

PARTICIPATE IN YOUR LIFE

THE MAGIC OF INTERACTIVITY IN THE PUPPET THEATRE!

- Interactive theatre insists that you are present.

In a world where people and especially youngsters and children can get the cinema or theatre, news and all possible happenings, directly into their living rooms through a computer – we need a way that's proceeds these experiences – and to actually be a part of the happening they are experiencing is the ultimate platform of really meeting people and getting to know them!

Company 13 is mainly doing puppet-/figure theatre, and when venturing in to the participating and interactive theatre, we were wondering if this could be a good combination! Unsecure and fumbling in the start, we gradually experienced that the puppet-/figure theatre had some special possibilities concerning interactivity. Our main goal with doing this new/old theatre was to get the audience, and especially children in closer contact with the artistic experiences they met, and though that be able to discuss the most important social topics of our days in a way that really reaches out with some validity. Interactivity in theatre demands a more focused presence in the experience you take part in, hence in a longer term or bigger picture, have a greater effect on both individuals and society!

When starting, Company 13 had no real experience in interactive theatre, but the three artists of the group had all some experience with different form of expressions. All three had seen some performances that used some technics of this sort, especially the traditional *Theatre in Education* and we had all also practised it briefly. We had also tried out the Forum-theatre of Augusto Boal – theatre of the oppressed. But in a general sense, we have to acknowledge that interactive theatre was quite obsolete in Norway. This realization did not come clear to us until our first experience with the theatre of Káva Kulturális Műhely in Budapest. Then our eyes opened for the magic of this theatre.

I think it's fair to say that we all want to say something important with our theatre. To express something serious about a topic – weather it be social, personal, fictional, realistic or philosophical topics, and to reach out to our audiences in a way that has the best impact. To give them the message so that it reaches the right people in the right way. Of course, there is many exiting ways of reaching this goal, but one of the most effective way of doing this is by giving the audience a possibility to take part in the performance, or in the making of it.

The difference between seeing a theatre-performance that is interactive and a regular theatre-performance, is about avoiding distance, and creating communication. Theatre is too many youngsters inaccessible. In Norway in some schools, everyone has been to the theatre, in others none. They go to the theatre with a certain distance. We have a hope, a goal that the distance disappears, that they break the code with theatre. That they get a personal and close experience of the theatre, by giving them the feeling that is their performance by the experience of actually being an important part of it – or instrumental in the making of it.

We will lead them into the story they are going to see, so they get a recognition effect. There are many ways to communicate. It is important to get the students/young people in dialogue. Our method should be like an icebreaker. We want to get the students to put words on things and understand the themes. We have (still!) faith in theatre as a form of communication, being together and participating in storytelling. In order to reach it, communication and interactivity must create a bridge. In the interactivity, it is about using the students' frame of reference, using what they are concerned about from present time. We want to push them out of the comfort zone. We want them to take positions. We want them to problematize popular subjects of their time – topics that concern them – but also showing them topics and themes that they didn't know was essential to their lives . Hence, it was during our first study-trip to Budapest and taking part in a week of workshop with Káva Kulturális Műhely, watching their performances, we realized the magic of the interactive theatre, and more specific, theatre with audience-participation.

Inspired, Company 13 went home to Norway and started work on our first interactive play – *Peer Gynt, God's Choice*. But, all our positive effort ad, we soon experienced that this was not an easy task. We struggled with the method: at which points in the performance should we make the breaks? How could we get the children to really be safe enough to really take an honest part in what we wished for – and most important; what was it we really wanted of achieve with the interactive parts. We tried different ways, during our performances with the youngsters, but felt quite helpless. We went back to Budapest to show the performance in a symposium together with Káva Kulturális Műhely and discuss the performances. We got very constructive feedback and a lot of help and it was a great experience. Even so, we felt a little discouraged when returning to Bergen to play even more performances for youngsters. So, we asked Káva Kulturális Műhely for help, and we went again to Budapest and worked with the performance and especially the interactive parts. It was great. When back in Norway, we re-wrote the complete performance and implemented our new experiences of interactivity and participation. This time – *Peer Gynt – God's Choice # 2* it was a very much more positive experience and a success as a interactive process.

So boldly, with new courage and optimism, Company 13, started the production of “Romeo and Juliet” as a Puppet-/Figure theatre performance. We had a wonderful work-period with the Swedish director and actor Lasse Åkerlund, which showed us another exiting method of participating theatre. In this play, we work very close to the audience, and we give them small task during the play: the one part of the audience is the family Capulet, and the other part is the family Montague – and they of course HATE each other – and must express that in different ways. In a light and humoristic way, we try to draw the children closer in to the play, and make the become props or characters in the play – but without them having to do anything difficult. After the performance we discuss with the audience about their experience with the interaction, and how it affected the way that thought about the topics. The feedback from the audiences, teachers and children has been very positive, highlighting that the easy and playful engaging of the audience, made everyone feel very safe, and unafraid of participating, hence giving them a much closer relation chip to what they had experienced, sparking a lot of discussions and replays of the play scenes among the youngsters. Teachers comment to us that students had many questions, they were wondering about deeper things, getting keys to dig deeper into the topics, having been on interactive shows.

In our new performance, coming up the autumn of 2019; *Can you Whistle, Joanna!*, which is about the communication between different generations – aka school-children and elderly people in nursing homes, we will have both separate- and joined workshops with both these groups in the developing part of the performance, exploring topics like gaps and connections between these groups of people – and we will use these insights in the performance.

As working with Puppet- and what we in Norway call; Figure-theatre, we have learned that by using puppets and figures, the process of actually communicating with the young people could be easier. Children have a special way to relating to puppets. They of course know that they are not real persons and such, but their imagination works in a way that the story and the characters become real to them. At the same time, it is not as close or demanding as a grown-up person standing in front of you craving their attention. Children – and grownups, too – is less deterred to interact with a puppet than a person. This gives wonderful opportunities of really having an interaction with the audience. If the Puppet actually – still in fiction – started talking directly to the audience, instead of one of the actors, the children felt less threatened, and felt that they could open up, hence being an ice-breaker for continues dialog and discourse throughout the performance and process.

So, we are experimenting with different ways of using the puppets engaging the children in the performances. We tried to experiment by giving the audience/youngsters some small easy tasks with a puppet or a prop, and this gave great experiences. When, in Peer Gynt, we gave a puppet to a group of the audience, and said that their task was to look after their new friend, he was now one of them, and they had to take good care of him, they really took the task seriously. After a short introduction on how to lead/use the puppet, the group of audience was given the responsibility for this character in several scenes. And mostly, they did really great! The feedback from these new “puppeteers”, was that they had felt a big responsibility for the puppets well-being and they had really concentrated on how he was behaving in the different scenes. We also did framing of the audience, giving them a roles as of being one special group, like in Peer Gynt, half the audience was refugees, and the other half was “Norwegians” or “trolls” – and they had to talk to each other and interact in a way that was making them think on the topics from the “inside”, rather than their usual view from the “outside”. This had a great effect in the responses from the audiences/students.

These ways of using the puppets in direct contact and interaction with the audiences, can be instrumental to how the perceive the performance and communication between the artists and the audience – making us all a bunch of children playing together with puppets and props in a theatrical framework. The interactivity insists that you are present. This calls for a deeper and more lasting awareness! Through participation, the audiences, both students and grown-ups, will gain a closer understanding of the theme, symbols and subtitles in the performance they are seeing.

Come, join us – let’s do something together. Let’s play! Let us take part in each other’s life and participate in the world – and our one lives!

Company 13
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