

Open rehearsals

How does this open format affect audience's experience and audience conversations?



By A Suitcase of Methods

The applause dies down, the doors to the auditorium open and as you slowly move with the crowd towards your jacket, your companion asks you: So what did you think?

This is a very difficult question to answer for several reasons: One of them being that even though the experience is still fresh in your mind and not yet settled in your body, emotion and memory we instinctively want to give a complete and satisfactory answer. But what happens if the audience instead of experiencing a perfect and flawless show are invited into the workspace of the theatre? If they get to see a work in progress at an open

rehearsal? How may that affect their experience and the following conversation about their experience?

Open rehearsals

Open rehearsals are often used by theatres as a way of 'testing' how different aspects of a production work on an audience. A Suitcase of Methods wants to explore how this imperfect format affects both the audience's experience and the conversation we have with them after the rehearsals. So far, we have tried it on three different productions, *Human Outphasing* (Human afvikling), *With Snow* (Med sne), and *Stellar Family*



(Stjernefamilien) with a somewhat basic research design setup:

Research designs

Productions:

- 1) *Human Outphasing October*, The Royal Playhouse, October 17th 7.30 pm.
- 2) *With Snow*, The Royal Playhouse, October 22th 01:00 pm.
- 3) *Stellar Family*, The Royal Playhouse, December 27th 12:30 p

Research format: The audience is invited for a cup of coffee or a soft drink in the foyer of the Royal Playhouse after rehearsals (and before the rehearsal for Stellar Family). Here they have the opportunity to talk with each other or someone from the theatre about their experience and (in case of Stellar Family) their *expectation* with the rehearsal. We were three or four theatre representatives, who walked around and talked with the audience.

Recruitment: We invited 100 audiences from the Royal Danish Theatre Panel¹ via email. We sent them an email with a link to sign up.

Duration: The conversations lasted approximately 45 minutes after the rehearsals. At Stellar Family we talked with the audience before the rehearsals, during the two intermissions, and briefly after the after talk with playwright Nikoline Werdelin.

Interview questions:

- How are you right now?
- Describe your experience today.
- Name your first memorable experience with performing arts.

Sub-questions:

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

At Stellar Family we also asked:

- What are your expectation with today's rehearsal?

Conversation groups:

The audience talked in groups of 2 to 5 persons with the people they came with as well as with strangers.

- Groups ages from c. 20 to c. 80 years old coming from Copenhagen and suburbs.

Documentation: Notes and photos.

The productions

Human Outphasing

In *Human Outphasing* we get a startling, hilarious, and brutally honest insight into the life of cerebral palsy sufferer Jacob. In a provocative, intense, and present manner, this production poses the question: What are we supposed to do with people with disabilities in Denmark in 2016? Do they have the right to live at all? After all, we will soon be able to deselect people who may have chronic illnesses. Throughout the production the audience is asks several specific questions of this ethical nature. The audience give their answers electronically using a voting device. The answers are collected and displayed percentage-wise on a big screen in the auditorium. The audience is thus confronted with their own ethical standpoints in relation to others' opinions. The production is directed by Thomas Corneliussen.

With Snow

With Snow is, similar to *Human Outphasing*, an intense, emotional and thought provoking production. It portrays a father, a son, a daughter, and a neurologist. The father is diagnosed with dementia and is cast into the totally unknown, while his children become powerless witnesses to his demise. *With Snow* thus portrays how people suffering from dementia experience the world, and how the families cope with the chaos that ensues from such a condition. The production is directed by Thomas Bendixen.



Stellar Family

Once again we have a though provoking production, which portrays different complex characters and the different dilemmas of the modern patchwork family. It is a comic tragedy, which focuses on the most important aspects of our lives: our relationships and the families of our own making. The play is written and directed by Nikoline Werdelin.



After the rehearsal the sound of multiple conversations fill the foyer. The overall impression is that the audience have had a meaningful experience, and the transition from the intense experience to the conversation seem to happen naturally and easily.

The production presents them with complex ethical questions. It confronts the audience with our society's as well as their own position on these questions. The audience is for instance asked the question: "Would you use a sperm donor with Cerebral Palsy?".

One audience describes his experience in this way:

"The productions holds up a mirror in front of you, and it is a bit disturbing what you see" (male, 60 years old.)

Most of the people we talk with are very affected by their experience. The production makes them consider how they deal with handicapped people in their own lives. Many of them explain that they had a certain image of themselves as being open and fully accepting of people with handicaps, but this production altered this perception and confronted them with a somewhat unpleasant truth.

However, I talk to one woman who is not affected at all. She explains that the interactive elements in *Human Outphasing* communicated to her intellect instead of her emotions. All the facts about cerebral palsy made it difficult for her to be emotionally affected and carried away.

The conversations – the experiences

Human Outphasing

When we meet the audience before open rehearsals for *Human Outphasing* they are a bit confused as to what is expected of them this evening. It thus becomes evident that when presenting audiences with new formats we need to be very clear and detailed in our communication. For instance even if the audience don't need a ticket for the rehearsal, they want some kind of physical confirmation of their registration. However, the audience are grateful for the opportunity to witness the work in progress with this production.



With Snow



Silence... The queue for coffee after *With Snow* was an almost complete silent line of approximately 100 audiences. A woman comes up to me with tears in her eyes and says, that she can't really talk, because she is so moved. She just wants to say to me that politicians and other decision makers need to watch this production. "It is important that they see how we treat the sick", she says.

While I receive this heartfelt message, the audience start finding their way from the coffee line to small tables around the foyer. They spread out and engage in conversations with people they have never met before. Three employees from the theatre and myself mingle with the crowd and try to talk with as many different audiences as possible.

All of them are eager to talk with us. They describe how they relate the plot to their own lives either by identifying themselves with the man with Alzheimer's or with the relatives. Most of them are deeply affected by the experience and they immediately start describing the personal, emotional, and relevant aspects of their experience to us. Several of them tear up during the

conversation, but they still seem quite uplifted by the experience. A young woman describes that the emotional intensity provoked her and she liked that. "That makes it feel relevant to me", she explains.

Only one couple in their twenties were not moved by the experience. They honestly and in detail gave their critique. They would have liked a more audio visual, aesthetic communication of Alzheimer's disease. "A more psychedelic universe", as they put it. They found the production to be too literal with too many facts. They did not relate to the patient's or the relatives' perspective.

This case and the previous case with *Human Outphasing* indicates that the audience respond differently to different artistic expressions. Some people seem to be impressed and moved by abstract audio visual elements, whereas others respond more to facts and a realistic narrative. These indications raise new questions that could be interesting to explore further in future studies with *A Suitcase of Methods*.

Stellar Family

On this open rehearsal, we have two new employees from the Royal Danish Theatre, who have never before worked with open rehearsals as part of *A Suitcase of Methods*. One of the things they note and are surprised about is how eager the audience are to talk with them. Before the rehearsals, both of them suspected that they would have to convince the audience to talk about their experience, and that the conversation might



be somewhat awkward to begin with. Instead, they learn that the challenges are (quite the contrary) that they don't have enough time to talk with everyone who approach them, and that they have to choose between having meaningful and deep conversations with a few or reaching out to as many people as possible in the short period of time. Seeing as we work with *qualitative* interview- and conversation methods, we choose to focus on establishing a meaningful relation and conversation with a few audiences and try to get as much knowledge from them as possible.

The audience's willingness to talk may also partly be a result of the introduction we give them before the rehearsal. Here we explain what is going to happen, and we introduce the employees from the theatre, who is available for questions and a talk. In this way, the audience are not surprised or sceptical if they are approached by someone asking about their expectations for the experience.



Everyone we talk to are very enthusiastic about the concept of open rehearsals. Two women (in their 40s and 60s respectfully) are curious about the process leading up to the

final result, the premiere. They both have tickets, and they look forward to experiencing how a production can change in the last week of rehearsals. Another woman in her 50s says *before* the rehearsal that she doesn't want to see the production when it is finished. She is only interested in the process. "You learn so much more when watching people working towards something, than you would if you 'just' see the final result. I go to the theatre (particularly the Ballet) to learn something", she says. "The more you know about an art form the more you can appreciate it"

After talk

Approximately 35 out of 75 audiences participate in the after talk with Nikoline Werdelin. They are obviously excited to meet her and to hear some of her thoughts and concerns about the productions. This extra talk also provides new knowledge to the project in regards to both how the framing of a talk and the specific questions affect the answers, and thus how the project's methodological focus and knowledge may also be relevant to the creative team working with the artistic output.

Nikoline Werdelin is well prepared for the after talk. She has considered what aspects and questions it will be relevant to get the audiences' feedback on. Therefore, she opens by asking specifically if they understood why the main character is placed physically in the periphery of scenes that he isn't part of? This works really well in the sense that the audience knows specifically what to give feedback on. However, this and some of the following questions gives the



audience the choice of either complementing the production and reassuring that they understand or can hear everything or disappoint the playwright and say that certain aspects don't work according to the intention. Nikoline Werdelin is very warm and inviting in her approach, which helps to create a pleasurable atmosphere during the after talk. Nevertheless, several of the audience members who responds to Nikoline's questions give 'nicer' answers than they did to our team in the foyer during intermissions. This is not to say that they are lying, but they modify their answers in order to avoid an uncomfortable situation. That means that the knowledge produced and communicated in this situation is not entirely accurate.

Summing up our learnings

When summing up what we learned from *open rehearsals*, it seems like the open, unfinished, and in that aspect generous format, has a positive impact on the audience and on their willingness to share their personal impressions, experiences, feelings, etc. It is during open rehearsals that we have had the most success with audiences opening up, taking the time to talk, and wanting to engage in meaningful conversations not only about their experience with the production but about how this experience relates to their own personal lives and the world around them.

These findings can in part be explained with reference to the relationship between the performers and the audience during open rehearsals.

PhD Anja Ali-Haapala introduces the concept of the 'insider-other' in her thesis on the spectator-dancer relationship developed during rehearsals.ⁱⁱ This term describes the particular role of the audience watching rehearsals in comparison to watching regular, complete productions. She proposes "that this role (of the spectator) places them (the audience) *with* dancers during open rehearsal, and *between* dancers and the wider audience during performance" (Ali-Haapala p. 207). This indicates an intimacy between performers and the audience, which is carried on to the experience of the final production. The intimacy affects their experience, but it also bears with it a responsibility for the relation on the theatre's part (for instance by listening to the audience after the rehearsal).

Ali-Haapala also touches on the 'educational' aspects of open rehearsals and how this affects the experience: "*According to some spectators, this relationship has permanently shaped their perception of contemporary dance or ballet, as they now possess insider knowledge that provides a new dance 'frame'*" (p. 217).

As mentioned this aligns with our findings. The audience enjoys how the open rehearsals gives them insight into an art form, which again tends to help them to enjoy that art form even more in the future. In that sense, the open rehearsals may function as a tool for engagement, as long as it is a supplement to the final production and not an event in itself (p. 216). Ali-Haapala also concludes that this field is in need of more in depth research.



Tools for the suitcase

It seems that the open rehearsal as format and a framing of an experience has five primary learnings for the project:

- 1) The audience needs a thorough framing when attending open rehearsals. The format is different and it may be new to some of them. Therefore it is important to give them an idea of what they might expect. This seems to be true for experiences with performance art in general, but particularly when introducing a new concept, where we need the audience to feel secure enough to receive what is thrown at them and to talk about it afterwards.
- 2) The audience are not less observant to details in the production, but they seem less affected by aspects that they do not appreciate. They are more likely to take it as an experience regardless of their opinion of the production.
- 3) It is very important for the audience to be heard and to be able to give their feedback after their experience. When we invite an audience to a rehearsal the format implies that we are interested in their opinion, and if we fail to listen to this opinion it may feel like their specific and personal experience doesn't matter to us. It thus needs to be a priority to listen to the different kinds of feedback after open rehearsals.
- 4) The loose format creates better flowing conversations. During open rehearsals there are no ushers, no tickets, there is free coffee, no lines, a small group of audiences, and time for conversation. These circumstances seem to also affect the nature of the conversation and the audiences' willingness to open up. As mentioned (and to our surprise) they sat down and started talking to strangers about their experience. It thus seems that the overall atmosphere that is a result of the concept also affects the audience and thus the conversations.
- 5) Finally, summing up on the after talk, we learned how our findings may also be relevant for the creative team at the theatre. Again, being aware of the importance of framing and the wording of questions is essential. One simple way to go about this could be to ask the audience to give two suggestions for improvement for each complement they give, and there are many other alternatives.

Our conclusion is thus, that the theatre, by being courageous and generous enough to show their work in progress, invite the audience to do the same – to open up, and to share elusive thoughts and experiences, which are difficult to put into words. In that



sense, the theatre has to take the lead and set an example for this open and trustful dialogue about what the theatre is aiming for and working on one side, and how this is perceived and received on the other side.

Now what...?

This study has brought a lot of new questions with it and pointed at other interesting areas of inquiry. For instance, it seems relevant to consider how working with open rehearsals may establish a different relation not only between the audience and the players, but

potentially between the audience and the entire creative team at the theatre. In following Ali-Haapala's notion of the 'insider-other' this particular relation between an 'insider audience' and the theatre could hold great potential in regards to knowledge about the production, the audience, their experiences etc. A Suitcase of Methods will explore this relationship in future research designs.

ⁱ Learn more about the Royal Danish Panel (KGL Panel) [here](#). (Link in Danish).

ⁱⁱ Ali-Haapala, Anja (2016): *'Insider-other'. Spectator-dancer Relationships fostered through*

open rehearsals. Creative Industries Faculty. Queensland University of Technology.

