

# AFTERWORD

## LOOKING TOWARDS THE FUTURE – CREATING A TEEN NETWORK ACROSS EUROPE

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**S**ince 2016, the T.E.E.N. (Theatre European Engagement Network) project has investigated new audience engagement strategies tailored towards teenagers and has focused on enhancing their experience as active spectators by developing an innovative approach of theatre criticism. The project started by focusing on the expression of the teenagers' individual experiences, however, we ended up devising the 'Kitchen Table' format. This entails a group debate where the focus is on the teenagers' ability to listen to each other's points of view. The 'Kitchen Table' allowed for the possibility of discussing themes around individual performances and wider programming processes and was powerful not only for the teenagers but also for the festival curators and cultural professionals.

Indeed, this format of debate helped us to uncover various barriers to the engagement of teenagers in theatre and allowed us to move the project discussion and research onto the characteristics of proposed show programming as well as the frameworks that could

usefully be put in place to engage teenagers. In this manner, the 'Kitchen Table' format enabled much wider frames of analysis for the debate such that it included discussion over all production processes related in *any* way to the means in which young audiences engage in theatre. In this way, the engagement activities that we had trialled developed into a proper methodology that stimulated young people's critical thinking and awareness – a means of educating them to be engaged in active citizenship.

Above all, we understood that the challenge was not to simply increase the number of teenagers in the audience but, more significantly, to increase the number of those who would repeatedly return to watch performances. The task was to instil in those teenagers who were brought to watch theatre, the same enthusiasm that motivates those who make theatre.

However, the teenagers pointed out that, when theatre is presented in a school environment, the didactic function of the art form is often prioritised over any emotional, empathic experience and that this can have a detrimental impact on teenagers' attitudes and engagement in theatre. With the focus of programming decisions being didacticism, young people learn to view theatre as a mandatory and academic activity, rather than a fun or engaging pursuit. The 'Kitchen Table' format worked so effectively precisely because it was not like any activities that the teenagers engaged in at school and was not led by a teacher figure.

As a result of this research, we understand the need to engage in further work that explores how teachers

and the school system are involved in the creation and selection of theatrical experiences. Forms of expression and reflection like writing, reviewing, debating, and the 'Kitchen Table' format itself would appear suitable to form a central function in this pursuit. These extracurricular activities allow teenagers to process any negative experiences in the theatre by giving them the opportunity to engage with each other's opinions and to express what annoyed or bored them in the performance.

Evident throughout the diverse activities in this project, particularly in the Danish workshops, was that the students' critiques could be used to achieve a new aim, influencing the subsequent stages of the project. In this sense, responsibility is the new keyword, alongside the protagonism championed by many audience engagement projects.

I also understand the term 'responsibility' as Rui Pina Coelho uses it in his analysis (see outlook 4.1), where it is applied to the process of critique itself. In this context, cultural professionals and teenagers are invited to be responsible for the outcome of their work (see the 'Golden Recommendations'). In particular, teenagers are encouraged to take part in creative processes with the due care, reading their own critiques and taking responsibility for expressing their opinions in front of the actors and production team members. This form of feedback is quite the opposite of what tends to happen on social networks, where critiques and comments

are being thrown out whilst being masked behind a protective virtual wall.

The introduction of the Kitchen table format has shifted attention from engagement to the reflection on group's opinion within an actual and lively citizenship workshop.

On completion of the project, we realised that every method, recommendation, and tool involved in the T.E.E.N. project was focused on preventing the 'boomerang effect'. This is when a teenager watches a single unsatisfying performance which colours their experience and perception of the theatrical artform as a whole. If this can happen even in those productions that have been selected with the utmost care and attention, it stands to reason it is an even more widespread phenomenon when productions are brought in without great consideration of the teenagers' needs. As such, it





is crucial to develop proper engagement strategies in order to overcome this threat.

One of the most productive outcomes of this project was how it empowered cultural curators, by taking on what had been learned, to better programme theatrical events and activities dedicated to teenagers. In order to disseminate this learning further, we are also now able to train, and advocate for, colleagues around Europe to develop their visions and methodologies of teenage audience development in suitable ways. The most crucial aspect to be taken onboard by cultural professionals is that of genuine dialogue and listening, conducted in a manner that recognises that teenagers are not a homogenous group but a collective of individuals with individual tastes, interests, and opinions.

In order to continue extending our thinking beyond this current project, the question we should now be asking is: Is it possible for European theatre festivals targeting teenagers to be programmed and produced by a pool of curators, that includes teenagers themselves? In order to examine this question, a new project, 'Teen Ambassadors across Europe' will be launched to build upon the achievements of the T.E.E.N. project. It will explore the challenges of building a co-curatorial relationship between professional curators, producers, and teen ambassadors, thereby establishing further new long-term strategies for audience development. The new methodology is expected to influence wider European cultural programming, making theatre more

accessible to different audiences of different cultures, including young people who are socially disadvantaged. Working together in partnership on this new project will be the same partners from the T.E.E.N. project (*Segni d'infanzia*, *Norsk Scenekunstbruk*, and *Teatercentrum*) as well as three new organisations (*Caixaescena*, *Cultuurcentrum Hasselt*, and *Dialogue Community Performance*).

It is important to begin the new cooperation process straight after the conclusion of the T.E.E.N. project in order to harness the power of the established TAGs in Denmark, Italy, and Norway. The teen ambassadors in these groups are willing, engaged, and motivated to share their enthusiasm for theatre with their peers. The methodology developed during the T.E.E.N. project (such as TAGs and the 'Kitchen Table' format) will be used as the basis for the new co-curatorial approach. These established tools will continue to be used by the existing partners, will be put into action by the new partners for the first time, and will also be used at festivals in other countries that have expressed an interest in understanding the co-curatorial approach and better engaging teenage audiences.

We are confident that by completing this 'Teen Ambassadors across Europe' project, the sector's call for research into a concrete methodology that may be used to better engage teenage audiences will be answered by a scalable, sustainable, and inclusive approach to teenage audience development in Europe.