

NOBA network meeting in Oslo December 5th 2013

Summary from the dialogue seminar during Showbox 2013

Venue - Black Box Teater, Marstrandgata 8, Oslo

Date - December 5th at 15:00-18:00

Theme - Quality and Aesthetics

What do we mean with the terms quality and aesthetics? And how do we relate to it? How do we define it? What geographical and cultural differences are there? Can aesthetics affect how we value quality? This is an ongoing and vast discussion and an important one at that.

Presenters

Ådne Sekkelsten from Scenekunstbruket.

Malin Enberg from Producentbyrå, Sweden presented the background of NOBA.

Guri Birkeland, Senior advisor Scenekunstbruket (The Norwegian Touring Network for performing arts) from Norway talked about quality from Scenekunstbrukets perspective.

Tinna Gretarsdottir, choreographer and dancer from Iceland talked about "The bird and the bat - dance performances for the very young".

Riitta Aittokallio, managing director for Glims and Gloms dance theatre company Finland talked about the need for tools in talking about quality.

Ola E. Bø presented "Quality: Getting our money's worth", which is an evaluation project initialized by the Norwegian Ministry of Culture.

The meeting was moderated by **Gerhard Verfaillie** from The Crocus Festival, Belgium and

gathered about 65 people from Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Iceland, Finland, Estonia, Belgium, USA and UK.

Guri Birkeland

– How do we work with the term quality when we choose which performances to present? Scenekunstbruket doesn't produce performances, we choose, in dialogue with our artistic advisory board, from professional performances that are already produced and done. Scenekunstbruket uses the Danish model Ønskekivistmodellen as a platform for discussions, not as a checklist. This model utilizes three concepts: Villen, Kunnen and Skullen.

About the concepts

Villen (vision/ambition)

The will, from the artists perspective, to communicate with their audience. It's about the artistic vision and how that translates to the artistic work on and behind the stage and in the interaction with the audience.

Kunnen (ability)

This is about the artist's knowledge about the craft, but it also concerns professionalism and the ability to inject the piece with your own personal touch. Knowledge is the vehicle necessary for the artistic will to reach the audience.

Skullen (relevance)

This concerns the relationship with the audience and with contemporary society. This is what gives the artistic will its direction and what gives

the artistic ability its perspective. This includes both the artistic perspective, but also external perspectives from cultural policies that inevitably affects artistic work.

Translated from

[http://www.skane.se/sv/Webbplatser/Kultur-Skane-samlingsnod/Kultur_Skane/Utdredningar-och-rapporter/Om-Onskekivistmodellen/]

– *Ønskekivistmodellen has proved a very useful tool in discussing and evaluating quality. It's very important to constantly ask questions: Did I like it? Did it grab me? Do they have a perspective on things? What do they want to tell me? Do the children understand? Have they (the artists) achieved what they want? How do they utilize the various elements and the dramaturgy in the performance? At Scenekunstbruket we always choose performances for their artistic merits and never on a thematic or pedagogical basis.*

– *I also want to make a short note about Den kulturelle skolesekken. Most times, artistic productions are presented in a pedagogical context. Since these are performances the children have not actively chosen themselves, and since they are presented during school hours, we call this "Mandatory Theater". As an artist and a performer it's very important to have respect for the arena (meaning the school) that you come to and try to keep in mind that not all art is suitable for schools and children. In Norway the investment in Den kulturelle skolesekken has led to a drastic increase in the number of active dance compa-*

nies. In 1997 we had 30 companies and in 2011 we had 145 companies!

– Another project I would like to mention is SUS - Scenekunstbrukets unge stemmer. This is a project where we let a group of adolescents observe the Showbox Festival, they then blog about their personal experiences and reflections and also post reviews and interviews. This is truly a project where young audiences can make themselves heard. I can also add that SUS - Scenekunstbrukets unge stemme will become a national project.

Tinna Gretarsdottir

Tinna is an Icelandic dancer and choreographer who have previously studied in Norway. She is based in Iceland where she creates performances for children age 6 months – 5 years.

– Quality is such a huge, and perhaps difficult word. I think perhaps it's more fruitful how we maintain our level of quality. The most important thing in creating a performance is knowing, respecting and believing in your audience. Who is it that you're creating for? As an audience group, children are very honest in expressing what they like and what grabs them. Take the children seriously, acknowledge their presence and use this when you're creating the performance.

Tinna was part of the Glitterbird project where she learned a lot about the importance of the relationship between the performers and the audience.

– Let even the smallest one take part, let them create their own universes; let them create new rooms in the room. A participating audience doesn't devalue the artistic quality of the performance; it's actually quite the contrary. As a choreographer you have to create something you believe in, something that you feel passionately about. And don't be afraid to use dance as a language because children don't have any prejudice or preconceived notions about contemporary dance. So, stay strong and be true to your artistic vision and the audience will feel it. But make sure you know your audience!

Riitta Aittokallio

Riita started off with explaining how quality is basically a non-subject in Finland and how this is related to the fact that they lack tools on how to discuss quality. After this we got a brief presentation of the performing arts scene in Finland. There are currently 11 companies upholding national funding based on criteria such as audience figures, tours, diversity and accessibility.

– I think it's very interesting how the term quality is so absent in Finland while at the same time it's a natural and important part of the discussion in Norway, Sweden and Denmark when talking about dance and performing arts. Perhaps a reflection on or discussion about quality should be a criterion for being eligible for national funding? In Finland you say, "it was good or it was bad" and you leave it at that, without further elaboration. But there's obviously more to it than that...

After these three Nordic perspectives on the terms quality and aesthetics the meeting was open for a general discussion between the audience and the panel. Here are some of the things that were said.

– *You can never come to a conclusion about quality since it's so hard to define, even if you have tools such as Ønskekvistmodellen. There will always be the subjective experience; the gut feeling and you know it when you see it.*

– *Quality is a difficult notion. What would happen if we replace the word with something else? The word quality feels so “measurable”; that it's just about how we measure things and is that really accurate and relevant in discussing art? A Swedish report states that the Swedish art sector should become more measurable, but is this the right way to go? How do we create a checklist for that?*

– *What might be measurable is craftsmanship. But is this relevant? In Flanders there are no subsidized dance companies. They all have a high level of quality, but very few of them are interested in creating performances for children and young adults. There are also some who, for various reasons, don't want to work with trained dancers, thus implying that skill actually hinders the performance.*

– *The audience-actor relationship is very important. What’s the value of the performance? Make performances with commas and question marks that challenge the children.*

– *We (adults) chose performances from an academic point of view, without letting the children take part of this process. Children often chose other performances than we would. Can you label something as qualitative just because the children appreciate it? We have critics writing about adult performances, but rarely about performances for children and young audiences. When performing for young audiences we can instantly see weather they like it or not. Not all children have the ability to discuss these issues on a “professional” level like grown ups do.*

– *If you ask a child what he or she wants for dinner, you may get the answer “crisps”. And the next day you ask again, and the answer is “crisps”. We have to acknowledge the fact that children don’t always know what’s best for them.*

– *If we don’t include the children, perhaps we run a risk that the children think they are stupid because they don’t understand the performance (that we, the grown ups have chosen for them)? Sometimes you hear them saying “theater/dance is not for me, I don’t want to go again”. Our ambition is to give the children a sense of ownership in performing arts, and Den kulturelle skolesekken in Norway could be a big part in this work.*



– *Speaking from a strictly European context, how do we perceive and talk about dance performances from other continents? Is African theater “old style” lacking quality? Are we open to other cultures, with other aesthetics? Can we look beyond our own definitions on quality? It’s important to define which cultural context we are in when discussing quality and aesthetics.*

Ola E Bø

Ola E Bø presented “Quality: Getting our money’s worth” which is an evaluation project initialized by the Norwegian Ministry of Culture and carried out during 2013.

– The purpose was to gain information and insights that can show how theatres contribute in reaching the different goals within the performing arts field. The evaluation pays particular attention to the goals of artistic quality and efficient resource utilization, based on the theatres and their self-assessment. Three theatres were selected: Nationaltheatret, Rogaland Teater and Sogn og Fjordane Teater.

– *The committee looked at: What kind of discussions goes on in the theatres? And what about the artistic part versus the administrative part, how does their work affect the programming and the artistic quality? How do the theatres evaluate what they do and what they program? What is the relation between measurable results such as revenue and number of visitors in relation to artistic vision and needs.*



– *The committee had wanted more time to evaluate the project, more time to see performances on the theatres, and to talk more to various employees at the theatres. The committee used the ønskevistmodellen in their work. This project will continue, which is a positive thing.*

After this there was an open discussion.

– *It's good with various aspects of evaluation but how do we make sure they come to use, how do we utilize them?*

– *What about the quality of the educational institutions? Sure, they teach you your profession, but do they teach you about quality?*

– *The audience is important, but should we really be making audience friendly performances? In times of declining finances, does the artistic vision take a back seat to financial aspects? We all agree that we are in a dire financial situation and the big question is: how do we survive as artists?*

We all agree that we hadn't really been able to define what quality is, but that we all see the importance in discussing these things, even if we couldn't reach a conclusion. We work for children and young audiences, a group that in many ways lack a voice in the public discussion. So let's be that voice, let us make sure they have the opportunity to experience good performances of high artistic quality.