Location and conversation

A report based on audience interviews after Carl Maria von Webers “Der Freischütz”, staged at the Royal Danish Opera, Copenhagen, November 2015

Summary:
This is a study about how the location affects the conversation when the audience articulates their impression of the art experience. After the romantic opera Der Freischütz at the opera house in Copenhagen, we used three focus group interviews and tested three different settings: the meeting room, the auditorium and a walk outside the venue. There seems to be a connection between the setting and the topics of conversation.

By Anna Lawaetz, PhD

What is the ideal space for audience conversations after a performance if you want to know something about how your audience experiences the relevance of performing arts? This is a report on an experimental study about how the space affects the conversation among audience members after a performance, or how the setting can emphasize certain elements. The aim was to find the optimal space for an audience conversation, where it can run freely, and the audience member feels that he/she doesn’t have to give right answers, but is able to reflect upon what he/she actually...
experienced or did not understand. What happens to the conversation if we sit around an ordinary meeting table, if we walk and talk outside the art institution or if we return to the physical position where we had the original art experience?

**Research set up:**

**Purpose:**
To study how does the space affects the conversation when articulating the experience of performing arts.

**Performance:**
Carl Maria von Weber *Der Freischütz*, staged at The Royal Danish Opera, Copenhagen by Kasper Holten.

**Settings:**
- Outside the venue (walking, café).
- Meeting room at the venue.
- Auditorium (where one had the art experience).

**Basic structure:**
Alternation of talk in pairs, with strangers and group talks.

**Questions:**
- Describe your experience today?
- Name your first experience with performing arts?
- What is your relation to the Royal Danish Theatre and what is your perception of the Royal Danish Theatre?

**Sub-questions:**
- What is your motivation for going to this actual production?
- Do you go to other kinds of performing arts?
- How do you prepare before the visit?

**Time frame:**
- Sundays in November at 5.30 p.m., duration 2-2 ½ hours.

**Groups:**
- 3 groups of 7-10 audience members found through our ticket database.
- groups with a combination of ticket-buyers and those who are accompany them, with different ticket categories (inexperienced and habitual participants).
- groups ages 13-82.
- with people from Copenhagen and suburbs.
- with those who bought the tickets 17 days before the premiere.

**Rewards:**
All participants received a voucher code to the Royal Danish Theatre.

**Documentation:**
Audio recordings and photos.

It is rather easy to establish a close connection to the interviewee in a one-on-one relation. It is less time consuming for a theatre to set up a focus group, and since *A Suitcase of Methods* is aiming to find tools that can be employed by small theatre companies, too, we choose to work with the focus group. It might be challenging to talk about a personal art experience in a group, and therefore we have combined the group conversation with conversations in pairs. The report is divided into two parts: the main investigation of the setting, and a sub-investigation of how the experience of a live film-transmission of the same production is articulated by the audience.

The first question was intended to be very open in order to gain knowledge about what the interviewees instinctively would choose to tell. The presentation of themselves through their theatre habits was deliberately put late in the conversation, in order to let the experience come before the mechanics of group dynamics intervene.
Theory
The theatre experience can be divided into three phases: before - during – after. In the last report, ritual theory was brought into the analysis. This time, we are tapping into the theoretical framework created by three Swedish scholars; Willmar Sauter, Curt Isaksson and Lisbeth Jansson as a part of their large-scale study of what the theatre audience in Stockholm experience in the 1980ies. Here they introduce an analytical framework that divides the topic of conversations about the experience into formation and fiction, in order to compare different open conversations after a performance. Formation is understood as how something is presented (physical level), whereas the fiction is what the scenic world is representing (interpretative level). In this study the perception of the entire institution is also added as a layer as well as background information about the first visit to the Royal Danish Theatre.

Willmar Sauter’s study of Swedish Audiences
In Teaterögon - Publikens möter föreställningen upplevelse-utbud-vanor (1986), the researchers followed 25 groups. In total they analysed experiences of 180 participants with six performances during the winter 1983, and developed the concept Theatre talk. The aim was to acquire knowledge about who experienced what. Part of the theoretical framework brought references to the sociologists Pierre Bourdieu and Jürgen Habermas into the field of theatre studies. Pierre Bourdieu replaces the concept of economic capital with that of cultural, social and symbolic capital. Jürgen Habermas is especially known for introducing the idea of the private and the public sphere. Each of the 25 groups had an observer who would be present at the Theatre talk held at one of the participant’s home just after the performance. The observer would fill out forms for each participant but otherwise be as transparent as possible. Through this open approach, the researchers could acquire knowledge about how audiences are articulating, negotiating and sharing experiences together after a performance. In order to be able to compare the results concerning different groups’ perceptions of different productions and different articulations of the experience in the auditorium, the content was separated into three categories: formation, fiction and interpretation. In a later study by Willmar Sauter, Braaavo! En studie över publikens på Operan i Stockholm (1987), only formation and fiction was kept.

Although our aim was to let the participants articulate their experience freely, we had a moderator running the focus groups, to be able to apply the theoretical framework to the material gathered.

Der Freischütz
Der Freischütz (1821) is a romantic opera by Carl Maria von Weber in three acts, originally with spoken dialogue. It is the story of the young man Max, who gets tempted by the devil during his chase after his beloved Agathe. In order to get married to Agathe, he has to prove his skill in marksmanship. Unfortunately, he does not have luck in the shooting contests. Therefore it is easy for the former soldier and outcast, Caspar, to convince Max that he just needs seven magic bullets that kill everything
the shooter wants. But one of the bullets belongs to the devil, materialised in the Samiel-figure. During the shooting contest, Max unfortunately shoots Agathe, but the magic of the Hermit, Samiel’s counterpoint, saves her life and secures the love between the lovers. Caspar and Evil have lost. The Hermit asks the Prince who has arrived to forgive Max, which he does.

The Staging
In the staging of Der Freischütz by Kasper Holten anno 2015, the symbolic good and evil figures, Samiel and the Hermit, were transformed into one figure, as a compilation. Large parts of the original dialogue were taken out. The visuals were very dominant, putting the somehow historical costumes and props into an abstract Meyerhold-like setting.

A metaphorical aesthetic space
The first audience conversation was held just two days after the terrorist attack in Paris, November 2015. We were sure that the large map that became blood stained during the overture, and the gun toting in the Wolf Glen, would make the audience reflect on the attack in Paris even though the costumes were historical. But we were wrong. None of the focus group participants linked their everyday life with that of the scenic world during our focus group conversations. Instead there was a general longing for being emotionally immered and aesthetically overwhelmed. A young girl explained that she went to opera in general and to all the performances of SIGNA, an avant-garde group working with large scale immersive theatre installations. Opera and SIGNA might, to some, be seen as a contradiction, but she found that in both universes, an otherworldliness, an aesthetic overwhelming experience, would immerse her. The audience we talked with - as we described earlier, very diverse - was seeking a metaphorical escape from everyday life rather than a mirror of it.

The music was, to most of the audiences, the key argument for choosing to see an opera. As a man in his 60s told me in the foyer:

We just went to see a production of Faustus abroad. They used a golf club to kill with. Very modern. We see a lot of operas, but the main thing for us is the music. We cope with whatever the mis-en-scene is (M1 29112015).

Putting the music in the center of the experience is not new. In Willmar Sauter’s large work from 1987, he found the music to be key to the opera audience, too. Now his study was occupied with what the audience talked freely about afterwards, whereas we asked directly what had tempted them to purchase a ticket to this production. Nevertheless the audience in general found it hard to express the experience with the music. As a lady in her 70s said:

Well, when we did not discuss the music, it was because we found it just beautiful. The music always is key to me (K1 22112015).

Sauter’s study of the audience’s ranking elements of performance significant to the opera experience:
Music
Musical interpretation
Interpretation on stage
What was not on Sauter’s list, is the venue and the auditorium. In the present study, those elements seemed to be quite important to the audience when choosing and describing a performance (as will be described later in this report). The experience in the auditorium was a part of a larger experience for the audience.

Apart from the composer, the stage director in the case of Die Freischütz was important: Kasper Holten. There was an awareness of Holten especially during the conversation in the auditorium. As one articulated:

*I am sure that Kasper Holten would love to hear this conversation. Imagine what he would think if he were standing behind the curtain listening* (K3 29112015).

Kasper Holten was the artistic director of The Royal Danish Opera from 2000 to 2011. Many of the audiences follow his work. He managed during his period not only to stage Der Ring des Nibelungen with international success, but also to make opera as such accessible in the public opinion. The opening of a new venue, The Opera, might also have helped to give the dynamic young director Kasper Holten a particular status in public life in Denmark.

For the inexperienced opera-goers in this study, the status of the piece would matter as well; an opera that is perceived as a classic is preferred. The fact that something is recognised – the music or just the title – makes it more attractive for the inexperienced who are trying to get an overview of an art form. This is also the conclusion of Sauter’s study from 1987.

**Articulating the art experience**

If we go back to the methodological point of departure – to explore the relation between the setting of the focus group interview and the articulation of the art experience - we actually found something interesting.

In the first set-up we went outside the venue walking and talking in pairs and later sharing experiences in the group. During the walk there would be time for longer personal stories. It was legitimate to have quiet moments of reflection where the movement of the body would secure that no one felt awkward. For some of the participants it became a space for negotiating what they would later on tell everybody – long personal stories about their experiences with opera as such. The opening question did mainly evoke conversations linked to the *formation* of the production, primarily the scenography and
video projections. The dancing birds were also mentioned. But quickly the conversation would slide into a more general talk about the interviewee’s relation to opera and performing arts in general. Some would even generously share tips and tricks to get tickets to both national and international venues. When it came to explaining the relationship to The Royal Danish Theatre, the conversations would mainly consist of glimpses from experiences he/she had watching productions.

The last focus group took place in the auditorium at the venue. The aim was to make a re-embodiment of the experience. This was inspired by Uwe Gröschel’s article *Reseaching Audiences through Walking Fieldwork* (2015), where he uses re-embodiment as a method for re-experiencing and articulating a performance installation in a gallery. In the case of Gröschel, the audience did move around during the performance and the re-embodiment would help memory. In an auditorium the body is fixed in a chair. The question was therefore whether this method was suitable. When the focus group re-entered the auditorium, the festive ambience of applause was gone. Instead, they experienced a silent huge space where the safety curtain was down. Somehow it was like walking into a church (as described in report #2). There was an amplified presence among the audiences in the room; we were entering a ritual space. Even though we had the same amount of time as in the meeting room, the conversations in pairs were more personal. For this group, the story and ethical dilemmas of Max became the core of discussion; the fiction. By being in the room facing the stage, it became unnecessary to focus on the visual elements, maybe because they were already there (hidden behind a safety curtain). Furthermore the group discussion became more and more lively. Somehow the space intensified the feeling of being together. When it came to discussing the relationship to The Royal Theatre, architecture was taken as a departure for a discussion about the entire experience and the brand.
There seems to be a relation between the space and the articulation of the art experience.

Tool box:
- If you want to know something about the audience’s personal experience with performing arts, the walk-and-talk set-up might be good.
- If you want to know how something visually is perceived, and hear about opinions about concrete elements along with the brand and the experience of the entire evening, the classic focus group set up around a table is good.
- If you want to know how the performance is interpreted by the audience, the re-embodiment in the auditorium might be useful.

The extraordinary
I remember once, I had dressed up to go to The Royal Danish Opera. I was ready and just wanted to check if I had the tickets. Then I realised that the show was yesterday. I was so disappointed. I had prepared myself throughout the entire day (K3 29112015).

Preparation is important to most people, either by listening to the music before or by dressing up. Actually, dressing up was such an important element that some suggested that the Opera start to have regular days where men would wear suits and women wear long dresses. The group got carried away with the idea until one stated that to her, it was more important that people came and experienced the opera than that they had to dress in a certain way. Immediately all the others changed their attitude and agreed that it was important that the opera was inclusive. This was a clash between two different discourses – the one aiming for the extraordinary, the other making it accessible for everybody. The suggestion of making special dressing days was not meant as an attempt to exclude, but a longing for beauty and the extraordinary.

When I come to the Opera (venue red), it is like leaving everyday life. Everything is just so beautiful, and you are literally on an island looking at the town on the other side of the harbour (K2 29112015).

Audience conversation in the auditorium. Photo: Diana Lindhardt

In another group, an elderly man told us that to him the opera experience became sublime when something unexpected happened like a royal visit. When he travelled away to go to the opera, the setting of the hotel and the food would matter, too. To him the opera production then would be a part of a larger experience, an entire evening.
What are we bringing into the field?
In the beginning of this study we had a somehow naïve idea that performing arts across art forms had a lot in common. Nevertheless, we had to face the fact that the articulation of the art experience for opera goers to a romantic opera was very different from what we heard from the theatre goers who went to see Beckett’s absurd theatre play, *All that falls*. And this was not only something to do with the setting. The audiences are seeing something else when going to an opera. It is not about the here and now, but about an aesthetic escape, that permits grand emotions through a non-realistic form. Singing is very different from everyday conversation. We can also add that the setting of the focus group interview changes how we talk about the experience. In Sauters’s study from 1987, he revealed that unexperienced opera goers would tend to talk about the *fiction*, whereas the experienced would talk about the *formation*. In this study, we found that the setting changed the way different sorts of audiences (experienced and non-experienced) talk about their experience.

Appendix – the experience with a live transmission of *Der Freischütz* in a cinema

This is a spontaneous reaction from a female audience member who went to the live transmission of *Der Freischütz* in the Svendborg movie theatre. The performance was transmitted to about 46 cinemas in the entire country and Greenland. The Royal Danish Theatre had its first live transmission to cinemas in 2014. How was the experience of *Der Freischütz* in the cinema?

Entering the foyer, one was served sparkling wine, poured into the glasses by the organizer in the cinema. The door to the heart of the cinema was open, transmitting the actual moving pictures and sounds of the guests at the Opera in Copenhagen. The local coordinator of the opera transmission in Svendborg, Finn Dyre, explains:

*Even though it is not sold out, we prefer the large auditorium because it emphasises the grandeur of the experience.*

Approaching the starting time the camera followed the audience into the auditorium. The man backstage who rings the warning bell was shown on the screen (hidden from the audience at the venue). The light in the cinema was turned down, and the production opened with a view of the orchestra and the conductor facing the cinema-audience. Compared to the experience at the venue in Copenhagen, the spectators in the cinema would get close-ups of the singers, a view of the orchestra from the stage angel, but less full-screen pictures of the scenography. Furthermore, they would get a technologically transmitted sound (instead of an acoustic one), which the audio system in

It was like sitting in the first row! Even better. Not only did we see the singers close-up, we also saw the orchestra from an entire new perspective that we never would have experienced at the Opera (venue red.).
the cinema amplified astonishing well. During the transmission, the signal of the satellite went down. And the crew of the cinema quickly transformed the waiting time to a pause-like break by serving coffee. The organisers were following a technical blog, so they could inform the audience about the technical details. The uncertainty of when the signal would get through made some of the audience members leave the cinema, whereas those who stayed found that the entire art experience outshined the technical troubles.

I knew that if I didn’t stay I would not have the opportunity to see it again. This was it. And it was worthy the waiting time. I feel sorry for those who left just before the signal came back.

In this explanation, the “moment” or the “live-ness” was emphasised in the experience (technically when the signal came back, it was no longer a live transmission but a taped version of the performance that was still on). The live-ness but also the local-ness seemed to be quite important to the experience as such. As one lady states:

You can only choose one date. You really have to wish that it fits into your plans because you don’t want to miss it (the live-transmission red).

This aspect seems to emphasise the “here and now” element. The organizer from the cinema explained how he is trying to make the rest of the plans in the cinema fit into the live-transmissions. Therefor it is important for him to know quite in advance when something is going to be transmitted. In the local milieu, the transmission from the Royal Danish Theatre as such is quite an event.

Audience conversation after the live transmission of the opera to a cinema. Photo: Diana Lindhardt

The set-up

Only three spectators were interviewed in this study. This number is quite different from the focus group interview described above, and the results are therefor only indications that can be elaborated on in a later study. Due to logistical reasons, those interviewed were chosen in the foyer just before entering the live-transmission. The duration of the interviews after the transmission was limited by the fact that the performance ended at 11.30 pm. Therefor the interviews only lasted ½ an hour. The questions asked were the same as in the focus group interview:

The mediated control of the eye

Compared to the previous study of the audiences who went to see Der Freischütz, there was an immediate interpretation of the play and of its relevance today. One of the audience members did associate the wounded soldiers marching on the front scene during the overture to the present flow of refugees in Europe, political turbulence in general, Putin and the airplane that was shot down by Turkey
the day before the transmission. She and her companion found that Der Freischütz in the staging of Kasper Holten was about giving people one more chance. If we use Sauter’s terms, they were mainly occupied with the fictional level – what the staging was about. But also formation elements were important to them: The singer’s interpretation of the role and the anxiety produced by the use of real fire on stage (a candle). They also commented on the make-up that was not intended to be seen from a close-up perspective (the use of wigs, silicone wounds and fake blood).

Compared to the experience at the venue, the mediation created a clearly interpretative approach to the entire play that we did not find in audiences of the live transmission. It was as if the transmission through a screen created a different analytic view of the entire production. Compared to the situation at the Opera in Copenhagen, the camera would choose what to focus on, making it much easier to extract the sense, whereas the spectator in the auditorium in Copenhagen would have to choose the direction of his/her eyes at the risk of missing something.

In a study of galvanic skin response (GSR) in audiences from the article Love, Hate, Arousal and Engagement: Exploring Audience Responses to Performing Arts, the audiences are presented a video of a dance performance in order to measure the audience engagement through their emotional response. GSR is a common biometric technique that measures conductivity of sweat on the skin, secreted in response to autonomic nervous system arousal. It is a very interesting article, but when facing the question of liveness vs. mediation, the conclusion is, that the live experience amplifies the physical response. Our study is a study of the reflections after the experience, and is of course based on a very limited amount of data. Nevertheless, it indicates that a mediated performance arouses different mental processes than the live experience. Therefore we suggest that if you want your audience to reflect upon the relevance of the play, you might choose to show a taped version of the production.

The research design and its execution are the result of a collaboration between Christina Østerby, Director of Strategic Analysis and Business Development at The Royal Danish Theatre, Martin Havn, M.Sc and Anna Lawaetz, PhD. Diana Lindhardt has been in charge of visual documentation of the encounters with the audiences. Thanks to our colleagues Mira Bach Hansen for her comments and to Deborah Wood for proofreading.