

Curling
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a novel by
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Economics are the method: the object is to change the soul.

- MARGARET THATCHER

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(1861: In the Costume department a desperate seamstress, single mother of a babe in arms, sets fire to some tulle petticoats. Flames spread from the oil lamp through the fabric, killing the seamstress in a matter of seconds. The fire races through the stage and into the auditorium while the audience, who have just entered, push and shove their way out of the Theatre. Some suffocate during the stampede. The foyer, the stage and a good part of the auditorium go up in smoke.

Flames are extinguished. Some bodies are recovered. The place is rebuilt. For the theatre's patrons, it becomes quite fashionable to buy small pieces of rubble that homeless people sell at the entrance: it's considered the height of good taste to present a lady with one, inscribed with the words "Souvenir of the fire at the Grand Theatre Walhall".

PlusValue Group Solutions, on the anniversary of the fire, gifts replicas of these curious souvenirs to season ticket holders.

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(1893: Season premiere. The second act of Rossini's William Tell is just beginning. Amidst the happy trombones and timpani, a bomb goes off in the stalls, killing 20 important and distinguished individuals; at least 15 of whom were the Theatre's main patrons. Extremities are blown as far as the fifth floor. Fragments of bone become lodged in the seats. Hair buns catch fire. Performances are cancelled. Huge sums of money are lost. Weeks later an anarchist is arrested; his confession is straightforward, claiming he was merely avenging the death of his mother, who had died in the same theatre 30 years earlier; he is garrotted before an excited and timorous crowd. In his dying moments, the anarchist declares: "My desire has always been to sow stupor". Meanwhile, civil rights in the city are suspended and the bourgeois shiver whenever they pass the Theatre.

But the months go by. The damage is repaired, the dead are honoured, performances resume. At first, out of respect or superstition, the victims' seats remain empty. They fill again in due course. Manon, by Massenet, is performed, sung by a beautiful contralto with an exquisite voice that brings the audience out in rapturous applause.

People forget.

For the centenary of the attack, in 1993, the Publicity and Marketing Team at PlusValue Group Solutions designs special guided tours. They're a great hit with audiences. They put on a historical re-enactment with professional actors playing the important and distinguished individuals of the era, this time with fire-resistant clothing, as befitted the occasion. The public

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enjoys the controlled pyrotechnics, and they hand out shirts printed with: "MY DESIRE HAS ALWAYS BEEN TO SOW STUPOR". They are still available for purchase on the online store.)

(1994: a workman, grandson of the anarchist, sends sparks onto flammable material backstage while carrying out maintenance work. The fire barrier malfunctions.

This time, the Theatre burns.

Nothing is spared. What survives of the stage and auditorium is displayed to the city like the ribs of a sperm whale. A rotund soprano walks amongst the ruins and cries in front of the national news cameras. Smoke covers the sky for a whole week.

And when the sky clears, the Theatre is rebuilt. At its grand reopening, the New Spectacle is premiered.

PlusValue Group Solutions Inc. has the honour of providing Spectator Experience Facilitation services.

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HUMAN RESOURCES DEPARTMENT
SPECTATOR EXPERIENCE FACILITATION SERVICE
GROUP INTERVIEW ACTIVITY

1. Read the following text:

You are in an aeroplane. Regrettably, the right wing engine fails and it bursts into flames. As a consequence, the engine stops. As a consequence, you crash into the middle of the Pacific Ocean. All passengers die on impact, with the exception of [insert participants' first names], who manage to swim to a desert island. On the island are three different areas: Zone 1, Zone 2 and Zone 3.

Zone 1 is the shore on which you've arrived. The undertow has carried the plane's fuselage onto the beach, with some objects that may be of use.

Zone 2 is high ground in the middle of the island, arid but with good visibility; from there, you might be easily spotted by light aircraft and/or boats.

Zone 3 is a freshwater lake in a jungle, surrounded by fruit trees.

Ask the question:

Which area do you decide to stay in?

With the instruction:

Justify your response and try to convince the other members of the group that yours is the correct decision.

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2. Rorschach Test.

Note for the Interviewer: to interpret candidate responses, please refer to the Hershel-Smart Interpretative Framework (1988).



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NOTES ON TEST RESULTS BY AJENJO WÜNDER

CANDIDATE I

Arrives at the interview wearing an adequate suit jacket in what I take to be wool, a white shirt, black trousers and high heeled shoes, which I would attribute to reasons of Low Stature. They are of a reasonable height, leaving her at the same level as the other candidates of Normal Stature. First impressions are not negative. The ponytail indicates an easy-going nature (MARQUEZ ROBLES, ELEANOR, 2012: "INTERPRETING PONYTAILS FIXED WITH HAIRPINS ABOVE CHIN LEVEL: A COGNITIVIST APPROACH" IN *JOURNALS OF WORK PSYCHOLOGY*, VOL. II, PP 32-33). However, I do observe that she has chosen earrings in a shade of carmine which recalls... tulips? We could be dealing with a particularly shrewd narcissist - or possibly not. Perhaps they are simply her "lucky earrings" (MARQUEZ ROBLES, 2012), which would instead denote an oral-stage fixation. In any case, I note this down for the record. In terms of her greeting, the candidate shakes my hand with conviction, yet applies scant force to the index fingers and thumb, turning the handshake into something approaching a caress, generating a fleeting, if intense, Non-Professional Situation. The remaining proxemics are stable throughout the interview process: approximately forty

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centimetres between my body and hers and some twenty between her and CANDIDATE 2. Perspiration: normal for an adult exposed to a situation of prolonged tension. I suspect that the candidate lacks foresight and the necessary medium-term planning skills, given her oversight in anticipating her make-up would run due to sweat, something betrayed mostly by the white collar of her shirt. Smile: yes. It is sustained throughout the interview, though I should note that it no longer appears natural after the first twenty minutes when some signs of muscular strain appear around her outer cheeks, accompanied by what appears to be a nervous tic on the upper lip. This begs the question: is she lying to me? Was hers a false smile from the off, or did it become forced at some point during the interview? Otherwise, the candidate possesses a pretty smile which would easily align with PlusValue Group company culture.

Her performance in Activity One is straightforward: she gives her opinions in a harmonious fashion and contributes without imposing, appearing receptive and discreet. She chooses the lake. When questioned about the difficulty of surviving with no hope of rescue, she suggests *working as a team to generate new dynamics which allow long-term subsistence in the new community*, thereby displaying a certain ability to adapt to new situations. This could be interesting for PlusValue Group Solutions, particularly given the upcoming flexibilisation of our Auditorium Personnel, soon to be known as Audience Experience Facilitators. That

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said the candidate is not so convincing in the second test, stammering when describing a *black bat perched on top of a head* (if we apply the HERSHEL-SMART INTERPRETIVE FRAMEWORK, 1988, this is not good news for the candidate) and bringing up episodes from her personal life, which fall outside the scope of this document.

Conclusion: the interview confirms that CANDIDATE I does possess some characteristics of an Experience Facilitator at the Grand Theatre Walhall. However, I suspect she was lying to me during the test activities, and several paralinguistic signals such as coughs and throat-clearing leave me inclined to think that her smile is not one that PlusValue could depend on. The results of the second test leave me worried that we are dealing with a psyche, which, if not completely broken, is fragile at best. That the candidate breaks into tears at the end of the interview does not help: it denotes a lack of contention and poor control of personal feelings. It's a *no* from me.

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CANDIDATE 2

Has more than five years of good references in the service sector, as well as specific training in Cultural Industries and New Entertainment Technologies. He knows how to shake a hand, combining virility and servitude in his use of physical force when taking my hand with his. We separate from the handshake without difficulty. He smells good, like forests and cardamom (we cannot find any bibliography on cardamom, but a forest scent can be easily interpreted, in the candidate's favour, by reference to RUBINS SOTELO, MARIANO in *TELL ME YOUR SCENT AND I'LL SHOW YOU YOUR PLACE: THE OLFACATORY DIMENSION OF HUMAN RESOURCES*, 2014). Smile: hard, cordial, unyielding. *Perfect* for PlusValue Group's male audiences who are less in touch with their emotions. To Activity One he responds: *What kind of idiot would choose fresh water? You can purify seawater. The freshwater is stagnant. There are spiders, mosquitos, bacteria. No way are our stomachs prepared for stagnant water or mosquitos. And, even if we can drink the water, for Christ's sake what's the point? To stay on some godforsaken island for the rest of our lives? Do you really think PlusValue Group would hire someone so overwhelmingly passive? The correct answer is the beach. Zone One. That's my answer.* Though we may detect a certain discursive violence towards the options chosen by CANDIDATE 1, he also shows conviction and a strong ability to make his opinions count.

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In his account I see a marked pragmatic streak and a good understanding of the company's needs. In Test Number Two he responds sensibly, displaying no psychological shortcomings: *he sees two employees of PlusValue Group working cooperatively to create a high level of Experience Facilitation to customers on their way to enjoy a performance at the Grand Theatre Walhall.* However, despite this eminently positive information about the candidate, I must add two details that I would have preferred to overlook, but alas I cannot. First: the position of his thumbs in relation to the rest of his body. I notice that his thumbs remain together throughout the interview process, that's to say, interlocking without joining his hands. As a result, his arms form a V shape across his torso, closing this part of his body off from others. Oh, dear. The second detail: the candidate's hair colour is so indeterminate as to be indescribable, which begs the question – what natural colour could be hiding underneath this fictitious one? It seems like the result of many fictitious colours mixing over time, covering something that CANDIDATE 2 is trying to disguise. If he is capable of hiding something so apparently trivial as his hair colour, what else might he hide from PlusValue? Is this dye the crude expression of some thinly veiled contempt on the part of CANDIDATE 2? If so, what is this unspeakable darkness he is trying to cover up at all costs? I feel betrayed by CANDIDATE 2 and this does not incline me favourably towards his joining the company.

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CANDIDATE 3

I find his suit jacket and matching grey shirt very agreeable; what's more, his hair is of a reassuringly natural colour. The proxemics are rather distant and he cannot hold eye contact for more than one second, something I put down to shyness. Although in other times this would have led us to rule the candidate out, following the conclusions of our latest market studies on customer service, we now understand it as *pleasant for the spectator's experience*. Smile: yes, soft and reserved, perfectly compatible with the duties of an Experience Facilitator. In test Number One I discover his leadership skills and ability to adapt to the company's needs as evidenced by his choice. He responds: *A company like PlusValue isn't going to appreciate short-term thinking. They want you to think big. We wouldn't last even a couple of days on the beach. How long can a person spend trying to dream up a seawater purification system? And anyway, would PlusValue Group really want us to come up with ex-machina solutions for our survival? Only by knowing when to delegate, then by delegating when necessary, and then, in the final instance, crying out for help, can an employee be worthy of PlusValue's trust. We are not Gods. We must delegate. We must make a bonfire on the highest peak of the island.* I like his inclination to teamwork, his assertiveness and medium-term foresight, which would doubtless be valuable on Main Entrance. In test two he says

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he sees *a two-headed beast with a bloodied jaw devouring a smaller animal, presumably its child*. If we consult the relevant bibliography, this is nothing to worry about.

However, what is that I spy on his forearm under his shirt? A tattoo? He's out of the running, I'm afraid.

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CANDIDATE 4

My analysis can't go much further than assessing the candidate's dress as correct (shirt and suit, which, though not exactly impeccable, are in line with PlusValue Group's recommended *NEW TRENDS IN HUMAN RESOURCES*, developed in last year's Team Leader's Meeting in Huesca, namely: informality which conveys creativity and an indifference to social norms in a way that puts customers - in this case the spectator - at ease, reinforcing the company's reputation for creating pleasurable experiences) and his greeting as adequate. The answers to Exercises One and Two do not fit into any of the interpretative frameworks in the relevant bibliography. I note down some representative expressions: in Test One, he declares plainly that *one place is as good or as bad as any other*; in the following Test, the candidate describes the Rorschach image as *a pretty stain*. I cannot form much of an opinion on these statements without objective backing, though I would like to make note of his docile attitude. I daresay that his professional background is fitting for this new era for PlusValue Group Solutions, Inc., possessing as he does qualities such as: an absence of rebellious temperament, softness of character, a marked anodyne element to his personality. His smile: though unsettling in its whiteness, is real, and the candidate sustains eye contact for long periods, creating a complicity with the subject that is hard to ignore. Is

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PlusValue Group, as has been communicated to me, looking for a new type of employee for its Experience Facilitation Team? Someone who, more in line with the requirements of our times, can turn the traditional usher-spectator service paradigm on its head? The answer, so far as I'm aware, is *yes*. The candidate is immobile and inexpressive while I inform the others that PlusValue Group Solutions, Inc. wishes them all the luck in the world in their job search.

The chosen candidate goes by the name of Eusebio Morcillo.

Let the record show, the undersigned:

Ajenjo Wunder, Talent Manager, Spectator Experience Facilitation Service, Grand Theatre Walhall.

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INFORMATIONAL CIRCULAR TO SPECTATOR

EXPERIENCE FACILITATORS, GRAND THEATRE WALHALL

Dear valued employee [insert first name here]:

If you are receiving this email, it means you just joined our team, or that PlusValue is counting on your continued service in our exciting new Experience Facilitation project here at the Grand Theatre Walhall. In any case, congratulations! As you probably know, the reopening of Grand Theatre Walhall aims to be a high watermark in theatre globally, so now is the time to give our best to the exciting demands of our new customers. To do so, we must leave behind our collaborators' conflictive attitudes towards PlusValue and give it a rest with the passivity and complaints which have become, quite honestly, a rather heavy burden on the company's progress. We would like to tell you about some of the important Changes to your duties as an Experience Facilitator at the Grand Theatre Walhall.

First thing's first: it is vital that you understand the Grand Theatre Walhall's democratic approach to desire. We all desire things, don't we? And how wonderful those desires can be! When given the opportunity, human beings can be profoundly creative. Well, over the summer we did market research, focus groups, paid surveys and consultancies with specialised big data agencies.

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The conclusions were extremely interesting. Chief amongst them: there is unmet demand. You will well understand that this is something that a theatre like the Walhall cannot tolerate. What is this demand? Have you heard of a little guy named...Richard Wagner? Well, in his day, Wagner imagined an art to contain all other arts, the Artwork with a capital A, an absolute and primordial Artwork, from a time before the Arts split off from one another. Music, dance, painting and literature would be reunited, elevating the spectator, freeing them from their human shackles and turning them into Something More. Or, at least, that was the idea. Wagner never managed to make his dream a reality, though we should remember that back in his day, the means did not yet exist.

The good news is that three centuries later, we now have the means. Genius often moves far ahead of the technical possibilities of its time. Wagner could never have imagined the technology we have at our disposal, and if he had, he would doubtless have approved of the Walhall's plans. He never knew virtual reality, or immersive sound systems. In his day, they had to make do with *imagining* stories that now, we can *live*. They didn't know about the *gamification of experience*. They sadly lacked an exhaustive understanding of the relationship of sublime emotion to contact sports. Though there is no specific area of our brain dedicated to "spiritual betterment", in our frontal lobe we can easily locate the part of the brain that releases serotonin. Luckily for us,

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advancements in neuropsychology mean we are closer than ever to understanding the true nature of pleasure.

Let's remind ourselves – what demand is the Great Theatre Walhall trying to satisfy? The way we see it, it's the one that makes the most sense for 21st Century citizens. Think about it. Who, in this day and age, would allow a performance that had not been designed exclusively for them to be imposed upon them? Who in their right mind would watch something they found only moderately enjoyable? Our studies showed that audiences are crying out for nothing short of a revolution: a spectacle that grabs the attention with such ferocity that it suspends your very personhood without you even realising. That ravages minds and bodies, leaving in its wake extreme, frenetic pleasure beyond even your wildest dreams.

The time for the Total Spectacle has come.

Designed by experts from every field: the creative team comprises acclaimed musicologists, NBA players, cultural managers of worldwide renown and, of course, a solid team of economists. This multi-faceted approach allows the Grand Theatre Walhall to offer a spectacle unlike anything else ever seen. Does this spectacle include stories of profound moral depth that rouse the great human emotions, that force us to reflect on the nature of our own humanity? Yes. Extreme sports? Those, too. All this plus augmented reality, sensory immersion, multimedia experiences, personalisable settings and the ability to place bets in real-time. And don't you think

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that the forms of entertainment that humans enjoy have so much in common, are so close they almost overlap? After all, don't they all make us feel something? Don't they all push us towards collective catharsis?

Please find attached the new Operating Procedure that you will be following from now on.

What do we expect from you? You must be wondering. Well, for this season's programme, the old parameters no longer apply. In the 21st Century, passive service is no longer enough to fulfil our customers' needs. We must be active. Pro-active. Really *stimulate* our customers. You will see that the new Spectator Service Framework has been superseded — the marketing department has practically begged us to use the new language of Spectator Experience Facilitation, developed specially for you, which is much more in line with our new objectives.

We hope you like them as much as we do.

Please remember, we consider ourselves an innovative, cutting-edge company that creates efficient solutions to new problems. We don't want to frighten anybody, but you will of course understand that if in the coming months we find that the response to our new needs is not materialising, we will be forced to take decisions.

Kindly send us a signed copy of the attached contract.

Our warmest regards,

PlusValue Group Solutions, Inc.

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P.S. By the way! The complaints made by some of your ex-colleagues about the overtime and holiday pay were resolved in our favour. It just goes to show that negativity will get you nowhere. So, stay positive guys!