



REFLECTIONS ON BECOMING

A TEEN AUDIENCE

– by Naja Birke, Denmark

Teenagers are often overlooked when it comes to theatre programming due to the fact that they seldom choose to go and buy a theatre ticket themselves. Often young audiences, whether children or teenagers, watch theatre performed in their kindergartens and schools. In this context, the production has been chosen for them and so, more often than not, they do not arrive at the performance with any expectations or thoughts about what it is they are going to see.

If their teachers, or other adults, do not engage them in conversation about the performance either, they may not even form a cohesive opinion of what they have seen. In other words, the theatre they are presented with is out of context and this can easily lead to teenage apathy about what it is they see.

With the T.E.E.N. project partners having combined our efforts over the past two years to find new ways of engaging teenagers through means of theatre criticism, a number of things appear to have been important, even essential, in the process of developing an audience identity.

Matthew Reason, Professor of Theatre and Performance in the Faculty of Arts at *York St John University*, authored the *'Talking About Theatre'* booklets (you can find a link to these in *Part 5 – Tools and Methods*) on the premise that talking about theatre prolongs the experience. When you talk about your experience, he argues, the conversation has its own quality and is, in fact, just as important as the original theatre experience itself.

From creating theatre critiques, to discussing shared visions with fellow TAG team members and teen ambassadors across various countries, the teenagers not only got a sense of their own likes and dislikes, but also learned how to express their opinions, and how to remain culturally sensitive regarding their peers from other countries perceiving art and theatre through a different social and cultural lens.

I learned how to describe my feelings and emotions and how to appreciate other points of view although they are different than mine.

Martina Bosi, Italian teen ambassador

As Rui Pina Coelho stresses in his essay *'A Critic is Never Wrong'*, to work with theatre criticism is to start a dialogue. It can never be right or wrong, nor can it ever be the last word. Rather, it is the beginning of a conversation about the performance, about art

in general, and about the cultural and social context through which we have each experienced the art. By understanding that a critic is never wrong, and that theatre criticism is the start of a dialogue, the teenagers had the possibility to share their thoughts freely whilst appreciating, and being able to explore, the diversity of their peers' different opinions. This opportunity for the teenagers to gain a wider perspective on their own likes and dislikes, in the context of other people potentially disagreeing with them, is an important stepping stone to becoming an active audience member.

Moreover, the teenagers were empowered to take charge in these conversations about art and how it is relevant to them. Such discussions are inherently political, as Kjell Moberg proposes in his short article, *'The Political Aspects of Critical Thinking'*. The teenagers were empowered even more when they became aware of their own value as audience members, aware of the significance of expressing their opinions and engaging professionals in their ways of perceiving art, and aware that those professionals were listening and taking them seriously. It is important to note that, when the teenagers developed this position of authority, the professionals were not only inspired to listen more seriously to the teenagers themselves, but also to each other's points of view.

When we started the project, it was considered that teenagers were often overlooked in theatre programming. However, the dialogue achieved through the tools of theatre criticism allowed the teenagers to develop more of an established identity as audience members. Establishing an identity as a young audience member is to find out what you expect of a performance, to allow yourself to feel moved by the experience, and to be able to share that with others. Not only were they able to identify their own artistic preferences but they were also able to express them to their peers, producers, curators, and other theatre professionals.

It was important that the teenagers found their own voices not only for this project, but also as an important life lesson for the future. Having a voice is crucial to being an active part of a society with a rich cultural history, as it allows us to tell the stories of who we are as individuals and as part of a group. If we are people of any age group, nationality, class, gender etc. it is important that we are able to frame our experiences.

So, if using theatre criticism as a tool to start these dialogues is important for young audiences, who will teach them?



How can you enjoy a game of football if you don't understand the rules? We do not expect young people to understand the conventions of mathematics, biology, history, or language without schooling, but for some reason we seem to expect artistic taste to be a matter of individual perception, and therefore, something to be learned instinctively without any schooling. This is particularly impractical when it is considered that art and theatre are part of a complex history that refers not only to other pieces of art, but also socio-political events, cultural references, and other stories.

As such, we need to provide tools for teachers and teenagers to explore art together, teaching our young people about different cultural and historic contexts. This will start them off on their dialogues with each other about how they experience theatre performances and will ultimately, therefore, help on the road towards them becoming an audience.