

## **The Democratic Potential of Theatre Talks**

**Louise Ejgod Hansen**

### **ABSTRACT**

The article discusses and analyzes the democratic potential of theatre-going within the framework of cultural policy. Theoretically, the article is based on three different approaches: theatre research and the link between theatre and democracy, cultural policy research on the strategy of democratization of culture, and the democracy theory of James S. Fishkin. The analysis is based on the empirical material of thirty-one theatre talks carried out as part of an audience development project and focuses on four different aspects of the democratic potential of theatre: First, how the theatre talks gave the participants the opportunity to reflect on the experience and thus gain a better understanding of the theatrical event. Secondly, the importance of the social setting of the theatrical event, and thus of creating a safe framework for new theatre visitors. Thirdly, the article provides a critical approach to a target-oriented approach to audience development in which the content of the performance should be matched with certain audience segments. And fourth, the article points to an outcome of the experience related to the challenging of one's own view point and thus expanding one's horizon.

### **BIOGRAPHY**

Louise Ejgod Hansen is a postdoctoral fellow at the Department of Aesthetics and Communication – Dramaturgy, Aarhus University. Her main area of research is cultural policy. She has, amongst other works, published her research on artistic quality, decentralization and audience development. During 2010-12 she carried out a research-and-development project in the region of Central Denmark in co-operation with Scenekunstnetværket Region Midtjylland.

# The Democratic Potential of Theatre Talks

LOUISE EJGOD HANSEN

“It touches me in a way so that I have to make up my mind about it. And when I walk out of here, I have the feeling that it has moved me in some way – and I have had that feeling the two other times as well. And you can’t deny that that is a cool criterion when that happens”.<sup>1</sup>

The quote is from a so-called *theatre talk* that was a part of an audience development project carried out by Scenekunstnetværket Region Midtjylland, a network of nineteen professional theatres in the region of Central Denmark. Several groups of around eight primarily non-theatre-goers were invited to experience three performances and to talk with each other immediately after each performance. As an audience development project *Theatre Talks* had, at its core, an ideal of enhancing the democratic potential of theatre. This participant verbalizes what the democratic potential of theatre might be. In this article I will take a closer look at *theatre talks* and use them as a case study to discuss the idea that theatre can contribute to the democratization of society.

I will approach the question from three different perspectives: first, that of theatre, trying to put into words how the link between theatre as an art form and democracy can be understood; second, that of cultural policy, because the whole idea of audience development that frames the case study is highly influenced by a cultural policy agenda of democratization, inclusion and participation. And third, that of democracy, where I will introduce James S. Fishkin’s thoughts on democracy which will help develop a deeper understanding of the democratic potentials of theatre.

## THEATRE

In itself, theatre has a close and complex relationship to democracy. Theatre and democracy both originated in ancient Greece, which in itself implies some kind of connection. But also the collectivity of the theatrical experience has contributed to the idea that theatre is perhaps the most democratic of all art forms. In his book *Theatre and Citizenship: The History of a Practice*,<sup>2</sup> David Wiles analyzes the historical development of the relationship between theatre and citizenship. He ends his book with a celebration of the democratic potential of theatre: “Although it has lost some of its former cultural eminence, theatre remains a uniquely valuable testing ground for citizenship both because it brings citizens face to face in an interactive space, and because of its history.”<sup>3</sup> In the final chapter, “The People, the Folk and the Modern Public Sphere”, Wiles presents a contemporary analysis of the relationship between theatre and citizenship and thus of an important aspect of the question of democratization. Here he presents two different understandings of the democratic potential of theatre: one is based on the community-building potential of theatregoing, which means that the democratic potential of theatre is its ability to create meetings amongst citizens and thus to give them an experience of being part of a community. This understanding of the democratic potential of theatre is fundamentally linked to the concept of *Gemeinschaft*: of the need for citizens to belong to and identify themselves with a – typically quite small – group. Wiles presents theorists like Hannah Arendt and Richard Sennett as repre-

sentatives of this understanding of the democratic potential of theatre.<sup>4</sup>

The other understanding of the democratic potential of theatre Wiles presents is based on the possibility of individual reflection and public debate as a result of the theatrical experience. The central theorist to whom Wiles refers is Jürgen Habermas, who pleads for the value of art in the formation of a public sphere in which communicative actions are central to the democratic development of society. To Habermas, the core of democracy is the engagement of citizens in a rational debate, and thus, in his theory, the concept of *Gesellschaft* (society) is more important than *Gemeinschaft* (community).<sup>5</sup> It is not about the small, more emotionally-based community, but about the ability to deal with complex societal matters in a deliberative manner, with everyone striving to find the best solutions for the common good. Theatre contributes to this by functioning as a public space where questions of public interest are raised in ways that makes the audience reflect on them. A central critique of this understanding has been that the ideal of rational argumentation also functions as a mechanism of exclusion, thus reducing the possibility of participating in different ways.<sup>6</sup>

Both of these understandings are based on the belief that theatre can be democratic, but they take different approaches. An empirical examination of this difference may reveal something about the experience of going to the theatre: do audiences use the theatrical event as an occasion to reflect on societal matters? Do they feel as part of a community during – and after – the performance? Another reason for an empirical testing of the thesis of democratization is that both Arendt and Habermas are painfully aware that there is no guarantee that theatre will actually contribute to a democratization of society. Theatre – and other art forms – might also contribute to non-democratic social developments. This is a key argument for taking a closer look at the experience of specific audiences at specific performances where theatre might have a democratic potential due to its ability to create a community feeling and being a place where individuals can reflect on and debate societal matters.

## CULTURAL POLICY

The idea that theatre should contribute to the democratization of society is central from the perspective of cultural policy. Here, the democratization of society has been a central objective of modern welfare-based cultural policies as they developed in the Nordic countries after WWII. As cultural theorist Henrik Kaare Nielsen describes it: “Nordic cultural policies are based on an overall socio-political objective of furthering the empowerment of the individual, universal enlightenment (‘Bildung’) and the continued democratisation of society.”<sup>7</sup> One of the central ways in which this ideal has been promoted is by focusing on the question of participation. In his comprehensive analysis of Nordic cultural policies, *The Nordic Cultural Model*, Peter Duelund concludes that a central aim has been to include all citizens in publicly subsidized cultural activities.<sup>8</sup> During the last ten to fifteen years this question has increasingly been addressed under the heading of audience development. As analyzed by e.g. cultural policy researchers Eleonora Belfiore and Nobuko Kawashima, this is an originally British strategy of cultural policy aimed at removing different barriers to participation, thereby creating socially and culturally inclusive cultural institutions.<sup>9</sup> This strategy has recently had more focus in the Nordic Countries as well, as shown e.g. in Egil Bjørnsen’s report *Kunstkonsument i storbyene*, Malene Forsare og Anja Mølle Lindelof’s *Publik i perspektiv* and Louise Ejgod Hansen’s report *Hvad er publikumsudvikling?*<sup>10</sup>

Access and participation have been the focus of cultural policy for good reasons: the socioeconomic composition of audiences for theatre and other art forms, especially classical high art forms, remains relatively homogeneous, and many social groups are effectively excluded. For this reason effort has been put into solving challenges related to ensuring equal participation and focusing on the question: *who* participates in cultural activities? Yet there has been a tendency to ignore the question that Habermas and Arendt posed: *how* can theatre contribute to democracy? In the report *Spændvidder*, written for the Danish Arts Council, Professor in Dramaturgy Jørn Langsted states that one problem with the focus on representativeness is that no attention is paid to

the meaning or value of theatregoing: "Surveys on audiences to the arts have the drawback that they focus on quantitative calculations of types: who (number, sex, social class et cetera) does what (goes to the theatre, reads, attends art exhibitions, goes to concerts et cetera)? Surveys of this kind are not qualitative; in other words, they do not say anything about how the actual reception of art takes place or how the audience processes and uses the experiences."<sup>11</sup> This approach implies that sitting in a theatre per se makes us more democratic human beings. In my opinion, this needs to be qualified, not only by addressing what we mean by democratization but also by taking a closer look at the experience of the theatrical event. This has been an important part of the *Theatre Talks* project.

## DEMOCRACY

Before taking a closer look at the *Theatre Talks* project and exploring how theatre is experienced within this context, I want to supplement the theories of democracy presented above with the concept of 'deliberative democracy' as defined by James S. Fishkin, Professor of Communication and Political Science. Fishkin's concept of democracy is directly relevant to the analysis of the *theatre talks* since he addresses the process of practicing democracy on a micro-level. To Fishkin, democracy is "to include everyone under conditions where they are effectively motivated to really think about the issues".<sup>12</sup> Because he asks how people should participate in democracy, his terminology is useful for the analysis of the democratic potential of theatregoing in general, and for *theatre talks* in particular. This means that Fishkin's theoretical framework allows me to raise the question: how should people participate in theatre if experiencing theatre is to contribute to the democratization of society?<sup>13</sup>

Fishkin's thoughts are based on a deliberative concept of democracy. At the core of deliberative democracy is the ability of citizens to participate in public debate and decisions on an informed basis. Thus to Fishkin, there are three central elements in a functioning democracy: equality, participation and deliberation. To him, the three principles constitute "the trilemma of democratic reforms":<sup>14</sup> "The three

principles – deliberation, political equality and mass participation – pose a predictable pattern of conflict. Attempts to realize any two will undermine the achievement of the third."<sup>15</sup> Deliberation ensures that people are "engaged to think seriously and fully about public issues."<sup>16</sup> Political equality ensures that "everyone's preferences need in some sense to count the same."<sup>17</sup> And participation is the principle that as many people as possible should take as much part as possible in the political processes. Fishkin states very clearly that the three ideals are in conflict with each other and this conflict must be dealt with and the principles must be balanced in order for the ideal of deliberative democracy to be fulfilled.

Fishkin's diagnosis is that contemporary Western democracies tend to downplay the need for deliberation. One symptom of this is that mass participation mainly takes place through, for instance, polls. Fishkin is very critical of polls as a way of determining the public will because they just express the spontaneous opinion that research has documented will often change once people gain insights as well as the opportunity to discuss them with others who have different viewpoints.<sup>18</sup> So Fishkin suggests another way of making people participate in democratic decision-making: the so-called deliberative polls and deliberative days where people are gathered to debate different subjects and to make up their minds about them before and after. These show that people do change their minds on the basis of more informed consideration.<sup>19</sup>

With this in mind, let us return to the discussion of cultural participation I addressed in the section on cultural policy. In my opinion, the benefits of mass participation have been taken for granted, and this has given rise to a one-dimensional understanding of the objective of democratization. As long as citizens just go to the theatre, it is taken for granted that this will contribute to democratization. Especially the cultural political debates based on population surveys tend to ignore the outcome or value of participation.<sup>20</sup> By approaching this with Fishkin's democratic trilemma in mind, it becomes important not only to address the question of who participates, but also to ask how and why they do so. Thus, the concept of deliberative democracy contributes to a more nuanced understanding of

the ideal of democratization within a cultural policy context, which does not take the democratic value of participation for granted.

## THEATRE TALKS

The most recent official survey of the cultural habits of the population of Denmark shows that 19 % never go to the theatre and that an additional 49 % have not been to the theatre during the last year.<sup>21</sup> When asked why they do not go to the theatre, 52 % answer that it does not interest them.<sup>22</sup> But given Fishkin's point that deliberation causes people to change their minds, it seems reasonable to ask how they can be so certain of that, if they have never been to the theatre. This was a focus of the *Theatre Talks* project: what happens if non-attendees are invited into the theatre to experience performances? Do they still not like it, or are some of them actually positively surprised? Another central interest was to broaden the perspectives to focus not only on non-attendees and the socio-economic composition of the audience but also on how one can challenge the new as well as the existing audiences to reflect more on their experience as part of audience development.

The *Theatre Talks* project was initiated by me and carried out in cooperation with Scenekunstnetværket Region Midtjylland.<sup>23</sup> *Theatre talks* are small focus group interviews conducted immediately after a performance, which give the participants the opportunity to share their experiences of the performance with each other, discuss their impressions and develop their own understanding of the theatrical event. *Theatre talks* were originally developed as an audience research method by theatre scholars Willmar Sauter, Curt Isaksson and Lisbeth Jansson for an extensive audience research project conducted in Stockholm in the early 1980s.<sup>24</sup> On the basis of interviews with altogether 150 participants who talked about the same six performances, Sauter, Isaksson and Jansson analyzed the differences in experience related to each performance but also to socio-demographic differences between the participants. Two interesting conclusions were that the reaction of the participants was very much dependent on the performance, and that there was

no clear pattern of which audience groups preferred which performance: "These different reaction patterns show that any one dominant profile cannot be identified for all of the performances. The impulses from the different performances fragment the collective of the audiences after different patterns. The signals of the performance and the characteristics of the spectator intertwine in the theatrical experience."<sup>25</sup> The relationship between the spectator and the performance is thus complex and there does not seem to be any simple way to determine which performances are preferred by which socio-economic groups. In relation to audience development this means that it is not enough to talk about 'going to the theatre' in generic terms, it is also important to keep in mind that different performances offer different experiences.

The project in Stockholm was designed to provide new insight into audiences' experiences of theatre performances, but a spin-off of the project was that the participants reacted very positively to the *theatre talks* themselves: they gave the participants a better understanding of the performances and added value to their experience of going to the theatre.

This was the background for Dr Rebecca Scollen's decision to adapt the method to a purer focus on audience development. She adjusted the method to what she named *Talking Theatre* and carried through an audience development project in regional Queensland and the Northern Territory in Australia.<sup>26</sup> Scollen adapted the original *theatre talks* in two ways: she raised the number of participants to fourteen and reduced the number of talks to three.

During the project in Scenekunstnetværket Region Midtjylland, thirty-one *theatre talks* were conducted as part of a combined audience development and audience research project from 2010-12. The aim of the project was twofold: to give the theatres a useful new tool for audience development and to provide empirical material for audience research.<sup>27</sup> The standard model that we eventually found best suited to the project was a group of six to ten people participating in a series of three performances and talks.<sup>28</sup>

## THEATRE TALKS AS AUDIENCE DEVELOPMENT

So what was our experience with the *Theatre Talks* project? First and foremost, we received positive reactions from the participants. As the experiences from Stockholm and Australia documented, this was a form of audience development that engaged the participants and gave them a better experience. This experience can in itself be seen in the following results: we have introduced a wide range of people to very different performances, and the experience has mainly been positive. Participating in the *theatre talks* nuanced their perception of theatre and their idea about whether or not theatre was something they enjoyed.

In the rest of the article, I will analyze the outcome of the *theatre talks* and discuss how they can be considered a contribution to the democratization of theatregoing. I will base this on the different aspects of democratization that I have presented – first and foremost, Fishkin’s concept of deliberative democracy. There are several sub-points related to different aspects of the democratic potential of theatrical experiences. One was that it gave the participants an opportunity to reflect more deeply on the theatrical experience – its content, aesthetics and social setting. Another positive response was that the *theatre talks* provided a social framing of the visit to the theatre that made it more attractive and reduced the feeling of exclusion that is often part of the experience of non-theatregoers.<sup>29</sup> A third outcome of the project was that there seemed to be no simple link between a presumed target group and a positive experience. And the fourth outcome was that participants stressed the value of an experience that expanded their horizons.

## REFLECTING ON THE EXPERIENCE

A central element of the *theatre talks* is that they give the participants an opportunity to reflect on the experience and thereby counteract experiences of not understanding the performance. From audience development it is known to be a barrier to a good experience for those theatregoers with very limited experience or for more regular theatregoers introduced to types of performances other than those they are used to attending.<sup>30</sup> Several of the *theatre*

*talks* were done in connection with performances that the participants found more or less frustrating because they did not understand them. Especially in these cases, the participants valued the *theatre talks*, not only because the talk helped the participants to understand more of the performance, but also because it made them appreciate the experience more. As one participant said, “I am really happy that we are talking about it afterwards, because otherwise I would have thought it was bad. But now that we are talking about it, I like it much better.”<sup>31</sup> Another reaction that pointed to the same conclusion was that several participants during and after the talks asked if they could change the evaluation questionnaire that they had been asked to fill in immediately after the performance, before the *theatre talk*. One participant explicitly stated: “Because I feel that there might be some ticks in the questionnaire that I just filled in quickly that I would change now that we have had the chance to talk about it.”<sup>32</sup>

So an important aspect of the *theatre talks* is that they enhance the understanding and thus the value of the theatrical experience. During the *theatre talks* the participants’ judgements and understandings of the theatrical experiences are qualified by the inputs of the other participants. In cases where the participants experienced the performance as inaccessible, they eventually co-created an understanding of or a framework for the theatrical experience during the *theatre talk*: “We started off by saying that none of us had understood anything, and yet we have said a lot. But that is also because we have worked through the experience along the way.”<sup>33</sup>

This result of the talks links directly to Fishkin’s point about deliberation: that the discussion about an experience in itself enhances the basis of the evaluation. One important point in the way we dealt with deliberation was that the *theatre talks* had an appreciative approach. This implied that all experiences were accepted and valued and that the aim of the talk was not to agree on one correct understanding of the experience, but to exchange viewpoints and perceptions. Thus the role of the moderator was not to correct ‘misunderstandings’ or to explain the meaning of different parts of the performance, but to let the participants express themselves.

The appreciative approach partly counteracts

the critique within cultural policy research of audience development, which is accused of being paternalistic, of expressing a 'we-know-better' attitude towards non-attendees. However, following Fishkin's point that deliberation is an important part of the democratic process, it should be considered reasonable to challenge the spontaneous reaction that "theatre is not for me" and to give inexperienced theatregoers the chance not only to experience theatre but also to reflect on the experience.

## INCLUSION

The ideal of creating an inclusive theatre is central to cultural policy as I described it above. In Fishkin's terms, the ideal of inclusion is related to participation: democracy depends on the participation of all citizens. The majority of the participants in the *theatre talks* were neither regular theatregoers and nor did they belong to groups that are underrepresented in the theatre.<sup>34</sup> To these groups a barrier to theatre-going might be that they do not feel accepted as part of the audience because they are different. This is what is called the cultural barrier.<sup>35</sup> In the *Theatre Talks* project, it was especially the young participants who described a feeling of not belonging, mainly because the vast majority of the theatregoers were much older: "When you go in and stand in the foyer and look around 90 % of the people are over fifty [...]. You feel a bit out of place without really being so. But I think that it creates that feeling."<sup>36</sup> This young man describes the mechanism quite well: he knows that he is allowed to be there, and no one is acting in a way that signals the opposite, but still the experience of exclusion, of not belonging, is strong, and he was not the only participant who described this experience. *Theatre talks* help the participants to overcome this feeling, not only because the staff members explicitly welcome them, but also – and more importantly – they meet and share their experiences with their peers.

So one important democratic potential of the *theatre talks* is that they have proven to be a good frame for non-regular theatregoers to come to the theatre and feel comfortable as part of an audience group consisting of people unlike themselves. In this sense, it can add to the diversification of audi-

ences central to the process of democratization, not only as an objective of creating equal access, but also as a way of creating meeting places that transgress segmentation. To Nielsen, this is a central aspect of the democratic potential of cultural institutions: "The objective must be to create frameworks for cultural meetings and public dialogue across ethnic as well as lifestyle-based borders. The establishment of this type of cultural meeting and public space is the precondition for the creation of more far-reaching solidarity and mutual recognition"<sup>37</sup> In a very basic way *theatre talks* deal with this by inviting participants who are different from the average audiences into the theatre.<sup>38</sup> In this way they become part of the community of theatregoers, which then becomes more diverse. From the perspective that theatre-going is a community-creating activity, this is positive, and something that should be valued and promoted.

## CHALLENGING SEGMENTATION

If the creation of meeting places across the segments of society is considered a central aspect of democratization, there is good reason to take a critical look at some of the thoughts behind audience development. Kawashima argues that theatres need to shift from a traditionally product-oriented practice towards a target-oriented practice, arguing that theatres have traditionally been more interested in producing high-quality performances than in giving the audience a good experience.<sup>39</sup> There is certainly much truth to this point,<sup>40</sup> but even the target-oriented approach can be questioned precisely because it risks enhancing the segmentation of audiences into similar groups, thereby restricting rather than enhancing cultural meetings.

Where the product-based approach is based on universalism, the target-oriented approach is based on relativism: different groups have different preferences and in order to reach them, we should adjust to their needs.<sup>41</sup> But these preferences are unreflective when based on no or very little experience with theatrical events and can, therefore, be challenged. Another reason for challenging them is that it is a way to avoid a segmented cultural life.

This critique of the more target-oriented audience development projects is partly relevant in relation to the *Theatre Talks* project that I conducted in Jutland. The recruitment of participants was quite conservative and resulted in groups that typically consisted of participants belonging to the same target group. This meant that the ideal of a diverse composition and of the theatre as a community consisting of a diversity of people did not apply to the *theatre talks* groups themselves. From a democratic perspective, this might have reduced the participatory gains from the project: there has been too little focus on confronting the participants with a variety of viewpoints. The main reason for this decision was that we considered it radical enough to invite inexperienced theatregoers to the theatre three times and to ask them to talk to strangers – in the presence of a theatre researcher – without confronting them with a too diverse group of participants.

But even with this recruitment strategy, the combination of group members was not very systematic, and given the rather broadly defined target groups, we ended up with some level of diversity within the groups. For instance, the different youth groups typically consisted of both regular theatregoers, occasional theatregoers and non-theatregoers, and the level and type of education also varied. Diversity was actually highlighted as a positive part of the experience by some of the members of the more heterogeneous groups: “I think it is positive that we are so different, because I have been thinking [...]: We tolerate each other’s differences, right? We have the courage to open up and say: I don’t think that way. We can sit in the same room and be different.”<sup>42</sup> And in some of the more homogeneous groups the participants asked for more diverse groups: “1: Yes, I would have liked to talk to someone aged sixty-five. 2: I think so too, because it adds more aspects; because they understand it in another way since they have experienced other things. Then you would see it from different angles, I think.”<sup>43</sup> The diversity and unpredictability of the responses to the performance were thus an important quality in the eyes of some of the participants. This quality is directly linked to the democratic ideal that deliberation happens in debates between participants with different viewpoints and life situations.

## MATCHING PERFORMANCE AND PARTICIPANTS

A point taken for granted in target-led audience development is that the performances should be adapted to the target group that the theatre is trying to reach. This has been described as part of the cultural barrier to participation: that some groups in society do not feel that their life is reflected on stage.<sup>44</sup> This approach puts more emphasis on participation and is based on a relativistic understanding of culture that might increase participation rather than promote cultural meetings. A central principle of the *Theatre Talks* project was to deal with the challenge of diversity and cross-segmentation by presenting performances that the participants would not necessarily consider ‘for them’ in advance, whether due to the genre or to the subject matter.

The reactions to this were mixed. There were performances that the participants did not like, but there was no simple connection between the type of performance and the participants. One group discussed their own expectations after attending a cabaret, a genre some of them were less interested in because of its popular form and content and because of its tendency to be pure entertainment. They were positively surprised, and as one of the participants stated at the beginning of the *theatre talk*: “I do not normally attend cabarets or musicals or the like, but I had a great time, so I think it was good. [...] I was positively surprised.”<sup>45</sup> My intention with the project was to introduce the participants to very different theatrical experiences, including some that on the basis of a target-oriented approach would be characterized as not addressed to the them. Not because of a naïve belief that everything is for everyone, but because I wanted to test how far I could go in giving the participants unexpectedly positive experiences. The theoretical background was originally Wolfgang Iser’s claim that one of the most important functions of art (in his case, literature) is that it makes it possible to understand and empathize with other life worlds.<sup>46</sup> But this approach is also in line with both Fishkin’s and Nielsen’s points of view on the question of democratization.

The *theatre talks* showed that the possibility of mirroring one’s own life situation was not the central key to a good experience. There were participants who stated after a performance that they



found the performance uninteresting because it did not relate to their life situation: "I think that it was a very target-oriented performance. And it was certainly not a sixty-five-year-old target group."<sup>47</sup> But this verdict was opposed by some of the other participants in the same group, and other performances made it clear that external similarities were not necessary conditions for a good theatre experience or for identification: "And the thing about relating to the end of the play, the epilogue – I just felt that the way Johan talked about himself and the way he had realized this and that. Then I thought – that's what I thought too. It may sound strange, because I have not been married for twenty years and don't know this. Yes, it sounds a bit wrong to say that I know it, but that was the feeling I had."<sup>48</sup> Thus, one of the findings of the *Theatre Talks* project was that there is no need to maintain the idea that relevance and identification are dependent on external similarities.<sup>49</sup> Another finding is that the experience of situations and characters that are new and different to the participants may enhance tolerance and the understanding of a diversity of lifestyles. This was explicitly discussed at Randers EgnsTeater, where the participants experienced some characters that they initially disliked because they were very different from themselves. In the *theatre talk* the participants actually discussed the contribution of performances presenting unfamiliar subject matters and characters dissimilar from themselves to increased tolerance and understanding of different ways of living. "But you end up liking them. So from really resisting – and there was a lot of resistance in me – I ended up thinking that they were actually really nice, and that is related exactly to what we are talking about: that there are several layers, that there are not only types, and that you don't only see what is stupid. And that actually makes you more tolerant; it is contextualized in some way. And I think that that is the most important aspect of this, at least to me."<sup>50</sup> Thus, our attempt to challenge segmentation was generally a success, and to me this constitutes a central aspect of the democratic potential of the *theatre talks*.

## THE DEMOCRATIC POTENTIAL OF THEATRE (TALKS)

At the core of the discussion about the objective to democratize cultural participation is the far too rarely asked question: why? The obvious answer is to promote equality in society and to prevent cultural policy from being reduced to merely subsidizing the leisure interests of the rich and well-educated. In his recent analysis of the development in participation patterns in Norway, Per Mangset concludes that equality remains to be achieved and he ends up questioning whether or not this seemingly utopian objective should still be at the centre of cultural policy.<sup>51</sup> Mangset pleads for a more nuanced and less statistic understanding of the concept of participation, which is very much the approach I have taken in this article. There are two central points to my understanding of democracy: one is the need to create meeting places that transgress the normal segmentation within society, which functions to a high degree within the cultural field as well. The other is to see cultural experiences as part of a deliberation process, which means that they should also enhance the general debate within society.

I have no doubt that the context for a theatrical experience created by a *theatre talk* emphasizes the democratic potential of the theatre for inexperienced as well as regular theatregoers. However, this does not mean that the real process of democratization takes place during the *theatre talk*. It is important to keep in mind that the reflections and the temporary community created in the group derive from the common theatrical experience. What *theatre talks* do is to enhance the democratic potential in different ways. With Fishkin's trilemma in mind, the *Theatre Talks* project deals with the question of deliberation: the participants get the opportunity to reflect on their experiences. But it also deals with the question of participation. Our experience was that the talks invited former non-theatregoers into the theatre and gave them a feeling of being part of the audience in such a way that the differences within the audience as a whole were easier to accept, and the exchange of different points of view became a positive experience.

How does this differ from other kinds of deliberative democratic practices? There might not be any essential differences, but the *theatre talks* point to an understanding of the theatrical event as an opportunity to engage with very different world views than one's own, and that this engagement, in the end, might do what the participant I quoted in the introduction of the article stated: "move me in some way". The combination of a community-building potential and the sharing of experiences and reflections that happens in the *theatre talks* shows that there is a democratic potential in inviting new participants into the theatres.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 Adult female theatre-goer, participating in a *theatre talk* at Randers EgnsTeater.
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- 3 Ibid., p. 223.
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- 8 Peter Duelund, ed., *The Nordic Cultural Model*, Nordic Cultural Institute, Copenhagen 2002.
- 9 Eleonora Belfiore, "Art as a Means of Alleviating Social Exclusion: Does It Really Work? A Critique of Instrumental Cultural Policies and Social Impact Studies in the UK" in *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, vol. 8 no. 1, 2002; Nobuko Kawashima, "Audience Development and Social Inclusion in Britain: Tensions, Contradictions and Paradoxes in Policy and their Implications for Cultural Management" in *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, vol. 12 no. 1, 2006; Louise Ejgød Hansen, *Hvader publikumsudvikling?, Rapport 1*, Scenekunstnetværket Region Midtjylland 2011.
- 10 Egil Bjørnsen et. al., *Kunstkonsument i storbyene. En studie av brukere og ikke-brukere av det offentlig finansierte kunsttilbud i byene Oslo, Bergen, Trondheim, Stavanger og Kristiansand* FoU-rapport nr. 7, 2012, Agderforskning, Kristiansand; Malene Forsare and Anja Mølle Lindelof, *Publik i perspektiv. Teaterarbeid i Öresundsregionen*, Makadam Förlag, Gothenburg 2013; Hansen op. cit.
- 11 Jørn Langsted, ed., *Spændvidder*, Klim, Aarhus 2010, p. 77 (my translation).
- 12 James S. Fishkin, *When the People Speak: Deliberative Democracy & Public Consultation*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2009, p. 1.
- 13 By participation, I mean here: attending and experiencing a theatrical event. I have no intention of raising the issue of whether or not the active co-creative participation of audiences is better in democratic terms than the traditional passive and receptive one. I am aware that this is another central discussion related to the question of the relationship between theatre and democracy. The *theatre talks* involved very different performances and the roles of the audiences varied. However it is not that variation I focus on in this article.
- 14 Fishkin 2009, op. cit., pp. 32-60.
- 15 Ibid., p. 46.
- 16 James S. Fishkin, *The Voice of the People: Public Opinion and Democracy*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 1995, p. 41.
- 17 Fishkin 2009, op. cit. p. 43.
- 18 See Fishkin 1995, op. cit., pp. 1-3.
- 19 Fishkin 2009, op. cit., pp. 38-43.
- 20 In his report on cultural participation in Norway, Professor in Cultural Policy Per Mangset raises the question of whether equal participation should continue to be so central in cultural policy. His scepticism is mainly based on a disbelief that equal participation will ever be realized: "But the main conclusion in this analysis must be that even though society is changing, central social differences in cultural consumption have a tendency to last". (Per Mangset, *Demokrativering av kulturen? Om sosial ulikhet i kulturbruk og -deltakelse*, Telemarkforskning, Bø 2006, p. 48).
- 21 Epinion and Pluss Leadership, *Danskernes kulturvaner 2012, tabelrapport, teater og anden scenekunst*, the Danish Ministry of Culture, Copenhagen 2012, p. 5.
- 22 Ibid., p. 47.
- 23 For more information, see [www.scenet.dk](http://www.scenet.dk) (in Danish).
- 24 Willmar Sauter, Curt Isaksson and Lisbeth Jansson, *Teaterögon, publiken möter föreställningen, upplevelse-utbud-vanor*, Liber, Stockholm 1986.
- 25 Ibid., p. 280 (my translation).
- 26 Rebecca Scollen, "Bridging the Divide: Regional Performing Arts Centres and Non-Theatre-goers Introduced" in *International Theatre/Drama and Education Association (IDEA)*, no. 9, 2008; Rebecca Scollen, "Talking Theatre Is More Than A Test Drive: Two Audience Development Methodologies Under Review" in *International Journal of Arts Management* vol. 12 no. 1.
- 27 A general analysis of the results is published in Hansen 2013. In this article my main aim is to discuss how the democratic potential of the method as an audience development tool can be understood.
- 28 Louise Ejgød Hansen, *Teatersamtaler. Giv publikum ordet*, Scenekunstnetværket Region Midtjylland, Randers 2012, introduces to the practicalities of the method.
- 29 Hansen 2011, op. cit., p. 16.
- 30 Hansen 2011, op. cit. pp. 19-20.

- 31 Young female theatregoer, Teatret OM.
- 32 Adult female theatregoer, Randers EgnsTeater.
- 33 Young female theatregoer Limfjordsteatret.
- 34 The definition of non-theatregoers is not as simple as it seems, because if the group is reduced to those who have never in their life visited a theatre, the group becomes very small (for a discussion of this, see Damvad, *Unges museumsbrug*, Kulturstyrelsen, Copenhagen 2012). For this reason different projects and surveys define the term differently, e.g. as those who have not attended theatre the last year. The complexity grows when talking about underrepresented groups, because even though young people, from what we know, are underrepresented in theatres in Denmark (see Hansen 2011 op. cit., pp. 30-4, for a discussion), it is still possible to find regular theatregoers within this group.
- 35 Hansen 2011, op. cit., pp. 15-16.
- 36 Young male theatregoer, Team Teatret.
- 37 Henrik Kaare Nielsen, "Kulturpolitik og mangfoldighed" in *Nordisk Kulturpolitisk Tidsskrift*, no. 2, 2012 (my translation).
- 38 Primarily young people – very few with a non-Danish background – but also a group consisting only of men, another underrepresented group in the theatre (see Rikard Hoogland "Hatar män teater?" in *Peripeti*, vol. 18, 2012, for a discussion of this).
- 39 Kawashima, op. cit., p. 68.
- 40 Even though I basically agree with Kawashima, I also see very different practices within the theatrical field. For instance, Danish theatres producing for children have developed practices that carefully keep the target group in mind during the production period (see Kirsten Dahl, *Spot på Danmarks skjulte teaterskat*, Scenekunstens udviklingscenter, Odsherred, 2008).
- 41 In cultural policy research this corresponds to the difference between a strategy of democratization of culture or cultural democracy (see Duelund 2002, op. cit.).
- 42 Adult woman, Randers EgnsTeater.
- 43 Young man and woman, Entré Scenen.
- 44 Hansen 2011, op. cit., p 16.
- 45 Adult female participant, Randers EgnsTeater.
- 46 Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore & London 1994 (1980), pp. 67-8.
- 47 Adult man, Randers EgnsTeater.
- 48 Young man, Aarhus Teater.
- 49 This result corresponds to an analysis of the best theatre experiences of theatre lovers, cf. Peter Eversman, "The Experience of the Theatrical Event" in Cremona, Eversmann, Van Maanen, Sauter and Tulloch: *Theatrical Events: Borders, Dynamics and Frames*, Rodopi, Amsterdam and New York 2004.
- 50 Adult female theatregoer, Randers EgnsTeater.
- 51 Mangset, op. cit., p. 48.