

Art experience and focus group composition



Femke Mølbach Slot as Kate and Gregory Dean as Hank.

Photo: Costin Rodu

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When talking about art experiences, how does the composition of a focus group affect the topic and mood of the conversation? And more specifically how does an audience verbalize their experience with modern jazz-ballet? These questions have been the starting point for this report. Focus groups are traditionally used to reveal social interactions in a specific group discussing a certain topic. But they might also be used explorative, as is the case in this study, where we are trying to discover the potential of the focus group when it comes to performing arts testing how small adjustments to the set-up affects the generation of data.

The composition of focus groups

The production of meaning is created in everyday life as a part of social experiences (Halkier: 2008:10). A focus group set-up is taking advantage of this by framing a social setting that also creates a possibility for revealing the tacit knowledge that exist in a group. In our case, dealing with the art experience, the focus group becomes a space for conscious reflection about the experience in a social setting. According to professor in entrepreneurship Helle Neergaard, Aarhus University, a very homogeny group makes it possible to see a very strong pattern in the conversation, which makes for an easier interview process and



analysis. Whereas a group with a large variation makes it possible to document and identify patterns across the variation (Neergaard 2003:23).

Now, what is a homogeneity group when it comes to performing arts? We have chosen to let the experience be key in the selection strategy. Through the ticket database of The Royal Danish Theatre, it is possible to track the ticket history of the costumers. In this case, it was interesting to divide the audiences into 'high frequency users' and 'low frequency users' without considering the demographic data i.e. their cultural consumption habits became key when choosing the homogeneity groups. The group based on variety was chosen among the different ticket categories, which in the former focus groups conducted by 'A Suitcase of Methods' has resulted in groups with maximum variation (see report #2, #3 and #4).

Two basic questions were posed during the conversations with the audiences: 'Describe your experience today' and 'name your first memorable experience with performing arts'. The conversation consisted of an alternation of talks in pairs, with strangers, and group talks.

Reservations

Since the screening was based on the ticket-purchaser, the companions were not screened. This might blur the actual results: The companions might be frequenting the theatre more often. Furthermore, we experienced that two experienced group members replaced themselves with their daughter and her friend. In the context it became inappropriate to reject them.

Research set up:

Purpose:

To study how group dynamics, among an experienced and non-experienced dance audience, affect the conversation when articulating the experience of performing arts.

Performance:

'Come Fly Away' by Twyla Tharp with The Royal Danish Ballet. Starring Frank Sinatra. Venue: The Opera House.

Settings for the conversations:

- Auditorium (where the performance took place).
- Foyer (small café tables).

Basic structure:

Alternating talks in pairs, with strangers and group talks.

Questions:

- Describe your experience today.
- Name your first memorable experience with performing arts.

Sub-questions:

- How do you prepare before the visit?
- What are you going to do/did you do after the performance?

Time frame:

- Saturday 24th, 31th of May and 2nd of June from 9.45 pm just after the performance. Duration: 1 hour.

Groups:

- 3 groups of 7-10 audience members found in the CRM database.
- 1) one group consisting of high frequent users of The Royal Danish Theatre (6+ performance per year), 2) one group consisting of low frequent users of The Royal Danish Theatre (1-2 performances during the last 3 years) 3) one group consisting of a combination of ticket-buyers and those who accompanied them, with different ticket categories (inexperienced and habitual participants) .

General:

- Groups ages from c. 20 to c. 80 years old.
- with people from Copenhagen and suburbs.
- with those who bought the tickets at least 7 days before the performance.

Recruitment:

A combination of telephone calls and emails.

Rewards:

All participants received a voucher to The Royal Danish Theatre.

Documentation:

Notes and photos.

The Performance

The performance attended in this study was the jazzy Broadway success 'Come Fly Away' by choreographer Twyla Tharp created as homage to Frank Sinatra. Like a ghost from the past the recorded warm free-flowing voice of Sinatra filled up the auditorium accompanied live by the Chris Minh Doky Orchestra at the stage at The Opera House in Copenhagen.

The scenery is a nightclub but instead of a crooner, the floor is full of dancers from The Royal Danish Ballet embodying Frank Sinatra and characters from his glamorous Hollywood circle. During the evening the skirts of the female dancers become shorter and shorter and suits and shirts are slowly disappearing from the body of the males. We are following the love story of four couples and their struggle with life. All is structured around 32 Sinatra songs containing a number of evergreens such as 'That's life', 'Let's face the music and dance', and 'My way'. The musicians are placed behind the dancers, as a part of the nightclub scenography. Through the music the pulse of the performance is evolving as fragmented images from life.

The performance had two different casts of dancers during the three performances of this study. Whereas the cast the two first times was more jazzy and free-style in their interpretation, the cast of the closing night presented a more 'ballet-like' and ephemera version of the characters although the dance technique is far away from the Bournonville the company is famous for. It is the third season the

performance is on, but this time not presented at the Old Stage but at a different venue of the Royal Danish Theatre; The Opera House. All three performances attended in this study were sold out and many of the audiences frequented the performance for the second or even the third time. The ambience was festive; many were dressed in evening gowns. At the second performance in this study the Royal Family attended the performance.

Spheres of conversations

An act of depicting *unrecognized as such*, immediate and adequate 'comprehension', is possible and effective only in the special case in which the cultural code which makes the act of deciphering possible is immediately and completely mastered by the observer (in the form of cultivated ability or inclination) and merges with the cultural code which has rendered the work perceived possible (Bourdieu 1993:215).

The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu claims in the essay *The Pure Gaze* that there is no perception, which does not involve an unconscious code. Therefore he divides conversations about art into two spheres: The first is the immediate impression from a factual and expressional approach ('I felt sad' or 'the colour is very gay'.) The other sphere is to understand the piece in a context and what it aims to say, the sphere of meaning of the signified or *region du sens du signifié* (Bourdieu 1993:218). The first sphere is available for everybody whereas the last needs knowledge about the field of the specific art form. Now, if we look at the conversations between the homogeneity groups and the variation group, what does perspective from Bourdieu give us?

The inexperienced group

The main part of the inexperienced audience in this study had a tendency to stay in the mood of experience enjoying the easiness of the performance. Nevertheless it is possible to divide their topic of conversation into three subjects; the narrative (was there one?), the 'mistakes' (intended or not?) and the origin of the dancers (did they belong to the corps de ballet?). There was a general longing towards a simple storyline – the montage like composition made it difficult for the group to catch up a meaning except for an elderly man, who had borrowed a program from some friends and prepared himself before entering the new field. Both the confusion about the faux pas of the young dancing-couple and the questioning of the origin of the dancers revealed a clash of codes and a general insecurity in this group about their capability to read the 'codes' of the art piece. The conversation in this group remained in Bourdieu's first sphere. A young couple differed from this tendency by using their own experience as child gymnasts. Based on this background-experience their rhetoric was mainly about like/dislike. This affected in general the group dynamic (deciphering vs. judging).

Although the homogeny group according to the focus group theory (Neergaard 2003:23) should be easier to interview this was not the case.

Compared to the two other groups the inexperienced seemed more vulnerable in their interpretations and it became a discussion of the actual experience and a negotiation of it. This might be the reason why the young

gymnastic couple with their strong opinion of like and dislike affected the other audiences and thereby their understanding of the art piece.

The experienced

The second homogeny group in the experiment consisted of high frequent costumers. There was a tendency of zooming in on details or relating the experience to different contexts. Using Bourdieu's terms of spheres we would enter the sphere of the meaning of the signified, as the group placed the art experience in a context. However, they did not discuss what the piece aimed to say or in other ways interpreted the experience itself.

In this group the bodily appeal of the performance was mentioned with words like 'it was quite risqué' or 'it was quite sexy' or 'sitting in the front row you could really feel the intensity'. The audience group discussed the different positions in the auditorium. They were more aware of their own gaze 'I really care for scenography, light and colours' as one male stated. As was the case with the inexperienced participants, this group discussed, if the faux pas of the young couple was intended, but quickly concluded that it was a charming part of the storyline.

Furthermore, the venue was mentioned as a lovely place to visit. All the participants kept themselves away from the position of like/dislike. Instead they pointed at specific elements and were able to make very detailed explanation of them: 'the relation between the movements and the songs fitted so well – and the hat was even used as wheel'. During the conversations in pairs in the auditorium we

noticed that there was a tendency of placing each other according to other experiences with performing arts by asking politely 'Did you experience this or that performance...'

None of the participants mentioned that the royal family attended this specific performance, which was surprising since everybody had to rise twice during the performance and therefore was bodily engaged in the greeting of The Royal Family. This might be due to the fact, that this group of audience attends performances frequently as well as The Royal Family does.

'I want to be seduced' - variation in the group

The third group consisted of audience from all ticket categories with a large variation in their experience with performing arts. Two young girls had bought tickets for the second ballet of their lives because they recently experienced a male dancer in *Romeo and Juliet* and just wanted to see him again whereas the most experienced in the group were in her 70ies and wanted to experience a specific cast sitting at a specific seat in the auditorium. This group differed radically from the two other groups. The conversation took the actual experience as starting point and developed into a conversation about what made the audience attend the ballet, a discussion about the art form, and the role of art in everyday life. This group actively used the different 'levels' of experience by engaging in an explorative dialogue. If we use Bourdieu's notions this group very quickly went to the sphere of meaning of the signified, although some of the participants through their age and lack of experience with the art form would have been thought of as unable to read the codes. But the play full

dialogue between the participants made it possible to enter a deeper understanding, which added a new dimension to their experience and gave data, not only linked to the actual performance but to the art of dance as a medium. The second group had touched slightly on the bodily appeal of the dancers. But this group really discussed how the dancing bodies were key to the experience. As an elderly woman all of a sudden claimed, with her husband on her side: 'And they have amazing bullocks!'

Another topic that was touched on is the lack of presence in our culture how this experience due to its duration differed from this, and how dance and acting differs or evoke different ways of thinking.

The first time

If we look at the background stories, it is possible to see a difference in how the experience and the unexperienced audience were introduced to the art form. For the unexperienced, their meeting with performing arts has been through the educational system, whereas the experienced have been introduced to the art form either through subscribing to a theatre program in the school (paid by the parents) or through family. Based on the conversations in the mixed group, the most powerful meeting with the art form seems to be in the years when the young adult just have left the nest. If it becomes a choice of constructing oneself in these years the cultural habit seems to be build in to the core of the person.

Why did they come?

The inexperienced group was very clear in their search for entertainments, whereas the experienced group was less clear in their formulation. 'We wanted to see how the performance fitted into the Opera House' as one stated. The mixed group had, apart from the already mentioned longing for seduction and fascination of one of the male dancers, a need for finding new ways to challenge themselves.

Summing up

Although this study is too small to base fundamental conclusions on, there seems to be a clear tendency in the three groups:

In the first group, consisting of an inexperienced audience, the conversation had a tendency to revolve around the immediate impression with the performance and focus on facts. The second group containing experienced users entered the sphere of meaning of the signified although they did not touch on what the ballet aimed to say.

The third group with a large variation entered the sphere of meaning and touched on what the art form evoked in human beings.

Thus, the level of reflection and contextuality increased throughout the three groups.

If we look at the variation vs. the homogeneity in the focus group composition when it comes to exploring the audience experience with performing art, it seems like the variation in the group may stimulate a richer conversation, where the experience and the performance is placed and reflected into a larger context. However, the homogeny group in this case

seemed to have difficulties challenging themselves with the question: What is it all about?

This assumption is backed up by the previous conducted focus groups by 'A Suitcase of Methods', where the groups were based on variation. However, it is important to bare in mind, that the purpose of the focus group is key when designing a focus group in order to generate interesting data. To some it might be interesting to investigate the sphere of facts and immediate expression, and to others it might be interesting to look into the sphere of meaning.

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