



Theatre Sociology Today

International symposium on the methodology of audience research
and societal functions of theatre

Budapest, National Theatre, Kaszás Attila Hall

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Organisers:

10th Theatre Olympics, Budapest National Theatre
Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church, Budapest. Institute of Arts Studies and
General Humanities
Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute, Budapest

Speakers:

14:00 Enikő Sepsi-Attila Szabó, opening of the workshop

14:15-14:30 **A sociology of play; how theatrical values function in surrounding systems**

Hans van Maanen, University of Groningen, The Netherlands

Theatre sociology is the domain of theatre scholars with sociological interest, more than a subfield of sociology. Hence the early investigations in the 1960s and '70s concerned the composition of audiences, a decade later followed by reception research. But the influence of real sociologists helped to develop the concept of the theatrical event, as it occurs and is related to societal contexts. The final step still lacks, but has to be made, which is to describe the relationships between a theatre system and its societal contexts, or more precisely how values generated in theatrical events function in other systems.

14:30-14:45 **The problem of theatrical autonomy. Analysing Theatre as a Social Practice**

Joshua Edelman, Manchester Metropolitan University, United Kingdom

The potency of theatre – both as an art form and a social practice – comes from its valuable but incomplete ability to operate according to values and norms that it has set for itself. This independence – which many critics call autonomy – is particularly tenuous for the theatre, which relies on public spaces, public funding, and public perception to its work. The way that theatre negotiates and uses its autonomy from the society and culture that surrounds it is a key way of understanding theatre sociology. This presentation will demonstrate this through a small group of coteremporary European examples.

14:45-15:00 **Theatre after Covid: Innovation or Path Dependence?**

Christopher Balme, LMU Munich

Drawing on a mixed methods approach, this paper will present findings from survey data and discourse analysis of materials gathered in the UK, Germany, Switzerland and Austria. It asks the question whether the exogenous shock brought about by the Covid pandemic has prompted theatres to innovate. Starting from the theory of path dependence which suggests that institutional change is extremely difficult, the paper will argue that preliminary findings do indeed point to transformations that affect both aesthetic and institutional dimensions of theatre, particularly in the field of digital infrastructure and knowhow. The differences vary, however, considerably across the countries and theatre systems surveyed which provide a point of departure for a discussion on systemic differences.

15:00-15:15 **Migration Narratives as a Pedagogical Function of Theatre**

Stephen E. Wilmer, Trinity College Dublin, Ireland

The theatre has long been concerned with the theme of migration. From Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* to Shakespeare's *King Lear*, from Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage* to Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, homelessness and dispossession have been recurring features of dramatic texts. With the number of forcibly displaced people rising to over one hundred million today and resistance growing to the influx of refugees, theatre activists have provided an important voice for hospitality in Europe. In Germany at the time of a major influx of refugees in 2015, for example, more than 160 theatres regarded their function as public institutions to provide welcome centres and/or present performances relating to the needs and experiences of the incoming refugees. This paper explores not only the mechanisms to deny the rights of the non-citizen and the philosophical commentary around this by Hannah Arendt, Giorgio Agamben and Jacques Rancière, but also the ways in which theatre performances can oppose the disenfranchising activities of governing authorities. Such performances as Christoph Schlingensiefel's *Please Love Austria*, Maxi Obexer's *Illegal Helpers*, the Maxim Gorki Theatre's *Winterreise*, Refugee Club Impulse's *Letters Home*, and the Good Chance theatre's *The Jungle*, etc. have challenged the disempowering practices of the nation-state, and reaffirmed, as in the UN Declaration, "the right [of refugees] to have rights". The paper discusses the medium of theatre as a discursive resource for conveying to the public their moral responsibilities for welcoming refugees, employing such pedagogical strategies as documentary verisimilitude, subversive affirmation, and cross identification.

15:15-15:30 Coffee break

15:30-15:45 **The Promised Land. Audience and reception research within the context of performance-as-research.**

Marline Lisette Wilders, University of Groningen, The Netherlands

This paper will present research concerning the theatre production *Het Land van Belofte* (The Promised Land), a production which is based on a so-called table or dinner play, a medieval theatre genre intended for performance during meals. What the characters say and do is always related to the reason for the meal and to the guests, in particular to the person or persons for whom the feast is arranged. The audience also always plays a part in the spectacle that unfolds before its eyes. The production was part of a performance-as-research trajectory, in which the creative process, from the first rehearsal to the last performance, was closely monitored. The goal of this process was to map opportunities and dilemmas – artistic and cultural – associated with the staging of historical

plays, especially on locations where they have been (or may have been) played in the past. The play was performed on five different historical locations in The Netherlands and Belgium in September 2022 and small-scale reception research was executed to get more insight in audience reactions. The audience in the production takes up a specific role; it is not approached as passive recipient, but as active participant in the play, while enjoying a meal on a historical site, both elements that create very specific reception conditions for the performance, which were expected to influence the particular meanings and values that are attributed to the theatrical event by audience members to a high extent.

15:45-16:00 Re-voicing Cultural Landscapes: Minority - majority dynamics in Frisian spoken theatre in the Netherlands

Antine Zijlstra, University of Groningen, The Netherlands

The research project *Re-voicing Cultural Landscapes* (Horizon 2020) aims to get better understanding of the value and functions of cultural events as intangible cultural heritage (ICH), asking questions like: *Who benefits from cultural heritage, and what does it 'do'? How do different groups understand, experience and value heritage?* Thereby, we focus on the interplay between minority - majority dynamics and the question how to amplify marginalised voices and re-frame the discourse towards a more balanced cultural landscape. The Frisian strand looks at Frisian spoken theatre as such. Frisian is the second official language in the Netherlands. It is used in the Northern part of the country and officially recognised as a minority language. It has a long standing (amateur) theatre tradition that is closely connected to the village communities it stems from. However, like in every European country the population is getting more diverse and majority voices are increasing. The presentation will focus on how the dynamics between Frisian and Dutch speakers and how they negotiate between minority and majority perspectives when they value Frisian spoken theatre events.

16:00-16:15 The methodology of STEP City Research

Hedi-Liis Toome, Tartu University, Estonia

This paper places the STEP City Research in the context of other audience and reception research projects that have aimed to compare the experience, value and functions of theatrical events, including those of Reason, Johanson, Walmsley, Radbourne, Glow, Heim and Sedgman. The paper clarifies both the similarities and differences between STEP approach and these others.

16:15-16:30 STEP City Project Debrecen: methodology and the assessment of values realized

Magdolna Balkányi, University of Debrecen and Attila Szabó, KRE-BTK

The city of Debrecen represented Hungary in the STEP City Project, the data was collected between 2009-2012. The research tried to both map the offer of all productions in the supply of a given season and gather in-depth empirical evidence of the experiences of spectators in the city, across different genres and theatre types. The research was the first such large-scale research in Hungary, especially in an international comparative frame. The paper will present the methodological challenges of data collection and research design, followed by the presentation of some results of the quantitative research, about the question of the specific types of values realized in the Debrecen sample, following the classification of Hans van Maanen.

16:30-16:45 Analyzing audience reception in Romeo and Juliet at the National Theatre

Enikő Sepsi and Lilla Gódor, KRE-BTK

The paper presents the results of the quantitative research carried out among young audiences (aged 16-25) who have been spectators of the performance *Romeo and Juliet* at the National Theatre, Budapest, directed by Attila Vidnyánszky. The focus of the research was to map the theatrical experiences of young spectators and have a detailed view on how they assess certain components of the theatrical event. These results are related to the marketing and communication practices the theatre uses to specially target young audiences, also highlighting the relevance of the play for students today.

16:45-17:30 Discussion