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Lindelof, Anja Mølle; Hansen, Louise Ejgod

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Talking about theatre: Audience development through dialogue

Anja Mølle Lindelof,
Roskilde University, Denmark

Louise Ejgod Hansen,
Aarhus University, Denmark

Abstract:

Taking as its starting point the Nordic cultural policy debates surrounding audience development, which concentrate either on reaching out to new target groups or on artistic quality, this article suggests that the focus on the audience's experience of theatre performances has thus far been underdeveloped. Through qualitative audience investigations, this article shows how talking about theatre offers a method by which to explore theatre experiences from an audience perspective, and thus provides invaluable knowledge for theatres and cultural politicians in search of larger and broader audiences. The analysis discusses audience experience with regard to the sensory, the artistic and the symbolic level of two specific Swedish-Danish performances, thereby demonstrating how this approach offers a useful tool for theatrical institutions engaged in audience development.

Keywords: Theatre; theatre talks; audiences; audience development; the theatrical experience; art institutions

Introduction

When the doors are opened to Musikteatret's large auditorium and the audiences are shown to our places on the cushions on the floor, the actors have already taken up their positions. I walk across the floor with its beautiful calligraphic writing – perhaps in Persian? – and with sand which crunches under

my feet. The warm, slightly sultry air fills our nostrils and the atmosphere is unmistakable: Patrolling soldiers, a child with its head buried in the lap of a consoling woman with a headscarf, and a desperate elderly man with bare feet in a crumpled suit are accompanied by a melancholy clarinet's slowly descending melody. We are in a country harried by war, and something dramatic and painful will happen.¹

This is how the first meeting with the performance *A Thousand Rooms of Dream and Fear*, produced by Københavns Musikteater and Malmö Stadsteater in 2011, was described by one of its audience members. The experience of any performance is situated in the body, in the meeting-place between the audience as a concrete group of individuals and the here-and-now of the performance. The audience's experience is decisively at the heart of theatre practice and should therefore be the base for theatres' and politicians' interest in audiences. But in reality this is not always the case. A full understanding of the audience experience is rarely captured by marketing research methods, cannot be explained even by a delicately balanced description of target group membership, and is rarely discussed in the politically-mandated discourse on audience development. Theatres, as well as researchers, still know astonishingly little about what is really of significance for audiences when they visit the theatre, regardless of whether they are accustomed or unaccustomed to going there. The performance *A Thousand Rooms of Dream and Fear* (Da: Jeg er drømmenes labyrint) was, together with the performance *Bastard* (produced by Teater Får 302 in 2012), the artistic result of the audience development project Theatre Dialogue (Teaterdialog), in which a collaboration between publicly-subsidised Danish and Swedish theatres in the Oresund region worked on reaching new target groups and creating a common Swedish-Danish theatre market. A number of Danish and Swedish researchers were associated with the project providing knowledge of inter-cultural dialogue, audience development and theatrical collaboration.²

Just as theatre institutions have started to show greater interest in audiences, as suggested by the increased number of audience development projects in the Nordic countries during the last decade (e.g. Hansen 2011; Winkelhorn 2013; Lindelof 2015), there has – as this special issue shows – been a growing amount of academic research into the experience of theatre audiences from theatre scholars (e.g. Eversmann 2004; Reason 2010), as well as from within arts marketing (e.g. Radbourne et al. 2010; Scollen 2009). In this article we recommend 'theatre talks' as a method that seeks to combine these two strands of scholar- and institution-led interest, and thereby put audience experiences at the centre of collaborative research.

In doing so we seek to traverse the boundary between two dominant approaches to audience development: 1) a product-led approach; and 2) a target-led interest (Kawashima 2000). The product-led approach takes as its starting point the existing products offered by theatres, and aims to increase interest in these products among groups of non-attenders. This is achieved via improved marketing and with the help of targeted information, which,

for example, can offer increased knowledge of concrete productions or a greater understanding of the theatrical institutions and their rituals. In short, product-led efforts tend to be interested in enabling these groups to appreciate the artistic quality of existing theatre productions. In contrast, the target-led approach makes performances with specific target groups in mind. This is based on a marketing logic according to which target groups are offered what they are expected to want, which at the same time means that the product moves into the background. Here the issue of artistic quality becomes reduced to a question of the degree of satisfaction among selected audiences, and whether what is offered satisfactorily reflects the cultural and social diversity of the population. In both cases, the task of audience development and associated debates about the potentially conflicting relation between social inclusion and artistic quality are easily reduced to issues of strategy and ideology. In both cases there is a tendency to forget a critical aspect of the nature of the performing arts: the sensual and the playful.

Focus on the artistic experience

We propose as an alternative a focus on the audience's experience, and show how this can contribute to alternative strategies for establishing new relationships and strengthening existing ones between audiences and theatrical institutions. Our approach has been to use the method of theatre talks: focus group discussions about the performance carried out in the theatre immediately after the performance. Through practical examples of the benefits offered by such audience investigations, we argue that theatre talks are able to enrich theatrical practice as well as the audience's experience itself and should therefore be understood as a good, long-term investment for theatre institutions. In our investigation of the differences between audience reactions we use the Swedish theatre scholar Willmar Sauter's (2000) simple analysis model, which distinguishes between three different levels in both the performance and the experience: the sensory, the artistic and the symbolic.³ In this way we have been able to include more aspects of the theatre experience in our analysis, which also means that we can finely adjust discussions to deal with matters other than just the extent to which particular groups recognise themselves in the performance's themes and content. In our analysis of audiences' experiences of *Bastard* and *A Thousand Rooms of Dream and Fear* it becomes clear how these three levels all contribute to participants' experiences of the theatre performance.

Our explorative and qualitative form of investigation does not directly match the more target-led and quantitatively oriented initiatives used for audience development, but aims instead to understand what makes it attractive for an audience to go to the theatre. At the same time, it is worth noting that attention is also beginning to be paid within arts marketing to the potential offered by qualitative approaches (e.g. Baxter 2010; Radbourne et. al. 2010). Adopting an approach to audience development that is neither target- nor product-led requires cultural institutions to indicate openness and co-operativeness in their approach by demonstrating a real interest in the experiences of their audiences. Traditionally, qualitative evaluations within arts marketing had been based on reviewers',

colleagues' and other experts' opinions, while in strategic work with audiences it is first and foremost quantitative results that mattered: audience size, percentage of new participants, bar sales, and number of performances. For theatre talks to play a useful role, audiences' experiences must be incorporated as an integral part of how theatres evaluate the quality of theatrical events. Furthermore, it should be stated that the aim is not to present a typology for various modes of experiencing, nor to explain how a given scenographic element affects its audience, but to obtain a better understanding of the interaction between the performance and the audience in all its complexity. In this way, audience development becomes not just a question of wine-tasting events in the foyer or stand-up talent development, but of theatre institutions relating to their surroundings beyond their geographical and demographic audience base. The decisive argument for theatre talks is that in order to develop an audience one must try to get to know them and listen to them. This is the case both on a local level, with regard to institutional practice and repertoire, and more generally with respect to the development of the overall cultural landscape and current agendas within cultural politics. We will return to the former point later in the discussion, but first: Let us look at the latter.

Cultural politics, diversity and artistic quality

In order to understand why investigations into the artistic experience of audiences are essential for successful audience development, it is necessary to offer a picture of the environment in which the art exists. Here established artistic institutions are increasingly challenged by temporary, urban, digital, portable and interactive communities. The modern audience is different to that envisaged when most big cultural institutions were initially established. Instead of a faithful assembly of cultural attendees, participants are more likely to be 'omnivorous consumers of culture' (Peterson & Rossman 2008), who select events traversing cultural, genre-related and institutional boundaries, and who appreciate both digital and physical meetings and various ways of experiencing live. Here, segmentation studies and target group analyses quickly turn out to be insufficient.

In order to understand how big a challenge this has been for Nordic artistic institutes as a sector, it is worth explaining that big cultural organisations have their roots in the classic social democratic educational ideal, which was the starting point for the development of a welfare-based cultural policy in Scandinavia. In the rest of Europe, the relationship to the development of a social democratic welfare state is not quite so clear, but many of the basic ideas have been the same. The aim was to combine ideas of democracy, artistic freedom and social welfare in order to 'enlighten and educate the people to democracy, stimulate artistic freedom and ensure that the people have equal access to artistic experiences' (Duelund 1995: 34). The product-led approach to audience development follows the same path, reflecting existing ideals of cultural politics and holding on to the idea of the autonomy of art, with cultural value seen to cut across social boundaries. This preserves the basic idea that some forms of culture are better than others. This has potentially important consequences when designing systems by which to support

artistic work, with professional art of high quality having been the main aim of cultural policy in Scandinavia. However, this has more recently become the target of criticism, with proponents of the product-led approach blamed for hindering the recognition of alternative forms of art and culture that do not live up to the established standards for art (see Davies 2007: 27). In contrast to this we therefore have the target-led approach, which argues from a sociological and allocational perspective that the value of art is to be found in its use, and that the established cultural hierarchies should be regarded as an expression of social distinctions established in a particular context of cultural history.

All this has meant that cultural institutions increasingly face contradictory requirements. This was quite explicit in relation to *Bastard*, which on one hand received support from the Nordic Council as '[t]he Nordic theatre event of the year', and on the other hand formed part of the project 'Oresund Theatre Dialogue', which aimed to '[reach] new groups of the public who normally do not go to the theatre' (Teaterdialog Øresund, n.d.). This is why another method for understanding audience development is required, with the sociological quantitative approach primarily focusing on who uses and who does not use the publicly-supported cultural offerings. This alternative approach asks also *how* different participants use these offerings; something about which cultural statistics tend not to say anything at all (Langsted 2010: 77).

Theatre Talks – how the audience experience the performance

'I hate points of view!', snorts the father in *Bastard*, ridiculing the ever-faster exchange of (and consequent lack of differentiation between) opinions in the public sphere. Nevertheless, it is such points of view we are interested in here: firstly, because every conversation supplements and adds nuance to our overall picture of the aesthetic experience (Funch 2003); and secondly, because accessing competing viewpoints is a pre-requisite for ensuring that audience development initiatives are developed neither at random nor on the background of private assumptions among theatre professionals (Kawashima 2000). Through delivering a collection of many voices and points of view within the same 'knowledge bank', theatre talks can qualify (and disqualify) experts' quickly-generated opinions. This is precisely where the potential lies. By gathering more information on audiences' valuations – both good and bad – theatres can challenge existing views of what makes up a good theatre experience, and what kinds of significance audiences tend to place on the various elements in the performance as well as on their overall experience.

The Theatre Talk method was originally developed by the theatre researchers Sauter, Isaksson & Jansson (1986) in Stockholm and further expanded by Scollen for use in audience development in Australia (2008, 2009). Our uses of the method have been inspired by both Sauter et al. and Scollen and have been adjusted to the project framework and institutional settings. The analysis in this article focuses on the empirical material collected in connection with Oresund Theatre Dialogues' *A Thousand Rooms of Dream and Fear*; and *Bastard* by Anja Mølle Lindelof, one of the authors of this article. In its analytical approach the article

also draws on the Theatre Talks project carried out by Louise Ejgod Hansen in collaboration with the Theatre Network of Central Denmark Region (SceNet).

All things considered, this project gathered such a quantity of empirical material that we cannot analyse it completely within the limits of this article.⁴ Instead we intend here to provide a solid base on which to build our arguments for why qualitative investigations have something to offer theatres. Later in this article we describe the methodological characteristics of theatre talks, and give examples of the types of knowledge that such conversations can provide. For now, we briefly present the empirical material that is directly used to inform this analysis. In the case of *Bastard*, this consisted of theatre talks with three groups and two individual interviews carried out immediately after the performance, together with two conversations carried out about a week after the performance. For *A Thousand Rooms of Dream and Fear* we conducted five short audience interviews and three theatre talks in the weeks following the performance. We also gathered 65 written reviews from sixth-form pupils and students, the primary target group for this performance.

The strengths and weaknesses of these different types of material have been dealt with elsewhere, both in relation to qualitative interviews in general (Kvale & Brinkman 2008) and more specifically in relation to theatre (Reason 2009, 2010). By choosing to include different types of material in our analysis, we intend to show the broad range of responses generated within these projects. It was clear from the outset that rather than developing one universal method, we wanted to provide a flexible framework for theatres to investigate audiences' experiences, adaptable to the individual institution's ambitions for inclusion and participation.

The sensory element - scenography

Answering the question 'What made the greatest impression?', almost all participants mention the scenography first. The scenography sets up participants' first impressions of the actual performance, with the programme's short summary initially transformed into a spatial realisation. It is here that audiences' prior expectations are put to the test, and their curiosity hopefully excited. This was the case for *A Thousand Rooms of Dream and Fear*, where the intimate room and the physical proximity (as described in the quotation that opened this article) were considered significant in almost every participant's description. And it was also true for *Bastard*, where audiences who entered the tent making up the theatrical space were met by a grandiose and spectacular universe: a large scenic space with many entrances and exits, and the stage in two levels. This was often emphasised as the biggest strength of the performance: 'The stage was fantastically fine and a really great help in creating the fairytale-like primitive Nordic Viking volcano feeling, which I find really beautiful, and in diametrical contrast to the characters, which are pretty rotten – great'. The scenography also possesses specific sensory qualities. In *A Thousand Rooms of Dream and Fear* a wooden floor on pallets works as a house, but can also be hoisted up, so the house also has a cellar. In *Bastard* a watering hole suddenly becomes deeper and can be used as a

swimming pool. These scenographic elements can surprise and thus lead to a changed perception of space, which in its turn has significance for the story.

In both performances the scenography was kept unchanged throughout the whole performance, and this presentational choice was also generally seen as positive. Participants also discussed the scenography in relation to the performance's physical expression, where for example the use of real water, fire, air and earth on the stage were repeatedly described in a positive way as surprising and different. In such statements the live nature of the theatrical experience is underlined, with audiences comparing the events positively to films; as, for example, did this young man: 'one might say that this piece to a great extent has what many cinemas these days strives to make: the full 3D experience'.

In *A Thousand Rooms of Dream and Fear* the physical proximity – the fact of almost being able to trip up the actors and feel their spit when they shout – created an intensely-felt, sensuous universe. Almost all participants describe the performance using words like inclusion, participation, intimacy and proximity. Or as one young participant puts it: 'I was expecting a typical theatre performance, but what I saw when I got there was completely different [...]. The stage was part of us [the audience], and we were part of the stage'.⁵

In *Bastard*, several participants mention the opening scene in which a powerful and sudden symphonic wall of sound fills the theatre tent at the moment when the lights go down. This is of course a signal that the performance is starting, but it is also a very concrete sensory influence that was designed to create a moment's disorientation, intending to turn the participants' presence in the tent's here-and-now into a bodily experience. Despite the difficulties inherent to verbally expressing such impressions of the affective experience, this overwhelming reaction to the atmosphere came across very clearly in a conversation like this:

J: I think the stage is a very important part of the impression. Because the stage is very close to you and it unfolds in three dimensions.

S: Here [in the foyer] there's nothing, it is just cold. But it wasn't in there. The scenography was interesting because it was so close to you, and you felt included.

Investigating participants' reactions to the scenography, it is worth noting that many people felt the performances had simultaneously satisfied two properties of scenography that are often positioned as diametric opposites: the spectacular and the minimalistic.⁶ Spectacular scenography tends to be seen as a quality of large-scale performances, and offers audiences magnificent and beautiful theatrical elements that can fascinate through their ability to do a number of technically advanced things. Minimalist scenography, typically used in small venues, conversely often hold their own fascination through the way simple scenographic solutions leave much to the audience's own imaginative abilities. As the following section further explains, both scenographically and in terms of the physical performances, *Bastard* offered both types of fascination.

The artistic level – physical presence

The scenography also plays an important role in how participants experience the actors' artistic work. This was especially conspicuous in *Bastard*, where part of the action involves clambering on to the lattice construction of a holiday cottage, which together with the water hole forms the primary scenographic element. Here, pure strength and acrobatic precision are seen as essential elements of the action. Participants commented on the element of excitement that often accompanies live performance with regards to artistry: will they manage? And in relation to the dramaturgical effects when, for example, an actor disappears under water for a longer time than one might expect: how is it possible?

In both performances audiences are situated around the stage, so the actors are seen by turns far away and close to from different angles, including from behind. In *Bastard*, the audience is arrayed on all four sides of the stage, which therefore takes on the nature of a circus arena. While the circus association, to which the tent also contributes, is quite clear for some people but not others, a large proportion of participants express appreciation of the performers' artistic abilities:

A: I found the set-up interesting. That they ran. It really engages the audience when they run around after one-another in order to talk together. I haven't seen that before, and it was fascinating.

B: I think it was impressive how much physical activity there was. They hopped round on the frame, jumped down into the water and stayed down there a long time. It was groovy to see a theatre piece like that, where you wonder whether they really do it.

The little water hole in the middle of the stage played a bigger and bigger role in the performance as the action proceeds. Here, participants stressed that while it was important that the water hole provoked a surprising effect every time, the question of how 'in reality' it could be done imposed itself:

A: It is also a funny effect that they disappear [into the water hole]. So you think: where did they get to? Do they drown or what? Then you think how it could be done. It is really a bit distracting for the play itself, because you get to think how they have done it. It is not a conjuring trick, that sort of performance.

At stake here is a tension between the wish not to be 'distracted' from the narrative, and a natural interest in new and surprising theatrical forms. This can be further understood as a conflict between the artistic and symbolic levels of a performance, in which two views of art can be seen to collide. In the first, the ideal is concealment or 'naturalisation' of theatrical conventions, aiming to make it possible for the audience to immerse themselves in the here-and-now of the performance and to create a space for contemplation. In contrast we have the second ideal, where the performance to a greater or lesser extent draws attention

to its own form and design, and in doing so makes it obvious to the audience how great an effort lies behind what we see. *Bastard* balances in between these two poles, with fascination of the artistic production preventing some of its participants from entering into the spirit of the performance's symbolic level. In our audience conversations, participants were seen to impose on a theatrical experience the dual expectation that the setting offer a new, exciting dimension to the performance, but that it must not come so much to the forefront as to prevent people from getting absorbed in the experience. This connects to Eversmann's view of the two tracks of theatre:

The spectator is watching on two tracks as it were; sometimes focusing more attention on the aesthetic qualities, then again more on identification and empathy – depending on the demands of the theatrical stimulus, the conventions and the individual's own preferences (Eversmann 2004: 143).

Here it is a question both of sensory perception in the physical here-and-now and of analytical processing in the reception process. It is important to stress that the perspective is not either-or, but both-and. This has also been confirmed by Matthew Reason's (2008) research into young people's theatrical experiences. He documents that even quite young children are perfectly able to see and experience both the man holding the puppet and the character that the puppet represents. The participants' objections to the artistic level in *Bastard* can thus be seen to come from an awareness that certain production-related decisions have been made, in which the connection between the performance's artistic and the symbolic aspects has not been made clear.

Linguistic understanding

The question of linguistics offers another perspective on the relationship between sensory, artistic and symbolic levels. *Bastard* was the result of a Nordic cooperation, and because Icelandic, Swedish and Danish were all spoken on stage, the performance was subtitled. It was possible to follow the dialogue either on screens or by using a downloadable app.

The fact that several languages were spoken on stage had two dimensions for audiences' experiences: 1) a semantic dimension of understanding, which is concerned with the content of what is said; and 2) a pre-semantic aesthetic quality, which relates to tone, sound and so on: i.e. the sensory qualities of the language (Pedersen 2011). During the theatre talks, participants mentioned in various ways both how they thought the solution worked and what significance, if any, the spoken language was felt to have within the performance. The participants generally indicated that subtitles were a solution to the semantic linguistic problem. One participant explicitly reflected on this urge to understand: 'At some point I wondered why I had this need to understand the language and tried simply just to watch. But it was what they said and not what they did that was funny'. Here, a tension was experienced between the semantic and pre-semantic levels. While subtitles added positively to the semantic experience, satisfying participants' desires to understand

the narrative, these were often felt to negatively impact on the pre-semantic experience. Many participants felt that the subtitling emphasised the constructed nature of the actors' lines – 'as we know it from opera', as one participant pointed out – which in turn inflected how the participants identified with the characters. This was partly explained in critical terms, as in the following quote:

It was very artificial, because it was caricatured and because you could read what they were going to say before they said it. We went to see a theatre performance [...] and I like it when you don't think about it being a theatre performance. But I had it all the time at the back of my head.

Here, the artificiality or constructedness of the drama was brought to the fore by the action of subtitling. For audiences the linguistic experience is therefore not just a simple question of understanding, with the pre-semantic level also playing an important part in how people experience the universe of the performance. However, other participants articulated a more positive response to the experienced relationship between the performance's sensory and symbolic levels: 'There is all that with the universe – that it is a wild universe with many different spaces. You also accept immediately that they speak different languages'. Here, the dialogue is understood in connection with the way the scenography was used to create different spaces. Just as the stage space is used horizontally as well as vertically – they were walking and climbing on the roof, creating a second stage space – the verbal (inter)actions are understood to be an integral part of the aesthetic quality of the performance. While each language has its own characteristics – especially the very guttural sounds of Icelandic, which were repeatedly remembered by audiences – the use of several languages together was often synthesised as part of the overall aesthetic experience.

Multilingual or foreign-language performances present a particular challenge for audiences, and this cannot be ignored. The audience is naturally quite aware that the words mean something, and so it can be *ab initio* frustrating not to be able to decode this layer of meaning. But at the same time there can be pre-semantic qualities associated with a foreign-language theatrical experience. If movement, music, the language's pre-semantic qualities and so on clearly communicate with the audience, then it is in fact possible to tone down the importance of the meaning of the words and encourage participants to focus on other qualities of the experience, such as the actors being able to perform a convincing multilingual dialogue, or on the languages' different expressive forms.⁷ Where subtitles are used to enhance audiences' semantic experiences, it is also important that *how* these are used should augment – or at least not detract from – the pre-semantic experience.

Theatre language

While understanding is not the only profit from a theatrical experience, there is no doubt that the experience of failing to follow the onstage narrative can be extremely frustrating. Here it is not just verbal languages that can give problems. Different theatrical conventions

can also assume a degree of pre-knowledge that not all members of the audience necessarily possess. This is an important aspect in connection with audience development. One of the things that became clear from the theatre talks is that the complexity of the dramaturgy and the means used to tell the story can sometimes create problems of understanding. In this respect, the straightforward storyline of *Bastard* differs from a performance such as *A Thousand Rooms of Dream and Fear*, in which a rather complex narrative unfolds.

The starting point of this production is a present-day story frame, with the past relived in memory. Instead of clearly-defined flashbacks, the two parallel sequences of events melt together, so it is uncertain how much of the story is a truthful recounting and how much a product of the main character's wishful thinking. In this way the causal relationships of the story are broken down, so that past, present and future coalesce. One of the central intentions for the performance, according to the director, was that the audience should experience the sensation of physical and mental chaos in their own bodies. While this parallel was not explicitly articulated by any of the participants, the chaotic and multiple sensory inputs of the performance universe were (as expressed in the opening quote above) intensively perceived by several audience members as being at the heart of the performance. This was underlined by repeated formulations like: 'the intimacy was exceptional and the senses were challenged'; 'the fear is palpable as stiches in the stomach and you wish you could physically move away from the stage'; or 'they were crying, shouting, fighting and frying onions – all of which confused the senses'. However, for this performance it was found that several other audience members were rather confused by the dramaturgy of the performance, with one participant commenting: 'The story was relatively simple, but presented in a complicated manner'. In several cases this produced irritation, in one instance explicitly formulated as a 'mistake in the piece' rather than an intentional quality.

Bastard, in contrast, has a story that some of the participants felt to be too simple but a staging where many things happened at the same time, producing quite a chaotic universe. For some, this was felt to create excitement: the continual feeling that there are several things going on at the same time and so, as a member of the audience mentions, one must 'be awake' to catch everything. Meanwhile, for others, the extensive number of characters and the many parallel events with several side stories not necessarily carried through to the end were primarily a source of irritation. At some points these two modes of experience met: one of the characters was particularly repeatedly discussed as having an ambiguous significance within the story. This was the figure of the 'painter', whose role slowly changes during the piece as he is transformed from a person into the shadow of one of the other characters. Most participants' reactions to the ambiguous function of the painter indicate a commonly-felt tension between the comprehensibility and ambiguity of artistic intentions, such as in this exchange:

D: I believe there is an intention with him [the painter]. It makes me want to think more and go on working on the piece to analyse it. But I didn't understand him.

B: I don't think it matters if you understand it or not. You need to experience it before you can analyse it. As long as it makes sense afterwards.

What the participants put into words here is a balance between understanding and lack of understanding, which the aesthetic theoretician Richard Shusterman (2000) points to as vital for the aesthetic experience, and which has been theorised as flow (Csikszentmihaly 1990, Eversmann 2004). In the aesthetic communication there must be something new, as otherwise the experience becomes boring and unchallenging, but the new elements must not be so new or extensive that the result is incomprehensible and inaccessible.⁸ Finding this balance is important in the context of audience development, because it acknowledges that participants have different starting points and wishes and that these are critical for their experience and evaluation of the performance.

The room, the stage and the other audience members

A theatrical experience is not just a matter of what happens on the stage. The performance's surroundings, the audience, the auditorium: all are important aspects of a theatrical event (Sauter 2000; Cremona et al. 2004). In both *A Thousand Rooms of Dream and Fear* and *Bastard*, an essential scenographic element was to re-organise the well-known theatre room in which the audience usually becomes 'the fourth wall'.

Participants continually described how being placed around the stage contributed to their feeling of being included in the performance; how they felt 'part of the stage', as quoted above. This is especially interesting because, despite the visual abandoning of the fourth wall, neither of the two performances used interactive elements. This corresponds with the feedback from SceNet's theatre talks, which indicates that the feeling that the performance is going on in front of you live offers a sense of inclusion because of the impression that one's own presence has significance within the performance. This focus on bodily co-presence is central to most definitions of performance, and participant responses suggest that this experience is heightened by physical closeness in an intimate theatrical space, as in the case of *A Thousand Rooms of Dream and Fear*; as well as in *Bastard*'s risky execution of acrobatic numbers and 360-degree view.

Several participants comment on how the abolition of the proscenium arch as a spatial dividing line played a significant role in their experience of being part of an audience. With the audience as a visible part of the scenography, the production conspicuously draws attention to the fact of being an audience.

Just as seeing the actors' backs seems to offer audiences a feeling of sincerity – 'they [the actors] can't hide, they are "on" all the time' – the audience too has to turn around in their seats during the performance:

Sitting on the floor makes my butt hurt, but it does something to me, and I feel – because I am placed where I am in front of the stage – that I move around. I like that I actually move around in order to see if something is happening there?

The very fact that the audience sees the faces of other audience members when watching the stage obviously has an influence on how they receive the production,. The sense of one's own presence amongst others is felt to be a quality of the atmosphere from the moment one enters the auditorium, as the following quote suggests: 'I feel my heart beat faster and faster, as I move across the room [towards my seat]. Curiosity, expectation and a touch of nervousness is clearly felt by all of us'. Also, the physical organisation of the space led to differences in audiences' experiences depending on their position in the auditorium. This becomes the matter of a longer reflection between two participants who enthusiastically discuss specific scenes, in which one was close and the other at a distance.

M: This implies that you had another experience than I did, because someone turned their back on you so that I could see their faces, and I think that is...

H: And I saw it from the other side – when you saw their backs, they were looking at me!

M: Exactly, so one should see it [the performance] 2-3-4 times, one from each corner [...]

After around five minutes of discussion, they seem to find satisfaction in the conclusion that: 'it is quite interesting: We obviously saw the same performance, but we saw it very differently' (M). While this might be obvious, it also seems to be one of the fundamental pleasures of talking theatre: sharing the experience with others and learning about their experience at the same time.

On the other hand, there is the risk that this experience of directness and closeness is weakened when participants' attention to their own role moves into the foreground. This happens, for example, when other audience members are behaving in ways that call for attention, typically described as 'bad behaviour' (like looking bored), or if the emotional reactions of others are not recognised in oneself. It also happens due to the subtitling in *Bastard*, where the static written language preserves the idea that the actors' dialogue is made up of rehearsed lines, which, as described by the participant above, might enhance the awareness of one's role as an audience member. Thus having attention drawn to one's own role as an audience is something that in itself can be demanding, disturbing or fascinating.

Also, another way of becoming aware of oneself as part of an audience is articulated during the talks. The sense that the theatre institution has consciously worked on reaching them as a target group was articulated by a couple of participants independently of one another. In *A Thousand Rooms of Dream and Fear*, in which young students were a special

target group, this was crystallised in relation to a specific dance scene, which uses The Doors' iconic rock number 'Break on through (to the other side)' to illustrate the happiest moment in the life of the protagonist. This is experienced as being out of place. One participant elaborates: 'I thought as I sat there in the audience that the scene had been included in the play so that young people could more easily relate to their own lives'. The same tendency is found in a discussion of whether or not the frivolous language in *Bastard* was experienced as provocative. As one young audience member says: 'There was nothing really provocative in it, rather, well, if they did it in order to provoke. Nobody ate their own shit or something like that. It was a little fucked up though that they were brother and sister, those two...' In this case, the attempt to provoke is considered unsuccessful because it is seen as a construction with a particular and inappropriate intention, while provocative elements might – maybe unexpectedly – be found within the story's plot. The same goes for the feeling described above, of being targeted as part of a particular (young) audience group. This points to audiences' awareness of the theatre experience as a 'produced experience'; especially, perhaps, when there seems to be a fallacy in the producer's notion of these audiences. However, in a more general sense it also reminds us to be aware that the translation of target group features to specific aesthetic strategies is not always a simple process.

Collaborating with theatres on audience development

As stated earlier in this article, we suggest that this interest in the audience experience is not only relevant in terms of an academic context. By investigating audiences' experiences of *Bastard* and *A Thousand Rooms of Dream and Fear* we have accumulated knowledge about how people find meaning in these performances, on what they put the most emphasis, and how they experience being an audience. It is clear that the audience's experience involves both a dimension of understanding and a more sensory, direct dimension, and that both of these are important. Good experiences of theatre are therefore not a question of either sensing or understanding, but are formed in the interaction between.

A common feature of these two projects is that they are both the result of close collaboration between theatres and universities, with the intention of producing knowledge potentially leading to changed institutional practices. The method of theatre talks was deliberately chosen because of its potential to provide valuable insights from different perspectives. From a research perspective, the method allows us to deal with our continual lack of systematic and valid knowledge of concrete audience experience in the theatrical domain. From an institutional perspective, theatre personnel within both communication and artistic development can learn a lot from this form of differentiated feedback. And from an audience perspective, the participants are offered a way to relate to the theatre in a constructive, edifying and engaged manner based on the appreciative approach to the variety of theatrical experiences.

As mentioned above, the two projects used the theatre talk method somewhat differently. Here it is worth thinking about the advantages and disadvantages of these variations. In SceNet, a sequence of theatre talks consisted of conversations held with the same group after three separate performances. This longer sequence has definite advantages with respect to building up familiarity with the theatre and self-confidence in relation to expressing oneself about one's own experience. Another element in the SceNet project was the requirement that an employee of the theatre should be present, because the knowledge that the theatre employee obtained by sitting with the group was seen as an explicit purpose of the project. In contrast, the various theatre talks carried out as part of Oresund Theatre Dialogue had a less systematic design. The reason for this was firstly that the project only involved two performances, presented almost a year apart, so it was not possible to incorporate a coherent sequence of events. Secondly, in order to illustrate how theatres might engage with their audiences in various ways, a part of the project was to supplement the theatre talks with other forms of audience response, including short audience interviews on a group or individual basis, together with written feedback in the form of reviews. For some participants it may be an advantage not to have to take part in such a long and exacting course of events as the three theatre talks, just as shorter and more spontaneous interviews might be easier for theatres to conduct. At the same time, the written feedback offers a possibility for reflection when participants have had a little while to 'digest' the experience: a requirement that was explicitly expressed by two participants. Oresund Theatre Dialogue's use of various qualitative methods has shown that also less systematic feedback from the audience can generate significant knowledge of their theatre experience. On the other hand, for both participants and theatres the benefits of the longer sequence of theatre talks seems to be so great that it is worth plunging into. Through this it is possible to get a longitudinal sense of a variety of equally important reactions to the same aesthetic expression. This can be exciting for audiences, as well as useful for the theatres themselves.

This raises the question of accessibility: when did participants experience that the performance was difficult to understand? And the question of engagement: when were the characters and stories appealing and interesting? A clear lesson for both theatres and researchers was that these things were fairly unpredictable. This means that even a carefully-planned analysis of target groups and marketing might fail, because of a lack of understanding of the potential relations between performance and audiences. One example came from two theatre talks at different theatres in Aarhus with the same group of young people (18-25 years old) speaking about two performances, both of which were about relationships. In general the participants were engaged in the first performance but not the second:

Last time I could engage and thought that this touched upon something essential and relevant. But in this performance I could not see any parallels...

(Moderator: To your own life?) Yes, it seemed so abstract. I do like it when things are abstract, but this I could not relate to.

Of course there were several aspects of the performance (style of acting, the fact that the actors in the second performance were older, etc.) that may have caused this difference in reaction, but the point is that this difference was unexpected, indicating a need to learn much more about audiences' reactions to specific performances.

Despite the differences in application, there are three central points to be made in relation to the two theatre talks projects explored in this article. Firstly, it is the participants themselves who decide what is worth talking about. Therefore this is an appreciative approach that doesn't put special emphasis on 'the right' expert interpretation, but takes as its starting point participants' own experiences. An essential part of the method is unobtrusiveness, which importantly intends to stimulate participants to explore one another's experiences. This was explicitly stated in a discussion between young people at Limfjordsteatret about the benefits of the theatre talk after a modern dance performance that they previously found quite inaccessible: 'Then you become aware of something that you have not noticed yourself, but others noticed. And you might combine that with some of the things you noticed yourself'.

Secondly, it is essential for all conversations that the experience is reactive: the audience put emphasis on different elements depending on which performance they see. Thus, when audiences for *Bastard* and *A Thousand Rooms of Dream and Fear* talk a lot about scenography, this is due at least partly to the fact that in these productions a great deal of emphasis was placed on the performance's scenographic expression. The interesting thing is therefore not so much what the audience stress but more the reasons they give for why this is important; as well as how participants consider individual elements to relate to the entire theatrical experience.

Thirdly, the theatre talks method is suited to giving both those who are familiar and those who are unfamiliar with theatre a better experience of going there. For those who are not used to going to the theatre, it is important that a theatre talk has a motivational character and forms a secure framework for the visit. Here it is, for some people, vital that the visit should be a social event: you meet other people with more or less the same mindset. For those who are used to going to the theatre, a theatre talk can help to introduce them to new forms of performance that lie outside their usual choices, and to put already known patterns of interpretation and modes of experience into perspective.⁹

To talk about an experience is to improve it

A vital aspect of theatre talks when used for audience development has been that participants have also had to see performances that initially were not intended for them from a narrow target-group point of view.¹⁰ Inviting participants to see something they have not chosen themselves gives them the possibility of going beyond their pre-understanding of what a theatre experience is. This may turn out to be an unexpectedly positive

experience. One of the pupils who saw *A Thousand Rooms of Dream and Fear* responded in this way to the experience: 'Everything was different from what I had imagined!' This comment is not unique, but can be found in our investigations of audience experiences irrespective of the performance, generation, genre and region. In conversations with the audience about their experiences, a general idea of what constitutes 'theatre' tends to be expressed. This can often be described as either a proscenium stage, where the actors from a distance play hard-to-understand dusty classics and speak in an affected manner; or, in the case of young people, school plays, which at best are seen as an attractive alternative to 'ordinary lessons', but which do not manage to reach out to those who are not used to theatre. Thus the theatre talks have, on a generic level, the potential to challenge the audience's understanding of what theatre 'is'. At the same time they might address the audience on a concrete level, as they are presented with performances that initially are considered 'not for them'. Naturally this does not work well every time: in our material there are voices that criticise the various performances, both when the performance does not reach out to the target group and when the performance is experienced as hard to understand. But it also goes well in many cases, and it is here that theatre talks as a method has the potential to go beyond a purely target-led approach to audience development.

One of the method's qualities is that it gives participants the possibility of a greater understanding of the theatre experience. Understanding is not just something that arises in the auditorium while the performance is going on; it is also something that grows after the performance through dialogue with others. Here lies part of the explanation for participants' positive feedback: theatre talks give participants a framework for working on their experience of the performance. This is because when participants share their experiences and their proposals for interpretations they become more aware of what the performance is about for them, but they also begin to realise that perhaps there is no final, correct answer to what a particular scene means. Theatre talks can thus make the theatre-going experience more constructive and less frustrating, as by sharing their thoughts with others they can in the course of the conversation create a collective frame of understanding for the experience.

But at the same time there is an institutional benefit from this approach. Most importantly, theatre talks challenge theatres' traditional product- or target-oriented practices by actually opening the debate up to the recipients. The step does not need to be especially big: the aim is not for theatres to change their performances according to the audience's directions, but for them to use theatre talks to find out more about how different spectators experience their performances. This can also have useful practical outcomes: for example, when participants in *A Thousand Rooms of Dream and Fear* notice that the main character's visible top-brand underpants are an odd anachronism, it is very simple for the theatre to take suitable action. And for researchers, theatre talks provide rich material for further discussions of various elements of the aesthetic experience. For all parties, then, theatre talks can be the first important step on the way to getting to know the audience, and for audiences getting to know their theatres. This might pave the way for a

real dialogue, if the intention is to incorporate the audience's perspective in further institutional developments.

Biographical Notes:

Anja Mølle Lindelof is Associate Professor at the Department of Communication, Business and Information Technologies, Roskilde University, Denmark, where she teaches in Performance Design. She researches cultural performance across the areas of music, popular culture, audiences and theatre. She has recently written on audience development and art institutions, and she is currently working on music and mediation with an emphasis on 'experiencing live'. Contact: lindelof@ruc.dk.

Louise Ejgod Hansen is Associate Professor at the Department of Aesthetics and Communication, Aarhus University, Denmark. Her main research areas are cultural policy and theatre. During the last years one of her main focuses has been audience development, including audience studies and institutional development. She is currently the Project and Research Manager of rethinkIMPACTS 2017, a research-based evaluation of Aarhus as European Capital of Culture 2017. Contact: draleh@dac.au.dk.

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Notes:

¹ All the quotes are from recorded and transcribed interviews with theatre audiences. All quotes are originally in Danish and have been translated into English for the purpose of publication. When transcribing we have adjusted the original oral expression into an understandable written quotation and thus also adjusted grammatical mistakes, etc., unless they seem important as a part of the expression. All interviews are anonymised.

² The research results of the complete *Theatre Dialogue* are presented in the book *Publik i perspektiv* (Forsare; Lindelof 2013). The current article draws its analysis from the article *Teatersamtaler – publikumsudvikling gennem dialog* (Lindelof & Hansen 2013) from that anthology.

³ This idea that the immediate sensory experience and the mental task of interpretation both have significance for the overall experience can also be found in the American philosopher Shusterman's (2000) description of the artistic experience.

⁴ For detailed analyses of the individual investigations see e.g. Hansen (2012), Lindelof (2012)

⁵ See Lindelof 2012 for a nuanced analysis of the audience's experiences of *A Thousand Rooms of Dream and Fear*.

⁶ See Hansen 2012b for an analysis of the difference between the experience of big spectacular theatre performances and small intimate ones.

⁷ See Hansen 2012b for an analysis of Teatret OM's performance *I Maltagliati* (2011), which was considered successful by many audience members at least partly because the performance, played in Italian, was for a Danish audience, and it was therefore not the intention that they should understand the semantic content of the words.

⁸ The concept of accessibility conditions comes from the reception aestheticians Eco (1979) and Culler (1980) and one way of looking at this is that understanding of theatrical art – like so many other things – is something which has to be developed and rehearsed. Another perspective is that access to a performance does not only depend on the participants' individual starting points, but is also something which can be worked on in the production.

⁹ This point is clear in both Oresund Theatre Dialogue and SceNet's theatre talks, but was also central to the conclusions made by Sauter et al. (1986) and Scollen (2009).

¹⁰ For an analysis of this, see Hansen 2014a and 2014b.