



## Summing up A Suitcase of Methods

It's all about vulnerability and relationship



*By Nina Gram*

Is it really that simple? Can several years of work in A Suitcase of Methods simply be boiled down to two basic terms and values? Yes and no! Yes, because it is obvious when looking at what we have done and what we have learned over these past couple of years that these two terms are fundamental in order to achieve relevant and fruitful contact with the audience and get useful qualitative data from these encounters. No, because the concepts are not simple tools that can easily be applied in the analytical work with audiences. The concepts are instead fundamental *values*, which can work as a basis when cultural institutions work with audience feedback, and later in the process when they implement their knowledge in the organization.

This report contains first an overview of the surveys we have carried out in A Suitcase of Methods along with links to the complete reports. Furthermore, a selected few of the most central surveys will be described more thoroughly, and finally I will describe why the core values of vulnerability and relationship both sum up our findings in A Suitcase of Methods and support the process of making sure these findings give value back into the organization,

### What did we look at?

Over the past couple of years we have worked with various projects exploring different questions in relation to audience experiences in the theatre. Below is an overview of each survey we carried out:



- Who hangs around our venues?  
How can conversations with people hanging around our venues teach us about our audience and our organization? Find the report [here](#).
- How does the space affect the conversation we have with the audience?  
Find our report about the impact of the space during audience conversations [here](#). We also looked into the impact of the surroundings during the actual art experience. Find the report [here](#).
- Which questions are most efficient in order to have relevant conversations with audiences?  
What happens for instance when we take our physical experience with the art as point of departure for the conversation? Find the report "Where in your body..." [here](#). And what results do we see, when we test a discourse taken from the marketing and product design world? Find our 'Jobs to be done'-report [here](#), which explores which 'job' the customer needs the theater ticket to do for him/her.
- How to design an efficient focus group.  
How does the combination of different types of audience members affect the conversation we have in the focus group? Find our reflections [here](#).
- When should we talk to the audience?  
The audience's experience with and memory of a performance changes over time. When is the best time to talk to them? Find our reflections [here](#).
- What about the companions? We can easily get in contact with the ticket purchasers, so we often ask them about their theatre experience. But what about the people that are invited to the theatre? What are their profiles and impressions of the theatre? Read our report [here](#).
- What happens when we invite audiences into open rehearsals and talk to them afterwards?  
What effect do these open imperfect processes have on the relationship we establish with the audience and the feedback they give us afterwards? Read more [here](#).
- How can we use digital technology to explore the relationship between the artists on stage and the audience? Find our report [here](#) and our short film [here](#).
- How can qualitative and quantitative data come together to give a more complete picture of our audience? Find our report about how The Royal Danish Theatre works with [segments here](#) and with [systemic evaluation here](#).
- How can we track new audiences during free open house events? Read what we tried [here](#).
- What do we get out of observing our audience during and after a performance?  
What are the qualities and limitations of this well-known method? Find our reflections [here](#).



## Selected survey projects

The above mentioned perspectives on audience research each bring different insights to the field. However, there are a couple of our studies that point at some fundamental themes, which can be relevant to both small and large cultural institutions working with audience feedback

### Who hangs around our venues?

We started A Suitcase of Methods with a very basic method to explore who is hanging around the Royal Playhouse. We wanted to avoid focusing on specific questions or themes and allow ourselves to be surprised at what and who we met.

We talked to 64 people and asked them why they were there and what their relationship to The Royal Danish Theatre was, and the conversation developed from there.

We found out that many had no direct relationship to the theatre, and some of them didn't even know that they were sitting in front of the Royal Playhouse. Both the theatergoers and the non-visitors had many ideas on how the theater ought to invite new people in etc.

Most of these suggestions, however, described events, performances etc. which were already part of our program. We thus learned, that we needed a clearer communication of our productions, events etc. especially in the front of house area of our three venues.

This study was carried out almost four years ago, and some of the insights are not as relevant for this specific theatre any more. This basic method, however, is still relevant and a good example of how cultural institutions relatively easy can make a first attempt to engage with their surroundings from an analytical perspective.

Furthermore, the method is efficient to learn more about the institutions' own bind spots. Read the entire report [here](#).





## Companion Survey

As cultural institutions work more and more with data from their ticketing systems a question seems to rise to the surface: What about the companions? – The group who is invited into the theatre, without taking the initiative themselves or receiving an information email. Do they have the same profile and the same experiences and the ticket purchaser?



To answer this question we carried out a rather simple but still comprehensive survey. We placed a questionnaire on each seat for three operas, three ballets and six plays. We asked about the audiences' age, gender, if they purchased the ticket or were a companion, and to what degree they would recommend the performance and the overall experience to others.

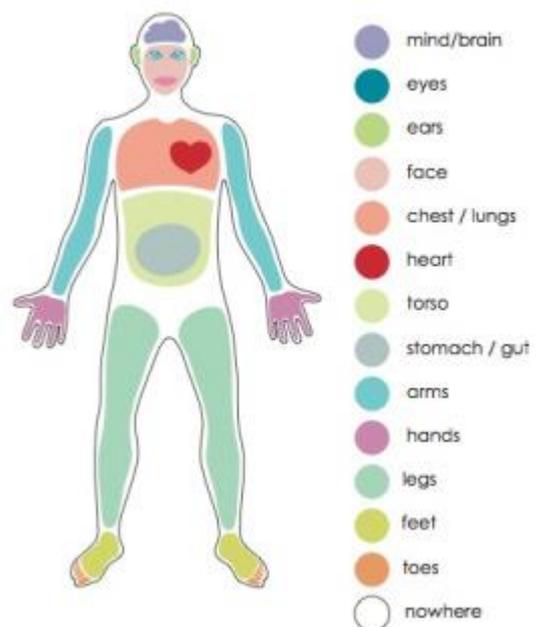
We received 3,677 answers, and the results showed us that the ticket purchasers and the companions are quite similar in terms of their profiles and experiences. In the opera, however, there was a tendency that the customers rated the performance and overall experience slightly higher than their companions. This specific exception taught us that opera audience in particular can benefit from being well prepared for their visit by for instance knowing the plot etc. Read all of our findings in the report [here](#).

## "Where in your body...?"

We have in various ways tested the questions we ask the audience. One perspective was to explore, what type of knowledge we get when we ask the audience to focus on their physical responses to the performance.

The method we used was a so-called A-B test, where we sent half of the audience our regular post-performance survey, in which we ask them to rate the performance and the overall experience. The other half of the audience received the illustration on the right along with the question "Where in your body did you feel the experience with the performance?"

The audience then chose a body part by clicking on the man, and here after they could elaborate on their choice in a short text answer.





The results showed us a great diversity in the written comments for the two different surveys. The table below illustrates how a question directed towards our bodies result in more personal, emotional, and physical reflections about the art experience.

	ART FORM	TRADITIONAL ONLINE SURVEY	WHERE IN YOUR BODY...
1	BALLET (Jewels)	A ballet as ballet was and should be.	TORSO: The experience gave me calm, blissful, joyful, and peaceful sensations, which spread precisely to my torso.
2	PLAY (Terror)	Very welcoming and very well executed by the performers.	HEART: I felt my pulse raise, when we had to decide if he should be convicted or acquitted.
3	OPERA (The Journey to Reims)	Excellent. Well sung. Well played and an all-together impressive staging and scenography.	EYES: It was a strong audio-visual experience. Amazing scenography and compositions. However, I wasn't emotionally affected due to the non-existent narrative.

This doesn't mean that cultural institutions should use this evaluation method from now on. Instead the study reminds us that the questions we ask affect how the experience of the performance is recalled. Furthermore, the way we talk about these experiences influence how our audience will remember them going forward. There thus lies a power in these questions that we as institutions should be aware of. Read our entire report about this project [here](#).

## The importance of the space

Another central focus point in our surveys was the way our surroundings affect the conversation we have with the audience. We need to feel comfortable and preferably inspired when we open ourselves up in the conversation about our personal experiences with art. The space we are in can either support or hinder this feeling.

In A Suitcase of Method we tested the effect of three different spaces. We talked to audiences right after a performance in a meeting room, in the auditorium and during a walk through Copenhagen. These different spaces resulted in different conversations, which led us to conclude the following:

- When walking with the audience, they are more inclined to share how the experience relates to their personal life.
- When staying in the auditorium they often talk about the staging, the costumes and other details about the performance.
- When talking to them in a meeting room they reflect more broadly on the institution.

This study reminds us to reflect on our surroundings when designing a survey, a focus group etc. and be aware of how these may support or hinder the knowledge we are seeking. Read more about this work [here](#).



## Open rehearsals and access to the work in process

Inviting audiences to open rehearsals is not a new initiative in theatre. However, the open rehearsals have in this project, proven to be a beneficial frame for and method to establish a good contact with the audience. In order to understand why this initiative works so well when it comes to the analytical work with audiences we have to take a step back and look at a central theme, that emerges in almost all of our studies in A Suitcase of Methods:



Our audience have in many different ways expressed that they want the theatre to be both *exclusive* and *inviting* at the same time. They request performances of the highest quality, and at the same time, they want the theatre to be a place that is easy to visit and which doesn't require too many special prerequisites. They want to feel like a competent cultural consumer, who knows all the theatre norms, who can find the rest rooms and knows how to dress appropriately etc. The need to feel competent as an audience also applies when we ask for their feedback. If we want honest, personal, and relevant feedback, the audience need to feels clever enough and allowed to mean something about our productions.

A way of finding the balance between the excellent and the inviting is by doing open rehearsals. Because the excellent art performance is very impressive, but it is not relatable. The struggle to become excellent, however, is something we can all understand and relate to. By inviting audiences to see the work in process – something which is not perfect or even finished – we invite the audience to do the same. To share their immediate and honest thoughts. When we dare to show something vulnerable, we give the audience permission to give us difficult feedback such as "I didn't understand", "It was too long" or "This really resonated with me because of my personal situation right now".

The challenge of this method, however, lies in the fact that theatre is a live art form. It is here and now, and changes are often made in the last minutes and the entire performance often comes together a week before the premiere. It is therefore difficult to invite audience to give feedback on the fundamental elements of a production early in the process. However, this is not the aim of this method, seen from A Suitcase of Methods' perspective. The goal is instead to create a relationship with the audience by inviting them into this vulnerable process, and afterwards continuously, by talking to this audience, build an understanding for this audience, which in the long run can be valuable to the strategic and artistic planning in the organization.



In extension of the insights mentioned above, all of our surveys in A Suitcase of Methods also point at two essential values, which we argue are fundamental for the qualitative analytical work with the audience.

## It's all about relationship and vulnerability

If we work with *relationship* and *vulnerability* as cores values in our interaction with the audience, we may establish a more sustainable connection with them and thus get more relevant data. But how do we establish and maintain this relationship? First of all, we (the cultural institutions) need to understand, that a relationship requires something from both parts. We need to be genuinely interested in our audience. Who are they, and when are we as a theatre relevant to them? Moreover, we need to communicate this genuine interest to them for instance by being clear about how we use their feedback, and what we have learned from it. We recommend that audiences who participate in focus groups, surveys etc. get access to a brief summery including for instance information about the number of participants in the survey, the what we learned in headlines (if it is safe to share), and how we will go forward from here. We should also be honest about the level of influence the audience have. They cannot dictate what we put on stage, but we use their input (regarding the art as well as the overall experience) in our strategic planning on various levels. The point of this is to demonstrate to the participants/ the audience that we take their feedback, time, and effort seriously and that it is valuable to us.

Another way of establishing the relationship is (once again) by the institution daring to be vulnerable. As mentioned before, we may do this by opening the doors into the open rehearsals, or by taking the audience by their hands and teaching them about the crafts that are involved in making a theatre production. Going back to the insight about the competent audience, these experiences help the audience to be more engaged in the theatre and to feel even more like an experienced guests. For instance, if we are invited into an orchestra rehearsal and we experience a cellist struggling to get a phrase right. We may hear the magical moment, when it all comes together in a perfectly toned phrase. A moment like this is both inviting due to the vulnerability of the struggle and it is educating the audiences, who are introduced to new facets of the music.

## How do we work with data in creative organizations?

The summery of our findings presented in this report seem to point to one last and important question in regards to working with audience data in creative organizations: How do we make sure that all the data and knowledge, which may be collected by an employee in the communication department or the like, gets communicated to the entire organizations and creates value? This implementation process is a great challenge, but here I will argue that the values relationship and vulnerability once again can be beneficial.

It is complex and vulnerable to introduce audience feedback in a creative organization. It is therefore essential to insist on a healthy and transparent *relationship* internally in the organization. To communicate clearly what each colleague is working with on this field, and emphasize that we are all working towards the same goal: Presenting the best art experience to as many people as possible.



In addition to this, we should internally in the institution dare to express the *vulnerability* that is naturally involved in giving and receiving feedback on a performance. If this vulnerability 'lives in the dark' unmentioned, the resistance that may exist towards this data can never be reduced.

The question of how we implement data in creative organizations was one of the focus points of the final workshop in A Suitcase of Methods, held in the summer of 2019. Here we worked to communicate our findings in a different, more sensory way. You can read more about how we did it and what we learned in our next report #18, which will be the last from A Suitcase of Methods' hand.

If you want to learn more about our work and results feel free to contact me Nina Gram at [nigr@kglteater.dk](mailto:nigr@kglteater.dk). I would love to hear from you.