

# PART 1 THE T.E.E.N. PROJECT

## 1.1 DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT

**T**.E.E.N. is a pilot project that aims to explore, establish, and apply best practice audience development strategies in order to engage European teenagers in theatre. This involves a comprehensive research process that maps and translates successful practices in various local contexts into a methodology that may be applied across Europe. It is intended that this project will mark the beginning of a permanent European network structure that provides step by step support for local organisations to engage the younger generations in theatre.

The T.E.E.N. project partnership was founded by festival managers working in the Theatre for Young Audiences sector. What began with a cursory exchange of experiences around audience development, particularly those approaches used to target teenagers, developed into more in-depth conversations about the similarities and differences in the way we each worked. The most significant outcome of these shared reflections was the acknowledgement that, on the one hand, the sector produces a lot of work for children aged from eighteen months to nine years and is largely successful at attracting large audiences. However, on the other hand, the industry frequently fails to retain these audiences in the later years, between the ages of ten to nineteen (*N.B. for the sake of simplicity, we have defined this age demographic as “teenagers” or just simply “teens”*). With our shared awareness about this problem, the

partners felt the need to consider why this occurs and to work together on a common strategy to resolve this problem. We passionately believe that working with teenagers is crucial to ensure the survival and the development of contemporary European identity and culture in the future.

Some of the reasons why it is difficult to engage teenagers in theatre-going include:

- teenagers tend to be a ‘non-audience’ for the cultural offer in general;
- as a lot of programming has not been directed towards teenagers specifically, an appropriate creative offering for them doesn’t exist;
- as such, it is difficult to reach and attract them with the current creative offering;
- a specific engagement approach to attract teenagers has not yet been fully explored and developed by the sector;
- often it is teenagers’ schools or parents who choose what they will go to see, meaning teenagers are not able to exercise their own choice; marketing and communication about performances is not targeted to suit teenagers’ habits (e.g. how they surf the internet or use social media);
- for those without a close friend, family member, or teacher who is directly engaged in the cultural landscape (such as a parent who regularly attends the theatre), it may be difficult for teenagers to understand the positive and emotionally-engaging experience of theatre.



In response to these points, the project partners decided to develop a new young audience development strategy that built on positive experiences and practices at local and national levels. These practices were further explored, compared, developed, and translated into a comprehensive methodology, that may now be applied to the whole sector at European level, across all European countries.

### **OBJECTIVES:**

T.E.E.N. aims at identifying the most suitable kinds of theatre performances, as well as the most effective engagement techniques, for the teenage age group. To this end, it employs several tools that draw upon theatre criticism and a shared process of direct observation. It brings together festival directors, artists, and young audience members in order to improve the creative offering for teenagers and help creative teams to keep in tune with young audiences. The project is entirely founded upon the idea that it is only through engaging in the perspectives of young people, and listening to their needs and voices, that it is possible to develop meaningful engagement of teenage audiences - an audience which is interested, determined, confident, and able to convey diverse opinions.

### **THE PROCESS:**

Each country recruited a collective of teenagers called a TAG (Teen Action Group). Supported by local tutors, they went to the theatre together and then discussed, wrote about, and processed the experience in different ways. The TAG teams experimented with several critical approaches to form their personal opinions, learning different ways to express and share these. Every participant kept a critical journal of the cultural events they attended in Pepys' Diary (you can read more about Pepys and his Diary in *Part 5 – Toolbox and Methods*).

From each TAG team, three teen ambassadors were selected to visit partner festivals overseas with their tutor, and to meet with their foreign peers. After returning to their countries, they shared their adventures with their local TAG team and acted as hosts to their foreign counterparts when they reciprocated the visit.

Each partner had their own approach of working with the local TAG teams according to each of the three different local structures and cultural contexts. In the following section you can read about the activities and outcomes achieved by each of the partners in working with their TAG teams and teen ambassadors.

## 1.2 THE ITALIAN APPROACH

**A**fter the second meeting of the T.E.E.N. project in December 2016 (held at the festival *Showbox* in Oslo), a call for participation was published on *Segni d'infanzia's* website and Facebook page. *Segni d'infanzia* also presented the project to all middle and high schools in Mantua and the wider province, as well as schools from further away that had been engaged with *SEGNI New Generations Festival*. Furthermore, the call was presented to library reading groups often frequented by teenagers, as well as to social and youth centres. Those teenagers interested in participating were asked to send two reviews of shows or cultural events that they had recently attended, as well as a self-evaluation of their English competency level.

All of the teenagers selected for the Mantuan TAG were contacted and invited to see their first show together in order to get to know each other. A calendar of activities for the TAG was drawn up and included the performances that would be seen together, as well as the monthly meetings that were used to discuss cultural events, performance visions, and to prepare for the international visits with the foreign partners.

The calendar of performances was developed more or less on a monthly basis and involved all theatrical events presented not only in Mantua, but also in nearby cities. Owing to the fact that there were no performances programmed especially for young audiences in Mantua, the calendar was made up of theatrical events targeted towards adults.

Since there was no project budget for tickets, *Segni d'infanzia* engaged local theatres in the project to negotiate very accessible ticket prices. As such, members of the TAG had free or strongly

reduced tickets at three of the city's theatres upon presentation of their 'T.E.E.N. Card', if they went alone and not together as the TAG team. They were also able to invite their friends to join them and 'have a ride' on the discounted ticket 'merry-go-round'.

These partnerships with the local theatres also provided an opportunity for our TAG team members to share a space with the artists before or after the show in order to discuss and share their opinions, questions, and observations.

Sometimes, when this meeting was done straight after the performance in the presence of all the audience members who attended, the teenagers felt listened, important and so self-confident. This was evident because some of their questions and comments were very sharp and attuned to the themes in the production. As a consequence, this self-confidence feeling transferred to other TAG members, who may normally have been quite shy, and encourage them to ask questions too.

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Another indirect output observed by the partner theatres was that, thanks to the presence of the TAG team and their questions, audience members who may not have been confident in understanding theatrical codes and devices had an opportunity to live the experience in a new way and learn more about them. Therefore, we discovered that, when there is a space where it's possible to share questions and points of view, both teenagers and other audience members unfamiliar with theatre may learn that being a spectator can be an engaging and fulfilling experience.

TAG meetings were an opportunity to give voice to the teenagers and to support them to discover and learn new ways of expressing their feelings and thoughts in regard to the Performing Arts field.

During the meetings, it was also necessary to select the teen ambassadors who would be visiting the overseas festivals. The TAG team members decided unanimously that this selection should be done through a secret and democratic election. Moreover, it was decided that the Mantuan TAG would send different teen ambassadors

to each overseas festival in order to allow the greatest number of teenagers to experience an international festival and have the opportunity of cultural exchange with peers from different countries.

This set-up allowed for, and indeed made necessary, the exchange of lived experience between different peers. The adult tutor and project manager were also able to observe those topics considered by the teen ambassadors to be most crucial, in order to pass these on to the other teenagers in the TAG.

As *Segni d'infanzia* was the Leading Partner of the T.E.E.N. project, in addition to coordinating the activities of the Italian TAG, it was also in charge of several other activities such as project management and monitoring, media relations, and partnership development with local stakeholders (this partnership development focused on involving curators and artists in the engagement of the teenagers). Furthermore, as part of the association's organisation of the *SEGNI New Generations Festival*, it also played a role in developing activities that focused on enhancing the professional skills of the local partners.

## 1.3 THE NORWEGIAN APPROACH

**A**s *Norsk Scenekunstbruk* was already engaged in non-formal cooperation with both *Segni d'infanzia* (Italy) and *Teatercentrum* (Denmark) prior to this process, the T.E.E.N. project was as an opportunity to strengthen and formalise the cooperation with its existing partners. *Norsk Scenekunstbruk* had a special interest in researching international perspectives on teenage engagement in theatre through the T.E.E.N. project because it had already established a project called 'Young Voices' back in 2012.

'Young Voices' aims to foster critical thinking about the arts, encouraging young people to reflect deeper on their arts experiences. *The Cultural Rucksack* (a national programme for arts and culture in schools) was published in 2001 to motivate Norwegian schools to embed the arts into students' daily school lives. This means that every Norwegian student aged six to nineteen will have an art experience three to six times every school year. The 'Young Voices' project utilised these experiences, encouraging young people to act as critics, writing reviews about the performances they saw in their schools. The web platform for the 'Young Voices' project was also launched in 2012 and now includes hundreds of written reviews and interviews that have been contributed by teenagers from all over Norway. Some schools even incorporated the project into their teaching plans and, in the county of Østfold, publishing a critique of a recent arts experience formed a part of students' final exams.

Since *Norsk Scenekunstbruk* already had a large group of teenagers involved in the 'Young Voices' project, it was decided that these existing groups would be used as their TAG teams. Since the start of the project, TAGs have been working not only in Oslo, but also in the cities of Asker, Fredrikstad, Hvaler, and Kristiansand. The work with the TAG groups has taken place throughout the whole year but was of course intensified during the time of the local festival, *Showbox*.

As part of the TAG process, Anette Therese Pettersen, a Norwegian tutor, also facilitated workshops in schools across the country that explored how to foster critical thinking and how to critique the arts. Pettersen's workshops, which have been developed in collaboration with music critics Ida Habbestad and Hild Borchgrevink, have usually been held at schools. Conducting the workshops with pre-existing classes of school students meant that not only did the teenagers already know each other but there was also already trust within the group. Although all of the workshops focused on introducing the concept of criticism (a link to the corresponding PowerPoint can be found in *Part 5.3* of this report), the content of the sessions varied according to the age of the TAGs and on what performance they had seen in the past and/or would be seeing with their schools in the future. Usually the workshop begins with a task called 'Five Words', where the TAGs listen to music (specifically folk music, which they have often not listened to before) and are asked to write down five words. There are no

rules as to what sort of words they write down - the point of the exercise is to see what sort of associations, thoughts, and opinions occur to them during the three to four minutes of listening. Each TAG member's paper is collected anonymously (i.e. without their names), these are shared, and then there is a discussion about what sorts of words have appeared. The workshop then continues with other exercises where the TAGs see videos from different performances and write down descriptions and their opinions on what they see. "What actually happened? What did you think about what you saw and heard? What thoughts or memories occurred during or after watching it?" The TAGs often have some experience within dance, music, and/or theatre, and we also discuss how our competence and preferences affect and form our meetings with art. After discussing these ideas around art, and by looking at examples of criticism (including texts written by other teenagers), we discuss what criticism does as well as different approaches and formats of reviewing and criticism that can be used. To do this, the TAGs work in groups, discussing examples of art. Towards the end they either write a short review of a single scene from a performance (shown as film clip) or they complete

a collective piece of criticism. When possible, the workshop also includes research into a performance that the TAGs will be seeing in the near future.

The aim of these workshops is to provide the TAGs with tools for describing and discussing art. By conducting this in a group setting, different opinions and views on the art can be thoroughly discussed - demonstrating the value of having multiple opinions and thoughts without concluding with any 'definitive' or 'correct' view. The Norwegian teen ambassadors all have experience in writing about theatre and dance, and their critiques were used during the TAG workshops as examples of what criticism can be, who can write it, and where to publish. One example is Rauand Ismail's criticism of the opera performance *'Simon'* - a performance that was targeted towards teenagers. In the text, Ismail writes about being a part of the performance's intended target group, of watching a performance comprised solely of teenagers, about his own prejudices, and of how these were confronted while watching, and then writing about, the performance. (Read the review here: <https://www.minervanett.no/ensomheten-utfordres-operaen-simon/>).



## 1.4 THE DANISH APPROACH

**T**he *Aprilfestival* in Denmark is a touring festival that changes municipality every year. *Teatercentrum* works in collaboration with the chosen municipality to bring theatre performances to young audiences living locally. Throughout the week of the festival, theatre is performed in schools, kindergartens, nurseries, cultural centres, libraries, local theatres, and even venues like old factory buildings. Many people in the municipality get involved as collaborators in the festival - from the people working in the local theatre to schoolteachers, caretakers, municipal road and park agencies, and even the mayor.

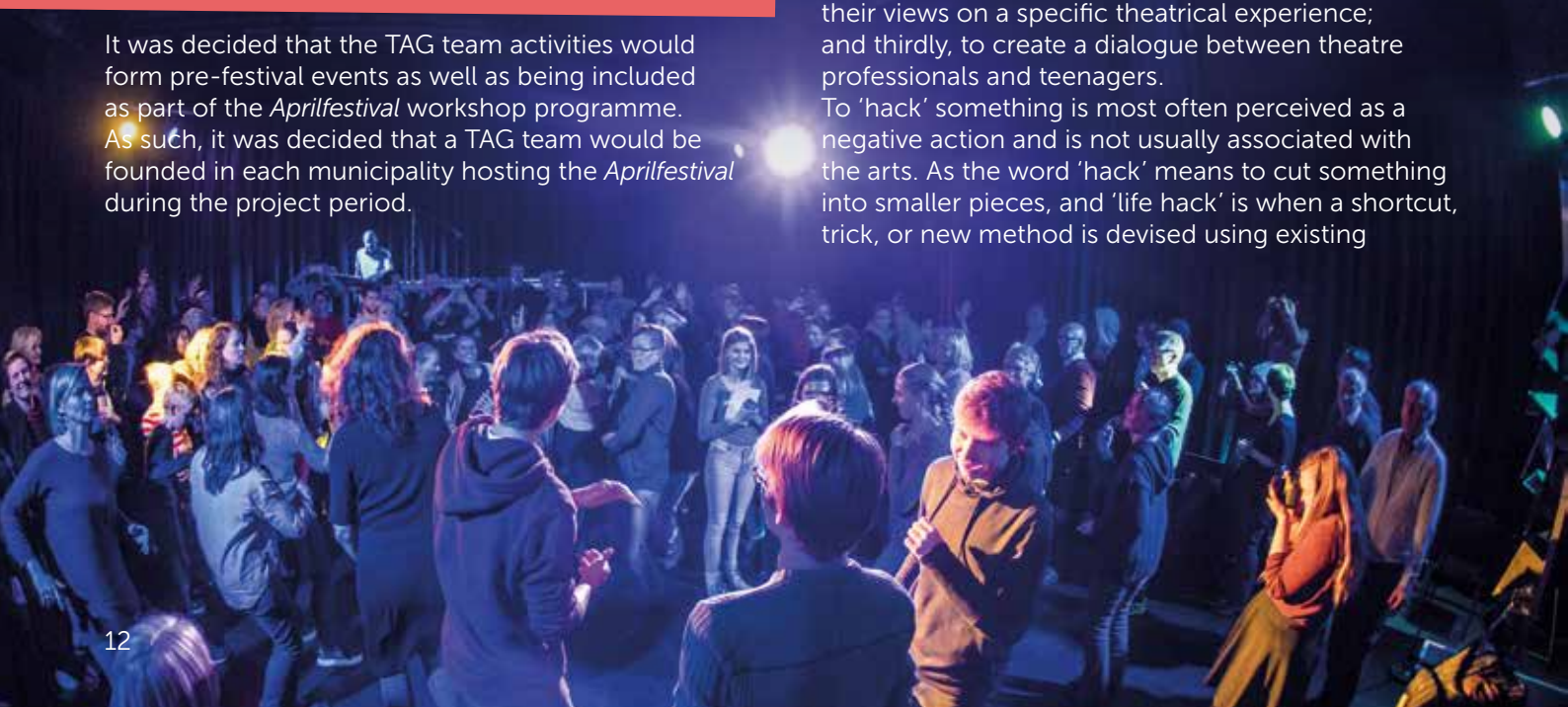
It was decided that the TAG team activities would form pre-festival events as well as being included as part of the *Aprilfestival* workshop programme. As such, it was decided that a TAG team would be founded in each municipality hosting the *Aprilfestival* during the project period.

### Introducing a New Method of Engagement – ‘Hacking the Theatre’

Exploring new methods of teenage engagement in theatre took place during a series of workshops both in the run up to, and during, two manifestations of *Aprilfestival* – firstly the *Aprilfestival* in the municipality of Sønderborg in 2017, and also the *Aprilfestival* hosted a year later in Syddjurs.

The idea of ‘Hacking the Theatre’ came about in response to several aims: firstly, to create workshops that focus on engaging teenagers in theatrical experiences; secondly, to use theatre criticism as a tool to create new methods for teenagers to express their views on a specific theatrical experience; and thirdly, to create a dialogue between theatre professionals and teenagers.

To ‘hack’ something is most often perceived as a negative action and is not usually associated with the arts. As the word ‘hack’ means to cut something into smaller pieces, and ‘life hack’ is when a shortcut, trick, or new method is devised using existing



materials to make an action easier, more productive, and more efficient, there are parallels with theatre criticism. When a piece of art is analysed, the critic reduces it down to all its constituent parts, looks at all the different pieces, and then presents them together as a subjective interpretation. In other words, a 'hack' involves taking out different pieces and doing something with them in order to offer new value. 'Hack the Theatre' began as a working title for our series of workshops. These explored and tested tools of talking about theatre, reflecting on the expectation and experience, and learning about how to express those reflections both through written and non-written forms of communication (see *Part 5 – Toolbox and Methods* to learn more about these tools). In this context, to 'Hack the Theatre' is to cut out or isolate a specific piece / element of the performance that stood out to you – for example, something you thought was fantastic, good, special, weird, or annoying – and to comment on it by using words, video, podcasts, drawing, body language, and so on in order to reshape and remodel it into different media formats. More details in Part 5.4  
N.B. Videos and hacks can be found on the T.E.E.N. website ([www.teentheatreetwork.eu](http://www.teentheatreetwork.eu)).

## 1.5 THE ROLE OF PORTUGAL

**A**s T.E.E.N. is a research project that investigates how teenagers use critical thinking to engage with theatre performances, an important part of the project has been to stay connected to professionals in the field of theatre criticism. As the premise of the T.E.E.N. project is that critical thinking, specifically theatre criticism, can be used

as a method of engaging teenagers, the knowledge and perspectives of a critic have been essential in gathering the ideas and tools of teenage engagement to be used on a European scale. Furthermore, sharing a common language with the field of theatre criticism will help us to make a solid base for a strong European network and to develop productive collaborations with many new partners in the future.

Taking on these responsibilities has been Rui Pina Coelho, a researcher from the *University of Lisbon*; the Chief Editor of the *Performing Arts and Theatre Studies Journal, Sinais de Cena*; and member of the *International Association of Theatre Critics*. Included in his role has been framing the project through research questions on theatre criticism and coordinating Pepys' Diary – an activity completed by everybody involved in the project, from the teenagers to the tutors, curators, and festival directors (N.B. *More about the research questions and Pepys' Diary can be found in Part 5 – Toolbox and Methods*). In addition, Rui Pina Coelho has offered a refreshing perspective in his essay, *'A Critic is Never Wrong'* that can be found in *Part 4* of this booklet.

These activities brought scholarly writing and research methodologies into the discussion with curators and producers from cultural institutions. This academic experience on theatre criticism is founded upon the researcher's experience of Theatre for Young Audiences in Portugal, whilst practical experiences comes from his role as a theatre critic at a European level.