

Diversity on the Norwegian Stage: Whose Story Is It Anyway?

Ellen Foyn Bruun

ABSTRACT

The article proposes that non-hierarchical participatory models in the lineage of community-based arts practice might offer interesting strategies for mainstream, professional Norwegian theatre today. The article argues that the P:UNKT project at Akershus Theatre initiated with the purpose of supporting integration in the region, offered a significant opportunity for the professional, state-funded theatre to enhance its relationship with the population. The research study demonstrates that the P:UNKT project entailed several dilemmas and tensions embedded in the social-cultural context that was challenging to negotiate. The analysis of the different perspectives involved will demonstrate that the project was not only potentially transformative for the non-professional participants but also for the host theatre itself. Through P:UNKT the theatre developed new ways of creating relationships and collaborations with the population in the region. This strengthened the audience infrastructure and the connectedness with the community. The article argues that the project potentially offered an opportunity for Akershus Theatre to develop innovative practices and to redefine its own purpose as an arts institution in a multicultural Norway in the twenty-first century.

BIOGRAPHY

Ellen Foyn Bruun, MA, MPhil, Associate Professor of Drama and Theatre Studies, the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), Trondheim, Norway. With a previous professional career as stage director/dramaturge, Ellen trained as a dramatherapist at The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London. She teaches several theoretical-practical modules at Bachelor and Master level, such as theatre production, arts-based research methods and theatre applications. Her research seeks to develop artistic practice and theory for holistic and embodied practices and transformational learning processes. Ellen has published several articles, written plays and contributed to books on drama and theatre practice.

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ELLEN FOYN BRUUN

From 2010 to 2012 I conducted a case study on an applied theatre project, which was unique in Norwegian mainstream theatre. The P:UNKT project had a social agenda of supporting integration and was run by Akershus Theatre, a professional, state-funded regional theatre. P:UNKT translates as 'point' and creates associations to 'meeting point', 'shared spaces' and 'turning point'. From the case study, themes around collaborative theatre methods and ownership arose. Dilemmas of democracy and citizenship emerged not only as potent themes in the performances, but also in the rehearsal space and as part of the social arenas outside. In this article I propose that non-hierarchical participatory models for cultural production might present interesting strategies for professional Norwegian theatre today. The article argues that the specific applied theatre project offered a significant opportunity for Akershus Theatre to enhance its relationship with the population. After an introductory presentation of the project, I elaborate on the cultural-political context followed by an outline of the research position and methodology. Then I clarify the nature of the project through a description of one specific production, and this leads to the main discussion of the article that addresses some perspectives to corroborate the argument. Finally, I return to the cultural-political context of the P:UNKT project presenting the conditions that led to its termination by early 2012. In the conclusion I acknowledge the achievements of the project and the significance of the research study.

WHAT WAS THE P:UNKT PROJECT AT AKERSHUS THEATRE?

The project was initiated in 2007 by Artistic Director Bjørn Birch after a visit to the Betty Nansen Theatre, Copenhagen, and their department for integration and education, C:NTACT,¹ established in 2004. C:NTACT was inspired by community-based theatre practice in the United Kingdom following in the footsteps of the strong legacy from the 1960s and 70s. The Danish C:NTACT served as a kind of mentor for the Norwegian project, including seminars and exchange visits. Due to strategic changes at Akershus Theatre the P:UNKT project ended at the end of 2011, as opposed to the prosperous development of C:ONTACT that is currently a leading force in Danish theatre.

The participants of P:UNKT all lived in the Akershus region that surrounds Oslo and is characterized by many new communities. In 2011, 14 % of the population of half a million were immigrants.² The aim of the project was to be an "alternative storytelling theatre"³ with a rationale of contributing to active citizenship, diversity and enhanced understanding between different ethnic groups, between majority and minority perspectives.⁴ The theatre employed professional practitioners to set up and work with local theatre groups in different areas in the region. From 2008 to 2012 eighteen different performances were produced, devised from the participants' autobiographical narratives. Of the theatre's total budget of around thirteen million Norwegian Kroner per year, some 800,000 Kroner were spent on the project each year.⁵ During the two years

of my research a stable group of around thirty-five non-professional performers took part. Half the group were immigrants, the other half were born in Norway but not necessarily in the Akershus region. The number of languages and countries of origin varied. In the 2010 program the cast was presented as “Norwegians from fourteen different nations”.⁶

THE SPECIFIC NORWEGIAN CULTURAL-POLITICAL CONTEXT OF THE P:UNKT PROJECT

From Distribution to Cultural Democracy

In a recent report on cultural affairs from the Norwegian government, *NOU 2013: 4, Kulturutredningen 2011*, the importance of infrastructure as a foundation for a flourishing cultural life is emphasized.⁷ This community-based aspect of cultural practice from the bottom up has a long tradition in democratic cultural policy. Theatre practice with a purpose for justice and solidarity took place in Norway as in all Western societies in the aftermath of the Second World War. In the book *Teater ut til bygd og by?*, Ellen A. Aslaksen⁸, head of research in the Norwegian Arts Council, outlines this development. She points out that there was a paradigm shift during the 1970s and early 1980s with new models for organizing Norwegian theatre with a shifting purpose of the arts from conventional distribution to cultural democracy. Regional theatres and theatre workshops⁹ were established, particularly to strengthen local ownership and agency, and this strategy was labelled the overarching theatre policy.¹⁰ The political philosophy of this way of thinking is elaborated on in a book I co-wrote in 1988.¹¹ Some key words are cultural identity, non-hierarchical collaborative models and participatory action methods. Professor Barbro Rønning¹² frames the legacy of the overarching theatre policy applying Finnish director Ralf Långbacka's eight theses about the artistic theatre. With Brecht in mind, Långbacka states that both art and culture will be undemocratic and anti-art as long as it cultivates conventions and norms of one group of the population only. Active audience inclusion and agency is at the centre of this way of thinking and in the eighth thesis Långbacka sums up that the artistic theatre is only artistic “as long as it renews itself artistically and cultivates or renews

its relationship to the surrounding political and social reality that is its source”.¹³

THE ROLE OF THE NON-PROFESSIONAL CITIZEN AS PARTICIPANT

Although amateur theatre is regarded as an important part of Norwegian theatre in the official documents on cultural affairs, it is clearly defined as separated from the professional theatres' practice and obligation.¹⁴ As Aslaksen points out,¹⁵ the search for an overarching practice based on cultural democracy suffered a setback during the 1990s due to neoliberal tendencies. According to Aslaksen, the understanding of art and culture as two separate fields was restored, while the more radical interpretations of democratic theatre practice were silenced and the theatre workshops more or less erased. Thus, mainstream and avant-garde Norwegian professional theatre has not had much interest in developing non-hierarchical, creative collaboration models with people for whom theatre is a leisure activity. There is, however, a well-established tradition for collaboration between professional theatres and local amateurs, and my point is not to dismiss this. In this model of collaboration, which represents the dominant way of thinking cultural politics for Norwegian theatrical life since before the Second World War until today, professional and non-professional theatre practices are – and should be – separate entities in Norwegian theatre, each kept separate and best developed “on their own terms”.¹⁶ To sum up, the main reason for professional theatres to work with non-professionals has typically been guided by the rationale of educating the audience and future professional practitioners.

DIVERSITY – REDEFINED IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM

Another contextual aspect of the P:UNKT project is the notion of diversity, first addressed in the *NOU 2002: 8 Etter alle kunstens regler*.¹⁷ Diversity in this document, however, is defined as *artistic* diversity¹⁸ and the focus is on the independent professional companies that also were cut back and marginalized during the 1990s as elaborated on by Aslak-

sen.¹⁹ It is not until the documents *Kulturloftet 1* and *2*²⁰ from 2005-13 that diversity is associated with Norway as a multicultural society. In 2008 the Year of Diversity²¹ was launched, during which many projects and local activities were supported. Diversity has since become a buzzword, as articulated in the *Diversity Report*²² from 2011. In this report the attitude towards the citizens has changed dramatically. Here, collaboration and diversity are not based on separation but rather on inclusion and *cultural* diversity.²³ The way of thinking connects clearly to the democratic legacy from after the Second World War, updated and redefined for the twenty-first century. Approaches to working with non-professionals are complex, but the official cultural-political signals emerging since the turn of the century ideally support participatory ways of innovative collaboration practices. The non-professional citizen is no longer seen as excluded or outside cultural production. The *Diversity Report*²⁴ reflects this, although cultural diversity is narrowly defined with a focus on the immigrant population and therefore new dilemmas also arise. However, there has been a shift in the Norwegian official thinking regarding the non-professional citizen as a resource and contributor. This tendency is enhanced by the recent *Kulturloftet 3*²⁵ released by the government in the aftermath of the Utøya and Oslo terror attacks on 22 July 2011 and with a renewed emphasis on diversity and sustainable democratic values. The question of participatory agency for all citizens seems as potent as ever before. In this context the P:UNKT project might be regarded as an attempt to address, through active citizenship, the question of how a professional state-funded theatre might redefine its role and function in an increasingly diverse Norwegian community.

RESEARCH POSITION AND METHODOLOGY

When I was made aware of the P:UNKT project in 2009, I recognized an ethos to community arts practice that I myself had been part of as practitioner in the 1980s and early 1990s. As a theatre scholar I wanted to draw attention to this untold strand of Norwegian theatre history and investigate the potential of this legacy today. The study addressed the

project as a case. According to Professor in Educational Drama John Carroll, case study methodology is a flexible and open research approach that acknowledges the continual negotiation necessary within a specific context.²⁶ In other words, the case studied is seen as an emergent and dynamic *cultural performance*²⁷ in process. It has its own complex web of actions and activities in time and space. At the same time, this 'drama' takes place in a context. How it creates meaning is important to address from different perspectives in order to understand its impact on socio-cultural practice. In the lineage of humanistic psychology, John Heron and Peter Reason²⁸ promote a participatory worldview in social constructivism as we are all co-actors and performers in our own and others' narratives. Thus, the research design was multi-modal and executed flexibly in continual dialogue, formal and informal, with all involved. It encompassed performance analysis, interviews and questionnaires, as well as participatory action methods. Willmar Sauter's concept *playing culture*²⁹ acknowledges the complexity and multi-layered dynamics of this kind of project, in which it is neither possible nor desirable to draw a sharp line between life processes and the symbolic.

THE NATURE OF THE P:UNKT PROJECT – *WITHOUT CONNECTION 2011*³⁰

The Asker group included young participants, aged seventeenth to twenty-five, a mixture of young immigrants, minor refugees under eighteen and Norwegian-born high school students. The following section serves to clarify the nature of the project, demonstrating how the non-professional performers conceptualized their performance on stage. One of the participants, Herbie,³¹ originally comes from Africa. In the performance *Without Connection*³² his story was re-told and enacted by Herbie himself supported by two Norwegian-born performers: "Herbie comes from Uganda. When he was nine years old, his mother died. When he was fourteen years old, his father died. At the age of fourteen Herbie was responsible for three younger siblings in Uganda". The story moves on until: "One evening, when the neighbour's security light was suddenly switched on, Herbie discovered his own shadow and

the movements of his own body. Through practicing with his own shadow for weeks and weeks he learned to dance and the dance became his way of expression". In the next sequence Herbie plays himself – as he was then – a cool guy, successful and rich, partying and on top of a career as a celebrity. Then, the two Norwegian performers continue and let the audience know how Herbie meets a boy in the street who does not attend school and how angry he becomes with the father of this child. The turning point of the scene comes when Herbie learns that the father of the boy is poor and ill, and cannot afford to send the boy to school. The distanced ironic and cool modality evaporates. The performer then turns to the audience with the line: "In this boy, I saw myself". He now addresses the audience directly in a sincere and authentic way, revealing how this encounter changed his life and ethical values. All three performers sum up Herbie's story-telling, the story of his present life in Norway where he earns his living by teaching children to dance and, at the same time, supports his younger siblings as well as eighteen orphans in a home in Uganda.

This example represents the overall style of the P:UNKT performances. The performance shows the narratives of the performers conveying as an overall theme the tension of vulnerability and strength. As a format the show had some elements that resembled play-back theatre. The performers took turns playing the main character as demonstrated above. In another scene, the performer, who had supported Herbie's story, was the protagonist, relating his experiences with Norwegian mathematics education, as a contrast to the story from African reality. In this particular show, another fictional level was introduced as a carnivalesque parallel universe to the realistic narratives. The performers also played characters such as Facebook, www and Dot Com. This virtual world was played with humour and irony on a meta-level representing the young actors' own familiar, daily reality. In this reality they related comfortably as digital natives in a global youth culture that transgressed national and ethnic boundaries. Self-irony was used to create distance and to contrast the emotional impact of the lived stories. For example, one scene showed how it would feel to break up a relationship in the differ-

ent realities while questioning and trying out which reality was more real: the live face-to-face encounter or Facebook. Mobile phones were used actively as props and both live and filmed projections of on-line communication were projected onto the back wall. This created a technological feel to the show that supported, through contrast, the realism and emotional impact of the autobiographical narratives.

DISCUSSION AND PERSPECTIVES ON THE P:UNKT PROJECT

The scene described might easily be understood in the frame of applied theatre, defined as theatre with a specific purpose. However, it is important to remind ourselves of the risk of a patronising, ethnocentric discourse that defines the need of agency for another human being. This said, Akershus Theatre developed new ways of collaboration with citizens in the region through the project in which people, who are usually silent in the Norwegian public space, participated. This article argues that the project offered the potential for Akershus Theatre to enhance its awareness with regard to its purpose as an arts institution contributing to the construction of Norwegian identity appropriate to the second decade of the twenty-first century. I will corroborate this argument through the lens of three interconnected perspectives: the tension of social and artistic theatre practices, dilemmas connected to the participants' focus and the relationship to the audience infrastructure. Finally, I will sum up by focusing on the potential significance of the P:UNKT project for Akershus Theatre as an opportunity to challenge and renew its own role as an arts institution. In the conclusion, I will finally convey how the project was terminated despite its success and to the disappointment of the participants and many other citizens of the region.

THE TENSION OF SOCIAL AND ARTISTIC THEATRE PRACTICES

As Akershus Theatre's main obligation is to produce professional theatre, it was logical that the collaboration with the non-professionals was legitimized

by the social aspects of using theatre as a tool for integration. From the start, the tension of social and artistic practices were embedded in the given contextual circumstances. In all the printed material from the theatre the artistic framing was communicated clearly. Citizens were invited to share their stories through the art of theatre. However, the social aspect was transparent with aims such as “to contribute to social change” and through “diversity by getting to know some foreign Norwegians”.³³ When adverts appeared in local newspapers to recruit participants, the term “untraditional amateur theatre”³⁴ was used. In the essay “Why ‘Social Theatre’?”³⁵ James Thompson and Richard Schechner present different trends and traditions from the broad field of applied theatre practices. They discuss the concept of social theatre that points to a rich international practice that resembles the P:UNKT project, as theatre with a specific purpose. When working with non-professionals Thompson and Schechner advocate symmetric and inclusive collaborative methods. They write that, “by creating a theatre of, by, and with silenced, marginalized, and oppressed peoples, social theatre workers assert that we *all* can experience performance in a broader and deeper way than before”.³⁶

Helen Nicholson launches the notion of the gift of theatre in *Applied Drama – the Gift of Theatre*.³⁷ A one-way giving direction from the professional to the non-professional theatre practitioner is, according to Nicholson, an outdated colonial way of addressing creative processes in the arts, education and action research. According to the participants’ own narratives, the P:UNKT project demonstrated an interactive two-way giving principle shared by all the involved parties which created and reinforced a strong feeling of community. By the end of the project period, this *playing culture* had expanded substantially and included an emergent community of new spectators. It was, by all means, a *cultural performance*³⁸ with new symbol-making on all levels. It would be reductive to understand it as good social practice and less good artistic practice because of the non-professional performers. Rather, Sauter’s notion of *playing culture* offers a non-judgemental approach to aesthetic quality based on how the live

relationship creates symbolic meaning for the participating parties, performers and spectators alike.

DILEMMAS CONNECTED TO THE PARTICIPANTS’ FOCUS

Firmly placed in the lineage of applied theatre, the P:UNKT project contained the three-fold perspective of theatre *for, with* and *by* the community.³⁹ The project was initiated with a vision to “mirror the world in Akershus and Akershus in the world”,⁴⁰ and the emphasis on the participants’ focus was transparent. For example, in the 2009 project report, Artistic Director Birch writes that P:UNKT is more for the participants and their development than for the theatre’s usual audience.⁴¹ The tension of social and artistic theatre practice is embedded in this statement and raises some dilemmas as to how to address the ‘effect’ on the participants. In my view it is important to respect the participants’ own narratives in the context and not dismiss them as serving to legitimize the purpose of the project, even if their narratives seem biased or loyal. The fact is, according to the participants’ statements, taking part in the project had a positive impact on their everyday lives. Learning Norwegian and cultural codes about living in Norway was further experienced as very important for the immigrant participants. It seemed vital for the ownership of the participants that the performances were devised from lived experience and shared with an audience. It would obviously not be the same project without the public performances through which Akershus Theatre attested that these stories were worthwhile sharing publicly. Based on what I was told, I claim that it was an indispensable motivating factor that the project was run by the region’s own professional theatre. The artistic framing had a decisive significance for the performers. According to the participants, it gave them a boost of confidence that they performed in public performances produced by a professional theatre.

One concept that emerged from the voices of the participants was the *theatre of life* as an all-embracing notion of collective dramatic/social action, resonating with Sauter’s *cultural performance*. One

participant wrote that “[i]t has been a fantastic and developmental process with the theatre of life. I am so glad I seized the opportunity. Hope this continues. Recommend everybody to join: this is really something that does everyone good”.⁴² The well-being factor was experienced as health-promoting and transformative, supporting many to process difficult and confusing experiences from past and present lives. With a cast of several members coming from war-stricken areas and oppressive regimes, notions of diversity, democracy and tolerance were at stake in a concrete embodied way all the time. Notions like ‘experience of belonging’, of ‘coming home’ and of ‘being seen’ were repeatedly articulated in interviews, writings and talks with the participants. The term *communitas* coined by Victor Turner connects, according to Sauter, to the aspects of identity and liminality,⁴³ both strongly present in the P:UNKT project. All involved, professional and non-professional practitioners alike, expressed unanimously a shared experience of doing ‘something important’ together as citizens. As a researcher I was astonished by the collective sense of purpose in this shared feeling of building a ‘new’ Norwegian identity. In my view, this represented a utopian hope for Norway in the future where notions of us and them, of ‘old and new’ Norwegian citizens, are no longer in the foreground. As *cultural performance* this strong feeling of community seemed to represent the inclusive face of Norwegian life and culture. One could say that they perceived themselves as ambassadors for democratic values worth fighting for, of inclusion and diversity. This was particularly heightened after the terror attacks on 22 July 2011 that changed Norwegian reality over-night and was immediately mediated into the P:UNKT performances during the autumn of 2011. With simple lines such as “I was walking my dog; I was having tea at my friend’s house; I was at the Oslo Main Station” the national trauma was acknowledged and mediated in aesthetic form from the stage.

THE RELATIONSHIP TO THE AUDIENCE INFRASTRUCTURE

Despite the focus on the participants, the audience played an important part in the project from the

start. Each year, the numbers increased and the audience attendances more than doubled from 2008 to 2011, from 500 to around 1300 spectators.⁴⁴ A dilemma to negotiate when working with non-professional performers is: who do we do this for, audience or actor? Throughout the five-year project period, the theatre improved the strategies for framing the performances appropriately designed to each particular event. The performances themselves also improved as the performers became more experienced and confident on stage. The P:UNKT performances were advertised as clearly different from the main repertoire of the theatre and were mainly free to attend. Not surprisingly, the circumstantially given tension between social and artistic theatre was mirrored in the audience strategies. The focus on integration and ‘ordinary’ people as contributors and performers was stressed. At the same time, Akershus Theatre presented the shows in the main brochure and on the webpage as interesting performances worth attending.

The reception of the performances equally represented opposite paradigms of defining and understanding artistic quality: on the one hand, as high or low (good or bad), and, on the other hand, quality assessed as perceived experience. Sauter⁴⁵ proposes the term *eventness*, proposing a flexible process-oriented understanding of quality as opposed to the non-dynamic understanding of high/low quality in the canonized Western discourse. This resonates with French philosopher Jacques Rancière who proposes the concept of the emancipated spectator⁴⁶ to identify an open and not-knowing stance as necessary in order to perceive the uniqueness of a shared moment. These are both useful theoretical terms in this context as the distinction of professional (high) and non-professional (low) is transgressed. I will give an example of how this way of thinking and experiencing quality dynamically was demonstrated during one of the performances of *Without Connection* in November 2011. Asylum-seekers and refugees, who had just arrived in Norway, were among the audience that mainly consisted of young people of the same age as the performers. For many among the audience it was the first time they were included in Norwegian cultural life. For the performers it was as if they played into a mirror image of themselves

in the past, when they were still in confusion and at risk of exclusion from the Norwegian community. The performance resonated emotionally with the audience and the performers experienced their energetic presence while performing. In performance theory this resonates with Erika Fisher-Lichte's concept of *auto-poetic feed-back loop*.⁴⁷ Consequently, both performers and audience became aware of the *theatrical event* as a shared symbolic experience. This example demonstrates how the P:UNKT performances were able to make theatre matter and resonate with a diverse Norwegian theatre audience.

According to a report from Agder research unit in 2012,⁴⁸ just a fraction of the Norwegian population is represented among the conventional theatregoers in Oslo and the largest cities in Norway. In general, the P:UNKT performances attracted quite a diverse audience as the performers were from so varied backgrounds; first of all attracting friends and family. This illustrates a different reality than mainstream Norwegian theatre and is, in this respect, much more similar to other performance practices with non-professionals all over the country with children, adults, conventional and unconventional amateurs of any sorts. During the period I followed P:UNKT, there was a clear shift in the way the professional practitioners at Akershus Theatre understood its relationship to the audience. It moved from initially being a project mainly for the participants to becoming increasingly relevant for the whole community and potentially new audience segments.

THE POTENTIAL SIGNIFICANCE FOR THE PROFESSIONAL THEATRE

The P:UNKT project contributed to creating new cultural conditions for cultural life in the region of Akershus. Interestingly, the collaborative practice developed in the project challenged the dominant ethnocentric thinking that in the first place had defined the participants as *different* groups of ethnic Norwegians and of other ethnicities. Through the collective creative practice another sense of community emerged that transgressed the conventional definitions of us and them, of 'old and new' Norwegians. Consequently, the P:UNKT project, con-

sidered from the perspective of Norwegian society, made an important impact. This impact resonates with the earlier mentioned *Diversity report* that underpins Norway as a nation characterized by equality, democracy and language.⁴⁹ The ideals and values of this kind of understanding mirror the total impact of the P:UNKT project as *cultural performance*. The long-term strategy of the project contributed to a collaborative cultural practice that resonates with the cultural-political aims of creating "a model for a new community".⁵⁰ I have demonstrated how this practice embeds a significant potential for making theatre a more direct and relevant art form for a diverse audience. However, the vulnerability of a project like P:UNKT, in the context of professional Norwegian state-funded theatre practice, became evident when the key figure of the project, Artistic Director Bjørn Birch, moved on after ten years as leader. With a new management and different artistic strategies, the project was terminated in early 2012. The marginal status of a project like P:UNKT in professional Norwegian stage practice is quite symptomatic of the kind of thinking that dominates mainstream Norwegian cultural policy. In the last *NOU 2013: 4, Kulturutredningen*,⁵¹ there is an enhanced focus on quality as high or low.⁵² This is disturbing in regard to creating the necessary infrastructure for a truly diverse and innovative arts practice that explores aesthetics as well as ethics with symmetric participation models and critically engaging with what cultural democracy might imply today.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, I have demonstrated in this article how the P:UNKT project achieved significance on several levels in and as part of the community. Through the project, Akershus Theatre developed collaborative strategies with the community that proposed appropriate ways of meeting the needs and challenges of the twenty-first century concerning inclusion and diversity. The project was connected to experimental Norwegian professional theatre practice represented by the legacy of the overarching theatre policy most prosperous during the 1970s and 1980s. Finally, the case study has significance because it puts in per-

spective the role of a state-funded arts institution as an active agent in Norwegian society. The community that the P:UNKT project represented as a *playing culture* and *cultural performance* erased the ethnocentric way of regarding us and them, of the split between majority and minority perspectives. Further, it transgressed the binaries of professional and non-professional theatre practitioners. Ethnocentric assumptions about who is doing something *for* someone were challenged. From this perspective, the *gift of theatre*⁵³ does not signify the gift given by the professional practitioners to the community. On the contrary, the *real* gift of theatre becomes the contribution from the community, in this case the expanded and emergent P:UNKT community, which is given *back* to the professional theatre and to Norwegian socio-cultural life in general.

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- 50 Ibid., p. 3. In Norwegian: “Norge er i ferd med å bygge opp en modell for et nytt fellesskap som skaper internasjonal oppmerksomhet”.
- 51 *NOU 2013: 4, Kulturutredningen 2014*, <http://www.regjeringen.no/nb/dep/kud/dok/nouer/2013/nou-2013-4.html?id=715404> (retrieved 28 April 2013).
- 52 Ibid., chapter 14.
- 53 Term coined by Nicholson, see op. cit.