



## Reading and watching right now #5

### Common misconceptions about young and new audiences

In this 'Reading right now' we will focus on a common misconception about young and new audiences. It is something we see at The Royal Danish Theatre (RDT) from working with audiences and looking at our data from our ticket sales: Furthermore, the insight is explained in this informative talk [Taking out the Guesswork: Using Research to Built Arts Audiences](#) based on Wallace Foundation research.

### Young audiences want cool and edgy art and culture - or so we think

There seems to be a misconception that young audiences generally are disinterested in traditional pieces or the core work of cultural institutions. Thus, in order to get their attention, this audience often presented with the most cutting edge and contemporary productions or works. We as cultural institutions often suppose that breaks with a traditional artistic format will appeal to this group. What we forget, however, is that new audiences don't know what to expect from a theatre visit. They don't know the traditional mode of expressions of the different art forms, and therefore a contemporary break with these may be slightly lost on this audience and even worse: It may leave them feeling culturally incompetent and simply not welcome.

Cultural institutions may be afraid that traditional productions will bore young audiences, but as mentioned in the talk, research shows that the preferred first ballet experience would be something like a *Swan Lake*, *A Giselle* etc.



*Swan Lake, The Royal Danish Theatre, 2018 Foto: Costin Radu*

Our ticket sales at RDT tell the same (somewhat surprising) story. Here our young and new audience gravitate towards the classics such as *La Bohème*, *Giselle*, *Napoli* and so forth. It is a strong tendency particularly within ballet and opera.



We have seen similar tendencies within A Suitcase of Methods. In one of our surveys we invited a high school class to the play *Oedipus and Antigone*. A production that brought together two classic stories. Our aim was to explore the students expectations before a theatre visit. Our primary learnings, however, regarded the aforementioned 'threshold fear' (mentioned in a [previous blog post](#)). We saw that coming to the theatre for the first time, learning where to leave your coat, how to find your seat, when to clap etc. meant a lot and affected how they interacted in the focus group and acted in the theatre in general. Even though they were engaged, at the end of the night we saw something that resembled experience overload in their tired faces.



It reminded us that we have to stay curious and aware of how our productions and venues affect our audience and reflect on what the different audience groups are in need of – especially when visiting us for the first time.

### **About the Wallace Foundation**

When it comes to reading about interesting projects and results within audience work and research The Suitcase is keeping a curious eye on the Wallace Foundation. This foundation works to foster the vitality of the arts for everyone, and they have published several reports and videos about their findings, Find more information [here](#),

In the talk and the report [Taking out the Guesswork](#) they for instance describe the findings from one survey about what keeps audiences away from (in this case) a museum. They found that this group seeks experiences with these three qualities:

- Low commitment
- social
- participatory

The Royal Danish Theatre works in various ways with these three points. The social and participatory qualities are a fundamental part of our outreach activities. In regards to the low commitment, we want this low commitment audience to have a relation to the theatre without feeling tied down too much. We therefore offer a theatre card, which gives the customers a range of advantages but with a lower level of commitment than with a traditional theatre subscription.

These three factors of course don't apply for all young audiences and every art form. We also hear from young audiences who simply want to be entertained in a more traditional setup and with minimal participation on their



part. It is therefore important for each cultural institution to carry out its own research to get to know their exact audience and the barriers for coming to that particular institution.

The way it is presented in the report and the talk, it seems that cultural institutions simply need to change some of their activities in order to be more relevant and welcoming towards young and new audiences. This is of course an important first step. However, what we have found at RDT is that one of the major challenges is to be visible on the platforms of young people and potential new audiences with these initiatives that we believe are relevant to them. They will not search for information on our website or follow us on Facebook so we have to find a way of coming to them. This continues to be a subject for further research.