

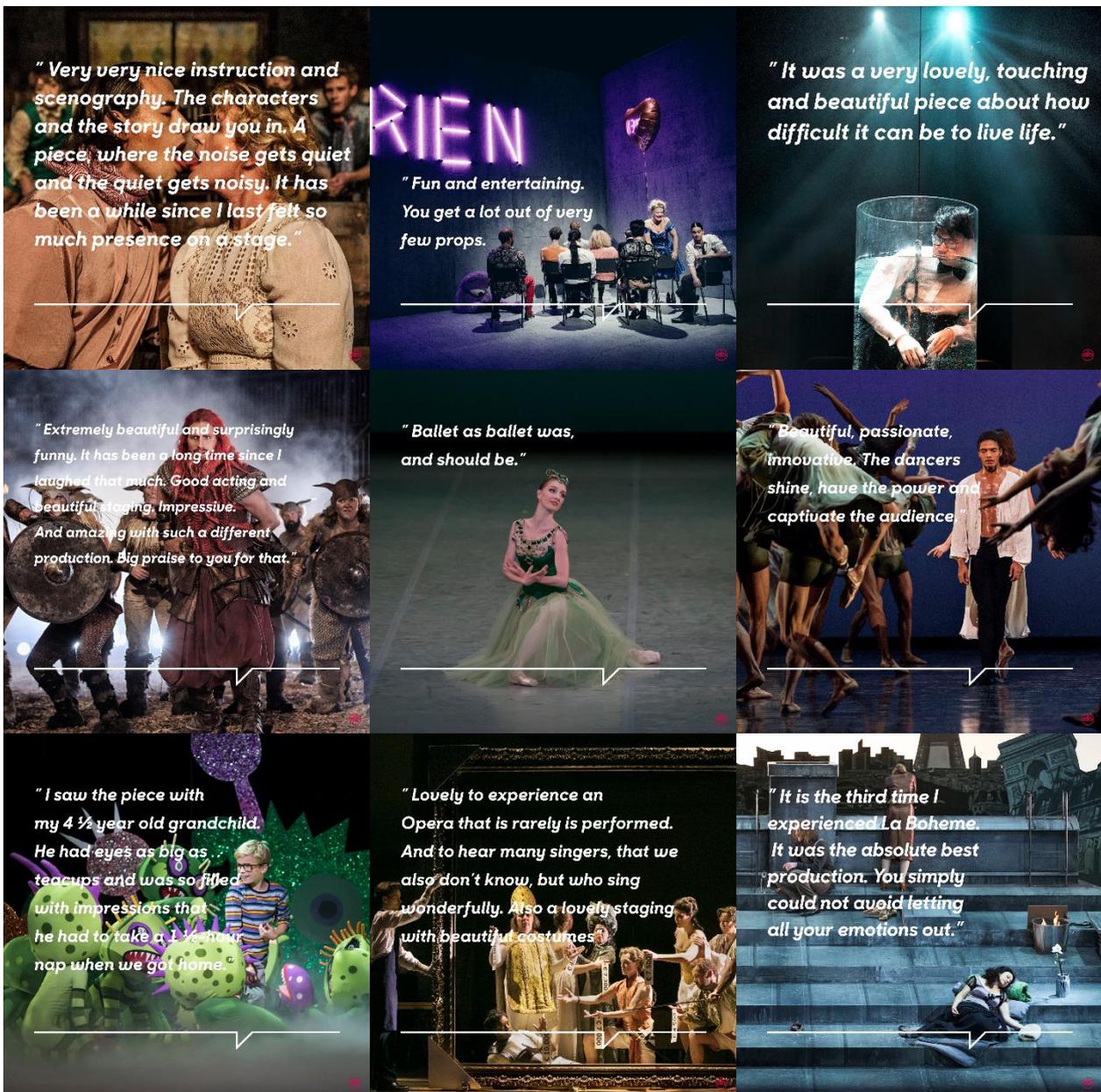


# Systemic evaluation

*What we do and what we learn*

*By Christina Østerby, Nina Gram and Kasper Koefoed Larsen*

Every day The Royal Danish Theatre (RDT) receives feedback from audiences through ratings, evaluations, and descriptions of their experience with the theatre. In this report, we describe the systems, projects, and initiatives we work with in order to receive and handle this feedback, and we share what we learn from this practice of systemic evaluation. Below are examples of the feedback we have received on the past season's productions.

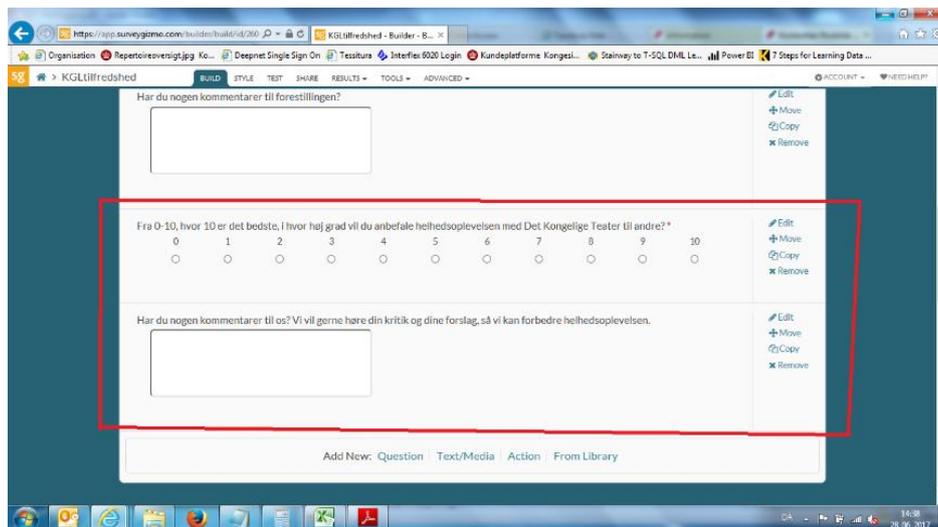




## What do we do?

Our primary evaluation method is our online post-performance survey, which we send out to audiences after they have experienced one of our productions. They receive a questionnaire asking them to rate, on a scale from 0 to 10, how likely they are to recommend the production and their overall theatre experience to others – a so called NPS (Net Promoter Score). When the audience rate 0–6 they are so called *detractors*, from 7–8 they are *neutral*, and from 9–10 they are *promoters*. The NPS is found by subtracting detractors from promoters. This method is popular and it is used by companies to measure and segment their customers' loyalty. The theatre's NPS ratings are collected and communicated in an evaluation report, created for each production.

After rating, the respondents are invited to leave a comment. In the survey, it says: "We want to hear your critical feedback and your suggestions, so that we can improve the overall experience with The Royal Danish Theatre".



Every comment is read through and coded using the programme NVivo. We work with five categories that reoccur in each report: *The production/staging*, *the artists*, *the physical location*, *the service*, and *other*. From this general divide of the comments, we ascribe the content of the comments to various themes. For instance "the players", "the houses", "customer service issues", etc. In the reports, we show an overview of the frequency of each theme, and the content of the comments is summed up in a few text pieces. The reports also show the response rate and how the responses are distributed across different customer segments.



## What do we learn from these surveys?

As part of my research for this report, I carried out an interview with Kasper Kofoed Larsen, who codes every single comment from the respondents. I wanted to know what impressions about the audiences' experiences he was left with after reading all these comments.

The first thing he established is that our audience in general is very content and loyal towards The Royal Danish Theatre. This quote is an example taken from Balanchine's *Jewels*:

*It was magical and the dancing expertise of the company was amazing.*

Because we get so many positive and enthusiastic replies, Kasper (after reading through more than 30,000 comments in total) sometimes almost forgets to pay attention to these and focuses primarily on the critique, complaints and suggestions. This in itself tells us that we have an invested and theatre-loving audience. Below are the most dominant insights we have gained from these surveys.

### The Net Promoter Score

A NPS score can range from -100 to +100. The average depends on the specific field of business, but 0-50 is usually considered good and everything above that is excellent.<sup>1</sup> The results from the past season's NPS average on the productions and especially on the overall theatre experience support our impression of a content and loyal audience. We see noteworthy differences, though, between the three art forms (play, opera, and ballet). There may be many reasons for this. It is important to be critical when working with these numbers, as they may be a result of many different factors affecting the outcome and how 'recommendable' a 'product' is, in the first place. We must for instance consider how many responses the NPS is based on, if it was an expensive or inexpensive production, if it was a classical and popular work, or a more artistically experimental production and so forth. The customer's expectations and the culture within the customer segment may also affect the outcome.

Nevertheless, the theatre's NPS average might tell us something about the nature of the three different art forms and the cultures surrounding it. The Ballet, which has the highest NPS, often has a very enthusiastic audience. They greatly appreciate the beautiful visual experience and the impressive physical talent and effort. Our feedback here is often a pile of positive adjectives. The plays, on the other hand, often present a more critical social perspective and, together with the opera, they may 'require' a bit more from the audience. If you have just watched a complex political play, which takes you days to digest, you may be more hesitant to recommend it to your family than if it was a beautiful, festive ballet.

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<sup>1</sup> Read more about NPS here: <https://www.netpromoter.com/know/>, <https://www.npsbenchmarks.com/> and <http://www.relationwise.dk/artikler/faq/hvad-er-en-god-net-promoter-score>



To further understand this NPS scoring system and get an idea of an overall average, we can look to a benchmark for other industries. On the right, we see the distribution and average NPS for 20 industries' from August 2017.<sup>2</sup> A direct comparison between for these industries and cultural organizations is a bit of a stretch and perhaps even a useless task, but the benchmark still provides a context when working with these NPS numbers. And from this perspective The Royal Danish Theatre's NPS average of 54 underlines our sense of a generally loyal and satisfied audience.

Most importantly, the NPS score can work as a tool to *measure our own progress* in order to see if for instance the overall experience with the RDT has become easier or harder to recommend.

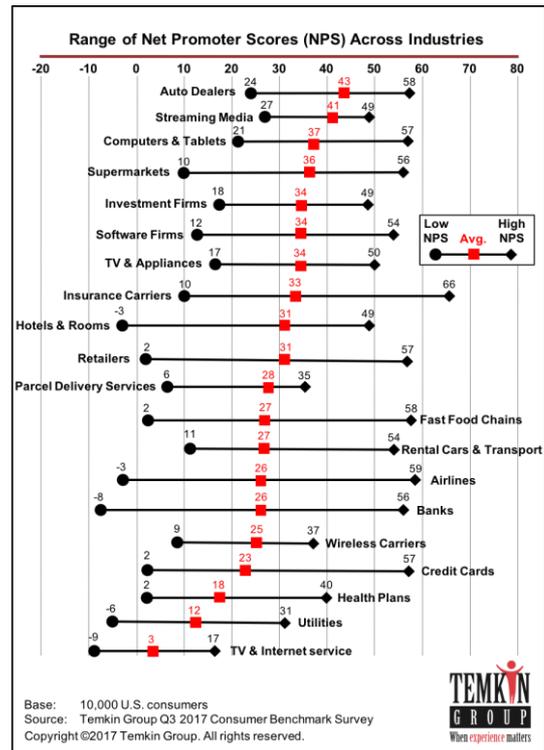
The classic productions

We see in the comments that classical productions (whether it is ballet, opera or plays) seem to cause many emotional reactions from the audience, both positive and negative. Many of them want to relive previous experiences with a production and therefore prefer original staging of the classics. On the other hand, we see a group of audiences, who appreciate new interpretations, where the story and the setting is clearly related to our world today and our everyday lives.

Art and artists in focus

When coding the comments and distributing them to different categories we see that there are often a lot of (positive) comments about the artists. Many respondents refer to artists by using their first name, and even somewhat unknown artists, seem to hold a star status to our audience. They are preoccupied with the cast, and it is important to them who is dancing, singing, or playing the large parts this particular evening.

Not surprisingly, we also see many comments about the staging. The scenography, costumes, lights etc. affect people's experience to a great extent.



Comment categories

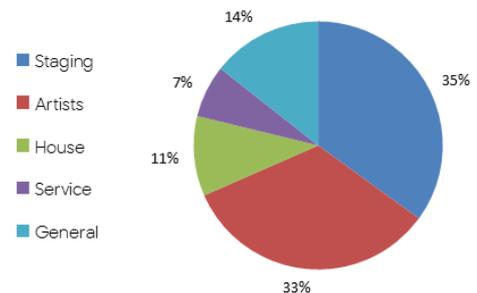


Figure: Comment categories, Macbeth

<sup>2</sup> [https://temkingroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/1710\\_NPSIndustryRanges.png](https://temkingroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/1710_NPSIndustryRanges.png)



### The importance of the physical surroundings

The venue and the physical surroundings in general also seem to be important to our audience. We often get comments about the magical atmosphere of the Old Stage, but we also hear that the building appears somewhat worn down, and the lighting in The Playhouse is too dark. However, there seems to be a tendency that a great art experience 'softens' the evaluation of the rest of the elements of the evening. If the experience with the production is satisfactory, problems (or discontent) with other factors seem to fade and be less important.<sup>3</sup>

### Customer service

The evaluations also give us feedback regarding the service and the staff in the foyer and the ticket office. We very often hear that the staff is helpful and welcoming, but we also see approximately 350 comments (out of a current season total on 24.000) about the lines for the bars being too long.

### Feedback for the feedbackers

Some respondents have described a need to see that their feedback and comments are being heard and taken seriously by the theatre. It has become clear to us, that when we ask people to engage with us, we need to make sure that the respondents know that their contribution is valuable to the theatre, and that they know how the feedback is treated in the organization. At the moment we are considering creating a seasonal newsletter to our respondents describing the changes their comments have contributed to. For instance, deciding to open the café in the foyer of the Opera during the summer.

### Improvements

Aside from the respondent's critique and suggestions, we also use the evaluations to detect improvements. For instance, when we launched a new website a couple of years ago we received many critical remarks saying that it was difficult to figure out. We made various improvements and over time the audience got familiar with the site, and now we very rarely get comments on this, and approximately 80% of our ticket purchases happen online.

Another focus area is the information about the productions. The respondents have requested a lot more information, and we have tried to accede to this by writing more on our website and by doing small introductory videos where the artistic directors introduce the productions. The videos are distributed on the theatre's website

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<sup>3</sup> It is worth mentioning that we specifically ask about the overall experience in the survey. This may explain some of the comments of this subject. Another explanation could be that some people find it easier to give responds about to the surroundings and thus about the facts than about the elusive art experience.



and Facebook page. After taking these initiatives, we see fewer complaints on the lack of information. However, it is still an area in need of further improvement, and we are contemplating other additional information initiatives.

### The potential of the evaluations

As described above, the online evaluations provide us with knowledge about how content the audience is with a specific production and with the overall experience. Furthermore, the evaluations can give us a sense of how new initiatives are being received by the audience. For instance, we got immediate reactions in the comments (positive and negative) when we changed the start time for plays in the Playhouse from 8 pm to 7.30 pm. Also, the evaluations give us a sense of the audiences' expectations of the different productions. These are not communicated directly in the comments, but from the rating and the comments we can sometimes get an idea of what this particular audience member sought to get out of his or her theatre visit.

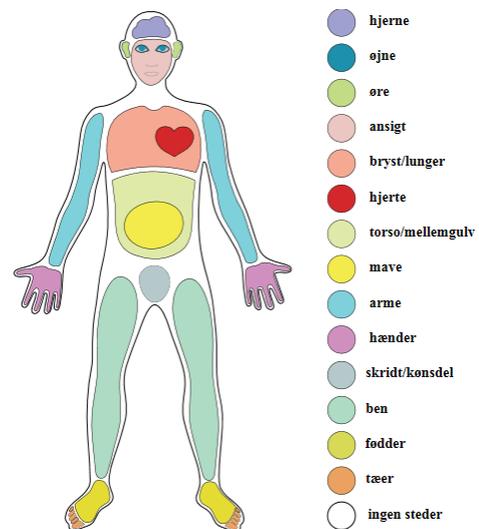
*I would have liked to have been even more emotionally shaken up. It wasn't difficult to me to choose [when I had to decide if the defendant should be convicted]. It would have been a greater experience, if I was more in doubt. But it was a good experience with great actors.*

The example is taken from the play *Terror*, and it gives us insight into a particular expectation of the production. This respondent wanted the participation to involve or cause a greater emotional reaction, and he associates this reaction with the intensity and quality of his experience.

### Qualitative, exploratory surveys – the work of the Suitcase

In addition to this (primarily quantitative) NPS-survey and as part of the theatre's systemic evaluation we have the work within the project A Suitcase of Methods. This project's exploratory surveys contribute with a purely qualitative (methodologically focused) perspective on the audience's experience with performance art.

As part of this experimental focus, we wanted to try a different setup on the online evaluations. We therefore carried out an online survey, where we only asked the audience ONE question: "Where in your body would you place your experience with the production?". We did this in a split test format, where 50% of the audience received our regular survey and the other half received the "where in your body"-survey. When summing up our learnings from this survey we saw that asking a different question gave us new insight into the audience experiences and knowledge about the effect and importance of the questions we ask. We saw that the three different productions and art forms (play: *Terror*, ballet:





*Jewels*, opera: *Il viaggio a Reims*) spoke to very different body parts in the audience. The complex ethical dilemma presented in *Terror* primarily spoke to people's minds for instance.

Furthermore, the comments from this survey were more personal and elaborated than in our traditional survey. It seems that the 'body' question encouraged people to reflect in a deeper and more personal way on their experience and on how the theatre affects them.

Our work with the "Where in your body"-project is done in collaboration with Matthew Reason, Professor of Theatre and Performance, York St John University. You can find the complete report and see the results from the chosen body parts [here](#).

### **What we learned from our conversations with the audience**

Over the past two years we have worked in A Suitcase of Methods to test how the *physical environment*, the *relation between interviewer and audience*, the *time of the conversation*, and the *interview questions* all affect the conversations we have with the audience and thus affect the knowledge we receive from these conversations. This qualitative work doesn't give us with an overview of how a production is received. Instead, the conversations offer details about how the theatre or a specific production plays into the life world of the audience. Here are some of the specific insights we have gained from our studies:<sup>4</sup>

- Access to the work in progress

By working with open rehearsals, we have learned that the audience really appreciate getting access to the unfinished imperfect work-in-progress. During open rehearsals, audiences learn a great deal about the craft of the different art forms, and about the process of working towards a premiere.

- The need for post-performance conversation

We have learned that the audience appreciates a facilitated space for conversation. This is more prevalent with very complex or sad plays, than with the more visually aesthetic operas or ballets.

- Sharing the experience with friends and family

We often hear stories about families or groups of friends who have a tradition of going to the theatre together. We also hear that it enhances and often improves the experience when you are able to share it and talk about it with someone close to you.

- The aesthetically driven or fact oriented audience

Not surprisingly, we see audiences responding differently to various effects and elements of a production. Some of our informants react immediately and emotionally to aesthetic, audiovisual stimuli. They will

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<sup>4</sup> Read more about our various studies and reflections [here](#).



for instance be moved when hearing an opera even though they don't understand the plot. The fact-oriented audience open their hearts during more realistic productions with many (correct) facts. These facts often overwhelm or even put off the first audience group.

- The early introduction to the theatre

It is clear that audiences, who have been introduced to the theatre early in life, feel 'at home' in the theatre. They know the codes and norms, and even though they may dislike a specific performance, they often still enjoy an evening in the theatre.

- The physical surroundings

The physical surroundings affect the overall experience of the theatre, and it is a big part of the ritual of going to the theatre.

- Getting the balance right

We hear contradictory wishes from the audience regarding the role of The Royal Danish Theatre. The theatre is asked to represent and present *excellent* art, and many of our audiences enjoy the ritual of dressing up for a night in the theatre. At the same time, we must be open, inviting and relevant to the broader public. Both of these roles and qualities are central and important to the theatre, and they are often brought up in our conversations with the audience.

### **Summing up – combining big and small pictures**

These insights are examples of what we get out of continuously seeking meaningful and personal connections with the audience. We get insight into their emotional lives, which gives us a deeper understanding of the complexity of the meeting between performing arts and the individual – how a production fits (or doesn't fit) into the pieces of an individual's personal life.

By working with this qualitative project, as part of our systemic evaluation, we see the qualities of examining both the big picture (who buys the tickets, and will they recommend the production to others?), and the smaller details regarding *why* they buy the tickets and *why* the production is or isn't relevant to them. When we mix our methods in this way, we get a fuller picture of the always very complex and particular meeting between the theatre and the audience.

Our next focus with this work is on the implementation of the data in the organization. How can we use this information in the development of the organization, what function should these numbers have, and how do we best communicate this knowledge? Questions like these are currently on our minds.