Making a drama out of a crisis

On the face of it, it is a nightmare scenario. Midway through a corporate health and safety workshop at a local hotel, a woman – wearing only a pair of red shoes and a sheet – bursts into the conference room. But instead of rushing out again, she stays to reveal her story to the slightly stunned audience.

It is a tale that begins with the workplace accident that has disabled her husband, Fraser, and ends in infidelity as Gail struggles to hold together their marriage. As the monologue continues, it becomes clear that Gail, far from being a disorientated hotel guest, is part of a new breed of health and safety training that employs hard-hitting drama to get its message across. Although the numbers of such drama troupes is small, albeit increasing, they claim dozens of well-known clients and enthusiastic testimonials.

Even roustabouts cry
Gail’s creator is actor Emma Currie, founder of drama-based training firm Acting Up. “Gail’s shoes tells, unconventionally, the story of a woman whose world has been turned upside down because of an accident her husband had at work,” Currie told HSB. “As she talks about him, we learn that Fraser had a lapse of concentration at work two years previously and has been left disabled and unable to care for himself ... Through the monologue, we hear the story from both sides, his feelings of inadequacy, his depression, her frustration and loss of the life and the man she loved.”

Since it was written in 2004, Gail’s shoes has become Acting Up’s most popular script, having been performed twice a month for the past six years at health and safety events in Europe and North America as well as Australia and India. “It’s gutting,” says Currie. “It often opens to a bit of heckling – because it’s a woman on stage dressed only in shoes and a sheet – but by the end I’ve seen roustabouts crying.”

And audiences – which include workers in chemicals, mining and utilities firms as well as those in engineering, construction, and oil and gas – seem to agree. E.ON Central Networks worked with Acting Up on 10 events last year, including a customised version of Gail’s shoes.

Tom Notman, commercial manager at Central Networks told HSB: “It was the launch programme for a new alliance contract to welcome others into our fold. It included safety, customer service and commercial priorities. It was a shared experience for everyone to rally round and Acting Up did live performances for all three elements.”

Some 1,200 E.ON contractors have seen Gail’s shoes, and witnessing Gail burst in halfway through the safety workshop made a real impact on staff at all levels of the business. “It’s difficult making it real for people who think they’ve seen it all before,” says Notman. “When we ask staff what they want from training, they tell us they’d like something more engaging, more entertaining and more real. Gail’s shoes brings home the impact of a serious incident to an employee and its fallout for individuals. Gail’s husband wasn’t gung-ho, he just didn’t think for a moment. The message is that it could happen to anyone.”

In the steps of Hare ...
AKT is another firm that, like Acting Up, uses drama to help businesses communicate health and safety messages. And, like Currie, AKT’s Sue Briggs has swapped theatre and film roles to work on a corporate stage. According to Briggs – who worked as an educational psychologist before falling in love with drama – performing for corporate clients is demanding for an actor. Although it has the “same challenges and excitement” as conventional live theatre, she believes AKT’s work “also gives you something [conventional] theatre doesn’t – the chance to engage with an audience. It really helps you develop your improvisational skills – staying in character, talking to the audience without the safety net of a script”.

AKT’s repertoire includes interactive techniques such as forum theatre, hot seating and skills practice (a euphemism for role-play) (see box 1 on p.14) as well as plays. The plays (see box 2 on p.15) – both bespoke and off-the-shelf scripts – are performed during health and safety workshops where audiences use the drama to discuss the issues raised.

Crucially, clients work closely with actors and scriptwriters at AKT to ensure the action rings true. “The process needs really good
research to understand a workplace and the people in it,” Briggs told HSB. “After doing research in the organisation, we put the piece together, the client looks at the script and the workshop process, and also comes to rehearsals. So the client is heavily involved from the outset and the more the client is involved, the better the outcome.”

Using actors to research and develop a script is a technique theatre director David Hare used to great effect – and critical acclaim – in his 2003 play The permanent way at the National Theatre. Described as political or verbatim theatre and based on Ian Jack’s book about the Hatfield train crash, the play tackles head-on the impact of corporate failings in health and safety.

Interviewing the bereaved, crash survivors, politicians and railway executives – many of whom spoke with surprising candour – the cast brought back their words and characters, simply selecting and interpreting them for the stage.

In a similar vein, many of AKT’s scripts draw on real events – health and safety failings that led to fatalities – such as Think again, a safety play about the deaths of 15 people in the 2005 explosion at BP’s Texas City refinery (HSB 358 p.1). Originally commissioned by Balfour Beatty, the play has been widely used in the oil and gas industry as well as in construction and transport and was due to be performed in March at the IOSH conference. Based on the reports of investigations by the Baker Panel (HSB 356 p.5) and the Chemical Safety Board (HSB 358 p.3), as well as other sources including Failure to learn by Andrew Hopkins, Think again “examines culture, leadership, accountability and decision making in BP at that time in order to help other organisations take the learnings without having to repeat BP’s horrific experience,” says Briggs.

... and JB Priestley ...

Among AKT’s clients is BAM Nuttall, whose project director Jim Morgan decided to employ AKT this year after seeing it perform Terminal – a safety play set during construction of an airport extension – at a Civil Engineering Contractors Association meeting in 2010 (see box 2). Morgan told HSB: “When I saw the play, it was in an audience of people like me – project directors and safety advisers. Over the tea break I talked to a colleague and said it’d be tremendously valuable to our workforce because of how it had engaged everyone. By the end of the event we had both made up our minds to use AKT.”

In January this year, some 75 labourers, engineers and office staff at BAM Nuttall attended morning or matinee performances of Terminal. “It starts with a scene – the accident – and the action then pauses while the actor addresses the audience and talks about who’s responsible,” explains Morgan. “Then the action moves back in time – to build up to the accident and how the audience can influence the outcome, what they can do to stop it.” It is, says Morgan, “like one of Priestley’s time plays”.

When the action pauses, it is the audience’s turn to address the actors. Briggs – part of the AKT cast at BAM Nuttall – says: “They have a conversation with the characters in an effort to influence their behaviour. The characters do not see the risk in the same way that those ‘looking in’ do and there are many factors compelling them to continue working, so there is resistance to this influence.”

... and Ayckbourn

According to Morgan: “The end is like an Alan Ayckbourn play with alternative endings – in this case two – although in the theatre that gets decided by the toss of a coin and here by the input from the audience, a bit like pantomime,
and the actors decide the outcome by judging the input from the audience.” Interestingly, only one of the two groups decided to stop the job. Morgan claims he predicted this: “I go to the theatre a lot. You can read an audience and I knew in the morning it’d be a success and that in the afternoon Sue would have to work harder.”

In the audience at BAM Nuttall were planner Sharon Oswald and foreman Chris James. Both loved the event. “It was a very effective way of getting people to speak up, even the younger guys,” James told HSB. “The foreman in the play was very arrogant – I could really relate to that because I’ve met his type in the past. He took so many risks. All four characters were very convincing – I’ve been in the industry 20 years and met all of them at one time or another.” According to Oswald: “The reason I loved it was that it let people think more rather than being dictated to. People even went on the internet after work to look up more about the accident and discussed it at work for days.”

For health and safety training to provoke such strong reactions is, Morgan admits, unusual and one way of gauging impact. “If you get heaps of people talking about it the following day, then it’s a success. I can’t remember people discussing a course the following day like this. You’re lucky if you get a grunt out of them if you ask them how a bog-standard health and safety training event went,” he says.

No “bloke in a suit with PowerPoint”

Confronting the workforce with something different is, Notman believes, partly responsible for its success. “It’s not your typical middle-aged bloke in a suit with a PowerPoint presentation,” he points out. Fred Brookes, environment, health, safety, security and quality manager at Wylfa power station on Anglesey, agrees. He was involved with the station’s union-appointed safety representatives in hiring AKT for Wylfa in April 2010 to stage The mousehole – a safety play based on the true story of a fatal accident on an oil rig.

Wanting everyone to see the play, Brookes scheduled nine performances during one of the two reactor’s regular biennial overhauls so that 300 contractors as well as Wylfa’s 650 staff could take part. “It’s a different way of getting a safety message across – it’s unusual – more dynamic, and it engages people,” Brookes told HSB. “We wanted everyone on-site to see it. We wanted to give people the courage to intervene ... In addition to our professional staff we had fitters in to overhaul pumps, so everyone got involved. It was fantastic.”

Seeing is believing?

Creating a buzz around a health and safety event is no mean feat, but does that translate into improvements in safety performance? Drama is widely used outside entertainment, in drama therapy for example, and drama-based learning has long been used in the civil service outside the realm of health and safety. Drawing on her background as an educational psychologist, AKT’s Briggs says: “Drama is a huge part of almost every human culture. We love stories. It engages our emotions and also engages us at a cognitive level, exploring why people do things and the barriers to more desirable outcomes ... People make their own discoveries and connections. It allows people to make their own sense of things and that embeds learning.”

Like Briggs, Notman believes that participating and feeling creates stronger memories. “Instead of sitting there and listening, it’s meant to provoke an emotional

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**BOX 2: HEALTH AND SAFETY ON STAGE**

**Terminal**

Based on a real event, this play tells the story of a team of contractors working on an airport terminal extension. While working at high level, the method used to place and fix a structural steel element goes wrong. The six-metre-long element slips from its sling and falls into a public area, injuring two travellers. The foreman responsible is renowned for his ability to deliver on schedule. Terminal starts after the incident has happened and goes back in time to uncover the attitudes and behaviours that contributed to a potentially fatal injury.

**Think again**

On 25 March 2005 at approximately 1:20pm an explosion at the BP refinery in Texas City killed 15 people and injured many more. And, in so doing, untold damage was done to the reputation and wellbeing of those responsible. Why did it happen? This play, originally commissioned by Balfour Beatty, shows how decisions made at the highest levels contributed to the disaster.

**The mousehole**

The tragic and true story of a horrific death on an oil rig. A man is being hoisted in a harness towards the “mousehole”, a trapdoor in the deck of the rig. His harness slips and instead of hanging vertically, he is dangling horizontally. A radio fails, a crane operator operates blindly, and a man dies. The mousehole begins after the incident has happened and goes back in time to reveal the attitudes and behaviours that contributed to a fatality. The mousehole is one of the UK’s most frequently performed safety plays.

Source: AKT brochure (adapted).
**BOX 3: E.ON CENTRAL NETWORKS’ STAFF FEEDBACK**

- “This new approach works really well, it is fun and informative. A lot better than previous approaches.”
- “Very good, best presentation of the health and safety message I've seen.”
- “This is an excellent portrayal of the consequences of human error. It really got through to my team. They didn’t even need to know the details of the accident – what we saw was the aftermath. [It was] something that we don’t typically think about. This makes you realise the devastation that such a lapse in concentration can cause, not just for the employee but for family and friends too. This is very powerful stuff. We need more of it.”
- “[It] really put some human sentiment and cost into a subject that is often mired in figures and doesn’t really mean anything. Seeing emotion and a real life put into it really brings it home to you. What a great piece of work.”
- “Wow, that actually made me well up, even though I knew it was an actress. Completely different to any other H&S presentation I’ve seen or heard of. Well done!”
- “Very emotional and very informative! Well done!”

Source: E.ON.

response because you learn and change faster like that,” he says. “Acting Up’s strength is showing the impact of behaviour. You can’t do that or demonstrate behaviour change in a PowerPoint. You can describe it but you can’t make it real unless you act it out.”

“The feedback we get is that people remember it and ask for more of it. It helps us bridge a gap – which is getting across to people a safety message that we all know in a way that people will remember,” he says. Gail – or the “girl in the sheet”, as she has become known at E.ON – has become part of the language of the company’s safety message. Says Notman: “We’re still not there yet, we’ve a long way to go. But safety performance has improved massively this year.”

Without a carefully designed scientific study, however, there is a lack of quantitative evidence to support a causal link between drama-based training and improvements in health and safety standards. Any such improvements will, in any case, be the result of many different interventions, of which drama might be one. But both employers and actors say there’s plenty of anecdotal evidence to suggest it works. Lanxess, a chemical company that has used Acting Up, reports: “Our shutdown is injury and incident free so far ... our observations are that people are not taking any chances and are working more safely.” And since AKT’s visit in April 2010, Wylfa has recorded no “significant events” – injuries requiring medical treatment other than first aid. “That for us is a success,” says Brookes.

Briggs offers further feedback from another client. “It’d be naïve to think one workshop can result in major long-term change,” she says, but “Dolphin Drilling did a massive roll-out involving AKT and a risk management consultancy and over six months did a two-day programme for all offshore staff. They told us their accident rates fell dramatically.” Briggs adds that the Department for Work and Pensions had formally evaluated the use of drama in increasing employee engagement (generally, rather than in health and safety) and concluded that it did have a measurable impact.

**Drama critics**

If drama helps improve health and safety, even those traditionally less comfortable with its current focus on behavioural safety welcome its use. TUC health and safety officer Hugh Robertson told HSB: “I’ve no problem with the use of drama in health and safety training. Anything that keeps people’s attention is good. Training and reinforcement are an important part of health and safety training as a way of removing or reducing risk.”

But behavioural safety training, with its focus on personal responsibility, should never be used on its own, says Robertson: “Done properly as part of an overall health and safety management within a hierarchy of control it can be very effective. But when done on its own as an alternative to them it’s extremely damaging. Lots of employers think the solution is to train the workforce not to do something rather than removing the hazard and therefore the potential risk. Removing the hazard is the way to remove the risk, rather than focusing on the worker.”

For large employers in high-hazard sectors, drama-based safety training seems here to stay, with new productions on the cards. AKT looks set to develop a script based on security in the nuclear industry, while Acting Up is producing a DVD for E.ON and other clients.

But rather than something new, using drama is perhaps more of a return to tried-and-tested ways of telling a story. “We need to do everything to make sure everyone gets the health and safety message,” concludes E.ON’s Notman. “Nobody should get hurt working for us. We’re just changing the methods of communication. The message hasn’t changed. It’s not that it could all end in tears, but that all day we make decisions that could end up in people getting hurt.”


1. J.B Priestley’s “time plays”, which include “Time and the Conways” and “An inspector calls”, explore different concepts of time and often start with an outcome before examining the events leading up to the outcome.

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