Preface

Only in modern times has the beautiful been divorced from the good. It is time to consider uniting the two once again. *Aesthetics and Business Ethics* is one of the first books to attempt such reconciliation, focusing especially on the context of business. Drawing on cutting-edge research, the book explores the myriad ways in which aesthetics and business ethics can come together to illuminate the nature of the firm, moral judgments, the creative process, and wisdom itself. The discussion is both theoretical and practical, showing ways in which the teachers and students of ethics can draw upon art and even create art to reveal hidden aspects of both good and evil.

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Chapter 8

Cheat: Exporting Business Ethics to Theatre Arts

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Abstract Within the Academy and, of course, within the principal business school accrediting body, there has been persistent debate around whether business ethics should be taught as a stand-alone course or rather integrated across the business curriculum. Rare, however, are conversations heading in the direction of integration of business ethics beyond the traditional bounds of the business curriculum and into, for example, theatre arts and vice versa. And yet just this type of collaboration was established when an inter-College alliance was formed to create the devised play Cheat, a main stage theatre production for Western Washington University (WWU), in which theatre became the ground and moral theory from business ethics became the figure. The following is a detailed deconstruction of the variety of ways in which business ethics concepts and models informed the creation of Cheat, an original play written, designed, produced and performed by undergraduate theatre arts students.

Keywords Plays • Cheating • Theory • Practice • Liberal arts

The Frame: Theory and Pedagogy

Before commencing this rich description, it is worth outlining the several motivations for engaging in the collaboration. The first has to do with extending the reach of business ethics theory and practice. Principally the domain of business programs, there is great benefit to leveraging the investment of faculty in the teaching of business ethics to the academic advantage of non-business students. After all, students
from virtually every scholastic discipline engage in discussion and debate—some thoughtful and some not—around matters of corporate malfeasance. Better to have such conversation informed by solid theory than by mere intuition. The second has to do with better understanding what constitutes effective pedagogy. While much attention has been given to the distinction between visual and auditory learning styles, “little attention has been given to kinesthetic learning” (Tranquillo 2008, p. 1). Kinesthetic learning is one form of active learning and has generally been deployed in those circumstances in which the objective is to acquire a manual skill or refine muscle coordination. However, it has been suggested that at the post-secondary level kinesthetic learning can well serve the objective of “strengthening concepts as well as connecting ideas together,” and is thereby “intended to stimulate deep thinking” (Tranquillo 2008, p. 1). What better way to test such an hypothesis than by challenging students who are already well-versed in the mechanical benefits of kinesthetic learning to extend the principles and practices of such learning to the acquisition and application of the most abstract concepts—those of business ethics?

Kinesthetic learning extends upon the construction of compelling metaphor. “[M]etaphorical meaning...denies the well-established distinction between sense and representation”—as does theatre (Ricoeur 1979, p. 149). Within the context of Cheat, “the meaning [of business ethics] is not only schematized but let’s itself be read on the [theatre] image in which it is inverted” (Ricoeur 1979, p. 149). In this same exposition, Ricoeur argues that “imagination and feeling have always been closely linked in classical theories of metaphor” (1979, p. 149). Theatre bears great potential to move the engaged student beyond a purely intellectual understanding of business ethics theory and application: “[t]o feel, in the emotional sense of the word, is to make ours what has been put at a distance by thought in its objectifying phase...[i]ts function is to abolish the distance between knower and known without canceling the cognitive structure of thought” (Ricoeur 1979, p. 154). In sum, “[a] metaphor is a peremptory invitation to discovery...[w]hat is discoverable are the various allusive ties, or common attributes, between the metaphor and the underlying truth to which it points” (Swanson 1979, p. 163).

So far so good. But to the extent metaphor is “the fundamental form of verbal conceiving” (Cassirer, Language and Myth, as cited in Sacks 1979, p. i), we are left to establish a meaningful distinction between metaphor and kinesthetic learning. It has been noted that good metaphor incorporates an affective component; kinesthetic learning does this and more by engaging the body as well as the mind. “Kinesthetic activities are a time when students can develop their own personal interpretation of a concept and make connections to other ideas and concepts” (Tranquillo 2008, p. 7). You will find in the detail that follows a sketch of both metaphor as well as kinesthetic learning. The students devising Cheat were able to take the theories of business ethics as presented in lecture and discussion, interpret these metaphorically through elements of character, dialogue, narrative, costume, staging and lighting—and then internalize the metaphor and associated learning in creative performance. In so doing they captured the two primary aspects accounting for the power of any metaphor: “the greater the number of allusive ties discovered and the greater the speed or suddenness with which the discoveries are made” (Swanson 1979, p. 163).

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1WWU uses the quarter system. This new course was only one quarter, even though the whole project spanned two quarters. Students had an option to enroll in THTR 356: Performance (3 credits) to receive credit for their work developing, rehearsing, and performing the play during winter term—after the fall course had ended.

2We say “loosely” because every devising company creates their own method of working based on the subject of investigation and the strengths of the collaborators. Not every company member must perform for it to be a devised piece, but the majority often do. In short, the creators are also the performers.

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Figure and Ground

This project began with the creation of a new course within the department of theatre for fall term 2008 at WWU—THTR 480: Devising Production (5 credits). The course objective was to research, create, develop, and finally perform an original play for WWU’s mainstage theatre season. The 10-week course engaged 18 undergraduate theatre majors, both designers and performers, who were selected through a combination of auditions and interviews to form a devising company. Devising is loosely defined as the process of collaboratively creating a new work without a pre-existing script wherein the collaborators are also the performers. In the standard theatre model, a single playwright writes the text and then a director casts actors and selects designers to interpret that text, resulting in a theatre production. With devised theatre, however, the collective artists begin without a script. They unfetter themselves by surrendering their traditional, specialized theatrical roles of actors, designers, playwrights, or directors to become theatre cross-trainers who start with an idea, a hunch, that takes them into a studio space to investigate collaboratively or unpack that hunch. A devised piece of theatre can literally start with anything: a painting, a song, a real-life event, a novel to adapt, or in this case an instinct about the rise of cheating in the United States.

Reading David Callahan’s The Cheating Culture: Why More Americans Are Doing Wrong to Get Ahead (2004) a few years earlier sensitized Professor Brown to Callahan’s avowals about the causes of cheating in America. With no particular desire to adapt this book for the stage, a latent interest was nonetheless maintained in investigating Callahan’s ideas of how and why cheating is on the rise in our culture. This interest led to a need to unpack this hunch with a company of students. The Cheating Culture was therefore selected as the source material from which to launch an inquiry into cheating. Interested theatre students were invited to audition for the devising course. In addition to the Callahan book, students enrolled in the course were required to read Sheila Kerrigan’s The Performer’s Guide to the Collaborative Process as well as numerous journal articles about devising. The play would ultimately be successful only as an investigation into the subject of cheating that was coupled with instruction and training about the skills and methodologies of devising.

Devising a new theatre piece consists of five key phases: the research phase, the creation phase, the development phase, the rehearsal phase, and finally the performance phase. The first 5 weeks of the 10-week course were devoted to the research phase. In addition to the ideas in Callahan’s book, the students selected their own areas of
interest within the realm of cheating. In order to broaden and deepen the students’ examination of cheating beyond the bounds of the book, colleagues from across the university were invited to visit the class and give presentations on cheating from their specific disciplinary perspectives—those of sociology, psychology, philosophy, and business ethics. Such instruction took place during regularly scheduled class time.

These presentations illuminated the complexity of cheating to all involved in the devising process. The visiting professors guided the class to scrutinize assumptions and explore deeper dimensions of cheating. Because Callahan’s book examines cheating in the business world, most particularly against the backdrop of the rise and collapse of Enron and Arthur Anderson, students were already involved with this area of research. However, as noted in many reviews of Callahan’s book, his exploration was devoid of substantive scholarship in business ethics. To remedy this shortcoming a business ethics professor from WWU’s College of Business and Economics was invited to visit the theatre classroom. The strength of Professor Dunn’s presentation on business ethics and cheating inspired the students, which led to the eventual creation and development of the business through-line within the play Cheat.

Once the research phase was complete, the devisers moved into the creation phase for the final five weeks of the course. The methodology of creation focused around Moisés Kaufman’s process of Moment Work. Kaufman, best known as the artistic director of the New York City-based theatre company Tectonic Theatre Project and co-creator of the play *The Laramie Project*, developed moment work as a means of writing performance from the stage rather than writing text in isolation of a production’s context. This technique employs all the elements of the stage (costumes, sound, lights, movement, tempo, breath, surprise, spatial relationships, etc.) to write performance and generate individual moments. Kaufman defines moment work as “a method to create and analyze theater from a structuralist (or tectonic) perspective.” He further defines a particular moment as “a unit of theatrical time that is then juxtaposed with other units to convey meaning” (2001, p. xiv.)

Students learned to write with all the elements of the stage, text being only one element of many holding equal importance, in order to create characters, dialogue, and narrative by generating moments. Cheat, therefore, did not consist of scenes or acts as in a traditional play script; it rather consisted of 33 individual moments that formed a narrative arc as well as meaning for the audience based on how those moments were structurally ordered.

Devising necessitates hours of experimenting in order to net the best theatrical material. Those 33 moments making it through the final round of edits in order to form a coherent 90-min play were the result of countless moments (and their characters) having been culled during the creation phase. This creation phase produced numerous moments centered on business ethics, resulting in business becoming one of the major through-lines within the play. A through-line is connective tissue within a dramatic work—a mini-narrative within a larger narrative. Ultimately it is the audience members’ experience that matters. After weeks of creating a mountain of moments, the company held a public work-in-progress showing to discover which characters and narrative elements would captivate the audience and therefore survive into the development phase. The showing’s test audience was enthralled by the business through-line, as well as through-lines involving a high school baseball player’s journey with steroids and cheating within romantic relationships.

These through-lines became the focus for the development phase that occurred after the devising course had officially terminated at the end of fall term. Per Kaufman’s methodology, these through-lines were interwoven moment-by-moment in order to form the structure and generate the meaning from within the play. Breadth had been created. Energies next shifted during winter term to establishing greater depth. This shift was accomplished by each student focusing on their specialized theatrical roles of design (set, costumes, light, sound, playwrights, actors, and for Professor Brown on directing. Through numerous drafts over 3 weeks a script emerged that was ready to go into a 3-week rehearsal phase. Once the script was in hand, the students collaboratively cast themselves in the roles of *Cheat*. Since they had devised the piece, these students possessed a lucid understanding of which actor could best serve each character and, therefore, how the play could best be structured to enhance the audience experience. From this point forward, a devised theatre process is very similar to a standard theatre model, except that the script continues to go through minor changes during the rehearsal phase. The rehearsal phase transitioned seamlessly into the final phase—performance.

*Cheat* ran for two weeks for ten sold-out performances. Perhaps the biggest success of the whole project could be seen in the make-up of the audience, which consisted mainly of students—but not just students from the theatre department. Because the devising process required reaching out beyond the College of Fine and Performing Arts to enlist the help of professors from other disciplines, the eclectic audience was filled with students from psychology, sociology, philosophy, and, of course, business and economics. Audience members were confronted with the question of why more Americans are doing wrong to get ahead. A significant value-add was achieved for both the College of Fine and Performing Arts as well as the College of Business and Economics as business ethics was exported to theatre arts—and vice versa. Theatre students were exposed to business ethics theory and the business students experienced the theory they had learned in the classroom—all through the performance of dramatic action via characters, dialogue, narrative, costumes, staging and lighting. In many ways, *Cheat* served as a living, breathing case study for business students to analyze and discuss.

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3 However, research still continues during the creation phase. These phases have porous boundaries in the devised process.

4 Again, this approach is very different from a standard theatre model where actors audition for specific roles within an existing play, often hoping for a lead role that benefits them personally the most. With collective casting in devising, however, the actors are encouraged to put the play’s needs above their own. And because devisers birth the play themselves, they often do.
Overview of Business Through-Line

It is important to reiterate the context: business was one of several through-lines that generated 33 moments interwoven to form Cheat. The business through-line consisted of ten moments with five characters—the Boss and four interchangeable and replaceable employees within an abstract, office-like setting. The theatrical style of expressionism was invoked for the business through-line, meaning the dramatic action, dialogue and design elements such as costumes, sound, and lighting were non-realistic. Expressionism seeks to dramatize the spiritual awakening and struggle of its protagonists against bourgeois values and established authority. For example, stylized choreography movement was employed to represent the business world abstractly and the characters’ emotions within that world; actors wore only black and white base costumes with added costume elements of green or gold, suggesting the armor of gladiators as well as wealth, power, and status within the organizational hierarchy. Characters spoke in a stylized textual form that often named the intent and emotion of their character rather than employing realistic dialogue. Each time a worker was fired, the boss directed another worker to sweep them off the stage with a golden broom, only to have the same actor return in the next business moment and be hired as a new employee within the organization.

This expressionist world formed the narrative of a boss who is under increasing pressure from his Board of Directors (who are in turns under pressure from their investors) to increase profits through cost minimization to the point at which he finally submits to the Board’s demands of “rank and yank.” This pressure is funneled directly onto the four employees who then fear for their jobs and begin cheating, scapegoating, and threatening one another to maintain their positions within the organization. The through-line follows Lopez, a female employee, as she rises in power by trampling other employees—to the play’s climax as the CEO is figuratively killed and a hostile take-over by order of the new Board of Directors is consummated.

Business Through-Line: Moment-by-Moment

Each of the ten business moments was created in reaction to research from the Callahan book, outside research, and conferral with Professor Dunn. For the sake of parsimony, six moments that deal most directly with business ethics theory are highlighted.

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Footnotes:

1 For example, the first words spoken by the boss while on the phone to his investors: BOSS: Salutation Investors. Commencement of speech. Outline of current business models, exultation of current state of stock value. Pride in corporate policy. Expression of plan for future profits. Specific details of quarter’s model interwoven with colloquial allegory.

2 The use of rank and yank is the most direct connection to Callahan’s book from within Cheat.
determined the car had a propensity to explode on rear impact as a result of a design flaw. The differences between social and economic utilitarianism were explored, with the Ford Pinto case providing an illustration of a key management decision having been supported by economic rationale. It was simply cheaper to kill people than to fix the product defect. As Trump is alleged to have said, the almighty dollar trumps all. The final language of this moment—“Let the competition begin”—directly references the words that we imagine rang out at the opening of each day within the gladiator’s arena: Let the games begin. Only this time the words have a decidedly economic overtone.

**Moment: 10 Investors; Moment 13 Strategy/Meeting; Moment 19: Balloons**

Moment 10 finds the Boss on one of what will turn out to be several conference calls with the organization's Board of Directors. The CEO/Boss explains the relatively good profits his organization is producing during the recession, but the board members (represented as disembodied voices coming over the theatre’s sound system) pressure the Boss to consider global economic realities and competitors’ tactics of outsourcing. They encourage him to make changes within the company to increase profits as they chant “rank and yank, rank and yank, rank and yank.” Moment 10 leads to Moment 13: Strategy/Meeting as the employees and the Boss prepare for their day of work with ritualized movements culminating in the donning of clear masks and white gloves. Each in turn makes a distinction between who they are in *real life* versus who they have to be while *at work*:

- **COLE:** I’m a single father. People assume a single parent can’t pull their weight, so at the office I wear a ring.
- **JOHNSON:** I got this job because I graduated from Dartmouth. (Smiles) My parents are very generous donors.
- **LOPEZ:** On my résumé, I wrote that I held a similar position at a small but competitive firm; that firm does not exist.
- **SMITH:** I work 50 hours a week, but that’s not competitive anymore, so I bill a 60 hour week.
- **BOSS:** When I first came to the company, I slept with my superior to get a promotion, now I’m the superior.
- **ALL:** That’s not who I am, it’s just who I need to be to succeed. That’s the difference between real life... (Employees put on masks)... And business.

In his landmark work *Moral Mazes* (1988), Robert Jackall studied life within bureaucratic organizations. Jackall’s work “treats ethics and morality sociologically,” a characterization reinforcing the distinction between descriptive theory and normative theory. This difference was discussed as the script, sets, lighting, and costumes for *Cheat* were in development. Students here learned that ethics is fundamentally

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1. *Cheat* was performed in January of 2008, just as the recession had officially begun.
about ‘ought’ rather than ‘is’—or as Schwartz puts it, “[w]hile moral philosophy attempted to teach people how they should live, what they should value, what roles they should play in their communities, social science teaches people how they do live, what they do value, what roles they do play in their communities” (1986, p. 17). Throughout the balance of his treatise Jackall documents managerial behavior best termed “moral schizophrenia”—conduct that is decidedly different in a manager’s professional life than in her personal life. Laying the groundwork for his later account, Jackall argues in the preface that “the enduring genius of the organizational form is that it allows individuals to retain bewilderingly diverse private motives and meanings for action as long as they adhere publicly to agreed-upon rules” (p. 6).

These understandings were well captured in the masks the employees in Cheat donned. Each mask was the same, although given that the masks were clear, each also hinted at the underlying humanity of the worker—a humanity nonetheless decidedly obfuscated by the disguise. The metaphor of the mask was not mere hyperbole; Jackall’s sociological study found that managers “stress the need to exercise iron self-control and to have the ability to mask all emotion and intention behind bland, smiling, and agreeable public faces” (p. 47).

Another aspect of the masks deserves elaboration. Lenses, too, are clear. And lenses serve a particular function: they afford great precision of sight, while others outside the focal zone are blurred or altogether invisible to the observer. It is worth quoting Jackall here: “[T]he manager alert to expediency sees his bureaucratic world through a lens that might seem blurred to those outside the corporation and even to some inside who are unable to rid themselves of encumbering perspectives from other areas of their lives...[I]t is a lens, however, that enables him to bring into exact focus the rules and relationships of his immediate world” (1988, p. 133). The distorting influences to which Jackall refers are those related to ethics. Clarity only comes as “managers apply a thoroughly secular, pragmatic, utilitarian calculus even to areas of experience that, in their private lives, they might still consider sacred” (1988, p. 127). Any notion of the workers’ private lives were similarly covered as the actors donned white gloves, providing a veneer of sterility to the office.

As the action continues, after another phone call from the Board of Directors threatening to terminate him, the Boss relents and calls a strategy meeting to announce a new performance-based rank and yank policy designed to cut losses and determine which employee will earn the opportunity to work on the big case. In the next business moment, Moment 19: Balloons, the rank and yank policy takes effect. Responding to the mandate of his Board of Directors, the boss demands increased productivity from each of the employees. Each employee immediately begins a movement sequence at top bodily speed accompanied by quick, circus-like music. On the Boss’s cue, “rank and yank,” the exhausted employees attempt to blow up balloons that have numbers pre-written on them. As the Boss inspects their numbers, which are indicators of individual productivity, employee Cole realizes that he and employee Johnson both have the number two (2) on their balloons. In a bid to control his own work destiny, Cole pulls a marker out of his pocket and changes the number on his balloon from a two (2) to a three (3) while the Boss is distracted. The Boss congratulates and dismisses the three employees with the highest numbers, then fires Johnson by bursting his number two (2) balloon with his pen. Instantly, time changes. The lights shift to red and Johnson slowly collapses to the ground over a period of thirty seconds. During this slow death, the other employees freeze, knowing any of them could have been in Johnson’s situation. With a snap of his fingers the Boss then instructs Cole, the employee who had cheated, to sweep the fired employee off the stage.

During script development considerable attention was paid to the nuances of the utilitarian ethic, given the prominence of this perspective within organizational life. The deficiencies of this perspective were delineated. The inadequacy of an approach to ethical decision-making that imagines all cost-benefit variables can be assigned a monetary value was challenged, as was the assumption that goods carrying the same monetary value are thereby equal on all non-monetary dimensions. The rank and yank sequence expressed this utilitarian logic. The moment captures not only the reasoning of an objective performance-based evaluation system, but additionally highlights the vagaries of a system that, while appearing neutral, is nonetheless subject to manipulation.

8 Actors were directed literally to exhaust themselves physically to the point of gasping for breath so the act of inflating their respective balloons became a challenge itself.
More is happening in this moment. For the employee ensconced within a bureaucratic culture, ethics comes to be more about blame than about normative assessments of right and wrong. Blame is not always assigned with regard to merit—or with regard to ethics for that matter. Jackall suggests “[T]he most feared situation is to end up inadvertently in the wrong place at the wrong time and get blamed...[y]et this is exactly what happens in a structure that systematically diffusion responsibility” (1988, p. 86). Diffusion of responsibility introduces not only arbitrariness into the assignment of blame, but so too does the “complete lack of any tracking system to trace responsibility” (Jackall 1988, p. 87). The result is scapegoating. So beyond an introduction to a variety of idealized theories of ethics, theatre students were now confronted with the pragmatic realities of organizational life. One might know the morally right thing to do, but organizational pressures—and perverse incentives—may lead well-intentioned individuals to engage in nefarious acts that even they would find reprehensible in their personal lives. The very title of the play Cheat was selected to play on the variety of contexts (and the ways these contexts matter) within which double-dealing can be practiced.

**Moment 20: David Johnson’s Dream**

This moment follows on the heels of Johnson’s firing. In addition to his role as a worker, Johnson is also the husband character within one of the romantic relationship through-lines. The devisers were interested in examining how Cole’s cheating at work and the unjust consequences of that cheating would affect Johnson’s homelife—which had been nothing but positive up to this point in the play. After Johnson is swept to the side of the stage by Cole the stage picture shifts to an open space and the audience watches Johnson “pick himself up from being fired” and slowly, shamefully walk home. When he arrives, he finds his wife asleep and he himself quickly falls asleep and begins dreaming. His female co-worker Lopez appears in his dream, provocatively dressed, and inflates a phallic shaped balloon. The Boss also appears with a bouquet of balloons with the number two written on them, and the golden broom. As the Boss pops each balloon and shouts “Fired,” Lopez hits Johnson with her balloon in a sexually dominant manner. Johnson moans and writhes, waking up his wife, who is clearly concerned about her husband for the first time in the play. From here forward their relationship deteriorates as the stress of unemployment takes its toll on their marriage. By the end of the play the two have entered couple’s therapy and appear to be on their way to divorce.

The narrative development outlining the break between professional ethics and personal ethics up to this point in *Cheat* is now called into question. During the initial discussion of ethics, the concept of integrity was elucidated. One important aspect of moral integrity is being integrated—holding coherent ethical values that are expressed consistently across contexts and roles over time (Dunn 2009, p. 109). Integrity is therefore not in evidence when one simultaneously maintains two separate ethical personae, one at work and the other at home. Integrity demands consistency of character, irrespective of context.

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Additional discussion shifted to a deeper probing of the sexualization of the workplace—a challenge to the sterile, objective, rational view of bureaucracy put forward by many, including Max Weber himself. This theme, well-articulated by Woods (1993), references the “veneer of asexuality” that attends our vision of an organization—a veneer that “is itself built on masculine, heterosexual principles” (1993, p. 58). By suggesting that “the abstract, bodiless worker, who occupies the abstract, gender-neutral job, has no sexuality, no emotions, and does not procreate’ is in fact a deeply sexualized figure” (1993, p. 58), Woods challenges head-on the idea of organizational neutrality. He goes on to assert that this system of oppression in which masculine attitudes dominate non-masculine (or caring) moralities can

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8 She was also seductively whispering business text such as, “Synergy. Synchronicity. Rank and yank. Inferiority. Increase productivity time.”
only be maintained with the assent of the oppressed—otherwise known as a system of hegemony (1993, p. 69). Within the setting of *Cheat*, the underclass is not only dominated but, to use Woods’ term, “shamed into silence.” Workers thereby become complicit in sustaining the source of their shame, “the very system that renders them powerless” (Woods 1993, p. 71). Organizational power is not asexual but rather deeply masculine. Early in the development process the devisers began critically to examine the use of macho, even warlike, business metaphors.

**Moment 22: Water-Boarding**

This scene finds the same four employees at the work locale, only now the actor who formerly played Johnson has been introduced as the new employee Bateman. The moment begins with the Boss informing the employees that he is upset because: “Company leak within branch. Sharing trade secrets.” He demands: “Name required by 5:00 pm. Perpetrator or scapegoat.” Once the Boss exits, the new hire Bateman immediately accuses Smith whose head is dunked in the office’s water-cooler tank by the other three employees as a means to gain his confession. Smith, in turn, attempts to accuse Lopez. This effort doesn’t gain traction so Smith next accuses Cole: “Diversion! Cole. Family ties. Rival business!” This scapegoating works, and all employees drop their attack on Smith and turn against Cole despite his protests: “Fraudulent accusation! Loyalty!” After numerous dunks in the water-cooler tank that increase in duration each time, Cole relents saying what he thinks they want to hear: “Confession! Confession! Admission of wrongdoing. Confirmed bystander of fraud.” Smith quickly informs the Boss who unceremoniously announces: “Fired.” Lopez and the new employee Bateman hold Cole’s head under water until he stops moving. After he collapses to the floor, Bateman sweeps him offstage.10 The Boss rewards Smith (who is the real perpetrator of the trade secret leak) for whistle-blowing with the *big case*. Ironically, the reward of the *big case* is simply more work.

Scapegoating has an interesting history, one well described by Carmichael (2000). In his exposition of the topic, Carmichael not only sketches the act of scapegoating itself—which has the sins of the Israelites transferred to a blameless and domesticated animal who is then sent into the wasteland to a most certain death—but additionally notes this action “is a means of concealing [Joseph’s brothers’] wrongdoing” (2000, p. 172). Long understood within the Judeo-Christian tradition as a foreshadowing of the death of the Messiah, the concept of scapegoating takes on a much more insidious cast as the act comes to be understood as a deliberate assignment of personal, as opposed to communal, guilt by those who are directly

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10 It’s important to recall that the same actor played both Johnson and Bateman, wearing the exact same employee costume of black pants and white shirt. So the audience was watching Bateman sweep off Cole when approximately 25 min. ago that same actor had been swept off the stage as Johnson.

The juxtaposition of the water cooler with water-boardung deserves some brief elaboration. The water cooler has been viewed as a non-work space within the work environment. Workers visit the water cooler not so much to hydrate as to swap quick gossip or share personal tidbits. The water cooler may be viewed as a threat to the alleged impersonal office structure as it provides an intersection at which humanity encounters bureaucracy. The danger is that what is disclosed at the water cooler seeps back into the objective reality of the organizational structure, as it does in *Cheat*. It is thus no accident that the students chose to label this moment using an expression of torture: water-boarding.

**Moment 27: Tear**

The business through-line moments start to come faster and harder as the play builds to its crescendo. This moment traces Lopez’s and Smith’s escalating competitiveness as they strive to rise to management positions within the fictional organization. As Bateman and Erickson,11 the two newest employees, repeat the
increased productivity dance, Lopez and Smith physically fight over the big case. When the Boss discovers them, he demands an explanation. Lopez wins the dispute by offering the Boss a “sexual favor” coupled with a “reminder of ethnicity quotient.” The Boss then promotes Lopez to management and offers her a gladiator leather costume piece to add to her base costume. He instructs Lopez to “rank and yank.” Lopez takes a contract out of the big case and quickly rips it in half as she cries: “Fired!” This exclamation causes Smith to collapse to the floor. The Boss hands Lopez the golden broom, and she sweeps Smith off the stage.

In the closing paragraph of The Battle for Human Nature, Schwartz points to a solid conclusion grounded in the preceding 300-plus pages of argument:

Rational economic man as a reflection of human nature is a fiction. It is a modern invention, a new path. But it is a powerful fiction. And it becomes less and less a fiction as more and more of our institutions get pervaded by its assumptions and other paths are closed.

(1986, p. 325)

The theatrical moment under consideration imagines two workers—among many workers—driven by competitiveness to do whatever it takes to advance within the organization. During the preliminary discussions of ethics, the devising students came to understand that the worker performance imperative is inextricably bound to the social architecture within which work is embedded. It is for this reason so much play was given to the role of the Board of Directors whose disembodied voices are channeled through the Boss. To the extent the Board shares Friedman’s (1970) belief that the responsibility of the business enterprise is to increase profits, managers structure competitive reward systems, incentivizing workers to attend only to performance-related outcomes—often at the expense of social and/or moral good.

However, such objective performance measures are subject to challenge when the personal collides with the impersonal. Both sexual favors and ethnicity quotients refer not to the supposed objective realities of the workplace but rather hearken to the most intensely intimate dimensions of personhood. The lesson here is that for all the supposed trappings of organizational rationality, neutrality yields all too easily to expressions of personal pleasure or incarnations of legal duty. At the end of the day, after all, managers are not mere actors but rather living, breathing human beings.

When Lopez is promoted to manager she receives a new costume piece made of leather that is similar to the Boss’s gladiator-inspired forearm guards. As the moment progresses she is thereby subtly but visibly transformed from a submissive woman to a dominatrix. Lopez embraces the trappings of masculinity in her relentless pursuit of advancement. For decades now organizational researchers have observed that “traits such as aggression, dominance, and achievement orientation, which have been attributed to male managers, are more likely to be associated with both men and women who have attained managerial positions” (Brenner et al. 1989, p. 663). One significant cost of getting ahead in business is renouncing femininity—along with significant associated ethical attributes such as caring.

Moment 31: Bonus

Here O’Reilly is hired to replace Smith. O’Reilly is played by the same actor who formerly played Smith. It quickly becomes apparent that O’Reilly’s position is the result of a nepotistic hire. The Boss states: “O’Reilly. Congenial remarks lacking formality. Casual question regarding mutual cousin’s health. Congratulations on successful recruitment. Polite request to begin work.” When Lopez questions the Boss’s hiring choice, he reprimands her, assigns her mandatory overtime, and denies her consideration for future bonus opportunities. He then publicly announces the bonus—a gold vest costume piece identical to his own. O’Reilly, Bateman, and Erickson immediately begin an increased productivity movement sequence as they watch the vest being lowered from the stage’s lighting grid overhead. Lopez is forced to watch the competition from her seat. The three employees increase their tempo and scale of movements until they literally exhaust themselves and collapse panting on the ground. The Boss then nonchalantly santsorounces onstage while whistling and claims the bonus vest for himself, putting it on over the gold vest he already wears.

Why Cheat? Whether in games, or business, or relationships the answer is the same: to gain an advantage one does not, on the basis of one’s own merit, deserve. Cheat is both a verb, used with or without an object, and a noun, used to describe the perpetrator of cheating. In this moment, the Boss takes as his own something earned by the workers. He thereby both cheats and is a cheat. This cheating of the worst kind for it is the Boss himself who has initiated what the workers have accepted as an objective, rational, performance-based reward scheme, only to step in once they have exhausted themselves in the quest for recompense. This vest duplicates the one he already possesses. His cavalier attitude—whistling while making his move—adds insult to an already profound injury. All is not as it seems.

Moment 33: Gladiators

Moment 33 concludes the business through-line and the entire play. Dressed in full gladiator gear including a headdress helmet with plumage made of dollar bills and telephone receiver nunchucks, the Boss enters the playing area followed by Bateman
(who is swinging a computer mouse by its cord) and O’Reilly (who has computer keyboards attached to her forearms like shields). All are prepared for a corporate take-over battle. Lopez, now also in full gladiator costume and wielding the golden broom, enters and reports: “Investors demand rebranding. Request mandatory CEO resignation. Board approved new leadership.” With a slice of the golden broom handle, she eliminates Bateman, then O’Reilly, and finally the Boss—thus taking control of the organization. The play ends with a bewildered Erickson, who has not witnessed the coup, entering and surveying the carnage. Lopez informs him “Hostile takeover. New employee required. Begin at middle management.” But Erickson removes his clear business mask, sets it at Lopez’s feet and exits, leaving Lopez alone at the top of her corporate ladder.

This moment would seem to be Lopez’s triumph…but it is not. What rivets the audience’s attention is the action of Erickson as he rejects success—indicated by the removal of the mask—in favor of personal integrity—captured by the exit. From the merely pragmatic point of view, perhaps a common catch phrase asked of one who cheats in a relationship was ringing in his ears: if she would cheat with me, what makes me think she would not cheat on me?

There is much deeper import here, the moment being reminiscent of the closing words of The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas. Following a compelling description of a society characterized by utilitarian ideals, Ursula LeGuin (1975/2000) writes:

Each alone, they go west or north, towards the mountains. They go on. They leave Omelas, they walk ahead into the darkness, and they do not come back. The place they go towards is a place even less imaginable to most of us than the city of happiness. I cannot describe it at all. It is possible that it does not exist. But they seem to know where they are going, the ones who walk away from Omelas.

A reference to this story in the initial planning stages of Cheat gave rise to this closing moment of the play.

The field of nursing offers a concept germane to, but seldom mentioned in, organizational literature writ broadly—the notion of moral distress. Unlike a moral dilemma, in which competing options make deciding on the proper course of action perplexing, moral distress refers to those instances in which a worker “knows the morally right course of action to take, but institutional structure and conflicts with other co-workers create obstacles” (Jameson 1993, p. 542). The challenge is settling on a method of coping effectively, which sometimes means—as in the case of Erickson—taking flight. Such a response is ultimately the strongest of indictments against an organizational structure that has become so perversive as to make life within its bounds utterly unmanageable.

Critical Success Factors

There are several practical considerations that contributed to the success of this learning venture. The first was that the faculty involved both got along with and respected one another. They were additionally willing to devote the time to making the learning project a success, even absent full compensation. This was undergirded with a commitment to interdisciplinary, supported by a university culture that values boundary spanning. This boundary spanning was not only evident in the eagerness of faculty to collaborate, but in the willingness to take risks—to surrender learning to the students. Pragmatically, it was enormously beneficial to have had a devising course already a part of the university curriculum. This again points to university culture, in this case one that places trust in faculty to successfully articulate the goals and parameters of a course that seems by its very nature to defy structure, supports the expenditure of faculty political capital to navigate the course approval bureaucracy, and entrusts faculty to market an innovative course product to what might have proven a skeptical customer base.

The Frame: Theory and Pedagogy Redux

At the conclusion of this endeavor it is difficult to determine the point at which business ethics theory leaves off and kinesthetic learning picks up. In drafting the script for Cheat, theatre students relied heavily on ethical theory as presented in class by a business ethics professional. However, in interpreting ethical theory through
characters, dialogue, narrative, costumes, staging and lighting these students not only encapsulated but more importantly extended upon such theory. The process was neither fully deductive nor fully inductive. Kinesthetic learning occurred in the actual performance of the play. Through the very enactment of the devised piece learners came to a more complete understanding of business ethics. This appreciation was then used to refine the performance in all its dimensions—but this was of greater import for the audience than for the devisers, since understanding had already been enhanced for the latter through the very activity of kinesthetic learning. In the final analysis it was difficult to determine which dimensions of *Cheat* represented deliberate efforts to breathe life into abstract theory, and which dimensions of *Cheat* had emerged through enlightenment resulting from the physicality of the performance itself.

Tranquillo accurately notes "the degree to which physical activity is present in the classroom appears to drop to nearly zero as students progress from primary to secondary to post-secondary school" (2008, p. 1). To the extent "both active and reflective elements are involved and tightly integrated" (Tranquillo 2008, p. 1), this loss of corporeal movement within the educational context diminishes the university student’s acquisition of abstract notions, such as those of business ethics. To remedy this deficiency Tranquillo suggests five elements to be considered in the design of a successful activity: (1) Identifying the objective; (2) Rules to simulate the activity; (3) Logistics; (4) Post-processing, and (5) Closing (2008, p. 4). Couple this with the twin observations that "most students only understand a concept in the context in which it was introduced by the instructor,” and “only a few connections may be made by the instructor between the current topic and other course topics,” and the prescription becomes clear: to be effective faculty must provide students the occasion to extend their personal apprehension of nonconcrete concepts (Tranquillo 2008, p. 7). One of the best ways to do this is through employing the techniques of devising—even to such theoretical constructs as business ethics.

The ability to integrate kinesthetic learning into the business ethics curriculum is only limited by the imagination of the instructor. Brainstorming, which in part involves suspending judgment of ideas, might be useful here. Imagine a discussion regarding utilitarianism, as expressed through cost-benefit analysis, taking place in the classroom. Students must identify all the categories of costs and benefits appropriate to the issue at hand and then specify these in monetary terms. Risk appraisal is also calculated. In the front of the room is a large balance scale. When the analysis is complete, students place money—say bricks masquerading as gold ingots, each with a purported value of $1 M—on the appropriate pan of the weighting platform. The scale’s beam will indicate whether costs outweigh benefits.

Brainstorm some more. The scale is now a huge teeter-totter, each side able to accommodate the entire class. Students have been debating the ethics of child labor, with some concluding it to be morally justified as a means to economic development and others concluding it to be morally reprehensible because it violates basic human rights. The time for commitment to a decision has arrived and students are instructed to make their stand on the matter of child labor by joining one or the other end of the teeter-totter. One by one students stream to the front of the room and position themselves on the teeter-totter. Since there is no reason to believe that individual student weight is systematically related to a position on this issue there is no need to standardize weight across students. The fulcrum does its job, and the will of the majority is revealed by the slope of the beam. Now imagine you are on the ‘losing’ end of the teeter-totter and you are lifted off the ground. You are convinced you are on the right side of this issue. And you are literally left high-and-dry as you hang suspended in mid-air. The sense of helplessness is palpable in ways not possible had not the principles of kinesthetic learning been harnessed to drive home the despair felt by those who find themselves ineffective in persuading others to what is honestly believed to be the right point of view. Now moral distress is understood viscerally, through the body, as well as intellectually.

Use metaphor to brainstorm some more. An instructor might assign Barbara Ehrenreich’s *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* (2001) as a course reading related to the increasing disparity of wealth between rich and poor in capitalist societies. But as an extension to this, require students to replicate for themselves the experience of working for poverty-level wages. An instructor might assign John Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath* (1939/1992) as a course reading related to the dominance of corporate power in America. But as an extension to this, require students to replicate for themselves the experience of being displaced from all that is both familiar and a source of livelihood. An instructor might assign Ursula LeGuin’s *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas* as a course reading outlining the deficiencies of a society based solely on utilitarian ideals. But as an extension to this, require students to replicate for themselves the experience of privilege—and the associated hubris—which should be (but is not) all too familiar to them.

**Conclusion**

This is a call for an interdisciplinary kinesthetic approach to higher education. The space between and overlap within business ethics and theatre forms fertile ground for enhancing learning, particularly for student artists and student audience members within the walls of the university. The collaboration between theatre and business ethics outlined herein opened a door for the student devisers. Most had never heard of the theories presented by Professor Dunn, so the challenge to generate performance based on those concepts posed a formidable challenge. Yet as these theatre artists transformed business ethics theory into playable actions for the stage the depth of their theoretical understanding was clearly demonstrated. The student devisers who created the business through-line for *Cheat* not only digested complicated business ethics theory, they synthesized it and presented it effectively to an audience through characters, dialogue, narrative, costumes, staging and lighting. In numerous instances, they spontaneously made critical connections on their own between business ethics theory and each element of the theatre production.

*Cheat* additionally benefited the numerous business students in the audience. They were afforded an opportunity to see the theories they had discussed in
class come to life as they shared the same physical space with living, breathing characters. Seeing the play also created a shared language among those business students that they could reference during future class discussions—much like case studies in the more traditional classroom setting. Business students could agree or disagree with character dialogue, actions and interpretations; they had to go through a critical process of analysis and synthesis of ethical theory in order to argue their critique of the play within their business classes. Regrettably a joint talk-back session with the theatre devising students and business students did not occur. As future collaborations are executed, this element will most definitely be included.

Beyond the valuable depth of learning for students, the two educators involved in this project gained a deeper appreciation for cross-college collaboration and dynamic participation with another colleague’s research. The methodologies and praxis from both disciplines informed the thinking of each professor about his own discipline, which will certainly lead to more exporting in the future.

References


