IETM REPORT

www.ietm.org

PLEASE TURN OFF YOUR CELL PHONE

Report from the IETM Rijeka Plenary Meeting, 24-27 October 2019

by Nina Gojić

Flanders
State of the Art

Co-funded by the
Creative Europe Programme
of the European Union

Please turn off your cell phone

The central focus of the working session *Please turn off your cell phone* was the issue of drawing new audiences into what are perceived to be traditional performing arts venues and formats. British scholar Kirsty Sedgman, a professor of theatre at the University of Bristol, and József Kardos, programme director for the Hungarian Sziget festival, each from their specific perspectives, sparked a discussion about how to approach potential new audiences that do not identify as regular theatregoers. The facilitators raised questions about who gets to participate and who remains excluded, and how this occurs when traditional audience behaviours are required. While Sedgman introduced her research findings from her ongoing academic interest in audiences and discourse analysis, which she employs to describe spectating experiences, Kardos introduced a series of practical approaches that he and his Sziget team apply in reaching out to audiences who may not (yet) be interested in or used to attending performing arts. Although their approaches differed, their common stance was that our contemporary views on spectatorship and the tacit understanding of behavioural norms vastly depend on the contexts in which performances take place and the type of theatre contract that is established with each performance situation.

© Tanja Kanazir

Facilitators:

Jozsef Kardos, Programme Director of Sziget Festival, Hungary

Kirsty Sedgman, Lecturer in Theatre at the University of Bristol, UK

The ideology of theatre etiquette

In order to situate the discussion about the possibility of traditional theatre audiences becoming more inclusive, Sedgman introduced the term "theatre etiquette" which has become common in the UK and the USA since the early 2000s and signifies a sense of normative considerations of "good" and "bad" behaviour in theatres. In relation to this, Sedgman mentioned some newspaper articles that describe a growing sense that audiences are increasingly behaving badly in the theatre, probably due to a confusion among new audiences about what to do when they enter theatrical spaces. Particularly in English-speaking countries, this has resulted in an audience-led campaign to retrain audiences in what they should be doing, and to produce consensus on what is good and bad behaviour.

But who gets to prescribe these norms and what kinds of ideologies do they perpetuate? This question was brought up in relation to the necessity that performing arts audiences become more inclusive for audiences who, for a vast variety of reasons, have previously been excluded from traditional theatre contexts. The fact is that as the contemporary performing arts have gone through a process of democratisation over the past decades, especially in developing formats that have become more participatory, more inviting to random audiences, more present in public spaces and thus more accessible, so too is there a need to reconsider theatre etiquette itself, in order to focus on the theatre's popular forms as opposed to its elitism. An increasing number of traditional theatres have started including more popular forms so as to attract wider audiences. This has caused traditional audiences to complain about these new audiences for being rude, but pointing to the tension that this binary produces, "we need to think of theatre etiquette in the sense of what we are demanding of audiences", Sedgman said.

She also pointed out that the normative perceptions of "bad" behaviours come from the so-called traditional audiences, which, as many studies have shown, are predominantly white, socioeconomically privileged, usually upper middle class, older, or generally, people from a higher

socioeconomic class background. These traditional audiences claim that "newer" audiences, who have previously been marginalised or excluded from the theatre, are now practicing "poor" behaviour. The most common complaints include: being late, coughing, eating and drinking, fidgeting, invading personal space, laughing and clapping too loudly, leaving before the curtain call, leaving the seats down, not preparing in advance, obstructing the view, perfumes and other smells, singing/humming along, sitting in the wrong seats, sleeping/snoring, other bodily noises, talking to other spectators, talking to performers, using technology, wearing the wrong clothing.

To inspire discussion about the wider implications of theatre etiquette that renders some behaviours more acceptable than others, Sedgman proposed a small workshop exercise in which she distributed sheets with the aforementioned list of "poor" behaviours and asked the participants to engage in a brief discussion by selecting up to five examples of behaviours they might consider annoying or disturbing in the theatre. The participants were invited to think about where they draw the line as well as the nuances in tolerating certain "bad" behaviours.

Some of the immediate responses dealt primarily with the issue of context and set-up, and the use of mobile technologies. For instance, attending a site-specific performance or an otherwise dislocated performance that steps outside the black box usually allows for more relaxed or informal behaviour. In black box theatres there is a growing tolerance towards some of the aforementioned behaviours, but participants agreed that, for instance, talking to other spectators, particularly if it is not even related to the performance, is one of the most annoying behaviours in the traditional theatre context. Furthermore, an ambivalent status of the usage of mobile phones was mentioned. For example, the lights of the screens can be particularly distracting if the performance conceptually requires darkness or immersive experiences. Likewise, a person indicated that a spectator using a cell phone is not really present anymore. Another person offered the perspective that sometimes taking a photo or video can be a nice opportunity for audiences to share their spectating experiences; this later became one of József Kardos' main arguments in his encouragement of using new technologies in attracting new audiences.

How common is common sense?

Wondering about how to make sense of the do's and don'ts that are prescribed, Sedgman summed it up with the question "who benefits from the perpetuation of the theatre etiquette and who loses out?" Obviously, it is not just about the theatre or the artworld anymore, but "about public space, which enables us to ask whose opinions and desires are prioritised, and what it means to be reasonable." Hence the title of her book *The Reasonable Audience: Theatre Etiquette, Behaviour Policing, and the Live Performance Experience*, from which she presented some findings. Her methodology included analysing resources such as blogs and online articles dealing with theatre etiquette and venues that prescribe appropriate behavioural norms.

Some venues, for example, expect their audiences to be in the so-called "reverend silence". As a discourse analyst, Sedgman focused particularly on the use of terms in describing and prescribing normative theatregoing behaviour, and the term "annoyance" was the one that came up most often. In this respect, the use of cell phones is considered by far the most annoying of bad behaviours. Not only do they cause distractions, but in the past 10 years the theatre etiquette ideology has started raising questions of copyright infringement, the main argument being that performers and authors should have the right to distribute and show their work under their own conditions. Other most annoying behaviours include talking to other spectators, issues of punctuality, consuming food and drinks and singing or humming along. After a question from one of the participants about where the surveyed people and analysed contents came from, Sedgman made it clear that her research of theatre etiquette is English-speaking and Western-oriented, being aware that different cultures understand what is appropriate behaviour in different terms.

However, this Western idea of theatre etiquette is a recent phenomenon. It is known that in Shakespeare's time audiences would shout during performances and that all kinds of interventions and expressions of opinions were considered acceptable in that period. According to historical research that Sedgman included in her analysis, contemporary theatre etiquette stems from the 19th century. This was the time when the theatre contract modelled audience behaviour as silent and receptive and this was part of a campaign that sought to retrain audiences to behave in appropriate ways. Sedgman referred to an influential 1869 book of essays by Matthew Arnold, Culture and Anarchy which, as she explained the relevance of the book for her research, showed how "in the 19th century, society was breaking down: the industrial revolution caused mass migrations to urban centres, people suddenly squeezed together in the same cultural spaces and strict social hierarchies were reflected in the theatre as well, such as the segregation of audiences in galleries and pits, but those hierarchies started breaking down". For Arnold, culture could be used to prevent anarchy: everybody needed to learn to listen and receive greatness. This could help to unravel the strange paradox: the 19th century saw the birth of so-called high art as a purely aesthetic experience which required "complete absorption" and so any distractions and disturbances had to be eliminated. As a consequence, working class audiences were deliberately excluded. This peculiar process even included conductors stopping the performance to demand silence, or venues hanging posters that advised audiences how to behave. For Sedgman, this shows how our contemporary perception of what is "natural" in the arts is quite recent and that the idea of spectatorship which demands silent absorption is brought up by white supremacist culture and civilisation.

Furthermore, Sedgman analysed a number of online articles to see what people are so annoyed by and what are the tacit

understandings of the separation of good audiences from bad. This was again done by looking into the discourse, namely, the way people talk about audience behaviour. 82% of the articles analysed involved direct instructions to audiences about how to behave, being imperative in their grammatical constructions, such as "do this" or "you should not be doing that." The remaining 18% were not so explicit and imperative, but were still instructive, albeit hidden under a descriptive approach, including complaints about certain types of behaviour that are judged by the authors of the articles. Furthermore, they often invoked the idea of "common sense", or even considered there to be something like blatantly obvious examples of bad behaviour. "The term obviousness is interesting, but how obvious are these things actually? How common is common sense?", Sedgman asked. The lines that are drawn really vary, but the issue of reasonability remains negotiable: what is considered reasonable to one person is completely unreasonable to others, but the language that people use suggests that everyone considers their moral sense to be universal, common sense, unquestionably right.

Please turn on your cell phones

József Kardos began his presentation with the wish to rename the session *Please turn on your cell phones*, thereby pointing to the fact that technologies can be very useful and can help to promote artists whose work is not widely known or accessible. Building on Sedgman's open question about how to make non-traditional audiences feel more inclined to attend performing arts, Kardos shared a number of examples that Sziget festival implements to do precisely that. While Sziget festival is best-known for its strong music programme featuring world-famous bands and artists, they also host a large number of performing arts events through which they seek to reach out to new audiences. Their performing arts programme thus includes popular and attractive forms, such as urban dances, new circus and street theatre. One of

© Tanja Kanazir

the ways the Sziget team attempts to make their programme more inclusive and accessible is that they make the performing arts programme open for anyone. When purchasing a festival ticket, everyone receives a wristband that enables them freely to attend the entire performing arts programme offered by the festival. The team thus hopes to reroute the attention of their usual audiences to contents and artforms that they might not expect or which were not the primary reason for their visit to the festival. For some, this might even be the first time they encounter this type of art. Referring back to the issue of copyright raised in the discussion earlier, Kardos emphasised that many of the artists ask the audiences to use their phones, to take pictures and videos, and to share them on social networks as a means of promoting their work and raising its visibility. Kardos thus adopts an affirmative stance towards the use of affordable technologies in the attempt to reach out to non-traditional performing arts audiences.

The main strategy that Kardos introduced as having been effective so far was to use Sziget as a long-existing platform that already has wide recognition, vast resources and faithful audiences in order to infiltrate less familiar artforms into the contexts of popular entertainment forms. The festival has been running for 27 years, with an ever-growing number of visitors which, in recent years, averages around half a million attendees. The festival relies on the fact that its main target group comprises people aged between 18 and 25 and about 67% of the visitors are non-Hungarian, coming mainly from the rest of Europe but also from other continents. The stages are mainly open stages or tents, which are able to host big theatre and dance pieces. The programming is intended to be as inclusive as possible so the festival hosts a variety of theatre forms from non-European countries such as Canada, Ethiopia, Nigeria, etc., but it also aims to offer diverse performance genres including puppet shows, cabarets, queer cabarets, urban dances, even family programmes and operas. In addition to a hopefully intriguing performing arts programme, last year the Main Stage hosted short performing art acts and speeches between music gigs called "Love revolution presents". This programme was part of the festival's "Love revolution" campaign, an initiative of the human rights and green movement that aims to inspire discussions and raise awareness of these important topics.

Furthering his arguments about the positive sides of new technologies, Kardos said that their website is the main tool to inform audiences about their programmes. Most people are not even aware of the existence of the performing arts programme in Sziget so their strategy is to advertise the "big names", mostly musicians, in order to attract wider audiences because that is how most people decide if they want to attend the

festival. Kardos also noted that the written text announcements are less important, especially for the younger audiences, so they favour audio-visual formats and hashtags to announce performing arts productions. He also stressed the importance of the Sziget app as being probably the most important form of engagement between the visitors and the content and other visitors at the festival, and also for being informed about what goes on throughout the whole duration of the festival.

Kardos acknowledged other similar music festivals in Europe but highlighted that the advantage of Sziget lies precisely in its variety of different programmes that strives to invite and include as many new visitors to the programmes that might usually be out of their focus. He believes that Sziget has so far been successful in this endeavour. He also noted that he and his team are caring towards the artists, warning them that Sziget audiences are not traditional and might display their likes or dislikes more actively than usual. Some artists enjoy this type of challenge since they are aware this might be a way to get in touch with potential new spectators of their art. Kardos also noted that the festival team ensures that their performances are understandable to international audiences (i.e. making sure they are subtitled) and recognise that some theatre forms simply don't fit in their programme, such as monodramas or excessively text-based forms, so they try to avoid these in their programming. The main aim is to offer attractive performance forms that might instigate their audience's further interest in the performing arts elsewhere.

Discussion

After the two presentations, Kirsty Sedgman proposed a discussion which summed up the arguments expressed thus far. She asked about the potential for reasonable exceptions, especially for people who feel excluded or might even be physically excluded from events "if we maintain strict rules like receptive quietness". She also said that we can think about the pleasures that these traditional modes of audience behaviour give us, again highlighting the importance of context and theatre contract that is established each time anew. She asked: "Who gets excluded when complete silence is demanded, whom does that kind of experience disadvantage, but also, what would be lost if we opted for more relaxed audience norms, and what would be gained, and for whom?"

The participants then split into two groups. The main arguments that occurred in both groups can be summed up as follows:

- There are no unilateral solutions, since contemporary performing arts are so diverse in their forms that we have to be open to all kinds of agreements with regard to how we (self-)organise as spectating collectives. This is a fact of our contemporaneity – these are times in which we have to be open and prepared for all kinds of experiential situations as performing arts audiences. Besides training the audiences, the artists need to be trained as well.

- There is a need to make theatres more relaxed spaces where audiences could be encouraged to eat, drink, or come and go as they like. There are pros and cons to this becoming either a new norm or an open invitation. Theatres could include both relaxed and "uptight" performances for those who still want to enjoy their performances in complete silence. This type of choice makes it possible to welcome different types of audiences, both traditional ones, but also new ones, such as children or people with alternative attentional needs or medical conditions.

- Some performances simply require a type of attention that rests on more formal behaviours that contribute to the power and beauty of the idea of complete absorption. For some, the arts are precisely that: an opportunity to escape the pressures of everyday life and allow themselves to indulge in a different state of perception or time investment. However, the question was raised: if only one person with neurodivergences or disabilities gets excluded from the space in order to preserve this experience, can that really be seen as fair and equitable access?

- Some immersive performances conceptually depend on quietness and calm. However, there were instances of immersive performances with more informal theatre contracts that have led to performers' personal boundaries being crossed by audience members. For this reason, the lines of acceptable behaviour have to be negotiated and clearly drawn when necessary. This is an ongoing process of current and future critical examination for both audiences and performing arts professionals.

© Tanja Kanazir