

Capturing the Audience Response – Walking, Talking and Drawing the Experienced Relevance of Performing Arts

- A report based on audience interviews after Beckett's play "All That Falls" staged at Takkelloftet, The Opera, Copenhagen, August 2015



Photo: Nina Gram. Audiences sitting at a spot close to The Opera (Hal C) drawing their expectations to the play and their experience with it.



Does it matter if we are inside or far away from the theatre institution when we conduct audience research interviews? This is a report on an experiment working with the framing of the focus group interview. It is our impression and experience that audiences often tend to want to give a good answer. They might have the notion that the theatre institution is seeking a specific answer from them, and that there is a correct answer to a very personal and complicated question. Is it possible to collect a different sort of answer if we change the setting? What happens if we replace the large group discussion with elements such as one-to-one dialogue, group discussions and space for individual reflections that are drawn on paper instead of spoken?

Focus groups are used to gain knowledge about how something is perceived or to reveal patterns of behavior. The group is often chosen to reflect a certain segment of the audience or society. At The Royal Danish Theatre this method has been used previously to adjust the communication strategy to specific target groups and discuss their needs and expectations when they engage with performing arts and especially with The Royal Danish Theatre. Typically, this entails a group interview held at the theatre. But does the framing of the interview affect the responses? As discussed in report #1 [From Visitor to Audience](#), reflecting on the short open interviews outside The Royal Danish Playhouse, an informal tone and setting seemed to help make the interviewees feel comfortable, and led them to reflect on their experiences with the theatre and give more spontaneous and thus less "correct" answers. In this study A Suitcase of Methods is testing a new framing of the focus group interview to gain knowledge about what function the performing arts fulfill in the everyday life of the audiences.

The research design and the execution is a collaboration between the team behind A Suitcase of Methods represented by Nina Gram, PhD, Christina Østerby, Director of Strategic Analytics and Business development at The Royal Danish Theatre and Marie Markvad, MA in Dramaturgy and extern partner Thomas Rosenberg, MA in psychology/Cubion. Anna Lawaetz, PhD, has written the final report. Martin Havn, M.Sc., has been proofreading.

Research set up

The experiment was conducted the 28th and 29th of August 2015 with 17 paying members of the audience (8 and 9 pr. night) who went to see the absurd theatre play by Beckett "All That Falls" at Takkelloftet, an intimate stage at The Opera. The research set up differed as the performance Friday was playing at 8 pm whereas the performance Saturday started at 5 pm. The interviews were conducted immediately after the play and lasted approximately 3 hours.

Participants were selected from the theatre's customer database. The aim was to get a group with a large demographic span. The type of ticket purchased was also taken into account. We did not only want theatregoers with subscription/"theatre cards", expected to have a high frequency of visits, but also those who



bought a regular ticket or a ticket with youth discount, and thus might have a more loose affiliation with the Royal Danish Theatre.

After a couple of phone calls to potential participants, the approach to the customers was changed. It seemed to confuse customers to be phoned by a representative from The Royal Danish Theatre in their daily activities on their cell phones. So instead the prospective interviewees were contacted through email, which had an immediate and very positive effect. To control the composition of the group, only a few potential participants were contacted at a time. Some would ask to bring friends and relatives that was a part of the audience as well. Unfortunately none of the youth-ticket buyers were able to attend the interview and the composition of the group differed the two days. On Friday, the group was based mainly on an elderly audience, whereas we had a more even age distribution on Saturday.

In the email the participants were asked to spend 2 ½- 3 hours after the play in company with staff from The Royal Danish Theatre and offered a voucher code as compensation for the use of their time to be used at one of the venues at The Royal Danish Theatre (The Royal Danish Theatre consists of 3 venues, 7 stages and 4 art forms). The participants were advised to wear cloths and shoes suitable for a walk. Furthermore they got a detailed description of the route. The group was offered food and beverages during the research set-up.

Method

The research set up was a combination of a range of different methods that all were executed outside the theatre institution 1) an interview/conversation between two persons while walking, 2) drawing the expectations and the actual art experience and 3) group conversations in different non-theatrical spaces. The methodological foundation thus stems from a wide range of fields.

The walk and talk as a knowledge expanding space has during the last 15 years gained a new role in management and therapeutic circles. External consultant Thomas Rosenberg has been working intensively with this approach and named the method "Camino" after the pilgrimage routes where one walks to get new insight. To be moving in a repetitive way and not facing each other can create a conversation where silence is present as a mode for reflection. This method seemed interesting; to get more reflected answers that were not necessarily "correct".

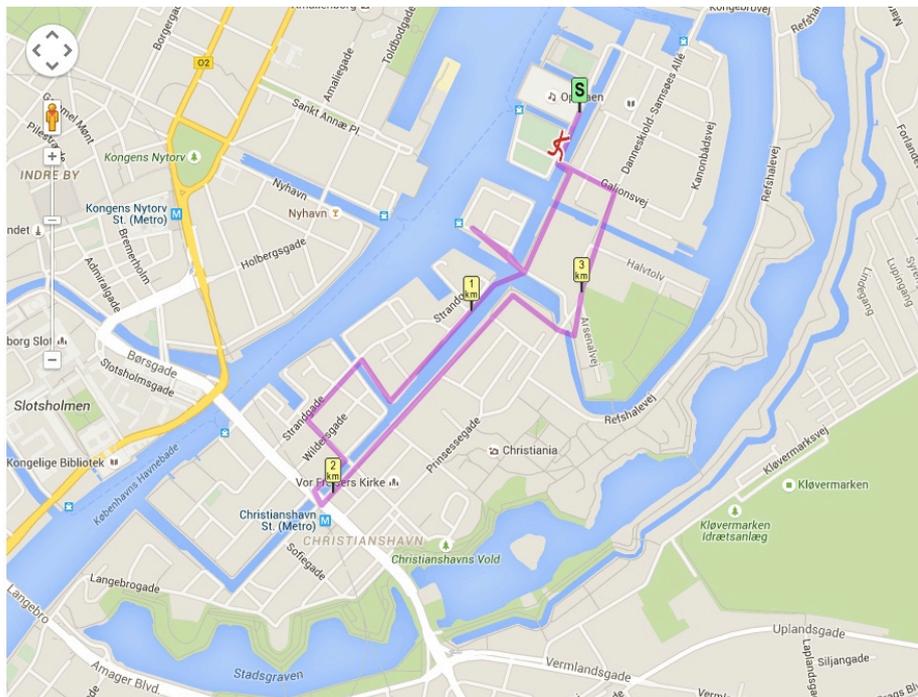
It is a challenge to verbalize the art experience because one mainly is restricted to use the language of something already known. In phenomenology the sensed and the perceived is seen as two different layers. We sense all the time but we only perceive what we recognize or have a language for. Facing the performing arts we might face an "other world", with a large complexity in the sensual stimuli. As mentioned in report #1, it is challenging to transform this encounter into language. To get inspiration for a different approach that acknowledges the difficulty of articulating the art experience, professor in Theatre and Performance at York



University Matthew Reasons methodological work was introduced. He proposes drawing on paper as a starting point for a conversation about the theatre or dance experience. He has conducted experiments with a wide range of audiences from children to grown-ups. Even though adults often are a bit shy about their lacking drawing skills it creates a new outlet for articulating the art experience. Since we wanted to be able to talk with the audience about their expectations of the play and their actual experience, we used the drawing method as a tool to start a mode of reflection and an outset for further conversation.

To maintain a group discussion, still the core of a traditional focus group interview, we introduced a third element: Group discussions in non-theatrical spaces/spaces that was not connected with The Royal Danish Theatre. From the start, the venues were chosen with quite different connotations: "Papirøen", a lively and young eating area hipsters are frequenting and "Our Saviour's Church", a large baroque church build in the 1680s by King Christian V. The ambience of the church is sacral and pompous. Would the informal space evoke different thoughts than the very formal?

The plan of the route was: To walk 20 minutes in conversation with one partner (a representative from The Royal Danish Theatre or another member of the audience) – to draw the experience at Papirøen and discuss the drawings in group – to walk 20 minutes with a new partner – to have a group discussion in the church and visit the tower in the church – and to walk 20 minutes with a new partner. The total walking distance was 3,5 kilometers. The walk was intended to start and end at The Opera. Each walking distance had a theme and a group activity was carried out at the stops.



The original plan for the walk received by all participants. The main part of the walk was along the old canals of Copenhagen.



Basically all interviews and group discussion were conducted according to the principles of "humble inquiry" introduced by psychologist Edgar Schein, which in brief entail sincere curiosity, open questioning and focused listening. The goal was to gather knowledge and avoid steering the conversation in certain directions. External consultant Thomas Rosenberg facilitated the themes for conversations and group discussion.

None of the conversations were recorded. Instead the four members of the research project wrote down their experiences and thoughts just after the execution. The members were encouraged not to share their experience before all four had handed in a written summary. Naturally some things might be forgotten or overseen in this process – but on the other hand only what seemed remarkable was memorized. The lack of an audio recorder might have helped the interviewer in gaining a more intimate relation. For less historically loaded institutions the entrance to a less formal form might be easier to achieve and different tools to capture the knowledge might be of use.

Adjustments

Although the aim was to conduct the interviews in a consistent manner, the execution of the set up differed. This was mainly due to the different time of day (sunset at 8 pm), an unexpected concert at Papirøen and some of the elderly ladies' overestimation of their walking capability. The concert at Papirøen made it difficult to hear and talk to each other, so a quiet place nearby was used the second day (see photo). The ambience was quiet and poetic and therefore the contrast to the church space was less striking. Instead of ending the walk at the Opera, the formal end became at the metro station.

Summary of the conversations

Among the interviewed, the performing arts as an art form mainly had two functions: 1) a ritual framing for maintenance of social/family relations. 2) To expand the everyday life through emotional engagement with a live art form.

Maintenance of relation

To most of the participants in this study frequenting The Royal Danish Theatre is a tradition, a ritual with specific social functions. The two main functions are 1) maintaining relations across geographical or social distances/a frame for social life 2) overcome a life-changing incident by a strongly framed activity.

In the first category it is possible to separate the active ticket buyer from the passive, who has been invited. But in both cases going to the theatre is a way to maintain relations and frame social life. The intimate walking sessions revealed the personal motivation for going to the theatre. In order to get some images of what is at stake three personal stories are represented here.



A regular woman in the 60s, living in a town in Jutland more than 260 kilometers from Copenhagen would regularly take a 3 hours journey with the train to be together with her son and son-in-law. Together they would go to a play at The Royal Danish Theatre. The theatre experience served mainly as a frame to maintain a close connection to her relatives: Doing it together and being able to talk about it afterwards was beneficent to her. In this case visiting theatre served as a ritualistic frame for maintaining a relation to her relatives and gave a collective experience that would strengthen their relationship. By doing it together, they stayed close, even though their lives and values differed a lot.

Two examples of the use of the theatre as a frame for overcoming a crisis in life is the story of a father and his daughter and a mid-aged couple.

An elderly lady described how she and her father started frequenting The Royal Danish Theatre once a month when she was only 16, just after the death of her mother. It was a part of a healing process. Being together in a framed, intellectual and emotional experience on a regular basis was beneficent to maintaining the relation between father and daughter. She is still frequenting The Royal Danish Theatre on a regular basis but now with her husband instead of her father.

A less dramatic example of the use of the performing arts to overcome a life-changing incident is the story of a mid-aged couple. They started frequenting The Royal Danish Theatre when their children grew up and left home. Seeing a play or listening to an Opera is a way to find new common ground.

The strong ritualistic feeling associated with going to the theatre or performing arts is maybe amplified because The Royal Danish Theatre according to the Gallup Survey from 2012 are associated not only with quality but also as the keeper of cultural heritage. The understanding of the theatre experience as a ritual to the theatregoer is an interesting starting point for further enquiry.

The expansion of everyday life

Another tendency in the responses was to use the theatre experience or the experience with performing arts as an expansion of everyday life. One framed it as a way to connect to the inner life of emotion, in an environment where you are not interrupted by everyday life. This way of perceiving the art inscribe itself to the argument of art as a Dionysian place with the potential of catharsis – the purifying emotional state.

A lady in her 40s, who would regularly bring all her three sons (9, 13, 15 years old) along with her husband to The Royal Danish Theatres, and frequent all the four art forms, described how she and her husband consciously exposed their children to new perceptions of the world through the performing arts. They would prepare their children before going and spend time afterwards for discussion about how this expanded their everyday life.



To use the potential of the performing arts as a strategic life-expanding element in raising the children is interesting. How come they used it in this way? The woman told about her meeting with the performing arts in her youth. After high school she went to London working as an usher at The National Theatre. This was a period – leaving the nest – where she was formed as a person and took her first conscious choices as a grown up. The experience with the performing arts as a proactive choice at that age marked her for life. And she decided to pass this on to her children. This brings us back to the theme of ritual and relation. According to a recent study among theatres in Copenhagen (2015) most people who regularly engage with performing arts have had a relative who introduced them to the art forms as children. This is an interesting perspective on cultural habits and influence.

The art experience

As mentioned in the methodological part, drawing was used to capture and express the art experience. Just 20 minutes after leaving the performance participants were asked to draw their expectations to the performance and their actual experience. Afterwards, the drawings were used as starting point for a group conversation. Only one participant denied to draw because of lack of confidence in her art skills and wrote keywords instead. There was a remarkable difference between the expectations, that often would be drawn vague, and the experienced performance, that would be drawn much more detailed. Through the drawings it became possible afterwards in the 1:1 conversations to talk about how participants personally related to the themes in the play (loneliness, marriage, growing old ect.). These conversations were quite contemplative and interesting. One lady chose to draw a zero, when she was asked to draw herself as a cultural consumer. She understood herself as uneducated in culture, although the conversation showed something else. This was a tendency among the participants who did not buy the tickets themselves, even though they routinely consumed a wide range of cultural offers. The social hierarchy between the active ticket buyer and the "follower" would mostly be that the active ticket buyer was looked upon as more culturally savvy, even if they both are consuming art. This is interesting – the two groups might have to be addressed quite differently to change the feeling of being culturally illiterate.

The ability to hear

There is a long tradition for complaining about the actors' lack of articulation/ the inability to hear what is said on stage. According to a recent survey 85% of the responding theatregoers in Copenhagen mentioned acoustics as the most important feature "around" the performance to ensure a good experience. The ability to hear seems to be highly important to the audiences, no wonder – and even more important than the seating. But what does it mean to hear? From the extensive conversations in the informal setting in this study it became clear that complaining about not hearing is not necessarily an acoustic challenge. A lady would – in fragments – tell that she was unable to hear the actors. Beckett is challenging and "All That Falls" was originally a radio play so it is word loaded. But later she would tell that her life was a mess right now and going to the theatre that day



was a little bit too much. Finally she would describe how she felt a bit insecure in the theatre. She was not used to be there and didn't feel sure of the social codes of conduct. This gives a deeper insight into what might have triggered the impression of not being able to hear. This is a path that we are planning to follow in collaboration with sound designers and acoustic engineers in a later study.

The Reputation of The Royal Danish Theatre

In the previous report we raised the question: 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? Several of the participants thought that we ought to have more for the youth and develop new formats – activities that we already have now. The advice was based either on their own experience with The Royal Danish Theatre in their youth or just as general good advice. Even the frequent theatre goers were not aware of the actual activities such as KGL+ – and even this group found it very hard to articulate their actual experience with performing art. Instead they would propose outreach activities. This need of being in a logic and concrete discourse instead of an emotional perceptive discourse is very interesting. This does not answer the question of how to eliminate this gap, but underlines that there is something to elaborate on in the future.

Revising the method

Did the framing affect the answers? The large amount of methods tested in this study might have been too many to properly evaluate the effect of them. And most important: We have not tested the same questions in an ordinary focus group. But as Christina Østerby, who is experienced in drawing focus group interviews, state:

By walking and talking in pairs we avoided group dynamics where one overrules the rest of the group with his or her opinion on the play or the world.

During the walks it became possible to achieve deep and personal conversations with the audiences at a level that is not possible in a group. On the other hand the alternation with the group discussions functioned as a kind of inspiration for the walk-and talk sessions. During the walks we experienced that the participants were not as conscious of "right" and "wrong" answers. Silence was somehow legitimate and more time was spent on reflection. Also the drawings were useful to start a conversation about something complex.

We would often get information that an interview guide or a regular group interview wouldn't grasp. The lack of structure makes it more difficult to compare the answers, but on the other hand it gave new insight to the theatre experience understood as a ritual to maintain social relations and the complexity that might lay behind claiming that it is impossible to hear the actor. The overall impression is that it was fruitful to bring the focus group interview out of the venue.



Some individuals in the research group experienced the set up as an ethical balance act because some of the audiences, due to the setting, would give very private answers that they would never tell in a group. What can you do when you as an interviewer, in the name of openness, experience that your boundaries are overstepped? Others experienced that they had to explain a lot about the aim of the research project "A Suitcase of Methods" which affected the responses. As Nina Gram states:

I found it necessary to give them quite a bit of information about the project to make them feel comfortable. The fact that I had to explain so much about my role and the entire research project made people go "meta" in their responses. Instead of talking about themselves they became helpful consultants. And this was certainly not the aim.

But other of the researchers created a non-linguistic confidence that was not questioned and did not have to tell more than their first name. This calls for a critical revision the role of the interviewer.

The walk as framing for reaggregation

Several of the participants mentioned that the thematic walk with strangers not only was nice but expanded the total experience of the play and added a new layer. Many repeated that they would enjoy taking this kind of walk after a play in general. The British anthropologist Victor Turner's expanding of ethnographer Arnold van Gennep's threefold structure of rites of passage can be of use frame what function such a conversation could add. If the theatre-experience is seen as a ritual it is divided into three phases: The *preliminal phase* where you are preparing yourself to go to the theatre (separation), the *liminoid phase*, where you are experience the play – a transitional experience that might add something new to your everyday life. After the play you are in the *postliminal phase* where you are reintegrated in society or your everyday life. Turner broadens the perception of the rite by adding performing arts into the field. He is replacing the original named liminal phase with the name liminoid. His point is that the way to reggregate into society again is different than the rite of passage of young Native Americans in the past. Nevertheless, ritualized behavior is often used to cool down after a play such as post-performance suppers. By offering the possibility of a framed talk with a stranger, who does not belong to the same social everyday life, you get the possibility to reorganize the experience in a "safe" place where you are not framed socially as usually are. Therefor it might be of great value to the entire theatre experience to explore the path of a "post liminal walk" a bit further¹.

Since we experience the reframing of the focus group interview very fruit full the next research set up in A Suitcase of Methods are going to work more in depth with the framing and the consequences of the answers.

¹ The two Danish Researchers Louise Ejgod Hansen (AAU) and Anja Møller Lendeloff (RUC) has been working with audience conversations in a different form as a successful part of out-reach activities/audience development.

