

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

"A Suitcase of Methods":

Seeking the Experienced Relevance of Performing Arts

Project summery

Over the course of the next four years (fall 2015 – summer 2019) the Royal Danish Theatre will be working on the research project "A Suitcase of Methods" – a project seeking knowledge on audience experiences with performances and events on and outside the different theatre's stages.

The project has a methodologically experimental focus, and it seeks to contribute with new methods and tools to uncover, collect and analyse qualitative data on audience experiences.

The project is funded by Bikubenfondem.

Project description

The project "A Suitcase of Methods" is a knowledge seeking and knowledge-developing project, which over the course of the next four years will develop new methods to uncover, collect and analyse soft and qualitative data on audience experiences. Focus will be on both the experiences of the core audience as well as the experiences of people who less frequently visit the performing arts. Specifically we want to learn more about the accompanying audience, who is invited to the theatre by their companion.

The project focuses on these terms: *learning, relevance, and sharing knowledge.*

Learning

A focus on learning underlines the project's investigative and knowledge oriented character. In order to gain new knowledge we assign great priority to a methodologically experimental phase where we test and try out different experimental designs. In the course of these four years we will try different approaches to collect soft data – different ways of framing interview situations, different questions, using different tools and media (drawing, writing etc.) to assist the reflection process etc.

Relevance

The project will seek new knowledge on what is considered relevant to different audience groups. The term *relevance* was described as a necessary field of action in BrandsAhead's brand identity survey of the Royal Danish Theatre from 2012 and Gallup's survey from 2013. In this context *relevance* refers to whether the audience feels that a brand 'suits them' or is 'addressed' to them.

Today the notion of relevance is crucial for cultural institutions to consider. The user pattern of art and culture are under development and there is no longer an explicit national formative ideal. E.g. it is no longer a given



that you have to visit the national theatres as part of your cultural education. Thus the performing arts need to learn more about what the audience and people in general find relevant.

The themes *learning* and *relevance* will function as central guidelines and focus points in an otherwise open, experimental and creative research process, where mistakes are allowed and expected.

The term *relevance* also refers to the project's aim to be relevant to the society in general. The project will collect data and knowledge that is relevant to other cultural institutions and work continuously to communicate these results throughout the project.

Knowledge sharing

The focus area *knowledge sharing* can be divided into two overall themes:

1) As mentioned the project "A Suitcase of Methods" aims to share reflections, results and knowledge with stages and companies of performing arts nationally and internationally. As it is now many stages work independently with their own experiences and knowledge about their audience. The aim of this project is to develop methods to gather relevant qualitative information – methods that are relevant and applicable for small itinerant stages as well as larger stages.

2) Additionally the data and knowledge that is collected should be communicated to people working with artistic content on stage. So far the attempts to do so at The Royal Danish Theatre (*Det Røde Rum* [The Red Room], *Corpus* and *The Children's Concerts* at The Royal Danish Opera) have received great feedback.

Here focus has been on thorough communication regarding target groups and the experiences of the audience. *The Red Room* has for instance received and worked with demographical data on their audience, and the Royal Danish Opera's out reach team has worked with the feedback and qualitative interviews from the audience buying tickets. In this project we wish to further develop this knowledge sharing.

Background

Today The Royal Danish Theatre has substantial knowledge on the audience buying tickets (their sex, residence, purchase frequency, personal interests etc.) and on the behaviour of the same group, which can be measured through transactions (when they buy tickets, drinks etc.). This knowledge is both relevant and useful but it should be supplemented with qualitative data on audience's experiences with the performing arts.

This soft data is hard to uncover and collect, and it seems that cultural institutions in general have recognized the limitations of the traditional qualitative questionnaire. Questionnaires can be useful in some situations but they rarely give us the full picture or portray the complexity of audience experiences. Often the audience will answer one thing in the questionnaire and do something completely different in real life.

Target audience,



In order to learn more about the individual's experience with performing arts we need information from different audience groups. As mentioned the project's target audience are both the frequent performing arts users, the accompanying audience, and people who only occasionally come in contact with the performing arts. We want to examine what these groups find relevant.

Collaboration and network

Knowledge sharing is central to the project. It is our ambition to be in an open dialogue with the field of practitioners and researchers. The process and results are shared at the blog <http://asuitcaseofmethods.com> where the growing network is invited to participate.

We are already in touch with a range of different organisations: Scenit, The Danish Broadcast Cooperation, department of Media Research, Det Københavnske Teatersamarbejde, TIO – Teatrenes interesse Organisation, Randers Egnsteater, Fredericia Theatre, Kulturstyrelsen og CKI – Center for Kunst – og Interkultur. And we are already in dialogue with a broad range of international researchers. We are expecting the network to grow during the next four years and are warmly welcoming practitioners and researchers in the field.

Final communication

In the final phase of the project we want to make sure that the results of our work are shared and live on in other theatres and cultural institutions working with performing arts audience. We plan to round off the project in a conference where we invite national and international theatres and institutions.

Other activities

The project owner Christina Østerby spoke at the conference for [Tessitura Learning & Community Network](#) in August 2015. Here she spoke under the theme Digital Audience Involvement regarding the necessity of working strategically with different approaches and different digital products and always being aware of *why* this product is relevant at this particular stage in a process. This perspective is very much present in the methodological work of our project as well.

Furthermore an update about the project on LinkedIn with the article "*Love, Hate, Arousal and Engagement: Exploring Audience Responses to Performing Arts*" attached was opened and read by 374 individuals in the network. From this we conclude that there is a growing interest in this field – both nationally but especially internationally.

Potential challenges

One of the greatest challenges we may meet with this project is associated with its open structure. We are not working towards a very specific goal. When starting out we don't know what we will learn, and it is only by enduring the open, unknown experimental phase that we will actually be able to gain *new* knowledge. We must have the patience and courage to stay in this unsettled and unknown phase, which characterizes all exploration and creative thinking. This 'space' of exploration and creativity is known from the artistic theatre



work. The project we will be inspired by this creative work tradition, as it will help us to think 'out of the box' and gain new insight and new knowledge.

