's trainings are called "Forum scenes" because they are named after Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* (TO) methodology, an interactive way of enabling community members to propose and practice solutions to social problems through the repetition and discussion of dramatic scenarios (Boal 1985, 117-120). But although the consultancy referred to its participatory training activities as "Forum scenes" during office meetings and in script materials, I had noticed that Boal was absent from the company's marketing materials and client communication meetings. When I explained this, Dhruv (a business developer from a well-known Maharashtrian artist family) told me he avoids mentioning Augusto Boal out of a fear that he will not appear professional or knowledgeable enough in corporate settings. A month earlier, he had expressed similar sentiments to a group of actors auditioning to join the consultancy:

> We use Forum scenes…Forum drama is based on this particular idea of spectactorship. The only difference is here we don't get the audience to do any acting. It's risky in the corporate world *(laughs)*. I personally freak out when

[12] Access the full report at https://www.accenture.com/_acnmedia/Accenture/Redesign-Assets/DotCom/Documents/Global/1/Accenture-Corporate-Citizenship-Report-2018.PDF#zoom=50
[13] https://www.stepsdrama.com/diversity-inclusion-and-unconscious-bias/. Accessed 6 Feb. 2019.

> an audience member says “can I try?” I freak out. Anyway it's not exactly an oppressor/oppressed situation; at the end of the day this is not the same thing in the corporate environment. We don't have these people.

Dhruv’s comments on the tentative use of Boal in the corporate space were similar to others I heard from trainers throughout the duration of my research. While consultancy methodologies vary widely from company to company, a substantial subset of corporate theatre draws on elements of TO. “I use a lot of games from Boal’s work with the oppressed,” one trainer explained in 2015, “especially the games I learned during acting school.” Another described Boal as especially helpful for “getting insights [from employees] intuitively that we don’t get in other training discussions,” while still others (like Dhruv) shared the difficulties they face when bringing Boal into a workplace context. “Unfortunately while working with [HR], we don’t have that much of time,” one trainer explained. “Normally if I ask [HR] to give me three days of time, they can’t. I get maximum a day; 8 hours. Forum theatre turns into a lot of time, so sometimes I need to cut out some of its activities.” Still others depicted their choice to stop using Boalian games and exercises during training events because, to quote one trainer, “they’re not innovative enough.” As he explained:

> We had to graduate from Augusto Boal’s Forum theatre, which of course creates very interactive exploration of issues. But those issues deal with sexuality, with social injustice, working with different disenfranchised people—very useful techniques, but we have never seen how this could transform a leader to become a better leader. We didn’t know how this could be used to engage people more effectively, or to make effective presentations, or communicate better, or work in teams. And that was never, sort of—uh—a direct link was not drawn.

My conversations with Dhruv and other trainers made me curious to learn more about how and why Augusto Boal appears (and disappears) in corporate theatre training. I also wondered: when corporate trainings inspired by Boal *are* implemented, what happens? Can the use of Boal in corporate theatre ever inspire some kind of social change, or do tenets of TO become muted by virtue of the corporate logics circumscribing these events?

These conversations also pointed me toward a bigger and broader question that serves as the impetus for this chapter: how and why did *theatre* (not only Boalian theatre, but dramatic performance in any manifestation) emerge in business management training—in India or elsewhere?

In this chapter, I approach these questions by first providing an abridged history of theatre-in-management that attunes us to how and why drama has emerged as a key tool for developing human capital in the global work economy. I attend to the varying manifestations of theatre in critical and mainstream academic management discourse since the late 1980s to show how the insinuation of drama into business evolved in response to changes in workplace culture that began in the 1960s, when the rise of the knowledge economy triggered new demands for employees to be transformed, creative, and communicative. I demonstrate how managerial visions of theatre evolved from a promotional employee entertainment platform to a legitimized educational tool for ethics and diversity programs that have grown in popularity as organizations face increased pressure to humanize their operations for the sake of profit.

This history circles us back to Augusto Boal's Forum theatre, which began appearing in business literature alongside the dissemination of "New Age" management theory in the 1990s, which draws on artistic and spiritual genres to affectively bond workers to notions of organizational community. Providing a critical discourse analysis of select works on Forum theatre in the workplace and drawing on the work of linguistic anthropologists Richard Baumann and Charles Briggs, I trace the emergence of what I call a *Boalian genre of New Age management*—a contemporary category of management knowledge that draws on histories of theatre for social change to bolster the "revolutionary" contours of corporate capitalism. Attending to the ways theatre traditions premised on oppositional thinking and anti-authoritarianism get recoded into management discourse reveals how the cultural circuits of capitalism are repackaging histories of political theatre to make organizations appear more radical, emancipatory, and democratic—vested in liberating their employees from the constraints of disciplinary work apparatuses to "set free" their "true" creative potential.

I conclude this chapter with a return to HR Makers, where I examine a Forum-

inspired training scenario designed to discourage manager bias during the interview process. I highlight the ways the skit was carefully engineered to engrain mythic representations of organizational meritocracy that evade discussion around the structural inequalities and caste and class privilege of India's corporate sector. I then call attention to a moment that transpired after the scene ended to show how despite the ways theatre-in-management can never be "Boalian," the theatrical excess of the skit and ensuing social dynamics it triggered demonstrate the promise of theatricality to inspire moments of critical thought and expression in corporate spaces. First, however, I join a chorus of others in theatre and performance who insist on the importance of telling new stories about Augusto Boal and broader politics of participatory theatre praxis in corporate and developmentalist contexts of contemporary capitalism.

TO for a New Millennium

Scholars of performance have long positioned theatrical practice as antithetical to the institutional authority and punitive logics of transnational corporations. Boal's own writings serve as a poignant reflection of this viewpoint. As Adrian Jackson writes:

> 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, corporately, socially responsible, persisted, ingrained in the early years, and refus[ed] to be shifted or deceived (1992, 307).

Boal's fear that TO would be sapped of its revolutionary potential by the same capitalist institutions the methodology sought to dismantle is an anxiety that permeates disciplinary investments in politically committed arts practice today. 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 and Plastow's statements are indicative of a wider fear that the theatrical tools once created

for proletarian empowerment are being shaped into vehicles for human exploitation by neoliberal logics which de-politicize art in the service of profit. Attempts to retain and restore the vitality of democratic arts practice thus concern questions of human rights, equity, and social justice within what Jenny Hughes calls "a social world under siege:" an era wherein all forms of social life are constantly open to threat (2017, 3).

But as theatre scholars mourn the loss of radical arts practice to the eviscerating force of free market capitalism, business schools and organizational learning scholars have been celebrating something remarkable gained: the vibrant, dynamic, and transformative power of the arts. This paradox has thus far been examined as symptomatic of the cooptation of art's democratizing aims; that is, the policy-driven undermining of community and furthering of individual precarity through illusory discourses of empowerment and care (see, for example, Joseph 2002, Bishop 2012, Harvie 2013). It has also been examined as a distinctly modern paradigm of organizational power, most notably in Jon McKenzie's study of how performance came to signify optimal human productivity in systems of Performance Management (2001, 55-95). McKenzie brilliantly charts how paradigms of performance are interwoven into the discourses and practices of business, computer engineering, technology, and other fields, attuning us to the ways performance consolidates capitalist value even as it possesses an enduring transformative potentiality that transcends it. McKenzie's analysis, however, investigates performance as an epistemological trope and theoretical construct, whereas I am interested in analyzing the specific forms, meanings, and conditions by which *theatrical* performance is being discursively imagined and played out in managerial contexts.

Returning to Augusto Boal, many stories about TO have been told. Scholars have probed Boal's conception of politics (Balsa 2008), traced his life in activism and its impact on contemporary theatre (Babbage 2004), drawn attention to Boal's lesser known works like his plays (Mcmahon 2005), and chronicled the expansion of TO into settings like education (Tuluk 2012), trauma and cultural healing (Blair and Angus 2010), sexual assault intervention therapy (Jose et. al. 2006), grassroots and community decolonization efforts (Adam 2012), and many others. Since the 1980s, TO has also been applied in a

variety of non-theatrical and non-activist spaces as modes of training and development, like NGO skills camps, theatre for development (Marlin-Curiel 2002), and medical education (Gupta et. al. 2013), leading to increased discussion around the politics and priorities of community-engaged arts work in neoliberal contexts. However, the story of Boal in management training has not yet been told in theatre and performance studies, perhaps owing to the fact that Boal's own indignation about the misuse of his methodology by business institutions has deterred scholars from engaging with adaptations of TO in blatantly capitalist contexts.

The understudied nature of Forum theatre in management is ironic, given that throughout his life, Boal himself assumed a contradictory stance assumed towards capitalism. While he remained a staunch anti-capitalist in writing, Boal's experiences traveling from Latin America to the West caused a shift in how oriented his methodologies to address new capitalist contexts. In the 1980s, Boal began adopting his methodology for communities in the post-industrial nations of the Europe and the US, and 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" (2004, 23). Boal confronted workshop participants who felt more oppressed psychologically, rather than materially, through dilemmas like alienation at work, depression, and loneliness. While at first he was hesitant about the superficiality of these issues because they were a sharp departure from the "concrete, visible, oppressions" he faced in South America, Boal created *Cop in the Head* and formed *Rainbow of Desire* to address different modes of oppression and exploitation which arose since TO was first formed (23).

The absence of scholarly work on Boal in corporations from the perspective of theatre and performance is also surprising, given recent suggestions by theatre for social change scholars to reimagine the politics and possibilities of TO within the post-industrial present. Mady Schutzman, for example, argues that Boal's journey from a South to North American context is encapsulated in a shift from theatre-as-activism to theatre-as-therapy, where the problematic of transposing "a 'third-world' aesthetic of resistance to a 'first-world' aesthetic of self-help" necessitates a re-thinking of Boalian practice in

contemporary capitalist contexts (1994, 143). Rather than "rehearsals for revolution," Schutzman suggests, we might think of contemporary workshop spaces as "rehearsals for healing," where participants are often situated within more fluid systems of power that become internalized in bodily, rather than material ways (144). "It might be more valuable if we stop evaluating Boal's work solely on the basis of the quantifiable political activism it stimulates," Schutzman writes, as it "fails to acknowledge subtle, but significant, shifts in participants' critical faculties and socio-political outlooks" (144). Schutzman also proposes we focus our efforts on understanding how workshops help identify "oppressive territory:" the ways in which mutual and ongoing oppressions structure participants' everyday behaviors and sense of self (145). Thinking about TO through the lens of oppressive territory invites us to reimagine the efficacy of TO in ways that avoid moralistic posturing and strives to achieve, in Schutzman's words, "any politics based on a dialectic of liberation and a commitment to a slow, personalized, and deliberate process of ongoing cultural exchange" (147).

In what follows, I follow Schutzman's encouragement to address new iterations of TO in new dynamics of capitalist oppression by looking at the history of theatre-in-management, a parallel history of theatrical performance that arrives at Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* as a disciplinary salve to the confining nature of modern workplaces. This genealogy invites us to reconsider what constitutes the grounds of critical arts praxis and emancipation in the "oppressive territories" of modern workplaces, and how we might identity moments of transgressive or creative potential in more fluid, ambiguous zones of social power and soft control.

Theatre in Management: The Beginning

In 1986, thousands of New York City's Chase Manhattan Bank employees were invited to a night of theatre designed especially for them. After work on a Friday, they were bused to a nearby sports complex to spend the evening celebrating Chase's "employee family." Workers delighted in watching images and videos of themselves at work projected on giant screens hanging above a stage, company executives offered speeches affirming the power of company community, and Broadway entertainers performed songs about the importance of customer satisfaction and employee bonding.

The evening ended with employees, executives, and performers assembling on stage as one "Chase family," rejoicing in their unity as fireworks burst over their heads and a live orchestra played in the background.

John Bell's 1987 *TDR: The Drama Review* essay "Industrials: American Business Theatre in the 1980s" opens with a similar description of Chase Manhattan Bank as an example of what he calls "industrial theatre," a little-known yet prosperous sector of the arts world that profited between $75 and $100 million annually (1987, 36). Industrials, according to Bell, were "event-specific performances designed to intensify the experience of a particular business meeting," or advertise company products to corporate affiliates (37). Industrial theatre emerged after World War II, when automobile and manufacturing companies hired performers to perform highly-produced theatrical spectacles for product launches. During the 1950s, for instance, automobile manufacturers in Detroit hired actors to enact the dramatic reveal of their next year's products, incentivizing customers through flashy songs, melodramatic skits, and large-scale dance numbers. In the decades following, however, Bell notes that the nature of industrials shifted alongside changes in US working culture. The shows became more technologically advanced, replacing live actors with multimedia aesthetics to produce performances that catered to a "new generation of salespeople" who worked in service sector and information technology fields (42). The globalization of work further "strengthened the motivational aspect" of industrials, Bell notes, imbuing their content with an awareness of the increasingly competitive international work arena (43).

Despite shifting developments in the themes and aesthetic techniques of industrial theatre, its goal to inspire productivity and promote narratives of company care remained largely unchanged. As Bell writes:

> The definition business theatre most often seeks to propagate is one that would blur the importance of strict corporate hierarchy and instead promote the corporation as a family, connoting the existence of a (patriarchal) hierarchy, but with the warmth associated with the family unit. The industrial theatre production attempts to instill among its employees a motivational energy beyond that of the personal commercial transaction or employee-employer

> relationship, and seeks to identify the economic goals of the company with the personal goals of the employee (39).

Bell's little-known essay on industrial theatre challenges 21st century business scholarship that presumes the novelty of the use of theatre in managerial contexts. The use of theatre for corporate promotion in postwar America pre-dates the onset of post-Fordist working culture, demonstrating how dramatic performance has long been used on a global scale to bond employees to organizational life through narratives of company values and care. While industrial theatre events were not forms of learning or training as is practiced today, they were highly produced spectacles that existed solely for the purpose of company promotion—in Bell's unequivocal summation, "unabashedly straightforward examples of theatre as a powerful tool of ideological persuasion" (55). Bell urges theatre and performance scholars to pay greater attention to industrial theatre because it represents what he calls "one of the strongest, most viable aspects of drama today" (56). However, Bell's inability to gain physical access to these events (he admits having to rely on videotape footage of select shows) is perhaps one of the reasons why academic investment into this field is limited; there have been no analyses of corporate theatre in theatre and performance studies journals since Bell's essay in 1987.

On the other hand, management scholars have grown increasingly excited about the organizational benefits of the arts. Although dramatic role-playing has been used as an office tool since the creation of Human Resources in the United States in the 1980s, the use of theatre in management training accelerated throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s alongside what Stella Minahan (2017) calls "the aesthetic turn in management." The aesthetic turn is a wide-ranging scholarly analytic referring to the emergence of visual, narrative, and artistic mediums (like theatre, dance, story-telling, and art-making) in workplace contexts throughout the world. Minahan attributes the aesthetic turn of management to a scholarly de-emphasis on "scientific-rationalist" paradigms of business, and turn towards valorizing the "thoughts and feelings" of employees as a crucial part of organizational life (1, 3-4).

Theatre in the aesthetic turn first emerged as a metaphor for organizational life. A *Journal of Management Studies* article by UK management scholars Timothy

Clark and Iain Mangham expounds on this, suggesting that theatre first entered organizational studies through the writings of Kenneth Burke and Erving Goffman (2004, 39). Goffman and Burke's dramatistic theories regarding the use of performance as a way of understanding everyday life had become a popular framework in the social sciences years prior, and the latter half of the 20th century witnessed their dissemination into management (40). The use of theatre as a dramaturgical metaphor views organizations *as* theatre, where employees are examined as actors and workplace interactions as scripted social performances. In particular, Goffman's "situated activity" (1986) paradigm became a helpful way of helping scholars study the "fleeting and episodic face-to-face interactions that constitute a large part of social and organizational life" (Clark and Mangham, 40). As emblematized in Pine and Gilmore's famous assertion that "every business is a stage, and therefore work is theatre" (1999, xi), the use of theatre-as-metaphor aims to augment productivity by likening job tasks to theatrical processes such as directing (leadership), scripting (project management), and artistic collaboration (team-building) (Clark and Mangham, 40-45).

The Goffman-based approach to management is significant because it paved the way for scholars to examine the role of corporations as theatres of capitalist oppression. Goffman's perspective that social actors can become disenchanted and change their existing social realities inspired business scholars to think more critically about the potentially emancipatory possibilities of the workplace, imbuing management discourse with an awareness of oppressive power configurations and problematic forms of work. These developments form part of a more extensive history in which Critical Management Studies (CMS) emerged as an intellectual field in the early 1990s. Pioneered by management specialization scholars like human resource management, information systems, and marketing scholars, CMS identifies itself as an alternative to mainstream management that aims to highlight the problems inherent in hegemonic business orthodoxy through attending to topics silenced or discouraged in mainstream management. Put similarly by Mats Alvesson, Todd Bridgman, and Hugh Willmott in their introduction to the *Oxford Handbook of Critical Management Studies*, "CMS challenges prevailing relations of domination—patriarchal, neo-imperialist as well as

capitalist—and anticipates the development of alternatives to them" (2009, 1). Drawing on the work of Marxist, poststructuralist, post-colonial, and feminist theory, CMS analyzes the duplicitous aspects of organizational processes and considers the possibilities of greater autonomy in work systems through highlighting issues of worker discipline, subjectivity, identity, and agency. Michel Foucault's theories of power have proved especially important to the field, serving as a framework by which scholars have examined issues like gender relations in management (see Weiskopf and Munro 2002, Barratt 2003).

Goffman's diffusion into business demonstrates the arrival of theatre in business in two antithetical ways correlative to mainstream and CMS as opposing fields of study. The first, pioneered in CMS, envisions drama as a vessel for oppositional thinking that can harness the liberatory and agentive potentials of the workplace. The second viewpoint, emerging from mainstream management, does the opposite—promoting the use of theatrical techniques to bond the employee more tightly to organizational systems of efficiency. The dissemination of dramaturgical theory into business scholarship further demonstrates the ways performance theorists have been taken up in diverse ways in an intellectual field not typically grappled with in theatre and performance studies. These figures include William Shakespeare, whose characters are studied as exemplars of leadership, communication, and team mentorship (Adelman 1999), and Viola Spolin, whose improvisation games have become popular in improving work skills like creativity, collaboration, and confidence (Moshavi 2001). All of these trajectories further encompass part of the wider aesthetic turn in critical and mainstream management theory.

Since the early 1990s, mainstream management theorists have turned to theatre as an educational platform for personal and professional development. This trend, as Mangham and Clark argue, encompasses a shift from theatre-as-metaphor to theatre-as-*technology*, in which the arts are viewed as an untapped source of potential for optimizing the human capital demands (adaptability, flexibility, innovation) of the modern corporate environment (2004, 41). The turn to theatre-as-technology emerged alongside growing industry awareness of an unpredictable business age, evidenced in

Mary Crossan and Henry Lane's point that," "if the future is uncertain, best learn to improvise. Find out how by looking at how actors and jazz musicians do it" (1996, 20). Theatre-as-technology is often characterized as something distinctly new and growing in prominence. An April 2018 special edition of the *Journal of Business Research*, for instance, is themed "The Power of the Arts in Business," and declares that the use of artistic mediums in workplace culture has "gradually increased" (2018, 337). The authors write:

> Through arts it is possible to manage those organizational aesthetic dimensions, such as passion, emotions, hope, moral [sic], 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, 337).

The excerpt shows how theatrical performance is discursively transformed into a Learning and Development (L&D) industry that suits the demands of the post-industrial economy's self-reflexive business ecologies. The process of "exploiting" the arts for workplace development, however, evacuates the employee from the equation—those human beings who presumably harbor the "intangible value" of these practices are not factored into rationalizations of organizational growth. While the authors emphasize the need for employees to feel energized and inspired in and through their work activities, employees remain vessels for company growth and external stakeholder satisfaction.

Theatrical Capital in the Knowledge Economy

A glimpse into the history of theatre-in-management illustrates how the arts have become a vital company investment in the so-called "knowledge economy," an

economy pioneered by new producers of business knowledge (the business school, training consultancy, and management guru), and a dependence on the continuous influx of new information about itself (Thrift 2005). Work and labor in knowledge economies operate not through means of material production, but through intangible forms of intellectual, social, and human capital that function as economic goods in the global supply chain. Nigel Thrift encapsulates this in the term "soft capitalism," characterized by a "cultural circuit" that emphasizes the continual production of new managerial subjects, the influx of new research regarding bodily potential and self-making, and a constant awareness of one's ability to adapt and thrive within a chaotic business world. "In other words," Thrift writes:

> A partially coherent set of practices of ''government of the soul" is starting to be produced by the cultural circuit of capital, a kind of instrumental phenomenology that can produce subjects that disclose the world as one that is uncertain and risky, but that can also be stabilized (in profitable ways) by the application of particular kinds of intense agency that are creative, entrepreneurial, and businesslike (2005, 97).

Insights supplied by business school scholars have been integral to these transformations, Thrift writes, because these academics have "[…] access to the primary 'movers and shapers' of the global economy" (96). Most importantly, the cultural circuit of capitalism sustains itself through *self-critique*, a constant assessment of the status quo and of capitalism itself that legitimizes and fuels billion-dollar training, skill development, and corporate strategy industries that equip workers and leaders to adapt and survive in a chaotic global marketplace. The task of the worker in this newly configured world is to quickly acquire the aptitudes required for survival in a competitive corporate landscape, a move which fosters the creation of "fast" managerial subjects whose high-performance capabilities are nurtured through workplace activities that value play, creativity, and energy (2010, 675).

The managerial turn towards theatre thus arose from the simultaneous growth of creative business knowledge and intensified focus on employee self-making in training regimens. While thinking about the self has a long history in management, Nikolas Rose

argues, contemporary managers are invited "to live as if running a *project* of themselves: they are to *work* on their emotional world, to develop a style of being that will maximize the worth of their existence to themselves" (1996, 17, emphasis original). Drama in this framework helps employees discover themselves and enhance their ability to *appreciate* their best performance qualities and assist others in the identification and understanding of their own self-journeys. Theatre becomes a neoliberal "identity project" (Rose 1996), which validates particular performance figures (Shakespeare, Spolin) techniques (improvisation, role-playing), and languages (fun, play, liberation) as new discourses of expertise in the knowledge economy. Theatre invests employees with the responsibility to become masters of themselves—to become self-managing, risk-taking, role-players adept at navigating the communicative demands of soft capitalism. If neoliberal subjectivation operates through an ethico-political discourse of choice (we think we are free because we are governed in terms of our "freedom"), theatre delivers that freedom for employees to perform as the organization desires (Rose 1990).

Forum Theatre in Business

The evolution of corporate theatre from role-playing to a medium for corporate self-making is best emblematized by the recent emergence of Forum theatre in training. Before delving into managerial adaptations of Forum, however, it is necessary to mark how Augusto Boal envisioned Forum theatre to be a "rehearsal for revolution" that asks communities to debate and discuss solutions to social and political problems impacting their lives. In *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Boal describes Forum theatre as the third component to his of "The Theatre as Language" model, where audience members are invited to insert themselves as active participants in the dramatic action. According to Boal, the first step of Forum theatre asks participants to share a story containing a social or political problem without an easily identifiable solution. For example, the communities Boal worked with in 1960s Latin America while in charge of the Teatro de Arena de São Paulo shared stories about factory labor exploitation, poor living conditions, and hunger.

After the story is told and shared in front of a group of actors, a ten to fifteen minute skit enacting the problem and intended solution is rehearsed and presented to the audience. After the skit ends, the facilitator (what Boal called the "joker") asks the

audience if the solution corresponds with their given reality (usually, the scene is presented so the solution does not fit the accepted reality). After participants say "no," the scene is performed once more, but this time the participants are turned into "spectactors"—spectators given the opportunity to replace any actor on stage and lead the action in the direction they feel helps achieve the best solution to the problem. The repetition of the dramatic scenario is enacted over and over, with each spectactor assuming the bodily actions of the spectactor before her/him. The goal is for the audience to collectively decide on a solution that best corresponds with the conditions of their lives, and practices ways of eventually transforming it into a reality. Boal wrote:

> Maybe the theatre in itself is not revolutionary, but these theatrical forms are without a doubt a *rehearsal of revolution* […] Forum theatre, as well as these other forms of a people's theatre, instead of taking something away from the spectator, evoke in him a desire to practice in reality the act he has rehearsed in the theatre. The practice of these theatrical forms creates a sort of uneasy sense of incompleteness that seeks fulfillment through real action (1974, 119-120, emphasis original).

Since the mid-90s, studies on the benefits of Forum have appeared in journals like *Harvard Business Review*, the *Journal of Management Studies*, the *Journal of Management Development*, and the *Business and Professional Ethics Journal.*[14] Throughout this small, yet growing body of work, Boalian terminologies and ideologies are strategically translated into organizational narratives of trust, care, and community. For example, a 1998 *Management Learning* essay by business scholar John Coopey introduces Forum theatre as a curative tool for fixing the oppressive dynamics of the modern workplace. Looking at the UK business environment, Coopey argues that trust between employees has eroded and opportunities for expression are stifled by normative behavior codes and worker surveillance mechanisms. The oppression to overcome is work itself, reminiscent of Nigel Thrift's assessment that the cultural circuit of capitalism sustains itself through self-critique. Forum theatre can create a "utopic vision of democratic potential" that allows employees to break free of these modern disciplinary

[14] https://hbr.org/2002/12/theater-tools-for-team-building. Accessed December 20, 2018.

constraints (379). In a thin description of what Coopey calls a "quasi-Forum scene" (373) that took place for a group of employees working in London's Redbridge Council (interestingly an administrative environment and not a corporate workplace, but Coopey does not elaborate on this), Coopey describes its effects as the following:

> Slowly people open[ed] up, representing more and more freely their representations of experiences and the emotions which the memories evoke, especially fear. Learning happens as other actors draw on their own personal history, their biography of self. The deeper the trust as each participant obtains freer and freer access to the motives and reasons of the others, the deeper the learning. Implicit in Boal's view is that people can act on the stage to explore different selves. They feel freer to move beyond the bounds of their 'personality,' the self that is morally and socially sanctioned, to play with any possibility of who they might be (375).

The excerpt above coverts Boal's revolutionary vision into a source of psychological enrichment for the employee, sparking a sense of agency that would otherwise be constrained by the "Foucauldian gloom" of the modern workplace. Boal's intention for Forum theatre to critically analyze the structural dynamics of oppression gets recoded into an exercise in corporate self-making and affective management. This seemingly self-reflexive focus on employee care helps brand the "conscious" organization while the grounds of liberation remain in the service of organizational intentions. Forum theatre helps "flexibilize" the workplace through shaking loose habits and hierarchies that function not as antithetical to democratic dialogue and individual consciousness-formation, but to ultimate company productivity and growth.

A more recent take on Forum in the workplace understands Forum as an innovative form of ethics training that can improve employees' moral awareness and decision-making conduct. "Ethics" in the organizational setting refers to the establishment of normative conduct correlative to goalposts of productivity, and training practices aim to assimilate an individual's inner belief system with "company values." The literature on Forum theatre in ethics training recodes Boal's theatrical model into organizational problem-solving discourses which aim to teach company-sanctioned ways

of fixing workplace social dilemmas. One example of this is Jolanta Jagiello's essay "Toward a Human Centered Organization" (*Business and Professional Ethics Journal*, 2002), which introduces Forum as a form of learning in the "Organisational Theatre of Professional Practice," a model that "facilitates managers to work and respond more creatively to their organisational problems both moral and non-moral" and transforms the organization into what Harvard business scholar Kenneth Goodpaster called "a corporation with a conscience" (1982, 92).

Jagiello characterizes Forum theatre as an extension of the "game-based approach" to ethics training, pioneered by the Martin Mariette Corporation (an American company that ceased operations in 1995) in the early 1990s. Mariette created an interactive board game called *Gray Matters,* which gave employees playing cards detailing workplace quandaries and a list of potential solutions. In 1993, a panel of business editors traveled to Martin Corporation to play the game, later publishing a review critiquing *Gray Matters* for its unrealistic and simplistic pre-chosen solutions to complex workplace social and job-related situations. After the failure of *Gray Matters,* researchers began searching for an approach to ethics training that would avoid establishing a "pre-determined ethical climate" (94). Forum theatre was discovered to be an interactive and enjoyable way of doing so, because it "eliminates the fear" associated with ethics training and invites employees to create and discuss their own ethical environments and dilemmas (rather than choose them from a pre-made list). Although Jagiello concedes that the terms "oppressed" and "oppressor" "may seem a bit strong," Forum makes it easier for employees to deal with ethical workplace situations like bribes, unfair pay, theft, sexual harassment, and racism. These problems tend to be communicated through oral exchange rather than written mediums, so Forum is "ideally suited to the exploration and resolution of moral problems" through bodily communication and unrestricted dialogue (95).

Jagiello, however, proposes several changes be made to the Forum model in order to adapt it to an organizational context. This process is illustrated as follows:

> *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 (96-97)

Several problems emerge with this model. First, the spectactor is replaced by the stakeholder—those individuals and companies who own a share in the company and remain responsible for its growth and bottom line. The workshop turns into a space for the stakeholder gaze to determine what is best for future company policy, rather than dialogue around sensitive issues. Second, the protagonist's "criteria of acceptance" (the conditions that correspond to their given reality) is eliminated from the process. Instead, stakeholders are instructed to categorize scenes into "approximately eight decision points and three to five predicted intervention points" which predict how the dramatic action will unfold (99). While there may be space for participants to spontaneously create their own intervention points, the time spent determining and recording predicted intervention points overshadows the workshop with a managerial consciousness that promotes authorized ways of responding to ethical situations. Third, the role of the joker is assumed by an HR professional trained in the five professional ethics codes governing HRM conduct: integrity, legality, proficiency, professional loyalty, and confidentiality (99, 92). Conscientization (conscientização, critical consciousness) is stymied; Forum is deluded into an exercise in determining "best practices" for resolving situational impediments to workplace productivity. Additional stipulations regarding documentation and workshop surveillance overlay this process: trainings must be recorded and scripts should adhere to a pre-approved, workplace social reality that dictates the grounds of what is possible, sayable, and thinkable during the program.

Boal has also been taken up in the critical management discourse. A 2004

Organization Studies article titled "The Politics of Performance in Organizational Theatre-Based Training and Interventions" by learning scholars Nick Nissley, Steven Taylor and Linda Houden describes increasing investment in theatre-based training as illustrative of management's "colonization of theatre" (818). The authors use Boalian theory as a framework for their critique, comparing HRM to a "ruling class" which has sought to "colonize" theatre as a tool for domination over its workers (830). They illustrate how theatre-based interventions are controlled by HR personnel who commission them and contractors who administrate them, which blocks opportunity for empowerment. The authors use Boal's theory on spectactorship to envision an alternative to conventional theatre-based training practices, calling for a shift from the corporate-controlled "theatre of the oppressor" to the "liberation of the spectactor" (832). The solution they propose is that employees be invited to write and perform their own plays, which will provide them more agency. This viewpoint, however, neglects the ways workshop spaces remain entirely circumscribed by management logics. As I have shown elsewhere, giving employees control over their storylines does not equal handing them their freedom.[15]

This section has demonstrated how managerial investment in Forum theatre ranges from organizational learning scholars advocating for Forum as a weapon of workplace emancipation, to CMS scholars using Boal to deconstruct the oppressive power relations of modern work sites. This diversity is important, because it challenges a monolithic view of business management often positioned in theatre in performance studies as ascribing to a homogenous set of interests. A look at different managerial investments in Boalian theatre demonstrates how, to a certain extent, the same questions concerning the hope and struggle for change in late capitalist labor contexts are being posed in a discipline often understood as antithetical to theatre and performance studies. At the same time, I have showed how management scholars intend for these events to be

[15] My 2017 article in *RIDE: The Journal of Theatre and Performance* examines a training event from 2014, where employees were asked to script, rehearse, and perform their own plays for audiences of their supervisors. While I maintain that giving employees autonomy to create their own skits allows for forms of expression that otherwise might be stifled in organizational enclaves, I also demonstrate the illusionary contours to this "agency" through attending to the ways scripts must adhere to company values and HR expectations.

entirely circumscribed by company objectives and protocol, evacuating the politics of theatre for social change from these practices and assuming a corporate politics that expressly violates the grounds of Boal's vision.

The Boalian Genre of New Age Management

One way to understand the transmutation of Boalian theatre into corporate contexts is through the lens of genre theory by anthropologists Richard Baumann and Charles Briggs, who define genres as "constellations of co-occurrent formal elements and structures that define or characterize particular classes of utterances" (132). Baumann and Briggs draw on Mikhail Bakhtin's characterization of genre as forms that absorb and digest earlier forms of discourse to propose a rethinking of genre through the lens of intertextuality (1986). They write:

> Genre is quintessentially intertextual […] Unlike most examples of reported speech, however, the link is not made to isolated utterances, but to generalized or abstracted models of discourse production and reception […] Genres have strong historical associations […] Invoking a genre thus creates indexical connections that extend far beyond the present setting of production or reception, thereby linking a particular act to other times, places and persons. Generic features thus foreground the status of utterances as recontextualizations of prior discourse (147-148).

Genres acquire social power through abstracting and decontextualizing select elements of historical events and phenomena to fit contemporary social orders, "influenc[ing] our perception[s] of reality by playing off of historical associations and expectations" (149). New genres get formed through strategic manipulations and adaptations of history that allow them to acquire particular forms of contemporary legitimacy and visibility (148). A Boalian genre of management training, then, is not merely the replication or appropriation of Boal into business contexts, but the continuous mediation select aspects of Augusto Boal and TO in order to serve late capitalism's communicative business ideologies. Grammars of oppression, freedom, and revolution become historiographically unmoored from their political and economic contexts and recoded into the philanthropic and enterprising grammars of 21st century capitalism. The Boalian genre of management

invokes and draws power from revolutionary theatre histories, re-packaging them into training events that circulate countercultural ideas to perform organizational humility and invisibilize power.

The Boalian genre of management is also predicated on the recoding of Augusto Boal from a Leftist revolutionary to a New Age management guru. The dissemination of the New Age movement into the management realm since the 1980s transpired with the rise of business gurus (Sanskrit for "master/teacher") who help sanctify the managerial self through narratives of creativity, spirituality, and intuition (Thrift 2005, 41). Gurus are envisioned as alternative to conventional ways of thinking, and management gurus capitalize upon this alterity through devising strategies that draw on forms of spirituality, artistic genres and dance forms, story-telling, and indigenous cultural traditions that help transform and motivate employee performance. New Age management theory functions as part of the aesthetic turn in management, and as Nigel Thrift writes, training is crucial to its efficacy:

> This emphasis on self-belief as a function of personal growth is perhaps best exemplified by the growth of New Age training […] New Age's stress on changing people works in with attempts to change the management (and workforce) subject, particularly because changing oneself or others seems a feasible and certain task compared with many others that management faces (42).

Over the past decade, revolution has become a popular trope in New Age management training. Anu Kantola, for instance, uses American business guru Gary Hamel to argue that ideologies of revolution have become a central technology of soft capitalist control. She writes:

> The promises of revolution – liberation, empowerment and communal feelings – also fit[s] well with soft management techniques. Revolutionary ideas […] are often used to ignite joint action (Jasper, 1997: 5–7). 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).

Forum-based training asks managers to embody and inculcate company values through coding revolutionary political theatre ideologies into workplace directives of the self. This process translates Boal's fight for anti-authoritarian colonial liberation in Latin America to a "fight" for employee "liberation" in a modern business context. This uneven linguistic repositioning is, of course, a fantasy; HR personnel do not wish to revolutionize and liberate their workers any more than Boal wished to enslave his spectactors. Nevertheless, Boal becomes a "branded revolutionary," liberation becomes sellable as an appealing imaginary of HRM, and Forum is remade into a New Age training device that provides employees opportunities to constantly self-transform. As Paul Heelas writes on New Age management culture:

> The New Age Manager is imbued with new qualities and virtues, new in the sense that they differ from those found in the unenlightened workplace. These have to do with intrinsic wisdom, authentic creativity, self-responsibility, genuine energy, love and so on. Trainings are held to effect this shift. Furthermore, work itself is typically seen to serve as a 'growth environment'. The significance of work is transformed in that it is conceived as providing the opportunity to work on 'oneself.' It becomes a spiritual discipline. (1996, 90)

The tenants of New Age management invite the incorporation of artistic traditions like *Theatre of the Oppressed* as tools to foster collaborative creativity and give birth to workplace subjects who are taught to channel and intensify their feelings towards organizational ends, devote themselves to a business morality, trust themselves and each other, and invest in the continuous revolutionizing of their own labor (Thrift 2005, 41, Kantola 270, also see Sennett 1998, 2006). The circulation of Forum as a revolutionary tactic of corporate capitalism allows us to how corporate strategy gives traction to a radical capitalism that sells revolutionary ideals as packaged fantasies of organizational empowerment and global workplace emancipation.

Managerial scholarship on Forum theatre leaves much to be desired in terms of illustrating how Forum actually gets played out during training events. The following

section addresses this lack of empirical evidence by returning to HR Makers Mumbai, where I show how a textured look at the dissonance between Forum-inspired training in theory and Forum-inspired training in practice demonstrates how despite the ways Forum theatre gets funneled into managerial expectations, the latent theatricality of Forum-inspired training can lead to unanticipated opportunities for critical expression and contestation regarding normative company protocols.

Boal in the Workplace: HR Makers Mumbai

HR Makers took place at Mumbai's Centre for Excellence in Telecom Technology and Management (CETTM), one of India's largest corporate training centers. Around 50 HRM employees from over a dozen multinationals were in attendance. The session began like any other, with Dhruv introducing the audience to the work of Dynamic Drama. "Initially when we started the business in India we had a bit of an identity crisis," he began, "because sometimes we were referred to as a theatre group." "Theatre group" is drawn out with comedic emphasis, and several younger participants in the front row giggle. Dhruv goes on:

> While we absolutely love acting, we also know that it's a very exclusive skill. So we are very careful about the way we are positioning ourselves. We are a learning and development company that happens to use the skills of actors. This is very important for us to understand, because the moment I talk to a potential client and I say "we are a drama-based training company," the client kind of 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 requests, like requests for cocktail theatre where someone says "oh you guys perform, and our guys will have booze..." And I say, "uh, no. That's not what we do."

Dhruv's introduction, while light-hearted and humorous, contained a critical subtext that asserted drama-based learning as an accredited managerial practice. Theatre is alluded to as something distinctly non-corporate; Dhruv's insistence that DD is not a theatre group is a branding tactic that professionalizes theatre on par with other management tools and disassociates drama from histories of political activism or social change (a move similar

to the DSM and SMART's branding tactics in chapter one). "Theatre group" becomes "learning and development company," a recoding act that allows the group to remain legible and valuable as a business enterprise. Dhruv's speech also tacitly alluded to the kind of work DD will and will not do. Insisting that DD's products are for learning and not "cocktail theatre" (paltry entertainment) reaffirms this air of businesslike professionalism while maintaining a sense of individual control and agency in corporate spaces. Establishing boundaries on what jobs one will and will not accept is a common tactic for keeping professional standing and personal dignity intact.

DD specializes in drama-based learning for Diversity and Inclusion purposes. In 2015, a research report published by Beyond Diversity Foundation (an all-woman consultancy and think tank in Gurgaon) and the Indian Institute of Management: Ahmedabad (IIMM) reported that Indian multinationals began implementing D&I in response to a global push for diversity that began in Western contexts and disseminated around the world.[16] Corporate diversity efforts focus on harnessing demographic diversity for competitive advantage, and overcoming interoffice social bias to foster social responsibility programming (Bendl et. al. 2016). While most D&I efforts in India emerged in a Western work context, they are not simply superimposed to an Indian context. Gender has been the top theme of inclusion efforts; women employees struggle with discrimination and harassment, there are is a continued lack of female professionals in upper management roles. Retention is also a concern; many women leave work after getting married or having children (Ghosh and Alagaraja 2016). Like other D&I efforts, gender sensitization is framed as a business imperative; for example, consumer purchasing behavior is women-led, so having more women in leadership roles is seen to lead to better customer retention (BD and IIMM 2015, XI). As we saw in chapter three, gender diversity is also framed in terms of workplace balance; women are viewed as more empathetic than men; having a woman on the team is often justified through her unique ability to aid with conflict-management and emotional communication.

The second largest diversity theme is cultural diversity, seen as particularly vital to organizational achievement in India. Given the high preponderance of cross-

[16] www.beyondiversity.com/best-practices-in-inclusion/. Accessed March 22, 2019

cultural working teams, diversity agendas place special emphasis on cross-cultural communication and inclusion across cultural difference (Donnelly 2015). Team members can also come from widely different educational, regional, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds, and diversity efforts have concentrated on combatting instances of national, educational, and regional bias in the workplace. As one Associate Vice President in an American multinational in Gurgaon explained to me during a phone interview in 2016:

> There are other biases; for example the educational background or geographical area you're from. I live in Delhi; there are lots of Northeast [citizens] that come here for education and stick around to earn an education, and it's a known fact that some people are a little hostile because their appearance and their geographic locale. The other [bias] is education, because we constantly say, you know, you've got to have a certain level of education backing you, or certain level of experience […] sometimes there are very black and white scales. Also there are many unconscious biases kicked in when doing performance management reviews.

The third largest diversity theme is age and generational differences. The median age in India is 26 years old, and the private sector has a high population of workers who recently graduated from college and engineering schools. Generational differences between younger workers who grew up in a post-globalization era and their older counterparts are a common training theme.

Structures of corporate diversity management, in India and elsewhere, point to tensions in regimes of neoliberal governmentality that harness "culture" (ethnicity, race, gender) as a resource that can be managed for capital consolidation. In recognizing and subsuming workers' identity into the purview of organizational life, diversity management "demands (nicely) that employees give the corporation their entire person and potential, now including even those aspects which had previously remained refractory to direct workplace control" (Gordon 1995:18). They also point to the paradox whereby corporations attend to the inclusion of marginalized populations at the same time as they depoliticize that inclusion. The hypervisibility of select forms of inclusion in India further attests to this; minority populations like women and disabled persons are

heavily featured in training, whereas LGBT communities are less discussed. This is sometimes attributed to a perceived "lack" of LGBT citizens in the corporate sector, rather than symptomatic of the ways organizations harness some bodies in the service of growth while expunging or illegitimating others (see Park 2013).[17]

"Interviews as an opportunity to build employer brand"

The opening Forum scene for HR Makers centered on bias during the hiring process. The private sector prides itself on operating on the ideology of "merit;" according to industry officials, the most qualified applicants get the job, regardless of caste, class, gender, religion, or reservation status. The meritocracy system supports depictions of the corporate sector as a magnanimous benefactor of equal opportunity by foregrounding economic growth and concealing the takeover of smaller, family-owned firms and the reproduction of middle class and caste hegemony in urban India. As Upadhya writes:

> Several aspects of the recruitment process operate to the advantage of students from urban, educated, and middle-class families …who are more likely to possess desired forms of cultural capital. Second, many IT companies only hire candidates who have consistently scored 70-75 per cent marks from class 10 onwards, thereby excluding those who have gained entry to engineering colleges through seats reserved for the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs)…These filtering processes operate to create a hierarchy within the software labour force" (2016, 93).[18]

An elevated stage in the front of the large conference room is set with a table and two chairs. Saanvi is playing a company VP (Vice President) named Vinita who sits quietly typing on a laptop. Sanjay is playing Ashwin, an interviewee applying for the AVP (Assistant Vice President) position. He enters stage right and takes a seat. He is visibly

[17] As one trainer stated during an interview in 2017, "LGBT is carried over from the US; we don't have those people here and it doesn't fit the Indian context."

[18] Sociological data on the Indian corporate sector substantiates this claim: Hindus from Brahmin castes make up around 93% of the corporate sector, Muslims less than 3%, and women approximately 30%. The majority of employees are borne into educated middle class families, originate from urban municipalities with access to the internet, and attend private schools that teach them "neutral" English speaking and accent skills (Upadhya 2016).

nervous, wiping imaginary sweat from his brow and tapping his foot energetically. The audience sits quietly; several text on their phones. Vinita asks Ashwin where he is from. "Atpadi," Ashwin replies, and burst of surprised laughter breaks out from amongst participants in the audience; Atpadi is a rural district several hours from Pune. Ashwin continues, saying he comes from a small village in Sangli District. He recently earned his MBA in Business from Joglekar's College of Finance, a Tier III institute. Brow furrowed, Vinita asks Ashwin why his is applying to work at "SFS," a pseudonym for the global multinational. Ashwin smiles broadly and responds:

> Well, 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 this company is a leader in its field so I am here only. I want to work for SFS only.

The audience now watches with amused interest. Vinita asks Ashwin if he has any hobbies. Ashwin scrunches up his face, deep in thought. "Knitting," he finally says. "I knit." "You what?" Vinita raises her right eyebrow, looking horrified. "I knit. Sweaters, scarves, mufflers…" Spurred by the audience's uproarious laughter, Sanjay starts improvising his lines. "Actually, I have a scarf in my bag right now, do you want to see—no!" Vinita shouts over the laugher. This banter continues for a few minutes more, and the scene ends with the following exchange:[19]

> Vinita: Hmmm… Good… good… *(indicates closing of the meeting)* Ok… Thank you very much, Ashwin. It was great to meet you. We are still in the stage of considering candidates… once our shortlist, is ready, we will definitely get back to you, if you get selected. Thank you for coming in today. Wish you all the very best.
>
> Ashwin: *(A little surprised…not sure the interview is over…hesitantly gets up to leave)* Ok…thank you very much…
>
> Vinita: You are welcome. Have a nice day!
>
> *(Ashwin walks to the door and looks back once as if to ask something, then decides against it and walks away)*

[19] All script portions are lifted directly from script copies.

> Vinita: (In to 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... see you soon....

Vinita's disdain for Ashwin embodied the paradox of meritocracy as a system of non-biased selection. The language used to describe Ashwin's background (Atpadi, Joglekar's College, Sangli district) enacts his non-urban and lower educational background. These identifiers are not only linguistically inferred, but coded in the language of Ashwin's body; his awkwardness (sweating, fidgeting), vocal stumbling, and ambiguous effeminacy (knitting) performed a non-corporate body with an inability to embody "global professionalism." Ashwin, however, has all the right skills for the job. He is highly self-motivated, enthusiastic, knowledgeable about the company, and forward-looking; all markers of the enterprising, entrepreneurial work ethic of the knowledge economy. But Ashwin's bodily ineptness and passion to belong in the "global market economy" is perceived as desperation, rather than a professional air of self-assuredness. Corporate belonging is positioned as not only conditional upon a checklist of educational criterion, but upon one's ability to perform oneself *as* corporate—a strategic verbal and bodily exhibition of one's personal "background" (educational and social status).

Dhruv told the audience that it was time for "hot-seating," a de-brief period where employees ask the actors (still in character) questions and offer comments or critiques. Hands shot into the air, and the first comments chastised Vinita. "Why were you so disrespectful to him?" one man asked. Vinita deflected, saying it was laughable that applicants like Ashwin thought they could work at SFS. Strategically sidestepping questions of caste and class, she repeatedly insisted that his "background" was not right for the position. A woman raised her hand: "but this guy could be a star performer," she told Vinita, "he could be a better performer than you even." The room began laughing as Dhruv stepped in, asking the audience to locate the moment Vinita decided she was not going to hire Ashwin. After a thirty-second jumble of conversation, the audience said it

was the moment Ashwin explains he is from Atpadi. Once more, the discussion of "background" commenced, where Vinita was informed by participants that she should treat every candidate in the future with equal consideration.

This example reveals a dissonance between managerial literature on corporate theatre and how trainings unfold in "real time." It also makes powerfully evident the difference between Forum-inspired workplace training and actual Boalian models. On one hand, the vignette indirectly aired issues of classism and casteism in a context where such identity markers go unaddressed, offering a space for employees to assert their opinions on these issues. On the other, the skit used bodily language and humor to stereotype Ashwin in ways that confirmed his character as not "modern" enough to navigate a global workplace context, inviting the audience to participate in the marking of Ashwin as emblematic of the non-modern. The discussion sidestepped thorny discussions on lingering social inequalities through didactically repeating the importance of organizational meritocracy, which failed to critically expose the structural and social dynamics that exclude marginalized communities from India's elite private sphere and stifled consciousness of how to solve the problem of enduring class, caste, and educational discrimination. The perceived solution that Vinita is a "bad manager" motivated a desire for uniformity from participants and, perhaps, fears to voice alternative thoughts and questions.

Afterwards

As we began to set the stage for the next scenario, an older participant from the back row approached Dhruv and asked if he could take the microphone to make "a brief comment." "I just want to say a few words," the man (a Senior Director in HRM Strategy and Transformation for a multinational in Mumbai) began, gripping the microphone. "I am ashamed of you all," he said forcefully into the microphone. "I am ashamed at the moment I heard Atpadi." In a lengthy speech which lasted around twenty minutes, the participant told the audience that their laughter "made [them] as bad as Vinita." Waving his arms energetically while ignoring Dhruv's suggestions to move on to the next scene, the man characterized the audience's disavowal of Vinita as "hypocritical," telling participants they were all "guilty" of committing similar acts. "In

laughing at him, you were all full of bias," he repeated, wagging his finger at several younger participants in the front row who seemed to find his outburst amusing. His speech began veering into other points of contention, like how "close-minded" the labor force in India is and how "cultural sensitivity trainings never work." Eventually, Dhruv grabbed the microphone and thanked the man for his comments, telling him we could return to these points if there was time leftover at the end of the session (there wasn't).

While not a part of "official" workshop records, the man's disruption is important, because it demonstrates how corporate theatre events go "off-script" and deviate in unexpected directions that often contradict HR objectives. The man's castigation of the audience's unruly laughter at Ashwin called attention to the ways the dramatic skit engineered dynamics between spectators and actors that replicated stereotyping and contradicted the objectives the workshop intended to teach. In other words, the man "Boalified" the profoundly un-Boalian skit by reading it critically, standing up, and challenging the entire social contract and structure of the training. At the same time, the participant's suggestion for the audience to acknowledge their own complicity in the perpetuation of damaging stereotypes reiterated narratives of meritocracy that reproduced the logics underlying the training. While the man's disruption can never be "radical" or "revolutionary" in a Boalian sense, it invites us to think about the inadvertent side effects of corporate theatre and the promise and problem of theatricality in corporate spaces. Even as corporations instrumentalize theatre, there is something *insistently inadmissible* about theatricality that makes it impossible to quantify these practices as always and only ever occurrences of capitalist appropriation—a point I return to in the chapters that follow.

Conclusion: Theatre of the Corporate Capitalist

This chapter provided a condensed history of theatre-in-management to call attention to a parallel history of theatre that can inform our understanding of why and how drama acquired managerial legitimacy in the contemporary global work economy. I proposed that tracing the shifting meanings of theatre in mainstream and critical management discourse over the past several decades evidences a complex *re-coding* (rather than a straightforward case of cooption or assimilation) of theatrical histories,

ideologies, and techniques into contemporary corporate strategies that aim to "revolutionize" employees and workplaces to consolidate power. The second part of this chapter textured this claim through providing a look at the training space in India, where I demonstrated how theatricality in corporate spaces unwittingly carries potential to produces its own kinds of emancipatory potentials even as it enables forms of capitalist power that are inherently anti-radical and anti-revolutionary.

Returning to my early morning taxi ride on July 15, 2017, I recall my sense of confusion over Dhruv's admission about using Boal in his corporate training sessions. What he was describing as "Forum theatre" was not, in fact, anything to do with Forum theatre as I understood it. The element of spectactorship was eliminated altogether, the participants did not get to decide which problems to discus, and conversations about Boal and TO were absent from actual workshop spaces. Why call it Forum theatre at all? But Dhruv's anxiety and struggle over not appearing professional or "businesslike" enough also reveals the tension at the heart of corporate theatre: the simultaneous distrust of the actor and employee as a thinker, agent, and creative individual alongside passionate calls for individuals to transform themselves to become ever more productive, liberated, and powerful. Dhruv, like many trainers I observed, has to continuously walk a fine line between fulfilling corporate objectives of productivity while striving to make the workspace look and sound as "Boalian" as possible. The chapters that follow continue to explore this crux between theatre and professionalism and its wider implications for artistic labor and corporate self-making in India. Next, I dig into corporate theatre's promise to inspire personal and organizational transformation in India's rapidly changing global business world.

Chapter Two:
Activating the Corporate Soul

Freedom without Definition in a VUCA World

Savita takes a deep breath and rolls her head back and forth. "If I could just have you all come back," she says, beckoning those sipping tea and chatting to return to the center of a spacious training room housed in a global bank office in Gurgaon. It is mid-afternoon on July 7th, 2018, the second day of a "Personal Impact and Influence" training designed as part of three-series employee "journey" on foundational leadership. When not coaching corporate leaders, Savita spends most of her time doing applied theatre work with Muslim youth in Nizamuddin Basti, a bustling neighborhood in old Delhi. Picking lint from her blazer, she now smiles encouragingly and introduces the second half of the day's work:

> So you've just delved a little deeper into yourself, [because] theatre is about presence and about making a lasting impact. Before the break, I asked you to think about your personal values. I'll begin with mine. "Why would people choose to work with me?" I bring passion into whatever I do. "What is my point of view?" My point of view is that everyone is a bag of stories. "What do I stand for?" I stand for dignity. "What are my values?" Critical thinking, nurturing myself. What sets you apart? Makes you different from competitors? For me, it is living theatre principles.

Savita announces it is time for participants to create individual logos. She holds up her own—a piece of paper with a drawing of a heart and a question mark on it. She explains that the question mark symbolizes her inner curiosity, and the heart represents her love for herself and others. Gesturing towards piles of crayons laid out on each table, Savita gives the group 10 minutes to create their logos. The participants, twelve men and one woman (all middle managers), look baffled. "We can Google, right?" one man jokes. Savita says sure.

We work in silence. I watch one man scroll through his phone hurriedly, brow furrowed. Later when I ask if he has ever done something like this, he laughs and shakes

his head; “Not at all; I work.” Savita tells the room to stop, put the crayons down. After everyone takes a pledge they will not judge each other’s artwork, we begin. “*Challo,* I wanted to depict us all,” the first participant starts. He holds up an image of two eyes and a nose surrounded by shades of yellow. “This is a soul—it's nothing but a point of light and energy. It wants to spread light and remain light. Remain stress-free and enlightening, people.” Everyone gives a round of applause. “Basically,” the next explains, “I tried to say that growing life, not financially but as a person, how giving light to the entire world, to the team, to the people…these describe me as a person. Honesty, care, integrity.” More applause.

The next participant holds out a brightly colored drawing and reads from a piece of paper. “So mine’s essentially three critical components: one is traveling the big bad road, [the] second is the destination for me which is the markets—the first opportunity I get I go there, working towards there— and the third is the sun, very clichéd (*he laughs*), and represents light and everything about life.” “For me,” the next man says, “life revolves around [work first] and whatever I do, I want to be best. And other aspect of me is peaceful; I want to be connected. Then family is very important, and social responsibility. I want to contribute back to people, society, nature, my country.” The last to go holds up a sign displaying “Deepak Freedom” against a backdrop of purples, blues, and greys. He stands up and smooths down his tie:

> This is my logo, and why? This is the flying word which I can think of now. When you are flying in [the] sky, that is the best posture of freedom which I can think of right now. Deepak freedom. And last but not least important, from childhood Ghandiji taught me about freedom—freedom without definition.”

“Wow,” one woman breathes as the room breaks into applause for Deepak. Savita thanks everyone for their honesty. “I just want to check how you're feeling,” she says. “Often times we cannot express things into words, and this allows us to express.” Activities like these, Savita continues, allow participants to tap into their innermost selves—to peel back their professional masks and transform themselves in order to strengthen their impact on

others. “Authenticity has *power*,” she says emphatically. “Our inner reality is in it; it’s way more powerful. And that’s when you’re absolutely able to make an impact.”

Transformation is the new mantra of the business world. Board room walls, training spaces, and organizational change literatures espouse transformational change as the saving grace of a global market in extreme duress—what India’s Global Leadership Report of 2014, an annual research paper published by the Center for Creative Leadership international consultancy firm, calls “the VUCA vortex.”[1] First developed as a preparedness strategy by the United States military following the Cold War (Mack 2016, 81)[2], VUCA refers to a climate of constant disruption, chaos, and change. The V, as Suhayl Abidi and Manoj Joshi write in their book on India’s VUCA landscape, marks Volatility, where the nature and speed of organizational change flows in erratic patterns. U is Uncertainty, a lack of predictability regarding workplace issues and solutions. C is Complexity, the mitigating factors involved in conducting business in a globally intertwined environment, and A is Ambiguity, a lack of lucidity regarding business affairs (2015, 1-2). Similar to how the United States had to improvise and develop its military intelligence in order to navigate a newly multilateral geopolitical landscape, global firms in India are navigating elements ranging from currency volatility, cybersecurity, and corruption to economic depression in Europe and financial insecurity in China.[3] The VUCA world, often referred to as simply “VUCA,” has created more pressure than ever on HR teams to implement skill development programs that secure retention and endurance in a business age marked by growing automation technologies, increasing shareholder expectations, and large-scale acquisitions (GLR 2014/15, 11, GLR 2018/19, 5). [4]

VUCA first appeared to me in 2014, while observing a meeting between an HR executive and a theatre trainer in Gurgaon. While I have little recollection of the actual

[1] For a full manuscript of the report see http://www.ddiworld.com/DDI/media/trend-research/in/working-within-the-vuca-vortex_glf2014_in_ddi.pdf. Accessed March 27, 2019.
[2] Also see the Harvard Business Review https://hbr.org/2014/01/what-vuca-really-means-for-you. Accessed March 27, 2019.
[3] https://www.ccl.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/developing-next-generation-indian-business-leaders.pdf. Accessed March 1, 2019.
[4] https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/tech/ites/how-indian-it-companies-trying-to-survive-as-outsourcing-business-decline/articleshow/64499542.cms

meeting, my notes detail the manager's emphasis on requiring a training which would prepare her employees to "deal with the truths of VUCA." Since then, VUCA has rebounded throughout my conversations with staff, employees, and trainers; as one interlocutor put it in 2016, "VUCA. Five or six years back I heard this, and it just keeps coming and coming." Alertness of VUCA since the 2010s abetted in the growth of theatre as a tool that can teach employees how to traverse an arbitrary and fickle work landscape. To quote a Delhi-based theatre consultancy CEO in 2017:

> There has been a huge shift. The VUCA world as they're calling it now; a huge shift in awareness…One change is L&D being classroom-centric to experiential; being more around case studies to now saying "okay, let's implement this and do action learning projects." A lot of those shifts are visible in the lingo, in the approach, and of course we're also shifting something within ourselves. Our ways of looking at things, our ways of designing our workshops, our way of implementing our theatre facilitation.

If VUCA is the new framework for global business strategy and transformation its key to survival, then personalized employee growth is the adhesive that fasten these narratives together. In 2018, Harvard-educated Judi Neal's *Handbook of Personal and Organizational Transformation*, a "book on cutting-edge theory and practice on small and large scale transformation," announced that "there can be no team, organizational, or global transformation without *personal* transformation." (2018, viii, emphasis original).[5] HR departments in India looking to avoid "falling behind in the race to transform" (GLR 2018, 48) are implementing theatre trainings which highlight individual transformation as central to what Ruediger Fox calls "activating the corporate soul:" "a new evolutionary level of leadership that transcends our traditional mental models of management" (2018, 695-696). These workshops, exemplified in Savita's "Personal Impact" training, where employees were asked to share their innermost sense of self in order to transform their impact potential, position personal transformation as critical to professional advancement in the VUCA age. Stated by an executive to a crowd gathered for a national HR meeting I attended at Tata headquarters in Pune in 2016, "we now need

[5] https://www.springer.com/us/book/9783319668925. Accessed March 24, 2019.

to know employee speak. It can't be all about business." Later on, CEO's shared their own examples of "employee championing," which ranged from custom-made birthday mailers to an "I Care" web platform where employees send anonymous messages complementing each other's performance. Such "best practices" make employees feel valued through spotlighting their individual journeys, while foster competitive advantage by improving inclusion metrics on the *Great Place to Work* index.

Transformation has also been a key refrain of the performance world. "Drama always provides a place for, and means of, transformation," Richard Schechner writes in *Performance Theory* (1988, 164), through qualities such as empathy, catharsis, and delight. William Beeman approaches performance from an anthropological perspective to locate its transformative power in its pragmatic ability to "restructure social order" and do "cultural work in the world" (2002, 86). Performance studies theorists like Jill Dolan (2005), José Esteban Muñoz (2009), and Erika Fischer-Lichte (2008) turn to moments of serendipitous connection formed through spectator and audience dialectics to show how performance produces "a transformative and vital energy" which can incite new democratic futures and empower those outside racial, economic, and sexual mainstreams (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 99). Cormac Power refers to this energy as a "sort of experience" where reactions of joy, sentimentality, and consciousness arise from the ephemerality of the theatrical encounter (2008, 3, also see Phelan 1993). These scholars mutually attest to performance's phenomenological complexity—its inherent ability to incite processes of transformation through producing kinds of "body-presence" which assist in continuous modes of being and becoming that lead to what Fischer-Lichte calls "the reenchantment of the world" (2008, 99).

In the corporate world, then, transformation refers to those tangible changes (to workers, office environments, strategy plans, operating models) designed to dramatically alter a company's future trajectory in ways that feed bottom line profit scenarios. In the performance world, transformation is an indefinable experience and feeling of the ordinary becoming the extraordinary through the aesthetic experience, or those small but profound moments where artistic practice inspires sensations of hope, change, or meaningful ways of assessing ourselves and each another anew. How can we ration these

two conceptions of transformation through corporate theatre, a practice which intertwines these dynamics to incite workplace change?

In this chapter, I demonstrate how theatrical performance has become a key technology of the 21st century "corporate soul"—a business ethos which harnesses discourses of human potential and individual self-making to attain moral and social legitimacy (see Marchland 2008, Shah and Ramamoorthy 2013)—through detailing how corporate theatre is administered to target transformation in three sites of India's VUCA economy. I first look at the use of corporate theatre in "Campus to Corporate" orientations, aimed at transitioning recent college graduates into global corporate life through soft skills enhancement. Detailing a workshop administered for entry-level Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) workers in Gurgaon in 2017, I show how organizations teach employees to be corporate story-tellers who humanize the company brand by transforming organizational data into creative, consumable capital. I further demonstrate how theatre-based Campus to Corporate programs present India's VUCA world as at once highly chaotic and personally liberating, using tropes of personal vulnerability and the celebration of individual experience to impart an ethos of company loyalty.

From there, I look at how organizations work on transforming middle and upper-level employees through using dramatic games and exercises to cultivate *presence* in the workplace: a metaphysical state of being-and-becoming where employees are taught that eliciting vibes of magnetism, leadership, and style are the solution to occupational advancement in VUCA. Detailing findings from a series of theatre-based "assessment center" workshops—a form of training where employees are closely inspected while undergoing drama activities—I show how corporations decide which employees harbor "peak performance potential" through inculcating a regulatory beauty politics that renders personal, physical labors of aesthetic transformation central to the makeover of the corporate self under neoliberalism. This process, which I argue typifies a particularly insidious version of "body-shopping" in 21st century capitalism, demonstrates how VUCA operates as a sexualized labor economy which utilizes the transformational

qualities of performance to position workers in a perpetual state of insufficiency and always-becoming with respect to the organization.

The final part of this chapter pivots from analyzing transformation inside the workplace to examining how theatre training transforms the individuals who develop, design, and deliver these events. I offer a close look inside the consultancy office space (where I worked in close proximity with trainers and staff over the course of several years) to show how trainers and personnel are expected to perform as agents and models of corporate self-making—to constantly evolve their own presence and self-journey in ways subject to discourses of middle class belonging, liberal youth culture, and global aspirations in contemporary urban India. Within this, I place emphasis on examining how women professionals navigate corporate theatre work, underscoring narratives that demonstrate the differentially experienced processes of personal and professional transformation and quotidian forms of gendered violence inherent in VUCA economies.

"Numbers Have to Speak"

Mukta looks annoyed. HR told her she would be in a "private" training area, but "private" meant a tiny room with transparent walls overlooking a bustling office floor. She hands me some posters and tells me to cover the glass. As I start taping a cheerful sign encouraging employees to skip lunch breaks as a way of "Living Company Values," a young woman walks in. She introduces herself as Tanvi and says she is from Calcutta. She asks Mukta if theatre training is like *jatra*—street theatre in Bengal.[6] Mukta shakes her head. "Nowadays that is more so used for campaigns and awareness," she says, then rolls her eyes. "They even have street theatre competitions now, can you believe?" Today's workshop is a part of a "Campus to Corporate" orientation, where recent graduates ("freshers") get acclimated to corporate life through intensive hard and soft skills training. Tanvi and others recently finished two weeks of technical instruction, and the Friday morning theatre workshop was slated to fulfill the soft skills portion of the introduction program.

[6] While Mukta referred to yatra in its street theatre iteration, Bengali yatra also refers to other forms of popular folk theatre in Bengal which use elements of religion, comedy, music, and dance (see Guha-Thakurta 1974 for a detailed history).

The soft skills revolution hit in India in the 2000s, when the government's 11th Five Year Plan (covering the period from 2007-2012) became the first to devote an entire chapter to citizen skills training. According to the report, 80% of India's workforce did not possess the "identifiable, marketable" skills needed to "respond to changes in technology and market demands" and contribute to a newly globalized economy (2008 Volume II, 21).[7] The document, as Divya Nambiar (2013) writes, set into motion three interrelated developments crucial to the formation of contemporary neoliberal India. The first was the rise of a "range of institutions to promote, coordinate, fund, monitor, and implement skills-training initiatives," like rural anti-poverty skill development programs and NGO youth empowerment skilling schemes. The second was the creation of a National Skill Development Policy in 2009 to oversee private and public sector skilling agendas like the government's "Skill India" campaign of 2015, targeted to train over 40 crore people by 2022.[8] The third was a range of programs designed to fix the talent deficits of specific departmental domains, in particular the Information Technology industry, rural education landscape, manufacturing zones, and retail sector (2013, 61). As Nambiar writes, the history of skill development in India provides an excellent landscape to examine how state and private enterprise function together in the development sector, as well as how "skill development programmes are not simply aimed at imparting technical skills, but are an attempt to create an entirely new workforce, with certain specific psychological and behavioural qualities which would enable individuals to fit in perfectly with India's new workplaces" (62-63).

India Inc.'s "skills crisis" is attributed to an industry-wide lack of soft skills.[9] "In the IT/ITES sector," a 2016 *Economic Times* article reported, "a lack of soft skills (36%) and looking for more pay than what is offered (34%) are the top reasons that employers in India are not able to fill the positions."[10] Similar to the United States, soft skills

[7] http://planningcommission.nic.in/plans/planrel/fiveyr/11th/11_v2/11th_vol2.pdf. Also refer to Divya Nambiar's essay "Creating Enterprising Subjects through Skill Development: The Network State, Network Enterprises and Youth Aspirations in India" in *Enterprise Culture of Neoliberal India* (2013).
[8] See https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/pm-modi-launches-skill-india-initiative-that-aims-to-train-40-crore-people-781897. Accessed March 27, 2019.
[9] http://www.softskillsindia.com/. Accessed March 26, 2019.
[10] https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/jobs/48-of-indian-employers-up-against-talent-

training in India emphasizes the necessity for employees' to "transform their lives" (Nambiar 65) through interpersonal skills like personal effectiveness, teamwork, and leadership (also see Upadhya 2013, 93-100). Soft skills in India also refers to mastery of English and includes the addition of complex forms of cultural conditioning that address specific interpersonal issues like social awkwardness from gender-related concerns.[11] As awareness of VUCA permeates the corporate consultancy field, so has the emphasis on soft skills; as the CEO of India's GEMS Skills consultancy put it during a press interview 2016, "we are living in a VUCA world. Content is not as important as how you deliver that content."[12]

India's Skill Report of 2019—an annual joint initiative of Wheebox, a global talent assessment company, PeopleStrong, an HR firm, the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII), and associated partners including the UN Development Program—affirms the continued necessity of soft skills training for remaining on par with the global standards and encourages companies to impart "reskilling" programs that equip workers to navigate the VUCA economy. In a section of the report titled "From Skilling to Reskilling," reskilling is described as a continual process of etching new work competencies contingent upon fluctuating business patterns (2019, 21). The report reads:

> The dynamic nature of businesses has increased the level of pressure on the leaders and decision-makers to innovate and create something new on a frequent basis…but the availability of talent to meet these demands is under question. The unavailability of talent for new age skills have made savvy organizations reskill their people ahead of demand … reskilling initiatives were not heard of 10 or even 5 years back, but now the employers are trying to strengthen the skills and capabilities of their employees so they can meet the changing business and organizational demands (20-22).[13]

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shortage/articleshow/54913657.cms?from=mdr. Accessed March 1, 2019.

[11] Male employees not knowing how to speak or work alongside women employees was an oft-cited HR concern during my research.

[12] http://asq.org/qualitynews/qnt/execute/displaySetup?newsID=21274. Accessed March 24, 2019.

[13] For a full text of the report, access file:///C:/Users/saddl008/Desktop/India%20Skill%20Report-2019.pdf

While the Skills Report encourages organizations to replace their current training programs with reskilling initiatives that ingrain the "new age" skills compulsory for growth, however, what constitutes these aptitudes is left underspecified, demonstrating an evasiveness surrounding the grounds of employability in the VUCA economy I detail later on.

The Skills India report optimistically states that the IT industry will continue to "alter the perception of India in the global economy," reaching a transaction value of Rs. 32 trillion (USD $480 billion) by 2022.[14] It also documents, however, a continuing decline of "employability skills" emerging from recent graduates. To remedy this, MBA and engineering school students are increasingly targeted for soft skills enhancement before they enter the workplace. Prestigious Tier-I schools like the Indian Institutes of Technology and the Indian Institutes of Management offer programs aimed to prepare students for the campus interview process and office environment through utilizing drama and other experiential learning approaches. For example, in 2017 I participated in a weeklong "Creative Minds" student orientation at the Indian Institute of Technology in Mandi, a city in North India's Himalchal Pradesh state. Throughout the week, students were constantly reminded of the importance of soft skills (in particular English fluency) to their future career paths. As the lead facilitator (a children's theatre director and teacher from Delhi) stated on the first morning of the orientation:

> Physical communication [is] important, emotional communication [is] important, intellectual communication [is] very important. All three are very important. Your body language is very important. Communication cannot be complete without all three being totally in your control: body, emotion, and mind. If you're not prepared to deal with a situation like this, you cannot become a big boss.

Against the backdrop of India's skills crisis is Mukta's Campus to Corporate workshop, designed to "upskill" 12 new employees (five women, seven men) beginning their careers in a back office data BPO in Gurgaon. "These guys are responsible for

[14] Other media sources have reported less encouraging results from the Skill India campaign. For an example see https://thewire.in/business/why-is-india-inc-reluctant-to-participate-in-the-skill-india-campaign. Accessed March 25, 2019.

crunching numbers all day," Mukta explained to me that morning, "then they have to present those numbers to their supervisor, who will then present it to the client. But they currently speak in their own language;" technical jargon not easily understood by upper management. The goal of the workshop was to make employees more comfortable with public speaking by teaching them, in Mukta's words, "how to make numbers speak." A "Dramatic Storytelling" workshop was created to show the participants how to transform the data they will be gathering during their everyday work lives into engaging, dynamic presentations easily digestible to immediate supervisors and external stakeholders.[15]

"Why might storytelling be important for your work?" Mukta asked the room. "I think everything is a story," one participant began. "Like Shakespeare says, all the world's a stage and everyone's an actor." Another rolls his eyes: "because clients need to understand numbers only." Next was an observation that "stories give us learnings," followed by the guess "because stories help us with our motivation?" (This woman's dubious-sounding answer is common in training and demonstrates how participants are often already cognizant and eager to supply the "right" answers to facilitator questions). Mukta agreed all these are important points and added one more: "storytelling really helps you cut noise. We get so attached to the data that we feel like we want to present all the numbers that we have, whereas it's actually not useful for the end user." Mukta's description of cutting noise alluded to participants' reliance on hard skills in workplace social situations, viewed as a detriment to their ability to fit with the culture of the organization. Put differently by Mukta, "Boss doesn't know what you're saying when you speak in numbers only." Importantly, story-telling will also help employees bring their personal feelings and experiences into the office context, inviting them to find points of emotional connection with their peers and seem relatable in front of managers. Mukta explained:

> Something that is central to all human beings is feelings. Stories make you feel things. And on that level you connect. So today the first half of the day is going to be on

[15] This form of training is not unique; in recent years HRM theory has advocated for story-telling as a way of bringing in the personal experiences of individuals into organizational life—although story-telling is usually framed in terms of improving efficacy and less in terms of soft skills enhancement (see, for example, Beigi 2014).

> creating stories, and the second is going to be on being able to tell the stories…whether it's stories from numbers or stories from fantasies, any of those—it's just so, so, so, so central. So we are going to spend the day exploring how stories will get realized in your work life.

During the first half of the day, employees walked through space, improvised stories about what they had for breakfast that morning, answered prompts like "*when was the first time you cheated on an exam and what happened?"* and *"have you ever looked up your ex on Facebook, and if so how many times?"* and played a game called "feeling cards" where they performed emotions ("happy," "angry," "sad") in front of a partner. During these ice-breaker activities, Mukta encouraged participants to "tell the truth" and "open up" to become more comfortable with one another. She also reminded participants that the workshop was a "safe" space and whatever information they shared would remain confidential; "being vulnerable" was positioned as "proof" that employees were passionate about learning. (I also saw this kind of initiation process replicated inside theatre consultancy offices; for example, one interlocutor accounted how during his first day in the office, staff members asked him to divulge details of his dating life and sexual history as a means of joining the company community).

Following ice-breakers, Mukta gave a lecture on the Mehrabian model of communication, a psychology theory on the effectiveness of body language often used in theatre training (Mausehund et al 1995). "Mehrabian discovered that 7% of what we perceive from others is from the words they are saying," Mukta explained, "the rest of the 93% is communicated through our bodies." She stressed the point by slowly scanning the room while she spoke, making eye contact with each person her gaze fell upon. Employees were reminded that their technical knowledge and pedigree no longer makes them competitive in a VUCA climate; as with other soft skills training programs, an employee's ability to appear pleasant, confident, and engaging was emphasized as not equally important to occupational expertise, but demonstrative of it.

The group was then divided into groups and given thick folders of data. They had 35 minutes to assemble the information in the folder into an engaging story to perform for their peers. Everyone greeted the task with an air of slight panic; spreading hundreds

of sheets of numbers and figures across the floor, groups of four and five sat down and hurriedly begin highlighting, sorting, and categorizing. I huddled in a corner with a group of three men and one woman; within five minutes they had assigned each other data-gathering tasks and a time-keeper to monitor their progress. When Mukta announced a half hour later it was almost time to perform, the group expressed dismay that time had run out and hastily decided to stand in a line reading their data analyses one by one.

The first group presented on trends and drivers of global air conditioning systems across the Asia Pacific, the US, and sub-Saharan Africa. In their presentation, they attributed India's overextended electricity grids to urban crowding, and advocated for the government to devote more resources to power control. The second group presented on climate change, opening with the announcement that "No matter what Donald Trump says, we know global warming is a huge deal for us," which received a smile from Mukta and appreciative laughter from the rest of the group. The third discussed global food production, where they stood in a line reading statistics that showed how India is "lagging behind" behind countries like the US and China. During feedback, Mukta encouraged everyone to "let go of the numbers," and suggested they create a "hook" to get their audience interested. She reminded participants that their stories should make the audience "feel something," and suggested bringing in case studies, using more quotes (she complimented a group that had used a quote from politician Shashi Tharoor in their presentation), or structure their presentations like they would a play, with a first and second act. "You could start with 'once upon a time,' or include a conflict, or have a moral of the story," she reminded everyone. "Get your numbers to speak, and create a *need* for your story in that space and for people to listen to what you have to say." She announced that the first presentation was a warm-up for the final workshop activity, which would compile data on the Brexit Referendum (that took place earlier that month) and transform it into an engaging story.

Mukta's encouragement sunk in; once again the room became inundated with papers, but this time participants barely glanced at their data. The room became a flurry of excitement, noise, and commotion; instead of sitting quietly sorting reports and figures, everyone remained standing, eagerly debating the most entertaining way to

present their information. Several groups left the room to find items on the office floor to use as props or costumes. One group named itself "Team Deathnote" and hung posters to prevent anyone else from seeing their rehearsal, while another left to rehearse in the tea room. After around twenty minutes Mukta tried to get the final presentations started, but everyone begged for more time. "Please madam, three more minutes" was repeated until Mukta exasperatedly stated we had to begin. Since Mukta had made it clear that the participants were only expected to "be themselves," the challenge fell upon making the dramatic performances as goofy as possible.

"So we're not going to be politically correct because we're Indians," the first group announced at the start of their presentation, which received a generous round of applause. They chose the theme of "friendship," ("an integral part of any Indian's life"), to tell the story of four friends who became drug lords and "did a referendum of drug addicted people." The friends, symbolizing countries involved in Brexit, got into a knife fight over the "drugs," piles of crumbled colored paper strewn around the floor. When one man screamed "Bitch please!" and threw "drugs" at his female team member, Mukta gave him a disapproving glance and said we had to move on. The next group (Team Deathnote) attributed the referendum to the UK's thirst for world domination. "Britain colonized the world and dominated us and other colonies," one man explained while flourishing a makeshift Indian flag, "so they believe they can reach their past glory again through leaving the EU." The audience hooted and hollered throughout the group's performance, especially when a participant made a Modi joke. The final group set their presentation in 2014, immediately after India's World Series loss to Sri Lanka and prior to the national elections. "Just like in India, young people in Britain are the future of the country," a woman announced, "they must throw off the old people who want to stay in the union and use their experience to give protection to the ethnic minorities." While seemingly nonsensical in the context of Brexit, Mukta nodded approvingly at the ways each group used storytelling to insert themselves and their data into broader political and social debates.

At the end of the day, Mukta had everyone sit in a circle and asked them what they had learned. "I feel very happy with the learnings," one man offered. "This was an

opportunity for us to think of data as a bigger picture and as a story, also [an] opportunity for us to work together as a team." "Yes," another woman agreed, "we were able to think of data in a creative way, and it captured the attention of our audience more than the text." Other participants jokingly applauded particular employees for their theatrical talents, and once more the room turned into a jumble of laughter and conversation before Mukta interrupted. She cautioned the group against eliminating numbers altogether from their presentations, reminding everyone that they needed to find a balance between "making numbers speak" and retaining enough professionalism to ensure managers took what they were saying seriously. "You need to balance your creative, intuitive side with your technical side, not let one shine over the other," she concluded.

Mukta's Campus to Corporate workshop illustrates how "hard skills" workers are taught to perform as corporate storytellers whose ability to present themselves as self-assured, likable, and socially adept gets linked to their future career potential. The training also demonstrates how entry-level workers are being acclimated to corporate life through undergoing exercises that ask them to expose themselves emotionally—to share their innermost secrets and experiences regarding their love lives, cheating on exams, etc. in order to acquire a sense of inner belonging and loyalty to the organization. These activities not only bolster narratives of companies as uniquely invested in what their workers believe and value, but transcend the office environment from a site of work to a sanctuary for bonding and acceptance—an imperative that has grown in recent years as India's "millennial" workforce is understood to be increasingly disillusioned by the "grandeur" of corporate life.[16] Research emerging from corporate India suggests a rapid deterioration of younger employees' sense of dedication to organizational values—a Deloitte Millennial Survey from 2018 described the dilemma as follows:

> Following a troubling year, where geopolitical and social concerns gave rise to a new wave of business activism, millennials and Gen Z are sounding the alarm….Millennials' opinions about business' motivations and ethics, which had trended up the past two years, retreated dramatically this year, as did their sense of

[16] Corporate jobs are highly esteemed by the public as occupations with impressive benefits like air conditioned offices, modern interior environs, and overseas travel opportunities.

> loyalty. And neither generation is particularly optimistic about their readiness for Industry 4.0. Their concerns suggest this is an ideal time for business leaders to prove themselves as agents of positive change.[17]

"Freshers" like those in Mukta's workshop are considered vital sources of talent and future growth. As the survey continues, "attracting and retaining millennials and Gen Z respondents begins with financial rewards and workplace culture" (www2.deloitte.com). Campus to Corporate programs operate as not only a soft skills platform to make workers less socially awkward, but as a way to impress an ethos of care, responsibility, and community into incoming employees—to incite belief in a "corporate soul." Dramatic storytelling functions as a vessel by which new workers get exposed to corporate life as accepting, chaotic, and liberating, rather than isolating, competitive, and grueling. This narrative disrupts depictions of Campus to Corporate platforms as orienting Indian employees to an ethos of global corporate professionalism which diverges from their seemingly more relaxed, vernacular college environments. See, for example, the following ad from a consultancy services company in Hyderabad:

> Making a transition from campus to corporate life proves to be a major stumbling block for many new hires. There are unspoken nuances and social norms that many graduates are completely unaware of and adjusting to a professional environment can be extremely challenging as also traumatic to a few. It has been observed that people who are equipped with the basic knowledge of the survival skills needed in a working setup tend to do much better. Employability requires three key ingredients of competency - knowledge, skills and attitude.[18]

In a reversal of the so-called "traumatic" transition experiences new hires navigate when adjusting to corporate life, dramatic story-telling crafts an ethos of organizational benevolence and acceptance (you can tell your secrets here, you can make jokes, you can even be political!) in an environment marked by extreme competition, constant

[17] https://www2.deloitte.com/global/en/pages/about-deloitte/articles/millennialsurvey.html. Accessed March 28, 2019.
[18] https://www.bodhih.com/corporate-training/behavioural-skills/impactful-corporate-presence/campus-to-corporate/. Accessed March 26, 2019.

evaluation, and long working hours. Employees, especially younger entry-level workers without family obligations, are encouraged to spend as much time at work as possible. Humanizing the brutality of the workplace by eliciting the personal feelings and experiences of new hires not only convinces them that they belong, but that they should desire to spend as much time at work as possible.

Mukta's emphasis on "being yourself," moreover, is constantly positioned in relation to one's ability to perform in front of a supervisor or external stakeholder. Training workers to be storytellers reifies the corporate brand through leading supervisors and stakeholders to perceive organizational information as authentic, personable, and attention-grabbing. Saturating data with perceived national ideologies ("friendship") and markers of a globally aware outlook attentive to changing political dynamics and historical ideologies ("Donald Trump, "colonialism") imbues company knowledge (and, by extension, companies themselves) with personality; data becomes cultural, knowable, edgy, acquiring its own voice and agency. Employees "perform the organization" through embodying its information as creative capital, partaking in a form of corporeal work Maurya Wickstrom calls "corporate performance," within which "corporations have turned us into affective, embodied, theatrical laborers on their own behalf" (2006, 4). Dramatizing data assists in the "reskilling" of soft skills from the cultivation of interpersonal aptitudes to humanizing data for competitive advantage in the VUCA economy.

Cultivating Presence

In November 2017, I sat in the back row of a classroom at IIMB (Indian Institute of Management Bangalore), a business school ranked one of the top ten in the Asia-Pacific.[19] A professor was lecturing on the importance of goal-setting. He stressed to the class (a group of managers in a large state-owned gas company) the significance of remaining competitive for internal growth and national productivity: "Today, in the global environment, if you're not number one or number two, you tend to become a part of history…you're responsible for supervising growth and ensuring that it contributes to

[19]https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/news/education/iimb-ranked-among-top-10-in-ft-asia-pacific-business-schools-2018/article25654043.ece. Accessed March 1, 2019.

the growth of the country." He launched into a discussion on the importance of self-presentation:

> Performance is about behavior, and you create a vision of a person in his role. We look at the person and decide what competencies he has, what competencies needed for that role—just by what he looks like. If you're going to work in the VUCA world, you have to have a vision for your journey and for yourself.

The professor's discussion of behavior and the importance of first impressions echoes Erving Goffman's impression management paradigm, which studies the ways individuals partake in modes of social performance that control how others perceive them (1959). Goffman's theories are commonly used in work contexts to teach employees how to orchestrate their appearance and self-presentation in ways that make a positive lasting impression on others (Sinha 2010).

The professor's speech, however, portrays impression management as only one part of an employee's broader "vision," gesturing towards a more expansive process of worker transformation where appearance and self-presentation function as pieces of a broader individual "journey" of personal and professional development. This sketches out a mode of corporate self-making that connects an individual's outward demeanor with a phenomenological sense of their being, alluding to a kind of workplace *presence* that encompasses an employee's intangible sense of energy, feeling, or vibe. Presence as an inferred, metaphysical perception of an individual's inner self is presented as a crucial signifier of one's performance potential in the VUCA world.

My use of presence derives from the work of performance theorists like Antonin Artaud, Tadeusz Kantor, Jerzy Grotwoski, and Cormac Power, who theorize the non-representational qualities of presence as a continuous mode of being-and-becoming associated with "unmediated communication, the mysterious, and heightened states of awareness with truth, revelation and even spiritual salvation" (Connelly and Railey 2010, 206). Transposed into a work context, presence hinges on an individual's ability to release sensations of confidence, magnetism, style, and an assertive yet non-aggressive sense of control over oneself and others. The rise of presence in India's VUCA world can

be understood as a response to increasing demands for employees to present themselves as "star performers" from the interview process. Throughout my fieldwork, hiring personnel often admitted to selecting applicants based on the "feelings" they perceived from that person. As one manager stated during a phone interview I conducted in preparation for a training in 2016:

> We go more with the gut feeling [when hiring someone]. We mostly have an idea of what kind of a person we want in the team, so we look for very specific behaviors / knowledge and if there is any deviation, we reject the candidate. Like a year ago, the things I was looking for were being capable of showing empathy, signs of patience, and a few more. The way the candidate took my questions …I felt quite comfortable because he was [the] kind of a person I wanted. More often we would reject the person if we did not feel comfortable in the first 10 minutes.

While the manager has a list of specific qualities he looks for when hiring, he also refers to a "gut feeling" he needs to experience when choosing a candidate—later ambiguously articulated as a sense of being "comfortable." Another manager in the same company described a similar sensation which "kicks in without your knowledge;" an "intuitive and gut feeling" that leads him to make decisions about who harbors high performance potential and who does not. "When having [an] interview discussion," he said, "you take a decision that is more a hunch and a gut feeling." We see how talent assessment often gets funneled through notions of presence as a subjective form of perception which might refer to a range of culturally and gender specific preferences, backgrounds, and corporealities. Other employees alluded to presence as an always-emergent, yet never fully realized subject position in which they are expected to constantly be prepared for an unpredictable future. As a female employee working in a Risk Management department in Mumbai told me in 2016: "We are always upskilling. In my profile we get reports from banks, and everyone needs to know the market move [and] the future market wherever we go, to what extent it may affect the rates, all these things. That has become part of my activity on a daily thing." In order to progress in her job, this woman's presence must be

marked by a perception that she can predict the future and would successfully navigate future market shifts.

Savita's "Personal Impact" session is a helpful example of how presence gets introduced along an axis of impression management, where workers are taught that presence can be sensed upon a first glance. Participants were asked to fill out a form with two columns: "*How I'd like to be Seen*" and "*How I Fear I Appear*." Common traits participants named for the first column included "assertive," "the best," "specialist," "SME (subject matter expert)," "approachable," and "versatile." Common fears included "not an expert," "not confident," "not a specialist," "lazy," and "too old." The room was then asked to share their first impressions of one another. These had to be "totally honest," Savita explained, then volunteered to go first. After an awkward pause, participants told her that she came across as "very young," "confident," "assertive," and "passionate about her work." From there we went around a circle, where reactions for others ranged from critical features like "too soft," "simple," "submissive" "very religious," "less talkative when talking about facts and figures," "a smoker," and "someone with no interests or hobbies," to kinder traits like "happy," "mature," "bomb," "cool guy," "approachable," "smart," "family man," "subject matter specialist," and "reads lots of books." These perceptions, which fell under positive and negative markers like whether one seems submissive (negative) and how "cool" a person appears (positive), are viewed as intrinsic signifiers of an individuals' being and points of mindfulness for how individuals can improve how they are perceived by others.

Savita then asked the group to discuss how impressions get constructed. The way a person dresses, how confident they seem, how firmly they shake your hand, the way they stand, what kind of hand gestures they use, and how "honest they appear" were offered as suggestions. "But which characteristics make an individual appear honest and confident?" Savita asked. "His tone," one man replied. "Maybe their kind of energy?" another woman guessed. Savita pressed them to break it down more: "What makes you judge the *intensity* of the energy?" At this point in the exercise everyone looked mystified; several participants had their brows furrowed, staring studiously at the floor as if trying to avoid being called on. Others looked at Savita expectedly, as if waiting for her

to attune them to something they do not realize. When it was clear the question was not rhetorical, participants began throwing out guesses which evolved from more concrete bodily features to more evasive descriptions of feelings and senses: a person's accent, their body, their face? Perhaps the way they construct their sentences? How their emotions come across? Their sense of obedience? Their…gravitas? "Gravitas" was repeated several times, as if participants were struggling to come up with a different word which captured the same sentiment. Savita nodded approvingly in response to each suggestion, but did not elaborate on which responses were least and most accurate. When she seemed satisfied, she walked to the whiteboard and launched a short lecture on the "ABC's of Impact:" "The Aim of your communication, whether or not you were Being yourself, and your Chemistry with others." After a brief pause, she added one more: "Of course dressing is important and making an impact in terms of the way you look is very important too. Let's move on."

The participants' quest to discover the intangible qualities of impressions reveals several aspects of workplace presence I want to highlight here. First, employees are being trained to engage in a performance analysis of what constitutes another's inner being—it is not their physical and social performance capabilities being worked on, but their analytic ones. This deep investigative scrutiny conditions employees to constantly mentally assess one another for tangible and intangible evidence of each other's being, which is then positioned as illustrative of professional potential and expertise. Second, we see how in the participants' struggle to pinpoint those elusive, abstract, and indefinable qualities of presence, those qualities become unevenly translated into *visual* markers of comportment, body, dress, language, and demeanor. The discussion became a bundling of different performance markers that are assessed as valued properties of corporate personhood. Finally, Savita's concluding remark of "of course how you look is important too" demonstrates how presence links the behavioral and phenomenological with the aesthetic—a term derived from the 18th century German word *Ästhetisch* which translates to "relating to perception by the senses".[20] The aestheticization of workplace presence

[20] https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/aesthetic. Accessed March 28, 2019.

connects perceptual experience (vibe, energy, gut feeling) with visual signifiers of class, style, and charm which are seen as the solution to work under VUCA economies.

Savita's workshop invites us to think about the constant quest to formulate worker subjectivity in 21st century VUCA economies. No one really knows what presence is, but everyone knows they should have it. Presence is the result of an interminable search for new metrics of achievement in a business climate marked by radical uncertainly, extreme volatility, and a "survival of the fittest" mentality that elicits an everlasting, futile search for new performance faculties no longer articulable under umbrellas like "soft" and "hard" management skills (thus the increasing usage of nebulous terminologies like "new age" and "employability" skills and paradigms like "Skilling to Reskilling"). An affective state (gut feeling, instinct, sense of comfort) which exceeds base pursuits of productivity and veers into realms of optimal performance, presence alerts us to the slipperiness of worker subject construction—the ways organizational development schemes remain an unending expedition for uncharted terrains of efficacy that will somehow keep organizations abreast of a hysterical business age.

Presence is infinite, shattering narratives of "high performance" (Mckenzie 2001) which assign a threshold to productivity. The search for presence evades assigning an end-point to the process of self-transformation; an individual's journey is never complete because presence is *felt* and *sensed*, rather than deduced via vocational knowledge. As Elin Diamond writes, "presence, then, is never simply present" (1997, 151). Just as there is no stability or constant when living in a VUCA world, presence is constantly being strived for yet always just out of grasp, only present in terms of a perceived lack or abundance. Like we saw Savita and her participants struggling to put their fingers on what exactly constitutes the grounds of impression management, presence is a tremendously powerful criterion for management precisely because it can never be complete. This state of always-becoming places employees in a perpetual state of wonderment and disillusionment with respect to the organization—a sense of never quite knowing what is going on and a constant unknowingness of what the future holds (but, of course, constantly pretending as if you do).

This feeling of being constantly on a precipice, of always reaching yet never attaining, encapsulates the limitlessness of VUCA and allows us to understand why performance has become a prime technique for its operations. Performance is an ideal vehicle for worker training in VUCA environments by virtue of its never-thereness, its intangibility, and its resistance against being easily named or quantified. Performance's ability to evade realist representation, to "slip out under the thumb of the real into identifications," (Wickstrom 2006, 5), invites space for a range of assessments, experiences, and decisions on the nature of being and becoming central to management ideology in VUCA times. In the next section, I show how the slipperiness of performance allows for assessments of presence to fall upon the enforcement of particular kinds of normativities that reinforce the gendered and classed dimensions India's corporate sector and broader transnational class.

Theatre as Body Shopping

Presence has arisen not only as an urgent need for individuals to find channels of self-transformation in the VUCA age, but also as a way that corporations are quantifying the future performance potential of their employees. This is particularly visible in the growing focus on assessment in training, which has risen as demands for personalized coaching and individual talent analysis workshops (as opposed to large-scale community building and ice-breaker workshops) grow more prominent. For example, in 2017 the consultancy I worked for was approached by a client who needed assistance narrowing down a list of 150 managers to 25 "high potentials" who would "help build a pipeline for future leaders" by assuming future leadership roles in the organization (although these leadership roles had not yet been created, again demonstrating the nebulousness of worker development in VUCA). The client asked the consultancy to develop a training product which would identify the top 25 individuals in areas of Change Management, Executive Presence, and Decision Making.

Early one Friday morning, I sat in the consultancy's development room with Varun and Anand, the two consultants responsible for creating the assessment training. Varun comes from an L&D background, but during college he was a self-professed *nautanki* (theatre artist) whose "love for theatre always existed." Anand is a theatre

director and actor in Delhi. He enjoys doing corporate training, but admitted there are certain times, especially when clients ask him to do street theatre, where he feels his artistic background is being "insulted." Lounging on bean bags not unlike those you see in Silicon Valley, Anand and Varun have their eyes closed and shoes off as they contemplate the principles of developing a theatre-based training: Think/Feel/Act: what does the employee undergoing the training think about at work? How do they feel about the training subject matter? And how does their employer (the client) want them to act? Believing that consultancy staff should rehearse and practice the values they impart, Varun and Anand place themselves into the "role" of the employees they train while designing products. I hear Anand muttering quickly under his breath as he jots down notes: "offices in China and Singapore…pension schemes… because I am an Indian this might not happen, I would just say 'yes sir,' … we need to teach them to be courageous and speak up, tell them everything has to change as result of the new requests for automation…."

It was decided that the consultancy would implement large-scale "assessment centers" in the client cafeteria throughout May and June, 2017. Employee participants were instructed to dress in clothes that they could move in, but to present themselves in a way that projected a sense of "care, flair, and aware." Groups of ten employees underwent three-hour sessions involving a variety of interactive activities including improvisation games, experiential survival scenarios, and dramatic tableaus. Three consultants were on hand to document behavior and assess each individual according to a chart entailing competencies like "passion," "rapport," and "courage to state one's view." At the end of each week, employees received individual "assessment reports" detailing their strengths and suggested areas of improvement. When I asked Varun where the idea for the assessment center came from, he told me it emerged from increased client pressure to show a more tangible ROI from theatre training. "We still have a big question mark on our return," he said, "People will say 'yes, you have results, but nobody can put a number to it,' …we are slowly changing it to make our work as relevant, as relevant, as relevant to business activity as possible."

It quickly became clear that the timeline for submitting hundreds of individual reports to the client was vastly miscalculated. Throughout the month of June, consultancy staff stayed at the office late into the evening frantically typing up reports to submit by each Friday morning. The client did not want an outside researcher physically present during the assessment centers, so I joined others in typing reports. While I was unable to observe the embodied work trainers and participants participated in throughout the workshops, a close look at the individual assessment reports created for each employee provides the opportunity to conduct a performance analysis of how "high performance" gets assessed according to aesthetic markers of presence which vary from individual to individual.

The first indicator of high performance potential is a person's sense of style; how trendily an individual dresses correlates to their leadership ability. One woman's assessment report, for example, described her as "well-dressed" and "wearing well-fitted and crisply ironed clothes," which augmented a "sense of self-confidence." Another was informed that "your yellow shirt, distinct shape of your spectacles, and your straight posture helps you come across well-groomed and stylish." Another man's "black t-shirt and jeans" similarly gave him a "well-dressed appearance," while another man's "ability to dress neatly and confidently given the context of a business meeting" earned him high points. On the other hand, individuals that were perceived to dress un-stylishly or appear un-groomed were seen as lacking motivation and inner confidence. Several men were informed that because they were not "clean-shaven," others might doubt their ability to lead. An older female participant was told her face acne might give others the impression that she "does not take care of herself," and that her sluggish body movements may weaken her ability to be an inspirational leader. Her report ended with a sentence of encouragement to work on her "physical fitness."

A second metric of high performance potential was bodily enactments of happiness or unhappiness. Smiling, for example, was a key indication of high-achieving performers, particularly in women. Several female participants were complimented on their "constant smiling," having a "soft voice," and for radiating "warmth" during the meet-and-greet. Employees who made snarky comments, brought politics into the

conversation, uttered sentences that did not make linguistic or grammatical sense, or failed to make steady eye contact were observed to have a number of weaknesses. These included but were not limited to: lack of courage, lack of self-confidence, being distracted, not a subject expert in their field, afraid of assuming a leadership position, not enthusiastic about their work environment, emotionally stunted, awkward, unable to motivate others, and fearful that others will judge them. We see how gender-specific enactments of happiness, like "warmth" and "soft voices" in female professionals, signify degrees of occupational knowledge—tangible evidence of intangible presence factors that mark which bodies "feel" the strongest personally and professionally. We also see how other mannerisms, particularly relating to one's ability to speak English, get translated into evidence of self-fear and inability to transform.

Smaller-scale bodily imperfections spotted during the assessment exercises were also noted as marks of an individual's unpreparedness to advance. While one man "was smiling and interacting with others in the beginning," for example, "[he] spoke with one foot lifted up, which [gave him] an unstable effect to [his] stance." His "lack of facial expressions," the report further noted, made him appear disinterested. Having a "wavering voice," a "nervous energy," talking too fast or too slow, slouching, and interrupting others were viewed as additional detriments to high performance potential. Comments like these demonstrate how particular performances of excess (bringing politics into the conversation, interrupting someone, talking too fast) and lack (of facial expression, smiling, linguistic sleekness, eye contact, etc.) get translated into rationalizations of degrees of investment.

A look at the reports further demonstrates a remarkable disjunction between assessment-style training and the welcoming ethos of programs like the Campus to Corporate orientation I discussed in the last vignette. At the same time as entry-level employees in the Campus to Corporate training are being taught that personifying company data (through jokes, politics, etc.) makes them appear more interesting and knowledgeable, mid-to-high level managers at the assessment center must constantly inhabit a position of professionalism that projects an ambiguous balance of social and intellectual maturity, charisma, and space to continuously grow. Meanwhile, those in the

assessment center whose decisions and behaviors came across as spontaneous, creative, and playful were complimented for "embodying risk," a signpost of the VUCA age. As Nick Horney and Tom O'Shea write in their book on creating "agility advantage in the VUCA world:"

> Socio-political and economic volatility ripples through organizations in multitudes of ways…these dynamics influence the organization's risk profile and complexity of decision-making, as well as the implications of contingency planning as organizational leaders strive to anticipate potential scenarios. The volatility in the economy over the past decade has certainly resulted in a much more cautious business environment…but volatility can also lead to opportunity for those who are focused, fast, and flexible competitors poised and positioned to seize resulting opportunities (2015, 3).

Throughout the reports, an individual's choice to improvise a line, select an unexpected prop, or "step out of the box" while creating a dramatic tableau became indicators of the agile, risk-taking ethos of modern corporate culture and, as Geeta Panel writes, neoliberalism as a system that romanticizes risk for capital accumulation: "Risk emboldens decisions, animating where and how capital is free to move. Risk becomes a technology, a tool, an instrument that determines financial stability and failure" (2006, 31). Theatre becomes a way in which, as one article titled "Why Your Company Should Hire Risk-Takers" explains, "creativity is being expressed through nontraditional techniques" which present opportunities for HR to find those "adventurous employees" unafraid to takes chances for the reproduction of organizational advantage (business.com).[21] Drama makes risk visible and knowable, spotlighting those who exemplify risk by creating unexpected possibilities and solutions in perplexing, uncertain, and time-sensitive environments. Risk makes inner fear and self-doubt the enemy; therefore those whose conduct and appearance suggested lack of poise become especially deficient.

Corporate Attractiveness in VUCA Economies

[21] https://www.business.com/articles/hire-risk-takers/. Accessed March 28, 2019.

To me, the assessment center was an almost comically overcritical exercise in employee self-preservation. It was also radically indecisive—what one facilitator might perceive as a lack of self-confidence in one person could come across as a sign of quiet introspection in another. One man's smile could be another woman's awkwardness; one woman's overly-long personal introduction could be another man's self-assured stamina. Indeed, by the end of the program it remained unclear (to me, at least, and I suspect also to the trainers and employees) what exactly constitutes high performance potential and what does not. Nevertheless, a close reading of the individual assessment reports demonstrates how high performing bodies are generally those assessed as moving the most quickly, motivationally, and smoothly—with these characteristics hinging upon the idiosyncratic translation of behavior and demeanor into degrees of capital investment. But the criteria remain markedly superficial: they are bodies glossed with a middle class fashion sense that stands in for a mode of urban cosmopolitanism which, as Sanjay Srivastava (2007) writes, links preppy Western clothing brands with global (not vernacular or rural) brands and lifestyles.

High performing bodies are also attractive bodies—with "attractive" here signifying a global cosmopolitan outlook and bodily enactment of corporate professionalism. The constant emphasis on having "chemistry" with others, of possessing a sense of "care, flair, and aware," promotes a sexual kind of charm and energy that gets economically and morally attached to notions of the peak performer in VUCA. While employees were instructed to show up to the training dressed comfortably, the dual encouragement to project a sense of "care, flair, and aware" intimates constant attention to presenting oneself as stylish, unique, and as a person who "takes care" of their body. Unattractive bodies (those with acne, weight, stubble, signs of aging, etc.), or bodies that betray choppy, leaky, or otherwise vulnerable and excessive corporealites (fidgeting, coughing, slouching, anxiety, awkwardness) cannot advance to the esteemed ranks of the top performing vis-à-vis a perceived lack of self-maintenance viewed as directly correlative to intellectual and emotional fitness. These characteristics also illustrate the ways that performance in assessment-style training remains entirely under a schema of *value*, rather than a tool for self-transformation. Each report meticulously laid out what

each employee was doing right or wrong, but failed to suggest modifications for how employees can self-transform themselves in ways that fix these deficits.

The emphasis on bodily maintenance, dress, and stylishness exemplifies broader developments in the consumption practices of India's aspirational middle classes, which have become a major target market for Western-style clothes and accessories, cosmetics, cuisine, and electronic gadgets over the past few decades. This is particularly visible in the corporate sector, where "working for an MNC increases disposable household income and enables young people to pursue an individual lifestyle by becoming a global consumer (Mathur 2010, 218). Mid-to-high level employees are expected to exemplify global modernity through displaying their ability to adopt global brands and possess an agency of "doing style" (Nakassis 2016). These distinctions, to reference Pierre Bourdieu (1984), help consolidate the corporate sector as the epitome of India's upward social mobility. This intimacy between cultural, economic, and social (class and caste) capital in the workplace further illustrates how attractive corporate bodies get legitimized as attractive corporate minds; "no longer is it enough to work on and discipline the body," Rosalind Gill and Ana Elias write, "but in today's society the beautiful body must be accompanied by a beautiful mind" (2014, 185). The 25 chosen high potentials, it is worth noting, would soon thereafter undergo another multi-month "journey" on leadership, where they would be further plucked, tweaked, and molded into notions of ultimate performance through devised theatre, monologue work, and improvisation games.

Finally, the assessment center demonstrates how aesthetic forms of labor are being prioritized by corporations as not only on par with vocational knowledge, but representative of it. Beauty work is not just work, but a central factor in determining which bodies will succeed and which bodies will fail in VUCA. The physical body becomes a key site for the management of the self through the use of interactive drama as *body-shopping*—a term used to refer to the practice of Indian consultancies recruiting and contracting IT workers on short-term bases to cut costs (Xiang 2007), but when transposed into the training context denotes bodies shopped and selected for prime performance potential. Assessing bodies, shopping for bodies; how much does that body look like its worth? How much does this body seem to matter? Ultimately, of course,

there is no turning inward in this "image factory" (Elias 2018, 37), little hope that one's inner beauty will prevail over the unforgiving process of assessing corporate agility through appearance. Instead, the assessment reports summon employees to think of themselves as "aesthetic entrepreneurs," a term coined by Elias and Gill to refer to an optimization of the neoliberal self through embodied beauty work (5). Employees who cannot project "care, flair, and aware" (marked by the same ambiguity that constitutes presence) are perceived to be at blame for their inability to self-transform; it is your fault if you do not give off the right vibe, rather than the product of a workplace culture that fetishizes your body as corporeal confirmation of future success. Body-shopping transpires as what Irene Neverla calls "soft hatred," a feature of contemporary beauty discourse which remains "entangled in a context of neoliberal and postfeminist governmentality and capitalism's move to colonise all of life—including our deepest feelings about ourselves" (Elias 2018, 33).

"Breaking all the Lines": Corporate Theatre as Self-Transformation

> In my school days I had done a little bit of acting, and I had one or two prizes (*laughs*)…but that's it. I didn't think I would become an actor, and I'm not an actor. My first job was in a bakery. Then I started doing odd jobs, and then I moved to a call center. My parents were not happy about me working there … Mom said "you know … you can't work like this all your life. You might settle down, get married. How are you going to manage all of this?"

On a rainy day in late August 2016, I sat with Nikhil, the marketing manager for a theatre consultancy in Pune. Nikhil's father owns a confectionary shop and his mother works at home. Several of his relatives perform in Marathi theatre, but Nikhil never acted until he joined a theatre consultancy. Before this he worked for a call center in Mumbai, and as we sat he reminisced on how much he hated it. The southern American accent he was trained to use made him feel isolated from his everyday life, and the long nighttime hours made him physically ill.

I asked Nikhil lots of questions during our interview, but he insisted that the most important thing I take away from our conversation is how much corporate theatre has

impacted him personally. He spoke at length about the joy working for the company brought him and his family:

> I'm far more relaxed and happy [here]. It's more like a home to me and it's more like a family. In terms of training, you cannot take a person's profession away from him. And a profession is personal to him. At times I would wonder, is there any difference between a professional life and a personal life? And I think there is hardly any difference … Back home they love it. My parents love what I'm doing. At the end of the day they'll call me and say "how was your day? What happened?" Yeah, yeah, they love it.

Nikhil's beliefs about the transformative power of theatre training, which he sees as both his professional vocation and personal calling, were echoed by many others throughout the duration of my fieldwork. In this section, I detail corporate theatre subject formation by accounting how the forms of presence corporate theatre encourages get impressed into staff in ways that lead them to model transformative self-work. I emphasize the enmeshment of these qualities with the unequal social dynamics and precarious forms of work latent in VUCA economies; for example, while Nikhil detailed the transformation he underwent from joining a theatre consultancy, he also described the everyday sense of frustration he feels from his job:

> The gestation period is really long for the client to get back to us. I remember a case where the client said, "Okay, come over." I said okay. I called him twice after that [and] said "would you like to go ahead?" He said "yeah we're working on it and we will get back to you." So the "get back to you" thing over here is there. We don't say no directly. I don't even remember [a client] telling me "sorry no, this doesn't work for us," nobody has ever said anything like that. They say "we'll get back to you."… It's wait and watch always. I also remember getting a call from a person which I had met around 8 or 9 months back, and he calling me back saying "do you remember coming to our office? We would want to do this session." And I was like, "Did I...yeah, but that's been almost a year back?" He said "yeah yeah yeah so we are just finalizing this so can you come and meet us?" And I'm like, "okay, sure."

Although Nikhil does not have to endure the emotionally draining conditions he felt as a

call center worker, his days consist of cold calls, meetings, and creating (un-paid) demo sessions for clients who, more often than not, will not hire him. (When I would attend these demo meetings with Nikhil, he would often account the difficulty with appearing businesslike and knowledgeable about the client without coming across as "too desperate" for work). This "wait and watch" mentality is symptomatic of an increasingly unreliable and unpredictable business landscape, where Nikhil is expected to embody the risk-taking ethos of VUCA with rare opportunities for success. Getting paid is another problem; it is not uncommon for clients to delay payments or lower overall payments after training programs had concluded. When Nikhil challenges this, clients either ignore his calls or blame monetary adjustments to communication issues between finance and HR or Procurement departments. These difficulties demonstrate how theatre consultancies and their staff are symbolically positioned on the lower tier of a VUCA hierarchy that renders the grounds of payment and security increasingly precarious. The accommodations corporate theatre staff must make in VUCA thus refers to an awareness of how to navigate power structures where they are simultaneously "modelers" of training aspirations and constantly disempowered in a VUCA power hierarchy.

The enmeshment of personal and professional life corporate theatre invites also plays out along a complex terrain of class, caste, gender, and religion which impacts how individuals envision their lives in a globalized nation-state. Isha, for example, is a woman in her mid-20s whose desk sat opposite mine while I worked for a consultancy in Gurgaon in 2017. During our interview, she spoke at length about the transformation she has undergone since joining the company:

> I came from a very conservative family and there are very limited things, a closed box kind of mentality. My mom is a graduate and my dad has not even done college. And like coming here [made me] open up, to see other perspectives and views. So I think that completely changed my things. The way I think, the way I talk. So the people who know me for past 6 years, and myself also, I can completely say I am completely changed from who I was.

Isha, who has a background in economics, worked as an intern for a year before she was promoted to finance manager. When I asked her what aspects of the work most

influenced her, she told me the consultancy's use of theatre exercises in staff meetings helped her express herself in new ways. She loves performing; her first play was a production the staff (a group of mostly theatre artists) staged for the public the year before, and more recently she acted in a scene for an Ethical Leadership seminar. Both experiences, she told me, were incredibly difficult, but "absolutely transformative. I had a hell lot of stage fear. I couldn't stand in front of people." Corporate theatre's methodologies helped Isha become more comfortable speaking in public, installing in her a newfound confidence she feels her social background stifled. Facilitators often practice workshop techniques on staff members, so Isha also underwent dozens of sample sessions on leadership, teamwork, communication, and making presentations. These experiences, Isha explained, further incited a "360 degree change" in her; "it's like my whole of the thinking process, my thoughts and opinions about certain things, changed."

Isha's self-transformation was accompanied by a detachment from her modest upbringing in the service of a new socially progressive life in Delhi. At the time of our interview, she had recently moved out of her parent's house into an apartment closer to Hauz Khas (an affluent neighborhood in South Delhi) with roommates. She described this decision as both conflicting and liberating:

> [My parents] have that typical Indian mentality about girls being brought up and going out of the house is only for the reason: that you get married. That's the only reason you leave your parents' house… I'm continuously trying to break all these things that they have explained to me as "this is the line that you cannot cross." I'm constantly breaking those lines.

The emotional support and sense of community Isha received from her co-workers played a large role in her decision to pursue a different life than the one her parents intended for her. Spending "eight to ten hours a day" in close proximity with the staff—a group of highly educated, middle class professionals who work late into the night, go out drinking and shopping together, and embrace the enterprise culture of young, urban India—exposed Isha to new ways of acting and thinking that led her to "constantly change my behavior to higher levels." India's VUCA economy is notoriously known for its long,

"flexible" working hours, where employees (especially from a younger generation) spend extended amounts of time in formal and informal business contexts. Isha's work community became her personal community; her professional aspirations are deeply tied to her new vision for herself, demonstrating the enmeshment of personal and professional identity corporate theatre strives to cultivate. Her religious views have also changed:

> My family is very religious, and all sorts of practicing belief in god every day. And earlier, I was the same person, doing all sorts of religious things. And now I don't do a single thing. That has also changed—the belief in god. Now I believe that the belief in god doesn't come from doing puja and going to rituals …god is not asking you to get hungry and not eat for the whole day, not eating non-veg on this day, not eating non-veg on Tuesday because it's Hanumanji's day. And the other days are not the god's days? *(laughs)*…and I have started eating non-veg also.

The new vision Isha has for herself is tethered to a disavowal of her religious background and embrace of new patterns of consumption; for example, eating meat, ordering take-out food, and wearing western-style clothing. Isha's journey towards "higher levels" is described as an expulsion of the "non-modern," and her story presents us with a contrasting image of neoliberal female Indian subjectivity than discourses like Rupal Oza's "New Hindu Woman" describe, where working women have come to symbolize India's simultaneously "modern-yet-traditional" stance (2006, also see chapter three). Rather than unify the "modern" with the "traditional," Isha had to renounce the "traditional" in order to become "modern:" to lay a claim of belonging in an aspirational, socially mobile youth generation that has come to symbolize India's "consumer patriotism" (Lukose 2009, 11).

The Gendered Politics of Presence

One's "journey" as a corporate trainer entails cultivating an arsenal of specialized knowledge regarding how to maneuver oneself in and out of corporate spaces, how to project oneself as a creative expert with intimate knowledge of the business world, and how to practice theatre while upholding company values and achieving training objectives. These responsibilities become more difficult, however, when you are a

woman trainer. Priyam, for example, comes from an affluent family in Delhi, and is one of three female lead trainers in the same consultancy Isha works for. She began doing theatre as a child and continued throughout college, doing street theatre and activist-based performance work at an all-girls school in Delhi. After getting a master's degree in psychology, she started looking for careers that would allow her to merge her passion for theatre with her skills in therapy. She spent time working for an organization in the city that administered a large-scale theatre-based gender sensitivity training with auto drivers in the city. She recalled the challenges she faced working with the Delhi police force:

> I could just see that sense of "you're young, you're a woman, what would you know, and of course you'd talk about this bullshit…you've become too progressive." And I would get that sense from my conversations with people and also the auto guys or the police guys [that] they felt being gender sensitive is going to be bad for our women. There was the sense of "you're a person who comes from an English medium privileged background, and so all of this is great in books, but if you come to our family we don't want our daughter acting like that."

Priyam recalled the moment she knew she wanted to do theatre-based training; she had watched a public demo session and approached the two male facilitators afterwards:

> I said [to them] dude, I really want to do this. I said, I understand I'm young, I understand all of that. What should I do? They said there's a course in Bangalore and it's a one-year program in art therapy. And I said oh, I was thinking of doing this, they said that's brilliant, why don't you do that and come back? They said we generally don't hire people with your kind of limited experience because many of our clients are older and we need that kind of extended experience.

Priyam completed the one-year course in Bangalore then returned to Delhi to audition for the consultancy. She remembered the day of the audition well:

> The approach to coming as a consultant was first you send a video of yourself and then you answer 3 questions: Who am I? In the past, has there ever been a transformative moment in your life and what was it about? If you think you're a team-player, why are you a team player? I got very

> excited. I thought, okay, here's an organization that's doing it unconventionally. [After the audition] they shared feedback. A lot of people said "young, talent[ed] girl, maybe we can develop her and it would be great to have her energy. And my wondering is, she hasn't ever worked in the corporate space." But still they said come join us.

Priyam's description of the audition process demonstrates how prospective trainers are asked to "presence" themselves by performing their own narratives of self-journeying. It also illustrates the intangible dimensions of youthfulness and "energy" that both helped get Priyam hired and invoked doubt as to her abilities to handle the corporate space. Priyam worked in HR for nine months before she received her first solo facilitation opportunity. Her lengthy admittance experience, similar to Isha's prolonged internship prior to becoming a certified staff member, demonstrates the additional labor women must complete to overcome social perceptions based on age and gender in the corporate space.

Navigating the training space as a woman means maneuvering multiple forms of gender discrimination without appearing overly contentious. Rolling her eyes, Priyam expressed annoyance at the gendered forms of humor scripted into the scenes—"oh, my wife is so nagging me, you know." It is especially difficult for female trainers who come from a "feminist background" to put up with this, she said, "you want to say 'that was too aggressive' or 'stop it right there.'" Another challenge is overcoming gender bias during client meetings. "I have personally seen that the L&D partners might be like 'oh you don't have great hair, you look young,' Priyam explained. On another occasion, a client informed Priyam's boss that the company did not want two younger women working on a project together. "They said to us, "don't think we're biased against women, we're not biased against women…but we suspected that there is something that makes them a little uncomfortable." Similarly, Priyam said male participants will "look down" on women who smoke during breaks, and only make eye contact with male consultants during meetings. "They only see [men] as the credible one[s]."

Women trainers must also learn to moderate their own femininity in the service of projecting a masculinist presence of corporate professionalism. For example, a few years

ago Priyam was facilitating a workshop in Mumbai when a female participant approached her and told her that when she bent over, her skin was exposed to the participants. Eyes wide, Priyam recalled the memory in detail:

> I was shaking inside. I was like "fuck. Oh my god, oh no. These people think I'm a clown." And then this other man, he was a Muslim man and he came up to me later and was like, (we were having this conversation about assertiveness) "you know if I really think [somebody is] doing something wrong, should I tell them?" … I said "if your intent is not to judge, but in some way you think they need to know, then you must have that conversation." So he said "that the person is you. The kind of clothes you wore, I didn't like that. And you're a great person, you're a lovely person, but when you were bending down and people were looking, I got very uncomfortable and I thought if it was my sister or my mother I wouldn't have been okay with it."
>
> My first thought was like fuck, what have I put myself in? My gender has something to do with it. Like shit shit shit, this is happening and I'm having this conversation. My second thought was I was excited that this person still chose to come and speak to me, because somewhere as the facilitator I was able to build enough rapport for him to say it. And yeah, I didn't process it from my gender lens at all. I took that feedback.
>
> Yeah, so sometimes I feel like I've been much more careful about how I'm dressing. My shirt is buttoned up, I have collars, and I'm not wearing too much jewelry. There is that sort of masculine thing that's given preference to in the corporate space. And the feminine energy is sort of something that might threaten people.

Priyam self-monitors her appearance and behavior in ways that avoid acting "too feminine" out of fear of retribution from participants and clients. In a reversal of the gendered self-presentation styles encouraged from female employees in the assessment exercise (smiling, being warm, etc.), Priyam subdues her sense of inner femininity through ways of talking, dressing, and moving that embolden a sense of corporate professionalism through performing masculinity. She relates this experience to forms of respectable femininity taught to her from a young age; "my mom would always say 'shut

your legs and sit, shut your legs and sit,' and all of that. And that also really made me feel uncomfortable in my body." Priyam constantly inhabits a space of bodily unease, and like other women trainers I spoke with, she rarely speaks out when discriminatory moments happening because "they are clients at the end of the day, and what fights do I have around this?"

Priyam's story attunes us to the differentially experienced forms of quotidian violence latent in VUCA workplaces, marked by discourses of seeming cultural and gendered transcendence, global professionalism, and individuality. The gendered forms of discrimination, threat, panic, and shame Priyam navigates on a daily basis shed light on the reproduction of gendered inequality in VUCA economies. Expectations placed on her to model a masculinist presence of corporate professionalism, which necessitates a self-ascribed "toning down" of her sense of feminine style and youthful energy, constantly expose her to a fear of "being oneself" in the workplace that collides with the individualistic, self-assured ethos of VUCA skills development. Priyam's experience also demonstrates the wide-ranging nature of presence as a mode of worker construction that fluctuates across varied social and cultural dynamics and ingrained social hierarchies of the VUCA workplace.

Conclusion: VUCA as the Neoliberal Control Society

In a short essay titled "Postscript on the Societies of Control," Giles Deleuze (1992) paints a picture of a new world constantly on the precipice of transformation—a landscape marked by a shift from Michel Foucault's industrial "spaces of enclosure" to the modern corporation's constantly fluctuating and ambiguous technologies of world sovereignty. He writes:

> In the disciplinary societies one was always starting again (from school to the barracks, from the barracks to the factory), while in the societies of control one is never finished with anything-the corporation, the educational system, the armed services being metastable states coexisting in one and the same modulation, like a universal system of deformation…We are taught that corporations have a soul, which is the most terrifying news in the world (4).

Deleuze's late capitalism of mania and mayhem wields power not through the levers and pullers of industry, but through the constant flow of data and intangible energies and affects of control that make it increasingly difficult to discern what constitutes the grounds of power, agency, and discipline in contemporary capitalism. VUCA exemplifies this landscape and alerts us to the methodological challenge of how to theorize the increasingly imperceptible grounds of social action, performance, and subject construction in global capitalism.

This chapter charted some of the ways corporate theatre helps parse the complexities and illogicalities of VUCA as a system of worker disciplining. I first showed how organizational data (the prime currency of the global knowledge economy) is being embodied through the transformation of workers into storytellers who invigorate the "soul" of the corporation through humanizing its data. I then moved to a discussion of presence, a process of worker subject formation I understand as fundamental to VUCA's control matrix. Realizable through the intangibility of performance and its ability to transform along axes of feeling, affect, and vibe, presence demonstrates how the perceived solution to VUCA hinges upon continual formations of corporate personhood that emerge from a bundling of different performance markers that reproduce normative identity categories and class prerogatives in India. The qualities of presence, which vary according to assessor and assessed, are understood as both innate and perpetually in demand of cultivation through the exhaustive work of "upskilling," a never-ending search for new metrics of achievement in the neoliberal control society. I concluded by attending to the stories of individuals who pioneer corporate theatre to show the differently experienced modes of personal and professional transformation and ongoing forms of gender discrimination latent in VUCA economies.

On a final note, ideas of self-possession and authority innate to the qualities of presence I have charted here can be historically traced to the purported sovereignty of the liberal subject as discussed by classical political theorists like Adam Smith, Jeremy Bentham, and John Stuart Mill. These thinkers link notions of progress and productivity with ideas of individual self-possession that become tied to qualities like empathy, patience, and virtue. Future work can analyze how corporate qualities of presence are

traced to political subject formations conceived throughout the intellectual history of liberalism. In the next chapter, I turn to corporate theatre's central appeal to be fun, amusing, and pleasurable as a way of considering its emancipatory promises and unsettling disappointments.

Chapter Three:
Get Out of Your Corporate

Introduction: **Learning Can't Happen Without Fun**

Corporate theatre is fun. It has to be; training consultancies claim that theatre is effective because it is a refreshing counterpoint to non-dramatic training formats. As one trainer explained, "(HR) all suck up to humor, you know. One thing that is the most important—they all want humor and they all want messaging. As long as it's fun." The entertainment value of theatre also makes great marketing material for managing the company's brand. As another trainer put it in 2017:

> I think (theatre) is one of those ancillary things which excite them more than the real crux. Like, if there's a good article written on them, if there is some kind of visibility that happens, or if they can click some good pictures. Many times I'll say in meetings 'hey, so yeah, we do this activity where you can get some great pictures (*laughs, rolls his eyes*). And for them it's like 'oh yeah, pictures. Let's do it.'

Corporate theatre is also fun in the sense that it makes extensive use of play and spectacle. A Chennai-based independent consultant describes his workshop style as the following in 2017:

> …Then I give them sort of exploratory, highly dramatic situations like 'traitors in a gangsters den' or 'black magic healing ritual in a remote village,' gurus and all that; aliens coming out of space when a party is going on. We give them lots of chances to get out of their corporate, and we can get into very unusual costumes and makeup and you know, tantrics and bones and skulls and gun fights.

Lastly, corporate theatre is fun because employees find these workshops immensely enjoyable. When I would ask participants to describe their training experience, their responses often mentioned how much fun they had, alongside an expression of relief about not being "at work." This seemed ironic, because as I demonstrated in chapters one and two, corporate theatre is an activity constantly shadowed by management demands in both blatant and concealed ways. But in another sense, I understood what employees

meant when they would express their pleasure. I also laughed at the skits, anticipated how each audience would react, and delighted in the terrible overacting, melodramatic storylines, and moments of unexpected tension and expression that revealed corporate theatre as a performance practice latent with creative possibility.

In chapter one, I proposed that assessing corporate theatre through its strategic recoding of theatrical histories and performance techniques (rather than a cooption of them) affords a more nuanced understanding of how corporate theatre functions in relation to managerial fantasies of efficiency. In chapter two, I showed the ways corporate theatre capitalizes upon tropes of transformation and the immateriality of performance to create various forms of precarious worker subject construction in India's VUCA business world. In this chapter, I turn to *failure* as an inherent element of corporate theatre that allows us to consider both its promises and disappointments. Corporate theatre is often fun because it fails; it fails to deliver the transformational behavioral adjustments it promises, it fails to provoke large-scale organizational change, and it entirely fails at taking itself seriously. It fails by virtue of the same mechanisms it endorses—humor, laughter, affect, and all those other slippery characteristics of performance that veer workshops "off-script" and remain constantly open to unpredictability, improvisation, and threat. But I argue that it is precisely in assessing corporate theatre's recurrent capacity to fail, through performance, that we can understand its concealed pedagogy—how it instructs employees to suppress and repress institutional contradictions, how it breeds temporary forms of contestation in the face of power, and how it painfully lays bare neoliberalism's creative façades of achievement, happiness, and empowerment.

In organizational change studies, scholars use failure management as a key business strategy for alleviating loss. Identifying failure diminishes weakness, errors, and defeats; organizational survival is dependent on assessing failure as a gateway to best practices, customer satisfaction, and worker retention (Kunert 2018). Scholars of theatre and performance studies approach failure in reverse—as an aperture to complex zones of indeterminacy and, possibly, autonomy from neoliberal logics that shackle us to narratives of success. "Failure is a point of transformation," Margaret Werry and Roisin

O'Gorman write, "when a goal, an outcome, a future, a subject, an institution becomes something other than itself' (2012, 106). Failure is the currency of the weak; it counters authority through giving us "another kind of time – time out, time out of joint, time to think, time to reimagine thinking, time to cheat Time" (110). An unavoidable consequence of performance, failure maps alternative imaginaries even as it nourishes forms of social power that keep institutional mandates in place.

How do we map failure? For those in performance, it can be traced to the sticky terrains of affect, experience, and structures of feeling latent in any artistic practice (Berlant 2011). These bodily entanglements distort hard lines inflected by categories like race, gender, and class, and generate emotional impulses not always tethered to neoliberalism as a system of achieved objectives and success (Werry and O'Gorman 2012, 111). Humor is central to the affective experience of failure; from the fifth-century satyr plays of Sophocles to Bakhtin's *carnivalesque* to Brecht's use of comedy as a political device, performance scholars have always been empathic about comedy's relationship to power. Oscar Brockett, for instance, marks the appearance of satire in early Elizabethan theatre to trace a shift from theological drama to a socially critical authorial stance that pinpoints moments of failure in order to critique and expose (1995, 197-201). Joel Schechter turns to the American Yiddish theatre of the 1930s to explore how vaudevillians, clowns, and puppeteers poked fun of messianic devotion to assess their own religious "failures" and assess Yiddish identity (2008). E. Irobi shows how Wole Soyinka uses African indigenous forms of satire in his plays to examine the failure Western imperialism state corruption (2005). In these examples and others, humor helps identify what Mady Schutzman (2017) calls "non-oppositional modes of resistance" which "refuse dualistic thinking" and "tell a truth that everyday logic cannot" (10). As Schutzman writes:

> Humor has the power to reject the hard lines incurred by polarities and point to a surplus, an excess, that seems to hover around us, even as we bunker up in our separate identities. […] Humor, like play, lubricates a third way in which skepticism and belief coexist [and] makes it possible to live with systemic contradictions that inflict their gnarly

> enigmas, mess with our emotions, and instigate hesitation and decision (11).

This chapter demonstrates how corporate theatre's failure to create working subjects whose affective comportments are commensurable with neoliberal norms (Rudnyckyj and Richard 2009) manufactures the occasion for a different form of pedagogy to arise—one which activates a "third way" for employees to endure the systemic contradictions of their everyday lives, and remains contingent upon the disavowal of certain gendered, classed, and nationalist norms that circumscribe India's IT industry and the broader transnational work economy. Humor is central to this, in that corporate theatre's extensive use of satire, parody, and irony deliver insightful commentaries which invite participants to step outside themselves, even while cultivating modes of emotional and physical endurance that reify their own disempowerment. Humor and satire have long been used as outlets for political expression and contestation in India, from the *hasya rasa* mood in the *Natyashastra*, to the satiric political art forms rampant during the colonial era (Freedman 2009), to the highly dramatic, satiric television genres of the past several decades that negotiate class, language, religion, and caste tensions against backdrops of postcolonialism, right-wing nationalism, and globalization (see Kumar 2012). Across different artistic and media contexts in India, satire continues to be a vital way of pointing out flaws in existing systems, of impersonating and embodying authority in order to deconstruct it, and circulating oppositional ideas in a sharply censored public landscape. As I show in this chapter, humor and satire also emerge through and alongside humiliation, anger, and pain—both on behalf of employees subjected to forms of arbitrary power and trainers who recognize the painful incongruities of their practice.

` I first turn to the use of corporate theatre in cross-cultural bias training, where I share my experience working as an actor for a three-city training series in 2016 to show how comedic satires of everyday work life mediate notions of "Western" and "Indian" culture that circulate through transnational work circuits. I call attention to the production of what I call a "laughter of recognition," which enforces gendered tropes of difference that demarcate the workplace while providing rare moments of cultural validation for

employees taught to moderate and conceal "Indianness" in the global workplace (Upadhya 2016). I then look at corporate theatre as gender sensitization training, detailing a workshop delivered in Gurgaon in 2016 to illustrate how the production of what I call a "disobedient affect" invites employees to indulge in performances of rebelliousness which provide ephemeral forms of emotional release. I equally point out how these moments transpire through forms of gendered power disavowal that reify female exclusion to maintain systems of masculinist organizational leadership.

I finish with an examination of corporate theatre as soft skills training for lower-level workers viewed as in need of the cultural forms of conditioning seen as essential for becoming a global professional. I detail an unexpected moment of tension which arose from a *Navarasa*-inspired exercise in Bangalore in 2018 to illustrate how organizations compel specific forms of conduct which involve employees doing violence to their own cultural agency in ways that embroil daily sentiments of humiliation, rage, desperation, and compliance. The moment further exemplifies how drama in the workplace lays bare the concealed forms of subjugation and desperation experienced by employees searching for a way out of the institutional confines of their lives. This kind of pedagogy, emergent only through corporate theatre's failure to fulfill its promises of betterment and fulfillment, points us equally to the delusion and fluidity of neoliberal subject-formation as a process that creates new possibilities for freedom and expression, even as it participates in processes of capitalist control that exacerbate worker isolation, discontent, and bondage.

Performing Cultural Difference

In 2016, the consultancy I was interning for scheduled a three-city training series on cross-cultural bias in the workplace. Their requisite "foreign" (white) actor was in London, so the business head asked me to fill in. I felt eager to assist, because at that point in my internship my office contributions had been lacking. My accent was difficult for employees and clients to understand on the phone, so I was unable to conduct employee interviews and speak with HR about potential sessions. I had also been unable to perform in trainings until that point; the week prior the business head decided against having me represent the "millennial" character in a session on generational bias because

he believed the audience would fixate on my race, rather than my age. I had also been informed that my emails sounded "too American." Upon asking my office mates how to fix this, they described their own correspondence as more "British" than "American," alluding to the fact that my distinctly American approach might come across rude or too direct. At that point in my internship, I was mostly transcribing training sessions, taking pictures for marketing purposes, and typing up expense sheets.

My own cultural incompatibility with "global" workplace norms in corporate India demonstrates the ambivalence of the global as an ideology of world interconnectedness. Scholars like Arjun Appadurai and Smitha Radakrishnan have pointed out the ways global, as an all-encompassing signifier for world communication, dangerously evades the national, local, and empirical realities central to understanding the negotiation and mediation of culture in specific contexts (Appadurai 1996, 158-177, Radakrishnan 18-19). Anthropologists of work, for instance, have parsed and deconstructed the global by examining the differentiating hierarchal mindsets and teamwork styles taught and encouraged in Indian and Western work environments (Upadhya 2016, 217). Radakrishnan advocates for the alternative term "transnational" as a way of accounting for the enduring centrality of the nation-state in the everyday practices of the international workplace and media landscape. Similarly, my own "failure" to translate my cultural orientation in consultancy and multinational work environments exposed a dissonance between myself and my interlocutors and revealed the fallacy of the global as an ideology of cultural transcendence—a revelation that became more pronounced during the cross-cultural bias training series.

Cross-cultural communication is a popular training theme in India (Upadhya 2016, 245-247). It is not uncommon for employees to have team members living and working around the world, and multinational firms pride themselves on working all hours of the clock. As a friend who works for Gurgaon's Deloitte office told me in 2017, "When I wake up I see the work [his team member in New York] has done, and when I go to sleep he starts." In-person intercultural communication is also common. Employees often travel to international offices for temporary work stints, which last anywhere from a month to several years. The cultural tensions involved in these processes have become a

popular trope in Hollywood representations of outsourcing. For instance, the 2006 romantic comedy *Outsourced* tells the story of Todd, an American manager who relocates to "Gharapuri," a small city outside Mumbai, for a year. Upon his arrival, Todd faces an assortment of cultural complications including being called "Mr. Toad," cows running amok in the office, and a staff of call center workers who cannot speak with convincing American accents. The racialized fantasy of "India" *Outsourced* portrays, it is worth noting, has been made into a "case study in intercultural adjustment" in American business training (see Briam in *Business Communication Quarterly*, 2010).

Cross-cultural training became popular in the international work economy following the release of Geert Hofstede's seminal management text *Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values* (1980). Hofstede's schema, based on four cultural dimensions (individualism–collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity–femininity) is used by Western companies to negotiate differences between the values of the dominant organizational culture and those of its subsidiaries (Kirkman et al. 2010) Carol Upadhya has examined how cross-cultural training in India evolved from imparting advice on eating habits (for example, using silverware and not one's hands) and other forms of social etiquette to a more advanced form of cultural conditioning that draws on various academic fields to explain human difference and rationalize workplace expectations. She writes:

> Trainers incorporate psychological and anthropological theories in order to explain cultural differences and to teach engineers how to change their behaviour. Such training is aimed not only at engineers going abroad but also at improving communication within multicultural virtual teams. In fact, cultural sensitivity and communication skills training are often combined in the same programme, because communication problems in multi-sited projects are usually attributed to the cultural gap between Indian software engineers and people at the client site (2016, 120).

Upadhya argues that cross-cultural training is used to orient the non-dominant cultural group to the values and social customs of the dominant (typically American or European) management context. Trainers deliver workshops that divide "Indian" and "Western"

cultures into tidy categories in ways that reproduce harmful stereotypes and justify inequitable labor practices. For example, Indian employees are often taught that they have a hierarchical mindset stemming from a patriarchal family structure, whereas Western working culture is touted as more aggressive, individualistic, and self-starting (2016, 120). Aspects of Indian culture also get valorized in the service of organizational profit, like a perceived "Indian" propensity for working longer hours which validates the private business sector's infamously long working hours (120).

Returning to the cross-cultural training series, we delivered sessions in Pune, Mumbai, and Bangalore throughout June and July 2016. The Mumbai session was set in the Mumbai office of "Global Bank," where three team members were meeting for the first time to commence a cross-divisional task force. I played Helen Davies, an American Vice President (VP) in investment research who had been on assignment in India for a year. Saanvi played Meena Raghavan, a Kannadiga (Kannada-speaking person from Karnataka) Hindu and VP in Investment Banking. Sanjay played Anant Bhave, a Maharashtrian Senior VP in Sales and Trading. According to the script, it is 3:30 PM:

Helen paces back and forth while on the phone.

HELEN: So what did the cleaning lady say? She can't come from tomorrow? Did you correctly understand what she said? Oh, so she is not going to come for the next three weeks. And what did she say? Wedding in the family. Hmm… *(Pause)* What? Say that again. Her mother – in – law's younger sister's grandson? I am not surprised, honey! I get a lot of those leave requests here in the office as well. Very typical of these people…

(*Meena and Anant are seen on the other side of the stage. Meena is wearing a Punjabi Dress.)*

MEENA: Anant, is *this* Helen?
ANANT: Yes. From Chicago. Came to India last year.
MEENA: She is so young.
ANANT: Yeah, she looks about 20.. and she is already a VP!
MEENA: She is married?
ANANT: I don't know. I never asked her.
HELEN : Ok…yes…about eight-thirty or nine… ok…ok, bye love, see you later.

(Helen puts her mobile phone away. Anant and Meena enter the meeting room)

HELEN : So, How are you Anant? And you must be Meena! Venky told me you would be a part of the team. Glad to meet you!
ANANT: Sorry to keep you waiting. I..er… we…
HELEN : Not a problem, not a problem. I am getting used to the extended breaks. With the exotic and elaborate cuisine of India, I am sure you want to enjoy your lunch more than we do back in the US. And you need more socialization at work, right? *(Anant and Meena exchange looks).* Incidentally, it is good that you came in a little late. I got a call from my partner. Our cleaning lady has decided to leave.
MEENA: Oh! These people are always a headache! I am so sorry to hear that, Helen . I can imagine… it is quite difficult…. you having to do the household chores…
HELEN: Well, Doug does most of it… so I am ok (*laughs. Meena and Anant look bemused)*
MEENA: Doug .. means your husband, right?
HELEN: Erm… partner… we…
ANANT: Umm…. So let us start the meeting, shall we?

The three of us sit to commence the meeting. I tell Meena I love her dress, then express dismay that a fourth team member is absent. I struggle with pronouncing his name: "Chan-Chan—." Anant interrupts: "Chandan Wadhwa. But don't worry Helen. It's a good thing he is not here; you can't trust people from that part of the country." Anant says Meena needs to speak up more in meetings, "like those North Indians do." A man in the front row snorts in surprise, while the rest of the audience remains silent. Like other workshops, most of the audience has gotten off their phones and is now actively interested in the scene.

I ask the group if they read the project report I emailed the night before. Meena nods. Anant says he has not read the report because he had a "very important religious ceremony to attend" the previous evening. The audience begins tittering. I ask him which ceremony, and Anant begins whispering to Meena under his breath in Marathi: "*Me kay bolu*? *Tula kay watate*?" (What should I say? What do you think?) The audience erupts into laughter. "I had to attend my son's … threading ceremony," Anant finishes. The laughter grows in intensity, so much so that I struggle to contain my own smile. The threading ceremony, known as *upanayana* in Sanskrit, is a Hindu tradition symbolizing a

young boy's indoctrination into his formal education. Mostly restricted to young males belonging to the upper three castes, Brahmin, Kshatriyas, and Vaishyas, the ceremony is marked by the boy receiving a sacred thread called *yajñopaveetam* that he wears while being blessed by a teacher. "You see Helen," Anant declares as if commencing a lecture, "in Hindu tradition, when a boy becomes about 10 or 11 years old—" Struggling to be heard over the laughter, I interrupt say that we need to move on.

After the audience settles down enough to continue, I announce that I planned drinks at the Hard Rock Café down the road to celebrate the project launch. I tell Meena she will love the restaurant's cocktails, adding that my favorite is the "Sex and the City." Meena, noticeably uncomfortable, mumbles that she might not be able to attend. The subtext for this line, written to be implicitly understood by the audience, had been explained to me during rehearsal: Meena's husband disapproves of her going out after work and does not want her in spaces of alcohol consumption. Misinterpreting Meena's discomfort for social anxiety, I tell her not to worry if she does not have any clothes to wear. I offer to give her something "a bit more Western" from my closet. The scene ends with the three of us getting on a conference call with the UK office, where I make a joke about Brexit and speak ill of my British colleague Steve.

The debrief period begins. "What do you think?" Dhruv asks the room. "Did they handle this well? What would you like to say to them?" The room remains quit for a long moment, before one voice in the back rings out: "all of them need to do cultural sensitivity training." As if a balloon of tension has been popped, the room breaks into laughter and gives a healthy round of applause. Hands shoot up in the air; the first questions are directed at me.

"Why would you speak to your cleaning lady in such a way?"
"You should have never commented on her dress like that."
"Why do you think Indians need longer lunch breaks?"
"Why did you talk about your UK colleagues like that?"

I was prepared for this onset of criticism. During rehearsal, I had been given a set of "push-backs" to use when confronted about my offensive remarks. I responded defensively, telling the audience I had undergone cultural training in the US that had

prepared me to work in India. The audience does not seem convinced; several participants are frowning. An older man in the front row with a nametag reading "Senior VP of Sales" raises his hand. "Why did you scandalize her?" he asked me, pointing his finger at Meena. He appeared visibly upset, which seemed to amuse a few younger participants who started laughing quietly in the front row. I repeated my pushbacks—I was trying to be inviting, not offensive. Meena's standoffishness was offensive to me; *she* should be the one apologizing. The man shook his head and asked me again: why did you shame her?" Unsure how to proceed, I began stuttering through a response before another participant interrupted with his own comment.

The room shifted its focus to Anant. Several men asked him about his comments regarding North Indians. "Why would you say those things?" Anant rolls his eyes and sighed exasperatedly. "Oh come on, we all know what North Indians are like, just as we all know these Americans (*tilts head at me*) never get married." The room once again breaks into laughter; several participants begin having side conversations and others clap in amusement. It takes a minute for the lead facilitator to gain control of the room, where he launches into a closing speech on the importance of understanding our cultural biases and how to break free of them.

The Theatre of Cultural Globalization

In her ethnography of the global IT sector, Smitha Radhakrishnan argues that the software industry has produced a new class of "Indian-yet-global" professionals whose diverse cultural identities are molded into a set of "Indian" characteristics palatable to an international work imaginary. Radhakrishnan calls this process "cultural streamlining," in which "a dizzying diversity of cultural practices" get simplified "into a stable, transferable, modular set of norms and beliefs that can move quickly and easily through space" (2011, 3). The cross-cultural bias scene performed an inverse of cultural streamlining through depicting Indian and American values as cultural polarities. Helen sets herself apart from Meena and Anant through differentiating her eating habits and notions of time from an "Indian" propensity to socialize and take prolonged lunch breaks. Her expectation for Meena and Anant to have read the email she sent the night accentuated conflicting cultural expectations regarding work-life balance.

The scene also depicted Indian and Western culture as a clash between tradition and modernity; if Indians possess "traditional" values regarding (Hindu) marriages, religious customs, and consumption practices, Americans are secular, obscene, and culturally ignorant. It further highlighted caste and class-specific aspects of Indian culture to isolate Helen as a cultural outsider. Meena's complaints about domestic household help marked her class status, while Anant's joke about his son's threading ceremony emphasized his caste and religious identity. The audience's outbursts of laughter at Anant's threading ceremony joke was funny because it simultaneously exposed a cultural custom in the space of the "global," spotlighted Anant's trickster-ism, and invited the audience to poke fun of Helen as the one not "in" on the joke.

The scene concretized oppositions between Western and Indian culture along an axis of appropriate womanhood. In Partha Chatterjee's formulation of the nation-state, he shows how the British colonial mission aligned itself with the plight of female oppression, rationalizing colonization as a matter of liberating Indian women from allegedly barbaric religious doctrines and cultural practices (1989, 629-632). The nationalist response constructed a reformed middle-class female subjectivity where the nation asserted its superiority over the West on grounds of tradition, values, and morality. Rupal Oza draws on Chatterjee to argue that India's post-economic liberalization integration into the global market economy was accompanied by a similar crisis of national identity and resurgence of nationalist womanhood. The Hindu Right mediated its encounter with global capital through fortifying rigid gender identities and forms of sexual censorship that established India's national identity as distinct from the West along axes of appropriate femininity (2006, 2).

In particular, representations of what Oza calls the "new liberal Indian woman" have become an icon of India's neoliberal modernity. Women's magazines like *Femina* and the Bollywood film genre depict urban middle class women as simultaneously belonging to the new transnational cosmopolitan class and embodying a role as female care-taker of the nation. In one example, Oza looks at an advertisement for the National Institute of Information Technology (NIIT, an Indian multinational software company) which depicts a woman with short hair wearing a *shalwar kameez*. Looking at the

camera, she states "You know what helped me decide that NIIT was best suited to train my son in software? IBM and the World Bank." Emblematic of Oza's new liberal Indian woman, the mother is simultaneously "modern" (short hair), "traditional" (*shalwar kameez*), and liberated enough to make rational decisions about her son's future as a global professional. Here, global cosmopolitanism and patriotism get conjoined through narratives of development and the IT sector growth. The corporate working woman also typifies this trope, in that she embodies a commitment to India's economic progress through working for the global market economy while also exemplifying conservative values of the Hindu mother and daughter. This brand of femininity, Oza maintains, hinges on a disassociation of Indian womanhood from the contaminating influence of Western sexuality. The "new Indian woman had to be modern but not so modern as to transgress into 'Westernized' modernity," Oza writes, where she would be susceptible to cultural intrusion in the form of "provocative attire, smoking, or drinking" (31). These representations of women professionals consolidate fantasies of middle class women as transmitters of economic growth and safeguards of India's traditional values.

Meena and Helen perform two axes of womanhood; one "Indian" and modern-yet-traditional, the other "Western" and obscene, aggressive, and contaminating. Meena's Indianness is marked by her Hindu *bindi*, demure attitude, and Punjabi dress. Her hesitation to attend the project launch at the Hard Rock Café (a restaurant emblematic of American modernity) suggests she takes seriously her role as a wife and her husband's reservations against consuming alcohol. Helen's Americanness is performed through her overly aggressive working demeanor, sexual promiscuity (partner instead of husband), and unabashed love for drinks like the "Sex and the City." Helen's insistence that Meena go to the restaurant and change her clothing from Indian to Western wear further marks her as a threat to Meena's feminine values. The scene "collapsed the anxiety about globalization in India onto women's bodies" through locating cross-cultural communication "within a framework of false essentialisms" that fortified India's national sovereignty in the global workplace (Oza 45, Chatterjee 1989, 632).

The scene also contained subtexts about the politics of class, regional identity, and language that permeate India's corporate cultures and wider public sphere. The session's

location in Maharashtra, a state in Western India, served as the inspiration for Anant to speak in Marathi and critique North Indians as less hard-working than those like him. Anant's prejudice is a training strategy used to confront class-based bias stemming from regional location, a concern frequently cited by HR in diversity development. I sat in on several client meetings where HR cited office discrimination against individuals from India's Northeastern states, as well as prejudice against Noida-based employees from those centrally located in Gurgaon—a corporate city that epitomizes upper middle class privilege and global cosmopolitanism. This sound of the "familiar" in the "unfamiliar" is also a common strategy used to make audiences laugh. Scripts are re-adapted to each training location because employees take particular delight in hearing the names of local restaurants, colleges, and other signifiers in a space representative of a "global" aesthetic that discourages the spotlighting of "culture" in the form of references to the local.

Similarly, during the training series actors spoke in Marathi in Pune and Mumbai and Kannada in Bangalore. The move to spotlight Marathi questioned English as the parlance of economic opportunity and of the transnational urban elite. English fluency is a necessity for job placement in the highest echelons of the central government or in a multinational corporation, two sites touted as the epitome of middle class success and urban cosmopolitanism. English language training (otherwise called accent neutralization, de-Indianization, voice neutralization, global English, safe international accents) is an ongoing priority for HR heads (Shome 2006, 109). During fieldwork, it was not uncommon for HR to request that theatre trainers relay the importance of speaking clear English and to implement voice exercises that reduce regional dialect. (Theatre trainers often decline this request, either because they find it personally insulting or because it contradicts the point of the workshop) Anthropologists and sociologists have pointed out the ways English as the language of corporate communications reiterates low-cost labor exploitation and signifies new logics of racialized transnational governmentality in contemporary neoliberalism—what Raka Shome calls "a new postcolonial re-colonization of the body" in her work on the Indian call center (Shome 2006, 117, also see Chow 2014, 9, 27-28).

Anant's use of Marathi, the state language of Maharashtra, was at once permissible because it manifested through a comedic aside and illicit because of the contested nature of the "local" in spaces governed by the spatial, racial, and postcolonial rationalities of the "global"—what Constantin Nakassis (2016) refers to as attempts to "do away with the local" in his ethnography of youth cultures in Tamil Nadu. The business head was also adamant that actors refrain from using Hindi, which is increasingly touted by the Hindu Right as the language of India's cultural heritage and national character.[1] Anti-Hindi agitation movements, particularly in the South, have roots dating back to mid-20th century and continue today in the form of state-wide rebellions against the BJP for its attempts to mandate Hindi as the language of a Hindu *rashtra.* Anant's Marathi rejected English as the language of international business and Hindi as the language of Hinduizing national politics. This choice was, to use Pierre Bourdieu (1991-68-69), a "strategy of condensation," where Anant interjected a kind of "local" linguistic value in spaces to legitimate a lower-status identity and generate forms of playful, cathartic release from institutionalized logics (also see Nakassis 2016, 146).

Sanctioning "Indianness" and the Laughter of Recognition

The hot-seating process adds texture to this analysis by showing how the circulation of what I call a laughter of recognition invites employees to experience feelings of cultural visibility and validation in contexts administered by organizational norms which, as Upadhya argues, present "Indianness" as an obstacle to professional advancement. She writes:

> Software companies invest heavily in fashioning socially acceptable subjects who are able to handle customers and cross-border teamwork, training them in the habitus and practices of the global corporate workplace, and instructing them to manage or suppress 'Indian' characteristics and habits that are deemed inappropriate for this space (2016, 245).

[1] For example, non-Hindi speaking Members of Parliament are asked not to speeches in their non-Hindi native language. While the Official Languages Act of 1963 rendered Hindi and English India's two national languages, the 2001 Census reported only 45% of the population speaks Hindi as their native tongue.

Upadhya shows how software engineers encounter a range of experiences at work which "impinge on their sense of self and identity as well as their orientation to others and the world" (2016, 115). This "colonization of their lifeworlds" (Upadhya 115, drawing on Habermas 1981) is the result of a sharp cultural contrast between global corporate culture and the way of life in which many employees were raised, as well as organizational regimes of self-making which utilize team-work as a mechanism of control. Being socialized into global corporate culture entails constant exposure to discourses and images of Western work environments, understood to represent a "universal" workplace aesthetic. This sense of the global is replicated in the interior design of many offices; while employees are allowed some autonomy in adorning their workspaces with figures of deities or the Indian flag, for example, they are encouraged to adapt their physical and emotional dispositions to the global work aesthetic constructed around them.

My own time in corporate spaces further gave me a sense of how global corporate culture gets physically constructed, reinforced, and negotiated through the built environment. One training room inside an American multinational in Whitefield, Bangalore, for example, adorned its walls with a life-size cartoon sketch of "Steve," an employee who suffers from physical and social anxiety at work—especially when speaking to women.[2] A series of sketches depicts Steve making his female team members uncomfortable during morning meetings (a thought bubble over one co-worker reads "Creeper!"), acting awkward at social gatherings, and generally lacking the social grace and charismatic physicality viewed as compulsory to job success. Steve's problem is not a lack of technical proficiency or occupational knowledge, but his inability to perform a corporate habitus, "systems of dispositions characteristic of different classes and class fractions" (Bourdieu 1979, 6) which links self-assurance to job success. Steve's issues are clearly understood to be "Indian," yet his body is coded white—the global norm he would embody if only he could master his awkwardness. The cartoon demonstrates the kind of aspirational tactics management uses to assimilate workers into a global cultural

[2] Improving male employees' ability to converse with female team members was a common objective cited by HR. As one manager stated during an interview in 2014, "These guys went to engineering school. They have never talked to women, not at home and not at school. They don't know how. We need to teach them how to stand next to women, how to be near them, talk to them, work with them."

context, as well as strategies of humor deployed to temper any offense employees might take to these efforts.

Returning to the de-briefing, Meena and Helen's gendered difference became more pronounced, rather than resolved, during audience comments. Helen was accused of dishonoring Meena's cultural values and feminine virtues, while Meena was encouraged to stand up for herself against distasteful bosses like Helen. The audience's accusation of shame reinforced Helen's vulgarity and affirmed Meena's need for protection against the contaminating influence of Western sexuality. Implicit in the need to protect Meena and deride Helen were misogynist undertones that bolstered a sense of corporate patriarchy in India that pushes against the (seemingly) more egalitarian style of American corporate culture. It is not only Helen's status as an employee that is presented as the problem; it is that she is the boss. The audience is led to experience her authority as first inappropriately sexual and secondly as a foreign imposition.

We also see how gender privilege works intimately with caste privilege, demonstrated by the audience's love for Anant. Anant came across as enormously funny, especially when he spoke in Marathi and duped Helen about his son's threading ceremony. Anant thrust "Indianness" center stage; the audience's affection for him emerged from a shared recognition of his implicit critique of Helen's authority and ignorance, which undercut her status as representative of the broader transnational business hierarchy. Anant's threading ceremony joke further consolidated a sense of collective identity and group positioning through attuning the audience to the forms of class and caste capital they share with him, echoing Bourdieu's analysis on the ways cultural capital serves as a powerful tool of social formation. At the same time, Anant functioned as a dual site of identification and disidentification for the audience. While his role as the protagonist inverted media narratives of outsourced labor which tend to position intercultural communication as a problem endured by Westerners traveling to third world locales, the audience's discomfort over Anant's remarks about North Indians pivoted their appreciation to apprehension over the scene's problematic politics of regionalism.

The cross-cultural bias training provides us with a striking paradox. Although it was perceived as successful by the audience and producers, what it succeeded at was not what it purported to *offer*—described as follows in the consultancy's promotional materials:

> We believe that to achieve success, your people need to be taken on a journey of exploration; to 'see' things as they currently are, to consider the part everyone has to play in developing the right kind of inclusive culture and the practical ways to help achieve it. […] Drama is an incredibly powerful tool in bringing to life an exploration of what constitutes the right kind of behaviours and practices – so that people can 'see' what inclusion, exclusion and bias look like in a recognisable context and explore 'how' to do things differently moving forward.[3]

Rather than teaching individuals to accept and communicate across cultural difference, the scene offered an affirmation of corporate patriarchy, Hindu womanhood, and the recognition of gender, caste, religious identities and non-"neutral" languages in the global workplace. Instead of bridging diverse cultural identities, the scene spotlighted and assuaged feelings of national humiliation at being asked to accommodate and accept US norms. These departures transgress instrumentalist understandings of corporate theatre as a didactic mechanism. Similar to my own failure to advance professionally in organizational settings due to my workplace habitus (my inability to craft the right email tone, understand proper phone etiquette, etc.), Helen's cultural incompatibility with Meena and Anant illustrated the failure of global workplace cohesion. At the same time as the scene actualized little of what it was intended for, however, we also see how it partakes in complex forms of cultural and subjectivation work that invite employees to discern the hierarchies and challenges of global workplace communication.

Performing Corporate Feminism

"Why hire women?" Pooja asks the question with enthusiasm. The audience, a group of eleven upper-level employees (ten men and two women), shuffle in their seats.

[3] https://www.stepsdrama.com/diversity-inclusion-and-unconscious-bias/. Accessed March 31, 2019.

Without waiting for an answer, Pooja launches into a lengthy speech on the role of women in India:

> …When we had an agrarian culture, men and women had equal roles, right? Now with our introduction into trade and commerce, it's structured around men. […] And now lots of sexist jokes get shared on WhatsApp, usually about wife-bashing and girlfriend bashing. And women don't want to speak with the team or the manager because they also share this mindset. But people who are also exposed to this WhatApp believe violence against women is a way of life. They grew up in a one-room shack with [their] father beating [his] wife—these people are not as privileged as all of us, and less mature.

It is nine o'clock on the morning of August 29th, 2016. I am sitting in the back row of an office cafeteria-turned-training room of an American multinational software conglomerate in Gurgaon, where a makeshift wall of inspirational work quotes divides our group from the morning coffee and tea drinkers. Pooja is a consultant for Diversity Driven (DD), an all-female global think tank and consultancy firm that specializes in workplace diversity development. The session is a shared job between DD and a Pune-based theatre consultancy that entails four back-to-back sessions featuring three skits each. Pooja shouts to be heard over the hiss of the coffee machines. "The idea," she shouts, "is to raise consciousness through drama by learning what is right and what is wrong at work." She continues:

> Organizations with better gender ratios are most productive. It's not about "men" or "women" being better, it's about bringing a balancing impact. Remember, it isn't about men or women, it's about mindsets. This is about understanding what is not happening right in the system. Men and women have lots of the same stresses, and women have to start thinking differently and behaving differently to become more confident.

The other lead facilitator, Anshu, steps in. He gives a brief introduction on the importance of gender sensitization for remaining on par with Western cultural standards:

> When I went to the US, women had equal opportunities because in society that's how they are. In India, it's always

> "women can't be managers!" But the biggest gender imbalance is here, in the BFSI industry.[4]

Pooja tells the room that her consultancy recently completed a two-year project with the company where they conducted exit interviews and gathered data on gender-based concerns. The material for the session was drawn from real-life examples supplied by men and women during the research period. In the script I was given that morning, scene one's characters were described as follows:

> **Raj**: A senior Director with an authoritative pace setting style who likes fast decisions and actions and can get quite impatient in meetings if there is "too much" debate. He has had a fast track career and has been very successful all his life. He has a loyal following of Managers and Directors who emulate his style.
>
> **Ashish**: Has followed a classic graduate career path to where he now is. A real networking relationship builder. Emulates Raj.
>
> **Sumati**: She has worked hard to get where she is at TECHNOWELL. Joined from another telecoms company and has worked abroad in US, recently returned to India. More liberal and open-minded - Doesn't like some of the outdated views and behaviours that the other guys express.

Raj and Ashish walk on stage complaining loudly about morning traffic. A few participants smile, no doubt in agreement over the nightmarish state of Gurgaon's roads. "Can you believe the other day Lakshmi asked me if she could work from home?" Ashish asks Raj. "What?" At Technowell?" Raj replies. "She must be crazy. What did you tell her?" "I told her no of course!" Ashish laughs and tucks a pack of cigarettes into his pocket, insinuating that he and Raj just returned from a smoke break.[5] They start talking about a new job opening for a Sales Director on their team. Ashish says he is under pressure to hire a woman for the role. "Tanvi is pushing me to hire a woman for the role. You know how keen Subramani is to see more women in senior roles," Ashish sighs. Raj looks at him in horror. "*Arrey* you can't have a female Sales Director." Ashish nods. "Exactly, you are right. But this is typical of the new approach. The other day they tried

[4] Banking, Financial Services, and Insurance industry.
[5] Male bonding and conducting office tasks over smoke breaks or after work was a common concern cited by women in Pooja's study and in interviews I conducted on behalf of other consultancies during my fieldwork.

to land me with a 27 year old, recently married woman. I said, not happening boss!" The audience is quiet.

Sumati walks on stage wearing Western business wear. "Who are we talking about?" she asks. Raj and Ashish explain the situation and Sumati looks confused. "I thought we were discussing this in the development discussion next week." "Yes," Ashish says, "but it's always worth having a chat before the formalities!" The three characters starts debating about whom each of them think would be best for the job. Ashish says he is being encouraged to hire Neelam Taneja, a Deputy Marketing Director in the company who is married and in her mid-30s. Sumati starts to say that Neelam would be an excellent choice, but Raj interjects. "She is not going to fit into Sales. Is she really going to want to spend evenings chatting to clients? No, I don't think so." Raj instead suggests a man named Vikram who has been with the company for ten years. Sumati shakes her head and says they should consider a Senior Sales Manager named Rani Kapoor from the Bombay office. She tells Ashish he met Rani at a conference last year. Ashish frowns and says he does not remember her. Sumati frowns. "Well, I remember you saying how impressive you thought she was." Ashish looks confused before he snaps his fingers. "Ah yes, she was wearing the blue saree!" Sumati looks increasingly uncomfortable as the conversation continues.

> **Ashish**: Not sure though, [Rani would] be a real risk. And why does she want to move here, is she mobile??
>
> **Sumati**: Yes, she got married recently and her husband is coming to work here for one of the banks I think..
>
> **Ashish**: Oh I see… what do you think Raj?
>
> **Raj**: Hmmm. Risky. Again, is she really going to be able to put in the hours that we need? This is a high pressure role, very demanding.

Sumati tells Ashish and Raj that the company should consider having employees work from home. "In my last job in the US, there were quite a few women who worked three or four days per week and it worked brilliantly." Ashish and Raj exchange a meaningful look. "That all sounds lovely Sumati," Raj explains slowly. "But in India we need young,

fiery, dynamic men!" A few men chuckle. "We need a real tiger in this case, and according to me, there's only one candidate," Raj continues. "My friend Rajat. He is a real 20/20 player—aggressive, driven, a true HiPo (high performer)." Ashish and Raj expound on Rajat's virtues while Sumati, clearly disappointed, slowly packs up her things and leaves the room. The scene ends with the following:

> **Raj**: She has some very strange ideas. Part-time, at this level?
>
> **Ashish**: Crazy. She will get well soon….she was too long in the US.
>
> **Raj**: Yes. Look, I have started going to the same swimming pool that Rajat goes to. I mean Rajat swims, *(pats his belly)* I float. *(audience laughter)*
>
> **Ashish**: Yes, tell him I will call him early next week…
>
> **Raj**: Ok, good work my friend.

After the scene ends, Anshu begins audience feedback. The first participant asks Raj why he was against hiring a woman for the job. Raj rolls his eyes. "Come on guys, we all know that sales is a very male-dominated field." A man in the front row raises his hand: "Nowadays men and women both can work in sales," he says, alluding to how the industry-wide push for gender sensitization programs makes it "now" acceptable to consider women for upper management. Next up, a participant tells Raj that women can be valuable team members because of their high "emotional intelligence" abilities. Justifications for bringing women onto teams due to a perceived higher-level of emotional intelligence are common in gender sensitization training, inversing Arlie Hoschchild's critique of emotional labor as the additional work women do to regulate their feelings and expressions at work (1983).

A female participant asks Raj why he ignored Sumati's suggestion to hire Rani Kapoor. Raj shakes his head emphatically. "See listen, I am a feminist (*the audience starts laughing*) and my wife couldn't handle this job. Come on guys, women also cannot go out after work in Gurgaon—we know it's not safe." In order to ensure the safety of their female employees, companies offer nightly shuttle services that leave the office by nightfall. While the shuttle system is extoled by companies as a diversity and inclusion

policy, women often report difficulty with male team members staying late and making project decisions without their advisement. Gurgaon is viewed as especially unsafe for women at night; Raj presents gender bias not as discrimination, but as a matter of male responsibility for female protection. The audience shows mixed reactions; several male participants nod their heads in agreement, while others shake their heads but refrain from speaking up.

The two final participants are a man and a woman. The man asks Raj why he disregarded Sumati's suggestion that employees work from home. "I often work from home because of childcare. My wife also works. Care-giving is not primarily a women's responsibility" he says. "That's sexism," another male participant bluntly states to Raj. Following this, one of two women in the audience talks about the ongoing biases she faces at work. "There is a huge bias about hiring any women, because in three to five years they will get married. Any resistance to this thinking needs to be very subtle," she continues, alluding to the fact that gender discrimination is widespread, but not easily discussed with HR. Pooja steps in, reminding the group that today's training "is not a man/woman problem. It's not about a gender ratio—it's about talent diversity on the team. How can you maintain talent diversity?" Out of time, we move on to the next scene.

Disobedient Affect

The audience's reaction to Ashish and Raj was more mixed than the laughter which greeted Anant in the previous scene. On one hand, Raj and Ashish's complaints about management, cigarettes hanging from their pockets, annoyance over traffic, and overwhelming lack of professionalism similarly provided the audience a refreshing counterpoint to the glossy depictions of organizational behavior promoted and regulated in the workplace. Their performances, like Anant's refusal to suppress his own cultural identity and misogyny, produced what I call a "disobedient affect," where enactments of insubordinate workplace thoughts and behaviors provide employees temporarily forms of delight and release from the pressures of their everyday lives. Disobedient affect creates the conditions by which employees do not feel "at work" in training, and emerges from amusement at watching an employee intentionally *fail* to follow workplace expectations.

Ashish and Raj know that they are thinking, doing, and saying things they should not, but do it anyway. Disobedient affect emerges from the grounds of a transgression wherein participants find joy in Ashish and Raj's humanity, even as they are aware that they are meant to disavow and critique it.

At the same time, Raj and Ashish's disobedience played out along a complex terrain of gendered humor which chafed against some participants who articulated feelings of suspicion and frustration with the over-the-top displays of gender prejudice. Raj and Ashish's dismissal of Neelam and Rani, two women who embody ideologies of the "good wife" and working woman professional (Oza 2006), landed poorly with the audience because it was based on a chauvinism that lacked the localized forms of humor showcased in the previous scene—(as well as, perhaps, hit upon enduring prejudices that overlay the workplace.) Unlike the laughter *at* Helen *with* Anant, Raj's parodic reference to himself as a feminist exposed his own ignorance and made him the butt of the joke. The participant's reiteration that "nowadays things are different" affirmed Raj's exclusion and distanced his character's over-the-top sexism from the workplace (and perhaps, again, from themselves as individuals who may or may not partake in similar beliefs).

Participants also countered the scene's antagonistic depictions of Western and Indian culture, where Raj and Ashish attribute Sumati's attitude to her time spent in the United States, elevating the question of gender from the workplace context to a broader struggle between a conservative India and an overly liberatory West (a similar distinction set up by Anshu at the beginning of the session, although Anshu's description of US corporate culture painted a utopic picture of gender empowerment and equality). The joke backfires, and Raj and Ashish are left hanging their heads in shame, gratifying the aim of the workshop to correct wrong behavior. At the same time, justifications for having more female team members because of their emotional intelligence were left undiscussed, bolstering narratives of emotional labor which position women as only present to assist their male colleagues.

Overseeing these overlapping negotiations is Pooja, who must side-step male blame ("it's not a man versus woman thing") in the service of organizational priorities.

"There's nothing that you are doing wrong," she assures the room of mostly older, senior-level men, "but think if there's something you can do *better*." In my conversations with Pooja, she expressed the difficulty she faces facilitating gender workshops. Male participants, particularly those in senior management, become easily offended or upset if they believe (female) facilitators are insulting their outlooks towards women. In order to avoid accusations of blame, Pooja introduces her gender workshops as combatting the issue of mindsets, rather than gender itself. "It is about talent diversity," she kept reminding the audience, not women as such. At the same time, her opening speech characterized gender bias as an ongoing problem in India by individuals "not as privileged as all of us, and less mature." This situated the audience as a group of "modern" professionals who must undergo training in order to assist a broader societal problem of violence against women presumably by lesser educated, non-modern individuals located outside the workplace context. Pooja's strategic dance is symptomatic of the negotiations female trainers, actors, and employees must make in order to advance professionally and express their struggles in ways that remain palatable to gendered norms.

Lastly, Pooja's workshop is illustrative of a larger point about the landscape of corporate theatre—audience debriefing is almost always cut short by the lead facilitator. Clients try to cram as many dramatic scenarios into one training session as possible (and they pay trainers per hour), so debriefing is frequently comprised or sometimes eliminated entirely from the training. What is offered instead, as we see above, is a glib dictum from the facilitator that repeats workshop learning points. This demonstrates how despite corporate theatre's promise for transformational change, there is never time for such processual experiences given the incessant focus on achieving measurable results.

Polite Anger

The failure of corporate theatre sometimes transpires through expressions and moments of humor that are intimately tied to feelings of humiliation and anger. This sheds light on the diagnostic ability of corporate theatre to identity the entrapment of employees in barely tolerable conditions of power, and to provide them fleeting moments of pleasurable (and painful) release. For example, on a Thursday in July, 2018, I sat in the

corner of a cramped training room of a Spanish IT provider in Electronic City, Bangalore. It was 2 PM, and we were halfway through a day-long "body language" training. Employees undergo a series of dramatic exercises borrowed from actor's training regimens (voice/body work, walking through space, and monologue enactments), designed to orient them to expectations of the workplace. The participants (two women and ten men) were low-level data analysts from various regions in India ranging from Guwahati in Assam to Dehradun in Uttarakhand. Several told me this was the second time they were doing the training. As one man explained, "I had fun the previous time, and the learnings were very good." The facilitators, Shruti and Raghev, were artists from Bangalore who perform in a well-known English language theatre group. Like other artists in the city, they begrudgingly began doing corporate work to supplement their income from artistic pursuits. Shruti performs as a *Yakshagana* performer, and Raghev directs and writes plays. Both of them do Amazon voiceover work when corporate gigs slow down.

Shruti began writing the nine *Navarasa* emotions on the whiteboard. The *Navarasa* originates from the classical *Natyasastra* text on the performing arts. It lists nine *bhavas* (emotion, sentiment) and corresponding *rasas* (essence, flavor) to be represented in dramatic performance. After describing each *rasa* in English and Sanskrit, Shruti explained how the emotions will help the group better express themselves through their bodies:

> As a performer, if I was trying to communicate *soka* to you, you should be able to receive sorrow, right? You should be able to taste sorrow from what I've done. So there is an idea of the nine emotions that I've put down here, and we'll try and see if that can come into the workplace, especially as it will help us with gesture, the body, intent, and emotion—all the things we've been talking about today.

Shruti instructed everyone to stand in a circle. She asked the group which of the emotions they most wanted to explore. "*Krodha* (anger)" someone offered immediately. The group broke into nervous laughter; several nodded in agreement that anger would be the easiest emotion for them to embody. Shruti told them to create one gesture and line that

conveyed anger to the rest of the group. They could either focus on a workplace context or not; "it is entirely up to you."

The first volunteer was Anant, a "fresher" (recent hire) in his mid-20s from Kerala. During introductions, he admitted that his boss asked him to attend the workshop after watching him give a presentation the week prior. Like others in the room, Anant was from a small city and spoke English with a heavy accent. Also like others in the room, he had been encouraged by his superior to attend the workshop in order to work on his "communication skills," a code term encompassing the complex forms of class, caste, bodily, and linguistic conditioning required for advancement in India's corporate cultures (Upadhya 2016). His hands in his pockets, Anant looked at the floor and muttered "still I don't know why I am here." Stated in a muted tone that suggested a deeply resigned sense of frustration at having to be present for the workshop, he kept his eyes on the floor. Shruti and Anant nodded encouragingly, while the rest of the room remained silent. Next up was a man named Krishna, who shouted with significantly more enthusiasm "leave me alone!" Several smiled at this more emotional, slightly comedic burst of anger. Following this, an older participant named Vikram pointed his finger at someone across the room. "It's not working buddy," he said gently. "Good, but right now you sound sad, not angry," Raghev told him. Puffing out his chest, Raghev said authoritatively, "It's not working buddy." He told Vikram to try again. Taking a deep breath and widening his eyes, Vikram pointed his finger and shouted "It's not WORKING buddy!" The room broke into laughter and several participants began clapping; Vikram looked relieved his turn was over.

From here others followed Vikram's suit, adopting the irritated tones and stiff posturing of a "boss" character, either impersonating themselves (which seemed unlikely, given that most were low-level analysts without a team to supervise) or assuming the role their own supervisors—perhaps even the same ones who ordered them to attend the training. Straightening their posture and puffing out their chest, each participant pointed their fingers at an imaginary figure in the center of the circle the room:

"Why don't you come on time!?"
"Don't irritate me."

"Don't do that again!"
"Get OUT of here."

It quickly became a game; the louder and angrier someone performed, the more laughter they received. As illustrated above, each expression of anger centered on bringing someone else down, of treating a lower-level employee as an irritation, nuisance, or someone who can never get anything right. Near the end of the exercise, one participant dropped his voice and whispered "what the hell is this?" in a breathy, shocked tone. Raghev pressed the participant to show more anger. "It's really okay to express anger. We all feel it every day," he told him, softly gripping the participant's shoulder. But after two more tries, the man refused. "It has to be *polite*," he insisted. "Polite anger." The room instantly broke into loud laughter. Broad, triumphant grins, lots of clapping, and several side conversations began to break out as several participants glanced back at Shruti, Raghev and I contritely, as if to apologize for the training going off-course. To the room's delight, Shruti and Raghev joined in on the laughter.

The audience's reaction to the admission of "polite anger" felt as if a balloon of nervous tension had been popped in the room. To me, the laughter which followed at first seemed out-of-place and out-of-time. After all, no joke had been made and no exaggerated comedic display had been performed. But polite anger was profoundly, absurdly *funny* to everyone in the room because it referred to the ways anger in the workplace must be carefully cultivated to seem self-motivated without being overtly emotional or weak. Employees, especially a group of low-level analysts forced to attend the training because of a failure to perform a corporate habitus, must hold in their "real" anger while outwardly embodying a "polite" anger that reads as confident, charismatic, and illustrative of the complex forms of linguistic and social capital and conformity required to embody global professionalism. Anger is funny because it is a constant paradox, wherein the daily forms of frustration individuals experience (often at the expense of their class and educational background) must always be in deference to codes of business hierarchy.

In a pent-up moment of cathartic release released and recognized through the ambiguity of laughter, polite anger unmoored a profound, painful, "unofficial truth"

concerning the demeaning conditions of power that dictate the participant's everyday lives (Bakhtin 1984, 90). Polite anger names the moment of explosive precision for employees who experience daily forms of rage and humiliation ("still I do not know why I am here") and who are constantly subjected to the arbitrary authority of supervisors and systems which incessantly quantify their intellectual, social, and cultural capital to fit the demands of the organization. This anger is "polite," precisely because employees understand that they must remain docile and forever open to self-improvement in the face of their own disempowerment. A poignant reminder of their own "failure," polite anger is imperceptibly acknowledged to be so absurd that it is hysterically, sadly funny. Polite anger provides a fleeting release that is as painful as it is pleasurable, because soon the workshop will end and everyone will have to return "to work."

Conclusion

Corporate theatre is fun; it has to be.

But as this chapter has demonstrated, corporate theatre is fun because it fails to create the productive, aspirational, and self-transformed employees it promises. This failure transpires upon a complex ground of cultural politics, humor, and organizational control that breeds a form of performance pedagogy which teaches employees how to suppress, repress, and perform the contradictions of their everyday lives. Corporate theatre paves a "third way" (Schutzman 2017) for employees to contend with the frustrating absurdities and humorous ironies of their institutional confinement. Moments like those illustrated in this chapter make it possible for employees to live with inconsistencies that make up their lives. They also manufacture, through performance, opportunities for employees to hold onto moments of pleasure and pain that temporarily release them from immobilizing effects of structures of power. It is within these smaller, more intimate expressions and experiences where we might begin to identify what an "exodus" from neoliberal governmentality (Lorey 2015) looks like within the dispersed networks of power that characterize the neoliberal present.

In the next and final chapter, I shift from looking at theatre inside the workplace to considering what consequences the instrumentalization of the arts for corporate gain have for theatre artists working in contemporary urban India.

Chapter Four:
Acting Limitless: The Performance Ecology of Corporate India

Introduction: a Changed World

The historical and socioeconomic changes outlined in chapters 1-3 did not unfold exterior to the lives of artists working in economic hubs like Bangalore, Mumbai, and Gurgaon. Rather, the business imperatives of India's private sector disseminated throughout the urban arts landscape, impacting how artists are applying and modeling their roles as creative-cultural workers for the transformed nation-state. "In the theatre world, there has been a need felt to bring cognizance of the changed world and to get equipped," Sudhanva Deshpande, *Jana Natya Manch* performer and director, told me one afternoon in Delhi in 2017, "to be able to handle this world and to live one's life as an artist in this world." The intensity of Sudhanva's words and conviction of his tone was similar to others I heard from artists throughout the duration of my research, and this closing chapter nuances his remarks through providing a glimpse of what I call the "performance ecology of corporate India:" an artistic terrain marked by its newfound, tenuous relationship to the private business sector and to discourses and representations of enterprise and entrepreneurialism. Industry documents outlined in my introduction like the *Creative Arts in India* report illustrated heightened demands on artists to direct their talents to the tasks of national productivity and private sector development. But if "the very language of theater is being rediscovered and challenged" in India today, upon whose grounds are these transformations unfolding and what are their broader implications for artistic livelihoods and histories of politically committed theatre practice in India?

This chapter shows how theatre artists in contemporary India are joining together to fashion new ways of teaching and doing performance that are positioned at the crossroads of an enduring socialist democratic vision of theatre and a neoliberal arts landscape—the boundaries of which are unclear and complex but provide a more textured understanding of how contemporary performance practice reflects upon, grinds up against, and redefines the celebratory logics of enterprise that permeate India's urban milieu. I call attention to a development that emerged in response to increasing

expectations for artists to model creative entrepreneurship: new modes of artistic training that equip artists to survive the "changed world" of theatre in India. I focus on two artistic initiatives that emerged in the last six years: the Drama School of Mumbai and the Strategic Management in the Art of Theatre program.

The Drama School of Mumbai (DSM) is an acting institute created in 2013 by educational theatre company Theatre Professionals in Mumbai. Pioneered by well-known actors, directors, and arts managers from around the city, it offers a year-long training program for up-and-coming performers aimed to teach them how to create and support their own theatrical work and apply their skills in performance occupations that arose in tandem with corporate India. The Strategic Management in the Art of Theatre (SMART) program is an arts management program formed through collaboration between UNESCO cultural policy makers, the India Theatre Forum (an informal collaborative of activist and professional theatre artists), and the India Foundation for the Arts (a national grant-making organization). Celebrated in the CAI report as "the first ever strategic management course for theatre practitioners," SMART hosts a bi-yearly "residential capacity building program" aimed at making theatre groups around the country more managerial and professionalized in focus and design.[6]

My reasons to focus on the DSM and SMART are threefold. First, their emergence represents a mode of performance practice not yet examined in scholarship on Indian theatre, a robust body of work that includes analyses of postindependence urban theatre (Bharucha 1983, Dharwadker 2005), theatre and development (Da Costa 2010) women practitioners and feminist performance (Batra 2011, Mangai 2015), regional forms like the *nautankis* of North India (Hansen 1992), *Tamasha* in Maharashtra, *Kūṭiyāṭṭaṁ* in Kerala, and *Koothu* in Tamil Nadu (Hollander 2013), theatre and religion (Mason 2009), intercultural collaboration with Western and European models (Bharucha 1993), Sanskrit drama (Richmond, Swann, and Zarrilli 1993), and an expansive body of work on *nukkad natak* and *Theatre of the Oppressed* in Bengal (Ganjuly 2010, Ghosh 2012), to name only a few. While this scholarship attends to the varied beliefs, traditions, and politics at play in India's myriad performance histories, it remains isolated from

[6] http://indiaifa.org/platforms/smart.html. Accessed March 19, 2019.

much of the anthropological and social scientific work that emerged on India's neoliberal reform period and its attendant social and cultural transformations (a point I echo from Da Costa 2016, 20). An examination of the DSM and SMART that bridges these literatures not only enriches scholarship on neoliberal India and Indian theatre historiography by considering them as co-constitutive of India's broader social and economic transformations, but also sheds light on novel iterations of artistic history and identity in the transnational creative economy.

My choice to focus on two initiatives that embrace managerial demands and project corporate aspirations is intentional and methodological. I view the DSM and SMART as two case studies that invite us to think about artistic corporatization without counterpoising art with capital. While distinct in aims and techniques, both programs present themselves as qualifying artists to do work in "corporate" India. Here "corporate" is conceived of as not only affairs pertaining to the business sector, but to the reconfiguration of Indian cities as branded representations of multinational values and the global lifestyles of India's managerial class (Ahmed 2011). "Corporate" India is the "New" India," "the newly emergent 'pulsating, dynamic' India that is suffused with optimism and the aspiration to fly" (Gooptu 2013, 1). Upon a cursory glance, the DSM and SMART's enthusiastic embrace of business management, CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility), and global development parlance may suggest that both initiatives are symptomatic of the corporatization of performance by depoliticizing neoliberal mandates. Indeed, in her book on India's creative economy, Dia Da Costa cites SMART as an example that bespeaks the "disarming presence of occasional, minor alliances" between political theatre and corporate power in India today (2016, 5). For Da Costa, activist groups doing management workshops is one example of a larger trend where artists and corporations are joining hands, validating management norms that exploit artistic livelihoods to nurture corporate capitalism and ethno-nationalist state agendas.

But do all performance practices that deploy market terminologies signify the valorization and victory of capitalism? I do not believe so, or at the very least I do not think the term "alliance" quite encapsulates the tenuous, contradictory, and multifocal connections being forged between artists and corporations today. Da Costa's use of the

term suggests that practitioners who adopt managerial vocabularies are in league with corporate capitalism—and, by extension, a right-wing agenda that views the corporate sector emblematic of an economically virile Hindu nation. My research suggests, however, that rather than bracket alliance with capitulation, we might think of the increasingly ubiquitous conjunction of theatre groups, creative aspirations, and business management directives as entanglements of artistic labor with the specific social and political forms that neoliberal economics assumes around the world. These entanglements require a closer, less judgmental look precisely because artistic participation in corporate development schemes forces us to reimagine what constitutes possibilities for creative resistance within contemporary models of performance today. They also invite us to ask anew: What forms of theatrical branding, institutional dialogue, and alliance work (and on whose terms and conditions) are necessary for theatrical longevity today?

To approach these questions, I begin by outlining the DSM and SMART's artistic branding strategies to demonstrate how theatre in India is being strategically refashioned from a decolonizing arts praxis to a "clean," economically valuable national asset. Each program's online presence and marketing materials align theatrical value with business sector development and nation-building imperatives, showing how artistic visibility in corporate India is contingent upon presenting oneself as simultaneously managerial, nationalist, and belonging to the nation's aspirational urban middle classes. I then show how the national and economic value of theatre gets perpetuated through artistic entanglement with creative industries like academia, where I discuss my experience conducting research for this chapter as one example that shows how academia's messy relationship with the creative economy fuels processes of global neoliberalization, even as it attempts to undo its priorities.

I then shift focus from each program's external branding to an ethnographic analysis of their internal training practices, showing how the DSM and SMART's pedagogical priorities both merge with and depart from their branding in ways that invite us to consider how visions of socially committed arts practice persist in corporatized enclaves of the Indian arts economy. I demonstrate how the DSM reveals entrepreneurialism as a lived practice interwoven in networks of artistic precarity, and

calls attention to contradictory and ambivalent narratives supplied by faculty and students to exhibit the complex generational politics and modes of belonging at play in India's corporate performance ecology. Moving to SMART, I sketch out what I call the program's "not management" management methodology to show how the initiative transforms theatre into a CSR vessel in the effort to maintain an anti-state politics that remains palatable to corporate interests. In my conclusion, I discuss how the DSM and SMART break from established narratives of Indian performance historiography, and speculate on what a historiographic project that takes seriously the ambivalent intersections between artistic production, theatre histories, and neoliberal capitalism might look like.

Cleaning Theatre for the Global Culture Business

In early 2017, I stumbled upon the DSM and SMART while home in the United States researching theatre companies doing corporate training. At that point in my fieldwork, I knew that theatre artists who did corporate training mostly did it for the money, using the funds earned from corporate jobs on other artistic pursuits. But corporate work in the multinational sector is notoriously difficult to get; most companies require applicants to have some kind of business background, in addition to a particular social disposition that projects an air of businesslike expertise and artistic professionalism.[7] Industry contacts are also critical—many artists told me they stopped trying to do corporate work after dozens of cold-calling attempts to contact HR failed. Most artists I met had either written off corporate work because it felt unattainable, or begrudgingly began doing it because without the income, they felt they might have to give up theatre entirely. Because of this, I was surprised to find what appeared to be enthusiastically managerial initiatives emerging from within the theatre community from groups I had associated with staunch anti-corporate agendas.

Finding success in India's corporate performance ecology is a matter of branding. The DSM and SMART's online promotional materials demonstrate how artists

[7] My informants often liked this air of businesslike professionalism to caste and class status. As one trainer stated in 2019, "corporate trainers are mostly upper caste, because first of all, if you're a corporate trainer, you have to understand that your English has to be very good."

deploy marketing practices that position theatre as a global economic asset for nation-building. While older studies on branding focus on the ways that firms shape consumer engagement through trademarking, recent attention has turned towards novel identity technologies that brand bodies within the circuits of global capital and the complex social agendas companies use to emotionalize and personalize their business operations. However, as David Savran (2014, 2017) has shown, branding is not restricted to the undertakings of corporations, but also functions as a key survival tactic for theatre groups and artists looking for visibility in the market economy. Examining branding as a cultural and economic performance of mainstream ideologies and identities sheds light on the ways artists gain visibility and legitimacy in the market economy.[8]

The DSM brands itself as simultaneously nationalist, global, and emblematic of India's urban middle-class cosmopolitanism.[9] Embellished in dramatic black and red shades, the school's website displays images of young actors in the midst of class, extending their bodies in striking physical poses. To the right, we see a photograph of students smiling with guest artists from Europe, marking the school's participation in an elite global arts arena that is further accentuated by a lengthy depiction of the school's faculty: an assortment of theatre and film actors, directors, and arts managers who earned their degrees at prestigious international schools like the National School of Drama in Delhi, the Film and Television Institute in Pune, New York University, and the University of London. A video on the bottom of the page shows interviews with faculty and alumni, where in Hindi and English I am told that no other school in India has so many professional practitioners as teachers, or obtains the same degree of physical training rigor in their approach. Jehan Manekshaw, DSM founder and Mumbai-based director with performance degrees from London and the United States, explains to the camera: "if you want to be a doctor, you train. If you want to be a lawyer, you train. If you want to be an artist, you train. It is a craft, and the craft requires craftsmanship, and teaching, and training."[10] Theatre training is extoled (seemingly defensively) as a

[8] For example, Savran argues that a 2009 revival of *Hair* manufactured an "aura of authenticity" that exploited countercultural ideals to brand socially liberal art palatable for corporate consumption.
[9] https://dramaschoolmumbai.in/. Accessed September 17, 2018.
[10] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8qVEnYAEm-s. Accessed March 19, 2019.

professional vocation on the same intellectual plane as law and medical work—a specialized craft that adds unique value to a global-yet-Indian performance landscape.

The DSM's chief branding strategy is its promise to transform actors into "actor-creator-entrepreneurs," defined as a "new brand of individual who can practice theatre to a standard of professionalism and can develop full time careers using theatre as their primary skillset."[11] The actor-creator-entrepreneur is not just a performer, or a director, or a playwright, but an amalgamation of all three: an actor formally trained in a wide array of classical, modern, and contemporary Indian and Western performance styles, a script writer and director, and a producer who can secure their own financial sponsorship and apply their talents to a diverse range of applied theatre settings. These traits mobilize an artistic subject whose primary responsibility is to "unleash the power of drama as a highly effective experience-based learning platform" for private sector growth.[12] The artist-entrepreneur is member of the burgeoning "creative class," those described in the *Understanding the Creative Economy in India* report as "responsible for generating the new and creative ideas that support economic growth" (Martin Prosperity Institute, 2013, vi). As Jen Harvie writes on similar shifts in the United Kingdom:

> Funding regimes in particular exhort artists to model creative entrepreneurialism, marked by independence and the ability to take initiative, take risks, self-start, think laterally, problem-solve, innovate ideas and practices, be productive, effect impact and realize or at least stimulate financial profits (2013, 62).

In a similar tone, the CAI report describes entrepreneurialism essential to public and private sector development in India:

> [Performance groups and artists] must also become increasingly entrepreneurial, in an effort to become more self-reliant by developing marketing and communication skills to nurture their immediate communities (such as Government agencies, corporations and festival authorities) as well as potential clients (2016, 33).

Notably, the report defines the artist's "community" as government agencies,

[11] https://dramaschoolmumbai.in/training-actor-creator-entrepreneur/. Accessed December 15, 2018.
[12] Ibid.

corporations, and festival authorities, marking a distance between neoliberal artistic stakeholders and former leftist or communitarian models. The actor-creator-entrepreneur is designed to orient their faculties towards these institutional entities, shifting theatre from an art form to a collection of creative skillsets for global reputation building and state and corporate growth.

Entrepreneurial discourses in India are inflected by postcolonial and generational dimensions that situate India's younger citizen generation (those born or grew up in the post-globalization era) as emblematic of the values of India's new aspirational middle classes. Ritty Lukose describes how discourses of "India Rising"—a development slogan that depicts the nation as having transcended its colonial baggage for a neoliberal capitalist modernity—tout India's youth population as harbingers of India's transformation from an uneducated "traditional" society to a global economic powerhouse (2009, 3). Discourses of the "New India" hinge on the distancing of an older age group from the values and aspirations of the younger generation, otherwise known as "liberalization's children." As Lukose writes:

> The "older" generation has idealized Gandhian poverty and socialism, grew up in the midst of famine, had only one state-run television channel, was technophobic, was thrifty, grew up within a stable single-party system led by upper castes, favored civil service careers, and had low levels of literacy. By contrast, the "new generation" admires capitalism and wants to get rich, can watch fifty television channels, is technologically savvy, grew up with shaky coalition governments and assertive lower-caste political parties, favors jobs in the private, corporate sector […] all harbingers of India as a modernized, global power rather than a poor third-world country (2009, 5).

The DSM capitalizes upon generational narratives of difference (a "new generation" of theatre makers) in order to detach the talents and priorities of a new artist generation from their older counterparts. If an older generation performed plays for the purpose of awakening political consciousness and anti-government discord, the new generation is professionally trained to benefit the global economy through working for the corporate sector. If the older generation allied itself with decolonizing, anti-big business causes, the

new generation embraces the changes of global capitalism through applying their training to fix the skills deficiency of the private sector. Theatre gets branded "clean:" void of its political roots and ideologically attached to post-globalization imaginaries of skills-building, urban development, and economic virility.

My use the term clean is inspired by Rajesh Bhattacharya and Kalyan Sanyal, who build upon Partha Chatterjee (2004) and Saskia Sassen (2011) to explore the relationship between material and affective labor in processes of postcolonial urbanization in India. They write:

> In post-colonial cities, this unhinging of the cities from their regional or national economies manifests in the dissociation of the new class of workers engaged in immaterial production from regional lifestyles and social modes of production … material production becomes a dirty activity … the traditional proletariat and informal labour force appear as producers of 'dirt' to those who are detached from material production. Immaterial labour—symbolic, communicative, and affective—is clean. (2011, 44)

The DSM inserts itself into hegemonic sectors of India's global economy through detaching art from earlier commitments linked to modes of *material* production, such as an emphasis on factory labor exploitation in street theatre performance (Ghosh 2012). Theatre becomes unhinged from its material roots and reformed into the affective, communicative, and hygienic contours of corporate India.

In a different move, SMART uses the language of Corporate Social Responsibility to reform art into capacity building. The program was formed in 2013 as an outreach program of India Foundation for the Arts, an arts grant-making organization in Bangalore. The CAI report introduces SMART as follows:

> … Even aspects of theater such as theater management are growing in prominence. India's very first theater management training program SMART (Strategic Management in the Art of Theater) has attracted a magnificent array of young theater groups that are keen to learn and add value to their operations (2016, 21).

The bi-yearly program begins with IFA staff and SMART founders traveling to cities

outside the "global city" circuit, like Patna in Bihar and Nagpur in Maharashtra, to facilitate one-day workshops that recruit theatre artists and groups to submit online applications for the program, a two-week residential program aimed to teach them how to create a Strategic Plan for future operations. After the residential portion ends, theatre groups are assigned "mentors" from the Indian arts community who will continue to monitor their progress over the following six months. Interestingly, the structure of SMART is similar to the programmatic layout of more recent corporate theatre trainings, which take employees on a "journey" and assign them mentors from the business community who monitor their growth over three or six month phases.

The language of capacity building gained traction during the rise of international development in the 1990s, when global corporations began using CSR as a way of crafting a distinctive global presence in their national contexts. In 2013, section 135 of the Companies Act made India the first country in the world with mandatory CSR spending, a move advertised by the state as illustrative of India's longstanding commitment to social humanitarianism. The Gandhian concept of trusteeship, a philosophy endowing the industrial elite with the responsibility of overseeing the nation's social welfare, is often invoked by industry heads as a national duty to foster ethical business practice and social philanthropy (Ansari and Santosh 2014). The Companies Act requires companies with a net worth of 500 crore or more to spend at least two percent of their annual net profits on designated focus areas like sanitation, women's health, and rural infrastructure development. The objective of the mandate was to make companies "discharge their social responsibility through their innovative ideas and management skills," breathing new life into the development sector (Alvy 2013).

The Companies Act was a strategic nation branding tool that helped project the IT/ITES (Information Technology and Information Technology-Enabled Services) sector as a world leader in ethical business practice—a move which helped companies consolidate global social power and distinguish their operations from the pre-liberalization practices of Indian domestic businesses. Figures like Infosys CEO Narayana Murthy use CSR to distinguish their companies as distinct from corrupt "old economy" operations, understood as antithetical to the forward-looking ethos of

contemporary corporate India (Upadhya 2016, 34). Murthy refers to India's current corporate mode of governance as "compassionate capitalism," where "fairness, integrity, and putting the interest of society [is] ahead of one's own interest."[13] CSR functions in this framework as a technology of neoliberal governmentality that bolsters a state-corporate power nexus which administrates power through discourses of rural vitalization, social welfare, and national progress.[14]

Murthy's "compassionate capitalism," of course, obscures the messy politics of corporate charity and absents questions of accountability, who determines what development priorities are according to what principles, and the ethics of development priorities that emerge from the privatization of social responsibility. It also evidences a shift whereby artists and theatre groups become recipients of corporate sponsorship, rather than civic support. CSR investment in the arts was not possible until 2014, when the Companies Act was amended to include an "arts, culture, and heritage" focus area. The arts, however, have remained a low priority for CSR support. Most money is directed to projects with clear nation-building aims, like the preservation of traditional cultural forms and the maintenance of monuments and museums for national heritage conservation. To be eligible for CSR funding, an artistic project must demonstrate its unique social value and contribution to driving the growth of the economy. For instance, Citi Foundation's Corporate Citizenship program implemented a "Desert Pastorale" campaign aimed at empowering artisans from West Rajasthan by teaching them how to "orient their products for high-value markets."[15] Infosys' Culture Initiative gives financial assistance to "underprivileged artists who don't have access to contacts or help" that will award them "much-deserved recognition" as economic agents.[16] Angling artistic value to CSR expectations, SMART translates theatre into entrepreneurial skills indoctrination which professionalizes and incentivizes rural and urban artists to fulfill

[13] See the NDTV article for a full draft of Murthy's letter to the IT industry: https://www.ndtv.com/business/compassionate-capitalism-full-text-of-narayana-murthys-letter-to-the-media-1676524. Accessed March 1, 2019.
[14] See Sanjay Agarwal's *Corporate Social Responsibility in India* (2008) for a comprehensive history and analysis of the rise of CSR and its shifting role in the post-liberalization economy.
[15] http://www.csrworld.net/Desert-Pastorale-Program-CSR-initiative-of-citi-india.asp. Accessed March 10, 2019.
[16] https://www.infosys.com/infosys-foundation/initiatives/culture/. Accessed March 10, 2019.

their creative dreams through following a market ethic. Theatre gets ideologically detached from its political usefulness and transposed into a privatized developmentalist landscape where art is instrumentalized for business advantage under the guise of civic productivity.

In sum, DSM and SMART's branding strategies illustrate shifts in theatrical value from a medium of critique and social dialogue to a national enterprise device that fuels a state-corporate power apparatus, modes of urban class configuration, and historical narratives of progress and development. Each program engages in processes of what Michel Foucault has called "governing at a distance," described by Aradhana Sharma and Akhil Gupta as the reconfiguration of power through "dispersed institutional and social networks" that exercise rule indirectly through the responsibilization of autonomous citizens (Foucault 2009, Sharma and Gupta 2006; 9, also see Rose and Miller 1992; 199). Indirect governance necessitates the continuous development of enterprising citizens by non-state agents and sites (NGO's, schools, training centers) that teach narratives and practices of enterprise that "empower" citizens to intensify their productivity and individual aspirations for the sake of the nation.

The DSM and SMART demonstrate not only novel modes of artistic subject formation arising from these processes, but the broader historical and historiographic stakes of cleaning theatre for global capitalist development. They also shed light on the specific forms activist theatre projects assume and become illegible and illegitimate under this rubric. For example, during my research I found that corporations often fund "street theatre" events for training and values promotion. Artists who perform in these events must cater their dialogue and body movements to company expectations and HR-approved scripts. One friend in Delhi recounted a *nukkad natak* performance he acted in for a corporation in Gurgaon in 2018. 'We were dressed in black like Asmita (a street theatre group in Delhi who performs in all black), and these guys (the employees) barely looked at us. We had to do it in English, not Hindi, also. We will never do that again." Narratives like these evidence not simply the intentional expulsion of histories of political and activist theatre from neoliberal arts enclaves, but strategic enmeshments of theatrical histories and beliefs with new conditions of institutional arts funding and expectations.

An Aside: Academia in/as Creative Economy

The story of my own research process at the DSM further sheds light on entanglements between artistic practice and academia as a knowledge industry that consolidates creative capital for intellectual profit. In early 2017, I sent an email to the DSM introducing myself as a PhD student interested in studying the school's approach to performance training. A few weeks later, I had a Skype conversation with a DSM program head, who told me that the school was eager to have its methodologies studied by an academic who could offer an outsider's perspective on their approach to performance pedagogy. In exchange for observing classes and interviewing faculty and students, I was asked to write a case study that would be used in future programming materials. Portions of this chapter serve as my case study.

I informed the program head that I was especially eager to learn more about the school's involvement with corporate training, a practice I learned about via the DSM's website, which boasts its ability to train actors to work as corporate trainers. The program head, however, told me how despite their website, the school had not done any corporate work. According to her, DSM faculty struggled to find a way of pitching theatre to corporations in a language that appealed to HR interests. Because of this, I was asked to share my "insider knowledge" on how arts groups I worked with in the past have been able to enter the corporate realm—in particular the kinds of terminologies and languages used to translate the value of theatre into corporate spaces.

I share my initial contact with the DSM as a way of elucidating the situated nature of academia in the accumulation of creative economic value and global arts branding practices. My conversation with the program head contained critical subtexts around the real and imagined distances between myself as a performance scholar located in the hemispheric North, and the DSM as a school searching for a global visibility within an international arts training network whose values and techniques are often traced back to the West. My ethnographic entry was a creative economic transaction of sorts, in which my academic capital and global mobility made me a gateway to strengthening the DSM's brand image. My knowledge of how theatre groups are strategically translating the value of their theatrical skillsets to corporate houses further rendered me a helpful

resource for navigating new realms of the global cultural economy. My academic labor, built upon multiple, intersecting layers of locational, historical, and cultural privilege, rooted my research venture in the processes of artistic validation and belonging I sought to analyze and challenge. The politics that undergirded my research unwittingly naturalized the process I disavowed—the intensification of artistic precarity through the necessity to brand oneself as belonging to an aspirational, global creative class. (At the same time, my conversation with the program head about corporate training suggests that the school participates in their own re-coding processes, whereby advertising corporate training functioned as a veneer for other dramatic practices).

While academic discourse is often thought of as commenting on social processes and practices from a position exterior to their demands and flows, my research at the DSM highlights the currency academia carries in legitimizing the global-cultural value of artistic industries and nourishing the parameters of power and creative prestige it sometimes purports to dismantle. My experience at the DSM, replicated in other spaces and times throughout the duration of my fieldwork, also made me wonder how I can do more to offset the transactional exchanges ethnography brings into being, how I can attend to the possibilities, limits, and risks of knowledge exchange while also working for social justice (and whatever that may mean to me), and what other kinds of methodological approaches I can deploy in the pursuit of scholarship that more fully and responsibly acts on the knowledge of intellectual and academic complicity in processes of institutional and epistemic violence. This chapter, and the dissertation as a whole, does not supply answers to these questions, but only to reassert the necessity for continued modes of self-reflective scholarship that try to assert new ways of attending to the inherent limits and dangers of ethnography (a discussion nuanced in richer detail by others like Grewal and Kaplan 2004, and Nagar and Swarr 2010).

In the next section, I pivot from an analysis of the DSM and SMART's branding efforts to attending to the materiality of each program—the everyday lived movements and practices, emotional investments, and ambivalent narratives that disrupt and exceed each program's brand performance. This move is inspired by the work of anthropologist Constantine Nakassis, who argues that brands are constituted through an

inherent instability between their identity (how the brand generates profit), and their excess: the differences and gaps between the brand's identity and its lived materiality. Thinking about the brand vis-à-vis its excess reveals what social realities brands represent, perform, and gain profit from, as well as the "social practices that exceed the very intelligibility of the brand through its own logics and forms" (2012, 632). In other words, brands cannot be reduced to their images. Looking beyond a brand's representation to how the brand is lived and experienced is a methodological move that can illustrate novel articulations of brand logics and social conditions of possibility that transgress the brand itself. In what follows, I attempt to ground the DSM and SMART in the structures, histories, and trajectories that give them traction by transitioning from a discursive analysis of their external branding to an ethnographically textured reading of how each program lives out its brand through its everyday practices.

Precarious Entrepreneurship at the Drama School Mumbai

In October, 2017, I took the train each day from my rented room in Khar to the DSM's studio in Colaba, a neighborhood near the city's famed Marine Drive. I observed classes, chatted with faculty when they had a free moment between classes, and generally lingered around the main office. Given that my visit coincided with a weeklong student break, most of my time was spent doing the latter, which gave me an intimate sense of how the DSM faculty differently experience and approach questions of arts praxis, training, and entrepreneurship. For example, in one of my early conversations with DSM founder Jehan Manekshaw, I asked him what the term actor-creator-entrepreneur meant to him. He replied:

> Becoming an actor-creator-entrepreneur is not about learning how to produce a play, but how to embody a mode of entrepreneurial thinking. Here we teach not the craft of theatre, but the craft of being. You exist through being informed, equipped to navigate your social space, your political space. The agenda is not to tell [the students] what to think but how to think, how to go about thinking, how to go about doing. They'll come up with it on their own. So at the DSM we emphasize the students' ability to come up with lived material, to come up with stories. It's giving them the tools of theatre and the tools of dialogue. […]

> Also, I believe theatre exists against fascism, so there is also that.

Jehan locates the efficacy of actor-creator-entrepreneur not in terms of their contribution to national productivity, but through an internal mode of cognitive being that can use the "lived material" of theatre to navigate complex social and political times and spaces. Jehan's description of theatre as anti-fascist, which conjures up histories of colonial, anti-state, and contemporary anti-*Hindutva* arts activism, aligns communitarian theatre models with narratives of arts management that celebrate creative entrepreneurship and businesslike professionalization. While this restores a political dimension to the actor-creator-entrepreneur that challenges the school's own advertising, Jehan also paints the actor as a highly individualized performer, focused on the unique development of his/her own capacities and journey to achieve success.

The DSM's daily curriculum places ensemble formation at its core, rubbing against representations of entrepreneurialism as only a mode of self-starting individualism. While students write journal entries and create research projects that ask them to reflect upon their individual artistic journeys, the weekly class structure is rooted in a community-based pedagogy that validates principles of collaboration and co-dependency as essential to artistic survival. Every Monday morning, students are divided into groups and asked to create a devised piece on the acting style learned throughout the week. On Saturdays, each group performs for faculty feedback, which generally revolves around each ensemble's collective performance. "It's about trusting each other" was a common phrase repeated throughout these Saturday morning rituals. Students also complete research projects that ask them to study the life of a living theatre artist whose work they emulate. A look at the reports shows how students are taught to pursue and create work that feeds their social and political interests, rather than direct their skills towards purely economic ends. For instance, one report on puppeteer Ramdas Padhye in 2016 included the following student observation:

> Ramdas Padhye ji never let his work suffer due to lack of support or facilities. He would always make sure that he delivered a quality experience to his audience. He wouldn't take up bad quality work for money.

Another student chose Iranian theatre artist Faezeh Jalali. In her presentation, she expressed her admiration for Jalali's emphasis on performing plays that carry socio-political messages. She quoted her favorite Jalali saying: "I'm not frivolous, but I don't want to do entertainment for entertainment's sake. As artists we have a little more responsibility." Such projects show how DSM students are encouraged to think about theatre not purely as an economic asset, but also as an important form of social and political dialogue that creates social change. They also ask students to conceive of themselves as part of a larger community of artists who must join together to face the artistic challenges of the contemporary economy.[17]

In her work on arts funding in the UK, Harvie argues that pressure on artists to model creative entrepreneurship explicitly valorizes neoliberal capitalism and "insists that art prioritizes self-interest and individualism" (2013, 63). While a focus on artistic entrepreneurialism indeed exemplifies *homo economicus* insofar as students are taught that they must be able to produce their own work, the DSM's emphasis on entrepreneurialism occupies the same space as activist and socially-committed theatre histories and impulses. It is also premised on systems of artistic precarity that views self-sustaining theatre as not a mode of empowerment, but the only option left for young actors working in a selective arts network. In my conversations with Niloufar Sagar, head of the school's entrepreneurship module, she framed her decision to join the DSM as based on her experience navigating the country's arts landscape since the 1980s. "I come from a Westernized, urban elite English-speaking background," she began one morning over breakfast. Niloufar's father took her to see theatre as a child, where her encounter with the arts came via the work of Alyque Padamsee, a Sangeet Natak Adademi winner who was also active in the advertising world throughout the 1980s and 1990s. "At that time theatre was entirely weekend theatre, and at this point, I got the theatre bug"

[17] Future study could take up the ways the DSM's emphasis on ensemble formation can be understood as part of a longer genealogy of the group theatre tradition in India, where non-full-time actors join together under the guidance of a director or group of leaders (see Richmond, Swann, Farelli 1993, 394-396). Pioneered by well-known artists like Utpal Dutt of the People's Little Theatre of Calcutta and Tripti and Sombhu Mitra of the Bengali Bohurupee group, the group theatre tradition holds collaborative movement and ensemble work at its core.

Niloufar explained. After getting her start in stage management, Niloufar joined Rage Theatre in the 1980s, a group that produces English and Hindi plays for prestigious Mumbai arts houses like the Prithvi Theatre and National Center for Performing Arts (NCPA).

Niloufar moved to London to earn a degree in cultural policy and arts management before embarking upon a career in arts festival planning, dance production, and site-specific performance in India and the United Kingdom. She recalled witnessing new forms of performance in India that arose after liberalization:

> In the mid-90s to the early 2000s, the economy was flourishing, and the banking sector [was] actually a key reason for what happened to theatre after all the growth. It was all your multinationals that came and started a huge market with theatre sponsorship. In the late 90s we used to do a huge amount of what we call "sold-out" shows, which is [sic] shows that are bought over by a sponsor […] So for example, HSBC would call 200 of its most important clients, and we'd do a stand-alone show for them. You do it in sort of luxury surroundings, so they'd book the ballroom at the Taj, they'd serve them drinks, and we'd do the show in between. And then there would be dinner after. So it's supper theatre.

Niloufar notes a shift since the 2000s from theatre as a "luxury good in the banking sector" to a corporate development tool for "underrepresented social causes and philanthropy." Like other artists I spoke with, she described funding for the arts as scarce, especially from the state. Importantly, however, Niloufar's description of her artistic background sets itself apart from leftist theatre commitments and histories, attuning us to parallel histories of theatre where the arts have long been used as an instrument in private enclaves of the Indian economy. Niloufar spoke about her job at the DSM as a commitment to guiding young practitioners without access to the artistic knowledge she acquired throughout her career:

> In Bombay now, realistically, at the small scale, there's one theatre that people can put their productions up in, if you're looking at conventional space-based theatre. So what are the opportunities? The reason we brought producing and entrepreneurship into the course currently is to give them

> the tools to go out and be able to make their own work. And some of them have, some of them haven't. But I think it is necessary for them to have the knowledge. […] We as the senior members of the community have some sort of responsibility in terms of generating more opportunities for them. And what I do encourage people to do is to look at the other models of working that may not involve applying for Privthi, which you know, has less calendar dates in the year than applications. So it's as simple as that.

Niloufar describes teaching as a personal commitment to helping artists work in a city whose arts landscape is dominated by high-status venues like the Prithvi Theatre, an arts house with a long history of corporate sponsorship that dates pre-liberalization (discussed in a moment). Her self-identified role as "a senior member of the community" inculcates her with a sense of accountability to equip a younger generation to navigate an economy where arts are targeted as primarily instrumental to economic growth. This sense of responsibility was inflected by feelings of uncertainty and doubt:

> My intention [in teaching entrepreneurship] was to encourage [the students] and give them the wherewithal to try and arrive at a process by which they could deliver work that one comes from a complete artistic integrity, but yet works in the market. But how do you bridge that gap, right? […] And although I think that the corporate power empowers the individual to some extent, I really question that. And I'm saying this as somebody who is working in that world and who is looking to make more opportunities in that world. But we have to find a way of balancing the two of that—right now, it's very skewed in one direction. The influence that theatre may have on behavioral or social change is only one of the very important functions. I'm saying another very important function which is simply putting an artistic product in the mind of the public—that is being neglected. Whether it's the Tata Trust or the IFA, no one funds performance for performance sake."

The statement above reveals Niloufar's deep ambivalence about her own entrepreneurial teaching responsibility, which she positions as a struggle between training artists how to orient their work to corporate demands, while also inspiring them to pursue their artistic dreams and identities. Underlying this sense of uncertainty concerning her teaching

responsibilities and generational sense of accountability is also a worry surrounding the growing use of theatre in business contexts, which Niloufar believes may detract from the longstanding validity of theatre in India as a societal art form. Echoing Jehan's statement about the actor-creator-entrepreneur, Niloufar also depicts an expressive, individualist understanding of theatrical art that departs from communitarian models of theatre-making.

An aside: Niloufar's mention of the Prithvi Theatre, a prestigious arts house in Mumbai, brings to light the tenuous, longstanding relationship between theatre arts and the corporate sector.[18] Prithvi was built in 1978 by the Kapoor family, a well-known name in the Bollywood film industry, and gained a reputation as an innovative Hindi language theatre in a city dominated by English and Marathi drama. When it opened, the theatre charged a price of one rupee per ticket, establishing the venue's status as making art accessible to audiences of all backgrounds. According to the Kapoor family's website, in 1983 the theatre was nearly forced to close due to increasing rental costs and controlled ticket pricing.[19] To remedy this, the theatre partnered with the Vazir Sultan Tobacco Company corporation, which subsidized the building's running costs and its annual theatre festival in exchange for equal billing. Prithvi became "Prithvi Theatre in association with VST," and the theatre continued its annual arts festival throughout a decade-long collaboration with VST. Prithvi's corporate patronage demonstrates a fragile relationship between the arts community and the corporate sector dating pre-liberalization—a relationship described on the Kapoor's family website as "a unique relationship where corporate patronage was intimately woven into and identified with the growth of a dynamic theatre movement."[20] While this study does not attend to these longer histories and narratives of corporate sponsorship (and the ways artists have long oriented their labors and values to institutional forms of colonial and postcolonial patronage), they are worth reflecting on in future research.

Returning to Niloufar, her sense of personal responsibility to a younger

[18] In another example, 20th century Parsi theatre in Bombay largely flourished by the Parsi business caste/class (see Gupta and Hansen 2005).
[19] http://www.junglee.org.in/theatre.html. Accessed December 15, 2018.
[20] Ibid.

generation of artists echoed throughout my time at the DSM. I was often told by students and staff that the faculty taught not for the financial benefits, but out of a personal duty they felt to prepare students to face the challenges of the moment. Again, this sense of collective responsibility hinged on a generational distinction between an older arts generation who grew up pre-liberalization and a younger arts generation in need of newfangled proficiencies now necessary for "making it." The ideology of generational kinship, in which artists born pre-globalization must join together to formulate new modes of pedagogy that ensure the duration of theatre, was a key theme of the DSM's philosophy and over the course of my fieldwork. Beliefs regarding the necessity of unification across cultural and political artistic difference were reflected by artists like Chani from my introduction, who told me he feels confident that "the next generation will carry on the task the older generations started." While Chaniji is concerned with safeguarding legacies of oppositional theatre amidst contemporary Hindutva politics and urban privatization, Niloufar's concern was a diminishing absence of financial opportunity for young actors facing a changing arts landscape. Regardless of these differences, generational kinship emerges from a collectively felt sense of concern over the survival of theatre as an art form in and of itself.[21] At the same time, however, Chani and Niloufar's sense of *why* theatre, what is valuable about it, and what its future should look like, are crucially different, showing how alliances formed through ideologies of generational kinship often efface crucial differences in the politics and priorities of contemporary theatre-making and arts praxis.

Younger faculty members at the DSM positioned their creative work along different lines that can be linked more closely to the DSM's aspirational branding of

[21] During my research, there were exceptions to this narrative from artists like director Neelam Mansigh, who articulated a greater sense of isolation emerging from the contemporary theatre landscape. To quote her during an interview conducted in Chandigarh in 2017: "The entire money [for theatre] used to come from the Ministry of Culture. […] so you work on the salary grant and you work on the production grant—it's very minuscule but it's enough to keep you going decently…When this new government came, they gave all those powers to the NSD. 'We will give you the money, and you will take the decisions.' And that's very dangerous, because what happens is whether you like it or not there's so many prejudices that exist. We being a community of theatre people, but nobody gets along with anyone. It's very strange. Everyone thinks that the other persons work is rubbish; nobody is ever given their due. You form a little world of isolation."

entrepreneurialism as a pathway towards financial success and middle-class belonging. During my interview with acting faculty Tushar Pandey, I asked him what he thought about the rise in corporate work in Mumbai. After sharing my thoughts regarding the political and social differences between corporate theatres and the public theatres of earlier decades, Tushar told me that I needed to speak to "more artists like [him]." By this, I assume he meant those who grew up in a post-globalization context. Tushar continued:

> The corporate world is something that we are brought up into, not the factory and things like those earlier political theatre commitments. The corporate and the capitalist is a fit for me. I don't see it as an anti-theatre world thing, it is my world. Money and these corporations are part of my lifestyle. Look, you're drinking a Pepsi and we both are using our iPhones. This is the context of young theatre makers like us.

Tushar, a film and stage actor in his mid-20s who trained in London before returning to India to pursue artistic work, positions himself in a younger generation of artists who grew up in a post-liberalization urban arts context. Here, corporate work is viewed as an acceptable way of earning money that can be put to other "authentic," theatre-for-itself pursuits like directing and acting, rather than a form of "selling out" that betrays earlier political theatre commitments. Although he had no political qualms about doing corporate work, Tushar also expressed frustration over corporate uses of the arts. "It's the essence of theatre that corporates like, because it says on their tax bracket that they support the arts," he explained. Tushar might not carry the same feelings of generational kinship as other faculty, but he similarly positions his creative work against the misuse of art for corporate promotion in ways that articulate an anti-corporate politics. Tushar lives the DSM's aspirational branding even as he disavows it.

Tushar's his description of the corporate world as "a fit" for him also touches upon a crucial aspect of how "corporate" is felt amongst young artists as a powerful source of economic opportunity and mobility. The "corporate world," a phrase commonly used by practitioners throughout the duration of my fieldwork in complimentary and disparaging ways, serves as a powerful source of economic opportunity for artists like

Tushar, who (like most DSM faculty) can be viewed as part of India's mobile cosmopolitan creative class imbued with the economic and social class and caste capital required to achieve work in corporate spaces. At the same time, Tushar's statement also depicts the "corporate fit" as not simply an ethos of mobility, but as a fact of living in a consumer-based society (coke, iPhones, etc.), a non-negotiable aspect of the neoliberal order that has, in Margaret Thatcher's words, No Alternative.

In Carla Freeman's ethnography of female tech entrepreneurs in Barbados, she demonstrates how the concept of entrepreneurship as "fundamentally an economic enterprise" gets imagined, articulated, and experienced through broader structures of feeling in ways that reveal entrepreneurialism as a complex way of being in the world today (2014, 17). This became powerfully evident at the DSM, where ambivalent faculty narratives of generational kinship and corporate commitments re-frame neoliberal ideologies of individuality and entrepreneurship within a contradictory politics of care, individualism, and collective survival. While the actor-creator-entrepreneur is a prototype for neoliberal labor in the school's branding, to live and work as an artist at the DSM is differently imagined, felt, and experienced by faculty members as a strategic negotiation of multiple, conflicting worlds in the service of social dialogue, individual development, and community formation. The DSM's ambivalent narratives and practices, however, should not be mistaken for a lack of political commitment or uncertainty. As Megan Moodie argues, ambivalence can be a strategic navigation between an individual's intimate, personal, and dream worlds with calls to community, nation, and survival. As she writes in her ethnography of female Dhanka tribal community members in North India:

> I characterize girls' subjectivity [...] as "ambivalent" in order
> to highlight the extent to which they do not easily occupy a "position," and thereby throw into relief the undecidability of
> subaltern speech "in the face of which we must risk the decision that we can hear the other" (Spivak 1999,199). […]
> The truth is that it requires a great deal of effort to maintain the emotional buoyance that allows one to be part of a

> project one is not entirely convinced of […] Their agency here is not one of rebellion or resistance, but of refusing closure (2005, 136-137).

Instead of understanding the DSM as (only) symptomatic of artistic commodification, we might instead the understand the school as an "occupation," in Jenny Hughes words, of the social factory that concedes to capitalist demands even while advancing social and political art-making.

Limitless Labor

Sweat dripped down my face as I sit in the back of the DSM's studio early one Monday morning, watching thirteen black-clad students claw, meow, and crawl their way around the room, learning the acting technique of Animal. That day had started at 7:55 AM, with two hours of yoga, improvisation, martial arts movement, and *riyaaz*—Hindustani vocal training. Following class was lunch, then an afternoon of improvisation, character study, scene analysis, devising, theatre history, and/or producing and entrepreneurship classes. Between breaks, students would complete journal entries, study for research projects, partake in individual mentorship meetings, or continue to work on their techniques. The school day ends at 8 PM, unless there was a visiting guest artist or evening event, as was often the case. The school's curriculum draws on an assortment of Indian and Western performance traditions ranging from Stanislavski and Laban to the *navrasa* system of aesthetics and *katha gyan vachan* form. The goal of the multicultural curriculum, according to teachers, is to expose students to a wide variety of theatrical styles which have long assumed a key role in India's dramatic histories. This "global-yet-national" approach helps the school brand itself an institute exemplary of "national heritage" while preparing students to work internationally in a global arts arena.

The room smelled like sweat; the heat index was especially high that morning. After the exercise, the instructor (a Mumbai-based practitioner and director) instructed the group to play a game involving running then standing still in timed increments. As the group began playing, they kept messing up, and the instructor became visibly angry. She shouted instructions with an urgency that made my heart beat with the instrumental music playing from in the studio corner: "Walk. Walk. Walk. Space. Space. Up. Up. Up. Up.

Energy. Eyes. Alertness. Come on, too lazy. Too lazy. Hold your core. Balance the space. And breathe. Breathe. Breathe. Walk. Stop." It continued, escalating in intensity as the students failed to follow instructions properly. As they fail again, they try again, and the instructor shouted: "Walk. Breathe. Walk. Don't crack. Don't crack. Don't crack." The group began again. "This is a matter of life or death. This is life or death."

Labor was a persistent theme in the DSM's classroom practices. I argued earlier that the DSM's branding promotes theatre as a reputable occupation for corporate work and an elite global arts arena by making it clean, or disassociating it from modes of material production connected to the informal economy and histories of leftist theatre. The use-value of art gets re-framed as a communicative commodity, where training functions as a medium to produce the central effects of the knowledge economy—emotions, behaviors, and aspirations. This functions as part of larger processes of postcolonial urbanization in India, where the transition from Fordist manufacturing to outsourced knowledge work is framed within a context of changing labor relations from Marxian categories like value, productivity, and exploitation to care, communication, and empowerment. Making the artist an immaterial laborer, however, does not exempt them from processes of biopolitical neoliberalism. As Hardt and Negri write:

> Labor and value have become biopolitical in the sense that living and producing tend to be indistinguishable. Insofar as life tends to be completely invested by acts of production and reproduction, social life itself becomes a productive machine (2004, 148).

The vignette above provides a glimpse of the DSM's inner-classroom emphasis on ceaseless labor—on a "don't crack" pedagogy that prepares students not only to exert an abundance of physical labor in the service of artistic survival, but to internalize neoliberal values of productivity through their bodies. During class, students are constantly pushed to assume stronger mental and physical dispositions, which indoctrinate modes of bodily disciplining that place emphasis on mental and physical resilience as key to sustenance. The harder students labor, the more chance they have of survival. Of course, students are not actually preparing for a lifetime of hard physical labor, but they are taught that the harder, faster, and more productive their bodies can perform, the higher their chance of

sustaining oneself as a working artist. The physical ordeal of training becomes a corporeal manifestation of the ceaseless demands of (immaterial) neoliberal labor on the student; training as a discipline is perceived as a technology of the self that is vital to the students' flourishing in the corporate performance ecology. The students are affectively and physically laboring in the interests of neoliberalism, even as they are encouraged to pursue their extra-capitalist desires and individual artistic urges.

DSM alum Niketan Sharma, for example, is a playwright and actor in his late 20s from Delhi. He auditioned for the DSM after hearing from his cousin (an actor in Mumbai) about the highly-reputed faculty. He initially refused his acceptance, however, because he could not afford the tuition fee of 3.85 lakhs (around $5,889 USD). During our interview, he told me how the DSM's admittance fees (considerably more than the cost of an average college education) prevented other students from auditioning: "Obviously I felt that students didn't take admission because of [the] money. My father was expired, and my mother also doesn't have money." Unlike other DSM students who Niketan alluded to as possessing the class privilege required to pay for tuition and spend a year without working, Niketan accepted admission with borrowed money, a scholarship from the school, and by living in his cousin's apartment. Since graduation, he works as an actor and director and facilitates afterschool workshops at nearby colleges, where he uses theatre as a tool to teach communication skills. When I asked Niketan what the biggest impact of the DSM's training was on him, he responded "I can work limitless." I asked him what he meant by "limitless:"

> By limitless means, 'til I cannot finish that. I have to do [that] and I will continue to do this. Like today I have slept at 5 or 6 [in the morning]. So the one thing I think which I learned from there is that my body—I can work limitless. Whatever, even if I'm tired I know, but I'll manage that also. I'll take time out to just take rest, and then come back to that work; limitless.

Limitless reflects a bodily comportment without end, limit, or boundary. For Niketan, the DSM installed a physical work ethic that allows him stay up all night, curbing the feeling of exhaustion and enabling him to work unremittingly. Limitless correlates to neoliberal

mandates of productivity that posit an individual's moral imperative to work incessantly to fulfill her/his desires (by the same token, if you do not find success it is your fault, and if you are not working then you are not fulfilling your moral imperative to be productive). Niketan admitted that one of the biggest challenges he faced after leaving the DSM was a lack of continuous work:

> Sometimes I felt that after the drama school that they made us too comfortable, there is a work ethic. But when I [left the DSM], that was not there. Now, what can I do? Because I was strong in the sense that I've gained and learned. But that's totally opposite from outside. But at the same time, they made us so strong.

The non-stop activity inside the program kept Niketan busy and constantly moving. Once he graduated, he was able to work hard when needed (like the night before our interview) but he also had to adjust to long periods of no work—a skill the DSM did not prepare him for and contributes to personal feelings of inaptitude. Niketan also expressed difficulty knowing how to translate theatre to potential sponsors:

> This kind of thing, like making a product, still I don't know that. So that's my—I won't say my struggle, but even I am thinking on that. So I have a play about two brothers, [but] I'm still finding that thing. If I have to find a sponsor or someone, what will I tell them? I don't know. Because if I'm making a play on some political or social message, then I think it's easy. But now obviously I am not sure what I have. And if someone asked me that, why anyone would want to come, tell us one reason, why they want to see your play, why they should come? I don't know. I really don't know what the answer to that is.

Niketan's story demonstrates how actor-creator-entrepreneurs are trained to have no limit to the amount of work they can and will do to get a job. But this emphasis on hard, continual work remains shrouded by a veneer of entrepreneurial vitality that presents the theatre worker a knowledge worker of 21st century cognitive capitalism. Theorists like Richard Florida envisioned the knowledge worker as the purveyor of a future free of the dirt of the factory and alienation of the worker (2005). But if the fabric of the global order is communicative and affective, "limitless labor" reveals its cracks—its ongoing

exploitation of bodies and ceaseless demand for physical exertion within what Enda Brophy and Jack Bratich call the "newly loquacious factory floor" (2011, 12).

Niketan's struggle to convert the value of his theatrical product to the world of corporate sponsors and institutional affiliations further evidences the complex terrain of translation and cultural capital required for advancement's in India's corporate performance ecology. Niketan cannot pitch the social and political value of his plays to corporate sponsors, which alienates him from pursuing CSR opportunities that have overtaken India's national developmental agendas. As an actor who grew up in the post-liberalization era and trained within the youth-driven enterprise pedagogy of the DSM, he is equally removed from an older generation of theatre makers who understand their political commitments as informed by and carried over from previous decades of state violence. By virtue of his non-elite background and limited English language ability, Niketan might also face difficulty pursuing avenues of corporate entrepreneurialism, like workplace training. Caught between these poles, Niketan's struggle for belonging attunes us to the multiple, overlapping historical, generational, and economic conditions and obstacles that undergird artistic practice and priorities in India today.

"Not-Management" Management: SMART

As I earlier demonstrated, SMART brands itself as a CSR receptacle—a capacity building program that professionalizes artists into the global economy through teaching them how to be more management-savvy. In early 2016, I contacted SMART co-founder Sudhanva Deshpande and staff at IFA to inquire into the possibility of attending the two-week residential program and interviewing the program's creators. This proved difficult, however, as SMART members did not feel comfortable with having an outsider attend the residential portion of the program. I was, however, able to interview several founders and program developers over the duration of 2016-2018. While this section draws on these conversations to tease out the dissonance between SMART-in-practice and its CSR branding, my analysis lacks a close-up view of the residential capacity program I craved when first researching the initiative. In what follows, however, I show how SMART emerged from the same impulse of generational kinship as the DSM—a collective sense of banding together in the face of difficult circumstances

despite strikingly different personal and political beliefs. Within this, I highlight the strategic translational maneuvers and pedagogical techniques SMART founders deploy to, in Deshpande's words, "re-claim" management from its neoliberal moorings.

SMART arose through the belief that a robust system of arts management had been in practice long before the dissemination of post-liberalization neoliberal culture. As Milena, a UNESCO policy maker from Belgrade who assisted SMART's development, explained to me in 2017, "Artists were already doing strategic management. They were leaders of their theatres doing budgeting, financing, fund-raising, only they haven't been using the terminology." Put similarly by Sudhanva in 2017:

> One of the concerns we had right from the beginning, that actually all of us felt in our own different ways, was that theatre people know how to manage. There are management practices that are already on the ground; real practices that theatre people have evolved in response to specific challenges that they faced in many different parts of the country. […] There is indigenous knowledge that is already present—knowledge that does not come from business schools.

SMART founders aimed to teach a form of arts management not translatable into the profit-driven demands and priorities of business knowledge. This "not-management" management pedagogy uses the same language as mainstream models, but distances itself from them through attaching itself to grassroots forms of arts sustainability that have helped Indian artists produce creative work for decades. As Sudhanva explained:

> Theatre people are extremely good at managerial work. We are very good managers—we just have to be. And particularly in a country like India where you're working with such few resources, we have to be bloody good managers. That's how we're able to swing these big things. We can't do it if we're not good managers. But it's a certain management that's coming that's a problem.

SMART's "not-management" management pedagogy was also administrated to prevent escalating forms of artistic precarity arising from the landscape of international arts funding. Grants awarded by global organizations like the Ford Foundation, Sudhanva explained, fulfill a crucial need to monetize artistic work in lieu of an absence of state

support, but often place pressure on small theatre groups to professionalize their operations in ways that fail to correspond to their artistic realities (for example, insisting that theatre groups establish formal office environments or adhere to particular online marketing standards).

SMART's aim to legitimize modes of management knowledge otherwise ignored in contemporary models of professionalization is an artistic survival tactic that evidences what Margaret Werry calls "the inherent ambivalence of translation," which "promises the mutual legibility of distinct cultures and attests to their mutual opacity" even while attempting to depart from them (2011, 94). A "not-management" management pedagogy retains a sense political purpose, even as it conforms to mainstream professionalization impulses that detach it from the anti-state languages and practices of earlier decades. This mode of management is distinct from "corporate" as an ideology of big business—a move summed up in the following conversation that took place between Menaka and Darshana, two IFA SMART programmers:

> Menaka: "What SMART is about is reclaiming the idea of management that is not only a corporate word. So not to say that "oh, it's not for theatre," but it's about reclaiming it. It's also a thing amongst artists. There's this whole thing like, 'Oh, I don't know what management is. I don't know how to deal with money and I can't deal with money.'
>
> Darshana: And there's a certain pride in claiming that!
>
> Menaka: And it's that idea that 'I'm not a manager,' because in the corporate world—and we come from a country that's very socialist that moved into, you know, in 1991, so that whole idea of what corporate represents and what management represents. And that's how people are viewing; 'Oh, he's a manager. He's a leader, no, that's not for the arts. I'm not a leader of my group.'
>
> Darshana: 'He's a corporate guy.'
>
> Menaka: 'He's a corporate guy. We don't function like that.' So that distancing happens."

Menaka and Darshana's exchange demonstrates how the goal of SMART is not to ignore

management demands altogether, but to recuperate the value of a distinctly anti-corporate (with "corporate" as the antithesis to "art") management into the wider theatrical sphere. To do so, the 10-day residential program reinscribes what founders call "indigenous" management knowledges Indian theatre history into frameworks of arts management. Sudhanva discussed what this looks like in practice:

> There's a friend of mine who is Swedish, and he had come as an observer for the SMART course. And for the first 3 days he was just completely confused and kept saying to me, "but this is not arts management, what are you talking about?" Because [what] we were talking about is […] "what kind of theatre do you do, and why do you do it?" So we hardly ever articulated the words vision and mission. It's only right at the end of the course that the words vision and mission come in. For the most part it's really trying to understand why do you do what you do. What is your raison d'etre for existing? What is the difference that you seek to make in the world that marks you out in some different way?

Sudhanva's concluding remarks about investigating one's "raison d'etre for existing" gesture towards a highly individualistic drive for art-making espoused earlier by Jehan and Niloufar. In this framework, the purpose of making theatre is positioned as singular and specific to each individual, in need of perpetual discovery through an artist's unique personal and professional journey. The emphasis on self-possession and transformation, as we now know, is a tenant of neoliberal self-making found in corporate theatre's promotion of qualities like workplace presence as integral to each individual's pathway to success. This evidence on making theatre as a process of neoliberal self-making distances SMART from a community-driven pedagogy based on collective problems and needs (even as we see Sudhanva claiming pride that his friend did not recognize the program as "arts management" typically conceived).

A look at the content of SMART's residential program also evidences the strategic translational maneuvers staff deploy to reinscribe terms associated with arts management with knowledges unique to an Indian theatre context. Participants discuss manuscripts like the Bread and Puppet Theatre's "Why Cheap Art" manifesto as a way of

discussing mission and vision. Facilitators shared stories about which modes of audience development, sponsorship, and advertisement have worked best for them, and which ones failed. Participants learned strategic planning through materials like Kannada dramatist K.V. Subbanna's *Community and Culture*, where he writes about the decades-long project of creating Karnataka's *Ninasam* cultural foundation (Subbaṇṇa and Chakravarthy 2009). Every five years, a new step was completed towards building a theatre for the village; a strategic planning process not bound to strict time constraints or mainstream organizational priorities. In my conversations with Milena, she elaborated on other techniques used throughout the training:

> We talked about different experiences from Mumbai, like Privthi theatre and such, or Rangashankara in Bengaluru, and so on, using those examples to teach planning, fund-raising, communication, administration, and so on. And to build this knowledge which is going to be real knowledge. So that somebody from, for example, Assam comes to the training—he can relate. He can't relate to Los Angeles or Sao Paulo or so on. But if he hears that, for example, Naya Theatre in Bhopal did this, and forgot to do this, and that is the reason why this theatre does not exist anymore.' For him, that is very realistic and it's real life.

As Menaka, IFA's Resource Mobilization Manager, explained about the session she created for the residential program:

> We specifically call our session resource mobilization and not fund-raising. Because it's like, how do you mobilize people? How do you mobilize volunteers? How do you mobilize funds and when you're a political theatre group that doesn't want to take money from the corporate world? But how do you raise funds nevertheless? Those are questions and concerns that come up.

In Menaka's session, facilitators offer words of advice on how they have been able to mobilize resources while upholding their political values, personal financial security, and professional artistic goals. For example, Sudhanva discusses how *Jana Natya Manch* subsidizes their work through May Day Cafe, a leftist book shop located on the first floor of their rehearsal building, and Studio Safdar, a performance space named in honor of

Safdar Hasmi's memory. Facilitators also stress the importance of thinking about resource mobilization beyond securing financial gains. Principles like volunteerism, where artists offer their labor free of charge, are taught as ways of doing management that help sustain artistic purpose without being coopted by other agendas.

A look at some of the collective impulses, personal trajectories, and social and political concerns behind SMART brings shades of grey to performance analyses that situate artistic corporatization in black and white terms of compliance or resistance. SMART's not-management management pedagogy lives neoliberal demands, even as it collides against them to include the priorities of activist and professional theatre histories, practices, and commitments. Importantly, the strategic translational maneuvers SMART advances exceed the linguistic, opening up new realms of communication and identity-positioning that simultaneously compromise as they struggle against; that *give in* even as they refuse *defeat*. This dialectic as central to understanding the limits and risks of artistic practice today, and it necessitates a greater willingness to embrace the ambivalence of artistic labor and subjectivity in the neoliberal present.

Conclusion: Towards a New Indian Theatre Historiography

I began conducting research for this chapter in 2016, when the DSM and SMART were still in early years of development. Both programs have undergone considerable changes since then. The DSM continues to gain national recognition; in 2018, Jehan was featured in an international panel discussion on India's Creative Economy. In 2019, the school partnered with Mahindra Corporation to lead a series of master classes for META (the Mahindra Excellence in Theatre Awards), an annual event sponsored by Mahindra's Outreach department that sets "benchmarks for excellence" in Indian theatre practice.[22] SMART, however, experienced different changes. In 2019, I met with Menaka and Darshana at the IFA office in Bangalore, where they told me the program did not receive continued funding for the residential component of the program in 2020/2021. Menaka and Darshana ascribed this to a continued lack of CSR interest in the arts.

I asked Menaka and Darshana if they were disappointed that SMART's

[22] http://metawards.com/learn. Accessed April 10, 2019.

funding fell through. Darshana shrugged and told me that this struggle was only a small part of IFA's larger battle to advocate for the arts in India. IFA does not take money from the state, so the organization's efforts remain on finding ways to fund artistic work without supporting right-wing government. The question remains: are multinational corporations a better alternative, and why? Given the Hindi Right's intimacy with the corporate sector, why is accepting corporate sponsorship a better choice than government money? Menaka expressed disappointment. For her, SMART fulfilled a critical need to help fledging theatre groups find ways of sustaining themselves without submitting to demands to be "corporate" in ways that erase potential for social and political efficacy. Echoing Sudhanva's opening statement that artists have joined together to navigate "a changed world" of theatre in India today, Menaka and Darshana described SMART as one experiment of many emerging from a collective resolve to find new forms of artistic survival in a shifting arts terrain.

The DSM and SMART are two examples comprising a more expansive arts landscape facing increased pressure to orient its values and labors to the economic and social dynamics of the neoliberalizing nation-state. I suggested that despite the ways both programs embrace neoliberal edicts of performance and self-making, a look into the ambivalent relationships and narratives that comprise their internal dynamics reveals the entanglement of theatre with global aspirations, generational politics, and modes of precarious entrepreneurship and limitless labor that invite us to re-envision what it means to live and project oneself as an artist in the neoliberal creative economy. They also provide a more intimate and complex understanding of how artists on a global scale are negotiating the push-and-pull between prescribing to neoliberal demands and retaining a sense of personal and political purpose.

The DSM and SMART also provide us ways of thinking about Indian performance historiography anew. Since the beginning of the 21st century, Indian theatre historiographers have emphasized the difficulty of writing theatre histories that unfolded under the asymmetrical power relations of colonialism and within a country with staggering amounts of intercultural, linguistic, and religious diversity. Aparna Dharwadker (2010) refers to this as a "crisis of representation" in Indian theatre

historiography arising from conflicts between Indian and Western ideas of time, the archive, and what constitutes historicity. For example, Bharata's *Natyasastra* contains no dates, years, or other such "concrete" historical details; therefore, classical dramatists have concentrating on describing Indian theatre "as aesthetic-performance," rather than accounting a history of texts, authors, and productions (173). Dharwadker also calls attention to the ways Indian theatre history lacks many of the foundational history-telling conditions of Western historiography, such as an established professional discipline of theatre history and methodologies for categorizing history-as-record and history-as-account (185, referring to Postlewait 1991). In Dharwadker's words:

> The activity of *representing* the past in Indian theatre historiography is therefore inseparable from the problem *of* the past: how to approach, define, and order the vast performance archive of an ancient culture that allegedly lacks a sense of history and is deeply invested in tradition even as it negotiates the ruptures of colonial and postcolonial modernity (2010, 169).

In a different move, Rakesh Solomon (2004) provides a comprehensive view of Indian theatre histories from 1827 to classify Indian theatre history into three periods. The first is "colonial India's Orientalist phase," where histories of Sanskrit drama supplied by European historians characterized Sanskrit drama a stand-in for the entirety of Indian arts practice (114). Like Dharwadker and other theatre historians, Solomon argues that the Orientalist privileging of Sanskrit theatre "effectively erase[d] the extraordinary variety of theatrical genres that flourished in different Indian languages during the subsequent eight to nine hundred years," and contained brahmanical undertones that allied dramatic history with Indologists' preservation of a classical Hindu civilization (116). The second period is the modern Indian theatres of the late-eighteenth to mid-nineteenth centuries, when Indian elites adapted elements of European models into dramatic productions. In spite of a brief revitalization of multilingual theatre histories, Solomon maintains that modern Indian theatre continued to erase traditional theatres from the newly metropolitan public memory. By contrast, the third and most recent period of theatre history "mirrors a postcolonial nationalism" that spotlights

indigenous, rural, and non-literary performance genres previously silenced by European Orientalists and Indian postcolonial nationalists (121).

Solomon advocates for continued deconstructions of elitist historiography and future avenues for study arising from developments in 20th century India, such as changing "audience reception, the shifting of patronage away from royal houses after Independence, and the impact of decades of Bollywood films and now global television" (125). Similarly, Dharwadker encourages scholars to move beyond "reductive Orientalist or indigenist frameworks" and remind historiographers that India's diverse performance cultures do not fit binaries such as elite/popular, urban/rural, and professional/amateur; rather, "all significant performance practices of the classical, premodern, and colonial pasts have come to coexist in, and intersect with, the theatrical present" (187). Dharwadker cites texts like Nandi Bhatia's *Acts of Authority, Acts of Resistance* (2004) and Sudipto Chatterjee's *The Colonial Staged: Theatre in Colonial Calcutta* (2007) as examples demonstrating new historical methodologies that merge the colonial and postcolonial through "chronological as well as qualitative organization" (187).

The DSM and SMART attune us to the difficulty of locating more recent theatre initiatives within established historiographic models and phases. For example, would we categorize these programs under Solomon's most recent "postcolonial theatre" period? Perhaps not, since the contradictory narratives showcased at the DSM and SMART highlight more ambiguous subject positions and differently experienced relationships with capital, identity, and the state than categories such as "classical," "modern," "postcolonial" and "nationalist" suggest. At the same time, advocating for an extension of Solomon's periodization to account for something like a "neoliberal theatre" may contribute to the absenting of "traditional" histories in the service of a performance landscape seemingly untouched by colonialism and modernity. As we saw with the DSM and SMART, diverse Indian and Euro-Indian dramatic traditions, approaches, and figures are being deployed and conceived by artists today in unique ways, impacting the terrain of stage production and how artists are approaching questions of corporate consumption, infrastructural support, and the conditions of possibility for performance today.

In Patricia Ybarra and Jon Rossini's work on Latino performance historiography, they argue for a renewed understanding of the history of Latino theatre as "always under the aegis of neoliberal development" (2012, 162). The authors demonstrate how Latino theatre historians have focused on theatre productions predicated on the celebration and identification of "forms of identity marked by mainstream culture" (in particular on Black, Asian American, feminist, and gay identities) against a backdrop of civil rights and minoritarian empowerment (163). This focus, they suggest, relies on a trajectory of racial equality and progress that "elide[s] the shifting relations of art, capital, and identity under the changing macroeconomic capitalist conditions in the Americas, ignoring the conditions of a global economy" (163). Similarly, my concern is that an inability to categorize recent initiatives like the DSM and SMART through either resistance from colonial foundations or enunciations of postcolonial nationalism(s) eclipse evolving dynamics between theatre, corporate consumption, nationalism, and global aspirations in India today—risking the absenting of theatrical works that do not (or *cannot*) identify themselves along established histories and priorities of theatre. As much Indian theatre history must be understood as co-emergent with the rise of colonial and postcolonial histories, they must also attend to neoliberalism as a historical phenomenon and lived artistic practice through and alongside lineages of coloniality.

The historiographic project I am advocating for can consider how shifts in state power and infrastructure support are impacting the work of artists from the ground up. Future avenues for study can mark how developments like liberalization, privatization, commercialism, global and middle class regimes of consumption, and the incursion of market-based funding practices and career opportunities have provoked new modes of artistic citizenship and, indeed, what constitutes artistic practices and subjectivity today. This project can re-think the social and economic norms and subject positions implicit in Indian theatre historiography, and ask what conditions (like the influx of transnational labor markets, shifts in political theatre ideologies, etc.) inform production today. It can ascertain the continuities and ruptures from earlier decades of Indian theatre history; for example, how might we understand CSR support in relationship to histories of colonial court and postcolonial corporate patronage, and how have conditions of production

evolved across these genealogies? What kinds of history-telling are embedded *inside* contemporary theatre productions, particularly those that grapple with changes in urban life, national politics, and post-liberalization mindsets? Questions like these ask us to methodologically reimagine the structures, relationships, and affiliations inherent in Indian theatre history alongside the ambivalence of arts practice under contemporary neoliberalism.

Conclusion

In January 2019, I received an email from an interlocutor that described a moment he experienced while facilitating a theatre training in 2018. This interlocutor was a friend in Bangalore who had given up a corporate career to become a full-time director and performer. Portions of his letter read as follows:

> *…At the end of the workshop a man, not more twenty five perhaps, walked up to me and held my hand tight. He was struggling with English, so I asked him to switch to Hindi. We spoke.*
>
> *He confessed to me, holding my hand tightly, about how he felt like he was dying there. He wanted to leave. He wanted to be a singer songwriter. He had written some songs. Would I care to listen to them? Would I care to instruct him on how to leave this corporate world that is sucking the life out of him and become an artist? Would I guide him? Would I fit him in the trunk of my car and take him? (He actually said that). He was crying.*
>
> *I had never been put into that sort of position. I was held hostage and required to address the issue immediately. To show the "light" at the end of the tunnel. I was being asked to do the exact thing I had sworn to never do. I asked the man to calm down and then spoke to him about what he wanted to do. I gave him a few numbers of theatre companies he could work part time with. Go there on weekends. See if he can sing for their productions. I told him that everything he wanted to do was achievable. He needed to take it one step at a time, the way I did when I left the corporate world to become an artist. He seemed pacified, but I suspect he wasn't fully happy. He wanted me to give him my number and take him in my group and work with him. I did what I could and I left, hoping that he would take the first steps to finding his art.*
>
> *I will never forget the look in his eyes as he asked me to put him in the trunk of my car. It is the most extreme reaction I have seen in the corporate space, but I have to say, I sense more people feel that way. As someone who spent five years working in the IT corporate sector, I had a deep understanding of its ethos, its notorious "corporate soulless slave" impression. I have to say, I was never fond of terming the corporate workers "soulless." Even though in my country the large corporations have a reputation (and rightly so) of doing terrible things such as land grabbing, influencing politics to ignore environmental repercussions, and of course controlling the mainstream media.*

That day I found another reason to keep performing at corporate spaces- it gives people like that man a hope that they too can try something other than their jobs. They can figure out how that fits into their lives, and how much they crave it. Maybe the man will quit his job and try his hand at being an artist, maybe he won't, but at least now he has been pushed to the brink to make a decision. At least now he has a few phone numbers in his hands that he could call and make inroads. But why didn't he do it already? What was he waiting for? For someone like me to come around to inspire him? Why did he wait?

Theatrical performance has become instrumental to a creative labor revolution taking place around the world, where governments, development agencies, and corporations are using performance to recuperate a world under extreme duress. This dissertation turned to the case of corporate theatre in India, a nation undergoing neoliberal re-structuring since the late 1980s, to show how corporate strategy is harnessing the transformative power of performance to inculcate complex forms of physical, emotional, and cultural conditioning required for advancement in India's global work economy. As I have maintained throughout this study and as the email above attests, however, performance always finds a way to disrupt these processes, engineering moments of human expression and feeling that remain irreducible to human capital formation.

Corporate theatre is one component of wider transformations unfolding on a global scale, where cities from Kuala Lumpur to Bangalore to Dubai to San Francisco are implementing "creative economy projects [that] capitalize on the power of art to inspire and delight, and focus on creative business growth as strategies to help bring economic development to a multitude of places" (US National Endowment for the Arts, 2019). The tone of "tremendous optimism" in these narratives, to echo Dia Da Costa (2016), is replicated in scholarship on theatre training, which celebrates drama as a fun and efficacious way to indoctrinate company norms. By contrast, I mixed insights drawn from organizational archival data, theatre and performance studies, and business management discourse with ethnographic research conducted throughout India from 2012-2018 to show how corporate theatre shapes the aspirations, expectations, and conducts of employees and trainers and exemplifies a global shift in how artistic traditions are being

instrumentalized in corporate capitalist development. I also traced some of the wider social and cultural reverberations of corporate theatre in India, where artists have faced increased pressure to orient their talents towards corporate sector growth.

Inspired by the appearance of Augusto Boal's Forum Theatre in Indian corporate theatre training, chapter one supplied a history of theatre-in-management that I believe will continue to evolve as the arts-based global consultancy industry grows. I showed how performance histories, techniques, and figures are being selectivity taken up ("recoded") into business theory and practice, and proposed that the diffusion of Boalian theatre into management discourse evidences how neoliberal regimes of governmentality are capitalizing on tropes of revolution to humanize workplace technologies of control. Chapter two examined how corporate theatre uses tropes of transformation to create precarious worker subjects in India's VUCA business world. I emphasized the ways drama is used to cultivate workplace *presence*, a continual mode of being-and-becoming that positions workers in a constant state of deficiency with respect to the organization, and to *body-shop* which bodies are understood to possess the most value for capital investment. Underlying these theorizations is my preoccupation with how corporate strategy is wielding the immateriality, ephemerality, and never-thereness of performance to quantify human potential in neoliberal capitalism—an intervention I hope will become clearer as I continue this research.

Chapter three analyzed the role of humor and laugher in corporate theatre as a performance practice that fails to bring about the transformational change it promises. I highlighted moments from various trainings which evidence not only how employees accommodate the expectations of training, but also the concealed pedagogies emerging from these practices. The letter above, which accounts a heart-breaking moment where a participant expresses his desire to leave the corporate world to become an actor, further demonstrates the ability of drama in the workplace to lay bare concealed forms of subjugation and desperation experienced by employees searching for a way out of the institutional confines of their lives. Chapter four considered the consequences of corporate theatre for India's urban performance ecology. I supplied case studies of The Drama School of Mumbai and the Strategic Management in the Art of Theatre program

to propose that despite the ways each program appears staunchly neoliberal in their outward persona, a look into their inner negotiations reveals a more ambiguous push-and-pull between conforming to neoliberal demands and sustaining one's sense of purpose and responsibility as an artist. I also confess, however, that my knowledge of India's diverse performance histories and their attendant social, economic, and political dimensions remains lacking. Future study must situate the presumed novelty of corporate theatre within older economic configurations and histories of performance and development in India.

As an outsider to corporate theatre training, I cannot presume to fully understand the cultural and gendered nuances circulating in these spaces. Indeed, as I discussed throughout this dissertation, my own cultural and academic positioning was sometimes a point of contestation and "failure" to fully ascertain the social dimensions to training events. In turn, the dialogic quality of ethnographic fieldwork sometimes entailed becoming entwined within the power dynamics that I sought to deconstruct.

These limitations do not lie outside the purview of this project, however, but function as part of the broader politics of neoliberalism that circumscribe my own positioning and that of my interlocutors. Throughout this study, I have traced how those studying, experiencing, and pioneering corporate theatre are constantly being confronted with the paradoxes and ambiguities of neoliberal agency and identity (along axes of gender, aspiration, cultural identity, etc.). The case studies and interviews supplied by artists, trainers, employees, and personnel throughout this dissertation attest to the multiplicity of subject positions, institutional maneuverings, and creative tactics individuals use in the context of power.

Indeed, I find corporate theatre so fascinating because it not only lays bare the grueling, dehumanizing process of neoliberal subject formation, but because it reveals the complex range of hope, desire, aspiration, and frustration that accompany these processes. Small, intimate maneuverings like laughing (instead of crying) at "polite anger," teaching students how to embody a "limitless labor" that reproduces their own precarity, and teaching workers to excel in an environment you know dehumanizes them (highlighted in the email above) emerge precisely from grounds of disempowerment to

lay a claim to survival and belonging. These tactics cannot be reduced to episodes of resistance or conformity, but are modes of being which concede to systemic demands even as they divide. They moreover evidence a latent critical capacity of performance that is not extinguishable in the encasement of neoliberalism, revealing the grounds of its governance as pliable, never-finished, and constantly on the precipice of transformation.

As a final note, the interlocutor's admonishment above of "corporate soulless slaves," which calls attention to overdeterminations of corporate sites and individuals working with them, also casts light on how scholars of performance can engage with its disciplinary formation in more honest ways. Scholars like Jon McKenzie and Janelle Reinelt have called attention to the prevalence of English as the parlance of performance studies, a discernable lack of scholarly attention to non-Western performance histories, and the problem of deciphering grounds of agency, identity, and power along distinctly British and American definitions (McKenzie 2006, 6). I hope that dissertation has demonstrated some of the ways we can rethink the role and power of theatrical performance in global capitalism, and the wide array of subjectivities, agencies, and modes of belonging individuals assume in response to institutional hegemonies of the present.

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