

THE POLITICAL ASPECT OF CRITICAL THINKING

– by Kjell Moberg, Norway

When we began the T.E.E.N. project, we did not know what its impact would be until we conducted the research. It has been a journey of searching for, and researching, a methodology that would give our participants, the teenagers, the best tools not only for critical thought but also for verbalising their experiences of the performing arts.

Initially, the T.E.E.N. project focused on the format of criticism. During our festivals in Italy, Denmark, and Norway, the teenagers were led through a series of workshops on how to write and publish critiques / critical reviews about something they had seen or taken part in.

After experimenting with different formats and settings for the exposition of critical thought, we decided to try out the 'Kitchen Table' format during the festival in Mantua, Italy in 2017. Explained simply, this format involves a panel of young people discussing topics of interest to them in the

contemporary performing arts. The audience of adult professionals watching this 'Kitchen Table' were able to ask questions of the panel. The success that was achieved during this direct dialogue in Mantua in 2017 led to a more comprehensive dialogue with an audience of global theatre professionals during the Showbox festival in Oslo later in the year.

It was at this point of the project that the teenagers moved from being mere participants of the T.E.E.N. project to becoming active teen ambassadors. They were representing their own values and ideas that they had developed on the project leading up to this point, as well as the ideas of their local TAG teams. Rather than just writing critiques or making films about their reflections (as they had done before), this was an active format where they were in charge of setting the topics of discussion and leading the debate. As such, I propose that it was at this point that the project developed an entirely new political dimension.

The change in positionality, from someone who produces written thoughts or video materials to be disseminated indirectly, to stating your viewpoint directly to a group of professionals in front of you, is one of real empowerment.

To start on the path of becoming political, one does not need to know everything there is to know about the subject at hand. The first step is to simply

realise that your thoughts and feelings are legitimate. Teenagers are, after all, the experts on what it is like to be a teenager. Undeniably, there are lessons they can teach us about teenage life and these must be understood as politically legitimate viewpoints. The second step is to realise that you have the language and ability to verbalise your experiences, that your subjective reflections are an important means of deepening the debate. Thirdly, it is necessary to understand what power structures are at play and to realise that you have the ability to reflect and

comment on them. Lastly, and most importantly, for your thoughts and visions to have real impact, you need to get yourself into a position where your message is being genuinely listened to.

From where I was standing, I saw a remarkable change in all the teenagers after they participated in the first 'Kitchen Table' debate in Mantua. This experience was only amplified during the session held later at the *Showbox* festival in Oslo. Rather than asking hypotheticals (e.g. What might be relevant?),





the teenagers began asking very concrete questions of importance to their own lives (e.g. What is relevant for me?).

They also started addressing questions about the democratic process like, 'What is a good and valid discussion?' and 'What is important for the panel to consider in the 'Kitchen Table' session?' This I found very interesting - as the teenagers felt more comfortable about what their role in the project entailed, they also started considering how the 'Kitchen Table' sessions could be made into a truly democratic platform.

I believe there were two political aspects that were most relevant in the room at this point – (1) the realisation of power and status and the effect this can have, and (2) the definition of what constitutes quality.

A good example of when this first point arose during the 'Kitchen Table' in Oslo was when one of the teenagers commented, "We are very aware that we are successful white middle class youth, and that a big part of our society is not represented on this panel. However, we have to remember that you are the adults in this room that are in real power to do something about this situation."

When it comes to the second point, the definition of quality, it is of course very complex to delineate any specific 'elements' of quality in objective terms, as

it is an inherently subjective task. Nonetheless, the teenagers still had a lot of advice for the professional theatre makers and programmers about quality (as can be seen in the later section listing the 'Golden Recommendations'). During the 'Kitchen Table' session in Oslo, one of the teenagers remarked, "The point is to understand that [when you see a performance], you do not always have to understand." Interestingly, this statement parallels, in many ways, the Socratic paradox, "The only thing I know is that I know nothing". She went on to say, "The point is to not feel stupid. You should not leave the theatre feeling stupid." This neatly sums up the notion that, whilst it may not be easy to define quality, it is still important to have certain demands for the work.

The development of the teen ambassadors' political approach towards the project was very interesting and, in many ways, their views were in opposition to the current political climate when they stated, for instance, that "we realise that we do not hold the ultimate power to change this but we still want to understand more" and, "there are no easy answers to what quality is".

What I do believe is certain is that many of the teenage participants in the project will be part of forming European cultural politics of the future – after all, you cannot take part in a project that fosters critical thought like this one, without having some new ideas about how things may be made different.

