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AUDIENCE – AN OBJECT OF DESIRE

"One can no longer depend on audiences. People come when they want to."

Audiences are increasingly the object of desire, as the fight for spectators has become the main issue of the financial support for the performing arts in many countries.

As the most ephemeral of contemporary art forms, theatre undoubtedly needs stronger financial support from the public authorities. Audience attendance is becoming increasingly important for the municipal and other theatre houses in Germany. But there is surely a consensus that these houses are important cultural institutions. I also support this notion, although some structural modifications are necessary.

Festivals are ephemeral occurrences and face the challenge of presenting in a sustainable manner programmes that are both memorable and moving. Reactions cannot be measured by demographic analysis. There are no such ratings. For individuals who see, hear, and feel something in a play, film, image or a word, something may change in their lives, - perhaps motivate decisions that would otherwise not be made. This is not changing the world, but it is a small, sometimes subtle intervention into the processes of life. The question of audience numbers often overshadows the issue of a festival's artistic quality. Ratings have already reached every aspect of life.

But who are the people who are still attending theatre or festivals?

The furniture industry is currently jubilant - despite, or because of, the so called financial crisis. People prefer to stay in their cosy homes and not to be burdened by the ominous outside world. When they have extra money, people clearly prefer to buy a new sofa.

We better realize that the most valuable commodity - time - is now being fought over. There is a struggle for the attention of users: look at Twitter, Blogger, YouTube, MySpace, second life, singles markets, the TV jungle, remote control fetishists, couch potatoes. The number of people who go out for entertainment is not growing. The cake is not bigger but the pieces are becoming smaller.

In general, the audience! we can no longer depend on it. People come when they want to. "The audience only knows what it wants when it can see what it wants." Samuel Goldwyn (1884-1974), American film producer (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer), once said.

Dortmund is situated in the Ruhr Valley where the European Cultural Capital will be celebrated in 2010. The region has historically been characterized by labour and industry - and has been undergoing a process of restructuring for many years now. There is a diversified cultural life, but no large middle class comparable to that in Hamburg, for example. There is plenty of space and a large population, but even smaller festivals are struggling with attendance. The media landscape is disintegrating and providing less coverage for art and culture.

Since its inception in 1997, the biannual international Off Limits festival in Dortmund, a city with a population of about 600.000, has been continuously working to develop new strategies and reach new audiences. This includes a realistic assessment of possibilities offered by the city and region. The budget does not permit large advertising campaigns of the appropriate scale. Uniqueness must be highlighted: audience-centred activities, participatory projects, the inclusion of different genres and environments, new spaces, social discussion and provocation-actions all taken in advance. Of course, none of this can succeed without a high-quality programme and without assessing the structure of the potential audience.

We chose for the festival projects which had already gained prior media coverage and made an impact on audiences elsewhere. For example: competitions that are thematically related to the festival. Castings for extras were conducted at public places in the city centre. We sought out "constant audience members," 3 local residents, non-experts who agreed to view every festival production. Afterwards, they publicly shared their perspective on the the festival and were available to the media. Ultimately, it was a 90-year-old Lithuanian woman, a 40-year-old architect, and a 25-year-old student. Our concept includes regular staging at non-theatrical locations, to produce theatre within local, historical, or other contexts. The surroundings of these locations, such as an old coal mine or the Botanical Garden, are also included. Because of their proximity to the location, diverse segments of the population are also close to our festival. Reports about the media and audiences attending rehearsals spread like wildfire.

At the Botanical Garden, the "Friends of Roses Club" became involved. At their annual market-feast we had a stand selling tickets and informing the visitors who are not close to theatre about the festival. They printed own posters for the event showing that they are part of it. In 2005 we

celebrated the opening of the festival in a beer-garden of a former huge plant in Dortmund, called Kokerei Hansa, which was closed in the 1990s and is now a part of the “route of industrial heritage”. Today, many tourists come to see the big and now very quiet site. The whole site was our playground – inside as well as outside the industrial spaces. We communicated with former workers and their families, made interviews, which we used for the performance. They were curious about what we would do there. Our festival theme was “legacies” and the site was perfect to get into the matter. We also integrated a local choir, the professional guides, and former workers who became guides for our audience. We asked the international artists to create something for the site; it was for them a new new experience, just like for the audience. On a Sunday morning, the same artists were taking part in a morning performance-stroll in a park. Everyone was saying: You are crazy to do this, nobody will come. But the media was very interested and published a few articles beforehand. That morning at 7 am there were 400 people coming to take the walk, many of them had seen performance in the old plant the night before.

This year we will be using an urban garden plot as a venue. There are more than 100 garden plot communities with over 10,000 tenants throughout the city. Of course, it is not easy to get in touch with those people who are fighting with a certain image, being supposedly closed and conservative. We try to convince them to take the chance to change the image into a better one. Last year they had to fight against an industry company wanting to take part of their ground to expand own r halls. But they succeeded with the help of politicians. Now they found some polluted ground on the premises, making green cabbage uneatable. Those problems we will integrate into the artistic approach. Those people are eager to create their public relation campaigns together with the festival.

Through participatory projects, we are reaching art aficionados as well curious new audiences who enjoy getting involved in activities. Of course, contact with schools and universities are indispensable. Support staff must now be hired to manage these relationships. Personal contacts are an essential component.

The first artistic director of the RuhrTriennale in the Ruhr area, Dr. Gerard Mortier, the former director of the Salzburg Festival, led the first edition of this large event to immediate success by taking advantage of every opportunity to make personal appearances and to demonstrate his dedication - in an effort to persuade audiences to attend. He spoke to the most diverse groups and associations in both small and large contexts. The festival quickly found a face, someone to represent the event. He represented the enthusiasm and infected the audience, by being a friendly

and clever artistic director who was able to explain what he and the festival were up to. This is related to the population structure of the Ruhr Valley. People are primarily down-to-earth. They love it when they are included and valued as an audience. Admission tickets included free use of the public transport. More distant locations are serviced by shuttle buses.

I am talking here about festivals that are not in a position or do not want to work with well-known stars. The off limits festival is only one example, but it is noteworthy. As a festival, it stages domestic and international productions in a compact form to gain attention as well as to find and bond with audiences. The theme of the festival can also motivate audiences. In 2007, our theme was "Generations and their search for the genius loci." Groups ranging from seniors to school children signed up for visits. Some theatre or dance productions and certain content-related contexts only become possible within such a festival program or an independently produced series. Audiences benefit from the opportunity to experience something new, different and unfamiliar. Meaningful experience and quality of life are often closely related. But as producers, festivals also have the opportunity to initiate projects that are not attached to a specific venue; to seek out new spaces and content. This applies to small scale events: for example, productions in homes and at other non-theatrical locations, as well as to large projects, such as those staged by the RuhrTriennale. These works cannot generally be produced or performed by municipal theatres.

Conventional advertising such as flyers, posters, and other print media remain indispensable. But distribution channels have become more difficult. There are stacks of papers and bulletins in many cafes and institutions. Posters are mostly for image-building. Without sponsors, large campaigns are too expensive, unless they are part of the artistic programme. In the late 1990s we had the chance to cooperate with a big Hamburg promotion company. They created many different posters, also to promote themselves. People really bought them to take them home.

In 2007, we created a campaign, together with a postcard-publicity-company. This company did not bill us for the printing of 30.000 postcards, but for the distribution of a series of six different motives. So many people turned out to be collectors, looking for all six motives, and some of them really showed up at the festival. At the end, it was a good campaign evoking attention for the event.

The latest advertising instrument, the Internet, is emerging as less effective than previously thought. It must be included but the impact is hardly measurable - unless large numbers of experts are available for certain areas and forums used only by specialists. We will have a poll this year to find

out who was inspired by internet to come to the festival. There are so many web-sites publishing our events but none of them is really able to have all events in our area on their list.

Relatively cumbersome postal mailings are once again regaining ground. This includes ongoing address file management, which is often neglected. We conducted targeted mailings and identified that 350 letters brought 8.6% of visitors. The daily flood of e-mail that people receive makes it difficult to reach an objective. But even here there are creative ideas for subject line design or content that is directly targeted at personal interests. Some weeks ago we organized an informal meeting for the anniversary of our label *artscenico* without a performance, except some short cuts and videos. We sent 350 letters and sent about 300 emails. The result was quite strange. There were more registrations for this meeting than for a performance, it was a rating of about 15%. So, perhaps people prefer to have a cosy evening than being confronted with a performance. We should transform such meetings into a piece of art afterwards.

After having been responsible for a number of festivals, being an artist myself, I came to the conclusion that a rational festival budget should show the following breakdown: artistic fees 35%, staff 25%, office 5%, technique 15% and public relation 20%.

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