

## From Visitor to Audience

A Suitcase of Methods Report #1

- A minor report based on open conversations with visitors in the recreational area at The Playhouse, Copenhagen, July 2015.



During the month of July 2015 Nina Gram, Ph.D. initiated 33 interviews with one or more visitors at The Playhouse's cozy outdoor space called "The Bridge Deck" at the Copenhagen harbor front. In total she came to speak with 64 persons aged 10 to 71 years. The ambition was to learn more about the visitors at the Royal Danish Theatre who are using the facilities around the stages such as restaurants and cafés but not necessarily frequenting the performing arts. What is their perception of The Royal Danish Theatre? The interviews were conducted during the day, when there was no shows or concerts going on. The Royal Danish Theatre consists of three venues (The Old Stage, The Opera and The Playhouse) with seven stages presenting more than 2.000 events annually. The Royal Danish Theatre has four artistic departments staging the art forms opera, ballet, drama, orchestra and events.

This is a summary of the themes of conversations as well as the interview related experiences. It is a snapshot, taken in the height of summer – and thus not representative for the entire Royal Danish Theatre. The purpose



of this report as a part of the newly launched research project "A Suitcase of Methods" is mainly to give an idea of themes that might be interesting to explore during the next four years. A Suitcase of Methods Report #1

Half of the interviewed in this report were from foreign countries and had never experienced a performance at The Royal Danish Theatre. According to sales reports less than 10% of the audiences at The Royal Danish Theatre are foreigners. The report is therefore not representative for The Royal Danish Theatre as such.

## Method

Basically, the interviews were conducted according to the principles of "humble inquiry" (E.H. Schein), which in brief entail sincere curiosity, open questioning and focused listening. The goal was to gather knowledge about the visitors and avoid steering the conversation in certain directions. On a methodological level Nina Gram was testing how informal it is possible to conduct an interview when you are representing a historically loaded cultural institution such as The Royal Danish Theatre. The thesis was that if you can keep an informal tone you might get a response that is closer to the actual held views and not biased with cultural assumptions about what you have to answer. In order to keep an informal tone Gram addressed visitors enjoying the sun, drinking coffee outside the Playhouse:

I experienced the interviewed to be curious about what I was representing and how their responses were going to be used. I wouldn't get an informal conversation before I framed the interview properly by telling how I represented The Royal Theatre and what I wanted. On the other hand I experienced that the more the informants knew about me on a personal level, the more willing they were to tell me without aiming to give "the right answers". So after a short presentation the aim was to make the conversation run freely. I was not using a recorder or pen – in order to be as informal as possible with the informants. After every interview I wrote a resume, which became the foundation of the data analysis. The interviews lasted from 5 to 45 minutes. The depth of the interviews is therefore variable.

All informants gave their approval to the use of their answers before leaving. They were not given any sort of economical compensation. Questions about the morning, how they went to the spot and what they were doing after was raised were used as context to get to questions such as "What does the Royal Danish Theatre mean to you" or "Tell me of your greatest experience with art, theatre, music?"

## Tendencies in responses

Generally, very few of the interviewed were large-scale consumers of the Royal Danish Theatre due to the time of the season and the time of the day the interviews were conducted, and the fact that there was no performance going on. Most interviewees had never been to The Royal Danish Theatre or had only visited one of the venues a few times. Nina Gram scarcely met anyone who went to all of the venues or was interested in all four art forms. This is contradicted by the ticket-sales statistics based on 600-700.000 registered costumers of The Royal Danish Theatre. Here we see that the consumers mainly have a preferred art form, but that they



are not restricting their ticket buys to only one but several of the performing arts forms at The Royal Danish Theatre.

## The Imagined Theatre

There was a discrepancy between the respondents' "image" of the Royal Danish Theatre and the actual outreach activities. Sitting just beside a banner for the free of charge jazz-event "Ofelia Live" taking place at the "Bridge Deck" during the summer some would ask for exactly this kind of events. The immediate understanding or prejudice is that The Royal Danish Theatre only offers difficult and more serious performances. In 2012 a large Gallup survey about The Royal Danish Theatre framed a paradox of views, with demand for a more edgy national theatre showing provoking content on one side, and what the audience actual expected and went to see such as the classic "Romeo and Juliet" on the other side. The actual practice and the imagined ethos of the Royal Danish Theatre is an interesting area to investigate further.

## A Folksy Place

The Playhouse is located in an area filled with cafés and restaurants in the sightseeing area *Nyhavn*, the old harbor in Copenhagen. Most of the foreign tourists interviewed don't know they are sitting next to The Playhouse (built in 2008 by the architects Lundgaard & Tranberg) but ended up here after a stroll along *Nyhavn*. Several people mentioned that they were pleased being on the bridge deck without having to buy something although most were drinking a cup of coffee during the interview. And those who knew the house mentioned that they enjoyed staying there without having to watch a performance. Several people called it "an open and folksy place". This understanding is in immediate contrast to the comprehension they have of The Royal Danish Theatre, and contribute to the complex ethos of The Royal Danish Theatre. But why are non-theatre goers in an area filled with competing food offerings ending up at The Playhouse – and could they be turned from visitors into audiences? And is there a special magic atmosphere linked to The Royal Danish Theatre as such that is so strong that it becomes attractive just to be in the surroundings of The Royal Danish Theatre in, to be a part of the "theatre magic"?

## The Cultural Ambassador

Many of the interviewed referred to specific persons in their network who would take them to the theatre or other cultural events. They become a kind of "cultural ambassadors", since they choose performances and events for others. Thus it is the personal connection to a friend that becomes the link to The Royal Danish Theatre. Since 2013 The Royal Danish Theatre has been working with the cultural ambassadors on a strategic level by developing their loyalty program. By subscribing to it, the ambassadors do not only get a deeper understanding of the performances in the program, they also are invited to special "behind the scenes" events and gets beverages for free for themselves and their guests.

Engaging the loyal audiences is a general challenge to cultural institutions. Recently it was one of the main topics addressed at the conference "Nordic Venue Forum" in Stockholm, Sweden in 2014. Director of Strategic Analytics and Business Development at The Royal Danish Theatre Christina Østerby presented a paper on how



The Royal Danish Theatre have been facing that challenge during the last years and shared knowledge about what activities proved to be valuable. The challenge of engaging the loyal audiences is seen across cultural activities from performing arts to sport events. A Release of Methods Report #1

### **The Art Experience**

Regardless of age and life experience most interviewees found it hard to articulate their arts experience with other words than "good" or "nice". Nevertheless two 18-years old girls explained that they got a light sensation in the body when experiencing theatre or other live performing arts. To get a verbalization of the arts experience we might elaborate on this from a methodological perspective. The verbalization of the perception in audience analysis is a growing field that we find several researchers are exploring. Most of them take a phenomenological approach, which takes into account that we only are able to verbalize sensations that we already have a language for. It might be through that lens that we continue our approach to capture the audiences' experience with art.

Nina Gram also discovered that some think that going to the Royal Danish Theatre is more challenging and demands special knowledge, even though the interviewed already was an experienced theatre consumer. As one states "I might start with a children's play".

### **The Ritual**

Nina Gram did an interview with a middle-aged couple. They were living in a provincial town on Zealand. Every year during summer they would take a trip to Copenhagen, purchase a vacation abroad, and then finish with a dinner at The Playhouse. The couple used the outside area and the restaurant of the Playhouse as a part of a yearly ritual. This points not only at the earlier raised question: How do we turn this group of people into an audience – it also raises the question: where does the experience with the theatre start and what role does the theatre have for visitors – as mentioned before there are a lot of fine restaurants in this area so why choose The Royal Danish Theatre? In the case of the couple, a central part of the experience is based on positive expectations. And in contrast to tendencies in the rest of the theatres located in Copenhagen, the audiences at The Royal Danish Theatre are buying their tickets long before the show: To go to The Royal Danish Theatre is not a spontaneous act but rather a part of a cultural ritual. This puts The Royal Danish Theatre in a special position among theatres in Copenhagen. How can we emphasize the ritualistic feeling that include positive expectations in the future work with the audiences?

### **Methodical reflections**

On a methodological level the informal approach to the audiences, meeting them spontaneously provided a valuable insight into their thoughts. Normally The Royal Danish Theatre interview the audiences in large focus groups who are somewhat prepared to the questions, and chosen to fit into a specific segment. In this study none of the interviewed had time to prepare any "right" answers. The composition of the sample, on the other hand, is random. The only thing in common was that they all were located in the recreational area of The Playhouse. What can be concluded out of this study is therefore of course questionable.



Not all the interviewed were able to "jump" into this informal tone and demanded a more structured interview design. Nina Gram explains:

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There was a huge difference in how certain questions affected different people. Those who thought it exciting being addressed gave good responses to the open questions and almost immediately started talking about their morning, holiday and their relation to the city etc. The more reluctant ones needed more specific questions that lead to concrete answers before they felt like participating.

But when this obstacle was overcome the answers were quite deep. The passionate theatregoers were more than willing to share their thought. Thus Nina Gram concludes:

From the few passionate theatregoers I spoke to, there was a huge inclination and pleasure in talking about their experiences. Those who seldom make use of cultural offers would at times have quite the opposite reaction to the same topics. Thus, I conclude that in our database there exist a large group of people who could be interested in letting us know what they experience on the stages and what make them come back again and again.

To give a quick and cost-low insight to the audience in order to make a larger research design this method is valuable.

### **Future work**

The answers from the interviews raised a couple of questions that we are going to address in the next audience research set-ups. As earlier mentioned the interviews can only be seen as a snapshot taken during the summer in Copenhagen. Nevertheless it has given important clues where to start our further investigations on the audience at The Royal Danish Theatre. Some of the themes that we might elaborate on are:

- Methods of capturing audience and visitor response. E.g. does it matter if we are inside or far away from the theatre when we conduct a research interview?
- The reputation of The Royal Danish Theatre – how can we eliminate or draw advantage of the gap between the perception of The Royal Danish Theatre as a brand and the actual activities?
- Verbalization of the art experience. How do we qualify the conversations about the experience with performing arts?
- Exploring a ritual understanding of the theatre experience not only from the ticket purchasing process to the conversation in the bar after the performance but also including the consideration phase.
- Engagement and loyalty. A continuation of the existing work at The Royal Danish Theatre.
- Investigating the attraction of the theatre – not only the performances but also the attraction of being associated with The Royal Danish Theatre as a destination.

