

# Is Theatre Personally and Socially Relevant? Empirical Insight into Theatrical Experience

**MAJA ŠORLI & HEDI-LIIS TOOME\***

## **ABSTRACT**

In the years 2009–2015, a comparison of theatre systems in seven smaller European cities was conducted and named the *STEP City Study*. The study also included reception research, conducted with an extensive questionnaire, and qualitative research comprised of focus groups and interviews with audience members. One of the surprising results showed that, generally, the spectators enjoyed the performances a lot, but at the same time, did not rate them as very personally or socially relevant. That is why we decided to explore the notion of relevance in this article, or in other words, to examine what we are measuring when we ask the audience if the performance was relevant for them. In this study, we combine reception research and performance analysis of the shows that were evaluated as the most personally or socially relevant. The shows had either existential or contemporary political topics, were created in rather traditional ways, and did not stand out in any particularly innovative theatrical approach. We also conclude that relevance is a complex issue expressed in different dimensions of theatrical experience and cannot be straightforwardly measured.

## **KEYWORDS**

*STEP City Study*, relevance, empirical study, reception research, theatrical experience, quantitative survey, focus groups, performance analysis, Tartu, Tyneside

- \* This research has been supported by the Centre of Excellence in Estonian Studies (European Union, European Regional Development Fund), the Slovenian Research Agency (project No. P6-0376, Theatre and Interart Research programme) and the Arts and Humanities Research Council under the Cultural Value Project, grant no. AH/L01440/1. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Hedi-Liis Toome, Institute of Cultural Research, University of Tartu, Estonia. E-mail: [hedi-liis.toome@ut.ee](mailto:hedi-liis.toome@ut.ee).

# Is Theatre Personally and Socially Relevant? Empirical Insight into Theatrical Experience

## INTRODUCTION

In the past few years, empirical theatre audience research has flourished. Finally, we can agree with Matthew Reason and Kirsty Sedgman<sup>1</sup> who point out, in the editorial to the Themed Section on Theatre Audiences in *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies*, that maybe it is time to “stop bemoaning the absence of audiences as a topic of empirical research.” Indeed, that type of research can cover a number of themes, such as audience response, theatre reception, theatrical experience, audience motivation, or theatre values. Despite the numerous theatrical experience literature, we still lack studies that could be broadly generalised because they are done as case studies or investigate a small number of performances or they focus on a special audience, for instance, theatre experts. In our study of audiences and reception presented in this article, we have focused on the general or so-called mainstream audiences to explore the theatrical experiences of a broad spectrum of visitors.

Susan Bennett<sup>2</sup>, in her much-cited book *Theatre Audiences*, has argued that theatrical experience takes place in a well-determined cultural environment, which influences the experiences of the spectators to a very large extent.<sup>3</sup> Our work originates in the Theatrical Event Analysis Model (TEAM) as developed by Hans van Maanen<sup>4</sup> as a base to describe theatrical experience as an encounter

---

<sup>1</sup> Reason, Sedgman 2015, 117.

<sup>2</sup> Bennett 1997.

<sup>3</sup> To indicate this cultural structure of the encounter, she used the term “theatrical event”. This term was elaborated and used more thoroughly as a fundamental concept by the Theatrical Event working group of the IFTR, established in 1997 under the leadership of Willmar Sauter.

<sup>4</sup> Van Maanen et al. 2013, 85; Wilders et al. 2015, 329.

between a theatre production and an audience. However, in this study, we are interested in a small segment of the theatrical event, an estimation of the relevance of theatre.

The relevance of theatre seems to be irrefutable. Theatre is a social praxis and it is therefore socially relevant. Many agents in the theatre field affirm its importance: the theatre organisations that present their work, the state or municipal authorities that justify the subsidies, the media that report about the events, the educational institutions that include art as a valuable part of their programmes, the audience that talks about how they spend their free time, etc. All this supports the presumption that if theatre is found irrelevant, then it does not serve its purpose. However, this kind of need for the performing arts to have a social impact that has been confirmed by empirical impact studies is being criticised.<sup>5</sup> Eleonora Belfiore and Oliver Bennett state that the important role of the humanities is seen in trying to “overcome the false and sterile dichotomy between ‘intrinsic’ and ‘instrumental’ value of the arts” and “also helping to clarify what the role and functions of the arts in present society might be.”<sup>6</sup> Ben Walmsley argues that the studies into the impact of the arts have given fresh insights, but the emphasis of the scholars is “not to investigate what value is, but rather how it might be reliably expressed, reflexively and inter-subjectively.”<sup>7</sup> We must certainly distinguish the type of social relevance described above from what the audience experiences as relevant theatre for them.

In the context of our research, that is the *STEP City Study*, the notion of the “relevance of theatre” is understood as a separate value or experience of theatre. We asked directly if the performances under investigation were personally or socially relevant for a spectator. Similar research that has investigated the experiences of theatre<sup>8</sup> has not differentiated relevance from other categories of dimensions such as cognitive or emotional as was done for the *STEP City Study*. For instance, Boerner et al.<sup>9</sup> have explored the “recognition of oneself or of familiar circumstances” as part of the cognitive dimension, developed on research carried out by Peter Eversmann.<sup>10</sup> Later, Boerner and Jobst empirically tested “associations to own life” as a part of cognitive response, “empathy” and “identification” as a part of emotional response and also added a conative determinant that includes “thought-provoking impulses” and “animation for information seeking”.<sup>11</sup> Ben Walmsley has included “getting an emotional hit” and “mimesis and personal

---

<sup>5</sup> Belfiore, Bennett 2007, 148.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 148.

<sup>7</sup> Walmsley 2018, 274.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Boerner, Jobst 2013; Eversmann 2004; Radbourne et al. 2010; Brown, Novak 2007; Walmsley 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Boerner, Jobst, Wiemann 2010.

<sup>10</sup> Eversmann 2004, 153.

<sup>11</sup> Boerner, Jobst 2013.

relevance” as part of an emotional driver, and “being intellectually challenged” as part of an intellectual driver.<sup>12</sup> Brown and Novak have created a separate Relevance Index that measures the respondents’ comfort level with the performance, that is, “the extent to which their experience varies from those who are inside of their regular boundaries.”<sup>13</sup> All this demonstrates different perspectives of understanding the relevance of theatre. Asking directly about the personal and social relevance of certain performances in the STEP research was considered a way to touch the question of the contextualisation of values – as shown further in this article, straightforward quantitative questions may have not been the best methodological solution to analyse this aspect of theatrical experience.

### **THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STEP RESEARCH**

The empirical data presented in this article is based on the international research called *STEP City Study*. In the years 2009–2015, a group of sociologically-minded theatre scholars named STEP (Project on European Theatre Systems) set up the project focused on drawing a portrait of the theatre lives of seven smaller cities across Europe.<sup>14</sup> The broader research question of the project was to understand how different theatre systems function on a societal level. Functioning is seen as a realisation of values in the different domains of a theatre system: values are created in the production domain, mediated through the distribution domain, realised in the reception domain, and contextualised creating “(new) ways of seeing the world” and “confrontation with existing perceptive constructions.”<sup>15</sup> Value in the context of this research is defined as “the typical experience art is able to generate in the act of reception.”<sup>16</sup>

In analysing the results of reception research, we came across interesting results showing what exactly was valued in the selected theatrical events. We were not surprised that the spectators valued highly the performances’ skills and forms as well as their emotional and cognitive engagement; we did not expect, however, that spectators did not rate highly the performances as socially and personally

---

<sup>12</sup> Walmsley 2011.

<sup>13</sup> Brown, Novak 2007.

<sup>14</sup> As researchers in the study, we analysed the total supply of theatrical performances offered to the public in a chosen city over a certain period of time (normally one year) and also surveyed the spectators who attended these performances. The cities were Aarhus (Denmark), Bern (Switzerland), Debrecen (Hungary), Groningen (the Netherlands), Maribor (Slovenia), Tartu (Estonia) and the Tyneside area (United Kingdom). To read more about the whole project, see *Amfiteater. Journal of Performing Arts Theory* (2015), vol. 3, no. 1–2. The results of the first research project by STEP is published in *Local Stages, Global Changes. How Theatre Functions in Smaller European Countries*. 2009. Ed. by Van Maanen, H., Kotte, A. Saro, A.; Brill/Rodopi.

<sup>15</sup> Van Maanen 2009, 143.

<sup>16</sup> Van Maanen 2009, 149.

relevant compared to the other aspects.<sup>17</sup> Those findings seemed in contradiction with the high overall evaluation of a selected performance. That is why the low averages for relevance made us look more deeply into the notion of personal and social relevance. We therefore formulated the following research questions:

1. How does “relevance” rank among other theatrical values?
2. What topics are common to performances estimated as highly personally and socially relevant?
3. What is similar among performances rated as not relevant?

## **METHODOLOGY**

As already stated, we followed the methodology developed for the STEP research, but we also added a performance analysis of the selected shows to explore the notion of relevance further.

The main research question of the STEP reception research was to identify the different experiences spectators have while watching different types of theatre.<sup>18</sup> For the quantitative research, we used a unified questionnaire designed especially for comparative research based on the (revised) Theatrical Event Analysis Model (TEAM).<sup>19</sup> In the (revised) TEAM, theatrical experience is structured into five dimensions: theatrical, thematic, communicative, immersive, (which was titled narrative in the original model), and contextual. However, we felt that this model was insufficient to describe the audience experience, and so we added clusters of experiential values that were a direct result of the engagement with the aesthetic characteristics of the selected performances. We hoped that in these ways we would most comprehensively describe the complexity of the average audience experience in contemporary theatre.

We also present the results based on the qualitative research that was carried out in addition to the quantitative. The theoretical framework for the qualitative research was directly connected to the framework for the quantitative research. For the in-depth interviews, the interviewer did not have a structured questionnaire, but a list of key themes based on the TEAM model to be discussed with the interviewee. For focus groups, the methodology “Theatre Talks” was used,<sup>20</sup> where

---

<sup>17</sup> Wilders et al. 2015.

<sup>18</sup> Wilders et al 2015, 306.

<sup>19</sup> The questionnaire consisted of five types of questions: (1) the overall evaluation of the performance, the venue and the evening in general and the reasons for coming to the theatre; (2) the frequency of theatre attendance as well as attending different types and genres of theatre (both professional and amateur) during the last twelve months; (3) the expectations for the evening, if and from where the spectator had gained information before coming to the theatre and if and from where the spectator got information after seeing the performance; (4) questions about the experience of the theatre; (5) questions concerning the socio-demographic data (Toome 2013, 66).

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Hansen 2013, 2015.

the respondents discuss what they saw and experienced during the performance very freely leaving the facilitator as passive as possible.

We used the statistical program SPSS to analyse the data collected through the quantitative questionnaire. The qualitative interviews and focus-groups were recorded, transcribed, and analysed using qualitative content analysis.

## **THE SAMPLE**

Our findings are based on empirical data collected for the international comparative research undertaken by STEP. However, only the data from the city of Tartu, Estonia and the Tyneside area in the UK is included in this article.<sup>21</sup> The sampling of the performances chosen for audience and reception research followed the idea of choosing a variety of performances that could be considered a representative sample of the supply available to the spectators during a season, also trying to consider the different companies or venues present in the city. Performances of Spoken Theatre, Dance Theatre, Musical Theatre and *Kleinkunst*<sup>22</sup> were included in the sample. An exception is performances of *Kleinkunst* in Tartu due to the lack of this type of theatre during the period of research.

In Tartu, quantitative audience research was conducted in the year 2012, in Tyneside in 2014 (see Table 1). In general, the spectators answered an electronic questionnaire which they received via e-mail a few days after the performance. The e-mail addresses were collected before the performance or during an intermission; in Tyneside, audience lists were also used to distribute the questionnaire. In both cities, a small number of print questionnaires with stamped envelopes were also distributed to the people who did not have e-mail accounts but were willing to participate in the survey.

The sample of performances is dominated by Spoken Theatre in both cities. In Tartu, the dominance of Spoken Theatre is visible also in the number of respondents. In Tyneside, the number of respondents for different types of theatre is more equally distributed because the dance performances included in the survey were shown on big stages, thus more audience members could be accommodated.

In addition, qualitative research was carried out both in Tartu and Tyneside (see Table 2). In Tartu, the productions and performances included in the quantitative questionnaire and qualitative research were different (with one exception). The reason for this was that the quantitative and qualitative research was carried out in different years due to the lack of resources.

---

<sup>21</sup> In addition, quantitative audience and reception research was conducted in the cities of Debrecen (Hungary) and Groningen (The Netherlands).

<sup>22</sup> The term *Kleinkunst* (used in both German and Dutch) was chosen because the term "Stand-up" was too narrow to describe the essence of this category and the Dutch word *kabaret* has a different specialised meaning in Danish and Estonian. For more on developing the genres and categories for STEP City Study see Toome and Saro 2015.

|  | Tartu | Tyneside |
|--|-------|----------|
| Research period                        | 2012  | 2014     |
| Productions in the sample              | 13    | 24       |
| <i>Spoken Theatre</i>                  | 8     | 14       |
| <i>Musical Theatre</i>                 | 3     | 2        |
| <i>Dance Theatre</i>                   | 2     | 4        |
| Kleinkunst                             | 0     | 2        |
| <i>Other</i>                           | 0     | 1        |
| Performances in the sample             | 23    | 105      |
| Respondents of the quantitative survey | 1401  | 1808     |
| <i>Spoken Theatre</i>                  | 56.5% | 35.8%    |
| <i>Musical Theatre</i>                 | 31.3% | 34%      |
| <i>Dance Theatre</i>                   | 12.3% | 27.3%    |
| Kleinkunst                             | 0     | 2.3%     |
| <i>Other</i>                           | 0     | 0.5%     |

**Table 1.** Research period, number of productions and performances and number of respondents included in the quantitative audience and reception research.

|                       | Tartu | Tyneside |
|-----------------------|-------|----------|
| Research period       | 2014  | 2014     |
| Productions           | 4     | 9        |
| Focus groups          | 3     | 9        |
| In-depth interviews   | 10    | -        |
| Participants in total | 20    | 28       |

**Table 2.** Research period, number of productions and number of respondents included in the qualitative reception research.

In Tyneside, qualitative research was conducted after nine different productions that were all surveyed with a questionnaire as well, but some productions did not get enough responses (for the analysis of our quantitative research in the article, we dealt only with productions for which more than fifty respondents answered the questionnaire).

## THE PARADOXES OF SOCIAL AND PERSONAL RELEVANCE

### Theatre relevance vs. skills and forms

For the STEP reception research, we used the already mentioned questionnaire to investigate basic questions of demographics and theatre-going habits, the nature of the experience of the performance they saw, and their experiences of performances in general. In this article we focus on a single question that offered a list of twenty-four adjectives or keywords (“challenging”, “relaxing”, and “recognisable”, etc.) and asked to what extent these traits characterised the perfor-

mance, on a 6-point scale from 1 “not at all” to 6 “very much so”. In analysis we have combined them into clusters of experiential values: forms and skills demonstrated, emotional engagement of the spectators, cognitive engagement of the spectators, experienced complexity of the performance, entertainment values, and experienced relevance of the performance. Our lists resemble those of Boerner et al.<sup>23</sup> and are not wholly dissimilar from those developed by Brown and Novak.<sup>24</sup> Because the same lists were to be used for all performances in all other STEP cities, they did not refer to specific characteristics of individual productions.

First, we analysed the averages of the keywords to understand how the relevance of theatre is positioned in relation to the other aspects of theatrical experience. Both in Tyneside and Tartu, performances were considered more socially than personally relevant. In Tartu, the average for social relevance is 3.89 and for personal relevance 2.94 (see Table 3). From the twenty-four keywords presented for the audience members, only five – skilful, beautiful to look at, impressive, satisfyingly complete, and easy to follow – were rated higher than social relevance. Personal relevance was ranked at the sixteenth position.

In Tyneside, the situation was slightly different: spectators likewise found the performances to be mostly skilful and impressive; they were also often described as easy to follow, as well as good fun and exciting.<sup>25</sup> Social relevance ranked eleventh and personal relevance fourteenth. Similarly, as in Tartu, people value theatre skills, forms, and positive emotions in performances, but do not consider them as highly “relevant”. The importance of emotional and cognitive engagement is confirmed by similar research into theatrical experiences.<sup>26</sup>

| Tartu                    |         | Tyneside                |         |
|--------------------------|---------|-------------------------|---------|
| Keyword                  | Average | Keyword                 | Average |
| 1. Skilful               | 4.43    | 1. Skilful              | 5.28    |
| 2. Beautiful to look at  | 4.28    | 2. Impressive           | 5.21    |
| 3. Impressive            | 4.27    | 3. Easy to follow       | 5.09    |
| 4. Satisfyingly complete | 4.26    | 4. Good fun             | 4.79    |
| 5. Easy to follow        | 4.07    | 5. Exciting             | 4.56    |
|                          |         |                         |         |
| 6. Socially relevant     | 3.89    | 11. Socially relevant   | 4.21    |
| 16. Personally relevant  | 2.94    | 14. Personally relevant | 3.72    |

**Table 3.** The highest rated keywords compared to the ratings and ranks of social and personal relevance.

<sup>23</sup> Boerner et al. 2010, 176.

<sup>24</sup> Brown and Novak, 2007.

<sup>25</sup> In Tyneside the evaluation in general was higher than in the other cities compared.

<sup>26</sup> E.g. Boerner, Jobst 2013, 2011; Eversmann 2004; Walmsley 2013.

However, the fact that most of the chosen performances were not estimated as highly relevant cannot leave us with conclusion that theatre is not significant in general. Some performances also received high scores in the relevance cluster. That is why, in the next subchapter, those scoring highest on “personal relevance” and “social relevance” in Tartu and Tyneside are analysed to see what is common to performances that are valued as remarkably relevant.

### **Relevant topics: painful national history and existential dilemmas**

The most socially relevant performance in Tartu was *Purge* (average 4.91), written by widely acclaimed Finnish-Estonian author Sofi Oksanen. The story takes place in Estonia during the 1990s with flashbacks to the 1950s, and deals with the controversial times of living and surviving under the violence of the Communist era, also pointing to the more universal problem of women being victims of violence and trafficking. The play was developed into a novel by the same name and subject matter,<sup>27</sup> which, when published, caused very diverse reactions in Estonia because of the depictions of Estonians (that is to say, very black and white as communist collaborators versus good patriots), even though Oksanen herself stated that the novel is more about violence against women than about Estonians per se. *Purge* was also rated as one of the most personally relevant performances (average 3.44). Aesthetically, *Purge* is very traditionally and realistically staged, and received rather negative reactions from the critics: the set design was seen as “naturalistically butaphoric”<sup>28</sup>, and the world created onstage as naïve and simplistic considering the multifacetedness of the material.<sup>29</sup> However, the première of the production was visited by almost all the ministers of the Estonian government and most of the performances of *Purge* received standing ovations.

The second most socially (4.71) and personally (3.57) relevant performance is *Career*, a play written and directed by a young promising Estonian director, Uku Uusberg. One of the protagonists, a university professor, Evald Liiv (*liiv* means “sand” in Estonian) has moved into the forest to live in a gravel-pit. His only friend is a mute, Pierrot-like figure, DJ Zlava, who lives in an old theatre warehouse in the middle of all the props left there. The performance’s story starts two years later when the professor and DJ Zlava are visited by a local government official and the mayor – both very young and recent students of Professor Liiv – who wish to throw them out of their current residences. Uusberg created a unique

---

<sup>27</sup> Even though the play was written first (first staged in 2007), it was the novel (published in 2008) that gained international success and was translated into different languages.

<sup>28</sup> Mänd *Tartu Postimees* 2010.

<sup>29</sup> Sibrits *Tartu Postimees* 2010.

atmosphere onstage that was literally and symbolically surprising, offering a combination of recognisable people and situations with an unpredictable twist, which made the performance enjoyable for both audiences and critics.

The performances that are considered the most socially relevant in Tartu are those dealing with subject matters that are either connected to Estonia's (painful) history or to current themes of wider human existence. Issues raised in these two performances can be related to by almost every Estonian theatre goer. *Purge* tackles Estonia's recent history, which has directly or indirectly affected every Estonian of today. The violence of the Communist regime, the key subject matter of the Estonian staging of *Purge*, is therefore experienced emotionally as socially and personally relevant. *Career*, the performance that combined "expressive theatricality, surrealism, opera, dance and drama in an intimate black box" (Mikomägi 2012), discusses the ongoing conflict of carrying a mask of social roles to fit into society versus finding yourself and following your own path in life. This subject matter, especially through the more unrealistic performance style, offers people of different backgrounds the possibilities of relating to the themes of the performance.

The performances in Tyneside that were seen as the most socially relevant were *The Two Worlds of Charlie F* (5.54), *Captain Amazing* (4.73) and *Catch 22* (4.67); most personally relevant were *The Two Worlds of Charlie F* (4.28), *Incognito* (4.00) and *Dirty Dancing* (3.96). *The Two Worlds of Charlie F* is a piece about true (war) stories of injured British Servicemen and women, performed by real service personnel and actors, named Bravo 22 Company. The show premiered in 2012 at the Theatre Royal Haymarket, London, and was successful enough to have a new touring life in 2014. Based on interviews and a sharing process, the company created a spoken theatre piece with a significant amount of song and dance. The audience seemed to love everything about it. In the open question section in which the audience was asked "what did you like about the performance and why", members wrote: "/.../ that the standard of acting was excellent whether the performers were professional actors or ex-military personnel. That the play covered all the emotional spectrum." or "The insight into what serving forces have to face in the way of risks and injury, and the problems of integrating back into civilian life." In these two examples, we can read about impressiveness and cognitive insights, but does this already make it relevant for the audience? For one member, that was definitely the case: "It was SO REAL, and relevant to all our lives. Felt so much admiration for the characters and their traumas, everyone should be MADE to see it. It made me think, and has stayed with me ever since." However, this female, age 69, evaluated the performance as socially relevant (6 points), but not personally relevant (2 points). Another of her remarks

makes the point: “Can’t rate the performance highly enough, felt disappointed that the Theatre was not full to capacity on the night we went.” Compared, for instance, to two other shows that we also surveyed at the same venue which played for two weeks (*Swan Lake*) or four weeks (*Dirty Dancing*) and were always full, *The Two Worlds of Charlie F* had trouble selling tickets (according to information from their marketing department, they also expected to attract more people with this show). So, on the one hand, a performance that was completely made in the UK, based on true and inevitably dramatic content was perceived as very relevant from its audience, but the fact is that fewer people chose to see that performance compared to other shows in spring 2014 at the Theatre Royal.

The second production that was valued for social relevance was a one-man show called *Captain Amazing*, written by young English playwright Alistair McDowall, which played at the Live Theatre in Newcastle, the second most-subsidised venue in the area known for promoting new (British) playwriting. The story was announced thus: “Struggling to balance his family responsibilities and conventional job with defeating super-villains and rescuing families from burning buildings, *Captain Amazing* represents how all parents strive to be heroes in the eyes of their children.” Performed by one young actor in a smaller club-like setting of the Main Theatre, which has a capacity of up to 170, this performance was very different from the before mentioned piece in the biggest commercial theatre in the city with an auditorium of a maximum capacity of 1250 seats. Overtly fictional in the name (personal trait) of the main character, the story is about a working-class dad and his relationships to his girlfriend, daughter, job, etc., and how he is coping with the death of a child. The performance does have some societal content as it addresses class and gender identity, and death, but nothing beyond that (no wars, national identity topics as in the before discussed *The Two Worlds*). The audience liked it because of: “[the] fantastic acting, within all the characters that he performed. Very moving, emotionally powerful” or “[t]he script – it told the story succinctly, clearly and it was very moving”. However, when it came to the evaluation of personal relevance, the mark was only 2.93. In the focus group discussion immediately following the performance, one male participant said: “This one, it was intense and it was, and because it was intense, I didn’t come away feeling uplifted and joyful. I enjoyed the performance it was excellent, but also like I found him quite irritating through the performance. He’s supposed to be a horrible, grumpy, reluctant person who was bored, like he wasn’t a nice person was he, *Captain Amazing*, do you think?” So perhaps the low mark for personal relevance comes directly from personal identification with and comparing oneself to the protagonist. Could it be that an affinity to a young working-class male with heroic fantasies is less likely to happen in a theatre that still predominantly at-

tracts women with high levels of education or those from middle class society?<sup>30</sup> However, this does not prevent the audience from seeing “universal” stories and therefore recognising performances as socially relevant.

### **Less relevant productions**

We can also explore relevance by looking at the other end of the continuum – the least relevant productions. The performances that are considered the least personally and socially relevant in Tartu are comedies, musicals, and ballets, but only if they do not present subject matter that can be considered socially relevant. For example, the personal relevance of the comedy *Calendar Girls*, based on the popular British film (2003), which tells the story of a group of middle-aged women who pose naked to raise money for cancer patients, is very low (2.61), but the social relevance is 3.95. A similar case is the world-renowned Broadway musical *Cabaret*, where the social relevance is 3.57, but the personal relevance is one of the lowest, only 2.20. The two performances considered both personally and socially the least relevant in Tartu were the opera *Tosca* and the ballet *Sleeping Beauty*. Similarly, in Tyneside, least socially relevant were the musical *Dirty Dancing* (3.82) and the well-known play *Pygmalion* by G.B. Shaw (3.99) that was also the second least personally relevant.

Can it be speculated that the more classical theatre genres which often present themes that are not topical (often famous operas and ballets), or of which the staging is already world famous (musicals), are due to these reasons less personally and socially relevant? On the other hand, these kinds of performances are valued highly in skills and forms which mean that in general these genres are also greatly appreciated.<sup>31</sup>

### **The relevance of strong experience in discussions after performances**

While the results of quantitative data suggest that theatre – with some exceptions - is not experienced as very personally or socially relevant, qualitative data enables us to analyse some more aspects of this issue. Among the twenty participants who were either interviewed or were part of focus groups in Tartu, it was difficult to find people who stated that they found the performance personally relevant or that they thought that particular performances were socially relevant. Nonetheless, several respondents expressed the strong experiences that the performance brought forth for them. For example, a 34-year-old male (M34) respondent, who came to the theatre with his wife, said that after seeing the performance *To Kill a Mockingbird*, based on the famous novel, they did not attend

---

<sup>30</sup> For more on demographics and Tyneside research see Edelman, Šorli 2015.

<sup>31</sup> The *STEP City Study* has also shown that personal or social relevance does not have an impact in rating the performances in general (Wilders et al, 2015).

the party they were supposed to go afterwards: “The emotions we got from this performance ... it would have been really hard to go to an ordinary party. We talked a lot about the performance.” The performance surpassed his expectations and “by the emotional thing that I got from this performance and the positive impression. I would really like to recommend this to others.”

It is more evident when people talk about their theatrical experiences that they are more personally touched by the performances that present more easily-relatable subject matter. This also confirms the quantitative relevance of the four performances previously analysed. The before mentioned M34 confessed that the child characters from *To Kill a Mockingbird* reminded him of his own children; the more universal theme of the performance – “being a good person” (quote from M34) – and how it was presented in the performance confirmed his own thoughts and ideas on these issues: “/.../ the things [*subject matters presented in the performance – ed.*] are as we have always thought ourselves [*he and his wife – ed.*]. This is interesting.” A 65-year-old woman (W65) said about the tragicomedy *Panic*, which tells the story of three men going through mid-life crises and the anxiety problems faced by one of them: “I know two people who have anxiety issues /.../. This is a problem that we, humans, have. It is not a utopia. I am not so attached to the starving African children (*laughing*), worry whether they have food. I can’t. This is too far away from me.” Her sister has the same problem and she recognises the context of this illness presented on stage. A younger audience member, a 17-year-old girl (W17), did not relate to the same performance because she thought “it is more interesting for older people who face these kinds of problems [*burnout etc. – ed.*] more often.” However, she admitted that the performance was not bad because of the skilled actors. The strong connection between emotional reactions and what the respondents feel strongly about the performance is also confirmed by a qualitative empirical study conducted among long-time opera attendees in London.<sup>32</sup> So being able to identify with the subject matter offers some strong emotions for some audience members and not identifying does not mean that the visitor does not value the skills and forms of the performance in general.

## CONCLUSIONS

In her book, *Audience as Performer*, Caroline Heim acknowledges many roles of audiences throughout history and for the 21st century spectators the consumer role<sup>33</sup> is one of the most performed. It works “to build the esteem of the audience member through ownership, performance and building identity.”<sup>34</sup> Most of the audience research listed in this article works on these premises and has a goal,

---

<sup>32</sup> O’Neill et al. 2016.

<sup>33</sup> Heim 2016, 128–44.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 139.

as Jacques Rancière puts it in *The Emancipated Spectator*, to “recognize the knowledge at work in the ignoramus and the activity peculiar to the spectator.”<sup>35</sup> Audience research today recognises theatre visitors as equal partners in the theatre event and wants to know what they expect from the production, what is the visitors’ motivation to attend, what do they value most in performances. Our research revealed that audience members value highly skills and forms of particular performances and the emotional and cognitive engagement, however, not so much the social and personal relevance when asked about it very directly. Nonetheless, the performance analysis of the most relevant productions enables us to conclude that shows that tackle more “serious” matters such as war and violence, are based on documentary materials, or offer an aesthetically enjoyable approach to human controversies are considered both personally and socially relevant. The results of the qualitative survey confirm the importance of personal engagement with the subject matter presented on the stage. Considering the variety of productions from spoken to dance theatre, it is not surprising that some of them were considered more relevant than others – genres like comedy which usually aims to entertain, or opera and ballet, which are often more valued for their professional excellence than for their subject matter or innovative directorial styles, are experienced as less relevant than performances dealing with the issues stated above.<sup>36</sup>

There are also other ways to prove the social relevance of theatre. In Estonia, 87% of the respondents of a representative national survey state that theatre is one of the most important parts of Estonian culture<sup>37</sup> – so even people who do not attend the theatre value it on a societal level. In the case of Estonia, we can assume that the respondents of this survey responded about the “theatre-as-institution” and not the “performance-as-event”.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, the STEP research in general confirms that “performance-as-event” is also highly valued by the people attending theatre.

As a main methodological observation, we must emphasise the fact that the direct question of relevance takes visitors’ attention away from the frame of theatrical experience. Thinking about personal and social significance directs the spectator’s evaluation to other aspects of their lives. Thus, we suggest exploring the topic of relevance within the field of theatrical autonomy, as understood by Edelman, Hansen and van den Hoogen. In their book, *The Problem of Theatrical Autonomy. Analysing Theatre as a Social Practice*, they claim that “theatre is

---

<sup>35</sup> Rancière 2009, 17.

<sup>36</sup> The STEP research into the relevance of different types of theatre shows that Spoken Theatre and *Kleinkunst* are considered most socially relevant, and *Kleinkunst* is the most personally relevant type of theatre (Wilders et al. 2015: 321).

<sup>37</sup> Kivirähk 2016.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Kershaw 1994, 163.

autonomous to the extent that it pursues its own value.”<sup>39</sup> They also explore how different agents in the various fields of theatre make use of claims to autonomy; in our case, the agents justify what is most valued in the theatrical experience. We believe that the findings of our research, in the context of theatrical autonomy, can persuade anybody about the relevance of theatre in general.

---

<sup>39</sup> Edelman et al. 2017, 27.

## Works cited

- Amfiteater. Journal of Performing Arts Theory*. 2015, 3:1–2. <http://www.slogi.si/en/publikacije/journal-of-performing-arts-theory-volume-3-number-1-2/>
- Belfiore, Eleonora, Bennett, Oliver. 2007. "Rethinking the Social Impacts of the Arts." *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 13:2, 135–151.
- Bennett, Susan. 1997. *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception*. London; New York: Routledge.
- Boerner, Sabine, Jobst, Johanna. 2013. "Enjoying Theatre: The Role of Visitor's Response to the Performance." *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts* 7:4, 391–408.
- Boerner, Sabine, Jobst, Johanna, Wiemann, Meike. 2010. "Exploring the theatrical experience: Results from an empirical investigation." *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts* 4:3, 173–180.
- Brown, Alan. S., Novak, Jennifer L. 2007. *Assessing the Intrinsic Impacts of a Live Performance*. Detroit: Wolfbrown.
- Edelman, Joshua, Ejgod Hansen, Louise, Hoogen, Quirijn Lennert van den. 2017. *The Problem of Theatrical Autonomy. Analysing Theatre as a Social Practice*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Edelman, Joshua, Šorli, Maja. 2015. "Measuring the value of theatre for Tyneside audiences". *Cultural Trends* 24:3, 232–244.
- Eversmann, Peter. 2004. "The experience of the theatrical event" in *Theatrical Events: Borders, Dynamics and Frames*. Eds. Vicki Ann Cremona *et al.* Amsterdam: Rodopi, 139–174.
- Global Changes – Local Stages. How Theatre Functions in Smaller European Countries* 2009. Eds. Hans van Maanen *et al.* Amsterdam: Brill/Rodopi.
- Hansen, Louise Ejgod. 2015. "Behaviour and attitude: the Theatre Talks method as audience development." *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 21:3.
- Hansen, Louise Ejgod. 2013. "The Democratic Potential of Theatre Talks." *Nordic Theatre Studies* 25, 10–21.
- Heim, Caroline. 2016. *Audience as Performer. The changing role of theatre audiences in the twenty-first century*. London; New York: Routledge.
- Kershaw, Baz. 1994. "Framing the Audience for Theatre" in *The Authority of the Consumer*. Eds Russell Keat, Nigel Witheley, Nicholas Abercrombie. London: Routledge. 166–86.
- Kivirähk, Juhan. 2016. *Teatri roll ja positsioon ühiskonnas*. Turu-Uurigute AS, Eesti Etendusasutuse Liit, Eesti Teatriliit. [http://www.eeteal.ee/sisu/326\\_1129Teatri\\_Poisysioon.pdf](http://www.eeteal.ee/sisu/326_1129Teatri_Poisysioon.pdf).
- Mikomägi, Margus. 2012. Vanemuise liivakell heliseb äratust. *Postimees*. 18 April.

- Mänd Maarja. 2010. "Vanemuise lavalt paistis puhastumatus". *Tartu Postimees*. 20 September.
- O'Neill, Sinéad, Edelman, Joshua, Sloboda, John. 2016. "Opera and emotion: The cultural value of attendance for the highly engaged." in *Participations. Journal of Audience & Reception Studies* 13:1, 24–50.
- Radbourne, Jennifer, Glow, Hillary, Johanson, Katya. 2010. "Measuring the intrinsic benefits of arts attendance." *Cultural Trends* 19:4, 307–324.
- Rancière, Jacques. 2009. *The Emancipated Spectator*. London; New York: Verso.
- Reason, Matthew, Sedgman, Kirsty. 2015. "Editors' general introduction: Themed Section on theatre audiences" in *Participations. Journal of Audience & Reception Studies* 12:1, 117–122.
- Sibrits, Heili. 2010. Naiivsusega looritatud jõhker lugu eesti naistest. *Postimees*. 20 Sept.
- Toome, Hedi-Liis, Saro, Anneli. 2015. "Theatre Productions and Distribution in Different European cities." in *Amfiteater. Journal of Performing Arts Theory* 3(1–2), 257–279.
- Toome, Hedi-Liis. 2013. "Teatrist Tartus, rahvusvaheliselt. Metodoloogilisi küsimusi rahvusvahelises võrdlusruuringus" in *Eesti teatriteaduse perspektiivid. Studia litteraria Estonica* vol 13. Ed. Anneli Saro. Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus, 55–82.
- Van Maanen, Hans, Zijlstra, Antine, Wilders, Marline L. 2013. *How Theatre Functions in the City of Groningen. Supply and Use in the Regular Season*. Groningen: Research Centre Arts and Society, University of Groningen.
- Van Maanen, Hans. 2009. *How to Study Art Worlds. On the Societal Functioning of Aesthetic Values*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Walmsley, Ben. 2018. "Deep hanging out in the arts: an anthropological approach to capturing cultural value." *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 24:2, 272–291.
- Walmsley, Ben. 2011. "Why people go to the theatre: A qualitative study of audience motivation". *Journal of Customer Behaviour* 10:4, 335–351.
- Wilders, Marline Lisette, Toome, Hedi-Liis, Šorli, Maja, Szabó, Attila, Zijlstra, Antine. 2015. "I was utterly mesmerised': Audience experiences of different theatre types and genres in four European cities" in *Amfiteater. Journal of Performing Arts Theory* 3: 1–2, 304–343.

## **AUTHORS**

Maja Šorli is Research Fellow at the Academy of Theatre, Radio, Film and Television of the University of Ljubljana (AGRFT UL), editor-in-chief of the journal of performing arts theory *Amfiteater*, a dramaturge and psychodrama trainee. In 2014 her monograph *Slovenska postdramska pomlad* [*The Slovenian Postdramatic Spring*] was published by MGL Library. She is a co-editor of three monographs, *Skupnost emancipiranih misli in teles* [*Society of Emancipated Thoughts and Bodies*] (2018), *Hibridni prostori umetnosti* [*Hybrid Spaces of Art*] (2012) and *Dinamika sprememb v slovenskem gledališču 20. Stoletja* [*The Dynamics of Change in the 20th-Century Slovenian Theatre*] (2010).

Hedi-Liis Toome (PhD) is a lecturer of theatre studies at the Institute of Cultural Research at the University of Tartu, Estonia. In her research, she mostly studies the relationship between theatre and society, more particularly theatre audiences and reception and the functioning of theatre systems. She is the head of Estonian Association of Theatre Researchers and Theatre Critics, she is also teaching at the Estonian Academy of Arts and has worked on administrative positions in theatres and theatre organisations. Since 2010, she is a member of and international research group STEP (Project on European Theatre Systems).