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Agency and Generationing Aspects of Young Audience's Self-initiated Theatre-going Practices

Abstract

The greater part of professional theatre performances for young people in Sweden takes place during school hours, clearly situating theatre-going within a compulsory school context. Consequently, most audience reception studies with young audiences are carried out within this context as well. The aim of this article is to discuss young audience's agency within theatre-going practices which they take part of outside school hours, on their own initiative, as well as to discuss in what ways these theatre-going practices are generationally constituted. The article draws on theories from both theatre- and performance studies and childhood studies, where the concept of *theatre as event* is used as basic framework of understanding (Sauter 2000, 2008) and *generation(-ing)* (Alanen 2001) and *agency* (Esser 2016; James 2011; Lee 2009) are used analytically. The material consists of three transcribed in-depth focus group discussions with eight individuals, 13-15 years of age (five girls and three boys), who on a regular basis take part of professional theatre and performing arts in their leisure time. Even though the school as mediator is absent, adults still clearly impact young audience's theatre-going in several, and somewhat contradictory, ways paving way for as well as limit young audience's agency. The very infrastructure of theatre and performing arts outside school hours leans heavily on adult norm, communicating that the theatre is yet another public space that young people should not have (full) access to. At the same time adults do encourage and invite young people to participate in theatre-going practices outside school hours through networks and organizations connected

to venues and theatre organizations around Sweden. This article demonstrates such young voices. Though young audience's agency is tangible, it takes on various expressions and to varying extents. However, it still works within generational structures as young audiences are more or less depending on adult support, openness and/or willingness to share the world of theatre and performing arts with young audiences. Thus, generational boundaries are largely maintained by generationing practices, by adults and young people both.

Keywords: theatre; performing arts; young audiences; leisure time; theatre as event; agency; generation(-ing)

- Mohammed* *I saw another performance at the Skärholmen stage where you had like headphones on. And there were like mirrors.*
- Ellinor* *»Som i spegeln«? (»Like in the mirror« in Swedish. Recognizes the performance and suggests the title) Did you see it in school?*
- Mohammed* *No, by myself*
- Ellinor* *With your family?*
- Mohammed* *No, with my friends*
- Ellinor* *With your friends? Uhum... How come? (a noticeable surprised tone of voice)*
- Mohammed* *We were going to the mall in Skärholmen. I was supposed to buy Converse. But then I didn't. We wanted to go to the movies, but then my friends said« Nah, we can't take it, a movie is too long. So... Jalla! We wanted to go to the theatre.*
- Ellinor* *So you bought tickets? (a questioning tone of voice)*
- Mohammed* *Yes*
- Ellinor* *You and your friends? (a considerably questioning tone of voice)*
- Mohammed* *Yeah, they had cash too*
- Ellinor* *Pardon? (not perceiving what Mohammed said)*
- Mohammed* *Money*
- Mikaela* *Pengar (»money« in Swedish, turns to me as if to interpret)*
- Ellinor* *Would you like to go back?*
- Mohammed* *Yeah, what do you think, bro? Definitely! Jalla!*
- Ellinor* *But you said to me before that theatre is boring*
- Mohammed* *I was kidding. That was the old Mohammed*

(Lidén 2022:174f)

Introduction

Professional theatre and performing arts for young audiences are immensely dependent on adults. To begin with, playwrights, dramatists, directors, actors, scenographers and costume designers, just to name a few, are involved in producing and performing. Other adults, often teachers, principals, governmental and municipal employees but also parents and relatives, then make the arrangements and/or escort young people to the theatre, thus also become part of the audience. Consequently, most initiatives and arrangements tend to be kept away from the primary audiences themselves. Although benevolent, a distinctive feature of theatre for young people, in comparison to its adult counterpart, is that its audiences rarely choose to attend themselves. This constitutes the basic premise of what I call the »scenario of children's theatre« (Lidén 2022).

The greater part of all professional theatre for young people in Sweden takes place during school hours (Swedish Agency for Cultural Policy Analysis 2024). It is thereby subject to compulsory schooling and largely supported by governmental funding and subventions. On the one hand this makes theatre and performing arts (potentially) available for nearly all children and young people in Sweden regardless of social background. This fits well with article 31 of the *UN Convention on The Rights of the Child* (1989), incorporated in Swedish legislation in 2022. On the other hand this clearly situates theatre-going within a school context, also shown to leave traces in young audience's experiences of theatre (Lidén 2022; Lundberg, Hallberg & Zetterqvist Nelson 2012; Helander 2011, 1998; Wittrock 2011; Lund 2008, 2004; Gustafsson 2008; Hjorth & Klosterberg 1997). Adults are thus crucial when it comes to enabling professional theatre and performing arts for children and young people in the first place. However, adults also profoundly shape the conditions and influence the overall theatre-going practices for young audiences.

To say the least, it is quite unusual that young people around 11 years of age, like Mohammed and his friends, go to the theatre on their own without accompanying adults. Mohammed made visible a rift within the scenario of children's theatre, and by doing so highlighting an infrastructure generally not well customized for young people exercising agency to buy theatre tickets themselves. Professional theatre for young audiences slightly stands out in the general child and youth culture context in being so surrounded by adult intermediation when it comes to the mere access to it. One can compare this with the agency of young people of the same age as Mohammed buying tickets on their own to go to the movies together with friends, or young people's access to TV/film, literature, gaming or social media. Worth noting in this matter, and somewhat contradictory, is that Swedish theatre praxis generally do attribute quite an amount of agency to children and young people, addressing them as competent theatre audiences who are more than capable to appreciate complex artistic expressions and themes (Lorentzon 2018; Helander 2014; Helander 1998; Davet 2011). However, when it comes to acknowledging young audience's agency as theatre *consumers*, that is facilitating young audiences to buy tickets on their own after school hours, the current infrastructure does not attribute young people agency to the same extent.

This conversation with Mohammed lingered and eventually led to a two-year postdoctoral research project on which this article is built. Contributing to the relevance of the project, initiatives have lately begun to sprout among theatre organizations and venues around Sweden in order to reach young audiences without, or at least with *less*, adult intermediators,

in addition to keep addressing school audiences. Several networks and associations of all sorts involving young people who take great interest in theatre and performing arts have thus been founded and this article demonstrates such young voices.

Research aims and questions

The aim of this article is to discuss young audience's agency within theatre-going practices which they take part of on their own initiative. Even though the school context is absent in this case, generational aspects undoubtedly still affect young audience's theatre-going practices. Therefore, the article also seeks to discuss in what ways young people's theatre-going practices are generationally constituted. This falls out in the following two research questions: How do members of young audiences perform agency within self-initiated theatre-going practices? How do generational aspects emerge within this context?

Previous research

Theatre for young audiences (TYA) is modestly represented within the overall research field of theatre and performance studies, which also applies for audience studies, although emerging (Schonmann 2006; Reason 2010). Bringing these together suggests that there is indeed room for expansion. However, audience research within TYA conducted in the Nordic region demonstrate not only vibrance but potential to immensely enrich the research field of theatre and performance studies in general, not least when it comes to research involving the very youngest audiences (Nagel 2018; Nagel & Hovik 2016; Böhnisch 2010). Where audience studies are carried out on adult audiences these are usually demographically oriented, often resembling those of the market research kind (Snyder-Young & Omasta 2022). TYA audience research from the Nordic region is often designed differently, placing young audiences and their experiences of performances in the centre (Lund, Brinch, Lorentzon 2024; Lidén 2022; Aspán 2020; Helander 2011; 2004; Wirdeñäs 2000). Each member of an audience brings its own personal set of experiences, references and interpretations to the theatre (Freshwater 2009; Bennett 1997). Not only is this inevitable, Snyder-Young and Omasta claim (2022), but necessary, as they argue for a critical empirical audience research that should be multifaceted. Audience research in TYA has developed from mere observing and mapping audience expressions at specific moments of performances, to now encompass qualitative, complex and interview-based studies to a greater extent (Saldaña 2022:52f). This project fits well with the latter and follows the footsteps of the audience research conducted in the Nordic region.

The dyadic relationship between school and theatre is frequently discussed, where school is often described as being both indispensable to the theatre as well as being considered a problematic spouse (Lidén 2022; Aspán 2020; Hald 2015; Lundberg, Hallberg & Zetterqvist Nelson 2012; Wittrock 2011; Gustafsson 2008; Gustafsson & Fritzén 2004; Lund 2008; Lund 2004; Helander 2011, 1998, 2004; Hjorth & Klosterberg 1997). This is not solely a Nordic dilemma. Omasta (2015, 2009) and Reason (2010) illustrate this intricate relationship within North American and British contexts. Australian audience studies point in the same direction (Anderson, Ewing & Flemming, 2014:62ff; Stinson & Burton, 2016:69), as do Israeli receptions research by Schonmann (2006). However, a scenario where school is *not* part of the infrastructure of providing professional theatre and performing arts to young audiences

has rendered very little attention academically. Hence, this project provides new, albeit initial, knowledge to the field.

Theoretical framework and concepts

Theoretically, this article has one foot within theatre- and performance studies and the other within childhood studies. The notion of *theatre as event*, drawing on Sauter (2000, 2008) means studying performances with a wider scope than focusing merely on what is performed on stage, which enables bringing the audience into the performance analysis. This article, however, stretches the concept even further thus making it possible to both include and exceed the time and space of the actual performances. Audience's experiences and thoughts derived from performances do not necessarily end with a final round of applause or a curtain fall. Such experiences, in this article made visible through focus group discussions, can thus be included in theatrical events, as do experiences of theatre-going as a whole.

This broadened notion of theatre as event constitutes this article's basic framework of understanding, as it allows the many layers in time and space surrounding theatre performances to be included. All these layers also inhabit adults who tend to impact the theatrical events that young audiences take part of, thus leading to the concepts used in this article emanating from childhood studies; *generation(-ing)* (Alanen 2001) and *agency* (Esser 2016; James 2011; Lee (2009)). Both are key concepts within the field of childhood studies, emerging from what has commonly been described as a shift of paradigm during the 1970s and -80s. Childhood studies acknowledge children and young people as social actors with agency of their own. As such they construct, as well as have the ability to re-construct, the social and cultural structures they inhabit together with adults (Qvortrup et al., 2011; James & Prout, 2003). James argues that the concept of agency constitutes the most important theoretical development within the field, and before the paradigm shift there was no such thing as »the agentic child« (James 2011:37). However, agency should not be understood as an innate characteristic, but rather relationally and generationally co-constructed. Different social contexts thus offer different kinds and extents of agency for children and young people and to varying extents, where generational hierarchy can, but does not have to, be a determining factor (Esser 2016:64 f). Lee (2009:72) suggests children's agency be considered as *distributed* in situations shared by adults. Similarly, the concept of generation is to be understood as relational and co-constructed by adults and children both in processes best described as *generationing* (Esser 2016; Alanen 2001). This translates to the context of theatre and performing arts that children and adults both are social actors exercising agency within theatre-going practices. The scenario of children's theatre, mentioned above, is in itself a good example of such a context that, as Mohammed showed, also carries the potential to be changed by young people's agency, thus also potentially change the whole of the theatre-going practices.

Methodology

Woodhead & Faulkner (2008) stress the importance of using research methods that are meaningful to the participants, not least when involving children and young people, for ethical and validity reasons both. In my prior research the participants aged 6-13 expressed great appreciation discussing their experiences of theatre-going with peers and me as a researcher

(Lidén 2022). Hence, I decided to continue working with focus group discussions in this project. However, researching young people's experiences of self-initiated theatre-going practices outside school hours did give rise to some challenging, although expected, methodological circumstances. Ruling out school as intermediary made the process of recruiting research participants slightly difficult. As initial attempt, 100 printed research inquiry flyers were placed in theatre foyers at three venues each in Stockholm offering weekend theatre performances for audiences ranging from 6-13 years of age. Interested parties were asked to contact me should they be interested in participating. As I attended all venues a few times as part of the audience myself, I noticed a tangible interest from young audience members and some parents, of whom some even approached me having recognized me from the flyer. One of the venues even ran out of flyers and decided on their own to produce additional copies on several occasions. Quite surprisingly, despite this apparent interest, this procedure generated no participants at all. Simultaneously, I contacted the organizer of a network of young people connected to a venue in Gothenburg. Although this venue mainly addresses adult audiences, the youth network is meant to function as a means to attract young people, who in turn are expected to serve as ambassadors for other young people to find their way to the venue. This recruitment strategy turned out successfully. Hence, I decided to reach out to other networks of the kind. Although most of these consisted of individuals from 18 years of age, I managed to locate three involving younger participants as well. I sent out research inquiries through the coordinators, who distributed them to the young members of their networks. This resulted in eight voluntary young participants, 13-15 years of age, five girls and three boys, who all on a regular basis, although to varying extents, take part of theatre and performing arts on their own initiative outside school hours. Written consents were obtained from both the young participants as well as their parents. The research participants were asked to choose their own pseudonyms for me to use when citing them. Aside from being highly appreciated, this procedure has proven to be of significance for improving participants' understanding of what it means to participate in research, but also in explaining how confidentiality is assured throughout the research process (Alderson 2005; Danby & Farrell 2007).

I travelled to the participants' locations to conduct focus group discussions. Two of a total of three focus group discussions involved participants living within or right outside the second and third largest cities in Sweden (Gothenburg and Malmö). The third focus group consisted of two participants living in smaller towns in south/mid-Sweden, who are part of a nationwide network gathering young people with an interest in theatre and performing arts. Consequently, the material thus consists of transcriptions from three audio recorded in-depth focus group discussions, with the duration of around 50 minutes each. Even though the focus group discussions are few in number, the participants' pronounced interest in theatre and performing arts resulted in a surprisingly dense material, where almost all recorded information turned out to be of high relevance to the project, and was thus transcribed.

Agency and generational aspects of young audience's self-initiated theatre-going practices

The fact that the school context is not present in young audience's self-initiated theatre-going practices does, by no means, mean that adult impact is all together absent. The young audience's stated experiences show that generational aspects do still permeate the theatre-going practices, on several levels and to different extents, where adults both pave way for as well as limit young audience agency. This is accounted for below, sorted under three prominent, although intertwined, themes: *Adults as norm, chaperones and financial supporters, Young audiences as liminal, generational outsiders and Obstacles and opportunities within self-initiated theatre-going practices*. Uniting the three themes and their contents is a demonstration of a broadened notion of theatre as event (Sauter 2000; 2008) – encompassing aspects beyond the time and place of the actual performances.

Adults as norm, chaperones and financial supporters

The participants mentioned experiences of performances covering a wide range of repertoire: *Don Giovanni, The Great Gatsby, Wicked, Carmen, La Bohème, Mean girls, Cabaret, Oliver, Beetlejuice, The Nutcracker* as well as contemporary dance performances like *Hammer and Vaults of heaven*, to name a few. As stated above, performances intended for young audiences are usually and predominantly provided during school hours. Consequently, for young people to pursue an interest in theatre and performing arts in one's leisure time, often means taking part of performances produced with an adult audience in mind, or rather with *no* explicitly defined age group at all. The adult audience is, as ever so often, the unstated norm, thus does not need definition (Young-Bruehl 2012; Wall 2010). However, other parameters do indeed communicate a presumed adult audience, such as ticket prices and time of day, both often being out of reach for young audiences. This indicates that the theatre (after school hours) is yet another public space, highly generationally constituted, that young people should not have full access to. However, the young network at the venue in Gothenburg do invite their members to attend dress rehearsals and selected performances. Alex, Viktor and Victoria from Gothenburg speak about a dance performance they have all seen, although well aware of that it was not intended for their generation.

Alex *But it wasn't really intended for....*

Viktor *No*

Alex *...for kids, was it?*

Victoria *No*

Ellinor *No?*

Viktor *I wouldn't say that/.../ I would say that it's a little more complicated than others/.../*

Ellinor *In what way?*

Viktor *Yeah, well like it is a lot oh, what do you say...*

Alex *They... are hard to understand in general, dance performances and operas, I think*

Victoria *Yes*

Alex Like *... you don't like get a clear picture of it. You get to like figure out how it is yourself/.../One has to like imagine how it is*

This performance, not »intended for kids«, is described as »more complicated« and not so easy to »understand«. The same goes for dance and opera performances in general, which they claim leave more room for one's own imagination. Dance and opera performances, it seems, require the experiences of theatre and performing arts often held by adults in order to fully enjoy them, thus implicating they are not actually intended for young audiences.

There are simply fewer opportunities to take part of performances produced specifically for young audiences after school hours, and beggars can't be choosers. Two of the participants, Haylie and Ebbie, who both live in small towns in south/mid-Sweden, expressed taking any given chance to see any kind of performance comes their way, be it for young or adult audiences, toddlers or youths, professional or amateur and even friends' recitals. For them age recommendations do not seem to matter. Spoken theatre and musicals are the genres Ebbie and Haylie enjoy the most. However, taking part of performances intended for the societal norm, adults, means ticket prices are out of reach and far from the subsidized prices often allocated for school audiences. Living in a small town also makes regular theatre-going difficult as opportunities are often rare. Consequently, they are not only dependent on their parents financially in order to pursue their interest in theatre, they also often need a ride to cover the distance. Sometimes a couple of hours away and on rare occasions even abroad, which requires quite some ingenuity from the youngsters, who often lack funding. Ebbie describes how she and her mother once negotiated using Ebbie's school grades as currency:

- Ebbie* *When I went [to the theatre] in London, then I had to pay for both my mum and myself because I sort of had to drag her with me (laughs)*
- Ellinor* *(laughs) Did you pay for the tickets?*
- Ebbie* *Eh... yeah but... she said like »if you manage to get this grade...*
- Ellinor* *Aha*
- Ebbie* *... then you can like... then you only need to pay for your own ticket/.../or like... yeah, something like that/.../and I do pretty well in school so that was not a problem (laughs)*

Though depending on adults to quite some extent in order to take part of performances, the participants do find room for agency, using all possible resources available. Not only does Ebbie »pay« for her mother's ticket with her grades, but she also pays for her own ticket, and she arranges for an adult chaperone to escort her, for this exceptional occasion to a performance in London. Haylie shares similar experiences:

- Haylie* *I am like the only one in my family who is really into performing arts (giggles)*
- Ellinor* *Is that so?*
- Haylie* *So I try to like convince them... »Don't you want to see this performance with me, or come with me to see this one?«*
- Ellinor* *So you are the one introducing...*
- Haylie* *Yes*
- Ellinor* *...for the rest of the family?*
- Haylie* *My mum is beginning to warm up (giggles)*

One could easily assume that young people's interest in theatre and performing arts would stem from growing up in families who share their interest. However, and quite surprisingly, that did not seem to be the case regarding all participants, as shown above with Haylie and Ebbie. Although they both grew up in families with a general interest in the arts, they describe how they are the ones introducing theatre for the members of their family. Though it seems to emerge from a basic need of adult escort and financial support, they are indeed exercising quite some agency reconstructing the cultural habits of their families, using all means and capital at hand making their interest in theatre possible (Qvortrup et al., 2011; James & Prout, 2003).

Young audiences as liminal, generational outsiders

Not surprisingly, the participants living in or nearby the large cities of Gothenburg and Malmö spoke of more regular access to theatre and performing arts, where they seem not as dependent on adults to the same extent as Ebbie and Haylie express. Not only do they live near the venues of their choice, but their engagements within the networks offer regular opportunities to see theatre and performing arts as well. This, however, means that adult coordinators have facilitated for the young members to access, perhaps not all, but a number of selected performances at times of their own choice. This is similar to what Lee (2009) calls *distributed agency*. In this case adults invite and make room for young people's agency within the adult-oriented theatre-going practices. Alex, Viktor and Victoria mainly see opera or dance performances where they go by themselves, one by one. However, they often end up meeting peers from the network once at the venue, but they do not plan ahead to go together. Nor do they talk to friends and peers at school about taking part of theatre and performing art and asking a friend to come along seems almost out of the question. This is worth a remark, not least considering networks where young members are expected to function as ambassadors in order to attract other young people to the venues. That kind of ambition thus might lack support. And the reasons seem manifold. Theatre and performing arts in general, the participants say, are perceived by people their age being for »geeks«, or »old people«. Alex claims: »Apparently it is not as popular anymore... to go to the opera amongst kids«. Similarly, Ebbie and Haylie talk about theatre as an artform associated with old age, both in the sense of being ancient and an art form primarily intended for senior citizens:

Ebbie Well, it is kind of geeky...

Haylie I think the geek-label... I also think it's because one thinks of it as something old/.../I mean... they did like this [performed theatre] in ancient Rome and in Greece/.../ And then I mean... when I am at the theatre, I am always the youngest one there (laughs) /.../ I mean I don't see a lot of people in my own age. I see like... old people. And I think that is why it [theatre] is perceived like »nah, that is dorky, that is only for old people. Why would a 14-year-old want to do something that a bunch of 60-year-olds would do?/.../Not many young people seem to be interested in going to the theatre.

The participants seem well aware of that they are entering a space not primarily intended for young people. They seem to position themselves in a liminal, almost ambivalent, position.

Sometimes they consider themselves being outsiders yearning to belong to the adult theatre community, and sometimes they feel they are already a part of it, although not always recognized as such by adults, where they often talk about themselves as part of a chosen group of young people exclusively entitled to occupy this adult space. Their interest in theatre and performing arts seem to also separate them from peers of the same age, adding to the liminality. Viktor, Victoria and Alex:

- Ellinor* *What do your friends say when they learn that you see so many performances? Are they curious?*
- Alex* *I... it is not really something that is discussed at my school*
- Ellinor* *Isn't it?*
- Alex* *No*
- Ellinor* *How come?*
- Victoria* *I usually don't...*
- Alex* *I am the only one that like... have been to the opera, so to speak...*
- Ellinor* *Okey*
- Alex* *None of them have like been there/.../it's not something you talk about*
- Victoria* *I don't usually tell people that I have seen performances... so uhm...*
- Alex* *No me neither*
- Victoria* *... I don't know how people would react*

Viktor, however, says he once tried to bring a friend to the opera, but his friend was not allowed to stay out that late in the evening, again highlighting the adult norm in theatre-going practices after school hours. Viktor and Alex demonstrate yet another reason they are hesitant to ask friends to come along, claiming that people their age are not as knowledgeable when it comes to opera as they themselves are, lacking both the interest and experience of theatre and performing arts.

- Viktor* *They are not as informed, or what do you say*
- Ellinor* *Uhum...*
- Alex* *I wouldn't be able to ask any of my friends/.../ if I want to go to the opera, I ask my grandma/.../Opera doesn't really feel like something you do with, like, friends*

Not only do they believe that other young people might feel uncomfortable with the art form of opera itself, but also the duration of the performances. Many operas last for hours and they fear that other young people their age will find it boring and hard to sit still, a skill they themselves claim to have acquired over the years. Alex utterance draws again on relying on adult escort, but this time not to pay, not do drive them, but as sheer company!

Where the Gothenburg participants have explicitly been invited by adults to take part of performing arts within the network, Haylie and Ebbie express experiences where they have been treated like they do not belong by the adult co-members of the audience. They speak of being side-eyed with suspicion by the adult majority audience, as if they were worried they would ruin the event by not being able to behave in a theatre-going context. Haylie shares an example from a rare occasion where she managed to bring a friend to the theatre:

»When I went to The Great Gatsby, like I did recently, then there were none... I mean there were me and my friend who I managed to bring with me... uhm... (laughs). We were the youngest ones, no doubt about that. We were absolutely the youngest and we got looks, like 'why are there two children here?'«

Other participants too share stories where adults in the audience and/or the organizers and staff at the theatre have made them feel alienated. However, not always manifested as adult skepticism, as in the example by Haylie above, but instead being overly and exaggeratedly welcomed. Yet, still leaving them with feelings of not belonging. Both adult approaches emphasize generational distinction and are thus processes of generationing (Alanen 2001). The young audience seem to be positioned by adults primarily as young, in the meaning *not* adults, rather than being considered fellow human beings who also take interest in theatre and performing arts. Though for the young participants age seems to be of subordinate significance, like Alex with his grandmother, while a great interest in theatre is more important. Most participants do, however, express wishes to go to the theatre with young people in their own age who share their interest, but those seem hard to find. And going to the theatre with peers during school hours does not appear to fulfill this need according to Haylie and Ebbie:

- Haylie* *Well I would like to be able to go with people who like show at least some interest but have not really been there before. Then I could like show them: »this is my world«*
- Ebbie* *Well it feels like it depends on the context, like what you are about to see*
- Haylie* *Well, yeah*
- Ebbie* *Maybe you don't want to go see everything with your classmates, maybe you don't want to see certain things with your parents. Some performances you would want to go with your friends/.../*
- Haylie* *Yes. It's also a lot of fun sometimes to go together with others who share your interest in theatre, because then you can like sit down together afterwards and discuss like »how did they do that?« and »did you notice that detail?« And such things/.../ and you can't do that with people who are not interested in theatre/.../*
- Ellinor* *And such conversations, do they arise when you go to the theatre with school?*
- Ebbie* *No*
- Haylie* *No*
- Ebbi* *Many people in school think theatre is for geeks and that it's a waste of time*
- Haylie* *Like an excuse not to do your schoolwork*

Although in a liminal position, the participants seem proud to be associated with the adult-oriented community of theatre and performing arts, where few people their own age seem to (want to) participate. Though they clearly enjoy a certain perceived exclusiveness and seem to consider theatre-going to be somewhat an elevated activity for their age group, they

would still gladly welcome other young people to join them. The emerging networks and organizations connected to venues and theatres around Sweden, such as the ones represented in this article, constitute promising opportunities for young people with an interest in theatre and performing arts to connect with each other. Although it would be beneficial should they lower their age-limit to also include participants under 18 years of age.

Obstacles and opportunities within self-initiated theatre-going practices

This liminal, generational position did not seem to resonate quite as much with the experiences of the participants in Malmö, nor the vast extent of dependence on adults in order to merely access the performances. Hence, this enables agency to a larger extent for the young people in Malmö in their theatre-going practices. Dua, Ruth and Gabriel mainly take part of dance performances and music concerts, and they do so together with their friends, which stands out among the participants. However, these theatre-going practices are not evenly distributed throughout the year. These are sometimes, though not always, specifically addressed to young audiences, although it does not seem to matter. The Malmö participants specifically mention one big annual event, the Malmö Festival in August, where they take part of a wide range of performances for free. This affordable, accessible and highly appreciated occasion offers opportunities to take part of performances together with friends, thus reinforcing young audience's agency. The festival is described by the participants as a very important event not only when it comes to accessing performances, but also as a socially significant event among friends their age. Dua explains »/.../everyone is there and everyone writes about it in the group chat«.

Dua is greatly interested in dance performances and those are the kind she takes part of the most. She explains that she might very well go by herself, but preferably with friends and sometimes with her family, mostly together with her mother. Her agency stands out among the participants, since she often plans in advance and she knows exactly where to find information about upcoming performances as well as how to access them. She mentions yet another annual event that seems to be of importance for her as well as her agency in accessing performances:

- Dua* *The dance scene in Malmö is... compared with other cities in Sweden... it's a bit bigger and then you can uhm/.../ you find people who like to dance here... easier and then you can go to places... by yourself and all/.../There's a week... Malmö Dance weekend. It's a huge event/.../where you can go around participating in workshops, buy tickets on your own /.../ and then I have gone out on my own, with my friends who are also interested in dance. Then you have looked up and bought your own tickets and checked the schedule...*
- Ellinor* *So you know where to find information? Do you know how to get information about what is being performed right now?*
- Dua* *Well we... like there is this... uhm... It's called Kul i Malmö (Fun in Malmö). There you can usually find out/.../they have a website where /.../ they show what's going on every day, what time and what place*

Living in a big city has its advantages when it comes to accessing performances, thus exercising agency in that very context. The Malmö participants seem quite satisfied. I asked what all the participants would like to ask of adult decision makers. Dua is more than happy as it is for her own sake, also appreciating Malmö's location close to Copenhagen. However, she expresses solidarity with other young people in Sweden and wishes for them to enjoy her privileges:

»In Malmö I think there is a lot going on already. Like I... you can of course always have more and that would be great, but if anything, then maybe... I don't know... like for others in other places to have this too. That everyone would have what we have here... here in Malmö when it comes to culture and stuff. Because it's really... there are so many people from different places and... well like there are... so many religions and different traditions and all/.../ That's really nice (laughs). I mean it's really good here«.

Haylie and Ebbie wish for better access to performances for the sake of their own as well as for others, recognizing the unfair conditions too. Haylie explains:

»Make sure theatres are available in more places. The closest one for me /.../ I have to travel for hours. Still, it's pretty close. But think about those who live in like... uhm... Åmål... or I don't know/.../They don't have anything like that/.../So I would say invest in more places to see theatre. And increase the budget so that ticket prices can be lowered so that young people are able to go/.../ I think an important part is that it shouldn't be too expensive/.../I think that if you make it less expensive, I think more children would want... or more young people would want to go«.

She points out that ticket prices are often out of reach for young people, not only excluding them from taking part of performances, but also communicating that these are not intended for young people. Hence, young audience's agency in theater-going practices is also a question of marketing and communication. Haylie and Ebbie suggest that theatres and other venues address young people more directly in their public communication in order to attract them. If addressed directly, as agentic members of an audience in the broader understanding of theatre as event (Sauter 2000; 2008), young people would thus be more motivated. In the long run that might even boost their interest, thus stimulating their agency in theatre-going practices:

Ebbie Really... young people should be able to find their way to the theatre themselves and if someone is forcing them/.../then they will not enjoy it. Like they must... there must be more advertising in like social media so that people will actually know....

Haylie Yes, exactly

Ebbie ... know that this world exists. Uhm... because like nobody... not many people go look for information about things to do anymore/.../It's like if you find...

Haylie ...yeah, find it on social media

Ebbie *... something to do on social media. Like spreading information in a better way*

Adjusted communication strategies in order to reach young people more directly could indeed be worth considering, thus facilitating young audience's agency in theatre-going. Not least should this be of relevance when young people are indeed the primary audience. Ebbie and Haylie imply that using social media platforms frequented by young people might be fruitful, claiming that young people do not often actively search for information. Instead, information tends to *find them* on social media. Information about performances through social media might pique their interest and initiative will thus come from themselves, instead of being imposed upon them. These arguments are indeed interesting to relate to the fact that most professional performances for young audiences are mediated by school, hence making performances mandatory and, to use the words of Ebbie, in one sense *forced* upon. An ongoing debate in Finland, concerning high school audiences acting out towards the performers during dance performances at the National Ballet highlights these issues (Yle 2025-11-21). By some, this kind of behavior is believed to be the direct consequence of cutbacks and slimmed opportunities for school audiences to take part of theatre and performing art during school hours. Although perhaps Ebbie offers an alternative, or at least a complementary, interpretation, that performances during school hours are often perceived by young people to be imposed upon them by adults, thus might trigger resistance. Her view also finds support in my earlier research (Lidén 2022), where school audiences (13-year-olds) admitted that the sheer presence of a teacher within a theatre performance context seems to prompt defiant behaviors by the pupils.

Still Ruth in Malmö finds it important that children and young people are indeed given the opportunity to take part of theatre and performing arts during school hours, in order to balance inequalities when it comes to access to theatre and performing arts in the first place.

»There are maybe many... who like... for example children that have parents who are not used to this, growing up with things like this and therefor do not attend anything. And then it might be fun... uhm... that for example school or other adults help out so that you can at least try it out. It might be that you don't like it. But it might also be that you find a new hobby or really love it«.

In theory, public performances during weekends produced with young audiences in mind are already part of the existing infrastructure of theatre and performing arts for young audiences. They should thus be able to attract young people to a higher degree, and by doing so offer opportunities of agency for young people to buy tickets on their own. In practice, however, young people do not seem to think of weekend performances as opportunities to take part of theatre and performing arts together with friends (see also Lidén 2022). Leve & Ruwe (2022) claim, though based on American context, this being a mere question of labelling performances in the marketing process. Theatres rather market weekend performances as »Family performances« than »Children's performances« in order to appeal the adult buyer of the tickets. It is reasonable to assume that this be the case also in Sweden, reinforcing young people's notion of theatre-going in general as a mainly adult initiative.

Concluding words

Further and more developed knowledge about young audience's agency and motivation to theatre and performing arts, be it within a school context or not, is not only necessary but simply reasonable, not least considering that most performances are indeed carried out during school hours and are thus supported by governmental funding. Deepened knowledge about both means of offering performances to young audiences, be it during school hours or in young peoples' leisure time, have great potential to enrich, complement and develop each other. Where the former has the potential to establish an interest in theatre and performing arts widely for young people, the latter can be developed in order to meet the needs of young people who wish to continue pursuing this interest after school-hours.

As stated, the young participants in this project are few, partly due to the fact that they are hard to locate without help from networks and associations and, as of today, the majority of those involve only young adults. Consequently, this project is best considered a first step in filling a gap that is academically, as well as in praxis, previously overlooked.

Notes

1. This is a translated excerpt from a focus group interview with Mohammed and some peers of his in 5th grade (11 years old), from my dissertation (Lidén 2022). Mohammed and Mikaela are pseudonyms that the participants decided by themselves.
2. Still, as stated in a report by Swedish Assitej (2022), the possibilities to take part of theatre and performing arts for children and young people are quite unevenly distributed across Sweden.
3. »31:1: States Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.
31:2: States Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity«.
4. Several children and young people in my dissertation spoke of regularly going to the movies with friends, buying tickets on their own. Many of them expressed that they had not even considered the possibility of buying tickets to a theatre performance by their own initiative and go together with their friends, since theatre-going is perceived closely intertwined with school practice (Lidén 2022).
5. A detailed TYA research overview is provided in Lidén (2022).
6. In this section I use the terms »child« and »children« since the research field from which two of the article's theoretical concepts are emanating from is referred to as »childhood studies«. Although in the rest of the article I mainly use the term »young people«, referring to individuals in the upper age range of childhood. However, there is no clear boundary between the two. As shown further on in this article, the participants sometimes refer to themselves as »children«, sometimes as »young people«.
7. Conducting research with minors requires continuous methodological and ethical consideration. Hence, an application to the Swedish Ethical Review Authority and a data processing plan, aiming to structure the work at an early stage in order to handle research data in a secure manner throughout the project, was carried out. Registry number at the Swedish Ethical Review Authority: 2024-01172.01.

8. From what I could see, all children and young people were accompanied by adults.
9. To ensure participant confidentiality these networks/organizations are not mentioned by name.
10. It is worth mentioning that theatre and performing arts for young audiences are highly segmented based on age, thus might risk communicating an expected progression and advancement.
11. Distributed agency can also be said to be practiced by The Royal Dramatic Theatre in Stockholm (Dramaten), who offers membership for young audiences under 26 years of age to book tickets for a heavily reduced price to, what they claim, are an unlimited number of performances. However, the tickets can only be booked two weeks prior to the performances and therefore in practice only include unsold single tickets, if any.

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Biography

Ellinor Lidén holds a PhD in Theatre Studies from Stockholm University. Her research interest revolves around professional theatre and performing arts for children and young people, where her prime focus is young audience's own perspectives of theatre-going practices, both within and outside a compulsory school context. Being a scholar within theatre and performance studies as well as being anchored within the studies of children's culture Ellinor's work is interdisciplinary, drawing on both theatre- and performance studies as well as childhood studies and often actualizing generational issues.

